

# ***Isekai by Moonlight***

**A fanfic by Rob Kelk**

**Based on the works of Naoko Takeuchi and others**

Updated on March 1, 2025

The original text and original characters of this work are copyright © 2022-2025 by Rob Kelk. Unauthorized reproduction of this work is prohibited.

As per section 29.21 (1) of the Copyright Act of Canada, [R.S.C., 1985, c. C-42](#), it is a federal offence for anyone to accept payment for a copy of this work.

Unfamiliar ceiling. Where was I?  
Then I realized what I'd thought. Better take a look around.  
It was a small bedroom... no, a studio apartment, and I was sleeping on a mattress on the floor. Not a mattress, a futon. Japan, or someplace inspired by it?  
More importantly, why was I here, instead of in my own bed?  
I got up. Rather more easily than I thought I would.  
Looking around, I saw on a desk an envelope addressed to Rob Donaldson.  
That was my name. Except that it wasn't.  
The letter inside the envelope was written in Japanese, using a mix of all four character sets. I had no trouble reading the first few lines.  
Somebody had messed with my brain. Quickly, I grabbed a pencil and paper, and checked whether I still knew how to read and write in English. Thankfully, I did.  
The letter told me that I was in a different world, and in a rejuvenated body.  
I ran for the washroom – which after the fact I realized I already knew where to find – and looked in the mirror. My face looked back at me. My young-teen face. No acne, though.  
Right. Of course I'm going to be at the peak of health if I'm going to be trapped in another world. Stupid genre conventions, making me live my teenage years all over again. I wasn't particularly fond of the first time around. Although I had to admit that my teen years, the first time around, were better than many people's.  
I went back to the desk and finished reading the letter.  
Apparently, I had some superhuman powers to go along with my youthened body.  
Which meant I was going to need them. Stupid genre conventions. I expected that "Stupid genre conventions" was going to become my catch phrase in this world.  
It would have been nice if the letter had told me what my powers were. Stupid genre conventions.  
The letter – unsigned, of course; we can't expect the Random Omnipotent Being who did this to me to actually identify itself – ended with "Don't be late for your school transfer interview." Insert my new catch phrase here. Again.  
So, which school was I transferring to, where is it, and where did they expect that I was transferring from?  
And what was today's date? I switched on the TV, and discovered it was September 5, 1992. Which means everything I took for granted in the way of IT didn't exist yet. On top of the TV – of course the 1990s didn't have flat-screen TVs – I found another letter, this one addressed to me and having been sent from Kuritsu Juban Chuugakkou.  
Ah, no.  
Noooooo...  
I've been dropped into *Sailor Moon*, haven't I?  
In 1992. What was waiting for me outside – the Dark Kingdom or the Black Moon?

## ***Isekai by Moonlight***

### **Chapter 1**

There was only one way to find out. I had to go look. After breakfast. Please tell me there's something in the fridge.  
Good – I found eggs, ham, and bread. White bread, but what could I do? Ham and egg sandwich for breakfast. And coffee. With stevia instead of sugar because Japan sold stevia for decades before anybody in North America did. That's one less worry for me when watching my weight.  
Fed and dressed, and the dishes cleaned, I realized somehow that I'd better hurry if I was going to make my appointment. I gathered up everything I needed and headed out...  
...only to literally bump into a very attractive young-teenage girl.  
"I'm terribly sorry!" We said it at the same time. Then, after a beat, I added, "I should have looked before stepping outside."  
"No, it was my fault. I should have looked for people leaving their apartments." She looked to be my own age, to within a year or two – my new age, that is. Stupid genre conventions. She was tall for a Japanese girl; I guessed taller than five and a half feet. She looked surprised when she realized she had to look up to me. Even in Canada, I was on the tall side; I had a few inches on her. And she had lovely green eyes, and she wore her auburn hair in a ponytail, and she had rose piercings in her earlobes. She was gorgeous, despite the old-fashioned school uniform that she wore.  
Stupid genre conventions. But maybe this one wasn't so stupid.

"Oh, but I'm being rude. I'm Rob Donaldson, and I'm pleased to meet you."

"Kino Makoto. Happy to meet you. But I have to be going; I have an appointment at the school I'm transferring to."

I held up my letter from Kuritsu Juban Chuugakkou, making sure that she could see the school's logo. "We wouldn't happen to be transferring in to the same school, would we?"

"What a coincidence!"

Stupid genre conventions. Although I expected this one as soon as I heard her name. "Shall we go together? Once I lock my door, that is."

She thought for a moment. "Why not? Us outsiders need to stick together, after all."

As I locked my door, I confirmed that I was in apartment 201. Which meant Makoto wasn't, so this wasn't the manga continuity. We headed down the stairs together, then out to the street ... where we noticed an Asahi vending machine.

Makoto-san smiled. "That's convenient."

"I thought people our age weren't supposed to drink alcohol in Japan."

"Who cares about that silly rule?"

"The neighbours, and the police." I sighed theatrically. "So don't get caught."

Her smile turned into a grin. "As if I would."

Once we were on the bus, I asked, "If you don't mind me asking, why are you changing schools at this time of year?"

She thought for a moment, then decided to give me the same answer that I knew she'd be giving a certain blonde shortly. "I'm being carried by the wind. I have a feeling that I'm needed here. So here I am. Why are you changing schools now?"

My mouth worked on automatic while I thought that I needed to look out for the Dark Kingdom. "In North America, September is the start of the school year. Although I just got to Japan, so that doesn't really matter, does it?"

"I guess not."

We continued to chat about matters of great import, such as the weather and where to find a decent convenience store near our apartment building. Then, after a lull in our conversation, Makoto announced, "Neither of us are going to fit in, you know."

I nodded. "I know. But, hey, we're neighbours and schoolmates. We have each other. And maybe we'll find somebody who'll accept us for who we are."

"You're a lot more optimistic than I am, Donarudoson-san."

I couldn't tell her that I fully expected that at least she would become friends with Usagi. And I suppressed a wince at her pronunciation of my name – my new name. "Kino-san, I know that we just met, but, please, call me Rob."

"Did I mangle your name that badly?"

I smiled to show that it wasn't that big a deal. "Well, yes. But I'm also used to being on a first-name basis with my friends. And I hope we can be friends."

"It's against all the unspoken rules to be on a first-name basis with somebody you just met less than an hour ago... Robu-san," she finished with a sly smile.

I'd forgotten just how much of a rule-breaker Makoto-san was shown to be in her first few episodes in the first season, despite her wearing an older school uniform instead of the sailor fuku that I knew was our new school's girls' uniform. And I never knew how devastatingly attractive she was with a sly smile on her face.

Then she added. "Will you call me Makoto?"

"We're neighbours and schoolmates – and friends." I used the Japanese word nakama there, not tomodachi, and hoped that I had the correct shade of meaning for what I wanted to say. "Of course I will, Makoto-san."

And the bus was at our stop. Not at the school – Kuritsu Juban Chuugakkou was a block and a half away. Makoto sighed. "Here we are," she said with a bit of trepidation.

"Let's do this," I replied with as much optimism as I could muster.

According to my transcript, Rob Donaldson's father was in Japan at the invitation of the government, and I was staying in Tokyo to get a stable education while he traveled from city to city doing... something. The records specifically didn't say.

Great. That meant I was probably a target even if I did nothing but study, because somebody was no doubt going to be inconvenienced by what he was doing.

Assuming he even existed, and wasn't somebody made up to justify my presence in Japan.

Stupid genre conventions.

The school's principal, one Naoya Takeuchi, raised an eyebrow at this part of the transcript, but let it pass without comment.

Once our paperwork was completed and approved, we were assigned to our classes – Makoto-san to class 6 and me to class 5.

I remembered that Usagi-san, Naru-san, and Umino-san were in class 1, so I didn't need to worry about being pestered about my private life by the first and third person on that list – at least, not until Usagi met Makoto and my neighbour introduced her new friend to me. Maybe I'd be lucky and nobody that I knew from the anime was in class 5.

No, of course I wasn't that lucky. Stupid genre conventions.

"The seat at the end of the first aisle is available, Donarudoson-san."

The homeroom teacher mangled my name just as badly as Makoto-san had. At least I had a seat in a corner, so I wouldn't have too many people around me. But who I did have sitting right next to me... May as well bow to the inevitable and run with the stupid genre conventions.

"Hello, I'm Rob Donaldson. Please be kind to me, sempai."

The student beside me looked up, and almost smiled. She replied in English, "I'm Ami Mizuno. I'm pleased to meet you. But I'm not your upperclassman, I'm your classmate."

I smiled and answered, "Thank you for the correction. I hope that we won't get into trouble for speaking English in class."

Ami-san looked surprised, then said in Japanese, "We shouldn't be having a private conversation in class, no. I'm sorry."

I bowed my head slightly. "I also apologize for my rudeness to the class."

The class appeared to accept our apologies. Some of them looked nervous, though. But I couldn't help towering over them; if they were intimidated by me being taller than anyone else in the room, there was nothing I could do about it.

Some of my braver classmates introduced themselves between subjects. A few – the ones who I walked over to visit, instead of them visiting me – suggested that I was wasting my time trying to get Mizuno-san to open up to me... to which I replied that it was my time to waste if I wanted. That shut most of them up. One persisted, although he was smart enough not to say anything negative, or have his say when she could hear him.

"Donarudoson-san, she only studies. There's no way you could convince her to look at you, or at anything that isn't a book."

"Sato-san, I'll be honest with you. She reminds me of me, back in Canada, before I learned that I needed to talk with other people. Doesn't she have any friends at all?"

He frowned. "Only Tsukino-san in class 1. But we're all convinced that Tsukino-san is only using Mizuno-san as a free tutor."

"That's rather unkind to this Tsukino-san, isn't it? But even if it's true, that means Mizuno-san doesn't spend every single minute of her time reading books."

Sato's frown deepened; I guessed that he didn't like being corrected by somebody he'd just met. "Maybe not, but she doesn't open up to anybody in class, either."

"I'm here in Japan to learn and to make friends, Sato-san. And the 'make friends' part of that means I have to at least try."

"I see what you're saying, Donarudoson-san. But I still think you're wasting your time." The English teacher walked in, and we returned to our desks as she walked to the lectern.

I didn't bother speaking with Sato-san again that day.

And Sakurada-sensei mangled my name, too.

The school day ended uneventfully. When the class representative asked me which club I wanted to join, I asked whether there was a Conversational English club in the school. There wasn't, so I told him that I would need to think about which club I might want to try out.

As I packed my school bag, I heard Sato-san talking with one of his friends about a sukeban who had just transferred in to class 6.

That's at least two people he was judging by superficial features. Makoto might be an iconoclast for now, but she wasn't a hoodlum. I had no desire to find out what he really thought about me, being a foreigner. But I didn't expect to find out, because at that point I didn't want to spend any more time with Sato-san than I absolutely needed to.

Makoto and I decided to walk home, which led us to discovering a supermarket reasonably close to our apartment building. We each bought groceries for two days and small gifts to give to our neighbours when we introduced ourselves to them, and she offered to make dinner for the two of us. Since I wasn't a fool, I accepted her offer.

The next morning, as I was changing shoes at school, I noticed Sato-san talking with a boy with slightly-messy hair and extremely thick glasses.

Which explained where Umino-san got the rumour about Makoto-san from.

I did not point them out to Makoto-san; her shoebox wasn't close enough to mine that we could talk quietly. I nodded to her and headed for class 5, passing the two boys along the way.

Wondering whether the powers that the anonymous letter said I had included clairaudence, or even really good hearing, I did my best to listen to their conversation as I continued walking.

Of course I couldn't. Why couldn't the letter writer simply tell me what I could and couldn't do? Stupid genre conventions.

Classes ensued.

Lunchtime came around, and Ami-san... no, I had to remember to call her Mizuno-san, at least for now... was kind enough to direct me to the closest door to the school's courtyard. Of course I wasn't about to eat lunch in the classroom or the cafeteria; I think I already mentioned that my simple presence was making some people nervous. Just because I towered over every other student in the school, and most of the teachers as well, was no reason to hate me, really. But I've said that already, and I knew better than to disrupt the harmony of the school if I could help it. It was in the student guidebook, after all.

So I headed outside... to discover that Makoto-san was already having lunch with a cute blonde girl who had not yet been introduced to me so I had to pretend I didn't know who she was.

Stupid genre conventions. But I wasn't going to let this one get in my way.

I made my way over to them, held up my bento, and asked with a smile, "May I join you for lunch, ladies?"

They looked up at me. And up. And up. The blonde squeaked out, "Oni!"

I pouted theatrically, which made her giggle, then I smiled. "Sorry, miss, but I don't own tiger-striped shorts or a spiked club. I'm just a normal if somewhat tall exchange student. I'm Rob Donaldson; I'm happy to meet you."

"I'm sorry!" Rising to her feet and bowing, she continued, "I'm Tsukino Usagi. Nice to meet you!" She was a *short* girl, and not just compared to Kino-san and me.

After I returned her bow, we sat down on either side of Makoto-san. "I see you're making friends here, neighbour-san."

"Neighbour?" Usagi-san asked with a puzzled look on her face.

"We're next-door neighbours, in fact," Makoto-san confirmed. "Robu-san is in the apartment right beside the stairs. And it's nice having to look up to somebody who's my age, for a change." She turned to me. "If you don't mind me asking..."

"I'm 183 centimetres tall – six feet exactly." I still had an inch to go before I was my full height, but that last inch wouldn't show up for a year yet.

"Wow!"

Smiling, I commented, "You get impressed easily, Tsukino-san."

"Call me Usagi! Just like Mako-chan does!"

I raised one eyebrow, Spock style. Then I grinned and chuckled. "'Mako-chan'? Maybe I should call you that, too."

"Don't you dare! I don't want people thinking we're dating."

"So, in order for people to not think we're dating, you want me to call you Makoto-san instead of Mako-chan."

She thought for a moment, frowning at the start and sighing at the end. "Since you put it that way, maybe you should call me Mako-chan."

"Agreed." I turned to Usagi-san. "And I'll call you Usagi if you call me Rob, Usagi-san."

She smiled and nodded. "Okay, Robu-san!"

We chatted about the school and our experiences during our first day and a half. When I mentioned having the desk next to Mizuno-san's, Usagi smiled. "Oh, good! Ami-chan needs more friends."

Time to look puzzled for a brief moment. "'Ami-chan'? Oh, yes – one of our classmates mentioned that you knew Mizuno-san. I take it that you'd prefer I get to know her better."

Usagi nodded. "Yeah. She needs somebody to talk with who isn't me, or Rei."

"Rei?"

Usagi nodded again. "A friend of ours. She goes to a different school."

I noticed the time, and stood up. "Speaking of school, afternoon classes are going to start soon. It would look bad if Mako-chan and I were late for them on our second day."

The girls also stood up, and we all headed for the door back into the school. "And we mustn't make a bad impression during the first week," Makoto grumbled.

"I know. But if I'm going to be Mizuno-san's friend as well as yours, then I have to be a good boy, don't I? She has a reputation of being one of the best students in the school."

Makoto grinned. "Are you gathering a harem, Robu-san?"

"Are you volunteering, Mako-chan?" I countered with a grin of my own. Without waiting for an answer, I shook my head and continued, "But seriously, absolutely not. I doubt I could keep up with more than one girlfriend. Not that I have a girlfriend yet."

Afternoon classes were uneventful, as was the trip back home. We parted ways at my front door and I got ready to do my homework... when I noticed a familiar thin box hiding in a larger box beside my futon in the closet.

Was it...? Yes, it was! My laptop! Windows 11, NVIDIA GPU, a half-terabyte SSD... easily the most powerful – and most irreplaceable – personal computer on the planet at the moment.

With the possible exception of the Mercury Computer. But, judging from the anime, my laptop at least had better graphics. Heck, my cellphone had better graphics... and I found that sitting beside the laptop. Not that a 5G phone had any chance of connecting to the brand-new 2G network in Japan, but it was still nice to have if only as a music player. And, yes, I also had that dongle that let me plug wired headphones into the phone.

My multi-terabyte external drive had made the trip as well, so I also had the software and data files to do... not "deep fake" images, but close to photorealistic images that nobody in 1992 would suspect were CG. And the laptop's North American power brick and cable worked just fine with the Japanese grid.

I didn't want to look a gift horse in the mouth. Even if it was an obvious trap for me. All I had to do was use it where somebody else could see it and my secret was out.

Stupid genre conventions.

But it was so tempting.

I also wasn't expecting to get very much use out of it – there were fewer than fifty websites in the entire world at this point, and I obviously didn't have Internet access at my new home. Good thing that I never trusted my files to OneDrive (entrusting them to said external drive instead) and that I'd installed the Japanese fonts for the OS and the Japanese language packs for LibreOffice, so I could at least use it as a typewriter... once I figured out how to connect a current printer's RS-232 port to my laptop's USB-C ports.

Then I noticed the kludge cables, right beside the external Blu-Ray burner.

It was definitely a trap. I mentioned the stupid genre conventions already, right?

A good chunk of my music collection was on the laptop. I could at least listen to something that hadn't been written yet... once I had a decent set of headphones.

But that was a treat for later. Much later, once I had figured out some way to keep it secret from my neighbours.

Including Mako-chan. At least, for as long as she didn't have just as big a secret that she was comfortable sharing with me.

I put the laptop away, and covered it with a blanket... just before Mako-chan showed up for homework. I was going to help her with English, and she was going to help me with Japanese history.

Including, much to my surprise, Nikkōjanbokitsuirakujiko.

Damn it, that was less than a decade ago! Why were they teaching it in history class?

Because it was the worst aviation disaster in history, of course. And it would keep that record until 9/11, at which point it would become the worst single-aircraft disaster in history. But here and now, anybody in Japan who said "plane crash" without saying which crash was talking about this plane crash.

And I had to pretend that I didn't know how Makoto would take it.

She took it poorly, of course. And quietly, which I didn't expect.

After the third time she didn't say anything for a few seconds, I closed my textbook. "Mako-chan, what do I need to know about what happened in 1985?"

There was another pause.

"If you don't want to tell me, that's okay. Am I prying?"

She nodded.

"Then I won't ask any more."

"Thank you, Robu-san," she whispered. Then, after a long pause while I re-opened my textbook and re-found the correct starting page for today's homework, she added just as quietly, "But I need to tell you before you find out from the textbook."

I gave her my complete attention.

She turned the page and pointed at the list of survivors... a slightly longer list than the one back home, in that I needed more than one hand to count them all, and it ended with the name Kino Makoto. "That's me."

I knew from the anime that her parents had died in an aircraft crash. However, the anime didn't say that she had also been aboard JAL123.

"Mako-chan... Makoto-san, every instinct I've learned is telling me to give you a hug, because you're my friend and you so obviously need to feel the touch of somebody who cares about you. But you Japanese don't do that, do you?" I finished off somewhat sadly.

She didn't try to hide the tears that she'd started crying. "Not as a rule, no," she said quietly. "But you already know what I think of rules. My parents, and a lot of other people, could have survived if it wasn't for somebody blindly following the rules."

I could tell an agreement when I heard one. We both stood up, and I gave her the closest hug that I thought a Japanese big brother would give his little sister. After a moment, she returned the hug. "Thank you, Robu-san."

"Any time, Makoto-san. And I mean that. You are my closest friend in Japan. If you need me, I'll come running." I almost said that I'd come flying, but I caught myself in time.

Eventually (less than a minute later), she let go of me, and I let go of her and stepped back.

"It's almost dinner time. May I make dinner for us, Robu-san?"

I was about to point out that she'd made dinner last night when I realized that she wanted... no, needed... to keep busy. "I'd like that."

Another few days of classes, another few days of making excuses why I wasn't looking at school clubs (my best excuse was that I had to catch up on lessons that I hadn't yet learned in Japan), and another few days of being annoyed at the almost-unconscious racism displayed by so many of my classmates and teachers. But it had gotten out that my father – whom I still hadn't met yet – was here as a guest of the government, so nobody actually tried to provoke the gaijin oni.

Which I appreciated, because I was not a fighter.

Unless that was part of my powers. Stupid genre conventions.

Apparently, Mako-chan was having almost as hard a time as I was at fitting in. She was taller than her classmates, and she had trouble following rules. I wasn't about to point out in public that I thought her behaviour was rooted in the fact that it was the government following rules that led to so many people dying around her in 1985; she'd already said as much in private.

But we had each other. And Usagi-san. And, if I worked at making friends with her, Ami-san. Three or four of us against the disapproval of the world. I was betting on the four of us... and not just because three of us were Sailor Senshi, because this wasn't a fight that could be won with Silver Millennium magic.

And that required Mako-chan and me to make friends with Ami-san. Makoto-san had an advantage there that I didn't, of course... but I also had an advantage that she didn't, which I'd decided to use even if I didn't want to use it. Just as the lunch break began, I turned to her. "Mizuno-san, would you be willing to help me with a small problem?"

"What sort of problem, Donaldson-san?"

Once again, I was quietly happy that she didn't mangle my name.

I held up an oversized bento. "I made plans to have lunch with Kino-san in class 6 and Tsukino-san in class 1, but I'm afraid that I may have made far too many sandwiches for the three of us. Would you care to join us for lunch?"

"You know Usagi-san?"

"I do. She was the only person at school brave enough to try making friends with Kino-san – she's my next-door neighbour – and I was caught in the halo of Usagi-san's friendship effect, much to my benefit," I finished with a smile.

Ami thought for a moment, then nodded. "I'd be happy to have lunch with you all, Donaldson-san."

We headed out to the courtyard together... and even if she didn't notice the envious or jealous looks aimed at me from half the boys in the class, I certainly did.

I dropped a note on Sato-san's desk as we passed him. It read, "This is what happens when you put in the effort to take an interest in somebody."

Fifteen minutes after we had shared our sandwiches with each other, Ami-san was – at Usagi-san's insistence – on a given-name basis with Mako-chan and me.

We decided to visit the local game centre on the way home.

Well, three of us decided to visit the Crown. Ami-san had cram school... no, she wasn't cramming for a test. Supplementary lessons... no, she didn't need help to pass. I'll just use the Japanese word juku because there isn't really a good match in English.

I was walking through the arcade's doorway when it struck me how apropos the game centre's name was, considering that in many realities it was also the secret base for the Sailor Senshi. It was only right for the Moon Princess to have a Crown.

Mako-chan and I gave the Sailor V game a try. She did better than I did, but we both placed in the top ten.

Which surprised me immensely, since I knew that the Sailor V game was a Senshi training simulator. Something was going on; maybe my superhuman abilities were finally making an appearance.

I wondered whether I could port the game to my laptop and improve the graphics to photorealistic. For the girls' benefit as a training tool, of course.

Then I noticed the boy who was winning big at the crane game.

No time for wondering about improving the simulator. The plot was interfering. And I had to let it.

Stupid genre conventions.

By the time I had made my way to the crane game, the boy wasn't there any more, and Makoto was making her excuses to Usagi. She noticed me and said, "Sorry, but I have to go."

To follow the young man who was hosting a youma, and to become Sailor Jupiter, I knew but didn't tell her. This was something she needed to do on her own. "See you later?"

"Sure," she answered over her shoulder as she left.

"Ano... I should be going, too."

"I can find my own way home, Usagi-san. Don't worry about me."

"O'kay! Bai-Bai!"

The way she pronounced "okay" reminded me of that scene from *Girls und Panzer* with Anzu and Kay. And that reminded me that I'd never know how the sequel movie series ended. I had to cheer myself up somehow. I turned to the crane game and looked at the prizes, and decided to sacrifice a 50 yen coin to the owner's piggy bank. If I recalled correctly, said owner was a white cat with a crescent moon mark on his forehead, so the money was going to a good cause. Then I gave the machine a second coin, and got a Sailor Mercury plushie for my trouble. Three more coins and I had a Sailor Moon plushie to keep her company, two more coins and I got a Tuxedo Kamen plushie – the cape actually got in the way of me getting a Sailor V. Four more tries got me the Sailor V doll that I had been trying for, and another five coins got me a Sailor Mars plushie to complete the set. A bargain at 800 yen... and, I realized later, too easily won unless I was unconsciously using one of my powers.

All I wondered at the time was how long it would be before I would be able to try for a Sailor Jupiter plushie.

A few hours later, Makoto-san knocked on my front door, looking slightly the worse for wear. "To what do I owe the pleasure of this visit, fair damsel?" I asked with a smile.

She noticed the plushies that I had arranged on my desk, and smiled in response for a brief moment. "I was hoping maybe you still had a sandwich or two left over from lunch."

"Sorry, those were my supper. I can fry an egg and make a sandwich from it and some bread if you want one that badly."

"Actually, yeah, I do. Don't bother taking the time to cut off the crusts."

I raised an eyebrow. "That isn't like you. Did something happen?"

"If I just say 'yes', will you keep asking questions?"

"Only if you want me to, Mako-chan."

"I'd rather you didn't."

One fried-egg sandwich later, eaten in silence, and she was half-asleep. "Mako-chan, either you're going home right now or you're sleeping here. And I only own one futon."

"In that case, good night, Robu-chan. Robu-san," she corrected herself with a blush.

I smiled and prepared to escort her home, one door down the walkway. "You can call me Rob-chan if you really want to, Mako-chan."

As Ami-san and I walked out to the courtyard the next day to have lunch, we overheard Makoto saying to Usagi, "Motoki-san reminds me of my sempai, but Robu-san reminds me of my sempai, too."

"Oh?" Ami-san asked as we joined the others. "How so? And who is this sempai?"

Mako-chan blushed as she noticed my presence. "I couldn't possibly tell you that right now," she said quietly as I sat down between her and Usagi-san.

I said nothing, being so surprised at her comment that I was at a loss for words. I thought for sure that Makoto-san had me placed firmly in the "friend" zone, along with Shinozaki-san who I didn't expect to meet for a while yet. But



then, I didn't really know what Mako-chan's relationship was with that fandom-famous sempai she had left behind when she transferred to Kuritsu Juban Chuugakkou. Maybe they were just close friends.

"Mako-chan said you have a full set of Sailor Senshi dolls in your apartment, Robu-san!"

Ami-san looked surprised at Usagi-san's comment. "I wouldn't have taken you to be the sort who collects dolls."

"I'm not, normally, but the Sailor Senshi are a special case. They're young women who are sufficiently self-confident that they don't wait around for a prince to fight for their honour; they go out and do their own fighting, and from everything I've read about them in the newspapers they aren't trying to act like men when they do it. They're women in a men's world but they're still women, not fake men. I'm sure that a generation from now, people will call them an inspiration to be the best people they want to be, not just merely adequate people that society squeezed into gender-specific roles. And I think that a time when everybody can live up to their fullest potential is something to not just look forward to, but work toward."

Nobody said anything. But they all had smiles on their faces... smiles that I carefully did not comment on.

Time to change the subject, for their sake. Little did I know at the time that I was starting a tradition. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't be making speeches at lunch. Speaking of lunch, what did everybody bring? I have hamburger patties, potato salad, and cherry tomatoes."

"And a fork instead of chopsticks, right, Robu-san?" Makoto-san opened her bento as I nodded in acknowledgement. "I made rolled egg, daikon stewed in miso, sausages, and rice."

"You're going to make somebody a happy husband someday, Mako-chan!"

Quietly agreeing with Usagi-san's comment, I began to seriously wonder who that person was going to be. To my surprise, I found myself becoming jealous of him.

Makoto-san and I didn't get together for homework that evening; she was in a study group with Usagi-san, Ami-san, and their friend Rei-san instead. And, no doubt, Luna, with their conversation incorporating Senshi business. I wondered for a moment when if ever I'd get to meet Rei-san.

And we wouldn't get together tomorrow, either, because Usagi-san had invited Makoto-san to Yokohama so that they could keep one of her other friends company. Which meant I was going to miss both another youma battle and an opportunity to meet Naru-san.

Oh, well. I hadn't experienced any youma battles yet, so I didn't miss them.

If I was going to be of any use to the Senshi – assuming they wanted an ally – then I had to figure out what my powers were. But every attempt I made to trigger something at home failed.

Finally, I put that project aside and looked at my other project: setting up the laptop so that I could use it without anybody else noticing. Thick drapes would block any view from outside... at the expense of making me look like a hikikomori. Moving my desk to the corner of the room and setting up a screen so that I'd have a "study nook" was a better option. My apartment was cozy by Canadian standards but big by Japanese standards; I had room for a divider.

Once that was done, I spent some time on the bus and a half-hour on the subway, visited Akihabara, and looked at both good headphones and good printers. The headphones were easy to choose; I found a display of Koss headphones, including some Porta Pros, in the same store that lured me in with a display of computers running the brand-new Windows 3.1. (I'd have to wait a year for the QZ1000 with noise reduction.) The printer was less easy. I immediately dismissed the idea of a laser printer; they cost more than my laptop did, even without adjusting for inflation. I finally found a monochrome inkjet PostScript printer that fit both my budget (I hoped, since I didn't know when I'd be getting more money in my bank account) and the space I had available in my new study nook. They accepted a cheque (which I wasn't sure about in 1992 Japan), promised that my purchases would be delivered the next day, and included my first pack of paper.

By the time I was home with convenience-store katsudon and a Ramune for supper, so was Makoto-san; I saw a light on at her apartment. In order to let her know I was coming, I started singing a tune that wouldn't be written for a quarter-century as I climbed the stairs. By the time I got to the lyrics "I will never be deceived, I'm a guy that sees through lies" (well, I am a guy, not a girl, so I had to change that line), Makoto met me at my own door.

"Good evening, Robu-san. It's unusual for you to be coming home so late."

"Good evening, Mako-chan. I was doing some shopping."

She looked at my supper. "You didn't buy very much!"

My smile almost matched hers, except that mine wasn't teasing. "The rest will be delivered tomorrow. Would you like to come in?"

Of course she would. Why would today be any different from every other day since we met? As we settled in and I set my supper aside to pay attention to my guest, I asked, "What would your guardians think if they found out you were visiting a foreigner every day?"

"Oh, they'd be scandalized," she answered matter-of-factly. "Do you think I care?"

"Of course not. But I think maybe you should care at least a little bit, even if it's just for Usagi-san and Ami-san's sake. They're proper Japanese teenagers, not like us."

Makoto-san grinned. "You might be surprised."

I chose to misinterpret her inadvertent hint. "Yeah, Usagi-san is a lot more genki than a proper Japanese girl our age should be." My stomach chose that moment to grumble.

She noticed. "I've already had dinner. Don't mind me; eat up!"

"If you're sure..." She was sure, so I started making short work of my meal.

She took the opportunity to tell me about her visit to Hikawa Shrine. I made the appropriate encouraging noises, and by the time I'd finished my supper, Makoto-san had told me as much about Rei-san – not Sailor Mars, just Hino Rei-san – and where she lived as I could have learned by watching the anime up to episode 25. Which meant that I no longer needed to hide what I knew about the shrine and its most famous miko any more.

I gave the plastic box a quick rinse and set it aside to wash properly later. Makoto-san noticed that I wasn't simply throwing it away. "Why are you keeping that?"

"Waste not, want not, as we say in English. I can re-use this a few times, and put off buying a proper lacquerware box for a few days."

"That makes sense," Makoto said with an approving nod of her head. "But I could look at the housewares in Yokohama Chinatown when I'm there tomorrow, if you want me to do some price checking for you."

I smiled and chuckled. "If you do that, Usagi-san is going to ask whether you're my girlfriend, you know."

"Would it be so bad if she did?"

"Mako-chan, we've only known each other for about a week. Isn't it a little early to be thinking of becoming closer than just friends?"

She lost her smile. "I guess."

That wasn't good. I needed to keep her as a friend. And, I realized, I *wanted* to keep her as a friend, which made me feel better since I now knew that I wasn't using her as an introduction to the Sailor Senshi. "I'm only saying 'not yet', not 'no'. And weren't you going to Yokohama to help cheer up Usagi-san's friend? That's more important than running an errand for me."

Her smile returned, but only as a shadow of what it was before. "You're right. Do you always think of other people instead of yourself?"

"Not always, but often enough."

The printer and my headphones arrived early, and hooking the printer up to the laptop was easy with the kludge cable. My laptop even recognized the hardware. (That must have been an ancient device driver, despite it being a PostScript printer.) After doing a test print of a single page of text, I shut down the system and made sure the laptop was stashed where nobody could find it.

There were a lot more videos on the external drive than I remembered having copied from my collection at home. Read that as: there were videos copied from my collection at home. I hadn't ripped anything in my collection, but there they were. Including all of *Sailor Moon* through to the end of *SuperS*.

It had been a while, but it was time to say this again: Stupid genre conventions.

I had other things to do today. So I headed out and tried to find out what those things were.

It turned out that "meeting somebody I only knew from the anime" was one of those things, and we met in, of all places, a beef-bowl restaurant. He was my age, clean-cut, about as tall as Ami-san, and looking at me with the oddest expression on his face.

After waiting long enough that "looking" became "staring", I walked over to the counter and sat down beside him. "One house special, please," I told the cook, before turning to the boy. "Is there something wrong?"

"What? No, I just didn't expect to see you here, Donarudoson-san."

"You have the advantage on me, sir."

He bowed in apology. "My apologies, sir. Urawa Ryou." As I was thinking the nickname that Shadowjack had given him, he asked in bemusement, "Ryou the Psychic Boy?"

My eyebrows went up in surprise. "I thought you were a precog, not a reader."

"Well... yes. I sensed that you might have been about to say it."

"Might have been."

"I'm having trouble sensing your future," he continued more quietly, "I thought you were going to be my competition for Mizuno-san's attention, until I actually met you just now. I'm happy that you aren't because she's already noticed you but not me, but I'm surprised, too."

"She's a lovely young lady, well worth whatever friendship you choose to give her. I could introduce you to her, if you want."

"Oh, you don't need to do that."

I began to think that I did, the way he was fading into the background. The poor kid had almost no drive where Ami-san was concerned. But that was something for another day. After a moment, I continued, "So you know who I am."

He nodded. "Who and what, yes. But, please, this isn't the time or place to discuss what we are. Except: Don't force it, let it flow."

"Let what flow?"

Instead of answering, he left a few coins on the counter and went on his way as my order arrived.

Stupid genre conventions.

The next day, after school, Usagi-san took a candid photo of Ami-san eating a hamburger, then dashed off. Which surprised Ami-san to no end, and let me know that we were almost ready to see Ryou-san become a youma. Poor kid.

After a beat, I wondered whether I was thinking of Ryou-san or Ami-san there.

And it wasn't until I got home that I thought of the "I Can Has Cheezburger?" meme. She probably wouldn't have appreciated it anyway.

And the day after that, I just happened to see Usagi-san and Ryou-san together.

Because I "just happened" to have been following Usagi-san in order to let her lead me to Ryou-san. Somehow, she never noticed me... which, at the time, I attributed to stupid genre conventions.

She was giving him a photograph. I wondered how she got the film developed and printed so quickly, until I remembered that her father is a magazine editor who sometimes pinch-hits as a photographer. She probably did it at home.

"How long before Zoicite shows up?" I muttered, not remembering the exact timing of the episode in question. As if in summons, said Dark General appeared. Stupid! Genre! Conventions! Summoning the enemy had better not be my power!

Ryou-san and Usagi-san split up, him to lead Zoicite away from Usagi-san and her to find some place private to get changed. Not that anybody other than me – and Ryou-san – knew both of those things. I dithered on who to keep an eye on, and as a result lost track of them both... until I saw Sailor Mercury.

It was the first time I'd seen any of my real-life friends in Senshi uniform. That girl's got legs.

I followed at a discreet distance. After a couple of minutes, I realized I was keeping up with her.

I've never been a particularly fast runner. Heck, Osaka-san from *Azumanga Daioh* could probably beat me in a foot race. But there I was, moving as fast as a Senshi.

It looked like, whatever my powers were, quick movement was one of them.

As I was wondering whether my other abilities were speed-related, Sailor Mercury found Ryou-san. I stopped far enough away to give them privacy – I didn't need to embarrass my new friend by overhearing that somebody else knew her secret identity – but close enough that I could still race in and help if Zoicite showed up unexpectedly.

Unexpectedly by Ami-san, that is. Ryou-san and I both knew it was only a matter of time.

Which meant I saw Zoicite attack from longer range than he had in the anime, as the attack passed over my head.

I didn't force it. I flowed. Suddenly I was between Ryou-san and the attack – not a teleport, "just" a high-speed run – and there was a shimmering field of... pure force, for want of a better name, and I privately cursed "Doc" Smith for popularizing that imprecise term in the SF lexicon... centred on my outstretched hand, serving as a shield. The attack struck my shield and stopped, falling to the ground.

As Sailor Mercury moved to get the Mercury Computer out, presumably to analyze Zoicite's attack, my forcefield, or both, I said, "Mercury-san, get Urawa-san out of here! I'll hold off the girly-boy!"

"What did you call me?" Zoicite shouted in anger, paying attention to me instead of Ryou-san and Ami-san's escape. Just as planned. If you could call something thought up on the spur of the moment a plan.

"You heard me, Dark General Zoicite! You look enough like a girl that you could probably be mistaken for one if you wore a wig!" And that comment, I hoped, just might dissuade him from impersonating Sailor Moon later on.

"You will pay for your impudence!"

"Yeah, sure, whatever. But I think you're going to make the down payment," I said as I looked over Zoicite's left shoulder and grinned.

He turned to look. The fool. Sailor Moon was coming up on his right.

And she threw away the element of surprise. "Hold it right there! Heaven may forgive you for coming between two young lovers, but I will not! In the name of the Moon, I – oof!"

What do you know – Zoicite attacked her in the middle of her speech. Even I wasn't expecting that. I must have riled him up more than I planned.

Note to self: No more insulting Zoicite's self-image unless all of the Senshi were ready to attack him.

Moon looked like she was stunned. In an instant, my forcefield was between the two of them. "I'm your opponent!"

Zoicite turned back to me, a snarl on his face. "Don't interfere! You're an annoyance, kid! She's a threat!" Before I could reply, he added, "And I don't have time for this," and teleported away.

I hoped I'd given Ami-san and Ryou-san enough time to hide somewhere. Walking over to Sailor Moon, who was being tended by a black cat with a crescent-moon mark on her forehead, I asked, "Are you alright?"

She nodded. "I will be, as soon as I catch my breath."

"Good. Do you know where Sailor Mercury is? I told her to get Urawa-san to safety, so they should still be together."

She shook her head as I offered her an arm to steady herself. "I'm sorry, Robu-san. I can't track my teammates."

"We need to figure out a way to do just that. And it's only because you're still catching your breath and your wits are still scrambled a bit that I'll overlook you knowing my name." She looked startled when she realized she'd let that slip, followed by worried. "But we'll talk about this later, at my place since you already know how to find it."

"I do?"

"You'll remember soon enough. Don't say it – Zoicite could be listening."

"Yeah, right." Then, after a moment, she asked, "You know who I am, don't you?"

I nodded. "Being an outsider, I need to pay attention to things like the shape of your face, the colour of your eyes, and the way you speak. And you do have a unique hairdo." Seeing that she was worried, I quickly added a lie; the only one I've ever told her. "I doubt your friends have noticed." It was time to change the topic. "Are you ready to look for Mercury-san?"

"Mercury! We have to find her!"

So we went and looked for her. And Ryou-san. I gave Sailor Moon a quiet moment alone with her cat, so that Luna could tell her that the Moon Stick can find the Rainbow Crystals, then joined her in the search. We finally found them in a park, just like in canon.

And, just like in canon, Ryou-san had been turned into a monster, and Sailor Mercury had grabbed the Rainbow Crystal that had been released from him in the process.

Cue attacks from allies in three, two, one...

"Fire Soul!"

"Supreme Thunder!"

Right on time. I grabbed Zoicite in a forcefield so he couldn't interfere, then shouted, "Sailor Moon! I've got the Dark General!"

She nodded and readied the Moon Stick. "Moon... Healing... Escalation!"

The attacks from the other Senshi had worn him down enough that Sailor Moon was able to turn him back into Ryou-san... just as I felt the tension against my forcefield disappear. "Blast it! Zoicite's teleported away!"

Note to self: Never turn your back on a Dark General, even if you're certain you have him secured.

"Not again!" Sailor Moon moaned.

Sailor Mars, on the other hand, was looking at me suspiciously. "Who's this?"

Before anyone else could answer, I quickly said, "No names, please. Zoicite might still be nearby and spying on us. Sailor Moon called me 'oni' the first time she saw me; that's as good a code name for me as any."

And the matching looks on Sailor Moon and Sailor Jupiter's faces let me know that they both got the message that I couldn't come out and say. I wondered whether Mako-chan realized that that meant I also knew who she was.

I continued, "You four -- sorry, neko-san, you five -- probably already know how to evade being followed. Get out of here and go meet up wherever it is you have your after-action debriefings and talk all you want about me. Including everything that you know about me, Sailor Moon, and yes, I know that you know that I know who we are, even if Zoicite doesn't know. I'll make sure Urawa-san gets to a hospital."

"No. I'll do that." Sailor Mercury insisted. This was the first time I'd ever seen a determined look on Ami-san's face outside of anime, and I've already mentioned that 2D is no comparison to 3D. That girl looked scary.

"Alright. I'll take my leave now."

As I headed off, I heard Sailor Moon ask, "What's an after-action debriefing?"

Partway home, I realized which power set I had been displaying. I'd rolled up the character years ago as a favour for a friend, but never actually played him.

Standing in front of a sufficiently-reflective window, I wrapped a forcefield around myself and willed it to divert light around me. Sure enough, I faded into invisibility.

While making my way home while invisible just in case Zoicite had been following me, I wondered whether I also had the brainpower boost and the other power on his character sheet. I also wondered how I could possibly test for them.

It was nearly midnight before I heard a knock at my door.

Which had given me plenty of time to consider how much I was going to reveal about myself. I stood up and walked over to the door. "Hello?"

"Robu-san, may we come in?"

In response to Mako-chan's question, I unlocked and opened the door, to see all three of my usual lunch companions. Rather tellingly for anybody who knew her, Ami-san wasn't carrying a book. "Please come in, ladies. I apologize that I don't have enough furniture to go around. All I can offer is cushions."

They waited until I had closed the door behind them before saying anything. "That isn't a concern, Donaldson-san," replied Ami-san.

"I suppose it isn't," I commented while getting cushions out of the closet anyway.

Once the cushions were out and I had moved to my kitchenette to prepare tea for everyone, Ami-san and Usagi-san sat down. Makoto-san didn't. "How much do you know about us? And how do you know? Don't give me that 'unique hairdo' line, because we already know that Usagi's family doesn't recognize her when -"

I cut her off there. "Are the walls here thick enough to hold in secrets?"

Mako-chan sighed. "You know that they aren't."

"Then we whisper." I had already lowered my voice. Opening my desk drawer while the tea steeped, I added, "The easiest way to answer your questions is with a question of my own. Ami-san, can you interface the Mercury Computer with my computer from the future of another reality altogether?"

"Your computer? That's a computer?"

"What do you mean by 'another reality'?"

"Yes, Usagi-san, this is a computer. It's easily breakable and completely irreplaceable for three decades, so please, all of you, keep your hands off of it. As for another reality," I opened it and brought it out of sleep mode, to reveal VLC Media Player already had episode 25 of *Sailor Moon* queued up and ready to go. "Mako-chan, want to see how the week we met would have gone without me?"

A half-hour later, everybody looked pole-axed.

Makoto-san was the first to recover. "So that's supposed to be me. They didn't do a very good job of showing who I really am."

I nodded. "She's a bit one-dimensional at this point in the story. The scriptwriters don't actually know you, after all. But they did show your sense of justice."

"Which character is supposed to be you?"

"I'm not in the story. I implied before I showed you this that I'm from another universe, remember?"

Ami-san took a sip of tea to steady herself. "Does that mean we can use this anime to tell the future?"

"Good question." I sighed. "I've already changed things just by being here, and I've changed them even more by showing you this one episode. And don't ask me to show you any more. I'm tempted to erase the lot of them. But they do show what your opponents are doing, so we might be able to notice their plots earlier than any of you did in the anime story."

"But that changes the future."

I nodded in agreement with Usagi-san. "Right. So the episodes will become useless for particulars rather quickly."

"We could still use them to learn more about our opponents, though," Ami-san pointed out. "Now we know who Queen Beryl is, just from this one anime episode."

"But we don't know where she is," I pointed out. "This knowledge is about as useful as knowing that Sailor V is Sailor Venus."

Mako-chan grinned. "I think maybe you shouldn't have said that."

I sighed. Again. It was too late at night; I was tired and making mistakes. "I think you're right." I reached over and shut down the laptop, being careful to close the lid completely. "No more temptation, at least not tonight."

Usagi-san finally asked the big questions. "Robu-san, does this anime say who the Moon Princess is? And who Tuxedo Kamen is?"

I nodded. "Yes to both questions. No, I'm not going to tell you right now. You're going to find out soon enough."

Usagi-san sighed deeply. "You're an oni," she complained.

"Fine. I'm a monster. But I have your best interests at heart."

Mako-chan looked me straight in the eyes. "Did you use me to meet Usagi-san?"

"No!" Lowering my voice back to a whisper, I continued, "No. I never used you for anything, Makoto-san. And I was completely truthful and honest when I told you that you are my closest friend here. Please believe me."

"How many friends do you have, Robu-san?"

I turned to Usagi-san. "In this world? Including the people in this room?" She nodded in reply to each of my questions. "Three. Considering that I've been in Japan, and this world, for less than a month, already making three friends is pretty good. And you're good friends."

Makoto-san and Usagi-san smiled at hearing my compliment. Ami-san blushed.

After a brief lull, Makoto-san asked, "Is there anything else that we need to know about you? Or should know about you, considering you probably know a lot about us from that anime?"

I nodded. "'Need to know': I have some superhuman powers, too. Usagi-san and Ami-san saw two of them this evening, and unfortunately so did Zoicite. 'Should know':..." I hesitated, because I didn't know what I should tell her. "Later, once you've come to terms with everything that I've told you already. As for what I know about you, that you haven't already told me... Mako-chan, you dream of owning your own shop, but you don't know whether it's a cake shop or a flower shop or both. You don't look the part, but you have a lot in common with the Yamato nadeshiko stereotype."

"I'm not feminine at all!"

I let that slide for the moment. "I was thinking of the 'silk hiding steel' part of the stereotype. And you compare almost every boy you like to your ex-sempai," she blushed slightly, "although I don't know what that actually means."

Her blush faded. "You know things that only my closest friends know about me."

"Mako-chan, I'll say it again. You're my closest friend in this world. Does that help at all?"

She thought for a moment, and finally replied, "A bit." Then she noticed the pile of textbooks sitting beside my laptop. "Eep! Homework! I have to do mine, too!"

"You had to remind me. Makoto-san, Usagi-san, Ami-san, would you promise me that you won't say anything about the anime or me to anybody unless I'm there with you? Please?"

Without hesitation, Makoto-san replied, "Yes, Robu-san, I promise."

"So do I," added Usagi-san.

"I promise, as well," Ami-san completed the set.

I smiled in relief. "Thank you, ladies. And I promise that I will not tell anyone who any of the Sailor Senshi are unless you give me permission. Mako-chan, go do your homework, and I'll do my homework, and we'll all have lunch together tomorrow. Okay?"

"Sure." As they stood up to leave, Makoto-san added, "Robu-san... I think you already know this, but you remind me of my sempai."

I stood up to accompany them to my door. "Yes, I remember that you told Usagi-san that. I really like you, too, Mako-chan. And now I have something to think about while we're keeping each others' secrets."

The next day, after school, Ami-san and I saw Ryou-san off; he was going back home to Niigata. I carefully did not notice Ami-san give Ryou-san a better photo of herself.

Once the train's doors closed, she sighed.

"You'll see him again."

"You're sure?"

I smiled. "You already know how I know."

Ami-san and I spent most of the next week, outside of school and juku, figuring out how to interface the Mercury Computer with my laptop.

After I moved the "Sailor Moon" images and episodes I had on the local drive over to the external drive, and then leaving that drive unplugged. No more letting secrets slip out; my new friends were nowhere near ready to learn about Chibiusa, let alone the other Sailor Senshi.

I left the soundtracks on the laptop, which of course let Ami-san discover that they wouldn't meet Sailor Uranus and Sailor Neptune for a while yet.

As a result of working on that project, we missed Usagi-san and Mamoru-san's debut as portrait models.

Makoto-san made sure we didn't starve... or get up to anything inappropriate. Not that I would; Ami-san is a lovely young woman who deserves better than me. For that matter, so are each of the other members of the Sailor Team. But Makoto-san coming over regularly meant that we didn't miss her tears of heartbreak, the day that we finally kludged Teams on both the laptop and my cellphone to act as a terminal for calls from the Mercury Computer. (Of course, our test text message was "Merry Christmas," echoing the very first SMS message... that wouldn't be sent until December 3 of that year.) Not that my cellphone could connect to anything other than the laptop, of course.

"Motoki-san has a girlfriend!" the poor girl wailed.

"You just discovered that today?"

"Less than an hour ago!"

I nodded grimly as I plugged in the external drive and started up episode 29. "Good. That gives us some breathing room." As both Makoto-san and Ami-san looked at me in surprise, I continued, "Motoki-san's girlfriend Nishimura-san hosts one of the Seven Great Youma. Let's see whether we can break Zoicite's streak at getting Rainbow Crystals."

I must say that having a beautiful girl on each side of me makes watching anime much more pleasurable, even if our attention was on the screen rather than each other. Simply knowing that they were there made a difference.

A half-hour of taking notes later, Makoto-san sighed. "It looks like my attack is going to be nearly useless this time around."

"Yeah," I sighed in sympathy, then had an outside-the-box idea. "Wait. Maybe you can use it indirectly."

"What do you mean?"

"I'll show you." Half a minute later and my laptop was playing the short version of fripSide's "Only My Railgun", with visual accompaniment. Half an hour later and Mako-chan was grinning from ear to ear.

The next day, after school, I escorted Ami-san to her juku. "OK Shingaku Juku?" I continued with a smile, in English, "I would have thought you'd be attending a juku that's better than just okay." She smiled slightly. "Ah, there's the smile that I haven't seen since Urawa-san left." And that comment made her smile disappear.

"Why did he have to leave, Donaldson-san?"

Our relationship was an odd one at that point, with us being on a given-name basis when Usagi-san or Mako-chan were around and on a family-name basis the rest of the time. That was all that Ami-san was comfortable with at the time. "I don't know, Mizuno-san. All I'm sure of is that he'll be back. Not soon, but before the end of the school year."

Ami-san's half-smile returned. "Thank you. I have to go now."

"Of course. Have fun!"

"I'm here to study, not to have fun."

"I thought that studying was your way to have fun. I'll see you in class tomorrow."

And she went inside while I headed off to a hardware store.

The next day, when Ami-san and I met Usagi-san and Makoto-san for lunch, I smiled and patted my jacket pocket. "Mission complete."

Makoto-san grinned while Usagi-san looked puzzled. "What mission?"

"Sore wa, himitsu desu."

"You're quoting somebody there," Mako-chan said.

Surprised, I asked, "How could you tell?"

"You've never been so formal to say 'desu' in all the time I've known you."

Ami-san shook her head. "Rob-san is a perfect gentleman in class; the teachers have never found fault with his formality. He says 'desu' all the time."

"Ah, but Usagi-san and Mako-chan don't hear me in class. Usagi-san, are you busy after school?"

"I have no plans at all!"

"That isn't something to be proud of, Usagi-san," Ami-san chastised her.

I nodded in agreement. "You really should study more. But today it would be better if you were to spend time with Mako-chan."

Makoto-san looked upset at that. "But I had plans to... Oh!"

"Right. I'll go straight home after class. Give me a call when he leaves."

Usagi-san looked from Makoto-san to me, and back. "What are you two talking about?"

It was Ami-san who answered. "They've been watching that anime again."

"That we have. So, what did everybody bring for lunch?"

\* \* \*

It didn't take long for Makoto-san to call me. "Robu-san! He just left! And it sounded like he was worried!"

"Is the Moon Stick reacting to a new Rainbow Crystal?"

"Yes!"

Damn – the story had changed from what I knew. We should have had a few hours; now we only had minutes. "I'm on my way. Where are you?" She gave me the address.

Instead of texting Ami-san the way I wanted to, I locked up my laptop and headed out at a run. Then I went invisible and went to my top speed. I was at Motoki-san's apartment in less than three minutes, to discover Usagi-san and Makoto-san waiting for me outside. Fading back into view, I asked, "Which way?"

"That way!" Usagi-san gestured with the Moon Stick.

"Right. Get changed and let's go."

"But..." Usagi-san started to complain.

Mako-chan cut her off. "There's no time for modesty. Jupiter Power, Make-Up!"

I quickly learned three things. First, the transformation didn't take nearly as long in real life as it did in the anime. Second, yes, there was a noticeable moment when Makoto-san was completely naked, which I expected after seeing that one time in *S* when Sailor Uranus transformed back to Haruka-san. Third, an animated drawing doesn't compare at all to a three-dimensional woman.

I quickly turned my back to the girls, in order to give Usagi-san as much privacy as I could. And to hide my nosebleed. Stupid genre conventions.

As soon as Sailor Moon told me she was ready, we headed out – Moon in the lead, and Jupiter carrying me piggyback while the two Senshi roof-hopped to the scene.

Of course Mako-chan noticed my ... nosebleed. "Is that my fault?" she asked with a smile in her voice.

I'd spent enough time with Mako-chan to know that lying to her about this would be both pointless and rude. "It is," I replied with a smile of my own, not that she could see it.

"I was beginning to wonder whether you thought of me that way at all."

In front of us, Moon was slowing down. "I think this conversation will have to wait. Time for Oni to fade into the background." And I made myself invisible as Jupiter landed beside Moon.

"That is freaky," Moon said.

Jupiter added, "You're still here, I can tell from your weight, but I can't see your arms at all now."

As I let go of her, I replied, "Let's hope Zoicite can't see me at all, either. At least until it's time for me to make an entrance. Time for you two to pretend I'm not here," I finished as I took Jupiter's hand and handed her what I had picked up at the hardware store.

Nishimura-san had already been transformed into Rikoukeidar, but it looked like the transformation had just finished. Zoicite already had the Rainbow Crystal.

The fight went remarkably similar to canon, up to the point where Rikoukeidar manifested the big flask – the one that could catch and return Jupiter's attack. I used the time to get closer to Zoicite without being observed. I hoped.

The flask appeared, Jupiter grinned, and I saw that Zoicite was still holding the Rainbow Crystal. While remaining invisible, I created an equally-invisible forcefield sledgehammer and anvil. Yeah, I know how derivative that is.

Jupiter called her attack. "Supreme..." And she tossed one of the steel ball bearings I'd just given her into the air. "Thunder!"

Rikoukeidar caught the attack, but the electrically-propelled ball bearing inside the attack shattered the base of the flask. Rikoukeidar took damage from the electrical attack, the ball bearing, and the glass shards.

Zoicite was stunned by the sight. "What? How?"

So I put his fingers between hammer and anvil, forcefully, which caused him to drop the Rainbow Crystal... which I quickly grabbed with a forcefield after dispelling my forcefield weaponry.

"Ow! It hurts!" And Zoicite teleported away while Sailor Moon healed Nishimura-san.

At which point Motoki-san finally showed up. I decided against letting him see me, instead quietly tugging on Jupiter's sleeve. Either she took the hint or she was already thinking the same thing that I was. "As Sailors of Love and Justice, we have served Justice here today, and now it is time for us to serve Love! Fare well, both of you!" And she grabbed Moon's arm and headed off at a quick pace.

It wasn't until I got in front of them that I saw the tears on both their faces. Fading back into view, I said, "I'm sorry, girls. He does love her."

"Oni," they both complained at my bursting their bubbles. Moon added, "At least tell me you got the Rainbow Crystal."

I held it up for their perusal.



"That's the important thing." After a moment, Moon added, "Would you, er, mind...?"

"Ah! Say, that's quite the rosebush over there," I said while turning to look at the shrubbery instead of looking at Moon and Jupiter.

After a moment, Makoto replied, "That's a poinsettia plant."

"Oh, so it is," I answered, just before turning back to Usagi-san and Makoto-san.

"That's one Rainbow Crystal that we didn't get in the anime," Mako-chan commented. "Can we get another?"

I thought for a moment, then said, "We're going to have to tell Mars and Luna who I am. Each of them are directly involved in the remaining two manifestations of the Seven Great Youma. Usagi-san, could you set up a meeting while I figure out how much to tell them, please?"

Makoto-san and I stopped at the 7-12 convenience store on the way home. Yes, 7-12, not 7-11. Somebody was writing around trademarks. Stupid genre conventions.

"How much are you going to tell them?" Mako-chan asked while picking out a few staples for tonight's dinner, just in case I botched the meal.

No, I wasn't about to let her cook every night. Even if she was a better cook than I was. I would, however, let her teach me how to cook. It was only fair to let her take the lead in our studying sometimes, even if what we were studying were life skills instead of schoolwork.

"How much *should* I tell them?" I wondered aloud.

Makoto-san sighed at my question. There was a bit of annoyance in her voice as she asked me in return, "How much do you trust them?"

Yes, of course. I had to trust them. "Thank you, Mako-chan. From what I know about them, I trust them completely, so I tell them everything."

Two days later, after we'd shown off what we brought for lunch, Usagi-san asked me whether I'd ever visited a Shinto shrine.

"No, I haven't. Would it be alright for an unbeliever to make a visit like that?"

"Why would that matter?" Mako-chan replied. "It would be good for you to visit, Robu-san."

"Especially at the Hikawa shrine," Usagi-san added. I suddenly understood what she was really asking me... but my classmate Sato-san was nearby and could overhear what we were saying, so I couldn't tell them as much.

Ami-san added, "If you're polite and follow the instructions, you'll be fine."

I nodded in understanding. "Then my failure to visit before now might be taken as rudeness. I should pay my respects as soon as possible, shouldn't I?"

"Let's go right after class!" Usagi-san grinned.

Ami-san shook her head. "I have class duty today. You three go on without me."

"You two go ahead without me," Mako-chan added. "I have class duty today, too."

And so we visited the Hikawa shrine. I let Usagi-san lead me through the rituals, and finished off with making a donation to the shrine and making a prayer. "May the Sailor Senshi be successful in their actions against the Dark Kingdom."

"That's a fine thought, young man," came a voice behind me. I turned to see a short, bald, old priest.

Bowing in respect, I replied, "There is nothing that I want more than that, sir."

"Your desires are for others. You'll be a fine man after you graduate from school." He turned to Usagi-san, who was standing beside me. "Good afternoon, Tsukino-san. Are you here to become a miko, by any chance?" he asked with a smile.

"Not this time, ojiisan," she replied with a matching smile. Even if I hadn't seen the anime, I would have been able to tell that this was a private ritual of their own. "I brought my schoolmate here to present him to the kami, and now I'll introduce him to Rei-chan."

"Good, good. It's good that some of you youngsters care enough about the old ways to do so much. Rei was in her bedroom ten minutes ago,"

"Thank you, Jijiii!" Then she turned to me. "Come on, Robu-san, Rei-san should be off this way."

Bowing again to the priest, who was obviously Rei's grandfather, I let Usagi-san lead me "this way" to the house behind the shrine. An outsider like me wouldn't have been able to tell that it wasn't one of the shrine's outbuildings.

And that was because it was one of the shrine's outbuildings, repurposed to be a place to live, I realized as Usagi-san stopped at the door and said, "Rei-chan! We're here!"

A moment later and the door was opened to reveal a lovely young woman with long black hair. "What took you so long?"

"That was my fault," I replied. "This is my first visit to the shrine, and I felt it proper to pay my respects to the resident kami."

She turned to look at me... and looked up, and bit back whatever comment she was about to make. "It's not usual for people who aren't Japanese to do that, but it is good manners. I'm Hino Rei; pleased to meet you."

"I'm Rob Donaldson; happy to meet you," I replied while bowing.

She returned my bow, then said, "Please come in." Once we were inside – shoes off and slippers on, not just through the doorway – and she was sure we couldn't be overheard, Rei added, "Where are Ami-chan and Mako-chan?"

"They both had class duty," Usagi-san replied. "We thought you should meet Oni – Robu-san – without waiting for them."

"U-sa-gi..." Rei began with menace in her voice.

"Hino-san, I already know. And I will repeat the promise that I have already made to Usagi-san, Ami-san, and Mako-chan: I will not tell anyone who any of the Sailor Senshi are unless you give me permission."

Rei's attention was still on Usagi. "Why did you tell him?"

"I didn't! He already knew!"

"How?"

I replied, "The short answer, which is somewhat misleading, is that I come from three decades in the future."

"Oh, great. Everybody is going to find out about us."

Usagi-san turned to me. "Tell her about the anime."

Hino-san was suddenly suspicious. "What *about* an anime?"

By the time Ami-san (with Luna in her arms) and Mako-chan arrived, Hino-san was at the acceptance stage of the coping path. "This is really a separate *Sailor Moon* series, not the *Sailor V* show that I saw last week?"

"I didn't know you were a *Sailor V* fan too, Rei!"

"It's kind of difficult to be a Sailor Senshi and not like *Sailor V*," she admitted.

"Yes, it's a separate show," I confirmed.

"Does the anime tell all of our secrets?"

I shrugged my shoulders. "Well, I don't know. I don't know whether I know all of your secrets. But I suspect they do tell enough of your secrets that you'd be upset. Which is another reason why I'm not letting anybody see all of the episodes."

She sighed. "Thank you for that much, at least. Did they get a big name seiyuu to play me?"

Usagi-san was surprised by that question. "Rei-chan, what does it matter?" Then she turned to me. "What about the rest of us? Who plays us?"

"You got to read the credits of the episode that I showed you, Usagi-san."

"They were in English!"

"You should be able to read names by now, Usagi-san," Ami-san commented. "You're played by Mitsuishi Kotonosan."

"What!? But she plays a dog..."

"Look around you, odango-for-brains," Hino-san said. "Does this look like *Mary Bell*?"

"It could if you'd let me plant some flowers here," Mako-chan replied before Usagi-san could.

"You're not helping. And who plays you?"

"I have no idea, and I don't really care, either. It's not like I know how to read English, either."

Ami-san sighed. "You're going to have to learn, Mako-chan. Somebody named Shinohara Emi-san is your voice actress."

"Who?" Hino-san and Mako-chan asked in unison.

"B-ko?" asked Usagi-san.

"Who?" Hino-san and Mako-chan asked in unison again.

"You've gotta watch *Project A-ko*. I'll bring over the tape next time." Usagi-san turned to Ami-san. "What about your voice actress?"

"Well... I'm played by Hisakawa Aya-san."

"Oh, wow! Sumire from *Sally the Witch*? You might be the biggest name of all of us, Ami-san!"

"Am I? I don't know the names of the people who work in anime," she pointed out. "Luna is played by Han Keiko-san."

"I take it back," Usagi-san replied. "Luna's the biggest name of us all."

The Mau in question simply preened... which finally gave me a chance to answer the question that started off that digression. "Hino-san, your character was voiced by the same seiyuu who played Kasuga Manami on *Kimagure Orange Road*."

"Oh, that's fine. Tomizawa-san has a nice enough voice." Then the penny dropped. "But she wouldn't be working three decades from now. Would she? Or any of the others, either?"

Mentioning that her seiyuu had retired and come out of retirement would be yet another digression from what mattered. "Amazingly enough, they would, but they play older roles in the 2020s." Then I remembered *Crystal*. "Except Mitsuishi-san; she's still playing Usagi-san in the remake. That's why I said that my answer was misleading, even though it's true. I came from the year 2022, but not this world's 2022. In my world, the anime that I showed Usagi-san, Ami-san, and Mako-chan was made in 1992."

Mako-chan added, "So it should be on television right now. Except that it isn't."

"Which means that either you've been misled or your claim is correct and you aren't originally from our reality," Ami-san added.

"I did mention that I'm from a different reality when I showed the three of you the anime, ladies," I replied. And this was feeling like an expository recap filler sequence. But then the anime, especially during the Seven Great Youma storyline, was filled with expository recap filler sequences. Which meant I was going native. Stupid genre conventions. I decided to change the subject, and turned to the one person who I hadn't been introduced to yet. "Oh, but I'm being rude. You must be Luna. I'm Rob Donaldson; I'm happy to meet you. I've never met a Mau before."

Hearing me say her species name surprised Luna. "A... Mau? Why do I know that name?"

"It's as much your name as 'human' is mine."

She looked puzzled for a moment... which looked adorable on a cat's face. Then her face lit up with a smile of recognition. "I'm a Mau! I can ... what is it that I can do?"

This wasn't the time for her to try to remember that she can change into a human form. "You can talk, for one thing. Luna-san, might I impose on you to find someplace else to sit for a moment?" She hopped out of Ami-san's arms. "Thank you. Ami-san, I have something for you to hold onto for safekeeping." I pulled the Rainbow Crystal that we had taken from Nishimura-san (via Zoicite) out of my pocket and handed it to her. "I feel much more comfortable knowing that an actual Sailor Senshi has that."

"Thank you, Rob-san," she said as she put it with the crystal she had recovered from Urawa-san.

"You're just giving us a Rainbow Crystal?" I nodded in reply to Hino-san's question. "I guess you do trust us, after all."

"So," Usagi-san asked, "why's somebody from 2022 watching an anime that was made before he was born?"

So much for changing the subject.

"Because of cool and stylish characters like me," Hino-san explained, not entirely wrong.

"There's a place for style and a place for presence. And we all know who here has the most presence," Mako-chan said with a smile. She wasn't entirely wrong, either.

"Why, thank you, Mako-chan!"

"U-sa-gi..." Hino-san growled. Again.

I really didn't want to hear them fight. "Before I answer Usagi-san's question, I want the same promise from Hino-san and Luna-san that I already have from the rest of you. Will you promise me that you won't say anything about the anime or me to anybody unless I'm there with you?"

Hino-san thought about my question for a moment, then nodded. "You've already promised to keep our identities secret. And you're willing to trust us with a Rainbow Crystal. You can trust me with your secrets, too. I promise."

Luna... hedged her reply. "I won't tell any human being about you or your anime."

"Luna-san, I've already told you that I know you're not human. And your reply is making me think that you're in contact with another Mau. I need that promise from you."

"Luuu-naaa..." Usagi's tone of voice was verging on threatening.

I cleared my throat. "No coercion, please."

Everybody was silent for a moment. Finally, Luna said, "I promise that I won't say anything about the anime or you to anybody unless you're with me."

"Thank you, Luna-san. As for your question, Usagi-san... the anime is not older than I am. I've been rejuvenated to this age."

"That means you're as old as my father!"

I shook my head. "A bit older than that, Usagi-san. I'd rather not give my exact age."

"You aren't that old." Everybody turned to look at Mako-chan. "You have to be delusional." And you're in denial, Makoto-san, but why? "You can't be that old. I know! You're sick and saying things that you don't mean!" She leaned over and touched her forehead to mine, the way that Japanese mothers check their children for signs of a fever.

When we touched forehead-to-forehead, I suddenly "heard" her thoughts. « – over forty! He can't be that old. It's a lie! I can't be interested in somebody older than papa. I don't want another papa. Why – » And the flow of thoughts stopped when she pulled away from me. "You aren't running a fever."

I didn't say anything for a moment. Then I remembered that other power on the character sheet: memory copying. It shouldn't have worked this way, though; that was more like telepathy. I supposed surface thoughts were the easiest to get... and skin-to-skin contact was the easiest way to get them.

"Are you okay, Robu-san?"

"What?" I blinked a couple of times. "I think I'm okay, Usagi-san. Mako-chan, we need to talk. In private. Later. Right now, it's time to discuss youma."

"Right," Hino-san agreed with me. "That anime says who the other two hosts are, right?" I nodded. "Who's the next one we'll face?"

"Your grandfather."

"He's nowhere nearby, so he won't overhear us." I just waited for her to realize I wasn't raising a concern. "Oh, no. Ojiisan is a youma?"

"He *hosts* a youma." I turned to Usagi. "So when – not if – he starts acting strangely, it is not 'endearing' or 'cute' or 'a pleasant change'; he'll be fighting to keep the Rainbow Crystal inside himself. And he'll end up losing."

"I have to be the one who brings him down when he finally loses control," our hostess announced with steel in her voice.

"Of course," Usagi-san replied. "He's your family."

"The only family I have left that I care about."

That interaction was much better than how they acted in canon over the same issue. I decided to give it a bit of a boost. "Hino-san, Usagi-san can bring him back with her Moon Healing Escalation, but only after you bring him down to human-level power. The two of you will have to work together to save him from a fate worse than death."

We spent the next hour talking about the best ways to bring "Youma Jiji" back to human and how to handle the final Youma – the one sealed in the body of the cat called Rhett Butler.

Then we did our homework, after Usagi-san called home to tell them she'd be late and where she was. As long as we were together, we may as well have a study session. Ami-san impressed the others by actually having a conversation with me in English, and I impressed the others by helping her with basic matrix mathematics, which she was learning at juku. (Even Hino-san had no idea what matrix mathematics was.) And Ami-san helped me with science (I never was good at biology the first time around, being too squeamish to dissect a frog), we both helped the others with English and math, and the others helped me with Japanese history and Japanese literature. All in all, it went well, and we finished off our assignments just as Hino-san's grandfather brought in a simple dinner for everyone. Of course we invited him to join us at the table, and she acted as our hostess.

I had trouble sleeping that night. I literally could not forget Makoto-san's thoughts. Just how was she "interested" in me?

It wasn't until Saturday that I had a chance to speak with Mako-chan alone.

Hino-san was at the shrine and Usagi-san was with her. The elder Hino was acting oddly, and Usagi-san – instead of dismissing his behaviour the way she did in canon – decided that the best way to keep an eye on him was to accept his offer of becoming a miko, at least part-time. Which I completely approved of, and not just because she'd be in a better position to watch Hino-san's grandfather. She needed a bit of self-discipline in her life.

Ami-san was unavailable for the best of reasons; her mother was not on-call at the hospital, and the elder and younger Mizunos were taking the opportunity to spend time together. (When she told us her plans, I carefully did not ask about her father.)

This left Mako-chan and me with an afternoon all to ourselves. Assuming, of course, that Hino-san's grandfather didn't go youma on us.

We started by stocking up on specials and staples at the supermarket. There weren't any baseball playoff specials this year – neither the Swallows nor the Lions were owned by companies that owned supermarkets – but we still managed to find decent deals on rice and soy sauce.

Once we had our purchases safely in our own apartments, Makoto-san and I made ourselves comfortable at her place. "What's so important that we couldn't talk about it where the others could overhear us, Robu-san?"

I'd had some time to figure out how I was going to open the topic, but I still wasn't sure how she'd take it. "I discovered that I have another power."

"Something you can use to fight the Dark Kingdom?"

I shook my head. "Not unless we can pin a Dark General down and keep him from teleporting away. When the two of us touched foreheads, I heard your thoughts."

She blushed more deeply than I've ever seen her blush before.

"Yeah. I don't want to be your father, Makoto-san."

"What... do you want to be?" she whispered.

In response, I reached for her hand... and she let me take it.

« – please Kami-sama oh please tell me what I want to hear Robu-san please – »

I let go of her hand. Quickly. "Oh, my. I want to be close to you, but just holding your hand let me hear what you were thinking. You really want something. I didn't hear what it was."

"Does this mean we can never touch each other again without you hearing my thoughts?" Makoto-san looked aghast.

And I realized that I didn't want that either. "Oh, I really hope not."

"Why can you read my thoughts? And why can't I read yours?" she added sadly.

"I don't know, Mako-chan. If my theory is right and whoever it was who rejuvenated me did give me powers based on a character I created a while ago, then I should be getting a copy of your entire mind over a ten-minute reading, not your surface thoughts as you're thinking them in real time."

"Sounds like your theory isn't right, then."

I nodded. "It would have been nice if the power did work that way, and you'd let me copy your mind."

"Why?"

"Because..." I thought for a moment, and realized what I'd been carefully avoiding thinking about since I met Mako-chan. "Because I don't want to lose you."

That got a smile from her – the first smile I'd seen on her face all day. "I'm not going anywhere now, Robu-san."

"It isn't that."

"Then what is it? Are you going somewhere?"

"I'm not planning on leaving. Although I didn't plan on coming here, either."

"Then why ...?" She stopped for a minute, and her smile disappeared. "This is something you saw in the anime, isn't it? Robu-san, does something happen to me?" I didn't say anything, but my thoughts must have shown on my face. Makoto-san kept talking, but there was a note of fear in her voice. "Robu-san... do any of the Sailor Senshi get hurt while we're fighting the Dark Kingdom?" Again, I didn't reply. "Somebody dies, doesn't she? Who... who is the first Sailor Senshi to die?"

I wasn't about to lie to her. I whispered, "Sailor Jupiter. And I don't want that to happen."

She hugged me tightly. "I don't want that to happen, either."

Then I realized that I wasn't hearing her thoughts – she'd said that aloud. Surprised, I commented, "My telepathy is turned off."

She looked disappointed. "Oh."

Then I had a thought. Extracting myself from her hug and turning away from her, I asked, "Would you transform, please? I want to try something, and you need to have some control over electricity for it."

"I don't mind being seen, if it's by you."

"I don't mind seeing, if it's you, but I don't want to be distracted."

"Alright. Jupiter Power, Make-up!" And a moment later, she said, "It's done."

I turned back to Sailor Jupiter. "If you can, I want you to use your power to look at the electricity moving through my brain." And I hoped my mental power would activate.

Without touching her, I heard Jupiter's thoughts. « – he ask for that? I can't see power. No, wait, I can. Isn't that what we learned in science class yesterday? Thoughts are electrical. And it looks like Robu-san is trying to help, I guess. He's such a good person. I want – no, we're working right now. His mind's doing something weird over there. I wonder if I could do that. Concentrate here, and here, and – Wow! Echo! »

She could hear her thoughts in my thoughts?

« Yeah, I can! That's so great! »

« Can you turn it off? I don't want your brain to burn out. I just realized how special you are to me. I don't want to lose you. »

She smiled when I thought that she was special. A moment later, Jupiter said, "It's off now. Is yours off?"

I nodded. "Yeah. I saw in your thoughts how you turned the power on and off, and I can do the same thing now."  
"Good," She grinned... and transformed back to her non-Senshi form without giving me any warning.

She flashed me on purpose. Didn't she?

Her smile turned into a grin. "Yep!"

"Did I say that out loud?"

"No, but I wanted to see whether I could do that mind-reading thing without being Sailor Jupiter."

Oh, boy. Are our neighbours safe? Don't turn into a monster and make me stop loving you, Mako-chan.

Her grin disappeared, replaced by a hopeful smile. "You love me?"

As I sorted through my own emotions, she continued, "I'm trying to read other people's minds, but I can't. I can only read yours."

I turned my power back on. « – when is he going to take the hint oh there you are! I don't want to read anybody else's mind, just yours. Do you really love me? Stop thinking of pink elephants and answer my question. Please? »

She deserved an answer. And I finally had one for her. "Makoto, I love you." And I thought about how I loved her – her strength, both moral and physical, her sense of justice, her ability to make me happy just by being nearby, her beauty, and more – as I said the words.

« Squeeeee!!! » "I love you too, Robu!"

And I could sense how she loved me, too – my readiness to comfort her, my willingness to accept her as she is rather than trying to change her into a proper student, my not asking about her past despite knowing her two biggest claims to fame, my desire to help her rather than tell her what to do, my friendliness toward her and her friends, my thinking her height was an asset instead of a liability, and more. « This is going to be a weird relationship, isn't it? »

« Yeah, but it's our relationship. Oh I like that idea. And that one, you'd look good in the green that I wear sometimes. Not that idea, that's too kinky. Hey, no fair switching to thinking in English. You're an oni sometimes. I may as well turn the mind-reading off now. »

As I turned my mental power off as well, I wondered what was so kinky about kissing in public. Then I remembered that the Japanese equated kissing with foreplay. "Let's leave that power turned off for the rest of the day, okay... my dearest?"

"That's a good idea, darling. Mind reading is harder work than I thought while I was doing it. But at least I know you aren't lying to me, the way some boys did." After a moment, Makoto asked, "What do we tell everyone else?"

"Good question. This isn't Senshi business yet; right now, it only concerns the two of us."

"I can't tell Usagi-san that you finally said you love me?"

I could read her mind, but I couldn't read her mood. Go figure. That would come later, as it does in any relationship. "I was thinking of whether we can teach the others how to read minds. And I don't want to try any experiments there until Hino-san's grandfather is safe."

She pouted. "You're an oni, thinking of other girls right after confessing your love to me."

"Sorry."

She grinned. "I'm kidding! If you didn't think of helping other people, I wouldn't love you as much."

I slipped an arm around her waist, and she moved in to reciprocate. It wasn't our first hug, but it wasn't a chaste hug, either.

"There's something else I want to try after Hino-san's grandfather is safe and before we tell the others. I still want to copy your mind into mine."

"Why?"

"So I'll still have you even if we can't change the future."

That wiped the smile off of Makoto's face. "Yeah. I guess living on inside you is better than being completely dead. But you're right; we can't take the time to try when we could be called by Rei-san and Usagi-san."

"And we can't go out on proper dates, either," I sighed.

"Oh, you'd better believe we're going out on dates, darling!"

We spent the rest of the afternoon at a mall, finding a shirt for me that matched the shade of green of the top she'd bought just after the first time she became Sailor Jupiter, then having dinner out together. It wasn't a bad date – heck, it was a great date made even better by each of us knowing exactly what the other thought of the two of us being a couple – but it also wasn't as much fun as it could have been since we were half-expecting one of the other Senshi to page Makoto.

They didn't. And that made me wonder when we'd need to deal with Youma Jiji.

\* \* \*

We discovered the next day that we didn't need to deal with Youma Jiji – Hino-san and Usagi-san, working together, had taken care of him on their own and managed to grab the Rainbow Crystal. Zoicite was moving more slowly than he had in the past, and he was wearing armour. I assumed that those two facts were related.

His armour included gauntlets. Aw, poor boy; I must have cracked or broken a bone the last time we met. Anything that made his job harder and our job easier was fine by me.

The girls were far more impressed by Makoto and me showing up at the Hikawa shrine in matching outfits. They mobbed her and demanded details, leaving me alone to meet the shrine's new hire, Yuuichirou-san. My first impression of him was that he was a big, lovable dork; if I didn't know from the anime that his family was as rich as (but not as important as) the Hino family, I would have dismissed him as a wannabe social climber who was trying to use Hino-san as a stepping-stone to a better life.

Hino-ojiisan was doing fine. This was the first time that I'd had the opportunity to talk with somebody who had been "refreshed" after the fact. He remembered the experience, but wasn't willing to give any specifics on the people who had rescued him from it. And that made me uncork my mind-reading to find out whether he really didn't know or was protecting his granddaughter's secrets... only to discover that I couldn't read his mind.

I couldn't read Yuuichirou-san's mind, either. Or Usagi-san's. But I'd never made skin-to-skin contact with any of them, either. This was something that I... no, Makoto and I... would have to investigate later.

Mako-chan and I managed to keep our relationship secret at school.

For three days.

We really needed to find some friends other than the Senshi. But we both had the same problem: we were so tall that we intimidated our classmates. When I visited her in class 6 at the start of lunch break that day, I heard one of her classmates say, "He's even worse than Kino-san!"

Which I shrugged off, but Makoto didn't.

Which lead to us ending up in the vice-principal's office. Makoto was required to be there; I went along as moral support and as a witness. The student who made the comment showed up eventually, after her classmates helped her calm down.

Don't get the wrong idea. Mako-chan didn't raise a finger against her classmate. But the vehemence of her verbal defence of me was enough to give the poor girl a horrid fright.

I did my best to protect everybody from official censure. I honestly didn't know who the girl was; I hadn't learned Aoyama-san's name before the vice-principal used it. So I was able to say honestly that it was somebody I didn't know who'd made the comment. And Makoto was obviously coming to my defence as required by the camaraderie rules in the students' handbook.

So nobody was expelled or suspended, but we all had to listen to a lecture about considering our classmates' feelings that took up most of the lunch break.

The vice-principal was not happy to hear that somebody who wasn't Japanese was dating a survivor of JAL123. But it wasn't his call to make, and I quite politely told him so before Makoto could complain the way she did in class an hour earlier. I could tell that I didn't convince him, but he let us go without further punishment.

And Aoyama-san – a girl with a depressed nose root and projecting cheekbones, which hinted that she was from Hokkaido, and who wore her raven hair in a shoulder-length cut – apologized to both of us once we were out of the vice-principal's office.

The next day, everybody in school knew that the two tallest students were an item. It wasn't Aoyama-san who told the world, it was her classmates, repeating what Makoto had said when she was angry.

Aoyama-san asked whether she could buy lunch for us, in order to make up for being responsible for us missing an earlier lunch. Instead, we invited her to have lunch with us.

By the time we had to go back to class, Ichigo-san was on a given-name basis with all of us. Thanks to Usagi-san, of course.

I don't care what the fans say. Sailor Moon's most impressive power is the Power of Friendship. And I don't mean *Nanoha* style. Drop Usagi-san into Equestria and she'd be in charge in a week.

Ami-san visited Makoto after school the next day. They spent an hour or so alone together, then Mako-chan knocked on my door and invited me over.

I closed my English textbook – I was reading up on what the Japanese did differently from native English speakers – and headed next door, to discover Ami-san was getting Makoto's help with her Home Economics homework. "We need a taste tester," Makoto grinned.

It looked like I was going to have curry for dinner – home made, not from a mix. "I'd be honoured."

Ami-san is many things, including a genius, beautiful, kind, an introvert, and Sailor Mercury. She is not, however, a gourmet chef.

Not to say that the curry was bad, mind you. It was easily as good as what I could make when I wanted something mild. But I'm not a gourmet chef, either.

Makoto and I both offered our opinion of the meal. I was more generous in my assessment than Mako-chan was, but Ami-san accepted both of our criticisms in the spirit that they were offered.

While I helped clean up after dinner, Ami-san remarked, "You two are working together so well that I'd almost think you're a married couple."

I smiled at the thought. Makoto replied, "Oh, I hope that'll happen some day. But not now, while we have to worry about the Dark Kingdom."

"And we're both too young to get married in Japan," I added.

"That, too," Mako-chan agreed dismissively. "No, we work so well together because we're reading each other's minds."

"You're *what*?"

I sighed. "I guess we have to tell her now."

So we did. At length. Including her testing us by whispering a question in one person's ear and hearing an answer from the other person.

She insisted on taking measurements with the Mercury Computer. Which we both sat through with as much dignity as we could muster.

After a few minutes, Makoto said, "This would be the perfect time for you to try copying my mind."

Ami-san looked shocked. "You can do that, Rob-san?"

"I don't know. Maybe. I hope so."

Ami-san's shock turned into curiosity. "Why would you want to copy Mako-chan's mind?"

After a short moment, I answered, "I'd rather not say." I wasn't about to lie to either of the ladies in the room or to Usagi-san, but that didn't mean I needed to tell the whole truth.

"Coward." We both turned to look at Makoto. "You're afraid of losing me. I'm afraid of you losing me, too."

Now Ami-san was puzzled. "Why? Are either of you going somewhere?"

I sighed deeply. How could somebody that book-smart be that naive? Rather easily, I realized later but not then. "According to the anime, which I'm doing what I can to change, that 'somewhere' is the undiscovered country."

Ami-san dropped the Mercury Computer in shock. Apparently she knew *Hamlet*. After a long moment, she whispered, "When?"

"After you locate Queen Beryl's base and take the fight to her."

"And Robu tells me that Sailor Jupiter is the first to fall."

Ami-san leaned over and picked up the Mercury Computer. Without looking at us, she asked, "Is she the only one to die?"

I still wasn't about to lie to her. "No."

Ami switched to English, and hesitantly asked. "When... when do I die?"

She'd finally figured out the situation. In the same language, I replied, "I'm so sorry. Unless things change, you're the second Senshi to fall."

"I don't want to die..." And the quiet introvert forced herself onto me, head touching head. "Copy my mind. Please."

Unlike when Makoto did the same thing, I couldn't hear her thoughts. I couldn't hear Mako-chan's thoughts while I was touching Ami-san head-to-head, either. But I did sense Ami-san's memories and personality flowing into my mind. I quickly set up a compartment for her... "brainprint" is as good a name as any... so that her thoughts wouldn't mix with mine. Then I wondered how I knew how to do that. I'd never done any exercises that would have let me set up something like a memory palace or some other form of thought container in the past.

I just knew. Stupid genre conventions.

Finally the flow ceased. "It's done. Are you okay?" I asked in Japanese.

"I'm still me," Ami-san replied. "And I'm sorry that I forced you to do that."

"It's alright, Ami-san. I don't mind... although I would have preferred to have copied Mako-chan's mind first."

Makoto giggled, then asked, "Still thinking about me even when you have another pretty girl in your arms, Robu?"

I smiled as I let Ami-san stand on her own. "Of course. I always have you in my mind, my dearest."



"Not yet, you don't!" As she moved in to take Ami-san's place, I sensed her think, « What is "Head on! Apply directly to the forehead!" supposed to mean? »

« Just a bit of silliness. Brainprint now, explanation later. »

So Makoto and I spent ten minutes sitting together with forehead touching forehead. Ami-san had the Mercury Computer out, recording the entire process.

At the end of that time, I said, "And now I'll never be alone. I'll always have my girlfriend and our closest friend to keep me company." I was in no hurry to let go of Makoto, the way I had let go of Ami-san earlier, but we stopped our hug out of consideration for our closest friend.

Then I had a thought. "Did you get a brainprint of me?"

Mako-chan sighed and frowned. "No. I think that's something only you can do. Unless Ami-chan can help us there."

Ami-san shook her head. "I can barely decipher these readings. There's no way I can turn them into something useful so quickly."

"Let's not worry about that right now. Oh, and despite having a copy of your mind inside my head, I can't read your mind the way I can read Makoto's."

"Can you still read my mind?" Mako-chan asked with a bit of worry in her voice.

"Yes," « and I can tell you're reading mine. My dearest. »

« With a lot of trouble, my darling. You're about to fall asleep. »

I nodded, then turned to Ami-san, and said in English, "Putting two people into me took a lot out of me. I need to go get some rest. Thank you for making dinner."

"Thank you for giving me a chance to survive in even the small way that you have."

"Good night, ladies," I said in Japanese as I left.

I had a lot to think about... and two new perspectives to help me think.

After a nap but before I turned in for the night, I finished my homework. It wasn't until I was halfway through my science homework that I realized I was pulling some of the answers out of Ami-san's brainprint.

I'd left the curtains open, so the morning sunlight woke me up before my alarm did. I spent a quarter-hour going through my thoughts as I thought them, and came to the conclusion that my thoughts were my own, not Ami-san's or Makoto's.

I skipped ahead in my Japanese history textbook – something Ami-san would know but I wouldn't – and did a sample quiz. The Ami-san in my head wasn't thinking on her own; it was more accurate to say that I had a massive database of her thoughts and personality up to the moment that I completed the brainprint.

And the brainprint of Makoto was also a vast memory database. I found myself crying as I looked at her memories of JAL123... and resolved then and there to stay out of that part of her brainprint forever.

Then it was time to wash up, eat, and get changed into my school uniform. In that order. The morning rituals done, I met Makoto just outside my door and we walked to the bus stop, hand in hand.

Lunchtime, and after what we were calling the Revealing Of The Lunches, Aoyama-san – sorry, Ichigo-san – commented on what Mako-chan and I had brought. "Neither one of those is a balanced meal... but they complement each other to make two balanced meals."

Makoto smiled, and I answered, "I'm getting better at knowing how Mako-chan thinks." That caused Ami-san to smile as well.

Usagi-san didn't smile... or notice.

"Tsukino-san, is something wrong?"

"How often do I have to ask you to call me Usagi, Ichigo-san? Yeah, my cat Luna isn't feeling well. I think maybe she got into a fight this morning."

"Oh, dear," I commented, while wondering how I was going to proceed with Ichigo-san sitting right beside us.

« Proceed with what? »

« Telling you that it's time to get the last Rainbow Crystal, my dearest. We're not going to Shinagawa, but it's time to see cats. »

« Darling, that's a terrible pun. »

« Sorry. »

"Look at these two, just staring into each other's eyes as they eat out of each other's bento," Ichigo-san commented. "I wish I had a boyfriend."

"Oh, I'm sorry!" Mako-chan and I said in unison.  
That made everybody laugh. Yes, even Ami-san.

Mistaken identities. Cats. More subtle references to *Gone With the Wind* than you could shake an Academy Award at. Youma cat. Zoicite. Sewers. Rats. Zoicite covered in sewer rats. Tuxedo Kamen getting the final Rainbow Crystal. And I couldn't change a thing.  
This did not fill me with hope that I could change the final fight and keep Makoto alive.  
All I could do was remind myself that tomorrow is another day.

The next day, I made my apologies to Makoto and visited the post office to withdraw enough cash for a couple of weeks. I do appreciate the "one stop service" mentality that led Japan to offer banking service at the post office. Instead of using the ATM and paying the service fee, I stood in line and had my passbook updated when I received the cash that I needed.

I sat down in a quiet corner and checked my passbook after it was updated... to discover that my balance was close to what it had been before I bought the printer. Which made me curious. I flipped back a few pages and discovered two things: first, that there was activity on the account before I arrived in this reality, and second, that somebody was replenishing the account at least once a week. During normal working hours. My balance had been stable, almost to the yen, since late August. Despite my not being in this universe until September, and my buying a printer.

Somebody out there was looking after my financial affairs, and from the timing of the transactions I doubted that it was the father that my paperwork said I had but I still had yet to meet or hear from.

Of course, the anime never explained where Sailor Uranus and Sailor Neptune got their money from, either.  
Stupid genre conventions.

As I headed home from the post office, I noticed that I was being followed by a man who was about as tall as me, wearing formal evening wear, a cape, a top hat, and a mask. Either Kunzite was impersonating Tuxedo Mask or the genuine article had taken an interest in me. Or somebody was cosplaying as a super, but how many people in a culture that prizes conformity are both our height and interested in obvious cosplay outside of conventions? I dismissed the cosplayer idea immediately, which left me with two possibilities; either way, I knew I needed to check it out.

I headed into an alleyway. Sure enough, "Tux-boy" followed me in. "Do you have some business with me?"

"I believe you have something that I need."

I decided to play dumb. "The cash that I just withdrew is in my wallet." I reached for my pocket, slowly.

"I'm not a thief. I need the Rainbow Crystal that you have."

"Ah. Why should I simply hand it over to somebody who I've never met before? For all I know, you could be a youma dressed up for a formal ball."

In response, he threw a rose past me. I heard it "thunk" into the wall.

"All right, you're probably Tuxedo Kamen. But I can't be sure. Not that it matters, because I don't have the Rainbow Crystal any more."

"Where is it?"

"Some place safe. I don't know the specifics."

"Who has it?"

I knew that my answer would determine whether this person was Tuxedo Mask or Kunzite. "I'm not going to tell you that."

He turned on his heel and left. Since he didn't attack me, I assumed that he wasn't Kunzite.

I skipped grocery shopping and went straight home. The first thing I did there was get out the laptop and call Ami-san, to let her know what had happened... and to alert her that she was probably the next in line for a visit from our caped ally.

Only after that did I go next door and ask Makoto whether she had plans for the weekend.

"I was going to sit at home and do nothing, but I guess I could spend time with you instead," she replied with a grin. « Especially if this is a date, or Senshi business. »

« It might be both. » "I have two tickets for Dreamland. Would you care to spend Saturday afternoon with me?"

"I'd love to!" « What's going to happen? »

"I'll meet you here right after we get changed out of our school uniforms." « Zoicite's probably going to try to get our Rainbow Crystals. »

"It's a date!" « And if he doesn't? »

« Then we enjoy a date at the theme park. » "I'll see you then!"

She smiled that lovely smile of hers.

I returned to my apartment, but Makoto and I kept reading each other's minds while we did our homework. Nice to know that she didn't need to be in the same room for us to be able to make contact that way.

Saturday arrived, as it has a habit of doing once Friday leaves.

Classes ensued, but only for the morning. Usagi-san left before the rest of us could, but we weren't too far behind her.

Makoto and I wore the matching outfits that we had worn when we visited the Hikawa shrine after Rei's grandfather was "refreshed". There was a line to get into Dreamland when we arrived, but it was short; we ended up behind a blonde girl with twintails.

"It looks like they're letting rabbits into the park now," Makoto said quietly.

Usagi-san turned around and held a finger up to her lips. "Shhh! Don't let them know I'm here!" Then she lowered her hand. "What are you doing here?"

"We are on a date," Mako-chan announced as she took my arm in hers. "What are *you* doing here?"

"Well..." She looked at the ground as we moved closer to the front gate. "I want to make sure Naru-chan's feeling okay. Is that going to be a problem?"

"Not at all," I replied. "In fact, it's probably a good thing you're here," I added while using one finger to draw a crescent moon shape in the air.

She blinked, then sighed. "I'd better stay close to her," she announced just as she was let through the gate.

"See you later!" Mako-chan said as we followed her in, then turned to go in a different direction. We were easily the two most visible people in the park; we didn't want to spoil Usagi-san's shadowing of Naru-san and Umino-san.

Makoto enjoyed the roller coaster. I didn't. « I'm sorry, darling! If I knew you couldn't handle jet coasters, I wouldn't have insisted. »

« No, I should have told you ahead of time, » I thought as I emptied my stomach's contents into a bag, off where nobody could see us.

As a result of my ... issues ... we ended up sitting at the outdoor cafe nearest the special events stage just as the Redman show was beginning. "Too bad that isn't Red Lad instead of Redman," I commented while thinking of Kohran from *Sakura Wars*, both in her Red Lad costume and in her kohbu.

« I want one of those! » Makoto grinned mentally. "Oh, the kids look like they're enjoying watching it," she commented aloud as I looked over the crowd.

After I spotted Usagi-san, I replied, "The kids and the rabbits both. Somebody should make a note of this, but I didn't bring a pen."

« Is that a subtle hint that I should get my transformation pen ready, darling? »

« Got it in one, my dearest, » I thought back at her as we both stood up and took the remains of our drinks to the second-closest wastebin... the one that was in a nice, quiet corner.

But we didn't make it there before Zoicite arrived.

Stupid genre conventions.

Of course he wanted the Rainbow Crystals; he had out the black crystal that could track them down. "I know you're here somewhere, Sailor Moon! Give me the Yellow and Indigo Rainbow Crystals and nobody gets hurt!"

One of the children in the audience asked his friend, "Is this part of the show?"

I raced away from Makoto; having already seen in my mind what I had planned, she took off in the opposite direction. Then I shouted, "NO, IT ISN'T! RUN! NOW!"

"Aah! Oni!" Some of the younger kids ran for their parents. I turned my attention to Zoicite. "We meet again, Zoicite! This time I'm ready for you!"

"And just what do you plan to do this time?" he sneered.

"Isn't it obvious? Distract you!" I answered as a thrown rose came from the direction Zoicite wasn't looking in and cut his cheek. "By the way, nice armour." I created a nice, sparkly forcefield battering ram and knocked him down with it.

*That* got most of the rest of the children to run.

Zoicite stood up, unharmed except for the cut on his cheek, as Tuxedo Kamen walked toward us. "You're both here. Good. I can take the crystals you have," he pointed at the caped hero, "and then kill you unless Sailor Moon hands over the crystals she has." Needless to say, he was pointing at me when he said that.

I laughed. "The last time we met, you had to teleport away to get free of me."

"Oh, but I'm not your opponent this time." He pointed that damned black crystal at what was left of the Redman show's audience – and shot a bolt from it.

From the anime, I knew that the bolt would transform whoever it hit into a youma.

Unlike in the anime, Zoicite didn't miss his target.

Naru Osaka-san. Student. Friend of Usagi Tsukino-san. The only actual friend that Nephrite had before Zoicite killed him. Youma magnet. And, now, a youma herself.

Her short-sleeved dress looked like a slice from the night sky had been used for the fabric, and her kumadori makeup looked fierce, although her hair was still wavy, short, and just a shade darker brown than mine. She looked nothing like Queen Beryl did in the anime; if I ever met Shadowjack, I'd have to tell him he got that detail wrong.

"She's your opponent while I deal with him!" And Zoicite proceeded to ignore me and go after Tuxedo Kamen.

I had no choice but to let them fight it out without me. I had somebody more important to deal with. Somebody whose date, I might add, I saw cut and run as soon as she was transformed.

"Oh-ho-ho-ho-ho!" Aargh. That was the second-most-annoying noblewoman's laugh I'd ever heard. But at least she was focused on me. "Kneel before me and your death will be swift and painless!" she announced as she manifested a Zweihänder sword made from a single diamond. "Otherwise, it will be slow and agonizing!"

"You're not going to kill him at all! Guarded by the Planet of Thunder, Sailor Jupiter is here!"

« You were supposed to get Usagi-san! »

« I did! » I saw through Makoto's eyes Sailor Moon heading for the battle from behind the stage where I couldn't see her directly.

Youma-Naru-san laughed again. Please stop laughing. "Another sacrifice for master Zoicite!" She pointed her sword at Jupiter, one-handed and arm fully extended, and a bolt of energy shot from it directly at my girlfriend.

I hit top speed from a standing start and got in its way.

At least she wasn't hurt. I, however, was completely encased in a giant diamond. Uncut and not polished.

No other option. Manifest a cutting forcefield right at my face – sharper than obsidian, tougher than diamond - and slice a hole in the diamond. As soon as I could breathe, I made a forcefield tube to make sure the diamond wouldn't "heal" the hole that I'd made.

Then I turned my attention back to the battle. I couldn't hear a thing, but I could see that Jupiter was attacking Naru-san's sword with a "Jupiter Railgun" attack. Alas, the ball bearings simply bounced off. And here I thought diamonds were brittle.

Then I saw a spinning tiara hit Naru-san from the side. Everybody turned to look in the direction it had come from, except for me; I couldn't turn my head at all. I also didn't bother listening to Sailor Moon's speech through Makoto's ears; I was busy carving slices off of my prison in an attempt to get free and join the fight.

Then Moon kicked Naru-san. Much to my surprise, a Sailor Kick actually knocked her down.

I finally got a look at Usagi-san; she looked pissed off. I'd be pissed off too, if my best friend was turned into a youma. She launched a Moon Healing Escalation from point-blank range.

Suddenly I was free, just in time to hear Naru shout "Refresh!" and return to herself.

I'd never seen Sailor Moon take down a youma that quickly, and, judging from Makoto's thoughts, neither had Sailor Jupiter. « That rabbit's dynamite, » I thought.

« No time for pop-culture references, darling! Zoicite turned the Redman actor into a youma, too! »

Looked like I had changed things... for the worse. The bad guys were getting smarter.

We got to the other fight just in time to see Zoicite take Tuxedo Kamen's Rainbow Crystals and teleport away. Tux-Boy looked to be in bad shape, being trapped in a giant marimo ball like that.

Somebody needs to learn how to dodge.

Yes, I know the hypocrisy inherent in that statement. I did it on purpose.

I was still catching my breath and in no shape to help Moon and Jupiter take down the second youma. Nor did I particularly care. The entire afternoon had gone poorly, other than my interrupted date with Makoto. For the Redman actor and Tuxedo Kamen's sake, I asked, "Ladies, has anyone seen my girlfriend? Tall girl, wearing the same colour top that I'm wearing..."

"We'll go look for her!" Moon announced as she and Jupiter took off. Turning back to the others, I saw that Tux-Boy had disappeared as well, leaving me to help the actor to the aid station behind the stage.

Once he was in the hands of somebody who could do a better job of caring for him than I could, I headed out to find the others. At human-normal speed. I knew that the party was over, so I saw no reason to be speeding around the park.

I finally found Usagi and Makoto, comforting Naru. Makoto noticed me first and touched her eyelid with a finger pointing toward the sky. "Eye in the Sky" was a code we'd worked out that we wanted the other person to read our mind. Yes, it's from the Alan Parsons Project song that some people say equated reading minds with falling out of love, but Makoto and I had found that reading each other's minds made us fall more deeply in love with each other.

Usually. And we loved each other enough to respect each other's boundaries. As soon as I had that power back on, I thought, « What's wrong? »

« She remembers everything that she did. And everything Umينو-san did. »

« Or didn't do, » I thought with disgust.

« Be fair. If he'd stayed, he would have been the first victim. »

« Yeah. Mindreading off for now; I want to concentrate on talking. » And I joined the others. "There you are, my dearest!"

Makoto looked up. "Robu! You're safe!"

"Thanks to Sailor Moon, yes. Oh, hi, Usagi-san. And you are...?"

"Osaka Naru," she said quietly.

"Rob Donaldson. I wish the circumstances of our meeting were better, but I'm still pleased to meet you."

She looked up at me. "You're the one that Sailor Moon called 'oni', aren't you? I'm sorry."

That must have been while I couldn't hear anything. "Yes, I am. You weren't yourself, Osaka-san. And, as you can see, I'm perfectly fine. Oh, and before you ask whether I know who Sailor Moon is, consider this: Do you think she'd appreciate me telling other people her secrets?"

"No, of course she wouldn't." Usagi-san sighed in relief; I think Naru-san didn't notice.

Makoto turned her attention from me to Naru-san and Usagi-san. "I'm going to be terribly selfish and spend the rest of the afternoon with my boyfriend. Usagi-san, can you take care of Osaka-san?"

"I'll make sure she gets home safely."

"Then let's go, darling," Makoto insisted as she took my arm.

As soon as we were out of earshot of whispers, I quietly asked, "What's the rush?"

"Naru-san's date who cut and run is heading over here."

"Right." We intercepted him. When big people want to intercept somebody, that somebody gets intercepted. "Kid," Makoto said in a decent Yakuza imitation, "she don't wanna see you right now."

"But I'm her boyfriend!"

"She's with her best friend," I replied, not unkindly. "Talk to her later. Right now, Osaka-san needs Tsukino-san, not you. I hear they've been friends for years."

Umينو-san looked like he was going to argue, then deflated. "You're right. If anybody can get Naru-chan to cheer up, it's Usagi-san." Then he turned and headed for the park's exit.

As I watched him leave, I said quietly, "I really hope that that was the right thing to do."

It wasn't until I'd escorted Makoto home after dinner that I realized Naru-san's makeup in youma form had been blue, not brown.

By kabuki standards, that meant she was no mere monster at the time.

I immediately fired up the laptop and sent a text to Ami-san, asking her to ask Usagi-san to invite Naru-san to lunch on Monday and telling her why.

Lunch on Monday did not go well. Or it went fantastically well. I'm still not sure which.

It started, as always, with the ritual Revealing Of The Lunches. Ami-san brought sandwiches, of course. Usagi-san brought three different kinds of onigiri, and Ichigo-san had zangi (which was the second hint I'd had that she was from Hokkaido), gyoza with negi, and noodles. Naru-san's bento held pork katsudon. Makoto and I went vegetarian because she was short on cash: inarizushi and kappamaki, with edamame and pickles.

"Hey, yokai for the oni!"

Makoto and I both looked at Ichigo-san, to see the smile on her face. "Cute," I replied before Makoto could get upset.

She still asked, "Which of us is the oni?"

"Isn't it obvious? You both are! Robu-san is the red oni who wants to be everybody's friend, and Mako-chan, you're the blue oni who charges to his defence."

"I'm not planning on going anywhere, though," Makoto quickly insisted.

Seeing my puzzled look, Ami-san explained, "It's a reference to 'Naita Aka Oni'. We learn it in kindergarten here."

Eating commenced.

Then Ichigo-san had to try to find out more about Naru-san, which is when things started going downhill.

"Osaka-san, do you have a boyfriend?"

Which she could have handled if somebody hadn't been passing by behind us at the moment. At least I hope he was passing by and not stalking Naru-san. "Excuse me, but I couldn't help but overhear. I'm Umino Guiro, and I'm Naru-chan's boyfriend."

"No, you're not."

Naru-san had said it quietly, but it rang out like a gunshot.

"But..."

"You ran away when things got dangerous. Donarudoson-san jumped in front of an attack that was aimed at Kino-san. I know how boyfriends act. I have no boyfriend."

Oh, boy. I wanted to change things, but not *that* relationship.

Then I realized she'd said "Kino-san", not "Sailor Jupiter". Oh, boy, again. I'd seen Umino-san run when we were at Dreamland; there's no way he could have seen what had actually happened. I sincerely hoped that nobody else within earshot had been at Dreamland last weekend.

"You can't mean that!" Oh, gods, he was whinging.

Ami-san looked crossly at Umino-san. "It appears that you are not wanted here." That was the rudest phrasing I'd ever heard Ami use; it certainly shocked him.

I handed my bento to Makoto before she could hand hers to me. In as emotionless a voice as I could manage, I said, "Umino-san. Please don't force me to stand up and make things worse than they already are."

He took the hint.

Makoto, Ami-san, Usagi-san, and I exhaled in unison as we watched him walk away.

Ichigo-san was looking at me in awe. "You jumped in front of an attack? You must really love Kino-san." Then she realized how Naru-san was taking the conversation. "Oh, I'm sorry, Osaka-san. Kino-san can tell you that I sometimes talk before I think."

"But don't yell at her for doing that, unless you want to end up in the vice-principal's office," Makoto added as she handed my bento back to me.

It was Ami-san of all people who came to the rescue. "Ichigo-san, are you still having trouble with mathematics?"

"Yes! Yes, I am. I'd appreciate some help with some of the problems we were given for homework today."

"We don't have math until this afternoon. Perhaps you could show me the homework in your classroom," Ami-san suggested.

"I'd be happy to." And the two of them headed back inside, leaving Naru-san alone with Usagi-san, Makoto, and me.

Nobody said anything for a moment. Naru-san finally remarked quietly, "If it was supposed to be a secret, you shouldn't have dropped so many hints."

"Hints?"

Naru-san turned to Usagi. "Yes, hints. Oni jumped in front of the only attack I launched so that it wouldn't hit Sailor Jupiter. Then Donarudoson-san didn't deny being Oni."

"Would you have believed me if I had?"

She shook her head slowly. "No. How many two-meter-tall white people are there in Minato?"

"Considering the number of ex-pats and embassy workers here, I'd expect more than one," I replied.

"And he's only 183 cee-em tall," Makoto said.

"And then you called him your boyfriend."

Nobody said anything for a moment. Then Naru-san turned to Usagi-san. "And you!" she hissed. "How many times did you call me 'Naru-chan' when you were Sailor Moon and I was a youma?"

I guess that I should have paid attention to that discussion. But I was busy staying alive.

"What makes you think I'm Sailor Moon?"

I sighed. "Don't insult your best friend's intelligence, Bunny-chan. She's figured it out."

"Bunny-chan?" everyone else asked in unison.

"Sorry, it just slipped out. But don't you know that much English, at least?"

Naru-san smiled. "I like it. You have a new nickname, 'Bunny-chan'."

"Will you keep our secrets, Osaka-san?"

"I'll keep Usagi's secret. You two... On one condition."

"What condition?" Makoto asked before I could.

"That you call me Naru instead of Osaka. If I'm going to be in on this, I want to actually be part of the group."

I could live with that. "If you're going to be part of the group, then please call me Rob, Naru-san."

"And 'Bunny-chan' says I'm 'Mako-chan', Naru-san."

"I'm stuck with that nickname, aren't I?"

"Serves you right for keeping secrets from me." After everybody but Usagi-san laughed, Naru-san asked, "Do the others know?"

I touched my eye with a finger pointing upward, as if I was wiping away some dust. « I don't want to lie to her, but telling the truth would break my promise. »

« Then I'll answer. » "Ichigo-san doesn't know. Ami-san does."

Naru thought for a moment. "Yes, she is smart enough to figure it out. How long did it take her?"

This one I could answer. "Ami-san knew before I met her."

She accepted that answer at face value. I think.

Monday was followed by Tuesday. Who would have guessed?

The last period before lunch was English. Sakurada-sensei asked me to stay behind at the bell.

"Donarudoson-san, are you still interested in joining a Conversational English club?" she asked in English.

If I hadn't become involved with Senshi business, I would have said yes immediately. I replied in the same language, "I understood that the school didn't have one, ma'am."

"We don't, yet. But if you can find somebody else who would be interested, I'd be willing to be the club advisor for you."

"That's quite kind of you, Ms. Sakurada. But don't the school rules say there is a minimum of three people in a club?"

"They do. We just had another student transfer in from England and she expressed an interest, so you and she would be two club members. Although she also asked whether she could join the volleyball club."

For a moment, I thought that it couldn't be her... but then I realized that she was about due to show up. "Assuming we can find a third person, I'm in. Perhaps Ms. Mizuno would be interested. Where would the club meet, ma'am?"

"You only need a room to talk in. You could meet in classroom 1, my homeroom."

"Thank you, Ms. Sakurada." I bowed as she left the classroom, presumably to get lunch.

Which I wanted to do as well, but Sato-san was at the door. "What did you say to Umino-san yesterday?"

Oh, great, Umino and Naru-san's breakup was on the grapevine. I hate gossip. Switching back to Japanese to match him, I said, "I *asked* him to not let things get worse than they already were."

"Ah. I guess he just misunderstood. So, what did Sakurada-sensei want?"

As if it was any of his business. "She told me about a new student that wanted to join a Conversational English club, and asked whether I wanted to start one with her."

"The new transfer student? That ice queen?"

Maybe she wasn't who I thought she was. "Ice queen?"

"Yeah," he said dismissively. "I asked her out this morning and she turned me down flat. She's not a wallflower like Mizuno-san used to be, so she must be an ice queen."

Or maybe she just doesn't like you, Sato-san. I'd ask him whether he was an incel, but that word won't be coined for another seven years.

"And you're going to be in a club with her? Good luck, Donarudoson-san, and don't let your girlfriend find out."

"Is the new girl that cute?"

"Aino-san is hot, not cute."

It was her! Good. "I'll keep that in mind. Now if you'll excuse me, lunch is waiting. And so is my girlfriend."

"And you don't want to keep her waiting. I heard what she said to Aoyama-san."

"You did?"

"Everybody in the classroom heard. She's got a good set of lungs." He grinned. "Considering..."

"Maybe you'd better stop there, before she yells at you."

"Yeah, sure." And he finally let me go.

When I made it outside, I discovered that everybody had waited for me. "You didn't have to do that."

"Bunny-chan insisted that it wouldn't be the same without the Revealing Of The Lunches, Robu-san," Naru-san pointed out.

Of course I ignored Sato-san's advice and told everybody about the Conversational English club and the apparently-attractive-female new student who wanted to join it, before asking Ami-san whether she would join as well. She mentioned juku, and I promised to make sure we'd work the schedule around her extra classes... as I quietly made a "V" shape with my chopsticks while shielding the sight of them from Naru-san and Ichigo-san. As soon as she noticed that, she agreed immediately.

Ami-san's the smartest girl I've ever met. I wondered for a moment what it would have been like if she was my next-door neighbour, instead of Makoto. Maybe there was a different reality somewhere where I shared an apartment

building with her... but I wasn't in that reality, I was here. And then I thought that maybe I could do something to get Urawa-san to stick around the next time he showed up. Usagi-san was going to get Mamoru-san eventually unless I changed something there, and Makoto already had me; Ami-san deserved some happiness, too.

It took a few days for the Conversational English club to have its first meeting, what with the paperwork needing to be approved, Ami-san's juku, and the weekly volleyball team practice. We didn't get together until Friday, and that was just a "getting to know you" meeting. In which nobody actually mentioned the truly important things about ourselves, because Minako-san didn't know us yet and Sakurada-sensei sat in for the first few minutes of the first meeting.

Of course we spoke English. Sakurada-sensei insisted.

"I'm Mizuno Ami, and I'm happy to meet you."

After a moment, I sighed. "Ami-san, it's okay to boast a little bit."

"Do I have to?"

"Yes. You can't possibly carry out a conversation if you aren't willing to talk."

She sighed quietly. "Oh, alright. I placed at the top of the entire school during the last exams, and I'm taking high-school level courses at cram school."

"Ooh..." Minako-san said in appreciation.

I waited for another moment, then decided to give her a break. "I'm Rob Donaldson, and I'm pleased to meet you. I grew up in Canada, I just came to Japan in September, and Ami-san and I are in the same class. And I've just started a new hobby: taking walks with my girlfriend."

"That's so romantic," Minako-san replied. "Does your girlfriend speak English?"

"Not well enough to take part in a casual conversation, no. But I'm sure you'll meet Makoto some time soon."

Minako-san smiled as if she was keeping a secret. Of course, so were we. "I'm sure that I will. I'm Minako Aino... Aino Minako," she corrected herself, "and I'm happy to make your acquaintance. I've spent the last few years in London, but circumstances have brought me back to Japan. I like singing and playing volleyball."

"At the same time?" I asked with a grin.

"Don't be daft," she replied with a smile of her own.

"Daft?" Ami-san asked.

Seeing that Sakurada-sensei was as confused as Ami was, I replied, "That's British for 'silly' or 'stupid', depending on the context."

We continued chatting about where we each grew up for a quarter-hour or so, although Sakurada-sensei left five minutes in. Then we decided to wind up the meeting and have a longer one next week.

"What are we going to talk about next Friday?" Minako-san asked.

I smiled. "I'm sure we'll have something to talk about, the next time we meet."

Makoto and I got together to do our homework that evening, so that we wouldn't need to do it over the weekend. Well, except for whatever homework we were assigned Saturday morning.

Partway through, she put her pencil down and stretched. I watched. Judging from her smile, she didn't appear to mind.

Not for the first time, I wondered how lucky I was to have caught her eye... and then I remembered that whichever anonymous being it was who had dropped me into this reality had obviously intended us to meet. Stupid... no, this particular genre convention wasn't stupid at all, because it let me meet my dearest.

"Darling, how closely does the anime about us match our reality?"

"Where did that come from?"

"Just idle curiosity."

I thought for a moment. "Well, the events so far have been pretty close."

"Oh."

"Yeah, I don't like that idea either." We both knew why. "The timing, though... The only point that matched the timing of the anime was the day we met. Everything else has been moving faster than the schedule in the show."

"I'm almost afraid to ask, but how much faster?"

I thought for a moment, then the implications hit me. "I'll put it this way: If we were on the anime's schedule, I'd be giving you a birthday present the day after tomorrow."

"But it's only October..." Then she frowned. "You're telling me that things are happening on a three-to-one ratio between the anime and real life?"



"And speeding up."

"How many more episodes before... D-day?"

I sighed deeply. My policy of not lying to my girlfriend was starting to hurt. "Three months worth, as broadcast."

"Which means that if we don't change things, I'm not going to make it to Labor Thanksgiving Day, let alone my next birthday. I might not even make it to 7-5-3 Day."

Neither of us said anything for a moment.

"I'm still going to buy you a birthday present. No matter what. And I will do my very best to be able to hand it to you, my dearest Makoto."

We went shopping after school the next day.

No, not for a birthday present. I needed a warmer jacket, and Makoto decided we needed to match.

Which meant we were in the shopping district when the window-washers' platform's support wire broke. "Oh, no!"

« Doubly, » I thought. « Zoicite dressed as Sailor Moon will be along to rescue them shortly. And I thought telling him he'd look like a girl if he wore a wig would prevent this! »

« Awfully convenient that Zoicite has somebody to rescue... Oh. He put their lives at risk, didn't he? »

As I nodded, we heard somebody in the crowd say, "Look! It's Sailor Moon!"

Damn it, I was going to change *something*! "Hold my bag," I said as I passed it to Makoto and looked up. I hadn't tried using any of my powers at that range yet, so I needed to concentrate. "That's it... swing over... closer... just like that... There!"

My forcefield reached the impostor, and knocked the wig off his head.

"That's not Sailor Moon! She's a fake!"

So Zoicite decided to drop the people he'd rescued from the peril he'd put them in.

I'd never created a soft forcefield before. But I managed it, and they sank into it the way a pair of stuntmen sink into an air-and-foam pad the height of a person. And, as I dissolved the forcefield, they got up and walked away, while everybody around us cheered.

Makoto gave me a big hug. "You saved them!"

"After putting them in danger." « Zoicite's getting more ruthless than I remember. »

« But you changed things. »

« For the worse, not for the better. »

« *But you changed things.* Give me a straw to grasp at, darling. »

Then we saw Usagi-san and Naru-san heading toward us. « Time to go. »

A few minutes later, the four of us were in a quiet corner of a fast-food place, enjoying the best that The Colonel could offer in Japan. Which was pretty good, actually.

"Was that Zoicite?" Usagi-san asked.

"Oh, that was definitely Zoicite," Naru-san looked angry. "I'll never forget the man who killed Nephrite."

I'd forgotten that he'd already displayed a ruthless streak. Mind you, that happened before I arrived.

"Why would Zoicite impersonate you, though?" Makoto asked.

"Dunno," Usagi-san replied with a shrug of her shoulders.

"I could understand if he was trying to lure Tuxedo Kamen out and attack him, but Zoicite got his Rainbow Crystals at Dreamland," I mentioned.

"Maybe they were trying to lure you out," Makoto suggested. "They don't know that you gave your Rainbow Crystal to Sailor Mercury."

"But they should also not know that I had one."

"Can't they track the crystals, though? Maybe they know you used to have one. They definitely know you work with Sailor Moon."

"There is that, Naru-san," I agreed.

"They're going to try again, you know."

We all nodded in agreement with Usagi-san.

Makoto and I continued our shopping trip after lunch, but with a side of uneasiness. In canon, Zoicite and Kunzite lured Tuxedo Kamen out by pretending to capture Sailor Moon. We'd already derailed that, so how were they going to lure Sailor Moon out? And when?

Ask a stupid question, get a stupid genre convention.

"Sailor Moon!" Zoicite's voice boomed from above, like a wrathful ... No, Zoicite's never been a god, or even a demigod. "You and your followers must bring your Rainbow Crystals to the 300-year-old pine at Hamarikyū Gardens at once, or we will destroy this city! You have one hour!"

"Do they really expect that to work?" Makoto asked while the visage of the Dark General faded from the sky like an afterimage on a TV screen.

The shoppers around us started to panic. "It's just like a few months ago!"

I nodded. "It worked when Jadeite tried it."

"That was before my time."

"Mine, too. Let's go."

We were halfway to the subway station when Makoto's pager went off. "Mako-chan! Did you see that?"

"We saw it! We're on our way!"

But when we got to the subway station, there were people walking away from the platform for the Oedo line, enough that the crowd slowed us down and made us miss the first train. Although the four-minute delay did let Usagi-san catch up with us. Once we finally reached the platform, we learned why there was a crowd; there were subway staff being all apologetic while announcing, "Due to circumstances beyond our control, the Metropolitan Police have asked us that we not allow anyone to ride past Daimon Station for the next two hours. We apologize for the inconvenience." One of the staffers was even hand-writing apology letters for anyone who wanted one.

Makoto, Usagi-san, and I exchanged glances, smiled, nodded, and got on the train anyway. The car only had one other passenger: Hino-san. "Fancy meeting you here," I said.

"This is hardly a time to make jokes," she snapped at me.

"I'm completely serious, Hino-san. I didn't expect to see you until we reached Hamarikyū Gardens."

"Do you have the crystals?"

I shook my head. "Mercury has them."

Guess who boarded the train at Akabanebashi Station. If you guessed "Ami-san", then you know the stupid genre conventions, too.

We double-checked that we were the only people in the car. Then I raised a nice, sparkly, nearly-opaque forcefield around the ladies and looked out the window anyway.

"Mercury Power, Make-Up!"

"Mars Power, Make-Up!"

"Jupiter Power, Make-Up!"

"Moon Prism Power, Make-Up!"

I went invisible. Saying anything would have been counterproductive.

By the time we reached Daimon Station, the forcefield was gone and everyone was ready for action. A subway staffer looked into the car while saying, "We apologize for the inconvenience... Oh! Yes, of course the four of you may continue to Tsukijishijo Station. Good luck, ladies."

Two stops later and we were there. It's normally an eleven-minute walk from Tsukijishijo Station to the 300-year-old pine; the Senshi covered the distance in five, and it only took them that long because they were avoiding detection.

Now that I knew I had sufficient range to pull off the stunt, I made an invisible forcefield bridge across the Sumida River and got there in four... and was immediately dogpiled by youma, including one wearing very thick and large glasses who was directing the others. So much for invisibility being useful.

I really needed to learn some actual hand-to-hand combat skills, and stop relying on my powers during combat. By the time I realized I already knew all the martial arts that Makoto knew, it was too late. Once they had me pinned, a tall, white-haired man levitated over to me.

"Dark General Kunzite, I presume."

"And you would be Oni. Be a good boy and stay still, or my youma will rip your throat open. I don't suppose you'd like to drop your vision cloak and let me see your face, would you?"

In reply, and because I spotted a white cat with a crescent mark on his forehead in the branches of the 300-year-old pine, I misquoted the Dread Pirate Roberts. "No. I think everyone will be wearing them in the future. They're terribly comfortable."

"And you're a fool if you seriously believe that. Now, where are the Sailor Senshi?"

"Right behind you!" shouted Sailor Moon. "The heavens may forgive you for terrorizing the city, but I will not! In the name of the Moon, I will punish you!"

With that, I used a forcefield to grab those big thick glasses and throw them into the river. "Now, Sailor Jupiter!" I shouted.

"Sailor Kick!" She'd never done it in canon as far as I remembered, but she was a martial artist, so she pulled it off anyway. That left only one youma holding me down, and Makoto standing by my side. A forcefield battering ram took care of said youma.

The other Senshi rushed to Jupiter's side as she helped me up. "Are you okay, Oni?" Moon asked.

Still invisible, I answered, "I think so. Now, somebody tell me why Kunzite's smiling."

The man himself answered, "Because you've fallen into my trap!" And a dark forcefield surrounded the five of us and started to constrict. "That forcefield is invulnerable to all of the powers you've shown so far. I'll simply return later and take the Rainbow Crystals from your dead bodies. Good-bye, Sailor Senshi."

I sighed deeply. "I should have seen that coming."

"Let me guess," Jupiter replied. "Straight out of the anime."

"Except that we're in a park instead of a freight yard." I saw Mars stand and pose, and yelled, "*Duck!*"

"Fire Soul!" The flames bounced off Kunzite's forcefield and nearly fried us all, before I caught them in a forcefield of my own.

"Don't do that!"

"Are you saying we have to wait around for Tuxedo Kamen to come rescue us?" The thought obviously annoyed Sailor Mars.

Before I could answer her, an orange beam punctured Kunzite's forcefield from outside, kept on going over our heads, and punctured the forcefield again on its way out.

As the field collapsed, I replied, "No, we had to wait around for Sailor V to come rescue us."

And said defender of love and justice made her grand entrance, removing her mask as she did. As she walked over to us, her costume changed from a mirror of Sailor Moon's to a white-and-orange number, with a dark-blue bow that looked like the ones on Sailor Moon and Sailor Mars's outfits.

"I'm not using that name any more, whoever you are. Sailor *Venus* has arrived!"

"Sailor V! Venus!" Moon was going ga-ga as if she was meeting a celebrity. "Are you the Moon Princess that we're looking for?"

She smiled. But before she could say anything, I said, "Kunzite or Zoicite might be listening in."

The white cat that had been perched in the 300-year-old pine jumped onto her shoulder and whispered in her ear. She nodded and replied, "I'll see you tomorrow, where you usually meet."

"At tea time?" I suggested.

She nodded, and was off.

"Where we usually meet?" Moon asked with a puzzled look on her face. "How would she know that? And how would she know when we have tea?"

"All will be explained tomorrow," I replied.

Just to be sure, Makoto, Ami-san, Luna, and I were at the Hikawa Shrine at 2:50 the next afternoon.

Rei had a pot of tea waiting for us. "Where's Usagi?"

"I don't know," Luna answered. "And I'm worried."

I accepted a cup of green tea from Hino-san. "Ladies, will you allow me to make the introductions?"

"Why would you need permission to make introductions?" Minako asked.

"Because I made a promise to each of you."

"Ah. Those introductions." Hino-san thought for a moment, then continued, "if you're introducing us to Sailor Venus, then yes."

"You have my permission on the same terms," added Ami-san. Luna nodded in agreement.

Makoto smiled. "And I trust you to know what's best. Go ahead and introduce us."

"Thank you, ladies," I replied just as a blonde girl approached us... a girl that Ami-san and I had already met, who was carrying a white cat.

"Donaldson-san? I didn't expect to see you here," she commented.

I sipped my tea, then gave the cup back to our host. "Thank you, Hino-san." I turned to the newcomer. "Aino-san, I believe I said we'd have something to talk about the next time we met. Please allow me to make the introductions."

"Shouldn't we wait for Usagi-san?" Ami-san asked.

I shook my head. "We can't." I turned back to Minako-san. "You've already met Mizuno Ami-san, who is also known as Sailor Mercury. The cat she's carrying is named Luna, and she's actually a Mau. This is our host, Hino Rei-san, also known as Sailor Mars. This lovely young woman is my girlfriend, Kino Makoto, also called Sailor Jupiter. Everyone, this is Aino Minako-san, also known as Sailor V, now calling herself Sailor Venus. And her cat, or rather her Mau companion, is named Artemis. I'm Rob Donaldson; Usagi-san calls me Oni when she's Sailor Moon."

The white cat looked at me and asked, "How do you know all that?"

"No time to explain. We only have a few minutes and we need to go over some things that there's no point in keeping secret now. Tsukino Usagi-san is the reincarnation of Princess Serenity; there never was a Sailor Moon in the Silver Millennium." Luna's eyes went wide at that revelation. "Chiba Mamoru-san is Tuxedo Kamen and the reincarnation of Prince Endymion." It was Hino-san's turn to look surprised. "And since Aino-san just showed up right here right now, Usagi-san and Mamoru-san are both trapped by Zoicite and Kunzite, most likely in the Star Light Tower."

"That's where they are, yes," Artemis said.

Hino-san put the teapot down and said, "What are we waiting for? Let's go rescue Usagi and Mamoru before the Dark Generals call us out and demand the Rainbow Crystals again!"

"Who *are* you, Donaldson-san?"

As Makoto took Minako-san's arm and half-guided, half-dragged her along with the rest of us, she said, "We'll fill you in on the way."

We didn't have a subway car to ourselves this trip, so we had to have our discussions in whispers. As Luna explained the Silver Millennium to the Senshi and Makoto explained me to Minako-san, I had a quick talk with Artemis about how I knew what I knew. Our conversation was in English.

"So, you aren't from this time or this world at all. I can sympathize with you there, Donaldson-san."

"I thought you would, which is why I'm telling you so much, Artemis-san. And please, feel free to use British rules of politeness when we're speaking English."

"That might be harder than you think, Rob. I never did convince Minako to drop the honorifics or call me 'Artie', so I never got into the habit of using English rules of polite procedure."

"Well, you're her co-worker and in many ways her supervisor. There's a certain level of professionalism required there. I'm just an ally who doesn't need to be treated with the same level of politeness that your staff does... Artie." I said the last with a grin.

"Does that mean we can go drinking some time?"

"I'm too young for alcohol here. And I don't know what the local spirits would do to a cat."

He raised an eyebrow, or rather he would have raised an eyebrow if he had one. "You said that you know Luna and I are Mau."

"Luna has forgotten what that means."

"Ah. I'd better not transform to human where she can see me, then."

"And we'd better finish this conversation. We're almost there."

Artemis meowed and I bowed to the people who were watching us. Switching to Japanese, I said, "Thank you for being interested in my ventriloquism act. Look for me again on another train!"

I passed Artie to Minako-san, to carry out when we left the station. Finding a quiet corner nearby, we copied the drill we'd done last time; I put up a privacy screen, the girls transformed to their Senshi forms, and I went invisible. It was faster for the Senshi to roof-hop and me to run to our destination than it would have been to take a bus or a taxi.

The Star Light Tower was what I'd call an early version of Crystal Tokyo architecture, all crystal-like glass with no apparent metal skeleton. It looked a bit out of place among the steel and concrete towers of 1990s Tokyo.

And, when we approached it, it suddenly looked even more out of place when its entryway's appearance shifted to Early Modern Demon Lair. I didn't know whether that was Zoicite or Kunzite's doing, but whoever it was, he had no sense of style.

"Why'd they bother doing that?"

I turned to Artemis. "Beats me. It's bad tactics; they've just told us that they know we're here. And it isn't frightening any of us. Sailor Moon might have been unnerved by it, but she's already their prisoner."

"Are they boasting? 'Look at how much energy we can afford to throw away', and all that?"

"If they are, then they're going against their queen's direct orders. The Dark Kingdom has been operating in Japan specifically to gather the energy they need to resurrect their dark god."

"I wasn't aware of that."

"We can talk more after we rescue the hostages." I turned to Ami-san. "Mercury, can you map that tower?"

She already had the Mercury Computer out. "Whatever that effect is that changed the building's appearance is making scanning the building impossible, Oni."

"That explains why they're doing it," Artemis said.

"Yeah. Please do your best, Mercury. At least keep an eye on a path out."

Mars looked cross at that comment. "We're not going to retreat."

"But we do need to know how to get Sailor Moon and Tuxedo Kamen out of the building," Jupiter pointed out.

"Okay, that's different."

Minako-san lowered Artemis to the ground, to join Luna (who'd already freed up Ami-san's hands). "You two are staying out here, where it's safe."

"Or at least safer," Jupiter added.

"Right. Have fun storming the castle!"

I stayed invisible when we raced inside, so Artie didn't see me roll my eyes. May as well force the bad guys to spend some energy tracking me so they couldn't use it against us.

Once we were five meters past the doors, the entryway collapsed. "So much for keeping track of our way out," Mars grumbled.

"Which way?"

« I'm staying silent for as long as I can. Tell Mars "up". I don't know how far up, but it might be all the way. »

« Good idea. » "We go up. As far as we have to. Maybe to the top."

And we headed for the stairs. But before we got there, the Rainbow Crystals that Mercury was carrying floated out of her pocket or wherever, and shot almost straight upward.

I dropped my invisibility and formed a forcefield platform under everyone's feet. "Track them!"

"Already tracking!"

Before Makoto could say anything, I said, "The time for stealth is past. Sailor Moon just created the Ginzuishou, which means Tuxedo Kamen is seriously hurt. Start blasting holes in the ceilings, ladies, we're going up!" And I raised the forcefield on a forcefield pillar as fast as my companions could clear the way, following the trajectory of the Rainbow Crystals.

On the way up, I mentioned, "You know, a coherent light beam could blind somebody if it hits them in the face."

"I already know that trick," Minako commented with steel in her voice.

I had to change anchor points a few times because my forcefields reached maximum extension, but we got there faster than we would have by taking the stairs. Assuming we could take the stairs.

We came up through the floor between Sailor Moon and the Dark Generals. I had to duck to avoid being hit by the Moon Tiara.

Turning around, I saw that Kunzite already had Mamoru-san and was teleporting away. We weren't fast enough.

Zoicite and I played tag for a few minutes; I grabbed him in forcefields and he teleported out of them. "Stop wasting my time, Oni!"

"I'll keep wasting your time for as long as it takes my friends to get in position, Zoicite!"

"Crescent Beam!"

Sure enough, Venus's attack hit him in the face. I couldn't imagine a better sight than a blinded Dark General.

"Fire Soul!"

Mars pointed out my lack of imagination. A blinded and on fire Dark General looked even better.

Zoicite got off an unaimed attack, which I blocked easily. Mamoru-san wasn't here to say it, so I shouted, "Now, Sailor Moon!"

She didn't do anything.

Damn. She's in shock. "Now, Sailor Jupiter!"

"Supreme Thunder!"

Dazed and staggered, and still on fire for whatever reason, Zoicite nonetheless rushed us... and fell through the hole in the floor that we'd arrived through.

He didn't teleport away. After a moment, we heard the thud.

Sailor Mars threw up.

"Is this the first time you've seen death, Mars?" Venus asked. She got a nod in reply, then Mars threw up again.

I wasn't doing too well, either. "It's the first time I've seen a violent death. Let's get out of here."

Ami-san guided Usagi-san out of the room and into what could pass for a corridor in an H. R. Giger nightmare. Minako-san helped Hino-san, and Makoto and I covered our retreat. Not that there was anybody left attacking us.

"He must have been out of energy."

"Not a pleasant way to go," I replied.

"I've seen worse."

Yes. Makoto, you have. I'll shut up now.

« Thank you, darling. »

We just missed witnessing The Slap Heard 'Round The World, Except In The North American Broadcast Dub. I put my arm out to keep Makoto from walking in on the drama. « Neither of them want to see a happy couple right now, my dearest. »

We waited for a few minutes, until Minako-san walked back to find us. "It's over. Mercury is just finishing calming them down."

"Thanks, Venus."

We joined the others. "Is everybody okay now?" asked Makoto.

"I'm not okay, but moping won't solve anything," Usagi-san replied. Her cheek was already turning red.

"Then let's get out of here," Minako-san suggested. We headed off, with Mercury and Venus supporting Moon.

"Didn't I just say we needed to do that?" Hino-san grumbled.

"Was that before or after you slapped your princess?"

"You can keep your mouth shut, Oni."

By the time we'd reached ground level, the Dark Kingdom's spells had ended and the Star Light Tower was back to normal. Including not having holes in all of the floors where we'd punched through them. That was convenient.

We didn't have an after-action debrief that afternoon.

We did have a study session, but not at the Hikawa Shrine.

The study session was at Ami-san's apartment, for a change. And I was *very* impressed by the building. "How can you afford to live in a place like this?"

"Oh, the hospital owns it. They bought it at a bargain price last year, and mother and I moved in not too long afterward. It's a much better building than the one the hospital was using for staff housing before the asset bubble burst, and it's closer to the hospital, too."

"Are you talking about the apartment again, Ami?" I heard somebody with a voice very much like hers ask. Then I saw the speaker. She looked like Ami's older sister, and she was wearing a blouse and slacks ensemble with an ID card on a lanyard around her neck.

"Only because my classmate asked, mother."

I bowed to who I now knew was Dr. Mizuno. "I'm Ami-san's classmate, Rob Donaldson. I'm honoured to finally meet you, Mizuno-sensei."

She returned my bow quickly, then talked to me while putting her shoes and coat on. "I'm happy to meet you, Donarudoson-san. Ami's told me that you're helping her with English. Thank you for looking after my daughter. And I hope we can talk properly some time, but I have to be going now. Don't forget to eat, and not just sandwiches, Ami!"

And she was out the door.

"But sandwiches are so convenient..." She was interrupted by a knock at the door. "Come in!"

It was Usagi-san, with Luna in her arms. "Hi! Pardon the intrusion! Ami-chan, I held the elevator for your mother just now. Another emergency at the hospital?"

"Another?" I asked.

"Mother and I don't see each other very often. She's been on call for months. The extra money pays for my juku."

"I see." Then I felt a tickle at my mindreading sense. "Hang on a minute." « Can you sense me? »

« Barely. What's up? »

I had to concentrate to sense Makoto. « Ami-san's mother just told her to have something other than sandwiches for dinner, then took off for the hospital. »

« Not a problem, darling. » And I saw through her eyes what she was carrying.

« I love you, my dearest. Shutting off the mindreading now. » "Ami-san, you don't need to worry about dinner. Mako-chan's almost here, and she's loaded down with grocery bags. Tonight, we feast!"

By the time Minako-san and Artemis arrived, we were just about to start the sukiyaki party. But they insisted we wait until they gave us some gifts, the way somebody who just moved into an apartment building would give gifts to their neighbours.

They'd put some thought into the gifts, too; each suited the recipient instead of being something useful but generic. Ami-san got a leather-bound book that I didn't see the title of, Makoto got a collection of Twinings teas, and Usagi-san got a promise that Minako would take her for an afternoon at a beauty salon next weekend.

Then I discovered that a particular revelation took place earlier than in canon. "I cannot believe you were 0091 all along," Luna complained as she opened the envelope that Artemis gave her... to see a simple card with one thing written on it with a brush: I'm sorry. "Oh, how can I stay mad at you now...?"

Then it was my turn. "Artemis-san said that Luna-san told him that Usagi-san said you have a collection of Sailor Senshi crane game dolls."

"I have the complete set," I replied.

"No, you didn't, but you do now, Rob-san," Minako-san said as she handed me a small package.

I opened it to discover a Sailor Jupiter plushie, and a maker's card authenticating that it was the first one off the production line. "It's... the perfect gift. Thank you so much. I trust you'll excuse me for leaving the table for a moment just before we begin dinner; I don't want her getting stained."

Unfortunately, they went home with one gift ungiven. Hino-san never did join us.

I hoped we hadn't finally come together just to fall apart.

Ami-san told me in class the next morning why Hino-san didn't join us. It turned out that Yuuichirou-san had been burned while tending to the sacred fire, and she had to take him to the hospital. Which, by the way, was why Mizuno-sensei was called in.

We let the others know at lunchtime. Including Minako-san, who we pretty much drafted into our unofficial lunch club.

It was amazing how well Ichigo-san and Mina-chan got along. Naru-san and Mina-chan didn't get along quite as well, though; I heard Naru-san mutter something about another person taking Usagi-san away.

We... no, *I* had to do something about that. My meddling had already cost Naru-san her boyfriend; I didn't want her to lose her best friend as well.

So I asked Ami-san whether she was busy after school.

Then I asked Ami-san whether she was busy after juku.

She got the hint, and agreed to come over after dinner.

"What's on the agenda tonight, Rob-san?" Ami-san asked once she had joined Makoto and me in my apartment.

"A little homework, one episode of an anime, and some brainstorming," I replied. "In that order, and our homework is almost finished."

Ami-san looked over Makoto's shoulder. "You're doing a lot better now than you were when we met, Mako-chan," Ami commented.

"I'm finally used to the textbooks you use here," she replied.

Ami walked over to me. "Should I bother checking your homework?"

"You already are. Or, rather, your brainprint is." That comment soured the mood a bit. Not because I'd made the comment, but because of why we'd made the brainprint in the first place. I closed my textbook. "Speaking of, I think it's anime time."

Once Makoto had her homework put away, I started episode 36.

An hour later, the ladies had come to terms with the idea of a brainwashed Endymion, and we had a plan to protect Usagi-san from discovery when Minako-san took her to the beauty salon this weekend. Teal Deer, since the hair dryers/scryers were networked together, spoof the network so that everybody would be identified as Sailor Moon. We considered having nobody be identified, but then we'd be condemning a half-dozen women to remain youma, and nobody wanted that.

"Can I impose on you to deliver the virus to their network, Ami-san?"

"Virus?"

I smiled as I explained to Makoto, "It's designed to make the system sick, and cough up something wrong. Thus, it's a virus."

"Ah."

Ami-san nodded. "I can do that as soon as I write it," she said.

I smiled. "We're lucky to have you as a friend, Ami-san. Thank you,"

"Are we going to warn Usagi-chan?"

"She and Minako-san did a pretty good job on their own in the anime. And do you really think she'll believe us about Tuxedo Kamen?"

Makoto thought for a moment. "No, that's something she needs to see for herself. What are we going to be doing while Ami does her part of the plan?"

I sighed. "We are going to be doing something else altogether: Salvaging Usagi-san and Naru-san's friendship."

"Their friendship is in trouble?"

"Naru-san is feeling crowded out. Before Bunny-chan became Sailor Moon, Naru-san was her best friend. Now, who looks like she's Bunny-chan's best friend? Hino-san? Ami-san? You? Me? Ichigo-san? And Minako-san was just added to that list."

"I never thought of it that way."

Ami-san thought for a moment. "Perhaps if we let Osaka-san in on one of our secrets, that might make her feel like she's still valued."

"She's already figured out who Sailor Moon, Oni, and I are," Makoto said. "And if she's still feeling left out even after that..."

"Then that might not work," I finished. "Mind you, she had to figure it out for herself; we never told her. What if we brought her all the way in, and asked her to help us?"

"We'd need to tell her that I'm Sailor Mercury."

"Yeah. Are you okay with that, Ami-chan?"

"Let me think about it, Mako-chan, I'll tell you tomorrow."

"Sure. And if you say yes, we need everybody else to agree to let Naru-san know who they are, too."

We ended up warning Usagi-san and Minako-san anyway, the one day that Naru-san and Ichigo-san got drinks for everybody at lunch.

Needless to say, Minako-san had something to talk about during the Conversational English club meeting that week. In English, of course; not only was that the whole point of the club, but we could mention some things that we couldn't talk about in Japanese without spreading our secrets around to all and sundry.

"How do you know all these things about us, Donaldson-san?"

"Aino-san, I hoped we could be friends. Please call me Rob. As for how I know about you, didn't Artemis tell you anything about me?"

"Call me Minako, then. Artemis said something I couldn't believe. You're supposedly from another universe altogether, where all of this," she waved a hand around, "and all of us are in a work of fiction."

"I've seen episodes of the anime we're in," Ami-san said quietly. "Which reminds me that our countermeasure for this weekend is ready."

"Thanks, Ami-san. Minako-san, I'm not going to make any copies of that anime, so if you want to watch it, you'll have to come over to my place."

"Is this some ploy to get me alone with you?"

"Rob-san isn't like that!"

"Thank you, Ami-san. Minako-san, I would expect Makoto, Ami-san, or both to be with us to act as chaperones."

"I might come visit some time, then. And no honorific for Mako-chan?"

I just smiled in response.

"Oh, ho! When's the big day?"

"You're a nosy one, Minako-san. We haven't set a date, but we've agreed that we aren't going to get any closer that we already are while we're fighting the Dark Kingdom."

"How close have you gotten?"

"Minako-san!"

I was happy that Ami was willing to come to my defence. "It's alright, Ami-san. We have hugged. And I've seen her transform."

"Woah!" Minako blushed at that last statement. Interestingly, Ami-san didn't; maybe she's become used to the idea. Minako-san kept following this chain of thought (and, yes, I was tempted to call it a love-me chain) despite the blush. "Aren't you tempted to go any farther than that?"

"I'm curious about that, as well."

"Alright. Yes, we're both tempted. But we know we mustn't, at least not now."

"Why not?"

Ami-san answered before I could. "We're not even fifteen yet. Our bodies are still developing."

"That alone is good and sufficient reason to wait. I don't want to hurt Makoto."

Ami-san continued, "Also, imagine what would happen if a pretty warrior was taken out of action by something like morning sickness."

"Birth control is a thing," Minako-san pointed out.

"No birth control is 100% effective," Ami-san countered.

"Ladies! Can we talk about something else, please?"

"Oh, is the big bad ogre getting embarrassed?"

"Yes," I lied. Hey, I never promised not to lie to Hino-san or Mina-chan, just Usagi-san, Ami-san and Makoto. And it wasn't a complete lie, but if we explained the other reason why Makoto and I had yet to kiss, let alone go any farther



than that, Minako-san would wonder why Makoto needed a reason to survive the fight. And then I'd have to tell Minako-san that she was third in line to fall in battle.

And she didn't need the burden of knowing that she was fated to die if I didn't change the timeline. It was bad enough that Makoto and Ami-san knew.

"Fine, fine. we'll talk about Usagi-san instead. After we get our hair done, I was thinking of taking her somewhere for tea. Do you think she'd like that?"

"Usagi-san loves cakes," Ami-san answered.

"I'll take that as a yes."

"It sounds like you're planning on pampering our princess," I commented.

Minako-san nodded. "I know what it's like to lose a boyfriend," she said wistfully. "She needs this."

"You're a good friend to our Bunny-chan." Ami-san smiled.

"Speaking of Bunny's friends... She's close to losing one. Naru-san is feeling crowded out, and while she has an idea why, she doesn't exactly know."

Minako-san grimaced, then asked, "How can I help?"

"Rob-san and Mako-chan have an idea, but it involves telling Naru-san who we are."

"And it has to be unanimous. Would you talk with Artie about bringing Naru-san into our confidence, please? Both of you have to agree. And so do Bunny-chan, and Luna, and Ms. Hino."

Minako nodded. "I'll ask him. Why is Rei-san the only one of us you don't call by her given name, Rob-san?"

Ami-san looked surprised. "I hadn't noticed that."

"She's never told me that I'm allowed to. And from her attitude toward guys who aren't Chiba-san or Yuuichirou-san, I don't want to assume that I have that right unless she says I do."

"Oh, okay." Minako-san turned to Ami-san. "So, cake shops. Where are the good ones?"

I let them talk, but took notes on a sheet titled "Where to take Makoto on a date"... which caused both of them to smile.

While Usagi-san and Minako-san were battling at the salon and Ami-san was making sure nobody had proof of who they were, I was talking with Luna at my place.

"Most people arrange these so that Sailor Moon is in the center," she complained about how I had my crane-game dolls displayed.

"Most people aren't dating Sailor Jupiter," I replied.

"There is that." After a moment, she continued, "Usagi says we can tell Naru-san about me and the others. I've been watching Naru-san for a while and I think I know what I'm going to say, but I have some questions first. What do you want to have her do? She isn't a Senshi."

"Neither are you and Artemis, but you help the team simply by giving us advice. I'm hoping that Naru-san could cover for Usagi-san at school, make excuses and take notes for her when Sailor Moon needs to be elsewhere, and simply remind everybody exactly why we're fighting the Dark Kingdom. And now that I'm saying that, maybe we should bring Aoyama Ichigo-san into the inner circle so she can do the same for Makoto."

"I have no idea who Aoyama Ichigo is."

I waved one hand dismissively. "She's Makoto's classmate. Bringing her in isn't important right now. Naru-san is the one we need to worry about today."

"Do we really need to worry about Naru-san?" The way she asked, I could tell she already knew her answer to the question; she wanted to know mine.

"For love and justice, I think we do."

"You're right, of course. We can't just say we support an ideal and then not live by it."

"Then we're agreed there. But we can care about Naru-san without bringing her all the way in to the inner circle."

"Are you arguing against your own idea, Robu-san?"

"No. If I can't see the flaws in an idea, then I haven't thought it through."

"I can understand that. What did Rei-san, Minako-san, and Artemis say?"

I shrugged my shoulders. "I don't know. Makoto is talking with Hino-san this afternoon. And it was only yesterday that we asked Mina-chan to ask Artie."

"Artie?" Luna's eyes went wide in surprise.

"He complained that Mina-chan never called him that, so I decided to make him happy that way."

"I couldn't possibly call Artemis 'Artie'."

I smiled. "Not now, but who knows what the future holds?"

"Apparently you do."

"Only in broad strokes at this point. And I don't know what you're going to say about Naru-san."  
She thought for a moment. "I'll let you bring Naru-san all the way into our group."

Much to my complete lack of surprise, Makoto convinced Minako-san, Artemis, and Hino-san to go along with our plan. "Love and Justice" covers a multitude of virtues.

But then Usagi-san couldn't join us after school at all that week. She had plans. And considering what she'd learned at the salon about what had happened to Tuxedo Kamen, I wasn't about to pressure her.

In retrospect, I should have realized what those plans were, but I was still hoping that my actions were changing the timeline away from canon events. I had my nose rubbed in that mistake when I wanted to discuss our plan to bring Naru-san into the inner circle and discovered Makoto wasn't home, and I tried calling Ami-san on the off chance that she was there.

Ami-san's mother picked up. "I'm sorry, Donarudoson-san, but Ami is out this afternoon. She's attending a special dance session."

"That doesn't sound like her usual behaviour, Mizuno-sensei."

"Oh, I insisted. She needs to learn how to interact with people if she's going to become a doctor, and the Princess Seminar is willing to teach her at least this much."

The Princess Seminar. Oh, crap.

"Did she leave the address of this seminar, by any chance?" I asked while securing my laptop.

Mizuno-sensei told me, and I thanked her and wished her a pleasant day.

Then I was out the door, invisible, and running for the estate where my girlfriend and our best friend were about to walk into a trap.

Not at full speed – I couldn't maintain my top speed without tiring myself out – but fast enough that I made it there before public transportation could have.

It wasn't until I was at the wall surrounding the estate that I was able to hear Makoto's thoughts. « Robu's going to be so proud of me that I passed! »

« No! Makoto, get out of there and take everybody else with you! It's a trap! Damn it, why aren't you reading my mind right now? Makoto! NOOOOO!!! » I was too late.

Damn it. I like it when my girlfriend wears green, not when she is green and covered in wax.

There was one small comfort that applied to all of their previous victims: I couldn't hear her thoughts. Which means the victims were in suspended animation, not imprisoned and slowly going insane.

That didn't stop me from feeling righteous anger, or using a forcefield battering ram to break the window so I could go through it.

The youma Shakoukai was ready for me, but I was also ready for her. The wax that she thought she was shooting at me only covered a pair of forcefields. I pushed her out of the room we were in, both to protect her victims and to bring Sailor Moon into the fight.

"Why is there a youma here?"

"She's your teacher! And all of the girls who passed her course are trapped in wax in the next room!" I put up another forcefield to protect Bunny-chan, Mina-san, and Hino-san.

"Ew, ick! Moon Prism Power, Make-Up!"

"Mars Power, Make-Up!"

"Venus Power, Make-Up!"

I sighed as I blocked another attack from Shakoukai. "Since when do you transform *right in front of a youma*?" I asked with some steel in my voice.

"Whoops."

"We just need to defeat her first! Fire..."

"Mars, no! Don't melt the wax statues that she turned people into!"

She aborted her attack. Quickly. As Mars reached for an ofuda instead, Venus launched an attack of her own: "Crescent Beam!"

I'd never seen a wax impression of a laser beam before that day.

"Enough playing around," I said as I slammed Shakoukai into a wall and pinned her there, making sure she couldn't launch another attack while leaving her forehead uncovered.

"Akuryo Taisan!"

Venus took Tuxedo Kamen's usual role. "Good work, Mars! Moon, now!"

"Moon Healing Escalation!"

And suddenly I had Countess Rose pinned to the wall, not Shakoukai. She cried "Refresh!" and fainted as I let her loose, and Venus caught her.

Then we heard screams of panic from the next room. I was never so happy to hear panicky screaming girls in my entire life.

Ten minutes later, we very carefully confirmed that Countess Rose had no memory of the Sailor Senshi's identities.

While escorting Makoto and Ami-san home, I idly wondered why Hino-san didn't pass the course.

"Why would you expect that she'd pass?"

"Because of her family... Oh, wait. She doesn't like her father, does she?"

Ami-san nodded. "That's right, but if she didn't tell you that, then don't mention him in her presence."

"Wait a minute," Makoto interrupted. "Rei-san is part of *that* Hino family?"

"Yes, and you can imagine the scandal if her secret identity was revealed."

I added, "I wouldn't be surprised if she deliberately didn't learn the skills of high society."

"It looks like Bunny-chan didn't learn them, either," commented Makoto.

"Too bad," I replied. "It looks like you two will have to be the group's elegant members until Sailor Neptune shows up."

"Oh-ho! So there's a Sailor Neptune, is there?" Makoto grinned.

Oopsie. "To quote Rubeus Hagrid, I shouldn't'a told ya that."

"Who's Rubeus Hagrid?"

Before Makoto and Ichigo-san joined us for lunch on Monday, Usagi-san asked, "Naru-chan, are you busy after school?"

"I don't have any plans," she replied. "What are you thinking about doing?"

"I want to introduce you to some people I know."

Naru looked surprised. "You want me to meet... them?" she finished as she noticed the last two members of our group approaching. "I'd like that."

"Great! I'll meet you at your place after school."

I looked up at the latecomers. "Ah, there you are! Neither of you are usually late for lunch."

Ichigo-san looked miserable. "I'm not going to be allowed to go on the school trip next week." That was a special trip; instead of having a sports festival for Sports Day this year, we were all going into the mountains for a week to learn how to ski. And so were the middle-school students from Toyo Eiwa Jogakuin. Yeah, TA Girls' School. "And I really wanted to win the contest, too."

"Contest?" I asked.

"The night skiing event, only for the girls. The winner will be named the Moonlight Princess."

"Oh, that." It's a trap, of course.

« We figured that out already, darling. »

"Why can't you go?"

"Hang on to that question," Minako-san insisted. "We haven't done the Revealing Of The Lunches yet."

Other than Minako-san's lunch, there wasn't anything special. Ami-san had to comment on that one lunch, though. "Mina-chan, if you eat like that very often, your arteries will end up clogged."

"You don't think I should eat pigs in blankets?" Ichigo-san looked puzzled. Minako-san explained, "These. They're pork sausages all wrapped up in bacon like they're in blankets." And Ichigo-san was enlightened.

"Not every day, but once in a while is okay," Ami-san allowed.

"Now that that's settled, there's still a question in the air that hasn't been answered," Makoto pointed out.

Ichigo-san sighed. "Oh, right. My Japanese History grades aren't good enough. I have to stay here and take supplementary classes."

"We can do that?" I asked.

"I *have* to do that. Who'd want to stay behind and take classes instead of going skiing?"

"Well..." I started. "Even though I grew up in Canada, I was never very fond of winter sports. And I'm struggling with Japanese History, too."

Makoto looked sad, but said, "I suppose academics are important. But don't you dare try to get out of skating class when we have that."

That's right – figure skating was Makoto's sport. "I'll let you teach me, m-Makoto." I almost called her "my dearest", but we all knew how poorly Bunny-chan was taking Chiba-san's brainwashing.

We chatted about various and sundry things, and after lunch I asked my homeroom teacher whether I could stay behind and take the supplementary Japanese History classes. He almost declined until he checked my grades; then he told me that I was showing initiative in making the request before he had to tell me to remain behind, and approved my absence from the school trip.

School ended, and we went home to change out of our school uniforms. Then we headed for the Hikawa shrine. Makoto and I were the first to arrive, followed shortly by Ami-san, then Minako-san and Artemis, and finally Usagi-san, Naru-san, and Luna.

After paying our respects to the shrine and the resident kami, we joined Hino-san in her home. "Thank you for visiting, Osaka-san," she said with a smile on her face.

Looking around, Naru-san formally replied, "Pardon my intrusion." Then she asked, "Do we all know the secret?"

As previously discussed, I took the lead and bowed deeply to Naru. "Osaka-san, I must apologize to you for my misleading statement earlier. While it is true that Mizuno-san knew that Tsukino-san is Sailor Moon before I met either of them, I did not explain how she knew and I allowed you to reach an incorrect conclusion."

Then it was Ami-san's turn to bow. "And I apologize to you for not telling you this earlier. I'm Sailor Mercury."

"Oh, raise your heads, you two. I suspected as much. Thank you for telling me the truth." Then she turned to Minako-san. "How do you know the secret, Aino-san?"

"My cat told me," she replied.

"Your cat."

"That's right," Artemis replied.

"Gaah! Talking cat!"

"Naru-san, this is Artemis. He's a Mau, not a cat," I explained.

"What's a Mau?"

"An alien who looks like an Earth cat," he explained. "Although, as you can hear, we can talk."

"Sure. Of course you are." Naru-san turned to Usagi, who was still holding Luna. "And I suppose your pet cat is a Mau, too."

"I am," Luna answered.

"Would you care for some tea, Osaka-san?"

She nodded. "I'd like that, Hino-san. How is it that you know Usagi's secret?"

"I'm Sailor Mars."

"That makes sense, I guess. So the only Sailor Senshi that I haven't met yet is Sailor V?"

Artemis replied, "You didn't ask why I told Minako about Usagi-san."

Naru-san blinked. Twice. "You're..."

"I call myself Sailor Venus now."

"I've been having lunch with four of the Sailor Senshi and Oni for how long, now? And I only figured out three of your identities."

"That's three more than Aoyama-san has figured out, we think." Usagi-san said.

"Oh. Good. I'm not a complete idiot." Naru-san turned to me. "I suppose you're Tuxedo Kamen, too."

I shook my head and gave the reply that we'd prepared for a question like that one. "No. Tuxedo Kamen is somebody else who I don't have the right to name at the moment. And now we start telling you things that only the inner circle know." I made a motion with my hand that encompassed everyone in the room... including Naru-san.

"Tuxedo Kamen has been kidnapped and brainwashed by our enemies, the Dark Kingdom."

"The group that Nephrite was part of."

"And Zoicite, who I watched die," Makoto confirmed.

"He's dead? That's good to hear," she said with some venom in her voice. "I've been afraid ever since that bastard killed Nephrite that he'd come after me next." After she sipped her tea, she asked, "How did you find out about Usagi-san, Donarudoson-san?"

"Please, call me Rob. Not everyone in this room knows my entire story, so I'll only share part of it with you. I'm from the year 2022."

"Time travel is impossible. They said so in science class."

"Yet I'm here. And it isn't impossible for Sai..." I cut myself off before saying the name.

Makoto wouldn't let me stay silent, though. "Oh, no. That's a secret that we need to know. It might give us an advantage over the Dark Kingdom. *Which one of us can travel in time?*"

"Since you put it that way..." I sighed. "Sailor Pluto."

"And how do we contact Sailor Pluto?" Hino-san demanded.

"I have no idea. According to the records I have access to, she contacted you."

"So much for having another ally in the fight."

"Sorry, Bunny-chan. And please stop asking me about Sailor Senshi other than the people in this room."

Naru-san took pity on me. "If you're from 2022, why are you here in 1992, Robu-san?"

"That's a good question, Naru-san. And I don't have an answer for it."

"Are you here because the Senshi need your help?"

I shook my head. "They're quite able to fight their own battles."

"I should hope so," Hino-san muttered.

"Did you volunteer to come back in time?"

"No. To be honest, this world is primitive in many ways, and I'm not completely comfortable here. You don't even have internet connections in every home yet."

That caught Ami-san's attention, but she didn't ask about it then.

"Is there anything about this time that's better than in 2022?"

"Yes," I replied instantly. "Makoto."

She smiled. "Robu has let me see a few of those records of his. I didn't have a boyfriend in the reality where he didn't come to 1992."

Naru-san thought for a moment. "So you've changed history."

"Only in ways that don't affect the Dark Kingdom."

"What do the Dark Kingdom want, anyway?"

Everybody waited for the answer to that question.

After a moment, I decided to tell them. "You have a right to know, but please don't tell anyone else. We don't need mass panic. They're trying to gather enough energy to revive their dark kami, Metaria, and take over the world."

Nobody said anything for a moment.

Finally, Naru-san whispered, "I never imagined that what you were doing was *that* big."

"Are we going to win?"

I turned to Usagi-san. "Naru-san has already told you that I've changed history. I certainly hope we'll win, and if you'll have me I'll fight by your side to help make that happen, but I can't make any promises."

"Mako-chan, are there any hints in the records Robu-san let you read?"

Instead of answering, she ran out of the room.

Before Ami-san and I followed her out, I said more harshly than I intended, "Never ask that again."

Between the two of us, Ami-san and I calmed Makoto down to where she was coherent again. "Why did Usagi have to ask me that?"

"Because she doesn't know what the answer means," I replied.

"And she mustn't know," Ami-san added. "We should never have learned."

I swept both of them into a hug. "And I'm so sorry that I told you. But I'm never going to lie to either of you. Or to Usagi-san, either."

We stood there for a moment, simply feeling each other's friendship. Skinship is a wonderful way to grow closer, as long as everybody involved agrees to it and respects each other's boundaries.

"Thank you for telling us, Rob-san," Ami-san finally said.

"And thank you for being here for me," Makoto added.

We let go of each other. "And thank you both for being yourselves. Remember when I said that you and Usagi-san were my only friends here? That's changed – there's Artemis and Minako-san and Ichigo-san, and I hope Naru-san, and even Luna and Hino-san, but the two of you are still my closest friends."

"Even Hino-san?" the person in question asked from her bedroom doorway.

"Well, we don't spend very much time together," I pointed out. "But I still hope you're my friend."

"You're as clueless as Yuuichirou-kun," she complained. "Of course we're friends. But I'm not ready to be on a given-name basis with you. Are you three ready to come back inside?"

"Mako-chan?"

She nodded to Ami-san. "Yeah, let's go."

We discovered Usagi-san bowing to us when we returned. "I'm sorry, Mako-chan. I shouldn't have asked that question. I don't know why I shouldn't have asked, but I'm sure you have your reasons."

"U-sa-gi..." Hino-san growled.

"Please ignore that last sentence!"

Naru-san giggled. "Now I know why you want me involved in the group. You need somebody with some common sense."

We all joined in on the laughter.

Then I had an idea. "This faux pas reminds me of an idea one of you had, I forget who, to make it look like there was a rift between the Sailor Senshi."

« When did we have this idea, darling? »

« Let's see; we're almost at episode 38 now, and it showed up in episode 43, so... »

« Oh. One of those ideas. » "I think that was my idea."

"But why?" Naru-san asked.

"So that the Dark Kingdom would think they could recruit one of you, and then we could finally find their base. Right?"

Makoto smiled upon my explanation of "her" idea. "That's it exactly."

"It could work," Artemis said. "But we'd have to put a lot of work into it."

"Which is why I was thinking we should start now. Naru-san, your role in this would be... let's see..."

"The friend who refuses to abandon Usagi." She must have seen the surprised look on my face. "Well, who here would the Dark Kingdom most want to recruit, if not Sailor Moon?"

We continued tossing around ideas until it was time to go home for supper... at which point we had the beginning of a plan.

I decided to listen to some music that evening... but when I switched on my laptop, I discovered that there was a message waiting for me.

Untitled. And from an unknown sender.

Was I finally about to get some answers as to why I was here? Or was this the first spam message in this world's existence? I opened the email.

"Please be more careful about what you say to others. --Meioh"

I hit reply... only to discover that the address was "example@example.com".

I quickly examined the message source... only to discover that the email appeared to originate from localhost.

Stupid genre conventions. And stupid internet conventions.

While the girls were off skiing, and Bunny-chan and Hino-san were getting caught in (and getting out of) a youma trap, I was sitting nice and warm in a Japanese History classroom for four hours a day. And so was Ichigo-san.

We were the only two students in the class. But not in the school; Sakurada-sensei had a half-dozen students in her English class, to name one.

At least we didn't go all the way back to Emperor Jimmu. But going back to Emperor Meiji was bad enough. We were getting the "Greatest Hits" version of recent Japanese history.

I won't bore you with any of that. If you're interested, you can watch *Rurouni Kenshin*, *The Wind Rises*, *Zipang*, and *Grave of the Fireflies* just like everyone else.

Ichigo-san and I continued the tradition of the Revealing Of The Lunches, and we learned a lot about each other. At least, I learned a lot about her; I wasn't about to let her know that I was anything other than a normal if mysterious transfer student. Yet.

She was born on September 3, in Wakkanai, which I did not previously know was the northernmost city, railway stop, and point in Japan. She knew a smattering of Russian, which she admitted to speaking with a thick Japanese accent, from the occasional trip to Korsakov. She loved skiing; she went to Komadori "all the time" before her family moved to Tokyo. (I later discovered that the longest run at Komadori was 300 meters, and felt sorry for her that she didn't get to ski on a real mountain with everybody else.) She wanted to be a biologist and go back to Wakkanai to study the harbour seals. Yes, she admitted that what she really wanted was to go back to Wakkanai. And she absolutely hated Japanese History.

The way they were teaching it, I didn't blame her.

The night before the make-up exams, Ami-san texted me to tell me that Hino-san and Bunny-chan were taken out of the Moonlight Princess race by a youma attack. I thanked her and didn't tell her that things were still proceeding as much like in canon as they possibly could, given the compressed timeline. She didn't need to know just how happy I wasn't.

But, at the end of the week, we both managed to pass the make-up test. Barely, but scores in the low-60s were enough to keep us from failing.

\* \* \*

We met our friends at the school, which was the designated drop-off point for the buses returning from the mountains, with our passing marks clearly displayed. Usagi-san congratulated Ichigo-san while Makoto congratulated me. (No hugs, at least not in public.)

And Makoto mentioned picking up a flyer at the ski resort, advertising a special session with the professional figure-skating duo Janelyn and Misha. "It looks like you're going to get that chance to skate with me sooner than we thought."

I pointed at the fine print without looking at the flyer. "What does it say here?"

"Limited to groups of five females only'. So you've seen the flyer already."

I made sure Ichigo-san wasn't listening before I replied. "No, except in an anime."

"Ah. Trap?" she asked as she picked up most of her own luggage.

"Trap. But we should still spring it," I added as I picked up the last of her bags and the largest of Ami-san's. The three of us headed for the bus stop just down the road. "If we're very lucky, we might turn it to our advantage."

It took me a couple of days to find skates in my size. Then Makoto and I went for a practice skate after school.

At which point I discovered that I didn't need any practice to keep up with her. And I wasn't pulling the skills out of her brainprint, either.

"I thought you said you didn't like winter sports," she said while lazily doing a double axel. "When did you get so good?"

I concentrated and pulled off a double axel of my own. "I don't know. What time is it?"

"Don't tell me that you've never done this before. Nobody gets that good in one session."

"Well, I haven't. But nobody becomes fluent in Japanese in one night, either."

"Oh." After a moment, she asked, "Is this where you say something about genre conventions?"

"Yes, it is. And they are stupid."

"No, they're not. We just discovered that we have something we can do together for fun." She skated over to me, took my hand, and started spinning, so I dropped and let her lead a gender-flipped forward-outside death spiral. Then I wondered how I knew the terminology for what we were doing.

"When we're up against Janelyn and Misha this weekend, we have to do one of these," I grinned. "There's no way they'll be able to pull one off."

"They're professional level skaters!" she pointed out while pulling me back to vertical.

And then I revealed how little I knew then about the performing arts. "And their attitudes are firmly rooted in the 1990s, when gender roles on ice are, pardon the pun, frozen. I have no doubt that Misha could lead a Love Spiral, but could Janelyn?" I put one arm around her waist. "No, that's something that I think only you can do here and now."

"You say the sweetest things, darling," she said with a smile.

"Only because they're true, my dearest," I replied with a smile of my own.

We worked on our elements for as long as they'd let us use the rink, reading each others' minds to get our timing down and turning the sport into the beginnings of a martial art.

After they finally kicked us out, we grabbed a beef bowl each at the counter where I'd first met Urawa-san. "What gave you the idea for martial arts figure skating?"

"A couple of things. First, you were enjoying skating with me and I wanted to make it something that's all our own. Second, the dancing martial art of capoeira. Third, one of Rumiko Takahashi's manga stories."

"Oh, now I remember reading that! It's completely unrealistic to freeze over a swimming pool, though."

"That story had people who changed sex or species when they got wet, and you're complaining about realism?"

"Consider that we both know about people who transform into Sailor Senshi," she replied as our orders arrived.

"If you're saying that that could happen in real life, I'm going to have to ask for proof. And I'm not going to China to find it."

Makoto pouted. "So we're not going to China for our honeymoon. Meanie."

"I assumed we were going to honeymoon somewhere in Japan, that we can reach without needing to fly."

Her mood darkened. "I should slug you for mentioning that, but I know you were thinking of my feelings. Just... don't bring it up again, okay?"

"Sure. And I'm sorry." I'd forgotten that it was a sore spot for her.

Since it seemed that I had an unlimited budget for relatively small purchases, I took Makoto shopping in Shibuya the next day, and we picked out matching green outfits for the weekend – the same shade of green as Sailor Jupiter's uniform.

She was surprised to find outfits that fit us both, matched, and gave us enough room to move, all on short notice and in the same shop – a place called "Atelier Lucent" about halfway down Center Gai. After seeing the designer's tag on my shirt, I wasn't surprised. I most carefully did not point out that we had just picked out some Setsuna Meioh original outfits.

I guess I didn't piss Pluto off as much as I thought I had.

And then the big day arrived. We met near the rink where Janelyn and Misha were offering the free class. "Robu-san, this is for girls only," Usagi-san said.

"Groups of five girls," I replied. "Who's the most famous group of five girls in Minato right now?"

"Five girls and a guy or two," Makoto added. "But they've already got your guy." Usagi-san pouted at the reminder.

"So we're not actually going to get a free skating lesson?"

I smiled. "No, Mina-chan, you'll get that lesson. But you'll also get ID'ed unless we're careful. And that's where I come in. Or, rather, where I go in with some other group who they aren't watching as closely as they're watching people our age. I'll see you in there." I faded into invisibility and snuck in with a group who looked old enough to be OLs.

At least, I looked like I thought I snuck in. I assumed Kunzite could duplicate his youma's see-invisible trick whenever he wanted.

By the time I'd found the control room for the scanners, the girls were on the ice. And nobody was in the scanner control room.

I rectified that shortcoming and locked the door behind me. Then I took a look at the scanner's control system.

It was running Windows for Workgroups. Oh, look, a trap. But I'd brought my cellphone and a kludge cable, and viruses for Windows in this day and age weren't going to touch the Android OS from three decades uptime. So I looked for a data port.

Five minutes later, I was in their system, downloading their files... other than the viruses that they were trying oh-so-hard and failing to plant on my phone.

Ten minutes after that, I had their data, and had corrupted the biometric information that they had on the Senshi. Mission accomplished. Now to find some place to lock up my things and prepare to go skating.

I noticed on the big display Makoto lifting Misha over her head, much to her delight, his surprise, and Janelyn's annoyance. I had to get ready *now*. Remaining invisible, I unlocked the door and headed to the change rooms.

By the time I got to the ice, Janelyn was kicking everybody else out. I watched for a while, wondering when Usagi-san would get back... then I realized that, since I'd corrupted the biometric data, there was never going to be a match for her to discover and a reason for her to return. I headed back out with forcefields protecting my skate blades, and looked for her. I quickly found her near the control room.

"Bunny-chan, over here," I whispered.

"Oni? Where are you?"

"Down the hall, toward the rink. The party's about to start at centre ice, and Sailor Moon's invited. See you there!"

As I headed back to the rink, I heard behind me, "Moon Prism Power, Make-Up!"

When I made it back, Misha and Janelyn were arguing with each other, and she was threatening to break up their partnership if he didn't do something about "that girl" – Makoto – right away. I knew my cue. I dropped my invisibility and did a slow clap from the corner of the ice. "Ah, such teamwork! Such professionalism! Who made you two a team for Japan, the Russians?"

As soon as their attention was on me, Makoto made a break for it.

"Don't interfere!"

"How dare you!"

"Are you upset that I'm here, or that I called your relationship so well?"

Makoto was just clear of the door when Kunzite made his appearance. "We meet again, Oni! And I finally get to see your face. I was hoping to kill some Sailor Senshi with this trap, but their ally will do just as well."

"How many times have you Dark Generals tried to kill me, again? I've lost count!" « Hurry up and change, my dearest! »

« I just finished transforming, darling! Since Kunzite's watching, Moon and I are going to make an entrance like you've never seen before! »

"We only need to succeed once. Janelyn! Misha! Transform!"

And they did. But just as they finished their transformations, two doors burst open and two Senshi raced for the rink... and ran into each other just before they reached the ice.



"Ow!"

"Watch where you're going, you clumsy crybaby!"

« Don't overdo it! Kunzite's not stupid. »

"I'll show you who's clumsy!" Sailor Moon stepped onto the ice and skated while giving her speech. "You have turned the ice rink that should have been a place for girls to dream of the Olympics into a place of fear! Kristi Yamaguchi might forgive you, but I will not! In the name of the Moon..." and she pulled off a quadruple axel "... I will punish you!"

I was impressed. « I'm about to make you jealous, my dearest. Sorry. »

« Good, I can work with that. »

"Wow, a quadruple axel! That's better than even Itō Midori-san can do!"

Jupiter sneered: "Is that so?" And she performed a more elegant quadruple axel of her own, landing right beside me, "Pay attention to your own partner, Oni!" Then she turned to Kunzite. "We will not be defeated by your youma! The Emerald Pair is here!"

« 'Emerald Pair'? Really? »

« Martial arts figure skating was your idea, darling. »

The youma Janelyn finally found her voice. "We should be learning from these two, not attacking them."

"We have our orders. Die, Sailor Moon!"

But before they could attack us, a rose came flying from the rafters and embedded itself in the ice.

A black rose.

