Ordinary World
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Ordinary World
by WildBlueSonderling

Summary

But I won't cry for yesterday, there's an ordinary world somehow I have to find. And as I try to make my way to the ordinary world, I will learn to survive.

Notes

Sailor Moon belongs to Takeuchi Naoko, not me.
Are one of the Celestial Warriors series.
Tsukino Usagi was not a morning person. Never in a million years would she wake up at the crack of dawn to go jogging along the waterfront with Makoto, no matter how many cute guys she claimed to pass every day. Saturday morning was sacred; Usagi stayed up late the night before getting all her homework done and deserved to sleep in. She had seven hours of classes every day so she wanted to spend her weekends relaxing, not exercising, which amounted to playing video games and consuming junk food.

Makoto told her that eating so much without burning off the calories was going to make her fat. She’d been saying this since their second year of middle school but Usagi’s metabolism hadn’t gotten the memo, so Makoto spited it by using her culinary skills to only make healthy food. Once she finished her jog and returned to the apartment overlooking Elliott Bay she took a shower, got dressed, and began concocting a batch of gourmet waffles for her roommates. She didn’t have to wait long for their scent to summon someone. Michiru drifted into the kitchen, and although her dark, wavy hair was a tangled mess she still radiated elegance in silk pajamas. She poured coffee into a mug stating “my violin gives me superpowers” before sitting down to enjoy a stack of waffles with homemade syrup.

Michiru sighed after the first bite. “These are divine, Mako-chan. How do you do it?”

“It’s just a simple scratch recipe, but my secret ingredients are vanilla bean, almond oil, and nutmeg.”

She nodded in satisfaction as Makoto returned to the griddle to make many more waffles for Usagi, but even the smell of rich blackberry syrup didn’t rouse the blonde. Once Michiru finished her breakfast she went into the bedroom her friends shared. Makoto’s half was extremely clean and well-organized. Usagi’s side of the room featured clothes strewn across floor and a bookshelf cluttered with manga, video games, and action figures. Cords belonging to four different Nintendo consoles snaked around her bed and there were empty containers from her midnight snacking tucked beneath it. “Good morning, Usa-chan!” Michiru said cheerfully. Her amber eyes glittered with the hope that Usagi would wake peacefully, but she didn’t even stir. The brunette then gently shook her shoulder. Again there was no reaction and she pursed her lips. Usagi was in fact awake and smirking into her pillow as she pictured her friend’s vexation. She wasn’t expecting the pillow to suddenly be yanked out from under her head, eliciting a surprised yelp. “Oh good, you’re up,” Michiru said sweetly before leaving.

“Breakfast is ready!” Makoto called. Usagi glanced at the alarm clock; it read 10:07 and she groaned loudly before abandoning the warmth of her comforter. She shuffled to the kitchen, plopped into a chair, and opened her mouth wide. “I’m not going to feed you,” Makoto said disdainfully. “You’re supposed to be an adult.”

“It’s too early for motor skills,” Usagi yawned. Michiru reached over to pinch her arm and she swatted at the manicured hand.

“It certainly looks like you’re capable of using a fork.” The morning dreariness fell off Michiru as soon as she finished her coffee, revealing the vigor in her eyes. “Thank you for breakfast, Mako-chan. I’ll pick up something for dinner on my way home so you don’t have to cook again.”

“I vote for pizza!” Usagi shouted, suddenly perky. But her friends shook their heads and she pouted. Michiru then left the younger girls to their routine, retreating to her master bedroom. They ate in silence with occasional sighs of delight coming from Usagi, who downed six waffles to Makoto’s two. “You’re going to waste away if you keep working out so much and eating so little,” the blonde
Makoto crossed her arms defensively. “It’s only ten-thirty. If you’re really so worried about me, I’ll have a big lunch.” Her countenance softened. “What should we do today? We haven’t ridden the Great Wheel yet, or the carousel at Westlake.”

“Actually, I was thinking about giving this place some personality.” Usagi moved her hands in a big arch to indicate the whole apartment. Since Michiru had moved to Seattle to attend Cornish College of the Arts she’d been too busy with her job as a music tutor to really decorate. When Usagi and Makoto came to live with her in June they found jobs right away, but because they were now both students at the Art Institute their hours had been reduced and their weekends could be spent doing some serious shopping in the Emerald City.

Using the black leather seating and moonlight-white walls as a blank canvas, Usagi and Makoto browsed galleries and antique stores looking for décor to make their apartment feel less like a doctor’s office. They purchased cheap vintage furniture and quirky modern artwork that fit the bill, arranging for most of it to be delivered to the apartment on Monday since neither girl had a car. While taking a break in Pioneer Square a poster caught Makoto’s attention. “There’s a horticulture fair at Bastyr University,” she read aloud.

Usagi smiled, knowing her friend had an affinity for house plants. “Where’s that? Should we check it out?”

“Ooh, they’re also hosting a community lunch featuring locally-grown ingredients!” That definitely meant they were going. After consulting a map app they hopped on a bus to the University District, then transferred to another bus to Kenmore at the north end of Lake Washington. Makoto could barely contain her excitement when they arrived at the beautifully wooded campus featuring rows upon rows of plants and flowers.

“Now Mako-chan, don’t—” Usagi didn’t get the chance to finish before the bus doors opened and her best friend flew down the steps. “—go overboard…” she sighed, following less energetically. She perked up, however, upon realizing how many cute guys were wandering around and donned her signature flirty smile. She received a lot of double-takes since no one was accustomed to seeing a typical Japanese girl with such atypical true-blue eyes and corn silk hair.

At the opposite end of the fair, Makoto was in botanical heaven. She reaffirmed that she would return home with just two plants instead of enough to start her own nursery. Right away she fell in love with a bright red bromeliad in an attractive pot. The boy at the table locked eyes with her, summoning her with a megawatt smile. “How much?” Makoto asked.

“That was already far less than the bromeliad’s worth. Someone had obviously taken good care of it; its leaves were deep green without any evidence of rot and the flower itself was over a foot tall. “Forty,” she agreed, surrendering the bills. The planter pot matched the décor she and Usagi had chosen, too. What a score!

With one of her long arms wrapped around the bromeliad, Makoto carefully perused the rest of the
fair. Most people moved out of her way but there were a few kids running amok; luckily she was tall enough to hold her treasure above their heads. Eventually she spied a shelf of orchids in a dizzying array of varieties and colors, but she decided to contrast the bromeliad and only looked at cool-hued ones. She ended up choosing a violet moth orchid and a beautiful blue Vanda, which was quite rare. She quickly realized it was impossible to carry the large bromeliad and both orchids so she moved all three plants to a vacant table and stared at them, perplexed. Where was Usagi when she could make herself useful?

“Pardon, do you want some help with those?”

She turned around to face a broad, muscular chest. The man’s sculpted pecs strained against his purple t-shirt reading “Fear the Dawgs”. Makoto, considered Amazonian back home in Tokyo and tall for a woman in general, had to crane her neck to view his countenance. He was around her age; not a man at all, just some guy. He had auburn hair, deep brown eyes, and smooth bronze skin that people who artificially tanned would never achieve. He had wide, full lips, a sharp jawline, and his chin had a slight cleft, the whole of him presenting the image of typical masculine athleticism offset by a charmingly boyish smile.

“Sure, thanks,” Makoto answered after her assessment. “You can carry these orchids for me.” The guy faltered for an instant and she smirked, knowing he had expected the heavier bromeliad. She was no fragile maiden; her outfit simply concealed her muscle tone.

“Where to?” he asked, holding the delicate flowers out of harm’s way.

“I need to find my friend,” Makoto said. “She’s a short blonde wearing a pink sundress.” As an afterthought she added, “Her name is Usagi.”

He nodded and glanced from side to side while following her through the crowd. “And what’s your name?”

“Makoto Kino,” she replied.

“That’s Japanese, right?” She hummed as a confirmation, not quite in the mood for small talk. Thankfully the guy got the hint and trailed her in silence until they arrived at the main lawn. “I didn’t see her. Did she go into the school?” Makoto had made that comment about lunch… and Usagi had a black hole for a stomach. Before she could suggest they head inside he took a deep breath and bellowed, “Usagi, where are you?!”

Within moments she emerged from the perennial booths, cautiously approaching the giant boy standing beside her friend. “There you are!” she said to Makoto, “I had no idea where you ran off to! Who’s this?”

“Just an oke trying to help,” he answered, grinning.

“I love your accent!” Usagi exclaimed. “Where are you from?”

“Usa-chan, we have accents. Don’t be rude.”

He shrugged. “It’s all right. I’m from Johannesburg.”

“Where’s that?” Makoto face-palmed; her BFF was terrible at geography.

“South Africa. And my name’s Nicholas.” His hand completely enveloped Usagi’s as they shook.

“Great, good, terrific,” Makoto griped. “It was nice meeting you, Nicholas, but we need to go.
There’s a bus we have to catch.”

Usagi gave her friend a very specific look. It said: “This guy is cute! If he’s looking for plants you have something in common! You should give him your number.”

Makoto’s return look said: “Hell no.”

The blonde narrowed her eyes and donned a small, devious smile. “So Nicholas, do you have a last name?”

“Meyer,” he answered.

“Do you live around here?”

He glanced down at his shirt in astonishment. “You don’t recognize the Huskies? I go to UW.”

She giggled airily. “Sorry, I didn’t know! We’re kind of new to the area.”

“I see. Well, here comes your bus.” Nicholas surrendered the orchids to Usagi and smiled amicably. “It was nice meeting you both. Enjoy the sun while you can, it’s rare this time of year.” She nodded her thanks and watched him walk away. As soon as he was out of earshot Makoto scowled at her.

“What was all that for? I just needed him to carry my plants.”

Usagi rolled her eyes as they boarded the bus. “You can be such an ice queen sometimes! You didn’t even know his name until I came along!”

“You made everything awkward when you came along. So what if he had an accent? What if he’s self-conscious about it? Who cares where he’s from or what school he goes to? We’re never going to see him again.”

Her last sentence was so pointed that Usagi knew it would be futile to keep discussing why Nicholas Meyer seemed like good boyfriend material. He was tall, chivalrous, built like a bronze god, and he had a ruggedly-handsome look going on. Makoto hadn’t even given him a chance to grow on her! But Usagi would give her another one. She knew his full name and that he went to the University of Washington. She could find him in the student directory, get his email address, and hopefully provide an opportunity for another interaction.

‘Some day Mako-chan will thank me for this!’

Chiba Mamoru liked eating at Amabie. It was a sushi bar-café that served a variety of artisanal teas instead of coffee like most places in Seattle, and he always ordered green tea with honey while doing research. One wall of the café was an aquarium full of tropical fish and the others were decorated with nautical items and classical Japanese artwork including woodblock paintings. Beach glass mobiles and glass float balls hung from the ceiling like precious treasures in a sea cave, providing a serene environment. He had the misfortune of moving into an apartment complex with neighbors who liked to throw parties and blast annoying music every other weekend.

Amabie was south of the U District in a neighborhood called Montlake. Mamoru discovered the eatery by complete accident after someone in his research group told him about the Japanese garden in Washington Park. When he went to check it out he became hopelessly lost; he ended up crossing an entire golf course and walked into the café to ask for directions, but had dinner before returning to campus. He’d been a regular ever since.
At 2:30 Mamoru was seated at his usual table working on his dissertation when the bells on the door jingled, and he surreptitiously admired the girl wearing a dark blue cook’s uniform as she headed for the kitchen. She crafted the desserts in the cold case, miniature morsels that were works of art in their own right. Mamoru thought the girl looked more alluring than the edible pieces she created, deducing she was only half Japanese. Her skin had pink undertones instead of beige, she had wavy golden brown hair, and her eyes were bright green in addition to lacking an epicanthic fold. She was also very tall, so Mamoru assumed that one of her parents were of Germanic or Scandinavian heritage.

Genetics were an important aspect of Mamoru’s program at UW, and it helped that he’d been interested since childhood. He liked guessing the heritages of those around him, always observing in silence. Seattle offered a very diverse range of people to study yet allowed him to remain incognito. He didn’t stand out at all but the dessert chef did, and he tried working up the courage to talk to her every day. He just didn’t want to come off as creepy.

‘Forget about her and get back to work,’ he told himself, logic pulling him from such contemplations. Mamoru resumed compiling arguments for and against vaccinations, a tiresome subject since everyone had data to validate both sides. Researching research was sometimes a task of its own because studies were supported by statistics and statistics could be manipulated to produce certain results. So far Mamoru had concluded that American studies tended not to be as trustworthy as those from Asia and Europe, and he made sure to include plenty of evidence when it came to discrediting them.

“What’cha reading?” someone asked from beyond his shoulder. Mamoru jumped in surprise and rotated to find one of the pretty waitresses smiling at him. “You gonna have something besides tea today?”

“I don’t think so…” he answered, blushing when his stomach rumbled in protest. The waitress laughed and held up her notepad expectantly while Mamoru skimmed the menu. “I’d like the number five combo and another pot of tea, please.”

“Combo number five,” the girl repeated. After putting in his order the kitchen staff cheered and ‘Mambo No. 5’ came through the dining room speakers.

Mamoru smiled ruefully at their lighthearted attitude and kept researching. Sometime later his food arrived and he ate absentmindedly, engrossed by an article claiming the H1N1 virus had been artificially engineered for population control. Then he caught someone in his peripheral vision and turned from his laptop. The dessert chef was walking by! Mamoru straightened and locked his eyes on her, tracking her to a booth across the room. She sat down opposite a girl with blonde, curled, shoulder-length hair. His focus shifted to this other girl, tracing the clingy fabric of her blue dress down her narrow torso to equally slender legs beneath the table. He wondered if she was a model. Then, in slight disappointment, he wondered if she was the dessert chef’s girlfriend.

He checked the time and balked; it was past 18:00 already and he hadn’t left his seat in three hours. Mamoru stood up and was unable to restrain a groan as his joints unlocked. They were loud enough to draw the girls’ attention, making him freeze in embarrassment. The brunette wore an expression that clearly said it was his fault for being a workaholic while the blonde looked sympathetic. Mamoru went to the restroom before meandering outside for some fresh air. It was late September and dusk was just about to surrender to full night. He returned inside and was surprised to see the blonde girl sitting at his table, approaching her cautiously.

“My friend says you’re a regular here and thinks you need a study aid.” She gestured for him to sit down, smiling warmly. “I ordered mocha mochi ice cream.”

“Uh, thanks…” Mamoru managed, a bit dumbfounded. The girl was texting instead of looking at
him. “But how can there be mochas when they don’t serve coffee?”

“It’s just mocha-flavored. My friend makes it herself and it’s way better than Starbucks.” She put her phone away and flashed a set of perfect teeth. “So what’s your name? Everyone’s dying to know.”

“Everyone?” Mamoru repeated in confusion. The girl’s eyes flicked passed him and he turned around to see the three female servers clustered behind the counter. They giggled and started whispering to each other as Mamoru faced forward again, reddening. “I’m, uh, Chiba Mamoru,” he said.

“Nice to meet you, Chiba-san,” she chirped. “I’m Tsukino Usagi. For future reference, the girls who work here are Rachel, Cammy, Jessica, and Makoto.”

“Makoto… Is she your friend, the dessert chef?”

Usagi’s eyes widened before she laughed, the sound a fairy would make. “How’d you know that? She’s not a pastry chef yet, but that’s why she’s going to the Art Institute. I go there too– I’m studying fashion merchandising.” She leaned forward expectantly. “So what are you working on?”

“Oh, this? It’s my dissertation, PhD research. I’m in my fifth year of the medical scientist training program at UW.”

“Oh, so you’re a doctor?”

Mamoru smiled a little at her impressed tone. “More of a lab technician, but I’d still be useful in the event of triage.” They chatted for a while about their respective areas of study, with many more questions coming from Usagi about biology which Mamoru gladly expounded upon. Eventually the server named Rachel delivered their ice cream. There wasn’t really anything mochi about it other than the fact that Makoto used rice milk to make it. “This is good,” Mamoru commented after a few bites. “The consistency is like gelato but lighter.”

“I’ve never tried that,” Usagi said, turning the spoon upside-down in her mouth.

“You’ve never had gelato?” Mamoru was aghast; it was one of his only vices. “I have to take you to this Italian bistro downtown. Their gelato is the best and they serve delicious authentic food.”

Usagi grinned around her spoon. “Okay, it’s a date.” She abruptly blanched. “I don’t mean a date-date, I just met you!” She tittered as Mamoru regarded the table bashfully. ‘Way to make it awkward, Dumb Bunny!’

He focused on scraping up every bit of ice cream. “So, how long has Makoto been working here?”

“Since June– as soon as we moved in with our other friend we went job hunting. This place was a little farther than Mako-chan wanted to commute but the owners were really impressed with her cooking skills. They hired her on the spot!”

June, huh? Too bad he only discovered Amabie last month. “Where do you work?”

Usagi looked extremely pleased with herself. “I got hired at Nordstrom. My employee discount is so awesome and I’m, like, right in the middle of the fashion center. There’s Macy’s nearby, Juicy Couture, H&M, Nordstrom Rack of course…” She stopped upon noticing Mamoru’s blank expression and examined his attire. He wore an unlabeled black jacket over a gray shirt, blander than bland. Usagi glanced at her phone to check the time and realized it was almost 19:00, the end of Makoto’s shift. “Well it was nice meeting you, Chiba-san. I’m glad I decided to talk to you.”
Mamoru sat there for a moment. On the one hand he was saddened that he hadn’t even exchanged a
greeting with Makoto, but on the other Usagi had been very easy to converse with. He generally
tried not to interact with complete strangers yet had easily opened up to her. “It was nice meeting you
too, Tsukino-san. I won’t forget about our gelato date.” The corner of his lips turned up in hopes that
she’d laugh. Her cheeks flushed instead and her bright blue eyes lowered to the floor. That bubbly
exterior had faded a little; was Usagi embarrassed by the thought of hanging out with him? Or,
maybe, was she blushing because he’d made a good first impression for once and she actually looked
forward to going out with him?

There was nothing physically remarkable about Mamoru. He was a tall but spindly, and a few peers
jokingly called him manorexic because he tended to work right through the standard three meals a
day. He didn’t consider himself handsome by any means although he was proud of his unusual eyes.
They were deep blue in color, dark and enigmatic. Usagi met them when Makoto tugged her arm,
anxious to get home. “I can’t wait for it,” she said shyly. After they left Mamoru fell back into his
seat, unaware that he’d been sitting on the edge. He glanced around and saw he was the only
customer left in the café so he gathered his things and headed home.

His lab began early but he couldn’t sleep. He paced his apartment in Radford Court, replaying his
interaction with Usagi dozens of times. He hadn’t gotten her number so he couldn’t call and work
out the details of their date. The more he internally said that word the more anxious he became. He
barely had any experience in the dating department having gone out with approximately one girl in
high school. That relationship lasted five months before she got fed up with the fact that Mamoru
wanted to study instead of spend time with her. Only a total loser like him would choose homework
over “hanging out” while her parents were on vacation.

He was older but hardly wiser when it came to this ritual. What should he wear? Fashion was
important to Usagi but Mamoru thought it was trivial. He couldn’t drive her around because he didn’t
own a car, thus forcing them to depend on public transportation. Did she expect him to hold doors
and pay for everything? What if she wanted to hold his hand while they walked around? Should he
kiss her at the end of it all? Mamoru’s spiral was interrupted by a knock at the door; he opened it to a
shirtless young man who put his physique to shame. He tried glaring at Mamoru but his eyes were
too laden with slumber. “Dude, it’s two in the morning. I’ve been listening to you walk around
through my ceiling for hours. Could you go to sleep already?”

“I’m really sorry,” Mamoru sputtered, “I’m just really nervous about a date I have with a really pretty
girl.” He didn’t care how pathetic that made him sound.

The guy actually grinned. “Oh, I see. Just ignore what they say about the dating league and go for it!
Try to get some rest, okay?” Mamoru nodded and closed the door, feeling guilty that he’d disturbed
someone. He was just as bad as his bass-happy neighbors.

It was times like this he wished for an older brother to give him advice, or even a father figure. He’d
been orphaned at the age of eight after his parents died in a car accident, and he couldn’t remember
them or his own name upon waking up in the hospital. Doctors and police officers kept repeating
things until he accepted them as the truth but deep down he always wondered if he really was Chiba
Mamoru. No extended family members had shown up to become his guardian so he lived in an
orphanage for a few years until being adopted by a wealthy gentleman. He was the Benefactor; he
didn’t want to be called Dad or Father. He wasn’t really involved in Mamoru’s life at all besides
paying for absolutely everything he needed. The Benefactor bought whatever he wanted, mostly
books and toys in his youth, then sent him to a prestigious middle school even though he had
mediocre test scores. The Benefactor paid for night school courses so Mamoru could test into an
even more elite high school. People on the streets had stared at his uniform, admiring his presumable
genius from afar.
Mamoru was very knowledgeable regarding mental medical matters due to his obsession with trying to reverse his amnesia. He had read everything on the subject and even flew around the world to meet with experts. The last doctor he visited regarded him rather pityingly and said that if his mind wanted to regain its lost memories it would do so of its own accord; there was no way to force them to come back. Therapy hadn’t worked. Hypnosis hadn’t worked. Mamoru had even gone on spiritual journeys with the help of questionable substances, none of which freed his mind like they promised, so he gave up after high school. He realized that if he kept trying to obtain the impossible he’d end up in a sanatorium. Even though he was pursuing a PhD he didn’t desire it as much as he wanted to cure his amnesia. Hopefully he could put his accumulated knowledge to good use and develop a cure for some debilitating mental disease.

‘I’m a complete basket case,’ Mamoru thought as he attempted to get comfortable in bed. ‘I have no business trying to go on dates like an average guy. I should just forget everything about Usagi.’ But try as he might he couldn’t dismiss the way she had smiled at him. That smile seemed to light up his entire life, banishing the shadows that usually encroached upon his mind when he slept. For the first time in a long while he dreamed peacefully.
Joe needed a new place to live. Since moving into Radford Court Apartments he’d been subjected to aural torment every other weekend, though it was far worse during the summer months when subwoofer-powered EDM made his walls vibrate on a near daily basis. Much to his chagrin most of the building’s tenants attended these legendary parties so the landlord paid his single complaint no mind. One Saturday in September Joe paused from writing his sustainability report to look up at the ceiling. The fourth floor remained utterly silent. He worked until 23:00 and tentatively went to bed, keeping an ear open for any sounds of an impending party. But none came; instead a slight yet persistent creak woke him an hour later. He listened for a while, realizing the occupant above him was pacing. With an annoyed grunt he got out of bed and didn’t bother putting on a shirt before heading up the stairwell and knocking on the door.

A skinny Asian guy answered, and when Joe chastised him about his pacing he explained that he was nervous for a date. Joe was sympathetic since he’d been awkward around girls, too… until age twelve, then puberty struck and his Slavic genetics presented themselves in all their glory. During the last few years at his Catholic school female peers had practically thrown their panties at him, not that he took advantage. There had been pressure from his parents to attend university in his hometown so he might earn the affection of an administrator’s daughter, but Joe hated politics; he wanted to do something that benefited the world instead. Because of his love for nature he decided to study environmental science at the University of Washington. The culture of Seattle was a lot different than that of eastern Russia but the scenery ensured he didn’t get too homesick.

He spent Sunday morning browsing housing ads, expanding his search to nearby communities because everything in the U District was overpriced. A tiny ad eventually caught his eye, reading: *Seeking roommates for Shoreline home. $500/month rent includes utilities & cable/internet. Call to schedule interview.*

Shoreline was a ways north of campus but Joe owned a vehicle and didn’t mind commuting. He dialed the provided number and was disappointed to get an answering machine. “Hi, my name is Josef Levin and I saw your rental ad online. I’m a senior at the University of Washington, I have a job, and I’m trying to escape the party scene. If you decide to consider me, give me a call at this number…” After showering, shaving, and getting dressed Joe returned to the kitchenette and found a message on his phone. ‘*Mr. Levin? Sorry I missed you. I’d like to meet today if you have the time.*’ He jammed the receiver into his ear while writing down the address; it was a bit hard to understand because the speaker had a thick Irish accent. He smiled at his hurried handwriting and headed out. The house in Shoreline could very well be his salvation.

Joe felt bad when he roared onto Cherry Loop in his Suzuki Samurai, a small old SUV that also served as the environmental class’ exploration rig. ‘*The ad couldn’t possibly be for one of these houses…’* But the GPS confirmed he was in the right area. He parked in front of a three bay garage and apprehensively walked up the front steps. When he rang the doorbell he heard it echo through the interior and grew nervous, wondering what kind of person lived here. The guy on the phone hadn’t sounded very old. Maybe this was his parents’ vacation home and they wanted to make extra money by renting it out. Had he read the ad correctly? Was it really only going to cost him 500 dollars a month to live in this mansion?

The door opened, revealing a man who immediately held out his hand. “Mr. Levin?” he asked.

They shook firmly. “Yeah, Josef. Please call me Joe.” It sounded weird for someone his age to address him as “mister”.
“Joe, then. I’m Kaelan Burke. Come on in.”

He stepped inside, instantly feeling dwarfed by the vast, empty abode. The walls were bare and skylights illuminated vaulted ceilings. Straight ahead of the entry was what looked like the living room; old leather couches sat around a huge fireplace, and off to the left was a staircase with a carved wooden railing. The floors were all hardwood, probably mahogany, and appeared recently refinished. Joe stopped taking in his surroundings to focus on the owner. “Did you say Burke, as in the museum?”

“Yes. Thomas Burke was my great-great-grandfather.” Joe regarded him skeptically, noting that Kaelan looked nothing like the museum’s founder due to his pale skin, cool gray eyes, and platinum hair. His lashes and brows were silvery as well but he had to be around Joe’s age, no older than 24. “I’ve got a melanin deficiency,” Kaelan explained with a slight sigh. “You were expecting freckles, red hair and green eyes, yeah?”

Guilt washed over him. “Err, well, that is the stereotype…” Joe apologized, hoping he hadn’t sabotaged his chances of moving in. “So the interview?”

“Right. This way, please.” Kaelan led him from the foyer to the kitchen which was as impressive as expected. There were new stainless appliances, granite countertops, maple cabinets, and a breakfast nook with a bay window overlooking the woods and rocky beach beyond. An opening on the opposite wall connected to the dining room but the table and chairs were covered with moving blankets.

“How long have you lived here?” Joe asked.

“A couple weeks,” Kaelan answered, earning a look of surprise. “My granddad left me this house in his will.”

“Oh… I’m sorry for your loss.” The words were automatic but Kaelan shrugged off the condolence.

“I didn’t really know him,” he said. “He was my dad’s dad, and he didn’t stick around after I was born. It was just me and Mum until a month ago. One day I’m up to my elbows in fish guts and the next I get a letter saying I’ve got to come to America to claim an inheritance.” He paused, smirking. “This house isn’t even the best part. The old man left me a big chunk of the family fortune so now I’m stupidly wealthy.”

Joe shook his head at the notion of unexpectedly inheriting millions of dollars and briefly wondered if he had any estranged relatives. “Why do you want roommates, then? You’d no longer have this place all to yourself.”

Kaelan shrugged at the question but his answer belied his indifference. “It’d be too easy to go wild with this money. I can’t take it back to Eire, something about taxes. Since I have to stay here I figured I should try making some friends… and it’s odd hearing my voice echo in every room. So I thought if I gave some people a nice place to stay they could help me figure out how to spend my millions in ways that benefit even more people. That way I can do right by my granddad.”

Joe beamed; he liked the fact that Kaelan had integrity. And there was something else about the man he couldn’t quite figure out. It was like he knew Kaelan from somewhere, but Ireland and Russia were a few thousand kilometers apart. Joe tried to suppress his feeling of déjà vu while answering questions about his degree and final project, his hobbies and interests, his job and his future plans. When Kaelan finished he leaned back on a bar stool, smiling a little. “I’ve only got one question left— when would you like to move in?”
Mina had a pretty sweet job on campus. She was only a secretary in the sports medicine center, but there was an upside to sitting in front of a computer and filing paperwork: she got to check out all the sexy athletes as they came in for physicals, and it was football season. Some of the potential players loitered without their shirts on and tossed intrigued glances her way, wondering if she wanted what they were offering. She really, really did, but Ami would kill her. Getting distracted by boys was one reason why she’d almost been held back in high school. Mina would never admit it, but without Ami to keep her on track she definitely wouldn’t have gotten into college. She was thankful that Ami’s strict tutoring had raised her grades enough to earn a scholarship for the University of Washington. They were even roommates, which was nice because Mina didn’t know if she could handle the stress of freshman year without her best friend at her side.

She averted her gaze from the male specimen at the water fountain to focus on a sheaf of exam results. Before she could go deposit them into the Husky coach mailboxes another tall, muscular guy walked in and came to a stop before the front desk. Her eyes flicked up to find him staring at her in bewilderment. “Usagi?” he asked.

“Oh, no…” Mina pointed at her name tag.

He shook his head and smiled apologetically. “You look just like someone I met last week. Are you from Japan too?”

“Yeah, Tokyo,” Mina answered, wondering if the boy had encountered a gyaru somewhere. She didn’t identify with that subculture since her blonde hair and tan skin were natural due to years spent on beaches and in chlorinated pools. “So are you here for a physical?”

“Yeah, I think it’s at twelve-thirty. Name’s Nicholas Meyer.”

She consulted the day’s scheduled appointments. “Sorry, you’re early. It’s at one-fifteen.”

Nicholas dragged a hand down his face and groaned. “I was hoping to avoid my roommate for a bit, he’s in such a mood. Theater major.”

Mina gave a short laugh. “I’m rooming with my best friend and she’s already stressing even though we haven’t had tests yet. Pre-med.”

“That’s justifiable– my roomie freaked out ‘cause I was humming.” Nicholas rolled his eyes and leaned on the counter, directing an easy smile at the girl. Clearly he wanted to stay and chat, and since he was attractive Mina obliged.

“So what position do you play? I’m assuming you’re on the football team.”

“Yeah, I’m an outside linebacker. Do they even play football in Japan?”

“Some schools have teams, it’s catching on slowly. We usually call it ‘American football’ because football means soccer—”

“Isn’t that annoying?” Nicholas interjected, slapping the desk with his large palm. “Americans are always inventing words for things that already have perfectly good names! Where I’m from, football is rugby and soccer is diski. They don’t even spell ‘racquet’ the right way here.” He shook his head in mock disdain while Mina laughed, then he leaned in conspiratorially. “If I ask you something will you promise not to call me ignorant?”

She also moved forward until their noses almost touched, narrowing her light blue eyes to scrutinize his very deep brown ones. “That depends on your question.”
“Why do all you Japanese girls speak such good English?”

Mina covered her laugh with one hand. “How many Japanese girls do you know, Mister Meyer?”

“Three, including you.”

“I see. Well, we start learning English in primary school and study all the way through high school. Some people end up becoming teachers themselves or interpreters and translators for big companies. Speaking good English can also get you a job as a tour guide which is good for people who like traveling.”

“Lekker,” Nicholas grinned. His cheeks grew warm as Mina raised an eyebrow. Upon arriving in the States he had quickly discovered that very few people understood his colloquialisms and made a point to adjust his speech patterns. “Ag, sorry…” he mumbled.

“You don’t have to apologize, I got the gist of it.” Mina glanced at the clock and was happy to see that it was time for her lunch break. “Want to grab something to eat with me? You have forty minutes until your physical anyway.” Nicholas agreed but had to retrieve his wallet from his room, much to his annoyance. They trekked northwest across campus and entered Elm Hall.

Mina had not yet been in a boy’s room so she was curious as to what it would look like, standing behind Nicholas while he knocked rhythmically upon the door. “Come on in,” someone answered. The scent of Old Spice greeted her nostrils right away, but Nicholas was an Axe-wearer so it must have belonged to the room’s other occupant. He rotated to face them, giving Mina an intrigued once-over before turning to his roommate. “Who’s this?” he inquired.

“Minako Aino,” she provided, “but call me Mina.”

He held out a hand and said, “Zacharie le Blanc, but I prefer Zach. Enchanté.”

When Mina clasped it he swept her knuckles to his lips, captivating her with hazel eyes of the light brown and blue variety containing blatant desire. He had a masculine voice and haircut offset by rather androgynous facial features; it was easy to picture him rocking a contour. She didn’t think the French was fake given his name and aristocratic air. As if reading her mind Nicholas remarked, “Don’t let him fool you. Zach’s from New Orleans, not France.” Her would-be suitor glared daggers as she stifled a snicker and reclaimed her hand. Nicholas then grunted in annoyance. “Where’s that dang wallet? I know I left it right here…” He began unmaking his bed.

Mina inched further into the room. Nicholas’ half was very tidy and monochromatic except for a tower of brightly-colored CDs with African names she couldn’t pronounce. On his desk was a bulky outdated laptop-drawing tablet combo and miniature world landmarks that appeared to be constructed from pieces of metal. Above his bed was a poster of Nelson Mandela and the quote “Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world.” Oddly she didn’t see a single thing related to football. Zach’s side of the room was basically a tiny arts and crafts store. No two things were the same color or texture and he had a tall shelf packed with knick-knacks, art supplies, tools, and books both new and vintage. If someone asked Mina to describe this boy she would say he lived in controlled chaos. She peered over his shoulder and saw that he was constructing a diorama, a miniature stage complete with fabric scrap curtains and tiny actors. “What’s that for?” Mina asked.

Zach beamed with pride. “It’s my stage lighting project. Check it out.” He flicked a switch on the side of the box and LED bulbs shone down on the cardboard, then he turned a dial and the bulbs cycled through different colors. “Lighting plays a big part in setting the tone of a scene. This baby will earn me extra credit for sure.” Nicholas cleared his throat and Zach shot him an annoyed
look. “Thanks to you, I guess. Perk of having an engineer for a roommate.”

Mina was temporarily taken aback. “I thought you were a football player?”

“I’m actually majoring in civil engineering, but I decided to try out for the team this season.” Nicholas flashed a self-deprecating smile. “I know I don’t look like someone suited for anything other than sports.”

Mina bowed deeply. “I’m sorry. I guess it really is true that you can’t judge a boy by his muscles.”

In order not to inconvenience Mina during her lunch break, Zach surrendered Nicholas’ wallet and watched him walk out the door with envy in his heart. She was beyond gorgeous, a real catch, but Nicholas was such a clod that he had no idea how to handle a girl like her. They were much better suited to being friends. If Mina started coming around more often Zach could work his magic on her without seeming too obvious. She had a fantastic body and probably knew how to use every inch of it in bed; if she didn’t, he could teach her.

Now that his diorama was complete he had to write up the paper that went with it. Zach was a fabulous procrastinator but still received good grades since he worked better under pressure. He made his way to the library where he was unsurprised to see hundreds of freshmen fueled by coffee and desperation working to get their assignments finished by tomorrow. He smiled knowingly since he had been just like them last year; as soon as he got to college all he wanted to do was enjoy his newfound freedom. No parents, no more high school drama or two-faced friends, just parties with endless supplies of booze and hot people to hook up with. Zach didn’t particularly care who his dick ended up in as long as they were clean, but every once in a while he came across someone seemingly immune to his seductive charms and that only made him want them all the more. There was such a target in his crosshairs currently, a female library assistant who reeked of sexual repression. He knew from asking around that she was a freshman but she was as serious and focused as a senior, maybe because she was pre-med, something to do with the brain. Zach wasn’t concerned with her studies unless they included him, which they never did. Even as he sat down on the front desk she didn’t look up from her notebook. “Bonjour, Ami.”

“It’s Ami,” the girl stated, “ah-mee. Why are you incapable of saying my name correctly?”

Zach grinned; he loved teasing her. “Mademoiselle Ami, are you ready to do me the honor of having dinner with me?”

“Only in your dreams,” she answered. “On second thought, I don’t want you harassing me there either.”

“One could hardly call this harassment,” Zach returned with a flippant wave. “We’re just having a conversation, right?” He shifted forward to inhale her delectable perfume of osmanthus and magnolia. The latter scent stirred recollections of home: outdoor holiday parties, chasing fireflies, sunlit morning mist between willow trees… He shook his head before bad memories could ruin the moment. “You’d be surprised by what you do in my dreams, Ami.”

“No doubt I’m naked in some Kama Sutra position.” She said this in a monotone that made him laugh.

“Not at all! But I can certainly turn that vision of yours into a reality.” Ami finally released her pencil and locked her almond-shaped eyes on the boy, their dark intensity sending a shiver down his spine. She was very aesthetically pleasing and he made sure to savor the moment when anger banished her otherwise impassive mask. Zach leaned even closer, his lips curving into something between a smile
and a smirk. “All we do in my dreams is walk through gardens and share sweet kisses. Tell me what I have to do to make that a reality with you.”

“I want you to leave me alone,” she stated, returning to her notebook. Zach sighed dramatically and hopped off the desk, tossing a wave to some theater students from last year’s production. He started toward them but paused and spun around.

“Hey Ami, how many other Asians do you know?” She groaned in exasperation. “Have you met this girl named Mina Aino? Sort of a strawberry blonde?”

Ami folded her arms and scowled. “As a matter of fact I do know Mina. She’s my best friend and also happens to be my roommate, but she’s definitely not your type.”

“All beautiful people are my type,” Zach replied with a wink, sauntering away.

Ami really wanted to slap him, anything to wipe that smug look off his face. Her distaste for the boy she hardly knew was quickly replaced by concern for her truest friend in the entire world. How did Zach even know about Mina? Had they met somewhere? He certainly didn’t look like an athlete so he wouldn’t have any reason to go to the sports clinic. Maybe he had a friend who scouted for girls he could seduce. How nefarious.

Thanks to Zach she could no longer focus on her homework. With a sigh Ami stood up and grabbed the cart of books to be shelved, thanking another assistant for organizing them. Hardly anyone glanced away from their papers or computers as she skirted the tables. She was silent and invisible to them, just the way she wanted it, but she couldn’t deter Zach no matter which tactic she tried. He hit on her at least three times a week even though she’d made it clear she wasn’t interested. He obviously had a privileged upbringing and therefore felt entitled to whatever he wanted, but without a shred of humility Ami would never see him as anything other than a self-absorbed jerk. As she slipped dictionaries and thesauruses into their spaces she thought of a few choice adjectives for the boy, muttering them to her own ears.

She rounded a corner and gasped; Zach was seated right in front of her! Ami froze and waited for him to turn around with that arrogant smirk on his face… but he didn’t move. He must not have heard her. She released a breath and cautiously resumed her task, shooting glares at Zach all the while. He hunched over a touchscreen laptop, the stylus in his hand working furiously. Ami caught a glimpse of the monitor and what appeared to be a fashion sketch. She moved closer, intrigued by the growing amalgamation of lines.

She hated to admit that Zach was a good artist. He drew a typically-elongated croquis but gave her a realistic expression, a fierce look indicative of the model’s personality. The dress he sketched had a sweetheart neckline, cold shoulders, a corset belt, and ended mid-thigh. It was definitely something Mina would wear. He drew a pair of cage heels on the croquis’ feet, tilted his head in consideration, and selected a color palette from a menu. Some girl sitting across from Zach coughed and gave him a meaningful look, prompting him to spin in his chair as Ami retreated. He simply presented the sketch to her. “What do you think? Is it worthy of Paris?”

“I wouldn’t know,” she evenly replied. Fashion wasn’t really her forte much less haute couture. “Aren’t you supposed to be a theatrical director, not a fashion designer?”

Zach shrugged. “I want to do it all— writing, casting, costume and set design… I don’t want a bunch of people ruining my production.” Ami just stood there, a little stunned by the fact that he hadn’t yet contaminated their conversation with innuendo. “Do you want help with those?” He pointed at the cart and smiled kindly, though it still resembled a smirk, and grabbed some books before she could articulate a response. “I know exactly where these go. Seven-ninety, performing arts.”
Ami shook her head and resumed the task at hand. She replaced texts on painting, photography, architecture and music, then pushed on to history. Zach jogged to catch up and reached for another stack of books, but she stepped in his way. “What are you doing?” she demanded.

He blinked in surprise. “I thought I was helping you.”

“I didn’t ask for it.”

“I know, but you didn’t answer when I asked.”

Ami crossed her arms and glared. “You shouldn’t presume silence to be a confirmation.”

Neither gave an inch; Zach didn’t put the textbooks down nor did Ami move aside. She didn’t feel bad for confronting him since it was perfectly reasonable for her to be suspicious of his sudden change in demeanor. He couldn’t make suggestive remarks every time he saw her and expect her to disregard them because he was acting like a decent person now. She’d seen Mina fall for that trick more than once.

Eventually Zach sighed. “Fine, I’ll get out of your hair.”

‘And stay out!’ Ami wanted to say, holding her tongue. Zach surrendered the books, held up his hands, and walked backwards out of the aisle as she lifted her chin in triumph. Once he disappeared she released an irritated breath. If she wasn’t already certain that Zach was pursuing Mina, Ami would have asked her best friend if his change in tactic meant he was genuinely interested in her, not just a ploy to get in her pants.
Rei was known as “that girl with the glasses” on campus; sunglasses, not reading glasses. They were a stylish Oakley pair, the lenses coated with thin layers of clear paint containing crystal particles in multiple colors. Rei was rather proud of herself for coming up with this solution to her vision problem since doctors had been unable to diagnose what was wrong with her eyes. As a child she would burst into tears upon the sight of any other human being, including her own parents. To this day she felt guilty that she never gave her mother a moment of peace even when she was dying of leukemia.

Upon entering middle school Rei stopped seeing optometrists and started researching her illness on her own only to discover she possessed what occultists called an open third eye, supposedly enlightening her with the ability to see auras. When she took her eyes off the ground and really started looking at people, this explanation made sense because everyone around her radiated an intense color, hence the filter. To offset the constant chromatic assault Rei owned mostly black things, and her secondary identifier was “that goth chick” even though there was nothing gothic about her lifestyle.

She made her way to downtown Seattle for some autumn shopping. Rei’s last splurge had been on furnishing her apartment one year ago, but before moving to America her father had said she should feel free to buy anything she needed. Apparently Hino Takashi’s politician salary was so great he had no qualms about giving his daughter a limitless credit card, not that Rei really took advantage of it despite their strained relationship. They had only been slightly closer before her mother’s death. Takashi had no idea how to raise a child and admitted he never planned on having one, which was definitely not what Rei needed to hear after losing her mother. At least he also admitted he truly loved Risa and was unlikely to remarry or produce any more accidental offspring.

Rei breezed through all the high-end department stores. Although she found Nordstrom to be sparsely populated probably because it was lunch time, she didn’t dare remove her glasses because sales associates had a tendency to appear out of thin air. One tried to sneak up on her as she lingered in the perfume section but she ascended an escalator before the woman could attack with a sales pitch. In the denim department she was happy to discover black jeans as an autumn trend, and she wasn’t alone. A tall girl exited a dressing room to examine herself in the mirrors, judging a flared pair. “Those look good on you,” Rei commented. The girl turned and eyed her all-black ensemble. “I guess you would know,” she said, smiling. “I just wish they weren’t so expensive. This is one of the only places I can get long-inseam jeans.”

“I’m sorry. I bet it’s nice being tall, though— no one can look down on you.” The girl’s eyes widened. She had probably never thought about that before, but Rei’s perspective of the world was a lot different than most. She lowered her glasses a little, catching a burst of lush, grassy green. Green people tended to be honest, affectionate, and energetic. “Levi’s has long lengths. You could check there to save some money,” Rei suggested.

“Thanks, but my friend is letting me use her employee discount since she’s working right now. And I kind of felt like treating myself.” She then bowed. “I’m Kino Makoto.”

“Hino Rei,” she replied. “I like your earrings.”

Makoto brushed one of the pink roses with a diamond in the center, a birthday gift from her late parents. “Thanks. I like your sunglasses.”
She didn’t ask why Rei was wearing them indoors which made her happy. She could already tell Makoto was a very straightforward person who didn’t like frills. There were a lot of people like that at her school. “You don’t go to Bastyr, do you?” she inquired.

“Nope, the Art Institute. But I was just there for the horticulture fair. I got this massive bromeliad and a couple orchids.” Makoto then rolled her eyes. “And I also met this guy who my friend wants me to marry.”


“I doubt it, he was visiting from UW. At least that’s what he said.” She shrugged and entered the changing room, talking loudly through the door. “Bastyr sounds really cool, though. If I’d known about it I might have applied there. They have an organic cooking program, right?”

“Yes, there are bachelor’s and master’s in nutrition and culinary arts. Do you like to cook?”

“Yeah, but I’m more into baking. I’m going to the Art Institute to become a pastry chef. What do you do?” Makoto reemerged, looking genuinely curious.

“I’m studying acupuncture and Chinese medicine,” Rei answered.

She shuddered. “That thing with the needles? I hate needles. But hey, I bet these skinny jeans would look great on you.” They spent half an hour shooting the breeze and not once did Rei feel like Makoto was waiting around for something better to do. She did ask if Rei was into visual kei or lolita fashion; maybe if they actually became friends she’d explain why she wore so much black. When they had wasted enough time and only picked out one pair of jeans each they headed down to the first-floor checkout. Rei followed dutifully until she was halted by an arm being flung across her face. “What the hell is he doing here?” Makoto hissed.

“Who?” Rei asked. She ducked beneath the arm and saw a cute blonde cashier talking to a rather plain-looking boy, and she wondered how Makoto knew who it was.

“That guy is always hanging out at the restaurant where I work. Last week Usagi came by so we could go home together but she ended up talking to him until my shift ended, and apparently he wants to take her out for gelato. He’d never said a word to anyone besides the waitresses before.” Rei frowned and looked at the boy without her glasses. His aura was gold, a highly unusual color indicative of personal growth or achieving enlightenment. And she saw something else that gave her an involuntary shiver. “See, isn’t he weird? I definitely do not want him hanging around my best friend.”

“Wait, it’s not that!” But Makoto was already marching toward him.

Usagi couldn’t believe it when Mamoru walked up to her checkout stand. The fact that he came all the way from UW to see her filled her stomach with butterflies. For a full minute after saying “hi” they just stood there smiling at one another. Truthfully, Mamoru wasn’t sure what to do next. He didn’t even know when Usagi had a break or what time she got off work. Also truthfully he was quite enamored with the single-sleeved top she wore, wondering why the milky curve of her shoulder was so alluring. Eventually he found some words. “So when do you have a break? The bistro is only a few blocks from here.”

Usagi glanced at her watch. “I’ll actually be off in twenty minutes. You have really good timing.”

“I try,” Mamoru chuckled, though he thanked his lucky stars at the coincidence. “And don’t worry about having to pay, I’ll cover it.” He praised himself for being assertive.
“Okay. Well, why don’t you look around in the meantime? If you find something you want to buy I can give you my discount.”

If adding designer names to his wardrobe would bring them closer, so be it. Mamoru turned toward the escalator only to nearly run into Makoto and another girl he didn’t recognize. “Are you stalking Usagi?” the brunette demanded, hands on her hips in a power stance.

Mamoru reflexively stepped back. “No, of course not!”

“Then why are you always at Amabie? Do you just sit around waiting for her to show up?”

His mouth opened and closed a few times. Mamoru wasn’t about to admit that he kept going back to see Makoto, not Usagi. He hadn’t even been aware of the blonde’s existence until last week! “I really like the tea and the atmosphere,” he meekly explained. “It helps me focus.”

Makoto deflated a little, eyeing him suspiciously, and the girl in black gently tried pulling her out of his path. She yielded but still glared. Makoto had no idea what was up this guy’s sleeve if he was interested in Usagi. Not that her best friend wasn’t totally awesome, but she was kind of an airhead who didn’t take anything seriously. If Mamoru really was as intellectual as Usagi said, being a medical researcher and all, then she suspected he was only after one thing. The boy slunk away and she lifted her chin, smirking; he was right to be afraid of her. “What was that all about?” Rei asked.

“I just have a feeling he’s up to no good,” Makoto answered. She then let out a huffy breath. “Come on, let’s pay before Usa-chan goes skipping off with him.”

Usagi’s manager suggested she wear heels in order to make herself taller and less susceptible to customer bullying, but heels weren’t exactly the best shoes for walking around downtown. “It’s really not far,” Mamoru assured her for the third time, “just another block.” They headed west toward the waterfront, stopping at a red light. Her feet were killing her; usually she went straight home after work to take a shower and nap.

“Are we really getting close or are you just leading me into unfamiliar territory?” she joked. Mamoru cringed, however, at the second mention of him being a creep within the same hour. “And what’s the name of this place? I’ll look it up on my phone.”

“No need, I know exactly where it is. It’s Italian and I can’t really pronounce it.” He flashed a smile and crossed the street when the light turned green, Usagi’s shoes clacking as she tried to keep pace. With every step her Marc Jacobs pinched and rubbed; why did she suffer in the name of fashion? If her ankles gave out maybe Mamoru would carry her. “See, there it is!” He pointed at a storefront with green trim and tall windows. An Italian flag was painted on the glass and the name was indeed something long and unwieldy. A bell on the door jingled when they walked in, and all of Usagi’s complaints vanished as the scents of freshly-baked bread, rich tomato sauce, fresh herbs and melted cheeses wafted up her nose. She gratefully leaned on the cold case to admire the cartons of glistening gelato. After she requested strawberry cheesecake and Mamoru ordered plain vanilla, they went to a corner table and were treated to a panoramic view of Puget Sound.

Upon the first bite Usagi closed her eyes and moaned in delight. Having sampled every flavor in the bistro Mamoru knew her selection was made from pureed strawberries and chunks of actual cheesecake; it was quite decadent. “How’s yours?” she asked.

“Very smooth. Here, have a taste.” He proffered the spoon under the assumption that she’d take it from him, but she just ate the speckled glob right off it. Mamoru gave his empty utensil a perplexed look. ‘Her lips were on this spoon. It’s like indirectly kissing her.’ He instantly banished the silly
thought.

“That’s really good. Is it made with actual vanilla bean? It tastes so much better than the fake stuff.” Usagi had a sudden epiphany and began laughing, making Mamoru tilt his head. “Sorry, that must have seemed really random. It’s just that Mako-chan is always nagging me about eating healthy. She only cooks with natural ingredients and I’m beginning to understand why.”

“You should consider yourself lucky to have her. I basically subsist on ramen, rice, chicken, and dried fruit.” He laughed, but Usagi’s lower lip slid forward in a sympathetic pout.

“All you do is study, huh?” She stared at her gelato, already knowing the answer. “How do you discover places like this if you don’t have time for it?”

Mamoru sucked in breath. He was a little miffed that she made such a negative assumption about him, but it was true so he couldn’t exactly refute it. “It was during the summer,” he answered. “I’m at UW year-round so during breaks I utilize public transport and walk around. I don’t have much of a family to visit in Japan.” He shrugged and took another bite, but it was bitter.

“Oh, I see,” Usagi said softly. “I’ve only been away from my parents for four months. I’m saving up to visit them during Christmas break. They’ll have a new house by then.”

Although she didn’t elaborate Mamoru knew exactly what she was talking about. Last year a huge explosion had decimated a substantial portion of Tokyo. Millions of people were displaced and a large percentage of them fled the country entirely. The United States opened its arms to the Japanese refugees and many of them settled in Hawaii and along the west coast. After a few more months the Japanese government’s investigation traced the explosion to a research company called Tomoe Laboratories, but the CEO and head scientist perished in the blast. Further investigation had yet to reveal the exact cause of the incident. “Where did they relocate to?” Mamoru asked.

“Tokushima. My dad always wanted to live near the beach.” Usagi lifted a shoulder and all the negativity of their conversation seemingly slid off her. Silence still reigned for a few minutes until Mamoru asked what she liked to do for fun. Usagi tossed her empty gelato cup in the trash and grinned. “C’mon, I’ll show you. This time it’s on me.”

“Where—” was all Mamoru got out before she grabbed his hand and pulled him from his seat. Usagi didn’t let go as they ran down the cobblestone street to Pike Place, pausing beneath the Alaskan Way viaduct to wait for a lull in traffic. Mamoru wondered if she were leading him to the ferry, but then she turned into Pier 57. They passed a seafood restaurant and a few curio shops before arriving at her favorite destination: the arcade.


He laughed. “Absolutely not, I have two left feet.” He glanced around, taking in all the lights and noises. They were the only people in the arcade which felt weirdly intimate, but he knew Usagi was trying to get him to have fun for once in his life. Part of him began to protest but he stifled his misgivings. “I don’t think I know how to play any of these games.”

“No problem, I’ll teach you!”

After an hour Mamoru learned how to kill aliens and race through a city. He managed to hit most of the quarter notes of fast-paced bemani songs but could only watch in awe as Usagi kicked off her heels and sprinted her way through tracks laden with eighth and sixteenth notes. “Makoto is even better than me,” she panted. “She’s good at actual dancing.” She stepped off the stage and regarded
her shoes resentfully; the notion of even walking up the sidewalk to her apartment made her feet ache. With an indolent shrug Usagi left them on the floor and headed into a small alcove with old game cabinets. “Do you know how to joust?” she asked, tossing a grin over her shoulder.

“Only in theory.” Mamoru stood beside her as she fed quarters into the machine.

“Well, this version is super easy. I’m the ostrich and you’re the stork.” Mamoru raised an eyebrow, unable to discern which pixelated bird was which. “You press this button to flap and fly around with the joystick. To kill the green guys you sort of land on their head. Don’t let them land on you. If you run right into them you bounce off. Got it?”

Mamoru wanted more details but Usagi suddenly shouted at him to get off the ground and start lancing green birds. He pressed the button furiously, already feeling his hand cramp up after the first level, but he quickly figured out that it was easiest to sit on the topmost pixelated ledges and let the green birds come to him. His strategy worked well until the fifth level. “Egg wave! Egg wave!” Usagi yelled. “Get them before they hatch!” In his haste Mamoru descended to the first platform and ran to a green pixel on the edge, but a hand came out of the fire and killed him.

“Dammit!” he hissed, immediately flushing at the curse. Usagi found it funny because it meant he was getting into the game. She grabbed all the eggs before he regenerated, then they went on as normal until a message appeared on wave eight. “Beware the unbeatable pterodactyl?” Mamoru repeated.

“Oh crap, I forgot about that. Just stay away from it.” The alcove echoed with their combined button-mashing. Mamoru actually had to fly around because the enemies were getting smarter; some of them bounced off ledges and killed him, but Usagi’s ostrich was always there to avenge him. The pterodactyl finally appeared, flapping incessantly toward Mamoru and releasing a terrifying eight-bit screech. “Go on the middle platform, the one with the crack,” the girl commanded. He landed his stork and the pterodactyl, though he noted it was actually a pterosaur, descended from the top of the screen. Usagi landed behind him as the pterodactyl lunged across the platform right into the lance. The game released five notes of victory. “Owned!” she exclaimed.

“I think my hand is going numb,” Mamoru said, and much to his surprise Usagi just walked away from the game. She retrieved her shoes but didn’t put them on until they had exited onto the sidewalk, where he checked his watch. They had spent a substantial amount of time in the arcade and ferry traffic now dominated the streets. Mamoru could either hop on a bus or grab a taxi to take him back to campus, but either way he’d be trapped in a vehicle for much longer than he wanted. He chastised himself for getting stranded downtown, but then he decided that spending time with Usagi was totally worth it. However, he did have some lab work to prepare for tomorrow. “Usagi-san, could I please use your phone to call a taxi?”

“You’re so polite,” she smiled, batting at him playfully. “But sorry, it’s dead.” She giggled as his expression fell to despair. “Hey, don’t look so glum! My apartment is, like, right there. You can use our house phone.” She began walking north, Mamoru following after a moment’s hesitation. He had never been invited to someone’s home before.

Mamoru assumed the girl in black was the third roommate Usagi mentioned, but when he entered their apartment he was introduced to someone he actually recognized. “I’m a huge fan of yours,” he gushed after bowing to Michiru. He then gave Usagi a look that asked if this was really happening right now.

The virtuoso smiled and returned the greeting. “It’s always a pleasure to meet my fans. I wasn’t expecting there to be so many of them around here. I get recognized almost every time I go out.”
“It isn’t because you’re totally gorgeous or anything,” Usagi said from the fridge. There were usually leftovers from Michiru’s gourmet lunches. “People are always hitting on you when we go somewhere together.”

Mamoru understood why that would happen. Michiru carried herself with the elegance of a mature, self-assured woman, and she was very intellectual as anyone who followed her musical career knew. Usagi was pretty too because she had such a unique look, and she was definitely more approachable than Michiru and Makoto. “How did the three of you become friends?” he asked.

Michiru rolled her eyes a little as Usagi turned to grin at him. “Funny story, actually. I met Makoto in junior high. She transferred into my class and was all cranky because people started spreading rumors about her. One day we were playing dodge ball in P.E. and some jerk threw one right at my head, but Mako-chan jumped in the way and caught it. She threw it back at him and knocked him out!” Mamoru could picture it easily. “She sort of became my bodyguard and we bonded over our love of food. She likes to cook, I like to eat! Then we met Michiru in high school. She performed at our school’s cultural festival and afterward came up to mine and Mako-chan’s booth—”

“And I exclaimed it was the best yakiniku I’d ever had,” Michiru finished. “But that’s just the story Usagi likes to tell. I actually met them because they both had abysmal exam scores and started coming to the same night school where I studied.”

Mamoru smiled but it was far from genuine. He wished he had friends like that. Ever since his parents’ death he’d only been able to rely on himself, his own best friend. Maybe that was why he seemed magnetically attracted to Usagi; she was so inviting, so non-discriminating. She knew he had terrible fashion sense. She knew he was socially awkward. She knew he was a newbie at video games. But the fact she had spent the afternoon with him before inviting him to her home meant she didn’t care about any of those things… or she was just being way too nice. Yet he had a feeling that having Makoto for a friend would dissuade any doormat-like tendencies.

They spent a couple hours in Usagi’s room, Mamoru forgetting all about calling a cab. First she showed off her anime and game collectibles, then she got down to the business of teaching him how to play Kirby Air Ride. There were so many secrets to unlock that Mamoru got completely sucked into the game. Michiru listened to their banter while working on a composition, glad Usagi had made a handsome and gentle new friend.

Makoto returned around 17:00 with several shopping bags in hand, leaving them in the living room and heading straight to the shower. Since Usagi hadn’t shown up at Westlake like she was supposed to after her not-date with the creeper, Rei had taken her place and they shopped until the point of almost dropping. After a quick rinse she donned a towel and headed for her room, halting when she noticed three people sitting at the kitchen table. Makoto slowly turned to face the young man sipping tea from her favorite mug. “What is he doing here?” she frigidly inquired.

“This is Chiba Mamoru,” Michiru answered. “He’s a medical scientist at the UW hospital.”

“I don’t care who he is or what school he goes to. Why is he in my kitchen?” Michiru began to elaborate but Makoto erupted. “It’s bad enough that he stalks me and Usagi where we work! Usa-chan, you said you would meet me at Westlake because you wanted to go to Sephora, so I waited there for a whole hour. You never replied to any of my texts and I had no idea what was going on!”

Usagi frowned. “We went to get gelato as planned, then I took Mamoru to the arcade. My phone died while we were there, then we came here.”

“Chiba-san needed to call a taxi,” Michiru added.
Makoto scoffed. “What, you don’t have a cell phone?” Her eyes flicked over him judgmentally. “I guess you can’t afford one if the way you dress is any indication.”

Mamoru felt an angry prickle in his chest. What the hell was this girl’s issue with him? Was she a raging misandrist or something? He always left a tip for his servers at Amabie. He had been nothing but courteous to each of them. Why was she attacking him like this?

Usagi positioned herself in front of Mamoru, standing as tall as she could make herself. “Leave him alone, Mako-chan. You of all people know you can’t judge others based on what they wear.” This statement made Makoto glower at the floor. “Mamoru is a nice guy, okay? You don’t have to worry about me with him. We’re not in high school anymore.”

Makoto abruptly transitioned from angry to guilty. “I’m sorry, Usa-chan…” she uttered, then she straightened and looked at Mamoru. “I’m sorry for insulting you.” Although curt she sounded sincere enough and he nodded in acceptance. Makoto then spun on her heel and retreated to her room, Usagi following a moment later.

Mamoru sat in the kitchen chair like a statue, unsure what to do. He could go stand out in the cold until the taxi arrived, but he didn’t really want to leave even though Makoto considered him some kind of bad guy. But Usagi wanted to smooth things over so she went with Mamoru down to the front of the building. They sat on a bench beneath a streetlight, listening to traffic trickle across the viaduct until she sighed. “Makoto was just being protective,” she explained. “She saw how bad I was with guys during high school, but I’m not that girl any more. I thought she knew that.”

“I see,” Mamoru said. “She seems… ruthless.”

Usagi gave a slight laugh. “Yeah, that’s how she chased away some of my boyfriends. They couldn’t handle her constantly attacking their egos.”

“Luckily I don’t have much of an ego to destroy.” This earned a small smile from the girl. “Um, listen… I really don’t want to come between you and your friends so we probably shouldn’t hang out any more.”

Usagi stared at him before her lips separated into a grin. “Are you kidding? It’s not every day I meet a guy who can keep up with me at Joust!”

“It was actually kind of fun,” Mamoru admitted.

“Then we *have* to play again– I have it on this arcade pack for my Super NES! We could have a marathon gaming session, or watch movies and order pizza! And I can teach you how to play Mario Kart!”

Mamoru smiled at the suggestions. “That all sounds great. We can do whatever you want as long as I’m able to catch a bus next time.” A light blue taxi pulled up to the curb. He opened the door but didn’t get in yet.

“Yeah, next time…” Usagi inched closer to him. “I have classes every day of the week. Today I had a half shift but I usually work nine to three on Saturday and Sunday. If you drop by after I’m off we can get dinner and hang out, or go somewhere or something. I had fun today and I really wanna see you again.” She directed a blush toward the asphalt.

Mamoru stood with one foot in the cab and the other on the sidewalk, smiling like a fool. This was the first meaningful connection he’d ever made in his life. He had a friend now, someone to talk to and spend time with. “All right,” he said, and Usagi looked up shyly. “We’ll do something next
weekend. It won’t be a date, I promise.”
“So who was that girl you were with yesterday?” Usagi inquired upon finishing her morning routine. “The one wearing all black?”

“Her name is Hino Rei,” Makoto answered, flipping an omelet before sliding it onto Usagi’s plate. “She goes to Bastyr, that school we visited. We’re going to hang out this weekend.”

“Oh, cool.” A pause. “Why was she wearing sunglasses inside?”

“I don’t know, maybe she’s sensitive to light or something.” Makoto sat down across from the blonde, lacing her fingers beneath her chin. “Listen, I’m sorry I was so bitchy last night. I know you can take care of yourself now.” Usagi tilted her head. “It’s just… you’re perfectly awesome the way you are, and I don’t want to see you change for anyone.” She flashed a look of concern before heading to their room to change out of her jogging clothes. “You’d better eat that whole omelet!” she called.

“I will!” Usagi replied, grabbing it and her book bag as she left for class. She knew she should be grateful to have a friend as attentive as Makoto, but deep down it annoyed her to be treated like a princess in need of constant rescue. One of the main reasons they both came to America was so they could have fresh starts as they took the step into adulthood. Usagi just wanted to put the past behind her but Makoto seemed intent on dredging it up whenever possible.

In high school Usagi had been a serial dater. Most of her boyfriends were guys she actually knew, ones she grew up with who developed their own varied interests. And yeah, she had sex with a fair amount of them, but was it wrong for her to crave attention and intimacy? She knew that wasn’t quite where Makoto’s concerns stemmed from. Usagi had a tendency to transform into the girl her boyfriends wanted her to be, abandoning most semblances of her true self while in the relationship. But she wasn’t like that anymore and never would be again.

Makoto had personal hang-ups when it came to men and dating, too; she wasn’t just crusading on behalf of her best friend. When she transferred to Usagi’s high school and had to don a new uniform it didn’t look the same on her as it did the other girls because of her tall, toned physique. Her skirt was shorter, her blouse was tighter, and most of their male peers thought she purposely wore it that way to entice them. She had to deal with lewd comments almost every day in addition to being harassed by total strangers during her commute. Usagi always wondered if Makoto’s devotion to karate was so she could defend herself in the event of an unwanted physical advance.

Usagi knew she would inevitably meet some new, interesting men to flirt with and date in Seattle, but this time she wasn’t going to let anyone walk all over her or tone down her personality for their sake. No, everyone she encountered quickly found out exactly who she was: an easygoing nerd girl whose idea of fun was staying in on the weekends, ingesting copious amounts of junk food, and having marathon sessions of her favorite video games with someone worthy of being her player two. Mamoru had the current distinction of claiming that honor.

Makoto needed her own player two. There had to be a way to prove that not every man was out to get her, that involving them in her life wouldn’t be as dramatic as Usagi unintentionally made it seem. ‘Lead by example, I guess.’ She had to spend more time with Mamoru so Makoto could see what a healthy relationship looked like, an idea she definitely wasn’t opposed to.

When Mamoru exited his apartment building he was somewhat amused to see a bed frame and sofa
sticking awkwardly out of a tiny SUV in the parking lot. Clattering resounded in the stairwell and he rotated to see the blond guy who lived below him hefting a box of small appliances. “You must be moving,” he remarked.

“Yep, to Shoreline!” the guy cheered, throwing the box into his rig. “It’s a little ways north of here but it’s so much quieter. Can’t beat the rent either, only five-hundred bucks a month.

“Five-hundred?” Mamoru repeated in awe. That was less than what he paid for Radford Court, but he couldn’t move out of the U District since he didn’t have a car to commute with. “Well, I hope everything works out. Are you moving because of the people next door to me?”

“Yeah, I really need to focus on my graduate project.” He narrowed his eyes. “Are you telling me you hate them too? I’m not the only one?”

“I really do hate them,” he laughed, and held out his hand. “Mamoru Chiba.”

“A protector, eh? Hajimemashite.” His grip was strong and his hands were calloused from manual labor. “I’m Joe Levin. You know, the place I’m moving has three other rooms for rent. I can give you the landlord’s number if you want to get out of here.”

“Thank you, that would be great.”

Joe scribbled it on a piece of scrap paper and slapped it into Mamoru’s palm. “Take it easy, dude!”

The dark-haired boy felt a twinge of jealousy. He’d lived on campus for five years and was ready for a change of scenery, but there was no sense getting his hopes up when he couldn’t travel back and forth from school.

Once again Mamoru spent all day at Amabie but actually ordered a substantial amount of food to fuel his intense research. At three he realized Makoto hadn’t come in for work and waved at the server of Vietnamese descent named Camille, who glided over with a smile. “She only works Tuesdays, Thursdays, and weekends because she has classes the rest of the week,” she explained.

“Oh… I’m actually trying to get a hold of her friend, Usagi. Do you know her number by chance?”

Cammy put a manicured fingernail to her lips. “I think Ryo might have it. I’ll get it for you.”

Mamoru smiled and thanked her. Now that he’d done it a few times, talking to strangers wasn’t so daunting. Cammy delivered the number on a post-it note along with his teriyaki which he devoured before editing his bibliography. He left a few hours later, heading into Montlake to look for a cell phone. There was no sense having Usagi’s number if he was unable to communicate with her.

Mina and Ami only had two early classes on Thursday, and neither desired to hang out where the other worked on campus. “We can’t just sit here and rot in our room,” Mina declared. “We need to get out and do something! We need to meet hot guys!”

Ami waved away the notion. “You can go meet boys while I stay here and read.”

“What are you reading, anyway?” She leaned down to examine the cover. “The Last Unicorn? Isn’t that a little too fantastical for your taste?”

“It’s actually a decent representation of tropes that are now common in the fantasy genre.”

“Bor-ing!” Mina said airily. “Okay, fine. You stay here and I’ll go scope out the deli for hotties. I wouldn’t want you cramping my style, anyway.”
“That’s me, the style-cramper.”

She laughed at Ami’s monotone, grabbed her trench coat and left, immediately texting Nicholas. With guys like him she typically established a whirlwind relationship based on mutual physical attraction, but he said he considered her a friend and he wasn’t looking for a hookup besides. “Nikko-kun, I’m bored! Wanna get something to eat with me?”

“Zach and I are just leaving to try out this sushi place nearby. I have a promo thing.”

“Oh. Well Ami and I know all about sushi, you know! Can we tag along if we chip in?”

“I just told Zach you two wanted to come and he says be outside your dorm in five.”

Mina spun around and ran back to the room, earning a raised eyebrow from Ami when she burst through the door. “You found a hot boy already? It’s only been two minutes.”

“You know that guy Nicholas I’ve been telling you about? He wants us to get sushi with him.”

Ami lowered her book. “I suppose it might be nice to go out for dinner…” She gave Mina a sidelong glance while putting on a few more layers. “Am I going to end up being the third wheel?”

Mina shook her head. “Not at all, Nicholas and I are just friends. But he’s so hot, Ami-chan. If you end up being the kind of girl he likes and you don’t even flirt with him, I’ll be bitter toward you ‘til the end of our days.”

Ami laughed dryly. “Don’t worry, it’s been my experience that I’m nobody’s type.” They navigated the maze of hallways and staircases leading out of Hansee Hall and discovered a silver BMW sedan waiting to pick them up, but when Ami saw Zach in the passenger seat she froze. “Minako! You didn’t tell me that he was coming with us!”

Her eyes widened in surprise. “You know Zach? He’s Nicholas’ roommate.”

“Do I know him?! He’s the jerk who’s been harassing me in the library since the quarter began!”

Mina frowned, glancing between her best friend and the blond boy as he lowered the window. “Come on ladies, it’s starting to rain.”

“I’m not going anywhere with you!” Ami spat.

Zach left the car and she recoiled when he approached wearing an amiable smile. “Mademoiselle Ami, I apologize for the wrong foot we started off on. I never meant any harm. If you come with us to dinner I promise to be a perfect gentleman.”

She glared. “I don’t trust you.”

The boy inched closer. “Come on, it’d be a good chance to get to know one another. I even learned something about you today. Your hobbies include reading classical literature and swimming, right?” The sound of disbelief she made confirmed it. “See? I’m not that self-absorbed.” The smile shifted to a slight smirk without malice, his default expression. “The place we’re going has tons of tea combinations, and Mina told me you really like tea.”

Ami loved tea, especially citrus varieties. She released a groan of resignation and settled into the backseat since Mina had stolen the front, positioning herself as far from Zach as possible. The rain fell harder as they drove south, turning the roads reflective black. “You didn’t tell me you had a car,” Mina remarked as they skirted Washington Park.
“It’s Zach’s,” Nicholas said.

“Oh.” She twisted around to face him. “Then why aren’t you driving?”

Zach set his chin in one hand while staring out the window. “I received some really overwhelming news earlier. It’s nothing bad, I’m just too jittery to focus on anything else right now.”

Ami was curious but held her tongue. She fumed all the way to Amabie, hoping her aura would convey to everyone else how unhappy she was with this situation. Thankfully Mina and not Zach sat beside her in the booth they were shown to. They ordered three different kinds of tea: honey green, vanilla chai, and white peach with orange blossom for Ami. She glowered as Zach poured himself a cup. “Wow, this is way better than the liquid sugar they drink where I’m from.” He chuckled when everyone looked at him in alarm. “Not literally. Southern sweet tea just lives up to its name.”

“In my hometown we drink rooibos.” Mina smiled at the way Nicholas rolled the R’s; even if he didn’t like-like her she still thought he had a sexy accent. She reached for the stack of menus but his giant hand fell upon it. “I’ve got it covered,” he grinned. When the server returned he handed her the promotional coupon he’d printed several days ago.

Her attention flicked between the flyer and their group. “So which of our employees are you friends or family of? They get a little bonus when you order this.”

Everyone stared at Nicholas. “Employee? Uhh…” The server narrowed her eyes in suspicion just as the kitchen door swung open and a girl holding a tray of mochi appeared. “Her!” Nicholas exclaimed, more in awe than relief.

The server relaxed. “Oh, are you Makoto’s friends from AI?” They all nodded in what they hoped was a convincing manner. “All right, one matsuri special coming up!”

After she left Nicholas blew out a nervous breath. “Eish, that was close. What’s a matsuri anyway?”

“It means festival,” Ami supplied. He hummed absently, distracted by the girl shaping the mochi into little cups. Was it really the same Makoto he’d met at the horticulture fair? Her hair was in a neat bun instead of a messy ponytail but there was no mistaking those vibrant green eyes. She looked kind of cute in her chef’s blues.

Ami watched Zach while Mina gave a lesson on Japanese dining etiquette. He listened intently, like he would take the bit of cultural advice to heart. Was he just hoping to impress Mina? She wished she had more to go on other than what she’d overheard in the library. He was earning an MFA in theatrical directing, a perfect fit for his overbearing personality. ‘Charismatic’ was the word Ami often heard other drama students use to describe him but ‘arrogant’ seemed more appropriate. Compared to Nicholas, he appeared much less traditionally masculine yet had all kinds of girls fawning over him; self-confidence was the key in his case. It didn’t really seem like anything could faze him, so what had overwhelmed him so much as to impede his driving ability? “Zach…” Ami spoke, and he instantly faced her with a hopeful glimmer in his eye. “How did you get your car?”

“Ah, it was a Sweet Sixteen present.” He grumbled a little while trying to get a grip on his chopsticks. “My family is very wealthy so I had a huge birthday party. A bunch of people from my school and the neighborhood showed up. It was crazy.”

Mina jumped into the conversation by asking, “If you’re from New Orleans how come you don’t have one of those funny accents?”

“You’re probably thinking of Cajun, easily the most renowned dialect from Louisiana. I’m French
Creole and I grew up in the Garden District, so I have an Uptown accent which sounds like proper English to non-natives.” He flashed his signature smile-smirk. “Ah kin talk that way if y’all really want me tuh.”

Ami shook her head as the others laughed. “How did you get into theater? What made you want to be a director?”

“You might find this hard to believe, but I like being the center of attention.” Nicholas snorted. “As a kid I was always singing, dancing, and making up stories for my parents. They started taking me to operas, plays and musicals, and I fell in love with the idea of being on stage. I acted throughout middle and high school but then I became more interested in writing and design.”

“So why did you come all the way to UW to pursue theater? Why not Tulane or Juilliard?”

Any enjoyment Zach had been deriving from the conversation was instantly replaced by cold indifference. He folded his arms atop the table and narrowly gazed at Ami, unnerving her with his multicolored eyes, and his words contained a note of harshness. “Does it matter? Why did you come all the way here from Japan?”

“Mina and I both qualified for medical scholarships. I’m studying neurogenetics and she wants to become a physical therapist.” Ami stoically met Zach’s stare in order to let him know that she didn’t find him intimidating. What was so offensive about her innocent question? Surely it would have made more sense for him to pursue theater at prestigious Tulane since it was in his hometown.

“Not to mention that Todai is closed for repairs,” Mina put in. “We were going to try testing into it but then everything blew up.” She resumed describing different kinds of sushi to Nicholas.

“So that’s our reason,” Ami said. “How come you moved twenty-five hundred miles to attend a school that probably won’t give you the recognition you want?”

Much to her surprise Zach grinned. “You wound me, Ami. It’s like you don’t have any faith in my ability to become famous.”

“I can see you becoming infamous,” she muttered.

“Howm, that’s why I left home,” Zach retorted in a blasé manner. It pleased him to see curiosity flood Ami’s visage. He knew she was trying to figure him out but he really didn’t want to let her, not yet anyway. “That story is better told when there’s no polite company present.”

Rei drove around the city when she was bored. Her Acura got decent mileage and there were still many areas she had yet to explore, but as she returned from Ballard she recalled that Makoto told her to stop by the restaurant where she worked if she wanted a taste of home. She entered Amabie into her GPS and followed the new route east, speeding along rain-slicked roads. Once seated at the bar she ordered shrimp and veggie tempura with a Ramune. There were a few other people in the bistro including a rowdy table of four; apparently the two boys had never experienced nigiri or sashimi before much to the amusement of their dates.

“I am going home! I just have to empty the case!” someone shouted. The doors to the kitchen swung open, dispensing Makoto with a large tray balanced over her shoulder. Rei waved her fingers and she wandered over, setting it on the counter. “Hey! I thought we were going to hang out on Saturday!”

Rei’s sweater-covered shoulders rose and fell. “I was hungry, and you were right. This food reminds me of a little place in Omotesando.”
She grinned; that was high praise for a simple mom-and-pop eatery. The boy who had prepared Rei’s dinner began his cleaning routine, whipping Makoto with his towel as she bent over to remove everything from the dessert case. “I will hurt you, Ryo. Don’t think your grandparents can save you from me.” He chuckled and disappeared around the corner. “I think he likes me,” Makoto tutted. “He’s so annoying.”

Rei stopped her when she began piling fruity daifuku on the tray. “How much are those? Do you have kiwi?”

“You bet! They’re only a dollar. How many do you want?”

“Just one…” Rei bit her lip as she examined the more decadent treats. “And that slice of chocolate cheesecake.” After receiving the desserts she was remiss to cut into the cheesecake; it just looked so pretty, but her sweet tooth won out. The first bite simply dissolved and she made a sound of pleasure. “This is the best thing I’ve ever put in my mouth.”

Makoto ducked her head in gratitude. “I’m glad you like it. The secret is fair-trade Venezuelan cacao. That way you can feel good about eating it.”

“I think I’d feel good regardless of—” Rei was interrupted by a clamor from the entrance. She turned to see Makoto’s roommate and the skinny dark-haired boy both dripping wet.

“What the heck, you guys?” Makoto asked as she rounded the counter. “Did you fall into the lake or something?”

“We missed the bus here and had to walk a few blocks,” Usagi answered. Her denim jacket and white pants were thoroughly drenched.

Makoto raised an eyebrow. “You missed the bus? What were you doing that made you miss the bus?”

Usagi gulped at her accusatory tone. “We were playing Smash Bros! It’s easy to get sucked into that game!” Her friend’s expression didn’t change. “Honestly! Michiru was there the whole time. We weren’t alone or anything.”

Mamoru briskly nodded in agreement, but Makoto’s lips just curled into a sly grin. “I believe you, I just think it’s funny that you were really trying to convince me.” That comment earned her a light slap on the arm before the new arrivals sat down beside Rei.

“Hi!” the blonde chirped. “I’m Usagi.”

“I know, I saw you at Nordstrom,” she coolly replied.

“And this is Mamo-chan! I mean, Chiba Mamoru.”

Rei laughed at the cute nickname. Ryo, the sushi chef, amalgamated some leftovers into a few interesting varieties of maki with generous amounts of fresh ginger for Mamoru. Usagi forsake the offering for a hot bowl of gyudon. They chatted about their respective schools until it was officially closing time. As they gathered purses and shrugged on jackets Rei noticed the table of four hadn’t left yet, though they successfully cleared the huge platter. The pretty blonde girl looked very familiar for some reason… She suddenly lowered her classes to examine Usagi, brow furrowed. Usagi frowned at the intensity of her russet eyes. “What? Is there something in my teeth?”

“No, it’s just that you look eerily similar to that girl.” Rei pointed at the blonde putting on her long coat. Mamoru faced her as well, eyes widening in surprise.
“You’re right, Hino-san, unless she’s using contacts and hair dye.”

“Is she your sibling, or a relative of some sort?” Rei queried.

Usagi stared too and slowly shook her head. “No way, I’m an only child. And I have a cousin around my age but he lives in Kyoto.” The three of them looked away as the quartet headed for the exit, but then the boy in a Huskies hoodie made a detour to the dessert case and a huge grin split Usagi’s lips. Her scheme had worked.

“Hi, Makoto. I thought it was you back there.” Nicholas smiled at her but she only blinked in astonishment before fixating her best friend with a glare.

“Usagi! You told him where I work?!”

“How would I have done that, Mako-chan?” she asked.

“I don’t know, maybe you got Chiba to find him for you! I can’t believe you’d do something so… so… sneaky!” Usagi’s smug little grin made her temper flare, which she directed toward Nicholas. “So your group was the one who ordered the matsuri special? I could have Jessica revoke that deal, you know. I don’t know any of you!”

Nicholas raised his hands in alarm. “Hey, I didn’t even know you worked here. Someone emailed that promo to me. Utsukino at…” He trailed off and looked at Usagi, everything suddenly clicking. She just stood there beaming innocently, and Mamoru felt a twinge of jealousy that someone way more attractive than him was interested in Makoto.

Zach came up behind his roommate. “Did I hear there’s something wrong with the coupon he used?” He flashed a credit card and frowned at Nicholas. “I told you to just let me pay.”

“No, it’s fine…” Makoto sighed. She was mad at Usagi, not the patrons. “I hope you enjoyed everything. Have a nice night.” Without a further word to her friends she disappeared into the back of the kitchen.

Zach stowed his wallet and gave the trio standing nearby a quick once-over, rubbing his eyes upon seeing a short-haired version of Mina who was supposed to be outside. Her outfit was different, too. “Whoa…” he breathed in awe, stepping closer to Usagi. “Are you her twin?”

“I’m nobody’s twin!” she exclaimed. “That girl you were with looks nothing like me!”

“Yes she does,” Zach, Mamoru and Rei chorused. “Hang on, I’ll get her,” the first added. He jogged out the door and came back with Mina.

She froze at the sight of her doppelganger. Usagi stared right back, the close-up view confirming that they indeed looked very similar. “Well this is freaky,” Mina muttered after several silent minutes.

“I know,” Usagi said. “What’s your name?”

“Aino Minako.”

“I’m Tsukino Usagi. I moved here from Tokyo to go to school.”

“Me too… How strange.”

“Yeah…” Usagi examined her trendy outfit. “Do you like fashion?”

“Oh yeah,” Mina smiled. “What kind of music do you like?”
“Bemani, eurobeat, that sort of stuff.”

“Omigod, me too!” They grinned at one another. “Do you play any sports?”

“Not unless DDR counts as a sport.” Well, it would have been really weird if they turned out to be exactly the same. Mina felt herself glowing on the inside, like she’d encountered a long-lost friend.

In order to become better acquainted the group of eight went for a walk in Washington Park even though it was closed for the night. Rei stuck with Ami at the rear so she could examine everyone’s spiritual energies. Mina’s vibrant yellow aura reflected her playful, outgoing personality. Zach’s orange aura indicated his pursuit of perfection in creative endeavors. Nicholas’ rich maroon aura told Rei that he was a grounded, strong-willed person. Ami’s blue aura was tinged with darkness suggesting she currently harbored repressed thoughts or feelings. “This is so strange… I never thought I’d meet another girl similar to Mina. She always seemed like one in a million.”

“The universe must have pushed us together for a reason,” Rei stated. “What could it be if not some kind of divine intervention?”

Ami didn’t want to be disrespectful of Rei’s beliefs but she laughed a little. “When you consider how many people were displaced from Tokyo and ended up in this area, the odds of running into someone you might know are favorable. But it’s Usagi and Mina’s genetics that have me astounded. Blue eyes are already very rare for Japanese people. When you factor in the chance of being born with blonde hair as well, the odds become astronomical. They very well may share a common ancestor.”

“I take it you study genetics like Chiba-san?”

“I’m actually planning to major in neurogenetics,” Ami explained. “I’m fascinated by degenerative diseases like Alzheimer’s and dementia.” One of Rei’s slim eyebrows rose above her sunglasses, making her blush. “My mother is a neurosurgeon so I was exposed to such things at an early age. It doesn’t make sense to me why either disease can suddenly appear in people who didn’t inherit it and were otherwise perfectly healthy. There must be environmental factors to consider, and there are too many research groups receiving funding from questionable sources for me to simply accept their results on the subject.” She nodded matter-of-factly as Rei smiled kindly.

“I’m studying holistic medicine at Bastyr University. If you like, I can research the history of natural remedies regarding the treatment of Alzheimer’s and send you my findings. I assume that will be the subject of your dissertation?” Ami nodded again. “Most people are quick to dismiss the merits of homeopathy in this modern age, but they forget that convenient little capsules haven’t been around for the majority of human history. The right blend of plants and herbs can work wonders, and they won’t leave you with debilitating side effects. Well, unless you ingest something poisonous like belladonna or hemlock.” This information piqued Ami’s interest and she asked Rei to expound on the subject of flora Mother Nature never intended for humans to consume.

