

Return of Astera

A Sailor Moon Fanfiction

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Notes

Chapter I: Introductions and Revelations

The long tendrils of clouds turned a hazy pink as the sun kissed the horizon. At the same time, a small tired hand ran across a furrowed brow. Ami Mizuno had just finished preparing herself for the marine biology mid-term exam. Now, she was contemplating going for a walk in the gardens to let her overworked mind settle before she ate supper. It was still early - only five o'clock - but she had gotten accustomed to eating earlier because rigorous study sessions she had been keeping recently. Feeling as though she reserved this break, Ami decided it was still light enough to go out. As she was picking up her jacket, the telephone rang.

She lifted the receiver with one hand while the other came through the jacket sleeve, "Hello?" It was Usagi Tsukino.

"Ami!" Usagi's brilliantly excited voice pierced through the phone. Ami smiled as she pulled the phone away from her head and turned the volume down. She caught the end of the next explosion as she returned the phone to her ear: "So we are all going out for ice cream," Usagi continued. "Would you like to join us?"



"That sounds great," Ami replied honestly. "I was just going out for a walk anyway. Only, I still have some homework to do..." She guiltily looked over at the scattered and untouched physics notes spread in a wide array on her bed.

"Oh, Ami!" Usagi cried, "It's Saturday! You can study tomorrow! Plus, you know you'll ace anything!"

"Well, I suppose," Ami agreed, "but not to late, all right?"

"Deal!" Usagi agreed. She added that Ami should bring some extra money in case they decided to go somewhere else after. Ami grabbed a few dollars off her dresser and scrawled a quick note for her mom to let her know the plans for the evening in case she

arrived in Ami's absence. Placing her keys in her pocket, she headed out to greet her friends.

It was chilly outside; Ami wrapped her collar up around her neck so that it met the end of her hair and covered her neck. She figured it would only get colder as the sun set. "I wonder if mom will make it home before I do?" she thought as her mind wandered with her steps down the sidewalk. Her mother, a doctor, had been very busy lately with all the work at the hospital with all the new patients. There was some new strand of flu going around and people were falling ill all over town. The media was having a field day with it. Ami recalled her mother's apathetic words after watching a late night news segment titled 'Epidemic Sweeps Tokyo.'

"It's not an epidemic," she had sighed, "this happens every winter." But it still worried Ami; she hated being sick. Even though her mother was a doctor, she had always felt that way: cautious around those that were ill and fearful of disease. To challenge that fear, she'd set her heart on becoming a doctor in order to help others overcome those challenges. Her mind drifted through those private thoughts as she walked toward the parlor.

When she got to Frosties everyone was already there: the bubbly blonde Minako Aino, the tall and tough Makoto Kino, the mysterious and beautiful Rei Hino, and of course, the ever impatient – very hungry – Usagi. All of them plus the two cats, Artemis and Luna, huddled up in one of the corner tables looking over the menus. "Hey Ami-chan, took you long enough," Makoto said playfully as she scooted closer to Minako to make room on the bench.

"Yeah, we were waiting for you to order and Usagi was going crazy with choco-holic anticipation," Rei teased. "She just can't wait to shove more food down her throat!" All the girls laughed except for Usagi who snubbed her nose at Rei and stuck her tongue out. Thankfully, before she could start another war, the waiter was there to take their order.

"Hello girls, welcome to Frosties! What would you like this evening?" His nametag was missing but he was adorable from head to toe, even in that silly pinstripe uniform with bright buttons all over it. He had deep brown eyes, almost black, and his hair was auburn, a soft color that was not quite red but not quite brown. All the girls gawked open mouth and wide eyed, except for oblivious little Ami who was far too busy looking at the menu Minako had just handed to her.



"He totally looks like my old crush!" Makoto whispered to Usagi who giggled. The waiter smiled uneasily under their ogling eyes, and was thankful when the cerulean haired girl finally spoke up. "Hmmm...I think I'll have a..." Glancing up, Ami's eyes widened and she momentarily seemed to choked on her words. She turned ghostly pale and blinked

a few times. "Derek?" she finally sputtered out in astonishment.

"Derek?" All the girls said at once.

"Ami," Usagi asked curiously, "is that a new flavor?"

The waiter smiled, "That is not really you Ami-chan, is it? Wow! I mean, hi! Geese, I was really hoping to -"



But Ami was not saying anything now. She did not even move. Her face seemed to grow a little paler and actually, to Luna, Ami looked as though she were about to throw up. Feeling suddenly dizzy with an overwhelming amount of shock, she almost slipped off the chair.

"Are you okay Ami-chan?" Usagi was really hoping Ami would not be suddenly sick. If she were, the other girls would definitely want to take her home and forget about having ice cream. Besides, Usagi thought, why would such a hunk make her stomach turn?

"I'm fine." Ami said as she blankly stared at the boy in front of her. He looked at her with concern and was just about to say something else, when all of a sudden tears began to well in Ami's eyes. She unexpectedly jumped up and strode off in a daze toward the bathrooms at the back of the shop.

"Um, I'll... go talk to her," Minako whispered as she got up and followed after the shaken girl.

After a moment of silence and utter confusion for most involved, Usagi sputtered, "Well, this is odd."

"Maybe I should explain," All the girls turned to the waiter. "My name is Derek Sullivan and Ami-chan and I were friends when we were much younger, only we'd lost touch." He looked at the sets of eyes gazing at him in various states of disbelief.

The raven-haired girl spoke up, "That's why she ran away from you like a plague?" Rei was suddenly very suspicious of this boy and his story. Her eyes narrowed. Minako found Ami watery eyed and sitting on the floor in the girl's bathroom staring at the wall, clinging to a balled up piece of toilet paper.

"Ami, who is he?" She was really worried; Ami did not usually act like this. She always was the calm and



collected one of the group, always knew how to manage. "I'm in shock." Ami said matter-of-factly, she was troubled. "After all this time..." she thought to herself. "...after I had finally accepted that he... that Derek was..."

"Come on Ami-chan, you can trust me. Is he an ex-boyfriend?" She playfully joked, trying to lighten the mood of the downcast girl.

"No, Minako, it not like that," Ami half laughed. "It was a long time ago," she started in between softening sobs, "we used to live near-by one another. His family had moved from America a year after his birth, and his mother and my mother became instant friends in the neighborhood since both families were new to the area."

Minako listened intently as Ami told her about her childhood playmate. Derek had been her best friend and they had spent almost every day in the light of each other's company, growing up together. Every summer Ami and her family would go on vacation for a month and she would miss him terribly because there would be no one to play with. But he was always there on her front porch the day she returned, waiting for her to play once more.

"It was all so childish and fun," she smiled, "Except that last summer, the summer before I moved after my father left us." She looked up at Minako with a straight face, "He wasn't at my porch when I got home that time. In fact," she sighed, "he was never at my porch again. While we had been away, my mother told me, he had gotten very sick and it hadn't gone away," She recollected her imagined images of Derek in the hospital all tied to machines and tubes. She fought back another wave of tears. "His parents had taken him to the hospital and they had discovered a malignant tumor attached to his heart," she choked on the words.



She began to cry: "They had to go to back to America because the medicine and technology was more advanced there and I never saw him again. He wrote, once. The next thing I heard was that the chemotherapy and other treatments had not worked and he had died. We were only eleven at the time! All this time, after I've grown up to accept the loss of my first dear friend..." she trailed off, thinking of Derek, standing in the parlor after her storming off like she had. What a mess.

Minako put her arm around her friend and Ami quietly wept into her sleeve. "It's like he's back from the dead," she managed to say.

Minako sat with her and talked to her quietly. After Ami had collected herself and calmed down a bit they went back out to their table. Not wanting to upset Ami more, Derek had excused himself and to Usagi's disappointment everyone decided there had been enough excitement for the night after Minako's explanation. Rei

had to go back to the temple and Makoto and Usagi were going back to Usagi's house to spend the night. Minako offered to walk Ami home.

"Thanks Minako," she said in her mousy voice with a weak smile. She glanced over her shoulder as she left the shop; the silhouetted figure of a boy was clear in the doorway facing the road and she watched his figure until she could not see him anymore. She desperately wanted to talk to him again.

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Days passed and Ami got over the initial shock of finding her best friend was alive and well. They got together one afternoon and walked to the rose gardens. It was Derek's favorite place to walk and Ami's as well. She had been pleased to find out the corporate plans to build a tower here had been thwarted by protestors and environmentalists, so they had used that news as an excuse to celebrate.

"I'm so sorry Ami," Derek said after a long silence that came up while discussing the picketing. "I didn't know that you thought..."

"It's okay, really. I mean, how could you have known, right?" She glanced at him, he had become amazingly handsome in his supplementary years, but she couldn't look at him long because it was still sort of like looking at a ghost. Her eyes wandered to the pavement and she began to count her steps robotically.

"I just feel terrible thinking about how you must have felt," he said, "I stopped writing because of all the treatments. Your letters came but I was extremely weak and my parents didn't want to trouble me by letting me read them, so they kept the in a draw for me to read when I was well again." He looked at the ground as they walked. "I thought you had forgotten me."

Ami gazed at the sky above and she felt fresh tears welling. "I could never forget about you, Derek," she whispered. Later when he had gone into remission, Derek explained that he had read the letters and even replied. But it was to no avail, since Ami's family had moved at least three times since he had left. He had meant to tell her he was coming back to Tokyo. Reminiscing, they walked to the center of the garden and sat on one of the benches. The crisp, cool air had been there for weeks but there had been no sign of any flurries to come.

"Snow." Ami thought back to their childhood. In her mind, her reminiscing continued as she kept her attention on her feet, "We used to have so much fun in the snow, making tunnels and having snowball fights. I wish it would snow again; it's so rare here..."

"You know Ami," Derek's voice caused her to jump out of her memory and look up, "wouldn't it be nice if it snowed?" Her eye widened at his suggestion and then she giggled; he always managed to do that somehow.



"What's so funny?" He asked smiling.

Her giggle turned into a mild uproar as she grasped his arm tighter. Other than the other girls, she had never felt as at home as she did with Derek.

"What?" He asked again laughing with her. But all she could do was continue laugh at the perfect feeling of it all as they walked arm and arm.

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Ami and Derek had been spending a lot of time together since they had been reunited. Derek's family had decided to come back to Tokyo after he had been in remission for three years and he had wondered a lot about Ami on his flight over. He had only been eleven when he last saw her but how could he forget those captivating sapphire eyes and that silly, playful grin. He also recalled how serious she could be. He wondered if she would still even be in the area with all that talent.

He got the job at the ice cream place in hopes of running into anyone familiar; he was so scared when he found Ami that night. He was worried she would hate him for leaving, but thankfully, she didn't. Not in the slightest.

Usagi was discussing the subject with Minako over tea a month later. Luna was asleep on the carpet and Artemis was sitting on the table pawing at the end of a placemat in boredom. "Well, I think he has the thing for her," Usagi stated.

"Oh Usagi, you think everyone has a 'thing' for anyone they look at." Minako was right, Usagi loved to play Cupid. Though quite often she ended up just causing a whole lot of trouble where none should have existed. "Yeah, Usagi," Artemis' peanut gallery comment began.

But he was interrupted by a dreamy Usagi: "But can't you tell by the way he stares into her eyes? I'm telling you, he's dying for her!" She paused, and then cracked up laughing, "Ah! He he he! HA! Get it? *Dying* for her!"

Artemis did not laugh. Minako rolled her eyes but broke a smile. Luna lifted her head at the terrible crack and gave Minako an 'is-she-for-serious' look.

Minako broke into a sigh. "But seriously," Usagi plowed on, "have you spent any time with Ami lately? No. And neither and I nor any of the other girls have either. Know why?"

Minako did not even bother with an answer to this one-sided conversation; she was finding this display of love knowledge quite humorous after all. Artemis was about to reply with something witty but was once again interrupted.

"It's because she's always with Derek! See?" She got another idea. "Maybe they are destined for each other like Mamoru and I! How romantic?" Her eyes got hearts in them and she puckered her lips like a kissing fish. The sight was more than enough for Luna, who finally decided her afternoon nap had been ruined.



Minako stirred her tea and giggled at the thought of Ami having a real boyfriend. "I don't know Usagi," she said, "but if not, then he better watch out cause I know a few girls around here that wouldn't mind getting under that cute little pinstripe Frostie's uniform." She was being flirtatiously playful of course. Her interest was perfectly content in her unspoken crush on Motoki, the arcade guy.

"Not me!" Usagi informed her matter-of-factly, "I have my guy!"

"When is Mamoru getting home anyway?" Minako recalled that he had left a week and a half ago to visit a friend who lived in Kyoto. Luna sat up and stretched kitty-style, half listening to the conversation above her.

"I'm not sure," Usagi said despairingly, "he hasn't called." As if on cue, the phone rang. Usagi leapt up and got it before it completed the first ring. It was not Mamoru.

"Usagi, is Minako there?" It was Rei.

"Yeah she is, why what's up?" Usagi noted the twinge of apprehension in Rei's voice.

"Something strange is going on. I think you guys should get down her right away. Makoto is already here and Ami's on her way." "Gotcha," Usagi said and hung up the phone. "Let's go. Rei's got something."

"What now?" Minako groaned, downing the rest of her tea and grabbing her mittens. Luna jumped onto the table, "Looks like I woke up just in time for the fun." She followed the girls out the door. The five girls and two cats gathered at Rei's temple on the stairs faces stern and ready for business. Artemis asked Rei what she had been looking into.

"Well, I was doing some chores around the temple when I glanced out the window and saw a blonde girl sitting alone out here on the stairs." Rei went on, "She was all by herself so I was a little concerned she was lost or something. You know how people just end up here sometimes," she rambled. "Well, anyway. I went outside to see if she needed some help." Her eyes widened as she told her tale. "But when I got there all I found was this." She held up a piece of stationary paper folded in half.

"Well, what does it say?" asked Makoto.

Rei unfolded it and cleared her throat, "Sailor Mars," she began, followed by a collective

gasp of shock. "She knows who you are!" Usagi practically yelled, "What are we going to do now? Who is this girl? What does she want?"



"Will you let me finish?" Rei yelled, steaming at the irritating blonde. "Anyway," she continued, "Sailor Mars, yes I know your identity - I know who you and all of your friends are. I want you all to know that I am coming. You and your little White Moon friends can't stop my forces and I from getting the vengeance we yearn for. If you try to defy us, we will destroy you. I will destroy you." Rei stopped.

"That's it?" asked Artemis.

"No signature?" asked Luna.

"That's the weirdest part." Rei said incredulously, "It's signed, Sailor Astera."

"Sailor?!" Minako, Luna and Usagi all gasped at once. Makoto leaned in over Rei's shoulder to read the paper for herself.

"Astera?" Ami repeated, "That's definitely not the name of any planet I know of."

Rei's brow furrowed in annoyance and Usagi ripped the note from her hand, dying to read the words for her own. "Me neither," said Artemis. "Not in this system."

"Well, looks like I'll have to do some research," Ami said, "it sounds familiar to me but I don't know where I've heard it."

"Could it be more people from The Dark Moon?" Makoto asked.

"I doubt it," Minako replied, "The Nemesis was destroyed."

They began to discuss the various enemies they had encountered but Luna noted they had never come across another sailor senshi. A new enemy presenting themselves in such an odd manner, and with what seemed like an uncommon amount of knowledge, was certainly reason for caution.

Nevertheless, conversation soon fell off topic and it got near lunchtime. Soon the girls left and Rei sat in front of the temple for a while contemplating the idea of a new sailor senshi: "Well, she's obviously not very friendly..." Rei thought as she reread the note. "I still say think she's just an impostor." They had discussed that too. There had been

other cases of villains appearing as sailor senshi, even once as Sailor Moon herself. Rei wanted to take some kind of action to help understand this situation more, but what could she do when she did not know her enemy? She walked back into the temple and sat in front of the fire searching for answers.

"After all," she said aloud to herself, "what kind of a planet name is Astera anyway?"

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A slender female figure in a sailor senshi outfit sat perched in a tree near the temple, her long black hair falling along beside her. Her outfit was similar to the true identities of the girls below and included colors of black and purple, with her front and back bow shaped in three points and a thick stripe running along the edge of her skirt. Adorning her forehead was a golden crescent moon.

Sailor Astera watched the girls below read the note and listened as they discussed what to do; she could not help but smile when they called her an impostor. The chocolate brown cat that sat near her had the unmistakably recognizable mark of a golden crescent moon mark on a collar around his neck.

"They all look so weak, Demetrius," she said to the cat, taking time to scratch the top of his head affectionately. Her violet eyes sparkled with anticipation of the revenge she would have, the revenge her father had sought but failed to attain. She leaned forward for a better look at Rei as she sat on the steps watching the others leave. "I've watched for almost a year now," she breathed, taking in all the time and effort this mission had used up. "I know everything about them, even the boys they like. Why can't I just obliterate them now?" She smiled at her feline companion.

"Don't be deceived, Astera," the cat replied. "They are much stronger than they appear to you, both individually and together. You have not seen them at their full potential" To himself, he thought about how she could never imagine the real power of the White Moon Princess and her four guardians. "There will be a time," he thought, "eventually. You will come to terms with their true power."

"It's hard to believe," she scoffed, "sure they managed to defend themselves against that fool Metallia and her little underlings, but honestly, they weren't that impressive." She reached into her pocket and pulled out a glistening amethyst crystal. This small crystal, which fit nicely in the palm of her hand, was called the Adazuishou – the Revenge Crystal. It was her source of power and strength. Her fingers ran across its surface gingerly as the sunlight bounced off of it brilliantly. She kissed the gem and placed it safely back in her pocket. "I won't fail you Daddy," she thought. She narrowed

her eyes eagerly as she watched Rei walk into the temple; a pleased chuckle echoed through the treetop.

Chapter II: Dreams and Visions

Ami had been sitting at her computer for seven hours straight. Her eyes kept falling out of focus and she was getting a little frustrated. In her quest to locate information on the name Astera she had come across a computer technology company with the same name. This had caused problems with all her search results because they would often turn up with this company or references to it.

She was just about ready to give up for the night when she decided to go into an Astrology/Astronomy chat room to see if anyone in there could help. There were 22 people in the room.

"Hello," she typed, "does anyone know of a planet with the name Astera?" She waited but no one replied to her. "Can someone help me?" She typed, "I need to know the significance of the name Astera."

Suddenly an Instant Message screen appeared. The screenname was AstroKid325. "Astera is the exploding planet," the screen said. She typed back, "What exploding planet?"