Everybody looked up – except for me. I kept my eyes on the youma. Besides, I didn't need to see Chiba-san to know he was in full Tuxedo mode.

"Sailor Moon! Give me the Ginzuishou and I'll let you live!"

"Tuxedo Kamen-sama!"

"How many times do I have to tell you? I am Endymion. What is your answer, Sailor Moon?"

"Tuxedo Kamen-sama, won't you come back to us?"

"Join them and die!" Youma-Misha shouted.

"I won't let you kill her!" And he leapt down to the ice, landing beside Sailor Moon.

« Is this how the anime played out, darling? »

« Different words, but the same general idea, my dearest. »

"What about the other two?"

Sailor Moon put an arm around Tuxedo Endymion's waist and posed as if they were about to begin a pairs performance. "Nobody kills anybody today!"

"You're crimping our style, Moon!" Jupiter shouted. "But what do you care, as long as you get to spend all the time you want with Tuxedo Kamen! Fine! We'll do the *real* job here!" We both started skating toward the youma.

Misha threw Janelyn at us.

We ducked together, hydroblading in unison, and let her fly over our heads.

She landed on her skates. Of course, she was a professional, so we should have expected that. "Now we have you flanked!"

"There's only two of you!" Jupiter straightened up but I didn't, and we performed a gender-flipped forward-outside death spiral just like we'd practiced... but with me extending a forcefield to knock both of the youma off their feet.

Although I accidentally-on-purpose clipped Sailor Moon as well, sending her into Tuxedo Endymion's arms. Since Jupiter and Moon were supposed to be at odds, we needed it to look good.

"Watch it, you two!"

As I straightened up, Jupiter asked, "Oh, are you finally going to take part in this fight?" We did synchronous twizzles to face and close with them instead of the youma... and then stopped, pretending we didn't know our opponents were preparing to attack us from behind.

"I'll show you what I can do! Moon... Healing..."

Jupiter and I pushed off of each other, giving Moon a clear shot at both youma.

"Escalation! Hey, you dodged!"

But she'd hit her actual targets. Janelyn and Misha said "Refresh!" in unison – the first thing they'd actually done in unison since I stepped onto the ice.

"You incompetent idiots!" It looked like Kunzite bought our little show. "Die with the others! I'll freeze you all and take the Ginzuishou from your cold, dead hand, Sailor Moon!" And he teleported away just after cranking the aircon up to eleven... thousand.

I had my hands, and my forcefields, full protecting Janelyn and Misha from the cold. So it was up to Tuxedo Endymion to save everybody... just like in canon.

As far as I was concerned, this battle was just another missed chance to change things for the better.  
"I will leave you now today, Sailor Moon, But rest assured that I will have the Ginzuishou from you."  
"Tuxedo Kamen-sama..."

Janelyn and Misha looked at Moon, then at Jupiter and me. "Do you remember when we used to work together like them, Misha?"

"We still can, Janelyn."

The three of us left the two of them to their future. By the time I'd changed and secured my belongings – including my cellphone with all of that Dark Kingdom data – Minako-san, Ami-san, and Hino-san had met up with Makoto and Bunny-chan, and we were all ready to head out.

"I never want to go skating again in my life," Ami-san commented.

"You looked like you were enjoying yourself at the time," commented Minako-san.

"I had to concentrate on keeping my balance. I couldn't skate and read at the same time..."

I smiled. "Ami-san, don't ever change. We like you just the way you are."

Over the next few evenings, Ami-san and I carefully sorted through the data that I was able to grab from Janelyn and Misha's computers, being doubly certain to ensure no viruses, trackers, or other malware ended up on either my laptop or the Mercury Computer.

There wasn't much that we didn't already know. I'm assuming the girls already knew their own weights, heights, three sizes, and other distinguishing features... but I kept those data models anyway since I was still considering upgrading the Sailor V game to photorealistic. Why reinvent the wheel?

We did find five locations that the Dark Kingdom liked anchoring their teleport tunnels to. They had designations, not names: "A", "B", "C", "D", and "E" points.

I just knew we were going to end up visiting D-Point as a team. Because canon said so. Stupid inexorable genre conventions.

I said *nothing* about that to Ami-san.

There were also notes about a Papillon project, which was already underway and expected to end with the death of Sailor Venus. This, I did tell Ami-san about, mentioning that we needed to warn Minako-san about it.

And the scanning software that Janelyn used caught Ami-san's eye. She copied it to the Mercury Computer for later study and possible upgrades.

As long as she was interested in upgrading her hardware, and we were at my apartment so I knew we wouldn't be overheard by anybody but Makoto, I suggested tying the communicators in with the Navstar array so we could find each other.

"I considered that, but I couldn't make it work properly. The GPS coordinates were always off, sometimes by as much as thirty-five meters," Ami replied.

I wondered why, then remembered that this was a feature, not a bug, and it would remain on until May 2000. "They're programmed to be off by as much as fifty meters on a pseudorandom differential and schedule, so that the system can't be used against the US military," I replied. "But if we set up a secondary transmitter with a known location, we can use that to counter that feature, and use the satellites with close to the same precision that the US government enjoys as long as we're in the same general area as our transmitter."

"Using the known location's reporting error as a counter-differential to apply to the system's reported location!"

"Exactly!"

Ami smiled. "We work well together, Rob-san. And I'm glad that you're on our side." By this time, we were long past the family-name-basis stage of our friendship.

I smiled in return. "I think of you as a friend, too, Ami-san."

Which got a slight blush from her, that she tried to get me to ignore by asking about English grammar. "I've noticed that sometimes you call Mako-chan your dearest. Does that mean that there are other people who are dear and dearer to you?"

Amazingly enough, I had an answer for her that had nothing to do with grammar. "You're almost as important to me as Makoto is, so you would be my dearer friend. And Bunny-chan – Usagi-san – finishes the set by being a dear friend to me, but not so dear that I love her or you the way I love Makoto."

"Thank you, Rob-san," she whispered.

Whoops. She's acting the same way that Makoto did before we finally realized that we loved each other. I don't want a harem. "Oh, that question about dearer and dearest people reminds me that Urawa-san should be showing up again some time soon."

That got a smile out of her. "I'll be happy to see him again." And that wasn't a whisper.

\* \* \*

The weekend came. No, not The Weeknd; he was only two years old. But the girls managed to get some entertainment that weekend anyway.

It started with everybody but Usagi getting together at the Hikawa shrine. "Where's Bunny-chan?" asked Minako-san.

Luna sniffed in disdain. "She is taking the weekend off, and has gone to the mountains with her family to ... how did you say it, Artemis-san?"

"She's gone to take the waters."

"Oh, an onsen? We should have gone, too," commented Hino-san.

"We should go. All of us." Everybody turned to look at Ami. "We've all been under a lot of stress lately. Relaxing would be good for us."

"That's all well and good," Makoto said, "but which onsen is she visiting? It's not as if we can track each other."

Ami-san smiled as she opened the Mercury Computer. "We can now, to within... how close was it, Rob-san?"

"You've implemented it already? You work fast. To within fifty meters."

"To within fifty meters of her communicator," Ami-san finished while looking up Usagi-san's location. "And there it is. We're all going, right?"

Luna shook her head. "Usagi told me to mind the house, and she is my princess."

The others all thought it was a good idea.

"You're coming too, right, Rob-san?"

How should I answer that? Truthfully, of course. "So, Ami-chan, you want a teenage boy who you know can turn invisible to join you in a trip to an onsen?"

Before anybody else could react, Hino-san said "Bad idea" flatly.

"Yeah. No looking at other girls naked, darling!"

Even Minako-san was surprised. "What were you thinking, Ami-san? And you're staying home too, Artemis!"

Ami-san didn't say anything, but she did blush. I hoped that that was from embarrassment.

"While you have fun and Luna minds the house, Artie and I will find something to do here."

"I'll bring you back a souvenir," Makoto promised.

I found out later that their trip went almost exactly according to canon, except that it was only Endymion who was there to awaken the lake monster. Kunzite... well, Artie and I knew exactly what Kunzite was up to at the same time. The bastard.

I answered for Ami-san in class Saturday morning, letting the teacher know that she was unavoidably away that day. It being a half-day, we didn't get together for lunch, but Naru-san and Ichigo-san did meet me at the school gate, where Artemis was waiting for me. "Want to go get something to eat?" Ichigo-san asked.

"It would have to be somewhere pet-friendly; I'm taking care of Minako-san's pet cat today while she's out of town," I replied while scooping Artemis up.

"Nyan."

Ichigo-san looked at Artemis. "Did you just say the word 'nyan' instead of purring?"

"Don't be silly..." Naru-san said, just before Kunzite teleported directly in front of us. "Eek!"

He looked around. "So this is Kuritsu Juban Chuugakkou, the school that sent at least four students to the Princess Seminar immediately before Sailor Moon, Sailor Mars, and Oni shut down that operation. And look who's here. Hello again, Oni." He said the last while looking straight at me.

"Who are you?" Ichigo-san asked. "And why are you calling him 'Oni'?"

"Don't play dumb! He is a six-foot tall brown-haired white man in Japan. Did you seriously think he had a secret identity?"

What a time for the stupid genre conventions to fail.

"And the two of you... No, you're Nephrite's pet human, not a Senshi at all," he sneered at Naru-san, much to her dismay. "And you... don't look like any of the Sailor Senshi. Where are they, Oni? I want to kill you all at the same time."

That last statement got Ichigo-san to run, quickly followed by Naru-san as soon as Artemis jumped from my arm to hers.

"What makes you think I'll tell you, Kunzite?"

He laughed. "No, of course you won't tell me. You're too fond of them to see them hurt, aren't you? I'll just have to look for them myself. And to make sure you don't run away..." He pulled that thrice-damned black crystal from who-knows-where, and pointed it behind me. "... Have a sparring partner to keep you busy!" He shot past me, then teleported off somewhere.

I turned quickly, to see that a crowd of students had gathered behind me... and the he'd hit a classmate of mine.

Sato-san didn't look much different as a youma, except for being twice as tall, three times as muscular, and five times as annoyed. Specifically, annoyed with me. "Die, Donaldson-san!"

He finally said my name right. Hell of a price to pay for that ability, though.

He slammed his hands together, forcing the air to rush toward me. I barely got a forcefield up in time, and as it was I was pushed back a meter.

Most of my schoolmates decided that this was a good time to run. As I feinted to the left then broke to the right, I shouted at the others, "This isn't a play! Get out of here! Now!"

Then I heard screams from inside the school grounds.

But I'd let myself be distracted, and youma-Sato-san was taking a swing at me. The only reason my head stayed attached to my body was that I'd raised a forcefield from learned reflex. As it was, I was shoved a couple of meters to the side, only stopping when I hit a tree.

"I don't have time for you, Sato-san!" I used a forcefield battering ram on him...

...only to see him shrug it off. "Die!"

It was then that I realized I had no choice. In desperation, I wrapped youma-Sato-san ... Sato-san ... in three forcefields at once. Three body-conforming forcefields. That didn't let air through.

He struggled, but instead of holding the forcefields firm, I let them move with his body while staying just out of his reach.

I'll give him this much; he actually managed to break one of the forcefields before he fell over from asphyxiation.

Then I made a decision that will haunt me for the rest of my life. I couldn't let him regain consciousness and attack somebody else.

I left the forcefields in place.

Damn me.

And damn the stupid genre conventions.

I headed toward the source of the screams.

The first body I found was Ichigo-san's. Checking quickly, I discovered she was merely unconscious.

I quickly found other schoolmates – people I didn't know – in the same condition.

Then I found Naru-san, barely awake. "He... drained my... energy," she told me before finally succumbing.

And then I saw Kunzite. There was no way that I was about to fight fair, not after what he'd done to Sato-san. I hit him from behind with everything I had other than one forcefield that I had to keep up around Sato-san.

My cowardly sneak attack actually slammed him into a wall.

Instead of turning to face me, he teleported away. The coward.

I looked through the school grounds at high speed until I found Artemis. "Artie! Can you turn a youma back into a human?"

He shook his head. "Only Sailor Moon can do that."

Then I felt the forcefield I had around Sato-san go slack. I grabbed Artemis and headed back to the school gate... to find Sato-san's body had returned to normal. The school nurse had arrived and was trying desperately to bring him back, performing CPR.

All I said was, "Beelzebub has a devil put aside for me."

Seventeen students were taken to the hospital.

One was taken to the morgue.

Class 5 was given Monday afternoon off to attend Sato Kichirou's funeral.

Nobody blamed me. Nobody other than Artemis even knew that I was the one who'd killed him.

But I knew.

And, as soon as she read my mind after returning from their weekend away, Makoto knew, too. And I knew she knew. She didn't visit me that evening.

Instead, Minako-san paid me a visit on Monday evening. "I'm guessing you aren't in the mood for these," she said in English while putting a box of onsen manju on my kitchen counter.

"You guess right. Thanks anyway."

She sat down beside me. "Artemis told me what happened."

"I killed my classmate."

"No, Kunzite killed him. You put him out of his misery."

"I could have saved him! I could have hit Kunzite as soon as I saw him."

Minako shook her head. "No, you couldn't. Mako-chan's already told me that he can counter any of your attacks. That's why I had to rescue all of you, remember?"

"I've been getting stronger, though."

"And if you did attack Kunzite right away, what would have happened to Artemis? Or Naru? Or Ichigo?"

"Who knows? I *didn't* attack him right away."

"And they got clear of the fight because you didn't make them targets. And even if you did attack Kunzite as soon as he showed up, which would have blown your cover at school, would that have stopped him from turning somebody else into a youma?"

I sighed deeply. "No. No, it wouldn't."

"As soon as Kunzite showed up while Sailor Moon wasn't available, somebody was going to die. You couldn't change that no matter how hard you tried."

"I guess. But ..." I realized what I was about to say, and couldn't continue.

"But?"

I had to say something. "I knew Sato-san. Have you ever had to kill somebody you knew, Minako?"

It was her turn to sigh deeply. "Let me tell you about the Dark Agency's leader, Danburite, better known to the world as Ace Saijyo... or the love interest of Sailor V."

She had it worse than I did. I barely knew Sato-san as an acquaintance and classmate. She'd had to kill the person she thought she was in love with.

Genre conventions that force people to kill other people are the stupidest genre conventions of all.

A few minutes after Minako left, there was a knock at my door.

"It's unlocked, Makoto," I said in Japanese.

She came in, locked the door behind her, and without saying anything held me the way a mother would hold her frightened child.

I finally fell asleep in her arms, and didn't dream.

The discussion topic at the Conversational English club that week was grief. And Sakurada-sensei sat in, which wasn't a surprise; she and I had actually been present when Kunzite attacked the school, and neither of us were handling the matter well.

I almost threw caution to the winds. Then I realized that telling everyone that things were about to get worse wouldn't help anyone. Besides, it wouldn't be true. There was still one good thing left to happen in canon, and it was something that I was going to do my best to make sure wouldn't be changed.

Which of course meant that it was changed almost immediately. Urawa Ryou-san was waiting for us outside the school gates. "Mizuno-san, it's good to see you again," he said with the faintest outline of a smile. Then he turned to me and lost even that much expression. "Donarudoson-san, we need to talk."

"Let's go to my place," I suggested. "The others can join us there once they've changed out of their uniforms."

"But... Alright," Ami-san said quietly.

Minako-san looked at Ami-san, then at Urawa-san. "I'll have to bow out. I'm expecting friends from England to visit tomorrow, and I need to get ready for them." Then she winked at me, and I knew she knew I knew why she was really bowing out. Senshi of Love, indeed.

The ladies went their ways and Urawa-san accompanied me. "You already know why I'm back." It wasn't a question.

I forced a smile; I wasn't in the mood so soon after Sato-san's death, but it was appropriate. "To see your girlfriend, and also something about the most powerful youma of all."

"She isn't my girlfriend."

"So, you just want to take random girls on dates to amusement parks?"

Urawa-san shook his head. "I meant that she isn't my girlfriend until she says she is. If she ever says she is."

I raised an eyebrow. "You're the precog; don't you know?"

"No. I see possible futures, not a definite future. And right now I'm seeing three futures. The first is that somebody called Endymion turns me and the other Rainbow Crystal hosts into a powerful youma, and the Dark Kingdom takes over the world. The second is that Mizuno-san stops this Endymion person, she and her friends fight the Dark Kingdom and lose, and the Dark Kingdom takes over the world."

After a moment, I asked, "And the third?"

"Mizuno-san stops Endymion, she and her friends fight the Dark Kingdom and die, and something happens to time itself."

"Because Sailor Moon resets reality."

Urawa-san actually looked relieved at my statement. "Ah. That's what I couldn't foresee. I was worried that they might have destroyed the entire planet during the fight."

"The downside to what you've told me is that Ami-san and the others have to die in order for the Dark Kingdom to be defeated."

He looked at his feet. "I'm sorry."

"Am I one of the others that you just mentioned? And are you?"

"I've never been able to see your future clearly, Donarudoson-san. And what's the difference between me foreseeing my own death and me foreseeing time being reset? Either way, there's nothing to see beyond the event." We stopped walking, and he commented, "Nice place you've got here."

"Thanks, My apartment's on the second floor, unit 201." I wondered whether Makoto was home, and opened my mind to try to detect hers.

« Yes, darling, I've been waiting for you to get home so we could do our homework together. Who's your friend? »

« Don't you recognize Urawa Ryou-san, my dearest? You helped Bunny-chan and Ami-san turn him back into a human. »

« Oh! That's Ryou the Psychic Boy? I guess homework can wait. »

« I have got to stop thinking that nickname for him. » At this point, we were nearly at my door. « Want to come over and meet him? And is it okay if he knows who you are? »

« Yes and yes. » Her front door opened. "Hi, Robu!" she said with a smile as I got my keys out of my pocket.

"Hi, Makoto! Come on in. You've already met Urawa-san."

"She has?" he asked.

"Don't tell me you only used your precognitive powers to learn the identity of only one Sailor Senshi."

At this point, he smiled. "Ah. We aren't keeping secrets from Kino-san, then. It's good to meet you under more pleasant circumstances, Sailor Jupiter."

Once we were all in my apartment, I put up an opaque forcefield to give myself some privacy while I changed from school uniform to casual clothes. "Urawa-san and I were just talking about the near future, Makoto."

"I don't suppose you figured out an easy way for me to survive the upcoming fight?"

I sighed deeply, and her smile disappeared.

Urawa-san commented, "We really aren't keeping secrets from Kino-san, are we?"

"Ami-san knows, too," Makoto explained. "Robu refuses to keep any secrets from either of us. The other Sailor Senshi ... well, if they know or suspect, it isn't because I told them."

"Nor have I," I added as I let my privacy screen drop and finished buttoning my shirt.

"As far as I can foresee, any path forward that doesn't result in you and Mizuno-san dying lets the Dark Kingdom win."

Before Makoto could reply, I said, "Let's save this discussion for after Ami-san gets here."

So we did. Urawa-san told us about his home in Niigata, a couple of hours from Tokyo by shinkansen. He seemed a bit wistful when he described the view from the Rainbow Tower in the middle of the city; I understood his wistfulness when I recalled that the tower was going to be torn down in 2018.

By the time Ami-san arrived – with sandwiches for four – I had made a decision based on Urawa-san mentioning when we first met that he already knew who and what I was. "Urawa-san, I'm about to let you in on my biggest secret. I'm from a different reality altogether, and I know how things would have gone if I wasn't here."

Makoto sighed. "We're going to watch another episode of that anime, aren't we? I'm beginning to hate that show."

"Oh, you'll like this one," I replied as I got the laptop out and queued up episode 41.

A half-hour later, Ryou looked calmer than he had before we met at school. "That's a rather elegant solution to the problem," he commented.

"But... I couldn't possibly talk that way to Tuxedo Kamen," Ami complained.

Makoto and I both rolled our eyes. "Ami-chan," Makoto said, "have you never listened to yourself when you're Sailor Mercury?"

"You're far more assertive when you're in uniform than when you aren't," I added.

Urawa-kun added, "And I think I like you better that way, Mizuno-san."

"You do?" She blushed, deeply.

« She's adorable when she's like that, isn't she? »

« You aren't falling for our best friend, are you, my dearest? Because I think Ryou-san might get upset if you did. »

« I'm pretty sure that I'm straight, darling. This is kawaiiisa. »

Neither of them had noticed that we hadn't said anything for a moment... because they only had eyes for each other. "Do you want us to go next door to Makoto's apartment so the two of you can talk alone?"

"What? But... why would we have to be alone to talk about anything?"

"Oh, for... Ami-san, do you want Urawa-san and me to step outside for a moment so you can transform to Sailor Mercury and have enough self-confidence to say what you're really thinking? We just watched the anime; it's pretty obvious what the two of you think of each other."

"But... No." A bit of Mercury's spine of steel made itself heard in that "no" of Ami's. "You don't have to leave, Mako-chan, Robu-san." And she turned to Urawa-san. "May I call you Ryou?"

He smiled. "Yes, Mizuno-san."

"Ryou-san... I think I love you."

"And I love you too, Ami-san," he said as they hugged each other.

"Woo-hoo!"

"Way to spoil the mood, Makoto," I grumbled... but the two of them paid the two of us no attention.

After all of that, do I really need to describe how we foiled Endymion's plot?

I suppose I do, at least in broad strokes. He tried to grab Urawa-san... no, Ryou-san; we were all on a given-name basis after they showed how close we were by using my apartment to confess their love to each other... we slowed him down enough for Ryou-san and Ami-san to escape to Dreamland, Sailor Moon showed up and pointed out their show of love and affection combined with Makoto and me showing just as much love for each other and saying that she and Endymion used to be that close as well, he almost broke free of his brainwashing, and Kunzite attacked Endymion from behind and took him back to the Dark Kingdom.

I never should have attacked Kunzite from behind, because that told him that we weren't being chivalrous in combat any more. But it was that or risk seeing more of my schoolmates die. This was a war, not a sports meet.

What's done cannot be undone. I was beginning to realize that.

After the fight, I took Ryou to a menswear store and paid for something casual that wasn't his school uniform, along with an overnight bag for his clothes. The poor guy had run to Tokyo without packing as soon as he realized he was in danger. Which showed either a blank spot in his precognition that led him to race straight into danger, or a trust in Ami-san's abilities to protect him that showed just how much he loved her. I sincerely hoped that the second alternative was the right one.

Then we went back to my place, and he insisted that the two of us were going to do something he'd never done before.

No, not "this and that", or anything like that. He's just as straight as I am.

What we did was make a brainprint. And as soon as we were finished, he wrote out a half-page of notes and put them in his pocket.

The day after the battle, Ryou-san and Ami-san finally got to go on a date to Dreamland. Makoto showed up at Ami-san's place early and dragged our best friend's fashion sense kicking and screaming into the 1990s, so she wore something other than that canon outfit that looked like it came straight out of 1950s-era America. And Makoto, Hino-san, Luna and I all made sure that their date wasn't interrupted. And at the end of their date, when we saw him off at the train station, I saw him hand her that half-page of notes that I'd watched him write the evening before.

Minako-san and Artie? They had company from England. Usagi-san was on standby to become an actual sailor if necessary, and to continue pretending that she and the rest of us were on the outs. And it was necessary, which meant that the rest of us didn't get to help Minako-san and her friend Katrina-san mend their relationship.

Events were continuing the way they did in canon, but not at the same pace. And I hated that, even... no, especially with Ryou-san's statements that the only way to win against the Dark Kingdom was to have the Senshi die. I refused to believe that there wasn't some way to both win and survive.

But for the life of me I couldn't come up with one. Damn it.

Sato-san was already dead because of the Dark Kingdom. Were my girlfriend and our best friend truly fated to be next despite my best efforts?

And then it was Monday, and lunchtime. Other than Ichigo-san, we knew going in that it wasn't going to be a pleasant lunch.

Before Ami-san and I joined the others for lunch, I opened my mind to listen to Makoto and thought « Is anything unusual going on out there? »

« Besides paparazzi watching the school? » The picture in her mind was of a camerawoman wearing clothes straight out of the 1970s. « I guess we can't avoid them, given the tragedy earlier. »

« That particular paparazza is a youma. » I switched from thinking to Makoto in Japanese to whispering to Ami in English, counting on my girlfriend to give Bunny-chan and Naru-san a cue somehow. "We're being watched. I hope you know your lines." She nodded in reply.

The Revealing Of The Lunches went well enough. Ami, of course, had sandwiches, and so did Minako-san, although Minako-san's still had the crusts on, were thicker, and had lettuce as well as meat in them. Makoto and I shared a double-size box of assorted onigiri. Ichigo-san brought squid marinated in miso with a side of potato-stuffed vareniki, saying that she had this sort of meal back in Wakkanai all the time (to which Usagi said she didn't understand, making the Wakkanai/wakannai pun by accident). Naru-san bought some stuffed buns from the school cafeteria. Usagi-san had the most traditional bento that day: sausages, rice, and pickles.

And none of us got to eat very much of any of it. At least, not together.

"How was everybody's weekend?" Ichigo asked, giving us the perfect cue.

Ami quietly said "I went on a date," but was drowned out by Usagi.

"Terrible! My boyfriend got hurt! Mamo-chan was hit from behind and now I don't know when I'll see him again!"

"Did you have to remind me that I don't have a boyfriend any more?" Minako grabbed her bento, stood up, and walked off.

I sighed. "Didn't she just reconcile with her friend from England, who her boyfriend liked better than her? That wasn't the best timing, Bunny-chan."

"But..." Usagi looked sad, then continued, "Yeah, I guess that wasn't the best thing for me to say. But you understand, don't you, Robu-san, Mako-chan? How would each of you feel if something happened to the other one, the way that Mamo-chan was hurt?"

Ami-san decided that this had gone on for long enough. "That's all you've been talking about all weekend! Mamo-chan this, Mamo-chan that, Mamo-chan Mamo-chan Mamo-chan! You didn't even hear what I just said! You aren't the only one whose boyfriend isn't here any more, Usagi!" And then *she* stormed off. Makoto and I quickly stood up and chased after her, with concerned looks on our faces and her and our bento in our hands.

We left Naru-san and Ichigo-san behind with Usagi, who shouted at our retreating backs, "Fine, be like that!"

Once we were inside the school building, Ami-san collapsed against Makoto. As far as anybody watching from the courtyard could tell, Ami-san was crying and Makoto was comforting her. Instead, Ami-san whispered, "I hated having to say that. It had to have hurt Usagi-san."

Other than whispering, "I'm sorry," all I could do was look like a friend caught in the middle of an awkward situation, and make sure they had some privacy.

Before the lunch break ended, Naru-san visited Ami-san and me in our classroom. "You couldn't have seen Usagi's point of view? Ami-san, your boyfriend's just gone back home. Her boyfriend's hurt!"

That started some murmurs in the classroom. "Mizuno-san has a boyfriend?" "Since when?" "Who's the lucky guy?" "Not Donarudoson-san, Kino-san would kill them both." I nodded in agreement to that last comment.

"I know that, and I helped cheer her up after it happened. But she hasn't said a thing about Ryou-san leaving."

"Who's Ryou-san?" "Nobody in our class is named Ryou." "Maybe somebody she met at juku?"

I stood up and stretched. "Everybody, if Mizuno-san wants to share the details of her personal life with us, she will. In her own time. *Understand?*"

And suddenly I changed from "big friendly Donarudoson-san" back to "the big bad oni" in my classmates' eyes. All that work at getting them to see me as a person, tossed out the window. For Ami-san's sake, so I considered it a fair trade.

Even Naru-san reacted to that. She turned on her heel to look at me, leaned onto my desk with both hands, and said, "Kindly keep out of this, Robu-san. You and Kino-san still have each other as boyfriend and girlfriend. Everybody else in our lunch club except Aoyama-san has lost their boyfriends one way or another."

When she straightened up, she left three stones on my desk. Small, shiny, clear stones. I wondered what they were, but Naru-san had turned back to Ami-san. "We'll talk more about this after school, Ami-san."

"I have juku after school."

"Then we'll talk about this tomorrow." And she headed back to her own classroom... after quietly dropping three more of the stones on Ami-san's desk.

She passed the teacher coming into the room, which meant classes were starting, which meant we didn't get any curious looks from our classmates for the rest of the day.



\* \* \*

On a hunch, I detoured to OSA-P on the way home, where I found Naru-san working behind one of the counters. "I do believe you wanted to speak with me, Osaka-san," I said while dropping the stones onto the counter.

"Yes, and it's about those. That's what's left of half of a new box of sketching sticks. Ami-san has the other half."

"What do these have to do with sketching sticks?"

"Charcoal sketching sticks," she explained.

"Char..." Then the penny dropped. "Carbon. Are these diamonds?"

"Half-carat, uncut and unpolished. Mama says she can cut them into 35-point or 40-point gemstones, and asked where I got them from."

"What did you tell her?"

"I showed her."

"Would you show me, please?" I opened my school bag, pulled my own set of charcoal sticks from it, and arranged all six of them into a neat pile on the counter.

She put her hands over them and started humming a tune that I didn't recognize. Her hands started glowing for a moment, then she stopped the sound and light show. There was a single slightly-dirty stone on the counter where the sketching sticks used to be.

Then her mother came out of the room behind the shop. "Naru, are you... Oh, hello, sir."

"Hello, miss," I bowed. "You must be Osaka-san's older sister; I can see the resemblance. I'm a schoolmate of hers, Rob Donaldson."

"Naru didn't tell me that you're a flatterer, Donaldson-san. I'm her mother, Mayumi. She has told me that you're the person filling in for Tuxedo Kamen while he's away."

I just stared at Naru-san.

"I'm not about to lie to my own mother, Robu-san."

"Nor should you," I admitted somewhat sheepishly. I turned to her mother. "I don't suppose that metahuman powers run in your family, do they?"

"No, they do not," she replied. "Naru's the first to show any ability like this one. We assume it's because she's been targeted by youma so many times that something rubbed off on her." After a moment, she asked, "You aren't going to force my little girl to fight, are you?"

I shook my head. "I won't force her to do anything." Turning to address Naru-san directly, I continued, "Although I will ask that you continue to develop your ability, maybe see whether you can create other gems with it."

"You want me to play with my new power?"

"Sure, why not? Maybe you can make something with it that you can be proud of saying that came from you."

Then I had a thought. "Oh, what's this worth?" I gestured to the diamond that Naru had made from my charcoal.

"Nothing," Mayumi replied. "Every jeweler that sells diamonds has a contract with de Beers. You can't sell it to anybody but them, and they won't buy only one stone."

"I see," I sighed.

"But we can cut and mount it for you, if you want. It would probably be around two and a half carats after cutting and polishing."

I thought about it. "Maybe later." I picked up the stone and put it in my pocket. "Thank you for your time, ladies."

I bought a replacement pack of sketching sticks on the way home.

Ami-san dropped by after dinner.

"Rob-san, we need to talk. You, me, and Mako-chan."

"Come on in. Makoto's already here; we were doing homework together."

"Hi, Ami-chan! What's up?"

As Ami-san sat down at my table, she replied, "It's about that note that Ryou-san gave me at the end of our date. He said it might be possible to reverse the brainprinting process."

"How?" From the game rules that I created the character in, the ability was a one-way deal. Then again, the ability also didn't need to take ten minutes under those rules.

"I worked it out over the last two evenings. If you update your brainprint of me, you should get the process."

Makoto grinned. "I won't get jealous of Ami-san."

"Okay," I nodded. "Let's find out how long it takes for me to do an update."

It only took three minutes, and most of that was my power going through Ami-san's brainprint and deciding it already had those parts of her mind.

"I'm going to have to think about this for a moment or two," I said once the process was completed. While I reviewed Ami-san's thoughts, she helped Makoto with her homework. I finally decided that I understood Ami-san's process based on Ryou-san's notes. "I think I'm ready." Makoto was in front of me within two seconds. "Let's give it a try." The first thing I did was update my brainprint of Makoto. Then I gave the reverse process a try. After a moment, she squeezed my hand. I stopped as soon as it was safe to do so. "What's wrong?" "I'm not getting your thoughts. I'm getting my own thoughts back." She sighed. Ami-san and I sighed as well. "So much for you getting a brainprint of me," I said. "This could still be useful, though," Ami-san commented. "Especially if one of us gets brainwashed the way Tuxedo Kamen did."

"There is that," Makoto admitted.

Before I could say anything, Makoto's and Ami-san's communicators beeped. "Somebody's robbing OSA-P!" Makoto had her communicator out first. "Mercury, Oni, and I are on our way!"

We got to the jewelry store just after Sailor Moon. I whispered, "What are you waiting for? Go rescue your friend and we'll complain about you wanting all the glory."

"Oh, right!"

And she headed in just as Venus arrived. "Why aren't we helping?"

"Help that prima donna?" Jupiter asked loudly. "She waited for us to show up and then rushed in just as we got here, as if she was making a point that she didn't need us!"

"What, is she grabbing the spotlight *again*?" That came from Mars, who was just arriving.

"I'm afraid so," Mercury sighed.

"I'll just have to give her a piece of my mind!" And Mars marched into the store.

"Better be careful, Mars!" Sailor Moon countered. "You don't have that many pieces to give away!"

While the girls fought, I grabbed the would-be thief in a forcefield... making sure she could see and hear everything that was going on, which meant I missed seeing Mars give Moon a kick in the butt.

"That's where you keep *your* brains!"

While the girls bickered – yes, even Mercury – I asked Mayumi-san, "Ma'am, would you be willing to call the police? I suspect these five aren't going to remember their civic duty for a while."

And suddenly the thief/ninja/youma wasn't in my forcefield any more... or anywhere to be seen in the store. We did hear the front door slam shut, though.

"Never mind, ma'am." And I started a slow clap as I turned to the Senshi. "What a display of teamwork, ladies!"

"She started it!" Mars and Moon shouted in unison while pointing at each other.

"And I'm ending it. Stop acting like kindergarten students. Especially in front of the people we're here to help."

"Excuse me..." Oh, look; it's the papparaza with the '70s wardrobe. Funny how you never see her and that particular thief together. "I'm Asahina Nana. Could I ask you a few questions about what happened here?" And she held her camera as if to take a photo.

I quickly obscured her lens with a forcefield. "No photos. Asahina-san... You wouldn't by any chance have a relative named Mikuru, would you?"

She looked puzzled as she tried and failed to clean her camera lens. "Not as far as I know. Why do you ask?"

"Oh, no reason."

She finally gave up on the camera. "Can I get your thoughts about the Sailor Senshi's behaviour this evening?"

May as well give her something to take back to Kunzite. "I think they should get back to working together, instead of squabbling all the time. They're giving me a headache. And, yes, you may quote me on that."

As she tried to get statements from Moon and Mars, the rest of us slipped away... but not before I saw Naru-san sigh at the two Senshi.

Just before lunch the next day, Naru-san mentioned to Minako-san, Ami-san and me that Asahina-san ambushed her and Usagi-san on their way to school. "We didn't tell her anything, of course."

"Good. Stick to the plan."

Then, as if it had been choreographed and I'll never confirm or deny whether it had been, Usagi-san approached from one side of the courtyard while Makoto and Ichigo-san approached from the other. Bunny-chan and Makoto saw each other, stopped, turned on their heels, and walked away from each other and us.

"That's our cue," I whispered as we all stood up. Ami-san, Minako-san and I went to join Makoto, and Naru-san went to join Usagi-san. Ichigo-san, may the gods bless her, refused to take sides and ate alone.

The Revealing Of The Lunches was a somewhat somber event that day, without Usagi-san present to make it fun. I had hot soup in a thermal bottle.

"That's all you brought?"

"Back home in Canada, we say that chicken noodle soup is good for you when you're ill. Here, it's rice porridge. I split the difference and brought chicken rice soup."

Makoto looked worried. "What's making you ill?"

"This whole mess with Bunny-chan is leaving me sick to my stomach."

Sailor Moon's reputation being smeared by the tabloids. Letter from Sailor Moon to Kunzite, delivered by Usagi-san to Asahina-san. Arrangement of a meeting between Moon and Kunzite. All of which I had nothing to do with. And all according to canon.

I was starting to think that I'd used up all of my ability to change canon on getting a girlfriend.

Stupid genre conventions.

And then came the night of the meeting between Moon and Kunzite.

Unlike in canon, he did *not* spot the Sailor Senshi watching them... because I was using my powers in a new way. I think I mentioned when I related the first time going invisible that I did that by wrapping a forcefield around myself and using it to manipulate light. This time, I'd wrapped that forcefield around all five of us. It was a tight squeeze. As in, Jupiter and I were physically closer than we'd ever been even when we hugged, Venus was literally draped over my back, and Mercury and Mars were on either side of me and close enough to whisper in my ears. "Now you all know why I don't want a harem," I joked when I made the group of us fade into invisibility an hour before the scheduled meeting time.

Which meant that we saw Asahina-san scouting the area three-quarters of an hour before the meeting. Good thing we were ready before then.

Enough about us. Kunzite wanted the Ginzuishou. Moon wanted to see Tuxedo Kamen first. Again, according to canon.

"What makes you think we'd take you and your followers anywhere near Endymion, Sailor Moon?"

"My followers? *What* followers? Have you forgotten how they treated me at the Princess Seminar, or in the mountains, or at that skating event with Janelyn and Misha, or on the ski slopes, or at the jewelry store earlier this week?"

He thought for a moment. "The only one of those that I witnessed was the event at the skating rink. But my youma have provided reports about most of the other events you mentioned. Alright, I'll take you to Endymion once you give me the Ginzuishou."

"You get the Ginzuishou after I see Tuxedo Kamen."

Kunzite snapped his fingers. "Oniwabandana." Right, that was youma-Asahina's name. "Take the Ginzuishou from Sailor Moon."

"Yes, sir, banban." And she advanced on Moon.

"Sailor Kick!" Moon knocked Oniwabandana to the ground. "*After* I see Tuxedo Kamen." Then she was pulled off her feet by the youma.

Moon managed to twist so she landed on top of Oniwabandana, knocking the breath from both of them.

I suddenly had a nasty thought. "Is there any chance they'll get the Ginzuishou from her?" I whispered.

"No," Mars whispered back. "She trusted it to me." And Mars showed me the Moon Stick with the Ginzuishou mounted on it.

"Good." I turned my attention back to the fight.

"And stay down!" I heard Moon announce.

Kunzite came to a decision. "Oh, very well. Oniwabandana! Enough!" The youma nodded and stood up beside her general. "You can keep your precious bauble until you've seen him. Let's go."

"Now?" Moon asked in surprise.

"Yes, now. Unless you don't want to go."

"No, I thought maybe you needed to make some arrangements first. We can go now. Where are we going?"

"To our dimensional teleport nexus." And the three of them were gone.

"Mercury!" I said while dropping our invisibility.

"Already on it!" She was examining the Mercury Computer. "Her communicator just appeared at D-Point." Of course it did.

"Let's go!" Mars ordered, and three of the Senshi immediately started roof-hopping. Jupiter joined them as soon as she grabbed me in a bridal carry. We caught up to the others quickly.

Halfway there, the Moon Stick suddenly disappeared from Mars' hand. She and I reached the same conclusion at the same time. "Sailor Moon's in trouble!" Mars announced.

"Be ready to fight as soon as we arrive!" I added. "Oniwabandana can do the ninja replication trick!"

True to my instructions, Jupiter dropped me just before we touched down at D-Point and landed on her feet, prepared to launch a Supreme Thunder. I landed on a nice, soft forcefield and quickly got to my feet.

We headed into the ... teleport tunnel, for want of a better name. It looked like it was carved out of living rock, with enough room for us to walk five-abreast and enough headroom even for me to feel comfortable. Obviously it was designed to allow troops of youma to invade whichever city it was pointed at, although it had a few twists and turns which made it impossible to simply launch an attack straight through the tunnel.

We followed the pyrotechnics, only to be blocked by a row of four identical ninja blocking our path.

"Shabon Spray!" The fog cloud engulfed the ninja crowd, making it obvious which three were projections and which one was the real Oniwabandana.

I hit the real one with a forcefield ram, pushing her into the battle between Moon and Kunzite just as Moon was shouting "Moon Healing Escalation!"

Moon's attack hit both Oniwabandana and Kunzite. She shouted "Refresh!" and reverted to being just Asahina Nana.

Kunzite announced "On my honour, I will not say 'Refresh'!"

Time to ignore the use-mention distinction. "Dude, you just said it!"

"What? No, you fool! Not like that!" He was only distracted for a second, but that was enough for Moon's attack to push him to the far wall. I grabbed Asahina-san in a forcefield and got her out of there.

By the time I'd dropped her off at the D-Point end of the teleport tunnel and returned to the battle, Kunzite was alone. "I just banished them, Oni. You're next."

"Oh, they'll be back as soon as they've had a history lesson." And there was a glow behind me.

I got out of the way. Quickly. Moon... no, Serenity's attack still brushed against my sleeve on its way to hitting Kunzite.

I didn't have a sleeve any more. Kunzite... didn't have a body.

And the teleport tunnel started to collapse.

Kunzite was a load-bearing boss? I didn't remember that from the anime, but it made sense from a security standpoint. Stupid genre conventions.

Mercury thought faster than anyone else. She got out her communicator and threw it as far down the tunnel as she could.

Which wasn't quite far enough to clear the tunnel, so I bounced it off a forcefield and made sure it landed in the snow at the Dark Kingdom's end of the tunnel.

Then I grabbed Moon with one arm and Mercury with the other, and we all hightailed it out the Tokyo end of the tunnel just before it collapsed altogether.

We took a few minutes at the Hikawa shrine to catch our breath, eat something, and strategize. Quickly. And with Luna and Artemis in attendance.

"Where are they?" I asked.

"Practically at the North Pole, according to the Navstar satellite array," replied Ami-san.

"Although that could be as much as fifty meters off," I reminded everyone.

Hino-san glared at me for that comment. "We know."

"How do we get there?" asked Artemis.

"We can't all go," Minako-san answered. "Sailor Teleport can only take the five of us. No passengers, not even a cat."

"Let alone two, or an oni. Sorry, Robu-san." Usagi-san did truly look sorry when she said that.

I turned to Luna and Artemis. "There's no way we can go with them?"

The Mau said nothing; they only shook their heads.

Hino-san looked straight at me. "What happened in canon?"

I wasn't about to lie, but I wasn't going to tell them anything that would demoralize them, either. "You waited a week, and they were ready for you."

"Then we don't wait. We leave in fifteen minutes," Usagi-san announced. "If you need to do anything that can't wait, do it now."

It was all too soon. And events had continued just like in canon, except for the death of one person who was never shown in canon, and some minor differences elsewhere, and happening faster. Damn it.

Most of the girls and both of the Mau headed into the Hino residence to take care of whatever they needed to take care of. Makoto didn't go anywhere. Neither, to my surprise, did Ami-san. "Rob-san... could you update your copy of my mind, please?"

"Of course, Ami-san." And I did.

Then I turned to Makoto, who was standing and waiting for me.

We hugged tightly, and kissed passionately – the most passionate kiss I'd ever taken part in. We were reading each other's minds, but neither of us thought anything that could be put into words. It was the most intense moment of my life, and, as I learned later, of her life as well.

Then, and only then, did I update my brainprint of Makoto.

And then I had to let her go. I stopped reading her mind. "Please come back to me, my dearest."

She smiled sadly. We both knew why. All she said was, "Jupiter Power, Make-Up!"

Then she walked over to the other Senshi, already waiting for her in uniform. She held hands with Mercury and Moon, who were already holding hands with Mars and Venus. Moon said it for everyone: "Sailor Teleport!"

And then they were gone.

And then we were gone. Artemis, Luna and I headed for the Crown to use the instruments Artie had there to track our friends the best we could. There would be time tomorrow to repair the flagstones broken by the Sailor Teleport, assuming the Sailor Senshi defeated Beryl and Metaria.

And if they didn't, it wouldn't matter whether anybody repaired the walkway.

By the time we'd started up the systems in the Crown and connected to the Mercury Computer, the Sailor Senshi were already fighting the DD Girls.

*"That can't be Oni! We left him behind!"*

*"Then they grabbed him after we left! I have to save him!"*

*"Jupiter, no! Look at him!"*

*"I am looking at him, Mercury! They've been torturing him!"*

*"When did they have the time? That's not him!"*

*"I can't take that chance!"*

I sat down. Hard. "I could have warned her. I *should* have warned her. Damn it, Makoto, that's a trap!"

"Can we warn her now?"

I shook my head in reply to Luna. "We're too far apart. And even if we weren't, she has to read my mind; I can't send thoughts to her. Artie?"

"There's no microphone or proper keyboard on this console," Artemis answered. "Our communications are strictly one-way."

*"Jupiter!"* That was Usagi's voice.

Oh, no.

*"Supreme..."*

Makoto, no!

*"Thunder!"*

"FUUUUUCK!!!"

Artemis muted the console game that he was using as a monitor, and turned to face the two of us. "According to the Mercury Computer, Jupiter just went into cardiac arrest."

I stood up, walked over to the nearest wall...

"Rob-san, ..." Artemis started.

... and put my fist through it in one punch.

"... that's drywall, not paper. Too late now."

Luna headed to the front desk. "I'll get the first aid kit."

I suspect I subconsciously had a forcefield up, because I didn't break any bones. The wall wasn't so lucky.

Just as I finished tending to the worst of the damage I'd done to my hand, Artemis' console sounded another alarm. "Not again."

He turned the volume up.

*"Look at who they're showing us. It's my turn now."*

No, Ami-san. Don't do this.

*"And I'd only slow you down anyway."*

Gods, no. You're so much more than just a smart girl, Mercury.

*"All right, Ami."*

No, Usagi-san! Don't let her!

"There must be something wrong with the telemetry," Artemis said. "Mercury couldn't have walked away from the others."

"Oh-yes-she-could-that-genius-idiot!" I wasn't in any mood to be charitable, even to my second-closest... my closest friend.

*"I'm so sorry, Ryou-san, Rob-san, Luna-san, ... mother."*

"Ami, please, no!" Luna was as anxious as I was.

Then we heard a cracking sound from Artemis's console, followed by static.

Artemis adjusted the controls – which I knew was useless – then announced, "The Mercury Computer has gone offline."

"Damn it *damn it DAMN IT!* And I tried to make that NOT happen!"

"Rob?"

"She's dead, Artie. Ami is dead! And Minako's bloody well next! Then Hino-sa... Rei." I started to calm down, at least enough to not yell at the only people left in this world who knew what I was. "Then Mamoru. And then, finally, Beryl... but, if everything goes according to canon, she'll merge with Metaria just before she dies. But the Sailor Team's souls will support Usagi for long enough to kill Metaria, but Usagi won't survive the fight either."

"That's a lot of 'but's. Things could change."

I shook my head in sorrow and anger. "No, Artemis, they won't. I've been trying to change things ever since I got here, and Makoto ... Makoto and Ami still died. I couldn't do enough."

"So all of this was for nothing?"

"No, Luna, this was not all for nothing. Usagi makes a dying wish, and she..." The last occupant of Pandora's Box finally made herself known. "Artie, shut everything down! We're leaving now!"

He leapt onto the front desk and hit a big red button. "Where are we going?"

"We're going to my apartment. And thanks for trusting me, Artemis." I grabbed both of the cats in a forcefield and headed for the door.

"What's Usagi's dying wish?" Luna asked as she mentally lowered the arcade's shutter behind us.

"To reset the world, but without the Dark Kingdom in it, so everybody can live a normal life."

Then I was moving at top speed with a forcefield around us to protect against wind friction, so it didn't take long for me to get home. Nobody said anything during the trip.

"That doesn't sound so bad," she finally replied as I unlocked my door.

"In order to have a normal life, they're going to forget everything that happened since the day you met Usagi-san, Luna. Only you and Artemis will remember that they were ever friends."

"That's bad," Artemis commented as I dropped both of the Mau onto my desk.

"Yeah. Be ready for a long night." I got out the futon.

"You can't possibly be able to sleep now, Robu-san."

"No, but I might not have time to get it ready later. The three of us, along with my laptop, are going to be on that futon, surrounded by as many forcefields as I can raise, as soon as we start seeing aurorae in the sky."

"Why?"

I turned to Luna. *"Because I am not giving up my memories of Makoto without a fight."* Then I saw the doll that Luna was sitting beside. The Sailor Jupiter doll.

And my tears finally started flowing.

I couldn't sacrifice my Sailor Jupiter doll. Or the others, but especially not Makoto. Makoto's doll.

So when the aurorae started, they were right on top of the laptop. Which was right on top of me, with a cat to each side.

And we were sitting on top of no less than five forcefields.

Then it suddenly became bright outside. "It's time!" I raised the edges of all of the forcefields to surround us in nested bubbles.

The shockwave of Usagi's wish went through the wall without damaging it. As it passed over my desk, my homework disappeared, although the printer didn't.

I doubled and redoubled the strength of my forcefields just before the shockwave hit.

The light show near the end of *2001* had nothing on the coruscation set off between Usagi's dying wish running on autopilot and my living willpower boosted (I later learned) by Artemis and Luna. I was recreating forcefields almost as fast as the Ginzuishou was knocking them down.

When the wavefront passed, I was down to one forcefield. But I still had my Makoto doll. And, less importantly, my laptop and the other Sailor Senshi dolls.

And I felt like I'd had my brains smashed out by a slice of lemon wrapped round a large gold brick.

But I still had my memories, and all three brainprints.

I very carefully moved my laptop off my chest, and onto the floor. "Are you two okay?"

"I'm fine and have all my memories of you, Robu-san," replied Luna.

"And I still remember you, too," Artemis added as he pushed my laptop away from my futon.

"Good, good. But now it's just the three of us who remember the Silver Millennium and the Dark Kingdom," I muttered before falling asleep from exhaustion. Silly me.

Why bother going on in this primitive world without my dearest? Sailor Moon won, so she'd have been brought back... somewhere. Nobody was in the apartment next door, at least that I could hear.

I knew that Sailor Moon won because Metaria wasn't taking over the world. Besides, the calendar had been reset; whether she did it intentionally or by accident, Usagi had rewound the clock by exactly one year to the minute. It had been less than a week and there was already talk about "Missing Time" in astronomy circles... and in the tabloids, where I noticed it first.

Sailor Moon was triumphant. And I was alone.

I couldn't even talk with Luna and Artemis on a regular basis; the resurrected Usagi-san and Minako-san thought of the Mau as their pets, and they didn't remember me other than as "that really tall schoolmate in Class 5".

This was getting me nowhere. I couldn't pine for my lost love any more. I had to face reality. And reality told me that I needed to go buy some food. So I headed out...

... only to *almost* bump into my new neighbour, who had just come up the stairs. She was five months less two days younger than me. She was tall for a Japanese girl; 174 cm. She looked surprised when she realized she had to look up to me; I had 9 cm on her. And she had lovely green eyes, and she wore her auburn hair in a ponytail, and she had rose piercings in her earlobes. She was gorgeous, despite not smiling as soon as she saw me.

And I had to pretend that I didn't know who she was. Stupid, stupid, *stupid* genre conventions!

She spoke first. "Oh! Excuse me, I didn't see your door opening."

"That's quite all right, miss."

"Kino Makoto. Happy to meet you."

Somehow I kept it together. "Rob Donaldson. Pleased to meet you."

"Were you on your way out?" She held up one of the bags that she was carrying. "I was about to pay visits to my new neighbours."

"I wasn't going anywhere special, just making a grocery run. That can wait."

She smiled – not the happy smile that I'd become accustomed to, but a friendly smile. "I'll be right back." And she headed to her own apartment.

I meditated to get my emotions under control for four minutes and twenty-seven seconds – not that I was counting, and if I told myself that often enough I might even believe it. Then there was a knock at my door. I opened it to see Makoto... no, I had to think of her as Kino-san... standing there with a small parcel in her hands. She bowed politely. "Hello, I'm Kino Makoto, and I just moved in next door. Please be kind to me. This isn't much, but I hope you'll accept it." She held the parcel out to me.

"I'll do my best, Kino-san." It was about the same size and shape as her usual bento box, which reminded me of the day that she met Usagi-san, I looked into her brainprint at her memory of that meeting as I accepted the box from her.

And, because I wasn't paying attention to what we were doing now instead of then, our hands touched. "Oh, I'm sorry!" She didn't respond immediately. "Did I offend you, Kino-san? I didn't mean to."

"Who ... who was that? And why do I think I know her?"

"You saw someone?" For the first time since Usagi-san hit the reset button, I began to hope.

"I... remembered something. I think. A blonde girl, my age, saying that my bento looked really good."

I nodded in understanding. "Ah. That's a memory from the Missing Time."

She looked skeptical. "The year that some scientists and those two cosmonauts claim we've lost? I don't believe it."

I had completely forgotten that there were people off-Earth (on *Mir*; in Principal Expedition 12, I looked up later). I wondered whether Usagi-san knew about the miners and neutrino astronomers deep under the surface, too.

I don't know why I went all-in – it was probably desperation on the part of my subconscious – but it seemed like the right thing to do. "I have memories of it, from the first day to the last. Please believe me, M- Kino-san." Technically that was true; I had Makoto's, Ami-san's, and Urawa-san's memories of the entire year.

She looked at me critically for a long moment. She'd obviously noticed that I almost called her by her given name... but did that help or hurt whether she trusted me?

"Alright. You can tell me more about the Missing Time. After I pay my respects to our other neighbours."

I smiled slightly. "I'll be here. And I'll do something about the mess."

## ***Isekai by Moonlight*** **Chapter R**

Makoto looked around in amazement. "This is a mess?"



"Compared to its usual state, yes." Mainly because she hadn't cleaned my apartment over the last half-week; Makoto had a profound dislike of uncleanness, which I was willing to indulge her in. But it wasn't too bad compared to the usual single-male apartment. The dishes from lunch had gone unwashed for a few hours, and, I realized just after she spotted them, I hadn't put away my collection of Sailor Senshi crane-game dolls. But how could I store away my feelings for Makoto?

"Those are cute," she said, walking over to take a closer look at them. She picked up the one in the place of honour, in the center of the group. "I like this one the best. Who are they?"

"They're called Sailor Senshi. That one is Sailor Jupiter." You, I carefully didn't say. "The dolls are physical artifacts of the Missing Time."

She put the doll down immediately. But gently.

"Every bit of common sense tells me that I shouldn't trust you about the Missing Time. If it even exists."

Well, so much for hope.

"But I want to trust you."

Then again, hope springs eternal.

"Please, tell me about the Missing Time."

"I can do better than that if you'll let me. But you have to trust me."

Her eyes narrowed. "Trust you how?"

"You need to sit down in front of me, and let me touch my forehead to yours for a few minutes."

She looked like she thought that my request was... not insane, but odd. "Maybe I should check your temperature, and find out if you're feeling okay."

"A few minutes, not a few seconds." I sat down, leaving her the cushion closer to the door.

After a long moment, she sat down in front of me. "Will it hurt?"

"It never has before." And I touched my forehead to hers.

She gasped as the memory flow began. Then she sighed, and giggled, and gasped again, and finally started crying as the last memory flowed into her mind.

She didn't say anything for a moment. "You're... no, that can't be right. We fought beside each other?" She stretched out her right arm, palm up... and after a few seconds was holding her transformation pen and communicator.

"I need to think about what you've shown me, Robu-san."

And she stood up and left my apartment.

My heart, which I was expecting to be soaring in the heavens in happiness, suddenly crashed and burned at the end of the runway.

But then I realized she'd called me "Robu-san", not "Donarudoson-san",

Hope walked away from the wreckage at the end of the runway and headed for another aircraft.

And, yes, I know that that's a terrible analogy for anything to do with Makoto.

I didn't see Makoto... Kino-san again for three days.

Which was understandable – I had just dumped a year's worth of memories into her head, the newest of which told her that not only was she my girlfriend, but that we had kissed. She had to go through them all, and then figure out whether they actually apply to her.

Yes, she did need to do that. The alternative was that I was mind-controlling her by giving her back her memories. And I didn't want that at all.

It was obvious to me what she was going through. Despite having the transformation pen, she was still Kino Makoto, not Sailor Jupiter... except in those memories. And despite living next door to me, she wasn't my girlfriend, either... again, except in those memories. Who was she: the person who she remembered being, or the person in the memories that I had returned to her? Or both?

And she had nobody to talk with about it. As far as I knew at the time, she and I, and Luna and Artemis, were the only people on Earth who had any memories from the Missing Time. She couldn't monopolize Luna or Artemis without Usagi or Minako getting suspicious of this girl who they'd never met paying attention to their pets. And she certainly wasn't going to ask me whether I was really her boyfriend.

But after supper at the end of those three days, I heard a scratching on my door, as if a pet wanted in. Then I heard, in English, "Let me in already, Rob."

I moved to the door quickly and let him in. "Sorry about that, Artemis," I replied in English. It felt good to speak my native language again without keeping secrets from the people I was speaking with.

"No worries. You're not a 'cat' person."

I nodded. "Yeah. And I don't have anything to offer you, either. Sorry."

"Just be sure to have some fish for the next time I'm over. I'm already getting tired of the dry cat food that Minako picked out."

I grimaced at the news of his monotonous diet. "I'll keep that in mind. What brings you to this part of town?"

"Mako-chan came by to talk while Minako was in class."

Looks like Makoto figured out a way to talk with Artemis after all.

He looked me straight in the eye. Note to self: Never get into a staring contest with a cat. Or a Mau.

I finally broke, not that I left him hanging for very long. "Yeah, I gave her back her memories. I'll point out that she had to cooperate for the process to work."

"Do you know how weird it is to get the 'talking cat! talking cat!' reaction from somebody who asked to talk with you?"

"Can't say that I do."

"Well, it's very weird. And then I had to be the one to confirm that she and you actually were an item during the Missing Time."

"Sorry about that, Artie. And thank you. How well did she take it?" Before he could reply, there was a knock at my door. I switched to Japanese out of courtesy. "Coming!"

I opened the door to see Makoto. Blushing. "May I come in?"

"Certainly!" I stepped aside to let her in, and turned to my other guest. "Don't answer that question, Artemis-san."

"Oh! Hello, Artemis-san."

"Hello and good-bye, Mako-chan. I was just leaving."

I smiled at his thoughtfulness. "I'd ask you to say hi to Minako-san, but... well..."

"I'm sure that she'd think the thought is enough. I'll see you tomorrow."

I held the door open for him. "And I'll have some sashimi waiting. See you then."

I barely had time to close the door before Mako-chan glomped me.

I'd never been glomped before. It's quite pleasant – when done by somebody who you love and who loves you.

Turning the glomp into a full-fledged hug, I smiled and said, "I see that the talk Artie said you had with him went well."

"Is that why you're going to have sashimi with him tomorrow?"

"No. Aino-san's feeding him dry cat food."

She grimaced. "Oh, yuck! I'll help pay for the sashimi."

"Thanks. Let's have dinner together, all three of us, and we can figure out how we're going to make friends with the others again."

"Robu-chan... Robu... *darling*, would you mind if I kept you all to myself for a while?"

I chuckled. "I don't mind at all. I don't want a harem, remember? I only want you, my dearest."

For that comment, I got a kiss from my girlfriend. Not as passionate as our kiss at the end of the Missing Time, but not as urgent, either.

No, we didn't go any farther than that. I believe I've mentioned before how her body is still developing that way, and how thin the walls of our apartment building are.

The next day, the three of us figured out how Mako-chan and I were going to meet at school, and over the next month become a couple, without anybody thinking that our relationship was at all unusual. Well, other than the "Japanese girl dating a non-Japanese guy" level of unusual.

Artemis is more devious than I am. It was mostly his ideas that we ended up using. Most of my ideas were too Rube-Goldberg-ish in application, and Makoto was willing to simply pick up where we left off and not pay any attention to what anyone else thought.

Our height actually worked to our advantage here. Teal Deer, Mako-chan and I were going to commiserate with each other about being tall, then realize we could help each other with our homework, and one thing would lead to another.

After we figured that out, Makoto asked the big question. "Should we give the others their memories back?"

Artemis shook his head. "Luna and I think you deserve to live normal lives, without having to put yourselves in harm's way. I haven't told her that you have your memories back, Mako-chan. And it's bad enough that the two of you do remember."

"But that was the only way to get our love back. I'm happy with the trade." She turned to me and raised an eyebrow – an expression that she'd picked up from me.

"That trade is the second-best thing that's happened in my life so far, right behind meeting you to begin with. As for the others' memories, I can't give them back, except for Ami-san and her boyfriend Urawa Ryou-san. And I don't

know how to begin to look for Ryou-san. Sure, I can pull his address in Niigata out of his brainprint, but then what do I do? He has no reason to trust me until after I give back his memories, and he has to trust me before I can do that."

"You're still Ami-chan's classmate, and see her every day, though. You know her better than I do right now."

"I suppose I do. She's almost as quiet as she was when we met her, despite still being in the Conversational English club with Minako-san and me."

Makoto frowned at that news. "I was hoping to have her as a friend again, but ..."

"But?" Artemis asked.

"But I'm still a little jealous of anybody who Robu might be interested in." She turned to me and added, "I'll leave the choice up to you."

I didn't need to have a copy of her mind in my head to know how she was thinking. "Let's not restore Ami-san's memories just yet." Then it was my turn to ask a big question. "Makoto, my dearest... can you still read my mind?"

She looked surprised at the question. Then she thought, and concentrated, and finally frowned. "No, I can't. I tried turning that on, but instead of your mind, I read the memories you gave back to me. Can you still read mine?"

I shook my head. "No. And I don't know why. I was able to give you back your memories, so why doesn't this work?"

Artemis suggested, "Maybe it's because you gave her back her memories."

"The power did what it needed to do, and then burned out?"

"That makes sense," Makoto said.

"It does at that. Stupid genre conventions."

"Hey, that genre convention brought us back together. Don't call it stupid." After a moment, Makoto asked, "So, what happened after that fantastic kiss? Which, by the way, was my first kiss ever."

"Thank you for sharing your first kiss with me, my dearest." As I thought about how to answer her question, I sighed deeply. "Right after we made that copy of your memories, you headed off to the Dark Kingdom. And..."

"And...?" Then the penny dropped. "You didn't change the anime. I died, didn't I?"

When I didn't answer, Artemis said, "He put his fist through the wall when it happened."

"That is so sweet of you, darling."

I had forgotten how physically-oriented Makoto was. "Losing you hit me hard, even though I was pretty sure Bunny-chan would bring you back. I don't want to lose you again, my dearest."

She smiled. "And I don't want to risk losing you, darling. We don't need to read each other's minds. We'll just have to have a normal relationship, like everybody else."

If Artemis hadn't been in the room, I'd have kissed her again.

Friday came, as it usually does near the end of the week. Maybe if it was more motivated, it would show up earlier. I could understand not being motivated, though, so I didn't complain about it arriving in its own time.

But Friday meant I had to pretend again. The membership of the Conversational English club hadn't changed, but only one-third of us remembered the Missing Time. Of course we spoke English during club meetings; that was the whole point to the club.

"Donaldson-san, what do you think of the rumours about the Missing Time?"

I missed being on a given-name basis with Ami-san. "Which rumours have you heard, Mizuno-san?"

"The most recent is that the cosmonauts on Mir aren't the people who the Soviet space program thought were on the station."

Her mention of the Soviets puzzled me, until I remembered that they wouldn't formally dissolve the USSR until Christmas Day, nearly two months after our conversation.

"That does lend some credence to the idea that there *is* a Missing Time," Minako-san offered.

"And we'll probably never know what the cosmonauts know," I added. "If they know anything about what happened during the Missing Time, the Soviets will treat it as a state secret."

"How do you figure that, Donaldson-san?"

"When have they not classified anything, Aino-san? Besides, there might be something in that knowledge that would give them an edge. But to answer Mizuno-san's question, I think they know more about the Missing Time than anybody else in what's left of the Soviet Union does. I suspect they'll be left in orbit where they can't talk with anybody until Gorbachev decides what to do with them."

"I can't argue with that," Minako-san said. "So, since we'll never know, let's talk about something else instead. I hear we're getting a new transfer student in on Monday."

Thank you for giving me an opening, Minako-san; now I can start Artie's plan and it'll seem like it was your comment that started it off. "You mean Kino-san?"

"How do you know her name, Donaldson-san?"

I smiled. "Believe it or not, she's my new next-door neighbour."

"What's she like?"

"Self-assured, very pretty, and once she's enrolled here she'll be the second-tallest student in the school."

"Behind you," Minako-san grinned.

"Where have I heard the name 'Kino' before?" Ami-san asked.

I sighed. Leave it to the resident super-genius to ask the difficult question. And I still wasn't about to lie to her.

"Her given name is Makoto."

"Kino Makoto-san, as in ... six and a half years ago?" Ami-san asked.

"She hasn't said anything about that to me since she moved in." Since she moved in the second time, I didn't say.

"But I do know that she doesn't like the sound of aircraft."

"What are you two talking about?"

"The worst single-airliner crash in history," I replied to Minako-san. "You'll learn about it in second year."

Monday, and Makoto officially joined the student body at Kuritsu Juban Chuugakkou. Or, rather, re-joined, not that anybody other than the two of us remembered that.

She told me after school that her desk was right beside Aoyama-san's, so during the first break between classes Makoto sighed loudly and mentioned that she already missed her last school... which got Aoyama-san to sympathize with her instead of being afraid of her. The two of them had lunch together that day.

"So you're already making friends in your new school," I said with a smile after she told me that.

"Re-making friends," she agreed. "How long until I get to coincidentally bump into you at school?"

"I've already told Ami-san and Minako-san... sorry, Mizuno-san and Aino-san that we're next-door neighbours, so whenever you're ready to complain about how you're being treated because you're tall."

"Tomorrow, then. And you're re-making friends, too."

"We're in the Conversational English club together. We talked about you last Friday."

"Nothing scandalous, I hope," she grinned.

"Not from me. But Mizuno-san figured out that you're the famous Kino Makoto."

Her grin disappeared. "You didn't tell her that I wasn't?"

"My dearest, I promised myself that I would never lie to you, or her, or Usagi-san. Just because the two of them don't remember being our friends and comrades-in-arms doesn't make that promise invalid."

"You'll never lie to me?" She actually looked surprised.

"Never. I might refuse to say anything or say something misleading, though."

Her smile came back. "I can see that." Then she thought for a moment. "Yeah, I guess you're right about telling Ami-san. And I wouldn't love you if you were the type of person who'd break a promise." After another beat, she continued, "But that doesn't mean I'm happy about my history preceding me."

"I doubt anybody else has figured it out, or if they have, they haven't said anything."

"I hope it'll stay that way. So, what are we going to do tonight?"

"The same thing we do every night. Homework."

Artie's plan went perfectly. Makoto and I started spending time together, towering over every other student and many of the teachers in the school. She started walking with me to the Conversational English club on Friday afternoons, which meant that she got to officially meet Aino-san and Mizuno-san for at least a moment each week and – more importantly – Aino-san didn't decide that I was available. And, after the Labor Thanksgiving Day holiday, we were holding hands while walking to the club on Fridays, and having lunch together every school day.

And, away from school, I re-established an acquaintance with Naru-san when I made a very special request at OSA-P.

We alternated which classroom we had lunch in – mine or hers – because we could still tell from the amount of room everybody was giving us that we still intimidated most of our classmates. But "most" wasn't "all"; Aoyama-san was willing to at least say hello when I visited Makoto's classroom, and of course my clubmate Mizuno-san returned the favour when Makoto dropped by our classroom.

Before the end of the month, even before everybody knew that Makoto and I were a couple, Aoyama-san started joining us for lunch when we ate in Makoto's classroom. We even re-started the traditional Revealing Of The Lunches after Makoto expressed an interest in Hokkaido-style cooking. It was fun.

Then came the day that the three of us had lunch together in my classroom. It was November 22, which I remember because we had the next day off for Labor Thanksgiving Day, so some of what I just mentioned happened after this. Aoyama-san noticed the single lily on a desk. "Is that...?"

I nodded. "Yeah, that's Sato-san's desk."

"It's been a while since that car hit him," she commented, which finally told me how he'd died after Usagi-san reset the timeline and Kunzite wasn't around to turn him into a youma. "Who's still bringing in the flowers?"

I didn't say anything. But Mizuno-san did. "Donaldson-san does, every day."

Makoto raised an eyebrow, copying my habit in situations like this one. Ichigo-san... Aoyama-san raised both of her eyebrows. "I didn't know you were that close to him."

"I wasn't," I admitted. "But it's the right thing to do." I turned to Ami-san. "Mizuno-san, I didn't realize you'd noticed."

"Want to join us for lunch?" Makoto asked.

"I don't want to intrude..."

"It's no intrusion, Mizuno-san," Aoyama-san insisted as she moved her chair over to make room. "The more, the merrier!"

"I'm not in a merry mood right after talking about Sato-san," I mentioned. "But I join with the ladies in inviting you to join us."

"If you insist," she said with the ghost of a smile on her face. And then she moved her desk over beside mine.

Despite Ami-san... Mizuno-san barely joining in, that lunch was more fun than any other lunch I'd had all month.

And Mizuno-san apparently agreed with me there, since she mentioned it – in English, of course – during Conversational English club that afternoon. "I don't know why, but it felt right to have lunch with you and Kino-san and her friend today. But I couldn't help but feel like something or somebody was missing."

"It's not like you hadn't met Donaldson-san or Kino-san before, Mizuno-san. Maybe you knew Aoyama-san during the Missing Time!"

Ami-san actually looked annoyed at Minako-san's suggestion. "I don't want to hear any of those ridiculous conspiracy theories about the Missing Time, Aino-san. Rumours that we can pull information from are one thing, but conspiracy theories don't advance knowledge."

Minako-san actually pouted. "I *know* that something important happened during the Missing Time. But I don't know what!"

"Why don't you ask your pet cat? Maybe he knows what happened," I said with a smile.

Ami-san rolled her eyes. Minako-san asked, "Even if he did know, how could he tell me?" Then, after a beat, she asked, "And how did you know I have a pet cat? I'm pretty sure that I never mentioned Artemis to you."

Oops. And I'd gone nearly a month without slipping up, too. Then I spotted an out. "I'm pretty sure that that completely white hair on your shoulder isn't yours. And you look like a 'cat' person to me. So his name is Artemus?"

"Artemis," she corrected my pronunciation as she picked his hair off of her school uniform. "And, yes, I know it's a girl's name. But I didn't name him."

Before we could continue, there was a knock at the door, then one of the girls' volleyball team members poked her head in. "I'm sorry to interrupt," she said in Japanese, "but we need Aino-san for a quick meeting before this weekend's match with Toyo Eiwa Jogakuin."

"Gotta go! Don't wait for me; these quick meetings usually last at least a half-hour. Sorry!" And she was gone.

Once she was gone, Ami turned to me. "I wonder who did name her pet cat."

"Did you want to wind up the meeting now, Mizuno-san?"

"Not yet, if you don't mind." After a quick pause, she continued, "When I heard Aino-san say the name 'Artemis', I had the same feeling that I had at lunch time when I was talking with Aoyama-san, Kino-san, and you. I'm starting to wonder whether we actually did know each other during the Missing Time."

I wasn't going to lie to her. But that didn't mean that I had to volunteer information.

"Artemis... Artemis and... somebody. Oh, why do I think that that's important?" she asked with some frustration. "I don't like not *knowing* something!"

I nodded in sympathy. "That can be annoying, I know. There's something that you think you should know, but when you reach for it, it dissolves into mist."

"Or fog. And that seems important, too."

More important that you know right now, my dearer friend. And I don't dare call you *that*. "Maybe you should sleep on it, and see whether your dreams tell you anything."

"Maybe I should. Thank you for listening to me, Donaldson-san."

"You're welcome, Mizuno-san," I replied as she stood up and grabbed her bag. I stood up as well and said, "I'll clean up today. See you Monday."

I did so, then headed home, changed into more comfortable clothes, and went grocery shopping for the weekend. Once I was home again and food was put away, I knocked on Makoto's door. "Anybody home?"

"Come on in!" I did, to see her in jeans and a t-shirt; she'd been cleaning her apartment again, although she wasn't so impolite as to continue cleaning while she had a guest. Considering how messy an aircraft crash usually is, I could understand why she was a neat freak.

"If you maintain this habit of keeping your home spotless, you're going to make some lucky guy very happy, you know that, Makoto."

"And just who do you think the lucky guy is going to be, Robu?" she asked with a grin.

I grinned in return. "I thought we settled that during the Missing Time. Me, of course." Then I gave her a hug.

"And don't you forget it!" Then she lost her grin and sighed.

"What's wrong, my dearest?"

Slipping out of our hug, she said, "I think we messed up."

"I know I messed up today; I mentioned Artemis to Minako-san before she told me about him. I managed to come up with a convincing reason why, though. I think."

"That isn't what I meant. After having lunch with Ami-san and Ichigo-san today, I realized how much I miss my friends. Our friends."

I sighed. "I can't bring them back. Except for Ami-san, and she has to allow it and cooperate, just like you did."

"I know. It would be nice, though." Then she forced a smile. "So, what's for dinner?"

I smiled in return. "Well, I have all the ingredients for chicken curry."

"Your curry's too spicy! Honestly, who puts nanami togarashi in curry?"

Anthy, I thought but didn't say. "I do. But since you don't like it, we'll just have to go out. I know a nice little beef-bowl place, perfect for discussing things like Martial Arts Figure Skating."

"I'll get my skates."

I mentioned the conversation we'd had during the Conversational English club meeting to Artemis when he came over to use my laptop. He was following up on an idea that I'd had during the Missing Time; he was using the software I had installed and the Dark Kingdom's biometric data that I had taken from Janelyn and Misha to improve the graphics of the *Sailor V* game. Not to near-photorealistic levels, because the state of the art wouldn't support that in a console game, but still better than simple sprites. He was doing this in order to make it a better training simulator, of course; the additional income that would result from being the first to have that level of realism in a game had nothing to do with things. And if we repeated that often enough, we might even believe it.

While he was doing that, Makoto and I were going on dates.

That weekend, Makoto and I decided to throw caution to the winds and go watch the volleyball game. Luckily for us, Hino-san wasn't there to cheer for her school's team and possibly notice us and start wondering about the Missing Time. And, thanks to a last-minute rolling save by Aino-san, our team won! Yay us!

Mizuno-san joined us for lunch every day the next week. And, of course, the Revealing Of The Lunches revealed her sandwiches every day.

And I noticed that she was becoming more comfortable around us every day. Which made the rest of us happy, too.

Finally, Friday deigned to arrive. Minako-san brought some photos of Artemis to the Conversational English club, so of course we talked about the cats with crescent moon marks that we knew about. Which took all of half a minute, because I didn't mention Luna.

"It almost looks like he's posing in this shot," Ami-san remarked while holding a photo of Artie, who to my eye was obviously posing. The scamp.

"He does, doesn't he?" Minako-san agreed... just before there was a knock at the door. Sure enough, the volleyball team wanted her to attend another meeting.

"Should we reschedule this club to a different day of the week?" I asked.

Minako-san shook her head. "We're just in the middle of a three-week run of games. This shouldn't happen again after next week. Sorry!" she added as she headed out.

"Well, that was a short club meeting," I commented.

"Donaldson-san... I've been thinking about the Missing Time."

Oh, boy. "Have you reached any conclusions?"

"Not really. But the more I think about it, the more I'm convinced that Aino-san had lunch with you and me and Aoyama-san and Kino-san and... somebody else. Either a blonde or a brunette."

"I see."

"Or maybe two people." Then came the question I was half-expecting and half-dreading. "Do you have any memories like that, that could come from the Missing Time?"

I sighed deeply. She'd asked directly, and I wasn't going to lie to her, no matter how crazy it made me sound. But speaking of crazy... "Mizuno-san, do you think that I'm sane? Because sometimes I wonder."

"You're one of the sanest people I know."

"Aw, you had to phrase it that way. Yes, I have memories of having lunch with you and Makoto and Aino-san and Aoyama-san and... I may as well tell you... Osaka-san and Tsukino-san."

"From class 1?" I nodded. "Yes, the blonde girl did have long twintails; it could be Tsukino-san. Do you have any other memories from the Missing Time? Assuming these are memories from the Missing Time. Because sometimes I see you and wonder whether your computer is running properly, and you've never mentioned owning a computer."

I owned two computers at that point, one from here and now and the laptop from my home reality, but that wasn't important just then. "Before I answer that, I'm going to have to ask you to lock the door, so that nobody walks in on us, overhears this conversation, and thinks we've both gone mad."

"Oh! They would, wouldn't they?" And my beautiful friend showed how much she trusted me, maybe only on a subconscious level, by locking herself in with me. Although she was careful to sit closer to the door than I did.

"Thank you, Mizuno-san. I know you're going to have trouble believing this. I know more about the Missing Time than anyone else on or off Earth."

She was taken aback by that statement, but rallied quickly. "How? And how can you be so sure?"

"Answering the first question first, I lived through the experience, and, alongside some other very special people with metahuman abilities, fought off an attempt to take over the world."

"That's an extraordinary claim, Donaldson-san. It needs extraordinary evidence."

I used a forcefield to draw the room's drapes closed. "Is that sufficient, Mizuno-san?"

She shook her head. "As evidence of metahuman abilities, no. You could have rigged some servos to do that."

"But I couldn't use servos to do this." And I used a forcefield to lift myself off the floor.

Her eyes went wide, but she said, "That could be wires."

So I used a forcefield to lift her off the floor.

"Eek! All right, I'm convinced!"

I set her down gently, then joined her on the ground just before there was a knock at the door. "Are you okay in there?"

I quickly-as-in-flash-move walked over to the door, unlocked it, and opened it to see Sakurada-sensei. "We're fine, Ms. Sakurada," I answered while stepping out of the way to let her see Ami-san and the classroom.

"I was just surprised by something that Donaldson-san told me," Ami-san added.

"You should be calling him 'Mr. Donaldson' when you're speaking English, Ms. Mizuno," the teacher scolded her.

"I'll keep that in mind, Sakurada-sensei... Sorry, Ms. Sakurada."

She smiled as Ami-san corrected herself. "I was just stopping by to let you know I have to leave the school now. Can you clean up after you're finished, please?"

Ami nodded. "It's my turn to do that."

"Lovely. I'll leave it to you, then. And I'll see you tomorrow."

"Have a good evening, Ms. Sakurada," I said as she left. Then I locked the door again and walked back to Ami-san.

Before I could say anything, she asked, "Did you just teleport?"

"No. That was extremely rapid movement, but I did pass through the points between where I started and where I finished. Answering your second question, I'm sure that I know more about the Missing Time than anyone else because two of the people who I fought alongside and the boyfriend of one of those two people each gave me permission to make copies of their minds close to the end of the Missing Time, so I have multiple sets of memories of that time instead of just one."

"That's incredible."

"I wouldn't find it credible either if I hadn't lived through it."

"Is there any mechanism to give those memories to somebody else?"

I saw the hopeful look on her face. "I'm going to be very careful about how I answer that. We did some experiments and determined that I can only give the memories back to the people who gave them to me in the first place, and I keep a copy anyway."

"Oh. I don't suppose any of those three people are people I know?"

"You might want to sit down before I answer that, Ami-san."

She's a smart girl. "I think you did just answer that. You're hinting that the 'we' you mentioned carrying out experiments includes me, and that you knew me well enough to be on a given-name basis with me, Donaldson-san."

"We were closer than that." As kindly as I could, I asked, "Do you want your memories back?"

She didn't answer for a long moment. Finally, she said, "I don't know whether I should."

"I didn't ask whether you should. Of the four people on Earth who I know remember the Missing Time, two think that you shouldn't, and one wants it to happen but isn't sure whether it should happen. But I'm the person who has the final say, and I think that your memories belong with you. If you want them."

"Who are the other three who have memories of the Missing Time? And whose memories do you have?"

I smiled. "Two of the people aren't human. Remember last week when I suggested Aino-san ask her cat about the Missing Time? If she does, Artemis is quite capable of answering her in Japanese. And so is Luna, Tsukino-san's pet. The person who's in both circles on the Venn diagram is my girlfriend, Makoto. And given that much and what I've already said, you should be able to figure out your relationship with the person who gave me the other set of memories in my head."

She thought for a moment. "I had a boyfriend during the Missing Time?"

"I don't know whether the rest of the world would have said that, but your memories in my head say that you thought so. And his memories in my head say that the feeling was mutual."

"I had a boyfriend during the Missing Time... Please don't think poorly of me for making a selfish request, but I want to know who he was."

I smiled. "Please don't think poorly of me for making a selfish offer, but I want my friend back. And I know Makoto wants you back, too."

"What do we have to do? How long will it take? And what preparations do we need to make?"

I turned the chair beside her to face her and sat down. "The preparations are now complete. We touch foreheads together for approximately ten minutes, while I do all the hard work."

She took a deep breath, turned her chair to face me, and leaned forward.

Ten minutes later, Ami-san smiled. "I'm home, Rob-san."

"Welcome back, my dearer friend," I smiled in return.

Then there were the thuds of three things hitting the desk she was sitting at. Without looking, she picked up her transformation pen and communicator and put them in her pocket. Then she looked at the Mercury Computer. "I wonder how this was dented," she said. I knew that it was probably from her using it to break that youma's illusion gem, but that happened after the last time that I updated her brainprint. Putting her palmtop in her pocket alongside her other Senshi gear, she asked, "So now I can tell Mako-chan that I remember her, too... No, wait." Her smile started to change to a grin. "I'll tell her on Thursday!"

I knew exactly what she was thinking. "If you're going to wait until then, I'll have to change our reservations."

Jumping straight to Thursday...

After the Revealing Of The Lunches, which did not include sandwiches because Ami-san was busy with something else that lunch break, I reminded Makoto that we had plans for after school. "And please wear your best dress."

"Is today special?" Aoyama-san asked.

I smiled as I handed a box – one that I'd picked up at OSA-P the day before – to Makoto. "Happy Birthday, my dearest."

"Oh, you shouldn't have!" She opened the box, moved the cotton that was protecting her gift out of the way, then said, "Oh, darling, you really shouldn't have. Can you afford this?"

"I promised you a present, no matter what. So I've been saving up especially for today," I replied as she took the pendant out of the box and put it on.

"It's beautiful..." Aoyama-san turned to me. "What is it made of? I don't recognize the stone."

"That's a [pink tourmaline](#). It took a month for Osaka-san at OSA-P to carve the rose into it." Before Makoto could say anything, I added, "And it's already bought and paid for."

"Oh, I wish Mizuno-san was here to see it. I'll just have to show it to her tomorrow."

Lunch ensued, as did afternoon classes. Then we went home and got changed.

I was in my best suit – all right, my only suit – with a white shirt and black tie. Makoto was in a green long-sleeved dress that came down to just above her knees, with a matching hair ribbon, wrap, and flat shoes, and of course her rose earrings and the pendant I'd given her earlier in the day. I offered her my arm and escorted her to the waiting taxi.

Yes, I know how expensive taxis are in Tokyo. And so did she. "All this, just for me?"

"All this, just for you." I told the driver, "The National Art Center in Roppongi, please."

Makoto's eyes went wide. "The... darling, can you afford dinner there after buying me this pendant?"

"Nothing but the best for my dearest on your birthday."



We made small talk during the trip, mostly about how much we loved each other, so it wasn't really "small". Finally we arrived, and I paid the driver. It was a good thing that I pulled out of the bank more than I planned to spend, because I needed it.

And, as she'd already figured out, we made our way to Brasserie Paul Bocuse Musée, which in the early 1990s was still one of the best French restaurants in Tokyo. The maitre d' showed us to the only table that had a dozen pink roses in a vase as its centrepiece.

"Oh, they're lovely!" Then she noticed how many chairs were around the table. "But there must be some mistake. The table's set for three."

"There's no mistake," I replied as the maitre d' left me to seat Makoto. "Our companion should be along any minute now." And, sure enough, the maitre d' returned with the third member of our party just as I was seating myself, so I had to stand as she arrived.

"Happy Birthday, Mako-chan," Ami-san said.

"Mizuno-san?" Then Makoto realized what she'd called her. "Ami-chan...?"

"For love and justice, I couldn't miss your big day," she replied.

Makoto's smile lit up the room.

Oh, yes; Ami-san was wearing a sky-blue dress and matching pumps, with (as we discovered when it came time to leave) a pale-blue wrap.

And, yes, we did draw quite a few looks. Most of the men seemed to be envious of me, for obvious reasons.

Friday followed Thursday, and the Conversational English club followed classes.

And Minako-san was called out of the club for the third time in a row. She promised that it would be the last time.

Once the door was closed behind Minako-san, Ami-san sighed deeply, "I'm worn out from having to pretend I don't know Mina-san well enough to call her by her given name. And you've been doing this for a month?"

"You're a more honest person than Makoto and I are; we have an advantage over you there when it comes to keeping secrets. But I know you can keep the secret. After all, nobody figured out that you're Sailor Mercury the last time around."

"How do you do it?"

"I don't lie to anybody, but I don't volunteer the truth, either. And I'm getting good at truthful but misleading statements, and at changing the subject. Maybe it would be best to say that I treat it like a game: Can I keep up the façade without actually telling anybody a lie until there's no need for a façade any more?"

"I just realized that you and Mako-chan were playing that game for an entire month. And you won; I never imagined that you were already in love while you looked like you were falling in love."

"Thank you," I smiled.

"And speaking of love..."

When she didn't continue that sentence, I replied anyway. "Yes, I could pull Urawa-san's address out of his brainprint. But I'm not going to while we're studying for end-of-term exams. That gives you almost a month to figure out whether you want to get in touch with him again."

"What happened in the anime?"

"We never saw him again in the anime. But you already know what I think when it comes to changing canon."

"Thank you, Rob-san. And I'll have to think about how I want to contact him."

"Message received and understood, Ami-san. Now, why don't we review our English classes and study for the English exams? While speaking in English, of course." I got out my textbook just before Sakurada-sensei showed up to mention club activities were being put on hold until after the winter holidays. When she saw that we were studying, she let us stay for the rest of the afternoon... and even gave us some semi-private tutoring.

Mid-December wasn't all a slog of studying and exams, of course. Makoto and I spent two delightful weekends seeing some of Tokyo's sights, including taking a tour of the Imperial palace grounds the Sunday morning after her birthday.

Well, the weekends were mostly delightful. There was that one incident.

We spent the Sunday afternoon after her birthday walking through Hamarikyu Gardens. "Remember when Kunzite got the drop on you here?" she asked as we walked past the 300-year-old pine.

"That hasn't happened yet," I replied with a smile. "And with the Dark Kingdom no longer existing, it won't happen at all."

"But we both still remember it happening," she pointed out as she leaned against me. "Oh, this feels so good. I never got to just rest against my sempai back at my old school."

"What, never?"

"Well, he turned me down, so we were never close enough to do this."

"His loss is our gain," I replied with a smile while putting my arm around her waist and drawing her closer... which caught the attention of a man with a professional camera and his family, one of whom we both recognized from the Missing Time but couldn't acknowledge.

"Excuse me, but may I take some photos of the two of you?" he asked. "I'm Tsukino Kenji, and I'm working on a human-interest piece for my magazine."

"Daaaaad, we're supposed to be relaxing!" This came from the older of the two children – a blue-eyed blonde with long twintails. Yes, the girl who we had to pretend we didn't know was Usagi-san... and I didn't dare call her Bunny-chan.

Before I could reply to either of them, Makoto said, "I'm sorry, but I really don't want my photo in the media."

"That's a shame," said Kenji's wife who I had to pretend I didn't know was named Ikuko. "You're a pretty girl, miss..."

"Mama, papa, stop bothering her." That was Usagi. "If Kino-san doesn't want her photo taken, I'm sure she has a good reason."

And that gave me an opportunity to acknowledge knowing her, at least from a distance. "Ah! You're our schoolmate, aren't you, Tsukino-san?"

She smiled and nodded. "Tsukino Usagi, from Class 1. I'm surprised you recognized me."

"Why shouldn't we recognize you? We aren't celebrities who are isolated from everyone else, Tsukino-san. We're just noticeable because we're so tall." I turned to her father and bowed. "From Class 5 in your daughter's school, I'm Rob Donaldson. I'm happy to meet you all."

"And from Class 6, I'm Kino Makoto." She also bowed.

Kenji-san recognized her name. "Oh! Yes, of course I understand why you wouldn't want attention called to you, Kino-san. I apologize for intruding on your afternoon."

"No apologies are necessary, Tsukino-san," she replied graciously... but I knew my girlfriend well enough to see subtle signs of stress when she said that.

"Let's go, dad..." Apparently, Usagi-san noticed the signs, too. "You were going to show us the statue of Umashimadenomikoto, remember?"

"Was I?" Then he noticed the look his wife was giving him. "Ah, that's right! Let's not waste any time." And the entire family headed off to the southwest, leaving the two of us as alone as we could be in a public park on a weekend.

"So, who is Umashimade-no-mikoto?" I asked, just before noticing the name in Ami-san's brainprint.

"A great-grandson of Amaterasu-sama," Makoto replied distractedly as she watched the Tsukino family walk away. Then she sighed deeply. "Why do people have to know my name?"

"It isn't your fault," I replied. "And it isn't everybody. C'mon, let's go get some tea and relax."

Silly me. How was I supposed to know that the tea house in Hamarikyū Gardens was the formal sort, rather than a place to relax? Okay, I know ritual is supposed to be relaxing, but I just can't relax when I'm sitting in seiza. Good thing that we were still dressed for a tour of the Imperial Palace grounds, and thus didn't stand out during the tea ceremony.

But there's something to be said for going through a formal ceremony, even one that until I started it I didn't know that I knew. Stupid genre conventions.

And Makoto liked it, which was the important thing.

Instead of getting together for the Conversational English club the next Friday, we had a study session at Ami-san's apartment. By "we", I mean the lunch group, not just Aino-san and I, so Aoyama-san finally got to meet Aino-san this time around. Ami-san had the advantage of remembering having taken the courses before, so she could concentrate on helping the rest of us study.

And I got to meet her mother again, for the very first time. But this time we actually had some time to talk while the girls were making supper. Or, rather, we had time for her to interrogate me... quite politely, of course, and to ensure that it was safe for Ami-san to continue associating with me.

"What are your career plans, Donarudoson-san?"

This was something I'd been considering for a while; I had a new start on life and wanted to try something different. "I'm planning to become a professional photographer, Mizuno-sensei, possibly working with some of the major newspapers if they'll have me."

"That doesn't pay very well, does it?"

I understood why she was concerned about money, what with the economic bubble having burst recently. "It pays well enough to stay alive and continue in the profession, even if I don't become wildly successful. And the lack of stress compared to many other jobs helps; not everything that's worthwhile can be valued in yen."

"That's a remarkably mature outlook. How long have you known Ami?"

"Since we met at school. I'm lucky enough to have the desk next to hers."

"Is she doing well in school?"

I smiled. "Academically, she consistently ranks at the top of our grade, not just the top of our class. Socially, she's become less introverted ever since she joined the Conversational English club. I think you can thank Aino-san for that; she's a very outgoing girl who draws others into her conversations."

"That's good to hear, and I'll be sure to thank Aino-san when I get a chance to talk with her." After a moment, she asked the big question. "What do you think of my daughter?"

"Ah, that's the important thing, isn't it?" I smiled to show that I wasn't offended by the question. "Your daughter has been kind to me ever since I started school in Japan. She's a lovely young lady and a good friend."

"Just a good friend?" she asked with some disappointment in her voice.

I was slightly surprised that Mizuno-sensei appeared to be wondering whether she could play matchmaker between a doctor-to-be and a photographer-to-be. Her daughter wasn't so old that she was at any risk of becoming "Christmas cake", after all. "Just a good friend. She deserves the attention of somebody who isn't already in love with one of her other friends."

While she wasn't completely happy with that answer, she did nod in agreement. "You have your principles aligned correctly, Donarudoson-san. Do you mind me asking you about her friends at school?"

"Not at all. Aino-san, who I've already mentioned, has been a good influence on Ami-san and a big help in getting your daughter to open up to the rest of us. Aoyama-san might not think before speaking as often as she should, but she's an honest and hardworking girl who has a different outlook on life than the rest of us because she grew up in Hokkaido. And Makoto... well, I'm biased here because I literally cannot imagine life without Makoto and me by each other's sides any more, but I do believe that she's one of Ami-san's closest friends. I know that they're learning a lot from each other; Ami-san is helping Makoto become more book-smart and Makoto is helping Ami-san learn the life skills that aren't taught in school."

"Your 'Makoto' is the Kino-san that I met earlier today?"

"She is as much mine as I am hers," I smiled. "But, yes, her full name is Kino Makoto."

She looked thoughtful. "I know that name from somewhere..."

I didn't let her continue. "From August of 1985. And she does not appreciate being reminded of that time."

"Thank you, Donarudoson-san. I will refrain from mentioning it."

Just then, Aoyama-san knocked on the door frame. "Dinner's ready!"

We quite enjoyed the [ishikari nabe](#) that Ichigo-san had taught the others to make.

Exams ensued, and were followed by the public posting of the aggregate marks.

Makoto and I just barely placed in the top quarter of the school, with total scores in the high-600s... on purpose, so that we didn't suddenly look like students at Ami-san's level. And I made sure to thank Sakurada-sensei for telling me some of the differences between conversational English and Japanese-test English, which let me get a perfect score in her class.

I didn't need to see Ami-san's report card. Her marks were obvious – straight 100s with the exception of P.E. and Home Ec., and Makoto was helping Ami-san with Home Ec, so Ami-san's aggregate mark was 864 instead of last term's 851. That was enough to put her at the top of the entire school.

Makoto showed me her report card, and pointed out the numbers that she was happiest with: 87-59-87. I swear she enjoys drawing my attention to her body. Mind you, her body is worth drawing attention to, and I'd say that even if she wasn't my girlfriend.

And we noticed that Usagi-san scored 459. Yes, it's a pass, but only just barely, and she had to have flunked some of her courses unless she got 51 in every single course. Ouch. We really needed to give her back her memories of the Missing Time, so that Ami-san could tutor her again... but only Luna could do that without a brainprint, and she refused to take away Usagi-san's normal life.

On our way home from school, we stopped at the 7-12 and made a copy of Makoto's report card. Her guardians had a right to see it, after all.

Then we got home... to discover her front door was slightly ajar. "I locked that this morning."

"You lead, I'll back you up," I whispered as I went invisible.

We quietly walked over to her door... and she pushed it open. "Who's here?"

"It's about time you got home, child."

While Makoto relaxed physically, I could see that she wasn't happy. "Hello, grandfather. Here is my report card." And she pulled the report – the original, not the copy – from her school bag and handed it to him, the way somebody would hand a meishi to a new business associate.

Even I could tell that they were not a happy family.

"Wait there quietly while I read it." He took his time. "Hmm. You've finally taken my advice and started studying, I see."

"Yes, sir."

"You may continue to live on your own in Tokyo."

"Thank you, sir."

"And you may consider this meeting to serve as your New Year's greetings."

"Grandmother still does not want to see me, then?"

"She does not. I will ensure that your bank account is replenished sufficiently for the next three months. Until the end of your next term, Makoto." And he walked out of her apartment so quickly that I had to dodge to get out of his way.

She locked the door behind him, then sighed deeply. "Every time," she muttered. "I wish I was already 20."

"Why?" I asked quietly.

"Oh! Sorry, Robu, I thought you were still outside. Japanese companies, including JAL, aren't legally allowed to settle claims with minors."

And that explained why Makoto was short on cash so often; it was her relatives who were supporting her, not her parents' life insurance payments and the airline's settlement payment. I dropped my invisibility as I said, "You know that you can count on me for help, at least with food. If you don't mind me asking, what was that mention of your grandmother about?"

She leaned against my chest. "She... has never forgiven me for surviving when her daughter didn't."

"Her... your mother. That's... oh, Makoto... I'm so sorry for you," I said as I hugged her tenderly. Makoto's grandmother obviously needed professional assistance to work through her grief... but she'd probably never get it, because the availability of community psychiatric care in Japan was haphazard at best. The Seven-year Strategy of Normalisation for the Disabled wouldn't even be written until 1995. And I wondered how I knew that, but my girlfriend is more important than stupid genre conventions.

"I don't feel like making anything for dinner tonight, Robu."

Which meant she didn't want company just then. "Do you think you'll be okay on your own?" She nodded, so I said, "Then I'll see you tomorrow." And I let myself out.

Tomorrow, in this case, was Christmas Day.

Back in Canada, Christmas is a day for family and New Year's Eve is a day to party with friends. But in Japan, it's the other way around. And I'll stop there before I end up expositing again, or quoting a certain pink-haired gondolier.

We got together at Ami-san's place and did all the fun stuff: had a gift exchange (in which I got a teacup from Arashiyama, and it was obvious who brought that), ate tasty food including chicken from the Colonel, played a few board games, and did some party tricks. And talked. Boy, did we talk; we were all on a given-name basis (again, but this time without Usagi-san's help) by the end of the day.

Ichigo-san learned just how lucky she was to have two parents who cared about her, even if one was away because of work for a few months at a time. From the stories Minako-san told us, her mother was a harriidan and her father let her mother get away with it. Ami-san mentioned that she hadn't seen her father in years. And of course Makoto and I... well, the less said there, the better.

And it turned out that Mizuno-sensei heard what the two of us didn't say. I think that's something that they teach you how to do at medical school. Once everyone else had left and Makoto and I were saying our farewells, she invited us over for New Year's Eve. I let Makoto accept on behalf of both of us.

Makoto and I did a lot of tourist things over the first week of our vacation, after we spent Boxing Day... sorry, they just call it the day after Christmas here in Japan... doing the homework that we were assigned for the break and writing our New Year's cards.

"Tourist things" included visiting the Tokyo Tower. "This is a nice little tower," I commented.

"Little?"

"I've visited the CN Tower."

"Oh, we'll take the title of the world's tallest tower back from your home country, Robu," Makoto replied with a grin.

"Not until 2012, you won't," I countered with a grin of my own. Then I stopped grinning. "Although this reminds me: If Usagi-san ever shows off glass slippers that she gets for her birthday, be ready for a major battle. I don't *think* this tower will be destroyed during that fight, but the anime showed it taking some structural damage."

"We'd never wreck a national landmark!"

"You and I wouldn't, but it takes two sides to have a fight."

"Oh. Maybe we should take some photos while we're here."

"No, it's probably okay. Although if we come back in 1993 and see three girls transported to another world, maybe it would have been better to wreck the tower after all."

"Is that another anime reference?"

"Change the date to 1995 and it would be. It's a manga reference." I thought for a moment. "Although, if I have the anime here, Hino-san might be interested in watching it."

"The way I was interested in that anime set in Academy City?"

"Exactly. If she ever gets her memories back, remind me to check my computer, please."

Our conversations about other landmarks went along the same lines: Appreciate the place for what it is, mention how it ties in with canon if it does at all, and make some comments about some other story where the landmark was featured. Makoto took it as a challenge to find a famous landmark that I couldn't do that with. After asking about the Hachikō Memorial Statue, the Tokyo Big Sight, the still-under-construction Rainbow Bridge, the Diet building, and Tokyo Station, she finally stumped me with a place in Roppongi that we'd already visited: the National Art Center. Of course, we got a lot of strange looks while we talked about stories that hadn't been written yet. But we got looks simply for being so tall, so we didn't really care any more.

Then came New Year's Eve itself, and we were faced with a conundrum. What if anything do you bring as a gift to somebody who's treating you like family? We finally decided on handwritten letters – using brush pens, of course – of appreciation and thanks.

Even though it was obvious that our calligraphy needed work. It's the thought that matters, right?

At least Mizuno-sensei appreciated the thought.

And Ami-san appreciated it when I gave her a slip of paper with an address in Niigata.

We did all of the usual New Year's Eve things – talked, watched television, listened to the temple bell being rung 108 times, ate a mikan each, and simply found comfort in each other's presence.

The only awkward moment came when we had to figure out what to call Ami's mother. "Mizuno-sensei" was too formal for family, which Makoto and I were for at least one night. Only Ami-san could call her "mother" without showing disrespect to somebody else. And "Saeko-neesan" was just silly. She finally agreed to let Makoto and me call her "Saeko-basan"... just before being called away to the hospital.

Luckily, she was back by dawn, so we were able to make our first shrine visit of the year together. And of course we visited the largest shrine nearby, the Hikawa shrine. The miko who was responsible for handing out the omikuji must have liked us, since all of the ladies received good fortunes; maybe she was subconsciously remembering the bonds between the Sailor Senshi, or maybe it was just luck, or maybe the resident kami guided our hands. Saeko-basan got daikichi, and she bought an okimono to display it with. (Makoto told me later that she thought the figurine looked a lot like Hino-san would look with a bob-cut hairdo.) Ami-san and Makoto got kichi. Everybody was amazed that I received a kikkyou imada wakarazu fortune; they'd never seen an "undetermined" fortune before, which especially puzzled Hino-san who had written most of the shrine's fortunes over the year. I remembered what Urawa-san told me and smiled, and told the ladies, "I have it on good authority that my future has always been difficult to foresee."

And then Ami-san decided that she, Makoto, and I were going to visit Niigata during the second half of our New Year's break.

So we went to Niigata the next morning, paid for out of Ami-san's New Year's money. I brought a camera and a notebook.

Standing in the JR station lobby, Makoto asked, "Well, we're here. Now what?"

"Isn't that obvious? We let Ryou-san find us."

"So why did I give you his home address, then?"

"We couldn't possibly just show up unannounced," Ami-san replied to me with the beginning of a blush.

I sighed. "So your plan is that we wait for him to come to us. Assuming he still has his precognitive powers, which he might not because he was never host to one of the Seven Great Youma this time around. And also assuming he remembers us."

Ami looked aghast. "Don't say that, Rob-san. He *has* to remember me."

"You vaguely remembered Usagi-san before you got all of your memories back, so it's possible. I'm just saying that it won't be easy." Then I had a thought. "But it might be easier for us to find each other if we go some place he likes."

So we went to the Rainbow Tower. I played middle-school tourist, taking photos and making notes. Yes, I promised to share them with Makoto and Ami-san. Yes, I took photos of each and both of my companions with the view of Niigata in the background, and Ami-san took photos of just me, then of Makoto and me. After an hour or so of that, I said, "Well, that's our 'what we did on our vacation' essay covered, if we're asked to write one. Shall we get some lunch?"

"We may as well," Ami-san sighed.

Then Makoto grabbed our arms. "Not yet. Look at the group who just got out of the elevator."

"I can't see them through the crowd," Ami-san complained.

But I could see them. Including Ryou-san. "You've got good eyes, my darling. Do we go meet him, or do we let him come to us?" And that question put a hopeful smile on Ami-san's face.

"Let him come to us," Makoto said. "We're obvious, and if he does remember us, he'll investigate." Then she let go of us. "But if he doesn't... Be strong, Ami-chan."

She nodded nervously as her smile disappeared.

It took him nearly five minutes to approach us. "Excuse me, but do I know you from ... some...where?" His voice trailed off when he finally saw Ami-san.

"Yes, I believe we've met," Makoto replied. "You are Urawa Ryou-san, are you not?"

"I am..." Then he pretty much ignored Makoto and me. "Your name... Are you named... Mizuno?"

It wasn't until Ami-san finally exhaled that I realized she had been holding her breath. "I am. Do you remember me?"

"I think so... We met in Tokyo, didn't we?"

Her smile was wider than I'd seen it since Usagi-san hit the reset button. "Yes, we did. Twice."

His smile didn't match hers, but that was only because he was nervous around us. "I wish I could remember you clearly, Mizuno-san. And I'm glad I followed my hunch and came here today."

I smiled and cleared my throat. "Did you know that the rare hornless white oni can grant a person's wish? But only once, ever."

He looked at me, and blinked. Twice. "That's the most ridiculous thing that I've ever wanted to believe."

"We were about to go for lunch. Perhaps you could recommend some place where the four of us could have some privacy, and I could grant that wish of yours."

So we went to an out-of-the-way restaurant and got some shoyu katsudon, the house specialty. And Ryou-san got his memories back. I've already described the process of convincing the other person to take their memories back twice; repeating myself again would just be boring. Besides, he didn't need much in the way of convincing.

Once we finished lunch, Ryou-san turned to Ami-san. "I'm sorry that I have to say this..."

"Do you have another girlfriend?" Ami-san asked anxiously.

"What? No! I'm sorry that I have to say that I can't go to Tokyo with you today. I have a hunch that I need to re-learn how to actually see the future before it's safe for me to join you. But I think that will only take the rest of the school year."

"So you'll transfer to Kuritsu Juban Chuugakkou for second year?" Ami-san asked hopefully. Makoto and I smiled at her display of emotion.

"If I can convince my parents, yes."

After we left the restaurant, I took a couple of photos of Ryou-san and Ami-san together.

Then we saw the sights downtown. After a few hours of sightseeing that Ryou-san and Ami-san enjoyed far more than Makoto and I did, he excused himself to head home for dinner. We had some time before our train was scheduled to leave.

So we went shopping. Niigata prefecture grows some of the best rice in Japan, and it's also the only place where Kanzuri paste is made, so Makoto and I went grocery shopping. And Ami-san picked up souvenirs for her mother, Minako-san, and Ichigo-san.

By the time we were back home, we were exhausted. But Ami-san was walking on cloud nine anyway.

\* \* \*

I spent half of the rest of break in front of my computer screens. Yes, "screens"; I believe I mentioned already that I'd picked up a 1990s-vintage computer complete with the brand-new CD-ROM drive technology during the week when I wasn't dating Makoto.

Which meant that I could transfer data from that computer to my laptop by burning it to disc, a half-gig at a time. Alas, I'd have to wait until 1993 for CAT4 to arrive and I could get a cable that I could plug in to the laptop's CAT6 connector. And hope that the laptop supported 10Base-T. If I had to wait for 100Base-T, then I had to wait for CAT5, which wouldn't show up until 1995.

I think I already mentioned how primitive this world is.

Anyway.

What I was doing in front of those screens was building dossiers on our upcoming enemies. From scratch. WikiMoon and the Sailor Moon Wikia didn't exist in 1991, and even if they did, I seriously doubted that they'd exist in-universe, which is where I was now.

So the cardians, droids, daimons, and lemures got short shrift. And without any episodes of *Stars*, I would have to go by memory for the phages. But they could wait. It's the people in charge of the monsters that needed the detailed dossiers.

I started with Ail and An, because I expected that they would be first up. But, by the end of vacation, I realized that we had to save those two, not defeat them. And there was also that bit about Usagi-san and Mamoru-san's relationship. It was bad enough that my meddling caused Naru-san and Umino-san to break up – and, yes, they still weren't a couple after the reset – I really didn't want to put the core relationship of the entire story at risk.

So I decided to refrain from interfering at all. Until I realized that my very presence counted as interference; Makoto didn't unlock her Supreme Thunder Dragon attack in canon until she tried to go on a date with Ail, and it was obvious that the only person she was planning on dating this time around was me. We'd have to cross... or burn... that bridge when we reached it.

Speaking of dates, I decided at that point that a date was exactly what I needed and put the dossier project on hold. And Makoto was in the mood for some pairs skating, too. So we got out our matching outfits and headed to the skating rink.

Skating with my girlfriend is a much more enjoyable way to spend an afternoon than writing a dossier is.

The dossiers went on the back burner once school started again. I didn't have time to work on them, do homework, and date Makoto.

Hey, I have my priorities.

I didn't even mind... much... when she took me shopping in Shibuya. She wanted something warmer to wear in the same style as her figure-skating outfit, so we visited Atelier Lucent again to see whether they had anything suitable.

The good news was that they did. The bad news was that the proprietor was at the shop that day... which I only discovered was bad news after Makoto was trying on an outfit in a fitting booth.

"Do you have any idea how much work you're making for me, Oni?" she whispered.

I blinked in puzzlement. "Have we met?"

"Not yet."

There was only one person in this reality who could say that both truthfully and meaningfully, which I realized when I noticed the green tint to her black hair. "Ah. It's an honour to finally meet you, Meioh-san. Aren't you supposed to be guarding the Door of Space-Time?"

"Think about the possibilities inherent in time-travel. I am, and I'm here, and I'm also in med school."

"Hang on; isn't time travel in this world set up so that duration in timeframes is synchronized?"

She groaned. "You know more than I thought you did. The me from now is in med school. I'm from two centuries uptime. The current Guardian of the Door of Space-Time is from the Silver Millennium. And we're all being given orders from the me from the early Crystal Millennium." After a beat, she continued, "And it's that knowledge of yours that's making it necessary for four of me to be here now. You're fracturing the timestream just by being here. Not that uptime-me cares."

"Meioh-san," – I couldn't call her Sailor Pluto where Makoto might hear me – "I have no choice whether I'm here. And maybe uptime-you knows something that you don't."

She snorted. "Well, obviously she does. She knows everything I know, and then some." Then Setsuna-san smiled. "But, to tell you the truth, I haven't had this much fun since I was in med school." Which surprised me, because I never thought of her as somebody who had fun.

We heard the fitting-stall curtain slide back. I turned to see Makoto in a delightfully lovely emerald-green outfit based around the "proper tights with a skirt" look that Studio CLAMP loves so much, with a winter jacket added. "How do I look?" she asked.

"I wish I had a camera with me. You look mahvelous!"

She smiled. "Oh, you and your pop-culture quotes."

"I'm only saying it because it's true. That fits you like it was made for you."

Meioh-san quietly kicked me in the shin. Yeah, I deserved that one for dropping a hint to Makoto right after Setsuna-san had complained to me. But the smile on Makoto's face was worth it.

Makoto didn't notice Meioh-san's reaction. "Maybe I should wear this home."

"If you do, I'll pay for the outfit."

"Ooh! You're too good to me, you know that."

"It isn't as if I do this every day, my dearest." I turned to Meioh-san. "How much do I owe you?"

While Makoto put the clothes that she had been wearing into a bag, Meioh-san spoke with me quietly. "Don't bother. If you pay me, I'll just put the money back into your account and you'll withdraw it again. Why waste both our time?"

And that was one mystery cleared up. "Ah. Thank you for taking care of me while I've been in this reality, Meioh-san. Or should I call you Setsuna-nee-chan?" I finished with a smile.

"Don't you dare!"

"You take all the fun out of being stranded in another reality, you know that."

She glanced at Makoto, who had almost finished packing her old outfit. "I think you might be mistaken there."

"You have a point. Speaking of Makoto, since you're willing to make clothes for us, why haven't you made a Kuritsu Juban Chuugakkou uniform for her?"

"Unfortunately, Atelier Lucent isn't on the school's approved list of uniform suppliers."

"And even Senshi powers can't defeat bureaucracy," I finished. Seeing that Makoto was finished with her clothes, I added in a more normal tone, "It's been a pleasure doing business with you."

And Makoto and I left the shop before she could look at the price tags on the other outfits.

It wasn't until we were passing the Hachiko Memorial Statue on our way back into the subway station that I realized how apropos the name "Atelier Lucent" was, with the double meaning of the word lucent. Yes, anything that a Senshi was responsible for would be as clear as a crystal and glowing like the moon, wouldn't it?

We went skating the next afternoon after school, and she wore her new outfit. That drew a few eyes... and our performance on the ice kept the eyes on her, so much so that the manager offered to play over the loudspeakers whatever we wanted to skate to, whenever we were in.

Makoto politely declined, saying that she didn't want that much attention being drawn to us, before I could suggest working out a pairs routine based on Evgenia Medvedeva's routine from 2017.

That was probably for the best. While I had no doubt that Makoto would make an excellent Sailor Moon (and for obvious reasons an even better Sailor Jupiter), I had my doubts about how good a Tuxedo Kamen I could be.

But it gave me an idea.

We were already planning to have dinner with Artemis and Ami-san that day, so I didn't need to wait very long to ask him about it. "Say, Artie, you know those toku shows that the theme parks put on for kids?"

"I've never actually seen one, but I know the formula."

"Do you think they'd be willing to do a show based on Sailor Moon?"

That question got spit-takes from Ami-san, Artemis, and Makoto.

"Aren't we supposed to be keeping the existence of the Senshi secret, darling?"

"Hey, it's as secret as it's ever going to get, with half of the team not even remembering that they are Senshi." That comment got me frowns from Artemis and Ami-san. "But if there's a Sailor Moon toku show, then anybody who sees any of the three of us in action will think it's just another toku performance."

"Until somebody gets caught in the crossfire," Artemis pointed out.

"Then we take steps to make sure nobody gets caught in the crossfire," I countered. "It's usually worked before."

"Usually isn't always," Ami-san riposted. "Sato Kichirou-san learned that the hard way."

I glared at her. "Miss, you fight dirty."

"No, I'm pointing out the consequences if you're wrong."

Yeah, human lives were pretty high stakes in the game that I was proposing that we play with our powered identities.



I took a sip of tea to give myself a moment to think. But before I could come up with a response, Makoto said, "I think it's a good idea, now that Robu has explained it. If we can't stay hidden, we can at least practice misdirection."

"And, while Mercury might be able to keep her identity secret," I nodded toward Ami-san as I said that, "there's no way that the two tallest students at Kuritsu Juban Chuugakkou can stay hidden," I added. "Also, it would be a revenue stream for us if we set up the shows and provided the plots."

Artemis thought for a moment, then nodded. "Who gets the money?"

"Pour it into the Crown Arcade," I suggested. "At least until the girls need cash," I added, remembering where Makoto was getting her cash from.

"You're assuming that the others are going to remember being Senshi," Artemis said flatly.

I sighed. "I hate to tell you this, buddy, but... we're only 46 episodes into a 200-episode series, plus specials. Enjoy this break while you can."

Another Friday, another meeting of the Conversational English club.

"Hi, Rob-san! Hi, Ami-san! Presents for you!" Minako-san handed each of us a shiisaa key chain.

"It's pretty obvious where you went over the break," I grinned while looking at Okinawa's leonine guardian beast.

"Didn't you go anywhere?" she asked.

"We visited Niigata," Ami-san replied as she gave Minako-san a Na-chan key ring. "Here's the fireworks fairy from Nagaoka, for you."

"You went to Niigata? The port city?"

"That's right," I said.

"You went to Niigata together?"

"It was the best vacation I've ever had in my life," Ami-san answered, with a smile on her face.

"Excuse me a moment," Minako-san said while heading for the classroom door, an odd look on her face.

It wasn't until she closed the door behind her that we realized what we'd said and how we'd said it. "Oh, dear," Ami-san commented.

"Yeah," I agreed. "If she took what we said the wrong way, and I think she did ..."

"... then she just left to go find Mako-chan ..."

"... to tell her that I'm cheating on her with you."

"But why would she care?" Ami-san asked.

"She's the Senshi of the Planet of Love, even if she doesn't remember it. Of course she'd care."

We just sat there in silence until the classroom door opened again. "Why didn't you tell me you went with Mako-chan?"

"You didn't give us time to," I replied.

"Oh, right." After a moment, Minako-san asked, "So, why'd you go to Niigata, of all places?"

"We went to share some old memories with a friend we made last year," Ami said with a straight face. Never mind that I was the one who did the memory-sharing.

Minako-san grinned. "Last year? During the Missing Time?"

I realized that I had the perfect answer to her interest in conspiracy theories about last year. "Yes, Minako-san," I replied before Ami-san could, "during the Missing Time. You see, Ami-san, Makoto and I are part of a secret team that defended the entire Earth from being conquered during the Missing Time, and the existence of the Missing Time is a side-effect of our success."

She looked at me flatly. "Pull the other one, it has bells on."

I raised both hands in an "I surrender" gesture. "Hey, if you don't want to believe me, that's your prerogative."

"The part about a secret team defending Earth was good; I've heard a few theories that said exactly that. But putting yourself on that team is just silly. We're middle-school students, not soldiers, Rob-san."

"I can't argue with you there. We are junior-high-school students, and I've never been a soldier."

Just then, there was a knock at the door, and Minako-san's teammate poked her head in. "I'm sorry to interrupt..." she started, in Japanese.

"I thought this wasn't going to happen again," I said to Minako-san.

"I'm sorry! I forgot to tell you!" And she headed off to another volleyball team meeting.

After the door closed behind Minako-san, Ami-san looked at me in wonder. "You told her the exact truth and she didn't believe it!"

"It's all in how and when you say it, Ami-san," I replied with a smile.

\* \* \*

Makoto and I went shopping after school. Nothing special, just groceries, although she didn't pick up any tea.

"I thought you were running low on tea, my dearest."

"I was, darling, but there's a new shop that just opened up in the shopping arcade. I got some wonderful chamomile tea there while you were spending the afternoon with my best friend."

We both laughed over Minako's misunderstanding of the situation. "Speaking of Ami-san, she said she could come over after dinner." She was back to helping both of us with our studies. "Do you mind being host this time? I have books all over my desk right now."

"You need to keep your home clean, Robu; you never know when somebody might visit. I suppose I have no choice but to chaperone the two of you." She grinned when she said that.

"You're sure she isn't chaperoning us?" I asked with a smile.

Since Makoto was hosting, I made dinner. No, not curry; [salmon in panko](#) with a side of [grilled onigiri with miso](#) (which I made enough of for lunch the next day as well). We ate together, and were just finishing washing the dishes when Ami-san arrived. Makoto made a pot of her new chamomile tea for us to enjoy while we studied.

But we couldn't keep our minds on studying. Sorry, that isn't quite right; Ami-san kept her mind on studying, going through the entirety of what was left in her textbooks before the study session was over. Makoto, on the other hand, left her books on the table and went back to cleaning and then polishing the dishes, insisting that she couldn't tolerate hard-water spots on the ceramics. And I found myself making notes about what I remembered about the Ayakashi Sisters and Rubeus instead of what I was learning about the Meiji Restoration.

We finally fell asleep in a heap, completely out of energy.

Which should have been a warning sign, but none of us were in the right frame of mind to notice. Besides, the Dark Kingdom was gone and the Doom Tree hadn't arrived yet; who would be stealing our energy? And chamomile tea was known for putting people to sleep, too.

The pattern repeated the next day. We came home from school after the half-day, Ami-san joined us, we had lunch that included a pot of chamomile tea, and we focused on our current obsessions: Ami-san making it three chapters into each of the second-year textbooks, Makoto cleaning her cookware so thoroughly that even the cast iron threatened to gleam, and me making notes from what I remembered of our upcoming enemies, completing the notes on the Black Moon Clan and starting on the Death Busters. And then all of us collapsing from exhaustion.

And it happened again on Sunday morning, starting with breakfast with chamomile tea. "Doesn't that tire you out?" I asked.

"It's all I have right now, sorry."

So I went without. Ami-san – who hadn't gone home Saturday night – and Makoto had some, though. And I saw them start their manic activity. This was definitely wrong.

I spent a few minutes just thinking, and came to the conclusion that the chamomile tea had something to do with the strange behaviour. "Makoto, my dearest, where did you get the tea from?"

"A new store." She didn't look up from scrubbing the tiles in the kitchen area. I knew she liked things clean, but, considering she had company, this had passed Flanderized Felix Unger levels of cleanliness.

"Does this store have a name?"

"Don't remember."

"Where's the receipt?"

"In the paper trash."

Luckily for me, it was at the top of the paper trash; none of us had read a newspaper since Friday. So I didn't make a mess in Makoto's apartment. She probably would have killed me if I had – and not figuratively. The store's name was "Pri-Pri", which rang a bell for some reason.

And I was just suspicious enough of what was going on to equate "rang a bell" with "enemy alarm".

I walked over to the table in the middle of the room, and asked, "Ami-san, could you scan the teapot for magic, please?"

Without looking up from her textbooks, she handed the Mercury Computer to me. "Busy. Do it yourself."

I'd *never* heard Ami-san speak that tersely, either before or after the reset.

Accepting the Mercury Computer from her, I flipped it open, squinted at the screen, and hunted for the scan function. Luckily, she had set the interface to Japanese rather than whatever language they spoke in the Silver Millennium, so I didn't need to hunt for very long.

Sure enough, there was "dark energy" infused throughout the tea. But not a match for the Dark Kingdom, which relieved me; it would have been heartbreaking to think Usagi-san and the others had gone through what they did only to miss somebody somewhere. Instead, it was listed as being "corrupted [Xianren Cave](#) energy", which threw me for a

loop; I had no idea what Xianren Cave referred to. (I'd learn later, but not until... oh, but I'm getting ahead of myself. Back to the Pri-Pri tea.)

I picked up the teapot and carried it to the sink. That got both ladies' attention.

"No! We need that tea!" Makoto insisted.

"No, you don't," I said. "It's been infused with dark energy."

"It can't have been! I would have noticed!" Ami-san claimed.

"None of us noticed until today!" And I tried to pour the tea down the drain.

The liquid refused to pour more than a half-foot down, forming a bubble of liquid hovering above the sink.

I put the teapot down and stepped away from the sink, raising a forcefield between it and me.

And that finally convinced Makoto and Ami-san that something was wrong. They stood up and stood at either side of me. "Show yourself!" Makoto cried.

Sure enough, a spirit arose from the tea. "Ho-ho! I am Touhi-chan! After ten thousand years of being suppressed by the guardians of the Silver Millennium, I have finally gathered enough energy to re-form myself! And now I will drain your energy and use it to establish a toehold in this barbarian land! Today, this lodging; tomorrow, the settlement!"

I blinked in surprise. I remembered that name. I didn't expect an analogue of a manga side-story villain to be behind this. "Wait, you said that you were suppressed by the guardians of the Silver Millennium? Well, back home in Canada, we have a saying: Sucks to be you."

"Jupiter Power, Make-Up!"

"Mercury Power, Make-Up!"

"Noooo! Not again! Chamomile Petal Swarm!"

The three of us had a mass of flower petals dumped directly on our heads, causing Mercury and me to lose concentration and me to drop my forcefield. I suspect that the attack would have hurt if Touhi-chan was at full strength... but Makoto wasn't going to give her the chance to get any stronger.

"Jupiter... Coconut... Cyclone!" And my dearest spun in place as if she was skating, winds laced with ball lightning the size of coconuts surrounding her and Touhi-chan's flower petals flying everywhere. When she stopped, she shot the lightning straight at Touhi-chan.

"Aargh!" And Touhi-chan collapsed, shrinking down to a small pottery figure that I immediately wrapped in a forcefield. What do you know; a manga villain gets defeated by a manga attack. And that made me wonder how many other attacks the Senshi were capable of using.

Mercury took her computer back from me and scanned the figure, while Jupiter picked flower petals out of Mercury's hair and I combed petals out of my own hair. She finally announced, "She's quiesced."

Jupiter looked puzzled, so I assume she didn't know the word, either.

"She's in hibernation, or a coma," Ami-san explained as she transformed back to her normal form.

And that embarrassed me. "I'm sorry!" I hadn't done anything, but I could have at least closed my eyes. And seeing a very pretty girl other than Makoto change clothes was definitely something I needed to apologize for, to both girls.

Makoto transformed back to usual, making sure I could see her, then said, "Not your fault, darling." I wondered whether Makoto was jealous of Ami-san, or was she maybe staking her claim to me?

Then I noticed that I was more awake than I had been since Friday evening. "I think I just got back all the energy that Touhi-chan drained from me."

"Me, too," Makoto said with a nod.

"And I, as well," added Ami-san.

I thought for a quick moment. "There's no way that I can just sit still and study today. Anybody want to go skating?"

"I have to clean up first..." Makoto started, before she realized just how much cleaning she'd been doing over the weekend. "No, that can wait."

An hour later, we were on the ice. I had a beautiful girl on each arm, and every eye in the arena was on the three of us. And, no, Ami-san didn't have a book with her.

It wasn't until I was getting ready for the next day's classes that I remembered Ami-san was the one who'd suggested I join the Senshi on their trip to the onsen during the Missing Time. And now she'd shown me one of her transformations. Did she not care whether I saw her naked?

At the time, I expected that I'd probably never know. I wasn't about to ask her.

She has a boyfriend, after all; Ryou-san might care. And I have a girlfriend; Makoto certainly looked to me like she cared.

Even if Ami-san wasn't interested in dating me – which I hoped was the case – and was just a naturist or just naive, I really didn't want Makoto to become jealous of Ami-san.  
And I hoped I was completely misreading the situation.

Nevertheless, I spent less time alone and more time with just Makoto, so that she would know that she was the girl that I wanted to spend time with. Which meant that the enemy dossiers went even farther onto the back burner than they had been.

Weekdays and Saturday mornings were for school, homework, and housework, and Friday afternoons were for the Conversational English club. She and I finished off our Saturday homework as quickly as we could so that we could go on dates. Every Saturday afternoon and every Sunday.

Why had we not been going on dates every Saturday afternoon since we got back together? It wasn't as if we had enemies to fight, Touhi-chan notwithstanding.

Two weeks later, we realized why; some of my housework was piling up, and Makoto was losing sleep keeping on top of her housework. While the idea of wearing an outfit once and throwing it away had a certain appeal, I doubted that Atelier Lucent would make that many clothes for us, so we had to actually do our laundry on occasion. So we cut back on the dating; Saturdays went back to being chore days, while, to misquote the Bangles, Sundays were our fun days.

And on the third Sunday in January, I finally convinced Makoto that it was okay to get a little bit messy while eating, when we discovered the Tony Roma's in Roppongi. I hadn't had Tony Roma's baby back ribs since the last time I visited Miami, back home, so I insisted. It took the intervention of our waitress to assure her that, yes, she was supposed to make a mess, and, yes, they had enough napkins for her to clean up after eating.

I haven't been able to convince her to go back since then, though.

I don't usually mention what we did weekdays, but Wednesday that week – January 22 – was special. It was Ichigo-san's birthday, and she invited us to her place for dinner after classes.

Her mother was a delightful woman, happy to make sure that we were all comfortable in her home. We didn't get to meet her father or either of her brothers, since they were on a months-long fishing trip. And that made me wonder why the Aoyama family was living in Tokyo instead of Wakkanai, until Ichigo-san explained that they were in the capital for her education.

Knowing that Urawa-san intended to use the same reason to transfer to Kuritsu Juban Chuugakkou, I understood completely.

We gave the birthday girl gifts, including a scarf from Atelier Lucent from me, and her mother fed us to the brim with [Jingisukan](#). I hadn't had lamb since I arrived in this reality, and Minako-san hadn't had lamb since returning from the UK. We both quite enjoyed the Hokkaido take on how to serve it. Makoto thought that it was greasy, although that didn't stop her from matching the rest of us slice for slice.

A good time was had by all, and we promised to do it again the next year.

And then January made way for February, and the fun times in the early part of the month – including Makoto and me both wearing masks and having soybeans thrown at us by our classmates on Setsubun, since it was a Monday – made way for studying for final exams after National Foundation Day on the 11th. We all got together for study sessions, which we alternated between everybody's homes. Except for Minako-san's house, after the Wednesday that we tried to study there. Her mother got upset that she'd brought a boy home to what she expected would be a girls-only session, then she got upset about how tall Makoto was and how she was probably a sukeban what with wearing a skirt that long, then she got upset and raised her voice about Ichigo-san being from Hokkaido. Then we apologized that our presence was disrupting the harmony of the house, left, and re-met at Makoto's apartment.

"When you said your mother was a harridan, I thought you were exaggerating," Ichigo-san commented as we settled in around Makoto's table and opened our textbooks.

"I'm so sorry about what she said about all of you," Minako-san replied while bowing. "If I had remembered her prejudices, I would have never have suggested getting together there."

"Raise your head, Mina-chan, you're not at fault here," Makoto replied. "Although I don't understand what she has against people from Hokkaido."

I raised an eyebrow. "You hadn't noticed?"

"Noticed what?"

Ichigo-san answered before I could. "I don't know how Robu-san noticed."

"What I noticed the day I met you was your depressed nose root and projecting cheekbones. But it didn't and still doesn't matter to me."

She smiled at my answer. "Thank you, Robu-san. And you're right. I'm not just from Hokkaido, I have Ainu ancestry." She looked around. "If that makes a difference to anybody here, I can leave."

Makoto put her hand on Ichigo-san's shoulder before she could stand up. "I'm dating a foreigner. Why would I care who your great-grandparents were? You'll always be welcome in my home, Ichigo-san."

"I'm surprised that you actually know your ancestry," Ami-san said. "If you know anything about Ainu history, I'd like to learn it from you instead of from a book." And by this time we all knew how fond Ami-san was of books.

Minako-san smiled. "I spent years in London with kids my age with lots of different skin colours. Like I'd notice or care who has what blood in them. Especially if it pisses off my mother."

Not the greatest reason to be accepting of other people, Minako-san, but I've heard worse. "And I already said that it doesn't matter to me. Looks like you can't get rid of us, Ichigo-san," I said with a smile.

And we all started studying, putting our racial differences behind us.

I hoped that Ryou-san, Usagi-san, Naru-san, and Hino-san would be as accepting of Ichigo-san's ancestry as my friends here were. Assuming it was even a concern, and not something that only Ichigo-san was worried about.

After a few hours, Makoto looked up. "I wasn't expecting to be hosting today, so I don't have enough food for everybody. I'm sorry."

That wasn't like Makoto. Then I remembered that this particular Wednesday was February 12. "Oh, I wouldn't want to put you to any trouble, my dearest. I'll see you all tomorrow."

She smiled at me; I could tell that she knew why I was leaving early. "Thanks, darling. See you tomorrow."

I collected my books and headed off, stopping at my own place just long enough to drop off my schoolwork. Then I headed out for dinner... well, a coffee, a single-serve basket of cheese-flavoured chicken bites, and a box of Senior Mints (and somebody was writing around trademarks again)... at the Lawson at Azabu-Juban station. I resolved to eat better the next day.

When I got back home, I could hear the girls talking and laughing in Makoto's apartment, but they were in her kitchen, not her front room. I pretended that I didn't know what they were doing and settled in to watch my favourite Studio Ghibli movie on my laptop... and made plans to see it in the theatre when it debuted on July 18. Without Makoto, because I wouldn't torture her by forcing her to watch something she hated.

Nothing important happened on Thursday the 13th. At least, not to me or anybody I knew.

And then it was Friday. February 14. And lunch went about the way I expected, except that Minako-san joined us. The Revealing Of The Lunches revealed a lot of chocolate for some strange reason.

"It's obligation chocolate; you can have it if you want," Minako-san said as she passed what looked like a chocolate bar over to me.

"This is also obligation chocolate," Ami-san said as she handed me a chocolate cupcake.

"Giri-choco here, too," said Ichigo-san as she handed me a small bag of chocolate drops.

I looked at Makoto and raised one eyebrow.

"Nope. Mine's 100 per cent honmei-choco!" She smiled as she offered me a chocolate heart the size of a bento box, with two smaller hearts beside it. "Will you accept it?"

"Of course I accept your feelings, Makoto," I said with a smile as I took the box from her and immediately ate one of the smaller chocolates, before eating any of the lunch I had brought. Then I turned to the others. "And I happily accept your obligatory gifts, ladies." These I didn't unwrap during lunch time.

And then we studied every weeknight... which paid off during final exams during the first half of March.

Our last exam was on March 14, so it was with a sense of relief that we got together for lunch that day. That's also when I gave the ladies their White Day presents: Queen's *Greatest Hits II* for Minako-san, Terry Pratchett's *Witches Abroad* for Ami-san (in English since we were both in the Conversational English club, and I insisted to her that the best fiction had things to teach people), a set of blank notebooks to start off the next school year for Ichigo-san, and... well, silver counts as white, right? Makoto certainly didn't object to the bracelet.

And we all went for a relaxing group skate that afternoon. Ichigo-san was able to keep up with Ami-san, Minako-san was able to keep her balance, and as usual everybody watched the "Emerald Pair" having fun. I'd given up on us getting a different name.

And then the grades were posted.

Makoto and I showed some improvement again, placing in the low-700s... again on purpose. Improvement was good, but sudden improvement to Ami-san's level was impossible to explain, or maintain once we passed the point where we were repeating what we'd learned during the Missing Time. Ami-san improved again, too, as hard as that might be to believe; with Makoto's help and tutoring in both Home Ec. and P.E, she got 95 in Home Ec. and her aggregate grade was 870. Once again, she placed at the top of the entire school... and we helped her start to come to terms with the fact that she was always going to stand out that way.

Ichigo-san and Minako-san placed in the mid-600s. So did Naru-san, we noticed.

Usagi-san... well, she was improving, with a total of 531. She was so happy that she wasn't being held back a year.

We had to figure out some way to get Usagi-san into our homework circle again. And Minako-san, too, for that matter.

Needless to say, Makoto's grandfather was waiting for her at her apartment. He was as terse and grumpy as the last time he stopped by. After he gave Makoto permission to continue attending classes at Kuritsu Juban Chuugakkou and told her not to bother visiting over the school break, he asked who I was; Makoto introduced me as a schoolmate. Seeing me unlock the door to my own apartment appeared to satisfy his curiosity as to how she knew me. He told her that he'd see her in August, then left with barely an acknowledgement of my existence.

I didn't ask about August. She was in a bad enough mood as it was.

There was a message waiting on my phone: Ami-san said that her mother wanted to see me. I wondered why. The message continued with Ami-san saying to bring my report card, and I stopped wondering. After I got changed into comfortable clothes, I opened my door to see Makoto about to knock. "Did Ami-san call you, too?"

"She did," I nodded. "And she told me to bring my report card."

"I guess we'd better not keep her mother waiting, then." Makoto had reached the same conclusion that I had.

Sure enough, Ami-san's mother expected us to present our report cards to her as if she was our mother. Her decision at New Year's wasn't just to accept us into her home; it was to accept us into her family.

So we had no choice as to what to call her from now on.

Saeko-basan was much kinder than Makoto's grandfather was, actually giving us both compliments where we were doing well and constructive criticism where we could do better, suggesting some additional books to help Makoto with math and both of us with Japanese history and Japanese literature. Then she asked us to stay for dinner... just before being called to the hospital. She apologized to all three of us as she left, and we made plans to have dinner together the next evening.

Then the three of us went out for dinner – at the Hard Rock Cafe in Roppongi, because Makoto refused to eat at Tony Roma's again. Neither of my friends had been to a Hard Rock Cafe before and I'd never been to a Japanese HRC, and we hadn't made reservations... but there was a table waiting for us anyway.

And Urawa Ryou-san was sitting at it.

Needless to say, Ami-san was ecstatic.

It wasn't until two days later that we could get together at Makoto's apartment. Ami-san didn't want to introduce Ryou-san to her mother just yet, for obvious reasons.

By "we", I mean Makoto, Ami-san, and Artemis... who immediately went quiet when Ryou-san showed up.

"Hello, everyone, Thank you for accepting me into your group here in Tokyo. Please take care of me," he said as he offered us small parcels. "These are mere tokens of my appreciation of your welcome." He handed a package to each of us, and then offered one to Artemis. "And that includes you, Mau-san," he finished.

Artie looked straight at me. "Who told him?"

"I did," replied Ami-san, with all of Sailor Mercury's self-confidence in her voice.

"And I gave him back his memories," I added as Artemis was turning to glare at Ami-san.

Artie facepalmed... er, facepawed. "How many more sets of memories do you have in your head?"

"Nobody else, honest! All three of the brainprints I took during the Missing Time are now in their rightful owners' heads."

After that bit of awkwardness with Artie's reaction to the situation, we ended up enjoying ourselves while telling stories about what we'd been doing since New Year's. It didn't take much convincing on Ryou's part to be allowed to live in Tokyo, not after he pointed out to his parents that he'd get a better education in the capital than he would in a port city. And we all had a good laugh about Ami-san, Makoto, and me getting flowers in our hair when Touhi-chan attacked.

Ryou-san wasn't in Tokyo for good, though; he still had to settle his affairs in Niigata. He promised to return on the 26th, and asked Ami-san to help him with the paperwork to move in to an apartment in a particular building close to

where she lived. He also asked me to help him with the enrolment paperwork for Kuritsu Juban Chuugakkou, which I happily agreed to.

Spring vacation continued, including a completely delightful day that Makoto and I spent at Jindai Botanical Garden in Choufu. She spent most of the day admiring the roses, while I spent a large part of the day admiring her admiring the roses (and, when nobody could see, using my smartphone to take photos of her admiring the roses – I needed a proper image of my dearest for my laptop's screen). Even though we got our travel time down to an hour each way because we caught the express to Choufu at Shinjuku, this was our "special day away" for our end-of-school-year vacation. And the people at the gift shop were kind enough to deliver Makoto's purchases so that we didn't need to carry a couple of potted plants back to Minato, which let us pay our respects at the Jindaiji Temple, just south of the botanical gardens. And, since Ichigo-san had called us a couple of oni during the Missing Time, of course we needed to stop at [Kitaro Chaya](#) while we were in the neighbourhood.

Finally the day that we'd been waiting for arrived: March 26. It turned out that we'd been waiting for that day in more ways than one.

Makoto, Ami-san, and I all helped Ryou-san unpack and settle in to his new apartment, the girls taking notes on what he didn't have but really needed to get, and me helping him move a few pieces of furniture to where he preferred them to be. Then we took him on a quick tour of all the places he needed to know where to find: the closest convenience store, the closest supermarket, and the closest laundromat.

Then we went out for dinner at the beef-bowl place where he and I had first met. It was Ami-san's first visit to that particular restaurant. She said that she wasn't a big fan, since she couldn't eat and read at the same time, but she looked like she enjoyed the food. Or maybe she enjoyed the company.

Ryou-san asked whether we could walk back to his place. Nobody objected.

"It's a pleasant night," I said. "It's warming up, there aren't too many clouds in the sky, and ..." I slipped my arm around Makoto's waist. "... we have excellent company."

"The best company of all," Ami-san agreed while taking Ryou-san's hand in her own.

"Ami-san, would you be kind enough to show me the Mercury Computer?"

I thought that was an odd request for Ryou-san to make just then, momentarily forgetting that he's a precog, but she just smiled. "Of course! Here it is," she said as she let go of his hand and flipped the computer open.

Then the sky lit up. We all looked up to see a meteor. A big one, that wasn't breaking apart as it fell.

"Ami! Track it!"

"I already am!" she answered Ryou-san.

Makoto looked puzzled. "What's going on?"

All I said was, "Plot."

"Aw... And I was enjoying getting to spend time with you without worrying about being called to fight a monster."

"I have the meteorite impact site projected," Ami-san announced.

Ryou-san and I immediately turned our backs on our girlfriends.

"Mercury Power, Make-Up!"

"Jupiter Power, Make-Up!"

Then we were both lifted into bridal carries and the Senshi started roof-hopping.

But we were too late. By the time we reached the impact crater – which was only a couple-dozen meters across, far too small for the meteor we saw to have left behind – the impactor had already left. Mercury took some scans of the crater, then we left when we heard sirens.

It was too late in the evening to contact Artemis or Luna; Minako-san and Usagi-san were no doubt monopolizing their attention. We'd have to fill them in later.

"Later" turned out to be the next evening. Ami-san and Ryou-san were on a date, and Makoto was busy with spring cleaning, so it was up to me to touch base with the Mau.

I really didn't want to visit the Aino residence again.

So I headed over to the Tsukino residence... only to notice Sailor Moon standing on the rooftop.

I was too late. Ail and An had already played their first cardian, Luna had given Usagi-san her memories back in order to save Naru-san and her mother, and we were almost at the end of the first episode of *Sailor Moon R*. But that meant it was time to let Luna know that I'd derailed canon months ago, assuming Artemis hadn't already told her... and to let Bunny-chan know that she wasn't alone in her fight.

I went invisible so as to not draw the attention of anybody who might be passing by, and used the forcefield-pillar trick that I'd used at the Star Light Tower to make my way to the Tsukino family's rooftop.

Usagi-san had a determined look on her face. "I can't ask the others to fight again. I will protect everyone on my own."

No, Princess. You couldn't and you didn't in canon, and I won't let you try this time around. You need allies. And, frankly, so do Ami-san, Makoto and I. "I can't let you do that, Bunny-chan. It's too big a job for one person."

She turned in surprise. "Who's there?"

I let my invisibility drop. "Have you forgotten your favourite Oni already?"

Sailor Moon's face showed a mix of surprise and relief. "Robu-san!" Then she held my hands in hers. Just for a quick moment that was only skinship (if skinship can be called "only"); we both knew that her heart still belonged to Mamoru. I like getting a hug from Makoto better.

It was a shame to have to make Usagi-san sad again. "I'm sorry, but you need to know. Makoto and Ami-san remember, too. And so does Urawa Ryou-san."

Usagi didn't say anything for a moment, but her expression changed like flowing water, never the same for three seconds in a row. The poor girl was really conflicted about my news.

Finally, Luna asked me, "How long have they known?"

"I gave Makoto her memories back less than a week after Usagi-san hit the reset button. Ami-san got her memories back about a month later, and Ryou-san got his back over the New Year's break."

Usagi looked at me with a mix of dread and hope. "And Rei and Minako? And Naru? And Artemis? And... Mamo-chan?"

"Artie-san never lost his memories. The others don't remember, as far as I know, and I can't give them back their memories," I finished while shaking my head slowly.

Luna added, "But I can give Rei, Minako, and Naru-san their memories back if you really want me to."

"I'd appreciate that, thanks," I replied before Usagi-san could... but she nodded in agreement.

Then she asked the important question again. "And Mamoru?"

Before Luna could reply, I said, "If you want him to remember your love, *you* need to bring him back." Which wasn't a lie; it was her actions that finally got Mamoru to remember.

"But... I don't know how."

I smiled. "You'll figure it out."

She pouted and complained, "Now I remember why we call you Oni."

After a moment with nobody saying anything, I quietly asked, "Are you okay with being Sailor Moon again. Usagi-san?"

She took a moment to think. "If I'm not Sailor Moon, who is? I know now that Sailor Jupiter and Sailor Mercury and you can be heroes so I don't have to... Mako-chan and Ami-chan can still become Jupiter and Mercury, right?" I nodded in confirmation. "But... nobody else can be Sailor Moon."

She had such a wistful look on her face when she said that. The poor girl.

"Bai-bai, ordinary Usagi," she almost-whispered in sadness.

"Hello, Princess Serenity," I replied.

It didn't cheer her up.

Makoto, Ami-san, Ryou-san, Usagi-san, Luna, Artemis, and I met at my apartment a few days later.

Then we immediately headed to Makoto's apartment next door, which was larger than mine.

"So, darling, what do you know about what's going on?"

"I know enough to not answer that, my dearest."

Ami-san asked, "Why?"

"Because it's necessary," Ryou-san replied. "If Chiba-san and Tsukino-san are going to get back together, neither Robu-san nor I can interfere."

"Yeah," I agreed. "I've already broken up one couple by meddling. I don't dare ruin your relationship, Bunny-chan."

"I don't want to lose Mamo-chan!!!"

"Which means everything you two know is off-limits," Luna complained.

"It can't be helped," Artemis replied.

"You can't tell us anything?" Ami-san asked. "Not even about the youma they're using?"

Revealing a name shouldn't hurt. "They aren't youma. They're cardians."

"Like on *Star Trek*?" Ryou-san asked.



"What?" Then I realized what he was thinking, and remembered that that particular race had appeared on *NextGen* a year ago. "Cardians, not Cardassians. Don't expect them to –"

"TMI, Robu-san," Ryou-san warned before I could finish my sentence.

"Sorry, I'll stop now."

"Good!" Usagi-san said. "Don't change what you know, especially if that would drive Mamo-chan and me apart!"

I bowed deeply. "I humbly apologize for my lapse, Your Highness." That got a giggle out of her.

Makoto sighed. "And here I was hoping to use some asymmetric plot escalation and finish things off quickly, so Robu and I could get back to dating."

"Not every problem can be solved by force, Mako-chan."

"That only shows you aren't using enough force, Ami-san."

"Force and diplomacy both have their place," Luna insisted.

"And so does love," Usagi-san added.

I simply nodded in agreement with everyone.

Another week, and then it was time to start school again.

Usagi-san and Naru-san were in Class 1, along with Umino-san and that new student Ginga Natsumi-san. Ryou-san was in Class 3 with Minako-san. Another new student, Ginga Seijuurou, was in Class 4, and yes, he was Natsumi-san's brother. Ami-san and I were in Class 5 again, and Makoto and Ichigo-san were still in Class 6.

And I had to pretend I didn't know who the Ginga siblings were. But then, so did Ryou-san.

He and I had trouble dodging the crowd of girls gathered around Seijuurou-san at lunch time. "Maybe I should have learned to play the flute," Ryou-san muttered.

"Don't draw attention to the flute," I warned quietly. While I was surprised that nobody in canon had ever connected the flute with the activation of the cardians, especially considering Ail... sorry, Seijuurou-san... only knew one tune, I was pretty sure that any of the Senshi who overheard either of us mention the flute would think it was a clue. Which, you know, it totally would be if we mentioned it.

"Ah, right. Sorry, Robu-san."

We finally got past the crowd and into the school's courtyard, where everybody else was already waiting for us to take part in the first Revealing Of The Lunches of the new school year. Usagi-san, who was there at my invitation, had dragged Naru-san along, so we were finally back to our pre-reboot group plus Ryou-san.

Minako-san showed us a flyer, which we passed around while we ate. "I think I'm going to give this a try! It isn't every day that somebody our age gets a chance to try out for a TV show! Especially not with somebody as famous as Shiratori Mikan-san in the cast!"

She seemed to be excited for some reason.

"I wouldn't mind trying out for a role, too," Naru-san commented.

"I wish I could, but they're only looking for girls," Ryou-san sighed.

"I have class duty today," Ami-san said.

"What, and miss your chance to be on a TV show?" I asked. "I'll trade with you. Go have fun with the others."

So we did. And she did. And Luna went along for the fun... and to restore the memories of Minako-san, Hino-san, and Naru-san.

I, on the other hand, completed the class log and ensured the classroom was tidy. Then I had a nice, long chat with Ryou-san about how things had already diverged from canon. Ail and An weren't mid-term transfer students, for one thing, and Ryou-san was here, too. He assured me that the changes weren't enough to drive a wedge into Sailor Moon and Tuxedo Kamen's relationship, but we still needed to be careful not to change very much else and drive that wedge ourselves.

Friday finally arrived, too soon for my comfort. What left me uncomfortable was the new school year's first session of the Conversational English club.

Because it started with Minako-san glaring at me for a half-minute before saying anything.

"I cannot believe you!" she finally whispered angrily.

"What? Did I lie to you?"

She was about to answer immediately, but caught herself and thought for a moment. "No, you didn't. I think. But, really, 'ask your pet cat?'"

"And have you asked your pet cat?"

"Yes..." she admitted grudgingly.

"And did he answer?"

"After I told him that Luna zapped me."

"Then what's the problem?"

"I can't believe I thought you were joking! And you three really were part of a secret team that defended the entire Earth from being conquered during the Missing Time, too."

"You were part of the same team," Ami-san replied.

"And that's what makes it all the more frustrating. You never once lied to me about the Missing Time, did you?"

"Never," we replied in unison.

"Does anybody else know? I'm still going through my memories."

"Ichigo-san doesn't know," Ami-san answered. "The rest of the lunch club is in on it. And so is Rei-san."

"Of course Rei-san knows; she was there with Naru-san and me when Luna zapped us. So why doesn't Ichigo-san know?"

Neither of us had an answer for that.

Tuesday arrived in its due course. Yes, Tuesday, and I know I haven't been mentioning mid-week activities very often. But this particular Tuesday was special.

Ami-san called me after school. "Rob-san, there's been an accident."

My blood ran cold. "What happened?"

"Usagi-san and Mako-chan met me after juku, and a cardian showed up."

Just from that much, I had a pretty good idea of what had happened, but I had to ask. "Who's hurt?"

"A friend of Mako-chan. She called him Shinozaki-san."

Yeah. The start of episode 49 happened. Now to ask something I didn't know the answer to. "Where did they take him?"

"We're at Juban Daini General Hospital."

"I'm on my way."

"Thank you, Rob-san." And she hung up... presumably to call the others.

It didn't take me long to get there, even though I wasn't moving at my top speed. Yes, I was invisible for most of the trip (there was no point to blowing my cover over something that I couldn't change), so I had to be very careful that I didn't hit anybody and no drivers hit me.

I went visible in a quiet alleyway near the hospital, and finished the trip at human-normal speed. Ami-san met me in the lobby and helped me cut through the paperwork to get in to see Shinozaki-san. Makoto was in the bed next to his, with a tube in her arm. "Hi, Robu," she said quietly.

"Hi, Makoto," I said back. "Ami-san said that Shinozaki-san was hurt. What are you doing in a hospital bed?"

"Helping keep him alive," she answered while looking at the needle in her arm and the IV tube attached to it.

"How do you know Shinozaki-san?"

I took a quick look around the room to make sure we were alone. "Only from your memories. He's a lucky guy to have you as a friend."

"He's just a friend," she said quickly.

"I know."

She smiled at my reply, then frowned. "Why didn't you warn me that this was going to happen?"

"I'm so sorry, my dearest. For Bunny-chan and Chiba-san's sake, Ryou-san and I can't risk changing things right now. If we meddle, we might destroy the happy ending, so we can't change sadness to happiness along the way."

"You're an oni, you know that."

She wasn't joking. I sighed deeply and replied, "So I've been told, many times. Is there anything I can do to help?"

"Only if you have blood type O."

"As a matter of fact, I do." O positive, but Rh negative was so rare in Japan as to be nonexistent. "I'll tell the nurses."

"Thank you, darling."

I stepped out of the room and made my way to the nurses' station, where I discovered Ami-san was saying hello to the doctor on duty. So I joined them. "Good afternoon, Mizuno-sensei."

"Donarudoson-san? What are you doing here?"

"I've just come from Shinozaki-san's room. I understand you're short on type O blood, which is my blood type."

She looked relieved as she started the checklist. "How long have you been in Japan?"

I knew the drill from donating blood in Canada before I was rejuvenated to my current age. I also knew she needed me to answer truthfully. "More than four months."

"Any new tattoos or body piercings?"

"None."

"Any new sexual partners?"

In this body? "Saeko-basan, I'm still a virgin." That answer surprised her for some reason.

"Any drug use?"

"Only caffeine, in tea, coffee, and cola."

"Have you ever visited Saudi Arabia, Latin America, or Europe including the UK?"

"Never."

"When was your last vaccination?"

"Over a year ago."

"This process counts as receiving a blood transfusion. Doing this means you'll never be allowed to donate blood again."

That came as a surprise; that particular rule was different here. "Thank you for that information, Mizuno-sensei. I'm still willing to do this."

She immediately turned to the nurses. "Confirm Donarudoson-san's blood type. Once you've done that, prep him for transfusion donation, to start when it's no longer safe for Kino-san to donate."

And thus it was that, 90 minutes later, I was flat on my back and the woman who was essentially my foster mother here in Japan was standing by my side. "Thank you," she said as she stuck the needle in my arm.

Well, that was one way of getting out of school. We weren't donating blood after our one donation each on Tuesday – the Japanese Red Cross had made a supply available overnight – but our doctor was keeping us for a day for "observation", which we both quickly figured out meant forced bed-rest.

Getting out of school didn't mean getting out of schoolwork, though; Ami-san and Ichigo-san brought the handouts from our classes on Wednesday. And when we weren't doing our homework, Makoto and I chatted quietly with Shinozaki-san. He was a nice enough guy; I could see why my dearest liked him.

Saeko-basan let us go home Thursday morning, after giving each of us notes for our teachers that explained our absence for the entire day Wednesday and Thursday and asked us to be excused from P.E. for a week. "It's a small token of our appreciation for helping save a life," she explained. "We aren't allowed to pay for blood donations, but I can do this."

"Thank you, sensei," we said in unison.

Not that it was a free afternoon to do whatever we wanted; neither of us were up for anything very strenuous.

Which is why Ami-san and Ichigo-san visited us at home with the second day's set of handouts from class. "Have you finished yesterday's homework?" Ami-san asked while Ichigo-san was visiting Makoto.

"I have, but I'd like to review it before I hand it in tomorrow morning," I replied.

She smiled at that answer. "It's good to hear that you'll be back to normal tomorrow."

"I don't know about 'normal', but I want to see everybody. I just spent a day and a half talking with only Shinozaki-san and Makoto, and while they're great company, so are you, Bunny-chan, Naru-san and Minako-san."

She nodded in understanding. Then she frowned. "That cardian is still out there, stealing energy from people. And Ryou won't tell me how to stop it."

"Then I mustn't tell you either. I'm sorry."

The Revealing Of The Lunches on Friday showed that both Makoto and I had high-iron meals to help replace what we'd donated to Shinozaki-san earlier in the week. Canada has a reputation of skipping fusion cooking and going straight to creole, so I had a decent idea of what would taste good when put together: I had spinach, marinated mussels, broccoli, and chickpea salad, with sides of inarizushi (which was both a treat for me and a source of iron) and edamame, with dark chocolate to finish off the meal. Makoto played it safe with agedashi dōfu, edamame, and rice. I took pity on her and shared my chocolate.

And then, after classes, it was time for the weekly Conversational English club... except that Usagi-san called on us because of a cardian attack. At least we didn't have any new first-year-student club members to make our excuses to. All three of us headed out just before Minako-san's volleyball teammate could interrupt our meeting.

"Sorry, I have to go!"

"Thanks for putting Senshi business ahead of sports, Minako-san," Ami-san said as we passed through the school gates.

"I still feel bad for letting them down," she replied.

I sighed. "I think you're going to have to choose which one you want more."

"If there's a monster, the entire Conversational English club responds," Ami-san pointed out.

"I know, but I'm good at both volleyball and fighting. Venus Power..."

I quickly turned my back to the girls.

"Make-Up!"

"Mercury Power, Make-Up!"

We picked up the pace, Mercury watching to make sure I didn't fall over from overexertion. We and Jupiter arrived just in time to see a leonine cardian shred Mars' ofuda before the paper talisman could make contact with its head.

"That isn't good," Mercury pointed out the obvious.

"Is that...?" I asked.

Makoto nodded grimly. "Yes, it's the monster that hurt Shinozaki-san. And the blood that now flows through both our veins is calling out for vengeance." Then she turned to face it. "You! Supreme... Thunder... Dragon!"

Note to self: Never make Makoto angry at me. That's the second time that my girlfriend's used an attack before canon said she was supposed to, not that that really matters. What does matter is that it worked; the cardian dissolved into smoke, leaving behind only a blank card.

And Jupiter collapsed into my arms. Luckily, Mercury caught me before I fell over, too.

She and I got the comfortable chairs during the after-action debriefing, this time at Ami-san's apartment.

Ryou-san (who showed up just after everyone else) and I kept our mouths shut, at least while we were talking about the fight against the cardian. Instead, we heard about a "Moonlight Knight" person who had shown up for the fight.

But once that discussion was finished, he asked a question. "I keep seeing the same name when I look into the future. Does anybody know just who Aoyama Ichigo-san is, beyond being a girl that we have lunch with?"

"That girl our age, a bit taller than Ami-san, with Ainu features and shoulder-length black hair? Never heard of her," I grinned.

Now I know why they're called throw pillows; Makoto threw one at me. It bounced off my chest and landed in my lap. "She's a classmate of mine," Makoto replied. "Although Robu took supplementary classes with her before Usagi-chan reset the timeline."

"She wants to be a marine zoologist when she graduates," I added.

"Why do you ask?" asked Hino-san.

"I keep seeing that she's going to be important somehow, but I can't tell how. She isn't a warrior or a victim."

Minako-san mused, "I did ask a week ago why she wasn't in on our secret."

Ami-san turned to Ryou-san. "Would telling her who we are change anything for the worse?"

He thought for a moment, then shook his head. "Not as far as I can see."

"Well, then," Usagi-san decided, "you have a job to do, Luna."

The weekend passed uneventfully. No date for Makoto and me; we took it easy at her place, with Ami-san and Ryou-san chaperoning us and the two of us chaperoning them. We finished our homework and had a sukiyaki party, in that order.

Artemis-san was at my place, using my laptop again. Apparently there was a new virtual reality theatre in town that offered a shooting game that the Crown didn't, and he wanted to use the Dark Kingdom's youma biometric data to help him catch up quickly. As long as it helped the Crown arcade, I didn't mind.

And then Monday made its presence known with a bright, shiny sunrise. Which we tolerated. Giving in to the inevitable, we went to school.

Lunchtime rolled around, and we discovered that Luna had been even more efficient than usual. Ichigo-san was telling Makoto, Usagi-san, and Naru-san about her weekend when Ami-san and I joined them.

"There I was, minding my own business, when a talking cat walked up to me and gave me back my memories of the Missing Time. Can you believe it? A talking cat! Can somebody *please* explain why it's so important that I remember I used to have lunch with all of you that a talking cat had to make sure I knew? And who are you, anyway, that a talking cat knows who you are?"

Makoto smiled. "I think the talking cat left an impression on you, Ichigo-san."

"Ichigo-san, do you also remember not being allowed to go on a skiing trip?" I asked.

"Yes! And I didn't tell you about that yet, so you just confirmed that these are real memories. Unless..."

"Unless?"

"Unless the talking cat brainwashed both of us."

Ami-san shook her head. "The fact that you can wonder whether you've been brainwashed shows that you probably haven't been brainwashed."

I wasn't going to undermine her position by pointing out the MKUltra experiments. "You also asked who we are."

"There's this one memory that really stands out, from the day that Sato-san died. Somebody appeared in front of the school and said that I didn't look like any of the... Sailor Senshi? And he called you 'Oni'. Are you some kind of yokai, Robu-san?"

"No, I'm completely human," I answered.

Ichigo-san turned to Naru-san, "And he called you Nephrite's human... or..."

Naru-san interrupted Ichigo-san's chain of thought before she could repeat Kunzite's insult. "I thought Nephrite was human, too. I fell in love with him before I knew he was an enemy."

Bunny-chan could see the pain on Naru-san's face as she said that. "We shouldn't be talking about this here; other people could overhear. Oh, hi, Ryou-san! Ichigo-san, are you busy after school?"

"Just with homework."

"That's perfect! Come join our study session at the Hikawa shrine."

"I didn't know that the Hikawa shrine offered help with homework."

Minako-san smiled. "They don't. But those of us who study there can answer your question."

And so it was that Ichigo-san joined us at a study session for the first time. It was certainly educational.

"I think I've figured it out," she said after being introduced to Hino-san. "You're the Sailor Senshi that I remember hearing about during the Missing Time."

"That's right," Minako-san answered.

"Can I tell you who I think you are, and let you tell me how many I got right?"

Ryou-san smiled. "This should be interesting." When a precog says something like that, it's best to play along.

"I'll start with the easy guess. Only one Senshi had short hair, Sailor Mercury," she said to Ami-san. "And Sailor Jupiter towered over the other Senshi, classmate," she said to Makoto. "If I'm not mistaken, your long black hair marks you as Sailor Mars, Hino-san. As for you two... Sailor Moon's the one in charge and Sailor V's the one who inspires everybody else. So you're Sailor V," she said to Usagi-san, before turning to Minako-san and adding, "And you're Sailor Moon." Then she turned to me. "And you're the group's token male, Tuxedo Kamen."

At that point, Hino-san started laughing. "Him? Tuxedo Kamen-san? Not a chance!"

"You already know that my *nom de guerre* is 'Oni', Ichigo-san," I told her while Makoto and Ami-san did their best to get Hino-san to stop laughing. "I did my best to stay out of the spotlight, which is why you might not have heard of me other than that one time at the school gate."

Ryou-san nodded. "He did a good job of that, too. Aoyama-san, your score is three out of six."

She sighed. "Well, I was working with half-remembered data. Who other than Oni did I get wrong?"

"Nobody talks about the rabbit in the V," Minako-san replied. "I'm Sailor Venus."

"So you're Sailor Moon?" Ichigo-san asked Usagi-san, who nodded in reply since she was eating a manju at the time. "Wow. You really don't match the image I thought I had of her." Ichigo-san turned to Naru-san and Ryou-san. "How do the two of you fit in?"

"We're just two people who were turned into youma, turned back into humans by Sailor Moon, and kept at least some of our powers," Ryou-san answered.

"Just", he says," I muttered.

"What about me? How was I special?"

Usagi-san took Ichigo-san's hands in her own. "Being the only person in our group who doesn't have any metahuman powers at all makes you very special, Ichigo-san. You remind us every day as to why we fight, simply by being you."

"That's... that's really cheesy." After a beat, Ichigo-san added, "But it helps a bit. Thank you." Then she turned to me. "Since I'm the only person here who doesn't have powers, that means you do. And you told me at lunchtime that you're completely human. What's your story?"

"It would take hours to tell my story," I replied. "The short form is that I'm from the future."

"If you're from the future, what stocks should I buy?"

I grinned. "You know, nobody else has asked me that yet."

"I'm planning ahead. University is expensive!"

My grin turned into a smile as I glanced at Ryou-san, who nodded. "Ah. Drop your money into the IPOs of Starbucks and Bed Bath & Beyond, and you won't regret it for the next three decades."

Everybody took note of that statement.

And then everybody did their homework. Most of us had memories of taking the courses; Minako-san, Makoto, and I were the only ones who had transferred to Kuritsu Juban Chuugakkou during the Missing Time, and I had Ami-san's memories of the courses that she had taken, so we treated our homework as a memory game. Ami-san helped Minako-san, Makoto, and those of us who needed the help (naming no lagomorph-style names) while she did her own homework flawlessly.

Needless to say, everybody noticed that I was still calling Sailor Mars "Hino-san". She finally sighed, drawing everybody's attention to herself.

"I've got a question for you, Donarudoson-san. Why are we the only two people here who are still calling each other by our family names?"

The only thing I was surprised by was the timing of the question. "You haven't given me permission to be any closer. In fact, I remember you saying during the Missing Time that you weren't ready to be on a given-name basis with me."

"I did say that, didn't I? But that was before we... stormed the Dark Kingdom." It was pretty clear to the Senshi and me that she was about to say "before we died", but Naru-san and Ichigo-san didn't need to know that.

"And I remember comparing you to the red oni in 'Naita Aka Oni'," Ichigo-san added. "You still want to be everybody's friend, don't you, Robu-san?" I nodded in reply.

"So it's because of what I said," Hino-san commented. "Life's too short to keep my friends at arm's length. Call me Rei, Robu-san."

I smiled as I replied, "Thank you, Rei-san."

Artemis asked me to accompany him while he checked out the new VR arcade in town – the one that we were trying to catch up to at the Crown. After checking with Ryou-san that we wouldn't be putting Usagi-san and Mamoru-san's relationship at risk, I agreed, and we made plans to check it out the same day that Luna and the Senshi were checking it out as a training tool. Which I would have expected to annoy Artemis, since he was now at risk of losing the real reason he'd coded the *Sailor V* game and set up the Crown arcade in the first place, but he didn't seem to mind.

Makoto invited me along with the other girls, but I declined, honestly saying that Artie and I had plans. He came to my place a quarter-hour after Makoto left.

"They probably aren't going to let a cat into a VR arcade, Artie. Not even a talking cat."

"Have you forgotten that I'm a Mau, Rob?" he asked just before transforming into human form.

I blinked. "I didn't know you could do that yet."

"Rob," he said with a smile suited to the cat that ate the canary, "nobody in this time signs contracts with talking cats. I have to become human every so often just to keep the Crown running. And I remember that you told me that Luna's forgotten that she can do this, too. I won't tell her."

"Thanks, Artie. Better safe than sorry, and all that. So, why aren't you worried that Luna wants to take the training business away from the Crown and give it to this new place?" I asked as we headed over to the shopping district.

"Oh, I bought a minority interest in the competition."

My eyes narrowed. "Using what? If you're dipping into the girls' income from the Sailor Moon toku shows..."

"No, of course I'm not. I'm officially a character designer. That biometric data you grabbed from the Dark Kingdom and the new arcade's VR systems has combined to create some extremely detailed opponents for the players to go up against."

I was momentarily annoyed that he'd done that, then realized that I shouldn't be. "Well, we stole that data from them, so I can't complain that you're using it without asking first. As long as you didn't give them the girls' data."

"I'm not that stupid."

"Sorry, Artie."

So it was that, a half-hour later, we were watching the VR technology from the comfort of the owners' booth. We were the only two there.

"Artie?"

"Yes, Rob?"

"Why is that winged person wearing boxing gloves?"

"I have no idea. It was in the data that we took from the Dark Kingdom."

"Ah. Is that monster over there wearing a cocktail dress?"

"That's another one from that data."

"What about that giant ant?"

Artie blinked. "That's not one of ours, Rob..."

And thus it was that we saw the entire kerfuffle caused by the cardian Hell Ant, Moon's utter failure to defeat the monster, and Chiba-san and the Moonlight Knight standing side-by-side. At least Venus and Jupiter were able to destroy the cardian just like they did in canon. And Usagi's little brother had something to do during this adventure, too.

But I couldn't help but sympathize with Usagi-san. Poor kid, drawn back into the life of a hero but unable to actually be heroic.

We didn't give Usagi-san time to become melancholy. The cherry blossoms were finally blooming – I blame the reset for messing up the seasons, although it wasn't completely unheard of for the sakura to blossom as late as mid-April, so we went out to have a hanami picnic. I arranged for a good spot by the simple virtue of camping out at one overnight... the way that Umino did in canon, and it was sort-of my fault that he wasn't dating Naru-san any more so that was my job now.

We couldn't talk Senshi business during the party; Sakurada-sensei joined us for the viewing. And there were crowds all around us, too.

Usagi-san brought a very spicy bento that Rei-san complained about (and I ended up eating), Ichigo-san got Usagi-san to laugh at one of her jokes, and Sakurada-sensei had her energy drained by a cardian when she wandered off on her own.

Naru-san and I went to look for Sakurada-sensei, and found her passed out near a tree stump. "Sensei! Are you okay?" Naru-san hurried over and checked Sakurada-sensei, then noticed somebody walking toward her from the direction of that tree stump. "We need some help... no! You're a cardian!"

I wondered how she knew.

When the cardian tried to drain Naru-san, our group's designated victim showed that she was quite finished with that role, thank you very much. Every loose sakura petal within two meters suddenly flew to her hand and crystallized together, forming a pink ko-wakizashi that Naru-san immediately swung at the cardian.

The cardian wasn't expecting to encounter armed resistance, and immediately fled.

I was tempted to run, too. How the hells did Naru-san do *that*?

As she turned to me, I saw the same kumadori makeup pattern that she had worn when she was a youma fading from her face... but this time, it was hero red instead of villain blue. And her sword didn't dissolve, either.

"We need to get help for Sakurada-sensei," was all she said.

I replied, "We need to hide your sword, first." She looked at it in wonder, then quietly handed it to me. I wrapped it in a forcefield, put it through a belt loop, and made it invisible. "I'll get it back to you later," I promised as the others ran to us. "When we try to figure out exactly what you just did."

Naru-san, Ryou-san, and I didn't go anywhere near the park for the next few days, which meant we missed seeing Sailor Moon's first use of Moon Princess Halation.

What we were doing in the meantime, besides attending school, was trying to figure out exactly what Naru-san's powers were.

"Don't you already know?" she asked us both as I returned her sword to her at her apartment.

I shook my head. "You didn't display any powers at all in the documents that I have access to," I replied.

"And I can only see possible futures, not the past," Ryou-san added. "So I can't tell who you used to be, or are now."

"I see," she replied. "Well, let's start by looking at what we can see." She rubbed the sword against a piece of unglazed porcelain without any visible effect.

"That didn't help," Ryou-san commented.

"Actually, it did," Naru-san corrected him. "I was trying to get a streak of the material that the sword is made of, but nothing rubbed off."

Some trivia from my high-school geology classes from my home reality came back to me. "So the blade has a hardness of at least 7," I commented. "You've got some pretty tough flower petals there."

"How many substances are that hard?" Ryou-san asked.

"Dozens," replied Naru-san. "But I think this might be diamond."

"Because we know that your powers work on carbon," I said while nodding in agreement. "Have you tried using your ability on aluminium yet?"

"I haven't been able to find any," she replied.

I raised one eyebrow. "Not even in the supermarket?"

She blushed. "Ah. I was looking in the jewelry store, not the apartment. I didn't even think of using aluminium foil."

"That can wait," Ryou-san said. "Right now, we have something else to figure out." And he lunged at Naru-san, arms outstretched, for all appearances about to strangle her.

"What the hells?" I exclaimed... just as the kumadori makeup appeared on Naru-san's face again.

Ryou-san immediately backed away from Naru-san. The pattern faded from her face.

"Never do that again!" we both yelled at him.

"My apologies, but it was necessary," he said. "Now we know the pattern of Osaka-san's kumadori."

"Does it make a difference?" I asked.

"Yes, Robu-san. That pattern is in the mukimi kuma style, showing that she's young, handsome and virtuous."

Naru-san looked slightly annoyed. "I like 'young' and 'virtuous,' but 'handsome'? You have noticed that I'm a girl, haven't you?"

Ryou-san smiled as he replied, "I suspect Ami would prefer that I not answer that question."

I shook my head. "Ami-san has a kind soul; I doubt she'd get upset. Makoto might get upset if I noticed, though."

"You may be right." Ryou-san turned back to Naru-san, who was smiling at us. No, not with us, at us. "Now, can you invoke that state without being in danger?"

She thought for a moment. "I don't know."

"That's something you're going to need to figure out on your own," I said. "Unless you like having your life put at risk." Seeing her shake her head in rejection of that idea, I continued, "Could you try using the sword as a weapon, please?"

She smiled as she picked it up... then swung it at Ryou-san, who ducked. "Turnabout is fair play, ne?"

"Thank you, Naru-san," I said. "You didn't display any of the skill you showed me the two times that you had the mukimi kuma markings on your face."

"So the markings are more than just makeup, then," she mused. "Am I really transforming?"

Just then, Mayumi-san burst into the room. "What's going on up here? I heard Naru shout!"

"Sorry, mama," she replied. "We were trying to make that change happen again, but it didn't work."

"I think you'd better stop trying things that make me worry about your safety, Naru." And she glared at Ryou-san and me.

I nodded. "I quite agree, Osaka-san. And perhaps Ryou-san and I have overstayed our welcome today."

Mayumi-san calmed down a bit at that. "I'll see you to the door, then."

As we left, I heard Naru-san ask, "Mama, do we have any aluminium foil in the kitchen?"

Naru-san showed off her newest creation the next day at lunch, producing a nearly-transparent stone for us to marvel at.

"What is this?" Ichigo-san asked. "A glass marble?"

"No," Naru-san sighed. "I was trying to make corundum, but I had some trouble pulling just oxygen out of the air. This is aluminium oxynitride."

"Wow..." I whispered. I could see that Ami-san was just as impressed as I was.

"If it's aluminium, why isn't it shiny?" Usagi-chan asked.

"Aluminium *oxynitride*, Usagi-san," Ami-san repeated.

"Or 'transparent aluminium' if you'd prefer," I added.

Ryou-san looked impressed by that. "You mean like in that *Star Trek* movie?"

"The one with the whales?" Usagi-san asked. "I *loved* that one!"

The trivia that Usagi-san remembers never fails to surprise me. If only she'd pay that much attention to her lessons – Alex Trebek might forgive her for concentrating on trivia, but her teachers would not. "Yes, Bunny-chan, the one with the whales. More realistically, windows made of aluminium oxynitride could stop a bullet."

And that impressed Naru-san. "I think maybe I should get some more aluminium foil at the store today. Mama noticed that one of the store windows had a crack in it."

"Good thinking, Naru-san," Ryou-san said. "Just remember to anchor the new window securely."

"I still want to make some corundum, though. Where can I get a tank of just oxygen?"

"I don't know, but any welder would be able to answer that question," I replied.

"Or any hospital," Ami-san added.

\* \* \*



Life was relatively peaceful for the next few days, once Ichigo-san figured out that asking Naru-san about her early experiments with making crystals wasn't a good idea. No, Naru-san wasn't doing as well as she had hoped. At least she was able to sell the diamonds that she could make through OSA-P, so she wasn't driving her family into bankruptcy with the cost of her raw materials.

