



Against All Odds

a Sailormoon fanfiction by Dejana Talis

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you I need you am I ready for this did I think I would be can I see the future no
I don't want to leave you I don't want to love you I still do I still
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She was a princess betrothed
to the prince of Earth.
He was a stable hand
with an unknown past.
Theirs was a love no force in the
Silver Millennium could put asunder.

ARTWORK BY DEJANA
LYRICS BY THE CRANBERRIES

Prologue

"Endymion!"

The gray-eyed boy stopped short. His heart sank into his stomach; he knew what command was coming next.

"Water."

Endymion grumbled as he hopped down from a hay bale and crossed the room to pick up the two heavy wooden buckets. Shooting a sharp glare at the now-grinning Misa, Endymion wrestled the pails through the stable doors and out onto the grounds.

The soft grass was cool beneath his bare feet as he lugged the water buckets toward the pond. Water, water, always fetching water. Not that the stables needed it; the cistern was kept perpetually full by the same magic that kept the entire Moon Kingdom running. Endymion knew Miss Amaris only sent the children in her charge to get water from the pond as a punishment.

Not that he'd done anything to deserve it. Nothing really bad, anyway. So he'd pulled Misa's braid; so what? He'd done much worse during his time working in Queen Serenity's stables.

The rough cord handles of the buckets chafed against Endymion's palms. The boy groaned as he imagined how much worse it would be on the way back when the buckets were full, the splintering wood banging against his legs. If he wasn't careful, he'd end up with more rips in his breeches for Miss Amaris to mend.

Endymion stopped to rest beside a corner of the ivy-covered wall surrounding the castle gardens, which marked the halfway point between the stables and the pond. The sunlight seemed unusually warm today; the Queen must have been in the mood for a little humidity. Endymion set the buckets down and wiped his sweaty forehead with his sleeve, brushing his midnight hair out of his eyes. Sighing, the stable boy let his gaze roam the vine-embraced stones of the garden wall. Day after day he made this trip of shame to the pond, and every day he stopped by the wall to wonder what lay in the forbidden garden beyond.

As usual, Endymion glanced at the barred and locked gardener's entrance, wishing he could someday work in the castle gardens instead of the stables. The heat was making his mind play tricks on him; for a moment he thought the wooden door was open.

Against All Odds

Endymion rubbed his gray eyes with both hands. He blinked in the sunshine. The door *was* open. It wasn't an illusion. The gardener must have forgotten to lock it today. The boy's breath caught in his throat and his heart quickened with excitement. At last, a chance to see what the mysterious garden looked like!

Eagerly, the boy abandoned the buckets and slipped through the half-open doorway. Ivy hung thick on the other side of the wall, and short as he was, Endymion still had to push it aside to get through. As he shoved through the vines, an amazing sight met his eyes.

There was color, color everywhere. On the Moon, a realm of marble and alabaster, Endymion was lucky to occasionally see a few flowers in a vase on Miss Amaris' table. The pale greens of grass and ivy were the main source of color in his life. Here, however, was a kaleidoscope of brilliant, vibrant colors, a vast array of flowers of every type in colors of every shade. Bright petals covered a network of pebbly pathways and stone benches.

Endymion stared for a long moment, wide-eyed, drinking in the beauty that surrounded him. He was so awestruck that he almost didn't notice the girl. His eyes finally fell upon her standing in the center of the garden, watching him.

She seemed a bit younger than Endymion, and even from where he stood, the boy could see her bright eyes were pure blue. She wore a long white dress that reached the ground and had waist-length pale hair tied in two long pigtailed. A gentle breeze flowed through the garden, and the girl's streams of hair waved against the snow-white cloth of her dress.

Caught, Endymion gasped and took a step back, but the girl was smiling.

"Hi!" she called out in a bright, clear tone. Her voice was sunshine and cool breezes and babbling brooks. Endymion decided it was the sweetest sound he had ever heard. "Do you want to play with me?" the long-haired angel asked.

Endymion knew he should turn right around and fetch the water like Miss Amaris had instructed him, but the girl seemed so friendly and welcoming, he decided there could be no harm done. After all, she had invited him. Shaking off his nerves, Endymion strode up to the girl, trying to look confident. Soon he stood beside her in all her innocent beauty.

Abruptly Endymion felt a wave of shame rise within him as the pretty young girl looked him up and down with her sky-blue eyes. He blushed slightly, acutely aware of his ragged stable-boy's clothes and dirty face and hands. To his relief, the warm, welcoming smile on the girl's face never faded. She reached out with a pale, delicate hand and plucked a flower from the closest bush.

"Here," she announced, handing it to Endymion. "This is for you." It was a rose, a perfect rose with a full set of soft petals, the pure, deep red of blood. Endymion accepted it gratefully, inhaling its sweet scent.

"Hey!" a sharp voice boomed, making both children jump. "You, boy! What are you doing there?"

Endymion whirled around, his pulse accelerating until it pounded in his ears. A tall man with long white hair and a crescent moon emblem hanging around his neck was marching toward them from a nearby hedge maze. A slender woman in a yellow dress followed closely behind the man, her waves of ebony hair rippling to her feet. From the elegance of their clothes, Endymion could tell they were nobility. As if that weren't enough, the man and woman both had the legendary golden crescent moon marks on their foreheads. Endymion swallowed hard, knowing real trouble when he saw it.

"Who are you, boy?" the white-haired man demanded, reaching them. "How did you get in here?" His hand darted out and seized Endymion by the arm.

"My lord, you're hurting me!" Endymion cried out as the man's grip tightened painfully.

"Artemis, stop!" the girl protested in horror. "He didn't do anything wrong!"

"Come here, Serenity," the woman ordered. The girl hesitated for a moment, then rushed into the woman's arms.

"Luna, make him stop," the white-robed girl wailed into the woman's dress.

"Serenity, you know you're not allowed to associate with common children," Luna scolded her gently.

Serenity! Endymion nearly choked as he realized the pale-haired girl was Princess Serenity herself. Artemis glared down at him with a face full of fury. His piercing eyes combed Endymion's shabby clothes, gray eyes, and flushed skin. The boy's complexion was rosier than any Lunarian's.

Against All Odds

"Here, you're an Earth boy, aren't you?" Artemis snarled. "What are you doing in the private gardens?" Endymion's heart sank. Through all ten Earth-standard years of his life, the fact that he was an Earth-child always put him an extra step below even the other servants.

"Luna, take Serenity inside and fetch the guards," Artemis called over his shoulder, still keeping a death grip on Endymion's arm. Luna led the girl away into the hedge maze.

"Don't hurt him!" the young Princess cried. The sound of her voice, pleading for his safety, fixed itself in Endymion's mind forever.

"Endymion! There you are!" Miss Amaris rushed into the garden through the open door, her slightly plump face flushed from exertion. She bustled between the flowerbeds and flung herself to the ground at Artemis' feet. "Please, my lord, the boy is harmless," she pleaded with desperate eyes. "He's one of the orphans in my charge in the castle stables. He wandered away while doing his chores."

Endymion could only stare, his panicked breath harsh in his throat. He had never seen the hard-edged matron of the stables act subordinate to anyone before.

"Please, my lord, it was only a mistake," Miss Amaris begged. "Please release him."

Artemis turned his sharp eyes on Endymion, searching for signs of deception or malice. "Boy?"

"It was a mistake," Endymion agreed hurriedly. "The door was open, and I always wanted to see the gardens. I didn't know she was the Princess, honest!"

"All right." Artemis didn't let go of the boy's arm. Instead, he pulled Endymion closer and bent down so that his glaring eyes were a hand's length from the child's frightened ones. "Listen here, boy. Don't ever approach forbidden areas of the grounds again. Don't even think about it. Not ever. Do you understand?"

"Yes, my lord," Endymion stammered, wanting nothing more in that moment than to get out of there, no matter what it took. Then Artemis released him, and he fell backward, landing hard on the stone path. Miss Amaris hauled him up by his shirt and yanked him toward the door and out of the garden.

Woman and boy hustled through the grass toward the stables, each carrying one of the still-empty buckets. Endymion walked in fear, dreading the explosion of scolding and punishment that was soon to come. Sure enough, when they neared the stables, Miss Amaris stopped abruptly and turned to face him. Endymion braced himself.

He was caught completely off-guard when Miss Amaris gathered him into a close embrace. Endymion was nearly smothered in the soft warmth of her body as she held him tightly.

"Endymion, when I saw the buckets abandoned by the garden wall, I knew where you had gone. I came as quickly as I could. I was so afraid, boy. You could have ended up in prison, or who knows where!"

Finally, Miss Amaris let him go. She swiped a few tears from her eyes as Endymion stared at her, openmouthed. "Well," she said in a broken voice, "back to the stables."

They picked up the buckets again and resumed their walk to the nearby building. Endymion was too overwhelmed by the day's events to speak.

"So," Miss Amaris said after a moment, "you met Princess Serenity?"

"Yes," Endymion croaked. He cleared his throat and tried again. "She was beautiful. Nice, too."

"Best put her out of your mind, boy," Miss Amaris replied with a chuckle. "You'll never see her again. Besides, a Princess soon forgets an orphaned stable boy."

Endymion looked at the vibrant red rose he still clutched in one rough hand. "Yes, you're right," he said softly. "A girl like her deserves a prince."

Chapter One

Princess Serenity raised her slender arms obediently, and Sailor Venus, leader of the four Sailor Soldiers, pulled the simple everyday dress off over her head. Normally, the heir to the Moon Kingdom would be dressed by her servants and the Princess' bodyguards would have other matters to attend to. Tonight, however, would be a special occasion, and so the four sailor-suited soldiers had sent the maids away. The planetary warriors were said to possess great powers, but although Serenity had spent her entire life in the girls' company there had never been cause for her to witness their magic, and so she considered the four soldiers her best friends rather than her bodyguards.

The pale young woman, her crystal hair now grown to the floor, blushed as Sailor Mars adjusted Serenity's undergarments in a businesslike manner. The blue-haired Sailor Mercury blushed also and took a sudden interest in the jewelry on Serenity's dressing table.

"Is this really necessary?" Serenity asked plaintively. "It's not my wedding day!"

"It might as well be," Venus chided her friend, folding up the day-dress and dropping it on the bed. "You're meeting your betrothed for the first time tonight! That's not something to be taken lightly!"

"Yes, I know," Serenity mumbled, hanging her head. She shuffled her dainty feet nervously. "What if he doesn't like me?"

"Stop fidgeting," Mars scolded, trying to fit a glass slipper on Serenity's foot. "How could he not like you?" she asked incredulously. "You're beautiful, friendly, graceful... What's not to like?"

"Thank you, Mars," Serenity said with a smile, standing still while the violet-haired girl slid her other shoe on. "Still, my stomach's filled with butterflies." The Moon Princess ran her hands over her flat abdomen, examining her reflection in the mirror.

There was a soft knock from the sitting room. Sailor Jupiter hurried to answer it, then reentered the bedroom with her arms full of cloth. "Serenity, look!" she called out, her voice warm with barely-restrained excitement.

Serenity turned on the footstool she was standing on, and the tall brunette soldier held up the maiden-gown for all the girls to see. The Moon Princess would wear this style of dress from the day of her engagement to her wedding day. It was white, of course, and long enough that Serenity's shoes would not be visible when she was standing still. In that way it was similar to the dresses Serenity had worn throughout her childhood. Representing her advance into adulthood, the maiden-gown had a high waist

Against All Odds

and was sleeveless, with a band of silver circles lining the gown's top edge. A chain of pearls embraced its waist.

"Oh, it's beautiful!" Sailor Venus exclaimed. Rushing forward, she pulled the dress out of Jupiter's arms and pressed it against her own body.

"Tonight is Serenity's night, Venus," Mercury reminded her golden-haired friend and leader with a grin.

Venus pouted, swishing the dress back and forth over the short orange skirt of her uniform, enjoying the feel of the soft cloth against her bare legs. "It might be a little dangerous tonight, don't you think?" Casually she twisted a lock of blonde hair between her fingers. "All those people... Don't you think perhaps the Princess' double should-"

"Oh, come on, Venus! You're not fooling anyone!" Sailor Jupiter whisked the silver-trimmed gown out of her friend's hands and playfully bumped her own green-skirted hip against Venus'. The blonde laughed, giving up her game.

Jupiter lifted the dress high and slipped it over Serenity's slim body, cloaking her alabaster skin in pure white. The Moon Princess closed her eyes, absorbing the feeling of the silky soft cloth feathering against her skin and the admiring gasps of her friends. She opened her eyes to behold four faces awestruck by her beauty, then turned to face the mirror. In that moment, the meaning of the day finally became real.

Despite her youth, Serenity had long ago crossed the threshold of womanhood. The dress fit her perfectly, the silver circles curving around her well-developed breasts and dipping lower on her back to cradle her shoulder blades. She looked herself over, from her slender elegant neck to the graceful curves of her hips, and almost couldn't believe how grown-up she looked. It was truly her engagement day at last. This dress was the final sign of the reality that would be formalized tonight. Its elegant, yet modest design would serve as a symbol of Serenity's reaching the proper age of betrothal.

The Moon Princess took a deep breath to steady herself and shuddered all over to loosen her nerves. That broke the spell; Venus approached with a hairbrush, Mercury with some simple jewelry, Mars with a tray of cosmetics. Sailor Jupiter knelt and began filing Serenity's fingernails.

"Prince Endymion of Earth," Serenity mused aloud, staring at her own reflection, at a face that barely seemed her own as her guardians dressed her up like a porcelain doll. "I wonder what he'll be like?" Her eyes strayed to the window. From her place on the footstool, Serenity could nearly see clear to the edge of the castle grounds, where a certain garden grew. Perhaps he would be like... him.

What foolishness! That was a long time ago, and she didn't even know the boy.

"Turn and parry, now, thrust. Watch your feet! That's much better." Sir Marton locked swords with Endymion one more time, then withdrew and sheathed his blade. "That's all for today."

"It is not earthrise yet!" Endymion protested, letting his sword arm drop to his side.

"It's close enough," Sir Marton replied. "Besides, I need to wash and dress for the engagement festivities."

Endymion sighed and laid his naked sword down, then lifted the knight's breastplate from its hook on the wall.