Makoto walked in a line with Mamoru, Zach and Nicholas, listening to the nonstop chatter from the blondes ahead and wondering if she had anything in common with the boys. She sighed, breaking the silence, and said what was bothering her before she regretted it. “Sorry I threatened you about revoking that promo.” Nicholas angled his head toward her. “It’s just that Amabie is a family business, you know? And the matsuri special is a lot of food for fifty bucks.”

“I get it,” Nicholas replied. “You’d go out of business if everyone used it.”

She smirked. “You’re pretty smart for a jock.”
“He’s not just a jock,” Zach cut in, “he’s going to become an engineer.” His remark almost sounded prideful, earning a surprised look from Nicholas.

“What kind of engineer?” Makoto wondered.

“Um, civil. Buildings, bridges, highways, things like that.” Zach gesticulated for him to keep talking. “After getting my degree I want to return home and contribute to the mining clean-up. There was this gold rush in the eighteen-hundreds, you see…”

Mamoru found himself clinging to the story Nicholas told. He knew nothing of South Africa much less Johannesburg itself, but had heard of Apartheid which was a major reason why some of the rural black communities were in danger of the mine’s residue. Thanks to erosion, heavy metals brought to the surface along with gold had contaminated streams people on the outskirts drew water from, and there was growing concern that toxic elements would poison the rest of the city’s water supply sooner rather than later. “So how are you going to stop the leaching?” Makoto asked when the history lesson ended.

Nicholas answered with a question of his own. “Do you know anything about nanotech?” Everyone shook their heads. “Picture a chain link fence, like the one around this park, only measured on the nanoscale and made of carbon. When you use one of these things as a filter it only allows water molecules to pass through, like the world’s most discerning net. Simply installing nanocarbon in Jozi’s water treatment facilities would make a huge difference. And don’t even get me started on what I could do with an industrial 3D printer…”

“Seriously, don’t,” Zach commented. “It’s so boring.”

“Not as boring as your play,” Nicholas countered, eliciting an indignant gasp. “Anyway, if I never get funding for a filtration project there’s always infrastructure to improve.”

“Something tells me you’ll accomplish that goal,” Mamoru said kindly. “Amadare ishi wo ugatsu.”

“What?” the other boys asked in unison.

Makoto laughed. “It means ‘drops of water will wear down a stone’, or ‘slow and steady wins the race’ in other words.”

“Ah, right,” Zach scoffed. “You Asian people are just full of wisdom, aren’t you?” He released an undignified squawk as Nicholas shoved him sideways and told him to quit being such an ass.

Mamoru wondered how on earth these sophomores had managed to tolerate one another thus far.

After returning to Amabie where the cars were parked, Rei offered to take Usagi and Makoto to their apartment and Mina suggested Mamoru ride in the BMW since they were all going to UW. Several phone numbers, smiles and waves were exchanged, and there was an inexplicable mutual feeling that their meeting tonight had been some form of destiny.
Mamoru anxiously paced his living room while staring at the screen of his new phone, at the Benefactor’s number to be precise. He needed to call the man to discuss purchasing a vehicle and potentially moving out of Radford Court, but he feared having his propositions shot down right away. Usagi’s voice came through to him: ‘You won’t know until you try. Just go for it!’ Her invisible presence gave him the courage to press the green icon.

“It’s nice to hear from you, Mamoru,” was the first thing the man said. “How have you been?”

“Well, thank you,” he answered.

“I see that you’re calling me from a new number.”

“Yes, I bought a cell phone the other day.”

“I’m not at all upset that you finally decided to join the modern world.” Most of the tension left Mamoru’s body just then. “Are there any other significant life changes you want to tell me about?”

He couldn’t have asked for a better opening. “Onjin-san, there are actually a couple things I wanted to discuss with you. The first is acquiring a vehicle—” He heard the man start to sigh and rushed on. “—which I would use to commute to the hospital from a new residence.”

“And where exactly are you thinking of moving?”

Good, he sounded curious instead of angry. “I have the opportunity to live off campus in a quiet neighborhood. I believe I told you about my neighbors during our last conversation?” Hopefully he could garner some sympathy. “This place would be much better for working on my dissertation. The rent is also less than Radford Court by three-hundred dollars.”

“All very valid points Mamoru-kun, but any reduction in rent would simply go toward your car payment.”

“I could get a job and cover it myself—”

“No, I want you to stay focused on earning your PhD. You don’t need any distractions now.” The Benefactor released a somewhat resigned breath. “Having a car would be an excellent way to start building your credit, but you need to earn your license first. I’d also like you to do some research and send me a list of vehicles you’re interested in. I want you to continue taking good care of yourself so if moving away from the school is something you deem necessary, I hope it works out. I trust you to handle everything efficiently.”

Mamoru could barely contain his giddiness. “Thank you very much, Onjin-san.” As soon as he hung up he let out a whoop, and after his excitement ebbed he dug through the papers on his counter for the phone number from Joe.

“Ello?” asked a voice he didn’t recognize.

“Uh, hi. Is Joe Levin there?”

“One sec.” Mamoru cringed as the man bellowed not far from the receiver. “Joe! Some bloke on the phone fer ya!” He caught the accent, wondering if the man was Irish or Scottish.
“Hello?”

“Hi Joe, it’s Mamoru Chiba. You gave me this number just before you moved.”

“So I did. What’s up?”

“I was hoping you might be free to help me out today.”

“With what?” he asked in mild suspicion.

“I need some lessons on car maintenance and driving. You seemed fairly knowledgeable.”

Joe made a sound of superiority. “I am– I grew up helping my dad in his auto repair shop. Are you telling me you don’t know how to drive?”

“I don’t,” Mamoru admitted, “I’ve never even sat behind a steering wheel.” This statement elicited some noises of disbelief and despair. “Can you teach me what I need to know to get my license?”

“Damn right I can,” he declared. “I’ll swing by the apartments to pick you up and we’ll go somewhere you can practice. What time is it, ten? I bet it’ll only take you a couple hours to get a good handle on my Zuk.”

Mamoru glanced at the clock. “I have to meet a couple girls for lunch at noon so that works perfectly for me.”

“Well aren’t you the player,” Joe remarked. There was a pause as the Scottish-or-Irish person said something in the background. “Hey, would it be okay if Kaelan tags along with us? He’s a car guy too, he can give you advice about what to shop for.”

“That’s fine. The more the merrier, they say.” Once the call ended Mamoru went to take a shower and get dressed, pausing when he caught his reflection in the mirror. There was something different about it, a little spark in his eye he’d never seen before. It had to be a glimmer of self-confidence.

Ami glanced at her watch and sighed irritably. “Will you stop that?” Mina chided. “He’s only five minutes late.”

She pursed her lips; Mina knew punctuality was important to her. Ami assumed Mamoru was also the type who placed a high value on time, but perhaps she had misjudged him during their initial encounter at Amabie. She rested her chin in one hand while browsing the menu, debating between various combinations of soups, salads and sandwiches. Her attention was diverted outside when a loud vehicle pulled into a space, its rumbling exhaust making the windows vibrate. Ami was shocked to see Mamoru exit the driver’s side and even more confused as two boys followed him into the bistro, all three of them claiming stools at the table she shared with Mina.

“Hi girls, sorry I kept you waiting. We were across town,” Mamoru explained.

“Did you drive here?” Ami inquired. “I thought you didn’t have a car. Or is that a truck?”

“Technically it’s an SUV, and I suppose some introductions are in order. Ami, Mina, this is Joe Levin. He’s from Russia and is in his final year at UW. He’s been kind enough to let me drive his rig around today.”

Joe smiled warmly as he reached across the table to shake their hands. “Hajimemashite.”

“You speak Japanese?” Mina gasped.
“Quite well,” he answered. “I hope you weren’t thinking of gossiping about us.”

“We would never!” To test his claim she turned to Ami and stage-whispered, “He’s pretty cute, don’t you think?” which made Joe’s cheeks turn noticeably pink.

Mamoru next indicated the stoic young man one year his senior. “Kaelan Burke is an Irish expatriate who owns the place I’m moving into next month. He’s probably the wealthiest person you’ll ever meet.”

“Thanks for that, Mamoru.” Kaelan rolled his eyes before nodding politely at the girls, then he looked away as an embarrassed smile quirked his lips.

Mina wondered how rich he really was. Were they talking half-millionaire, millionaire, or even billionaire? Where had the money come from? Kaelan’s silence throughout the conversation only continued to intrigue her, curiosity coming to a head when their food arrived. She asked him to pass the pepper, holding his gaze and brushing his hand with her fingertips as it slid her way. “Are you in the Irish mob?” she lowly inquired, but not quietly enough because Ami dropped both her jaw and her fork.

“Minako!” she scolded, “What kind of question is that to ask someone you just met?”

Joe thought it was hilarious and covered his mouth to prevent bits of French fry from falling out while Mamoru peered at them from behind his teacup. Kaelan simply shook his head in mild amusement. “I can assure you I’m not a member of any criminal organizations. My money was inherited, not acquired by illegal means.”

“So how wealthy are you?” Mina pressed, receiving an instant reprimand from her friend. But Kaelan only gave her a prolonged once-over, making her stomach do a little flip-flop as it dawned on her that this mature, sexy man possessed at least one mystery for her to unravel.

“Maybe you’ll find out some day,” was all he said.

When the waiter arrived to take their empty dishes and asked if they wanted to split the check, Kaelan answered “no” before anyone could say otherwise and surrendered a card. “You didn’t have to do that,” Mamoru said, slightly miffed that his credit card had a daily spending limit.

Kaelan only shrugged. “It’s my way of being thankful for meeting you.” He looked at Mamoru, Ami, and Mina in turn. “I’m still the new guy in town so I don’t have any friends yet. It would be nice if I could count you as such.”

The sentiment made Ami blush. “Sure… I think we’d like that.” Mina and Mamoru nodded sincerely. “In that case, why don’t we spend the rest of the day together? We could go to the science center, or Pike Place…”

“How about the Burke Museum?” Joe suggested. “It was named in honor of Kaelan’s great-great grandfather, you know.” Ami was thrilled by this information and began questioning the man about his family history as everyone but Mina piled into the small SUV.

“I hope you guys have fun. I have to help out a friend at the theater.” Ami gave her a questioning look but she didn’t want to admit it was Zach she was blowing them off for. He had been texting her all morning, plying her with flattery before outright begging her to come fill in for a sick actor. In high school Mina dreamed of becoming a teenage idol—a singer, actress and model— but no agency would hire her. Most called her a ‘risky asset’ even though her tanned skin and coppery locks were from natural exposure, not artificial enhancement. The more polite agencies said she didn’t have ‘the
look’ they were going for.

She opened the theater’s heavy main door and was presented with a lush, dimly lit forest scene. There were three actors on stage and Zach sat in the front row beside a balding older man. “Hey, thanks for coming,” he greeted, hazel eyes conveying relief as he handed Mina a script. “Hop on stage, we’re about to start the scene.” She read that she was standing in for the role of Mommy Fortuna the Witch and would be killed by the Harpy at the end.

The actors quietly introduced themselves as Zach and their professor conferred. “I’m Schmendrick the Magician,” said a baby-faced boy. He gave off a class clown vibe that likely made him perfect for the role.

“I’m Amalthea the Unicorn,” said a girl with striking features and a melodious voice.

“And I’m Ruhk, your henchman,” said a muscular boy who loomed over them all. He seemed more suited for athletics than theater.

Mina had a fair amount of dialogue with each of them and there was a note in her script to gesticulate pointedly a lot. Ruhk dutifully followed her around the stage as she presented the Midnight Carnival and its illusory mythological creatures save the Harpy (the prop was currently a stuffed owl) and the Unicorn, who begged for freedom so she could resume her quest to locate her brethren. Schmendrick’s spells to save the Unicorn all backfired, providing a comedic element to the otherwise serious scene. The message conveyed was that people no longer believed in magic and didn’t need unicorns in the world, so Amalthea might as well stay with someone who appreciated her. But she and the Harpy were of the same force that couldn’t be contained and controlled; Celaeno killed Ruhk and Mommy Fortuna as soon as Amalthea freed her.

Once Zach was satisfied with the scene’s progression he dismissed everyone, asking Mina to accompany him to the nearest provider of good coffee. “What happened to the actual Mommy Fortuna?” she inquired as they trekked across campus.

“She caught the flu. I told her to stay home because I didn’t want her infecting the rest of the cast, not to mention me or Professor Sinclair. It’s a shame because she has a great croaky-old-lady voice. I asked you to take her place since she doesn’t have an understudy.” Mina hummed in comprehension.

“I have the prop department designing puppets for the Harpy and the Red Bull. It’s going to be so great at the end of that scene when Mommy Fortuna stands at one end of the stage and it comes swooping down on her as the lights dim and the curtain closes. I held you!” Zach shouted, flinging his arms wide.

She giggled at his exuberance. “When is the presentation date?”

“I’m hoping for January. It might be sooner if I weren’t including all the elements of Two Hearts which is the novella sequel to The Last Unicorn, but I never do anything half-assed. I couldn’t just leave out a huge chunk of the story.”

“Is that really your decision to make?”

Zach nodded. “This whole thing is my idea. It’s not just some little project, it’s the entire drama department’s winter production and I’m the lead director. I couldn’t believe it when Sinclair announced that he’d chosen my script.” Mina raised an eyebrow. “High fantasy is really difficult to bring to the stage. It can’t be too out-there or the audience won’t be able to empathize with the characters. If you don’t have relatability you don’t have a successful play.”

“You said you received overwhelming news the night we went out for sushi…” The realization
made her gasp. “Ami was reading *The Last Unicorn* just before we met up with you!”

“I’m not surprised. She reads a lot.” Although Zach sounded blasé he was inwardly preening. According to his source on all things Ami, a fellow sophomore who shared several of her advanced classes, she didn’t like the high fantasy genre to which *The Last Unicorn* belonged. For her to have read it meant she either wanted to critique the accuracy of the play when it came out or she was genuinely interested in his project, which meant she had a modicum of interest in him. The notion that Zach had finally captured her attention provided a swagger to his step as he and Mina headed west to a tiny café called Lavender. The place served artisanal caffeine creations and baked goods, and the smell of freshly-ground coffee beans permeated the air. “Do you want anything?” he inquired, dangling his debit card in front of the cashier while Mina decided.

What was it with rich boys showing off their wealth today? “Sure… Can I get a medium caramel apple frappuccino and one of those white chocolate cherry galettes?”

“Ooh, I’ll take a chocolate hazelnut one,” Zach added. Mina pretended not to notice the thirty dollar charge as she claimed a seat near a window, her phone chiming a minute later.

“Would you be interested in going to Old Spaghetti Factory for dinner?” she relayed. “This guy Ami and I had lunch with is offering. He wants to meet people so I don’t think he’d mind if you joined us.”

Zach quirked a slim eyebrow. “How do you know him? Did Mamoru ditch you two and a random guy just took his place?”

“It’s not like that at all!” Mina tittered. “Mamoru showed up at the deli with these guys Kaelan and Joe. They’re roommates now but Joe used to live below Mamoru in the same apartment complex.”

“Wow, the lab rat has friends,” he dryly remarked. “Who knew?”

She whacked his arm. “Don’t call Mamoru a lab rat! He’s so nice and super smart.” The boy muttered something into his cappuccino. “Oh, I get it– you’re jealous!”

“Yeah, you’re right,” he admitted. “Mamoru is the dorkiest guy I’ve ever met but he was surrounded by hot girls at Amabie. For a moment I honestly thought it was you flirting with him when I saw Usagi. And Ami asked him to tutor her.” Whoops, he sounded a little resentful just then, earning a confused yet curious look from Mina. Zach sighed airily, waving it off. “You might as well ask Nicholas to tag along, too. The poor guy could use a full meal.”

“That’s a great idea!” Mina promptly texted him as Zach sipped serenely.

Usagi leaped off her bed and sprinted to the front door when someone rang the bell, but as usual Makoto beat her to it since she was working on an elaborate dessert in the kitchen. “Mamo-chan!” Her enthusiasm never failed to put a smile on his face. “How was dinner with everyone last night?”

“I thought it went well, but Joe kept saying he felt bad that you two couldn’t join us.” After removing his shoes and hanging up his coat he followed Usagi into her room, taking up his gaming position at the foot of her bed while she flopped onto it.
“Did you tell him we were out with Michiru? She took us to a nice place near her school.”

“I did, but Kaelan wanted to meet you, too.”

“He’s that guy you’re moving in with?”

Mamoru nodded. “It seems I’ve started a trend because Nicholas and Zach are claiming the last two rooms he had available. That reminds me…” He got up and went into the living area to look around, Usagi following interestedly. “The mansion is… barren, to put it politely, and none of us really have an eye for interior design. You two managed to bring this place to life with only a few pieces, so I was wondering if you could help Kaelan with his décor.”

Makoto paused her frosting rosettes and faced him. “You want us to outfit a mansion? What’s the style? What’s the budget?”

“I’m pretty sure the budget is infinite,” Mamoru answered, prompting sounds of awe, “and I think the style is… classic European?” He honestly had no clue. “I’ll ask him for some pictures of the rooms.”

They only had to wait a few minutes for photos to arrive. “Ooh, look at all that space and gorgeous cherry wood! Are you thinking what I’m thinking, Mako-chan?”

“Yeah, we can definitely work with this,” she confirmed. “Are you seeing as much Michael Amini in there as me?”

“Who’s that?” Mamoru asked.

“An upscale furniture designer,” Usagi answered. “Although, if Kaelan’s budget really is unlimited, he could spring for some Bernadette Livingston pieces. That’s like estate and palace-level furniture.” She whipped up the website and flicked through a gallery of seating options. Mamoru thought any of them would look good in the mansion, but ultimately Kaelan had the final say.

“You know, we should all just go shopping together,” he suggested. “Joe and I have stuff from our apartments so we just need a few things, but Zach and Nicholas have nothing. There’s also a guest room on the third floor Kaelan wants to furnish.” The girls agreed that a group shopping trip would be most efficient.

The next day, Saturday, Usagi and Makoto eagerly awaited their clients. “It kind of sucks that we’re not getting paid to do this,” the latter stated, but honestly she couldn’t think of anything else she’d rather be doing.

“At least we get free food out of it,” Usagi said, receiving a laugh. It was always a good day in her book when she could hang out with new friends and eat without having to cook something. One would think Makoto’s culinary skills had rubbed off on her after several years, but they would be sorely mistaken.

Once the five boys arrived they all went to Seattle Lighting so Kaelan could pick out a chandelier for the foyer. Although Mamoru and Joe insisted they didn’t need anything and were just tagging along for moral support because Nicholas hated shopping unless it was for groceries, they both ended up with little luxuries including new pillows, high thread-count linens, bachelor’s chests which were a step up from ordinary nightstands according to Usagi, and some actual artwork instead of cheap posters to decorate their walls. Zach kept commenting that Kaelan was nouveau riche and didn’t know what he was doing, so he finally broke down and asked the girls to take him to premium distributor. After a two-hour consultation they’d ordered furniture for literally every room in the
house with the help of a virtual design program. “Are you happy now?” Kaelan demanded, waving the invoice in Zach’s face. “I just spent two-hundred grand on stuff I’ve never even heard of, like divans and sconces.”

Zach simply nodded his approval. Unlike Kaelan he’d been born into wealth and grew up knowing that one needed to spend their money in order to be respected in society. Otherwise what was the point of a vast fortune?

A few days later several trucks arrived at the Burke Mansion to drop off its new furnishings. The boys rolled up their sleeves and began the arduous process of unboxing, assembling, and situating everything starting with the guest bedroom on the third floor. The second floor contained four bedrooms and two bathrooms, plus the master bed and bath in addition to a huge study complete with bookshelves built into the walls. Since the house had been built by Kaelan’s great-grandfather John Matthew Burke before the turn of the 20th century, most of the books were from the Victorian and Edwardian eras and worth a bit of money to collectors. When Kaelan’s grandfather John Thomas Burke inherited the mansion in 1955 he had it slightly remodeled to accommodate more modern technologies, but it had been over half a century since then and the house was due for some 21st century upgrades such as solar power and water recycling, which it would receive from Nicholas in lieu of him being able to pay actual rent.

They finished hauling glass tables and lounge chairs to the pool and collapsed into them, draining water bottles as quickly as they were opened. “Everything looks good,” Mamoru said to break the long silence that followed. “I’m glad you agreed to let Usagi and Makoto help you.”

“Me too,” Kaelan replied. “Now it feels like people actually live here.” On that note he groaned, got up, and returned to the ballroom, a massive circular space with a marble floor and painted ceiling. At one side was a long, curved bar in which Kaelan had discovered a few very old bottles of whisky. He opened one of them and poured its remains into five crystal glasses, handing them to his housemates. “Welcome home, lads.” They drank simultaneously and Mamoru stifled a cough; it was strong stuff so Kaelan couldn’t blame him. “Alright, next order of business– what do you think about throwing a Halloween party?”

“Here?” Nicholas asked.

“In this very room– I think it’d be perfect. We put up some lights, some fog machines, hire a DJ and someone to cater the food…” He trailed off, hoping they would chime in with ideas.

“Who are you thinking of inviting?” Joe queried next.

Kaelan traced his mustache as he considered it. “I thought it could be just us and the girls… if they want to come, of course.”

“You should probably invite them before other people get around to it,” Mamoru suggested. “And do we want to do costumes or…?”

Zach nodded vigorously. “Of course we have to wear costumes, that’s the best part about Halloween! I’ve been planning mine since last year. And I know a guy who’s a resident DJ at one of the clubs downtown.”

“Well alright then,” Kaelan chuckled. “It looks like our little soiree is already going to be a huge success.”

Makoto glanced over her shoulder every twenty seconds so she wouldn’t miss Rei’s arrival. The
raven-tressed beauty always showed up at Amabie when she was working so they could have sushi made from leftovers and gab over Ramune and cheesecake, and tonight they potentially had a lot to discuss. Or maybe not; it all depended on how Rei regarded her invitation to the party at Kaelan’s house.

The door bells jingled and Makoto all but flew to the lunch counter, barely managing to wait until Rei took off her coat and sat down before proffering the invitation. “What’s this?” she asked, raising an eyebrow at the giddy look on her friend’s face. Rei peeled the wax seal with its monogram stamp despite not knowing anyone with the initials KTB and unfolded the cardstock. Once she had read its contents she lowered her glasses to meet Makoto’s anxious gaze. “I’m not sure how I feel about being invited to a party by someone I don’t even know.”

“You’ll get to meet him if you decide to come,” Makoto said. “Please say you’ll be there, Rei-chan. Me, Usagi, Ami, and Mina are all going, and it’s a costume party! Plus the actual house is amazing. It has a ballroom and a pool and a conservatory!” She reined in most of her enthusiasm, smiling kindly. “I know you get anxious in public but it’ll only be the ten of us. That shouldn’t be too much for you, right?”

“I suppose not.” Rei sighed and slipped the invite into her purse. “I haven’t done anything to celebrate Halloween since grade school, and I have absolutely no idea what kind of costume I’d wear…”

Much to her surprise Makoto laughed. “Isn’t it obvious? Witch!” Although Rei went “hmm” the notion of dressing like a modern, classy enchantress greatly resonated with her. Some of her peers already described her aesthetic as witchy, and she’d seen an amazing black gown for sale in one of the downtown boutiques. Perhaps with some opera gloves, a mask and an elegant hairstyle, she could turn herself into the belle of the ball.
“Guys, I have great news!” Mamoru announced during breakfast. His housemates all eyed him sleepily having stayed up until two in the morning finishing the party decorations. Joe was especially tired since he’d been awake since 8:00 the previous day on an expedition in the Cascade foothills. Kaelan’s silk bathrobe was askew, Zach’s hair resembled a bird’s nest, and Nicholas seemed ready to fall asleep in his cereal bowl at any moment. Unlike the rest of them Mamoru didn’t depend on coffee to function.

Joe glared at him, then glared at the Keurig. “Spit it out,” he grumbled.

“The girls all said they would be here tonight.” Everyone instantly perked up. “Are there any last-minute preparations?”

“We’re all good on the décor, but…” Zach flapped his arm feebly. “Costumes.”

“Shit…” Joe muttered, though no one heard him over Mamoru’s groan. Evidently they’d both forgotten one of the most important aspects of Halloween.

“I got mine yesterday,” Kaelan said. “I’m going as Robin Hood.”

“Isn’t he English?”

He crossed his arms. “Don’t remind me. It’s the best I could do since everything else was sold out. At least the outfit makes me look like a dashing rogue.” He brushed his chin, smirking. “I’ll definitely be getting some tonight.”

“He crossed his arms. “Don’t remind me. It’s the best I could do since everything else was sold out. At least the outfit makes me look like a dashing rogue.” He brushed his chin, smirking. “I’ll definitely be getting some tonight.”

“Some of what?” Mamoru asked.

Everyone looked at him in shock and began laughing the next instant, making him frown. Kaelan came over to sling an arm around his neck while continuing to sip his coffee. “You’re a virgin, aren’t you?” It was more of a statement than a question.

“Err… yes,” Mamoru answered, a bit miffed by the mildly condescending expressions Zach and Nicholas directed at him. Joe had his back to them as he stared out the bay window.

“And you seem to have grown up fairly sheltered, so I’ll lay it out for you– ‘getting some’ means having sex.” Mamoru flushed scarlet at that. “Knocking boots, bumping uglies, tapping ass, getting your dick wet, doing the horizontal mambo…” Kaelan gestured for more examples.

“Paddling the pink canoe,” Zach provided.

“Putting a bun in the oven,” Nicholas added.

“…Going heels to Jesus,” Joe finished with a sigh.

Kaelan nodded his approval. “Hasn’t there ever been anyone you simply wanted to fuck, Mamoru? It can be a guy, I don’t judge.”

“I… no,” he declared. “I had a girlfriend once, in high school, but we didn’t… do anything sexual.” Now his ears were turning red. “Why are we even talking about this?”

“Yeah, let’s get back to figuring out costumes,” Joe said before Kaelan could hijack the conversation again. “Zach, you said you planned yours last year?”
“Indeed,” he replied, “I’m going to be Jareth from *Labyrinth*. I even figured out how to achieve his hairstyle.”

“I got a gladiator costume,” Nicholas said proudly. “The girl at the store swooned when she saw me in it.”

Joe rolled his eyes. “So what do you want to be, Mamoru?” He couldn’t answer because he honestly had no idea. Halloween wasn’t really celebrated in Japan, and even since coming to UW he’d always spent the holiday studying.

Zach suddenly snapped his fingers. “Hey, you know what? You kind of have that mysterious, dark and brooding thing going on. How about the Phantom of the Opera? I can borrow a mask and cane from the prop department at school.”

“And I have a tuxedo that will probably fit you since we’re almost the same build. Brilliant, Zacharie.” The blond boy beamed at the praise.

Mamoru only shrugged. “I guess I don’t have a choice since it’s too late to go buy something.”

Halloween fell on a Saturday and there were still some things to be done in the ballroom, namely helping the DJ set up once he arrived. Nicholas handled the wiring while Joe and Mamoru crafted a playlist. The latter may have been considered quirky by his housemates but he had surprisingly good taste in music, owing it to the varied compilations he listened to while reading or wandering. That left Kaelan and Zach with the bar; one stocked the shelves with full bottles of liquor and the other ran a rag through the crystal glassware. “So why the Goblin King?” Kaelan inquired out of the blue. “Are you a Henson fan?”

“I’m a bigger fan of Brian Froud,” Zach explained, “I’ve had a bunch of his art books since I was a kid. But yeah, I love *Labyrinth*, *The Dark Crystal*, and other fantasy movies like that. Even though I mostly write now I still design and make costumes.”

Kaelan turned to gape at him. “You made Jareth’s costume by yourself?” Zach nodded slowly. “Damn. Guess I don’t really have a chance against a crafty guy like you.”

“Sure you do! You’re the one with the nice house, the rest of us just live here. And you can take me out of the running for getting laid since the girl I like hates my guts.”

“It’s not exactly a competition,” Kaelan said sheepishly, “I’m just slagging you all, testing your boundaries. I’ve never lived with anyone besides me mum.”

Zach snorted. “I’m sorry, how old are you?”

“You’d better shut your gob right quick if you know what’s good for you,” Kaelan warned, pointing a strict finger at Zach. He was smiling a little, though. “Maybe you can impress this girl by pouring her a nice drink.”

“Tch, the only thing I know how to do is pour my old man’s bourbon.” Kaelan examined the varieties he had just finished arranging and proffered Blanton’s Single Barrel for Zach’s consideration. He also eyed bottles of Knob Creek, Eagle Rare, and a trio of authentic Irish whiskeys. “I don’t even want to know how much you spent on all this booze.”

“Hey!” Nicholas shouted from the top of a ladder where he was affixing speakers to brackets along the wall, “Don’t open that unless you know what you’re gonna do with it!”

“Yeah? Why don’t you come down here and show us how it’s done?” Kaelan shouted back.
Nicholas did exactly that, grabbing a small tumbler off the lower shelf, dropping two ice cubes into it, and pouring the bourbon without losing a single drop. He placed it on a coaster before sliding it to Kaelan, who huffily crossed his arms for the second time that day. “Where’d you learn that?”

“Mom’s a bartender,” Nicholas answered, also folding his arms. “Know why you should drink high-quality stuff like this on the rocks? When you put a cold drink in your mouth it gradually warms to your body temperature which allows you to experience all the different notes.”

Kaelan wore a tiny smile while shaking his head, then he spread his arms as if to hug Nicholas. “Lord, thank you for bringing this man into my household. I have truly been blessed to have his knowledge of alcohol at my beck and call. Please make me a White Russian.”

Zach balked. “Wha… it’s not even noon yet!”

“There’s coffee liqueur in it. That counts as part of a good breakfast.”

Usagi and Makoto hopped on a bus to the U District, meeting with Ami and Mina so Rei could pick them all up at once. The UW girls were loitering near the stop and Mina released a fangirl squeal when she saw Usagi’s costume. “You look positively adorable!”

“Thanks,” Usagi beamed, “I made it myself.”

“No way!” She circled her eagerly, praising the excellent construction and detailing of her Dark Magician Girl costume. They were slightly color coordinated as Mina wore a white and pink rhinestone cowgirl outfit. “You should really be doing fashion design instead of merchandising!”

Usagi and Makoto shared a look. “We were talking about that on the way here, actually. I’ve decided to switch majors. It’s only the middle of the quarter and all the credits for the classes I’m already in will transfer to the design degree.”

“That’s great! I can just picture you with a boutique in Harajuku or even Akihabara. You can have a bunny logo because of your name!”

“First I have to pass all the business math courses.” Usagi laughed sheepishly as they dove into a discussion about the best autumn trends, Mina asserting that arm warmers were totally in this year. Makoto sighed, crossed her arms and tapped her foot, hoping Rei’s blue Acura would show up soon. She glared at a pack of boys that whistled at them while Usagi and Mina waved and giggled. She had a feeling the copper blonde could become a negative influence on her friend; Mina clearly wasn’t shy about attracting attention with her body. ”You look just like Lara Croft,” Ami said, startling the taller girl with her silent approach. “Sorry, I thought you heard me.”

“I was just a little lost in thought, but thanks. I’m sure there’s going to be alcohol at this party and I don’t want Usagi going overboard. She’s a total lightweight.” Ami nodded in understanding. “We don’t really know any of the guys there so I want to make sure none of them take advantage of her… of any of us. I’ll kick someone in the balls if I have to.”

Ami could see that Makoto had the physique to put significant force behind such an action. “Do you work out a lot?” she asked.

“I jog every day and go to a karate studio sometimes, but I’m only a green belt. The dojo I used to train at back home got demolished.”

“Oh no, that’s terrible. Was your sensei all right?”
Makoto nodded. “He’s fine, but to my knowledge he hasn’t had the money to open another dojo.” She turned to better see Ami, noting how modest her Greek goddess costume was. She was quite pale but had some freckles dotting her nose. “Do you play volleyball like Minako?”

“I can play the game but I’m definitely not on her level,” Ami laughed. “She was almost scouted for the Olympic team! She chose to become a physical therapist instead.” She tapped her lips thoughtfully. “I think it may have something to do with her mother who became a professional tennis player right after high school. She suffered a lot of minor injuries before she had Mina and developed sciatica after her pregnancy.”

“That’s unfortunate,” Makoto said. “I don’t want to wear myself out before I get old, but I hate just lazing around. I can’t play video games or read for hours on end like Usagi.” Ami pursed her lips at that. She didn’t regard reading as lazing around, she considered it brain exercise.

Night had just about fallen when Rei arrived, the awaiting girls jumping into her car to escape a cold breeze. “Sorry it took so long. Can you believe there’s so much traffic on Halloween?”

“Everyone probably has awesome parties to go to, like us!” Mina cheered. She tried to get a good look at Rei’s costume but it was too dark; all she could discern was a feathered black mask and matching dress. Her nail polish and lips were black as well. And come to think of it, hadn’t Rei been wearing black when they met at Amabie? Mina thought she pulled off the goth look rather elegantly.

Upon arriving at the Burke Mansion they made some last-minute adjustments to their costumes before forming a nervous cluster on the front step. Makoto lifted the brass knocker and let it fall. Mamoru opened the door, his cape flaring dramatically and making Usagi yelp. He almost laughed, which would have ruined his character’s sinister air, but withheld it and stepped aside, bowing low to welcome them in. Zach then showed them to the ballroom where Nicholas was situated at the bar. “Who’s ready for a drink?” he asked, smiling broadly.

Everyone spent the first hour talking and getting to know one another. Much to Usagi’s chagrin only Mamoru was familiar with the character she portrayed; the other boys thought she was some kind of fairy. They were more intrigued by Makoto’s perfect representation of the Tomb Raider heroine anyway and took turns dancing with her until Mina barged onto the scene, stealing some of the spotlight with her overtly sensual moves. A buzzed Ami turned out to be quite giggly. She didn’t stop laughing as Zach spun her around and around, their costumes in perfect contrast.

Rei omitted herself from the dance floor though not entirely by choice. The downside to her tight-fitting gown was that she didn’t have a great range of motion. She was stuck sipping the fruity cocktail Nicholas made her until one of the boys extricated himself from the mob, stumbling over Mamoru’s cape. Joe hadn’t called attention to the fact that he didn’t have a costume; he just donned his nicest pair of jeans and called himself a Calvin Klein model. Rei surreptitiously admired his muscular arms and abs while he downed several cups of water. After taking a swig of vodka straight from the bottle he leaned against the bar and exuded a long sigh, his handsome face turning toward her. “Why aren’t you out there with us?” he asked.

She sighed. “Honestly, I can’t move very well in this dress. It certainly looks like everyone is having a good time, though.”

Joe nodded idly and gave her another once-over. “I hate to ask, but just who or what are you dressed as? I first thought ‘witch’ but that didn’t seem quite right. You’re too elegant.”

The gorgeous girl he hardly knew drew herself up, looking even more regal. “I’m the Morrígan, the Celtic goddess of death.”
“I see! That makes your costume the most appropriate!” Rei thought so, too. “You might not be able to shake your ass like everyone else, but I bet you can waltz just fine.” Joe smiled and held out a hand. Rei was slightly surprised by the gesture. “Come on. If you don’t know how just follow my lead.”

“I can waltz,” she declared, placing her dainty hand in his palm. After assuming the stance they began moving to a beat he drummed with his fingers against her waist. It didn’t match the music everyone else was dancing to but Rei no longer heard it as she focused on his captivating green eyes. She felt nothing but the connection of their hands and the way his muscles flexed with every sweeping turn.

“Where did you learn this?” Joe wanted to know.

Rei shrugged. “I used to dance with my father and the members of his cabinet during formal events. After my mother passed away I became his designated partner.”

“He taught you well. I was forced to ballroom dance at my Catholic school.”

“What was that like?”

Joe sucked his teeth. “Brutal. You know how people like to joke about being beat by nuns for misbehaving? It wasn’t a joke at my school. You’d get whacked for even mentioning drugs or sex unless it was a promise to never engage in such sinful activity.” He grinned when Rei laughed.

“Where did you learn to speak Japanese?” she then inquired.

“I picked it up from one of the mechanics at my dad’s auto shop. I’m actually fluent in several languages.” Rei tilted her head, looking every bit a curious raven. “Russian is my native tongue since I was born there, and I can hold a conversation in Polish and Czech. I learned Japanese, Korean, and Mandarin as a kid.”

“So you’re a polyglot. That’s an impressive skill to have, especially since you can’t be more than…” Rei looked him up and down again. “Twenty-two years old.”

Joe confirmed her deduction with a nod. “As of May. My hometown, Vladivostok, is right between China, Korea, and Japan so I grew up hearing people from those countries speak and I took note of the similarities. My mother is Czech and she forced me to study English for when I became a big-shot politician.” Rei tensed at the word, making their rhythm falter, and he glanced at the floor in concern, thinking she’d tripped over something. “Are you all right?”

“Yes, sorry… I’m just feeling a little dizzy now. I think it’s the fog.”

“We can go outside for some fresh air,” Joe offered. “There’s a gazebo that overlooks the Sound. It was a mess when I moved in but I just finished landscaping around it.”

“That sounds nice, I’d love to see it.” Rei placed her hand on his offered arm and allowed him to lead her out through the conservatory. Despite only being half dressed Joe was turning out to be quite the gentleman, the type of person Rei definitely hadn’t expected to encounter at a silly Halloween party. If only he hadn’t mentioned politics.
his own friends before the night ended. At least these young people had paid well and were having fun.

Kaelan knew the Thriller dance because his mum liked Michael Jackson’s music, and Zach knew it because it was one of those things every American picked up in school or from their friends at some point, but much to their surprise Usagi, Mina, and Makoto performed with them in perfect sync. “You are awesome,” Kaelan said to Mina once the routine ended and the DJ began packing up his equipment. He planted a hand on her waist as they stood at the bar receiving drinks from Nicholas. “Do they teach that in Japan?”

“Not exactly,” she giggled, unbothered by the physical contact; Kaelan had only gotten more attractive as the night wore on. “We have something called para-para, dancing to fast-paced songs with preset choreography. I’ve been doing it forever.”

“Me too!” Usagi added, piña colada in hand. “I started dragging Mako-chan to events with me, so she had no choice but to learn!”

The blondes exchanged a high-five. “Anyway, where’d Rei ‘n Joe go?” Mina giggled at her rhyme.

“If they’re around somewhere it’s best just to let them be. They could be getting up to anything.” Although slurred, Kaelan’s advice was sound enough.

“I guess you’re right. Hey, where’s this pool I’ve heard so much about? I want to cool off!”

“Yes!” Makoto cheered. “We can play some games, girls versus guys!”

It appeared everyone was on board with the idea of a late-night pool party. Kaelan made a grand sweeping gesture toward the double doors opposite the room. “Right this way… and someone bring the booze!”

“Oui monsieur!” Zach saluted, gathering random bottles into his arms and following dutifully.

Mamoru was the last to leave the ballroom, but by the time he got to the pool almost everyone had already undressed and jumped in. He shielded his eyes only to realize that he couldn’t see anything below the water because of the dark blue tiling. ‘Normal boys would be excited to see half-naked girls splashing around.’ He made himself useful by gathering abandoned costume components and setting them on the patio table. Then he sighed and lay back in a lounge chair, staring at the winking stars visible through the dusty glass ceiling.

He became lost in thought until water splashed his leg. “You’re not coming in?” Usagi asked. Her makeup had smudged in such a way that she seemed to have stepped out of a watercolor painting.

Mamoru shook his head. “I figured I’d stay here in case someone needs rescuing.”

“What do you think’s gonna happen?”

“Well…” A quick survey showed that Nicholas, Zach, Makoto and Ami were having a chicken fight with more tickling involved than shoving. On the far side of the pool Mina had her arms wrapped around Kaelan’s neck as they made out in a surprisingly non-sloppy manner. “I just don’t want anyone to get hurt. The combination of alcohol and water can be dangerous.”

Usagi laughed off his concern. “I got banished ‘cause I can’t reach the bottom or support Ami-chan, so the least you could do is come over here and keep me company, Mister Lifeguard. Promise I won’t splash you.”
“You already did,” Mamoru pointed out, but he went and sat down beside her anyway.

She rested her chin on her forearms. “I meant to tell you earlier that your costume looks really great. And it seems playing DDR with me taught you some decent moves!”

Mamoru smiled shyly “I was just going along with you… I really am a bad dancer.”

“Well it didn’t look bad to me,” Usagi returned. “Why’re you always putting yourself down?” His mouth opened but the words were halted by her hand falling on his. “You’re a great guy, Mamo-chan. You’re nice and generous and smart… and something tells me you don’t wanna swim with us ‘cause you’re intimidated by the other guys.”

“That’s not…” He faltered, knowing it was somewhat futile to try having a discussion with a girl who was tipsy at the very least. Mamoru wasn’t intimidated by his housemates so much as he still felt a little like an outcast among them, but Usagi was correct in that Mamoru couldn’t help but compare himself to the other four men. Zach was extremely confident in his looks, downright vain in fact, despite his slim, androgynous figure. Nicholas simply had a genetic predisposition for easily gaining muscle; he’d maintained his bulky stature by playing sports his whole life. Kaelan also lived an athletic lifestyle until moving from Ireland, leaving his rugby team behind. Last was Joe whose toned physique had been acquired from years of hard work and a do-it-yourself attitude toward pretty much everything. Mamoru was a bookworm with glow-in-the-dark skin and a body that was just kind of there, features no one could possibly be attracted to.

“You shouldn’t care what anyone else thinks,” Usagi said as if reading his mind. “You’ll never look like anyone else because you’re you, a unique and beautiful butterfly! Just remember that at least your body is healthy. You don’t have any scary diseases like the ones you and Ami-chan study.” She grinned and kicked off the wall to rejoin the others, leaving him silenced by her rather eloquent statement. Maybe she wasn’t as drunk as he assumed.

Before he could second-guess his actions, Mamoru returned to the table and carefully removed the borrowed tuxedo. He then stood at the edge of the pool in nothing but his dark blue underwear. “C’mon in, Mamoru!” Nicholas called. Everyone else began yelling for him to join them as well. After catching Usagi’s eye and giving her a grateful smile, he dove into the water.
Kaelan awoke because he was on fire. He sat bolt upright in bed, flinging the down comforter away and kicking off the sheets while gasping for breath. He could feel sweat beginning to dry on his skin but the room was still incredibly warm. He got up and stumbled over to the window, opening it to blast himself with November air. Only then did he realize he was stark naked. “A cold shower might be more effective,” said a feminine voice. Kaelan whirled around to find Mina wearing one of his bathrobes and dabbing at her wet hair with a towel. Her eyes drifted south before returning to his face, and she smirked.

“Why is it so damn hot in here?” he demanded while retrieving another silk robe from his closet.

“You lit a fire before we went to bed,” she explained.

“Before we…?” He glanced at the hearth to see the smoldering remains, then a smug smile turned his lips. “I could get used to waking up with you.”

The girl rolled her eyes. “Oh, please. This was a one-time thing that only happened because we were both completely wasted.”

Ouch. Kaelan thought she’d really been interested in him last night; she had no reason not to be when he was attractive, rich, and obviously charming enough to have seduced her in the first place. “We could get back in bed to make it a recurring thing.”

Mina scoffed at the suggestion. “No thank you. Once was quite enough.”

His expression fell. Did that mean he had performed badly? Kaelan could hardly remember bringing Mina up to his room much less the actual sex. He had never gotten so drunk that he forgot what he did with whom in bed, but maybe Nicholas’ concoctions were potent enough to make him black out. It had also been four months since his last hookup so he was probably a little out of practice. “I apologize if you weren’t satisfied.”

“It’s not that,” Mina stated, folding her arms. “We didn’t use protection.”

“Oh, fuck me.” Kaelan sat down on the edge of the bed as his stomach churned with anxiety. He’d been so focused on getting laid last night that he hadn’t even stocked his nightstand with condoms or asked his housemates for one. Right then and there he vowed to ditch the playboy attitude before it ended up ruining someone’s life. “You’re not on the pill or anything?” he asked in a hopeful tone.

“I usually get a Depo shot, but I’ve been so busy with school that I missed this month’s. Don’t worry, I’ll go get Plan B today.”

Kaelan nodded, a little stunned by how calmly Mina was handling the situation. Thinking about each potential outcome that could spawn from their indiscretion made him even more nauseous. What if Mina wasn’t aware of her options and just went straight home only to find out she was pregnant? Would she have an abortion or give the baby up for adoption? If she kept it, would she ask him for support or attempt to raise the baby on her own? Would she drop out of school? Kaelan wasn’t anywhere near ready to be a father yet and he hated the idea of irrevocably altering Mina’s life in exchange for getting off inside her, which was in no way worth the risk. The party last night was supposed to be a celebration of his favorite holiday, not an excuse to let all his common sense fly out the window. “I’m terribly sorry, Mina,” he said in earnest.

She shrugged and gave him a partial smile. “Don’t worry about it. I never expect guys to think about
contraception in the heat of the moment.”

“That doesn’t absolve of us responsibility,” he returned. But since she clearly had a plan to deal with the consequences of their act of lust, he allowed himself to relax. “I’d better check out the damage.”

“Yeah, speaking of damage…” Mina indicated the bedroom. “What happened to my lingerie? It was expensive.”

Kaelan pressed a hand to his forehead, forcing himself to remember. “You had it on in the pool, right? Then I think we showered off down there…”

“Let’s just go ask.” She stepped into the hall and he followed a moment later. As he closed the door behind them Zach exited the bathroom and offered a thumbs-up, which did nothing to bolster his ego. Minako was incredibly sexy but he only felt guilty after sleeping with her.

A tantalizing scent reached his nose. Nicholas was the only one of his tenants who really cooked, but he was definitely still asleep since he’d partied the hardest. Cinnamon and nutmeg lured Kaelan to the kitchen where he found Makoto and Ami standing at the stove as Rei sliced fruit on the counter. “Ohayo,” she said to Mina, then greeted the boy in English. He wasn’t at all mad that they’d raided the fridge.

“You should go wake up your friends,” Usagi said from the cushioned nook. “An epic party deserves an epic breakfast!”

Kaelan simply nodded and trudged back upstairs, barging into Nicholas’ room first and yelling at him to get up since Zach was already awake. “Whazzat smell?”

“The girls are making breakfast.” Despite being incredibly hungover Nicholas made a happy sound and began the lengthy process of popping all his joints. Kaelan entered Joe’s room next and shook his exposed foot. “Wake up, breakfast time!”

“Go away,” Joe growled.

“You’re not hungry?”

He shifted slightly to glare at his landlord. “I’ve only gotten ten hours of sleep in three days, so kindly fuck off.”

Kaelan retreated into the hall, wondering if Mamoru would be just as cranky, but when he knocked on his door he answered it fully dressed. “There’s food downstairs if you want it,” Kaelan said. He felt like shit and returned to his master suite to shower.

Mamoru was the second least-rested person in the house. After everyone finished messing around in the pool they took turns showering off, though Kaelan and Mina had made out for so long they almost used up all the hot water, then Zach donated some pajamas for the girls to wear since they were similar in size. They all sat around drinking even more until passing out in the lounge chairs. When Joe and Rei finally reappeared they worked with Mamoru to get their friends somewhere comfortable, placing Zach and Nicholas in their rooms while leaving Makoto, Usagi, and Ami in improvised beds. Rei then left to grab some actual clothes from her apartment so no one would have to go home in their disarrayed Halloween costumes, and Mamoru told an exhausted Joe to get some rest while he gathered every soaked undergarment and put them in the wash. Finally he went around leaving aspirin and water on the side tables at four in the morning.

When Mamoru entered the kitchen he was surprised to find a buffet of pancakes, bacon, eggs, toast, and fruit waiting on the island. The five girls sported messy hair and blotchy makeup but they were
significantly more attractive than his housemates of which Zach and Nicholas were the only two present. “Was it you who washed the ladies’ underwear?” the former asked. Mamoru nodded since he held a piece of toast in his mouth while loading a plate with additional offerings.

“Thanks for that,” Mina said, “but for future reference you should always dry lingerie on low heat.” She smirked when Mamoru blushed at the notion of handling lingerie again, then he blushed even harder as he imagined which garments belonged to each girl, fairly certain Usagi had worn the pink thong.

“You gave us the muti too, right?” Nicholas rasped. “You’re good china.”

“Um, thanks?”

Ami gazed at him. “Thank you for attending us, Chiba-san. To be honest I was somewhat nervous about staying the night with several boys we only recently got to know.”

Zach looked up from his plate. “What do you think this is, a house of miscreants? We’re perfect gentlemen.” As if on cue a belch escaped Nicholas, earning surprised expressions all around. Then Usagi started giggling, her laughter contagious.

“Compliments to the chef,” Nicholas spoke as an apology. His face turned beet red but a glance at Makoto revealed that a tiny smile had turned her lips since she had done most of the cooking. Zach then patted him reassuringly on the shoulder.

After Usagi, Makoto, Ami and Mina changed into Rei’s clothes, returned Zach’s sleepwear, thanked the guys and headed out, Kaelan finally reappeared looking his usual polished self. “Where’d everyone go?” he inquired.

“The girls just left,” Mamoru supplied, washing dishes.

“Damn, I wanted Mina’s number.”

“Why do you need to call her when you already nailed her?” Zach asked. Mamoru and Nicholas dropped their jaws.

“Just… because I can,” Kaelan answered. He nibbled on a strip of bacon while staring at the floor. Was Planned Parenthood even open on Sunday? What if Mina couldn’t get any emergency contraception and ended up being pregnant? They were both good-looking people so they’d probably make a good-looking kid. Shaking his head to clear such thoughts, Kaelan turned to the calendar and saw a starred date. “Hey Mamoru, what’d you do with my tux?”

“It’s folded in my room. I can have it dry-cleaned if you want.”

“It’s probably fine. You wore it for, what, five hours? I need it for a charity auction next week.”

Nicholas snorted into his orange juice. “Since when do you go to charity auctions?”

“Since I want to contribute to this community,” Kaelan declared. “It’s an auction for old weapons from around the world. I could end up with a sword belonging to one of my Celtic ancestors!”

Kaelan spent two hours getting ready for the auction; however, when he got to the tie he stared helplessly at his reflection. It was a weekday and he thought his housemates were attending classes, but when he passed Zach’s room he heard papers shuffling and peered through the cracked door. “Hello?”
“Merde!” Zach shouted, spinning in his chair. “Why are you sneaking up on me like that?”

“I didn’t think you were here,” Kaelan answered, “but to be honest I could use your help. Can you tie a tie?” He held up the emerald green silk accessory.

“Can I tie a tie?” Zach deadpanned. “I wear at least three a week. What style do you want— Windsor, Pratt, Prince Albert?” Kaelan stared at him blankly and he groaned. “Every man should know how to tie a tie! I’ll teach you a really fancy method called the Trinity. Watch carefully…” After a five minute tutorial Kaelan admired the knot in Zach’s full-length mirror. It definitely gave him a regal look and doubled as a nod to his heritage.

His Maserati brought him to the Westin Hotel a half hour before the auction was to start, meaning he had to mingle. Kaelan wasn’t worried about finding people to talk to so much as being ridiculed for his age. Now that his selfish spending was over he wanted to make a name for himself as a philanthropist. anyone who read the *Seattle Times* article about him probably assumed he was just an irresponsible twenty-three year-old millionaire, but he wanted to prove them wrong. While drinking champagne and wandering aimlessly around the foyer, Kaelan met an elderly couple who were still active archaeologists and had one of the world’s largest private collections of masks. They seemed to know a great deal about most of the items that would be up for bid and gave him tons of advice he kept in mind as everyone finally filed into the hall.

Kaelan got into an intense bidding war for an immaculately-preserved Scottish dirk with a stag antler handle from the 18th century, but gave up when it reached a hundred-thousand dollars. “Next we have a sword of unknown origin recently excavated from the Yonaguni ruins off the southern coast of Japan…” People murmured their disapproval, but one look at the sword and Kaelan knew he had to have it. The blade itself was the most unique thing he’d ever seen; the auctioneer said it had been carved from a single slab of ilmenite, whatever that was. The sword’s composition attracted a few buyers but they quit when it reached twenty-thousand. “Do we have any more offers? Mr. Burke has the high bid. Twenty-thousand going once… going twice…” He banged the gavel. “Sold to Mr. Burke for the price of just twenty-thousand dollars! Young man, your personal vehicle would have been a greater contribution to this auction than this item.” A few people chuckled at the remark and Kaelan gave his best indifferent shrug before leaving his seat to claim the antique.

He wrote a check, accepted some paperwork for tax purposes, then clung to the wooden case while a valet retrieved his car. During the drive he kept glancing at the rearview mirror to make sure the case was in the backseat, thinking it would vanish by the time he got home. His heart pounded in anticipation; he very much wanted to feel the blade in his hand, to heft its weight and see if the crystal edges had been rendered harmless by time.

“Kaelan got a sword!” Zach hollered as soon as his landlord came through the door, and footsteps came tromping down the stairs while he carried his prize into the great room. Joe and Nicholas crowded him while he gingerly set the case on a couch.

“This thing is a bit unusual,” Kaelan explained. “It was found in some underwater Japanese ruins and its age is undetermined. It doesn’t match anything from Japanese history or other neighboring cultures.”

“Who cares? Just show us!”

Kaelan took a deep breath, unfastened the locks, and lifted the lid.

Mamoru was almost ready to earn his license, but until then Joe picked him up at UW and let him drive home. He was so focused on the road that it didn’t occur to him Joe had remained silent the whole way, and when Mamoru glanced at him he was staring straight ahead as if in a trance. “Are
“Kaelan won a sword at the auction,” he quietly replied.

“Oh, that’s great! What kind of sword? Where did it come from?”

“No one knows— it’s sort of a mystery. I’ve been searching for info online all day but never found anything. Kaelan received a page of research notes but they weren’t very helpful.”

Now Mamoru was excited to take a look at it. He parked the Samurai in Joe’s bay of the garage and found his other three housemates seated in the kitchen. They all held cups of hot tea and were bundled up in blankets even though a fire was lit in the great room’s hearth. “Where’s the sword?” he asked. Kaelan, Nicholas, and Zach faced him at the exact same time, their eyes wide with fear, and Mamoru’s expression dimmed. “What’s wrong? Did someone get hurt?”

No one answered; the three of them just stared at the ripples of tea made by their trembling hands. Now Mamoru was certain something bad had happened. “Take off those blankets,” he demanded. They obliged, but he was only slightly relieved to see that they looked fine. No bruises, no cuts, no slashed clothes… then he noticed it. Mamoru grabbed Kaelan’s wrists to bring his hands into the light; on both of his palms were white patches of blistered flesh. Zach’s were exactly the same but only one of Nicholas’ hands was affected. “How did you get frostnip? It’s not cold enough outside for that.”

“It happened when they held the sword,” Joe replied, leaning against the door frame. He spread his fingers for inspection. “I didn’t touch it.”

“The handle would have to be far below freezing to affect the blood so quickly.” Mamoru examined their palms again and a shiver went down his spine; he didn’t like being confronted with medical mysteries. He felt their foreheads, backs and chests, but their temperatures were completely normal. At a loss for explanations, Mamoru asked to see the sword. Joe led him into the great room and pointed at the blade lying on the carpet where Nicholas had dropped it. He knelt beside it and held his hand over the ancient leather-wrapped handle. Just above the crossguard was an enameled upward-facing crescent, the tips curving inward until they met at the fuller. Mamoru became transfixed by the unblemished black crystal blade, his vision tunneling as he stared into its endless facets. The elegant design belied its true power, power he wanted to wield for himself…

A strong grip suddenly prevented him from taking up the sword and with a gasp Mamoru looked into Joe’s face, his expression a mixture of anger and concern. “Don’t they have folktales in Japan, Mamoru? Aren’t there legends of objects possessed by evil spirits?”

Rational thoughts returned quickly. “You think Kaelan bought a possessed sword?” The idea sounded ludicrous.

“Maybe not, but there’s definitely something weird about it.” Joe released him with a sigh. “You couldn’t feel any cold radiating off the handle, could you? But somehow the others received ice burns.”

Mamoru backed away from the glimmering weapon, but not before grabbing the research notes. “Discovered among the Yonaguni ruins…” he read aloud. “The blade is made from… ilmenite?”

Joe nodded. “Yes, ilmenite. It’s a weakly magnetic iron-titanium-oxide mineral similar to hematite. Ore is typically ground down and refined for titanium-based applications.”

“But the blade looks like it was cut from a single crystal.”
“That wouldn’t have been difficult. It only has a hardness of five to six Mohs, same as feldspar.”

Mamoru gazed at him narrowly. “Now you’re a botanist and a geologist?”

Joe gave a small laugh. “Well, yeah– I took two years of geology. I’m familiar with ilmenite for a few reasons. One, it was first discovered in Russia. Two, it’s a mineral found on the Moon. Three, it can be refined on the lunar surface to provide oxygen for cosmonauts.”

Mamoru sat down to absorb this information. His head spun with theories but none of them were logical. The sword certainly didn’t look Japanese, so why had it been in Yonaguni? Some scientists believed the ruins were the site of an ancient technologically-advanced culture due to the construction of the pyramid, which was similar to Egyptian and Mesoamerican styles. Some believed Yonaguni to be the real Atlantis. Others said it had simply been a structure on an island that sunk into the seabed.

He was so lost in thought that he didn’t notice Joe returning the sword to the case until he sucked in a breath and shook his hand. Mamoru jumped up and watched in morbid fascination as a thin white line appeared on his calloused palm and slowly spread outward, claiming every skin cell that had touched the handle and turning his fingers porcelain. “Ah, that hurts…” Joe furrowed his brow. “You study virology. You know that primordial, dormant viruses get trapped in ice and things they dredge up from the ocean.”

“I don’t think this is some kind of virus,” Mamoru refuted. “There would likely be an indication of sepsis, but this just looks like common frostbite. Did the handle feel cold to the touch?”

“Not at all,” Joe answered, “it’s just leather and wire. There has to be bacteria or something living in the material that’s reacting to our skin temperature. It doesn’t make sense otherwise.”

“I can analyze it at the lab tomorrow,” Mamoru offered.

His friend nodded. “Do that. I’d rather not have my cause of death be Kaelan’s pretentiousness.”

Usagi’s dream of showcasing her latest designs at New York Fashion Week was interrupted by a meow. She thought it was part of her dream until she heard a slight thumping. “Mako-chan, is that you?” she whispered. An incomprehensible response came from the other side of the room. After a few minutes she caught another meow followed by the shrill noise of claws on glass. Usagi got out of bed and shuffled through the living room, pausing to turn on a light near the door to the balcony.

A pair of bright yellow eyes stared up at her. Usagi squinted and was able to discern the form of a black cat sitting right outside the door. ‘It must belong to one of our neighbors,’ she reasoned, and lifted the lock to let it inside. The cat immediately wound around her legs. “Well aren’t you friendly? What’s your name, kitty?” It didn’t have a collar or tag. “I guess your owner will know.”

The cat laid its ears back at that. It wandered around sniffing the coffee table, Makoto’s plants and the sofa, then proceeded to rub its face on everything. Usagi noticed that in place of a tail it only had a short tuft of fur. “What happened to your tail, kitty? Is it supposed to be like that?” The cat looked at her, winked, and trotted around the corner. She followed and gasped as it jumped into Makoto’s bed. “Bad kitty!” she whispered, plucking the cat off her comforter. But she had moved too slowly. Makoto mumbled something and sat up, blinking wearily.

“Usa-chan? What was that?” The cat mewed as an answer and she drew back. “Where did that thing come from?”

“It’s not a thing,” Usagi chastised, “it’s a kitty, and it was on the balcony.”
Makoto switched on her table lamp to examine the feline in her friend’s arms. It purred as she scratched its chin, and she noticed it was jet black except for a patch of white fur on its head. It appeared healthy, meaning it likely wasn’t a stray, but how had it gotten to the balcony? Their apartment was on the third floor and there was a six-foot gap between railings. She groaned when she checked the time; it was three in the morning. “We can return it to its rightful owner before we go to class tomorrow. It must live around here somewhere.”

The cat gave Usagi a rather imploring look that tugged at her heartstrings. “What if it doesn’t, Makochan? What if it wants us to be its owners?”

“Then you get to buy the food, toys and litter ‘cause I’m too busy to take care of any pets.”

“Yay!” Usagi whispered. She knew Michiru would approve of the cat; it was too sweet not to like. When she got back into bed the cat curled up between her arm and the wall, and she pondered a name while stroking its soft fur. “Kuroko? Kage? Hoshi?” The white patch looked more like a crescent moon than a star. “Maybe just… Luna.” Yes, that sounded right. “Good night, Luna-chan.”

The cat purred contentedly as a response.
“Usagi!” The blonde awakened instantly upon hearing Michiru’s tone of voice. “What is this *cat* doing here?”

“Why’re you asking me?” she asked, rubbing sleep from her eyes.

Michiru raised an eyebrow. “*You’re* the one with the biggest weakness for animals.” She directed her pursed lips at the feline winding around her ankles. “*You’re* lucky she’s friendly.”

“And cute! I think she looks like a mini bobcat.”

“That’s because she’s a Japanese bobtail, which means she probably belongs to someone nearby. You should ask around to see if anyone lost a cat recently.” That was all Michiru had to say on the matter. She grabbed her violin case and left.

Since Usagi couldn’t go back to sleep she made herself some toast with jam and ate it while Luna watched from another chair. When Makoto returned from her jog she tilted her head at how at-ease the cat looked, as if she owned the place already. “Lucky you,” she said to Usagi, “I checked the classifieds while I was out and there were no ads for lost cats.”

“Oh, that’s great! You know I’ve always wanted a pet, Mako-chan. My mom is allergic to cats and dogs so I only ever had boring fish.”

“I don’t think fish count as pets,” Makoto commented while pulling ingredients from the fridge. “*They’re* more like decoration.”

“So we should totally keep Luna! She’ll be our shared pet.”

“I’m fine with her as long as she doesn’t jump on me when I’m asleep.” Luna apologetically lowered her head, earning a kindly pat. “What did Michiru say?”

“She said I should still ask around…” Usagi’s eyes abruptly widened. “But what if someone lies about owning Luna and they end up abusing her?”

Makoto sighed even though it was a reasonable concern. “We could ask people to describe her. We’ll just put her breed, gender, where we found her, and ask them to describe her markings. If they fail to do so then we’ll know she doesn’t belong to them.”

Usagi grinned at the prospect of telling off people with bad intentions. After getting dressed she went to the nearest store to pick up supplies for Luna, even grabbing all-natural cat food to appease Makoto who believed animals deserved to eat healthy, too. She set up the litter box in the bathroom, the food dish at the base of the kitchen counter, and sprinkled a few toys around the living room. Luna only sniffed them before staring up at the girl. “You have to behave, kitty. You have to make a good impression on Michiru, so no shredding the furniture. Mako-chan will be back before me to keep you company.”

Luna meowed as she left, causing a pang of sadness. Usagi just wanted to cuddle her all day even though the cat seemed rather stoic and probably wouldn’t appreciate the attention. She hoped Luna really was a stray; she didn’t want her to end up being someone else’s cat. She felt like Luna *belonged* with her.
Midterms were greeted with abhorrence. Nicholas had testing all day and Mamoru was undergoing an evaluation, but Joe and Zach were free since they were both working on big projects. Kaelan found them in the conservatory that was now full of exotic fruit-bearing trees, tropical flowers, and water fountains connected to a complex irrigation system. “I think it’s time for another party,” he declared.

“Don’t tell me you want to celebrate Thanksgiving,” Zach said. “I’m the only American around here.”

Kaelan shook his head. “No, I want to have a star party. The Leonid meteor shower peaks tomorrow night. I thought we could invite the girls again.”

“As long as no one passes out by the pool this time. You guys aren’t exactly lightweights.” Joe set his pruners down and smiled. “We could throw some pillows and blankets in the gazebo. It has a perfect view of the Olympic skyline.”

“Brilliant! This is why I let you live here. Someone text the others so they can spread the word.”

Mamoru’s phone chimed just as he peeled the rubber gloves off his hands. His supervisor raised an eyebrow while he scrambled to silence it. “You’re very lucky, Chiba. If that had gone off five minutes ago I would’ve made you start over.”

“Sorry, Doctor.” Mamoru bowed and the woman waved him away; he was free for the rest of the day. He checked his phone as soon as he entered the hall.

“Apparently we’re having a party tomorrow to celebrate some falling space rocks. Can you pass it on to the girls? And Kaelan says us guys have to cook dinner, so pick up ingredients for whatever you want to make.”

Mamoru wasn’t sure if Zach was being serious and consulted a celestial events app. Sure enough, the Leonids were ongoing. Now that he was no longer stressed out about lab work he thought it would be nice to spend some quality time with Usagi, and he couldn’t wait to show her his new car.

“Hey, Usako!” he texted.

“I still have one left, but that sounds fun! I bet you guys have a great view since you’re far away from all the city lights. Should we bring food or anything?”

“We have it covered. Just be sure to dress warm. Oh, and I’ll be picking you up this time.” Mamoru stowed his phone and began the rather long walk to the library. He had to turn up the collar of his jacket to keep a persistent chill off his neck and shoved his hands deep into woolen pockets. ‘It might even snow before December,’ he thought, and wondered if Joe could teach him how to drive safely on ice.

The temperature inside the library was a nice 75 degrees Fahrenheit, but Mamoru wouldn’t be staying long enough to acclimate. He spied Ami at the front desk and she looked up when he approached, flashing a smile. “How did your evaluation go?” she asked.

“It went well. I almost got in trouble because my phone went off right when I finished.” Mamoru noticed that she was coloring several brain diagrams. “Is that your midterm?”

“Yes. Pretty silly, isn’t it? I have to label all the lobes and functions without using notes.”

“Well there’s the challenge,” he said, but he knew it was a piece of cake for her. “We’re having a
Leonid-viewing party at the mansion tomorrow night. Do you want to come?”

Ami grinned delightedly. “Yes I do! I was hoping to find a place to watch them since there’s too much light pollution here. I even convinced Mina to come with me if I found a place.” Her expression suddenly hardened, making Mamoru recoil a little. “I don’t think she should be around Kaelan, though.”

“Why not? We all know they hooked up.”

“Yes, but I had to go with her to get Plan B. Mina told me she hadn’t gotten her birth control shot and they didn’t use protection.” Ami practically glared at him. “Your landlord could have gotten my best friend pregnant.”

Mamoru raised a hand to mediate. “He doesn’t deserve all the blame. They were both inebriated. They both made the decision not to be safe.” Now he knew why Kaelan had wanted Mina’s number: to see if she followed up on getting emergency contraception.

“Yes, but if Mina had gotten pregnant, she would be the one suffering the consequences. Kaelan is five years older than her. He should know better.”

“I understand your point of view,” Mamoru calmly replied, “but I think you should let Mina make her own decisions. This is like when…” He didn’t finish saying “when Makoto wanted to keep me away from Usagi”. It was clear Ami accepted the fact that her best friend had casual sex, and her concern was valid, but Mina was responsible enough to take care of herself. “I’m sure the guys will agree to an alcohol-free evening if it means you’ll both join us.”

Ami sighed, then gave a tiny smile. “They can drink if they want, but if anyone tries putting the moves on me I’ll have Makoto beat them up.”

“Deal,” Mamoru laughed. “See you tomorrow, then!”

The next night, Michiru answered the door when Mamoru knocked. “Usagi is in the shower, so you’ll have to wait a few minutes.”

“Help yourself to some cookies!” Makoto called from her room.

Mamoru eyed the platter and wasn’t sure which one to pick because they all looked delectable. He ended up choosing pumpkin chocolate chip, but as soon as he bit into it something nudged his leg and he jumped back from the table. Glancing down revealed a black cat with wide yellow eyes staring up at him. “Oh, that’s Luna-chan,” Michiru said while pouring a cup of tea. “She showed up earlier this week and someone begged me to keep her. She behaves well enough so I can’t be upset.”

The boy held out his hand for Luna to sniff. Her little black nose wiggled slightly, then a pink tongue darted out to lick his fingertip. “I probably taste like leather steering wheel,” he chuckled, for the cat’s ears flattened and she retreated beneath the table.

“Usagi did tell me you have a car now,” Michiru remarked. “What did you get?”

“A Mercedes E-Class coupe,” he answered. “The guys wanted me to buy something really sporty but I feel comfortable in it.”

“That’s what matters. When I was still in high school I met someone who taught me how to drive high-end cars like Lamborghini, Ferraris and Porsches. She said if I ever beat her in a race she would buy me any car I wanted.” Michiru’s fond smile faded to nothing. “It’s been a few years since...
I’ve seen her. Since I don’t need to drive here, I doubt I’d win if we ever did get the chance to race. I’m out of practice.”

Makoto had been listening to the story from her room and entered the kitchen once Michiru fell silent. “Sure you don’t want to come with us tonight? I feel bad leaving you here all alone.”

“I’ll be fine as long as I have my violin. Maybe Luna can help me practice— if she cringes I’ll know I have the wrong note.” The cat’s meow of agreement elicited a warm look from Michiru, then she rinsed out her teacup and went around the corner to knock on the bathroom door. “Usa-chan! It’s very rude to keep your guests waiting, especially when they offer to chauffeur you!”

“I’m drying off now!” Usagi shouted back.

Makoto sighed, knowing her friend would be another fifteen minutes at least, and began cleaning the kitchen even though it was already tidy. Mamoru slowly ate another cookie, wondering if he should attempt small-talk. He almost choked on the first bite of his third cookie when Usagi stuck her damp head around the corner, her shy expression making him laugh. Makoto planted a hand on her hip. “He’s already seen you in your underwear. A towel isn’t anything to get excited about.” Mamoru still turned around so she could slink past the kitchen. He heard drawers sliding open and closed, then she returned in skinny jeans, short boots, and a white sweater. “About time…” Makoto grumbled.

“It’s only eight. We still have plenty of time to catch the meteors,” Mamoru assured.

“Well I’m hungry,” Usagi stated. “We didn’t make dinner ‘cause you said there was food.”

Mamoru nodded. “There is. Nicholas was putting steaks on the grill when I left and Joe made apple cider to keep us warm.” They exited the stairwell and stood on the sidewalk for a moment. “It’s this one,” the boy smiled, placing his hand on the hood of his car.

Usagi’s face lit up. “Ooh, it’s so stylish!”

“Now you just need the wardrobe to match,” Makoto muttered as she settled into the roomy backseat, but she wasn’t quiet enough.

“Well, about that…” Mamoru pushed a button to start the vehicle. “Usako, I was wondering if you could go shopping with me before Christmas since you’ll be visiting your family. I want to give myself a new style for the new year.” He glanced at the blonde sidelong and found her staring at him in awe. “I guess that’s a yes?”

Makoto scoffed lightly. “You have no idea what you’re in for.”

The two girls bounced fashion ideas off one another during the drive, mentioning many designers Mamoru had never heard of. Once home he parked in the Samurai’s old garage space, then led the girls along a path curving around the house. Joe had done a great deal of landscaping to the backyard, transforming the patch of dead grass and bark into a soft carpet of moss. He’d planted winter flowers and shrubs around the gazebo and hung up lanterns of all colors, creating a very mystical environment. Nicholas stood before a grill on the deck wearing an apron that barely fit. He heard footsteps approach but wasn’t expecting Makoto to suddenly appear over his shoulder. “Smells good,” she commented. “I love peppercorns on steak.”

He nodded and began flipping them over the low flame. “The marinade is a super-secret family recipe, so I can’t tell you what’s in it. I will say that the peppercorns are for flavor contrast.”

Makoto put a finger on her nose. “I bet I can guess what’s in it. I smell orange zest, cardamom,
“Keep it down!” he exclaimed, nudging her with his elbow. “This recipe wins my dad a ribbon every year at the annual barbecue competition in Jozi. It has to stay secret!”

“Well I’m not going to South Africa any time soon, so you don’t have to worry about me stealing his ribbons.” Makoto gave him a return bump with her hip. “Is there anything I can eat right now?”

He pointed at the screen door with his spatula. “Everything’s inside staying warm. Help yourself.”

She and Usagi discovered a few platters of finger foods including fried zucchini and mushrooms, Panko-breaded oysters, and gorgonzola cheese spread with crackers. “Have at it!” Zach said, startling them. They hadn’t even noticed him cooking at the stove. “You two are the first ones here, and Joe and Kaelan are on a mission to collect all the spare bedding in the house. No one’s eaten a bite!”

He didn’t have to tell them twice. “Wha’re you making?” Usagi asked after cramming food into her mouth.

“This is fettuccine with scallops in a white wine sauce.” He grinned as the girls practically drooled. “We’re also having veggie salad and fresh bread.”

“That sounds amazing,” Usagi gushed. Makoto agreed wholeheartedly, uncaring of how many calories she was consuming right now. They both stood at the island picking things off the trays until Zach offered them each a mug of apple cider, which they happily accepted.

“Are there cloves in this?” Makoto asked.

“Sure are,” Joe answered. He was hidden behind a mound of pillows, Kaelan following with down comforters and fleece throws. “That’s my mom’s recipe. I hope you enjoy it.”

Makoto gave a half-smile and set her cup down. “I’ll have to savor it– cloves make me sleepy. Need a hand?” She helped carry some of the bedding out to the gazebo, spreading it over the hardwood floor. From the outside it looked like a great bird’s nest.

“Hello!” someone called. Kaelan looked up to see Rei, Ami and Mina enter the backyard. “Wow, this place looks like a fairy garden!” the blonde girl remarked. She smiled broadly at everyone, but when her eyes fell on Kaelan it vanished. “Hey,” she said simply.

“I’m glad you could make it,” he politely returned. “There’s food and drink inside, or you can sit by the fire if Mamoru ever gets it going.”

“The wood is damp! You should have covered it up.”

“The weatherman said we’d have clear skies tonight.” Kaelan turned up his palms. “Looks like he was right for once.”

“There’s still moisture in the air…” Mamoru muttered. He managed to arrange the driest logs into a pyramid.

Rei knelt beside him and placed her glasses on her head. “You forgot the kindling,” she said gently. Mamoru groaned as she stuffed newspaper between the logs, then struck a match and blew on the flame.

Everyone sat in chairs around the fire once it came to crackling life, their stomachs growling in
anticipation as the scent of grilled beef filled the air. “It’s ready!” Nicholas called, and they all but stamped inside, forks clashing for the largest cuts. Plates were loaded with scallop fettuccine, Mamoru’s contribution of chikuzenni, and Kaelan’s soda bread.

Usagi was the first to sample the steak. “It’s sweet!” she exclaimed.

“But the charring and pepper make it savory,” Rei added. Everyone else nodded approvingly since their mouths were full.

Nicholas grinned. “So it’s delicious is what I’m hearing. I’m glad I got to cook something fancy for a change.”

Usagi then raised her eyebrows at her best friend. Makoto shook her head slightly and stared at her plate, prompting the blonde to begin meddling. “Hey Nicholas…” He looked up expectantly. “Remember when we first met? What were you doing at the plant sale?”

“Oh, that…” He pointed his fork at Zach. “He sent me to find something.”

“What was it?”

“Some flowers to remind me of home,” Zach answered. “Indian pink, hibiscus, rain lily, things like that.”

“In this climate those plants would only survive in a greenhouse,” Makoto remarked, “but luckily you have one of those now.”

“I’d like to see the conservatory after dinner, if that’s okay.” Ami’s request was seconded by Rei. Joe and Zach shared a look, more than happy to show off everything they’d cultivated to pretty girls.

Mamoru, Rei and Joe were the last three to finish eating. Since everyone else had gotten comfortable in the gazebo they handled the leftovers and dishes before joining them. “That was the best meal I’ve had in a while,” Rei said. “I don’t do much cooking in my apartment and although the food at Bastyr is good, it’s very…”

“Simple?” Joe supplied.

She smiled. “Yes, and it’s nice to have a meal with diverse flavors.” She blew on her cup of cider, dispersing the steam before taking a sip. “I love the nutmeg in this.”

The green-eyed boy scooted a little closer to her. “I’m glad everyone likes my mom’s recipe. It’s one of the few things I remember how to make.” He suddenly turned bashful. “My dad said cooking wasn’t manly. I was always with him in the shop instead of helping my mom in the kitchen. But every Christmas I’d stay inside all day and cook with her. We made ham, bread, and enough dessert to feed the neighborhood. Her cider was always my favorite, though. The smell got me out of bed on Christmas morning.”

“Are you going to see your family during winter break?” Rei asked.

Joe sighed. “Maybe. They’ve been saving up to fly me home since last month, but it’s also insurance against horrible winter storms. Last year part of the roof collapsed on us, but me and Dad and the shop guys patched it up.”

Rei’s hand rose consolingly to his shoulder. Until that evening she had been under the assumption that Joe was just another rich boy rebelling against strict parents. She thought his decision to study
environmental science was to spite the people who wanted him to become a politician, but now she knew better. His parents weren’t wealthy and haughty at all, just a hard-working couple who’d raised a very down-to-earth son.

Mamoru saw the look they were sharing and turned his attention to the blue-black skies above. Orion and Taurus shone brightly while Leo glimmered near the horizon, and after a few minutes of staring he caught the faint flicker of a shooting star. He wondered why they were called that when they weren’t actually stars, just space debris burning up in the atmosphere. Yet only when one was firmly on the ground did the fragments of comet Tempel-Tuttle become something to marvel at. Usagi sidled up to him. “I didn’t realize how close this place was to the beach. We should walk down there later.” Her suggestion earned a nod.

Nicholas lay on his stomach, supporting Makoto as she rested across his shoulders. Ami sat between her and Zach who kept swatting at Mina’s toes as she tickled his lower back. Eventually she gave up and leaned sideways to rest her head against Kaelan’s chest. His pulse increased for a minute, then he wrapped an arm around her and sought out her left hand, somewhat surprised when she laced their fingers.

The sky gave an unspoken command for them to remain silent. Nobody said a word for the first hour, but then the shooting stars started coming more frequently. Breaths of awe were punctuated by shouts of excitement when a particularly bright meteoroid lanced through the heavens. “I think this is a good time to make a wish!” Usagi hopped to her feet. “C’mon, Mamo-chan!” She led him down the overgrown path to the beach, holding his hand tightly in case she tripped on a tree root. The path reached a steep cliff and became a set of stairs slick with moss, but Usagi raced down them anyway. She picked her way across the rocky shore and finally came to a stop at the water’s edge, letting waves brush her shoes while she stared upward. The meteoroids fell at a rate of at least ten every few seconds, a celestial downpour across the northern hemisphere.

“Usako, look at the water!” Mamoru squeezed her hand as she gasped at the magnified reflection of the sky. The meteor shower seemed just beyond her reach. If she took a step forward it would be like standing in a field of starlight…

Mamoru freed himself from the mesmerizing sight just in time to prevent Usagi from entering the water. He tugged her backwards with unintentional strength, causing her to release a surprised squeak. He caught her in his arms and for a moment they were still, Mamoru taking deep breaths to quell his surge of fear as Usagi blinked slowly to bring her surroundings into focus. She craned her neck to look up at his face. “What was that for, Mamo-chan?”

“You were about to… You almost…” He shook his head. “That water is ice cold, Usako! What were you thinking?”

“I… I don’t know.” Her brow furrowed as she rotated in his arms. “For a second I thought it’d be like floating in space with stars all around me.” She also shook her head. “That’s crazy, isn’t it?”

“Completely crazy. You would have gotten hypothermia in no time at all.”

Usagi laughed at her own stupidity before gazing out at the Sound again. There weren’t as many shooting stars now, but a mere minute ago the sky had blazed with streaks of white light. She sighed, wondering if she was a little out of it due to stressing over midterms, and realized how tightly Mamoru held her. She flattened her palm against his chest, feeling his adrenaline-fueled heart beginning to calm. His arms relaxed but he didn’t let her go just yet. She wasn’t sure if she wanted him to.

“Usako, don’t move,” Mamoru suddenly spoke.
“Why? What is it?” Her eyes darted around the beach in search of a bear or cougar or some other ferocious animal, but she saw nothing. “What is it, Mamo-chan?”

He grinned at her. “Just hang on to me.” She raised an eyebrow as he went to the water’s edge, rolled up a jacket sleeve, and plunged his hand into the waves.

“What are you doing?” When he didn’t answer she grabbed onto the waistband of his black pants, finding she actually had to hold him back as he stretched even farther over the water. “What are you looking for?” she demanded.

Mamoru suddenly straightened, making them both stagger. “This!” He shook off the saltwater and his fingers unfurled to reveal a round, shimmering object. Usagi’s eyes widened as he frowned. “Oh, I thought it was a shell.”

She laughed at how disappointed he sounded. “It’s beautiful, Mamo-chan! The prettiest makeup compact I’ve ever seen!” She gingerly took it from his hand and wiped away the remaining granules of sand. “It’s so smooth and shiny. I can’t remember what this material is.”

“Nacre, better known as mother-of-pearl,” Mamoru provided. The compact glistened with a mixture of ivory, ecru and silver hues, and he’d only spotted it because it was buried in the sand about four feet from where they stood.

Usagi ran a finger along the compact’s slight lip. It had to be an antique, maybe from the Victorian era, and she wondered how it had washed up near shore. Perhaps it was a family heirloom someone lost while sailing out to the ocean, in which case she wanted to return it to its rightful owner. ‘But Luna came to me just as mysteriously, and she didn’t have an owner…’ Her thumb unconsciously slipped beneath the edge of the lid and popped it open.

A smooth white stone streaked with every color of the rainbow sat in the center of the compact. The lid was lined with reflective silver, like a natural mirror, and something fell out a split second after Usagi opened it. She pinched a delicate silver chain and held it at eye-level. The pendant was a thin conical version of the stone in the compact, opaque white with rainbow streaks spiraling down it. With great effort she tore her eyes from the bauble to give Mamoru an incredulous look. “Do you really want me to have this? It’s probably worth hundreds of dollars.”

“I don’t need hundreds of dollars.” He plucked the trinket from her fingers and fastened it around her neck. Even against her snow-white sweater the stone stood out, and he thought the hint of blue was the exact same shade as her eyes. “I would rather see you smile.”

“Mamo-chan…” She blushed and turned from his intense gaze. His eyes were as dark as the waves lapping at the shore and just as compelling, making her nervous about what might happen if she kept staring into them. So many odd things were occurring lately that Usagi wondered if she were experiencing a very realistic, drawn-out dream. Mamoru seemed to be changing into someone much different than the boy she’d met at Amabie two months ago. He held his head a little higher and his shoulders back. He no longer stumbled over his words or looked at the ground when he spoke. Usagi reasoned he wanted the makeover to project his confidence; she had to transform his exterior to match the self-assured young man he had become on the inside, leaving the awkward boy behind.

The young man before Usagi seriously considered kissing her. She was the one who had fostered his newfound self-acceptance, the one who taught him that he had to love himself before loving others. He wasn’t sure if his feelings for her were that profound yet, but his heart always skipped a beat when he saw her. Her smile made him glow and the slightest touch lingered on his skin like a ghostly breath, though he was beginning to desire something more tangible. Mamoru became aware that Usagi was shivering and quickly dismissed all notions of romantic gestures. “Let’s go back,” he said,
holding her hand again. “You can warm up by the fire.”

She simply nodded and fell into step beside him. As they approached the gazebo she noticed there were only two people nestled among the blankets where Nicholas appeared to be asleep. “Where did everyone go?” Usagi inquired.

Makoto pushed herself into a sitting position. “Oh, let’s see… I’m pretty sure Mina and Kaelan went to go bang as soon as you two left, Rei and Joe went to the conservatory to talk about medicinal plants, and I’m not sure where Ami and Zach disappeared to.”

“And you didn’t want to get out of the cold?” Usagi refrained from making a joke about Nicholas keeping her warm.

“I figured it’d be mean to leave this guy all alone outside, so I was waiting for you to come back.” She shook him between the shoulder blades. “Time to wake up, sleeping beauty.”

