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Sailor Moon the novel #8

DIAMOND'S NOT FOREVER

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Lianne Sentar**

**Created by
NAOKO TAKEUCHI**



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Chapter 1

"Princess"

Diamond

The queen of darkness, her Whip of Discipline clutched tightly in her hand, glared down at the blonde by her feet.

"This is the end of you," the queen bellowed. "I will have no mercy this time."

Poor Serena Tsukino, dressed in rags and sprawled on the rocky ground, gripped the edge of the queen's robe. Tear streaks carved twin paths through the dirt on Serena's cheeks.

"No!" Serena cried. "No, please! I can't stand any more of your punishment!"

"You have brought this upon yourself." The queen's eyes blazed. "Detention from now until

doomsday! Accept your fate!" With a roar, the queen raised her whip.

"Serena!"

Serena blinked. The rocky, depressing surroundings melted away. Her rags turned back into her school uniform. She found herself sitting in her chair, her arms neatly folded on the desk in front of her.

But the queen of darkness herself still glowered at Serena from the front of the classroom.

Serena immediately sat up. "Y-yes?" she stuttered.

Serena's homeroom teacher, Ms. Patricia Haruna, snorted. "You seemed to be stuck in one heavy daydream, Miss Head-in-the-Clouds."

Serena averted her eyes. "Not so much a daydream," she said slowly. "I was just... thinking about you."

Ms. Haruna cocked an eyebrow. "Then I certainly hope you were *also* thinking about what punishment I have in store for you," she said sharply. "You realize today was your fiftieth tardy this year."

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"Fiftieth?" Serena repeated. Wow. That was pretty lucky. She was sure she had been late more times than that.

"Yes. So I'm assigning you a week's worth of detention."

Serena's jaw dropped. "But Ms. H--"

"No buts." Ms. Haruna cleared her throat and went back to her papers. "Tim House?" she called. "Come to my desk. I couldn't read your handwriting on this last assignment."

A thin boy got up from his chair and nervously made his way toward Ms. Haruna's desk. The other students took the opportunity and started talking amongst themselves, filling the room with the usual morning chatter.

Serena lay her head down on her desk. A week's detention! Luna was going to kill her. The little guardian cat had told Serena there was an important Sailor Scout meeting after school. It looked like Serena was going to be late for something else that day.

"Hey, Serena!" Melvin Grier suddenly popped up by Serena's desk, grinning broadly. "Been reading the newspaper lately?"

HALL ROOM

Serena sighed. "With my tardiness record," she said lowly, "do you *really* think I get up early enough in the morning for the newspaper?"

"Oh, yeah. Didn't think of that." Undaunted, Melvin pulled a newspaper clipping from his pocket and placed it on her desk. "I saw this article and thought of you," he said in his usual chirp. "A visiting princess is having a ball tonight."

The mention of royalty and parties immediately got Serena's attention. "Really?" she exclaimed as she sat bolt upright in her chair. "What kind of princess? From where?"

Melvin took a nervous step back from the eager blonde. "Um, she's not really the princess of a country or anything, but it's still really cool. She's the only daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Diamond, a majorly rich couple who live somewhere in the north of Japan," he said as he pushed up his coke-bottle glasses. "They have a huge piece of land that they live on, nicknamed Diamond Kingdom. They call themselves King and Queen Diamond. Their daughter is the princess. It's really an honor that their ball is going to be nearby!"

Serena visibly wilted. "That's stupid," she

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said, laying her head back down on her desk. "You don't just go around calling yourself royalty just because you're rich."

Melvin, surprised, slapped his palms on her desk. "Come on, Serena. How could you not be thrilled? They're one of the most powerful families in Japan! They're practically royalty, anyway." He raised his index finger. "Besides, that princess is inheriting the Diamond family's heirloom: the Diamond Crystal. That's a big deal!"

Serena looked at the photo in the clipping, but all she saw on it was a short girl with coke-bottle glasses glumly holding a locked box. "What's the Diamond Crystal?" she asked.

"Nobody knows. They're unveiling it at the ball tonight." Melvin rubbed his hands together. "Isn't it exciting, Serena? I plan to open an Internet chat room with my buddies tonight in case anyone finds out what the treasure is before it's shown at the ball. Think of how cool it would be to know before everyone else!"

Serena rolled her eyes. Melvin. Count on him to want to know something first just for the sake of knowing it *first*. Serena had always thought

HALLOWEEN

Melvin would make a great reporter when he grew up. He'd be on new stories like Serena on an ice cream sundae.

But the ball *did* sound pretty cool. Serena loved to dress up and go to parties, and she had always loved fairy tales. A princess, even a princess who wasn't *really* a princess, was probably the closest thing to a fairy tale she was ever going to experience.

Well, besides the fighting-evil-at-night-as-a-mysterious-Champion-of-Justice thing.

As Melvin started to murmur online aliases of the people he would invite into his virtual gossip fest, Serena glanced over at her best friend Molly Baker.

"Hey, Molly," Serena called. "Did you hear about the ball tonight? I just have to go. Wanna go and try to nab tickets with me?"

Molly, who seemed to be lost in thought, blinked. "Hm?" she asked, turning her head.

"Tickets. With me. Nab." Serena lifted up the news article. "We could go do super-speed shopping for some dresses. And we could go for some new jewelry and get our hair done..." With each

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new thought, Serena got more and more excited. "And I'm sure the party'll have great food. C'mon, we should go!"

Molly shrugged unenthusiastically. "I already have a ticket, because my mom's a jeweler. Not too interested in going, though. It's not really my thing." With that, Molly rested her chin in her palm and stared off at nothing.

Serena frowned. Molly didn't seem herself that day. Come to think of it, Molly had been pre-occupied with thoughts a lot that week.

"Mols." Serena leaned over to her redheaded friend. "You OK?"

Molly mumbled an affirmative, but she didn't look at Serena. And Serena couldn't help but notice the sadness that nipped at the edges of Molly's features.

In the swirling darkness of the Negaverse throne room, Nephrite walked silently up to the stone dais. He got to one knee and bowed his head.

"You summoned me, my queen." Nephrite's deep voice was low. "What is it you ask?"

"Nephrite." Queen Beryl beckoned with a

CHAPTER SEVEN

long-nailed finger. "Stand and come closer. I want all of your attention."

Nephrite looked up, surprised. The normally fiery and cruel queen had an almost anxious look on her face. Nephrite stood and took a step toward the throne.

"Yes?"

Something, perhaps eagerness, flickered through Beryl's orange eyes. "You know of the Empyrium Silver Crystal, general?" she asked.

Nephrite didn't move. "Of course, my queen. Everyone in the Negaverse does."

"And you know that the Empyrium Silver Crystal could easily allow the Negaverse to triumph if I should possess its powers?"

"Yes, my queen."

"Good." Beryl raised her crystal ball. Slowly, an image of Princess Diamond and her locked box appeared inside the clear sphere. Beryl let several of her long nails click on the ball's surface.

"This child is going to reveal a family heirloom tonight in Crossroads. She comes from a wealthy family, and the heirloom is rumored to be a great crystal." Beryl's fangs glistened against her

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ruby lips. "This may be the Empyrium Silver Crystal I have been searching for. Get it and bring it to me."

Nephrite was silent a moment. "Understood," he said at last.

"Good." Beryl leaned back in her throne. "You are dismissed, Nephrite. Though I must warn you--don't fail me again." She eyed him dangerously. "Your failures are becoming tiresome."

Nephrite's stone face was unreadable. "Ancient history, my queen," he said flatly. "I will not fail again." With that, Nephrite turned, his long brown hair shifting over the back of his shoulders, and walked out of the dark throne room.

Beryl snarled lowly. "Watch your arrogance," she said after he had left. "You don't pay me the proper respect, Nephrite. If your loyalty wavers..." Her fingernails pressed against the crystal ball so hard that her knuckles turned white. "I won't hesitate to destroy you."

In a small personal chamber in the Negaverse, Zoycite paced angrily. The general's mouth was contorted in a furious scowl.

CHAPTER FOUR

"Impossible!" she cried, throwing her arms in the air. "Not only is Nephrite not punished for his last failure, but the queen sent *him* on a mission after the Empyrium Silver Crystal. The Empyrium Silver Crystal has always been *my* assignment! Just because he happens to be head general right now, Beryl--"

--Is not someone you should question," a deep, cultured male voice said from the other side of the room. "Calm yourself, my love."

Zoycite stopped pacing and let out a breath. She testily brushed a strand of tea-colored hair behind her ear. "I've had it with Nephrite in charge," she declared. "It's time we took over things." She looked over at the voice. "We should take Nephrite out now."

"Patience, my dear." The man in the room was hidden in the shadows. He sat on a stone chair, his legs crossed and his long, gloved fingers touching his chin. "Now is not the time. If we interfered with Beryl's orders, we would find ourselves with more trouble than we could deal with."

Zoycite ran her tongue over her teeth. "When, then?" she asked irritably. "*When* will it be

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our time?"

In the darkness, a pair of beautiful, deadly ice blue eyes turned to her. "Soon, dear Zoycite," the man murmured. "Soon."



Chapter 2

Countess Serena

Luna, lying on a porch at the Cherry Hill Temple, curled her tail around her body and focused red-orange eyes on her Scouts. "I told all of you we're looking for the Princess of the Moon," the black cat said. "I've been reading the news lately, and I think Princess Diamond may be our girl."

Serena stopped digging the toe of her shoe into the ground and looked up, surprised. "What?" she asked. "Did you say Princess Diamond?"

Amy Anderson crossed her legs and frowned. Raye Hino, sweeping the temple grounds as usual, shook her head.

"Amy and I read that article, too," the priest-

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ess said. "Princess Diamond's not a real princess. That's just a fancy title her family gave her."

"I'm not concerned with royal blood," Luna said in reply. "Our Moon Princess is likely to have little or no memories of her past life on the moon. What concerns me most is that she's a girl who," Luna's voice lowered, "has a mysterious crystal."

Amy and Raye both looked up at that. "What?"

Serena let out a breath. "What does a crystal have to do with anything?" she asked. "Geez, Luna. As if our super-hero lives aren't filled with enough magical items," she said as she fiddled with the Luna Pen in her pocket.

"You've never spoken of a crystal before." Raye stopped sweeping and settled her dark eyes on the black cat. "Luna, what aren't you telling us?"

Luna shook her head. "Don't worry about it now. If it looks like Diamond's crystal is what we're looking for, I'll explain it to you." The cat got to her feet. "All you girls need to worry about right now is our finding the Moon Princess and the fighting the Negaverse."

"Oh, really?" Serena asked sarcastically.

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"That's all? Gee, thanks, Luna."

Raye shot Serena a look.

Amy pulled her Mercury Compact Computer from her skirt pocket. "All right," she said, flipping open the cover. "If you want us to check out Princess Diamond, we'll have to get into that ball tonight. It's our best chance of getting to her."

Serena brightened. Cool! For once, the Sailor Scouts weren't interfering with her plans--they were helping her out. Serena was sure she could get those ball tickets she wanted if Amy and Raye helped her. When Sailor business was involved, those two were great at getting what was needed.

Amy pressed a few buttons on her tiny computer and waited. A moment passed, and then the computer made a tiny beep. Amy frowned.

"Tickets are a problem," she said, closing the compact lid. "It turns out the ball is closed off to the general public. We'll have to find another way in."

Serena blinked. "What?" she asked. "But Molly said she's going because her mom's got that jewelry store."

"Think about it, Serena." Raye's long fingers

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curled over her broom. "The ball's main purpose is to unveil the Diamond Crystal. Of course they'd want the local jewelers there to give an appraisal of its worth. And I'm sure they'll let reporters in, too."

"Maybe we could have Serena use the Luna Pen," Amy suggested. "You know, to turn her into a jeweler or reporter."

Serena grinned. The Luna Pen! Of course! Now that the ball was considered Sailor Scout business, she had an excuse to use her handy disguise item.

"Great idea, Amy!" Serena agreed brightly. "Only I think I should turn into someone who blends in with the ball crowd more. You know--to be a more effective investigator." Serena smiled proudly. "I'll turn into a gorgeous princess myself!"

Raye cocked an eyebrow. "Are you sure you can put on a lavish dress and then stay out of your daydream fantasies enough to investigate?" she asked. "I know you too well by now, Serena."

Serena scowled. She didn't deny the fact that her attention span, when it came to work, was about 15 seconds, but Raye was overly rough on her. There were times Serena felt a little angry that

Raye was such a mature and responsible teammate. It made Serena's relaxed approach to Sailor business look really lazy in comparison.

"Raye," she said flatly, "I've done really well with my Sailor Scout business recently. Lay off for once!"

"Serena's right, Raye." Amy looked over at the priestess. "Serena's truly done an excellent job as of late. Consider an enjoyable assignment like this a sort of reward for her."

Serena turned happily to Amy. "Oh, Amy," she cooed. "I knew I could count on you. You're such a pal." Serena smiled and pointed to herself. "Relax, guys. I'll check out that princess for you. Nothing will escape my investigation!"

Amy caught Serena's eyes. "Just promise me something," the blue-haired girl said. "OK?"

"Sure." Serena clasped her hands behind her back. "What?"

Raye finished Amy's thought. "Behave yourself."

Serena giggled and scratched her head. "Geez, guys," she said with a nervous grin. "Do you even have to ask?"

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"Yes," Amy and Raye said in unison.

He stood in fog.

Darien coughed. He covered his mouth with a gloved hand and blinked watery eyes behind his mask.

"This fog's so thick," he murmured, looking down at the tuxedo and red-trimmed black cape he wore. He frowned. "And I'm dressed as Tuxedo Mask again," he added. "Why am I always dressed like Tuxedo Mask here?"

"My prince," called a voice.

Darien quickly looked up. A white castle, hidden in shadows, loomed before him. On a balcony stood a barely-visible young woman with long hair.

"You!" he called, running forward. "You! Who are you? Why do you keep bringing me here?"

"Find the Empyrium Silver Crystal, my prince." The girl's voice, soft to begin with, grew softer as she and the castle were swallowed by the fog. "Find the Silver Crystal and set me free."

"Wait!" Darien ran faster, his arm out-

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stretched. "No, please! Who am I? Can you tell me who I am?"

"My prince," the girl whispered. "Please set me free..."