"An extra coat of polish tonight," Sir Marton instructed. "The Moon Knights are performing a demonstration for the Royal Family of Earth tomorrow. I'll see you at our usual time." He paused at the door that led out of the small armory and looked back at the raven-haired young man. "Unless, of course, you'd like to earn a few extra lessons-"

"No." Polishing the knight's armor and doing his laundry in exchange for fencing lessons was enough; Endymion was not about to wash and dress Sir Marton as well. He might be an orphaned Earth-child, but he was no one's personal manservant.

"Tomorrow, then." Sir Marton shrugged and disappeared into his modest house. Endymion opened a tin of polish and bent over the breastplate, working away the grime of the Moon Knights' daily drills. The engagement festivities, indeed! Sir Marton was such a minor noble that he would be lucky to find standing room in the back of the hall.

The young man rubbed the armor until it shone, reflecting his own image as clearly as a mirror.

Against All Odds

Endymion the stable hand had grown into a tall adolescent, nearly an adult now, who stood a bit taller than Sir Marton. His gray eyes had darkened to a smooth charcoal depth that matched his dark hair. The skin of his palms was rough, but the same years of hard labor had built healthy muscles on his arms and legs, and the sunlight had given his melanin-rich Earth-born skin a luscious tan. Endymion knew that many of the girls on the Moon found his dark complexion attractive, but he looked at his reflection and saw only his biggest shortcoming.

Here, you're an Earth boy, aren't you? Lord Artemis had said. It was so long ago now, but the words still stung as if it were yesterday, along with the contempt in the eyes of the white-haired man.

Don't hurt him! The sweet voice of little Princess Serenity was also fresh in his mind, fresh as a newly-blossomed rose.

Miss Amaris had told Endymion to forget her. That had been the last instruction Endymion had not heeded. Since that day, he had devoted every waking moment of his life to improving himself, so he could someday become the kind of man Serenity deserved. He stopped misbehaving and breaking rules. He efficiently completed any chore Miss Amaris asked of him, and in return, she taught him everything she knew about horses and riding. He weeded the herb garden so the head of the kitchens would teach him table manners. He sought out a knight with ambitions beyond his station, yet too minor to have his own squire, and shined his armor in exchange for lessons in swordsmanship.

The matron of the stables was the first to admit that Endymion had become quite the young gentleman and could have gone far - if it weren't for his lineage. Indeed, no matter what advances Endymion made, the same barriers always stopped him cold. He was an Earth-child, and an orphan.

Endymion was head of the work-animals division of the stables, and most of the other heads often came to him for advice, but his official career could advance no further without noble birth parents. He could never be trained as a knight, or even a guard. If he wanted to remain in the employ of the Moon Castle, Endymion would always be a servant.

Frustrated by his thoughts, Endymion flung the polishing cloth to the ground and strode to the window, as he always did when his shortcomings irritated him. Through the marble-edged opening in the wall of Sir Marton's house, the young man could look down on the lazy sprawl of the city as it spread out below him. The other side of the house faced the Moon Castle, which looked down on the busy metropolis from a slight rise. From this angle, Endymion could see where the common citizens of the Moon went about their daily lives.

Things could be worse. He could be down there, trying to scrape out a living in whatever trade would have him. An Earth-child alone in the streets of the Moon's capital city... Yes, things would have gone very badly for Endymion, had Miss Amaris not found him as a toddler and taken him in. He should be grateful for the security of his job on the castle grounds.

This reminder of his fortune lessened Endymion's bitterness, and he returned to polishing Sir Marton's armor with more enthusiasm. His pain was alleviated for the moment, but lately he needed to force himself to think realistically more and more often, and each time the misery of his life's stagnation returned a bit faster.

Later, Endymion strolled through the grass of the castle grounds, returning to the castle proper from the nobility's sector. He carried his sword in one tanned hand, unable to afford a sheath for the blade. It had taken most of his life to earn the money for his own weapon, and Endymion could make do without the accessories for now.

The sun was fading from the sky, and the grand stables seemed nearly deserted as he approached. Of course, almost every handler had been called to the main gates to care for the beasts that would be bringing in the evening's guests. Those handlers with the pale skin and light hair of a Lunarian, at least. There would be Earth dignitaries present, but no Earth-child servants.

Endymion paused for a moment to gaze up into the sky at the planet of his birth, which was climbing higher as night approached. It seemed small to his dark eyes, but Endymion knew it was several times larger than the Moon. Looking up at the glowing blue-green globe, he felt as if his mother world had dropped him from his cradle and left him with no way to climb back up. All of the portals linking the Moon

Against All Odds

and Earth had been sealed or severely restricted by law for more than fifteen Earth-standard years.

Not that Endymion wanted to live on Earth, anyway. Everything he had heard described the Earth as a world of poverty and desperation, where pleading citizens reached out in vain toward an indifferent and uncaring monarchy. The lost son of Earth much preferred the Moon, where things sometimes became difficult but nobody slipped through the cracks.

"Ah, there you are!" Miss Amaris emerged from the stable entrance, handing the saddle blanket she was carrying to one of the newest stable boys. Endymion's robust caretaker was still firmly entrenched in middle age, but her Earth-born charge was now a full head taller than she. "Walk with me a moment. I need to speak with you."

The two of them headed off to Endymion's small house, the structure reserved for a stable hand of his level. It was hardly more than a hut, with only one room, but it was comfortable and snug, and Endymion's own as long as he kept his job.

"Listen, son-" Miss Amaris had taken to calling the midnight-haired boy "son" sometime during his adolescence "-I think it would be best if you didn't go around calling yourself 'Endymion' any longer."

"What?" Endymion stopped dead in his tracks and stared at the stable matron. "Why not?"

"Haven't you heard?" Miss Amaris half-whispered. "The Earth Prince, Serenity's betrothed, his name is Endymion!"

"What difference does that make?" He hadn't heard. It must have been mentioned to him at some point, but his mind had been preoccupied lately. "I was Endymion here long before he arrived!"

"Not so loud, son," Miss Amaris shushed him. "Look, I know that, but people might think you're getting ideas beyond your station. Besides, he will be King someday! It would just be easier on you, understand? You wouldn't have to change it completely," the older woman added hurriedly as Endymion's face began to darken with fury, "just use something different, like... 'Endou.' That's a nice name."

Endymion couldn't even speak. He whirled around, marched into his hut, and slammed the rickety door behind him. It was bad enough that the Earth had ruined his future; did it have to steal his past, too? His name, the only thing he remembered from his childhood before he was orphaned?

The young man threw his sword down on the rug, flung himself into a chair, and slammed his fists into the rough surface of the wooden table that stood beside it. The slim crystal vase that sat in the center of the tabletop jumped, tipped, and started to fall.

With a gasp of alarm, Endymion lunged forward and caught the transparent vessel gently in both hands before it hit the wood. The vase had been a gift from Miss Amaris on the day Endymion became head of the work-animals stable, but that was a small part of its value.

A deep sigh of relief escaped the dark-eyed man's lips as he set the undamaged vase back in its place. Not a single petal had fallen from the blood-red rose the vessel contained. It was the very same flower that Princess Serenity had given to a young garden-invader as a child, miraculously untouched by time. The blossom was as full, its petals as soft, its scent as sweet as the day it left the Princess' hand. Miss Amaris believed it was some manifestation of Serenity's latent magic, even though she was only a child at the time. Endymion had cared for it faithfully ever since that day, and it was his most prized possession.

Absentmindedly, Endymion leaned against the table, gazing at the blushing rose with his charcoal eyes. The day was finally here. Princess Serenity's engagement would be made official tonight. She was being bonded to someone, an Earth-child with the name of Endymion, no less. Fate was cruel to give Serenity's betrothed that particular name.

Endymion the stable hand groaned as his mind dredged up a memory of the innocent, sweet, flawless face of the child who had given him this rose, a gift that had brightened many a dark day for an orphaned Earth-child. He let his head fall forward onto the uneven wood of the table. He was a mere servant; surely she did not even remember him, and that was as it should be. Serenity deserved a true prince. That Prince Endymion, whoever he was, had better treat her right.

The Great Hall of the Moon Castle was decorated to the fullest extreme, decked out from floor to ceiling with ribbons and banners of cloth. Abundant flower arrangements added color to the elegance. The hall was filled with lords and ladies of every class of the Moon's nobility, as well as every Earth-born noble

Against All Odds

who had been able to afford the permits and passports necessary for the trip. Several attendees from the other planetary kingdoms were in attendance as well, all eager to witness the engagement of the planetary alliance's future leader.

Prince Endymion of Earth was to be the crowning gift of an elaborate diplomacy effort by the blue-green planet. His marriage to Princess Serenity would seal a treaty between the Earth and Moon, ending the icy relations that had existed for nearly two decades. The attendees chatted amiably as Earth met Moon, but there was a trace of tension in the air.

The dais at the front of the Great Hall was empty save for the grand throne of Selene, built of pure moonstone and encrusted with crystals. The conversation in the room died to a low murmur as a door opened to the right of the dais. Out walked Queen Serenity herself, a goddess incarnate, her streaming lavender hair blending with her royal gown as it brushed along the floor. As she walked, the Queen beamed a loving smile to all the gathered peoples.

Behind her walked Princess Serenity, followed by her four guardians, the Sailor Soldiers of the innermost worlds. Serenity shivered as she felt hundreds of pairs of eyes focus upon her and heard hundreds of voices gasp at her blossoming beauty. All she could do was hope she wouldn't trip on her new dress as she followed her mother up the steps of the dais.

Queen Serenity lowered her slender body into the Moon Kingdom's throne, and her daughter took her usual place standing by her side. The four sailor-suited soldiers strode to the rear wall behind the throne and stood at attention, providing a forbidding show of strength without appearing threatening to the visitors from Earth.

There was a moment of silence, which was excruciating for Princess Serenity. Standing there in her new white dress with its silver trimmings, facing the citizens of ten worlds, Serenity tried desperately not to fidget. She almost wished it were already her wedding day, when her betrothed would be the one standing here expectantly with all these eyes fixed upon him.

After what seemed an eternity, the double doors at the rear of the Great Hall were opened and all the burning stares turned in that direction. Princess Serenity heaved a sigh of relief, momentarily out of the public eye and free to nervously pursue her own thoughts.

A middle-aged couple in elegant robes entered the Great Hall, and the crowd parted before them, clearing an aisle straight down the middle to the dais. The man and woman wore golden crowns, but the royal way they walked showed their noble upbringing more clearly than any clothing could. The King and Queen of Earth strolled regally toward the ruler of the Moon, pleasant smiles on their faces. As a gesture of trust, they walked without guards.

Behind them followed the person Princess Serenity was both eager and terrified to meet, Prince Endymion. From the dais she caught a glimpse of reddish-brown hair, but with the royal couple blocking her view she could not see his face. Serenity was unwillingly given more time to wait and wonder as they approached. What would he be like? What would he think of her? She felt as if she were standing on the verge of her dreams, about to be swept off her feet and carried into a beautiful fairy tale. Eager and impatient, Serenity made a tiny whimpering noise in her throat.

"Patience, my child," the Queen muttered beneath her breath. "Be strong." Despite her mother's words, Serenity could detect a slight eager quickening of the Queen's breath as the trio of Earth-children drew nearer. The Princess wanted to scream at them to hurry, but she forced herself to remain still, not even craning her neck for a better view. This man, whoever he was, was destined to be her only true love for all eternity. He would be by her side to support her when she became Queen and ruled the Moon, loving her, caring for her, and sharing his life with her.

At last, the Royal Family of Earth reached the foot of the dais. The King and Queen smiled up at Princess Serenity, their son still hidden behind them. They seemed friendly enough.

The King cleared his throat. "Queen Serenity of the Moon," he announced in a loud, powerful voice, "we offer our son, Prince Endymion, to your daughter in marriage. Through their union, the blessed lineage of the Moon will be secured. We ask only that the Earth and Moon shall be joined as these two are joined, as allies and friends, and that the second child born of this union be given to our world as heir to the Golden Kingdom as soon as the child is of age. What say you?"

Calm, collected, as regal as a true goddess, Queen Serenity replied with a voice that touched all

Against All Odds

corners of the vast Great Hall. "King Arton of the Earth, I accept your offer and your terms, and give the hand of my daughter, Princess Serenity, to your son in marriage. My blessings be on their union."

At long last, the King and Queen of Earth parted, stepping to either side to allow their son to pass between them. Prince Endymion climbed the steps of the dais. He was about the same height as his betrothed and dressed in a handsome black tunic and breeches. Plates of ebony armor were fastened to his legs, arms, and shoulders, and a long cloak flowed out behind him as he approached the Princess. Prince Endymion had auburn hair and deep blue eyes, eyes as dark as the sky after sunset.

Serenity glanced at the face of the man she would spend her life with and quickly averted her eyes to avoid blushing. She tried to ignore the fact that she would soon know this stranger intimately and instead concentrated on the rest of the engagement ritual.

The Prince reached for Serenity's hand, and she timidly placed her pale fingers in his palm. She kept her eyes lowered, too nervous to look at Prince Endymion's face, as he lifted her hand to his lips and kissed it. The kiss was soft and gentle, a light feathery pressure against Serenity's skin. Her heart quickened slightly at the heat of his breath on her flesh.

Prince Endymion lowered her hand again and released it before turning to his mother. The Queen of Earth ascended the bottom step of the dais and held out the engagement pendant to her son, stretching the filigree chain between both hands so the gold-edged blue stone caught the light. From behind the throne, Sailor Venus approached and gave Serenity a similar pendant, with a white stone framed in silver dangling from it. The Prince and Princess faced each other again, each holding a precious gift that would seal their promise to one another.

Silver hair pooled on the smooth stones of the dais as Princess Serenity bowed her head, leaning toward her betrothed. The Earth Prince lifted his blue pendant over the round balls of hair atop her head and settled the thin chain around her neck. He then bent forward in turn, and Serenity stretched out her arms to lift her own pendant over the man's head.

That was the final step. They were now engaged, promised to one another in marriage. Serenity shook herself inwardly. This was no way for a woman about to be married to behave. This man was going to be her lover and best friend until the end of her days. She had to look him in the eye, as an equal. Besides, Prince Endymion had to be as curious and eager to learn about Serenity as she was to get to know him.