Nicholas gave a deep groan and rolled over, rubbing his eyes. “Agh, I didn’t mean to pass out on every…” He lifted his head to look around. “Where is everybody?”

“They left,” Makoto answered, “and I don’t blame them ‘cause it’s freezing out here!” She shivered after separating from his body heat.

“Help me up,” he said, holding an arm in the air. Makoto wrapped her long fingers around his wrist and pulled with a surprising amount of force, bringing him to his feet. Nicholas yawned and stretched, then the four of them gathered the blankets and pillows and returned to the warm interior of the mansion.

“Do you ever get angry with Mina?” Zach asked. He flopped onto his canopy bed to stare at the fabric while Ami stood next to his computer desk. They had come to his room so she could read some of the script for The Last Heart, which she had expressed more than a little interest in.

Her sepia eyes flicked from the paper to him. “Angry about what?”

“This can’t be the first time she’s gone off with some guy and left you alone.” Zach watched her reaction carefully, but to his surprise she just smiled.

“You’re right, it’s not. But for once I’m not alone. I have more friends now, so there’s nothing to be upset about.” She paused, almost grinning. “I wonder what she’d think if she knew I was in your room.”

Zach flashed his smile-smirk. “Probably that we’re up to no good… Or rather, up to something very good.” Ami actually laughed, hiding her pink cheeks behind the sheaf of papers, and he was encouraged by the fact that she found his innuendo amusing. He got up, opened his door, and cleared his throat. “Oh, Ami!” he shouted down the hall, “You are the light of my life, the fire of my loins!” He looked at her expectantly.

“Oh Zach, you have bewitched me, body and soul! I never wish to be parted from you from this day on!”

He abruptly closed the door when Mina stepped out of Kaelan’s room, snickering. “She actually heard us!”

A moment later there was a knock on the door. “Ami-chan? Are you okay in there?”
“I’m fine! Just looking at Zach’s collection of classic literature,” she answered.

“Oh, okay. For a second I thought…” Ami giggled as she trailed off. “Never mind, I know he’s not your type.”

“You are absolutely right about that.” She listened to Mina’s footsteps venture back down the hall before shooting the boy a look of triumph.

“What did she say?” he asked, since their exchange was in Japanese.

“She wondered if you had seduced me and I told her you weren’t my type.” Ami turned her nose in the air at such an absurd notion.

Her smugness shifted to apprehension when something dark flickered across Zach’s visage. Although he was only four inches taller than her, his eyes became shadowed when he ducked his head and were as cold as the smile gracing his lips. He crossed the room quickly and silently, like a graceful predator, and even though Ami wasn’t afraid of him she reflexively stepped back, but the desk prevented her retreat.

“What makes you believe that, exactly?” Zach came to a stop once the buttons of their jeans were touching. “Do you mean to say that I don’t have the ability to seduce you, or that you are simply repulsed by me?”

“I don’t mean either of those things,” Ami said evenly. “I’m just not like you or Mina. I’m not interested in hooking up.”

“But it’s not hooking up if there’s a connection,” he returned, “and we have one.” Ami only shook her head, aware that he stared at her lips as he leaned closer. “Don’t believe me? Let me kiss you and you’ll definitely feel it.”

“No!” She moved to push him away but he caught her hands and held them against his chest. Ami was surprised to feel a calm, steady heartbeat. “Why are you like this, Zach?” He quirked an eyebrow. “One minute we’re having a normal conversation and the next you’re trying to coerce me into sleeping with you! I don’t… I don’t do that. I could never have sex with someone I don’t know as well as myself.”

Ami blushed while Zach looked her up and down a few times, then he backed off with an almost sly smile. He interpreted this to mean they had to become friends first before he had a real chance at fucking her. Normally he would have given up and focused his attention on someone else long ago, but Ami was worth the wait. “I understand,” Zach finally spoke. “I promise you’ll never hear me say anything remotely sexual to you from now on.” He hunched his shoulders and donned his best sheepish grin. “It’s been a really long time since I was just friends with a girl.”

“Oh, well… thank you.” Ami placed her hand on the doorknob and paused, glancing over her shoulder at Zach. He certainly looked sincere, like he really did want to try being friends, but she couldn’t stifle her suspicion that he had just enacted some elaborate scheme to seduce her. Ami was confident she could see through it, though; she was intelligent and intuitive with an eye for even the subtlest details. Zach was nowhere near clever enough to pull something on her.
“Wow, it’s three in the morning,” Makoto remarked upon glancing at the clock on the mantle. “Can we just call it quits?”

“No way, I’m totally winning!” Usagi stared at the Upwords board for a minute. She only had four tiles left and had given up consulting the dictionary as their words evolved to take up the entire ten-by-ten space. At the beginning of the last round, Makoto had turned ‘macro’ into ‘hydro’, which Nicholas made into ‘hydraulic’, which Mamoru changed into ‘xylophone’. Usagi now placed her remaining tiles atop his to spell…

“Cellophane?!” Nicholas wailed. He banged a fist on the rug and slumped forward in defeat. “I’m done.”

Mamoru quickly calculated her score. “Good job, Usako. You really did win. I’m second, Nicholas is third. Sorry, Makoto-chan.”

She waved off her loss. “I’m tired– I wasn’t expecting to do well at this game. Oyasumi.” She crawled over to the same couch she’d slept on last time and dragged herself up onto the cushions, sighing contentedly.

Usagi settled onto the other couch as Mamoru put the game away and Nicholas threw a few more logs on the fire; since the house was insulated with aerogel a little heat went a long way. They all bid each other good night, Usagi focusing on the boys’ footsteps. Mamoru’s almost faded to nothing as he went to his room at the very end of the hall and she heard Nicholas shuffling around for a few minutes before the mansion became completely still. She felt wide awake despite having been up since seven in the morning for her midterms. She had then spent most of the day at a seminar on textile innovations that were going to be implemented into the fashion design curriculum. After that she attended a workshop and created a doll-sized outfit from the many fabric samples available, then finally went home to prepare for the star party. Usagi definitely should have been unconscious by now, but her thoughts were unusually rampant.

The nacre compact helped assuage her. She held it in her dominant left hand and rubbed the smooth ridges with her thumb, like a worry stone. The cool exterior seeped into her fingertips, clearing her mind with the sensation of standing beneath a waterfall. Firelight danced across the opaque stone when Usagi opened the compact, mesmerizing her for a moment, and then something fell out. Her free hand instantly flew to the pendant on her chest, finding it still in place, and she picked up the new one in confusion. It was a marquise-cut topaz on a silvery chain.

Makoto suddenly stirred. “Hm? What’d you say, Usa-chan?”

“I didn’t say anything,” she whispered.

“You didn’t? I thought I heard… something about a storm.”

Usagi glanced between her friend and the necklace a few times, inexplicably knowing it belonged to her. She got up and poked Makoto awake. “Here, this is for you.”

Makoto sat up blearily. “What is it?”

“An early present, since I might still be gone during your birthday.”

“Oh wow, Usa-chan…” Makoto fastened it around her neck and smiled at the yellow gem. “When
did you get this? We always shop together.”

“I got it… a long time ago,” Usagi answered. “I forgot I had it until recently.” Even though she pulled the lie out of thin air it sounded true enough. She felt oddly nostalgic as she examined her moonstone pendant again. Did it resemble costume jewelry she used to play with? Had she seen similar pieces in Tokyo boutiques or Nordstrom’s fine jewelry department? No, it seemed more familiar than that. The weight of her necklace was ingrained upon her skin as if she had always worn it. The clarity provided by the compact was something she had sought quite often, especially after a disagreement with her parents.

In frustration she let the compact fall to the floor, where it rattled. Usagi’s first thought was that the stone had come loose but popping it open revealed yet another necklace, a square ruby on a gold chain. She hastily closed and opened it several more times, utterly stunned when she ended up with approximately nine more precious gemstone pendants in her hands. Where had they come from… and who were they for? She couldn’t even remember what some of the gems were called, but Mamoru mentioned that Joe had knowledge of minerals. Usagi gathered the necklaces and went in search of him.

Rei brushed the petals of an enormous flower before turning to face Joe. “I love lilies, especially these white ones. *Lilium casa blanca*.”

“Do you want me to cut some for you?” he offered. He stepped closer as that section’s sprinkler system turned on, misting the aisle in addition to his clothes.

“No, you should let them keep growing,” Rei moved on to tiger and calla lilies, touching all the waxy petals with two fingers. The veins of plants were just like the energy channels within humans, one reason why she didn’t believe that Chaos was the primary force of the universe. There was too much symmetry between humans, nature, and the cosmos for it not to be the grand design of some omnipotent being.

Joe fiddled with the training stakes of a young tree. “We’ve been here for quite a while. I’m sure we missed the rest of the meteor shower.”

“It was a bit too cold for me,” Rei admitted. “I like it in here.”

“You don’t think it’s too humid? This is a *tropical* greenhouse.”

“Japan gets very humid during the summer.”

“So it reminds you of home?” he deduced, smiling. “It seems like all of us are missing our families lately.”

“Except for those who don’t have any…” Rei sighed. “Mamoru and Makoto are orphans.”

“Then I guess it’d be better for them to stay where their friends are.” Joe felt a wave of relief when she nodded in agreement. He still didn’t know Rei that well so he didn’t want to offend her by making more ignorant comments. Earlier that night she had asked if he was going home for the holidays, and judging by the way she sighed just now he thought family might be a sensitive issue for her. Plants were a safe subject for the time being. “So… why do you like Casablanca lilies so much?”

Rei removed her glasses but didn’t look at him, examining some orchids instead. “They’re beautiful in a simple way. As a girl I wanted to walk down the aisle on my wedding day in a red kimono with a bouquet of pure white lilies.”
“Ah, wedding fantasies…” Joe chuckled slightly. “Where I’m from it isn’t only little girls who dream them up.”

She gave him a sidelong look. “Do you have one?”

“It’s not too elaborate, but I’m determined to get married outside. Maybe the bride and I will stand beneath a nice arbor. Maybe it will be at night, near a river, with lanterns floating downstream and hanging from trees. I think I want to wear a white tuxedo instead of black. I want our first newlywed dance to be to Antonin Dvorak’s ‘Silent Woods’.”

The girl raised one of her slim eyebrows at him. “That’s many more details than I have planned for my wedding.”

Joe grinned sheepishly. “Well, I only started thinking about it so much because my parents kept bothering me about finding the ‘right girl’. If they really forced me to marry for money, the least they could do is indulge the setting I want.”

Rei went “hmm” and returned to the flowers before her, but she didn’t see any of them beyond a veil of tears. Her parents had married for social standing. What if her mother’s loveless union had aggravated her sickness? She always had to appear a certain way for the media and was constantly stressing about what people would think. If she had married someone she really loved, she would have been happy. She could have fought harder to live because her life would have been worth it. Rei wasn’t so selfish as to believe she was a reason worth living for. She was an accident, after all; she hadn’t been born of love despite what her father claimed. She knew she was nothing more than an inconvenience, but now she was on her own. As soon as she earned her degree she would be completely cut off from her old life and everyone in it. She could fill it with new people who really cared about her, people like Makoto and Ami and Joe…

Her tears were abruptly blinked away as something soft and warm landed on her forehead. Rei looked up into Joe’s face as he stood right in front of her, arms loosely wrapped around her shoulders in a hug. “Did you just kiss me?” she softly inquired.

His fair complexion immediately reddened. “Ah, yes. I saw you crying and that was all I could think to do to help…” He trailed off upon noticing that Rei’s russet eyes were staring right through his chest. She didn’t seem particularly upset, but it was so hard to tell with her.

“Hey Joe! Are you in here?”

They separated and turned toward the door to see Usagi waving. She approached with a smile on her face and a glimmer of hope in her eyes. “Jou-kun, I’m trying to figure out which of these necklaces to give to each of my friends. Can you tell me what these gems are?”

He leaned down for a closer look, noting the flawless faceting and precious metal chains. “Where did you get these, Usagi? They must have cost you a fortune.”

“They’re early presents!” she answered, avoiding both topics. “I forgot I brought them until going through my bag. I wanted to make sure everyone got one before I left for Christmas break.”

Joe regarded her narrowly. There was still month and a half until Christmas vacation and he was suspicious as to how she’d been able to afford such fine jewelry on Nordstrom cashier’s pay. Still, he accepted the necklaces dangling off her wrist and named each gemstone while handing them back. “These four are ruby, emerald, diamond and sapphire. These three are amethyst, aquamarine and peridot, they’re pretty common. This is sunstone from Oregon.” He almost didn’t want to surrender the last one. “I’m not an expert on opals but I think this is an Indonesian black. I’ve never seen color
streaks like this, though. It looks rare.” Joe also noted that Usagi was wearing a conical moonstone pendant on the same style of chain as all the other necklaces. Had she bought them as a set or something?

“Thanks a lot, Jou-kun.” She selected the ruby necklace and proffered it. “This would look good on you, Rei-chan.”


“Just like you!” the blonde praised. “Do you know where I can find Ami?”

“I don’t, but it’s so late she’s likely asleep already.” Usagi considered this for a moment, thanked Joe again, and ran off.

He dragged a hand down his face with a groan. “I don’t understand how she has so much energy.”

“If you were tired then you should have gone to bed earlier,” Rei chastised as they left the conservatory.

“You needed someone to stop those tears from falling,” he returned. “I hope I didn’t cause them, and I’m sorry if I did.”

She shook her head. “I started thinking about things better left forgotten.”

Joe’s gait faltered. “Rei… If you ever want someone to talk to, I’ll listen.” An expression of surprised relief greeted this apprehensive statement. She was so stoic it was difficult for him to determine her boundaries. Perhaps giving her a reassuring kiss had been too bold, but evidently offering to hear her out was not.

“Thank you for the offer,” she said simply. They climbed the stairs and paused simultaneously at the landing. She should just talk to him right now and get everything that had been tormenting her for years off her chest, but it was late and they were both so tired. Rei also feared being judged. If she told Joe about her family and childhood he’d realize they shared few of the same values. And if he realized who her father was he’d probably hate her. “Good night, Josef. Thank you for showing me the flowers… and for everything else.”

“Oh, you’re welcome. You can call me Joe, you know.” He winced at the rhyme.

“I like Josef better.” She smiled, bowed her head, and made her way to the guest room on the third floor. Joe stood there for a minute, trying and failing to repress a genuinely happy smile. His full name had an attractive ring to it coming from Rei.

Mina opened her eyes to find Kaelan’s grey gaze directed at the brocade canopy above. His brow was furrowed slightly but the hand on her shoulder wasn’t tense at all; he appeared to be lost in thought. After staring at him for a minute, he turned onto his side and smiled wearily. “You didn’t sleep?” she asked.

“No. Ever since I was a kid I haven’t been able to sleep through celestial events. Meteor showers, auroras, weird full moons… Eclipses are the worst. During those I get really anxious and can’t focus on anything.”

“That’s kind of strange,” Mina lightly remarked.
“What’s strange is that you were talking in your sleep,” Kaelan returned. “You said you had to save a princess but you weren’t strong enough because you lost the heart.”

Mina gave a short laugh. “I don’t think I’ve ever spoken a dream out loud before. Ami would have let me know.” She rolled over and pressed her back against Kaelan’s chest, smiling as his arm automatically circled her waist. His bare, toned body felt nice and he smelled like fresh evergreen. His breath on her neck was warm and his steady heartbeat soon lulled her back to sleep, allowing her to experience her dream with absolute clarity this time.

Mina looked down to see pale yellow fabric billowing in a gentle breeze. At her feet was a carpet of small white flowers stretching several miles in every direction. Off to her left was a domed white building glistening in the light of the dying sun. She craned her neck to examine the sky, but instead of familiar clouds dotting a blue canvas she saw a dark gray veil with winking stars beyond, seemingly close enough to touch. Upon facing forward she drew in a breath of awe. She had presumed the sun was setting on Earth, but Earth loomed at the edge of the flower field, rising from the horizon like a giant blue marble covered in nebulous whorls.

“Cordie…” someone apprehensively spoke from behind. Mina rotated to find a woman she instinctively recognized as Ami despite her completely different appearance. “Are you still leading your forces to Terra?”

“That is the only way to save Selene, Pronoia,” she answered. “Do your people still refuse to stand with us?”

The blue-eyed woman nodded. “We are thinkers, not fighters. We do not belong in battle.” She looked down at an opaque orb hanging off her belt. “This does not mean I have turned my back on the Inner Alliance— if it were any other action I would gladly stand at your side. I hope you will see things clearly from Terra, for Luna is covered in nothing but shadows of late.”

Everything went black like Mina had fallen asleep within her own dream, and when she opened her eyes she was quickly descending through the atmosphere, vertigo striking in waves. Something heavy weighed her down, a round shield strapped to her right arm. There was also a sword in her left hand, a helmet on her head, and a breastplate over the same yellow dress from before. She stood among other men and women in armor, their bronze, silver, and gold armaments glittering in the dim lighting of the capsule carrying them into battle with the planet called Terra.

A single blink placed her in the middle of the fight. Metallic clangs, battle orders, and death cries surrounded her. Her sword and dress were coated with blood. Wooden shafts stuck out of her shield where a few steel arrowheads had pierced it. Mina paused for a moment to survey the area; her allies in red, green, and white appeared to be driving back the enemy in dark blue. She led her unit toward high ground in hopes of finding an enemy commander and was not disappointed. A heavily-armored man came forward to meet her, ordering his guards to stand down. Mina told her unit to do the same before striding right up to him, nearly touching his nose with her own. “Verticordia,” he stated, omitting her title, “I am honored to see you here. I was under the assumption that Venerians considered themselves above such base actions.”

“I will gladly soil my own hands if it means rescuing a dear friend,” she replied.

“Oh? Who have you come here to recover?”

“Selene!” she shouted, nearly slapping the indolent look off his face. “Selene has been taken hostage by your abominable rulers! Did you expect the Inner Alliance to let them get away with it?!” She drew in a breath to quell her anger. “Your armor informs me that you are a general of the army. Take me to wherever Selene is being held and this bloodshed will cease. Terra cannot win
against the might of four kingdoms.”

The man hummed thoughtfully. “And what if she does not wish to go with you?”

“Your question is asinine,” she said. “Captives do not willingly remain with their abductors. Take me to her or I will cut you down where you stand.”

“As you wish, Princess.” The man spun on his heel and led her through a sea of Terran soldiers, rows upon rows of them waiting their turn to fall before the forces of Venus, Mars, Luna and Jupiter. None of these men and women had to die if King Aitolos simply surrendered Selene to her parents, but evidently he thought he could use her as some kind of bargaining chip. Well, he would realize the folly of his arrogance when the Grand Council put him to death.

The general named Kunz led Mina to a teleportation pad in the middle of a field, an area of lush green grass that hadn’t yet been trampled by boots or spattered with blood. “Your retinue cannot come where we are going,” he said. Mina looked back at her commander and nodded, then stepped onto the transport device. If Kunz betrayed her, their orders were to return to Venus and inform the crown of her death. Hopefully that would prompt Mercury into action since the kingdoms had close ties. “Take hold of my hand and do not let go.” She did so warily, his gauntleted fingers enveloping her own. All of sudden the platform plunged straight down, making Mina gasp and cling to the general, but the vertigo only lasted a few seconds before they came to a stop.

“Where... What is this place?” It was the most beautiful location she’d ever seen, an obvious sanctuary of some sort. The colors were brighter, the air cleaner, and animals paid them no mind as they walked ever forward. The plain of grass was broken by tree stands here and there, nothing large enough to be considered a forest, and small temples became visible the farther they went. There were no paths of dirt or gravel but Kunz knew exactly how to get where he was going, leading her through flower patches and over babbling streams until a gazebo came into view. It was completely covered in wisteria, clusters of violet flowers hanging through the ceiling over a couple enjoying one other’s company. The general approached them as Mina halted in her tracks. “Selene?”

“C-Cordie!” the Lunar princess exclaimed, blushing at the fact that she’d been caught in the midst of receiving passionate kisses from the shirtless young man above her. They hastily made themselves presentable.

“What is the meaning of this?” Mina demanded. “You and Endymion are involved?” She recalled Pronoia’s words, beginning to see a different image than the one King Hyperion painted.

“I’ve been coming to see him for a long time now,” Selene explained, twining a strand of snow white hair around her finger. The action reminded Mina of Usagi. “I love him with all my heart and soul. We’re going to be unified today.”

“Unified?!” Mina gasped. “Selene, are you aware of what transpires above us??” The pale princess frowned slightly. “Jupiter, Mars, Venus, Luna-- all of their armies are fighting to bring you home! Fighting and dying for you!”

Selene covered her mouth with one hand and fell to the floor weeping, Endymion kneeling beside her. “Cordie, forgive me, I didn’t know... Gods, my father has finally started the war he always wanted.” She dried her eyes, got up, and firmly gripped Mina’s hands. “My father wants to claim Terra for himself. He knows I am here, with Endymion, as does my mother. She sanctioned our union– she believes Endymion and I can usher in an era of peace with Terra.”

“Then Hyperion lied about you being taken by the Terrans. All of this is a ploy. Aitolos has done nothing wrong,” Selene nodded in agreement and Mina’s gaze slid to Prince Endymion, a handsome
young man with compelling eyes not unlike Mamoru’s. “What is this place? Is there a way to contact my comrades on the surface?”

Prince Endymion shook his head. “There is no way to enter or leave Elysium on your own, that is why General Kunz brought you. Think of it as the spiritual heart of Terra, our most holy place. If you wish to return to the world above, Kunz must escort you.” Mina nodded and held out her hand imploringly, then the two of them ran back to the transport pad and reentered the field of grass. She quickly removed a flare from her belt, lit it, and hurled it into the sky. It went off a moment later, streaks of golden light telling her forces to cease their assault. Red, green, and white flares also appeared, the din of battle fading.

She met with the allied commanders: Princess Enyo of Mars, Princess Nemesis of Jupiter, and General Mani of Luna. “We have been deceived,” Mina informed them. “Selene is here willingly, in fact the lover of Prince Endymion. Hyperion opposes their union. He wants us to devastate the Terran army so they will be unable to combat him when he moves to invade.”

“That bastard…” Enyo hissed, punching the wooden table and leaving a scorch mark upon it. She had the same long raven hair as Rei. “He thinks he can use my people to do his dirty work?! I will turn my armies upon Luna right now and leave nothing but ashes for him to rule!” General Mani gulped at this proclamation.

Nemesis raised a hand for peace; she was tall and dignified just like Makoto. “He will be judged by the Grand Council, which we must convene immediately.”

Mina reached for the departing woman. “Wait, Nemesis. If Selene and Endymion are unified, Endymion can become a representative at the Grand Council—surely there will be no way for Hyperion to escape judgement then. With the three of us overseeing the unification ceremony, plus Pronoia, we can induct Terra into the Inner Alliance right away. What say you?”

So it was that the princesses of Mercury, Venus, Mars, and Jupiter gathered in Elysium alongside Selene, escorting her to a beautiful arbor beneath which stood Endymion. His cortege consisted of two generals, Kunz and Jaden, a spiritual advisor named Nephriticus, and a young royal artificer named Zois. Besides Endymion there were many priestesses residing in Elysium, women whose duty it was to gather the spiritual essence of flora and fauna. Some of it went directly to the prince, the source of his power, and the rest went to the surface world in an endless cycle of renewal and rebirth. “Such a beautiful place,” Pronoia remarked. “I feel blessed to see it with my own eyes.”

“Elysium is certainly a wonder to behold,” said Zois, “as is the sight of you all gathered here. Thank you for supporting this union.”

“I will do whatever it takes to ensure Hyperion is dethroned and punished for his treachery,” Enyo said harshly. “I will even ask the Grand Council for the pleasure of removing his head myself.”

General Jaden examined her up and down. “You are a truly savage goddess, Enyo. Is it possible to tame your bloodlust?”

“Not by the likes of you,” she spat, earning a laugh from the man. “And you are a hypocrite, Jaden.” He raised an eyebrow at that. “You became the ruler of your domain the same way I did—by slaughtering all who opposed you, all who believed they had the strength to conquer you.”

“Yes, you are right,” he replied, and gave her a look both enraging and thrilling. “If you were to stand at my side, I feel we would have the strength to conquer the solar system.” All of their allies exchanged nervous glances, awaiting the Martian’s response.
Enyo only scoffed. “I do not stand behind or beside any man. He would only get in the way of my bow.” A collective breath of relief filled the air, but Enyo was impressed the general even had the audacity to make such a proposition.

A priestess named Khamyne arrived to officiate the ceremony. She had deep brown skin and eyes bluer than the clearest sky, a color that artists could spend their whole lives attempting to emulate and never get quite right. She filled a golden chalice with water from a nearby fountain, holding it up between Selene and Endymion. “For so long have the kingdoms of Terra and Luna been separated by trivial distance. Now, finally, they shall be united by the love between these two people.” She lowered the chalice so the couple could grasp it together. “This water provides life to everything residing on Terra’s surface, her people, plants and creatures. Luna presides over the movements of her tides, her oceans that are the source of this blessing. As these two celestial bodies work together in harmony to support existence, so must you two maintain harmony in your union. Selene, drink the life water of Terra. Endymion, drink the watery life from Luna.” They did so, repressing laughter while trying not to empty the chalice onto one another. “And so, with this blessing shared between you two, the unification ceremony is complete.” Khamyne regarded them kindly. “Are there any vows you wish to exchange?”

Endymion nodded and drew in a breath, but a shout rang out before he could speak. It was nothing more than an inarticulate call from another priestess who ran right up and threw herself upon him. “I love you, my Lord!” the redheaded woman proclaimed. Before anyone could move or say a word, she whirled around while drawing a dagger from her sleeve and plunged it into Selene’s throat. “Nooo!” Pronoia shrieked, catching the Lunar princess as she fell with wide-open eyes. A split second later Enyo bellowed a war cry and summoned her bow to her hands, a wicked weapon burning so hot that all the plant life around her simply disintegrated. She aimed an arrow at Endymion, missing her mark as Khamyne jumped in the way and landed on the ground as a pile of ash. Before Enyo could ready another shot one of Jaden’s crossbow bolts punched through her shoulder. She pulled twin short blades from sheaths around her thighs, leaping on him while he quickly nocked another bolt. Enyo buried her blades up to their hilts in his eye sockets, both of them screaming rage and hate as he squeezed the trigger, puncturing her vital organs.

The two of them had perished in the short time it took Verticordia to draw her sword and cut down the deranged priestess. Advisor Nephriticus assumed she was attacking Endymion and removed the giant two-handed blade from his back, swinging to slice her in two. Verticordia was saved by Nemesis’ staff intersecting the strike, sparks shooting out as the metals clashed. Nephriticus and Nemesis were both dedicated warriors who traded blows of equal force, neither unable to gain the upper hand, and in their short duel they developed mutual respect for one another. Resorting to violence was something they wanted to avoid whenever possible, but once engaged in combat they would keep fighting until victory was achieved or they died trying. In order to uphold this ideal Nemesis drew on every ounce of elemental power she inherently possessed as a daughter of Jupiter, the planet of storms, and channeled it into Nephriticus while letting it consume her. They were both vaporized in the blink of an eye, charred armor and weapons clattering to the ground.

Pronoia surrendered Selene’s corpse to Verticordia and shakily made her way into Zois’ arms. “All has gone as was foreseen,” she murmured, “but I am in such pain to have witnessed it.”

“As am I, Princess…” Zois said, trying and failing to withhold tears of despair. “I can only hope they find happiness with each other in their next life.” He placed a hand on her cheek, smiling. “We must follow them into the Void. When we are reborn we will have forgotten this heartache.” Pronoia nodded, steeling her visage as her fingers splayed across his chest. Zois felt a tiny lance of pain in his lungs, then his breath came short, then he couldn’t breathe at all as ice spread throughout his veins. Pronoia passed in the same manner, the pair of them freezing to death in a shared embrace.
Verticordia just stood there with her black-crystal sword in hand. It had been gifted to her by Luna when Venus joined the Inner Alliance… but now Selene was dead, as were the rest of her allies. Only she, Endymion, and General Kunz remained beneath the arbor, their tranquil surroundings utterly contrasted by the tragedy that just took place. Birds still sang, the fountain still burbled, and the breeze carried a sweet floral perfume. Kunz sank to his knees. “It is hopeless…” he said, voice devoid of emotion. “All is undone now. There will be no peace for Terra.”

“No, that cannot be.” Verticordia tried pulling him up by his spaulders but the man was too heavy. “We are still alive. We can explain this!”

Kunz slowly shook his head. “Two priestesses are dead— their loss will be felt across the entire planet. Endymion and I will be killed by the Inner Alliance armies as soon as we show our faces on the surface. No, it is better I die at your hands, surrounded by my brethren. This place that was once a sanctuary has become our grave.”

“What are you talking about? I am not going to kill you!”

“Then I shall do it myself.” He snatched the sword from Verticordia’s grasp and transfixed himself before she could move to stop him. She watched in horror as his lifeblood spread across the ground, a dark stain defacing the beauty of Elysium.

Her attention snapped to Endymion when he drew in a shuddering sob, anguish etched into every feature. “My men are dead, the woman I love is gone, your allies fallen, priestesses murdered…” He reached for the knife embedded in Selene’s neck and yanked it out, bright red droplets falling upon her silver gown. “I have nothing left to live for.”

Verticordia wanted to yell at him to stop despite knowing her words would be just as futile to his ears as they were to Kunz. So she said nothing, turning away as the once noble prince shoved the dagger into his heart.
Nicholas was the first one to wake Saturday morning. His alarm clock informed him it was actually closer to noon, which made him groan since he never slept in so late. His craving for waffles and bacon lured him out of bed and down the stairs. He entered the kitchen, opened the fridge… and was heartbroken to see that there was no bacon. He searched for suitable alternatives, anything savory would do, but there was no sausage, eggs, milk or butter! And he couldn’t have toast with one slice of bread. “Guess we need groceries,” he muttered. He went upstairs to Zach’s room and shook him. “Hey, gimme your keys. It’s a bacon emergency.”

The blond boy mumbled incoherently and flapped his arm in the direction of the desk where Nicholas found the keys beneath a stack of costume designs for *The Last Heart*. He then spent a few minutes on a grocery list. If there was one thing he had learned since being in college it was to make every dollar count, and shopping while hungry usually resulted in unnecessary expenditure. When Nicholas returned to the kitchen a second time he found Makoto standing in front of the open fridge. Her hair was a mess and her shirt was halfway up her midsection. She shot him a narrow look, making him freeze. “There’s no fruit,” she grumbled.

“I’ll put it on the list…” he replied, distracted by her lacy lavender camisole and flower-print boy shorts.

“You guys don’t have any food.” Makoto spotted the slip of paper in his hand. “Are you going to the store?”

“Yeah… wanna come?”

“Sure.” She glanced down at herself. “I should probably get dressed first.” Nicholas cleared his throat and stepped aside, trying not to stare while she shuffled back into the living room. After pulling on her jeans and warm hoodie, Makoto frowned when something poked her in the chest. She fished out the necklace Usagi gifted her last night and instantly felt invigorated by the yellow topaz, tucking the zesty gem back into her shirt. Nicholas proffered her sneakers which she quickly tied before following him out to the garage. “How come you don’t have a car?” she asked once they were on the road.

“They’re expensive,” he answered simply. “Gas, insurance, maintenance… I haven’t been able to find a job on or around campus. ‘Civil engineer-in-training’ doesn’t look too great on my resumé because it’s not very applicable.”

Makoto thought for a moment. “I bet you could advertise yourself as a handy-man. You’re good at fixing things, right? And you know all about green technology. You installed the aerogel insulation, the water recycling system, the solar panels and energy storage… People will want to hire you when you tell them you worked on the Burke Mansion.”

Nicholas smiled at the idea. “You think so?” She nodded decisively. “I guess I’ll try it.” They listened to the radio spew news until arriving at the grocery store. “You’ll like this place. They mostly sell local and organic food.”

“Perfect!” Makoto grinned, entering the market with a spring in her step. The first thing she put in the cart was a carton of strawberries followed by blueberries, raspberries, cocoa powder, and finally almond milk. “That’s all I need for my smoothie.”

“No kale?” Nicholas teased, making her wrinkle her nose. He briskly navigated the aisles, tossing
everything but the eggs and milk into the cart. His stomach rumbled incessantly; the cashier’s eyes widened when it growled like a beast, prompting her to bag the food faster. Nicholas was in no mood to argue when Makoto insisted on contributing, saving him twenty whole dollars. He sped on the way back home, taking turns like a Grand Prix driver, and Makoto faced the window to hide her delight.

“Why the rush?” she asked once they had returned to the mansion. Both of them carried as many bags as possible on their arms which made opening the front door a rather difficult task. They rustled into the kitchen where Makoto heard a yawn from the living room. ‘Trust Usa-chan to wake up when the food arrives.’

“I’m a bit hypoglycemic, and I was trying not to pass out on you,” Nicholas answered sheepishly. “I didn’t eat much last night ‘cause I wanted everyone else to have their fill.”

“Hypoglycemic people are supposed to avoid empty carbs, bad fats, and fake sugar.” Makoto paused from slicing her fruit to scrutinize his breakfast ingredients. “Isn’t that the foundation of waffles and bacon?”

“I’ll have you know I always make waffles from scratch,” he said, and Makoto remarked that they had this in common. “As for the bacon, any fat I consume just gets turned into muscle. When I joined the football team I spoke with a dietitian who put bacon on a list of banned foods. I didn’t eat it for a whole year.”

“How tragic,” she smirked.

“It was!” Nicholas insisted. “All freshman year this old lady kept telling me what I should and couldn’t eat, and a guy can only handle so much wheat bread and eggs before he goes crazy. This year I went to Bastyr to get another opinion, and the dietitian there said I’m healthy enough to eat whatever I want.” He looked up from the mixing bowl. “That was the same day I browsed the plant sale for Zach, when I met you.”

Makoto dumped her fruit chunks into the blender and added a dollop of yogurt. “And who could have guessed that in a few months we’d be making breakfast together in the gourmet kitchen of an Irish millionaire?” The blender’s buzz drowned out her laughter as Nicholas grinned and slapped some batter onto the waffle iron. Surely no one could have guessed that, but he was thankful for the circumstances that had led to this moment.

“Thanks for the ride, Rei-chan!” Usagi and Makoto waved at the retreating Acura before climbing the stairs to their apartment. “That was a really good breakfast you and Nikko made for us,” the blonde said cheerily. “He should consider cooking instead of engineering, and then he can work for you when you open your bakery!”

Despite Makoto’s scoff Usagi caught a hint of red in her cheeks. “I know you really want to play matchmaker with us, but it’s not going to happen. I still barely know him.”

“That just means you need to spend some quality time with him! C’mon Mako-chan, he’s like the perfect guy for you!” Makoto ignored her while slipping the key into the lock. “Nicholas is in great shape, he’s smart, he has that ruggedly-handsome look going on… and he can cook!”

“Forget it!” Makoto returned, pushing the door open. She would have continued had she not dropped the keys and her jaw at the sight of their home. Usagi stepped around her, the clever comeback dissolving into a cry of confusion.
Their apartment was completely trashed.

Makoto looked down at the remains of dishes scattered throughout the kitchen. The circular wooden table was upended with one leg snapped off, and the chairs had been reduced to kindling. In the living room they saw the décor had been smashed against the walls; the carpet was too plush to shatter anything, although glass was everywhere. The coffee table was in a thousand pieces, the antique vases had been obliterated, and the sliding door to the balcony was just a frame now.

“What happened, Mako-chan?” Usagi looked at her friend through watery eyes, hoping she could magically explain everything.

“I have no idea, but you should call the police. And try not to disturb anything in case there’s evidence.” Usagi nodded and returned to the landing, dialing 911 with a trembling finger. Ten minutes later two officers showed up, a young man named Danner whistling at the damage.

“I’m sorry for you girls. This was a nice place.”

“Yes, it was…” Usagi sniffled. Her head snapped up a second later and she shot Makoto a look of horror. “Where’s Michiru?”

Her expression fell. “What if she was here when they broke in? What if they kidnapped her?!” Makoto immediately tried calling the older girl.

“What’s the matter, ladies?” asked Morrison, an older officer with a Southern drawl.

“Our other roommate isn’t here!” Usagi shouted in English. “She doesn’t teach today and she doesn’t usually go out for lunch!”

“And she didn’t answer her phone!” Makoto wailed.

Officer Danner held up his hands. “Let’s calm down for a second. What’s the name of this girl?”

“Michiru Kaiou!” they answered together. Danner nodded and returned to his vehicle.

Morrison continued poking around their apartment, jotting things down on a notepad until his radio crackled. The girls couldn’t hear what Danner said to him, but the older man sighed deeply before stepping onto the landing where the girls were waiting. “The rookie just finished calling all the hospitals around here. Your friend was admitted to Swedish Medical Center this morning. Another unit picked her up in Magnolia Park around seven.”

“Magnolia Park?” Usagi repeated, mirroring her friend’s quizzical expression. “Isn’t that, like, three miles away?”

“Michiru doesn’t jog or go for walks,” Makoto mused. “There’s no reason why she would have been there so early. Maybe the vandals dumped her there.”

Usagi’s mouth opened and closed a few times as the connotations of that statement ran rampant through her mind. Officer Danner drove them to the hospital while Morrison waited at their apartment for a forensics team. He tried to reassure the girls by saying someone had most likely broken in to steal something, not kidnap Michiru. “I hope Luna got away safely…” Usagi muttered as Danner turned into the hospital parking lot.

“Maybe she was what they wanted to steal,” Makoto said, earning a fearful look. “Sorry, but purebred dogs get stolen all the time. I bet the same thing happens to cats.”
“Gee thanks, that makes me feel so much better,” Usagi returned. She kept quiet while the young officer led them to Michiru’s room. Much to their relief she was sitting up in bed and didn’t appear overtly traumatized. They both hugged her and battered her with questions until she held up a hand.

“I’m glad you found me. I lost my phone and wasn’t sure how to contact you since I haven’t memorized your American numbers.” A large bandage on her cheek hindered her regretful smile. “Apparently I went for a hike in my pajamas.”

“What do you mean ‘apparently’?” Makoto asked. “Don’t you remember doing it?”

Michiru shook her head. “I have no idea how I got to that park. One doctor suggested I sleepwalked, and nobody stopped me or thought anything of it because I appeared to be awake. I told him I didn’t have a history of somnambulism but they want to keep me overnight to be sure.’

“So you don’t know what happened to our apartment?” Usagi asked.

Her amber eyes narrowed. “What happened to our apartment?”

“Someone broke in and wrecked everything,” Makoto answered. Michiru’s shock quickly turned to denial. She refuted the claim by saying they lived in a nice area and someone would have to be really gutsy or really stupid to break in with so many people around. She asked if her friends were joking, but their somber expressions finally convinced her.

“It’s okay…” Michiru said after taking several deep breaths, “I have renter’s insurance. We’ll get everything replaced.” She glanced between them. “Were any of your valuables taken?”

“I don’t think so,” Usagi answered. “My figures and manga were knocked off the shelves, but they were all there.” Even though she was being completely serious the brunettes started laughing.

“I think if someone wanted to steal a bunch of action figures and comics they would break into Uwajimaya, not our room,” Makoto teased. At that the trio knew everything would be all right. Danner came in to gather a report from Michiru, then they bid her goodbye. Usagi faltered at the door and turned back, digging in her purse for the necklaces. The aquamarine teardrop pendant would look beautiful on her friend.

“I don’t know what to say, Usa-chan. Thank you so much.” After fastening it Michiru gently took hold of Usagi’s hand. “Has anyone told you that you’re very selfless? That’s such a rare quality to find in people these days.”

The compliment made Usagi glow and she felt guilty that neither she nor Makoto could drive Michiru home when she was released… if their apartment could still be called ‘home’ since it was now a crime scene. Officer Danner confirmed her deduction when he asked if they had somewhere to crash during the investigation and repairs, prompting an argument.

“We’re not staying with them,” Makoto declared. “It’s one thing to spend the night on their couch, but I’m not living with five guys for a whole week!”

“Where else can we go, Mako-chan?” Usagi countered. “We can’t afford a hotel and we don’t really know anyone from school. Plus they have cars so they can drive us around.”

She crossed her arms tightly. “I’d rather stay in a homeless shelter than with those dumb boys.”

“No you wouldn’t.” While Makoto huffed Usagi called Mamoru and explained the situation to him, maintaining a cheerful tone as his became fraught with worry. He was placated by the knowledge that Michiru had insurance.
“What about Luna?” he inquired. “Did you find her?”

“No, not yet…” Usagi sighed, “but I have a feeling she’ll turn up. She found me once before.”

When Usagi and Makoto returned to the mansion with several suitcases of clothing and personal items, Zach greeted them with a beaming smile. “You couldn’t get enough of this place, huh?” The tall girl rolled her eyes and strode by him, stopping in the great room where the other four boys were gathered. She noticed they all wore expressions of genuine concern.

“I can’t believe this happened to you,” Kaelan said. “Someone really wanted to ruin your sense of security. Do either of you have any enemies? Someone jealous of how awesome you are?” Usagi smiled weakly at his attempt and shook her head. “Well, make yourselves at home here. Don’t hesitate to ask for anything.”

“We’ll need rides to school and our jobs. We can work out a schedule after Usagi and I wash clothes.” Makoto held up her favorite bolero jacket with black smudges all over it. “The cops dusted everything for fingerprints.”

“Even your unmentionables?” Zach gasped. “What kind of freak would break into a place just to plunder your panties?”

Nicholas shrugged. “Probably some loser who can’t get laid.”

“That makes you a suspect, then,” said Joe, grinning mischievously.

“You’re one to talk!” the engineer shot back. Usagi giggled while they argued for a minute about who had the best sex life. Kaelan was the only one who’d gotten some in the last three months.

Makoto just sighed and carried her clothes to the laundry room. Usagi appeared a few minutes later, still smiling. “See, Mako-chan? It won’t be so bad here.”

“I’m going to break something if I have to hear more details about what Kaelan has done with Mina, and by ‘something’ I mean his face.” Her own wore a look of disgust. “She’s our friend, Usa-chan. You can’t expect me to be okay with listening to that stupid rich boy talk about her like an object.”

The smile faded slightly. “Kaelan’s just exaggerating. That’s what guys do!”

“Well you would know since you’ve been with so many of them.”

A hot mixture of ire and shame surged through Usagi. She knew her best friend didn’t really mean that; Makoto was just lashing out. Whoever vandalized their apartment had ruined their sense of security, but it was worse for Makoto since she already lost her family once. Usagi and Michiru were her new one and she was terrified of the what-ifs, angry for being helpless in this situation. It was her duty to protect her friends and defend their castle. If they had all been there when the vandal broke in, Makoto would have stood up to them whether or not they were armed. The image of her best friend dying replaced Usagi’s anger, tears sliding down her cheeks. “I know you don’t mean that…” she said tremulously, “I know you blame yourself, but there’s nothing you could have done.” Regret flickered across Makoto’s visage. “And I know I made a lot of stupid decisions in high school, but I trust the guys and I’m positive we’ll be safe here.”

Makoto’s lips parted in denial, but she didn’t have any arguments left. “I’m sorry, Usa-chan…” Now she was the one crying as she gave Usagi the tightest hug possible. “I’m sorry I said that. I know you didn’t want to come here for attention. I’m starting to trust them too, and I don’t want to be let down. I’m sorry for being a bad friend, I’m sorry I’m insecure…” Usagi let Makoto hold her and cry into her hair until they both ran out of tears. They separated, dried their eyes and waited for
their complexions to clear up, then they returned to the great room. Zach held the t-shirt he’d been wearing out to them and imploringly asked if the girls could include it in their wash. “What’s happened to it?” Makoto wondered.

“This asshole spit soda on me!” Zach jerked his thumb at Nicholas who shook from the effort of withholding raucous laughter. Joe covered his face with one hand while Mamoru tried and failed not to grin.

Kaelan finished removing the pillow covers from one of the sofas. Usagi tilted her head in question and he straightened with a sigh, gesturing to their suitcases. “Zach, being a nosy fecker, started going through your stuff. He found your lady products and presented them like a world cup trophy. The way Joe freaked out was honestly hilarious.” He turned to Zach, thrusting the soiled covers at him. “So since you were acting the maggot, you can clean up.”

Usagi stared at the innocent box of tampons on the floor. The boys followed her gaze, Joe’s neck and face immediately turning cherry red. Nicholas and Mamoru erupted in amusement as Kaelan pinched the bridge of his nose and Zach stomped off to the laundry room.

Makoto only sighed again. Dealing with this kind of immature bullshit was one of the many reasons why she didn’t date.

It was easy for the three girls to get into the swing of things. Michiru was rarely seen by anyone, even her besties, since her social calendar was always full. If she wasn’t teaching young violin students or practicing with a talented pianist named Samuel, she was having dinner at fancy eateries and rubbing elbows with local talent managers. Usagi sighed as she flopped onto her designated couch-bed. “Michiru is always going out to have fun. Why don’t we do that?”

“Because we have classes and jobs and no friends besides each other?” Makoto offered. The blonde stuck out her bottom lip at how lame that made them sound.

Joe, who had picked them up from school, paused with one foot on the stairs. “You don’t consider us friends?”

Makoto floundered for a moment having forgotten that he was fluent in Japanese. “We do… but, I mean, you guys are all older than us. We can’t go with you to the bar or anything.”

“There are lots of things to do around here besides bar hopping. There are museums, the aquarium, the Pacific Science Center and IMAX, theater shows, outdoor activities…” He looked to his housemates for more suggestions.

“We’d even go shopping with you if you asked,” Nicholas supplied, like it would be a great sacrifice of their time. Makoto intended to hold him to his word eventually; for now she had to prepare for work at Amabie. While she went to take a shower, Usagi helped Joe trim some plants in the conservatory.

“I’ve noticed that Makoto doesn’t have much of a filter,” he said.

“No, not really… but at least you know she’s never lying to you.”

“She didn’t want to stay with us, did she? I can tell she hates being uprooted, and Mamoru told me about all the work you put into your apartment.”

Usagi gave a small nod. “Yeah, Michiru put on a brave face, too. She was so proud of that place.”
“Have you heard anything from the police? Do they have any leads or suspects?”

She started to answer, but Kaelan’s voice entered the greenhouse and drowned it out. “Usagi! There’s someone here for you!” She looked at Joe like he’d predicted the future before making her way to the front entrance. Once Kaelan finished greeting the guest and stepped aside, her hand flew to her mouth in disbelief. Luna was in the arms of the visitor.

It was a young woman with deep brown skin and even darker eyes. She wore relaxed cargo jeans, a white halter top, and stacks of white and gold bangles on each arm. “This cat belongs to you,” she said with a rich accent.

“Th-thank you…” Usagi stammered. The girl lowered Luna into her arms, towering over her by at least ten inches. She wasn’t much shorter than Nicholas who stood at six-foot-three.

“Where are you from?” he blurted.

“Originally Ghana, but I have traveled the globe. My name is Nia.” She refocused on the blonde girl. “Keep her close from now on. Do not let her go wandering.”

Usagi nodded several times. “I promise I will. Where did you find her?”

“She came to me. She is a very good cat, but I knew someone missed her.” Nia ducked her head and smiled at the contrasting pair before gracefullly taking her leave. The sudden absence of her presence left everyone without words for a few minutes, and in that time Zach came home.

“Who was that incredibly fine lady? She looked like a supermodel.” He smirked at Nicholas. “She’s your girlfriend, isn’t she? You’re both African.”

“That’s the dumbest thing I’ve ever heard.” He gave Zach a not-so-gentle push and went into the kitchen, Kaelan following a moment later.

Joe scratched Luna’s chin while Zach hung up his jacket and kicked off his shoes. Only after that did he notice the black feline. “Is that a baby bobcat?”

“Of course not!” Usagi chided. “This is Luna. I lost her when our apartment was vandalized. That supermodel-girl found her and brought her here.”

He blinked a few times as a response, then asked, “How did she know where you lived?”

“I wondered that as well,” Joe added.

Usagi started to say they were being paranoid when her phone interrupted by blaring ‘Sunkiss Drop’ from DDR Supernova 2. She didn’t recognize the number and gave a cautious “hello?”

“Miss Tsukino? This is Andrew Danner from Seattle PD.”

“Oh, hi. Are you calling about the investigation?”

“Partially. A young lady contacted our animal department about a cat she found. I realized it was yours based on the picture you provided, so I gave her your temporary address.”

“Thanks, Officer Danner. She dropped off Luna a few minutes ago.”

“That’s great to hear. I also wanted to let you know that forensics managed to lift a few prints from the furniture in your apartment, namely the kitchen table, and got a match for them. I was wondering if you and your friends could take a look at a few photos to see if you recognize anyone from the
‘Finally, some suspects!’ Usagi thought. “We’d be glad to. Oh, but Makoto is about to leave for work and Michiru is out with friends. Should we come by the station tomorrow?”

“I can email you the photos so you can show your friends when they have time. If you’re able to identify anyone you can come to the station then.”

Usagi agreed, ended the call and opened her laptop, refreshing her inbox every five seconds. Joe and Zach hovered over her shoulder so they could be part of the action. Usagi downloaded the six attachments and opened the first one, a French man named Adrien Levesque. The next portrait was of a teenage Chinese girl named Wen Xuezhi. Three more affiliates of Pakistani, Brazilian, and Australian ethnicities were teenagers as well.

“None of these people are from here,” Usagi said. “Why would they be suspects?” The answer came when she opened the final photo. She gasped, recoiling from the monitor while the boys leaned forward. Zach snatched up her phone to redial the officer.

“This is Danner,” he answered.

“Yeah hi. Listen, we need a K-9 unit or something up in here like right now.”

“Who is this? This number is for Miss Tsukino, not some kid trying to make a prank call.”

“You don’t understand,” Zach said disjointedly. “That girl? That…” He squinted at the screen to read her name. “Nia Baffour? She was just at our house.”
Makoto heard sirens off in the distance as she dried her hair. She didn’t realize they were steadily drawing closer until the dull murmuring of a crowd reached her ears. She hurriedly donned her work uniform and left the bathroom, stopping dead in her tracks upon seeing a swarm of Seattle police officers, a SWAT team, and a man and woman in matching FBI jackets. “What’s going on?” she dared to ask.

Usagi paused her conversion with Morrison and Danner to answer. “Someone found Luna,” she answered, presenting the black cat with a smile that didn’t reach her eyes.

“Too bad that someone turned out to be a member of a crime syndicate,” Zach deadpanned. “We might have to enter a witness protection program.”

“That won’t be necessary,” said the female FBI agent, offering Makoto her hand to shake. “Carla Fisher. This is my partner, Luke Bedford. Did you witness this woman today?” She proffered a photo but Makoto didn’t recognize the girl in it.

“No, I’ve been getting ready for work,” she explained. “What’s all this about? Are we in danger or something?”

“We believe the woman who returned Miss Tsukino’s cat was the one who broke into your apartment, or was an accomplice at the very least. She goes by the alias Nia Baffour but her real name is Nyamékye Silasi. She’s affiliated with an international organization of jewelry thieves.” Carla withdrew more photos from her file. “These are some of her known associates. Do any of them look familiar? Maybe you’ve seen them loitering near your apartment building or other places you frequent?”

“I haven’t, sorry,” Makoto said regretfully. Agent Fisher didn’t seem daunted by her lack of helpfulness. “Why would an organization like that go after us? The most valuable thing in our apartment was Michiru’s violin, but she usually leaves it locked in storage at Cornish. They’d know that if they had an eye on us.”

“What about those necklaces?” Joe chimed in. “Usagi had a bunch of them.” Carla raised a curious eyebrow as Makoto felt her stomach lurch, her hand automatically going to the topaz hidden beneath her shirt. She wouldn’t tell anyone about it, couldn’t let them take it from her. She stole away to the conservatory as the authorities focused on Usagi.

After Kaelan finished speaking with Agent Bedford about security measures, it was decided that two units would remain on patrol in case Nia returned to his property. In addition to being a beauty pageant winner since age five she had degrees in cultural and religious studies as well as a Master’s in psychology. “She’s a genius sociopath,” Bedford explained, “so she’s very good at manipulating people. Some of her affiliates back in the UK said they couldn’t resist her magnetic personality. She made it seem like they were the most important people in the world before disappearing from their lives.”

“I see,” Kaelan said dismissively. “If she’s really as smart as you say I doubt she’ll come back here since she knows you’re hot on her trail.”

One of the Seattle officers cleared his throat behind the agent. “Speaking of trails, the dogs didn’t pick up anything.”
Bedford grunted his thanks before giving the youths a stern look. “You should all try to memorize those faces. If you see somebody who even bears a vague resemblance to one of Nia’s associates, contact us right away.”

“Right, we’ll keep a lookout.” Kaelan ushered the remaining personnel out the front door, closed it, and stared at the intricately carved wood for a few seconds. When he turned around he crossed his arms and scrutinized Usagi. “You said you had no idea why anyone would want to steal from you. I’d bet money that Silasi was after your hoard of jewelry!”

She scowled back at him. “It’s not a hoard, and the police just took all but the ones I already gave away.”

“But where did you get them, Usagi?” Joe felt like he’d thrown her under the bus, but if it would prevent criminals from robbing them… “I don’t mean to offend you, but there’s no way you could afford all those necklaces working at Nordstrom. Those gemstones had to be at least twenty carats each!”

She couldn’t provide an answer, not one that made sense. Who would believe the necklaces came from a compact Mamoru found on the beach? Usagi absently rolled the moonstone pendant between her fingers while staring at the carpet. It wasn’t a rational thought, but what if this situation really was somehow all her fault?

Kaelan tutted at her silence and went upstairs to his room, closing the door rather forcefully. Everyone knew he was worried about the bad press the police-turned-FBI investigation might generate. “I’m going to make cider,” Joe declared in an attempt to diffuse tension. Zach returned to his room as well and Nicholas left to track down Makoto, leaving Usagi alone in front of the hearth. The isolation made her shiver, so she lit a fire and climbed into her blanket fort.

Mamoru arrived not long after everything had wound down, entering the kitchen with a perplexed look on his face. “Why are there police cars outside?”

“They’re for our protection,” Joe explained. “The cops think this girl named Nyamékye Silasi is the one who broke into Usagi and Makoto’s apartment. Apparently she’s an international jewelry thief who was last active in London. Now here’s the crazy part— Nia showed up here about forty minutes ago with Usagi’s cat! The police think she’s going to target this house next, hence the security detail.”

That was a lot of information for Mamoru to absorb. He went in search of Usagi, discovering a blanket stretched over two of the couches in the living room. She was wrapped in her pink comforter with a Hello Kitty pillow bunched beneath her chin. “Can I come in?” he gently inquired.

“Sure,” she mumbled. She scooted over so he had room to lie down, though it was still a snug fit. “I’m pretty sure everyone hates me now.”

“I don’t think it’s humanly possible to hate you,” Mamoru reassured.

“Well Kaelan does, and Joe’s on his side. They think those necklaces are the cause of all these problems.”

“Necklaces?” Mamoru repeated, emphasizing the plural. “You mean there’s more than one?”

Usagi nodded. “After the moonstone there were ten more. I gave one to Makoto, one to Rei, and one to Michiru. The police took the other seven as evidence.” She sighed despondently. “They just kept coming out of the compact, one after the other. I don’t know how it happened but I feel like I’m
supposed to give them to the right people. Joe says they’re worth a ton of money and Kaelan thinks Silasi is after them.”

Mamoru hummed thoughtfully. “There’s no way she could know about the necklaces. It wasn’t as if you bought them at a store and she started stalking you. They came out of a compact I found on the beach.” He wrapped an arm around her narrow shoulders. “These events are just weirdly circumstantial. None of this is your fault, Usako.”

She sighed again and leaned into him, staring at the dancing flames for answers. Why was she even here right now? So many coincidences had occurred over the last few months to push her into contact with Mamoru, Kaelan, Rei and the others… but was it really just happenstance? Usagi began considering the possibility that some higher power had a plan for her, though it would be nice to know what the end goal was supposed to be.

Nobody went to sleep in a timely manner, but even so Usagi was the last to doze off well after midnight. She didn’t dream so much as constantly replay Nyamékye Silasi handing Luna to her. She seemed genuinely happy to reunite them; Usagi hadn’t gotten the sense that Silasi had an ulterior motive. She also didn’t seem like the kind of person who could have destroyed their apartment. Silasi came off as calm and collected, always in control of her actions, yet the person who trashed the apartment seemed to have done so in a rage.

All the stress and anxiety Usagi had suppressed since the break-in manifested as an unusually lucid dream. She wandered through a maze of white marble corridors, constantly glancing over her shoulder to ensure no one followed, and came upon a room containing a metallic arch with intricately carved designs and a control panel with runed buttons. Apparently her dream-self knew how to read the myriad symbols because she entered a sequence that made the arch crackle to life. After shielding her eyes against an intense wave of energy, she stood facing a lush green meadow dotted with flowers. The image wavered as wispy tendrils came forth and drew her into the pastoral scene. She experienced a sudden head rush, and then she was standing in the meadow. She could see individual dewdrops lingering on blades of grass and feel creatures both small and large churning the dirt beneath her feet. She looked toward the bright blue sky, hearing a hawk cry as it ascended on a thermal.

This place made Usagi feel truly alive. She was almost overwhelmed by her senses the first time she came here, but she quickly realized that her domain was what had diminished them so severely. She lived in a cold, stark place with selfish people, chief among them her father. He wanted to claim this planet in his name without regard for the plants, animals, or the people who tended them. He didn’t understand that they all depended on one another for survival, and eradicating the people would transform the planet into a barren wasteland. That horrible imagery almost made Usagi turn back, but her newly-keen ears caught a word on the wind and her magnified vision saw a figure approaching. “Selenel!” the young man called; just hearing his voice made her heart flutter. They ran to one another and shared a kiss. She hadn’t realized how much she desired be in his embrace, to be loved by the prince and protector of this planet, Endymion. “I missed you,” he murmured.

“And I you,” she replied. How was it that his heart beat so steadily while hers resounded like a war drum? “My father is very determined to keep us apart.”

“Yet you managed to escape his guards again.” Endymion looked both impressed and concerned. “I fear he may resort to locking you away.”

Selene accepted his hand and began the lengthy walk from the portal to the royal palace. “Pronoia offered to help me elude him. She’s seen our relationship unfold in the Eye.”

“Oh? I hope she hasn’t seen us in a position that will make it impossible to face her with dignity.”
She laughed at the implication, blushing slightly. “I hope so, too. But she and my mother are the ones who made it possible for me to come here today, so you must thank them.” Endymion proclaimed his gratitude to the sky, then Selene’s smile faded. “There are other things the Eye has revealed to her as well. She has seen recent activity among the Dark Cloud.”

“…What sort of activity?” the prince queried.

“All of the hidden kingdoms are mobilizing forces on Tartarus. It looks as if they’re preparing for an invasion.”

“Would they be bold enough to attack Mar Serenitatis?”

“With the current state of relations between our kingdoms, perhaps so.” Selene’s grip tightened. “My father has openly declared his desire to rule Terra, speaking of the resources we could gain. He calls your people greedy, selfish, and antiquated in your beliefs.” Endymion scoffed at such slander. “My mother isn’t as vocal in her opinions, but she told me that if we were to unify we may be able to usher in a new era of peace. Terra could finally join the Inner Alliance and you could sit among the Grand Council.”

“The idea of having a voice in matters affecting the entire solar system is very appealing, I’ll admit…” Endymion came to a stop, facing her while taking up her hands in his own. “But if we were to unify, it would be for the sole reason that I love you, Selene. I wouldn’t pledge the remainder of my life to you for any other reason. Not political gain, not to claim ownership over you, not to secure an heir to the throne…” He gave her fingers the gentlest of kisses. “But there is a side of me you haven’t seen. I want to show it to you, then you can decide if you still wish to be with me.”

Selene’s brow furrowed at that. She thought she knew Endymion quite well, so what secret had he kept hidden all this time? He led her to a teleportation pad in the middle of the field, not too far from the galactic portal itself. “Don’t let go of my hand, or you will become trapped between the physical and spiritual planes of Terra.” She certainly didn’t want that and held him firmly, gasping as the pad suddenly fell out from under her feet. It was as if she were being pulled down into an abyss so pervasively dark that not a single point of light was strong enough to reach her eyes. But then she opened them to a sight more beautiful than she could have ever imagined. “Welcome to Elysium,” Endymion said. “This is my true domain, not the world you know above.”

Everything was so much more here. Sights, sounds, scents, sensations all so intense Selene started crying from the wondrous magnitude of her surroundings. “Endymion, this place…” She couldn’t even find the words to describe it, but maybe she didn’t have to. Elysium was him, moving, breathing, feeling in perfect sync with every fiber of his being. So if Selene unified with Endymion in the corporeal sense, felt him with every fiber of her being… she could become part of Elysium, too.

Usagi awoke abruptly, yearning for something she had no knowledge of with all her heart and soul. She had no clue whether it was a person, place, or object, she just felt totally empty and knew this thing would fill her with bliss. The fact that she was slightly aroused made her wonder if she’d been having some kind of sex dream. She reached for a glass of water on the side table and was promptly scared out of her skin when her hand landed on a piece of icy metal. Makoto stirred on the opposite couch as Usagi felt around for her phone to illuminate the mysterious object.

It was a necklace, but not hers; she wore the moonstone at all times. As her mind withdrew from its sleepy haze she discovered multiple necklaces on the side table. They were in fact the ones she had surrendered to Seattle PD earlier that day. Everything about the dream vanished, replaced by growing fear. The light of her phone fell upon a small piece of paper.
I can explain if you come out to the gazebo.

It wasn’t signed, but Usagi was certain that Silasi had penned the note since the handwriting didn’t belong to anyone in the house. Did this mean she was waiting in the backyard right now? Usagi put on a hoodie and went to the deck exit, noting frost on the glass door. Should she really be meeting a complete stranger in the middle of a cold night? Luna placed her paws on the glass, ears alert, and Usagi steeled herself as she stepped outside. “Silasi?” she whispered from the stone path, “Are you there?” Something moved within the shadows of the gazebo and sent her heart into a beating frenzy, but as if by magic the clouds parted and a half moon bathed the area in pale luminescence. Usagi was still frightened to see the tall, darkly-dressed girl regarding her impassively. “What do you want from me?”

“Please, call me Nia,” she answered quietly. “I need one of your amulets. Someone is after me and I won’t survive much longer without its power.”

“Why didn’t you just keep one when you stole them back from the police?” Usagi asked.

Nia knelt to pet Luna, who had chittered and trotted right up to her. “I wish that hadn’t been necessary, but please listen when I say the amulets cannot be given to just anyone. There are very specific people to whom they belong.”

“How can I tell who deserves them?”

Nia left the darkness to approach Usagi, holding out a hand until her palm splayed across the shorter girl’s chest. “The connections you forge with people are all felt in your heart, but there are some that resonate even deeper, in your very soul. It’s true that we are strangers and this is only our second meeting, but can you not feel something for me?”

“I… trust you,” Usagi breathed, “and why do I feel like I know you?”

Nia smiled kindly and withdrew something from her back pocket, eliciting a little gasp. It was a copper twin of her nacre compact. In place of a moonstone there was a jade cabochon encircled by smaller faceted gems of red, blue, white and dark green. “These are talismans, Usagi. The power within them is what drew us together, and this same power also protects you in conjunction with your amulet. It is imperative you locate the other guardians now that the awakening process has begun. They need protection too, and all will be lost if they never remember.”

Usagi shook her head at the onslaught of cryptic information. “Wait, guardians? Awakening? What are you talking about?”

“You must look to your dreams for answers. It’s my understanding that we all see different things because of who we used to be, and I haven’t been able to piece everything together yet. As each guardian awakens more of the past is revealed, and there is one who can unite all of our minds.” She closed her eyes and frowned. “I used to be so close to her, but I cannot remember her name or her face… She is a central guardian like us, so I’m searching for her. Please search for the others, Usagi. I know they have all been drawn to this area, to you. It’s why I came here in the first place.” Nia smiled. “From now on, don’t dismiss your encounters as random. Sense the world with your soul. Give protection to the guardians you find.”

“Well, since you’re here now…” Usagi looked at the cluster of gemstones in her hand and gave Nia the oval peridot on a gold chain.

“Thank you,” she said, visibly invigorated. “Now that I have this, hopefully I can divert the dark ones’ attention while you track down the guardians. Their true nature is beyond my sight as well, but
I know they want to hurt us.”

Usagi’s eyes widened. “Is that what happened to our apartment? You went there to find me and one of these ‘dark ones’ attacked you?”

“That’s exactly what happened,” Nia answered, “and I am so sorry for it. But you and your friends are safe here. Something is drawing strength from the Earth and forming a barrier of sorts, a haven.” She shrugged. “Consider it a small blessing, I suppose. Good night and sleep well, Usagi.”

“Bye, Nia,” she muttered, watching her disappear down the path to the beach. Usagi looked at the necklaces again. ‘Six guardians left.’ She had suspicions as to who two of them might be, but the last four were a complete mystery. The sooner she found them, the sooner she’d receive a definitive explanation for everything.

Kaelan had nothing to do on Thursday. Zach had flown home to New Orleans for Thanksgiving and the rest of his housemates had turned the simple task of grocery shopping into a group expedition. Since Michiru, Makoto and Usagi would be returning to their apartment in two days, they wanted to make a nice dinner as thanks for hosting them. Although he’d initially been indifferent about it Kaelan now realized he was going to miss them. Things were always cleaner and more organized with women around.

He idly flipped through cable channels until reaching a local news station, catching a headline that made him sit up in bed: Visitor prevents shooter from opening fire on UW campus. Kaelan ignored the reporter, focusing on the sea of students behind her. They were talking a mile a minute, gesticulating wildly, crying and holding one another, speaking into cell phones or to cops and security officers. Everyone looked visibly shaken except the visitor who had saved the day.

It was Nyamékye Silasi.

“Holy Christ…” Kaelan breathed, dialing Mina’s number. “Mina! What the fuck is going on over there?!”

“I guess you saw the news,” she weakly replied. “Don’t worry, everyone’s fine. The shooter didn’t get the chance to kill anyone.”

“Do you know who that girl is, the one who stopped him?”

“Oh, yeah. I think her name’s Nia?” She asked around before returning the phone to her mouth. “Yeah, Nia Silasi.”

“She’s a fucking criminal!” Kaelan shouted.

“How dare you say that? She’s a hero!”

He could tell by the affronted tone of her voice that she was about to hang up on him. “No, Mina, she’s the person who destroyed Usagi and Makoto’s place!” That had to have gotten her attention. “She was at my house yesterday, too! The FBI is investigating her and she’s wanted for grand larceny in England!”

The other line was silent for a moment. “The police are cuffing her… Oh my god Kaelan, what’s going on? She saved everyone! Ami and I were right there when it happened!”

“I’m coming to get you two,” he declared, and was dressed and out the door in just under a minute. There was a neighborhood cop on patrol but he didn’t have a chance in hell at catching the Maserati.
Kaelan skillfully wove between highway traffic and screeched to a crooked halt upon arriving at the parking lot nearest the library. “Mina! Mina!” he called while shoving past people. It was times like this he was thankful for his rugby-toned physique.

When he reached the lawn he ran into a mob shouting at the police for arresting Nia. “Hero” was being said liberally, but if they only knew… Kaelan heard his name and spun around in time to catch the blonde as she flung herself against him. She sobbed hysterically, her arms squeezing tight enough to break a rib. Ami approached in a calmer manner despite trembling slightly. “Mina just realized that we could have died today,” she stated.

Kaelan gave the girls a stern look. “I want every detail.”

“We were coming back from the library, talking about what to get for lunch, when this man in a long jacket stepped out in front of us. We were right about there, at that lamp post.” Ami pointed across the lawn to a wide path. “The man asked if we could help him find one of the buildings, and we asked which one, but then he pulled out a gun and we froze up. I didn’t even think about grabbing my pepper spray.”

“Th-th-then Nia came up behind him,” Mina stammered, “and whacked him on the back.”

“It was a good kick,” Ami added. “I bet she knows some kind of martial art.”

“So he dropped the gun and fell to his knees, and we screamed, and he picked it back up and aimed at Nia…”

“She lashed out again and broke his arm. I heard the bone snap. Then she stood on it so he couldn’t move, and I called the police. A few security guards arrived to make sure he didn’t get away. That’s all that really happened.” Ami shrugged as if she weren’t relaying a harrowing experience.

Now Kaelan was even more conflicted. Nyamékye Silasi belonged to a criminal organization and had trashed Michiru’s apartment. She had also returned Usagi’s cat and saved hundreds of lives just now. He was jarred from his thoughts when someone behind him asked “Mr. Burke?” It was a cop who garnered an automatic glare. “How does it feel knowing your home is safe from Silasi?”

“Good, I suppose.”

“Great. Listen, the FBI would like you and your friends to make some public statements about how you were victimized by Silasi. You’re not the first people to suffer because of her crimes.”

“What other crimes is she accused of, Officer?” Ami asked.

He gestured dismissively. “Well, they’re so numerous, but the money she makes from selling stuff on the black market funds African extremist groups.”

The three young adults shared a look. “That doesn’t sound like the kind of person who would stop a campus shooter,” Ami remarked. Kaelan grunted in agreement.

“I don’t want to make a statement. I’m not one of her victims,” he said.

The cop narrowed his eyes at the trio “Well, your girl friends don’t have a choice since they’re the primary witnesses in this investigation. Would you like to drive them to the station, or should I?”

“We’ll see you there,” Kaelan answered. Mina shivered at his icy tone.
“What were you doing on campus Thanksgiving weekend?” Agent Fisher inquired of Ami and Mina.

“It’s an American holiday. We’re Japanese,” the former placidly replied. “We’re both medical students with a lot of homework, that’s why we were in the library.”

Mina had not uncrossed her arms since sitting down in the interrogation room. “Are you saying it would have been our fault for being there if we got shot?”

Fisher looked alarmed. “That’s not what I’m saying at all! I was just curious. I think you two are incredibly lucky. Usually these kinds of events end with at least one body in the morgue.”

“Yeah, well, that didn’t happen because of Nia,” Mina said pointedly. “When can we talk to her? We haven’t been able to thank her for saving our lives.”

The woman leaned across the table to give them a hard look. “You girls need to realize that one act of heroism does not undo a lifetime of crime, especially on an international scale. Nia Silasi is a dangerous person.”

“Allegedly,” Ami said.

Agent Fisher pursed her lips, sighed, and stood up. “If it will make you more receptive to future inquiries regarding this case, I’ll allow you to speak to her very briefly.”

The girls nodded and followed her into another room where Nia was handcuffed to the table. Ami noted that she didn’t look surprised to see them, nor did her expression change when Mina threw her arms around her. “Please do not make physical contact with the suspect,” said a male voice through the intercom.

“Sorry!” Mina waved it off and grinned at Nia. “Thank you so much for being there today.”

“It was no trouble,” she replied. “I was just in the right place at the right time.”

“But you’re not a UW student,” Ami said. “Why were you there?”

“I had an appointment for a polysomnography.” One of her eyebrows rose while Ami’s furrowed. “I don’t find much solace during the day now, either.” Nia’s gaze darted to the door just before Agent Fisher opened it, their cue to leave. “Stay with your friends,” was the last thing they heard.

On the other side of the two-way glass, Agent Bedford chewed on a pencil. “What was that word, poly-graph-y? Do you know what that is?”

“Not a clue,” Mina answered, emphasizing her cluelessness. “Thanks for letting us talk to her.” Bedford waved them away but they didn’t have anywhere to go except out to the parking lot where Kaelan waited; as promised they had arrived before the rude cop. Mina saw their driver speaking to Mamoru and jogged up to him. “Hey! What are you doing here?”

“Usagi, Makoto, and Michiru had to come in for a routine follow-up.” At that both girls spun around and went back inside the station. “Did I miss something?” he gaped. Kaelan only shrugged.

Ami and Mina found the distinctive trio in yet another interrogation room. There were a few officers, including Agent Bedford, listening in on the conversation. “Are you sure about this?” Officer Danner asked as they eavesdropped.

“Yes, we don’t want to press charges against Nyamekye Silasi,” Michiru answered.
“She just saved our friends’ lives,” Makoto stated.

“And we don’t believe she did the damage to our apartment,” Usagi added.

Officer Danner squinted at them. “Are you certain you want to ignore the blatant evidence we have against her? Her fingerprints were all over your stuff.”

Makoto rolled her eyes. “Just the kitchen table, right? How do you know she didn’t go to our apartment to return Luna and walked in on the actual vandals? How do you know she didn’t shield herself behind the table?” Usagi looked at her friend like she was a genius.

“Okay, fine, it’s your decision. Just know that the prosecuting attorney can subpoena you to testify against her. We’ll inform you if it gets to that point.”

Ami and Mina backed around a corner, the latter frowning. “I don’t get it. Why are the police so certain Nia committed all these crimes?”

“I don’t think they are,” Ami postulated. “I think they have very little evidence linking her to them and want to use our testimonies to build a case against her. She’s guilty by reputation alone, but that will hold up better in court if her victims can sway a jury with their sob stories. The authorities wouldn’t sound so desperate if there really were victims in the other cities Nia supposedly heisted in.”

Mina nodded, admiring Ami’s logic. “What was that word she said to you, the poly one?”

“Polysomnography. It’s a test that monitors certain functions during sleep, like brain and muscle activity, to diagnose sleep disorders.”

“So Nia was at school for a sleep test? Maybe she has really bad nightmares or something…” A door opened, depositing their friends. “She said we should stick close to them. I guess we’d better take her advice.”

Everyone gathered before the large TV in the den, watching the news channels for any information regarding Nia. They kept playing a snippet of security footage that showed the UW intruder approach Ami and Mina before pulling a shotgun on them, although the networks withheld their names at the behest of the police. Finally, around 7:00, channel four flashed a ‘breaking news’ banner before presenting several police officers gathered in front of the station. “Nyamèkye Silasi has been acquitted of all charges made against her in the United States and abroad,” said Agent Fisher.

“How can you just let her go?” someone off camera shouted. “She funds terrorist groups!”

“Miss Silasi has provided compelling evidence against members of the organization she was suspected to belong to,” Agent Bedford glanced at his partner. “The FBI is about to begin a cooperative investigation with various agencies from around the globe, including Interpol, to track down these people and bring them to justice. Now, we’ll take your questions one at a time…”

“So they decide she’s innocent all of a sudden?” Nicholas asked once Kaelan muted the TV.

“She probably told them where to find all the important people in the syndicate in exchange for her freedom,” Joe mused.

“That’s exactly what I did,” said a voice from behind. There stood Nia, leaning against the door frame and wearing the ghost of a smirk. “I owe those people nothing.”

“I think you owe us some explanations,” Kaelan demanded. “First, how the fuck did you get in my
house?”
Nia stood in front of the fireplace with everyone situated around her, shifting her weight from one foot to the other while considering how to condense her life story. “I was born in Kpandu, Ghana, and grew up thinking I’d live the simple life of a farmer like my parents. They struggled to send me to school, even trading their harvest for tuition and supplies at times. For my fifteenth birthday they saved up to take me to Accra, the capital, where I was discovered by a talent agent at a bazaar. I modeled for a while until entering a pageant, Miss Teen Africa, where I placed second. I used the winnings to polish my appearance a little, then I won Miss Teen Africa the next year. It was like a dream come true—suddenly I was receiving scholarships from universities all over the continent. But when I finished high school I ambitiously applied to Oxford and got in.”

“That’s quite an accomplishment,” Ami remarked.

Nia nodded. “I thought so as well, but my first year there was very difficult. I was a simple farm girl from West Africa who had been accepted to one of the most elite universities in the world. Many people called me a charity case or thought I was involved with someone influential, but I stayed focused on my studies.” She lowered her gaze with a sigh. “As soon as I earned my Master’s, Adrien Levesque recruited me for his company. I honestly didn’t know they were thieves until after they had subverted the security protocols I established for a wealthy client. I was angry, of course, but I couldn’t turn away from the money— I sent it all back to my hometown. And the younger team members looked up to me, admired how I’d risen from rags to riches in only a few years. They became like family to me.”

“And these are the people you’ve betrayed?” Nicholas asked with an edge to his tone.

“Enough was enough,” Nia softly replied. “After we left London and came to the States, I found out that Adrien had ties to various extremist groups around the world, including ones in Africa. He may have been robbing the rich but he certainly wasn’t distributing wealth to the poor.” She lifted her head proudly. “So I began setting up a paper trail to help Interpol and the like track him down. The rest of the team scattered when they found out I was being interrogated by the FBI, but I know exactly where they’re hiding. Because most of them are minors their sentences won’t be very harsh, and when they reenter society I hope they will pursue legal applications for their talents. I hope they never fall in with someone like Adrien ever again.”

“So what exactly have you been doing with your ill-gotten gains?” Zach inquired.

“I put them into a charity fund managed by my parents. The money is given to people wishing to enhance infrastructure or build schools, recreational centers, modern housing and hospitals. I’m also a sponsor of the same pageant that provided my stepping stone to success.”

“Well that’s pretty selfless…” he muttered, folding his arms. “I guess we can’t really be mad at you.”

Kaelan raised a hand. “Uh, I can. I still want to know how the hell you got in here when all the doors are locked.”

“Oh,” Nia smirked, “there’s a loose glass panel above your conservatory.”

“Then how did you get on the roof?!” But she left without further word, and Kaelan sighed in defeat. He motioned for Nicholas and Joe to follow him to the conservatory so they could repair the ceiling, leaving Mamoru and the five girls to their own devices. During the brief silence he noticed something different about Ami and Mina.
“Where did you get those necklaces?” he asked. His gaze slowly slid to Usagi before either of them actually answered. Hadn’t she said they’d been taken by the Seattle police as evidence?

“Usagi gave them to us!” Mina happily answered. Her pendant was a heart-shaped diamond and Ami’s was a radiant emerald.

Mamoru indicated for Usagi to follow him, leading her into the dining room where their conversation wouldn’t be overheard. “How did you get them back, Usako?”

“Nia brought them the night all the police were here,” she admitted. “I didn’t know until I woke up and found them on the table. She said I can’t let just anyone have them, so…” She shrugged, unsure how to explain her quest.

Mamoru placed the tip of his thumb between his teeth, a mannerism Usagi found really cute. Much to her surprise he didn’t berate her for subverting the authorities. “Have you been having weird dreams lately? No, that’s the wrong word… vivid dreams, since the night of the meteor shower?”

“Mamo-chan…” she started to say, but her tone confirmed it.

He leaned against the arched doorway and sighed, pushing a hand through his hair. “What’s going on around here, Usako?”

“Something about guardians and awakening and answers in our dreams…” Usagi also sighed. “Nia’s involved, too. She told me that I’m supposed to give these amulets to guardians so they’ll be protected from ‘dark ones’. She said everything will become clear once we’re all awake.”

“So you, Nia, Michiru, Makoto, Rei, Ami, and Mina are all guardians,” Mamoru stated. He didn’t sound dubious, just matter-of-fact. “Guardians of what?”

Usagi scoffed. “The galaxy? I have no clue. I don’t know how to find them, either– Nia just told me to feel people with my soul.” She groaned a little. “This is like an RPG without a tutorial. I don’t know what to do!”

“Maybe I can help you.” Mamoru half-smiled at her expression of relief and curiosity. “I know this doesn’t make much sense, but I feel like all the people I’ve seen in my dreams exist in the real world right now. I feel kind of… connected to them, like there are strings leading right to them. I think I can follow the strings, Usako.”

Joe hopped out of the Samurai and surveyed Bastyr University. Huge evergreens dwarfed the campus and muffled the surrounding metro, providing a serene environment for students to better connect with nature. He wished he had transferred to Bastyr after his first two years at UW, but it was unlike him to finish what he started; he had to see his horticulture degree through to completion. That didn’t mean he couldn’t augment it with knowledge from someplace else. He followed the most direct path to the herb garden which was divided into culinary and medicinal applications. Rei mostly worked with the latter but today they were packing an herb-infused lunch for their excursion into the Cascade foothills. Joe wanted to show her where his class’ conservation efforts had been directed for the past four years and Rei wanted to get away from civilization for a while. Although the weather had granted them a bright cloudless day, winter’s chill still permeated the air.

When Joe came upon the garden it took him a moment to recognize Rei. Her hair was up in a high bun and she had opted for olive green and taupe instead of typical black. She turned, saw him, and smiled, a hint of color staining her porcelain cheeks. “I decided on something a little more heavy-duty than jeans and a sweatshirt,” she explained.
“The wilderness does tend to punish impracticality,” he smiled back. “If you’re ready to go I’ll just clip a sprig of rosemary… and this lemon thyme… Is that dill?”

Eventually they got on the highway heading northeast into the mountains. Since Rei had never seen the interior of Joe’s rig she was a little stunned by its contents. He seemed prepared to survive nuclear fallout; there were a couple gallons of water and a filtration system, MREs, a large medical kit, a tent, blankets, a fire extinguisher, a solar-powered radio, and a set of utility knives. “My goodness, Josef. The only thing you’re missing is a gun,” she jokingly remarked.

“I have one, actually,” he carefully replied, watching her eyes widen. “It’s in the box on the roof. It’s a 30-06 rifle.”

“Oh… What do you do with it?” Rei wondered how Ami and Mina would feel about this since they had just been threatened with a shotgun.

“It’s a hunting rifle, but I’ve met my share of crazy people in the woods so it’s an intimidation factor, too. You know that saying— I’d rather have a firearm and not need to use it than need it and not have one.”

She grinned. “You are such a boy scout. ‘Be prepared’ and all that.”

“Well, I did receive a few years of military and survival training when I was younger. I’m the kind of guy you want to stick with during the apocalypse.” Rei gave a small laugh at the notion, but now she had complete faith in his ability to keep her safe. After passing several trailheads Joe turned onto a logging road following the edge of a ravine. Rei looked out the window and felt her stomach sink; it was a very long way to the ribbon of water at the bottom. “My professor thinks an arm of the Skykomish River carved out this little valley. We found remnants of a mining settlement but there was never much gold in these mountains. Silver, lead, and copper deposits are more common.”

Rei felt better once they parked. She got out, stretched, and inhaled a breath of fresh air. It seemed like they were the only two people in the world right now since there wasn’t another soul around for miles. She shrugged on her backpack and followed Joe into a small clearing. He informed her that his class had been coming to this area to keep an eye on things for four years, but it appeared not a single blade of grass had borne the weight of a human foot. “Why is this place so important?”

Joe’s eyes instantly lit up. “There are a few species of rare flowers we discovered here, and it’s my duty as an environmental horticulturalist to protect, observe, and possibly propagate them. One is *swertia perennis*, which we found down in the ravine. Another is *fritillaria camschatcensis*, the chocolate lily, discovered near a bog to the south. And the last is in here.”

Rei raised one of her thin eyebrows at the cave’s dark maw. It wasn’t pitch black; there were shafts of sunlight beaming into it, illuminating a long, narrow tunnel. It looked too precise to be natural.

“What is that?”

“A lava tube,” he answered. He then plunged into the gloom and Rei hurried to catch up. She wasn’t very fond of dark, enclosed spaces, so she followed very closely behind him. After a few minutes of silence Joe took hold of her hand. “You feel a little clammy.”

“I like being able to feel the sun,” she uttered.

“We won’t stay long, then.” He squeezed her fingers as reassurance but Rei hardly relaxed. Joe turned on a flashlight and she was only mildly relieved not to see any massive spiders dangling from the ceiling. There was, however, a fuzzy substance growing along the walls and floor, and a dull roar filled her ears.
“Moss…” she remarked after brushing the stone with her free hand. “There’s moisture down here?”

“That noise is an underground river,” Joe explained. “We think the source is a glacier on one of the neighboring peaks.” They emerged from the tunnel into a circular cavern perhaps ten feet high. Rei thrust her sweaty hands into the water.

“It’s warm!” she exclaimed, looking to her guide for an answer.

“We haven’t quite figured out why that is. It could be because it never reaches the outside atmosphere, or that there’s a lot of vegetation in the riverbed. Certain plants, especially freshwater varieties, help keep water warm. It could also be that volcanic heat upriver is strong enough to reach this particular spot before dissipating downstream. But the river isn’t exactly what I wanted to show you– have a look at this.”