"Gooooood afternoon, ladies and gents! Hope you're all enjoying the simply beautiful weather we've been having lately!"

Darien's eyes popped open. The clock radio, near his ear, blared noisily. Sunlight fell on his face through his high apartment window. He squinted against the bright light.

"Man..." Darien sat up slowly, holding his head. The digital 4:30 on the radio glared at him. "At least I set the alarm," he said, rubbing an eye. "I could've slept the whole afternoon away."

Darien stretched his arms and leaned back on his couch. He looked out the window, and his own slightly groggy reflection looked back.

He sighed. "Again," he muttered, crossing his arms. "Again with that dream. It's bad enough I get it every night--now it has to come in my afternoon naps, too? I don't get enough sleep as it is."

"Oh," the DJ continued, "yes, it seems the

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jewelers in town will get an eyeful tonight. The famed Princess Diamond will be unveiling her Diamond Crystal tonight. Based on the press release that came out this morning, the crystal will be available for public view for the first time in twenty years."

Darien looked abruptly to his radio. "Crystal?" he repeated.

Princess Diamond's ball was held at the nearby embassy that night. Serena watched from afar as the finely dressed guests handed in their invitations at the door.

"All right." Serena ducked behind some bushes and looked to Luna. "You said Amy and Raye are positioned around the house in case something happens, right?"

"They're prepared for anything." Luna nodded at Serena. "Just keep yourself in check. Remember, you have a job to do."

Serena rolled her eyes. "Right," she said as she pulled the Luna Pen from her pocket. "I'm not as immature as you treat me, you know."

"If you *proved* your maturity to me more

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often, I would *acknowledge* it more often."

Here they went again. Serena growled. "Oh, enough!" she exclaimed. "We're always arguing over this! I'm going to that party and I'm not gonna let our usual bickering ruin it." She glanced quickly around to make sure no one was watching, then thrust her Luna Pen up.

"MOON POWER...TURN ME INTO A DIGNIFIED BALL GUEST!"

A wave of pink and orange smoke burst from the pen and surrounded Serena. When it finally cleared, her jeans and blouse had turned into an elaborate white ball gown.

"Oh *wow*." Serena whistled approvingly as she admired her shining high heels. Strings of pearl and ribbon held her hair up in two buns on her head, long silken gloves adorned her arms, and a pearl necklace encircled her throat. She even had a parasol. Serena twirled happily and glanced at her cat.

"How do I look, Luna?" she asked with a smile. "Truthfully now. Cover of Vanity Fair?"

Luna narrowed her eyes. "Very pretty, Serena. Now get to work."

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"With pleasure." Serena walked casually into the line of guests, then spun her parasol behind her head as she waited in line. The Luna Pen was definitely one of her favorite parts of being Sailor Moon. Even though she prided herself on her fashion sense, she could never afford such fabulous clothing on her allowance. Particularly since she spent most of her money on comic books or the arcade.

Her turn at the door came. The doorman, looking rather uninterested, glanced up from his book. "Name?"

"I'm the Countess Popover of the Ivanovich Kingdom." Serena lifted her chin and tried to look as Countess-ish as she could. "I was invited late, so you won't find me in your book."

"Countess Popover?" The doorman raised a suspicious eyebrow. "I wasn't told you were coming. And I've certainly never heard of the Ivanovich Kingdom."

Serena gasped. "You...you *what*? How dare you!" She pinched her lips tightly together. "Why, I've never been so insulted! The Ivanovich Kingdom sends an elaborate gift to Princess

Diamond, and this is the thanks we receive? You don't even recognize the fine kingdom I represent?"

The doorman blinked. He started to stutter. "B-but miss, I--"

"Unbelievable." Serena thrust her nose in the air and turned around. "I shall return to my kingdom and tell everyone about Princess Diamond's lack of courtesy. And I'll be sure to mention *your* name..." Serena glanced at the man's name tag, then thrust her nose up again. "Frank."

Frank quickly took her arm as she tried to leave. "I'm sorry," he said, face turning red as he looked at all the other shocked guest in line. "I was mistaken. I-I seem to remember hearing about your coming. Yes, I'm sure I did." He motioned to the door. "Please go right in. Forgive me."

Serena fluffed the tufts of hair behind her neck. "Yes, well. I will, thank you." With that, she marched into the embassy, her head held high, her parasol tilted over her shoulder.

Serena could barely hold in her giggle. That had been the slickest thing she'd ever done! She couldn't help but feel sorry for poor Frank. She

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never would've come up with such a story to put him on the spot if it hadn't been Sailor Scout business.

"Sorry, Frank," she whispered under her breath. "Consider it your contribution to the fight against evil."

A very bored-looking Molly stood on one of the embassy's balconies, her arms resting on the railing. She sighed and lowered her head.

"I wish I didn't have to be here," she mumbled. "This is Mom's night, not mine. I don't care about that Diamond Crystal, and I don't want to be here when I'm still confused about..." She bit her lip. She looked off the balcony and into the night sky.

"I *know* it was just a dream," she whispered at last. "That thing where I went to the mall and Maxfield Stanton attacked me--I *know* it was a dream." She closed her eyes. "But there was something so real about it, and I haven't seen him since then. I don't know how I feel about him anymore."

"Molly?"

Molly turned, then gasped. She pressed her

back against the railing. "Maxfield!" she exclaimed.

Maxfield Stanton, a.k.a., Nephrite, walked onto the balcony and lowered his costume mask. He was dressed in a sleek white tuxedo. "I *thought* that was you," he said, smiling slightly. "How are you, my dear?"

Molly turned red. "I'm f-fine," she stuttered. "I didn't know you were going to be at this party."

Nephrite slipped his mask into his pocket. "Of course I came," he said, voice soft. "I knew you'd be here." He held out his hand. "Would you care to dance?"

Molly's eyes widened. "Dance?" she asked.

Nephrite smiled at her. "I'd be honored if such a beautiful girl agreed."

Molly covered her mouth. "Oh, Maxfield," she mumbled, flattered. "Al-alright." She took his hand and let him pull her closer. She looked at the balcony around them. "Don't you want to dance inside?" she asked.

"It's much nicer out here." Nephrite tilted his head. "Don't you think?"

Molly blushed. "M-Maxfield," she whispered.

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Nephrite suddenly slammed his palm against her forehead. Black energy seared into her skin and rushed through her body, making Molly gasp and go rigid. She choked.

"You work for me now." Nephrite narrowed his eyes. His gentle demeanor had completely vanished. "You're to do the bidding of the Negaverse, Molly. I want you to find the princess and get her crystal, understand?"

Molly's face had turned an evil shade of purple. Eyes dark, she grinned wickedly.

"Yes, master," she said with a snicker.



Chapter 3

Run-Ins

The ballroom in the embassy looked like something out of a movie set. Huge chandeliers and wall lamps lit up the atmosphere with bright light, thick tapestries hung along the walls, and a large orchestra in the corner provided ongoing music. Serena hardly even noticed the long tables covered with exquisite food and drinks. She was too busy watching the couples on the dance floor--to her surprise, all the guests wore fancy masks.

"It's really like a fairy tale," Serena whispered, covering her mouth. She tried to hide her huge smile. "Wow, this is so totally gorgeous! I never thought I'd get to see a fancy party like this."

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Just then, she noticed a familiar figure taking quick photographs of people in the room. Serena blanched.

"*Dad's* here?" She quickly turned away, her eyes wide. Just her luck! He was probably taking pictures for work. Why oh why did he have to be here tonight?! Tentatively, she peeked behind her to see if she'd been spotted.

Sure enough, he was looking straight at her. Serena gulped and spun to face another direction. Maybe if she pretended nothing was wrong, he'd think he was mistaken and would leave her alone. She started muttering while she fluffed the hair behind her neck.

"Please don't see me, please don't see me, please don't see me..."

A hand rested on her shoulder. "Excuse me?"

Serena winced. Trying to think up a hundred excuses at once, she slowly turned to face her father.

"Wow." Mr. Tsukino grinned. "The resemblance really is remarkable! May I take your picture, Miss?"

Serena blinked. He didn't recognize her! But

how could that be? All the Luna Pen had done was change her hair and--

The Luna Pen.

Realization fell on Serena like a ton of bricks. The Luna Pen was *magic*. Luna had once said that each disguise wasn't just a new set of clothing--the Luna Pen, somehow, used a spell to make Serena's face unrecognizable. The girl gulped. She didn't know the magic was effective enough to fool her own father.

Mr. Tsukino smiled. "You remind me of my daughter," he said, tilting his head. "If she was a little older. I bet she'd love to have a picture of you."

Serena blushed. "Oh," she answered, trying to change her voice. The Luna Pen didn't disguise *that*. "Um, sure, you can take a picture."

Her father happily readied his camera. Serena clasped her hands behind her back and let him snap a quick photo.

"Great. Thanks!" Mr. Tsukino waved, then made his way back to one of the punch tables. Serena let out a breath. It was going to be weird seeing that picture after it was developed. She wondered if the Luna Pen's magic was good

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enough to fool herself.

Just then, somebody bumped into her from behind. She squeaked and nearly lost her balance, but a strong arm grabbed hers and kept her from crashing to the floor.

"Sorry," the person mumbled. "I didn't mean to--" He looked down at her, then stopped. His eyes, behind his white mask, widened.

Serena's jaw dropped. "No way!" she thought. Was she dreaming? As if this night wasn't already surprising enough.

She was standing face-to-face with Tuxedo Mask.

For a long moment, the two of them just stared at each other in disbelief. Serena could feel her heart begin to thud. What was she supposed to say? The last time they'd met, they'd been caught in Nephrite's trap in the elevator shaft. They'd hung on for their lives together, and he had said those things about *wanting* to protect her...

Her heart thudded faster. Serena swallowed and tried to calm it.

Tuxedo Mask released her arm. "You," he said slowly. "Do I...know you?"

Serena froze. The Luna Pen! He didn't know she was Sailor Moon!

"Wh-what?" Serena had no idea what to do. Tell him who she was? Not tell him who she was? What could she do? Where was that stupid Luna when she needed her?!

"Know m-me?" Serena stuttered. "Uh, I uh, well, I mean--"

"My dream." Tuxedo Mask's breath caught in his throat. "Y-you look like that princess in my dream."

Serena turned beet red. What was *that* supposed to mean? "What princess?" she asked.

Tuxedo Mask frowned. "Never mind," he said, looking away. "Forget it."

Serena nervously brushed a strand of hair behind her ear. Tuxedo Mask was dressed as he usually was--his tuxedo, cape, and mask were similar to what all the other male guests were wearing--but for the first time, she saw him without his top hat. She'd never realized he had such beautiful black hair.

A new song started up from the orchestra. Tuxedo Mask glanced at the dance floor, then back

diamond's not forever

to her. "Hey," he said carefully, as if he wasn't sure of what he proposed. "Do you...want to dance?"

This wasn't happening. This wasn't happening. Dance with Tuxedo Mask? Only when she let her daydreams get the better of her! Dumbfounded, she let him lead her to an open space on the dance floor. She had to stop eating before bed--when she snapped awake in a minute, she was going to be sorely disappointed. She held her breath. She would wake up. She would wake up.

But she didn't wake up. In fact, as soon as she and Tuxedo Mask were in dancing positions, she felt something come over her. Grace and experience seemed to settle on her shoulders. She and Tuxedo Mask began to dance, and Serena soon realized their steps were perfectly in time.

"Wow." Serena blushed. "We're, uh, doing this right."

"Yeah." Tuxedo Mask looked quizzically into her eyes. "Is it just me, or does this feel familiar to you?"

Butterflies were swarming madly throughout Serena's stomach, but she managed to nod. The

dance really *did* feel familiar. Holding his hand felt familiar. Even his smell, the smell of mild cologne and fresh soap, felt familiar.

The song seemed to wrap around Serena as she gazed up at Tuxedo Mask. She couldn't see behind his mask, but his expression told her he was getting swept up in the music, too. And in the memory. It was as if they had danced together a long time ago...

And something, deep inside Serena, began to hurt.

She sucked in a breath. That pain again! It came when she looked at Tuxedo Mask, or even when she looked at Darien. What was it? She bit her lip and broke from Tuxedo Mask's hold. The song ended a moment after she did so.

Tuxedo Mask gave a start. "Are you OK?" he asked as the guests around them applauded the orchestra.

Serena let out a breath. "I'm sorry," she whispered, her forehead creasing. "I-I don't know."

In an elaborate guest room in the embassy, Princess Diamond sat atop her bed. She wore an

diamond's not forever

intricate ball dress, exquisite jewelry, and held a carefully carved chest in her lap. The young woman frowned.

"I hate these stupid parties." She pushed her coke-bottle glasses up her nose. "Nobody's coming to see me, anyway. They just want to see Mom and Dad's crystal." She sighed. "I wish I was at home watching TV or something."

A loud argument suddenly sounded outside her door. Princess Diamond looked up curiously. Evil Molly, her face purple and her eyes black, burst into the bedroom and slammed the door shut behind her. The princess' doormen could be heard pounding and yelling from the other side.

"What's going on?" Princess Diamond stood. "Who are you?"

Molly smiled wickedly. "I'm just here to liven things up a bit," she answered in a low voice.

Princess Diamond snorted and crossed her arms. "Are you somebody my parents hired to be my friend?" she asked flatly. "Because I have *real* friends, you know. I don't need the company of a stranger." She frowned. "And your face is kinda purple. Maybe you should see a doctor."

"The only one who'll need a doctor is *you!*" Molly ran up to Princess Diamond, slapped her palms on her forehead, and released dark energy into her body. Princess Diamond stiffened. Molly, after the transfer, moaned and collapsed to the carpeting.

The doormen finally managed to break down the locked door. "Princess Diamond!" they shouted as they rushed into the room. "Are you all right? Did that girl attack you?"

Diamond, her face now purple, smiled evilly. "All right?" she repeated. She picked up her treasure box and hugged it greedily to her chest. She snickered. "I'm more than all right, fools. Now I can get this crystal to the Negaverse!"

With that, Princess Diamond bolted past her doormen and flew down the hall. The men watched her in disbelief as she disappeared around a corner, her laughter ringing throughout the marble hallway.

"Wh-what?" One of the men blinked. "What's happened to the princess?"

Another one grabbed the nearest phone. "I'm sounding the alarm," he declared as he quick-

diamond's not forever

ly punched in numbers. "Something is terribly wrong with Princess Diamond!"