Steeling her resolve with the thought that the Prince was surely as nervous as she, Serenity raised her head, looked eagerly into her fiance's face, and found... nothing. Prince Endymion's expression was an emotionless mask. His royal blue eyes, though dark and mysterious, were empty and glassy. His face was like stone with no trace of feeling. Serenity found nothing within his lifeless countenance: no affection, no vague interest, no curiosity, not even bitterness or disappointment. She nearly shivered with cold just looking at him. Had it not been for the warmth of his breath on the back of her hand, Serenity would have found it hard to believe Prince Endymion lived at all.

Another flurry of tiny bubbles broke the surface of the tankard of Moon Nectar. Endymion sighed and stared down into the amber liquid, letting his jet-black hair hang over his eyes. All around him, the tavern buzzed with voices and laughter, but the stable hand tuned it all out. He couldn't even explain to himself why he felt so depressed on a night of celebration.

In the distance, a chorus of horns sang their musical message to the entire city, marking the official moment of Princess Serenity's engagement to the Earth Prince. All the tavern's clientele erupted into cheers, celebrating this keystone moment in the history of the Moon Kingdom. Tankards were raised, toasts were given, and drinks were distributed on the house. The air within the tavern became charged with the energy of joyous revelry.

Through it all, Endymion sat silently at the bar, dark eyes watching the tiny bubbles burst on the surface of his untouched Moon Nectar.

As the small ensemble took up their instruments and began to play a slow, warm tune, Princess Serenity shook off her startled reaction to her fiance's stoic appearance. She gave him a friendly smile,

Against All Odds

filling herself with new hope for their first dance together.

Prince Endymion's expression did not change. He bowed stiffly, formally, and Serenity curtseyed gracefully in response, her white skirts rippling smoothly across the floor. Taking her hand, the Prince led his bride-to-be down the steps of the dais and to the center of the Great Hall. The crowd parted to let them through. Sensing all the eyes upon her, Serenity forced a smile to her face. It had to be nerves, just the strangeness of the situation. He would surely warm up to her once they had a chance to get to know each other.

As the music kept up its lilting melody, Princess Serenity turned to face her Prince and lifted one delicate arm to his shoulder. He laid his free hand gently, but firmly, on her hip, and they began their first slow dance as a couple.

The Prince of Earth was a skilled dancer, leading his partner through intricate steps that were somehow easy to follow, and Serenity concentrated on applying all her training in grace and finesse to match his ability. The two of them glided across the floor, Prince Endymion's heavy boots landing lightly on its marble surface, making even less sound than the soft clicks of Serenity's glass slippers. The royal couple made a handsome pair, the Prince in his polished obsidian armor plates and the Princess in her fine middle-youth gown with the silver trimmings that matched her hair. Their twin engagement pendants sparkled in the light, sending beams of blue and white leaping around the Great Hall.

Serenity tried to relax and enjoy the dance despite the audience surrounding them, but her partner, though talented, was as stiff as a statue. His hand was warm in hers, but he moved as if following an unbendable pattern. With innocent hope she looked into Prince Endymion's face, smiling warmly, hoping to help him loosen up once he saw how kind and gentle she was.

The auburn-haired man would not meet Serenity's eyes. He stared straight ahead, deep blue eyes unblinking, his blank gaze refusing to focus on the young woman standing less than an arm's length in front of him. Although Serenity's eyes burned into her stoic dance partner in earnest, and then confusion, he did not seem to notice. It was all the Princess could do to keep up her illusion of happiness.

After what seemed an eternity of sterile, emotionless dancing, the ensemble transitioned into another song and the suffocating crowd began to pair off. The pressure of attention subsided as the guests' eyes turned to their own partners, and the room began to move with hundreds of dancing couples.

Princess Serenity breathed a sigh of relief, then blinked in disbelief as the Earth Prince instantly released her hand and let his arms drop to his sides. She waited for him to speak, but without a word, Prince Endymion turned away and strolled off into the crowd.

For a moment, the abandoned young woman stood frozen, hurt and confused. She nearly choked as tears welled up in her throat. She couldn't understand what was wrong; they hadn't even spoken and he already seemed to hate her. Serenity's vision began to swim with tears as she stood alone in a sea of dancing, happy couples. On the brink of breaking down, the Princess somehow found a shred of courage. She was a woman about to be married, and she would not accept this behavior from her lifetime companion without an explanation.

Gathering her light, flowing skirts in her hands, Serenity hustled off in pursuit of Prince Endymion, weaving through the whirling dancers. She caught up with him as he was slipping off the dance floor into the semi-corridor formed by the row of pillars that lined the sides of the Great Hall. Reaching the empty space between the pillars and the wall, Princess Serenity hesitated only a moment, watching her fiance striding away toward the dais with his black cloak flowing out behind him.

"Prince Endymion, stop, please," she called out, loud enough for her voice to reach him but soft enough to be discreet. He did stop, but did not turn around. Brow knitted in frustration, Serenity jogged up to him, the glass slippers pinching her feet in protest of such an undignified movement.

"Please look at me," she whispered.

The Earth Prince turned around and met her eyes for the first time. Dark royal blue pools engulfed Serenity's own sapphire eyes, his emotionless face draining her remaining hope. Also for the first time, he spoke.

"Princess Serenity."

His voice was deep and mysterious, and could have been seductive were it not so flat and empty.

The crystal-haired Princess of the Moon gazed up into him, finding layer after layer of cold nothing,

Against All Odds

and fought the tears that threatened to cloud her own eyes.

"Endymion, is something wrong?" she asked quietly.

"No, Princess," the living statue replied. "The ceremony was completed according to plan, was it not?"

What was the matter with this man? Were all Earth people so unfeeling? "Yes, it was... nice," Serenity replied, absentmindedly lifting one hand to idly play with the engagement pendant hanging at her throat. They were finally having a conversation, strange though it was, but Prince Endymion was still looking at her with the same empty expression.

She took a deep breath, preparing herself for her next question, but she could not prevent the blush from tainting her pale cheeks. "Do... do I not please you?" Serenity whispered, her free hand nervously grasping at her dress. "Am I a disappointment?"

Surprisingly, a first hint of emotion entered the Prince's face, but it was confusion. "You are beautiful, Princess," he replied matter-of-factly. "My parents are surely pleased."

Slightly relieved, but even more puzzled, Serenity tried another tactic. "Where are you going?"

"To sit with my parents. We've finished the required rituals."

"I thought we might go for a walk together," the Princess suggested timidly. "We could get to know each other better."

"Is that necessary?" There was no cruelty in the question, no emotion at all. From those three words, Serenity finally realized that Prince Endymion simply did not believe their marriage had anything to do with love, now or ever.

She could almost feel her dream of future happiness crack and shatter. The pleasant music being played in the Great Hall, the hundreds of couples dancing in one another's arms, all seemed to be mocking her with their illusion of love. She felt cold, chilled to the bone, alone and empty in an uncaring universe. The matching pendants around their necks became just so much lifeless stone; a lie. Serenity's mouth worked soundlessly, but she could find no words to respond to her fiance's unexpected question.

Prince Endymion waited for a moment before deciding she was not going to speak. He bowed formally, respectfully.

"Princess."

Then he was gone.

"I thought I might find you here."

The voice was familiar. Endymion had heard it every day since he was a child. He looked up from his still-untouched tankard and turned toward the friendly voice.

"Misa."

The little girl he used to squabble with in the stables had grown up into a slender, well-built young woman with brilliant green eyes. She could lift hay bales with her own two arms, and yet her hands were gentle with a bandage when needed. Her skin was as fair as the surface of the Moon itself, and she shone like the sun when she smiled.

"What are you up to?" the female stable hand asked her tanned Earth-child coworker. She leaned casually against the bar, her well-shaped arms displayed by her sleeveless dress. A wave of pastel green hair cascaded over Misa's shoulders, released from its usual braid.

"Just relaxing," Endymion replied, trying to tune out the noise of the crowded tavern. "Having a drink."

Misa leaned forward and peered into the tankard, which was no longer bubbling. "Your drink's flat." Her rosy lips curved into a teasing smile. "There's a street dance going on in the Lower Quarter," she added, laying one hand on Endymion's shoulder. "Want to go?"

She was beautiful. Friendly, too, and talented, with a body that could turn heads in any part of the Moon. With his position in the stables and a home of his own, Endymion was considered a good match, despite his Earth heritage. It was a widely-held opinion among the servants of the Moon Castle that the two of them would make a lovely couple.

Despite all this, Endymion was not attracted to Misa. As the years went by and Misa began to

Against All Odds

warm up to the mischievous boy, Endymion ceased to tease her, but he never felt anything more than friendship for the green-eyed woman. For that matter, he had never had true feelings for any of the women who had flirted with him while he pursued his mission of becoming a gentleman. As far back as he could remember, no girl's hair had been pale enough, no complexion fair enough, no eyes blue enough to stir his fancy.

Endymion sighed inwardly under the burden of disappointing Misa yet another time. "I'm sorry, Misa, but I'd like to be alone."

Her bright emerald eyes took on a look of true concern. "This is a night of togetherness and celebration," she reminded him. "What is troubling you?"

The dark-haired child of Earth opened his mouth to speak, then hesitated as he realized the true answer. "I don't know," he replied honestly. Laying a few coins on the bar, Endymion rose from his seat and left the tavern, heading for home.

Struggling to contain the grief churning within her stomach, Princess Serenity leaned against a marble pillar and clenched her fists to maintain self-control. The effort was beginning to make her feel queasy. Peeking back into the Great Hall, the abandoned bride-to-be searched for a friendly face. After a moment she spotted her four friends, but they were all gliding across the dance floor in the arms of smiling men. Of course, as nobility of their planets, the Sailor Soldiers would never miss a chance to meet potential mates. Serenity did not want to disrupt anyone's happiness with her own misery.

On shaky legs, the Princess headed down the passage beside the wall, breathing deeply to contain her tears. At last she emerged at the side of the dais at the front of the Great Hall, next to the very door through which she had entered earlier. Upon the dais, Queen Serenity still sat in her throne, watching the guests enjoy the ball. To the Princess' slight satisfaction, her mother looked worried. Comfortable chairs had been brought for the King and Queen of Earth, and their son, soon to be Serenity's husband, stood beside them in a refined posture.

Steadying her nerves with every remaining shred of confidence, the Princess lifted her skirts and climbed the steps of the dais. Before anyone else could speak to her, she hurried to her mother's side.

"Serenity, there you are!" the Queen greeted her warmly. "I was beginning to worry!"

"Mother, may I speak with you in private?" the silver-haired heir to the throne whispered.

Queen Serenity's eyes narrowed in puzzlement. "Certainly, my dear," she replied, rising from her throne. "Please excuse me," she remarked to Earth's royal family with a warm smile. Together, mother and daughter stepped down from the dais and slipped through the side door into the preparatory chamber, a luxurious room where royalty could make themselves ready for a public appearance.

"Serenity, I hope this is urgent," the Queen sighed as she settled herself on a silk-covered couch. "We might insult our guests."

"Mother, I..." She could not maintain control any longer. The emotions churning inside the Princess bubbled over and spilled forth, emerging as great heaving sobs. Her vision clouded, and tears flowed freely down her cheeks. The bride-to-be pressed both hands to her face, but could not stop the drops of sorrow from slipping off her chin and splashing against her pale chest.

The Queen was out of her seat in an instant and gathering her young daughter into her arms. The silver-haired girl pressed herself into her mother's warm bosom, letting all the frustration and pain that had built up drain into the fabric of her dress. For a long moment they simply held each other, a mother's comfort melting away the pressures of royal decorum.

"Now," Queen Serenity said as the sobs finally subsided, "what has upset you so, my dear?"

Her daughter stepped back from the Queen's arms and caught her breath, wiping the remaining tears from her eyes. "Prince Endymion, he..." She hiccupped, then tried again. "Oh, Mother, he's like a statue! There's no emotion, no warmth inside him at all!"

The Queen gave her an indulging smile. "Calm down, Serenity," she said soothingly. "You've only just met. There's bound to be some awkwardness. Once you get to know each other, things will be better. You'll see."

"That's what I told myself at first," Princess Serenity protested, "but he won't even talk to me. He'll

Against All Odds

barely even look at me!"

"It's all just so new and different," her mother argued. "He'll soon learn to love you."

The Princess bit her lip and averted her eyes, wringing her hands nervously. "Mother... If he doesn't..." Her voice began to waver. "If it doesn't get any better, I don't really have to marry him, do I?"

Queen Serenity sighed and closed her eyes, but when she opened them again, her gaze held a look of deep pity. She looked at her precious daughter, so grown-up and beautiful in the long white dress that complimented her perfect skin. The Queen's eyes swept over her child's long colorless hair - tied into balls like her own - and the blue stone hanging around her neck, and was reminded of her own coming-of-age. She was proud of the young Moon Princess and hated to see her crystal blue eyes bright with tears, but she knew what she had to say.

"Serenity, you are the heir to the Moon Kingdom," the Queen explained, looking at her daughter with apology in her eyes. "You must do what is best for your people."

The Princess' mouth hung open in disbelief. "You would force me to marry a man who does not love me? Who does not even care about me?"

"It is the way things are," her mother replied softly. "As royalty, your marriage must be a contract forged for the good of the Moon. Please, try to understand," she begged, reaching out for her daughter as the younger woman's eyes filled with fresh tears.

"Mother, how could you?" Princess Serenity cried in a hoarse voice. Whirling around in a flurry of white and silver, she dashed from the room, leaving her mother standing in a cloud of regret.

The Princess ran down the passage between the pillars and the wall, freely weeping, continually clearing tears from her eyes so she could see. Fortunately, all the guests in the Great Hall were still dancing, and no one noticed as one half of the newly-engaged couple fled down the corridor and slipped out the main double doors, drowning in her own misery.

Dashing down the front steps of the Moon Castle, past the startled valets and stable hands, Serenity rushed into the night, white dress flying out behind her. Wanting to be left alone, she shunned the castle gardens and headed for the common areas that the servants called home.