Rei followed the flashlight beam to an odd specimen growing from a mass of moss, tree roots and detritus. There was a hole to the outside world directly above it but any sunlight, at least during this time of day, was blocked by thick evergreen boughs. The specimen was tiny with pink and white petals, a pale red stem, and no leaves. “That’s a flower?”

“Not just any flower.” Rei could feel Joe’s aura blooming in excitement. “This is *epipogium aphyllum*, the ghost orchid, one of the rarest plants in the entire world.” Her brow rose with interest. “It’s been found in the Pyrenees and Himalayan mountains, Siberia, Crimea, northern Europe, and very sporadically in the UK.”

“So it only grows in cold climates,” she reasoned.

“It doesn’t have leaves, as you probably noticed, and it doesn’t produce chlorophyll which is what most plants use to perform photosynthesis. It gets nutrients from this species of lichen or possibly decayed organic matter. Scientists don’t actually know how it eats because it’s too rare to study.”

Rei scrutinized him. “You’ve really been researching this flower for four years and haven’t told anyone important about it?”

Joe scoffed. “Who’s important, the Department of Natural Resources? If people in the plant world heard about this they’d flock here and ruin the whole micro ecosystem. There’d be people poking around the lava tube and trying to map the river. This place is a UW environmental science class secret.”

“And now my secret as well,” Rei deduced. Joe nodded somberly. “All right, I won’t tell anyone.”

“Thanks. How about we eat lunch here?” She agreed to the suggestion despite her claustrophobia. As Joe sprinkled some herbs onto their sandwiches Rei became entranced by the roar of the river. “Bon appetit,” he said, walking up behind her. She turned her head so quickly that her glasses flew off and clattered upon the stone floor. She and Joe reached for them at the same time, her fingertips landing on his swifter hand. “Let me get that…” he started to say, but the words were cut off when they locked eyes.

It wasn’t that this was the first time he had actually seen them; Rei took off her glasses around Joe more than anyone else. What shocked him was the fact that her pupils were dilated to the point where there was almost no color left, but the influx of light should have made them constrict. Joe stared into the visage of a predator and his brain fired off commands for him to get away from this dangerous creature right now. He could feel adrenaline surging through his veins, giving him strength to run, but his body would not obey. He was paralyzed with fear.
Suddenly Rei blinked and looked away, freeing him from stasis as she hurriedly put her sunglasses back on. “Josef, I’m so sorry. Are you all right? Did I hurt you?”

He sat on the floor in a daze. “I’m not sure. What was that?”

“It’s my fault. You scared me, so I… I attacked you with my aura.”

He stared at her in evident confusion. “Your aura? How does that work?”

“Well, I…” Rei had never told anyone about her odd abilities and wasn’t quite sure how to explain them, but she owed it to him. “My aura flared and overcame yours. That’s why you were stunned.” She faced the river to hide her embarrassment as Joe slowly rose to his feet.

He dusted himself off, rearranged Rei’s sandwich which he had clung to in terror, and proffered it. “So you can control and sense auras?”

She shrugged. “I don’t sense them, I see them. Almost every person on the planet has one. They used to overwhelm me until I made these glasses. And I can’t control anyone’s aura, not even my own. Influence is a better word.”

“Then I guess your aura just scared the crap out of mine,” he chuckled. “It must be really weak.”

“It’s not,” Rei refuted, “it’s quite bold, and an interesting color. Turquoise.”

Joe looked intrigued by this information. “What do you do with a skill like that? Do you judge people based on the colors of their auras?”

His tone was teasing rather than accusatory. “Only a little. For instance, when I first saw Mina I knew she was energetic and outgoing because she had a yellow aura. I try not to make assumptions about people before I get to know them.”

“Don’t we all?” He stuffed a handful of almonds into his mouth, speaking around them. “It doesn’t seem fair that you have to dampen the rest of the world in order to not see everyone’s auras. I wonder if there’s a way to turn it off or something.”

Rei smiled gently. “It’s been nineteen years. I’m used to it by now.”

Zach tapped his foot impatiently as he waited for one of his roommates to pick him up from the SeaTac Light Rail station in the International District. He practically jumped into Mamoru’s Mercedes once it arrived, grateful to get out of the wind and rain. When he flipped down the visor to fix his hair he was not expecting a magnified pair of dark brown eyes to be staring back. “Jesus!” Zach yelled, and Ami smirked as he twisted around to face her. “I didn’t even see you there!”

“I’m a ninja,” she said.

He crossed his arms and glared out the window. “I survived a week with my family only for you to nearly give me a heart attack. Thanks a lot.”

Mamoru cleared his throat. “How was Thanksgiving? Was everyone happy to see you?”

“More or less,” Zach shrugged. “My mom iced me out but that’s nothing new. I went golfing with my dad and failed miserably because golf is stupid.” Ami tittered at that. “My Aunt Vivi brought her new husband along. She’s fifty and he’s practically my age, so that was gross. Uncle Philippe wouldn’t shut up about how great life in New York is, and two of my cousins decided to go vegan
which pissed off my mom since they wouldn’t eat her cooking.” He sighed. “Just another episode of ‘My Big Dysfunctional American Family’.”

“How big is it?” Ami asked. He waggled his eyebrows suggestively. “Your family.”

“Philippe is my dad’s only brother, unmarried, no kids. Everyone else is from my mom’s side. She has two sisters and three brothers, and she’s the youngest so it’s really important that she one-up’s them all at life. This time of year is for her to show off how great everything is, but I threw a wrench into that plan a lot time ago.” Once again Ami wondered what had happened that prompted Zach to basically run away from home.

“You don’t have any siblings?” Mamoru asked. The blond boy shook his head. “That means we’re all only-children. What an odd coincidence.”

“Who’s ‘we’?” Zach returned.

“All of us, the ten of us. You, me, Kaelan, Usagi…”

Zach rubbed his chin. “Huh. That could be a family-feels show of some kind.”

“You shouldn’t be writing something else when you’re still working on your play,” Ami said.

“The writing’s been done,” he countered, “I’m just directing now. And we are so close to perfection. If only Lir would get his act together.”

She was curious. “What’s wrong with Lir?”

Zach began gesticulating pointedly. “This kid Jackson is so great at everything except intimacy. He has to convince the audience of his love for Amalthea, but he tenses up during every romantic scene. The part where Amalthea saves him from the griffin is supposed to be this huge moment when they’re finally reunited. The whole premise of the first book is that Amalthea regrets turning back into a unicorn because she loves Lir, so this one scene reveals that she never forgot about him, never stopped loving him even as a beast.” He growled in frustration. “It’s the most important scene in the whole play, and Jackson keeps fucking it up!”

The car fell silent for a minute. “I’m sorry I asked,” Ami whispered. “I didn’t mean to upset you.”

“No, this is a good thing. You reminded me that I have a lot of work to do with that kid. I bet he thought he’d get to rest on his laurels during break—ha!” Zach whipped out his cell phone and left a rather courteous message for the freshman actor. When they got to the mansion, however, he muttered a constant stream of expletives at his luggage while hefting it up the stairs, letting everyone know what kind of mood he was in.

Zach was placated by the dinner Michiru, Usagi, and Makoto provided. It was comfort food of the Japanese variety, simple dishes that warmed everyone to the core. There was sake as well, and various sweets from Usagi’s private stash including chocolate-covered macadamia nuts, pocky, melon chews, and fruit gummies. Zach had a difficult time opening his bottle of Ramune, but Ami intervened before his temper erupted again. “Why’re being s’nice to me?” he slurred, having downed several shots of rice liquor.

“I don’t want you to throw the bottle against the wall.” His expression agreed that was indeed a viable outcome. Zach swung the Ramune back and forth, tracking the trapped marble as Ami settled beside him. “I want to know more about your family,” she said.

“Why? They’re boring.”
“Then tell me about you. What is Creole? Do they all speak French? What’s the Garden District?” She wanted to know why he hated going home.

Zach released a long groan and righted himself as best he could. “It’s called the Garden District ‘cause there’s a shit-ton o’ plants in front o’ every house. The whole neighborhood is groomed for terrorists… I mean tourists.” He shook his head in an attempt to banish the alcoholic haze. “It’s right next to the French Quarter so the mansions are all that style. There’s lots o’ fancy boutiques ‘n restaurants, too.”

“So you have to keep up a certain appearance?”

“Yeah. It’s a lotta work but my mom likes doing it for the prestige.” Zach sighed deeply. “So Creole refers to people descended from the original French and Spanish immigrants who settled in Louisiana. Not everyone who identifies as Creole speaks their dialect of French ‘cause it’s dying out fast. My family’s just really snobby and speaks modern French the last three generations. My grandparents hardly use English just ‘cause they don’t wanna.”

“I see…” Ami thought it would be most prudent if she could simply go to New Orleans and experience the culture firsthand, but she likely wouldn’t get the opportunity until finishing school. And that might have been going a little too far just to figure out what made Zach tick. “You said your mother is a psychologist, right? What does your father do?”

“He’s a lawyer, pretty good one I guess. My folks assumed I’d graduate high school and go to Harvard like him, then come back to join his firm. I really threw ‘em for a loop by stickin’ with theater.” He chuckled smugly, downing the Ramune.

Ami wondered if what she was doing could be considered following her mother’s footsteps even though Mizuno Saeko was a neurosurgeon and not a geneticist. She just wanted to make her mother proud and form one more positive bond. They had been forced to rely on one another when her father decided to shirk his parental responsibilities by “following his heart” or whatever nonsense he’d spouted upon walking out the door. Ami knew he was a traditional artist residing in the mountains but she hadn’t sought him out in over a decade. He could be dead for all she knew.

Zach’s phone chimed, pulling Ami from her reminiscence. Most of her inebriated friends were watching Wheel of Fortune on the large TV, making inappropriate guesses as to the word or phrase. Zach hummed at the text he received. “Looks like everyone’ll be at the theater for practice tomorrow. You can swing by to meet the cast if you want.”

Ami was curious about his interpretation of Peter Beagle’s work. “I’ll do that,” she said, and his countenance brightened. “I can bring you another Ramune.”

“These things ain’t half bad.” He clinked his bottle against the one in Ami’s hand, then regarded her quizzically. “Y’know, I kinda like this friend thing.”

She flashed a charming smile. “I do too. You haven’t antagonized me at all since the star party.”

“Ya came with Mamoru to pick me up.”

“So I did.” Ami wasn’t about to tell him that she had simply been along for the ride because she wanted to buy a few things at Uwajimaya.

A commercial interrupted Wheel of Fortune. Joe slapped his palm over Nicholas’ loud mouth and shushed everyone else, intently watching the TV while cars zoomed along dirt roads. When it was over he simply stared with his mouth agape. “They do rallycross here?”
Michiru nodded sagely. “The Cascade Rally is a stage of the North Fire Rally. I believe this is the second year it’s been held here– it was previously in Namu, British Columbia. Drivers come from all around the Pacific to compete.”

“That is so awesome!” Joe yelled. “Where is it? When is it?”

“The commercial was just on, baka!” Makoto chided. “It’s this weekend in Sultan.”

He practically vibrated with excitement. “Why didn’t anyone tell me about this last year? I love rallycross!”

“Calm down before you piss on something,” Kaelan said, rolling his eyes. “It’s just sanctioned speeding, big deal.” This earned a glare from Joe and they began arguing about what was truly awesome in the world of motorsport.

Usagi gave her roommate a mystified look. “How do you know about this, Michiru-chan?”

“I do have other interests besides music,” she answered, tossing her hair.

“How can you go wrong with hot guys in fast cars?” Mina added, earning giggles. “We should go check it out!”

Everyone but Ami, Zach, and Mamoru agreed to spectate the rally. “I have to keep up my PhD research,” Mamoru explained.

“I want to study for finals,” Ami added.

“And I don’t have time to waste if I want this play to be ready by January. Half my cast’ll be going home for winter break.”

Mina pouted. “You guys are totally lame, choosing to do school stuff instead of appreciating nature and cars.” She shook her head in disappointment as Ami gently pushed her off the couch.

Zach waved it off. “I’m a southern boy, I don’t belong in freezing cold mountains anyway. I’m gonna park my ass in front o’ the fireplace and laugh as y’all spend the day getting frostbite.” He faced Ami with a hopeful glimmer in his eye. “That reminds me, wanna help with my English homework?”

“I can try. They say two heads are better than one.”

Mina and Nicholas shared a look. Since when was Ami voluntarily agreeing to help Zach? She’d made it more than clear that she disliked him, and Zach had only been after one thing from her since the beginning. It was almost impossible to think their dynamic had shifted so profoundly in less than a month… but they weren’t the only ones with new emotions rising to the surface.
Although Ami had offered to bring Zach a Ramune during practice she could not in good conscience deny everyone else refreshments, so she crammed as many bottles as possible into her bag before heading to the theater. She used a side entrance to avoid disrupting the actors and cautiously skirted the stage, sighting Zach in the front row. He looked more irritated than anyone she’d seen in her life. Ami claimed an aisle seat to watch Prince Lir deliver a monologue. He questioned his manliness; it was so easy to face monsters in mortal combat but he couldn’t find the courage to tell Amalthea how he felt. Letters, poems, and lyrics all failed him. He spoke aloud what he wished to say to her, but unbeknownst to him Amalthea was situated on the balcony just above. She heard every word and called out. Lir went to profess his love in person.

The change in Jackson’s acting was definitely noticeable; he had no confidence in what he was saying and stumbled through his lines. It was the last straw for Zach. “God dammit, Jackson!” he yelled, the acoustics amplifying his voice. “Lir was just there, so where the fuck did he go?!” The freshman only stared at the floor.

“I’m so tired of doing this scene over and over again!” said the Amalthea actress. “Will you just bring out his understudy already?”

“No!” Jackson pleaded, “I can do it, I swear!”

“I really don’t think you can,” Zach disdainfully returned. “You’re holding back the whole goddamn production!” As he rose to his feet his volume increased as well. “Do you get off on this kind of shit? Do you feel powerful knowing the entire show is at your mercy? You think you’re too good to act alongside Aubrey? Are you racist or something?!”

“Settle down, man,” said one of the stagehands, but his words were drowned out as Jackson shouted back.

“I’m not! It’s not because of her!”

“Then what the fuck is your problem?!” Zach bellowed.

A well-dressed woman appeared from backstage. “That’s enough, le Blanc. You need to go outside and calm down. Everyone take a fifteen-minute break!” Zach obeyed her by slamming open the nearest side door. Jackson was on his heels and Ami followed a moment later.

“I swear to god, Jackson…” she immediately heard, “if you don’t get over whatever hang-ups you have today, you’re out. I’m so done with this.”

“Wait, Zach, please…” Ami kept her distance, loitering behind a dumpster full of wood and construction materials as Jackson grabbed his arm. Zach rounded on him with fury in his eyes but the actor stood his ground. “I’m sorry, I really am. In those scenes it just… it feels like I’m betraying you.”

“Amy to god, Jackson…” she immediately heard, “if you don’t get over whatever hang-ups you have today, you’re out. I’m so done with this.”

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“I told you it was going to be this way. You have to treat this like a job. I’m your boss. I need Prince Lir to come to work, not you, and Lir loves Amalthea.” His tone softened. “I cast you because I knew you could make Lir real, give him life outside the book and movie. He’s a passionate man just like you.” Ami’s brow furrowed; that didn’t sound like Zach at all. She peeked around the corner and saw the two of them standing with their backs against the wall in contemplation.

Jackson scoffed. “I can’t believe you called me racist in front of everyone. I bet Aubrey hates me
now.”

“She’s mad because you’re delaying the show, not because you refuse to be intimate with her. Here, maybe this will tide you over.”

Ami’s breath hitched as Zach turned to kiss Jackson. Not an air kiss or a mere peck on the cheek, but a no-one-else-on-earth-at-this-moment type of kiss. After the initial shock her brain went into overdrive processing this development. ‘Oh my goodness, Zach is gay. He just acts like a womanizer to hide it!’ She recalled him saying beautiful people were his type, not women specifically. He hated his hometown because they were less accepting of his sexuality there, and there was tension with his mother because she couldn’t have the perfect life with a gay son. Everything made perfect sense now.

She caught one last exchange while retreating for the door. “You have to forget about us for the time being,” Zach said kindly. “I’m your director, not your boyfriend.”

Jackson sighed wistfully. “I’ll try my best. Maybe I can pretend Amalthea is you.”

They both laughed a little and Ami felt her face turn scarlet, then the door swung open and almost knocked her down. “Oh!” exclaimed Aubrey, the lead actress, “I’m sorry! Are those two out here?” Ami just ducked her head and scurried inside before the boys realized she overheard them. Still her mind was racing.

‘If Zach is gay, why did he hit on me for so long? Was it just the attention he wanted?’ Should she tell him she knew the truth? They were trying to be friends now, and if he knew he could be his real self around her he would surely open up more. Ami really wanted to trust him and being honest would make that a lot easier.

She glanced up as Zach greeted her with a smile. “Hey, you made it. Please tell me you brought something to drink. I’ve been yelling way too much.”

“One Ramune, as promised,” she said, surrendering a lemon-flavored soda.

Zach heard the glass clinking and raised an eyebrow. “Just one?”

“I brought enough for everyone, at least I hope so. How many people are there?”

“Eight, I think. Did Andrew leave?” The crew nodded. “Is it possible to get a keg of this stuff?” Ami laughed and Zach flashed his smile-smirk, feeling more optimistic now that he’d dealt with Jackson. In the actor’s mind he was professing his love to Zach, and Zach was content to let him do so. Whatever it took for his show to achieve perfection. As he left the auditorium with Ami at the end of the day he noticed a jaunty spring in her step. “What are you so peppy about?”

“I really can’t wait to see the play. I don’t think I’ll come to any more practices, if that’s okay. I want to see the finished product on opening night. Zach, I just have to tell you… I really love your work!”

He was a bit stunned by how amicable she sounded. “Well thank you, Ami. I’m glad you think I’m doing Beagle’s story justice.”

“The movie is excellent, of course,” she went on, “but there’s just something so real about bringing it to the stage. I mean it is real, obviously,” she giggled, “but it feels like the actors are the embodiment of the characters. Aubrey, Jackson, David, Lauren… they’re all so amazing!”

Zach walked in silence with a bemused expression on his face. What on earth had caused this change of heart? Where had Ami’s barrier gone, that layer of ice? She was babbling away like they
discussed such things all the time; she was *praising* him! This was not the girl he had grown accustomed to, so he tested the waters. “I’m famished, Ami. Do you want to get teriyaki or something?”

“That sounds great,” she replied, and Zach managed to repress his shock. When they reached his car he held the door for her, earning a beatific smile, but then she didn’t say a word while he drove to the tiny eatery. Only after they had ordered, sat down, and split their chopsticks did Ami regard him shyly. Zach chewed slowly, preparing for whatever she was about to say. “So, um, how long have you been with him?”

“With who?”

“Jackson.” Zach had expected anything but that and coughed up a few grains of rice. He looked dumbfounded while Ami sat there wearing the most non-judgmental expression ever. “I saw you kiss him,” she explained. “I got to the theater as you were storming out, so I followed you. I didn’t mean to see you. But does anyone know? I mean, are you out?”

Zach’s features remained passive as he made the connection. ‘Oh my god, Ami thinks I’m gay. She heard me call Jackson my boyfriend.’ She had no idea he’d just done what was necessary to ensure his play went off without a hitch. He couldn’t stand the fact that Jackson’s little crush, which he’d been aware of since the very beginning, was now actually poised to ruin all his hard work. *The Last Heart* was a magnum opus and he certainly wasn’t going to give it up to satisfy the desires of a naïve freshman actor. That kiss had just been to manipulate Jackson into behaving the way he wanted.

So the reason why Ami opened up all of a sudden was because she believed his interest in her was some kind of ruse. It really wasn’t; Zach fantasized about being her first in numerous senses of the word. Lately his lust had given way to contentment at simply being in her presence. He still wanted her, just not as all-consuming as he had when he first laid eyes on her. In order to get even closer to Ami it might be beneficial to play off her assumptions for a while. Zach lowered his chopsticks and laced his fingers beneath his chin, summoning a humble smile. “I’ve been seeing Jackson since his audition, and yes, our relationship needs to stay secret. People would accuse me of favoritism if they knew we were together.”

Much to his delight Ami promised not to tell anyone, not even Mina. And she had no reservations whatsoever when it came to working out the details of their study date that weekend, when they would have the mansion all to themselves.

The metamorphosis happened surreptitiously. One day Mamoru came downstairs for breakfast in one of his usual boring outfits and the next none of his roommates recognized him. Kaelan even lowered his newspaper and almost asked “who the hell is this guy?” before it dawned on him. Nicholas did a double-take as Mamoru held out his plate for some eggs and sausage, smiling innocuously. Joe didn’t even notice since he required a few cups of coffee to actually wake up. When Zach joined them after his shower he regarded Mamoru appraisingly. “Nice jeans. Did Usagi pick them out?”

“She helped me buy a whole new wardrobe,” Mamoru answered.

“I bet that cost an arm and a leg,” Nicholas commented. “You get everything at Nordstrom?”

He shook his head. “We went to stores from high-end to low. I had no idea there was so much shopping downtown.”

“That’s cute,” Zach said in mild condescension. “You seriously never noticed all the clothes on your way to visit Usagi?”
“Well, no… I’m usually only focused on her.”

Everyone went “aww” and began teasing Mamoru about his crush on Usagi, which his darkening blush did nothing to refute. “All kidding aside, maybe she shouldn’t be the sole focus of your affections now that you’re rocking a new style.” Zach gesticulated with his cereal spoon in hand. “I mean now that you’re putting yourself out there, you’ll probably get hit on a lot. You look way more approachable than you did before.”

Joe had perked up enough to roll his eyes. “Or maybe people will notice that he has more self-confidence. That’s more attractive than any outfit.”

“The first time you meet someone you judge their appearance. No one’s going to realize how confident Mamoru is until they get to know him, and they’ll want to do that based on how he looks.”

“It’ll be because of the way he carries himself,” Joe countered.

“The clothes make the man,” Zach said.

“The man makes the clothes.”

“Will you two shut it?!” Kaelan’s outburst silenced the kitchen. “No one cares what you wear and why you wear it so long as they can’t see your naked arse.” He went back to his newspaper while Nicholas cleared his throat and resumed cooking. It seemed like they were all arguing over petty things lately.

Joe helped tidy up the kitchen after Mamoru and Zach left for school. He had bags under his eyes despite having downed three cups of coffee. “You don’t look so good, bru,” Nicholas remarked. “You sick or something?”

“No, just tired…” He unintentionally yawned then. “I stay up late working on my research paper, but then my sleep gets interrupted by these crazy dreams. Even though I only have a couple classes my hours changed for the holidays so now I work from two to ten.”

“That’s rough,” Nicholas said, giving him a pat on the back, “but at least you have a job. I still can’t find anything.”

Joe smiled sympathetically. “The only reason Napa hired me was because I know how to drive manuals. Keep an eye out for jobs like that, ones requiring skills you might not consider useful.”

Nicholas considered the advice as he set out for a midmorning jog. He hated running but it was the best way to fend off flab since he could no longer simply walk across campus to spend a few hours at the gym. Two of his classes had been cancelled and Kaelan was at a shareholder meeting for a startup company he’d invested in, leaving him alone at the mansion. He slowed as he approached a bus stop and snagged a schedule, finding a route to downtown Seattle. Then he texted Makoto.

“You don’t have school today, right?”

“Right, but I’m experimenting with syrups since there’s no one here to complain about the smell of burnt sugar.”

“Do you wanna go on a run to the Ballard locks?”

“It’s supposed to rain today.”

Nicholas wasn’t sure if that was a dismissive statement or not. “I’ll bring one of Zach’s jackets for
“Thanks for offering to commandeering stuff for me, but I have my own coat. Do you want to meet somewhere?”

“I’m headed your way now. Be there soon.”

Although Nicholas had never been to the girls’ apartment he knew it was close to Pike Place and got off the bus there, making his way down to the waterfront and finding Makoto waiting out front of the complex. She wore a wrap hoodie and ombre leggings, and Nicholas thought she looked positively gorgeous even though she wasn’t even trying. “So what brought on this idea?” she asked.

“I thought it would be fun to go on an adventure with you,” he replied with a grin. “I haven’t been to the locks yet, and I remembered you didn’t have classes Tuesday or Thursday.”

“I do have work at three, though. It’s ten miles to the locks and back.” She raised an eyebrow. “Can you handle that distance?”

“Oh, of course. I work out all the time.”

Makoto smirked. “Lifting weights doesn’t give you endurance. I hope you can keep up with me.” She set off at a brisk pace but Nicholas’ long strides kept him at her side. The trail was almost abandoned except for the odd roller blader or cyclist who rushed by. While skirting the train yard Makoto took a swig from her water bottle, something Nicholas had neglected to bring because he was only supposed to go on a two-mile run.

“Care to share?” he asked hopefully.

“I don’t want your germs,” she replied. He honestly couldn’t tell if she was joking or not; she was very good at ambiguity. This time Makoto just sighed and surrendered the bottle. After another mile Nicholas started to feel the burn in his legs, but by then they were close enough to the locks to see a few ships lined up. Opposite the canal was a visitor center and botanical garden that wasn’t very picturesque this time of year.

Makoto refilled her water at a fountain, then she and Nicholas stood on the bridge watching boats come and go. She could hear Usagi’s voice in her head telling her that this was an excellent opportunity to get personal, but she couldn’t think of a conversation starter. Nicholas did it for her by making a casual comment. “This is neat. I wish my parents could see it.”

“How are they?” she wondered.

He sighed deeply. “I’m not sure, really. Every time I call they end up badgering me with questions. ‘How are classes? How’s the chow? Do you like your flatmates? Do you have an American girlfriend yet?’ They always ask if I’m going with someone.”

“I’m sure they don’t want you to feel lonely or anything. You’re a long way from home, after all.”

“It’s not quite that— they really wanna become grandparents.” Makoto raised an eyebrow. “They tried having another kid after me but it never happened— they’re the lonely ones. I felt guilty for coming here even though they insisted on it. I’d feel better if I had a little brother or sister to watch over them.” He shook his head. “So yeah, they’re waiting for the day I call to say I knocked up a gal and she’s having my baby.” Makoto just had to laugh. Nicholas’ parents seemed like quirky people; his mother was a bartender at a popular nightclub and his father was a hotel chef. All his culinary knowledge came from them but Nicholas had deliberately channeled his energy into sports, because
what teenager wants to be exactly like their parents? She asked how he went from playing diski and scrum to studying civil engineering.

“I dunno why but I’ve always been good at math and science,” Nicholas explained. “Geometry and physics were my best subjects in school– I nearly flunked everything else. Most teachers gave up on me since I was such an underachiever, but not Mr. Mitcham, my physics teacher. He convinced me to apply for scholarships even though I knew I’d never get into uni. My rents just couldn’t afford it. But Mr. Mitcham wrote me a letter of recommendation, and I explained why I wanted to earn a degree in engineering, and I qualified for a bunch of scholarships in America. I chose UW because it seemed cool even though I was nervous about being so far from my rents.”

Makoto nodded idly. She was numb to the subject of family by now but a stupid thought wriggled into her mind and didn’t leave: what would the Meyers think of her? Would they still want their son to give them grandchildren if she was the one carrying them? A child between her and Nicholas would be a mix of Japanese, Dutch, Welsh and Zulu, but the unique combination might end up creating the most beautiful baby imaginable. ‘Oh god, why am I thinking about having kids with Nicholas? I don’t even like him that much!’ That was a lie. Makoto was very attracted to him yet highly adept at not acknowledging it ever. ‘Why did he have to come here? Why did he have to be at the horticulture fair? Why couldn’t he have helped some other girl carry her plants?!’

Makoto whirled around to start the long jog home, running up a hill covered in exposed tree roots. “Hey, wait up!” Nicholas called, and that only prompted her to run faster. She wasn’t really paying attention to the terrain until one of her feet wedged itself beneath an arched root, transferring all her moment toward the ground with a single gasp. But Makoto landed on an arm instead, a strong muscular arm attached to the rest of Nicholas. “That was close. You okay?”

“I think so. My foot just…” She dislodged it and instantly felt a sharp pain travel up her leg, informing her that she had most likely twisted her ankle. Nicholas saw her wince and carefully lowered her sock, seeing the area already beginning to swell.

“Guess who’s not walking back?”

Makoto groaned. “Whittle me a crutch or something, but please don’t carry me. I’m not a baby.”

Nicholas scoffed. Before she could protest he flexed and gathered her up, and she clung to his neck at the sudden height difference. “I know you’re not a baby, but I’m not going to let you hurt yourself even more.”

“Fine…” she groused. This was turning out to be one stupid day. If she hadn’t answered his text message she wouldn’t be in this position right now. Stupid Nicholas. Stupid Ballard. Stupid tree. Makoto felt a drop of water on her forehead. “That better not be rain!” she pleaded. “Could this day get any worse?!”

“It’s not that bad. I’m still having fun.” Nicholas moved his fingers near her underarm and she released a shriek of laughter before attempting to fling herself from his hold.

“You jerk! Put me down right now!”

“Sorry,” he chuckled, “didn’t know you were so ticklish. I won’t do it again, promise.”

Makoto internally fumed before sighing in resignation. Upon arriving at the bus stop near the entrance to the garden they learned it only ran during the summer. She said nothing while Nicholas gently lowered her, then withdrew his phone to ask Kaelan for a ride. The Maserati arrived and quickly brought Makoto home; she didn’t protest as Nicholas carried her up the stairs. She hobbled
into the bathroom for a gauze wrap which the boy promptly plucked from her hand. “I can handle my own wounds. You’ve done enough for me already.” She didn’t mean to sound scathing but he looked guilty nonetheless.

“She’s my girlfriend.”

“Please, let me. I know this is all my fault. I should’ve done my typical route and gone home, not roped you into an excursion.” Makoto said nothing as he removed her shoes and socks. He secured the end of the wrap and tested her foot for flexibility; it had to be rigid but not immovable. Satisfied, Nicholas watched while she stood up and limped around the living room. “You still going to work?”

She nodded. “Yeah. I can’t afford not to.”

“I see.” He took in his posh surroundings. The only thing that made this apartment so expensive was the view, otherwise Makoto could afford to rest. He didn’t want her to take the bus since she could trip on the steps or someone’s luggage, but if he voiced these concerns she’d think he was babying her. She wasn’t weak, not by any means, but Makoto didn’t know when to ask for help. Nicholas wished she knew she could depend on him.

Zach had been right: several people Mamoru didn’t even know made passes at him throughout the day. The first was a girl from his lab group. The second was a girl training to become an RN. At lunch a boy channeling his inner K-pop star came up to Mamoru’s table with a few friends in tow and made a rather bold proclamation. With his face aflame Mamoru explained that he wasn’t attracted to men, hoping not to offend. The boys only shrugged and left. At the end of the day a senior girl approached him in the parking garage and asked about his car, leaving him with a business card for a European performance shop and her number.

‘Was it really because of the way I looked?’ Mamoru wondered during the drive home. No, it had to have been his countenance and body language. People could dress exuberantly and still be introverted; they weren’t calling attention to themselves, they just wore what they found comfortable. Mamoru felt assured in his own skin and now the world could see it as well.

He greeted Nicholas and Kaelan before heading up to his room and was struck by its starkness for the first time. ‘Usagi would hate it,’ he immediately thought. His old apartment in Radford Court had been just as sparse, completely lacking personality. Mamoru suddenly detested his monochromatic surroundings. He dropped his bag by the door and pulled the bedding off his mattress with a ferocity he hadn’t known he possessed. He emptied his nightstand, a steel box with wheels, and pushed it into the hall. After clearing the bookshelf he banished it from his room as well. Now it really looked empty. He didn’t have any posters or art on the walls, no silly knick-knacks or personal treasures, nothing that indicated Chiba Mamoru lived here. Like he didn’t live at all.

“Hey,” said a voice that startled him. Kaelan stood at the threshold. “If I ask you something, will you tell me the truth?” Mamoru blinked away his anger and nodded. “Are you changing for yourself or for Usagi?”

“What do you mean?”

Kaelan folded his arms. “I mean what I say. Are you making all these changes because you want them to happen or because you think it’s what Usagi wants?”

Mamoru was struck with a slight sinking feeling. “I… I don’t know.” What had compelled Usagi to talk to him at Amabie? Did she view him as a pet project, a doll to play dress-up with? All she had to do was flash that pretty smile and bat those pretty eyes, and it worked on him because he was a pathetic loser who just wanted to feel like he mattered to someone for any reason. “Do you think she’s just using me?” he muttered.
“Do you feel used?” Kaelan returned.

Generally people who manipulated others did it to crush their spirit, but Mamoru felt so strong now. He shook his head. “No, I don’t. I think she wanted me to better myself. She gave me the confidence to go after what I want.”

Kaelan nodded in acceptance. “Then maybe I was wrong about her. I just don’t want to watch you get hurt. You guys are like the little brothers I never had. I care about you.” He half-smiled before slapping Mamoru on the arm and leaving, then the blue-eyed boy refocused on his room.

‘This isn’t me,’ he thought. ‘I hate it.’
“Well, it’s a good thing we dressed warmly.” Joe turned his head every-which-way so as not to run into any of the people trudging up the snowy road. “I didn’t think this many Americans were into rally.”

“They’re not, to be fair,” Michiru said from the passenger seat. “Most of these people are the drivers’ team members and hardcore fans.”

Joe felt like such a novice compared to Michiru. She’d given their fellow passengers, Makoto and Nicholas, a brief overview of the event, teaching him a few things in the process. The Cascade Run was the antepenultimate stage in the North Fire Rally which consisted of eleven courses in various countries. The regional competition was only open to residents of Washington, Idaho, Oregon and California as means to appeal to more American drivers. The international competition was much more cutthroat since teams could earn sponsorships from many auto-related companies if they were skilled enough. Michiru said the fiercest rivalry existed between Subaru and Mitsubishi, and the teams representing them occupied first and second place overall.

They came upon pockets of tents and trailers as they continued up the mountain to the main site. There were no parking spaces to be found so Joe drove the Samurai onto a snow pile and they hopped out. He directed Rei, who had also driven, onto another mound her Acura couldn’t have handled without tire chains. Everyone loaded up on hot beverages and food before perusing the vendors and team booths, a source of much geeking-out. “I thought you said this was nothing to get excited about,” Mina teased, nudging Kaelan. “You said it was just sanctioned speeding.”

“Yeah, well…” He rubbed the back of his neck and avoided her gaze. “I appreciate well-built machines. My car wasn’t made for this kind of thing.”

“And what car would that be?” asked a voice no one recognized. It belonged to a tall, thin man in a driver’s jumpsuit. His eyes were hidden behind a pair of sleek sunglasses and his hair was very pale blond in color, like tropical sand. He leaned on the Mitsubishi Evolution they’d been admiring, tilting his head inquiringly.

Kaelan audibly gulped. “I have… a… Maserati MC Stradale.”

The racer nodded his approval. “You’re right, a car like that is more suited for GT than rally.” He smiled a little, then raised his glasses. “Hello, Michiru.”

Everyone gasped and looked to the violinist as she visibly tensed. “Haruka. I see you’re doing well.”

“Haruka?” Usagi repeated in disbelief. “You mean he’s a girl?”

Michiru only nodded. Haruka smirked before approaching her, the group instinctively parting. She was more androgynous than Zach; not even her tone of voice belied her gender and her nearly six-foot stature was enhanced by her willowy frame. Her smile turned frosty as she looked down on Michiru with a hint of contempt in her steel blue eyes. “What are you doing here?”

“My friends wanted to watch the rally,” Michiru replied.

“But not you,” she said scathingly.

“I wasn’t expecting to see you in person.”
Haruka glared and leaned forward until their noses were almost touching. “I wasn’t expecting to see you ever again.” She began to say more, but someone called her name through a megaphone and she left with a scoff.

Nicholas waited a few seconds before asking “what was that about?” since their exchange had been in Japanese.

Makoto made the connection. “High-end cars… Is she the one who taught you to drive?” Michiru gave a tiny nod. “You knew her in high school?”

She sighed deeply. “Haruka was a track and field star at Mugen Academy. She was a natural given her build, and she broke a lot of records. We became friends in music class because she also played piano, but after school she’d head to a garage to work on cars. She loved racing more than anything. During our second year she was approached by a company who wanted to sponsor her. She said I should support her if I loved her, but I couldn’t bear the thought of losing her in a wreck. I told her that if she really loved me, she wouldn’t do it because it was too dangerous.” Michiru’s gaze fell to the dirt.

“I guess she chose cars over you,” Mina remarked.

“I understood why– it was so selfish of me to give her an ultimatum. Haruka dropped out of high school to focus on racing. She won three Junior World Rally Championships in a row and she’s moving up to the main event next year. A lot of people are watching her in North Fire to see if she really has a chance at a WRC trophy.”

“And you know all this because you’ve been following her career,” Joe deduced. Michiru ducked her chin again. “We don’t have to stay if you don’t want to.”

She tutted at that. “I’m not going to make all of you leave just because I have history with one of the competitors. Let’s go find a good vantage point.” The eight of them returned to their vehicles and proceeded upward to a scenic pull-off. They could see about half the course winding through the little valley. Cars disappeared at the top of the foothill, followed a logging road down through the forest, then crossed a shallow flooded section of the Skykomish River. Although that segment was out of sight, they heard cheering mixed with exhaust rumbles and engine roars before the cars came hurtling by.

It only took about fifteen minutes for a driver in the amateur division to lose control after drifting around the corner. He slid off the road and his rear bumper was ripped off by a tree, sending chunks of fiberglass everywhere. “Eina!” Nicholas exclaimed, “That was brutal!” Michiru gave him a look that said he hadn’t seen anything yet. A few more cars lost fenders and front bumpers to the trees near the road, but then came a Volkswagen Golf that overcorrected and ended up rolling twice before coming to a stop on its roof. Joe hopped the guardrail and ran down to help. Kaelan, Nicholas, and Makoto followed, the four of them managing to flip the car over. The team was perfectly fine and their VW even started again. The men gave them a thumbs-up before speeding off to the finish line as if the crash hadn’t happened.

Rei regarded Joe admiringly when he returned. “How can they just keep going after wrecking like that?”

“Old cars have a lot more structural integrity than new ones. Steel is better than aluminum in terms of rigidity,” he explained. “With some reinforcements you can roll and be okay as long as you didn’t have too much momentum.”

“Now I understand what Michiru was worried about,” she muttered. Joe put an arm around her
shoulder and squeezed reassuringly. They were unlikely to witness any horrific accidents today, especially not with the professional heats beginning. The person in last place got to go first, doing three laps and contributing the best time toward his overall score. There were only a few female drivers, Haruka included, but many teams had female navigators. More people migrated to their viewpoint, team members on standby or fans who came from all over the Pacific: Malaysia, the Philippines, China, Russia, Canada, Mexico, and as far as Santiago, Chile, host of the final stage. Even though it was called the North Fire Rally the southern hemisphere was properly included.

Via portable TVs they were able to see the action on the opposite side of the mountain, thus they witnessed the driver in fifth place leave the road as he whipped around the corner at the summit. There was a moment of collective stillness followed by exclamations as the car began sliding down the hillside. Luckily it didn’t roll and the descent was halted by a stately tree about fifty feet down. “What a harrowing experience for driver Justin Rivera! He isn’t used to this kind of terrain!” the commentator said. “It’s going to be tricky getting the winch down there to pull him back up.”

“They should use your rig,” commented a fellow Russian, a man from Magadan.

“If I’d known about the rally beforehand I would have signed up as a volunteer,” Joe replied. Although she had no idea what they were discussing Rei listened to their conversation. It was such a useful skill, being a polyglot. Joe could have easily become a translator, or perhaps even an ambassador, yet he had chosen to commune with nature instead of people.

As the contestants in fourth and third completed their laps the crowd grew increasingly excited, breaking into a loud cheer when the video feed showed Haruka putting on her helmet and settling into the driver’s seat. The Evolution had a white and light blue color scheme and was peppered with sponsor stickers, including a red triple diamond graphic to let the world know which manufacturer she represented. “What’s that symbol on her helmet mean?” Nicholas inquired.

“It’s the kanji for ‘sky’,” Michiru answered. “Her family name, Tenou, means ‘sky king’.”

That sounded pretty auspicious to him. He wanted to ask what the other girls’ names meant but everyone was focused on Haruka. She tore up the mountain, making it look easy as she effortlessly drifted each corner to maintain her speed. “How is she doing so good when so many others had issues?” Usagi wondered.

Michiru turned to reply. “Each driver gets a couple practice runs. They usually go slow to look for problematic areas of the course such as hard turns, dips, and abrupt shoulders while the navigator makes notes and speed recommendations. The faster you go during practice, the faster you can go during the actual time attack.”

A great cheer arose when Haruka splashed through the river and another greeted her on the straightaway as she entered fifth gear, the Evo sending up enough powdery snow to dust the spectators. “She did that lap in just over five minutes!” someone shouted, prompting a fresh round of applause.

Upon crossing the river a second time Haruka’s lips curved into a confident smile. She was going to knock Team Subaru out of first place; there was no way they’d be able to match her times. She owned this course. “Let her fly,” said her navigator, a man several years her senior. By the third lap Haruka was virtually on auto-pilot, handling her Evo with muscle memory. She traversed the river for the final time, devouring the long straightaway as she ascended through the gears. 130 kph… 137… She hit 145 when the unthinkable happened.

Most of the spectators were looking off to the right toward Haruka, but a glint from the tree line drew
Usagi’s attention. The Evo’s rumble almost drowned out the loud snap that followed. She only heard it because the moonstone sent a brief surge of energy through her body, amplifying all her senses for just one second. Time seemed to slow down as she watched a crack spread across the trunk, then the tree began falling toward her. It was going to land across the road right in Haruka’s path and there was nothing anyone could do about it.

The huge evergreen came crashing down a mere twenty feet from the front of the Evo. Without really thinking Haruka practically stood on the clutch and brake pedals, shifted into neutral, and wrenched the steering wheel hard to the left. Thick branches acted like a ramp that carried the car up and over the main bulk of the tree, limbs snapping as the Evo crashed through them with its impressive momentum. At some point the car began to invert, rolling in air a couple times until landing on its tires, bouncing, skidding, finally coming to a stop as smoke billowed from the hood and warped metal groaned.

Nobody moved. They were in shock of what they just witnessed, a freak accident that had to have claimed the lives of Tenou Haruka and her navigator Sasaki Katsuro. The wail of a siren drew near, prompting most of the spectators into action; they raced down to the car, finding Katsuro conscious. He tried getting the seat harness off Haruka while her team members tugged on the door. It was her side that hit the branches, shattering the windows in the process. The roof had collapsed around her helmet and a section of reinforcement tubing had broken at the weld and impaled her leg just above the knee.

Usagi and Kaelan stood like statues, taking no notice of the clamor surrounding them. Mina began sobbing, positive she’d just seen someone die. Rei managed to start breathing again and realized Haruka’s indigo aura hadn’t disappeared but was tinged with black and flickered weakly. The racer was deeply unconscious and in tremendous pain, but at least she was alive.

Michiru couldn’t bring herself to move, to neither climb over the guardrail for one last glimpse of Haruka nor turn away from the horrible scene altogether. She just held the barrier in a death grip, her visage as white as the snow beneath her feet.

“So basically the Divine Comedy is self-insert fan fiction. Dante gets to hang out in heaven with his favorite poet and ideal woman while all his flamers are trapped in purgatory or hell.”

“It’s simply his thoughts on religion of the time,” Ami said with a sigh.

Zach scoffed. “It’s way less profound than that. Dante probably pissed off someone in the church and then wrote this to tell everyone how awesome he is, ‘cause even God forgives him in the end. He probably couldn’t handle the critique.”

“I suppose you could make a case for him lusting over Beatrice. She was a real person, you know.” Zach nodded vigorously, making notes out of their discussion. “Perhaps he felt he would be condemned for his covetousness unless someone thought his soul was worth saving.”

“See? Dante was totally trying to talk himself up. He just wrote all that allegorical crap to convince them how devoted he was with all his philosophizing.”

“It’s your paper so you can argue whatever you want. You just have to be able to support it.” A pause. “Is ‘philosophizing’ even proper English?”

“Yes, it’s the verb form.” After saving his notes and closing the laptop, Zach spun in his chair to face Ami. “Now that the work is done, I think it’s time for play.” His suggestive eyebrow-waggle earned a laugh as they headed downstairs to the kitchen. Zach was taking it upon himself to make lunch.
“What are we having?” Ami asked. She claimed one of the bar stools and folded her hands politely.

“Muffuletta!” he exclaimed, pulling exotic-looking ingredients from the fridge. “These are a true New Orleans original invented by Italian immigrants. We have Genoa salami, capicola ham, mozzarella, olive salad, and herbed mayo on focaccia bread.”

Ami had never heard of most of those things and was somewhat apprehensive about how the sandwich would taste. After setting it before her Zach smiled expectantly. ‘It would be rude not to sample his culture,’ she thought, taking a dainty bite. Her face lit up as the savory ingredients danced across her tongue, and Zach nodded his satisfaction before digging into his own meal.

After lunch they went swimming at Ami’s behest. “I think you and Mamoru are the only ones who really uses this thing,” Zach said while retracting the pool cover. “If you need to change afterward I suppose I can loan you something of mine again.” Not that he really minded Ami wearing his clothes.

She smiled. “That’s okay, I came prepared this time.”

Zach watched in fascination as she pulled off the baggy sweater to reveal her sylphlike body crisscrossed with white straps, and he actually held his breath while she stepped out of her jeans. “Ami…” he stammered, “you’re wearing an Herve Leger bandage monokini.”

She glanced down at herself. “Oh, it’s designer? I had no idea. Last year Minako gave it to me at school when we were invited to a pool party. She said I couldn’t wear my swim team suit.”

‘Thank god for Mina.’ “You really look like a model.”

Ami waved off the compliment. “I do not, I’m too petite. Makoto is much better suited for modeling.”

“I don’t know about that.” She directed a shy look over her shoulder before diving gracefully into the deep end.

Zach freed his bottom lip from his teeth while releasing a whoosh of air and some pent-up desire with it. If he wanted to maintain the charade he had to act like he wasn’t sexually attracted to Ami, like he didn’t want to strip off all his clothes, get in the pool, pin her against the wall and kiss her senseless. But it was so difficult not to go to her when she kept doing things he found endearing and attractive, especially since she was only being herself. Zach sighed and fetched his sketchbook, drawing more costume concepts for The Last Heart. He managed to stay focused on the paper until realizing his croquis had grown to resemble Ami; evidently he’d been using her likeness since September. “Shit…” he groaned, “I’m hopeless.”

“What’s wrong?” Ami inquired. Zach popped up to find her resting on the edge of the pool. With her hair swept back, water droplets clinging to her skin, and eyes wide with curiosity, she resembled a mermaid.

“Don’t move!” He snatched up his materials and began sketching before Ami even furrowed her brow. “Don’t frown,” he said, “give me that questioning look again, like you’ve never seen a human before. Study me. Philosophize.”

She scoffed slightly. “Are you drawing me?” Zach only nodded so she sighed and rested her chin on her forearms, her head listing to one side. Several minutes went by before she spoke again. “Do I get to see my portrait?”

“No,” he answered non-antagonistically, “this is reference material. This is the expression I want
“Amalthea to have when she becomes human, when she realizes she has hands instead of hooves.”

“Anything for the show, I suppose.” Ami only had to wait another few minutes for Zach to close his sketchbook triumphantly. He then stood, stretched, and put his hands on his hips as she pushed off the wall and drifted to the center of the pool. “Are you coming in?”

Oh god, now she was inviting him into the water with her. ‘Stay strong, Zacharie!’ “Mm, not today. My delicate skin doesn’t like the new treatment Kaelan got.” Ami quirked an amused eyebrow. “If you dry off we can watch this sixties revenge film I found called La Mariée Était en Noir. I think you’ll like it.”

“Well, you do have somewhat good taste.” Ami practically saw his ego inflate. She got out, grabbed a towel, and made her way to the guest bathroom, Zach following with her dry clothes in hand. She turned on the shower and pawed through a basket of travel-sized soaps and conditioners, casting a glance at the boy who leaned in the doorway with an expression on his face that made her heart skip a beat. Did he really think she had that much artistic merit? “A lady needs her privacy, Zacharie.”

He blinked in surprise. “Oh, sorry. I’ll be going.” He started to, but stopped and turned back. “Should we watch the movie in the den or in my room?”

“Your bed is little more comfy than the couch,” Ami answered.

Zach let slip a sly grin at that. “I’m glad you think so.”

Kaelan paused with his hand on the door to look back at the procession of his ashen-faced friends. He could hardly blame them; having a front-row view of someone’s life potentially being snuffed out by a freak accident was justifiably traumatic. Usagi and Michiru had gone to the hospital to look after Haruka so it was just the six of them returning. He was flattered that the girls thought of his home as a safe haven and didn’t object when they asked to spend the rest of the day there. “We’re back!” he called out as they removed coats and boots, receiving no answer.

Joe, Nicholas, Rei and Makoto went into the kitchen for tea while Kaelan and Mina headed upstairs. The former paused at the landing, staring at the closed door to Zach’s bedroom as Mina grabbed his arm. “Did I just hear what I think I heard?” she asked.

“If it was your best friend giggling in my depraved tenant’s lair, then yes.” Kaelan barged into the room upon receiving a nod from Mina.

They were lying beside one another on the bed, thankfully fully-clothed. Zach shot a scowl over his shoulder. “Can I help you?”

“What are you getting up to in here?” Kaelan demanded.

He held out a hand toward his TV. “Watching a movie, obviously.” Zach’s hazel eyes darted to Mina as she folded her arms, then his irritated expression transformed into a semi-lurid one. “Ami and I were very productive today. After we had lunch she got a little wet in the pool, then we moved things to the bedroom.”

The innuendo went right over Ami’s head. “We’ve been watching foreign films for the past few hours! Some of them were really good.”

“They weren’t.” Mina drawled in Japanese.

Ami shrugged. “I didn’t really want to.” Her head tilted owlishly. “Why do you sound so worried?”
“Um, hello!” Mina waved, “You’re alone with Zach on his bed! Last time I checked you hated him for constantly trying to get in your pants!”

Ami laughed off her concern. “That was before I—” She stopped abruptly. “He’s not going to try anything with me, Mina-chan.”

Dumbfounded, the blonde simply spun around and strode down the hall to Kaelan’s room. He unlocked the door and she flopped onto the duvet in a daze. “Was I just hallucinating the past three months? Have they always been getting along and I never noticed it before?”

“No, something has certainly changed between them,” he replied while shedding layers of clothes.

“I have no idea what happened! Ami has never even been interested in anyone. I thought she was asexual!” She threw an arm over her face and sighed in exasperation. “After everything that’s happened today this is almost too much. What if Zach, like, brainwashed her?” A few hangers clanked before footsteps came to a stop in front of her. Mina smiled as her socks were pulled off and her jeans unbuttoned.

“Zach is clever, I’ll admit, but Ami is much too smart to fall for any tricks of his.” Kaelan’s lips alighted below her navel.

“Are you trying to distract me from everything?” Mina asked.

“Yeah. Is it working?” He kissed a little lower, just above her lacy blue panties.

“Mmm… not yet.”

“Then I think you need to join me in the shower.”

Mina didn’t object. By now Kaelan knew exactly what it took to send her over the edge into ecstasy, and he usually did it expeditiously so she could get there multiple times a night, but for some reason he was being very slow and gentle. He pushed her up against the tiled wall, letting hot water run down his back while kissing nothing but her lips and neck. She moaned his name in the tone that meant “take me now” but he still didn’t give her anything more than soft kisses. When the heat began to fade he turned off the shower, leaving her aching with want while he dried and returned to the bedroom. ‘Why is he being so weird?’ Mina wondered. She toweled off and vaulted the bed just before he reached the closet, barring access. “You’re not getting dressed any time soon, Kaelan Burke,” she declared.

“And you’re going to stop me?” he lowly returned. As an answer Mina shoved him onto the bed, straddling him before he could move otherwise. She grabbed his hands and held them above his head, kissed him fiercely and felt him smiling at how badly she wanted him. If Kaelan was just trying to rile her up he succeeded, but he certainly wasn’t getting away with it. Mina knew his weaknesses, what it took to make him moan her name in desperation. Despite the power he held he gladly got on his knees for her.

At some point Kaelan turned the tables, ravaging Mina to the point of exhaustion. She fell asleep on his chest, breath cooling his sweat-drenched skin. He knew he should also try getting some sleep, especially after making senseless love with her for hours on end, but there was too much on his mind. It was mostly thoughts about her, about this, whatever it was. Zach called them fuck buddies but Kaelan didn’t think it was that simple. He was starting to feel something for Mina other than desire, wanted more from her besides sex.

He didn’t know where to go from here since they’d flown over all the proper steps to this point. He
wished it were possible to go back in time and take things slowly, discover more about Mina besides her body. Having a conversation with her was surprisingly easy because she had opinions on everything, but he honestly didn’t know that much about her. She never talked about her family or what life was like in Japan while he prattled on about Kinsale all the time. He knew about her hobbies but not why she liked them, what she had real passion for. ‘Why won’t she get close to me?’ Kaelan wondered. That was what he’d been testing in the shower. He kissed Mina like she was the only one he ever wanted to be intimate with again but she still only felt him on the surface. If there was nothing beyond that, no depth to their relationship, then maybe it was time to swim away.

Mina stirred, groaning softly while peeling her face off Kaelan’s chest. He was sitting up slightly, supported by two pillows as he lay with his hands locked behind his head, and he wore an utterly blank expression. “What’s wrong?” she inquired, running a finger from the hollow of his throat down his abdomen. His muscles twitched beneath her feather-light touch.

“Mina…” he said, and the flat tone of his voice instantly alerted her to what was coming. “I don’t think we should do this anymore.”

“Do what?”

Kaelan waved a hand around. “This, me and you fucking. It’s stupid.”

She frowned. “You didn’t think it was stupid earlier.”

“Well, I thought about it…” Mina didn’t even wait for him to finish speaking. She could tell by his body language that their time together was over, and she wasn’t going to wait around to be on the receiving end of empty excuses or condescending remarks. She turned over, taking the blanket with her as she began hunting down her clothes. “Ack, Mina…” Kaelan covered himself with a pillow. “Hold on, you don’t have to go. Just hear me out.”

“I know what you’re going to say,” she tersely replied. “It’s been fun but you’re bored now, or you met someone you really care about, or I’m just not the right girl, or you need some time to yourself. I’ve heard it all a dozen times.”

“I wasn’t going to say any of those things!” Kaelan floundered for a grasp on the situation but could clearly see Mina slipping further and further away. “I just meant that I want to take a break from the sex and get to know you, the real you!”

She gave him a withering look. “What would be the point of that, Kaelan? The only reason men pretend to be interested on a ‘deep’ level is so they have a better chance at getting laid, but you already got that from me. I’m not stupid or desperate. I know when I’m no longer wanted.” The frigidity in her gaze actually made him shudder. “For the record, you didn’t mean anything to me either.”

“Mina, wait!” Kaelan reached the door just as it closed in his face, leaving him in very profound silence. A tiny voice screamed at him to chase after her. His words had triggered assumptions in Mina he had no idea she even possessed and that alone meant pursuit would be futile. He touched his forehead to the door. It felt like cold stone instead of warm mahogany.

Kaelan didn’t want to let Mina go. Since the wrong words had broken their relationship, perhaps the right ones could mend it. He need only seek them out.
“Mm… Michiru?”

“Sorry, it’s only me.”

Haruka slowly brought her surroundings into focus. She was in a hospital room. Her body was weighed down with bricks and her eyes seemed to glide in their sockets. She looked to the right and saw who had spoken. “Katsuro.”

“There are a lot of drugs in your system right now,” the man explained. “Don’t try moving too fast.”

Haruka laughed; it came out as an uncharacteristic giggle. “I bet the car’s ruined, huh?” Katsuro nodded. “You okay?”

“I suffered some bruises. But you…” His dark eyes fell to her leg where she found a thigh-length cast enveloping it.

“There goes the season,” she sighed, “and probably next season too, huh?”

Katsuro steepled his fingers. “Most likely. Depending on how you recover you might need physical therapy, but luckily you got hurt in a city with great medical care.”

“So they don’t want me flying home?” He nodded again and Haruka shrugged. “It’s not like I had anyone to go back to.” She sighed, staring up at the ceiling. “How’s the crew?”

“Worried about you, of course. They wanted to leave flowers but the doctor didn’t want them cluttering up the room.”

“Flowers just wilt and die, anyway.” Haruka looked at her navigator again. “I’m sorry, Katsu. If we’d been further away from the tree neither of us would have gotten hurt.”

He raised an eyebrow. “So you’re taking the blame for Mother Nature?”

“Umm… yes?”

“Your quick reaction saved both of us, Haruka.” Katsuro placed his hand atop her own. “If you hadn’t turned us sideways we would have crashed head-on.”

Haruka hummed thoughtfully. “I bet the footage looked really awesome, huh? Even better since we were both able to walk away.” She cackled as Katsuro shook his head at her drug-induced sense of humor.

“Get some rest, you crazy kid.” He gave Haruka a profound smile, grateful that their accident hadn’t taken away his ability to see his wife and three children again.

After a few minutes Haruka sighed despondently; it was too quiet in the hospital. Even the beeps and whirrs of the machines seemed muted, and there was no thrum from the rain outside. She wondered if she’d sustained some kind of trauma to her eardrum. Maybe it was just a side-effect of the morphine, which she’d never had before. A different sense informed her that someone was coming and she faced the door just as the person stepped into the room. “Michiru. So it wasn’t a dream.”

Michiru tucked a strand of wavy dark hair behind her ear, her expression a combination of relief and embarrassment. “I’m so glad you’re alive,” she said in a small voice.
Haruka couldn’t quite bear the look and stared out the window. “Well, go on. Say ‘I told you so’.”

“I would never.” She sat down in Katsuro’s chair, knotting her fingers. “I will say I’m sorry, though. I’m sorry I didn’t believe in you.”

“Right now I don’t believe in myself much, either,” Haruka flatly remarked.

Michiru instantly reached for her right hand. “Don’t say that! You’ve worked so hard to get where you are. What happened today was nothing more than a fluke!”

Haruka turned toward her. “How do you know I’ve been working hard?”

“I kept an eye on you, obviously.” Michiru tutted before shyly meeting her gaze. “I’ve been watching since you dropped out of Mugen.”

“Oh really? Then you know this wasn’t my first wreck.”

“It was definitely your worst, though,” she replied. “Much scarier than when you went off the road in Nanjing last year.”

The memory made Haruka smile. “It looked way worse than it was.”

“Well, this wreck was just as bad as it looked.” Michiru withdrew her hand, clenching it. “I was so scared I couldn’t move. Most of my friends ran down to your car but I just stood there uselessly. I couldn’t bring myself to go to you, because if you really were dead…” A single tear rolled down her cheek. “I felt so much regret for letting things end the way they did, for never getting the chance to apologize. What would be the point in asking forgiveness from a corpse?”

“You have nothing to apologize for, Michiru.” Haruka finally steeled herself to look her in the eye. “Your concern for me was valid, and still is. I felt invincible back then. Even now I feel like I can’t really acknowledge this injury, because if I do it means I won’t be able to race next year.” Her countenance dimmed. “But I guess I have to grow up and face the truth. I’m not indestructible and I’m not as good as I think I am. It really hurts to admit those things.”

“But the fact that you can shows you’ve changed since high school.” Michiru tilted her head a bit. “The doctors told me you have a long recovery ahead, and since you’ll be in Seattle all that time… it’d really mean a lot to me if you could come to my concert in December.”

Haruka half-smiled while raising an eyebrow. Her ex had become so bashful in the three years they hadn’t seen each another. “You know I love listening to you play, Michiru. That’s one thing that hasn’t changed since high school.”

“I’m glad to hear it.” Her cheeks were beginning to flush. “The concert is called ‘The Spirit of Yule’. I’ll be performing at Benaroya Hall with the Seattle Symphony Orchestra on December twentieth.”

“I promise to be there even if I have to drive myself in a wheelchair.” They shared a laugh and conversed until a nurse came in, commenting on the glimmer in Haruka’s eye. It was that kind of spark, she said, that helped people heal quicker.

Mamoru had arrived at the hospital not long after Usagi and Michiru caught a ride with one of Haruka’s crew members. He found them in a sitting area with tears in their eyes. “I heard there was a bad accident at the rally. What happened?”

Usagi wiped her cheeks and breathed deeply, but her voice still quavered. “A tree almost fell on one
of the drivers, Tenou Haruka. Her car kind of... rolled over it. At the very least she has a concussion and broken femur so she’s in the ICU.”

“But why did you two come to the hospital with her?” As an answer Usagi looked at Michiru. Mamoru made the same deduction Makoto had: Haruka was the source of her automotive interests. He sat down with them until Haruka’s navigator, Sasaki Katsuro, told them she’d been moved to a recovery room. By then it was quite late in the day; Usagi kept urging Michiru to go see Haruka at the very least, but she was too conflicted.

Usagi stood up to stretch and winced as her stomach growled. “I’m going to get something to eat, Mamo-chan. Can you stay with Michiru?” The boy nodded and she began following signs to the cafeteria. While rounding a corner on the third floor she bumped into someone, releasing a surprised gasp as hands reached out to steady her. “Nia!” she exclaimed.

The tall girl smiled down at her. “I was hoping to find you here. Come with me, if you don’t mind.” She led Usagi into a silent alcove. “What happened to Haruka was no accident. The dark ones were targeting her.”

“So Haruka’s a guardian.” Usagi removed the remaining amulets from her purse. “Which one?”

“That is something for you to feel. You’ll have to get close to her.” Nia then leaned against the window with a sigh. “I am sorry I could not stop them. It was very difficult tracking them through the wilderness. The weather is harsh in the Cascade Mountains.”

“It’s okay, Nia,” Usagi reassured. “You managed to save Ami and Minako-chan, so I’m thankful for that.” She looked at the gemstones again. “That means there are only three guardians left. I promise I’ll find them before anyone else gets hurt. Mamo-chan said he might be able to help me.”

“How so?” Nia queried.

“Well, he said that he’s been having strange dreams lately and he feels like the people from his dreams exist in reality.” Deep brown eyes widened at that. “He said he can sense them, kind of...” But wouldn’t he have been drawn to Haruka in that case?”

“Not necessarily. She was overseas until coming here for the rally.” She put a finger to her lips. “The barrier encompassing the five of them... Could it be possible?” Usagi tilted her head inquiringly. “It may be too early to tell what their exact roles are, but I would venture to guess that they are involved in this plot as well.” Nia squared her shoulders. “If Mamoru has offered to help you locate the remaining guardians, take advantage of him. All will become crystal clear once they are found. For now, return to Haruka. Her dreams should be unveiled once she has an amulet in her possession.”

They parted ways. Usagi went back to check on Michiru and Mamoru, all notions of filling her stomach gone. To her surprise she discovered the boy sitting alone in the lobby. “Haruka’s awake. Michiru went to speak with her,” he explained. “Nicholas also texted that he and Makoto will have spaghetti waiting when we get back, if you want to have dinner with everyone.”

Usagi beamed. “That sounds nice.” She went to collect Michiru, entering the room as quietly as possible. Haruka’s eyes were closing as she succumbed to her painkillers, so Usagi stealthily slipped the amethyst necklace into her left hand and closed her fingers over it. “I hope this helps,” she whispered.

Kaelan pulled into the visitor parking lot at UW, receiving intrigued glances as he exited his vehicle. There were convenient signs all over campus so it was relatively simple to locate Hansee Hall and
even easier to find the room since there were name plaques outside each. He smiled when Ami greeted him, though she looked flustered at the fact that he’d caught her in lounge attire and not one of her usual polished outfits. “Have I come at a bad time?” Kaelan inquired.

“No, I just… umm… It’s just me here, you know. Mina is in class.”

“I know. I wanted to talk to you.” Ami hesitated before stepping aside to let him in. Their room seemed rather spacious; there was a full-size bed against each wall and a wide window between them. Each girl had a desk and shelves, and they appeared to share a closet. The décor was an odd mixture of modern minimalism and color à la Lisa Frank. “I made a mistake,” Kaelan said. “I mucked up things with Mina pretty well.”

Ami had guessed as much. Yesterday her friend came downstairs and immediately asked Rei to take her back to UW. Everyone asked what was wrong but she didn’t say anything, but with Ami she didn’t need to. She could read people, especially Mina, as easily as she read and analyzed books. “I can’t help you win her back, if that’s what you were hoping.”

“I know that’s for me to do on my own. I just want to understand where her assumptions come from.”

“Well, what did you say?”

Kaelan licked his lips. “That I wanted to stop hooking up and get to know her better.”

The girl nodded sagely. “I see.” She patted the foot of her bed, leaning against the headboard while Kaelan sat down. “Minako-chan truly is one in a million where we’re from. We met in our first year of high school. We had both swam in junior high and made the swim team, but as soon as the season began her grades started slipping. The older girls didn’t have time to tutor her so I offered, and that’s how we became friends. Now, I had no idea that Mina had established a bit of a reputation. She was that girl who always had a boyfriend, jumping from one to the next as soon as she got bored of them, and everybody thought she was a gyaru because of her hair and eye colors. Gyaru are perceived as somewhat vapid and promiscuous by society so it wasn’t a good association for her. From what I learned, Mina was just very confident in herself. I think most people were jealous of that confidence so they belittled her to make themselves feel better. It seemed like nothing fazed her, that all the rumors and mean remarks just slid off her, but then I noticed that people were talking about me, too.

No one could understand why a girl like me would voluntarily hang out with Mina.”

Kaelan could picture it easily. They were total opposites now so the contrast must have been even more severe when they were establishing identities in high school. “But no one said the same things about you that they did Mina,” he deduced.

Ami nodded. “Right, she was the target of all the bullying. After the swim team made it to nationals she told me that if we won it would give her the courage to profess her feelings to the most popular boy in our year, Yousei Sakai. He was practically a celebrity—good grades, handsome, student council member, class leader, basketball star… When we returned to school with a trophy from nationals, Mina dragged me with her for moral support while she tracked down Yousei. She just went up to him and told him how much she liked him, right in public with tons of students around.”

Her countenance grew gloomy as Kaelan said, “I can’t imagine that went over well.”

“It really didn’t,” Ami muttered. “Yousei just laughed at her and everyone else began laughing with him. Mina managed to hold her head high until he replied. ‘I can’t believe you think you’re worthy of someone like me. Don’t you know what everyone says about you? Mizuno-san, though… She’s the kind of girl I’d want to be seen with’.” She hid behind her knees. “Mina and I didn’t talk for a
long time after that. She still studied with me but we barely said anything to one another. I didn’t blame her. I kept scolding myself for remaining silent, for not stepping up to defend her and telling Yousei off. I didn’t agree with everyone else that he was too good for her, that Mina wasn’t good enough for anyone, but I just couldn’t articulate it.”

She fell into a prolonged silence. “Then what happened?” Kaelan urged.

“We had a fight.” Ami looked up, eyes shadowed. “She said the only reason I started tutoring her was because the swim team had sent me to learn her weaknesses. She said I had to be studying her like some kind of science experiment. We had almost nothing in common so why would a girl like me willingly become friends with a girl like her, someone with only beauty and no brains? She got so angry, screaming at me for answers, but just like before I only stood there in silence. I finally spoke up when she began walking away.” A warm smile turned Ami’s lips. “Minako-chan is like a star, don’t you think? She’s always radiant, always shining from within. When we met I was in a really dark place. The only reason I was able to crawl out of that void is because she shone down on me. She cried when I told her that.”

Kaelan sighed deeply at the story, now realizing how awful his words had sounded to Mina’s ears. “So she thought I was pushing her away with thinly-veiled excuses because I feel she’s not good enough for me. That couldn’t be further from the truth, Ami. Can you tell me where she is so I can talk to her?”

She regarded him for a long moment; it was the most judgmental stare he’d ever received. Ami was very conflicted about helping Kaelan and Mina get back together. To her he was just another male in a long line of those who didn’t appreciate Mina for the amazing person she really was, just another male who saw a pretty woman to conquer. But at the same time Mina’s relationship with Kaelan had been different from all the others. Maybe it was because he was an actual adult who had his life all figured out, a stable figure for her to hold on to when times got rough. But it might be best for Mina to be on her own for a while. No men, no drama.

“Mina is in her anatomy class right now…” Ami eventually answered, “but I think it would be best if you left her alone. She needs space to breathe. Once she’s calmed down I’ll give you her schedule, but I can’t make her listen to you.”

Kaelan’s expression only fell a little, though he knew Ami was being a good friend with the best intentions at heart. He sighed and stood to leave. “I appreciate you taking time away from studying to speak with me.” The girl frowned at his business-like tone. He paused with his fingers around the door handle to look back over his shoulder. “I don’t know what’s going on with you and Zach, but I suggest keeping your wits about you. There’s a lot more to him than meets the eye.”

Ami’s brow furrowed as he closed the door. Why did everyone keep acting like she was in danger around Zach? They were oblivious to his deepest secret and she wasn’t. Ergo, she knew him better than anyone.

While leaving biology class Mina was stopped by one of her acquaintances, a sophomore named Julie who also worked in the sports clinic. “Hey!” the redhead called, “We’re having a girl’s night out at this club downtown. Do you want to come with us?”

“Yes,” Mina instantly answered. This was the perfect opportunity to focus on something other than Kaelan breaking up with her. She was told to meet up with the group outside the football stadium by six o’clock. It was 4:30 now so she had plenty of time to get ready. “I’m going dancing tonight,” she announced as she entered the room. Ami looked up from her laptop. “Is there a chance you want to come with?”
She smiled ruefully. “I really need to perfect this final paper.”

“Okay,” Mina shrugged. She opened the closet and stood back to appraise its contents.

“But…” She turned to Ami, whose voice had gone soft. “Thanks for always inviting me even though you know it’s not my thing.”

Mina half-smiled. “You’re my bestie. Maybe one day you’ll surprise me and say yes.”

“Maybe I will,” Ami replied. She returned to her essay while Mina rifled through their wardrobe, discovering an aqua sweater dress hidden in the back. It still had the tags on so she asked where it came from. “Express, maybe? Or Macy’s? I think Usagi picked it out. You could wear it with those white boots you can never find a use for.” For someone who claimed not to be artistically inclined, Ami sure had a good eye for color. Mina struck a pose once she was dressed and made-up and her friend smiled approvingly. “Have fun and be safe.” She was used to hearing that, but then Ami added, “Let me know how the selection of hot guys is.”

“Of course! I’ll call you if anything happens. Bye!” She made the long walk across campus and arrived to find only five girls, Julie among them. “Is this everyone?”

“Yes,” the redhead huffed. “A bunch of those bitches bailed on us!”

“Nice alliteration,” a girl named Aruna commented.

“Thank you. But seriously, thanks for coming Mina. I hate it when people don’t follow through with plans. It’s like, what, you found something better to do? You’re too cool for us or something?” She scoffed.

The only cheerleader who had actually shown up placed her hands on Julie’s shoulders and steered her toward the parking lot. “It’s whatever. We need to get a move-on so you can dance out this aggression!”

“Be aggressive, B-E aggressive!” someone else called as they piled into Shannon the Cheerleader’s SUV. She pursed her lips, unamused. After the giggling died down Mina was introduced to Sophie and Vera. The former worked on the sports section of UW’s newspaper and the latter was dating a football player. When Vera inquired if Shannon knew Nicholas, Sophie jumped into the conversation.

“Are you talking about Nicholas Meyer? I’d love to write his player profile. So far I’ve only managed to snap his photo a couple times. He’s so elusive.”

“I can ask Matt to tell him the paper wants to interview him. Nicholas is really nice and friendly, so I’m sure he’ll go for it.”

“I bet he’s great in bed,” Julie commented, earning stares. “What?”

“Are you ovulating or something?” Aruna asked. “Is that why you wore those hooker heels?”

“These are my man-catching shoes.” She brought one of her feet onto the center console, earning a swat from the driver. “Hopefully these babies will take me home with a hot guy from the club, preferably to a place he has all to himself so I don’t have to hold back.”

Sophie snickered as Vera rolled her eyes. “I definitely don’t miss being single.”

“You have your own mountain of football-playing man meat, so leave those who want to fantasize
about Nicholas alone!”

“I think you’re the only one,” she returned.

“No she’s not,” Shannon and Sophie chorused. Aruna said that skinny nerds were her type. Then they looked at Mina who hadn’t chimed in since she was too busy staring out the window.

She held up her hands defensively. “Oh, no… I mean no, I don’t think of Nicholas like that. He was one of my first friends here!” She received some “awws” and “yeah rights”, and then Shannon parked outside the club where a big banner hung above the entrance. “Julie, you didn’t tell me this was a grand opening!”

“Oh yeah, it’s brand-new,” she grinned. “This place is cool ‘cause it’s only open to people ages sixteen to twenty!”

“So it’s a youth club?” Sophie asked disdainfully.

“No, it’s a dance club for young adults.”

“So they don’t even sell alcohol?” Julie shook her head and Sophie groaned in dismay.

The group of six walked to the back of the line which was rather long but moved quickly, ushering people out of the cold. Mina felt a surge of excitement once they got in. So what if there were boys a couple years younger than them? At least there wouldn’t be any pervy older men slipping strange substances into their drinks. They lingered in the lounge, examining their surroundings. The bar at one side served finger foods and mocktails while the bistro opposite dispensed heartier dishes. The silver walls were angular like the faces of a great polyhedron, perhaps to help with acoustics, and ropes of LEDs snaked around the booths, slowly cycling through every color of the rainbow. Speakers hidden within the furniture filled the huge room with ambient music.

The club was four stories tall with the top two floors reserved for offices, the VIP lounge, and a guest DJ stage. The main floor and basement featured amateur in-house DJs, but Mina discovered they weren’t half bad when she and Julie ventured downstairs. The energy in the room was phenomenal, likely due to the drum ‘n bass tracks commanding the crowd to bounce around. During a break in the set Mina and Julie found Sophie in the lounge with two large gourmet pizzas on her table. “Eat, drink, and be merry,” she said kindly. They devoured several slices and emptied an entire pitcher of lemonade.

“So…” Julie said, reclining, “where’d you learn to do that funky line dance? Is that a thing in Japan?”

Mina blinked in confusion. “Oh, you mean para-para? It’s part of the Eurobeat music scene. There are some pop groups who choreograph specific routines for their songs but it’s dying out.”

Julie grinned. “It looks like it’d be good for aerobics. Can you show me some moves?”

Sophie wasn’t the only one watching. Several people had turned in their seats to see the routine unfold, and a few even asked to join the lesson. Mina led with a smile on her face; this was almost like being at a para-para club back home, except the one she used to attend had been destroyed in the Tomoe Laboratories explosion. Perhaps she could start a dance club at UW.

Shannon, Aruna, and Vera finally showed up, the first sporting an autograph from the special guest DJ on her shirt. “This is the best day ever!” she exclaimed in a squeaky voice. “Thanks so much for inviting us, Julie.” The other girls echoed the sentiment, then they finished off the pizzas while watching the TV nearest their booth. It was tuned to a local news station and nobody paid much
attention to the broadcast until Vera released a loud gasp.

“Guys, look! They’re about to do a live segment from here!” She pointed at the screen and they all fell silent. The station was indeed about to go live to Club Trillium’s grand opening and conduct an interview with one of its owners, Kaelan Burke. Mina nearly choked on her drink.

Aruna patted her back. “Who’s that? Do you know him?”

“Yes,” she croaked. “Nicholas and his old roommate Zach live with him, plus two grad students I know.”

Julie indicated a camera crew setting up along the far wall where Kaelan chatted with a female reporter. Mina experienced a slight flutter as she gazed at him. He wore black slacks, a dress shirt with the sleeves rolled up to his elbows, and a burgundy tie. She always thought those jewel tones looked good on him. “Wow, he is fine,” the redhead remarked. “You really know him?”

Mina swallowed nervously. “Not really… I mean, I know who he is, but he’s just my friends’ landlord.”

“I don’t think he’s ‘just’ anything,” Shannon said, licking her lips.

Sophie rolled her eyes and scoffed. “Come on, guys. Don’t you read the Times? Burke is an angel investor. He’s been sticking his hand into lots of projects around the city.” She left the booth and made her way toward the news crew, merging with the small audience. She looked back and motioned for everyone to join her.

Julie clung to Mina’s arm, wobbling a little as they entered Kaelan’s proximity. “Oh, he’s so handsome! He’s way better than Christian Grey!” Mina wrinkled her nose at the comparison, then another member of the crew shushed the audience as gave the reporter a countdown.

“On the outside, Club Trillium seems like just another hotspot for people who love music and dancing. But once you step inside it’s clear there is something very different about this venue. We’re here with Kaelan Burke, co-owner of Seattle’s only youth-oriented nightclub, to celebrate its grand opening.” She turned to him; Mina noticed how at-ease he looked in front of the camera. “As I understand it, Kaelan, you’ve been making quite a name for yourself with philanthropic behavior. What made you want to invest in such a project?”

The people gathered around collectively leaned forward to hear his answer.

“I’m sure there are a lot of parents wondering what a place like this has to do with art,” Kaelan began. Julie and Shannon shared a look of infatuation upon hearing his voice. “But I thought it was obvious that music and dance were forms of art. Trillium is only a club in aesthetic. Really, it’s a safe place for young adults to express themselves in a healthy, creative manner.” He paused to take a breath, relaxing a little more. “As art programs continue to be cut from school budgets it becomes increasingly difficult for teens in high school and their early college years to feel like they have something that’s really for them, someplace to escape when they need a break from academics.” He said that last bit while pulling a sheepish face. “I don’t mean students should slack off and spend all their time here!”

Everyone laughed; it was hard not to when he was so charming. Kaelan just had a presence about him, an almost regal air that made people listen when he spoke. His platinum hair and grey eyes also contributed to the fact that people saw him as a sagely leader. They were drawn to the wisdom he might possess, and given the fact that hundreds of eyes were now upon him he seemed to be dispensing it properly.
“Excuse me for saying this, Kaelan, but you’re practically a teen yourself! At least compared to all of us at the station.” The crew chuckled a little. “I think it’s safe to say that any other twenty-three year-old who inherited a fortune like yours would not be spending it as selflessly.”

“For the record, I’ll be twenty-four in February,” he grinned, then smoothed his mustache in the manner Mina found rather adorable. “I think the question you’re getting at is why I support things like this, and the simple answer is it’s because people deserve a helping hand in achieving their dreams. Who’s to say a young person won’t walk through these doors and be inspired by the music they hear? Who’s to say they won’t buy some equipment and start creating their own music? Who’s to say they won’t then be the genius behind the score of this decade’s greatest film? That could happen because someone found inspiration here, in this place, and it’s just the idea…” Kaelan paused to clear his throat, getting caught on his emotions. “The idea that someone could be inspired by something that wouldn’t have existed if I hadn’t given it a chance is worth much more than the number in my bank account. It’s worth more than all the money in the world.”

Utter silence greeted his final statement. The reporter didn’t even move until Kaelan angled his head downward and nervously rubbed the back of his neck. “Well then…” she breathed while facing the camera, “I don’t think I’m alone when I say I can’t wait to see what other changes you’ll bring to Seattle. Thanks so much for your time, Mr. Burke.”

A smile played at the corner of his lips as he nodded. “It was my pleasure. Goodnight.” He stepped out of frame so the reporter could make a few more closing comments, and he hadn’t taken five steps before his audience began to descend upon him. Security guards moved quickly to form a human shield but Kaelan brushed by Mina just before they made it impossible to reach him.

“You are so full of shit,” she hissed into his ear.
Mina’s voice was a ghostly breath lingering in Kaelan’s ear. He hadn’t gotten the chance to talk to her due to the zeal with which his security guards performed their job, escorting him to his office on the top floor of Club Trillium. He had severely underestimated his public presence but he seemed to be the only one. After his interview the answering machine became full of messages asking if he would be interested on appearing on such-and-such program and if he could please let them know his schedule. Local charities weren’t outright asking for money but they would really appreciate it if he would consider donating since Christmas was two weeks away.

There were other requests as well. Would he be interested in a reality TV show? Had he ever considered acting? Did he want to sign to such-and-such modeling agency? Would he consider endorsing some product? He already had a financial advisor and now debated hiring a personal assistant to act as a buffer between him and the media. Kaelan couldn’t have cared less about becoming famous, which seemed to be happening despite his aversion to publicity.

“Forbes called today,” Joe informed him during breakfast. Finals were over and everyone was on winter break. “They want you on their 30 Under 30 list.”

Kaelan only sighed and continued eating his toast in silence.

“That’s not as cool as Glamour naming him one of this year’s hottest eligible bachelors,” Zach said.

Joe scoffed. “Forbes is way more reputable than Glamour.”

“Well you know what I heard?” Nicholas cut in. “He’s in the running for Person of the Year.”

Now Kaelan did look up. Appearing in TIME, on the cover no less, was a Big Fucking Deal.

“Where’d you hear that?”

“From someone at school,” he answered proudly. Nicholas never had interesting news to share so he basked in the feeling of importance. “This girl from the Daily told me. Her uncle works at Time.”

Mamoru nodded slowly. “You should probably set up a meeting with them.”

“It sounds like a rumor,” Kaelan returned. “If it’s true I’ll wait for them to contact me.” This meant he actually had to listen to all future messages received, an extremely off-putting notion.

Mamoru drove slowly along the waterfront. He couldn’t remember where Usagi told him to pick her up, but it was one of the piers currently crawling with tourists. Was she at the arcade? The Great Wheel? The Curiosity Shoppe? Ivars? No, she was getting a smoothie from a coffee stand. Mamoru lightly tapped the horn, earning more than a few irked looks. The blonde spun around, grinned, and got into the passenger seat before he held up too much traffic. “You’ll want to go left here to avoid the construction.”

Mamoru obeyed, guiding his Mercedes up the steep hill leading away from the ferry terminal. They were essentially heading toward the U District; Mamoru had called her in the middle of the night to say he had a dream involving two dark, indistinct women who seemed rather close to the school. He wasn’t sure if they were students so the plan was to find a central location from which to expand his new supernatural senses. First they had to slog through Westlake’s congested streets where Mamoru constantly glanced around to avoid hitting jay walkers. Usagi began worrying her nacre talisman, unknowingly exuding an aura that calmed the boy to her left.
Once in the Montlake area the spiritual strings Mamoru had mentioned practically began pulling him to the northeast, just beyond the UW campus, and he was a bit annoyed with himself for never having sensed guardians that were so close to an area he frequented. “What’s this neighborhood called?” Usagi asked, since she couldn’t see the GPS on his side.

“Laurelhurst,” Mamoru answered. They drove to a big green field, as good a place as any to park and begin honing in on the guardian pair. “This area looks ritzy. They must be rich if they live here.” Many of the compact yet stately homes featured stone and brickwork, and ivy grew over a fair number of them.

Usagi removed the three remaining necklaces and held them up like pendulums, turning in a slow circle until facing due south. “This way, Mamo-chan.” He followed dutifully. There were a few people working on their landscaping in the December frost, and Mamoru waved at them while Usagi passed by. He soon realized that she had started to jog away and he rushed to keep up with her, then they both halted in front of a particular house. It looked no different from the others but it certainly felt unique among the row. “I think this is it,” Usagi said, panting slightly.

“Shall we go up and knock?” Mamoru ascended the tiered steps to the stoop, missing the apprehension in her tone.

“Wait, Mamo-chan…”

But it was too late. The door opened mere seconds before his knuckles fell upon it.

“I was wondering when you two would show up,” said the girl at the threshold. Mamoru gaped in amazement, partly at that statement and partly because she was very beautiful. Her almond-shaped eyes were dark brown in color and her long black hair fell in loose waves. She smiled amicably and stepped aside. “Please come in.”