Tuxedo Mask tilted Serena's face up. Looking at his concealed eyes, she wished more than ever that he didn't wear a mask. She wanted to see what color his eyes were.

Pain bit inside her again. She winced and averted her gaze.

"I know you." Tuxedo Mask furrowed his eyebrows as if trying to remember. "I know you from somewhere. Don't I?"

Serena wanted to leave. She wanted the pain to stop. "Sorry," she said, gently trying to pull from him. "Um, I kinda have to go. Maybe I'll see you later."

"What's your name?" He rubbed a thumb down her temple. "And what's wrong? You look like something's eating at you."

The feeling of his glove brushing over her skin sent tingles down her spine. "I-I have to go," she managed to whisper above her pounding heart. "I'm sorry."

Tuxedo Mask was about to say something

else when an alarm rang through the embassy. Surprised, he let go and looked for the source. Serena quickly slipped away and ran out onto a balcony.

Saved by the bell! Serena sucked in deep breaths of the night air and tried to calm herself. The combination of that strange pain and her raging emotions was making her very uncomfortable. Why was this happening to her? What was going on?

"Serena!"

Luna's voice broke Serena's thoughts. The blonde looked to her feet to see that the cat had somehow made it onto the balcony.

"Luna!" Serena bent and picked up her cat. "How'd you get here? Do you know what that alarm's for?"

"That's what I came to tell you about. Amy and Raye are on standby. Something seems to be terribly wrong with Princess Diamond." Luna placed her paws urgently on Serena's dress. "Serena, you've got to find the princess. I think the Negaverse has brainwashed her!"

As if to emphasize her statement, the pur-

diamond's not forever

ple-faced princess suddenly rushed out onto the balcony. "Out of my way!" she ordered as she pushed Serena aside. "I must give the crystal to my master!"

Serena's eyes shot wide. Looking over the balcony, she saw the one person in the world she least wanted to see.

Nephrite stood on the lawn below.

"Master!" Princess Diamond held up her box and grinned crazily. "I have the crystal! I'll drop it to you!"

Nephrite smiled. "Good girl," he said, raising his hands. "I'll catch it."

Serena threw her arms around the princess' waist. "No!" she shouted, frantically trying to pull Diamond back. "Don't give that to him! He's the bad guy!"

Princess Diamond snarled and ripped from Serena's hold. "Don't touch me!" she shrieked. She grabbed Serena by the shoulder and threw the blonde toward the railing.

Serena tripped on her dress. With a gasp, she crashed into the railing and felt her feet come off the ground. Before she knew it she had flipped

FALL FROM

over the iron rails and was flying, headfirst, off the balcony.

The only thing she could do was scream.



Chapter 4

Surprises

Serena's mind went blank as she fell through empty air. The nighttime wind flapped her skirt around her legs and whipped loose strands of golden hair in her face. Heart thundering in her chest, she blindly struggled to reach upwards. But she knew it was too late. Her hand wouldn't reach the balcony.

"Help!" she screamed, terrified. "Please, somebody, help!"

A hand grabbed her wrist.

Serena was jolted to a stop so abruptly her arm was nearly ripped from her body. Blinking tears of shock from her eyes, she looked up to her

savior.

Tuxedo Mask, leaning dangerously far off the balcony railing, clutched her wrist. He clenched his teeth as his arm shook under her weight.

"Hang on!" he called. "I've got you!"

Princess Diamond scoffed. "But who's got you?" she asked as she gave him a brutal shove.

Tuxedo Mask choked and fell forward. Serena watched with horror as his body slid further and further over the railing.

"Somebody grab him!" she screamed.

Princess Diamond laughed. "Happy landing!" she mocked as she gave him another shove. Serena shrieked as he slipped over the rail, causing the two of them to fall towards the hard marble floor below.

Serena couldn't focus her brain--all her thoughts were clouded with panic. But, for some reason, she could see very clearly. She could see very clearly as Luna threw Serena's closed parasol off the balcony to fall into Serena's hand. She could see very clearly as the parasol opened in a burst of pink and orange smoke, sending glittering bits of magic to sparkle in the night air.

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Serena didn't need to think. Like that first time she had become Sailor Moon, she felt the knowledge come from deep inside her. She clutched Tuxedo Mask and shouted, "Grab the handle!"

Tuxedo Mask grunted in disbelief, but he obeyed. As soon as he and Serena both gripped the handle, the parasol abruptly opened with a whuff. The super-heroes were jolted upright as the parasol held their weight and slowly, carefully, floated them toward the ground.

The evil Princess Diamond gasped. "What?" she exclaimed. "How are they doing that?"

Nephrite's eyes narrowed.

Serena felt like she was in some crazy dream. Falling to her oblivion one minute, saved by an umbrella the next. As if her normal Champion of Justice predicaments weren't weird enough--this one topped even that time she'd been turned into a giant tennis ball. Swallowing the bile in her throat, she tried to calm her racing heart while not looking down.

Tuxedo Mask stared at her in disbelief. "How in God's name is this parasol floating us

down?" he whispered.

Serena let out a breath. "It's the magic from my Luna Pen," she answered. "I guess, anyway. If this was a normal umbrella, we would've been pancakes by now." She lowered her voice and added quietly, "I'm Sailor Moon."

"What?"

Neither said anything more as their feet touched the ground. Nephrite vanished with a snap of the fingers, and Sailor Mars and Sailor Mercury ran across the lawn to see if Serena was hurt. Tuxedo Mask quickly looked down at her.

"This's been some night." He nervously pulled his crooked mask on correctly. "Um, thanks for saving my life."

Serena looked to the grass. "Well," she answered, "you always save mine."

His lips curved slightly upwards. After running a hand over her head, he dashed off, his outline quickly disappearing in the darkness. A moment later Serena was joined by her super-hero teammates.

"Serena!" Amy threw her arms around Serena and hugged the blonde tightly. "Thank God

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you're all right! I thought you were done for!"

Serena watched the parasol in her hand shrink back down into the Luna Pen. "That makes two of us," she murmured as she fingered the glittering trinket. "I'm definitely coming to like these magic items more and more."

Raye gripped Serena's shoulder. "Transform," the priestess ordered. "Nephrite's probably still after the Empyrium Silver Crystal, and the princess is in danger. We have to get moving."

Serena's eyebrows furrowed. "What are you talking about?" she asked. "Empyrium Silver Crystal? What's that?"

"Luna told us about it. But we'll explain later." Amy pointed to the ballroom balcony. "We have to save Princess Diamond. Transform, Serena!"

Serena didn't like this one bit. She'd have to corner Luna later and make the cat tell her what was going on. Taking a breath, Serena threw her hand into the air.

"MOON PRISM POWER MAKE-UP!"

Rainbow lights swirled around her body.

Ball Room

Serena's gown melted down into her bright Sailor Moon uniform, and her hairstyle broke free to become her standard ponytails. Once her transformation was complete, she nodded to her teammates.

"Let's go."

The three Sailor Scouts ran back into the embassy and flew up the stairs to the ballroom. Princess Diamond was there, her palm held out, her lips curled in a crazy grin as she drained white light from all the guests in the room. The people were moaning and passing out by the dozens.

"I'll bring energy back for my master as well," Diamond declared. "With this energy and the crystal, the Negaverse will be unstoppable!"

Serena scowled. "That's enough!" she shouted, stepping forward. "You've caused enough trouble tonight as it is, Diamond. You're ruining your own ball!"

As the last guest fell unconscious, Diamond lowered her hand and snarled. "Who are you?" she demanded.

Serena spread her feet. Her super-hero speeches were really becoming second nature. "I

diamond's not forever

am Sailor Moon," she called. "Champion of Justice and defender of the innocent, and in the name of the Moon, you're punished!"

Raye threw an anti-evil parchment at Diamond before the princess could attack. The parchment stuck to Diamond's forehead.

"Whatever force is in that girl," Raye ordered, "come out and face us now! MARS FIRE-BALLS CHARGE!"

The parchment glowed. Princess Diamond screamed as black energy erupted from her body and formed a large, undefined shape in the air. The princess collapsed. Nephrite's face, purple and sinister, formed in the center of the dark energy.

"Fools," the face of Nephrite taunted. The voice was deeper and more evil than Nephrite's. "The Silver Crystal is within the Negaverse's grasp. You'll never win!"

A dark wind suddenly filled the room. The girls shouted and covered their heads as their skirts and hair whipped mercilessly around them. Serena could hardly stay on her feet.

"Mercury!" she yelled over the roar of the wind. "If we don't blast him soon, we'll get

knocked around like dolls! Use your bubbles!"

Amy desperately cupped her palms together. "MERCURY BUBBLES..." She fought to aim the blue light that spun in her hands. Clenching her teeth, she released the sphere in her attacker's direction. "...BLAST!"

The bubbles burst from Amy's hands and filled the room. The purple face roared as its evil winds stopped. Serena, seeing her chance, quickly gripped the jewel in the center of her tiara.

"Whatever that crystal is," she declared as her headband glowed gold, "you can bet your stupid purple face that you won't get it!" She ripped the tiara from her forehead and hurled it at the enemy. "MOON TIARA ACTION!"

The golden discus shot through the air and cut straight through the dark mass of energy. The face of Nephrite screamed and began to dissipate.

"Curse you!" the purple face shouted. "You won't win this! The Negaverse will get the crystal and destroy you all!" With a final cry, the purple face melted away.

"Man." Serena frowned and rubbed the back of her neck. "That was one weird villain. Was it just

diamond's not forever

me, or was that purple face really starting to creep you guys out?"

Raye shook her head. "It wasn't just you," she murmured.

Just then, Luna ran into the room. "The princess," she ordered as she scampered up. "Now, while the guests are unconscious. We have to see if she's the Moon Princess we're looking for!"

Serena's eyes widened. In all the excitement, she had almost forgotten their mission. "Right," she agreed, carefully stepping over sleeping bodies to get to the unconscious princess. She knelt by Diamond and lifted the girl's head up.

"Hey." Serena tapped Diamond's cheek. "Hey, Princess Diamond. You OK?"

Princess Diamond stirred. Moaning, she reached for her face and knocked her glasses to the floor. She sniffed and opened her eyes.

Serena blinked. Princess Diamond, without her coke-bottle glasses, was absolutely gorgeous. Those thick lenses had been covering up a remarkably delicate face. Seeing the princess' hidden beauty, Serena couldn't help but wonder if Melvin was a hottie beneath his giant glasses.

HALL OF MIRRORS

Then again, she doubted it.

"What happened?" Diamond asked, looking around the room in confusion. "I don't remember coming out here. What did I do?"

Serena tried to think of a good answer. "Sleepwalked, I guess," she replied stupidly. Wincing, she handed Diamond her glasses. "Um, here. You dropped these."

Luna walked up to them. "Princess Diamond," the cat asked, "do I seem familiar to you?"

Diamond rubbed her eyes. "Hang on," she said, sliding her thick glasses onto her face. She looked from Serena, to Amy, to Raye. "Wait," she said after a moment, furrowing her eyebrows. "*Who* just asked me if they seemed familiar?"

"I did." Luna pointed to herself. "Do I?"

Diamond's jaw dropped. "That cat *talked!*" she shrieked, grabbing her chest. With a gasp, she passed out in Serena's arms. Serena struggled to keep the girl from falling to the floor.

Luna frowned. "I guess *that* answers our question," she said flatly. "She's not our princess. Sorry, girls."

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Raye picked up Diamond's box and flipped it open. She sighed. "Looks like no luck with the crystal, either," she murmured.

"What?" Serena looked up as she gently placed Diamond on the carpeting. "What's inside that thing?"

Raye turned the box to her companions. A small crystal statue, in the shape of a short girl with coke-bottle glasses, rested on a large velvet cushion.

Amy covered a smile with her hand. "It's a family heirloom," she said. "That's probably the founding mother of the family."

Serena looked at the statue, then at the short girl lying on the floor. She chuckled. "I can see the resemblance," she said with a smirk.

Some time later, Serena gazed at the moon from one of the embassy's many balconies. She was once again in her Luna Pen ball gown, her hair pinned up and her parasol resting by her feet. She could hear the oohs and aahs of the fully recovered jewelers as a fully recovered Princess Diamond unveiled her statue in the ballroom.

Serena rested her arms on the railing and let out a breath. What a night. No princess, no crystal, and no explanation. Luna had said she would tell Serena more about the Silver Crystal after Serena staked-out the rest of the party, but all Serena wanted to do was go home and get in bed. She'd had enough super-hero stuff for one night.

She yawned. All of the evening's excitement began to take its toll on her, and her eyelids sank. She wasn't going to make it to her bed, after all. As her head drooped to her chest, gloved hands took her shoulders and supported her. Someone gently pulled her from the railing and led her to a sitting position against a wall.

"Poor thing." Serena was too tired to recognize the voice. "Do you think your friends can get you home?"

Serena murmured an affirmative. Closing her eyes, she rested her head against the wall and drifted off to sleep.

Tuxedo Mask smiled. Gently, he brushed a few golden bangs from her eyes.

"Sailor Moon, huh?" He let his finger linger on her cheek. He carefully slid down his mask to

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get a better view of her face.

Darien's eyes grew light. "You look so much like that princess who's always calling me," he said quietly. "But who is she? And who are you?"

Serena mumbled something about chocolate cake. Darien chuckled and pushed his mask back on.

"But you don't just remind me of her." He bent his head down and moved close to her face. With her sleeping breath on his cheeks, he whispered, "You remind me of someone else, too."

Serena gave no response. Darien smiled, closed his eyes, and gently, softly, pressed his lips against hers.

Somewhere, deep in the back of Serena's sleeping mind, she realized that his kiss felt familiar.



Chapter 5

Forbidden Love

Serena didn't remember how she'd gotten home after the ball. As she frantically prepared for school the next morning (late as usual), she quickly dialed up Raye on her phone. She rested the receiver on her shoulder and pulled on her skirt.

After a few rings, Raye's voice echoed in Serena's ear. "Yes?" Raye asked calmly. "This is Cherry Hill Temple."

Serena made a face. Raye sounded so relaxed. How come Serena seemed to be the only one on Earth in a crazy rush every morning?

"Raye," Serena said as she grabbed her socks from the bed. "This is Serena. Can you talk for a

diamond's not forever

second?"