By the time she reached the cluster of huts near the stables, Serenity's glass slippers were badly chafing against her feet. Limping slightly, the Princess kicked off the hated shoes, imagining them symbols of the class that held her prisoner. The grass was cool and soft beneath her sore feet, and calmed her enough to end her emotional flight.

The servants' community was deserted, all its inhabitants off celebrating the very engagement their Princess was running away from. The grounds were silent enough that the distant snorting and stomping of the stabled beasts could be heard clearly. Pausing for a moment, Serenity wiped the tears from her face and neck. Her hands came across the thin silver chain encircling her throat. The engagement pendant felt heavy, like a lead weight, choking her with unwanted responsibility. With a strangled cry, the bride-to-be pulled off the pendant and flung it to the ground, where it lay glittering in the grass.

At the bottom of the slope Serenity glimpsed a pond shining with earthlight, the perfect medicine for her stinging feet. Chest shuddering with erratic, dry sobs, the Princess hobbled down the grassy hill.

The Moon Castle towered over the surrounding grounds, glowing with the eternal power of Queen Serenity. All its sweeping towers and turrets were ablaze with light on this special evening, casting a shine of celebration and happiness across the entire city. Endymion strolled over the grounds alone, gazing up at the beautiful structure. His life was so close to that of the nobility, and yet so far away.

Nearing home, the stable hand noticed a peculiar shine in the grass, reflecting the light of the looming Moon Castle. He bent down and discovered a perfect glass slipper lying forgotten on the ground. After some searching, he soon located its mate nearby. Both shoes were like new, completely undamaged. Endymion was delighted; shoes like these would fetch a fine price in the city.

When the young man took another step, a blue flash caught his eye. A stone's throw away he found a priceless treasure: a gold-rimmed blue gem on a silver chain. Endymion lifted it carefully in one hand. It caught the light of the full Earth brilliantly, sparkling as if glowing from inside. Surely this stone was worth more than a crate of glass slippers. However, although Endymion would gladly sell a pair of shoes

Against All Odds

that the nobility could easily replace, he could not in good conscience do the same with jewelry. A piece of jewelry was a personal gift... like a flower.

Sighing, Endymion looked around for clues to the whereabouts of the lost items' owner. He hoped to find a footprint or another lost trinket, but his search proved much easier than he expected. As he raised his head, his midnight eyes fell upon a distant figure wading in the pond at the base of the slope. The mystery person was dressed all in white, and even from this distance Endymion could tell the stranger's clothing was not that of a servant. Apparently a guest of the engagement celebration had wandered away from the others.

The stable hand adjusted his worn clothing as he headed down the slope toward the pond he had drawn water from as a boy. Perhaps if he were polite enough, the owner of the pendant and shoes would grant him a reward for returning the expensive property. Out of habit, he glanced at the old gardener's entrance to the royal gardens as he passed by. It was locked, as always.

Before long, he drew near to the pond. Endymion hid for a while behind some bushes by the shore, watching the stranger as he tried to decide how best to approach a member of the nobility. It was a young woman, and her back was turned to him and the Moon Castle. She was wading barefoot in the pond, her white skirts gathered in both hands.

Even from the back, Endymion was struck by her beauty. She had flawless pale skin, and the sloping line of silver circles that edged the top of her dress flattered her slender curves, adding an extra hint of grace to her every movement. She moved slowly, in jerking steps as if her feet hurt her, and her long pigtails trailed in the water.

Something stirred within Endymion's memory, and his eyes widened. Twin streams of hair tied into balls atop her head. A long white dress. Alabaster skin. The raven-haired young man stared at the glass slippers and blue stone pendant in his hands - a Princess' ransom. His heart began to pound within his chest. It couldn't be.

Serenity stepped carefully on the smooth stones at the bottom of the pond, soothing her aching feet in the cool water. She breathed a deep, shuddering sigh, all her tears finally spent. The Princess looked ahead, over the grassy fields of the castle grounds toward the city, where the common people of the Moon carried out their common lives, free of the bonds of a noble birth.

Her thoughts were interrupted by a sudden rustling, a heavy thud, and a muttered curse. Serenity whirled around to discover a young man lying sprawled on the grass beside the hedge that lined the edge of the pond. Startled, she let part of her skirts drop into the clear water.

Endymion could not prevent a blush of shame from searing his cheeks as he struggled to his feet, glass slippers and pendant still in his hands. Whatever he may have decided to do, tripping over a root and falling flat on his face certainly wasn't the greeting he had in mind. Shaking his clothes and hair back into place, the stable hand looked up at the young woman in the white dress, who had turned to face him. Endymion stared into a large pair of vibrant blue eyes. There was no mistaking her now. She did not speak, waiting for him to explain his trespass.

"Pardon my intrusion," Endymion muttered, averting his eyes. "I found these near the stables..."

The Princess sighed, seeing the symbols of her status that she had tried to abandon. "Yes, they're mine," she admitted reluctantly.

Don't hurt him! Since then, Princess Serenity's voice had matured into a beautiful soothing tone, filled with birdsong and flowing waterfalls. Endymion pushed the childhood memory out of his mind. Of course she wouldn't remember him, and he was puzzled. Serenity's reaction was not the one he had been expecting.

"Well," he said after a moment of awkward silence, "I'll just leave them here, shall I?"

Serenity's blue eyes studied the ragged stable hand as he carefully laid her shoes and the hated pendant on the grass. Even in the dim light she could tell he was an Earth-child, and a hard worker as evidenced by his trim body and muscular arms. Something about him seemed familiar, although she could not determine what. His presence was strangely comforting, and as he bowed slightly and turned to leave, the night began to feel quite cold and lonely.

Against All Odds

"Wait," the Princess called out. The stable hand turned to face her. "If you leave, you'll tell someone where I am," she sighed. "Besides, I could use some company. I thought I wanted to be alone, but..." She bit her lip and looked at him with eyes full of grief. "Please?"

"As you wish, Princess." Endymion felt like his heart had leapt up into his throat, choking him. Keep the Princess company? Him? A common stable hand? As Serenity daintily waded toward him, Endymion searched for something, anything, to say.

"You know, I used to draw water for the horses from this pond when I was a boy."

Serenity froze where she stood, ankle-deep in the crystal-clear liquid. Shivers rolled up and down her spine.

"I'm standing in horse water?" With a shriek of horror, she leapt out of the pond and practically flew to the shore, splashing water everywhere. When she reached the grass, the Princess danced around crazily, trying to shake off as much liquid as possible.

The tension was broken. In that moment, Serenity descended from the cloud of royalty and became just like any other squeamish young woman. More squeamish, in fact, than the average servant. Watching the Princess yelp like a child, trying to wring the water out of the tips of her hair without touching it with her bare hands, Endymion couldn't help laughing.

"What's so funny?" Serenity demanded, glaring at him.

"We just draw the water from the pond," the stable hand explained, chuckling. "The beasts don't actually drink here. Besides, the Queen's magic keeps the water pure anyway."

"Oh." The faintest shadow of a blush crossed Serenity's pale face, but she quickly adopted a haughty posture. "You shouldn't scare young ladies like that!"

"You shouldn't panic at a little horse water," Endymion shot back, smirking at her.

"You're rather bold, speaking to me that way," the Princess scolded with folded arms. It was oddly refreshing after the day's suffocating formality. She gave the midnight-haired man a slight smile. "I like it."

The stable hand grinned at her. "I am glad to please you, Princess."

"So, young man, might I have your name?" Serenity asked, idly squeezing the remaining water out of her silver tresses. "And what brings you out here this evening?" The Princess flinched inwardly at her use of such formal language, scolding herself for falling into old patterns.

"I'm Endy-" Endymion bit the word off halfway. He couldn't tell the Princess a stable boy had the same name as her Prince fiance. She'd laugh him right off the grounds. "Endou," he finished lamely. "Name's Endou. I'm a stable hand," he continued, lifting his jet-black hair off the right side of his neck.

Serenity casually glanced at the tattoo that served as the young man's permanent passport to the Moon Castle grounds. She would never have asked for proof, but was secretly relieved to see the royal crest marked in silver against his dark skin, proving he spoke the truth. Earth-children were reputedly untrustworthy.

"Walk with me awhile, will you?"

As if any castle servant could refuse. Endymion nodded and hurriedly scooped the pendant and glass slippers off the lush grass again, rushing to catch up with the Princess as she glided away along the edge of the pond. They walked for a while in silence. Endymion was as nervous as if the entire Royal Guard were chasing him. For all he knew, they actually were. Every other step he took, the stable hand looked back over his shoulder or peered into the shadows. Finally Serenity laughed like a peal of silver bells.

"Don't worry, Endou," she said lightly. "Nobody knows I'm out here." Endymion's senses were on heightened alert due to his paranoia, or he wouldn't have heard her add, "Or cares, anyway," in a near-whisper.

Why would a Princess sneak away from her own engagement celebration? Endymion risked a sideways glance at her. The Moon Princess was still a full head shorter than he, but now it was the result of heredity rather than age. Just looking at the crystal-haired young woman made Endymion's blood rush in his ears. She was growing up beautifully, slender and graceful, looking like an angel in her new white dress. She was older, yet somehow the same gentle child who had given a simple stable boy a rose.

Shaking himself out of a near-trance, Endymion noticed the sadness in her pure blue eyes and again wondered what could be troubling her. He wished he had the social status or the courage to ask.

Serenity breathed deeply of the cool night air, enjoying her respite from the reality that waited for

her inside the Moon Castle. Looking around, she realized that a moonlit pond, grass, and bushes could be as beautiful as a fountain-filled garden. Of course, much of that depended on the company. Serenity smiled absentmindedly, observing her companion out of the corner of her eye. For an Earth-born stable hand, he certainly was handsome. His dark eyes and hair were such contrasts to the light complexion of the male castle servants, and her mother had never allowed her to make friends with any boys of her own station. Here was the forbidden fruit, and what an attractive fruit it was!

"So," Serenity finally broke the silence, "you're a stable hand?" A blush flooded her cheeks, but she blurted out the rest of her question. "This might sound strange, but what is it like to work?"

Now it was Endymion's turn to laugh. "Necessary," he replied jokingly. The Princess turned her face toward him as they walked, blinking her large innocent eyes with a puzzled expression, and he sobered. "It can be hard, but rewarding," the tanned young man replied honestly. Besides, what if this was some kind of test? "It feels good to support my own life. I enjoy working for the glory of Queen Serenity."

The Princess nodded solemnly, her eyes downcast. "I suppose you feel... free," she said softly. "Free to make your own decisions, to choose your own destiny."

This time Endymion swallowed his laughter. If she only knew what it really meant to be a servant! Still, he could not complain to Princess Serenity about such things, or he'd be out of a job by morning. The stable hand did not reply, but his royal companion had more questions on her mind.

"Tell me, Endou," she began as they strolled through the earthlit evening, "if your parents told you you had to marry a certain person, even if you didn't want to, what would you do?"

The mention of parents momentarily distracted Endymion from the true magnitude of Serenity's question. "I... I don't know my parents," he muttered, a shadow crossing over his face.

"What? Why not?" The Princess stopped short and stared at him, her pale face a mixture of horror and pity.

"I was lost, somehow, when I was barely old enough to walk," Endymion explained. All the servants he saw on a daily basis long ago learned this story, and he was surprised at how much his heart still ached to tell it. "Miss Amaris, the stable matron, found me wandering the castle grounds and took me in. She asked all the Earth-born families she could find, but nobody knew me. I grew up as an orphaned stable boy."

"Oh, that's awful!" Serenity exclaimed.

"It's all right," Endymion assured her, unable to decide whether or not he wanted the pity of the nobility. "Miss Amaris takes good care of all the children in her charge."

"Still, if I didn't have my mother, I don't know what I'd do." The Princess turned to gaze up the sloping grounds toward the Moon Castle for the first time since their meeting. "I suppose I was too hard on Mother. I know she loves me dearly." She sighed a heavy sigh, the sigh of a burden heavier than her delicate body betrayed. "I should go back."

Without thinking, she lifted the hem of her dress and extended one dainty foot toward Endymion. The dark-eyed Earth-child stared at her blankly for a moment before they both simultaneously understood.

"Oh! I'm so sorry," Serenity babbled, blushing as red as a rose. "Force of habit, you know." She held out her hand to take the glass slippers, but Endymion knelt in front of her.

"No, allow me."

Face hot with embarrassment, the Princess allowed the stable hand to slide the cool crystal shoes onto her feet. He stood up, brushed the dust from his breeches and then moved to lift the engagement pendant over her head, but Serenity stopped him.

"It wouldn't be right," she explained with a slight, halfhearted chuckle. "Once it's on, nobody else is even supposed to touch the thing. It's bad enough that I took it off." She reached out and took the blue stone on its silver chain from him. For a brief moment, their hands touched, Serenity's silken pampered flesh brushing against Endymion's rough calloused fingers. They looked up into one another's eyes, blue engulfing black, black engulfing blue.

After a pause that seemed to last forever, Serenity blinked, feeling like she was waking from a peaceful sleep. What was she doing? Numbly, she hung the gold-edged blue stone around her neck and smiled at her companion.

"I enjoy talking with you, Endou," she said warmly. "You treat me like a person, not some object

Against All Odds

defined by blood. I should like to see you again sometime, if you're willing."

"Of course, Princess," Endymion replied with a slight bow. "Whatever you wish." A nervous wave abounded within the stable hand's stomach. See her again? A servant like himself?

"Tomorrow morning, there's a demonstration of the Moon Knights," Serenity said earnestly, wondering in a corner of her mind why she wanted to see this stable hand again so badly. Tomorrow? How had "sometime" turned into "tomorrow?"

"Yes, I know of it."

"The Royal Family of Earth will be occupied there, so I should be able to excuse myself," Serenity continued quickly before she could lose her courage. "Can you get away during that time?"

"I believe so." Endymion spoke as if he were dreaming, unable to grasp the fact that he was really standing there having this conversation.

"See that wall there?" The Princess pointed to the very stones that surrounded the garden where they had met as children. "There's a garden inside, my favorite one. I'll make sure the gardener's entrance is open. Will you meet me there?"

"As you wish, Princess."

"All right, then. Good night." Serenity turned and hustled away up the hill toward the shining Moon Castle, faster than she had meant to. Her heart was pounding in her chest and she felt as if it would explode if she didn't get out of there.