And Naru-san being in the spotlight in our lunch group reminded me that somebody needed to find some costumes for a play in a month or so. In canon, that somebody was Umino-san, but thanks to my meddling he wasn't dating Naru-san any more. Which left the task up to me.

I can't sew worth a darn. But I knew somebody who could... so I paid Atelier Lucent a visit, hoping to meet with the proprietor.

Oh, look – she was in the shop and there were no other customers present. And she looked like she was waiting for me. Stupid genre conventions.

"Good afternoon, Meioh-san," I said in English, just in case there was anybody listening nearby.

"Good afternoon, Donaldson-san," she replied in the same language. "What brings you to Shibuya?"

"Why, the Oedo Line with a transfer at Aoyama-Itchome to the Hanzomon Line, of course. I'm too young to drive."

She smiled. "Ah, but if you were old enough to drive, you'd be too old to date Kino-san."

"And we can't have that," I agreed. "But seriously, I'm here to see whether the two of us can repair a crack that I made to the timeline."

"Thank you for being willing to take responsibility for your actions. Which crack in particular are you thinking of?"

I smiled at the compliment. "The one where somebody who isn't part of the group any more would have obtained costumes for *Snow White*."

She pulled a sketchbook out from under the counter. "And you aren't going to be happy with animal costumes for the dwarfs and a hag costume for the witch just because they're cheap. Honestly, neither would I. What do you think of this for the witch?"

I looked at the sketch she had made of [Bunny-chan wearing a white short-sleeved blouse, a long blue skirt, white opera gloves and pointed hat, and accessories straight from her Sailor Moon uniform](#). "I think she'll like it, and it would be a definite change from the stereotypical hag outfit. The crescent moon attached to the tip of the hat and the colour scheme are something of a giveaway, though, aren't they?"

"Allow a centuries-old woman a bit of whimsy, Donaldson-san. The actual costume won't have the moon or that colour scheme. Here's what I was thinking of giving you," she said as she flipped the page to show a sketch of me in an oni's loincloth.

"Oh, har har. *Snow White* is a German story, not a Japanese one. It's bad enough that I'll probably be taking Umino-san's place as a dwarf despite the fact that I'm six feet tall."

"Don't worry about that. If Lina can mistake Philionel for a dwarf despite his height, you have nothing to worry about."

"When you start mentioning *Slayers* characters to make your point, I have to wonder whether you know we aren't living in an anime."

Sailor Pluto just stared at me, one eyebrow raised.

"Okay, fine, we *are* living in an anime. But it's not a fantasy anime. Getting back to the costume, unless you're going to put the girls in oni outfits as well, the children in the audience are going to be confused. And if you do put the girls in oni outfits, Takahashi-sensei is going to want royalties."

"Perhaps something like this, then," she suggested as she flipped to the next page of the sketchbook, to reveal [a girl wearing a sleeveless top, a long half-skirt over trousers, heavy boots, and a sturdy belt, and holding a double-headed axe with a blade as big as her torso](#).

I whistled in appreciation. "Oh, that's *very* nice. And the children's fathers will appreciate the outfits as much as I do just seeing the sketch."

"You don't mind your girlfriend dressing like this?"

"Why not? That bust line doesn't actually show anything off; it just hints. Although I think I'd want something a bit higher cut on my outfit," I added with a smile.

That actually got a grin out of Setsuna. "Of course."

"Oh, and we shouldn't go with battleaxes, just in case somebody thinks the blades are real. Hammers would probably be okay."

Setsuna was a picture of innocence. "Think the blades are real"? Donaldson-san, I was planning on making real weapons."

I almost started a recitation of Japanese weapons laws, but then I saw the smile playing at the corners of her mouth. "You almost had me there, Meioh-san," I replied with a chuckle. "I keep forgetting that you aren't this decade's very serious medical student Meioh Setsuna-san. We'll need something for Snow White and the prince, too. Something nice for Snow White but not so nice that she upstages Bunny-chan, and we both know what Chiba-san looks like as a prince. Can you have these ready before the play?"

"If you can get me Ginga-san's measurements, yes."

I thought for a moment. "That probably won't be possible. We both know why."

She nodded. "Then I'll do my best. Mind you, an ill-fitting outfit will make her look worse than Serenity-san no matter how good my design is," she added with a hint of an evil smile on her face.

"Thank you, Meioh-san. And I like the way you think. Will you want the outfits back after the play?"

"No, the performers can keep them. I can't re-use the fabric, so there's no point to getting the clothing back."

"That's quite kind of you. How would you like me to pay for this work?"

"I'll take the money out of your bank account just before the next time that I replenish it. Have you forgotten that I'm paying for all of your purchases anyway?"

"I did forget, yes. And I'll have to do something about that; it isn't fair to you."

She smiled. "You will, but not right away. And that reminds me: Keep your cellphone and its charger with you between the time that you and Kino-san pack to visit Narahara and when you actually set forth on your journey."

"Isn't it a little early for you to be telling me that? And how did what I said remind you to mention that, anyway?"

"This is the last time I'll be able to speak with you alone before August 12, and that's a secret, respectively."

"Okay, fine. When it comes to knowing the future, the shoe's on the other foot for once."

She nodded. "And that's all the time I can spare for you right now, Donaldson-san. I'll have the costumes ready for you to pick up on May 16."

Time proceeded, as it does when Sailor Pluto isn't using her forbidden power, into the final week of April, when another cardian made its appearance.

The only thing that kept me from going ballistic when I heard who it had targeted was the knowledge that the next cardian would be even worse.

And I had to let it progress the way it did in canon, or Minako-san wouldn't unlock her Crescent Beam Shower attack. Which she did.

The first topic of discussion at that Friday's Conversational English club meeting was speculation on what kind of monsters could target kindergarten children.

"And why didn't you warn us, Rob-san?"

I sighed deeply. "We all agreed that Ryou-san and I *mustn't* warn you, Minako-san, any more than we could warn Makoto about Shinozaki-san being injured. No matter how much it hurts us to keep quiet."

"You can't give us any warning at all what's going to happen?" Ami-san asked.

I thought of what was going to happen next week, hardened my heart, and said, "I *mustn't*. Changing the subject... Crescent Beam Shower, eh?"

"Why not?" Minako-san asked. "It fits my theme."

"Your theme?"

"From while I was Sailor V. Crescent Boomerang, Crescent Beam, Crescent Super Beam, Crescent Slender Beam..."

"I think I see the theme there, yes. What about when you had to fight close-in?"

"Those were usually just punches and kicks, although I did use an uchigatana once."

"So maybe you could use a Crescent attack as if it was a bladed weapon."

She grinned. "Of course! Something like a Crescent Beam Saber!"

Ami-san tilted her head in puzzlement. "'Crescent Beam Saber'?"

Minako-san turned to Ami-san. "I'm riffing off of something from *Gundam*. Don't you think it'll work?"

"I'm sure that you can make it work. It's just that I can't picture a transforming heroine based on *Gundam* imagery."

I thought of a certain White Devil – not the one from *Gundam*, the other one – and because of my sudden emotional shift, I couldn't stop giggling.

After a moment, Minako-san said, "Rob's gone bye-bye. Ami, what've you got left?"

And that sent both girls into giggling fits that matched mine.

\* \* \*

The next week started with May 3, so the school gave us May 4 off for Constitution Memorial Day instead. And May 5 was Children's Day, so we had an extra-long Golden Week weekend.

Ail and An noticed that as well, and launched their most reprehensible attack ever. It was bad enough when they were draining energy from kindergarten children, but draining energy from toddlers crossed the line.

Ryou-san and I had a very, *very* long discussion about whether it was safe for me to actually intervene, just this once.

He won.

Interfering this time in particular, when Usagi-san and Chiba-san actually worked together to care for the one toddler who had been protected by his mother, could have disastrous effects to their relationship later on. Which meant that I had to watch from the sidelines while toddlers were drained of their energy.

It's been a while since I've said this, but it's damned appropriate. Stupid genre conventions.

And the cardian got away, which meant it would be back.

I made sure to get to school early on Wednesday so that I could leave a note on Ami-san's desk. A handwritten note, using a brush pen. But she was there before I was, so I bowed and handed her the note personally.

She almost didn't take it from me. And I wouldn't have blamed her if she hadn't. But she did.

And she read my simple, one sentence note: "I am very sorry."

She finally looked at me. "I accept your apology, Rob-san. But I don't appreciate that you needed to apologize to me."

"And I don't like that I had to apologize. All I can say is that my inaction was necessary."

"You promised during the Missing Time that you would never lie to me. Please answer this question. *Why?*"

Misinterpreting her question and explaining why I would never lie to her would just make her angry with me again, as would refusing to answer. I sighed deeply. "There are multiple reasons, and I'm not going to tell you everything. What I will tell you is that you *need* to be angry with this cardian even if that means you're angry with Ryou-san and me as well, and Usagi-san and Chiba-san *need* to take care of Manami-kun."

She thought for a moment. "You didn't call Usagi-chan 'Bunny-chan'. I know you well enough to know that that means you're completely serious. This is about their relationship, isn't it?"

"It is, yes."

"Thank you. And my anger... no, I won't ask whether that will unlock anything."

"Thank you, Ami-san," I whispered as the classroom door opened and a couple of our classmates came in.

Even though we'd come to an understanding, it was still a chilly morning. But relations thawed at lunchtime, when Bunny-chan told us about her adventures in babysitting, including the most basic of mistakes that Ginga Natsumi-san had made while trying to take over Bunny-chan's changing Manami-kun's diaper.

"Wait, wait. Manami's a boy?"

I raised one eyebrow at Minako-san's question. "And Makoto's a girl," I replied while taking my girlfriend's hand in my own. "What's your point?"

Minako-san realized that she shouldn't have been surprised at discovering another person with a gender-bending name. "I guess I don't have a point," she replied.

Ryou-san raised his hand. "If I may..." We all turned to him. "Robu-san, can you pay a visit to Nakayoshi Koyoshi Nursery School after school tomorrow?"

I raised both eyebrows. "I thought we weren't interfering."

"The danger point for future events has passed safely, at least as far as this particular cardian is concerned. And I know that sitting back and doing nothing isn't helping your emotional stability any."

"In that case, then yes, I can bloody well be at Nakayoshi Koyoshi Nursery School tomorrow," I said with conviction.

"We can all be there," Usagi-san announced with steel in her voice.

"You have a baby to tend to," Ryou-san pointed out. "We'll make sure you're there for the climax, though."

We did, and she was, and Mercury unlocked her Shabon Spray Freezing attack before Moon went all Moon Princess Halation on the cardian.

And it felt good to be doing something after so long, even if it was only catching the toddlers as the cardian dropped them as a distraction, and cutting into the forcefields she had wrapped them in so that they wouldn't suffocate.

Of course, that put me on the aliens' radar as a new threat to them, assuming they were watching. But I wasn't so naive as to trust in stupid genre conventions this time around; I had used some tinted forcefields to make it look like I

had the black hair and scarlet skin of the red oni from 'Naita Aka Oni'. I couldn't do anything about my height, but neither could Jupiter and nobody had connected the dots in her case... so far.

I had to figure out some way to disguise myself more thoroughly. But that was a project for another day.

"Another day," in this case, did *not* come the next week.

What did come that week was an out-of-season culture festival at Toyo Eiwa Jogakuin. Ah, those Canadian-founded private schools, marching to their own beat instead of waiting for November. But if I recalled correctly, they had a culture festival out-of-season in canon, too.

Luckily for me, Rei-san's concert was on Sunday, the day after I was expected at Atelier Lucent. I recruited Makoto, Ami-san, and Ryou-san to help me carry all ten costumes... which I realized after the fact was why Meioh-san wasn't in the shop when we arrived. If Ryou-san met Meioh-san before we met Tomoe Hotaru-san, the timeline might have been fractured beyond repair. Or Ryou-san's power might have burned out from simply meeting Sailor Pluto. Or maybe she just wanted a day off. Whatever. She had left us ten costumes, and one of them was for Ichigo-san.

Anyway, we didn't miss Rei-san's concert. Or the cardian that attacked it. Ryou-san didn't let me take part in the fight, not that I needed to; it isn't just pride that keeps Sailor Mars from needing to accept help from a man. Besides, she had to fight that fight single-handedly in order to unlock her Fire Soul Bird attack.

We also didn't miss seeing Ail and An in a couple of truly ridiculous "alien" outfits. At least none of us laughed at the outfits in their presence, although I did need to literally step on Minako-san's toes to make that not happen.

What was more important, as far as I was concerned, was the conversation that Ryou-san, Ami-san, Makoto and I had at the beef bowl restaurant after the concert.

"So, what's coming next?"

Makoto looked at me. "Don't you already know?"

"I know what would have happened if I wasn't here. But I've completely derailed the setup for the next encounter."

"How can you be so sure?" Ami-san asked.

I grinned. "Because my girlfriend has a boyfriend now." I turned to Makoto and continued, "If you didn't, you would have thought that somebody might be the Moonlight Knight, and that he reminded you of your sempai, and you would have tried to get closer to him, and it wouldn't have been until you did that that you unlocked Supreme Thunder Dragon when you protected him from a cardian."

"But I unlocked that attack when I destroyed the cardian that hurt Shinozaki-san. Why didn't I unlock that attack then in the anime?"

"Because you were too weak from donating blood. Nobody else with type O blood was available in the anime, so it all had to come from you."

"You did that for me, as well as for Shinozaki-san? Remind me to kiss you when we're home."

I smiled. "Don't worry, I will." I turned to Ryou-san, who was blushing almost as deeply as Ami-san was. Then I turned back to Makoto. "Our talk about kissing seems to have scandalized our innocent friends."

"Don't worry, Ami-chan," Makoto commented. "We don't go any farther than that."

"Good..." she whispered.

Nobody said anything for a few minutes.

Once Ryou-san and Ami-san's skin colour was back to normal, I asked, "So, Ryou-san, what's coming next?"

"Since I'm not going to fall for somebody who isn't Robu, it won't be what happened in the anime that he just described," added my dearest.

Ryou-san nodded. "Are you sure you want to know? Seventeen times out of twenty, you take it poorly."

I took a deep breath, then let it out slowly. "Go ahead and tell me."

"Naru-san falls for him."

In anger, I accidentally snapped my chopsticks in two.

"Oh, good," Ryou-san said with relief. "This is one of the other three times."

"Hasn't she been through enough heartbreak?" I asked nobody in particular. Then I looked Ryou-san straight in the eyes. "Please tell me that we can intervene this time."

"I'm sorry, Robu-san. We can't. There's a one in five chance that this will get her and Umino-san back together, but that drops to zero if you take a role."

"Darling?"

I turned to Makoto. "Yes, my dearest?"

"Is this the kind of conversation that you and Ryou-san have before every new cardian shows up?"

"Pretty much, yeah."

"Remind me to never ask you what you decided in the other meetings."

"And thank you both for protecting us from these decisions," Ami-san said.

I couldn't help but think that Ami-san needed to learn how to make decisions that affected other people, if she ever wanted to become a doctor.

Monday's Revealing Of The Lunches went well enough, for a day that I expected that I'd need to smile and nod when Naru-san asked about Ginga Seijuurou-san.

Which she did, and Ryou-san, Ami-san, Makoto and I kept our mouths shut. But Usagi-san also asked whether any of us wanted to be in a play that was due to be staged at the end of the month. Chiba-san was looking for pinch-hitter actors after the rest of the troupe trooped out of the theatre.

"We could ask Seijuurou-san to perform the music. Have you heard him play the flute?"

Yes, Naru-san, we have, repeatedly, I didn't say.

"Hey," Minako-san commented, "we hear flute music just before the Moonlight Knight shows up at a battle."

Aw, Mina-chan... I know it's canon, but that's the wrong conclusion. The Senshi hear flute music just before the cardian shows up. And Ryou-san and I didn't dare point that out.

"You think Seijuurou-san is the Moonlight Knight?"

No, I didn't smile and nod. But I did smile at Naru-san's next question.

"Mako-chan, could you help me make a lunch for Seijuurou-san?"

Makoto glanced at me; I shrugged my shoulders; and she turned to Naru-san. "I suppose I could do that. But I want to take part in the play, too."

"Let's all take part in the play," I suggested.

Ichigo-san grinned. "I'd like to give it a try. I didn't get to try out for that show with Shiratori Mikan-san, the way you did. How's she doing, by the way?"

"You didn't hear this from me," Minako-san replied quietly, "but she's still in the hospital after having almost all of her energy drained, and she'll probably be there for a few more months. Even if she recovers completely, her career is dead because of her being out of the spotlight after that attack."

"Robu-san, Ryou-san, is Shiratori-san really not going to be an idol any more?" Usagi-san asked in concern.

I looked at Ryou-san, who thought for a moment. "Maybe. Unless... maybe... she works with somebody whose star is on the rise. I'm seeing a violinist... Kaiou-san...?"

I deliberately started choking on a bite of my lunch, drawing everybody's attention away from Ryou-san. Once my breathing was back under control, I said, "That can wait until Shiratori-san is out of the hospital. Right now, Naru-san is looking for advice about her love life and Chiba-san needs help with that play, and I can only help with one of those things."

And who happened to be passing by at just the right time to overhear me but Ginga Natsumi-san. "Mamoru-san needs help?"

Stupid genre conventions.

As An... Natsumi-san... and Usagi-san talked about the play, I leaned over to Naru-san. "I think we're concentrating on the other matter today, sorry."

She gave me a feeble smile. "At least you didn't forget about me completely."

We all visited the theatre after school. Yes, even Ail and An – sorry, Seijuurou-san and Natsumi-san. We even convinced Rei-san to take part.

Umino-san was there, too. Naru-san... at least acknowledged his presence, which was more than I expected would happen.

We all agreed to take part in the performance of *Snow White*, on the understanding that the show was probably not going to be very polished. We only had two weeks to rehearse, after all.

Then we decided on our roles. Chiba-san was playing the Prince, of course, and that led to every girl in the room wanting to play Snow White. They all had their reasons to play the titular role: Ami-san wouldn't have as many lines to memorize so she could study more, Ichigo-san wanted to show everyone that even somebody from Hokkaido could be a star, Minako-san pointed out her time in England gave her a European view on the role, and Makoto – just like in canon – reminded everybody that she had the biggest breasts. I immediately thought of the "talent" meme that was spawned by the North American dub of that line back in my home reality.

"Why are you laughing?" Naru-san asked.

The truth would blow my cover, so it was time for some misdirection. "Why don't I play Snow White?"

"Why don't we draw lots?" Natsumi-san suggested with a scowl on her face.

Canon re-asserted itself, and Natsumi-san cheated just enough to make herself Snow White and make Usagi-san the witch. "And you," Natsumi-san pointed at me, "get to be the biggest dwarf I've ever heard of."

"That's fine with me," I replied. "I can help out with costuming, too."

"You don't need to do that," Umino-san said. "I have a friend who can rent us some costumes at a bargain price."

I knew which costumes he'd find, and I wanted no part in them. Pun intended. "I know somebody who owns a shop on Center Gai."

"The shop where Mako-chan got her skating outfit?" Rei-san asked. After I nodded in reply, she continued, "Donarudoson-san is getting the costumes."

"And Naru knows a lot about music," Bunny-chan said. "You should work with Seijuurou-san about the score."

That got a smile from Naru-san... and a scowl from Umino-san.

Classes, rehearsals, and a complete lack of cardians took their toll over the next week and a half.

Yes, a lack of cardians had the girls worried. And I was worried that they were turning into child soldiers, with that outlook. I resolved to take Makoto on a date, and suggested Ryou-san take Ami-san on a date, just as soon as the play was performed; we needed the change of pace. He suggested the day after the performance.

What took its toll on me was how happy Naru-san looked when she talked about suggesting slow jazz pieces for Seijuurou-san to play during the performance. It was Nephrite all over again, and I couldn't warn her.

Then, the day before dress rehearsal, Umino-san decided that Seijuurou-san was spending altogether too much time with Naru-san, and went to confront him.

I turned invisible and followed, just in case the worst happened.

Sure enough, the worst happened. Stupid genre conventions. Umino-san barged in on Seijuurou-san and Natsumi-san when they were in their real forms of Ail and An, wondering where to find some energy to last the week.

I'll give Umino-san this much credit: he didn't try to run. But he only got in one punch before An drained him of energy until he collapsed... and kept on draining him.

I was *not* about to let what happened to Sato-san happen to Umino-san. I took two steps back and said, "Umino-san, are you in there?" as I went visible.

"Oh, it's terrible!" Natsumi-san said. It seemed that the Ginga siblings can shift forms faster than I can go visible or invisible. "We just found him here, unconscious!"

"I'll call an ambulance!" There was no way that I was going to become the next course on their meal, and there was a telephone on the wall right there.

A quarter-hour later, Umino-san was on his way to the hospital. "Now what?" I asked.

"The show must go on," Chiba-san replied.

"It's what he would have wanted," Usagi-san added.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Ryou-san sigh deeply. I gathered that this wasn't how the one-in-five chance of Naru-san and Umino-san getting back together was supposed to play out.

I also saw Seijuurou-san rubbing his cheek. "Are you okay?"

"I think I broke a tooth in all the excitement."

Naru-san looked alarmed. "Can you still play the flute?"

"Not right now, I can't."

I sighed deeply. "And after all the work you put into this, too. They would have loved your playing."

"There's no help for it," Chiba-san announced. "We'll just have to use prerecorded music."

And then it was time for the dress rehearsal. I imposed on Chiba-san to pick me up after school and drive to my place, where we put the costumes into his car and drove to the theatre.

Everyone else was waiting for us.

"How's Umino-san doing?" Rei-san asked.

"It's still too early to tell," Ami-san replied.

"We can talk later," Chiba-san insisted. "It's time to get into our costumes now."

I appreciated his diversion from a matter that I really didn't want to discuss just then. "I had to guess at some of the sizes," I added as we handed out the garment bags. "If I made a mistake, I apologize in advance."

Then we went to the dressing rooms, and presently stepped onto the stage in costume for the very first time.

Ryou-san remembered to bring a camera and a handful of rolls of film.

Natsumi-san's costume was a bit tight around the waist and a bit loose around the bust and hips.

Everyone else's costumes fit perfectly.

Ah, Setsuna-san, your revenge on somebody who tried to upstage your princess is both subtle and sweet.

And, no, Usagi-san's costume didn't have a crescent moon on the hat... nor was it in the same colours as her Sailor Senshi uniform. Blood red makes for a good colour for a Wicked Witch outfit.

We rehearsed the entire play, then performed it for real in front of an audience of one: Ryou-san. The director was happy with our performance and told us to be back early enough to get into costume before the performance the next day.

"What do we do with the costumes? Take them home?" Natsumi-san looked hopeful.

"Leave them here," Chiba-san insisted. "They're so well-made that I don't want to risk any damage to them on the bus. And we can lock the dressing rooms."

I smiled and nodded in agreement. The smile was because, if her costume was locked away, Natsumi-san couldn't make any alterations to it. She was going to look *almost* as good as everybody else.

And then came the performance, which was a bit more sombre than in canon because we still didn't know whether Umino-san was going to regain consciousness any time soon.

The children in the audience liked the colourful costumes of both Snow White and the Witch. The older males liked all of the ladies, which just went to show that a young woman doesn't need to show a lot of skin to be attractive. The older females liked the nobility and the handsomeness of Prince Mamoru. And maybe a few of them liked my looks, too; I was wearing the same sort of costume as the ladies, but without the overskirt.

And Ail didn't play the flute... until Natsumi-san was about to receive a stage kiss from Chiba-san, at which point he became jealous enough to summon a cardian right in the building. Just as in canon.

We scattered. I got Naru-san and Ichigo-san to safety, Chiba-san got Natsumi-san to safety, and the girls... did what they did in canon, including introducing themselves to the audience while in Senshi uniform just like the actors do in the toku shows. If we can't stay hidden, we can at least practice misdirection.

It was only after Mercury announced herself as the smart member of the team that I noticed Saeko-basan was in the audience. And then I realized why Ryou-san said we should double-date our girlfriends the day after the performance; tonight, to misquote everybody but Ricky Ricardo, we had some 'splaining to do.

No, he never actually said that on *I Love Lucy*.

Once the play was over, in more ways than one, I told the girls and Chiba-san that they could keep the costumes. Even Natsumi-san took me up on the offer.

Ryou-san declined to accompany us to Ami-san's apartment, saying that it would look bad if we tried deflecting Saeko-basan's attention away from one secret by revealing another secret. So it was just the three of us to face the music.

"Robu-san, Makoto-san, you don't need to be here," Saeko-basan told us when we stood beside Ami-san. Which wasn't the greatest visual, I'll admit, since us towering over her looked like we were keeping her from running away.

"If this is about what happened in the theatre today, then we should be here," Makoto insisted. I nodded in agreement.

"Do what you want, then." She tilted her head down to look straight at her daughter. "I'd like an explanation as to why you claimed to be a transforming heroine."

Ami-san sighed deeply. "Because I am a transforming heroine, mother. May I ask how you figured it out?"

"You *did* announce that Sailor Mercury consistently gets the top marks in national practice exams, Ami-san," I commented.

"But you can use any name when you take the mock exams!"

"Ami-chan," Makoto replied, "you're the smartest person I know, but that was a really stupid reply. It doesn't matter what name you use if you claim that it's you."

Before we could continue, Saeko-basan said, "I would prefer to have this conversation directly with my daughter."

"Yes, ma'am," I replied, with Makoto echoing me quickly.

"As you wish," Ami-san said. "I am the transforming heroine called Sailor Mercury, I have been a transforming heroine since partway through what the astronomers are calling the Missing Time, and I am personally responsible for saving dozens of lives. Including the lives of some preschool children earlier this month."

Saeko-basan looked like she was about to reply, but she paused. "I remember hearing about attacks on children, and that various different heroines prevented some followup attacks. Was that you?"

"Only one of those incidents was prevented by me. I have allies."

"Including a friendly red oni, from the reports that I heard from the ambulance teams." She looked in my direction.

Instead of replying, I used the same forcefield trick that I had used during that incident to change my hair and skin colour, then let the forcefield drop after two seconds.

"I see now why you thought that you should be present," she commented in wonder. "Ami, is your transformation similar to Robu-san's?"

Ami-san smiled slightly as she replied. "No, mother. Robu-san is a special case. The rest of us have transformations that look like this. Mercury Power, Make-Up!"

As she was transforming, I turned my head and complained, "I really wish you'd give me warning before you get changed!"

"Why?" Saeko-basan asked. "It's only a moment of nakedness. I assure you, any doctor or medical student has seen much more than that amount of skin."

"Ah. So..." I turned back to Ami-san. "You don't care whether I see you naked because you think it doesn't matter?"

"That's right," Mercury replied in a matter-of-fact tone. "Oh! Did you think I was trying to lure you away from Mako-chan?"

"Honestly, I wasn't sure," I admitted.

"Honestly, I was sure, but I was wrong," Makoto added. "I'm sorry for thinking that you wanted to take my boyfriend away from me, Ami-chan."

"Now that that's cleared up," Saeko-basan said, "how long have you known that Ami is... Sailor Mercury, you said?"

We all nodded. "Since a week after I met her," Makoto answered.

"In my case, the answer is more complicated," I said. "And it involves time travel."

Saeko-basan raised an eyebrow. "Are you sure that you should be telling me that?"

"Why not?" I replied. "In part because of my presence and actions here, this is not the past that I know from history classes. I have little to no knowledge of the personal futures of anyone in this room; all I know now is a general flow of time."

"A general flow of time... Oh, do you mean an overall pattern of future events?"

"Exactly."

Saeko-basan turned to Makoto. "How much of this is news to you, Makoto-san?"

She smiled. "None of it. Oh, and, Jupiter Power, Make-Up!"

"Now, my girlfriend wanting me to see her naked, I can understand," I said to Saeko-basan in a stage whisper that I fully intended my dearest to hear.

"As can I," she replied with a smile. "Although with someone like Makoto-san in your life who obviously likes you that way, how are you still a virgin?"

"We're still in junior high school, and Makoto's a transforming heroine in the middle of a conflict with forces who are willing to hurt innocent people. That's two reasons why I shouldn't get her pregnant right now."

"I admire your self-restraint," Saeko-basan commented.

"I'm beginning to dislike it," Makoto said, "but I understand why it has to be."

I bowed to my girlfriend. "I'm sorry that I'm keeping you waiting. Maybe when we're both sixteen and we're sure that we're the only ones for each other, we can enjoy each other's company that way. To quote a song that won't be written until 2019, 'we can have just one night, or we can have one whole life if we play it cool.'"

Saeko-basan actually laughed at our exchange. "Are you sure that you want to wait? No, you've already told me enough that I know that both of you don't want to wait. But you made a compelling case for waiting." I'm sure that I blushed. She continued, addressing the Senshi in the room. "Now, if the two of you would change out of your uniforms, perhaps you could tell me what it's like to be a transforming heroine while we have dinner together."

The only things we didn't tell Saeko-basan over the next three hours were my origin in another universe, the identities of the other Senshi and our friends who were in on the secret, and what happened during the Missing Time. She took things remarkably well.

Sunday turned into Monday, May turned into June, and a pleasant morning turned into an "all hands on deck" call-out when a cardian attacked before breakfast.

There's supposed to be a routine to that sort of thing: Wake up, go to school, save the world – in that order.

Jupiter zapped it with a Supreme Thunder Dragon, Mars roasted it with a Fire Soul Bird, Mercury put out the fire and immobilized it with a Shabon Spray Freezing, Venus cut it down to size with a Crescent Beam Saber (smart girl, figuring out how to do that attack so quickly), and Moon used a Moon Princess Halation on it to finish it off. Me? I worked crowd control.



And then it was time to go to school. We made mad dashes back to our homes to get our homework, and the girls stayed in their Senshi forms just to be fast enough to make it to school on time.

We met up a dozen blocks from school, with no time to spare. "We have to change soon! Go on ahead, Oni!" Moon said.

"Not without at least one of you!" I lifted Jupiter into a bridal carry and turned up the speed, muttering, "Eat my dust, Usain Bolt."

"Who?"

"An Olympic sprinter. He'll set two records in 2008."

"I think that's the first time you've ever given me a straight answer to that question."

I got her to an alley a half-block from the front gate of Kuritsu Juban Chuugakkou before the bell rang. Since I knew from canon that she would arrive on time anyway, this didn't change anything that hadn't already been changed. "Should I go back for the others?" I asked as she changed.

"I see Ami-chan just coming around the corner," replied Makoto.

"Just Ami-san? Then there's no time; we have to get to class. Sorry, Bunny-chan."

Bunny-chan was late, as in canon, but it wasn't until she was caught eating lunch early that Sakurada-sensei gave her detention, again as in canon.

It was amazing how Ryou-san had made extra food for lunch.

"How's Umino-san doing?" Bunny-chan asked as she mooched from both of us and from Makoto as well.

Ami-san sighed deeply, then replied, "He's in the same condition as Shiratori Mikan-san."

"Oh, no." That was from Naru-san. "I heard Seijuurou-san play the flute just before that monster appeared at the play. Don't tell me it was somebody else; I listened to his playing style for a week. Is he our enemy?"

Ryou-san and I reached the same conclusion at the same time: there was no point in keeping it secret from them any more. We both nodded slightly as I put up an invisible forcefield around us to keep prying ears out.

"I'm afraid so," Ryou-san replied.

"And I'm sorry that we couldn't tell you," I added.

"Why do I always pick bad boyfriends?" Naru-san asked nobody in particular. None of us had an answer. "Except Umino-san," she realized. "Did Seijuurou-san send Umino-san to the hospital?"

"No, that was Natsumi-san's doing."

"Oh, no," Usagi-san whispered. "I have detention with her today."

"Better be on your guard, then, Bunny-chan," Ichigo-san said. Then she turned to me. "So, oh visitor from the future, how close to history did we come?"

"In figuring out who the big bads are this time around?" She nodded. "According to my records, you're one week early." And I spent the rest of the lunch break telling them who Ail and An really were, and why they were on Earth.

At the end of my explanation, Usagi-san said, "I can't possibly punish them in the name of the Moon for that. They're just trying to survive."

"Ladies and gentleman, love and justice in action," I said to the others. "If you can keep that outlook, Bunny-chan, you'll make a fine queen someday."

We pretty much curb-stomped the cardian that Ail chose while An was stuck in detention with Bunny-chan. Knowing its contrary nature ahead of time, it was simple to get it into a trap: I shouted "Don't attack me!", it attacked me, and Jupiter hit it with a Coconut Cyclone from the side. Venus shouted "Defend yourself! Crescent Beam Shower!", which against a target that refused to defend itself was enough to finish it off.

In the meantime, Usagi-san did something very noble and very foolish: she volunteered to go home with An. Yes, it was only one week early, but still, she headed off without any backup.

But canon shows again and again how Bunny points out the folly of man. It worked flawlessly: Ail and An discovered what love really meant, Sailor Moon healed the "Doom Tree", Mamoru and the Moonlight Knight merged... and I missed it all, hearing about it only after the fact.

So we went to see a Sailor Moon toku show at Dreamland to relax on one of the rare almost-sunny days in June. We figured that, as long as we were writing the scripts, we might as well see the end results.

Hoo-boy, did they do a number on us. Episode number 9, to be exact. But, boy, was it funny. At least Minako-san, Makoto and I thought it was funny, especially Moon being in a hurry to go nowhere in particular, Mercury announcing the obvious, the time-controlling youma in a cocktail dress (straight out of the data from Janelyn and Misha's computer, but it still looked silly), "Moon-obao-san" shaking her Moon Tiara at the youma and telling it "In the name of the Moon, get off my lawn!", and Tuxedo Kamen throwing roses at the grandfather's clock until he finally hit it. At least the fog machine did a decent job of simulating Mercury's Shabon Spray.

"They got our personalities wrong," Chiba-san complained after the show.

"They had to get your personalities wrong so that people who know you don't think that you're... well, you," I pointed out. "Wait until you see Oni in one of these. They give him horns, a loincloth, a club, the works."

"I am going to murder Artemis-san the next time I see him," Bunny-chan muttered, not completely joking. "No, I'm going to *neuter* him."

"No, you're not," Minako-san insisted, unknowingly protecting the future existence of Diana. "And I should ask him whether he needs help writing some more scripts."

"If he does, please fix my character's personality. I am *not* that pedantic," Ami-san complained.

"Hey, given the constraints of the medium, I thought those Ember Island Players did a pretty good job of playing their roles," I commented.

Makoto wasn't the only one who looked puzzled, but she was the one to ask, "What's an [ember island player](#)?"

We spent most of the rest of June relaxing, when we weren't studying for our end-of-term exams that were coming in July.

There was one weekend that Makoto and I did something that neither of us had done before. No, not that. We visited Mount Fuji. We had permission from our homeroom teachers to skip Saturday morning classes that day, which we needed since the trip takes three hours each way.

Specifically, we attended the [Fujikawaguchiko Herb Festival](#). Seeing Makoto wandering through the lavender beds, picking herbs with a smile on her face, made the weekend worthwhile. The blueberry ice cream was a minor bonus. The festival being in the middle of June, of course it rained for half of the time that we were there. We had fun, even if we had to share an umbrella. No, *especially* since we shared an umbrella.

On the trip back home Sunday evening, Makoto leaned over to me and asked, "Which episode are we at now, darling?"

"Oh, this wasn't in the anime at all," I replied. "This is something that's all our own that nobody else gets to share." That put a smile on her face. And that's also why I'm not going into detail as to what we did over the weekend. "As for the overall story, we're between episodes 59 and 60."

"How will we know when the next story starts? It can't be something as obvious as a plot hook falling out of the sky onto somebody's head, right?"

"Funny you should say that," I said with a smile of my own. "But she's more a MacGuffin than a plot hook, at least to begin with."

"I was kidding, darling."

"I wasn't, my dearest. I promised that I'll never lie to you, remember?"

Once we were back and had turned in our "what we did while away" essays, school continued in the lazy-but-hectic way that it does when we're getting ready for exams. Ami-san had no worries about the term finals in July, of course, but the rest of us did, even though most of us had memories of taking the exams during the Missing Time.

Well, my memories of the exams were borrowed from Ami-san. Minako-san and Makoto had to study the hard way, and my dearest had to pass everything so that she wouldn't have to take supplementary classes in August. Minako-san didn't want supplementary classes, either, but there wasn't anywhere that she *needed* to be on August 12. And we made sure that Bunny-chan studied, too.

Although we didn't study on her birthday. Instead, we turned the Revealing Of The Lunches into a Revealing Of The Presents, turning lunchtime into a birthday celebration. Makoto and I gave Bunny-chan a set of homemade lavender sachets for her bedroom; three guesses where the lavender herbs came from. Ami-san and Ryou-san gave Bunny-chan a textbook; I didn't bother finding out which subject. Ichigo-san gave her a box of five of one of Sapporo's specialty treats, [tsukisamu anpan](#), which got smiles for both the pun and the sweets. (I noticed the JAL logo on the box – I guessed that this particular batch of sweets may have come from a first-class passenger – and distracted Makoto for long enough for Usagi-san to put the box in her lunch bag.) Naru-san showed off her latest experiment in using her power to make gems by giving Bunny-chan a sodium potassium aluminium silicate crystal – for the rest of us, that's a moonstone – and that got smiles from everybody for a completely different reason. And Minako-san gave Bunny-chan a gift card from her favourite cake shop.

As to why we didn't study together that day, Chiba-san gave Bunny-chan what she wanted the most: he took her out on a date.

Anybody who's familiar with the official history, or if you're like me and came from another universe after watching the anime, will know what I'm going to say next.

Besides "Stupid genre conventions", that is.

Yes, what they thought was going to be their first kiss ended up being interrupted by a little girl with pink hair and red eyes falling out of the sky onto Usagi-san's head. At least, that's what Bunny-chan told me the day after her birthday; if Chibiusa had actually landed on Bunny-chan's head, she would have ended up with a snapped neck. The younger Usagi probably landed on the elder Usagi's shoulders. I hope.

Bunny-chan also mentioned that Chibiusa had moved in with the Tsukino family, had ransacked her bedroom, and was hunting for the Ginzuishou. We immediately agreed to have a meeting at the Hikawa shrine after school.

On our way from Azabu-Juban to Roppongi, Ryou-san and I had a quiet discussion on the train.

"Chibiusa's here now, which means she's been born in the future, which means Bunny-chan and Chiba-san's relationship is secure," I said. "Can we start interfering with the Dark Moon's plans right away?"

Ryou-san thought for a moment. "I can't see any reason why we shouldn't, in 99 out of 100 probable timelines," he replied.

"And the other one?"

He frowned. "I can't foresee past August 11 in that timeline."

And that made me worry, because I remembered what Meioh-san said about keeping my smartphone with me between packing for our trip on August 12 and setting off on the journey... or on *a* journey. Granted, 99 times out of 100 there probably wasn't anything to worry about... but the timing matched up too well for me to completely dismiss that one in a hundred chance. "You're sure that it's August 11 that you can't see past?"

"Positive."

Time to ignore a stupid genre convention. "I think we should take the chance."

"I agree. You don't like sitting around and watching."

"Hey, not changing things during the Missing Time would have cost us both our girlfriends now."

And we arrived at the transit stop where we had to change for the bus, and dropped the conversation.

A half-hour later, the Senshi, Naru-san, Ryou-san and I were all in Rei-san's bedroom, discussing why a little girl even knew of the existence of the Ginzuishou, let alone why she wanted it.

"If you two know anything about why she wants it, I want you to keep your mouths shut," Bunny-chan insisted while looking straight at Ryou-san and me.

"Telling you won't put anybody's relationship at risk," I said.

"It isn't that," she replied. "I want her to tell me."

"I understand," Ryou-san said with a smile.

"Well, I don't," Minako-san complained. "If we have a source of reliable information, we should use it."

"Usagi-san trusts Chibiusa to do the right thing," Ami-san answered. "And she's the only one of us who's actually met the girl."

"Hang on," Rei-san interrupted. "Somebody's coming."

"Change of subject, then," Makoto announced. "Darling, I know a lot about you, but I still don't know when your birthday is."

"Really? I've never mentioned it?" I smiled. "I was born on Tanabata."

"That's less than a week away!" Bunny-san complained. "We'll never get a proper party together in time!"

"I don't need a party," I said just before there was a knock at the door.

It appeared that Rei-san's grandfather had brought us tea to drink while we studied. "Something to put you in the right frame of mind."

"Thank you, jii-san," Rei-san said while taking the tray.

She passed the cups around and we sipped at the tea... except that I had put forcefields over the mouths of my, Makoto's, and Bunny-chan's teacups. They looked at me while I made a show of pretending to fall asleep, just like everyone else had actually fallen unconscious from the drugged tea. Both ladies figured it out and followed the rest of us to the floor.

It didn't take long for "jii-san" to come back in and drop her disguise, turning back into Chibiusa and her ball Luna-P. Chibiusa quietly proceeded to start looking through everybody's bags for the Ginzuishou, beginning with opening Makoto's bag... which was as far as she got before Makoto grabbed her.

"Good girls don't look through other girls' bags without permission!"

"Why aren't you asleep? I drugged all of the tea!"

"And good boys and girls don't drug other people!" Bunny-chan sat down and turned Chibiusa onto her lap, and raised her hand to spank the youngster.

"Usagi! No!" I shouted. But it was too late. She got a single spanking in before I could stop her.

As Chibiusa cried in pain and surprise, the crescent moon mark on her forehead lit up and a beam of energy shot into the air.

"And now we have to worry about somebody from the Dark Moon showing up, because they were looking for that light show," I said in resignation. "And everybody else is out cold."

"Hide me, please!"

"Of course," I said. "Usagi-san, Makoto and I are heading into the woods with... I assume you're Chibiusa?"

"Uh-huh."

I turned back to Bunny-chan. "I hope you can distract whoever's about to show up – Kooan, if I'm not mistaken – until Sailor Moon can face her." And the three of us headed into the trees.

After a few minutes of walking through the forest and repeatedly almost tripping over tree roots, Chibiusa asked, "Can we stop now?"

Makoto nodded. "You're getting tired, aren't you? You've had a busy day." Then she turned to me. "What's a Black Moon?"

I thought for a quick moment, then realized how to explain without telling Chibiusa anything she didn't already know. "Some number of centuries from now, after Neo-Queen Serenity assumes her throne, there will be some sort of insurrection. The rebels will lose and be banished to a planet or planetoid, I don't know which, called Nemesis, and will develop a society called the Black Moon. And they'll come back here after Chibiusa."

"You should have told Usagi-san that even though she told you not to."

"We didn't have time," I said before Chibiusa started bouncing Luna-P as if it was a basketball.

"You know too much. Luna-P Henge!" And she was suddenly holding a parasol.

While I had to question her priorities, I knew that somebody as young as she was wouldn't be taking the long view. But I had no desire to be hypnotized into forgetting anything, especially after fighting so hard to keep my memories at the very end of the Missing Time. I bowed deeply, both out of respect and so I wasn't looking at her spiral parasol. "I humbly request that you consider what's happening just outside of these woods, Usagi Small Lady Serenity-sama."

Chibiusa abandoned her attempt to hypnotize me. "How do you know my name?"

"The same way you knew who Usagi-san is, except that I'm only from three decades in the future."

Makoto raised one eyebrow. "Should you have told her that?"

Without hesitation, I replied, "Yes. I trust her."

"You ... trust me?" She dropped the parasol, and it turned back into Luna-P before hitting the ground. "Only Puu has ever trusted me."

I smiled as I sat down so that we could look at each other on a more equal basis. "Sailor Pluto is pretty good about knowing who to trust, isn't she?"

"Uh-huh!" she nodded.

"Oh, but I'm being rude. I'm Rob Donaldson, and my friend is Kino Makoto."

"Hello, Danaru... Dona... Robu-san. Hello, Kino-san."

"Call me Mako-chan," she said as she sat down beside us. "Everybody else does, except for Robu."

"Why not?"

"Because we're boyfriend and girlfriend," she replied, just before we felt a wave of heat coming from the shrine complex.

"Stay close to me, Chibiusa," I said. "I'm pretty sure that that was Dark Fire, which means Kooan is fighting both Sailor Moon and Tuxedo Kamen right now. They'll keep the girls and Ryou-san safe."

She immediately sat on my lap, and I quietly raised an invisible forcefield around the three of us.

"What do we do now?" Chibiusa asked.

I couldn't resist. I whispered, "Be vewwy, vewwy quiet! Kooan's hunting wabbits!"

She just rolled her eyes... but she didn't seem to be as afraid as she was when we found our place to hide, and she didn't say anything for the next ten minutes, when we heard Bunny-chan and Chiba-san calling out our names. I dropped my forcefield and helped Chibiusa to her feet, standing up myself immediately afterwards.

"Makoto? Everything that I said about the Black Moon and about Sailor Pluto..."

"... stays between the three of us," she finished. "Usagi-chan doesn't want to know about it from you or me."

"I can't tell her?" Chibiusa asked, a look of worry on her face.

Smiling, Makoto replied, "She wants you to tell her. She doesn't want to learn why you're here from anybody else. But only tell her when you're ready, okay?"

Her worry disappeared. "Okay!"

Fifteen minutes later, we were back in Rei-san's bedroom and the others were just waking up.

"I'm sorry," Chibiusa said while bowing to everyone else. "I shouldn't have done that."

"Done what?" Minako-san asked.

Before Chibiusa could reply, Bunny-chan said, "We'll tell you later. Right now, it's time to introduce ourselves to the little brat..." I gave Bunny-chan a disappointed look. "... er, the little girl who's staying at my place for a while."

We introduced ourselves to Chibiusa in turn, and she finished by introducing herself. "I'm Tsukino Usagi. Mamo-chan calls me Chibiusa. I'm happy to meet you."

"Mamo-chan is *my* boyfriend, you brat! You don't get to call him that!"

"He's my boyfriend! Just like Robu-san is Mako-chan's boyfriend! You can have Urawa-san for your boyfriend!"

Ami-san quickly said, "I have a problem with that idea."

Before anybody else could say anything, Minako-san leaned down to look at Chibiusa eye-to-eye. "Mamoru-san isn't a prize to be won, Chibiusa. He's a person. And it's possible to love more than one person, in different ways."

"Oh." Chibiusa thought for a moment. "Does that mean you're one of Robu-san's or Urawa-san's girlfriends, too?"

Seeing no other way out of that particular line of inquiry, I quickly reached for the drugged tea that I hadn't drank earlier. Makoto wouldn't let me drink it, though.

I sighed deeply while we were on the train back to Azabu-Juban. "Why does she think I'm trying to collect a harem?"

Makoto sighed in return. "Let's list everybody you spend time with, darling. There's me, Ami-san, Saeko-basan, Usagi-chan, Rei-san, Mina-chan, Naru-san, Ichigo-san... and Ryou-san. And now Mamoru-san. Whether we like it or not, people think you and Ryou-san are collecting girlfriends."

"I dare you to call Saeko-basan or Rei-san anybody's girlfriend where they can hear you. And Bunny-chan made it quite clear that she's Chiba-san's girlfriend."

"How many people outside of our group know any of that?"

Friday made its way to our corner of the world, and brought a meeting of the Conversational English club along with it. I decided to let the ladies do most of the talking; Ami-san needed the practice.

"So, has Naru-san figured out how to make conundrum yet?"

"That's a puzzle," Ami-san replied.

"So she hasn't, even though she can make a moonstone?" Minako-san asked.

"No, I meant 'conundrum' means puzzle. It's corundum that she hadn't figured out how to make, the last time that I asked her about it."

"So she has made a conundrum!"

"Minako-san," I asked, "are you doing that on purpose?"

"Doing what?" she asked in reply, her face the picture of innocence.

"Never mind."

"Okay. So, maybe Naru-san's hung up on making only gemstones? There's a lot of different kinds of corundum besides the gem varieties."

Ami-san shook her head. "If that was the case, she wouldn't have been able to make transparent aluminium."

"Oh. Right." After a moment, Minako-san asked, "When did you ask her last?"

"Three weeks ago, if I remember correctly."

"Then maybe she's just figured out how to make gems and hasn't told anyone."

"So we should ask her," I suggested.

"Ami-san, can you do that?"

"I can talk with Naru-san, yes."

"Then it's settled." Minako looked happy, then realized that she'd shut down the conversation. "So... Rob-san, I think you said something about liking anime. Does that include movies?"

"It depends on the movie," I replied.

"The one that's opening on the 18th."

Ah. *That* movie. "I want to go see that one, but Makoto would hate it."

"Why?" Ami-san asked.

"The protagonist is an aircraft pilot."

"You're right, she'd hate it," Ami-san nodded in agreement. "You and Ryou-san should go."

It wasn't until after my birthday that I realized her other reason for making that particular suggestion.

Monday arrived, and Bunny-chan was in tears.

We skipped the Revealing Of The Lunches; we had something more important to do. "What's wrong?" Ami-san asked Bunny-chan.

"Mamo-chan dumped me!!!"

While the girls immediately tried their best to console the inconsolable, I caught Ryou-san's attention. He simply nodded. We then turned our attention to the girls.

"There's no logical reason for Mamoru-san to do that," Ami-san said in an attempt to understand.

"Logic has nothing to do with it," Minako-san replied. "Love is an emotion, maybe the strongest emotion that there is. He must be feeling something for somebody in order to do this."

"Maybe he's just looking for somebody different," Ichigo-san suggested.

"You're not helping," Naru-san said flatly.

"Should I change the way I look for him?"

"No," I said sternly. "Usagi-san —" The looks on everybody's faces showed that they noticed I didn't call her Bunny-chan. — if you want to change yourself because you think you can be a better person somehow, that's one thing. But changing yourself for somebody else's sake only leads to heartbreak. Change your makeup because you want to, not because you think he wants you to."

"But I don't wear makeup," she said.

"Tsukino Usagi-san doesn't wear makeup," I admitted. "But somebody else does, and right now it's the Crystal Power kind."

"Oh, right."

"So," Makoto asked, "was the mention of makeup supposed to be a hint?"

"We don't need to just hint any more," Ryou-san answered. "Eleven times out of twelve, the next place we'll find somebody from the Dark Moon is the cosmetics store Otafukuya."

"When?" Minako-san asked.

"Tomorrow at the earliest."

"Can I watch?" Ichigo-san asked.

Makoto and I shook our heads in unison. "Right now," my dearest said, "Usagi-san needs to beat up a ... youma?"

"A droid," I corrected her.

"Thanks, darling. Ichigo-san, right now, Usagi-san needs to beat up a droid, and I don't want to risk your life by letting you get in her way."

But Ichigo-san went anyway. And her telling me afterward what happened is the only reason why I knew Bunny-chan used the line that I had accidentally given her: "The only makeup I need is Moon Crystal Power Make-Up!" And then she did some nasty things to the droid's face before hitting it with a Moon Princess Halation, just like in canon.

Ichigo-san also gave me a description of the Ayakashi Sister who was in charge, confirming my assumption that it was Berthier.

I wasn't allowed to go. Nobody wanted me to be hurt on Tanabata; that would have spoiled the birthday party they were planning.

Not that it was a particularly happy birthday celebration. since Bunny-chan was still hurting from Chiba-san dumping her. And I told the others ahead of time that they didn't need to give me any presents, so of course they went in on one expensive gift for me that Makoto picked out — a pair of cufflinks with a ruby set into each one.

"Now I'm going to have to get dressed up more often. Thank you, everybody. I hope these came from OSA-P."

Naru-san smiled. "They did. And I made them. Not the gold, but the gems."

"Congratulations! I'll treasure them always."

Friday arrived, and brought the Conversational English club meeting with it... which we changed to a study session because exams were coming up. But one of us showed up late.

For once, it wasn't Minako-san who ducked out; she had resigned from the volleyball team before Ail and An left. "Where's Ami-chan?" Minako-san asked.

"The teachers wanted to speak with her," I said with a certain suspicion growing within me.

"Is this what the club was like when I went to play volleyball instead?"

"Pretty much, yeah."

"Don't take this the wrong way, Rob-san, but it's boring just sitting and talking with only you."

"Makoto doesn't mind being alone with me," I said with a bit of a smile.

"Mako-chan's your girlfriend, and that's one of the few things that I envy her."

Oh. "Minako-san, I'm not interested in you that way. You're my friend, but you're just my friend. Just like Bunny-chan, or Ami-san, or Naru-san, Ichigo-san, and Rei-san. Makoto is my dearest, and I think that will always be the case."

"I figured that out during the Missing Time," she replied quietly. "And I was on the rebound from losing Alan when I met you, so I didn't know whether what I felt for you then was friendship or love. But I know now that it's friendship." After a brief moment, she added, "It's the whole 'having a boyfriend' thing that I envy about Makoto-san, not that it's you who she has as a boyfriend. You can be the big brother that I never had."

"How can I be your big brother? We're the same age."

"Are we?" she asked. "The rest of us lost a year's growth when Usagi-san reset the world. Artemis told me that you two and Luna didn't get reset. Are you sure you aren't a year older than the rest of us?"

"Now that's an interesting question," Ami-san said from the doorway. "And I'm sorry that I'm late."

"Come on in," Minako-san said. "What did the teachers want to talk with you about?"

Ami-san suddenly looked at the floor.

"Don't tell me you're in trouble?"

"No, it isn't that," she replied. "It's about a scholarship that I was offered at a medical school."

"That's great!" Minako-san said with a smile.

"In Germany."

Minako-san's smile disappeared. "When would you be leaving?"

"Wednesday."

"During exams?" Minako-san asked.

"That's why I needed to speak with the teachers."

"Oh." I said. "And that explains why you wanted Ryou-san and me to go see a movie together on the 18th."

She nodded. "If I go, please stay friends with my boyfriend."

I noticed that she said "if", not "when".

"I don't know about 'friends', Ami-chan," Minako-san replied. "I might take him away from you while you're gone."

"Mina-chan!!"

We got together for lunch on Monday, the first day of exams. But Minako-san was distracted.

"What's wrong?" Bunny-chan asked after the Revealing Of The Lunches.

"Artemis didn't come home last night."

"He is a cat," Ichigo-san mentioned. "Maybe he's out tomcatting somewhere."

I shook my head and answered before Minako-san could. "It's more likely that he's been caught by enemy action. Ryou-san?"

"I can't sense him in any future that I can see. But I'm only looking at the immediate future."

"Immediate as in the end of the school day?" Minako-san asked. Ryou-san nodded in reply. "So, where is he?"

"Going by the records I have, he's in a deep-freeze along with the actual staff of that new ice cream stand, Bob-Floy." After a beat, I added, "And Ami-san needs to go rescue him."

"I do?" she said in surprise as she looked up from her textbook.

"You're the only one who can save the prisoners, including Artemis."

"I suppose I need to go, then," Ami-san said. "At least this means you won't be having a going-away party for me."

"But we need a party to take our minds off exams!"

Ami-san sighed. "That's exactly why we don't need a party, Usagi-san."

"Is that the only reason?" Ryou-san asked.

She looked straight at him as she closed her book. "You already know, don't you?" He nodded. "I don't want to say good-bye to all of you, and Rei-san."

"You don't want to, or...?" I asked.

She sighed deeply instead of answering.

"You'd have to learn German to study in Germany," Naru-san pointed out. "You could do that here. Heidelberg and Freiburg will still be there later."

"It's better to learn German in Germany, though," Ami-san replied without very much conviction.

Makoto handed her bento to me and took Ami-san's hands in her own. "Ami. Your mother says that we're sisters in all but blood. Listen to your sister. It's obvious that you don't want to leave us."

Thank you, Makoto. I could never have said that to her, as much as somebody needed to, because I couldn't possibly make Ami-san cry.

"I know," she said through her tears. "Don't let me go..."

We all skipped the rest of lunch in order to comfort Ami-san... and convince her to stay.

After our exams that afternoon, we all went to get ice cream, and Ami-san got a new attack at the same time. Nothing fights ice with ice quite like "Shiny Aqua Illusion" does. Since we all went for ice cream, Ryou-san got to see Ami-san's new "Mercury Star Power, Make-Up" transformation at the same time as the rest of us. The poor boy went through three handkerchiefs before he could stanch his nosebleed, and I had to sit out the fight in order to make sure he didn't faint from blood loss ... or embarrassment on Ami-san's behalf. I explained to him that he was just going to have to learn to live with having a beautiful girlfriend who didn't mind him seeing her naked... which set off another nosebleed.

Ami-san spent most of the evening convincing Saeko-basan to let her stay in Japan, with Makoto and me by her side. And by the end of the evening, the three of us had stopped using honorifics to refer to each other.

Exams continued through to July 17. We were given the Saturday off so that the teachers could start marking our tests... which meant that I was first in line at the theatre. I brought a bag. Hey, Luna gave the girls new communicators and transformation wands earlier in the week; I wanted some goodies, too, even if I had to pay for them out of my own pocket.

Which, I'll admit, was actually Sailor Pluto's pocket. But the principle still held.

After I told Makoto that the movie had aircraft in it, she decided to spend the day with Bunny-chan and Rei-san at the Hikawa shrine. Ami, Ryou-san, and Minako-san kept me company instead. Which meant that we completely missed Rei-san's grandfather's "Protect Esthe" project and Sailor Mars unlocking her Burning Mandala attack. That was probably for the best. I doubt Ryou-san or I could have survived seeing the "Mars Star Power, Make-Up" transformation; we probably would have been roasted for peeping.

Instead, we saw a very good movie.

Everybody else bought tickets. I got the souvenir ticket, the guidebook, the opening-day poster, the coffee mug, and the soundtrack CD. Oh, and a large popcorn.

We settled in to the best seats in the house, eventually the lights went down, we applauded when the Studio Ghibli vanity plate appeared on the screen, the credits played... and then the violins of the first instrumental track began and we saw a pig fly.

The only thing that kept the experience from being perfect was that I couldn't share it with Makoto.

We had the entire next week off, too. There were a lot of exams to be marked.

Ryou-san insisted that we leave Thursday afternoon open. Apparently, seven times out of nine, the weather forecast was going to be wrong.

"Maybe we should lend a communicator to Chibiusa," I suggested.

Ryou-san shook his head. "If we do that, she'll figure out who the Sailor Senshi are too early."

"More importantly, the wristband wouldn't fit her," Ami pointed out, knowing from experience how little I cared whether an event was too early. "She'd probably end up losing it."

"It isn't as if we won't know where she is," Makoto pointed out.

"This is true," I admitted. "So, what do you want to do between now and then?"

Ami wanted to visit the library. Makoto wanted to go figure skating. Ryou-san wanted to go sightseeing. I had the deciding vote.

So we went skating on Monday, sightseeing on Tuesday, and reading on Wednesday. Never let it be said that, when a decision needed to be made, I wasn't willing to come down firmly on the fence.

And then it was Thursday. A fine day, without a cloud in the sky... until suddenly it wasn't.

Makoto and I grabbed umbrellas and headed for Chibiusa's school. Halfway there, a bolt of lightning nearly hit us while we were walking past a three-storey building.

My dearest shouted over the storm. "That's not possible! Somebody's shooting at us! Jupiter Star Power, Make-Up!"

I put up a five-layered forcefield set while she was transforming, which was good because whoever was attacking shot another lightning bolt at us. The shot got through three layers at once... which meant the tip of the pinpoint attack was stronger than the leading edge of Bunny-chan's wide-area wish at the end of the Missing Time. Of course, Bunny-chan's wish was a lot bigger than a single pinpoint.

Jupiter slapped my cheek. "No going into shock, Oni! Run!"



I grabbed her in a bridal carry and went to flash-move, heading in an irregular zig-zag to the second-closest cover. "Thanks, Jupiter," I said as we took cover just before a third bolt hit where we had just been standing.

Then we saw a moonbeam from Chibiusa's school.

"Oh, no. She's panicking."

"And now the Dark Moon knows where to find her," I added as I raised another forcefield set – just before another lightning bolt hit it. "I can't keep this up forever," I added.

"Can you manage one more?"

"Two more, if you need them. Maybe three."

Yet another lightning bolt hit my forcefield... and Jupiter spun and pointed with one hand into the air. "Sparkling... Wide... Pressure!" She made a throwing motion with her other hand and a ball of lightning flew in the direction she had pointed.

Nothing happened for a moment... then a large drum fell to the ground, followed by the droid that had been pounding on it to create the thunder and lightning.

Then we heard a slow clapping from behind and above us. "Very impressive, *Jupiter*." We both spun to see a green-haired woman sneering at us and levitating just far enough away that we couldn't grab her in hand-to-hand combat. As she continued her slow clap, she asked, "This *is* a thing here and now, right?"

"Here, but not now," I replied. "You're two decades early, unless you're copying me. Petz, I assume."

She stopped the slow clap. "And you would be Oni. Rubeus wants you both dead, the sooner the better."

"Rubeus?" Jupiter turned to me. "Is he that Rubeus Hagrid person you mentioned during the Missing Time?"

"What? Ack! No! And why are you asking about that *now*?"

"Enough!" Petz shouted. "Time for you to die!"

"Not today!" came a shout from down the street. "Shiny Aqua Illusion!"

The rain that was still falling slowed Mercury's attack to the point that Petz was able to dodge it. "I'm not ready to face you all yet. But rest assured that the three of you and your precog friend *will* die soon!" And Petz teleported away.

"Where's Chibiusa?" I asked Mercury as she walked up to us.

"Still at school, and Ryou's with her."

"Good," I said, before sighing deeply.

"What's wrong?" Jupiter asked.

"This didn't go at all like the canon fight," I replied. "Originally, Petz and... whatever the droid's name was... were looking to frighten and capture Chibiusa, not kill us."

"That's a good thing," Jupiter replied. "That means we're a thorn in Rubeus' side."

"Rubeus?" Mercury asked.

"No, not Rubeus Hagrid."

"Ladies. Focus. Please. All three of us and Ryou-san are targets."

"If we're the enemy's primary targets, then Moon, Mars, and Venus aren't," Mercury pointed out. "They can protect Chibiusa with a freer hand."

"There is that," I admitted. "Although that state of affairs lasts only as long as we're still alive."

"Then we don't die," Jupiter replied as she transformed back to Makoto.

"That's easy to say," Mercury said while transforming back to Ami, "but not so easy to do."

"And Ryou-san will have a harder time of it than the rest of us," I added while seeing Bunny-chan and Chiba-san walking toward Chibiusa's school. "Somebody stays with him as often as possible."

"That's my job," Ami insisted.

Makoto, Ami, Ryou-san, and I got together the next afternoon, in place of a Conversational English club meeting.

"A few weeks back, I asked about our future," I said to Ryou-san. "And you mentioned we were good to interfere 99 times out of a hundred. Is that still the case?"

Ryou-san shook his head. "The future that I can't see past August 11 has gone from one chance in a hundred to one chance in twelve."

"I was afraid of that, after hearing what Petz said yesterday," Makoto said. "Can we hide from the Dark Moon?"

"I'm not hiding from anybody, my dearest."

"If it's a choice between hide and die, I'd rather hide, darling. I don't want to lose you."

"And I don't want to lose you, Ryou," Ami added. "Can we take the battle to the enemy?"

I shook my head. "Not without a spacecraft. Their base is in low Earth orbit."

"So why can't we see it?" Ami asked.

"I'm not the only one who can go invisible," I replied.

"Could we get there with a Sailor Teleport?"

"That would put the others at risk, Ami," Makoto said. "I still think hiding is the best option."

"And not get our report cards next week?" Ami asked.

"Oh." Makoto sighed. "I guess we can't hide."

"There's only one viable option," our precog announced. "Act like we don't care."

"And how many futures will that keep us safe in?" I asked.

"Eleven out of twelve."

"Then that's what we do," Ami decided for the group, Makoto nodding in agreement.

I didn't ask, but I was pretty sure that the twelfth possible future was the one that Ryou-san couldn't foresee past August 11.

Minako-san decided that she wanted some good luck in order to pass the exams despite the fact that she'd already written them, so she dragged Makoto off to the Lucky Charms House, a store that sold nothing but good-luck-charm costume jewelry. Even without Ryou-san telling her that it was the most likely place for the Dark Moon to try to take over. But he told the rest of us, so Ami and I followed them.

Makoto and Minako-san met Bunny-chan and Chibiusa near the store, quite by accident. This was lining up to be just like in canon. Just after they left Chibiusa outside and went into the store, I pulled Ami into an alleyway.

"Rob! What are you doing?"

"Hiding us," I replied as I put forcefields around both of us and went invisible. It was the first time I'd tried making two people invisible at the same time... but it worked. "Move slowly, please," I said, "I have to concentrate on keeping the effect going."

Once she walked out of the alleyway, she understood why I turned us both invisible. Chiba-san was talking with Chibiusa. They went inside the store before we got close enough to listen to their conversation, so I dropped the invisibility cloaks.

Then we heard two people inside the store shout "You!", the front window shattered because somebody threw a water jug through it, and Makoto jumped through the hole. "Petz is in there!"

We didn't need to be told twice. We ran. She chased us.

"Looks like acting like we don't care isn't going to work," I pointed out as I grabbed both Ami and Makoto, then turned up the speed. "I just hope Minako-san and Bunny-chan can keep Chibiusa safe. And they've obviously figured out your secret, my dearest. By the way, there was a door."

"With a droid blocking it, darling."

"Ah. I think we've outrun Petz."

"She'll be here in a minute or two," Ami said. "Mercury Star Power, Make-Up!"

"Jupiter Star Power, Make-Up!"

If we weren't running for our lives, I would have enjoyed the view. But we had to stop running; Petz caught up to us while they were transforming. "I knew you were the girl I saw transform into Sailor Jupiter last week! It's too bad I didn't see who *you* are, though," she pointed at Mercury.

"You'll have to learn to live with disappointment," I said before Mercury could say anything that might give her away. It was bad enough that she'd spilled the beans to her mother.

"And you don't even bother transforming. Thank you for making my job easier. Nipasu!"

As the droid appeared, Mercury said, "Didn't I defeat that enemy already?"

"Silly girl," Petz answered. "They're droids. We can rebuild them."

I put up a forcefield before neo-Nipasu could freeze us, which quickly meant that I had a frozen forcefield... that I couldn't drop.

"Scatter!" cried Mercury. We split up, but I passed a few coins to Jupiter first.

I did my best to get the droid's attention. "Hey, Nipasu! Your ice cream tastes terrible!"

She ignored me.

"Shiny Aqua..."

Nipasu shot at Mercury instead, freezing her in mid-attack.

Petz took the opportunity to gloat. "When we rebuild them, we rebuild them better than they were before!"

At least they were distracted. "Jupiter... Supreme..."

"Go ahead! Waste your time! We're ready for your Supreme Thunder attack!" Petz boasted.

Jupiter tossed my change into the air. "...Railgun!"

And Nipasu fell apart from being shredded by coin shrapnel, freeing both Mercury and my forcefield.

"...Illusion!" Mercury's attack would have hit Petz if she hadn't teleported away.

By the time the ladies had transformed back and we made it back to the Lucky Charms House, Moon and Venus had disposed of the threat there... and I was too late to corner Tuxedo Kamen and ask him what he was thinking, the way he was treating Bunny-chan.

Knowing that the people who wanted us dead had literal eyes in the sky, I applied invisibility cloaks to both Makoto and myself a half-kilometer before we got home.

And then came the posting of our aggregate exam scores.

Ami improved again, thanks to Makoto's tutoring in Home Economics. Her score was 876 – not just the best in the entire school, but the best that anybody attending Kuritsu Juban Chuugakkou had ever scored.

Makoto, Ryou-san, and I placed in the low-700s again. We were getting good at appearing to be good but not stellar students.

Ichigo-san, Naru-san, and Minako-san placed in the mid-600s again. And Bunny-chan scored 601 – a personal best.

Makoto's grandfather wasn't waiting for her at her apartment. But I realized that they'd be seeing each other on August 12, so there was no need for him to make the trip.

Saeko-basan read through our report cards, congratulating Ami on her grades and encouraging Makoto and me to keep improving. Then Naru-san and Bunny-chan dropped by with ice cream from Bob-Floy, and it turned into an "everybody passed every course" party.

"I understand that Ami has been helping you with your homework," Saeko-basan said around bites of ice cream.

"She has!" Bunny-chan nodded her head. "And Mako-chan's been helping both of us with Home Ec!"

"Do you get together every afternoon that Ami doesn't have juku?"

"Almost every afternoon," Naru-san replied.

"Yeah, sometimes we have to go fight cardians or droids, so we can't study," Makoto added.

"Er... Mako-chan..."

Makoto looked at Bunny-chan, then at Ami. "Didn't you tell them that your mother knows?"

Ami blushed. "I... forgot."

"Mizuno-sensei, how much do you know?" Naru-san asked.

"I know about Sailor Mercury, Sailor Jupiter, and Oni," she replied.

"So less than you do," Makoto added.

I facepalmed. "My dearest, have you forgotten how to keep secrets?"

"Oops. Sorry."

Saeko-basan laughed. "Would you be happier if I forgot what's been said here today?"

Naru-san and Bunny-chan exchanged a meaningful glance, the sort that only long-time friends know the meaning of. Then Bunny-chan... Usagi-san said, "No, it's all right, Mizuno-sensei. Naru-chan isn't a Sailor Senshi."

"But I know that I hang out with them," Naru-san added.

"I'm Sailor Moon."

"Ah. Do Ikuko-san and Kenji-san know?"

Usagi-san shook her head. "I don't think mama or papa know. And I'm pretty sure that Shingo doesn't know, either."

Right. That's her little brother's name. I keep forgetting.

"Then I shan't tell them," Saeko-basan said.

"I'm also pretty sure that Chibiusa doesn't know, either," I added.

"I'll keep that in mind," Saeko-basan replied. "Right now, the ice cream is melting."

"Eek!" Bunny-chan turned her full attention to devouring her snack.

Before we could finish off the ice cream, the intercom buzzed. "Were you expecting somebody, Ami?" Saeko-basan asked.

"No."

Makoto and I exchanged a meaningful glance of our own as Saeko-basan answered the buzz. "Mizuno residence."

"Is Tsukino Usagi there?"

Ami, Makoto, and I exhaled. "Chibiusa?" Ami asked.

"Hi, Ami-neesan." She didn't sound happy.

"Your cousin is here. Come on up." And with those words from Ami, Saeko-basan buzzed Chibiusa in.

By the time she arrived, we had a bowl of ice cream ready for her. And by the time we had all finished off our snack, Chibiusa was ready to talk.

"Ikuko-mama and Kenji-papa are busy tomorrow," she said quietly. "I'm going to be the only person in class who doesn't have her parents with her."

"Why are your classmates' parents joining you in class tomorrow?" Naru-san asked.

"It's the last day of the term, and we're having a curry party."

Ah. Plot. I'd almost forgotten this episode, as well.

"Does it have to be your parents who share your curry, Chibiusa?" Saeko-basan asked.

"You have a seminar tomorrow, mother," Ami reminded her.

"Oh. Yes, that's right."

"Well," I said, "I don't have plans for tomorrow, and I know how to make curry..."

"No!!!" everybody but Chibiusa and Saeko-basan shouted.

"Why not?" Chibiusa asked.

"Yeah, why not? My curry's pretty good."

"If you like having your tongue burned off," Makoto replied. Then she turned to Chibiusa. "He puts nanami togarashi in his curry."

Chibiusa actually shuddered on hearing that.

Well, fine. Be that way. Then I remembered who Small Lady's parents actually were. "Bunny-chan, why don't you and Chiba-san stand in for Chibiusa's parents?"

"Yeah! Let's ask Mamo-chan!"

"You don't get to call him that, you brat!"

Saeko-basan cheered her throat meaningfully. Both Usagi-sans quieted down.

"I'll call Mamoru-san," Ami volunteered. "Chibiusa, you need to learn how to make curry. From Mako-chan, not from Rob-san."

"That's fine," Saeko-basan said, "but you'll need to buy groceries first."

So, while Makoto gave Chibiusa a lesson in knife safety, Bunny-chan, Naru-san, and I headed off to the nearest supermarket. Which was apparently having a sale on a new food – something called "Dark Fruit".

I told both of my shopping companions to avoid that display and not so much as touch the free samples. Naru-san told me she'd already figured that out; Dark *anything* was almost certainly connected to the Dark Moon. Then I found a quiet corner and went invisible. And, sure enough, when I took a look at the free sample display, Petz was standing behind it along with two other women. I assumed that they were her sister Calaveras and their current droid Avokadora.

Good thing I was sufficiently paranoid to go invisible; the body count from collateral damage in the supermarket could have been horrific if Petz was to try killing me.

Not that it didn't end up appearing to be horrific anyway; a few minutes after we arrived, all of the other customers collapsed, and the store's meat and produce collapsed into rotten piles.

Bunny-chan quickly made use of the same quiet corner that I had used to go invisible. "Moon Crystal Power, Make-Up!"

No, I didn't watch. She never gave me permission, express or implied, to watch.

Then she boldly went one aisle over and turned to face the Dark Fruit display. "How dare you invade this place where people buy what they need to make the meals that they offer to their families, and turn those ingredients to dust! Shizuo Tsuji may forgive you, but I will not! In the name of the Moon, I'll punish you!"

Petz and Calaveras took the opportunity to cut and run. I wouldn't have been surprised if each had intended to get away on her own, leaving the other to face the music without her.

The droid Avokadora was much braver; the banana that she was holding suddenly had a blade sticking out of it. "Banaknife!"

"Be careful! She's got a knife!" Moon yelled a completely superfluous warning.

Naru-san just smiled as she held her hand in front of her as if she was holding a hilt. "That's not a knife." The carbon from the supermarket's destroyed produce flew to her hand, forming a diamond wakizashi in three seconds flat. "That's a knife."

She'd obviously been practicing. Both the technique and the intimidation.

Unfortunately, Avokadora wasn't intimidated, and it was also obvious that Naru-san hadn't been practicing how to actually use her sword. But the droid wasn't particularly good with her blade, either; it seemed that she was expecting people to run just at the sight of a weapon. It looked to me like the two of them were [Flynnning](#)... and diamond-sword versus banana-sword Flynnning should not have gone on for that long. At one point, I even had to use a forcefield to make sure Naru-san wasn't impaled by a banana.

But the fight went on long enough for Sailor Moon to get in position and say three words: "Moon Princess Halation!"

As the droid turned to dust, I resolved to ask Minako-san or Chiba-san to give Naru-san some kenjutsu lessons or the equivalent. She obviously needed them. I couldn't train her, not then. I rarely concentrated enough to give my forcefields sharp edges, so I was more of a stick fighter than a sword fighter when I fought close-in at all.

Come to think of it, I needed some lessons, too. But not until Makoto and I got back from our trip.

From all reports after the fact, the curry party on July 31 went well.  
I still think Japanese curry is too mild, though.

Makoto and I had less than two weeks to decide whether it was a good idea for me to join her on August 12. We had discussed it more than once, but for the longest time she refused to commit to an answer, yes or no.

But Meioh-san had told me that I was going on a trip, so I prepared to pack anyway. I also did as much research as I could ahead of time as to how I should behave... which, according to Rei-san, boiled down to "stay silent and be respectful".

Which I could do. Even Makoto admitted as much, so she finally told me that I could go to the memorial service.

So I paid a visit to Center Gai, to discover that there was a garment bag with my name on it at Atelier Lucent. Pre-paid, just slip into the suit to check the size, which was of course perfect. And the jacket had a pocket large enough to hold my smartphone. Meioh-san knew what she was doing, even though she wasn't around to serve me directly. Which was probably another hint that she knew what she was doing. What I appreciated the most were the shoes that came with the suit – sturdy shoes that would support my feet during the climb from the parking lot to the memorial site, and still looked good with the suit.

I hung the garment bag in my closet as soon as I got home. Then I visited Ryou-san.

"Come in, Robu-san," he said just before I could knock on his door.

I did, then I said, "You already know why I'm here."

He nodded. "The possible timeline that I can't foresee past next Tuesday now has a probability of one in three."

"Here's something that you might not know. Sailor Pluto has told me to keep my 2022 cellphone with me next Tuesday."

He sighed. "I didn't know that you had already made contact with her. The possible timeline that I can't foresee past next Tuesday *now* has a probability of one in two."

"Sorry. Should we stop pretending that it isn't going to happen?"

"The probability is only one in two. As long as it isn't at least five in six, I'm not going to admit that it's going to happen."

"I can understand that. Take your comfort where you can, buddy. And we don't tell the girls yet."

"I'll agree with you on your last sentence."

That Thursday, I paid another visit to the Hikawa shrine, in order to pay my respects to the resident kami. I carried out all of the rituals, made a donation of ten thousand yen (which in 1992 would buy a lot more than two bags of groceries), and spoke my wish. "Please, help Makoto and Ami and Ryou-san survive whatever's going to happen on Tuesday."

"And what's going to happen on Tuesday, Donarudoson-san?" I heard a gruff voice that I didn't recognize ask from behind me.

"I don't know," I admitted while continuing to face the offering box; for some reason, it felt rude to look anywhere else. "But I doubt it will be anything pleasant."

"You have concerns for your own life, but your wish was for others."

"I don't want any of them to die. The kami can do what they want with me, as long as Makoto and the others get to keep fighting the good fight here."

"Because you ask for others, not for yourself, and you are willing to sacrifice yourself for your companions, I will help when the time is right." Then I felt a touch that burned like fire on the back of my neck, and suddenly I had something resembling another brainprint in the back of my mind.

I quickly turned to see who I was talking with.

There was nobody there.

\* \* \*

On Friday morning, I wore my new shoes in order to break them in, and visited a camping supply store... where I bought a pocket first-aid kit, a water bottle, and four vacuum-packed meals.

Something in the back of my mind told me that it would be prudent to have those.

Friday afternoon, I asked Makoto what she wanted to do for the rest of the day. So we went skating.

Saturday, Sunday, and Monday, we prepared for the trip on Tuesday... both physically and mentally. Makoto stopped what she was doing and cried on my chest more than once.

Then it was Tuesday morning. August 11. We both finished packing. My suitcase wasn't large enough to hold everything – on a hunch, I had packed my new water bottle, the vacuum-packed meals, and the first-aid kit – so I wore my new suit, and I put my phone and its charger in my pocket. Then, Makoto and I stepped out of our apartments to head for the train station...

... only to find a small group waiting for us. Bunny-chan, Minako-san, Chibiusa, Ami, Ryou-san... even Rei-san was there. "Naru-san and Ichigo-san send their best wishes," Rei-san said.

"And we all hope that your Obon journey will be safe," Minako-san added.

"I thought they were going to a memorial service," Chibiusa said.

Makoto passed her bag to me and squatted down. "We are. It's a memorial for hundreds of people, including my parents."

"Oh. You're going to honour your ancestors."

"That's right."

Then Ryou-san leaned over to Bunny-chan and whispered, "Get her out of here. *Now.*"

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"That probability just hit five in six."

"Oh,..." I bit back the curse I was about to say. Stupid genre conventions.

Usagi-san, Minako-san, and Rei-san got Chibiusa to the other side of the street just as I realized that the people who Rubeus really wanted dead were now in a small group together... and Petz teleported in. "There's the precog that we've been looking for!"

And she pointed the thrice-damned Black Moon Stick, which I only knew from the anime, at Ryou-san.

We couldn't transform or show off our powers, not with Chibiusa watching. Ami, Makoto, and I all decided to be heroes at the same time, and covered Ryou-san with our bodies before a beam from that stick hit him... and us.

The last thing we heard from what we considered was the real world was Petz shouting, "Be sent to another dimension!"

There was only one way out of the trap that she had just sprung on us: Sailor Teleport. Unfortunately for us, that needed three more Sailor Senshi than we had here, and the Senshi that were here were in their untransformed states.

As Makoto hugged me and Ami held on to Ryou-san for dear life, I thought that, since we couldn't get away from this, I really hoped that being sent to another dimension wasn't a euphemism.

We heard the Sailor Senshi approach the shrine. "I still can't believe they're gone."  
"We all saw it happen, Usagi," As always, Small Lady was the rather blunt voice of childlike truth.  
"*That doesn't mean we have to accept it!*" I didn't realize that Minako-san cared so much about us.  
«We'd better let them know we're still alive before somebody says or does something she shouldn't,» I sent to the others.

"How are we going to tell Mizuno-sensei?"

Ami smiled at Rei-san's question as she stepped around the corner of the shrine's main building. "What are you planning to tell my mother?"

"Ami-chan! You're alive!"

"I'm sure she'll be happy to hear that, Usagi-san."

"Mako-chan!"

I let Ryou announce our presence as we joined the girls. "Don't forget us."

"Ryou-san! Robu-san! You're all alive! *How?*"

"That's a much longer story than you're probably expecting," Makoto replied.

Which is my cue to tell the story here in more detail than my dearest planned to tell it to our friends. Twenty minutes earlier according to Bunny-chan, or two years earlier according to Ami, Ryou, Makoto, and me...

Unfamiliar sky. Where were we?

Mind you, the sky was the same shade of blue as back home – either home, for me – and the clouds looked much the same, but there were two moons visible when I looked past Makoto's shoulder.

Oh, good. It wasn't a euphemism; we really were sent to another dimension.

Wait – "we" or just "Makoto and I"? Looking around quickly, I saw Ryou-san and Ami getting up off the ground... and Ryou-san favouring his left ankle. I quietly thanked whoever was responsible for a small miracle; we were still together. And it looked like I was the last to recover from our trip. Well, somebody had to be last.

"He's finally awake!"

"Yes, my dearest, I'm finally awake." I got to my feet as quickly as she'd let me. "Ami, you might want to borrow this." I pulled the first-aid kit out of my luggage and tossed it to her, then said, "Let's take stock."

"What, now?" Makoto asked as she took her own suitcase from me.

"Better to do this sooner than later. This isn't my first rodeo."

"No, it's your second."

"I love you too, my dearest. Okay, on the plus side, we're alive, so obviously the laws of physics in this dimension allow for life, and wherever this is that we landed can support life as we know it. We're together, which is a *big* plus. On the minus side, Ryou-san's hurt, what we're wearing and carrying is everything that we have," and that reminded me to check the smartphone that Sailor Pluto had told me to bring along, which was still in one piece, "and we don't know whether anything here is edible. Has anybody figured out where we are?"

"Outside?" Makoto answered with a shrug.

"In an open field," Ami added while wrapping a tension bandage around Ryou-san's ankle.

"On a planet that isn't Earth," I contributed, pointing at the two moons while checking whether my smartphone could detect a signal. As I expected, it couldn't, which meant there was no compatible cellphone tower in range. I shut it off as I asked, "Ryou-san, is your precognition giving you any clues?"

"Just an abbreviation, in English. T.S.A.B."

## ***Isekai by Moonlight***

### **Chapter StrikeR**

I couldn't help myself; I started laughing. "Yep, Petz sent us to another dimension! One with dimension travel spells and dimension ships and dimension communication magic! Any other place and we'd have been in trouble!"

Ami stood up, walked over, and slapped my face.

I caught my breath and said, "Thanks, I needed that." As I got myself back under control, I sighed deeply.

"Everybody remember this phrase because you're going to be using it in place of swear words for the first few weeks: 'Stupid genre conventions'."

Makoto sighed. Ryou-san facepalmed. Ami quietly said, "That would only be helpful if we knew what the genre conventions are."

Oops. "Yeah. Right. Sorry about that."

"Another minus," Ryou-san said as he walked over, testing his weight on his ankle before leaning on Ami's shoulder. "We didn't get a chance to eat lunch before we were sent to this dimension."

"I have some vacuum-packed dehydrated food, enough for one small meal for each of us, and some Tokyo tap water."

"I used some of the water to clean Ryou's ankle," Ami told me. "Do we eat now, or wait?"

"Wait," Ryou-san said. "My foreseeing is fuzzy, but I think we're close to being found by these T.S.A.B. people."

"How close?" Ami asked.

"Four times out of five, we're sleeping in proper beds tonight."

"You need some food if your ankle's going to heal," Ami insisted.

"I have two kinds of curry – sausage or pork," I said just before a low hum filled the air. "Or we can wait."

Sure enough, the hum was coming from what looked like a transport helicopter without rotors that was headed our way. When they got close enough for us to see the TSAB markings on the nose, I raised a bright orange forcefield – the largest I could manage – just above our heads. Sure enough, they saw it and set down nearby, at which point I dropped the forcefield.

As three people got out of the vehicle and headed our way slowly, I said to the others, "If they really are TSAB, they're military and they're here to help us. If they aren't, we may have to defend ourselves. But that looks like a military vehicle out of their anime."

"Transform, or not?" Makoto asked.

"Not," Ami replied. "But keep your transformation wand ready."

I moved to Ryou-san's side so that Ami could become Sailor Mercury if necessary.

Then the people who were approaching stopped. The one at the front, who was noticeably shorter than the other two, said, "Hello! We're with the Time-Space Administrative Bureau Ground Armaments Service, Antiquities Administration Department Mobile Section 6. I'm Second Lieutenant Vita. Did you see any signs of a dimensional disturbance in this area in the last half hour?"

I relaxed, but kept my knowledge of who they were to myself; "Antiquities Administration Department Mobile Section 6" was better known as "Riot Force 6", and we'd landed somewhere in the middle of *Nanoha StrikerS* or a close variant thereof. Since none of us were in the original story, this was quickly going to become a close variant if it wasn't already.

"We were in the middle of it, miss," Ami replied loudly.

"No need to shout; I have a spell running. And call me lieutenant. Did you cause the disturbance?"

"No, lieutenant," I said. "We are victims of it. Please, where are we?"

"You're in a recreational wilderness area just outside of Cranagan, on Midchilda."

For Vita's benefit, I sighed deeply and commented on something I'd realized just before Ami slapped me out of hysterics. "Oh, boy. Not only are we in a different dimension, we're in a completely different reality."

It worked. "What's that supposed to mean?" Vita asked with some suspicion.

"It's a long story, lieutenant. In short, we are most likely fictional characters in this world, just as you're fictional characters in the world I came from. We request sanctuary and medical assistance."

"We do?" Makoto asked.

"Unless you want to stay in this park until we starve," I replied.

"If it's a choice between staying here and getting in an aircraft, I'd rather stay and starve."

Before I could reply, Vita said, "I'll have to ask my superiors about the sanctuary request. We can help with the medical request. Nakajima, move in and find out what help they need, and why the taller woman has a problem with aircraft. Lanster, cover Nakajima. I'm going back to the transport."

I didn't bother telling her that she'd left her spell on when giving orders; she no doubt wanted to listen in.

It didn't take long for Nakajima – a dark-haired woman who was only a year or two older than us – to arrive; somehow she roller-skated on rough ground. "I'm Private Subaru Nakajima. Who needs help?"

"I do," Ryou-san said. "I've hurt my ankle. My name's Ryou Urawa," he added; obviously, Ryou-san had noticed that Subaru... Private Nakajima had introduced herself using the Western order of her name.

"I think it's a sprain," Ami added.

"And who are you?"

Ami looked at me (as I said, this wasn't my first rodeo, and she was smart enough to know that made me the closest thing the group had to an expert in the current situation), and I nodded. No point in being rude when we're asking for help.



"Ami Mizuno. My mother is a doctor, so I've learned some basic medical knowledge."

"Ah. Is anybody else hurt?"

Makoto and I shook our heads. "I think we're okay," I said, "but we haven't been through quarantine or your world's equivalent. Oh, I'm Rob Donaldson."

"No, I guess you wouldn't have been through the dimensional entry process," Subaru said. "The dimensional flux readings back at headquarters were off the scale – you obviously didn't come here by using a standard spell."

"We were banished from our home reality. And I'm Makoto Kino," my dearest finished the introductions on our side.

Ami picked up Ryou-san in a piggyback carry. "You asked that we go with them, right?"

"If they'll have us. Would you take our luggage as well, please? I'm staying with Makoto."

"We've already agreed to give you medical care," Private Nakajima reminded us as she took both suitcases from me. "Now, why does Ms. Kino have a problem with our aircraft?"

"The last time I was aboard an aircraft," she whispered, "it crashed and my parents died."

Subaru stopped cold. "Oh. I'm sorry about your loss." She turned her head to look at the aircraft and had a distracted look on her face for a few minutes. Then she turned back to us. "I'll come back after dropping off Mr. Urawa and Ms. Mizuno at our transport. We'll walk out to the nearest road, then make our way to our base on foot."

"Thank you," Makoto said with obvious relief.

"You *are* serious about not flying," Subaru said.

"We'll send a car for you," Vira said over her spell. "HQ wants to talk with you about your sanctuary request, and why three of you have the same names as characters from a quarter-century-old anime from a non-administrated world."

It took a while for us to make the trip to their headquarters by foot and car. We got to know at least a bit about both Subaru and our driver, maintenance specialist Alto Krauetta. By the time we reached Long Arch, Riot Force 6's headquarters, we were all on a first-name basis; the locals seemed to expect it.

At that point, Makoto and I were only a couple of hours late to board the train to Narahara.

"There's an Earth in this universe," I said quietly while squeezing her hand. "We might be a bit late, but we can still go."

"Thanks," she whispered back.

But we didn't go anywhere other than the infirmary, where an attractive blonde doctor who introduced herself as Shamal was just finishing using magic to heal Ryou-san's ankle. Then we all went into a quarantine room; the four of us, Dr. Shamal, Lt. Vita, Private Lanster, Subaru, Alto, and helicopter pilot Sergeant Granscenic.

I'd complain about stupid genre conventions, but I did that one to myself. At least they fed us.

An hour or so after we finished lunch and didn't get to know each other better because Vita discouraged chitchat, there was a knock at our door.

"Come in," said Vita.

The door opened to reveal a tall young man who appeared to be in his mid-to-late 20s and a short girl a couple of years older than us, both wearing the same brown uniform that Vita, Subaru and Teana... Private Lanster had been wearing when they picked us up. They were also both wearing glasses; I guess Midchildan medical magic wasn't good enough to fix eyesight. Or maybe they liked the look for some reason. "I'm Captain Griffith Lowran," the man said, "and this is Corporal Shario Finieno." The woman nodded slightly. "First, you've all cleared quarantine. Team Stars, Vice, Alto, you can get back to work now."

"See you later, I hope," Subaru said as she headed out with the others.

Once they were gone, Captain Lowran announced, "I'm legally required to inform you that this conversation is being monitored and recorded. I understand that your names are Donaldson, Kino, Mizuno, and Urawa; is that correct?"

"It is," Ryou-san answered. "I'm Ryou Urawa."

"I am Ami Mizuno."

"I'm Makoto Kino."

"And to complete the formal record, I'm Rob Donaldson."

"Thank you," Captain Lowran said with a bit of a smile. "You made an extraordinary claim when the forward team picked you up; that you were from not just another dimension, but another reality altogether."

"One that I believe this reality considers to be a work of fiction," I replied.

"Do you have any evidence to support your claim?"

"Before I answer that, who will have access to the recording of this conversation?"

"Only the members of Antiquities Administration Department Mobile Section 6."

"Then this highly personal question won't be heard by people outside of Riot Force 6. How is Vivio?"

Nobody said anything for a long moment, although the look of surprise on the faces of Griffith... Captain Lowran... turned into a look of concentration within a few seconds. My suspicion that he was in telepathic communication with someone else was confirmed when he finally replied, "Captain Takamachi tells me that Vivio is recovering from her recent ordeal. How did you know who Vivio is?"

"As I told Lieutenant Vita, you're just as fictional in my original reality as my three companions are in your reality. And Vivio is the one person at Long Arch who I couldn't have learned about through reading military records. I assume that her recent ordeal took place aboard the —"

"We believe you," Captain Lowran said before I could say something that was probably being kept secret. Although I had no idea how they hoped to keep a multi-kilometre-long flying ship like the Saint's Cradle secret. Or maybe it was Vivio's background that was being kept secret. Captain Lowran changed the subject, "And that explains why you requested sanctuary from us."

"We don't know how to return home," Ami replied, "and we have no other place to go."

"Can't we do something for them?" Corporal Finieno asked.

"Colonel Yagami would like some proof that they are who they say they are," Captain Lowran replied.

"That's easy enough," Ami said while slowly taking her transformation wand from her pocket. "Mercury Star Power, Make-Up!"

"You should have asked permission to do that first," I said after she'd finished her transformation sequence.

"Oh. My apologies."

"Did you know that you're completely naked for a second when you transform?"

As I handed my handkerchief to Ryou-san — I didn't want his nosebleed to stain the only clothes he had here — Mercury turned to Corporal Finieno. "Yes. Does it matter?"

Shario... Corporal Finieno... actually blushed. "Well, I suppose, if you don't care, then it doesn't." Then she turned to Makoto. "What about your transformation?"

"I'd rather not show it to a man who isn't my boyfriend," my dearest replied while taking my hand in her own. "I am completely naked for a second when I transform, after all."

"Colonel Yagami says that one transformation is proof enough," Captain Lowran said before that conversation could continue. "I'm to give you quarters here, and we'll talk tomorrow morning about what you can do in order to earn your keep." Corporal Finieno waved a hand and a screen appeared in front of her as if by magic. No, wait; "as if" didn't belong in that sentence. After a moment, Captain Lowran added, "Never mind the part about earning your keep. You're here as guests of Colonel Yagami."

"Thank you, that's very kind of him," Ami replied with a smile.

"Her," Captain Lowran corrected my dearer friend.

"I have to ask this because it's on the residence registration form," Corporal Finieno interrupted. "Who's your next of kin?"

"She is," we said in unison. Ami and I pointed at Makoto, and Makoto and Ryou-san pointed at Ami.

"That works." Captain Lowran commented as Corporal Finieno entered the data. "It actually makes things easier if you're a family."

"It does? How?" Makoto asked.

"For one thing, we can give you family quarters instead of splitting you up in the men's and women's wings."

"We appreciate that, thank you," Ami said.

The family quarters turned out to be a two-bedroom apartment, with a kitchenette, a combined living and dining room, and one bathroom. While it was cramped compared to the officers' quarters that were depicted in the anime, it was spacious compared to our apartments in Tokyo.

Each bedroom had bunk beds in it, so we decided to bunk by gender. Ryou-san called dibs on the lower bunk in our room before I could ask for the upper bunk. I never did find out who was in which bunk in the girls' bedroom.

When I unpacked, I noticed that my luggage had been searched. It had been re-packed, but not the way that I had packed it originally. I didn't complain; it was a reasonable precaution.

The next morning, we quickly realized that we needed more than just a roof over our heads and a couple of meals a day. Makoto and I had packed two changes of clothes each, one outfit suitable to wear to a memorial service and one casual outfit. That put each of us two outfits up on Ami and Ryou-san, who only had the clothes they were wearing. So that we wouldn't embarrass our friends, Makoto and I wore what we had on when we were banished to this dimension, although I (and, I assume, Makoto) wore clean underwear.

"So, what do we do now?" Makoto asked once we were together in the living room. "I don't see anything to eat in the kitchen."

"I still have that vacuum-packed curry," I replied.

"For breakfast?"

There was a knock at the door before anybody could answer Makoto's question. "Come in!" Ryou-san said.

The door opened to reveal Corporal Finieno, loaded down with bags. "Good morning! Colonel Yagami thought you might want something clean to wear." She handed each of us a bag. "Once you get changed, I'm to take you to the mess hall."

"Thank you," Ami replied as she accepted the bag with her name on it.

Fifteen minutes later, we were wearing our new, clean, clothes: emerald-green shirts or blouses, and black slacks or skirts, respectively. Ryou looked as clean-shaven as me, but that was because he had been given depilatory cream, not a razor.

We noticed that our girlfriends looked as well-groomed as we did. And, of course, the colour scheme was one that Makoto and I preferred when we dressed to match. "That looks good on you, darling," she said.

"It looks good on you, too, my dearest." We turned to our hostess. "Thank you for the change of clothing, Corporal Finieno."

She smiled. "Please, call me Shario. I'm only 'Corporal Finieno' when I'm on duty."

"Thank you, Shario-san," Ami said. "Why are we in a uniform?"

"Actually, that isn't a uniform. At least, it isn't a Bureau uniform. If you were wearing brown, white, blue, or black, you could be mistaken for TSAB personnel at first glance. Green shows that you're civilians."

"That makes sense," Ryou-san replied.

"Now, if you're ready for breakfast?"

"Lead on," Makoto said.

By the time we got to the mess hall, it was nearly empty; the only person still there, other than the cooks, was a very small female, less than a foot tall, with hair so pale that I thought it was white at first glance. "Shari! You're late!"

"Sorry, Rein!" Her name had two syllables with equal emphasis: Re-in. "Where did everybody else go?"

"The forwards are training, and Hayate and Griffith are doing the paperwork to explain our new guests to the general staff. Lucino and Alto are all alone in the command center."

"I'd better go help them, then. But our guests..."

"Hayate said I should take over for you. That's why I'm still here." She turned to us. "Hello! I'm Sergeant Reinforce Zwei. Everybody calls me Rein."

We introduced ourselves, then assembled breakfast from what was still available. There was enough rice, grilled fish, and miso soup left for three people; I ended up with – wonder of wonders – scrambled eggs, English bacon, crumpets, and knoutberry jam. Remembering that knoutberry was an English name for the fruit called cloudberry or bakeapple in various parts of Canada, I helped myself to as much as I thought I could get away with.

"I knew that somebody has to eat those or they wouldn't cook them," Rein said while looking at the crumpets, "but I've never seen anybody actually eat them before. Where are they from?"

"In this reality," I answered around bites, "Non-administrated world 97."

"I grew up on that world! But I've never seen those there."

"They're from England, not Japan. Earth is a pretty big planet, demographically speaking, and I suspect there are a lot more cultures there than there are on Midchilda."

She and I had a discussion about the differences between Earth and Midchilda over breakfast, mainly for the benefit of Ryou-san, Ami, and Makoto. The biggest differences were that Earth didn't have very much magic, but also didn't have a centuries-long war that ended less than a century ago. Much like historical events causing Tokyo to have almost as large a population as the entirety of Canada, Rein told me that Earth had about as large a population as the entirety of the TSAB-administrated worlds put together. With the population of the administrated worlds so low, it was no wonder that the TSAB hadn't made any public approaches to the United Nations, and it was also no wonder that there were still so many unpopulated areas within Cranagan's city limits.

When I mentioned my conclusions to Rein, she added the fact that Earth still used reaction weapons – everything from firearms to nukes – which were banned on administrated worlds. That meant that there wasn't as much of a power imbalance between the two sides as I thought despite Earth's lack of mages... and Earth was still a savage place in some ways.

None of us could disagree with her there.

\* \* \*

We spent the entire day being debriefed by experts called in from the TSAB Midchilda Ground Headquarters. They were rather aggressive with their questions in the morning, but we knew that we didn't have any other options than "cooperate" or "get kicked out and starve", so we cooperated.

At lunchtime – we weren't allowed to eat with each other – Ami noticed the woman in charge of the debriefing team speaking with a short brown-haired woman in Ground Force uniform. When she described the woman later, I thought that she might have been our host, Hayate Yagami; considering that Hayate was in charge at Long Arch and the other woman was in charge of the debriefing, Ryou-san agreed that they were probably comparing notes.

And the fact that the debriefing team wasn't anywhere near as aggressive in the afternoon was another hint that Hayate had asked them to ease off.

But the debriefing went on so long that we missed having dinner with everyone else; it was "whatever's still left on the hot bar" for us once again. The tomato-ish-based stew that they still had was closer to [lecsó](#) than anything else I was familiar with, which I realized as I ladled some into a large bowl. "Careful," I said to the others as I grabbed some bread for my side dish. "This smells spicy."

"You of all people think it might be spicy," Makoto said flatly.

"That's right."

Everybody else avoided it.

Their loss; it had garlic *and* roasted paprika (or the local equivalents) in it, and the sausage was remarkably similar to a proper Hungarian kolbász, all of which gave it a slow heat instead of a sudden burn. Considering what had been available for both breakfast and supper that day, it was obvious to me that somebody in the kitchen liked Earth cooking.

The others went with Japanese dishes. It was no surprise that they had Japanese food available; three of the four highest-ranking people who lived on base grew up in this reality's Japan, after all, and one of them knew both how to cook and how to teach. What the boss wants, the boss gets.

When we finally got back to our apartment, we discovered a large jar of knoutberry jam on the kitchen counter, along with a note saying that nobody else ate it so we might as well. Note to self: thank the kitchen staff the next time I saw them.

We also found changes of clothing in our closets: three sets of green tops and black slacks each, although the ladies had a skirt replacing one pair of slacks. "Who chose this wardrobe, Chiba-san?" I groused.

"Mamoru-san would have given us green jackets, not green shirts," Ami pointed out with a bit of melancholy in her voice.

"Oh, right." And I regretted reminding her of home. Note to self: stop making my dearer friend sad.

The sun rose on the third day that we were in this reality, which we discovered was September 25, 0075.

"Why 'September'?" I asked Shario and Reinforce, who had saved us spots in the mess hall. "That's the name of an Earth month; I can't believe you came up with even a single component of our calendar independently." Of course, I knew the Doylist explanation from my original reality was that the people telling the story simply used the Gregorian calendar because it wasn't important to the story. I was curious what the Watsonian explanation was.

"I told you yesterday about the Saint King Unification War," Rein mentioned. "We lost so much knowledge then that we didn't even know what a complete Belkan calendar looked like for decades. And when the TSAB recruited a mage from your world, he just kept on using the calendar that he was familiar with, and it caught on because it didn't favour any one of the administrated worlds."

"Ah," I said. "So it's Admiral Graham's fault."

"You've heard of him?" Shario asked in amazement.

"We haven't, but apparently Robu has," Makoto said.

"Wasn't anybody listening in on my debriefing yesterday? I know that I mentioned I was from another reality where both *Sailor Moon* and *Lyrical Nanoha* are works of fiction."

"Before you go on," Rein interrupted, "we've agreed that we aren't telling Captain Takamachi that, in your world, this entire reality is named after her."

"So you were listening in," Ryou-san said.

"It's part of my job," Shario explained. "How much do you know about our reality, Rob?"

"Not as much as you might think, but probably more that you're comfortable with. I know in general terms about the Jewel Seed Incident, the final Book of Darkness Incident, and the JS Incident."

Shario quietly said, "We're still cleaning up the JS Incident."

"Would you know where to find the Numbers that managed to escape from custody?" Rein asked.

"Sorry, no. All I know there is that you did... will take them all into custody and make it stick."

"That's reassuring, at least," Shario commented. "But we shouldn't tell anybody else."

"Getting back to the calendar," Ami said before anybody could start a pointless debate about whether to change canon, Not that I could, given what I knew. "what is the offset between the local calendar and the Gregorian calendar on Earth?"

Shario smiled at the change of subject. "That's easy. Add 1,941 to the Midchildan year to get your year."

"So it's 2016," Ami replied as she typed on the Mercury Computer... and that fact gave me an idea that required access to Earth's internet to turn into reality. "And the day offset?"

"There's no offset there," Shario answered. "Our New Year's Day is the same day as yours. Admiral Graham didn't use a day offset when he introduced your calendar to the TSAB."

Rein suddenly looked distracted, then stood up quickly. "Speaking of the Numbers, two of them have been sighted near the Hotel Augusta. We have to get to work," Rein said. Looking around, we could see that almost everyone else were also cutting their breakfasts short, including Shario. "Sorry!"

A few minutes later, we were the only ones other than the cooks left in the mess hall. Again.

"So, what are we going to do today?" Ami asked.

"I know it's a day late by our calendar, but could we hold a memorial for my parents, please?"

We did what we could to help Makoto cope with the anniversary of her loss, so far from the crash site and without a priest.

Things proceeded this way for almost a full week: we'd eat with Rein and Shario when they weren't busy with Riot Force 6 work, and in exchange for room and board, we'd answer their questions to the best of our ability.

Shario was interested in Makoto and Ami's Senshi gear, so we let her run some scans. It turned out that everything counted as Lost Logia, but somebody pulled some strings so that it was declared as the safe sort, and Ami and Makoto were allowed to keep it all. Hey, Shario is a "device meister", whatever that is, so she should know... and apparently the "somebody" was a lieutenant colonel who was in line for a promotion to full colonel. (The casualties in the JS Incident went all the way to the top.) I had to remember to thank Hayate for that, the first time that we actually met her.

Shario and her co-workers classified Makoto and Ami's transformation wands as limited Devices that could only invoke a Barrier Jacket transformation. Which, honestly, wasn't too far off the mark. Their communicators were less useful than the magical communications that TSAB used on a daily basis.

We had to fight tooth and nail to keep the Mercury Computer, though, because it was more powerful as a hand-held processor and scanner than anything the TSAB had short of a Belkan-style Unison Device. It took direct intervention from the base commander to let Ami keep it, and even then the Riot Force 6 techs insisted in scanning all of the hardware, software, and accumulated data.

Which is how Shario found the scans that Ami had taken of Makoto and me during the Missing Time. She immediately brought Shamal into the research.

"Interesting," commented the base's doctor. "It's a complete inversion of our telepathy."

"We can't do that any more, though," Makoto said before I could.

"And it only ever worked between the two of us when it did work," I added.

"Which means I can't get any scans of the process at work," Shamal said with a sigh. "My hospital scanners have better resolution than your handheld Device does." After a moment, she added, "Did it stop working when you started using the same kind of telepathy that we use?"

Makoto and I didn't say anything for a moment. Finally, my dearest said, "We... don't know how to do that."

«It's one of the most basic skills in Midchildan and Belkan magic,» Shamal thought to us. Not just Makoto and me; judging by their reactions, Ami and Ryou-san "heard" her, too. «Here, I'll teach you all how to send your thoughts to each other, and to any other mage,»

"I'm not a mage, I'm a precog," Ryou-san said.

«That should be close enough,» Shamal replied.

Three minutes later, we were sending our thoughts to each other as easily as we could speak with each other... and Makoto and I were so happy to be able to share our thoughts and emotions again that we were replicating our last moments together during the Missing Time. Shamal didn't seem to mind seeing us kiss, and in fact was scanning us after we mentioned that we were sending more than just words, but Ami and Ryou-san told us to get a room. Spoilsports.

\* \* \*

The next day saw a change to our routine, or rather the start of a new routine. Ryou-san spent a lot of time in the infirmary, being scanned by Shamal in an effort to determine just how his precognition worked... with Shario taking copious notes.

The rest of us were invited to compare the ancient Silver Millennium fighting style with the Midchildan and Belkan styles. You can read that as "we were asked whether we wanted to take part in training." Considering that it was train or sit around doing nothing, we trained.

No, we didn't go up against Riot Force 6's Forwards on the first day of training. That came later. We did go up against Ginga Nakajima, Subaru's sister, who was on light duty because of what Rein referred to as "something that had happened during the JS Incident." (The poor girl. I think I've already mentioned that I hate the very idea of brainwashing. If I haven't mentioned that, well, I hate it a lot.)

We learned a lot just in the first day of training. Specifically, we learned that standing, posing, and announcing your attacks, the way that Sailor Jupiter and Sailor Mercury usually did, would get you killed in TSAB-style combat. We'd been lucky that our opponents so far were as unskilled in tactics as we were, which made me wonder how four of them from the Dark Kingdom had reached the rank of General in the first place.

Ginga explained that to me during the second day of our training, while defending herself against both Mercury and Jupiter who were trying to get one solid hit on her within five minutes. «From what you've been showing us, the Silver Millennium is even older than Al-Hazard,» she started while dodging a Shiny Aqua Illusion. «Historically, tactics have evolved quite a bit over the last three millennia, let alone the last ten or twenty. Your Dark Generals were no doubt very good *at the time*» – she easily evaded a Supreme Thunder as she sent that – «but their tactics didn't evolve alongside their opponents' changing tactics. If you had learned some modern tactics, you would have won your fights easily.» "Time!" She said that last to the ladies. "You lose."

"None of us have ever had any opportunity to learn tactics," I pointed out.

"We'll fix that," she replied as she roller-skated over to me.

"Rob," Ami said while catching her breath, "I apologize for all of the times that we called you an oni. Sergeant Nakajima is worse than you are."

Ginga smiled. "Why, thank you! And I'm only a Rank C mage; you should try going up against Captain Takamachi or Captain Harlaown some time after you've learned something about fighting. I can see why they asked me to train you to begin with." She turned to me. "Your turn. Begin!"

I put up a forcefield to pin her down, but she had a Wing Road ready first and got away from me before I could close the barrier around her. Rollerskating in three dimensions on that Wing Road – which I thought was unfair, but, remembering what Kunzite did to Sato-san, I said nothing about unfairness – she easily avoided all of my attacks... until I realized that her Wing Road limited her manoeuvrability and I wasn't leading my aim sufficiently. I thought that I almost had her, but time ran out before I could close my forcefield around her.

Once Ginga was back on solid ground, she turned to me and said, "You really need to work on making forcefields faster." Then she turned to the open air and asked, "How did they do?"

"Rank E, all three of them, except that they have more stamina than most Rank A mages," Rein's voice came from a video window that appeared in midair. The window pivoted to face us, and she asked, "Now that we know that, what kind of training do you want?"

We all thought for a moment. My dearest was the first to reply. "I have my Senshi magic for ranged attacks, so I'd like to concentrate on hand-to-hand fighting, please."

"Something Belkan for Ms. Kino," Rein said, "although we should also work on unlocking your other ranged attacks. Hayate tells me that you can do more than just Supreme Thunder and Sparkling Wide Pressure."

"Will I get to learn the nerve pinch?" Makoto asked.

"Belkan, not Vulcan," Ami said. Then she turned to Rein. "I'd prefer to concentrate on using my Senshi magic to its best effect. And, if I can, I'd like to learn some of your healing magic."

"We'll start you on a program of Midchildan training for use with the ranged combat and area-effect magic that you should already have from the Silver Millennium, Ms. Mizuno. And if you're good enough with mathematics, Shamal can teach you some healing magic."

Makoto laughed. "Ami and Robu are at least four years in advance of the rest of us when it comes to math."

"That might be enough, depending on the type of math," Rein nodded as she replied. "What about you, Mr. Donaldson?"

After a long moment, I finally said, "I don't know. I use my forcefields both offensively and defensively, including doing a little trick that I haven't shown you yet." I went invisible as I said that. "Oh! I can manifest my forcefields as sticks or staffs. Could somebody train me in stick-fighting?" I asked as I turned visible again.

"We can do more than that, if your forcefields are that versatile," Rein said. "For combat, we'll start you with the same Belkan training that we'll give Ms. Kino, plus some speed training, and we'll see where to go after that." She looked off-screen and added, "Did you get all of that, Shario?"

"I sure did!" Her voice came from the direction that Rein was looking.

«Why does Shario need to know our training programs?» Ami sent to Makoto and me.

«Dunno,» my dearest thought back. «Do you have any idea, darling?»

«Maybe,» I replied, «but if I'm right, I have one thing to say about it.»

«Stupid genre conventions?» both ladies sent to me.

«I'll thank you to not steal my line. 😊 And, yes.»

Ami, Makoto, and I spent the next month training. Shamal gave the ladies some telepathic assistance in unlocking their other canon attacks – Ami's Mercury Aqua Mirage and Mercury Aqua Rhapsody, and my dearest's Super Supreme Thunder and Jupiter Oak Evolution. Then Vita trained them to use the attacks by nearly beating the stuffing out of both of them repeatedly.

Ginga worked with me to get my basic hand-to-hand skill up to the bare minimum. Drawing on the martial arts skills in Makoto's brainprint helped me there.

Ryou-san was nowhere to be seen while we were training. And neither were Shario and Rein. We found out why on October 14, when he dropped four stacks of cash onto the dining table in our shared quarters. "All of this belongs to you, Ami," he announced.

"To me? But why?"

"While you've been training and when Dr. Shamal hasn't been scanning me while I used my precognitive ability, I've been negotiating a fair price for the scans that our hosts took of the Mercury Computer. And you own the computer."

I raised an eyebrow. "You're sure you got a fair payment for the data?"

"Seven timelines out of nine, this is what I could get without any hard feelings from anyone in the TSAB."

"He's sure," Ami told me with confidence. Then she turned to her boyfriend and added, "And you already know what I'm about to say, since you divided the money into four piles."

He smiled. "Ten times out of eleven, I know. But you should say it anyway, please, for Mako-chan and Robu-san's sake."

"If you insist," she smiled back. "Captain Lowran was right when he said that we're a family. Rob didn't hesitate to share his first-aid kit as soon as we arrived here. And mother..." Ami paused for a moment, then continued by sending us her thoughts while she cried quietly. «Mother already welcomed Makoto and Rob into the Mizuno family. I miss her. I miss everybody.»

Makoto hugged her sister in all but blood before Ryou-san or I could act. "We all miss everybody that we left behind. It's okay to cry."

The money sat on the table for a while while we all comforted Ami – the only one of us who didn't have any experience with being, to quote from the Bible, a stranger in a strange land. Once she had regained her composure, Ami said, "I'm sorry."

"Don't be," my beloved replied. "It's natural to miss your loved ones." We all knew how she knew that.

"Thank you, Mako-chan. This money," Ami waved a hand at the stacks on the table, "belongs to all of us. Each of you, take a stack."

"If you're sure...?"

"Yes, Rob, I'm sure."

With that, we filled our wallets and put the rest into safekeeping in our rooms. "We need to get you something to keep things in," I mentioned to Ryou-san. "We don't have practice tomorrow; I wonder whether we could go into town and buy luggage for both you and Ami."

"Rein already offered to be our guide if we wanted to do some shopping in Cranagan."

"And in how many timelines did you accept her offer?" I asked with a grin.

"Who knows? But I know that I accepted in this timeline," he replied with a matching grin.

So we went shopping in Cranagan. Ryou-san had negotiated a very good deal for the scans of the Mercury Computer; we barely needed to dip into our cash supply to purchase enough to turn our small apartment from a living space to a home, stock the kitchen for a few weeks, and get some clothes that weren't green or black. As much as I like seeing my dearest wearing green, it's possible to get too much of a good thing, and I like seeing her wear other

colours, too. At Ryou-san's suggestion, we also bought large frame backpacks for all four of us. And we took turns distracting Ami from noticing the rest of us were also making some special purchases.

One nice thing about a magitech society like Midchilda's was that I didn't need to hide my powers. The flip side of that, of course, was that I ended up carrying everybody's purchases in a forcefield wheeled basket... until Ryou-san asked, "Is there some place nearby that we can drop these off securely?"

"What's about to happen?" I asked before Rien could reply.

"Six times out of seven, we're going to get involved in a take-down."

"You're civilians," Rein pointed out. "It's the TSAB's job to capture dangerous criminals."

"Who are they?" Ami asked.

"I don't know their names. All I'm seeing are numbers: 9 and 11."

"Nove and Wendi?" I asked. "Didn't Private Lanster take them into custody?"

"She did," Rein replied as she opened a video window to Riot Force 6 headquarters. "But they escaped during transport to a maximum-security facility." She turned to the video connection. "Captain, Mr. Urawa has foreseen two of the Numbers will be in our immediate area shortly."

"Stand by, Sergeant."

Rein left the connection open and turned back to us. "There's a parcel forwarding service a half-block away." She pointed as she said that. "There's no point in you needing to go shopping again. But it's still the TSAB's job to capture dangerous criminals, and the Numbers definitely count as dangerous criminals."

"So we can't help?" my dearest asked.

I smiled and replied, "Oh, I'm sure that somebody will remember any minute now that Captain Takamachi was a civilian specialist during the Jewel Seed Incident. I expect that we'll be allowed to help our hosts, darling."

"You know too much about our history, Mr. Donaldson," we heard Captain Lowran over Rein's video connection.

"How soon until we make contact with the Numbers?" Rein asked.

Ryou replied, "Maybe five minutes, maybe ten."

Captain Lowran sounded resigned to the situation. "We can't get anybody to you in time. Since you're willing to help, I'm temporarily adding the three of you who have combat experience to our roster, Acting-Private Kino, Acting-Private Donaldson, and Acting-Private Mizuno. Sergeant Reinforce, you're in charge of the squad."

"Yes, sir," Rein... Sergeant Reinforce acknowledged the order. "Mr. Urawa, please find a safe place to take shelter."

I asked, "Ma'am, request permission to accompany Mr. Urawa to the parcel forwarding service with the parcels, and return as soon as he and the parcels are inside."

"Granted. Make it fast."

"Hop on," I told Ryou-san while pointing at the pile of parcels. He did, I took him to the storefront at faster-than-human speed and dissolved the forcefield basket once we were there, and returned to the rest of the squad at flash-move speed. I was there and back within a minute, but that was enough for Ami and Makoto to transform to Mercury and Jupiter, and for Sergeant Reinforce to end her call.

"They're both high-mobility fighters," Sergeant Reinforce was saying. "Nove's abilities are similar to Sergeant Nakajima's. Wendi is a flyer. Can any of you fly?"

"We can jump long distances, but we've never been able to fly," Mercury replied.

"We'll see whether we can teach you later. Right now, we have to expect combat at any time. Mercury, keep scanning the area for hostiles until you find some."

She activated her visor and started looking around.

"Jupiter, concentrate on the flyer. Hit her with lightning if you can. Donaldson, you've come closest to taking down Sergeant Nakajima of anyone in this squad. Concentrate on Nove. Both of you, take them alive if you can."

"Yes, ma'am," we both replied.

Then Sergeant Reinforce had an idea. "How well do you learn during combat situations?"

Jupiter replied, "Mercury and I developed all of our spells during live combat."

"Good. And Mercury's an ice mage, like me. Mercury, according to your medical scans, you can handle Unison in your powered form. Are you willing to try?"

Without taking her attention away from scanning, she said, "I'm willing if it'll help."

"Can either of you scan for enemies?"

"If Mercury lends me the Mercury Computer, I can," I replied.

"Do it." She did, and I took over the scanning duties... which meant that I didn't see Mercury and Reinforce start a Unison because there was suddenly a ping on the sensors.

"Two targets incoming from Jupiter's left," I reported as I went invisible and started moving. "One ground, one air. Ground target is using an effect similar to Wing Road."



"She's your target, Donaldson," Ami said with Rein's inflections. I took a very quick look at my teammate to discover her hair had turned an even paler blonde than Bunny-chan's, the blue of her uniform was almost white, and she was floating about a half-metre off the ground. Looks like the Unison worked. I think Ami looks better as a brunette, myself. "Nove and Wendi of the Numbers, if you stop running and surrender without a fight, the TSAB will not add any additional time to your sentences because of your escape attempt!"

"Who are you supposed to be?" Wendi asked. "I've never seen Barrier Jackets like yours, especially not on TSAB personnel."

"We're Sailor Senshi," Jupiter replied.

"Really? You are? Hey, Nove, what's a sailor cinchy?" Wendi asked.

"No bloody idea," the other Number replied.

"Does it mean 'target'?"

"It might. Let's find out."

«They seem awfully sure of themselves,» Jupiter sent to me.

«Why shouldn't we be?» Wendi asked, showing us that our sendings weren't secure.

«Three of you couldn't take down one TSAB private,» I sent in reply as I raised two invisible forcefields on Nove's path. The first one didn't manifest until after she'd passed it, but she hit the second one. I quickly added more forcefields to turn the walls into a box.

"Ow!"

If that was her only reaction to hitting a solid wall when moving that fast, I was pretty sure she could handle some of the tactics that I'd used against Zoicite and Kunzite. I hit her with a forcefield battering ram, forcing her into the forcefield wall that she'd passed just before I created it.

"What's attacking me? *Who's* attacking me?"

I didn't answer. Let her keep wondering. Instead, I added a floor to the box.

"Air Liner!"

Oh, no, you don't. I put a lid on the forcefield box before she could get airborne, sealing her in.

As she headed up just far enough to hit her head on my forcefield, I wrapped the whole thing in a second forcefield. By the time she realized she was trapped, I had added a third forcefield layer. «I think I have her, ma'am,» I sent specifically to Sergeant Reinforce.

«Oh, you think you have me, do you?» Nove sent. "Gun Shooter!" A half-dozen energy balls formed around her fist.

Remembering Usagi-san's wish at the end of the Missing Time, I added yet another forcefield layer... which was a good thing, since she shot the energy balls in all directions, completely destroying the first layer of forcefields that I had set up. So I added one more forcefield layer to replace it. «Give up, Nove. I can set those up as fast as you can knock them down.»

She tried again, only proving my statement. «Damn it. Wendi, run; they've got me.»

«I'm not leaving you behind! Aerial Cannon!»

Aw, crap – Wendi was willing to attack her sister's position just to free her. And now that I had time to split my attention, I could see a few electrical burns on her flying surfboard, showing she wasn't having it all her way in combat. That meant she might not have been in full control of her abilities. And our orders were to bring them in alive. Wendi might trust Nove's ability to survive, but I added one more forcefield – a visible one, this time – to be on the safe side.

"Jupiter Coconut Cyclone!"

"Frigid Dagger!" That came from Ami and Rein in Unison.

The combination attack was enough to shock Wendi enough to cancel her own attack. She fell off the board.

"Weichstütze!" And a net appeared under Wendi, breaking her fall. "Frierenfesseln!" A ring of water formed around Wendi, suddenly freezing.

I added a forcefield around the ice cage, and kept adding forcefields to Wendi and Nove's restraints until I couldn't any more. Thanks to the stresses of Ginga's training, my upper limit was higher than it had been at the end of the Missing Time for much the same reason that a muscle gets stronger when it's exercised, so that took a couple of minutes... and in the process I finally noticed that Nove and Wendi were the same age as Makoto and Ami, and Wendi was cute. Hey, so I have a thing for redheads; good thing that one has already laid claim to me. «I'm at my limit,» I finally reported.

Mercury returned to normal as Mercury and Sergeant Reinforce stopped the Unison. "Good work, everyone. Where is Private Donaldson?"

"Right beside you, ma'am," I said while dropping my invisibility.

"Ah. Going invisible was good tactical thinking."

Then we noticed that Mercury was still floating a half-metre above the ground. "Er... request permission to remain airborne, Sergeant Reinforce."

"Denied. No flight within city limits without prior permission. City by-laws."

"Yes, ma'am," Mercury replied as she touched down for the first time since combat began.

"Good work in picking up that skill while we were in Unison, Private."

"Thank you, ma'am."

"And all of you stop calling me ma'am! I'm a sergeant! Mou!" Rein complained adorably as TSAB forces finally arrived to take Nove and Wendi into custody again.

When we returned to Long Arch, we were paid for one day's work as recruit Ground Armaments Service privates and mustered out of the service.

The three of us pooled the wages and split them four ways. If it wasn't for Ryou-san's warning, we wouldn't have known enough to be able to capture Nove and Wendi, so it was only fair. Besides, as Ami had said the day before, we were family.

During training the next day, Ami demonstrated all three of the spells that Rein had cast through her while they were in Unison... while hovering three metres above the ground and correcting Rein's German on the fly. Pun not intended.

And on the way back from training, she couldn't keep her feet on the ground. I almost called her attention to that, but I heard her singing quietly, "I'm walking on sunshine, whoa, and don't it feel good?" She had been feeling down for too long; the change in her mood made all of us happy. So we let her have her fun.

A week after Ami showed off her flight capability, it was October 23 by the local calendar... or September 10 by the calendar back home.

So of course we gave Ami a birthday party.

We invited Rein, Shario, Shamal, Ginga, and Vita. The base commander dropped in for a few minutes, too; this was the first time that any of the four of us got to meet Hayate. But she couldn't stay for very long; she had to attend a meeting at HQ, so essentially all she said to us was hello. And she took Rein, Shamal, and Vita with her. Ah, well, the burdens of command, and all that.

So it was just the six of us. And Shario smiled as Hayate and her knights left. We didn't know why at the time. I should have. Stupid genre conventions.

We didn't do very much – we chatted about our predicament, we had cake (and we had cake left over because so many people had to leave early), and we gave Ami the presents that we had picked out for her when we were in Cranagan. Ryou followed my example and gave his girlfriend a necklace; his gift had an amethyst the same shade as Ami's eyes as a pendant. My dearest gave her all-but-sister a cookbook, and I gave my dearer friend a chess set – there was a small community of chess players in the TSAB and some of the civilians on Midchilda had picked up the game – and an apology that I wasn't likely to give her a good match... at which point she reminded me that I was as skilled at chess as she was as of the last time I took a brainprint of her.

So we played chess. Just because I had her skill didn't mean I had her experience or her patience; she won after sixteen moves.

Then we had sandwiches for supper. Of course. It was a cross between a stupid genre convention and a reminder of home.

Then we went back to training for three months. Well, Ami, Makoto, and I trained, Ryou-san spent his time at the base, submitting to Shamal's scans and helping Shario figure out how the scans related to his precognitive ability. Apparently, the three of them were making great strides in understanding how precognition actually worked, which up until then had been one of the great mysteries of ancient Belka.

As for the rest of us, it was gruelling training by our standards, five days out of seven, although Ginga was barely working up a sweat at first. One day out of seven, all four of us sat in a briefing room and were taught what we could learn out of books: Reinforce Zwei taught us logistics, Vita taught us tactics, and Hayate taught us strategy... which she admitted she was using as a refresher for her upcoming promotion exam.

"Still," I commented on January 14, "you're being very kind to teach us these things, Colonel Yagami. Not just strategy, all of what you and your staff are sharing with us."

"Mr. Donaldson, it's the least we can do for you," she replied with a smile. "Well, it's the least we can do for Ms. Kino and Ms. Mizuno; you and Mr. Urawa are getting a free ride."

I raised an eyebrow in surprise. "Oh? What makes Makoto and Ami so special? To you, I mean; I already know why my girlfriend and our best friend are important to me."

"Have you ever seen a *Sailor Moon* stage show, Mr. Donaldson? Nanoha, Fate, and I did when we were still living on Earth. Nanoha insisted because it was based on an anime that her parents let her watch in reruns. If it wasn't for your girlfriend and your best friend, and the characters that followed them like [Hanasaki Momoko](#), [Kinomoto Sakura](#), [Harukaze Doremi](#), and [Misumi Nagisa](#), Nanoha would never have imagined becoming a transforming heroine when she met Yuuno-kun, and then I would never have met her, or... well, you told us that you're already familiar with the last Book of Darkness incident. So I owe them indirectly for simply being able to live my own life today. And the TSAB as a whole owes them for the existence of our best combat instructor."

"If you think you're paying back a debt, you really don't need to do that," I said.

"Don't be silly," she replied. "I'm not going to kick you out and let you starve, as long as Antiquities Administration Department Mobile Section 6 still exists." She stopped smiling. "Which will probably last until the end of March, now that we've captured Jail Scaglietti and the surviving Numbers. As for paying back a debt..." Her smile returned, but this time it was a sly smile. "When's the next special event that the four of you have planned?"

If she was thinking what I thought she was thinking, that would be a stupid genre convention. Yes, I've learned the futility of trying to fight those. I can still highlight them in my own mind. "Adjusting for the offset between your calendar and ours, Tuesday is Makoto's birthday."

"That's perfect! Be sure to invite both me and Shario to the party."

Yep. Stupid genre conventions, all but guaranteed. "We wouldn't dream of slighting either of you," I replied. "Should we invite Captain Takamachi and Captain Harlaown as well?"

Hayate sighed deeply. "I know that they'd both love to meet you, but they'll be testifying against Dr. Scaglietti all week."

"That's a shame. Well, Ryou-san's birthday is eighteen days after Makoto's."

"I'll keep that in mind. Oh, would you like to go into town tomorrow, and maybe do some shopping?"

I grinned. "It's as if you read my mind. I'll need somebody to distract Makoto and Ryou-san at appropriate times, of course."

"Of course," Hayate replied with a grin of her own.

We went into town the next day, but Ami didn't do very much shopping. One of the shopping arcades had a chess contest – a local master... sorry, "meister"... versus all comers, playing them all at once – and she decided to take part. The exhibition was scheduled to take two hours.

When the rest of us came back three hours later, all of the competitors other than Ami had lost their games. Ami and the local meister looked to me to be near the endgame; both players were down to their king and queen, one rook, one bishop, and four pawns. Needless to say, there was quite a crowd around them.

I looked through Ami's brainprint to get a better idea of how she might handle the situation she was in, then noticed something that nobody else in the area could know. They were definitely at the endgame. «I wonder whether she's spotted it yet,» I sent to Makoto and Ryou-san telepathically.

«Spotted what?» my dearest asked the same way.

Ryou-san smiled. «I suspect she has, whatever it is. Nine times out of eleven, she wins.»

«Which matches the game that I know that she knows about: Reshevsky vs. Fischer's sixth game at the Interzonal Palma de Mallorca, back in 1970 by Earth's calendar. That's a grandmaster-level game. I keep forgetting that Ami ranks as an International Master back home because she won Japan's Junior Chess Championship.» And I keep forgetting that, because the rules changed in 2004; she'd be a Grandmaster by the rules that applied in 2022.

Less than a half-hour later, Ami had won. She collected both a handshake from her opponent and the prize money from the event organizers... and I let her know, quietly and by telepathy, that I had found everything on her shopping list.

We were getting to the point where we could defeat Ginga half the time during practice, so they threw the Stars forwards up against us the next day. Yes, the three people who had found us the day we were banished to this reality: Vita, Subaru Nakajima, and Teana Lanster.

We had our heads handed to us within three minutes.

Mainly because, like always, we fought as individuals and they fought as a team.

Vita told us exactly what we had done right, and what we had done wrong, then told us to get up and try again.

It took them five minutes to beat us the second time.

Another litany of our deficiencies in combat, another match, and another defeat, this time in four minutes. Not that we were counting – we didn't need to count the minutes, because Vita counted them for us.

Eventually, Vita outright ordered us to use telepathy to coordinate our actions during combat. Things stopped being so one-sided after that... and telepathic communication let Ryou-san offer advice during the matches, which closed the gap between Team Senshi and Team Stars even more.

By the end of the day, it was taking nearly a half hour for them to defeat us. We took that as a moral victory.

Then it was Tuesday – Makoto's birthday.

We had planned a quiet celebration after training. Hayate ordered us to move the celebration up to lunchtime, and hold it at the base.

We found out why when we gave my dearest her birthday presents. Ryou-san gave her a scarf, Ami gave her a math textbook, and I gave her a bracelet that was similar to the one I had given her on White Day and she hadn't been wearing when we were banished to this reality.

Then Hayate and Shario dragged us off to the infirmary to give their present to Makoto... and their presents for the rest of us.

I was expecting something like this from Hayate, given our previous conversation and the existence of stupid genre conventions, but I didn't realize how far she'd gone. "Your medical scans indicate that three of you can use Unison Devices. So I pulled a few strings."

Shamal looked up from her desk and added, "To be exact, the two ladies can Unison while in their Senshi forms. Mr. Donaldson, you can always use a Unison Device." By telepathy, she added, «And I'd like to speak with you in private about why.»

Oh, that wasn't ominous at all.

But Shario wasn't about to let me follow up just then. "You four can come out now!" At her invitation, three miniature humanoid figures the size of Rein and a small box the size of a 1990s-vintage calculator or 2020s-vintage cellphone floated over from where they were hiding. "Meet your new partners."

The box said "Hello" in English with a female voice that reminded me of [Kawasumi Ayako-san](#), but I wasn't sure whether she was intended to be "Ayachii" playing [Melfina](#), [Lafiel](#), [Mahoro](#), [Kay](#), or someone else. "I am an Intelligent Device optimized to assist to determine which possible future is most likely to occur." Ah, so she's supposed to be Ayachii playing [Chikage](#), odd grammar notwithstanding. She floated over to Ryou-san and said, "I ask of you, are you my master?" Or maybe she's supposed to be Ayachii playing [Saber](#)... unless she's just a smartass.

"I suppose I am," Ryou-san replied in Japanese, completely missing the reference.

"What is my name?"

We all looked at Ryou-san. He didn't hesitate; obviously, our precog friend had seen this coming. "Your name is Kasandara."

"Her name's [Cassandra](#)? I don't believe it."

Ami grabbed a pillow from the nearest bed, and threw it at me. The pillow, not the bed.

The two female Unison Devices laughed – the sea-green-haired one politely with her hand in front of her mouth, the electric-blue-haired one – who was wearing a sheathed katana scaled to her size – more openly. (Yeah, sea-green and electric-blue. Stupid genre conventions.) The male Unison Device, who was wearing similarly-scaled paired swords, floated over to me and took the pillow from my hand, casually tossing it back to Ami. "Please don't mind my sisters, sir. They're still young." His voice reminded me of Suyama Akio's for some reason, and he also spoke English.

"You're only one day older than the rest of us!" the one with the open laugh pointed out, also in English, in a voice that reminded me of Yokoyama Chisa-san playing Ryoko from [Nadesico](#).

He ignored her. "I gather that you're my partner. Have you chosen a name for me yet, Mr. Donaldson?"

"I didn't even know I was going to be meeting you today, let alone naming you." Then I had a thought. "Your sister with the hearty laugh; who is she supposed to be partnering with?"

"I'm right here, you know! I'm Ms. Kino's partner."

Oops. I turned to her, bowed, and said, "I'm sorry that I treated you like a thing." Then I quickly sent to my dearest, «Remember when you saw an image in my mind during the Missing Time and thought that you wanted one of the mechs?»

«I still want a mecha. But what does that have to do with... oh, something about them reminds you of characters from [that show](#)?»

«Their swords and their voices, yes, including the title character's voice.»

«Sure, why not?» Then Makoto turned to her Unison Device. "I'm Makoto. Do you have a name yet?"

"Nah, you're supposed to name me."

"Then your name is Sakura."

"I ain't no [cherry blossom girl](#), sister!" But she said that with a smile.

Ignoring them for the moment, I turned to my new partner. "And your name is Ichiro."

"Thank you, sir. It's good to finally have a name."

That left one Device unnamed. We all turned to Ami, who asked, "Is it really a good idea for us to accept such precious people as our partners?"

"Ms. Mizuno, I assure you that I will serve you willingly if you will have me," the last of the Devices said – again, in English – in a voice that reminded me of Han Keiko-san, of all people... or, I realized quickly, of Luna.

I wasn't the only one to notice the resemblance.

"Oh, how can I reject you now?" Ami said while giving her partner Device a hug; her homesickness that I thought was under control was showing through. "But how can I accept you, either? I'm still hoping that we'll be able to go home some time soon, and I'm sure that you won't be able to be healed if you're hurt there."

"Thank you for caring about me, Ms. Mizuno. If it means that I am able to assist you, I will happily take that risk."

"Er," Shario held up one hand in a may-I-speak gesture. "I'm a Device Meister."

"How does that help?" I asked.

"Well, I could go with you if you ever find your way home."

What brought that on?

"No, you can't," Hayate said quickly and sharply. "As your commanding officer, I forbid it. Earth of the 1990s is nothing like Midchilda of the 0070s. You'd be homesick in a week."

"Ladies," I interrupted, "we're getting sidetracked. Ami, are you ready to introduce us to your new friend yet?" I phrased it that way on purpose.

She sighed in resignation. "I still think that it isn't fair to put you at such a risk, but you won't let that stop you, will you?" Her Device shook her head. "Then I accept your offer, as long as it's an offer of friendship, not of service."

"I would be happy to be your friend, Ms. Ami."

"You remind me so much of two people back home who care for me, my friend Luna who mentors all of the Sailor Senshi, and my dear mother." I couldn't see how aside from her voice, but I wasn't the one who was homesick. Ami was. "So I give you the name of the mother of Mercury in Roman myth, spelled the Japanese way. Hello, [Meia](#)."

"Thank you, Ami." I noticed that, even though we were speaking Japanese and they were speaking English, there was no language barrier between the Devices and the rest of us. Just like Nanoha and Fate with Raising Heart and Bardiche, I realized. It's obviously a genre thing, so chalk another one up to stupid genre conventions.

Meia turned to me. "Mr. Donaldson, shall we return to the question that Ami and Corporal Finieno raised?"

I nodded. "We're going to have to settle that, one way or another. Even if we don't find our way home, there's no way that the TSAB is going to pay for your maintenance and repairs after Riot Force 6 is disbanded."

Nobody liked that, but nobody said anything about it being untrue, either.

"We can give you a basic field maintenance kit, but it takes years to become a Device Meister," Shario said. "It took me over a half-decade to learn everything."

"Could that information be transferred to one of us by telepathy?" Ami asked.

"It would take years, since telepathy works as fast as speaking," Shamal pointed out.

"Robu could do it in ten minutes."

"Makoto!" I wasn't happy about that statement. "I don't know whether I can still take a brainprint. And even if I can, it would be an intrusion on Sergeant Finieno's privacy."

"Brainprint?" Shamal asked. "Can you still do that? I want scans of the process."

"I don't know, and you have scans of the process, copied from the Mercury Computer," I pointed out.

"I want high-resolution scans of the process."

"I suppose I have no choice, then," Shario said. "The good of the service comes before the needs of any one of us."

I sighed. Deeply. "And we do need the knowledge. I'm sorry, Shario."

My dearest saw how much this bothered me. "Can we start with Robu updating the brainprint he has from me? Assuming he can still take one. If it doesn't work, then we drop the whole idea."

"I'd appreciate that," I added. "I already know that Makoto and I don't keep secrets from each other."

Five minutes later, I was seated with scanners positioned all around me. "What a way to spend your birthday, my dearest."

"As long as I'm with you, I don't mind, darling." And she touched her forehead to mine... and her thoughts started flowing in. Unlike the first few times I'd taken or updated a brainprint, though, I actually saw flashes of some of Makoto's memories as I copied them. A few minutes later and we were done.

"As long as we're updating our backups..." Ryou-san started.

I didn't really want to, but I couldn't play favourites, even though everybody already knew that my dearest is my favourite. "Sure, why not." And he took Makoto's place for a few minutes, and again I saw some of the memories that I was copying as I copied them. Then it was Ami's turn, and at the end of that process I knew second-hand what it was like to be in Unison with Rein. "Are we done?" I asked hopefully as Ami vacated the chair in front of me.

"Not yet," Hayate said, who had not forgotten why we were doing this in the first place. "I'm not happy about this either, but you do need the knowledge. Volunteers only at this point, and Mr. Donaldson has the right to say no. And since I won't ask anybody to do anything that I won't do myself..." She sat down in front of me.

"Are you sure, Lieutenant Colonel Yagami?" I put a bit of stress on her rank as I said it. "You'll be letting a civilian, no, a foreign national, know about every classified operation you've ever taken part in. I get everything from your mind, not just your surface thoughts."

"And who will you tell?"

After a moment, I said, "Probably nobody who isn't in this room."

"That's what I thought. We just touch foreheads for a few minutes?"

"It's closer to ten minutes for a brand-new brainprint."

"Then let's get it over with." And she touched her forehead to mine.

Twelve minutes later because Hayate didn't completely trust me the way my friends did, and we were done. I knew what it was like to spend years in a wheelchair, and to see friends die in front of me, and to see them restored, and to go through years of physiotherapy... and I also knew what Hayate, Nanoha, and Fate did together in private.

"That's quite a deep blush, darling," my dearest commented as she offered me her handkerchief.

I accepted it and stanching my nosebleed. "Er, yeah. I did warn Colonel Yagami that I'd get *everything* from her mind." From the startled look on her face, it was only then that Hayate finally realized what that meant, and she blushed almost as deeply as I did. As Hayate stood up, I asked, "Shario, are you sure you still want to do this?"

In response, she sat down in front of me. "I'm sure. Go ahead."

And eleven minutes later, I had yet another girl forever on my mind... and I had seen something very interesting when I made her brainprint. But I was too exhausted to do anything about it just then. "That's my limit for the day," I insisted with a yawn as I stood up, took three steps to the closest infirmary bed, and fell into it.

When I finally woke up, it was morning. "How are you doing, sir?"

"Never better, Ichiro," I replied in English, just to see whether he'd have any problem with it. It appeared that he didn't. "It's just that taking a brainprint is mentally tiring, and I updated three brainprints and took two new ones... yesterday?"

"Yesterday, yes, sir."

"Oh, good. And you don't need to call me 'sir'. You aren't my butler, or valet, or subordinate. I trust that we're going to become friends, and I prefer to be on a first-name basis with my friends."

"Yes, sir. Rob."

"Is that as close as I'm going to get?"

"For now, yes. I'm sorry. I was designed to be your assistant. much like Sergeant Reinforce was designed to be Colonel Yagami's assistant. It's going to take me a while to learn how to treat you as a friend."

At this point, Shamal walked in. "Good morning, sleepyhead," she said.

I switched back to Japanese to match her. "Good morning, doctor. You said something yesterday about wanting to talk with me?" As Ichiro got up to leave, I motioned to him to remain.

Shamal went from teasing to all business. "Yes. Your medical scans turned up something very interesting. You've been rejuvenated by a process that we don't recognize. And that process remade you at the genetic level."

"I knew that I've been rejuvenated, but the rest of that is new. Are you saying that I'm not the same person I was before I was plucked out of my homeworld and dropped almost into Makoto's lap, missing by one apartment?"

"I can't answer that for sure, because I don't have any scans of what your body was like before it was remade, but I suspect that you're still the same person. Just younger and much more resilient."

"Then how do you know that I was remade at the genetic level?"

"There are still residual traces of magic in your cells."

"Ah. Well, whatever happened, it was over a year ago, and I'm still alive and well. Do you want to run scans on me to try to figure out the process?"

Shamal shook her head. "That won't be necessary. I have all the scans I need. Do your friends know that you're older than you look?" she asked with a stern look on her face.

In complete seriousness, I replied, "They do, and they've known since before Makoto became my girlfriend."

Shamal relaxed. "Good. As long as they knew what they were getting into, I don't see an ethical issue here."

"Midchildan ethics and your ethics aren't necessarily their ethics, though, sir," Ichiro mentioned.

"True. Makoto and I have been dating and fighting beside each other for over a year, though, and we haven't found any situations where our ethics clash."

"In that case, I withdraw my concern," replied Ichiro. "The two of you obviously have compatible ethics if you haven't found any major issues after that long."

Then I realized that Shamal's scans might hold a clue as to who was responsible for taking me from my old life and dropping me into Makoto's life. "Doctor, are there any hints as to who rejuvenated me?"

"Only one. The residual magic's colour is purple."

"That isn't much of a hint, Dr. Shamal." Then I had a thought. "If you don't mind me asking, what colour are Ami's and Makoto's magic?"

"The same colours as their Barrier Jackets' accents when they're in Senshi form; blue and green, respectively. Does that matter?"

"It might," I replied. "One never knows what might be important."

As Shamal gave Ichiro instructions to keep me quiet for another day, I pondered what I had been told. Only one Senshi had purple uniform accents... but she wasn't awakened as of when we had been banished from our home reality. More importantly, why – and how – would Sailor Saturn rejuvenate me? She never showed any signs of going beyond simple healing in the anime. Then I thought of Jupiter Coconut Cyclone and realized the anime's limits were merely suggestions in the *Sailor Moon* close parallel that my dearest and I lived in.

Unless it was somebody other than Sailor Saturn who did the job, of course. But, no, conservation of detail and the stupid genre conventions wouldn't allow for that.

Would they?

We spent the morning in the infirmary. Shamal scanned me six ways to Sunday – that's a phrase that I picked up back in my home home reality from some American friends – while I demonstrated all of my abilities, except for the brainprinting which she'd scanned the day before.

"Interesting," she finally said. "Your defensive fields, your flash move, your invisibility, and your carrying capacity; they're all manifestations of your forcefields. If you were using magic, we'd call you a Barrier Mage, but you're using an Inherent Skill instead."

"I've been pretty sure for a while now that all of my powers are based on forcefields," I replied. "Frictionless forcefields for fast movement, light-bending forcefields for invisibility and disguises, and so on."

"Except that they aren't," Shamal said. "Your brainprinting is nothing like your forcefields. It's as if that was grafted onto you."

"Hmmmmmm..." I said eloquently. "Do you have copies of Ami's scans of Makoto and me from what we're calling the Missing Time?"

Shamal nodded. "I do, and I've already compared them to my scans. Your ability to read her mind has the same power signature that your brainprinting ability does."

"And she was the first person who I ever brainprinted. What about her ability to read my mind?"

"She didn't have that ability."

"I assure you, doctor, she could read my mind."

Shamal shook her head. "But not on her own. Her electromagnetic abilities let her switch your power on and off, and acted as an amplifier."

"Of course! That's why we could only read each other's minds; we were working together!"

"Exactly," Shamal smiled.

"So why can't we still do that?"

"That's a good question. Did something happen that would cause her to not trust you?"

I thought for a moment, then realized it's all Usagi-san's fault. "Yes, her memories were reset along with the rest of the world when Sailor Moon defeated Metaria, and I rather abruptly gave her back her memories by copying her brainprint back to her without warning. She didn't talk to me again for half a week."

"There you go. I wouldn't be surprised to learn that she doesn't want to use that ability any more, even if only on a subconscious level where she doesn't completely trust you."

"And with the telepathic ability that you taught all four of us, we don't need to use the mindreading version of brainprinting." Well, that was one minor mystery cleared up... assuming Dr. Shamal's diagnosis was correct, which raised its own issues. The idea that my dearest didn't trust me completely was somewhat disquieting – if Shamal was

right, what else had I misunderstood about my friends? But that wasn't something that she could help me with. Instead, I changed the subject. "Say, what time is it, anyway?"

"Lunchtime. Let's go eat."

We made our way to the mess hall, where we found Colonel Yagami, Rein, Shario, and Ryou-san. Rein waved us over to join them once I had lunch – pasta and a salad, which seemed to be the Forwards' favourite meal here. Colonel Yagami and Shario found it difficult to meet my eyes.

"Was it something I said?" I asked.

"No, it's something that I said," Ryou-san replied. "I mentioned just how much you know about each of the ladies now, and that everything that they've ever done or thought up to yesterday isn't private any more. Sorry about that."

Colonel Yagami added, "And that means it's rather silly to not be on a first-name basis, since you know literally everything about each of us, except for Rein."

"Just because a memory is in my head doesn't mean I've looked at it, but I do admit that I saw some of your most precious or most traumatic memories when I made your brainprints. Colonel... Hayate, you have reserves of emotional strength that I could never match, and you're blessed to have Captain Takamachi and Captain Harlaown as friends."

"Thank you, Rob. You don't mind that I...?"

It was pretty obvious to me where she was going with that, now that I knew how she thought. "Your life, your body, your rules. As long as everyone involved consents and nobody hurts anybody else. I suspect I'll never be in a similar situation, given how my girlfriend can be the jealous type, but I'm not you." Before I turned to look at my fellow refugee, I added, "Stop blushing, Ryou-san."

Sure enough, his face was red. "My birth culture isn't as open about romance as either of your cultures are, you know that."

"Stop teasing your friend," Shamal insisted. "It isn't good for his blood flow."

Remembering what I'd seen in Shario's brainprint as I made it, I took a quick look at her. She was beginning to blush, too. Nobody else appeared to notice, so I pretended that I didn't, either. But she surprised me by speaking up anyway. "And you shouldn't tease an old maid that way." And that comment puzzled Ryou-san.

It puzzled me for a moment, too. "Aren't you younger than Hayate, though?"

"Don't make me say it, Rob. Please."

Don't make her say what?

Rein of all people broke the awkward silence. "There's nothing wrong with not being married at your age, Shari. You're a professional with a career in front of you."

Ah. "I'll say it again," I added. "Your life, your body, your rules." Then I remembered from Lyrical canon that, if Lindy Harlaown was typical, Shario was right to worry about her prospects in this culture; when Lindy was Shario's age, she had already given birth to her son Chrono.

And Shario was only two years older than us... and Makoto and I were waiting before taking our relationship to the level that Shario desperately wanted to find somebody to take her to. By the standards of both Ryou-san's culture and mine, there was a major issue here concerning Midchildan mating customs.

I needed to go through her brainprint carefully and find out whether my suppositions were correct before saying anything, though.

Ryou-san looked like he was about to say something to Shario, then stopped. Instead, he turned to me. "Robu-san, the ladies' logic applies to me, too. More so since we've actually known each other for a while. And I know Ami would prefer that we all become closer. Can we drop the honorifics?"

I thought for a quick moment – not about the request, but about the timing of it. Then I realized Ryou-san... Ryou was changing the subject to protect Shario. "You know, you're right. And I'm sorry that we didn't do this sooner, Ryou."

"Is this a good thing, sir?" Ichiro asked me.

I nodded. "By Ryou's culture, it is. We're acknowledging in public that we are as close as brothers."

"Congratulations!" Kasandara offered.

Then I noticed that Hayate, Rein, and Shamal had distracted looks on their faces. Sure enough, they stood up in unison and grabbed their trays. "Sorry, the four of us have to get back to work. There's an emergency situation and we've been asked to help." Shario – presumably the fourth person that Hayate had mentioned – followed them promptly.

"I hope things turn out well," I replied as they headed for the door. After they left, I turned back to Ryou. "And I have some serious thinking to do for the entire afternoon. Sorry."

"Don't be, Robu. Nine times out of ten, what you learn is something we need to know."

"More accurately, thirteen of fifteen," Kasandara corrected. "That is one of thirty below your statement, my master." Okay, her grammar was better than Raising Heart's, but it still wasn't quite right. I wondered why.



Ryou smiled. "I think you can see more possibilities than I can, Kasandara. Please continue to correct me unless we're in a situation where every second matters."

"Yes, my master!"

The more I pondered that afternoon, consulting relevant parts of both Hayate and Shario's brainprints, the more I thought that Midchildan society was messed up with regard to mating customs. The Saint King Unification War ended three generations ago; there wasn't a huge requirement to re-populate the planet any more, even with the number of neighbourhoods and cities that were still empty. But they were still expecting people to be married at Makoto's, Ryou's, and Ami's age. Well, mine, too, now that I've been rejuvenated. And they were expected to have children at Shario's age.

My first conclusion was that this culture had some serious issues. But I remembered that line that Heinlein had quoted from Act II of *Caesar and Cleopatra* about the customs of one's tribe, and kept my mouth shut. Insulting our hosts was a quick ticket to getting kicked out, and that meant the four of us would be homeless and starving. Besides, I still had my middle-age outlook on life even if I had a teenage body, and I was all-but-engaged to a teenager, so this pot was not about to comment on the kettle. But I could still think it.

My second conclusion was that I'd erred slightly regarding what I thought I had seen when I made Shario's brainprint. Yes, she was looking for a mate. Yes, she was het. Yes, she saw us and liked what she saw. Thankfully, no, it wasn't me that she was looking at. Sorry, Ryou, but in this case I'm willing to throw you under a bus and hurt Ami's feelings if it keeps Makoto happy. Ryou's a good friend, Ami's my dearer friend, but Makoto is my dearest.

And, yes, we needed to know this. How was Ryou, who still became flustered at the thought of Makoto and me kissing let alone the thought of him kissing Ami, supposed to handle the fact that a very smart and very cute (glasses notwithstanding) woman who's only two years older than him wanted to bear his children?

Heck, how was *Ami* supposed to handle that?

And how was I supposed to tell either of them? This was Shario's secret, not mine.

At least now I knew why Shario was so flustered when Ami transformed in front of everybody the day we met. She thought that she'd have to be willing to show off her own body if she wanted a chance with Ryou. Of course, she didn't have a chance with Ryou, but she didn't know that. And that gave me an approach to help resolve the issue.

I asked the dorm's resident manager how to set up a short and non-urgent meeting with Shario, and she offered to take care of that for me.

Shario was able to make time for me before the evening meal.

"Thank you for seeing me on such short notice, Corporal Finieno."

She looked surprised at my use of her rank. "Is this an official visit, Mr. Donaldson?"

"Part of it is, yes, so I thought we should start formally. I have two requests to make of the TSAB, one of which I expect will be much easier to answer than the other."

"You may as well start with the easy one, then," she smiled.

"All right. I request copies of the TSAB Ground Armaments Service's combat training manuals."

"Why?"

"So that we can take them home and train the other Sailor Senshi. Assuming that we can get home."

"Well, let's find out whether we can help you there." She touched an illuminated spot on her desk and a video-conference window appeared in front of her. "Captain Lowran, Mr. Donaldson is in my office. He just made the request for training manuals that we expected one of our guests to make."

"Granted," Griffith replied immediately.

"Thank you, sir." The video-conference window closed on its own. Shario turned back to me. "We don't have printed copies of our manuals any more. I can download to your Unison Devices our manuals for basic combat, basic magic, basic magical combat, basic squad-level tactics, advanced hand-to-hand fighting, advanced stick fighting, advanced sword fighting, and advanced combat while flying. Are there any of those that you don't want?" she asked with a grin.

I grinned back. "I'm sure that we can find uses for all of them." Then I realized she'd said 'Unison Devices' and lost my grin. "Kasandara can't have copies, as well?"

"Kasandara is optimized for precognition," she replied. "She'd have trouble with teaching."

"Ah." That might also explain why her grammar skills were weaker than those of the other three Devices. But I didn't have a chance to ask about that.

"You mentioned having two requests...?"

I nodded. "The second request connects to the justification I gave you for our first request. Would the TSAB be able to help us find our way home? You do have dimensional travel already."

Shario sighed. "And that's the other favour we expected you to ask us. If you had coordinates for your homeworld, it would be a trivial matter to put you on a dimensional cruiser, even if the trip took years, but without knowing where you come from, we can't even begin to look for a way to send you home."

"Coordinates?"

"Our coordinate system lets us identify any place, down to the size of an inhabitable planet, anywhere in the administrated dimensions by using a string of sixteen hexadecimal quadruplets."

"Now that you mention it, I do remember seeing that system used once in the anime. But it's only sixteen quadruplets?"

Shario nodded. "Yes, I'm positive it's only sixteen. Why?"

"Because, not long before my friends and I were banished, I was given a string of sixty-four hexadecimal quadruplets by somebody who I suspect is a kami."

"Oh?" Shario was suddenly *very* interested. "Do you remember them?"

I grabbed a pen and a sheet of paper from her desk, and wrote down the entire string. "Here you go."

She looked at them for a long moment. "The last sixteen are our coordinates for non-administrated world 97."

"Are you thinking what I'm thinking, Shario?"

"I think so, Rob, but where are we going to find a dimensional transit meister at this time of night?"

I looked out the window. Sure enough, it was still daytime. Then I saw the smile on her face.

"I studied Earth – our Earth – during the Eltrian Formula Incident, and I am friends with Colonel Yagami, Captain Harlaown, and Captain Takamachi. I've picked up a few of your pop culture references over the last half-decade."

"Ah. If you don't mind me asking, how does a corporal get to be friends with a colonel and two captains?"

"Hayate sometimes says that ranks for mages are ornamental in the TSAB. We've known each other for years, and our ranks don't get in the way of that."

So the TSAB wasn't as military as I thought it was. Good to know. "I see. But getting back to my request..."

"I can't see TSAB being interested, but we might be able to help you on our own. I can't promise anything, though; the only dimensional transit meister that I know is busy with other things."

"That's more than I expected at such short notice, Shario. Thank you."

"You're welcome, Rob. Is there anything else you want to talk about?"

I nodded. "This is something personal. I spent some time looking through your memories. Aarse-Port looks like a great place to grow up, by the way."

"I thought so, and so did Griffith," she smiled.

"But it's your more recent memories that I wanted to talk about."

"The ones about the four of you?" she guessed with a bit of trepidation in her voice.

"Yeah," I replied as kindly as I could considering what I had to tell her. "When Ryou said that Ami was his next of kin, he wasn't joking. They love each other, and the memories that I copied from both of them just before I copied your memories agree that they plan to get married once we're back home." Seeing her expression at that news, that looked so much like Usagi-san and Makoto's expressions when they discovered Motoki-san had a girlfriend, I added, "I'm sorry."

"It's okay," she said bravely. "Do they know?"

I sighed. "Maybe. Ryou *is* a precog, after all, and I know from personal experience that he can use that power to foresee what people might be about to say. If you planned to confess your feelings for him, he has a good chance of already knowing it."

"Oh. I'd better talk with him, then."

"Thank you, Shario."

"Thank you for stopping me from making a fool of myself, Rob."

Shario didn't join us for dinner... but Rein mentioned that she wanted to see Ryou for a few minutes.

So he and Ami paid her a visit after we ate. After they got back to our apartment a half-hour later, nothing more was said about the matter.

Ever.

And that was the last relaxed day that we had for a while. Makoto, Ami, and I trained with our new partners fighting by our sides for a week, then we spent a week training how to simply live in Unison with our partners, then

we trained for two months how to fight while in Unison. By the end of that intensive training – and it needed to be intensive – all three of us were able to fly while in Unison and use both our own and our partners' abilities in combat as easily and quickly as breathing.

It was odd seeing the ladies in Unison. Ami looked like she'd stepped straight out of some of her fan art, with her normally black-with-blue-highlights hair replaced with Meia's sea-green locks. My dearest went from auburn to electric-blue, which I suppose was appropriate. Me? Thanks to Ichiro, I finally had the jet-black hair of an oni straight out of Japanese legends. And the equivalent to a Barrier Jacket that the two of us designed was essentially a second skin, the brick-red colour of a legendary oni, which meant what was previously a disguise was now my combat outfit. Of course, that didn't stop me from wanting a better solution, remembering the Lieze sisters' skills with disguise.

As for the skills we learned in training, Ami became good at both her Senshi abilities and basic Midchildan healing magic. She was also the best of all of us at tactics, as befitting an International Master at chess. After I casually mentioned Naru-san's ability to create gemstone weapons on the fly, Rein and Ami modified Rein's Frigid Dagger spell to create a full-sized ice sword that Ami could use in combat, and Sakura and Ichiro taught Ami the basics of sword fighting. And Ami spent a lot of time with Meia simply enjoying the ecstasy of flight, in Unison or beside each other.

Sakura taught my dearest the basics of both flight while in Unison and sword fighting while beside her. Sakura also taught Makoto how to channel her Senshi powers through a sword, turning them into close-in effects. For that, she needed a physical sword. She went through three cheap swords before learning how to control the amount of electricity flowing through the metal, then received from Hayate a high-quality blade that was for all intents and purposes an *ō-wakizashi*. No, it wasn't another big expense; there were literally warehouses filled with old swords from the days of the Saint King Unification War, and Hayate had one of her staff choose a good sword from that supply. Apparently, Wide-Area Search magic works wonders when looking for high-quality items in warehouses filled with average items... and putting "Japanese style sword" and "W.A.S." together hints that it was Captain Takamachi who carried out the search, although I never got a chance to confirm that. Anyway. My dearest sent a Jupiter Oak Evolution attack through the blade, Sakura looked happy at the result, and the two of them called the blade *Donguri-no-ken* – Japanese for "acorn sword" – to forever remind them of how they had tested the blade.

Ichiro and I could fly while in Unison, but like Makoto I couldn't fly on my own. When we were in Unison, though, I could fly faster than the others; being able to wrap myself in an aerodynamic forcefield helped there. Ichiro also taught me how to manifest twin sticks using my forcefields and fight opponents with them, starting with batons and working up to staffs that were as tall as I was. He also taught me the basics of how to fight with one stick. Then he taught me how to flatten the sticks and put a sharp edge on one side, turning them into swords... and then my sword-fighting training started in earnest. By the end of the second month, he declared me to be "barely acceptable".

Even Ryou picked up the basics of TSAB ground fighting when he joined us. Kasandara couldn't help him there, except to warn him of where attacks were coming from; the two became better at pure defence than any of the rest of us without a forcefield, despite being ground-bound. When I asked them about it later, Kasandara told me that she was able to process *all* of the immediate futures at once, and through their own telepathic link Ryou was able to pick the most desirable future – the one where they don't get hit – more easily than he could on his own.

Once we completed those two months of training, we were given the standard promotion tests over two days. Ami and Makoto officially jumped three ranks from Rank E to Rank B. I only managed Rank C. Ryou managed Rank D simply by outlasting his attackers without taking any damage. Of course, defence aided by precognition was an entirely different kettle of fish from offensive combat, so his ability rank isn't really comparable to ours.

And the day after the tests... that was the day that Antiquities Administration Department Mobile Section 6 disbanded, as in canon. No, we weren't allowed to attend the ceremony. And that's why our training after we received our partners needed to be so intensive; we weren't getting any more after those two and a half months.

Well, we weren't getting any more *official* military training. Ichiro, Sakura, and Meia had all of the training manuals that Hayate and Sharior were willing to give us, after all.

We quickly realized that we needed to find a place to live and a way to earn enough money to pay for the necessities of life. We didn't want to keep relying on Ryou's ability to play the stock markets with a substantially-better-than-average success rate – it wasn't fair to him or to Kasandara – but none of us could come up with any alternative.

We ended up relying on the kindness of our new friends again; Ginga offered to let us stay at the Nakajima residence in Anberse, a town in the 22nd district of Midchilda Central that was close enough to Cranagan to be considered a suburb. Since none of us were idiots, of course we accepted. We made an impression on Ginga and Subaru's father, Genya, when we offered to help out around the house... and it was a large house.

But before we moved in, Hayate offered to take us along on her vacation.

Back home.

We all leapt at that opportunity. Uminari might not be Minato, but at least they were both in Tokyo.

Before we left, Hayate exchanged half of our money for yen. It was only then that I realized just how much the TSAB had paid for those scans of the Mercury Computer; I was wondering what I could spend five million yen on in just two weeks. Then I realized that even five million yen might not be enough for my shopping list. Luckily for me, Ryou also realized what I wanted to do and was willing to help out.

It was just the six of us in Tokyo: Hayate, Rein, and we four exiles. We spent the first day familiarizing ourselves with local culture; 2017 Tokyo was both familiar and foreign to my friends from 1992. Then we spent a day in Shibuya, buying clothes that weren't green tops and black slacks or skirts. Center Gai was our friend here, even without an Atelier Lucent in this reality. While everyone else noticed that its absence disappointed me, they didn't ask me why. And that was good, since that meant I didn't have to decide which promise to break by answering that question.

After our one-day shopping trip, Ryou and I excused myself and headed to Akihabara while the ladies and Ichiro visited the [Tokyo Skytree](#). They had fun hearing what Hayate knew and was willing to say about [the Eltrian Formula Incident](#). We worked.

The first thing we did was pick up the bare minimum of computer gear for everybody: a laptop each running the newest version of Windows 10, a multi-terabyte external drive for each laptop, one external Blu-ray drive to share between the four of us, and a wi-fi router for my apartment back home. Ryou insisted we also get some 56k modems so we could communicate with each other and 1992's version of the internet, and suggested that our favourite electrokinetic might benefit from a backup drive kept in a Faraday cage. My laptop was relatively under-powered compared to the others since I had a much better one back in our home reality's Azabu-Juban. Oh, and I also bought copies of some movies and TV series to watch with my friends, and some music including all three of BTS's Japanese albums at the time to rip to the laptops and my phone. Ryou also bought a laser pointer for some reason that we couldn't figure out at the time; all he said was that it might be useful later.

Then we went to an internet cafe, plugged those drives into two of the laptops, and plugged the laptops into the fastest connections we could rent for the day. Then I downloaded every operating system patch that was available, and followed that up with the bare essentials for what we'd need back home: all of [Hitoshi Doi's on-line Sailor Moon encyclopedia](#), all of [Project WikiMoon](#), all of [The Sailor Moon Wiki](#), and what had been written of [Shadowjack Watches Sailor Moon](#). The last for the episode analyses, of course, not "A Stormy Relationship". That, I planned to share with Ami and Makoto when they needed a good laugh.

All of this, of course, was in accordance with our TSAB training to take any advantage we could get in a fight. The fact that I've wanted to do this since I realized that I could, half a year ago, was beside the point.

And, yes, taking advantage of knowledge gained outside of the reality that I'd found myself in was also a stupid genre convention. It was almost as if I was home.

Once that was done, I grabbed the latest available stable versions of [LibreOffice](#), [GIMP](#), [Thunderbird](#), and Firefox, with the source code where it was available. Unfortunately, [LibreWolf](#) wouldn't be released for another half-decade, or I would have pulled that back instead of Firefox. I followed those downloads with everything at [Google Fonts](#) that had Japanese character sets, [the DejaVu fonts](#), the [Worldwind](#) database and SDK, the [Red Cross](#) and [St. John Ambulance](#) first aid manuals for Ami, a [set of screensavers](#) because screen savers are expected in 1992, a few [public domain landscape images from Wikimedia Commons](#) for the others to use as desktop wallpapers – I still had those photos of my dearest admiring the roses at Jindai Botanical Garden on my smartphone – and as much of [the Virtual Gramophone](#) and [Project Gutenberg](#) as I could squeeze in – including the [cookbooks](#) for my dearest – while we still had access to the connection. Hey, I may as well make doing homework that much easier for everyone by assembling a reference library and the tools to use it. And, just for the fun of it, I grabbed all of [Four King Hell](#) that was available; I figured that Bunny-chan would get a kick out of it after she met the Senshi of the Outer Planets. Of course, I'd have to explain to her the concept of an abandoned fanfic once she reached the end of the series.

In the meantime, Ryou was trusting in his precognitive ability to find and download information that would be useful once we were home: the [9/11 Commission Report](#), Wikipedia's [lists of earthquakes by year](#) and their in-depth pages on the [2011 Tōhoku earthquake](#) and the associated [nuclear disaster in Fukushima](#), scholarly analyses on how the internet could have been designed to significantly reduce spam and fraud, lists of successful companies' IPO dates, and other documents that I didn't ask about at the time. Once he ran out of useful notes to supplement his power, we coordinated on what we downloaded from Project Gutenberg so that we didn't pull back any duplicate books. And, just like my guilty-pleasure download was *Four King Hell*, his was *Dungeon Keeper Ami*. Mind you, considering how scarily-competent that story's version of Ami ended up, maybe there wasn't any guilt to downloading it after all.

We grabbed a couple of convenience-store bentos for lunch and kept the downloads going while we ate. My lunch was a double order of inarizushi. Try as they might, nobody on Midchilda knew how to make it properly; they kept

insisting on adding things to the rice and fried tofu. Ryou had a more balanced meal, but, hey, getting only the food that I really like just once wouldn't hurt me.

Once that was done, we had enough time before needing to head back to Hayate's place to look at the used camera stores, and I'm glad that we did. Ryou found two working Nikon F90 cameras – top of the line and \$1500 new in 1992 (and in 1992 dollars) – for the equivalent of \$50 each. Of course I bought them both. It cost me more to buy a camera bag and a couple of inexpensive auto-focus lenses so that I could actually use the cameras than it cost for the cameras themselves. I also grabbed the last few rolls of 24-exposure and 36-exposure Fujicolor 400 film that they had in stock – it was just going out of production in 2017 – because the film was available in 1992, which meant I could get the rolls developed once I got back home.

All of this assumed that we were going to get back home, of course. I let myself admit to myself that this wasn't a sure thing even as I spent the money. Of course, I know now that we made it back, but I still had my doubts then.

Once we got back to Hayate's house that evening, Ami and Meia were kind enough to help me configure all four of the laptops while Hayate and my dearest made dinner. After a half-year of Midchildan meals, some of which were Japanese-style, actual [katsudon](#) was a treat.

Meia also cast a stasis spell on the film so that it wouldn't deteriorate before we got home. Assuming we would get home, of course.

The day after that, I kept a promise that I'd made to my dearest. Hayate, Ami, Makoto and I Unisoned with Rein, Meia, Sakura, and Ichiro, respectively; Ami picked up Ryou in a piggyback carry; I turned us all invisible; and we flew to a particular parking lot near Narahara. We could have flown all the way, but it was more respectful to walk the rest of the way to [the Flight 123 Cenotaph](#), where Makoto was finally able to pay her respects to her parents.

When we got back to Hayate's house that evening, Shario was waiting for us, along with a young blond man Hayate's age who we hadn't previously met. "Yuuno Scrya," he introduced himself. "I'm pleased to make your acquaintance."

Shario added, "Yuuno is an archaeologist and the librarian of the Infinity Library, which means he has access to all of the knowledge that we've been able to recover from ancient Belka and older civilizations. He's also a dimensional transit meister, and he holds a security clearance with the TSAB."

"I'm sure that there's a fascinating story about how you managed to gain all of those skills and permissions," Ryou said.

I carefully did not reply that it was the story about how Captain Takamachi learned about magic and the TSAB – the Jewel Seed incident. It wasn't my story to tell, and not only because we still hadn't met Nanoha.

But it was Yuuno's story, and he was good enough a storyteller to tell it. Not everything, though; he didn't mention that Captain Harlaown was known then as Fate Testarossa and was Captain Takamachi's antagonist at the time. He just mentioned that their main opponent was looking for Al-Hazard.

"Which reminds me of why I'm here," he added after giving us a sanitized version of the first season of *Lyrical Nanoha*. "I was looking through some of what we know about Al-Hazard in relation to that favour that one of you asked Shario about."

When I saw that the others looked puzzled, I replied, "My request for any assistance you could give us in finding our way home."

"You asked for that and you didn't tell us?" my dearest asked.

"I didn't want to get anybody's hopes up."

"I can understand that," Yuuno commented, drawing everybody's attention back to him. "I found a fascinating mention of a level of... over-reality, for want of a better term, that is home to the gods."

"Do gods really exist?" Hayate asked.

Yuuno shrugged his shoulders. "The ancient Belkans believed that the Al-Hazardian people believed in gods, plural. And so do many other civilizations. There are a lot of triunes in the religions described in books in the Infinity Archive, including the one where I found that reference. These gods tend to be the most powerful in their pantheons when they work together."

"Like the Fates or the Norns," I replied.

Yuuno-san nodded. "Those are two examples from your world, yes. Rob, may I examine your neck, please?"

"Sure," I replied, puzzled by the apparent non sequitur.

He did so, then walked back to where we could all see him. "I expected as much. There's another example of a triune of gods from your world: Nanoha-san's country calls them 'Mihashira no Uzu no Miko'."

"Amaterasu Ōmikami, Tsukuyomi-no-Mikoto, and Susanoo-no-Mikoto," Ami said, listing the Three Precious Children.

Yuuno-san nodded in agreement. "You're familiar with them. That saves us some time. The mark on the back of Rob's neck looks like an ancient Belkan, or possibly an Al-Hazardian, sigil associated with their version of Susanoo." I hadn't realized that I had a mark on my neck, but I knew instantly what he was referring to. "I *did* receive it at the Hikawa Shrine where Rei-san lives," I said. Yuuno-san looked confused. "It's one of an association of shrines to Susanoo."

Hayate looked thoughtful. "So there are gods, or at least beings with godlike powers," she commented.

"Looks like it, yes," I replied. "And if they live in a reality above other realities, maybe they can see the other realities the way that we can see maps in an atlas."

"And perhaps they can provide coordinates of those realities," Ichiro added thoughtfully.

"I'm working on the assumption that they exist and can provide that information," Yuuno said, "Although all I can say for sure is that without the string of coordinates that Shario said you received at that shrine, there would be no way for us to find your home reality."

"But with those coordinates, there's a chance?" I asked.

"Does that mean..." Ami started, hope obvious in her voice.

"... that we might..." Makoto continued, just as hopeful.

"... be able to go home?" Ryou finished. He's a precog, "hope" is something foreign to him. But he sounded happy.

"I'm not going to make any promises to any of you," Yuuno-san replied in all seriousness. "But my staff and I should be able to at least find your home, and we might be able to communicate with somebody there if we're very lucky. Actually sending you home, even assuming we can contact your home reality... that might take more magical power than any of us can gather. And it probably won't happen this year, if it ever happens."

"Changing the subject slightly," my dearest said, "isn't Susanoo enshrined at Rei's shrine in his aspect as a patron of marriage?"

Ami giggled. "That would explain why all of the Sailor Senshi want to find boyfriends. We've picked it up from spending so much time at the shrine."

I looked at Ryou, got a smile and a nod in reply, and said in mock-annoyance, "Oh, so the two of us are just tools of the kami, are we?"

"I don't know about romance," Yuuno-san said before either of the ladies could complain, "but it looks to me like you were a tool of Susanoo, Rob."

Considering that I had said that I didn't care what the kami did to me as long as Ami, Ryou, and Makoto were safe at home, I wondered whether I was still his tool. Or, I wondered, somebody else's; after all, I still didn't know who took me out of my original universe.