He replied, "Between Mars and Jupiter. You know the Asteroid Belt?"

"What?" Ami typed, "There is no conclusive evidence that the that belt was ever a planet."

"It's actually a biblical story of some sort," AstroKid325 replied. "It was said to be the planet on which a great battle between good and evil occurred. In the battle the entire planet was destroyed by an ultimate good, destroying the evil that was there."

"Thanks so much," Ami replied and signed off.

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Usagi sat at the kitchen table drinking tea with a blonde-haired friend she had met a few months ago. It was dusk and Usagi had been thinking about the possibility of a new sailor senshi since that afternoon when she left Rei's. Her friend, Sakura Kakatini, was stirring her cup slowly.

"Ami doesn't hate you Sakura," Usagi was saying as she tried to forget about her senshi dilemma for the moment, "she's just subscribing to those rumors." Sakura had been placed in their classroom at the beginning of that year after being removed from her

previous class due to a 'disagreement' with the professor. Sakura seemed to keep mostly to herself, but Usagi noticed her occasionally lurking near and her group of friends. She wondered if the pretty blond just needed someone to include her.

Today, as a friendly gesture, Usagi had invited Sakura over, much against Luna's wishes. Luna knew the group was planning to have another meeting about the recent events and she was disappointed that Usagi would shirk her duties as a sailor senshi to spend time with this new friend. Luna planned to speak to Usagi about this after Sakura had left, but Rei had beat her to it by giving Usagi a few curt words when they all met outside the school gates. "Honestly Usagi," she had said when Usagi told her she would miss the meeting, "we all have obligations - you especially."

On the way home, Sakura had asked Usagi if it were better for her to hang out with her other friends instead of causing all this jealousy. "I don't want to be a burden to you," Sakura had offered.

"Don't worry," Usagi smiled, "Rei doesn't mean anything against you. They will warm up to you."

"She seemed awfully serious," Sakura said, "I hope I can get to know her better and we can be friends too. I don't bite!" She said, snapping her teeth through her grin.

Usagi laughed too, "Oh don't worry about it, she'll come around, you'll see. Rei's just stressed about other things."

When they had gotten to Usagi's house, Usagi's mother had already set the tea out and began doting over the girls. Usagi was happy she had decided to hang out with Sakura that day; she really seemed to open up once Usagi got her talking. She figured the heat from the others would blow over. Usagi assured herself there would be plenty of time to investigate the new disturbances and there was nothing wrong with meeting new people.

Usagi's mother was bringing out some tasty cakes when the phone rang. "I got it!" Usagi barred over and tossed the receiver into her palm, "Hello?" Ami quickly chimed in told her about the significance of the name Astera and about the exploding planet theory. She also told Usagi that she really ought to come by. Usagi simply replied with "yeah"s and "uh-huh"s being careful not to look worried. She was surprised that Ami was not calling to preach at her about missing the meeting – this must be big news.

"I don't know what it means really," Ami's voice came through on the line, "but I think I should do a little more research. We could be dealing with someone that's for real."

"Well, okay Ami!" Usagi said ever so cheerfully, "I'm glad you finished your paper!"

"Usagi, this isn't a joke. We could have some real trouble on our hands!" Ami said with impatience.

"Okay that's great Ami," Usagi said, "I'll talk to you later tonight if I get a chance! Bye-bye!" She hung up.

"That was Ami?" Sakura asked.

"Yeah," Usagi said, "Just making sure we got home okay." She finished her tea and tried really hard to remember anything from her past that might help. She was so tense in thought that the door bell scared her so much she almost fell off her chair.

"Oh Usagi! Are you all right?" Sakura laughed. "Let me get the door," she jumped up and ran to the door and Usagi followed hoping it wasn't a very angry Ami. "Nah," she thought, "Ami can't run that fast..."

Sakura opened the door, "Oh!" she exclaimed, "Hello."

Mamoru was standing in the door way with a rose in his right hand. A long, silky, white ribbon was tied in a bow around the stem and the thorns had been taken out. He smiled and looked beyond Sakura into the room and spotted Usagi. Squealing, she ran to him as he scooped her up and spun her around. "I missed you so much!" she said and closed her eyes for a kiss.

"Ah-hem!" Sakura cleared her throat and interrupted.

Usagi rolled her head around and dropped the pucker in exchange for a blush, "Oh! Mamo-chan this is Sakura; she's come over for tea today. Sakura, this is Mamoru. He's my boyfriend!"

"Hi," she said with a casual but coy smile. "I've heard a lot about you." Usagi blushed a shade deeper red, and then turned a little green in regards to the look Sakura was giving her Mamo-chan.

"Well, it's nice to meet you," he said noticing the odd shade her violet eyes. "You have a very interesting eye color. Contacts?" Usagi's brow creased.

Sakura smiled, denying the answer.

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After talking with Usagi, Ami called Rei and told her about what she had found.

"Another planet?" Rei asked, "But that would mean another sailor senshi from the Silver Millennium."

"Quite possibly," Ami said, "but why wouldn't we remember her?"

"Hmmm..." Rei said, "I don't know. But at least we can assume we're dealing with someone who might be legitimate. Perhaps just some memory we haven't unlocked." She looked at the scrawled note that was tacked on her bedroom wall then glanced at the fire she had been working at.

Suddenly, she got a troublesome vision. Her mind went dark for an instant in which she saw most recognizably Neo-Queen Serenity standing on the grounds of the Moon Kingdom with King Endymion beside her. Serenity was calling an order for a full attack. Rei saw a massive battle with thousands of enemies battling the soldiers of the White Moon. A strong and robust blonde man on a black horse led the rebel army. Serenity stood strong with her King and Rei saw the unmistakable flash of the power of the Ginzuishou. Then there was a massive explosion, so powerful she felt as if the very planet she stood on would crumble to pieces.

Rei snapped out of it in a cold sweat.

"Rei?" Ami was saying, "Rei, Earth to Rei!"

"Sorry Ami," she stuttered, "I lost you for a second." The vision had escaped her memory but her hands were still trembling at the eerie feeling it had left her. She realized then that there was much more they did not know about this new enemy.

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After her new friend had left, Mamoru and Usagi were able to catch up on the events of the last few days. Usagi informed him of all of the mysterious circumstances of the appearance of the new sailor senshi and asked him to try to remember anything from the past that might help. Mamoru agreed to search through the deep recesses of his mind and let her know anything he came up with.

He told Usagi all about Toroku and how he was healing. He mentioned to her that he would probably be spending a lot of time with Toroku because without the use of his legs, things would be difficult for some time. Usagi admired his dedication to his friend, but undoubtedly felt a pang of jealousy knowing he would be around less. To add to this unease, Mamoru announced that he would be taking his leave of her not more than half an hour after his arrival. He seemed very distant to her just then, as he was pulling his jacket on.

"But Mamo-chan, it's only nine," she pleaded, "Stay."

"I really can't Usako," His placid look burned into her crystal blue eyes. "I need some rest; I'm very tired from the trip." She pouted and leaned in on his arm. He smiled a little, "When I pick up Toroku in a few days we could all go out together one night," he offered, hoping this would cheer her.

But Usagi felt troubled that night and needy of attention. She broke from his gaze and

looked out the window. The sky was clear and the full moon cast an almost daylight glow on the yard. "It's beautiful," she thought. "And Mamoru is home, so what seems wrong with this night?"

"Usagi, I'm sorry," Mamoru was saying. "It's just that I have to go. It's important," But he did not go on; he did not even know what he was going to say, really. Something had come over him since he had gotten there. "Maybe it was that airline food..." he considered to himself.

She turned her face back to him and lifted her finger to her lips. She took his hand and led him outside to the sidewalk and she sat down. He sat beside her and followed her gaze up to the moon.

"I've missed you," she said quietly. "Things are getting strange again; we have a new enemy." "I need you," she added in her own thoughts.

He began to say he had missed her too and that he would always be there to protect her, but something stopped him. It seemed as though all he could think about was Toroku, lying in that hospital bed. He felt a strange urge to protect him at this moment.

"I have to go," was what he said instead. He stood up and began to walk away half expecting Usagi to cry out, the other half expecting her to weep silently. He could not bear the thought of her crying but something was driving him away from her. He walked quickly without turning back.

She did not cry out, her face did not even flinch. Her gaze was fixed on the ever present moon as she comforted herself with thoughts of the future.

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Rei, Makoto, Minako, and Ami were all sitting around the fire at the temple. Rei's eyes were closed and her hands clasped in front of her. Yuuichirou Kumada, the longhaired temple apprentice, stood in the back against the wall. He watched Rei with anticipation and admiration that had built up since he had first come to the temple to work for her grandfather. Yuuichirou shivered as a draft came though under the door. The girls barely noticed it as they were warmed by the fire.

Luna was lying on the floor beside Artemis. She was distraught as she had not yet been able to recall anything about this new senshi. In the subconscious recesses of her mind she vaguely recalled the powerful senshi of the outer solar system and compared each to this new person. Nothing clicked. It was as though a part of her memory had been erased or destroyed and it bothered the guardian cat greatly. Artemis also was feeling useless as he could provide no useful information for the search.

Rei opened her eyes. "It's no use," she sighed, "I can't get anything now."

"Well, I guess we'll just have to prepare for the worst," Makoto said. "We'll confront her! After all there's one of her and five of us."

"We don't know anything about her," Minako pointed out, "That could be a pretty big risk."

"It's true," Ami said. "We should gather as much information as we can before we encounter her."

"What could she possibly be motivated by?" Makoto asked.

The fire abruptly jumped up and flared wildly. The girls all jumped back as well, except for Rei who immediately closed her ever-seeing eyes. They watched as the fire settled again and the shadows deepened throughout the room. Rei's face grew tight and her brow creased.

Then, suddenly and without warning Rei's eyes flashed open and she uttered out a terrified scream before she fell backwards and unconscious to the floor.

"Rei!" Everyone jumped to her side but Yuuichirou was the first to touch her. He lifted her head, "Miss Hino! Are you all right? Rei! Wake up!"

Ami checked for a pulse. "She'll be all right," she said. "She's just fainted."

"Are you sure? Rei can you hear me?" Yuuichirou asked, still very concerned. "Go open the door Minako," Makoto said, "let some cool air in. I'll go get some water." She ran off to the kitchen and Minako ran to the door. When Minako went to open the door, a gust of cold winter air blew it open for her. Minako yelped and tried to pull it shut again, but the air gushed into the room. The smoldering flames of the temple fire extinguished. Rei woke with a start.

She looked up at Yuuichirou; her head was in his lap. "Ugh!" She sat up, "what do you think you're doing?" He backed off and mumbled an apology. Feeling a little embarrassed, he decided to leave the girls alone. However after he got outside of the room, he leaned against the wall to listen.

Rei looked at the smoldering ashes. It's a bad omen for the temple fire to go out, she

thought.

Then suddenly, the vision came back to her all at once like a flood. It was the same as before except the blonde man on the black horse was no longer there at the end. Now, instead, she saw a tall and beautiful woman with long flowing black hair and deep violet eyes that were steaming tears. She almost passed out again from the pain she felt, but just then Makoto came rushing back and dumped the bucket of water on her head.

"Oh!" Rei cried out, "That's her!"

Chapter III: Deceptive Appearances

"What are you talking about Rei?" Ami asked. "Who did you see?"

"My vision," she said shaking and dripping, "I saw that girl in the fire!"

"Which girl Rei?" Makoto asked as she handed Rei a towel to dry her dripping hair.

"The blonde girl that was on my stairs that morning at the temple," She replied.

"You mean 'Sailor Astera'?" Minako asked.

"Yes, I saw her, only it wasn't really exactly her." Rei remembered the vision this time; it was as clear as if it had happened yesterday. Indeed it even felt like a memory being replayed, but a memory that wasn't her own.

"What exactly did you see?" asked Luna, her eyes searching Rei's for some answer she did not have.

"I saw Neo Queen Serenity and King Endymion and it looks like some kind of battle. There was fire and destruction all around them and it was nighttime, I don't know the place. I could see many warriors fighting and dying on the ground. Many were crying out for help.

"I saw the leader of the enemy army. She sat on a tall black horse and her cascades of black hair swirled around her body and she was crying. I felt her pain, like something breaking inside, and a burning feeling deep within her spirit. Someone was taken from her, or something." Rei paused, overwhelmed with the impact of replaying the vision in her mind.

"But Rei, I thought you said it was the same girl that was at your temple?" Artemis asked carefully.

"It was," She said, her voice cracking a little with hesitation.

"But the girl at your temple had blonde hair Rei," Luna said.

"It was the same girl though. Her hair was different but the eyes were the same. They were deep violet and sad; she was crying. I saw a brilliant flash and in silence, from a great distance, I witnessed an entire planet explode. It was amazing!" She stopped again, struck with the recollection.

"Was it Earth?" Ami asked, horrified.

"I don't really know," Rei stammered.

"And that's it?" Minako asked.

"Then I woke up." Rei shot a glancing glare at Makoto who handed her a towel.

"What are we going to do?" Makoto said with worry. "What if it was an omen for Earth?"

Suddenly Rei remembered something else. "Oh Luna!" she said, "There was a cat on the horse with her!"

"A cat?" Luna asked with wide eyes.

"Yes, like you and Artemis only he was brown. And he had the crescent moon on a collar around his neck." She said pointing to Artemis's forehead.

They all gasped.

"A crescent moon?" Artemis asked. "And it was golden?"

"It was gold all right. Her cat was wearing the mark of the Moon Kingdom." She said.

"Does that make any sense?" Minako said, looking to Artemis.

"Let's go everyone," Luna said, "we have to find Usagi right now."

They all got up and ran out, leaving Yuuichirou to clean the mess. He went back into the room to start the fire again. "Queens and exploding planets," he muttered, "I'll never understand Rei..."

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Sailor Astera crouched on the balcony outside of Mamoru's apartment a few hours after she had left Usagi's. The sky was dark and she watched him toss and turn trying to get some highly needed sleep. He had been busy and he was worried about Toroku, the

friend he had gone to see in Kyoto. The injuries he received had been pretty substantial. The accident occurred at night on slick roads and the driver of the car claimed she did not even see Toroku's motorcycle pull out until it was too late. He had been thrown twenty feet and doctors believed his helmet had saved his life. However he was still struggling with a concussion, two shattered femurs, and broken left arm.

When the EMT's arrived Toroku had been unconscious. He came around a little on the way to the hospital but could not remember who he was or what had happened. Shortly after arriving at the hospital he slipped into a coma. The nurse had found Mamoru's name and phone number on a bloodied scrap of paper in Toroku's jacket pocket so he was the first to be contacted.

Mamoru left Toroku and returned home after he had been upgraded to fair condition and had come out of the coma. Toroku had been healing at an alarming rate and doctors were surprised that he would be able to leave the hospital in another week or two with the use of a wheelchair. They told Mamoru that Toroku would recover full use of his legs, but a lot of physical therapy would be needed to get him walking again. Mamoru was very thankful.

He left instructions at the hospital to call him when Toroku was being released so that he could come pick him up and take care of him. Toroku lived with his grandmother and she was not physically strong enough to help Toroku in the next few months. As one of his closest friends, Mamoru knew he had to step in.

Something still irked him from the accident though. The woman that had been driving the car disappeared shortly after being questioned by the authorities at the scene. It was later discovered the car she had been driven was stolen earlier that afternoon from a shopping mall. Authorities only had a vague physical description of the woman: around five feet tall with long blonde hair past her shoulders. Not much to go on, but the officer that talked to her says he felt sick and dizzy in her presence and could not concentrate. He had trouble remembering even the name she had given. Upon review, his notepad was covered in sloppy scribbles.

Astera knew all this. It was she that had taken advantage of the opportunity.

"It was a perfect plan," she thought. "Now all I have to do is find where that kid is. Who knew he'd end up being a friend of Mamoru." Sailor Astera thought back to when she was a young Princess living on the planet Astera with her father, the ruler of the planet, King Yukio. He was so powerful back then, so loved by his people. He could move things with his mind and make warriors out of dirt with his sorcery. He had been her best friend and her confidant. Through some power she did not understand, they had lived for so many years together on that drifting planet.

Yukio's words replayed in her mind: "The rebels of Earth were weak my darling Astera." Her given name echoed through her memory, her true identity as Princess Astera. Her father's words seemed lost but she recalled them with effort, "The rebels of Earth were

defeated and rightfully sent to Nemesis to suffer in darkness. We are not weak, we will triumph. And you, my beautiful daughter, will be the Queen as you so deserve to be," he said, placing a light touch on the golden crescent moon on her forehead. "Neo Crystal Tokyo and that false Queen will fall under my hands." But he had been terribly mistaken.

Memories of the battle were blurred in her memory. All her father's stories about the female warriors of Neo Crystal Tokyo were true in her eyes. These princesses were not worthy of their titles and they would lie, cheat, and even kill to stay in power. "They are cruel and vicious," her father had said, "You can not trust them."

They were cruel. They had unmercifully killed her father and destroyed her home in the 30th century. Now she was after the revenge her father had sought. She remembered the night he had come into her room just before the day of the final attack. She sensed the presence of darkness and fear; she assumed it was from Earth and the evil people that lived there.

"Do not cry my child," King Yukio had said, "you are a strong fighter. You can survive." The next day he had sent her and her guardian Demetrius to Nemesis. Two weeks later she received word he was dead and the whole planet of Astera had been obliterated. She waited in horror at what her fate would be alone on this planet full of darkness. She heard rumblings from those that kept guard of her. The tall, dark men with black crescent moons on their forehead spoke of the Death Phantom, and taking back Earth. They undoubtedly saw the young Princess as a threat and she feared them.

Terrible as it was, her father spirit came to her in her dreams every night. Through his power, he taught her in her sleep what he could not continue when he was alive. As she grew older and stronger, he taught her more and more. He showed her through visions what had happened during the final battle on Astera. She saw that he had begged for mercy but the masterful false queen of Crystal Tokyo would not hear him. She violently destroyed all that Astera loved.

"Help me Father," she had said to him one night, "help me kill them all. Help me show them that they can not deny me my rightful throne."

At her plea, a light appeared pulsing from within her and she gasped, terrified. A sinking feeling overcame her and she cried for her father to stop whatever he was doing.

"Do you want revenge?" his powerful voice echoed through her head.

"I want revenge," she had cried as the stinging pain filled her whole body.

"Then give me your trust and give me your soul."