Once again, Endymion turned and headed for home through the cool of the evening. His mind whirled in disbelief. It was impossible. It all had to have been a dream.

Chapter Two

The morning dawned bright and clear, just like any other, and yet different. The people of the Moon slept off the effects of the previous night's revelry, dreaming of a future as bright as this dawn. To the casual eye, nothing had changed, but over the entire city lay a newly-woven blanket of security guaranteed by a pair of engagement pendants.

Unfortunately for the wearers of said pendants, even a light filigree chain could chafe against the skin. Princess Serenity awoke bleary-eyed after a restless sleep and rubbed the red, irritated skin around her neck. Nobody had told her whether or not it was acceptable to remove the pendant while she slept. Even if it hadn't been for the blue stone and its chain nearly choking her as she tossed and turned, Serenity's sleep would have been just as fitful due to her unsettled mind. As the servants washed and dressed her for breakfast, Serenity could think of nothing but the events of the previous night.

The air seemed cold against her bare shoulders as the maids fussed around their little Moon Princess, all grown up. The style of these new maiden-gowns left little to the imagination, and Serenity felt terribly exposed. One of the women rubbed some salve on the inflamed skin at Serenity's throat and covered the damage with powder as the others tied her hair into its customary buns.

The Princess gazed at her reflection in the mirror, still in a sleepy daze. Her eyes swept over her image, following the lines of the white dress as it flowed down from beneath her arms to her feet. The blue jewel sparkled on her chest even when she wasn't moving. Had last night really happened? Had she really become engaged to a cold statue? Had she really asked a stable hand to meet her in her favorite garden?

Serenity groaned as if she had drunk too much Moon Nectar, staring at the mirror with an expression of dismay.

"More powder?" Her lady-in-waiting hurried forward to dab an extra layer over the ring of irritated skin beneath the engagement pendant. "Don't worry, Princess, I'm sure no one will notice."

Princess Serenity longed to speak with her mother and apologize for her behavior the night before. It was all so silly, really; of course it would take time for Prince Endymion to become comfortable around his fiance. The Queen, however, was dining with the Earth delegation this morning. Their conversation

Against All Odds

would have to wait until later.

Breakfast was usually a relaxed, peaceful respite from the pressures of duty, but this morning the Moon Princess would be allowed no time to be alone with her thoughts. Her dining companions were the four Sailor Soldiers, and from the moment Serenity sat down she was bombarded with questions.

"A beautiful ceremony last night, wasn't it?" Mercury began diplomatically, trying to get information without prying.

Sailor Venus cut in with a far more direct approach. "So, tell us, what is the Prince like?" she asked eagerly, ignoring the plate a servant had set in front of her.

"He was handsome enough," Jupiter observed, glancing sideways at Serenity with a grin.

"He's quite... young," the Princess of the Moon commented quietly, squirming in her chair.

Mercury's eyes narrowed. "What do you mean?" she asked, confused. "Prince Endymion is older than you, Serenity."

At this, Venus stared at the blue-suited soldier with wide eyes. "But they're the same height!" she protested.

The short-haired girl shrugged. "That's what the Golden Kingdom's records say," she explained. "I read that all the children of his father's line have late growth spurts."

"No more distractions! Out with it, Serenity!" Sailor Mars demanded, focusing her violet stare on the young woman at the head of the table. "We want details!"

There was no way to avoid this conversation. The Moon Princess knew by looking at the four eager faces that her friends would not accept demure silence. The only choice she had was of what she was going to tell them. For a heartbeat, Serenity considered the truth. The four girls were her closest friends, after all. She could trust them.

However, she and Endymion had not yet had a chance to speak properly with one another. Their first and only meeting so far had been bound by ceremony and was under the watchful eye of the entire noble class. Once the situation relaxed a bit, the Prince might very well open his heart to his fiancée. Serenity could not in good conscience taint the four soldiers' opinions of the Earth Prince if there was a chance it was all a misunderstanding. After all, he was her future husband and would be living on the Moon from this point on. Serenity knew what her friends wanted to hear, even if it was not the entire truth.

"Prince Endymion is very mysterious," Serenity said finally, demurely blushing a delicate rose. "He's certainly a handsome and talented man, and a gifted dancer besides."

"We all saw that!" Mars waved her fork impatiently. "Tell us what he's really like!"

Now the Moon Princess shifted uncomfortably. "Well, we didn't have much opportunity to talk in private," she muttered.

"Oh, come on, Serenity," the green-suited soldier of Jupiter teased as she reached for a goblet of water. "You had all evening together. Tell us the details!"

The crystal-haired Moon Princess twisted her cloth napkin between her slender fingers and looked down at her plate, biting her lip.

Only Sailor Mercury had been quietly watching Serenity throughout the conversation, her face becoming creased with worry beneath her gold tiara. When she finally spoke, her sympathetic eyes stayed on the Moon Princess, even though she wasn't speaking to her.

"How would you know how much time they spent together, Jupiter?" Mercury asked. "Your eyes were on a certain young man all evening, as I recall."

A dreamy look flooded the brunette's face. She leaned on one gloved hand and stared off into space. "Ah, yes, Prince Tairou of Neptune," she sighed. The attentions of the other girls, however, were fixed on Sailor Mercury, who was typically the last person to make comments about romance.

"For that matter, Mercury," Venus spoke up with a coy smile, "you certainly enjoyed dancing with that refined blond man. From Saturn, wasn't he?"

Now it was the blue-haired soldier's turn to blush, staring at the table. The skin of the Mercury warrior burned as her friends teased her with eager questions about the Saturnian lord. She answered as briefly as possible, becoming intensely absorbed in the fruit slices on her plate. Serenity gave Mercury a sympathetic, but grateful, smile. For the moment, at least, she was off the hook.

Against All Odds

"All right, Endymion, confess. What's bothering you?"

"I told you to call me Endou from now on," the stable hand muttered, heaving another hay bale onto the cart.

"All right. Endou." Dropping his own block of hay back on the ground, Prien ducked around the dark-haired man and plopped himself down on the very hay bale Endymion had been about to lift next. Shaking his short wheat-colored hair out of his face, Prien stared up at his friend with a determined expression. "Well?" he demanded. "What's the problem?"

For a moment Endymion's face was like stone as he fought a battle of wills against his fellow stable hand. The Earth-born orphan's well-practiced neutral stare was engulfed by Prien's stubborn patience. The blond man waited, his hazel eyes never wavering as he stared up from his seat on the hay bale, defying Endymion's desire to avoid the subject. This was not the first time Prien had tried to force Endymion to open up, nor would it be his first victory.

At last, Endymion sighed and bent down to lift a hay bale adjacent to his friend's seat. Only Prien was more stubborn than Endymion.

"Do you ever feel frustrated with your life?" the tanned man asked, straining his muscles to raise the block of feed above the others.

"What do you mean?" Prien replied, getting to his feet and brushing hay off his trousers.

"Well, all this," Endymion said vaguely, waving one arm to indicate the Moon Castle grounds. "A realm of possibility, and my life is limited by forces beyond my control."

"Ah, this again," Prien grunted, shoving another block of hay onto the cart. "Look, everyone's life is determined by blood. You know that. It's the same with every other servant on the grounds."

"Not quite the same," Endymion mumbled, but his friend still heard him. Prien seized the dark-haired man's shoulder and turned him around to face him.

"None of us think any less of you or any of the other Earth-children. If anyone makes you feel differently, tell me and they'll be on the streets before you can blink." Prien's expression was stern in his seriousness. "Everyone knows you're the best handler in the stables, no matter what your birthright says." The blond man sighed as Endymion looked away without responding.

"Come on, now, we've been over this before." Prien released his friend's shoulder and bent down to grasp the binds of one last hay bale. He paused, letting the block rest for another moment. "You know," Prien said quietly into the ground, "you have it better than many Lunarians."

Endymion sighed and leaned heavily against the loaded cart. "I know," he murmured. "Despite Queen Serenity's best efforts, there are still many people desperate for a home and steady work." He leaned his head back, staring up at the sky. The sun's warmth poured over his face despite the artificial heat of the atmospheric dome. "I know I should be happy, Prien, I just... feel like I could be so much more," he confessed. "Like I *should* be so much more. Like I'm missing something, something important. Know what I mean?"

"Can't say I do." The last hay bale in place, Prien pulled himself up to the driver's seat of the cart. "If you ask me, Endymion, you're making stars of sand."

"Endou. It's Endou," Endymion reminded his friend, climbing up beside him.

"Whatever. Just don't think about it so much, okay? There's lots worse places to be than where you are." Prien leaned back against the seat, giving his dark-haired friend a jab in the side. Endymion whistled to the horses that were hitched to the cart and the marble-colored work beasts began to move. With a lurch, the wagon started rolling forward.

"You know," Prien said after a moment, "I bet I know what you're missing, Endy - Endou."

"Oh, really?" the tanned man scoffed, crossing his arms over his chest. He should've known the conversation would turn this way.

"You need a woman."

"Ah, that old tune," Endymion laughed, tossing his head. "You should know by now what I think of that, Prien."

"Yes, yes," the blond grumbled. "No interest, better things to do, no time... I know your usual arguments better than you do. But it can't be very pleasant to go home each evening to an empty hut and a

cold bed, my friend."

"There are benefits to a single life," Endymion shot back. "Besides, what Lunarian girl would want an Earth-child for a mate?"

"Look, Endy - Endou, you're not as bad off as you think," Prien argued, frustration in his tone. "You have a great position in the stables, a home of your own on the castle grounds... and you're not quite the ugliest stable hand around."

"Was that a compliment, Prien?" Endymion joked, elbowing the other man in the shoulder.

"If you ask me-"

"I'm not."

"-a potential love interest isn't as far away as you might think," Prien continued, ignoring Endymion's protests. "I'm not the only one who's noticed you've caught the attention of a certain young stable hand with green-"

"That's enough!" The humor was gone from the tanned man's eyes and tone. The blond threw up his hands in surrender and fell silent.

Endymion sighed and leaned on his knees, his body jostled by every bump beneath the cart's wheels. Misa was kind, beautiful, fun, talented - an excellent match. Why wasn't he attracted to her? He couldn't think of a single thing he disliked about her, and yet he couldn't shake off his subconscious' insistence that she just wasn't his type.

As the horses pulled the cart toward the low, rough stable buildings, Endymion gazed up at the white domes and turrets of the Moon Castle rising high above. Even in the daytime sun, the castle seemed to glow from within with innate majesty. Walls and hedges hid the gardens from the stable hand's view. As they rounded a corner and started up a sloping hill, a familiar old wooden door became visible.

Endymion felt a sudden nervous wave roll through the pit of his stomach. He was supposed to meet the Moon Princess there after he'd finished his morning duties. The very idea was absurd. He, an Earth-born stable hand, having a secret rendezvous with the heir to the Moon Kingdom? It couldn't be real. Most likely, it was only a joke. The Princess had been upset; she was probably only teasing him to amuse herself. If he actually went to the meeting place, he would be humiliated at best, arrested at worst. After all, he'd already had his warning as a child. Endymion still shuddered at the memory even after all these years.

On the other hand, what if Serenity was testing his loyalty as an Earth-born servant of the Moon? Not heeding her request could be even worse than violating Artemis' order. The Princess herself had invited Endymion personally. He would have to go. His eyes climbed the castle walls again. More time alone with the Moon Princess... How should he act? What would he say? Overwhelmed by uncertainty, Endymion hunched over and ran his hands through his short dark hair.

"What's eating you now, Endou?" Prien asked, noticing his friend's sudden nervousness. There was no response. "Hello? Endou?" The blond man shook Endymion roughly by the shoulder.

"What? Who?" The tanned stable hand shot bolt upright, looking around them.

"Endou. That's you, remember?" Prien teased, swatting Endymion over the head.

"Oh." Endymion grinned sheepishly, arching one arm over his head to scratch the back of his neck awkwardly. "I guess I'm having some trouble getting used to this myself."

"So what's on your mind?" Prien asked again, not letting up.

Endymion slumped back against the seat. He knew he would probably regret what he was about to ask, but he needed some advice and Prien was his closest friend.

"Well," he said slowly, "say there was someone. A woman."

"Hey!" Prien exclaimed, straightening up. "It's about time you woke up and realized that Mi-"

"It's not Misa," Endymion interrupted.

"All right, all right," the blond man chuckled. "If you are not ready to admit it, I will not force you."

"This woman," his friend said hesitantly, "is quite above me in status, yet it would be good for my position if she found me likeable." Yes, being friends with the Princess could very well help Endymion out of the career rut he was trapped in. That was the most likely reason why he wished to befriend her. "Tell me, Prien... what does one say to a woman like that?"

Prien stared at his friend with narrowed eyes. "What are you so worried about? None of the castle servants care what planet you were born on, you know that. Whoever she is, you won't have any trouble

winning her."

Leaning his face into his hands, Endymion groaned. Prien didn't understand... but Endymion had no desire to explain further. "Please, Prien."

"All right, all right." The blond man stared off into space for a moment, thinking. Endymion's gaze stayed fixed on the wooden door in the stone wall as they rolled past. Would it really be open for him? Would there be guards waiting on the other side? Had last night been a dream?

"Well, first of all," Prien finally began, making Endymion jump, "don't compliment her on how beautiful she is. She hears that all the time, from everyone. If you want her to notice you, comment on something else, like the sound of her voice or her friendly personality."

"But she *is* beautiful," the dark-haired man protested.

"Yes, but she knows that," Prien argued. "Even if she won't admit it, she knows she's beautiful. Everyone tells her so. You need to be unique, so she'll remember you."

"All right." Endymion's mind worked frantically, going over every detail of the previous night's meeting, looking for ideas. "What else?"

"Get interested in the things she's interested in," Prien advised. "If you don't know, ask. Women love to talk about themselves. With Misa, I don't think you have to worry about her hobbies being needlepoint or tapestry weaving," he joked.

"It's not Misa."

"Sure, sure, whatever you say." Prien playfully nudged his dark-haired friend in the ribs. Endymion sighed.

Princess Serenity glided smoothly down the marble corridors, heading for the balcony overlooking the courtyard where the Moon Knights' demonstration was to take place. Her guardians, the four Sailor Soldiers, surrounded her in a precise square. This was for appearances only, of course; the Princess was perfectly safe within the Moon Castle.