Mamoru gestured for Usagi to hurry up. She climbed the stairs and clung to his arm as they entered the foyer. Inside it was all earth tones and natural fabrics, and there was a cloying yet not unpleasant mask of incense. “This way, please,” the girl said, leading them into a large sitting room. She indicated a couch with embroidered and tufted cushions. Beneath their feet was an authentic Persian rug, and colorful tapestries and mosaics hung on the walls.

After taking a long look around Mamoru met the girl’s gaze. “How did you know we would come here?”

“Last month I started having vivid dreams featuring a young couple who looked a lot like you… in spirit, at least. Forgive me if I’m wrong, but are you both Japanese?”

“Yes,” they answered in unison, and the girl’s countenance brightened. She switched from English to their native tongue.

“When I told my mom about these recurring dreams she said it could mean I was destined to meet the couple in the present. But I’m usually not very receptive to strangers.” She clasped her hands.

“Although, to be honest, the two of you don’t feel like complete strangers. I don’t know if it’s because I met you in my dreams already, or maybe it’s just the presence about you.” She shrugged. “Anyway, I’m not really sure what to do now that you’re here.”

Usagi and Mamoru shared a look; they were in the same boat. “Who are you, exactly?” Mamoru inquired.

“Oh gosh, sorry! I actually have two names but they mean the same thing. My birth mother named
me Hinghoy, that’s Thai. She died when I was ten, then I went to live with my father in Tokyo. I’m —” The smile vanished in an instant as she diverted her attention to the floor. “Tomoe. Tomoe Hotaru.”

Usagi felt the blood drain from her face. “As in Tomoe Laboratories?”

“Yes,” she answered meekly.

An uncomfortable silence arose as Mamoru fell back against the couch, his eyes wide, and Usagi gritted her teeth. The question she bit back was “what in god’s name was your father doing that caused three wards to be destroyed?” Instead she asked, “What happened?”

The old wound made Hotaru sigh. “There’s a very simple explanation… and that’s what’s so terrible about the whole thing.” She paused, biting her lower lip. “Do you know what white phosphorus is?”

“It’s… not good.” Mamoru scolded himself for speaking when his brain was processing so many other things.

But Hotaru didn’t deride him. “My father was experimenting with it for military applications. The public doesn’t know that— no one but the Japanese government is supposed to. An official made me sign a non-disclosure agreement before I moved here, which I guess I just violated.” She smiled wryly. “White phosphorus is highly unstable— it can combust when exposed to oxygen. One of my father’s researchers improperly sealed a sample, which ignited, which then spread to a tank of hydrogen. That’s what caused the initial explosion. Of course, there are a lot of things that can react very violently in a chemistry lab.”

“So they know who left the sample open?” Mamoru asked.

“Yes, it was a woman my father had recently hired. Her name was Kaori and according to what employee gossip I overheard, she had a thing for my father. So maybe she was making eyes at him and forgot to seal the phosphorus.” Hotaru angrily shook her head. “It’s disgusting to think about. She should have been doing the job she was hired for, not trying to hook up with her boss. So many people are dead because of her!”

Silence greeted her outburst, and then Usagi began to cry as that statement echoed in her mind.

It happened on a Sunday, when she was home from school and playing video games. Her dad’s favorite TV show was interrupted by the emergency broadcast signal, then a news anchor told them that the neighborhoods surrounding Chuo ward had to evacuate. Then came the sirens and people left their houses to stand in the street, watching as a pillar of flame-tinged smoke rose into the air. Ikuko hurriedly told her daughter what to pack. Ten minutes later their most valuable possessions were in their car and Kenji drove to a marina in Ota. They left the radio on while staring at the blaze across the harbor.

Mamoru softly cleared his throat. “Tomoe-san, could you please explain how you knew we would meet today?”

She shrugged again, a tiny movement. “I’m sort of precognitive.” Usagi looked up at that, quizzical. “Sometimes I catch glimpses of the future, but most of the time it’s almost allegorical. I have no idea what’s going to happen until after the event occurred and I can piece it together.”

“Then how are you certain we’re the people from your dream?”

“Intuition,” she answered simply. “I feel it about you, something in your… auras.” Her dark eyes narrowed to scrutinize them, particularly Usagi. “Do you know anything about that, how to read and
focus auras? Chakras? Meditation?”

“Isn’t that what Rei does?” Usagi inquired of Mamoru, who nodded. “We have a friend who’s into that stuff.”

Hotaru rolled her eyes. “It shouldn’t be something people get ‘into’, like a phase. We’re talking about filling your body with cosmic energy and achieving nirvana. It’s not something to take lightly.” The three of them were alerted to the front door opening and closing. “I’m sure my mom can explain it better.”

Shanta Mirakhur was Hotaru’s adoptive mother and one of the most physically-striking people Mamoru or Usagi had ever encountered. She was Hindi, from the Kashmir region, with long, obsidian hair and ethereal violet eyes. She was also very short with a matronly hourglass figure, but her stature didn’t affect her commanding presence in the least. Mamoru spent a good five minutes staring into her eyes, which she handled stoically, in an attempt to figure out what gave them their utterly unique coloration. He deduced they were really dark bluish-grey with just the right shade of pale brown flecks to turn them wisteria.

Shanta’s occupation was that of a clinical psychiatrist, but she utilized a fair amount of her own spiritual beliefs in treating her patients. She showed them to her office brimming with books and charts that she indicated while explaining the most basic concepts of Tantric philosophy, a branch of the large tree of Hinduism. Usagi had been under the impression that Tantra was synonymous with certain sexual practices but she soon learned that wasn’t the case at all. Shanta gave them a couple books to peruse at their leisure: Balanced Chakras, Balanced Life and Introduction to Kundalini Yoga. Mamoru had never done yoga before but thought it might be fun if Usagi tried it with him.

“Now, about Hotaru’s dreams…” Shanta had poured them all tea and sipped hers daintily. “The fact that she was able to identify you based on nothing more than spiritual energy tells me the two of you possess ancient souls, and because they are so closely linked I would venture to assume you are soul mates.” Usagi and Mamoru shared yet another look. “That does not necessarily facilitate a romantic relationship or even attraction– soul mates can be platonic as well. It only means the universe ordained that the two of you stay together through all of your incarnations in order to achieve enlightenment.”

“The universe wants us to be enlightened together?” Usagi asked. “What does that mean?”

Shanta smiled kindly. “The pursuit of humankind has always been answering existential questions. Why were we put on this world? What is our purpose in life? What does the universe want from us? Everyone has their own answers to these questions, but some, like myself, seek the divine truth, answers from the universe itself. It is a difficult concept to embrace, and it is even more difficult for one to remain focused on all their life. Many succumb to the pleasures of the physical world and give up pursuing the spiritual one. Even I may do so in time.”

This discussion was far too esoteric for Usagi and Mamoru to grasp in its entirety. Shanta abandoned the subject and listened to them talk about their quest instead, absorbing all the details regarding amulets and guardians, and the mysterious enemy arrayed against them. “What does it mean to be a guardian, though?” Hotaru asked once they were finished.

The blonde averted her gaze. “Well, I’m not exactly sure. Nia just said that everything would become clear after I found you two because it would lead her to the final guardian, but… I don’t feel like I’ve learned anything new.” She turned to Mamoru. “Do you think something happened to Nia?”

Mamoru hoped it wasn’t so, but perhaps the dark ones had hindered her. “I think we should just wait
and see,” he replied. Truthfully he wanted answers just as much as Usagi and now they were almost within reach. Everything depended on Nia at this point.

Usagi presented Shanta with the Indonesian black opal pendant since it had a very mystical quality akin to her lifestyle. Hotaru received the sapphire, its faceted depths constantly shifting like her mature yet youthful personality; she was only a teenager, after all. “This is very fitting for her,” Shanta remarked. “Indigo is the color of Ajna, the third eye. It will help Hotaru focus her visions.” She then stood up and bowed, hands pressed together at her chest. “It was a pleasure to meet you both. Please let us know if we can be of any assistance in your endeavors, personal or otherwise.” Hotaru mirrored the motion.

“It was very nice meeting you as well,” Usagi replied, offering a traditional bow. “Thank you for inviting us into your home.” With that they left, but neither spoke until they had returned to the car. Her fingers unfurled around the sunstone, which seemed to blink at her despite the overcast weather. “I want to know who this belongs to. I want Nia to find her. I just want everything to make sense!”

Mamoru placed a comforting hand on her knee, making her groan and slump in the seat. ‘Make sense…’ he repeated during the drive to the mansion. ‘What if it doesn’t make any sense at all?’ That was completely contradictory to how he viewed the world. There had to be a grain of logic somewhere. He considered it all: his dreams, the people in them, the guardians and the amulets. There had to be a common denominator, something linking them all. He caught the reflection of Usagi’s moonstone pendent in the windshield, and then the sunstone in her hand, and then recalled what Joe had said about ilmenite being a mineral native to the Moon. “Oh my god…” he breathed, earning a worried glance from Usagi. His foot stamped down on the gas pedal and suddenly they were going ninety miles an hour down the highway.

“Eek! What’s wrong, Mamo-chan?!?”

He didn’t answer. There were still a few things he needed to confirm before presenting Usagi with a fully-detailed analysis of his conclusion.

“Of course there are only nine planets,” Kaelan scoffed, blowing a huge hole in just one of Mamoru’s hypotheses. His grey eyes flicked between a docket and his computer but he managed to give his housemate enough attention.

“What about Nibiru?”

Kaelan looked up sharply at that as Mamoru gulped. “Nibiru is a myth perpetuated by idiots too lazy to actually study astronomy, or physics for that matter. It is literally impossible for an object of planetary mass to randomly appear on a collision course for Earth without it causing a gravitational disturbance among major bodies in our solar system.” His expression softened a little. “It’s like a sheep herd mentality. One person read about it and now there’s a whole damn cult trying to discredit space agencies around the globe. Morons, the lot of them.”

“Err, thanks for clarifying that.” Mamoru turned toward Usagi who was pulling random books off the shelves and reading one page before putting them back. “I think I’ve figured it out, Usako.” They began to leave the office so Kaelan could work in peace, but then someone burst through the wooden double doors and lurched right into Mamoru.

It was Nia, and she was bleeding from every orifice on her face. Usagi recoiled with a yelp and Kaelan stood so abruptly his chair careened into the wall. Since Nia was taller than Mamoru she dragged him down somewhat, but with two extra pairs of hands he managed to lay her on the plush carpet and instantly went into medical diagnostic mode. “What happened?!?” Usagi cried.
Nia’s voice was raspy. “Those bastards found the last guardian before she could get to you. I tried to intercept them but was too late. They knew who she was… they saw her in the Eye.” She turned onto her side and retched, spewing blood. Mamoru grabbed his friends firmly by their arms and pulled them away.

“We have to help her!” Usagi shouted, fighting his grasp.

“You can’t, Usako. I’m fairly certain those are symptoms of ebola.” She stared at him wide-eyed, shocked that he was willing to do nothing but pull out his phone.

“Wait, Mamoru, don’t…” Nia coughed again and somehow gathered the strength to shift onto her hands and knees. “It is ebola, but I am immune.”

“The rest of us aren’t,” he coldly returned. “You’re going to kill us if you stay here!”

She shook her head and her words were punctuated with ragged breaths. “This is not a natural strain… it’s not contagious. It’s poison designed just for me. Usagi, take this…” She reached into her coat pocket, wobbling on three limbs, and pushed a shimmering object across the rug before collapsing. Usagi moved to claim it but Mamoru grabbed her arm again.

“Usako, you can’t!”

“I have to! She came all the way here in her condition to give me that thing!”

“You can’t go near her!” Mamoru shouted, the first time he had ever raised his voice to her. “Ebola is one of the most deadly diseases on the planet! Just look at what it’s doing to her!” Nia certainly presented a gruesome example of the effects. “I should have realized it right away, before her blood got on us. We have to get to a hospital and this whole place needs to be quarantined!”

Kaelan sniffed disdainfully. “What makes you think I want the CDC poking around here?”

“Excuse me? This is my fucking house!”

Usagi took advantage of their bickering to pick up the compact. It was completely gold inside and out, and instead of moonstone or jade there was a large diamond in the center surrounded by ten gems in every color of the rainbow. It refracted the light of the room, winking like a multicolored eye. After closing it she noticed blackish blood on the lid; Nia had obviously risked her life to get this compact. She had risked her life to save Michiru. She’d risked it saving Ami and Mina, and would have risked it for Haruka. And for what? Why did she keep putting herself in harm’s way for a bunch of strangers? Nia believed they were guardians, but what exactly were they supposed to be defending? What was the reason for it all? The answers had to lie in this talisman belonging to the final guardian… they had to.

Mamoru didn’t call the Center for Disease Control. He did, however, put on gloves and a mask to attend Nia after Kaelan fearlessly carried her up to the guest room on the third floor. “I should be pissed that she keeps getting in here without anybody realizing it,” he said, standing with his arms crossed, “but I actually admire her. She must have been a damn good thief.”

Mamoru raised an eyebrow, prompting Kaelan to sit down in the chair on the other side of the bed. “Why would you applaud someone who admitted to her crimes yet managed to avoid punishment the world over?”

“If you really want to know, it’s because she reminds me of myself when I was a kid. I used to fight
and steal and break into places. But unlike her, I didn’t get away with it… I fucked up real bad once.” Mamoru’s raised brow prompted Kaelan to tell the story. “When I was ten I got busted for pickpocketing guests at a fancy hotel. After getting me from the station this one cop said my mum needed a man in her life to straighten out her little bastard son. She started beating him with her purse right in front of everyone. The next day our neighbor, a clerk at the station, told Mum the cop was going to arrest her for assaulting him.”

Mamoru was wide-eyed. “Then what happened?”

“She sent me to my room and rang someone. She said ‘Simon, you need to come see your son. I might be in trouble and he has to have somebody watching over him.’ That was the first mention of my father in twelve years, and Mum knew his name and how to contact him no less. At that point I was confused and pissed to say the least.”

Kaelan stared at Nia’s inert left hand as Mamoru stared at him, so neither was aware that her eyes were open slightly and she was listening to the story. “Did your mother go to jail?” Mamoru asked.

He shook his head. “No. My dad never showed up and Mum refused to leave me, so she started fucking him. He made sure everyone knew what was going on, that he could fuck both of us with the cock of the law at any time.”

“Oh, you poor thing…” Nia suddenly spoke, making the boys jump in their seats. “I hope this story has a happy ending aside from you becoming a millionaire.”

“How long have you been awake?” Mamoru inquired.

“Long enough to pity him.”

After fetching a glass of water for her, Kaelan sat with his elbows on his knees. “Where was I?”


“Right. So, since this cop was banging my mum I didn’t exactly form a positive opinion of the authorities. I considered joining the mob for a while– it would have been a way to get back at the police for making my life miserable.” Nia berated him by quirking one of her eyebrows. “Course I knew better by the time I turned fifteen– it was my fault Mum got screwed by that cop. I went to school, looked for a respectable job, stopped being a menace to society. If I fucked up in the slightest I’d definitely go to jail, and by that point it was obvious my dad didn’t care about us. Mum and I were the only ones we had.”

Nia smiled. “You’ve used your money to do something nice for her, yes?”

“Of course,” Kaelan grinned. “I bought her a house, and I contacted my dad and gave him an earful on our behalf.”

“How did you do that?” Mamoru wondered.

“It was easy. I found out he’s in the Irish Army, a commandant to be exact. He has an office number and I left a very concise message for him. I said neither me nor Mum will lose sleep if he dies in a firefight. And I said there must be a good reason why Grandad put me in the will instead of him, which was for the best since I’m using his money to actually help people, something he never did.” Kaelan turned his nose in the air, radiating pride.

Nia eyed him dubiously. “I do not think you could have sounded more like a petulant child just now. It’s clear you still desire attention from your father. You want him to be impressed by your
accomplishments and see that you are worth his time.”

“I have zero fucks to give about Simon Burke,” Kaelan returned, standing. “The only thing he’s ever done and will ever do for me is give me his name, which was my mum’s decision. To be honest I wouldn’t saddle my kid with ‘Macshuibhne’ either.” With that he left the room, tromping down the stairs and shouting to Joe about what he made for lunch.

The girl in bed turned to her doctor. “Are you familiar with that saying ‘absolute power corrupts absolutely’? I believe it would be prudent to ensure Kaelan’s fame and fortune does not go to his head. He is sympathetic to the plight of others, yes, but his actions are not completely selfless.”

“I’m not sure I would act much differently in his position,” Mamoru admitted.

“Yes you would,” Nia smiled. “Empathy provides a fundamental difference between you two. It is what will make you a great leader again.”
Memories from the Future

Joe checked his watch again and nervously glanced up the street. Rei was probably just stuck in traffic… probably. That had to be why she was late meeting them at the Pacific Science Center. They needed her to complete their ‘triple IMAX date’ as Zach had referred to it, though he regretted those words as Makoto’s paranoia surfaced and he had to reassure her that this was not a giant scheme of Usagi’s to get her and Nicholas alone in the dark. “It still sounds to me like you’re sailing down a river in Egypt, Mako.” He’d been calling her that since discovering it was a type of shark.

“I’m not in denial!” she refuted.

Zach shrugged innocently. “I’m just saying that maybe Usagi is on to something. You guys have so much in common it’s almost weird. You certainly have a lot of chemistry in the kitchen.” He grinned at his own awful joke while Makoto scoffed and rolled her eyes.

Her alleged love interest returned from the water science exhibit. “Rei still isn’t here?”

“No, and now I’m worried,” Ami answered. “She hasn’t replied to any of our calls or texts!”

“Why don’t we just go pick her up?”

“We could,” Joe said, “except that nobody knows where she lives.”

“For real? Haven’t we been friends for like four months? I thought at least one of you had been to her place.” Everyone guiltily shook their heads.

“All I know is she lives near Bastyr, but that’s a fifty-acre perimeter we’d have to search.”

Nicholas groaned at how dense these supposedly intelligent people could be at times. “So let’s check the student directory, and if she’s not listed we’ll just go there and ask an admin where she lives. Ami can pretend to be a relative or something.”

“Who would believe that? We don’t look anything alike!” she protested. “Rei comes from a very respectable family with noble blood.”

“So she’s like royalty? That’s cool.” Zach got behind the wheel of his car while Nicholas claimed the passenger seat and the other three sat in back. In lieu of taking two vehicles and despite its illegality, they planned to have two of the girls share a seat belt. If Zach hadn’t offered to drive he would have arranged it so Ami sat on his lap.

“The Hinos aren’t related to the emperor or anything. They’ve acted as spiritual advisors to the imperial family since the Tokugawa era,” Makoto explained once they were on the highway. “Rei’s grandpa is the last priest in the family, though. She said was training to succeed him, but when her mom died her dad took her away from the shrine and sent her off to private school. It was because of her mom’s family, the Asano, that her dad was even able to become a politician.”

“What do they do?” Joe inquired. He hadn’t known any of this about Rei.

“Hino Takashi is one of Japan’s foreign relations officers to the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation. He acts as liaison between corporations and government officials.”

Joe mulled the job description over for a minute, then pulled out his phone to start Googling. “How do you even know all this?” Zach asked. “Do they teach you about the aristocracy in school or
Ami laughed. “I know because the hospital where my mother works is owned by the Asano’s medical division. They funded it but another smaller company manages it.”

“Japan sounds way too confusing,” Nicholas remarked. “I don’t think I could live there.”

“You’re a bit too big for Tokyo,” Makoto agreed, “but I bet you’d like Kansai. Beautiful countryside, lots of hot springs.”

Joe didn’t hear the discussion about life in Japan going on around him. His search for ‘Takashi Hino APEC’ turned up several articles about successful negotiations for a textiles company. He selected one at random, a chill passing through him as he scrolled down the page. There was a picture of six smiling men in suits and hard hats, and behind them was, according to the caption, ten-thousand acres of land that would soon be home to a vast cotton field. But all Joe saw was ten-thousand acres of ravaged Indonesian rainforest.

It turned out that Rei was in fact listed in the student directory under the title of ‘Oriental medicine consultant’, so they got her address and skirted campus to the apartment complex on the eastern side. “Wait here,” Joe commanded, exiting the vehicle before Zach had even parked. He went upstairs to the second level, found Rei’s door on the far end, and stood there with clenched fists. His anger was as smoldering embers beneath his skin. He wanted to yell and curse and break something, but he needed to talk to Rei in a calm, rational manner. Mostly he was angered that she hadn’t told him anything about her family, assuming she had purposely withheld such information after getting to know him. She knew he was a steward of the land and hadn’t thought to mention the fact that her family was cutting down trees, ruining ecosystems, killing off endangered species and generally destroying the fucking planet in the name of corporate greed. Her father’s latest despicable business deal paid for her tuition and the apartment, her car, clothes, food, *everything*…

He suddenly heard his name. His vision was so red with hate that he could hardly make out Rei’s visage at the threshold. “Josef, you need to calm down. You can’t control your aura, you’ll hurt yourself.”

“*Net, vam budet bol’no.*”

“I can’t understand what you’re saying, I don’t know any Russian. Please, you need to listen to me. Can you hear me?”

“*Ya ne budu slushat’.*”

Rei’s readings regarding overbearing auras told her to speak the person’s name as often as possible so they would remember themselves and go back to normal, but she found that increasingly hard to do since the person on her doorstep seemed like a complete stranger. Joe’s aura had transformed from gentle turquoise to violent, fiery red, and his desire to harm her was palpable. It almost felt like something tried to attack her *through* him, though demonic possession was not a notion she typically entertained. “Why do you want to hurt me, Josef?”

“*Ty solgal mne. Ty predal menya.*”

“If you calm down we can discuss your anger. If I did something that hurt your feelings I will apologize. Is that what you want, Josef?” She held her breath as he glowered at her. The effort of fending off this metaphysical attack was giving her a tremendous migraine but she couldn’t show any signs of weakness. She didn’t want to attempt to overpower him either and risk actual physical harm. Joe was still in there somewhere.
The force in that last word sent Rei stumbling backward, yet as she did intense heat blossomed in her chest and filled her with rage. She glimpsed a memory of the person at her doorstep and despised him with every fiber of her being. She felt it throughout her entire soul, channeling the desire to utterly annihilate him into her amulet, the ruby necklace. Passersby only saw a young couple glaring at one another, not their blazing auras clashing so intensely they caused the wooden door to begin splintering, the windows to vibrate, metal fixtures to creak and groan…

Pain lanced through Rei’s chest and the aural pressure simply vanished. She gasped, shuddered, and screwed her eyes shut as the onslaught of her migraine made her reel, almost sending her to the floor. Luckily she recovered in time to realize that Joe was falling toward her, unconscious and nothing but dead weight for her arms to catch. She laid his head on her lap instead of the cold tiles. “Josef, can you hear me?” she spoke softly.

His eyes fluttered open. They were their natural hue once more, green as the flora he cultivated. “Rei…” He was nearly breathless. “What happened?”

“You passed out on my doorstep.”

“I did? That’s weird.” He felt her thumbs making gentle circles on his temples, closing his eyes to the sensation.

“Don’t faint on me again, Josef.”

“I won’t, I don’t faint. It’s not manly.”

Rei gave a little tut. “That is the last thing you should be concerned with. You are the picture of stereotypical masculinity.”

“Is that bad?” she wondered. She only quirked one corner of her lips. “How come you didn’t meet us at the IMAX?”

She looked down at him, her countenance dim. “I’m very sorry about that. I was on the phone with my father which was why none of you could reach me. I hung up when I sensed someone at the door.”

“Your father…” Joe breathed deeply, successfully quelling the outrage that bubbled up this time. “Is Hino Takashi really your dad? How can you be related to such a—”

“Vile man?” Rei finished. “He didn’t use to be a corporate puppet. Before my mother died he cared about nature. He cared about mankind’s pursuit of spiritual harmony. He cared about achieving enlightenment, following the path of Buddha, living in peace with all the world’s creatures and people. I guess he did that for Mother, so when she died he no longer had a reason.”

“He could have done it for you,” Joe murmured.

She said nothing for a minute, then, “I should have told you. I knew you would come across an article about that textile company leveling the rainforest and make the connection, but I hoped, naively, that you would form an opinion of me independent of my family because I’m not like any of them.”

“I know you’re not,” he smiled. “You’re Rei and you’re amazing.” That earned a slight laugh. “Yet as comfortable as I feel right now, we should probably get back to our friends. They’ll be mad if we miss the movie.”
Nia recovered quickly and requested food items that were not available for immediate consumption. Mostly she wanted cans of smoked clams and oysters, earning funny looks from Kaelan, Mamoru and Usagi. “They contain large doses of iron, and since I just suffered a hemorrhagic fever—”

“Got it,” Kaelan cut in. He wasn’t squeamish about blood having gutted and filleted fish for over a year, but he was fairly certain that most people infected with the ebola virus didn’t bounce back from it so easily, although Nia said she was immune and had been poisoned. He was no doctor, of course, and just grabbed his coat and keys before asking questions he wouldn’t understand the answers to.

She stood at the island drinking a vitamin-rich smoothie, sipping serenely and ignoring the stares received from Usagi and Mamoru. Kaelan had burned her bloody clothes in the outdoor fire pit; Nia now wore one of his silk bathrobes since nothing else fit her. She also had a thing about natural fabrics and avoiding detergents, so she would have spurned any other clothing offers. “Will you tell us what’s going on?” Mamoru finally asked. “Not just how you were attacked but about the talismans and guardians as well. I think you owe us some explanations.”

“Do I?” Nia challenged, fixating him with her dark eyes.

He unflinchingly met her gaze. “Yes, you do. I was the one who found the compact with the amulets, after all.”

“Usagi would have found it herself eventually. It was looking for her.”

The blonde tilted her head. “You say that like it has a will of its own.”

Nia only smiled surreptitiously before opening her compact and arranging her peridot necklace around the center cabochon. “Do the same with yours and the one I gave you.”

Usagi mimicked the action, hesitating for a second before placing the sunstone amulet around the diamond. It wasn’t hers to touch, it felt wrong. “Who is the guardian this belongs to?” she asked. “What happened to her?”

“Her name is, or was, Alectrona, the very first guardian to exist in our solar system. The moment you gave Pluto and Saturn their amulets a beacon was released that helped the dark ones hone in on her location, and they captured her mere minutes before I arrived. But because she gave me her talisman and you had her amulet, the three of us can unlock her memories together. We can witness everything she has dreamed and finally piece together our own.”


“I knew it,” he breathed. “I figured it out on the way back from Laurelhurst, but I wanted to be positive.” He faced Usagi excitedly. “It’s so obvious, Usako– you’re the guardian of the Moon!”

This information seemed to stun her. “The amulets correspond perfectly to each planet. Emerald for Mercury, sapphire for Saturn, aquamarine for Neptune…” He laughed, genuinely giddy at having successfully solved the mystery… mostly. “It does make sense, Usako. It makes perfect sense!”

“Nia reached for him. “If you wouldn’t mind settling down, Mamoru, we must scry the talismans. There is still much we do not know.”

He instantly composed himself, excitement still visible in the way his fingers flexed. After Kaelan told him Nibiru didn’t count as a planet he postulated that the Sun and Moon were indicated by the two additional amulets. He understood why there would be a representative of the Sun but he couldn’t deduce what was so special about the Moon; Earth’s moon was quite boring by
astronomical standards. Nia was clearly the guardian of Earth since the gems in her talisman corresponded to the four classical elements of earth, wind, fire and water, and jade had heavenly associations the world over.

Mamoru realized that Usagi and Nia were waiting on him so he cleared his head and focused on the golden talisman. He didn’t see anything at first, then a hazy image appeared in the lid of the compact, a portrait formed by all three of their faces. Except it didn’t resemble them in the least; there were three completely different people staring back. ‘Is this what I used to look like?’ the trio wondered at the same time. Mamoru wanted to glance up and make sure he hadn’t just imagined Usagi and Nia’s voices in his head, but he could feel himself tumbling down into a void so blissfully dark and enveloping he wasn’t sure he ever wanted to leave.

He was assaulted by the night sky when he opened his eyes. There were more stars than he’d ever seen before, so densely packed he couldn’t even find the constellations. After taking a few minutes to adjust to the sight he noticed that some stars shone very brightly like Venus at dawn or dusk during the summer, and others appeared quite large as if close by. He identified a great red sphere as Mars, and when he turned around he could see a faint line going through a bright star he realized was in fact the planet Saturn, its ice-crystal rings reflecting light back at him. Mamoru knew he should not be able to see Saturn with his naked eye.

“This was the view from Oceania during the beginning of the Golden Era,” said a voice he didn’t recognize. It sounded vaguely feminine; moreover it was omniscient, every word an absolute truth. “The solar system was not young yet not as old as the one you know. The planets were closer together and the asteroid belt was nothing more than its largest specimens. Look around yourself.”

Mamoru turned in a circle, realizing he stood atop a pyramid on a relatively small island. He saw nothing but calm ocean on the horizon. No moon was visible but he could discern vegetation and dwellings with surprising clarity. “This is the work of the Ancients, the First People, and they built this pyramid to be closer to the heavens. Even though they were new to this planet and had barely explored it, they desired to learn what lay beyond, to travel to the bright islands in the sea above them.”

He experienced a brief dizzying sensation, then he found himself on a more ornate pyramid flanked by glass and stone buildings. Tall evergreen trees now dominated the skyline. “The years brought profound change. As the Sun expanded it warmed the core of the planet, now called Terra, causing the oceans to recede and continents to form. The Ancients utilized volcanic heat to make glass, and with glass they invented devices that let them see farther into the heavens. They recognized the Sun for what it was, a ball of intense flame and not a place they could venture, but then…”

Night again veiled Mamoru but he couldn’t see the stars as well since a light source polluted the view. He rotated to find the moon hanging in the sky above, half-lit, its visible craters like dry lakebeds. “Terra managed to capture one of the asteroids in its orbit. Mars caught some also, but Venus and Mercury were too close to the swelling Sun. Terrans watched their atmospheres change and become inhospitable, and Mars drew farther away, but Luna was right there, tidally locked, allowing the Terrans to plan their journey into space. Utilizing heat and pressure, they launched a ship to the region deemed most accommodating. At the end of the Golden Era Terrans successfully colonized Luna, naming their new land Mar Serenitatis.”

“The Sea of Serenity…” Mamoru uttered. He wasn’t aware he possessed a voice and gasped at the sound of it, making the omniscient being laugh. It was a gentle sound, the kind a mother gave when amused by their child.

“During the Silver Era, as it came to be called, for it was less grand than the Golden Era, Terrans
developed wonderful technology, thrived as a society, and realized their limits. They could not travel beyond the solar system, but there were several other planets and moons to explore. They mapped Terra, saw how Luna made the ocean’s movements predictable, and the population soon spread everywhere but the frozen poles.” Mamoru experienced a slight lurch as the world whirled around him yet again. His pyramid remained the same but now he faced familiar architecture of Greek, Mesopotamian, and Mesoamerican varieties. Everything held vivid color, so bright it almost hurt to look at, and he could smell hundreds of different plants and flowers, minerals in the dirt, and moisture in the air.

“The Silver Era lasted longer than any other. Although they continued to make advancements, humankind reached a stasis. They repeated the process of studying and colonizing each planet, even managing to bear the heat of the Sun and the chill of the Outer Limits, until realizing that life was not quite the same as it had been on Terra. The Martians, for instance, needed water if they were to survive, as their planet had very little of it. Luckily Mars was iron-rich and they could trade weapons to Terra for ice, and Venus followed suit with precious metals and jewels. Mercurians became great inventors of technology and devised the portals that allowed people to travel between colonies. Jovians harnessed the power of its violent storms, mastering lightning and wind energy. Everyone shared their discoveries with Terra in exchange for the materials they needed to prosper. Unfortunately, humankind forgot this over time. Once the planets were self-sufficient they established their own royal bloodlines and fiercely guarded their resources.”

Mamoru had been listening and watching in a comfortable trance, so he was slightly annoyed when he had to stand on his own feet in the middle of a plain white room. “Where am I?” he asked, cringing as his voice echoed loudly.

“The private chamber of King Hyperion is situated deep in a crater on the dark side of Luna, away from prying eyes.”

“What is he hiding?” An opening door answered him. He froze when the king looked right at him and strode into the room, but he passed through Mamoru as if he were nothing more than air. “Am I invisible? Ethereal?” His hand looked solid enough.

“These events can only be witnessed,” the being not-very-helpfully replied. She materialized beside him, a vaguely humanoid mass of energies both mesmerizing and terrifying. Mamoru examined himself to discover he wore a dark blue tunic with gold trim, plain trousers, and knee-high boots. He reached up to his head and traced some kind of crown, and there was a compass rose hanging from his shirt collar. He felt comfortable in the outfit.

Hyperion seemed to be the perpetually-scowling type, for there were lines around his lips and brow. He didn’t look very old but he had grey hair and clouded eyes. His jaw was square and he had a Roman nose, a jewel from his circlet just reaching the bridge. The king’s attire was mostly black with silver trim though he also wore shimmering sets of white greaves and bracers with a matching breastplate. ‘Ceramic armor,’ Mamoru thought. ‘How do I know that?’ The man bent to place his hand flat on the floor, then a hidden plinth rose with him. On it was a softball-sized sphere containing cloud fluff. Hyperion gazed into it, unmoving and unspeaking for a full minute, before smirking and turning on his heel, the pedestal descending as he left the room.

“What is—” Mamoru began to ask, but the being raised a hand for silence. After an undetermined amount of time the door opened again. It was not Hyperion who entered but a young man who cut a very roguish figure. He slowly circled the room a few times, occasionally brushing the marble bricks. Eventually he knelt exactly where Hyperion had, but instead of putting his palm on the biometric scanner he placed a screen over it first. The plinth came up, the man grabbed the orb and put it in a large pouch on his belt, and then he was gone. Mamoru faced the energy woman.
“King Pheletes is the leader to the Mercurial Kingdom, commonly known as the King of Thieves. He has just stolen an artifact of infinite value.” His brow furrowed. Where had he seen that orb before?

The omniscient being faced him fully. Mamoru watched, mystified, as the energies coalesced into a solid form. Alabaster skin coated her arms and legs, sleek hair cascaded down her back, facial features became discernible, and metallic conduits grew out of her veins, linking her bodily systems together to supply them with whatever force gave her life. The woman opened her eyes. There was only one of them and it was the faintest of yellows. The other was a mirror, and Mamoru became paralyzed when he saw his reflection in it. Images began cycling through his mind at an alarming rate, pushing him to the brink of insanity until the being mercifully closed it, gazing down on him without any trace of emotion as he crumpled. “What… Who…” he attempted to ask, but he could barely breathe.

“I am Cometa, the Aspect of Fate.” Mamoru forced himself to look up at that. “My purpose is to lay down the paths of Destiny that may lead to one’s ultimate Fate.”

“You can guide me to my fate?” He managed to rise to his feet, steeling himself against the pressure of simply being in the Aspect’s presence.

Cometa shook her head once. “I cannot guide, I can only watch. It is impossible for me to interfere in the lives of sapient beings.” She gestured to the scene behind her, like a movie backdrop. Mamoru realized he was floating in empty space. “The artifact King Pheletes removed from King Hyperion’s possession is called the Eye of the Universe. Pheletes gave it to his daughter Pronoia, Princess of Mercury.”

With every word she spoke memories danced through Mamoru’s mind. He was starting to recall who he had been during the Silver Era, the images fast-forwarding to his present life. “Pronoia is Ami,” he said slowly. “She had the Eye of the Universe when I… when Endymion died.” God, he could see it all so clearly. Everyone he had cared about ceased to exist in mere seconds; it hadn’t been fair for him to continue living. Dismissing the regret that welled up, Mamoru focused on the Aspect. “What’s so special about the Eye?”

As an answer Cometa tapped the lid on her mirror. “It is my gift to humankind. All I may see is revealed within.”

Mamoru closed his eyes to make his thoughts coherent. “The Eye reveals our destinies, each potential path leading to our ultimate fate. So Pronoia… Pronoia saw what would happen to us all in Elysium, and she let it happen anyway.” This was a very soul-crushing revelation. “But Hyperion must have seen it too, right? I remember him being desperate to rule Terra. He would have done anything to achieve that goal, even—”

“Kill me,” Usagi finished. Mamoru spun so quickly he almost gave himself whiplash. She hovered beside him wearing one of the beautiful silver gowns owned by Selene; it was surreal to see the two of them fused like that. Usagi took hold of his hand and smiled sadly. “Hyperion was the one who asked the priestess Beryl to kill me.” Mamoru could do nothing to stop his tears as he drew her into a tight embrace. He didn’t know if he was still Mamoru or had regressed to Endymion. He cared for her all the same, would find her no matter her incarnation. He knew that now. Shanta herself said they were soul mates. They belonged together.

“Why are we here, Cometa?” Mamoru and Usagi both looked up in mild surprise to see Nia floating to his left. “You determine our fate, yes? So what is it? What are we meant to do as guardians?”

The Aspect remained straight-faced. “The balance of the universe has begun to shift. It must be
restored.” With that she waved her arm and the whole scene became something entirely different. It was the end of the Silver Era, after the wars had ceased and humanity nearly extinguished itself. Those from the remaining planetary kingdoms gathered on Terra in order to rebuild and made significant progress when a ripple appeared in space, a massive dark planet tearing through it a moment later. The sense of dread was overwhelming.

“Is that Nibiru?” Usagi asked, half in awe.

“This is Tartarus. It comes from the Dark Cloud, the area beyond the Outer Limits of Mar Serenitatis.” The three Earthlings knew that had been the name of the solar system during the Silver Era, not just a crater on the Moon. “Tartarus is full of those who were born in darkness and desire light more than anything else. They came to Mar Serenitatis to steal Helios.”

“That is the celestial body Alectrona rules!” Nia said in dismay. “Clearly they didn’t capture it or she would not have been reincarnated along with us!”

Cometa only gestured for them to watch. Another ripple in space appeared, this one distinctively circular and swirling with non-malignant energy. “Is that a wormhole?” Mamoru gaped. The Aspect didn’t answer, but she didn’t have to. Whatever Tartarus had been hoping to use to transport the Sun collapsed on itself and sucked the dark planet in as well, the intrusion winking out of existence just like that.

“Tartarus has been attempting to steal sources of light for a long time. Every black hole in the universe is an indication of their failure— their portal technology is not stable enough. At the end of the Silver Era they felt confident enough to attack Helios directly, and because of the knowledge they acquired from Plutonian Soul Seers they passed through an alternate dimension in order to make themselves impervious in Mar Serenitatis. But Tartarus was not expecting there to be celestial warriors in the dimension they crossed. Those guardians successfully fended them off, banishing them to the Dark Cloud.”

The trio took a few minutes to ruminate over all they had seen and learned, Nia finishing first. “Tartarus is active again, yes? They want to try capturing the Sun again and began targeting reborn guardians from the Silver Era. Why would they do that if we are not the ones who defeated them the first time around?”

Cometa stared into the distance for a long while, then she shuddered and appeared more tangible, like they could reach out and touch her now. “Guardians, I have been waiting for you to receive the knowledge I already passed on to Alectrona’s reincarnation.” Usagi, Mamoru, and Nia wore the same confused expression. Had she not been addressing them all this time? “Tartarus has acquired the Eye of the Universe and now follows the path to its goal.” She nodded at Nia. “It is as you say, Khamyne– the denizens of Tartarus have begun hunting you so you cannot hinder their progress. Alectrona is in their possession.”

“How do we save her?” Usagi asked, but Mamoru and Nia already knew the answer.

“It is good that you have been reunited with your amulets— they will give you the strength necessary to protect yourselves. But as long as Alectrona is held captive, Mar Serenitatis will not be able to fend off another intrusion from Tartarus. They have only been growing more powerful throughout the millennia you remained asleep.” Cometa’s intact eye traveled in a slow arch as if seeking something above their heads, but all they saw was void. She closed it and began to fade away. “My purpose is to create paths of Destiny leading to your ultimate Fate, yet the choice to walk them is your own. I beseech you, guardians… Choose the path that will lead to the shining future.”

Mamoru, Usagi, and Nia were startled when she abruptly flashed out of existence, a gasp of pain
lingering in the space she had just occupied. “Wh-what was that?” Usagi stuttered.

“She just committed a taboo by hinting at the fate she would like to see fulfilled,” Nia answered, looking upward. “In one of my dreams I learned there are additional Aspects… I believe one of them pulled Cometa away so she would say nothing more to us.” She reached toward a tiny light that began to grow overhead. “We now know the truth. It is time to wake up.”
The way they returned to their physical forms really did feel like waking up. “Well, that was interesting,” Usagi remarked while releasing a loud yawn. “So how the heck are we supposed to save Alectrona from the Dark Cloud baddies?”

“We must kill them,” Nia said, and Usagi’s expression utterly fell. “They have been alive much longer than us and their powers are formidable, but we must destroy them.” The blonde only gave her a look of horror. “There is no other option! Alectrona is the personification of Helios, its protector. The solar system is centered on her. If Tartarus kills Alectrona, Helios will be defenseless. If Tartarus captures Helios, everything in Mar Serenitatis will die.”

It was safe to say no one wanted that to happen. “We need to formulate some sort of plan for dealing with them,” Mamoru diplomatically suggested. “Clearly they can track us down but we can’t do the same, so…” He trailed off, realizing he didn’t have any grand ideas. “So I guess we have to wait for them to come to us.”

“That’s too dangerous!” Usagi refuted. “They trashed our apartment while going after Michiru, they about shot Ami and Mina, and Haruka was almost killed by a tree!”

Nia shook her head at the claims. “Those were constructs doing the bidding of their masters, golems of a sort, not the minions of Tartarus themselves. I was only able to follow their movements because I could sense their intentions. They were perversions of nature.”

Silence permeated the kitchen until Mamoru spoke. “Are we the only ones who saw what Cometa showed us? No one else knows what’s going on?” Nia nodded somberly; the responsibility was all theirs for the time being. “You said you learned of additional Aspects in one of your dreams, right? What are they like?”

“They are… difficult to describe,” Nia answered. “There are ten of them, five that foster life and five that undo it. Cometa is an Aspect of Creation. Tartarus is a spawn of Vocitus, the Aspect of Despair. I didn’t see them all, but I felt them. They affect the entire universe.”

“So it’s light versus dark, life against death…” Usagi had a strange look in her eye. “This is like a real-life video game. We get to be warriors and heroes.”

“Usako, that’s not really—”

“I’m not going to die this time!” she shouted, her visage dimming. “I don’t want to be the useless princess again! I’m not going to let anyone die because of a stupid…” She started sobbing. “A stupid, selfish man who cared about nothing but himself, not even his own family!” Mamoru moved off his stool to hug her; it took a minute for her tears to soak through his shirt. “I didn’t do anything wrong, I just wanted to be with you! And my mother, Iremia, she supported us because she wanted peace in the solar system. Was that really too much to ask for?!”

“Hyperion was a truly arrogant man,” Nia said gently. “I imagine the Eye made him believe he could attain anything he wanted.”

Mamoru agreed with her wholeheartedly. In retrospect, Pronoia’s actions helped subvert the descent into chaos that Hyperion’s takeover of Terra would have ushered. She had chosen the lesser of two evils; he couldn’t resent her for that. Mamoru sighed, looking down at Usagi before facing Nia. “We should do something to prepare for the Dark Cloud’s inevitable attacks.”
She stood up to stretch, elongating herself to near-inhuman proportions. “There is a major fault in the strength of our forces right now.” She cracked one eye to give the boy a slight smirk. “I can sense that the brave men who perished in Elysium before Endymion also have protective amulets awaiting them out in the world. I am going to find them.”

“Good luck,” was all Mamoru could think to say. He had hoped, vainly, that if he didn’t acknowledge his housemates as being the reincarnations of Kunz, Jaden, Zois and Nephriticus, maybe they would be spared from the celestial conflict unfurling about them. He now realized how ignorant it was to believe that. He couldn’t afford to let unfounded pacifism dictate his actions ever again.

Endymion had been so in love with Selene it basically blinded him to everything else. She even told him the Dark Cloud was amassing some kind of force and still he was more concerned with bringing her into his fold than doing anything about it. He could have at least let his father Aitolos know. He should have acted like the prince his people expected him to be instead of running and hiding in Elysium like a damn coward. But Endymion didn’t really care about the outside world. He was so focused on keeping the heart of Terra beating that he took no notice of its decaying body.

Mamoru would be a better leader; he was already much more rooted in the physical world. And as for Usagi… well, now he really wasn’t certain of his feelings for her. Having Endymion awake in his soul was like schizophrenia; Mamoru could hear his voice echoing behind every thought. At the mere mention of Usagi’s name Endymion automatically corrected it to ‘Selene’. ‘But she’s not Selene,’ he kept saying. ‘Selene is gone. You are gone. We’re completely different people.’

“Not so different if you love her,” was the rather snide response. Mamoru finally opened the Introduction to Kundalini Yoga book and began to read. Perhaps with meditation he could learn how to make the Prince stay quiet.

“Jeez, could that movie have been any longer?” Makoto groaned while exiting the IMAX theater. “I hate sitting in one place for so long. I need to run!”

“At least it was a good movie,” Ami said. “I thought it was very realistic.”

“And the cinematography was great,” Zach added.

“Even the secondary characters were developed.”

“And that plot twist in the middle— genius!”

“Okay you nerds,” Joe cut in, “we all thought it was a good movie. But I think it’s safe to say that Makoto isn’t the only one feeling a little restless. The night is still young so let’s find something else to do.”

“We could go dancing or something,” Nicholas suggested. Zach whooped his approval.

Rei wasn’t entirely opposed to it either. “Where would we go? The four of us are too young to drink and you two are too old for Kaelan’s club.”

Zach held up a finger. “That’s true, but all he has to do is tell them to let us in. No one’s gonna say no to the co-owner.” So it was that they ended up in a VIP booth at Club Trillium; Kaelan even offered to cover all the food and drinks they consumed that night. One Matt Lange was guest DJing on the main stage. The sound was deep and dark, too moody for Makoto and Nicholas’ taste, so they headed to the basement for something more upbeat.
As soon as they stepped onto the floor Nicholas thanked numerous deities that everyone had agreed to his idea. He’d been feeling more than antsy as of late and hoped dancing the night away might cure him, plus he had a double curative in the form of Makoto. He remembered how good she looked on Halloween and wondered if she’d lower her barriers enough to actually dance with him. First they had to carve out their own space among the crowd, which was easy for Nicholas since he was the bulkiest person in the room. Makoto followed him closely so she wouldn’t get stuck as he headed to the far rear corner. “You struck me as an up-front-by-the-dj kind of guy,” she spoke, though not nearly as loudly as she expected to.

“I like being able to actually hear,” Nicholas returned with a grin. “Plus you get reverb back here.” Makoto just laughed and put her hands up to the progressive house track filling her ears, closing her eyes as she grooved. The music washed over her right away, carrying her into the same sea of sound everyone else heard, but as Nicholas focused on her he noticed something different about the way she moved. It was absolutely effortless, liquid even, like Makoto was alone with the music without a care in the world as to who saw her. The longer he watched the more he came to believe the music existed solely for her. She was so free from her reservations it was like she never had any at all. ‘Maybe she needed this as much as me.’

Something with a crunchy bassline came on and the crowd surged forward to devour it. But Makoto and Nicholas stayed right where they were, almost alone in the back of the room. “Wow, this is different!” the girl exclaimed.

Nicholas narrowed his eyes at the DJ. “I think I know this song…” He waited for the distinct melody to kick in. “I shared this on my SoundCloud last week!”

“Weird!” Makoto paid for a premium account on the streaming site so she could hoard work-out tracks. She’d ask for his username when they left. “I like this. You have good taste.”

“Thanks!” he beamed. It felt nice having his preferred genres validated. He mostly kept them to himself after Mina said he listened to funky music, and this came from a girl who frequently belted out Björk in a very dramatic soprano. When the next song transitioned in, the Arty remix of ‘King’ by Years & Years, Nicholas grew even more suspicious of the DJ since he’d reposted that too, and then came Seven Lions’ festival anthem ‘Falling Away’. ‘This is way too coincidental,’ he thought. Eventually there was a break in the set and he made a beeline for the turntables as everyone headed upstairs to refuel. “Hey bru,” he said, earning the man’s attention. “You got a site where I can grab this mix?”

“I just posted it on SoundCloud. I’m part of the Smashing Tunes collective.” Well that explained a lot: Nicholas followed their feed. The DJ grinned when he realized what was going on. “Thanks for the support, man. Is that your girl behind you?”

Nicholas glanced over his shoulder at Makoto, who waved. Not all women could make a pair of fitted jeans and a ruched top look like perfectly acceptable clubbing attire, but she certainly did. “I wish,” he furtively replied.

The DJ laughed. “Don’t worry man, the second set is full of stuff that’ll help you get on that. I know what the ladies want to hear– sexy, melodic trance. I got tons of new releases lined up.”

“Looking forward to it.” Nicholas gave him an appreciative nod before he and Makoto went to hydrate. Even though he had some money on his person he was thankful Kaelan was covering their drinks, enabling him to order a $10 mock Blue Hawaiian compared to Makoto’s $4 Lava Flow. She didn’t even hesitate to trade straws with him, a sure sign that her barricades were still down. He prayed for the tact to keep it that way.
“Have you heard from your folks lately?” she inquired. “Christmas is in a couple weeks.”

Nicholas groaned. “They called me the other day. I forgot I need to go present shopping for them.”

Makoto thought it was nice that he sent gifts since he couldn’t visit. “What did you get them last year?”

“Shot glasses. They like collecting them, plus they were cheap to ship. I have no idea what to send this year.”

“There’s a really cool culinary boutique not far from my place. I could go with you to find something. And if it’s… on the spendy side…” she said carefully, “I can help out.”

Gratitude glittered in his eyes. “Thanks a lot. Being a broke uni student sucks.”

She tried to wave it off. “The only reason I have extra cash is because our rent is split three ways.”

Crap, that sounded bad too since Nicholas didn’t pay rent like the other guys living in Kaelan’s house. “I mean, I’m pretty good with money in general… unless there’s a denim sale at Nordstrom.”

There, self-deprecating humor had to smooth things out. “Oh!” she exclaimed, startling him and several other people seated nearby, “You have a SoundCloud, right? I do too!”

“Oh!” he grinned. “I had no idea.” They both brought out their phones to add each other.

Nicholas admired her profile picture, a rear shot of putting her hair up in preparation for handling Serious Business. Makoto tried not to giggle at his because it was a selfie mimicking The Rock’s signature eyebrow-raise. Nicholas chewed his lip while browsing her page, discovering she reposted lots and lots of trance artists he’d never heard of with the occasional remix of a pop song. Most of her playlists were trance albums from the early 2000’s as well, and they must have been pretty elusive because there were a bunch of comments thanking her for uploading them. “This is the kind of stuff you train with?” he asked.

“Generally, yeah. It helps me work hard and fast.”

Saying those words together was not conducive to quelling his imagination. “Nice. Well, wanna go back?”

Makoto pounded down the rest of her drink. “I’m ready for round two! Bring it on, DJ!”

Nicholas found her carefree attitude totally endearing. ‘Is this the real her? Is this how she is when she doesn’t feel the need to protect herself from anyone?’ The notion that Makoto felt safe around him made heat blossom in his chest.

Round two started off with a track called ‘Runaway’ released the year before, vocals provided by a breathy female singer Nicholas thought was quite good. Since he gave Makoto his undivided attention he noticed her mouthing the lyrics more than the actual words. She was doing that thing again where she allowed herself to be swept up by haunting melodies and powerful synths and taken to some higher plane of existence Nicholas wanted to experience for himself. Maybe… maybe it was safe to ask permission to put his hands on her, if only for the opportunity to feel a fraction of what she did. Was it something that could even be shared?

Makoto’s eyes popped open when a hand landed on her arm. Nicholas gave her an expression she’d never seen before, an odd combination of hope and guilt. She tilted her head.

‘What is it? What do you want?’ His sepia eyes traveled down her body and back up, and it was a good thing her pulse was already racing because she might have died of embarrassment if he noticed how a simple look like that affected her. She invited him in with the slightest of nods, crossing her arms behind his neck.
as he stepped up to her. His stance was wide enough for her to avoid treading on his feet, and his hands lightly rested on her hips so as not to impede their sensual figure-eights. That was how she moved, twisting and shifting in time to the melody. It wasn’t the beat that provided the journey but melodies and harmonies, break-downs and build-ups.

Clearly this genre was the DJ’s forte. His transitions were flawless and he knew how to maintain the energy of the room, guiding his audience on an absolutely masterful expedition. Makoto allowed herself to become lost in the sounds flowing into her head and through her body. Nicholas was right behind her, literally, moving in such perfect sync it felt like they had become one person. He pressed his cheek to hers, chin fitted in the curve of her neck, hands pushing up her shirt to feel her soft, sweaty skin and sinuous abdomen. When his fingertips reached her bra they fell back down her midsection and slid into her jeans, fondling her jutting hips. Makoto felt his arousal and just couldn’t ignore the stupid little insecure thought that Nicholas wasn’t really attracted to her, he’d been seduced by the atmosphere instead.

It was at this exact moment Makoto asked herself why she had never allowed a man get close to her before. Her excuse had always been that she didn’t want to be like Usagi and let anyone change her, make her dependent on them, or whittle away her self-confidence. But Usagi was not that girl anymore, so it was wrong for Makoto to keep comparing herself to someone who no longer existed. It was wrong for her to generalize and assume that all men would treat her the same. It was wrong for her to keep believing she didn’t deserve love because anyone she cared about would pass away like her parents, leaving her all alone in the world.

From the second she met Nicholas he had been nothing but kind. He kept giving to her without expecting anything in return. She’d never heard him deride someone in any capacity. Nicholas truly was a genuine nice guy. He treated her like a goddess and being in his arms really made her feel like one, too. He was holding her so tightly like he never wanted her to go anywhere without him. She couldn’t deny that they had a lot in common, they did have chemistry, and he had openly admitted he wouldn’t be opposed to having a family. It was the one thing Makoto wanted more than anything else in the world, the only true life goal she set for herself. In order to achieve it she had to find someone she loved and allow them to love her back.

Being the ice queen she was it had taken a while for Nicholas’ flame to thaw the walls around her heart, but he held it steady and didn’t offer it to anyone else. Tonight it was blazing, consuming her slowly. If Makoto threw herself into it, it would become an inferno that consumed her entirely.

The last song in the set was a fantastic remix of Dash Berlin’s ‘Shelter’ that Makoto hadn’t heard before, so energizing that no one was really upset when the last note faded and the overhead lights became a single color, a soft hue illuminating the way out. Midnight struck and Trillium officially closed. Fellow music-lovers streamed along the sidewalk, heading for taxis, parental chauffeurs, or their own rides in the parking garage across the street. “Meet us out front,” Nicholas texted to Zach.

“He better. I definitely can’t afford a cab to Shoreline.” He blew out a breath in an attempt to unwind and stop thinking about how perfectly Makoto’s body fit against his own. Looking at her did not
assist that endeavor.

“Well, it’s cold as shit out here so you’ll have to excuse me for not really wanting to hang around in front of an empty building while we wait for Zach.” She smirked. “Just tell him to pick you up at our apartment, and then gloat about how he doesn’t get delicious tea for abandoning you.”

Nicholas chuckled as the two of them made their way along the waterfront. Trillium was about ten blocks from Elliott Bay Apartments and the walk did some good by ensuring he wasn’t hard as a rock by the time Makoto unlocked the door to her cozy abode. They both hung up their coats, then she put a teapot on a burner before disappearing into her bedroom to change out of her sweat-drenched clothes, Nicholas wishing he were so lucky. Instead he ducked into the little bathroom to wash his face. It was saturated with scents of feminine haircare products and body wash, and there were tons of small perfume bottles on one of the shelves beside the sink. Were any of them Makoto’s? The only scent he’d been able to pick up earlier was the strawberry and coconut combo of the Lava Flow on her lips.

“So what kind of tea do you like?” she queried, and he hurriedly rejoined her in the kitchen. “Rooibos, as Minako tells me?”

“I could do with a cup of earl grey,” he replied, sounding very British just then.

Makoto eyed the cupboard before glancing at him sidelong. “Do you like London Fog? I just learned how to make a really good one. Well, ‘good’ by Usagi’s very lax standards.”

London Fog was something Nicholas’ father drank religiously despite the South African climate and the fact that he was Welsh and not English. “I’d love one,” Nicholas said. He tried getting a good look at her exact method for crafting the latte, but she mostly had her back to him so his eyes kept drifting down to her posterior alluringly presented in Victoria’s Secret lounge shorts.

What else does she own from there?’ Nicholas pinched his wrist under the table. It certainly seemed like his second brain was doing all the thinking tonight.

Makoto set the steaming grey beverage before him while clutching her own green tea, anxiously awaiting his verdict. Nicholas’s eyes widened dramatically upon first sip. “What did you put in this?” he lowly inquired.

“Um, well, I used almond milk because that’s all we have… I know it adds an earthy flavor. The vanilla syrup is something I make myself with beans from Madagascar—Michiru uses it in her coffee. And there’s a dash of nutmeg on top.” Nutmeg was her secret ingredient in pretty much everything.

“It’s amazing,” Nicholas declared, gulping down half the latte.

Relief washed over her as she claimed the armchair in the living room. “You can come sit in here if you want. Just try not to spill.” He accepted the offer, getting comfortable on the sofa amid its plush pillows. Luna cautiously entered his proximity, sniffing him thoroughly while he sat motionless. “She’s so weird, watch,” Makoto whispered, waiting for the inevitable blep-and-run she did to Mamoru every time he came over. Sure enough, her tiny pink tongue darted out to lick Nicholas’ free hand before she dashed to Michiru’s room with a chirrup. She had hidden during the time they spent at the mansion so none of the boys had really gotten the chance to be around her. Here, though, Luna’s blep-and-run was a rite of passage for visitors.

“Never met a cat I actually liked ‘til now,” Nicholas admitted. “I’m more of a dog person.”

Makoto smiled. “I like dogs too, but not little yappy ones like the neighbor has.”
“Of course, they’re basically rats.” They shared a small laugh at that, glad they had yet another thing in common. Dogs, music, culinary expertise, nutrition, exercise, honesty… and a distinct lack of courage when it came to stating their feelings for one another. ‘I need to say something,’ Nicholas thought, ‘but what if she really doesn’t like me at all?’

‘I need to tell him,’ Makoto thought, ‘but what if he’s just been being nice this whole time?’ Both of their mouths opened and they stopped speaking as soon as they heard the other. The girl recovered first. “Go ahead.”

“Ag, ehm…” Nicholas glanced into his empty mug. “Can I have some of whatever you got?”

“Green tea? Sure.” The way Makoto rose from the armchair was nothing short of unfailingly graceful. “Do you want me to add anything? It’s kind of bitter by itself. I like it with strawberry syrup sometimes.”

“That sounds good, thanks.” Nicholas scolded himself for continually asking her to dote on him. “Wait, I’ll get it.” He all but leaped into the kitchen even though it was only five paces away. Makoto turned in surprise as he collided with her, the majority of her beverage splashing all over them. “Eina! Sorry, sorry!”

She blushed. “It’s fine! I’ll just rinse our clothes and throw them in the dryer.” She pulled off her hoodie as Nicholas tugged on the back of his shirt, then they both froze at the sight of toned abs on display.

Nicholas held his breath as Makoto made the two steps it took to reach him. She placed her palm on his stomach and he closed his eyes to the sensation of her hand gliding across his skin, fingers spreading as she reached his pectorals. They lingered there for a moment, then she grabbed the hem of his shirt and removed it completely, exposing his resounding heart. “Makoto, I…” Nicholas cleared the gravel from his throat. “I really like you. I know you don’t date, but if you give me a chance I swear I’ll be the best boyfriend in the world. Please…” Her viridian eyes searched his countenance for any signs of falsehood. “I promise I won’t hurt you.”

“I know,” Makoto said, and the words had never sounded truer.

At that the fire in Nicholas’ chest burst forth to incinerate them both. Within seconds he had picked Makoto up, sat her on the counter, and attacked her lips with such fervor that her mind almost went spinning off into another dimension. But the feel of his hands on her body, the burning trails he left on her skin, quickly brought her back to reality. She accepted his kisses in a manner that could only be described as ravenous; she had been starved all her life and knew he could sate her. Her head dropped back to give him access to her neck, lips and tongue white-hot until he arrived at her collarbone where he promptly stopped, panting, fevered forehead on her shoulder. “Nicholas…”

He righted himself at the worry in her tone. “Zach’s coming to get me. I don’t want to start something that can’t be finished tonight.”

Makoto didn’t want that either, but the notion of ‘starting something’ was difficult to dismiss since she had the apartment all to herself. Usagi was with Mamoru and Michiru was staying with her producer friends to work on some ultra-secret project. But she still had to wash two articles of clothing and the call of domestic duty couldn’t go unanswered. “You’re right, we should stop.” His hold on her hadn’t loosened at all. “I don’t know if I’m even ready for… you.” Her eyes darted to his crotch. Since he’d been grinding on her for several hours Makoto could tell he was rather well-endowed, and that was kind of daunting given her status as a virgin. She frowned slightly in an attempt to look serious. “I want to take things slow.”
“Yes, right, of course…” Nicholas stepped away, picking his shirt up off the floor. “I came on way too strong just now.”

“Well, that’s something I like about you.” She plucked the henley from his grasp, smiling. “That you’re strong. I’m not a delicate flower or anything.”

Nicholas laced his fingers behind his neck and directed a prayer for restraint at the ceiling. Makoto basically just said she wouldn’t mind if he man-handled her which made him envision tossing her onto beds, shoving her against walls, and not being very gentle when it came to removing her clothes, although he didn’t want to rip anything on purpose like a certain landlord he knew. He wasn’t made of money and couldn’t easily replace undergarments that became casualties in the quest for an orgasm. “Sooo…” he said, breathing deeply, “We’re together now, and Christmas is coming. What do you want?”

“Just to be happy,” Makoto answered from the laundry nook. “But since you’re here, I already got my present.”
**Fallen Tides**

Friday was already Hotaru’s favorite day of the week, but this particular Friday was special because it marked the beginning of winter break. That meant two whole weeks without being jostled in the halls. Two weeks without eating alone in the cafeteria or listening to people talk about her ‘weird food’. Two blessed weeks she could devote to focusing her visions instead of wasting the day in classes that hadn’t held meaning since Usagi and Mamoru showed up at her doorstep and left her with a beautiful sapphire necklace, a symbol of her status as a guardian.

But her mother had been right about the amulet enhancing her Third Eye. Hotaru’s dreams were clearer now, but the sapphire also had the unexpected effect of allowing other people’s thoughts to trickle into her mind. Most of the time it was white noise she could ignore, but when the thoughts concerned her specifically it was impossible not to catch them. Being able to hear everything that people didn’t have the guts to say to her face made her sullen. She didn’t really have any friends to begin with and she soon discovered that some peers were not who they appeared to be. For instance, as she changed into her P.E. clothes several girls who seemed very confident in themselves made silent wishes for their bodies to look like hers. They were pretty and popular, so it surprised her to learn they harbored such insecurities.

The sadistic P.E. teacher thought it would be a good idea to make his class do a two-mile run in 40-degree overcast weather, but Hotaru was prepared. She wore sweat pants and a fleece hoodie, plus a cashmere ear warmer Shanta had knitted earlier in the month. She received a lot of genuine compliments on it which made her smile despite the fact that her cheeks were flushed and stinging from the cold. She maintained a steady pace, concentrating on her breathing and the desire to just keep moving forward and get this over with since she’d be free as soon as the clock struck 2:30.

Hotaru took no notice of the fact that she had become a front-runner of her class, joining athletes from the football, basketball, and track teams. “Good job, Moe!” the teacher yelled, snapping her out of her trance. Apparently she only had two laps left. She lengthened her stride, her breath becoming visible in the chilly air as she bore down on the person in the lead. ‘Who’s that?’ the boy wondered, glancing over his shoulder. ‘Holy crap, it’s Hotaru!’ She smirked a little. He was Tyler Fontaine, varsity quarterback despite only being a sophomore. He was built like a Mr. Universe contestant, over six feet tall and nothing but muscle from his chin down. According to locker room gossip he was very desirable, and she supposed his Calvin Klein-model looks were enough for most girls, but Hotaru cared way more about the inner workings of a person than their outward appearance. ‘How’d she catch up to me? She’s tiny! I could lift her with one arm!’

Hotaru had intended to pass Tyler but matched his pace when she heard his thoughts. For one, he knew her name and had pronounced it correctly whereas mostly everyone referred to her as ‘Moe’. It had been her experience that introducing herself in the traditional Japanese manner tended to confuse Americans, and both her Japanese and Thai given names didn’t have any English phonetic equivalents, so Moe had stuck. And yes, Hotaru was very tiny by comparison, but he should have realized that her catching him wasn’t so far-fetched since she had little body fat weighing her down.

“Wanna race?” Tyler suddenly inquired, shooting her a grin that probably made other girls melt.

“What?” Hotaru blinked at him. One of the most popular boys in her grade was talking to her.

“To the finish line,” he added. “There’s exactly half a lap left. Think you can beat me?”

“I don’t know. I wasn’t trying to outrun you or anything.” His mind was so giddy with the thought of racing her that it threw Hotaru off completely.
Tyler laughed. “If you do, I’ll cover your lunch for a week when we get back from break.”

Oh, so he just wanted to make a bet for the sake of competition. “What if you win?” she asked.

“Then you let me walk with you afterward.”

His random interest in her made no sense at all, but the idea of saving money on lunch was kind of appealing. “Deal,” Hotaru said, and prepared herself as they arrived at the half-mile mark. The boy to her left instantly sprinted ahead but it was the kind of burst typical of a quarterback, one that didn’t endure. But Hotaru was small, light, and much more aerodynamic, so she ended up passing him exactly ten feet before the finish line. As she came to a stop, gasping for air to cool her heated lungs, she heard peers cheering her for winning the silly competition, and with it she had also claimed the fastest two-mile time in her class.

“That was amazing,” Tyler praised. “Why aren’t you on the track team?”

Hotaru aimed her dark eyes at the ground. “I’m not really into stuff like that.” B-average student, no club or team activities, no worthwhile achievements. She purposely wanted to remain as unremarkable as possible. Her high school career didn’t matter in the grand scheme of things.

“That’s cool, sports aren’t for everyone.” He looked a bit bashful then. “Can I still walk with you, to your main locker at least? Carry your textbooks? Do you get picked up or ride the bus?”

Hotaru faltered beneath the questions. “My mom picks me up… Why are you even talking to me all of a sudden?”

The suspicious edge to her tone didn’t faze him in the least. “I wanted to ask you about Mrs. Watanabe’s art class. I’m thinking about taking it next semester.”

“How do you know I have that class?”

He shrugged, a huge motion. “The team captain is dating her daughter. She has it third period, same as you.”

“Oh,” she said. She didn’t pay any attention to the football team but she was acquainted with Mrs. Watanabe’s daughter Kylie. Hotaru freshened up quickly after the grueling two-mile run, rejoining Tyler at the entrance to the gym. “So, do you draw or paint or anything?” she asked.

“I started messing around with charcoal pencils. My aunt got me a set for my birthday,” he explained. Hotaru noticed that literally everyone moved out of their way as they headed to her locker. “I don’t really know what I’m doing, though. So far I’ve only figured out how to achieve a gradient with the paper thingy.”

“That’s called a blending stick,” Hotaru gently corrected, eliciting a laugh, but at least he knew what a gradient was. Tyler held out his hands for her to set her textbooks on, carrying them effortlessly under his arm as they exited to the pick-up and drop-off area, discussing technique all the while. Shanta waved from her inconspicuous sedan, eyes widening when she realized the hulking young man beside Hotaru was really accompanying her. “Thanks for handling my books,” Hotaru said, smiling as she accepted the heavy stack.

“No problem. Thanks for convincing me to join the class next semester. You’ll still be in it, right?” His hopeful expression made her fidget.

“Yes, I should be. My only other elective will be choir.”
“Alright,” Tyler grinned. “See you after break, Hotaru. Merry Christmas and happy New Year.” He lifted a hand in parting and jogged over to a school bus.

Shanta didn’t say anything until they’d left the school. “Who was that very cute boy?”

“Tyler Fontaine,” Hotaru answered flatly. “He has P.E. with me. We were talking about him wanting to join the traditional art class.” Shanta made a sound of intrigue. “Don’t even go there, Mom. I don’t want a boyfriend. I hardly even know him.”

“I wasn’t going to say anything of the sort,” she stated. “It simply appeared like you two were getting along quite well. He could become your first real friend.”

“I doubt I’d fit into his circle,” she muttered.

“Then form your own circle with him.” Hotaru went “meh” as she stared out the window. “Perhaps it will encourage you to know that I bought tickets to see that violinist you like so much.”

“Kaiou Michiru?!” the girl squeaked, “At Benaroya? When?”

“Tonight at seven. There were a few seats left since it’s a weekday, but I thought this could be a special early Christmas present.” She smiled as Hotaru practically bounced with excitement. Once home she raced upstairs to her loft bedroom, any notion of finishing vacation homework way out of sight and mind. Shanta spent an hour organizing her client files before changing into a black evening gown. She transferred her long hair into a neat bun, then affixed a simple tikka inlaid with green sapphires, a treasure from her homeland. She completed her Indo-western look with a faux fur shrug.

“Hotaru, are you ready yet?” the woman called. “We must go now if we want to be on time.” Hotaru appeared on the landing and struck a pose. She wore a one-shoulder violet cocktail dress with a ruffled skirt. Her heels were of the costume variety, strappy and black with purple rhinestones, and all of her wavy hair had been combed to one side, the deep side part secured with bejeweled bobby pins. “Are you trying to upstage Michiru?”

“I don’t look that fancy!” Hotaru protested, but she was radiant as she came down the stairs.

Once they had arrived at Benaroya Hall, handed the sedan off to a valet, and loitered in the vestibule for what seemed an eon, the auditorium doors opened and everyone eagerly made their way to their seats. The curtains parted and two spotlights met on stage, highlighting Michiru while she strode to her short circular pedestal as if walking on water, the teal gown rippling around her. She bowed, placed her violin beneath her chin, and the audience collectively held its breath until the first notes of Niels W. Gade’s ‘Capriccio’ in A minor began lilting over them.

Haruka was more than annoyed at the way no one seemed to notice her crutches. She wasn’t exactly hard to miss so she assumed everyone was either being intentionally rude because she was disabled, or simply oblivious. Given the amount of complementary wine and champagne the latter seemed more likely. She had politely refused a glass someone offered her, not because she couldn’t in good conscience accept free alcohol before becoming of legal drinking age but because she didn’t want anything to dampen the performance. It had been a few years since she last saw the Stradivarius named Marina and she looked forward to hearing its more mature voice commanded by Michiru’s virtuosic hand.

To be honest, Haruka lost herself in the grand sweep of the first three concertos. ‘These Scandinavians really know how to compose,’ she thought while taking a peek at the program. Johan Agrell’s ‘Violin Concerto’ in D major currently resonated around her. It was fifteen minutes long but didn’t seem to end; each section effortlessly flowed into the next, and she only opened her eyes once
applause filled the hall. Of course Michiru deserved it. She used to be unable to hold Haruka’s attention for more than a few minutes at a time, but now she didn’t want the music to end.

Haruka waited until everyone else in her row had left to seek refreshments before hobbling out on her crutches. There was a lot of swing in her gait due to the cast; because of it she had opted to wear a pantsuit instead of a dress, which she generally disliked anyway. Some people gave her double-takes as she waited in the beverage line. Was she a femininely-dressed man or a masculine-looking woman? Haruka herself didn’t always know. Upon procuring a bottle of water she hobbled over to the wall and gratefully leaned against it, the crutches taking a toll on her muscles despite her weight training regimen, and listened to the idle chatter around her. Everyone was praising Michiru’s ability, saying this was the best concert they’ve been to all year, wondering what she’ll do next…

“Um, excuse me,” said a nearby voice. Haruka’s eyes snapped open and looked down at the teenager standing before her. She wasn’t very tall even in heels but she was also as thin as a rail. Haruka raised an eyebrow when the girl pointed at her chest. “Where did you get that necklace?”

The blonde glanced at the briolette amethyst pendant that had mysteriously appeared in her hospital bed. She wanted to ask Michiru how it got there but their face time was limited to in-person visits due to the fact that Haruka’s cell phone had been crushed in the crash. “I’m not really sure,” she answered. “It just showed up while I was in the hospital.”

“Are you that racecar driver who got hurt last month?” the girl then asked. “I saw it on the news. It has to be you– you have the same hair.”

Haruka reflexively ran a hand through her blonde locks. “Yeah, I’m Haruka Tenou. Do you want an autograph or something?”

The girl shook her head. “No, I was just wondering… Well, it’s complicated.”

“Out with it, kid.”

Now she glared. “My name is Hotaru, not ‘kid’, and I’m only four years younger than you so don’t patronize me.” Haruka was taken aback by her audacity. “I want to know where you got the necklace because I’m pretty sure it’s the reason why I can hear your thoughts so clearly.”

Haruka scoffed. “Are you for real?”

“Seriously! You think Michiru looks very beautiful tonight, and her playing has improved so much since high school, and you hope there’s a chance to accompany her on the piano again presuming you decide to stick around Seattle.” Haruka waved her hands as Hotaru offered a smug little grin, lowering her voice. “These necklaces were only given to certain people. Did you get it from Usagi?”

The name rang a bell. “She’s one of Michiru’s roommates but I’ve never met her. Not while I was conscious, at least.”

Hotaru nodded sagely. “Well, that means you’re a planetary guardian like me, my mom, and Michiru.” She then eyed Haruka interestingly. “Since you have history with her, maybe you could help us arrange a get-together?”

“I guess I can try,” Haruka mused. “I don’t have a VIP pass or anything, but I’m sure no one’s going to forcibly stop me from looking for her.” After divining Michiru’s location from a few stagehands she went right into the preparation room backstage without even knocking.

“Haruka!” Michiru exclaimed, throwing her arms around her neck, “You actually came!”
“I said I’d be here even if I had to roll up in a wheelchair,” she replied, hugging the violinist with one arm.

“You don’t seem much better off on those crutches!” Michiru pulled back to meet her eyes, her own sparkling, until someone cleared their throat. “Oh, where are my manners? These are my friends from Cornish, Matthew and Samuel. Matt is a producer and Sam plays all kinds of instruments. Guys, this is a very dear friend from Mugen Academy.”

The boys had been surprised by Haruka’s brusque entrance but composed themselves and shook hands. Shanta and Hotaru then stepped forward. “Hi, Michiru,” the girl said shyly. “I’m Hotaru and this is my mom, Shanta. I really enjoyed the concert tonight, especially the Jean Sibelius piece. You were beyond amazing.”

Michiru smiled warmly, idly reaching for her aquamarine pendant. “Thank you for those kind words, Hotaru…” She trailed off when the girl made the exact same movement at the exact same time. A frown turned her lips as she glanced between the pair, a spark of familiarity igniting in her memory. Where had she seen these dark guardians before? ‘Guardians?’ she then questioned, for it was an odd word choice.

“Are we still going back to my place for celebratory drinks?” Matthew inquired, ending the awkward silence.

“Yes, of course,” Michiru answered, shaking her head. “Haruka, Shanta, Hotaru, I would be honored if you joined us.”

The guest trio ended up trailing a limousine into the heart of the city where Matthew’s family’s penthouse was located. “So she’s friends with rich kids now,” Haruka muttered. “That’s fitting.”

“Don’t worry, there’s still a special place for you in her heart,” Hotaru said. “Even if I couldn’t hear either of your thoughts it’s pretty obvious the two of you have intimate history.” Haruka turned slightly pink at that as Shanta told her to stop poking around in other people’s minds. “I can’t help it, Mom. Their thoughts are crystal-clear as if I formed them myself.”

“That doesn’t mean you need to use your insight to embarrass Haruka or Michiru,” Shanta chastised.

Hotaru’s expression fell. “Am I making you uncomfortable, Haruka-san? I’m sorry.”

“No, it’s fine. I’ve been called every name under the sun for a queer woman, so simply being known as ‘Michiru’s former lover’ is totally fine.” Hotaru took that as an invitation to ask a few more non-invasive personal questions, fascinated by the fact that Haruka had found success in the male-dominated field of rallycross. They were laughing and getting along quite well when the unthinkable happened. A truck barged into the intersection, ramming the limo and trapping it between the brush guard and a light post. Shanta brought her car to a sudden stop as all three occupants sat and stared at the collision.

The driver of the pickup stepped down. It was a woman wearing a dark blue jacket, leather pants, and knee-high boots. They were too far away to discern her facial features but they were able to see the long, curved swords on her back. She approached the crushed side of the limo, effortlessly ripping the door off and flinging it away, revealing the terrified forms of Michiru and Samuel. Matthew appeared to be unconscious. “Get out, get out, get out!” Hotaru shouted, beating Haruka’s and her mother’s shoulders with her small hands. Forgetting her crutches, Haruka stumbled from the car, clinging to the side for support. As she leaned across the hood, wincing in pain, the sword-bearing woman lifted Michiru out of the limo and held her in the air like a rag doll.
“Let go of me!” Michiru cried, clawing at the hands with her long nails.

The woman only sneered at her. “I don’t think so, Thalassa. You were lucky to escape my minion before, but that witch isn’t here to save you now. This time I’m going to make sure you die.” The hand tightened around Michiru’s neck, cutting off her air supply. She no longer thought about why this was even happening; she just wanted to live, and to do that she had to fight back. She began by kicking wildly, successfully striking the side of her captor’s knee. The woman cried out, released her, and stumbled away. Michiru landed awkwardly in her heels. “There’s the look I was hoping for,” the woman smirked, “but I can tell your strength is only a fraction of what it used to be. Without it you don’t have a chance at survival!”

“Why don’t you quit gloating and tell me who you are?” Michiru demanded.

The woman’s eyes widened while her pupils constricted, turning her countenance even more maniacal. She drew herself up and unsheathed the swords, gripping one in each hand. “My name is Salacia, and these blades are going to ensure you never forget it.” The next instant she dashed forward, weapons raised to slice Michiru in two.

“No!” Hotaru cried, reaching for the virtuoso. She was not expecting Salacia to gradually slow down until she halted altogether, posed like some kind of dynamic statue. Shanta and Haruka stared in disbelief while Hotaru could only ogle her outspread fingers.

“Members of the Outer Alliance!” Everyone glanced around to find the source of the high, clear voice. A small black shape approached from the opposite side of the intersection, a cat that ran right up to Hotaru and placed its paws on her leg. “I’m glad to see you’ve begun to awaken, but I wish it had been under different circumstances! Michiru, could you come here?”

“Luna?” she gawked. “You… you’re speaking! Am I dreaming or something?”

The cat bobbed her head. “Yes, I can speak, and you are regretfully not dreaming. Salacia does indeed intend to kill you.” Luna jumped onto the hood of Shanta’s car where she sat primly. “Now then, I believe each of you has an amulet in your possession?” The four women reflexively touched them. “This is your fight, Michiru, but it will be good for the rest of you to get accustomed to your celestial forms. What you do is say the name of your planet followed by ‘Millennium Power, Release’. Give it a try.”

“Our planets?” Shanta repeated. “How do we determine them?”

“They are designated by your Zodiac signs,” Luna answered.

She looked down at the black opal glittering on her chest, then closed her eyes. “Pluto Millennium Power, Release,” she said evenly. Shanta was not expecting her necklace to release a swell of energy and wrap her in a protective auric layer. A feeling of dread began to well up but she embraced it, knowing this was how her enemies felt when they gazed upon her. Clad in titanium armor as black as night, her iridescent gown winking like thousands of eyes in the shadows, the reincarnation of Princess Cora was an intimidating sight to behold.

Hotaru could feel power radiating off her adoptive mother and wanted to experience it for herself. “Saturn Millennium Power, Release!” the girl shouted. Her transformation was much slower and subtler. She grew slightly taller, her features wizened, and grains of silver sand landed upon her skin to form an ensemble of innumerable tightly-linked chains. When she opened her eyes all traces of Hotaru were gone, replaced by a stoic individual who viewed the world through a callous lavender gaze. She had become Princess Moira, she who manipulated the strings of Time.
Hotaru held out a hand toward Haruka, her fingers moving minutely. “What are you doing?” the blonde asked, gasping as the sharpest of pains arose and her broken bones fused with an audible grinding sound. Haruka took several deep, recovering breaths before tapping her cast, then gave it a harder whack. “You healed me?”

“Child’s play,” Hotaru said, shrugging.

Haruka rested weight on her leg. It didn’t hurt at all but she couldn’t exactly take the cast off, and if she went to the hospital to have it removed they’d ask how she healed so quickly. Putting those worries aside for now, she gripped her amulet. “Uranus Millennium Power, Release.” Wind blasted her, almost knocking her over, but she held her ground until it calmed and swirled playfully around her. Haruka felt more like a knight than a princess in her etched platinum breastplate over a cloth tunic and leggings. She wore sky blue thigh-length boots and matching long gloves, and her limbs were protected by articulated armor.

“It is your turn,” Luna said to Michiru. “Are you prepared to embrace your destiny?”

“I thought it was just to become a world-renowned violin player…” Michiru muttered. Couldn’t they leave the scene, contact the police, and have the woman arrested? A little voice told her that Salacia would just keep hunting her down, stalking her through the streets of Seattle until trapping her in the shadows beneath some viaduct. Dismissing that image, Michiru placed her palms on her chest and said in a strong, clear voice, “Neptune Millennium Power, Release!”

At first she didn’t feel anything while the other three stared at her expectantly. She gasped as she was suddenly yanked down into a cold, dark void. The pressure increased, hurting her ears, and then she was free, gasping for air. She wore a breezy teal high-low dress and macramé sandals. Spiraling armlets went all the way from her wrists to her shoulders. There was a crochet wrap around her hips embroidered with seashells, pearls, and glass beads, and atop her head sat a spiked coral crown, clearly denoting her status as the Lady of the Sea.

“Are you ready?” Hotaru asked, hands poised toward Salacia.

“I don’t even know how to fight her!” Michiru helplessly replied. But that wasn’t true; she felt a faint tugging sensation around her feet, like lapping waves as she stood on the shore. In this form she had complete mastery over the ocean and could command it just like the conductor of an orchestra. She nodded and Hotaru flicked her wrist, removing Salacia from stasis. Michiru flexed her fingers as the woman crashed into the limo, glancing around furiously, then her eyes landed on the violinist and she smirked.

“It’s been a long time since I’ve seen you like that, Thalassa. I hope this means you’re prepared to die with some dignity.”

“I don’t remember you posturing so much, Salacia,” she returned. The swordswoman stalked toward her but leaped back when the manhole cover in the intersection flew off, gushing water. Whatever Michiru envisioned became reality; her seawater obeyed by forming a column and striking Salacia in the chest, throwing her into a building. The woman sputtered, flung wet hair off her face and snarled, dashing forward yet again. But her swords were angled differently, and Michiru wasn’t expecting a white crescent to come flying at her. She was slow to dodge it and got hit in the side, the impact making her cry out. As she was struck the crescent shattered, scattering across the ground to where her allies stood.

“Is that salt?” Haruka knelt to pick up a few granules and, after a moment’s hesitation, put one on her tongue. “It’s sea salt!” she confirmed.
“Salacia is the Roman name for the goddess of the sea,” Luna provided. “She was exiled from Neptune for attempting to murder the queen, Doris—she has always desired to be in a position of power. Salacia was on Tartarus when they attempted to abduct Helios, but thankfully they were fended off by brave celestial guardians.”

Haruka was about to mention that nothing Luna said made any sense, like she should even try finding the logic in a talking cat at this point. Images of a fierce battle flickered through her mind. She saw a dry, cracked plain dotted with misshapen humanoidos emerging from a column of malignant energy. There were people on the ground fighting against the monsters, at least a dozen of them wielding unique weapons. No two looked alike so Haruka assumed they had converged to fight off the shadowy figures from all across the globe. A newly-awakened sixth sense informed her that this was Luna’s vision, so she must have answers if she had experienced such events firsthand. “Who are they, those celestial warriors?” Haruka asked. They seemed familiar yet different in a fundamental way.