She had felt immense pain like no other pain that she had felt before. The absence of

her being seemed to envelope her in a dense darkness shattered by the sudden light that was shining from her spirit as it was pulled from her body. It was blinding, both the pain and the light, and it reached to a climactic point where Astera simply wished to die. Then all went dark.

On Mamoru's porch, Astera remembered all this. She reached into her pocket and once again took out the amethyst she carried, the Adazuishou. It was the last thing he father had given her, the seed of a star - her star - that allowed her to transform into Sailor Astera and fight. He came to her less frequently as the time approached for her to begin her new mission.

Astera had sensed her duty from that time on. She left Nemesis and returned to the Earth of the past. She began her plan to destroy the sailor senshi who would grow up to destroy her life; she came back to kill the woman called Sailor Moon, the future false queen of Crystal Tokyo.

Now what she had to do was awaken her Ministers. These powerful sorcerers would be an invaluable asset in eliminating the powerful guardians that swarmed about her target. To revive them, it seemed, Mamoru would play an important role. Astera watched him with an uneasy feeling as he lie in bed half cover by the thin blue sheet. She could make up the outline of his body and watched the rise and fall of his chest as he rested.

Just then, Mamoru stirred and sat up in his bed. He wiped the sweat off his forehead and caught a chill. It's impossible to sleep this early, he thought.

He decided to get up and forget about getting rest for now; he needed to slow his mind down. Rising, he left the room and moments later Astera heard the gust of the shower. This was her opportunity.

The sliding glass door to the room was locked but this did not pose a problem. Astera pulled a key out of her pocket and slipped it into the keyhole; silly Usagi had bragged about having the key only hours before. As she entered his apartment, the warmth engulfed her and the scent of masculinity was all around her. She tried to remained focused, she needed some information from Mamoru and she hoped to find it in his bedroom.

The unmade bed was a few feet from the door and she ran her eyes over it slowly, searching. She could feel the presence of his powerful spirit that was now only a room away. It was a cozy room and she smiled thinking about how unfortunate it was that such a powerful man was all wrapped up with a false messiah. Astera lifted the pillow from the bed and pressed it to her face, inhaling his scent. She was jolted back into reality with the sound of the shower coming to an abrupt halt.

She jumped up with a start then dove and slid under the bed. Her heart was pounding; getting caught now would prove terribly unfortunate.

Mamoru came out of the bathroom and entered his room again. Beads of water clung to his hair and chest and a light blue towel was snugly wrapped around his waist. He opened the top draw of his dresser and pulled out a new package of razors and then returned to the steam-filled bathroom.

Astera, still shaky, quickly crawled out and stood up. Her eyes fell to his dresser and focused on the various papers on top.

"I must not be so easily distracted," she thought. She rummaged through the mess as quickly as possible and piled the useless papers together. Then she found what she was looking for, not on the dresser but on the night stand beside the phone. "Toroku Chuki, Kyoto Regional Hospital, Room 210," she read as she looked at the yellow notepad. She immediately turned to leave, but a framed picture on the dresser top caught her attention. She had not noticed the series of photographs along the dresser when she had surveyed the room earlier. Now, the bright smile of a bubbly blond pulled her eye over.

It was a picture of Mamoru and Usagi holding hands underneath a cherry tree on some sunny summer day. She gingerly picked it up and traced the outline of his face with her finger staring intently into his deep blue eyes. She opened the frame and slid the picture out then put it in her pocket with a playful smile.

As she left his apartment, heading for the train station, she threw the frame on his bedroom floor. The glass plate shattered.

Astera met Demetrius just outside of Mamoru's apartment. "What took so long?" he asked, his brown tail swishing around behind him in aggravation.

She scowled at him, "Oh shut up! I got the room number, that's all that matters." She wondered if her guardian was useful for anything more than holding her back. "That was foolish," she thought, "I shouldn't have been so sharp. He'd really chew me out for straying like that."

Demetrius did not go into it anymore. Her smug attitude was something he could deal with as it was a trait he had become accustomed to, but that cold, dark feeling in her eyes often felt like too much for him. The young and happy Princess Astera, when had she become this deceptive? Demetrius shook his head, he knew that time would tell where this road would lead.

Astera took the opportunity of silence to change the subject, "So which way is the fastest way to the train station?"

"Well, I think we can take the road to the gardens then cut through there. It should bring us out right around the station," he replied.

"Sounds good," she said. They proceeded with no further conversation but Astera could

not stop toying with the picture in her pocket.

Mamoru came out of his bathroom and walked into the bedroom a little more relaxed than when he had left. The shower had cleared his mind and he looked forward to a peaceful night's sleep. The shattered frame on the floor stopped him mid stride. Curious, he walked over to it and picked up the oak frame and looked at his dresser on the other side of the room. He turned the frame over with a puzzled look and was surprised to find the picture missing.

He did not understand what had happened. He searched the house for any intruders and found none. "That's odd," he thought as he sat down on the side of the bed with the frame. "How could it have fallen?" He examined the frame more closely. The actual oak was unharmed and he thought it would be easy to find a new piece of glass for it. "But where'd the picture go?" he pondered. "Usako, why did I leave you alone?"

His pattern of thought was broken by the phone ringing. It was the hospital. The nurse apologized for the late phone call by stated she had instructions to notify someone at this number when her patient in 210 would be released. Mamoru was pleased to hear that Toroku Chuki could go home tomorrow. It was after ten so Mamoru tried to go back to bed. His night was restless; many times he found himself roused by a dark feeling.

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Usagi sat on the curb looking up at the moon as she listened to Mamoru's footsteps echoing away from her down the cold, concrete sidewalk. She did not take her eyes off the sky for a long time after the last steps faded. Her mind was blank and although something inside her was deeply affected by what had just occurred, she was not outwardly upset.

With little thought to the cold weather, she stood up and began to walk down the street opposite the way Mamoru had gone. She had a sweater on but it did not keep her as warm as she would have been if Mamoru was with her. She began to thoughtlessly skip over the sideways cracks as she walked. No one was out as the night fell and it was peaceful to let her mind unravel. She just kept walking with no goal in mind.

Subconsciously, however, she had a destination. She was heading to where she could really sit and think: the rose gardens. She always went there when she had that falling, depressed feeling. "Only you can do this to me Mamo-chan," she thought. "Why must you do this? Why are **you** the one to make me sad?" She began to really feel the pain of his cold reactions. She did not understand what she had done to make him want to leave that night and she tried to convince herself that it would all pass over soon. After walking aimlessly for about an hour she entered the gates for the gardens and fought

back stinging tears until she reached the clearing in the center. There amid the sleeping buds, she sat on the low wall around the marble fountain and let the tears come as they wanted.

Over her quiet sobs almost a half hour later she heard a voice, "It's almost ten, are you sure this is the fastest way to her house?" Usagi recognized the voice, it was Rei. She stood up and wiped her eyes and tried to seem composed.

"Sure I'm sure," Ami replied, "it's the fastest way to cut through the city from any point."

"Yeah but I'm sure she's in bed by now," Minako offered.

Makoto was the first to enter the clearing and see Usagi, "Oh! Hi Usagi! You're out here?"

"Hey guys!" Usagi said trying to sound cheerful, "Where are you all going?"

"Usagi," Luna said wasting no time, "Rei had a vision about the new soldier. We need to take action or we fear the Earth might be in danger."

"I think we should discuss what we can do to stop her from what ever she's trying to do." Minako said.

"Yes, we need a plan," Ami stated. Usagi nodded. She did not quite trust her voice to hold out and her fingers and toes felt numb from the long walk outside. She shifted uncomfortably.

"And we have something new from Rei's vision," Artemis said, "we think this new soldier has a guardian cat and might be related to the old Moon Kingdom in some way."

"Like you two? But how could that be? Wouldn't we remember?" Usagi's voice trailed off in confusion and she was careful of her tone as her nose was still a little stuffy. This was a lot of information and she was sure it was important, but her mind was being pulled in so many directions she could not seem to focus.

"It seems we are missing those memories," Luna replied. "I don't know how, but apparently we may not be the only Guardians from Mau."

Something suddenly dawned on Minako and she interrupted, "Usagi?" she asked, "Why are you out here?"

Usagi was silent for a while trying to think of an excuse other than the real story. As she was about to say something Rei interrupted her.

"Who's over there?" She said harshly looking with narrowed eyes into the shadows near the clearing. "Show yourself lurker!"

The girls all turned on guard as Sakura Katakini stepped slightly out of the shadows and smiled nervously, "Hi, Usagi-chan." She said quickly and in the meekest voice she could manage. Her heart was thumping and her pulse had raced at the sound of their collective conversation. As Katakini Sakura, she was Usagi's new friend. Would the others sense her other presence?

"Oh! Hi, Sakky-chan!" Usagi said surprised, trying to maintain her cheerful façade, "Guys this is my new friend, Sakura!" The rest of the girls smiled politely and mumbled some hellos. Luna and Rei caught a glance and exchanged the same thought with their eyes; there was some strong negative energy coming from this girl. Rei had sensed it earlier, but now she was sure.

"Well, it's nice to meet you all. I'm sure we can be good friends sometime." Astera, still trying to maintain her image as Sakura, began to back away towards the shadows and the path leading to the station. "I really have to go home." A thought suddenly occurred to her, "Should I destroy them all now? They're all right here in front of me." But she rethought the odds and decided it was not really in her favor without the power of her Ministers.

"Why are you in such a hurry? It's kind of late to be wandering around alone. There may be trouble around any corner." Rei spoke in a slightly mocking tone and Usagi caught it. She shot a glance at Rei.

"Sakura is welcome here Rei," Usagi said bitterly then turned back to Sakura, "Are you lost? I know these gardens can be like a maze sometimes!" She was the only one who laughed awkwardly and it died out quickly.

Makoto stepped forward, "Who's with you Sakura?" she asked, peering into the shadows.

"It's uh, just my cat..." she mumbled.

"I didn't know you had a cat!" Usagi said, still oblivious to what the others were feeling.

Usagi ran over to her and bent down into the shadow lifting the cat over her shoulder and petting its back. "He's so soft," she said, feeling a little better, "What's his name?"

The other girls all saw it at the same time: the golden crescent moon collar against the brown cat's chest shown brightly in the moonlight, his lavender eyes wide at the sight of Artemis and Luna on the ground below him.

"Usagi!" Rei yelled, "Drop the cat!"

"Why?" she asked as she pulled the cat off her shoulder to look at it. "The cat on the horse!" she screamed as she dropped the cat on the ground and back peddled into Ami.

Demetrius ran to Astera and they turned down the nearest path at full sprint. Makoto began to chase her but Ami stopped her, "Wait," she said, "we don't know anything about her yet! It could be a trap!"

"But she knows who we are!" Makoto argued.

Usagi blankly sat on the ground and closed her eyes feeling fresh tears screaming for release.

Chapter IV: Two Faced Evils

Astera ran down the path quickly, so fast that Demetrius had some trouble keeping up. When she finally got out of the gardens and was sure no one was following her she slowed down and caught her breath.

"Demetrius!" she said in a harsh, low voice, "Why didn't you run from her?"

The cat made no reply and Astera gasped for air and slammed the side of her fist against the building beside her.

"This takes away an important aspect of the plan you know," she finally said. "This means she won't trust me anymore. They'll know I wrote that note and I've lost my element of surprise." Astera continued walking in the direction of the train station and Demetrius followed.

"You can't play off her friendship," the cat said. "It seems that it was leading you to other means of distraction anyway..."

"**You** can stop right there," she scoffed. They were rounding the last corner before the

train station. There were a few people around but the place was pretty desolate. She took a brown paper bag out of her jacket pocket and unfolded it. No one took much notice of her; she was just another lonely face.

"Get in," she said to Demetrius as she pointed to the inside of the bag. He obediently did what he was told and by these means, was able to board the train. It was nearing eleven when they finally reached the hospital. Demetrius was thankful; he had been terribly uncomfortable on the bouncing train floor. "She at least could've put me down on a seat," he thought.

Astera stepped off the train and made her way past the Emergency Room entrance to the Ambulance lot. The parking lot was desolately empty. She let Demetrius out of the bag and they found a safe inlet in the building to conceal themselves in. There they waited.

"This is perfect," Astera considered to herself. "With Kuzreo at my side and Thyrei soon to follow, I will be untouchable." Her mind drifted and she remembered the great Ministers that had served by her father's side. Minister Kuzreo, with his light hair and dark determined emerald eyes, was gifted with the powers of controlling material right down to the molecular level. In a sense, he could control motion and speed of anything he could bond with. And Minister Thyrei, the more massive of the two, with his stunning white goatee in stark contrast to his black hair and crimson eyes, played a key role in the battle on Astera with his power over the molten elements of his onyx hellfire.

They were loyal and courageous to King Yukio. Blessed by his kingdom, they came from Astera's moons as chosen warriors to fight for the kingdom of Astera, and in this case, to die for it. They both fell protecting the King in the final battle. That hellish Queen of Crystal Tokyo had been too powerful, even for King Yukio, the greatest warrior of Astera. The Ginzuishou, that vile thing, was the source of all evil and hatred.

Sailor Astera was upset that her cover as 'Sakura Katakini' had been blown, and she scowled at the missed opportunities to strike that vile girl Usagi and destroy that fearsome power. Back on Nemesis, she realized that she had enough strength from the Adazuishou – her amethyst - to bring herself to the past, but she knew she could not defeat the future Queen's guardians alone. In her last dream the night before she left Nemesis for the past, she had seen a figure cloaked in dark shadow. At first she was afraid, but the voice was so soothing that she began to trust it. Could it have been her father's spirit beckoning her once again?

With the power from the Adazuishou, the cloaked figure told her, she could bring with her the spirits of the two Great Ministers of Astera. However, it also informed her that she did not have the power to put them on earth in any physical form. Sailor Astera knew she could trust the Great Ministers but if only in spirit, what could they do? The shadow figure told her to find weak humans who were incapable of sustaining themselves, those who had suffered great traumatic experiences. The spirits of the Ministers could possess the bodies and take a more useful form.

A nest body for Minister Thyrei had been easy to find. Sailor Astera had rested his spirit in a weak boy that had suffered years of emotional and physical challenges. She made her way into the family's life as a confidant of the boy's mother while he was very sick. Imagine! The family believed it was her thoughts and prayers that had healed their son. They had been guided back and Astera's plan was in motion; she would awaken that power when the time was right.

Astera had then searched for another weak person for Minister Kuzreo to possess. That opportunity came from Toroku and his motorcycle. She almost enjoyed running him down and watching him lying on the ground in a pool of blood crying. He was soon dead but with Kuzreo's spirit entering him he was given enough power to be revived. He then was patched up by doctors and began his rehabilitation, all the while not knowing about the powerful energy sleeping inside him.

A thought occurred to her.

"Demetrius, why didn't we wake the Ministers when we first got here?" she asked as they sat behind a cement wall.

"The bodies they were in were too weak. You were not ready to fight. I was not ready to let you go off with thoughts of revenge and no power to back it up." He was quite blunt. She did not have a reply.

Finally a siren came screaming though the night, getting louder as it approached.

The ambulance pulled up to the emergency door and a nurse came rushing out to meet it. Astera grabbed her wrist and pulled her into the darkness, covering her nose and mouth. The nurse panicked and tried to get loose from Astera's suffocating grip, but eventually she weakened and collapsed. As the stretcher was lowered to the ground and brought into the hospital, Astera followed it wearing a nurse's uniform. The medical bag over her shoulder was full of cat.

Once they were inside the building Astera dropped off into a hallway. She made her way to the nearest elevator where she found a chart that listed room numbers. For convenience, the room numbers corresponded with the level they were on. Therefore, room 210 was on the second floor. She pushed the up arrow beside the elevator doors.

The doors slid open and two doctors in the midst of conversation brushed past her with less attention than a nod. Astera proceeded to the room without encountering anyone else until she reached the nurses station.

As she was walking by the nurse looked up. "Miss?" she said politely, "I'm sorry Miss but visiting hours are over. The patients are all asleep. Could you please come back tomorrow?"

Astera turned around and causally brought her medical bag to the nurse's attention, "Oh I'm on duty." She said with a smile.

"Oh!" The nurse said, "You must be new! I'm terribly sorry; I thought Nanako was on tonight. I'm Tamaki." She said over the desk. "You've got a long night a head of you."

"Yeah, well, nice to meet you," Astera said, "I am Usagi." She lied. "Well, hopefully I'll see you around again but I really must go now - like you said, very busy." They said good-bye and Astera continued on.

When she reached the room she let Demetrius out of the bag. Then, pressing down the door handle, she quietly entered. The room was very dark with the exception of the blue light emanating from the bedside nightlight.

Toroku was asleep in his bed, totally unaware of the woman in his room. She admired his charming boyish looks for a moment while he was trapped in the innocence that sleep brings to a face. She believed one could really see the true face of a person only when he slept. In Toroku, all she saw was Kuzreo, the warrior.

Toroku opened his eyes and peered into the darkness. It was broken by a glow beside him on the night stand. He focused on the faint violet light and forced his tired eyes to adjust and see its source. What he saw there appeared to be a rock of some sort. He reached over to touch it lightly and as his hand approached it, the light grew stronger. He recoiled.

Astera laughed quietly in the darkness at his reaction. "Do you like it?" she asked. Toroku looked up startled, "Who's there? Who are you?"

Astera stepped slightly into the light of the amethyst. Her nurses outfit calmed him for a moment. A golden chain and amethyst pendant fell from her collar. He noticed the stone on the pendant was similar to the one on his nightstand, and asked her once again who she was.

"Oh Minister, you do not recognize me yet?"

"Why do you call me that? Are you a real nurse?" he asked, "I think you are mistaken. You have the wrong room or something lady." The light began to dim again.

"I am not in the wrong room Minister Kuzreo," she paused and added, "Toroku."

He sat straight up and the hair on his neck rose at his name. He went to stand but of course, he could not get his legs to move right. "Why don't I know you?" he asked. "What do you want from me?"

She looked at the stone on the nightstand and he followed her gaze. She did not say a word as he reached for it again but did not actually touch it. When it began to glow

bright once again he turned to her. "What is this then? Will you at least tell me that?"

He wanted to be angry with her. He wanted to tell her to leave so he could rest. But he wanted to know who she was. Who was this beautiful woman that had made her way into his hospital room? He waited for her reply.

"It is a present," she finally said, "it's for you - to get well again."