The crystal-haired young woman concentrated on moving as gracefully as possible, her flowing skirts nearly floating around her legs. This was her first full day as an engaged woman, and Serenity wanted her royal training to become habit. After her emotional episode the previous night, she wanted nothing more than to show her mother that she was worthy to be the heir to the Moon Kingdom.

It was a beautiful day, as most of them were. The next rain had been scheduled for after the departure of the King and Queen of Earth, to allow the visiting monarchs to enjoy the full beauty of the Moon. Sunlight streamed into the Moon Castle through the tall windows, filling the alabaster world within with soft light. Here and there, flecks of blue brilliance danced across the white walls, reflected by the blue stone hanging at Princess Serenity's throat.

Serenity was concentrating so hard on placing her feet correctly that she almost didn't notice when they rounded the final turn, coming into view of the small crowd waiting on the balcony. The murmur of conversation caught her attention, and she looked up to discover her mother and her retinue, along with Earth's royal family and their attendants. The Princess felt suddenly exposed, standing before all these people with her arms and shoulders bare. This maiden-gown was certainly going to take awhile to adjust to.

"Ah, Serenity!" The Queen came forward, followed closely by Luna, who stood ready for the slightest instruction from her mistress. The Princess put on her best smile. Her mother's dress was sleeveless also, as befitted a woman past her childhood, but it was completely form-fitting, exposing all the perfection of the Queen's slender curves. Princess Serenity was thankful that she would not have to wear an adult dress until her wedding day.

"I trust you are well this morning?" the ruler of the Moon asked, reaching out to take her daughter's hands in her own. The Queen's smile held its usual warmth, her voice its everyday casual tone, but her daughter could feel the trace of tension in the lavender-haired woman's delicate hands. The Princess saw a flash of desperate concern as she looked into her mother's eyes.

"Yes, Mother, I am well," she replied, adding all the sincerity and contentment she could muster to her own smiling expression. She longed to explain that everything was fine, but that would have to wait for a more private moment.

Against All Odds

Queen Serenity seemed to catch the hint, as an instant flood of relief lightened her entire demeanor. "That is good to hear," she said softly, searching her daughter's pure blue eyes for signs of unrest. Finding none, she released the Princess' hands and began walking back toward the balcony, extending an arm to beckon her daughter to follow.

Surrounded by a cloud of attendants, the King and Queen of Earth nodded respectfully at the approaching monarchs. King Arton was a tall, strong-looking man with dark hair and a serious expression. At first glance, he seemed a rock that the strongest storm could not disturb, but as Princess Serenity drew closer, she detected an uneasiness in his eyes that she could not identify.

Queen Elana smiled warmly at her future daughter-in-law, her delicate golden crown a perfect complement to her auburn hair. Prince Endymion had obviously inherited most of his mother's physical traits. As for the Prince himself, he stood in his mother's shadow, dressed in a simple black tunic and cloak. The moonstone around his neck was striking against the darkness of his clothing. He watched the approach of his bride-to-be with a neutral expression, even when Princess Serenity gave him a slight shy wave.

"Good morning, your majesties," the Moon Princess greeted the Earth rulers, curtsying gracefully. Behind her, the four Sailor Soldiers turned aside and headed toward Artemis, who was waiting by the staircase that led to the courtyard below.

"Is everything prepared?" Sailor Venus asked the white-haired man as they descended out of sight. As the premier soldiers of the Moon Kingdom, they would be organizing the Moon Knights' demonstration.

"Good morning, my dear." Queen Elana's voice was sunshine, but Princess Serenity could feel her ocean-blue eyes sizing her up, evaluating her suitability as mate to her son. Prince Endymion did not speak, standing motionless beside his mother.

"There is time yet before the demonstration," Queen Serenity commented, her gaze flickering between her daughter and the stoic Prince of Earth. "Perhaps Serenity and Endymion would enjoy a walk in the castle gardens."

Princess Serenity's heart lifted. Leave it to her mother to offer the perfect suggestion. "I would be delighted to show Prince Endymion around the grounds."

The Earth Prince, however, turned to glance at his parents without a word. Elana looked back at her auburn-haired son and gave him a slight, brief nod.

"Very well," Endymion said, with a small bow. Serenity was not quite certain whether the man's response was intended for his fiance or his mother. The Prince stepped forward and offered his arm, and the black-clothed man and white-robed woman moved off together toward the stairs. Their parents watched them disappear down the staircase.

"What a lovely couple they make," Queen Elana sighed, smiling at the Moon Queen. "They are sure to create such beautiful children."

"Indeed." After years of practice, Queen Serenity's smile of response showed not the slightest hint of strain. "With the combined ancient powers of the Earth and Moon, the future is certain to be an era of peace."

At this, King Arton cleared his throat and coughed lightly into his fist. A servant approached with a tray bearing two goblets of water, and the Earth monarchs moved toward the offered beverages. Queen Serenity and her retinue headed out onto the wide marble balcony, crossing from the shadows into the bright sunshine.

"Someday, we will have to tell them," Luna muttered through her teeth from her place at Serenity's elbow.

"Tell them what?" the Queen asked innocently, arranging the folds of her tight-fitting dress idly, but her eyes were averted.

"That the women of the line of Serenity can bear only one child," the woman in yellow pressed.

"No need," the fair-haired Queen said quietly, resting her slender hands on the rail of the balcony. Below, Sailor Venus stood on a platform, directing her division of the Moon Knights into position. "By the time that secret becomes impossible to keep, my Serenity and her husband will be ready to rule both worlds." The Moon Queen's thin lips curved into a casual smile.

Against All Odds

King Arton sighed heavily, swirling the crystal-clear water around in his goblet. His wife sipped her own water in a relaxed manner as they took a few steps away from their servants.

"Someday, we will have to tell them," Arton rumbled in a low tone, leaning close to Elana's ear.

"Tell them what?" The Queen of Earth moved to rejoin her attendants, but her husband stopped her with a hand on her arm.

"That Endymion does not possess the ancient Earth powers," Arton hissed. Elana whirled around to glare up at him, fire blazing in her eyes.

"He will," she said fiercely, barely keeping her voice below the servants' hearing. "He is still young. The powers will emerge in him."

"And if they do not?" The King was unfazed by his wife's intensity. "If our firstborn still lives-"

"He is gone." The goblet shook in Elana's hand. "He is dead, lost forever," she continued bitterly, in a tone that permitted no argument. She would never forget that day, no matter how many years passed.

It had happened years ago, during a period of unrest between the Earth and the Moon. After decades of discord and increasing mistrust, the situation had finally approached the boiling point. Historically, the people of the Moon had been regarded as gods that watched over the blue-green planet, especially the legendary Moon Goddess, Selene. As Earth evolved and more advanced civilizations developed, curiosity about the true nature of the Lunarians grew. Eventually diplomacy and permanent communications were established, and in the eyes of Earth's people, the Lunarians began to descend from their heavenly clouds. The goddess Selene was revealed to be Queen Serenity, little different from the monarchs of Earth, her kingdom little different from the Golden Kingdom.

This was where the real trouble began. Forgetting the immense age difference between the two kingdoms, the people of the Golden Kingdom soon decided themselves worthy of status equal to that of the other planetary kingdoms, especially the Moon. The palace of Earth's rulers was bombarded with protests and entreaties from citizens desiring everything from interplanetary travel to extended lifespans. The citizens of Earth demanded that their rulers no longer bow down to the supremacy of the Moon. Attendance at the temples of Selene dwindled.

Heeding the cries of their people, King Arton and Queen Elana, who had only recently taken the thrones, petitioned for Earth to be admitted to the Silver Alliance. As Earth had not yet developed the technology to travel through space, had not achieved complete political stability, and possessed no Sailor Soldiers, the request was refused. The older planetary kingdoms still viewed Earth as a headstrong child, not yet mature enough for their company. The council did concede that the hereditary powers of the Golden Kingdom's royal family had the potential to someday develop the strength of a Sailor Soldier, but for the moment, all appeals were denied.

Enraged and insulted, the people of the Golden Kingdom drew close to rioting. Its young rulers, unprepared to handle such a situation so early in their reign and with their backs against the wall, made a critical mistake. King Arton issued an ultimatum: If the Silver Alliance did not accept Earth as an equal, the Golden Kingdom would seal off all access to the blue-green planet. In response, Queen Serenity decided to cease all contact with the young world she had watched over for so long.

At the time of this turmoil between the Earth and the Moon, Prince Endymion, the first Endymion, was little more than one Earth-standard year old. King Arton and Queen Elana's firstborn son had dark hair like his father and soft gray eyes that promised to match the luster of Arton's someday. Even at such a young age, flowers always bloomed more fully around the boy, a sure sign that the Earth powers had reached a new generation. The sapling planted on the day of his birth had already reached the second-story windows of the palace, and it was the first to sprout leaves and the last to lose them. Since Endymion learned to crawl, his mother often spent hours a day with him in the grass beside the slender tree.

After Endymion's first birthday passed the young Prince rapidly became a real handful. The dark-haired boy learned quickly, too quickly sometimes for the attendants who were responsible for keeping him out of mischief. The rather simple duty of a nursemaid became far more complicated once the young Prince had learned to walk. Before anyone expected, he was racing around the halls of the palace, his small legs keeping him well out of reach of even his parents. Proud of their son's rapid development, the King and Queen rarely disciplined Endymion or tried to curb his adventurous behavior. Thus, the servants of the palace had plenty of fine clothing for their own infants, as long as they did not mind scrubbing out a bit of

mud or mending some tears in the fabric.

Arton and Elana would have reined in their royal toddler's mischievous nature had they known how much grief it would cause them. Half the palace staff gathered around the teleportation platform after the decree came down from the Moon. Together they watched in humbled disbelief as the column of light rising from the platform began to sputter and shift, the link to the Moon being severed and shut down. Their guardians, their gods, were abandoning them.

Enchanted by the dancing, flickering light, young Prince Endymion suddenly darted forward from his place. Distracted by what was happening and then startled by their son's impulsive act, the King and Queen had only enough time to cry out their firstborn's name before the dark-haired boy leapt upon the platform.

A shrill shriek of pain ripped through the air as the child discovered the column of colors was not harmless light. Before the eyes of his parents, Endymion's small body was torn apart and swallowed by the destabilizing technology.

Her son's scream of agony still ringing in her ears, Queen Elana lunged toward the platform with a strangled cry, but it was too late. The column of light sputtered one final time and then winked out completely, a metallic odor filling the air. By the time Elana flung herself upon the circular platform, it was nothing more than a mass of marble and metal.

There was little that could be done. All communication with the Moon had been cut off. The temples of Selene were being destroyed by angry rioters. Even if they could ask Queen Serenity if their son had somehow made it to the Moon alive, the kingdom would never forgive its rulers for being the first to break the mutual silence. Not only that, but to publicly admit the heir of the Earth was lost would be a dreadful blow to the reputation of the Golden Kingdom among the other planets.

In the end, the grieving King and Queen were forced to admit that their firstborn child had most likely been destroyed as the teleportation beam disintegrated. Prince Endymion was gone. For duty's sake, the royal couple abandoned all hope of finding their gray-eyed boy and set their minds on conceiving a new heir to the throne.

Their second child was truly his mother's son, with auburn hair and blue eyes, and was born not even a year after his elder brother's disappearance. In this crucial time of tension between Earth and the Silver Alliance, the Golden Kingdom did not want it known that this child was not their firstborn. The boy was also named Endymion, and would be kept in seclusion for several years, the rulers citing reasons of security. In reality, he was to be hidden until he was old enough for outsiders to believe he was two years older with a delayed growth spurt.

In the years of silence following the deactivation of all communication devices, the Golden Kingdom began to realize the value of its long-time guardian. All interplanetary trade with Earth had been cut off. Breeding programs designed to bolster Earth animals with desirable traits from beasts of other worlds ceased. Farms and industries suffered as they lost the aid of the Moon's researchers. When new diseases broke out, the Golden Kingdom had to develop its own cures. Queen Serenity's wise counsel was sorely missed in tough situations, and the young rulers often found themselves at a loss. Beyond that, it seemed the Moon Kingdom had even had some kind of peaceful effect on the planet itself, an effect that was wearing off. Winters became longer and colder. Wild animals boldly attacked villages. The mystics of Earth said it felt as if the world were slowly dying.

Poverty and death were gradually increasing. The Golden Kingdom remained stable, and the situation was not yet serious, but everyone knew it was only a matter of time. When the people of Earth began to penitently rebuild the temples they had once destroyed, crying out to Selene for forgiveness, King Arton and Queen Elana knew it was time for them to admit their mistake.

Striking a balance between the attitudes of equality and humility, the Golden Kingdom began an elaborate effort to mend relations with the Silver Alliance, admitting to its status as a child kingdom but looking forward to the day when it might reach maturity. With the acceptance of Prince Endymion as the seed of both kingdoms' future heirs, the Earth had achieved a valuable goal. It would even be worth the loss of the King and Queen's second son.

Elana smiled fondly as she thought about her auburn-haired boy. The charade had been successful; nobody suspected his true age. Prince Endymion was the Golden Kingdom's dearest treasure and its best-

Against All Odds

kept secret, and no one could be trusted to protect that secret more than Endymion himself. From birth, the child had been kept on a short leash by parents determined not to repeat their mistakes, and had been taught to respect and obey their instructions without question. This was a perfect son who would never disregard his parents' wishes. He would never destroy himself before his mother's eyes.

Princess Serenity and Prince Endymion strolled together through the warm morning sunshine. Serenity breathed deeply of the gardens' fragrant air, feeling much more at ease now that she was outside. The sun's rays were like a comforting embrace upon the bare skin of her arms and shoulders. Perhaps she could learn to like this new style of dress after all.

The betrothed heirs moved slowly down the wide main avenue of the gardens behind the Moon Castle, a long marble road that began at the rear balconies and continued to the distant wall. Ribbons of water separated their path from islands of brilliant blossoms, the perfectly still pools reflecting crystal clear images of the sky above. Slender pillars rose from the waters, towering overhead.