“They are your allies across time and space,” Luna answered, seeming to smile.

Haruka sighed irritably and resumed surveying the fight. Michiru certainly looked beautiful in her divine ensemble, and her hair had even turned aqua in color. Her graceful, purposeful movements opposed Salacia’s reckless attacks and there was no doubt in Haruka’s mind that Michiru would prove victorious. She had quickly adjusted to the rhythm of battle, learned to read her opponent by predicting her offense and counterattacking appropriately. Salacia’s wet blades flung water droplets everywhere, occasionally spattering the three guardians on the sidelines.

Members of the Dark Cloud were hunting them, likely had been for a while now, so Haruka knew one of them would eventually come after her in an attempt to finish her off. ‘If I embrace this power, I should be okay,’ she thought, glancing at Hotaru and Shanta. They were silent and motionless, observing now just as they had during the Silver Era. Would they be more proactive this time around instead of standing back and letting the world go to hell in a handbasket? The ancient soul inside her, Aura, yearned for answers. Why had Cora and Moira forsaken the remnants of humanity in their greatest hour of need?

Michiru was fed up with this battle; she just wanted it to be over. To that end she commanded the fountain of water to form a sphere around Salacia. She tried to slice through it but a layer of coral on the inside negated each slash. In no time at all the woman was encapsulated except for a tiny opening at the top. Michiru poured more ice-cold liquid into it, slowly replacing Salacia’s air supply. She could hear the woman choking and gasping, pounding on the sphere with her fists in an attempt to break it open, screaming at the fact that Thalassa had defeated her after several millennia of dormancy. Finally Salacia stopped moving, her eyes frozen open, and Michiru willed the saltwater to return to its source. Her would-be murderer had been reduced to a pale, waterlogged corpse lying in the intersection.
“Hey!” Kaelan bellowed, “Someone better help me decorate this goddamn tree!” He had spent the last twenty minutes maneuvering it inside by himself and was more than a bit cranky.

Mamoru, Nicholas, and Joe answered his summon, the first coming from the pool where he had been swimming laps. He wore a towel around his neck, sweatpants, and no shirt. “Is that a little ab I see?” Nicholas asked, poking his long torso.

Mamoru swatted the hand away. “You don’t get abs after working out for a week.”

“You can if you go on a high-protein diet while doing P90X,” he returned. Kaelan smirked. “That explains why you’re all brawn and no brain. Now get to work.” Nicholas shot him a narrow look before placing delicate glass globes and icicles on the higher branches, but given that it was a twenty-foot tree they would need a step ladder anyway.

They finished just in time to welcome Makoto and Rei, the only two girls remaining in Seattle since Usagi, Mina, Ami, and Michiru had all flown on the same plane to Tokyo. Zach had returned to New Orleans yet again after a very loud fight over the phone with his mother; he said his parents didn’t need to keep spending money on overpriced holiday travel fare and his mother took that as an insult to their financial security. “It’s so festive in here!” Makoto remarked, craning her neck to admire the tree in all its splendor. “It’s like a scene from a storybook. You guys did a great job!”

“Thanks,” Joe grinned, and proffered a coffee mug. “Cider?” Makoto downed the seasonal beverage without hesitation since the short walk from Rei’s car to the entryway had been cold enough to make her teeth chatter. Everyone then took turns situating presents around the tree. After that they sat down for dinner, a rather simple offering compared to tomorrow’s feast yet still a warm and savory meal.

As he was placing dishes in the washer Mamoru glanced out the bay window and gasped. “It’s snowing!” Everyone rushed over to watch small flakes float gently down from the sky and stick to the thicket of trees surrounding the mansion.

“Looks like we won’t have to dream of a white Christmas,” Kaelan beamed. “Anyone interested in biscuits and tea, or wine?”

“Biscuits go with dinner, not tea,” Joe said matter-of-factly.

“I mean *cookies* you barbarian.” Rei tittered and Joe shot her a grin. She hadn’t said much all evening so he wanted to cheer her up. He poured more cider for Makoto and himself while Rei accepted a glass of rosé, wandering into the great room to stare out the large windows. The snow piled up quickly, turning the world white.

Joe stood beside her but not close enough to invade her personal space. “It always snows in Tokyo around Christmas,” she spoke. “Decorations go up, stores announce their holiday sales, and everyone receives a few thoughtful gifts. It isn’t like here where the media constantly reminds you to think of other people while getting something for yourself.”

“That’s American society for you,” the boy sighed. “I’ve noticed that selfish indulgence is just part of consumerist culture. Christmas here is a lot different than in Russia, too.”

“Yet it’s interesting how people all around the world celebrate this specific time of year, cultures with such divergent ideologies.”
Joe mulled it over. He was orthodox Catholic and Rei was Taoist; their religious ideologies couldn’t differ much more than that. Their upbringings were at opposite ends of the spectrum as well. Wealth and opportunity had always been within Rei’s reach whereas Joe had to expend blood, sweat, and tears on scraps and chance. She had the safety net held by her father to fall back on if times got really rough. He had to push through hardships on his own because his parents didn’t have the means to help, and it was no secret that they were disappointed by his decision to pursue something esoteric instead of practical. He should have been a doctor, a lawyer, a police officer, a politician. The Levins and Mr. Hino wanted the same thing for their children. “Maybe…” Joe said softly, viewing Rei askance, “the people of the world are more alike than they know. The two of us are proof of that.”

The sentiment also held true for Makoto and Mamoru, who had become quite good friends despite the animosity in the beginning. They both felt despair at not having anyone to celebrate the holidays with followed by hope that in the future they would have their own families to celebrate every holiday with. Children were a little more on the forefront of Makoto’s mind than Mamoru’s, but he still imagined being woken up way too early by kids eager to see what Santa brought. As everyone headed to their rooms for the night the two of them exchanged a look along the lines of “see you in the morning, I’m glad you’re here”, with the inclusion of some guilt from Makoto because she had someone to sleep with and Mamoru didn’t.

However, she was only about eighty-percent certain that slumbering would be the sole activity occurring in Nicholas’ bed. It was difficult to ignore all the ideas that came to mind as she watched him undress. Makoto distracted herself by brushing her teeth and changing into her pajamas before joining him beneath the covers where they immediately spooned. “This is already the best present,” Nicholas murmured while embracing her, “falling asleep with you in my arms.”

Makoto giggled when he nuzzled her neck. “I agree. Having a big, strong man keeping me warm through the night is a great present.”

“So I’m just a space heater, huh? I see how it is.” He turned onto his back and waited a few seconds for Makoto to face him with a pout.

“You’re much more than that to me, Nikko.” Nicholas quirked an eyebrow as she began planting kisses across his chest. “You’re an orchid holder, a Matsuri Special buyer, a fellow stargazer, a jogging partner, an ankle wrapper…” Makoto moved her lips to his neck as he lay with the most contented smile on his face. “A rally-goer, a fellow music lover, a really good dancer, a tea drinker…” She arrived at his mouth and paused, prompting him to open his eyes. “Suffice it to say you’re the most amazing man I’ve ever met. And there’s no place on Earth I’d rather be than right here with you.”

Nicholas was so elated he couldn’t form a response just yet. He kept gazing into Makoto’s beautiful green eyes until slipping a hand behind her neck and pulling her even closer, their foreheads touching, and his voice came out as a gravelly whisper. “I think meeting you was some kinda miracle. There’s no other way I can explain how someone so perfect came into my life.”

Makoto began to protest her alleged perfection but he cut her off with a kiss, one so deep and passionate and sincere that she sunk beneath the blissful weight of it. The entire world fell away; she didn’t even feel him atop her because at that moment they were fitted together so flawlessly it seemed like they had melded into a single being. ‘I love him,’ she knew, ‘I love him with all my heart.’ But they had only been dating for one week so it was way too soon to say such a thing, and it was definitely too soon to physically express her love for him.

Nicholas seemed to sense her reservation and moved onto his side, fingers following the curve of her waist. “Sorry if I get too intense. Just tell me to stop if we start heading toward something you don’t
want yet.”

Makoto almost apologized. There were obvious indicators he desired her and she felt guilty for denying him, but it was her body and her choice. She and Motoki had barely reached the heavy make-out stage so everything about being in a relationship was still virtually new. New boyfriend, new emotions, new sensations… She didn’t want things to escalate so quickly that they fizzled and died before experiencing how wonderful they could be together. “Thank you,” she eventually muttered.

“Mhm. I promised I wouldn’t hurt you— I meant it in every way.” Nicholas held her flush against him and gave her a gentle kiss. “Merry Christmas, sugar plum.”

“Merry Christmas…” Makoto refrained from saying “future husband” out loud, but it sounded rather nice in her head.

Mamoru was the first one to wake the next morning, donning a shirt before slipping out of his room and tiptoeing through the house. The sight that greeted him downstairs was nothing short of magical and he stood still for a full minute to take it in. ‘This is my first real Christmas.’ The thought made him smile as he entered the kitchen to start prepping coffee and tea. The smell of freshly-ground beans must have reached Joe’s nostrils because he appeared not long after, his eyes gradually opening as he emptied his mug. Kaelan came down next in a Santa suit bathrobe followed by Nicholas and Makoto. Rei was the last person awake at nine o’clock, and everyone stared at the landing as her footsteps drew nearer.

“Sorry I slept in. Merry Christmas, all.” She wore an apologetic smile as she sat beside Makoto on one of the large sofas.

Kaelan rubbed his hands. “Now the fun begins! Who wants the honor of opening the first present?” They all exchanged looks before refocusing on him.

“It should be you,” Mamoru said. “You’re the one hosting us all the time.” The others nodded in agreement.

“All right, if you insist.” Since the presents weren’t arranged in any particular order it took some time to find one with his name on the tag. After that they went in a circle, and since they hadn’t done stockings there were many double and triple-stacked gifts will small things in them like clothing and tech accessories. There were presents from Usagi, Ami and Mina, who had left them with Makoto before jetting off, and something for everyone from Zach. Even separated by miles of land and sea the ten of them remained united.

They spent the afternoon watching TV specials and preparing for dinner. The menu consisted of glazed ham, green bean casserole, scallop potatoes, a pomegranate, walnut and goat cheese salad, and sourdough bread on the side. As the day darkened around four p.m. Nicholas handed out some festive cocktails including one Rei would really like so she’d forgive him for hitting her with a snowball earlier; he knew she had a thing for exotic spices. “It feels a little strange with only the six of us here,” she commented while setting the table. “I keep expecting to laugh at something Usagi said.”

“Or hear Zach critique Nikko’s cooking,” Makoto added.

“Or watch Mina flirt with everyone after a few drinks,” Mamoru said.

“Or have Ami telling us to arrange everything just-so,” Joe finished, sighing. “It’s really not the same without them.”
“There’s always next year,” Kaelan remarked upon entering the dining room. This was the first time it had been used. He spent a good hour cleaning the table before decorating it with a runner, evergreen boughs, and candles. A Yule log burned in the fireplace, a piece of which he intended to save for next year. He didn’t sit at the head of the table because that would have thrown off the symmetry of their arrangement. Instead he shared one side with Makoto and Nicholas while Mamoru, Rei, and Joe sat on the other. Everyone regarded him expectantly, waiting for some kind of grace.

Kaelan thought for a minute, replaying all the words his mother had said over the years on this specific day since she knew a lot of traditional blessings. He finally drew in a breath. “The land may be cold, the sea stormy, and the skies grey, but today our family is gathered, keeping warm in the midst of darkness. The love we share burns brightly, a beacon of hope in the seemingly endless night. Together we will make it through another year.”

As with previous get-togethers at the Burke Mansion, Rei and Joe were the last two awake. They sat on the couch sipping Mrs. Levin’s famous cider while watching the Yule log crackle. Around Rei’s wrist was a bracelet of garnet and onyx Joe had made in a metallurgy workshop. From her he received a personalized set of essential oils, incense, and cologne. He lifted the collar of his shirt to inhale the fragrance yet again. “I can’t get over how good this smells, Rei. It’s like you captured the essence of me in a bottle.”

She beamed. “I’m glad you like it so much.”

“And you like your bracelet, right?” he asked, suddenly self-conscious.

“I know you know that black and red are my favorite colors, Josef,” she chastised. “I love that you made this for me with your own hands.”

“Good, I’m glad.” They smiled at one another for a moment, then Joe sighed and let his head drop back. Ingesting all that rich food had exhausted him but he refused to leave Rei’s side. He didn’t want to break their tradition of having late-night conversations yet he couldn’t think of anything more to say. Rei didn’t seem to mind since she found comfort in silence, and knowing that about her made him happy. He thought they had grown quite amiable over the span of four months. All of their friends had, really, and two sets of them even paired off. ‘Is there a chance that could happen with us? Do I even want it to?’ He turned toward Rei, following the angles of her face. Half of it was shadowed due to the dying flames in the fireplace but she looked even more beautiful and mysterious in such lighting.

Joe didn’t feel the need to claim or possess her, he just enjoyed spending time with her. The thought of being physically intimate with her was… kind of scary, to be honest, since he was a twenty-two year-old virgin who had been raised to believe that surrendering to temptations of the flesh would condemn him to Hell. He even made an abstinence pledge in high school, the purity ring now fitted around his little finger. But it was tight; he wouldn’t be able to wear it much longer.

He didn’t go to church anymore, either. He just didn’t have time for it after getting hired at Napa where he’d been working for three years now. The employee discount really helped when it came to keeping the Samurai running smoothly, an asset to the environmental class besides his personal vehicle. Joe resumed working on Monday, prepared for the post-Christmas rush mostly consisting of gift card purchases and part exchanges. Winter was a popular time for vehicle maintenance since people tended to realize that a mechanical failure in the snow and ice didn’t make for an enjoyable experience.

As New Year’s approached and his coworkers requested time off, Joe saw an opportunity to earn
extra hours and offered to cover as many shifts as possible. This led to him working fourteen-hour
days in receiving and stocking as well sales and transport, and after a week of the grueling schedule
he found himself dozing off during lunch breaks and falling asleep in the parking lot. Halfway
through January Kaelan caught him coming home past midnight groaning like a zombie. All Joe
wanted to do was fall face-first into bed but his landlord stood in the way. “Dude, move. I give you
money to live here. This is my space.”

“And as my tenant I’m somewhat responsible for your health,” Kaelan countered. “I don’t want your
folks suing me if you drop dead from overexertion, which brings me to my question– what the hell
are you thinking burning yourself out like this?”

Joe really had to focus on forming a coherent response. “I need the money, okay? I didn’t save up
enough to go home for Christmas so this year I want to make sure I can.”

Kaelan folded his arms. “It sucks that you didn’t get to see your family but you’re not the only one
who got stuck here. Frankly it’s stupid to beat yourself up over not being able to buy a plane ticket.
They’re expensive, especially during the holidays. I’m a fucking billionaire and I didn’t even visit
my mum. I wanted to, but she told me to stay here and make sure all my friends had somewhere to
go, something to eat, and someone to be with on Christmas. And I’m glad I did.” His tone softened.
“Besides… if you really, really wanted to go back to Vladivostok, you would have asked me for
help.”

“I don’t need your help,” Joe almost spat. “I haven’t asked you for anything since coming to live
here. I’ll never ask you for a single penny as long as I have the ability to earn it myself.”

“Yeah? And how much longer do you think you’ll last at this rate? What you’re doing isn’t healthy.”
Kaelan stepped past him, glancing over his shoulder. “If you won’t listen to me, go talk to Rei. She’s
the one who asked me to check on you, said she could sense your aura fading. And you look pretty
faded to me, like a damn ghoul.”

Joe rolled his eyes, entered his room, and managed not to fall asleep as soon as he hit the mattress.
Tomorrow was Sunday so he wouldn’t be working anyway; Kaelan was overreacting. But Rei had
been able to sense his debilitating state despite being far away… Were her abilities really that potent?
They didn’t discuss the aura thing much because it was simply an aspect of her life he accepted.
Joe’s dedication to hard work should have been something his friends accepted about him as well.

After sleeping until late in the afternoon and feeling like he’d barely gotten a wink, Joe drove to
Rei’s apartment. She greeted him with a mixed look of surprise and worry. “Josef, you’re here.
Please come in.” He crossed the threshold, shivering at the temperature change. “I take it Kaelan
spoke to you? I wasn’t sure if he would or if you’d listen to him.” He raised an eyebrow at the way
she went a mile a minute, grabbing his arm and leading him into the kitchen. “Here, drink some tea.
Have as much as you want. Are you still cold? I can get you a blanket. Have you eaten anything
today?”

Joe finally stopped her. “Slow down, Rei. Why are you so riled up? I’m not dying or anything.”

She gave him a prolonged stare before closing her eyes with a sigh. “No, you’re not dying…but
your qi is severely depleted. You need to rest.”

“I just slept most of the day, I’m fine.” He ignored the itch at the back of his throat as he spoke.

“You are not fine, Josef,” Rei rather harshly refuted. “I know you don’t take my studies seriously but
you have firsthand experience with auras because of me. Right now I could crush you with minimal
effort, that’s how weakened your spirit is. You need proper rest and nourishment or else you’ll
become even more susceptible to physical ailments. Is that what you want?”

“Of course not…” he groused, “can’t work if I’m sick. And I do take your studies seriously, the needles and the herbs and the energy stuff. I never said I didn’t believe it worked.”

“Then let me treat you.”

“I don’t need it. There’s nothing wrong with me!” As if on cue a grating cough escaped his lips, prompting Rei to give him A Look. Joe spun on his heel and entered the living area, noticing for the first time that most of the room was comprised of floor-to-ceiling shelves packed with books. Her furniture was like his own, rustic in style. The cough persisted, forcing him to take a seat on the couch, and his head began spinning. The cushions seemed to cradle him and he thought it might be very nice to relax there for a minute…

“Josef, wake up!” Rei knelt on the rug before him, searching his visage. “You just fainted again, that’s how exhausted you are!”

“I told you I don’t faint—”

“Spare me the machismo!” she yelled, then composed herself and stood up, planting her hands on her hips. “I am not letting you leave here until your aura has been replenished. You are in no condition to be outside right now– your immune system is practically non-existent. It would be medically irresponsible for me to allow you into society.”

“So you’re holding me hostage?” Joe couldn’t bring himself to glare at her and scoffed instead. “That’s mature.” But he ached all over, so he really didn’t mind staying on the couch.

“Just… keep drinking your tea,” Rei sighed, pressing the mug into his hands. “It will help you fight off the viral infection you’ve already acquired.” She went to grab a heavy blanket, tucking him in. This was stupid; she was overreacting, too. It was just a harmless little cough, a cold he’d caught from someone at work.

Except when Joe woke up later that night he realized something was definitely wrong. He could hardly open his eyes since they’d been cemented shut with mucus, he couldn’t breathe through his nose, and his body seemed leaden. “Rei…” he managed to croak, and she swiftly appeared at his side. “I feel worse than before.”

“I’m sure you’ve contracted a strain of influenza, the common flu. Did you ever get this sick as a child?” Joe weakly shook his head, the small action making him dizzy. “Then you don’t have the antibodies to fight it off as easily as most adults. You’re in for a rough few days.” He groaned and sank deeper into the cushions as Rei smiled down at him. “I have everything needed to bolster your immune system and ensure this flu doesn’t progress to something worse, like pneumonia. But I need your permission to treat you.”

“Yes, please, anything…” Joe swiped at his eyes and peeled one open, a nearby light sending stabbing pains through his skull. “I believe in you, Rei.”

He ended up staying on the couch all night and through the next morning. Rei called Kaelan to let him know that Joe would be with her for a couple more days; it was best he be confined to a sterilized environment. Teas were her weapon of choice in eliminating the virus since they were easily absorbed by the body and didn’t tend to irritate the stomach. The most potent combinations were green tea with honey, ginseng and ginger, and oolong tea with echinacea, elderberry and blueberry. Once Joe had regained the strength to sit up she gave him a small bowl of oatmeal mixed with fresh fruits, almonds and flaxseed. By the third day he could move around without trembling.
too severely, allowing her to catch up on her own sleep.

On day four Rei made him take a long, hot bath to sweat out more toxins. She infused the water with a blend of Himalayan pink salt and essential oils to alleviate his muscle fatigue, and Joe came out an hour later even more rejuvenated. “You look much better,” she remarked upon examining him.

Joe felt awkward standing there in a towel. “I’m sure it’s all the superfood you fed me,” he said, voice still hoarse thanks to a persistent grating cough. At least he wasn’t full of phlegm any more.

“I’m glad it’s working. I made an antimicrobial shot for you to take.” He paled at that, but she handed him an actual shot glass. “This is just mineral water with oregano oil, olive leaf oil, and orange and lemon extracts. I added xylitol to make it sweet.”

Joe sniffed it before putting the glass to his lips and knocking it back. “It tastes like candy.”

“Good. You’ll take another one this evening and a third tomorrow morning.” She fetched his laundered clothes so he could get dressed. “I’m sorry I don’t have a guest room you can stay in. Is the couch adequate?”

“Yeah, it’s really comfy,” Joe answered through the bathroom door.

“Good…” Rei edged nearer. “Josef, I should give you a massage.” He faltered with one leg in his jeans. “I have a certificate in shiatsu, and you can stay dressed. It would simply be to improve your qi flow.”

He liked the staying-clothed part because it was embarrassing enough that Rei had seen him in various states of undress and general bedraggled-ness over the last three days. He opened the door with a smile. “If you think it’ll be good for me, let’s do it. I’ve never had a massage before.”

“In that case, please come lie on my bed. It’s the ideal height.” Joe followed her into the room that until now had been off-limits, first noting the panel bed with an elaborately embroidered comforter. Above the headboard was a silk screen painting of cherry blossoms and all around the room were shelves and tables full of more books, crystals, figurines, jars, incense, and incense holders. It seemed like there could never be too many tools of her trade. Half the floor was covered by a soft, squishy material Joe guessed was for yoga and the other half by a plush area rug. When he sat down on the mattress he released a happy sigh. Memory foam.

Rei’s delicate hands carried him to the most relaxed state he had ever been in. Her palms glided across his back and she paused to apply pressure on very specific points with her fingertips, unblocking energy channels. The amazing thing was he could really feel it working insofar as his blood flow seemed to improve and any remaining tension in his muscles disappeared. Her fingers dug into his chest but it didn’t make him the least bit uncomfortable. There were a couple instances where she repositioned his arms and legs to access specific points but Joe hardly noticed since he was basically a rag doll. “How are you feeling?” Rei asked when she finished, rubbing his chest in small circles. He made a sound of satisfaction deep in his throat and she beamed. “I’m glad it helped.”

“So much,” Joe agreed, opening his eyes to her placid countenance. “It’s like magic, what you did for me. I feel completely different than I did a few days ago.”

Rei shook her head. “Thank Mother Nature for her gifts, not me.” Her eyes flicked over him. “You’re well enough to return home. I’ll send you off with those citrus shots.” Joe didn’t move to leave and her brow furrowed. “Is something else wrong?”
His attention shifted from her face to the ceiling. It was selfish but he didn’t want to go yet, not when he felt so at-home with her. ‘You can’t stay here indefinitely, you need to return to class at some point,’ he told himself. ‘Rei does, too. Just get up and leave, go back to your own life. You’re inconveniencing her.’ At that Joe willed himself to sit up. Rei’s expression remained neutral; there wasn’t anything on it that let him know which answer she wanted to hear. “I need to go home,” he said as an affirmation. “I have lots of work to catch up on. For class, I mean.” She helped him gather his belongings before they stood together at the door. “Rei, um… thanks. For curing me.”

“It wasn’t a problem, Josef. I was just doing my job.” She gestured to her apartment as a whole. “You’re welcome to drop by whenever you want. I’m always here after four.”

“Yeah, okay, I’ll do that.” Joe managed to quirk an awkward smile. “Thank you so much, really. You’re amazing.” Rei smiled back and he left before a blush gave him away. Outside he gripped the railing and stared at the parking lot. ‘What’s wrong with me? She never made me so tongue-tied before.’ That was before she had refused to listen to his assertions that he wasn’t sick. Before she had expertly healed him. Before he’d seen how devoted she was to living and working in harmony with Earth, her affinity for nature equaling his own. But then she had to go and put her hands on him, the magical hands of a witch, a shaman, an enchantress, making him wonder what else her fingers were capable of.

Joe couldn’t stop thinking about her. Rei was unlike anyone else he’d ever met, full of passion and selfless ideals and possessing a moral compass probably straighter than his own. Mostly he couldn’t stop thinking about her hands and how… sure they were, perfectly precise in every action. He dreamed she massaged him again, except her hands were on his bare skin and her touch was the softest thing he’d ever felt. She knew what he wanted, what he needed, how to make him feel good. It was embarrassing how fast he came when he imagined her stroking his cock, and Joe awoke with a groan upon feeling the wet spot in his boxers. He hated nocturnal emissions but they had become more frequent ever since Halloween… when he met Rei.

He must be subconsciously lusting after her. It was worse now that she’d nursed him back to health since being attracted to caregivers was one of those weird human things. But they were just supposed to be friends, and Joe had to remain celibate until he found someone to marry, someone he loved. Rei was beautiful, of course, as well as intelligent, non-judgmental, dependable, and supremely confident in every aspect of her life, all traits he admired about her. But was it okay to be attracted to her when he didn’t love her? At least, he didn’t think his feelings for her were that profound. After changing into clean underwear he returned to bed with another groan, determined to visit Rei tomorrow. Hopefully she could cure him of this sickness, too.

The doorbell startled Rei since she had zoned out while waiting for her tea to steep, but as soon as her mind returned to the present she sensed the calm turquoise of Joe’s aura. “Good evening, Josef,” she greeted, stepping aside to let him in. Even though she extended an offer for him to visit she hadn’t expected him to appear the day after getting over his flu.

Joe hung up his coat and scarf and left his boots on the shoe shelf. “Hi, Rei,” he replied, looking a little pensive and thus piquing her curiosity. “I came by to have you treat me again.”

She frowned. “What? Are you getting another fever?” Joe closed his eyes to the feel of her palm on his forehead and cheek. “You’re not warm, your aura is strong, and your qi is flowing freely. What part of your body doesn’t feel right?”

“My head,” he answered, and they sat down opposite one another in the living room. Joe could only meet her gaze for a second. “I… had a dream about you last night. I need something to make me not think about you like that, or anyone. Is there an herb or extract I can take?”
“Oh, Josef…” Rei regarded him rather pityingly. “Sex dreams are perfectly natural, you know, and there’s nothing I or anyone else can do to prevent them. Dreams are comprised of thoughts and memories the brain decides to shuffle around for whatever reason. We have no control over them. Nocturnal emissions are perfectly natural as well. Men are even more likely to have them because it’s a way for their bodies to flush out excess sperm if they don’t ejaculate on a regular basis.” She gave him a small smile. “Did you ever take a sexual health or human anatomy class?”

Joe shook his head; he hadn’t known any of that. Now he was beginning to resent receiving an education that kept him ignorant of how his own body functioned. “So you’re saying I just have to live with the dreams and their… aftermath? I can’t do anything about them?” He blushed as their eyes met and Rei nodded sympathetically.

“Not unless you alleviate yourself or decide to start having sex. But I know you’re waiting for marriage.” She got up to refill her mug. “Do you want tea? It’s vanilla chai.”

“No thanks,” Joe mumbled. He waited until she returned. “Is sex really as great as everyone says?”

“It is if it’s with the right person,” she neutrally replied.

“How do I tell if I’m with the right person?”

Rei thought for a moment. “It’ll be someone you trust. I think that’s the most important aspect in any relationship whether it’s long-term or temporary.”

Well, Joe certainly trusted her; that’s why he was here right now. Silent minutes ticked by until he asked another question. “Does fángzhōngshù really work?”

Her eyes flicked to him as the mug froze on her lips. “Where did you learn about that, Josef?”

“I came across it while Googling stuff about Taoism. It translates to ‘the bedroom arts’, right? Does it work? Can you really exchange energy with someone through sex?”

Rei ducked her chin. “Yes, it’s a legitimate practice. When two people make love an energy called jìng is created. Jìng exists inside everyone when they are born and is expended over the course of one’s life through various means, so the belief is that during sex a person can transform jìng into qì to replenish their life force. Texts written in the Han and Tang dynasties regarding fángzhōngshù say that lovers must be equal in their desires or else imbalances will result. Ming dynasty scholars completely perverted the purpose of the bedroom arts, and by the seventeenth-century Qing dynasty sex became a taboo subject altogether due to widespread conservative Confucian philosophies.”

Joe viewed her sidelong. “Have you done it before?”

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“A couple times. It’s an intense process.”

“I want to try it.” As soon as the words left his mouth his heart began pounding. The way Rei scrutinized him made him flush from his ears to his chest. “I mean it, Rei. I trust you, and I’m tired of waking up in the middle of the night when I don’t get enough sleep as it is. Plus I have to do laundry all the time…”

Instead of saying anything Rei just smiled and grabbed his hand, leading Joe into her bedroom. She lit an incense cone before facing him. “The first step is to undress.” Swallowing his nerves, he removed his thermal and undershirt, then paused to watch Rei unfasten her bra. She looked very attractive standing there in only her fitted black jeans. He unbuckled his own, sliding them off at her pace so they ended up naked together. With that Rei knelt on the bed. “Lie down in a position you find comfortable,” she instructed.
Joe obeyed by getting situated on his right side. His heart skipped a beat when she lay alongside him, fitting her slender body against his toned physique. “We’re simply going to lie here for a while. Focus on my breathing, my pulse, my form in relation to yours. Just try not to fall asleep.” He closed his eyes, placing his free hand on Rei’s waist while hers touched his chest. This was the first time he’d been in the presence of a nude woman and he wasn’t even aroused yet; religious doctrine was too strongly ingrained within him. Joe hoped he would be liberated from those oppressive teachings by the time they finished this exercise.

It wasn’t a sin, he told himself. It wasn’t a sin to experience something with the body God had given him, what He had designed it to enjoy. Joe’s inhibitions slowly vanished as he snuggled closer to Rei. She was the one he had chosen to lose his virginity to because he trusted her implicitly, positive she would never hurt him. ‘Isn’t that the foundation of love, like she said?’ a little voice asked, but he still didn’t know. This was all new to him.

He had no clue how much time passed; he was content to stay this way forever. “Josef…” Rei whispered, preventing him from drifting off, “What did we do in your dream? Was it like this?”

“Mm, no… it was pretty pathetic. You grabbed my dick and got me off in about a minute.” She laughed at such blunt honesty. Joe liked the sound; it was kind of deep and a bit arrogant, like she always knew the truth of things. His palm slid along the curve of her waist as he breathed in the scent of her hair draped across his arm. Rei wore a floral perfume, something with iris notes, but her hair smelled sweeter. He also caught the vanilla chai on her breath ghosting his lips, and he pushed forward to give her the faintest of kisses.

When he tried for another one Rei halted him. “We’re not supposed to kiss, Josef. It distracts from the synchronization process.” He made a noise of disappointment and settled for running his hand over the rest of her body, reaching mid-thigh before it came back up to gently cup her breast. Rei’s breath hitched as his thumb brushed her nipple, a tiny peak standing out against her plain of soft skin. The slow circles he made elicited heat between her thighs, curiosity summoning his hand. Rei moved her right leg up onto his hip to give him access and withheld whimpers as he traced each warm, wet channel. It was this reaction that finally got him aroused, and he wondered if he had successfully turned her on or if she was just in tune with him.

Rei scooted down a few inches so Joe’s cock could do the stimulating instead of his fingers, the sensation damn near blowing his mind. A sweat broke out on his skin and his head spun with every glide against the hot liquid at her entrance. Rei tilted her hips forward and suddenly he slipped inside her, gasping at the pressure. “Keep going…” she breathed. It took Joe a second to register her voice since it was at a pitch he’d never heard before, but then he began moving in earnest, rolling atop her to find himself perfectly fitted between her thighs. The bite of her nails on his shoulders helped him establish a rhythm that made her moan with each thrust. Joe might have been moaning too but he couldn’t tell since the counter-motion of Rei’s body had him mesmerized.

At some point he kissed her without being chastised, and then their lips refused to separate. In the way-back of Rei’s mind was a reminder that she was supposed to be transferring energy to Josef, not losing herself in him, but whatever this was felt very different than the exchanges with her previous partners. She was on fire and he was a recurring gust fueling the flames that would inevitably burn her to ashes. Rei had totally lost control of their session, devouring his fervid lips and encouraging him to love her harder and faster so they would go tumbling into ecstasy together. When a hand clutched her lower back to hold her at a specific angle, she interrupted their kissing with a cry so loud her neighbors definitely heard. But she couldn’t help it, not when he was equipped to hit both external and internal pleasure centers with each stroke. “Oh, right there, Josef. Don’t stop, please…”

“I’m not stopping, milaya. I’ll never stop. Ya dumayu, chto lyublyu tebya…” He continued
murmuring sweet nothings in his native tongue, his accent making Rei even headier since she knew he had never said such things to anyone else. She was elated to be his first, maybe even his only… Wait, why did she think that? One instance of great sex did not a relationship make. There wasn’t even a guarantee this would happen again since they were just supposed to be friends! Rei felt their climax building when his tone turned desperate and he plunged deep inside her, her muscles abruptly contracting around his shaft as he exuded the most satisfied groan for having released almost a decade’s worth of repressed urges. Joe managed not to collapse right away despite his quaking arms. “I’m sorry I kissed you again,” he muttered, voice husky.

Rei giggled, then cleared her throat to regain some semblance of composure. “It’s okay. I’m sorry I didn’t give you any of my energy.” He only shrugged and started to slump. “Hang on, we at least need to clean up.” She went to the bathroom to run a damp towel over herself, tossing another one to Joe. “Don’t be a typical male and pass out right away. It’s not hygienic to stay covered in bodily fluids.”

He followed suit with a tired grunt before joining her beneath the comforter. “It is okay for me to stay here, right? I’m not intruding?”

“Of course not, Josef,” Rei replied. “I invited you to come over whenever you want.” He smiled and wrapped an arm around her waist, falling asleep within seconds. Rei wondered if Joe would be visiting her for healing of the sexual variety from now on. The notion left her feeling both thrilled and anxious. Would they still be friends going forward, or had they just taken an irrevocable step in a different direction?
Mina walked through SeaTac airport like a supermodel. Everything on her person was new since her mother’s idea of the perfect Christmas present had been spa treatments and shopping, which she certainly wasn’t about to decline. She’d gotten a wavy perm, facial, manicure, pedicure, and full-body massage. She had enough new clothes, shoes and cosmetics to fill another suitcase. After leaving the baggage claim she hopped on the Light Rail to Westlake where she sought out Joe’s SUV. He said he’d be parked nearby; there was six inches of snow on the ground with more currently falling, and none of the city buses ran. She sighed, watching her breath escape as a white puff lingering in the dense air. Westlake was normally one of the busiest shopping areas but right now it was practically abandoned. One couple walked arm-in-arm along the cobblestone street, their murmurings barely reaching Mina’s ears, and she shuddered in the silence. Separated from both her family and friends, she felt truly alone. Since Ami and Usagi flew in tomorrow maybe she could stay with Makoto for the night instead of going back to her dorm. First she had to get there, however… Where the heck was Joe?

Deep exhaust echoed off the surrounding buildings, alerting Mina to his arrival. She stepped out from beneath an overhang, wearing a grateful smile that abruptly vanished when she realized it was not Joe’s rugged Samurai that had come for her but a sleek Maserati. Kaelan exited the car wearing an impassive expression, his hands buried in the pockets of a naval-style jacket. “What are you doing here?” Mina demanded, not even attempting to hide her disdain.

“Joe got caught up with work.” He didn’t elaborate, simply opening the trunk and standing aside as Mina hefted her heavy suitcases. She wasn’t about to ask for his help and intended to give him the silent treatment until she claimed the passenger seat, dislodging dirty snow from her boots.

“Oh no, I didn’t mean to ruin the carpet.” She leaned forward to sweep it out.

“It’s fine, I bought all-weather mats.”

“Oh good. I mean, this car cost you a lot…”

“I appreciate your concern for my vehicle.” Kaelan stared straight ahead as he drove along the hazardous roads.

“Are you supposed to go this fast in the snow?”

He spared her a sidelong glance. “Rear-wheel drive is actually better in icy conditions than front-wheel drive. I have good winter tires, too.”

“Oh, okay.” Pause. “Thanks for picking me up.”

“No problem.” Pause. “How was your vacation?”

“It was fun. I did a lot of shopping with my mom, helped my dad file his paperwork, watched some Christmas movies, got drunk at a New Year’s party…” She waved off the rest as a small smile turned Kaelan’s lips.

“Mine was similar, though I did my own paperwork and ate too much in addition to getting bolloxed.”

“Let me guess– Nicholas’ cooking?”
“Makoto also contributed. The two of them are brilliant in the kitchen.”

“I know, right?” she grinned. “I wish my mom had a fraction of their skills. Every year she tries a new recipe. It’s never very good but me and my dad pretend to like it. She’s much better at desserts, especially cheesecake.”

“Oh yeah? What’s your favorite kind?”

“Chocolate with raspberries and even darker chocolate ganache.” Mina licked her lips just thinking about it. “And chocolate mousse with strawberries. And lemon-lavender-blueberry with white chocolate shavings on top.”

Kaelan raised an eyebrow. “I suppose it really is true that women love chocolate.”

She held up an informative finger. “Not all of us do—caramel is Ami’s weakness. There’s science behind it, though. Chocolate releases endorphins which make you happy, and raw cacao is one of the best natural sources of antioxidants. They say red wine and chocolate are keys to a long life. Both also happen to taste really good!” Kaelan laughed, a genuinely mirthful sound that filled her with warm fuzzies. She had missed his voice, their lengthy conversations that always went off on random tangents. She missed the selfies he sent every other morning asking what accessory would complete his outfit. She missed the flighty feeling she got when she saw him waiting in the UW parking lot after class, and she missed the magic that happened when they were in bed together. “Hey…” Mina said quietly, earning a look. “Did you… have you hooked up with anyone since we stopped seeing each other?” Kaelan shook his head once. “Why not?”

He shrugged. “No one can hold a candle to you, Minako.” He turned off the car and they sat staring at one another before Mina noticed they were at the mansion, not campus.

“Why did you bring me here?” she asked as a lump formed in her throat.

“I don’t want you to be alone,” Kaelan answered. “Ami isn’t back yet, it’s a dark time of the year, and there are people who care about you here, including me.”

Mina buried her face in her hands to hide the emotions flooding her visage. “I thought we were over. I thought you didn’t want me anymore.”

“Of course I do, I’m just a dumbass who said it all wrong. I want to know you, the real you, not just your body.” He shifted as close as the bucket seat and center console allowed. “I couldn’t stop thinking about you after you left that night. I wanted to apologize for everything but I was… a coward. I hoped we could talk on Christmas but you went home. Now that you’re back, I want you to have this.” He withdrew a small, flat box from his pocket.

Mina tentatively accepted the gift. Inside was a copper bracelet featuring a raw piece of rose quartz on a bed of druzy. “Kaelan, this is beautiful.” She gave him a guilty look since she hadn’t brought back anything for him. ‘Except myself…’

He traced his mustache, a nervous action. “I found it in Pike Place last month and thought it was perfect.” ‘Like you.’

“Thank you,” Mina said earnestly while slipping it on her wrist. She then leaned forward to embrace him, catching the familiar scent of his cologne and closing her eyes to the headiness it elicited. “I’m sorry for what I said when I walked out. You mean so much to me.”

“Glad to hear it,” Kaelan softly replied. “That makes starting from square one a bit easier.” He pulled back, squaring his shoulders. “Mina, will you please go out with me?”
“Sure, but where to?”

“How about dinner and a movie?”

Mina nodded. “It’s a date.”

Mamoru’s first time riding the ferry across the Sound was to pick up Nia at her home on Bainbridge Island. She didn’t own a vehicle, preferring to utilize her mountain bike, but where they were going was too far to ride in one day. He glanced at the GPS and turned down a long dirt driveway, the kind with overhanging trees and a thick veil of fog that seemed like a path to a hidden realm. It was still early, seven o’clock to be exact, but they had a two-hour drive to Cape Flattery, the northernmost tip of the state. Yesterday Nia called him to say she felt a strong spiritual pull from the cape and thought it might belong to the talisman Prince Endymion once possessed.

He parked in front of a modern farmhouse with a large barn off to the left. When he knocked on the front door a chorus of barks responded, and he heard their mistress whistle to quiet them down. Nia opened the door with a grin. “Do you like dogs?”

“I’ve never really been around them,” Mamoru answered.

“Then we’re about to see.” She stepped aside to unleash the canine torrent upon him, watching as he stood completely still while her companions sniffed him all over. Nia then snapped her fingers to command their attention and made them sit.

Mamoru brushed the fur off his jeans. “How long have you lived here?”

“I bought this property back in May,” she replied. “Five acres and a new house is prime real estate that will only increase in value, if I decide to sell. For now it is a working farm. I grow my own produce, raise cows, chickens and rabbits, and I have two horses. I would give you a tour if not for the fog.”

“You lead an interesting life,” Mamoru remarked. He looked down at the dogs. “What are their names?”

“The Akita is Nagi and the husky is Sila, they are inseparable. The Samoyed over there is Anya, a shy girl. Dundee is the Aussie and Maddox is the Border collie, they both help me wrangle the livestock. I adopted them all from shelters.” She knelt down and was instantly surrounded by fluff and lolling tongues. “I detest people who treat animals like disposable objects. These dogs thought they had a family, but they were abandoned.” After herding them back inside Mamoru and Nia headed out, the latter commenting how luxurious his car felt. They drove in silence until crossing the Hood Canal Bridge, entering the Olympic Peninsula. Tree-covered foothills rose before them, some dusted with snow while dark gray clouds surrounded taller peaks. “I’ve biked all over this region,” Nia commented. “After a few minutes on any trail you’ll forget civilization exists, that is how enveloping nature is out here.”

Mamoru hummed thoughtfully. “Why would you want to abandon civilization? I thought you were a city girl since you lived in London.”

“I only enjoyed London because it is a cultural melting pot. People from all over the world visit there so you never know who you’ll encounter, but it is crowded and dreary. As for my original home, I was born in a village near Lake Volta which is quite forested.” Nia directed a serene smile out the window. “I feel like I can be happy here and live without being told how. People come into this world with two options— help themselves or help others. I was devoted to the latter cause long before
the responsibilities of my talisman were thrust upon me… although I am not always certain mankind deserves it.”

“Why do you say that?” he ventured.

Nia released a beleaguered sigh. “It becomes easy to resent humanity when you consider the current state of our world. Resources are consumed at alarming rates and not replenished properly. We poison nature’s gifts and market them as superior. Corporate greed abounds. The selfish desire to maintain a legacy through offspring has led to gross overpopulation, and there are few who are truly worthy of remembrance.”

“So you’re saying that unless someone has done something extraordinary with their life, they shouldn’t have children.” Mamoru regarded her narrowly. “That’s not fair.”

Her head whipped toward him so fast that a breeze ruffled his bangs. “Do you want to know what isn’t fair, Mamoru? Hoarding wealth gained from the labor of others is not fair. Condemning the debilitated to miserable, burdening existences because their caregivers want to feel morally superior is unfair. Telling people to hate and murder each other because they believe in different deities is unfair. Purposely making this planet uninhabitable for future generations is not fair.”

“…Valid points,” he admitted after a moment, “but you have a degree in psychology. I thought that would make you more empathetic to the plight of humanity instead of… hating it.”

Nia’s expression shifted to weariness. “I don’t hate individuals, I hate society. When people fall victim to arbitrary constructs they lose important aspects of their true selves. Do you know how we even came to be, Mamoru?” She waited for a gesture to continue. “I told you there are five Aspects of Creation, remember? They are the ones who made humankind– they made everything in the universe.” Her countenance softened, growing distant and dreamy. “There is something called a Galaxy Cauldron maintained by an Aspect named Nebula. It holds the souls of every sapient being in the Milky Way. Our souls take the form of star seeds and when our bodies die they are gathered by another Aspect named Nova and taken to the Cauldron to be cleansed and placed into new hosts. You and I and all the other guardians have immortal star seeds– we can never truly die. We will be reborn with the memories of all our previous incarnations until this universe ends.”

“That’s… a lot to consider, Nia,” the boy muttered.

“Oh, there is more,” she grinned. “In addition to having immortal souls, we are imbued with gifts from Astera, the Aspect of Faith. They are called guardian crystals.” She touched her peridot amulet. “These amulets are the physical manifestations of the planetary guardian crystals. They give us access to the primal elements that created us, the very fabrics of reality, which means that when we retrieve your talisman it will unlock abilities far beyond human capacity.”

Mamoru dared to take his eyes off the road so he could look at Nia directly. He knew she wasn’t crazy and she wasn’t in a manic state, but it was so difficult to wrap his head around the fact that everything he knew to exist sounded more and more like the grand design of multiple omniscient beings. It had been hard enough to accept the concepts of reincarnation and soul mates! “Let me get this straight…” he said slowly, “Our star seeds will never be eradicated by Aspect Nova, we have special powers from Aspect Astera, and when we die our souls will be reincarnated by Aspect Nebula so we can choose to fulfill the fate determined by Aspect Cometa.” He blinked at the asphalt. “What’s the fifth Aspect for, then?”

“I don’t know,” Nia replied, “I have yet to see her in my dreams. I would venture to assume she is some kind of supreme creator, perhaps the one who shaped everything with her own hands.”
A long stretch of silence unfurled as they continued eating up miles of highway, then Mamoru spoke again. “If these beings really wield such power… what do you think the Aspects of Destruction can do?”

Nia shared his somber look. “That is a very good question. I believe we will personally receive the answer not far in the future.”

The parking lot and trail leading to the cape were both empty, a fact that made Nia happy since she wouldn’t have to explain herself to anyone. Mamoru tried handing over her backpack but it weighed more than anticipated. “What on earth do you have in here?” he asked with a grunt.

“The gear I need to retrieve the talismans.” Mamoru assumed she referred to a long coil of rope and maybe a hook or cage or something; he wasn’t expecting belaying equipment such as a harness and carabiners. He couldn’t believe Nia intended to descend into the tumultuous ocean from the observation platform. She could easily be trapped by an eddy or thrown against the sharp rocks. He turned away while she undressed to put on a wetsuit that would insulate her against the frigid waters.

“I guess there really isn’t anything money can’t buy…” he muttered as she secured her line to two wind-blown trees, “except sanity.”

“Thank you for considering my safety, but I’ve done this plenty of times.” With that she slowly backed over the cliff edge. Mamoru eyed the twitching rope for a moment before daring to look down at her. Nia didn’t appear to be having a hard time but she was careful where she placed her feet since the rocks were covered with slick moss and lichen. Finally she reached a half-submerged boulder and stood on it, giving herself some slack. She leaned over and turned in a slow circle. “It’s definitely right around here but I can’t see past the froth. I have to go in– hand me the goggles.”

Mamoru dropped them and she slipped into the water. He bit his thumb, breathing a sigh of relief when she resurfaced. Nia held up a box covered in barnacles and one purple starfish. “This is it!” she called, securing it to her lower back before beginning her ascent. Mamoru watched her don a look of annoyance as her fingers constantly slipped off the jagged rocks. He helped pull her onto solid ground where she stood with her hands clasped behind her neck, taking deep breaths.

“Your lips look a little violet,” he stated.

“I’m fine. No hypothermia today.” She smiled and stowed all her equipment in the backpack, handing Mamoru the weathered chest. He wondered how it had held up so well after thousands of years, then realized it probably had a magical ward since it was completely sealed and there were no key holes. After changing into dry clothes Nia watched him go over the container in consternation, a partial smirk forming on her lips. “If you cannot figure out how to open it, you don’t deserve what is in it.”

“If you can’t say something nice, don’t say anything at all,” Mamoru irritably countered, stowing their treasure the trunk.

“We need to have it restored. That should be a simple task for the mistress of time, Moira.”

Back across the ferry they went, navigating the myriad streets of Seattle until arriving in Laurelhurst. Mamoru knew that Moira was the Silver Era incarnation of Hotaru and she had been the most elusive princess aside from Cora of Pluto. Shanta answered when he knocked on the door, her violet eyes lingering on Nia. “I know you, yet I am certain we have never met.”

“Neither in this life nor the previous one,” she replied. “Our duties placed us both among hidden realms. I was called Khamyne, a priestess of Elysium.” Shanta nodded sagely and invited them in, calling out for Hotaru. Once seated in the living room Nia placed the chest on the coffee table. “Lady
of Time, we need your help in returning this reliquary to its original condition. Can you do that for us?"

“Of course,” Hotaru smiled. She brought a hand to the trillion sapphire. “Saturn Millennium Power, Release!” Mamoru shivered at the subtle physical change she underwent, youthful innocence and joviality being replaced by utterly cold indifference. Moira was perhaps the most powerful of all the planetary guardians. With her simultaneous viewing of the past, present and future, absolutely nothing escaped her sight. Even though the minions of Tartarus had the Eye of the Universe in their possession it didn’t provide clear, concise methods to achieve their goals because of all the different possible outcomes. Moira’s abilities could almost be considered superior in that regard since her vision encompassed every event fated to occur in their dimension and the exact causes leading to them.

Moira placed her palm atop the chest and closed her eyes to discern its state several thousand years ago. She also saw what lay within, relics that would continue to remain untouched by the passage of time even if she tried manipulating them directly. She focused her sight on the past, traveling all the way back to the talismans’ inception, and watched their creation at the hands of a shining being who existed beyond reality. Furrowing her brow, Moira returned to the Silver Era and pulled grains of silver sand from that period, sprinkling them over the reliquary. Within seconds a polished oak container with gold fixtures sat on the table. “It is done,” she said. Her celestial power fell away to reveal Hotaru once again, who looked at Mamoru expectantly.

He still didn’t see any key holes or latches, so when he reached for the lid of the box and it audibly unlocked he knew the same biometric technology he’d witnessed in King Hyperion’s chamber was at play. An inner shelf rose to greet him as the three women made sounds of wonder. Upon a silk cushion were five trinkets: one golden brooch, two silver rings, and two bronze rings. Mamoru picked up the brooch resembling a compass rose, marveling at the diamond in the center encircled by four smaller gems of ruby, emerald, sapphire and topaz. “Now what?” he inquired, looking around. “How do I use my powers?”

“You expect me to know?” Nia quipped. “Ask Endymion.”

Mamoru grumbled at the suggestion but turned inward and proposed the same question. “Our abilities are an intrinsic part of our being along with the Golden Crystal. They have been within you since you were born into this life. However…” He frowned at the Prince’s tone shift. “We are also intrinsically connected to the four who served us and the priestess who died for us. Therefore we must all awaken together.”

Mamoru responsibly sped home, eager to get things rolling. “Hey everyone, come down here! We have presents!” He made a beeline for the great room without removing his coat or shoes, earning a glare from Kaelan.

“Get your damn dirty boots off the rug.” His grey eyes widened in outrage when Mamoru only tossed them by the hearth, and Zach snickered. Nicholas greeted Nia as she placed the reliquary on the coffee table before glancing around.

“Where’s Josef?” The three boys shared a look, chuckling a little. “Why is that funny? He needs to be here.”

Nicholas cleared his throat. “He’s been working hard lately.”

“Really getting down to business,” Kaelan added stoically.
Zach burst out laughing at that. He quickly composed himself and looked Nia dead in the eye. “He’s with Rei.”

“…Is that all?” she asked, perturbed.

“No, he’s with her,” the blond boy emphasized, but she didn’t catch on.

“Then call him and tell him to get here as soon as possible.”

Now Nicholas snorted in amusement. “That’d be rude. He needs to finish first.”

Zach held himself to keep from falling over as his cackling filled the room. While Nia folded her arms in wait for him to calm down, Mamoru reread their expressions and gasped as comprehension dawned. “Oh, you mean he’s… he and Rei… When did that happen? I thought they were just friends!”

“He says they still are,” Kaelan supplied, “but you don’t ‘just’ start fucking one of your friends on a regular basis.”

“What?!” Nia exclaimed. Her countenance dimmed as she muttered to herself. “I don’t understand, they killed one another so violently. How could they be intimate now?” She shook her head. “Regardless, Josef must be present in order for us to proceed.”

“Proceed with what?” Nicholas inquired, but he was ignored as Nia whispered to Mamoru, who nodded furtively. His attention fell on the oak container. “What’s going on? What’s in this box?”

Still his questions went unanswered, for Joe returned just then. “Josef! Come here!” Nia commanded. He obeyed but warily stood at the edge of the carpet, wondering why everyone was leerimg.

“Were you at Rei’s place?” Mamoru asked, curiosity getting the better of him.

He frowned. “No, I had to run to the store to help a new guy receive a shipment. Why would you assume I was with Rei?”

“Because you’re banging her,” Zach said matter-of-factly.

“I most certainly am not!” The crimson on his ears instantly betrayed him, however. “How did you figure it out?”

Kaelan sighed. “It’s pretty obvious when you don’t come home after work and try to be sneaky about getting in the next morning. Plus a bunch of your clothes smell like clary sage which I’m aware is an aphrodisiac.”

Joe couldn’t explain that he and Rei were connecting on a spiritual level, not just physical. His friends wouldn’t understand and it was none of their business anyway. After shedding his winter gear he sat down beside Nicholas, receiving a broad grin from Zach. “How does it feel to finally be a man?”

He frowned. “I’ve always been a man.”

Zach waved it off and turned to Mamoru. “That makes you the last virgin. Got any plans to change that?”

“Enough of this!” Nia declared, raising her hands in exasperation. “Your sexual exploits are not
important! Mamoru, please open the reliquary.” He did so eagerly, and the four onlookers fell silent when the shelf appeared from its recess. “Put these on,” Nia said in a calmer manner. She handed the bronze ruby ring to Nicholas, the bronze topaz ring to Zach, the silver emerald one to Joe, and the silver sapphire ring to Kaelan. They slipped the signets on their fingers, admiring them while Nia opened her compact and aimed it at Mamoru.

“What am I supposed to see?” he asked after a moment.

“Nothing. You are showing them.” Sure enough, Mamoru noticed the diamond on his brooch exuding a thin beam of light that was refracted by the stones in the compact, directing four more light rays to his friends. They sat wide-eyed, entranced by the events of their past lives playing out.

The diamond abruptly stopped channeling. Mamoru gasped when everyone simultaneously fell unconscious. “Was… was that it?”

“Let us see…” Nia thrust her talisman into the air, her lips instantly separating into a confident grin. “Terra Millennium Power, Release!”

Mamoru had to shield his visage with one arm as bright green light emanated from the peridot pendant, completely enveloping Nia. He experienced the curious sensation of being outside beneath the summer sun, but he was indoors in the middle of winter. He thought he smelled flowers too, perhaps roses, and the scent of earth after a rain shower. ‘There’s a word for that. Petrichor, I think.’ He cracked his eyes once the strange feelings subsided, his mouth immediately falling open as he took in Nia’s transformation. She was the personification of the rainbow, clad in an iridescent white gown and an ornate golden headdress with precious metals and jewels glittering all over the rest of her. Every color found in nature seemed to be represented in her ensemble, cementing her status as a goddess of Earth.

Nia examined herself and winced. “This feels so impractical. How am I supposed to fight like this?” She released a huffy breath; at the same time a fierce wind rattled the windows and a few branches snapped off the trees outside. The pair exchanged a look of slight fear, then Nia approached a wilted peace lily near the stairs. All she had to do was touch it with one finger to perk it up once more. Beaming, she turned toward Mamoru and found him regarding the floor in bewilderment. She had left a trail of flowers in her wake, little ones like forget-me-nots, mazus, and lobelia. “I don’t think I’ll grow accustomed to that,” she said softly.

Kaelan awoke with horrible nausea. He sat up and took heaving breaths, waiting for the vertigo to subside before rising to his feet in an attempt to reach the kitchen. Clinging to the countertop, he took great gulps of water straight from the faucet, but it didn’t help and he ended up vomiting into the sink. It felt like World War III was occurring in his stomach. His body was wracked with waves of pain as he slid down the island, arms wrapped around his midsection to prevent himself from bursting open. He didn’t know how long he sat there in agony or if he really was fading in and out of consciousness, if the pain eventually vanished or he simply grew accustomed to it. It turned out to be the former; a cool hand touched his forehead and provided clarity. Kaelan looked up at Nia, embarrassed by his pathetic state, but she only gave him a gentle smile. “How do you feel?”

“No longer like I’m dying,” he answered, managing to right himself. With her help he returned to the great room, glancing at each of his tenants. ‘No, they’re my brothers in arms now.’ He examined Nia again and was taken aback by the primordial beauty she radiated. “I know your name…” he said slowly, “it’s Khamyne. I wasn’t able to thank you for saving… Endymion.” Kaelan regarded Mamoru in wonderment but the blue-eyed boy wouldn’t meet his gaze. He looked to the others instead, seeing them as they were now and how he remembered them. The changes were significant.

Nia cleared her throat to earn everyone’s attention. “Shitennou, you have awakened. You now know
that you are the reincarnations of those who served Prince Endymion and King Aitolos during the Silver Era of Mar Serenitatis. I am sure it may take a few days to assimilate the memories of your previous lives, and like us you may even communicate with the ancient spirits dwelling within your star seeds. But as times have changed so drastically since then, I believe it only fitting to bestow you with new identities for your celestial selves.”

She turned to Joe first. “Josef Ivanovich Levin from Vladivostok, Russia– you are Jikoku, Lord of the East, and you may now will the very air to do your bidding. You are the lord of spring and the Keeper of the Kingdom. Please continue to defend the natural wonders of this planet.” Nia faced Zach next. “Zacharie Eleutere le Blanc of New Orleans, Louisiana, as the Lord of the West you command the metal element and rule the autumn season. You are Komoku, the Lord of Limitless Vision, and I hope the beauty of this world will continue to inspire you.” He gave a small nod, humbled. “Nicholas Meyer, you hail from Johannesburg, South Africa, clearly denoting your status as Zojo, Lord of the South. You are the Lord of Spiritual Growth, meshing that which is intangible with reality. Your strength reaches its peak during the summer months and our enemies fear your fiery might. Use it well.” He lifted his chin, smirking a little, and Nia lastly addressed the platinum-haired boy. “Kaelan Thomas Burke of Kinsale, Ireland. You rule the water element and, like it, will always overcome obstacles in your path. The winter season is reflected in your appearance. You are Tamon, also called Bishamonten, Lord of the North and He Who Knows All. But you must promise not to use that knowledge to elevate yourself above others.”

“I promise,” he whispered. Nia heard him and smiled, then closed her eyes and willed her celestial energy back into the copper compact. Even in her civilian form it radiated off her, an aura of fortitude and soulful grace that infused the Shitennou with power in turn. She had given her life to protect Endymion all that time ago, even though her sacrifice ended up being futile. Now it was their turn to let her wield their elements against the Dark Cloud who threatened the peace they attempted to herald.

‘I won’t give up the fight this time.’ Kaelan repeated the affirmation as he knelt on the carpet and reached beneath his bed, flinching when his fingers landed on the wooden box housing the ilmenite weapon named the Titaness Sword, Verticordia’s blade. It was this artifact that had caused his sickness when he awoke. Even now it made him dizzy, but Kaelan steeled himself against the shame of his death. He should have lived on with Verticordia and prevented the war that decimated the planetary kingdoms, but he had been so weak then. Perhaps it was a bit morbid to fall in love with the woman to whom the instrument of his demise belonged, but Kaelan was no longer that man. He wasn’t Kunz and he would never give in to despair again. This time around he would keep moving forward with Mina no matter what trials came their way.
New Horizons

Zach sat backstage with his professor and a few technicians while every line of dialogue he’d written for *The Last Heart* went in one ear and right out the other. He didn’t care about the applause his actors received at the end of each scene, nor did he care about all the minor adjustments that had to be made to ensure the play went off without a hitch. Up until the curtain rose it seemed at least twenty people had asked his permission to do this or that, but he just didn’t care anymore. A few weeks ago he would have taken full control over every little aspect of opening night to ensure it went exactly the way he wanted. The play, its reception, and the chance at becoming a member of a professional theater group were the furthest things from his mind now, although a part of him knew they should be front and center.

The truth was that none of this mattered to Zois… or should he say Komoku since that was their combined identity now. His art was pointless. Scripts, lighting plans, costume and stage designs… all of it was completely inconsequential. Zach was a warrior now, not an artist. He couldn’t even try to be an artist when he had a whole planet to help protect. The day before winter break ended he and the other Shitennou went into the mountains to try out their powers. Nicholas’ ability to summon flame was by far the most impressive but he had deplorable control over it. Joe also struggled to bind the wind to his will, and the two of them almost succeeded in spreading a massive forest fire. Luckily Kaelan doused the blaze with his effortless mastery of water. The only thing Zach accomplished was dredging the remains of a silver vein up from the earth. It had taken every ounce of willpower to summon the metal from its subterranean home, but now he had a pure silver coin that he idly turned between his fingers. The simple shape disappointed him; it felt like he was losing his creative drive.

The play ended and massive applause flooded his ears. “Great job, Zacharie,” said Professor Sinclair. “I think you’ve just established yourself as a talent to watch out for.”

“Thanks,” he muttered, making the man frown.

“Do try to keep your chin up, Mister le Blanc. You’ve earned a four-oh for the quarter!”

“Thank you, Professor!” Zach said with forced enthusiasm. He took off his headset and left it on the chair, grabbed his bag, and headed for the exit. Some people gave him questioning looks but most of them were too busy congratulating each other. Tomorrow the critiques would roll in; Zach was certain most of them would be positive. He’d read opinions from a lot of critics who said high fantasy didn’t belong on the stage, challenging him to write *The Last Heart* in the first place. Throughout his whole life people told him what to do and how to do it, and throughout his whole life he had proven that his way was just as good if not superior.

He got in his car and put the key in the ignition but didn’t turn it. Instead he fished out his phone and dialed a number. A woman answered after a few rings. “Yes?”

“Yes, I’ve won, Ma. I’m quitting theater.” He heard her inhale. “But I’m not coming home any time soon. Give Dad my best.” Zach hung up before she could say anything, then he made the dark drive home. Once in his room he turned off all the lights and got into bed even though it was only six o’clock. It occurred to him that he might be experiencing some kind of depression due to the weather since it hadn’t been this cold and stark last year. Being from the Gulf Coast he wasn’t exactly fond of snow, but Nicholas loved it. Maybe that was another reason why Zach was down in the dumps. He’d spent his entire freshman year with the smart jock, even grown to consider him a pretty good friend, but as soon as they moved into the mansion Nicholas became better friends with everyone else.
Not to mention he now spent all his free time with Makoto. Kaelan and Mina had gotten back together and Joe was still seeing Rei. And Mamoru had Usagi, of course; even though they weren’t a couple they were basically married already. Following the trend, then, Zach should be dating Ami, but that couldn’t work as long as she thought he was in a gay relationship with Jackson. Zach wondered if she had been in the audience tonight, and no sooner had he formed that thought than he received a text from her. “Where are you? Everyone’s waiting for you at the after-party.”

This made him feel even worse. Ami wasn’t into the party scene at all yet she had gone in order to congratulate him, no doubt placing herself in an uncomfortable situation. “I went home, don’t really feel like partying. You should stay and have fun, though,” Zach replied.

“But it’s no fun without you!” Immediately after that she sent a selfie featuring her and Jackson pouting at the camera. If the freshman really were his boyfriend Zach would have found it endearing that he and Ami got along so well, but because it was a farce he felt like a total scumbag instead.

Over the next couple months Zach’s classmates stopped trying to socialize with him and his professors ceased asking him to participate. He no longer went to the library to have lunch with anyone, just sat by himself in lonely alcoves. Valentine’s Day passed like any other day, though he noticed people exchanging cards, sweets, and kisses. Somewhere in the back of his mind was a reminder to make salted caramel bites for Ami but obviously it was too late now. March came and the snows finally gave way to rain, a much more adequate reflection of his mood. Or was it actually Zois’ mood he’d been dealing with all this time? Nia implied they could communicate with their past-life selves but Zach had yet to hear a peep from the ancient advisor. Maybe he’d chosen to convey things through emotions.

If that was the case, Zach had tired of brooding. It was time he take control of his own life again, or at least attempt to get a handle on the newest aspect of his existence. On the way home he stopped at Barnes & Noble to buy some of those steel desktop sculptures Nicholas was so fond of. He opened one box and dumped all the pieces onto his bed, assembling the statuette with nothing more than willpower. At first they appeared crude and jagged, but when Zach focused inward he found he could shape the material into whatever form came to mind’s eye. After a week of designing abstract sculptures his creations became more ornate, and following that he mastered nouveau styles, bending and shaping the metals into highly detailed works of art. But there was a much more practical application for his abilities given his new destiny. He now had the literal means to protect himself and his allies from the minions of Tartarus.

It happened that Kaelan opened Zach’s bedroom door one day to find his arms and legs sporting medieval finery with a distinctively French flourish. “What the hell are you doing?” he asked in mild shock.

“Making armor, duh,” Zach returned. He finished a gauntlet and made a fist, finding that it restricted the movement too much. He transferred some steel segments to his elbow, tested its articulation, and smiled at the fact that he could finally do something useful for other people. He put his hands on his hips and grinned at Kaelan.

“You’re not going to wear that every day, are you?” Zach rolled his eyes and willed the steel off his body, compressing it into a large, flat disc that hung on the wall like a mirror. Kaelan glanced between it and him a few times before raising his eyebrows, impressed. “I just came to tell you that if you’d like to go to Hawaii for spring break, you need to pack tonight and be at the port of Edmonds no later than six o’clock.”

Now it was Zach’s turn to look confused. “What’s in Edmonds?”
“Our ride,” he answered.

All anybody knew was that Kaelan had some sort of plan to take nine people plus himself all the way to Hawaii for a month and they wouldn’t have to pay a penny for transportation. Usagi was more than annoyed that she didn’t get to sleep in on the first day of spring break, but the prospect of adventure enabled her to get out of bed and wait for Mamoru to pick up her and Makoto. “Do you think Kaelan chartered a ship or something?” she mused.

Makoto lifted a shoulder. “I thought it might be a cruise, but if so then everyone would have come to our place. I don’t know why we’d have to drive all the way north to Edmonds.”

“I guess Kaelan is just exercising his eccentric millionaire side.” A half hour later Mamoru pulled into the marina and parked between Rei’s Acura and the Maserati. The three of them stepped out, yawning, and made their way over to the security gate everyone had gathered around… everyone but the leader of this excursion, that was. “Figures he’s not even here!” Usagi grouched.

“Kaelan told us to wait,” Nicholas explained. “The guard let him right in.” He automatically put an arm around Makoto when she snuggled against him to keep warm, the simple action banishing Usagi’s irritation. Upon returning from Tokyo after New Year’s and discovering that her best friend was dating the guy she’d been pestering her about since September, Usagi released a shriek of excitement so loud the neighbors came over to ask if something was wrong. Every time Nicholas showed up to hang out she gave him a goofy grin and squee’d into one of her pillows. Often she went to the arcade with Mamoru to give them alone time, but Makoto didn’t share any details of what they got up to.

“Aren’t they so cute together, Mamo-chan?” Usagi whispered. “I’m so happy for Mako-chan that I just wanna scream!”

“I don’t think you should do that right now, Usako. It’s a little early.” He hadn’t gotten up before six a.m. since junior year.

“Then I’ll wait until we’re out in the middle of the ocean.” Mamoru chuckled at that, then the rattling of the gate alerted him to Kaelan’s return.

“Alright everyone, keep hold of your bags and watch your feet. If one of you falls in it’ll really put a damper on my morning.” He led them along a maze of docks to where the largest vessels were moored. Nestled among three-story yachts and blue water sailboats was an impressive catamaran that Kaelan climbed onto, grinning down at his gawking friends. “Well don’t just stand there, come on up! Saoirse is happy to have you aboard!”

“Seer-sha?” Joe repeated. It didn’t sound at all like how it was spelled on the side.

“Yeah, it means ‘freedom’.” With that Kaelan beckoned everyone to take either set of stairs leading to the deck, and he sounded extremely pleased with himself as he showed off his latest toy. “As you can see, this level has the living area, galley, and main bathroom. There are four cabins in the pontoons, two on each side, with individual bathrooms and showers. Someone is going to have to sleep on the couch here but it’s got a bed in it. The door there leads to the cockpit where the radio and GPS are. Got all that?” Nine heads nodded tiredly. “Great. Now, which of you knows how to sail?” Zach raised his hand and looked around, his eyes widening when he saw that Ami also had her hand up. “How much experience do you have?” Kaelan asked the girl first.

“My father used to take me sailing before he… when I was a child.” Even after twelve years it still hurt her to talk about her parents’ separation. “We used to sail all around the country. I might be a little rusty, but it should come back to me easily enough.”
The captain nodded and turned to Zach. “My parents also have a sailboat, and I was a member of the sailing club in high school. I used to race a little trimaran.”

“Excellent, glad to have you. I bought this particular catamaran because it can be handled by two people, one if it’s absolutely necessary. The weather forecast is expected to be good—no storms, just some pockets of rain. We’re going to sail down the coast to San Diego where we’ll stock up on whatever you guys need, then we’ll head across to Hawaii. Once there you can use the jet ski, dinghy, or kayaks under the hulls to go puttering off wherever you want. Oh, one more thing…” Kaelan lifted a sofa cushion, withdrawing a case from a hidden storage compartment. “Use this box to alert the Coast Guard if anything bad happens, like if we capsize. But if any of you turn this on and it’s not an emergency, I get fucked by a massive fine. So do not mess with it.”

“Aye aye, captain,” nearly everyone chorused, laughing. They dispersed to claim rooms and settle in for a few more hours of sleep while Kaelan started the motors, skillfully maneuvering the giant catamaran out of the marina and north along Puget Sound. They would pass through the Strait of Juan de Fuca and round Cape Flattery where the big ring on his finger had been retrieved by Nia and Mamoru. He looked down at the sapphire and wondered where in the world he could find water as pure and blue as its crystalline depths, if such waters even existed. ‘They did in Elysium,’ some part of him recalled. He hadn’t appreciated the natural wonders of the planet during his old life, but now he certainly would. He had all the time in the world to explore every corner of the globe.

“I didn’t know you liked sailing,” Ami remarked while she and Zach sat on the deck. Although a chill wind ruffled their hair and clothes, there was something mesmerizing about the wake of the catamaran and the effortless manner in which it pushed through the water.

“Oh yeah, there was no better way of escaping my parents than taking my trimaran to Corpus Christi on the weekends.”

“I don’t know where that is,” she admitted.

“Texas coast. They have a hookah lounge and a couple decent clubs. Even though I was underage they let me in.”

“Probably because you’re good-looking.” Zach smiled at the way she said this so offhandedly, like it was a fact they both knew. “I’d never been to a club until we all went to Trillium.”

“Did you have fun?”

Ami nodded. “I thought Matt Lange was really good. I actually like deep house music a lot.”

“You continue to surprise me, Ami. I definitely pegged you for a classical girl.” Zach gave her a playful nudge. “And I was really surprised you went to the after-party in my honor. How was that?”

“Ah, interesting… to say the least. There was a lot of singing. Dancing too, but mostly singing. And it actually got better when people were inebriated.”

“Those are the theater kids for you,” he chuckled. They sat in comfortable silence until Mina opened the glass door.

“Hey, Kaelan wants to talk to you two. It’s not urgent but he said the sooner the better.”

They obliged and Kaelan cut right to the chase. “I had originally planned on dropping anchor at night to get some sleep, but since you’ve both sailed I was wondering if you would mind taking the helm in shifts. If I leave off tonight you could keep us on course for San Diego. All you have to do is
follow the coast south.”

“You really trust us with this big-ass boat?” Zach scoffed.

He received a narrow look. “I trust you not to want to pay for something if you break it. We’ll make it to Hawaii much sooner if I don’t have to stop to sleep.”

“But my father’s sailboat was quite small compared to this. I don’t know if I can handle it,” Ami said.

Kaelan dismissed her concern. “Sure you can. It’s just like driving a big, old car with no assisted steering.”

“I’ve never driven a car!”

“Oh, uh, okay then. Just hop on up here.” They traded places, Zach peering over the girl’s shoulder. “You probably won’t even need to do anything unless the wind stops blowing. Since it’s daylight I’ll let you stay here and get used to it. When we get to the mouth of the Columbia, switch with Zach. How’s that sound?”

“I suppose I can try…” Ami swallowed before putting her hands on the large wheel. She kept glancing down at the instrumentation to ensure the catamaran stayed exactly south and maintained its speed of thirteen knots. She also eyed the gauges for wind speed, direction, and barometric pressure.

“You can use the radio to contact the cabin if you need anything, and you can close the windows and turn on the heater if you get cold.” His instructions relayed, Kaelan grinned. “Remember to relax— that’s the whole point of sailing.” Ami nodded wordlessly, then he went downstairs to the cabin. “Are there any leftovers from lunch?”

Makoto and Nicholas were in fact cleaning up the remains of everyone’s midday meal. “Sure, we saved you some soup. Do you want a panini with it?”

He nodded eagerly. “What do you guys think of the galley? Is it accommodating?”

“Oh, yeah,” Nicholas answered. “Why didn’t you buy copper cookware for the actual house?”

“I’m so thankful for this convection stovetop. Our apartment has propane and I hate it,” Makoto added.

“I replaced the propane systems with solar because I’m not keen on the idea of having contained explosives on my brand-new catamaran,” Kaelan explained. His eyes lit up when they presented him with a hot sandwich and a bowl of homemade tomato soup. “I hope I got all the ingredients you two could need.”

Nicholas waved it off. “We’ll make sure to feed you like kings and queens no matter what we have to work with.”

“Speaking of your brand-new catamaran…” Joe piped up from the couch, “How much did it cost?”

Kaelan sighed. “Why do you have to know that? Can’t you just appreciate this nice thing I’m doing for you?”

“Okay, new question.” Makoto pointed a scrubbing brush at him. “How did you even learn to handle something like this?”
He chewed thoughtfully before answering. “That one’s easy— I was raised around boats. Kinsale is a busy port and fishing town. One of the best jobs I had was working for the port authority where I got to inspect vessels for regulated goods. And drugs of course. I also worked on a fishing boat and in a processing plant, but that wasn’t nearly as fun as looking for contraband on rich people’s yachts. I got to sail a few in and out of the marina… And, okay, I took a week-long class when I bought this thing, but it’s almost the same as a monohull which I’m pretty good with.” Makoto nodded her approval and returned to the dishes. “Does anyone else have any more questions?”

Joe cleared his throat yet again. “Yes. Did you bring fishing gear?”

“Left pontoon storage,” Kaelan replied. Rei laughed a little at his hasty exit. “Now if that’s about it, I’m going to take a nap. No one bother me unless we’re sinking or on fire.” The former was basically impossible and the latter would only occur if one of his friends did something really stupid, but honestly there weren’t many ways for them to harm Saoirse. Upon entering his cabin Mina looked up in alarm from her fashion magazine.

“Who’s sailing this thing if you’re down here?!”

Kaelan chuckled at her concern. “Don’t worry, Ami’s got it. Zach’s helping her.”

“Oh.” She frowned slightly. “Do you trust them?”

“Sure, wouldn’t you?”

“Not with a multi-million dollar catamaran,” she said icily.

The boy removed his shoes and outer layers before falling onto the plush queen-sized bed. He allowed himself a few deep, relaxing breaths, then faced Mina. “It didn’t cost multiple millions of dollars.”

“But still in the million dollar range,” she confirmed. “You really shouldn’t be spending your money so frivolously.”

“It’s not frivolous,” Kaelan said evenly. “Sailing is something I enjoy. I got this particular cat so all of us could enjoy it. And I only bought it after receiving my government subsidy.”

Her eyes widened significantly. “You spent government money on this stupid boat?”

“No, I spent my own money on this boat. And Saoirse is beautiful, thank you.”

“Then what on earth did you get a subsidy for?!”

“Because I’m funding the first fully-sustainable skyscraper in Seattle!” Kaelan shouted back, losing his cool.

Mina blinked a few times in amazement, then lowered her voice. “Why didn’t you tell me that first, you idiot?” She gave him an apologetic hug. “You really need to work on communicating things in the right order!”

“I suppose I do,” he admitted. She regarded him inquiringly. “Back in January this start-up architectural firm called Emerald Concepts approached me to ask if I’d consider funding their project after their initial backer withdrew. They already had a site, permits, materials and all that, they just needed to pay the contractors. I showed the design to Joe and Nicholas and they said I should go for it, so I applied for a grant to take some of the strain off my personal finances. I just got the check last month and decided to buy this cat to celebrate. You know I’m not stupid enough to spend taxpayer
dollars on personal things.”

“No, but you are stupid for not telling me about this project you’ve invested in. I do care about what you’re doing with your life besides taking me out to fancy restaurants, shows, and now on exotic vacations. I want to be more than your trophy girlfriend, you know!”

Kaelan became awash with guilt. He had in fact been lavishing Mina in an attempt to buy her love because he didn’t want to give her any reasons to leave again, especially if he said one wrong thing. Instead he’d almost sabotaged their second go with his silence. “I’m sorry,” he muttered into her hair. “I thought I had all the right moves and knew exactly what to do, but then you came along and made me throw everything out the window. Are you sure you don’t want a kid? ‘Cause that’s probably the only thing I can get right.”

“I’m sure,” Mina laughed, pulling back to look him in the eye. “You’ve done a lot of things right in the time I’ve known you, Kaelan. All the projects you’ve funded have had such positive impacts on people’s lives and the community as a whole. You do the things no one else dares to do and you help people’s dreams become reality. I bet your grandfather would be so proud of the way you’ve utilized his fortune to benefit others instead of just yourself.”

He smiled contentedly. “Hmm… You sure know how to stroke a guy’s ego, Mina. But if you wouldn’t mind terribly, could you use something besides your words?” She scoffed and pushed him over but the impish grin remained on his face. “How about when we get to Hawaii?”

“We’ll see,” she said coyly, side-eyeing him. “I might be too tired from playing on the open ocean.”

“You know we’re still a week out, so what’ll you do ‘til then?”

Mina shrugged. “I guess I’ll just have to make my own fun. Your catamaran is impressive but there really isn’t that much to do on it. I suppose I could have Ami show me how to douse the mainsail and trim the jib.”

“Oh Mina, I love it when you talk nautical to me.” His heart soared at the fact that she even knew those terms. She giggled, rolled her eyes, and returned to her magazine. Abandoning the subject of intimacy for now, Kaelan pulled off his shirt and snuggled into a pillow. “Wake me up in a few hours so I can check our heading.”

“Oh Mina, I love it when you talk nautical to me.” His heart soared at the fact that she even knew those terms. She giggled, rolled her eyes, and returned to her magazine. Abandoning the subject of intimacy for now, Kaelan pulled off his shirt and snuggled into a pillow. “Wake me up in a few hours so I can check our heading.”

“Will do, captain,” Mina assured. As much as the notion of christening his vessel on its maiden voyage appealed to him, all Kaelan really wanted was for Mina and the rest of his guests to feel just as at home on Saoirse as they did in the mansion. It felt good to be back on the water; he had been connected to it long before the sapphire ring decorated his hand. Growing up on an island where he could find the sea or ocean no matter which direction he went made it difficult to stay on land for too long.

He wasn’t whisking his friends off on an exotic vacation just for the fun of it, either. He knew Usagi had already embraced her fate as a guardian but Ami, Mina, Makoto, and Rei were unaware of the true purpose behind the necklaces they wore. Mamoru said they had to have an encounter that triggered their celestial power. Kaelan hoped that by removing the girls from places where the minions of Tartarus knew they frequented, he could provide them with a couple more weeks of blissful ignorance. There would be no return to the lives they knew once awakened.
Shades of Love

Michiru woke up with a smile on her face for the third day in a row, and it wasn’t completely due to the fact that Haruka had an arm around her waist. Things were honestly a lot more peaceful with Usagi and Makoto gone; one had a tendency to stay up late playing video games and the other just kept going until she ran out of energy. It was nice having the apartment all to herself again, but Michiru had to admit that after the first day she felt a little lonely. Inviting Haruka to come stay with her turned out to be a good solution.

Haruka had changed quite a bit since high school. Where she used to be brash and unapologetic, she now asked for permission to do just about everything in an effort to avoid invading Michiru’s personal space, even though the violinist wanted her to invade her space. She was ridiculously polite and reserved, downright shy in fact, but Michiru finally managed to coax Haruka into her bed. The blonde had clung to her all night, using her as a replacement body pillow, and tended to talk in her sleep. Even now she muttered something about needing a better lap time before her eyelids fluttered open, groggily taking in her bed mate’s serene countenance. “Hi,” she mumbled.

“Good morning,” Michiru sweetly replied.

“Did I annoy you at all?”

“Not in the least.”

“I’m glad.” Haruka yawned widely and rolled onto her back; she was so used to sleeping in hotels that it felt like the queen-sized mattress went on forever. “Your bed is really comfy.”

“I know, that’s why I bought it,” Michiru smiled. “You’re welcome to sleep in it as often as you want.”

Haruka sat up and swung her legs over the edge. “Thanks, but I don’t want to bother you again. The futon was fine.” She started to rise but Michiru reached for her hand, stopping her. She looked back to see a little bit of hurt in the virtuoso’s eyes.

“I don’t know if I’ve been making it obvious, Haruka, but I want you to be here. I wouldn’t have asked you to stay with me if I found you to be any sort of nuisance. Why don’t you tell me what’s really bothering you?”

The woman let out a long sigh and partially faced her. “I just… I’m not certain if it’s me you really want… or Aura.” Michiru frowned at that. “I’m not even sure if I’m still me. After Hotaru healed my leg I should have called Katsu and gone right back to training, but part of me knows I have to stay here. Instead of racing I should be hunting down the other members of the Dark Cloud. Aura constantly reminds me that I have to kill one of them. I don’t know if I’ll be able to do anything like that when the time comes.”

Michiru placed her other hand atop Haruka’s. “I wouldn’t say it was easy. I honestly had no idea what to do— I wouldn’t have come out unscathed if Luna hadn’t been there. I also asked Thalassa for help. She fought during the Silver Era just like Aura and all the other guardians. History has come full circle and we’ve reached a point where we have to fight to survive again, but this time we have all the knowledge of our past selves. We can allow them to strike the final blow, in essence.” She sat up so she was level with Haruka’s eyes. “I know it’s difficult to accept, but these Dark Cloud beings have no qualms about taking our lives. If we don’t defend ourselves and one of us ends up dying, we
won’t be strong enough to prevent them from stealing the Sun.”

Haruka signed in resignation. “I know we have a duty to protect humankind from Tartarus… but I just can’t fathom sticking my sword into someone when they haven’t really done anything wrong. I mean, they didn’t even succeed the first time around! Why can’t those other guardians Luna mentioned take care of them?”

Michiru gave her a hard look. “It’s our battle to win now, Haruka. You can’t run away from your destiny. There is an ancient, determined warrior out there who will murder you if they get the chance. If you die because you refuse to embrace Aura’s strength, I’ll—”

“What do you even still care about me?” she demanded. “Why have you been following my career if you didn’t want to see me get hurt? Why did you break up with me only to want me back three years later? It has to be because Thalassa had feelings for Aura and they’re influencing you now!”

“I couldn’t care less about Aura!” Michiru refuted. “I’m in the exact same position as you! I had no knowledge of the Silver Era until Luna told us, so how could I have known that you were her reincarnation? I loved you way before any of this and I still love you despite what’s happened!” A heavy silence hung between them for a minute, then Michiru’s voice came out quietly. “After you were gone I realized how wrong it was for me to ask you to quit racing. I never should have tried to take that away from you. Every time I watched you win I was reminded of your passion, passion that disappeared from my life when you left.”

Haruka scoffed, but not at Michiru. “Yet I ended up getting seriously hurt anyway, so you were right all along.”

“No, I wasn’t. I know you would have won North Fire if Tartarus hadn’t interfered.” The blonde hummed thoughtfully. “You know, when we were together I used to think that anyone could do what you do, just drive a car really fast. But once you were gone and I took the time to really watch rallycross, I realized it requires just as much focus and precision as playing an instrument. And maybe I knew that all along… Maybe I was jealous that you would become more successful than me, fall in love with someone better than me.”