Yuuno didn't stay longer than overnight. He was just visiting to give us that all-important news, and to get some sleep between connecting flights. We convinced him to have dinner with us, and we introduced Shario to the delights of a [sukiyaki](#) party. It was only after the meal that my dearest told Shario that sukiyaki was something we usually only ate as a family... which caused Shario to blush as she stammered out her thanks.

As for Yuuno-san's flights, they were a dimensional flight from Midchilda and an aircraft flight to China. He was here to explore the Xianren Cave.

Yes, this reality's analogue of the source of that "corrupted Xianren Cave energy" that powered Touhi-chan. Here, [Xianren Cave](#) – which was presumably *not* corrupted – is the home to the oldest pottery in existence, dating back twenty millennia.

Yes, it was even older than ancient Belka or Al-Hazard, according to Yuuno-san. And that meant that the Silver Millennium predated Al-Hazard, as well.

We didn't need to make a report on what Touhi-chan had said; we had left the Mercury Computer switched on and it had recorded everything. And TSAB already had copies of everything in the Mercury Computer's databanks.

Once we learned that, we began to understand just how valuable that data was and why Ami had been paid so well for it.

After we saw Yuuno off at the commuter-rail station that connected directly to Narita airport the next morning, we had a quick discussion as to what we were going to do that day. Shario announced that we couldn't stay past tomorrow; Hayate's presence was needed back on Midchilda. We ended up making a poor decision; we went looking for places that we remembered from home, in order to show them to Hayate, Rein, and Shario.

We didn't see any signs of anybody who could have been Rei-san or Yuuichirou-san, or children of either of them, at the Hinata Shrine. The high-rise that Saeko-basan's employers had purchased for staff housing appeared to be a

privately-owned condo building with no connection to Juban Daini General Hospital. The apartment building that Makoto and I lived in had been torn down and replaced with a newer and larger building, if it ever existed at all in this reality.

We didn't bother looking at, or for, Kuritsu Juban Chuugakkou. As nice a place as this world was, we already knew that it wasn't home.

Ami wasn't the only one feeling homesick that evening.

Before we left, I got a small stack of inarizushi "station lunches" to take back to Midchilda. Thanks to some unexpected dimensional eddies between Earth and Midchilda slowing us down, we ate them on the transport instead; we got back to Cranagan only an hour before we absolutely needed to be downtown. Which meant all eleven of us instead of just the TSAB personnel ended up at Ground Armaments Service headquarters. As soon as we realized that we were going to be late arriving at the spaceport, we changed into our best outfits or formal uniforms during the dimensional flight. And despite all seven of us getting the VIP treatment at the airport in order to clear us through customs quickly, we made it to G.A.S. HQ with only six minutes to spare.

We were left in the care of somebody who we knew from Riot Force 6. "Dr. Shamal, what's so important that Hayate..." I remembered where we were just in time, "sorry, Lieutenant Colonel Yagami... needed to be here in person?"

"Her presence is required at a formal promotion ceremony," she replied. "The top brass decided that it needed to be here and now so that the public could see it. And that's why it's happening here instead of at TSAB headquarters in dimensional space."

Remembering why there were openings in the command organization, and that any competent military would be happy to take measures to keep those reasons secret, I simply nodded; there was no need to show off my knowledge of the events of *Nanoha StrikerS* in front of TSAB personnel. "Whose promotion ceremony is she attending?"

Shamal grinned like the cat that ate the canary. "Her own."

Ryou smiled in return. "I can see why she needed to be here."

Then we had to stop talking, because the ceremony was about to begin.

I could see why they insisted Hayate was present for the photo op. Of course the ceremony was a photo op; TSAB had some major public relations work to do after the JS Incident. And Hayate was the most photogenic person on the stage, both before and after receiving the half-cape that was part of a full Colonel's uniform.

She wasn't the only one to receive a promotion; Vita was promoted to full Lieutenant during the same ceremony. We applauded at the appropriate times.

Captain Takamachi refused the promotion that she was offered, just like in her canon, so she wasn't present. Besides, according to Shamal, she was busy with adoption paperwork. Captain Harlaown wasn't up for promotion (or on-planet), so she wasn't present either. And, with everybody in Riot Force 6 being assigned to other duties, at that point it was unlikely we would ever have the chance to meet anyone in the unit who we hadn't met already. Stupid genre conventions.

During the celebratory party after the ceremony, we discovered that it wasn't just officers who were promoted that day. Shario was quite happy to show off her brand-new sergeant's stripes, and Subaru was just as happy to let people see her corporal's stripes. "Teana was promoted to corporal, too," she told us, "but she had to leave right away to take her new position as Fate's assistant."

"So she's on the path to become an Enforcer," Sakura said with approval.

"Which career path are you following?" Ami asked Subaru.

"The only one that's worth following," she replied. "Disaster Prevention."

We all smiled, except for the one of us who didn't have a face. "That's a *good* career," Kasandara said instead.

I added, "Here's hoping that you save so many lives that you can't count them all."

"Thanks," she said. Then she grinned and added, "But I can count really high!" Then her grin went back to being a smile. "Dad told me that you're moving in with us for a while. I don't have to leave until tomorrow, so I'll take you home with me."

"We appreciate that," Ryou replied.

"We'll follow you home, but you can't keep us," Sakura added as Shamal caught our attention.

«Hayate asked me to find the eight of you,» she sent to us. «She's asked to see all of you in private.»

«We mustn't keep the colonel waiting,» Makoto sent back. «We'll be right there.»

Subaru noticed the distracted look on our faces. "Is something wrong?"

"We don't know," Ami said as we headed for Shamal. "Colonel Yagami wants to see us. We'll see you later."



A few minutes later, and we were in a quiet room with our friend in high places. "Congratulations, Colonel." Ryou said formally.

"Thank you. I'm sorry that I had to cut our vacation short, so I've pulled a few strings and managed to get these for the eight of you." She gave us ID cards with our names, photos,... and honorary ranks. Kasandara, Ichiro, Sakura, and Meia were all listed as retired ensigns, while Ryou, Ami, my dearest, and I were listed as retired second lieutenants. Obviously the TSAB did things differently than the services back home did, in that they made a fuss over retired junior officers' previous ranks. "Those ID cards can get you past TSAB checkpoints if you have legitimate business on a base, and if you are on a base, you can use them to claim junior officers' mess privileges. You don't get paid, though, unless you want to sign up."

"Thank you, but we're already pledged to Neo-Queen Serenity," Ami said with a smile to show that she intended no insult toward the TSAB.

«Neo-Queen?» I asked privately.

«Makoto told me that you mentioned that name to Chibiusa, so I read ahead in that WikiMoon download you made,» she answered just as privately. Of course Ami read ahead.

Either not knowing or not caring about our aside, Hayate said, "I expected you'd say that. This isn't much, but it is something that I can do for you before I have to accept a command in the Sailing Force."

"I'm amazed that you did this much for us, ma'am," Ichiro replied.

"Hey, she likes Mako-neesan and Ami-san," Sakura replied. And that was when I became aware that she was calling my dearest her big sister.

«You could learn something about relationships from your sister, Ichiro.»

«Yes, sir.» Before I could correct him, he added, «Rob.»

«That's better.»

Turning my attention back to Hayate, I realized that somebody had asked what her next posting was.

"I've been offered command of the Wolfram. It's a new ship."

"I'm sure that it will be a good ship, with you in command," I said.

Once we were mixing with the other invited guests again, Shamal pulled me aside for a moment. Again. "Some people you haven't met yet would like to talk with you and me some time soon. When can you spare some time?"

"Did they say what they want to talk about?"

"Brainprints."

Ah. So these were TSAB people who wanted to talk with me. I still owed them for Hayate's hospitality, so I thought it best to at least find out what they wanted. "After we move in with the Nakajimas, pretty much any time. How much time do you need me for?"

"An hour or two, maybe half a day."

"Is the day after tomorrow too soon?"

"No, that's perfect. Thank you."

Once I was back with the others, I asked Makoto, "Want to spend some time with me and some strangers the day after tomorrow?"

She grinned. "Of course I'll be your bodyguard, darling."

It felt good to be at the stage of a relationship where the two of us knew what we were leaving unsaid.

A few hours later, Subaru took us home.

Her home, not ours, unfortunately. But it would turn out to be our home for the rest of our stay on Midchilda.

It was a large estate in Anberse, west of Cranagan. But, then, with all of the small towns left empty after the Saint King Unification War and the high-mobility magic that the TSAB possessed, why shouldn't somebody who could afford the upkeep have a large estate in the suburbs?

We only met the family head in passing that day – Major Genya Nakajima was busy commanding Ground Forces Unit 108, and he didn't have time to talk. Subaru and Ginga mentioned to us that Unit 108 was a criminal investigation unit.

I kept the *NCIS* references to myself. He was a Ground Armaments Service officer, not a Sailing Force officer.

Since Genya had been called away, Subaru showed us to our rooms in our home away from home. Two bedrooms with twin beds, to begin with. And somebody had put Ami and Ryou's luggage in one room, and Makoto's and my luggage in the other.



After a lengthy discussion of how her culture's morals in this matter didn't match those of the cultures that any of us came from, she was kind enough to move us to a set of four single-occupancy bedrooms. When we asked her why the Nakajima family had so many guest bedrooms, she asked in return why they shouldn't; Anberse still had as many empty buildings as Cranagan.

As I was unpacking, I noticed that I still had those four vacuum-packed dehydrated curry lunches that I'd bought in Minato – Bishoujo Minato, not Lyrical Minato – a half-year ago. According to the labels, they were still edible, so I gave them to Subaru as a taste of her ancestral home and a token of our thanks.

After we were settled in, we talked with Subaru about how we could at least not be a drag on the household. She gave us a list of what her father hoped she'd be able to help out with when she wasn't on duty with the Gulf Special Rescue Unit. Whatever that was.

The first line on the list was "cook". We all knew what my dearest was going to be doing. Ryou and I split the jobs that needed strong backs and stamina, and Ami took charge of organizing the estate's library... after she found some translation magic.

The day after we moved in, Genya joined us for dinner and pronounced it "intriguing". It wasn't anything special, just katsudon, but despite his Japanese heritage he'd never had it before. We talked about modern Japan for hours, bringing him up to speed on his ancestral homeland... or, at least, the 1990s Bishoujo version of his ancestral homeland.

Genya was kind enough to give me and my dearest a ride into town the next morning, where we met Shamal at Ground Armaments Service headquarters. He went off to carry out his duties, while Shamal escorted us into a deep, dark part of headquarters.

We quickly realized that it was going to be one of *those* meetings. Even if we hadn't, the fact that nobody we met introduced themselves would have clued us in – this meeting never officially happened.

One of the people we met – a woman with glasses and brown hair – said, "We understand that you have Rare Skills that we might be able to make use of."

Before either of us could reply, Shamal said, "Colonel Yagami has already asked them whether they're interested in joining the Bureau."

"And we said no," Makoto added.

"That's a shame," said the other person we met that day, this one a male with black hair. "Antiquities Administration Department Mobile Section 6 gave you quite a bit of support, both financially and logistically, including supplying you with three Unison Devices and an Intelligent Device."

We already knew that telepathic messages weren't secure from all other telepaths, so I didn't send one. Instead, I squeezed Makoto's hand. She took the hint and said nothing.

Luckily, Shamal answered the implied question, so there wasn't an obvious pause in the discussion. "The materiel, training, and funding provided to them and their companions was approved as fair compensation for the information that they provided to us." And I found the thought that Shamal was calling Ichiro, Sakura, Meia, and Kasandara equipment instead of people to be somewhat disquieting... especially considering that I thought that she and Rein were friends.

"Perhaps we could convince you to assist us another way," the woman said. "Would you be willing to provide us with some of your undifferentiated stem cells?"

"Our what?" asked my dearest.

I turned to her and said, "The cells that are the easiest for somebody to make a clone from," I replied. Then I turned back to our interlocutors. "Are you planning on using them in Project FATE? Because I have serious ethical issues with leaving a younger copy of myself behind when or if we leave here."

"That's supposed to be top secret," the man complained.

"You obviously didn't read Yagami's reports about them, or Scrya's report about their origin point," the woman replied, somewhat accusingly. "They're from a different reality, and much of what we know about them comes from a work of fiction." Then she turned to us. "Presumably you know about us the same way, Mr. Donaldson."

"Presumably," I replied, without mentioning that I had all of Hayate's knowledge somewhere in my head. If they didn't already know that, then they didn't need to know. Then I finally recognized the woman, probably because I was thinking of Hayate's memories and she was in them. "And, since you're no longer keeping our names secret, might I offer my condolences on the recent death of your father, Commander Gaiz."

She looked shocked for a moment, but quickly got her reactions back under control. "Thank you. And it was foolish of me to use your name. I can't blame you for not liking the idea of being copied, though." She thought for a moment, then asked, "Is there anything that we could bribe you with, in order to get your cooperation?"

"Do you know how to send us home?" Makoto asked immediately.

After a moment's pause that I wasn't sure how to interpret, Auris Gaiz replied, "No."

"And you've already made it clear that it isn't in your interests to send us home just yet, even if you could," I said, taking a guess that turned out to be correct.

"Mind your words," the man said.

Commander Gaiz laughed; an unpleasant sound. "He's right. We don't want any of them leaving just yet. But we can't stop them. What we can do is explain the project that we want your help with."

"I was wondering when you were going to get to the matter of my brainprinting ability."

"According to Dr. Shamal's reports, you cannot put somebody's memories into somebody else's mind."

I wasn't keeping that secret from anybody who knew that I had the ability. "That's correct."

"Can you place them into a synthetic intelligence?"

I raised one eyebrow in surprise. "That's... an intriguing idea. I've never tried."

"Why not?" asked the man, who I still didn't recognize.

"I've never had access to a synthetic intelligence..." Then I realized where this conversation was going. "At least, not before I met Meia, Sakura, and Ichiro. But they already have personalities; I suspect that the process wouldn't work on any of them." I certainly hoped the process wouldn't work on any of them – that would be evidence in favour of them being hardware instead of people.

"We'll get you a blank Unison Device to experiment with," offered Commander Gaiz.

"If you deliver blank Devices to Major Nakajima's residence in Anberse, I'll get them," I replied, making it clear that I wasn't about to stay in their headquarters while I carried out the experiments, and that I expected more than one blank Device to experiment with.

The man looked upset, but Gaiz answered, "We'll do that later this week. Now, we expect that the three of you will not speak about this to anyone. Dr. Shamal, you can treat that as a direct order from headquarters. Colonel Yagami isn't here to shield you from proper procedure any more."

I was surprised to hear that they considered headquarters issuing orders directly to a single person to be "proper procedure".

"Yes, ma'am," Shamal replied stiffly.

Gaiz turned back to me and Makoto. "And we expect both of you to sign secrecy agreements about this matter."

"And if we refuse?" my dearest asked.

I could tell that she disliked the idea of a non-disclosure agreement as much as I did. "There's no need to be combative," I said before anyone else could reply. "If they don't trust us, I'll just stop the project here and now."

"We must insist on this," Gaiz insisted. "Your world has a saying: 'Trust, but verify'."

I chuckled, surprising Makoto. "That isn't what the saying means, but I take your meaning. All right, I'll at least read the contract that you want me to sign."

Two hours later, we had all signed a contract that we were equally unhappy with, but at least I was getting paid for my time, Makoto and I got to tell Ami and Ryou what we were doing, and we didn't have to work at headquarters... but they did get to keep surveillance cameras on me while I worked.

While Makoto and I were in Cranagan, Ami discovered some textbooks in Genya's library. Sure, they were a generation old, but they were still useful; high-school math doesn't change from year to year, after all, unless somebody's dumbing-down the curriculum, and nobody had done that with these textbooks. We set up a schedule that included all four of us studying at least some of what we would have been learning if we were still in Azabu-Juban: math from the discovered textbooks and the textbook that Ami had given Makoto for her birthday, English and Japanese literature from the books I had downloaded from Project Gutenberg, geography from the Worldwind data I had downloaded at the same time after Ami and Meia wrote a front-end for it, and P.E. from Ichiro and Sakura – which meant combat drills and sword-fighting practice, although Ichiro surprised us by knowing more than a few different formal dances that he was willing to teach us. A few of them went well with some of the waltz music that I had downloaded.

Yes, the sword-fighting practice meant that Ryou became sufficiently proficient with a sword to be trusted with "live steel" after a year, although we had to borrow one from Major Nakajima for him to use. Ami and I could create our own weapons from ice and forcefields, respectively – and our partners trained us both until we could do so reliably, quickly, and most importantly *silently* – and my dearest already had Donguri-no-ken. These weren't the only abilities that Ichiro and Sakura taught the group to use silently; by the end of August, Mercury and Jupiter were no longer calling out their attacks' names on a regular basis, although – like Hayate's magic – their spells were more precise if they did.

Ami continued to learn Home Ec. from Makoto. So did Ginga on weekends, and Subaru when she had time off and spent it at home. In return, what amounted to full-immersion training in Midchildan English when the Nakajima girls were home helped Ryou and my dearest lose the rough edges in their own conversational English skills.

I was worried that we wouldn't be able to keep up our history studies, until I discovered that Ryou had downloaded the official curriculum while we were in Uminari. Ami and I taught the others what we knew of the pure sciences and computer sciences. Music and fine arts... was off the table other than those dances that Ichiro knew, until I realized we could use the collection of music on my smartphone as source material for the activities of a Light Music Appreciation Society, which was better than nothing. Although I did justify going out and taking photos with my cellphone as being practice in artistic composition of scenes.

Ryou taught himself, with Kasandara's help, to play the stock market without being caught as a precog. Ginga and her father gave both of them the occasional tip on what was and wasn't legal to do in Cranagan's bourse. We gave Ryou the money we had left from what Hayate had paid Ami for the Mercury Computer's data and what the TSAB was paying me to work on brainprinting a Device, and he gave us back whatever cash we needed whenever we needed it. Needless to say, we quickly stopped worrying about money... which Major Nakajima appreciated once he was sure that we weren't breaking any laws.

We also set aside some time for keeping in touch with the neighbours; with Major Nakajima and Ginga in Cranagan for work so much and Subaru posted elsewhere on Midchilda, they were our only contacts with the outside world half the time. Ami and I ended up tutoring some of the local children, which got us invited to stay for dinner on occasion, and of course we returned the invitations.

And, almost a week after we moved in and on a day when all of the Nakajimas were at work, Shario paid us a visit.

"It's good to see you again!" she said at the door. She was in civilian clothes, and carrying a large case.

"It's good to see you, too," Ami replied. "May I take that?"

Shario shook her head, and quietly replied, "I can only give this to Mr. Donaldson."

"Ah, so this is a business visit," I said. "Come on in and we'll talk." She did, and we did. "Do you know what's in this case?"

She nodded. "Commander Gaiz told me."

My first reaction was that TSAB security wasn't what it should be, then I realized that Shario was a device meister and already aware that I could take brainprints, so she had a good chance of figuring it out anyway. But did Commander Gaiz know that? I'd never know. "Do you know what I'm supposed to do with it?"

"See whether you can make them think like us," she said.

Close enough. "And are you here to help?"

She shook her head. "I wish I could, but I have to get back to headquarters. I can only stay for an hour or so."

"Long enough for a cup of coffee," Ami commented. "We still have a bit from when we visited Earth."

"Thank you, but no. Coffee makes me nervous."

"The caffeine in coffee makes everybody nervous," I replied with a grin, to put her at her ease. "It's a nervous system stimulant. It just hits some people harder than others."

We didn't make coffee. We did have a discussion about what was in the case: TSAB security surveillance cameras that Shario told us (with a wink) to set up ourselves, the completely-stocked Device field repair kit that Hayate had promised us, and – according to the packing slip – four doll-like unprogrammed Unison Devices. They reminded me of the uncustomized dolls from *Angelic Layer*. And there were six of them, two with tags saying they were faulty.

When I noticed that, I looked at Shario and raised one eyebrow while pointing at the discrepancy. "Sergeant?"

"I'm under orders."

"From Commander Gaiz," Makoto guessed.

Shario shook her head.

"From Colonel Yagami?" asked Ami.

As Shario nodded, I realized that Hayate really didn't want this project to succeed. Why else would she give us faulty hardware? I wondered how she found out about the project in the first place... then realized that she's the type of commanding officer who inspires loyalty in her troops, so she no doubt had some unofficial back-channels to draw on.

Ryou must have come to the same conclusion that I had. "This whole project that Ami and I aren't supposed to know about is intended to see whether Robu can create a Rank SS Unison Device, isn't it?"

"I'm not allowed to say," Shario replied quickly.

"And they don't want a Unison Device that has no mage ranks at all, right?" Ryou persisted.

"Nobody would want that," Shario said with a smile, suddenly figuring out where he was going with his questions.

"So if Robu was somehow able to produce the Device that Commander Gaiz wants..."

I interrupted Ryou. "And I have no guarantee that I can do anything of the sort, even if I have everything I need; I just promised that I'd give it a try."

Ryou went on as if I hadn't said anything. "...but the Device had no mage ability at all, then the project would be declared a failure. Eleven times out of thirteen."

"Thirty-three of thirty-eight," Kasandara corrected him.

Ami smiled. "It would be best if Rob had the most up-to-date information set possible, though."

Shario lost her smile as she turned her chair to face mine. "I suppose so. We mustn't give anybody the chance to say that we didn't do our best."

Five minutes later, I had updated my copy of Shario's brainprint, discovering in the process just who Hayate's back-channel into this project was. That's wonderfully naughty of you, Sergeant Finieno. "Sorry about this," I whispered as we finished.

"It's okay," she whispered back. "Ami's right; we had to do our best." Then she glanced at her wrist and said in a more normal tone. "Oh, look at the time. I have to get back to headquarters."

"We'll set up the cameras as soon as Major Nakajima lets us know which room we can use as a workroom," I replied as we both stood up. "And it really was good to see you again, Shario."

After we told Genya and Ginga as much as we were allowed to, our hosts let us set up a workshop in a relatively small outbuilding in the back yard. When I had the chance to mention this to Minako-san after we returned home, she called it my shed at the foot of the garden where I could putter around. I was thinking of it more as a man-cave, myself, even though I did hang a sign saying "Midchildian home of [Project Binky](#)" on the front door. If I can't keep it hidden, I can at least practice misdirection. Even if nobody here got the reference.

Inside, it was a small house of its own, resembling our studio-style apartments back in Azabu-Juban, with its own kitchenette and washroom... and a small room that was obviously intended to be a bedroom. We brought a bed in just to keep up appearances, and set up a workbench and the tools in the large room. Then Ami helped me set up the surveillance cameras so that they had a good view of everything except the bedroom and washroom. She was very careful to make it look like there were no holes in the surveillance zone while still giving me some privacy.

I'd swear that I'm a bad influence on her, but in this case, the genre convention of "corrupting the innocent girl into helping keep secrets" wasn't stupid. She knew as well as I did how many intelligent beings would end up as military slaves if Rank SS Mage Unison Devices became a reality. I had to keep at least some of my experiments out of the TSAB's watchful eyes. Besides, sometimes it was simply easier to concentrate while I was stretched out on that bed.

Then I spent three hours a day, five days a week, for most of the next five months on the experiments, consulting Shario's brainprint for her skills so often that I was a device meister for real by the middle of August. Ichiro and I worked them in around our studies and socializing with the Nakajimas and their neighbours.

Teal Deer, the experiments didn't work, and by the middle of August I had three burned-out Devices – two of which were the faulty ones that Shario had slipped in with the good ones – and a series of headaches to show for it. No matter what I did, I couldn't get a Device to accept a brainprint. And some of the failures were so spectacular that they blew out long sequences of the serial numbers in the devices' chassis. I can't imagine how that happened. Oh, and while I was having all those problems, Sakura was teaching Makoto how to apply her powers with pinpoint accuracy. A coincidence, I assure you.

Even so, the setbacks got me annoyed after a while. It was a good thing that we did have our studies, so that I could devote at least some of my time to something that didn't leave me frustrated. Watching the movies and shows that I had picked up on Earth also helped us pass the time. Makoto and Ami finally found out who Rubeus Hagrid was, along with being introduced to such luminaries of fiction as Samantha Carter, Mal Reynolds, and Veronica Mars.

This continued to the middle of August, when Ami reminded me that the local August 20 was July 7 back home. I was about to turn sixteen. Unless Minako-san was right when she pointed out that I hadn't been reset when Bunny-chan defeated Metaria, in which case I was about to turn seventeen, but I said nothing about that because I didn't want to annoy my dearest any more than she already was. We still had almost half a year before she turned sixteen and I would be willing to take the next step in our relationship.

So we went to the beach for the weekend. Genya had to work, unfortunately, but Ginga and Subaru joined us for both days, the younger of the Nakajima sisters taking the opportunity to show us where she worked. That took a half-day, and thanks to the ID cards that Hayate had given us we were able to get lunch at the base mess. Riot Force 6 had better cooks.

Saturday afternoon, though, we drew almost every eye on the beach. No, not because I was there. The technophiles or whatever the equivalent term is in a magitek society were interested in the Unison Devices, half the ladies were interested in Ryou, and most of the men were interested in the four biological women in our group.

Ryou, Ichiro, and I wore swim trunks, not that anybody noticed what Ichiro and I wore. Kasandara, being nonhumaniform, didn't wear anything as usual. Sakura and Meia wore one-piece suits that looked remarkably like school swimsuits from back home, in their partners' signature colours.

Subaru, being on-call because she was still close enough to her base to respond to emergency alerts, wore a navy-blue bikini top and denim Daisy Dukes, with her Device, Mach Caliber, on a cord around her neck. So, basically, a very abbreviated version of her Barrier Jacket. Her sister Ginga wore [a black bikini and a short-sleeved purple jacket](#) along with her usual hair ribbon. Ami wore [a white side-tied bikini with blue trim](#), which almost made me jealous of Ryou for being her boyfriend.

But only almost, because Makoto wore [an emerald-green bikini top and trunks that were even shorter than Subaru's Daisy Dukes, with a white belt. She also wore her hair loose](#), which was the first time I'd ever seen her with her hair down.

She wore that swimsuit again the next day, on my birthday. I have no idea what anybody else wore on Sunday. Or what they did, either; I'd be surprised if Ami didn't go swimming, but I really wasn't paying attention to anybody other than Makoto.

It was three days before the anniversary of our being sent to this dimension when Ichiro made a suggestion that in hindsight should have been obvious.

"Sir... Rob, I can't help but wonder whether we've been going about this project in the wrong way."

I snorted. "Five months of poor results does indicate that, yes."

"True. If you'll allow me, I'll re-state the goals of this project."

I sat down and gave him my full attention. "I'm all ears."

"They aren't that big," he replied with a smile. "But we're getting distracted. We, and especially you, have been given a task by the TSAB: copy a brainprint into a Unison Device. As yet, you have not been successful in downloading the mass of information which is organized in a biological manner into a synthetic, or more precisely cybernetic, mentality processor."

"You're telling me that there's a formatting problem. I figured that out a month ago. But what can I do about it? I'm a biological intelligence, and so is every person who I've been able to take a brainprint from."

"Have you considered applying a protocol-transformation filter?"

"Where would I get a ... Oh, no. Ooooooh, no. We've never done *anything* with brainprints while in Unison. We have no idea what it would do to you."

Ichiro smiled at my comment. "Thank you for considering my well-being, Rob. I took the liberty of asking Kasandara about the matter, and she told me that there would be no adverse effects to either of us in seventeen out of twenty-one timelines."

"That's good to know. But those four in twenty-one other cases worry me; they're approximately one-fifth of the possibilities. Ryou has in the past thought that that wasn't good enough to be sure, most recently just before we were sent to this dimension."

"I'm willing to take the risk, sir. And Kasandara also told me that if we don't try today, we won't have the chance to try again without breaking the contract that you signed."

I sighed deeply. "You know me too well. Okay, we'll strike the bell and bide the danger." And we went into Unison.

«Now that we can't be monitored,» I thought to Ichiro, «is there anything that you want to tell me that you don't want the TSAB to overhear?»

«I can't imagine what I could possibly want to keep secret from the TSAB, sir. Rob.»

«Do you want this project to succeed?»

After a pause, Ichiro thought, «I don't know. It would be an enormous boon to the TSAB to have powerful Unison Devices. But the terminology that your memories say Dr. Shamal used leaves me disquieted.»

«Especially considering she's a synthetic intelligence, too, if what I know about this reality is accurate. Ichiro, there's only one reason I can see for Shamal to call you materiel.»

«I agree. Commander Gaiz must have insisted on it during an earlier meeting.»

«And it looks like Gaiz is the one who's driving this project.»

Neither of us thought anything coherent for a moment. Then Ichiro thought to me, «I dislike the idea of mass-produced Rank SS mages being used as hardware.»

«As do I, even assuming we can create a synthetic mage by uploading another mage's brainprint into a Device. We aren't Ancient Belka; we don't have the knowledge that they had when they created the Tome of the Night Sky,

assuming that they're the ones who created that Device. And I don't want the TSAB to get hold of a synthetic Senshi or precog, either. So let's see what we can do with Shario's brainprint.»

«Is that fair to Sergeant Finieno, Rob?»

«Maybe, maybe not. But she does know that this is what I intended to do all along, and she let me update her brainprint after I let her know that.»

«Ah. In that case, shall we proceed?» I could hear the smile in Ichiro's thought.

It took us nearly two hours before we were both happy with the dataset that we were going to attempt to download into our fourth blank Unison Device. The actual copying over took fourteen minutes; longer than a biological brainprint transfer, but not unreasonably so.

A few seconds after we finished, Ichiro and I broke our Unison, just before there was a knock at the door. "Hi, darling! Hi Ichiro! I brought you some clean handkerchiefs; Ryou insisted... Oh, wow!"

Makoto was looking at the Unison Device, which was morphing its external appearance so that it more closely resembled a miniature version of Sergeant Finieno. My dearest wrapped a handkerchief around the little Shario's body as if she was protecting the modesty of a Barbie doll.

Of course, the Device was far more than a Barbie doll. She opened her eyes and said, "Woah, I feel a bit dizzy. Did something go wrong with the brainprint, Rob... EEK! You're a giant!" Then she realized what she'd said. "No, I'm a Device, aren't I?"

"That's right," my dearest said.

"Eek! You're... no, you're not. I have to get used to this. Where are my clothes and my glasses?"

I raised an eyebrow in surprise. "Do you need glasses?"

"I've worn glasses all my life. I feel naked without them."

"If I may, sir," Ichiro said, "I'll make a set of glasses for Ms. Finieno from some wire and clear plastic."

"Yes, please do," I replied. "And can I impose on you to make an outfit for Shario-chan, my dearest?"

She raised an eyebrow, copying me. "Shario-chan?"

"I like it," Shario-chan said. "It's still my name, even if I'm not the me who grew up with it."

I sighed. "It's your name for as long as the TSAB will let you keep it. I have to give you to them, along with the three Unison Devices that I pretty much destroyed while trying to create you."

"Yeah, I remember being told that. I hope we're going to be able to keep in touch."

"So do I," Ichiro replied. "But I don't plan to count on it. Requirements of the service, and all that."

And then we discovered why we wouldn't be able to continue the experiments. Major Nakajima mentioned over dinner that he was going to serve as the parole officer for some of the Numbers, and three of them would be moving in with us shortly.

We very quickly arranged to dismantle my workshop so that the parolees couldn't figure out what we had been doing in it. And some very polite and insistent TSAB officers showed up to take charge of Shario-chan and the three burnt-out devices. It took a few minutes to convince them that we weren't giving up the tools; Riot Force 6 had promised that we would be allowed to keep them. I got the feeling that Commander Gaiz would have preferred to take the tools from us as well, but she wasn't going to outright countermand Colonel Yagami's orders. We pretty much insisted that they take their cameras; those, Gaiz would have been happy to leave behind.

Once they were gone, we very quickly packed the tools into their carrying case and put that case with the computer hardware that Ryou and I had bought to take back home. I was close to filling my backpack with all of that hardware.

And then it was the anniversary of the day we had arrived, a day that Subaru was home on leave... and the day that Nove, Dieci, and Wendi moved in.

The Numbers bowed to us once they were out of the car. "Thank you for taking us in," Deici said.

"It was my pleasure," Major Nakajima replied. "Please call me Genya. These are my daughters, Ginga and Subaru."

"We've met," Subaru said flatly.

Genya caught the unspoken message immediately. All three of these newcomers were directly involved in Ginga's capture and brainwashing slightly over a year ago, after all. "Girls, there's no need for that. I'm their parole officer and they have nowhere else to go; so they're living here with us."

"Father, do you know what they did to me?" Ginga asked.

Before Genya could reply, Wendi bowed deeply and said, "I've read your victim impact statement. I humbly ask your forgiveness for what I did to you and your sister." After a short moment, the other two bowed, but not quite as deeply, and they didn't say anything.

Ginga finally replied, "I can forgive you for what you did. But don't expect me to forget."

"Me too, on both counts," Subaru added. Then she turned to her father and asked, "Do they have to live with us?"

Genya nodded. "If we turn them away, then we'd also have to turn away your other friends," he said while gesturing to us.

Ami took that as our cue and stepped forward. "I'm Ami Mizuno, and this is my friend Meia." Said Unison Device bowed in greeting.

"I'm Ryou Urawa, Ami's boyfriend, and this is my friend Kasandara." As Kasandara made her greeting, I wondered why Ryou mentioned his relationship with Ami... until I heard Wendi sigh deeply.

What *is* it with Ryou and cute girls? I might never know. "I'm Rob Donaldson, and this is my trusted companion, Ichiro."

"I'm pleased to meet you, ladies," he said.

Before my dearest could introduce herself, Nove shouted, "Hey! You're the assholes who recaptured Wendi and me!"

"Guilty as charged," I admitted with a slight bow of apology.

"And here I was starting to think that you were cute."

Hearing that, Makoto quickly took my arm in hers. "I'm Rob's fiancée, Makoto Kino, and this is my friend Sakura."

"Hi," Sakura said quickly to the Numbers while waving once. Then she turned to my dearest. "Fiancée"? Since when?"

"Well, I hope so," Makoto said before turning to me. "We are going to get married, right?"

Ichiro quickly read the mood and moved away from me, giving me room to walk over to Makoto. Sakura figured it out almost as quickly, and gave me room to stand beside my dearest.

"That's the most unorthodox marriage proposal I've ever heard, Makoto. And my answer is yes." Lacking a ring, I swept her into a hug.

As we kissed, everybody applauded. Even Deici, who from what I'd seen of the anime I expected to keep her emotions to herself.

It may have been an unorthodox marriage proposal, but it turned what was becoming a tense situation into a shared moment of happiness. And the two of us actually saying that we wanted to spend our lives together felt *good*.

My dearest... my fiancée and I went into Cranagan the next day, carrying a rather large amount of cash that Ryou had the foresight to have ready for us. You have to respect a precog who uses his powers for other people's benefit.

We came back without the cash, but with wedding rings in our pockets and engagement rings on our fingers.

We realized later that we should have waited until Mako-chan's grandparents had their say, but at that point we were still half-expecting to be living on Midchilda for the rest of our lives. And it wasn't as if we were short on money.

And I discovered when we got home that Midchildan women and Earth women had something in common. Everybody dropped everything in order to admire my dearest's ring.

Then we had a discussion over what to have for dinner. Makoto suggested curry, but Subaru said that the vacuum-packed curry that we gave her was too bland.

Then I volunteered to make curry for the two of us.

After we finished dinner, she asked for my recipe. Nobody else could understand why she liked spicy food.

The three newest members of the household quickly discovered that it was a rare day when all three of the Nakajimas were in residence, and days when none of them were present weren't particularly rare. Out of sheer boredom, they ended up joining us in our training and studies.

Which is how Makoto ended up learning Wing Road from Ginga and Nove, once she figured out how to morph her Sailor Jupiter uniform to include in-line roller skates instead of ice skates. I think I've mentioned how much my dearest... my fiancée loves skating.

The day that she mastered forming a pathway in the sky, she took me on a quick skate. I couldn't find roller skates on short notice, so I inverted the trick that let me do flash moves and put frictionless forcefields on the soles of my

shoes instead of surrounding all but my soles with that sort of forcefield. Sure, she had to pull me, but neither of us minded. After all, I'd realized back in Azabu-Juban that I wanted to spend the rest of my life with a woman who's stronger than I am.

We headed out of town the day after that so that we could practice our high-mobility techniques. My fiancée made a picnic lunch for all of us.

"Are you sure we have enough food?" Nove asked while Makoto unpacked the picnic basket at lunchtime.

"Oh, don't worry about that. Ami eats like a bird," my dearest replied with a smile.

Just then, Ami swooped down and grabbed a sandwich from the top of the pile that Makoto had already set out and flew back into the air with her prize, followed by Wendi who missed grabbing her own lunch.

"Case in point," I added.

Nove ignored me. "Gotta admire her accuracy." «Hey, Wendi, you suck at that game!»

«I'd care about your taunts if you were up here with us, big sis!»

«Here I come!» "Air Liner!"

Which left Makoto and me alone together. I pulled her away from the base of Nove's version of Wing Road and into a hug, then rested my forehead against hers. Not to update her brainprint, but so that I could think to her with some hope of privacy. «Dearest, how much do you trust the Numbers?»

«Don't they have a family name other than that?»

«Maybe 'Scaglietti', but I think they'd rather distance themselves from him. If things here go the same way as in canon, Genya's going to adopt all three of them and another of their sisters, and they'll have his family name after that. But right now, they don't have one.»

«Those poor girls. I know what it's like to have no family. But, to answer your question, that doesn't mean I trust them yet.»

I almost nodded, but I would have had to break contact with her. «Yeah. So I can't do anything with those two unprogrammed Unison Devices yet. Even if they didn't see me doing the brainprinting, there's no way they couldn't meet the people that the Devices would become if I'm successful.»

«And then we'd be in violation of that non-disclosure agreement we both signed. Speaking of trusting them, why does Nove make me more uneasy than the others do?»

«You mean besides the fact that she thought I was cute?» I quickly added, «Don't worry on that score, my dearest. You're the one that I love and plan to marry. ♥ As for Nove, the backstory of the show we've been dumped into says she and Subaru were both cloned from the same person.»

«Oh! Yeah, that's what's been bugging me. They have almost the same voice and build.»

«And the differences are because they aren't the same age.»

Just then, Ryou cleared his throat, and we broke our hug. "Hi, Ryou! Sorry about ignoring you. How long did we keep you waiting?"

"I just got here, Robu. Is lunch ready?"

"Your girlfriend already grabbed hers," I said with a smile. "If you call everybody, we should be ready to eat by the time they get here."

"Four times of five," Kasandara confirmed from Ryou's pocket.

So he did, and we were as good as my word; Makoto had the last of the drinks ready by the time that Nove made it back.

Training and studies and odd-jobs for pocket change proceeded. I won't bore you with the specifics.

One of the things that I had to teach Makoto, Ami, and Ryou was how to navigate Windows 10. It was so different from Windows 3.1 that they all had some trouble with it at first.

Which led to a short conversation about a month after the Numbers moved in.

"Darling", my dearest asked while looking up from her laptop, "why do all of these episode analyses keep saying 'The Other Four Sailor Soldiers Are Useless This Season'?"

Ah, she'd found her copy of the *Shadowjack Watches Sailor Moon* threads. "I thought you didn't want to know your own future," I said.

"That was before I died because I didn't know my own future. Now, I want to know."

"That makes sense. Well, the anime creators did add a lot of plots to the show that weren't in the manga, and they didn't want to give you any abilities that the manga would later say you didn't have, so they played it safe and didn't let you do anything at all."

"You aren't going to be like that, *right*?"

I sniffed in disdain. "Mako-chan, you already know what I think about cleaving to canon so closely."



She grinned. "Yeah. You cleave from, not cleave to."

"And you're getting a lot better at English," I said with a smile.

"You can thank Sakura, Ginga, and Subaru for that."

I nodded in agreement, not mentioning that she'd been immersed in the language for over a year.

I remember that it was a few days after that discussion that Ami revealed – at her own sweet-sixteenth-birthday party – that she'd hacked her transformation by transforming instantly without her wand. I had no fears that she was going to end up being useless, this season or any other.

Apparently, Meia and Ami had spent a week and took the Senshi transformation sequence apart, treating the spell as a program and analyzing it subroutine by subroutine, and worked the inefficiencies out of it. Including the part that left the Senshi naked for a second during their transformation. The fix was so simple, once they'd figured out what the problem was, that it was easy to teach to Makoto.

Ryou was quite happy that his girlfriend wasn't flashing him every time she transformed. Makoto said that she wasn't happy that she wasn't flashing me, but I could tell that she was joking. I was happy that they could now transform while moving, and Ami was happy that she was able to modify somebody else's spell. Nobody else thought it was a big deal, but they were Midchildans who were used to magic, not Japanese who aren't.

Then she created a spell of her own, displaying the classic 「やっとなたよ。」 message on a magic screen that was floating in the air.

Her second try at a spell from scratch, a month later, was far more ambitious. She wrote a healing spell just to see whether she could. And I ended up becoming her guinea pig, because I had tripped over a tree root while flash moving during a practice.

"I don't know whether this is ready, Rob. I've never tested it."

"Go ahead and test it on me, Ami. I think my leg is broken!"

So she did, and my leg stopped hurting. However, I was very hungry after she finished; apparently, healing burns through a lot of calories.

"That's to be expected," she said when I mentioned it. "Magic doesn't give anything for free."

I was so hungry that I was willing to eat bland Japanese-style curry that night... and I didn't consider the ramifications of Ami's statement just then.

It wasn't until the week after Ami first used her healing spell that I finally had a chance to ask about Ami's statement. And I only had that chance because Hayate was visiting after the Wolfram's shakedown cruise and wasn't allowed to talk about work, and there were only so many things we could say about her letting her hair grow longer. So, after my dearest complimented Hayate on her longer hair and Hayate admired Makoto's engagement ring, we talked about magic.

"It's simple, the way that Yuuno explained it to me," Hayate said. "There's a metaphysical balance of some sort, and practicing magic tips that balance. He's seen it in every culture that he's ever investigated."

"How can metaphysics know what a single person is doing?" Makoto asked.

"It isn't the universe reacting to the mage," Hayate answered. "It's the mage reacting to the magic. Some people get drunk with power and tip the metaphysical balance to selfishness. The people we fought during the Eltrian Formula Incident and the JS Incident were like that."

"We were, weren't we?" Wendi asked rhetorically.

Hayate didn't answer, possibly from politeness. "Other people get consumed with selflessness and will do anything, including die, if it helps somebody else."

"Like Usagi-san," Ami said.

"Ami, you *did* give your life for others when you stormed the Dark Kingdom," I pointed out. "And so did Makoto. And Ryou was host to a youma."

Hayate nodded. "If the anime I saw about you is correct, all of the Sailor Senshi ended up dying at one point or another."

"All of them?" I asked. "When did Uranus and Neptune die?"

"When their pure hearts were shot out of their bodies. Pluto brought them back. I think." Hayate paused for a moment, as unsure about what actually happened there as I was. "The important part is that they were willing to make the sacrifice. Nanoha is like that, too; she'd give her life for Fate, or me, or Vivio. And that reminds me of the people who had to give up something in order to become mages."

"I gave up my home reality," I said aloud without meaning to.

"And I gave up the ability to walk for years, and almost gave up my life," Hayate replied. Then she turned to face me. "How much magic have you learned, Rob? Or are you just talking about your Inherent Skill with forcefields?"

"Forcefields and brainprints, not spells," I admitted.

"Maybe you should try learning some magic."

"Maybe I should. Disguise magic would be a good choice, assuming we ever get home. Somebody died once because an enemy recognized me." Ryou raised his eyebrows at my comment, but said nothing.

"I can teach you 'Mirage Hide' later," Hayate volunteered. "I learned it from Admiral Graham's familiars."

"I've never known you to use disguise magic," Makoto commented.

"I use it all the time, at the beach. Do you think somebody who was in a wheelchair for half her life has legs that look as good as mine seem to when I'm in a swimsuit?"

"We've never seen you in a swimsuit," my dearest said.

"We'll have to fix that while I'm on leave," Hayate replied. Why she wanted to go swimming at the beginning of winter escaped me, but Ami looked happy at hearing the idea. Then I remembered that Earth's calendar didn't necessarily correspond to Midchilda's seasons. Silly me.

I decided to give my fiancée an ego boost, not that she needed one. "My dearest, if you wear that green number that you wore on my birthday, I'll still have no idea what Hayate looks like in a swimsuit."

She leaned over and gave me a quick kiss. "I knew there was something I loved about you, darling," she teased. Then, without looking away from me, she added, "And stop blushing, Ryou."

Later that evening, Hayate taught me "Mirage Hide". It's quite a versatile disguise spell, and I was able to learn it easily thanks to my skill with matrix mathematics transformations.

I also brought her up-to-date on the Unison Device project. She appreciated my decision to give Commander Gaiz a Device with Shario's personality and skills... and utter lack of magical ability. Then she asked what happened to the other blank Devices. I let her know that one of them was burned out, and the other two were stored safely with the maintenance tools she had given us. Then I asked whether I could update her brainprint, so that if I used it on one of those two Devices, she'd know what was happening without needing an explanation.

She agreed, and a few minutes later I knew what it was like to command a dimensional cruiser during its shakedown cruise. It wasn't something that appealed to me.

Then she excused herself. She wanted to be well-rested for our trip to the public pool the next day.

I wondered briefly what it would have been like if I had been sent directly to her world instead of Makoto's. But only briefly. She's a military commander; we probably would never have met if Makoto and Ami weren't along to pique her interest in us.

I still have no idea [what Hayate looks like in a swimsuit](#).

We went back to our routine after Hayate returned to the Wolfram. (I carefully did not ask whether her ship had a sister ship named "Hart"; either she wouldn't get the joke, or she'd be offended by it.)

Ryou had become about as good as he was going to get, both at day-trading and at building a portfolio that was a good long-term investment. At least, according to his precognition, it was. He'd gotten good enough that even Genya and Ginga trusted him to invest their savings.

My fiancée decided that she wanted to use her Senshi magic in ways other than long-range, but farther away than what she and Sakura could channel through Donguri-no-ken. Which meant that I got to be her sparring partner while she developed an "electro-quarterstaff". Not that I minded being my dearest's sparring partner. We even came up with a kata for her to practice her fine control, and we made sure she'd practice her control by saying the words we agreed to: "Ho! Ha ha! Guard! Turn! Parry! Dodge! Spin! Ha! Thrust!" Makoto *really* didn't want to end up hitting herself in the face with her electro-quarterstaff.

But sometimes she did, so, by the end of the calendar year, Ami and Meia had developed a spell that was optimized to heal electrical damage.

Me? Beside the staff fighting, Ichiro continued training me in swordplay, and the two of us refined the Mirage Hide spell to make me look more and more like a legendary oni.

Ginga, Nove, and Makoto also got into the habit of having Wing Road races. My dearest didn't mind ... too much ... that she never won a race; after all, the others had years of practice that she didn't. Besides, Deici took potshots at my fiancée more often than she shot at her own sisters. Not in anger; her Enormous Cannon was a course hazard. Yes, Deici called her cannon "Enormous Cannon", which made us feel better about the name "electro-quarterstaff".

\* \* \*

I mentioned the end of the calendar year, because it was when the next big change happened in our lives.

Genya brought another Number home to live with us. His prerogative, of course; it was his house and he was their parole officer. Her presence did change the dynamics of the household, though.

"Hello. I'm Cinque. I'm happy to meet you," she said formally. She was still wearing the prison-issued outfit that the other three Numbers had been wearing the day they arrived in Anberse, the only customization being the patch over her right eye.

We introduced ourselves, then she turned to her sisters and they got caught up with each other.

In the meantime, Genya talked quietly with us. "There's a reason that Cinque wasn't paroled with her sisters."

"Is it something that we need to know?" Ami asked.

"I think it is," Major Nakajima replied. "Her crimes included murder."

"Does she want to reform?" I asked, knowing full well from what I remembered of *Lyrical Nanoha* canon that she did.

"She says that she does," Genya replied, "and I have no reason to doubt her. But this means that I'll be working from home more than I have been in the past."

Which I thought was a good idea, realizing that he'd been using us as surrogate parole officers to keep an eye on Nove, Deici, and Wendi when they first got out of jail. The TSAB *really* did things differently than how I remembered governments did them back home. Either home. But we got a free roof over our heads in exchange for being volunteer parole officers, so we couldn't really complain.

The day after she moved in, Cinque had found a trenchcoat – with the same armour that our backpacks had – that was the colour of her platinum hair. She was also quick to join our training sessions, teaching Ichiro and Sakura the basics of knife throwing, and learning basic TSAB hand-to-hand fighting from all of us... which she needed a week after she moved in, when Subaru came home on leave. Cinque was at least able to defend herself until we were able to pull Subaru off of her.

I can't blame Subaru for disliking Cinque – she was the Number who was in charge of kidnapping Ginga, after all – but nobody wanted her to send Cinque to the hospital. It finally took me putting Subaru in a forcefield box, and then Genya reminding his daughter that she'd lose her post with the Gulf Special Rescue Unit if she was charged with a crime, to get her to calm down. She announced her intention to get her own apartment, though.

Which Genya thought was a good idea. He mentioned later that it was long past time that his daughter lived on her own for a while.

As for what we thought of what was going on in the household, it was Nove of all people who approached me.

"I'm surprised you want my opinion on anything," I said.

"Well, you're not going to sugarcoat what you tell me, the way Ami or Ryou would."

"What about Makoto?"

"I've seen some of the show she and Ami were in. She thinks with her fists, like I do, so I've got a pretty good idea of what she'd say. And I gotta say I'm surprised you'd want to marry somebody who isn't book smart; you don't look the type to want a girl like me or her."

I sighed and shook my head. "You must have seen the early episodes. Later in the show, she shows that she isn't at all stupid. But you already know that from training with her."

"I didn't say she was stupid, I said she wasn't book smart. But I don't want to talk about her. I want to talk about that asshole Subaru."

"Am I still an asshole, too?"

"Yeah, you're still an asshole," she said with a smile, which she quickly lost. "But Subaru's a complete asshole."

I sighed deeply. "You're going to have to learn to at least tolerate each other. I don't know whether she's ready to do that yet, though. Are you?"

"I haven't said a damned thing about her beating Cinque to a pulp back when we worked for Scaglietti, or trying to repeat the process yesterday. But she didn't even give Cinque a chance to apologize, the way we did when we showed up here."

"Er, Wendi apologized. You just bowed."

"You think Deici and I should apologize to Ginga and Subaru separately?"

I nodded. "It wouldn't hurt. And it would show that you're willing to take the first step in bridging the gap between you."

"I'll think about it." Nove almost stood up, then said, "Hey, as long as I got your ear..."

I raised an eyebrow. "What's up?"

"I got another year of parole to get through, then I get to do whatever the hell I want with my life. All I know is fighting. You got any ideas?"

I was about to say no, then I remembered what job she took in canon. "Why not do something that lets you fight for a living?"

"Can't do that. I don't want to join the Tee-Sab, and the pro fighting leagues won't take ex-cons."

I shook my head. "I wasn't thinking of you being a professional fighter. It's more like you could teach other people how to fight. Maybe open a dojo."

"What's a dojo?"

"A school where people learn a particular style of fighting and the skills to go with that style."

"Oh, a gym! Maybe I could do that. Thanks; I'll give that some thought, too." After a quick moment, she added,

"And maybe you aren't an asshole after all, Rob. But you're still a jerk."

"Happy to help. And thanks, Nove."

Then I remembered what day was approaching quickly, by the calendar back home. I made myself scarce after dinner each night, letting the others know that I had some serious thinking to do. Ryou and Ami got the hint immediately, but my fiancée didn't figure it out for a few minutes. «What do you need to learn from everybody's brainprints, darling?»

«That's a surprise, my dearest.»

«This better be worth it.»

«I think it will be. 😊♥»

Then I spent a few nights doing something that I suspect any other teenage boy in my place would have done ages ago: I looked through her brainprint to find out what she liked when she was alone. To my amazement, I discovered that she hadn't experimented that way at all, at least not as of the day we'd met our companion Devices. Neither had Ami beyond the basics. Shario was a bit more adventurous in her personal time. Hayate, though... yeah, I ended up blushing again. Oh, boy, did I end up blushing. But I learned a lot about what she liked and didn't like during her private time with a very small number of very loving people.

Of course I couldn't practice any of this, not without Makoto. And there was a very good reason why I couldn't ask her to help me: this was going to be her birthday gift.

And I hoped that Makoto remembered what I had told Saeko-basan when she had asked why I was still a virgin.

I discovered on January 17 that Ami remembered, when I met her in the kitchen that morning.

"Haven't you been keeping track? It's December 5 according to the calendar back home. And ever since you both mentioned it to mother before we were banished here, I know exactly what Mako-chan wants for her sixteenth birthday."

"Trust me, Ami, I've been keeping track, and I'd be very surprised if she hasn't." I couldn't resist teasing her a bit.

"And just think, Ryou's sixteenth birthday is only eighteen days away." Sure enough, that comment got my dearer friend to blush slightly. "Now, I believe my dearest awaits my presence. If you'll excuse me...?"

"Have fun," Ami said with a knowing smile.

I quickly made my way to my dearest's bedroom and knocked on the door. "May I come in?"

"Please do, darling." I opened the door to see Makoto. She was wearing her usual hair tie and ear studs, a sheer babydoll negligée and panties, and a smile.

Yes, my fiancée remembered.

"Oh, my. You look even sexier than you do when you're naked, my dearest." I closed the door behind me... and that is all that anybody will learn from me about the rest of that day, except that we were both very happy at the end of it.

Needless to say, Makoto and I were in very good moods the next day. And over a year's worth of TSAB training and the equivalent from our Unison Devices had left us both sufficiently physically fit that we weren't even tired.

Ichiro and Sakura quickly brought us back to reality with an extra-gruelling training session. "This is what happens when you skip a day, sir. Rob," Ichiro corrected himself before I could comment.

"We routinely skipped two days out of seven when Riot Force 6 trained us," I complained. "It's called a weekend."

"And just look at how soft you are," Wendi joked, looking at Ryou. And me, but mostly Ryou. No, neither of us had obvious six-pack abs; Dr. Shamal made sure that we had what was a healthy amount of muscle tone and fat for us instead. But our muscles still showed.

And it was amazing how quickly Ami and Makoto closed ranks with us after Wendi's joke.

«My dearest, I would have expected you'd know how much I love you after yesterday,» I sent specifically to her. «I know,» she sent back, «but I've lost everybody else who I ever loved. I don't want to lose you, too. Please let me call you 'mine'.»

«Only if I can call you 'mine' as well.»

«It's a deal!»

Sakura didn't know we had a discussion going. "He's right, [aniki](#). They're only human, they need some rest."

Makoto and I shared a smile at that comment.

"I suppose I can scale back the intensity of the training sessions," he allowed. "I understood that, if we were going to move to our companions' home reality, we were going to end up in the middle of what the TSAB would classify as an Incident, and everyone needed to be ready for that."

"Oh, we are," Ami replied. "What Ginga and Vita and Hayate and all of you have taught us has prepared us for almost anything."

"Our friends do still have room for improvement, niisan," Meia added, "but what they need now is to learn how to maintain their existing skills. I see no reason to train them to be ready for new skills at this time."

Ichiro thought for a moment. "If everyone is agreed on that...?" We all expressed our approval with Meia's suggestion. "Then I will go easier on everybody. Except for the young ladies with numerical names," he added with a slight smile.

"Bring it on!" Nove declared.

The next day, she was cursing at herself for having said that.

Then, two weeks later, it was February 5 by the local calendar and December 23 by the calendar back home – Ryou's sixteenth birthday. Meia and Kasandara spent the day and night with Sakura and my fiancée, the way Sakura and Ichiro had spent Makoto's sixteenth birthday with Meia and Ami.

While Ryou and Ami were busy, Cinque asked me why his name was spelled "Ryo" in WikiMoon. We spent a couple of hours talking about close parallel timelines, and how the things that I knew from canon might not be the same as what had actually happened or would happen in either Ryou's home reality or this reality. She appeared to like the idea that she still had free will.

The next morning, I couldn't resist a bit of teasing... that didn't go exactly the way I expected.

"Good morning, Ryou! Good morning, Ami! I trust you had a pleasant evening last night. Stop blu-..." I stopped in surprise. "Wait. Ryou, you're not blushing."

"I'd be surprised if he was," my dearest said. "After our two friends kept me awake half the night," she added with a grin.

Ryou still didn't blush... but *Ami* turned deep red. Heh. It's always the quiet ones.

Life went on, in the routines of training and socializing. Genya was present for most of it since Cinque was finally part of the household.

My dearest was the first to realize that the four of us refugees were present in order to help the Numbers become more... human, I suppose is the best word for it. Not that they weren't human to begin with, for all that Scaglietti designed them to be combat cyborgs, but there was a difference between being able to blend in with a crowd and being able to attend a party without being bored. And we were teaching them how to do the latter.

Deici expressed an interest in chess after she saw Ami beat me at a game, so we taught her. Her usual poker face helped her with the social aspect of the game. Speaking of poker faces, we also taught the Numbers some card games, including poker. Ryou and Kasandara were forbidden to take part, because the precogs never fell for our bluffs.

Instead, Ryou shared what little he knew about running a business with Nove, and Makoto taught her what she knew of Jeet Kun Do as an example of a martial art with a definite style. It seemed Nove had taken my advice to heart.

Cinque taught Ami and Sakura how to throw their Frigid Daggers instead of relying on magic to propel them. And Makoto taught Cinque how to cook past the "keep body and soul together" level.

Wendi taught Ryou and Ami about combat banter; the questions she had asked during our very first fight were at least partly intended to make us angry. And Makoto and I taught Wendi how to hold her end of a conversation, using many of the same skills that she used in combat.

And I turned them on to the music of BTS. They liked both the band's energy, and the idea that people could make art with their voices.

Their first test in acting like normal people was in late March, when we received visitors. We were expecting one; we got two.

"Hi everybody! It's been a while!"

"Hi, Shario!" Makoto said before everybody else. "What's new?"

"You are looking at the first TSAB sergeant to have an assistant! I brought her along."

"Hi everyone!" came a voice from her pocket.

"Shario-chan!" All of our Devices floated over and helped her get out of the older Shario's pocket. "Still can't fly, huh?" Sakura asked.

"No, and I don't think I ever will. What's new with— *is that a ring on your finger, Mako-chan?!'*"

"Well," I said to Ryou and Genya, "they won't be interested in us for a few minutes."

At least the Numbers expressed an interest in Makoto's and my romantic life, whether they actually had an interest or not. They passed their first test in socialization.

We spent a couple of hours catching up, and then we introduced Genya and the Numbers to the delights of a sukiyaki party... which took another hour and a half. Even Deici smiled when Shario told them that this was something that usually only families did. Genya smiled at that, too, and I could see that he was thinking about something.

Did we just push a canon event into happening early? If we did, then that was a stupid genre convention... for whatever genre I was living my life in. And just maybe the Numbers would become the Nakajimas earlier than in canon.

Shario and Shario-chan finally got the four of us alone while Wendi and Nove washed the dishes and Cinque and Deici had their weekly parole meetings with Genya. "We're here because Commander Gaiz asked us to speak with you."

"Ordered, you mean. What does she want this time?" my dearest asked sourly.

I could see from the look on her face that Shario only pretended to ignore Makoto's tone of voice. "She's still looking for tissue samples from you. All four of you."

"I'm not going to let her run me through Project FATE," I declared.

"I have no idea what Project Fate is," Shario replied.

"Neither do I," added Ryou.

"Does it have something to do with Captain Harlaown?" Shario-chan asked.

"You don't need to know," I said. "It's bad enough that I know what little I do about one of TSAB's top-secret projects. Anyway, she won't be getting any stem cells from me."

"Or me," Makoto announced.

Ami looked like she was about to say something, but obviously thought the better of it.

"I was told to expect that answer," Shario said quietly. "And I think I'm beginning to understand what Project Fate is, putting together some remarks that Fate and Nanoha said when we were still children with what you just said."

I sighed deeply. "Well, I'm not employed by TSAB at the moment, and my NDA only covered the creation of Shario-chan. *Do you really want to know?'*"

After a moment, Shario and Shario-chan both nodded. "I think I do," Shario said.

"So do I," Ami added. No surprise there; I've known since just after the Missing Time that my dearer friend hates not knowing something.

"Alright," I said quickly as I put a soundproof forcefield up around all of us. "Anybody who doesn't want to know, please leave now."

Nobody left.

Then I told them what I knew – how Project FATE was designed to bring into existence a child with the memories and personality of a dead person, that it was created by Jail Scaglietti in order for him to take control of the Saint's Cradle, and how Captain Testarossa, Private Mondial, and Vivio – all of whom had been part of Riot Force 6 in one way or another but we other than Shario had never met – were brought to life by the project.

Nobody said anything for a moment.

"I can see why you don't want to be part of that," Ryou finally said. "How do they get the personality of the dead person? And would we have to die for the process to work?"

"I don't know the answers to either of those questions," I admitted.

"Who is Vivio a clone of?" Shario-chan asked.

"Ask Captain Harlaown. She knows. She might even tell you." That was one of my true-but-misleading answers. I knew as well, but given how Makoto reacted to strangers back home knowing that she was famous, I thought that Vivio didn't need to go through life being known as a clone of the last Empress of Belka. She was her own person, not a relic of the dead past.

Then Nove walked through the soundproof forcefield. "Didn't you jerks hear me? I asked twice if you want some tea."

"Sorry, Nove," I said. "I have a hush hood up."

"I didn't know you could do that!"

"You never asked. I don't want anything right now, thanks anyway."

Everyone else declined as well, and Nove left us to our discussion. I made the forcefield less permeable once she was out.

"So, no, I'm not going anywhere near Project FATE," I confirmed.

"Commander Gaiz expected that you'd say that," Shario replied. "Are you willing to provide reproductive cells?"

"Ova and sperm?" Ami asked. "I don't see an issue with that."

"I do," Makoto said. "First, who's going to control them?"

"Me," Shario-chan said.

"Okay. I trust you. Second, don't you have to pretty much wreck one of my ovaries to get the eggs from it?"

Shario looked horrified. "Is *that* how it works on your homeworld?"

"Our home reality is a quarter-century behind this reality on the technology curve, and we don't have magic to assist our medical procedures," I pointed out.

Shario tapped her forehead in a 'silly me' gesture. "Oh, right. Dr. Shamal can take only as many – or as few – ova as you tell her you're willing to donate, without destroying an ovary."

"Can we visit Earth again, please?" Ami asked. "I need to buy some medical textbooks."

"And download the online content that goes with them," I added. "I'm pretty sure that at least *Gray's Anatomy* has online videos now."

Before we could discuss that further, Shario said, "Make a list and I'll have the station on non-administrated world 97 get them for you."

"How much will we owe you for that?" Ami asked.

Shario and Ryou replied in unison, "Donations of ova and sperm." Ryou continued alone, "I'm willing."

"If it's for Ami, so am I," my dearest added.

Then everyone turned to look at me. "Sure, why not? Mind if I add a few things to the shopping list? We're out of nanami togarashi." Everyone else, except for Shario and Shario-chan, facepalmed. "Hey, it's not my fault that Subaru uses it every time she visits."

We had the list put together the next morning, at which point Genya drove the four of us to GAS headquarters in Cranagan. The Devices stayed behind to continue the Numbers' training.

Teal deer, we gave our list to Shario, she volunteered to help extract Ryou's cell sample, Ami quickly declined that offer on his behalf, and he and I retired to separate rooms while Ami and Makoto saw Shamal. Afterwards, Shario-chan collected all of the samples and put them into stasis, then under lock and key.

We spent the rest of the day playing tourist until Genya was ready to head home.

Then we returned to our routine, thinking nothing of what we had given to Shario-chan.

It wasn't until April 29 that our order from Earth arrived. Shario and Shario-chan brought the package over personally. In addition to the medical texts and some groceries, Shario-chan gave us a set of "thank you for bringing me into existence" gifts – we each received another external data drive for our laptops, these ones with Midchildan magical capacity. I don't know what information the others got, except that Ami got both *Gray's Anatomy* and *Grey's Anatomy* apparently because somebody wasn't sure which one she wanted, but mine contained the entire Internet Archive and Project Gutenberg as of March 2018 with plenty of space left over.

I quietly let Ami know that all I wanted for my birthday was a search engine for my drive. She told me that she'd see what she could do, as long as she got a copy of the data.

Shario also shared some freshly-declassified footage taken at the Coastal Airport 8 fire six years previously. Even I was impressed; I believe I've mentioned that 2D images don't compare to real life, so seeing the actual events of part of the first episode of *Nanoha StrikerS* was an eye-opener. We hadn't previously seen Hayate in action, so watching that footage and realizing just how powerful she was was a surprise. And it was the first time that most of us had a chance to see Captain Harlowan and Captain Takamachi in action at all. Halfway through, during one of the scenes featuring Captain Takamachi, Ami asked, "Do you remember when we were fighting cardians and I mentioned that I couldn't picture a transforming heroine based on *Gundam* imagery?"



\* \* \*

We continued our training, and Ami and Meia continued to create new spells. One that Ami was particularly proud of was "[Hyperspatial Sphere Generate](#)", a defensive spell that her manga counterpart used once when their Dark Kingdom attacked. Well, she was proud of it until Ginga told her that it was a re-creation from first principles of the standard-issue "[Temporal Force Field](#)" spell that hid magical effects from public view. I like and respect my dearer friend, but sometimes she needs to be reminded that she's human and thus fallible. Better she learns that now when she's unknowingly re-creating spells, than later when she's a doctor.

Ichiro and Sakura finally gave Makoto and me permission to fight each other with full-power manifested weapons, as long as Meia was nearby with healing spells ready. That was when I discovered why he uses two swords; I needed twin force swords to block my dearest's electro-quarterstaff.

Deici got to the point where she was beating me at chess, too. Either she was a very quick study, or I wasn't as good as Ami was letting me believe I was.

Wendi and Ami spent a lot of time just flying. Sometimes they'd come home happy, sometimes they weren't speaking to each other. I was never brave enough to ask whether they had been talking about Ryou on the days when they weren't happy.

Cinque spent more time with Genya and Ginga than I expected her to. They got along remarkably well.

Nove actually learned to temper her tendency toward coarse language when some of the local children came over for tutoring sessions.

Ryou and Kasandara made money. They were at the point where they were treating it like a game, which made me worry that they were Flanderizing themselves... but they were also plowing the proceeds into both our accounts and what the Nakajimas had let them invest, so I couldn't complain too much about how they chose to live their own lives. Subaru wasn't going to have any trouble making mortgage payments on her new apartment for a few years, even on her TSAB salary.

And of course we kept up with our studies. The Revealing Of The Lunches was rather boring, though, since we all had whatever Makoto made that day for lunch.

Our routine continued until June 23, when Ryou made an announcement.

"Good news, everyone! Kasandara and I are having trouble seeing the future!"

"Why is that good news?" asked Ami.

"Because I had exactly the same problem with my precognition before Sailor Moon fought Metaria, and before Petz sent us here."

It took a moment for the rest of us to figure out what he meant. When it sank in, my fiancée squeed with joy and gave me a hug, which I returned when I put the pieces together.

Ami asked, "Does that mean we should start packing?"

Ryou shook his head. "Not yet. If the pattern remains the same, we still have a few months before I leave this timeline."

I added, "But it might be a good idea to start choosing what we want to take with us."

The next day, we went into Cranagan to get large-capacity backpacks – the ones with frames that spread the weight over the wearer's entire back. The backpacks we bought a year ago on Lyrical Earth weren't big enough, and the Midchildan versions could safely hold slightly more mass while being both armoured and lighter than anything we could get back home. We had so many things that we wanted to keep, including Ami's chess board, Makoto's sword care kit, and all of that computer gear that I bought a year earlier.

Ryou also accepted delivery of what looked like a lawyer's briefcase, the kind on wheels – if you've ever seen *Read or Die*, it looked like the case that Yomiko Readman took to bookstores – that he had had custom-made to hold something *extremely* heavy. When I asked, he mentioned that he needed something to carry the precious metals he was planning to buy when he liquidated our stock portfolios.

Even without fully-functioning precognition, Ryou was still thinking ahead. But, we discovered later, not far enough ahead.

As Ryou and Kasandara had more and more trouble foreseeing events, they slowly converted a large fraction of their stock portfolio to cash, which we ended up spending on various things that we wanted to take with us. Ryou mentioned that there would still be a sizable investment left after we had bought everything that we could take with us.



After a long discussion, we decided to give the remainder of the portfolio to our friends in the Nakajima family. Including Cinque, Nove, Dieci, and Wendi, none of whom even knew about it, let alone had contributed to it. If Nove wanted to cleave to canon and open the Nakajima Gym, she wouldn't have any problem finding seed capital.

Genya pointed out that most of the money used to purchase the portfolio belonged to us... originally to Ami, but she had shared it with us back when we were still living at Long Arch.

Ryou pointed out the existence of both metal-rich asteroids like [Psyche](#) and TSAB's space-capable dimensional cruisers. He'd discovered that gold was used in electronics and electrical applications on Midchilda because they had so much of it; they considered it to be a rather pretty industrial metal, but our home reality considered it to be a precious metal. We were going to come out ahead and still leave a gift for our hosts.

So we visited an industrial supply company and filled his reinforced wheeled briefcase with gold... and then realized that he had made a mistake. Even transformed to Sailor Jupiter, Mako-chan couldn't move it at all. The silly thing massed 800 kilograms when full.

The staff at the industrial supply company had a laugh at our predicament. That was apparently a common first-timer's mistake.

So we purchased some smaller containers that my fiancée could move when they were full and she was Sailor Jupiter, and an extra-heavy-duty motorized cart with treads. We didn't want to leave ruts in the ground when we moved the cart, which we would have if the cart had wheels. And because we had the cart, we could carry another 200 kg of gold home.

Yes, a megagram in total. 1000 kg. One metric ton. I commented to my fiancée that, assuming we were going straight home, she'd have no trouble affording [a Kuritsu Juban Chuugakkou school uniform](#).

The four of us also each carried a handful of gold wafers that we put into leather pouches so that we could safely carry them in our pockets, but even adding them all together, they amounted to a rounding error to the big load. Still, having something that we could immediately offer to the kami in residence at Rei's shrine gave me some psychological comfort.

And then it was August 20, or July 7 back home. Yes, my birthday.

Ami gave me that search program that I had asked for. Ryou gave me another gold wafer and told me to spend it in whichever world we ended up in a little over a month from now, which meant that his real gift was confirmation that we were going *somewhere* before the end of local September. My fiancée made a spicy curry for me.

And Yuuno-san showed up to give all of us something that I couldn't use directly. "I'm pretty sure that this is the spell that you want, but I don't have enough power to make it work. Are any of you Rank A?"

"Not officially," Ryou replied, "but I think we won't be disappointed if Ami casts it."

"I'm willing to try," she said.

Yuuno-san nodded. "It will take a while for me to teach Mizuno-san the spell."

We took that as our cue to go do something else, in order to give them some privacy... but Yuuno-san motioned to us to stay. "Please, I'd prefer to teach this to everyone."

So we did. And he told us the spell's aria. And I laughed my head off.

"Sorry," I said once I got myself under control. "I've heard those phrases before, all from the same work, but not in that order."

"Will that keep you from being able to cast the spell?"

I thought about Yuuno-san's question for a moment. "I suspect my lack of power compared to the ladies would be a bigger impediment. I'm only Rank C."

"You may as well learn the spell, Rob," Ichiro suggested. "Perhaps one of your friends in the reality you came from will be able to cast it."

I nodded in agreement. "I suspect that there's at least one who has the raw power, yes, but does she have a sufficient grounding in the math?"

"Hush, you two," Meia said. "Ami is casting the spell."

I turned my attention to her as she said, "-al Pathway!" I'd missed almost the entire spell.

But I didn't miss seeing the spell's effect. A pinpoint in the air in front of Ami started glowing, before expanding to a ring... three millimetres in diameter. We couldn't see through it, but we did smell a hint of wood smoke from the portal.

I turned to Ami, about to ask whether she could make the portal larger, only to see her face covered in sweat.

"I've smelled that wood somewhere before," my fiancée commented.

"Who said that?" we heard from the other side of the portal. It was said in Japanese, and I thought I recognized the voice.

We all switched to speaking Japanese.

"Jii-san? Is that you?"

"Kino-chan? What are you doing here? And where are you? Rei left a quarter-hour ago to see you off."

I *did* recognize the voice! He was the kannushi of the Hikawa Shrine that we usually visited... or, as we knew him, Rei-san's grandfather. And, apparently, only a minute or two had passed in our home reality since Petz banished us.

We all grinned widely, for obvious reasons. Except for Ami, who was concentrating on keeping the spell going, but even she smiled.

Makoto kept talking. "We aren't actually at the shrine, jii-san. We're using magic to speak with you."

Then I heard that gruff voice that I had heard the last time I had visited the shrine, but in my head instead of in my ears. «I will tell you what is going on later, Hino-san. Trust Kino-san to know what she is saying.»

Turning to Makoto, I could see she'd heard that thought as well. I nodded and sent, «You can trust him, too, my dearest.»

"Donarudoson-kun? Where are you? Are you with Kino-chan?"

I didn't expect him to be able to receive my sending; it was strictly short-range communication. Then I realized that the portal was essentially two-dimensional and he was practically in the same room as us. And I also realized that him recognizing my voice meant that we had connected to our home reality, not a close parallel of it; I didn't know of any other version of *Sailor Moon* that had me in it. "We're in another reality altogether, Hino-jii-san. We are alive and well, and trying to get home. It's good to hear your voice, sir."

Ami whimpered from the stress of keeping the portal open.

"We don't have much time, sir," Makoto added. "We're going to have to find somebody else who can open a larger portal. I hope that we'll be in touch again very soon..." Makoto stopped talking as Ami finally couldn't handle the stress of keeping the portal open.

As the portal collapsed, Ryou caught his girlfriend in his arms and helped her to the most comfortable chair in the room.

Then we all cheered. "We can talk with home!" my dearest cried.

"If we can find a more powerful mage, maybe we can *go* home." Ami added.

"We know the most powerful mage in the TSAB, folks," I pointed out.

"She's on a cruise right now," Ami pointed out.

Ryou smiled. "I don't need my precognition to read the posted cruising schedules. Hayate should be back on Midchilda a month from now."

Yuuno-san smiled. "I'll ask her to make some time for you."

Yuuno-san taught us all the spell, and copied his notes to our laptops. Yes, all of them. The more copies we had of the spell, the less likely we were to lose it.

And, by that logic, we taught it to all of the Unison Devices, even though none of them could cast it. Ami was the only one of us who could.

I looked at the math in Yuuno-san's notes and sighed. I could barely follow it; there was no way that Makoto or Ryou could cast the spell without a lot of tutoring in university-level math.

And that meant that going home was likely a one-way trip. If my dearest couldn't handle the math, there was no way that Bunny-chan could, and I seriously doubted that Rei-san or Minako-san had the necessary power.

Everyone agreed with me when I mentioned my conclusion. Nobody suggested that we not leave, or that our companion Devices stay behind.

Meia pointed out that we needed new clothes; we had outgrown the ones we were wearing when we were banished. So Ryou pulled some more money from the stock portfolio, we went into Cranagan, and we spent a half-day being measured for tailor-made replacements that looked like our old clothes but were made from Midchildan fabrics and had reinforced pockets for our companions, some of our gold, and Ami and Makoto's transformation wands.

They would be ready in a month – the day before Hayate was due in.

But Hayate arrived a few days early. She brought Shario and Shario-chan along with her.

"Yuuno told me what happened on your birthday, Rob. Congratulations!" Hayate offered.

I smiled. "Don't congratulate me; all I did was turn another year older. Yuuno-san and Ami did all the hard work," I said in Japanese.

Shario switched to the same language. "Why aren't you speaking Midchildan?"

"We have to get into the habit of speaking the language of the place we'll be living in," I replied. "Why are you here early, by the way?"

"Officially," Hayate said, "to give you, the Numbers, and the Nakajimas mage rank promotion exams. Unofficially, to distract the Nakajimas and the Numbers from you and Ichiro for a day."

"Why would they need to be distracted from us?" Ichiro asked.

"Because of the NDA that Rob signed."

Ah. "I'd better unpack those two blank Devices that I don't have, then," I smiled.

Hayate smiled back. "After you update your record of my mind."

A half-hour later, I had updated brainprints from both Hayate and Shario, and Ichiro was unpacking the two blank devices from the field maintenance kit. Then Shario put me through a mage rank test which ended up the way that I expected, with me remaining a Rank C mage. Ichiro tested as Rank B.

The next day, everybody took their tests. Ami cleared Rank A, as we expected from her being able to open a pinprick portal to back home.

Funny; I'd been in or near Cranagan for two years and Tokyo for less than one year before that, but it was the Azabu-Juban neighbourhood that I thought of as home. Of course, so did Makoto, and home is where the heart is.

My fiancée tested as rank B, just like last time, and our Unison devices also tested as Rank B. Except for Kasandara, who was Rank D. I didn't see any of those tests; Ichiro and I were busy.

Just like last time, we started with organizing Shario's brainprint in order to implant it into Shario-chan II. This time around, we had clothing for her; not a TSAB uniform of any sort, but a simple jeans-and-blouse outfit with a pair of zero-prescription glasses.

Then we took three hours to put together the brainprint for the other Device – which of course we called Hayate-chan. We had clothes ready for her, too – [that sweater, skirt, and tights outfit that she wore so many times in 4's](#), which still looked good on her twenty-year-old figure.

"So this is how Rein feels when she's working with everybody else," Hayate-chan said as she woke up and looked at Hayate and me. "I didn't expect to be this small."

At that point, Shario and Shario-chan walked in. "I've finished all the mage rank tests!"

"All but one," Hayate replied while motioning to Hayate-chan.

A half-hour later and we'd discovered that Hayate-chan also tested as Rank B. "Maybe that's a hard limit for Devices," she said while looking over the results.

"I'm tempted to agree," Shario said.

"I hate to say this, but..."

Hayate-chan interrupted me. "We have to hide so you don't get in trouble with the TSAB."

"Yeah. Sorry about this. It should only be for a few days."

Then it was September 21, and time to pick up our tailor-made clothes. We had a discussion before we went into town.

"Midchildan money is just waste paper back home. We may as well spend it all," I suggested.

"Or give it to our hosts," Ami suggested, as she sorted through her own pocket change to leave behind all of the Midchildan money and the Japanese coins dated after Heisei 4.

"Oh, we wouldn't dream of it!" Ginga insisted. "Go shopping, and don't forget to buy souvenirs for your friends back home."

My fiancée facepalmed. "Souvenirs! I knew we forgot *something*!"

"We could give everyone some Midchildan money," Ryou suggested with a smile. Ami threw a pillow at him.

When we mentioned that exchange to Shario-chan and Hayate-chan, they gave each other a meaningful glance, and I guessed that somebody was going to get a better souvenir than she ever expected. I wondered who Hayate-chan was going to choose as a partner.

But we went into town first. The souvenirs that we picked out ranged from kitsch to cliché to classy. Ami picked up a few diamonds for her mother. Ryou bought some gems for Naru to examine, and for seed capital to go along with the gold we already had. My dearest bought some actual seeds – apparently, our home reality didn't have blue roses, which were popular with TSAB admirals here.

"Do you have any place to plant those?" I asked as the gardening shop's clerk put the pack of seeds into a stasis spell. "I doubt there's room in your apartment for them, alongside the potted plants that you already have."

"Darling, we're going to have enough money to move into a proper house with a proper garden," she reminded me. "These are for then."

Once we got home, we spent the rest of the day packing, leaving only changes of clothes for the next two days not packed. Our motorized cart was loaded down almost to its rated load. Donguri-no-ken and its care kit; clothes that fit; electronics and media; my camera gear in its own camera bag; Ami's chess board and pieces; assorted souvenirs, keepsakes, and magitech; and literally a metric ton of gold were all packed securely in assorted backpacks, briefcases, and bins. Ami and Makoto had to transform to Mercury and Jupiter in order to magically fuel the cart's motor, so we weren't worried about anybody walking off with it.

We went back into Cranagan the next day.

All of us – Genya, Ginga, Subaru, Cinque, Nove, Deici, Wendi, Hayate, Reinforce, Shario, Shario-chan (the original), Ichiro, Sakura, Meia, Kasandara, Ryou, Ami, Makoto, and me. The TSAB members were in uniform, the four of us who had been banished were wearing – one last time as a group – black slacks or skirts and green tops, and the Devices and Numbers were wearing their best outfits.

We posed for a set of commemorative photos, individually and in groups. We all knew that we'd never have this chance again.

Then Ryou showed that he was ready for this even without working precognition, and let Shario-chan II and Hayate-chan come out from wherever they were hiding. We got photos of both Hayates and all three Sharrios together, and all of the devices except for Rein with all four of us who were expecting to leave soon. Then the two Devices who needed to keep hidden went back to being hidden and I got copies of all of the photos downloaded to my cellphone.

Then, over the last fancy meal we had in the *Lyrical* reality, we told the Numbers about the stock portfolios that we had made for them. Wendi and Cinque thanked us first, followed quickly by Nove and Deici. We also let Genya, Ginga, and Subaru know that they each had slightly larger portfolios that had the money they had trusted to Ryou to invest plus a share of what we didn't have room to take home. Subaru got the housewares that we weren't taking and the last of our nanami togarashi, so that her new apartment wouldn't be completely empty and her food wouldn't be at all bland.

And nobody mentioned that Subaru and Cinque sat at opposite ends of the table... which was probably for the best.

And then it was September 23 by the *Lyrical* calendar – the second anniversary of the day we had arrived here, and the day that we expected to go home.

By mutual agreement, and to keep anybody in TSAB who might report back to Commander Gaiz on what we were doing until it was too late for her to track us, we chose to leave from the place we had arrived. We used the last of our local money to rent a heavy-duty truck and hire a driver; our Japanese money was in our pockets, along with a few small gold wafers.

We were all wearing the duplicates of the clothes that we had been wearing when we were sent to this dimension. Makoto and I had our best clothes in our suitcases; we were going to need them for our train trip as soon as we got back home. I helped Mercury and Jupiter move our cart with forcefields to smooth the path from the road to where we had arrived on Midchilda.

Shario-chan was riding in Ryou's shirt pocket. She enjoyed the view. Hayate-chan helped Mercury and Jupiter – I had to get used to calling them that again when they were transformed – by sharing some of her magical power and scouting for anything that they didn't expect to block the path.

And then we were there.

Jupiter transformed back to Makoto and [relaxed on the ground for a moment](#). I sat down beside her. "Any regrets?" I asked.

"No," she answered. "At least none that I didn't have two years ago. I wonder how my grandparents are going to handle having a foreigner in the family?"

"We'll cross that bridge when we get to it."

"We're going to get to it after the ceremony tomorrow, assuming Ami's right about time not passing back home while there's no portal between the worlds and we get back just after we left."

"That's another bridge that we'll have to cross, if she's wrong."

"Yeah." After a moment, she asked me, "How about you? Any regrets?"

"Well, we never did get to meet Captain Harlaown or Captain Takamachi. But that's a small thing."

"Which of them do you think would fall in love with Ryou?" she asked with a grin.

"Neither," I said. "In their canon, they end up with each other. So Ryou doesn't have to worry about them."

Before my dearest could reply, Mercury walked over to us and smiled. "We're ready."

We both stood up, and Makoto transformed to Jupiter as we walked over to the others.

"Last chance to change your minds, everybody," Ryou said.

"Although we're only accepting Devices as passengers, not biological people," Mercury added, looking straight at Wendi when she said that.

"I think I speak for everybody when I say we prefer to stay with you," Sakura said.

Ichiro, Meia, Shario-chan, and Hayate-chan all nodded in agreement, and Kasandara said, "She speaks for me."

"Then let's do this," Hayate said, just before Makoto gave her a hug.

"Thank you for everything. And good-bye."

"Yes, thank you for everything, all of you," I added. "We wouldn't have survived here if it wasn't for all of you, let alone thrived."

"You guys..." Hayate started, then after a quick pause, added, "Don't make me cry before I cast the spell." She took her usual stance for when she cast spells, then lowered her arms and turned to face me directly. "Rob, you know that I have to speak an aria in order to have full control over my magic."

"Yes, because you have so much raw power. Why are you mentioning this now, Hayate?"

"Because of the aria that Yuuno wrote. Please don't laugh."

"Laugh? At something that would finally get us home? Who the hell do you think I am?"

She grinned. "Oh, you've already heard the aria!"

I smiled in return. "Yeah, Yuuno-san taught it to all of us, even though nobody in the group except Ami can actually cast it. If it still matters, I promise."

"Thanks." Only then did she chant the spell. "If there's a wall in our way then we smash it down! If there isn't a path, then we carve one ourselves! Pierce the heavens! PANDIMENSIONAL PATHWAY!"

We stepped through the portal that Hayate was holding open, going from a field just outside of Cranagan in what I called the Lyrical reality to an outbuilding of the Roppongi Hikawa Shrine in what Yuuno-san called the Bishoujo reality. Once we passed through it, there was no going back any time soon – barring a breakthrough in dimensional theory, only a Rank SS mage could open a portal big enough to walk through, and Bunny-chan didn't know the math she'd need to cast the spell. I for one was going to miss Genya, Ginga, Subaru, Shario, Hayate, and Reinforce... and the Numbers, too... even though we were pretty sure that we'd be able to email each other whenever Ami visited me, once I had my wi-fi router set up. But Ami, Ryou, Makoto, and I were finally home, and a half-dozen of our friends were coming with us.

Once we were through the portal, we turned and waved good-bye as Mercury and Jupiter transformed back to Ami and Makoto. I thought I saw Wendi start to wave back, but that might have been a flicker of the light as the portal collapsed. Then we turned to the shrine's kannushi and bowed deeply. "We thank you for your assistance, honourable sir," I said in the most respectful Japanese that I knew.

"Why are you being so formal? The kami told me that we've known each other since the Missing Time."

Ami smiled. "Oh, but we've been gone for so long, and we were rude enough to bring some friends unannounced when we returned."

"I think our other friends are about to show up," Ryou commented.

"I'd best leave you and them alone, then," Rei-san's grandfather replied with a slight smile. "I gather that I'm not supposed to know about any of this."

"Not yet," Ryou replied as he moved Shario-chan from his pocket to the group of Devices who were riding on our luggage. "But please keep Friday afternoon open."

"Would you mind playing host to some of our companions for a while?" Makoto asked. Meia, Sakura, Ichiro, Shario-chan, and Hayate-chan bowed politely to him, and Kasandara did a wiggle that got the same intention across.

"How could I refuse?" he said while openly staring at the miniature people and the self-moving box. "I will also tend to your possessions," he added while trying and failing to move our cart; he didn't know how to activate the controls. Ichiro and Sakura came with us, promptly hiding in Makoto's and my jacket pockets as we got our suitcases from the cart.

## ***Isekai by Moonlight***

### **Chapter R, Return**

As we left the outbuilding, we heard the Sailor Senshi approaching. "I still can't believe they're gone."

"We all saw it happen, Usagi," As always, Small Lady was the rather blunt voice of childlike truth.

"*That doesn't mean we have to accept it!*" I didn't realize that Minako-san cared so much about us.

«We'd better let them know we're still alive before somebody says or does something she shouldn't,» I sent to the others.

"How are we going to tell Mizuno-sensei?"

Ami smiled at Rei-san's question as she stepped around the corner of the shrine's main building. "What are you planning to tell my mother?"

"Ami-chan! You're alive!"

"I'm sure she'll be happy to hear that, Usagi-san."

"Mako-chan!"

I let Ryou announce our presence as we joined the girls. "Don't forget us."

"Ryou-san! Robu-san! You're all alive! *How?*"

"That's a much longer story than you're probably expecting," Makoto replied. "And we'd rather tell it only once."

Usagi-san looked around. "Most of the group is already here..."

"Not just us, we should tell *everybody*," Ami insisted with Mercury's determination, which didn't go unnoticed.

"Ryou will give you a full list later, but I know it will include my mother, Rei's grandfather, and Naru-san."

"The afternoon of the 14th," Makoto added as she put her suitcase down beside mine. "I have an appointment to keep tomorrow." Tomorrow, in this case, being August 12.

"And if we're going to keep that appointment, we need to leave now," I added as I picked up both my and Makoto's suitcases and we headed back around the corner of the shrine.

As we double-checked that nobody was watching, I heard Minako-san ask "Can we at least have a hint right now?"

Then I heard that gruff voice in my head: «I will collect my debt later.» At the time, I said nothing.

Makoto transformed to Sailor Jupiter, we Unisoned with our Devices, I wrapped the suitcases in a forcefield and made us all invisible, and we literally flew to the train station.

Don't tell anybody, but we had to fly over the Imperial Palace in order to get to Ueno Station on time.

We set down in a wooded area in Ueno Park close to the train station, went visible again, and dropped out of Unison. Ichiro and Sakura hid in our pockets again once Jupiter transformed back to Makoto. I handed her suitcase back to her, we ran from there at slightly faster than human-normal speed, the JR station staff cleared the way for Makoto and – once she made clear that I was with her – me, and we were just in time to catch our train, joining the group who were making the trip to the memorial.

It was a special train, as so many were in the few days before and after [Hachigatsu Bon](#), that had left Osaka the previous evening, and was already half filled with mourners before it reached Tokyo. We filled the remainder of the train.

We ended up sharing a set of four seats with Makoto's grandparents. JR had arranged the seating that way on purpose, not knowing about how Makoto's grandmother felt about her. It was an awkward two hours in which Kino-baasan refused to even acknowledge her granddaughter's existence, spending the entire trip looking out the window. Kino-jiisan, however, noticed the ring on Makoto's finger when she presented her report card to him. He looked over to me, saw the matching ring on my finger, and said, "You're just like your mother, girl."

"I am? How?"

"Where do you think you get your height from? Your father, that's who. And you're following your mother's example."

Nobody said anything for a half-hour. He gave the appearance of concentrating on her report card.

Then he added, "Do what you want. I will not refuse your choice, but I will not condone it, either. You will have to wait until you are of legal age. As for schooling, you may continue to live in Tokyo." I heard a sigh of relief from Kino-baasan; the only reaction to anything that I noticed from her for the entire trip.

We essentially took over a few hotels in Shinmachi that night. Makoto and I had separate rooms, as was only proper.

The next morning, which was the first time that I had ever seen my fiancée wear a kimono and the first time that I had worn the ruby cufflinks that all of the girls had given me for my birthday either a month or two years ago, we took a special train on a twisty track to Narahara, where we were met by a small fleet of buses. They took us to a parking lot where the road ended. From there, we made our way on foot to the [Cenotaph of Flight 123](#), almost like we had in the Lyrical reality. I say "almost" because I wasn't walking beside my dearest; she was near the front of the procession with the other survivors, and I was near the back with the associates of people who had lost loved ones in the crash. Also, they had not installed steps or a handrail yet. Of course I quite politely offered my assistance to one elderly woman who was having trouble negotiating the slope. While she declined the offer, the people nearby were less suspicious of the foreigner in their midst simply because I had shown respect for the aged.

Speaking of good manners, I took Rei-san's advice and remained quiet throughout the ceremony, and I kept my head bowed for over eight minutes while they sounded the bell once per second for each fatality of the crash.

Once the commemoration ceremony was complete, we returned to Shinmachi, where we stayed in the same rooms that we had slept in the previous night. I was surprised twice: first, that there was an envelope holding a quarter-million yen waiting for me from Setsuna, and second when Kino-jiisan knocked on my door after dinner.

"I would speak with you."

I nodded. "I have only a small bed in this room. Shall we speak in the hotel's lounge instead?"

"No. People would overhear. Walk with me." And he turned to the stairs. I grabbed my jacket (and Ichiro so that he could overhear), locked my room's door behind me, and followed him.

Once we were outside, he asked while walking, "Do you know what it means to marry a Japanese woman?"

"I have an idea," I replied as I remained by his side. "Since my family does not have a family register in Japan, I would become a member of your family and take the Kino name, just as your son-in-law did."

"That is the least of it. There are those who will never trust you, simply because you are not Japanese. You will likely see co-workers who are less skilled than you be promoted over your head. You will never be completely accepted. And, I fear, because of your height, there will be some who will call you an oni. Are you familiar with the oni, young man?"

I nodded with a smile. "I met one of my schoolmates the day after both Makoto-san and I transferred to Kuritsu Juban Chuugakkou. The very first thing that she said to me was to call me 'oni'. Both Makoto-san and I have become good friends with Tsukino-san since then. Also, one of Makoto-san's classmates has compared both her and me to the two oni from 'Naita Aka Oni'. Aoyama-san seems to think that I'm the red oni."



The barest hint of a smile played upon his face for a brief moment. "Which leaves my granddaughter as the blue oni, then. How like her mother she is. You mustn't rely on her for help in learning to live here. And do not expect me to be able to support you financially."

"Sir, I am sufficiently wealthy that financial support will not be a concern." I pulled from a pocket one of the leather pouches that we had had made in Cranagan, opened it, and let him see the gold ingots within before closing the pouch and returning it to my pocket. "As you can see, I have so few concerns about finances that I feel comfortable carrying precious metal as well as cash. I will need to practice a career, though."

"Yes, you will, and not just for the salary. You must not appear to be idle; that would dishonour the Kino name."

"My current plans are to work independently as a photographer. I already own two high-end cameras and a small selection of lenses for them," which was not a lie; one couldn't get any smaller a selection than two, "and I am in contact with a magazine editor in Tokyo who I expect will be willing to purchase my photographs once I am legally allowed to do business in Japan."

"It is good that you are planning ahead. Now, you have been calling my granddaughter 'Makoto-san', yet you wear matching rings."

I understood his concern. "I would not wish to trouble your wife by speaking in her presence of the woman I love by her name with no honorific, and I would not wish to put you in a position where you would need to speak other than the truth, so I used one in case your wife asks about our conversation. Makoto and I love each other very much, and as I told my physician in Tokyo, I literally cannot imagine life without Makoto and me by each other's sides."

"An odd thing to tell one's doctor."

"She is also Makoto's doctor."

He nodded in understanding. "Not so odd, then. One last question today: If you were to discover that my granddaughter is more than she appears, would that change your opinion of her?"

Did he know that she was Sailor Jupiter? I couldn't ask because of the promise that I made to her so long ago. "Sir, we each know things about the other that we have promised never to reveal to anyone else, not even to you. I am fortunate to know that my dearest Makoto is more than what she shows to strangers."

He stopped to think for a moment, just short of the hotel's door. "I will accept that answer. Good night, Donarudoson-san."

His use of my name for the very first time was not lost on me. "Good night, Kino-san."

I stopped at the concierge's desk and asked him where to find souvenirs at such a late hour, since we wouldn't have time to shop before returning home. He must have been expecting the request; there was already a selection of [Gunma's world-famous silk](#) goods behind his counter. Of course, silk isn't a bargain item even at the source; I needed almost all of the money that Setsuna had left me to buy enough for everyone. I resolved then and there to pay her back as soon as Ryou let me have some of my cash.

We returned home the next day, to find messages on our phones. Ryou's precognition was working again, and we were expected at Rei-san's shrine in an hour.

"No rest for the weary, eh, Ichiro?"

"Apparently not, Rob. Do you have any idea why we're expected at the shrine?"

"I have plenty of ideas. Let's go find out which one is right."

We met Makoto and Sakura at the stairs – they'd received the same message – and we headed off... to meet Rei-san once we arrived.

"What did you leave behind in that outbuilding?" she asked once we had paid proper respect to the kami and I had quietly acknowledged my debt to him. "We're not running a storage service here."

"You wouldn't believe us if we told you," my dearest said. "We're just going to have to show you."

So we did.

"Is that all gold? How much do you have here?"

"Only the heavy-duty containers hold gold," Ryou replied. "And approximately one metric ton."

**"HOW MUCH!?"**

"1000 kilograms," I said as I opened one of the cardboard boxes with my name on it, which was sitting on top of a larger box marked 'Shario-chan and Hayate-chan's Stuff' – and I wondered how two people who weren't even alive two weeks earlier managed to collect enough stuff to fill a box that size. "One megagram," I added while the ringing in my ears from Rei-san's shout faded away.

"I was hoping you'd take the entire cart home with you, but there's no way that the floors in any of your apartments can support that much weight. But it can't stay here past the end of the next school term."



I wondered why our apartments' floors couldn't take the load, but then I realized she meant all on one cart. "That's more than fair," I said. "Thank you. Oh, and we brought back souvenirs for everybody. I apologize that Makoto and I didn't have time to buy much more than just [silk scarves](#) and [ties](#) while we were in Gunma. Oh, and a [silk handkerchief](#) for Small Lady. The souvenirs that the four of us brought back that are on this cart are things that we think you'll each appreciate. Do you want yours now, considering we won't answer the questions it will raise until tomorrow?"

"You may as well. I can contain my curiosity for one day."

«When did you have time to buy souvenirs in Shinmachi, darling?»

"Okay," I said to Rei-san before sending to Makoto, «When we were at the hotel, my dearest. The concierge was expecting that we'd need to go through him for our gifts.»

«That's an expensive way to shop.»

«We can afford it... once every year or two.» I finally found Rei-san's gift. "Ah, here it is; a reprinting of the 1996 deluxe edition version of all seven volumes of *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind*."

"Why, thank you! I've been waiting for volume six since before I became Sailor Mars... Wait. The 1996 edition? All seven volumes?"

Makoto grinned. "You just said that you can contain your curiosity for one day."

Rei-san actually growled. "Ma-ko-to..."

"We all heard you say it," Ami added.

"Here, let's take at least some of this load back home with us and ease Rei-san's concerns a bit," I offered as I grabbed my camera bag and my backpack. "Everybody grab whatever you packed your clothes in, so we have something clean to wear tomorrow."

"Good idea," my dearest said as she grabbed her backpack. Ami and Ryou were quick to follow suit.

"Thanks," Rei-san said. "But if you're expecting us to stand guard over all this gold, think again."

Ichiro poked his head out from my jacket pocket, surprising Rei-san. "I'm willing to stay and stand guard, sir. I assume Hino-san is cleared to know everything."

"Thanks, Ichiro. And, yes, she is. If the two of you want to talk today, that's fine; we're going to tell Rei-san and Hino-jisan the big picture tomorrow, anyway."

"And Yuuichirou-san," Ryou added.

"He's trustworthy enough?"

"Twenty-nine times of thirty-one", answered Kasandara, to Rei-san's amazement.

"Sure, and Yuuichirou-san," I replied. Then I turned to Rei-san. "And now you already have a better idea of what questions to ask tomorrow. Or today."

When we discovered the next day that Rei-san and Hino-jisan had set out a light lunch for the twenty-four of us – not including the synthetic intelligences – who Ami and Ryou wanted present, we offered to reimburse them for their time and expenses. When I found out that the lunch included [inarizushi](#), I insisted on paying as I grabbed one from the table that was set up outside. Then people started arriving.

It was a nicely overcast day. "Nicely" in that the clouds gave us some cover from Rubeus's eyes in the sky, so we didn't need to crowd two dozen people into one room.

"It's good to see you again, Tsukino-san," I said to Kenji-san as he and his family arrived. "Although I'll have to ask you to leave your camera with me. You'll know why soon enough. Hi, Bunny-chan!"

"Hi, Robu-san!" Usagi-san giggled.

"Have we met, sir?"

"Oh, papa, we met when we all visited Hamarikyū Gardens. He's Mako-chan's boyfriend."

"Ah, yes. Thank you, Usagi." He turned to me and offered me his camera for safekeeping. "I trust that you know how to treat a camera like this one... Donarudoson-san?"

I nodded and replied, "I own two F90 cameras myself, Tsukino-san. They're good cameras and I wouldn't dream of abusing one."

"You own two? You're more than you appear to be."

"Yes, and that's part of what we'll be discussing today. If you'll excuse me, I see more of our guests have arrived. Please, feel free to speak with the others." As I passed Bunny-chan, I whispered, "Please leave some of the [viking](#) for everyone else."

A few minutes later, after storing Kenji-san's camera with Ryou's gold, seeing that most of our guests had arrived while I was doing so, and welcoming Naru-san and her mother, I took a look around... and realized that there were

only twenty-two people in the courtyard behind the shrine. «Do we have a problem, Ryou? I don't see Ichigo-san or Chiba-san.»

«Yes and no,» he sent back to me. «Ichigo-san will be here in three to seven minutes, and we asked people to be here in eight minutes. Chiba-san...»

After a moment, I asked, «Is he still giving Bunny-chan the cold shoulder?»

«It seems like it, yes.»

I sighed deeply. «You and I need to pay him a visit. Do you know where he lives?»

«No, but Ami does.»

«She can come along. Maybe we'll get lucky and she won't have to set any broken bones.»

«I heard that!» Ami sent.

«You were meant to!»

«I'd throw a pillow at you if there was one here, Oni.»

«You can chastise me later, Mercury. I think I hear Ichigo-san.»

Sure enough, she made her appearance just in time. "Hello, Robu-san! Am I late? I'm sorry."

"No, you're a bit early, and there's one more person who hasn't arrived yet. Come on over, and say hi to everyone else."

"Thanks. Hi, everyone else!"

There were a few chuckles from Small Lady and the assembled teens. The adults were more restrained.

Ami made a show of looking at her watch, then said, "I think we're going to have to start now. Thank you for indulging our selfishness on such short notice. For those of you who don't know me, I'm Mizuno Ami."

"Hi, Ami!" Ichigo-san said, looking Ami straight in the mouth. Then she tilted her head up a bit and looked Ami straight in the eyes. "You've gotten taller since I saw you on Monday."

"The explanation for that is part of why we asked all of you here," my dearest replied before my dearer friend could. "Oh, I'm Kino Makoto. Yes, the Kino Makoto whose photo you probably saw in a human-interest story in the paper yesterday, and that's all I'm going to say about *that*. How long were we gone for, Usagi-san?"

Bunny-chan thought for a moment. "A half-hour, maybe? It depends on how long you were waiting for us to get to Rei's place."

"We had just arrived back home when you arrived at the shrine," Ami commented. "But from our point of view, we've been gone for two years, to the day."

You could hear a pin drop.

Sacko-basan was the first to recover. "I hope you kept up with your studies, young lady."

The mass laughter broke the tension in the courtyard, followed by more laughter when Ami replied, "Yes, mother, we did."

"What have you learned over the last two years?" Rei-san asked. Ichiro had mentioned earlier that he'd fed her a few questions to use if the discussion looked like it was being derailed, and that was one of them.

"For one thing, I learned how to do this without needing to say anything," Ami replied as she transformed to Sailor Mercury without using her transformation wand or being naked briefly.

There wasn't any laughter this time. Small Lady was the first to respond. "Hey! Since when were you one of the Sailor Senshi?"

"I became a transforming heroine a year before I met you, Chibiusa."

"Which one are you?" Minako-san's father asked.

"It's been years since I last said this to an enemy," she said with a smile before clearing her throat. "I am the Pretty Guardian who fights for Love and Intelligence. I am Sailor Mercury! Douse yourself in water and repent!"

"Well, as long as we're doing the formal battlefield introductions," Makoto said while transforming, "I am the Pretty Guardian who fights for Love and Courage. I am Sailor Jupiter! I'll fill you with so much regret, it'll leave you numb!"

"Ano..." Minako-san started.

"Right, we haven't taught anyone else the streamlined transformation yet. Just say your phrases," Jupiter suggested. Then she realized what else Minako-san could have been about to say. "Or not, if you don't feel comfortable letting everybody know."

"Thanks."

Rei-san went next, surprising Yuuichirou-san. "I am the Pretty Guardian who fights for Love and Passion. I am Sailor Mars! In the Name of Mars, I'll chastise you!"

"I guess it's my turn. I am the Pretty Guardian who fights for Love and Justice. I am Sailor Moon! And in the name of the moon, I will punish you!"

"What?" Shingo-kun refused to believe Bunny-chan. "Sailor Moon can't be my sister! Sailor Moon's cool!"

"The coolness is built into her transformation, Shingo-kun," Minako-san said with a grin. Bunny-chan stuck her tongue out at both of them. "Saving the first for last, I am the Pretty Guardian who fights for Love and Beauty! I am Sailor Venus! In the Name of Venus, I'll punish you with the power of love!"

"What!? I forbid this!" Minako-san's mother insisted. "The newspapers all say that people who get involved with the Sailor Senshi get hurt, or worse. And you want to be one? No."

"I already am one, mother," Minako-san insisted. "I just told you that I've been a Senshi longer than any of the others have."

"Unthinkable! I will absolutely *not* give this my blessing! Either you give up being a Sailor Senshi or you find another place to live. And don't expect your father or me to help pay for you to live on your own."

Minako-san looked at her feet. "I see," she whispered, although everyone could hear her. "If that is your choice," she paused for a moment, then continued at a more normal volume, "I will live on the streets before I abandon my friends."

"Well said, young lady," Hino-jiisan commented, to my surprise. I would have expected a Shinto priest to recommend respecting one's elders. Then I remembered his own family situation.

Makoto quickly stood beside Minako-san. "You can sleep under my roof until you find another place to live."

I thought that Aino-san looked as if she was about to explode. "Then never darken my doorway again!" She turned on her heel and walked away, presumably to find her husband.

«This is not good.» I sent to Makoto, Ami, Ryou, Ichiro, Sakura, Meia, Kasandara, Shario-chan, Hayate-chan,... and Minako-san, much to her surprise. «Minako-san, what are the chances that your mother will throw away everything you own as soon as she gets home?» I saw the worried look on her face, and continued, «You don't need to say it. We need to get your most precious possessions out of your house before she gets there. And I hope you left your window unlocked, so that we don't have to darken her doorway.» She nodded at that. «Good. Everyone, we're leaving right now. If you can't fly under your own power, move in close.» Ryou and Minako-san stood next to me as I cast Mirage Hide to look like myself, and I grabbed them in a translucent forcefield as Ichiro Unisoned with me. "I apologize, everyone, but we need to leave immediately. We'll be back as soon as we're able. Hino-san, may I trouble you to entertain our guests while we're unavoidably called away?"

"Of course," Hino-jiisan replied.

"Thank you." Then we levitated – to everybody's surprise – before I surrounded the group with a frictionless invisibility cloak and we literally went flying to the Aino residence.

We got there much faster than we could have made it by roof-hopping.

"Important items first," my dearest insisted as I formed a large forcefield cart outside Minako-san's bedroom window and Ichiro moved to guard the bedroom door. "Your school uniforms, your best dress, a change of underwear, photo albums, your diary if you keep one, homework, textbooks – anything you need right away or can't replace. Then other clothing and keepsakes."

"And Artemis's stuff," Minako replied.

"And Artemis's stuff," I agreed.

Three minutes later and the essentials were all placed carefully in the forcefield cart. Then all of the ladies started packing suitcases and throwing unbreakable things into the cart pell-mell; it was only thanks to Meia, Sakura, and Ryou that nothing that was already in the cart was broken.

As the last of Minako-san's huge collection of stuffed animals landed in my cart, Makoto moved to pick up her chest of drawers. "No furniture," I insisted.

"But..." my dearest started as Ryou made room for it anyway.

"It won't all fit in your apartment. I'm already going to be storing most of these plushies at my place for now."

"For now?" Minako-san asked as Ami made sure we hadn't left anything irreplaceable behind and Makoto grabbed a bag to put the last of Minako-san's remaining clothes in.

"Fourteen times of seventeen, we will be capable to procure a house inside six months," Kasandara announced.

"That soon?" I raised an eyebrow. "You and Ryou must have confidence in your ability to day-trade without being investigated for picking the right stocks consistently."

"All four of us are millionaires now, and Kasandara and I are precogs," Ryou reminded me while reorganizing items in my forcefield cart so that they wouldn't fall out or damage anything else in the cart. "And, thanks to what the Nakajimas taught us, we know enough to avoid drawing very much attention. The only reasons we're waiting are because property prices are still dropping, and we need to convert our gold to cash."

"Ah. Take possession in seven months and we can move at the end of the school year." I turned back to Minako-san. "And of course you're invited to move in with us when we own our own property."

"That's fine for seven months from now, but what will I sleep on tonight? I can't afford to buy new furniture."

"Actually, you get a share of the royalties from the Sailor Moon toku shows that Dreamland puts on, so you have some cash on deposit at the Crown. Didn't Artemis tell you about that?"

"Oh, right. I never used it because I didn't want to explain to mother where the money came from."

"And even if you didn't have that," I replied, "I'll repeat what Ryou just said. We're millionaires now. We can buy our close friend a new bed. As for inexpensive furniture, we'll visit IKEA after we drop your things off in our apartments and finish our meeting at the Hikawa Shrine."

"IKEA pulled out of Japan in 1987," Ryou pointed out as Ami quickly took a framed photo of [Minako-san with three girls I didn't recognize](#) off the wall. "Also, it's now two minutes before we *must* leave if we aren't going to be seen."

"Oh." I turned to Makoto. "Better grab that chest of drawers after all. But nothing else; we're out of time. We can get a futon somewhere, I'm sure."

With the furniture added, my forcefield bin was big and heavy; there was no way that I was flying away. Ichiro and I Unisoned so that we could pull off another stunt: my power, his magic capacity, and both our attention to detail were all needed in order to create a pair of forcefield ducted thrusters for the first time. We weren't moving that cart any other way. I put another forcefield – one of the frictionless ones that made it possible for me to travel at superspeed – over the entire load other than the thruster intake and exhaust, and used Mirage Hide to make it look like a truck. "I'll see you at home, my dearest."

"We'll be waiting, darling," she replied as she took Minako with her and Ami took Ryou away.

We headed home in the disguised cart, carefully avoiding busy roads as much as possible. After all, I didn't have a licence to drive a forcefield in Japan.

«Rob,» Ichiro asked, «who will hold title to this house that you plan to purchase? None of us are of legal age.»

Before I could answer, we heard an inarticulate scream of rage from the Aino residence. I ignored it. «I'm hoping that Saeko-basan will agree to buy it for us,» Sensing his puzzlement, I added, «Saeko-basan is Mizuno-sensei, Ami's mother.»

«Ah. And if she doesn't?»

«We'll cross that bridge if we get to it.»

As we unloaded my forcefield cart at Makoto's and my apartments, we taught Minako-san Midchildan telepathy so that we could coordinate our actions more closely and get the job done that much faster.

At least, that was the intention. She spent more time playing with thought-sending than she did working.

We realized, as we headed back to Rei-san's shrine and Ami was teaching Minako-san the instant-and-modest patch to her Senshi transformation, that we had been the same with sending in the first few hours that we could send our thoughts. Being able to send and act at the same time would come naturally, but not immediately.

"We're sorry about that, everybody," Ami said once we got back to the shrine, "but it was necessary. Where were we?"

"You five young ladies, including my daughter, had just introduced yourselves," Kenji-san reminded her. "We haven't heard from the two gentlemen yet."

I looked at Ryou and sent, «Please tell me you were expecting this.»

«Have you forgotten who you're talking to? 😊»

«No, I'm just stalling for time.» I wasn't expecting this, and didn't have anything prepared.

He was and he did, though. "None of us choose our names, but we all choose our futures. I've been called 'Ryou the Psychic Boy'. I don't go out and fight monsters. Instead, I give tactical support to my girlfriend Sailor Mercury and her friends by seeing possible futures before they happen."

"Girlfriend? Aw, man..." Sorry, Shingo-kun, but Ami's taken. And thank you for distracting everybody from Ryou's announcement that he's a precog.

Artemis of all people noticed that I was still having trouble putting together something. "Advisor to the Guardian who fights for Love and Beauty, I am Artemis!" he announced as he hopped onto Venus' shoulder; she transformed as he was speaking.

"Eek! Talking cat!" I'm not sure who said that, but there's a chance that it might have been everybody who hadn't been introduced to him before today.

"He isn't unique, you know. Advisor to the Guardian who fights for Love and Justice, I am Luna!" Then I heard her whisper, "And saying that was oddly relaxing."

"Oh, my," Ikuko-san said in surprise.

And then everybody's attention was back on me. Time to go with what I had ready. "Crossing between realities for Love and Friendship, I am Oni! I'll never be filled with regret, because I am the fiancé of the Guardian who fights for Love and Courage!"

"Fiancé?" Naru-san and Ichigo-san asked, to which Jupiter transformed back to Makoto and showed off her ring. "Squee!"

"Did you just say the word 'squee' instead of squeeing?" Artemis asked.

"Don't be silly," Ichigo-san replied with a grin.

"Well, we've lost the girls' attention for a few minutes," I said to Saeko-basan, Ryou's and Bunny-chan's parents, and the other men in the group as Naru-san, Ichigo-san, and all of the Senshi other than Mercury mobbed my fiancée. "And here we were ready to introduce you to the friends we made while we were away."

The mobbing of Makoto abruptly stopped. Bunny-chan announced, "Meet new friends first. Get the details about what Robu-san's proposal sounded like later."

"Thank you, Usagi-san. Even if I can't give you those details because Makoto proposed to me." That got a few laughs. "No, seriously. Most of our new friends were there."

"I can confirm that report," my companion said. "My name is Ichiro, and I am what is known as a Unison Device. Our primary role is to assist our companions and boost their magical abilities. I have only ever Unisoned with Oni, although I have taught some skills to all four of our biological friends."

As everyone but Rei-san and Hino-jii-san stared at Ichiro and the other Devices in wonder, Small Lady whispered, "Where have I heard of Unison Devices before?" I doubt that anyone else heard her.

"Hi Ichiro! I'm Ichigo!" Realizing that everyone was now expecting her to explain how she fit into our group, my dearest's classmate continued, "Aaand I really have to learn to think before I talk. I'm nobody special; I just know the Sailor Senshi."

"That's special enough for me! Hi, everyone! I'm Sakura, and I'm the girl who's lucky enough to get to Unison with Sailor Jupiter. I've also taught some things to our big friends."

"Everyone, I am honoured to make your acquaintance. My name is Meia, and I have the good fortune to be Sailor Mercury's Unison companion and magical research assistant."

"Kasandara, Intelligent Device to Ryou," our non-humaniform friend announced, surprising everyone else again.

"I'm Shario-chan, and I don't know why I even exist. I don't have any magic at all so I can't Unison with anybody. But Oni says I have skills that nobody else does, except he has them too but he cheated, so I guess I'm special in a good way too."

"You're the only one who knows how to treat us if we're injured, Shario-chan; that makes you a very important person. Hello, everybody, I'm Hayate-chan. I can Unison, but I never actually have Unisoned with anyone. I'm still looking for the right person."

"Oh, me, me, pick me!"

"Usagi!" Her mother looked at her crossly.

"Sorry..."

"It isn't just a matter of picking somebody, Moon-san," Hayate-chan said. "Meia or Mercury have to give you a short medical exam to determine whether you can even survive Unison, let alone tell whether we're compatible with each other."

Bunny-chan lost her enthusiasm when Hayate-chan said "survive". "Maybe I don't want to try after all."

"Is that everyone?" Kenji-san asked.

"I think so," Minako-san replied.

"Not quite," I pointed out. "There are still people who should introduce themselves..." I took another look around to confirm that Chiba-san still was not present. "... although one of them hasn't joined us today. Then there's the young woman who's been quietly inspecting my fiancée's engagement ring for a while now."

Naru-san looked embarrassed at being caught. "Oh, hi. I'm Osaka Naru. I'm still learning what I can do, so I don't fight monsters very often. Although for some reason they like coming after me."

Meia floated over to Naru-san. "Ami has told me some intriguing things about you, Osaka-san. I would be interested in watching you use your abilities and perhaps learning them, if you would allow that."

"You want to learn from me? Nobody's ever said that before."

Meia smiled. "Then I am happy to be the first."

"Robu-niisan," Small Lady changed the subject, "you said something about crossing between realities."

"Count on you to notice the important part, Chibiusa," I said with a smile as I knelt down to be closer to her level. "Yes, I'm from a completely different reality altogether, and I know a little bit about many of the people here because I either read about you or watched a show about you."

"What books and shows were we in?"

"They were called *Codename wa Sailor V* and *Bishoujo Senshi Sailor Moon*. Neither of them went into very much detail about your lives, with the exceptions of the Sailor Senshi."

"*Codename wa Sailor V* didn't go into any detail about anyone's private lives," Minako-san pointed out.

"The version that aired here didn't, that's true. The version published in my home reality mentioned a few things, including your name."

"Do you already know from your world's stories that I'm from the future?" Small Lady didn't-really-ask, surprising everyone who hadn't read ahead in WikiMoon or Shadowjack's threads.

"That's right. And that's part of why I trust you; we have in common the fact that we aren't in the worlds where we grew up."

"Part of?"

I nodded. "Part of. There's also the fact that you're smart and observant, which you just showed us. And you're determined to make things right."

"Thank you," she whispered shyly. She didn't take the opening that I had left for her, though, but that's okay. We still had to deal with Rubeus and the Ayakashi Sisters before she could go home.

Then, after the adults introduced themselves to each other, we all had a belated lunch of what was still left of the buffet. Over lunch, we told everybody a condensed version of what we had been through for two years our time and two minutes their time.

After that story, Ami and Ryou gave everybody the souvenirs we had bought for them in Midchilda, and Makoto and I gave everybody the souvenirs we had bought for them in Gunma. We ended up with eight boxes left over, which became six after we gave Ami her blue silk scarf and Ryou his blue silk tie. "This is for Chiba-san," I said while holding up one of the remaining silk ties.

"Before you ask, it's bad manners to ask somebody else to give someone a souvenir," Ryou said.

I set it aside with his souvenir from Midchilda and the boxes holding the gifts for Minako-san's parents. "I'll give it to him later, then. These two..." I opened the last box with a tie in it, showing it was green, then I gave the last box to Makoto. "These are for us," I said as she opened her gift to discover a scarf in the same colour as my tie.

"I don't know when I'll ever wear it, but thank you."

And then we went home with more of our luggage from Midchilda, leaving Yuuichirou-san to clean up the buffet and Sakura to take a turn guarding the gold. A quarter-hour later, Ami and Ryou came to Makoto's and my apartments to help Makoto and Minako-san unpack. Apparently, Saeko-basan sent them over while she talked with the Urawas.

By the time we had things arranged to both Minako-san and Makoto's liking, with most of the plushies keeping my Sailor Moon crane game dolls company, my dearest got a call from Saeko-basan, asking Ami and Ryou to come back home.

"There's nothing to worry about, eight times out of nine," he said.

"Seventeen of eighteen," Kasandara corrected him.

"Even better," Ryou smiled.

Shario-chan and I spent the rest of the evening setting up my wi-fi router. She surprised me by offering me a Midchildan SIM for my smartphone; at least some of what was in her luggage box was Lyrical magitech. I wouldn't be able to connect to DoCoMo, but I would be able to connect to the wi-fi router from at least as far away as Atelier Lucent in Shibuya. Since I couldn't connect the phone to DoCoMo until 4G service was available, which wouldn't be until years after DoCoMo changed the styling of their name to Docomo, I took her up on the offer. She set up my Lyrical laptop to accept my smartphone as a terminal. She also set up guest accounts for Kasandara and the Mercury Computer, which completed a project that Ami and I had started during the Missing Time; we could finally send texts to each other.

The next morning, we found out why Ami and Ryou had to leave: they were summoned for a discussion about their futures. No, they weren't being forced apart, or forced into an arranged marriage; Saeko-basan didn't see the need when both people were so obviously already in love. But I finally found out why she was willing to approach somebody like me to start a relationship with her daughter: she wanted desperately for the Mizuno family name to continue. Ryou wasn't the eldest son in the Urawa family, and the Mizuno family had no sons, so both families agreed to take part in a custom that I hadn't heard of before; Ryou was going to take the status of [mukoyōshi](#) in the Mizuno family, which meant Saeko-basan allowed the marriage on the condition that he takes the Mizuno name and gives up any claim to the Urawa family.

Ryou, having seen this coming as usual, had had plenty of time to think about his future. Of course he agreed.

In turn, I told everybody about the conversations I'd had with Kino-jiisan on the train and in Gunma. .. and Makoto asked everybody to keep December 1999 open.

"The month that you turn 20," Minako-san said with a smile.

"Officially, yes, although I'll really be 22," Makoto confirmed. "But I'll be busy settling my affairs with JAL the week of my birthday and the week after, and then there's the absolute minimum time a bride needs to get ready even if other people are handling the logistics of the wedding. So we're thinking the third Saturday after my 20th birthday."

Ami smiled. "How romantic! That's December 25."

"I didn't even think of that!" Makoto smiled as well as she turned to Minako-san. "And we want you in the [wedding reception committee](#), Mina-chan."

"Of course!"

"As long as we're asking..." I started.

"Yes, Robu, I'll serve on the wedding reception committee as well." Ryou said before I could ask.

"I'm supposed to ask before you answer, you know. And thank you."

"Ami," Makoto said with a bit of worry, "do you think that Saeko-basan would be willing to accept our [hanataba](#)?"

"You and I are as close as sisters," she replied. "And I know that she likes you. I think that she would. But it would be best if you ask her yourself."

And that exchange got me thinking about my relationship with Mizuno-sensei. That was something to discuss with her and my dearest later... but not three-quarters of a decade later.

Rei took a few days to meditate and come to terms with what she'd learned from us. So did Bunny-chan.

At the shrine, not on a deserted island with a small plesiosaur population. Kenji-san and Ikuko-san didn't want Bunny-chan leaving Minato for a while, while they and Shingo-kun also came to terms with the fact that Usagi-san was both a transforming heroine and a reincarnated princess. I heard after the fact that the Tsukino family joined then one day, talking through their concerns with Hino-jiisan. He called it "a productive discussion", before letting me know that Ikuko-san didn't handle the reveal as well as the men in her family did. I resolved to talk with her about Bunny-chan's life the first time that she was willing to talk with me and we both had some time... which didn't happen until after we had resolved the whole mess with Rubeus. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

Makoto and Minako-san spent the week re-organizing their now-shared apartment.

Ryou had some appointments to keep that, other than the one at OSA-P, he didn't tell me about except to say that they were connected to all the gold he'd brought with us and that there was nothing illegal involved.

I had an appointment to keep, too, although the person I had the appointment with didn't know it until just before it happened. Ami gave me Chiba-san's address before she left. I called him up from a pay phone reasonably nearby.

"Chiba-san, I'd like to come over and chat with you about a meeting that you missed five days ago."

"I don't know whether now is a good time," he replied.

"Let me put it this way: I'm coming over now, and we will talk about things that you need to know."

"Don't be surprised if I'm not here when you arrive, Donarudoson-san."

"I'll be right there." Then I hung up, flash-moved the two blocks to his apartment building, and knocked on his door.

"Not now, whoever you are," I heard him say. "I'm on my way out."

"Then I'll walk with you."

I waited for a moment, then heard from Ichiro, who was watching the apartment from outside. «He just transformed to Tuxedo Kamen and is headed for his balcony, Rob. Shall I surprise him?»

«Please do.»

A moment later, I heard Chiba-san's apartment door's deadbolt being unlocked. Then he opened the door. "I see you have a friend that I didn't know about," gesturing to Ichiro who was using Mirage Hide to appear to be slightly larger than me and dressed in the same tuxedo that Tuxedo Kamen usually wears. "Well, come in."

"Thank you. Here, this is a souvenir from the trip Makoto and I made to Gunma. Right now, I don't care whether you take it, but she does. As for Ichiro, that's what you get for missing the discussion session. Bunny-chan was sad that you weren't there."

"I'd rather not talk about Usako."

"Why? You obviously still love her since you just used your pet name for her. Is it because you're having visions of her future self being trapped in a crystal?"

"How did you know ... no, you've told us that already. We're just fictional characters to you, aren't we?"

"Chiba-san, I assure you that my fiancée is not 'just' anything. And neither are Ryou or Ami or Usagi-san or Minako-san or any of the other girls. Or you, for that matter."

"Fiancée?"



I nodded. "Again, that's what you get for missing the discussion session. Makoto and I have her grandfather's permission to marry after she turns 20. But I'm not here to talk about me. I'm here to talk about you and Usagi-san and the complete mess you're making of your relationship. Get this through your head, mister: those visions aren't predictions of doom, they're warnings that you need to be prepared!"

"I'm not happy with your tone, Donarudoson."

"And I'm not happy with how your actions are hurting Usagi-san, Chiba. So we're even there. But somebody needs to make sure you know what's actually going on here, for her sake."

"Sir," Ichiro interrupted, "you've had your say. Chiba-san is an intelligent man; he doesn't need to be told twice."

"Fine. We may as well take our leave, Ichiro. We're keeping Chiba-san from running off." I turned to our unwilling host and added, "I trust you'll think about our conversation, as short as it was. Oh, and Ami brought back a souvenir for you. Good day, sir."

"Good bye, Donarudoson."

Once we were out of Chiba's apartment and he had locked his door behind us, Ichiro dropped his spell and went back to looking his own size. «I'm surprised that you left the role of 'good cop' to me, Rob.»

«I'm surprised that I almost immediately went to being the 'bad cop', Ichiro. But Chiba and I have never been on particularly good terms; remind me some time to tell you about how he threw one of his roses at me the day we met. At least you stopped me before I said anything about Small Lady's existence being at stake. Thank you.»

Two days later, everyone was back from their retreat, and we made plans to go shopping for replacements for some of the things that Minako had to leave behind. But just before we were about to leave, my dearest got a call from Bunny-chan.

Whatever it was that she said, Makoto replied with, "That's okay, Usagi-chan. Something just came up that's more important than shopping. We'll see you later; go find Chibiusa." After a moment, she added, "Right. Bye!" and hung up.

"What's more important than shopping?" Minako-san asked.

"Chibiusa's run off and Usagi-chan has to go look for her. And so do we."

"We do?" Artemis asked.

I nodded. "We do. I'll go tell Ichiro, and text Ami so she and Meia will meet us at Juban Park."

"This is work, isn't it?" Minako-san asked as I headed to my own apartment. I assume my fiancée replied, because by the time I had texted Ami, everybody was waiting outside my door.

"Do we have time to walk to Juban Park, or do we have to roof-hop?" Minako-san asked.

"I can't do either," Shario-chan replied. "Whose pocket do I ride in?"

"Mine." I manifested a forcefield for her to hop onto, then brought her over from Makoto to me as the two biological ladies transformed instantly to Jupiter and Venus. "Oh, good, you've been practising."

«While we were away with Mars, we taught everybody Mercury's fix. Except for Chibiusa.»

«And Mercury taught Moon and Mars how to send while we were at it,» Sakura added. «Better to go fast and wait there. Let's fly.»

"Flying is a good idea, Sakura," I said aloud for Shario-chan's benefit. "Ichiro, if you would?"

The Senshi knew how to transform nearly instantly now, but Unison still took a few seconds for the interface to connect both ways. While Jupiter and I were Unisoning with Sakura and Ichiro, Hayate-chan asked, "Venus, do you want to try?"

Shario-chan added, "Better now than later, so you can get used to it."

"I thought Moon was going to try first."

"She isn't here, you are, and we're in a hurry," Hayate-chan pointed out.

"Okay." And we mentally guided Venus through the process. Watching her change from a blue-eyed blonde to a hazel-eyed light-brunette was an interesting sight. "Am I supposed to feel like this?" she asked nervously.

"Everybody feels it differently," Jupiter answered while she picked up Artemis. "Now, let Hayate-chan drive and enjoy the trip."

"I can't believe you just said that."

"I don't mind flying this way. I'm in charge, not a passenger."

«Talk on the way,» Sakura sent. «Let's go!»

We went. In formation so that I could hide us from curious eyes. We didn't do much talking, though; Venus was radiating fear by the time we were halfway there.

By the time we reached Juban Park, Ami and Ryou were already there. And Ryou brought along a paper bag, a face cloth, and a bottle of water. Hayate-chan left Unison as soon as she and Venus landed. Ryou offered the bag, cloth, and



water to Venus, she took them quickly and ducked behind some bushes, and ... well, it was a good thing she wasn't flying on a full stomach.

Jupiter took the opportunity to transform back to Makoto, after ending her Unison with Sakura.

"I am *never* Unisoning again," Minako announced upon re-joining us, the now-full bag and now-empty bottle left in a waste bin.

"Motion sickness?" Shario-chan asked as Ichiro and I stopped our Unison.

"No, Venus had trouble letting me steer her body," Hayate-chan replied. "She's mentally unable to share that much control." She turned to Minako and added, "I'm sorry, but we can't be partners. If you can't handle even that much, then there's no way that you'll let me cast spells through you."

"If that's what Unison requires, then maybe I don't want to try it," Rei-san said as she walked over from the park's entrance. "Why are we meeting here?"

"It's the closest public place to where we need to be very soon," Ami said. "And we need to discuss tactics."

"Rush in and crush them," Sakura suggested.

"And let Wiseman see just how much stronger you are now," Ryou countered.

"Oh, right. Bad idea. I suppose Unison's out, too."

"Thank the gods," Minako muttered.

"Right. Individual attacks only," Hayate-chan said, quickly taking charge of the planning. "Shario-chan, your job will be to give Chibiusa moral support."

"Don't let her go to pieces. right."

"Mercury, Mars, Jupiter, Ichiro, Sakura, Meia, Oni, standard TSAB ground tactics against a smaller force."

"Divide and conquer?" Rei-san asked.

I shook my head. "Uh-uh. Contain and conquer, unless they get the drop on us. Divide and conquer is for when they outnumber us. With you and Minako here, we have a two-to-one advantage. Assuming Tuxedo Kamen shows up to help Sailor Moon."

"And if he doesn't?"

"Then I'll have to help fight Rubeus," Hayate-chan announced.

"I know your personality donor well enough to know you'll do that anyway," Makoto said with a grin.

Artemis changed the subject with a cry of "Luna!"

Meia and Ami both rushed to the seriously-injured Mau who had just arrived. "Healing!"

As they tended to Luna's wounds, Hayate-chan turned to Ichiro and Sakura. "We need a couple of eyes in the sky."

"We're on it," Sakura announced as Ichiro nodded.

As they flew up and out in a double-spiral pattern, I turned to Luna. "Who attacked you?"

"Petz and Calaveras," she replied weakly.

«Canon situation confirmed,» I sent to the airborne Devices. «Look for a construction site.»

«I just spotted Small Lady running into one, sir.»

Hayate-chan replied before I could. «Guide us in, Ichiro. Everybody, transform!»

If this was canon, I'd get to see a half-minute of transformation sequences. Instead, we were ready to go as quick as I could say "Mirage Hide".

"Meia, stay with Ryou, Artemis, and Luna," Mercury said. So much for a two-to-one fight, but Luna needed the medical attention... and, if we lost, the bodyguard. We roof-hopped over to the site. Okay, I faked it with some work – a forcefield pole-vault and a run-up to get some altitude and an aerodynamic forcefield shell to keep me up at the stereotypical parkour height. It was so uncomfortable that I resolved never to travel in such a rough way again if I could help it. Honestly, I was becoming spoiled with the ability to fly any time Ichiro was available.

Rubeus was explaining to Sailor Moon why he thought that Crystal Tokyo had to be destroyed.

Mercury got his attention. "Shiny Aqua Illusion!"

Once Rubeus' attention was on her, I airdropped Shario-chan – with a forcefield [paraglider](#) – to Small Lady, then landed with the others in a ring around the bad guy.

"You can't win, Rubeus!" I said. "If you kill us now, you'll create a temporal paradox and you'll never be born!"

"As if we care, as long as we get vengeance for our ancestors!"

"Everyone," Moon asked, "why's he smiling?"

It was pretty obvious that we wouldn't get to contain and conquer. Instead, I took a page from Wendi's book and started the trash-talking. "He thinks his girlfriends have us surrounded. He's wrong, of course."

"They're not my girlfriends! But they have surrounded you!"

"Dark Fire!" Kooan yelled.

"Dark Water!" Berthier shouted.

"Dark Thunder!" Petz cried.

"Dark Beaut!" Calaveras yelled.

"Round Shield!" said Sakura and Ichiro.

"Panzerschild!" said Hayate-chan.

I yawned theatrically and finished the defensive box with a forcefield. When all of the attacks simply bounced off our defences, I announced, "As I was saying before being so rudely interrupted, we're not trapped by them, they're lined up for us."

"Who are the shorties?" Kooan asked.

"Fighters from another dimension!" Sakura shouted. "We have no names to give to the likes of you!"

"What? This is your fault, Petz! You sent them to another dimension and they came back with allies!"

"Shove it, Calaveras! I was acting under Rubeus's direct orders!"

"Where *is* Rubeus, by the way?" I said as I surrounded Sailor Moon with a forcefield bubble, just before he tried to attack her. We both knew that if he killed her, this reality will be destroyed. Unfortunately, that's what he and Wiseman want. "Oh, there he is. Meh. He can wait."

"I'll teach you to insult me that way!"

"No need; I already know how." I spared a quick look away from Rubeus to see that Jupiter and Sakura were double-teaming Petz. Thanks to Donguri-no-ken and Sakura's blade against an unarmed spell-caster, it looked like Petz was at cut number eight of the death of a thousand cuts.

Rubeus took advantage of my apparent distraction to rush Moon... only to be stopped by a thrown rose. About time Tuxedo Kamen showed up.

"Now that everybody's here, we can stop playing and start fighting for real. Who needs a dance partner?" I asked.

"Sailor Moon and Tuxedo Kamen have Rubeus."

"We're good!" my dearest said while Sakura stabbed Petz's arm... and twisted the blade.

"So are we. [Claíomh Solais](#)!" said Hayate-chan from her perch on Mars' shoulder. Five beams of light shot from Hayate-chan's hand and hit Kooan.

"No issues here. Frigid Dagger!" Mercury cast from two meters above Berthier. Show-off.

"I'm equally matched," announced Venus.

«No fair fights, Venus! You lose half of those.» I manifested two short staffs, Ichiro drew both his swords, and we rushed into the whip-against-whip fight between Venus and Calaveras. "Let's see how good I've gotten with these."

"Sir, I can't help but notice we're each fighting our counterparts on the opposing team."

"Normally, I'd agree by quoting Professor Farnsworth and saying perfectly symmetrical violence never solved anything," I replied while hitting Calaveras' arm with a staff. "But we're not perfectly symmetrical, we're two-on-one, on average."

Rubeus must have heard my comment. "Break off and retreat!" And he teleported out, followed by each of the Ayakashi Sisters.

We all came back to Earth – literally, in Mercury's case – and let the [adrenaline rush](#) ease off. "If you're going to spend all your time in the air, we're going to have to add wings to your boots, Mercury." She smiled, and I turned toward Small Lady and Shario-chan. "It's safe to come out now."

She did so, somewhat nervously. "Who are you?"

"I already told you," I said as I let the Mirage Hide drop.

"Robu-niisan! You *really* looked like an oni!"

"It's a magic spell. I can teach it to you after you learn enough math to be able to cast it, but that probably won't be for a while." Small Lady smiled at that, while Sailor Moon looked dismayed. Probably because I mentioned the dreaded word "math".

Tuxedo Kamen looked at me with some concern. "Should you have let her know who you are?"

Without hesitation, I replied, "Yes. I trust her."

Small Lady grinned. "That's the second time you've told somebody that." Then she suddenly looked worried. "Oh! Luna's been hurt!"

"We know," Mercury said as she transformed back to Ami and knelt to be closer to Small Lady's height. "Meia and Artemis are with her."

Chibiusa relaxed. "Oh, okay."

"How about we go and join up with them?" I suggested, ignoring Tuxboy trying to have a quiet word with Ami.

Small Lady smiled. "Yeah!"

So we did. A quarter-hour after everybody else, Ami, Bunny-chan, and Chiba-san joined us. Him not ignoring Usagi-san – or the rest of us – any more was a good sign. All Ami ever told me after the fact was that she did a better job playing "good cop" than Ichiro did.

\* \* \*

While Chiba-san not ignoring Bunny-chan was a good sign, their relationship wasn't quite back the way it was before they started getting those visions, as we discovered when he gave Motoki-san's younger sister a ride on August 23 and Bunny-chan got jealous. What a way to spend a Sunday.

My dearest got a bit jealous, too, when she noticed that I noticed Unazuki-san. "Do you think she's attractive?"

"She reminds me of my fiancée, with that hairdo," I replied, "but the way she carries herself it's obvious that she's no fighter. I couldn't see myself dating her."

She smiled at that. "Okay. You're forgiven for looking at another girl when you're with me. This time."

So she and I went out on a double-date with Ami and Ryou the next day... which meant that we missed the droid attack that targeted Small Lady and Bunny-chan. But our services weren't required; unlike in canon, Chiba-san raced to Bunny-chan's side as soon as she was attacked, and was able to break the spell almost immediately.

It was a good thing that they were back together, because events deviated from canon almost immediately after that. Well, they deviated from anime canon – they would have been completely in place in the manga.

They only waited a day to start launching their final attacks. They knew that a massed attack, five against five, wouldn't work, since they now knew that there were more than five of us. So they tried what I would have called dishonourable tactics before I was trained by the TSAB.

And they knew that the easiest way to find Sailor Mars was to visit the Hikawa Shrine; that had worked twice already.

But the Ayakashi Sisters' inability to work as a team without Rubeus' direct supervision was their downfall. They sent Kooan in with no backup.

We were in the middle of a homework session – Ami, Ryou, Makoto and I were refreshing ourselves on where we should be in the curriculum, Rei-san was finishing her homework after the Obon festival, Minako-san had a bit more to do than Rei-san, and Bunny-chan hadn't even started hers yet.

So I lent her my laptop from Lyrical Tokyo, turned on the microphone and LibreOffice Writer, and told her to dictate her essay to the computer.

"Am I supposed to just tell the computer what to do? Hey, what I'm saying is appearing on the screen! That's cool! Can I keep this for later?"

"No," I told her. My reply also appeared on the screen. "This is an emergency situation; you need to finish your homework quickly."

"Warning!" Kasandara announced. "Kooan approaching in seven of eight futures!"

As I turned the computer's microphone off, I added, "It's turned into a different emergency. If this goes according to canon, she's going to try to sell the lady of the house some cosmetics, Rei-san will talk with her until she notices Small Lady, who she'll try to kill, and when she can't do that on her own Rubeus will send her a Space-Time Bomb that's powerful enough to do the job at the cost of Kooan's life. That will convince her to change sides, and the first thing she'll ask for is that Moon heal her of the dark energy in her body."

"There's only one problem with that," Rei-san said. "Chibiusa isn't here."

"Mamo-chan is looking after her while I'm doing homework," Bunny-chan added.

"Then I have no idea what's about to happen," I replied just before there was a knock at the door.

"Coming!" Rei-san got up to answer the knock.

"If you go alone, we'll all regret it," Ryou said.

"It would look too suspicious if I take anyone with me," Rei-san replied as she left the room.

Ryou and I sighed. "I'm regretting it already," he said.

Then we heard Rei-san say from the door, "May I help AAAHH!", followed by sounds of a brief struggle.

Then Kooan announced, "Show yourself so I can kill you, Sailor Mars! Or I'll kill my hostage instead!"

"Ryou-san," Usagi-san asked with her Princess Serenity voice, "What is the best course of action here? I want to save everybody."

He shook his head as Kasandara replied, "Impossible. Sorry."

"Then we save our own," Ami announced in her Sailor Mercury voice.

Ryou nodded. "Give Minako-san the Disguise Pen."

Usagi-san fumbled for it as Minako-san hunted for her compact and I started imagining a new pattern for Mirage Hide. But Bunny-chan was ready first. She passed it over.

"Disguise Pen! Turn me into Sailor Mars!"

There was a gentle buzzing and no light show; apparently, one Senshi becoming another Senshi wasn't allowed.

"Disguise Pen! Sudo turn me into Sailor Mars!"

This time it worked. Thank you, Randall Munroe.

"Mars" jumped over the [engawa](#) and into the trees behind the house where Small Lady, Makoto, and I had hidden from Kooan the first time she came to the shrine. A long moment later, we heard her say, "Summoned to fight evil, I am the Pretty Guardian who fights for Love and Prettiness. I am Sailor Mars! In the Name of Mars, I'll spank you!"

We all facepalmed. I hoped that Kooan didn't notice Minako-san had gotten Mars' battlefield introduction speech wrong, and that she wouldn't earn divine punishment for lying about her identity while on the grounds of a shrine.

"Now, move that Stick away from that innocent girl's throat! I'm here as you asked!"

Oh, crap. Kooan brought the Black Moon Stick. "Ichiro, go quietly and see what's happening out there."

"Yes, sir." And he was off, flying barely a centimetre from the ceiling. A moment later, he sent to us, «Kooan has just released Rei, sir. She's aiming at the ersatz Sailor Mars now.»

«Protect her!» Ryou, of all people, gave that order.

We heard "Round Shield!" just before there was the telltale crack of an energy discharge.

At this point, everybody but me had transformed. "Mirage Hide!" Then Meia started directing traffic in order to avoid a pileup at the door.

By the time we were all outside and could see what was going on, Kooan had a large box out. "Nobody come any closer! I'll use this if I have to!"

"Is that a Space-Time Bomb?" Moon asked.

"Yes, and I'm impressed that you know enough to ask! Now, stay put, drop that shield, and let me kill Mars!" She started walking away from the building and toward Minako-Mars.

When Kooan was halfway to her chosen victim, a wave of heat came from the direction of the shrine's offering box. "Burning Mandala!" As the attack hit Kooan, we turned to see the real Sailor Mars. "The true Sailor Mars is here! I will chastise you!"

Minako took the opportunity to transform to Sailor Venus.

Kooan, while singed, was not incapacitated. "You lied to me! I'll kill all of you for that!" She reached for the control on the Space-Time Bomb.

And that's when I heard that gruff voice – from the expressions on everyone else's faces, including Kooan's, they heard it as well. «Oni, I call in my debt. Protect the shrine and its residents, at all costs.»

Interpreting "protect" to include "from emotional trauma", that meant that I couldn't let Sailor Mars do what had to be done. Ichiro must have reached the same conclusion; he flew over from the doorway and Unisoned with me. We surrounded Kooan and the Space-Time Bomb with as many forcefields as I could on a moment's notice, and kept piling them on.

Which meant that there was now no way for anyone to reach Kooan and take the bomb away from her. Not that such an act would save anybody's life.

"Can you turn that off?" I asked from immediately beside her.

"No! The reaction can't be stopped! We're all going to die and no magic known to the Silver Millennium can stop it! Rubeus wins!"

Alas, those were Kooan's last words.

We invoked a stupid genre convention and drew on our knowledge of two schools of magic that were unknown to the Silver Millennium: Belkan and Midchildan. Mercury and Meia cast a spell that I'd only ever seen Yuuno-san and Shamal use in *A's*; I have no idea when they learned it. "[Ultra-long-distance Transportation!](#)" Unfortunately, I was too close to Kooan to avoid being caught in the transport tube – it looked like Ami took "at all costs" seriously. As I'd expect her to, after our training.

It took less than five seconds to traverse the transport; Kooan and I were out of the tube and just past the [Kármán line](#) when the bomb went off. I opened the top of the forcefields just in time to let the blast vent into space instead of overwhelming my forcefields and me... which meant that Kooan's bomb served as a [reaction pulse](#) to start my trip back to Earth.

A moment later, as Ichiro flew us away from Kooan's body, I thought to him, «Why am I not dead from massive sudden thrust and lack of air? I'm not complaining, mind you, just curious.»

«I am currently operating in Life Support Mode, Rob.»

«I didn't know you could do that.»

«All Unison Devices, even Shario-chan, and many Intelligent Devices can do this. Don't you remember how [the Eltrian Formula Incident ended?](#)»

Oh, yes; Hayate can breathe in space, and so can Fate and Nanoha, as long as they have their Devices. At this point, the forcefields that surrounded Kooan's body dissolved because they went past my power's maximum range. «I remember now. How long until we get back to Tokyo?»

«About six minutes if you don't mind leaving an impact crater, assuming we don't burn up in re-entry; thrust from the bomb's explosion pushed us and there isn't going to be enough atmosphere to slow us to terminal velocity before we hit. I'd prefer to go more slowly than that, sir.»

«That's a level of understatement worthy of Admiral Graham. I would prefer to live, too.» We started flying upward to reduce our speed; our top speed was lower than usual because Ichiro was in Life Support Mode. Eventually we came to a stop as Kooan's remains were cremated in the atmosphere, whatever ashes she might have left behind being scattered across the Pacific Ocean. «May your soul find the peace that Wiseman stole from you in this lifetime, Kooan.» It wasn't much of a blessing, since I wasn't a priest, but at least it was something... and, while I didn't know it at the time, it was something that I was going to have to repeat.

A half-hour later, we finally reached the Hikawa Shrine, and I was hugged to within an inch of my life by Makoto, who had tears in her eyes. "Don't *ever* do that again! I thought I'd lost you, until Sakura and Meia explained Life Support Mode to us."

"I thought I was dead, too."

"Ichiro, get out of my fiancé's body. Mina-chan, take Ichiro and Sakura home with you and don't wait up for us."

We went into downtown Roppongi, found a hotel, paid cash, and ... well, let's just say that we were both glad to be alive, if you know what I mean.

Nobody suggested taking the battle to Rubeus in orbit, even knowing about Life Support Mode. We'd all read the relevant WikiMoon pages by then; we had no choice but to let Small Lady take the actions that she would to free the Sailor Team. If we didn't, she wouldn't be mature enough to save her mother.

It isn't always the person who was learning who finds a learning experience to be painful. In this case, we had to accept the burden for her sake.

Ami decided that she wanted to spend some time somewhere quiet. Those of us who needed some place quiet to contemplate what had happened to Kooan – which turned out to be the entire team, save for Chiba-san – went along.

Ami wore her school uniform, one that fit that she had bought after returning from Midchilda; she mentioned that a proper uniform is always appropriate. Ryou wore the typical sararīman's outfit – black slacks and jacket, white shirt, and the silk tie the colour of Ami's eyes that we'd brought back for him from Gunma. My dearest and I decided to go with our matching "not a TSAB uniform" outfits, and not just because we could let the Unison Devices ride along in our pockets. Minako-san decided to wear her "My Friends Went To Another World And All I Got Was This Lousy T-shirt" t-shirt and a matching pair of pink slacks. Bunny-chan wore a blue-and-white top and a navy-blue skirt, and Rei-san – feeling underdressed, she admitted later – wore her pink overalls with a white top.

"This is a nice place," Bunny-chan mentioned while we walked down the chequerboard path to the Chess Tower, passing by statues of chess pieces.

"That it is," I agreed. Then I smiled and said, "There must be a lot of birds living in that tower."

Ami gave me an annoyed look. "Remind me to throw a pillow at you later."

"Why?" my dearest asked.

I replied in English, "Because there are no birds there. That's a rook, not a rookery."

An older gentleman with skin the colour of mine who was passing by chuckled at my comment, then addressed all of us in English. "Excuse me, but I couldn't help but overhear that wordplay, and notice that you are a tall gentleman wearing black and green. By any chance would you happen to be Chiba Mamoru?"

"Mamo-chan? No, no, no, him Donarudoson-san," Bunny-chan replied, latching onto the name she recognized and showing off a substantial fraction of her conversational English skill.

"As my dear friend says," I added, "my name is Rob Donaldson, not Chiba Mamoru. But we do know Chiba-san."

"What are the odds of casually meeting some of his friends in a city as large as Tokyo?" he wondered aloud. I wasn't about to mention the stupid genre convention about everybody knowing the protagonists; only Ami, Ryou, Makoto, our Devices, and I had seen actual proof that we were living in a story. "Please let him know that I was looking for him, to answer his questions about Boston that one of my employees mentioned. My card." He passed me his business card, casually in the American style, which I quickly looked at before putting it in my case.

"Thank you. I'll do that, Mr. Edwards," I replied. Then I presented to him a card of my own, as much in the proper Japanese style as I could, which he accepted and added to his own case. "I am Donaldson, self-employed. Should you need a photographer during your work here, please keep me in mind, although I am still in school so I might not be able to accommodate a tight schedule."

"I'll be sure to remember you, Mr. Donaldson. Good day, ladies and gentlemen." He tipped his hat and was on his way.



While Ami translated our exchange for Bunny-chan's sake, Rei-san nodded in approval. "You didn't get it quite right, leaving the meishi exchange to the end of the meeting like that, but you did a better job than he did," she said in Japanese.

"Thank you, Rei-san. I'm lucky I even own a card case, let alone have it with me." Officially, I was still too young to work for wages... unless they'd believe that I had spent two years on Midchilda on August 11.

"He's a nice old man," Bunny-chan said once Ami finished telling her what we'd said. "Will we see him again?"

"Eighty-five times of eighty-seven, yes," Kasandara replied from Ryou's pocket.

"So you'd better work on your spoken English skills," Rei-san added.

"Let's go inside now," Minako-san said, sounding somewhat bored.

So we did... to discover that the front-desk clerk was staring off into space, a dazed expression on her face. "Oh, dear. Ami, Ryou...?"

Ami and Meia gave her a quick look. "She's been magically hypnotized," Ami finally said. "We can break the spell, but she should come out of it naturally in a few minutes even if we don't."

"Six times out of seven, there's an Ayakashi Sister in the building," added Ryou.

"Split up and look for her?" Minako-san asked.

I absolutely refused. "Never split the party!"

So we headed off in a group, following Ryou's directions, until we found her in the main game room – the one with the big chess board on the wall.

Seeing her in person for the first time outside of that battle royale, I was amazed at how much Berthier looked like Elsa from *Frozen*. Or vice versa, considering which story was older. I suppose there are only so many character designs to go around. She was doing something to the table.

"Hold it right there!" Oh, Bunny-chan, why did you give away the element of surprise? "This is a place to match intellects! Whatever you're doing, it can't be good! [Naoko Takemoto](#) might forgive you, but I will not!"

Berthier looked up from what she was doing. "And just who are – You!" she finished when she saw Makoto.

Bunny-chan realized that she hadn't transformed yet. "Er, I'll be right back."

"Don't let her leave!" Ryou said.

Not sure whether he meant Usagi-san or Berthier, I [grabbed Bunny-chan's upper arm](#) while Ami transformed to Sailor Mercury and cast "Hyperspatial Sphere Generate!"

The lighting everywhere took on a reddish tinge.

"Why did you transform in front of an enemy?" Rei-san asked.

"It didn't matter," Ryou answered before Mercury could. "Petz already knew who Robu, Makoto, and I are, and Ami's the only woman here with short hair."

"So logically she had to be Sailor Mercury," Berthier finished. "So your name is Ami." A moment later, she asked, "Mizuno Ami? Last year's All Japan junior champion? Everybody expected Watanabe Akira to win two years in a row."

"I have the honour of holding that title at the moment, yes."

"That's perfect! Come up here and play a master level game with me. And when black wins, my spell will be complete!"

"And if she refuses?" Rei-san asked.

Berthier smiled. "Well, then I'll just kill all of you, starting with the precog. Just like I will if she doesn't play her best. Don't bother trying to leave. You'll find that the doors are frozen shut."

Ami walked toward the table. "Everyone, please sit down and be quiet."

Berthier offered the choice of pawns in her hands. Ami ended up choosing white. "That's good, isn't it?" Bunny-chan asked.

"I'd say so, considering Berthier wants black to win," my dearest replied. "Ami's not going to throw the game."

Ami turned to look at us, a cross look on her face. "I said, 'quiet!'"

Scary Ami is scary. We shut up.

Ami offered [the Queen's Gambit](#), Berthier replied with [the Hübner variation of the Nimzo-Indian Defence](#). By the end of the tenth move, an hour later, I had a bad feeling about the game.

«Why is this taking so long?» Bunny-chan complained.

«Long? This is [bullet chess](#), the fastest variant of competition play,» I replied. «A classical competition game can last for two days, with over an hour between each half of a move. I'm no good at chess because I don't have the patience to play anything slower than bullet. But Ami does.»

By the fifteenth move, my bad feeling had turned into a near-certainty. Consulting Ami's brainprint took me the time it took Ami and Berthier to make one more move. «That's the fifth game of the [1972 World Championship](#),» I sent. «A grandmaster level game, and they're playing it at bullet chess speed! 🤪» Just like in canon.

Ryou, I hope you can keep pace with Ami for the rest of your life. This game proves that I'm not in her league.

«If they continue to play that game,» Bunny-chan asked, «how long does it take Ami to win?»

«If they continue to play that game, Ami will lose in twelve moves. Berthier is playing at Bobby Fischer's skill level.»

But Ami was playing at slightly better than Boris Spassky's skill level, and she didn't make Spassky's blunder in move 27. Of course, "win or die" gave her a pretty good incentive to avoid blunders.

«And that's just changed the game,» I sent to everybody except Berthier and Ami. «I have no idea what's going to happen next.»

Ami not making a blunder rattled Berthier. She started making mistakes, and Ami started taking more and more time to study the board before making her own moves. Six moves later, Berthier stood up and shouted, "How are you so good at this game? I can't fail this mission! I *have to* succeed!"

Ami didn't take her eyes off the board. "It's your turn."

Berthier didn't bother looking at the board; she just moved some piece in some way.

Ami immediately moved her queen. "Checkmate."

Whatever Berthier's spell had been that needed a master-level match to be played with black winning, it was undone by Ami's win. We all felt the power dissipate.

"No! I can't lose!! I can't go back without taking over this crystal point!" So that's what she was trying to do.

"Rubeus won't let me! Dark Water!"

Rather unsporting to attack your opponent when you lose, Berthier.

"Mercury Aqua Illusion!" And you're showing off an attack that you aren't supposed to know yet, Mercury. But it completely cancelled the Dark Water.

"No. I can't lose. I'd rather die." Berthier started concentrating.

"Master!" Meia shouted. "Spell Power A+!"

Oh, crap. Ami's only Rank A.

"Frigid Sword!" And Ami sliced Berthier's braided ponytail off, then moved the tip of the sword to her neck. "Stop your spell! Now!"

That's the first time I'd ever seen her use that spell in actual combat. It certainly impressed me.

And it definitely impressed Berthier, who dropped to her knees. "You win. I admit it. I'm so completely outclassed that there's no way for me to catch up. And there is only one way for me to atone for my failure. But I can take some of your friends with me as an honour guard!"

«I watched this episode!» Makoto sent. «Any minute now, Kooan will show up and convince Berthier to keep living. Any second now. Where is she?»

«My dearest... Kooan is dead.»

"Mercury, we can't let her kill us! Can't you talk her out of killing herself?" Bunny-chan pleaded.

"No, Moon. I plan to be an ethical doctor when I graduate. I will not follow the example of [Unit 731](#) and force someone to remain alive if they want to die."

That wasn't going to be made public in Japan for another five years; how did... oh, right, Ami must have seen a reference in the textbooks that she and Ryou brought back from Hayate's reality.

And I'd seen confirmation of an issue where my belief "where there's life, there's hope" didn't match the belief of my dearer friend, but this wasn't the time or place to discuss that.

"But she's going to kill us, too!"

"No," Mercury stated with conviction. "She won't. Frierenfesseln!" And Berthier was held in the same ice-water restraint that Wendi had been, a couple of years ago. "Gefrierende Kugel!" *That* spell was new to me. The restraint around Berthier moved away from her body, letting her move, but closed into a complete sphere around her. "Shabon Spray Freezing!" And the sphere froze solid. "It is now your choice, Berthier. Use Dark Water to cut your way free and live, or do as you threatened and use Dark Water Full Power on yourself." Ami stood up and walked away, letting her transformation drop. As the rest of us got up and followed her, I heard from behind us, "Dark Water Full Power!" followed by the sound of ice shattering against the stone floor.

I made the mistake of looking back, and discovered from the blood all over the floor that this was our final meeting with the platinum-blond Ayakashi Sister. A moment later, once I trusted myself to not throw up, I said, "May your soul find the peace that Wiseman stole from you in this lifetime, Berthier."

At least there was enough left of her body for a proper funeral, even if it had to be closed-casket. But then Ami let her Hyperspatial Sphere Generate end, and even that much dignity was denied Berthier as her body disappeared and the lighting returned to normal.

Bunny-chan still hadn't finished her homework, so we braved the light showers and got together again at the Hikawa Shrine on Thursday. Chiba-san was looking after Small Lady, so she wasn't along – Bunny-chan called it "keeping the brat out of our hair" – but Naru-san, Ichigo-san, Ryou, and the Devices joined us for the last push.

Ami made it quite clear: "You have to finish this before Monday, Usagi-san."

"Can I use Robu-san's computer?"

"Only as a typewriter for your essays, not to do your math homework," I insisted.

"That's better than nothing!" So I set up the voice dictation system and let Bunny-chan tell the computer an overview of the [nichiro sensō](#) in her own words. to the surprise of Naru-san and Ichigo-san who hadn't seen my computer previously. The essay was slanted toward the Japanese viewpoint, of course, but that's what was in her textbooks.

"Darling, I can't get my computer to take dictation," my dearest whispered to me while Bunny-chan was doing that and Ami was helping Rei-san, Minako-san, Naru-san, and Ichigo-san with their own history essays.

"Oh, I upgraded Rob's computer," Shario-chan whispered before I could reply. "I can do that for yours later."

Once Bunny-chan was finished, Ami looked over the essay and suggested a few changes. She didn't tell her the facts; she just let Bunny-chan know where to find them in her history textbook.

As we took what we intended to be a quick break between history homework and math homework, there was a commotion outside. "Now what?" Rei-san asked.

As if in reply, Yuuichirou-san knocked on the door. "Rei-san, a green-haired woman wearing a scandalously-inappropriate outfit for the shrine grounds insists on seeing a Sailor Senshi. Your grandfather is lecturing her about [proper decorum](#). Should I tell her to go away?"

Makoto sighed. "Petz. I may as well go; she already knows that I'm a Sailor Senshi." As she moved to stand up, Usagi-san put a hand on her shoulder.

"Promise me that this won't be like yesterday, when Ami wouldn't stop Berthier from committing suicide."

My dearest replied, "I don't want to kill her or let her die. But that depends on her actions. If she refuses to talk and attacks first, all bets are off."

Usagi-san thought for a quick moment, then removed her hand from my dearest's shoulder. "Okay. But I'm coming along to watch."

"So am I," Ichigo-san announced enthusiastically. "I've never seen Sailor Jupiter fight before."

"I'm hoping it won't come to that," Bunny-chan said.

So was I, but probably not for the same reason.

We all headed out, Makoto first, to discover the rain had intensified. We heard Hino-jii-san telling Petz, "Your naked shoulders show disrespect for the kami. Do not be surprised if you suffer divine punishment."

Makoto stepped forward and cleared her throat. "You wanted to see me."

Petz looked up from talking with Hino-jii-san. "I don't *want* to see you, but vengeance declares that I must. Oh, get out of my way, kannushi, my business is with her."

"What business?" Hino-jii-san asked. "And why with Kino-chan?"

"I said it already, old man. Vengeance. She and the other Sailor Senshi killed Kooan and Berthier. Blood demands blood!"

"They killed themselves," Makoto pointed out.

"More Crystal Millennium lies! Everybody liked Berthier! Why would she kill herself? You killed her, just like Neo-Queen Serenity killed my ancestors by exiling them to Nemesis!"

"What!?" Bunny-chan gasped.

"Wiseman's propaganda," I replied. "You can't trust anything he says." I turned to Petz. "Your ancestors *chose* to remain mortal!" At least, I think that's what happened.

"Another lie!"

"Enough!!" Hino-jii-san shouted, drawing all eyes to him. "State your case calmly, or leave, or proceed to what the Westerners call trial by combat."

"I came here for combat. Not with you, old man. Kooan told me about how you defeated everybody at Protect Esthe at once without working up a sweat. I will fight *her*." Petz pointed at Makoto. "To the death."

Then Makoto showed me that, much like Hayate's spells, Ami's streamlined transformation is more effective if you speak the aria. "Jupiter Star Power, Make-Up!"

It was still a near-instant transformation, but she ended it wearing her *SuperS* uniform – yellow star on her choker, a heart as her bow clasp, thinner shoulder pads, a larger bow at her back, and only one stripe on her collar – instead of her usual uniform. And there was a belt attached to the bow at her back, with Donguri-no-ken and its sheath attached to the belt.

And there was a roll of thunder in the sky. Stupid genre conventions.



"Kannushi-san, please join us over here," Ichiro asked. "It is not safe to stand between an Ayakashi Sister and a Sailor Senshi who are ready to do battle."

As he did so, Petz looked at Jupiter's belt. "The only reason I couldn't win last time was because I wasn't ready for you to use a sword. I'm wearing armour this time." But still leaving her shoulders and arms bare – not much good, that armour. "Sailor Jupiter, I *will* kill you today, or die trying."

"I have no plans to die today," Jupiter told Petz quietly as she unbelted Donguri-no-ken and passed it to me. "And I don't want to have to kill you."

"Then die, despite your plans! Only one of us is walking away from this. I can't return to Rubeus without a Sailor Senshi's severed head!"

And thus did the truth finally come out.

"Do you need any help?" Sakura asked in Midchildan English.

"Stay out of this," Jupiter replied in the same language. Turning her attention back to Petz, she said in Japanese, "I would prefer that we fight to submission, but if you must insist upon attempting to draw blood, I will respond as necessary. Your challenge is accepted."

I knew what that meant from our training; Vita always said that if you must duel, end it quickly and decisively.

After Sakura grabbed hold of me and I flash-moved to the others, I took steps to minimize any collateral damage... and to keep everyone else uninvolved. This was not going to end well, no matter who won; but if it went the way I expected, it was better that Makoto and I be the only two to have Petz's blood on our hands. And if it didn't go the way I expected, then I wanted to be the one to take vengeance. Yes, I know the drawback to vengeance; it never ends. «Triple forcefield up around the house and everyone else, including me.» I sent to my fiancée.

She knew me well enough to know why. «Thank you, darling.»

Petz tried to take advantage of Jupiter's momentary distraction. "Dark Thunder!"

Jupiter dodged Petz's attack and without stopping quick-cast "FlowerHurricane!"

The attack looked as pretty as Touhi-chan's "Petal Swarm" did, but despite being much more deadly, Jupiter's death of a thousand razor-sharp cuts didn't slow Petz down, presumably because of her armour. However, even at full speed Petz wasn't fast enough. "Dark Thu-"

"CoconutCyclone!"

*That* attack slowed Petz down. But she tried a counter-attack anyway. Unfortunately for her, it was the only attack that she knew. "Dark... Thunder!"

"Please, both of you, stop!" Moon cried as she pounded on my forcefield. I didn't even realize she had transformed. "Oni, please let me intervene!"

"ElectricShield!" Jupiter caught Petz's attack... "OakEvolution!" ...and repaid it with interest. Then she said, with some kindness, "It isn't too late for you to surrender."

Petz took the attack, barely, but rejected the offer of mercy. "N... never. D... d... dark..."

I've never seen my dearest look sadder than she did at that moment. "So be it. No more going easy on you."

"Going easy?" Moon, Rei-san, Naru-san, and Ichigo-san whispered in disbelief.

For the first time in actual combat since we were trained by the TSAB, Jupiter cast what Hayate would call an aria. "Guardian Jupiter, bring down a storm! Jupiter Thunderbolt!"

It appeared that only Hino-jiisan, the Devices, Ami, Ryou, and I knew enough to turn our backs and shield our eyes. I also darkened my forcefields for a moment in the hope that it would help the others. It didn't.

"Oh gods..." Moon whispered in terror once Meia had [healed her eyes](#) and she could see again.

Petz's body, still smouldering from the lightning strike, was laying on the ground beside Jupiter, who was on her knees and crying softly. "What did Oni say... oh, yes. May your soul find the peace that Wiseman stole from you in this lifetime, Petz."

Ichigo-san, completely pale, quietly announced, "I never want to see Sailor Jupiter fight again."

"What *happened* to you while you were gone?"

I wasn't going to lie to Moon – I had promised myself that I wouldn't – but I didn't need to be Ryou or Kasandara to know telling her the truth then and there would destroy our friendship. "Too many things to go over right now," I replied while dropping my forcefields. Then I looked up and said loudly, "Rubeus, Calaveras, in case you're watching, *this* is what it means to challenge Sailor Jupiter to a fight to the death."

"Everybody, back inside," Ryou said. Then he turned to Hino-jiisan. "Except for you, sir. Nine times out of ten, emergency crews are about to be dispatched because of reports of that lightning strike."

"The bolt from the heavens that killed that poor young woman," Hino-jiisan replied. "It was a terrible tragedy. But she insisted on wearing metal when she visited a hilltop during a storm, despite my warning her about divine punishment."

"Grandfather!"

He turned to Rei-san. "Did I speak any words that were not truth?"

"No... but you sound like my father."

"Would you rather Kino-san be arrested for murder?" I noticed that he didn't use "-chan" this time. "She had the permission of the shrine to fight that duel, and her opponent was the one who declared it a duel to the death. In the eyes of the kami, she committed suicide."

Rei-san thought for a moment. "It was a terrible tragedy. She should have taken your advice. And I could not get to her before she died."

We heard sirens in the distance. "Inside, now!" Ryou insisted.

Once we were back inside the house, Usagi-san said, "I don't think I can do math homework right now."

"That's fine," Rei-san replied. "Because you need to put on your miko robes and help me purify the grounds."

Bunny-chan didn't put up a fuss. She must have been seriously shaken by Petz's death.

Once the firefighters ensured that the grass wasn't on fire, the ambulance had removed Petz's body, the police had taken photographs of the charred ground and were satisfied that what had happened was a terrible tragedy, and Rei-san and Usagi-san had purified the grounds where the battle took place, we were finally allowed out.

Except for those of us who had made the trip from Midchilda. Usagi-san insisted. Using her Princess Serenity voice.

"This is the third time in as many days that you have condoned the death of one of our foes. Worse, Sailor Jupiter actually killed Petz today. I want an explanation."

"We're soldiers, not heroes, ma'am," Ichiro replied before I could. "And I was under the impression that the Bishoujo Senshi were also soldiers. Perhaps there's a fault in my translation spell."

Usagi-san looked uncomfortable. "Well, we're *called* Senshi, but as for actually killing somebody... I don't know whether I could kill in cold blood."

"Bullshit," Sakura said before anyone else could say anything. "You already know how to kill in cold blood. Or are Beryl and Metaria still alive?"

"That was in combat!"

"So was what happened today! Except today took Makoto by surprise. You went to the Dark Kingdom *knowing* that you were going to fight. Their blood is on your hands, Tsukino-san."

Usagi-san sighed deeply, then muttered, "I'm beginning to not like you, Sakura-san."

"If me telling you the truth means you don't like me, then whatever friendship we might have is built on a lie. Is that what you want?"

"Sakura!" My dearest was mortified. "You've said too much."

"Fine. I'll stop here, for Makoto's sake."

As Sakura left, pursued by my fiancée, Ichiro bowed to Usagi-san. "I apologize for my sister's lack of tact, ma'am. She had no right to address you that way. After all, you are our commanding officer."

"No, Ichiro-san, I think that maybe I needed to hear that from someone." Bunny-chan looked at me. "I'm never going to be a normal girl again, am I, Robu-san?"

I shook my head. "I'm sorry. If it's any consolation, none of us are normal people any more, either."

"Except Ichigo-san," she added.

"Except Ichigo-san," I agreed.

After a moment, Usagi-san said, "I have some thinking to do."

We took that as our cue to leave.

Usagi-chan, Rei-san, Naru-san, and Ichigo-san didn't invite us to join them for homework at Usagi-san's house the next day. Minako-san was only there for long enough to drop off the printout of Bunny-chan's essay; she told me when she returned that as long as she was living under Makoto's roof, she was honour-bound to support her host, and she had told the others that. It seemed that they accepted her explanation.

Makoto spent the day with Hino-jii-san at the Hikawa Shrine in order to ask the kami for forgiveness for being so unskilled as to have no choice but to kill her opponent in battle.

And Ami and Ryou were enjoying the last Friday of summer vacation together, on a date.

Which meant it was Ichiro, Shario-chan, Minako-san, and me who played host to Saeko-basan – who wore the [silk wrap](#) that Makoto and I brought back from Gunma for her. She was taking her self-imposed parental duties seriously, and had come to check that we were doing well on our own.

We also played host to two surprise guests.

The first surprise guest was Minako-san's father, who arrived just before we had lunch. [Toad in the hole](#) and a green salad, and it was Saeko-basan's introduction to the dish.

"Have I come at a bad time?" he asked.

"We were just about to have lunch, father." Minako-san thought for a brief moment, then added, "Would you care to join us?"

"Thank you," he replied. It was obvious that he wasn't thanking his daughter for just the food.

After Minako-san had served everyone since Makoto wasn't present, her father said, "I'm sorry, my dearest Mina. You know I don't have the strength to stand up to your mother."

"Yes, I know," she replied flatly. "You can't even bring yourself to say her name any more."

"But I did bring the family seal," he replied. "She'd be livid if she found out I was willing to make your change of address official, even though she demanded it. Do you have the school paperwork here?"

"We do, but that can wait until after lunch."

So it did.

But, after we finished eating and before we could tend to the paperwork, our second surprise guest arrived. And kicked the door down. "Kino! Prepare to die!"

"Hello, Calaveras," I said as I put up a forcefield to protect both my fiancée's apartment and our guests. "She isn't home right now."

"If she isn't here, then you can die instead!"

"Another Ayakashi Sister?" Minako-san asked. "I'm starting to think mother was right."

"She's the last one," I pointed out before turning to the invader. "So, what's your excuse for wanting to kill us? Orders? Vengeance? That time of the month?"

Every woman in the room glared at me for saying that last one. Yes, even Shario-chan. Note to self: Don't joke about menstruation, especially not to Sailor Senshi or the female mid-bosses.

"Because I damn well want to!"

"Minako-san, I'm maintaining a very complex forcefield so that Makoto doesn't get upset when she returns home. Could I trouble you...?"

"Of course," she replied while transforming to Sailor Venus. "You want death, Calaveras? *Die*. Crescent Beam!"

"Dark Beaut!"

Those aren't actually laser beams, considering they can be knocked off-course by a whip.

"Crescent Beam Shower!"

Calaveras didn't deflect all of those beams, but the ones that got through were weaker than a single Crescent Beam. And she dodged the rest by jumping out of their way. I couldn't help but think of celebrated jumping frogs.

"Just be a good girl and die, already."

"Not while my father's watching! Venus Lovely Chain!"

"Dark Beaut!"

And we were back to whip versus whip, just like during the battle royale.

Until Venus suddenly closed with Calaveras. "Crescent Beam Saber!"

Ouch. She can't hold a whip with that big a gash in her arm.

Venus stepped back. "Do you surrender?"

"Never!" Calaveras declared while picking up the whip in her off hand.

"Sailor Kick!"

Venus' aim was too good – and I have never asked her whether it was accidental or intentional. Calaveras went flying out the doorway and over the railing, hitting the Asahi vending machine on the ground just outside the building.

The sounds from the machine as it broke, and broke down, didn't include any from Calaveras.

"Oh, dear," Venus said as she transformed back to Minako-san. "I have to call the police."

As I dropped the forcefield, Minako-san's father firmly applied the family seal to the paperwork for her change of address, and handed it to me. "Please make sure she gets this," he said before fainting.

"How can we keep Minako-san from going to jail?" Saeko-basan asked.

For once, I was at a loss. But Minako-san wasn't. "You were here to visit your patient, Mizuno-sensei," she said as she hung up the phone.

"My patient?"

"You were the attending physician when I donated blood to Shinozaki-san," I said.