He touched it and it lit up once again, but this time he did not pull back. It felt warm to the touch and as he picked it up he felt secure and safe. He thought perhaps a miracle was about to take place. Then, suddenly, the light grew immensely and became almost blinding. Toroku tried to put the stone down or throw it away, but it was impossible. It seemed to have fused with his flesh! His attempts to cry out for help failed as he found he had no voice; the light was suffocating him and he felt his body being slowly lifted off the hospital bed. His injuries sent severe pain shooting through his body.

"Kuzreo," Astera said softly, "wake up now."

The white-purple light filled the room with a blinding glow and even Astera had to turn away. Demetrius, who had been watching from just inside the doorway, covered his eyes with his paws. At last the light ceased and a massive body fell to the bed jarring the springs. The Adazuishou hit the floor with a loud clank.

Astera reached down and picked it up. It was still hot. She walked to the hospital bed and took hold of the seemingly lifeless hand that hung off the edge of the mattress; when she touched it, the body trembled and reawakened. Astera stepped back as the man opened his eyes and took a raspy breath.

As he sat up and slowly stood up beside the bed, the torn and tight hospital gown vanished. It was quickly replaced by elegant half-plate armor and flashy medallions of honor. "Mistress," Minister Kuzreo said as he knelt before Astera and kissed her hand. "It is with the entire honor of my King that I serve you."

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Mamoru jolted out of bed and shut off his alarm clock. He had been dreaming something just before that revolting noise had disturbed him, but he could not remember what the dream had been about. He found that happened often. He knew he dreamt every night, even with his restless evenings, but no matter what he tried, the dreams often seemed to evade his memory in the morning.

"These dreams," he thought, "why do they give me such a bad feeling? Why do all these omens come through in my subconscious?" He opened his closet and pulled out the tan khakis and navy shirt he had bought the week before. Always one to dress sharp, Mamoru had bought this particular outfit hoping to take Usagi out to dinner. Today he planned to take Toroku with them when he and Usagi went out that night. Maybe if they

were both there, he would be able to divide his attention more effectively between them. Mamoru struggled to remember the dream as he got dressed. It seemed to linger just beyond the reaches of his mind.

As he reached into his dresser to select socks, the broken glass in the barrel caught his attention and he frowned. It was still really bothering him; there were so many things about the night before that led him to believe someone had been in his house. When he found it, the broken frame had been far from the dresser it previously sat on. The added surprise of not being able to locate the photograph stirred him to instant uncertainty. He had searched the apartment for an intruder twice over but he had found no one. To his surprise however, he did find something most interesting: his balcony door had been unlocked.

Still there were other things that bothered him about the events of the previous night. The fact the other pictures on the dresser were untouched, each in their place with a thin layer of dust collecting in the corners disturbed him greatly.

"Whoever it was broke the one of Usagi and I," he thought, "And they took it as well. I don't like that. It's as if we were targeted, like a warning sign." He sighed aggravated as she pulled on his dress shoes, "She could be in trouble."

He wanted to go see her right now and talk to her about the night before, but he had to go pick up Toroku. He hesitated as he glimpsed at the phone before he left. It was only seven in the morning and for that reason alone he did not call Usagi right then. She would most likely be asleep and he did not wish to disturb her dreams and possibly make her forget them. Still he wanted to let her know about the plans for tonight.

"I'll call her from the hospital," he thought, "it's all right; she probably won't be up for a few more hours. She'll be fine. And plus," he figured, "I will know if she is in danger."

The streets were calm as he stepped out of the building into the fresh morning air. The sun had lifted some of the evening chill off the city and Mamoru unlocked the door of his car.

As he drove down the quiet roads his mind drifted through the events of the past day or two over and over. He had hoped to return to a peaceful Tokyo when he and Usagi could be together and not have to worry about left over evil from a past life, or any other disturbances. They had each other, so why could that not be enough? It seemed that since he returned more and more strange things had begun to occur. He thought that maybe he should have just stayed in Kyoto.

"No," he scolded his selfishness, "no, I came home to see Usagi." He had been so worried about her the whole time he had been away, yet somehow now that he was home he felt he should stay away from her. His mind reeled. "Why am I doing this to us? Why am I staying away?" He hit the steering wheel. "I came home to see her so what is stopping me?" He remembered when he had arrived at her house. He had given

her a hug and had smelled the sweet smell of her hair against his face. He had longed for nothing more than her kiss right then but something had stopped him.

"It was that girl," he realized. "Her eyes...they were so..." He snapped out of it. "Could it be something from her? Am I jealous of her attention to Usagi?" He was confused. He had never been so transfixed on anyone's eyes except for Usagi's.

His mind was filled with these troubled thoughts as he pulled into the hospital lot and got out of the car. He made his way into the building and greeted the women at the front desk. From here he was directed to the second floor nursing station. A young lady was there typing diligently at a computer. She did not even notice him approach until she looked up to check the time. She was due for a break soon. "Oh!" she exclaimed, "I didn't see you sir! How may I help you?"

He was looking at the ring on the woman's delicate finger, it was a gold band mounted with a heart shaped amethyst stone. His attention was momentarily distracted as he gazed into the stone.

"Are you all right sir?" the woman asked.

"Oh, I'm sorry," he blushed slightly. "I'm here to pick up Toroku Chuki, room 210." He tried to keep himself from looking at the stone. It was enchanting, the way the lights played off it.

The nurse typed a few things in the computer and finally looked up after a moment or two. "I'm sorry sir, it seems Mr. Chuki was discharged last night."

"Last night?" he thought. "By whom?" he asked.

"I'm sorry sir but that's classified information. Are you family?"

He sighed, "No, I'm not. All right, thank you." He walked down the stairs and into the lobby. He was about to leave when he stopped for a moment. "I should call Usagi," he thought. He turned and walked to the pay phones. He hoped she would be up by now. On the third ring she picked up.

"Hello?" her voice came through the phone.

"Usagi, it's me," he said quickly. "I'm sorry about the other night. Look, I wanted to make it up to you by taking you out tonight with Toroku, but –"

"Out to dinner?" Usagi's excited burst interrupted him. "Really?"

Mamoru smiled, "Well, it seems Toroku's already left the hospital so I wanted to go over to his place and see if he will be staying there or not. I am not sure if we will get back in time to go out, but I wanted to call you and let you know so you could keep the time

free." He paused for a reaction but Usagi did not say anything. "I promise I'll call as soon as I get home."

"Are you really going to try to make it back on time?" she asked, suddenly sounding upset again. He realized he made a mistake by telling her about dinner. He probably would have been better off just letting her know where he was going for the day.

"Usagi, I will try my best to get back in time." She did not reply right away, but eventually muttered something about waiting for him and said goodbye. He tried to tell her he loved her, but the line on the other end had already been disconnected.

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Usagi slammed the phone down and flung herself on her bed in a fit out pouts.

"What is going on?" she asked the empty room. "Did I do something so awful that he doesn't even want to see me?" She moped around her room for a while before she went outside and walked to the playground. There were lots of children there laughing and playing. "Enjoy your carefree life," she thought sarcastically. She went to an empty section of the playground near the edge of the gardens.

She spent so much time in there now just thinking about life and where it leads. She had begun to doubt destiny and fate; she had even lost faith in herself occasionally. She was indeed falling into a deep state of depression that she felt could not be lifted. All the fighting, it always came back to her somehow. "I must be overreacting," she thought. However that did not soothe her.

She heard voice coming from around the corner of the garden wall. The voice was a familiar one, was it Sakura? Usagi jumped behind the slide and held her breath. When they came around the corner Usagi almost cried out. It was Sakura, or rather Sailor Astera as Sakura! But she was not alone. Toroku was with him! "No," she thought, "I am not seeing this! Mamo-chan would not lie to me!" But the evidence was plain and simple to her, Toroku was right there before her eyes. And he was *walking*! He didn't look like he'd broken anything! "So what **is** Mamoru doing?" She was almost so wrapped up in these fears that she almost forgot what had happened the night before.

"Sakura! Oh no! Sailor Astera!" She jumped out.

"Toroku!" she shouted, "get away from her! Sakura isn't who we thought she was!" They both looked to her with surprise. Then a slight smile came over Astera's face.

"Usagi," she paused, "my *dear* friend." A slight laugh escaped through her lips. "Sakura is dead to me now, you should know that. Why are you all alone, Usagi?"

She realized her mistake but she could not let Mamoru's friend be harmed. She repeated her warning and took a defensive stance. "Toroku, step away from her! She's

nothing but trouble!"

Usagi did not understand why he was not running. Did he not believe her?

"Oh silly girl," Astera said, "You really come off quite pathetic. Can't you sense it? Minister Kuzreo's powers are with me now?"

"What did you call him?" Usagi was awfully confused, and the thought of Mamoru lying to her continued to nag her mind.

Toroku stepped forward and bowed to Usagi. "Neo Queen Serenity," he said with a voice so unlike the one that should have belonged to that body, "a pleasure to meet you once again."

She looked at him with wide eyes, "I do not understand... How do you know...? Why aren't you with Mamoru?"

"In good time," he laughed, "For now, you don't have to understand, your Highness. Perhaps you never will," he spoke the words with a bitterness that stung.

"Enough taunting, I am in no need of your assistance right now. Now that she is alone..." Astera reached into her pocket and took out her brilliant amethyst stone. She kissed it and Usagi backed up to the wall behind her. "You shouldn't wander by yourself Miss Princess. Now I shall have my revenge! Amethyst Crystal Power! MAKE UP!"

Astera held up the stone and it released a bright flash of light that engulfed her whole body.

A gust of wind flew around her as she raised her arms high above her head. Her golden hair rippled violently towards the sky and in a flash, she stood before Usagi in a sailor senshi outfit of purple and black. There was another flash of light and a golden crescent moon appeared on her ivory forehead. She opened her violet eyes and when she did, Usagi saw the bright flash of an exploding planet. Not even a second had passed as the transformation was complete and Sailor Astera stood in front of Usagi looking down on her with hatred and disgust. Children and their parents ran screaming from the park.

"I am Sailor Astera, soldier of revenge! You destroyed my home, my life, and my family! I shall not forgive you, and I will avenge the death of my father." She walked up close to Usagi slowly and in a voice so that only she could hear she said, "And for my revenge, I shall take pleasure in destroying you, personally." Toroku was no longer there. In his place stood the Minister Kuzreo in all his gilded glory. He watched the scene unfold condescendingly as he admired his mistress' skill in provoking her victim.

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Ami and Derek pushed their way along the busy street side by side holding hands. They were heading to the park where they hoped to catch a moment alone and along the way passed by the Crown Game Center.

Makoto and Minako were quite busy enough flirting with Shinozaki and Motoki to not notice them when they walked by the arcade. Rei did take notice however, and worked to get the love struck girls' attention.

"Hey, that was Ami," Rei tugged on Minako's sleeve. She was giggling and hanging all over the guys while Motoki's boss called for him to get back to work and stop wasting the day on young girls.

"Well, I better go," he said blushing.

"Yeah, me too," Shinozaki said, "I have to go work now anyway." The girls said their good-byes and made their way outside to the crowded sidewalk.

"So what should we do now?" Minako asked.

"Well, as I was saying earlier, Ami just walked by with Derek," she made a face, "but you two were too busy drooling!"

They both blushed; Artemis was waiting for them outside. "It's about time you guys came back out here; I was worried I was going to be forgotten forever!" Minako laughed and picked him up, laying him over her shoulder and scratching his back. He purred.

"Well, what are we waiting for? Let's follow them," Rei suggested.

"You mean spy on them?" Makoto asked with a raised eyebrow. Rei looked at her with a smirk and the three girls immediately ran off as fast as the crowd would let them in the direction Ami had gone. Artemis, in turn, was plopped to the ground and left to follow behind shaking his head, "Girls..."

They got to the gardens just after Ami and Derek. The girls, whispered obnoxious things and waited until Ami and Derek were a few yards in before they followed. They were walking arm in arm now and Ami was resting her head on his shoulder. The noise of the city was considerably less within the confines of the garden walls.

"They look so adorable," Minako practically shouted as she was not one to quickly adjust to volume changes.

"Shh! Keep it down Minako!" Rei hushed as they group crept slowly along just behind the couple.

Artemis butted in, "This is silly, and I don't understand why you girls do this. I almost got trampled back there you know!"

"SHHHH!" was the reply he received from all sides.

Ami and Derek sat on a bench and continued their low conversation. Minako climbed on a bench nearby and peeked over the shrubs. Rei tried to climb up behind her but their balance was off and they both toppled to the ground. They burst into hysterics. Makoto too could not keep the laughs under control. They all tried to hush each other but this simply made them laugh all the more.

Ami looked up in the direction she had heard a noise from. Derek felt her tense under his arm.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"Nothing," she said, "I just heard something." He smiled at her. "My little Ami-chan," he thought, "afraid of being seen showing affection in public I bet."

"There are other people in the city," he said with a slight laugh, "I will protect you." He lightly touched her chin and turned her face up to his. Her crystal blue eyes faltered and her cheeks flushed a little.

Rei, Minako, and Makoto were climbing all over each other trying to see.

"He's gonna kiss her!" Makoto said astonished as she balanced her tall frame with her left hand on Minako's head.

"Our Ami's in love!" Minako whispered feeling melancholy while standing on one foot and peeking through the shrubs.

"Ow! That's my foot!" Rei said in a harsh but low voice as she tried to free her toes from Minako's cumbersome weight.

As Derek's face grew near to Ami's she closed her eyes. Her hands were shaking and she almost got up and ran, but stubbornly she held herself in place. Within a second, as

the suspense was becoming unbearable for Ami as well as her hidden audience, a high pitch scream broke the garden silence and disturbed this delicate scenario.

Derek jumped and Ami almost fell off the bench. Rei wobbled back, then forward into Minako who, yelping swung her arm up and knocked Makoto off the bench. She in turn landed on Artemis who let out a horrible yelp. Minako and Rei followed suit in clamoring to the ground, all but the poor feline in stitches at their situation.

Derek and Ami had already begun to run in the direction of the scream by the time the others had reorganized themselves. The spies were right behind them within a few moments and they all came around at once into the playground. Usagi was lying beside the swing set rolled over on her side. A woman stood above her in a black and purple sailor senshi outfit. She had a wicked smile on her face and looked down on Usagi as if she was less than dirt. Rei was the first to notice the dispirited girl on the ground was in fact Usagi.

"Usagi!" she cried as she ran towards her. Astera turned.

"Amethyst Dynamic Burn!" she shouted as a bright purple beam shot from the crystal she held in her hands. Rei dodged the blast as best she could in civilian form but it caught her shoulder and she fell to the sand wincing in pain.

Makoto went to step forward but Derek's voice came first.

"Who are you?" he asked as he stepped in front of Ami. "What do you want from these young girls?"

Sailor Astera laughed with an evil echo, "My dear Thyrei, you are still so blind."

He scowled at her, "I don't care what you call me! Just get away from here! And you leave these girls alone!"

She calmly walked up to him and stared his stern face right between the eyes. He stood strong and tried to stare her down but the deep violet of her eyes took hold of his mind. Her lavender scent was all around him.

Suddenly, she leaned forward and kissed him! Ami cried out and tried to slap her out of spite and jealousy but Sailor Astera was quicker and caught Ami's arm in a tight hold. Derek fell suddenly unconscious to the ground and Ami struggled to free her wrist from Astera's tight grasp. Her face was hot with resentment.

"Jupiter Star Power!" Makoto yelled out.

"Venus Star Power!"

"Mars Star Power!" The three girls transformed and in a flash became the pretty suited sailor soldiers Sailor Jupiter, Sailor Venus, and Sailor Mars. Each stood tall and proud, gazing at Sailor Astera as though she was not fit to bear the title. Sailor Astera flung Ami across the sand to Usagi who was still mumbling incoherently on her side.

"I don't know what kind of senshi you are, but you're not one of us!" Mars said. "You picked the wrong girls to mess with," Jupiter hissed.

"We are the Sailor Senshi of the White Moon and we've vowed to protect the Princess," Venus announced, "Whatever business you have with her will be settled with us first."

"Petty, empty threats," Astera scowled. "I am Sailor Astera, sworn to destroy the Moon Princess *and* her pathetic royal court. Let me introduce Minister Kuzreo." The man with the dirty blonde hair and olive eyes appeared beside her at this summons. "Destroy them," she said, "I'll be back for the Princess. Remember, she's mine!"

Chapter V: Minister Kuzreo

As Astera faded, Ami came to again. Blind with frustration and anger she managed to stand and launch herself at the fading image of Astera only to fall face first into the sand sobbing and choking on her tears.

Meanwhile the other girls had begun trying their luck with the Minister; they were doing little damage and exerting much energy. It seemed as though all of their attacks were being deflected somehow. Ami crawled over to Usagi who had finally sat up and began to comprehend the situation.

"Usagi!" Ami pleaded, "Transform! Why haven't you fought them?" Usagi looked up into her friend's eyes as fresh tears began to well.

"Mamo-chan," she said as she choked on those tears, "he doesn't care any more!" She did not know if these tears were of pain of the heart or body but Ami could see she was in both. Ami checked her own selfish pain and focused on her friend.

"Usagi!" she shook her harshly, "you have to fight!" She stood, stepped back, and held up her pen, "Mercury Star Power, MAKE UP!" Her school uniform faded and she surrounded herself in a cloak of water that became her senshi outfit.

"Listen Usagi," she said in a more soothing voice after she transformed, "we have to

stick together." She nodded and turned to the fight. She paused, "Come when you can, but remember, we need you." Sailor Mercury ran off to help the others.

"Burning Malanda!" Sailor Mars shouted as ringlets of fire shot at Minister Kuzreo. He easily dodged them and returned fire with fire, as the mandalas seemed to reverse direction and amass together to form a giant ball of cosmic proportions. Mars jumped out of the way just in time.

"Is that all you've got girls?" he laughed.

"What do you say, Venus?" Jupiter asked, "Lets show him what we've got!"

Venus nodded, "Venus Love Me Chain!"

"Sparkling Wide Pressure!"

A chain of hearts surrounded by electric energy buzzed through the air and caught Kuzreo in the leg. He stumbled and tripped, falling backwards, but he caught himself with his massive arms and flipped over once and landed upright.

"Mercury Bubbles!" Catching his balance on his good foot, the Minister then found himself in a misty fog in which he could not make out his own hand from an enemy. There in the haze the four female warriors stood poised for their next move but none of them could have been prepared for Minister Kuzreo's next incantation. A smile spread over his face as the fog began to lift. His olive eyes flashed silver as he turned his gaze upon the girls.

"I hope you've enjoyed out time together," he said, "Now, I'm afraid, we will have to part."