Serenity was pleased to see Prince Endymion's stoic expression falling victim to simple curiosity, his eyes roaming their surroundings. She was careful to leave her hand free at her side, half-outstretched, just in case he might feel motivated to take it in his own. So far, Endymion had made no such moves, walking silently beside her.

"So, what do you think of the Moon so far?" the Princess asked brightly, hoping for the best.

"Your home is quite pleasing to the eye, Princess," Prince Endymion replied. His betrothed bit her lip. Would he never drop the formal language?

"It is quite different than the Earth, I suspect," she prompted.

"Indeed."

Serenity fought the urge to growl within her throat or stamp her foot in frustration. Instead, she drew a calming breath of sweet fragrance and turned her head toward her companion as they walked.

"I have never been to Earth," the crystal-haired girl commented. "I should like to hear about your home."

Prince Endymion sighed quietly, his stiff shoulders drooping slightly. He paused for a moment, as if searching for words. "Earth is... more alive," he said softly.

"Alive?" Serenity looked puzzled.

"There are more trees," the Prince explained hesitantly, "and the air is never still. There is always a breeze stirring the leaves." He looked up. The dome over the inhabitants of the Moon gave the satellite an artificial atmosphere, but there were no clouds, and even in the midday sunshine the sky was dark enough that some of the brightest stars were still visible. "And the sky is brighter on Earth, a brilliant blue... like your eyes."

"My - what?" The Moon Princess blinked. Had this emotionless statue really just compared her eyes to the sky over his homeworld?

"Ah, well, it is as blue as - as -" Prince Endymion looked around wildly for another comparison. Serenity thought she caught the hint of a blush on his cheeks. Unfortunately for the Earth Prince, the only other acceptable analogy was also in his fiance's possession. "It is as blue as the stone on your pendant," he amended.

The Princess' hand automatically flew to her throat. The chain of the engagement pendant was just long enough for her to catch a glimpse of the stone, and she raised it before her eyes. The blue jewel sparkled in the sunlight, sending tiny cerulean beams dancing over the alabaster skin of her fingers. She tried to imagine a sky as bright and vibrant as this, and a fresh breeze tugging at her hair and skirts.

"I should like to visit Earth someday," she said. "It sounds like a beautiful place."

Prince Endymion cleared his throat. "I hope I will be able to visit there often myself," he said, a hint of a question in his voice. "My parents and friends, of course, are there..."

"Oh, certainly!" Serenity exclaimed. She suddenly felt dreadfully selfish. She had been so upset about being forced into marriage, but at least she was not being taken from her home. Prince Endymion was definitely making the greater sacrifice for this union between their worlds. The auburn-haired man was giving up the crown of an entire kingdom to live as second-in-power on a strange world.

Against All Odds

"You'll be free to visit Earth as often as you like," Serenity assured her fiance. A shadow of relief flowed across her companion's face. Had he truly thought he would be a prisoner on the Moon? "I only hope I might accompany you sometimes. I would like very much to see Earth."

Prince Endymion's face darkened slightly, and he turned away, continuing to walk down the wide avenue. The Moon Princess narrowed her eyes in determination and hurried to catch up to him. For a moment, the briefest hints of emotion had leaked through her fiance's cold exterior. She knew if she just kept trying, she could get through to him.

Shielding his eyes from the light, Endymion checked the position of the sun. The Moon Knights' demonstration would be beginning soon. His gaze rolled down the hillside toward the corner where a certain gardener's entrance lay half-hidden in the overgrown ivy. Would it really be open for him, or was it all a cruel trick?

"Endou, what are you doing?" Prien called. The Earth-child turned away from the window to face his friend, who was busily brushing down a snow-white steed, the mount of a Moon Knight. All the stable hands had been called to the high-class end of the building to help prepare the cavalry horses for the second half of the demonstration.

"Going to leave all the work to us?" Misa complained, grinning at Endymion over another beast's back. The dark-haired man jumped down from the ledge that ran beneath the windows and returned to his work, smoothing out the fine hair on a black stallion's side. A stable hand had no business being in the royal gardens. It would be best if he stuck to his work and stopped dreaming about befriending monarchs.

On the hay-strewn main floor of the stables, dozens of workers and beast handlers groomed and saddled the horses of the Mounted Guard. Endymion bent to his task, combing the tangles out of his charge's tail. On the Moon, a realm of crystal and marble, the black stallions were the rarest beasts in the stables. Only the highest-ranking Moon Knights rode them, and the senior squires were almost always their handlers. Out of all the stable hands in the employ of the Moon Castle, only Endymion was trusted to assist in caring for the inky black horses when the staff was shorthanded.

Endymion stroked the nervous stallion's neck reassuringly as a squire lifted a saddle onto the horse's back. He loved working with these sleek, muscular animals, their color obtained through crossbreeding Moon steeds with the wild horses of Earth during some long-forgotten age. Endymion knew it was silly, but he often felt a bond of brotherhood with the handsome black horses. As the tanned man ran his hand over the stallion's velvet skin, it seemed he could almost feel the Earth blood pulsing through the beast's veins. It seemed to resonate with his own life's blood, singing the same song of distant lands, fresh breezes, rolling grasses... Beyond that, Endymion sometimes felt as if the majestic creatures held a strange measure of respect for him, a distant quiet reverence.

Today, the horses seemed uneasy. The beasts surrounding the tall young man were skittish, stamping their hooves against the ground. Endymion suspected they were detecting the haste of preparation in the air, and the unusually large crowd in the stables was anything but reassuring to them.

Suddenly the dark-haired man whirled around to face another of the black stallions, being saddled by a squire. At first glance everything seemed normal, but an instant later the powerful beast tossed its head, tensed its muscles, and reared up on its hind legs, kicking at the air. The squire, a thin red-haired man, was flung to the ground and lay sprawling on his back. Around them, other horses were stirring, stamping, shifting...

Endymion was already moving, squeezing between horses and handlers as he darted toward the source of the potential stampede. The squire only lay there for a moment, gaping up at the thick black forelegs flailing above him, before a pair of strong rough hands seized him by the arms and yanked him out of harm's way. Then those same tanned hands reached up for the horse's bridle and the dark-haired Earth-child pulled the black stallion back to the ground. The beast neighed indignantly, but Endymion calmed it with soothing hands and gentle words.

The squire climbed to his feet with wide, astonished eyes. Without a word, Endymion handed over the horse's reins and returned to tending his own stallion. The tension among the other horses gradually mellowed out. The stable hand could never figure out how he always seemed to know when something was

Against All Odds

about to happen among the animals. Surely it was some small noise that had attracted him... but he couldn't help feeling as if he had some connection to the four-legged offspring of Earth.

Giving the horse a final once-over, Endymion glanced up at the catwalk that lined the far side of the stable. The stablemaster, head of all the beasts' quarters, stood there talking pleasantly with a handful of Moon Knights. The well-dressed man, who was rather short and stocky for a Lunarian, had not even noticed the near-disaster that Endymion had averted. The stablemaster continued his conversation, glancing at the floor below only to shoot the stable hands an occasional impatient glare.

Endymion growled within his throat, even when Prien and Misa complimented him on his quick thinking. He could be up there. He *should* be up there, directing the proceedings. Few of the stable hands worked as well with the horses as Endymion, and everyone knew that. He *would* be up there, dressed handsomely and giving tips to the Moon Knights, were it not for his blood. As a mere orphan, he might have had a chance at a transfer to the Mounted Guard's stable. As an Earth-child, he could not even hope for any position higher than what he already had.

This could not go on. Endymion could not live the rest of his life like this, having reached the top of his career at such a young age. There had to be a way to escape the golden prison in which his birth had trapped him.

His thoughts returned to the Moon Princess. She would be Queen someday. If he could befriend her, could show her that even an orphaned Earth-child had talents that could benefit the Moon, surely she could bend the rules of class and ancestry. Princess Serenity was Endymion's only hope for a chance to reach his full potential.

He would go to the arranged meeting in the garden. Even if it was a trick and he was arrested, at least that would bring change to his stagnant life.

Sailor Mars' temper is as hot as her fire, but I know she truly cares about me," Princess Serenity finished. She and Prince Endymion were walking through the tall hedges of a smaller garden now. This was a truly peaceful place, devoid of all sound. Everything was perfectly still; not a single green leaf moved. The couple's shoes on the stones and the rustling of their clothing were all that broke the background silence. Serenity walked slightly ahead of her fiance, leading him toward a particular garden.

"Tell me about your friends," she suggested.

The Earth Prince sighed quietly, his eyes roaming the motionless bushes. Serenity suspected he was growing tired of her questions, but she was not about to give up. After a long pause, he finally began speaking.

"My closest advisors are all the friends I need," he said. "They are my guardians, much like your Sailor Soldiers, and are the generals of Earth's army. Kunzite is their leader. He is a strong, serious man who works hard at his duties..."

The Princess listened attentively, watching Endymion with a sideways glance as they passed a small marble fountain. The young man's demeanor seemed to brighten as he spoke of the friends he had left behind and the pleasures of his homeworld. He still kept his stoic exterior, but beneath, a hint of feeling was beginning to shine through.

A gradual mist of sadness began to drift into Prince Endymion's eyes as he described each of his advisors in turn. Serenity had to admit his royal blue gaze was rather enchanting when it was not glassy and blank. Her fiance did not look directly at her, but the cool blue orbs shining from beneath strands of auburn hair, contrasting with the fairness of Endymion's skin, reminded the Moon Princess of the fresh, clear pools that were threaded through the gardens. Somewhere beneath the cold, sterile Prince there was a man with thoughts and feelings.

Without even realizing it, Princess Serenity's steps brought them to her favorite garden, sequestered in one of the far corners of the private grounds. It was a small hideaway, overflowing with flower-encrusted pathways and vines. A few small trees pushed toward the sun, their tender branches thin from growing in very little wind. Clear water burst forth from a pedestal in the center of the garden, forming a small pool at its base.

Eagerly, Serenity locked her eyes on her fiance's face to see his reaction to her favorite spot on the

Against All Odds

castle grounds. After a moment, her smile faltered. Prince Endymion looked around the garden casually, blinking in the sunlight, but his face remained impassive. His eyes had regained their blank, glassy look. He stared at his surroundings with a dull expression, without a flicker of interest.

The Moon Princess steeled her resolve and forced the smile back to her face. She wasn't going to give up now. The crystal-haired girl stepped forward and took a deep breath of the fragrant air, closing her eyes to absorb the feeling of the sun's warmth on her skin. The sweet scent of flowers filled her from head to toe, easing the weight on her soul. Opening her eyes again, Serenity turned to face her auburn-haired fiance, putting on her most friendly smile.

"Endymion, what is your favorite flower?" she asked brightly. The blue-eyed man sighed, looking around lazily.

"Princess, my life has not allowed much time for flowers," he said stiffly.

"Well, from now on, you will have more time to relax," Serenity commented. "The color of the gardens is refreshing, is it not?" Endymion nodded vaguely. Trying not to show her exasperation, the Princess pressed on.

"Look around the gardens," she suggested. "Find your favorite flower and bring it to me."

Cold sterile eyes bored into her. "Why?" The Earth Prince's voice was neutral and empty.

"Please, Endymion," Serenity sighed, begging with her eyes.

"As you wish, Princess." In a swirl of black cloth, Prince Endymion turned and strode away from his fiance. He headed off into the small garden and disappeared behind a tall bush.

Princess Serenity wandered idly down the pathway to the center of the garden, which was paved with small stones. This place had seemed so much larger when she was a little girl, like an entire world. She had been so innocent then, wanting nothing more than to play with her guardians. As a child, she thought those days would last forever. It had been years before she understood the responsibilities that came with her birth.

Reaching the fountain, Serenity reached out to touch the clear water bubbling from the marble pedestal. The crisp, cool liquid flowed over her fingertips, splashing against the hem of her dress. The Princess smiled vaguely, remembering all the times she had been scolded for playing in this fountain. It was here that she had met the first boy she had ever talked to.

She remembered it as if it were yesterday. A boy older than she, with dark hair and gray eyes, had wandered into the garden. He had obviously been a servant of the palace, with his dirty face and clothes. Serenity hadn't cared. Any child was a potential friend.

The grown Princess raised her head, and her gaze fell on the old gardener's entrance, through which the boy had invaded her world. The wooden door was barely visible beneath the ivy, which had grown thicker over the years. Only a few panels showed through the curtain of green. Serenity remembered how startled she had been to see a boy walk through that door. He had seemed so... natural, really, in his patched clothes, more real somehow than the immaculate courtiers that surrounded her mother all day. It had intrigued her.

Most likely, that was what interested her in the man she had met last night, Endou. His muscular, rough-skinned body, tanned by the sun, represented a life where stability was earned, not given. The Princess was curious about the world beyond the castle walls, a world she only glimpsed through the words of servants.

Endou. Princess Serenity had told him this door would be open for him to visit her. She sighed, nervously clutching the white fabric of her dress in her hands. She had been upset; surely she had merely been desperate for a sympathetic ear. She couldn't possibly have really wanted a second meeting with the stable hand. Besides, she was engaged; it would be inappropriate for her to associate with another man.

A sound behind Serenity caught her attention, and she turned around. Prince Endymion was back, strangely fast for a man who had never seen many of these flowers before. The Princess stepped toward the approaching Prince, away from the vine-covered door, leaving it firmly locked. She felt a twinge of guilt, but brushed it aside. It was unthinkable for her to befriend a lowly stable hand. When Endou found the door locked, he would surely dismiss the planned meeting with the Princess as a fleeting whim of royalty - if he showed up at all.

Serenity's face brightened when she noticed her fiance was indeed returning with a flower. Last

night everything had seemed hopeless, but now there was a chance that she and Prince Endymion might become friends. Her eyes narrowed as Endymion drew closer, and she realized the plant he carried was a tiny, pale thing, little more than a weed. Why would he choose that flower out of all the beautiful, colorful blossoms that filled the gardens?

The Earth Prince marched up to his betrothed, his youthful face as neutral as always, and held the flower out to her. Serenity took it from him timidly, with a stab of inner pain as Endymion shifted his fingers to prevent them from brushing against hers. She looked down at the pitiful, feeble plant, trying to guess the answer to her question even before she asked it.

"And what inspired you to choose this flower, Endymion?" the Princess inquired, swallowing her disappointment.