Serena heard Raye sigh. "I know what time your school starts," the priestess said flatly. "You're late, Serena."

"Cut me some slack! The ball ended late last night." Serena growled and tied the bow on the front of her blouse. "Speaking of which, how'd I get home? The last thing I remember is being kissed."

"I carried you on my back. Next time you--what?" Raye stopped abruptly. "Did you just say 'kissed'?"

Serena stopped pulling on her shoes. "What was that?" she asked.

"Kissed." Raye's voice was surprised. "You said you remember being kissed."

Serena blinked. Had she said that? Thinking quickly, she realized she had said the last thing she remembered was a kiss. Why had she said that? She hadn't been kissed last night.

Wait a minute. Serena suddenly remembered the odd, fuzzy sensation of lips being pressed against hers. But that was impossible. That hadn't happened, had it?

"Serena?"

Serena wondered if it had been a dream. She tried to remember, but she couldn't recall anything more than that weird sensation. Lips. Familiar lips. A kiss that seemed familiar...

"Serena, are you still there?"

Serena suddenly realized she had forgotten Raye. "S-sorry," she mumbled, quickly busying her fingers with her shoes. "Um, forget that thing about the kiss, Raye. It may have been a dream or something. I hardly remember it."

"Are you sure?" Raye asked. "The last thing you want is to be kissed when you're not aware of it."

Serena switched the phone to her other shoulder and started separating her long hair into ponytails. "I'm sure, Raye. Come on--who would've randomly kissed me, anyway?"

She heard Raye let out a tentative breath. "Alright," the priestess said at last, "but don't ever fall asleep at a party again. You leave yourself open to danger when you do that."

Serena felt a smile curving her lips. "You're getting awfully protective of me, Raye," she drawled. "Does that mean you actually *like* me?"

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"Of course I'm protective. You're my leader and my friend, Serena. I care about you."

Serena felt the smile melt from her face. Something, something warm and soft, swirled around in her chest. Hearing Raye talk like that...

Serena carefully held the receiver with both hands. "Th-thank you, Raye," she said quietly. She swallowed. "Thanks for...saying that."

"I meant it. Now get moving before you break your own tardiness record. Good-bye."

Serena heard the phone click on the other end of the line, and then, after a moment, a dial tone droned in her ear. She slowly returned the receiver to the phone stand.

Raye could be pretty bossy--there was no doubting that. And sometimes Raye was rougher on Serena than she needed to be. But Raye really *did* care about Serena. When things came down to it, Serena knew she could count on Raye more than she could count on just about anyone.

Serena smiled. "Yeah, Raye," she whispered. "I care about you, too."

"Serena dear! School starts in two minutes!"

Mrs. Tsukino's voice snapped Serena back

to the present. The blonde yelped and quickly finished dressing. One minute and forty-five seconds later, Serena flew down the stairs with her backpack on.

Her mother stood by the door with Serena's lunch and a piece of toast. "Fourteen seconds left, Serena." Mrs. Tsukino raised an eyebrow. "Can you run the mile to school in that time?"

Serena grabbed the lunch, kissed her mother, and shoved the toast in her mouth. "Love you," she mumbled through the bread as she raced out the door. "See you after detention."

Ten seconds left. Serena checked her watch as she chewed toast and dashed down the sidewalk. Ms. Haruna was *really* going to get her this time. She'd probably give Serena another week of detention for daring to be late after fifty tardies.

Five seconds. Serena moaned as she watched the seconds tick by. She couldn't deal with another week of cleaning desks.

Bright red caught the corner of Serena's eye. The blonde turned her gaze, then slid to a dead halt. She took a deep breath. She didn't notice as the final seconds to the school bell clicked away on

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her watch, nor did she notice the toast fall from her mouth.

Molly sat on the sidewalk, her back against a building wall and her eyes blankly staring at nothing.

Nephrite stood in his abandoned mansion in Crossroads Woods. His holographic star chart was spread along the crumbling wall before him. "Aid me," he whispered as he raised a hand. The planets on the star map glittered. Slowly, they began to move in their orbits.

"Am I interrupting something?"

Nephrite growled. His spell broke, and the planets stopped moving and went back to their solid, standard glow. He turned.

Zoycite, her arms crossed, leaned against the wall behind him. She smiled. "Hello," she cooed.

"You." Nephrite's teeth glinted dangerously in the darkness. "Get out of here. Now."

Zoycite snorted. "I'll do no such thing," she shot back. "You're overstepping your boundaries, Nephrite, and I simply won't tolerate that any-

more."

"You have no say in what I do." He abruptly turned back to his star chart. "And whatever boundaries you've concocted in your inferior mind, I can assure you that I don't care if I overstep them."

"Ouch." Zoycite furrowed her eyebrows. "Aren't we cold today?"

Nephrite didn't face her. "I said to get out."

Zoycite leaned her head back and looked to the ceiling. "Well," she said in her normal drawl. "Let me tell you something, dear one. Queen Beryl's been snarling your name all day. After you failed to destroy the Sailor Scouts last night and didn't even bother to report back in, she's been rather upset with you." Her lips curled into a smirk. "And I wouldn't be surprised if she came into these accursed woods to get rid of you herself, you worthless failure."

Nephrite suddenly whipped around, his blue eyes blazing with fire. He glared daggers at the female general.

"Listen to me," he said through gritted teeth. "I know you think finding the Empyrium Silver

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Crystal is your job, but it's not. You're too incompetent and reckless to handle such a delicate assignment. I will find the crystal." He snarled. "And you had better stay out of my way."

Zoycite seemed amused by his anger. "Fine," she said, uncrossing her arms. "Go ahead and try to find the crystal. You'll fail, just like you always have, and Jedite's fate will be yours." Her green eyes glittered. "Or, with any luck, you'll end up worse than he did."

Nephrite gave Zoycite a final dark look before turning back to his chart. "Get out," he ordered. "I don't need you disturbing me."

Zoycite chuckled and snapped her fingers. She disappeared in a flurry of spiraling cherry blossom petals, leaving Nephrite to his silence once more.

Since school had been in session for twenty minutes by the time Serena lead the blank-eyed Molly into homeroom, the two girls spent detention together that day. Serena, knowing the detention routine, fetched the disinfectant bottles right after school and brought one to Molly.

HALL ROOM

"Here." Serena handed Molly a rag. "You'll need this, too. We have a half-hour detention, so Ms. Haruna'll expect all the desks to be washed."

Molly took the bottle and rag emotionlessly and walked to the first row of desks. Serena, a frown on her face, went to start on the other side of the room.

Serena didn't like the way Molly was acting. It was weird that the punctual Molly had been sitting on the sidewalk when she should've been in school. Molly claimed she'd been lost in thought, but Serena didn't like the look that had been on Molly's face. Not only that, but Molly had hardly spoken to anyone all day. It bothered Serena.

Serena sprayed a desk with her bottle. "Molly," she called as she ran her rag over the desk top. "Are you all right?"

Molly shrugged and didn't look up. The redhead silently ran her rag over the smooth wood.

"Come on, Molly. Why're you so upset?" Serena gave her desk another spray. "You're worse than you were yesterday. What've you been thinking about? You look depressed."

Molly shrugged again. "Maybe," she said

diamond's not forever

softly. "Maybe I *am* depressed."

Serena's eyebrows creased. "What is it, Molly?" she asked. "You can tell me. I am your best friend, right?"

A moment of silence passed, and then Molly sighed. "Serena," she began quietly, dropping her rag on the desk. "Have you ever been in love?"

Serena blinked. She hadn't been expecting Molly to say something like that. Still, she decided Molly saying *anything* was a good sign.

Ever been in love. Well, Serena had a crush on Andrew, but she wasn't sure that was love. Her mind strayed to Tuxedo Mask, but when she thought about him and love, pain started up deep inside of her. She quickly brushed off the thought.

"I dunno." Serena sucked at her teeth. "Maybe. Why?"

Molly took a moment before answering. "I know this guy," she said at last. "I don't know him that well, really, but I find myself caring for him. A lot. I've been getting feelings for him that I've never felt before."

Serena's rag lay on her own desk, forgotten. "Yes?"

Molly let out a breath. "But I've been having dreams about him lately. Dreams about him using me or hurting me. And the weird thing is, these dreams seem oddly real." She closed her eyes. "Like they're not dreams at all."

Serena felt her body go cold. That description: dreams of pain that seemed too real. Serena knew what that meant. They *hadn't* been dreams--they had been Negaverse attacks that Molly had woken up from. The redhead had been attacked by the Negaverse several times before.

No. No, no, no.

"I know he's too old for me. I know I hardly know him, and I know that bad dreams like that may be warnings that he and I wouldn't be right together." Molly swallowed. "But I don't know what to do, Serena. The more I try not to think about him, the more I do think about him. And just thinking about him makes my feelings grow stronger."

Serena covered her mouth. She turned away and clenched her fist so tightly she could see her knuckles turn white. She knew what Molly was going to say. And she had no idea what she was

diamond's not forever

going to do about it.

"I just don't know what to do, Serena."
Molly bit her lip. "I think I'm in love with Maxfield Stanton."



Chapter 6

Looking for Help

"No." Amy's eyes widened. "You're not serious."

"I wish." Serena buried her face in her hands. "Molly's gone on Nephrite, guys. She's totally, *totally* gone."

Raye stopped her sweeping. She looked over at Serena, her dark eyes serious. "I hope you talked her out of it," she said lowly. "We can't just let something like this pass."

Serena shrugged. "I tried," she answered, "but it was no good. She knows he's too old and he's not right for her. I even told her he'd done some really bad things." She shook her head. "But

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when it really comes down to it, all that stuff's no good. Molly knows she shouldn't pursue this love; she won't. But she can't help her feelings."

"And feelings are bad enough." Luna let out a breath and let her tail swish on the temple porch. "Simple affection for Nephrite may lead to dangerous situations. You were right to come to us about this, Serena."

Amy gripped her chin. "So it sounds like even if we *did* tell Molly that Maxfield Stanton really did attack her, it may not help matters much." She pursed her lips. "It doesn't seem like there's much we can do."

Serena sighed. She brushed a ponytail over her shoulder and stood up.

"I guess I just have to talk to her again." The blonde dug the toe of her shoe into the ground. "I know love's tough to talk people out of, but I have to give it a shot. I have to."

Raye nodded. "You're right," she agreed. "You have to try." She reached out and touched Serena's shoulder. "Good luck, Serena."

Serena swallowed. Molly was her best friend. Serena wasn't just going to watch Molly's

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heart get broken by an evil general's cruelty. Serena had to save Molly while there was still time.

But it wasn't going to be easy.

Serena rubbed the back of her neck. "Thanks, Raye," she murmured as she looked away. "I'm gonna need all the luck I can get."

It was early evening by the time Serena and Luna began their trip back from the Cherry Hill Temple. Serena was deep in thought, so Luna scurried home ahead of the Champion of Justice and left Serena to herself. Serena was glad for the silence.

What was she going to say? It wasn't like she could tell Molly to flip the love switch in her heart to OFF. Things didn't work like that. Unfortunately, Serena had never dealt with serious love issues before, so she wasn't sure what to do. The last thing she wanted was to end up hurting Molly even more.

Familiar beeping broke Serena's thoughts. She looked up, only to see she had come to the cheerful Crown Arcade. Andrew Foreman's care-free laughter drifted from the open double doors.

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Her heart tightened. She wished she could be that carefree now. Thinking she could get some stress relief and maybe even some good advice from the kind arcade manager, she walked through the doorway and into the familiar warmth of buzzing video game units. She let out a relieved breath. She already felt better.

Andrew stood on the far end of the arcade, helping a boy with a shooting game. At Serena's entrance, he looked up. He smiled brightly.

"Hey!" he called. "Serena! What are you doing here this time of day?"

Serena smiled and sat down on a stool. "I'm stuck in detention for just about the rest of my life, Andrew. I won't be here until the evening for a while."

Andrew laughed and walked over to her. "Then I guess I'll just have to be lonely until the evenings," he said as he rubbed her head affectionately. "What's up?"

Serena clasped her hands in her lap. "Actually," she said slowly, "I have a bit of a problem with one of my friends. It's kinda serious. Do you think you could help me?"

"What kind of serious, blondie?"

Serena jumped at the voice. Darien, a book in his hand, sat on a nearby stool. With his midnight hair and dark clothes, she hadn't noticed him in the shadow of a tall arcade unit. She swallowed as his ocean blue eyes focused on her.

Something suddenly fogged up Serena's head. Surprised, she found herself thinking about that odd kiss dream she had had the night before. Why was that coming to mind now? Not even sure why she did it, Serena looked at his lips.

That thing, deep inside, began to hurt.

Serena quickly shook her head. Not now! She didn't have time to think about the feelings Darien spurred in her, and she certainly didn't have time to think about that weird kiss dream. She had to help Molly.

"Look, Darien," Serena said flatly as she tried to calm the pounding of her heart. "If you're here to tease me again, I'm not in the mood. I wasn't kidding when I said the problem is serious."

"I didn't say it wasn't serious." Darien furrowed his eyebrows. "I just wanted to hear it."

Serena stopped. It almost sounded like

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Darien wanted to help. As she furiously fought the thundering in her chest, Andrew put a hand on her shoulder.

"Just say whatever's wrong," Andrew told her gently. He cocked his head. "I'll bet we can help you out."

Serena swallowed again. Nervously, she wiped her palms on her skirt and clutched the edge of her stool. This was for Molly. She had to concentrate on Molly.

"OK," Serena said at last. "A really good friend of mine is in love with the wrong guy."

Andrew frowned sympathetically. Darien averted his eyes. "Always a thing you hate to hear," the dark-haired teen said quietly.

Serena shook her head. "Even though she doesn't know how bad he really is, she still knows he's not right for her. The thing is, she can't get over her feelings." She looked up, a pleading look on her face. "Any suggestions?"

Andrew took a seat beside her. "Well," he said, "you could just give her a little time. She may get over it herself."

Serena bit her lip. She didn't know if she *had*

a little time.

"No." Darien's voice was flat. "Don't leave her. Something awful may happen if you leave her."

Andrew turned, surprised. "Are you sure?" he asked. "I mean, getting over strong feelings can be a very grueling personal matter, Darien. Maybe the girl needs time alone."