Sailor Mercury reached for her earring and brought across her visor just in time to see a surge of invisible energy wrap around her. She was stuck in that position, a look of shock plastered on her face.

Sailor Venus was beside her with an arm raised to call upon her crescent beam but no words were uttered from her still, gaping mouth.

Sailor Jupiter's eyes were shut and her arms folded across her chest. A small spark of lightning sat frozen in time above her tiara.

Sailor Mars stood frozen over Usagi, her mouth hung open in mid-scold and her hand raised at a threatening position.

All around was silence.

Usagi's eyes shifted from Rei to the others. Slowly, she stood and walked among the

motionless figures of her friends. She inspected the spark above Jupiter's head and turned to Kuzreo. "Put them back," she said emotionlessly.

He laughed, "You'll have to excuse me, I'm just taking orders."

She looked from girl to girl seeing no signs of life in them; they looked real but it was the kind of real you would expect of a wax museum or art show. She didn't understand what he'd done.

He noticed this, "I have stopped all molecular motion in their bodies," he explained. "They are totally vulnerable. Soon they will die." Usagi sat in the sand. She did not want to fight again. She wanted to know why Mamoru was not in love with her any more. She wanted to know what she had done. How could he fight their destiny?

"This is going to be a beautiful collection, don't you agree?" Minister Kuzreo was very pleased. He hoped to gain favor in the mistress' eyes before the other Minister was roused.

"However," he hissed, "there are only four here and I believe that the collection calls for five." Usagi still move, she just sat staring at her feet in the sand.

"Please, just let them go," she mumbled. "I don't want to fight." She looked up with the same stoic face. In reality, she was filled with emotion and she wanted to let it all out but there was so much it was over bearing. It was always this way, always about her friends protecting her. "Just take me. I know that's what you want. I don't want to fight."

The Minister smiled and his eyes grew bright with a silver glow. Usagi pulled her eyes tightly shut and waited for pain but no pain came. Instead, she heard the Minister let out a terrible cry of shock. She opened her eyes and saw a trail of roses from just in front of her all the way to the Minister's foot. The last was wedged deeply in his flesh, a thick line of blood running down the side of his boot.

"Mamo-chan," Usagi looked up to the slide where a man in a black tux and cape stood. He skidded down the slope on his feet and landed beside Usagi then knelt down to her.

"Usako," he said quietly, "are you all right?" She nodded. He stood and turned his attention to the matter at hand.

"What do you want from them?" he asked the Minister. His hand was wrapped tight on his cane; his knuckles were white under his gloves.

"I want nothing to do with them," he motioned towards the frozen soldiers, "I just want her." Usagi stood up finally. Her mind was racing; he was here. "He still cares," she thought. "Was I wrong?"

"If you are all that stands in my way." Kuzreo added, "You will be taken care of

immediately." With that he unsheathed a gleaming sword. The silver hilt encased seven topaz crystals and he held it with exceptional skill.

Tuxedo Mask gripped his cane still inside his cape. "This will do nothing," he thought, "Usagi, I need you." He began to back up taking care to keep focused on the Minister who followed keeping the distance between them.

"Are we running away from a fight?" Kuzreo asked as Tuxedo Mask reached Usagi.

"Usagi," he said to her, "transform." For a second his eyes darted to look at her, but that second was long enough. Usagi saw the concern in his eyes turn quick to pain as the shining sword sliced into his shoulder. He winced in agony as he fell forward to his knees with a cry.

Usagi fell beside him, afraid and suddenly alert. "It's okay," he said clasping his shoulder. The crimson life seeped through his fingers in thin lines soaking into the black of his jacket. Usagi stood and turned to Kuzreo who was pleasantly pleased with his warning shot. The anger on Usagi's face was now clear and she clutched the brooch on her chest.

"Next time, I won't miss on purpose," he sneered. "Allow me to add you to my collection now." His eyes glowed bright and Usagi found she was unable to move. Kuzreo laughed victoriously but a faint sound behind him made him turn. As he did he was confronted with a right hook to the jaw.

Staggering back, he saw his assailant fall to the ground once again. Astera's kiss had rendered Derek an empty shell but he had found a small bit of energy deep within himself. It had been just enough to see Ami and the other's transform, and just enough to help.

The blow to the Minister had been quite weak indeed, but it served to distract his attention from his power and the girls were able to break through the spell.

"Crescent Beam Shower!" Venus continued as if no time had passed.

"Fire Soul Bird!" Mars shouted without skipping a beat.

A huge burst of combined energy caught Kuzreo as he turned and he let out a painful cry. Usagi's brooch opened and the crystal shone brilliantly as it pulsed with light. The wings around Usagi's naked body spread and ribbons surrounded her body. Her white gloves formed from these ribbons and her red-heeled boots as well. Her blue skirt appeared and the red bow on her lower back. A golden crescent moon flashed on her forehead of a moment before her tiara appeared and her crystal blue eyes opened with determination. All this happened in less than a second and the Pretty Suited Solider Sailor Moon held her scepter at the threatening angle.

"You've harmed my friends," she said, "you've hurt my lover," she silently prayed for Tuxedo Mask, "and you will be punished," She said with an air of authority.

"Oh, please, Sailor Moon," Minister Kuzreo said with a twinge of pain and a note of sarcasm. "You are hardly a match for the Mistress."

"The mistress? You mean Sakura?" Sailor Moon asked.

"Sailor Astera will destroy you," he clutched his sword but his strength was leaving him.

"I've heard enough," Sailor Moon said, "I don't know why you are here but your evil is not welcomed!" Realizing he was now outnumbered, injured, and face to face with the future terrifying Now-Queen Serenity the Minister cried out like a child to Astera. She was nowhere in sight.

The scepter swung around Sailor Moon and a massive amount of energy shot out from the end of it. As the attack was about to hit Kuzreo, Sailor Moon's anger cleared in a sudden revelation! Minister Kuzreo was only a pawn of Astera's! He had taken over Toroku's body!

"NO! STOP!" She cried out running after the attack. But it was too late. The staggering figure was struck down in mid howl. As the lifeless body of Kuzreo struck the ground, the image faded. There in its place lay a pale, young faced boy. Mamoru looked up and thought his mind was surely fooling him.

"Toroku..." he called as he staggered to his friend's side. "Toroku!" He shouted in fear as he fell to the dead boy's body. Sailor Moon and the other watched him weep silently as a red rose appeared upon his friend's chest.

Sailor Mercury could not bear to watch and turned away. How could it have been avoided? Her eyes fell upon the slab of cement where Derek had been lying after his heroic stand. She gasped and looked around nervously but he was nowhere to be seen. Something was shining on the ground near the place where he had been. Sailor Mercury ran over to it and crouched to pick up the silver ring. A bright sapphire gleamed in the center of the band.

She read the inscription on the inside of the band, "For my Little Ami-chan. I love you, *Eternally.*"

Chapter VI: Minister Thyrei

Derek sat up. The bed was warm and familiar and the room had a sweet smell. He looked around him and noticed there was a small frame on the nightstand beside him. He leaned over to turn it into view but a piercing headache forced him to lie back again.

"You're awake," a sweet voice said, "thank goodness."

Derek opened his eyes and forced them to focus on the ivory rounded face and crystal blue eyes. He tried to speak but found that the sound of his voice was like a cannon going off in his head.

"You're probably still tired," she said as she pushed her short blue hair behind her ears. She placed her hand on his and he noticed how cold it was, how strange the skin felt. He reached up to touch her cheek trying to signify his gratitude. He found it to have the same harsh cold as her delicate hand. Her eyes were the perfect sapphire he loved but they lacked the tender passion he usually found there. The slight smile that had slowly crept into his lips began to fade slowly.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"You!" he managed to utter as he pulled his hand away and stood up. The sudden movements made his head swarm. The room around him vanished and he found himself standing in an empty apartment. The image of Ami smiled and her eyes diminished to a deep violet. Her cerulean hair flowed from her head to her knees and changed to a pale blond. With a pass of her hand the sweet face was altered to that of Astera's and she let out a laugh as her junior high school uniform became a violet cocktail dress.

"I guess I can't fool you," she said. "You might be too smart for your own good, boy."

He ran for the door but just as soon as he reached it, he felt himself being pulled from it. His body was thrust backwards and he groaned as his back slammed against the wall opposite the door.

A piercing laugh broke the darkness, "Oh silly boy! Don't fight your destiny!" She appeared beside him, kissed his cheek and vanished again.

He jumped back and swung at the air. He had a scowl on his face and his head was still pounding. "You witch," he shouted, "leave Ami alone!"

"Are you afraid?" she asked. Her voice was all around him and inside his mind. "Do you fear me?" She laughed and he tensed suddenly aware of everything around him. She appeared in front of him and walked around him once. He eyed her cautiously, aware that his chances to escape were probably slim.

"So my friend, you now know the secret of your beloved Ami," a flash of memory when off in Derek's mind. He had seen Ami transform; she was Sailor Mercury!

"But trust me, she not worth the time or the effort!" She reached into her black purse and took out her Adazuishou. "Thyrei," she coaxed approaching his apprehensive and fearful face, "wake up."

She touched the crystal to his chest and watched the mist of purple light envelope him. He tried to force her away, but his chest ached intensely and he felt his knees give out. She laughed menacingly as his figure began to change. Through the haze she saw his arms grow stronger and his eyes burn red. The scream of the fading Derek uttered one word before it evil inside consumed his whole being: "Ami-chan..."

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The five girls walked in silence. Little had been said that day and no one really wished to speak first. Ami was like an empty shell. She had gone through the motions of the day after the battle without really thinking about anything. Her mind was lost on thoughts of Derek. He had vanished after the fight and the possibilities of his whereabouts frightened her into silence.

Rei was also feeling apprehensive. Yuuichirou had not been at the temple when she had returned the night before and her grandfather had no idea where he had gone off too. She was worried that some harsh words they had recently exchanged may have impacted him more deeply than she. "It's not like him to just run off," she thought, "not that I **really** care..." she lied to herself.

Minako was the first brave enough to speak, "Come on, let's go to the arcade." No one really responded; Usagi barely nodded. "We can get our minds of this business for a while," she persuaded, "We can't get down on ourselves!" Minako knew that they needed to stay positive to stay strong. "Plus, maybe Matoki will be working," she thought.

Everyone more or less just followed Minako halfheartedly as she chattered away along the cluttered road to the Crown Game Center. When she entered the arcade they were greeted by a very worried Unazuki, "Rei, Minako! Have you seen my brother?" Minako was taken aback by Motoki's sister's concerned greeting.

"I was hoping to find him here," Minako stammered.

"No," she replied shaking her head, "I haven't seen him since yesterday. Right after work, he left to go meet Shinozaki and go to the mall," Makoto looked up at the mention of her beloved friend, "but he didn't come home last night." She motioned to the chrome clock on the wall, "He should have been here for work two hours ago."

Minako was beginning to fret a little.

"Have you called Shinozaki?" Makoto asked.

"Sure," Unazuki said, "his apartment and his cell phone, but there's been no answer." She threw her arms up in the air as if admitting defeat. Makoto nodded to the others and, wanting to withdraw herself from the situation, she stepped outside into the cooling

evening air. It was dusk and the sky was hazy. She thought about the last time she had really done something with Shinozaki. Had it really been that long ago? They had always shared a close relationship as friends, but there were moments when she felt the desire for something more from him. She blushed for just thinking about that.

To herself but aloud, she whispered his name. To her utter shock, a voice behind her answered. She turned sharply.

The boy in front of her was tall and dark haired. He had soft, sweet eyes that gazed at Makoto with warmth as he smiled.

At that moment Rei turned her head from the conversation and glanced out the window. Through the glass windowpane she saw Makoto with a boy. "Is that Shinozaki?" she started walking toward the door and as she did a cold fear gripped her chest. She walked faster as she exited the arcade.

Usagi noticed her exit and she broke from conversation with Minako, "Rei! Where are you going?"

As the boy was about to embrace Makoto, Rei came up behind him and shoved him hard from behind. He tripped and fell on his knees as Makoto jumped back and stared in shock for a moment. Without even seeing straight, she dove forward and hurled a fist in the aggressor's direction. Years of martial arts had been effective and Makoto's fist caught Rei's jaw square. As she fell toward the ground Makoto realized whom she had just punched and ran to catch her. "Rei!"

Usagi came to the door at the same time and saw the whole scene. She ran over and the rest of the girls came pouring out of the arcade into the evening air.

"Rei!" Makoto yelled again. Usagi helped Makoto lift Rei to her feet. She was conscious enough to fight back tears and tried to stand on her own. All the while Makoto was apologizing profusely.

"Honestly! It was a natural reaction!" She looked back at Shinozaki who was slowly getting up and wiping the mud off his pants. Rei stood and regained some balance, her hand on the lump that was forming on her face and her eyes were burning. Shinozaki stood and smiled as cold, simple smile.

Usagi was confused, "Makoto, why did you hit Rei?" She looked at Shinozaki then back to Makoto.

Rei spoke with a brittle voice, "Stay away from him! He's not Shinozaki!" Makoto scowled at the thought of someone impersonating her best friend. "Show your true self!" Minako said.

The man laughed a sharp cruel laugh and was abruptly and violently enveloped in a

purple haze. As the mist faded, so did the image of Shinozaki. The gathering crowd of civilians looked on at the man in his place.

He was dressed in the same style the Minister Kuzreo, however, Thyrei was even taller and his eyes were burning red. His cloak and armor was dark grey and silver, lined often with gleaming white. His black hair was a stark contrast to the white goatee on his chin, and his right hand clutched a bow of silver. On his weapon, seven onyx stones gleamed in the sunlight.

Now the civilians scattered. Some ran as far as they could, others ran to the nearest object to hide behind. Makoto was boiling with fury and her eyes were severe and violent. Rei glanced at her and stepped back near Minako who was standing with Ami in front of Usagi.

The Minister bowed slightly and smiled, "I am Minister Thyrei, servant of the Mistress and the strongest of Astera's Ministers. You girls are my new mission." His gaze fell upon Usagi.

She narrowed her eyes and tried to figure out how to transform without the growing crowd around them seeing. She looked at Ami who nodded and then ever so slightly motioned to Rei who also nodded. Rei walked towards Thyrei slowly and he smirked at her. "Okay you want to play?" she taunted.

In one quick and sudden movement she jumped out at him and lashed at his face. A thin line of blood appeared as he caught her wrist as she made her break. Before he could even turn, the other four girls had vanished. He swung Rei away like a used towel and she caught herself with no more than a small twist at her ankle as she hit the pavement. "Don't waste my time," he muttered. She watched him stalk off toward the gardens and followed him until she was sure he was not coming back. She took out her communicator.

"All set guys. He's coming your way," she said in the speaker, still feeling the throbbing of her pulse in her ears.

There was an affirmative reply. She transformed and ran off behind him.

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The Minister walked leisurely under the star spattered sky and into the gardens where he was confronted with a tree full of bird settling in for the night. He looked at the inferior creatures and chuckled. With a lifted hand he formed an arrow of bubbling molten metal and shot it at the flock. A hundred birds took off in fright but one remained: a charcoal blast pile of embers against the trunk of the tree. A voice came from within the hedges behind him and he turned to see four suited soldiers standing defiantly across the

clearing. They were each more than a foot shorter than him, with the exception of the brunette who was slightly taller than the rest. She looked the most vicious.

"Hey," Sailor Moon said, "If Astera sent you here then you're looking for me." She narrowed her eyes and recited, "I am Sailor Moon, champion of love and justice. In the name of the moon, I will punish you."

He smiled, "I would love to see you try but unfortunately my orders are not to harm you." He looked at the other three senshi; that tallest one was scowling, "A real fighter," he thought.

He looked at Sailor Venus who stood partially in front of Sailor Moon now. "A guardian," he thought. He looked at Sailor Mercury and noticed her eyes were cast toward the ground unlike the hard cold stares he was receiving from the others. "Pathetic and weak," he thought, "perfect."

"Sailor Mercury," he called to her, "feeling a little under the weather?" He chuckled, forming a molten arrow in his bow.

Mercury looked up but her eyes were empty. She felt always on the verge of tears but knew she had to be able to focus in order to fight. Her mind was foggy; her thoughts were hard to organize.

Thyrei drew the arrow back and took aim. Jupiter took a defensive position, "Don't try it," she said menacingly. She crossed her arms across her chest as he drew the arrow back on the bow.

"Jupiter Supreme Thunder!" she called as the arrow soared through the air. The lightning hit the tip of the arrow and was absorbed into it as it plunged on its course to Sailor Mercury.

In a quick move Sailor Mars came running in and jumped at Mercury. The arrow sliced through the air less than an inch from the back of her bodysuit and her skin blistered as the cloth melted to her skin. She cringed as she held in her cry of pain, and Mercury rolled across the ground from the impact. Mars muttered to herself how unfortunate and ironic it was that she always seemed to take the brunt of fire attacks.

Wasting no time, Thyrei formed another arrow and aimed again at the fallen Mercury. Sailor Venus acted fast, "Venus Love and Beauty Shock!"

A shower of golden energy rained down on Thyrei and he turned the bow on Venus. As he released it, she dove and the arrow flew by her, singing her hair.

Jupiter had maneuvered herself behind Thyrei and was about to call on her Oak Evolution when a hard blow to the head caused her to grow dizzy and slip to the ground. The violet eyes laughed as Sailor Astera threw the thick tree branch to the side. Jupiter tried to stand and fight but her head was churning and throbbing. Mercury and Venus were trying to help Mars stand but the burns on her back were unbearable. Sailor Moon was standing alone in the center of the clearing.

"Well done, Thyrei!" Sailor Astera was delighted! What agony those burns would cause! She kissed him patiently and broke off only when Sailor Moon spoke.

"What do you want here?" she asked.

"I want you to die," Astera replied simply. But she was not pleased with the effect, so she continued. "But before that, I want you to suffer. I want you to lose all those you love, and I want you to feel the agonizing pain of loneliness." She watched the ivory face and blue eyes for some reaction but the expression did not change. It was not fear in her eyes, it was not even hatred. Astera began to grow irritated.

"Why?"

It was an ignorant enough question to Usagi. Here was some sailor senshi from who knows where, seeking to kill her for reason apparent to her. She wanted to know why, simple enough.

"You are heartless," Astera replied, a little taken by the question, "You and your friends," she twisted the word friends and motioned to the other senshi who had gathered around Jupiter. "You are all cruel and spineless with no real understanding of death and what it feels like to be alone. You are the root of all evil in this system and in my life." She lifted up her amethyst Adazuishou, "So therefore, you must die."