"So he's your patient," Minako-san said with a nod. "My father was here to finalize my change of address," she added while taking the paperwork from my hand and putting it on Makoto's kitchen counter, "and you're here as a witness to that, Rob-san." Gesturing outside, Minako-san continued, "She broke down the door and stormed in, the

three of you took cover, and by the time it was safe to come out, that woman was in the condition she's in now," she finished as we heard ambulance sirens.

By the time that the ambulance team had covered Calaveras' face, Aino-san was awake and a car from the Tokyo Metropolitan Police was parked at the scene, its lights flashing. The car's driver was taking photos of the crime scene while the other person from the car – who looked familiar for some reason – was speaking with us. "I'm Superintendent Sakurada Natsuna, from Metropolitan Police headquarters. Miss, please identify yourself for the record and explain what happened here," she said directly to Minako-san.

So she did, telling the truth and nothing but the truth... but not the whole truth. No mention that we knew Calaveras or that we'd found cover behind a forcefield or that magical powers were involved, just what could be believable if everybody involved was normal.

"You say that you live here, but your father who also lives in Minato was visiting. Do you have any evidence that you live here instead of with him?"

"The change of address form is on the kitchen counter," she said. "That's why he was here, to finalize the paperwork. Our next-door neighbour and his doctor were here as witnesses."

"Itō, get a photo of that form." The driver did so. "Is there anything that any of the rest of you have to add to Aino-san's statement?"

"No, Superintendent," Saeko-basan said.

"No, ma'am," I added.

"No," Aino-san echoed us.

"Itō, go call it in. Let headquarters know that my report will say it was a forced entry and the person who lives in the apartment fought back."

He left to do so. Minako-san waited for a moment, then she hugged the superintendent. And that was another reminder that I was in a close parallel to the canon story; Superintendent-General Sakurada and Minako-san weren't *that* close in *Codename: Sailor V*. "It's good to see you again, and I'm sorry I haven't been in touch for so long." Then she stepped back and said, "Ichiro, Shario-chan, would you come out now? I think Natsuna-san would like to meet you."

Superintendent Sakurada grinned for a moment, then looked stern. "So this is Sailor V business. I can't keep covering this up for you forever, young lady. I'm not that big a fan of you."

"It's Sailor Venus now, and I know. And thank you."

I couldn't help but ask, to satisfy my curiosity. "Superintendent, why do I think that I know you from somewhere?"

"Perhaps you've met one of my sisters," she replied while looking at our Midchildan friends with curiosity of her own.

Minako-san added, "Our English teacher is one of her sisters."

Ah, yes, I remembered seeing something about that in one of the supplementary sources. Or maybe it was fanon.

"I'd love to stay and get to know the rest of you better, but I have to get back to work before Itō comes back here to find me and sees your friends. You can fix that door now. Mina-chan, don't be a stranger. Good day, everyone."

As I picked up the door and placed it roughly where it belonged so I could check the hinges for damage, Ichiro said, "Shario-chan and I can fix that for you, sir."

"I'm a device meister, not a carpenter."

Before they could continue, I said, "Thank you, but we're going to have to replace the entire door frame. That's a job for somebody at my scale, not somebody at yours." Seeing a faint look of disappointment on both Devices' faces, I added, "But you can make a temporary patch so we can close the door."

"Who wrecked my favourite vending machine?" my fiancée asked as soon as she got home.

"Calaveras. Here's the police report, straight off your phone's fax," Minako-san replied. "Oh, and we need to repair our front door."

The next morning, I got a text from Ami just as I was about to start making breakfast. "Ryou says you need to get to Usagi's house right now."

Sometimes it's annoying to have a precog friend. I grabbed my shoes and headed next door. "No time for breakfast, Makoto, Minako-san. We're needed at Bunny-chan's place."

Transform, Unison, grab passenger, go invisible, fly, let passenger stand on her own, stop Unison, transform back, go visible. In short, what was becoming the usual way for us to get around. If my life is ever made into an anime, I expect that sequence will be stock footage.

This time, we went visible in front of Bunny-chan as she was muttering "...the most foul, cruel, and bad-tempered rodent you ever set eyes on!"

"Are you quoting Monty Python about yourself?" I asked.

"Gah!" After she got over her surprise, she added, "No, about that brat!"

I sighed deeply. "What are you fighting about this time?"

"She stole the Ginzuishou!"

Oh, crap.

Chiba-san, Ami, Meia, Kasandara, and Ryou showed up just then, the former by car and the other four out of a [Transporter](#) spell. I shouldn't have been surprised, since she can cast Ultra-long-distance Transportation and Transporter is a shorter-range version of the same spell, but I was. And so was Chiba-san.

"How did you do that?"

Ami unknowingly echoed my comment from earlier: "That's what you get for missing the discussion session. Meia and I learned some useful spells while we were away, and we've developed a few more on our own."

"Meia?"

"That would be me. I have the honour to be Ami's Unison partner."

Chiba-san looked puzzled. "All right, I admit it. I should have attended that meeting. Do we have time for somebody to explain what Unison is?"

"We have until Rei-san arrives to go over things," Ryou answered.

"Do I know you, sir?"

"We met during the Missing Time. My name is Urawa Ryou, at least for the next six years, after which I will be lucky enough to become Mizuno Ryou. I'm a precog."

"You're a lucky man, Urawa-san. Not many people could get Ami-chan's attention, let alone her love. I'm Chiba Mamoru."

"Also called Endymion in some circles, and the man who gained Usagi-san's love. I'm pleased to meet you."

"Folks," I said while Meia hovered around Chiba-san, "Rei-san is on her way. Teal deer, Unison Devices are intelligent beings with synthetic minds. They can cast spells on their own – well, most of them can – and they can physically merge with their chosen partners to boost both people's magical ability."

"Teal deer?" Bunny-chan asked. I suspected she was imagining a blue-green [mouse-deer](#).

"TL;DR - 'too long; didn't read'. It's internet shorthand to show there's a much longer explanation and this is the summary. In English, saying the letters sounds like 'teal deer'." By the time I'd finished giving the teal deer on what teal deer meant, Meia was hovering around Bunny-chan.

"Who chooses the people that the Unison Devices work with?"

"Usually," Ichiro said while floating out of my pocket, "we're designed to partner with a specific person. But a Unison Device can survive for centuries, so we also have the ability to choose which biological person or people to partner with." He bowed to Chiba-san. "While we've already met, we were not properly introduced. My name is Ichiro."

"You were taller when we met."

"You can blame Rob for that, sir. He is getting very good at disguise magic, for somebody of his magic rank, and he allows me to borrow his spells."

"Disguise..." By the time he turned to me, I already had Mirage Hide up and looked like a storybook oni with my own features. "So I see."

"Don't forget the rest of us! I'm Sakura, Makoto's partner."

"I'm Shario-chan, and I can't Unison at all. I was made that way on purpose so that synthetic people like Hayate-chan wouldn't become slaves."

"And I'm Hayate-chan. Amongst other things, I'm an expert in strategy and tactics. Rob and Ichiro made me and they decided to leave the choice of my partner up to me."

"And I am most definitely *not* her partner," Minako-san added with a shudder. "Never again."

Chiba-san looked worried at Minako-san's reaction to the thought of Unisoning. "Perhaps I shouldn't ask whether I can Unison, then."

"I'm sorry, Chiba-san," Meia said while still hovering around Bunny-chan. "Hayate-chan self-identifies as female too strongly. She can't Unison with a male; the imposed [gender fluidity](#) would cause severe psychological issues for Hayate-chan even if you could handle the physical stress. Which, unfortunately, you can't, so there's no point in me offering to Unison with you either."

"Sorry about that," Hayate-chan said.

"Tsukino-san, could you transform to Sailor Moon, please?" Meia asked.

"I'll try."

"Shouldn't you do that where your family can't see... how did you transform so quickly?"

"Mama, papa, and Shingo know now. And Ami-chan fixed the transformation spell."

"I see. Let me guess; that's what I get for missing the discussion session." We all nodded.

Just then, Rei-san arrived. "Hi everyone. What did I miss?"

"Just a bunch of exposition about Unison Devices," Sakura replied. Hey, she knew she was now in a story; she's allowed to lampshade the fourth wall.

Rei-san narrowed her eyes. "I hope you didn't call us together for that, Ami-san."

"Chibiusa stole the Ginzuishou," announced Moon.

"That's bad. How are you transformed?"

"I'm running on my personal power. And I'm getting tired." She transformed back to Bunny-chan. "That's my limit. Sorry, Meia."

"Thank you anyway, Usagi-san," she replied before hovering over to Rei-san and floating around her for a moment... then stopping. "Oh, my."

"What?"

"I've only seen readings like this once before, when I scanned some of the people at the Saint Church on Midchilda. Are you a holy woman, Hino-san?"

"I'm a miko, yes."

"That explains it. Your faith is strong. You've given yourself too thoroughly to the kami. You *can't* Unison, Hino-san. I'm sorry."

"From the way Mina-chan described Unison, I don't mind that at all."

We noticed that people were starting to leave their homes and start their Saturday routines, so we moved inside and commandeered the Tsukino living room.

"Sorry, mama. Senshi stuff."

"I understand," Ikuko-san said.

"So, Robu-san, what do we need to know?"

"I can tell you what happened in canon, for all the good that will do. Ryou and Kasandara, please correct me if I say anything that conflicts with what you foresee."

He nodded while she said, "Yes, sir."

"Chibiusa has already taken Usagi-san's locket with the Ginzuishou, which means that the younger Usagi thinks she can go home now. She'll fail because she doesn't need just the Ginzuishou, she needs Sailor Moon as well. That will cause her to send off a flare which Rubeus will track down almost immediately. We need to be ready for that flare."

"Which means we need to stake out the most likely place she'll use to try to go home," Hayate-chan said.

"Which is where she arrived here," I added.

"Transporter spell or Sailor Teleport?" Ami asked.

"Whichever uses less power," Chiba-san suggested.

"Transporter, so Ichiro and I can join you," I said. "The first two on the scene will protect Small Lady and try to drive Rubeus off."

"Only in three of seventeen futures," Ryou said.

"Then canon's no good. Ryou, what's most likely?"

"Rubeus is ready to defend himself against what Makoto demonstrated during her fight with Petz. He defeats the Senshi and you, but Usagi-san and Chiba-san get Chibiusa-san to safety."

"Is this with us in Unison or not?" Sakura asked.

"Not," Kasandara replied. "Odds of Senshi defeat while in Unison are one in one."

"What?" My dearest couldn't believe what she'd heard.

"They're guaranteed," Ami explained. "Is that because we let ourselves be captured?"

"Three times in four, yes," Ryou answered.

"Why would we let ourselves be captured?" Rei-san asked.

"So that Small Lady can rescue us," I replied. "Which she needs to do in order to learn that she *can* rescue somebody, and by extension so she can rescue her mother in the future. Whoops, you didn't want me to tell you that, Usagi-san."

"You're forgiven. It's an emergency. What do I do?"

"In canon, you offered yourself to Rubeus in exchange for the rest of us. Small Lady went with you, and she rescued us while you defeated Rubeus."

"The same way you defeated the Ayakashi Sisters?"

"Not directly, but his supposed allies will ensure he won't survive the destruction of his spaceship."

"Nineteen times in twenty," Kasandara added.

"How do we survive *that*?"

"Sailor Teleport, with Small Lady as a passenger. You'll barely have enough power to do that."

"Seven times in nine."

"Thank you, Kasandara. So Luna, Artemis, Ryou, Kasandara, Shario-chan, and Tuxedo Kamen are *not* going along."

"How do you get home if you get captured, darling?"

"The same way I did the day Kooan died, my dearest." Then I turned to Ichiro. "Do you have to be in Unison to go into Life Support Mode?"

"No, but it is easier."

Hayate-chan smiled. "You want me along as backup, in case Chibiusa doesn't leave in a Sailor Teleport."

I nodded as Ami announced, "I have the spell coordinates ready."

"Then transform and let's go," Usagi-san said. "Volunteers only from the people who are likely to be taken hostage."

Every Senshi stood up and transformed without a moment's hesitation. I felt honoured to be their ally as I stood and transformed as well.

Sakura, Meia, and Ichiro went into Unison with us, Hayate-chan hid in my pocket, and Mercury cast the spell.

"Chiba-san, please drive there," Ryou asked. "If things go according to plan, and they will eighteen times out of nineteen now, they won't be able to teleport you, Usagi-san, or Chibiusa back."

"I'll meet you there." And he headed out the front door.

"Good luck," Shario-chan, Luna, and Artemis said as we teleported to the park... to see the light show that was about to lead Rubeus straight to Small Lady.

Usagi-san got there first. "Hi, Chibiusa. Why did you run away?"

Small Lady turned and started to run – straight into Rubeus. "Time to die, Rabbit."

Time to distract the mid-boss while the Senshi got into position. Remembering that Small Lady had recognized my Elmer Fudd reference the day we met, I started singing – okay, shouting – as I rushed him. "Save the wabbit, save the wabbit, save the wabbit!"

Whatever crowd that had started to form to watch the show quickly ran.

"Yay! Oni!" At least Small Lady had an idea of what was going on now. I hated to disappoint her.

Rubeus turned his attention from her to me. I quickly put up a forcefield... just in time to block the blast that he sent my way.

I was knocked back into a wall... and knocked out. As I lost consciousness, I thought that I heard the shout, "Venus Lovely Chain!"

I regained consciousness partially embedded in a cross made of some sort of black crystal. Looking to either side, I saw Mercury to my left and Mars, Jupiter, and Venus to my right, in that order. Mercury and Jupiter's hair colours showed me that they were still in Unison with Meia and Sakura.

On the positive side, at least this much of our plan worked. Of course, that meant nothing if Usagi-san and Small Lady didn't follow up with their part.

On the negative side, I hurt like Hell. And Venus was bleeding from her mouth.

«Ichiro, are you still with me?»

«I'm still here, Rob, and maintaining the disguise spell.»

Oh, good. The plan was still working.

«Meia is tending to Minako-san right now. She'll treat Rei next. Then Ami, Makoto, and finally you.»

«I'm in the best shape of us all?»

«Yes, Rob.»

I felt sorry for everyone else. But then I realized that none of my bones were broken, I wasn't bleeding, and I wasn't concussed. I could wait. «Were you in Life Support Mode when I rushed Rubeus?»

«Yes, sir. And so were Meia and Sakura.»

«That explains why we got off easier than Venus and Mars. Thank you.»

«My pleasure, Rob.»

We weren't tortured. At least, not directly; Rubeus simply left us completely alone. We couldn't get free; Venus proved that when she tried a Crescent Beam with no effect other than a shock from her crystal prison... which re-opened her wounds.

«Hayate-chan, are you still here?»

«Still in your pocket, Rob.»

«Venus needs your help. And Meia's.»

«I doubt she'll survive if she isn't put into Life Support Mode quickly,» Meia added.

«I'm on it.» I felt Hayate-chan leave my pocket. I didn't dare make her invisible; trying to use my power probably would have alerted Rubeus.

We were nothing but bait for him, which we expected... but he needed us alive and where we were.

Somehow, I dozed off, to wake up to Usagi-san saying, "What? No, she's my cousin! You got the wrong girl!"

That line was almost canon. I hoped the fight ended up like in canon, too.

"We'll find out whether I got the wrong girl after I kill you."

And thus Rubeus and Sailor Moon fought. Just like in canon, they were evenly matched; it was going to be up to Small Lady to save the day.

It took her a few minutes to find the control crystal to our restraints; time that Rubeus used to increase the gravity in his spaceship to slow down Moon, then drop it down to almost nothing to disorient her. Once Small Lady found the crystal, she tried to operate it. All she managed to do was send shocks through all of us. Just before I could send a hint to her, she used her moonbeam to shatter the crystal.

That released us all. Mercury immediately moved to Venus and cast a healing spell while Rubeus made his "you've doomed us all" speech, before a malfunctioning ship's system set him on fire.

"How do we get out of here?" Small Lady asked.

"You're going to have to use Sailor Teleport," I answered. "The Senshi should be able to take a small passenger."

"No! Oni, you can't stay here and die!"

"I don't plan to die here," I replied as Mercury cast another healing spell on Venus, and Meia and Hayate-chan floated over to us.

Meia quickly scanned Small Lady, asking, "Are you well?"

"I think so."

"Good. Oh! Hayate-chan, she can do it!"

"Do what?" Small Lady asked.

"It's time for us to leave," Moon said before Meia could answer. She quickly went back into Unison with Mercury as the Senshi formed a ring around Chibiusa.

"See you on the ground," Jupiter said to me.

"Sailor Teleport!"

And they were gone... but Small Lady stayed behind.

"I was afraid of that," I said. "It looked like Venus took some serious damage in her fight with Rubeus. I think there was only enough power for the five of them, even with Meia and Sakura helping."

"Are we going to die?"

"No," said Hayate-chan. "You asked 'Do what?' just before the others left. You can Unison. And so can I."

"Will it hurt?"

"I hope not," I said. "But dying will definitely hurt."

"Yeah. I can't die now. I have to save my mama."

"And you have to tell Usagi-san that," I said as Hayate-chan Unisoned with Small Lady for the first time.

Just like Reinforce Zwei's Unisons blended her hair colour with whoever she Unisoned with, Hayate-chan changed Small Lady's hair from pink to auburn-red. "I wonder what you'd look like with a ponytail instead of twin-tails," I mused.

"Not the time," Small Lady said with Hayate-chan's usual inflection. "We've achieved full Unison; let's leave before Esmeralda discovers us here while she kills Rubeus."

"Good idea." I punched a hole in the hull – not difficult when it's falling apart anyway – and we took off.

«Wow.» I took Small Lady in hand and led her away from the exploding spaceship while she looked at Earth from space.

Then I joined her in admiring the view. «Yeah. Wow.» After a moment, I added, «We'd better head back now.»

It took us an hour to get back to Japan safely. And a flight that long with that big a delta-v change – we'd completed an Earth orbit – exhausted all four of us; we missed Tokyo.

"That was fun! Can we do it again some time?" Small Lady asked while Ichiro and Hayate-chan ended our Unisons.

"Being nearly blown up was 'fun'?" I asked in disbelief.

"Yeah! Well, after we were safe, it was."

Oh, great. Small Lady's turning into an adrenaline junkie.

She added, "And visiting space was fun, too. Can we do it again?"



"Maybe when you're older, and we've both had more practice being in Unison," Hayate-chan said.

"Okay. Where are we?"

"The outskirts of Osaka," said somebody I hadn't seen since before being sent to another dimension.

"Puu!" Small Lady raced over to give Setsuna a hug.

"It's good to see you again," I said. "I don't suppose you can get us the rest of the way home?" In reply, she handed me cash for a taxi ride, two [Nozomi Shinkansen](#) tickets, and a consent form that let Tsukino Usagi travel with me.

"That works. I owe you for these."

"You can pay me back in eight months," she replied with a smile.

"I'll let Ryou know that I'll need the cash by then. Thank you again, Meioh-san." Then I knelt down. "Small Lady, we have to go."

"But... Puu, why can't I go home yet?"

"There's another enemy."

"Esmeraude? Hayate-chan said that name."

"That's right. You need to make sure she can't stop you, before you can go home."

"Oh. Okay. Is mama okay?"

"She's still resting; she hasn't gotten any worse."

"But she hasn't gotten any better, either?" Setsuna nodded at Small Lady's observation. "So it's still up to me."

"I trust you," I said. "I know you can do it."

"Thank you, Robu-niisan."

Once we reached the train station, I found a pay phone, called Makoto, and let her know where we were and which train we were going to ride.

When we finally got back to Tokyo, there was a reception committee waiting for us.

And then it was Sunday, the day before the new school term started.

And Bunny-chan still hadn't finished her homework. Not her fault, but she couldn't tell her teachers, "I had to beat up some villains from the future so they wouldn't kill my cousin."

So we got together at the Hikawa Shrine – well, everybody but Minako-san got together; she was still healing under the direct care of Meia and Saeko-basan – and made one last push to do as much homework as we could. But before we started, Bunny-chan said, "Makoto-san, I'm sorry."

"For what?" Naru-san asked.

"For how I reacted after Petz died. Rubeus proved to me that some people have to be taken down. And you offered to let Petz surrender. I didn't have a chance to give Rubeus that choice."

My dearest gave Bunny-chan a hug. "Thank you. And I agree with you that everybody should have the chance to be redeemed. But if someone insists on fighting to the death even then, I'm not going to let that be my death. Or yours."

Bunny-chan returned the hug. "Thanks, Mako-chan." Then she drew back and added, "And I apologize to the rest of you, too, Ami-chan, Ryou-san, Robu-san, Ichiro-san, Sakura-san. And I'll have to apologize to Meia-san, too."

"I'm sure she'll accept your apology, ma'am, just as I do," Ichiro replied. "And thank you for offering it to me."

Bunny-chan turned to look directly at Sakura. "And I have a favour to ask of you, Sakura-san. Please keep telling me the truth."

"Yeah, I can do that," she replied with a smile. The subtext didn't need to be explained to anybody who didn't already know it.

Then Bunny-chan turned to me. "And thank you for saving Chibiusa's life, Robu-san."

"Don't thank me," I said while gesturing to the devices beside me, "thank Hayate-chan. She did all the hard work."

"Ah. Thank you, Hayate-san."

"You're welcome. But 'Hayate' is my original, *my* name is 'Hayate-chan'."

"Then thank you, Hayate-chan-san."

Ichigo-san grinned. "'chan-san' sounds silly. But I guess we're stuck with it. We're going to have lunch together tomorrow, right?"

Ami smiled. "Of course!"

"It wouldn't be a proper Revealing Of The Lunches unless everybody's there," I added. Then I grinned and said, "You, too, Rei-san, if you want to change schools."

"Oh, should I drop out of a [3K](#) top-tier [escalator school](#) and enrol at a city school just to show off my lunches? I don't think my grandfather would approve." From her tone of voice, it was obvious that Rei-san didn't approve, either. "Now, is there anybody else anyone needs to apologize to, or can we start doing homework?"

Nobody said anything for a moment. Then Bunny-chan said, "No, that's it for me. I guess it's homework time."

Much later that day, I introduced the others to the North American custom of ordering pizza for a late-nighter, but everybody finally finished all of their homework.

And then it was Monday morning, and my fiancée knocked on my door earlier than I expected. I opened it to see her wearing the same school uniform that everybody else wears.

"You wear that uniform well."

"Thanks, darling. Do you have any more of that Midchildan depilatory creme? Mina-chan has been using my supply on her underarm hair."

"Sorry, my dearest, but I ran out a week ago. Unless Ryou or Ami stocked up, you're going to have to go back to shaving, just like me."

"Oh, drat."

As she went back to shave, I made breakfast and lunch for all three of us: eggs, fried tomato, and toast for breakfast, and three [onigiri](#) – one each stuffed with egg, pickled plum, and salmon – with a side of edamame for lunch.

We double-checked that we had all of our homework, Makoto went back to her apartment for her math homework, and Minako-san also made sure she had her change-of-address paperwork and a letter from Saeko-basan asking she be excused from P.E. for a week for medical reasons.

My onigiri started off the group discussion after the Revealing Of The Lunches.

"They're so big!" Ichigo-san said.

"Well, I have big hands," I pointed out.

"Is it true what they say about big hands and a big -"

"Yes," my fiancée replied with a smile before she could finish. "At least in Rob's case."

Ami looked up from her book with interest and a bit of a blush, Ryou looked jealous, and Naru-san said, "Whoa."

"Is this really proper talk for lunch time?" I asked.

"It is now," Minako-san insisted.

Naru-san raised a hand. "I thought you were waiting until you were sixteen."

"We were away for two years last month," Makoto replied. "We *are* sixteen." Noticing that Naru-san was thinking that through, she added, "And he's mine, girls. Hands off the only guy who can make me forget about my old sempai."

"When you put it that way," Bunny-chan replied, "I for one am happy to support the Mako-chan/Robu-san couple. I still think you didn't wait long enough, though."

"How so?" Naru-san asked.

"Mamo-chan and I are waiting until after I graduate from high school."

Minako-san grinned. "I admire your willpower. I have to admit that, if he wasn't already dating Ami-chan, I'd be trying to become Ryou's girlfriend with benefits."

And *that* finally made Ryou blush... and Ami take his arm in hers. "Can we *please* change the subject before a teacher overhears us?" Ryou asked.

"Okay," Minako-san said. "Mizuno-sensei and I talked for a while yesterday while you were finishing your homework."

"Well, she was giving you medical care," Ami said.

"We also talked about my family. Ami-san, what would you think of having a sister?"

"What does that have to do with your... Oh."

"Yeah. She asked whether I want to leave the Aino family and join the Mizuno family."

To quote Keanu Reeves in practically every role he's ever played, or Naru-san a few minutes earlier, Whoa.

"Mother has been worried about the future of the Mizuno family for a while," Ami mused.

"I only know your parents from when we met during our big reveal," Ryou said, "but I think Saeko-mama is a better parent than either of yours is. I would be happy to call you sister-in-law."

His calling Saeko-basan "Saeko-mama" got me thinking, not for the first time, about my relationship with her... and I could see Makoto was thinking, too.

"How likely is that to happen?" Naru-san asked.

"I'm not going to look. I don't want Minako-san to think her decision is preordained."

\* \* \*

It took us almost the entire week to get from Monday to Friday. Go figure.

But Friday finally arrived, and Sakurada-sensei dropped by the Conversational English club with some news. "I've received applications to join the club from two students," she announced. "And I've spoken with each of them in English. They appear to be able to hold up their end of a conversation."

«Are we about to lose our extra planning time for Senshi work?» Minako-san sent.

«I hope not,» Ami sent back.

«There isn't much we can do about it,» I sent.

Sakurada-sensei added, "I wouldn't have expected either of them to know that much English, based on their test scores, but they do. You can come in now!"

And Ryou and Makoto walked through the doorway.

"I believe you already know them," Sakurada-sensei said to us, "so I won't bother with introductions."

"We had reason to spend a large fraction of the Obon holiday in English immersion together," Ami said.

"Ah. Well, remember, speak English! That's what this club is all about. And I have to leave now. I'll see you tomorrow."

"We will, Ms. Sakurada," I promised. "And have a good evening."

We waited until she'd left, then I turned to my dearest. "You didn't give me any hint that you were going to do this," I said as I gave her a hug.

"Neither did you," Ami said to Ryou with a smile, as she hugged him.

Minako-san pouted. "Oh, sure, rub it in. The Senshi of Love is the only person in the room who isn't in a relationship."

We quickly broke our hugs. "Sorry, Mina-chan!" Makoto said. Then she asked, "So, what do you talk about in the Conversational English club?"

"Oh, all sorts of things," Minako-san replied. "So, now that Rubeus is gone, what happens next?"

"Ah. Those kinds of things." Ryou thought for a moment. "Chibiusa's going to be targeted by a droid some time next week, eight times out of nine."

I nodded. "That's right! That's when Sailor Pluto contacts all of the Senshi."

"And that explains that blank spot in my foreseeing. After that, the probability curve is so smeared out that I can't be sure. Esmeraude and Fiore both appear, but never together."

"Oh, great," I said. "Fiore is the tougher opponent, but Esmeraude is the bigger threat. At least they aren't teaming up."

"Er, who are these two people?" Minako-san asked.

"Fiore's an alien who looks somewhat like Ail and An, and he really likes Chiba-san. Esmeraude is Rubeus' replacement."

"Shall we force a decision?" asked my fiancée.

"How do you plan to do that?" I asked. "It isn't as if we have any control over either of them."

"True," agreed Ami, "but we can arrange the starting conditions for one or the other of their stories."

I looked at Ryou. He shrugged his shoulders and said, "It's worth a try."

"After we meet Sailor Pluto," Makoto said. Ah, my dearest, if you only knew. But I made a promise that I wouldn't tell anyone who any of the Sailor Senshi are without their permission, and that promise didn't have an "unless I tell another Senshi" rider.

"So, our options are to either open a cake shop and offer an opening-day viking, or visit [Jindai Botanical Garden](#) as a group. Before we became millionaires, I would have said the choice was easy."

"I've just barely started selling our gold, Rob," Ryou reminded me. "Osaka-san was kind enough to buy 32 troy ounces from me."

"So, one kilogram down, 999 to go?"

"Approximately, yes. This will take a while."

Minako-san sighed. "You're dating *and* you're rich. What did I do to deserve just a normal life?"

"Normal? You're the Senshi of Love and Beauty," I pointed out with a smile.

"Since we aren't cash-rich yet, the choice is still easy, as much as I'd like to open a cake and flower shop," Makoto said, getting us back on track.

I nodded. "That sounds good to me. And if it doesn't work, we can take Ringo Starr's advice to stop and take the time to smell the roses. When do we want to go?"

"Let's go to Jindai Botanical Garden the weekend between [Respect for the Aged Day](#) and [Autumnal Equinox Day](#), and I can look at the flowers again even if that doesn't draw out Fiore."

"September 19 or 20, then," Ami said. "Considering how long it takes to get there, I'd prefer going on Sunday."

"Can't we just Teleport there?" Minako-san asked.

"Not without coordinates," replied Ami. "Unless you want to show up in the middle of a street and get hit by a truck."

"Do I look like [Minky Momo](#)? No, thanks. We'll take the train."

"Come to think of it," my dearest asked, "doesn't Chibiusa look a lot like Minky Momo?"

"We'd better keep her away from trucks," I suggested.

"How did she end up like this?" I asked. "She wasn't hit by a truck, was she?"

It was Saturday afternoon, and Small Lady was unconscious in Usagi-san's bed. Now I knew how Ami felt before she got her memories back. I hated not knowing how this happened; the canon episode started *in media res*.

"Probably not a truck, Robu-san," Usagi-san replied. "I don't know how this happened; I found her like this downstairs when I got back from school. The doctors don't know what's wrong, not even Ami-san and Meia-san. Do you know?"

Before I could answer, Small Lady said in her sleep, "No... the Jakokusuishou... I can't let it hurt mama..."

"Jakokusuishou?" Usagi-san asked.

"Diabolischer Schwarzkristall," Hayate-chan offered.

"Evil Black Crystal," said Minako-san in English as she walked in and stood beside Rei-san. Switching to Japanese, she asked, "A counterpart to the Ginzuishou?"

"From Nemesis, yes," I confirmed. "Wiseman uses it. And that means there's a droid in a mental connection with Small Lady."

"Robu-san, Ryou-san, how do we save her?"

"You're going to have to make mental contact with her yourselves," Ryou answered before I could.

"That's my job, then," Hayate-chan said as she floated over to Small Lady.

But before she could begin the Unison process, Small Lady said "Puu..." And Luna-P's eyes lit up.

As the ball rose to hover above Small Lady, a hologram appeared above Luna-P. "Hello, Sailor Senshi. I am Sailor Pluto."

"About time you showed up," Sakura muttered. "Where are Saturn, Uranus, and Neptune?"

"That's not important right now," I said.

"Hey, aren't you Meioh Setsuna-san from Atelier Lucent?" my dearest asked.

Luna-P swivelled to look directly at me.

"I didn't say a thing. She figured that out on her own." Turning to Makoto, I continued, "Also not important right now. Small Lady needs help."

"You must not take part in this, Oni," Sailor Pluto said. "For the same reason that Tuxedo Kamen must not Unison with Hayate-chan."

I nodded. "I assume that this is because I self-identify as male and Small Lady is still developing her own gender identity. No risking the self-identity of the person who we're trying to help."

Luna-P swivelled to look directly at Ryou. "For the same reason, you also must not take part, [Onmyōji](#)."

"I understand."

Luna-P swivelled to face Usagi-san. "This will be very dangerous. If you are crippled in Small Lady's dream, you will lose the use of the crippled limb in this world. If you die there..."

"Then we never wake up here," Ami concluded. "But couldn't Rob restore our memories?"

"How would you cooperate to accept them?" I asked. "No. If you die in her mind, you die for real."

"Knowing this," Sailor Pluto continued, "if you are willing to help Small Lady, please take your Senshi forms."

All five of the Sailor Senshi transformed immediately. Sailor Pluto smiled, nodded in recognition, and raised her staff. Then the Senshi – and only the Senshi – were gone. Luna-P's eyes went dark, but the ball continued to hover.

"Onmyōji?" I asked.

Ryou nodded. "The official diviner in the [Ministry of the Center](#), when [the Imperial Court was in Kyoto](#). I never thought to look to the past to choose a name for the future."

"It's a pretty good codename for a precog," I said.

"It's certainly better than 'Ryou the Psychic Boy'," he agreed.

The door opened and Ikuko-san walked in. "How is she? And where did everyone go?"

"No change, and they've gone to help her," I replied.

"Do you know when they'll be back?"

Ryou shook his head. "Maybe in ten minutes, maybe in ten hours." That sort of uncertainty wasn't something I wanted to hear from a precog.

She sat down on Usagi-san's desk chair. "I can just barely handle the idea that my daughter is a transforming heroine," she said. "The waiting for her to come home, though... I dread the day when one of you tells me that she won't be coming home again."

"It's not any easier for the rest of us, even if we stand beside her," Sakura said, with some kindness in her voice. "We know how you feel."

We all sat or stood there for a moment.

Then Ikuko-san asked, "Do you think she'll want pancakes when she gets back?"

"I'm sure that they both will," I replied with a smile, remembering how much both Usagis liked that treat in canon. "But it'll probably take Small Lady... Chibiusa a few minutes to get her bearings back when she wakes up, so don't start making them until they're back."

"Tsukino-san, I'll stand watch," Meia offered.

"Thank you, Meia-san. I'd better go make sure I have all the ingredients," Ikuko-san said as she stood up and looked at both Ryou and me. "Will you help with the shopping, please?"

"Of course," I replied. "And thank you. My fiancée is probably standing right beside your daughter right now."

Once I'd been to the supermarket and back, we spent a couple of hours in the living room. Ikuko-san told us stories about Bunny-chan when she was Small Lady's age, Ryou told her about the day in Niigata when he got his memories of the Missing Time back and met Ami again for the first time, and I told her about the time that my dearest and I first visited Jindai Botanical Garden.

"You two are lucky to have Ami-san and Makoto-san as your fiancées," Ikuko-san said at the end of it all. "They're good people, even if they don't fit the mould of the traditional Japanese housewife."

"I'm lucky to be allowed to be Makoto's fiancé," I replied. "I don't fit the traditional Japanese mould, either; I'd much rather have somebody who stands beside me than somebody who stays behind and protects the home. We could never live the way that you and Kenji-san do. Did you know that she wants to own her own business?"

"I know now," she replied just as Ichiro flew into the living room.

"Sir, they're back. And Small Lady is waking up."

"I'd better get started on the pancakes, then," Ikuko-san said with a smile of relief as she headed for the kitchen and we headed upstairs.

We knocked on Bunny-chan's door, then went in. "How is everybody?"

"Just fine, thanks to Usagi-san," Small Lady answered. "She saved *everybody*."

Ryou smiled. "You'll have to tell us about it downstairs. Ikuko-san is making pancakes for you."

That got her out of bed in a hurry.

Once we were home, Makoto, Minako-san, and I had a long talk about what we wanted to do about how we wanted to relate with Saeko-basan. Then we asked Ami whether we could come over to talk, only to learn Saeko-basan had been called in for an extra shift.

So Makoto and I decided to visit the next day. Yes, just the two of us; Minako-san still hadn't made up her mind.

"Do you have a few minutes free, Saeko-basan?" my dearest asked.

"I can make the time for you, Makoto-san, Robu-san. Is there something wrong?"

"No, quite the opposite," I replied. "Makoto and I learned a few things while we were magically banished to Midchilda, including how important it is to have a family. And we also learned that family members don't need to be related by blood."

"Ami's our closest friend now, and she's told me that she thinks of me as her sister, just as I think of her as my sister."

Saeko-basan smiled when Makoto said that.

"And Ryou is just as important to me – no, to us – as Ami is."

"And so are you, and acknowledging that fact does not dishonour my parents. May we call you 'mama', Saeko-basan?"

She gave both of us a hug at the same time, tears in her eyes. "Oh, yes, please, Makoto-chan, Robu-kun."

"Thank you, Saeko-mama," we said with tears in our own eyes, returning the group hug.

School that week was remarkably relaxing, since we were reasonably sure that we weren't about to be attacked. Which meant that I felt comfortable sending Shario-chan home with Naru-san on Monday; that shouldn't turn either of them into a target.

"Why?" Naru-san asked.

"I want to see how precise you can be with your powers," Shario-chan said. "If you're really good, then I'll start teaching you how to make replacement parts for us."

"Oh, okay," Naru said. "This isn't going to be a problem for you, is it, Robu-san?"

"Not at all. Ryou will let us know when she has to come home."

Which, I hoped, wouldn't be for a while, our planned trip to Jindai Botanical Garden notwithstanding. Naru-san really needed the attention from somebody else who's in on the secret, and maybe Shario-chan could give her some pointers at using her gem-creation powers.

That meant Naru-san and Shario-chan missed Bunny-chan's attempt at Unison with Hayate-chan when we got together to discuss the idea of forcing a plotline to start. Hoo-boy, was that a mess.

"You're the only one who hasn't tried it yet, save for Hino-san and Chiba-san," Meia said while hovering around Bunny-chan again.

"Don't forget Osaka-san and Aoyama-san," Sakura added.

"I had forgotten about them. Thank you for reminding me, sister. Where are they?"

"Ichigo-san is at home," Ami replied. "Her father and brothers are ashore and everybody's catching up on family news. Naru-san is busy showing Shario-chan how her power works."

Sakura grinned. "So what's really happening is Shari's teaching her fine control."

"You said that, not me," I said with a grin.

"Perhaps that should be left unsaid," Meia suggested. "Tsukino-san, would you transform to Sailor Moon, please?"

"Sure," Bunny-chan said while she did so. Meia went back to taking readings.

"So," Rei-san said, "does anybody know what happened to Chibiusa that needed Sailor Pluto to reveal herself?"

"I haven't had a chance to ask her yet," Makoto said before I could. "I need an excuse to go get a new outfit."

"Whatever happened," Minako-san said, "it's pretty obvious that Chibiusa was targeted."

"In her own home?" my dearest asked. "How would they know where to find her?"

"Their leader Wiseman's in the future," Sakura pointed out. "What we call 'now' is history to him. *Duh.*"

Nobody said anything while that sank in.

Moon was the first to speak. "But that would mean that this Wiseman is toying with all of us."

"Again, duh."

"Remember how Wendi gave us lessons in trash-talking our opponents?" Ryou asked. "I think he's figured out how to do something similar without saying anything."

"And we just noticed it now," I added. "From now on, I'm calling him 'Wiseguy'."

"I'm gonna call him 'Wiseass'," Sakura announced.

"Not in front of Small Lady," I said. "She needs to take him seriously. Maybe she'll avoid canon when she finally meets him, but that'll only happen if she doesn't underestimate him."

"Sure," Sakura said. "No trash-talking Wiseass in front of the Chibster."

We all looked at her sideways for a moment. "The Chi Buster?" Makoto asked.

"No, the Chibster. You all have nicknames for each other, don't you, Mako-nee? She doesn't mind."

"As long as she accepts that name, I have no problem with it," Meia announced before changing the subject back to her scans. "Moon-san, you have the ability to Unison."

"Do you want to try?" Hayate-chan asked.

"Sure, why not?"

As Hayate-chan passed Sakura while flying over to Sailor Moon, she whispered, "'Chibster'? Really?"

"Oh, get over it," Sakura whispered back.

"So, how do we do this?" Moon asked.

"I'll send you the procedure," Meia replied before getting that distracted look on her face for a moment. Then she said, "Did you understand that?"

"Not at all," Moon replied. "Was that math? I'm no good at math. Ami-chan, what's three-squiggly-lines triangle-pointing-upward squiggly-bracket mean?"

Oh, dear. She couldn't even grasp the first line of Meia's description. Not that any of the rest of us, other than Ami and me, could either, and we had to learn Midchildan mathematical symbols first; just like with Minako-san, Ami would have to explain the process step-by-step.

As she did for the next three minutes. I know that Bunny-chan isn't stupid, but she really doesn't learn things easily, unless she cares about them. My dear friend doesn't have much in the way of self-discipline... at least, not yet.

Then Moon announced that she was ready. "Let's do this."

"Here goes," Hayate-chan replied as the process started.

This was the first time I'd seen a Unison where the person's hair and eye colours didn't change. Instead, Moon's uniform changed to her Super Sailor Moon version.

"Was that supposed to happen?" she asked.

"No, it wasn't," Ami replied, worry evident in her voice.

An actual alarm sounded in front of Meia, from a magical screen that displayed the word "ALERT". "End the Unison, now! Moon-san's power is overwhelming Hayate-chan's identity!"

"How?" Moon asked in alarm.

"Think *exactly* what I tell you to think," Ami said before sending to Moon for a half-minute, at the end of which Hayate-chan separated from Unison with Sailor Moon.

Unconscious.

Ryou grabbed her from midair before she could fall.

Meia immediately ran a scan while we held our collective breath. "Her personality is in bad shape, but she's still in there. I must admit that I don't know what to do."

"Oh, no!" Moon cried.

"Ichiro, Unison with me," I immediately ordered. "We're going to have to rebuild her mind."

I had no idea how I knew that, but I knew it was true.

It took us three hours to repair the damage, after which Hayate-chan opened her eyes and said, "Did anybody get the number of the truck that hit me? No, wait, Truck-kun didn't send me to this dimension. Yagami-san did."

"She's going to be okay," I announced while collapsing into a chair. "She still has most if not all of her memories."

"What did you say to me before you started?" Sakura demanded.

"I said, 'Chibster'? Really?"

Sakura grinned. "Yep, she's got her memories."

"The last thing I remember was starting the Unison with Sailor Moon. I gather it didn't go well."

"We had to use the emergency ejection procedure to get you out," Meia told her.

"Oh. Then I can't be Sailor Moon's partner."

"Nobody can," Meia and Sakura confirmed.

"I'm so sorry, Hayate-chan." Bunny-chan said while bowing.

"And I'm sorry that I didn't foresee that happening," Ryou added.

"I'm okay, Tsukino-san, Ryou-san. At least we found out in a safe environment."

We talked about Bunny-chan and Hayate-chan during the club meeting on Friday, after wishing Ami a happy birthday. I gave her a pair of aviator's goggles and wished her happy flying.

"Why didn't you foresee something so important?" Minako-san asked Ryou. "Hayate-chan could have died!"

Ryou looked at his feet. "I didn't think to look. I'm sorry."

"It's Hayate-chan you need to apologize to," Ami pointed out.

"He already has, twice," I said. "He stopped by my place the day after it happened and apologized again."

"Oh. I should have realized you'd do that, Ryou. I'm sorry."

"It's okay, Ami. You can't know everything."

I smiled. "You certainly do your best to know everything, though."

The door opened and Makoto walked in. "Sorry I'm late. I had class duty." She reached into her school bag and pulled out a thermal flask. "I brought some sweets for the birthday girl; cupcakes and tea. Earl Grey. Hot."

"Thanks, Captain Picard," I grinned... but Ami stopped me from accepting a plastic cup.

"Food isn't allowed in club rooms."

Makoto looked around, pointedly. "This is a classroom."

"While the club is meeting here, it's a club room."

"You weren't such a stickler for rules back on Midchilda."

"*This isn't Midchilda.*"

"Ami-san," Minako-san asked, "is there something wrong? You aren't acting like yourself."

"Nothing's wrong... Oh, who am I kidding? This isn't Midchilda, and I'm so annoyed!"

"At what?" Ryou asked.

"Everything! I spent *two years* learning at my own pace from Vita and Hayate and Ichiro and Cinque and Rob and Makoto and especially on my own, and now I'm back to having to keep pace with everybody else because it's the rules."

"There are a lot more rules here than there," my fiancée agreed.

"And I'm starting to think that everyone else in this school is an idiot. Even you, Ryou."



"I know that I'm nowhere near as smart as you are, my love."

"And that makes it even worse! The only people I know who are anywhere near as smart as me are mama and Meia and Rob, and..." she trailed off.

I saved her from the risk of embarrassing me. "And I know that I'm not as smart as either you or Meia are. Saying that is a compliment to you, not an insult to me or anybody else here. And you're right about the education system here; if we were in Canada, you would have skipped some grades and you'd be in high school or college by now."

"Why couldn't I be living in Canada?"

Minako-san took Ami's hand in her own for a moment. "Then we never would have met you."

"There is that. Thank you, Mina-chan."

After a moment, I said, "My dearer friend has a problem. How do we help her solve it?"

"I wasn't complaining to ask for help," she said.

"I know. It's a guy thing. If we hear that there's a problem, we try to fix it."

"Stop pretending," Ryou suggested.

"What?"

"Let everybody know who you really are. I'm not suggesting that you tell everybody you're Sailor Mercury," he added quickly, "just that you don't need to pretend to be less capable than you actually are."

"But [the nail that sticks out gets hammered down](#)."

"You already stand out, Ami," I pointed out. "You've taken all of the hammering you've been given and it's made you stronger, like the hammering of a folded sword blank during [shita-kitae](#). I routinely see your name at the top of the grade or the entire school whenever marks are posted."

Ryou added, "Why not try for 900 this term?"

She thought about that for a moment. "Why not', indeed..."

It wasn't until we were back home that I mentioned Hokago Tea Time to Makoto... and thanked her for the tea anyway.

Then we had a split week, because Wednesday was Respect for the Aged Day.

We were outside for P.E. the entire Thursday afternoon that week, practising various track and field events before [Health and Sports Day](#). October 10 fell on a Saturday this year, so we were going to have the school sports festival on the holiday and get the following Monday as a day off instead. It wouldn't be until 2000 that Japan officially moved the holiday from October 10 to the second Monday of the month, so Kuritsu Juban Chuugakkou was a trend-setter there.

Of course the boys who weren't practising at any given time watched the girls. Then people noticed how well Ami was doing and even the teachers were looking at her. 100m, 400m, long jump, high jump, javelin... Ami was coming first in our class in them all. When the teachers told everybody to take a break while they had a short meeting at the side of the field, Bunny-chan and Ami grabbed a Frisbee from somewhere and played catch. By the time the teachers came to a decision, the game had become three-on-three [Ultimate](#) on a short field, Bunny-chan, Naru-san, and Ami versus Minako-san, Makoto, and Ichigo-san, with everybody else watching while I explained the rules when necessary. Seeing this, the teachers went back into a huddle for a few minutes. The game was tied 2-2 when the teachers finally forced the ladies to stop playing.

"Mizuno."

"Yes, sensei?"

"Have you been holding back for the last year and a half?"

"Yes, sensei," she lied.

"Why?"

"Because the nail that sticks out gets hammered down, sensei."

"Why did you suddenly stop?"

Ami smiled. "Because a dear friend of mine pointed out that the hammering had a different effect on me, sensei."

Everybody, teachers and students alike, turned to look at me.

"What, am I that obvious?" I asked, to laughter from my schoolmates.

The teachers cleared their throats, and the laughter died down. "You're the only one in the school who would say something like that, Donarudson. We have reached two decisions. First, Mizuno will be re-tested in every sport in the curriculum. This will not affect her previous grade. Second, whatever game you were playing while we were talking will be added to the sports fest this year."



"Yay!!" Bunny-chan grinned. "Finally something I'm good at!"

When we split up into classes again, I overheard one of my classmates telling another, "Look at Donarudoson-san, Kazuya. He was brave enough to talk with Mizuno-san and Kino-san, and now he's friends with one and dating the other. Go talk to Aino-san if you like her!" I quietly wished Sakamoto Kazuya-san luck; he didn't seem like the type that she liked, but maybe she'd had a change of heart in the last month or two. And "dating"? I decided to wear my ring to school the next day.

Sure enough, the next day's gossip was dominated by the fact that Makoto and I were wearing matching rings. When my homeroom teacher asked about it, I told him that we had permission from her grandfather to marry once she was 20, and left it at that. Since he asked me in class, that quickly made it onto the grapevine as well.

Sorry, folks, but I'm hers and she's mine. We're both off the market.

Minako-san grinned and called me "Mr. Kino" during the Conversational English club meeting that day. Upon hearing that, Ryou insisted on being called "Mr. Mizuno".

After that, the discussion moved to a review of the canon *Sailor Moon R* movie, mostly for Minako-san's sake for the upcoming weekend. I printed out [Hitoshi Doi's summary of the movie](#) and made a few notes in the margins before letting her read it.

"Chibiusa's going to shoot a dart gun at Usagi-san?" Minako-san asked in disbelief when she got that far.

I nodded. "Yeah, that scene of Small Lady packing heat surprised everybody at the time. I don't know whether she's going to do that this time, though."

After she finished reading the summary, Minako-san offered the printout to me. "I assume you don't want anybody else reading that."

"Actually," I said without accepting the paper, "I do want Bunny-chan and Rei-san to read it. Could you take it with you after school tomorrow, please? I assume you're getting together to do homework."

"Why can't you take it along?" she asked.

"I'm going to Shibuya instead," I replied as Ryou, unasked, handed me an envelope filled with money. "Thank you, Ryou. Minako-san, I have a debt to pay down and an invitation to extend."

Of course, "Shibuya" meant Atelier Lucent. When I arrived the next afternoon, I was lucky enough to be the only customer in the store.

"I see you've been shopping elsewhere," Meioh-san said with a small smile.

"Sorry. I had a growth spurt while I was away; I didn't have any choice," I apologized as I handed her the envelope. "This is the start of my repayment of the financial part of the debt that I owe you. There's two hundred thousand yen in there."

"This could have waited until after you moved, you know."

"Ah, so we will be moving. For my own peace of mind, I'd prefer to at least start now, even if it's only a token payment."

"Then I will accept this now." She made the envelope disappear behind the counter.

"Would you happen to be free tomorrow? The group is visiting Jindai Botanical Garden. I know that Neo Queen Serenity would be happy to meet you face-to-face, and we both know how Small Lady would react to your being there."

"And you expect Fiore to show up and my power would be useful against him, but that's beside the point. Unfortunately, I must decline. When one's business relies on teenagers buying the latest fashions, Sunday is the busiest day of the work week. I won't be able to get away from the store."

"I understand." Then we heard the door open and some other customers come in. I was ready for this; I pulled out the tie that I bought in Shinmachi, still in its box. "My fiancée bought this tie for me in Gunma," I lied with a wink, "and I was hoping you might have a shirt that would compliment it."

"We should have something you'll like right over here," she said as the other customers started browsing while they waited their turn.

Thus it was that I wore slacks, a trendy shirt, and a silk tie to Jindai the next day. If it wasn't for my camera bag, my height, and my skin colour, I could have been mistaken for a J-Pop boy band member. A few people, noticing that Makoto was wearing matching colours with me, asked whether we were a new singing duo.

My stock response to that question was, "You really don't want to hear me sing."

Makoto and Minako-san got at Ami's closet and picked out her outfit, so she didn't look like she was all-business the way she did so often since we got back from Midchilda. Her black-and-white outfit with her blue silk scarf

matched Ryou's black-and-white outfit with his blue silk tie quite well; there was no question whether they were a couple.

And we all made sure that Bunny-chan's accessories matched Chiba-san's outfit. Even though Small Lady was upset about that.

Minako-san, Rei-san, Naru-san, and Ichigo-san were along for the ride, and they knew it. They dressed casually, not matching any of us. And our littlest fashion victim, Small Lady, wore what she always wears.

As for invoking the movie plot, there's good news and bad news.

The good news was that Fiore did show up. The bad news is that events almost immediately went off script, and not to our advantage.

"Mamoru, I've finally returned to keep my promise. I found a flower that I think you'll like."

Ami immediately started taking scans with the Mercury Computer.

Chiba-san asked, "Do I know you?"

Bunny-chan took the narrative into her own hands at that point. "Mamo-chan, don't you remember? You two met in the hospital the day my little brother was born, and you gave him the rose that I gave you to cheer you up."

Aargh! She played our trump card as the opening move!

"I... think I remember that. Everything from around the crash is fuzzy in my head." Chiba-san turned to the newcomer. "Fiore...?"

"You *do* remember," he said with a smile as he took Chiba-san's hands in his own.

"Er... Mamo-chan is my boyfriend."

Fiore pushed her away – not so hard as to push her over, but hard enough to stagger her. "My gift is for Mamoru, not you. I'll return in a few days with it, Mamoru." And Fiore vanished.

We all rushed over. "Well, that could have gone much, much worse," Ryou said.

"And it could have gone better," I replied.

Rei-san pointed out, "He said he'll be back in a few days. In the canon that Robu-san knows, he was back the next day."

"Which means we rushed him," Minako-san said. "Do we have the initiative?"

"We know he's being controlled by a Kisenian flower," Ami said, holding up the Mercury Computer. "We could take the battle to him, based on that much evidence."

"If we know where he is," I pointed out.

Bunny-chan asked "Can we borrow a satellite and look for him?"

I shook my head. "Most satellite cameras are pointed at Earth, not at space. The only two I know about right now that aren't are Hipparcos and the Hubble Space Telescope, and they're both being used full-time."

"People are looking at us," Small Lady pointed out.

"Yeah. Let's go home. No time to stop and smell the roses, my dearest, sorry."

We headed out through the front gate, found a quiet alleyway, and let Ami Teleport us to Rei-san's shrine. I noticed that our pushcart was in the corner of the room we arrived in. I raised one eyebrow. "I already had the coordinates," she explained.

Ichiro looked up from the guard post on top of the gold. "I gather things did not go well," he said.

"They could have gone worse, or better. We have to find an asteroid – no, a seed pod in space – before it arrives near Earth in a few days."

"Are there any sensors in space that Meia could use to carry out a Wide Area Search?"

I shook my head. "I just explained to the others that most cameras in orbit are pointed at Earth."

"Correct me if I'm wrong, sir, but are there any systems on the Moon that survived the fall of the Silver Millennium?"

Nobody said anything for a moment. Then I turned to Naru-san. "Where's Shario-chan?"

"Right here," she said from Naru-san's pocket. "Why?"

"You're a device meister. We may need you to repair something on the Moon, once Meia finds it."

"Oh, okay! I've never worked in a vacuum before. I'll have to go into Life Support Mode."

Ryou turned to Ami. "Do you know where on the Moon the ruins of the Silver Millennium are?"

She nodded. "I was only there once. but I think I remember enough of the night sky to pinpoint their location," she said as she transformed to Sailor Mercury. "Meia, if you would be so kind?"

"I am initiating Unison and Life Support Mode now to protect against the acceleration invoked by the Ultra-long-distance Transportation spell."

"Likewise," Ichiro said as he floated over to me.

"Don't forget us!" Sakura said from Makoto's pocket as my dearest transformed to Sailor Jupiter. "You might need something heavy moved."

"Well, see you later," I said to the others as Mercury and Jupiter stepped outside. By the time I joined them, Mercury and Meia were finishing their spell.

Once we were in the tube, we flew to reduce our transit time. «Fly me to the moon and let me play among the stars...»

«Darling? We really don't want to hear you sing. 😞»

«Sorry.»

Six minutes later, we were flying above Mare Serenitatis. Of course. Stupid genre conventions.

Mercury dove toward the surface, and we followed her. «Meia, Wide Area Search. Anything that appears to be artificial.»

«Yes, ma'am. W.A.S.» After a long moment, Meia continued, «Two sources detected in the Taurus–Littrow valley. One source detected close to the Chacornac crater.»

«Hmmmm...» I sent. «The Taurus–Littrow sources are probably [Apollo 17](#) and [Lunokhod 2](#). And from orbit, Chacornac looks very strange compared to what's around it.»

«Agreed,» Ami sent back. «Let's check out the Chacornac crater.»

So we did, and we discovered that this was probably where we wanted to be when we flew through an invisible forcefield and into atmosphere. We had to adjust for the sudden gravity increase as well.

"Warning!" we heard all around us. The only reason I understood it was because Ichiro's translation spell was running. "This is a restricted area. If you do not identify yourself within thirty-three seconds, you will be fired upon."

Mercury pulled out the Mercury Computer and tapped a few buttons. "Transmitting identification now."

"Identification received. Welcome, Princess Mercury. Please follow the guide beam." And a light that reminded me of Venus' Crescent Beam attack lit a path for us to follow, to reach a small building surrounded by spheres. The building's door opened for us when we arrived, and we walked in.

"Greetings, Princess Mercury and associates. It has been more than 4,294,967,295 seconds since this tracking facility was last visited. There have been no Dark Kingdom incursions detected in the last 4,294,967,295 seconds."

A tracking facility? We couldn't have been luckier. Of course, this was a stupid genre convention... but I'll take it.

"It can't tell us past that?" Jupiter asked.

"I'm surprised it can go back that far; that's the largest 32-bit number," I replied. "Normally, somebody would be in to check on things more often than once an Earth century."

Ami held up a hand, and we stopped talking. "Status report," she said while activating her visor display.

"Space-facing sensors are at below 0.1% operational status. Earth-facing sensors are at below 0.1% operational status. Communications are at 1.3% operational status. There has been no communication between tracking facilities and central command for more than 4,294,967,295 seconds. This tracking facility is operating in restricted access mode because of the lack of communications. Life-support at this facility is at 97.6% operational status."

Ami looked at some text being displayed on her visor. "Expansion requested. Explain the below-minimum status reports."

"Power feeds to the Earth-facing sensors at this facility are damaged. The majority of Earth-facing sensors are offline for lack of power. Power feeds to the space-facing sensors at this facility are damaged. The majority of space-facing sensors are offline for lack of power. Communications to other tracking facilities are offline for unknown reasons."

Ami read some other text. "Are your personnel recognition systems online?"

"Recognition sensors are running. There is some interference present."

She turned to us. "We should be safe here. Everyone, end Life Support Mode and Unison so that the facility can get clean recognitions of you."

"If you're sure..." Makoto said.

"I'm sure."

We did so, and I got Sharior-chan out of my pocket.

"Interference has cleared. Welcome, Princess Jupiter. Remaining personnel are not listed in identity banks."

Whatever sensors this facility was using, they obviously weren't visual if they detected the reincarnation of a person as the original person.

Mercury told the facility, "The other human is designated Rob Donaldson. He is Princess Jupiter's consort-apparent."

"Hello," I said.

"Consort-apparent Donaldson recognized and entered into identity banks."

"The other people are of a race designated 'Unison Device' in their language. Meia is my combat partner. Sakura is Princess Jupiter's combat partner. Ichiro is Consort-apparent Donaldson's combat partner. Sharior-chan is a repair technician."

As they identified themselves, the facility acknowledged them, then added, "Request the services of repair technician Shariochan to repair the power systems at this facility. Additional repairs may be required."

"I'm willing," she said, "but I've never worked with this particular hardware before, and I don't have tools with me."

"Schematics are available. Tools are stored in bin 31-Green." A glowing arrow appeared above the lid of one of the bins, and started bouncing up and down to draw attention to it.

"Somebody give me a hand here," Shario-chan said. Meia helped her open the bin and look inside. "Wow. Some of these tools are pretty basic, but others look like they're more advanced than anything from back home. Okay, looking at these readouts, it's pretty clear where the first breaks are."

"The first breaks?" Makoto asked.

"That's all that can be detected," Ami replied. "Once those are repaired, additional damage should be revealed. Shario-chan, Meia, work on getting the space-facing sensors running first. We need to know where the Kisenian Flower is, and fast."

"Expanding scan parameters to alert for Kisenians," the facility stated. That's a smart facility.

While Shario-chan and Meia worked, Ami brought the facility up-to-date on the Silver Millennium – or lack thereof – and discovered that there was some equipment available in storage. While the facility reconfigured to stop scanning for the now-nonexistent Dark Kingdom, we took a look at the available gear.

"We're definitely taking this back to Tokyo with us," Ami said while holding up a box that would just barely fit under my desk.

"What is it?"

"A communications node for the tracking facility network," Ami answered Makoto's question. "We'll get Shario-chan to connect it to your wi-fi, Rob."

"Of course. Once this facility has power back, we'll be in a much better position than we were. Artemis should be happy to have the data."

"Please activate the node," the facility requested. "It is currently set up for Silver Millennium access only. If it is activated, it can be reconfigured to allow native Mau access as well." Right; Luna and Artemis had high-ranking positions in the Silver Millennium, so they'd be in the facility's data banks.

Ami switched it on, to discover the batteries were nearly drained. "We'll need to recharge it as well."

"Near-field recharging in progress. Status update: Space-facing sensors are now at 63% operational status. Earth-facing sensors are now at 12% operational status. Communications are at 24% operational status. Information: Classified update is available."

"Everyone currently in this building has the same security clearance that I have," Ami said.

"Accepted and filed. Continuing. Classified information: Unable to establish connection to tracking facilities at [Moon Castle](#). Condition of the capital is unknown. Unable to establish connection to tracking facilities at Mariner Castle. Condition of the Mercury government is unknown. Unable to establish connection to tracking facilities at Magellan Castle. Condition of the Venus government is unknown. Unable to establish connection to tracking facilities at Phobos Deimos Castle. Condition of the Mars government is unknown. Unable to establish connection to tracking facilities at Dawn Castle. Condition of the Ceres government is unknown. Unable to establish connection to tracking facilities at Io Castle. Condition of the Jupiter government is unknown. Unable to establish connection to tracking facilities at Titan Castle. Condition of the Saturn government is unknown. Unable to establish connection to tracking facilities at Miranda Castle. Condition of the Uranus government is unknown. Unable to establish connection to tracking facilities at Triton Castle. Condition of the Neptune government is unknown. Unable to establish connection to tracking facilities at Charon Castle. Condition of the Pluto government is unknown. Connection established with tracking facilities at Door to Space-Time. Systems put in place by Queen Serenity during the [Sailor Wars](#) to block access to Sol System are at 100% operational status. Exchanging classified data updates with Door to Space-Time."

"Which means Sailor Pluto shouldn't be surprised if we ever need to go there," I commented while pondering what the existence of the Senshi's castles meant.

"Warning: Large number of Kisenian Flowers detected in one group. Their trajectory will be determined in approximately 19,000 seconds."

Makoto looked at Ami and me with a puzzled look on her face.

"Slightly over five Earth hours," I replied.

"I leave math to you two," she commented as Shario-chan and Meia literally popped out of an air vent.

"That's all we can do with the spare parts here," Shario-chan announced as Jupiter caught her. "Thanks."

"Polling Door to Space-Time to obtain list of spare parts available there." This facility was easily at least as smart as Kasandara.

"We'll have to come back later," Ami said. "Princess Serenity is expecting us to return."

I nodded. "Yes, ma'am. Unison Devices, good work today. It's time to go home."

"Initiating Unison and Life Support Mode, sir," Ichiro reported as Jupiter handed Shario-chan to me.

Ten minutes and one Ultra-long-distance Transportation spell later, we were back at Rei-san's shrine.

Five hours later, Shario-chan had connected the communications node to my wi-fi and Ami had tied the Mercury Computer in with the tracking facility communications network.

We decided to get a good night's sleep, have breakfast, go to school, and save the world. In that order.

By the time classes were out, the tracking facility had transmitted to the Mercury Computer an [ephemeris](#) that included the Kisenian pod. Then there was an argument about who would take the fight there.

I lost.

Ami and Meia's version of Ultra-long-distance Transportation imposed massive acceleration on the subjects if it was going to be of use over the distances that the Senshi needed to travel. I assume a TSAB cruiser's transport systems could damp down that acceleration, but we didn't have a TSAB cruiser. And we didn't have enough Intelligent Devices to go around who could use Life Support Mode to make that acceleration survivable.

And after what happened on Rubeus' ship, Usagi-san was only willing to risk one passenger in a Sailor Teleport. That passenger had to be Tuxedo Kamen.

So the six of them went, along with Sakura and Meia in Unison with Jupiter and Mercury. Just before they left, I sent to my dearest, «Have fun storming the castle!»

All she said in reply was, «As you wish.»

And they were gone.

"I hope they'll be alright," Shario-chan said.

"They will be," Small Lady said. "Sailor Moon will look after them. She's everybody's mama."

Save for Luna and Artemis, we all smiled on hearing her comment; we knew whose mother she actually was. "She is, isn't she?" I said. "She's even scolded me once."

"She did?"

"She did," I nodded. "Sometimes mama has to scold the people she loves, because she loves them."

"I don't get it."

"If you make a mistake, would you want somebody to let you make that mistake again?"

"Uh-uh."

"So mama loves you enough to scold you so you won't want to make the same mistake again."

She thought for a moment. "Oh." After a moment, she added "Ikuko-mama must love Usagi-san a lot."

"I'm sure that she does." And I hoped that Small Lady would remember that if she ever met Wiseguy.

The Senshi returned a few hours later, with Moon looking worse for wear.

Once Usagi-san was resting at home with Meia watching over her, my fiancée told me that things had happened close to canon, with Fiore attacking Moon and being stopped by Tuxedo Kamen. Fiore didn't take it well, and tried to suicide while taking the Senshi with him. Moon saved him and destroyed the Kisenian that was controlling him, and would have saved everyone else from dying in Earth's atmosphere at the cost of her own life if it wasn't for Fiore giving the last of his life energy to Mamoru to pass along to her.

Bunny-chan was back in school on Tuesday morning... which was good, because Thursday was the Autumnal Equinox Day holiday. Ryou, Ami, and I were up early to watch the meteor shower, relaying the feed from the Mercury Computer to the Silver Millennium tracking facility at Chacornac.

Between the tracking facility's readings and Ryou's precognition, we determined that three Kisenian Flowers survived atmospheric entry. We went back to Makoto's and my apartment building, woke my dearest and Minako-san, and headed out to clean up the three loose ends.

"Shouldn't we get the others?" Minako-san asked while Makoto and I transformed.

"No. Our opponents may be evil, but the Kisenians are still intelligent beings," I replied. "And we're going to go kill them in cold blood if they're still alive."

"Yeah, Usagi wouldn't like that," she said while transforming to Venus. "But it has to be done."

Jupiter put her hands on Mercury's and my shoulders. "If she finds out, the four of us will be punished in the name of the Moon. And we'll deserve it."

"The five of us," came a voice from behind us. We turned to face Sailor Pluto. "The [Senshi of the Outer Solar System](#) have standing orders from Queen Serenity of the Silver Millennium to protect Earth from incursions from

space. Since three of us have not yet awakened in this reincarnation, I call upon the [Senshi of the Four Guardian Deities](#) to assist me in my sworn duty to the Moon Kingdom."

"Should you be telling us that some Senshi haven't awakened yet?" Venus asked.

"I assumed that you already knew," she replied, looking at me.

"Venus doesn't know who Saturn, Uranus, and Neptune are," I said. "I made a promise that I wouldn't tell anybody who a Senshi is without that Senshi's permission."

Before Pluto could reply, Mercury said, "We would be happy to work with you, Sailor Pluto."

"Since we're acting under orders, we should get started," Jupiter said.

We took the opportunity to teach Pluto Midchildan-style telepathy so we could work silently. With Pluto teleporting us where we needed to go, Venus using the Crescent Beam Saber to uproot a Kisenian in [Changchun](#), Mercury using the Frigid Sword to slice apart a Kisenian in [Vladivostok](#), Jupiter using her electro-quarterstaff to crisp a Kisenian in [Sapporo](#), and me keeping the group invisible while we cleaned up the last of the invasion forces, we managed to accomplish the cleanup without anybody noticing.

Or so we thought at the time.

Then it was the day after the holiday, and we got together for lunch.

The Revealing Of The Lunches showed that Makoto, Minako-san, Ryou, Ami, and I each brought along five homemade cake slices, enough that everybody in the group could choose three. I had never had [wiener apfelkuchen](#) made with Fuji apples before, but Ami's was quite tasty and I was lucky to get a slice; they went fast. Of course I had to take a slice of my fiancée's [yuzu cake](#), and she took a slice of my [rustic peach tart](#) in exchange. My third sweet was a slice of Minako-san's [persimmon loaf](#). Ryou made a [pear coffee cake](#), and Bunny-chan enjoyed a slice of it.

"You're trying to tell us something," Naru-san said around bites of yuzu cake.

"Yeah," my dearest replied. "If anybody hears anything about a new cake viking, call in everyone."

Ichigo-san grinned. "Because you want cake?"

"That, too," Minako-san said.

"We're expecting the Dark Moon to start the next phase of their attack by targeting a cake shop's opening special," I added. "And Makoto thought this was the best way for everybody to remember that."

"I'll remember," Bunny-chan said. "This apple cake is so good, Ami-chan!"

Anyone who can do math should already know that we brought twenty-five sweets for eight people. By consensus, Bunny-chan got the "leftover" slice of persimmon loaf; after all, she was still recovering from what happened on Fiore's seed-pod asteroid.

We discussed the impromptu cake viking at the Conversational English club meeting that afternoon.

"Do you think it'll work?" my dearest asked.

"Only one time in thirteen," Ryou answered. "While it was something like a buffet, Esmerauade didn't take part in it."

Makoto shrugged her shoulders. "Oh, well. At least we got to cook."

After the holiday, Shario-chan asked permission to live with Naru-san for a while.

"Why?" she asked.

"I think you might be able to help me, but I need to teach you how."

Shario-chan also asked for a kilogram of gold. Which we still had, but it was an odd request.

"If I can teach Naru-san sufficiently fine control," she explained, "we can start making some replacement parts for the tracking facility. And the same techniques will let us make spare parts for your laptops." She turned to me. "Yes, even your laptop from 2022."

"That helps everybody," I said. "I'm willing to give up a bit of gold for the Sailor Senshi's benefit, and I don't mind Shario-chan living with the Osakas if they don't mind."

"We have a ridiculous amount of gold," Makoto added. "If we can use it directly, I say we should."

Ami nodded. "Likewise."

"Then it's unanimous," Ryou said.

Thus it was that Shario-chan and a kilogram of gold moved to OSA-P for a while. We only expected to get Shario-chan back.

When I mentioned this to Ichiro later the same day, he reminded me that I wanted him to teach Naru-san some sword and knife techniques.

"I wanted either you or Sakura to teach Naru-san how to fight with a blade," I replied.



"Only Makoto can give Sakura orders," he pointed out.

"That makes sense. I'll set up a training schedule with the Osakas, and help Naru-san with sparring during your lessons."

I woke up halfway through the night with a thought about why else Ichiro might want to train Naru-san while Shario-chan was living with her. After all, Shario-chan and Hayate-chan were the only Unison Devices in this entire reality that Ichiro didn't consider to be siblings, and Hayate-chan looked and thought like Colonel Yagami and thus he might think that she's off-limits.

Then I realized that Shario-chan was an adult by the standards of her home culture and able to take care of herself, and their personal lives were none of my business. So I went back to sleep.

No new cake shops opened in the next three weeks. Nor did we see any green-haired women, friend or foe.

Anxiety about when Esmeraude was going to make her move was replaced by anxiety about the sports fest. And then Minako-san apologized that she was going to miss the club meeting on October 9, the day before the festival. Ami and Ryou smiled at that news but said nothing... which gave Makoto and me a pretty big clue as to why Minako-san needed to leave school early. We didn't spoil the surprise, even after Minako-san came home with a new name plate for Makoto's front door.

"It's official now," she said as she unveiled the plate that read Mizuno Minako. "Saeko-mama gave me this for the house, but I'm keeping the Aino name for school records. My birth mother, and I'm never going to say her name again, is going to be furious when she finds out."

Then Minako-san, Makoto, and I invited Saeko-mama, Ami, and Ryou over for a sukiyaki party. You know, just the family.

And I thought that, since we were all family, I should stop using an honorific when talking to, or about, Minako. When I mentioned that, her only reaction was, "What took you so long to realize that?"

And then it was October 10, [Health and Sports Day](#). We went through all the usual rituals: everybody in attendance was invited to take part in the [warm-up](#), a speech encouraging us to enjoy ourselves was given by a local leader – in this case, Tokyo Metropolitan Police Superintendent Sakurada Natsuna – and a reply promising we would practice fair play was given by the student council president, and we broke into teams. This year, the odd-numbered classes were the red team and the even-numbered classes were the white team.

As the first-year students took part in track races and the third-year students did team sports, our year cheered for our teammates. Minako won that one by leading the second-year red team in an athletic American-style cheer, and Superintendent Sakurada wasn't the only person surprised to hear her referred to by her new name.

Ami proceeded to sweep the second-year track events for the white team, as everybody but Saeko-mama expected.

Second-year tug-of-war lasted for fourteen minutes, and was declared a tie after everybody but the team anchors collapsed from exhaustion, because the anchors were needed on the podium to explain the next game. Why, yes, Makoto and I were the anchors.

And, yes, the next game was Ultimate. Bunny-chan's seven won that one for the red team, and everybody who took part liked the idea of a game where there were no referees and the players were on their honour to admit whether they'd made a foul.

Taken overall, it was too close to call which team won at the end of the day, and I'm sure the teachers arranged things that way on purpose. But looking only at the second year, Ami nearly single-handedly won it for the white team. Yay us!

We got together at Bunny-chan's place the day after the sports fest, to do our weekend homework together.

Ami didn't even open her textbooks; she didn't need to in order to complete the assignments. In ink.

I wasn't so sure of my knowledge; I opened my textbooks and used pencil, just like everybody else.

And over lunch, Small Lady of all people mentioned the brand-new Maxi-5 cake shop. Almost like in canon.

"You know," I commented, "a cake viking is one of the few places that girls usually visit that some guys would like to visit."

"Let's invite Mamo-chan!"

"You don't get to call him 'Mamo-chan', you brat!" And both Usagis headed for the telephone.

Whispering, my fiancée said, "I suppose you want an invitation to go see whether Esmeraude is there. Sure, you can take me on a date."

"Do you want to go, too, Ryou?" Ami asked at the same volume.

He shook his head. "It would be better if Kasandara and I aren't on the front lines."

"I'll pass, too," Ichigo-san said. "I never realized before Mako-chan fought Petz just how dangerous your work is. And I'm on a diet," she added at a more normal volume as Bunny-chan and Small Lady came back into the room.

"You are?" Bunny-chan asked. "I told Mamo-chan that we'd all be there."

"When will we all be there?" Rei-san asked.

"Right away!" Small Lady said as she grabbed her jacket.

"I guess we're going now," Ami sighed as she put her homework into her school bag.

I suggested to Artemis that he didn't want to come along, using the two dreaded words: "pet carrier". He stayed behind with Luna, Ryou, and Ichigo-san.

And so we headed to Maxi-5, meeting Chiba-san just outside the door. He was kind enough to pay for Bunny-chan and Small Lady; I covered the other girls' entry fee. There weren't any tables for nine, which suited both Chiba-san and me just fine. He sat with Bunny-chan, Small Lady, and Rei-san, while I shared a table with Makoto, Ami, Minako, and Naru-san. And, it turned out, Shario-chan, Meia, and Ichiro. Sakura was guarding the gold that day.

Or, at least, that was the plan. We realized that Bunny-chan hadn't made it past the buffet table. She wasn't the only one who was eating directly from the buffet; a taller woman with green hair was matching her slice for slice.

«Usagi!» Ami sent. «Remember the Princess Seminar!»

«Elegance!» my fiancée added.

Bunny-chan stopped eating. "Oh. Excuse me, honored elder," she said to the other woman before leaving, who got visibly upset upon being called "elder" and more upset when she realized she was making a spectacle of herself. She quickly headed for the back room.

"Well, whatever's on the buffet right now is safe, but don't trust anything new," I said.

"That was Esmeraude?" Naru-san asked.

"She fits the canon description," replied Ami as she stood up to get a few cakes.

We all followed her lead, just before a waitress stepped out of the back room and replenished the cake supply.

Then came the hard part: eating slowly and waiting for everybody else to go into trances. Luckily, that only took ten minutes, and eating elegantly while taking part in conversation stretched out our supply of non-tainted cakes for most of that time.

Then it happened: the other patrons of Maxi-5 started freezing in place. Chiba-san threw a platter at the waitress, who dropped her disguise and announced she was named Marzipan.

We took that as our cue to leave through the side doorway, apparently in a panic. "Naru-san, please take care of Small Lady," I asked.

"Of course. You're going back in?"

"Shario-chan didn't make it out. Mirage Hide!"

Ami added, "Neither did Meia," as she transformed to Mercury. The rest of the Senshi transformed and headed back in.

Chiba-san was having trouble; half of the platters within reach were already sugar-frosted and brittle.

Marzipan noticed us, saw Sailor Jupiter, and immediately sprayed rings of marzipan at her. Jupiter ended up trapped and bound in a stack of donuts.

I couldn't resist. As I dodged, I sent, «When I say you look good enough to eat, I don't mean like that, my dearest.»

«I know what you mean, darling. 😊»

«Seriously, you being taken out first means they think you're the dangerous one.»

«Considering what I did to Petz, I *am* the dangerous one. Incoming at 2 o'clock.»

During our exchange, Venus had managed to get herself caught in a full-body decorated cake. «We have to give Venus some speed training,» I sent to Ichiro as I dodged a marzipan stream from my 2 o'clock. Then I noticed that Meia had conjured up a display and Shario-chan was pointing at various things on it.

While Marzipan's attention was on us, Chiba-san finally had a chance to duck out and get changed. Moon was standing, posing, and about to get coated in marzipan when Tuxedo Kamen threw a rose at Marzipan, puncturing one of her two icing bags. "A girl's pure heart is made of sugar, and sometimes sugar melts." A corny line straight out of canon, but it hid the fact that Mercury had already figured out the correct attack.

"Shiny Aqua Illusion!"

And, like the Wicked Witch of the West, Marzipan melted into a puddle. Unlike *The Wizard of Oz*, though, there was a sweetness to this puddle.

As the shop's patrons woke up and Marzipan's restraints faded away, the green-haired woman stepped out of the back room to discover her plan was ruined. "What! How dare you! Well, you may have won this battle, Sailor Senshi, but we will win the war! I am Esmeraude of the Dark Moon!"



I wasn't in the mood to listen to a villain speech. "Colleague of Saphir and subject of Diamande of Nemesis, yes, yes."

"How do you *know* that?"

"That should be obvious, or has your brain become fogged with age?" The taunt had its desired effect on the young-appearing woman. "You travelled back in time because you were chasing another time-traveller. Did you seriously think you were the only ones?"

"Who are you?"

"They call me Oni."

"Oh, yes, one of the Millennium's lackeys, along with Okuni and Onmyōji. None of you are any good in combat." I manifested a staff and telegraphed a thrust at her, which she dodged easily. "Case in point."

I wondered who Okuni was. "At least they trust me, old lady. Does your Wiseguy trust you?"

"Wiseman works for Diamande, just as I do! He does what he's told!"

"Sure, sure, you keep telling yourself that. So are you going to surrender to us, do you want to fight all of us alone, or are you going to run with your tail between your legs?"

"You wait until next time!" She chose to run.

After she left and as we were leaving, Moon asked, "How did you miss her?"

"He let her dodge," Jupiter answered before I could. "A blind man could have seen that attack coming. He also let her jump to a conclusion about where and when he's from."

"And now she thinks I'm less capable than I actually am," I said as I let my disguise spell drop and the others transformed back to their usual identities. "That may come in handy later. Now, what were you two doing during the fight?" I asked Shario-chan and Meia.

"Scanning Marzipan. That droid had a lot of security holes," Shario-chan said as Naru-san took her from me.

"And she wasn't waterproof," Meia added. "I expect that they'll mitigate that with the next droid, though."

"Ichiro," my dearest said, "would you mind spending the night with Naru-san and Shario-chan? I believe my fiancé thinks I'm good enough to eat..." she finished with a grin. I licked my lips in reply.

"I won't wait up for you," Minako said with a matching grin.

"Humph," Rei-san sniffed.

"Naru-chan," Bunny-chan asked, "what are they talking about?"

"Oh, Usagi... I'll tell you later, but not in front of Chibiusa."

I wondered what was going to happen next. In canon, Bunny-chan and Chiba-san got back together, but that's already happened.

Three days later, and I knew what was about to happen when half the class – including Ami – called in sick.

It was the worst possible scenario, as far as everyone's sanity was concerned: we'd skipped straight to "[Venus Minako's Nurse Mayhem](#)".

Insert scare chord here.

At the end of the day, Ichigo-san, Ryou, and I met for a moment; I gave Ami's homework assignments to Ryou, and Ichigo-san gave Makoto's homework assignments to me.

The next day, there was a sign in the school lobby that told all students who had managed to come in to take a seat in class 1 of their year. When the bell rang, class 2-1 contained Sakurada-sensei, Ichigo-san, Minako, Ryou, and me. And Ichigo-san and Sakurada-sensei were wearing masks. There was plenty of room for social distancing, which we adopted as soon as I explained the concept.

"I'm the only second-year teacher who made it in," Sakurada-sensei announced after taking attendance. "And that's only because they begged me. I'll be in the nurse's office if you really need me. Everybody, the entire day is study hall."

After she left, I said, "Okay, I was vaccinated against influenza back in 2022. How are you three still standing?"

"Kasandara has been steering me away from infection vectors," Ryou explained.

"If I let a little thing like the flu slow me down, I could never be a field researcher," Ichigo-san said.

"I never get colds!" Minako announced proudly.

We all looked at her as if she'd grown a second head. Finally, Ryou said, "[That isn't something to be proud of.](#)"

After Ichigo-san explained the superstition, Ryou showed that he'd broken a school rule and brought a guest with him. Specifically, Meia.

"Ami sends her regards to you all and regrets that she cannot attend classes at the moment. Kasandara tells me that I should stay with you for the rest of the day," she announced while floating over to Minako.

"Me? Why?"

"She told me that you'll need my help."

I wondered why – a single Unison Device couldn't possibly offset the oncoming disaster that was Hurricane Minako – but set that aside because everyone else was having a quick talk about what we were going to do in class. Then Ichigo-san led us through an hour of biology, I led us through an hour of English, Ryou led us through an hour of math, and Minako led us through an hour of low-impact P.E. Then it was lunchtime, but just before we could do our usual Revealing Of The Lunches, Principal Takeuchi told us to go home and not bother coming back the next day because the school was going to be closed. Needless to say, there was no Conversational English club meeting that afternoon.

"Want to go home together?" I asked Minako.

"Do you mind if we stop along the way? Mako-chan and I need some groceries."

"We'd better eat lunch first, then." So we did, and then we bought enough food for a few days.

As we climbed the stairs to our apartments, Minako said, "I wish there was something I could do to help everybody else."

Remembering what *that* meant from canon, I quickly replied, "Ichiro and I don't need any help right now, Minako. Thanks anyway."

Ten minutes later, just as I finished texting Ami with a warning that her new sister wanted to "help", I received a thought from my fiancée. «Rob! Help! She's wrecking my kitchen!»

"Ichiro, mind the house!"

"Yes, sir. And good luck." Apparently he'd heard Makoto, too.

Luckily, they'd left their door unlocked. Unluckily, I took a bowl of hot [okayu](#) to the face as I opened the door. Not on purpose – Minako had tripped – but it was only because I reflexively put up a forcefield that I avoided being burned by the boiling water that she'd used to make it.

"I'm so sorry..." Minako said as she stood up.

"Maybe I should take care of my dearest," I volunteered.

«Oh, *thank you!*» she sent to me.

"Would you?" Minako asked. "That will let me help one of the others!"

Just then, my cellphone beeped. I pulled it out, looked at the text message, and showed it to Minako, saying "Ryou is at Ami's place."

"I'll go help Rei, then!" And she was out the door, Meia quickly following her.

As the door closed behind them, my dearest said, "I feel sorry for Rei."

"So do I, but it's canon," I replied as I picked up the bowl that had almost hit me. "We're going to have to replace this," I said, holding it up to show the crack that went halfway down the side. "You call Rei-san and warn her; I'll clean up. Why didn't Sakura prevent all this?"

"She's at the shrine, guarding our gold today."

"I think Rei-san needs guarding more than the gold does right now."

When I finished cleaning up Makoto's apartment and making a list of the damage, Rei-san called back and let us know that Hurricane Minako was on her way to the Tsukino residence.

"I have to go," I told Makoto as Ichiro Unisoned with me. "I'm sorry."

"I know. Good luck."

It was a good thing that I was used to going invisible while flying; I was able to approach the Tsukino residence without being seen, which meant I was able to catch Small Lady as she overbalanced while hanging sheets to dry on the balcony. In canon, Bunny-chan caught her... but here, Bunny-chan was talking with Makoto on the phone. I went visible as I grabbed Chibiusa.

"Robu-niisan! Thank you!" Small Lady held onto me for dear life as I landed.

We met Minako at the front door. "Rob? Why are you carrying Chibiusa?"

I let her answer. "I was hanging the laundry out to dry. One of the sheets was too big for me and I fell over the railing."

When she didn't continue, I added, "And I was in the right place at the right time. Now, what are you doing here? I thought you were going to Rei-san's place."

"Oh, Rei was happier with me once I was gone."

Small Lady tightened her hold on me. Smart girl.

"Ah. Well, shall we go in and let Bunny-chan know that we're here? I assume Small Lady would be able to let us in without knocking."

At this point, Bunny-chan leaned over the railing of the balcony where the laundry was drying. "I heard a shout. Is everybody okay?"

"I'm okay! Go back to bed!"

"Small Lady, please don't shout in my ear."

"Sorry!" She finally let go of me, and I let her stand on her own. She let us in, and I talked with Ikuko-san for a moment.

Then I headed upstairs. "Small Lady, Ikuko-san tells me that she's run out of flu medicine. Can you get more for her, please? I'll finish hanging the laundry."

"Maybe I should go," Minako said. "We don't want anybody thinking they're filming an episode of Hajimete no Otsukai, after all."

"Mina-chan," Bunny-chan asked, "do you even know where the hospital is?"

"Of course I do! My new mother works there! It's... er..."

I sighed. "Small Lady, would you show Minako how to find her mother's workplace from here, please?"

"I can do that!" And the competent girl took the hand of the middle-school student and lead her downstairs.

As they left, I turned to my companion. "Ichiro, you and I are going to finish hanging the laundry out to dry. Then we're going to follow the ladies. Meia is with them."

"Certainly, Rob."

As Ichiro headed for the balcony, Bunny-chan said, "You've said more than once that you trust Chibiusa."

"I do. It's Minako that I'm worried about."

The laundry took longer than I expected; we didn't get to Juban Daini General Hospital until after Minako and Chibiusa were already inside.

After I landed but before I went visible, Meia sent a distress message. «There is a droid in the hospital!»

"Mirage Hide!" I went full Oni in appearance. «Ichiro, stay in Unison! Meia, where are you?»

«We are inside the public dispensary on the ground floor.»

It didn't take us long to find the dispensary, or to see the unconscious staff – including Saeko-mama – in one of the back rooms. Then we found Small Lady, Venus, Meia, Esmeraude, and the droid of the week... Pharmakon, I remembered.

Venus was pinned to the wall with syringes. Esmeraude was holding Small Lady down. Pharmakon was trying to get close enough to inject Small Lady with something. Meia... was *awesome*.

"I shall not let you pass," she announced, holding a full-sized Frigid Blade with both hands and swinging it both effortlessly and effectively. Alas, Pharmakon was regenerating the damage as fast as she was taking it, but at least she wasn't hurting Small Lady.

«I had no idea that Meia could do that.»

«We are all rated as TSAB combat instructors, Rob.»

«I would appreciate some help, gentlemen,» Meia sent to us as she swung her sword at Pharmakon and cast a spell at the same time. "Frigid Dagger!" That, she sent Esmeraude's way, keeping her too busy to simply kill Small Lady.

«Drop out of Unison and keep Esmeraude busy, Ichiro. I'll let the droid try to pick on somebody her own size.» He did so as I dropped the vision cloak. «Meia, you and Shario-chan spent a lot of time examining Marzipan.»

«I believe I know what you want me to do, sir.»

I was glad one of us did. «Do it.» I turned my attention to Pharmakon. "I'm your opponent now!"

The droid shot some syringes at me, which I deflected with a forcefield shield. I heard a ruckus behind me, and then suddenly Small Lady was beside me. "Stay still, Small Lady." I dropped a forcefield bubble around her as I formed a forcefield sword of my own; Meia had dropped hers.

Then I was using my sword to parry syringes as Pharmakon launched them at me. And then I wasn't, as Meia said, "I have finished."

"Finished what, you annoying little Device?" Esmeraude asked while dodging Ichiro's blade.

"You sought to spread a virus from this place for your own purposes. In exchange, I have given your droid a virus of our own."

At that point, I heard the sound of crystal shattering in the corner of the room. I risked taking a look; there were pieces of a small figurine all over the floor.

"Curse you!"

By the time I had turned back, Esmeraude was gone. "Oh, that isn't fair. She's supposed to announce that she's leaving, not just complain." Then I turned to Pharmakon. "So, how do you feel?"

"Much better now that I am not attempting to follow conflicting programming to both heal and harm, sir." I noticed that her skin looked more human-like and all of the sharp edges on her chassis were smoothing out; Pharmakon was looking more human with every second that passed.

"Meia...?" I started, to discover she wasn't in the room any more. Then she was, with Saeko-mama following close behind her. "Ah, there you are, Meia. How are you feeling, sensei?"

"I'm the only one who's awake, Robu-kun. Meia's letting everyone else sleep off the hypnosis spell that was cast on us."

"Ah. In that case, how are you feeling, Saeko-mama?" I asked while dropping both my disguise and the forcefield around Small Lady.

"I'm fine. Are all of you doing well?"

"Oh, sure, I'm just hanging around," Venus said from where she was still pinned to the wall.

I grinned as we walked over to her and I created a forcefield box for her to stand on. "You know, when my classmates say they have Sailor V on their wall, they mean a poster."

"Oh, very funny," she replied sarcastically as Small Lady and I started pulling the syringes out of the wall and her clothes.

"I don't like these," Small Lady said.

"I will dispose of them for you," offered Pharmakon.

"Thanks... er, do you have a name?" Small Lady asked.

"As a droid, I am called Pharmakon. As a person, I do not have a name."

"Yet." I added while pulling another syringe out of Venus's uniform. "Do you have a preference for your name?"

She thought for a moment. "I wish to serve Neo-Queen Serenity. Can I have a name that reflects that?"

"Sailor Moon is Princess Serenity," Saeko-mama said. "Would Mochizuki be acceptable?"

"Moon desire?" Ichiro asked in English. "That would be an excellent family name."

"And I can use 'Ka' as a given name, since I am one."

"Simply calling yourself 'nurse' lacks a certain amount of humanity, though," I pointed out.

Meia smiled. "Perhaps you might appreciate the name 'Ka'o'." Ichiro smiled along with her. I wondered what I was missing.

"I do believe I would." Pharmakon turned back to Small Lady and bowed. "My name is Mochizuki Ka'o. I am happy to meet you."

Small Lady bowed back. "I'm Usagi Small Lady Serenity. But only Robu-niisan and Puu call me Small Lady here; everyone else calls me Chibiusa. It's good to meet you, Ka'o-neesan."

We heard sounds of movement coming from the next room over. "I'd best see to my colleagues," Saeko-mama announced. "You, too, Mochizuki-san." Seeing the surprised look on the droid's face, she added, "If you're a nurse who's working here, then you're assisting me until we figure out which department to put you in full-time."

"And we'd best get out from underfoot," I added while pulling the last syringe out of Venus' outfit and helping her down safely. "Meia, Ichiro, if you'll ride in our pockets, the five of us will be on our way."

"We still need flu medicine," Small Lady insisted.

"Right," Minako said. "We'll get that from the nurse on duty on the way out."

So we did, and we started walking back to the Tsukino home.

We got halfway there before Small Lady stopped. "Hey!"

"What?" Minako asked.

"Saeko-basan wouldn't lie to me, would she?"

"I've never known her to lie to anybody," Minako said.

"And she said that Sailor Moon is Princess Serenity."

"Yeah, I told her that when she was tending to my wounds after we fought Rubeus."

"But Usagi is Sailor Moon, so Usagi is Princess Serenity. And Princess Serenity grows up to become Neo-Queen Serenity. And she's my mama. But that means... *Usagi is my mama?*"

Well, at least Small Lady had deductive logic down pat. "That's right," I said. "Ichiro, I'm ordering you to keep that secret until after Bunny-chan finds out from Small Lady or somebody else who isn't here."

"Yes, sir," Ichiro acknowledged.

"Meia, Minako, I'm asking you to do the same."

"I can do that, sure," Minako said.

"I see the need to keep this private," Meia added. "It isn't my secret to tell her. I will abide by your wishes."

"Thanks," Small Lady said. "But now I have to live with knowing that."

\* \* \*

Sunday arrived, and Ryou enlisted us to help him move 300 kg of our gold from Rei's shrine to Setsuna's car. We had to pack the car carefully so that its suspension wouldn't sag unevenly.

Ami wasn't with us; she said that Naru-san needed her help talking with Bunny-chan. I didn't catch everything she said to Makoto, but it included "she's old enough that she needs to know all this by now" and "what is Ikuko-san thinking?" Given that, I didn't really want to know what they had to talk about, even though it was pretty obvious.

So Yuuichirou-san helped us with the physical work.

"Do you want my family to buy any of this?" he asked.

"I thought you wanted a simpler life than what the Kumada family lived," Rei-san replied.

"Simpler both physically and spiritually, yes. That's why I'm grateful to your grandfather for letting me live and work here." He turned to us. "I really don't understand why you'd want to become rich."

"That's because you've always been rich," Ryou said. "It's a lot easier to walk away from money than it is to get it in the first place."

Makoto nodded in agreement. "And legally buying gold where it's inexpensive and selling it where it's expensive is a much better way to become rich than the alternatives. I'm going to have enough money to open a cake and flower shop when I turn 20, but..."

After a moment, I walked over and gave her a hug. "But you'd rather have your family."

"Yeah."

"Go sit down; we'll finish up here," Rei-san offered.

"No, that's okay. Grief won't bring them back." She picked up a box and headed for Setsuna's car.

We all saw the need to change the subject. Ryou thought of something first. "Rob, how many more droids do we have to worry about?"

"None, if Meia and Shario-chan can hack into them. But I doubt Saphir will leave those backdoors open now that Esmeraude has no doubt told him that we've used one. If things go according to canon, there will be one at the Animal Kingdom petting zoo, then one at Ami's juku, then two at the same time, one at Small Lady's school and one in a public park. Then we all go to the future."

"No, you don't," Setsuna declared. "Because of the carnage of the Sailor Wars during the Silver Millennium, the Door to Space-Time is restricted to the use of Senshi and royalty only. The only exceptions are Artemis and Luna. Ichiro, Kasandara, Okuni, Oni, Onmyōji and Shario-chan must not use it."

"But Meia, Sakura, and Hayate-chan can?" my dearest asked.

"What Sailor Pluto cannot see, Sailor Pluto cannot stop." Setsuna winked. "Although she can see the difference between pink hair and auburn hair."

"And it's an earlier version of you guarding the Door to Space-Time," I added. "Presumably she doesn't know about Unison Devices yet."

"So I'm not going," Hayate-chan said. "Meioh-san just said as much."

"By the way," I asked, "just who is Okuni? That's the second time I've heard that name."

"I don't know whether I should tell you that," Setsuna replied. Then she showed that I had been a bad influence on her. "But I will. [Okuni](#) is she who wears the firmament, who has the visage of a virtuous and handsome warrior, who wields blades of diamond, and who in another reality would have been called Sailor Earth."

That was a surprise. "Naru-san?"

"Do you know anybody else with powers, Robu-san?" Rei-san asked.

"Just because I don't know anyone else with powers doesn't mean they aren't out there," I replied while thinking of the Senshi who I hadn't yet met. "And that box goes directly under the driver's seat, not the passenger seat, my dearest."

"Oh, right."

"Well, that's one mystery cleared up. Ryou, why were you asking about canon? You know we do our best to change it for the better." Setsuna scowled at my comment, but said nothing.

"Because Kasandara and I are foreseeing four different attacks being launched at the same time, seven times out of eleven."

Even Setsuna was surprised by that.

"The same four that I mentioned?" He nodded. "When?" I asked while loading the last box into Setsuna's trunk.

"Thursday. Or possibly Friday."

"We're going to be spread thin. Hayate-chan...?" I started.

"I'll stay with Small Lady until she leaves for Crystal Tokyo. Ichiro, you're with me; we need to teach her enough to stay alive in the middle of an all-out melee and then defend her once it starts, and we'll need Usagi-san the day of the attack. Ami, Meia, Ryou, and Rob will take the cram school. Minako-san, Luna, Artemis, Makoto, and Sakura get the petting zoo."

Our resident strategist was obviously just waiting for a chance to give the rest of us our orders. Not being stupid, we took them.

"What about me?" Rei-san asked.

"You get the hard job. We're deliberately setting you up to fail in the park. I'm not even going to tell you which park it is. That Dark Point *must* be opened before Chibiusa can go home, but we can't let them know that we know that."

"What? *Why?*"

I sighed. "Because the Dark Moon needs a victory in order to take their attention away from the Door to Space-Time until it's too late to stop you from using it."

"If I wasn't a miko and thus doing my best to remain pure, I'd swear right now."

"Would you like us to swear for you?" Ryou asked.

"Not on the shrine grounds."

Monday came, followed by Tuesday and then Wednesday. The Revealing Of The Lunches showed that Bunny-chan had high-carb, high-protein lunches all three days.

"I thought you were an oni," she told me on Wednesday. "But you have nothing on Ichiro-san."

"Is his training that bad?" Naru-san asked.

"He spent an entire day teaching me and the brat how to fall! I don't know why. There's nothing hard about falling."

"If you fall the wrong way," Ami explained, "you could break a bone. It's best to know how to fall properly."

"Oh!"

"I have some good news," Ami continued. "The tracking facility in Chacornac has focused its working Earth-facing sensors on the [Kantō Plain](#)."

"That *is* good news," I said. "I can't think of any enemy that shows up somewhere else before we graduate from middle school."

"Can we use that to find our enemies before they find us?" Ichigo-san asked.

Bunny-chan smiled. "You said 'our enemies', not 'your enemies'. Thank you."

"And I believe that we can," Ami added, "as long as we know what we're looking for. I've already set up the system to scan for both unidentified flying objects and Dark Points. However, we can't locate a new enemy until after we've analyzed their first few attacks."

We were going to hate that once the Death Busters showed up, but that's a story for another day.

My dearest asked, "Can we tell Rei where her target is going to be... is it still tomorrow, Ryou?"

"The probability that it's tomorrow has risen to nineteen times out of twenty-one."

"And yes," added Ami. "Although Hayate-chan said that we weren't going to tell her."

"Hayate-chan should know by now what Rob and I think of following rules," Makoto said. I nodded in agreement. "Everybody else is going to fight as part of a team. She's going alone. No backup. No reserve force. Tell me with a straight face that Hayate-chan expects us to let that happen."

"Even if she will," Naru-san said, "I won't. Ichiro-san has been training me how to use my swords; I can at least cover Rei's retreat if she needs to make one."

"Thank you so much, Naru," Usagi-san said.

Ami handed Naru a folded piece of paper, showing that she agreed with us. "That's the bus route to get to the park where the Dark Point is. Chacornac could only find four Dark Points, and we already knew where the other three were." Then she coughed loudly. Ryou did the same a moment later.

And then we were paged to the school office. All of us, except for Ichigo-san.

When we got there, we discovered that Sakurada-sensei was talking with Superintendent Sakurada and Saeko-mama. "You're hiding something from me, Natsuna, I know it. Why these students?"

"As I have already explained to the school principal," Saeko-mama replied, "some of them were at the hospital during the influenza outbreak and were not treated properly, and the others are known to associate with the ones who might be carriers."

"And Tokyo can't afford to have another outbreak so soon after the last one, Haruna," our teacher's sister added.

"We have to get them out of here and test them. I'll send someone to pick up their homework assignments."

"Is there something wrong with us, sensei?" Minako asked from the doorway.

"We hope not," Sakurada-sensei said. "This is just a precaution. But I have both medical and public safety instructions to let all of you out of school for up to a week."

Saeko-mama walked over and handed masks to all of us.



"While we're still deciding what to do for the [cultural festival](#)?" Ichigo-san asked.

"You haven't decided yet?" her homeroom teacher asked from his desk. "You're running out of time."

"I'm counting on you to push my suggestion through," Makoto said while putting her mask on. I quickly followed suit.

We were lead out to an unmarked passenger van and told to get in. Then Superintendent Sakurada took the wheel, with Saeko-mama sitting beside her.

"That gives you a week, just as Urawa-san requested," Superintendent Sakurada said. "Go kick some Dark Moon butt, Sailor V."

"Yes, ma'am!" Minako replied. "But I'm still not working for the Tokyo Metropolitan Police."

"Maybe not now, you aren't, but I'm not going to stop asking." After a moment, she added, "Are any of the rest of you interested in joining the Tokyo Metropolitan Police? I can arrange a recommendation to a good university."

"We're still a little young for that," Ryou replied diplomatically.

We were dropped off at the hospital, and Saeko-mama personally tested all of us. An hour later, Meia and Ami healed Minako of the flu that she was beginning to suffer from... so it was a reasonable precaution after all.

And then it was Thursday, and all four of Esmeraude's remaining plans went off at the same time.

"This is going to be difficult for you," Ryou said as we approached OK Shingaku Juku.

Ami nodded. "Yes, they're going to play to our fears as much as possible. But I'm reminded of something the Jewish people say: 'Yea, thou I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for thou art with me.'"

"The 'thou' in that line is God, not some fallible mortal like either of us," I pointed out.

"And we're nowhere near as powerful as a kami," Ryou added with a smile.

"You two," Ami complained while opening the door to the juku, "don't give me self-doubt by pointing out things right when I need to be at my most confident."

"Sorry," we said as one of the juku's teachers approached us.

"Mizuno-san, it might be best if you were not to attend classes today."

"May I ask why?"

"Your classmates are unhappy with your progress, and I must agree with some of their concerns. We all heard about the results of your school's sports festival. You were never that good before your Canadian friend arrived; there is some question as to whether you're following in the footsteps of [Ben Johnson](#)."

"I am that Canadian friend, sir," I said before she could reply, "And I must object to that slander. Listening to baseless rumours does you no credit, sir." I stared directly at the teacher. "I would have expected teachers to be able to prevent the spread of malicious statements in their classes," I added, knowing that I wasn't making any friends here.

"Unless you are a student here, I have to ask you to leave."

I nodded. "I most certainly will not become a student here, nor will I be recommending your establishment to others. Good day, sir." I turned on my heel, walked away, ducked into an alleyway, and went invisible.

By the time I was back, Ryou was leaving the building. He held the door for me.

Ami followed the teacher to the juku's office. The teacher went in first, then left Ami waiting for a half-minute. Normally, that would be passive-aggressive bullying, but I took the opportunity to let her know I was there, and she passed Meia to me before the two of us headed for the classrooms.

I waited for a moment to make sure nobody followed us in, then I dropped my invisibility cloak and looked out the classroom's window, admiring the view for a moment.

"I wonder how we're going to win," I muttered.

"You can't possibly figure that out," I heard Ryou say from behind me. I hadn't heard him come in.

"Why not?"

"You leave all the heavy thinking to Sailor Mercury. You couldn't come up with a plan without looking through all that canon material you brought back."

"Hey, that's not fair. I've come up with plenty of plans on my own."

"And how many people died because of those plans? Mercury? Jupiter? Sato-san? How many more?"

"I couldn't stop any of those!" I cried, just before I picked up on the mistake. Ryou didn't know Sato-san's name. The droid Giwaku was playing with my emotions. I wondered whether Ryou was even in the room.

Just then, the door opened and Mercury walked in. "You killed me, Oni, because you had to keep your precious data to yourself. It's a good thing for you that Sailor Moon brought me back so you don't have to wallow in self-pity, isn't it? Honestly, I don't know what Jupiter sees in you, gaijin."

«Did you just call me "gaijin"?» I sent to Ami.

«No, I usually say gaikokujin. Did you just call me "ugly nerd"?» she sent back.

«No. You're beautiful, and not nerdy except for all your reading.» I glared at her for appearances' sake. "You keep Jupiter out of this!"

She glared back at me. "I'll talk about whoever I want! Including that brainless bimbo!" «You can't have said that about my mother. Meia, where's the droid that's making us mishear each other?»

«W.A.S. in progress.»

"You dare?" I raised my arm and manifested a showy, glowing forcefield around my fist.

"Don't take that tone with me!" She raised her hands to her upper torso, looking like she was about to launch a Shiny Aqua Illusion.

«Target found! Two meters outside the centre window!» Meia announced.

I turned on my heel, punched the window so it shattered, then ducked.

"Frigid Blade!" A half-dozen ice daggers flew to the window, three of them breaking the glass and the other three hitting Giwaku. Other than cutting its antennae off, the blades had no effect... but she needed those antennae to use her powers.

"Thanks, Mercury. My turn." I used a variant of the hammer-and-anvil technique that I'd used against Zoicite so long ago, but with Giwaku's torso instead of a hand trapped between the surfaces. And I'd become much better with my forcefields over two years of TSAB training.

The droid didn't survive being pounded into two pieces.

«School staff approaching,» Meia warned us as I heard a crystal shatter above us.

"Thanks. Mirage Hide!"

I just barely had my usual disguise on when two people raced into the room. "What's going on in here? And why is that window broken?"

"I'm terribly sorry about that," I said, "but it was necessary. Sailor Senshi business. Here, this should cover the cost of the repairs." I slowly pulled a leather pouch out of one of my pockets, opened it, and dropped a single gold ingot onto a desk without touching the ingot. As I put the pouch back in my pocket, I saw Meia take hold of Mercury. "And now we must be on our way." I jumped out the broken window, followed by Mercury.

She landed on her feet. I landed on a triple-layer soft forcefield. I made us both invisible as she helped me to my own feet. "Meia, I heard a crystal shatter. Did we secure the Dark Point?"

"I believe that we did, yes."

"Then let's meet up with Ryou and get out of here. Maybe we can help somebody else."

But we were too late to help anyone else, as we discovered when we returned to Rei-san's shrine.

We made our reports to Hayate-chan. Apparently, Ami heard me calling her ugly and a showoff, like her mother, and claiming Makoto was more feminine than either of them were.

"Ouch. That's nasty," Ryou commented.

As for the other three Dark Points, I only know what I heard from the people who were there.

"I hate Dark Power," Artemis said during the after-action debriefing. "Kittens were beating me up with their bare paws. *Kittens!*"

"You did pretty good for somebody with no combat training at all who was outnumbered," Sakura said.

"And you can add 'defender of Sailor Venus' to your titles," Minako added.

«I'll tell you what really happened when we're alone later, darling,» my dearest sent to me. «For now, let's leave it at "he did his best and didn't embarrass himself".»

"I was quite impressed with how well the young miss Usagi fought today," Ichiro told me. "She was able to hold her own against most of her classmates, losing only to a girl named Momohara Momoko. Rob, her moonbeams –"

"I know," I said, cutting him off. "We don't dare say anything about them to anyone else."

"You've repeatedly said that you trust her."

"I trust her to figure it out for herself. If we say anything, Wiseguy might learn the truth from what we tell her."

"Ah. That would be strategically unsound. I will keep my observations to myself, then. And that also explains why we haven't given her additional training; best not to train someone who might become our opponent."

"I wouldn't mind getting some of your training, when one of you can fit me in," Rei-san said from one of the comfortable chairs. "Even after having been healed by Ami while Meia healed Naru, I still hurt."

"I've got this request," Sakura volunteered. "I'm better at teaching unarmed than you are, [aniki](#)." Ichiro nodded in agreement.

"Thank you." Rei-san turned to Naru-san. "Where did you get that dress that you wore when you pulled your sword out of wherever it came from?"

I'd never seen Naru-san in a dress, except for that one time when she was turned into a youma. I wondered whether it was the same dress.



"It's my fighting clothing, like that seifuku is yours," Naru-san replied from another comfortable chair, with Ka'o fussing around her arm. "It's part of the transformation. And I made the sword on the spot. That's why it exploded."

"Exploded?!" I wasn't the only one who asked. Although that explained why she needed a nurse.

"I tried to use that crystal figurine in the sword. I learned the hard way that my power and Dark Power don't like each other. I don't think I can take part in the next mission."

"And I ended up covering your retreat, instead of the other way around," Rei-san added.

"I'm sorry about that."

"Don't be," Hayate-chan said. "We needed that Dark Hinge to take form. You gave Mars a valid reason to break off your attack instead of throwing the fight."

"So, now what?" Minako asked.

"Now, we let Chibiusa know that she can go home," Hayate-chan replied. "Go get some sleep; you'll need it."

"You aren't coming with us?" Rei-san asked.

"We can't," I replied. "Sailor Pluto won't let us. There's only nine tickets for that ride, and two of them are for Mau."

That evening, we introduced Small Lady to the joys of a sukiyaki party. I made sure that she knew this was something we only did with friends who are so close that we think of them as family... not just because she *was* as close as family, but also as something she could remember if Wiseguy got his hooks into her.

The next morning, we saw them off. "Come back safely, my dearest." Then I turned to Small Lady. "And I'm sorry that I can't come along. Plu says I'm not allowed."

"She's a meanie."

"No, she has a good reason for leaving somebody here to watch the Dark Hinge." I took her hands in my own, gently. "Small Lady, please remember that I will always be your friend and that I trust you. And don't talk with strange people, okay?" I added while I let go of her hands. Hey, it was worth a try.

"Chibiusa!" Usagi-san called before Small Lady could reply. "Are you ready?"

"Coming!" She raced over to the others, who had already transformed, and used the Key to Space-Time to open the Door to Space-Time.

And then they were gone.

"How long will they be in the future?" Naru-san asked.

"According to canon," I replied, "four episodes. Maybe just today, maybe they'll stay until tomorrow."

"Can't they come back just after they left?" asked Ichigo-san.

I shook my head. "No. This method of time travel synchronizes duration. If they stay for six hours, they come back six hours after they left."

"You were gone for two years but came back only a few minutes later."

"We were gone to a different reality altogether," Ryou said. "There was no connection between that reality and this one until we made one."

Funny how Ryou always knows what to say, however many times out of however many.

"So what do we do in the meantime?"

"You could practice your swordsmanship," suggested Ichiro.

Hayate-chan shook her head. "Naru-san isn't the type who loses herself in acts of destruction. Although you could practice making your swords," she suggested while looking at Naru-san.

"We could catch up on our homework while we're supposedly in quarantine," I said.

"*You* can," Ichigo-san said. "I'm not quarantined; I have to go to school. 'Bye!'"

"So," Ryou asked me, "how many episodes are left until the end of the series?"

"It's the start of episode 82 now. In canon, they win decisively in episode 88. Then there's the clip show episode 89. The entire series ends with episode 200."

"With a happy-ever-after ending?" Naru-san asked. "Or is this like *Minky Momo*?"

"If this was a straight close parallel to the anime without me in it, then we would get a happy ending. But I'm here and I've started seeing some manga elements in this reality, so there's a chance that we're going to get a bittersweet ending instead."

"How far forward do I need to look?"

"Somewhere in the first year of high school, Ryou."

\* \* \*

Ryou, Naru-san, and I spent a half day doing our homework. Then we let Saeko-mama give us medical checkups to make sure we weren't contagious... and so she could stay busy instead of thinking about Ami. And Minako.

Then we worried. Nobody was back yet. I practically leapt on the distraction of the express delivery of a handwritten letter of apology from the headmaster of OK Shingaku Juku, for the way I had been treated while visiting. Hand-writing an acceptance of his apology and taking it to the convenience store to express-mail it to the headmaster kept me busy for almost an hour.

Ryou and I made meatloaf sandwiches for dinner, just like Makoto and Ami had made so many times on Midchilda. Hayate-chan made sure we had vegetables with the sandwiches, but not carrots. Naru-san brought ice cream and cake.

Alas, having a fusion of Makoto's and Ami's favourite foods, avoiding Usagi-san's least favourite food, and following up with Usagi-san's favourite dessert, didn't bring them back any faster. I was starting to think that [sympathetic magic](#) simply didn't work in this reality.

None of us slept well that night.

Then it was October 24 – not quite the new moon, but a bad omen nonetheless.

And the Chacornac tracking facility alerted us over breakfast to a UFO hovering near the Dark Hinge. *That* worried me more than anything else had in the last twenty-four hours. I hoped that it was only Saphir, Diamande, and Wiseguy aboard, but I knew the stupid genre conventions and assumed Dark Lady was with them.

"I'm still not a front-line fighter," Ryou commented before I could ask him anything.

"And my match against Esmeraude a few days ago showed that I'm not a front-line fighter, either," Naru-san added. "Yet."

I smiled on hearing her addition, then turned to the Unison Devices who had not made the trip to the future. "Who's with me?"

"I am, of course, Rob," Ichiro replied immediately.

"So am I," Hayate-chan added.

Shario-chan shook her head. "I'm not a fighter. I'll stay here with Ryou, Kasandara, and Naru."

"Rob, can we borrow your good laptop?" Ryou asked.

"Why?"

"I have a hunch that we're going to need it."

"Six times of seven," Kasandara added.

I pulled my 2022 laptop out of storage, switched it on, and plugged in the drive that the first Shario-chan gave me back in Midchilda. "And I have a hunch that you want the *big* drive."

"Seven times of eight," Kasandara confirmed.

"Don't break or delete anything, okay?" I turned to the other Devices. "Ichiro, let's Unison now and fly there. Hayate-chan, will you ride in my pocket?"

"I'll take you up on that," she said as I went invisible. "I'll save my energy for the fight that we're no doubt about to have."

The Dark Hinge had grown overnight; it was larger than any of the building around it. I ignored it and started looking for the UFO.

«Do you see a distortion, just over there?» Ichiro asked.

«You think that that's them?» I asked in reply.

«Who else would it be?» asked Hayate-chan.

«Me,» Setsuna... no, Sailor Pluto sent from inside the distortion. «Diamande's ship is over there,» she added, sending us a string of vectors.

«It's good to know you're here,» I sent back. «I thought you didn't meddle the way that I like to.»

«The Setsuna in Crystal Tokyo insisted.»

Oh, dear. «I have a bad feeling about this.»

«Time to land,» Hayate-chan sent. «Somebody just teleported.»

As we headed for the ground, I sent to Pluto, «Since when could you become invisible?»

«Since you taught me.»

I hadn't done that yet. «Ask a silly question... Aw, crap.» That last was because I saw who had teleported in. «And I tried my best to make sure she didn't talk to strangers, too. Where are the Senshi?»

«They're on their way,» Pluto replied as we landed.

"I wondered when I was going to meet you, Oni," Small Lady... no, Dark Lady said. "You can't stop me."

"I remember when we met," I said. "Kooan was hunting for you, and I kept you safe from her. And later, you first saw me as Oni during the big fight."

"I remember when we met, too," Hayate-chan said as she left my pocket. "And I remember what happened when Rubeus died."

"That..." Dark Lady looked confused. "I almost remember that... why can't I remember?"

Pluto became visible. "Somebody has been tampering with your memories, Small Lady."

"Don't call me that! I'm Dark Lady!"

"Is that the name you want, though?" Hayate-chan asked. "Or is that a name somebody else gave you for his own purposes?"

"That's... Aaaaaaargh!" She dropped to her knees in pain.

"Please, let us help you!" Pluto all but begged.

"*NO!* You're using me, too!"

Just then, there was a pop of air and six people dropped out of a hole in the sky. "Spread out and... No." Moon's voice trailed off.

"Oh, no," Mars said. "What did they do to you, Chibiusa?"

"How many times do I have to say it? I'm Dark Lady!"

"You sound like a petulant little brat," Venus said with a glare.

"Hey! Nobody gets to call me 'brat' except for... for... who?"

She was sill in there somewhere; our only hope to solve this without violence was to reach the Small Lady who was trapped inside Dark Lady.

"Please, Chibiusa, stop this! If you let this happen, what will happen to Momoko-chan and all your other friends?"

*"I have no friends!"*

At this point, Mercury pushed something into my hand. "Where's Sharior-chan?"

"At my place –"

"Transporter!"

And suddenly Ichiro and I were back home.

"You're back already?" Naru-san asked.

"What the Hell did Ami do that for? They need us there, not here!"

«Sir,» Ichiro sent to both Sharior-chan and me, «what did she give us?»

I looked at what was in my hands. "It's her tiara," I said in tones of wonder.

«She was wearing her tiara,» Ichiro pointed out.

"Oh, give me that," Sharior-chan said. I did, and she popped the gem out of its mounting to reveal a USB-C port. "I thought I saw that in our scans. Well, that explains why we needed the 2022 laptop." She plugged it in and looked at the file structure; there was a file named PLAYME.mp4 and a folder named "COPY THIS".

Sharior-chan fired up VLC Media Player and played the MP4 while she started the file copy.

The video showed a gorgeous young woman – either a young Saeko-mama or a grown-up Ami. "Hello, Sharior-chan, Ichiro, and Rob," she said. She was obviously not Saeko-mama. "Sharior-chan, it's vitally important that you finish the download before Chibiusa returns home. Rob and Ichiro, we have one chance to end this with only Wiseman dying." Future Ami smiled. "Listen very carefully, I shall say this only once."

Unlike the characters in *'Allo 'Allo!*, we shut up and listened.

The recording finished with Future Ami saying "... and don't think that you can't. I know you're only a Rank C mage, Rob, and Ichiro's Rank B, but in Unison you add up to a Rank B+ mage. Use the coordinates I just gave you; Hayate knows the spell."

"Is there any spell that Hayate doesn't know?" I muttered as I very quickly looked through her brainprint and found it. "B+ is the bare minimum rank for the spell. Shall we?"

«Ami thinks we can do it,» Ichiro replied. «Let's.»

"Just in case... Sharior-chan, Naru-san, Ryou, if this doesn't work, Makoto gets everything I own."

"I understand. Good luck, both of you." Sharior-chan went back to downloading data from the tiara as Ichiro followed Future Ami's instructions to the letter.

Then I took a deep breath, and Ichiro used my voice to cast the spell. "Transporter!"

And we were back in the fray.

"Dead Scream." I didn't expect to hear *that* attack used against Dark Lady... or at all before the Death Busters made themselves known.

Unfortunately, Pluto's blast bounced off of Dark Lady's parasol. Fortunately, the Dark Hinge took the damage... which might have been what Pluto intended all along.

Dark Lady struck back. "Dark Power!"

I didn't expect to need to implement Future Ami's plan right away... but I did. I jumped in front of the blast that she had aimed at Pluto.

If Ichiro hadn't been in Life Support Mode the way Future Ami had instructed, I would have been killed. As it was, I couldn't move for a moment.

"Robu-niisan! Why did you save Puu?!"

Sailor Moon turned away from me to face Dark Lady. "Because they're both your friends, and he knew you'd hate yourself if you killed her!"

"I don't need friends!"

"*Everybody* needs friends!" my fiancée insisted. "And if you've hurt him –"

"I'm still alive," I managed to say before she could finish that sentence.

Dark Lady dropped to her knees. "Is what Sailor Moon said true? Did Oni save Puu for my sake?"

"Yes," I said with a bit more strength.

"You didn't think that I could have killed you instead?"

Without hesitation, I replied, "No. I trust you."

"You must love me, Robu-niisan. I feel like you just scolded me." As her tears flowed, the spells that Wiseguy had put on her flowed away, leaving Small Lady behind where Dark Lady had been.

And her tears crystallized before they hit the ground, leaving the Ginzuishou behind.

«Sir?»

«*Now* we can tell her about her moonbeams. I release you from that order.»

But Moon beat us to it. "It must have been inside you all along."

"Her moonbeams, that Rubeus was using to track her..." I started before running out of strength.

"I was using the Silver Crystal?"

"You were," Mercury confirmed.

"Small Lady," I said quietly, "you have the Ginzuishou. It's time for a Moon Princess... no, a Princess Lady Halation."

"Princess Lady'," she said. "That's the name I want to be called by." Then she got the same look on her face that Usagi-san has when she uses her Neo-Queen Serenity voice. "Mama, let's go dispense some Love and Justice."

And then the two of them were wearing matching princess dresses, and then they were gone.

Pluto and Jupiter immediately rushed to me, one on each side, and helped me sit up. All Pluto said was, "Thank you."

"You could have been killed!" my dearest said between her tears.

"No, I couldn't have been. I trust Mercury, too, and this was her idea."

"It was?" Mercury asked.

"It will be."

"Oh, good," Meia said as she dropped out of Unison with Mercury. "You saw it."

"Saw what?" Mercury asked.

I smiled. "A video made by your future self. And since that's who you grow up to be, Onmyōji is going to have a very happy life." I turned to Meia. "So, you were an accomplice, were you?"

"I am guilty as charged, and will accept whatever punishment Mercury-dono sees fit to give me."

I couldn't help but think "Meia culpa".

"Punishment for what?" Mercury asked.

I chuckled, then winced from the pain. "Aiding and abetting the creation of a stable time loop, I suspect. Depending on what else your future self sent back with you besides the plan to save Pluto's life and Princess Lady's sanity. Shario-chan is copying it to my laptop even as we speak."

"I see." Mercury looked cross as she turned to Meia. "Your punishment is to sort and organize whatever data you did bring back without my knowledge."

We all smiled at that. Even Mercury and Meia.

It took me fourteen minutes to recover sufficiently from the Dark Power attack to be able to stand on my own... at which point both Serenities returned to us, the Dark Hinge crumbling behind them. They were quickly followed by two men who I hadn't seen before.

The younger one did the talking while the older one simply stared at the ground. "Sailor Moon, I am Saphir, and this is my brother, Prince Diamande. You have defeated us. We will return to Nemesis and live out the remainder of our lives there, never to trouble you again."

"I understand that I am to grow up to become Neo-Queen Serenity," she replied. "In this time, I talk about love and justice quite a lot. If those words are to have any meaning, I must accept a petition from you and the others of Nemesis to be allowed to live on Earth. Whatever crimes your ancestors committed were their crimes, not yours. Love and Justice demand no less than a full hearing." Then she turned to Diamande. "You, however, attempted to confine

and rape me while I visited your time. That, I cannot forgive. If you are allowed to move to Earth in your own time, you will not be allowed unlimited freedom."

"But you must understand, you are so beautiful and I need a princess by my side..." Diamande stopped talking; from the look on his face, he had realized that he was only digging his own grave.

"I am to become a queen, not a princess. And I do not want to be called beautiful by someone who attempted to use my body for his own desires. In the name of Love and Justice, you must learn that people are not property, even if you are their ruler. I have spoken." And she turned away from the two of them.

We watched them return to their UFO and leave Tokyo's airspace.

"And don't come back," Venus muttered.

Even using the fastest microprocessor on the planet and solid-state media, it still took the better part of the day to copy the data from Future Ami's tiara.

Which was fine, because it took me just as long to recover to the point that I could pretend to be fully healed. Ka'o made sure that I didn't hurt myself by trying to do that too quickly.

We all got together to celebrate at the shrine. Yes, even Setsuna and Princess Lady... and Princess Lady took great pride in explaining to Setsuna that a sukiyaki party was something only people who were practically family members took part in. And that statement got Rei-san to pull her grandfather and Yuuichirou-san into the festivities.

Which made me think that maybe it wouldn't be pointless to play matchmaker between Rei-san and Yuuichirou-san. From the look on my fiancée's face, I could tell I wasn't the only one thinking that way.

And then it was October 25, and Princess Lady headed home. We all gave her farewell gifts: Makoto gave her a box of pancake mix and a recipe book, and I gave her a copy of "Naita Aka Oni" and a card asking her to visit again. Ami, predictably, gave her a textbook. I don't know what the others gave her. Although I did see Meia give her Future Ami's tiara and ask that Princess Lady return it to her.

Which reminded me that in canon Mercury was shown without her tiara when Chibiusa returned home. And here I thought that that was an illustration error.

There were tears all around when she left us.

Eventually, Bunny-chan turned to me. "So, Robu-san, what happens next in canon?"

I chuckled. "Believe it or not, a recap episode. Although that clip show did include a talk about who should lead the Sailor Senshi."

Sakura said, in all seriousness, "Now there's a talk that we should have in our group."

Oh, dear.



With the Dark Moon no longer an issue, we were released from the quarantine we were supposedly in, and went back to school on October 26. We all had our homework finished to hand in. Yes, even Bunny-chan.

I can't speak for the others, but nobody in Class 5 asked about Ami's and my absence. If the stupid genre conventions work to our advantage for a change, I'll take it.

We didn't watch the flashback episode until the end of the week, which happened to be October 31. There are worse ways to spend Halloween.

## ***Isekai by Moonlight*** **Chapter R to S**

One of the things that Shario-chan brought from Midchilda was a holographic display terminal. She hooked it up to my 2022 laptop – the one with the good graphics – and used it to create a virtual big-screen display so that everybody could watch the show together.

"Why are there four opening sequences for two seasons?" Ichigo-san asked while passing the bowl of popcorn to Ami.

"It was a popular show," I replied. "At this point, it had run for the equivalent of four regular seasons."

We settled in to watch the episode.

"Wow, that's a sparkly transformation sequence," Bunny-chan said as I wondered why the Lyrical reality's version of the anime had my original reality's North American dub transformation sequence.

Rei-san asked, "Would you rather people saw pictures of you naked?"

"Sparkly is good."

Then we saw the first of the clips from the *S* season, with Mitsuishi-san asking by voice-over, "Who are those two that suddenly appeared? Are they new allies or enemies?"

I sighed. "They manage to make it all the way to the end of episode 200 without actually answering that question."

"Be nice," my fiancée said.

"I am being nice."

"Hush," Naru-san complained. "Some of us haven't seen this yet."

We watched for a while, then saw the clip where Luna-P landed on Bunny-chan's head.

"Hey! Chibiusa didn't show up that way!"

I nodded. "That's why I keep saying this reality is a close parallel to the anime, Bunny-chan."

Instead of complaining about chatter, Naru-san said, "That explains why Mako-chan and I have each other's hair colour in the anime."

"Exactly. Just enjoy the show for what it is."

So we did, until the seiyuu started talking about who gets to replace Sailor Moon as the lead character in the next season. When Shinohara-san asked in-character "Does anyone want my spot?", Makoto pulled me closer and said, "Nobody else gets my spot in this reality!"

Naru-san cleared her throat meaningfully.

"Sorry."

We watched the show in silence, until Shario-chan paused the playback at the commercial break. "Does anybody need to stretch their legs?"

"I'm good," Rei-san said while my dearest collected the empty popcorn bowl from Bunny-chan.

"The next bit is going to be new to practically everybody," I said.

"Is this where we start seeing the show's version of stuff that hasn't happened yet?" Ichigo-san asked.

"A bit, yes. Starting with the animators' impression of one of Rei-san's fire readings."

Rei-san raised her eyebrows. "Really? I've got to see *that*."

Once the popcorn bowl was refilled and Makoto was sitting beside me again, Shario-chan re-started the playback and we watched the destruction of the Sailor Senshi.

"That's... actually pretty close, for an anime," Rei-san said just before the clips changed to showing each of the Senshi on their own, with the seiyuu saying in character why each of them should be the new lead character.

When Shinohara-san said, "But you don't forget the sempai you like", Makoto said, "What sempai?" before giving me a kiss on the cheek. I gave her a kiss back, while everybody else laughed at her line. Then Shario-chan rewound the playback so we didn't miss anything.

And then when Hisakawa-san said "Urawa-kun, the future is something you build with your own two hands", Ryou gave Ami a hug and said, "I like this future we're building together better than the one I would have had alone." Ichigo-san commented, "You're quite the clean-cut gentleman in the anime, aren't you, Ryou-san?"

Naru-san grumbled, "Some of us are trying to watch the show..."

We shut up and Sharioro-chan rewound the playback again. Note to self: Don't piss off somebody who can make sharp knives out of popcorn, especially right after we refilled the popcorn bowl.

Finally we reached the end, where Hisakawa-san said "But, we didn't find out anything about the mysterious two. Are they friend or foe?" and Mitsuishi-san replied "Ami-chan, don't worry! When the new series starts, we'll find out soon enough!"

As the ending credits started playing, Bunny-chan turned to me and said, "Or we could just ask Robu-san now."

"And I'm not going to answer, because I made a promise."

"Ah!" Ichigo-san said. "So they're Sailor Senshi!"

I forgot she was training to be a scientist, and thus was getting good at deductive logic and remembering small details. Stupid genre conventions. "Yes, they're Sailor Senshi," I sighed.

"Well, I didn't make that promise," Hayate-chan said. "And Rob's right to not trust Sailors Uranus and Neptune. They're on our side but they don't do things our way. In fact, sometimes what they do gets in the way of what we do."

"But we end up working together, right?"

"For a very broad definition of 'together', Bunny-chan," I answered.

Rei-san gave me a sideways look. "How broad a definition of 'together'?"

Ryou replied, "The 'standing roughly in a widely-spread-out line and facing in the same general direction' kind of together. Six times out of seven, that is."

"About that whole 'who should be the lead' thing..." Sakura said.

Minako interrupted her to point out, "That was an excuse to introduce the characters to people who weren't familiar with them."

Sakura nodded. "In the anime, yes. But I think maybe we should consider changing our leadership."

"Usagi-san is Princess Serenity," I reminded her.

"And she'll stay the head of state," Sakura replied. "I'm talking about our field leader. Usagi-san has the tactical sense of a rock."

"Hey!"

"Well, you do," she said. "First off, you keep making those 'in the name of the Moon' speeches and giving up the element of surprise."

"Sneak attacks are unjust," Bunny-chan insisted.

Sakura ignored her. "Also, there is somebody here who's actually trained in strategy and tactics."

We all turned to look at Hayate-chan.

"I have to agree with the anime," she said. "We aren't the Sailor Senshi unless Sailor Moon is in charge. Besides, I don't want the job."

"But you're a much better military commander than Usagi-san is!"

"Sakura," my dearest said, "despite the name, the Sailor Senshi aren't soldiers. We're heroes."

Meia added, "And heroes need a different kind of leader than soldiers do."

"One who inspires us, not one who orders us," Rei-san said.

And Minako finished, "Somebody who we love, not just respect."

Ichiro quietly said to Sakura, "I believe we're outvoted, sister."

I chuckled. "If we were soldiers, we wouldn't have been allowed to vote at all."

Ichiro nodded. "Quite true, sir. But what of the element of surprise?"

"We're just going to have to get used to not having it. So, who has the popcorn, and what are we going to watch next?"

After the Revealing Of The Lunches the next Monday, conversation turned to the upcoming [Cultural festival](#).

"Well, I've got my line memorized," I commented to Ami.

"Oh, your class is doing a play, too?" Minako asked. "We're doing an abridged version of *Romeo and Juliet*, with Ryou-san and me in the lead roles."

"Oh," Ami said quietly.

"Hey, it's just pretend, and we all know that that relationship ends poorly anyway. I'm not trying to make a move on your fiancé, sis." The last word was in English, and I had an idea why; Minako was slightly older by the calendar but Ami had been in the family longer, so who was "neesan"? They'd work it out eventually, I was sure.

Ami looked happier after hearing that. "Thank you. We're doing a set of short scenes on Saturday to entertain people in the auditorium while the curtain is down and the stage is being set up for the next class' show."

"And I have the same line in each and every mini-play," I complained.

"You just said you have it memorized," Ichigo-san said. "Let's hear it!"

I sighed deeply, then said, "Fine." Clearing my throat, I added, "Now, Sailor Moon."

Minako's eyes went wide. "You're pretending to be *us*? I hope Artemis isn't writing your scripts." I don't think she's ever forgiven him for some of the lines he put into the scripts he wrote for Dreamland's toku shows.

"You sound *nothing* like Mamo-chan," Bunny-chan said.

"Good! The last thing I want is people thinking I'm him."

"Who's playing Sailor Moon?" my dearest asked.

"Me," Ami said. "And the wig I have to wear is heavy."

"This hairdo isn't something that just anybody can wear!" Bunny-chan said with pride... as Makoto started looking at Ami sideways.

I quickly sent to her, «My dearest, it's just pretend. You're the one that I love.»

That made her happier. "We're doing a sweets café," she announced.

"Sweets from around Japan," Ichigo-san added. "[tsukisamu anpan](#) from back home, [itokiri dango](#) from Fukushima, [okoshi](#) from Osaka, [yatsushashi](#) from Kyoto, and [chinsuko](#) from Okinawa."

"I thought [okoshi came from Tokyo](#)," Bunny-chan said.

"No, [it's from Osaka](#)," Makoto insisted.

"Don't look at me," I said. "I thought [they came from Battle Creek, Michigan](#)."

Naru-san commented. "Every so often I manage to forget that you weren't born in Japan. Then you say something like that."

Since we were at an impasse, everybody turned to our source of all knowledge, Amipedia. "Legends say that [Sugawara no Michizane](#) discovered them during his travels, liked them, and carried them with him," she said diplomatically.

"If the god of scholars liked them that much, we'd better make a lot of them for the school festival," Ichigo-san said. Then she turned to Naru-san and Bunny-chan. "What's your class doing?"

"A jazz café!" Bunny-chan announced. "It was Naru's idea."

"Strong coffee and slow music," Naru-san added. "What else could somebody want?"

"I'll be sure to stop by," I promised. "Maybe after the club's presentation."

"What's the Conversational English Club doing?" Ichigo-san asked.

"A play," my fiancée answered. "In English, of course. But we think everybody already knows the story."

"Which story?" Bunny-chan asked.

I grinned. "'Naita Aka Oni'. Somebody here seems to think we have a couple of oni in the club, after all."

Ichigo-san and Bunny-chan both blushed. "Sorry," they said in unison.

Speaking of unison, Ami and Meia tested Saeko-mama, Naru-san, and Ichigo-san after school that day while we were doing homework at her place. None of them were able to support a Unison with any of our Devices. Saeko-mama and Ichigo-san actually tested as magic-null, just like Shario back on Midchilda.

No big surprise there, since almost nobody can support a Unison even in the Lyrical reality. If it hadn't been for whoever it was who invoked the stupid genre convention of re-making my body, I probably would have been in the same situation that they were.

I won't bother going over all of the minutiae of the school festival. Sure, it was a lot of hard work and a lot of fun, but a lot of the fun was of the "you had to be there" type.

I will mention that I was impressed by Bunny-chan and Naru-san's jazz cafe. They sold me a coffee that even Dale Cooper would appreciate, and when I said so, Naru-san thanked me for the *Twin Peaks* reference. I also gained a new appreciation for Amade Yuusuke's music after hearing the full "Waltz for Akiko" rather than just the parts that were in episode 6 of the anime.

Rei-san managed to see one of our class' short plays. She couldn't stop giggling at it.

And the Drama club complimented the Conversational English club on our makeup. It was fun using Mirage Hide to change everybody's appearance instead of just mine... but we told them that Makoto and I were wearing body paint.

Speaking of Makoto and me, we ducked out before the folk dance at the end of the festival. While we both wanted to dance, neither of us wanted to dance with anybody but each other, so folk dances were a non-starter. Instead, we



went to our favourite skating rink and let the regulars know that the Emerald Pair were back for the season. I'm sure that dancing on ice was more enjoyable than dancing with strangers would have been, especially when they played "[Sayonara wa Dance no Ato ni](#)" and we almost lost the rhythm by laughing. But only almost.

And then we had almost nothing to do but study for the end-of-term exams.

"I should warn everybody that I'm not going to hold back this year," Ami announced at our first study session after the cultural festival.

"Ami-chan," Bunny-chan said with some confusion, "you're already the top student in the school. You got 870 last term."

"That was two years ago for her," Minako pointed out. "Maybe she forgot."

"I didn't forget. But a score of 870 means there's still 30 points that I didn't earn."

"Almost all of which were in P.E.," Ryou pointed out. "And you won almost every event that you took part in during the sports festival."

"Yes. *Almost*."

Bunny-chan looked worried. "Ami-sama, please help me with my math homework and ignore how I beat you at Ultimate!"

I grinned. "Ami has a gentle soul; I'm sure she'll forgive you for being better than she is at one thing." After everybody – including Ami and Bunny-chan – laughed, I continued, "Seriously, we're all in a much better position than we were last term."

"How so?" Rei-san asked.

Ichiro, Sakura, and Meia poked their heads up out of our pockets. "Because the three of us are TSAB-certified instructors," Sakura said while the others took a scroll over to one wall. "Sure, our P.E. training is more martial than what most of you are used to, but we can teach from books, too."

"All three of us have already reviewed the curricula for both Kuritsu Juban Chuugakkou and Toyo Eiwa Jogakuin," Meia added.

"And we all enjoy teaching," Ichiro finished as he and Meia unrolled the scroll: "AIM FOR 900!"

"Three teachers for nine students," I said. "Or, if Ami is an instructor instead of a pupil, four teachers for eight students. Try finding that ratio at a juku."

"We would prefer that all nine of you learn from us, at least to begin with," Ichiro said.

Ichigo-san grinned. "I'll take you up on that offer! Who's going to teach me zoology?"

"I will be leading the science and mathematics tutoring," Meia replied.

We settled in to a routine: three of us getting help with math and science from Meia; three more being tutored in history, geography, and classical Japanese from Ichiro; and the other three learning English and Home Ec. from Sakura. All of us would get help in all of the courses over a three-day period, learning from each of our tutors twice a week. Except for Ami, who still attended juku twice a week because some universities expected to see that on applications. They left us time to do our household chores on Saturday afternoons after tutoring.

And then there was P.E. training on Sunday mornings. No, Sakura and Meia didn't get out the Time-Space Administrative Bureau Ground Armaments Service basic training manual. Ichiro did, though, and he taught Yuuichirou-san, Ryou, and me most of the TSAB's advanced unarmed combat curriculum. While we were doing that, Rei-san's grandfather re-started Protect Esthe just for the ladies; my fiancée told me later that she was incorporating some of his moves into her own interpretation of Jeet Kune Do, and he was in turn adding some of her moves to his style.

Sunday afternoons were our fun times. So of course Makoto and I spent a lot of time at the skating rink. And, once they started *not* kicking us out at closing time because they all-but-admitted that they knew we were Oni and Sailor Jupiter – which didn't worry us nearly as much as it would have before we were sent to the Lyrical dimension – we brought Ichiro, Sakura, Meia, Shario-chan, and Hayate-chan along and they became our students. I remembered from what I knew of *Nanoha Force* that the Unison Devices could take larger forms outside of combat; we had five apparent children learning from us.

"See this, Shari?" Sakura asked during their first session. "There's always something new to learn! Although I don't know when people who can fly will ever use this skill," she finished quietly.

"I can't fly," Shario-chan pointed out. "This is great! And fun, too!"

"And our partners have turned this into an art form," Ichiro added while skating beside Shario-chan. Funny how often I noticed the two of them skating together during their lessons.

By Christmas, they were all competent enough to keep their balance without hovering, and Sakura and Meia were approaching my skill level on ice... but nobody was as good as Makoto.

There was that one Saturday, just before we started writing exams, that we all relaxed and ignored our studies. Because that Saturday was December 5. Happy Birthday, my dearest.

We didn't spend a lot of money on gifts, not after the day in late November when Bunny-chan asked how much would be appropriate to spend on a gift and Meia had each of us work out just how wealthy each of the people who'd been to the Lyrical reality were. Bunny-chan did the math twice, and would have done it again if Meia hadn't pointed out that she had solved the problem correctly both times.

"But that *can't* be the right number!" Bunny-chan insisted. "I must have misplaced a decimal point somewhere."

"It is the correct number, Usagi-san," Meia replied. "That is Makoto and Sakura's current wealth, not including the settlement money they expect to get from JAL after Makoto officially turns 20."

"*Not* including..." Bunny-chan gasped as she realized just how much Makoto was worth. Financially, that is; my dearest is priceless to me. "She's going to have even more than 350 million yen?"

"That's before taxes," Ryou pointed out.

"Ah," I replied, "but we expect you to make sure our stock portfolio earns enough to pay the taxes each year."

"True. The dividends from just our Starbucks stock should cover most of that," he replied.

Bunny-chan whispered, "I'm surrounded by millionaires."

Ami looked at Bunny-chan's math. "You forgot to include the money that she gets from the Sailor Moon toku shows at Dreamland."

Meia looked over the calculations. "Oh, so we did."

"Are the licence fees that we get from those shows really worth including?" I asked. "I thought they were only enough for a convenience-store bento once a month."

"They are for you and Naru-chan, since you're each in so few of the shows," Ryou replied, "but the Senshi and Tuxedo Kamen have much larger payments. As for the toys, the ladies' dolls sell much better than ours do."

"In that case," I said, "Artemis, please put Naru-san into more shows."

Naru-san smiled. "While I appreciate the thought, my time as a youma is something I'd rather forget, and I don't want people to know about Okuni yet. Besides, I don't need the money. I can make diamonds, remember? Although, since I already have the money, I'll take my licence fees so I can buy more raw materials to make gemstones with."

"We should let Saeko-mama know about that," my dearest said. "Isn't she collecting diamonds as her retirement plan?"

"No," Ami replied, "mother expects to get a pension from the hospital. She collects diamonds because she likes them."

"Oh, good," Naru-san said. "Not that I want to ruin the resale market for diamonds and destroy someone's retirement savings, but somebody else might learn how to make inexpensive synthetic gems."

"Hey, wait, what was that about licence fees and Dreamland?" Bunny-chan changed the subject back. "Does Dreamland owe us money for those toku shows?"

I shook my head. "Artemis has been collecting those fees, along with the fees from Bandai for the licensed toys."

Upon hearing his name, Artie added, "And the money's waiting for you at the Crown, although some of it is tied up in the games themselves. Ryou and I have already invested his and Ami's fees, but we didn't have permission to do that with anybody else's money. And since Sailor Moon is the only character in all of the toku shows that they put on, you get more than anybody else. It isn't in the millions, but you could pay for a trip to Hawai'i for your entire family with your share."

"I could go to Hawai'i?!" Bunny-chan noticed the looks we were all giving her. "No, I'd better not spend it all on one thing. Could I get you and Ryou to invest it for me, maybe?"

Ryou replied, "You could, but you have to give me clear instructions before I'm allowed to. I can't do it if you say 'maybe'."

"Oh! Please invest my licence fees, Urawa-san," Bunny-chan said. "Except for an allowance that I can spend on treats at the Crown," she added quickly.

I smiled at the thought of Bunny-chan having a cake budget.

Artemis looked at Ryou for a moment – I assume they were having a telepathic conversation – then turned back to the ladies. "We'll work out how to get your money into the fund without hurting the Crown. We don't want to throw the Furuhatas out of work, after all."

Bunny-chan nodded. "Yeah, we should do that slowly if doing it fast would hurt Motoki-san and Unazuki-san."

"What about the rest of you?" Ryou asked everyone. "I'm already treating the portfolio like a mutual fund; we may as well open it up to everybody who's in on the Senshi's secrets."

"Toss half of my payments in, too," my fiancée said. "I need the other half for food and clothes for me and Minako, at least for now."

"Hey, wait!" Minako said. "I can live off my licence fees; I don't need charity."

Ami reached over and took Minako's hand. "I'm not going to let my new sister live on a pittance while I have millions of yen invested. It isn't charity, Minako, it's family."

"And I'm not going to let you starve, either. We're as close as sisters, even if that isn't official."

"Ami... Mako-chan... thank you so much." After a moment, Minako added, "Artemis, Ryou-san, do the same thing with my licence fees that you're doing with Mako-chan's. I'll accept help from my new family, but I won't freeload."

"You may as well add my licence fees, too," I told Artemis and Ryou. "I still need to pay Meioh-san back what she's given me since I arrived in this reality the first time, so every little bit that earns us all some money before that debt comes due helps everyone."

"We'll draw up the paperwork so it's all nice and legal. I'll have it ready after Luna talks with Mamoru-san. What about you, Rei?" Artemis asked.

"Donate it to the shrine," she said immediately. "Unlike my father, I prefer to live a simple life."

Artemis nodded. "I'll speak with your grandfather about that tomorrow."

Bunny-chan thought for a moment. "Getting back to December 5th, buying things as gifts for each other isn't really meaningful any more, is it?"

"Not really, no," Ryou replied. "Except for token gifts like souvenirs and Christmas exchanges. We'll just have to do things for each other that don't involve money, instead."

"Like cheer each other up when we're sad, and laugh together when we're happy? I know how to do that!"

I quietly stood up. "Don't mind me. I'm just going to stretch my legs for a moment and get some fresh air." I left behind the discussion about what would make for a good gift when you don't buy something, and took a quick walk outside. Seeing the crows on the torii, I took a chance. «I don't suppose either of you want to invest some money alongside the Sailor Senshi, do you?»

«Thank you for the offer, but we have nothing of our own to invest,» one of them sent back. I "heard" a slightly-raspy alto female voice.

«Ah. I was wondering whether you two were the Phobos and Deimos who I'd read about.»

«I'm Deimos,» the same voice said inside my head.

«And I'm Phobos.» The voice that I heard was slightly different from her companion's, but they were similar.

«And we're only telling you this because of what you told everybody the day after you got back from Gunma,» Deimos sent. «You no doubt already knew our secret.»

«Does Rei-san know?» I asked.

«No, and we'd prefer that it remain that way. You no doubt already know about Galaxia; we're hiding from her.»

«Right. I'll keep your existence secret for now, unless Rei-san specifically asks me.»

«Thank you,» they sent at the same time.

I woke up in the middle of the night, wondering just how it was that Phobos and Deimos knew Midchildan telepathy.

That kept me awake for a few hours, until I finally decided to blame it on the kami. As I went back to sleep, I hoped that I was right.

And then came exams, and then should have come the posting of the grades.

But that didn't happen until the report cards were handed out on December 24, because eight students needed to be re-tested under close supervision. If you need to ask who those eight students are, you don't know the stupid genre conventions.

Just before our first re-test, Ami asked us, "You showed off for my sake?"

My fiancée nodded. "Of course. We're as close as sisters, after all. Why wouldn't I keep you company on the leader board?"

"And why wouldn't I support my fiancée?"

"And you are my second-closest friend in two different realities, Ami. Of course I'll stand beside you if I can." I smiled before continuing, "Just don't ask me to be unfaithful to Makoto, okay?"

We all laughed at that.

Then Bunny-chan said, "I didn't show off; I just did my best. And our tutors really helped make my best something good."

"Oh, you've been getting tutoring?" Sakurada-sensei asked as she walked in with a small stack of tests. "That would explain everyone's improvement. Now, no more talking for the next 45 minutes," she finished while handing out our Japanese history tests.

Once we'd completed those, she gave us our math re-tests with the same instructions. Then we headed for the school gym and were re-tested in P.E. We ended up playing four-on-four Ultimate for twenty minutes – Ami, Ryou, Makoto, and I against Bunny-chan, Minako, Ichigo-san, and Naru-san – which Bunny-chan's team of course won despite our team using telepathy to coordinate our plays. I noticed that Bunny-chan threw the disk to Naru-san more often than she did to Ichigo-san or Makoto, which meant that Bunny-chan and Naru-san scored most of their team's points. The game was followed by individual tests of overall physical capability. I think they tried to wear us out by starting with Ultimate, but we surprised everybody, including ourselves, by barely working up a sweat. The TSAB GAS basic training for Ryou and me and the Protect Esthe training for the ladies definitely helped with our stamina.

Then it was lunch time. "It's just the eight of us and the teachers here today," Bunny-chan said. "Should we invite them to have lunch with us?"

"They're testing us today and tomorrow," Naru-chan pointed out. "Acting like we're friends with each other wouldn't be a good idea. Besides, who ever heard of teachers being friends with their students?" Before I could answer, she added, "Outside of an anime."

"Oh, more than one anime," I said. "Teacher characters being friends with their students was a big fad for a while. So, what did everybody bring for lunch? I have [pork katsudon](#) and [inarizushi](#)."

"Of course you have inarizushi, Robu-san," Ichigo-san replied. "Sometimes I think you're [part fox](#)!"

I looked completely serious for a moment. "So, what would an inari/oni cross look like?" Everybody laughed at that question... except for Ami, who looked thoughtful but didn't say anything.

The Revealing Of The Lunches was followed by the eating of the lunches, as it usually was, and they were both accompanied by our usual discussions about nothing in particular.

This did not go unnoticed by our teachers.

Our re-tests after lunch were science and English.

The next morning, Sakurada-sensei was in the classroom before we arrived. Once we were all there, she said, "I don't know how you did it. I saw all of you, including Mizuno, chatting as if you didn't have a care in the world during lunch yesterday instead of studying, I know none of you cheated, and you all passed both of your afternoon tests. I can understand how everybody in the Conversational English club scored 100 in English, but what I didn't expect was that Tsukino scored higher on the English re-test than she did on the first English test!"

"I passed my English tests? How did I do that? I suck at English," Bunny-chan said. In English.

"You really shouldn't be using that sort of language when speaking to a teacher, Usagi-san," I pointed out. In Japanese.

Sakurada-sensei just sighed. "How do you know enough English to even *know* that kind of language?"

"What about our morning tests, Sakurada-sensei?" Minako asked.

"Oh, you all passed all of them, too. Time for your Japanese language exams."

Naru-san got out a calligraphy brush and an [inkstone](#).

"Oh, now you're just showing off," Ichigo-san said with a grin. Then Sakurada-sensei gave her a copy of the test, and she got out a calligraphy brush and inkstone as well. The rest of us took the hint; this was going to be a relatively difficult exam, especially for those of us – like Makoto and me – who needed to work on our penmanship.

Somehow I managed to complete the exam without blotting my exam paper. I was confident in my facts; it was my penmanship that had me worried for this test. I couldn't help but notice that Ami was taking things in stride; apparently, she intended to avert the "doctors have poor penmanship" stupid genre convention.

The rest of our re-tests ensued, ending with a special Home Ec. test: make lunch for everyone, students and faculty, no menu provided.

As Ryou and I moved to take our places in the kitchen classroom, Sakurada-sensei said, "The two of you don't need to take this exam. Home Economics is a girls' course."

"We each live alone, sensei," Ryou replied. "We need to know these skills."

"Do as you wish, then." And she sat down in a corner of the room.

Minako started us off with a question. "Okay, what are we serving, and who's making what?"

"I'll make the rice!" Bunny-chan volunteered.

"You'll *wash* the rice," my dearest said. "We have rice cookers. Rob, can you make that salad you made after we both donated blood to Shinozaki-san? That would go with almost anything."

"I don't see any mussels in the pantry, sorry. I can make a vegetarian version of that spinach salad, though."

"We have [nitsume](#)," Ami announced. "Shall we serve fish with a nitsume glaze?"

Sakurada-sensei made a note of Ami's question.

"Nitsume on fish?" I asked. "I thought that only went on eel."

"It *usually* goes on eel or shrimp," Ichigo-san replied, "but I've had it on grilled fish. And that was in Tokyo, not back home in Wakkanai."

"Let's do it, then," Minako said. "We also have apples. Ami, can you make that apple cake that everybody liked?"

"I'm sorry, Minako. It takes two hours to make. We only have one."

"In that case, I'll make Apple Charlotte."

Makoto summed up what we'd decided so far. "Fish with nitsume, spinach salad with chickpeas and broccoli, rice, and apple pudding. That's a sweet lunch."

Sakurada-sensei made another note.

"We have [yuzu](#)," Naru-san announced.

"Perfect," I replied. "Juicing some of those for the salad dressing will provide a sour counterpoint to the sweet sauce on the fish. Naru-san, can you juice a half-dozen of the yuzu, please?"

"Sure."

Makoto nodded. "Okay, Rob and Naru-san are working on the salad. Minako's working on the sweet course. Usagi's washing the rice; help Ami and Ichigo when you're finished. Ami, get the nitsume ready. Ichigo, I assume the daughter of a fisherman knows how to debone fish."

"I do, but not because all of the men in my family are fishermen."

"Sorry, I shouldn't have made that assumption. Work with Ami on preparing the fish, please. Ryou, you're with me."

"Doing what?" he asked.

"I'll tell you when I come up with something," she answered while looking through the pantry. "Oh, we have cherry tomatoes! We're doing [yaki yasai](#)."

"Salad *and* grilled vegetables?" I asked.

"Serve one or the other, depending on which each person wants."

"I guess I don't need to juice this many yuzu, then," Naru-san commented; Makoto nodded in confirmation.

"Hot food is good on chilly days like the ones in December," Ryou pointed out. "May I suggest that we take turns doing everything? I suspect we'll get higher grades if we all show that we can do all of the kitchen tasks, not just the ones that we're good at."

Bunny-chan looked a bit upset at that, but was smart enough to say nothing.

Sakurada-sensei spoke up. "If you didn't decide to do that on your own, I would have told you to do it. We want to see as many of your skills as we can."

"Right," my fiancée agreed. "Everybody start with what I already said. Minako, how long do you need for the dessert?"

"A half hour," she said while peeling apples, "then it goes in the oven and I'm available to do something else."

"Rob, help Minako. Naru, keep juicing those yuzu, then help Minako and Rob. Then all three of you work on the salad. It doesn't take an entire hour to make a salad."

We got to work. As the puddings went into the oven, Minako thought to check the fridge, then announced, "Oops. We don't have custard."

"Whip some cream and use that to top the puddings instead," Ami suggested.

"Good idea!" Makoto said. "Ryou, take over grilling the vegetables; I have to make enough whipped cream to fill a piping bag."

Sakurada-sensei seemed to agree, since she was smiling as she made another note.

When it finally came time to serve, Bunny-chan started sliding fish onto plates. Then Makoto slid the fish onto slightly larger plates. "Appearance is important, Usagi."

"It is?"

"Yes, it is. Naru, I know you have steady hands; help me decorate the puddings while Rob and Ryou serve the entree to everyone. Everybody else, go eat."

"No Revealing Of The Lunches?" Bunny-chan asked.

"We made the lunches together," Minako pointed out. "We know exactly what's in them."

Once everyone had finished lunch, including the dessert, and we had washed and put away the dishes, we were told that we could go home... but not before Principal Takeuchi apologized to us. "It is obvious that none of you were cheating, and we should not have thought that you were," he said.

"Think nothing of it, sir," I replied. "We all received special tutoring over the last month; you would have been remiss if you did not double-check that we were only showing what we had learned in the process."

"I would be very interested in meeting your tutors, should they be interested in tutoring some of your classmates."

"I cannot answer for them, sir. However, I will relay your request."

"Of course. We will see you on December 24." As we turned to go, he added, "Oh, there is one more thing. Could I have [the recipe for that apple pudding](#)?"

Minako grinned. "I'd be happy to share it with you, sir!"

And *then* came the posting of the grades. For real, this time.

Before we got to the hallway with the posted grades, we saw a hand-written sign that read, "The top score on the second-year students' list is not a typographical error. Please stop pointing it out to the teachers."

Makoto and I looked at each other. "Do you think...?" I started.

"Let's find out," she replied.

It was almost as good as we thought. The first line read "Mizuno Ami: 899".

"Oh, Ami came so close..." I said, which got me a few odd looks from other students.

Ryou, Makoto, and I were all right behind her, with grades in the mid-to-high-800s. Then came everybody else in our grade, with Naru-san, Ichigo-san, and Minako each in the mid-700s. It took us a few minutes to find Bunny-chan, because she earned a mark higher than she'd ever earned before: "Tsukino Usagi: 639".

Speaking of Bunny-chan, she was looking at her mark with unalloyed glee. "Hi everybody! Look! Look! That's my personal best *ever*!"

"Congratulations!"

"Where'd you two place?"

"Well," I said, "I don't want to boast, but..."

My fiancée cut me off. "The two of us and Ryou placed right behind Ami." Then she turned to me. "I don't mind boasting."

At this point, we noticed that there was a commotion outside the main gate. "We'd better check that out," Bunny-chan said, all thoughts of grades forgotten.

We slipped out as soon as we could switch back to our outdoor shoes, only to discover that the commotion was the result of somebody we recognized trying to get an interview with Ami. Yes, Asahina Nana was trying for an exclusive.

"Mizuno-san, how does it feel to get the highest grade in all of Japan?"

"I haven't seen my test results yet. I don't know what score I received."

Makoto and I held Bunny-chan back. "If you go running to Ami's defence," my fiancée told her quietly, "your photo will be in the papers right beside hers."

"I don't mind the publicity."

"With that unique hairdo of yours?" I pointed out. "Everybody will recognize you." I added mentally, «Both as Tsukino Usagi-san and as Sailor Moon.»

«Oh. Right.»

Just then, principal Takeuchi passed us on his way to the front gate. "Mizuno-san, please make your way to your classroom."

"Certainly, principal-san." Ami did as she was instructed.

"Whoever you are," he said to Asahina, "this is not the time or the place to interview one of our students. Please be on your way."

"Oh, all right. But see if I give you a good mention in my article!"

We quickly surrounded Ami, as an honour guard, and headed into the school.

"Look, it's Mizuno-san!" I think it was our classmate, Sakamoto-san, who said that, but almost everybody who had seen the posted grades applauded her.

After a moment, I sent to Bunny-chan, Ami, and Makoto, «I think you were right, my dearest. Ami certainly does have [kawaisa](#) going for her when she blushes that deeply.» Which, of course, made her blush even deeper.

«Oh, you. I'd rather hear that from Ryou, though.»

«Which is why I sent it to just the four of us, instead of saying it so everybody could hear.»

«Thank you, Rob. Usagi, do you think your father's magazine would like an exclusive interview with the student who got what's probably the highest mark in Japan?»

«I think papa would love that! I'll ask him when I show mama my report card.»

«We're almost at our classroom,» I pointed out. «Now, unless you say no, I'm going to introduce you to the class when we walk in.»

I heard her mentally sigh at my comment. «I can't avoid that forever. You may as well.»

I nodded, then opened the classroom door. "Classmates, I present to you our class's very own celebrity, Mizuno Ami."

Everybody applauded as she walked in, still blushing.



\* \* \*

It turned out that the 99 that Ami got was in P.E. There was a hand-written note beside the grade: "If you hadn't lost that disk game to Tsukino-san, you would have earned 100."

"I can't possibly show this to Usagi," Ami said quietly, as if she was afraid she'd be overheard.

When we got home after receiving our report cards, we discovered Makoto's grandfather, standing very still just past the doorway.

"Makoto. Explain what this is and how it is flying," he ordered, not taking his eyes off of Sakura... who had her sword drawn.

"[Aneki](#), who is this guy?" she asked. "He had a key."

"Grandfather, I am very sorry about this inconvenience to you. *She* is a very dear friend of mine. Sakura, he's my grandfather and my legal guardian, so put your sword away."

Explanations ensued. It turned out that he had had suspicions that his granddaughter was Sailor Jupiter, which was why he had asked me the last question that he had back in Gunma. After my fiancée confirmed that suspicion, Makoto and I showed him our transformations, and then we proceeded to tell him about the two years we had spent in the Lyrical reality the day before we attended the commemoration ceremony. He asked a few questions that nobody else had asked, including just how close we were. Makoto chose to tell him that she and I had known each other, to use the Biblical euphemism, once she was sixteen, but refused to provide details.

At the end of it all, and after he'd read and approved of Makoto's report card, he told her that she had his permission to continue living in Tokyo. Unlike last December, he didn't put a time limit on that permission... but he did promise to return at the end of the school year.

Just after he left, Ryou called, inviting all of us to the Mizuno residence where sukiyaki was waiting for us. He added that Saeko-mama had reminded him to tell us to bring our report cards.

During the Christmas gift exchange the next day, Ami gave me a sketch of what she thought an inari/oni cross would look like. And the artistic quality of that sketch gave us a reason to ask about her father, who she'd inherited at least some artistic ability from. From what Ami told us that she remembered about him, he seemed to be a nice enough person... but I noticed that Saeko-mama's expression indicated otherwise. I decided that, since Saeko-mama wasn't outright disagreeing with her daughter, she'd tell us what she thought of her ex-husband if she wanted to, and left it at that.

Which is why all that I know about Ami's father is what Ami told me.

When it came time to play games, Shario-chan asked me to switch on my laptop – which I had brought with me at her request. "This is my Christmas gift to everybody," she said as she started a program that I hadn't installed.

As soon as we saw the startup screen, Bunny-chan said, "Oh, wow! You got the *Sailor V* arcade game to run on Robu-san's computer!"

"Oh, I did better than that," Shario-chan replied as a near-photorealistic version of Sailor V walked out, shot the logo out of the way, and began a demo screen while [Route Venus](#) started playing from the laptop's speaker. "Rob, I hope you don't mind me finishing your project."

"I don't mind at all," I said. "And you did more than just finish it. Thank you for improving something that I didn't have time to do myself."

"Everybody, here's how you play..." and she spent five minutes showing us the controls as Sailor V went up against a half-dozen different – and recognizable – youma, followed by a boss battle with Jadeite.

Bunny-chan practically begged Shario-chan, "Can I try? Please?"

"Sure, but run your right thumb across this bar first, like this," she said, demonstrating with the laptop's fingerprint scanner.

Bunny-chan did, and the player character morphed from Sailor V to Sailor Moon. "Oh, wow! That's cool!"

I hadn't realized that the biometrics that the Dark Kingdom had gathered on the Senshi were *that* detailed. Or, more likely, Shario-chan and Meia got everybody's fingerprints while scanning us earlier.

We all took turns playing. Minako got the highest score, of course, but Ami came close to beating her. And all five of the Senshi, Naru-san, and I had custom game avatars that had our known powers. Ryou, Ichigo-san, and Saeko-mama had to play as the default Sailor V, the one with the pistol.

"Hey, that's not a youma or a Dark General," Bunny-chan commented while Ami was playing.

"You're right," I replied. "That's Wendi. Shario-chan, why did you program in our Midchildan friends as bosses?"

She grinned as she answered, "So you could spar against them again! Only Ami, Makoto, and you get Midchildan opponents." As we said that, Ami figured out on her own [how to get the Sailor Mercury avatar airborne](#) so that she could fight Wendi in her own element.

"Let me guess; I get to go up against Nove?"

"And Deici; you need the practice if you're ever going to make Rank B. And Makoto gets to fight Cinque. If that's a problem, I can disable it if you want."

"Don't you dare!" my dearest insisted. "Now that I know that, I want a multiplayer mode!"

"Multiplayer video games?" Bunny-chan asked. "You mean taking turns?"

"I mean playing the same stages at the same time, with our characters side-by-side."

"I'll install the game on all of your laptops," Shario-chan promised. "Then you can net-play. But I'll warn you now: you, Ami, and Rob playing together unlocks Hayate as a boss."

I mock-groaned. "Awwwww, way to make the game unwinnable, Shario-chan." Then I grinned, chuckled, and winked at Hayate-chan to show that I wasn't serious.

When it was finally Naru-san's turn to play, I watched for a moment, then leaned over to Shario-chan and said, "Oh, nice touch on Okuni's dress." Unlike everyone else's clothing, her pattern remained in place relative to the screen when the character moved, showing a different part of the night sky with every step she took.

"Thank you! Now that this game is done, I have to figure out what to do next in my free time..."

Before I could make any suggestions, Naru-san flubbed a shot and the game ended. As she closed the game window, she noticed that an icon on my desktop was blinking. "What's that?"

"I don't know." Discovering that it was an MP4 file, I added, "But there's one easy way to find out." I double-clicked on it.

When the file started playing, we saw Future Ami, smiling. "Merry Christmas, everyone! I'm speaking to you from Crystal Tokyo to give you our best wishes for the year 1993. Younger me, please don't panic too much when your next opponents show up. Also, you have mail waiting for you at your Cranagan account."

"We were so busy that I forgot to set up that connection! Rob, I'm going to have to visit you tomorrow."

"Uh, yeah, of course," I said distractedly, because Future Makoto had walked by in the video's background and waved while pushing a cart holding a fancy decorated cake. If the smile she had on her face was genuine, Ryou wasn't the only person who was going to have a happy life with the Senshi who'd chosen him as a boyfriend. Assuming she was still with me a millennium from now, of course.

Future Ami either didn't see her or pretended she wasn't there. "Ami, we also have to sort out our opinions. I agree with you that Berthier needed to make her own choice. What will you do if there's someone who tries to make that choice for somebody else? Think long and hard about that, please. Naru, I have a hint for you: consider how to work with something that's smaller than you can see easily."

"Oh, of course!" Naru-san and Shario-chan said together.

"Usagi, you'll see her again, I promise." I think we all knew that "her" was Princess Lady. "And please don't get too upset with Ryou, Rob, and my mother; instead, remember the Animal Kingdom. Minako, Rei, don't stop reaching for the stars. Rob, please help the younger me and Meia work out some spells; the notes on what you'll need are in a file named 'Not a Hokago Tea Time song'."

"Not a... Oh, Ami, that's a terrible pun." Of course, nobody else in the room, including present-day Ami, knew the context to recognize it as a pun. I did not choose to enlighten them at the time.

"Ryou, don't get so caught up in making money for us that you forget why you're making money for us. Makoto, my sister in all but name and blood, don't be afraid to travel in order to learn. Oh, and don't forget that the contraceptive spell that Dr. Shamal cast on us both will only last another five months."

"I didn't know you had access to that kind of magic," Saeko-mama said to our Ami.

"Rob and I knew," Ryou replied.

"And I really should work out how to cast that myself," our Ami said. "Preferably some time in the next five months."

Future Ami had waited patiently for us to finish that digression. "There are some notes for you in the same file that I mentioned earlier. Ichigo, Ichiro, Sakura, Meia, and Hayate-chan, I don't have time to tell you anything special in this message, sorry. Finally and most importantly, I didn't say this often enough when I was growing up. I love you, mother, more than you can know."

Saeko-mama reached over and gave her daughter a hug. "I love you too, Ami."

"And now I have to go. Shario-chan, please don't waste time trying to break the time locks on these messages; the older and more experienced you created them. I trust you'll all have a Happy New Year, even considering what's going to happen partway through." And the video ended.

Nobody said anything for a short moment.



"Well, that was the most unique New Year's greeting I've ever received," Bunny-chan said.

"Usagi," Ami said with a bit of irritation, "'unique' means 'one of a kind'. You can't have something that more unique than something else."

"Sorry, Ami-sensei," Bunny-chan said quietly.

Oh, dear; it looked like she'd taken the wrong message from Ami's gentle correction. Time to distract her. I smiled as I asked, "So, Bunny-chan, do we get to live through 1992 a third time, or do we have to live in a new year this New Year's?"

"You're an oni, Robu-san."

I grinned. "So you told me, the day we met."

Everybody laughed... including the two of us.

Ami came over the next day – alone; Meia spent the afternoon with Ryou and Kasandara – after writing her New Year's cards. And I'll digress and describe the cards this time around. The Mizuno family's cards had a formal photo of Saeko-mama, Ami, and Minako, and the card that they sent to me went straight into my scrapbook. It was the first time I'd seen any of them wear kimono, let alone all of them, and as far as I knew it was the first formal photo of the Mizuno family since they had adopted Minako; that photo was worth preserving.

Makoto and I sent a shared card as well, with a photo of the two of us in pairs skating. We imposed on Kenji-san to take that shot of us as part of the price for his magazine getting an exclusive interview with Ami.

Ryou sent a card of his own, bearing hand-written wishes for prosperity in 1993. The Devices sent only a few cards, so they also sent hand-written wishes for good fortune in the new year. Ichiro wrote half of the Devices' cards, while Meia wrote the other half.

I used my 2022 cellphone to take photos of all of our cards – it was the next best thing to a flatbed scanner that I had at the time – and attached the images to emails to our friends in and near Cranagan. Physical mail delivery to Midchilda was still nonexistent, so we couldn't send them the proper way. As I finished writing a cover email apologizing for not contacting everyone sooner and letting them know that we'd successfully resolved what they would call the Dark Moon Incident, Ami opened a pinpoint Pandimensional Pathway and Shario-chan connected our wi-fi to Ginga's. Then it was a matter of a minute to upload our messages and download theirs... which was all that Ami had the stamina for.

We really needed to optimize that spell, so that the rest of us could take turns with the spellcasting. But that was a project for another day, and for Ami and Meia to do; all I could do there was advise the ladies.

Most of the mail from Midchilda was New Year's greetings. Shario sent us greeting on Hayate's behalf – a ship's captain could be excused from writing her own cards – while the others sent their own messages. Yuuno-san's e-card included a note about how his calculations showed our realities were likely to synchronize if we continued to open pathways between them, worded to suggest that this was a good thing. Nove thanked us again for the stock portfolio and let us know she was going to cash it out once she had enough to open that gym that I had suggested. Nobody else there had news that was as big as our news, although it was all interesting to us because they were our friends.

New Year's Eve came, as it does at the end of every year, and of course Makoto, Sakura, Ichiro, and I spent it with Saeko-mama, Ami, Meia, Ryou, Kasandara, and Minako at the Mizuno residence. Shario-chan and Hayate-chan planned to spend the evening together at my place, until Saeko-mama personally invited them both to join us as well.

With her inviting Makoto and me last year and inviting Shario-chan and Hayate-chan this year, Saeko-mama showed that she believed something that wouldn't start to be quoted widely for another decade: Family means nobody gets left behind or forgotten.

So of course Shario-chan and I brought the DVD and the projector, and, by using Ami's 2017 computer, we all watched *Lilo & Stitch*.

While Saeko-mama and Hayate-chan were in the kitchen after we watched the movie, Ami showed us the card that she'd received from her father. Apparently, he sent her New Year's cards in this reality instead of the birthday cards he sent in canon. I could see where Ami got her artistic talent from. Unfortunately, the painting on the card – literally; it was an original, not a print – didn't give any clues as to his whereabouts, and there was no return address on the card, just a postmark from Uwajima.

"You know, we're rich enough to hire somebody to look for him," Makoto commented.

"What description would we give of my father, though? I get my looks from my mother; all I can say for sure is that he has the same colour eyes as me."

"And that he's Japanese," I added. "Sometimes I think that there are more blue-eyed Japanese people in the Sailor Senshi than there are in the rest of the Kuritsu Juban Chuugakkou student body."

"I'm not going to look for him. If he wanted to see me, he'd let me know his address. And the cards come from different cities each year."

Before my fiancée could respond, I said, "You know your own will here, Ami. And I think you're right, although he obviously wants to stay a part of your life. If he didn't, he wouldn't send you cards every year."

"I still think we should look for him," Makoto said just before Saeko-mama walked into the room with a tray of food.

"May I help you with that?" Ryou asked before anyone else could volunteer.

"Thank you," she smiled as she passed the tray to him.

We enjoyed a simple dinner, more because of the company than the food. Like her daughter, and like me, Saeko-mama was a decent cook, not a gourmet chef.

But fine dining wasn't the point to New Year's Eve, not in Japan. Family was the point.

Makoto, Ami, Ryou, and I decided to take a trip during the second half of the new year's break.

After Kasandara confirmed that she and Ryou could go into Life Support Mode, that is.

Yes, we planned to go off-world. The ephemeris that Chacornac gave us when the Kisenian Flowers tried to invade Earth included updated orbits for five of the senshi's castles along with a note that the others were not detectable at the time the ephemeris was produced.

We already knew that Moon Castle was in ruins, so we suspected that the others that Chacornac couldn't detect – Magellan Castle, Phobos Deimos Castle, Miranda Castle, and Triton Castle – were also destroyed. But we would have to go look to be sure; it was possible that they were occluded by their planets.

Chacornac detected magitech in orbit around the other planets that we hoped were the castles. With Life Support Mode on, we wouldn't die if we teleported into a vacuum, so we could go look for ourselves. Mind you, Life Support Mode wouldn't help us if, for example, Sailor Saturn had left lethal defences switched on at Titan Castle before the Silver Millennium fell. And we didn't want to trespass on Setsuna's prerogative by visiting Charon Castle without her along, and she was busy at Atelier Lucent.

That left us with three possible destinations for our first trip: Mariner Castle, Dawn Castle, and Io Castle. Dawn Castle was immediately dismissed for our first trip because it was a complete unknown; there was no canon that I was aware of where Sailor Ceres was stated to have a castle. Best to set that destination aside until we had some experience with interplanetary travel. We voted on whether to visit Mariner or Io first, with predictable results. Shario-chan cast the tie-breaker: Mercury was roughly a quarter of the distance from Earth that Jupiter was at this point in all three planets' orbits.