Darien narrowed his eyes. "Trust me," he said lowly. "You don't know what loneliness can do to people."

Darien's words chilled Serena. She remembered what Andrew had said about Darien living by himself. Darien, of all people, would know about facing things alone.

"Mmm." Andrew leaned against the arcade unit behind him. "Instead of advice, maybe you could just give her your support. You know--just show her that you care and that you'll always be there for her. If you need to conquer love, you can simply overpower it with stronger love, right?"

Serena thought about that for a second. "Yeah," she said slowly. "Yeah, you could be right. Maybe if I just showed her how much I care about

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her, it'd help her get over him."

Darien's lips curled into a small smile. "Good thinking, Andrew," he drawled. "I guess your charming philosophy of giving as much love as possible actually comes in handy every once in a while."

Andrew frowned. "Just because you're not a people person doesn't mean you have to make fun of me."

"Being your best friend gives me that right."

"Don't *start* with me, Darien."

"Andrew, it's just how I show you I care."

"A simple 'I care' would do."

"I couldn't say that. I'm not a people person, remember?"

Serena smiled as she watched Andrew and Darien's mild bickering. She felt a lot better. Their advice really sounded like it would work.

"Thanks for the help," she said, but Andrew was too busy getting frustrated with his best friend to hear her. Darien, however, caught her gaze for a brief instant.

His ocean-blue eyes glittered in reply.

It had taken hours of concentration, but by that evening Nephrite had completed his task. A thin black crystal, empowered by the aligned planets on his star chart, had become a tracking device for the Empyrium Silver Crystal.

"Excellent." He palmed the crystal. "It took all of my skills to create this, but it will be worth it. Now there's no way I can fail."

The black crystal shimmered with a strange light. Nephrite held the crystal up and looked to his holographic star map.

"Great Stars," he called. "The powers of the universe flow in this crystal. Help it lead me to my goal."

The stars on the map twinkled. Slowly, the black crystal began to emit a blue light. The light formed into a small hologram of a familiar girl.

Nephrite's eyebrows rose. "That child Molly?" he said, surprised. "What does she have to do with the secret of the Silver Crystal?"

Outside the mansion, Zoycite smirked. She turned from the window.

"Looks like Nephrite's made himself a little

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trinket," she murmured. "That boy certainly does have a few tricks up his sleeve."

Her tall companion smiled slightly. He was dressed in the same general's uniform as Zoycite and Nephrite, though his collar was opened, revealing a muscular neck. A heavy cape lay draped over his shoulders. He brushed a strand of snow white, shoulder-length hair behind his ear and focused intelligent ice blue eyes on Zoycite.

"Nephrite's a magician, all right." His voice was deep and cultured. "But when you take away magicians' illusions, they're left with nothing."

Zoycite licked her lips in anticipation. "Let's get that crystal, Malachite," she said. "I'm sure it'll work for anyone now that he gave it such power. Once we get rid of him, we'll be able to find the Silver Crystal easily!"

"Then don't hesitate to implement the plan, love."

Zoycite turned her head to the empty air behind her. "Yasha," she ordered. "Come here."

A small, huddled woman with a porcelain mask appeared at the female general's command. The woman, wrapped in a thick white robe, bowed.

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"Yes, master?" Yasha asked in a high, feminine voice.

Zoycite pointed to the window. "I want you to follow Nephrite. If he manages to find the Silver Crystal, come back and tell us immediately. If not, get rid of him and bring us back his Black Crystal."

Yasha nodded. "Of course," she answered politely, before vanishing into thin air.



Chapter 7

Doomed Meeting

Serena went to Molly's place after the arcade. The sun was dipping behind the horizon as Serena walked up to the apartment door and read the nameplate.

BAKER. MOLLY AND SUSAN.

Serena took a deep breath. She didn't think she should give Molly a major talk today. They had already had a long discussion in detention, and Serena was afraid she might strain Molly's feelings if she tried too hard.

Serena pressed the doorbell. There were some mild scuffling sounds from inside the apartment, followed by the sound of clicking locks. The

door opened. Molly blinked.

"Serena," Molly said, surprised. "What are you doing here?"

Serena took Molly's hands. "Molly," she began, "look. I know we talked about this today, but I just wanted to tell you one last thing. About Neph--Maxfield. A-about Maxfield."

Molly wilted. She turned away.

"I know," the redhead said softly. "I thought about it more today, and I've decided that I have to forget about him. I *want* to forget about him." She sighed. "And I will. Eventually."

"I know you will, Molly. I know." Serena squeezed Molly's hands and gazed at her friend. "But I wanted you to know that I'll be there for you, OK? You're my best friend. I won't leave you alone with this. I love you as much as any friend's ever loved another."

Molly inhaled deeply. "S-Serena," she whispered, her eyes glazing over. "You really mean that?"

Serena quickly threw her arms around Molly and hugged tightly. "Just know that I'm here, Molly." Serena fought the tears she felt welling up.

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"If you need any caring to flush out your feelings for Maxfield, I'm here for you. Forever."

Molly sniffled. Slowly, she hugged Serena back. "Oh, Serena," Molly mumbled. She sighed as a tear broke from her eye and rolled down her cheek. "Serena, that means so much. You're the best friend I've ever had."

Serena felt something inside of her lift. She and Molly could get over Nephrite together. After all, no man could withstand the power of two girls who had been best friends since kindergarten. Their love was stronger than Molly's love for Nephrite.

Serena held Molly at arm's length and smiled sadly. "Don't worry too much tonight," she told her friend. "You've been thinking about Ne--Maxfield a lot today. Give yourself a break."

Molly rubbed the tear from her face. "You're probably right," she agreed softly. "I'll do something to take my mind off him. Read a book or something." She smiled and bit her lip. "Thanks for coming, Serena. I feel much better."

Serena gave Molly one quick final hug. "Forget it. That's what friends are for." She grinned

nervously. "I'd better go, though. I've been out for hours, and I want my family to know I'm alive and well."

Molly giggled. The phone rang from inside her apartment, and, after the brief moment of silence when her mother picked up the receiver, Mrs. Baker's voice came from the kitchen.

"Molly!" she called. "It's for you!"

Serena waved and began her walk back down the apartment hallway. Molly waved back, then closed her door and picked up the nearest phone.

"I got it," she called before putting the receiver to her ear. "Hello? Molly speaking."

The voice that came from the other line was deep and low. "Hello, Molly," it said quietly. "I have to talk to you."

Molly sucked in a breath. She covered her mouth.

"M-Maxfield?" she whispered in disbelief. "Is that you?"

Twenty minutes later, Molly walked through Crossroads Park. It was starting to get

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dark, and she continuously glanced at the deepening shadows and checked her watch.

"Ten minutes," she said to herself. "That's all. I told mom I'd be back soon, so all he's getting is ten minutes."

Molly brushed a strand of hair behind her ear nervously. Nephrite had told her over the phone that he had an emergency on his hands, and that he wanted to speak to her briefly before he went to deal with it. He had said he might never come back. Molly, although obviously hesitant to come, had agreed that she would meet with him for a few minutes--before it got very dark.

She eventually came to the decided bench and found Nephrite waiting for her. He stood at her approach and smiled grimly.

"Hello, Molly." He reached out a hand toward her. "Thank you for coming."

Molly looked at his offered hand, then shook her head. "Maxfield," she said, averting her eyes, "I know we've talked a few times, but we're really not that close. Why did you call me here?"

Nephrite let out a breath. He sat once more, motioning Molly to do the same. Molly slowly

complied.

It was a moment before Nephrite spoke. "As I told you," he said at last, "I'm going to go away for a little while. I'm leaving tonight, and I may never return to Crossroads again." He turned to her. "I just wanted to see you one last time."

Molly swallowed. "Maxfield," she began, "I really can't see you anymo--"

"I care for you, Molly." Maxfield was suddenly very close, his eyelids half-lowered. "I know we don't know each other well," he said, taking her hand, "but I really find myself thinking about you all the time."

Molly sucked in a breath. She shakily pulled away and moved farther down the bench from him.

"M-Maxfield," she said as she trembled, "I-I don't think this is right."

Nephrite's dark blue eyes focused on her. "Don't worry, Molly," he murmured, moving close to her again. "I won't hurt you."

Nephrite's fist moved along the park bench. The glint of his dark crystal flashed from between his closed fingers.

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Serena stopped at the arcade briefly on her way home. Darien had already left, but she found Andrew and told him what she had done. He seemed pleased with her visit to Molly's.

"I'm sure she's much more confident now," he said, patting Serena on the back. "That was really good of you to go, Serena. You're a great friend."

Serena smiled. Andrew was always so encouraging. After chatting with him for a bit about less stressful matters, she left the arcade to go home at last. Luna was outside, sitting on the sidewalk and waiting patiently.

Serena blinked. "Luna?" she asked. "What are you doing here?"

Luna got to her feet and made a kitty shrug. "No matter what's going on," she said simply, "if I need to find you, I know you're always at the arcade." The cat jumped on Serena's shoulder. "I wanted to see what you've been doing all afternoon. Did you talk to Molly?"

Serena nodded and started to walk in the direction of her house. "Yeah. Andrew and Darien suggested I just give her some friendly support, so I did. She really seemed to appreciate it."

Luna raised her eyebrows. "Darien?" she murmured. "I thought you hated him."

Serena scowled. "I *do* hate him, Luna. But he's still smart. And he sometimes gives really...good advice." Serena's mind drifted back to the modeling contest, and the way Darien had persuaded her to not enter. She swallowed. Her heart thudded when she thought back on it.

The Crossroads Park loomed ahead. Serena's eyes absently ran over the park benches as she let her mind wander, a relaxed smile on her face. Her gaze suddenly stopped. She froze dead in her tracks.

Luna made a surprised noise as she nearly fell from Serena's stiff shoulder. "Serena," she said, scrambling to regain her sitting position. "Why did you stop so suddenly?"

Serena's jaw dropped. Unable to do more than stare, she pointed to a bench just over fifty feet ahead of them where Molly and Nephrite sat side by side.

Molly finally stood up from the bench and stepped away. Trembling, she shook her head.

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"Maxfield," she said, holding out her hands, "please don't do this. We're not...we're not right for each other. Our ages are too far apart, we haven't spent much time togeth--"

Nephrite's hard gaze cut her off. Without taking his eyes from her, he stood and walked right up to the redhead. Molly's mouth opened, but her protest died in her throat.

"I want to know more about you, Molly." Nephrite's deep voice was lined with something urgent. "You have a secret that I must know. I have to find out what's so important about you." He opened his palm to reveal his Black Crystal. Molly watched, surprised, as the crystal lit up with a blue light when he held it near her.

Molly swallowed. "Maxfield," she whispered, worried. "What is that? Why's it lighting up?"

But Nephrite only gripped her chin in his hand and tilted her head up. She stared up at him in shock. His dark gaze searched her carefully, running over every contour of her face.

"Strange," Nephrite murmured, something odd crawling through his eyes. "There's something

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about you I can't place. But what? What is it?"

Molly's lips moved, but no sound came out. He gripped her chin more tightly.

"Don't *touch* her, creep!"

Molly and Nephrite both snapped out of their daze. They turned to the voice.

Sailor Moon stood in the light of a nearby lamppost, Luna by her feet. The Champion of Justice scowled and gripped the jewel on her tiara.

"Molly," Serena ordered. "Step away from that man. He intends to hurt you!"

Molly sucked in a breath. She turned to Nephrite. "Hurt me?" she repeated. "Are you--"

"He's not who you think! Molly, that man's real name is Nephrite, and he works for the forces of evil!"

Molly stared at Nephrite, shock written across her face. "Maxfield?" she asked. "Is that *true*?"

Nephrite's eyes narrowed. Slowly, he pushed Molly away.

"Sailor Moon," he called, raising a hand. A ball of black energy formed in his palm. He scowled darkly. "Prepare to meet your end."



Chapter 8

Just Whose Side Are You On?

Nephrite released his attack at Serena. Serena dove as the black energy blast zoomed by where she had been standing, leaving a trail of sparks behind it. The energy crashed into the pavement and sent chips of cement scattering through the air.

Serena clenched her teeth. She could clearly see Molly's horrified expression. After trying so hard to make Molly feel better, something like *this* had to happen. Knowing you were falling in love with the wrong man was one thing--finding out he was a super-villain was much worse.

Serena didn't have much time to think

about it as Nephrite shot another black blast at her. She ducked, and it barely whizzed over her head.

"You need to do an offensive, Sailor Moon!" Luna shouted. "The other Scouts are on their way, but they may not get here in time!"

Serena gripped her tiara. "If I can get an offensive in," she snapped. "He's too fast!"

A holographic star chart suddenly lit up behind Nephrite. Closing his eyes, he raised a hand into the air.

"Great Stars," he called. "STARLIGHT ATTACK!"

The stars on the holographic map glowed. Serena sucked in a breath as the stars suddenly shot speeding bullets of light at her. She cried out and fell flat to the ground.

"MERCURY BUBBLES BLAST!"

Thick bubbles fogged up the air. Nephrite, surprised, abruptly opened his eyes. His star chart vanished behind him.

Sailor Mercury ran to Serena and helped her up. "Sailor Mars!" Amy yelled. "The chart's disappeared! Hit him now before he can form a new attack!"

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"Right." Raye emerged from the fog. Spreading her feet, she clasped her hands together. "MARS FIRE..." she called. Flames started up around her fingers, and she released them at the general. "IGNITE!"

Fire roared through the air. Nephrite barely dodged the attack, and the sudden movement threw off his balance and sent him crashing to the ground. He cursed.

"Sailor brats," he muttered, wiping his bruised cheek. He began to get to his feet. "I won't be defeated so easi--"

A hand gripped the fabric of his sleeve. He turned. Molly, her eyes wide, held him back.

"I can't believe this." Her voice was barely a whisper. "Maxfield, I can't believe this. H-how can this be? How?"

"What's the matter with you?" Nephrite pulled from her grip and pointed angrily away. "You heard the Sailor girl--I'm not Maxfield Stanton, I'm your enemy. Get out while you have the chance."

Molly sniffled. Tears filled her eyes. "So all those things you said," she mumbled. "They were

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all lies. I-I knew we weren't right for each other, but I didn't know you were lying the whole time."