“Like who, Lindsey Stirling? She’s pretty cute.” Michiru narrowed her eyes at the impish grin on Haruka’s lips before pushing her over with a laugh. “Don’t worry, she’s a little out of my age range. And I haven’t exactly had time to go out with anyone since entering the Junior WRC circuit.”

“I see. So will you stay with me over spring break at the least?”

Haruka pretended to think about it. “I suppose so. This place really beats the hotel.”

“And will you promise to make yourself comfortable?” After receiving a nod Michiru grinned, got out of bed, and grabbed her bathrobe. “That means you can make breakfast, watch TV, do your laundry and anything else you need. No more asking for permission.” With that she entered the master bathroom to take a shower, hanging her silk nightgown on a hook. About five minutes later she heard the door open and could make out Haruka’s slender silhouette through the steamed glass. She stepped into the hot water, wrapping her long arms around the brunette. Michiru couldn’t help it; coyness automatically entered her tone as she asked, “What are you doing?”

“What you said– getting comfortable,” Haruka smoothly replied.

Usagi stood on the front half of a pontoon as the catamaran sailed into the port of San Diego. She waved at people on jet skis and paddle boards, receiving enthusiastic greetings in return. Every
stretch of sandy shore was also dotted with beach-goers, and on the boardwalks she discerned bikers, joggers and skaters. “This place looks amazing!” she shouted up to Kaelan.

“Enjoy it while you can, I only want to be here for a couple hours at most. That should be enough time for you guys to buy clothes, food, beach stuff, or any necessities you forgot.” Once the marina was in sight Zach and Ami came out to secure the sails so Kaelan could switch on the motors, guiding the catamaran to a pier with practiced ease. “Alright everyone,” he said after they gathered on the dock, “keep your phones on, don’t wander too far away, and try to avoid tourist traps. Make sure to be back here by…” He glanced at his Cartier. “One o’clock on the dot. Stay safe, kids.”

Usagi, Mina, Ami, Mamoru and Zach ran off to the waterfront shops while Rei, Makoto, Joe and Nicholas hailed a taxi to take them to the nearest grocery store. “It feels weird not having my own rig to drive,” Joe remarked from the backseat. “How does Kaelan plan for us to get around on the islands?”

“Rental cars, bru,” Nicholas supplied. “We’re only gonna need them for a day or two at a time. I also read that lots of places let you rent bikes and scooters and stuff like that.”

Joe shook his head and mumbled something about being stupidly rich. When they got to the store Rei asked their driver to stick around, offering a big tip. Since she and Zach had access to their families’ wealth they had agreed to chip in whenever possible so the financial responsibilities didn’t fall solely upon Kaelan. It was the least they could do to thank him for organizing this expedition.

“Where would you go if money was no object?” Nicholas randomly inquired while he and Makoto perused the seafood department.

She picked up a filet of king salmon, contemplating it. “Italy, I think. I’d love to learn some authentic recipes and do a wine tour.”

“Mm. I wanna go to Wales where my dad was born and see all the castles.”

Makoto beamed at him. “Then we’ll have to start a travel fund so we can go to both those places someday.”

“That might take forever…” Nicholas sighed as she put a hand on his arm. “It just hit me that I might never be able to take you on a trip like this. I still haven’t got a job, I got two more years of school, and demand for engineers isn’t exactly booming so there might not even be any opportunities when I finally graduate.”

“Maybe not in Seattle. You’ll have to go where the work is, like China or India and their booming metropolises… metropoli?” Ami would know the correct plural.

Nicholas rubbed the back of his neck. “I don’t wanna drag you halfway around the world though, assuming we’re even still together by then. If I get done with one job in Dubai maybe a new one will pop up in Argentina or something. Then you’d be uprooted.”

“Nikko, I can be a pastry chef anywhere in the world, including on a catamaran in the middle of the ocean. Why are you so worried about the future all of a sudden?”

“Cuz I don’t wanna lose you…” he muttered. “I’ll never be able to give you whatever you want, like Kaelan can with Mina. I’ll never have as much money as him in my whole life.”

Makoto set down her basket and placed her arms around his neck, smiling reassuringly. “I don’t need money to be happy. I just want to be with you, you big lug.” Even though Nicholas nodded she could still see inadequacy swimming in his eyes, so she stood on her toes to give him a deep kiss.
Other shoppers walking by looked alarmed but Makoto didn’t care since she wasn’t going to see any of them ever again. ‘Although, I thought that about Nicholas and look where we are now.’ She really would have to suck up her pride and thank Usagi.

After the taxi returned them to the marina and all the food was put away, Rei lounged outside browsing swimsuit trends on her phone. She should have bought one at the beginning of the season but she couldn’t have known that Kaelan was going to whisk her off to Hawaii. Monokinis and tribal prints seemed to be hot sellers this year but she didn’t like patterned anything and the monokinis all looked the same. She was about to give up the search when Joe appeared on deck. “Ah, just the person who can help.” He raised a pale eyebrow. “Will you come with me to get a swimsuit?”

“Sure, we still have half an hour until we leave.” He jumped to the dock, offering a hand to help Rei down the pontoon’s narrow steps. They meandered along the boardwalk, occasionally popping into stores, but Rei had a discerning eye and spurned all the non-branded swimwear. She may have had lots of money at her disposal but that didn’t mean she had to waste it on disposable garments. Finally she found a more upscale boutique, Joe following dutifully as she perused the racks. “How about this one?” he would say every so often, suggesting mainly dark colors.

“I think I want something different, like tie-dye.” His eyes widened in surprise before he went off to the other side of the store, regrouping with Rei at the dressing rooms. She immediately shot her head at the neon orange and lime green suits but took his other picks with her, tossing him a little smile as she closed the curtain. It seemed oddly sensual, though he didn’t know why since he received an eyeful of her beautiful body every time they practiced the bedroom arts. Without warning his pulse quickened, his palms growing sweaty and his fingers twitching with the desire to caress her. Joe slipped into the changing room, coming to an abrupt halt as his actions caught up with his brain. Rei calmly stared into his eyes reflected in the mirror. “Can you tie me?” she asked, lifting her dark hair off her neck. The weird moment passed and Joe felt his face turn scarlet, completely unable to vocalize an apology. Once his fingers had knotted the string Rei turned around. “What do you think?”

The two-piece was an intriguing blend of blue, violet and red, splashes of vibrant color against her porcelain skin. The bottom half wasn’t that interesting but the top crisscrossed her abdomen several times before securing at her side, and it gave her marvelous cleavage. When Joe didn’t answer Rei reached for the garments still hanging and unclipped a violet sarong, wrapping it around her hips. “I think I’ll get this to go with it,” she idly remarked, posing a few more times.

“It looks good on you,” Joe finally managed to say. He was perplexed by the fact that Rei hadn’t asked him to get out yet, but part of him didn’t want to leave anyway. He wanted to keep watching her, wanted to touch her, wanted to feel her against him. But he already knew how she felt in every sense of the word. Their liaisons had been ongoing for three months now.

“You only see what she chooses to show you, feel what she wants you to feel…” came a darker voice that wasn’t quite his own. “Just take what you want instead of waiting for her to give it to you.”

As Rei reached back to untie the bikini Joe’s hand beat her to it. He stared at the dangling strings for a minute before shaking his head and exiting the room. She slowly released a breath, goosebumps rising on her skin. For the briefest of moments his aura had donned the same color and intensity the day of their IMAX date, when he appeared outside her apartment. He wasn’t himself then, wasn’t himself just now. Perhaps, and she hated considering it, she didn’t know Joe as well as she thought. Perhaps she hadn’t learned anything true about him. ‘No, that can’t be right. When we make love I experience all of him physically and spiritually. Nothing is hidden when we reach nirvana together.’ So why was it that such a dark part of his soul remained unseen by her? Rei desperately wanted to
keep Joe in her life, but if he was only going to end up harming her…

She squeezed her eyes shut to block the image. His energy existed within her so she irrefutably knew that Josef was a kind, gentle, selfless person. The only explanation left was that something was trying to use him to get through to her. Rei had received spiritual training from her grandfather and was fairly confident in her ability to exorcise malevolent spirits, she just never imagined she’d actually encounter one. She never imagined one would take root in someone she so deeply cared for. ‘This is my fault,’ she thought, a bit irrationally. ‘My feelings weren’t strong enough to protect Josef.’ But now that she admitted how much he meant to her, she would do whatever it took to save him.

The cabin was completely silent aside from the faint scratching of Usagi’s pen and a rustle of paper when Mamoru turned the pages of his book. He’d been reading since San Diego disappeared behind them and glittering blue water became the only thing visible on the horizon. When night fell Usagi came in from the deck and opened her Nintendo DS, changing the game cartridges a few times before settling on Hyrule Warriors. Without even speaking Mamoru had lifted his legs so she could lie down with her elbows on the edge of the bed, then he stretched back out, his knees bridging her back. It had been quiet then as well because Usagi muted the volume, only releasing an occasional utterance of frustration. It didn’t occur to either of them that there was anything weird about this total lack of communication. This was just how things were between them, how they had been for many months now.

Mamoru finally bookmarked the next chapter and put down his novel. “Are you drawing or writing?” He knew Usagi had brought both her diary and her sketch journal, which was full of designs for class.

“Writing,” she answered, but there was a despondent note in her voice suggesting she didn’t really want to be. Still her pink pen continued dancing across the page. Mamoru waited patiently until it stopped, then she sighed. “I had a dream last night about the Silver Era. It made me think about everything we’ve learned, what we saw with Nia. If the Dark Cloud members really want us out of their way, why haven’t they come for us en mass?” Mamoru considered it as well. “And I was wondering if Alectrona is okay. They could just kill her and take Helios.”

“No they can’t,” he refuted. “We’re like the armor she wears. As long as all of us are alive and drawing power from the celestial bodies orbiting the Sun, Alectrona will be safe.”

“As long as we’re alive…” Usagi quietly repeated, regarding him somewhat guiltily. “I didn’t tell you that Michiru was attacked by a minion named Salacia the night of her concert.” Mamoru’s countenance admonished her. That had been almost five months ago. “I keep thinking we’re due for another run-in any time now. I mean, what are they waiting for?”

“Maybe they’re wary of our strength. Maybe there are more of us than them. There could be any number of reasons.”

Usagi sighed again. “I was also thinking it’s because of this reincarnation and fate stuff that we’re all here now, together. If we weren’t destined to fight the same enemy, would we still be friends? Would any of us have gone to Seattle? Would all of us have even gone to university? If Tomoe Laboratories hadn’t blown up, would I still live in Azabujūban?”

Mamoru only placed a reassuring hand on her arm. “People have driven themselves mad over the what-ifs, but there’s no way to find out how things could have gone. All we have is the present and the choices we make in it. We can’t know whether they’ll lead us to a good future or a terrible one. We only live as best we can each day and hope we made the decisions that ensure our tomorrow.”
Usagi half-smiled. “You’re much more of a realist than Endymion ever was.” She put away her diary before standing up to stretch. “I dunno, I feel like we should be more proactive in looking for the Dark Cloud baddies, but I have no idea how to find them.” An idea occurred to her as she spoke. “Ooh, Mamo-chan! Can’t you use your powers to, like, sense where they are in the world?”

He laughed sheepishly. “They don’t work like that, Usako. I can only sense people, animals, and plants that were born on Terra, and hardly the first anymore. Nia told me about this thing called the Galaxy Cauldron where souls go to be reborn, but the spirits of flora and fauna still go to Elysium. It’s way easier to sense them now.” She pouted at having her theory shot down. “If it makes you feel any better, I brought those flowers back to life.”

Her attention shifted to the vase of Blue Moon roses at the end of the bed. “Mamo-chan! You gave me dead flowers?”

“I gave you rejuvenated flowers,” he corrected. “They had wilted in the heat. When I walked by the stand the florist started shouting, so I turned around and saw that they had perked up. He gave me a discount because he thought it was a miracle.”

“A miracle that the Prince of Earth just so happened to be looking for roses.” Usagi grinned at Mamoru as he looked bashful, then her stomach growled and she gasped. “Oh my gosh, we missed dinner! I was so busy kicking butt with Midna that I totally forgot!” She raced down the hall and up a short set of stairs, tearing open the fridge to find two sets of containers labeled with her and Mamoru’s names. One held an ample serving of chicken Caesar salad and the other was full of risotto; there was also some garlic bread wrapped in foil. Usagi thanked her best friend for letting Nicholas get away with serving double carbs for dinner as she bit into the warm, buttery morsel after nuking it, carrying her meal outside.

She was surprised to find Rei, Ami, and Zach seated in the lounge chairs, the last raising a bottle of tequila when she stepped on deck. “Ayy, it’s Usagi! We ‘r won’drin where yar!”

“Ignore him, he’s rather intoxicated,” Rei said. “We did miss you at dinner. Minako knocked on your door a few times but no one answered, so we thought you were sleeping or something.”

“Or somethin’,” Zach repeated, waggling his eyebrows.

“Actually, I was playing a game and Mamoru was reading. I guess we both zoned out.” Usagi smiled apologetically before sitting down. “What are you guys doing out here?”

“Stargazing mostly,” Ami answered, “but someone’s been trying to goad us into playing Truth or Dare.”

“Whaaat? I never said nothin’ ‘bout paying no toad for truth order.”

Rei laughed as Ami reached over to take the bottle from his hands, hiding it out of reach beneath her chair. “I think you’ve had enough of this,” she declared. Zach stood up without protest and managed to make it inside without crashing into anything, but he came back a minute later with a bag of pretzels in hand and plunked into his seat.

“’m not tired yet,” he grinned. Ami groaned in defeat, but at least the bread product would sober him up.

When Mamoru also brought his leftovers outside he craned his neck to take in the astounding view of the Milky Way. “I wonder what else is out there…” he muttered, flushing as he realized everyone heard. But Zach and the girls didn’t make fun of him. They expounded on the subject instead, their
conversation ending well after eleven. Everyone gathered their dishes and snacks and finally went to bed. Usagi was wide awake, too hopped up on candy to open her DS again or focus on a fashion sketch. Mamoru chuckled at the way she practically bounced around their room. “I know you’re feeling restless but we’re only a few days from Hawaii.”

“I can’t help it, Mamo-chan! Thinking about all the fun things we’re going to do is making me stir-crazy!” She froze. “Do you think it’s too cold to go swimming?”

“Um, yeah, I do. It’s also dark and there could be jellyfish or sharks in these waters. And it’s also raining.”

“What, it is?” Usagi pressed her ear against the porthole and heard the soft pattering of raindrops. “Well there goes that plan.” She fell back onto the bed and threw an arm across her face. “I’m so bored…” she pitifully groaned.

She felt Mamoru’s weight beside her and uncovered one eye, seeing that he had opened an app on his phone. “Here, try this. I bet you’ll be good at it.”

Usagi rolled onto her stomach, gingerly accepting the device. “Blendoku?”

“It’s not really like Sudoku, it’s a game about color theory.” He pressed the ‘Easy’ menu. “As you can see I haven’t gotten very far. You just have to put the colors in the right order, but the layout changes sometimes.” Usagi opened the first level and completed it in seconds, and the five after that, and continued blazing through them in a manner Mamoru found nothing short of remarkable. It was also fascinating to watch her non-linear thought process in action.

“I’m totally downloading this when we reach civilization,” she grinned.

“If you like it then keep at it. I’m going to bed.” After brushing his teeth Mamoru began changing into pajamas but faltered, wrinkling his nose at the fact that he could smell sweat escaping its deodorant barrier. ‘Must be the humidity,’ he reasoned, and took a quick shower, utilizing the homemade body wash he purchased from a vendor at the farmer’s market in San Diego, the same place he found the roses for Usagi. Since it was so warm he decided to forego pajamas altogether and stepped out of the bathroom in black boxers with the towel slung around his neck.

“M-Mamo-chan…” He glanced over to find Usagi’s wide blue eyes fixated upon him, and the fact that she was blushing made him do the same in turn.

“Usako, I’m so sorry. I guess I feel too at-home around you…” He desperately sought his nightshirt, forgetting it was on the counter.

“No, it’s… it’s okay, Mamo-chan.” She refocused on his phone. “We’re in a tropical climate now so you don’t have to put on a bunch of stuff that’ll make you overheat. I was just shocked that you’re no longer, um…”

“Scrawny?” Usagi looked rather apologetic but Mamoru wasn’t upset at all. “That’s how I would have described myself last year.”

“You’re still thin, but you look kinda muscly now. I know there’s a word for it…”

Her shyness made him grin. “Lithe. It’s because I’ve been swimming regularly. I figured someone in that house should make use of the pool, and it feels good to do something with my body after a long day of sitting in the lab.”

“In that case, I’m happy for you.” Usagi checked the time on his phone and grimaced; it was almost
one in the morning. When she exited the bathroom in a comfy tank top and shorts featuring printed carrots, Mamoru released a bout of genuinely amused laughter. “What’s so funny?” the girl asked.

“Howdy,” he answered, recovering. “You know, because of your name. You just keep surprising me.”

“Hey, it’s not like we’re an old married couple or something. I have tons of surprises up my sleeves, just you wait.” She made a small sound of superiority as she climbed over him to claim the wall side of the bed. Mamoru switched off the light above their heads, bathing the cabin in darkness. Now that silence reigned over the entire catamaran Usagi could easily hear the rain sprinkling all around her. It was very soft and steady, not like the rain back home that got caught on tree branches before falling to the ground in irregular patterns. She focused on the ambient sound, let it carry her to a state of total relaxation. She was surrounded by the peaceful ocean, its gentle waves, an endless sky… and the boy right beside her breathing deeply and rhythmically, as if he were already asleep. She rolled over and whispered, “Mamo-chan?”

“Mm?”

“Good night.”

“Good night, Usako,” he said lowly. Usagi shifted a little closer, sniffing the air, distinguishing the scents of oatmeal, shea, and a hint of cinnamon. Since she couldn’t see at all she didn’t realize she was breathing on Mamoru’s neck. “Usako…”

“What?” Her top lip brushed his earlobe, sending a shiver down his spine and making him flinch. She instantly pulled back. “Sorry Mamo-chan, but you smell really nice! Is that your shampoo or something?”

“Body wash,” he mumbled. She gave a tiny “oh” and faced the wall. Mamoru only waited about twenty seconds before rolling onto his right side and slipping an arm beneath Usagi’s pillow. His free hand fell tentatively on her hip which he tugged with his fingertips. Wordlessly she scooted back, fitting her petite body against his lanky one. He found her fingers and entwined them in his own, noticing for the first time how thin and delicate they were.

She released a tiny sound of contentment that warmed him to the core. Their relationship had been advancing toward this kind of intimacy for months, and now that Mamoru experienced it he wasn’t sure he could give it up. He wanted very much for Usagi to love him and let him love her in return, but he had to acknowledge that she was not Selene. There was no guarantee she would share the same emotions as her previous incarnation; after all, there was nothing forbidden or darkly romantic about a chance encounter between two college students. He knew that if she fell in love with him this time it would be because he was Mamoru, not Endymion. It was Mamoru she’d met at Amabie, Mamoru whose confidence she helped foster, Mamoru who believed her existence made the world a better place.

Selene and Endymion were gone. Their time was over and their worlds had changed. Endymion believed it was for the worst but Mamoru felt the opposite. “You don’t have Selene,” the Prince said to him. “You’ll never be happy without her.”

‘I’d be happy if we stayed like this forever. Your princess was a scared little girl who ran and hid from the world. She never wanted to leave Elysium once you took her there. Usagi is creative, adventurous, forgiving, gentle… She feels compassion for every living thing and is as much a part of this planet as I am. I would never choose who she used to be over who she is now.’

Endymion scoffed and in response Mamoru drew Usagi tighter against him. She sighed a little and
murmured his name, silencing the Prince. Mamoru knew she was dreaming about an Era, but not the one of Silver. It was their future, a shining, splendid world they would build so everyone could live blissfully. Mamoru saw it as clearly as crystal.
Kaelan sailed into Honolulu extremely early in the morning, surprising everyone when they awoke to sandy shores, palm trees, cruise ships and luxury hotels. Ami sensibly wanted to find a visitor’s center to get a thorough list of all the activities they could engage in, but pamphlets were no longer necessary in this day and age. And Zach had been to Hawaii already so he was like their built-in travel guide. “Family vacation when I was thirteen,” he despondently explained.

“Was it bad?” Usagi inquired.

He made a sound between a sigh and a groan. “The last time I was here I made way too many questionable decisions, including this one.” He turned around and lifted his shirt, exposing his lower back. Everyone leaned forward to better see the tattoo there.

“Is that a tramp stamp?!” Nicholas exclaimed so loudly that people from a nearby yacht glanced over. “How come I never saw this?”

“Cause I got really good at hiding it. Why do you think I never wander around the house topless like the rest of you?” His housemates made sounds of comprehension.

“Okay, but what even is it?” Makoto asked.

“Sea turtle? Starfish? Manta ray? I have no clue, I just know it’s hideous and I’m going to get it lasered while we’re here.” Zach yanked his shirt back down before directing a scowl at the ocean.

Kaelan consolingly patted his shoulder. “Why didn’t you have it removed when you got home?”

“Oh, because using needles to draw shitty artwork on thirteen year-olds is illegal,” he said as if it were obvious. He began to walk off somewhere but Mamoru stopped him.

“Zach, we’re not judging you,” he reassured. “Lots of people have tattoos they regret. If you want to get it taken off now, we’ll go with you. Is that okay with everyone?” They nodded kindly. “It would be a good way for us to see some of the city, too. So where is this place?”

“Like I remember,” he snorted. The truth was Zach hadn’t received his mark of shame from a licensed establishment. He could practically hear the questions everyone wanted to ask him forming in their minds, and maybe once he put this accursed place behind him he would at least tell Ami the whole story. For now he tolerated Honolulu because his friends wanted to be here, and he took some solace at the fact that his reminder of the Worst Vacation Ever would soon be erased from his skin.

They found a place with framed business certifications and amazing works of art hanging on the walls, and even though it was only eleven o’clock the parlor buzzed with activity. “Hello and welcome,” said the woman at the front counter. “How can we help you today?”

“Please get this thing off me.” Zach flashed his undefinable sea creature and the receptionist grimaced.

“Oh, that’s terrible. How long have you had this?”

He had to consider the math for a second. “Seven years.”

“I’ll make you an appointment to get that taken care of right away. Will your friends be staying?”
“No,” Zach answered before anyone could say otherwise, facing them. “You guys go on. I need to deal with this eldritch abomination on my own.”

“Are you sure you don’t want at least one of us keeping you company?” Mina asked.

“I’m sure. No one needs to sit around watching me wince and maybe cry a little. They say laser removal hurts worse than getting the actual tattoo.” He shrugged off all the pitying looks he received. “Seriously, go have fun. Do all the touristy crap and buy souvenirs. I’ll probably be back on the boat when you’re done.”

After their goodbyes were exchanged Ami hung at the rear of the group, staring at Zach through the window. The poor boy looked like he was preparing to face a firing squad and she really didn’t want to leave him all alone. “Hey, don’t worry about it. He’ll be fine.” She looked up into Joe’s calm visage. “I had a tattoo removed once. One of the mechanics my dad hired gave it to me and it was complete garbage. The place I went used the glass method, where they put a microscope slide between your skin and the laser. I almost didn’t feel a thing. I bet he won’t either.”

“But won’t there be a big scar? Won’t he have a recovery period?”

“It’s not as if they’re ripping his skin off– he’ll be able to walk around and such. But since it’s on his lower back it’ll probably hurt to sit up. Is the hide-a-bed big enough for you two to stretch out on?”

“Yes…” Ami answered resignedly. During the trip she and Zach had both sprawled in their sleep but barely invaded one another’s space.

“So everything will be okay, then,” Usagi said, looping her arm through Ami’s and beaming at her. “We can take lots of pictures during whatever we decide to do, that way Zach’s not really missing out on anything!”

Makoto laughed a little. “Usa-chan, has anyone ever told you that maybe you’re too considerate?”

“Nope!” The sun was shining, the air was warm, and even though they were down one friend for the time being she knew they would soon be having more fun than they could shake a stick at.

With Zach out of commission they decided to hike Diamond Head and take in the substantial view of the southern end of Oahu. At the summit their phones came out in force, aside from Rei’s since she brought an actual digital camera, so there would be plenty of photos to share with family and other friends. When they descended it was about two o’clock and time for lunch. In town they wandered aimlessly, hanging around the outskirts until locating a quaint seafood shack. It was extremely casual but practically on the beach, providing a fantastic view of breaching humpback whales. Thankfully they had arrived at the islands just before the migration ended.

After lunch they simply went and sat on the sand, watching a windsurfing class not far offshore. “Anyone up for that tomorrow?” Mina asked, a hopeful glimmer in her eye. Kaelan, Joe, Makoto and Nicholas agreed to try it out. Mamoru, Usagi, Rei and Ami wanted to go hiking. With tentative plans established they returned to the harbor area, Kaelan navigating to a bicycle and scooter rental shop. Joe griped that they didn’t offer dirt bikes or quads since he actually knew how to ride those, but as he was the most mechanically inclined he mastered the Vespa in no time, circling his friends as they followed an instructor for a few blocks.

Now that they were mobile they decided to return to the catamaran, put on swim suits, and hit the beach. Instead of hanging out on Waikiki they headed west to Kahalā. The area was comprised of grandfathered bungalows on one side and new opulent mansions along the waterfront, and although they could see the ocean there didn’t seem to be a way to access it without trespassing. Eventually
they found what appeared to be an abandoned property; all that remained was a cement slab covered by tall grass and weeds. “Do you think we’ll get yelled at for parking here?” Usagi wondered, glancing at the neighboring homes.

“I doubt it,” Kaelan answered. “Maybe you haven’t noticed, but almost all of you could be mistaken for locals. If anyone gets a stick up their arse about it just say you guys go to the university and I’m a friend visiting from the mainland.”

“Works for me!” Nicholas cheered. He carried their cooler on one shoulder and a large umbrella on the other, blazing a trail through the overgrown shrubbery. Everyone made sounds of awe when they stepped onto the beach, kicking off their sandals in order to feel the near-white granules beneath their feet.

“I’m so glad you wanted to come here,” Mina said, standing on her tiptoes to give Kaelan a kiss. He smiled in return, then they walked with their arms around one another’s waists until finding the perfect half-shaded spot. “Oh yeah…” the blonde sighed when she had stretched out in the sun, “this definitely feels like paradise. Wake me up when it’s time to leave.” Usagi and Makoto plunged into the water, the latter having to go quite a ways out before it even reached her chest. Once Ami and Rei finished applying sunscreen they went in, too.

After Nicholas set up the umbrella he dug through his backpack for a tangerine and meticulously peeled it. “You guys ever notice how good our girls look?” he inquired of no one in particular.

“Mhm,” Kaelan agreed. “Other guys would kill to be us right now.”

“We should make sure to keep an eye on them,” Mamoru quietly suggested. “I don’t think any of us should go anywhere alone.”

“What about Zach?”

“He’ll be okay, he’s only a skip away from the cat.” Kaelan stood up and rolled his shoulders, striding into the waves with Joe and Nicholas on his heels. The three of them instantly received splash attacks from the girls, inciting a water war that Mamoru laughed at before it died with a sigh.

Mina looked at him through one of her sky blue eyes. “Don’t be such a worry-wart, Mamoru-kun–this is Hawaii. You’ll be much better off if you forget everything about our regular lives while we’re here. Promise me you’ll stop being such a dad for once and just cut loose and have some fun.”

“I’ll try,” he guiltily replied. He couldn’t shake the feeling that by being here he was shirking his duty, leaving Nia to handle any Dark Cloud threats on her own. Still… maybe he should take Minako’s advice and focus on enjoying a vacation he probably wouldn’t get to have for at least a few more years, when he finished his PhD. But where in the world could he take Usagi that compared to here? Peru? Ibiza? Bali? Morocco? It was probably arrogant for him to assume he’d even still be in her life by then. What if her fashion career took off and she made it big in New York, London or Tokyo? Luckily his chosen field was one that held demand all over the world, so he could go wherever Usagi went and live comfortably; he could even support her if she needed it. Of course, all these notions rode on the presumption that they would stay friends. “Soul mates, remember?” Endymion piped up. “You are fated to be together regardless of the word attached to your relationship.”

About two hours into her lounge session Mina heard a panting dog paired with footsteps trudging through the sand. She sat up groggily and looked around, spying a woman and an Australian shepherd heading her way. “Hi there!” the woman called. Even though most of her visage was obscured by sunglasses and a broad hat, her smile seemed to light up the entire beach.
“Hi,” Mina greeted once the duo stopped a few feet from her towel. She was slightly remiss that all of her friends were still playing around in the water, but the woman and her dog weren’t exactly menacing.

“How come you’re not hanging out at the country club?”

It took her a moment to comprehend the question. “Oh, we’re not from here. We’re tourists, actually.”

“Sorry, my mistake! I assumed you lived nearby since most visitors hang around Waikiki. They say this beach isn’t as amazing, but you folks look right at home.” She held out a hand. “I’m Hayley.”

“Mina,” she replied, and they shook. The dog licked her fingers as his own hello, making her giggle.

“Oh, how could I forget to introduce Charlie?” Hayley picked up a stick and hurled it into the waves, smiling at the way her companion went bounding after it. Once he had captured it he paddled over to Usagi and the others, eliciting cries of joy. Mina laughed at his antics as he led her friends back to shore. As soon as introductions were made Hayley’s demeanor turned shy. “I hope I’m not being too forward with this, but I was wondering if you would all consider being my guests at a party tomorrow night.”

The nine of them exchanged surprised looks. “A party for what?” Usagi asked.

“It’s to celebrate the opening of a new gallery featuring local artists. Most of them are going to be there, and I do know a few of them, but I thought it’d be better to show up with my own entourage.” Seeing that they still looked a little suspicious, Hayley sighed and lowered her head. “My ex is hosting the party, he’s the one who funded the gallery. I think he only invited me so he can rub his success in my face.”

“Sounds like he could stand to be taken down a notch,” Kaelan declared. “We’d be glad to go with you. Where and what time is it?”

“Black Point, six o’clock. His place is next to Shangri La so you really can’t miss it. There’ll be lights and signs at the driveway.” She gave them her contact info, smiling in relief. “Thank you so much. The artists are all really friendly and I promise you’ll have fun. Come on, Charlie!” The dog hopped up and trotted down the beach as Hayley tossed them a wave.

Once she was out of earshot Nicholas was the first to say, “You sure about this?”

Kaelan nodded decisively. “Yeah, it’ll be great. I’ve become an expert at mingling with strangers.”

“Just because you have doesn’t mean the rest of us are,” Mamoru stated. Rei and Ami nodded in agreement.

“Where’s your sense of adventure, Mamo-chan? It’s not every day we get invited to fancy parties in Hawaii.” Usagi’s tone was exactly the same as the one Mina had berated him with, so he kept further logical protests to himself while they returned to the Vespas. Unfortunately they encountered traffic on the way to the marina, making it quite late when they finally boarded Saoirse.

“Hey…” Zach greeted weakly from his face-down position on the couch, flapping an arm. “How was your first day on Oahu?”

“It’s not over yet,” Joe grinned, “we still have to have dinner and you’re coming with us.” The blond boy groaned and pushed himself up with one hand, the other holding an ice pack in place. “Let me see the damage.” Zach slumped with another groan, sucking his teeth as Joe lifted the bandage. “Oh,
“Yeah, I have another session tomorrow. I’m totally not looking forward to it.”

Ami sat beside him. “A local woman invited us to a party tomorrow night.” She was going to follow up by asking if he thought he could make it, but Zach immediately paled and shook his head.

“Nuh-uh, no, don’t do that.” Everyone still in the main cabin paused to look his way. “Even though Hawaii is an official state it might as well be a different country. I’m not saying all of the natives hate mainlanders, but a lot of them resent us for taking over their islands. These people you’re going to meet might not have the best intentions at heart.”

“Zach, it’s to celebrate the opening of an art gallery. How nefarious could it be?”

“Nefarious enough if someone gets their hands on your identification!”

Ami tilted her head. “Is that what happened the last time you were here?”

“No, nothing so simple…” he muttered. “Look, if shit hits the fan while you’re there, don’t say I didn’t warn you. At least we’re leaving the day after, right?” Kaelan confirmed it. “What are you guys going to do until the party?”

“Some windsurfing, some hiking,” Rei provided. Zach grumbled a little as Ami patted his shoulder.

“I’m going with you this time. You shouldn’t be walking so far after your treatment, anyway.”

He opened his mouth to protest but closed it without saying a word; it was futile to argue with Ami. She allowed herself a victorious smile before going to take a shower and donning an outfit appropriate for a five-star restaurant. The one Kaelan had in mind wasn’t that far from the marina, but pain radiated through Zach’s spine with each step. Ami held out a hand and he accepted it eagerly, all but leaning against her for support. The butterflies fluttering in his stomach almost completely banished his anxiety at having to endure another round of laser treatment.

When the two groups returned to the catamaran after a long day of fun and exploration, they took turns telling stories and showing off photos of their adventures before dispersing to prepare for the party. “I can’t believe we did all this on just one island,” Makoto remarked to Nicholas as she decided on an outfit. “I hope the others aren’t boring.”

“All I know about Kauai is that there’s a huge canyon,” he said from the bathroom, “but it’s called ‘the garden island’ so I assume there’s lots of flowers and stuff.” Upon styling his hair just-so he peeked around the corner at Makoto, watching a dreamy expression claim her countenance.

“Oh Nikko, do you know how amazing it would be if I could bring home an actual Hawaiian hibiscus or, ooh, a bird of paradise?”

He smiled. “I dunno about a whole plant, but you can probably get some seeds or bulbs.” The girl sighed wistfully before giving herself a once-over in the closet mirror, adjusting her satin halter top and tugging on a miniskirt that may have been just a tad mini. After Nicholas put on his best pair of jeans he came up behind her and fondled her hips, lowering his mouth to her ear. “Why I haven’t seen you in this skirt until now?”

“Because it’s Usagi’s and I’m just borrowing it for tonight,” she explained. It took a great amount of self-control not to let herself melt at his touch or indulge in the notion of collapsing into bed with him and foregoing the party altogether. Makoto had successfully abided by her good sense for the last
four months, but every time Nicholas put his hands on her she gave in a little more.

The celebration was hosted by one Duke Leon, a philanthropist who, like Kaelan, used his money to give people opportunities they’d never receive otherwise. By funding the gallery he provided local artists the recognition they deserved, and with his social connections he could get some of them featured in galleries abroad. One young woman gushed to Rei and Joe about how she wanted to do a residency at the Museum of Glass in Tacoma, and she was overjoyed to learn they both went to school in Seattle. They spent a good half hour describing what it was like to live there before she finally ran out of champagne and questions. After snagging a new glass of bubbly the woman noticed Rei’s camera dangling from her wrist. “Oh my god, Rei,” she said, gesturing way too much, “you *have* to watch the sunset from here. Go out to the terrace and tell me it’s not the prettiest thing you ever saw. Take tons of pictures.”

“I’ll do that, thank you.” She and Joe gratefully separated themselves the inebriated artists. The terrace featured a large pool with an attached hot tub, a grilling area, and a set of lounge chairs situated beneath a pergola. There was also an outdoor bar offering cocktails to the people dancing around the DJ podium. Rei snapped a candid photo of Nicholas and Makoto grooving to tropical house music before turning her lens toward the magenta sunset and its reflection on the waves. She took a few pictures of Diamond Head and wandered down to the beach, pausing to capture the silhouette of a palm tree.

Mamoru sat at the kitchen island listening to Usagi and Mina’s running commentary of the hors d’oeuvres, which they made sure to critique in Japanese lest they offend their host who conversed with Kaelan nearby. “I was quite surprised to hear that the illustrious Kaelan Burke was coming to my little soiree,” Duke remarked. “What a coincidence that Hayley managed to intercept you during your vacation. I’m honored to have you here.” He didn’t really mean a word of it. Burke was six years his junior, a billionaire, and beat him to a place on Forbes’ *30 Under 30* list last year. Duke resented him to say the least. The only reason he tolerated Kaelan’s presence was because he had shown up with an assortment of attractive young people in tow, and he could tell there was something very special about them.

“Thank you,” Kaelan replied. “I suppose I have your, erm… acquaintance to thank for inviting me and my friends.”

Duke scoffed, his mossy eyes glinting in the low lighting. “Hayley was my fiancée for a long time, much more than an acquaintance. It saddens me to know that she goes around calling me her ex-boyfriend.”

“It sounds like you had a bitter break-up,” Mina stated from across the island. “What happened?”

The man focused on swirling the wine in his glass. “We stopped sharing the same dream. It’s difficult to stay with someone who doesn’t support what you’re doing. But I’m sure that’s not an issue for the two of you, is it?” His envious gaze flicked between Kaelan and Mina as they shared the same love-struck look. They made a beautiful couple, shining so brightly from within that it hurt to look at them. Duke suddenly slapped the granite countertop, startling a few of his guests. “I’m off to join the fun outside. I hope you kids enjoy the food.” He didn’t have to turn back to feel the glares his condescending tone earned. “Ah, here you are.” Hayley glanced up like a deer in the headlights before her visage steeled. Duke ignored it, slinging his arm over her shoulders. “I’m glad you could make it, but next time consider surrounding yourself with guardians who can actually protect you, not oblivious children.”

“Enough of them have awakened to fend you off,” she returned. “If you try anything they’ll destroy you.”
He smirked. “Oh, I’m terrified. The Lords never had much power to begin with, the Prince doesn’t know the extent of his own abilities, and do you really think I can’t handle the weak little girl who was murdered by a priestess?” He chuckled lowly, confidently. “I fear none of them, just like how I wasn’t afraid to approach you despite all the lesser men you sent to their knees.” Hayley slapped his wandering hand, still scowling. Duke pointed across the terrace to Makoto and Nicholas who were so wrapped up in one another they took no notice of anything else. “I recognize that one, you know. They say she wasn’t defeated, she blew herself up instead. I must tell you I love a woman with legs that go all the way up. Makes the fruit at the top even sweeter.”

“You disgust me,” Hayley spat, pushing herself away from the man. “I can’t believe I used to…” He raised an intrigued eyebrow at that train of thought and chortled again, stopping to hear her darkly whispered words. “I don’t think you noticed the storm rolling in. If you go after her, she’ll kill you.”

Duke ignored the warning, smirking in her face. “She can’t do anything to me in that dormant state, which I intend to take full advantage of. I believe I owe you a word of gratitude– thank you for bringing her right to me.” With that he strode toward the DJ and motioned for him to cut the music. His guests stopped dancing as it faded away, muttering their disappointment. “I’d like to thank everyone for coming out tonight,” he announced, “but first you all need drinks so we can do this properly!” The hired bartenders whipped into action, dispensing beer, wine and cocktails as quickly as they were ordered. When Duke noticed that Makoto didn’t have anything in her hand he personally mixed something for her, dissolving a little tablet into it. “Can’t leave Hawaii without having a real Mai Tai,” he said to the girl, proffering the glass. The Lord with her even encouraged her to accept it. This was too easy.

“But I’m underage…” she protested.

“No one’s going to bust you for having one drink,” Duke countered. He then held up his wineglass, dictating loudly so everyone could hear him. “To all the artists here tonight, thank you for allowing me into your lives. I can’t wait to see the wonderful things you’ll create, especially those of you who plan to travel abroad. You’ll all make the world a more beautiful place.”

“Cheers!” they chorused, clinking glasses with their neighbors. Duke winked at Makoto as she took a long drink of her cocktail, and her boyfriend or whatever he was chugged a full glass of whiskey on the rocks. Would it even affect him given his large physique?

The answer turned out to be yes. Nicholas continued consuming more alcohol than he sweated out and it finally hit him like a brick wall. “Ooh, I need to sit,” he said to Makoto. Duke eyed them smugly as they both wobbled on their feet on the way to the pergola. “Can you get me some water?” Nicholas asked once seated. She nodded and managed to make it into the house without tripping.

Duke crept up behind the boy and gave his occipital ridge a swift whack, knocking him out cold. “Hey, you two!” he called to a pair of sculptors, “Can you bring this poor guy inside? Looks like he couldn’t hold his liquor.” They did as instructed, then Duke went in search of Makoto. He met her in the living room and plucked the glass of ice water from her hand, adopting a soothing tone. “Why don’t you let me carry that for you?”

“Oh, thanks Mr. Leon.” She couldn’t focus on him and swayed on her feet. “I gotta give that to Nikko. D’ya think you can… help me down the stairs?”

“Sure thing, sweetie.” Duke let her cling to his arm, supporting her completely by the time they reached the bottom. To everyone else it appeared he was taking her somewhere to rest, but at the end of the terrace was a set of stairs leading to his private dock where a yacht awaited them, and it was onto the vessel he carried Makoto. Duke left her on a couch and started the motors, navigating to the waters off Waikiki and dropping anchor near a chartered boat exuding the sounds of a spring break
celebration. When he returned to the sitting area he found Makoto dragging her hand across the pillows while her head lolled.

“This is *sooo* soft, Mr. Leon. What *is* this?”

“Microfiber, darling.” He really liked hearing his name pass her lips, but he liked the look of her legs even more. That little berry-colored skirt was the only thing ruining the view.

Makoto closed her eyes while rubbing herself all over the sofa. It felt so plush against her skin and the way her head spun made it seem as if she were floating on a cloud in the sky. She really didn’t want the sensation to end… but something rough brushed her and ruined her journey. With great effort she peeled her eyes open and frowned at the way Mr. Leon ran his lips and stubbly chin along her leg. It was wrong; Nicholas was the only one she wanted to touch her like that. She struggled to move away from the man, her vision swimming as she tried to discern her surroundings. “Nikko… Where’s Nikko?” She didn’t see him anywhere. This didn’t even look like the house they had walked through. Where the hell was she?

“I bet you feel as high as a kite right now,” Duke said to her, leering. “It’s my own formula— the sedative effects of a roofie combined with the heightened sensations of ecstasy. Feels good, doesn’t it? The college kids around here love it.” He planted his hands on either side of Makoto and leaned down to kiss her, but she managed to brace a foot against the arm of the sofa and shove herself away. Her eyes fluttered, her pulse raced, and her body wouldn’t move as precisely as she needed it to. Duke laughed as she attempted to scoot out of his reach. “You can’t go anywhere I won’t find you, you know.”

“No, no, Nicholas…” Makoto dropped to the floor with an “oof”. The carpet felt like water, waves pulling her in the opposite direction of where she wanted to go.

Duke watched in amusement as she dragged herself toward the stairs, sighing once she made it about halfway. “This is pathetic. All you’re going to do is run? You don’t even have the courage to face me?” He pounced on her and she screamed, struggling against his grip on her wrists. “I’m disappointed, Nemesis. You’re supposed to be the most skilled warrior in this solar system.” Makoto blinked at him in confusion as his gaze swept over her. “At least you were reborn into a gorgeous body for me to savor.”

Panic welled up when she felt his hand between her thighs and a surge of adrenaline finally gave her the strength to defend herself. Years of martial arts training kicked in as she fiercely head-butted the man, making him recoil with a shout. “Keep your fucking hands off me,” Makoto said in a dangerously calm voice. She rose to her feet, muscles tensing as she assumed a partial fighting stance. The drug still affected her so she didn’t want to try anything beyond her capabilities.

Duke also stood up, pinching his nose to staunch the blood flow. “So there *is* some fight in you. I’m glad.” His green eyes went wild as his lips separated into a lurid grin. “Conquering you will be even more satisfying if I know you tried to stop me with all your might.”

He leapt across the room and Makoto barely managed to form a fist in time, swinging wildly but striking him in the side of the head and sending him crashing into the glass door. Duke recovered quicker than she anticipated, and when he encroached upon her again she drew up both hands to keep him at bay with jabs. He withstood them all, made it inside her defense, and tackled her at the waist. He attempted to put her in a submission hold but Makoto was flexible enough to escape. She had a decade’s worth of combined training in kyokushin karate and judo. With each resounding beat of her heart the drug’s influence on her system lessened, restoring knowledge of how to best overcome her opponent.
Makoto went on the offensive, holding nothing back. Duke’s expression shifted from arrogance to uncertainty to outright fear each time he managed to block or dodge her swift, precise strikes. But then he leaned back to avoid a roundhouse kick that transitioned into a sweep, knocking him on his ass. She was on him in a moment, pinning his arms as she straddled his chest to deliver increasingly-vicious punches to his face. Blood from his nose and mouth coated her knuckles but she didn’t stop, and why should she? This man had intended to rape her. Rapists didn’t deserve mercy.

All of a sudden her hand met an invisible stopping force and she cried out as some of her bones splintered, then the wind was knocked out of her as she slammed into a wine cabinet. Makoto shook her head to banish the stars and just managed to draw in a breath before Duke wrapped his fingers around her throat and lifted her like she weighed nothing, glaring before throwing her through the glass door where she rolled across the deck. She took great heaving breaths, barely acknowledging the torrential downpour soaking her clothes and hair. She rose to her hands and knees and turned her head to watch the man approach. The hostility he emanated filled her with rage. If Duke Leon thought he could get away with anything because he was rich, Makoto was damned determined to do what Kaelan said and take him down a few notches. She willed herself to stand up and keep fighting even though at least three of her fingers were broken.

“You want to know why I’m doing this, don’t you?” Duke asked. Her tenacity faded ever so slightly at his despondent tone. “It’s revenge, Nemesis. Revenge against your despicable family.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” she demanded. “I don’t even have a family. My parents died in a plane crash when I was young.”

Duke scoffed. “Not your family in this ugly Bronze Era, the one you had. You were Jovian royalty, the daughter of King Keraunios.” With each unfamiliar term Makoto felt something course through her, dislodging memories of a time long past. She touched the topaz pendant as it thrummed in response to the storm, and the man continued. “After you died in Elysium and the Inner Alliance crumbled, Jupiter brought fragile peace to the system. A new regime rose from the ashes of King Hyperion’s court and sought to reclaim their former glory. They took over the inner planets one by one, gaining enough power to challenge Jupiter head-on. Or so they thought— they were quashed almost instantly, but the weapons Keraunios deployed were beyond his control. The devastation reached all the way to Saturn.” Duke advanced upon her, his words growing harsher with each step. “My home was Enceladus. I had land, a wife, children… all of them died in the flood caused by your people’s weapons. I survived alone at the top of a mountain, watching my entire world be destroyed around me.”

Makoto winced at the enormous pressure bearing down on her, sending her to one knee. Duke loomed above her with pure hatred in his eyes. “I didn’t…” she managed to speak, quaking beneath his aura, “I mean, Nemesis… she didn’t… have anything to do with your family’s death!”

Duke lowered himself to her eye level. “No, you didn’t. Not personally. But you’re guilty by association. All the Jovians are. You shouldn’t have been messing with the primal forces of your planet.” At that a streak of lightning arced through the sky above, thunder ringing in their ears. “Look at that, Nemesis. Zeus himself bears witness as I ravage his daughter. My vengeance could not be more poetic.”

That word triggered something deep within Makoto, righteous fury that it passed the lips of a man like Duke Leon. Who was he to believe that Zeus, the God of Thunder, would let him get away with harming one of his children? Duke delivered an uppercut that sent her flying all the way to the bow, leaving her dangling over the railing. Before she could attempt to recover he began strangling her from behind. She clawed at his hands, gasped for air, tried flinging herself backwards and kicking his legs, all to no avail. Makoto’s eyes rolled back as she became starved for oxygen. She reached
skyward, praying to no deity, but one answered her anyway. A bolt of lightning lanced down from
the clouds and struck her beseeching hand, surging through her veins and filling her with raw
elemental energy. Duke released her, retreating with a shout and a curse, shielding his eyes against
her illuminated form. Wild sparks shot off her, burning his retinas and leaving so many afterimages
he couldn’t orient himself.

Finally, blessedly, the tempest dissipated. Neither Makoto nor Nemesis stood before him. She was a
perfect fusion of the two, a warrior-princess for a new era resembling a gladiatrix clad in green and
gold armor. Upon her head sat a Roman helm with an eagle motif, large wings extending from either
side. Duke stared at her in both abhorrence and amazement, thinking it wouldn’t be so bad dying at
the hands of a beautiful yet terrible goddess.

“Deucalion…” she finally spoke, “I am sorry that your family perished in the aftermath of the wars,
but I had nothing to do with it. Your hatred is misplaced, and you are a truly impudent man if you
sought to enact vengeance against me all these millennia. I am the embodiment of divine retribution. I
decide who deserves punishment and the manner in which it is dispensed, not weak, pathetic little
men like you.” She took three purposeful strides and grabbed his clavicle, squeezing hard enough to
make him kneel. “I know you fell in with Tartarus– nothing else would have driven you to such
brazen action. You betrayed your own people by joining their quest to steal Helios. So tell me,
before I end your miserable existence… how many of them are left?”

Duke tried glowering at her, but he was defeated. “Seven,” he answered. “Seven lords and ladies of
the Dark Cloud are going to find your allies and kill them off one by one.”

Satisfied, Nemesis maintained her grip on the man while extending her other arm toward the
heavens, calling a lightning bolt that she channeled into him. Deucalion didn’t even have time to
scream before he was obliterated, every cell that formed him vanishing from existence. She
summoned more lightning to destroy the yacht as well, reveling in the sensation of molecules
splitting apart all around her. When it was gone she fell into the water, relinquishing her celestial
power and allowing the waves to gently carry her where they willed. ‘I’ll save you, Nikko…’ was the
last thought Makoto formed before slipping into unconsciousness.
“What the hell was that?” Zach righted himself so he could better see out the window.

“Just some lightning,” Ami said from the galley. She finished scooping ice cream into two bowls and returned to the couch, handing one to him. It was kind of nice having the catamaran all to themselves. With the rain outside and a movie playing on TV, it felt just as cozy as his room.

“That seemed like more than a lightning flash…” Zach slid off the sofa and achingly went outside, watching the party boat come into the marina with its motors on full blast and its passengers in an uproar. His gaze slid eastward to a yacht that was there one second and gone the next. He didn’t see exactly what happened because he closed his eyes to a lightning strike that seemed close enough to touch, yet no thunder followed. “Yeah, that’s not normal.” He headed for the stairs leading up to the wheel.

Ami appeared as soon as he turned the key in the ignition. “What are you doing?”

“I’m not taking it very far out,” Zach reassured. He switched on all the outboard lights to illuminate their surroundings, slowly backing the cat out of its berth. “This thing makes me miss my trimaran.”

“I’m sure you’ll get the chance to sail one if Kaelan doesn’t end up murdering us!”

He waved off her concern. “I have a weird feeling, Ami. Will you please go to the bow and tell me if you see anything?” She folded her arms while deciding if the look of concern on his face was genuine. “Please?” he asked again, just shy of begging.

She acquiesced, leaning over the railing to survey the waters. The lights occasionally glinted off scales of small fish and she thought she saw some spinner dolphins playing in the distance, but there was nothing suspicious until she began swiveling the spotlight and its beam landed on a human arm. Her scream instantly made Zach pull back on the throttle. “Find something?” he called.

“Oh my god, it’s Makoto!” A chill ran through him; he barely heard the splash as Ami dove overboard. Zach opened the cockpit’s window and slid down the slope, landing on the narrow walkway connecting the pontoons, then he tossed a life ring that Ami secured around Makoto. The two of them dragged her onto the deck where Ami administered CPR. She coughed up a substantial amount of water before taking deep, shuddering breaths, shivering so violently her teeth chattered.

“What happened to you?!” Ami cried. “How did you get out here?!”

“I k-k-killed him…” Makoto stammered. “I gotta save Nikko and everyone else… They might b-b-be in danger.”

“Pretty sure that only applies to you,” Zach stated. He put one of her arms around his shoulders in an attempt to get her inside, but she was basically dead weight and it took Ami’s help just to bring her to the couch. He looked away while Ami removed her friend’s soaked clothes and covered her with a blanket. Eventually Makoto stopped trembling, her breathing slowed, and she fell asleep. Ami then faced Zach with wide eyes. He’d never seen such a look before, one with only questions and none of the answers. “I think we should let her rest,” he said. “I’ll get us back to the marina.”

Ami nodded absently. Her knowledge of basic first-aid clashed with her imagination as the worst-case scenario played out, turning her typically logical mind into an emotional maelstrom. She ended up crying them out all at once, a veritable river streaking down her cheeks to the blanket encapsulating Makoto. It dawned on her that she had jumped into the same cold seawater and was
likely doing her friend more harm than good by smothering her. ‘Get up,’ she told herself, ‘take a hot shower. Change your clothes.’ That gave her something to focus on, calmed her down. Ami wasn’t sure how much time passed but when she returned to the main cabin Makoto was no longer on the couch. “Mako-chan?” she called.

“Down here!” She cautiously peered into the girl’s room to discover her putting on jeans and a clean shirt. Makoto grinned at her as if there was nothing weird about this whole situation, making Ami question her sanity. “I need you to run me back to the party, if that’s okay. I have to check on everyone… take care of something.”

“Um, okay…” In a slight daze Ami exited to the deck. Just when Makoto appeared both girls were pitched sideways as the catamaran bounced off the dock’s rubber bumper.

“Merde!” Zach yelled from above them, descending a moment later. “Sorry about that, didn’t know I had to swing this thing wider than a Cadillac.” His attention fell on Makoto and he frowned. “Where do you think you’re going?”

“Wherever I want,” she shot back. “Are you going to stop me?”

He shook his head, glancing at Ami. “I’m taking her to the others,” she explained.

“Is that wise?”

“If I’m not there they’ll wonder what happened to me.”

Zach erupted. “Mako, we wonder what happened to you! Do you even realize that we found you floating in the middle of the ocean?! You were practically dead!” A dark look crossed her countenance, letting him know that things would not end well for him if he challenged her, and he held up his hands. “You know what, it’s cool. Run right back to the place that obviously fucked you up somehow. Whatever’s there must be really important.”

“Our friends are there,” Makoto icily retorted. “Excuse me for caring about them more than myself.”

“Screw you,” Zach muttered. As soon as the girls left he examined Makoto’s satin top, finding it peppered with hundreds of tiny blackened holes. It also smelled like ozone, the acrid tang confirming his suspicions: Nemesis was awake. She had been a neutral ruler of the Silver Era, joining neither the Inner nor Outer Alliances. When she heard that Selene had been abducted by King Aitolos and was being held against her will, she led a vast Jovian army to Terra alongside Verticordia, Enyo, and a Lunarian general. He remembered watching her battle against the holy warrior Nephriticus, their fighting prowess equal in every regard until she unleashed primal energies beyond her control, ending them both. Nephriticus was now Nicholas, his best friend, and Zach sincerely hoped Makoto never employed the same self-destructive tactic again.

“Thanks, Ami-chan!” Makoto waved before heading into the waterfront mansion. Ami watched her nervously, wondering if she should stay to check on everyone else or return to Zach as the brunette had suggested. She was still extremely confused by this sequence of events but knew Makoto was more than capable of handling things on her own, whatever that entailed. Maybe she had just fallen off a boat and everyone else was so hyped up they didn’t notice. Clinging to that explanation, Ami headed back to the marina.

Makoto smiled at all the artists she passed, noting none of them seemed to be aware their host had gone missing. ‘Who’s going to sponsor them now that Deucalion is dead?’ She felt a twinge of guilt at that, but definitely no remorse for killing him. She wandered from room to room until locating the
person she sought; Hayley spoke to a tall, tanned man with curly dark hair. Makoto marched right up to her and grabbed her arm, whispering harshly. “You want to explain what the fuck is going on here, or am I going to have to beat some answers out of you?”

Hayley’s hazel eyes widened in astonishment before relief flooded her visage. “You did it. You erased Deucalion from the world.”

“So you’re a Dark Cloud member as well,” Makoto confirmed. “Did you lure us here in hopes that he’d kill us?”

“No, I brought you here in hopes that one of you would kill him.”

Makoto faltered at that, loosening her grip on the woman. “Why?” she demanded. “Why would you conspire against one of your own?”

“Because I asked her to.” She spun toward the tall man whom she had completely ignored. He was an older version of Duke with the same Grecian features, but his green eyes were full of compassion instead of arrogance. “My name is Prometheus. Deucalion was my son,” the man quietly explained. “He defected to Tartarus after his homeland became a casualty of the war, and nothing I said could make him abandon his desire for revenge against your people. It corroded his humanity.”

“Long ago Prometheus asked if I could attempt to soothe his son’s angry heart,” Hayley added. “Deucalion and I became romantically involved, and I thought he had finally accepted the loss of his family, but then he told me he contacted Tartarus’ leader and joined their regime. He had been working with them for the last century or so, poisoning humankind with narcotics.”

“Duke ran a drug trade?” Makoto clarified.

Prometheus nodded, shame evident in his weathered features. “He manufactured them as well as transported them—global shipping was the legitimate side of his business. But the head of that serpent has been removed. I thank you, Nemesis.”

She shook her head. “I’m Makoto Kino.” It was more of an affirmation than an introduction. “What will happen to the artists?”

“I’ll make sure to finish the work my son should have been doing from the beginning. Call me Peter Mathis, by the way.” The man lowered his voice even more so no one in the crowded room would overhear him. “I know I can’t apologize for what Deucalion did to you, but I’m sorry. Most of us who remain from the Silver Era know there is only one person to blame for the war—Hyperion of Luna. He manipulated the events that led to the demise of you young royals. After his death, the Jovians halted the remnants of his regime and made it possible for humanity to begin anew on Terra, forging this era of bronze.”

Makoto blushed. “Oh… thank you, I guess. I didn’t do anything personally, though, because Nemesis was dead…” She frowned at her use of first and third-person; she should be keeping her identities separate. Regardless, Peter and Hayley were grateful. She left them to search for her boyfriend, running into Kaelan along the way. They came upon Nicholas’ form on a sofa in the study.

“Hey big guy, wake up.” Kaelan patted his face until his brown eyes opened. “You all right?”

“My head kills,” he groaned. He looked to both of them for an answer. Makoto lowered her gaze, blaming herself for letting Nicholas become a victim of Deucalion’s revenge quest.

“I’ll go find Joe and Rei so we can all head home.” When Kaelan left Makoto sat on the edge of the
sofa, stroking Nicholas’ cheek.

“I’m sorry he hurt you,” she said softly. “I made sure he’d never be able to harm anyone again.”

“Whaddya mean?” Nicholas was too groggy to ask what she was talking about.

“I… vanquished him.” She kept waiting for a fraction of guilt to set in for killing Deucalion even though she had simply been defending herself, but she felt absolutely no remorse. Makoto stared down at Nicholas, at Nephriticus, who had also been destroyed by the elemental power Nemesis wielded. She couldn’t remember which of them attacked first after Selene fell but it didn’t really matter since they had both died due to her reckless abandon. What if she lost control again? What if she killed him again? She kept dwelling on it as she rode with Rei back to the marina. Joe and Kaelan carried Nicholas onto the boat and into his room, Zach’s gaze following them worriedly.

“I’m sorry for what I said earlier,” Makoto said to him. “I know you care, especially about Nikko.”

“Yeah, well, if you really do too, try not to lose your cool. You’ll regret it.” His words were deadly serious and made a nervous lump form in her throat. Zach knew everything: who she really was, what she’d done, the devastation she was capable of causing…

Makoto stared at herself in the bathroom mirror. Her eyes were red from the effort of withholding tears but they looked the same otherwise; she couldn’t see any trace of Nemesis’ indifference in them. ‘Have I always been like her? Have I never truly cared about hurting people?’ Lord knew she’d maimed Usagi’s feelings plenty of times in the past. The remarks just rolled off her tongue so easily, blasting her friend’s confidence like well-placed dynamite. Why couldn’t she be a better person who learned and grew from her mistakes like Usagi, or any of their other friends for that matter? ‘Maybe they’re not my friends at all. Maybe they’re potential victims.’

“Babe? You in there?” She gasped at the knock on the door having forgotten people still existed on the other side. Makoto failed to stifle a sniffle and slid to the floor as Nicholas opened the door a crack. “What’s wrong?”

“Me. I’m what’s wrong.” He stepped inside and sat down opposite her, not saying anything just yet. “Something happened, Nicholas. I don’t think I can be with you anymore.”

“Why?”

“I’ll hurt you! It won’t be on purpose but… but someday I’ll end up doing something beyond my capabilities and I’ll just… end you!”

He allowed her to sob for a minute before clasping one of her hands. “Are you worried about Nemesis?” Makoto glanced up in shock, her gaze full of self-loathing. “I’ve known about her for a while. I remember everything that happened to me during the Silver Era.”

“Then you remember how I annihilated you!” Makoto wailed. “I removed every shred of you from existence because I was that desperate to be the victor of our fight!” Nicholas continued surveying her calmly. “And I destroyed myself in the process, so it was all for nothing! And… and before any of that I killed hundreds of Terrans, hundreds of innocent soldiers who had no idea why we were even there! I thought I was exacting vengeance on the ones that wanted to hurt Selene and ruin the Alliance, but I just murdered them…”

Nicholas drew her into his arms as she kept weeping, an unending torrent that soaked through his shirt. “If you saw what happened in your past life then you know there was no animosity between us when we died.” A pathetic little noise escaped Makoto. “I was in Elysium as a service to Endymion, and you were there ‘cause you wanted to see Hyperion brought to justice. We were victims of
happenstance, that’s all.” He cupped her face, brushing away tears with his thumbs. “I don’t believe you’ll ever lose control of your powers. You’re Makoto, not Nemesis, and I love you too much to let you vaporize yourself. If you do, I’ll go down with you in a literal blaze of glory.”

Makoto laughed weakly. “What do you mean?” She wasn’t outright ignoring the fact that Nicholas just said he loved her, she was simply too overcome with emotion to properly reciprocate the sentiment. In response to her question he spread his fingers. Makoto boggled when tiny flames flickered to life at the tip of each one, and then he drew the orbs into his palm in sequence before snuffing them out. “You can summon fire,” she stated. “When did that happen?”

“Late January, when I got this signet,” Nicholas explained, showing off the bronze ring with a round ruby in the center. “Also I guess I’m called Zojo now, not Nephriticus.”

“One of the Four Heavenly Kings? Jeez, are we living mythology or something?” Makoto shook her head at the absurdity of this whole situation. She was a reincarnated princess of Jupiter who could command lightning, Nicholas was a reincarnated warrior-monk who could control fire, she had killed someone with a several-thousand year-old grudge against her, and humanity depended on them to prevent the minions of Tartarus from fucking shit up again. She sighed, lacing their fingers. “Well, if this is our life now I’m glad I have you to live it with.”

“Me too.” They got up together and returned to the bedroom, coming to a halt in the middle of the floor. Neither relinquished their grip on the other, and the longer they stood there holding hands the more in tune they became with the elements coursing through their celestial souls, just out of reach below the surface. Fire and lightning had many similar properties. They were both capable of inflicting tremendous damage upon the natural world, but from such destruction new life always sprang. Their elements also served as a reminder to humankind that nothing, no matter how much they willed it, was permanent. Everything had to die so that other things could be born from the ruins.

“Hey…” Makoto spoke so quietly it took Nicholas a moment to register her voice. “What do you think would happen if we lost control together?” He raised an eyebrow, unsure what she was getting at. She pressed herself against him to make her intentions clear. “Will you burn me?”

“Only one way to find out,” Nicholas replied, pushing her back to the bed. “Let’s see if we cause a calamity.”

It took less than a day to sail to Kauai, but because Kaelan was mildly hungover he didn’t get up in a timely manner and they arrived at the island in the early afternoon, though there was still plenty of daylight left to do a bit of exploring. After checking in with the Nawiliwili Harbor office he addressed his friends with the authority of a drill sergeant. “All right everyone, I’m about to go rent a couple Jeeps for the day so we can check out Waimea Canyon. We’re all going, no exceptions.” He gave Zach a stern look as the boy mumbled something about physical activity. “After that I was thinking we could go for a hike on the Napali Coast or head back around the island to Wailua, so decide what you want to do while Joe and I are out.”

“I guess someone should wake up the chefs first,” Mina remarked afterward. “No nose goes!” Usagi lost because she was engrossed in her DS, looking up to find everyone grinning at her. Of course she didn’t mind barging in on her best friend since Makoto did it to her all the time, but getting woken up when she didn’t want to be was made considerably less irritating when presented with delicious waffles.

“Mako-chan, Nikko-kun, time to rise and shine…” She opened the door just enough to peek inside, her attention immediately falling on bare skin illuminated by the porthole. It wasn’t a big deal seeing
Makoto naked but she never imagined stumbling upon Nicholas in the same state. Usagi released a shriek of embarrassment and fled back to the main cabin, though the noise successfully roused the couple from slumber.

A few minutes later they appeared fully clothed, Makoto running a brush through her tangled hair. “What’s going on? You scared us, Usa-chan.”

“I’m sorry Mako-chan, but I saw Nikko’s butt. Forgive me.” She looked so guilty that Makoto just had to laugh.

“Unfortunately the two of us see him in such a state all the time,” Mamoru remarked as Zach nodded. “He seems to have no problem sleeping and walking around in the nude.” Nicholas only shrugged because it was true.

When Kaelan and Joe arrived everyone piled into the two Jeep Wranglers with soft tops removed so they could enjoy an unimpeded view of Kauai’s mountains drenched in every shade of green imaginable. Near the actual town of Waimea they stopped to check out the Captain Cook monument before continuing onward and upward, the asphalt gradually turning red due to washout from the canyon’s alkaline soil. Joe intentionally steered his Jeep through puddles collected in the pull-off areas, splashing mud all over the fenders and eliciting yelps from his passengers, which he found amusing because this was nothing compared to an actual off-road adventure. Rei answered his phone when it rang. “Tell him to knock that shit off unless he wants to reimburse me for violating the rental contract,” Kaelan growled. She relayed the message verbatim. Joe stuck his arm up through the roof and flipped Kaelan the bird.

Everyone ooh’d and aah’d when they reached the canyon’s scenic viewpoint. Red rock contrasted bright green shrubbery, creating a lovely backdrop for their group photo. From this high up they could also see the neighboring island of Niihau which they would not be visiting, instead backtracking to Molokai. While almost everyone went off on short trails to explore the sides of the canyon, Mamoru and Usagi sat on a rock sharing a snack. The latter turned to grab her phone for a few more pictures and when she looked back at Mamoru she found him frozen, for a little sparrow had landed in his palm to eat sunflower seeds from the trail mix. After a minute of sitting like statues a few more birds appeared in addition to a chipmunk, climbing all over the boy as if he were stone. Usagi really wanted to take a picture but knew she couldn’t move without scaring the animals away. From the corner of her eye she saw a couple return, falling silent. Rei lowered to one knee and aimed her camera, giving a thumbs-up once she had immortalized the scene. When Mamoru could no longer hold his breath the creatures scattered. “That was sooo cute, Mamo-chan!” Usagi exclaimed. “You’re officially a Disney prince.”

They got in the Jeeps and headed back around the island to Wailua River State Park. “This place is just too beautiful,” Mina said, turning every-which-way to take it all in. She gasped when she suddenly found herself high in the air atop Kaelan’s shoulders. Nicholas did the same with Makoto, the two girls picking blossoms off flowering trees and placing them in one another’s tresses. Soon enough they arrived at a white cascade tumbling from mossy rocks, its spray sending ripples across a perfect reflection of the sky and scenery.

Everyone gathered at the top and the boys quickly removed their outer layers, each one whooping as they jumped into the pool without hesitation. “I swear they all share one brain!” Usagi giggled. “They always seem to know what the others are going to do without even saying anything.”

“I think that just makes them predictable,” Ami said, stepping out of her shorts and neatly folding her shirt atop them. She had worn her monokini under her clothes for an instance such as this. Zach’s eyes were glued to her as she stepped onto the highest rock, her toes curling over the edge. She
swung her arms back before pushing off in a graceful swan dive, her friends applauding when she surfaced.

None of the girls followed Ami since they were a bit apprehensive about strangers potentially seeing them in their undergarments even though there was no one else in the vicinity. “I’ll give each of you one-hundred dollars if you all jump in,” Kaelan declared.

“Sold!” Usagi stood proudly in her lacy white lingerie, grinning at the boys’ whistles and cheers before pinching her nose and cannon-balling into the water. Rei asked Makoto to go with her but the taller girl only shoved her off the rock, eliciting the most feminine shriek imaginable before performing her own front flip. Mina went last, assuming the pre-race stance she used while on the swim team with Ami, and dove in with perfect form. She surfaced near Kaelan and beamed while he regarded her in wonderment, then she wrapped her legs around his waist when he pulled her behind a boulder for an impromptu make-out session.

It had taken half a year to begin unravelling her mysteries, discoveries being made each time they went out on the town, or on a mini road trip, or made love all night and through the next day. During the few instances Mina slept over and they didn’t get physical, they spent hours on end just talking. They discussed everything from politics to world cultures to health and medicine to pondering the nature of the universe. Kaelan wondered if she conversed with Ami the same way; their friendship was important to him and he made sure not to monopolize her time. Mina mentioned how much she appreciated him for not trying to change her to fit into his lifestyle. It would be so easy to become his kept woman, but Kaelan respected the fact that she wanted to forge her own path through life. Mina was too tenacious to let anyone control her anyway, not that he was the type.

“I don’t deserve you,” he murmured, interrupting their kisses.

“Why would you say that?” Mina asked.

Kaelan focused on the water grazing her sports bra. “I don’t know… I guess it just sunk in that you willingly crossed an ocean with me to explore a place we’ve never been. And you don’t feel any doubt that I’ll get us all home safely.”

She quirked an eyebrow. “So you find it odd that I have faith in you?”

“Yeah, a little. At this exact time last year I was up to my shoulders in fish. I had no plans for the future—hell, I had no plans for the next day except to down a few beers at the pub. I just realized how surreal my life has become. I came to Hawaii on my huge, gorgeous boat. Tomorrow morning I’m going to wake up to a gorgeous woman in my bed.” Mina smiled bashfully at that. “When we leave this place I’ll return to my huge, gorgeous mansion and wake up beside you in that bed as well.” He shook his head. “I’m trying to figure out what I did to deserve any of this.”

“I think it’s just fate, hon,” Mina said, embracing him. “Accept this is what the universe had planned for you.”

“Hmm… all right.” Kaelan kissed her again, drawing it out. She had no idea how right she was. “That means the universe planned for us to meet and for me to….” He trailed off, preparing himself with a deep breath. “…fall in love with you.”

She drew back to blink at him. “What?”

“I said I love you.” His features stayed neutral as hers shifted to shock. “I’m unreasonably in love with you, Minako.”
“You love me unreasonably? What does that mean?” All the sounds of nature had become muted as Mina stared at him, that four-letter word filling her with a mixture of joy and dread.

Kaelan glanced skyward while debating whether or not to tell her the truth. Honesty was the best policy, of course. “I’ve been considering asking you to marry me since New Year’s.”

Mina’s jaw dropped. He wanted to marry her? Like, devote the remainder of his life to her marriage? “W-wait, Kaelan, hang on a sec…” She shouldn’t have tried speaking when her brain spun with a million thoughts. “We can’t get married, I’m only nineteen! And I’m still in school!”

“I know that. I’m willing to wait.” He prayed to all the gods his confession hadn’t triggered Mina’s flight instinct; at the same time he was relieved to have finally gotten the proclamation off his chest. He was prepared to give her time to consider it, but he’d be heartbroken if she outright refused him now.

“Kaelan, that’s… that’s a big life step for both of us, a huge step. I had no idea you’d even been thinking about something like that!” She put a hand on her cheek to prevent her head from actually spinning. “I never thought anyone would want to marry me. No one’s ever told me they loved me, only parts of me.” Mina’s hang-up was that she didn’t know if her feelings for him were exactly the same. She admired and appreciated and trusted him, but did that equate to love? “Kaelan, did you bring me here to propose?”

“No, I didn’t. I don’t even have a ring or anything. I only thought…” His eyes squeezed shut with the feeling he had monumentally fucked up. “I wanted to tell you how I really felt and this place is fairly romantic so it just came out! I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be,” Mina said kindly. “I’m not mad or anything, I’m… amazed, really.” She gave him a half-smile. “I wish I knew what to say but I don’t, so can you let me think on it? At least a few days?” Kaelan nodded, watching her swim away and hoping, wishing, praying she came back to him before too long.

Who the hell actually said things like that, candidly and without any prelude whatsoever? Who the hell knew they really wanted to be tied down at such a young age? ‘He’s five years older than you,’ Mina reminded herself, ‘he knows exactly what he wants. But why bring up getting married when he already has so much on his plate?’ Was Kaelan getting bored? Did he want to do something with his money besides sink it into project after project? Maybe he wanted Mina to be the queen of his empire; maybe he wanted an heir or two to entrust it to. Well, the joke was on him since she had stopped having periods for some reason and was basically infertile for the time being.

She hadn’t shared any of this with Ami yet because she and Zach were reading a comic together, smiling and giggling at each page. They were totally spooning too, which still made no sense to Mina since her bestie didn’t even like hugging people. “What’s the deal with you two? Are you dating?” They faced her simultaneously. Zach rested his chin on Ami’s upper arm and gave the blonde a hint of a possessive smirk. It wasn’t his fault Ami had sought his affections after Mina got back with Kaelan.

Ami laughed. “Of course we’re not dating!”

“It sure seems like it,” Mina said. “Why do you find that funny?”

She bit her lip and turned toward Zach. “You should tell her.”

“Nah, you can do it.”
“Are you sure?” He only smiled reassuringly. “Mina-chan, Zach is gay.”

“What?!” she exclaimed. “No he isn’t! No way!” But it made a lot of sense if Ami actually believed that; she thought it was safe to be intimate with Zach because he wasn’t sexually attracted to her. Mina swore she could see a glimmer of lust in the boy’s eyes accompanying his smug confidence. She knew he had played the part so well for so long that nothing she said could sway Ami’s belief, especially since she had ample evidence of his purported non-interest in her by now.

Zach tutted. “Um, yeah way. I bet I’ve had more dick than you.” Ami gave his chest a light slap to which he responded by nuzzling her shoulder apologetically.

Mina bristled. ‘Ooh, you manipulative bastard. She’s letting you crawl all over her like the little worm you are!’ “Ami-chan, will you come outside with me? I need to talk to you about something.”

“Sure, but I have to use the bathroom first.”

As soon as the door closed Mina shot Zach a seething glare he accepted passively. “So what is it you think you know?” he asked.

“I think you’re waiting for an opportunity to stick your cock in her,” Mina hotly replied. “If you do that, you’ll break her heart. And then I’ll break you.”

He nodded slowly. “I do fantasize about her, I’ll admit that.” Mina looked like she was about to punch his lights out. “But Ami’s become much more than a conquest to me. She’s my muse. The last thing I want to do now is make her hate me.”

Mina narrowed her eyes in suspicion. “What do you mean she’s your muse?”

“I mean I’m an artist and she inspires me. A lot, actually. I’ve been sketching her since the first day of school when I saw her in the library, and I haven’t been able to stop.” Zach fished in his suitcase for a well-worn notebook, surrendering it for Mina’s inspection. She opened the cover to find a portrait of Ami reading, one in which he managed to capture the voracious look in her eyes as she devoured knowledge.

“These are really good…” she begrudgingly admitted, turning the pages. More portraits of Ami’s various expressions greeted her, including the one of her staring inquisitively from the pool. His fashion sketches featured her as the croquis, the early designs showcasing bold, edgy, modern styles Ami would never wear. As Mina continued browsing the designs became classical and feminine, modest pieces with flowing fabric in cool hues. Some were simple sketches and others were detailed and colorful. “I didn’t know you could draw like this, Zach.”

“Neither did I,” he said with a note of humility. “Ami did this to me. I need her, Mina.”

“Are you in love with her?”

He swallowed. “I… I think so.”

So much for dealing with her own romantic endeavors. “How does that work if she’s convinced you’re gay?”

Zach’s fingers raked through his hair, wavy strands sticking out at odd angles. “I have no fucking clue. I dug myself this hole and I have no idea how to climb out. I’m not going to ask you to help me, but… fuck, I’ll go crazy if things stay this way. She’s so close to me yet so far out of reach.”

Mina sighed and rolled her eyes. “You’re a complete idiot for getting yourself into this position. I feel
no sympathy for you.” He accepted that stoically. “But I love Ami too and I want her to be happy. I’ve never seen her so… glowing around another person, and I don’t think she’s ever had a male friend before. If you want to be more than that, you’re going to have to tell her the truth. Ami appreciates integrity more than anything. If there’s a real connection she’ll forgive you. You’ll have to bare your soul to earn her trust back, no secrets at all.” Mina paused, smirking. “If you do that, you might get to draw her like a French girl.”

“Ha, good one.” Zach sighed despondently. “So what’s the deal with you and Kaelan? Are you chilling with us because you had a fight or something?” Ami reappeared just then, leaning on the back of the couch and listing her head in that owlish manner.

“Um, well, I guess I can just tell you both…” Mina’s blue eyes flicked between them several times. “Kaelan said he wants to marry me.”

They both gaped but Zach was the first to find words. “Holy shit, really? When was this?”

“While we were at Wailua Falls.”

“Oh my god, Minako.” That was as close as Ami came to spouting anything vulgar. “What did you tell him?”

“That I had to think about it. That’s why I’m out here.”

“Well, shit!” Zach chuckled, “If you love him then the answer is obvious!” He stopped when he noticed Mina’s sullen countenance. “You do love him, don’t you?”

“I’m not sure,” she replied in a small voice. “I know I’m hurting Kaelan by not knowing. He probably thinks I’m running from him.” Again.

“It’s not an easy thing to figure out,” Ami wisely declared. “Love comes in so many forms that one person’s definition of it may differ from that of everyone else. But I think trust should always be the foundation for love, so if you have that…” She blushed and shrugged. “Well, what do I know? I’ve only read about it.”

“Jesus, this got heavy. I need a drink.” Zach withdrew a bottle of bourbon from his luggage and raised it. “Here’s to figuring out our shit.” He took a long swig and passed it to Mina, who downed even more than him. It turned out to be pretty good so she drank again to actually savor it.

Zach wagged the bottle at Ami. “Want some?”

“Why not?” she grinned, feeling adventurous. She sipped tentatively, licking her lips afterward. “It tastes like… toasted caramel.” Caramel was her favorite.

The three of them drained the bottle in half an hour since it was like drinking liquid candy. Ami fell asleep first with a rosy glow in her cheeks. Mina conked out next with her phone in hand, unable to finish a text to a friend. Zach found himself sandwiched between them and released a groan. Why did love have to be so complicated? Wouldn’t it be better if Mina could keep fucking Kaelan without complex emotions getting in the way? Wouldn’t it be better for him if he could go back to having meaningless sex with random strangers instead of pining after Ami?

“Thanks a lot, Destiny,” he grumbled before dozing off.
Maui was their penultimate Spring Break destination and although it was bursting with tourist activities, the passengers of Saoirse wanted to take a day off to relax and rejuvenate… except for Joe once he found out about Kula Botanical Gardens, and where he went Rei could be persuaded to follow. They rented yet another Jeep to cruise in, enjoying a warm breeze and ocean air. Joe noticed that Rei wasn’t wearing a single black garment, opting for a white skirt, violet top, and a sunhat in addition to her signature glasses. “Got your camera?” he asked. She answered by holding it up. Hawaii had been a great opportunity for her to learn more about its technical aspects instead of simply pointing and shooting.

Rei paid more attention to framing specific elements in each shot, moving through the gardens methodically as Joe practically ran around like a chicken without a head. Orchids! Lilies! Bromeliads! Hibiscus! Some were species he’d never heard of, recent hybrids he longed to cultivate. Rei spoke his name and he spun toward her, the sheer wonder on his visage making her smile. “How did you become so interested in botany?” They had shared a lot of pillow talk over the last few months but she had never asked why exactly he pursued a degree in environmental horticulture.

As with so many of his answers this one came with a story; Joe stuck his hands in his pockets while looking nostalgically at the sky, “I was about five or six when one of my dad’s mechanics decided to get married. He was a young guy, just turned eighteen, with no idea what to do so he asked my parents for help. My mom did all the girly stuff like going dress shopping with his fiancée, making invitations, and choosing a cake. When they got to the flowers my mom offered to provide them from her garden, which was kind of a big deal because she grew them to sell so we’d have a little extra money. The bride said she wanted unique flowers and my mom suggested blue roses. As you know there’s no natural true-blue rose, and when my mom told me that I said I’d figure out a way to grow real blue roses so she could sell them and make lots of money.” His shoulders rose and fell. “I guess I also gravitated toward flowers because they kind of mirror people. When I first met you at the Halloween party I thought you were like a black bearded iris, elegant and beautiful yet mysterious.”

Rei raised an eyebrow. “I can’t be mysterious, you know all about me.”

“That’s not true,” Joe refuted. “I believe it takes a lifetime to completely know someone because during all the years you spend together they’re still growing and changing as a person. We continue to evolve until the day we die.”

“Then what’s the point of making a lifelong commitment? What if your partner turns into someone you don’t like?”

He shrugged again. “That’s a risk I’m willing to take. I want to find a woman who’ll help me become the best man I can possibly be.”

Rei accepted that with a nod while attempting to suppress the butterflies in her stomach. Joe wasn’t referring to her, was he? One of the qualities she really appreciated about him was his candor. Because they communicated clearly there hadn’t been any drama in their relationship despite sex forming its basis. Their arrangement was simple and safe, which Rei liked, and she assumed Joe liked it too because there wasn’t any pressure to turn it into something more.

Except Joe did want something more, or the persistent voice in his head did. It kept urging him to act in manners he really wasn’t comfortable with. The voice belonged to Jaden, who still lusted after the Martian princess while loathing her with every fiber of his being. ‘Rei isn’t Enyo,’ Joe would often say to the warrior. ‘She’s a totally different person now. Why do you hate her so much?’
Until now he had never received a detailed response. Joe lay awake beside Rei’s slumbering form, hoping the waves would lull him to sleep. He knew having a conversation with the ancient spirit in his soul wasn’t conducive to a good night’s rest, but he wanted some definitive answers so he could get rid of all these invasive feelings. “Enyo and I were equals,” Jaden began. “We were both children of war who fought hard to survive the worlds we were born into. The Martians were only ever unified one time, just after their colony had been established by the great Ares in the Golden Era. Enyo was a descendent of that man, but the one who ruled at the time of our deaths was a simple warrior named Cadmus. A highly skilled warrior, but a commoner nonetheless. He married her mother Harmonia and claimed Enyo as his daughter even though they didn’t share blood.”

“How do you know all that about her?” Joe inquired.

“I was a general of the Terran army. One must know everything about one’s enemy if they wish to be victorious against them. However, I didn’t intend to involve myself in the conflict regarding Selene. Aitolos summoned me to battle and I ignored him, waiting and watching in hopes that he would be struck down and I could claim the throne for myself. Alas, the conflict did not reach the palace. A ceasefire was ordered after Kunz and Verticordia returned from Elysium together.”

“And then all the princesses gathered there for the unification ceremony…” Fragments of that jovial occasion, however brief it was, flickered in Joe’s memory.

“I don’t know why Endymion asked me to attend when we weren’t particularly close. I only served so I could seize any opportunity to rule that came my way.”

“You were selfish.”

Jaden laughed. “Yes, and arrogant. That was why I propositioned Enyo despite never having encountered her before.” He made a sound full of want. “You can see her, yes? How savagely beautiful she was. She was as fire, indiscriminately consuming all who stood in her path. She killed anyone who sought to take away her freedom. However miserable her childhood may have been, it is always better to be free than enslaved. I weathered similar experiences, that was how I recognized her true nature when we met in Elysium. She and I were fighters, murderers, survivors. No other would have seen it in her and respected her for it.”

“So she spurned you. Is that why you hate her, because she hurt your pride?”