"I don't understand," Sailor Moon said in all honesty, eyeing the crystal Astera brandished. "What have I done to harm you, and when?"

Astera cried out in anger, "Would you not seek revenge on those who will grow to kill your father?"

Sailor Moon opened her eyes wide in amazement. "Your father? I will kill...", she shock

he head, "Impossible. You are misguided."

Astera ignored the comment and looked to Thyrei who had found his way to floating slightly above the ground a few feet away, "Get down from there and rid me of these pests so I can take her without any interruptions." She was enveloped in a violet flash and was gone.

He smiled and touched his feet back to the ground. He formed an arrow and reached for his silver bow. Sailor Moon ran at him from the side and with a sweeping motion he quickly shoved her back with his left arm, entrapping her in a crystalline bubble before she slammed into the ground. By now, Sailor Moon was beginning to expect Tuxedo Mask to show up. "Anytime now," she thought, "anytime." But he was nowhere to be seen.

She struggled to get out of this new trap, but found it impossible; her cries were muted.

"Why do you listen to her Thyrei?" Sailor Venus asked. "You don't have to take orders from her."

"She is the Mistress. She gives the orders and I take them. There is no free will involved. It's a matter of honor." He leveled the arrow at Venus' chest. "Now would you be so kind as to die." He released the molten projectile and Venus froze as it soared at her.

"Shine Aqua Illusion!" The arrow was surrounded in a cascade of water and extinguished inches from Sailor Venus. Her bow had been singed at the edges. "Stop this right now," Sailor Mercury said. "You don't have to listen to everything she says. There is no honor in attacking us."

"You are a foolish little girl, and weak at that. You are the most pathetic of the pathetic. What purpose do you serve; certainly we are all better without you." He leveled another arrow at her.

"I don't think so," she replied. She raised her arm above her and her eyes fell shut. "Double Mercury Ice Storm Blast!"

She twirled around and swung a huge wave at Thyrei as he released the arrow. It was enveloped in the wave and fell as solid ice to the ground just as the wave reached Thyrei.

He had turned to run but had only taken one step before being frozen in place. The bubble around Sailor Moon collapsed and she fell two feet to the ground with a thud. By now Sailor Jupiter had come to and was being helped to stand by Venus. Mars was lying on her stomach, the burns exposed to the open air, her face quiet and calm.

"I don't know why your Mistress sent you here to destroy us, but I won't let you hurt me or my friends any more!" Sailor Mercury was screaming at the frozen figure. Never in her life could she recall being so angry, but there was a twinge of pity there too. "Why feel pity," she thought, "for someone so pathetic that they can't act on their own accord?"

"Damn you," she screamed in frustration, "**you** are the weak one!" She touched her hand to her ear and brought her visor across. She read the display. "He is weakest near his heart," she realized, examining the data, "figures." The visor continued clicking figures away as she folded her arms in front of her, "Mercury Aqua Mirage!"

She opened her eyes as she released the violent aquatic attack. A bright blue light was flashing in the corner of her visor's screen and when she looked up at Thyrei, she saw the shocking stat flashing, "Human. Human. Human."

"No!" she cried out, "No stop!" She dashed towards the frozen figure but her attack was far faster. It shook the ground on contact and the sound of the shattering ice was ear splitting. The others hit the ground as shards of razor sharp ice flew like tiny daggers through the air. Sailor Moon cried out for Mercury to get down but she was set on reaching who she could only assume was Derek consumed by this evil man.

Tiny scrapes began to appear all over her exposed skin and droplets of blood formed; her sailor senshi outfit was ripped to shreds bit by bit. As the angry rush of the attack settled Sailor Mercury fell beside the fallen Thyrei. He still had the appearance of the Minister and his eyes were still harsh and crimson. But somewhere behind all the cruelty, Mercury could sense Derek was there. Through her visor she could see it was Derek, trapped. She threw herself down beside him and began using her ripped clothes to bandage his millions of tiny scratches all the while sobbing.

"Forgive me," she whispered, "Had I known...oh God, I'm so sorry..." She realized her efforts were useless; she couldn't do this alone. She stood up, "Sailor Moon?" Her voice was pleading and filled with all the hope she had left. Sailor Moon walked over to her and touching her hand to Mercury's cheek, nodded. She stepped back.

"Moon Healing Escalation!" With the Ginzuishou and her moon wand, Sailor Moon

released some energy to try to heal Derek. She had to be careful no to use too much of the energy or else expend her own life force. Slowly, the man on the ground faded back into the image of Derek. Sailor Mercury closed her visor and knelt beside him but Sailor Moon began to feel weak and was forced to stop. She fell to her knees where she stood and rested there, waiting and watching.

His voice was a mere whisper. Mercury had to put her ear right to his lips to hear him, "At least we got to be together again," he breathed, "I will always think of you, my Amichan." She clutched his hand tight and looked into his eyes as a tear rolled down her face. She could see his pain even more through those eyes and was surprised when she saw him smile. He lifted his arm and turned her face to him, "I love you." Softly, he kissed her and then he laid his head back. She was overcome with uncertain calm, and nodded, "I love you too. It's okay for you to go." With that reassurance, he closed his eyes and stopped the fight. As his hand hit the pavement a sob broke out from Mercury's throat. She cried his name out to the empty night sky and the stars above seemed to dim for just that moment. The others turned away.

Chapter VII: Twisted Fate

When Rei got back to the temple the moon was high in the sky. Rei noticed that the lights were all off inside and she wondered if Yuuichirou had returned. The day had been draining and she walked tenderly as she was mindful of the wounds on her back. Making her way up the steps and across the front of the temple, Rei looked around to make sure everything appeared in order before heading inside. The porch was dark and she made her way through the familiar setting. Right when she stepped inside she could tell something was a miss; the familiar smell of sage that Grandpa burned each night was not there. It was also apparent from the lack of noise that Yuuichirou was not there.

"Hello?" she called to the dark interior of the temple. She walked to the wall and lit a light. The main room was empty. She walked into the fire room.

"Grandpa? Yuuichirou?" The fire was burning low and it cast deep shadows all over the room. She turned on another light and the shadows lifted a little. Cautiously she walked into her Grandpa's room. It was littered with papers and broken furniture. There she found her Grandpa face down on the carpet.

"Grandpa!" she ran to his side and check for a pulse; he lifted his head.

"I'll get them..." he muttered, "get out of my temple!" He threw Rei's arm away in

frustration.

"No Grandpa, it's me: Rei!" She lifted his face up and noticed a deep gash across his forehead. Whatever had done this had caught him off guard for sure.

"Rei? Oh Rei! Look what they did to my temple Rei!" He was ranting a raving about the mess as Rei led him to his room.

"Just lie down Gramps," she helped him into bed. "Tell me, what happened?"

He climbed into his bed and she knelt down beside it, "Some young lady, very attractive mind you, came in here looking for Yuuichirou and when he came out to see her she attacked him. I think I tried to help him, but all I can seem to remember is her eyes..." He shook his head, which proved to be an awful idea in the wake of the wound Rei was dressing.

Rei gasped at the story and asked, "Grandpa! Where is he?!" She stood up, letting the gauze fall from her hands to the floor.

He rubbed his hands together and pressed the wrapping against his wound, "I don't remember..." She ran out into the hall. "Rei?" He called after her. "Should I wrap this myself?"

She ran back into the main room and immediately she saw what she had missed before. There on the back of the door a note was tacked: "Sailor Mars..."

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Minako and Makoto walked along the sidewalk on their way to Minako's house. They were worried about Ami and both wondered where Shinozaki and Motoki had gone off to without telling anyone.

"Maybe they went out and Shinozaki's car broke down." Makoto said. "Or maybe they decided to go on a road trip."

"Yeah," Minako replied, "I'm sure it's nothing serious. You guy how random guys can be, especially those two." It was strange enough that Motoki had not shown up for work, but as they had later found out, Shinozaki had not showed up to drive his aunt to work that night either.

"It's really weird," Minako thought out loud as they reached her house. "But I am sure we'll have a good laugh about it when we hear from them. Well, Thanks for walking my home," she said as they reached her place.

Makoto smiled, "Sure, I'll call you tomorrow." Minako walked in the open door and waved to Makoto as she shut it behind her. Makoto stood outside and waited for the

light to go on in the bottom right window before walking on to her house a few blocks down.

Minako was greeted by an empty house. She found a note on the kitchen counter, "Gone to dinner, be home late. XOXO Mom and Dad." She shrugged, A night to myself, she thought as she went to her room. She walked into the mess, shut her door behind her and flopped down on her bed all ready for an evening of comics and movies when a little scrap of paper tacked to the door caught her attention.

She walked over to it and read only the first sentence before she shrieked: "Sailor Venus, Motoki hasn't much time..."

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As Makoto walked along the sidewalk she thought about the day. "Poor Ami," she reflected, "imagine how it is to finally find love and then loose it so suddenly." She sighed. The back door was unlocked and she walked into the spotless living room she had just cleaned the day before. There were some dishes to do but she had always maintained a clean place since she could remember. "I'll take care of those in the morning."

The answering machine was blinking and hoping it would be word on Motoki, she pressed the playback button. Minako's voice came frantic through the speaker, "Makoto! When you get home call me right away!" Minako sounded like she was crying which startled Makoto and made quite alarmed, "I don't know what this means! I found a note on my bedroom door! Oh Motoki, I'm so..." Minako was suddenly cut off. Makoto stopped the machine and picked up the phone but the line was dead. She was suddenly full of panic as she heard something move in the back of the house. Slowly, she made her way in the direction of the sound ready to attack anything that moved. A small irregular tapping noise was coming from her bedroom. Tap. Tap tap. Tap. Steadily, she approached the half open door. In one rapid motion she kicked the door all the way open and slammed it against the wall as she flashed the lights on.

The window was open and her curtain rod was tapping against the window sill in the light evening breeze; she sighed heavily as she released the tension and let her nerves settle. As the door rolled back on its hinges, Makoto saw it's reflection in the mirror. "Curious," she said, seeing something tacked to the back.

She swung the door closed and read the words on the scrap of paper. Not even halfway through it, she tore it off the door violently and ran out of the house. A ripped piece escaped from her hand: "Sailor Jupiter, Shinozaki hasn't much time. He's mine now..."

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"...and if you want to see him again, meet me at the Juuban Ice Rink tonight, midnight."

Usagi read the last part of her note and the other three girls clutched theirs tightly. Each had a heart that was gripped with fear. Yuuichirou, Shinozaki, Motoki, and Mamoru: all taken. The large clock in the center of the gardens struck eleven.

Makoto was a fit of rage, "Sailor Astera!" She slammed her fist down against the concrete, not even feeling any pain, "I'll destroy her with the first chance I get!"

Rei looked at her watch, "We have an hour."

Usagi nodded. "We have to stop her." Usagi had found her note tacked to her bedroom door after she had brought Ami home. Terrified, she had called the other girl's only to find the lines dead. She has used her communicator to round them up to meet at the park an hour later.

"Should we go get Ami?" Minako asked.

"No," Usagi remembered how upset Ami had been when she left her house. She felt bad leaving her alone since her mom would not be home for a few hours, but she was falling asleep while she was walking. "I should have spent the night..." she thought, "but now this..."

The girls made their way through the lamp lit side streets thinking about their plans for what was most obviously a trap. The nights had been cold the past few days and Usagi pulled her sweater closer around her. Makoto walked silently staring at the ground in front of her while Minako was focused on the rink roof a few blocks down. Rei had her eyes lowered.

"We need a plan," Minako said critically as they approached the rink. There was a pause. "Maybe we should have called Ami," Usagi said, half joking, half serious.

"We'll see what she's up to," offered Rei, "Then decided from there."

"Shinozaki is in there," Makoto said quietly but full of disgust, "I can feel it." With that she transformed and walked toward the doors of the rink. The other's followed her lead. As the senshi walked into the building it became apparent that this would be no easy task. The familiar rink lobby had been transformed into a series of reflective tunnels and passages. With a sigh Usagi began guessing which ones to take.

"Ami's computer would really help right now..."

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Astera walked into the building through a back entrance she had discovered the night before. The empty skating rink was freezing since it had been air conditioned all day and closed off for the night. She walked through the halls to the storage room where the janitors kept their supplies. Hastily, she opened the padlock and pulled the door open.

Mamoru squinted as light flooded the small room. As her eyes focused, Astera saw the other three boys sitting around the perimeter of the room. What had they been talking about? She had heard whispers when as she was approaching the door. She walked over to Mamoru and slapped him with malice and jealousy. He turned his head from the force of the impact but did not make a sound.

"It's too bad you fell in love with such a tiresome and weak girl." She tossed her long golden hair over her shoulder and leaned down beside his face, "You could have lived," she whispered. The others heard it and Yuuichirou glanced nervously at Motoki. Shinozaki sat silent in a corner. His mind was reeling for a plan, but he could not do too much with his legs tied together and his arms handcuffed to a pipe. Astera went to each boy and check their restraints, but came back to Mamoru one last time.

"I hope you realize that this isn't your fault," she smiled condescendingly. "She's the only one you can blame." If looks could kill Astera would have been in bloody shards on the floor but in his present situation, Mamoru could do nothing except wait. "Oh, just to remind you - in case you've forgotten. That band around Shinozaki's neck is a power-surge explosive. If you transform in here you will blow his head off." Mamoru had received this warning immediately after her woke up in this hole. He was not sure if Astera was bluffing or not, but for the sake of Shinozaki, he did not call her on it.

Astera walked out of the room and quietly shut the door and replaced the lock. With a sigh she leaned against the wall. She had not realized how tired she was. Thyrei was gone now; she felt it. That meant the girls would have returned home and by now to find the little gifts she had left them. She glanced at her watch; it was nearing midnight. Quickly she made her way to the security room and flicked off the lights. The glow of the hazy black and white monitors lit up the room and she saw them standing in an empty lobby walking in circle. "It seems the illusion is working."

They were in her tunnels. Mars and Moon appeared to be arguing with one another over witch direction to take. "Good," Astera thought, "I will need to rest before I am confronted with this challenge." She sat against the wall and tilted her head back as she drifted off...

"No daddy!" Astera cried. She had lived on Astera for her whole life, and now her father was asking her to leave and go to some strange and dark planet called Nemesis. "I can't leave here!"

"Astera, you will be in great danger if you stay here and I can't have that." He touched his hand to her chin and lifted her maturing young woman's face, "You are the future queen and ruler of this solar system, it's up to me to protect you." Astera had only been months old when her mother had suddenly vanished. Her father would never tell her the real story behind her mother or why she had stopped growing when she reached seventeen. Being a sorcerer, King Yukio had been able to sustain his age, but he felt that his time was drawing to a close.

"I will go," she said reluctantly, "but you must promise you'll return to me."

"I will return to you," he said. He kissed her forehead and took her hand as he lead her to the awaiting transportation ship. "I will see you again, my child." As the door was sealed, and the pod released into space, King Yukio gave orders for a course change.

"To the Earth," he said, "Let the battle commence!"

She sat up suddenly alert. There was movement in the room behind her. Frustrated, she stood and opened the door to find the four boys standing out of their restraints. Her shock caused her to hesitate for only a moment before she slammed the door shut behind her and pulled out her Adazuishou, "Amethyst Crystal Power, MAKE UP!" In minutes she had them subdued, each one re-cuffed and this time chained together.

She kicked Yuuichirou violently in the gut, "Get up!" He groaned at a crushing feeling in his chest and struggled to stand. Mamoru was already up, in fact he had not fallen for any of Astera's brutalities thus far. A gash adorned his face. Astera touched it lightly and noticed it had been rapidly healing.

"Mamo-chan, a secret power of yours?" She smiled, but her eyes looked dreadfully ominous.

Motoki failed to stand as well. Shinozaki tried to help him up but soon discovered he himself could barely stand. Astera sighed.

"Fine, I'll make it easy." With that she lifted and hand, in a flash, the room was empty.

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The senshi walked down the tunnel Sailor Moon had chosen.

"We're going in circles!" Mars was saying. She had her arms folded defiantly across her chest and her eyes narrowed.

"Well I don't see how you could really guess any better!" Sailor Moon said.

Venus put her hand to her head, "Can we please not argue guys? We need to figure out this place soon or..." she paused thinking of Motoki and did not finish.

Sailor Moon walked on, a determined look on her face and her hands clutched in fists. "Mamo-chan," she thought, "hang on because I'm coming." The reflective tunnels cast an eerie feeling and made them feel surrounded, even if it was images of themselves. The odd angles and jagged pieces proved not only painful when accidentally rubbed against, but continuously created illusion after illusion.

"Sailor Moon!" Jupiter said suddenly. The group stopped.

"What is it?" Moon replied.

Jupiter pointed straight to the left. A door was there but hard to make out. It was just as reflective as the tunnel around them but two iron handles marked it.

"Should we try it?" Mars asked.

"It might be a trap." Moon said.

Venus looked around her, "Given the current situation..." The other three nodded. They approached the door with caution. Jupiter reached for the handle and, though she was surprised to actually grasp it and not punch a reflective surface, she swung it open in one quick motion. The four senshi piled into the room ready for a fight. Immediately they were confronted with a strangely familiar setting: more reflective tunneling.

Sailor Moon slumped in a whine.

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With a little persuasion, simply a few minutes of relentless attacks, the boys had become all but half-conscious lumps. Mamoru had put up the most for the fight, but without his ability to become Tuxedo Mask he was much more tame. She had securely set them in place and walked the perimeter of the rink twice.

"They are denser than I thought!" she said to herself. Suddenly Demetrius came running in to the rink.

"They've found the first door," he reported.

She looked down at him eyes wide, "The FIRST door?!" she asked in amazement. He looked up at her matter-of-factly, "The smart one, Mercury, is not with them." Astera nodded slowly. That would be a problem. It would mean one of them would still have to be dealt with after tonight. She went back in her mind to remind herself just why she was here; just why she put up with all this time and effort on this forsaken planet...

The pod traveled through space at great speeds, covering the distance between Astera and Nemesis in only two hours. Astera had fallen asleep and when the pod gently touched down on Nemesis, she was not was alert to see the sun setting like a tiny dot on the horizon. The pod was carried by conveyor to the main facilities and opened.