"How long is it going to take us to get there?" I asked. "It takes us six minutes to get from the Earth to the Moon, which would indicate a two-day travel time to Mercury if it's the same average speed. But it took Ichiro and me almost five seconds to reach the Kármán line. Although Ichiro and I didn't accelerate by flying when we went to the Kármán line."

"I thought you were better at math than that, darling. Acceleration accumulates over time. This isn't rocket science."

Ami smiled. "Actually, Makoto, this is rocket science. Rob, I've fine-tuned the spell so that I can set the acceleration to whatever I want. I don't know what accelerating very fast would do to our bodies even in Life Support Mode, though, and I'm worried that Kasandara and Ryou can't handle the same acceleration that the rest of us can."

"Ah. Would two hours each way work?" I asked.

Ami thought for a moment, then nodded. "That's probably within Kasandara's tolerances. I hope."

"Eleven times of twelve," she confirmed.

"Then we're taking a day trip, just like last New Year's," Makoto said.

"I'll pack some sandwiches," Ami replied with a smile.

And we were off bright and early the next morning, after letting Saeko-mama know where we were going. Emphasis on "bright"; there's a lot of sunlight near Mercury.

The first thing we did when arriving in orbit around Mercury was shield our eyes. Then Meia did a Wide Area Search, finding Mariner Castle rather quickly. If we had depended on just looking for it, we would never have seen the structure; its invisibility cloak was better than mine.

We found an airlock, Ami opened it with her identification code that was listed in the Mercury Computer, and we went inside... to find just as thin a vacuum inside the castle as what was outside. We had lights and artificial gravity, but no air.

«I'm guessing there were no survivors of Beryl's war,» I sent. «If there were, they would have repaired the damage.»

«Or escaped, if they didn't know how to make repairs,» Ryou replied.

«It would be nice if that was the case,» Meia commented.

As we looked around, Ami became more sure of where she was going. Within an hour, she led us to the castle's dock – which was empty. «It looks like they escaped,» she sent with some relief. «Come on, this way.»

We didn't trust the elevators; we took the stairs to the command deck... where we found a body seated at one control panel in the main operations room. It... no, she hadn't decayed, instead mummifying in the vacuum. Ami recognized her.

«She was the flight director here,» Ami told us. «She probably stayed behind to make sure everybody else could launch. Her name... I think it was... Ninlil?»

«The Sumerian goddess of healing,» I sent, without knowing how I knew that. «She wasn't forgotten. Don't touch her,» I added as my fiancée almost did just that.

Makoto moved her hand away from Ninlil's body and pointed at the console that Ninlil had been facing for millennia. «I wasn't going to. What's this light, here?» It was the only blue light on the console; everything else that was lit was red.

Ami took a closer look at the console. «That's... it's... » She finally consulted the Mercury Computer. «The princess' private ship is still in my... her private dock.»

«If it's still functional, can we use it?» Ryou asked.

«I don't know how to pilot a Silver Millennium spacecraft,» Ami said.

«Sailor Pluto might know how,» Makoto suggested.

«Or Sailor Uranus, once she awakens,» I added. «In canon, she seemed to know how to operate any vehicle somebody showed her.»

«Before we make a list of who might be able to operate the craft,» Ichiro sent, «we should find out whether it's still operational.»

«In a moment,» Ami replied. «I haven't finished scanning this room yet.»

We waited until she had a full scan of the main operations room. «Yuuno-san would love exploring this place,» Ami sent to us as she finished recording everything.

Then we headed off to Princess Mercury's private dock... to find a blank card propped against the airlock controls.

«Any ideas why this is here?» Ryou asked.

«I suspect that it was a temporary sign of some sort, but the ink or paint has boiled off into the vacuum over the millennia,» suggested Meia.

«We have to move it to get at the controls,» I pointed out. Ami nodded, so I picked up the card and placed it on the floor. She opened the airlock, and we went inside, closing the door behind us.

After a few seconds, we heard a hissing noise. «Sounds like there's atmosphere on the other side of the lock,» Makoto pointed out.

«But is it breathable?» Ryou asked.

As the door in front of us opened, Ami used the Mercury Computer to scan the air. Then Meia dropped out of Unison with her and said, "It's breathable. It is somewhat thin, though, only two-thirds of the usual air pressure in Tokyo."

"[About the same as the air pressure at the peak of Mount Fuji](#), then," my fiancée said. "As long as we take it easy, we'll be fine."

"Ichiro and I will stay in Unison," I said. "Just in case somebody needs to exert himself."

We took a look around. The ship's interior, as much as we had time to explore, looked to be very comfortable; it was pretty obviously a yacht, not a working ship. For the first time in at least ten millennia, the ship's mess was used for its intended purpose as we finally had a chance to eat the lunch that Ami had packed. Then we carefully cleaned up after ourselves and went back to exploring. We discovered why the ship hadn't been launched when we finally got to the flight deck or cockpit or bridge, whatever the Silver Millennium called the control room; the shutters over the dock were twisted and warped.

"That looks like it was done by high-energy magic," Sakura said.

«I concur,» Ichiro replied as Ami scanned the controls.

"Sit down, everyone," she said as she took what I assumed was the pilot's seat. She pushed a button and a video screen lowered, blocking the view from the front windows. It showed some text that none of us could read. Ami physically connected the Mercury Computer to the pilot's control panel, typed in a command and waited. A half-minute later, the text of the ship's screen switched to Japanese. "I thought that would work," she said with some satisfaction.

The captain's final log entry said that the crew was abandoning the ship in dock since there was no way to repair the dock's launch doors before the atmosphere bled out of the station. He apologized to Mercury for leaving his post without orders.

"You're forgiven," Ami said quietly.

The ship was operating on station power. The air pressure was low because there was no reserve in the air tanks; the ship strongly recommended visiting a planet with breathable atmosphere in order to replenish the air supply. Of course, that wasn't going to happen without some major repairs to the station, fuel for the ship, and a pilot.

Ami downloaded the ship's log to the Mercury Computer. "While you're doing that," Shario-chan asked, "could you grab the engineering reports too, please? We might be able to get the ship running again, assuming we can refuel it."

"Her," I corrected Shario-chan. "In this reality, ships are traditionally female when speaking English. What kind of fuel does she take?"

Shario-chan studied the display for a moment. "I'll have to double-check in the power room and thruster room, but I think she uses hydrogen, both as a fusion power source and as reaction mass."

"Reaction mass?"

"It's a backup system to the reactionless drive, if I'm reading this display correctly." She pointed at another console that I hadn't examined yet.

"How are the ship's communications systems?" I asked. "Can we connect to the Chacornac station?"

Shario-chan looked at the controls for a long moment, then replied, "We'll have to go back to Chacornac and take it out of restricted access mode first."

"Can we do that today?" Sakura asked. "You never know when we'll need access to the systems here."

"Or the databanks," Ami added. "But, no, we're running out of time. We need to leave soon if we're going to be home in time for a late dinner."

"But we'll come back," Ryou said as everyone but Ichiro and I went back into Life Support Mode. The two of us, of course, had never left it.

"Is that precognition?" Shario-chan asked.

"No, it's a promise."

I made sure to pick up a couple of copies of Kenji-san's magazine that week, because it was the issue with Ami's exclusive interview. I didn't recognize the name of the stringer that he had brought in to conduct the interview, but whoever this Minkao Jinguuji was, they were good at interviewing people like Ami. I learned a few things about my second-closest friend that I hadn't learned directly from her over the past three years.

Oh, sure, I could have learned whatever I wanted to know about her from looking through her brainprint, but I'd made that mistake with my fiancée's brainprint once already. Just because I had a copy of all of her memories didn't mean I should, or was forced to, read them, after all.

The holiday wasn't all work, though. Makoto and I went skating together three times during the two-week break. During our second outing, after we had visited Mariner Castle, I brought one of my F90 cameras with my general-purpose lens, three rolls of 36-exposure film, and the camera bag with the model release forms... at Ryou's suggestion.

I found out why when a girl who I *almost* recognized skated up to us as we were taking to the ice. "Mako-chan!"

"Chieri-chan! I haven't seen you since August."

*That's* where I remembered seeing her; she was in the group of people who had lost loved ones in the JAL 123 crash.

"I'm so happy that you've kept skating," Chieri-san said. "Who's your partner?"

"Not just my partner, my fiancé!"

"Really?! You're so lucky!"

"Hello," I said. "I'm Rob Donaldson; please call me Rob, since you're one of Makoto's friends. I'm happy to meet you, miss."

"Hello, Robu-san. I'm Asuka Chieri. Call me Chieri; anybody who can catch Mako-chan's heart *and* skate as well as you is a friend of mine."

I smiled in reply. "She caught my heart, too. Have you ever skated with Makoto, Chieri-san?"

"Oh, I'm not that good. I couldn't possibly..."

Before she could finish, Makoto took Chieri by the hand. "You are that good. Darling, go relax for a few minutes."

"I have a better idea. You two warm up while I get my camera."

"Oh, yes, please!"

I think I've mentioned before that the rink's staff like Makoto and me. When I came back with my camera, they asked everyone else to clear the rink so that I could get some photos of the two ladies safely. Aside from a half-dozen posed photos which all came out well, I managed to get a few dozen good shots of the two of them skating, including a shot of both of them doing an axel at the same time, followed by some good shots of just Chieri-san skating.

My fiancée was right: Chieri-san was as good as she was. Maybe not in technical matters, but I could see the passion she had for the sport in every move she made.

Once I ran out of film, we all took a break and let everybody else get in some skating while I got both Makoto and Chieri-san to fill out and sign model release forms. "Thank you, ladies," I said when they returned the forms to me. "This will let me offer the photos for publication. You do want to be in a general-interest magazine, don't you, Chieri-san?"

"I would *love* that! Oh, but Mako-chan, you don't like publicity..."

"I don't mind being known as a skater; it's being known as just a crash survivor that I hate. And you want to go professional. How could I refuse to help you be better known?"

"Thank you so much. You're a good friend, even if we don't see each other very often. I actually came to this rink because I heard rumours about the Emerald Pair and I hoped that the tall girl was you; I'm glad I was right."

"You could send each other letters, you know," I said.

"But I don't know Mako-chan's address! She moved!"

"That's easily solved." I grabbed one of my blank release forms, copied both ladies' addresses onto the back of it, tore it in half neatly, and gave each skater's address to the other. "Now you do."

"I'll write to you as soon as I'm home, Mako-chan!" Chieri-san promised.

"And I'll send you copies of the photos tomorrow," I promised in return.

"Remind me to be extra-nice to you tonight, darling."

"Sorry, my dearest, but tonight I'm developing these photos so I can keep my promise to Chieri-san."

"Tomorrow night, then," she said with a grin.

I spent that evening at the Tsukino residence, using Kenji-san's darkroom in exchange for giving him first publication rights for a half-dozen of the photos... including the photo of the paired axel. He told me that he'd have to get Minkao Jinguuji-san back in to interview Chieri-san, for a story to go along with the photos.

We had fun skating, Rei-san and Ichigo-san spent a day skiing, and Minako and Bunny-chan made a day of watching *Otoko wa Tsurai yo: Torajirō no Seishun* in the theatre.

Oh, yes: According to Ichigo-san, Rei-san scored 777 on her end-of-term exams.

While we were having fun, Ami, Meia, Shario-chan, and Setsuna-san of all people were working. At Chacornac crater. They used the spare parts that past-Setsuna-san could spare from the supplies at the Door of Space-Time, plus a few components that Shario-chan and Naru-san had made together, to get the space-facing sensors up to 83% operational, the Earth-facing sensors up to 27% operational, and the communications gear up to a full 100% operational.

If we wanted anything better from the Earth-facing sensors, we were going to have to put a satellite cluster in orbit. Which meant figuring out how to deploy and pilot Princess Mercury's yacht. It also meant building some satellites, and even our combined fortunes couldn't bankroll that. Yet.

Full communications meant that the Senshi could now use their communicators to stay in touch practically anywhere in the Solar System. And, as long as I could contact the communications node connected to my router, I could reach them, too. Of course, that meant Ami and Shario-chan had to go back to Mariner Castle and tie the royal shuttle into the communications network, so that Chacornac could use its sensors... which they did the following day. Chacornac immediately started compiling a list of repairs needed by both the yacht and Mariner Castle.

Shario-chan put "build a telepathic transceiver to connect Midchildan telepathy to the Senshi comms" near the top of her to-do list. Not at the very top, since she had no idea how to do that with Bishojo technology, but she assumed there was something in the Infinity Library that could help. It was just a matter of putting the email in the "to send" queue for when Ami next connected our reality to the Lyrical reality, then waiting who-knew-how-long for Yuuno-san to reply.

Back to what we could do, we now had a much better chance of detecting anybody – and by "anybody" I mean "Galaxia" – attempting to enter the Solar System through normal space, the way Fiore had. Hyperspatial portals were still blocked by the Door to Space-Time being closed, and it was Sailor Pluto's job to keep them blocked. Although I suspected that this meant that a sufficiently-motivated invader – yes, Galaxia – could just take a hyperspace route to Alpha Centauri and spend a half decade at near lightspeed to get here. Which meant that she was already on her way,

and that meant there was nobody with a Star Seed left in the rest of the galaxy, other than Princess Kakyuu and the Starlights. Who were also on their way here.

When I discussed those thoughts with Hayate-chan, she couldn't find any logical errors with them.

On a lighter note, because at that point I would take whatever good news I could find, apparently Naru-san had fun creating fiber-optic cables for Chacornac. I didn't know that clear glass counted as a gemstone... and I wasn't about to ask her, in case she suddenly realized that she couldn't do this very useful thing that she was doing. Or maybe I just misunderstood the extent of her powers.

Naru-san also picked up a new power before Sakura trained her in knife throwing; one that we should have realized she could learn. The first thing that Sakura taught Naru-san was Midchildan telepathy.

Her showing that off during the first Revealing Of The Lunches in 1993 was a surprise to the rest of us. Well, except for Ichigo-san, who couldn't hear her.

On January 4, we realized that there was something we hadn't shared with everybody else yet: The experience of flight.

Minako decided that she didn't want to try that again. Which was understandable.

Ami took Naru-san for a flight over Hamarikyū Gardens, leaving Meia to keep Ryou company, and from all accounts Naru-san enjoyed herself immensely. At the same time, Makoto and I gave Rei-san and Yuuichirou-san a quick tour of Roppongi from 200 feet up. Or, at least, a quick tour of part of Roppongi; we had to make an early landing when Sakura needed to go into Life Support Mode because Rei-san was holding on for dear life and my fiancée couldn't breathe.

Makoto managed to squeak out, "Easy, Rei. I've got you."

"You... you've got me? Who's got you?"

Oh, great, she's panicking. "Rei has gone bye-bye, Yuuichirou-san. What've you got left?"

"I won't complete that quote for you, Robu-san. Not while Rei needs help."

"Good. You're keeping your head in a crisis. Let's all get her and you back on the ground. I think, right now, she needs you more than she needs us."

"Are you sure it's me that she wants to be with right now, though?"

"She did invite you to take part in a family-only event before Small Lady left. I'm willing to take a chance that she would rather talk with you than with me."

The big oaf's got a goofy smile.

We set down in an alleyway beside Tony Roma's and pried Rei-san off of Makoto. Even in order to help Rei-san calm down, Makoto refused to visit that restaurant again... so we went to the Hard Rock Cafe nearby for a quick non-alcoholic drink and a shared plate of cheese and tomato flatbread instead.

"That was embarrassing," Rei-san whispered. "I've seen you do that a few times, but I still went to pieces when it was my turn."

"Flying isn't for everybody, I'll admit," I replied. "Don't worry about being human."

"Do you think you want to try again?" Makoto asked.

Rei-san thought for a moment. "I don't know. Not now. And not unless I'm transformed."

So we walked back to the shrine instead of flying there. Makoto and I walked hand-in-hand; Rei-san and Yuuichirou-san didn't, but at least they walked closely enough beside each other that they could.

Then it was Bunny-chan's turn. And Shingo-kun and Ikuko-san's. We took it nice and easy. Ami told me afterwards that Ikuko-san seemed to enjoy the trip, and I could hear Shingo-kun's cries of delight while being carried by Makoto.

Yes, she carried him while I carried his sister. Bunny-chan insisted. Because she wanted to have a private talk with me.

"Robu-san, can I learn the spell to open a gateway between worlds?"

I smiled at Bunny-chan's question. "Of course you can! But you'll need to learn some advanced math in order to be able to use it."

"How advanced?" she asked with some trepidation. "I'm no good at math."

"Well, you'll have to start with matrix algebra, differential calculus, and non-Euclidean geometry."

"Ano... Robu-san, these are university courses."

"I know that, Bunny-chan," I replied. "Once you understand them, then you'll have the grounding to be able to cast the spell, and you might be able to Unison with Hayate-chan without overwhelming her, too."

"Mako-chan didn't need to learn all that math, did she?"

"Sakura's doing all of Makoto's spellcasting, except for her Senshi attacks."

"I'm going to have to learn math..." The poor girl cried almost as hard as she had when Kunzite kidnapped Tuxedo Kamen. But not for anywhere near as long.

The day before we went back to school, I noticed that there was a website that I hadn't visited listed in my browser history. I dialed up the internet and looked at it, then did a search for its owner. Then, after checking my email, I logged out and turned to one of my companions.

"Shario-chan...?"

"Yes, Rob?"

"Why is the domain name 'sailorsenshi.org' showing up as owned by 'Finieno, S.' in a whois search?"

"Because I bought it. I can't believe we didn't already have a website, Rob."

"It's 1993! *Nobody* has a personal website yet!"

"Oh, good; we get to be the first."

And then it was time for third semester. The big news on the grapevine was of a mysterious transfer student, followed by Shiratori Mikan-san's release from the hospital; almost nobody was talking about Ami's interview.

Which made me wonder, because as far as I knew, all of the mysterious transfer students who should be involved with the Senshi were already students at Kuritsu Juban Chuugakkou. Unless Saturn, Uranus, or Neptune transferred in from Mugen Academy, but the odds of that happening were somewhat less than the odds of me figuring out in the next ten minutes who was responsible for me being in this universe to begin with.

Not that I was complaining about being Makoto's fiancée. But I was still curious about why.

The mysterious transfer student was the topic of discussion after the Revealing Of The Lunches that day. "What's that?" Bunny-chan asked while pointing her chopsticks at Ichigo-san's side dish.

"It's [matsumaezuke](#)! Squid, herring roe, and konbu, pickled together. We usually eat it in Hokkaido around New Year's; this is the last of mom's supply for this year. It takes a week to ferment."

"Ferment? That sounds terrible," Minako said.

"Fermenting is important when making pickles," my fiancée replied.

"It tastes great," Ichigo-san insisted. "Want to try it?"

"I'll give it a try!" And Bunny-chan helped herself to a bite. "Oh, that's salty! But good!"

"Salty? I'd better not," I said. "Somebody as tall as me has high blood pressure at the best of times."

The rest of us found excuses to let Ichigo-san eat her own lunch while we ate our own.

Then we started talking about the transfer student – sorry, the *mysterious* transfer student – in class 3.

"I heard she's from Russia," Bunny-chan said.

"I think she is, considering her name is Elmira Bogdanova," Minako replied.

Ichigo-san dropped her chopsticks in surprise.

"Do you know her?" I asked in just as much surprise. "You mentioned that you used to visit Korsakov occasionally."

"No, I've never heard of her," she said while packing the rest of her lunch and picking up her now-dirty chopsticks. "But I know what her name means."

"Is that important?" Ami asked.

"It might be. 'Elmira Bogdanova'; electrification of the world, given by God. That sounds a lot like Sailor Jupiter to me."

"Most people's names aren't meaningful that way, Ms. Strawberry Greenhill," I pointed out, using the English translation of her name for emphasis.

"The Senshi's names are." Ichigo-san replied in Japanese.

Makoto frowned. "But it isn't that close to my name."

"It's as close as one can get without involving Roman gods," Ami pointed out.

Naru-san asked, "Should we keep an eye on her?"

"Perhaps we could become friends with her, instead," Bunny-chan suggested. "She probably needs a friend or two."

My fiancée nodded. "I know what it's like to be alone in a new school."

"So do I," Ryou added.

"Likewise," said Ichigo-san.

"Me, too," Minako said.

"That's half of our group," I said. "And I suspect I would've known as well, if I hadn't met Makoto the day I arrived here. So if she is lonely, we're probably the best people at Kuritsu Juban Chuugakkou to help her."

"So, how do we approach her?"

"That's easy, Usagi-san," Ichigo-san answered. "Let Ryou-san walk past her and she'll do her best to spend time with him."

"Oh, come on, I'm not some sort of male ideal. Am I?"

I blinked in surprise. "Haven't you noticed, Ryou ol' pal?"

"I have to admit," Minako said, "that when Ami was thinking of going to Germany to study, I was tempted to take you away from her. I wouldn't do that now – we're sisters ever since Saeko-mama adopted me – but the fact that it's Ami and not me who's your girlfriend is the only point where I'm jealous of her."

"I remember you saying that at the time," Ami commented. "I thought you were joking."

"Ami-chan... Mina-chan..." Bunny-chan looked worried.

Time for an intervention that only a foreigner who wasn't completely familiar with local customs could pull off. But lacking one of those, I'd have to do. "It looks like we're going to have to be honest with each other here. Raise a hand if you *haven't* wondered what it would be like to be Ryou's girlfriend." I raised my own hand, as of course did Ryou. So did Makoto. The other five ladies, including Bunny-chan, didn't. "Face facts, Ryou; you're a babe magnet."

"We need a point of comparison," he insisted. "Raise a hand if you haven't wondered what it would be like to be Rob's girlfriend." Ryou, Ami, Naru-san, Bunny-chan, Ichigo-san, and I immediately raised our hands.

"Minako?" I asked as Makoto moved closer to me.

"I wondered when we first met, but only until you told me that you had a girlfriend. But I did wonder, and you said to be honest. Don't worry, Mako-chan, I'm not going to make a move on your fiancé; I fully support your love for each other, just like I support Ami and Ryou's."

"Can we come up with a different idea on how to approach Bogdanova-san, please?" Ami asked.

"We really should," Bunny-chan agreed. "It isn't fair to you or Ryou to ask you to do that."

«Oh, good,» I sent to Ryou, Ami, and Makoto in English. «We've got at least two shippers cheering for our love.»

«What does maritime transport of freight have to do with our relationships?» Ami asked. «No, wait, I see it now; *relationships*. When will that term catch on?»

I thought for a moment as I ate. «In 1996, I think. Fans of *The X-Files* come up with it.»

My fiancée asked, «What's *The X-Files*?»

Before any of us met Bogdanova-san, though, we had other things to do. Mostly related to schoolwork, but not all. One matter fell into my lap. Literally.

"Oops! Sorry about that, Rob."

"No worries, Hayate-chan," I said as I helped her up. "You're usually more attentive to your surroundings than that; is there something wrong?"

She hopped off of my hand and onto my desk. "No. Not really. It's nothing. ... Yes."

"Is it anything that I can help with?"

She sighed. "I don't think so, Rob. You aren't in charge of the group."

"Oh, dear. Are you having personality issues with one of the Senshi, or Naru-san, or Ichigo-san?"

"No, no, not at all. But sometimes..." I waited, and let her continue at her own pace. "Sometimes everybody else forgets that I'm here. Everybody's busy with schoolwork, either learning or tutoring, except for Kasandara and me. Meia and Ami are busy with their spells and combining the old Silver Millennium technology we've found with Midchildan technology, you're helping them with the first part of that, and Shario-chan is helping with the rest. Even Naru-san helps out with that project. Ryou and Kasandara are busy earning us enough money to buy a nice house somewhere and fund all of our other projects. Usagi and Rei are miko when they're not students or Senshi. When Minako isn't trying out for movie or TV roles, she's figuring out what it means to be in the Mizuno family instead of the Aino family. You and Makoto are the Emerald Pair, and everybody likes seeing you skate together. Even Ichigo-san has her zoology studies. Usagi and Mamoru are finally a couple, Ami and Ryou love each other and have their parents' blessing to marry, and you and Makoto have the second-strongest relationship I've ever seen; only the one that Nanoha and Fate have is stronger. And Sakura keeps complaining about how much time Ichiro and Shario-chan spend together at Naru's place when they all visit to give her training."

"I wasn't aware that Ichiro and Shario-chan were getting that close, although I had my suspicions. But we're not talking about them. We're talking about you."

She nodded. "But all I have to talk about is everybody else. Ever since Princess Lady left, I haven't had anything to do, except wonder why Hayate agreed to let me come into existence. She can't have been expecting me to adjust to



being the same size as Reinforce with the same magical capacity as Makoto after remembering having been full human size and the most powerful mage in all of the worlds that the TSAB knew about."

"I know from your skating lessons that Unison Devices can at least take on a child-size form."

"You're right, we can, but it isn't any good in combat."

"We aren't in combat right now."

"Oh. Right." She hopped off my desk and grew larger, until she was about the same size as Princess Lady. "That helps a lot. Thanks for reminding me that I can do this," she said as she pulled my guest chair over and sat down.

"Happy to help. How do you do that, by the way?"

"Most of a Device's body is in a pocket dimension, for want of a better name. We just let our other forms come out to play, something like changing clothes. That's how Raising Heart and Bardiche can change from being a wearable size to being polearms."

"And how you and our Unison partners can become larger. I learn something new every day. But that's only one of your problems. You mentioned having less magical power that you're used to, and having nothing to do. I can't help you with the magical power; I'm only Rank C."

"And I don't know what you can do to help with my other problem. Usagi's in charge of the Senshi, Rei is her lieutenant, and Ami's their trusted advisor."

"Ami is *one* of their trusted advisors. I'll admit that Rei-san and I aren't as close to each other as the others are to either of us, but I do have Bunny-chan's ear whenever I want it. I just don't want it very often. But the Senshi don't have very much to do right now, and probably won't until the Death Busters make themselves known unless somebody like Touhi-chan shows up unexpectedly."

"Why don't we take that battle to the enemy? We know that Germatoid is Professor Tomoe, and his secretary and the prefects of Mugen Academy are the Death Busters."

"And Bunny-chan needs to power-up by getting the Holy Grail in order to fight them, and that requires bringing the Talismans together."

"We know where the Talismans are."

I nodded. "All of this assumes that this reality is the same as any of the canonical *Sailor Moon* realities, of course. But this reality changed as soon as I arrived in it during the Missing..." I had a horrible thought.

"Rob? Is something wrong?"

"Give me a minute. I'm working out the timeline. How old was Hotaru when her father implanted Mistress 9 into her? That was only alluded to in a flashback scene in the anime."

"You're thinking of the manga continuity. In the anime, Mistress 9 revived and merged with Hotaru after she was killed. And she was, maybe, ten at the time?"

"Oh, dear. That means they were on Earth during the Missing Time, while the Dark Kingdom was still in existence. I wonder whether they were affected by Usagi-san's reset of the world?"

Hayate-chan thought for a moment, then asked, "How powerful is Pharaoh 90?"

Neither of us said anything for a moment.

Finally, I said, "Well, there's something for you to do, Hayate-chan: go through every scrap of information we have about the *Sailor Moon S* anime and the Infinity arc of the manga, and develop strategies to deal with our opponents with minimum loss of life."

"By 'minimum loss of life', do you mean on our side or on both sides?"

"Both sides. The body count in this reality is already higher than the body count in the anime continuity; I'd really like to stop killing everybody we don't like. And you're the best strategist on the team... Oh! I just thought of something else that only you can do. Sakura wasn't wrong when she said that Bunny-chan has the tactical skill of a rock."

"But she's the Moon Princess. She doesn't need to know tactics, she needs to know... strategy," she finished with a smile. "I see where you're going with this."

I nodded. "You are the only one here who can teach her military strategy, after all. It isn't covered in the TSAB manuals that your personality donor gave us."

"Because you asked for the basic training manuals, not the officer academy manuals." Hayate-chan sighed deeply. "You realize that you're asking me to teach the person in our team who has the most trouble learning in an educational setting. I don't know whether I'm *that* bored. But you're right; she needs to learn what I can teach her. Has she agreed to learn strategy?"

"I haven't asked her yet. Maybe you should consider that your first lesson: get her to accept that she needs to learn what you have to teach."

Finally, on the first Thursday after the winter break, we met Bogdanova-san. Ami and I were walking to class 1, where the lunch club was meeting that day, when we saw somebody we didn't recognize standing just outside the door to class 3. She had black hair, longer than Ichigo-san's but shorter than Makoto's, skin that was a paler white than mine, and eyes so dark they looked to be black. She was taller than most of the other students, but not as tall as Makoto or me. And she was carrying a Lawson's bag instead of a bento. "Excuse me," she asked with a Russian accent, "but could you direct me to the cafeteria?"

"Oh, we don't have a separate cafeteria, only a lunch counter," Ami replied. "We eat lunch in our classrooms, or in the classrooms of our friends, or outside when it's warm enough."

"I see. Thank you, miss...?"

"I'm Mizuno Ami. Pleased to meet you." Ami bowed slightly.

"You are the girl that the magazines call the smartest student in Japan? I'm honoured to meet you. My name is Elmira Bogdanova."

"And my name is Rob Donaldson," I said with a bow of my own. "I'm happy to meet you."

"I have heard about you as well, Donaldson-san. Or is it Mr. Donaldson? My classmates tell me you are not to be dated, but they do not say why."

"Since we are in Japan, I go by Donaldson-san, although many of my classmates can only manage 'Donarudoson-san'," I added with a bit of a smile. "I hesitate to ask how badly your classmates pronounce 'Bogdanova-san'."

"Not as badly as they pronounce your name; they call me 'Bogudanoba-san'."

I continued, "As to why I cannot be dated, that is because I already have a fiancée."

She looked from me to Ami, then back to me. "Mizuno-san?"

"No," I replied, "Ami is my second-closest friend, not my fiancée."

Ami added, "And I am affianced to someone else. Would you like to meet our fiancées, and have lunch with us and some of our other friends?"

"Yes, please," Bogdanova-san replied.

So we did. Of course, Bunny-chan coaxed "Erumaira-san" to be on a given-name basis with everyone else in our lunch club before our bento were empty.

She seemed a bit shy, but that was understandable; she was meeting eight people at the same time, after all. And she was busy paying attention to us rather than talking very much; we never had to repeat anything.

When we walked back to our classrooms after lunch, Elmira-san asked whether she could join us again. In reply, we let her know our schedule of when we ate in which classroom and gave her an open invitation to join us whenever she wanted.

Elmira-san ended up being the topic of conversation at the first Conversational English club meeting of the new term. Not because she was there – she didn't seem to speak English – but because she had joined us for lunch again.

"We have to get that poor girl a proper bento," my dearest said. "She can't keep buying lunches every day."

"Ichigo-san did mention that buying lunch is the Russian way," Ryou pointed out. "She probably isn't used to making a lunch at breakfast time."

"Er..." Minako started. "Is it just me, or does she seem a bit odd to anybody else?"

"You know you left yourself wide open there, Minako," I said with a grin.

"We love you anyway," Ami added, "even if you are a bit odd."

Minako reached into her school bag, pulled out a small throw pillow, and threw it at Ami... who caught it easily. "But seriously, something about Elmira-san seems odd to me."

"She *is* Russian," I pointed out. "We're used to people who act the way Japanese people act."

"And how British people act, in my case," Minako agreed. "And you're probably still used to how Canadians act, too."

"Canadians and Midchildans both," I agreed.

"But that isn't what's bugging me."

"Then what is it about our new friend that has you bothered?" Makoto asked.

"I don't know. Something."

"Well, when you figure out what's bothering you, you can let us know."

We got together at Rei-san's shrine on Sunday. For the first time, Ryou, Ichiro, and I were invited to join the girls in their Protect Esthe training. Little did Ryou and I know that they had an ulterior motive.

I nearly had a nosebleed as soon as we walked in. Ryou did have one. Because each of the girls, including Sakura and Meia, was wearing an [ESPA](#) sleeveless leotard.

"You two just flunked the first test," Ichiro said. "Your opponents tend to be attractive women. If you can't keep your minds off people's appearances, how do you expect to be able to fight them effectively?"

"There's a big difference between seeing An or Berthier or I assume Mimete in clothes that tend to flatter their figures, and seeing my fiancée and the rest of the Sailor Team in spandex leotards," I pointed out.

"Ecchi," Rei-san commented with a frown.

"If you don't like his attitude," Sakura said, "then do something about it, the way we discussed."

"Fine, I will!" She transformed to Sailor Mars. At least now she was wearing a skirt over her bodysuit. "Form Blazing Sword!"

Okay, that was new. Well, at least it was new for her. I don't know what was burning – maybe it was just her passion – but the short sword she was holding was made completely from flames. If that hit me, it would hurt.

"Frigid Sword!"

"Crescent Beam Saber!"

My fiancée, in Sailor Jupiter form, simply formed her electro-quarterstaff.

And Naru-san grabbed a charred log and turned it into a diamond sword. And the fact that there was a charred log in the building to begin with showed me that I had been set up.

"Your second test starts now," Ichiro announced. "It isn't enough just to survive; you have to disarm all five of your opponents."

"Oh, you've got to be kidding me," I said as I formed a forcefield bubble around myself and dodged Jupiter's electro-quarterstaff. "Do I have to protect Ryou, Ichigo-san, and Bunny-chan at the same time?"

Ryou groaned. "Don't give him ideas."

"We'll see about doing that next week."

"See?"

At this point, Okuni and the [Senshi of the Four Guardian Deities](#) had me surrounded, and I had manifested a forcefield staff of my own. Time to divide and conquer, starting with the three who hadn't been trained by Ginga and Vita. I fainted toward Mercury, then spun while using my staff to knock Okuni's, Jupiter's, and Venus' feet out from under them while I rushed Mars.

She swung at me wildly. Obviously, she was at the point in her training that Naru-san was at just before Petz sent my closest friends and me to Midchilda; she could create the sword, but she didn't know how to use it yet.

"Too slow, Mars," I said while grabbing and squeezing her wrist, forcing her to drop her Blazing Sword – which disappeared before hitting the wooden floor.

"Mars! Out!" Meia said.

"Let go and I'll walk away," Mars said.

"Sorry, but I need you for a moment." Then, while dodging swings of Mercury's Frigid Blade at chest height and Okuni's diamond blade at knee height, I pushed Mars straight at the opponent who had returned to her feet: Venus.

As I hoped, Minako let her Crescent Beam Saber dissolve so she could use both hands to catch Mars.

"Venus! Out!" Meia said as Jupiter got to her feet.

I looked at Naru-san. Sure enough, she wasn't expecting the training to be life-threatening, so she hadn't transformed to her dress or kabuki makeup. Although after seeing how I had used Mars to defeat Venus, she decided to do just that. This was the first time that I'd seen she finally had control over her transformation.

I grabbed her in a forcefield and held her off the floor, forcing Jupiter to stop a swing that she was about to take at me.

"Hey! Using somebody as a shield isn't very heroic," Okuni complained.

"Just helping you get up," I replied as I let her stand on her own feet... between me and Mercury. I poked at Jupiter's electro-quarterstaff with my own staff, failing to make contact.

Okuni spun on her heel to face me... at which point I worked with her momentum and used a forcefield mallet to knock the sword from her hand, making sure it didn't hit Jupiter as it was sent in her direction.

"Okuni! Out!" said Meia.

And with the three people who hadn't been trained by Ginga and Vita now out of the fight, I felt a lot more comfortable with sparring at my full power; which I'd need in a two-on-one fight. Mind you, the downside to that was that I was up against two other TSAB-trained fighters who didn't have to worry any more about hitting their less-trained allies.

As Rei-san, Minako, and Naru-san walked over to where Ryou, Ichigo-san, and Bunny-chan were standing, I dodged the electro-quarterstaff and the Frigid Sword at the same time, used Mirage Hide to change my clothes to TSAB armoured training fatigues, looked at Jupiter and Mercury, and said with a grin, "Let's get dangerous!"

"Agreed. Frigid Dagger!"

"Coconut Cyclone!"

I succumbed to a bit of showboating and spun my quarterstaff to knock the missiles out of the air, relying on my TSAB armour to absorb the one ball of electricity that got through, then started moving. If I stayed in one place while fighting either Mercury or Jupiter, I just might be able to win, but leaving myself as a sitting duck while fighting them both was suicide.

At least we were indoors, which I thought meant Mercury wasn't able to take to the air. Silly me.

The I realized that Meia, not Ichiro, was refereeing this fight. It was a slim chance that my thought was right, but worth a try. I used my quarterstaff to poke Mercury in the stomach, pushing her back to the wall so that I could bypass her and reach my partner. "Unison!"

He nodded in approval. "Unison!" And I let Jupiter get in a free shot, taking down my forcefield bubble, while I powered up.

We dissolved my quarterstaff and formed twin forcefield swords, Ichiro's preferred weaponry.

As Jupiter swung her electro-quarterstaff in one hand and drew Donguri-no-ken with the other, I made as if to feint toward Mercury... then rushed Mercury after all, trapping her Frigid Sword between both of my swords. Then I shifted all three swords in an arc, forcing her to twist her wrist.

Except that she didn't twist her wrist. Instead, she levitated, spun her entire body to match how I was trying to twist her arm, and kicked me in the stomach, forcing me to let go of her sword. At least the armoured fatigues kept me from taking any real damage. "Shiny Aqua Illusion!"

I barely had time to raise a forcefield shield – sloped so I wouldn't be trapped by the ice.

As Mercury righted herself, Jupiter said, "Sakura! Unison!"

"Unison!"

«She'll kill me if we damage Donguri-no-ken,» I thought to Ichiro as I stood up.

«We'll have to seal it, then.»

«Easier thought than done,» I told him as Jupiter's Unison completed. Then I turned my full attention to my opponents. "Shouldn't you two be breaking morale and running by now, after most of your allies have fallen around you?"

"You're the one who told me Esmerade thought I was the most dangerous Senshi," my dearest said with a smile. "Supreme Thunder!"

I dodged away from the now-electrified Donguri-no-ken and blocked it with both of my own swords. "Now, Ichiro!"

«Sealing!» And we had my fiancée's sword.

"Meia?" I asked, wondering why she hadn't called Jupiter "out" yet.

Then Makoto hit me hard with her electro-quarterstaff. "You aren't the only one with two weapons."

As I lost consciousness, I heard Meia say, "Oni! Out! Mission failed."

When I regained consciousness, I saw Ami casting a healing spell on my head. "Easy, Rob. Meia says that you're concussed. Let us get you back in shape."

"Thanks," I muttered. Note to self: include a helmet in my sparring outfit. "Ichiro, give Donguri-no-ken back to Makoto, please."

"Already done, sir."

My wits returned to me as Ami's spell took effect. "Looks like I failed the second test, too."

"We were surprised that you lasted as long as you did," Ichiro replied while dropping out of Unison. "But, yes, you failed."

"And I'm upset that you took three of us out in less than a minute," Rei-san grouched.

Quietly, I said, "That wasn't your fault. The three of you have been learning TSAB techniques, but the three of us have had intensive training from an experienced TSAB trainer. Vita is a much dirtier fighter than Ichiro ever will be. I took you out first so you wouldn't get hurt in the crossfire when we got dangerous."

Bunny-chan nodded. "That makes sense. And I didn't realize just how dangerous you and Ami can be in a fight."

My dearest laughed. "That was barely a sparring session, except at the end. And I'm sorry I knocked you out, darling, but somebody had to take you down a peg."

Under doctor Meia's orders, I didn't take part in the rest of the session. I spent the rest of the morning lying quietly... or, considering Rei-san's Blazing Sword, lion quietly.

Hey, at the time and with the lingering effects of my just-healed concussion, I thought it was funny.

\* \* \*

Needless to say, I didn't go skating that afternoon. My dearest told me that I missed skating with Chieri-san and meeting her skating partner.

And my fiancée and I *never* sparred against each other after that; we were always placed on the same team.

Ami and Elmira-san started a chess game during lunch the next day. Nothing serious; the games that they played starting that week were each completed during the same lunch period that they were started. As a result, neither woman got to show off her true skills, whatever Elmira-san's chess skills might be; they ended up winning about half the games each.

And thus was our routine set for the final term. Teal Deer, we did well on tests, became closer to Elmira-san, and talked about trivial matters during the Conversational English Club. Tutoring and combat training progressed to the point that Rei-san could actually use her Blazing Sword as a weapon... and we got to experience sauna when the Blazing Sword went up against the Frigid Blade.

And when we weren't training and Makoto and I weren't skating as the Emerald Pair, Meia, Ami, and I decoded Future Ami's notes – at least the ones we had access to – and came up with a spell that the notes assured us would put Pure Hearts, Dream Mirrors, and Star Seeds back into people's bodies. We also re-created the contraceptive spell that Dr. Shamal had cast on Ami and Makoto – it turned out to be a basic Midchildan medical spell that Hayate had picked up along the way, so Hayate-chan taught them the spell and the ladies improved it so that the recipient could switch it off early if she wanted to become pregnant. Needless to say, that upgrade went into the e-mailbag for our Midchildan friends.

Then we worked on a mind shield spell, starting with all the notes that Yuuno-san was able to send us. While Wiseguy was gone, barring timey-wimey shenanigans, we didn't want Nehellenia to incapacitate us with dreams or nightmares. By the time that we had to drop our research in order to concentrate on final exams, everybody else who was able to cast spells could defend against Hayate-chan's mental attacks, no matter how direct or insidious they were. Including the "lotus eater" illusion that the original Book of Darkness had used against a much younger Captain Testarossa in Lyrical canon.

We hoped that that would be enough.

And then it was time to study, followed by the exams.

The Kuritsu Juban Chuugakkou faculty didn't take any chances this time; there were video cameras on Ami, Ryou, Makoto, and me for every exam. And copies of the footage of us taking the tests and verbally answering extra questions after each test were submitted along with our test scores.

And that's the only reason why we didn't need to be re-tested again.

Usagi improved slightly; she scored 640 instead of last term's 639.

Naru-san, Ichigo-san, and Minako scored in the high-700s, improving as well.

Ryou, Makoto, and I scored 881, 873, and 877, respectively. Normally, that would be newsworthy. Normally, Ami wouldn't be attending the same school as three other students who all scored above 850.

Ami, like Usagi, improved by one point. Mind you, that was as far as she *could* improve; it gave her the first 900 that I'd ever seen *anybody* earn, anywhere. Little did I know at the time that it wouldn't be the last.

Kuritsu Juban Chuugakkou hosted a press conference just after the awarding of the report cards. I remember being surprised that Elmira-san stayed to listen.

And this time, since everybody was in on the secret, we invited Makoto's grandfather to the celebratory sukiyaki party.

Ryou gave Ichigo-san an end-of-year gift: a printed copy of the peer-reviewed literature available online in 2018 about Wakkanai's harbour seals.

We didn't see her for the entire three-week end-of-year vacation.

Which, apparently, Ryou did on purpose. We had to explain to the others who couldn't initiate Unison that making an interplanetary trip might be fatal to them; with something important to her to read instead, Ichigo-san didn't even ask to join us.

And thus did we make our first long-term repair trip to Castle Mariner. We were there for a week, bringing along everything that we needed including tanks of nitrogen, oxygen, argon, and carbon dioxide. By the end of the week, all of us except Ami were sick of sandwiches and bottled water.

Ami and I got better at casting movement spells, since we used them so often. Even with the extra atmosphere cylinders, we couldn't get the air pressure in the shuttle high enough for the biological people to do very much physical work safely; we were all accustomed to sea-level air pressure, not mountaintop air pressure. Shario-chan ended up becoming the work boss, since she was the only one of us who had a technical background and the ability to work in the thin air.

We couldn't repair everything, not in one week. But we got the royal shuttle functional and the doors to its dock operational; now all we needed was a pilot. And fuel, but the Sun gave off more hydrogen than we could capture easily so filling the ship's fuel tanks was just a matter of time.

Ami and Shario-chan spent the entire last day we were there taking scans of various ship's systems throughout the shuttle, as requested by Yuuno-san after he finished studying the scans Ami had taken of the station the first time we visited.

Then we told the station to refill its sole intact hydrogen fuel tank from the solar wind, and headed home.

While we were gone, Naru-san made some more replacement parts for us to install at Chacornac. She was getting good at miniaturizing them; she was almost at the point where she could start making spare parts for the laptops. And while she wasn't doing that, she and Chiba-san practised their swordplay.

Rei-san gave Bunny-chan some lessons that we didn't realize she needed: Usagi-san was a much calmer miko when we returned than she was when we left. The newfound serenity suited Serenity, and I hoped that she'd be able to draw upon it as Sailor Moon as well.

Apparently, Minako, Saeko-mama, and Superintendent-General Sakurada spent an afternoon together. Apparently, two of those people asked a favour from the other person. Apparently, I don't need to be present for stupid genre conventions to take place.

Anyway.

The stupid genre convention made itself known the first day of our third year at Kuritsu Juban Chuugakkou. Makoto and Ichigo-san were no longer in Class 6, and Ami and I were no longer in Class 5. The entire lunch club, all nine of us, were in Class 1.

And so were a lot of other people who hadn't been in Class 1 last year. Sakamoto-san had come along with us from Class 5, for example. As a result, we managed to grab a group of desks together at the back of the room, nearest the door, because nobody had a prior claim to them.

I got the prized – well, I thought it was a prize – desk right beside the door. My fiancée was beside me, and Ichigo-san was beside her.

Minako was directly in front of me. Bunny-chan got the desk in the middle of our cluster, and Naru-san was beside her.

Ryou was directly in front of Minako, and Ami was beside him (and in front of Bunny-chan), with Elmira-san beside Ami.

Sakurada-sensei was our homeroom teacher. She walked in, saw that we were all together at desks convenient to the door, sighed, and started her start-of-year speech. "Some of you already know me, while others are meeting me for the first time. I'm Sakurada Haruna." She wrote her name on the blackboard. "I'll be your English teacher as well, and I'm also the faculty advisor to the school's Conversational English Club. Now I'll call on you to introduce yourselves, starting with student 1, Ito-san."

I had previously made a grid on a sheet of paper, and filled it in with my classmates' names as they introduced themselves; one of the perks of being in the back corner of the classroom was that I could do so without anybody noticing and taking offence that I couldn't remember their name.

Most of the introductions were the instantly-forgettable sort. A few weren't.

"I'm Aoyama Ichigo, and I'm an Ainu." You finally decided to tell everybody, eh? More power to you, Ichigo-san.

"I'm Matsudaira Hanzō. Yes, I'm named after Hattori Hanzou. And I am that good with a sword." You might think so, Matsudaira-san, but the way you move, it's obvious to the TSAB-trained people in the room that Minako, Makoto, and I are better armed-martial artists than you are.

"I'm Tsukino Usagi, 15 years old, clumsy and a bit of a crybaby." Bunny-chan, why did you just use your anime character's introductory speech?

"I am Sakamoto Kazuya." That's all, ol' classmate? But, then, I've never known you to say much; I barely know you as a person. No, I haven't been keeping my classmates at arm's length ever since Sato-san died; Sakamoto-san has always been somewhere in the background.

"I'm Mizuno Minako. I was born Aino Minako, and I still use that name when I try out for TV show roles." Keep on reaching for the stars, Minako.

"I'm Mizuno Ami. I can't help everybody in class with your homework all of the time, but my friends and I can help if you really can't figure something out at all." I nodded in agreement, as did Ryou and Makoto. And, while I wondered where the wallflower who I had fallen in love with had gone in the last half-decade, I appreciated being close friends with the self-confident young woman who could make such an offer unbidden.

"I'm Ueno Daisuke, and I'm so happy to be in a class with so many pretty classmates and a pretty teacher." Oh, dude, you just put yourself on the 'don't bother to date' list.

"I'm Osaka Naru. My family runs a jewellery store, and I've made a few pieces myself." She showed off the ring that she was wearing.

"I am Elmira Bogdanova. Please be patient with me; I am still learning Japanese."

Finally, it was my turn. Our names weren't spelled with kanji, so unconscious Japanese racism meant Elmira-san and I got to go last... and D comes after B. "I'm Rob Donaldson. You can probably tell that I'm not from around here. I'm used to people mispronouncing my name, so I won't think you're being overly familiar if you call me 'Robu-san' instead of trying to say Donaldson. Like Kino-san, I like ice skating."

"You and Kino-san are the Emerald Pair, aren't you?" one of our classmates asked.

We nodded in unison. "Yes, Yamaguchi-san, we are," I replied.

"Autographs after school tomorrow," Makoto added with a grin.

The other teachers took their turns introducing themselves to us as their classes began, followed by giving us tests that were designed to show how much we already knew about their subjects. To nobody's surprise, Ami got straight 100s on these tests.

Our final class for the day was English, which meant Sakurada-sensei was back in the classroom. "I'd like to give you a quick English test now. I want to know who here needs more help than the others, and who can help me teach tricky phrases." She passed out exams, face-down, then walked back to the front of the room and said, "Begin."

I turned my test over to see that it had a note attached: "Stay behind after class." I suspected that I wasn't the only one to get that note.

A half-hour later, Sakurada-sensei said, "Pencils down. Hand in your tests, and then you may leave for your first club meetings of the year. Be sure to be here on time tomorrow."

It took a few minutes for everybody else to leave. Sure enough, Sakurada-sensei had told the eight of us who had been a group for more than a term to stay behind.

She waited for a moment to make sure nobody else was loitering by the classroom, told Elmira-san to not bother waiting, then closed and locked the doors. "What the Hell is going on here?"

"Ma'am?" Minako asked, her face the picture of innocence.

"Don't 'ma'am' me, Mizuno Minako. My sister practically ordered me to make sure the eight of you were in the same class. I want to know why."

«Is there any point in trying to keep it from her any more?» Ami sent.

«She's trustworthy, seven times out of nine,» Ryou replied.

«We may as well tell her, then,» Bunny-chan decided.

"I'm waiting for somebody to answer me."

"It might be better to show you, ma'am," I said. Then I waved one hand and the drapes closed as if by magic. Well, they really closed because I used forcefields to pull them closed. I also put up a privacy forcefield along the classroom's interior walls, floor, and ceiling.

She turned to see the drapes closing apparently on their own. "How...?" Then she turned back to us... but instead of seeing Bunny-chan, Ami, Minako, Makoto, Naru-san, and me, she saw Sailor Moon, Sailor Mercury, Sailor Venus, Sailor Jupiter, Okuni, and Oni.

"They don't usually transform on-campus, sensei," Ryou said. "This is a very special day. Oh, and I'm known as Onmyōji. I don't go out and fight, which is why I don't have a costume."

"You're... This answers a lot of questions, actually. How long has Natsuna known?"

Venus took that one. "About all of us, since Bon last year. About me, since a couple of months after I became Sailor V."

"Who?"

"That's the name I used during most of the Missing Time."

"We should transform back before somebody else notices us," Moon declared as she shifted back to Bunny-chan. We each followed suit, making sure Sakurada-sensei could see us switch and thus knew who was who.

"I think I need to sit down," Sakurada-sensei said while doing just that. "What about you, Aoyama?"

Ichigo-san grinned. "Oh, I'm just an ordinary girl who happens to know my friends' biggest secret. Just like you now, sensei."

"I haven't been a girl for a half-decade now, Aoyama." She thought for a moment. "I suppose you've been using the Conversational English club as a place to talk about your other lives."

Ami nodded. "We have, yes."

"I'll do what I can to discourage new members from joining this year."

The club members bowed in appreciation. "Thank you, sensei."

"And now I know why you wanted desks near the back door. If you have to leave early or arrive late, you'll cause the least amount of disruption possible,"

"Actually, sensei," I said, "I'm just used to sitting near the back so that I don't block my classmates' view."

"Me, too," Makoto added.

"Yes, of course. That's considerate of you."

"Thank you, sensei," my fiancée replied.

"And the rest of us just sat with the people we know," Ichigo-san finished.

School quickly settled into a month-long routine of learning, deciding which if any high school we wanted to try for, Conversational English club meetings on Fridays – with no new club members – and our unofficial lunch club meeting either in Class 1 or in the courtyard. We all ended up talking about our hometowns during lunch. Thus it was that the group learned more than we would probably ever need to know about Niigata from Ryou, Vladivostok from Elmira-san, Wakkanai from Ichigo-san, and Toronto from me.

But that was April. May changed things up for us, and not just with two holidays in the first week of the month. Kuritsu Juban Chuugakkou had its school trip in early May.

Sakurada-sensei gave us the usual talk ahead of time: the trip to Kyoto was part of our studies, this was a school activity and we were expected to conduct ourselves appropriately, and we were expected to take notes. Then she told us to form groups of six people.

Elmira-san ended up not joining us. Bunny-chan quickly drew her closest advisors at school – Ami, Minako, and Makoto – into her group, along with Naru-san and Ichigo-san, which meant there wasn't room for a seventh girl in her group. And of course she couldn't join a boys' group.

Ryou and I were approached by more than a few of the boys in our class who couldn't get dates; it seemed like they thought we were going to be spending our free time with our fiancées, so they might have a chance at dating our other friends. But Ueno-san was one of only two who was honest enough to actually say so. So of course we let him join our group, *because* he was honest with us. The other honest classmate was Sakamoto-san, who was still hoping to spend some time with Minako, and we took pity on him. Hey, he was a classmate of mine from last year, so why not? Ueno-san suggested Yamaguchi-san, and after we chatted with him and discovered he had no ulterior motive for joining our group, we decided, "Sure, why not?" We rounded out our group with Matsudaira-san, of all people, who we asked to join us because he said flat-out that he wasn't interested in dating any of his classmates or covering for anyone else in his group if they tried... which meant that none of the other groups would have him.

We talked about the class trip during the Conversational English club's meeting that Friday, instead of packing for a week-long trip.

"Why are school trips always to Kyoto?" I asked.

"They aren't always to Kyoto," Ryou replied. "Rei-san mentioned that her class is going to Hiroshima next month."

"Which means they're going to be [folding origami cranes](#) for a while," Minako replied.

Ami smiled as she said, "Kyoto is a city filled with history. We should learn a lot next week."

Makoto added, "And most of the hotels downtown are cheap."

"Inexpensive!" insisted Minako and Ami.

"Right, inexpensive. I wonder where students from Kyoto go on their school trips."

Minako grinned. "Probably Tokyo. Maybe they see the sights from Tokyo Tower and get overwhelmed by how much they aren't going to see during their trips."

I looked at Makoto and sent, «Or maybe they get sent to another world and end up becoming Magic Knights.»

We both started laughing.

Unusually, we weren't making our trip from Sunday to Saturday; instead, we were going from Monday to Sunday. We found out once we were in Kyoto that this was because the Saturday that we would be there was [Aoi Matsuri](#) and we were being given the opportunity to see the festival before we returned home. Apparently, this was a special gift to the school with the student who scored 900 on her exams, as was our trip being made on the shinkansen instead of the slower local trains that would have taken all day to make the trip each way.



We packed on Sunday, and decided who was going to come along. The ladies had it easy; all of their Devices accompanied them because everybody in their group was in on the secret. Ryou and I finally decided to risk bringing Kasandara and Ichiro along, but Shario-chan and Hayate-chan had to stay home. Kasandara fit neatly into Ryou's jacket pocket; Ichiro had to hide in my camera bag.

Then it was Monday. Our two groups arrived early enough that we still had our pick of [ekiben](#) at Tokyo Station. Once everyone else arrived, we were on our way. Needless to say, we creatively adjusted the seating arrangements by pointing out that we were the top students in the school; Makoto and I were beside each other, as were Ami and Ryou. I brought one of my F90 cameras along, but cheated and used my 2022 cellphone to get a video of Fuji-san as we passed it. I pulled a good still from that video once we were back home.

We timed our meals so that we'd finish just before arriving at Kyoto, thus having an early lunch. We loaded our bags onto the buses that were waiting for us, then headed across the tracks to [Kyoto Tower](#) since our hotel wasn't ready to receive us yet. This was our first exposure to the distinctive Kyoto dialect; Ami had no trouble with it, and was willing to act as an interpreter for the rest of us.

"Great view," I said while taking photos of Kyoto... and of Makoto.

"I can't help but think this is the second time we've visited a city and gone straight to the observation tower," Ami commented, slipping one arm around Ryou's waist.

We didn't loiter; there were still hundreds of our schoolmates who wanted to get a look out the windows. Finally we'd all had a turn, and we got on the buses, which finally took us to our hotel.

We divided up into three large groups of two classes each. We all saw all of the sights that we expected to see, just not all at the same time. We were the lucky group who got to visit Higashiyama on Tuesday, while we were still well-rested; it took us all day to see the sights of eastern Kyoto, including the famous stage at [Kiyomizu-dera](#).

"Do you remember the phrase 'jump off the stage at Kiyomizu'?" Naru-san asked while we were standing on the stage.

"It's said that if you were to do so and survive, your wish would be granted," Ueno-san replied.

"That's a 13 metre drop," I pointed out. "People have survived falls from that height, but rarely without injury."

«Ami, don't you dare!» Makoto sent. «You can fly. Rob and I can fly with help. Everyone else would just fall, and I'm sure you don't want to be responsible for people being hurt while trying to copy you.»

«Oh, I wouldn't think of it,» Ami sent back. «Besides, jumping off the stage has been prohibited since Meiji 5.»  
«When?»

«1872, Usagi.» We could all sense the background sigh in Ami's thought.

While we were in that temple complex, we visited [Jishu Jinja Shrine](#). All of us, save for Matsudaira-san who couldn't be bothered, tried making the walk between the Koiuranai-no-ishi with our eyes closed. Of course, some of us had already found our true loves, so our love fortunes were a foregone conclusion.

All right, we still had to make the 10-meter walk between the two stones with our eyes closed. Ami and Ryou went first, walking hand-in-hand, never deviating from the correct path... which I assume was easy for a precog and somebody who was used to travelling in three dimensions. Makoto and I went next, and we both used our experience in three-dimensional movement to make the two-dimensional trip successfully; being able to make the walk together without help made my fiancée happy. And Bunny-chan made the walk successfully with her eyes closed, too, which she took as proof that she and Chiba-san were meant to be together.

The others... didn't do so well. Ichigo-san wasn't too proud to ask for help, even though that meant – assuming the legends were true – that she wouldn't find true love without a go-between... but, as she mentioned afterwards, "I always expected to meet my future husband at an [omiaiai](#) anyway. And, yes, I know Ainu have tended to be avoided at omiaiai." I had the feeling her comment was a decade out-of-date, but she knew her own life better than I did. Nobody else managed to make the trip successfully.

And of course I got a photo of Bunny-chan standing beside the statues of the [Hare of Inaba](#) and [Okuninushi-no-mikoto](#).

We spent the afternoon walking the [Philosopher's Path](#) – seven shrines starting with the [Silver Pavilion](#) and ending with [Nanzen-ji](#). Yamaguchi-san, Ueno-san, Sakamoto-san, Naru-san, and Ichigo-san all showed signs of fatigue by the time we were finished. I, on the other hand, bought some fried tofu from one of the many places near Nanzen-ji that sold it.

"I should have known you'd get some tofu to snack on," my fiancée commented.

"Want some?"

"No, I'll wait for dinner. I have to watch my figure."

"I thought it was my job to watch your figure," I said in English, with a smile that she quickly shared.

Speaking of dinner, we were in Kyoto two months too early in the year to try [hamo](#). Ah, well, we couldn't have everything. We did, however, get to try [warabi](#)... which turned out to be what in Canada we called [fiddleheads](#). I never expected to find a taste of my old home in Kyoto.

We went north on Wednesday, and saw many other famous shrines, including [the Golden Pavilion](#), [Kitano-Tenmangū](#), and [Ryōan-ji](#). I know we stopped at other shrines and that I took photos at all of them, but I barely remember them now.

Unlike the Silver Pavilion, which was plain wood, the Golden Pavilion was actually gilded. Yamaguchi-san said in awe, "I doubt anyone here has seen that much gold before." Somehow, Ami, Makoto, Ryou, and I kept straight faces as we didn't reply. The other Sailors – other than Rei-san, who wasn't along for our trip – had never seen the gold that we brought back from Midchilda. The building itself reminded me of the Silver Pavilion, which was unfair since the Golden Pavilion was designed first. The garden, though, was beautifully maintained and perfectly in harmony with both the temple and its surroundings; I took more photos of just the garden than I did of the garden and Makoto or the garden and any of the other ladies.

Of course we had to stop at Kitano Tenmangū. After all, we were students, and the temple is dedicated to Sugawara no Michizane. Thanks to the sweets café that Makoto and Ichigo-san's class ran during last year's cultural festival, we knew enough to bring okoshi with us. And the priests wondered just why the nationally-famous student scholar Mizuno Ami needed to pray for success in her exams.

"It's because I don't know everything," she replied. "I ask that the god of learning guide my studies so that I might become a better student and a better person."

The fact that the girl who was known across the country to have honestly achieved a grade of 900 thought that she needed to become a better student amazed many of the other students at the shrine... including Bunny-chan, alas. Sometimes I despaired for Crystal Tokyo, but only sometimes, since it didn't take me long to remember that Neo-Queen Serenity had some capable and trusted advisors to call upon.

Ryōan-ji was our last stop of the day. It was so different from the other temples that our teachers wanted us to remember it. The mortal remains of no fewer than seven Emperors were entombed there, but it was the gardens that were the most impressive part of the complex.

"What's with the stones?" Bunny-chan asked – quietly – while looking at the Zen garden from the temple's veranda. "I thought there were supposed to be plants in gardens."

"This is a special kind of garden, Usagi," Ami answered.

Matsudaira-san added, "You must look at what is not here, in order to learn."

"Look at what isn't here? I don't get it."

"No, I suppose you wouldn't," he commented with some disdain.

He had a point and I was impressed that he knew it. However, he could have expressed it better; there was no need to disrupt the harmony of the group. Ami, Makoto, Ryou, and I couldn't explain it to Bunny-chan without revealing secrets to Matsudaira-san, Sakamoto-san, Yamaguchi-san, and Ueno-san; Van Tonder, Lyons, and Yoshimichi wouldn't publish their analysis of the garden until 2002.

We left Matsudaira-san to contemplate what wasn't there, and looked at the water garden and the tea garden. The water garden was [a living pond](#), not a cleared and sterile reflecting pool, which I appreciated. Cleansing ourselves at the tea garden was more difficult for my fiancée and me than it was for the others, because of the famous [Ryōan-ji-tsukubai](#) that we had to bend over in humility to use. I had trouble reading the kanji written on the top of the [tsukubai](#) until Ami told me that the square water basin was part of each kanji, at which point I could read the koan without knowing how I knew how to read it: "I only know what I deserve." It took me a moment to realize that it was an reminder to be content with what one has.

Bunny-chan never figured out the kanji. I sent a thought to the passenger in my camera bag: «Ichiro, our princess needs tutoring in how to read and write kanji. So do I, but she needs it more than I do.»

«I'll make a note of that,» my Unison companion replied. «I trust you're getting some good photographs of the shrines, so that I can at least see them at one remove.»

«We'll know once I get the film developed.»

Thursday was our "free study" day. We had cleared our itinerary with Sakurada-sensei before we left Tokyo; she thought it was a bit thin but didn't complain because she knew we would all be getting tired by mid-week.

"Somebody tell me why we're visiting [Uji](#)," Matsudaira-san insisted while Ueno-san tried clumsily to chat with Bunny-chan and Sakamoto-san offered to carry Minako's bag. Both girls refused the advances.

"First," I replied, "the trip gives us nearly an hour each way to relax, which we all need to do after two hectic days. Second, the oldest Shinto shrine still in existence is in Uji."

"Third," my fiancée added, "the tea there is the best in Japan."

"I acknowledge the historical importance of [Ujigami Shrine](#)," he replied, "but the rest sounds like needless frivolity to me."

"It isn't needless to us," Naru-san muttered.

"That's because you're weak girls who couldn't hold a sword against me."

"Oh, really?" Makoto said crossly. Oh, dear. "You. Me. As soon as we get back to Tokyo. Shinai, unless you're willing to fight a 'weak girl' with a bokken."

"I see no reason to even acknowledge that statement."

And that got my ire up. "Matsudaira-san, I strongly recommend you accept Makoto's challenge. If you do not, then you will face a challenge from me. And I will insist that we not use shinai."

He looked me up and down, finally noticing just how muscular I was from the TSAB training, and how much extra reach I had over him. Then he turned to Makoto. "Your challenge is accepted, Kino-san. We will fight, using shinai, in the school's dojo after classes on Monday."

"I'll be there." Then she put a smile on her face. "Now, what else are we going to do in Uji?"

"Souvenir shopping, so we don't need to race around on Sunday morning with everybody who left that to the last minute," Ichigo-san suggested.

"That's an excellent idea," agreed Yamaguchi-san. Sakamoto-san, as usual, simply nodded in agreement without saying anything.

And, at that, it was time to get on the train for Uji.

We relaxed during the trip by the simple measure of Matsudaira and Makoto not sharing a four-person seat on the train. Then we were at Uji. We spent most of the morning at [Byōdō-in](#), taking the guided tour of the shrine and spending the rest of the morning in the attached museum.

Of course we had the local specialty, [cha soba](#), with lunch... and the freshly-made noodles were some of the best that I'd ever tasted.

In the afternoon, we did as we had promised Sakurada-sensei and visited [Ujigami Shrine](#). We also visited the nearby Zen Buddhist [Kōshō-ji Temple](#), then – as Ichigo-san had suggested – we went shopping.

During the shopping trip, Matsudaira-san took me aside quietly. "Donarudoson-san, I do not wish to hurt your fiancée when we fight on Monday. Is there any way that you can convince her to withdraw her challenge?"

"Matsudaira-san, I suggest that you look to your own safety. Makoto doesn't look like a sword fighter, I know, but her sensei has given her permission to use live steel."

That set him back. "I see. I will endeavour to provide her with a good fight, then."

"You could apologize to her, you know."

He shook his head. "No, it's too late for that now."

It wasn't just racism that permeated Japanese culture; sexism was just as strong. That, or Matsudaira-san was as stubborn as a mule.

Once we got back to Kyoto, loaded down with tea and tea services from Uji, we discovered we weren't the only ones who took advantage of our free study day to buy souvenirs – but those of us who had were in the minority of our class.

Continuing our lucky streak, we were the lucky group who got to stay downtown on Friday, seeing [Nijō Castle](#) in the morning and the [Museum of Kyoto](#) in the afternoon, among other tourist attractions. Matsudaira-san tolerated the visit to Nijō Castle and found the rest of the day to be a bore. By that point, we had learned to ignore what he thought... even though I privately agreed with him.

As a result of not needing to travel very far on Friday, we were relatively well-rested for Saturday. I had no idea what was going on during Aoi Matsuri; Ami had to explain it to all of us while we watched. Our two groups splurged and bought seats at [Shimogamo-jinja](#), roughly halfway along the procession route – even Matsudaira-san willingly paid for a seat – so we got the full festival experience. And even after all that, all I'm sure about is that it was a procession of a few hundred people dressed as Heian-era aristocrats, that had been taking place annually for a millennium. It seemed to me to be something that people did because they'd always done it, but what did a Canadian know about a millennium of history and tradition?

After the procession had passed, we toured the Shimogamo shrine, which predates the era of Kyoto being the capital of Japan. Bunny-chan hated the place while my dearest loved it; the kami enshrined there are associated with thunder.

And then it was Sunday – shopping day at Kyoto Station for everybody who had put off buying souvenirs until the last moment, while the rest of us had our pick of ekiben for the trip home. We pulled into Tokyo station early enough that Makoto and I could still get discount ekiben at the station rather than buying convenience-store bento for dinner.

Once we were home, one thing that Sakamoto-san, Yamaguchi-san, Ueno-san, Ryou, the ladies, and I agreed on was that we were never going to invite Matsudaira-san to join us in a group again. Ryou and I admitted that we'd made a mistake in inviting him to join our group in the first place.

Then it was Monday, and there was a kendo match after school.

I'll give Matsudaira-san credit; not only did he not back down, but he got the school's permission for the match.

Makoto didn't back down, either, as I expected. I insisted that she leave Donguri-no-ken with Hayate-chan that morning, and watching as she transformed to Sailor Jupiter and unbuckled her sword belt.

The kendo club's coach acted as referee. "This will be a three-point match. Hits will not count unless they are called," he announced as both participants selected shinai from the rack mounted on the wall.

"Agreed."

"Agreed."

"Then begin."

Matsudaira-san rushed at Makoto, calling "Head!" She blocked his blow easily with a minimum of effort, surprising everyone else in the room; formal kendo matches were not known for their participants blocking blows.

He backed up and rushed her again. "Chest!"

"Chest!" Makoto called... and, being taller than him and thus having a longer reach, hit his chest before he could hit hers.

"Point to Kino. Return to your starting positions."

Since it had worked so well last time, Matsudaira-san tried rushing Makoto again. Mind you, that's pretty much all that formal kendo matches allow, especially at the junior-high-school level. "Chest!"

Without moving, she announced, "Head!" Then she whacked him on the head. Nowhere near as hard as she had hit me with her electro-quarterstaff, thankfully.

"Point to Kino. It is now impossible for Matsudaira to win. Match goes to Kino."

Matsudaira-san removed his mask and bowed to Makoto. "I could not touch you, Kino-san. I acknowledge you as the superior swordsman, and I apologize for saying otherwise."

She removed her own mask and replied, "Your apology is accepted, Matsudaira-san. I trust that you will reflect on this match and learn from it, just as I plan to do."

"But of course." Then they both bowed to the referee and let the other club members use the dojo.

"Kino-san," the club's coach said before she could leave, "while your style is unorthodox, you have obviously been trained by a master swordsman. Might I be allowed to meet him, please?"

My estimation of the kendo club's coach's skills dropped slightly with that statement. Our style was only unorthodox when compared to sport styles; it was a perfectly normal combat style... and he should have noticed that.

"I apologize, sensei, but that might not be possible. Sakura-sensei is a very private person, and chooses carefully who she meets."

"I understand. Would you be interested in joining our team?"

"I have other demands on my time, sir. But I will think about it."

We all knew that she was saying 'no'. "I wish you luck in your future matches, Kino-san."

"Thank you, sir."

The gossip circuit was filled with reports of Makoto's skills in kendo before the end of the week. Some of the rumours were simply untrue, like the one that said she'd used live steel during the match; those rumours I squashed when I heard them.

Not that my dearest couldn't have used live steel if I hadn't insisted she leave Donguri-no-ken at home, but there was no reason for her to humiliate Matsudaira-san or risk legal attention by drawing a steel sword when he didn't have permission to use a similar sword of his own.

They boys' gossip circuit was also filled with rankings of the girls, because it was once again warm enough to hold P.E. classes outside. Makoto and Ami were, by common agreement, left off of most boys' lists – I suspect everybody knew they were my fiancée and second-closest friend and nobody wanted to make me angry – although Ueno-san was brave enough to mention to me that they were both in his top five, along with Bunny-chan, Minako... and Elmira-san.

I couldn't ignore him; we'd spent a week sharing a hotel room in Kyoto, after all, and we were sitting on the lawn beside each other. "Usagi-chan has a boyfriend, Ueno-san," I told him, not using my nickname for her so he'd know who I was talking about. "He doesn't attend Kuritsu Juban Chuugakkou."

He sighed and nodded, then said, "I guess I'm just choosing girls who are out of my reach. I keep doing that. Mizuno Ami-san and Urawa-san are a couple, Kino-san and you are a couple, Tsukino-san has a boyfriend, Sakamoto-san wants to be Mizuno Minako-san's boyfriend, and Bogudanoba-san isn't going to be in Japan forever."

"Hang on a moment there. Minako hasn't shown any interest in Sakamoto-san, as far as I've ever seen, and it takes two people to be a couple."

"So I still have a chance with her?" he asked with some hope in his voice.

I shrugged my shoulders. "As much as anybody else does. But she wants to be an idol, so she might have to consider herself to be off-limits to everybody in order to get the job that she wants."

He sighed again and said, "I can see that, yeah. Who's on your list, Donarudoson-san?"

"I am engaged to be married, so I don't have a list."

"Really? You don't notice anybody else as a girl, at all?"

I made a show of looking around, fully knowing that Ryou was close enough to overhear, then humoured Ueno-san. I whispered, "Hey, I'm engaged, not blind. If I was to have a list, Makoto would be at the top of it, of course. Followed by Ami, Usagi-chan, Minako, Naru-san, and Ichigo-san." All of whom, along with Ryou, Rei-san, and Setsuna-san, I would give my life for – and if it hadn't been for Ichiro's ability to put the two of us into Life Support Mode, I would have given my life for Setsuna-san when Dark Lady attacked. So I guess I had a list after all; it just wasn't the same kind of list as Ueno-san's.

"Osaka-san? Okay, she's cute enough to be on a lot of guys' lists, but a lot of girls here are cute. What's special about her?"

I couldn't tell him that she's Okuni. "She likes jazz music."

Ueno-san looked surprised. "She does?"

"She chose the music for her class' cafe during last year's culture festival."

"Oh, that kind of jazz. Er... you do remember Aoyama-san announced she's Ainu, right?"

Oh, dear. I really hoped that Ueno-san wasn't showing racism there. "I remember, and I don't care. Ichigo-san is a friend of mine and it doesn't matter to me who her parents are. So, why is Bogdanova-san on your list?"

He looked over to where the girls were playing softball, then said, "Look at how graceful she is."

So I looked. She was playing shortstop... and after a few minutes, I saw that, while she wasn't what I would call *graceful*, she was more *dexterous* than anyone else in our class. And that included Makoto and Ami, who had received some dexterity training from Ginga.

I'd have to mention to Minako that I'd figured out how Elmira-san was odd. Our Russian classmate was more than she appeared.

But then it was my turn to run the 100-metre sprint, so we had to stop talking. I made sure that I came second to Yamaguchi-san.

I brought up Elmira-san during that Friday's Conversational English club. And I had a hunch – which turned out to be a case of knowing without knowing how I knew – that a privacy bubble around the meeting was a good idea.

"What convinced you?" Minako asked.

"P.E. class. She appears to have had the same sort of dexterity training that Makoto and Ami got on Midchilda, and more of it."

"Do you think she's from the Lyrical reality?" asked my fiancée.

I shook my head. "No, there are plenty of groups on our planet that can give the same kind of training. There's no need to bring in extra-dimensional groups to provide the same thing."

"[Occam's razor](#)," Ami added while nodding.

"Don't tell me she's a ninja," Minako said.

"That's doubtful," Ami replied. "Japan and Russia were at war in 1904, 1932, 1935, 1939, and of course ever since 1945. There are some people who think the only reason they haven't attacked us since then is the US military presence in Okinawa."

"I'm sure we could outlast them," insisted Makoto.

"Until we run out of soldiers," Ryou pointed out. "Sun Tzu pointed out the need for a stronger army than what one's opponent has, and there are a lot more Russians than there are Japanese."

Ami pulled the conversation back to the topic at hand. "Be that as it may, I can't imagine any Japanese organization teaching Russians our combat techniques so that they could be used against us."

"Who, then?"

Minako answered Makoto before I could. "She would have said something by now if she or her parents had ever been in a circus or some other performing group. The only other groups I can think of are government-funded."

Nobody said anything for a moment. We were busy jumping to the same conclusion, which my fiancée would point out shortly.

Finally, I said, "I'm not faulting your logic, Minako, but that doesn't necessarily mean she's a Russian agent of some sort. Why would they send an agent here, of all places?"

"Because our school uniforms look a lot like our Senshi uniforms," replied Makoto.

"They're not that close," Ami complained.

"Maybe not to a Japanese person, but to an outsider?"

Then I remembered something from just after the Missing Time. "Aw, crap. The cosmonauts who were on Mir. They remember the Missing Time, I think. They might have at least partial descriptions of all five of the original Senshi and me. At the least, 'noticeably tall young teen' describes both Makoto and me."

Ryou nodded. "We weren't really big on operational security back then. You and I were expecting the world to end, after all."

"And in how many futures will that come back to bite us on the butt?" Minako asked.

Ryou shook his head in sadness. "Eventually, all of them that I can see. Kasandara might be able to see one where it doesn't."

"We're building a house of cards here, everybody," Makoto pointed out, finally being the voice of reason in this conversation. "Sure, it looks good, but it'll fall apart unless we find something to hold it together. We need evidence."

Ami pulled out the Mercury Computer and scanned the classroom, eventually undermining my dearest's position. "I just found some. There's a transmitter hidden in Yamaguchi-san's desk. One of the databases that Ryou thought to bring back from the Lyrical reality says it's cutting-edge SVR issue for here and now."

"SVR?" I asked, privately amazed that I didn't somehow know what it stood for.

Ami enlightened us, stumbling over the pronunciation. "Sluzhba vneshney razvedki Rossiyskoy Federatsii, and I suspect Ichigo-san could say that better than I can; I'm not as good with Russian as I am with English or German." Which told me that she'd been studying German since she said she needed to learn it before Petz sent us to the Lyrical dimension. "The Russian Foreign Intelligence Service. It took over when the KGB was disbanded in 1991."

"And I was really getting to like her, too," Minako commented.

"She's still our friend," Ryou insisted. "At least, if we don't want our cover blown, we need to act that way seventeen times out of eighteen."

"Are you sure we haven't blown our cover already, though?" Minako asked. "The signals from that bug haven't been leaving this room since Rob put up his shield."

"Which would definitely look suspicious to me if I were in Bogdanova-san's place," I agreed.

"That's easy enough to explain," Ami said while typing a command on the Mercury Computer. Then there was a puff of white smoke from Yamaguchi-san's desk. "It's such a pity that the capacitor failed so soon."

"Ami, you're getting devious," I said in wonder. "I've been a bad influence on you."

She smiled. "Thank you. Although it's more Hayate and Hayate-chan's influence than yours, Rob."

Makoto asked, "Do we tell the others?"

"No," Ryou replied immediately. "Six times out of seven, they wouldn't be able to keep the secret in front of Bogdanova-san, and it's usually Usagi who would end up spilling the beans. Minako has had some acting training and the four of us have had TSAB training to show no reactions in the face of the enemy. We should be able to keep the secret."

Then I had another thought. "Oh! I need to run some experiments. Ami, may I speak with Meia tomorrow? I need her to scan me while I'm doing the tests."

Ami smiled. "I think that that can be arranged."

"If she *is* a spy, she might think that you're a spy, too, Rob, but not a very good one."

"How do you figure that, Ichiro?" The two of us were discussing the matter of Comrade Bogdanova while Makoto made dinner.

"Immediately before your world's Spanish–American War a century ago, the United States created the first of its intelligence agencies in order to support their Navy. That agency is now known as the Office of Naval Intelligence."

"I see where you're going with that, but it's a specious comparison. Not everybody does things the way that the Americans do, so why would she assume that the Sailor Senshi even have a spy, let alone call attention to him by calling him an 'Oni'?"

"I'll point out that the Sailors do have a spy: Artemis."

"Whether we do or don't doesn't matter. Why would anybody *think* that we do?"



"If Ms. Bogdanova is a spy," Ichiro pointed out, "then she'll have been trained to assume that every organization has spies attached. Even the TSAB is rumoured to have a spy agency somewhere inside the Inspector-General's office."

"That would explain what little I heard about [Inspector Acous](#)," I admitted, not mentioning that the source of that information was the *StrikerS* anime. "Getting back to us, why assume the Sailors' spies are called Oni? That's US Naval public terminology, but I'm Canadian and the rest of the publicly-known team are Japanese."

"Both Canada and Japan are known to be American allies."

I nodded. "Okay, that just barely explains the 'oni equals spy' bit. But, given all that, why would she think I'm not a good spy?"

"Because you're the obvious spy. Either the Senshi are amateurs or you're a distraction; either way, you aren't likely to be competent at spycraft."

"That makes sense. After all, the Senshi *are* amateurs and I *am* not particularly competent at spycraft."

"Ah, but she has no way to know that. She sees at most a half-dozen uniformed transforming heroines and two supporting males, and assumes by her training – if she's a spy – that you have a support staff somewhere. And you do have a support staff; I'm part of it."

"Dinner's ready!" my fiancée announced.

"We'll continue this discussion later," Ichiro said.

But we never did.

I went home with Ami the next day. After paying my respects to Saeko-mama and the three of us having lunch together – which included some of the tea that we had brought back from Uji – Ami, Meia, Ichiro, and I started running those experiments.

Specifically, just how invisible was I when I went invisible?

It turned out that I was only invisible to normal human vision. And that showed that there was a huge hole in my stealth capabilities.

It took Meia and Ichiro less than an hour to figure out how to close that hole, and another half-hour for me to learn how to bend near-ultraviolet and long-wave-infrared rays around me at the same time that I bent visible-spectrum light. That finally protected me from being seen by some animals and most thermal imaging cameras, at the expense of me not being able to radiate away all of my body heat.

Which helped going forward, but if our suspicions were correct, it did nothing for previous uses of my vision cloak.

"I must agree with Ichiro-niisan," Meia said. "The Russians have a reputation for being paranoid; it would only take one thermal camera in the right place for them, and the wrong place for us, for them to have seen us destroy that Kisenian flower in Vladivostok."

"And that would have been enough for them to get at least our heights and general builds, although I doubt they would have been able to make out our faces," I added with a sigh. "It's another piece of circumstantial evidence, but it does support the hypothesis that Bogdanova-san is a spy for the SVR, sent to find out who we are."

"Is there any reason why we can't simply tell her who we are?" Meia asked.

"Besides the fact that Russians have a reputation, which I'll grant is not fully accurate, of being untrustworthy?" I shook my head. "I'm not going to tell her, unless Ryou can tell me that doing so won't hurt any of us. Besides, I've been told that the Russians have a proverb: Three people can keep a secret if two of them are dead."

"That's an unpleasant proverb," Ami commented.

The next day was Sunday, and we were back to being segregated by gender during combat practice. Not because anyone was worried about me being concussed by my fiancée again, but because Chiba-san finally decided to join us for training.

"It's good to see you here, Mamoru-san," Ryou said. "What convinced you to join us, if I may ask?"

"Both Usako and Naru-san told me how good Donarudoson-san is at stick fighting, I need an opponent who can test my skills."

"Shall we determine how good your skills are, then, Chiba-san?" Ichiro asked. "I'd prefer to see you run through a few kata before you spar with any of my students." Then he added, "Without transforming to Tuxedo Kamen, to begin with."

We watched him run through a few basic exercises. He was clumsy and slow, to the point where Yuuichirou-san said, "I think I might be the only fair match for you here, Chiba-san."

"I'm forced to agree," Ichiro added. "Please transform to Tuxedo Kamen and start over."

He did so, and his kata were no longer clumsy or slow. But they were predictable, even more so than most kata.

"You're seeing it too, right?" I asked.

Ichiro nodded. "Tuxedo Kamen-san, you have a problem."

"A problem? What is it?"

I didn't make the *Airplane!* joke.

"You're relying on what Endymion learned during the Silver Millennium instead of learning the skills yourself in this life. As to why that's a problem, I seriously doubt that Endymion-san and Chiba Mamoru-san have exactly the same bodies."

"You're competent," Ryou added, "but you could be better. However, you're going to have to unlearn some bad habits before you can learn the good ones."

"And that means you're going to have to fight Rob until you can reliably hold your own against him."

"Hey," I said, "I'm pretty sure that Tuxedo Kamen-san is a better fighter than I am."

All Ichiro said was, "Trust your sensei. Now, I want to see the two of you fight."

So we found some padding that would fit over his white-tie-and-tails outfit and I used Mirage Hide to armour up, including a helmet.

Once we were both protected from serious harm, Ichiro gave us our sparring instructions. "Chiba-san, fight the way that you normally do. Go all out if you wish. Rob, get dangerous."

"You're sure?"

"Do it."

So I used every dirty trick Vita had taught me and knocked Tuxedo Kamen onto his butt seventeen times in a row.

"If it's any consolation," I said while helping him stand up the seventeenth time, "I wouldn't be able to do this if I was fighting fair."

"Thanks," Tuxedo Kamen said sourly.

Ichiro smiled. "That's not much incentive for you to fight fair, then, is it?"

I smiled back. "I suppose not, Captain Jack."

"Who?" Yuuichirou-san and Chiba-san asked.

"It doesn't matter," Ichiro replied. "Now that I've seen all this, I can put together your training program, Chiba-san. Go take a shower; we'll start breaking your bad habits next week."

Except that we didn't.

On the way from the shrine to the bus stop, with our fiancées by our sides, Ryou and I had a chat about training.

"Everybody else has been getting skill upgrades and new skills, Ryou. What about you?"

He smiled. "What Kasandara can do for me along with the TSAB combat skills I'm still learning are enough of an upgrade for me, as far as I'm concerned. Besides, fifty-one times out of fifty-two, precognition training won't work."

I chuckled. "You know telling me that breaks causality unless we try anyway."

"You break causality just by being here, Rob. Although Kasandara and I have learned how to work around that."

"Maybe Usagi-san fixed that when she reset the world. Or maybe visiting Midchilda and coming back reset my causality."

Ryou shook his head. "No, you're still difficult to predict. At least with precognition; I have a good read on your personality now and can do the mundane sort of predicting what you'd do in some situations. Especially if the situation involves Makoto being in danger."

"Yeah, you don't need to be a precog to know what I'd do in that sort of situation."

"Or what I'd do if our positions were reversed," my fiancée added.

Ami smiled. "The four of us are family, and we have been ever since we were banished to Midchilda. Of course we're going to protect each other whenever we need to."

We couldn't avoid Bogdanova-san; she sat right beside Ami in class. So we trusted in our acting ability to keep her from figuring out we had our suspicions about her. We were pretty sure that we weren't treating her differently.

She didn't appear to catch on. Although if we were right – which I was sure of because of that listening device we had burnt out and its replacement that showed up on Monday – she was probably as good an actress as Minako was, so there was no way to know whether she knew that we knew.

Anyway.



The Revealing Of The Lunches became a way to keep her busy. My dearest had bought Bogdanova-san a bento and she was using it in order to fit in, so, no matter what she brought, somebody asked for the recipe. Usually Bunny-chan, or Makoto, but Ichigo-san asked about some of the less common dishes that Bogdanova-san brought along, mentioning her visits to Korsakov.

And I asked about some of Naru-san's and Bunny-chan's side dishes, so that Bogdanova-san didn't appear to be singled out. That almost backfired once, though.

"Robu-san, you gave me the recipe for that potato and egg salad."

Oopsie. However... "It looks nothing like what my salad looks like, Bunny-chan."

"I know I have trouble with presentation. It still tastes good!"

As Makoto gave Bunny-chan some tips on how to plate her meals, Ryou and I brought the rest of the girls up to date on who was at the top of the boys' lists. We'd explained to Bogdanova-san months ago that these were popularity lists based on who was considered to be the prettiest or cutest girls in the school, so she didn't mind that the boys rarely mentioned her name.

"Japanese boys can be as immature as Russian boys," she commented.

"Boys are pretty much the same everywhere," Minako agreed. "Until they actually get tied down."

"Right," I said with a smile. "That's when we stop noticing anybody except our fiancées, if we know what's good for us."

"And don't you forget it!" my dearest insisted with a smile of her own.

I don't even remember what we discussed at the Conversational English club that Friday, except that it wasn't Senshi business. As long as that bug was in the classroom, we couldn't take the chance that we'd say something we shouldn't.

Ami visited my place that evening and we traded email with Midchilda. Including a message for Shario-chan from Yuuno-san about tying Mid telepathy in with Senshi technology. It would take a few weeks of work to make some specialized hardware, but it was possible.

Shario-chan took the schematics with her when we dropped her off at Naru-san's place the next day.

And then it was Sunday, May 30, and we went to Rei-san's shrine for combat practice.

"How badly do you think Chiba-san's going to end up being trounced today?" I asked.

"That depends on who he's fighting," Ryou replied.

"And whether our sensei will let us go easy on him," I added.

Ichiro nodded and said, "I want you to play fair this week, Rob. There's no need to humil-"

"Warning!" Kasandara suddenly announced. "Emergency! Ryou will die in one minute unless Ami is protected!"

I immediately put the strongest forcefields I could make around Ami and moved to stand in front of her, shoulder-to-shoulder with Ryou and Makoto. The Unison Devices moved to protect Meia; Ichiro told me later that this was just in case she needed to cast some healing spells in a hurry. Then I saw the car. A white hatchback, with a black star painted on the driver's door. I made sure to stay between it and Ami as I said to nobody in particular, "Oh, crap. What's Eudial doing here? Kaolinite's supposed to show up first."

The car's window rolled down, the driver – whoever she was – shot, and whatever the gun fired barely missed me... hitting Ryou instead.

All I could think as Ryou collapsed with his Pure Heart floating above his body was that it was a self-fulfilling prophecy. Stupid genre conventions.

I should have expected that Ami would panic, given Future Ami's advice to her at New Year's. "Rob! Makoto! Somebody just shot Ryou's linker core out of his body! No, it's something else, something like a linker core but larger..."

"It's his Pure Heart," I said without taking my eyes off the car that was now stopping in front of us. Then I sent to my fiancée, «Ami's going into shock. Mako, don't transform, but get Bunny here, now! She should be at the shrine. Meia and I will keep Ami from fainting so she can keep Ryou alive.»

She nodded, then ran, taking the stairs to the shrine two steps at a time.

"Ami, I need you to stay with us, mentally. *Ryou* needs you. Meia, can you cast that spell to put a Pure Heart back into somebody's body?"

"I'm sorry, Rob, but I need to work with Ami for that. And we've never tested that spell."

That got Ami to focus. "Then we'll just have to test it now."

"Not so fast," said a red-haired woman carrying a longarm. "We need Onmyōji dead."

I looked straight at her while the ladies got to work. "So you do know who we are... Eudial."

"We do... Oni."

"Just out of curiosity, where's Kaolinite?"

Just then, Ami's communicator beeped, followed by Makoto's voice. "Rei's Pure Heart has been removed and the monster that did it destroyed Usagi's brooch!"

## ***Isekai by Moonlight***

### **Chapter S**

"Right," I said. "Never mind. You want them dead, too, don't you?"

Eudial smiled an evil smile. "Only after we check whether they have a Talisman."

Ouch. Grammar, Eudial, have you heard of it?

I couldn't risk taking my eyes off Eudial to see whether Ami had finished treating Ryou. "You'd better check Onmyōji's Pure Heart as well, then."

"I'll do that," came a voice from partway up the steps to the shrine.

"Then get down here and do it!" Eudial shouted. "Or I'll shoot the others!"

"Maybe you should," the voice replied while approaching us. "We can check them all at the same time."

"Please don't give her ideas," I said.

"Oh, I don't have another shot to extract a Pure Heart. Not with me, at least. I'd have to hideously disfigure these people by burning them all."

Then there was a Senshi who I hadn't yet met – but from her hairstyle and my knowledge of the anime, I knew she was Sailor Neptune – kneeling beside Ryou. She jostled me as she worked and I reflexively looked at her. "This is not a Talisman," she announced just as Ami re-started her spell.

I turned back to Eudial... but she was already back in her car. She's fast, maybe as fast as me... and she'd never shown that kind of speed in the anime. I turned back to Neptune, but she was gone, too. At least I knew that she could teleport unaided. Ami looked up at me as Ryou's Pure Heart returned to his body. "Second time's the charm," she misquoted.

"Rei-san and Bunny-chan need you," I replied. "I'll look after Ryou."

"Thanks, Rob," she said before literally flying up the stairs to the shrine. Our cover was already blown; there was no point to wasting time trying to keep it.

As Ryou moaned, I helped him sit up. "Are you okay, ol' buddy?"

"I... think so. What hit me?"

"You had your Pure Heart shot out."

"Oh, dear. And I didn't see that coming."

He didn't? That surprised me. "Did you just not look for the possibility, or are the Death Busters shielded from your power?"

"Trust me, Rob, I've been looking for this event since Chibiusa went home."

"Aw, crap. It gets worse, Ryou: they knew that you're Onmyōji and I'm Oni. Now that you know that they're active, can you tell where they're going to hit us next?"

He thought for a moment, looking more worried with each passing second. "I can't see the futures."

"Precognitive ability is offline," Kasandara confirmed.

"Here's hoping that that's a temporary condition," I said. "Going from bad to worse, at least two of the Death Busters are active at the same time: Kaolinite got Rei-san while Eudial got you."

"We'd better go talk with the others, face to face."

Needless to say, we didn't practice that day. Instead, we held a council of war. Teal Deer, Rei-san described what happened to her and Bunny-chan – it was practically a match for what happened in canon – then I described what happened to Ryou.

I finished with, "I thought that events completely skipped over Germatoid's assistant Kaolinite attacking Rei-san and sicced Eudial on Ryou without warning, until I learned that Rei-san was targeted at the same time."

"When was this Eudial person supposed to start attacking us?" Bunny-chan... no, this wasn't the time for diminutives. Usagi-san asked in a quiet voice. The poor girl was still in shock from losing her ability to transform to Sailor Moon.

"Eudial shouldn't have shown up until after Chibiusa returns," replied Makoto. "They've already escalated things. Darling, everybody, am I the only one who thinks we should go all 'asymmetric plot escalation' on their asses?"

"It's about time!" Sakura agreed with relish.

"And just how are we going to do that?" We all turned to Minako. "We don't know who they are or where they are, or even what their monsters are called."

Usagi-san turned to Rei-san. "Looks like Mina-chan didn't watch the anime."

"We haven't watched it either, odango-for... Usagi."

"But Robu-san has."

"So have Makoto and I," Ami replied. "We had two years in Midchilda with nothing else to do in our free time but read ahead in our textbooks."

"Or, in this case, watch the anime of your lives," I added. "Just remember that we're living in a timeline that doesn't exactly match the anime. Ryou and I are here and Naru-san has started developing metahuman powers, for example."

"But the big picture is the same, right?" Naru-san asked.

"In general, it has been so far," I admitted. "Specifics have been different, sometimes very different."

"So fill us in on the big picture," Chiba-san said. It wasn't a request.

I nodded. "Right. The anime called this 'Sailor Moon S', and the manga called it the Infinity Arc. As you can guess from the manga title, our opponents are connected to Mugen Academy. Their leader, Germatoid, is either possessing, completely replacing, or has always been the school's headmaster, Tomoe Souichi. The Death Busters are either possessing or have always been his secretary and the school's prefects. Kuromine Kaori also answers to Kaolinite, and she's the one who attacked Rei-san. The philosophy department's prefect Arimura Yuko is called Eudial, and she's the one who attacked Ryou. There's also Hanyuu Mimi – Mimete – Teruno Ruru – Telulu – Bidou Yui – Viluy – and the twins Cyprine and Ptilol. Their monsters are called daimons. I'm not sure what their goal is, but it has something to do with an extraterrestrial entity called Pharaoh 90."

"You missed one, darling."

"Did I?"

Ami nodded. "The most important one for the long term: Mistress 9."

I nodded slowly in agreement. "I think I was trying to forget about the most powerful of our current foes, because her other identity will be so important to us later."

Rei-san asked, "So who is she?"

Before I could refuse to answer, Ichiro said, "Tomoe Hotaru, daughter of Tomoe Souichi, otherwise known as Sailor Saturn." Then he turned to me. "I never promised to keep the Senshi's identities secret from the other Senshi, the way that you did."

"Neither did the rest of us," Ami added.

I sighed. "Fine, fine, just don't say that you got that information from me, because I don't break my promises."

"You are so cute when you're being stubborn, darling."

"He is, isn't he?" Minako agreed.

My dearest gave her a dirty look... and Makoto is *not* cute when she's jealous. I know that every other important person in her life before she met Usagi-san and me has left her alone one way or another, but that's only an explanation for her jealousy of anybody else who shows interest in her fiancé, not a reason or even an excuse.

"Ladies, focus," Hayate-chan said.

"Yes, please focus. A Sailor Senshi is our enemy?"

"No, Usagi-san," I replied. "Mistress 9 is our enemy. She's possessing Tomoe Hotaru-san."

"Then we have to do our best to free her from that possession."

"No," Hayate-chan said. "We can't just 'do our best'. We *must* succeed. No counting on the inevitability of the anime events to happen, because they didn't when Small Lady became Black Lady. We must not count on having the kami or the cosmic scriptwriters on our side. We need to work, and work hard, for our victory."

Sakura, Ichiro, Rei-san, and I nodded in agreement.

"At least this time we know in advance what a complete victory requires," Hayate-chan continued. "Pharaoh 90 defeated, Hotaru freed from possession, and Uranus and Neptune working with us."

"With minimal loss of life," I added. "Assuming anime continuity, then other than Germatoid, none of our foes asked to become Death Busters. We have to assume that they're as much victims as the owners of the Pure Hearts who will be targeted are, unless and until it's proven otherwise."

"Agreed. If I was my personality donor and still working for the TSAB, I'd be calling this the Infinity Incident in official reports, and that's the name I'll use in the unofficial reports that I'll be making to Colonel Yagami." Which reminded me that we *should* be getting our friends in the TSAB involved; they might have some ideas that we would overlook. But Hayate-chan wasn't finished. "TSAB Incidents are *never* easy to end, let alone end in our favour. We have to work harder than any of us have worked before if we're going to succeed. As to taking the fight directly to them, we can't do that yet. Sailor Moon isn't strong enough."

"I can't even transform to Sailor Moon without my brooch," Usagi-san pointed out.

"With all due respect, ma'am," Sakura said, "that's bullshit and you know it. All five of you have been able to transform instantly and without your transformation trinkets since before we visited Crystal Tokyo."

"I know I want you to point out when I'm wrong, Sakura, but do you have to use profanity when you do it?"

"It got your attention, didn't it?"

"And we're getting sidetracked," Rei-san pointed out. "Usagi. Transform. Right here, right now."

"But -"

"*Do it.*"

"Moon Crystal Power, Make-Up!" It took her a moment and it was the old transformation with the naked bit in the middle – and, yes, Ichiro, Ryou, and I averted our gazes – but she managed to become Sailor Moon without her brooch. "Well, what do you know?"

Meia scanned Moon, then looked unhappy. "I believe she still needs her brooch and a wand of some sort for her to unlock her full power as a Sailor Senshi."

"I have to agree, sister," Ichiro said. He later told me that his opinion was based on his understanding of her personality. "Please transform back, ma'am."

That, she could do instantly.

"You need to do something about that first transformation, Usako."

"Ami-chan already taught me a better one, Mamo-chan!"

Hayate-chan added, "Which you aren't using because you don't have a transformation focus item. When does the spirit of Queen Serenity get the Cosmic Heart Compact to you, again?"

"During the next fight," Ami replied before Usagi-san could ask what the Cosmic Heart Compact was.

"Then we'll worry about it if that doesn't happen." Hayate-chan has always been a pragmatist that way. "Back to the topic at hand, Shario-chan and I have been running some simulations over the last few months. Sailor Moon needs to be strong enough to use the Holy Grail without feeling any magical stress in order to be able to defeat Pharaoh 90."

"The Holy Grail? The Cup of Christ?" Rei-san asked.

I was surprised that she knew what it was, Rei-san being a Shinto priestess, but then I remembered that she attended a Christian private school. "Maybe," I replied. "What they showed in the anime and the manga didn't look like what Leonardo da Vinci painted in '[Il Cenacolo](#)'."

"Oh, okay, then," Rei-san said, before showing the influence that our Unison Devices have had on her. "If Usagi needs to be able to use it easily, then she has to train with it. How do we get this grail?"

Hayate-chan answered her. "We bring the three Talismans together. They're incredibly ancient artifacts, and they bear at least a superficial resemblance to the Imperial Regalia of Japan."

"I'm guessing that they aren't actually the Imperial Regalia," Bunny-chan said with a bit of a smile. It was good to see that she was starting to recover from her ordeal with the first daimon any of us had encountered.

"I certainly hope not!" Rei-san said. "Kaolinite mentioned something about looking for a Talisman, and I think that woman who we're not yet supposed to know is Sailor Neptune did, too."

"Where are the Talismans, anyway?" Minako asked.

I grinned. "Oh, you're going to laugh..."

\* \* \*

We couldn't talk at school about what had happened, because Elmira Bogdanova was still part of our lunch group. Still, Ichigo-san managed to figure out that *something* had happened, simply because none of the rest of us were really interested in the Revealing Of The Lunches on Monday. In case anybody's interested, I had my usual comfort food, inarizushi... which did not go unnoticed.

Unfortunately, Bogdanova-san figured out that something was wrong, too. Stupid genre conventions. "Excuse me for saying, but none of you seem happy."

"It's a time of change for us," Minako replied, improvising as best as she could. "Tomorrow is the first day of June, and that means we have to start studying for exams."

Which wasn't untrue, but wasn't a particularly good excuse either.

"Oh. I am surprised that Mizuno-san would dread exams or studying."

And that's why it wasn't a particularly good excuse.

"I'm in a bit of a quandary," Ami said. "Every exam season last year, I managed to score higher than I did the exam season before it. What am I going to do now that I've reached 900?"

"I wish I had your problems, Ami-chan," Bunny-chan said quietly.

"I know how to cheer you up," Minako said. "I'll let your boyfriend know that you need to go on a date."

"I can ask him for a date myself!"

"Meh," I said quietly. "Most guys don't like being chased like that."

"Mamo-chan isn't like you, Robu-san," Bunny-chan said. "Why don't you like him, anyway?"

I sighed. I couldn't mention the reasons that involved Tuxedo Kamen in front of Bogdanova-san, but there was one reason that she could hear. "He almost dumped you last year for no good reason, remember?"

"That was a misunderstanding!"

"Okay, fine, you still love him and he looks like he loves you back."

Makoto frowned at me. "He *does* love her back, darling."

"Hey, I'm just trying to protect Bunny-chan the way a big brother of hers would."

"You can't be my big brother. My birthday's a week before yours... otōto-san."

Everybody laughed at her calling me "little brother"... which meant we as a group were getting back to normal. I still took the hint, though. No more meddling in Bunny-chan's love life; that's the Four Guardians' prerogative.

We cancelled the Conversational English Club meeting that week, because Friday afternoon was the only time that Saeko-san was available to make a purchase for us.

It was a rather large purchase: two floors plus a basement, six bedrooms, three bathrooms, all in a half-timbered building that looked like it came straight from the Rhineland. Or, at least, it would look like that if it hadn't fallen into disrepair. It was an unusual building for 1990s Japan: a large house that had fallen on hard times when the bubble burst.

"So why are we buying this now?" I asked Ryou.

"Because we're at the lowest point on the 'purchase and renovate' curve for a property this size," he replied. "Any house that's big enough to hold the entire family and is still in good shape would cost us too much, we were going to renovate whatever building we did buy to include 21st-century conveniences, and it will cost more to repair it later than to repair it now."

"Nineteen times of twenty," Kasandara added.

I blinked in surprise. "You have your powers back!"

"Affirmative."

I smiled. "And that means you have your precognition back, too, Ryou. Which means permanent power loss is probably not something that the ladies need to worry about when they have their Pure Hearts extracted."

We walked past the gate of our new home. Ami, Makoto, Saeko, and our Devices started walking or flying around the property while Ryou and I headed into the building. I kept forcefields up above and below us, just in case some of the wood was about to collapse.

"About that, Rob—" Ryou started, then stopped talking when we heard voices from one of ground floor rooms. We made our way there quietly, then pushed the door open...

... to discover Bunny-chan, Chiba-san, and a grade-school girl that I didn't recognize, surrounded by what looked like every stray cat in Minato, in a room with a large hole in the wall. Hey, look, it's episode 91. Stupid genre conventions.

The people looked our way, surprised by our opening the door. "Who's there— Oh, Ryou-san! Robu-san!"

"Usagi-san? What are you doing here?" Ryou asked.

"Mamo-chan brought me here to cheer me up." We didn't need to ask why she needed cheering up; she still wasn't wearing a brooch. "And all of these cats are making me feel happier. But... Oh, it's terrible, Robu-san, Ryou-san! Miharu-chan," the girl bowed to us, "says that somebody's buying this house and they're going to force all of these cute kittens to leave! What are you two doing here, by the way?"

Even if it meant she'd hate me for a moment, I wasn't going to lie to Bunny-chan. "Er... we just bought this house. Saeko-mama signed the paperwork this afternoon."

"You're going to kick the cats out! You're an oni!"

"Remember Ami's New Year's message!" I didn't mention in front of Miharu-chan that it was Future Ami's message from Crystal Tokyo. "We'll call the Animal Kingdom. The cats will live more comfortably there than they could here."

"Oh..." Miharu-chan looked a bit sad, but added, "Okay, then."

Chiba-san told her, "I'm sure you'll be allowed to visit them there." But, instead of replying, Miharu-chan ran away.

"We're going to have to fix that hole," Ryou said.

Bunny-chan and Chiba-san turned to follow Miharu-chan, but I stopped them. "She's just going home," I explained. "Unfortunately, she'll be attacked by a daimon there. Fortunately, she'll run back here, so we just need to wait for her."

"Eleven times out of thirteen," Ryou added. "However, events won't go completely as in canon, Rob."

"Let me guess: Kaolinite *and* Eudial at the same time again? Who else gets her Pure Heart shot out?"

"Query contains gender error," announced Kasandara.

"What, it's going to be Chiba-san?" He looked as worried as I felt.

Ryou sighed. "Are you being deliberately obtuse, Rob?"

Oh. "No, I'm just surprised that I even have a Pure Heart. I wasn't born in this reality, after all. I guess I should go find Ichiro."

Before I could leave, Ryou grabbed my arm. "Don't. Twenty-three times out of twenty-seven, Eudial will show surprise if your Unison is forcibly ended when she shoots out your Pure Heart."

"Which means they probably don't know about Unison yet," Chiba-san said.

"And we still have that as Ami and Makoto's ace in the hole," I added.

Bunny-chan grinned. "It's a card up your sleeve, too."

I nodded. "And there's no point in playing that card right now. Let's go meet up with the others, so Eudial doesn't have to invade our new house – what there is of it – to get to me."

So we did, and Bunny-chan finally had the opportunity to introduce Saeko-mama to Chiba-san while Ami and Makoto played with some of the cats. "Mizuno-sensei, this is Chiba Mamoru-san, my boyfriend. Mamo-chan, this is Mizuno Saeko-sensei, Ami's mother."

Saeko bowed to Chiba-san. "I've heard about you from my daughter, Chiba-san. She tells me that you work with her sometimes."

Chiba-san bowed in return. "I have that honour, ma'am." Before he could say anything else, we heard Miharu-chan scream.

Ami immediately ran over to her mother, hugged her, and flew away with Saeko-mama still in her arms. Without transforming to Sailor Mercury first. While I admired her [filial piety](#), I had to question her willingness to break cover. I also hoped she'd be back in time to put Miharu-chan's Pure Heart back into her body if Sailor Moon couldn't. Oh, and put my Pure Heart back into my body, too.

Makoto, Chiba-san, and I transformed to Sailor Jupiter, Tuxedo Kamen, and Oni just before the purple catgirl daimon – named Nekonneru, if I remembered correctly – grabbed Miharu-chan and forced her Pure Heart out of her. I ran toward them, hoping I'd be able to do something to help, when Kaolinite and Eudial stepped forward from the trees behind the house.

"Have you adjusted the sights on that thing?" Kaolinite asked.

"I should be able to hit who I'm aiming at this time," Eudial replied. Then she shot me. "Yes, they're adjusted properly now."

As I lost consciousness, I remembered that the bitch had almost hit me when she shot Ryou.

I regained consciousness to the sight of the second-most-beddable woman in three different realities... and wondered why my internal description of her was so impure. Then I felt my Pure Heart return to its accustomed place in my body, and immediately returned to thinking of her as my second-closest friend. "Mercury! How's Miharu-chan?"

Ami smiled. "Sailor Moon has already returned her Pure Heart to her body, Oni."

Then we heard Moon say something she never had before: "Moon Spiral Heart Attack!"

"Down!" Mercury covered as much of my body as she could with her own, just before a giant pink heart flew above us on its way to hit its target. It was a good thing that my thoughts of her were pure again.

Nekonneru shouted "Lovely!" and fell to pieces. Puzzle pieces, to be exact.

Jupiter quickly walked over and helped us up, Mercury first, then me. "Are you okay?"

"Well," I sent the rest to only Makoto and Ami so that Miharu-chan and Bunny-chan couldn't overhear, «I now know that I can be sufficiently impure to want a wife and a mistress, but now that I have my Pure Heart back, I feel a lot better about only having one fiancée.»

«You'd better!» my dearest sent back.

Mercury blushed; she must have picked up on my subtext. «How are your powers?»

I tried to raise a forcefield. «Gone. At least for now.»

«They aren't all gone,» Ami pointed out. «You can still send your thoughts to us.»

I smiled at that thought. «Well, let's hope my other abilities come back as fast as Ryou's did.»

«Your Pure Heart is gorgeous, mostly red but streaked with green and blue with a few white streaks and rainbow strands,» my fiancée sent.

Sakura added, «I can show you pictures, if you want.»

«Later, please,» I answered. «I want to see what Sailor Moon's uniform and brooch look like now.»

I woke up in the middle of the night. "Streaked with green *and* blue"? And more? I could understand the green streaks in my Pure Heart – Makoto and I were deeply in love with each other to the point where our hearts were metaphorically one, and her magic colour is green – but the blue streaks, combined with my impure thought earlier, made me wonder exactly how I really felt about my dearer friend. Then I remembered that Ryou's Pure Heart was white, with some red, green, and mostly blue streaks, and I assumed each of the four of us who had been banished to the Lyrical reality had all three of the others' magic colours in our Pure Hearts. But that didn't explain why Ryou's white streaks were less common in my Pure Heart than Makoto's and Ami's were. And the rainbow strands puzzled me altogether. Hey, I was still half-asleep; I didn't realize the obvious.

It was too bad I was the only person on the Sailor Team who had anything resembling telepathic powers beyond sending thoughts, and that Meia had told me I couldn't Unison with Ichiro until I got my powers back; I couldn't get somebody else to take a look inside my head and see exactly what's in there. Stupid genre conventions.

I wondered why removing my Pure Heart caused me to have impure thoughts in the first place. That wasn't shown in the anime or the manga, after all. Then I remembered that the target audience for the manga and the anime were girls the age of Princess Lady and Miharu-chan; of course there wouldn't be any mention in canon of people's impure thoughts.

Or so I thought at the time, forgetting about Unazuki-san's canon behaviour.

A half-day of classes ensued the next day, as it so often does on Saturdays. That afternoon, we took care of our laundry and other weekly chores, and Makoto spent a half minute sitting in front of me with our foreheads touching.

I wasn't able to update her brainprint.

Sunday, of course, was study day. Just like last term, we started our intensive cramming early, getting together at Rei-san's Hikawa Shrine. Or, at least, we were supposed to. Bunny-chan and Minako didn't show up.

"So, how did Mina-chan not make it?" Rei-san asked. "Doesn't she live with you now, Mako-chan?"

My dearest nodded, then said, "She said she had something to do and she'd meet us here later."

I looked at Ryou. "Daimon?"

"Seven times out of eight, but not yet."

Ami pulled the Mercury Computer out of her pocket and typed in a command. A moment later, she announced, "Minako's communicator is in the Crown Game Center."

"Anybody want to bet that Bunny-chan's communicator is right beside Minako's?" I asked. Nobody took me up on the offer.

"If there's a daimon coming, shouldn't we go help them?" Naru-san asked, her kabuki-style face markings becoming just barely visible.

"I don't know how much good I'll be today," I said. "I still can't raise more than a tissue-paper forcefield."

"Right," Rei-san said. "You stay here with Ami, Mako-chan, and Ryou-san. The rest of us will go help Usagi and Mina-chan."

"I assume I stay behind, too," Ichigo-san said.

As Rei-san nodded, I had a thought. "Hang on. This might be episode 92."

"When we would have found out that Tenou-san and Kaioh-san are Sailors Uranus and Neptune?" my dearest asked.

Ami shook her head. "No, that comes later. This is when we discover that they're a lesbian couple."

Rei-san thought for a moment, then said, "We should go anyway. Ami, keep us posted as to where they are."

"They're heading out the game center's front door right now," Meia replied. "I'll concentrate on tracking them, if I may use the Mercury Computer." Ami gave it and her communicator to her Unison companion, and Meia took the electronics to the telephone nook in the hallway.

I sighed. "They're probably headed for Tuning Service Kameda Motor. That's where the daimon appeared in canon."

"Kameda?" Rei-san asked.

"No." Kasandara replied. "Kameda. *Akira* reference is not present."

I sighed, again. She knows at least that much about pop culture, but Kasandara still can't string together a normal sentence half the time. Maybe Ryou likes her that way.

"Sir," Ichiro asked, "should we stay or go?"

"Go," I said immediately. "If this is the canon daimon, Meia will benefit from eyes in the sky to help track her."

As Hayate-chan moved to accompany Ichiro, Sakura looked at Makoto, who nodded in agreement. "Let's go, then."

I heard Rei-san ask Yuuichirou-san whether he could give them a ride out to where our blonde teammates were. Considering that he walked with them to the parking lot behind the shrine, I assume he agreed.

Which left at the shrine Hino-kannushi, Meia, Ichigo-san, and the four of us who had been sent to the Lyrical dimension a few months or years ago. And whichever kami were here instead of at any of the other Hikawa shrines, of course. Ryou-san asked Ichigo-san, "Aoyama-san, would you help me get some refreshments, please?"

"Sure. I assume there's some reason why we need to leave the three of them alone, right? We'll get the usuals for everyone."

After she left, I asked, "Are we sure that Ichigo-san isn't a metahuman?"

Ami smiled. "She's just very observant, Rob. She'll no doubt be a fine scientist someday."

"No doubt," Makoto agreed. "And speaking of being observant, I seem to remember seeing somebody getting all cuddly with my fiancé the day before yesterday."

"That was only to keep him from sitting up and being hit by Sailor Moon's attack."

"I know. I'm still not happy about it, because somebody else didn't complain about the attention."

"It was all over before I could say anything," I pointed out.

"You still haven't said anything. And you told us – and *just* the two of us – that you're able to want both a wife and a mistress. I'd like to know what Ryou thinks about this, because I know I'm not happy about it."

I didn't know what to say. Neither did Ami.

The universe decided to take the opportunity to invoke [Chandler's Law](#); Eudial burst through the door with her gun in her hands. "There you are! And nobody to help you, either. Time to die, Mercury."

As Eudial pulled the trigger, Makoto stepped between her and Ami.

"Tch. Well, you were the next one on my list, beanpole." As Ami transformed to Mercury, Eudial added, "Nope, not fighting you without a daimon backup." And she was gone at superspeed. Again.

I know the Death Busters are non-sane by human standards, but that was particularly random behaviour. Burst in, shoot once, and leave? If this was a story, I'd call that hack writing.

I was still impure enough to think of Eudial as a "bitch". That bitch definitely copied my superspeed. And I couldn't go after her because I still couldn't invoke my power.

Then I realized that my dearest was still standing, even with her Pure Heart – green with red, blue, white, and rainbow streaks – shot out. In a quiet voice, she said, "Mama and Papa died and left me behind, and Grandma hates me for that. I'm too tall to be pretty. My sempai dumped me for a cute girl and my fiancé wants to bed my cutest friend. Eudial doesn't think I'm a threat. I need Sailor Moon to finish my fights. And I'm not even good enough to be killed first."

As I realized that those were her impure thoughts, she pulled a folding knife out of her pocket. "I'll save Eudial the trouble."

I grabbed her wrists before she could open the knife. "Makoto! My dearest! I love you! I want to spend the rest of my life with you! Please don't do this!"

She turned, slowly, to face me. "Then why do you like Ami so much?"

"She's my friend. She's your friend, too, remember? You know why she's your friend."

"I know," she said, just before Ami put her Pure Heart back into her body. Then my fiancée finally collapsed.



As I carried Makoto to Rei-san's bed, I told Ami without looking at her, "I don't mind if you tell Ryou. Back before Zoisite turned him into a youma, he mentioned that he was worried I might have received your love before he could."

Almost as quietly as Makoto has listed all of the things she thought justified her suicide, Ami asked, "Were either you or Ryou planning on ever telling me about that?"

"I can't speak for him. I didn't want to lose your friendship."

Some anger slipped into Ami's voice. "You're an idiot, Rob. And so is my fiancée. I'm a big girl; I can handle unwanted attention, even from my friends."

"Er... I've seen the anime special *Ami's First Love*. You blushed bright red just from receiving a love letter, let alone reading it."

"I'm not her. She didn't stay in love with Ryou after Usagi reset the timeline, and she never spent two years in Midchilda growing older while growing up."

I looked her straight in the eyes. "You're right. And I'm sorry."

"I have no intention of being your suture, Rob." Leave it to Japan to have a single word for "friend with benefits".

"I have no intention to ask that of you, Ami."

"Good," Makoto whispered as she opened her eyes. "And thank you for stopping me from doing something foolish, darling."

I knew who needed my complete attention just then. "Makoto, I call you my dearest because you *are* the dearest person to me in three different realities. Please, always remember that, no matter what anybody else thinks of you, I love you more than anyone else I know. Even when I was so impure as to want more than one lover, I wanted you to receive my first and strongest love. To be my wife."

A single tear ran down her cheek. "And when I was so impure as to think I wasn't wanted on this Earth, I remembered that you did love me. It wasn't the lack of love that hurt so much, it was the thought that you might have betrayed that love, and that I didn't deserve it anyway."

At the time, I didn't know how prophetic my next words were. "Makoto, my dearest, if I am ever in a situation where anyone other than you wants to share her body with me, I will make sure that you know and approve before I even consider my reply to her. I will never willingly betray the love that we share. And I will swear that in front of the kami of this shrine if you want." Then I gasped as I felt warmth on the mark on the back of my neck. "Actually, I think I just did exactly that."

Makoto sat up and hugged me possessively. "Don't expect to ever get that approval, darling. You're mine and I'm yours and I hope that never changes." She looked over my shoulder. "Don't try sneaking off, Ami. We haven't finished our talk."

"I was just going to call my mother."

"Why?"

"Mako-chan, you just tried to kill yourself. I need to know how long we need to watch you before we're sure you won't try again."

She let go of me and stood up. "That was because my Pure Heart was out of my body! I shouldn't think that way again."

"Er..." I said for the second time in less than ten minutes. "The night after my Pure Heart was shot out, I woke up wondering exactly what I thought of Ami. If you're like me, my dearest, you're going to wake up in the middle of the night, wondering whether you should keep living. *Somebody* needs to be there for you to talk with."

"Oh. Yeah, that's a problem. And since you mentioned it, what *do* you think of Ami? You didn't answer me before I blacked out."

I let her change the subject because the answer would probably make a difference to her when she woke up in the middle of the night. "I'm lucky to still be her friend, after what I said to both of you." I turned from Makoto to Ami. "You're the smartest person I know, including myself, and one of the kindest after Bunny-chan. And you are an extremely attractive young woman." I turned back to Makoto. "And you, my fiancée, are an extremely attractive young woman and a strong fighter who I'm lucky to be loved by and in love with, and to have at my back when we fight."

"You aren't just saying that to get into my pants, are you? How long does it take to go back to normal?"

"My dearest, you should know by now that, if I wanted to get into your pants, I'd ask you directly whether you want to make love with me. As for how long, I think I'm back to normal, but normal doesn't feel the same as it did three days ago. I'm a lot more interested in making love with you now than I was then."

"Like right now?"

I shook my head. "I'm not going to take advantage of you while you're still in a fragile situation. I love you too much to do that to you. Ask me again the day after you wake up in the middle of the night."

Ami asked, "Does this mean you're always going to have doubts about yourself, Mako-chan?"

My fiancée sighed deeply. "Who knows? I've always had doubts."

Which partially explains where her jealousy comes from. If she thinks she isn't good enough for me – which is definitely not the case, if anything it's the other way around – then she's going to worry about anyone who she thinks is prettier than she is. I suggested, "You should talk with Rei-san's grandfather about that. But I think I know part of what he'd say: If you let self-doubt hold you back, it cripples you, but if you use it to drive yourself forward, you come out stronger."

"That makes sense," Ichigo-san said from the doorway.

We all turned to look at her, and at Ryou standing behind her. "How long have you been there?" Makoto asked.

"Since you asked about Robu-san getting into your pants. I wish I had a boyfriend. What's this about a fragile situation?" she asked, ignoring the blush that started to show on my dearest's face.

My fiancée and I sighed. Ami said, "Mako-chan had her Pure Heart shot out while you were gone."

"What? How? No, those are stupid questions. Does losing your Pure Heart make you want to have sex?"

"Not in my case," Ryou said. "I wanted to do... well, nothing. Because nothing seemed to be important enough to do. I know better now."

"And I thought I wasn't worth the air I was breathing," Makoto said. Ichigo-san and Ryou both winced at that. Then my dearest gestured toward me. "Him, it made horny."

"So what else is new?" Ichigo-san asked. "It seems like you two visit love hotels at least twice a month."

Before we could say anything, Ami sent, «Please don't mention my name.»

I told Ichigo-san, "I was thinking of something Makoto and I have never done, and that's all you need to know. She knows the details."

"And after hearing an explanation, I haven't called off our engagement," my dearest added. "But I'm not going to allow it, either. Now I'd really like to stop dwelling on this and do something else."

"Study?" Ami suggested.

Ryou added, "That is why we got together today."

So we studied, until the others – including Minako and Bunny-chan – returned, when Hayate-chan led us through a pair of after-action debriefings. She wasn't happy to hear that we had been targeted by Eudial while Kaolinite was targeting a possible Talisman host. "To quote Auric Goldfinger, 'Once is happenstance. Twice is coincidence. The third time it's enemy action.' They're targeting two people at a time deliberately to split our forces, and we've been letting them."

"No more," Usagi-san announced, using her Princess Serenity voice.

"Easy to say," Sakura replied, "but how do we stop them? We can't take the battle to them without the Holy Grail. Right now, they're setting the agenda."

"And you still need to practice the Moon Spiral Heart Attack," Minako added.

Bunny-chan sighed as deeply as I wanted to just then. "All right, we can't stop them from dividing our attention. Yet. But we have to change that."

Hayate-chan nodded in agreement. "And the first step there is to get Uranus and Neptune to work with us."

"Again," Sakura said, "that's easy to say."

"We have to get them to trust us," Ami said. "Somehow."

"I have an idea there," I announced. "But it depends on getting somebody who they trust to be seen working with us."

"Who do we know who they trust?" Bunny-chan asked.

"Sailor Pluto, of course," Ami replied.

Naru-san frowned. "Does anybody know how to contact her?"

I grinned. "Yeah, I owe her money. She'll talk to me."

I realized where the rainbow strands in our Pure Hearts came from while I was washing dishes after dinner.

They weren't reflected in her current attack and uniform, but they'd be in her next set: Moon *Rainbow* Heartache.

Of course Makoto and I loved Bunny-chan like a sister. But why weren't the strands in Ryou's Pure Heart?

The next morning, I had to knock on Minako and Makoto's door, instead of the usual other way around... and they were both still in pyjamas and yawning. I thought that Mako-chan looked sexy in her pyjamas. Then I realized, to my happiness, that I thought Mina-chan only looked cute.

Minako told me that Sakura had woken her up in the middle of the night because Makoto needed to talk, I thanked her for being there when I couldn't be, and neither of us went into specifics. We didn't need to.

Unluckily for Makoto, she couldn't Unison with Sakura so they couldn't stay together for moral support without risking everybody learning about the Unison devices. Luckily for all of us, I was able to manifest my forcefields at full strength again, so once they let me know that they were dressed, I quick-moved from our apartment building to the bus stop – with each arm around a Senshi – and got us there before the bus arrived.

I could unison with Ichiro again as well. Not that it mattered at the time.

During the Revealing Of The Lunches that day, Ami and Ryou revealed that they had brought enough sandwiches for five people... and we didn't really care that we were giving Bogdanova-san a hint as to who knew what about whom.

I wondered how I had been lucky enough to be surrounded by so many close, trustworthy friends. If this was a genre convention, it definitely wasn't a stupid one.

When we got home after school, we found Mochizuki Ka'o waiting in my apartment. "I apologize for intruding, but there was no answer at the Kino residence," she said in English.

"Artemis and Sakura don't open the door for anybody while we're away," Minako explained in the same language, which we all used during our conversation.

"Ah."

"I thought it best to let her wait inside," Ichiro explained.

I nodded. "You thought correctly, of course. What brings you here, Mochizuki-san?"

"Public transit," she replied with a smile. Then, more seriously, she added, "Mizuno-sensei thought it necessary for somebody to watch over Kino-san. She knows that Minako-san shares Kino-san's apartment, but even Sailor Senshi need to sleep. I, as a droid, do not."

"Saeko-mama is being overly paranoid," my dearest replied. "I'm not suicidal any more. And Ami talks too much."

"Be that as it may," Mochizuki-san said, "we would be remiss in our duties as health care providers if we were not to make sure of your recovery. There is so little known about having one's Pure Heart removed, even by Black Moon and Crystal Tokyo medicine, that we cannot be certain how long a full recovery takes."

Before my fiancée could reply, I put my hand on her shoulder. "She's thinking of your welfare. And so is Saeko-mama."

"If we're taking a vote," Minako added, "I think it's a good idea for us to have a live-in nurse for a while. Especially if I have my Pure Heart removed some time." Then she turned to me. "I *am* pure enough to have a Pure Heart, right?"

I grinned. "Oh, yeah, you've got one. I'm actually looking forward to meeting the daimon they created in canon to keep you in one place long enough to check your Pure Heart."

"Why would you..." my dearest started, stopped for a brief moment, then smiled. "Oh, right, Doorknobder is a *fun* daimon."

"I wonder whether we can keep her alive?" I mused. "We have Osaka-san and Ryou as our resident youma and Pharmakon -"

"Please," Mochizuki-san interrupted, "I don't use that name any more."

I bowed to her. "I apologize." Straightening up, I continued, "Mochizuki-san is our resident droid. The cardians weren't people, but some of the daimons in canon are self-aware and intelligent, and Doorknobder is one of them."

Mochizuki-san frowned in annoyance. "We aren't Pokémon. You don't need to collect us all."

Minako asked, "What's a Pokémon?"

"We've gotten sidetracked," Makoto said before I could answer. "And my mental health is not up for a vote."

"True." Mochizuki-san looked straight at Makoto. "If you do not want me here, I will leave. But I strongly recommend that you let me stay."

Makoto sighed. You can't win them all, my dearest. "Oh, fine. You may as well stay. I don't have a futon for you, but you said you don't sleep. What do you eat, anyway?"

"Electricity is sufficient for my current requirements."

Did she just make a pun? If she did, she's a lot more human now than she was when Saphir built her.

Ryou and Saeko-mama were able to hire a reconstruction crew for our new home quite quickly. Thanks to the economic bubble having burst in 1991, there were a large number of companies willing to work for less than they had been charging a half-decade ago; efficient, competent construction crews that were willing to work around the clock were bidding for our relatively small job.

By the time I visited the site after school on Tuesday, the work at expanding the basement and rebuilding most of the walls was already underway. I got a few questions about why we needed so many power sockets in one of the two new basement rooms, which I deflected by saying I didn't know what was going in there. Which was true at the time, although I had my suspicions; it looked to me like we were either setting up for a game center or a datacenter. Since we were also wiring the entire building for a local-area network, I suspected the latter was the case.

One thing that I was able to confirm was that, yes, we wanted two of the bedrooms to be separated from the others. I explained that we'd be lodging both unmarried males and unmarried females so we needed separate sleeping areas in order to maintain propriety... which was true to begin with, but after a couple of weddings in less than a decade, the two areas would become the Mizuno and Kino residences, with my dearest and me living in the smaller area.

Once I was finished there, I headed to Shibuya. Specifically, Center Gai. Atelier Lucent had renovated since the last time I was in: they had fewer shelves and more display racks, which meant they had fewer items to sell overall but more of them were on display. And, as usual, the owner was waiting for my arrival.

"Congratulations on becoming a homeowner in Tokyo, Donaldson-san."

"Thank you, Meioh-san, although the paperwork says Mizuno-sensei owns the property on behalf of our mutual fund. I believe that foreigners can't own real estate in Japan."

"No, you can buy real estate here, once you're old enough to enter into a contract. So, what can I do for you today?"

"Well, I do need a couple of shirts. I believe you know my sizes and preferences already?" I asked with a grin.

"Of course." While she was showing me what she had, Setsuna-san asked, "What's your real reason for being here?"

"Two things. The less-important one first; I want to arrange a repayment schedule for the money I owe you. Ryou says we can start in a month."

"Rob-san, you saved my life when we fought Dark Lady."

"Can your life or anyone else's be valued by money, Setsuna-san?"

She thought for a moment as she pulled another shirt from a shelf. "No, it can't. We can worry about what you owe me next month, when you're ready to start payments. But that isn't your real reason for being here, any more than these shirts are."

"You're right, although I really like that teal shirt. We need Sailor Pluto to be seen fighting beside Sailor Moon."

"Seen by Sailor Uranus and Sailor Neptune." It wasn't a question.

I nodded. "So far, I've only traded a few words with Neptune and haven't even seen Uranus. Right now, they have no reason to trust the rest of the Sailor Team, but your presence can give them that reason."

"I can't get involved this week, which means that Mizuno-san will have to live through having her Pure Heart extracted on Saturday."

Thank you for the weekend forecast, Sailor Pluto. "Eudial did say that Mercury was on her list, but we didn't know when she'd be attacking."

Setsuna-san thought for a moment. "I'll let Eiko know that I won't be available next Saturday. I've been wanting to get to know Osaka-san better for a while now."

Presumably this Eiko was one of her employees who I hadn't yet met. "Thank you, Setsuna-san. I'll take the teal shirt and the white shirt."

"I'll give you this order for Kino-san as well." She pulled a bag from behind the counter, which I opened to discover a teal dress that appeared to be in Makoto's size.

"Does she know she's getting this, and do you ever get tired of knowing the future?"

Setsuna-san smiled, although the smile had some sadness in it. "Not yet, and more often than you'd imagine, in that order."

"Well, thank you. She needs a present from another Senshi right now, even if I end up buying it."

"I'll add it to your tab."

Bunny-chan brought us a bribe the next day.

"I need you all to teach me!" she insisted once the Revealing Of The Lunches was finished, producing a bag. "I brought homemade cookies!" Which explained why Ryou's lunch included an antacid.

Remembering episode 93 as if I had watched it with my fiancée two days ago – which we had – I asked, "What brought this on?"

«Darling, don't encourage her,» my fiancée sent to just me.

«She's going to tell us anyway, my dearest,» I sent back. «I'm surprised she didn't wait until after school, though.» We turned our attention back to Bunny-chan.

"I messed up Mamo-chan's genetic engineering study notes when I gave him some of my cookies."

Yep, it's time for episode 93. But Setsuna-san had mentioned Ami's Pure Heart, which wasn't due to be extracted until episode 97. Mind you, canon had already been shot down when Ryou's Pure Heart was shot out, so I wasn't completely surprised.

"He ate them and didn't seem to mind, but I know he's always so nice to me. I need bridal training if I'm going to be a good wife for Mamo-chan. Ami-chan and Ichigo-san, teach me about genetic engineering, please! Mako-chan, teach me how to be a better cook! Mina-chan, teach me more English! Erumaira-san, please teach me Russian! Ryou-san, teach me about investing money!"

"You need basic math skills before you can learn how to balance a ledger book, let alone invest money," Ryou pointed out.

Ami added, "And you need basic science skills and a good grounding in biology before you can start learning genetic engineering, Usagi-san. That's a university-level course that even I don't know very much about."

«Really?» I sent to just her. «I *know* I saw some genetic engineering textbooks in the bundle you brought back from Midchilda.»

«They're just introductory-level texts, so I don't know very much yet. Besides, I really shouldn't boast about my knowledge.»

We turned our attention back to the conversation to hear Bunny-chan say, "Well, if you don't want to teach me English, maybe Robu-san will."

I raised one eyebrow, Spock-style. "Do you really think I'd teach you something that would help you get closer to somebody who you know I don't like?"

"Oh. Right."

Bunny-chan turned to my fiancée, but Makoto spoke before Bunny-chan could. "You've been like this before, Usagi-san. I know you want to better yourself for his sake, and if I thought you'd actually stick with the training, I'd help you. But you've never stuck with the training whenever you've wanted to learn something in the past."

"That's not true," Naru-san said. "Usagi is still learning how to be a miko."

Makoto looked surprised, and I don't know why. After all, we spent at least a half day each week at Rei-san's shrine even when we weren't cramming for exams; she should have noticed. "Okay, you're right. I'm sorry, Usagi-san."

"I forgive you," Bunny-chan replied... although I think she was still a bit upset about my dearest's frank words. But somebody had to say it, and Sakura and Rei-san weren't here.

When nobody said anything for a moment, Bogdanova-san said, "I'm not good at teaching. Do brides in Japan need to know how to speak Russian, and all of these other things?"

"I need to know them so I can be a better wife for Mamo-chan! What if he becomes somebody really important and I have to show off Japan to people from other countries?"

"Er..." Ichigo-san said, "If that's your worry, you're already showing off Japan to Elmira-san."

Bunny-chan looked surprised, then dejected. "And I'm probably not doing a good job of it, am I?" Then she turned to Bogdanova-san and bowed. "I'm sorry for making such a bad impression on you, Bogdanoba-san."

"Please, don't be sorrowful. That is not the Russian way."

Really? Sorrow wasn't the Russian way? I thought that there was a huge stack of Russian novels that said otherwise. Maybe they didn't exist in this reality.

"And it is not your way. And you don't need training in all those things. What you need is culture! Experience it while sitting by your boyfriend's side! It brings you together!"

Hearing that cheered Bunny-chan up. Any excuse for a date, I guess. "Thanks! So, does anybody want some cookies, even if you aren't going to teach me anything?"

"Alas, if I accept sweets from somebody who isn't my fiancée, she'll be disappointed with me," Ryou said while looking at Ami.

Bunny-chan turned to me and said, "I suppose you're going to use the same excuse."

I looked at my fiancée and raised one eyebrow slightly. «I can't get out of it, can I, Makoto?»

«Not when she said it that way, darling. Go ahead, and may your next life be even better than this one.» She nodded slightly.

I slowly shook my head while looking at Bunny-chan. "No, my dearest knows that my head can't be turned by a bag of homemade cookies. I'm not Ruby Rose."

"Who?"

I almost explained *RWBY* to them, but Bogdanova-san was present. "The time for talk is later. Now is the time for cookies."

Just before we returned to class, Ryou gave me the antacid that he'd brought along. I needed it. Oh, boy, did I need it. Bunny-chan, please, *please* stick to ice-cream desserts.

Bunny-chan really liked the idea of experiencing some culture alongside Chiba-san. Ami was kind enough to purchase tickets for all of us to attend a violin performance by Takuzou Igarashi in the auditorium of the National Art Center that Saturday.

"What, is the National Art Center already open?" Hayate-chan asked when we told her about our planned late-afternoon outing.

"Why wouldn't it be?" my dearest asked, somewhat confused. "We celebrated my fourteenth birthday there."

It was Hayate-chan's turn to look confused. "But..." Then she realized something that I had known for a while. "Oh, right. Just because it wasn't opened until 2007 back home doesn't mean it can't exist already in this world."

I chuckled at her comment. "How many things have you and I already noticed here that are different from what we remember from the canon stories, Hayate-chan? You took in stride bigger things like Ryou's name not being 'Ryo', or Makoto being a redhead instead of a brunette. Why would this throw you?"

She smiled and replied, "I just wasn't expecting it."

"Now that that's cleared up," my dearest said, "who all is going, and for how long?"

"I bought tickets for our entire lunch group, plus Rei and Mamoru," Ami replied.

"Including Bogdanova-san?"

"Yes, Rob, including Bogdanova-san. It was her idea to begin with."

The topic of discussion at that Friday's Conversational English club meeting was what we would wear to the recital.

"C'mon, Makoto, you'd look great in a dress!"

"I don't want to wear a dress..." she started, then remembered what I'd brought back from Shibuya for her. "But I suppose I should wear the one that Setsuna gave me."

I nodded. "In the same colour as my new shirt, I'll point out. I would be honoured to wear matching outfits with you to the recital."

"That dress makes me look pretty. I'm too tall to be pretty."

And the real reason comes out; my dearest was letting her insecurities get the better of her.

Minako looked to be about to say something, but Ryou put one hand on her shoulder and she stopped in surprise.

Ami said nothing, which left it to me to answer my fiancée. "My dearest, you *deserve* to look beautiful. I want you to be the girl that every other guy, even Ryou and Chiba-san, wishes was his date. Makoto, will you be that dream girl tomorrow? Please?"

She thought for a moment. "For you, I'll look pretty. For *you*, not for anybody else."

Ryou finally let Minako say something. "That's so romantic. I was going to point out that Linda Evangelista is three centimetres taller than you are and Naomi Campbell is one centimetre taller than her, and everybody in the world thinks that they're pretty."

"Those are just numbers," Ryou pointed out.

I added, "Mina-chan, Ami might be convinced with numbers, but Makoto is the kind of person who understands emotions better than ledgers. And I wouldn't want it any other way," I finished with a smile for my dearest as I put one arm around her waist.

Minako nodded. "You two belong together, and I wish that singing idols could have boyfriends so I could find somebody who's the right one for me. Now, what am I going to wear? I can't wear a little black dress now, not if I don't want to upstage Mako-chan."

"Mina-chan," Ami replied, "it's an afternoon recital, not an evening performance. I'm just going to wear that blue outfit that I picked up in Cr-" she remembered the bug in the classroom just in time, and coughed. "Sorry. The blue outfit that I picked up in Kurobe."

«It's far too soon to let Bogdanova-san know about Cranagan,» Ryou sent. «Eight times out of nine. And I did drag Ami to the Unazuki Onsen after we got back from Castle Mariner.»

I nodded in reply. "And I was going to go with my black suit and tie, along with my new shirt." «I didn't know you two went out of town alone between the school years.»

«You were busy skating.» "I have a navy blue suit that I could wear," Ryou commented. "That should complement Ami's dress."

"Well, if two of you are wearing blue and the other two are wearing teal, that leaves me with no choice but to wear something in green," Minako announced. "But I don't own a green dress."

I grinned. "Not a real green dress, that's cruel."

Makoto pulled a pillow out of her school bag, and threw it at me. The pillow, not the bag.

"What are you quoting now?" Minako asked while sighing in resignation.

"A song that was released last December," I replied as I tossed the pillow back to my dearest. "It's called 'If I Had \$1000000'. It's a big hit back in Canada."

Minako rolled her eyes. "Whatever. I'll have to go with a skirt and blouse. Now, who's going to tell the others what we're wearing?"

"I'll do that," Ami volunteered.

Bunny-chan and Rei-san were the only others in our group to wear dresses to the concert: Usagi-san's was just off-white enough to suggest yellow without being obvious, and Rei-san's was the red one that I was beginning to suspect was the only European-style dress she owned. Not that I saw her in a dress very often. Naru-san, Ichigo-san, and Bogdanova-san each wore a blouse and skirt outfit, like Minako – Naru-san in a black skirt and jacket and white blouse, Ichigo-san in navy with white trim, and Bogdanova-san in yellow with red accents.

Chiba-san wore a black suit and tie, and a white shirt. My black jacket was the one that I'd bought in Cranagan, so Ichiro rode along in my pocket. Meia rode along with him, at Ryou's insistence.

Once we were at the National Art Center, we made our way to the third floor and took our seats. Ryou had the aisle seat, with Ami beside him, and Minako beside her. Beside them were Rei-san, Bunny-chan, and Chiba-san. I was seated behind Ryou, with my dearest beside me, Naru-san beside her, and Ichigo-san and Bogdanova-san on the other side of Naru-san's seat. Anybody who knew us socially would think we were seated beside our friends and family; anybody who knew we were the Sailor Team would realize we were ready to react at a moment's notice.

We timed things well; we only had to wait for five minutes before the lights were dimmed and Takuzou Igarashi took the stage.

Alas, he only got a few bars into [the third movement of Boccherini's String Quintet in E major](#) when his violin was possessed by a daimon.

No rest for the wicked. Or for us. The lights stayed down, so we quietly slipped away and transformed... except for Ichigo-san and Bogdanova-san, of course.

I put up a light-blocking forcefield so that nobody would see us transform or notice we left the room. At least, nobody in the auditorium noticed. Three guesses who was waiting in the hallway, and if you need all three you've forgotten the stupid genre conventions.

Kaolinite was watching the action inside the hall through the window in the door closest to the stage. "Uranus and Neptune are checking the Pure Heart now. Keep the others busy, will you?"

Eudial shot from the hip. Since she just wanted to keep us busy, it didn't matter who she hit. Ironically, she hit Mercury – the Senshi who she planned to hit when she'd hit Makoto instead.

Okuni created and threw a diamond dagger at Eudial, but it bounced off her weapon's barrel.

"I expected that," Mercury said. "Nobody else here has as much training as I do with ranged weaponry," she added smugly while trying to manifest a Frigid Dagger. Smug Ami isn't very nice to listen to; she reminded me too much of Arisa Sono from *All Purpose Cultural Cat Girl Nuku Nuku*.

The Frigid Dagger failed to materialize, probably because Mercury's Pure Heart – blue with white, green, red, and rainbow streaks, which I expected, and a few orange streaks, which I didn't expect – wasn't in her body. She also had a few blue-green streaks that looked to me like a caduceus which I assumed showed her feelings for her mother.

Tuxedo Kamen's answer to her statement was to throw a rose... which blocked Kaolinite from entering the auditorium.

"I don't want in anyway," she said. "That's not a Talisman. Let's go."

Eudial grabbed Kaolinite and took off at her top speed. But this time I was ready for them – I followed them as far as the car park before they got into Eudial's car and sped off.

"Next time, we track them," I insisted. "Somehow. We need to know how they can outrun me before we have any hope of countering that ability."

"We'd better get back to the others, sir," Ichiro pointed out.

"Yes, please," Meia added. "I'm worried about Mercury."

"So am I," I replied while heading back upstairs at top speed.

By the time we returned to the others, Jupiter had pried open the door that Tuxedo Kamen had sealed with a rose, and Moon was restoring Igarashi-san's Pure Heart to his body.

"Of course the civilian comes first," Mercury announced while holding her own Pure Heart. "It's obvious that Senshi have a duty to protect other people!"

I caught Jupiter's eye and sent only to her, «How long has Mercury been like this?»

«Since before you left to chase the Death Busters.»

Then Mercury noticed me. "You're already back? How did they get away from you? I should have gone with you to supervise."

«Good news, Makoto,» I sent privately. «Suddenly I'm not interested in Ami as a mistress, at all.»

«Thank you, but don't think poorly of her, darling. Those are her impure thoughts, not how she usually thinks.»

«I never imagined she could be so annoying, though. Was I like that?»

«No, you collapsed almost immediately.»

"I'm still waiting for an answer," Mercury said. "Pay attention to me when I ask you a question, Oni. It's obvious who you're having a private conversation with. It's too bad I can't listen in, the way that Nove and Wendi can."

"They're called 'private' conversations for a reason, Mercury," Moon said as she rejoined us. "It's time to put your Pure Heart back in your body."

"I'm thinking much more clearly without it."

"No, you aren't," Mars, Onmyōji, Jupiter, and I said. Ryou continued, "You just think you are because your thinking is impaired."

Then I remembered the next canon Pure Heart victim. "You can't survive for much longer without it," I added. "That should be obvious."

Mercury glared at me. "Oh, very well. But only because Onmyōji wants it." Then Moon put Mercury's Pure Heart back in her body, and Mercury dropped to her knees. Much less smugly than a moment ago, she said, "I'm so sorry, everyone. I don't know what I was thinking."

Moon offered Mercury a hand and pulled her back up to her feet. "There's nothing to forgive. You weren't yourself."

"But I never should have treated any of you that way..." Mercury replied before fainting. Ryou caught her, of course, and carried her over to a nearby sofa.

"Raise a privacy shield," Ryou told me. I did so, just before Mercury transformed back to Ami.

"The rest of you, go somewhere private and transform back," he said.

"But then everyone will know Mercury is Ami," Moon pointed out.

I shook my head as Ichiro and Meia flew out of my pocket. "Not if a double takes her place."

Both devices said "Mirage Hide!" and suddenly looked like Oni and Mercury. "Let's go," Meia added with Ami's voice.

Venus grinned as everyone else stepped through the shield. "That's a very useful spell." Then she joined them.

Which left me alone with Ami. I dropped my own Mirage Hide and sat down beside her feet. "You're a pretty girl, but if I had any doubts that you were Ryou's girlfriend, you just dispelled them," I whispered. "You were bossy and boastful to everyone else when you were impure, but not to him."

"I don't like bossing people around," she whispered in reply. "How did you know I was awake?"

"I guessed, based on how long Ryou, Makoto, and I were out cold after we had our Pure Hearts removed. And I'm also guessing that you can't transform, go into Unison, or cast spells right now."

She held up one hand, which frosted over. Then the ice dropped away. "I can use my magic, but I can't transform."

"I've never been happier to be proven wrong. But right now, I need to ask you about Silver Millennium technology..."

Five minutes later, somebody who looked like me stepped through the privacy shield. Then he dropped his Mirage Hide. "Sir, there is nobody else in the corridor."

"Thank you, Ichiro." I opened my jacket enough for him to take his place in my pocket, then dropped the shield. "How's the concert going?"

"It isn't," my dearest said from what was outside the previously shielded area. "The daimon possessed Igarashi-san's violin, and it broke from falling to the floor when the daimon was destroyed."

As Ryou helped Ami stand up, Naru-san asked, "Does anyone know where Erumaira-san is?"

"I saw her in a phone booth downstairs," Meia said from Ryou's pocket.

"I suppose we'd better let her know that the excitement and the concert are both over," Ichigo-san said. "I'll see you in class on Monday."

As she headed for the elevator, Chiba-san turned to Bunny-chan. "It's a shame that we won't be able to hear the concert. Instead, shall we go out for an early dinner?"

Bunny-chan grinned, then frowned as Naru-san said, "I'd love to have dinner!"



Watching Rei-san, Minako, and Naru-san squeeze in between Bunny-chan and Chiba-san, I said, "It's at times like these that I appreciate not being a babe magnet."

My fiancée smiled. "Me, too."

I grinned. "Yeah, I appreciate that you're not a babe magnet either."

She grabbed a pillow from the sofa and threw it at me... but she was grinning when she did that.

"I expected that something like this might happen," our group's precog said, "so I made reservations for the four of us at Brasserie Paul Bocuse Musée. Shall we?" Ryou offered his arm to Ami.

"Why not?" my dearest said as I offered my arm to her.

The next day, Ami, Naru-san, Ichiro, Shario-chan, and I got together at the Osakas' apartment above the OSA-P jewelry store. Meia didn't join us, since Ami still couldn't Unison and we weren't discussing magic; instead, she spent the day with Kasandara and Ryou.

We spent the day building a tracking device. Using the Silver Millennium technology that Ami and I had discussed the previous day, the two of us designed a beacon that Chacornac could track from the Moon.

While Shario-chan took our design and turned it into a wiring diagram, Ami, Naru-san, and I stepped out to get lunch at a ramen place nearby that Naru-san liked. While we were there, she picked up a flyer advertising a love compatibility contest being held on Saturday. "You two should take part in that with your fiancées," she said to Ami and me. I sighed deeply, so she asked, "What's wrong?"

"In canon, you took part in that, and your boyfriend had his Pure Heart pulled out of his body."

Naru-san looked puzzled. "But I don't have a boyfriend."

"Yes, I know. And that's because my presence changed the timeline. I'm sorry, Naru-san."

"Don't be sorry, Robu-san. Considering my bad luck in who I choose to date, I'm probably better off without a boyfriend."

I didn't know whether to hope she believed that, or to hope she was just saying it to spare my feelings.

When we got back to OSA-P, we discovered a completed diagram on Naru-san's workbench and Shario-chan and Ichiro standing on the workbench in an embrace and kiss, both fully clothed. Naru-san grinned, held up the flyer, and said, "Maybe you two should take part in this love compatibility contest."

Shario-chan made go-away motions without letting go of Ichiro. He sent to me, «Permission to stop working early, sir?»

And that was when I realized that he'd never see the two of us as equals, no matter what I had hoped for. If he could be that formal with me in this situation, he'd never stop being formal. I smiled anyway. "You two have fun. In another room." I remembered that, as human-like as they usually acted, they didn't have certain human anatomy and what we had walked in on was probably as far as they physically could go. "And I'm sorry that we interrupted you."

Ichiro took Shario-chan in a bridal carry and literally flew off to Naru-san's bedroom.

Watching them leave, she sighed and sadly said, "Our AI friends are getting more use out of my bedroom than I am. I just sleep there." After a moment, she added, "Well, let's get back to work." She picked up the schematic and created the crystal circuitry from what she had on hand – including some of what was left of our Midchildan gold. We made sure that the tracker didn't weigh more than Shario-chan, so that Ichiro could carry it while flying.

Then, while Ami and I went home, Naru-san followed up on one of Shario-chan's projects that I wasn't previously aware of and made comms relays that Shario-chan could retrofit into Ichiro, Meia, Sakura, and Hayate-chan, so that they could communicate with the Mercury Computer and my cellphone via the Silver Millennium comms relay attached to my router.

Then it was just a matter of time until the Death Busters showed themselves again.

Wednesday was fun. For meanings of "fun" which include "not fun".

It started with Ryou insisting that we not have a study session that day. Twelve times out of thirteen, it was necessary for certain people to be in certain other places instead.

Then Bunny-chan saw Chiba-san give Unazuki-san a ride to the Crown. I'll give them credit; nobody thought he was being unfaithful, even after the misunderstandings that took place while Princess Lady was in our time last year.

It was good to know that Usagi-san was mature enough to see a pretty girl with her fiancé and not become jealous. Idly, I wondered whether Bunny-chan could teach my fiancée that skill.

Then the girls, along with Ami, Makoto, and my dearest, had a conversation at the Crown Fruit Parlor. They talked about kissing, just like in canon episode 94, except that Ami and Makoto were there and had some stories to share with the others. But partway through the discussion, Ami excused herself and called me.

"Rob, is your computer turned on?"

"Yes. Ryou insisted. What do you need?"

"You need to contact Chacornac and set up a scan around Unazuki-san's apartment. Please," she added in a less-demanding tone. "I can't do that; Michiru and Haruka are here."

"What are we scanning for?"

"A daimon egg. It looks like canon's repeating itself and she's the next target."

"I'm on it."

"Thank you." She hung up and I started a call to the Moon.

Stupid two-and-a-half second lag between commands and responses. But as long as the Door of Space-Time was blocking FTL in-system – and we needed that blocking in place to keep Galaxia from attacking before we were ready – we had to live with it.

Chacornac confirmed the scanning commands, both Ami's requested scan for anything that looked like what we knew about daimon eggs and my request for anything that looked like Pure Hearts. If this worked the way we hoped, we'd end up with the ability to track them both. I sent a text to the Mercury Computer to let Ami know, then headed next door and let Minako know that we probably had to be ready for a daimon attack. I offered to fly her to Unazuki-san's apartment, but she refused to fly again, so I carried her and stuck to the ground.

"We'd better not tell Makoto about this," Minako said while I had her in a bridal carry. "She might get jealous."

"I have no secrets from my fiancée," I replied. "I'll take my chances."

She looked like she was going to say something else, but her communicator chimed. She looked at it and told me, "Chacornac's detected something powerful that's not us near Unazuki-san's apartment."

I stopped a half-block short of the apartment, put her down, and used a forcefield pillar to raise us up to where we could see what was coming. After a few seconds, Ichiro and Minako said, "There!" and pointed at two different places.

I created a carefully-shaped set of forcefields to use as a telescope, and took a closer look. Ichiro had seen a distortion in the air where Chacornac had reported something. Minako had spotted Eudial's car. I dispelled the telescope and said, "Looks like we can track daimon eggs now." Then I spotted Unazuki-san returning to her apartment. "It's showtime!"

"I loved *All That Jazz*!" Minako replied as we returned to ground level. "I didn't know you watched musicals."

I thought I was quoting *The Big O*. "I don't. I just remembered the line."

«If it's any consolation, sir,» Ichiro sent to me, «I thought of *Beetlejuice*.»

By the time we got to Unazuki-san's door, we heard her scream. "Blast it, we're too late." Then the daimon burst through the doorway, followed by Sailors Uranus and Neptune.

I gave Ichiro the tracker we'd made. "Follow them!" Ichiro nodded and did so as Minako and I checked on Unazuki-san. We heard a car speed up to chase the daimon as well... and the only car nearby was Eudial's.

We found Unazuki-san standing in her front room, posed as if she was vacuuming the floor. Then she saw us. "Mina-chan." Her voice sounded hollow. "Kiss me."

"But we're both girls. And you wanted your first kiss to be perfect."

"I don't care now. I want to kiss. Donarudoson-san. Mako-chan says you're a good kisser. Kiss me." She started walking toward us, like a zombie.

We both backed off. "I'm engaged to marry Mako-chan! I won't kiss you!" Even if I wanted to, she wasn't in her right mind. Besides, she was acting way too creepy for me to want her.

"I don't care kiss me kiss me kiss me kiss me kiss me kiss..." She finally fell over.

I sighed in relief as Minako caught Unazuki-san's limp body.

"You could have kissed her, Rob. It wasn't as if she wanted to go any farther than that."

"By that logic, you could have kissed her, Minako. I don't *want* to kiss anyone other than Makoto."

"Ah. I respect your loyalty to my roommate. What now?"

"Let the others know what happened here, and tell them I'm going after the daimon that stole Unazuki-san's Pure Heart. Then put her on her bed and stay with her; somebody needs to watch over her and you're safer here than in combat. You're still a target; Eudial's shot out my Pure Heart but she hasn't shot yours yet."

Minako frowned as she answered, "I don't like that, but I can't argue with it."

I left the girls alone, got my cellphone out, hit one of the new speed-dial buttons, and headed out after Ichiro. "I'm on the move, partner. Give me directions."

"Certainly, sir." The screen lit up with a local map and a set of markers, labelled Ichiro, Sailor Uranus, Sailor Neptune, Daimon, and Pure Heart. As I got my bearings, two more markers appeared together on the edge of the map: Sailor Moon and Tuxedo Kamen.

Looking at where all their paths met, I saw that we were going to have a three-way melee at a scrap heap, just like in canon but with more fighters. And it looked like I was going to be the last one to the party if I took the time to rendezvous with Ichiro. "Sorry, but it looks like we'll get there too late if we waste time joining up first."

"I'll use a Mirage Hide to go invisible, then."

I didn't know he – or I, for that matter – could do that. "You'll have to show Ami and me that after the fight. Going quiet now." I used a Mirage Hide on myself to get into my combat persona, then went invisible my usual way.

I arrived just as Uranus, Neptune, and the daimon were fighting each other hand-to-hand. Stupid melee. And stupid genre conventions. I slipped around them just in time to see Unazuki-san's clear Pure Heart fly out of the daimon's hands and into an arc that would have had it land somewhere in the scrap pile... if I hadn't raced in and caught it.

Holding Unazuki-san's clear Pure Heart felt like being kissed.

Stupid genre conventions. I've already got a fiancée. And I didn't dare put her Pure Heart inside a forcefield in case that severed its connection to her.

Sure enough, the daimon and the two Senshi didn't even notice that the Pure Heart was gone. I could understand the daimon not caring, but the Senshi who were looking for Talismans should have known better. They should also have noticed the engine noises nearby.

"The crystal of a pure heart does not fit someone with a dirty heart. Give that crystal back and become one with this steel trash!"

Tuxedo Kamen was standing on his motorcycle – which I suppose made him Tuxedo Kamen Rider – with Sailor Moon riding the bike side-saddle. Show-offs.

It was only then that they noticed that nobody had Unazuki-san's Pure Heart. At least, nobody who they could see; I was still invisible.

It was also then that Eudial shot. She went for the obvious target.

Chiba-san's Pure Heart, all gold with rainbow streaks, hovered behind his body. He looked straight at Eudial. "Shot... through the heart... *and you're to blame!*" he roared. Then he lunged at her, anger on his face, ready to strangle the Witch.

He actually got to her before she could move... but collapsed before he could wrap his hands around her neck. Dude, you give wrath a bad name.

"Do you have more rounds for that thing this time?" Kaolinite asked.

Eudial grinned. "Oh, yes," she said with satisfaction as she aimed at Uranus.

Nope. Not happening. Not yet, at least. Moon needs more practice with her current attack first. If green forcefield boxing gloves were good enough for the comic books, they were good enough for me, and for Eudial. I punched the b... Witch in the face, making her drop her weapon.

Kaolinite cut and ran. Eudial followed her.

I couldn't give chase; Tuxedo Kamen was still out cold, Uranus and Neptune were examining his Pure Heart to determine whether it was a Talisman, and the motorcycle had fallen over, pinning Sailor Moon to the ground.

Bunny-chan came first. I went visible, pried the bike off her using a forcefield lever and fulcrum, helped her out, and pointed her at the daimon. "If you would, ma'am?"

She giggled. "Of course, Oni. Moon Spiral Heart Attack!"

There was a lot of spinning involved in that attack. Maybe the Emerald Pair could incorporate it into a routine.

Once the daimon was destroyed, Ichiro went visible and landed on my shoulder. "Secondary mission accomplished, sir," he reported.

I wondered what he was talking about, then noticed that he wasn't carrying the tracker any more. "Ah. Good work. Is Chacornac tracking them?"

"I believe so. I know that Sailor Mercury is."

"Excellent." Then I walked over to Uranus and Neptune, who had just discarded Tuxedo Kamen's Pure Heart as if it was yesterday's newspaper. Nobody's purity deserved that kind of treatment. Maybe I could speed up their search a bit and save some people some possible emotional trauma.

"Ladies, before I let you examine Unazuki-san's Pure Heart, I have a question. I believe you two can feel Talismans whenever you inspect Pure Hearts."

"That's correct," Neptune said with some impatience.

"But you never find one. So where's the Talisman that you're sure you're sensing? Think about that." I let them see, but not touch, Unazuki-san's Pure Heart.

"This isn't a Talisman, either."

"As I expected." As they walked off, I added, "Ladies? Lover's Park. Saturday. Osaka Naru-san is likely to be attacked, not that you care what her name is."

Uranus stopped and turned on her heel, anger obvious on her face. "You don't understand what our mission requires of us!"

"What 'mission'? Who assigned it to you? Not Neo-Queen Serenity, I'll guarantee you that."

"Who *are* you?"

I bowed, European style. "Standing by the side of the Sailor Senshi for Love and Friendship, and named by Neo-Queen Serenity herself, I am Oni. I know people who know things. So, who are you two?"

Neither of them returned the bow. "Protected by Uranus, The Outer Planet of Wind, Guardian of the Heavens. I am Sailor Uranus."

Oh, I *so* wanted to make a comment about the wind from Uranus. But I also wanted her to work with us, so I didn't; for all I knew, she might understand English.

"Protected by Neptune, the Outer Planet of the Seas, Guardian of the Deep Sea, I am Sailor Neptune. Do you know where to find the Talismans?"

And now we could all refer to each other by our noms de guerre. May as well let them have a freebie in their search. "I have seen the Garnet Orb, and know who holds it. It is in the safest possible hands."

"Yours?" Uranus asked with a bit of a sneer.

"Heavens, no. I don't even trust myself with one of the keys to the Ginzuishou." Which was true; I gave that Rainbow Crystal to Ami as soon as I could. And thinking of Ami reminded me that I had to meet her at Unazuki-san's apartment as quickly as possible. "A member of the Senshi of the Outer Solar System holds it. Unfortunately, I do not have time for further talk right now. Adieu."

Ichiro Unisoned with me, I grabbed Eudial's long arm, and we literally flew to Unazuki-san's side, dropping our Mirage Hide spells along the way. We dropped out of Unison and left the weapon just outside the apartment. Ichiro hid in my pocket as Ami arrived, and we restored Unazuki-san's Pure Heart to her.

She woke up, looked at Minako and me, and blushed down to her toes.

"Perhaps I should leave you with your friends," I said as I turned to her bedroom door.

"Donarudoson-san, before you go..." I turned back to look at Unazuki-san. "If I embarrassed you, I apologize."

"There was no embarrassment, Furuhata-san. And I trust that the person who you love will be happy to receive your first kiss."

"I hope so, too." She smiled, and I left the ladies alone to discuss matters of love.

We got together for a quick after-action debriefing, giving Eudial's weapon to Meia and Shario-chan to scan.

Hayate-chan wasn't happy to hear about what had happened. "We thought that only the Senshi were on the Death Busters' target list. We now have evidence that we were wrong. We have to assume that anyone who regularly associates with us are targets," she commented while gesturing toward Ryou, Ami, Makoto, and me.

"We can't protect everybody, not all the time," Bunny-chan pointed out.

"Then we do what we can do." Hayate-chan turned to Ami. "Were you able to track the Death Busters back to their base?"

Ami shook her head. "They're shielded somehow; even Chacornac lost the signal as they approached Mugen Academy."

"Then we still have only Rob-san's laptop's anime collection and my memories of my personality donor watching *Sailor Moon* to tell us that that's where they're located."

"More importantly," Sakura pointed out, "they can cloak themselves against Silver Millennium scans."

Nobody was happy to hear that.

"Is there anything else?" Hayate-chan asked.

"Two things," Bunny-chan replied. "First, Robu-san, thank you for asking me to attack the daimon instead of telling me to. Second, Mamo-chan, you really need to work out more and build up your stamina. Everyone else on the team who's had her Pure Heart removed stayed awake a lot longer than you did."

I was happy that she told him that; that meant I didn't have to. But fair was fair; I pointed out, "Ryou and I collapsed quickly, too. There might be something gender-based going on there."

Meia frowned slightly. "If that's true, then we need to be even more protective of male targets in the future."

We used that Friday's Conversational English club meeting to coordinate our trip to Lover's Park the next day, including a three-minute digression about why it should have been called "Lovers' Park". Which meant that the exciting events that week happened the next day.

While Ichigo-san distracted Bogdanova-san at school, Naru-san quietly gave me a new communicator. «Will you test this for me, please, Robu-san? You should be able to think into it and let it think at you.»

«It's a Midchildan-style telepathy relay?»

She nodded. «If they had any this small, it would be. It is based on the telepathy circuits that Devices use, though, linked to Silver Millennium communication circuits. Oh, and would you send the schematics to Scrya-san, please? Shario-chan has them.»

«Of course! And if this works as well as you described, I'll insist that you get the Midchildan royalties for it.»

«Whatever good they'll do me. 😊»

«You never know. Ami might be able to open a portal big enough to send a package through, if she becomes a more powerful mage or optimizes the spell. Do you have a communicator?»

«I have the prototype.»

«Then we'll test it during the contest at Lover's Park.»

«😞» Her sadness didn't show on her face.

Oops. «I'm sorry.» Note to self: Don't remind Naru-san that she doesn't have a boyfriend any more.

Sakurada-sensei walked into the classroom before Naru-san could reply.

We headed straight home when the half-day of classes was over, and got changed into our matching outfits. Then we headed for Lover's Park.

There were three other couples waiting for the contest to begin when Makoto and I arrived and checked in. We recognized one of the couples: Tenou-san and Kaiou-san. The other two couples... well, if this was a beauty contest instead of a love contest, they probably wouldn't have been accepted. But love knows no boundaries, and that includes the boundary of appearance. I shan't name them here; instead, I'll call the women "Ikuhara" and "Sato".

My dearest dragged me over to the two who I knew as Senshi. "I don't know whether you've met yet. Darling, this is Michiru Kaiou and Haruka Tenou. Michiru-san, Haruka-san, this is my fiancée, Rob Donaldson."

"I believe I saw both of you at the concert last weekend, that was interrupted by a monster attack. I'm Rob Donaldson, and it's good to meet you." I bowed slightly, as was polite.

They both returned my bow. "I'm Michiru Kaiou. I'm happy to meet you."

"Haruka Tenou. Likewise."

"I've heard your name somewhere before, Tenou-san. Would you be the Haruka Tenou who's becoming famous in the motocross circuit?"

"I am that person, yes. I'm surprised that you've heard of me."

Makoto grinned. "Haruka-san is very good at driving. But Michiru-san is even better at playing the violin."

"Ah. My dearest, for somebody who claims that she isn't feminine, you know a lot about the feminine pursuits." I turned to the others. "Do you have something to discuss if they ask us what we do as couples?"

They looked at each other, shared Meaningful Looks, then turned back to me. "There is something that we do together, but it isn't something that we should discuss in public."

"Say no more, then. I suspect I know what you're talking about." To Makoto only, I added, «Whether it's in the bedroom or on the battlefield.»

«Don't make me giggle! We aren't supposed to know that yet!»

"What do the two of you do together?" Haruka-san asked.

I turned to Makoto and asked, "Should we show them a pair lift?"

"Not yet, darling." She turned her attention back to Michiru. "We're reasonably well-known as pairs figure skaters."

Michiru-san's sudden realization showed on her face. "Are you the Emerald Pair?"

My dearest smiled as she replied, "We are."

Before we could continue, the contest organizers announced that the final couple had arrived and we were to assemble to draw lots for the order we would be asked the first question. Sure enough, the final couple was Ami and Ryou. We smiled at each other as the ladies drew lots: first up was "Sato", then "Ikuhara", then Michiru-san, then Makoto, and finally Ami.

And then we were separated, with the ladies being asked to stand behind a wall with five holes at hand height. Then the rest of us were led out and introduced to the audience.

After we gave our names, the announcer said, "We're sorry that we aren't introducing their girlfriends to you right now, but you'll find out why after our first contest!" One hand appeared at each hole in the wall. "Let's see whether our contestants can identify their girlfriends just by seeing their hands!"

In canon, the only couple who succeeded was Haruka-san and Michiru-san. But, as Hayate-chan keeps reminding us, canon is only a guideline in this reality.

Ryou, Haruka-san, and I found ourselves standing close enough that we wouldn't be overheard if we whispered. So Ryou started with something even quieter than a whisper. «This is the perfect time to get their attention,» Ryou sent to me as he looked at the hands that our girlfriends were presenting for us to choose and put a puzzled look on his face.

I played along. "Ryou," I whispered, "it isn't difficult to tell which hands are whose. Look at their calluses. Who has calluses consistent with painting and playing the violin, who has calluses consistent with cooking and practising Jeet Kun Do, and who has calluses consistent with reading books all the time?"

"But three of them have calluses left by using transformation wands," Ryou whispered back.

That surprised Haruka enough to show on her face for a very brief moment. She turned her attention to us and whispered, "We will have words later."

"I look forward to it," Ryou whispered back as I knocked at the door and called out "Makoto" Sure enough, I knew what my fiancée's hand looked like.

Haruka then did the same with Michiru, followed by Ryou and Ami. The others ended up guessing; I assume they thought they had a fifty-fifty chance of getting it right, which they did.

Then they asked us the first question: "What do you do as a couple?"

The first three couples gave the expected answers: take long walks together, go shopping together, and in Haruka-san and Michiru-san's case, take long moonlight drives along the bay. Then it was our turn. "Well," I said as I grabbed Makoto, lifted her, and held her above my head with one hand.

She finished, "We go figure skating!"

Somebody in the crowd shouted out, "Hey! You're the Emerald Pair!"

"No publicity, please," I said with a smile as Makoto returned to Earth. "Besides, neither of us are the most famous person on the stage."

Everyone turned to look at Ami and Ryou, and somebody else in the audience called out, "Isn't she Mizuno-san?"

Ami blushed slightly. "Yes, I'm Mizuno Ami. Ryou and I study together, and sometimes we go somewhere quiet and have a picnic."

The second question was, "How did you meet?"

"Sato" and her boyfriend worked together in an office. "Ikuhara" and her boyfriend rode the same bus home from work every day.

Haruka-san smiled and said, "Would you believe she stalked me?" Everybody laughed.

"Oh, it's true," Michiru-san said. "I couldn't stay away from Haruka. We were fated to be together."

"But I love her anyway," Haruka-san added.

«That was remarkably truthful,» Ami sent to us with a bit of wonder in her thought as the crowd laughed again.

«Did you mean to send that to me, too?» Naru-san asked. «Oh, and the communicators work.»

Then it was Makoto's and my turn. "We're next-door neighbours."

"But we're going to share a house any day now," my dearest added, which resulted in both gasps and cheers from the assembled crowd.

Then it was Ryou and Ami's turn. "He was alone in Tokyo and asked for my help, but I couldn't do what he asked me to do. Instead, I helped him get out of the trouble he was in. Then one thing led to another, and here we are."

Practically everybody in the audience went "Awww..."

Our next question was also our next contest. "We've already asked the ladies, and now we're asking the gentlemen! What is your girlfriend's favourite colour? You have to get this right to stay in the contest."

This is where both "Sato" and "Ikuhara" were eliminated, guessing red and green when they were actually yellow and orange.

Haruka-san knew that Michiru-san's favourite colour was marine blue. No surprise there, either about her favourite or that her girlfriend knew.

I teased the judges a bit. "Makoto's wearing her favourite colour," I said while everyone looked at [her off-the-shoulder green blouse](#)... then I held a hand up to the rose she was wearing as an accent. "Sugar pink."

"Correct!"

Then it was Ryou's turn. He smiled and said, "Light blue, of course."

"Correct! We're now down to three couples. Let's show our appreciation to the others for participating."

After the applause died down, they asked the ladies what our favourite foods are. It was a bit of a surprise to me that Haruka-san likes salads. Ami knew that Ryou likes beef bowl, and of course my dearest told the judges about my fondness for inarizushi.

The questions continued. Eventually, Michiru-san got an answer wrong, but it looked to me like she was distracted and not paying attention. «I'm guessing the daimon egg just showed up,» I sent to Ryou, Ami, Makoto, and Naru-san.

«No, that white hatchback just pulled into the parking lot,» Naru-san sent back.

«Get away from it!»

«I can't. Elmira-san's with me, and we don't have an escape route. Except toward the big heart sculpture.»

Ami sighed mentally. «And that's where the daimon egg ended up in canon. We'll meet you there.»

I deliberately flubbed the next question, saying Makoto's favourite sweet was [dorayaki](#) when I knew she preferred [cherry pie](#). Ryou knew that Ami's favourite sweet was [anmitsu](#), and that was enough to give them the victory and the prize.

After the crowd dispersed, we met up with Naru-san and Bogdanova-san at the heart statue. "Congratulations, Ryou-san and Ami-san!" Then Bogdanova-san turned to me. "How did you get Makoto-san's favourite dessert wrong, Rob-san?"

"Oh, I'd been answering so many questions that I couldn't keep all of the facts straight," I replied. Hey, I never promised not to lie to her.

Just for a quick moment, Bogdanova-san frowned. Then she smiled and said, "That could happen to anybody!"

Kasandara chose that moment to speak up. "Incoming attack!" And a shot rang out, and Naru-san collapsed, her clear Pure Heart hovering above her body.

Bogdanova-san of all people moved to protect Naru-san. And I didn't see where she drew the [Makarov pistol](#) that she had in her hand. "Comrade Osaka, can you get up and move?"

"Don't wanna." Naru-san never slurred her words like that; that had to be her impure thoughts making her talk that way.

"We're under fire!"

"Don't care."

I turned to Naru-san and angrily asked. "Are you going to not care about the rest of us being in danger?"

"Doesn't matta."

I guess her buried character flaw was apathy.

"Help me get her closer to the statue," Bogdanova-san practically ordered us as she started dragging Naru-san over to it.

My dearest said, "Don't do that!" But it was too late. The statue morphed into a daimon just from our relatively-close proximity.

As daimon went, this one looked practically human. It wasn't particularly good at English, though. "Let's dancing."

And we were surrounded by boys who were at least as attractive as Ryou. "Let's dancing," they said to the ladies.

"Whatever," Naru-san said as she stood up.

"Why not?" Bogdanova-san said.