"Get over it!" Nephrite shouted. "I was never interested in you, I was interested in how you were linked to my goal. Stay out of this fight!" He shoved her away. "Go!"

Molly whipped to him, her fists clenched. She gritted her teeth. "If I hold some secret to your goal," she cried, "then why are you letting me get away?!"

"MOON TIARA ACTION!"

Nephrite couldn't answer as Serena's voice rang through the park. He turned, but Serena's tiara was already cutting through the night air toward him. He stumbled back.

Molly ran in front of him. Holding her arms out, she shouted, "Don't hurt him!"

Serena gasped. Her tiara's course headed straight for Molly's heart! "NO!" Serena screamed, reaching out desperately. "Tiara, stop! *STOP!*"

The tiara didn't even slow down. Serena grabbed her head and shrieked with all her might. "STOP!"

The tiara froze just before touching Molly's

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chest. The headband fell to the ground, clattering against the pavement as its golden glow faded away.

Serena dropped to her knees. She had almost destroyed her best friend! She fought tears as her heart hammered against her ribcage. If she had hurt Molly, she never would've forgiven herself.

Raye stepped forward. "Molly," she called. "Get away from him. He's dangerous."

Molly shook her head furiously. "I won't move!" she cried. Glittering tears spilled down her cheeks. "You want to destroy him, and I won't let you!"

Nephrite's eyes were wide. "Molly," he whispered unbelievably. "Wh-what are you doing?"

Serena shakily got to her feet. "Please," she begged. "Molly, don't do this!"

Molly sniffled. "I love Maxfield," she said, voice trembling. "Whether or not he loves me back isn't important. I won't let you destroy him because I know he's not evil deep down!"

Nephrite's mouth opened. "M-Molly," he managed after a moment. "What--"

"He's not evil!" Molly shouted, as much to Nephrite as to the Scouts. "I know it. So I won't let you destroy him!"

Nephrite's Black Crystal lit up with blue light. The general held the jewel up to examine it.

"Again," he whispered. "It's reacting to her again." A thought seemed to strike him, and he sucked in a breath. "Wait," he said quickly. "Could it be...reacting to her love?"

A feminine humming drifted through the air. Serena, surprised, looked around for the source. She spotted a woman squatting behind a bush.

"What?" Serena took a step back. "Who are you?"

The hunched woman slowly raised her head. Her porcelain mask gleamed in the moonlight. "Is that the Silver Crystal, Nephrite?" she asked in her high voice. "Have you found it for old Yasha?"

Nephrite stiffened. "Who sent you?" he asked darkly. His hands closed into fists.

Yasha chuckled. "Don't worry about that," she told him. "You have plenty of worse things to

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worry about right now."

In half an instant Yasha had shot forward and slammed into Nephrite. Molly screamed as Yasha grabbed the Black Crystal, shoved Nephrite to the ground, and jumped out of his reach. The demon hummed and held the jewel up triumphantly.

"You're slow," she cooed. "And here I'd thought you might actually cause some trouble."

Luna ran to Serena. "Get ready!" the cat ordered. "That woman must be from the Negaverse!"

Serena shook her head frantically. "My tiara's in front of Nephrite," she exclaimed. "I don't have anything to attack with!"

Yasha, meanwhile, examined the crystal in her hand. She snorted. "No," she said, tossing the long jewel back to Nephrite. "This isn't the Silver Crystal. You're a failure, just like the mistress said."

Nephrite snarled and fought his way to his feet. "You're one of Zoycite's servants," he said, abruptly raising a palm. "Tell that witch she'll never get the Silver Crystal!"

Nephrite shot an energy blast at Yasha. She

jumped out of the way, but the blast smashed into the edge of her mask. The porcelain shattered and fell from her face.

Molly gasped. Yasha was a monster! Under the mask she had beady black eyes, a cruel, crooked mouth, and tiny horns that protruded from her forehead. Yasha growled and touched her horns.

"You destroyed my mask," she said lowly. Her voice had become deep and dark. "No one *dares* destroy the mask I must wear. I'll destroy you!"

Raye spread her feet and clasped her hands together. "MARS FIRE..."

But Yasha was too fast. With a roar, the monster flew toward Nephrite, her fingernails shooting out to become long, sharp claws. Molly was in Yasha's way. As if everything were in slow motion, Serena watched as Yasha raised her claws to get rid of Molly first.

"NO!" Serena screamed and ran forward. "MOLLY!"

Nephrite's hand clamped down over Molly's arm. Eyes burning, he threw her aside and

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blasted Yasha back. Yasha shrieked as she was blown down the sidewalk.

Serena froze.

Molly, sprawled on the concrete, sucked in deep breaths. She weakly lifted her head. Nephrite gazed down at her, his expression unreadable.

"Y-you protected me." Molly bit her lip. Tears brimmed in her eyes once more. "Maxfield," she whispered. "You saved my life."

Nephrite looked away. Molly took a long, shuddering breath, then passed out.

Serena couldn't move. Nephrite had *defended* Molly! Not only that, but there was now an odd passion in his cold features, and as he turned back to Yasha, Serena saw fire deep behind his pupils.

"How dare you." Nephrite glared at the struggling Yasha. The star chart lit up behind him, its tiny stars glowing brightly. "How *dare* you."

"Cursed Nephrite," Yasha said with a growl as she got to her feet. "You would put yourself in danger to save a stupid--"

"How DARE you!" Nephrite's eyes blazed. He raised his palm. "STARLIGHT ATTACK!"

The holographic stars shot out hundreds of

bullets of light at the demon. Yasha screamed as the shots hit her body and filled her with their brightness.

"No!" she shrieked. "No, Nephrite will not--" Her cries were cut off as she burst into dust. She sprinkled along the evening sidewalk, leaving the park to a sudden, deafening silence.

For a long moment, Serena could hear nothing but the pounding of her own heart. She watched as Nephrite rested his gaze on the unconscious Molly. Something tugged at the edges of his features, but Serena wasn't sure what it was.

Nephrite abruptly turned and walked away. Serena reached out blindly and blurted, "Wait!"

Nephrite stopped. Serena took a step forward. "Nephrite," she said. "You saved Molly's life."

Nephrite didn't answer. Amy clenched her fists.

"You destroyed another member of your forces," the blue-haired girl called. "Why would you--"

"That's none of your business." Nephrite's voice was sharp.

Raye narrowed her eyes. "She said she loved

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you," the priestess said lowly. "She stepped in front of the tiara when she knew it could have destroyed her. Doesn't that mean anything to you?"

Nephrite looked back at the Scouts and growled. "Shut your mouths," he snapped. "What I do and what my motives are aren't your business. And let me tell you something." He scowled. "You don't know *anything* until you've seen the true fury of the Negaverse. And once it gets its hands on the Empyrium Silver Crystal, you'll be powerless to stop it."

Once again, silence. Nephrite let out a breath angrily and picked up his Black Crystal. He slipped it in his pocket.

"Nephrite." Serena closed a hand over her chest. "She said she knew you weren't evil."

Nephrite paused. "Maybe that's what *she* believes," he said at last, "but that only makes one of us." With that, he walked away, his outline quickly fading in the coming night.



Chapter 9

Corrupt Confrontation

Molly didn't show up for school the next day. As soon as Serena got out of her long detention, she found a pay phone and dialed her best friend's number.

What was she going to do? She and the other Scouts had brought Molly home the night before, where they'd left the redhead in the hands of a shocked Mrs. Baker. Serena had desperately wanted to leave Molly a note saying she was Sailor Moon and that she would help Molly through this, but Luna had strictly told Serena she couldn't. If Serena was going to console Molly, she had to pretend she didn't know Maxfield Stanton was a gen-

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eral of the Negaverse.

But the events of the previous night kept replaying in Serena's head. Molly had saved Nephrite's life. Nephrite had saved Molly's life. Molly had seemed determined to prove that Nephrite wasn't evil, and yet Nephrite didn't seem to be moved from his quest. As long as Nephrite was after the Empyrium Silver Crystal, Molly was still in danger.

The Silver Crystal. Serena swallowed. Luna had told Serena the Empyrium Silver Crystal was a gem from the moon that had almost limitless power. Luna didn't remember much about the crystal, except that the Scouts could use it to destroy the Negaverse--but the Negaverse could use it to take over the world. So now the Scouts had three jobs: fight the Negaverse, find the Moon Princess, and get the Empyrium Silver Crystal. Serena had no idea how she and the other Scouts could manage all of that.

After the fifth ring, Serena slowly hung up the phone. She had the feeling Molly was home, but she wasn't sure if she should try paying Molly a visit or not.

"She may need a little time alone."

Serena blinked as her thoughts broke. She turned to see Luna sitting on the sidewalk. She sighed.

"I dunno," Serena said, frowning. "She's been alone all day. I doubt she told her mother what was going on."

Luna shrugged. "If she isn't picking up, she's probably not ready to talk. I suggest you just go home and wait. You can try again later."

Serena scratched the back of her neck. "I guess so," she said, "although I hate the thought of her being by herself with so much pain."

Luna jumped onto Serena's shoulder. "Give *yourself* a little break," the cat said, licking Serena's cheek lightly. "You look frazzled. You need some time to give your mind a rest."

"I don't have a lot of time to spare with Nephrite out and on the loose." Serena checked her watch. "One hour," she said. "I'll call her back in one hour."

Luna nodded. "That's a good plan," the cat agreed. "I truly doubt something dramatic will happen in just an hour."

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Serena brushed a strand of hair behind her ear. She really hoped Luna was right.

The interior of the abandoned mansion was dark. Nephrite, his fists clenched, stared at the holographic star chart on the wall. It didn't seem to show him what he was looking for. He scowled and turned his head.

"Why?" he asked coldly. "Why can't I figure out the Silver Crystal's location? Why can't I figure out what's going on with her?"

The Black Crystal in his hand glowed blue at the mention of Molly. Nephrite angrily shoved the crystal in his pocket.

"I have to find Sailor Moon," he said, looking through the broken stained-glass window in the wall. "She acted very familiar with Molly. If I can get Molly to reveal Sailor Moon's identity, I can get rid of the Sailor brat and have plenty of opportunity to find out how Molly relates to the Silver Crystal."

The Black Crystal grew warm in his pocket. Slowly, he pulled the long, thin jewel out. It immediately created a hologram of a sad-looking Molly

curled up on her bed.

Something crawled through Nephrite's eyes as he watched the virtual Molly hug herself and sob. His lips parted slightly. Again, some emotion tugged at the edges of his features.

Nephrite abruptly looked away and growled. He closed his fist over the crystal, and the hologram vanished.

"This has to stop," he muttered as he slipped the jewel back in his pocket. "I need to find out what Molly's connection is soon. I don't know how much longer I can tolerate feeling like this."

In the thick shadows of the room, Zoycite leaned against the wall. She touched her lips and smiled wickedly.

Molly, lying on her bed, hugged her biggest pillow close. Trails of former tears streaked her cheeks. She bit down on her pillow and swallowed.

"I don't know what to do," she mumbled as her eyes grew glassy. "I-I just don't know what to do. This all hurts so much, and I don't know what to do..."

There was a sound from her balcony. Molly

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looked up, then gasped. She shot up in bed.

Nephrite stood behind the sliding glass door.

For a long moment, the two only stared at each other--Molly's gaze was shocked, while Nephrite's was dark. Molly finally seemed to get a hold of her thoughts, and she jumped out of bed.

"No." Nephrite's voice was somewhat muffled through the glass. He shook his head. "Don't get up, Molly."

Molly froze. After a second, she whispered, "What are you doing here?"

Nephrite sighed. Slowly, he turned his head away. His fist closed by his side.

"You've opened my eyes, Molly." His voice was quiet. "Did you really mean what you said? About you loving me?"

Molly gripped her shirt over her heart. "I-I think I fell in love with you the first time I saw you," she answered shakily. "It was a feeling that grew inside me each time I thought about it. I knew we weren't right for each other, b-but I couldn't let the Sailor Scouts destroy you. I know you're not evil, Maxfield." She bit her lip. "Tell me there's com-

passion in your heart."

"Stop calling me Maxfield." Nephrite turned an unreadable gaze to her. "That's not my name. I lied to you, and I'm through with lies."

Molly opened her mouth as if to speak, then closed it again.

Nephrite brushed long brown locks from his face. "My name is Nephrite," he began. "I work for a force that attacks the innocents of Crossroads. I took the persona of Maxfield Stanton so I could move freely about the community and attack as I so wished.

"I've worked for this force for as long as I can remember. My entire life, all I could ever recall was darkness and evil. But I'm ready to leave it all behind." Nephrite pressed his hand against the glass. "You taught me there's more to life than that, Molly. You taught me there's love."

Molly gasped. "Maxfield!" she exclaimed. "I-I mean, Nephrite. I *knew* you had it in you!" She ran to him. "I *knew* you weren't a bad person!"

"I need Sailor Moon."

Molly slid to a halt. "What?" she asked, surprised.

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Nephrite let out a breath. "I want to start fighting *against* the forces of evil," he said. "They've enslaved me for too long, and I want to stop their practices once and for all. But I need Sailor Moon's help. Do you know her true identity?"

Molly swallowed. "Sailor Moon," she repeated. "I-I don't know who she truly is. Isn't there any other way I can help you?"

Nephrite stared downwards. "You don't believe me," he murmured softly.

Molly violently shook her head. "No!" she cried as tears started up in her eyes. "No, I believe you, Nephrite! I just don't know her identity. Please, tell me something else I can do!"

Nephrite shrugged, defeated. "There's nothing," he said stonily. "Good-bye." He turned away, snapped his fingers, and disappeared.

Molly fell to the floor. "No!" she shouted. "Nephrite, no! Please believe me! I want to help you!" She broke down crying, her body curling up against the carpet. Her hands weakly clutched the soft carpeting. "Nephrite..."

Nephrite hovered just below her balcony, out of her line of vision but within clear hearing

range. At the sound of her pitiful sobs, he crossed his arms.

"She'll lead me right to Sailor Moon," he said under his breath. He looked out at the afternoon sky, and the sun reflected darkly in his cold blue eyes. "Now it's only a matter of time."

From the building across the street, Zoycite watched Nephrite's encounter with Molly. The female general smiled wickedly.

"He seems interested in that girl, mistress."

Zoycite smiled at the voice. "More than interested, my girls," she drawled. "I would call the man thoroughly infatuated."