Astera was shaken awake by and old man who smelled of rotting flesh, "Wake up sugar pie," he said. She slapped his dirty hand away and climbed out of the pod. That had been the beginning of her troubles. Shortly after, in her given quarters, she was greeted by a small brown feline who intruded himself as Demetrius. "This journey will not be easy for you, Princess," he told her, "but I will be here to make sure you are lead down the right path." Less than 3 days after her arrival, a transmission from the Earth was intercepted, an raven haired man with a dark crescent moon on his forehead delivered the message to Astera's room.

"Hey," he said as he barged in, "you better get used to this quaint little planet cause it's your new home." He dropped a copy of the transmission in front of her on the floor and walked out. She picked it up and read the words: "2.17.2905 N.K. 23:03 - Rebels of Astera defeated. Planet destroyed." She read the words over and over again, her mind unwilling to believe. No, she thought, no!

"You Promised!" Astera yelled. She looked down, as if startled by her own voice.

"What did I promise?" Demetrius asked.

"Nevermind," she said, "Get them in here, things are ready." Her eyes brimmed with tears as she made her way to her post. This was going to be the end of all her suffering. She had little idea how much truth that thought held.

Chapter VIII: Facing Death

Sailor Astera jumped and caught her breath as she heard echos of heeled boots enter the rink. Quickly and quietly, she shifted her position and hid behind the judge's balcony, watching through the slits in the wall. Darkness shrouded the rink and she could tell the senshi's eyes had not yet adjusted as they inched their way foreword with caution.

"Where are you Astera?" Sailor Moon shouted looking around in the darkness as she listened intently.

Sailor Astera leapt over the banister down onto the rink. One might have barely seen the faint glint of one short silver dagger in each hand, "So you've come, Princess of the White Moon. I hope you are prepared to meet your dark fate."

Sailor Moon turned towards the voice and the other senshi spread out in a protective semicircle in front of her. "Return our friends and fight us honorably! They have done

nothing!"

"It doesn't matter!" Astera scoffed, "Sailor Moon, I'm going to kill you."

Astera ran through the darkness following the voice that had called out. As she approached the senshi, she cried out an incantation that combined the two daggers into a long sword. Adrenaline pumped through her veins and with little effort, she swung sword about her blindly as skid across the smooth surface. Chilled and pain-choked screams echoed through the rink as bloodied bodies slammed to the ice. Sailor Moon backed up against a wall with wide eyes full of terror, "Mars?! Venus?"

Lights came on in a flash and the lit the rink violently. Sailor Moon squinted against the assault at first, then shading her eyes, opened them slowly. "No!" she barely gasped, clutching her hands to her chest and losing the feeling in her legs. The other three senshi lay motionless on the floor, each in a puddle of their own crimson blood. As tears welled up in her eyes, she fell to the floor shaking uncontrollably.

"Dear, sweet Sailor Moon," a laughing voice echoed from above, "You *poor* thing!" Astera jumped down and landed in front of her. She lifted Sailor Moon up with one fist and cast her aside, watching her limp body slide across the ice and slam into the opposite rink wall. Sailor Moon's body arched with the impact and she lay crumpled against the cool ice trembling. Astera went to her and gazed into the pale, empty eyes, "You are nothing, you were never meant to be anything at all," With a quick kick to the side she threw Sailor Moon on her back and pinned her to the ice with her body.

Lifting a glittering silver dagger high above her head with both hands, she smiled madly and felt a surge of energy rush from her toes to her fingertips. "Death is mine to hand out!" she screamed. "REVENGE IS MINE!" As the dagger plunged downward and through bright red bow, the universe trembled. With bloodthirsty violet eyes, Astera rose to her feet above the lifeless body and crushed the dimming Ginzuishou to dust.

She woke up to total darkness. Her palms sweating and she was shaking from that blood-spattered dream. An eager smile crossed her lips as she heard voices in the hall - perhaps it was an omen of the future.

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Sailor Moon had just about given up all hope of ever finding her Mamoru, but the others were still determined and pushed her onward.

"This is ridiculous!" Jupiter said. She slammed a fist against the tunnel wall. Lucky for her it was a flat part, but it shattered none the less. She stared at it in disbelief, then grew very, very red. "What the heck?" she screamed as she began throwing punches left and right. Suddenly all the tunnels around them seemed to melt away and they were left standing in a room right outside the main rink.

They all looked at Jupiter in astonishment. She smiled uneasily, "Heh."

As they entered the rink they stuck close together. It was pitch black and very cold. A harsh laughter broke the silence; it was Astera.

"So you finally did make it! Incompetent trash. It's a puzzle to me how you defeated any enemy at all." She dashed quickly behind them, causing a shift of air and a cold breeze across their legs.

Mars turned with a vicious look and a fist of fire that lit the area a few feet around her, "You're a coward!" Receiving no reply she turned back, but was encountered with blackness beyond the red glow. "Guys?" she said, trying not to sound nervous.

"Mars?" A voice replied, to her right. "Where'd you go?" It was Sailor Moon.

"I'm here! To your left," she said, then realized she was a sitting duck. She went into a fighting stance and walked toward where the voice had come from. She was smart enough to realize the fire made her stand out and she extinguished it. "Keep talking," she said hoping Sailor Moon was also trying to walk towards her voice.

"Over here," Venus' voice said - only she was to Mars' left.

"What?" another voice said. It was Sailor Jupiter, but she sounded as if she were on the other side of the rink.

Suddenly a fluorescent light clanked loudly on and flickered a few times before coming to full power. It shown in a bright cone from the ceiling illuminating a figure was strung up by its arms, its head fallen to one side.

"Mamo-chan!" A voice cried out. Sailor Moon remembered the last time she had seen him this way in the Arctic before the fight with Metallia. "It must be a trap," she thought, "I will not be fooled." She clutched her scepter tightly. The figure rolled its head up and looked through the darkness. Its voice was raspy but it was that of Chiba Mamoru, "Just...kill Astera."

Progressively, three more lights sputtered on, each revealing another of the boys. Shinozaki was tied by his legs, hanging like a rag doll upside-down with his back to the girls. Motoki was tied like a hog by his hands and feet, spinning slightly; his head hung back and his eyes seemed to be rolled back in his head. Yuuichirou was tied at the waist, doubled over; his arms hung limply toward the ground. With each light came a gasp or cry from the darkness.

"Unfortunate for your friend Mercury that she couldn't be here for the show," Astera laughed, "but she wouldn't have any fun anyway. Her boyfriend's already dead!" The rest of the rink was flooded with light and the senshi saw that they were all more than four or five yards from one another. Astera jumped down from the balcony and landed in

front of Mamoru.

"You don't stand a chance Astera!" Mars spat.

"Yeah," Jupiter added, "it's the end of your games. The odds are against you."

"I don't recall asking you to speak." Astera said smugly.

"What do you want from us?" Sailor Moon asked, "If you are a senshi, why are you fighting us?" She was looking at intnetly Mamoru as she asked this. Astera realized that her plan was working just as she had figured it would.

"You are nothing right now, nothing compared to the monster you will become," she declared. "I want you're life in my hands, Sailor Moon. Or shall I call you Neo-Queen Serenity?" Sailor Venus stepped in front of Moon defensively followed by Mars and Jupiter as well.

"You'll have to deal with us first!" Venus glared at Astera with a disdainful eye.

Astera laughed, "Perfect! I was hoping you'd say that. But first, I think we have a slightly more important matter at hand." She motioned to the boys behind her. "I think they'll make great bargaining tools, don't you?"

"No deal!" shouted Jupiter, "Sparkling Wide Pressure!" A huge surge of lightning shot down from the sky through the ceiling and into the interior of the building. In a quick move, Astera jumped from her position and leapt towards the reflective mirrored wall along the side of the rink.

Jupiter altered her aim and released the attack not fully aware of the surroundings. Her rage turned to shock as she watched the attack miss Astera and shatter the wall.

"Watch out!" Venus screamed as she dove at Sailor Moon. But the attack did not head directly towards them and they watched as it flashed upward towards the ceiling. The four senshi stood in horror as the lightening crackled and caught the ceiling, surging many of the lights and throwing them into darkness again. It then ran down the wires that tied Shinozaki; his hanging arms were the closest and fastest way to the ground for the voltage. The current went through his body and jumped to the ice below. The band that had been secured around his neck flash a brilliant red before exploding in a ball of fire.

As Astera watched Jupiter fall to her knees and cry out her beloved's name. She lifted her arms above her head and crossed her wrists calling, "Amethyst Spiritual Delusion!" A flock of tiny violet energy-sucking mirages surrounded Jupiter and she collapsed totally; the mirages began draining energy from her body and mind as she slipped into a state of devastation.

Venus came swiftly from behind and kicked Astera across the back. She rolled past Astera, managing to sweep a kick across her legs and knock her to the ground.

Astera stood up quickly, and looked down at the nasty gash on her right calf. She was invigorated by the fight. "Jupiter should know it's bad luck to break a mirror," she hissed spitefully.

"Don't you know it's dangerous to play with fire!" a voice cried out, "Fire Soul Bird!" Sailor Mars sent her flaming phoenix at the outline of Astera. Mars was appalled when Astera smiled as it approached then simply vanished. The attack soared on and Sailor Moon looked up from her fending the mirages off Jupiter, "No!"

The fire sliced through Yuuichirou's mortal skin like a hot knife through butter. He uttered out a scream of agonizing pain as the entire left side of his torso was set ablaze by the attack. The warmth of the flames melted the ice and the flaming bits of flesh smoldered in the water.

Mars too, collapsed in incredulity. Astera laughed and shouted a command to her mirages. The hungry little energy shades flew over to feast on the fallen Mars.

Sailor Moon stood up and made a motion towards the predatory Astera, then suddenly realized she had not seen Sailor Venus, "Sailor Venus?" she called.

There was a rapid movement in the darkness, and she turned to see two dangling cords under one of the bright flood lights. Motoki had been freed. "Mamo-chan!" she thought as she got up and ran towards her love. Astera reappeared in front of her and Sailor Moon slammed into her, then fell back skidding across the slippery surface. She was unconscious from the fall.

"At last," Sailor Astera scoffed, "at my feet where you belong." She raised a hand to blast an attack at the stunned Sailor Moon, but a blur of brown caught her vision and distracted her. Demetrius had latched onto her arm with all four paws and his eyes were pleading.

"Please stop this! You can't kill her." he said. Astera looked at him with astonishment.

"Get out of my way!" she said with surprise and anger, "What the hell are you doing?" She pushed Demetrius away and dropped her foot right under his belly sending him skidding across the ice with a yowl. She then turned back to Sailor Moon, but her thoughts were now scattered. How could her guardian turn on her? Demetrius caught his balance and ran back at her as she knelt down to grasp Sailor Moon's throat. "I brought her here to help you!" Demetrius shouted at Astera. Then he called to Sailor Moon, asking her to wake up. Sailor Astera was furious. As he ran towards them, she turned her hand on him and carelessly blasted him far across the rink with a powerful beam of dark energy. Sailor Moon's eyes flickered open and she watched Demetrius slam into the rink wall. His brown body bounced and slid, coming to rest motionless on the ice.

"Why?" Sailor Moon asked.

Sailor Astera's eyes narrowed as she looked down upon the struggling soldier on the ice in front of her. "You even turn my own against me." She lifted a hand, "Astera-Nemesis Dagger!" A gold hilted dagger appeared and she glanced down at the semi-stunned girl on the ice in front of her. "Revenge will certainly be sweet!" Remembering her dream vividly, she let out a scream of glory and swung the dagger above her head.

"Not this time! Venus Love Me Chain!" a chain of golden hearts wrapped around Astera's raised wrist and pulled her forcefully down on her side; the dagger skittered across the ice. She struggled to regain her footing, as Venus tried to pull her down like a roped bull.

In a fit of frustration, Sailor Astera shattered the chain apart and ran at Venus. Sailor Venus was in disbelief as she watched in terror as the black and violet figure ran at her in the glimmers of her fading attack. She motioned to block the brunt of the rush, but no impact came.

A young man's voice came howling from the rink's edge and Astera came into the light holding Motoki by the head, another dagger at his throat, "You think that is the only dagger I have?" In a sharp motion she sliced his neck clean open, severing both major arteries. She let the body fall to the ground and wiped the blood off her dagger with her skirt.

With a snap of her fingers, the dragons were around Venus. She fought them off but they became entangled in her hair and drew her to the ground. Weakened, she too collapsed.

By now Sailor Moon had collected herself. She stood up and raised her scepter, "That's enough! I won't let you destroy these lives! How could you? Have you **no** heart?" she was choking on tears. "Moon Princess..." she stopped short. Astera stood in front of Mamoru, her arms folded, her head lifted.

"I can't attack," Sailor Moon thought. "Oh Mamo-chan!" His words came rushing back to her, "Just kill Astera..." She looked into those violet eyes and saw nothing but hatred.

Astera lifted her hand and there was a rumble under the rink. To Sailor Moon's surprise, the ice melted away in one giant circle under where Mamoru was hanging. "I think you might enjoy this, Sailor Moon," she laughed, "I know I will." She walked around the edge of the water, "I've started to have a little thing for him, you know."

Sailor Moon continued staring hard, just waiting for the opportunity to strike she made a few motions to the left and right keeping her distance; but Astera matched her move for move keeping herself between Sailor Moon and the helpless man behind her.

"But unfortunately, so do you," Astera sighed, "and fate has set it so that he must die." She paused, "And you must watch." She pulled her wrists together in front of her chest and thrust them forward, "Celestial Subversion!" A stream of aqua-amethyst light shot across the rink. The scepter fell from Sailor Moon's hand as she succumbed to the illusion of Astera's attack. The wand rolled across the ice, clanking along to Astera's feet. The light shot up and down simultaneously and Sailor Moon became cocooned in a solid rocklike shell, the only thing visible was her face.

"Isn't that splendid?" Astera kicked the scepter and it skittered across the ice slamming into the side wall. "Now, the show must go on."

The lights dimmed in the rink. A slight moan was heard from the darkness, the little energy sucking demons still fluttered about doing their work. The light on Mamoru flickered inconsistently, casting changing shadows on the water below. He lifted his head, only slightly aware of his surroundings, but entirely aware of Usagi's presence. His body was so weak now.

As the ropes holding him began to lower him down, his mind was telling him that he must be being rescued. He tried to move his body but nothing seemed to work the way he wanted. All the blood had rushed to his legs and they felt heavy and cumbersome. His arms had lost all feeling half an hour ago and it took all his effort to lift his head, only to be confronted with darkness. He wanted to badly to fight "Sailor Moon... is in danger..." he thought.

Sailor Moon struggled in her cocoon but it was far too tight for her to fight through. She began to cry as she realized what Astera had planned.

"Mamo-chan, I heard you were quite the swimmer," Astera was amused with herself, "I wonder just how long you can hold your breath!"

"Mamoru!" Sailor Moon screamed out, struggling to break free of the demon that held her. "Leave him alone! It's me you want!" She was frantic now, her grasp on reality was twisted and fading as she struggled. She screamed nonsense, anything to stop her, "Let me be the one! Take my life! I will give you anything! Please stop!" and so on, but Astera just smiled as she watched the figure lower.

When his feet touched the water and his pants began to soak up the frigid liquid, a sudden realization dawned on him. This wasn't a rescue, this was more torture. As the water level reached his waist he was far more alert than he had been hanging. He looked up with pleading eyes - no words could describe how one feels as death taps on their door and lets it self in.

When the water was to his neck he became aware of the need to fight this. With weak and beaten legs he tried to kick and keep his head above the water. As the ropes lowered his arms into the water, he flailed them around - but he could not feel if they accomplished anything. For what seemed to him like hours he struggled, fighting what

was truly inevitable the moment the ropes began to lower. He waited for Sailor Moon to come to his rescue, he struggled knowing that she was on her way to help him right then. As his head finally slipped under, he waited for her hand to pull him up. And under the surface, with lungs full of water, he departed this life believing his Princess would come.

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Ami sat up in her bed suddenly. She had been asleep with a fever for hours and woke to find the sun had set. But what startled her was the dreams she had been having. Something was terribly wrong; a darkness had settled in her soul.

She walked over to her desk and turned on her lamp, and took out a sheet of paper. She rummaged through her desk draw until she found a pencil and sharpened it.

"To my dearest friends," she began, "It has come to my attention that I can no longer be a sailor senshi. I am unable to be of any sufficient use to the team like I should be, and I think it's in the best for me and the team if I simply resign. I wish you all luck and," she stopped. And what? she thought. And I'm abandoning you? And I'm selfish? She sighed and rested her heavy head in her hands. Her eyes happened to wander upon an old dusty book lying on top of her bookshelf. Where did that come from?

She got up and pulled her chair over then gently took the heavy book off the case. She blew the dust of the cover and rubbed the caked stuff off with her hand. The gold writing on the cover read. "The Legends of The Silver Millennium: Stories of the Kingdom." How could she possibly have this book?

Ami tried to remember the many gifts Chibiusa had brought from her home in the future. Ami could not recall having ever received this book from her; surely she would remember such a prized possession. Looking at the publication date, she determined it would be published a century after the rise of Crystal Tokyo. Flipping through the Table of Contents, she saw that it contained all the tales of the Moon Kingdom of the past as well as some information on the early history of Crystal Tokyo. She had obviously stuck it up on the shelf and forgotten about it, though she just couldn't imagine how.

She flipped through the pages glancing at the beautiful illustrations and skimming the stories. She stopped suddenly, her heart jumping. The title read, "The Story of Astera." Quickly she came out of her dreamy state and sat up right reading, skimming for any information. "Astera was a strange planet in the Sol System." she read. "A remnant from a pre-Sol system, it had a strange orbit which alienated its people from the Moon

Kingdom. The rebellious ruling family wished to overthrow the Moon Kingdom. The history of this rivalry was thought to be only a legend from the Ancient Kingdom, but the inhabitants of Crystal Tokyo soon learned of its validity. Though the last of the rebels were destroyed in the year 2905, the Legend of Astera serves as a reminder of the extent to which people will go for power. Read this legend and know the darkness of a vengful heart:

"A long time ago, before the rise of the Moon Kingdom, the Solar System was in turmoil. War and disease ravaged the planets, and the people of the Solar System clung to the story that a legendary savior would appear with the mark of peace to lead the system into a new age. A daughter of the ruling family on the moon bore a child with white hair and a golden crescent mark on her forehead. The child, Selene, was proclaimed a savior and raised to become our beloved Queen Serenity.