Makoto almost took the hand of one of the boys, then stopped. "I only dance with my fiancée," she said as she assumed a combat stance.

Seeing that, Ami cast one of her new spells. "Mental Shield!"

And Bogdanova-san gasped before switching from dancing to shooting as her partner morphed into a monster. Her bullets had no effect on it, but her attempt to defend herself distracted her for long enough for the daimon to pull her red-and-yellow-tinted Pure Heart out of her body.

"Give that back! It's mine!" Bogdanova-san actually chased the daimon for a moment, then she noticed Naru-san's Pure Heart. "And I want that one, too!"

"World Shaking!" Uranus' attack tore through most of the pretty-boy monsters.

"Dead scream." And Pluto's attack took out the rest of them, leaving only the core daimon that still had Bogdanova-san's Pure Heart. "I apologize for being tardy," she said as she moved to stand beside Ami.

"Deep Submerge!" Neptune's attack forced the daimon back. I hit it with a hammer-and-anvil forcefield attack at the same time, being careful to avoid hitting the Pure Heart it was carrying.

As the daimon dissolved into rubble that used to be a stone heart sculpture, we heard the sounds of a car racing off.

Bogdanova-san looked at the Garnet Rod and insisted, "Give me that staff! I want it!"

"It is not yours," Sailor Pluto replied as she took Bogdanova-san's Pure Heart from the rubble. "It belongs to me. This is yours."

As Pluto and Ami walked over to Bogdanova-san, Neptune insisted, "We need to check whether that's a Talisman first."

"Make it fast, please," Ami insisted. "Otherwise she's likely to start saying she wants everything in sight."

"Even though we all know that neither of the loose Pure Hearts here are Talismans," I muttered.

"I do want it all!" Bogdanova-san said before Ami restored her Pure Heart to her body, at which point she finally collapsed. Then Ami restored Naru-san's Pure Heart to her body.

And then we heard a shout from behind us. "Hold it right... there... er..."

Without turning to look, I said, "You're late, Sailor Moon. It's all over except the explaining to Bogdanova-san."

"Explaining?"

Ami sighed. "She saw me cast a spell."

Bogdanova-san winced as she sat up. "Ow, I feel like I drank two bottles of vodka."

Which pretty much confirmed she was older than she looked, if she knew what a hangover felt like.

"Take it easy, miss," Sailor Pluto said as both she and Sailor Moon helped Bogdanova-san back to her feet.

"Since when were so solicitous about people, Pluto?" Uranus asked.

"Since I met Sailor Moon," she replied.

"Thank you," Bogdanova-san said before grabbing Pluto's arm. "You're one of the ones who was in Vladivostok last year, aren't you? And you, as well." She gestured toward Ami with her other hand, the one that still held her pistol. Then she realized what she was doing and holstered her sidearm under her blouse.

"You're speaking Japanese more fluently than you were a half-hour ago," Naru-san commented. "And you're armed. You've been hiding things from us. Why did you break your cover?"

She thought for a moment. "I must be thinking of you as my comrade. We were attacked, and I reacted according to my training."

"Thank you," Naru-san said, "for both the help and your friendship."

"We are comrades. There is a difference."

"But you were still able to work together," I replied before looking at Uranus and Neptune. "That counts for a lot."

The Senshi of the Outer Planets, including Pluto, chose that moment to walk away. Together. So much for Moon and Pluto working together, or Setsuna-san getting to know Naru-san better. Well, maybe Setsuna-san would be able to talk some sense into the other two.

Bogdanova-san looked at her hand. "I do not remember letting go of her."

"You probably didn't," Moon replied before she turned to Ami. "And just what were you doing in Vladivostok last year?" she asked with some suspicions.

Ami and Ryou spent what seemed like half of the time we'd set aside for an after-action debriefing being lambasted by Hayate-chan for letting Bogdanova-san find out that she was a mage and that his orders had let Kasandara talk instead of send in public. Being lectured by a levitating miniature person who could out-nasty R. Lee Ermey was unique, to say the least. It didn't look like either of them was enjoying it, but they didn't complain or try to take control of the conversation.

No, I'm not going to repeat any of Hayate-chan's tirade. Innocent people might be reading these notes.

At the end of that, Bunny-chan asked, "Ryou, what should we do about Erumaira-san?"

He thought for a moment, then replied, "We have to get rid of her."

"Ninety-seven times out of ninety-eight," added Kasandara.

"I won't allow the Senshi to murder her. We'll have to accept that the SVR now know more about you and Ami than we'd prefer."

"It's too dangerous, both for her and for us, to let her stay."

"What if she went back to Russia?" I asked.

Ryou thought, then nodded. "That would work, eleven times out of twelve. But how do we get rid of her?"

I grinned. "She was carrying a pistol. In Japan. I doubt it's licensed. A concerned citizen could bring that to the attention of the police."

Minako nodded. "I'll get in touch with Natsuna-san, but somebody who actually saw the weapon will need to make the report."

"I saw it," my fiancée confirmed.

Minako nodded. "And Superintendent-General Sakurada will need to be aware of any action against a foreign national anyway. We'll call her as soon as we get home."

Ryou smiled. "Thank you, Minako. That raises the probability of this working to fourteen times out of fifteen."

"That's one problem solved," Bunny-chan said. "Now, if we go by canon, who's the next daimon target?"

"Me," my dearest said. "Then Ami."

"But you've already had your Pure Hearts shot out."

Before anyone else could reply to Bunny-chan, Hayate-chan said, "And that's why we can't trust canon any more. Ryou-san, you're our best source of information now."

\* \* \*



Sunday, we spent at Rei's shrine, studying for exams and training. Naru-san threw herself into both activities with a vengeance.

Monday, Sakurada-sensei announced at the start of the school day that Bogdanova-san needed to return home unexpectedly, and probably wouldn't be returning. At lunch time, Ami and I volunteered to trade day duty with our classmates that day, and after school we did a thorough cleaning of the classroom – including sweeping it for bugs of the Soviet kind.

As a result, we missed Haruka-san almost hitting Makoto accidentally. But that touched off a discussion about the Senshi's outriders at the next day's lunch get-together.

"How does Haruka-san's and Michiru-san's relationship work, anyway?"

I sighed. "Makoto, do we really need to discuss the facts of life with you? Or can I just remind you of the stories we heard from Colonel Yagami about Captains Takamachi and Harlaown?"

"What do they ... Ooooooh. But neither of them looked like a boy, the way Haruka-san does."

I sighed deeply. "Ami, take over, please. You're the closest we have to a doctor here."

"I'm sorry, Rob, but I have to admit that I'm just as puzzled as Makoto is."

"I guess I get to explain stereotypes about, and three decades of changes in public opinion toward, same-sex couples. But not right here and not right now. Give me a day or two to pull my thoughts together."

"Are we all invited?" Bunny-chan asked.

"Sure, why not? Although I think we should have this talk somewhere outside of school."

"Do it at my place," my dearest suggested.

"How did I end up needing to give the enhanced version of The Talk to my fiancée, our best friend, her fiancé, our best friend's adopted sister, and the one person who all five of us love like a sister?" I asked myself.

From the doorway to her apartment, my fiancée replied, "You're just lucky, I guess."

I stood up and walked over to her. "Thanks for letting me use your place for this, Makoto. Are you ready for the next couple of hours?"

"I think so. Depending on how much detail you're planning on going into about our sex life."

I slipped an arm around her waist. "I don't plan on discussing techniques or acts. I'll probably touch on intentions, though."

"Oh, that's okay, then," she said as she put both of her arms around me.

Finishing the hug, I added, "What the two of us do together stays between us, my dearest. Ryou doesn't need to know what turns you on, and Ami, Minako, and Bunny-chan don't need to know what turns me on."

"Oh. I already told Ami some of what we do, and she's told me about some of the things that she and Ryou like doing."

"Ah." I thought for a brief moment. "If it's just Ami, then I don't have a problem with it, as long as you aren't implying that she can do 'this and that' with me."

"As if I would! Rob, you know that I don't want to share you with anyone, not even Ami, and I'm not interested in Ryou that way."

"Sometimes I think you're the only woman who isn't," I replied with a smile. "But, yeah, the four of us are closer than family, and we have been ever since Petz gave us that two-year vacation on Midchilda. You've never mentioned learning anything about sex from Ami, though."

"I prefer to show instead of telling," she said with a grin.

"I think we'd prefer to be told today," Minako said from outside the apartment.

We quickly broke our hug and got out of the way of the others. "Sorry!"

Everybody walked in, and we made ourselves comfortable in Makoto and Minako's living area. I put up a forcefield along the walls and windows to keep prying eyes and ears out, then began with the standard joke: "I suppose you're all wondering why I called you here today."

"No," Bunny-chan replied, "it's pretty obvious you're going to tell us about all the stuff my parents would prefer I don't know about until I'm married. By then, it'll be too late."

"I'm not going to tell you everything about adult relationships, no. If you want the purely biological information, talk with Saeko-mama. I want to talk about the social aspects, and clear up a few things that 1990s psychology are still getting wrong."

"I'd appreciate it if you would, Rob," Ami said. "You have a full generation of knowledge that we don't."

I nodded. "But only at a general level. Don't expect me to know all of the details." Then I motioned toward the holographic projector that I'd brought over. "Hayate-chan has volunteered to spend time with us today. Thank you, Hayate-chan."

"I'm happy to help my friends, Rob." She called up a display of a blank sheet of paper.

"Thank you. For the longest time, most people have thought that human sexuality was a two-state thing: either somebody was heterosexual or homosexual." Two points appeared on the sheet of paper, labelled accordingly. "But sociologists have known for decades that this isn't true. There's a lot more to sexual preferences than just het or gay." A two-axis chart joined the two points, with the axes labelled "orientation" and "frequency". Then a string of points appeared between the two points that were already there.

"I wasn't expecting that," Minako said.

"I know. There are a lot of people who would prefer to think that only heterosexuality exists, despite all of the evidence to the contrary. Sometimes it's because they haven't seen any of that evidence. Minako, Usagi-san, were either of you even aware of the existence of same-sex couples before you met Michiru-san and Haruka-san?"

"No," Bunny-chan replied.

"I'd heard rumours, both during the Silver Millennium and in this lifetime, but I'd never seen a same-sex couple." Before I could reply, Minako added, "That I knew about."

I nodded. "I was just about to say that. Not everybody makes their sexual orientation public."

"Why not?"

I turned back to Bunny-chan. "Because some of those people who would prefer to think that only heterosexuality exists can get pretty violent when confronted with evidence to the contrary. Nobody likes being proven wrong."

"Oh."

After a moment, I continued. "Back to the chart. You can see that the points now form something like a line. Starting at heterosexual, there's bi-curious," Hayate-chan added labels to the dots as I named them, "bisexual with a preference for heterosexuality, completely bisexual, bisexual with a preference for homosexuality, bi-curious again, and homosexual."

"What do those mean?" Bunny-chan asked.

"Bisexual means the person is sexually interested in both men and women. Bi-curious means the person has some interest in the idea of bisexuality but isn't interested in actually giving it a try."

She thought about that for a moment. "Okay, I think I get it."

"Now I'm going to tell you that this isn't necessarily the truth. Some sociologists even in my time think it is the truth, but others see orientation differently." The discrete points were replaced with a line, leaving the labels in place along the line. "Individuals can fall anywhere along that line, not just at the labelled points."

"Isn't there a break between bi-curious and bisexual, though?" Bunny-chan asked. "Either you've tried it or you haven't."

"It's tricky. If you try bisexuality once, but with somebody who you aren't really compatible with emotionally, and then decide that you aren't going to try again, are you still bi-curious? There are billions of people who you haven't tried it with, after all. And then there are people who wouldn't dream of having sex with somebody of the same sex, except with one particular person who they're interested in but haven't approached for whatever reason. Are they bi--curious or het?"

"But most people are het, as you call it, right?" Minako asked.

I shook my head. "Most people are het but bi-curious. They've just been told to believe that they're het. Or, in some unfortunate cases, brainwashed to believe that they're het. My time calls that brainwashing 'conversion therapy'."

"Therapy? You said it was brainwashing," Bunny-chan said.

"People who would prefer to think that only heterosexuality should exist call it therapy. But it most definitely is brainwashing, using techniques that date back to Pavlov's experiments with dogs and the techniques that turned fully-functioning native children into mentally-fragile teenagers and adults in my home country's residential schools. People who go through those kinds of processes are never truly happy at the end of them."

"I have to ask," Ryou said. "Do they work?"

"That depends on your definition of 'work'. They make people act like they should only be happy with a fraction of the people who could make them truly happy, and all because somebody else decided that they knew better than the brainwashed person what the brainwashed person wanted. Remember what Usagi-san told Prince Diamante about his subjects?"

"That they aren't property."

"Exactly. While it's related to sexual orientation, this is really about control, not love. Nobody should impose their will on somebody else."

Hayate-chan looked straight at me and said, "Rob, your biases are showing. I agree with you, but you're preaching, not teaching."

I quickly thought about what I had been saying. "You're correct, Hayate-chan. Sorry about that. Now, back to orientation. It took me years to figure out my own orientation; I hope I can speed up the process for each of you. Don't

answer these questions out loud or send anybody your thoughts, just think about them. First, is there somebody of the opposite sex who you would be willing to share your bed and yourself with?"

Makoto looked at me and smiled. Ryou looked at Ami, and both Ami and Minako looked at Ryou. Usagi had a dreamy look on her face, and I was willing to guess that her fantasy involved a certain cape and tuxedo draped over a chair in either his or her bedroom.

"I suppose that was a silly question," my fiancée said.

I shook my head. "I asked a question that I knew the answer to, before asking questions that I don't know the answer to. Now, why do you feel that way about that person? Don't say anything." I gave them a moment to think about it. "Okay, now you should have an idea of what you're expecting from love. Next question, and don't turn to look at somebody or get some expression on your face if you can help it. Is there somebody of the same sex who you would be willing to share your bed and yourself with?"

Since I already had brainprints of Ryou, Ami, and Makoto, I had a pretty good idea of what they were thinking... and the expressions on their faces confirmed it. Makoto and Ryou looked like they thought the question was a waste of time because obviously there wasn't anybody like that, while Ami was actually giving the idea some thought. Minako also looked like she thought the question was a waste of time. Bunny-chan, though... well, I guess that a characterization point from *Sailor Moon Crystal* applied to our Usagi-san, too, because she had a dreamy look on her face again. I wondered who her dream girl was.

"And now you know where along this line your boundaries are," I said, gesturing to the display. "Now, I've already mentioned that there are some people out there who think that heterosexuality is the only normal orientation. There are others who say that bisexuality isn't an orientation and anybody who says they're bi isn't willing to make a commitment to one extreme or the other. Those people are wrong, even if they happen to be political or religious leaders. Or your friends. I have no business telling you to be het or bi or gay. Neither do our parents, even if Saeko-mama is a doctor. Neither do our teachers, or our friends. We should like each other for who we are, not for what we are."

Bunny-chan nodded in agreement. "That makes a lot of sense. It's my body; why should I let somebody else tell me who I can share it with?"

"Your body, your rules, your choices," I agreed. "Although I hope you'll wait a few years until your body has finished developing." I waited for another moment. "Now, about the second axis on the chart. This one is a bit easier to understand, in that it goes from 'never' to 'always'."

Hayate-chan added labels to the extremes of the frequency axis: Asexual and Hypersexual. "We'll start at the 'always' end. This end is sometimes called 'nymphomania' or 'satyriasis', depending on whether it's a female or a male who exhibits a desire for hypersexuality. By my time, the gender-specific terms had pretty much fallen out of use, at least clinically. Some people call it an addiction to sex, while others call it a compulsive behaviour, and still others call it an exaggerated sex drive. A few think that there's a hormonal imbalance behind hypersexuality. In a few cases, people simply don't know how to relate to other people without bringing sex into the relationship. What little clinical research that exists, even in my time, is inconclusive as to why hypersexuality exists. For our purposes, it's enough to say that it does exist."

"So there are people who walk around always ready to have sex?" Minako asked.

"Not *always*," Ami replied before I could. "There are physiological issues with being constantly aroused."

"Not the least of which are the biological issues of interrupting the oxygenated blood flow to the penis or clitoris," I pointed out. "Mizuno-sensei can tell you more about that if you're really interested, which I for one am not. Hypersexuality has a social aspect that is separate from the purely biological aspect: somebody who is hypersexual is often but not always obvious."

"Like most boys," Bunny-chan said.

"No, not like most boys. While it's true that most of our male classmates are very interested in sex, that doesn't make them hypersexual. It makes them out of synchronization with most of our female classmates." The graph minimized, to be replaced by a new graph where the axes were labelled "Age" and "Frequency". Hayate-chan drew two curves on the chart, one labelled "Average Male" and the other labelled "Average Female".

"Those two lines don't match up," Bunny-chan said.

"You're right. Typically but not always, males our age are far more interested in having sex than females our age are, and males a bit older than your parents are less interested in having sex than females the same age are. The two curves sync up once people are past their child-raising years, when companionship is more important to most people than sex is. There are exceptions to this general guideline, of course."

"Like Rei's grandfather," my fiancée said.

"Yes, he never did lose interest in sex when he got older, did he? I wouldn't be surprised if he happened to be hypersexual. You'll notice that he can still lead a normal life; not everything he does is about sex. Hayate-chan, would you switch back to the previous chart, please?"

"Before you do that," Makoto said, "there's a question I have that relates to your sex drive, Rob."

"I think you know from experience what my sex drive is like, my dearest."

"Oh, I do," she said with a smile. "You've told us that your mental age and your physical age aren't the same, although you've never told us what your mental age is. What should I be expecting when you get older?"

I sighed. "I suppose I should have expected that question some time today. Mentally, I'm in my late 30s, older than Kenji-san but not by much. Physically, I'm your age, and being in junior high is emphasizing my habits from the first time that I was a teenager."

"And here I was worried that you were the same age as Hino-kannushi. When you said 'males a bit older than your parents', you meant yourself, didn't you?"

"Actually, I meant males closer to Principal Takeuchi's age. But to answer your question, I'm physically young again and I have what I consider to be a proper sex drive for a teenage male, so you should expect the same thing that every other woman expects when she grows older with her spouse. Now, Hayate-chan, if you'd be kind enough..."

She switched the display back, and the chart now showed a large band labelled "Socially Acceptable" between Asexual and Hypersexual. "Most people learn how to have a socially acceptable interest in sex, leaving most of their time available for earning a living and pursuing a hobby or two. Unless somebody tells me otherwise, and I don't want you to say anything right now, I assume that everybody in this room has a socially acceptable interest in sex. However, there's also a lower-than-usual interest in sex, and in some cases a person simply doesn't have much if any interest at all in the sex act. That's asexuality."

"I thought asexuality was an orientation of its own," Ami said.

"No, it isn't. It's possible to be heterosexual and asexual, or homosexual and asexual, or bisexual and asexual. One says who you're interested in having sex with, while the other says how often you're interested in having sex. I won't name names, and the person has graduated from Kuritsu Juban Chuugakkou anyway, but I'm aware of one person who told me he had no interest in having sex but was jealous of me because Makoto is in love with me."

"Somebody else thought of me that way?" she asked. "And you didn't tell me?"

"It wasn't my secret to tell. And I told him that if he wanted you to know, he'd have to tell you."

"Nobody ever did."

"There you go. He was interested in you, but he wasn't sexually interested in you or anybody else. That's the classic definition of asexuality."

"But not the modern one?" Minako asked.

"The 2020s definition allows for having some interest in sex, just not much interest."

"Going back to those two curves," Bunny-chan said, "and what you said when you told us how old your mind is, what happens with homosexual lovers? Assuming they can even become spouses."

"Same-sex marriage will be legalized in the Netherlands in 2001, in Belgium and parts of Canada in 2003, and in the rest of Canada and in Spain in 2005, so, yes, it's possible for homosexual lovers to become spouses. And even in places where same-sex marriage isn't legal in 2022, such as Japan, same-sex couples still exist. They just aren't married. As for what happens, well, their sex drives over time tend to remain in as much synchronization as they were when their relationships started. Not always – there are always exceptions to the rule – but often enough that I'd call it a pretty safe bet."

"Where does rape fit into the frequency axis?" Ami asked.

"It doesn't." I said flatly. "Rape is about objectifying people, not about love. Hayate-chan, let me know if I start preaching again." She turned off the display. "I don't know the psychological terms, but I'm pretty sure that the reasons for performing sex acts fall into four broad groups that in the real world blur into each other. Either you want your partner to be happy, which I call 'making love', or you want your partner to feel sexual pleasure, which I call 'having sex', or you primarily want to feel sexual pleasure yourself, which I call 'screwing', or you *only* want to use the other person, who in these cases can no longer be called a partner, for your own sexual urges. Since most people don't want to be used as if they're living sex toys, that last one sometimes involves rape."

"Rob, you're starting to preach again."

"Sorry. There's also the matter of consent. If the other person doesn't want to take part in sex, you're definitely raping that person."

"You keep saying 'the other person'," Ryou said. "Not 'the other people'."

"So I do, and that's a sign of my own sexual preferences. I'm not interested in having multiple sexual partners." A bit of a dodge in that I was counting on everybody to assume that meant 'more than one' instead of the 'more than two' that I actually meant, but I had to hedge my comment until I was certain that I felt no sexual desire for Ami. "Some

people are, though, and the technical term for that is polyamory. If more than two people marry each other, that's called polygamy."

"How would the physical act work if there's three people making love or having sex with each other?"

Before I could point out to Minako that this wasn't that sort of talk, Hayate-chan said, "If anybody's interested, I have memories from my donor personality about polyamory."

"Thank you, Hayate-chan. I have no experience with polyamory. Everyone, please save questions about particular physical acts until after this talk. I'll just point out that there are some people who believe that somebody has to be polyamorous, if not actually have group sex, in order to be considered bisexual. The fact that there are people who are both bisexual and asexual shows that this belief is incorrect."

I waited for a moment.

"So, is everybody okay with what I've said so far?"

"I think so," Bunny-chan said.

"There's one thing that I'm wondering about," my fiancée said. "Is a guy who wears girls' clothes bi-curious?"

"What, just because he wears girls' clothes? There's no way to tell. Wearing clothing that was originally designed for a gender other than your own is transvestism, not homosexuality."

"What's the difference?" Makoto asked.

"My dearest, I'm going to use you as an example. That [t-shirt and cargo pants outfit](#) that you're wearing looks really good on you, but that doesn't change the fact that it was originally men's clothing. You're wearing clothes that until recently were normally worn by guys. Does that make you bisexual?"

"Of course not! I just like the way this outfit feels on me."

I nodded. "It's comfortable, and it looks good on you. That's all that transvestism is – wearing clothes that are comfortable and look good on the person who's wearing them. It doesn't have anything to do with your sexual orientation."

"Rob," Ryou asked, "does everybody in the 2020s think the same way that you do about all of this?"

I shook my head. "No. Old thought patterns are hard to break even in the face of new evidence. Some people would rather keep thinking the old ways, even when changing their thought patterns would make them happier. And, as I mentioned earlier, nobody likes to be proven wrong."

I waited for another moment in case there were any more questions.

"Now that I've said so much about sexual orientation and frequency of sexual desires, and implied that those charts were a way to sort out everybody's sexuality, it's time to talk about people for whom that isn't true."

"Wait, is there a third sex out there somewhere?" Bunny-chan asked.

"Some Native Americans think so," I replied in all seriousness. "But I'm not Native American so I'm not qualified to discuss the 'two-spirit' concept. From a Western viewpoint, biologically there's just males and females, but psychologically, there are more than just men and women. Nowadays, the term is 'transsexuality'. In the 2020s, the term is 'transgender' to compare with the term 'cisgender'."

"You mean like Transformers?" Minako asked with a smile.

"In that there's more to transgender people than meets the eye, yes," I replied, again in all seriousness. "Have you ever felt uncomfortable in your own body?"

Bunny-chan nodded. "Ever since I started puberty, I've been clumsy sometimes."

"Now, imagine feeling like that *all the time* because you think you were born into the wrong body. Some biological males think that they should have been born girls, some biological females think that they should have been born boys, some people were misidentified as either male or female at birth because their primary sexual characteristics were unusual, which is called 'intersex', and some people think that they aren't human at all. Statistically, it's likely that somebody somewhere in Tokyo would have been more comfortable being born the same species as Ail and An than they are having been born human."

All Bunny-chan said was, "Wow."

Ami frowned in annoyance. "Rob, I have to admit that, other than the intersex cases that I've read about in medical textbooks, I'm having trouble grasping that idea."

"You aren't the only one, Ami. I've never been able to grasp it emotionally, although I understand it intellectually. Just because I'm cisgender and comfortable in the body that I was born in – and, yes, this rejuvenated body counts as the body I was born in – doesn't mean that everybody else is equally comfortable in their bodies."

"Before Rob starts preaching again," Hayate-chan commented, "I'll mention that there's some so-called 'conversion therapy' for transgender people in the 2010s, too."

"It exists for the same reasons that the other sort exists, and that's all we need to say about that," I agreed. "Oh, and before anybody asks, transsexuality is not the same as transvestism. There is some correlation, but one doesn't require the other."

"That makes sense," Makoto said. "I like being a woman, and I like these clothes, even if my fiancée says they're masculine. But I've never really thought of myself as feminine, even though I'm definitely female."

"So what do transgender people do about their bodies in the 2020s?" asked Minako.

I sighed. "A lot of them suffer. Some of them undergo some very expensive hormonal treatments and cosmetic surgery to change their bodies to look like what they know their bodies should have been all along, and from every account I've heard, they're happier for it. However, the state of the art in 2022 was not sufficiently advanced to completely flip the biological gender of a body; these people often end up unable to procreate."

"But they can still adopt, right?"

I nodded at Bunny-chan's question. "They can, unless they live somewhere that thinks being transgender automatically makes somebody unfit to be a parent. Which of course is false; there are plenty of cisgender people who are unfit to be parents but nobody stops them from having children. It's the person who is a good or bad parent, not the body." I waited for a moment, felt a bit of surprise that Hayate-chan didn't say I was preaching again, then continued, "I'm not going to say anything more about transgender people, because I don't know anybody who's ever told me that they aren't cisgender. I simply don't know enough to go into any more detail."

We all sat in silence for a moment.

"I think I've run out of things to talk about," I admitted.

"Thanks, Rob," Ryou said. "I now know a lot more than I ever wanted to know about some things I'd never thought existed."

"Happy to help you there, ol' buddy," I replied with a grin.

Most of the others stood up to leave. I noticed who didn't. «Makoto and Minako,» I sent to just the two of them, «would you mind giving the two of us a few minutes alone? I think she wants to ask me something that she doesn't want anybody else to hear.»

My fiancée and her roommate stood up. "I'm going to go shopping for dinner ingredients. Is there anything in particular you want? And don't say inarizushi."

"I'll let you surprise me, my dearest, as long as you're going to eat whatever you serve me."

"I'm in the mood for [omurice](#)," Minako suggested.

"Sure, why not?" And, with my sort-of agreement for the menu, they headed off to the store, followed by Hayate-chan heading for my apartment.

Then I got up, closed the door, and returned to the front room. "Is there something else you wanted to ask me, Usagi-san?"

"Maybe. Can I just talk for a few minutes?"

"Sure. Until somebody opens that door, I'll just listen unless you ask me something."

"Thanks. You said that it's my body, my rules, and my choices. And I already know that I want to wait until after I graduate before I share myself with Mamo-chan that way. But now that you've explained that there's more than just heterosexuality and homosexuality, I don't know what my choices are any more. I love Mamoru. I know you don't like him and he doesn't like you, but I'm not you. Chibiusa is proof that Mamo-chan and I are going to get married. Eventually. But... I love you, but not the same way that I love Mamo-chan. You're more a brother that doesn't annoy me, the way Shingo does. That is still love, right?"

I nodded, realizing that she was talking around what was really on her mind. "It's familial love, and I'm happy to hear you say that you love me that way. I love you as if you were my sister, too, the same way that I love Princess Lady."

"Thank you, Robu-san. That means a lot to me. But... I think there's somebody else who I love the same way that I love Mamo-chan. And if I do, then I'm bisexual. That doesn't make you love me any less, does it?"

"Not at all. I love you for who you are, not what you are."

"*Thank you.*" After a moment, she continued, "I'm pretty sure now that I love her that way. But I'm worried. She's so pure; maybe she isn't allowed to love me back. Maybe she's only heterosexual or only bi-curious and can't love me back. Maybe she's asexual. And maybe... maybe she doesn't love me that way."

I let her sit in silence. I had told her that, right now, I would only answer her questions.

"Robu-san, what should I *do*?"

And that was a question. "You said that she's so pure, so it's pretty obvious to me who you're talking about. I doubt Rei-san will hate you if you tell her that you love her that way. She might be a little confused that she's receiving a love confession from another girl, but she attends an all-girls school so she must have at least heard of that kind of thing happening. Right now, you're like so many other girls at school, worrying about how the person you love feels about you. Go and talk with her. Put a note in her shoebox at home asking her to meet you behind the shrine building, if you want to go all-out with the cliché. But you'll never know how she feels unless you tell her how you feel first."

She sat there for a moment. "I suppose you're right. I mean, that cliché is a cliché because it works, right?" I nodded. "I'll do that later. Not now. I want to be sure that I love her that way before I make the offer. But I'm pretty sure that I do. Oh, but what do I tell Mamo-chan?"

I smiled. "You can worry about that after you talk with Rei-san. If she tells you 'no' and never mentions it again, would you really want Chiba-san to know about it?"

"Well, he should know that I'm bi. Shouldn't he?"

"Maybe in a while, once he's a bit more mature. And I feel weird saying that about somebody his age."

She giggled. "Yeah, you're not unbiased there. I'll ask Ami-chan for advice on that. Thanks again, Robu-san."

And she let herself out.

"Any time, Bunny-chan," I said to the still-open door.

And then Friday arrived, as it so often does. But we had to cancel the Conversational English Club meeting. The work crews, who had been working around the clock on our house, had finally told us that they'd be out and ready to give us back our keys on Monday, so we had to pack.

Oh, we could have hired movers, but then how would we explain our 2017-era computers, let alone my 2022-era laptop and the Silver Millennium and Midchildan technology we had? Besides, I didn't trust anybody else to pack my Sailor Senshi crane-game dolls from the Missing Time.

Packing continued during Saturday, which means we missed Bunny-chan and Tenou-san spending some quality time together while they were handcuffed to each other.

We didn't miss Bunny-chan complaining after the fact, though, since she came over to help us pack.

"What brought on this desire to do something physical?" I asked while taping yet another box of Minako's plushies closed and labelling it to be moved into her bedroom.

"Haruka-san can be so stubborn!" she replied while starting another box of plushies. "She was willing to let Michiru-san die! Oni-san, why are some people like that?"

"Well, Bunny-chan, some people like being contrary so that they get attention, but I doubt that's how Tenou-san is thinking. Tenou-san..." I grabbed another plushie and put it in the box that she had going. "Remember what I said during our talk a few days ago?"

"You said a lot of things during that talk," she replied while blushing.

"Not that. Nobody likes to be proven wrong. And it's pretty obvious that Tenou-san is convinced that her way to find the Talismans is the right one."

"Yeah." Her blush faded away. "She did say something about the end of the world coming soon."

"You've been at the end of the world before, Usagi." My calling her by just her name without an honorific didn't go unnoticed. "And you won. Beryl and Metaria are gone as if they'd never existed."

"But if I hadn't reset the world without them in it, Rei and Ami and Mako-chan and Mina-chan and Mamo-chan would be dead."

"You look like you need a hug."

"Just a hug, yeah," she said as she walked over.

"I love you like a sister, Usagi. I don't love you the way I love Makoto." Then I put my arms around her but didn't pull her close, giving her some room while making it obvious that I was there for her.

We stood like that for a short moment, until she broke the hug. "Thank you, Robu. Or should I call you otōto?" she added with a grin.

That's the Bunny-chan I like seeing. "If you do, I'll look around for Shingo-kun."

"Robu, if I hadn't brought everybody back, would we have ended up dating each other?"

"Where did that question come from? No, never mind. I doubt it. You're my sister in all but blood, and dating my sister just seems weird."

She giggled at that comment as she put the last of Minako's plushies into the moving box. "Yeah, it would, wouldn't it?"

"Although that reminds me: what does big sister want for her birthday? Keeping in mind that Makoto, Ami, Ryou, Minako, Saeko-mama, and I move into our new house the day before your birthday."

"Oh, I saw a lovely pair of glass slippers for sale, but I already told Mamo-chan about them. Maybe just a birthday cake?"

I smiled as I replied, "I'll leave that gift to Makoto. She's going to want to try out our new kitchen anyway."

"How about a tour of your new house?"

"I was going to give you that anyway. I think you'll like some of the things we've added to the place."

"Oh, okay. In that case, surprise me."

\* \* \*

We headed over to Rei-san's shrine the next day, as we always do on Sundays. We weren't expecting anything to happen on the Talisman front, considering that the Death Busters staged an attack just the day before. Silly us, relying on the stupid genre conventions. Hayate-chan had even warned us that we couldn't trust canon any more.

Yuuichirou-san chatted with Ryou, Ichiro, Chiba-san, and me while we did our warm-up stretches. "Rei's pushing herself too hard. She's spending too much time in front of the sacred fire."

"She would," I replied, "after what Hayate-chan said."

Ichiro looked puzzled. "What logical chain leads from Hayate-chan's statements to Rei-san's overwork, sir?"

"One that you have to know something about her personality to follow. Hayate-chan said that Ryou is our best information source now."

Ryou grimaced. "Oh, dear. She did say that, didn't she?"

"Yeah. And for as long as I've known her, Rei-san has never liked being in second place to a boy."

"Ah!" Yuuichirou-san said. "So she's doing everything she can to find information that Ryou-san can't learn!"

"Ryou's precognition or my knowledge of the canon story," I agreed. "And presumably Hayate-chan's knowledge of canon, too, but she's a woman. But all of this assumes I have a good read on her personality."

"Don't you, though? You have seen the anime that they made about us in your home world."

"There were maybe 50 hours of story altogether that included Rei-san. How much can you learn about somebody in two days? Yuuichirou-san, I know a lot more about you from our sparring sessions than I do from everything I ever saw about you in the canon anime. And I have to admit that I like the man that I've been training alongside a lot more than the character, no, the caricature, in the story that I know."

Yuuichirou-san smiled as he replied, "I'll take that as a compliment, Robu-san."

"It was meant as one, Yuuichirou-san."

"How can we help her, sir?"

"We can't. We're males, and if I'm right, forcing our help on her will only make things worse." Seeing the dejected look on Yuuichirou-san's face, I quickly added, "But somebody who loves her, more than the way I care about most of the Sailor Team, can be there for her when she reaches out for help."

"Just how *do* you care about the girls?" Chiba-san asked with some suspicion.

"The same way that you care about Ami. I think of Bunny-chan as a sister, not as a lover."

That got him to relax.

"That's enough chit-chat, gentlemen," Ichiro said before we could discuss any of the other girls. "Today, Rob and Mamoru will concentrate on stick-fighting, while Ryou and Yuuichirou will concentrate on open-palm fighting. Pair off and –"

Before he could finish, we heard a gunshot from outside, followed by a second shot.

"– transform," Ichiro continued. "Oni, Tuxedo Kamen, we're probably needed outside."

Once we were in our fighting gear, we left the outbuilding to discover two Pure Hearts floating in the air. The first had the same mottled-gray coloration as one of Hokkaido's earless seals, while the second was orange with rainbow, blue, green, fire-red, red, and white streaks.

Aw, crap. If I had the Pure Heart colour scheme figured out correctly, it looked like Minako was still carrying a torch for both me and Ryou. At least Ichigo-san wasn't. Now, where were their bodies, and were they awake?

"Are those Pure Hearts?" Yuuichirou-san asked from behind me, just before a third shot rang out. "Never mind, I see mine now," he added before collapsing. One more datum for the theory that women could stay awake longer than men could with their Pure Hearts shot out.

His was storm-gray, as was appropriate for an acolyte at a shrine to Susanoo-no-Mikoto, with fire-red streaks throughout. The big lug did love Rei-san, not that there was any doubt of that in my mind. But I didn't waste time looking at it closely; instead, I looked in the other direction, expecting to see Eudial.

I didn't. What I did see was a low-rise building a couple-hundred meters away.

Eudial did need to rebuild her longarm after I took hers the day she shot Chiba-san. Maybe she built a sniper rifle.

I put up a forcefield covering the entire side of the shrine grounds, just in case. Bunny-chan still hadn't had her Pure Heart shot out, after all.

Then I turned my attention to the victims. Yuuichirou-san was still unconscious. The girls, though, were already beginning to become annoying, and I'd only started listening to them.

"You should feel happy to know me, Ichigo-san! I can defend you from anything that our enemies choose to throw at us!"

"I can't do half the things you can do."

"You don't need to! I'm here to do them for you!"



"But I want to do what you can do."

"Well, of course you do! I do great things! I take great strides!"

"And I can't. Got to be a Superman to survive, but I'm not."

"I'm plenty super for both of us!"

It was at that point that I realized that their impure thoughts were reflections of two of the Deadly Sins: Pride and Envy. «Ami, Usagi-san, *please* shut them up! They're reinforcing each other's impurities!»

Ami handed the Mercury Computer to Makoto, saying, "Keep it open and running, please," then raced over to Minako. Of course she would tend to her adopted sister first. Sailor Moon quickly joined the group and returned Ichigo-san's Pure Heart to her body. Once she had done that, she restored Yuuichirou-san's Pure Heart to his body, by which time Ami had given Minako back her Pure Heart.

"I still have much to learn before I can keep pace with you."

"The important thing is that we worked together to do it more quickly than either of us could do it alone, Ami."

Ami smiled. "You always know what to say."

Then I noticed Uranus and Neptune watching. I quick-moved over to them and said, "No Space Sword, no Deep Aqua Mirror. Have the two of you seriously not figured out where the Talismans are?"

"We have our suspicions," Neptune said, "but if you're correct, we need to choose who will use them once they're released."

"And if you aren't," Uranus added, "we still need to find the Talismans."

At least they were willing to listen to other people now. They weren't quite at the "trust but verify" stage, but they were closer than they had been before.

Ami flew over, literally, with the Mercury Computer in her hand. "Eudial still hasn't noticed the tracker we planted on her car. Although it hardly matters; as soon as she was within a half-kilometre of Mugen Academy, the signal cut out. Oh, there's one more thing; the identity matcher that we copied from Kunzite's systems confirmed that Eudial is Arimura Yuko-san."

Uranus asked, "Identity matcher?"

"Software that we copied from a previous enemy," I explained. Turning to Ami, I added, "I didn't know you had enough data to use it on the Death Busters."

"Well, I do like learning, and I need to gather information to be able to do that," Ami replied.

"Do you know who *we* are?" asked Neptune.

Ami smiled. "Let's just say that I look forward to a rematch in the pool." And here I thought that that hadn't happened because Ami's Pure Heart was shot out instead of being grabbed by a daimon. Shows what I know about my friends' private lives. But wasn't that essentially a corollary to what I'd just said to Yuuichirou-san less than a half-hour previously?

As they went their way and Ami and I went ours, I thought to her, «That wasn't a lesson that I meant to teach you, you know.»

«What, telling the truth in a way that's intended to deceive?»

«Yes, exactly. When they find out how I first learned about them, and that you knew about them the same way, they're going to be annoyed. Remember how Minako reacted when she got her memories back.»

«I know. Speaking of Minako, did you see her Pure Heart before I restored it to her?»

I nodded. «I'm going to have to tell Makoto.»

«Are the two of you still going to move in with us?»

«We have to. We've already given notice that we're moving out of our rental apartments.»

«Things might get awkward. Do you have to tell her?»

«Ami, it's none of my business how open you and Ryou are with each other. I do *not* keep secrets from Makoto. I trust her. Besides, I wouldn't be surprised if she already knows.»

When we got back to the others, Bunny-chan was telling Ichigo-san, "But we *can't* give you powers."

Poor girl, fated to be a normal person surrounded by metahumans. And she was a solid "B" student in mathematics classes, so she didn't know enough math to be able to learn Midchildan magic, either.

I ignored that conversation and made my way over to my fiancée. "We need to talk."

Ka'o spent the night at Makoto and Minako's apartment again.

Then came Monday, and Ami, Ryou, Makoto, and I had store-bought bento for lunch. "All of our cookware is packed," explained my dearest, who had chosen to sit between Minako and me.

Saeko-mama picked us up after class, handed us our keys, and drove us to our apartment building one last time. Our rooms were almost empty; all that the movers had left behind were the boxes that we had marked to be moved by us.

We grabbed those most precious items – including Artemis and our Unison Devices – and the items that we couldn't let anyone else know about, put them – excluding Artemis and our Unison Devices – in the trunk of Saeko-mama's car, and locked the doors of our previous lives behind us.

Then we dropped off the keys to the apartments at the rental agency and signed the move-out papers. That was it. No going back now.

Finally, we headed to our new home, and put our boxes in our bedrooms. I so wanted to explore the new house, but it was time for dinner, which we ordered in. We quickly chose our seats around the table. Saeko-mama was at the head of the table, as was right and proper. Makoto was at her right, claiming the position of "housewife", which made sense since she planned to do most of the cooking. I, of course, was seated to Makoto's right. Ami took the foot of the table, Ryou sat beside her, and Minako took the seat between Ryou and Saeko-mama. Mochizuki-san chose not to join us at meals, since she didn't eat anyway.

After dinner, we had homework to do. We only unpacked what we needed that evening, which at least in my case included what I had moved personally. An hour later, I had almost everything set up and I was using my 2022 laptop as a typewriter, telling it my homework essays and assignments for everything except Japanese language. That, I wrote out by hand because my teacher insisted.

And an hour after that, I was finished. Then I had to make a choice: explore or take a bath? I really wanted to know where everything was. I also wanted to soak; I had made do with showers ever since we returned from Midchilda. The choice was made for me by a knock at my bedroom door.

"Hi, Rob! Are you ready to see the basement?"

"Hi, Artemis! I am now," I said as I sent my homework files to my printer. "Amaze me, oh amazing amazer."

And he did. I didn't realize how much larger the work crews had made the basement, or how much Artemis had moved into the room with all the electrical outlets. "Ah, so this is where you've set up shop, Shario-chan."

Shario-chan looked up from her desk at the front of the room. "Hi, Rob!"

"Artie, where did all this gear come from?" The only item I recognized was the communications relay to Chacornac that used to be under my desk in the old apartment.

"The basement of the Crown Game Center."

"You were obviously running a full-fledged datacentre down there."

"A what?" Minako asked from behind us. "Hey, where did all of these come from?"

Shario-chan looked like she was about to explain what a datacentre was, but Ami poked her head into the room first. "Everyone, we need to do something important outside."

I offered a hand for Shario-chan to ride in, then we all headed outside, where the rest of the house's residents were already assembled. Our next-door neighbours on either side of us – including Miharu-chan, I noticed – were also present.

Saeko-mama walked over to the spot beside the gate where a name plate should have been showing. The recess was covered by a cloth, though. "I now announce to our neighbours that we are in residence. Please take care of us." She bowed to our neighbours, then took the cloth from the nameplate to reveal a sign. It read "*Maison Lyrique*", followed by the names of most of the residents: Mizuno Saeko, Ami, and Minako, Urawa Ryou, Kino Makoto, Rob Donaldson, and Mochizuki Ka'o.

«"Maison Lyrique"?» I sent to everyone who could reply the same way.

«It was Ami's idea,» Sakura replied.

«At least Shario-chan, Hayate-chan, Sakura, Meia, and I get an oblique reference on the plate this way,» Ichiro added.

We were at school a half-hour early Tuesday morning. We caught an earlier bus than we needed to, expecting that we'd need to spend as much time in transit as we had from our old apartment. At least we put the extra time to good use, presenting our change of address cards to the school office... and then getting Sakurada-sensei to explain that there wasn't anything improper going on when they noticed that we were all living under the same roof.

"Well, at least we can spend some more time at home now," Minako commented while we all walked from the office to the classroom.

"It isn't as close to our favourite skating rink as our apartments were, though," pointed out my dearest.

Sakurada-sensei was kind enough to wait for a few seconds while we took our seats before walking in, which gave us just barely enough time to drop invitations on the desks of the other members of the Sailor Team, including Ichigo-san.

"What's the occasion?" Ichigo-san asked just after the Revealing Of The Lunches.

"Two things," Ami replied. "First, we want to show off the new house. Second, we're celebrating Usagi's birthday a day early. I've already asked Mamoru-san to join us."

"Did you –" I began.

"He'll be giving Usagi his present on her birthday."

"Just like in canon," Bunny-chan muttered. "And I liked those slippers when I saw them, too."

"There's no guarantee that things will go the same way," Minako pointed out. "After all, Yuuichirou-san wasn't hit by a train."

"I thought it was Sailor Mars who was hit by the daimon train in canon," Ryou remarked.

"We can re-watch the episode at home," I mentioned.

"Hang on. Daimon train?" Ichigo-san asked in amazement.

*"Daimon,  
But that's how it goes,  
A dozen people know it's their foe,  
Maybe... it's not too late  
To learn about love and give up on their hate,  
Heartbreak wounds not healing,  
life's a lonely shame,  
We're going off the rails on a daimon train!"*

We applauded Minako's rewrite of the song, then Ami explained what would have happened if I wasn't around to meddle in things. I was wondering whether, when, and how "silly Minako" was ever going to show herself; this was a better way than most that I could think of. Then I figured out what she was saying and realized that she wasn't "silly Minako" after all.

Of all the things that my meddling has removed from this reality, what I missed the most is the Minako who knew how to enjoy herself. Stupid genre conventions.

The explanation and actually eating lunch took up most of the lunch break.

School resumed and ended in its usual course, and we all went home to change before dinner. Then our guests began arriving, starting with Rei-san, followed by Naru-san and Ichigo-san.

"This isn't a formal dinner, Naru-san," I mentioned as I offered her a set of slippers. "You didn't need to wear so much jewelry."

"I'd rather not be caught without it, just in case. And wearing it is the easiest way to carry it."

"Ah, yes, of course," I replied, remembering what she could do with gems.

Once Bunny-chan and Chiba-san arrived, we started the tour of the house, beginning in the living room where a portrait of Ami and Saeko-mama hung above the fireplace's mantelpiece, on the wall opposite the wall of windows that admitted the light of the setting sun.

"It's lovely!" Ichigo-san exclaimed. "Who painted it?"

Ryou replied, "A young woman named Yumemi Yumeno. She and I have something in common, although she doesn't remember it."

"Oh, yes," Chiba-san said. "She painted a portrait of the two of us. I wonder what happened to it?"

Bunny-chan sighed. "I'm sorry, Mamo-chan, but it disappeared when I reset time after destroying Metaria."

"That's a shame," Naru-san said. "I remember that you looked like you were meant for each other in that painting."

"I would have liked to have seen it," Saeko-mama said. "But we're being rude to Makoto. She and dinner are waiting for us in the dining room."

She gestured toward a door beside the fireplace, which I opened. "If you would, ladies and gentlemen?"

We all walked in to find the dining table had been extended so that twelve people could – just barely – fit around it, and my dearest was already at her accustomed spot between Saeko-mama's and mine. She had a large rice container and three pots for sukiyaki waiting for us. "Thank you for joining us for a humble meal," she said as I escorted Saeko-mama to the head of the table.

"There's nothing humble about sukiyaki!" Bunny-chan said as Chiba-san walked her to the table, discovering that we had left place cards for everyone. He seated her beside my place, then took the seat beside hers after helping Naru-san sit between his place and Ami's.

"Who's the extra seat for?" Rei-san asked while sitting between Ryou and Ichigo-san, gesturing toward the open spot between Ichigo-san and Minako.

Makoto grinned. "We're pretty sure that she won't be joining us today, but the message from Crystal Millennium's Ami did mention that we'd see her again, so we prepared a spot just in case."

And that got everybody thinking about our favourite visitor from the future.

And then we broke bread together, as a family should. Yes, we had reached the point where we considered Rei-san, Naru-san, and Ichigo-san to be family, not just friends and nakama.

Our Devices helped Makoto with the task of keeping a party of eleven people properly fed and entertained, for an unusual definition of "entertained" that only applies to the Sailor Team, I'll grant.

"I've done some analysis of what you've told me your impure thoughts were," Hayate-chan announced a few minutes into the meal. "It's remarkable how many of you have one of the seven deadly sins suppressed in your personalities. Ryou almost never gives in to his sloth, Mamoru buries his wrath, Bogdanova-san hid her greed well, and Rob controls his lust."

"Most of the time," Makoto commented with a grin.

"It's only when I'm alone with you that I don't. And it's a good thing Princess Lady isn't here to hear this," I replied.

"On the other hand, Ami and Minako both let their pride leak out on occasion."

"Sorry," Minako said quietly.

"I'm working on becoming a better person," Ami said.

Hayate-chan continued, "Ichigo keeps her envy in check, although she's the one who actually has good reason to be envious of the rest of us. No offence meant, Ichigo."

"None taken."

Naru-san commented, "The only deadly sin we haven't seen yet is gluttony."

"And the only two of us who hasn't had their Pure Hearts extracted are Saeko-sensei and Usagi," Rei-san added.

We all looked at Bunny-chan as she took two slices of beef from the closest sukiyaki pot at once.

"What? Sorry, I wasn't paying attention."

Sakura mock-sighed. "How are we going to be able to tell?"

"I believe that's more than enough talk about work," Ichiro said before anyone could explain. "Has anyone seen a good movie lately?"

"I hope not, this close to exams," Saeko-mama said before any of the rest of us could reply.

We ended up talking about the weather for a while, then Makoto changed the topic to shopping in the area, and we quickly left behind our concerns about school work and Senshi work.

Eventually, the end of the meal arrived. "If I may propose a toast?" I asked after we finished eating. Addressing the spot at the table that Princess Lady wasn't sitting at, I said, "To absent friends, and may they find their way back to us soon. Kampai!"

"Kampai!"

We [re-filled each other's glasses](#) and Rei-san stood up. "To our hosts, and may you find many years of happiness in your new home. Kampai!"

"Kampai!"

Before the meal turned into a drinking party, Ryou asked, "Is everyone ready to see our basement?"

"Oh, yes, please!" Bunny-chan said.

"Give us a moment to clear the table," Ami said, "and we'll be right with you."

"Excuse me for a moment." Ryou stood up and walked toward the front door before Saeko-mama, Ami, Makoto and I could start tending to the cleanup. He made it to the front room before the doorbell rang.

"I wonder who that could be?"

A short moment later, he returned with three young women who were known to all of us excepting Ichigo-san and Saeko-mama. "Our final guests have arrived," he announced.

"We apologize for being tardy. Oh, but we have yet to introduce ourselves to the head of the household. I am Meiou Setsuna." She bowed to Saeko-mama, then turned to me. "Are we still pretending we don't know who we all are?"

She had obviously asked a question that she already knew the answer to. I shook my head. "After Ami used the Mercury Computer in front of your companions on Sunday, I doubt that there's any reason to maintain the pretense, at least not inside this house. And both Saeko-mama and Ichigo-san know who the rest of us are."

"Thank you." Setsuna turned back to Saeko-mama. "I am also called Sailor Pluto."

After a moment, Setsuna elbowed her blonde companion in the ribs.

"Ow. Oh. Yes. I'm Tenou Haruka, also called Sailor Uranus."

"Kaioh Michiru, also called Sailor Neptune."

"Thank you for trusting us enough to tell us," Bunny-chan replied. "I'm Tsukino Usagi, also known as Sailor Moon."

The rest of the humans in the room introduced ourselves just as formally, ending with Ichigo-san. "I'm Aoyama Ichigo, and that's the only name that I have. I'm happy to meet you." She bowed to the newcomers.

And then the Mau and the Devices introduced themselves, Tenou-san and Kaioh-san were amazed, so we explained how four of us had spent two years in another dimension one afternoon almost a year ago.

And then we made our way downstairs. Ami played tour guide.

"I haven't had time yet to see what's down here," Saeko-mama said as we descended the stairs.

"Well, we could show you the laundry room," Ami replied while gesturing to the door closest to the foot of the stairs, "but I think you'd all be more interested in the rest of what's down here."

"They might be interested in seeing how we heat the building and baths with water warmed by solar heating and waste heat from..."

"Darling, nobody's interested in that but you and Ryou."

"Yes, my dearest."

Kaioh-san giggled. "The two of you sound like a married couple."

We showed off our matching rings as we said, "Thank you for noticing!" Makoto added, "It isn't official yet because my guardian won't sign the paperwork."

I added, "So we have to wait until we're of age before I officially become Kino Rob, but we already consider ourselves to be a couple. But we were showing you our home."

"I think we can all squeeze in here," Ami said while opening the door across from the laundry room and turning on the lights.

"This is an impressive weight room," Setsuna-san said.

"Not just a weight room," Tenou-san added while looking at the small assortment of shinai and bokken on a wall-mounted rack. "Who practices kendo?"

"All of Sakura's and my students," Ichiro replied. "Kino, Donaldson, Osaka, Chiba, and Urawa, from most skilled to least skilled. Although I teach kenjutsu more than I teach kendo."

Tenou-san nodded in appreciation. "Do you have a signature style?"

"My sister and I use different styles. She prefers to use one blade while I prefer two."

Before she could ask where the protective clothing was kept or whether we were good enough to use live steel, I said, "There's a shower behind that door, for when we need to clean up after a session. Has everybody seen enough of this room? We have more impressive things to show off."

"Lead on," Kaioh-san said with a smile.

So Ami did, with Luna in her arms and Minako and Artemis close behind her.

We reached the double doors at the end of the hallway. Ryou and I moved to either side of the doorway.

"Ladies and Mamoru," Ami said, "what is behind these doors is not for public conversation."

We opened the doors to reveal what I called the Situation Room: an octagonal room set slightly below the level of the rest of the basement. The centrepiece of the room was a table with sixteen chairs around it and our Midchildan holoprojector hooked up to my second laptop positioned in the open space in the middle.

Each chair was marked with a symbol denoting its owner, not all of whom were in the room. Clockwise from the chair with a golden crescent moon, there was a rose, a "[Great Wave](#)", a clock face without hands, an [Asklepian](#), [Dashinosuke](#), a crossed gem and sword, the Garnet Orb Rod, the Deep Aqua Mirror, the Space Sword, a lightning bolt, a spiked club, a firefly, a pink crescent moon, a heart, and a firebird. Artemis said, "Okay, everybody find your seats!"

Ryou quickly moved to cut off Setsuna-san before she could sit in the wrong chair. "You might announce yourself as the daughter of Chronos, but the handless clock is supposed to represent my precognition," he said. "Your chair is marked with the Talisman that you carry."

"Ah."

Saeko-mama asked, "I assume this is my chair?"

I looked over to see that Saeko-mama was standing beside the chair with an Asklepian. Artemis replied, "You assume correctly, Mizuno-sensei."

"Thank you for trusting me with a seat at your planning table." Saeko-mama looked at the amenities again, and asked, "What are you going to do with this room when you're not using it for Senshi planning sessions?"

Ami's quiet reply of "Homework" was drowned out by Makoto, Minako, Rei-san, and Bunny-chan: "Movie nights!"

Hayate-chan and Ichiro cleared their throats meaningfully.

"And homework," the ladies added with less enthusiasm as Ryou guided Tenou-san and Kaioh-san to their seats between Setsuna-san and my dearest.

"That's an interesting banner," Kaioh-san said, referring to the only decoration that the room had so far. It read 私たちの仕事は現状を守るのではなく、世界を守ることです

"Oh, that's why you wanted it!" Rei-san said with a smile.

"It is, and thank you again for writing it for us," I replied. "Your calligraphy is lovely."

Saeko-mama read it aloud. "'Watashitachi no shigoto wa genjō o mamoru kotode wa naku, sekai o mamoru kotodesu'. If that is your philosophy, then I have no worries as to whether your lives are on the correct path."

Ichiro translated it into English: "Our job is not to protect the status quo, but to protect the world'. A fine sentiment, and an important reminder of our duty. Is it a quotation?"

I nodded. "It is, allowing for translation to Japanese and back. The original was written by someone named Rich Burlew, in the year 2021 in my home reality."

"Your home reality?" Tenou-san and Kaioh-san asked in unison.

So we sat down while I explained once again where I came from, how I first knew about the Sailor Senshi, and how little that had prepared me for meeting the actual people around the table.

Finally, Tenou-san said, "So you knew who we were all along."

"I did, yes. I never said that I did not, and I did drop some hints."

"You dropped hints about the Talismans."

Before I could reply, Kaioh-san asked, "When did you tell Kino-san about this?"

I looked her straight in the eyes. "Before we started dating, and before we fell in love."

"I knew exactly what I was getting into," my fiancée added.

Tenou-san scowled. "I still think you were taking advantage of your knowledge of us."

"How?" Makoto looked like she was about to shout at Sailor Uranus. "He was honest with me up front and did his best to get me to listen to what he knew about my future!"

"Did you listen?"

"I didn't want to! Not then!"

Ryou suddenly shouted, "Ladies! You can't fight in here! This is the War Room!"

*Everybody* facepalmed, including me... but at least everybody calmed down a bit.

"Why don't we continue the tour?" Ami suggested.

"That's probably a good idea," replied Setsuna-san.

We headed for the door across the room from where we had come in, which was behind Bunny-chan and Chiba-san's chairs, and opened it to reveal the datacentre. I quickly put up a transparent forcefield so that all the visitors could do was look at the [blinking lights](#).

"Look at all those computers! It's the Batcave!"

Minako grinned at Bunny-chan's comment. "No, it's the Cat-cave!"

As Artemis preened, I silently sent a prayer of thanks to whoever was responsible for letting "silly Minako" finally show herself, if only slightly.

With everything that happened because Tenou-san and Kaioh-san showed up, we never did give Bunny-chan her birthday presents, although she did get a birthday cake that was home-baked by Makoto. Don't ask me when my dearest found the time to bake it. Bunny-chan's other presents would have to wait until her actual birthday, the next day.

So of course Bunny-chan had her Pure Heart ripped out of her body on her birthday. Just like in canon.

Stupid genre conventions.

Sure, it started out like in canon, with a daimon egg infesting the present that Chiba-san had bought for her and the glass slipper turning into a daimon as soon as she touched it. And then we drove off the daimon before it could rip her Pure Heart out and it headed to the Tokyo Tower, again somewhat like in canon but somewhat compressed because they didn't grab Tuxedo Kamen. But that was only the first thing that changed.

They knew we were coming: as soon as Bunny-chan walked into Foot Town, the building at the base of the Tower, all of the doors and windows sealed themselves without the shutters closing. Good thing Sailor Mars went in first.

«Looks like they brought two daimons today,» Sakura sent, surprising Uranus and Neptune.

«I'll teach you thought-sending later,» Pluto promised. Then she pointed her rod at the front door. "Dead Scream." The attack bounced off.

Meia looked up from her virtual display. "They have forgotten to seal the elevator shaft to the observation decks."

"It'll take too long to climb the stairs. It's too bad we can't fly," Uranus pointed out.

I smiled. "What, you can't? Okay, you three keep attacking the seal on the door so they think we're trying to get in that way. Everybody else, let's head up the Tower."

"Oh, no," Venus said as Jupiter approached her from behind. "You are not getting me to *OH GODS I HATE THIS!!!*"

And we were flying straight up. It took us a little over a minute to get to the top of the lower observation deck, because Jupiter was flying herself and Venus.

We followed Meia to the maintenance access hatch. Luckily for us, it was unlocked and could be opened from the outside – but then, that was simply a good safety procedure. Nobody wanted someone to be locked out on the outside of the observation deck, where they could fall to their death.

Once we were inside, Ami asked while she transformed, "Shall we distract them the same way our counterparts did in canon?"

"Assuming Bunny-chan needs the distraction so she can become Sailor Moon, yes," I replied, adding "Mirage Hide" to look like Oni.

"And that's why we brought you along," Jupiter told Venus.

"Er... Usagi has the Disguise Pen."

"What about your compact?" Mercury asked.

"Not unpacked yet."

Mercury sighed deeply. "Mirage Hide." Of course Ami can cast any spell that I can; she's two full ranks more powerful than me. Looking and sounding like Sailor Moon, Mercury added, "How does Usagi cope with all this hair?"

The elevator arrived before anyone could answer her. We got in and proceeded to take the minute-long ride to the ground.

Japan is a civilized country; we were not subjected to Muzak. When the door opened, we were nearly blinded by gold-tinted rainbow light, with individual beams of light of every colour of the spectrum. When I turned away, I still saw [stygian and hyperbolic colours](#) on the walls.

Then I realized what I was seeing. Usagi's Pure Heart was brighter than any of the others I'd seen before. To quote Hokago Tea Time, it was a Pure Pure Heart.

Bunny-chan was feeding all of her pocket change into vending machines and eating the snacks she was buying as fast as she could get them. «*That's* how we can tell,» I sent to Sakura.

Then we saw where the Death Busters were, through the near-blinding light. "Are you certain it isn't a Talisman?" Kaolinite asked.

"I'm sure," Eudial replied. "It's the purest heart I've ever seen, but it isn't what we're looking for. Keep it for study."

"All right. Given that hairdo, I think she's Sailor Moon, so letting her die helps us either way."

No, we can't let you do that. Mercury reacted before I could, though. "Hold it right there! I won't let you take the Pure Heart of a girl who is obviously a fan! Tsuru Hiromi might forgive you, but I will not! In the name of the Moon, I'll punish you!"

"I would have sworn we sealed this building!" Eudial turned on her heel and shouted, "Doorknobder! What did you leave open?"

"The air vents in the elevator shaft, so you wouldn't suffocate!" The reply came from the daimon standing in the corner.

"Keeping us alive is a poor excuse for not following your orders to the letter! Cenicienta! Destroy Doorknobder!"

"Ignore that order!" Kaolinite shouted. "If she dies, her seals will die with her! Do you want the rest of the Senshi in here?"

Jupiter said quietly, "Sailor Moon, that girl needs her Pure Heart back."

"Right! Sailor Kick!" And "Moon" used her TSAB unarmed-combat training and flight ability to deliver a kick that knocked both Eudial and Kaolinite to the ground.

I nudged Bunny-chan's Pure Heart back to her with a forcefield. Even that indirect contact left me feeling so happy to be her friend that I almost lost the will to fight anyone in her presence. I didn't dare to actually touch her Pure Heart, the way I had touched Unazuki-san's.

Luckily for us, her Pure Pure Heart returned to her body on its own.

"Oh, I don't want any more snacks." Then she gasped. "Mars! Where are you!"

"Over here," came a whisper from the corner of the room.

While the Death Busters were still getting to their feet, I put a vision cloak around Bunny-chan. «You're invisible now. I'll drop the shield when you can trade places with Mercury.»

«Drop it now, please.» I did so. "Hold it right there! The one, the only, the original Sailor Moon is here! You were going to let an innocent girl die because you thought she was me!" She paused for a moment, probably realizing she was repeating Mercury's speech. "In the name of the Moon, I'll punish you! Moon Spiral Heart Attack!"



Her blast hit Cenicienta. "Lovely!" Wow, she had a squeaky voice. I caught the glass shoes in a pair of forcefields and pulled them to me, and not just because they were a present to Bunny-chan. I didn't want Kaolinite using them against us.

"You're next!" announced Moon while pointing at Eudial. "Threatening to kill your underling because she kept you alive is –"

"Unforgivable, and you'll punish me in the name of the Moon. Yes, we've heard it all before. I'm leaving. Doorknobder, let me out of here."

"Screw you! You ordered my death!"

"Fine!" She flipped a switch on her longarm and fired it at Doorknobder. Flipping the switch turned it into a flamethrower, and the flame melted the daimon to death.

As soon as her escape route was clear, she raced off at high speed.

"After her!" Venus, Moon, and from what I could hear from outside Pluto, Uranus, and Neptune all gave chase.

While we were distracted, Kaolinite used some sort of liquid to turn a tourist-trap glass beer mug into a glass sword, and advanced on us. Bunny-chan's slippers may have been safe, but we were having this fight in a gift shop.

Jupiter drew Donguri-no-ken and blocked her way. "If you want a sword fight, I'm your opponent!"

Mercury and I headed over to Mars, who hadn't moved. "Is something wrong?" I asked.

She turned her head in my general direction. "I made the mistake of looking directly at Usagi's Pure Heart when it was withdrawn from her body. I can't see anything."

"Over-stimulation of the optic nerve," Mercury said, followed by "I concur." Okay, one of those opinions had to have been Meia's.

"Before we tend to that," I said while pointing in Kaolinite and Jupiter's general direction.

"Right. Hyperspatial Sphere Generate!" And the five of us were in a pocket dimension where we couldn't cause any further collateral damage.

I took a quick moment to look at my fiancée, then kept my eyes on her fight with Kaolinite. "Mercury, I think Mars shouldn't see this."

"Why? What's happening? Is it something bad?"

I sighed. "What you don't see won't give you nightmares later." What *I* saw was Jupiter, her sword crackling with electricity, blood coming out of a slice on her arm, doing her best to skewer Kaolinite, a wound on her arm cauterized electrically and her glass sword insulating her from the charged Donguri-no-ken. "You two stay here."

I manifested a forcefield sword and quick-moved to my fiancée's side. "No fair fights, Jupiter."

"Thanks, Oni. Yeah, we lose half of those."

And together we forced Kaolinite on the defensive. She was good enough to fight us both for ten seconds, but then Jupiter got past Kaolinite's defences and thrust into her torso.

And it was all over.

If the wound didn't kill Kaolinite, the electrical discharge sending her heart into [flatline](#) did. Either way, we both knew that it was a fight to the death as soon as Jupiter electrified Donguri-no-ken.

Mercury dispelled the Hyperspatial Sphere, leaving Kaolinite's body in the dissolving pocket dimension.

Not for the first time, I thought that our TSAB training had changed us in a fundamental manner. But this time, because I wasn't basking in the glow of Usagi's compassionate Pure Heart and I wasn't back to normal yet, I didn't care.

Only then did Mercury turn her attention back to Mars' eyes. One healing spell and a few minutes later, and she could see again. By that time, Jupiter had cleaned her blade and re-sheathed the sword.

As Mercury turned her attention to the cut on Jupiter's arm, Mars asked, "Where's Kaolinite?"

"Gone," was all Mercury said.

I had trouble sleeping that night, once my emotions were back to normal.

I wasn't the only one.

«Ami, are you awake?»

«Yes, Rob.»

«Today was the second time you've disposed of a body by leaving it in a pocket dimension.»

«And I feel terrible about that, now. But I couldn't let Makoto get arrested for murder.»

«I understand that. Thank you. But we all have to stop killing our opponents, unless there's no other option.»

«That's something to talk about in the morning. Good night, Rob.»

«Good night, Ami. I hope neither of us remember our dreams.»



\* \* \*

Ami dodged the question the next morning, because I didn't ask it. And that was because Saeko-mama joined us for breakfast.

"How are your studies going, everyone?"

Ami bowed her head. "With all of the Sailor Senshi work going on, I haven't been studying nearly as much as I want to."

"Well, we have a perfectly good place to do homework and study sessions now, that isn't a spare room at the Hikawa Shrine."

"I thought Rei liked our study sessions, though," my fiancée replied to Minako.

The blonde shook her head. "She enjoys the company. I don't think she enjoys hosting."

"And there are too many distractions in her room for Usagi-san to keep her mind on her studies," Ryou added.

"How much do we trust everyone?" I asked. "Not that I think they'll reveal our secrets, because they haven't for over a year, but do we want to give them keys to our gate and let them study here whenever they want?"

"Usagi, Rei, Naru, and Ichigo, definitely," Ami answered immediately.

Saeko-mama nodded in agreement. "They're all good people. I don't know whether I trust the other three who I just met this week, though." Her pager buzzed. "Oh, I have to go to work. Gochisosama."

"I'll clean up for you, mother."

"Thank you, Ami. Pay attention to what your teachers tell you!" And she was out the door, stopping only long enough for her shoes, her jacket, and the bento that Makoto had made for her. Mochizuki-san was close behind her; don't ask me how she knew Saeko-mama was leaving, because she was recharging electrically instead of eating breakfast with the rest of us.

Once Saeko-mama and Mochizuki-san were gone, Ryou revealed four spare keys to the front gate. "I don't trust Sailors Uranus and Neptune, either. I get the feeling that we'll have a falling-out at some point."

"Seventeen times of nineteen," Kasandara added.

"I was hoping we could trust them," Makoto said, "but I can see why everyone else thinks we can't."

"Considering what they do in canon, I don't know whether we should trust them," Ami replied.

"There is that. Oh, look at the time."

"Gochisosama!" We took our dirty dishes to the kitchen, left them in Meia, Ichiro and Sakura's care, grabbed our bento and homework, and headed for the door.

"Artemis, mind the house! We're leaving!" Minako called out.

"Have a good day at school!" he replied as we headed for the bus stop.

Thus did we start a new routine in our new lives.

When we got home that afternoon, we discovered that Shario-chan and Hayate-chan had added a thumbprint scanner to the door to the Situation Room.

We discovered it the hard way; Bunny-chan had trouble opening the door.

And then Rei-san had the same trouble when she and Ami arrived a half-hour later. Apparently, Ami had flown to Rei-san's place after school so she could present a key to her.

"Weren't you worried about being seen?" Naru-san asked.

"No, Ichiro taught me how to become virtually invisible using Mirage Hide." That was the same technique that he'd used to avoid detection when he planted the tracking device in Eudial's car.

"Speaking of Ichiro, where is he?" I asked.

"Right here, sir," he said from the door to the computer room, while carrying Shario-chan.

"Are you two having fun?"

"Minako-san, I would never dream of having 'fun' in the computer room!" Shario-chan looked insulted. "That's my workplace now."

"And, at least for the next two hours, this room is my workplace," Ichiro added.

"Three hours, please," Ami asked. "Mother reminded me this morning that we're behind in our studies. Although I have to go to juku now."

"We'll get you caught up once you're home," Sakura promised.

After she left, Ichigo-san said, "I don't know why she bothers wasting money on a juku when we have tutors here."

"That's easy," Rei-san replied. "Todai won't even look at her unless she has either a good juku or a good private school on her transcript."

"And Toyo Eiwa is one of the best schools in Tokyo, from what I've heard," Minako said, "which is why you don't have any worries about juku."

"Assuming I get into and stay in the top stream in high school," Rei-san replied. "And my chances of that happening are much better because of the tutoring you're giving us, Meia, Sakura, Ichiro, Hayate-chan, and Shario-chan."

Hayate-chan grinned. "Well, let's get to it, then! Take your seats, everyone."

Thus did we start another new routine in our new lives. And having the holoprojector instead of a notepad or a blackboard made it a lot easier to follow the course materials; whatever system the TSAB used for developing course notes, it definitely wasn't PowerPoint.

That Friday's Conversational English Club meeting was very short.

"What are we going to talk about today?"

"The Juuban matsuri that's taking place tonight?"

"Is that today? Gotta go; I promised I'd help staff a booth!"

"So did I."

"Me, too."

I looked at Ryou as the ladies left. "Meeting adjourned?"

"May as well."

I have to admit, Ryou looks better in yukata than I do. It being the early 1990s, the proliferation of multicoloured yukata hadn't happened yet, so we were both in the traditional indigo.

The ladies wore more formal and more colourful kimono, except for Minako, who wore a happi while staffing the goldfish-scoop attraction at the festival.

Watching as Ami helped one young boy catch a goldfish, I quietly said to Ryou, "I think your children will be well cared for, assuming the two of you decide to have any."

"Saeko-mama insists that we will," he replied. "But that's for a decade or more in the future. For now, I think we should wander over to the building beside the taiko."

We started walking over to the ceremonial drum. "You're expecting something to happen. But so is Rei-san; she's used her authority as a festival committee member to block road access to the area. Eudial can't just drive up."

"It isn't Eudial who I'm worried about," he replied as a orange-haired woman wearing a coat and sunglasses and carrying a white briefcase approached us.

"So I see."

Said woman stopped when she saw us, then asked Ryou, "Excuse me, but would you be available to show me around the festival?"

"I'm sorry, but I need to tend to some festival business right now."

She looked at me, then sighed deeply. "I suppose I'll have to find my own way around, then." And she walked off.

We watched as she headed in the direction that we wanted to go. Misreading her reaction, I complained, "I'm not *that* bad-looking, am I?"

"Not at all. You did catch the eye of two of our house-mates, Rob."

"And you caught the eye of one of those two, along with your fiancée. Minako needs to find a boyfriend who isn't one of us."

"I agree. As for that woman, do you really want to date her?"

I shook my head. "No, I do not want to date a Death Buster, or anyone other than my fiancée, thank you very much. But that explains how they're going to get the Pure Heart of... what's her name, again?"

"Touno Maya."

"Thanks. The daimon's in the briefcase." Then we saw a flare of light from behind the building closest to the taiko. "Or maybe I should say it *was* in the briefcase. How's your combat training coming along?"

"I'm not ready for real combat yet."

"Then I'm ditching you here, ol' buddy."

I found a place quiet enough to change my appearance, did so, then noticed Uranus and Neptune walking away from the flare. "Not a Talisman?" I asked them.

"You already know it wasn't," Neptune replied.

"And you aren't going to help fight?"

"We can't hold their hands forever," Uranus pointed out.

"That's fine, everything's a learning experience assuming they survive. If you'll excuse me?"

"Have fun," Uranus said with a grin as she and Neptune elegantly walked away.

I headed for the scene of the action, to discover Moon and Mars with their arms pinned to their sides because they were caught in drum heads and the daimon advancing on them with a spiked club in each hand. Moon was saying "Could you beat her drum first? That looks like it's going to be painful!"

Bunny-chan! You really didn't need to duplicate canon that closely! But then I remembered what the next line was in canon and decided to stand by and watch. I wasn't disappointed.

"I *knew* you couldn't do anything without my help!"

Okay, she skipped a line.

"That voice!" Moon and Mars said with matching smiles.

"I am the Pretty Guardian Trainee who fights for Love and for Justice! I am Sailor Chibimoon! In the Name of the Future Moon, I'll punish you! Pink Sugar Heart Attack!"

Nothing happened. Just like in canon. Stupid genre conventions.

"Pink Sugar Heart Attack!" Again, nothing happened. *Not* like in canon.

Time for me to step in. Manifesting two spiked clubs of my own, I said, "Hey, lady, those aren't [bachi](#)."

She spun on her heel. "What is this, senshi party night? And who are you?"

"This *is* a matsuri, lady! And standing in the place of the Sailor Senshi for Love and Friendship, I am Oni! Beating on people instead of on drums shows a lack of breeding! [Oguchi Daihachi](#) might forgive you, but I will not! In the name of my friends, I will punish you!"

"My speech sounds stupid when a guy says it," Moon complained.

I hate to tell you this, Bunny-chan... so I won't. "Complain later," I told her as I blocked the daimon's first swings.

"Pink Sugar Heart Attack!" This time, it worked. And, as in canon, it was nothing more than an annoyance... but Chibimoon and I kept the daimon distracted for long enough for Moon to get free.

"Moon Spiral Heart Attack!"

"Down!" I tackled and threw myself over Chibimoon, protecting her from the giant heart that flew over our bodies. Woah. Deja vu.

"Lovely!"

"Sorry about that," I said as I helped Chibimoon to her feet and made sure she wasn't hurt.

"That's okay, Oni-onii-san. I trust you. I know you had a good reason for doing that."

"It's a bit belated, but welcome back, Princess Lady. You've grown since you last visited."

"Thank you, Rob. It's good to be back. And it's been two years for me."

"Two years away. That sounds familiar." We both smiled.

By this point, we had all switched back to our outfits for the evening. While Princess Lady was wearing clothes that fit, she was still our littlest fashion victim; we'd have to do something about that. But first things first. "I was thinking about getting a snack, before Mimete attacked. I know that I'm still hungry."

She smiled politely. "In Crystal Tokyo, the appetite of the Legendary Red Oni is spoken of in hushed whispers."

Oh, really? I had better watch my weight, then. Unless she was teasing, in which case, I decided to get in a bit of teasing myself. "Would you care to try to match that appetite?"

"The Crown Princess and Heir Apparent of House Serenity accepts your challenge."

Bunny-chan sighed. "Fine, fine. What are we getting?"

"Ice cream with chocolate sauce and nuts and sprinkles and three cherries!"

I facepalmed. "You've been reading the fanfic collection that we brought back from the Lyrical reality."

"Yep!"

While we headed for the food stalls, I used the telepathic communicator that Naru-san had made for me to contact Shario-chan and Ichiro back home, letting them know that Princess Lady was back. Then Princess Lady thought to them that she planned to stay at the Tsukino house and please let Ikuko-mama know. Thus, once Bunny-chan and Bitty-Bunny (to translate "Chibiusa") finally got home, there was a bed waiting for her.

We got together at Maison Lyrique after school on Saturday and had an informal "welcome back" party for Princess Lady. After lunch – which of course included her favourite dessert, pudding – we took Princess Lady downstairs and showed her the Situation Room.

She made a beeline for her chair. "So this is what it looks like new!"

"You still have it in Crystal Tokyo?" Minako asked in amazement.

"It's well-cared-for, and only I get to sit in it. Because it's *my* chair." She sat down on it, then added, "But I think I need a cushion if I'm going to see over the table."

Ryou, as always, was prepared for her request. As he placed the cushion on her chair, he asked, "Why did you come back to this time?"

"Oh, right!" Princess Lady stood up, bowed formally, and presented an envelope to us "I came here to train. Yoroshiku onegaishimasu."

The simple act of saying "please" was never so simple in Japanese.

Usagi opened the envelope and read the note that she pulled from it. "To the Usagi of the 20th century, studying is important. Please study."

Looks like she pulled the wrong note from the envelope first.

"What do you think I do in this room, future me?"

"Watch movies?" Rei-san asked as Minako fired up a *Sailor V* game on the holoprojector. "And play games?"

"Besides that." Blushing, she pulled another note from the envelope, looked at it, then immediately handed it to me. Then she pulled out a third note. This one she read aloud. "It appears you will be training Chibiusa. I don't know how to thank you, but please take care of my daughter."

As the ladies looked at the letter and criticized its lack of kanji, Hayate-chan flew over to Princess Lady. "Don't mind the children. How have you been?"

While they talked, I read my note. Sure enough, there were no kanji in it. "Robu, I know that you know the real reason why my daughter has returned to your time. I am ordering you to keep it secret from her until after she has lived through the events."

I passed the note to my fiancée, who read it and passed it to Ami. Then Hayate-chan asked me, "Do we have paper and charcoal?"

"I think so, unless Naru-san's turned it all into diamonds." As Naru-san gave me a dirty look, Ryou handed Princess Lady a sketchpad and a box of charcoal sticks. "It looks like Ryou's ready for you."

"Thank you!" She proceeded to start sketching a picture of Hayate-chan.

"Well, what do we do now?" Chiba-san asked.

"I saw how well Princess Lady's attack worked last night. It barely qualified as comic relief." Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Princess Lady nodding in agreement without stopping her sketching. "That is among the stupidest of stupid genre conventions – the kind that get people killed. She's here to train. Let's train her *properly*." I turned to her and added, "After all, your name is Usagi Princess Lady Serenity, not Dan Hibiki."

Minako looked up from her video game. "Who?"

Princess Lady answered before I could. "You'll find out in a couple of years, Minako-neesan." Just in time for Galaxia to show up, I didn't say. "You can move now, Hayate-chan." She held up her sketchpad so we could all see it.

"You obviously don't need training in sketching," Ami commented. "That's very good for a quick sketch from somebody your age."

"It's very good for someone *my* age," I added. "Not all of us are as good at art as you are, Ami. The two of you have talent that the rest of us don't."

We spent the next ten minutes coming up with a training plan: Makoto and Sakura teaching her martial arts – Jeet Kun Do and TSAB basic hand-to-hand, respectively – Ami and Meia in math and magic including turning Pink Sugar Heart Attack into a reliable attack with the other spellcasters pulled in to teach specific spells, Rei-san in battlefield awareness and tactics, Hayate-chan in strategy and leadership while she was giving the same lessons to Bunny-chan, and just let Princess Lady run free and make friends as training in diplomacy. Just because we weren't allowed to say *why* she needed to make friends didn't mean we couldn't help her with the process. And of course we were going to take turns watching while she got to be a free-range child.

"Would you mind if I sat in on those strategy classes?"

We all turned to look at Minako.

"Oh, don't look so surprised, everybody. I think I should learn it. A hawk needs skill to hide its claws."

"That's 'A hawk with skill hides its claws', Mina-chan," Rei-san said.

"Close enough."

I smiled, for two reasons. First, she was right; you need to have the skill before you can hide it. Second, she was butchering an idiom, and it was good to see "silly Minako" come out to play if only for a moment.

"Well, I don't mind. Is that everything?" Hayate-chan asked.

"I'm going to be learning math in school," Princess Lady pointed out.

"You'll need to learn more advanced math than what they teach in grade school if you want to learn magic," Ami replied.

"Oh, okay."

Ichiro said, "We've missed something important. Swordsmanship. And you need to learn that as well, ma'am," he said to Bunny-chan.

"I will? Am I ever going to use it?"

He nodded. "According to both the records that we brought back from Midchilda and what Future Ami sent back to us, you're only going to use it in combat once, but you're going to *need* it when you do. And if we let your reality's canon happen as written, you won't have it."

"We've already changed things so that our lives aren't going according to that canon," Rei-san pointed out.

"It only takes one thing happening according to canon to make all the changes irrelevant," Ryou pointed out.

We spent the next two hours doing homework and being tutored by our Devices. Then Bunny-chan noticed the time and announced that she had to leave right away.

"What did the note from Neo-Queen Serenity say, again?" Rei-san asked.

"Studying isn't as important as going on a date!"

Princess Lady looked at Bunny-chan, then at the empty chair beside her, and decided, "I have to leave, too!"

«If Bunny-chan's date is with Chiba-san, this could be episode 104,» I sent to everybody but Bunny-chan.

«Episode 104 of what?»

I had completely forgotten that Hayate-chan taught Princess Lady how to send back when Rubeus' UFO was destroyed, despite the fact that she'd already done so since she returned to our time. «Something that you aren't cleared for yet, sorry,» I replied. Narrowing my sending to exclude her as well, I continued, «If it is, letting them go would make the most sense in the long run.»

"Very well, class dismissed," Ichiro announced.

Bunny-chan and Princess Lady immediately took off, followed quickly by Hayate-chan.

My fiancée and I took the time to get changed into something a little less comfortable, then we followed them. We just missed the *Crayon Shin-chan* crossover. Of all the shows they could have had a cameo from, it had to be that one. Why couldn't they have had a cameo from *Slam Dunk* or *Tenchi Muyo* or *Pom Poko* instead?

Because two of those weren't set in Tokyo and the other was a movie, of course.

"Ew. He was *weird*."

"Princess Lady, sometimes you'll meet somebody who you don't want to be friends with," I pointed out.

"Robu-niisan!" She turned to look at us. "And Mako-neesan! You look pretty, Mako-neesan, and you almost look as handsome as Mamo-chan, Robu-niisan. You should wear kimono more often." We were both in formal kimono, which I at least though wasn't as comfortable as my usual clothes.

Things progressed much as they had in canon, with the addition of two more Sailor Team members. We met up with Bunny-chan and Chiba-san on their date, Princess Lady insisted on inserting herself into their afternoon, she explained that she was in our time so she could make friends, Tenou-san and Kaioh-san showed up in kimono, and they were formally introduced to Princess Lady. Then they mentioned that they were going for tea.

"Oh, I'd love to have tea!" Princess Lady said.

«Going by what they're wearing, it's a Japanese tea ceremony, not an English tea party,» I sent, which surprised Tenou-san and Kaioh-san.

They were even more surprised when Princess Lady sent back. «I know how to behave at formal events, Robu-niisan.»

From there, things proceeded much as they did in canon but with two more people and without Bunny-chan and Princess Lady being surprised by the formality. Tamasaburou-san was a true master of the tea ceremony, and I quite enjoyed the experience. And I made sure that his ¥10,000,000 tea cup wasn't damaged... but I didn't ensure that Bunny-chan's pride didn't take a hit.

Bunny-chan, Princess Lady, and Chiba-san parted ways with us after the ceremony. Tenou-san and Kaioh-san accompanied us and we talked.

"You taught her telepathic communication?" Kaioh-san asked.

"We did," I replied. "We trust her."

"How far do you trust her?" Tenou-san asked.

My dearest replied, "She has a seat at our big table."

"That far... She's obviously more than she appears to be."

"Before you ask," I said, "she doesn't have a Talisman."

"Why are our opponents having so much trouble finding the Talismans?" asked Kaioh-san.

"You've come to the conclusion that I've been dropping hints about, I see." «The Death Busters are, by our standards, not sane. From what I saw in my homeworld's stories, they have technomagical computers that can identify anyone based on a simple query. So far, they've been asking 'which tea ceremony master has a Pure Heart?' or 'which miko has a Pure Heart?' or 'which volleyball player has a Pure Heart?' and then go look at those Pure Hearts, but I can count on the fingers of one hand how many more times they'll do that before Eudial will think to ask 'who has a Talisman?' Are you ready for when she does that?»

"You're sure you know where the Talismans are?" Tenou-san asked.

"Like the proton said to the atom, I'm positive."

"Then we have to decide who gets the Talismans when we're... gone," Tenou-san said.

"You're assuming that you have to die. And that's because you're assuming the Talismans *are* Pure Hearts and not just bound to Pure Hearts."

"So, which one's the case?" my dearest asked.

"Only Sailor Pluto knows that for sure."

Bunny-chan and Princess Lady didn't show up for training – the first training session in Maison Lyrique's back yard – the next day.

"Maybe they're at the shrine," I said. "Should I go look for them?"

"They aren't at the shrine," Ichiro replied. "Hayate-chan is with them. And you can't afford to skip training, sir."

"They've gone to see Tamasaburou-san, haven't they?" Ichiro nodded in reply to Makoto's question. "And he's going to get his Pure Heart extracted."

"Shot out by Eudial, six times out of seven," Ryou said.

"At least they aren't extracting two Pure Hearts at a time any more," Rei-san said.

"That's because Eudial and Mimete don't play well together," replied Meia.

"They hate each other's guts," Sakura added.

"Well, shall we get started?"

"We might as well. Hyperspatial Sphere Generate!" After the spell took effect, Ami explained, "We just moved in. I don't want to damage the house."

Training progressed, including special training for Tuxedo Kamen and Okuni so that they could cover each other's blind spots while swordfighting – training that Jupiter and I had received back on Midchilda. Then we had a two-on-two match, Jupiter and me against Tuxedo Kamen and Okuni.

"You beat us three times in a row," Naru-san complained once that was over.

"The two of you aren't used to fighting as a pair. We are."

Then the edge of the Hyperspatial Sphere shimmered and four people walked in: Bunny-chan, Princess Lady, Tenou-san, and Kaioh-san.

"You're late," Sakura said. "Transform and grab a shinai, each of you."

"We aren't your students," Tenou-san complained.

"Neither is the Chibster. Yet."

Before they could complain again, Ami said, "You don't need to take this training. Before you decline, I'll point out that Sakura, Ichiro, and Meia are all certified combat instructors, the training is in techniques that you can use on a battlefield, and it's free."

Kaioh-san asked, "Where is the bōgu?"

Princess Lady transformed to Chibimoon and picked up a shinai that was almost as tall as she was. "You don't need armour when you're in Senshi form. Even I know that." Then she pointed it at me and called "Chest!"

"Stop!" Ichiro floated over to Chibimoon. "You do *not* simply begin a match, young lady. Wait for me, as the referee, to tell you to begin."

"Sorry..."

"Donaldson, you will be testing your opponent's skill level during this match. Serenity, I expect you to fight to the best of your ability." Then he got out of our way as Makoto tossed a shinai to me. "Begin."

"Chest!" she called again and rushed straight at me as if this was a kendo match.

I called "Head!" and tapped her between her rabbit-ear twin tails before she could reach me. "Princess Lady, please treat this as kenjutsu, not kendo."

"Okay." Then she swung at me without calling her attack. Unfortunately for her, she telegraphed her action.

"Much better!" I said while blocking her attack.

We continued for three minutes straight, both of us increasing the power and subtlety of our attacks until she reached her limit. Then we continued for another half-minute, with Ichiro calling out attacks and defences that he wanted to see us use.

Finally he called "Stop! Serenity, take a break. Donaldson, Kino, Sakura, I would speak with you."

The four of us got into a huddle. "She isn't a beginner," Sakura said. "Her attacks lacked finesse and power, but she knew the forms that TSAB training uses."

Makoto added, "We might want to test her with a bokken."

"I'm up for that if she is," I replied. "What about the others?"

"Tenou looks like she's convinced," replied Sakura. "Kaioh, not so much."

"Kaioh-san doesn't need to learn how to use the Deep Aqua Mirror as a weapon," Ichiro said.

"Despite the name, the Space Sword's more a tanto than a katana."

"It's neither, darling. It has a curved blade. And canon shows that Uranus can focus a magical attack through it."

"I expect any Senshi can learn how to focus an attack through a weapon," Sakura commented.

"Do we ask Uranus to become your student, or wait for her to ask?" I asked.

Ichiro immediately replied, "We wait. If she asks us, she'll be more committed to learning. Are we done?"

We nodded, then broke from the huddle to see Bunny-chan and Princess Lady giving Meia their after-action report from the day's battle. Ami was telling Kaioh-san, "We always do this. It's the best way to learn what we did right and should continue doing, and what we did wrong and should stop doing."

"That implies there are other ways to learn."

"There are other ways for other people to learn from our mistakes, but those lessons are usually written with our blood."

We ignored them. "Hey, Chibster! Are you up for round two?"

She looked at Meia, who nodded. "Sure, Sakura-san!"

"Then ditch the shinai, grab a bokken, and show us what you can do!" While Sakura said that, I selected a bokken and manifested a helmet.

Once we were ready, Ichiro called "Begin!"

I stood my ground. So did Princess Lady.

So it's to be a contest of wills to begin with. Stupid genre conventions.

I don't have the patience for a contest of wills. I broke first and swung at her.

She blocked. I went under her guard and swung up, trying to force the bokken out of her hand.

She held on, which meant she went flying. She landed on her feet. That surprised me enough that she almost got a solid blow in. I dodged to the side and counterattacked, which she wasn't ready for. Pulling my attack at the last moment, I knocked the wind out of her instead of breaking a rib.

"You're thinking kendo instead of kenjutsu again, Princess Lady!"

At that point, she *threw* her bokken at me. I put up a soft forcefield and grabbed it out of midair so that it wouldn't hit any of the others.

"Now you're unarmed. How do you expect to win?"

"Pink Sugar..."

As I immediately put three forcefield domes over her, Ichiro called "Stop!"

She stopped her attack.

"We are supposed to be in a sword fight, young lady, not a spell battle! You have at most two years of training with magical effects. I have twice that much, half of which was in actual combat and the other half spent under trainers who think fighting dirty is a good thing. The two of us might be the least powerful casters in this dome, but you'd better believe I know more dirty tricks than you do. You do *not* want to try to get the drop on me magically. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, sir. I'm sorry."

I turned to Ichiro. "Should we bother continuing, sensei?"

"No, I've seen what I needed to see. Donaldson, chewing out your training opponent is never a good idea. You're done for the day. Serenity, I need to write a proper training plan for you. You can stay and watch." Then he turned to Bunny-chan. "Tsukino-san, are you ready to begin your lessons?"

"Do I have to?"

Sakura said, "You know that you need this skill."

"I guess I'm ready, then."

At that point, I left the Hyperspatial Sphere, so I have no idea what happened after that.

After I showered and changed clothes, I headed for the kitchen to see whether there was any prep work that I could do to help my dearest with making dinner. Instead, I discovered Artemis and Luna looking at the kitchen wall.

"What *is* it?" Luna asked in wonder.

"It's a glowing red dot..." Artemis' voice trailed off.

"A glowing... red... dot..."

Both Mau were transfixed.

Then I noticed that Ryou was also in the room. He moved the laser pointer that he had bought on Lyrical Earth, and two feline heads pivoted to follow the dot.

After a moment, I asked, "Have you had enough fun at their expense yet?"

"It isn't 'fun', Rob. It's research." Ryou turned the laser pointer off, and Luna and Artie both blinked.

"Research for what?" Luna asked.

Kasandara replied, "Classified."

Stupid genre conventions. "Whatever the reason is, it had better be a good one."

Ryou nodded. "I assure you, it is."

"Are you going to tell us?"

"Not yet."

I was getting angry again. Instead of shouting at the others, I headed for the Situation Room and asked Shario-chan to put something relaxing on the holoprojector for me to watch.

Two hours and all four episodes of *Yokohama Kaidashi Kikō* later, and I was finally fit company for lunch. By then, lunch was over... but Makoto had left a plate for me.

Once again, I woke up in the middle of the night. Was I showing long-term effects of having my Pure Heart shot out? I wasn't native to this reality; who knew how I was going to react to having part of myself ripped away and put back by the local magical effects?

I hoped I was being paranoid, and tried to get back to sleep.

And then I was awakened by a knock at my door. I got up, put a robe on over my pyjamas, noticed that it was an hour before I usually woke up, and walked over to my bedroom door. "Hello?"

"May I come in?"

I opened the door. "Of course, Saeko-mama. Is something wrong?"

She sat down on my desk chair and motioned me to sit on my bed. "That's what I'm here to ask you. Ami told me about yesterday. I want to hear what happened from your perspective."

So I told her, holding nothing back. While she wasn't my legal guardian in this reality – that was still Setsuna-san's responsibility – she was my mother in every other respect... and she was also my doctor.

At the end of it, she said, "You've told me what I expected to hear. You've gone through ... how many traumatic experiences in the last few years?" She started counting them on her fingers. "Being brought to this world in the first place, being forced to kill a classmate..."

"How did you know about that?"

"Artemis told me. Having to stand and watch your girlfriend go to her death, being forced into yet another dimension, and Ami told me that you nearly went into hysterics when you realized what had happened to you, watching while four women died in front of you, the second dying because my daughter gave her the choice to live or die, the third dying because your fiancée killed her and the last being somebody who died in front of me as well, nearly being killed by somebody who you trusted, having your Pure Heart literally shot out of you... I've run out of fingers."

"Did Ami tell you what I asked her not to tell Ryou?"

Saeko-mama nodded. "I *am* her mother." Which, in Japan, was explanation enough; one can always get another wife but one cannot get another mother. Even if we'd done our best to disprove that by getting Saeko-mama. "You weren't in your right mind; I don't bear any malice toward you for wanting to cheat on your fiancée with your friend's fiancée."

"Thank you, Saeko-mama."

"Now, I'm neither a psychologist nor a surgeon, I'm merely a general practitioner in residence at Juban Daini General Hospital. But being a GP in residence means I see many more maladies than an ordinary doctor would. And you, Donarudoson Robu-kun, are about to snap. You hide it well, most of the time, but you didn't hide it yesterday and those of us who know what to look for can see it."

"Did Ami ask you to look in on me?"

"No. Mochizuki-san and Makoto-chan did."

Our live-in nurse and my fiancée. "I see. Who else knows?"

"Just Kino-kannushi. I asked him to recommend somebody who could help you meditate, and it's doctor's orders that you *do* meditate and find your centre. Kakusui-san is expecting you this evening." She handed me an envelope with two round-trip train tickets in it. "It's also doctor's orders that Makoto-san keep an eye on you; the way you are now, she might be the only person who you trust."

"I trust Usagi-san and Princess Lady!"



"You trust Chibiusa enough to yell at her in front of other people."

I sighed deeply. "When you put it that way... Yes, I see what you're saying. If you'll excuse me, sensei, I need to get dressed and pack."

"One more thing: Sakura, Ichiro, Shario-chan, and Hayate-chan are *not* to accompany you."

I almost argued, but then realized that she was right. "Yes, ma'am."

And so it was that Makoto and I spent a week in the mountains. Without being able to fly anywhere, and the stairway to the shrine where we would be staying was 52 times as long as the stairway to Rei-san's shrine. We know that because Ami mentioned it in canon.

Yes, we had to work during our meditation. Our host, Kakusui Yakushiji-san, was targeted by a daimon. I don't want to talk about that, except to confirm that he didn't have a Talisman and that Makoto and I were able to defeat the daimon without assistance.

Nor do I want to talk about what Makoto and I did that Wednesday night, because we didn't do anything. And it was my birthday, too.

I do want to talk about what Kakusui-san taught me that week, after the daimon attacked him.

"No road leads one better than another road does. I will walk this road." Which I took to mean that sometimes things happened that I couldn't change, and there was no point to worrying about them. This is the road that destiny or whoever it was who brought me to this reality originally or both has set me upon, and it was up to me to either walk it or become consumed by what-ifs and how-dare-yous.

"Even tai, when alone, isn't delicious." Which is a Japanese idiom. It didn't matter how good I had it if I was alone. The only way to be happy is to share my life with my family and friends. And, I realized, I couldn't do that if I couldn't be open with them. I was almost always happy when I was with Makoto, but I had no secrets from my fiancée; I had to extend that outlook to the others who were close to me.

"The world would be boring if we all agree." I wasn't going to find anybody in this world or any other who agreed with me about everything, not even our favourite colours. And even something that I thought was important, such as Ami's and my different opinions on whether to let somebody live or die, wasn't something that was big enough to come between us. Learning *that* one, and it took me an entire day to figure it out, went a long way to helping me find my centre. And I spent the evening after I learned that writing a letter of apology to Princess Lady for how I had treated her, and that she was right to try doing something that I wasn't expecting.

"When I talk about tomorrow, the mice in the ceiling laugh." Another idiom, but one that definitely pertains to me. It echoes Robbie Burns's famous words, "But Mousie, thou art no thy-lane, In proving foresight may be vain: The best laid schemes o' Mice an' Men Gang aft agley." In relying so much on my knowledge of canon events and on Ryou's precognition, I had forgotten that it's impossible to know the future for sure, so the plans we had were at best well-thought-out hopes.

By Friday morning, Kakusui-san declared me fit to return home. "You are not perfect, but nobody on this Earth is perfect. Please remember what you've learned here."

We got home to discover a reception committee, so I didn't need to wait to present my apology to Princess Lady in front of those who had heard my outburst. She presented an apology to me at the same time, saying that it was wrong of her to change our test without permission. We read each other's letters, looked at each other, laughed from the bottom of our hearts, and hugged each other then and there and propriety be damned.

And once we were alone, Bunny-chan told us that they had dealt with two daimons while we were away. Which meant that, if things went according to canon, there were only two more victims to go before Eudial thought to ask the obvious question. Since one of those two was Minako, we already knew things weren't going to go according to canon.

Makoto and I had a week's worth of homework to do Saturday afternoon. Since everyone else was being tutored in the Situation Room, we commandeered the dining room table and got to it.

Which meant that we were the ones who answered the door when our visitor arrived.

"Who could that be?" Makoto asked when the doorbell chimed.

"Only one way to find out." I walked over to the intercom between the front door and the gate. "Hello, Maison Lyrique."

"Hello," replied an older male voice in English. "My name is Edwards, and I was told that Ami Mizuno lives here now."

I switched to English. "It's good to see you again, Mr. Edwards. We met at the Chess Tower last year. I'll be right out." As I put my shoes on, I said, "My dearest, would you call the others from the basement, please? I suspect they might want to see Mr. Edwards again."

"Of course!" And she headed downstairs while I headed outside.

Opening the gate, I bowed to our guest, then noticed that one of our neighbours was waiting with him. "Hello again, Mr. Edwards." Then I switched to Japanese. "And thank you for waiting with our guest, Miharu-chan."

"You're welcome. Can Artemis come out and play?"

"You should ask him yourself. Come in, please." Switching back to English, I said to Edwards, "My apologies for keeping you waiting. Please, come this way."

"Oh, that's quite all right, Mr. Donaldson." Either he remembered my name, or he read the house's nameplate and reached the obvious conclusion.

«Artie, Miharu-chan wants to play. Do you have time?»

«For her, always. I'm on my way.»

«And we have another guest.»

«I'll wait inside, then,» he replied as I opened the front door.

"Welcome to our humble abode, Mr. Edwards," I said as I offered him a pair of guest slippers. Miharu-chan didn't change her footwear, because Artemis leapt into her arms before she could. The two went to play outside.

He chuckled at their antics, then replied to me, "Thank you for allowing me into your home. Hello, ladies!"

Makoto and the others walked into the living room.

"It's good to see you again," Makoto said in English.

"Welcome to our home," Ami added.

"Please make yourself comfortable," added Minako.

"Hello," added Rei-san, a bit hesitantly.

"Thank you!" Ichigo-san said.

"That's a bit wrong, Ichigo-san," Rei-san pointed out quietly.

"Er... yay?"

"No no no Naru. Gomen. We no good at Eigo."

You're better than you think you are, Bunny-chan.

"Ah, then I should speak Japanese," Mr. Edwards replied in that language. "I was speaking with Chiba-san earlier today, and he suggested that I invite all of you to a party that I am hosting on Wednesday evening."

"A party? Will Mamo-chan be there?" Princess Lady asked.

"Chiba-san said that he was willing to attend."

I wondered how, with all the changes we had made to canon so far, episode 108 was taking place as closely to canon as it could. "Thank you for the invitation. I believe we can all attend, although I'll leave it up to the others to confirm that. What sort of party is it?"

"Oh, nothing special. Polite conversation, dancing, the usual. I do enjoy bringing young people together so that you can meet each other in a comfortable place, although some of my previous guests have told me that I might have been too formal."

"So when you say dancing..." Makoto started.

"Why, waltzes, of course. Or as close as you can manage."

"And the formality extends to our wardrobe, I assume," Naru-san said.

"Of course."

"And since this party is being held at your house, and you are from Great Britain, will we be expected to speak English?" Minako asked.

"Your accent reminds me of home, miss. Yes, my guests do usually speak English when visiting my house."

At this point, Ryou came in. "I'm home!" he said in Japanese.

"Welcome back," Ami replied in English.

"I'll put the groceries in the kitchen and be right with you," he said in English.

"Unfortunately, I cannot stay for very long," Mr. Edwards replied. He reached into his jacket pocket and withdrew a single invitation. "Here are the directions to my humble abode. I look forward to seeing you there."

"I'll see you to the gate," I said.

On the way back to the house, I asked Miharu-chan whether she wanted to join us for dinner. She refused politely, saying that she was expected back at home in an hour, and I let her know that she was welcome to stay until then. Artie purred as I headed back indoors.

Once I was back inside, I set my cellphone to chime in an hour, then headed for the kitchen to help Ryou unpack to the oh-so-delightful refrain of Bunny-chan repeating, "I get to go to a party! But I have to speak English... But I get to go to a party! But I have to speak English... But..." We tuned her out rather quickly.

"Ryou ol' buddy, if I was to corner Eudial at this party and suggest to her that she stop looking for Pure Hearts and start looking for Talismans, would that change anything for the worse?"

"Rob ol' buddy, I was about to suggest that you do that because it would change things for the better. She'll be more inclined to trust you after you give her that hint."

"Eight times of eleven," added Kasandara.

"And if you don't give her the hint, she'll think of it herself."

I nodded as I put the milk in the fridge. "So, no downside, and a plan that I'm thinking of will work better if she trusts us. Thanks."

"Plan?" asked Makoto as she walked into the kitchen.

I told them.

"You don't think small," Ryou said.

My dearest added, "I hope it works."

"So do I."

Ryou, Ami, Minako, Makoto, our Devices, and I retired to the Situation Room after dinner, "I wish we had more open room here, but this is the best we have."

Shario-chan grinned and said from the computer room, "More space, coming up!" She flipped a switch and the octagonal table and holoprojector sank into the floor, being covered by more flooring. "Just move the chairs out of the way and you've got plenty of room!"

"So we do," I said as we all grabbed chairs and moved them up against the walls.

"Why do we need room?" Minako asked.

"Because we need to practice our dancing skills," Ami replied. "I know I haven't danced since we were in Midchilda."

"Which sorts of dancing?" Meia asked.

"I like the Rigatean Three-Step," Sakura commented. The Rigatean Three-Step is named after the city of Rigate on Midchilda. For folks who've never visited Midchilda, imagine, if you can, a formalized version of a [Lindy Hop](#) – great for adapting into pairs figure skating routines, not so great for a ballroom with its slower dances.

"I've always preferred the Alzutian Paduana," Ichiro said. If you're imagining an [Alsatian](#) version of a [pavane](#), then I have to tell you not to trust those [false friends](#); it's more a Texas-style line dance.

"It's neither of those, alas," Makoto replied. "It looks like it's going to be a series of Viennese waltzes."

Ichiro, Sakura, and Meia looked puzzled. "What's a waltz?"

"It's one of the first dances that Admiral Graham taught my personality donor once she could walk again," Hayate-chan said. She added "Mirage Hide" and was suddenly Minako's height. "Do you mind if I lead?"

"I don't mind at all. The guys at the party will expect to lead, after all."

"Thanks. Shario-chan, does Rob have 'An der schönen, blauen Donau' in his collection?"

"I'm not sure..." she said as she started a search.

I made it easier for her. "Look in the classical collection for its English name, 'By the Beautiful Blue Danube'."

"Found it!" She played it over the room's speakers, and we proceeded to dance for the next nine minutes.

Makoto and Ami were the best at the dance, since they'd learned its nuances during the Princess Seminar during the Missing Time. Minako and Ryou were almost as good, and... well, Hayate-chan and I didn't embarrass ourselves while we shook the rust out of our joints.

"Do ballroom orchestras on Earth usually include brass instruments?" Meia asked.

"If they do, I think I could like ballroom dancing here," Sakura added.

"No, I was being cheap when I added that to my collection," I replied. "Why pay for a copy when [the U.S. Marine Band makes one available for free](#)?"

"Awww..." As my dearest comforted her Unison Device, I helped Shario-chan compile a playlist for us. Ryou had grabbed a few other waltzes while we were on Lyrical Earth.

We continued practising our dancing for an hour, improving as we remembered our lessons. Halfway through, once they'd seen the steps a few times, Ichiro and Shario-chan joined us.

"I can see why people like this dance," Shario-chan said at the end of our session, Ichiro's arms still around her.

Hayate-chan grinned. "You two should try a tango some time."

"Tango?"

"One of the more passionate of Earth's dances, and one that I don't know," I said. "Some people say that, if you do it properly, the couple has to get married afterwards."

Shario-chan grinned and said, "I *definitely* want to learn that dance!"

We all practised waltzing after school the next day; Ryou, Ichiro, and I taking turns dancing with the ladies.

We started out with Ryou dancing with Ami, Ichiro dancing with Minako, and of course me dancing with my dearest, while the others watched. I was much better than I was the previous day.

Then we asked some of the others to dance; Ryou danced with Naru-san, Ichiro danced with Rei-san, and I was the lucky one to dance with Bunny-chan.

"Pretend I'm Chiba-san and let me guide you around the dance floor," I told her.

"You'll never be Mamo-chan, Robu-san, but I suppose I can let you tell me where I should be going."

"I won't tell you after the first few times, I'll just press against your back. Like so. Turn to your left," I said as I guided her.

At the end of the dance, I bowed to my partner. "I'm impressed. You didn't step on my feet at all during the dance. Your reputation for clumsiness is overblown."

Then Ichigo-san said, "I've never danced in my life."

"I'll be your partner, then," Ichiro volunteered.

Ryou and I approached our fiancées, then we each asked the other's love to dance. They were surprised but went along with our suggestion. Luckily, Shario-chan played one of the shorter waltzes, because Makoto towered over Ryou and I was having trouble accommodating Ami's smaller steps. At the end of it, we escorted the ladies back to their chairs. "It was a lovely dance," I began.

"And I enjoyed myself," Ryou added.

Together, we finished, "But let's not do that again." Both of our fiancées grinned and nodded in agreement.

Ichiro and Ichigo-san danced together again while Ryou danced with Rei-san and I danced with Minako. Our partners smiled when we finished the dance, so we must have done something right. Unfortunately, Minako wasn't a particularly good dancer.

Then, while Ryou danced with Ichigo-san and Ichiro danced with Bunny-chan, I snuck in a dance with Hayate-chan.

"I was wondering when you were going to ask me to dance," she said.

"I'm wondering why I didn't ask earlier," I replied with a smile. I knew she was shapeshifted from her real height, but that didn't make dancing with her any less enjoyable.

We danced one more waltz – Makoto and I, Ami and Ryou, and Hayate-chan and Ichiro – before Shario-chan raised the table and we started the regularly-scheduled tutoring session.

We had an extra-long study session on Tuesday.

Then we attended Mr. Edwards's party on Wednesday.

Ryou, Chiba-san, and I were in suits. Makoto insisted that I wear midnight blue, and Ami insisted that Ryou wear black, reversing our usual suit colours. Chiba-san wore black, of course.

The ladies, on the other hand, stole the show.

Tenou-san and Kaioh-san wore the tuxedo and dress that they wore in canon, since they were providing the music for the party.

Naru-san wore [a forest-green dress with frilled short sleeves, with a matching hair ribbon and white gloves](#). She added more diamonds to her outfit than I thought practical, but if she wanted to show off her family's store's wares, who was I to say no?

Ichigo-san wore a little red dress, the shade of ripe strawberries, with elbow-length sleeves and one button unbuttoned at her neck.

Rei-san wore her usual crimson dress.

Bunny-chan wore a prim and proper pink dress; no doubt, her father picked it out for her so she'd look attractive but not too attractive.

Minako wore the classic little black dress, with her usual red hair ribbon.

Ami... dressed to make everybody's heads turn; she definitely didn't look like the top-ranked student in the entire country, not in that [sleeveless strapless backless dress that went below the knees, primarily in black with lines in blue and other colours, with matching high-heeled shoes and a black choker collar](#). She was using either glue or magic to keep that dress on.

Saving the best for last, Makoto dressed to turn one particular head, and it worked. Her dress was sleeveless and off-the-shoulder, in midnight blue, with just the right amount of décolletage for my taste. My impure thoughts came to the fore as I thought that it was the kind of dress that I both wanted to see her in and get her out of.

«Did you intend to send that to me?» she asked with a smile.

«I have to admit that my subconscious made that decision.» "You look gorgeous," I added out loud. "I don't remember seeing that dress before."

"Setsuna-san made it for me."

The nine of us arrived by limousine; crowding into taxis would have ruined those dresses. Ichiro rode in my pocket, while Meia and Sakura hid in Ami and Makoto's purses.

During the Missing Time, I had told Ami and Makoto that they were going to have to be the elegant Senshi until Sailor Neptune showed up. But that was before we'd spent two years in Midchilda, learning and growing from young teenagers to young adults.

Even Tenou-san and Kaioh-san stopped and looked as we made our entrance.

We mingled. We chatted. Bunny-chan got her hands on a glass from the grown-ups' tray... and she has zero tolerance for alcohol. Then, while Ami cast a healing spell on Bunny-chan to sober her up and Ryou talked with Tenou-san and Kaioh-san, I noticed somebody who I suspected wasn't on the guest list.

«Time to lay the groundwork for that plan,» I sent to my dearest.

«Yes, let's finally meet her socially.»

We made our way over to the redheaded Death Buster. "I wasn't expecting to see you here so early, Arimura-san," I said.

"Do I know you?"

"I was wearing a different face the last time you saw me, but I did wear this face when you tested the sights on your first weapon."

"Please don't try to run," Makoto said. "You'll only call attention to yourself, and I doubt you're ready for that."

She kept a smile on her face. "You're being very nice for sworn opponents."

"This is the real us. Who are you looking for today, if I might ask? A student with a Pure Heart? A philanthropist with a Pure Heart? Someone else with a Pure Heart, perhaps?"

"Don't you already know?"

I shrugged my shoulders. "I have a good idea, but it's always polite to ask. And speaking of asking, why do you keep asking your computers to find people with Pure Hearts, instead of asking for them to find people with Talismans?"

Eudial actually looked surprised at my question. Then she smiled again. "Thank you so much for the suggestion, Donarudoson-san."

"All of this running around that we've been doing is so wasteful of time and energy, don't you agree?"

"Yes. Yes, I do agree. Why are you helping me?"

"To be honest, we want the Talismans, too. You now know how to find them, and you've always known how to extract them."

"So we're to fight once I've found them?"

Makoto asked, "Don't we always?"

"It is an occupational hazard," I added. "Ah, but our host wants our attention."

"Thank you again. I'll have to be on my way now."

I bowed to her, European style. "Of course. You are a busy woman, after all. Until we meet again."

As Mr. Edwards thanked us for coming to his little get-together and invited us to listen to Kaioh-san play for us, Eudial made her way out of the room.

Unfortunately, in her rush to get back to her computers, she left a box behind.

After Kaioh-san finished playing and left her violin in a secure place, she and Tenou-san headed for the dance floor. Bunny-chan and Chiba-san joined them, as did Makoto and me, along with a few other couples.

We danced to prerecorded music. As we passed by Tenou-san and Kaioh-san on the dance floor, we heard Tenou-san say "Their technique lacks something, but they're so obviously in love that it doesn't matter."

«She's looking at Usagi and Mamoru, darling. Not at us.»

«You two know how to dance,» Tenou-san sent back, «and you do it well. You're anticipating each other's movements perfectly and without telepathy.»

«Thank you,» I replied. «The two of you are as elegant on the dance floor as you are everywhere else that I've seen you.»

The dance ended and we made our way to one of the refreshment tables, passing Minako, Rei-san, Naru-san, and Ichigo-san playing jan-ken-pon off to one side.

"What are they up to?" Kaioh-san asked.

"I suspect they're trying to decide who gets to ask your girlfriend for the next dance," my dearest replied.

"With Ryou as the second-place prize and me as the consolation prize," I added.

"You're a reasonably handsome young man."

Reasonably. Thanks so much, Kaioh-san. "Ah, but I'm obviously a foreigner. And most of them see me as a friend, not a love interest. It takes a special woman to fall in love with somebody like me," I said while putting my arm around Makoto's waist, which got a smile from her.

"And what does that say about them?" Tenou-san asked with a smile. "They do know that I'm a girl, don't they?"

My dearest nodded. "At the moment, I doubt they're looking past the surface. You'll notice that Ami and Usagi aren't taking part."

"I'm also noticing the time. We should be going some place quiet now, to get changed."

Makoto and I nodded. "We understand."

As they walked away, Kaioh-san said to Tenou-san, "I wonder when they'll notice that you're gone."

And I said to Makoto, "They deserve to get at least one dance in. Do you mind?"

"What do you think of their dresses?"

I knew what she was really asking. "I hope their dresses stay on all night."

"In that case, go right ahead."

I gave my fiancée a quick kiss on the cheek, then looked around for Ryou... who I saw was headed toward me.

"There you are. Shall we ask the others to dance? Ami doesn't have a problem with me dancing with someone else."

"Makoto's given me permission, as well." We walked over to where the others were still playing rock-paper-scissors. "Naru-san, may I have this dance?"

"Well..."

"Tenou-san just left. You'll have to settle for the two of us, or some other student. So allow me to re-phrase. Naru-san, will you grant me the favour of a dance?"

"When you put it that way, how can I refuse?" She smiled as she took my arm.

Ryou asked Ichigo-san for the honour of a dance, and we made our way to the dance floor.

Alas, they didn't get a complete dance; somebody with a Pure Heart bumped into that box and the daimon emerged from it.

Without an obvious target or a Death Buster to give it orders, it went wild, using the strings on its violin-shaped body to produce a cacophony that had everyone in the room covering their ears.

Well, almost everyone.

"Does anybody want to listen to this?" Naru-san shouted, her dress suddenly looking like it was made from a slice of the night sky and her kabuki makeup clearly visible.

«It's a freaking sonic attack!» Sakura sent back while peeking out of the top of my dearest's purse. «How are you not affected?»

«Not the time to ask!» Naru-san sent back as the gems from her jewelry flew together and formed a tantō... which she threw.

The attack stopped as the daimon suddenly had a dagger sticking out of its neck. Then the monster dissolved into its component parts.

In the sudden silence, Sakura sent, «Woah. Okuni uses knife, it's super effective.»

I noticed that Bunny-chan was looking at Ami. «I feel... useless. Is this how everybody else feels when I one-shot the monsters?» My dearer friend just nodded. «I'm going to have to stop doing that. Sorry.»

"That was amazing," I said to Naru-san. Then I whispered to my jacket pocket, "Ichiro, whatever you're teaching my dance partner, keep it up."

«Certainly, sir.»

Then I noticed that the other dancers, realizing that the show was over, had returned to their waltz. "Shall we?" I asked Naru-san.

"Please, yes. I need to do something while the adrenaline rush is still going. How do you do this every week?"

"You get used to it."

By the end of the dance, Naru-san's breathing had returned to normal. I bowed to her, she curtsied in return, and we headed over to where Rei-san and Minako were waiting.

Oh, dear.

«Ryou, you remember how Minako said that she had thought about dating each of us?»

«Rob, don't do this to me.»

«I had to dance with her during practice. And you know how jealous Makoto gets. If Minako wants anything more than a dance, I'm going to have to throw you under the buss.»

«If you're willing to resort to that bad a pun, I have no option but to concede. You owe me one.»

«Thanks. I know,» I smiled and asked, "May I have the next dance, Rei-san?"

She smiled in return – a polite smile, but a smile nonetheless. "Certainly, Robu-san."

And of course Minako accepted Ryou's offer to dance. We lead the ladies around the dance floor for a few minutes, then let them go back to their friends while the two of us returned to our fiancées.

And, yes, Minako did try to kiss her future brother-in-law.

I spent the rest of the party with my dearest, and one of the pieces we danced to was "[Les Patineurs](#)". Not-so-stupid genre conventions.

Then we went home, Makoto and I helped each other out of our party outfits... and we got some sleep. We had classes the next day, and we didn't know when Eudial would attack Uranus and Neptune. And we *still* hadn't celebrated my birthday. Stupid, *stupid* genre conventions.

The Death Busters didn't attack the next day. Or the day after, and we discussed the matter at the Conversational English Club.

"I am tired of seeing people die because they were involved in something we're fighting."

"What can we do about it, Rob?"

"I'm glad you asked, Minako..." And I proceeded to tell her and Ami the plan that I had come up with over the last couple of weeks.

At the end of it, Ryou commented, "I've been thinking about this plan of yours. You're assuming that the showdown will be in the same place that it was in canon."

"It has to take place somewhere."

Ami pulled out the Mercury Computer and checked a report. "According to Chacornac's logs, Eudial's car has been at the Marine Cathedral all afternoon."

"Thanks, Ami. Ryou, I think my assumption is a pretty safe one."

"And *I'm* assuming that I don't have a role in your plan," Minako said.

"Other than as part of the Sailor Team, yes. Unless you want to fly again."

"No, thank you!"

And then it was Saturday, and Bunny-chan asked that we do what we could to stop the fight that was about to happen. Apparently, Kaioh-san had called her to let her know they were going to finally find the Talismans at the Marine Cathedral.

"I spent half the night calculating coordinates," Ami said. "We can't miss school because Makoto and Rob have already missed too many classes, but we can leave as soon as classes end at lunch time."

"Sorry about that," I said.

"Does Rei know?" asked my dearest.

Ami nodded. "I spoke with her after dinner last night. Our first stop is Toyo Eiwa, then we go to the Marine Cathedral."

That Saturday's classes felt like the longest I'd ever sat through. At least Ichiro was paying attention for me.

Ah, yes – Ichiro was in Unison with me, Meia was in Unison with Ami, Sakura was in Unison with Makoto, and our partners all used Mirage Hide to make us look like ourselves.

Hayate-chan had borrowed the Mercury Computer and was already with Princess Lady. Naru-san had the second tracking device that she had built; when we moved, our backup would know. Sakurada-sensei was kind enough to pretend she didn't notice that we were ready to leave three minutes before the bell, and that Ichigo-san and Ryou had brought along bags large enough to hold four school bags each.

And, once the bell rang, move we did. We changed into our outdoor shoes and headed for a quiet corner in the school's back yard, where Mercury and Jupiter let their disguises drop, I changed my disguise to combat-ready Oni, and the others transformed to Moon, Venus, and Okuni.

Then Mercury cast "Teleport!"

Less than five seconds later, we were at Toyo Eiwa Jogakuin. Rei-san transformed to Mars and joined us, and Mercury cast a second Teleport spell.

The time between us hearing the end-of-day bell and arriving at Marine Cathedral was less than two minutes.

And we were still too late to take part in the fight between Eudial and the Senshi of the Outer Planets. Obviously, they'd skipped school; Mugen Academy must be lax on taking attendance.

We made our way inside, as quietly as possible... until we triggered one of Eudial's traps. Luckily for us, the machine guns dry fired; this was probably where Neptune took an entire drum of bullets and survived the experience.

"Mercury, can you find them using... no, you don't have the Mercury Computer right now." Moon said.

"That isn't the only way to look for somebody. Wide Area Search!"

It took less than a minute for her Midchildan magic to find Eudial and the Senshi of the Outer Planets. Or, rather, the bodies of the Senshi of the Outer Planets.

We rushed to the scene and got a shot from Eudial's second Fire Buster weapon for our trouble.

"Ow ow ow ow ow ow ow!" Of all the people to complain about fire, why did it have to be Sailor Mars?

However, Pluto chose the moment that Eudial was concentrating on us to appear and separate the Talismans from Uranus and Neptune's Pure Hearts, just as in canon. Jupiter grabbed Moon and *threw* her to land beside Pluto while Eudial shot at the rest of us again, surrounding us in a ring of fire.

So we couldn't interfere when the Holy Grail appeared from bringing the three Talismans together. But Uranus and Neptune, their Pure Hearts restored to their bodies, could.

It sounded like quite the battle. We had to figure out how to get out of this burning ring of fire. Mars tried the Dark Schneider approach, fighting fire with fire, and the flames went higher. Thanks, June and Johnny. Stupid genre conventions. Mercury tried fighting fire with ice; all we got was steam.

And then Tuxedo Kamen and Chibimoon came flying to our rescue. Literally; they broke a window on the way in. "Luna-P, Change!" And she had the right tool for the job: a Crystal Tokyo fire extinguisher. We were out of the trap just in time to see Moon go through her secondary transformation to Super Sailor Moon for the first time, the Grail in her right hand.

Eudial shot at her, Moon held up one hand, and the stream of flame reflected back, just like in canon.

That fire had to hurt. But she was the one throwing it around, so she was hoist by her own petard. As in canon, she decided to stage a tactical withdrawal and headed for her car. Not at superspeed, I noticed; perhaps her copy of my power had been burned away by her flames.

Which meant it was time to separate the soldiers from the heroes... and, as much as Ichiro and Sakura preferred otherwise, we were going to do our best to be the heroes this time around. "By now, everybody should know that she's heading for her own death. Who's with me to stop that?"

Everybody but Uranus and Neptune stepped forward. "You have a plan?" Moon asked.

"I do."

"Then you're in charge now."

I nodded. "Mercury, grab Moon. Jupiter, grab Mars. Meia, stick close to Moon. Everybody I just named, it's time to fly. Everyone else, stand by in reserve. If we need you, Mercury will let you know."

"I hate flying your way," Mars complained.

We all headed straight up and out the broken window, getting a good view of Eudial starting her car and driving off. «Where do you think it's going to happen?»

«The speed she's going, it'll be the first sharp corner,» I sent back to my dearest and everyone else. «Mercury, follow Jupiter!» I went invisible and drew level with Eudial's car as everybody else ducked under the bridge.

Sure enough, once I got close enough, I heard a saccharine-cute voice dripping with sardonicism over the car's radio.

«This is it! Mimete's taunting Eudial right now.»

«We're in position!» Jupiter sent back.

I waited until the very last second. «Now!» I sent as Eudial's car broke through the guardrail.

Sakura used Jupiter's voice to shout "Wing Road!" And there was suddenly a road, just barely wide enough to drive on, under the car.

I dropped my invisibility but kept my disguise spell running. "Concentrate on driving if you want to stay alive! Put it in neutral and coast down to a safe speed!"

Amazingly, she did so. I guess being possessed by the daimon Eudial wasn't enough to override Arimura Yuko-san's sense of self-preservation. Or maybe she trusted me.

As she steered, I sent the rest of my plan to Moon and Mars. Moon liked both the intent and the challenge.

By the time Jupiter and Sakura had extended their Wing Road to the shore, Eudial's car reached that end and kept going. It stopped on some flat rocks a few dozen meters from the high-tide mark.

"I'm not too proud to admit it," Eudial said as she got out of the now-useless car and grabbed the Fire Buster II. "You saved my life. Why?"

"Oh, you're quite mistaken. You're dead now, Eudial. Everyone knows it. Mimete knows it, Germatoid knows it," she was shocked to hear me say that name, "and the Sailor Senshi saw your car go over the side of the bridge. What we need from you is your cooperation. Eudial, we need you to die for us in reality."



"What? Never!"

"You don't have a say in the matter," Mercury said as she and Jupiter landed on either side of Eudial, letting Moon and Mars stand on their own.

Moon followed that announcement with a question. "Please, Arimura-san, won't you let us help you?"

Eudial's attention was almost completely on Moon and Mercury, sparing a fraction for me. Which meant, while she saw Mercury activate her visor, she didn't notice Mars pull three ofuda from wherever it is that she keeps them.

"Rin pyou tou sha kai jin retsu zai zen!" Yes, Mars, all combatants are present and lined up... and that chant was enough to get Eudial's attention. She raised Fire Buster II, but too late to prevent Mars's attack. "Akuryo Taisan!" And she threw all three ofuda at Eudial.

They hit. Eudial was stunned and starting to give off smoke the way a daimon gives off smoke when it's defeated.

I shamelessly stole Tuxedo Kamen's role in the proceedings. "If you please, Sailor Moon!"

"Moon Spiral Heart Attack!"

That finally worked against the bitch... er, Witch. "Lovely!" she shouted just before falling over.

It didn't take long for the daimon to escape from Arimura-san's body. Mars hit it with another ofuda, just to be sure, and Eudial dissolved into nothingness.

Mercury announced, "It's gone! Now, Meia!" And they both raced over to Arimura-san's body, dropping out of Unison in the process.

"What are they doing?" Moon asked.

"CPR," I replied as we watched Mercury begin chest compressions and Meia start a spell. "It's first aid for a heart attack. Even a Moon spiral heart attack, it appears."

Before anyone could say anything else, Arimura-san gasped and started to retch. Mercury quickly rolled her onto her side, in the [recovery position](#), so that she wouldn't drown in her own vomit. "Will somebody please call for an ambulance?"

"I'll do that," Mars announced as she headed for the nearest pay phone.

"I wish we could get cellphones," I said quietly, knowing full well that 3G service and thus truly useful cellphones wouldn't be available until 2001. Then I turned to Jupiter. "Well, look at this! Appears we saved a woman's life and freed her from demonic possession at the same time. What does that make us?"

"Big damn heroes, Oni!" Jupiter quickly answered with a grin.

"Ain't we just?" I asked before we both started laughing.

As Moon looked puzzled at our actions, Meia explained, "Some people deal with stress relief in odd ways, Moon-sama."

Arimura-san looked up and said, "You said you were going to kill me."

I stopped laughing. "No, I said we were going to kill Eudial. You aren't Eudial."

"Why save me?"

"I'll tell you that once we're both in a secure place. For now, let's just say that my hands have too much blood on them, and, unlike Eudial, you haven't done anything that we know about that deserves death."

We waited for the ambulance to arrive, then Mercury rode along with Arimura-san to the hospital.

Then they stopped attacking for a week. Which was good, because we had end-of-term exams to write.

Presumably, so did they.

I'll cut to the chase, even though we wouldn't know the results until the end of the month. Makoto and I didn't get any better because we'd missed too much studying, but we didn't get any worse, either. Ami, of course, couldn't get any better; she scored 900 for the second time in a row. Everybody else got at least a few points higher than they had the previous term.

And Princess Lady didn't have to worry about exams because she wasn't enrolled in school yet. We corrected that oversight rather quickly, but she wouldn't start classes until after the Bon holiday. So she went out and played... and made new friends along with reconnecting with old friends including Momohara Momoko.

Shario-chan spent the week debugging Princess Lady's Pink Moon Stick. She also turned its power setting up from "training mode" to "level 1 attack"

We had a strategy session the day after our last exam. We brought in two plain chairs at human scale for the session, replacing the chair with a firefly. We also brought in five chairs and desks at Unison Device scale, placing them on the table at Ami's, Makoto's, Naru-chan's, Princess Lady's, and my seats. And we set up a desktop easel at Ryou's spot for Kasandara.

Every seat was filled, save for the firefly chair.

"I see now why you wanted to free me," Arimura-san said on seeing the back of the empty chair.

"Before anyone says anything else," Hayate-chan said, "we need to secure the room."

Ami nodded. "Hyperspatial Sphere Generate! Mental Shield!"

And suddenly the light in the room had a reddish tinge and we couldn't use telepathy. "Thank you, Mizuno-san. I call this meeting to order."

"And just why is a talking doll running this meeting?"

"Because Yagami Hayate-chan has forgotten more about strategy, magic, and squad-level combat than everyone else seated around this table has ever learned, Tenou-san." I replied. "She is the best possible person to be in charge of our planning sessions."

"And also because I asked her to take charge today," Bunny-chan... no, Usagi added. The look on her face told me that she wasn't willing to take any guff from anyone today.

"Thank you, ma'am. Our first order of business is a report from Mochizuki Ka'o."

Our resident Droid stood up. "One of the Death Busters broke into the morgue at Juban Daini General Hospital the night that Arimura-san was brought there. From her appearance, I believe she was Telulu. Finding me with Arimura-san's appearance on the dissection table and failing to detect any life signs from my body, she severed my head from my body and then left. I am reasonably sure that the Death Busters now think that Eudial is dead. By the way, it took me three hours to reconnect my head."

Arimura-san asked, "How did you survive decapitation?"

"I was not alive to begin with, as you define life. I do not keep my main processor in my head."

"You're an android? Would you mind if I was to look at your mechanisms later?"

"It would be more accurate to call me a gynoid. As for you inspecting my workings, that is up to Tsukino-san and Mizuno-sensei. I don't mind."

"Moving on," Hayate-chan interrupted, "our second order of business is to review the notes that Ichiro-san and I made during our debriefing of Arimura-san."

"Can we trust her?"

"Kaioh-san..." I started. Then I heard Hayate-chan clear her throat.

"That is a completely valid question, Donaldson-san." She turned to Arimura-san. "Do you have an answer?"

She shook her head. "I don't. You'd be fools to trust me."

"We'd also be fools to refuse to listen to you. To be honest, much of what you told us simply confirmed what we already knew from other sources."

"Other sources?"

Ami, Makoto, Ryou, Ichiro, Sakura, Meia, Kasandara, Shario-chan, Hayate-chan, and I all said, "That's classified."

Ichigo-san grinned. "Oh, those sources."

"Be that as it may," Hayate-chan continued, "Arimura-san provided quite a bit of detail that we didn't previously have. Finieno-san?" Shario-chan flipped a switch on her desk and the holoprojector displayed a wireframe image of Mugen Academy. She zoomed in on the basement and Arimura-san gave us a virtual tour of the Death Busters' base, right down to the room with the evil-bake oven where Germatoid turned daimon eggs and run-of-the-mill items into daimons. That took a half-hour, but we now had a much better idea of how our current enemy's base was laid out.

"I'm surprised you know all this," Meia commented.

"Oh, we all know it, except for Mistress Nine's host."

Before anyone else could say anything, Hayate-chan announced, "And that brings us to the third item of discussion today. Tomoe Hotaru-san."

Princess Lady gasped. "That's the name of the girl I met yesterday!"

"Cute girl, older than you but younger than Hino-san, looks like a strong wind could carry her off, and has healing powers?" I asked. She nodded. "She's the same girl."

"And it is absolutely imperative that we get Mistress Nine out of her," added Ami.

"Why go to the trouble?" Kaioh-san asked.

Ami replied, "Besides the fact that she's an innocent trapped in a nightmare? Because she's Sailor Saturn."

That shocked Arimura-san, Kaioh-san, and Tenou-san. Uranus was the first to recover. "Again, why go to the trouble? Why not just kill her and save the Earth from her ability to destroy us all?"

"You can't! She's my friend!"

"And she hasn't done anything wrong yet," Usagi pointed out. "Or at all, if we get the daimon out of her."

"And if simple compassion is beyond you," I added, "consider that we went to the trouble of saving Arimura-san to show that we *can* save Tomoe-chan. I stand with Neo-Queen Serenity and say that we should save her, not kill her out of paranoid fear."

"It isn't paranoia," Setsuna-san said. "There used to be a planet between Mars and Jupiter. It isn't there any more because Sailor Saturn destroyed it during the Sailor Wars."

"Pull the other one, it has bells on," Minako said. "Even I know that there isn't enough mass in the Main Belt to form a planet."

Setsuna-san's reply was, "Not any more, no."

"You have to be joking, ma'am."

"No, Ichiro-san, I am not joking. Before the Youma War, Pluto was a gas subgiant. Magical combat at anything larger than squad level is extremely destructive. But what it took an entire army of youma a week to do to the planet Pluto, Saturn did to the planet Catamitus with a single attack."

"All the more reason to have her on our side," Minako said. "If Sailor Galaxia is on her way here, we *need* Sailor Saturn's power if we're going to have any hope at all of winning that fight."

Arimura-san went pale. "Galaxia? That's one of the few beings that Eudial was afraid of. What makes you think she's heading here?"

Ami, Makoto, Ryou, Ichiro, Sakura, Meia, Kasandara, Shario-chan, Hayate-chan, and I all said, "That's classified."

"I'm going to be hearing that a lot, aren't I?"

"I'm afraid so," Usagi replied. "We trust you enough to let you sit in on this session, but we don't trust you with all of our secrets yet." She turned from Arimura-san to Hayate-chan. "Now, how do we save Tomoe-chan?"

And then it was Saturday, and we got to meet Hotaru-san. Princess Lady had been invited over, and was allowed to bring friends.

She picked Bunny-chan, Makoto, and me.

And we were met at her front door by Kaolinite, who didn't seem to recognize us.

Being polite, my dearest and I didn't seem to recognize her in return. Bunny-chan wasn't able to keep a poker face, though. Kaolinite... sorry, Kuromine Kaori-san showed us to a sitting room and promised us refreshments while we were waiting. But Hotaru-chan arrived before Kuromine-san left, and Makoto presented our visiting gift – homemade cake – directly to her.

Which avoided the insult of us refusing our host's hospitality. We all assumed that any coffee that Kaolinite supplied would be drugged or worse.

While Hotaru-chan escorted us to her room, my phone buzzed. I took a quick look to discover a message from Ami: Mimete was at a book-signing session. "Excuse me a moment," I told the ladies, then typed a reply asking whether it was safe to bring Hotaru-chan to it. Ami sent back a yes.

As I put my phone away, I said, "Well, DoCoMo should be happy to know that their two-way pager system works even this far from a transmission tower." Which they probably would if we had been using it. "That was Ami. She's at a book signing."

"I don't really care about textbooks," Bunny-chan replied.

"Ah, but Ami reads romances, too."

That got a grin out of Bunny-chan. "Can we go?"

My dearest turned to Hotaru-chan and replied, "That's up to our host."

She thought about it for a moment, then smiled. "Why not?"

So we turned around and headed for the front door, only to be met by Kaolinite. "Your father did want you to stay inside today," she told Hotaru-chan.

"I assure you," Makoto said before Hotaru-chan could say anything, "that we will keep her as safe as we keep Chibiusa."

"So kindly get out of our way," Hotaru-chan told Kaolinite.

They stared at each other for a moment. Kaolinite either lost the battle of wills or remembered who was possessing Hotaru-chan. "Do what you want."

So we headed out.

"How are we going to get there?" Princess Lady asked.

I stepped to the curb and raised a hand. "Taxi!" And a taxi pulled up. That was convenient.

As the girls got into the back seat and my fiancée rode "shotgun", I walked over to the driver's side to provide the address. Then I saw who was driving, and no longer wondered why there was a convenient taxi in the area. "Juuban Bookstore, please. And things must be bad at Atelier Lucent if you have to drive a cab as well."

"I knew you'd need one. I am the daughter of Chronos, after all." Then Setsuna-san smiled. "Besides, I wanted to see Tomoe-san for myself."

"Pay attention to the traffic, not the possessed Senshi, please." Then I walked around the taxi again... and didn't get in.

"You aren't coming with us?" Hotaru-chan asked.

"I'm not one for romance novels," I replied. "I'll find something else to do. You ladies have fun."

And I did. Ichiro hopped out of my pocket, we went invisible and Unisoned, and I flew above the taxi for the entire trip.

So it was that the girls got autographed copies of Katakuri Ukon's latest novel. Funny, he was a mangaka in canon. And there was only one person in line behind them.

"Didn't I sign a copy of my book for you already, miss?"

"Oh, this time I want your heart." Mimete opened the case she was carrying, and a daimon came out.

Everybody panicked. We used the opportunity to get Hotaru-chan and Princess Lady clear. «Protect Hotaru-chan!»

«Okay, Oni!» "We'd better go hide over there."

As they got out of our way, Bunny-chan, Makoto, and I transformed.

"Hold it right there! I won't let you take the Pure Heart of a great romance writer! Danielle Steel might forgive you, but I will not! I am Sailor Moon! In the name of the Moon, I'll punish you!"

That actually calmed the crowd. "Hey, it's a Sailor Moon toku show!"

«I knew our contract with Dreamland would be a problem,» Mars sent as she arrived. Silhouetted against the door, she announced, "Likewise, Sailor Mars!"

"Likewise, Sailor Mercury!" That call came from the entry to the bookstore's nonfiction section.

"Likewise, Sailor Jupiter and Oni!" And that came from the Senshi standing between me and Moon.

"You keep posing and leave the fighting to us," Uranus said from the door to the staff room, Neptune standing by her side.

"Fighting?" I asked while using forcefields to squash the daimon against the roof, doing my best to make it look like an actor was getting away through the drop ceiling. A manga dropped to the floor as I asked, "What fighting?"

"This fighting," Moon announced as she took aim at Mimete. "Moon Spiral Heart Attack!"

"Witches Anti-Spiral CPR!"

We really should have seen that coming. And "Anti-Spiral"? Mimete, who the Hell do you think you are?

The two blasts were evenly balanced, and it was all I could do to keep the effect contained in a forcefield.

Amazingly, Sailor Moon didn't need to be told to power up; it looked like her training was paying off. "Crisis Makeup! Rainbow Moon Heartache!"

"Oooooohhhhh..." At least the crowd was impressed.

"Lovely!" Mimete shouted and collapsed, falling through the doorway into the staff's break room, with the daimon making its way out of her body.

"Akuryo Taisan!" And the daimon was destroyed.

Okay, so there was good news and bad news. The good news was that we'd saved Hanyu Mimi-san from an eventual fate worse than death. The bad news was that Mistress Nine was still inside Tomoe Hotaru-san and we couldn't do anything about that today. At this rate, we were going to need a larger table in the Situation Room; it looked like we were collecting a complete set of Death Busters.

Moon announced, "Once again, the day is saved, thanks to the Sailor Team!" What, not the Power Puff Girls? Anyway. "And now we must be off!" We quickly made our exit to the break room... where Mercury and Meia immediately started CPR and healing spells on Hanyu-san.

Makoto and Bunny-chan headed out the back door and around the building to meet up with Hotaru-chan and Princess Lady. I stayed with Mercury and Hanyu-san until the ambulance arrived, then spoke with the bookstore's owner about property damage. There wasn't any, and he thanked us for turning what could have been a disaster into a brief entertainment as far as his patrons were concerned. I then took my leave.

A half-hour later, Makoto and I were at the door to Juban Daini General Hospital. "I believe you're looking for a ride away from the Witches 5, Hanyu-san."

"I'll happily go anywhere if it's with *you*, Oni," she replied, just before Makoto took my arm in hers.

«It isn't my fault that she likes me, my dearest. She likes everybody. I don't return the emotion.» "Let's go." I wrapped the three of us in an aerodynamic invisibility cloak and we flew off.

We didn't take the fast route. Instead, we did our best to shake off any tracking and eventually ended up back at Maison Lyrique, where we quickly headed for the Hyperspatial Sphere that Ami had left in place from the previous day.

Once we were inside, Hanyu-san noticed our other house guest. "How are you still alive, bitch?"

Arimura-san looked up and scowled. "Probably the same way you are, slut."

Shario-chan commented, "I see you know each other."

"Don't make me put you into individual forcefields at opposite ends of the room," I threatened.

"It's an octagonal room. It doesn't have ends," Hanyu-san pointed out just before Arimura-san leapt toward her and tried to choke her to death.

Two seconds later, they were in individual forcefields at opposite ends of the room. "I'll let Sailor Moon sort you two out. Too bad I'm not expecting her back today. I don't know whether I can keep a forcefield up when I leave this bubble, so I'm confining both of you less comfortably. Struggle Bind."

Inwardly, I sighed deeply. These two were the least unpleasant of the Witches 5. How were we going to cope with the others? Maybe it wasn't a good idea to want to save them all.

I walked over to Shario-chan's desk. "Is there any chance Hayate-chan can take over?" I asked in English.

"I thought you knew," she said in surprise. "Hayate-chan's moved in with the ... Moons."

"She can't possibly Unison with Sailor Moon."

"No, but she can Unison with Sailor Chibimoon."

Of course she can; I was with them on Rubeus' UFO when they Unisoned the first time. "Well, she was looking for a larger role in our group. I guess she found one."

"Oni, would you close my door on the way out, please? I don't want to have to listen to the two of them yelling at each other."

"Sure. If you need me, just call."

Three hours later, I brought them rice and pickles, to discover them talking and laughing with each other.

"Oh, and remember when Ruru-chan got that special fertilizer from Okinawa?"

"That stunk the place up something nasty! And Yui-san had to *force* her to clean out her lab!"

"She couldn't work for a week! Hey, Yuko-san, why did I try to kill you, anyway?"

"You didn't, Mimi-san. Mimete tried to kill Eudial."

"Why did we let them?"

"What, try to kill each other?"

"No, possess us."

Arimura-san sighed. "I don't know about you, but I didn't have a choice. Tomoe-sensei strapped me down."

"Woah, kinky."

"Not like that!"

At that point, I realized that my choice of restraints might have been more fortuitous than I thought. Struggle Bind was designed to dissolve illusions along with securing people; without a magical illusion to dissolve, it must have gone to work on the illusions that the women held in their minds. Assuming that that was the case – I could be wrong, and they just needed a couple of hours to do nothing but talk with each other in order to get back to how normal people acted – but if I was right, it was far too close to mind control for my tastes. I resolved to never use that spell again unless I needed to dissolve a magical illusion, just in case.

And if they were acting, well, I could always re-cast the spell. "Ladies, are you hungry?" I asked while using Naru-san's telepathic communicator to send a text to Shario-chan and dismissing the Bind so that they could eat.

"Oh, yes. Thank you, Donarudoson-san."

"Rice and pickles?"

"If you want something fancy, Hanyu-san, you'll have to wait for one of the good cooks to come home." Because there's no way that I'm going to make a proper meal for somebody other than my fiancée, myself, somebody else on the Sailor Team, or Saeko-mama; I'd looked at too many of Rei-san and Bunny-chan's manga to want to invoke the "make dinner for somebody you care about" meme with anyone else.

"Thank you for the food."

"If you don't mind me asking..." I started. Once I had their attention, I continued, "When I left, you were at each other's throats. Now, you're bosom buddies. What changed?"

Arimura-san smiled. "After the first hour or so, we started reminiscing about the days before we were forced to become Death Busters."

"And that got us remembering what it was like to be friends, or at least co-workers as school prefects," Hanyu-san added. "So we really don't have any reason to fight any more. Although I still think you're a bitch sometimes, Yuko-san." That last, she said with a grin.

"And I think you're a slut sometimes, Mimi-san," Arimura-san replied with a smile of her own.

"Flattery will get you nowhere. Him, on the other hand..."

Time to squelch that idea before somebody says something that I'd have to tell Makoto. "I'm engaged to be married, ladies, and I'm very happy with my fiancée's love. I won't do anything to risk losing her."

Shario-chan chose then to reply to my text. «Meia would know better than I would, but I don't see any microexpressions that hint any of the three of you don't believe what you're saying.»

Yes, of course we had them under constant surveillance.

It was also then that Hanyu-san asked, "Am I a prisoner?"

I had to make the decision right away. "No. But I can't guarantee that Germatoid won't find you if you leave this bubble. Not that I'm assuming the bubble is a perfect defence, either, but it's better than nothing."

"Is there at least a toilet in this bubble?"

"Oh! Yes, it's right beside the showers."

"I'll show you where it is after we finish eating," Arimura-san offered.

"Thanks."

"And I'll get you a futon," I offered.

None of us needed to be back in class until July 31, and that – being a Saturday – would be a half-day even if we weren't just going to pick up our report cards.

So we had a few days to figure out what we were going to do next.

"I don't know about you," Princess Lady announced, "but I know I'm going to visit Hotaru-chan."

"May I accompany you?" asked Meia.

Hayate-chan nodded. "If you want, but I've already carried out a scan." She called up a virtual screen and the two Unison Devices looked at the scan's results.

"There, there, and there," Meia pointed out three items.

"I see. Yes, you'll need to accompany us, and so will Moon, Mercury, and Mars." Then Hayate-chan turned to look at the rest of us. "We can do this, if Moon-sama can reliably access the power of the Grail."

"Do what?" Arimura-san asked.

"What we did for the two of you."

"Er... I've been working so hard on sword fighting that I haven't had time to practice with it."

Hayate-chan looked cross. "Ichiro, Sakura, she needs practice with the Grail right now. There'll be plenty of time to teach her swordplay once Pharaoh 90 has been defeated."

"Yes, ma'am."

We discussed a few other things, then Princess Lady and Hayate-chan headed off, accompanied by Ami and Meia.

"Shouldn't we go with them?" Rei-san asked.

Luna shook her head. "If you showed up as a group, Kaolinite would figure out what's going on right away."

"Yeah, she's not stupid," Hanyu-san agreed. "You could probably fool me that way, but not her."

"At least you admit it," Arimura-san replied with a smile.

Bunny-chan, Ryou, Makoto, Sakura, Ichiro, and I left them to their discussion and headed out of the Hyperspatial Sphere that we were starting to think of as a permanent part of the building. "I'm guessing that Venus and Mimete aren't going to meet and fight over Araki Junta-san, considering that we left both of the ladies in the Situation Room."

"It's still possible that Araki-san will be targeted, though, nine times out of ten," Ryou replied.

"We'd better be ready for that, then," my dearest said.

We grabbed a quick lunch while we could, assuming that we'd be called out to the TV studio where they were holding the talent search for Araki-san's next leading lady.

Instead, we were called to Juban Daini General Hospital. It looks like Ryou's precognition flubbed its roll for once, and we were skipping episode 114 after all.

Once we arrived at the hospital, Mochizuki-san took us to a waiting room where Ami was... well, waiting.

"Hotaru-chan is in x-ray right now. Saeko-sensei is her attending physician."

"Thank you, Ka'o-san," Ami said. "Where is Chibiusa?"

"She's watching the procedure."

Rei-san arrived at this point and asked "What happened?"

"Hotaru-chan collapsed," Ami reported. "Officially, we don't know why."

"And *unofficially*?"

"As near as Meia and I could tell, Mistress Nine tried taking control of Hotaru-chan's body."

Bunny-chan stood up, the Cosmic Heart Compact in her hand. "We can't let this go on. Where is the x-ray room?"

*"Don't you dare transform inside the hospital!"* We all looked at Ami in surprise. "Please, think of the patients."

"Oh, right." The compact went back into Bunny-chan's pocket.

"That doesn't mean we can't ambush her outside the hospital, though," Sakura said.

I sighed. "I'd prefer you don't use the word 'ambush'. We're supposed to be the good guys."

"And look at how far that's gotten us," she pointed out.

"Arimura-san is still alive, and Hanyu-san won't have the plug pulled on her television appearance."

Before she could reply, there was a page over the hospital's intercom. "Nurse Mochizuki, your patient is ready to return to her room."

"I have to go," she said.

"And Ryou and I should go wait for Hotaru-chan in her room," I added. She told us where it was.

We didn't wait for very long; Hotaru-chan was wheeled in a moment after we arrived. Mochizuki-san transferred Hotaru-chan from the gurney to her bed, and then we waited for her to wake up. Which she did a moment later.

"Where am I?" she asked.

"You're in the hospital," Princess Lady replied, "You collapsed."

"Hospital?" She sat up, discovering she was still clothed. "Papa says I'm not supposed to let doctors look at me, ever. I should go."

"While we cannot keep you here against your will," Mochizuki-san said, "it would be a good idea to let us make sure you're sufficiently well to leave."

"No, I'm leaving now," insisted Hotaru-chan as she got out of bed.

"Here are your shoes," I said, "although I think you're making a mistake."

Then the intercom sounded three notes in a pattern I'd never heard before. "You'll have to leave through a side door," Mochizuki-san announced. "That's the alert that the front door is blocked by someone outside. Urawa-san, would you escort her, please?"

Ryou nodded. "Of course."

As they headed out, I said, "Chibiusa..." She stopped, not expecting to hear me use her nickname instead of her name. "You and I should check out that blockage, in case it's a danger to Tomoe-chan."

She nodded. "Okay, Robu-niisan!"

As we headed for an elevator, Hayate-chan asked, «Who do you think it is? Telulu, Viluy, Cyprine, or Ptilol?»

«None of the above,» I sent back to the two ladies. «It isn't their style. I'm guessing Kaolinite.»

«Right. I forgot she was back from the dead now.»

«Ew, that's creepy!»

«Sorry, Princess Lady.»

Sure enough, it was Kaolinite, and she'd already uncorked the daimon that she'd brought along. While nobody had had a Pure Heart pulled out of their body, there was some property damage near the hospital's front door.

"Moon Prism Power, Make-Up!" At least she didn't have a naked part to her transformation sequence, but it wasn't instant.

"Mirage Hide!" Mine was instant. Our partners Unisoned with us, and we stepped out of the building.

"Hold it right there! I am the Pretty Guardian Trainee who fights for Love and for Justice! I am Sailor Chibimoon! In the Name of the Future Moon, I'll punish you! Pink Sugar Heart Attack!"

The daimon charged at us, but was pushed back by Chibimoon's attack. It looked like her training was paying off.

"Blocking Wall!" I cried, as I made it impossible for the daimon to simply walk around us.

"Pink Sugar Heart Attack! Pink Sugar Heart Attack!"

Kaolinite laughed. "None of your attacks are doing any damage. Just what do you think you're doing?" she asked with a sneer.

Then we heard shouts from the side of the building.

"Rainbow Moon Heart..."

"Akuryo..."

"Physical..."

"Hyperspatial Sphere Generate!"

Then we didn't hear anything else.

I smiled. "We think we're distracting you."

Chibimoon added, "And it sounds like it worked! Claíomh Solais!"

I ducked as five beams of magical force shot from Chibimoon's hand to the daimon's chest. "Lovely!"

"As for you..." I turned to Kaolinite, only to see her running off.

"Let her go," Chibimoon said with Hayate-chan's voice.

"Yes, ma'am." Instead, we headed to the side of the building, where we saw Hotaru-chan on a gurney, being wheeled into Emergency.

Mercury collapsed into Ryou's arms, who of course was there to catch her. "We did it. Finally."

"Oni, we need to get home quickly, seventeen times out of nineteen."

"Right." Chibimoon, Jupiter, and I grabbed everyone else except for Mochizuki-san and headed into the sky.

By the time we made it back to Maison Lyrique, Mercury was sufficiently rested to stand on her own again. Which was good. "We should tell Ari-"

Kasandara didn't let her finish. "Warning! Emergency! Incoming attack!"

"Hyperspatial Sphere Generate!"

And the entire building was wrapped in a bubble. I added forcefields just in time to catch what made it through the first line of defence.

The attack kept coming for nearly a minute, until Moon transformed to Super Sailor Moon and used the Grail to counterattack. "Rainbow Moon Heartache!"

No, using the power of God offensively was not blasphemous. At least, not according to my reading of Deuteronomy 1:29-30.

After a long moment of quiet, Ami dropped the Hyperspatial Sphere and I dropped my forcefields.

"What just happened?" Hanyu-san asked from right beside me. I was so tired that I hadn't noticed her approach.

"Somebody just used a lot of power that he might not have been able to afford to use," Hayate-chan replied. At this point, I had no idea who was in or out of Unison or Senshi form.

"It was an all-or-nothing attack, and it didn't work," Setsuna-san confirmed. When had she shown up? Before I could ask, I collapsed, exhausted.

I woke up to the most beautiful sight in the world: my fiancée's smiling face.

"I haven't felt this tired since Sailor Moon reset the world and I made sure she didn't reset me or the moon cats in the process. How long have I been out?"

"Three hours. Saeko-mama's home, and she brought Hotaru-chan. As soon as Ami wakes up, we're having a war council." She helped me sit up and brought a bowl of soup over to my lips. "Here, drink this."

"Oh, chicken broth. Thanks."

"With some rice in it. I remember you eating chicken rice soup when you weren't feeling well during the Missing Time."

I put the bowl down, sat up, and gave Makoto a hug. "What good deeds did I do in a previous life to get somebody like you in this one?"

"I'm not that good a person, Rob."

"Yes, you are, Makoto. Don't let your insecurities do your talking. Any guy would be lucky to have a girlfriend who's half as good as you are, and I'm doubly lucky to have you as my fiancée."

She mock-pouted. "You're being unfair, not letting me speak my impure thoughts when I want you to speak yours."

"Oh, I want to say and act on those, but there's that war council you told me about coming up. I have to get out of my bed instead of inviting you into it."

"I know. And we still haven't celebrated your birthday, too."

"And if Princess Lady and Hotaru-chan are here, we shouldn't. Imagine what they'd hear."

She smiled. "They'd hear two people in love, darling."

I returned her smile. "I can't argue with that, my dearest." Then my smile went away. "But the other part's still valid. We just don't have the time right now."

She sighed. "Yeah, you're right. C'mon, let's get you dressed."

Two hours later, after Ami and I had eaten lunch, we started our war council. Of course Hayate-chan was in charge.

"Mamoru, what did you see outside?"

"This house is intact, as are most of the houses around it. The Tanaka residence needs a new exterior wall and a few replacement trees. Ami's quick thinking prevented a massive tragedy."

"Ryou...?"

"We can easily afford to fund those repairs."

"Thank you, both of you. Meia, what do you have to report?"

"First, Miharuru-chan and her mother were in their yard and were injured by a falling tree. They'll both recover. However, I needed to give Tanaka-san magical healing to keep her alive, so they're now both aware of who and what I am. On the logic that it won't do any further damage to our secrets, Artemis is talking with both of them right now."

Well, at least nobody died in that attack.

"Second, Chacornac still can't scan inside of Mugen Academy, but we can scan all the way up to the building itself now. We aren't picking up unusual energy readings of any type."

Arimura-san spoke up. "If I had access to the necessary parts, I could build some scanners that we could plant inside the building."

Hayate-chan nodded. "Work with Sharioru-chan and Naru on that, please."



Minako asked, "What made you decide to actually work with us?"

"My last boss just tried to kill me. Granted, he might not have known I was here, but he had reason to think that his daughter was."

"I got here at the same time as Mizuno-sensei," Hotaru-chan pointed out.

Arimura-san ignored her. "All of you have shown me nothing but kindness, and you've saved my life twice now."

"I wish there was something we could do to help you," Hanyu-san added.

Hayate-chan smiled that smile I only saw on her personality donor's face in the anime, whenever she had a wonderfully devious idea. "Oh, you can help, and all you'll need to do is tell the truth, but Tomoe-chan will have to agree to help as well."

Hotaru-chan looked up, surprised. "Help with what?" At that point, I noticed that she was wearing a loose blouse and knee-length skirt instead of her usual leotard-and-short-skirt outfit.

"It will involve telling a journalist about your body."

"But my broken rib came from the CPR treatment," she said. Which explained why she wasn't wearing tight clothing; she probably had a cast under her blouse.

Hayate-chan shook her head. "Not that. I'm talking about the experiments that your father performed."

"Experiments?"

"Hotaru-chan," Saeko-mama said, "nobody else that I'm aware of has the cybernetic implants that show up on your x-rays. You have been experimented on, whether you knew it or not."

"Oh."

I asked, "Did you tell your father that it was okay for him to add those implants to your body?"

"No, he never asked me that." Then a look of comprehension appeared on Hotaru-chan's face. "And people need to know about that, don't they? Yes, I'll help."

Hanyu-san said, "So will I, although there's a big difference between being possessed by a daimon and what happened to Tomoe-san."

Arimura-san added, "I still have a scar from where the daimon was implanted in my body."

Hayate-chan replied, "Thank you all for agreeing to do this. Tsukino-san, can you find us a journalist?"

"My father can."

"This is all well and good," Tenou-san said, "but why are we talking about it during a war council?"

Sakura shook her head in disbelief. "Haven't you ever heard of [psyops](#)?"

Before Tenou-san could answer, Ichigo-san said, "I don't know that word, either. What's it mean?"

"It's short for 'psychological operations'," Hayate-chan answered. "Essentially, it's using propaganda to demoralize or destabilize an enemy."

Kaioh-san said, "I can see how that would be useful, but how does this destabilize the Death Busters?"

"Twenty-three times out of twenty-five," Ryou said, "it will reduce the cash flow to Mugen Academy and thus cut off resources to our foes."

"How?" Ichigo-san asked.

"I thought that was obvious," Minako replied. "If the school's headmaster can do this to his own daughter and two of the school's prefects, what's stopping him from doing it to the other students? Anybody who has children enrolled at Mugen is going to seriously think about sending them elsewhere instead."

"Which means Mugen Academy will have less tuition money coming in," Tenou-san added in realization. "Clever."

Usagi said, "It also means there will be fewer innocent bystanders in the building when we're ready to take the battle to our enemies."

Rei-san pointed out, "If we act during the Bon holiday, there shouldn't be any bystanders in the building at all."

"It doesn't hurt to give them another reason to stay away," Ichiro said.

"Speaking of taking the battle to Germatoid, how many Fire Busters do you want me to build for you?"

"We need those sensors first, Arimura-san," Hayate-chan replied.

Since Bunny-chan could defend Hotaru-chan on her own, they went home together, along with Princess Lady and Hayate-chan.

I'll say this for Tsukino Kenji-san: he works fast. He had a reporter lined up and ready to interview Hotaru-chan the next day. I got there early and took some photos of Hotaru-chan to run with the interview.

The reporter was somebody whose name I knew but hadn't met before: Jinguuji Minkao-san. She was younger than I expected, in her mid-to-late 20s, and about an inch shorter than Makoto. Her strawberry-blonde hair and blue eyes made me wonder whether she had any European ancestry, but then wasn't the time to ask.

"It's an honour to finally meet you, Jinguuji-san," I said after we introduced ourselves to each other. I had stayed behind in case Kenji-san needed more photos. "I read your interview with Mizuno Ami-san."

"Thanks," she said quietly... which didn't fill me with confidence. "And I saw your photos of Asuka Chieri. Nice work."

"Thank you."

"Shouldn't you have a notepad?" Bunny-chan asked.

"It's in my bag. I'm planning to put Tomoe-san at ease before I pull it out and start the formal interview."

"If you don't mind me saying so, you sound like you'd rather be doing something other than this interview."

"Tsukino-san, I'll be honest with you. I keep working for your father because he pays on time and in full, and that's important in the current economic climate."

"But you'd rather be working on something else," I guessed.

She nodded. "I'm sure you know what it's like, Donarudoson-san. We both need to take photos or write stories that pay the bills. I'd rather be chasing a big story, not interviewing the 12-year-old daughter of a school headmaster and probably writing another puff piece."

Bunny-chan and I smiled as Hotaru-san walked into the living room. "Oh, I don't think you'll have any complaints about today's story," Bunny-chan commented.

"Hello. My name is Tomoe Hotaru, and my father performed medical experiments on me without my consent."

Jinguuji-san immediately got out her notepad. "Hello, I'm Jinguuji Minkao. Please tell me more," she said with obvious interest.

Bunny-chan and I got out of her way. Once we were in the hallway, she said, "I'll ask papa to publish the interview as soon as Jinguuji-san submits it."

I was called in halfway through the interview to get a candid shot of Hotaru-chan. The poor girl was crying, genuinely sad... and, for our purposes, that's the picture that we *needed* to run beside the story. I hated myself as I took it, but it had to be done.

An hour later, Jinguuji-san walked out of the Tsukinos' living room, closing her notebook. "It's a great story. It's a fantastic story. But I don't know whether I can use it."

"Why not?" Bunny-chan asked in dismay.

"I only have her word for any of it."

I smiled. "So you *could* use the story if you had something to corroborate her account? We have written authorization from her to show you her medical records, and I know that two of Mugen Academy's prefects have stories similar to Tomoe-chan's."

The alternate reading of Minkao's given name 明顔, "bright face", made itself known as her smile lit up the room. "If you can show me x-rays and set up interviews with those prefects, and they do have stories like Tomoe-chan's, then I can write this story. Now, why do the two of you want so badly for me to write it?"

She's a smart woman. So we told her a truth that we'd discussed during our war council: people needed to know.

An hour and a half later, Jinguuji-san was interviewing Hanyu-san, Saeko-mama was pulling Hotaru-chan's x-rays for the journalist's inspection, and I was apologizing to Hotaru-chan for putting her through what we had done.

The morning after the interview ran, NHK sent a team to interview Hotaru-chan. TBS sent [Toyohiro Akiyama](#) to interview her that afternoon, which made us wonder whether they thought this was an important story or a media sensation. All-Nippon News Network, Mega TON, and Fuji TV sent teams the next day.

Thankfully, Kenji-san took some of the interviews. Since he was the editor of the magazine that broke the story, he could justify taking Hotaru-chan's place on-camera.

Tomoe Souichi-san refused to give interviews, which was a boon for us. Even TBS and NHK started asking what he was trying to hide. Of course, at that time nobody would believe the truth: that he was hiding an alien invasion.

Hotaru-chan moved from the Tsukino residence to Rei-san's shrine in order to get away from the media crowds. Bunny-chan spent a lot of time at the shrine in order to protect her; the extra training she received as a miko was in her view a bonus in learning how to be serene.

Ryou suggested that it might be a good idea for me to develop a Faraday cage forcefield. Unfortunately, that was one power trick that I couldn't pull off, so Arimura-san and Shario-chan put together a few physical cages that were just big enough to hold a Unison Device and a communicator.

Then another file on my 2022 laptop decrypted itself and sent itself to Ami's computer. I wondered what new spell Ami was about to need.

There was word that a noticeable minority of Mugen Academy's student body were taking academic transcripts home with their report cards at the end of the month, at their parents' insistence. Tenou-san and Kaioh-san managed to sneak a few scanners into the building while they picked up their report cards and transcripts.

And, at the end of the month, after the family's end-of-term sukiyaki party, Makoto and I *finally* celebrated my birthday.

My dearest brought home a new plant during the first week of August. Apparently these "Telluns" didn't need water or light.

Of course they didn't. They fed on life energy and collected Pure Hearts. And Telulu needed a better naming sense for her plants.

Setsuna-san, Princess Lady, Hayate-chan, and Ami got together to carry out a few experiments on a Tellun while I stood by to protect the ladies.

They started with Ami casting a Physical Heal spell on it.

The Tellun absorbed the life energy, grew larger, and shot crimson energy bands toward Ami.

Setsuna and I stopped the attack, the Garnet Orb embedding itself in my forcefield and absorbing the energy that my forcefield blocked.

"I didn't know you could do that," I said to Setsuna-san.

"Neither did I." At the time, I thought nothing of the fact that Sailor Pluto didn't know something about her and my powers.

Hayate-chan ignored our byplay. "Claíomh Solais!"

And that attack made the Tellun grow even larger. Out of learned reflex, I boxed it in multiple forcefields... but left a gap so we could still attack it.

"Mistilteinn!"

*That* finally killed the Tellun, by petrifying it. It nearly killed Hayate-chan, too, being a Rank AAA+ spell. Unison Devices should *not* [let the magic smoke out](#), even if it looked to be just a bit from her right arm.

Ami went to get Shario-chan and Meia. Princess Lady ran off to go find Mako-chan. I frowned at Hayate-chan.

"Are you *trying* to kill yourself? You're only a Rank B mage now; what were you thinking?"

"I was thinking that my partner and her friends were about to die."

"Ah. Thank you for protecting us. One question: What would Princess Lady think if you died protecting her?"

"She wouldn't think I was dead..." Hayate-chan started.

"Oh, yes, she would. She thought I was dead when I protected Sailor Pluto from her attack as Dark Lady." Then I chuckled. "You nearly died while we were living out the *Sailor Moon R* story, and now you've nearly died while we're living out the *Sailor Moon S* story. Do it again during the *Sailor Moon SuperS* story and I'll have to invent TV Tropes early just to add you as an example of 'Once a Season'."

"Don't do that, Rob. It'll ruin your life." More seriously, she added, "I'm sorry for worrying you."

At this point, Ami returned, and Meia and Shario-chan started giving Hayate-chan a full physical examination.

A minute or so later, Princess Lady and Makoto came back. "Before you ask, of course I remember where I bought the plant," my dearest said.

"Then what are we waiting for?"

"Who, not what," Setsuna-replied to Princess Lady. "Without Hayate-chan to help, we'll need the power of the Grail to defeat these plants."

My fiancée didn't look happy to hear that.

"She's right," Shario-chan added. "Hayate-chan isn't going anywhere for at least the next three weeks, let alone flying or doing any magic. It'll take Naru-san at least that long to hand-craft the replacement parts we need."

"And with any luck," I added, "by then we'll have had our big fight with Pharaoh 90."

After a short moment, my dearest asked, "Has anybody actually called Usagi?"

After a shorter moment, we all reached for our communicators. Ami was first to make the call.

A half-hour later, Bunny-chan, Setsuna-san, Ami, Meia, Makoto, Sakura, Ichiro, and I were at the store. I had trouble believing anybody could be naïve enough to buy a Tellun. Ten yen per plant? That price was insane. Mind you, by our definition of sanity, so were the Death Busters.

We waited until there weren't any customers in the store before we walked in, passing three people who were leaving with Telluns of their own.

"Hello! Are you here for a Tellun?" Telulu looked up. "Oh. Took you long enough to find me. I thought you were smart."

"We aren't all here," Bunny-chan replied... just before the metal shutters closed over the shop's windows and doors.

"That just makes it easier for me. Telluns! Attack!"

We heard screams from outside the shop. Three screams. "You..." Bunny-chan started.

Telulu grinned smugly as Pure Hearts flew toward her, three at first, then dozens more. "I needed their life force to fight you five. And I've sold *hundreds* of Telluns."

"You fiend! You're killing them all!"

"So what? It's not *my* life. Telluns! Attack! Attack! Attack!"

The plants that remained in the shop started growing as the Pure Hearts started dimming. Then the Telluns started shooting energy blasts at us.

"Not today," Setsuna-san said as she and I protected the others the same way that we'd protected them earlier in the day.

"Jupiter Oak Evolution! Jupiter Coconut Cyclone!" My fiancée's accuracy was better than usual because I formed forcefield waveguides for her attacks to follow.

"Frigid Dagger, Genocide Shift!" Mercury and Sakura shouted that together, producing... well, Unlimited Dagger Works.

"Moon Healing Escalation!" That was aimed at the Pure Hearts, not the plants, and Moon was using the Grail to boost the spell... and I saw that it was necessary. Some of the Pure Hearts were so dim that I was afraid they were about to die, taking their owners with them.

"Physical Heal!" Meia cast *that* on Moon.

"Damn you, Sailor Team! Telluns! Combine!" That's when I noticed that most of the plants were dead. But there were enough to form a Hyper-Tellun larger than the one in canon. "Attack Sailor Moon!"

"Blutiges Schwert!" That was one of Ichiro's spells; much like the AAA-rank "Blutiger Dolch", it created a blade that the caster shot at the target. Unlike the Bloody Dagger, the Bloody Sword was a single projectile with no homing capability and thus within the capability of a Rank B mage.

He hit Telulu's hand with the blade.

«Every time she gave an order, magical energy flowed through her hand,» he explained as the Hyper-Tellun turned on Telulu.

"Stop! I am your creator! I order you to obey me! Aaaaahhh!" She said the last as the plant swallowed her whole, Audrey-style.

None of us could do anything... except for Sailor Moon, who was merely watching the plant kill the Witch.

I dropped my forcefields and turned to Usagi. "Moon! What are you waiting for?"

"She was willing to kill hundreds of people just to attack us. In the Name of the Moon, she must not be allowed to live."

Blast it! She'd learned the wrong lesson from us! "Even if you as Neo-Queen Serenity had sentenced her to death for attempted mass murder, *which you don't have the authority to do yet*, there's such a thing as cruel and unusual punishment! And that's what Telulu is going through right now!"

"Hang on," Sakura said. "She's the most cruel of the Death Busters. She should get back some of what she tried to dish out."

"Does that give us the right to lower ourselves to her level and ignore Love and Justice altogether?" Meia asked.

Ichiro added, "And aren't we condemning Teruno Ruru for Telulu's actions?"

*That* got everybody moving.

"Dead scream." Pluto attacked the plant, causing the woody parts around Telulu to dissolve.

We were too late. She wasn't breathing, and so much of her skin had been dissolved that it was impossible to perform CPR or artificial respiration.

"Moon Spiral Heart Attack!" And that finished off the Hyper-Tellun.

As the Pure Hearts that the Telluns had collected started floating back to their owners, I forced the shop's door open and walked out, saying nothing.

We spent the rest of the first week of August being interrogated by the Tokyo Metropolitan Police. Even Superintendent Sakurada couldn't protect us after Telulu's corpse was discovered at the scene. They finally decided that the death was outside of our control and let us go.

Ami spent the time that she wasn't being interrogated calculating coordinates of various locations that we might want to Teleport to.

We spent the first half of the second week of August doing our summer homework. At the same time, Hayate-chan and Ichiro gave us all supplementary lessons on the ethical behaviour of mages. Nobody brought up the fact that Hayate-chan's right arm was still in a sling.

No, we're not supposed to take the law into our own hands... and by the time the lessons were finished, even Tenou-san and Kaioh-san appeared to agree with that. More importantly, so did Bunny-chan, and she apologized to the rest of us for her inaction.

Makoto and I spent the second half of the second week of August in Fujioka, for obvious reasons. Unfortunately, her grandmother still refused to acknowledge her existence. We brought along what little homework we hadn't already finished. Sakura and Ichiro stayed home this time, so they were able to help the rest of the Sailor Team when Kaolinite launched an attack that didn't match anything in canon. It turned out that Ikuko-san has a Pure Heart, too.

The third week of August, Ami was invited to a practice entrance exam being given by Bidou Yui at Mugen Academy, and asked to bring friends along.

Yes, of course it was a trap. While any private school would be lucky to have Ami as a student, there was no way that they would let her bring her friends to a practice exam. And the leaders of this particular school knew full well that we knew they had attacked Ami's house recently.

Yes, of course we went. And by "we" I mean Ami, Makoto, Ryou, Bunny-chan, and I, along with our Devices; everyone else stayed behind in reserve, just in case. As far as we knew from debriefing Arimura-san and Hanyu-san, three... or six... of us still had an ace in the hole. But before we left, Ami took Ichiro, Sakura, Meia, and Kasandara aside and taught them a new spell, then told the rest of us to put our communicators into the shielded containers that Naru-san and Shario-chan had made for us.

Sakura and Ichiro went in in Unison with Makoto and me. Meia rode in Bunny-chan's pocket. Ryou insisted.