The three female demons behind Zoycite--tall women in skintight suits of yellow, aqua and green with elaborate boots and wrist guards--nodded respectfully. The demon in yellow spoke up.

"Shall we attack him now?" she asked. "Floating under the balcony like that, I'm sure he doesn't know we're here."

Zoycite gripped her chin. "No," she answered after a moment. "As much of an idiot as Nephrite is, he's still very powerful. He wasn't

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made head general just for that charming personality of his."

"Then what shall we do, Mistress?"

Zoycite ran her tongue over her teeth and smiled evilly. "Kidnap the girl," she answered. "If he has to worry about her safety, he'll have less attention to focus on us. And then we can crush him."

The three demons, known as the Delta Girls, chuckled. "Brilliant as always, mistress Zoycite," the yellow Delta Girl said.

"Yes." Zoycite's eyes glittered. "As always."



Chapter 10

Lost Identity

Serena was just stepping in the house when the phone rang. "I'm home!" she called, picking up the nearest phone receiver. "And I got it!" She put the receiver to her ear. "Hello?"

"Serena?"

Serena froze. Molly! Serena hadn't expected to hear from the redhead so fast. Serena noticed that Luna was looking at her quizzically, so the blonde mouthed Molly's name and pointed to the phone.

Serena once again focused her attention on the call. "Molly," she said. "You're home. I just tried calling you. Are you all right?"

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Serena heard Molly choke back a sob. "Oh, Serena," Molly answered sadly. "I'm afraid Maxfield's gonna leave me forever if I can't help him."

Serena immediately went on her guard. A trap. Nephrite was leading Molly into a trap. That creep! Using Molly's feelings in order to get something out of her! But what did he want? Serena wasn't sure why Nephrite would be after a civilian like Molly.

"Look," Serena said quickly, gripping the phone with both hands. "I'm coming over, OK? You can explain everything to me when I get to your house. Just calm down."

Molly sniffled. "But, Serena--"

"No buts! I'm on my way. Just stay put and don't believe a word he says!" Serena slammed down the phone before Molly could argue. Gesturing for Luna to follow, Serena bolted out her front door, shouting, "I'll be at Molly's!"

Mrs. Tsukino walked out of the kitchen just as Serena flew out of the house. "Bye, dear!" the woman called after the dashing blonde. Serena didn't hear her.

Mrs. Tsukino sighed. "I practically never see that girl anymore," she murmured, tapping her baking spoon against her palm. "It's like she's leading a totally separate life outside of this house."

Sammy, Serena's little brother, snorted from inside the kitchen. "Come on, Mom," he called. "Serena can't walk in a straight line for more than two feet. What do you think she is in her second life, a super-hero?"

Mrs. Tsukino frowned. "No," she answered sadly. "I suppose that is pretty ridiculous, isn't it?"

Serena ran as fast as her legs could carry her. She had to get to Molly before the redhead did something foolish. It wasn't only Serena's duty as Sailor Moon, it was her duty as a friend. Serena would risk her life if it meant protecting Molly from Nephrite's evil clutches.

"I'll go ahead and see what's going on," Luna called from running by Serena's feet. "Join me as quickly as you can. I've got a bad feeling about all of this." The cat picked up her pace and quickly vanished down the sidewalk.

"A bad feeling," Serena murmured. "That

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makes two of us, Luna." Serena tried to focus all her attention on Molly, but it was difficult; even though she ran down a deserted road, she had the terrible sensation that she was being watched.

The sidewalk suddenly swam in front of her eyes. Serena gasped and slid to a halt. Not only the sidewalks, but the road, the buildings, and the parked cars began to wobble and swirl in her vision. She blinked to try and clear her sight, but it didn't help at all. She fought to keep her balance.

"What?" she exclaimed, covering her eyes. She gritted her teeth and tried not to get sick. "Who's doing this to me? Show yourself!"

No answer. Serena angrily threw her hand in the air. "Enough of this!" she shouted. "MOON PRISM POWER MAKE-UP!"

Rainbow power wrapped around her and melted her school uniform down into her Sailor Moon outfit. When her transformation lights cleared, she tentatively opened her eyes. The sidewalks had stopped spinning.

She didn't like this. Somebody must have cast a spell on her to make her vision spin. But who? There was nobody nearby. She clenched her

fists and carefully let her gaze sweep across her surroundings.

"I'm up here."

Serena's head jerked up. She sucked in a breath as she saw Nephrite, arms crossed, floating before her.

"You!" she yelled. "What are *you* doing here?"

"Finding out your identity, Sailor Moon." His eyes narrowed. "Or should I say Serena?"

Serena's heart stopped dead in her chest. "Wh-what?" she asked, her voice practically a croak.

"Don't act so surprised." Nephrite slowly lowered to the ground. His boots clicked on the pavement. "I asked that girl Molly if she knew who Sailor Moon was, and you were the first person she called. That girl's more than proven her usefulness."

Serena felt something cold slide through her body. She ground her teeth together. This monster! Using Molly the way he did! Talking about her the way he did, after she had risked her life for him and said she loved him! Serena suddenly didn't care that Nephrite knew her identity. All she cared about was teaching him a lesson once and for all!

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"That's it, Nephrite!" Serena ripped the tiara from her forehead and prepared for her throw. "This has gone on for too long! I won't stand your treatment of Molly for another second!"

Nephrite abruptly shot a blast of black energy at her. Serena was forced to roll out of the way before she could throw her tiara. When she got back to her feet and prepared to attack, she had to dive as Nephrite shot at her once more.

Nephrite scowled. "Go ahead and dodge all you want," he challenged. "It's only a matter of moments before I finally get rid of yo--" He stopped suddenly. Frowning, he turned, as if he heard something far behind him.

Serena saw her chance. While he was distracted, she threw her tiara.

"MOON TIARA ACTION!"

Nephrite whipped back to her and jumped. The golden discus zoomed harmlessly beneath his boot soles as he hovered in the air. He stared coldly down at the Champion of Justice.

"I feel there's something else I must attend to." He furrowed his eyebrows. "I'll have to deal with you later. Not that it matters--now that I know

your identity, I can attack whenever I wish. See you soon, Sailor Moon." He snapped his fingers and was gone.

Serena fell to her knees, panting. This was *really* bad. Could things possibly get any worse? Nephrite knew her identity, he had easily dodged her tiara, and she still hadn't gotten to Molly. Could she even go now? She didn't want to visit Molly if it would put Molly in danger. Come to think of it, Serena didn't want to go near anyone she was close to. Nephrite might want to take a hostage for the next fight he had with her.

Serena swallowed. *Bad*. Through the raging worries that rang in her head, she found herself wondering what had made Nephrite leave so suddenly. That, at least, she hoped was Nephrite's problem and not hers.

By scampering up numerous fire escapes, Luna had managed to get to Molly's balcony. The cat ran to the sliding glass door and looked in on Molly's room.

The room was empty. The bed was slightly disheveled, as if someone had been lying on it, and

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a small note rested on the pillow. Luna squinted her eyes and read the scrawled handwriting. She took a deep breath.

"No." She stepped back from the glass. "Not this. Not *now*. Oh, this is awful!" Biting her lip, the cat made her way back down to street level. "I have to tell the girls," she declared as she flew down the sidewalk. "They have to know right away!"

A moment later, Nephrite appeared on Molly's balcony. He didn't hesitate to slide open the door and walk into the room. He looked around, confused.

"Where did she go?" he murmured to himself. "She was here a little while ago." His eyes fell on the note. He picked it up.

His expression immediately went dark. His mouth tightened into a thin line. "I have Molly," he read. "Meet me at midnight tonight in the abandoned warehouse on Park Street. Give me the Black Crystal if you want to see the girl again."

Nephrite stared at the note for a long moment. Finally, he snarled. Black fire burst from his hand and engulfed the note in one savage swallow.

"Zoycite." He practically spat out the word.

"End your games. Keep playing with me, and you'll soon found out who will be the victor."

The ashes of the note settled in his hand. He dumped them on the floor and looked to Molly's wrinkled bed sheets.

That odd something glimmered in his eyes again. "The calling I felt," he said. "It must have been Molly. She must have tried to call me when she was taken."

Nephrite was silent for a full minute. His gaze didn't stray from Molly's disheveled bed, nor from the crumpled, tear-soaked pillow she had left behind.

He clenched his fists. Closing his eyes, he abruptly disappeared.



Chapter 11

Rescue

After Luna told the Scouts about the ransom note, Serena immediately went to Molly's house and told Mrs. Baker that Molly planned to sleep over at Serena's that night. Mrs. Baker seemed surprised that Molly had managed to sneak out of the house without her noticing, but she gave her approval for the sleepover, saying the time out of the house would be good for Molly. Serena left just the slightest bit relieved.

"At least her mother won't worry about her now." Serena leaned against the side of Molly's apartment building and rubbed an eye. "But that's not saying much for our overall situation."

WALL OF MOON

Amy looked to the sinking sun. "All we can do now is wait," she said quietly. "It'll be sundown soon. At midnight tonight, we'll go to that warehouse and free Molly."

Luna nodded. Raye sat on a nearby crate.

"Be have to be especially careful," the priestess warned. "That note was from one member of the Negaverse to another. Essentially, we're going into the middle of a Negaverse civil war."

Serena shook her head. "No," she mumbled, her glassy eyes turning to her shoes. "We're not in the middle. Molly is."

Amy's eyebrows creased in sympathy. "Hang in there, Serena," she said as she touched the blonde's shoulder. "We'll save her. We know how much this must be eating away at you."

Serena sighed and closed her eyes. Raye took Serena's hand and squeezed gently.

"Be strong, Serena," she said. "We need you to be at your best. Because tonight," the priestess' voice went hard, "*this ends.*"

The moon was bright and full at midnight. The white disc in the sky sent thick beams of silver

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to fall over sleeping Crossroads, not to mention through the small, dingy window in an abandoned warehouse and onto the face of a very frightened Molly. The girl's hands were tied behind her, and she trembled in a dark and dusty corner.

The aqua Delta Girl tilted her head and smirked at Molly. "Aw," she cooed. "Are you scared, little girl?"

Molly curled her legs against her chest and bit her lip. "I-I'm not scared of you," she said weakly.

The red Delta Girl laughed. "Real convincing, Carrot Top."

The yellow Delta Girl kneeled beside Molly and smiled. "Don't worry," she said calmly. "We're not after you. After we destroy your dear general, we'll simply drain your energy and be on our way."

Molly lifted her chin. "You'll never destroy Nephrite," she said in shaky defiance. "He's too strong for all of you."

The red Delta Girl laughed again. "Don't be ridiculous!" she exclaimed. "There're three of us, and we each have our own unique attack. The chump doesn't stand a chance."

WALL OF FIRE

There was a noise from the end of the warehouse, and everyone looked up. Nephrite, barely more than a threatening silhouette against the moonlight, pushed open the creaky wooden door. He glared stonily.

"Well well." The yellow Delta Girl stood. "So he came. I guess it's true--you did fall for a human." The demon bared her teeth. "Traitor."

"Nephrite!" Molly cried. "It's a trap!"

There was no time for him to answer. The yellow Delta Girl shot a wave of small bombs at him, and Nephrite just barely jumped out of the line of fire. The bombs exploded in the doorway he had been standing in.

"Take this!" the aqua Delta Girl shouted as she sent a wave of dark power at him. Nephrite dodged it, but the yellow demon immediately shot another rally of bombs. He covered his face with his arms. The bombs exploded with a loud booming noise, and he vanished in the wave of dark smoke.

Molly gasped. "Nephrite!" she cried. "No!"

The red Delta Girl laughed. "My," she teased. "That was easy. And here I thought he'd be--"

Nephrite suddenly burst out of the smoke

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cloud, his eyes blazing. He slammed his fist into the stomach of the shocked yellow Delta Girl. She collapsed with a choke.

"What?" The aqua-clad demon stepped back. Nephrite flew forward and punched her across the face without a pause. He turned to the final Delta Girl as the aqua villain crumpled to the floor.

The red demon snarled. "You'll never win!" she shouted, spreading her feet. She shot out a wave of thorn-covered vines at him. "Traitor!"

A silver sword, the color of glittering stars, formed in Nephrite's hand. He chopped the vines in half before they could touch him. He shot like a bullet for the red Delta Girl as she cried out and slammed against a wall.

The tip of Nephrite's sword buried deep into the wood beside her face. She gasped. Nephrite, not more than an inch in front of her, growled lowly.

"Never." He moved closer, his breath cold on her face. "You tell that witch Zoycite that she'll *never* get the best of me. If she stands in my way, she'll pay dearly for it. And if she so much as *touches*

this girl again..." He pointed to Molly, then narrowed his eyes. "Then there's no place in the Negaverse that can hide her from my wrath."

He released his sword and stepped back. The red demon fell to the floor, her eyes wide as she clutched her heaving chest. Nephrite turned to the tied-up Molly.

The girl still trembled. Her body, however, no longer curled up in fear. Her gaze no longer held terror. She said nothing as she and Nephrite stared into each other's eyes, as the moonlight shone through the window and lit up the silent area that enclosed them.

He squatted beside her. He deftly untied her hands, then slid his arm under her knees and lifted her up. Molly blushed as he cradled her close.

"N-Nephrite," she whispered. "You don't have to carry me."

Nephrite didn't look at her. "I know," he said as he slowly brought her to the door. He walked outside, and the midnight air playfully swept back her wavy hair. "I know that, Molly."

Molly smiled shyly. "Nephrite," she said, "y-you came for me. Did you..." Her voice lowered,

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"come because you care for me?"

Nephrite stared forward. "That," he answered, his boots clicking on the pavement, "I don't know."

They traveled in silence. Nephrite brought her from the warehouse to the empty Crossroads Park, where he eventually set her in front of a tree and kneeled before her. He took her hands and examined the rope marks on her wrists.

Molly blushed. "I'm all right," she assured him. "It's no big deal. Really."

Nephrite turned his dark eyes up to her. Molly averted her gaze from his and swallowed. Suddenly, she gave a start.

"Nephrite!" she exclaimed. She pointed to a deep gash on his upper arm. "You're hurt! Did those demons do this to you?" She quickly pulled his arm to her. "Let me see it."

Nephrite pulled back. "I'm fine," he told her. "It's nothing."