The warrior glowered. “As I said before, we were equals. We should have died as equals, like Nemesis and Nephriticus or Zois and Pronoia. I attacked Enyo, she retaliated, and I knew as soon as she drew her weapons that she was going to kill me first. I knew, and I hated her for it because it meant we were equals no longer, that she was going to perish with one final, glorious victory under her belt. I didn’t even get to witness it because she stabbed those jagged blades into my eyes.”

There were highly unpleasant sensations attached to Jaden’s last personal memory. Joe turned toward Rei and found it impossible to envision her attacking anyone so viciously. ‘She’s definitely not like Enyo at all. I wouldn’t want her to be.’

“You wouldn’t love her if she were,” Jaden snidely remarked.

Joe mulled it over. ‘Am I in love with Rei?’ He was aware the words passed his lips every time he climaxed with her, but they were always in a language she didn’t understand and they just sort of… fell out during the heat of the moment.

“The way you copulate with her is much more lovingly than how I would handle Enyo. I would have dominated her like a real man, made her beg for it…”
‘Christ, shut up.’ Joe put pressure on his temples in an attempt to block out the images rising from his subconscious.

"Why do you even wait for her to give it to you? Just take her when you want her, make her submit to you. There isn’t a defense she can put up that we can’t overcome. We are a man of ambition who always obtains his desires. Conquering her will be so easy. She trusts us, use that to your advantage —"

“I said shut up!” Joe shouted, startling Rei from her dreams. He was too busy dealing with Jaden’s nonsense to notice her moving away from him, avoiding the clashing energies among his aura.

"Josef, what’s going on? Are you all right?"

“I’m fine,” he answered, still rubbing his temples. Jaden chortled smugly. “I was just having an idiotic dream.”

“…Was it about me?” she tentatively inquired.

“Yeah, I… yeah.” He heaved a sigh. “But it was kind of twisted and it’ll never come to pass, so I don’t want to think about it anymore.” Rei furrowed her brow at the way he seemed not to be addressing her but someone else, maybe himself. Maybe the entity within.

She scooted closer once turquoise became the dominant color of his aura. “There’s something inside you, tormenting you. I’ve been able to sense it for a while now.” Joe shot her a wide-eyed look in the darkness. There was no way Rei could have known about Jaden before he awakened… right? “I’m certain I can cleanse you of this malignant spirit. Just relax and let me see into your soul.” Her hand covered his forehead before he could say or do anything. Joe froze up, feeling her spirit seep into him with single-minded determination. Jaden howled at him to make her stop but it was already too late; Rei honed in on the ancient spirit almost instantly, attempting to drive him out through sheer force of will. And her will was very strong indeed, so Joe felt as if part of him were being ripped away.

“Rei, s-stop…” She withdrew completely and left him gasping for air. In the next instant she embraced him.

“Oh my god, Josef, I’m so sorry. I had no idea!"

“What did… how much did you see?” he managed to ask.

“Enough to realize there are two spirits in your soul, as I suspected, but the other is who you were in a previous life.” It wasn’t so dark that Joe couldn’t see her expression of intrigue and concern. “And I now know that the other part of you, Jaden, is obsessed with who I was in my previous life.” She searched his countenance. “Has our arrangement been causing problems for you? Are you struggling to keep him… restrained?”

“No, it’s not difficult to disregard what he wants. He’s just persistent and annoying.” Joe blew out a breath. “I would never hurt you, Rei. Jaden wants me to be a real man and take you the way a real man should, but nothing you do threatens my masculinity. I’d never jeopardize our relationship to satisfy his ego. But he’s a part of me now, has been since I was born, I guess…”

Rei placed a hand atop his before speaking. “I don’t believe you’ll surrender to Jaden’s lust either, but even if you did I don’t think you could harm me mentally or physically. I’ve been studying myriad ways to protect myself for many years.”

Joe ignored an urge from the warrior to test that claim. “Still, I think it might be good if we spent some time apart when we get back to Seattle just so that his ardor isn’t exacerbated. Not that it’d be
your fault, of course. I just…” He sighed. “I don’t want to take the chance of something occurring beyond my control.” If he hurt her in any way, if Jaden’s stupid inferiority complex drove him to such actions, he wouldn’t be able to live with himself.

“I agree…” Rei said quietly, “I think that would be for the best.” But the thought of no longer seeing Joe on a regular basis made her heart ache. If what they had really was the semblance of love it made sense why she’d never allowed such an emotion into her life before.

Losing it hurt too much.

“Well, here we are– the Big Island.” Kaelan sailed to the eastern side of Hawaii and docked in Hilo Bay. Although his passengers were excited to have toured all the islands, the fact that their vacation had almost come to an end put a damper on their spirits.

Mina draped herself over his shoulders and pouted. “I’m gonna miss this place. Let’s come here for every spring break.”

“You only have three more until you graduate,” Kaelan pointed out, “and after that…” He clamped his mouth shut. Mina told him she didn’t want to hear any more about his marriage plans, she just wanted their relationship to unfold naturally. That didn’t prevent him from looking forward to proposing after her graduation. He’d already found several pink diamond engagement rings she was bound to love. Now he just had to covertly figure out her band size.

The ten friends grabbed lunch and headed off to spend the day at Volcanoes National Park. Even before stepping foot on the island Nicholas was affected by the concentrated primordial energies; a volcanic eruption was one of the most devastating natural phenomena the planet could produce. If he felt so inclined he could take control of the lava flowing beneath their feet and reduce the entire island to ash, but from such destruction new flora would arise, quickly if bolstered by Mamoru. He and Usagi lingered at the rear of the group, the former glancing around in consternation. “What’s wrong?” the girl inquired.

“I feel something in the forest,” Mamoru answered. “Some trees are starving. They’re not getting enough water.” He stepped off the trail and Usagi followed him through the underbrush. He came to a spindly tree covered in stiff brown leaves, a stark contrast to its neighbors bearing vibrant red blossoms. He placed his hand on the trunk, eyes closed as he willed it to tell him what was wrong. “An invasive fungus?” he muttered. Well, those fell under his domain, too. He focused a tiny bit of his power into the tree and purged the infection from its vascular system. “Now all you need is some rainfall.”

“Mamo-chan, you saved it! You’re amazing!” Usagi hugged him but he only partially smiled. “This fungus is infecting trees all over the island. It’s not a native strain though, so I’m not sure how to cure it.” He bit the tip of his thumb while staring off into the forest. “There are hundreds of afflicted out there. I can feel each of them slowly choking to death.”

Usagi’s grin faded. “I’m so sorry. Maybe Joe could help if you guys took home a leaf or something?” A core sample would be the way to go about it, but it was against policy to remove anything from the park. He had a brief notion of personally locating every ohia tree and cleansing them but that would baffle biologists. Still, since Mamoru had the ability to do something about it that meant he was obligated to act. He limited his influence to infected specimens situated along the trail, Usagi beaming at him proudly all the while. Eventually they caught up to their friends at one of the many observation areas.
Lava spewed forth from the blackened ground as if Earth was experiencing a coughing fit, and they could see little pools of molten orange rock here and there. “I bet this place looks really cool at night,” Zach remarked as he posed for a selfie. “We should come back then.”

“Mm, that’s not a good idea.” Nicholas sounded nervous while he held Makoto’s hand in a death grip. “The ground is so dark it’d be hard to see. Don’t want anyone falling into a puddle of magma.” Although his concern was logical Makoto could sense something off about him and looked up inquisitively. He glanced around to make sure their friends were distracted before kissing her so fiercely she was left breathless. “It’s this place,” he whispered by way of explanation. “It’s a hotbed of raw power.”

“So I see…” Makoto felt his pulse racing and his skin smoldering like he would burst into flames at any moment. “Let’s go back to the boat so you can unleash some of that raw power.”

As if he had the resolve to dismiss such a suggestion. “See you guys later!” Nicholas waved, and they practically sprinted down the trail before anyone could ask where they were going.

Once the sun began to set they left the volcanoes behind and drove back to Hilo, cramming into one vehicle thanks to Nicholas and Makoto’s shared libido attack. Kaelan pulled into a park with an amphitheater, torches flickering among the rows of seating. “What are we doing here?” Usagi asked.

“I thought our last memory of Hawaii should be a luau,” Kaelan explained. “I know it’s a bit cliché but a local talked me into it while I was getting the rental cars. He said all the food is home-cooked, and I don’t know about you guys but I’ve been dying to try some authentic cuisine. What do you say?”

Everyone agreed that there was no better way to end Spring Break than with a celebration. The amphitheater filled completely as the sun finished sinking below the horizon, tourists and locals getting on as easily as if they’d been friends their whole lives. While in line for the potluck-style buffet Ami gave the blond boy a nudge. “See, Zach? This is the real Hawaii, not that terrible beach party you went to.”

“Yeah, you’re right,” he agreed. “I guess my rebellious streak finally caught up with me during that vacation.” After filling their plates with food they found a quiet place to sit, eat, and talk. “I didn’t get that tattoo at an actual shop,” Zach began. “Some random guy gave it to me at a bonfire.” Ami donned the admonishing look he was used to receiving. “I know it was dangerous. I could have gotten HIV or something, if not from the needle then sleeping around. God, I must have fucked twenty people that weekend. I think I was on molly the whole time, maybe coke at one point. I just wanted to get away from my parents since all they did was fight. It was like I wasn’t even there.”

“So you went to find people who would give you attention,” Ami reasoned.

Zach laughed self-deprecatingly. “Yeah, well, I definitely found it. I was only thirteen but I acted older because I had to be grown-up for social functions back home. Once Monday rolled around I dragged myself out of the gutter and realized I’d ended up on the other side of Oahu. My back hurt from that shitty tattoo, I had the worst hangover of my life, I was starving, dehydrated and ganky, but at least I had my wallet and I managed to make it back to the yacht. My parents found me passed out in the shower with the water on, so when we got home I had to go to therapy because they thought I was suicidal. That was more attention than I wanted so I acted like an angel throughout middle school– by sophomore year my parents had essentially turned a blind eye to me. I got away with so much shit.”

Ami frowned slightly. “Did they disown you because you’re gay? Is that why you came all the way to UW?”
He laughed again. “No… well, kind of. If they had actually disowned me I wouldn’t go back for Thanksgiving and Christmas.” Zach’s expression grew downcast, maybe even… ashamed? Ami had never seen him wear such a look before. “The South is really conservative, you know. Well, maybe you don’t know ‘cause you’re not American. What I mean is it’s deeply ingrained with conservative Christian values. Go to church, obey your elders, get married, have kids, just do what everyone thinks is best for you. I don’t jive with that perspective, and everyone knew it in high school. I was on the sailing team, I ran Drama Club, and I stood out for being that guy who always subverted expectations. My polar opposite was the mayor’s son—student council president, typical jock on the football and rowing teams, and dating some debutante everyone assumed he’d marry after graduation. Just picture a generic rich, handsome, conceded white kid and that’s him. Cameron.”

Ami tried to form an image but it was hard for her to generalize. “What happened between you and Cameron?”

“Nothing, really, until after graduation. We knew of one another from the sailing team-rowing team rivalry, my occasional interactions with student council as a club leader, and AP lit. But then he held a graduation party ‘cause that’s what popular kids do. Since I’d made friends with a couple club managers in Corpus Christi I showed up with a ton of booze and suddenly I was buddy-buddy with everyone. Girls danced with me and guys cheered me. Cameron pulled me away at some point, led me upstairs, and told me how cool he thought I was. Then he just… kept going, telling me all these things he liked about me, and since I was drunk as fuck I could only stand there uselessly.” Ami’s brow knitted in concern as Zach sighed. “Then Cameron kissed me and I was like ‘what the hell? Mister High-and-Mighty Jock President has a crush on me, the theater nerd?’ He was fucking great at it too, and I was like ‘oh shit, this is actually turning me on’, praying he wouldn’t notice, but I was wearing tight jeans so he totally did.”

Listening to Zach relay his assumed first homosexual experience made Ami blush, which she hoped he couldn’t see in the twilight. “Did Cameron stop after that?”

“Nope, not at all. He pushed me into his bedroom, got my pants off, and gave me what was easily the second-best head I’ve ever had. The best came from a Swedish exchange student I met at a frat party last year.” Zach repressed his lurid smirk as Ami stared in disbelief, no doubt wondering how the hell she had become friends with such an immodest slut like him. “Anyway, some chick barged in on us and then everything went to shit. Somewhere on the internet is a photo of the mayor of New Orleans’ son sucking me off even though the administration tried really hard to track down all the copies, but they couldn’t call it child pornography since Cameron and I were eighteen. So his family tried suing me for defamation of character and coercion and stuff, but my dad’s a kick-ass lawyer and my mom comes from really old money. The legal battle lasted a whole year— that’s why I came to UW a year older than most freshmen. I figured I should get out of town so the scandal would fade, and I did feel guilty for dragging my family’s reputation through the mud with an unintentional public display of indecency.” He shrugged. “So that’s the story.”

“Zach…” Ami’s voice shook, and she regarded him in a manner he really couldn’t describe before throwing her arms around him. “I’m sorry… I’m sorry they demonized you. You didn’t do anything wrong! Those people seem… they’re just narrow-minded and intolerant!”

He hugged her back with one arm. “I don’t disagree with you, Ami. Cameron got sent to a conversion camp after I left. I saw him over Christmas vacation and he seemed terrified of his own dick, that’s how badly they fucked him up. But that’s… that’s just the way things are where I’m from. One queer guy isn’t enough to affect an entire culture.”

Ami pulled away to dry her eyes, stunning Zach; he hadn’t expected her to get emotional over something he’d dismissed long ago… okay, mostly dismissed. He hated being judged by his family
even though they were the ones who wanted him to come home for the holidays. Despite being 2,600 miles away he could feel them wondering whether he'd show up with a boyfriend or a girlfriend in tow. For two years it had been neither, and their relief was palpable. Mostly he hated how polarized their opinions were. Everything had to be one way or the other and they couldn’t conceptualize anything that fell between, but nothing in life was only black or white. Ami acknowledged the spectrum but it was Zach’s fault she saw him at the end opposite her. Every time they spoke like this, every time he shared pieces of what made him tick, she only grew more accepting and empathetic. He feared that when he finally told her the truth, he would no longer have an ally or a friend.

Kaelan and Mina left the luau behind to walk aimlessly down the beach, appearing right at home on the tropical island. He wore crisp shorts and a button-down shirt with his chest exposed, and she was dressed in a tube top and breezy skirt. They both abandoned their shoes on a log near the amphitheater. The sand was soft beneath their feet and a gibbous moon glinting off the water helped them navigate in the dark. They found a nice spot to sit and stargaze beneath a flowering shrub.

“Thank you,” Mina said out of the blue.

“Hm? For what?”

“For using your status to do something nice for your friends, and remaining a good person despite it.” She gave him an appreciative smile. “Those are just some of the reasons why I love you.” Kaelan smiled before cupping her face and kissing her deeply, earning a giggle when he lay back while positioning her atop him. “You’re getting sand in your hair,” Mina said between smooches, “and probably your shorts.”

“I couldn’t care less right now,” he returned.

Mina obliged, letting their romantic surroundings banish her inhibitions. Soon enough she’d be sitting in lecture halls and studying for tests again, waking up across from Ami in their cramped dorm instead of with Kaelan in his opulent bedroom. She had an open invitation to stay with him whenever she wanted, but she didn’t want to be that girl for whom her boyfriend became the center of the universe. She still had her own life to live.

One of Kaelan’s hands tangled in her golden hair while the other played along her spine. Mina opened his shirt the rest of the way to leave damp kisses on it that dried quickly in the warm night air. He was so focused on the sensation of her lips that he didn’t notice the person who had stopped to stare at them until she cleared her throat, making them look up with a gasp.

“Hayley?”

Mina gawked. “What are you doing here?”

She stood with her arms crossed, her features obscured by shadows since her back was to the moon. “You two really do make a beautiful couple,” the woman remarked, devoid of emotion. “In all my long years I never found a man who treats me the way Kaelan does you, Mina.”

He assumed a protective stance. “What do you want with us?”

“This has nothing to do with you, Mr. Burke,” she stated. “I’m here for Minako. I mean her no harm.” The couple shared a look and Kaelan’s heart sank. Hayley was going to awaken Verticordia. He honestly thought he would have more time without the Venerian martyr potentially muddling things. No doubt she would disapprove of her reincarnation’s relationship with the general who threw himself on her sword.

“What do you want with me?” the blonde fearfully inquired. Hayley inched closer while offering her hand. Mina moved around Kaelan to accept it tentatively, seeking answers of any kind from
Hayley’s placid visage.

“It’s time for you to wake up, but in order to do so you must kill me.”

“Kill you?” Mina repeated, aghast. “I would never! Why are you saying this?!”

“If you don’t end my life tonight you’ll never get another chance. I’m not like the other members of the Dark Cloud who are on the hunt, so when you leave this place we’ll never meet again. In the beginning I tried to help Tartarus capture the Sun, but we failed miserably and were cast back into darkness. I began to lose faith in what we were doing– it simply wasn’t meant to be.” She gave an empty smile. “I escaped the regime and came to live on Terra where I was revered as a deity by these island people. Now that Tartarus is stirring again I want to ensure they can’t use my power to accomplish their wicked goal. They have a new leader who will stop at nothing to obtain Helios for the Dark Cloud. She was the one who sent that golem to attack you and your friend at school.”

Mina’s eyes widened as she recalled that terrifying encounter. “You know me as Hayley Mejia but my real identity is Haumea. It is my destiny to die so that your celestial soul will awaken and enable you to protect Helios.” Hayley frowned and inspected both sides of Mina. “You don’t have your blade.”

“Of course I don’t have something like—”

“I have the Titaness Sword,” Kaelan cut in. “She’ll receive it once we get home.” His lover gave him a look he had to ignore. It was like she saw him for the first time, regarding him as stranger she knew nothing about. He spoke quietly. “Mina, listen to the voice deep inside yourself. I know you can hear it now. Let her strength become your own and use it to give Haumea the noble death she deserves.”

Mina glanced between Kaelan and Haumea a few times, aware of an internal force linking her to both of them. Someone was knocking on the door to her conscious mind, an obscured presence that became more familiar as she focused on it. “If you love Kaelan, if you love your friends… If you love this planet, let me rise.”

She did love Kaelan, she did love her friends, and she adored the world in which she lived. If the Sun disappeared and Earth withered and died there would be nothing left to love, nothing in darkness. Was this the reason she had been born the Child of Love and Beauty? Mina closed her eyes and let herself fall away, inviting the dormant spirit within her soul to come forth via the heart-shaped diamond pendant Usagi had given her.

Kaelan and Haumea had to shield their eyes against the intense light Mina radiated. Every piece of jewelry on her person melded together and transformed into a set of golden finery: breastplate, tiara, bracers, and greaves. The light rays fused into a wispy cream-colored dress with a high slit up one side, and gladiator sandals adorned her feet. Since she commanded the elemental of metal she could now sense every trace of it, no matter how slight, comprising the sand beneath her feet.

“Verticordia,” Haumea greeted, bowing. Kaelan went to one knee before her like a knight of old.

“…General Kunz,” she said after studying him for a long moment. “I remember you. Where exactly is my blade?”

“Locked away beneath my bed,” he answered. Verticordia narrowed her eyes, no doubt thinking it quite morbid of him to have made love to her above the instrument of his demise. “And I respectfully request that you don’t call me by that name.”

“Right, of course not. How thoughtless of me.” The Princess of Venus faced Haumea. “If you’re no longer a member of the Dark Cloud then I don’t need to kill you, destined or not. I won’t take life without reason.”
The woman nodded slowly. “The ruler of Tartarus, Eris, has imprisoned Alectrona, the Guardian of Helios. These restraints are of a spiritual nature— they are linked to the nine leaders of the Dark Cloud. Two of them have already fallen, Salacia and Deucalion. You must end my life to sever the third bond keeping Alectrona in darkness.” Mina hummed her comprehension. “There is another reason…” Haumea added. “I have lived a very long time, and I am weary. I would be happy to pass on knowing I helped humanity advanced toward the shining new era that should have occurred long ago.”

“So be it.” Mina manipulated the metal around her arm into a thin spike, hesitating a second before plunging it directly into Haumea’s heart, and she barely winced while dropping to the ground. She mouthed “thank you” to the golden princess, then her eyes closed forever. As Mina reformed her bracer she felt it grow a little bit stronger thanks to the iron and copper in Haumea’s blood. Kaelan knelt and dipped his fingers into the gentle waves crawling ashore, asking the ocean to take Haumea’s body to a beautiful resting place. The pair of ill-fated warriors watched her drift into the horizon before Mina looked up at the man and smiled. “It’s a fascinating element you’ve been given command of.”

“It doesn’t support yours,” he refuted. “Metal sinks and corrodes in water.”

“You don’t weaken me, Kaelan. I’m not the lady of all that glimmers, I’m the lady of love. Love is what gives me strength.”

“So change back into Minako and let me love her.”

She put a hand on her chest. “I am Minako. Verticordia is just a part of me now. If you’re worried about what happened in the Silver Era, don’t be. I harbor no negative feelings toward your actions. I could feel your pain, your hopelessness. It was the end for both of us.”

“But I took the coward’s way out…” He kept staring straight ahead; he’d dissolve into a mass of shame if he met her gaze. “I should have continued fighting alongside you until the very end.”

She scoffed lightly. “Why do you think my sword found its way to you, Kaelan? It was imbued with Verticordia’s emotions. As she left Elysium she realized she loved you and trusted you implicitly.” Mina relinquished her celestial form then, hugging him. “I’m glad I got to fall in love with you this time around.”

Kaelan’s breath of relief ruffled her hair as he returned the strength of her embrace. “I was dreading this moment for so long. I thought you would see me as a weak, pathetic man undeserving of everything you’ve given me.”

“That’s exactly what I thought when I walked away from you that night.” Mina’s grip tightened as she gave a single soft laugh. “We’re a pair of fools, huh?”

“Fools in love, certainly,” Kaelan agreed.
The unthinkable had happened. Hotaru had developed a crush on Tyler Fontaine.

She hated admitting it but at least she kept it under wraps, refusing to blush profusely or sigh dreamily in his presence. Tyler had remained true to his word and joined Mrs. Watanabe’s art class for second semester, one of only five new faces. His participation also earned animosity from some of his peers; he was supposed to be a big, dumb, self-absorbed jock on the football team, not someone capable of visually expressing his innermost thoughts and feelings. It only took Hotaru a week to see that Tyler didn’t embody the stereotype at all, and the willingness with which he opened up to her made her do the same in turn. Obviously she didn’t tell him about her precognition, mind-reading, or the fact that she was the reincarnated Princess of Saturn, but she liked being able to call him an actual friend.

Following winter break they had established a bit of a routine, slowly and steadily growing closer. At first their conversations were limited to third-period art but then Hotaru started eating lunch with Tyler, and then he began waiting outside the choir room so they could walk to sixth-period P.E. together. Every day without fail he carried her books to the pick-up area, bidding her and Shanta goodbye before getting on his bus. In early March Hotaru realized that Tyler’s feelings had evolved into the romantic variety; she also knew he was hesitant to tell her because he didn’t want to jeopardize their friendship. She felt guilty for being aware of his emotions and even guiltier for continuing to act like she didn’t like him back. Having never had a crush on anyone before, she simply didn’t know how to proceed.

‘Maybe I should just say it after class,’ she thought as she and Tyler approached the gym. The outdoor pool had become available and their class was starting a swim unit, which she somewhat dreaded. Hotaru hurriedly changed into her suit, a violet one-piece with a halter neck. Most of the other girls were donning bikinis and those in her immediate vicinity made silent remarks about how shapeless and pale she was.

Hotaru wrapped a towel around herself before exiting the locker room, sitting down on the very corner of the bleachers to draw as little attention to herself as possible. She hid her porcelain legs beneath the bench and watched the lifeguards rearrange the lane markers while her teacher spoke to a certified swim instructor. “Hey!” Tyler called as he descended from the upper benches. She offered her signature smile, the one she practiced to convince other people that everything was A-Okay.

“You excited for this unit?”

“I’m having a hard time psyching myself up,” Hotaru replied, admiring his physique in her peripheral vision. Abs, pecs, traps, delts, biceps, quads… She stifled the urge to reach out and touch all those gorgeous muscles. “I’m already nervous about the diving board and we haven’t even gotten in the water yet. Is that dumb?”

“I’m right there with you,” Tyler assured. “Looking down from way up there makes me dizzy. But you know where there’s no diving board? The beach.” Hotaru faced him with one of her slender eyebrows raised. “Spring Break starts this Friday, right? My buddy Josh is having a barbecue and bonfire party-type-thing at his grandparents’ place on Point No Point after school.”

“Josh who?” Hotaru queried. There were more than a few Joshuas at their school.

“Miller, the football team captain. Forgot you haven’t met him.”

She waved it off. “He’s a senior, they have a different lunch than us. Who all is going to be there?
“Most of the team?”

“Just a few people, actually.” Tyler rubbed his knees. “It’ll probably turn into a sleepover thing if everyone stays up late and we miss the ferry. But the house is huge so there’s more than enough room for us all to, you know, sleep separately if that ends up happening.”

Hotaru regarded him in mild amusement. Usually Tyler was collected and confident but he sounded like he was preparing to give a graduation speech without having practiced. “I heard Point No Point is nice and sandy. I’m sure you’ll have a great time.”

“Yeah, well I…” One of his hands moved to the back of his neck. “I was wondering if you might, you know… wanna go with me?”

Oh. Oh. Was he asking her out? Was this like a date thing? Hotaru reasoned that dates didn’t typically involve multiple people. Still, Tyler wanted her to attend what seemed like a small, intimate gathering alongside him. The idea of hanging out with people she hardly knew for an extended period of time wasn’t exactly appealing, but on the other hand she had never been invited to a social event before. ‘And that’ll be the perfect opportunity to tell him how I feel.’ She gave the boy a beatific smile. “That sounds fun. I’d love to go with you.”

Tyler visibly deflated in relief. “Great! Um, okay. Josh said to show up any time after four, but I don’t have a car so I’m catching a ride with Alex Hayes. We’ll swing by your place around three-thirty and head over on the Edmond’s ferry together.”

“That works for me,” Hotaru said. Her projected calmness managed to assuage Tyler until the class began, and then they both ended up shaking like leaves as their sadistic teacher decided to introduce the swim unit by making everyone jump off the high dive.

Hotaru approached the sedan by herself when school let out on Friday. “No Tyler today?” Shanta asked.

“He’s getting ready for a party.” Shanta tilted her head. “The captain of the football team, Josh Miller, is having a small get-together at his grandparents’ house across the water.” Hotaru’s lips turned up in a tiny smile. “Tyler asked if I wanted to go with him.” Her adoptive mother made a cutesy noise and hugged her. “He and this guy from art are picking me up at three-thirty.”

“But we had better get you home so you can prepare!” Shanta navigated traffic while Hotaru directed her grin out the window. It had been a long time since she felt this excited for something.

She spent a good ten minutes perusing her closet. She needed an outfit both cute and functional, something that wouldn’t leave her at the mercy of April rain showers despite the predicted sunshine; Washingtonians never accepted the forecast as gospel. She changed into a lacy camisole, a long-sleeved wrap top, a double slit maxi skirt, and slouchy ankle boots, then ventured downstairs. “How do I look, Mom?”

“Absolutely charming,” Shanta replied. “You should try wearing that outfit to school sometime and see what everyone says.”

“Maybe I will.” Hotaru glanced at the wall clock. 3:20, perfect. She ran back upstairs to put on winged eyeliner. Eye makeup was the only kind she ever wore since her genetics provided a flawless complexion. “What about now?” she asked upon returning to her mother’s study. “Do I look overdone, like I’m trying too hard to stand out?”

“You always stand out, dear,” Shanta said. “You are even more than one in a billion.” Hotaru rolled
her eyes before hugging her, and then the doorbell rang. When she answered it Tyler’s jaw dropped.

“Hi,” Hotaru greeted shyly.

“Uh, hi. Wow, you look… wow.” She blushed profusely. So much for maintaining her streak.

Shanta cleared her throat. “Please let me know if you decide to stay the night, and I expect you to make wise choices. If you need me to come pick you up for any reason, I will. Be safe and have fun.”

Hotaru hugged her again. “I will, thanks Mom. I love you.”

Alex whistled when she descended the steps, making her blush yet again as Tyler offered her the front seat. “So this is the true Moe,” the bespectacled boy said. “I knew there was more to you than jeans and tee shirts. You have to wear this outfit to school so I can draw you.”

Tyler groaned from the backseat. “Dude, come on. If you keep adding cute people to your comic it’ll never be finished.”

“Is that the project you’re always working on in class?” Hotaru asked, ignoring the fact that one or both of the boys in the car thought she was cute.

“Yep. It’s your typical teenage drama and romance but everyone is a supernatural creature.”

“Like Teen Wolf,” Tyler quipped.

“Not like Teen Wolf!” Alex declared, and the two of them launched into an argument that lasted until arriving at the Edmond’s ferry terminal. There was a bit of a scramble for everyone to pay their fare but they made it on the boat in time, instantly heading upstairs where they purchased popcorn to share with seagulls. While Alex went to take some panoramic pictures Tyler followed Hotaru to the bow.

‘Tell him now,’ her conscience suggested, but she dismissed it. “I’ve never been to Point No Point,” she said after a silent minute. “Is it nice?”

“It’s pretty cool, yeah,” Tyler answered. “The community is small but there’s a casino and a lighthouse. A little ways inland there’s a lake I used to swim at when I lived in Kitsap.” Hotaru already knew he had moved from Silverdale to Seattle after his father got a job as a travel journalist. “I think Alex wanted to stop and get ice cream along the way. There’s a fancy shop at the Kingston terminal.”

Hotaru smiled. “That sounds good, I’m glad I brought extra cash. I figured he could use the gas money.”

“Alex doesn’t need it. Save it for breakfast or something.”

She turned toward him, narrowing her eyes. “So you already planned on spending the night?”

“Ah, well…” Tyler rubbed the back of his neck while avoiding her gaze. “This thing is only happening because Josh is house-sitting for his grandparents. It’ll just be you, me, Alex, Josh, Kylie, and Graham Garett. He’s on the track team with Alex.” Hotaru hummed. “It’s not going to turn into a rager or anything but I know Josh will raid his grandparents’ booze stash, and Alex brought whiskey. Since they’re all going to get drunk I figured we could just stay the night… or you could call your mom since she offered to pick you up.”
Hotaru shook her head. “I’ll be fine as long as no one tries driving. I’ll hide their keys if I have to.”

Tyler grinned at that, then they returned to the car as Kingston came into view. Alex made a detour to an ice cream shop called Mora which offered so many decadent flavors it took Hotaru a while to choose one. Tyler opted for dulce de leche, Alex got watermelon sorbet, and she finally ordered dark chocolate. After driving down a seemingly-endless road followed by zigzagging through a waterfront neighborhood, they arrived at the mansion and walked around to the rear deck where three seniors greeted them.

“You guys got ice cream? No fair!” Graham grabbed at the nearest cone. “Gimme some, Tyler.”

He held it up out of reach. “You have a car, go get your own!” Graham followed him around trying to snag a bite while Josh manned the grill and Kylie handed out drinks. Once the food was done they loaded up plates with traditional American barbecue offerings and ate at the patio table, mostly discussing sports, art, and music. Hotaru liked the feeling of being included and having people care about what she had to say, and she hoped she could become better friends with Kylie and Alex before the end of the year.

At sunset the six teens migrated to the beach, getting situated on bleached logs while Josh lit a fire in a well-used pit. Graham brought out his guitar which he tuned before strumming a song Hotaru wasn’t familiar with. The singalong continued for at least two hours, then Alex’s bottle of Jack Daniels began making the rounds. Hotaru passed it up but Tyler took a long drink after the other boys called him a pussy. Graham played and sang even more exuberantly, launching into something no one but Hotaru recognized. “Oh, come on,” he chided, “you guys know ‘Time of Your Lives’, ‘Fast Car’, and stupid-ass ‘Wonderwall’ but not this, ‘Moonshadow’ by Cat Stevens? Uncultured wretches.” He kept playing anyway. Hotaru squared her shoulders, drew in a breath, and projected her choral soprano all the way to the water. She never did solos since she hated being in the spotlight, but she felt fearless all of a sudden; she was having a good time and didn’t care about being judged. Because she sang with her eyes closed she didn’t notice everyone staring at her until the last note faded, and then her cheeks flushed.

“Damn girl, that’s a nice set of pipes you got,” Josh remarked. “No wonder you’re in choir.”

“I had no idea you could sing like that!” Kylie added, beaming. “You’re so talented!” Graham acknowledged her with a nod and Alex toasted her before downing a huge gulp of whiskey.

“Wanna go for a walk?” Tyler whispered, the proximity of his mouth startling Hotaru. She agreed and stood up with him. “We’ll be back in a bit, guys. Don’t do anything stupid like catch yourselves on fire.”

“Oh, I know that one!” Graham dramatically belted out the lyrics. “But I set fiiire to the raaain, watched it pour as I touched your faaace…”

Tyler and Hotaru left the revelry behind as they strode down the darkened beach, passing through beams of light cast by neighboring lamps. “You were really good back there,” the boy eventually spoke, “your voice is amazing.” He stopped. “I think all of you is amazing, Hotaru. I really like you, like, as more than a friend. Is… that okay?”

‘So candid.’ His thoughts were whirling but somehow he’d managed to articulate an admission of his feelings. Hotaru kept her own voice measured despite the fact that her heart resounded in her chest. “It’s okay, Tyler. I really like you, too… as more than a friend.”

She saw his eyes widen in the night as he mussed his hair in disbelief. “Oh my god, really? That’s so great!” Tyler sighed happily. “What do we do now? What do you want?”
“Maybe we should try holding hands,” Hotaru suggested, tittering when he gripped it eagerly. They walked until reaching the lighthouse, its beacon no longer lit, then they turned around and headed back to the bonfire in utter silence. Nothing really needed to be said since Hotaru could hear every thought welling up in Tyler’s mind, and she felt comfortable being with him just like this. When the bonfire came into view it started hissing and sputtering as fat raindrops fell from the clouds that had rolled in, and everyone was forced to make a mad dash for the house before the April shower became a deluge.

“Jeez, I hope you guys rolled up the windows,” Kylie said to those who had driven. “Now we can’t have s’mores since the fire’s dead.” She pouted but was placated by Josh’s offer to do something sweet to her, and they practically teleported upstairs. Alex and Graham found more booze and went off to play billiards, leaving Tyler and Hotaru on their own in the kitchen.

Hotaru yawned as Tyler checked his watch and boggled; it was 12:30. “Time sure flies when you’re having fun,” he said. “Did you have fun today?”

“Yes, but it’s just been a long…” she yawned again, “…day, since we had school. Sorry, I’m falling asleep on you.” Tyler only motioned for her to follow him, leading her down a few halls while she texted Shanta to let her know she’d be home in the morning. When Hotaru looked up she saw that Tyler had brought her to a sunroom or guest room or both. There was glass all around, a bunch of plants, some lounge furniture, and a large canopy bed just inside the door. She flopped onto it with a sigh and managed to kick off her boots, then she felt Tyler lie down beside her, resting a hand on her forearm. The din of the rain lulled her to sleep almost instantly.

Hotaru awoke sometime later to discover Tyler cuddling with her. She checked her phone and groaned when she saw it was only 3:30. The rain was still falling, natural ambient music she listened to so she could get some real rest. Tyler breathed deeply, his breath ruffling her hair. “You awake?” he asked, voice low and husky.

“Yes, sorry,” she whispered back. “I was just checking my phone.”

“S’okay.” Butterflies fluttered when he shifted slightly, burying his nose in her hair as his arm tightened around her waist and his thigh slipped between her ankles. Hotaru suddenly became aware of how tiny she really was compared to him. Spooning like this, her tailbone was even with his navel. The rise and fall of his chest actually moved her along the comforter and his hand was big enough to encapsulate her whole fist. Hotaru grew warm upon wondering if Tyler were proportionate everywhere, and then her breath hitched when he seemingly stirred in response to her dirty thoughts. “G’night, Firefly,” he only muttered.

She smiled at the pet name. “Goodnight, Ty.” His sound of contentment helped her drift off again.

In retrospect Hotaru probably shouldn’t have gone to sleep thinking about Tyler’s nether region because her mind concocted a stunningly vivid interaction with it. He brushed her hair aside and began kissing the back of her neck, sending shivers down her spine each time his soft lips alighted upon her skin. Their clothes must have come off at some point since Tyler ran a hand along the bare curve of her waist, and she could feel each of his defined abdominal muscles pressing against her. Hotaru keened when he kissed the sensitive spot behind her ear before moving his lips to the juncture of her neck and shoulder, leaving a faint bruise. “Tyler…” she said breathlessly, “What are you doing?”

“Making you feel good, Goddess.” She shuddered as his tongue flicked across her ear. “Unless you want me to stop?”
“No, don’t stop.” Tyler continued kissing everything he could reach without changing position. At some point his bicep slipped beneath her head and Hotaru clung desperately to his arm while he caressed her breasts with his other hand. “I’m sorry they’re so small,” she said, inhaling sharply as he sucked hard on her neck.

“They’re perfect, just like the rest of you.” Since this was a dream he knew exactly what to say and do. “You’re a beautiful, perfect goddess, Hotaru.” His fingers played across her waist and hip, then slid down her inner thigh. He didn’t touch her how she wanted, smirking as she pushed against his open palm, inviting his fingers to dive into the pool of liquid desire between her legs. Tyler simply held his hand there and resumed kissing her, enjoying the feel of Hotaru writhing beside him while increasingly-frustrated noises reached his ears. Finally he dragged two fingers over her entrance and grabbed her hip as she arched at his touch, fitting his cock between the gap at the top of her thighs. “Are you going to sing for me, Goddess?” he murmured. Hotaru moaned in response, more focused on the pleasurable sensations derived from gliding along his shaft. He let her stimulate herself for a while, holding her head to his chest while her lower body maintained a sensual rhythm. Eventually she paused at the tip of his cock, her breath stuttering as he rocked his hips. “Are you sure you want this?” Tyler asked.

“Yes,” Hotaru stated. “Please, Ty.”

“Well, since you asked so nicely…” She gasped when he slid inside her, a deeply satisfied groan emanating from his chest. He quickly became just as sweaty as she was and reveled in the noises she made with each thrust. “Come on, Hotaru, sing for me,” he said again. “Let me hear how loud you can be.” She had no choice but to obey when Tyler unexpectedly bit her neck, eliciting a scream that dwindled to a whimper as he soothed the spot with his tongue. Then her pitch increased once more, her climax building as he plunged into her harder and faster. “Come for me, Goddess. Let me feel you…”

There was something about his voice, the absolute certainty in his tone that he could make her do what he wanted, that sent Hotaru’s orgasm crashing through her. He finished immediately after, his hips moving erratically a few times before he stilled. As far as sex dreams went this one had been pretty good, but Hotaru wondered if she had a secret fetish for Tyler talking like that while fucking her. And why had he started calling her ‘Goddess’ all of a sudden? What happened to ‘Firefly’? Not that she minded the former, but she definitely didn’t consider herself any kind of sex goddess. She was a virgin, an educated and self-aware yet totally inexperienced virgin.

Hotaru awoke not long after the sun had risen, stretching and groaning as her limbs popped into action. She rolled over to find Tyler regarding her with a rather incredulous expression on his face. “Good morning?” she tried.

“Morning,” he replied, sounding shy. “Can I kiss you?”

“Yes?” Tyler grinned and shifted forward, cupping her cheek before pressing a very gentle kiss to her lips. Hotaru closed her eyes and sighed dreamily, ruining that streak as well.

He pulled away while blushing. “I just wanted to make sure this was real.”

Hotaru was about to ask why it wouldn’t be when she received a barrage of amorous thoughts from his mind. Apparently she had been quite expressive in relaying some of the things she experienced in her dream, moaning his name and grinding on him in her sleep. As if that weren’t embarrassing enough, her actions had alleviated his morning wood. Tyler was glowing because she got him off despite being unconscious, and he hoped to god their actual first time would be anywhere near as amazing as it had been in her dream. Hotaru turned away and stood up, hiding her flushed countenance by searching for her boots. “Um, about last night…” she started to say.
He laughed. “Don’t worry about it. No judgment here.”

‘Of course not– you woke up to an orgasm.’ She buried her face in her hands. “I’m so mortified. How loud was I? Did everyone hear?”

“I doubt it. This sunroom is on the other side of the house from where they are.” Tyler smiled crookedly. “You got kinda loud a few times. It was cute.” Hotaru groaned because he was lying. She’d been very loud several times and Tyler thought her moans were sexy as hell, again hoping he could perform well enough to produce them. She wondered if he had a voice kink, too. “I’ll go wake up Alex so we can head home.”

As soon as he left Hotaru ducked into the half-bathroom off the hall, dismayed by her appearance. Her hair was a bird’s nest, her clothes were wrinkled, her eyeliner had held up surprisingly well, her teeth felt gunky since she hadn’t brushed them, her breath probably smelled horrible, she was covered in dry sweat, and…

There was a bloodstain on her underwear.

Her instant assumption was that she had torn her hymen, but how could penetration have occurred if she and Tyler both slept with their clothes on? Hotaru’s pulse raced when she realized her pelvic muscles also ached a little, like they had actually been stimulated by something instead of just contracting in response to a nocturnal emission. She examined herself in the mirror again, relaxing somewhat when she didn’t see any hickeys or bite marks on her neck. Maybe in the midst of her dream she had picked up on Tyler’s subconscious thoughts and her body reacted accordingly. It was plausible since she wore her sapphire amulet at all times, even when she slept, and her Third Eye usually became wide open during periods of rest, turning perception into reality.

The return drive to Seattle was mostly carried out in silence. Alex was terribly hungover since he and Graham had stayed up until four in the morning talking and drinking. He fell asleep after driving onto the ferry, snoring lightly with an arm over his face. Tyler realized how awkward Hotaru felt about what had unintentionally happened between them and certainly didn’t want to embarrass her further, but he needed to know some things. “Hey, Hotaru…” he said, touching her shoulder. “Can we talk?”

She put her phone down and rotated in her seat. “About what?”

“About… us. Is there an us?”

She blinked at him. “Do you not want to put that label on it? Just be friends with benefits or something?”

His hands raised in alarm. “No! I’m one-hundred percent down with being your boyfriend and I’d love to be able to call you my girlfriend. But is that what you want? You told me you’ve never been with anyone before, so I don’t want to do stuff I consider normal only to make you uncomfortable.”

Hotaru smiled; he was so sweet. “It’d be nice if we could go slow for a while so I can get the hang of things. Like, at school we can hold hands and stuff, but I don’t want to kiss in front of other people.”

“Okay, great, that’s what I need to know. I definitely would’ve tried giving you a kiss in the morning.” He grinned when she laughed. “What about, like, doing homework together? Is your mom the kind who wants you to keep your door open and kicks me out after five?”

Hotaru had never given Shanta a reason not to trust her. She respected the rules that had been established since being adopted by her, and she didn’t really have a rebellious bone in her body. “I
have no idea if my mom is like that. I guess we’ll have to find out.”

The look in Tyler’s eyes informed her that he was really asking if they could get away with making out in her room, and she almost scolded him for having a one-track mind until realizing his attraction didn’t actually bother her because their connection was already deeper than that. Hotaru knew things about him that no one else was privy to, like how Tyler used his popularity to fill the void of loneliness brought on by his father’s near-constant absence; the man was only home for a couple weeks at most before jetting off to new locales. Tyler didn’t want anyone to know that the reason why his mom wasn’t in his life any more was because she was a meth addict who would fly into unprovoked rages and throw things at him; once she gave him a concussion with a half-gallon bottle of vodka. Hotaru knew that Tyler tried very hard to maintain a certain persona that society would accept, but it was mostly a mask like the ones everybody else wore. She knew she was one of the few very people he took it off around.

When Alex pulled up to her house, Tyler escorted her to the front door. “Thanks for inviting me. I had fun,” Hotaru said.

He paused since he’d been about to thank her for going with him. “I’m glad. I thought it was a decent way to kick off Spring Break.” He drew her fingers to his lips and kissed them. “We’re going to hang out some more, right?”

She laughed lightly. “Of course! You don’t have to give me puppy eyes. Why wouldn’t I want to spend time with my boyfriend?” Tyler smiled before glancing back at the car, then up and down the street. Seeing no one, he leaned in for a kiss that Hotaru stood on her tiptoes to return. A surge of giddiness made her sigh against his lips and it took Tyler a significant amount of willpower not to pick her up, hold her between his body and the wall, and kiss her senseless. “Mm… we could go shopping tomorrow?” Hotaru suggested when they separated. “My mom could give us a ride into town.”

“That sounds fun. Text me the details?” She nodded and waved as he descended the steps and got back in the car, startling Alex by closing the door. As soon as Hotaru went inside, Shanta called out from the living room.

“You’re back before noon! How was the party?”

Hotaru sat down on the opposite couch. “It was just a barbecue and bonfire, but it was fun. There were only six of us. The food was really good, we had interesting conversations, we sang some songs, I went for a walk with Tyler…”

Shanta grinned at the way Hotaru smiled upon saying his name. “Did anything happen between you two?”

“I guess you could say that…” she coyly replied. “We’re dating now.” Shanta squealed like a fangirl and got up to hug Hotaru, smothering her for a minute before sitting beside her wide-eyed. It was times like this their relationship felt almost sisterly despite the thirteen-year age gap. “We did sleep in the same bed, with clothes on,” Hotaru said in the interest of being honest. “We didn’t drink or have sex or do any drugs.” Not that any of those activities appealed to her in the first place, but her adoptive mother looked happy to hear it. “I was wondering if you could take me and Tyler downtown tomorrow so we can go shopping.”

“Hmm, tomorrow…” Shanta tapped her chin with one finger. “I’m going to a community lecture at the University, then having dinner with an old client so I’ll be busy most of the day.”

“What if you drop us off around noon and then we take the bus home?”
I suppose that works– the lecture begins at two. Where did you want to shop?”

“Just Westlake Center,” Hotaru answered with a shrug. “We’ll stick around there if I don’t find anything cute.”

“Okay then…” Shanta grabbed her phone and made a memo. “Sunday, April tenth… my daughter’s shopping date with her new boyfriend.” She glanced up. “Where does he live, by the way?”

“Oh Green Lake. Apparently there’s a bunch of good breakfast cafés he goes to on the weekends.” Which reminded her… why hadn’t Tyler invited her to any of them when he told her to save her money for breakfast? Hotaru reasoned that Alex wouldn’t have wanted to drive them around when he could go home and sleep, and the two of them weren’t exactly equipped for a public outing after crashing at someone else’s place. One day, though, she expected to be thoroughly sated after… well, after a night of thorough satisfaction.

‘Ugh, why does my mind instantly dive into the gutter whenever I think about him?’ Hotaru blushed at her reflection in the bathroom mirror. ‘Stupid hormones.’ She could not wait to be an adult. After graduation she planned on going to art school for the credentials, then she’d probably freelance for a while. She already earned her own money by accepting commissions from people online. Original characters, comic strips, fursonas, avatars, landscapes, fantasy worlds… She drew whatever people paid her for unless it was a smut request, but only because she didn’t think she could accurately portray it without having had sex herself. Of course her brain fell right back into the gutter upon imagining what would happen if Tyler said yes to letting her use him as a reference for male anatomy. She’d finish sketching him from every angle, he’d start to put on his clothes but she’d stop him, they would kiss passionately, she’d climb him like a tree…

Hotaru got dressed in her lazy clothes after showering and brushing her teeth, falling into bed with her phone as she texted Tyler. “My mom said she’d drop us off in Westlake tomorrow at noon. Does that work for you?”

“Perfect. We can grab lunch then shop?”

“Sure.” She thought for a moment. If Shanta was having dinner with someone, that meant Hotaru would have to fend for herself which she was more than adept at. “Do you want to have dinner at my place afterward?”

“Like order takeout?”

“No way! I’ll make us authentic Thai food.” Was the way to a man’s heart really through his stomach?

“That sounds amazing. I’m down.”

Apparently yes. Hotaru could only give her phone a goofy grin as her heart beat faster in anticipation of her first-ever real date tomorrow. The shopping was for practical purposes; she needed some new layering pieces and sandals. The dinner was because she didn’t want either of them to be alone. Hotaru had almost been overwhelmed by the feeling before Shanta offered to adopt her, and she still occasionally feared that something would happen to take her away, too. Tyler was also no stranger to loneliness since his mom was toxic and his dad was barely in the picture, but now he had Hotaru and she wasn’t going anywhere anytime soon.
Deep Blue

Shanta waved goodbye to Hotaru and Tyler, watching them stand around gesticulating for a minute before he took her hand and they ran off toward Sephora, no doubt telling her he didn’t mind if she browsed makeup. It warmed her heart to see her daughter in a relationship with such a sweet and easygoing person. By opening up to him Hotaru had made some other friends as well, but Shanta certainly didn’t expect the girl’s personality to change overnight. Socializing with peers her own age was already a huge step; Hotaru had always gotten along with adults better than children even while living in Japan where Shanta first met the girl and her father, Dr. Tomoe Soichi.

She headed to the University of Washington and made her way to the lecture hall where a stuffy old man and woman were going to discuss some of the psychological issues affecting Generation Z, which Hotaru was a member of, so Shanta listened with a healthy dose of personal bias. Much to her surprise the two professors spent as much time debating with one another (and occasionally the audience members) as they did orating, and even brought a few studies she had been unaware of to attention. Apparently Gen Z kids were more likely to suffer some form of depression and social anxiety, which was a bit ironic considering they had grown up with readily-available technology to form relationships with people all across the world. However, this led to the creation of false personas and a troubling disconnect between the true self and the social avatar, manifesting as surprisingly uniform mental health problems among the studies’ participants.

Shanta ended up filling her little journal with several pages of notes, two hours passing swiftly thanks to the riveting community discussion. It was still only 4:30, half an hour before she was supposed to meet her old client Ozora Kakeru for dinner, so she leisurely drove back to the metro and parked in a garage. She browsed the shops on Pike Street while glancing at her watch until the hands struck 5:00, making her way to the Italian restaurant and claiming a seat at the bar. Shanta ordered a mojito and kept an eye on the door, smiling brightly when the man she last saw three years ago walked in. He looked somewhat taller than she recalled, but then again mostly everyone towered over her. He still had the same shaggy blond hair, though. “You’re only five minutes late. I’m impressed.”

He chuckled, sheepish. “I’ve gotten a lot better at time management. You’d probably laugh if you saw how many alarm clocks I have scattered around my apartment.” They hugged and were shown to a table. “You look great,” Kakeru commented once seated. “I take it things have been going well since you left Tokyo?”

“Indeed they have, but I would much rather hear about you. First, what on earth made you move all the way to Seattle?”

The man smiled proudly. “I got hired on at UW. I’m going to be an assistant professor of astronomy starting summer quarter.”

“Oh, congratulations! That’s wonderful!” Shanta squeezed his hand, eyes sparkling. “Where are you living now?”

“Helios Complex down on Second and Pine.”

Her brow rose, impressed. “Having a waterfront view must be nice, and you’re right across from Pike Place on top of that. Good for you.” They paused to order food and another mojito for Shanta, then she laced her fingers in a no-nonsense manner. “Are there any personal issues I should be concerned about?”

He heaved a sigh; that was a definite yes. “I broke up with Himeko last year.” The woman waited
for him to elaborate as he tended to do so unprompted. “I just… couldn’t handle it any longer. I
couldn’t pretend to be happy for her and support her when all I did was feel jealous. You already
know about that, though.”

Kakeru had initially started seeing Shanta to be treated for the emotional aftermath of growing up
with a rather weak constitution, severely limiting him in terms of physical ability. He had been
bullied as a child, met and befriended Himeko during college while earning a degree in astrophysics,
then found himself struggling in his field as he fell behind with work due to constantly being ill. He
had improved somewhat after he and Himeko started dating. She was gentle and unerringly patient,
waiting with an outstretched hand to pull him into the next phase of their shared career. But she was
always ahead of him, and Kakeru began to feel guilty for dragging her down. So when she had the
opportunity to go up to the International Space Station, which she almost denied because he wanted
it more than anyone they both knew, he told her to accept. He thought he could live a little
vicariously through her but he was wrong. Instead he grew to resent Himeko since he would never,
ever get the chance to do something like that because he hadn’t been born with a healthy body.

“You came here to put some distance between you two, hmm?” Shanta inquired, twirling her
seafood fettuccine.

“And the research group,” Kakeru added. “I think I’ll focus on an academic career for a while.” He
directed a stare at his plate. “I had a few job offers from other institutions and space agencies around
the globe– India, China, Russia, Europe… but I really wanted to see you again, Shanta.” She blinked
in surprise. “I think you’re the only person who truly understands me. You pulled me up from the
abyss and figured out how to keep me from spiraling.”

She met his intense gaze. “That was all you, Kakeru. What I did was hand you some tools for
success. You’re the one who decided to utilize them and improve yourself.” The alarm clocks were
one such idea Shanta had suggested for him since he tended to dissociate while under stress. He set
them to remind him to do basic things like eat, bathe, wash clothes, and clean his apartment. Toward
the end of her stint in Tokyo she also got him to join a yoga class with her since it didn’t strain his
fragile body. “Are you still doing yoga?” she asked.

He smiled. “Yes, actually. I was going to ask if there are any studios you’d recommend around
here.”

“If you don’t mind a drive there’s one I like in Fremont, but we can check out a few downtown and
find a good fit.”

“Alright, we’ll make a day out of it. I’ll buy you lunch.”

She flashed an admonishing look. “Dinner is already more than enough, Kakeru.”

“I take it dessert is off the table, then?” He signaled their server. “Tiramisu and a glass of rosé,
please.”

Shanta could not say no to tiramisu. The glass of wine became a bottle they polished off together,
and then ordered another of white as they sat and talked for a good hour and a half after their dishes
had been taken away. It was a slow Saturday, though, so they didn’t feel too guilty about
monopolizing a table. Kakeru then shared the details of his hectic move over martinis, and she found
his first car shopping experience absolutely hilarious. He had rarely driven in Japan and was daunted
by the fact that Americans had so many creature comforts crammed into their vehicles he had no idea
which button did what. He was considering getting a scooter instead, maybe a nice Vespa, and the
image of him riding a scooter to work in an ugly tie and tweed jacket with elbow patches set Shanta
to laughing so hard that her face turned scarlet. She was aware enough to realize that three mojitos,
two bottles of wine, and two martinis had certainly worked their alcoholic magic on her, but the nonchalance with which Kakeru told his stories genuinely amused her.

Eventually they shrugged on their coats and made it outside, clinging to each other for support. “Where’d you park?” the man asked, also rosy-cheeked and slurring slightly.

Shanta waved in a random direction. “Somewhere thataway, I think, but I’m in no state to drive.”

“Let’s go to my place ‘til it wears off,” he suggested. Since they were only a few blocks from Helios Complex they made it without causing a commotion, passersby merely walking around them. A few people greeted Kakeru as they swerved across the lobby to the elevators, and outside the door he fumbled with his keys before finally getting it open. Shanta gasped at the sleek, spacious apartment he now called home. “Voila!” Kakeru exclaimed, spreading his arms wide. “Enjoy the view while I make us coffee.”

A gorgeous sunset captured her attention. She could see all of Elliott Bay, Alki Point, and the Olympic Mountains splashed with orange and magenta hues on the horizon. Kakeru returned to press a warm mug into her hands and they both sipped while gazing out across the water. Shanta then examined the rest of the room. There were a few moving boxes still piled up in corners but it was obvious that a man in love with the night sky lived here. All of his décor was star or space-themed, from lamps to wall charts to shelved bric-a-brac, and she spied at least four strategically-placed alarm clocks. The only areas separated from the open floorplan were the bedroom and bathroom, but peeking through the doors revealed the former was quite large. “This is a great place,” she remarked.

“Thanks, I’m pretty happy with it.” Kakeru sat on the sofa and patted the cushion beside him, which Shanta gingerly lowered herself onto. “Feeling any better?”

“A little. This coffee is amazing, by the way. I usually don’t care for it at all.”

“My secret ingredient is Irish cream,” he explained.

“Kakeru, you don’t sober up by drinking more booze!” The man grinned at her giggling fit. “Oh dear, I need to get myself sorted and out of your hair. I’d be so embarrassed if Hotaru ever found out I was too tipsy to drive myself home.”

“At least you know your limits,” he said softly. “I’d be a lot better off if I had realized mine long ago.”

Shanta rubbed his knee. “Don’t say that. It’s good to dream.”

“But it’s not good to be delusional, and that’s what I was until recently. It’s now a guarantee that I’ll never be able to go into space.” Kakeru sighed. “After you left I started thinking about more tangible goals like marriage and children. Himeko said she didn’t want either of those things so I dropped it—kind of hard to try convincing a woman in orbit, after all. But now that I’m on the market, so to say, I’m thinking about it again. You know they have apps you can meet people through?”

The woman pulled a disdainful face. “Those things do not work, I assure you. Hotaru joked that I should try one so I did, and it was full of creeps! But maybe it’s different for male users. I don’t think women are as liberal with sending vagina pictures as men are about showing off their penises.” Kakeru released a bout of raucous laughter. “Besides, neither of us are the hookup type. There has to be a connection.”

“Yeah, you’re right…” He finished wiping some tears from his eyes. “But I’m thirty-two and I’ve
only been in one relationship. Is that normal?"

“You were with Himeko for ten years, right?” He nodded. “Then that’s your normal. If you were to suddenly become the Casanova of Seattle I would be very concerned because it doesn’t fit your personality. You’re looking for a long-term relationship with emotional support, not short-term gratification.”

“So I should put that in my dating profile?” Shanta smacked his leg and they laughed together, the sound fading and becoming replaced by rain that drew their focus for a moment. When she turned toward him again Kakeru wore a serene expression. “I forgot how beautiful your eyes are.”

The compliment made her heart flutter. “Oh, thank you.”

“No, thank you for agreeing to meet me tonight. You’re the only person I know here and it was good to see a familiar face.” He paused, looking nervous. “We’re friends, right? You were always there when I needed you and I felt like more than your client toward the end. Unless I’m deluding myself again…”

Shanta set her cup down and embraced him, his hold snug in return. “Of course we’re friends, Kakeru. I’m so proud of you for taking charge of your own happiness. I’ve met a lot of people who fear change– they stay right where they are and slowly drown in misery. It takes real courage to move across an ocean and start a new life in a new country, so you should be proud of yourself as well.”

He withdrew to search her features, finding no trace of insincerity on her visage. She had always been bluntly honest with him even on his bad days. Shanta told Kakeru what he needed to hear, not what he wanted, and he used to get angry at her for it, complaining to Himeko about his heartless psychiatrist. Then he realized she was right about everything so he took her suggestions to heart and found they really worked. They started going to bookstores and seeing movies together, finding they shared the same tastes, and just as Kakeru really got to know her outside of her office she told him she was moving to America to join a practice opened by a colleague.

Now Shanta was here, in his new apartment on his expensive sofa, just as uplifting as he remembered her being. He had been alone for so long that it just felt really good to be with someone. His parents passed away years ago and even while dating Himeko for a decade she was gone so often that he always put his emotional needs on the back burner during her intervals at home. That was the last thread of their relationship that had unraveled; Kakeru gave everything he was capable of and received little in return. He couldn’t even be mad at Himeko because she was pursuing what they both loved. So the break-up had been mutual if bittersweet, and he thought he should have Shanta on speed dial in case his move proved overwhelming. Everything went smoothly and he had settled into his new environment well, but he still felt so very lonely that facing the most dependable person in his life coupled with his alcohol-induced lack of inhibitions prompted him to lean forward to kiss her.

Shanta froze at the totally unexpected contact before she realized that A: Kakeru was kissing her and B: it actually felt quite nice, but C: they were both a bit buzzed still and D: she hadn’t kissed a man in forever and forgot how to respond. She was so focused on her career and being a good mother to Hotaru that the last time she’d been intimate with someone was well over a year ago. But then her brain seemed to get with the program and flooded her with enough endorphins to make her dizzy, then she wound her arms around his neck and pulled him atop her as she lay back. Once in that position it seemed to dawn on Kakeru what was happening and he tore himself away with a gasp.

“Oh god, I’m so sorry. I don’t know what came over me.” The Irish cream infusing him with liquid courage, probably. He regarded her guiltily. “Shanta, I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have. But you’re here
and you’re so beautiful and…” And he wanted her more than anything right now, to be as close as possible to her because he cared for her so much.

“It’s okay, Kakeru.” She wanted him too, every nerve in her body begging for physical contact, knowing without a doubt he wouldn’t hurt her because he was such a gentle soul. Shanta briefly shut her eyes to gather her bearings. “It’s been longer than I care to admit since I did anything like this, so just… go slow.”

He swallowed, nodded, and came back down to her, lips meeting tentatively. They stayed on the couch for an age as Shanta tried to get over feeling like a clueless teenage girl again. Clothes came loose but not off, allowing hands to explore and caress, and she found herself sighing dreamily as his mouth did delightful things across her décolletage. They didn’t exchange any more words but somehow he knew exactly what she wanted, his skill and confidence rather arousing. Soon everything was so hot and wet and aching with need that Kakeru helped her stand so they could migrate to his room, undressing in a flurry and collapsing onto the bed together where he immediately pushed inside her.

Shanta keened with each slow, deep thrust, the rain all but drowning her out. He felt so good and right that she had to ask herself why the hell she hadn’t had sex in so long. ‘Maybe I was waiting for this… for Kakeru.’ Maybe him following her example by moving to Seattle and reconnecting in person was some form of Destiny. Entertaining that notion made the sensation of being joined with him infinitely more pleasurable, and it didn’t take long before she saw stars, Kakeru tumbling into ecstasy right after. They lay panting and sweaty and tangled together until the giddiness subsided, then he carefully withdrew and kissed her once more.

“Was that okay?” he wondered.

“Yes…” Shanta breathed, smiling like an idiot. “Yes, that was more than okay. You feel wonderful.” He blushed in the dim lighting, and now that they were separated she was able to get a good look at him. Kakeru had been thin as a rail when the first met, a side effect of being sick and not eating all that much, but now his slender frame appeared much sturdier, lithe muscles lending him some enticing lines for her fingers to trace. His deep brown eyes closed to savor her touch, then they met her violet irises. They shared the same unspoken question:

“Now what?”

The spring break excursion had come to an end. Saoirse carried her ten passengers back to Washington beneath perfectly blue sunny skies, allowing Makoto, Mina, and Usagi to work on their tans. Joe sat on the deck with them, zoning out as he continually cast and reeled in a fishing line with a thawed prawn as bait. “Any bites?” Usagi would ask from time to time, to which the answer was always a head shake and a dejected sigh. The catamaran was probably moving too fast since a strong wind pushed it toward the California coast. Once the sun began to sink the girls packed up their things and headed inside. Joe overheard Makoto and Nicholas discussing what they should make for dinner, and as if the universe planned it his reel suddenly spun with a catch.

Joe lurched to his feet to get a handle on it, but whatever wanted the prawn was much stronger than the tuna or snapper he’d anticipated. “Whoa!” he shouted when it jumped out of the water, zigzagging to the other pontoon. He had a striped marlin on the hook, a medium-sized one that would make a good meal. Fighting the thing summoned everyone but Zach, Ami, and Kaelan who were on the other side, but the enthusiasm of his friends helped him wrangle the fish until they were all screaming in his ears and practically pushing him overboard. A minute more and they had moved a safe distance away as it flopped on deck, Joe holding it down to prevent it from wriggling off. Finally the marlin stopped moving and he wiped his brow. “Whew, that was a tough little guy. Hand
me my knife, Mamoru.” A few of the girls grimaced while he sliced off the head.

“We’re going to eat that?” Mina asked, wrinkling her nose.

“Hell yes we are!” Makoto exclaimed. “If you cut it into steaks Nikko can grill them while I whip up some wild rice and tropical fruit salsa.” A collective murmur of approval arose. “Great! I’ll get started right now!” After divvying up the meat into ample servings Nicholas coated them with olive oil, salt and pepper and cooked them to perfection. Lemon was the only garnish required and Zach fell over with a hand over his heart at the first bite.

“The two of you,” he said upon righting himself, “need to open a restaurant. I will be your sugar daddy and pay for everything. My only stipulation is that this exact dish be on the menu.” The brunette couple laughed it off despite looking quite pleased with themselves.

Joe caught a few more fruits of the sea during their voyage, including some salmon once they sailed past the mouth of the Columbia River and crab off Cape Flattery. It was about two in the morning when they rounded the northernmost tip of Washington. Kaelan, Ami, and Zach were the only three awake, too excited about making the home stretch to sleep. Since the temperature had dropped Ami had a blanket over her shoulders and a mug of hot cocoa in hand, Zach sitting beside her on deck with some wine he’d bought in San Francisco. “Mmm, not bad. You should try this, Ami. It’s an aged riesling so it’s nice and sweet.”

“I don’t know the first thing about wine,” she said, but accepted the glass anyway and sniffed it before taking a tentative sip. Zach waited several moments for her verdict. “It’s good.”

“It would’ve gone great with that marlin.” He sighed longingly. “I would legitimately want that for my last meal if I were about to die.”

It was a rather morbid thing to say but Ami had grown used to his hyperboles by now. “Are you ready to finish spring quarter?”

He groaned. “Don’t remind me about school when we’re still on the water! I was having such a good time pretending I was rich and grown-up and never had to go to classes again.” She laughed as he twisted the stem between his fingers. “Honestly I’m surprised my parents haven’t cut me off yet. I thought for sure they’d put a hold on my credit card, especially after that charge to the tattoo parlor.”

“Maybe they deduced why you were there?”

Zach stared at his swirling wine. “Doubtful. They had to have forgotten I even had that shitty tattoo. Like I said in Honolulu, I got really good at hiding it.” He rubbed his lower back. “But it’s gone now, so that’s a load off my mind. Just like wiping the slate clean.”

“But you had fun otherwise, right? Hiking, sailing, surfing less—” Zach glanced up in confusion as Ami’s voice abruptly cut off, and then he leapt from his chair upon seeing a green-skinned creature pulling her overboard, one webbed hand on her mouth to smother a scream. Her eyes were wide with shock and terror, and Zach dove in after her without even thinking about it.

The water was cold and dark, her pale fingers escaping his grasp as she was dragged into the abyss. Zach ran out of breath and returned to the surface where the catamaran had stopped a ways away. “What the hell happened?!” Kaelan shouted.

“Something took Ami!” At that he jumped from the cockpit and ran across the surface to where Zach trod water, hauling him up. “We have to get her back!”

“Well, obviously. Let me lend you a hand– I’ll make you an oxygen bubble.”
As soon as the shimmering sphere enveloped his head Zach swam straight down into pitch-black nothingness. He couldn’t see or hear anything but he felt the iron in Ami’s blood racing somewhere far below, so he kept kicking his feet while trying to formulate some sort of plan. Clearly whatever had grabbed her was malicious so he needed a weapon, only he wasn’t a Boy Scout like Joe and didn’t carry a plethora of blades. Zach exerted his elemental influence instead, feeling a variety of scrap parts on the seafloor. He summoned the lightest one, a long section of rusty chain. ‘Better than nothing,’ he thought, swimming ever downward. If only he had the ability to generate light, too.

As if in response to his wish a faint blue glow appeared, though it brought dread instead of reassurance because it was immediately followed by a swell of intense energy, the same type that emanated from Usagi, Makoto, and now Minako. Ami’s newly-awakened celestial power manifested as a huge ice bloom. Zach halted and twisted in place to avoid being impaled by a sharp spike, catching sight of her reflection refracted in the crystalline facets; she was cocooned in the middle, frozen still. Thanks to the glowing mass he also discerned who had pulled her overboard.

The creature had a feminine form and was green-skinned as he initially observed with webbed fingers and toes. She had long black hair and her countenance resembled that of a shark, solid black eyes and a protruding jaw full of razor-sharp teeth. As she gnawed on an icicle in an attempt to break through to the center Zach reformed the chain into a harpoon and swam around to the other side, tapping on the ice to see if he could rouse Ami. The shark woman made a beeline for him, zipping effortlessly through the frigid water and attempting to take a bite out of his shoulder. Luckily Zach snagged her tattered clothes and diverted the attack, but he was much slower, too slow to fight her off for long.

After a few more thwarted strikes the creature stopped to regard him narrowly. “Stay out of this fight, Terran. Who is this callous wench to you?”

Zach was surprised she had the ability to speak and even more astounded that he heard her perfectly well. “She’s the love of my life,” he answered, “and I’ll be damned if I let you harm her.”

“Bold words for a land-dweller,” she sneered. “You may as well leave Pronoia to me since she will never reciprocate your feelings.”

If she knew the name of Ami’s previous incarnation that meant she had to be a minion of Tartarus and a Dark Cloud member. “Who are you?” Zach queried.

She placed a hand on her chest almost daintily. “My name is Sedna. I was once a handmaiden of Pronoia.” He gaped in disbelief. “We were also friends, or so I thought. I sought her aid in fending off the amorous advances of a Uranian Sky Knight but she subverted my efforts and helped our rulers arrange a union instead. When I managed to escape to Mercury Pronoia chastised me for fleeing my husband and dishonoring the union between our planets. She did not care that the knight took me against my will. Rather than go back to him I cut off my finger with our union band and threw myself into the Sea of Tir.”

“Where you turned into… this?” Zach gestured.

“I did not drown for some reason, I simply lay there at the bottom of the sea until Eris found me. I had been unaware of the passage of time. I did not know that Hyperion took over the Inner Alliance or that Jupiter had put a halt to Luna’s ambitions single-handedly. I did not know the remnants of humanity had gathered on Terra to start anew or that Tartarus invaded Mar Serenitatis to steal Helios after all the wars. Eris informed me that Pronoia had been born again and if I wanted revenge I need only wait for her here, and so I have until now.” Her eyes narrowed to slits. “I see you can use mana like us. What are you called?”
“Lord Komoku, but I used to be a man named Zois.”

“The royal Terran artificer. I had heard of you in our old life.” She drifted nearer. “Pronoia is too heartless to ever love anyone in return, so I suggest you go back to the surface and leave her to me. Move aside.”

His grip on the harpoon tightened. “I can’t do that. I’m sorry for what happened to you but your beef is with someone who no longer exists.”

“Her spirit is exactly the same,” Sedna refuted, tensing in preparation for an attack. “Pronoia’s aura indicates she is the only Mercurian among billions of Terrans. Move aside, you foolish male.” When Zach didn’t budge she snarled and surged forward. He barely raised his weapon in time, her terrible teeth clamping down on the shaft instead of his neck, but she was a lot stronger than him and ripped it from his hands. Zach called it back and nearly succeeded in spearing her, nicking an arm instead. The scent of blood blew her eyes wide open; within seconds Sedna had him trapped between two icicles, his thin piece of rusted iron the only thing preventing her from tearing him to pieces.

Without warning the ice trembled, the combatants pausing for the brief moment it took Ami to burst forth in an ensemble that made Zach’s jaw drop. Her pale blue dress seemed to flow of its own accord, her head was adorned with a finned circlet, and she wore delicate crystalline armor that was definitely more ornamental than functional, or so it appeared. Sedna chomped on her bracer-covered arm, a harsh screech ringing out as she tried and failed to bite through it. Then she darted away to avoid an icy missile from Ami’s free hand, glaring before she tried attacking from a different angle.

Although Sedna was incredibly agile Ami didn’t allow her to get close enough to land a hit, generating spike after spike to keep her at bay. ‘She’s relentless… I have to help put an end to her,’ Zach thought. He dredged up more chains and waited for an opportunity to ensnare Sedna, draping her in them after she was rebuked yet again. She could do nothing but struggle in place, simmering with rage as Ami eyed her pityingly.

“Sedna, I’m sorry things had to turn out this way. I know that if I don’t kill you now you’ll just keep hunting me, but there is too much at stake to let you enact your well-deserved revenge.”

“Your apology means nothing!” she spat. “You betrayed me both as your friend and a Mercurian. I am glad our kingdom fell to Luna and was then abandoned. Better that than to have let you become queen. You care for no one but yourself, Pronoia.”

Ami shook her head a couple times. “I had to let you become this being, Sedna. Everything has unfolded as I saw it in the Eye. I had to let you suffer, I had to let Eris recruit you, and I had to let myself die in order to awaken in this era. It was all for this moment, all so that I would gain the power to help save Alectrona.” A look of utter betrayal crossed Sedna’s countenance. Zach almost felt bad for her; she was nothing but a pawn in the grand scheme of things. “You have suffered enough, though. I’ll grant you a peaceful death.” Ami placed her hand on Sedna’s chest. Zach cringed as he watched her die in the same manner Zois and Pronoia had in Elysium, ice blossoming in her heart and spreading throughout her veins. She stopped thrashing, limp as a puppet without any strings. He willed the chains off and she sunk into the darkness.

They stared at one another for a long moment. Aside from the clothes Ami’s eyes had also changed, vivid sapphire as opposed to brown. She was looking at him with Pronoia’s eyes, rousing memories of their shared scheming since Zois had been her sole confidant in the end. “We should get back to going home,” Zach said, and they drifted upward, rising from the depths to stand on a thin sheet of ice.

They found Kaelan pacing on the surface. “You’re okay, thank god,” he breathed in relief. “What
happened down there?"

“A Dark Cloud member named Sedna wanted to kill Ami,” Zach explained, very aware that he was soaked, shivering, and almost too fatigued to move. “But we got her. I guess she’s in a better place now.” Back on the bottom of the sea where the world would continue to change around her, forgetting she ever existed at all.

The three of them returned to Saoirse and resumed sailing through the Strait of Juan de Fuca into Puget Sound. After taking turns showering Zach and Ami sat on their sofa bed drinking tea, the tension palpable. There were many things the boy wanted to say to her, to ask, but he couldn’t keep one in mind long enough to vocalize it. “I’m a terrible person,” Ami finally said in a small voice. “As soon as I saw Sedna I remembered who she was and why she came to Pronoia begging to annul her union. Her husband raped her, Zach. He was raping her and Sedna thought she could escape him by coming back to Mariner Castle, her home, and I turned my back on her. I let Sedna drown in her misery and become that creature.” Her eyes instantly filled with tears. “Did you see the way she looked at me when I told her I knew? She was my friend… how could I have condoned a union with that knight when I knew what he was going to do to her? I saw it in the artifact and I let it happen anyway. I’m the monster who needs to be vanquished.”

“You’re not a bad person, Ami,” Zach returned. “In fact, I’d describe you as kind and compassionate. You gave me a chance to become your friend even though I introduced myself by aggressively trying to get in your pants.”

She didn’t miss a beat. “That was all an act, though.”

“Well, still. You took a chance on me and gave me an opportunity I didn’t really deserve. You’re the sweetest girl I’ve ever met.”

Now she was actively crying. “But I killed you too, Zach! We could have lived and changed the ending of the Silver Era! We could have stopped Hyperion, prevented the wars, and dealt with Tartarus since I saw their machinations in the Eye of the Universe! Instead I gave up and did nothing, taking you with me. Because I let Selene die, everybody died. All of us on this boat died because of me.”

“But then none of us would be here, Ami. We wouldn’t have lived these lives. I never would have met you and become the man I am right this second, someone I can live with despite all the self-destructive and idiotic decisions I’ve made. I had to reflect on them in order to grow, to want to change for the better… I never would have done that without you, Ami Mizuno.” Zach embraced her tightly as she sniffled. “Sedna was wrong to compare you to Pronoia. She only knew you back then but I know you now, and you’re nothing like her.”

She drew in a shuddering breath. “But I must be because I can still see the cold, infallible logic in what I did. What I said in the water… it’s true. I let so many people agonize just so I would awaken to my celestial powers tonight. I can’t think of anything more heartless or selfish than that.”

Zach made a sound of consternation. “It was the right path to follow, Ami. If you hadn’t let the events seen in the Eye unfold humanity would be in a much worse state than it is now. Because we were all reborn and found each other, we can put up a truly united front against Eris and her regime. She wants to steal the Sun and condemn everyone on this planet to darkness and death. That makes her the selfish one in my book.”

“I know you’re right about everything, Zach, but… I can’t stop hating that part of myself, the one who has no qualms about sacrificing others to achieve a so-called greater good. When I think about all the suffering in the world right now—”
He leaned back to eye her sternly. “Ami, no. You can’t do that. The world’s problems are not your doing, not in the least. You’ll go fucking crazy or get depressed if you start putting things you have no control over on your shoulders, so don’t you dare try to take responsibility for any of it.”

Ami swiped at her watery eyes. “But we can’t just do nothing, Zach. We all have these amazing abilities and the power to change things. I know we can make the world a better place.”

“We will, but it’s not gonna happen overnight.” He hugged her again, burying his nose in her hair. She still smelled like magnolia. “Besides… in order for there to be a world to improve we have to make sure there’s still a sun to support life on it. So we need to get rid of Eris and her minions, then we’ll see about changing the future of mankind. How’s that for a plan?”

“It makes sense,” she muttered, sighing. “I guess I’m just overwhelmed by my awakening. Now I have all these memories floating to the surface of my mind and I can’t tell if they’re mine or Pronoia’s.”

“ Took me a few days to sort them out, too. I now have knowledge of metalworking, machining, and physics but it’s still muddled. If I focus really hard I can create something beautiful, but most of the time it’s crude and you know I’m all about aesthetics.” She laughed a little which was what he’d been trying to accomplish. After they settled into bed Zach blew out a breath. “You did the right thing back there, stopping her. Sedna was trying to eat us.”

Having her actions validated did little to assuage her inner turmoil. Ami saw Sedna in her dreams that night, a shy girl who had started out as a handmaiden but quickly became one of Pronoia’s closest friends. They grew up together, sharing their secrets, fears, and dreams. Sedna was one of the only people Pronoia discussed her visions with, but when she began seeing the events of her current path unfold she grew distant, isolating herself from everyone except the other princesses of the Inner Alliance and Artificer Zois. Even her own parents had no idea what would occur in Elysium, what she had to allow to happen in order to be reborn in the 20th century of the Bronze Era.

Becoming aware of her celestial powers was the last thing she had seen in the Eye. Neither Ami nor Pronoia were certain if the Dark Cloud would be defeated and Alectrona would be saved. Any of the guardians could die even though the odds seemed to be in their favor at this point since Rei was the only one left to awaken, and they also had the Shitennou on their side. Still, the ends didn’t exactly justify the means for Ami even though Pronoia assured her over and over again that what had happened to Sedna was necessary. It was exceedingly difficult to come to terms with the fact that she was the cause of someone’s suffering. Ami never thought herself capable of harming anyone; she was going to become a doctor for god’s sake.

Resuming her studies wasn’t exactly on the forefront of her mind, but luckily she had Mina and Zach to help get her back into the swing of things. That only lasted a couple weeks until the latter asked her to dinner out of the blue, to Canlis of all places. Ami borrowed a designer dress from Mina and permitted her to do her makeup. Afterward she paced anxiously in front of the dorm building, knotting her fingers and glancing up sharply when the silver BMW flashed in her periphery. Zach got out and she couldn’t help but notice how handsome he looked in a suit, like a modern prince. They met on the sidewalk where he smiled at her, wearing an expression she readily described as reverence. “You look really beautiful, Ami,” Zach remarked. “Shall we?”

She looped her arm through his. “Thank you, but you still haven’t told me the reason for this outing.”

“Do I need a reason to treat my best lady friend to a nice dinner?” Ami pursed her lips. That answer wasn’t enough to placate her, and even Zach’s tone belied an underlying motive. They made idle chit-chat during the drive to the restaurant and got situated at their reserved table before Ami propped up her chin in one hand to stare the boy down. He looked up with a sigh. “Okay, you got me. I have
something important to tell you but I want to wait until after our meal.” That was agreeable. Zach went ahead and sprung for the multi-course tasting menu in addition to wine for himself, which Ami sampled despite being underage. It was the most decadent food she had tasted in years, and the atmosphere as a whole was just very Zach; he belonged in places like this where he could show off his wealth. Ami wondered if she put a damper on his image. Did other people see a haute young couple or did she look like a little girl playing dress-up? Why was she concerned with fitting into the same places as him, anyway?

“Atmi…” Zach said, claiming her full attention. He eyed his near-empty wine glass, swirling the liquid rather than meeting her gaze. His own contained a hint of… sadness? “Atmi, I’m dropping out.”

“What?” She knew perfectly well what he meant, she just hadn’t been expecting him to say anything of the sort.

“I’m quitting school.”

“Why?”

He took a deep breath. “Because my future isn’t in theater, and…” He paused, glancing around before leaning forward. “And I have powers, Atmi. Unnatural, elemental superpowers. I would be so much more useful to everyone if I trained them.” She only blinked at him. “Right after The Last Heart premiered I applied to this smithing apprenticeship in Hungary and the master accepted me over Spring Break, so I’m leaving for Budapest tomorrow.”

“T-tomorrow?” Ami repeated in shock. “But that’s… that’s…”

“Sudden? I know, and I’m sorry. But I saw that you were struggling to get back into your groove because of your awakening, and I wanted to make sure you’d be all right before I left.” Zach reached across the table to take hold of her hand. “You’re okay now, right?”

No, she was not okay. She had murdered someone not two weeks ago, she had the memories of another person intermingling with her own, she couldn’t sleep soundly through the night due to dreaming about the Silver Era, and now one of her best friends was moving to another continent! But that wasn’t what Zach needed to hear. She had to be supportive of his decision because that’s what friends did. He was being selfless by choosing to hone his celestial talents in order to bolster the other Shitennou and the planetary guardians. Ami needed him for an emotional outlet since he was the only other person who knew about Sedna, but she managed to do what she’d done after her father left and bottled up those emotions to appear strong. “Yes, I’m okay,” she answered, “and I think this will be a good opportunity for you.”

Zach raised an eyebrow. “Really? Of all people I expected you to vehemently protest me dropping out to jet off to Europe.”

She summoned a wry smile. “Has anyone ever been able to stop you from doing what you want, though?”

“No.” They shared a laugh although Ami’s was distinctly lacking mirth. “So you’re not disappointed in me?” Zach pressed.

“Of course not.” She squeezed his hand as reassurance. “If there were some kind of cryomancer I could train with I’m sure I would do the same.” And if there was a way to go back in time and prevent herself from awakening, she probably would have done that, too. But deep down she knew there was no way to escape Fate.
Zach paid the exorbitant bill and returned Ami to Hansee Hall. He got out to escort her to the main door, and just as she reached for the handle it occurred to her that she wouldn’t see Zach tomorrow, or next week, or during summer quarter. She paused to face him. “How long is your apprenticeship?”

“It’s normally two years, but since I have a magical advantage…” He shrugged, offering his signature smile-smirk. “I’m sure I can cut that time in half at least.”

So she wasn’t going to see him for an entire year. Tears arose but didn’t fall; Ami suddenly felt incredibly lonely even though Zach stood right behind her. She could sense his presence, his aura overflowing with creative energy, and the knowledge that it was going to disappear after she went inside made her want to stay frozen in this moment. No more posing for his drawings, no more listening to him bounce story ideas off her, no more discussions about classic literature, no more critiquing pretentious films, no more study sessions in the library… Zach was leaving and not coming back to UW, but Ami had at least eight more years of medical training to undergo. She threw her arms around him, pressing her flushed cheek to his tie and staining the silk with a single tear. “I’ll miss you, Zach,” she whispered.

“Tears miss you too, Ami.” He hugged her back tightly as the temperature of the immediate atmosphere dropped in response to her emotions. It hurt like hell to leave Seattle, the city that had welcomed him with open arms and been his home for almost three years. He didn’t actually know if trading his life goal for an entirely different one was the right path to follow; it was more like a gut feeling that going to Hungary was something he had to do in order to help his friends in the future. And Zach certainly didn’t like leaving Ami, but he couldn’t really say anything about it because he was nothing more than her gay best friend, not some boy who had fallen hopelessly in love with her. He decided right then and there that he’d come clean when he returned.

They parted, Zach tossing a wave over his shoulder as Ami stood on the stoop with her arms wrapped around herself. He flashed one more smile before backing out of the parking space, and only after the car had vanished from view did she allow her tears to fall unabated, raindrops descending from the clouds to mask them.

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