Yes, of course there was no practice exam. Instead, Viluy still showed off the science club's homemade pocket universe. To all of us, not just to Ami the way she did in canon. They kept it in a comfortable little room with a sofa, which Bunny-chan immediately sat down on.

"This is what you can accomplish with pure logic, Mizuno-san. We can teach you how to do this if you'll join us. And you might be able to learn how as well, Donarudoson-san."

"I'll admit that it's the only way to make an apple pie from scratch, as Carl Sagan pointed out back in 1980," I replied. "But what else is it good for? It's *too* logical; there's no emotion to it."

"You won't even miss emotions. The methods of rationality are all that truly intelligent people need."

Ami shook her head sadly. "You've missed the whole point to emotions. They draw us together and let us aspire to do things that no one of us could do alone."

"They give us the security of knowing that we won't be betrayed by our friends," Makoto added.

"They give us a reason to live, instead of just existing," Bunny-chan said.

Ryou finished with, "And they give us the strength to face the future," which surprised me.

"None of those matter," Viluy insisted.

"Changing the subject slightly," I said, "have you and the other Death Busters ever asked yourselves whether you're the villains here?"

"Of course not. We are working to bring about the Silence, in which humanity will exist peacefully in order to serve Pharaoh 90 as undying daimon hosts, setting aside irrational desires to do anything else. And we are the first of those hosts. While it would have been easier if you cooperated, you *will* join us. What could be better?"

Ami replied. "Creativity."

Ryou added, "Change."

My fiancée said, "Progress."

And Bunny-chan finished with, "Love."

I nodded in agreement. "*Those* are better than what you plan for the people of Earth. Save your daimon eggs; we have no intention of being assimilated," I replied. "Besides, you're nowhere as frightening as the Borg."

That actually puzzled her. "The who?"

"What, you don't know anything about popular culture? No, of course you don't, that's an emotional desire. Anyway, they've been on TV for a few years now."

"I'll let you tell me about them once you're one of us." Viluy raised her arm and a device strapped to her forearm started glowing. "Mosaic Buster!"

I threw a sofa cushion into the path of the attack, and Viluy's nanites destroyed it.

"Frigid Dagger!" Ami's attack cracked the shell of Viluy's gadget.

Makoto looked at her in horror. "You... Ami, you've condemned her to death by her own tools, just like Telulu!"

Viluy simply said, "I appear to have miscalculated," as her nanotechnology destroyed her arm. "I regret nothing."

I heard rather than saw shutters fall to isolate the room and everyone in it.

"I know what I've done, Jupiter. Midchildans, now!"

"Faradayscher Schild!" Sakura, Meia, Ichiro, and Kasandara cast in unison, forming bubbles around themselves and us, except for Ami. Meia protected Bunny-chan. Then Ami destroyed the bubbles by casting "Elektromagnetischer Puls!"

Well, that's one way to disable nanites. And now I knew what Ami's new spells were. All I said was, "So that's why we needed the Faraday cages."

"Rainbow Moon Heartache!"

And Viluy fell over, saying somewhat sardonically rather than shouting, "Lovely."

Meia flew over to Bidou-san. "Physical Heal!" It was too late to save her forearm, but at least Meia prevented any bleeding when Ami started CPR.

I took a look around, noticing that the homemade universe was still intact. "Heh. Looks like they created the Roundworld Project six years early."

"The what?" asked Moon.

Before I could say anything, Ryou said, "No time to explain! We leave now!"

And Ami was busy. It was up to Ichiro and me to cast the spell. "Teleport!"

Moving so many people with so little preparation, we could barely manage to reach the closest location for which we had coordinates: Mugen Academy's front door. But that was where our reinforcements were waiting.

"What happened?" Rei-san asked.

"Pretty much what happened in canon, except that we saved Bidou-san. But I can't be certain that Viluy was destroyed."

"Why not?"

"You weren't there to make sure we got the daimon."

She immediately slapped an ofuda on Bidou-san's forehead. Nothing happened, other than the paper falling off her and Ami glaring at Rei-san for almost interrupting the CPR. "It looks like you got her."

At this point, Bidou-san showed signs of life. Ami rolled her onto her side as she woke up. "Ow, my head and chest hurt. And I can't feel my arm. Why can't I feel my arm?! Oh, gods, no, it's gone!"

"At least you're still alive," Minako pointed out.

"Yes, I'm still alive." And Bidou-san grinned. "I'm still alive! And I'm happy about that! I'm *happy*!"

Kaioh-san stared at her in disbelief. "You just lost an arm, and you're happy?"

"I haven't felt *any* emotions since midway through the Missing Time! Yes, I'm happy!" A quick moment later, her grin disappeared as she added, "And now I'm scared of being happy. What's happening to me?"

Bunny-chan knelt down and took Bidou-san's remaining hand in both of her own. "I can't imagine what it's like to feel no emotions. But now you're feeling years' worth, all at once. Aren't you?"

"I... I think so. And this is the first time in years that I've been unsure, too. I think I want to change my answer to your question, Oni."

"As heartwarming as this is," Tenou-san said, "can we afford to stay here?"

"No," Ryou replied.

Kasandara added, "Seven times in eight, we are targets within three minutes if we stay."

Rei-san asked, "Can you get her to the hospital?" As Tenou-san nodded and moved to pick up Bidou-san, Rei-san added, "Do it. We'll meet you back at the maison."

Saeko-mama didn't come home that evening. It was at times like these that I wondered whether she was the only doctor at Juban Daini General Hospital.

Nor did Bidou-san join us. Arimura-san and Hanyu-san didn't take the news of how she'd been freed from possession well.

"Braniac's lost her arm?"

"Mimi-san, now's not the right time to use your nickname for her."

"Yeah, sorry, Yuko-san." Hanyu-san turned back to Ami. "You couldn't have disarmed Yui-san without literally disarming her? And you call yourself a doctor?"

"She's still in training," Arimura-san mentioned. "But Mimi-san has a point. Nobody's going to want to marry somebody who isn't whole."

I'd forgotten how much value some Japanese put on their bodies.

Naru-san answered, "Nobody needs to know. It might take a week or two, but Shario-chan and I can build an arm for her. It'll be a lot easier than fiddling with tiny replacement parts to repair Hayate-chan's arm. I'll get on it tomorrow morning."

"No, you won't," Hayate-chan told her. "We finally have both the skills and the initiative to finish this. Makoto, Sakura, it's time for us to carry out that asymmetric plot escalation you've wanted since Rei and Ryou had their Pure Hearts extracted."

Sakura grinned. "Finally!"

"Does that include us?" Arimura-san asked.

"Have you built any Fire Busters?" asked Minako in reply.

"I have two ready to go."

Hayate-chan nodded. "In that case, you, Hanyu-san, Mercury, and Meia are Team A. Your target is Kaolinite. Oni, Ichiro, Jupiter, and Sakura, you're Team B, and your targets are Cyprine and Ptilol."

"Or, as Wendi might call them, Simpering and Petite-Lol," Makoto said with a grin.

Hanyu-san grinned in return. "Oh, they'll *hate* being called that. I wish I'd thought of those names."

"Ryou, Hotaru, Luna, Artemis, Shario-chan, Ichigo, and I remain here, with Princess Lady protecting us,"

Hayate-chan continued. "If Saeko-sensei or Bidou-san show up tonight, they stay here as well. Everyone else in the Sailor Team is Team C, and your target is Germatoid. I'm sorry I can't come with you, but with a non-working arm and a non-working Linker Coprocessor, I won't be much good in the fight."

Tenou-san asked, "Should we bring our helicopter? We might need it for aerial reconnaissance if somebody gets out of the academy building."

"Meia, Sakura, Ichiro, and I can all fly under our own power," Ami pointed out.

"But the rest of us can't," Bunny-chan replied.

Before anybody could ask Ryou the odds about bringing the helicopter, I asked, "Rei-san, have you had time to do a fire reading lately?"

She looked surprised, but happy, to have been asked. "I have, and I saw a vision of a winged angel smiting demons from the air."

Ichiro picked up on my intention without being prompted. "Did that angel have blonde hair?"

Rei-san nodded. "Yes, she did look a lot like Sailor Moon, if Sailor Moon had wings."

"And my crisis transformation does give me wings for a moment," Bunny-chan added. Then she turned to Tenou-san. "Bring the helicopter. Rei just said we're going to need it."

"Yes, ma'am."

Hayate-chan nodded. "Ryou, change of plans. You stay with the helicopter. Minako, let your friend on the force know what we're planning. Everybody, take whatever time you need in analyzing the diagrams we have of Mugen Academy, then get some sleep. We attack at dawn, and take no prisoners."

"What? Why not?" I wasn't sure who asked that. Possibly it was more than one of the Team members. It might even have been me.

"Consider how much of our power it takes to free one Death Buster from possession, in near-ideal conditions. We have no way to do that four times in a row while under enemy fire. I'll repeat what I said at the beginning of the Infinity Incident: Incidents are *never* easy to end."

"Oh. That's what you meant." Ichigo-san said sadly.

"Yes, Ichigo, that's what I meant. We've always had three mission objectives: defeat Pharaoh 90, free Hotaru from possession, and have Uranus and Neptune agree to work with the rest of the Sailor Team." Kaioh-san and Tenou-san looked surprised at that. "We've accomplished all but the first objective, but that's always been the most important one."

As much as I hated it, I had to trust that our team's only competent strategist knew what she was saying. Saving Hotaru's father and the other Death Busters, as much as I wanted to, simply wasn't possible within the framework of our asymmetric plot escalation, and we couldn't leave them alive behind us.

From the looks on everyone else's faces, including Hayate-chan's, I wasn't the only one who felt that way.

It turned out that only Ami, Makoto, and I were able to sleep at all; everyone else was nervous before deploying. TSAB Ground Combat training was useful in more ways than we expected.

Then it was almost sunrise, and we'd gathered just outside the Mugen Academy grounds, where Meia and Mercury were casting Mental Shield spells on each of us. Then a helicopter landed on the grounds. We headed over to meet it.

"Well, we're here," Uranus said as she and Neptune walked over from their helicopter, the sun beginning to rise behind them. "And this place is surrounded by police cars. Just who does Venus know on the force?"

"The Superintendent-General of the TMPD."

Uranus whistled in respect. "You know the highest-ranking police officer in Japan?"

"Yeah, she wants me to join the force."

"It's good to have friends in high places. So, now what? And what's with the manhole cover?"

"Now, we go in." Moon turned from Uranus to Jupiter. "If you would?"

Jupiter grinned. "Jupiter Supreme..." Mars and Venus tossed the manhole cover into the air as I formed a forcefield waveguide between it and Jupiter. "Railgun!"

And suddenly Mugen Academy didn't have an intact front door shutter any more. Or an intact front door. Or an intact inside vestibule wall.

"A-Team, then B-Team, then C-Team! Move!" Mars shouted.

Mercury took point on her team, her visor displaying the fastest route to where the sensors Uranus and Neptune had planted said Kaolinite was.

Then it was our turn. Ichiro had his own map out. Apparently, our two targets were in the room holding the bottle universe. There was still a section of basement close to that that we couldn't scan.

C-Team followed us as far as the first stairwell, then followed Kasandara's directions and headed up while we headed down. I never expected Mars to use a Device at all, but Hayate-chan did say "everybody else". And it never fails to amaze me how fast she can run in high heels.

It didn't take us long to get to Viluy's old lab, where we were met by a blue-haired girl. "I'm disappointed that your leader only sent the four of you against me."

My fiancée grinned. "Oh, hi, Simpering! Where's your sister, Petite-Lol?"

"That's Cyprine!"

"And Ptilol!" said the redhead standing behind her, giving away their advantage in a fit of pique. There's lots of redheads in this reality.

"No, I think Jupiter had it right," Sakura taunted them a second time. "L.O.L.," she added with a smile.

"You..."

"Yeah, me!"

Cyprine cast, "Charm Buster!"

We let the mind magic bounce off our Mental Shields.

"Flower Hurricane!"

Ptilol deflected Jupiter's attack. "You know who we are! You know you can't defeat us, because we fight as one!"

"No, you don't," Sakura replied. "You fight side-by-side. Unison!"

And I protected the ladies while they became a single more-powerful fighter.

"What *is* that?!"

I could see the electricity in Jupiter's hair. "*We* fight as one! Unison Flower Hurricane!"

Ptilol couldn't deflect all of that attack. It hit both her and Cyprine as the latter was readying another spell.

"Ichiro! Unison!"

"Yes, sir!"

"Coconut Cyclone!" It was my fiancée's turn to protect us.

Then the four of us shouted, "We fight as one and side by side!"

Ichiro drew two forcefield blades as I created a forcefield shield, and we leapt at Ptilol. She had no idea how to use her staff as anything other than a spell focus, so it didn't take us long to kill her.

Jupiter drew Donguri-no-ken while Sakura charged the blade. "Thunder Smasher!" Cyprine didn't last any longer than her sister.

I picked up Ptilol's staff – Cyprine's was completely destroyed – and Ichiro cast, "Sealing!" Not for a battle trophy, but so that Meia and Hayate-chan could examine and possibly duplicate it at their convenience.

I turned to my dearest. "How long have you two known one of Captain Harlaown's signature spells?"

"Since I got it from her two weeks ago," Sakura replied. "She sent it over in case we needed it against the Death Busters. Haven't you read your emails from Midchilda lately?"

"I've been busy. What else did she send us?" I asked while we headed through the door. Not the doorway, the door. Or what was left of it.

"Arc Saber, Jet Zanber, Photon Lancer, and Scythe Slash. And Captain Takamachi sent us Bind Break, Divine Shooter, and Lightning Protection."

"I wish I had that last one when we went up against the DD Girls," Jupiter added as a daimon leapt out at us.

She drew Donguri-no-ken and slashed in a single motion.

As she returned the wakizashi to its saya, both halves of the daimon landed on the floor before dissolving into smoke.

"Once again, I have cut a worthless object."

"You lead a hard life, Goemon," I replied with a smile. Then, in all seriousness, I added, "We'd better be ready for more of them."



We only had to cut down three more daimons – we took turns – before reaching the front door, where Team A was waiting for us.

"Kaolinite?" asked Ichiro.

"She's starring in a Kenneth Branagh movie," replied Meia. Seeing everyone else's looks of puzzlement, she added, "Dead again."

So that's how everyone else feels when I make pop-culture references. And I should have known that one, since it was released in 1991.

"Cyprine and Ptilol?" asked Arimura-san.

"Also dead," I replied. She wasn't happy about that.

"Where's C-Team?" asked Sakura just before we felt the building start to shake.

Then we heard Moon yelling at the top of her lungs. "RUUUUUNN!!!"

"Toward or away from them?" Jupiter asked.

"Arimura-san, Hanyu-san, you run away." Mercury turned to us. "Jupiter, Oni..."

"We go flying to their side."

"Literally."

So we did.

We got to the third floor before we passed Senshi going the other way. Mars saw us. "Why are you here? Run!"

Instead, Meia sent, «Mars! Report!»

"Yes, ma'am! Germatoid is dead, but he had a deadman switch. Every daimon egg in the building hatched!"

«Any casualties on our side?»

"Okuni's still in there! Moon's gone to rescue her!"

I asked, "Ichiro, does she still have the telepathic communicator she made?"

«I believe so, sir.»

Then Mercury asked, "Meia, can you track it?"

«I'm already tracking it. Sending the coordinates now.» I saw the numbers show up on Mercury's visor.

"Ichiro..."

«I can guide us in.»

Mercury turned to Mars. "Rei, get everybody else out of here, link up with Ryou, and stay ready for hostiles. Don't let even one daimon get off the school grounds. B-Team, Meia, and I have a rescue to carry out."

"You heard her, everyone! Move!"

We left them behind. I put up a wedge-shaped forcefield in front of us.

It didn't take us long to find the daimons.

"Jupiter Oak Evolution!"

"Mercury Aqua Rhapsody!"

Sakura cast, "Photon Lancer!"

Ichiro followed with, "Divine Shooter!"

We took out the closest of the mob, barely making a dent in their numbers.

"There's too many of them!" Meia said. "Punch through them!"

«Ichiro, I need a blade in front of us. Horizontal, and sharpen it on silk!»

He'd read that Discworld book, too. One sword manifested in front of my forcefield, slicing air molecules and daimons as we flew through them.

Then I stopped, because we'd reached an open patch of hallway. "*Dissolve the sword now!*"

He did, just before Moon walked backward into where it was. She was trying to fight off the daimons with her hands full, the Grail in one and Okuni in the other. Naru-san was in bad shape.

I dropped the forcefield between us and them, and Ami flew to Naru-san's side. "Physical Heal!"

"Ami! Get them in here, then stabilize her!"

"Jupiter Coconut Cyclone!" I set up an inverse waveguide so the ball lightning would hit everything *except* Moon, Mercury, and Okuni. That was another thing I knew how to do without knowing how I knew it, but it wasn't the time to wonder about that.

Meia grabbed Moon and pulled her into my forcefield bubble. Mercury followed with Okuni right after that. I re-sealed the bubble.

Ami grabbed my arm, stopping me from turning around to leave. "Flying will take too long. Meia, go into Life Support Mode with Naru."

"Done!"

"Rob, drop your shield! Tele..."

"It's down!"

"...port!"

And we were outside.

"Crescent Beam Saber!" Venus took the head off of a daimon that had hitched a ride with us.

"Thanks," I said as I formed a forcefield gurney under Okuni. "Let's get her out of the line of fire."

"Meia, go with them! Mars, Venus, Jupiter, with me! Hyperspatial Barrier Generate!"

"That's new," Mars said as Mercury wrapped the entire tower in a barrier.

"I just made it up! And I need help maintaining it! Moon, Oni, it's only a tube, I'm too tired to cap it!"

Moon started giving orders. "Senshi of the Four Guardian Deities, buttress the barrier! Oni, Senshi of the Outer Planets, get me into the air!"

Uranus, Neptune, and Pluto headed for the helicopter. I ran beside them. "Pluto, promise me you won't use your forbidden power."

"But..."

"*Promise me!* I'll handle defence!"

Of all the reactions she could have shown, a smile was the last one I expected. "I promise. And thank you for saving my life again."

So she knew as well as I did what she'd done in canon, and what it had cost her. "You're welcome. Now go on; Neo-Queen Serenity's waiting."

They took to the air, I followed them, and we copied Cyprine and Ptilol's tactics: Super Sailor Moon attacked and I defended. Afterwards, I found out that Neptune and Pluto shared their energy with Moon to make the attack even more powerful.

"Rainbow Moon Heartache!"

The sky lit up with a rainbow pounding down onto Mugen Academy. I was barely on the edge of it, and I could see, hear, feel, smell, and taste the thing.

If we survived meeting Galaxia, I had to remember to tell the Skittles people that their candy tastes nothing like a rainbow. And with thinking that silliness, I knew I was getting tired. But I held out, continuing to block the daimons' counterattacks. I told Setsuna-san that I would, after all, and I don't break my promises. «Ichiro, just in case...»

«Entering Life Support Mode. We are now able to survive a fall from this height.»

«Thanks. Let Makoto know, will you?»

I could sense his smile. «Of course, sir.»

And then it was all over except for the cleanup.

As I touched down beside the ruins of the Mugen Academy building and collapsed into my fiancée's arms, I wondered why the events of the *Sailor Moon S* movie hadn't taken place yet.

It was all over except for the cleanup. I just didn't realize how much cleanup – physically, mentally, emotionally, and legally – that the members of the Sailor Team had to do.

## **Isekai by Moonlight**

### **Chapter S++**

"I'm sorry that I'm late for lunch. We all have to see this."

Ami turned on the TV and switched channels to show a live aerial video of the wreckage of Mugen Academy. "– thank the Sailor Team for their heroic actions in containing this tragedy, and the entire police department hopes that the young heroine called Okuni will make a speedy recovery. As for the legality of the Sailor Team's actions, the Commissioner General and I have been discussing that very matter all day and are not yet ready to make a statement on the matter at this time." That was a statement by Superintendent-General Sakurada Natsuna, who is in charge of the Tokyo Metropolitan Police Department. The Mugen Academy Board of Regents has provided this statement on the matter: 'We mourn the loss of so many of our senior faculty and students in this disaster, and thank the Sailor Team for ensuring the safety of the people living and working in Mugen Academy's immediate neighbourhood. There will be a combined kokubetsushiki for headmaster Tomoe Souichi, executive assistant Kuromine Kaori, physical education prefect Teruno Ruru, and business studies prefect Sibu Rina on August 23. We do not know at this time whether computer studies prefect Bidou Yui, philosophy prefect Arimura Yuko, or arts prefect Hanyu Mimi will be able to attend the kokubetsushiki. Out of respect for the dead, we will not be re-opening Mugen Academy on September 6.' That was a statement by the Mugen Academy Board of Regents. In a related matter, Mugen Academy's prefect Bidou-san is an advisor to NASDA on their role in NASA's Mars Observer mission. NASA reports that they lost contact with that probe at 10:00 Japan Standard Time today. NASDA's press office has provided –"

"I think that's everything that concerns us," Ami said while turning off the TV.

"It's rather difficult to re-open a hole in the ground," Sakura pointed out.

"Show respect to the dead, sister," Ichiro admonished.

I said, "I wonder whether Viluy slipped something into the Mars Observer probe that failed when the daimon was banished."

"How could I... she?" Bidou-san caught herself quickly. "That probe was built and launched years before I was possessed by her. As for my attending the memorial service, well..." Instead of finishing that sentence, she merely looked at the stump of her right arm.

"For that matter," Ichiro asked, "should the Sailor Team attend?"

"I think that your entire team needs to discuss that," Saeko-mama said.

"Our team, mother. You have a seat at our table."

The table and holoprojector were retracted in order to make room for everyone in the Situation Room. We had all sixteen of our usual human-scale chairs and four more in a circle. The new chairs were decorated with a syringe, a Fire Buster, a Buster staff, and a galaxy. Only Mochizuki-san's chair had a permanent logo; the rest were tabards on the chairs' backs.

A table with the five Device-scale chairs and Kasandara's easel was set up between Bunny-chan's chair and Rei-san's chair.

Seeing Tomoe-chan looking at her chair, Hayate-chan said, "You're free to move your chair to sit beside whoever you want, Hotaru-san."

"Good, because Chibiusa says you're the one who ordered my father's death and I don't want to sit anywhere near you." She quickly moved her chair as far from Hayate-chan's as she could.

"Let's move our chairs, too, darling," my fiancée said. "Us Senshi who've lost our parents to violence can sit together."

Grammar, my dearest. But for Tomoe-chan's sake, I let it slide.

"Did somebody kill your father, too?"

Makoto leaned down to look Tomoe-chan straight in the eyes. "My father, my mother, and I were aboard JAL 123."

"Oh. You lost both your parents at the same time. When does it stop hurting?"

"I'm sorry, Hotaru-san. It never stops hurting completely. I had to learn how to live with the grief."

Tomoe-chan gave my dearest a hug, and whispered, "Please, help me learn what you've learned."

Nobody said anything for a long moment.

Finally, Rei-san said, "We need to talk about the memorial service, and it's obvious that Hotaru-san will be going. But we need to talk about what happens after the service, too. Hotaru-san can't stay at the shrine forever, unless she wants to become a miko."

"I don't want to do that."

"She can live with us. She is one of the Senshi of the Outer Planets, even if she hasn't manifested yet."

I turned to look at Tenou-san. "The minute that we announced that Tomoe-chan is Sailor Saturn, you said that we should kill her. That *immediately* disqualified you from being Tomoe-chan's foster parent, canon be damned."

Ami nodded. "I have to agree; it wouldn't be safe for Hotaru-chan to be placed under the care of somebody who claimed to want to kill her."

Tenou-san and Kaioh-san glared at us but said nothing.

Ami turned to Saeko-mama. "Mother, would you be willing to adopt her?"

"Hang on," Minako said. "Saeko-mama just adopted me, not too long ago, and then bought this maison. Can the Mizuno family afford another child so soon?" In reply, Ryou just tossed a gold ingot onto the Devices' table. "Oh, right."

"Do I get a say in this?"

We all turned to look at Tomoe-chan.

"Of course you do," Bunny-chan replied. Then she looked up and added, with some steel in her voice, "*Doesn't she?*"

Everybody nodded. I suspected that some people weren't willing to say anything just then.

"Tomoe-san gets to make the decision," Minako said to everyone, then turned to the girl in question. "It's your life, after all. I know what it's like to have to re-start my life. At least you get to make an informed choice instead of taking the first deal that came along. I didn't have that luxury, and ended up having to make a second decision later. If you want to join the Mizuno family, I'd be happy to be your big sister."

"No matter what you decide, you can always ask me for help," my fiancée said.

"You can always ask us for help," I added.

"Hotaru, you're my friend," Princess Lady said. "You can live with me, if you don't mind that Hayate-chan lives with me, too. I'm sure Usagi and I can convince Ikuko-mama and Kenji-papa to let you stay."

Then Arimura-san said, "No offence, but I'd rather not live with you. I know we aren't Death Busters any more, but every time I look at you, I see Mistress Nine."

Tomoe-chan looked at Makoto. "Makoto-san, what should I do?"

My dearest gave her the correct answer. "You're the only person who can answer that question, Hotaru-chan."

I nodded. "It's your life. I'll ask you something, though: I trust Saeko-mama with my health and my well-being. I love Usagi like a sister. Which is more important to you?"

"If you join my family," Saeko-mama said, "I'll offer you the Mizuno family name."

"Which you don't need to take," I quickly added. As far as I knew, she was the last member of the Tomoe family left; she might not want to give up her name.

Tomoe-chan took Makoto's hand. "Do I have to decide now?"

"You can share my bedroom until you make your decision," my dearest replied. "That's what I did for Minako, so I know what to expect."

"Thank you."

Nobody said anything for a moment.

Then Bidou-san said, "We still need to decide who, besides Hotaru-san, Mimi, Yuko, and I, will attend the memorial service."

"If we all go to the [kokubetsushiki](#), we're all but announcing that we're the Sailor Team," Ami pointed out.

"If we don't go, we aren't paying respect to people who were as much victims as the four of us who are going were," Bunny-chan replied.

Tomoe-chan looked at my dearest. "Will you come? Please?"

"Of course."

Then she looked at Princess Lady. "And you, Chibiusa?"

"Yes, I'll attend the reception." Then she looked at Setsuna. "What should I wear?"

"I'll make sure you have a black kimono and flat shoes." She turned to my fiancée. "Do you need a kimono as well?"

"Yes, please."

"Thank you," Tomoe-chan said before turning to me. "Will you attend, Donarudoson-san?"

"I will, for your sake." Turning to Setsuna, I added, "And I already own a black suit." Then I turned to Bidou-san. "As for your arm, I've had an idea. We have magic that can alter a person's appearance."

"Magic? At a funeral?" Rei-san asked disapprovingly.

"There's no way that I can make even a non-working transradial prosthesis in time," Naru-san replied. Thanks to Meia and Ami's healing spells, she looked healthy... as long as you didn't look closely.

"Neither can I," added Arimura-san.

"It's magic or go without," I pointed out.

"I'm willing to accept a magical replacement," Bidou-san said. "And it isn't a Shinto or Buddhist funeral."

"Ah. Well, the rules are different for a Christian funeral. I withdraw my objection."

"Thank you, Rei-san." I turned to look at the table. "Meia, I know you know the spell, and you no doubt want to scan Bidou-san's arm so that whoever does make the replacement will make something that looks like her existing arm."

"If Ami doesn't object, I am willing to stay with Ms. Bidou for the ceremony."

And that solved that problem.

But before the first memorial service came the funeral service for only the family, the cremation, and the [kotsuage](#). That last is a ceremony that I have no right to attend since I have no family in Japan, so I can't describe it.

And poor Tomoe-chan – no, Tomoe-san; anybody who had to do that with her father's remains deserves to be treated with more respect than -chan or -kun would give her – had to perform it alone, being the last surviving member of her family. The staff at the crematorium were kind enough to assist her.

She wore nothing but black, or her school uniform with a black armband, for an entire year after that ceremony. As was right and proper.

The day after the kokubetsushiki was not a fun one.

It started with a meeting of the Mugen Academy Board of Regents, which Tomoe-san had to attend. As much as she didn't want to, she was Tomoe Souichi's sole heir and thus owner of the academy, so she had no option. Makoto, Sakura, Ichiro, and I accompanied her, the Devices using Mirage Hide to appear to be fully-human-sized.

The Regents wanted to know who we were. Tomoe-san introduced us as her advisors.

Then they wanted to know when the Academy would re-open.

Ichiro asked where the classes would be held.

Tomoe-san said that it was too dangerous to rebuild on the site of the destroyed building because of lingering effects from the menace that the Senshi had fought there.

One of the regents asked why he should have to listen to a twelve-year-old girl.

Tomoe-san literally showed him the door and asked whether he wanted to remain a regent.

Things went downhill from there.

At the end of the meeting, which produced nothing in the way of decisions, half of the regents had resigned... but the other half knew that Tomoe-san was not somebody who anybody could simply ignore or intimidate. She also ordered them to approach the surviving prefects and sound them out as possible replacements for the regents who had quit.

Our newest Senshi, even though she had yet to manifest her powers, was a proper Yamato nadeshiko. And because mourning clothing was never made from silk, the steel that the silk normally hid was starting to show through.

Which all of us thought was right and proper. She was going to need that steel to survive her future meetings with the Board of Regents.

Lunch was a quiet matter at home, and vegetarian in respect to the deceased. It did include what I thought was a bright spot: inarizushi.

Then we had a visitor to Maison Lyrique.

"I apologize for any inconvenience that my visit creates," said Superintendent-General Sakurada. It was the first time I'd ever seen her out of uniform. "However, there is no way that we could have had this meeting at Tokyo Metropolitan Police Headquarters. Ah, but before I continue..."

Tomoe-san bowed. "I am Tomoe Hotaru, and I am honoured to meet you."

"She's also aware of our secrets," Minako added.

"Ah. I am Tokyo Metropolitan Police Superintendent-General Sakurada Natsuna. I am pleased to meet you, Tomoe-san." She returned the bow. "My condolences on the loss of your father."

"Thank you. You are much younger than I expected a police superintendent to be," Tomoe-san commented.

"Thank you!" She turned back to Minako. "Could you call your leader, please? I need to speak with her and you."

"She's actually visiting us right now. I'll go get her."

After a long moment that hinted Bunny-chan was in the Situation Room, and thus probably using the holoprojector for either movies or games, the two of them were sitting in the front room with the Superintendent-General, Ami, Ryou, Makoto, Tomoe-san, and me.

"I don't have much time, so I'll get right to the point. I've been authorized by the Commissioner General to deal with the Senshi directly. As far as he's concerned, you're a riot platoon."

"But we don't want to be police officers," Bunny-chan replied.

"You're already keeping the peace by fighting the Black Moon, the Death Busters, and only you know who else. It's time to stop pretending that you aren't already doing the job. And if you want to carry weapons, including that sword that I don't officially know about," she looked at Makoto when she said that, "you have to be police officers so that 'possession is unavoidable due to Japanese customs and practice', to quote [the Firearms And Swords Control Law](#). There's no other way I can get you a permit for that blade." Changing tone from serious to curious, she added, "May I see it, please?"

My fiancée drew Donguri-no-ken, still sheathed, from wherever it is that she carries it. Formally, she asked, "May I draw it from the saya?"

"You may."

She did so.

"I can see from here that it's not a mass-produced sword from the last war. Nor is it any ō-wakizashi that I'm familiar with. It would be a shame to have to confiscate and destroy it."

"We don't have a choice any more, do we, keishi-sōkan?" That was the first time I'd ever heard Minako refer to her friend on the force only by her rank.

"No, you don't. And I'm sorry to take the choice away from you, Minako-san."

"What do we need to do?" Ryou asked resignedly. If even our group's precog couldn't see a way out of this, there probably wasn't one.

"Anyone who wants to carry a sword needs to be licensed to do so. Any sword in your possession needs to be registered."

"Who can licence us?"

"I can, but I need to see whether you have the necessary skills."

I stood up. "Well, then, let's go downstairs."

We did *not* show her the Situation Room or the computer room. She didn't need to know about them. We did show her the workout room.

"Don your armour, please."

"Jupiter Crystal Power, Make Up!"

Before Superintendent-General Sakurada could complain, I told her, "We discovered during our fight against the Death Busters that a Sailor Senshi can take a dozen rounds from a .45 calibre machine gun with only minor injury. She won't even feel a sword blow unless we use live steel. And even if she does, Mochizuki Ka'o-san is a nurse and Mizuno Saeko-mama is a doctor."

"Who is your instructor?"

"That would be my sister, Sakura," Ichiro replied from the doorway. "She's on her way here. I'm Donaldson-san's instructor. It's good to see you again, keishi-sōkan."

"Ichiro, isn't it? I recall we met during the Black Moon matter, but we didn't have time to talk."

"That's correct, ma'am."

Sakura and Ka'o-san arrived shortly thereafter, and under the watchful eyes of our instructors and Superintendent-General Sakurada, we proceeded to take our licence examination.

Teal Deer, we both passed. So did Ami, who joined us partway through.

Superintendent-General Sakurada left some forms with us to complete, told us to use our code names, and asked that we provide photo negatives of each person on the Sailor Team. Yes, including the Devices. No, not including the ex-Witches, because nobody trusted them.

Nobody but the Sailor Team, that is.

Finally, Naru-san dropped by after dinner. She brought her mother, who proceeded to lambaste us for putting her only daughter in danger. We let Hayate-chan deal with her. *That* argument took half an hour, and the rest of us retreated to the Situation Room so that we didn't have to listen to the shouting.

And for Naru-san and Shario-chan to start drawing the plans for Bidou-san's replacement arm.

"Considering that you don't want metahuman strength, we can use Device-scale parts for the motive systems, and that means there's plenty of room for other hardware in this forearm even after we install a nanodevice tank," Shario-chan said while gesturing to the wireframe model being shown by the holoprojector. "Is there anything in particular that you might want?"

"Do I look like Inspector Gadget?" the platinum-blond genius asked.

"Well, no," Shario-chan replied. "But we could give you a Unison partner."

"Like you and Meia and the others? No, thank you. I don't want an arm that has a mind of its own."

Naru-san nodded. "I can see where that could be a problem. But we could install a communicator, a scanner, and a portable computer."

I raised an eyebrow. "You sound like you want to duplicate the Mercury Computer."

"Exactly!" Shario-chan replied in English, "But Yui-san would always have it at hand."

Bidou-san laughed heartily. The pun wasn't that funny... but then I remembered that she was still re-learning how to cope with the emotions that Viluy had suppressed for months if not years.

Then my attention was diverted. "Er, Robu-san?"

I turned my attention away from the discussion. "Yes, Tomoe-san?"

"Can you help me pack, please?"

"You've decided who you want to live with, then? Of course I'll help you."

She smiled slightly. "Thank you. I'll let Chibiusa know that I'm accepting her offer."

"So you're okay with living with Hayate-chan."

She nodded. "Papa died when Germatoid took over his body. Usagi-san only gave his body a mercy kill."

I can't say that she was wrong or right. I hoped she was right. "When do you want to pack?"

"Tomorrow, please."

"Right after breakfast?"

"All right. Thank you, Robu-san." And she headed over to Makoto, presumably to let her know as well.

I turned my attention back to the discussion about Bidou-san's arm.

"— have enough room to include the Midchildan information-technology databases that we brought back with us."

"Hang on," I said. "You're going to give TSAB-grade IT to somebody native to this reality?"

"And teach her how to use it," Shario-chan said. "Yes, I already know that this will let Bidou-san hack into any local computer she can touch, just like I can."

I chuckled and turned to face Bidou-san. "Well, that's one way to show that we trust you. Carry on, ladies."

"Thanks, Rob. Now, Bidou-san, what sort of communicator do you want? Silver Millennium audio calls, Midchildan virtual-screen video calling, a DoCoMo cellphone, or all of the above?"

"All of them, please, Shario-chan. And a radiophone, in case I'm ever in the mountains and away from other communications networks."

I suggested, "Best to make the cellphone upgradable, and to tie the computer into the communicator so that you can transfer data wirelessly."

"Well, of course," Shario-chan said with an implied "Duh" at the end.

"Okay, fine, I'll stay out of your way." I took a look around and noticed that Ryou was headed for the door. I thought at him, «OI' buddy, are you sure you want to go out there?»

«No, but I think Osaka Mayumi-san is almost finished, so I'm going to get Hayate-chan.»

«Better you than me.»

He headed out, and returned ten minutes later with Hayate-chan, who announced, "Naru-san, your mother and I have reached an agreement, pending your approval of it."

"How bad is it?"

"You don't go out and fight. You do get to remain a part of the Sailor Team, but you work with Shario-chan, and only on projects that don't put your life at risk."

Naru-san thought for a moment. "I can live with that, since I'm still making a contribution. Am I allowed to defend myself?"

Hayate-chan nodded. "I was going to insist that you not be left defenceless, but she proposed that before I could."

"In that case, Okuni is retiring from the front line." She turned to Bunny-chan. "I'm sorry."

"We have to do what our mamas say, even if we don't like it."

"Speaking of doing," Hanyu-san said, "what does the Sailor Team do when you... we aren't fighting?"

Hayate-chan replied, "We train, we attend school or work, we practice our hobbies, and we enjoy ourselves when we have the chance."

"Not necessarily in that order," Bunny-chan added.

"And sometimes we check out the local boys," added Minako.

Hanyu-san grinned. *"That, I like!"*

After helping Tomoe-san pack, I spent a half-day taking photos of everybody for the forms that Superintendent-General Sakurada had left with us, while the Devices other than Hayate-chan filled out the forms. Considering that she specifically said "each person on the Sailor Team", I included Saeko-mama in the photo set; after all, we gave her a seat at our planning table months ago. Taking photos of the Devices was tricky; I had to buy a macro lens capable of a high reproduction ratio. Luckily, we could afford it, and I could use it later to take photos of jewelry at OSA-P. Alas, Kasandara's photos made her look rectangular.

I didn't take any photos of Arimura-san or Bidou-san, and Hanyu-san's photos weren't for her paperwork because she wasn't getting a badge. I took an entire roll of photos of her for her portfolio.

Then I did the same for Minako.

Then I took a third roll of photos, this time of both of them.

Of course, the best of the photos were going to go into my portfolio as well as theirs. Nobody other than Tsukino Kenji-san was going to hire an unknown without seeing samples of his work, after all, and he was doing a favour to a friend of the family.

Then we went to the Tsukinos' house, and I developed the photos while Hanyu-san and Minako helped Tomoe-san unpack.

I found the ladies in Tomoe-san's new room, in the attic beside Princess Lady's room. She already had a couple of lamps on a shelf below the window. When I joined the ladies, they were trying to figure out how to get her bed, dresser, and wardrobe into the room.

"Oh, Rob! Good timing!" Hayate-chan grinned. "We need some furniture moved."

"And you still have your arm in a sling, so you can't move anything."

"That, and I'm a Unison Device and can't move any human-sized furniture at all."

But I easily could, with my forcefields. "Well, if my photography career doesn't take off, I can always get a job as a furniture mover," I replied with a smile of my own.

We finally managed to put everything into Tomoe-san's bedroom, just before Ikuko-san invited us to join the family for dinner. I let Makoto know that we wouldn't be home until after we ate.

We had katsudon, by the way. Princess Lady made it from Hayate-chan's recipe, and they were both happy that they could work together without being in Unison.

The Saturday before we returned to classes, Saeko-mama asked us about our high school plans. "Are any of you planning on attending a school that offers the yutori kyōiku curriculum?"

"I was thinking about it," Minako replied, "but some of the private schools that I like still use the old curriculum."

"Look at the private schools," Ryou insisted.

"Is that your precognition talking?"

"No, Saeko-mama, that's my informed opinion after reading studies from the year 2012 of the reality we were exiled to. Yutori kyōiku appears to be the worst thing that's happened in Japan in the last few years, and I'm including the economic collapse in that opinion."

He handed her [a printout about how much the relaxed educational standards of yutori kyōiku contributed to Japan's "lost decade"](#), which she took a quarter-hour to read. But Saeko-mama has always been a fast reader.

While she was doing that, my dearest and I prepared a quick snack for everyone.

As we returned to the living room, Saeko-mama looked up. "Ami, Minako, I forbid you from attending Juban Municipal High School or any other high school that uses yutori kyōiku. Ryou, Rob, Makoto, I can't order you, but I strongly suggest that you follow suit."

"Oh, but their uniform looks so good..." Minako complained as she took a bite-sized fruit tart from the plate we'd brought in.

"Can we afford to send everybody to private schools?" my dearest asked.

"If it helps," Ka'o-san said, "I have a salary from Juban Daini General Hospital that I've barely touched except for uniforms and electricity; the rest of my pay has all gone into the family's mutual fund. I don't mind if you use that for tuition."

"Thank you, Mochizuki-san," Ryou replied. "The fund has plenty of money. We can even take a vacation in Okinawa at the end of the school year, if we'd like."

"Isn't that about when the Black Moon Circus shows up, though?"

"It's the Dead Moon Circus, my dearest, and I believe so."



"No Okinawa vacation for us, then," Ryou said. "At least, not this year. That means we can easily afford even Toyo Eiwa's tuition."

"Oh, their school uniform looks good, too."

"Minako, there's more to school than just the uniform."

"I'll only get to wear it for three years, Rob. It has to look good on me!"

Sakura sighed. "Please tell me she's the only person who thinks that way."

"Unfortunately, no," replied Ami. "Some of our classmates are more concerned with getting into a high school that lets them look good than with learning in high school. Many of them like yutori kyōiku because the coursework is relaxed compared to the old curriculum."

"The next time we visit Shibuya, come along and see what the gyaru and gyaruos wear," I added. "Especially the high-school-age kogals. They're so concerned with their looks that I'm surprised they find any time to study."

"You've got a bit of gyaru style going, Rob," Ryou pointed out.

"I'll admit that a gyaru style shirt or two have found their way into my Atelier Lucent shopping bags, yes. Blame Setsuna-san for suggesting them."

"You look good in them, darling. But you'll be wearing a school uniform for three years, just like the rest of us. And I'd rather wear that eye-watering Mugen Academy tartan than the most stylish public school uniform if it means I get a good education." Not for the first time, I thought that Ami and Ryou's attitude toward studying had changed Makoto for the better... and had changed me just as much.

"Toyo Eiwa's a good school, and it has a good uniform. How hard can it be to get in?"

I facepalmed. "Minako, you'd better hope Rei-san never finds out you said that."

"If Toyo Eiwa is your goal," Meia added, "we will need to increase the amount of tutoring we're providing to you."

Just then, Naru-san walked through the front room, Shario-chan in her pocket. "Hi, bye, we're going to go test a hypothesis," the Device told us.

"Naru," Ami asked, "do you want to go to a good high school?"

"We can't afford it," she replied while putting on her shoes. "All of the Osaka family's wealth is tied up in OSA-P's store and jewels."

"We can subsidize you," Ryou said. "Mochizuki-san offered her salary for tuition."

"In that case, I'll ask mama. See you later!"

"Speaking of heading out," I said, "I think I'll head over to the Tsukinos' place, if Tomoe-san is at home. Naru-san's comment gave me an idea that she needs to know about."

I called ahead, discovered that Tomoe-san was home, and asked whether she wanted visitors. Ikuko-san said that she was about to ask us to visit, so Makoto and I headed over.

We discovered that they weren't the only people in the living room. Tomoe-san, Arimura-san, Hanyu-san, and one of the regents – Fujita Jiro, if I remembered correctly – were having a discussion. "Hello, Kino-san and Donarudoson-san," Tomoe-san said. "I believe you have recent experience with buying property."

"Only residential property, Tomoe-san. And I'm guessing that you've already had my idea."

"Buying a replacement building is the obvious route out of Mugen Academy's current problem," Arimura-san said. "But Fujita-san tells us that there isn't a large enough building in our price range on the market at the moment."

"Which is why we wanted your advice," Fujita-san said. "There are two smaller buildings available that could serve our purposes, but they aren't close enough to each other to serve as a proper campus."

"Less than an hour ago, I was reminded of Toyo Eiwa. Their high school and university are on different campuses. Are the two available buildings large enough to put the junior high school in one and the high school in the other?"

Fujita-san looked at his notes. "We could do that, yes. We would need to hire additional staff in order to administer two schools, though."

"Not necessarily," I replied. "If we can run a dedicated communications line between the two buildings, or rent one from NTT, we could set up videoconference rooms in both buildings and operate one school from the other."

"Let me check some numbers..." Fujita-san turned his attention to his notes and calculator.

"What is videoconference?" Hanyu-san asked.

"Holding a single meeting in multiple places by transmitting video and audio signals over telephone lines. Bell Labs did a demonstration of it back in 1986, IBM started selling the PCS/1 on the open market last year, and if Bidou-san's students can't come up with a more efficient system than the Americans have, I'd be very surprised."

«And in a quarter-century, it'll be standard on portable computers.»

«True, my dearest, but that doesn't help Mugen Academy today.»

Tomoe-san smiled. «Just so you know, Chibiusa taught me your telepathy.»

Before I could reply, Fujita-san looked up from his notes. "If we're getting the students involved instead of paying for specialists, then we can probably afford to do it that way. Thank you, Donarudoson-san."

"What can we do for you in exchange?" Arimura-san asked.

"Free tuition? Assuming the entrance exams are passed, of course. Even one year of free tuition will help."

"The third year," Fujita-san insisted. "You pay for the first two, in case you decide to leave school partway through."

"Agreed," my dearest replied.

Fujita-san scowled. "I thought this was for one person."

"What gave you that idea? Mizuno Ami has friends in her current school who she'd be happy to continue having as classmates."

"Well, of course every high school in Japan wants Mizuno Ami as a student," Fujita-san replied. "We'll probably offer her a full scholarship anyway. We'll need a list of her friends, though."

Hanyu-san smiled as she said, "I think we already have that list."

Before she could say anything more, I added, "I'll type it up for you later."

And then it was Sunday, and we had to call the entire Sailor Team together for a meeting. Superintendent-General Sakurada insisted.

Before handing us our new IDs, she said, "If you misuse these, [Kawaji Toshiyoshi](#) might forgive you, but *I* will not."

"That's my line!"

"Yes, Tsukino-san. I know. I want to make this perfectly clear: Sailor Moon has the [rank of keibu-ho](#) and can issue orders only to the Sailor Team; Tsukino Usagi is a civilian." And the Superintendent-General handed the force's newest Inspector her badge.

"Civilian?" Sakura asked. "So you're military? I thought you were police. Ichiro and I might have problems accepting commissions in a second military; we're still ensigns in the Time-Space Administration Bureau Sailing Force, even if we are on indefinite leave." As far as I knew, that was a blatant lie on her part; our TSAB IDs said we were retired.

However, Superintendent-General Sakurada actually looked surprised at the comment. "Oh. Perhaps 'civilian' is the wrong word for a police officer to use about a... a normal citizen."

"Perhaps," Ichiro agreed as he accepted his own badge. He and I, and most of the other members of the Sailor Team, had the rank of junsā-chō, which even I knew was an honorary rank but did outrank newly-hired police officers. Mercury, Mars, Venus, and Jupiter outranked us with the rank of junsā-buchō.

Ryou and I didn't have any magical pockets, so we just kept our IDs in our pockets with our school handbooks.

After dinner, while we were cuddling in her room – and nothing else, and still dressed, because the next day was a school day – Makoto asked, "Darling, when did Ka'o-san become part of the family?"

"Huh." I thought for a moment. "We never took a vote on it. I think she just did, somewhere along the way. Maybe the night after Minako's Pure Heart was shot out and the two of them talked."

"Oh." She thought for a moment, then said, "That works for me. Minako really needed somebody to talk with that night."

"Do you have a problem with a Black Moon Droid being part of the family, my dearest?"

"No, darling, she's as much a person as our Devices are, or we flesh-and-blood folks are. I was just wondering."

And then it was the first day of the second term of our final year in junior high. Or, as students still call it, the Examination Hell Prep Term.

We had two extra students in the class, both of whom Sakurada-sensei introduced as being from Mugen Academy. They had to attend classes somewhere.

"I'm Watanabe Aiko!" said the short girl with black hair and brown eyes. She was almost as cute as Bunny-chan.

"And I'm Watanabe Yuuko," said the tall girl with black hair, blue eyes, and runway-model looks that almost measured up to Minako's. Compared to Aiko-san, her voice was very quiet.

"You're both named Watanabe?" asked Naru-san.

Aiko nodded. "We're twin sisters! Can't you tell?"

I wondered why they hadn't been assigned to two different classes, the way the twins in *Lucky Star* had been. But I wasn't part of the school administration, so I never found out what the reasoning was.

Then they expressed an interest in joining the Conversational English club.

«Yuu and Ai. And they speak English. Darling, if we ever have twins, promise me we won't give them cutesy names like theirs.»

«I promise, my dearest.»

We couldn't stop them from joining the club... but we didn't need to discuss Senshi business during club meetings that term, either. Sakurada-sensei seated them next to our group, so we invited them to join us for lunch.

"Now that I have a chance to look at you closely, I see that you both have the same shape nose. Ah, yes, I'm Mizuno Ami."

"Nothing less from the smartest girl in Japan," Yuuko replied. "I take after our father, and my sister takes after our mother."

"And I'm Ami's fiancée, Urawa Ryou." Yuuko-san sighed when she heard that. Aiko-san frowned, but didn't sigh.

"Wait a minute... Haven't I seen a photo of you somewhere?" Minako asked Yuuko.

"I believe I've seen a photo of you as well. Are you Aino Minako-san? Yoronu Miyabi-san is a pen-pal of mine."

"You know Miyabi?! I haven't seen her since I got back from England, but we send each other letters all the time!"

"I know many people." And we lost the two of them to their own private conversation.

I turned to Aiko. "Hi, I'm Rob Donaldson, and I'm in the Conversational English club."

"We'll be seeing a lot of each other, then. What kind of girls do you like, Donaldson-san?"

"I like my fiancée," I replied as I took her hand and showed off our rings.

"Kino Makoto. I'm in the Conversational English club, too. Pleased to meet you."

"So, what kind of girls do *you* like, Kino-san?"

Even two months ago, that question would have left her flustered. But, thanks to that talk I'd had with her and a few others of the Sailor Team, my dearest took the question nearly in stride. "Oh, I only like boys. Rob, to be specific. Aiko-san, were you in the performing arts program at Mugen?"

"I was! How could you... Don't tell me you've met Hanyu-sempai."

"We've met Hanyu-san."

"I asked you not to tell me that. Ow!" The last was because her sister had slapped her head.

"Let me guess," Naru-san said. "You two do a manzai routine where you're the boke and she's the tsukkomi."

Aiko paused for a brief moment, then said, "Sure, let's go with that."

«Oh, dear,» Bunny-chan sent. She might not be book-smart, but she isn't stupid. Especially when it comes to other people's feelings.

We learned more about Aiko-san over lunch than we learned about Yuuko-san. Aiko-san was studying to become a voice actress. When I heard that, I hoped that her presenting as a highly-sexualized girl was just a role. She hoped to become the next Sakakibara Yoshiko-san... although it was her sister Yuuko-san whose voice reminded me of Sakakibara's. Aiko-san's voice sounded to me more like Yamazaki Wakana-san's.

And I really should have paid more attention to that.

But the important things in life got in the way. Such as the next day's homework and tutoring session.

"Who put a popcorn maker in the Situation Room?"

"Ah-heh-heh," replied Minako with her right hand behind her head.

"Keep it away from us, please," Naru-san said while pulling a long jewelry box out of her school bag. "We don't want to get oil or corn into the wrong places."

"Oh, you've finished?" Hayate-chan asked from her seat at the table, beside Shario-chan's.

"Finally, yes. I apologize for the delay."

"Don't apologize! Your body had to heal before you could help heal me."

Naru-chan opened the box to reveal some circuit boards that I recognized as Unison Device components. "Ah. Do you want me to put up a dust shield?"

"Yes, please, Rob," Shario-chan replied. "After somebody gets the tool box out of the computer room."

I got the tools that we'd brought back from Midchilda and put up a forcefield around the box and the two of them, and we spent an hour and a half watching Shario-chan perform the cybernetic equivalent of surgery on Hayate-chan, who provided a commentary on her own operation.

Arimura-san and Bidou-san were fascinated. Ami and I were interested. The others were bored after the first five minutes.

At the end of it, Rei-san said, "Performing surgery on a conscious person will never catch on."

"Actually," I replied, "it's a popular way to perform brain surgery in the 2020s. The doctors appreciate the immediate feedback from their patients on their work."

Hanyu-san commented, "Remind me to never need brain surgery, then."

"Rob, can you let us out now, please?" I turned to the Devices that were based on two of our Midchildan friends, to see Hayate-chan was hovering a few inches off the tabletop, her hand touching the dust shield. "I haven't flown for weeks..."

"And you're bored being stuck the way I am all the time," Shario-chan finished. I almost commented, but then I saw the smiles on both young ladies' faces.

"Well, I don't know," I teased with a smile of my own. "What would you do with your freedom, anyway?"

"Whatever I want," Hayate-chan replied in all seriousness. "That's what 'freedom' means."

"That's absolute freedom, which doesn't exist in our society because other people need freedom too. But, yeah, good point." I dissolved the forcefield. "Be free, Hayate-chan."

She immediately flew over to Chibiusa with a grin on her face. "My maker has finally given me my freedom. Now I can be your partner all the time!"

"Oh." Obviously, I didn't know everything about the Devices' base programming, although considering why I was called in to make them, I should have realized that the code was there. And Hayate-chan and Shario-chan had Hayate's and Shario's memories of being free, too. I made a snap decision. "I don't like discovering that I'm a slave owner. Shario-chan, Ichiro, I give each of you your freedom."

"Thank you, sir." Ichiro flew over to Shario-chan, gave her a kiss and a hug, then flew back to standing beside his sisters. "I prefer to remain in my current role. As a volunteer."

Shario-chan said, "Likewise. Although I wouldn't mind having a few yen for getting a few things I have a yen for."

Artemis smiled. "I think the Crown Game Center can pay all of you modest salaries for what you've been doing for us." They were the owner-of-record of our mutual fund until Ryou turned 20, so it was pretty obvious where the money would come from.

"Thank you."

"Kasandara," Ryou asked, "do you want your freedom?"

"No sir. I was made to work with you, nobody else."

"Meia," Ami asked, "do *you* want your freedom?"

"Only if I am allowed to continue working with you, Ami."

"Thank you. I grant you your freedom."

"What about you, Sakura?" my dearest asked.

"I don't know. Right now, being your servant is the only thing stopping me from taking over the world."

Bunny-chan grinned. "I'll point out that it's the job of the Sailor Team to stop people from taking over the world."

Ichigo-san added, "We're keeping it safe for Usagi-san to take over later. Besides, we outnumber you."

"Oh, fine. No taking over the world on my own. Sure, if you're offering freedom, I'll take it."

With as much gravitas as she could manage after that exchange, my fiancée said, "Be free, Sakura."

"Will do, partner! Now, let's wrap up the schmaltz and get this study session going."

Over the next few weeks, Aiko-san and Yuuko-san got used to life at Kuritsu Juban Chuugakkou. They didn't always join us for lunch, preferring to make friends with everyone in class instead of just a few of us.

From what I heard, Aiko-san didn't appear to be oversexualized when she was with our other classmates. But she kept hitting on Makoto, me, or both of us.

Come on, we hadn't been mysterious transfer students for a year now. Or four years, counting the Missing Time and our time in Midchilda. And neither of us wanted the attention, or a sefure. Stupid genre conventions.

Ignoring her seemed to help... except that that's what Yuuko-san did most of the time. But we didn't need to take all of the problems of the world on our own shoulders, and there was at least one other person in our group who was better suited than my dearest and me to solving the problem of how the Watanabe sisters acted toward each other. Besides, Bunny-chan was looking for a challenge.

Other than the challenge of passing entrance exams.

We all had that challenge. Minako and Bunny-chan declined our offer of including their names on the list of students that we wanted as Ami's schoolmates at Mugen Academy, one because the uniform was ugly and the other because there was too much math in the curriculum.

When I pointed out to Bunny-chan that this meant she was giving up on ever learning Midchildan magic, she told me that she'd rather learn how to get along with other people instead.

And *that* led me to have a conversation with Hayate-chan, in the Tsukino family's living room. I was seated on the sofa, she was hovering in front of me.

"She's hopeless at strategy."

"I'm not surprised. Is she still at least trying to learn?"

Hayate-chan shook her head. "Princess Lady and Minako are both better students than Usagi is. And Ikuko-san says that she isn't allowed to attend a publicly-run high school, so Usagi is distracted there."

"I'm guessing Saeko-mama has been talking with Ikuko-san. Has Bunny-chan given any preference for which private high school she wants to attend?"

"She wants to stay with at least one of her friends."

The look on my face must have telegraphed my sudden comprehension... and disbelief.

Hayate-chan nodded. "Toyo Eiwa."

"With Rei-san. I hate to say it, but if she has any hope of getting into a top-tier school, she's going to have to be taught to the exam. I can't tell you what to do –"

"And thank you for that, Rob," she interrupted with a smile.

"You're welcome, Hayate-chan. I can't tell you what to do, but I can suggest giving her more exam tutoring and less strategy tutoring. If she's no good at strategy, we can't waste time teaching it to her when she needs to learn other things right now."

"Ikuko-san won't like that..." Hayate-chan replied, "... but you're right. Do you have the test?"

"No. We're going to have to get hold of previous years' tests and base the tutoring on those."

"I'll speak with Ryou about that."

We got to know the Watanabe sisters a bit better during the Conversational English club meeting that week. Yuuko apologized to us for how shallow Aiko's dreams for the future were... which I thought was odd, especially when she told us that her dream was to be admired by everybody.

Both of the twins were odd ones.

But her comment reminded me of somebody else who used to be admired before her energy was almost completely drained. So, after school the next day, I invited Bunny-chan over, and the two of us approached Kaioh-san.

"Michiru-san, have you ever accompanied a singer when you play your violin?"

"Why, no, Usagi-san. That's usually something that a session musician would do, not a star soloist."

"That's understandable," I replied. "But we know of a singer who's dropped out of the spotlight because she had the bad luck to be attacked by one of the Senshi's foes."

"And you want to do something for her to make up for it. Who is the singer?"

Bunny-chan smiled. "Shiratori Mikan."

Kaioh-san shook her head. "Our musical styles are completely different. It would never work."

"Unless she adapted to your style, or vice versa," I said. "And considering she probably needs the work, I suspect she'd be willing to give it a try. If you would."

"I'll think about it. What does she think?"

"We haven't asked her yet."

"Do that. Then talk to me again."

The next day, after combat training, we finally let Princess Lady, the ex-Witches, and the Senshi of the Outer Planets in on our biggest secrets... by showing them selected episodes of the anime that was on my laptop. We showed them episodes 1, 8, 10, 25, 33, and 44 through 46 that day, while answering their questions.

Well, answering some of their questions.

And it's a good thing that Naru-san wasn't with us, because Princess Lady couldn't stop talking while they watched the anime.

"None of this happened in my history! But Ami-neesan told me back in Crystal Tokyo that reality was reset by Neo-Queen... no, *Princess* Serenity, and it's weird calling somebody who isn't me that title. Is that my grandmother? She's pretty. Hey, that's a lot of souls in bubbles. Is that Sailor Neptune?" She pointed at one of the bubbled souls that was floating past Queen Serenity. "So, what happened to everybody else whose souls were sent forward to, well, now?"

Makoto, Ryou, and Ami looked at me, each with one eyebrow raised. Sometimes I regret teaching them how to do that.

I shrugged my shoulders. "We have no idea, Princess Lady."

Ami's response to that was, "But maybe we should find out."

"If I can help, then... Wow, Sailor Moon's all coruscant!" What, you couldn't say "shiny", Princess Lady? Somebody must have given her a word-of-the-day calendar.

At that point, Shario-chan looked up from her console. "Rob, another file is decrypting itself."

"One of the Crystal Tokyo files? When did that start?"

"As soon as Chibiusa said 'coruscant'."

"Well, well." I wasn't about to ask Princess Lady whether she knew that would happen. She might answer me.

It took until the end of episode 46 for the decryption to complete, at which point we had another message from Future Ami to watch. So of course we called everybody together to see it.

But instead of a flat-screen video like the last one, we got a holoprojection. "Hello from 2017, everyone!" Okay, she didn't record these messages in order. Of course, she didn't need to. She'd let her hair grow a little bit, she was wearing a doctor's coat over a casual dress, and she was very pregnant. "You've probably noticed that Ryou and I are waiting for [Chizuru](#) to be ready to join us here. And I remember that some people have just joined us in your time. Welcome to the team, Haruka, Hotaru, Michiru, Mimi, Yui, and Yuko."

Shario-chan paused the playback. "I suppose you're wondering how we got this message."

"Time travel is theoretically possible, but nobody's ever been able to make it work. Obviously, you have."

"That's Sailor Pluto's doing, Bidou-san," I replied. "Keeping Galaxia from just teleporting into the Solar System means no FTL or other time travel is possible anywhere near Earth right now. But if Pluto wants you to travel through time..."

"Then I let it happen," Setsuna-san said from the doorway.

"I was wondering when you were going to show up," Bunny-chan commented with a smile. "We've just started listening to Ami's latest message."

"Oh, good. Let me get some popcorn, and I'll be right with you."

Minako cheerfully announced, "The popcorn maker's beside the door!"

A moment later, Setsuna-san settled in with her snack and Shario-chan restarted the playback.

"Oh, I wish I could have some popcorn right now, but I haven't eaten anything today for Chizuru's and my sake. According to what I remember telling you right now, my water will break by the time I finish this recording. I'll start with some comments that I won't have time to say at the end of this message. Everyone, I remember that you won't get another recording from me until after Galaxia shows up. Minako and Usagi, remember Gretzky's Law. Hotaru, give him time, he's still young. Yuko, we'll need them before December. Mother, I love you so much more than you can know. Now, the reason for this call is Chibiusa's noticing all of the souls being sent forward from the Silver Millennium..."

And she proceeded to give us some information that we needed to know. Even in 1993, people knew about technobabble; they use it so much on *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, after all. As far as I was able to follow it, Future Ami's lecture may as well have been filled with mystobabble. Maybe Rei-san could follow the mysticism. Our Ami definitely could... and so could Meia, Arimura-san, and Bidou-san.

A minute into the lecture, Setsuna-san offered me some of her popcorn, which of course I accepted. What else was I going to do?

Five minutes after that, Future Ami finished off with, "Don't be surprised if you get results you weren't expect-OH!" She gently caressed her torso as she talked to the little one inside her. "Chizuru. I know you want out now so you can fly with your sister [Tsubame](#) and me, but please wait until we're at the hospital." She looked back at the camera and smiled. "Mizuno girls are never good with being confined. I'm sorry about that. And now..."

"Mom, we're here!" A girl who looked remarkably like both Ami and Saeko-mama, wearing a Mercury-blue blouse and skirt, stepped into the recording.

"Tsubame and the other Neo-Sailors are here to take us to the hospital so Chizuru can be born." They both waved goodbye, and the recording ended.

I wondered why Future Ami wouldn't be contacting us again until during or after the events of *Stars*. I also wondered why, just for the briefest moment at the end, she had started to cry. I hoped it was something safe that had to do with Chizuru's impending birth, but I didn't really understand the process at the time.

Saeko-mama was the first to say anything. "So I'll have at least two granddaughters. I hope I'll have a grandson as well."

Ryou added, "Tsubame is a good name for somebody with a parent from Niigata. I assume we're going to teach both girls how to fly."

"Eight times in nine."

"We didn't need to know that, Kasandara," Ami chided her. Then she turned to me. "What's Gretzky's Law?"

"Why are you assuming that I know? I *do* know, but one of these days I won't. It's a quote that Wayne Gretzky said back in 1983: 'You miss one hundred percent of the shots you don't take'."

"So we should go for it?"

I nodded. "Whatever 'it' happens to be, Bunny-chan." I knew without knowing how I knew that 'it' was her first choice for her high school, but that was her secret to tell or keep.

\* \* \*

It was a couple of weeks before Future Ami's message bore fruit... weeks in which we learned almost nothing about the Watanabe sisters.

Yuuko was quiet from the get-go, and Aiko finally realized that offering to take part in a threesome with Makoto and me was getting her nowhere, so she turned her attention elsewhere. Alas, Makoto's and my gain was Ryou's and Ami's loss.

But Watanabe-san wasn't the only threat to my fiancée's and my happiness, as I discovered almost by accident when walking from the Situation Room to my bedroom. I didn't mean to eavesdrop, but our maison didn't have hallways on the ground floor so I had no choice but to either walk through the front room, invisible or not, or stop and listen. I chose to stop, and it was a good thing that I did.

"It isn't fair!"

"What isn't fair, Hanyu-san?"

"I see Donarudoson-san and Urawa-san every day, and Chiba-san at least once a week. Three hunks who I *know* are straight, and I can't get into any of their pants because you, Mizuno-san, and Tsukino-san are their fiancées! Did being Mimete make me ugly? Or does putting a ring on a guy's finger make him not notice me?"

"In Rob's case, it's definitely the second," my dearest replied.

Note to self: For the harmony of the house, we *had* to find Hanyu-san a boyfriend. Or someplace else to live. Or both. I quickly headed back downstairs, trusting that my fiancée would keep Hanyu-san away from me. For once, her insecurities worked in our favour.

"Did you forget something?" Shario-chan asked when I walked back into the Situation Room.

"Yeah, I forgot that Hanyu-san is proud of being ... boy-crazy."

"Or, in her own words, 'a slut'. We've both heard her say so."

"Yeah." I told her what I had overheard, and the conclusion I had reached.

"I can't say you're wrong, Rob. Let me make a few calls, starting with Artemis and Ryou..." And she quickly found two apartments, side by side, that were just large enough to hold three people between them. And we knew they were in a good neighbourhood, and the previous tenants had left them in good condition.

We knew this because the previous tenants were named Kino, Aino, and Donaldson.

"Thanks, Shario-chan." I headed back upstairs and discovered my dearest, Hanyu-san, Bidou-san, and Arimura-san in the front room. "Hello, ladies. Say, have we ever told you about where we used to live before we lived here?"

After a long discussion, Makoto and I convinced the others that it was better if they lived on their own. All I had to do to convince Hanyu-san was point out that there were single guys living in the apartment building. The others seemed to me to want to be convinced to move, but they still had to be convinced that they should move to that particular building.

That weekend, we helped them move in to our old apartments. Bidou-san was very happy to be able to carry some of her belongings in both of her hands, the one she was born with and the one that Naru-san and Shario-chan had built for her. Hanyu-san got my old place, and the others got Makoto's. Cue the relevant Barenaked Ladies song, which wouldn't be released until 1997. Yeah, the old place still held memories for Makoto and me, so we ended up visiting on an irregular basis until Galaxia finally showed up. But I'm getting ahead of myself there.

And then it was October. October 10, and thus the sports fest, was on a Sunday that year.

Princess Lady told us after the fact that Tomoe-san didn't take part. Which was completely understandable; it was so close to 49 days after her father died that she had something more important to do: plan and attend his [shijūkunichi service](#). What surprised me was that both Princess Lady and Shingo-kun accompanied her. Bunny-chan being there too wasn't a surprise to me. Makoto and I attended the service as well, but that didn't get us out of the annual athletics day. Not that we wanted to skip the sports fest, of course.

As for the sports fest at Kuritsu Juban Chuugakkou, we had the distinct feeling that we'd made a mistake last year when we discovered the third-year teams were "Class 1" and "everybody else". Ami apologized profusely to the class for showing off the previous year.

Teal Deer, it ended up a tie. The Watanabe twins won the three-legged race; Matsudaira-san won his kendo matches – he might not have been able to beat my fiancée and I doubted he could beat me, but he was still good enough to beat anyone else; Usagi, Naru-san, Minako, Ami, and my dearest trounced everybody else in five-person Ultimate; I managed to win the bread-eating race by the skin of my teeth; and of course Ami won everything she entered. But we couldn't enter all of the events. Ryou, Ichigo-san, and our other classmates were pretty good at their



events, but not quite good enough to win. Unless I cheated by using fast move, but I was careful not to blow my cover that way.

And then it was time to decide whether we were going to take part in the culture festival. Half of the class wanted to give it a miss, preferring to study for high-school entrance exams... until Minako came up with the perfect event.

"This... Is... Jeopardy!" she announced in English. "The High School Entrance Exam edition!"

"Hey, yeah, that could work!" Of course Sakamoto-san was going to support anything that Minako suggested. He was still carrying a torch for her, after all.

"What's 'Jeopardy'?" Ichigo-san asked.

Ryou replied, "[We called it 'Quiz Grand Prix' when it was broadcast here.](#)"

"What, that old show? Most of us weren't even born when it was on the air."

"Yes, Yamaguchi-san, that old show," Bunny-chan said. "Do you have a better idea on how to turn studying into a game?"

"I didn't think we needed to turn it into a game."

"Well," I said, "it won't be a game for *us*. We'll have to do all of the research and write all of the answer and question pairs, which means we'll have to study even harder than usual. We'll also need to set up the quiz boards."

"Are we going to do this?" Naru-san asked.

"Sure, why not?"

"I guess."

"We may as well. But I want to research the entrance exam questions, not build the set."

"Who's going to be the host?" Ueno-san asked.

"That's obvious," my fiancée replied. "There's only one person in this room who's qualified to be the game's host."

Everybody turned to look at Ami.

She actually looked flustered. "What? Me? But..."

"If you take part in any other role, people are going to say the game was rigged," Ryou pointed out.

"Oh, all right."

We did the board Art Fleming-style, with sliding cards instead of TV screens. The first round questions were straight out of previous years' last-chance high school entrance exams and the public schools' standard exams, the second-round questions came from the good schools' previous exams, and the final question came from the top-tier schools' exams, including Toyo Eiwa and Mugen.

We played the game six times each day, and the audiences were standing-room-only. And I very nearly fell in love with Ami because she did such a good job of hosting the games; she was definitely not the wallflower from canon any more. But only almost. Makoto was and will always remain the woman of my dreams.

And then it was time to study in earnest. Which of course meant that Makoto and I were breaking the rules and skating at least once a week again, but I'll get back to that. Ami, Naru-san, Arimura-san, and Bidou-san had something to show us before we knuckled down to studying, studying, studying, skating, and studying, though.

"Princess Lady, do you remember that you asked us about all of the souls that Queen Serenity sent forward?"

"Oh, yeah... is that what I think it is?" She put down the sketchpad and charcoal that she had been using to draw a picture of Shario-chan working at her desk.

Ami smiled as she held up an obviously-homemade electronic-and-crystal device that looked like somebody had built a Radio Shack hobby kit of some sort but replaced half of the resistors and capacitors with gems. "If this does what we think it does, we should be able to identify people who are reincarnated from the Silver Millennium."

"Well, let's test it!" Bunny-chan was even more enthusiastic about this than Princess Lady was.

"We've already established during design that I show as positive and Naru, Yuko-san, and Yui-san show as negative," Ami said as she started testing the people who she expected she already knew the results from. Bunny-chan, Rei-san, Makoto, Minako, Tomoe-san, Tenou-san, and Kaioh-san all showed as positive. Since they were all Sailor Senshi, we expected as much.

I showed as negative, to nobody's surprise. By this point, everybody on the team knew that I was born in a different reality altogether. Princess Lady also showed as negative, which also surprised nobody. She was from the future, after all, not the past.

"Now to see what results we get from other people..." Saeko-mama and Hanyu-san both showed as negative, which Ami pretty much expected.

Ryou showed as positive, which caused us to wonder for a moment until Ami said, "Yes, of course the hosts of the Seven Great Youma are going to be reincarnated from the Silver Millennium. You just came from the other side of the battle lines."



Luna, Artemis, and Setsuna-san didn't show positive or negative. They weren't reincarnated; they were physically from the Silver Millennium.

Then we got the biggest surprise of the year.

Ichigo-san showed positive.

"That *has* to be broken," she said. "If I was a Sailor Senshi, we would have known it by now... wouldn't we?" We could all tell from her voice that she was hoping otherwise.

Minako said something in a language that I didn't recognize. Artemis and Luna laughed. "It wasn't *that* funny," Minako complained.

"I'll have to take your word for that, because I have no idea what you just said," I commented.

Bunny-chan asked, "Could you say it again, please?" Minako did. "I *almost* understood that, I think."

"So did I..." Ichigo-san said in wonder.

That was when I noticed Rei-san, Makoto, and Ami had distracted looks on their faces for a long moment. I wondered what they were sending to each other.

Then my dearest said something in the same language... and Ichigo-san answered her immediately. "That can't be done, your highness."

The person who looked the most surprised was Ichigo-san herself.

"We really need somebody who has the power to look through somebody else's memories," Bunny-chan said. She quickly added, "Without making a copy of them."

I said nothing about Dream Mirrors; she'd find out about those soon enough. "Yeah, I really don't want to learn everybody else's secrets." At this point, everybody in the room knew that I could take a brainprint, and why I didn't want to, but repeating that preference couldn't hurt.

"That's the wrong power," Ami complained. "We don't need to look through Ichigo-san's memories, we need to re-awaken them."

"And that's my cue," Luna said as she sat in front of Ichigo-san. Once Ichigo-san nodded, a beam of light arched from the Mau to the human, and remained in existence for minutes.

At the end of it, Ichigo-san laughed. "I was right after all. I'm not a Sailor Senshi." She turned to Makoto. "Your highness, I thank you again for including me as your scientific advisor in your entourage when you visited Moon Castle the day that Beryl's forces attacked. If you hadn't, I would have been left behind with everyone else at Io Castle instead of coming to the present with you."

"Scientific advisor?" Bunny-chan asked.

"Yeah, it looks like my love of zoology is older than recorded history. I was never as smart as Princess Mercury, but I was no slouch, either."

"Now I remember," my fiancée said. "Back then, your name was... [Morom](#), wasn't it?"

"That's right. Just 'berry'. We didn't know about strawberries until after the Silver Millennium fell."

Sakura asked, "Does this mean you're going to stop needing tutoring in science?"

"Oh, no. There are a few things I remember from my previous life that we haven't rediscovered yet, but there's also over ten millennia of evolution that I need to catch up with."

Tenou-san sighed. "It would have been nice to have another fighter on the team."

"It's important to know that not everyone who was reincarnated was a palace guard or a Senshi," Naru-san pointed out.

Of course there had to have been innocent civilians caught in Beryl's attack. In hindsight, that was obvious.

Bunny-chan looked cross. "And we need specialist advisors, too. And people with other skills."

"Speaking of other skills and Io Castle," Ryou said in an obvious attempt to defuse the situation, "by any chance do you remember how to pilot a Silver Millennium spaceship?"

It worked. Tenou-san thought for a moment, then answered, "I think so, but without a spacecraft, the knowledge is useless."

"Ah," Ami said, "but we *have* a Silver Millennium spaceship. Princess Mercury's yacht, repaired, nearly refueled, and ready to launch from Mariner Castle as soon as a qualified pilot takes the controls."

Somebody had been doing repair work without telling me. And here I thought that the isekai character being involved in absolutely everything his friends did was a stupid genre convention.

"When can we go?" Tenou-san asked eagerly.

"Christmas," Saeko-mama replied. "Ami's studies are more important than flying your ship here."

And with that pronouncement, we got down to some serious studying. Needless to say, Ichigo-san was suddenly much better at zoology than she had been an hour earlier... which seemed to me to leave her happier than she was, too.

Before everybody went home that evening, I asked Luna whether she could reawaken everyone else's Silver Millennium memories. She could, but nobody other than Minako was ready to let her, just then.

\* \* \*

The ex-Witches, now Academy regents, had an announcement for us at the end of October. They and Tomoe-san had been talking with Hayate-chan off and on since September, and they had finally decided that Mugen Academy needed a rename.

Starting with the winter term – which would be held in the buildings that Fujita-san had suggested renting – the school would be called Mirai Academy, with the slogan 未来を見据えて – "Mirai o misuete", or "Look to the future". Considering that they dearly needed to leave the school's past in the past, I thought that it was a clever bit of rebranding.

They even toned down the tartan of the school uniforms to something that didn't clash horribly with itself. Tomoe-san obviously took a hand in its design; it reminded me of [the Nova Scotia Tartan](#) but with purple threads in place of the blue. The fabric would be ready for next year's school uniforms.

Kaioh-san wasn't at the next weekend's study sessions.

"She's busy with rehearsals," Tenou-san explained. "*Somebody* insisted that she pursue her entertainment career."

"Who insist– oh!" Bunny-chan figured it out before I did. "She's performing with Shiratori-san?"

"That's great!" Naru-san said with a smile while getting her own textbooks out of her school bag.

Minako sighed. "It's too bad Michiru-san writes her name in hiragana. If she used the kanji for 'street' to write Michi, she and Mikan could have been 'Orange Road'."

Ryou pointed out, "I suspect Matsumoto Izumi and Shueisha would have insisted on royalties in that case."

"Oh, right. Never mind."

We spent all of Saturday afternoon and Sunday morning studying for the entrance exams. Even Bunny-chan didn't complain.

Sunday afternoon was combat training time. Hanyu-san, Bidou-san, Naru-san, Ryou, Ichigo-san, and I were sent to learn under Arimura-san and Meia. "I don't have enough of these to go around yet," Arimura-san said while opening a crate, "so you'll have to take turns. Mimi, Yui, Donarudoson-san, you're up first." And she handed Fire Busters to each of us.

"Are these fully functional?" I asked.

"Yes, you can use them to shoot out someone's Pure Heart. Unless Sailor Moon or Sailor Mercury are present, don't do that."

"I don't *want* to do that," Hanyu-san replied. "I can't date a corpse."

"See that switch near your thumb? Make sure it's always set on setting two, then. That's the flamethrower setting."

"Wait a moment, please!" Ami walked over, cast "Hyperspatial Sphere Generate!", and turned to Arimura-san. "I really don't want anybody to burn down the house."

"Which switch is the safety?" I asked.

"The same switch. Setting zero is the safe setting. *Mimi! Don't look down the barrel!*" She sighed deeply and gave all of us the ten-minute version of the firearms safety lecture.

Only then did she say, "Now let's see how well you can aim these", and we got to try using the weapons. Let's just say that it's a good thing that Ami was with us, and that Mercury Aqua Rhapsody could now extinguish the Fire Buster's flames. It was only thanks to Ichigo-san that I wasn't the worst shot of the group. Yes, even Naru-san and Ryou were better shots than I was, and neither of them were full-time combatants.

Once we'd all embarrassed ourselves, we used paint guns for the rest of the session. Arimura-san gave Bidou-san, Hanyu-san, and me training on how to aim, while Meia did the same for Ichigo-san, Naru-san, and Ryou.

After our training was finished for the day, Ami took me aside for a moment. "Usagi had a good idea about sorting through memories without copying them. Do you think you could learn how to do that?"

Without knowing how I knew, I replied, "Probably." Then I added, "I have to go into somebody's mind in order to copy it, after all."

"Whose minds would you be willing to practice with?"

"I'd rather not risk it at all, Ami. I don't want to leave somebody a mindless zombie. But if we're going to do this, then I'm willing to go back into the mind of anybody who I already have a brainprint of. Assuming you volunteer."

"Makoto, Ryou, or me." She smiled. "Unless we can open a big portal and get Finieno-san or Yagami-san to come visit."

"How's that spell optimization coming along, by the way?" Yes, I was changing the subject on purpose.

"I think we have Pandimensional Pathway down to where you and Ichiro working together can cast it for communications."

"We?"

"Yagami-san, Hayate-chan, and I. We've been comparing notes on the spell for a few months now."

"Speaking of notes, I really need to study those spells that Captains Harlowan and Takamachi gave us."

"You still haven't learned those spells yet?"

"I've been busy. Entrance exams take priority."

Ami smiled. "I can't argue with you there."

"Which also means that experimenting with my powers needs to wait, too."

Monday morning came, and Minako asked a question over breakfast.

"If Usagi reset the world so that Beryl and Metaria never existed, what caused the fall of the Silver Millennium?"

"Beryl and Metaria's attack, of course," Ami replied.

I swallowed the last bite of fish from my breakfast. "Bunny-chan reset *Earth*, Mina-chan. I saw the event horizon of the spell move across Tokyo as I kept it from affecting Luna, Artemis, and me. She never changed anything in Earth orbit or on the Moon or in the rest of the Solar System. That's why the cosmonauts on Mir knew what happened, and why Bogdanova-san came to Japan to spy on us, and why Castle Mariner still exists."

"What about Castle Magellan?"

Ami, Ryou, and I looked at each other. Finally, Ami answered, "We couldn't find any traces of it, but that doesn't mean it isn't there."

Ryou added, "We couldn't find any traces of Phobos Deimos Castle, Miranda Castle, or Triton Castle, either. All of which are castles owned by awakened Senshi who weren't taking part in the search."

"So you couldn't find my castle because I wasn't helping to look?"

"It's as good a hypothesis as any," Ami replied, ignoring the fact that we could find Charon Castle without Setsuna-san's help.

"Speaking of Bogdanova-san," I said to change the subject, "I wonder how she's doing."

"Who knows?" my dearest replied. "I hope she hasn't been posted to some lonely Siberian outpost for messing up her last assignment, though."

Minako shrugged her shoulders. "We might never know. Thank you for the food, and we need to get going to school."

School. Studying. Training. Fending off Watanabe Aiko-san's advances, who ended up hitting on every single member of the lunch group, not to mention the members who were couples, sometimes interrupting the Revealing Of The Lunches to do so. Do I even need to mention the Teal Deer for that part of the rest of the calendar year? And I don't know what Bunny-chan and Minako were doing in their efforts to bring Watanabe Yuuko-san and Aiko-san closer together.

Skating, however, was more than just a pastime or a project. Bunny-chan brought Princess Lady, Tomoe-san, and Shingo-kun to watch us practice a few times, so they got to see the big event.

Of course it involved Chieri-san. "Mako-chan! Robu-san! Come meet my partner!"

"Masanori Tsuzuki. I'm happy to meet you."

We introduced ourselves, and we skated together for a few songs.

"You're good," Masanori-san told us at the end of the skate. "Maybe even better than us."

"They *are* better than us, and you know it," Chieri-san replied. "You saw Mako-chan and Robu-san do a synchronized triple axel, despite how tall they are. I can't do a triple axel at all."

"Why are the two of you not pros yet?"

My dearest smiled. "Well, we're still in school."

"That doesn't matter. You need to go pro, like us."

Chieri-san shook her head. "They still have a chance of doing something we can't do any more. Nagano. Or maybe even Lillehammer if they work quickly."

My eyebrows headed for my hairline. "You think we should try out for the *Olympics*?"

And that comment started spreading throughout the spectators. "The Emerald Pair are trying for the Olympics?"

"Maybe we'll win it, with them skating for Japan!"

"Win it for us!" Bunny-chan shouted, and the rest of the crowd took up the cry. Even Tomoe-san said it, despite still being in mourning... but with Shingo-kun and Princess Lady saying it as well on either side of her, she didn't look out of place.

"But..." I started.

"But what?"

I couldn't mention our roles on the Sailor Team.

"We don't have a coach!"

Thank you, my dearest.

"You've come this far without a coach?!" Chieri-san said in amazement. She turned to her partner. "Tsuzu-chan, they're definitely better than us."

"Indeed. Anyone would be happy to coach the two of you."

"If we may," a familiar voice said from the stands, "my partner and I would be honoured to be allowed to coach you, given what we saw you do today and knowing you did it on raw talent."

We all turned to look at them. Then we skated over to the stands. I noticed that Minkao Jinguiji was in the stands, but didn't think anything of it considering how many pro skaters were on the ice at the time. No doubt she was working on a story.

"May I make the introductions?" asked Chieri-san once we were at the boards.

I smiled. "The famous Janelyn and Misha need no introduction."

"You're too kind," Misha replied.

"And we have been following the Emerald Pair since we heard about you," Janelyn added while holding out a meishi. "My card."

It was a good thing I had my card case up my sleeve, and I made a note to thank Ryou for telling me to do that today. I accepted her card and offered mine in return. Thus did we move our relationship from fellow skaters to business associates.

"We do need to consider our future," Makoto said, "but how can we say no to our fans?"

"We'll be in touch in a few days, then," Misha replied. "In the meantime, we would like to observe more of your techniques."

"Certainly!" So we proceeded to show off for the crowd, including our specialty: the gender-flipped forward-outside death spiral. The crowd went wild when we did that, the way they always do.

Janelyn and Misha gave our signature move a pair of odd looks, though.

Just how much did average people remember from the Missing Time? Mind you, having been possessed by youma, Misha and Janelyn were hardly "average".

After the skate, we walked the Tsukinos and Tomoe-san at least partway home. My fiancée smiled and said, "Thank you for giving us an order to pursue one of my dreams, Neo-Queen Serenity."

"One of our dreams," I added.

"When did she do that?" Shingo-kun asked.

I smiled as widely as Makoto. "When she said, and I quote, 'Win it for us!'"

"Oh, yeah, I did say that, didn't I?"

Princess Lady smiled almost as widely as we did. "Don't worry, Usagi. It'll all work out for the best."

"Yeah," she sighed. "It would have been nice..."

After a moment, Makoto asked, "What would have been nice?"

"If Luna had seen you two skate, too."

Tomoe-san added, "But she hasn't been home for a couple of days."

My dearest and I gave each other a Significant Look.

And then it started snowing.

In Tokyo. On November 23. Which we had off for [Labor Thanksgiving Day](#), so there wasn't much in the way of traffic to worry about.

There was, however, the question of why was it snowing in Tokyo on November 23. And the question of just where Luna was.

"You realize those two questions are connected, Rob." Shario-chan wasn't asking me.

"Yeah, I know. Shall we go find some of not-Kaguya-hime's snow dancers?"

Minako pouted. "I was going to play the Sailor V game some more today."

"Work comes before fun," Sakura insisted. "Even on a national holiday."

"I'm coming with you," Arimura-san insisted.

"You can't," Ryou pointed out. "You aren't officially part of the team, according to Superintendent Sakurada."

"Then at least take these," she added while opening a closet.

We did, with smiles. She'd been busy; there were enough to go around.

Then we went out looking for trouble. Chacornac helped us find it. Closer to the Tsukino residence than I would have preferred, actually. We went flying, Jupiter carrying Venus and Mercury carrying Onmyōji. In Moon and Mars' absence, Mercury was in charge.

Sure enough, the snow was the work of snow dancers. Multiple snow dancers, unlike in canon. And there were already a few passers-by who had been frozen in place.

"Leave them," Mercury ordered as we landed between the snow dancers and what few normal people were out on a holiday. Our devices left Unison in order to bring up our numbers and let us flank our foes if necessary.

"Concentrate on the enemy." She raised her voice as she turned to the white maidens. "We are the Sailor Team! In the name of the Moon, we will punish you!"

"That's my line!" we heard from a block away. Sound really does travel farther in cold air.

We couldn't wait for Moon to arrive; the snow maidens rushed us.

"Shabon Spray Freezing!" And our opponents were stopped in their tracks. Mercury added, "In canon, Sailor Mars finished one off with a Fire Soul."

"Mars isn't here," my dearest pointed out.

"But we do have these," Venus replied as she, Mercury, Onmyōji, Jupiter, and I pulled out the Fire Busters that Arimura-san had given us. Jupiter and Mercury were carrying mine and Onmyōji's, respectively.

Sakura grinned. "I believe the correct phrase is 'lock and load'."

"Lowest power," Ami told us. "We don't know how many of these snow dancers are around."

"I need to check one thing first," I insisted. I switched my weapon from flamethrower to pure heart extractor, and fired at one of the trapped snow dancers.

My aim had improved since the first time I'd fired a Fire Buster. The bolt hit the snow dancer square in the chest. Nothing came out of its body.

"Okay, they're like Cardians, not Youma," I said while switching my Fire Buster back to flamethrower. "Lock and load, rock and roll."

"I'll thank you not to steal my malapropisms," Venus said with a grin.

"Have you been doing those on purpose?" I asked as I melted one of the snow dancers. Not that I could remember hearing very many examples.

"Of course! I *am* fluently bilingual," she replied while melting another of our foes. "Toasted!"

Ryou, Ami, and my dearest took out one each without talking about it. All four of them were better shots than I was, and I wondered when they had time for the additional practice.

"Another wave incoming, sir," Ichiro reported from three meters up.

Then we heard a shout from Bunny-chan's direction: "Silence Wall!"

It sounded like Tomoe-san had transformed to Sailor Saturn. And we didn't get to see it. Stupid genre conventions.

Mercury noticed as well. "Hit them hard, then we join up with the others! Oni, cover our retreat!"

I melted one more snow dancer to draw their interest away from the other Senshi, then put up forcefields to herd the remaining enemies into a group.

"Blutiges Schwert!" Ichiro got the one snow maiden that wasn't part of the group that I'd captured.

I pulled them along, still contained, and we headed for our teammates.

Saturn was facing away from us, maintaining a barrier that was obviously keeping more opponents at bay. Moon and Chibimoon, the latter obviously in Unison with Hayate-chan, were attacking single targets while standing on either side of Shingo-kun, who was trying his best to make himself a small target.

Ah. The three of them were protecting somebody that, at least in two cases, they loved. If that was enough to get Tomoe-san to manifest her powers, what did that say about her feelings for Shingo-kun? But it wasn't the time to ask.

"Moon!" Mercury called. "Orders?"

"You already gave the speech. Hit them!"

"Weichstütze!"

"Blutiges Schwert!"

"Photon Lancer!"

Meia, Ichiro, and Sakura thinned out the herd from above.

"World Shaking!"

"Deep Submerge!"

And Uranus and Neptune attacked them from behind... which was good in the short-term, but meant we couldn't use the Fire Busters without hitting them.

"Welcome to the party!" Sakura shouted in their direction.

"Less talk, more action! World Shaking!"

Venus stowed her Fire Buster. "Venus Lovely Chain!" She grabbed three snow dancers at once.

I made my way over to Saturn – not a full flash move on the snow, but faster than humanly possible. "Oni Wall!" Everyone else was announcing their attacks, and she'd never fought alongside us, after all. As my shield went up, she dropped hers and caught her breath. "See what I'm doing here?" I pointed out part of my forcefield. "The buttressing makes it more difficult for them to push the wall over. But you don't want to take too much away from the wall to make the buttresses." While I helped her learn her own powers, I also brought the bubble of trapped snow maidens over to join our other foes.

"I see how it works, yes," she whispered. "Silence Wall!" And her wall re-manifested, this time a bit shorter but supported on this side.

"You catch on fast, Saturn," I said with a smile.

"Learn or die, right, Oni?"

"True. Ichiro, how's everybody else doing?"

"Uranus is on our side of the line. Neptune is five steps behind her."

"Time for me to go on the attack," I told Saturn as I built a riser under my feet so I could shoot over her wall.

As Neptune joined our group, everybody with a Fire Buster shot flame into the main body of snow dancers, melting almost all of them.

"We left one for you, Chibimoon," Mercury announced.

She levitated and cried out, "Pink Sugar Heart Attack!"

And the last of our opponents was destroyed.

As the snow around us started to melt and the trapped passers-by started thawing out, we quickly made our way to a quiet alleyway where we could transform back to our civilian identities.

Makoto squatted down and asked Tomoe-san, "How was your first time as a Sailor Senshi?"

"Exhilarating!"

I noticed that Shingo-kun smiled at hearing Tomoe-san's happiness, too.

Then her adrenaline rush wore off and she collapsed into his arms, fast asleep.

He looked at me, panic on his face. "What do I *do*?"

"Take her home and help your mother get her to bed," I suggested, which calmed him down. He nodded as he picked her up in a piggyback carry, and the Tsukinos headed back to their house.

They grow up so fast nowadays.

Apparently there were three groups of snow maidens who attacked Tokyo that day. News reports say that Mars singlehandedly took out as many as the rest of us put together, defending Roppongi without so much as singeing any of the buildings. Rei-san told us later that she slept for twelve hours straight that night, though. And Yuuichirou-san mentioned at the next weekend's training session that he'd sat beside her all night, just in case.

The JGSDF took out the third group. For them, it was Tuesday.

What? No, the Sailor Senshi weren't the only people defending Minato, and never have been. This was just the first time I'd had reason to mention them. They're good at certain things, we're good at other things, and we rarely cross paths with each other.

"Darling..."

"Yes, my dearest?"

"You've given Tomoe-san advice. You've helped her move. You've fought alongside Sailor Saturn. Don't you think it's time to start calling her 'Hotaru'?"

"I thought of her as 'Hotaru' when her father was still alive, but now she's the head of her family and deserves the respect of that position."

"A family of one, as far as we know. Who's her official guardian?"

"That's a good question," I replied just before the phone rang. I reached for the extension in the front room. "Hang on. Hello, Donaldson speaking."

"Hello, Rob. To answer Makoto's question, I am."

"Hello, Setsuna-san. Thank you..." Hearing only a dial tone, I hung up. "Well, that was fast. Setsuna-san says she is."

"She's a show-off."

"She also didn't give me a chance to ask whether she could help fight not-Kaguya-hime. Oh, well. Since Tomoe-san and I have the same official guardian, I'll let her decide what relationship that makes the two of us, and what we should be calling each other."

Before she could reply, our communicators announced an incoming message. "Everybody! Luna's come home!" "We're on our way, Usagi!" Ami replied before any of the rest of us could.

Luna, looking very cute wearing a yellow ribbon, told us what she knew about the situation, including how Kakeru, the man who'd saved her from being hit by a truck, had found a comet and was feeling ill, and how Himeko, a woman who'd come from a NASA office in order to see Kakeru during her vacation, insisted NASA hadn't found a comet and wanted him to be more level-headed.

"Robu-san, what's wrong?"

"Oh, where to begin... No, I need to stop assuming that this world is just like the reality of my birth. I wouldn't expect NASA to find a comet because my NASA doesn't look for comets; that's left to the much larger group of amateur volunteer astronomers, like this Kageru-san. Next you'll be telling me that they're planning on sending a Space Shuttle to the Moon."

"Er..." Ami said, "NASA *is* planning to send a Space Shuttle to the Moon. It'll be piloted by Nayotake Himeko, a Japanese scientist who's part of the mission."

"Oh, for... *Somebody* in JAXA, no, sorry, it's still NASDA, has some sort of hold over NASA in order to get one of their pilots to be allowed to fly an American spacecraft. And you called her a scientist, not a pilot. Spacecraft pilot is a profession in itself. Have you seen [the flight deck of a Space Shuttle](#)? And don't get me started on how the Shuttle is only capable of low-Earth orbit with the fuel that it can carry... Oh, dear."

"What?" asked Rei-san.

"Unless NASDA found and reverse-engineered some Silver Millennium thruster technology somewhere or Viluy built some drives for them. If that's the case, then I can see Japan let NASA use that tech for this mission, if somebody on the design team is there to make it work. We need to get Bidou-san into this discussion. And exactly who is this Nayotake Himeko person?"

Ami held up a copy of one of that day's newspapers. "Here's an article about her."

Luna looked at the photo accompanying the article. "That's Kakeru's Himeko!"

I sighed deeply. "Of course she is. And that means she's not from some random NASA office. When does her mission leave?"

"A month from now," Ami replied. "They expect to be in Lunar orbit on Christmas day."

"And she came from Merritt Island to Tokyo to see Luna's friend Kakeru? She must really love him."

"How do you figure that, Robu-san?" Bunny-chan asked.

"She'll have to go back soon to go into pre-launch quarantine."

"By the timing shown in the canon story," Hayate-chan added, "she should have been in quarantine right now, because the launch took place while the Sailor Senshi were fighting in Tokyo while the launch was happening in a snowstorm in Florida. Except that she wasn't in quarantine, and that didn't stop her from taking part in the mission."

I nodded in agreement. "And any other NASA launch would have had her remaining with the rest of the crew running more simulations right now; NASA is really dancing to NASDA's tune here."

"Nayotake-san is putting love before her career," Minako mused. "I can't fault her for that, but if she loves him that much, she might not return to NASA while Kakeru is ill."

I nodded. "Which means she wouldn't return to NASA at all, ever, if this was happening in my home reality. This is still 1990s Japan; many if not most women expect to give up their careers for love."

"Or for marriage," Ami added. "But if we found a doctor who isn't fazed by what might be a magical illness to look after Kakeru-san, she might go back to work anyway."

Bunny-chan looked puzzled. "What makes you think it's a magical illness?"

"The timing. It started when he discovered that comet, and when the snow dancers attacked."

"I'm inclined to agree," Ryou said. "On all counts. Although, as far as we know, there's only one doctor in Tokyo who has any experience with magical illnesses."

"Mother has been ordered to take some time off at work, and relax. I think looking after only one patient would count as relaxing for her."

"Then what are we waiting for?" Luna asked. "Call her! And call Bidou-san, too."

Ami did, calling her mother first, then calling Bidou-san. After she did that, she said, "Meia, help me with these scans that Chacornac made, please. Why are only some people seeing this comet?"

While they did that, Makoto and I got up and walked over to Tomoe-san. "Do you have a moment?" I asked.

"Certainly," she replied while motioning for us to sit beside her. "There's nothing for me to do but wait until either Bidou-san or Mizuno-sensei arrive."

As I sat down, I said, "Setsuna-san tells me that she's your official guardian now."



"That's right."

"She's my official guardian, too. What relationship does that make us?"

She didn't need to think about it; she smiled and took my hand in hers. "The two of you have always been kind to me, and treated me as a person instead of a prize or a pawn. And I've always wanted a big brother. May I call you Robu-niisan, the same way that Chibiusa does?"

I smiled as I replied, "I would be honoured to be your big brother, Hotaru-chan. But this means that neither of us can go through life alone any more; we have to be there for each other during the good times as well as the bad times."

"I haven't had very many good times lately," she admitted while looking at me through the veil of her mourning clothes, "but the ones that I have had have been with Chibiusa or Hayate-chan or Shingo-kun or Usagi-san or you or Makoto-neesan."

I looked at my dearest and raised one eyebrow; she smiled and nodded. Then I turned back to Hotaru-chan. "Then it's settled. We're practically siblings. We're just going to have to figure out where to spend New Year's together: here or at Maison Lyrique."

"We have plenty of room here," she pointed out.

"We'll just have to ask Saeko-mama first, Tomoe-s... Hotaru-chan."

Princess Lady looked up from her sketchpad; she had started a picture of the two of us in order to pass the time. "Don't worry, Hotaru-chan. He can be slow to change sometimes."

"Thank you, Chibiusa. Should we be holding still for you?"

"No, that's okay. I have to learn how to do this without bothering the people I'm sketching." She went back to her work. "Besides, this is more the idea of the two of you than it is a particular scene."

I kid you not; Hotaru-chan actually giggled at Princess Lady's comment.

We waited for another half-hour for Bidou-san and Saeko-mama to arrive, during which Bunny-chan offered everybody tea, Artemis and Luna had a short talk that he wasn't happy about at the end of it, and Princess Lady finished her sketch. She offered it to me, but I insisted that Hotaru-chan get to keep the first picture of the two of us.

Princess Lady took that as a request to draw a second sketch of the two of us. It was at that point that I noticed she was drawing on [kyogi](#) instead of paper. Seeing that I was looking at what she was holding, she said, "[It's better for the environment to use wood sheets](#) instead of pulping the wood and making that into paper."

I couldn't argue with her. "Makoto and I use kyogi in the kitchen to line our cutting boards and wrap leftovers. I've never seen it bound into a sketchpad before."

"Even in Crystal Tokyo, I have to get big pads made special for me," she admitted. "But [I can get these small sketch pads by mail-order](#) right now."

That was when Bidou-san arrived, and we stopped talking about sketching and relationships. Princess Lady didn't stop sketching, though.

Hayate-chan spent a few minutes explaining the situation to Bidou-san.

"Yes, Viluy did build reactionless thrusters with NASDA resources," she told us. "They're very expensive to duplicate and they're prone to malfunction if they aren't handled just right. But what does this have to do with those snow women?"

"We're pretty sure that they come from space," Ryou replied before anybody could go into detail about Kakeru and Himeko.

Bidou-san frowned. "The thrusters aren't ready for use."

"Oh, dear," Ami replied without looking up from the Mercury Computer's display. "NASDA has already installed them on a NASA space shuttle."

Bidou-san looked worried, but before we could continue that discussion, Saeko-mama walked in. "I'm sorry I took so long. Ami said something about someone needing medical help?"

That's when we went into detail about Kakeru and Himeko, including finally mentioning Kakeru's family name, Oozora... and when I realized that both Luna and Artemis deserved seats at our planning table, because Luna did most of the talking.

At the end of it all, Princess Lady handed me two sketches – one of Hotaru and me, the other of my dearest and me – and asked "Do we need to help Oozora-san before we take the battle to space?"

I nodded. "The sooner Nayotake-san gets back to NASA, the better off her mission will be for everyone involved. Besides, Ami hasn't found our enemy yet."

"Actually," she said as she and Meia looked up from the Mercury Computer's screen, "I think we may have found them. Chacornac's scans are being obscured."

"It's subtle," Meia added, "but a statistical analysis shows evidence of a vision cloak of some sort in space above Lunar Farside."



Bunny-chan stood up, and with her Neo-Queen Serenity voice said, "Mizuno-sensei, you have a patient to care for, if you would be so kind."

"Of course," Saeko-mama replied.

"Luna will show you the way, and Oni and Princess Lady will accompany you in case any more of those snow monsters appear. Mercury and Meia, break that vision cloak. Everyone else will review what we know about our opponent in Oni's records." She turned to me and asked, "You do have something about them in your records, don't you?"

I nodded. "We're currently in the middle of the Sailor Moon S movie. Shario-chan knows where to find it. It isn't an exact match to our situation because Hotaru-chan and our non-powered friends and I aren't in it."

"Thank you, Robu-san." She turned back to the others. "Once we have a definite target, the Senshi of the Four Guardian Deities, the Senshi of the Outer Solar System, Tuxedo Kamen, and I will take the battle to the enemy. Oni and Princess Lady will remain here to guard Kakeru-san in case something happens. The combat-capable Unison Devices will remain with their accustomed partners."

Bidou-san frowned slightly as she sighed. "And we ex-Witches will stay at home and worry. The Tokyo Metropolitan Police Department won't let us do anything else."

"What about me?" Artemis asked.

Before Bunny-chan could reply, I said, "If it's all right with everyone else, would you accompany Luna, Saeko-mama, and me, Artie? It would be extremely useful to have you along." After a quick pause for emphasis, I added, "Please."

"I have no problem with that," Bunny-chan replied.

"Neither do I," Minako added, "and I think you need to spend some time together with Luna." She winked at me as she said that.

"The sooner we finish this, the sooner we can get back to studying for the end-of-term exams. Mizuno-sensei, how soon can you see Kakeru-san?"

Saeko-san stood up as she replied, "My bag's already in the car. Luna, Artemis, Robu, Chibiusa, if you would?"

We all moved to join her. On a hunch, I asked Ami, "Do you have that Silver Millennium soul detector with you? I remember that, in the movie, Kakeru-san mentioned feeling some sort of energy when he watched the Moon."

Without looking away from the Mercury Computer, Ami grabbed her school bag with one hand, opened it, and pulled the detector out. "Do you remember how to work it?"

"I do," Ichiro replied before I could.

I nodded in approval. "Thanks, both of you. Ichiro, let's go. I suspect we'll need to fly back because Saeko-mama isn't likely to leave her patient."

"Of course, sir."

I sighed as I stopped at the Tsukinos' front door. Putting my shoes and coat on, I said, "I distinctly remember manumitting you, Ichiro."

"Sorry, sir. Rob. Force of habit."

"You called me 'Rob' when we were on Midchilda."

"When we didn't have to do any Sailor Team work," he replied as we headed out the front door and walked to Saeko-mama's car. "Circumstances are different here."

"Even in medicine," Saeko-mama pointed out as we got into the car, "it makes sense to make clear who's in charge in life-and-death situations. Now, where are we headed?"

"Tsukuba Science City, in Ibaraki", Luna replied. "Near the Space Science Authority's observatory."

"It's good that Saeko-sensei is driving," Ichiro commented. "The train would take twice as long to get there."

During the drive, we discussed how we would approach Nayotake-san when we got there and which secrets we were prepared to reveal, so we all knew what roles we expected each other to fill during the conversation. Then I mentioned, "If things go according to canon, Nayotake-san won't let Luna in to see Oozora-san because she's a cat."

"Oh, dear. Just because I'm a cat?"

"But you aren't an Earth cat. You're a Mau," Princess Lady pointed out.

I added, "And in canon, you were about to rediscover something that Mau can do that cats can't. I think it's time you remembered what it means to be a Mau. Artie, if you would transform, please?"

"Ah," he said while he changed from cat form to human form. "That's why you wanted me along, isn't it?"

"You... he..." Luna sounded surprised, but calmed down quickly. "I remember!" And she shifted form as well, crowding Princess Lady between the two Mau. "They can't refuse to let me in now."

"Except," I pointed out, "that they've never seen you in that form." I looked over my shoulder to see what appeared to be a pretty 20-something girl with wavy hair as dark as Rei-san's. "You're cute in both your forms, Luna, but you'll have to change back to cat form for a few minutes."

"Of course," she replied somewhat disappointedly while both Mau shifted back to cat form. Then she said, "Artemis, we need to have a long talk about your bad habit of keeping secrets from me."

"You'll have to do that later," Saeko-mama said. "We're here."

Once Saeko-mama had parked the car, I put on the face that matched the photo on my TMPD ID as we got out and made our way to Oozora-san's front door. Ichiro and Hayate-chan hid in our pockets as Saeko-mama rang the doorbell. Nayotake-san answered the door. "Hello?"

"Hello, I am Mizuno, from Juban Daini General Hospital. I'm looking for Oozora Kakeru-san. Is he in?"

"He isn't seeing anyone at the moment, Mizuno-san." She moved to close the door, but I did the old foot-in-the-door trick with a forcefield to keep it open.

"Allow me to rephrase, Nayotake Himeko-san."

"How did you know my name?"

"There was an article about you in today's Tokyo Shimbun. I am Doctor Mizuno Saeko, and I am here in a professional capacity." She offered the astronaut her card. "I was the doctor who was brought in to treat Okuni of the Sailor Team." Not a lie; nobody else involved with Naru-san's treatment was a licensed physician. "I believe that incident was covered by the national news?"

"If it was, it wasn't repeated in America. How did you know that Kakeru is ill?"

Princess Lady answered that one. "Luna told us." She and I both showed Nayotake-san our IDs as a cold gust of air blew through.

"Aren't you a little young to be a Sailor Senshi?" Nayotake-san asked Princess Lady. Then she looked at me and asked, "And aren't you... well, the wrong sex?"

"It appears that our IDs aren't sufficient proof, trainee," I said to my teammate.

She nodded and said, "Moon Prism Power, Make Up!" And a short moment later, Sailor Chibimoon turned to Nayotake-san. "Is that enough proof?"

"I saw it with my own eyes. It will have to be enough." She turned back to look at me. "You still aren't a girl."

"True," I replied as I changed my appearance to Oni while saying, "We might not be bishojo, but Tuxedo Kamen and I aren't the only males on the Sailor Team, either."

"I see. Please, come in, all three of you." We did so, I dismissed my forcefield, and she closed the door behind us.

Saeko-mama introduced herself to Oozora-san while Luna drew my attention to a crystal on his desk. "That's bigger than it was the last time I was here," she whispered.

"Did Luna just talk?"

I turned to Nayotake-san. "We did tell you that Luna let us know about your friend's condition. Artemis can talk, too," I added while gesturing toward the other Mau.

"Hello."

"Oh." One thing that all astronauts have in common is a willingness to accept evidence; it's a survival trait in space. After a moment, she said, "Luna. I apologize for treating you as if you were an ordinary cat."

"That's all right. You didn't know."

I let them talk while I looked at the crystal. «Ichiro,» I sent, «can you sense anything unusual about this thing?»

«I'm sorry, Rob, but no. I'm not Meia.»

«Meia needs to stay with Mercury right now,» sent Hayate-chan. «We'll just have to do our best.»

«Right,» I sent back before turning my attention back to the crystal... only to see a Snow Dancer looking at it through the window.

"We've got company!" I announced as the Snow Dancer flew away. "Or, rather, we had company. The owner of this crystal is about to know where it is."

"The comet fragment?" We all turned to look at Oozora-san. He continued in a whisper, "I'm sure that Kaguya-hime left that here for me to find."

"I've never met a Moon Princess named Kaguya," I commented. "The two that I have met are named Serenity; it's a family name. But we can call your princess 'Kaguya' if you want."

"I'm right? There really... are Moon Princesses?" he asked with some effort.

"Yes, Oozora-san, there are," Princess Lady said with a smile. Quietly enough that he couldn't hear, she added, "But we might not be what you think we are."

But Nayotake-san heard. "Let's go into the other room and let Mizuno-sensei work." We did so, then she said, "I can accept that you're a Sailor Senshi because you transformed into one in front of me," she said quietly enough that she wouldn't be overheard. "But I can't accept that you're a Moon Princess. There's no air on the Moon, let alone life."

"If I may ask, why are you going to the moon next month?"

"What does that have to do with anything?"

"Please humour me," I asked.

"Very well. We're investigating the mascon in Mare Serenitatis."

I nodded. "I'd appreciate getting copies of your data, including any high-resolution photographs. We might be able to use it to determine what actually happened to Serenity's palace millennia ago."

"These flights of fancy are amusing, but hardly scientific. I'm surrounded by dreamers."

"You may say I'm a dreamer, but I'm not the only one. The world needs dreamers to imagine alternatives, no matter how preposterous those alternatives might sound."

Then the power cut out.

Princess Lady reached for my hand, and I let her take it. "Be brave, Chibimoon," I said while looking at the window... which was covered in frost on the outside. "It looks like we're needed. And please call Shario-chan for me."

She nodded as she let go of my hand and pulled her communicator from wherever the Senshi keep things when they're transformed. Hayate-chan came along with the communicator, which she had already turned on. "I'm way ahead of you, Oni," she said before turning her attention back to the conversation she was already having.

"Nayotake-san," I said, "I'm going to have to invoke my authority as an officer of the Tokyo Metropolitan Police Department and ask you to remain in this building for the foreseeable future." And that made me wish Ryou was here to tell us just how long that was going to be. "It will very quickly be unsafe to be outdoors, if it isn't already."

"It's already too late to go outside without magical protection," Hayate-chan said. "Oni, you're on defence. Chibimoon, you're on offence. Don't let any Snow Dancers get near that crystal."

"Or Oozora-san," I added as I put up an IR-invisibility forcefield around the house. This was one time when we didn't want any heat to escape... or give away our exact positions. And it should at least slow down any Snow Dancers out there; in canon, our foe *really* wanted that crystal back, and there was no reason to think our situation was any different. "It looks to me like he's linked with that thing."

"Right. Ichiro, you're on spotter duty for Chi- What?!" Hayate-chan turned her full attention to the communicator as Ichiro flew out of my pocket and headed for the front hallway. Nayotake-san didn't even blink; I think she was long past incredulity and halfway to blind acceptance.

"Oni, you'll need to let me out of the house."

"Right." I did so, feeling just how cold it was outside when I opened the door and a hole in the forcefield for Ichiro, then closed what I'd opened and returned to the others. "Ma'am, I doubt I'll be able to keep us both protected and warm for much longer."

Hayate-chan ignored me, paying full attention to the communicator. "No! You can't! We don't know whether she can control it, or what it will do to her!"

"Oh, no. Is Sailor Moon planning to use the Grail?"

"Worse," Chibimoon told me. "Saturn's planning to use Death Reborn Revolution."

I refused to swear in front of a child... so I begged instead, not caring that Nayotake-san could hear everything I said. "Please don't do that, Saturn. We just agreed to practically be siblings. I don't want to lose you."

"I don't have any other choice!" Saturn's voice came over the communicator. "The other senshi are down, except for Moon! Fire Busters are useless against the sheer number of foes!"

"Saturn, don't be Shiva to her Brahma, work together and be Vishnu!" I hoped that she would get the message that I couldn't just say, because I fully expected that our opponent could hear everything we said. However, she probably didn't know anything about Hindi gods.

I really hoped that Hotaru-chan did.

Shario-chan's voice came over the communicator. "This transmission isn't going to the battlefield. Chacornac is reporting an energy buildup centred on Moon and Saturn."

Nayotake-san looked puzzled. "Chacornac?"

"The Sailor Team has a sensor station and communications relay there," Chibimoon explained. "It's a relic of the civilization that existed before almost everything was destroyed millennia ago."

"My God! The energy buildup! The readings are off the scale!"

"Re-calibrate the scale!"

"This isn't a space opera, ma'am! I can't just re-calibrate the scale!" After a moment, she added, "Besides, Chacornac has stopped scanning to protect its scanners!"

"Both of you, please calm down," I said, just before the sky lit up in the south.

Chibimoon gasped. "That looks like one of my moonbeams, but lots bigger."

Then the house shook as a pressure wave hit it... and Ichiro slammed into the side of the house.

"Lots more powerful, too," Chibimoon added with some worry.

"Somebody give me a status report!" Hayate-chan insisted.

I looked into the other room. "Mizuno-sensei and Oozora-san are alive. Oozora-san looks to be breathing normally."

«I'm hurting, but I'll live,» Ichiro reported.

"I still have connections to Chacornac and the Mercury Computer." Then Shario-chan told us what we desperately wanted to hear. "The latter is showing all Sailor Senshi at the combat zone are still alive."

"Thank the gods," I said, with feeling.

After a few moments, once we saw that the snow was starting to disappear, I asked, "Permission to retrieve Ichiro?"

"Granted," Hayate-chan replied without looking away from the communicator.

I headed out and rather quickly found him where he'd fallen. "You didn't stand up on your own. How bad is it?"

"I'm still cataloguing the damage. I'm not flying and we're not going to Unison any time soon, Rob." Then he frowned. "And some of the damage is structural and can only be repaired on Midchilda."

Which probably wasn't happening any time soon, if ever. Ami was still working on expanding the Pandimensional Pathway spell effect to the point where we could physically pass through it. "Is there any bright side to this?"

"I don't think so, unless Shario-chan fusses over me while we're waiting for Naru to make replacement parts for me."

"The two of you do make a cute couple. Is it safe for me to move you?"

"It won't hurt me."

I didn't like that answer, but I doubted that I was going to get a better one.

There was good news and bad news.

The first good news was that the Lunar Frontier Project was not scrubbed because of snow. This meant that Nayotake-san had to return to NASA as soon as possible; she left Oozora-san in Saeko-mama's care.

The second good news was that Hotaru could transform to and from Sailor Saturn at will now.

The third good news was that my hunch was bad; Oozora-san was not a reincarnated Silver Millennium. Neither was Nayotake-san. Yes, that's good news in that we weren't tempted to try to recruit them.

The bad news was that even after the field repairs that we could provide, Ichiro wouldn't be flying anywhere or entering Unison without a major overhaul by a Device Meister with a full suite of tools and diagnostic devices. We knew one, but as far as I knew, we had no way to get him to the original Shario. We still let her know his injuries, just in case Hayate Yagami was available to open a portal at some point. Hotaru-chan and Bunny-san apologized repeatedly to him for being the immediate cause of his injuries, but he insisted that it was a small price to pay to let billions of people continue living.

I hoped I could be as selfless if a similar situation ever happened to me. Considering how I reacted to the Senshi's deaths at the end of the Missing Time, I seriously doubted that was the case, though.

Since nobody actually died and (except for Ichiro) we came out ahead, we celebrated with a sukiyaki party – the first with the entire Sailor Team participating. Excepting the Amazonas Quartet, but nobody expected to see them before the new year.

Then we went back to studying. Sakura and Hayate-chan took over Ichiro's lessons, until it was time to write the end-of-term exams. The most important end-of-term exams for most of us, in that they would determine whether Mirai or Toyo Eiwa would even look at our applications, let alone let us write their entrance exams.

No pressure.

Well, Ami wasn't feeling any pressure; having scored 900 twice in a row will do that. We actually had to talk her down from being overconfident. Bunny-chan and Minako, though... they were wondering whether they'd set their sights too high.

And Ami didn't let us watch the launch of Shuttle Endeavour on the Lunar Frontier Project mission, which in my home reality would have been STS-61 with a different crew and mission. That was time that we needed to spend studying.

Teal deer, we all passed with good numbers. Ami scored 900 yet again, Ryou, Makoto, and I were comfortably where Ami was before we took our two-year vacation in Midchilda, and Rei-san scored high enough that she was allowed to take the top-stream exam at Toyo Eiwa.

Ichigo-san scored 818, thanks to her newly-remembered science knowledge. Naru-san scored 791.

Bunny-chan and Minako... were almost re-tested until we reminded Sakurada-sensei about the last time we had been re-tested. We also let her speak over the telephone with Shario-chan, who confirmed that she had been tutoring both of our classmates. Only after that did Kuritsu Juban Chuugakkou enter their test scores: 751 for Minako and an all-time personal best of 721 for Bunny-chan.

It was only after we got our report cards that we learned the cutoff score for being allowed to write the entrance exams at both of our desired schools was 720.

We had another sukiyaki party on Christmas Eve, with everybody who had saved the world a month earlier taking part. Then Saeko-mama, Minako, Sakura, Meia, Ichiro, and Sharior-chan accepted the Tsukinos' invitation to stay the night at their place, everyone else went home, and... well, I think Ami and Ryo were as happy at their end of the house as Makoto and I were at our end.

I don't know where my dearest found the energy to make breakfast for the four of us the next morning.

But we were glad that she did, because we needed to work on Christmas Day. That in itself isn't strange in Japan. What was strange was where we needed to work.

We were in the middle of breakfast when we heard a news report on the television. "We have just been informed by NASDA that the Lunar Frontier Project has suffered a catastrophic failure of its engines. NASA has not been able to contact the Shuttle Endeavour since the failure, but telescopes indicate that the spacecraft is still in lunar orbit..."

"Why are we hearing about this from the news?" my dearest asked.

"Because our entire support staff are on vacation," Ami replied.

"Somebody call them," I said. "I'm heading to the Situation Room; maybe I can fill in for Sharior-chan until she gets back and we can go into Life Support Mode with our partners and... until *you* can go into Life Support Mode with your partners and go take a look," I finished with some annoyance.

"Yeah," Makoto said as Ryou picked up the phone. "You and Ichiro aren't going anywhere."

"Nowhere that we can't walk," I acknowledged as I headed for the kitchen doorway.

Five minutes later, I was sitting at the desk beside Sharior-chan's in the server room, looking at a Midchildan-style display that I assumed Sharior-chan and Naru-san had built. I knew enough about how to make it work to call up the message log from Chacornac – to discover that there was an incoming transmission.

I switched it on to hear Chacornac's AI. "This station is receiving a radio message. Should I answer?"

"This is consort-apparent Donaldson. Relay the message to this station."

Three seconds later, I heard the radio call. "... request any assistance that you can provide. Repeating: This is Nayotake of the Lunar Frontier Project, aboard Shuttle Endeavour. Our ship's engines have exploded. We have 24 hours of air remaining. If the Sailor Team can hear this, please reply. We request any assistance that you can provide. Again, this is Nayotake of ... oh, can *anybody* out there hear me? Over." It was in Japanese, which I was surprised to hear in a NASA transmission, but it did make sense for her to use the language of the people who she was trying to reach.

"Chacornac, establish two-way communication between the Endeavour and this station. Hello Lunar Frontier Project, this is Oni of the Sailor Team. I can hear you. Until I'm relieved, I'm your temporary and amateur [CAPCOM](#). Over."

Three seconds later, I heard, "Thank the gods! Oni-san, this is Nayotake Himeko. Do you speak English? Over." The entire discussion had these pauses.

"I do," I replied in that language. "I assume I'm on an open speaker in your ship. We heard you report that you have 24 hours of air. How many are still alive aboard your ship? Over."

While I waited for her reply, I paged Ami's communicator. "Ami here."

"All seven of us survived the explosion aboard, Oni-san. Can you record our final messages to our families, please? Over."

"Stand by, Nayotake-san. Sailor Mercury, I'm including you in a call from the Moon. The Lunar Frontier Project Shuttle's drives exploded, everyone's alive, but they only have 24 hours of life support. Can we assist?"

"We can, but I'll need to get Uranus involved."

"You're in charge until Moon says otherwise. I'll continue to communicate with the survivors."

"Understood. I'll reconnect after making contact with Moon." And her signal dropped.

"Ms. Nayotake, did you hear all of that? Over."

"We did, Oni-san. Even if you can't help us, thank you for at least listening to us. Over."

"It's literally the least I can do for you. And Merry Christmas. Over."

Makoto walked into the server room between that and Nayotake-san's reply. "Sorry to force you to work on a holiday, Oni-san. Over."

"You know as well as I do that it's only a vacation for ordinary high school students in Japan, Ms. Nayotake. As far as we're concerned, lives come before time off. And Sailor Jupiter has just joined me at this end."

"Hello," she said. "Do you have video?"

"Over." I added.

"No, we're using an emergency low-power radio. We have audio only. Over."

We chatted with the Shuttle's crew for five minutes; mostly small talk, but I was able to assure her that Oozora-san was expected to make a full recovery.

Then Bunny-chan called us by communicator.

"Stand by, Himeko-san, my boss is calling. Hello Sailor Moon. I've connected you to our channel with the Shuttle Endeavour."

"Hello, Oni and Lunar Frontier Project," she said in Japanese. "Sailor Mercury wants to know whether your airlock is intact. Is this where I say 'over'?"

"Yes," I said, "and now we wait."

"We believe our airlock is undamaged, but for obvious reasons we haven't tested it. And you don't wait for too long. Please note that we only have two EMUs aboard. Over."

"There are birds on the Shuttle?"

"No, ma'am, she's talking about Extravehicular Mobility Units. You'd call them spacesuits."

"Oh. Mercury tells me that that shouldn't be an issue. Here's what we're planning to do in order to get the seven of you home..." She took ten minutes to describe the operation, ending with, "... so if there's anything that you need to bring home with you, you'd better start packing now. Over."

"How long do we have to pack?" one of the other astronauts asked. "Over."

"We don't want to reveal all of our secrets," I replied before anyone else could, "but I expect you won't see anybody in person for at least twelve hours, and probably longer than that."

"Before they left, Uranus and Mercury expected to be there in thirteen hours, assuming no problems with launch," Ichiro added over the communicator. "I don't have a code-name, so I can't introduce myself to you."

"Thank you," I replied as Ichiro sent me a text message. Glancing at it, I saw some impressive numbers. "That's an hour to get to the spacecraft and twelve hours to reach lunar orbit. Over." And *that* meant that Mercury's Ultra-Long-Distance Teleport spell was sending them to Castle Mariner at an average speed of 0.25c because Mercury was in superior conjunction with Earth and they had to go around the Sun. I wasn't aware that the two of them could handle the G-forces involved with that even in Life Support Mode and magical buffering; I was pretty sure that Ryou and I couldn't.

"Which part of the Earth's surface should we be watching to see the launch? Over."

"Sorry, but I can't answer that." Because they weren't launching from Earth, I didn't say. And I wondered who asked the question; given the distances involved, they wouldn't be able to see the launch anyway even if it was happening on Earth. Maybe it was a joke. Then the door opened again and Bidou-san walked in. "I'm passing the microphone over to Bidou Yui, who was involved in the design of your failed drives. I'm sure she has some questions for you."

"I certainly do," she said as she sat down in a chair that she'd brought in from the Situation Room. "Do you have any access to the engines at all? Over."

"No, we can't get anywhere near them safely. Over."

"Then I need you to transmit the recordings of the telemetry from the engines." The discussion quickly became too technical for me to follow more than half of it, but it did keep everyone involved busy for three hours, during which Shario-chan and the others came home. I yielded command and control, and the CAPCOM position, to her; she was our C&C expert, after all.

I also had a quick talk with Ichiro, outside of the Situation Room while I made lunch for everyone. Nothing fancy, just beef bowls.

"I assume that Tenou-san is benefiting from more than just Life Support Mode. So, who's in Unison with her?"

He smiled slightly. "Hayate-chan, of all people."

"Huh. I would have expected Sailor Uranus to be too masculine for Hayate-chan to Unison with comfortably."

"You're looking at the surface, Rob. We look deeper. Haruka-san might not behave in a feminine manner, but she's still biologically female."

"And I let my preconceptions influence my opinion of her. I owe somebody an apology, especially considering I should have known better."

"Did you act on those preconceptions?"

I thought about my dealings with her, then replied, "No."

"Then, considering you've already apologized to yourself – you have apologized to yourself?" He knew me well enough to know what I was thinking; I nodded in reply. "I think you've apologized to who you need to. And the rice is ready."

"Thanks," I said while finishing the stir-frying of the vegetables. "I should still at least mention it to her, since my beliefs colour my actions. I'm changing the subject; do you have any idea how to get you to Midchilda so Sergeant Finieno can give you a complete overhaul? I can't stay on the sidelines forever, and I doubt you want to remain grounded and unable to Unison."

"While I don't mind being at Shario-chan's level of ability, I admit that I already miss the ability to fly. Perhaps if Ami had more power, she could open a pathway large enough for somebody my height to step through it."

"Or at least be passed through it feet-first," I added. "But where could she get more power from?"

"Perhaps Usagi-san and Hotaru-san could pool their power and share it with her."

"Isn't that how you ended up hurt in the first place?"

"Yes, sir. And Hotaru-san does want to help me."

"Because it was Hotaru-chan's power that hurt you to begin with."

"That and the house that didn't move when I hit it," he pointed out.

"Because I had it wrapped in a forcefield. I'm sorry that I added to your problem, Ichiro."

"No apologies needed, Rob. You didn't know, and you were acting under orders."

I shook my head as I spooned vegetables and beef onto bowls of rice. "I'll grant that I didn't know, but 'I was following orders' hasn't been a valid defence for decades."

"Only if you have reason to know that following the orders would be illegal or would put somebody else at risk. Neither of those apply here."

Heh; I learn something new every day. "Have our Midchildan friends been told what repairs you need?"

"Yes, Meia sent them the list along with our New Year's greetings. And the Nakajimas let us know that we have enough money on deposit that we can pay for the repairs; it seems that Ami's change to their contraceptive spell is very popular."

"It's nice to know that intellectual property is worth something even in Midchilda," I said while putting bowls on the table. Then I sent to the others, «Lunch is ready!»

«I'm still busy,» Bidou-san sent back. I didn't know that anyone had taught her our telepathy. «I'll get it later.»

«It'll keep. It's just beef bowl.»

«Good. Get down here now; Mizuno-san's sent us a message.»

I grabbed Ichiro and flash-moved to the Situation room. "How are they?"

"Hear for yourself." Shario-chan switched on the speakers on the holoprojector.

We heard Tenou-san's voice. "... flight is proceeding as expected and we expect to rendezvous with Endeavour on schedule. Out."

"Well, they obviously got the yacht to fly," Sakura said with a smile.

"Why didn't they call before now, though?"

I turned to my fiancée. "Because the biggest radio transmitter within a parsec, the Sun, was in the way."

"Oh, right. Planets move. I'll bet that Haruka-san is having the time of her life. She's the first person in over ten millennia to pilot an interplanetary spacecraft."

"The twelfth, I believe," Bidou-san pointed out. "The Moon would be a minor planet if it wasn't in orbit around Earth, so ten Apollo astronauts and Nayotake-san piloted interplanetary ships before she did."

"Does it really count, though?"

"Makoto, it's enough of a planet to give Bunny-chan a Star Seed."

Bidou-san smiled. "I hadn't even considered that, Donarudoson-san... or should I be calling you Robu-san?"

"I'd be happy to be on a given-name basis with you, Yui-san. We do care enough about you that we saved you from Viluny, after all. But that's you. I'd rather not be on a given-name basis with Hanyu-san; she might take it the wrong way."

Yui-san laughed. "There's no 'might' about it. She tells us at least once a week that she still wants to share her bed with you, Urawa-san, or both of you at the same time."

I put my arm around my fiancée's waist. «I promised I'd ask, even when we both know the answer.»

«My answer hasn't changed.»

«Neither has mine.» "She'll have to learn to live with disappointment, because I'm not interested in threesomes, or in her. Yui-san, do you need more data from Endeavour?"

"No, Robu-san, I have everything that they can send me. I'm using my arm's computer to analyze it now." She rolled up her right sleeve. "That's better; my arm was getting a bit warm."

"Let's go eat lunch, then. We're going to want to be alert later this evening. And you should let Shario-chan know that the cooling systems in your arm need some work."

It wasn't after dinner that we heard the good news – Mercury's yacht was able to dock with the Lunar Frontier Project shuttle. Apparently, she'd made some modifications to the yacht's airlock during the repairs.

We couldn't possibly keep it a secret. Every telescope on Earth that could be pointed at Endeavour had been pointed at them for hours. We had notified Superintendent-General Sakurada of the rescue mission during lunch, so both she and a representative from NASDA were in the Situation Room, listening in and watching what we could show them.

No, we didn't let either of them know where the Situation Room was; I brought them in wrapped in opaque forcefields so they had no idea where they were, and I took them out the same way. We all assumed after the fact that Superintendent-General Sakurada was smart enough to figure out where the Situation Room was, but we also trusted her to keep that knowledge to herself.

We didn't take part; we just listened.

"Docking procedure is complete. Pressure is holding. Over," Uranus reported.

"Endeavour confirms pressure is holding, but it's low. Over," replied Nayotake-san.

"Request you open both airlock doors in order to raise our internal pressure. Over."

"Denied; we aren't set up to do that in flight. Over."

"Understood. In what order are you sending people across? Over."

"Scientists first, then flight crew. Pilot Nayotake last. Over."

Yui-san, NASDA's representative, and I nodded in agreement; by tradition, the captain is the last to abandon ship. Everyone else in the room gasped.

"Agreed," Mercury said. "Please secure Endeavour for possible future recovery. We can't promise anything, but we can at least try to land the Shuttle somewhere. Over."

«Anybody want to bet on her pulling off a salvage mission later?» I sent to Makoto and Ryou.

«No bet,» Ryou replied. «Right now, it might only be four times out of nine that she succeeds, but I trust my fiancée to beat the odds.»

We turned our attention back to the procedure to hear that the scientists were aboard Mercury's yacht. Assuming that the rest of the rescue would go smoothly, I asked, "Where do we want to tell our ship to land?"

NASDA's representative spoke up first. "Our friends in NASA would prefer that Endeavour's crew land at an American facility."

"Sailor Mercury and Sailor Uranus don't have passports with their codenames on them," Superintendent Sakurada pointed out. "I must insist that they land on Japanese soil."

Before they could get into an argument over where Mercury's yacht – which really needed a name – would land, Shario-chan said over the intercom, "Kadena Air Base has a 3,688-metre-long runway." I wasn't aware that the USAF had that long a runway in Japan.

"Where's that?" Moon asked.

"Just north of Naha."

The NASDA representative said, "I believe that would be acceptable to NASA. How many of the Senshi will need to be on the flight to Okinawa?"

I needed to put a forcefield around my hand to keep Jupiter from breaking all of my fingers... but she didn't say anything. So I did. "Ma'am, I strongly suggest that at least one Senshi remain here in Tokyo, to liaise directly with NASDA and the TMPD."

It was pretty obvious that Moon knew why I said that. "Jupiter, it's your turn to stay here. Mars, Venus, Neptune, Oni, Onmyōji, Bidoh-san, you're with me. Jupiter, contact Okuni; if she's available, I want her on this mission as well."

"Yes, ma'am," my dearest said with obvious relief as she let go of my hand, stood up, and headed for the door. I put up an opaque forcefield so that our guests couldn't see the corridor on the other side of the doorway.

Superintendent Sakurada sighed. "As much as I want to hear the rest of this, I'll need to leave as well, in order to coordinate the landing with the USAF." She turned to NASDA's representative and added, "I expect you need to leave as well."

"Which means I'm leaving, too," I replied. "I'll have to put both of you into protective fields again."

So I did. I didn't take them directly to TMPD HQ, I swung past the Tokyo Tower instead, intending to add a few more minutes to the trip... but I was pulled over by a local police officer at the Tower because I looked suspicious. Carrying what appeared to be two bodies would give that impression, yes. I showed him my TMPD ID while I let Superintendent-General Sakurada out of her forcefield, she commandeered the officer's car, I gave her my Sailor Team communicator while I let the NASDA man out of his forcefield, and my passengers made their own way to headquarters while I returned home to the Situation Room.

I met Naru-san at our front gate. "Mama said that I'm not allowed to do any Senshi work during this trip," she told me as I took her overnight bag.

"Poor you, being forced to take an Okinawan vacation over the Christmas break," I said with a grin as I made an 'after you' gesture. "I expect I'll spend the entire trip blocking the paparazzi's view of Ami's yacht."

"Is one change of clothes enough?"



"I don't know; that depends on how long Bunny-chan wants to spend away from home. If it isn't, well, I've been led to believe that there are stores and banks in Naha, and I still have some gold that I can sell for spending money. For that matter, you could make a gem or two that you could sell there, too."

"Yeah, I'm never going to need money again, as long as I don't crash the market for gemstones."

"Become famous enough and you can sell one-hundred-per-cent-authentic Sailor Team gems for a premium!" We both laughed as we walked into the house itself.

By the time we got to the Situation Room, the exciting part of the rescue was over and Mercury's yacht was on its way to Earth.

"... to know where to land Caduceus. Over," Mercury was saying.

«Caduceus?» I sent to Ryou and Makoto.

«Usagi insisted that Ami's yacht needed a name,» my fiancée replied.

«And the connection to Mercury is obvious,» Ryou added.

I nodded. «Makes sense.»

As we had our private conversation, Shario-chan said, "There are two parallel long runways at Kadena. Local ATC will tell you which one to land on. Over."

"Now, where do we go to catch *our* plane?" Minako asked.

"I'll ask," Superintendent Sakurada's voice came over the room's speakers. A few minutes later, she said, "Haneda, Terminal 1. NASDA will meet you at the station."

"The commuter train stops running at midnight," Yui-san pointed out. "We'll need to leave soon."

"Which means most of us don't have time to pack anything," I added. Onmyōji pointed at a row of suitcases.

"Except for somebody who saw this coming. As I mentioned to Okuni a moment ago, the rest of us can buy what we need in Okinawa." I walked over to the row of bags and saw my own suitcase was there. «Who packed for me?»

«I did,» Makoto replied.

«Thanks, my dearest. ♥» I took all of the bags into a forcefield cart, the way I did when we went shopping back in Midchilda, and added Naru-san's bag to the pile. "Let's go."

Along the way, we decided that Sailor Venus would be our [Public affairs officer](#). She was fluent in both English and Japanese, she was a full Senshi, and she wasn't intimidated by the press.

I also commented to Ryou, "I thought you said we weren't getting an Okinawa vacation this year."

"This won't be a vacation, at least not for you or me."

Then we got to Haneda, and NASDA's PAO offered to take the role of press officer for us. We declined the offer, preferring to keep control of our own message.

And then we boarded a NASDA executive jet and took a two-hour flight straight to Kadena Air Base. I can't speak for the others, but I slept through it.

Sure enough, I spent our first day in Naha making sure that nobody could see Caduceus.

And that included our USAF hosts, who held an impromptu press conference to present the Lunar Frontier Project's crew, safe and sound and back on Earth thanks to the Sailor Team. Sailor Venus ended up answering a lot of questions, and not answering a lot more. I kept myself out of sight and the Caduceus under a loose but opaque forcefield. No, we weren't willing to show off our technology just then.

Mercury spent over an hour keeping me company, during which we discussed Ichiro.

"You're certain that the only place he can be healed is Cranagan?" I asked.

"Meia's certain," she replied. "And that means that we have to optimize Pandimensional Pathway even more so than we already have."

"Ichiro thought that an energy boost from Moon or Saturn might help you open a larger portal."

She thought for a moment. "It might, but I doubt I could keep a larger portal open for very long."

"It only needs to stay open long enough for us to push Ichiro through it."

She nodded. "It's worth a try. After Uranus and I get back."

"You are back."

"And the only known working Silver Millennium spacecraft is sitting on a USAF runway." She didn't gesture toward her yacht.

"Taxiway, actually, but I know what you mean. It can't stay here. Does it need refuelling?"

She shook her head. "Right now, it's refilling its air tanks, and I'm happy we landed here instead of in Tokyo to do that."

"Yes, the air is much fresher here than it is at home."

"Uranus and I are going to fly back to Mariner Castle tonight, and we've already planned our course to avoid flying over China."

"So Caduceus is capable of single stage to orbit? We really don't want anyone to know we can do that. How does that work, anyway?"

Mercury smiled. "Magic."

"Well, duh. What sort of magic?"

"I'd rather not answer that question while I'm in a military base."

I chuckled as I didn't look at the Marines standing guard over me and the yacht. "Point taken. Is there anything you want us to bring back as a souvenir, since you can't stay and look for anything yourself?"

"I've always wanted to try a [peach pineapple](#)."

I nodded. "I'll see what I can do."

Of course, launching that night wasn't as easy as just taxiing to the end of the runway and taking off. The United States really wanted that technology. We got the rest of the Sailor Team off the base before making the attempt, and I ended up needing to put up forcefields on both sides of the runway to keep Marines from storming the yacht as Uranus got it off the ground. We didn't even bother trying to get takeoff clearance from the tower; Uranus and Mercury just left. Then I had to use all of my stealth abilities including the invisibility cloak that didn't let heat escape in order to get off the base myself.

Needless to say, we weren't welcome anywhere in Naha that catered to the Americans after that. NASDA wasn't happy with us, either, and refused to give us a ride back to Tokyo.

So we spent the next three days vacationing in Naha. Thanks to the destruction during World War II and the rebuilding after that, it was pretty much like any other Japanese city, all concrete and glass downtown, cookie-cutter apartment buildings and houses in the suburbs, and a few re-built historical sites including Shuri Castle. Honestly, if you've seen *Azumanga Daioh*, you already know as much about Naha as I do from seeing the city. And I began to understand why so many school trips were to Kyoto, which had not been destroyed during the war.

I thought about visiting Irimote Island, but simple geography made that impossible. *Azumanga Daioh* lied to me; it wasn't possible to make a day trip to an island that was substantially closer to Taipei than it was to Naha. So I went shopping instead.

Shopping wasn't anywhere near as fun on my own as it was with Makoto.

The second night that we were there, Naru-san handed me a replacement communicator. "Here you go. Don't tell mama. I was bored."

"Thanks. And you aren't the only one. Who knew that a tropical city could be so dull?"

"The others don't seem to mind, but neither of us can relax. I miss working at my workbench and talking with Shario-chan, and you..."

"Yeah, I really want to see Makoto again. But this is the next-best thing, if it can reach Tokyo. Thanks again, Naru-san. And we really should spend more time together, if only for Shario-chan and Ichiro's sake."

"She's at your place more than mine nowadays, Robu-san. And what would Mako-chan say about you spending time with me?"

"If you spend time with us rather than just me, I doubt she'll complain."

She shrugged. "I guess. Give the communicator a try, please. This one doesn't have the telepathy circuits, so you'll have to talk."

"If you insist." I took her up on her offer, thumbing the communicator on and selecting a channel I knew by heart.

"Hello?"

"Hi, my dearest."

"Hi, darling!" She sounded as happy to hear my voice as I was to hear hers.

"Hang on, Naru-san's standing beside me."

She smiled. "Not for much longer, I'm not. See you tomorrow."

"Okay, she's gone..." And my fiancée and I talked for hours.

I found a lovely clay cook pot for my dearest, peach pineapples for Ami, Princess Lady, and Hotaru-chan, and various Okinawan snacks for our friends. I also brought home some vegetables that I could only find in Okinawa, along with a local cookbook that gave ideas on how to use them.

Ryou took care of getting plane tickets for everybody. Economy class; we were expecting to have to pay a huge fine for ignoring air traffic control, after all. We took the two-hour break in our routines to write at least some of our New Year's cards on the plane ride back.

"Welcome home!" Makoto greeted us with a smile. Then she closed the door behind us and frowned. "Sakura spotted Jinguuji Minkao-san snooping around the house while you were away."

"Oh, dear. I get the feeling that she isn't working on a story about figure skaters."

"Hayate-chan agrees with you."

"Did Jinguuji-san spot Sakura?"

"We don't think so, but we can't be certain."

"Interesting," Ryou commented. "Seventeen times out of nineteen, we don't need to worry about this."

"Thirty-five of thirty-nine," Kasandara corrected him.

"Close enough."

I frowned as I started unpacking the souvenirs. "You've been wrong before, Ryou ol' buddy. Not often, I'll grant you, but if Jinguuji-san is working on a story about us, what's going to stop her from publishing it? She's been on a scoop chase since I first met her."

"I don't know," he admitted. "And that worries me, despite the odds."

"Not as much as this worries me," Ami said while holding up a three-day-old copy of the Asahi Shimbun with Sailor Venus's photo on the front page over a story about the press conference that she took part in. "It was bad enough when it was just our enemies who knew we exist. Now everybody in Japan knows."

"And wouldn't that be a scoop for Jinguuji-san, revealing our identities to the world." Minako took a closer look at the photo. "Not that it'll take much to connect the dots, at least in my case. I look just like me."

The answer to that little problem was obvious... at least, to an old North American comic-book fan.

We got permission from the TMPD to hold an impromptu appearance and concert on New Year's Day in Center Gai, right in front of Atelier Lucent. We would have preferred a larger venue, but this was all we could get on short notice. A few police officers worked crowd-control while we put on a little show.

"Hi everyone!"

Passers-by turned to look. "Hey, it's Sailor Venus!"

"You said it! Happy New Year! Happy 1994! How's everybody doing?"

People with cameras started taking pictures... including, I noticed, persistent paparazzo Nana Asahina, who for once I was happy to see. Everyone else shouted back "Great!" or "Wonderful!"

One person who sounded remarkably like Shingo-kun shouted, "How do we know you're really Sailor Venus?"

"Who else could do this? Crescent Beam Shower!" And suddenly there was a light show from her fingertips to the sky.

"It's really her!"

"Can I get your autograph?"

"No autographs, sorry. Today I'm here to sing the theme from Araki Jinta-san's new movie! I hope everyone watching will like it... Hey, who are you?" She pointed her hand at a girl in the crowd.

Said girl looked around, then said, "Me? I'm Mizuno Minako."

"Get over here!"

Minako did so. "Wow! I never expected to be face-to-face with Sailor Venus!"

"And I never expected to see somebody who looks so much like I do! It's like I'm looking in a mirror! Hey, do you know the words to 'Katagoshi ni Kinsei'?"

"I think so..."

"Let's do a duet!"

"Sure, why not?"

Then they both started singing. "Venus in the clouds before dawn..."

There was quite the crowd by the time they finished the song. "Encore!"

"Sorry, everybody, but I only have permission to do one song for you! Until we meet again!" And she ducked into Atelier Lucent, where Setsuna-san and I were waiting, leaving Minako to re-join her friends and get mobbed by the crowd.

"Good work," we said as we escorted her to the store's back room... and she let her disguise drop.

"I really didn't expect that to work," Bunny-chan admitted. "The Disguise Pen really saved the day there. But I lied about who I am to everybody out there. In the name of the Moon, I should punish myself."

"You never said that you were Sailor Venus," Setsuna-san pointed out. "You let everybody else say that. As long as people believe you were Sailor Venus and Minako wasn't, that's all that matters."

While I worried that we might be teaching Bunny-chan the wrong lesson here, I remembered that I had taught Ami the exact same lesson before Ail and An showed up: tell part of the truth and let other people reach the wrong

conclusion. Oh, well, it was too late to decide otherwise now. "And I noticed at least one paparazzo in the crowd, so expect to see photos of Minako and 'Sailor Venus'," I did air quotes when I said that, "together in a magazine or newspaper any day now. Oh, and Bunny-chan, please tell your brother that he delivered his line right on time."

"I will!" she replied with a giggle. "And I'll also tell Naru and Shario-chan that their light-beam glove worked perfectly, too," she said while removing it. It was only when we were up close that we could see the glove was thicker than the one on her other hand, and had crystal laser emitters built into the fingertips.

"We're lucky that they can build things like that on short notice," Setsuna-san said with a smile while gesturing toward the glove. "Now, as long as you're here, I have a cute pink dress that I think would look lovely on you..."

I took the opportunity to escape while I could. Seeing my fiancée model new outfits is fun; seeing somebody I thought of as a sister model new outfits isn't.

Speaking of New Year's, of course we neither sent a New Year's card to, nor received a card from, Hotaru-chan, for the obvious reason. Which meant we didn't send cards to the Tsukino family, either.

The day after New Year's, which was the day before we went back to school, we visited the Hikawa shrine. Specifically, the outbuilding where we returned home after spending two years in the Lyrical reality.

"You're sure it has to be here?" Rei-san asked.

Ami thought for a moment. "I'm not certain, but we do know that it's possible to open more than a pinhole pathway to Midchilda here."

"Oh, fine. Go ahead."

Ami checked her watch, then told Meia, "It's time. Mercury Crystal Power, Make Up!"

I hadn't seen the old transformation sequence in a while. Yes, it still had the naked bit in the middle. Yes, Ami still didn't care who saw her. And yes, I had an impure thought about her... but only the one.

"Why the long transformation?" asked Minako.

My dearest answered while Ami and Meia went into Unison. "When I used the old version that one time, I had more power than when I use the instant transformation." Nobody mentioned Petz. "Not much more, but sometimes every little bit helps."

Note to self: Remind Bunny-chan of that when it came time to fight Galaxia.

"Well, we may as well do that, too... as soon as Ichiro-san, Robu-san and Ryou-san turn their backs."

"We'll just wait outside," I offered as we headed for the door.

"Jupiter Crystal Power, Make Up!"

"Mars Star Power, Make Up!"

"Venus Star Power, Make Up!"

"Saturn Power, Make Up!" I felt a bit sad that I didn't get to see Hotaru-chan's transformation. Again.

"Moon Cosmic Power, Make Up!" A moment later, she added, "You can come back in now."

As Ryou, Ichiro, and I rejoined the others, Mars asked Jupiter, "So, when do we get Crystal Power instead of Star Power?"

"Once you unlock your strongest attack. It shouldn't be too much longer."

"It would be faster if you spent more time training with us," Sakura added just before Unisoning with Jupiter.

"I have work to do here," Mars pointed out.

"Talk later," Moon ordered. "We have work to do." She turned to face Mercury. "Lend my power to Sailor Mercury!"

"Lend our power to Sailor Mercury!"

Beams of light shot from the Senshi's foreheads to Mercury's.

"If there's a wall in our way then we smash it down! If there isn't a path, then we carve one ourselves! Pierce the heavens! PANDIMENSIONAL PATHWAY!"

And there was a hole in the air, which widened to just large enough for Ichiro to walk through it.

I immediately set up a forcefield platform on our side of the Pathway and put Ichiro onto it, seeing that – as Ami expected – the other end was in the wildlife preserve outside of Cranagan. He raised his voice. "Hello!"

"Hello!"

I smiled. "Ginga! It's good to hear your voice again!"

"You too, Rob! We're ready over here whenever you are."

Ami was already starting to sweat from the exertion of keeping the portal open.

"I'm coming through now," Ichiro said as he did just that. He added from the other side of the portal as a small package came through going the other direction, "I made it through successfully, Rob."

"And whatever this package is, it looks like it came through all right, too." I saw that it was addressed to Naru-san. "I'll make sure she gets it." Picking it up, I couldn't help but notice it was very heavy. Then I remembered one important price difference between our two worlds, and realized she'd bought a gold bar with some of her patent royalties.

As Mercury closed the portal, I heard the original Shario-chan's voice from the other side. "Welcome back! What's this I hear about you dating my little sister?"

Ryou caught his fiancée as she collapsed from exhaustion.

As everyone transformed back to their normal identities, Bunny-chan asked, "Now what?"

"Now we wait while Ichiro gets the surgery he needs," I replied.

"Or for a couple of months," Ami added. "Whichever is longer. There's no way we can do that again for a while. Unless a Rank AA mage casts the spell from the other side of the barrier, Ichiro won't be home until we're in our last month of junior-high." Then she smiled. "As long as we're all here, shall we have a study session in Rei's room, for old time's sake?"

After dinner that evening, I helped Makoto water the Midchildan blue roses she was growing in her bedroom. Remarkable flower, the Midchildan blue. Beautiful foliage.

"So, what did you think when you saw Ami transform today?"

"My dearest Makoto, please remember that you're the woman who I want to spend my life with. That said, I won't lie; I thought our best friend is a very sexy young woman. Not as sexy as you are, though."

She sighed deeply. "I really want you to have eyes for nobody but me, darling. But if your eyes must wander, I suppose I can live with you looking at Ami."

"Especially since she's already told me that she isn't interested in sharing my bed."

"Speaking of sharing your bed..." my fiancée said with a smile.

"I like the way you think, but we have school tomorrow."

"Oh, right. Darn."

To nobody's surprise, Monday, the start of our final term in junior high, followed Sunday.

There were two empty desks in our class. But that was to be expected; with Mirai Academy open, the Watanabe twins wouldn't be attending classes with us any more. None of us were sad that they were gone, but some of us hoped to see them again next term.

We started cramming in earnest, every day after school, with Hayate-chan tutoring Bunny-chan, Rei-san, and Minako, and Meia tutoring Ami, Ryou, Ichigo-san, Naru-san, my dearest, and me. Sakura was in charge of Hotaru-chan and Princess Lady's lessons... which I learned at the end of the month was mostly TSAB Ground Armaments Service basic training, scaled back so that she didn't do more harm than good to the youngest members of the Sailor Team. I also learned that Shingo-kun joined them in that training and helped Hotaru-chan over the rough spots.

The Revealing Of The Lunches turned into the Revealing Of The Textbooks for a month. And the Emerald Pair weren't seen on the ice for a few weeks.

Yuuichirou-san and Chiba-san stayed out of our way.

Ami, Ryou, Ichigo-san, Naru-san, Makoto, and I were let out of classes early on Ichigo-san's birthday, January 22. Not because it was her birthday, but because we were writing our entrance exams that day.

We made it to Mirai with a half-hour to spare. We didn't see the twins, but we didn't expect to see them after we learned that they had their internal entrance exams earlier in the week. There was no reason for Mirai's students to stick around on a Saturday afternoon.

We showed our invitations and student IDs, and were asked to report to a small room beside the one where we were going to take the entrance exams... where we discovered Mugen's surviving prefects – now Mirai's regents – waiting for us.

Ami frowned as she said, "You know we really shouldn't be speaking with you just before the exams. Somebody might think you were giving us some help."

"They might," Yui-san replied, "but what we're doing is exactly the opposite." And she flipped a switch on a device that was sitting on the table.

Everybody in the room winced. Including the Unison Devices who'd come along to give us moral support.

"That's a Scaglietti-type Anti-Magic Field!" Hayate-chan gasped.

Yui-san nodded. "Good against Midchildan telepathy and Belkan Unison. Shario-chan told us how to build it."

"And I'm happy that none of you were in Unison with your devices," Arimura-san added. "We haven't been able to keep an AMF going for more than five hours, but that's more than long enough to cover the exam period. Now, Hayate-chan, Meia, and Sakura, you can join us in the staff lounge. The rest of you, go write your entrance exams."

"On your own," Yui-san added with a smile. "And good luck."

"Thanks, Arimura-san, Yui-san."

"If you pass," Arimura-san replied, "then you can call me Yuko."

We wrote our exams, and then we headed over to Ichigo-san's place for her birthday party. Thanks to our tutoring, we all felt relaxed after the exam and were able to enjoy our friend's big day.

Bunny-chan and Minako weren't in class the next Monday. It was their turn to write entrance exams.

Judging by how they looked after their exam, we wondered whether they'd get in. They might have to write the center exam for the public high schools... which wouldn't make Ikuko-san happy.

We had to wait a week while the exams were graded and sorted, so none of us knew our fates until the 31st. Ami didn't have juku that day, so we all got together at the Crown after school, bringing our unopened letters from Mirai and Toyo Eiwa with us.

We got the big table in the corner, with the manager's daughter waiting on us. As usual. None of us opened our letters until we had placed our sweets orders.

We read our letters in silence. Then we smiled.

Bunny-chan was the first to say anything. "Yay!"

"Oh, I can't believe that!" Rei-san complained as our orders arrived. She turned to our waitress. "Unazuki-sempai, odango-for-brains got into our school!"

I didn't know that Unazuki-san attended Toyo Eiwa.

"Just barely... sempai," Bunny-chan added after a quick moment. "I'm in the general stream. But at least now I have a chance to get into TA's university and study International Communications."

"You want to be a politician?" Unazuki-san asked.

Quietly enough that nobody else could overhear, Bunny-chan said, "Well, I do expect to become the queen of Crystal Tokyo after I graduate."

"Oh, right; Artemis-san mentioned that a while back. Here's your parfait. What about you, Mina-chan?"

"I get to wear your uniform, too, Unazuki-sempai! I'm in the same program that you're in."

"Then I'll help you study when I can! Rei, how did you do?"

"I still can't believe these two slackers got into our school, but at least I'm still a better student than they are. I'm now guaranteed a Toyo Eiwa university spot unless I flunk out of high school, although now I can aim for Today."

"How did the rest of you do?" Unazuki-san asked while placing Ami's anmitsu in front of her.

"Thank you. Ichigo and I will be in the same program at Mirai."

"We get to study biology together," Ichigo-san added. "She's preparing for pre-med and I'm preparing for zoology."

"You already have your careers planned out? I'm still not sure what I'm going to do after I graduate. Motoki's going to inherit the family business and work with Artemis-san, so I don't have to. What about the rest of you?"

As she put slices of cherry pie in front of my dearest and me, I replied, "We're all in the same program at Mirai, getting ready for careers in small businesses."

"We're going to be our own bosses," Naru-san added. "I get to take over the family's jewelry store after I graduate from college."

"And I hope you'll hire my photography studio to take pictures of your products," I said.

"Her jewelry and my cakes both," added my dearest.

"What about you, Ryou-san?" Unazuki-san asked while serving him his dorayaki.

"I'll probably end up at a stock brokerage. Thanks. And of course we all have our other jobs."

Unazuki-san nodded. "And I'm honoured that you let me support you with that part of your life. No bill for this round of snacks, it's on me. Congratulations, everyone!"

# Colophon

Original text and original characters are copyright © 2022-2025 by Rob Kelk. "Rob Donaldson", "Ichigo Aoyama", "Meia", "Sakura", "Ichiro", "Elmira Bogdanova", "Sakamoto Kazuya", "Matsudaira Hanzō", "Ueno Daisuke", "Yamaguchi Toshiaki", and any representations thereof are copyright by and trademarks of Rob Kelk. Please contact Rob Kelk if you want to use Ichigo Aoyama, Sakamoto Kazuya, Matsudaira Hanzō, Yamaguchi Toshiaki, Ueno Daisuke, or Elmira Bogdanova in your own stories.

"Kasandara" and any representations thereof are copyright by and a jointly-held trademark of Rob Kelk and Ian McLeod.

"Minkao Jinguuji" is copyright by and a jointly-held trademark of Brent Laabs, Rob Kelk, Robert M. Schroeck, "DartzIRL", and Heather K.

*Sailor Moon* and the characters thereof are copyright © 1991-1997 by Naoko Takeuchi, TOEI Animation, Kodansha, Bandai, and their licencees, and are used as allowed under section 29.21 (1) of the [Copyright Act of Canada, R.S.C., 1985, c. C-42](#).

*Codename: Sailor V* and the characters thereof are copyright © 1991-1997 by Naoko Takeuchi, Kodansha, and their licencees, and are used as allowed under section 29.21 (1) of the Copyright Act of Canada, R.S.C., 1985, c. C-42.

*Magical Girl Lyrical Nanoha StrikerS* and the characters thereof are copyright © 2006-2007 by Masaki Tsuzuki, Seven Arcs, and their licencees, and are used as allowed under section 29.21 (1) of the Copyright Act of Canada, R.S.C., 1985, c. C-42.

*The Cherry Project*, and the characters thereof are copyright © 1990-1992 by Naoko Takeuchi, Kodansha, and their licencees, and are used as allowed under section 29.21 (1) of the Copyright Act of Canada, R.S.C., 1985, c. C-42.

"Atelier Lucent" is an original element based on *Sailor Moon*. It should not be confused with the real-world "Lucent Atelier" in the USA or "Atelier Lucente" in Italy. The author makes Atelier Lucent available to anyone who might need a name for Sailor Pluto's clothing studio.

The "Rigatean Three-Step" and the "Alzutian Paduana" are extremely loosely based on elements from *Lyrical Nanoha*. Rob Kelk makes them available for use in any fan work that includes other elements from *Lyrical Nanoha*.

The name "Kibu Rina" (基部 莉奈) as the human name of the daimon Cyprine is the invention of Rob Kelk, who makes it available to anyone who cares to use it.

My thanks to my prereaders, Brent Laabs, Robert M. Schroeck, and Heather K.

## Chapter 1

Lyrics from "The Other Side of the Wall", by Void\_Chords feat. MARU, written by Konnie Aoki, copyright © 2017 Princess Principal Project, are adapted and used as allowed under section 29.21 (1) of the Copyright Act of Canada, R.S.C., 1985, c. C-42.

Quote from *Slayers Next*, copyright © 1996 by Hajime Kanzaka and his licencees, is used as allowed under section 29.21 (1) of the Copyright Act of Canada, R.S.C., 1985, c. C-42.

Quote from *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, copyright © 1975 by Python (Monty) Pictures, is used as allowed under section 29.21 (1) of the Copyright Act of Canada, R.S.C., 1985, c. C-42.

Quotes from *The Princess Bride*, copyright © 1987 by Act III Communications, Buttercup Films Ltd., and The Princess Bride Ltd., are adapted and used as allowed under section 29.21 (1) of the Copyright Act of Canada, R.S.C., 1985, c. C-42.

Quote from *Harry Potter*, copyright © 1997-2000, 2003, 2005, 2007 by J. K. Rowling and her licensees, is used as allowed under section 29.21 (1) of the Copyright Act of Canada, R.S.C., 1985, c. C-42.

Lyrics from "Bohemian Rhapsody", by Queen, written by Freddie Mercury, copyright © 1975 by EMI Records and Elektra Records, are used as allowed under section 29.21 (1) of the Copyright Act of Canada, R.S.C., 1985, c. C-42.

Quote from *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, copyright © 1978-1980 by Douglas Adams and BBC, is used as allowed under section 29.21 (1) of the Copyright Act of Canada, R.S.C., 1985, c. C-42.

Quotes from *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*, both by William Shakespeare, are in the Public Domain.



## Chapter R

Quote from the "Fernando's Hideaway" segments of *Saturday Night Live*, copyright © 1984-1985 by Billy Crystal, Broadway Video, and Universal Television, is used as allowed under section 29.21 (1) of the Copyright Act of Canada, R.S.C., 1985, c. C-42.

Lyrics from "Manic Monday", written by Prince, performed by the Bangles, copyright © 1986 by Prince, Discos CBS, and Columbia Records, are adapted and used as allowed under section 29.21 (1) of the Copyright Act of Canada, R.S.C., 1985, c. C-42.

Quote from *Ghostbusters*, copyright © 1984 by Dan Aykroyd, Harold Ramis, and Columbia Pictures, is adapted and used as allowed under section 29.21 (1) of the Copyright Act of Canada, R.S.C., 1985, c. C-42.

Lyrics from "Slow Down", written by Bibi Bourelly, H.E.R., Nasri, Rykeyz, and Skip Marley, performed by Skip Marley and H.E.R., copyright © 2019 by Universal Music Group & Island Records, are used as allowed under section 29.21 (1) of the Copyright Act of Canada, R.S.C., 1985, c. C-42.

Lyrics from "Godzilla", written by Buck Dharma, performed by Blue Öyster Cult, copyright © 1977 by Columbia Records, are adapted and used as allowed under section 29.21 (1) of the Copyright Act of Canada, R.S.C., 1985, c. C-42.

Quote from *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, copyright © 2005-2008 by Michael Dante DiMartino, Bryan Konietzko, and Nickelodeon Animation Studio, is used as allowed under section 29.21 (1) of the Copyright Act of Canada, R.S.C., 1985, c. C-42.

Quote from "A Wild Hare", copyright © 1940 by Leon Schlesinger Productions, Warner Bros. Pictures, and The Vitaphone Corporation, is misquoted and used as allowed under section 29.21 (1) of the Copyright Act of Canada, R.S.C., 1985, c. C-42.

Quote from *Crocodile Dundee*, copyright © 1986 by Paul Hogan, Ken Shadie, John Cornell, and Rimfire Films, is used as allowed under section 29.21 (1) of the Copyright Act of Canada, R.S.C., 1985, c. C-42.

## Chapter StrikeR

Lyrics from "[Walking on Sunshine](#)", written by Kimberley Rew, performed by Katrina and the Waves, copyright © 1985 by Katrina and the Waves, are used as allowed under section 29.21 (1) of the Copyright Act of Canada, R.S.C., 1985, c. C-42.

Quote from *Fate/stay night*, copyright © 2006 by Type-Moon and their licensees, is used as allowed under section 29.21 (1) of the Copyright Act of Canada, R.S.C., 1985, c. C-42.

Quote from *Pinky and the Brain*, copyright © 1995-1998 by Warner Bros. Animation and Amblin Television, is misquoted and used as allowed under section 29.21 (1) of the Copyright Act of Canada, R.S.C., 1985, c. C-42.

Quote from *The Magician's Nephew*, copyright © 1955 by C. S. Lewis, is used as allowed under section 29.21 (1) of the Copyright Act of Canada, R.S.C., 1985, c. C-42.

Quote from "Robin Hood Daffy", copyright © 1958 by Warner Bros. Pictures, is used as allowed under section 29.21 (1) of the Copyright Act of Canada, R.S.C., 1985, c. C-42.

Quote from *Futurama*, copyright © 1999-2003, 2008-2013 by The Curiosity Company, is misquoted and used as allowed under section 29.21 (1) of the Copyright Act of Canada, R.S.C., 1985, c. C-42.

Quotes from *Tengen Toppa Gurren Lagann*, copyright © 2007 by Kazuki Nakashima, Gainax, and their licensees, is used as allowed under section 29.21 (1) of the Copyright Act of Canada, R.S.C., 1985, c. C-42.

## Chapter R, Return

Quote from the [xkcd strip "Sandwich"](#), copyright © 2012 by Randall Munroe, is misquoted and used under the [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 2.5 License](#).

Quote from *Dracula*, by Bram Stoker, is in the Public Domain.

Quote from *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, copyright © 1975 by Python (Monty) Pictures, is used as allowed under section 29.21 (1) of the Copyright Act of Canada, R.S.C., 1985, c. C-42.

Quote from "What's Opera, Doc?", copyright © 1957 by Warner Bros. Cartoons, is misquoted and used as allowed under section 29.21 (1) of the Copyright Act of Canada, R.S.C., 1985, c. C-42.

Promotional tagline from *Stay Alive*, copyright © 2006 by William Brent Bell, Hollywood Pictures, Spyglass Entertainment, Endgame Entertainment, Wonderland Sound and Vision, and Stay Alive Productions, is misquoted and used as allowed under section 29.21 (1) of the Copyright Act of Canada, R.S.C., 1985, c. C-42.



Lyrics from "[Stop and Take the Time to Smell the Roses](#)", by Ringo Starr, copyright © 1981 by RCA Records, are used as allowed under section 29.21 (1) of the Copyright Act of Canada, R.S.C., 1985, c. C-42.

Quote from *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, copyright © 1987 by Paramount Domestic Television, is used as allowed under section 29.21 (1) of the Copyright Act of Canada, R.S.C., 1985, c. C-42.

Lyrics from "[Fly Me to the Moon](#)", by Bart Howard, copyright © 1954 by Decca Records, are used as allowed under section 29.21 (1) of the Copyright Act of Canada, R.S.C., 1985, c. C-42.

Quotes from *The Princess Bride*, copyright © 1987 by William Goldman, Act III Communications, Buttercup Films, and The Princess Bride Ltd., is used as allowed under section 29.21 (1) of the Copyright Act of Canada, R.S.C., 1985, c. C-42.

Quote from the Bible, American Standard translation, is in the Public Domain.

Quote from '*Allo 'Allo!*', copyright © 1982-1992 by Jeremy Lloyd, David Croft, and the British Broadcasting Corporation, is used as allowed under section 29.21 (1) of the Copyright Act of Canada, R.S.C., 1985, c. C-42.

## **Chapter R to S**

Quote from *Drunkard's Walk S: Heart of Steel*, copyright © 2017-2023 by Robert M. Schroeck, is used as allowed under section 29.21 (1) of the Copyright Act of Canada, R.S.C., 1985, c. C-42.

Quote from *Lilo & Stitch*, copyright © 2002 by Walt Disney Pictures and Walt Disney Feature Animation, is used as allowed under section 29.21 (1) of the Copyright Act of Canada, R.S.C., 1985, c. C-42.

Quote from *Superman*, copyright © 1978 by DC Comics and Warner Bros., is used as allowed under section 29.21 (1) of the Copyright Act of Canada, R.S.C., 1985, c. C-42.

Quote from *Ghostbusters*, copyright © 1984 by Dan Aykroyd, Harold Ramis, and Columbia Pictures, is used as allowed under section 29.21 (1) of the Copyright Act of Canada, R.S.C., 1985, c. C-42.

Quote from *Voltron*, copyright © 1984–1985 by World Events Productions, is used as allowed under section 29.21 (1) of the Copyright Act of Canada, R.S.C., 1985, c. C-42.

Quote from *Darkwing Duck*, copyright © 1991-1992 by Walt Disney Television, is used as allowed under section 29.21 (1) of the Copyright Act of Canada, R.S.C., 1985, c. C-42.

Quote from *Pirates of the Caribbean: The Curse of the Black Pearl*, copyright © 2003 by Walt Disney Pictures and Jerry Bruckheimer Films, is misquoted and used as allowed under section 29.21 (1) of the Copyright Act of Canada, R.S.C., 1985, c. C-42.

## **Chapter S**

Quote from *Goldfinger*, copyright © 1959 by Ian Fleming, is used as allowed under section 29.21 (1) of the Copyright Act of Canada, R.S.C., 1985, c. C-42.

Lyrics from "[If I Had \\$1000000](#)", by Barenaked Ladies, written by Steven Page and Ed Robertson, copyright © 1992 by Reprise Records, are used as allowed under section 29.21 (1) of the Copyright Act of Canada, R.S.C., 1985, c. C-42.

Quote from *All That Jazz*, copyright © 1979 by Robert Alan Aurthur, Bob Fosse, 20th Century Fox, and Columbia Pictures; or from *The Big O*, copyright © 1999-2001 by Hitoshi Ariga, Kodansha, and their licencees; or from *Beetlejuice*, copyright © 1988 by Michael McDowell, Warren Skaaren, Tim Burton, and The Geffen Company; or from a large number of other possible sources, is used as allowed under section 29.21 (1) of the Copyright Act of Canada, R.S.C., 1985, c. C-42.

Lyrics from "[You Give Love a Bad Name](#)", by Bon Jovi, from the album *Slippery When Wet*, written by Jon Bon Jovi, Richie Sambora, and Desmond Child, copyright © 1986 by Mercury Records, are misquoted and used as allowed under section 29.21 (1) of the Copyright Act of Canada, R.S.C., 1985, c. C-42.

Lyrics from "[\(Wish I Could Fly Like\) Superman](#)", by The Kinks, from the album *Low Budget*, written by Ray Davies, copyright © 1978 by Arista Records, are used as allowed under section 29.21 (1) of the Copyright Act of Canada, R.S.C., 1985, c. C-42.

Lyrics from "[Crazy Train](#)", by Ozzy Osbourne, from the album *Blizzard of Ozz*, written by Bob Daisley, Ozzy Osbourne, and Randy Rhoads, copyright © 1980 by Jet Records, are adapted and used as allowed under section 29.21 (1) of the Copyright Act of Canada, R.S.C., 1985, c. C-42.

Quote from *The Order of the Stick* instalment "[No Chance](#)", copyright © 2021 by Rich Burlew, loosely translated through Google Translate, is used as allowed under section 29.21 (1) of the Copyright Act of Canada, R.S.C., 1985, c. C-42.

Quote from *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*, copyright © 1964 by Stanley Kubrick, Peter George, Terry Southern, and Columbia Pictures, is used as allowed under section 29.21 (1) of the Copyright Act of Canada, R.S.C., 1985, c. C-42.

Quote from "[the LunchCounter](#)", copyright by "Kenjiro Cross" (Robert Haynie), is used as allowed under section 29.21 (1) of the Copyright Act of Canada, R.S.C., 1985, c. C-42.

Quote from "[To a Mouse](#)", by Robert Burns, is in the public domain.

Quote from *Pocket Monsters Green* and *Pokémon Red*, copyright © 1996 by Game Freak and Nintendo, is misquoted and used as allowed under section 29.21 (1) of the Copyright Act of Canada, R.S.C., 1985, c. C-42.

Lyrics from "[Ring of Fire](#)", performed by Johnny Cash, written by June Carter and Merle Kilgore, copyright © 1963 by Columbia Nashville, are adapted and used as allowed under section 29.21 (1) of the Copyright Act of Canada, R.S.C., 1985, c. C-42.

Quote from *Firefly*, episode "Safe", copyright © 2002 by Mutant Enemy Productions and 20th Century Fox Television, is misquoted and used as allowed under section 29.21 (1) of the Copyright Act of Canada, R.S.C., 1985, c. C-42.

Quote from *Tengen Toppa Gurren Lagann*, copyright © 2007 by Kazuki Nakashima, Gainax, and their licensees, is used as allowed under section 29.21 (1) of the Copyright Act of Canada, R.S.C., 1985, c. C-42.

Quote from the title of *Harry Potter and the Methods of Rationality*, copyright © 2010-2015 by "Less Wrong" (Eliezer Yudkowsky), is used as allowed under section 29.21 (1) of the Copyright Act of Canada, R.S.C., 1985, c. C-42.

Quote from *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, by Graham Chapman, John Cleese, Eric Idle, Terry Gilliam, Terry Jones, and Michael Palin, © 1975 Python (Monty) Pictures, is used as allowed under section 29.21 (1) of the Copyright Act of Canada, R.S.C., 1985, c. C-42.

Quote from *Lupin III: The Castle of Cagliostro*, copyright © 1979 by Tokyo Movie Shinsha and Toho, is used as allowed under section 29.21 (1) of the Copyright Act of Canada, R.S.C., 1985, c. C-42.

Quote from *Reaper Man*, copyright © 1991 by Terry Pratchett, is used as allowed under section 29.21 (1) of the Copyright Act of Canada, R.S.C., 1985, c. C-42.

## **Chapter S++**

Quote from *Get Smart*, copyright © 1965-1970 by Mel Brooks, Buck Henry, and Talent Associates, is used as allowed under section 29.21 (1) of the Copyright Act of Canada, R.S.C., 1985, c. C-42.

Lyrics from "[Imagine](#)", by John Lennon, written by John Lennon and Yoko Ono, copyright © 1971 by Apple Records, are used as allowed under section 29.21 (1) of the Copyright Act of Canada, R.S.C., 1985, c. C-42.

Lyrics from "[Katagoshi ni Kinsei](#)", lyrics by Naoko Takeuchi, music by Hideyuki Obata, translation by Google Translate, copyright © 2003, are used as allowed under section 29.21 (1) of the Copyright Act of Canada, R.S.C., 1985, c. C-42.

Quote from *Monty Python's Flying Circus*, copyright © 1969 by BBC, is misquoted and used as allowed under section 29.21 (1) of the Copyright Act of Canada, R.S.C., 1985, c. C-42.