The King of Astera was a dark sorcerer. He was greedy and jealous of the Moon's power in the Solar System, and he quietly began brew a rebellion against the Moon. He spread rumors that their messiah was fabricated and false. His Queen, Kiara, became pregnant. While she slept one night, he used his powers to cast a spell on the child. Shockingly, when the child was born, it bore the crescent mark of the Moon! The people of Astera proclaimed they had the savior and that Queen Serenity was a fraud. King Yukio spread the lie that Serenity had been falsified by the Moon Kingdom in order to stay in power. He called for acts of war to dethrone Serenity and replace his young Princess Astera in her place. Through his daughter, the wicked King Yukio wanted to rule the Solar Sytem. Our gentle Queen Serenity had a wavering heart; she wanted more than anything to live peacefully.

Queen Serenity's advisors told her they would attack the enemy and defeat him, but she was peace-minded and wanted no conflicts. She decided it would be wise to send a small group of soldiers to bring a hand written letter to the king and queen of Astera requesting time together to decide what was best for the Solar System. However, the people of Astera would not allow the letter to be delivered until they first read it, and since the orders were to only allow the letter to be read by its intended recipients, they remained in a deadlock.

Tired of the foolish bickering and desiring a peaceful outcome, Queen Kiara set out to retrieve the letter. The King would not let her go alone, so he sent her off with a group of lightly armed warriors as guards. As they approached the camp of the Moon Kingdom, darkness settled on the land. A scout from the camp saw the group approaching and mistook it as a secret attack by the Asterian rebels. They quickly warned the others. Another group was ordered out to come up behind the approaching band and destroy

them.

Since the Queen and her guards had come lightly armed, they had little means to protect themselves from the ambush and they were slaughtered by the light of fire and moon.

The next day, when his wife had not returned, Yukio went in search of her. There on the side of the road, he found Kiara's lifeless body, her silky blonde hair caked in mud and dried blood and her fair skin turned gray with death. He cried out from that place in time and claimed he would seek revenge for this horrible deed.

When Queen Serenity heard what had happened she was taken aback with horror and sadness and immediately went to Astera to meet with the King. Against the wishes of her advisors, because of her delicate condition with child, she went into the meeting room alone. As she stepped in, King Yukio held a sword up to her neck and told her she was foolish and he would kill her and her unborn child. She sympathized with him and her voice never faltered. Slowly she convinced him that all was not lost and that the queen's death may not have been in vain. As a token of her hope for peace, she offered him a gift.

The Obsidian crystal had been made by the finest artisans and spiritualists in the Moon Kingdom and would allow Yukio and his kingdom to have expanded lifetimes. Yukio reluctantly accepted the gift and went to bide his time, for he was still very bitter.

Astera was slowly leaving the solar system as it followed its awkward orbit. Then 16 years later, the horrible day of Metallia's attack on the Moon Kingdom came unexpectedly and King Yukio sent no help. Everyone was caught off guard and all of the royal family was killed - except Queen Serenity. With her daughter and heir dead and no hope for her kingdom, she used the remaining power in her crystal to send all her loved ones to a peaceful future on Earth.

During this battle, Astera had traveled far out of the system and existed in seclusion. With the fall of the Moon Kingdom, the entire planet went into a frozen stasis. When Crystal Tokyo was formed, the planet Astera returned to life. Yukio continued to raise his daughter to believe that she was the true heir to the Solar System's great power and that the Moon Kingdom had fallen because of its greed and lies. He believed their awakening to be the sign of a new dawn of power. It took many more years for the planet to reenter the main section of the solar system. When they finally entered the regular orbital plane, it was the year 2905. King Yukio was pleased to see a desolate Moon, but was shocked to find Neo Queen Serenity had come to power in the

gluttonous splendor that was Crystal Tokyo on Earth.

The mad king saw it as terribly unjust that the daughter of a murderer was in power of the entire solar system. He had convinced himself over thousands of years that Princess Astera was the true messiah and destined leader of the system. He had been teaching her and all in his kingdom about the Moon Kingdom and how they were cruel, heartless, and greedy. And above all, he told her, was the Queen, the most vile person in the entire universe, bent on avoiding justice with bribery. He was convinced that her heir, our beloved Neo Queen Serenity, would be the same. His skewed views were ever distorted through eyes of hatred. His feverish need for revenge culminated in an attack on Crystal Tokyo.

As the battle wore on, more and more of King Yukio's troops fell until at last it was just him astride his horse. He refused to surrender. In an attempt to gain the revenge he sought, he threw a dagger directly at Neo Queen Serenity. King Endymion was there to protect her and the Queen had no choice but to use some of the power of her Ginzuishou to defeat this man. However, King Yukio had one final hand to deal. Sacrificing everything, he activated a destruction sequence at the core of his planet in one final attempt to destroy the Queen. The planet Astera was destroyed, exploding along fault lines that tore the planet apart. Its pieces settled into a regular orbit between Mars and Jupiter. Serenity, with help from Endymion and her guardians, escaped unscathed. She knew the far reaching powers of hatred. Using the Ginzuishou, Serenity willed the planet Astera to be faded from all know existence and memory for as far back into history as she could feel. She wished, in effect, for it to be erased it from existence. She then sanctified the new asteroid belt by placing four new guardian seeds there to grow.

King Yukio was most certainly killed and it is believed that his child, the Princess Astera, was also lost in the battle. Let this tale of dark revenge be a reminder to all that seeking solace in hatred will not soothe tragedy. Darkness reaps dark rewards."

Ami sat staring at the last paragraph for a few seconds. Astera was from the future but had been alive since the Moon Kingdom. She was here for revenge of the death of not only her father, but also her mother and her entire planet. Quickly Ami flipped through the index looking for 'crystals'. She turned to the section and skimmed for the creation information. There had to be some more information in here that they could use.

"Ah ha!" she read aloud, "Some crystals are those of a pure heart, spirit, or soul. The power of these crystals forms the life of every living creature." She looked up at herself in the mirror hoping that she was right and could stop Sailor Astera in time.

Chapter IX: The Final Stand

Sailor Astera walked to the edge of the water and looked down at the floating body of Mamoru. She felt a choking in her throat and a sting in her eyes, but it all welled up into an dreadful laugh that echoed through the empty rink. With a pass of her hand, the little energy sucking dragons fluttered to the devastated Sailor Moon and began too fly around her, eating away at the cocoon entrapping her.

Sailor Moon's eyes were closed but she was fully conscious and aware of what had just occurred. She knew that her beloved was dead and deep inside a terrible feeling crept: the feeling that it was all her fault.

Astera watched and waited. Sailor Moon's life would be hers now; there was no other way. With their entire lot of boyfriends dead and all their energy destroyed, the White Moon soldiers had nothing on their side. Astera knelt beside the water and pulled the body to the edge. With some effort, she lifted it up onto the ice and checked the cold, wet flesh for a pulse. There was none. Satisfied, she stood up to finish the job.

By now the little demons had eaten away most of the cocoon. Astera could have just called it off, but she wanted her pets to have some fun. As she approached the feast, Sailor Moon was mostly uncovered, held now only by stands around her waist, wrists, and ankles. She remained there, eyes closed, head fallen to the side.

"So I guess that's the end of it," Astera said in an almost sympathetic voice. "You know, after all this, I thought I would feel some sense of power, some amazing urge to run out into the world knowing I've won." She sighed, "But somehow, I feel like I have made a mistake somewhere." A slight smile crossed her lips as she formed a dagger in the hand behind her back, "Oh I know what it is!" She took a few steps closer and leaned in close beside Sailor Moon's ear, "I haven't claimed my new crystal yet. Can't really be the Queen of the Universe without that, huh?"

With that, Astera grabbed Sailor Moon's brooch and tried to rip it from her chest while prying the at the Ginzuishou with the dagger. However, she found it almost impossible and the brooch cracked as Sailor Moon's sailor outfit turned to pink ribbons. Astera struggled with the brooch but it would not budge from its place.

"Let it go you fool!" She screamed, but a blinding light suddenly spilled from the small stone and illuminated the entire rink. Astera backed up, shielding her eyes from the

pure, heavenly light. She reached for her crystal that hung from a chain around her neck and clutched it tightly, praying for strength. The brilliant light cast harsh shadows around Demetrius' body on the edge of the rink.

The restrains holding Sailor Moon disintegrated and she fell to the ice on her knees. Slowly, she stood up. A powerful wind swirled around her as she lifted the Ginzuishou high above her. The light became more focused as it reduced itself to a glow and formed a pulsating aura around the crystal.

Usagi opened her eyes and smiled in care and love, "Aster, you have been hurt. I can help you and together we can make save you from this darkness. Please don't destroy yourself or others, it isn't necessary." She looked up through the windows at the top of the rink and focused her thoughts on the Moon, "Please help me, Serenity." The Moon's light grew brighter ever so slightly, and Usagi was instantly enveloped in a gleaming dress of white and gold. Her long golden tresses spun around her in wild motions as the Ginzuishou's energy pulled the air masses in the rink around. The crescent on her forehead shown radiantly.

This only angered Aster more. This Princess, this vile wicked woman, was to grow up to own the universe. She had no right.

"Let me heal you," Serenity said.

"I don't need any healing, you wicked descendent of the White Moon! This world, this universe needs to be cleansed of the hatred and destruction that **you** will bring to the future! You must be destroyed here and now, before you grow stronger, before you become the egotistical, wicked queen of the future!" Aster ripped the crystal off the chain, "And I will be the one to take your place!"

"So be it." Serenity closed her eyes and prayed for all the help she could get. With these prayers she imbued the hope that Aster would someday know the faults of her ways, "She is a sailor senshi; must this be the only way?" Serenity asked herself. Her eyes narrowed and she focused on Aster who seemed suddenly a little more unsure of herself. With the help of her inner power and the power that remained from her friends, she cried out, "Cosmic Moon Power!"

A violent light burst from the Ginzuishou and the ice below them cracked and splintered. Aster fell to the ground and was severely stunned by the impact of the blast. Serenity's intent was now was to destroy; if this enemy could not be helped, she must be killed.

"Pure powers of the White Moon, please give me this strength!"

Aster regained her posture and was facing the blast of the attack head on. Her grip on the Adazuishou was so tight its edges cut into her skin. With hands bloodied from herself and others, she held the powerful weapon in front of her, "Amethyst Crystal Power!" An explosion equivalent to, if not larger than the one from the Silver Crystal

ripped through the rink. The other three senshi lay motionless on the floor, harsh shadows playing around them.

The intense violet light began to counter the pure white light of Serenity's Ginzuishou. It was now a struggle of endurance, a battle to death until the weakest collapsed to the ice. Neither was prepared to give up.

Serenity could not believe the power of the Adazuishou actually appeared a formidable rival for the Ginzuishou. With all her mind, soul, and body she released everything she had, and yet the crystals seemed equal in power. Where the two powers collided, there was an awful sound of unearthly noises. The terrifying sounds carried down the street to the ears of Sailor Mercury, who had been running for the last ten minutes with the book clutched in her arm. "Come on Sailor Moon, just a little longer," she ran as fast as she could but she felt as though she was moving nowhere, as if in a nightmare. When she finally saw the rink, she hardly recognized it; the entire scene in front of her had blurred into a mass of strange shapes and colors. She could barely make out the stairs to the main entrance. "Just don't lose it now," she pleaded to herself, "Do it for Derek." With that thought came renewed strength and she pulled down her visor and raced through the doors with a sudden confidence.

The stalemate was still being fiercely upheld when Mercury came charging into the rink. When she saw Serenity, she realized her strength was failing; she could not have been a second later.

"Serenity, you have to heal her! She isn't meant to be this way!" She shouted from the edge of the rink. In a quick motion, Mercury scanned in the direction of the battle and typed variables and figures into the computer. She swung her view to her friends on the floor. She gasped as there were no lights present in their bodies. However, when she glanced up at Serenity through the visor she saw her as a translucent body with a beautiful white light glowing in her hands. Beside her, three more beautiful lights of red, green, and yellow glowed with intensity. When she looked at Astera, it was no surprise to her that a glow was not present inside of her. However, there was a bright lavender light from her hands. The crystal!

Serenity was wincing. She was weakening and she knew her strength could not sustain a healing attack on Astera. She trusted Mercury's guidance, but not her own constitution. Her eyes welled with tears as she thought of the consequences of her failure. All the lost lives: all her friends, Mamoru, Chibi-USA. She struggled to keep up the fight but the violet light was impossibly gaining power over the Ginzuishou. "Impossible!"

Sailor Mercury dropped her visor and the mini-computer faded. She too looked up through the windows of the rink and prayed. Then she took a quick moment to think of Derek. "We had been apart so long. Maybe soon, we can be together once again." She walked to Serenity and put her hand on her shoulder. Serenity looked over and saw the two cerulean orbs gazing at her with nothing but loyalty and admiration. No words were

exchanged for there was nothing to say. Mercury bowed slightly, her arm across her chest in a sign of respect, then stepped in front of Serenity, directly in the path of Astera's attack.

"Mercury Planet Power!" An aqua glow radiated all over the soldier's body as she formed a shield in front of her Princess.

Serenity cried out for her to stop, but Mercury would not move. She stood firm, her body planted in front of the one she was sworn to protect - her mind felt as if it might explode with the pain and the force of Astera's attack. Every fiber in her body told her to stand down and retreat, but her mind was pure and focused and her mission clear.

Serenity looked about her and realized that she would need to release the full power of her crystal if Astera was going to be defeated. "Such is my fate..." she thought, as she clutched the Ginzuishou's cooling surface. Sailor Mercury faltered and fell on one knee. Serenity, still shielded, began regaining strength. She collected the power she felt around her and focused on the pure thoughts of eliminating all evil feelings of vengeance from within Astera's soul. Serenity herself did not know that the crystal was indeed the soul that needed cleansing.

As Mercury collapsed the violet light stopped abruptly. Serenity kneeled on the floor and Mercury was flat in front of her, all of her life taken.

Astera was weak, but standing. Her voice was faint but there was such a heavy silence in the rink, it could be heard throughout. "A valiant effort, Mercury: to try to stop me even after your princess had fallen." She walked toward the two. "And you Serenity, were a challenging opponent, though not as challenging as I had hoped." Astera bent down and touched Mercury's wrist to check for signs of life. Sudden movements made her look up. Serenity was gone.

"Moon Healing Escalation!" Astera turned with her hand still on Mercury's wrist as another blast of pure white light engulfed her. She forced the Adazuishou to the light but it would not emit an attack. She swore and called out her incantations over and over to no avail. The crystal began to glow with a pure light from within. The dark violet in the crystal slowly faded and the dim lavender light emerged and cautiously grew brighter and more intense.

"What is this?" she screamed, "What are you doing to it?"

The crystal casing shattered and the dim lavender light grew brighter and brighter. Slowly, it took over illuminating the rink, as the healing light from Serenity's crystal forced the Adazuishou to take its true form. The powerful light of the Ginzuishou began cleansing the wounds of the fallen men and soldiers around her, breathing into them another chance at life in the face of certain eternal rest.

At last, all her energy expended, Serenity's body hit the ice. She struggled to open her

eyes. The last thing she saw was the pure lavender glow of the true soul of Astera, float gently into her body as it too fell to the ice. Then darkness.

The Ginzuishou rolled across the ice, dimmed, and turned to stone...

Epilogue

Usagi's eyelids slowly lifted. "I feel so light," she thought dreamily, "it's very nice to be this way." Her body felt warm and as she opened her eyes she saw herself surrounded by and floating in a warm endless glow. She looked down at herself, "Where am I?" She was nude; her skin felt smooth and soft and she felt neither exposed or threatened. "What is this place...? Did I use up the last of my life?"

"You did." A familiar voice echoed through the light. Slowly, the outline of a sailor senshi formed in Usagi's view: her hair was a long loose waterfall of gold and she wore a very familiar black and purple sailor outfit. In her left hand she carried a tall ornate staff that pulsed with lavender light from a strange curved symbol at the top.

"Sailor Astera?" Usagi asked in surprise, "Your hair! Your clothes!" The colors on Astera's outfit had been reversed; where previously a crescent moon had adorned her forehead, a golden tiara with a purple gem sparkled in the heavenly light. Sailor Astera came forward to Usagi and placed a hand on her shoulder.

"I have you to thank, Usagi," she smiled warmly, "for showing me my true path." Usagi stared wide-eyed at the new soldier before her; tears slowly came to her eyes as she pulled from Astera's touch and turned away.

"Usagi?"

Usagi turned to her with a tear filled smile, "I am so happy for you," she said honestly, "but, the others..." Sailor Astera's concerned look lifted as she embraced Usagi and wiped a tear from her cheek.

"Release your fears," she said as she waved her staff across the divine space, "your loved ones are safe." Through a hazy mirage in the clouds, Usagi could see Mamoru, Rei, and all the others waking up slowly in the ice rink; their wounds were all healed, their bodies returned to life. "It was your selfless power that saved them, Usagi." Usagi's tears continued at the sight of her loved ones safe and well. "Thank goodness," she sighed, then closing her eyes felt a sudden pain in her heart. She wanted so much to be with them.

"Astera, where will you go now?"

Now it was Astera's turn to bear the emotion, "It's because of you that I am free. You see, all this time I have been consumed by darkness; the fear and hatred of the past was laid upon me long before I was able to discern anything on my own. My power was

not destined for that," she felt a tug at the thought of all the pain she had caused. "My true mission is a mystery to me, but I will have to seek it on my own."

"I see," Usagi smiled, "then you will not return to Earth?"

"I was never meant to exist in your world," she sighed, "but you are." Usagi looked up expectantly.

"You mean...?"

Astera lifted her staff and the lavender light began to grow, "I cannot stay in this form for long. You're friends are waiting for you, Usagi. Please remember me this way! Your brilliant light is always meant to shine in this universe!"

Usagi was blinded by the increasing light and she shaded her eyes. In a flash, she felt as though she was falling, falling so fast - down, down, down....

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"Usako?" a startled voice choked out as she opened her eyes once again.

"She's alive!" another voice added, laughing with tears of joy. Usagi sat up, helped by strong arms. She was surrounded by all her friends, each one of them back to normal and beyond overjoyed at her revival. Cries of joy echoed through the demolished skating rink as Usagi realized the moment and embraced her friends. After their joyous reunion, Usagi noticed something near them on the ice. She reached out for it; it glistened in the rising sunlight: a small amethyst crystal.

"Remember me this way..." Usagi recalled. Smiling, she placed the stone in her pocket as her friends led her out into the new breaking day.

THE END!!! ^^

Then, [E-mail Sakura!](#) and tell me what you think about my story!!
Then, [read the sequel!](#)