Molly stubbornly pulled his arm back and shook her head. "No, it's not. It needs tending." She bit her sleeve and tore a large piece of it off. She carefully wrapped the fabric around Nephrite's cut

and tied it tightly. "Does this help?" she asked.

Nephrite let out a breath. He reluctantly flexed his arm. "Yes," he said after a moment. He paused, as if struggling for the word, then finally added, "Thank you."

Molly smiled. "You don't say 'thank you' often, do you?"

Nephrite sighed and sat down on the grass. "Not if I mean it."

Molly bit her lip. "Nephrite?" she asked quietly. "Can I ask you something?"

Nephrite barely nodded.

"Why did you save me?"

Nephrite leaned his back against the tree. "I don't know," was his flat reply. "Everything I told you has been a lie, Molly. Stop asking me questions. You'll never hear the truth."

Molly's eyebrows creased. "What do you mean by that?" she asked. She slid across the grass to sit beside him. "I know you've worked with bad people before, but you can change. I really can't see you as a thoroughly bad person. Why don't you leave your evil life behind?"

Nephrite closed his eyes. "You're just like

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those Sailor Scouts," he muttered.

"But you--"

"Don't *know* any other kind of life." He looked to her abruptly. "I can hardly remember my life before the Negaverse, Molly."

Molly frowned. "I know it must be hard," she said softly. "But you have to try to leave evil behind. I mean, you remember some kind of life before the Negaverse, right?"

Nephrite touched his temple. "Bits and pieces," he answered. "In my dreams."

"And?"

He brushed his wavy hair behind his shoulder. "Just...green grass, brown soil, white horses. And a young man. A dark-haired young man." He shook his head. "I don't know. I don't remember."

Molly hugged her knees to her chest. "Maybe I can help you," she said. "If I can show you a bit more of a normal life, do you think you could manage to lead one?"

Nephrite's eyebrows furrowed. "What?"

"Well, here. Let's see." She thought for a moment, then blushed. "I've had a little dream about you since I met you," she began shyly. "Just

something I always found myself wishing for."

Nephrite frowned.

"There's this place near my house that sells really good chocolate parfait. I don't eat it often because it's so sweet, so I only get it on special occasions." She smiled, embarrassed. "I've always dreamed about going with you on a Sunday afternoon and getting a chocolate parfait. But I suppose you don't get Sundays off in that evil place you live in, do you?"

Nephrite stared at her with wide eyes. "Don't get Sundays off?" he repeated. After a long moment, a smile curled the edges of his lips. He looked away. He began to chuckle.

Molly blinked. "Nephrite?" she asked.

He started to laugh. He started to really, truly laugh. Molly, at his surprising reaction, started to laugh, too. Tears broke from her eyes and rolled down her cheeks. Perhaps because of her laughter. Perhaps because she was seeing *him* laugh for the first time.

"You're right, Molly." He rubbed an eye. "We don't get many holidays in the Negaverse." He turned his glassy gaze to her. "Chocolate parfait,"

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he said with a smile. "OK. We'll go get some."

Molly's eyes widened. "Really?" she asked.

"Sure." He shrugged slightly. "Maybe you're right. Maybe trying a bit of a normal life will help things."

Molly covered her mouth. "Oh, Nephrite," she said, taking one of his hands. "You really mean it?"

Nephrite smiled thinly. "Do you think it's another lie?"

"No." Molly squeezed his hand, a smile lighting up her face. "I *know* it's not."

There was a crashing from nearby. Nephrite looked up. Molly gasped as he suddenly threw himself on top of her and tucked her head into his chest.

"You'll never escape, traitor!"

There was the sound of an object being thrown, and then Nephrite's body jarred violently. He grunted and squeezed shut his eyes.

"Nephrite?!" Molly exclaimed, frantically trying to pull out of his arms. "What was that? Are you-what?" She froze as her eyes fell on his shoulder.

A cluster of huge thorns, each as big as a

stake, was buried deep in Nephrite's flesh.

The Delta Girls stood nearby. The red one laughed and crossed her arms. "Did you seriously think you could escape us?" she mocked. "We're not as easily foiled as you think, loser."

Nephrite snarled and turned heavy-lidded eyes to the demons. He fought to sit straight, but ended up collapsing in Molly's arms. Terror gleamed on Molly's face.

"Nephrite!" she cried. "Nephrite, what's wrong?"

"Plenty." The yellow Delta Girl smirked. "That group of thorns will drain his life force dry. And as soon as that happens..." She cocked an eyebrow. "No more boyfriend, little girl."



Chapter 12

Love Never Dies

Molly sobbed and threw her arms around Nephrite. Her tears soaked into the thick gray of his general's jacket.

"No!" she cried. "I won't believe it! Nephrite, you *have* to be OK!"

Nephrite growled and tried to push her away. "Go!" he ordered. "Go while you still have the chance!"

"No!" Molly violently shook her head. "I won't leave you! We're getting out of here together!"

The yellow Delta Girl snorted. "Nephrite," she demanded. "Where's the Black Crystal?"

Nephrite scowled at her.

"Want to be difficult, do you?" The yellow demon pointed at Molly. "Tell me," she warned, a bomb forming in her palm, "or I blow up your little girlfriend."

Nephrite snarled. "I'll give it to you," he said through gritted teeth. He pushed Molly away. "Now go, Molly!"

Molly grabbed the thorns in his shoulder. "No!" she cried, pulling desperately. "Never! Never!"

Nephrite hissed at her. "Leave those!" he ordered. "Molly, *run!*"

But Molly only pulled harder. With tears streaming down her face, she dug her heels in the dirt and vehemently tried to wrench the thorns from him.

The yellow Delta girl scoffed. "Don't bother," she told Molly. "There's no chance a mere human could get those out."

"I will!" Molly screamed as she pulled. The sharp ends of the thorns dug into her hands, but she didn't let go. The thorns still didn't budge.

Nephrite grabbed her arm. "Stop!" he shouted. "Molly, *run!*"

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"Never!"

The red Delta Girl laughed. "What a stupid child," she remarked. "She's only going to get her own life force drained if she doesn't--" She stopped dead. Her eyes, on Molly, widened.

The thorns slowly slid a centimeter outwards.

Nephrite sucked in a breath. "Molly..."

"I'll get it out!" Molly cried. "I'll get it out no matter what I have to do!" The thorns began to crackle with energy and throw sparks into the night air, but Molly didn't stop pulling. The thorns slid another centimeter.

The yellow Delta Girl roared. "I'll show you!" she yelled, throwing her bomb at Molly and Nephrite. "Now you'll both be destroyed together!"

Nephrite shoved Molly to the ground. The bombs exploded around them, sending fire against his back.

Molly shrieked. "Nephrite!" she cried.

Nephrite crumpled to the grass. As Molly screamed his name and looked in horror at his new injury, a laugh echoed throughout the park. Zoycite appeared in a flurry of cherry blossom petals, her

ponytail fluttering behind her.

"My, my." The tall woman gripped her chin. "Looks like we have quite a mess here. Is that my dear Nephrite I see?"

Nephrite's back was horribly cut and burned. His jacket had ripped to shreds, and the crackling thorns remained buried in his shoulder. His eyes were closed. Molly sobbed and held him close.

Zoycite walked up to them. The Black Crystal, after falling from Nephrite's torn jacket, lay on the nighttime grass. She bent and picked it up.

"Excellent." She smiled at Nephrite. "Thank you, my boy. This should make my hunt for the Empyrium Silver Crystal much easier." Her eyes glittered cruelly. "Can't say I'll be sorry to see you gone."

Molly turned furious tear-filled eyes to Zoycite. "Witch!" the girl screamed. "Leave him alone!"

Zoycite cocked an eyebrow. "This one's attitude is as fiery as her hair," she murmured. "You sure know how to pick them, Nephrite."

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Nephrite's eyes slowly opened. Weakly, he turned his head to Zoycite.

"You'll never win." His voice, though dimming, was low and cold. "Don't forget that. Your treacherous ways will only get you so far, Zoycite. You'll never succeed."

Zoycite hummed and pocketed the Black Crystal. "Parting threats don't scare me," she said lightly as she glanced at her demons. She nodded. "Good work, girls. You have my permission to destroy them both."

The red Delta Girl snickered. "With pleasure, mistress."

Zoycite waved good-bye to Nephrite and Molly. "It was nice knowing you, love birds. And least you'll be going out together." She chuckled as cherry blossom petals appeared and swirled around her body. In a moment, she was gone.

Molly started to sob softly. As the Delta Girls surrounded her and Nephrite, she held him close. "I'm sorry," she mumbled through her tears. "Nephrite, I'm so sorry. I wasn't st-strong enough."

Nephrite shook his head. Damp wavy bangs fell over his face. "It wasn't you who wasn't strong

enough," he said quietly, taking her cheek in his hand. "Run, Molly. Run and save yourself."

Molly hugged his destroyed body closer. "We won't split up now," she said, turning a defiant gaze up to the demons. She sniffed. "And we're not defeated yet."

The aqua Delta Girl laughed. "That's about to change," she said, raising a palm.

The yellow Delta Girl smiled wickedly. "Good-bye."

"MERCURY BUBBLES BLAST!"

Fog abruptly filled the park. The Delta Girls gasped and stepped back. Molly, surprised, looked around her.

"Hope you didn't forget about us, you stupid lackeys!" Sailor Moon stepped from the bubble fog, eyes burning. She pointed menacingly, "Your reign of terror ends here!"

The yellow Delta Girl snarled. "It's those brats we were told about," she said. "Those stupid Sailor Scouts."

Sure enough, Sailor Mars, Sailor Mercury, and Luna appeared behind Serena. Amy put her hands on her hips.

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"Leave Nephrite and Molly alone!" she called. "If you want a fight, fight us!"

The aqua Delta Girl shot out her palms. "Fine!" she shouted. "You'll regret saying that, loser!"

All three Delta Girls attacked at once. The aqua demon threw a wave of power, the yellow demon launched an armful of bombs, and the red demon shot out a thick clump of the life-sucking vines. Amy, in response, cupped her hands together.

"MERCURY BUBBLES..." The small sphere of blue light formed in her hands. She released it with a cry. "BLAST!"

The stream of thick bubbles halted all of the Delta Girls' attacks. The dark wave of power vanished before getting near the Scouts, and the bombs and thorns fell harmlessly to the ground. The red Delta Girl gasped.

"What?" she exclaimed. "How could our powers fail like that?!"

Serena gripped the jewel on her tiara. The headband glowed golden. "Mars!" she shouted. "Together!"

HALLOWEEN

Raye nodded and clasped her own hands. She closed her eyes. "MARS FIRE..." she called as fire started around her outstretched index fingers.

Serena brought back her shining discus. "MOON TIARA..."

Raye's eyes opened and flashed purple. "IGNITE!"

Serena let her tiara fly. "ACTION!"

The two beams shot through the air at an alarming speed. The fire wrapped around the tiara as it zoomed forward, and the flame-embraced golden discus surged straight for the Delta Girls. They shrieked.

"NO!" the aqua demon cried, covering her head with her arms.

The red Delta Girl hid behind the yellow one. "This can't happen!" she cried. "We can't be destroyed so easily!"

But the tiara crashed into them and exploded in a flash of fiery gold light. When the glare finally cleared, the Delta Girls had been reduced to three neat dust piles on the nighttime grass of the park.

A long silence reigned after the Delta

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Girls' defeat. When it was finally broken by Molly's soft crying, Serena bit her lip. The blonde could see the horrible injuries Nephrite had sustained. His face, normally a healthy pink, had turned a terrible ashen gray, and the thorns in his shoulder crackled menacingly.

Nephrite carefully opened his eyes. "Sailor Moon?" he whispered.

Serena swallowed. "Yes?" she asked, walking up to him.

He slowly turned his head to her. They stared at each other a moment, and then he made a grim smile. "Don't worry," he murmured. "Your identity won't leak out, after all."

Serena covered her mouth. Molly hiccuped and gripped the remains of his torn jacket.

"Nephrite," she whispered, shaking. "Please don't say things like that."

Nephrite smiled again. His breathing grew shallower as he slowly raised a hand. "I'm sorry, Molly," he said as he cupped her cheek. "I didn't want to lie to you anymore, but I guess I did." His eyes glassed over. "I can't get that chocolate parfait with you, after all."

HALLOWEEN

Nephrite started to glitter. Molly sobbed harder and desperately held onto him. "Please!" she cried. "Please, Nephrite, I love you!"

Nephrite's glittering body grew transparent. "Molly," he whispered, closing his eyes. "Th-thank you. For everything. I'm glad I...met you. Forgive me."

"No!" Molly cried. "No, PLEASE!"

But it was too late. Nephrite's body faded into glittering sparkles as the last of his energy drained away, and Molly's arms, clutched around him, were suddenly clutched around her own body. The fabric she had tied around his arm was all that remained on the cool night grass.

"NO!" Molly screamed, her tears shining in the darkness. "NO, NEPHRITE! DON'T LEAVE ME!" The girl sobbed and curled into a ball, her body shaking as she gripped the stained bandage against her chest. "DON'T LEAVE ME!"

Serena turned to the other Scouts. Amy rubbed tears from her cheeks, and Raye, gaze on Molly, whispered soft prayers under her breath.

Serena looked to the trail of glitter that raised into the night sky. "Nephrite," she whis-

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pered, her own eyes growing glassy. "You gave your life to protect Molly. You're no longer our enemy." She put a hand over her heart and let out a breath.

"Rest in peace, Nephrite." Serena closed her eyes. "You're forgiven."



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About the Writer



Photo: Bill Burkhart

Lianne Sentar began her career as a writer at just 13 years-old working on an extensive fantasy novel entitled *Thief*. During the next two years, Ms. Sentar wrote hundreds of pages of fan-fiction and published them both on her website (http://members.tripod.com/~Lianne_Sentar/) as well as on other international fan-fic sites. Based on her initial online publishing success, Ms. Sentar self-published her first novella *Rain* in the fall of 1998. Since its initial release, *Rain* has been through four reprints and continues to grow in popularity. In the summer of 1999, 17-year-old Lianne began writing the *Sailor Moon* novel adaptations with the second *Sailor Moon* novel, *The Power of Love*. Ms. Sentar just finished her second original novel, the fantasy *Children of the Sky*. Ms. Sentar attends Wesleyan University in Connecticut, USA.