"It was there," the auburn-haired man replied simply. Serenity looked at him quizzically until he was forced to continue. "You asked me to bring you a flower, Princess. I have brought one to you, have I not?"

The pale young woman sighed, shaking her head until her streams of crystal hair waved back and forth over the stone path. "I wanted you to choose a flower that meant something to you," she grumbled.

Something flickered in her companion's eyes, and Prince Endymion looked away. "There is no such blossom here," he muttered. Serenity was at her wits' end. She stared at her fiancé, stepping closer to him so that he could not help but look at her.

"Endymion, we are to be together for the rest of our lives," she said, more bitterly than she meant to. "This can not go on. Please tell me what is troubling you so. Do you dislike the Moon? Are you displeased with this marriage? With... me?"

The Prince looked at her, his royal blue gaze meeting Serenity's evenly as they faced each other from equal heights. "Do you really want to know how I feel about all this?" he asked quietly.

"I do," the Princess replied, her gaze never faltering in her sincerity. "I must know."

"I can be honest, and you will not hold anything I say against me?" Endymion pressed.

"I can not punish you for speaking the truth," Serenity assured him, trying to remain calm. An uneasy wave of nervousness surged in the pit of her stomach as she dreaded what he had to say, and yet, she was eager to hear it.

For a moment, Prince Endymion looked away, uncertain. Then he turned back to stare intently at his betrothed, as if to ensure she would take him seriously.

"I have no desire to marry you, Princess Serenity," the Earth Prince said coldly, his eyes clear and sincere for the first time. "I do this because I am bound to. It is my duty, nothing more. I have no interest in becoming your lover or your friend, beyond what is required of us to ensure the continuation of our royal houses."

Serenity felt cold. She was surrounded by a fog of numbness. There was no light, and even the fragrance of the flowers was sucked away, leaving her alone in a world of emptiness. All that remained was the ice-blue stare of Prince Endymion's dark eyes, emotionless as he spoke the words that shattered her fragile dreams.

"I had hoped you would feel the same," the Prince continued. "I did not intend to hurt you, but it seems you were hoping for something that can never be. I have left my home - my life - behind because it is my duty, nothing more. It will always remain so."

The young Princess swallowed hard. The Moon was spinning around her, but she forced herself to stand firm. All chances at love, at happiness, destroyed? It couldn't be. Was she truly doomed to spend the rest of her days with a man who did not, would not, care about her? Despair threatened to bring tears to her eyes, but she fought them away.

"All right, then," she forced herself to say, although her tongue felt like stone in her mouth. "I'll speak to my mother. If both of us are unhappy, perhaps she'll see that we shouldn't be married."

"No!"

Startled, Serenity looked at the Prince and was shocked to see a genuine expression of fear on his perpetually apathetic face. All the color had drained from his cheeks, and his eyes were wide with horror.

"Please, Princess, do not break our engagement," Prince Endymion begged, looking almost panicked. "My parents have worked so hard to make our union possible. They will be devastated if I do not

Against All Odds

become your husband. The people of the Golden Kingdom are depending on this treaty to end their suffering. I can not fail them!"

"The treaty between the Earth and the Moon would not be in jeopardy," Serenity said, but her fiance shook his head vigorously. Suddenly, he reached out and gripped the Princess by her upper arms, touching her for the first time not required by custom or ceremony. His hands were smooth and warm against her bare flesh, soft from a life as part of the nobility, but the long-awaited touch brought no excitement to Serenity's heart.

"It is my parents' greatest wish that I be accepted as your consort," Prince Endymion said desperately. "I may not want to marry you, but I must! Please, Princess. You said you would not punish me for my honesty!"

"I apologize," Serenity said softly. "I will not breathe a word of this to my mother."

Prince Endymion heaved a sigh of relief. Suddenly, he seemed to realize what he was doing and released the crystal-haired girl abruptly. "I apologize as well, Princess, if I have offended you."

"Not at all, Endy-" Serenity stopped as her companion bristled and a flash of indignant anger flared on his face. "Prince," she amended wretchedly. The young man seemed satisfied by this.

"The demonstration will be starting soon," Prince Endymion commented. "Perhaps we should return to the castle."

"Of course," the Princess replied, moving toward the exit with a half-smile. She still felt numb, as if she were dead inside. She was engaged to this man, and yet he showed her no emotion beyond self-preservation. It was so disappointing, so... different from the only other Earth-child she had ever met. Serenity stopped at the bend in the hedge that would separate her from the secluded garden. At that moment, she wanted nothing more than a conversation outside the confines of formality.

"Please excuse me, Prince. I need to examine the garden for weed growth while I'm here. There's no need for you to wait; go on without me."

Endymion looked uncertain. "It would be unseemly for us to return separately," he said.

"I will rejoin you before you reach the castle, there is no need to worry," Serenity said brightly. The Prince nodded slowly, then turned and continued down the path alone.

Pausing for a moment, the Princess took a deep, steadying breath. Then, before she could reconsider, she hurried back to her favorite garden, her skirts rustling against the stones. After glancing around quickly to make sure no one was watching, Serenity scurried up to the nearly-hidden gardener's entrance. With trembling hands, she carefully worked the tendrils of ivy away from the old wooden panels. Soon she uncovered the lock, a simple sliding bolt of metal. After all, it was only intended to keep people out of the gardens; who on the inside would open it?

Steadying her nerves, Serenity wrapped her delicate fingers around the bolt and tugged it aside. The faint scrape of metal on metal seemed deafening in the silent garden, the soft click of the lock opening a startling blast. The Princess fought to quiet her breathing. She knew she should lock the door again and leave, but she could not bring herself to do it.

"I'll be back," she whispered to the old wooden door. Princess Serenity whirled around and hurried to rejoin her fiance, a strange excitement bubbling within her heart.

Chapter Three

Princess Serenity was nervous.

It had started off small, in the gardens; a tiny flutter within her stomach, the thrill of encouraging something that was forbidden. Now, as she stood on the castle balcony beside the man she was engaged to marry, the spark of nervousness had grown into a raging torrent of unease.

This was worse than waiting at the front of the Great Hall to see her fiance for the first time. The Princess fidgeted ever so slightly in her place as, far below, the Moon Knights marched and engaged one another in mock battles as the Sailor Soldiers put them through their paces. Serenity felt as if the demonstration were taking place within the pit of her own stomach. The sun was rolling higher in the sky. Soon, Endou would be looking for her.

"Are we to see the Sailor Soldiers in action as well?" King Arton asked. He had stepped right up to the rail of the balcony and was watching the Moon Knights with interest. "We have heard so much about them, and yet we know so little," he added hopefully.

"I'm afraid not," Queen Serenity replied, her voice casual. "The power of a Sailor Soldier is extremely destructive and can not be used so lightly." Arton looked disappointed, but did not argue.

Taking advantage of the break in the silence, Princess Serenity took a deep breath and leaned closer to her mother, who was standing by her side. "Mother," she said quietly, "I do not feel well. Might I be excused?"

"Are you ill?" the Queen asked, alarmed. Her eyes darted to the visitors from Earth, and her daughter realized the Queen's concern. Disease was rare on the Moon, and the lavender-haired monarch feared an illness had been brought from the planet.

"No, Mother," the Princess amended hastily, "only, the sun is so warm today, and this dress..." She rubbed her bare arms, as if to shield them from the sun's rays. Queen Serenity reached out a slender hand to touch her daughter's cheeks and shoulders. Fortunately for the Princess, her skin had indeed been warmed by the sun. A pang of guilt struck the younger woman as she read the sincere worry in her mother's eyes.

"Very well," the Queen said at last, squeezing her child's shoulder gently. "Perhaps you should spend more time indoors until you become accustomed to this dress, my dear. For now, it would be best for

Against All Odds

you to return to your chambers and rest." An apprehensive look crossed the monarch's face and she looked over the edge at the Sailor Soldiers, her daughter's guardians, who were busy with the Moon Knights.

"There is no need to disturb them, Mother," Princess Serenity said quickly. "I will be all right on my own."

"No, you must have an escort." The Moon Queen's eyes roamed the assortment of servants standing on the balcony and in the shadows just inside the castle. "Luna."

The dark-haired woman stepped forward immediately, the skirt of her ruffled yellow dress bouncing around her knees, and bowed slightly.

"Escort Serenity back to her chambers," the Queen instructed. To her daughter, she added, "I will check on you later, my dear."

Luna and Princess Serenity curtsied to the Earth's royal family and excused themselves, then headed into the shade of the Moon Castle's interior.

The walk to the Princess' suite of rooms was nearly painful as Serenity forced herself to move slowly despite her apprehension. She was supposed to be ill, after all. Inside, her mind worked furiously as she struggled to figure out how she could separate herself from Luna. The dark-haired woman had always been a bit overprotective of the Moon Princess, and Serenity could not help feeling that Luna still thought of her as an ignorant little girl. At least she no longer scolded the Princess for every misstep.

The Queen's advisor matched her pace to that of her liege's daughter, her long hair tumbling around the ruffles of her yellow dress. Serenity did not look at her escort, keeping her eyes trained on the floor, but occasional flashes of gold from the crescent-moon mark on Luna's forehead caught her attention as the older woman glanced at her with concern. Serenity knew she should say something to reassure her companion, but at the moment she was too frustrated at being unable to escape.

At last, they reached the Princess' chambers in the royal wing of the castle. Seeing them approach, the doormen opened the heavy double doors they were forever guarding to allow the women to enter.

The luxurious interior with its thick white carpet was no comfort to Serenity, although she was glad to remove her glass slippers. As they entered the sitting room, Serenity's personal attendant emerged from her own adjoining quarters, surprised to see her mistress back so soon. Blushing, the girl retied the confining ribbons of her dress and pinned up her red hair as she waited for instructions.

"A basin of cool water and a cloth, please," Luna ordered, putting an arm around the Princess' waist to guide her to the bedroom. The attendant nodded and was gone before Serenity could think to object. The two women wove between the chairs and couches of the front room and climbed the few steps to the raised bedroom, Luna lifting the white chiffon curtain aside for her Princess.

Serenity stretched out on her four-poster bed with a sigh as Luna circled the room, pulling the drapes closed to shut out the morning sunshine. The older woman met the attendant at the entrance to the bedroom, taking the bowl and cloth before dismissing the young servant. Sitting down at Serenity's bedside, Luna began to gently dab the Princess' face and arms with cool water.

The room was warm, the bed was soft, and Luna's caring ministrations were soothing. Princess Serenity could almost have relaxed into sleep, had she not been so nervous. She could not bear to look at Luna, the genuine concern in the older woman's eyes bringing Serenity nothing but guilt. For a moment, the young Princess considered forgetting all about Endou... but she had unlocked the garden door. The stable hand would be wandering the castle grounds alone - who knew what mischief he would get into?

Serenity sighed and swallowed hard, gathering all the courage she could muster for what she was about to do. It would have been easiest to feign sleep and wait for Luna to leave, but there wasn't enough time.

"Luna," she said quietly, "I'd like to be alone."

The dark-haired woman stopped pressing the cloth against Serenity's skin and was silent for a moment.

"Is something troubling you, Princess?"

"No, Luna."

With a sigh, Luna set the damp cloth beside the basin of water and leaned forward against the bed, her eyes serious and solemn. Her hair slid forward around her face, framing the golden crescent on her forehead.

Against All Odds

"Serenity." Luna reached out and lightly laid her hands on the Princess' pale arm. "I've watched over you since you were born. You can tell me anything, anything at all. You know that, don't you?"

The girl on the bed shuddered beneath Luna's touch. This was pure torture. She wished Luna would demand she cheer up, or even scold her; anything but this honest kindness. This way, there was no path left open to Serenity but that of cruelty.

"Hardly," she said coldly, swallowing tears of shame. "Your loyalty lies with the Queen. Anything I tell you goes straight to my mother."

Luna's hands abruptly pulled away from the Princess' skin. "Serenity - I -" The woman paused to keep her voice from breaking, then plunged onward. "I know you're unhappy about your engagement to Prince Endymion."

At this, a blush burned Serenity's cheeks and she wondered how many others knew about her outburst at the previous night's ceremony. She wanted to ask, but the rays of sun peeking around the edges of the curtains teased her, reminding her of time slipping by. She could patch things up with Luna later; right now, she had an appointment to keep.

"My mother told you about that, I suppose," she muttered.

"I'm worried about you, Moonbeam," Luna sighed, using her old nickname for the Princess. She had already been an adult when Serenity was an infant, yet due to the power of the Queen that embraced all who lived on the Moon, her face was still as youthful and lovely as it had ever been - even when she was distressed. "Did... did he... Did Prince Endymion harm you?"

Serenity stiffened on the bed and her breath caught in her throat. Was Luna truly that concerned?

"Please tell me!" the older woman cried, leaning forward over the Princess' form. "Has he hurt you in any way?"

"No," Serenity replied truthfully. She would not let her deceit extend that far. She turned toward Luna to show sincerity, and nearly gasped at the sight of tears in the woman's eyes. "The Prince has not harmed me, Luna."

Luna relaxed visibly, tension flowing out of her body. Serenity's arms ached to embrace the dark-haired woman, to show her she had not changed, but there was no time. She had to convince Luna to leave, and soon.

"I'm all right," Princess Serenity tried hopefully. "There is no need to watch over me."

"Nonsense," Luna replied, snapping back to her businesslike manner. "You are ill, Princess. I am responsible for ensuring your safety." This was an attitude familiar to Serenity. In moments like these, it was obvious that Luna was older than the Princess despite the growing similarities of their physical bodies. The dark-haired woman soaked the cloth in the basin again and began to wring the excess water out of it.

Now the bitterness in Serenity's voice was not entirely feigned. "I am not a child," she said coldly.

Luna looked confused. "I did not say you were."

"I am a woman about to be married," Serenity continued indignantly, pushing herself up into a seated position on the bed. Automatically, Luna reached out to arrange the Princess' streams of crystal hair so they would not impede the girl's movement. Without thinking, Serenity flung out an arm to shove her hands away.

"I can take care of myself!" Serenity protested. "I don't need all this ceremony and fussing! I don't need all of my decisions to be made for me, and right now I want to be alone!"

For a moment, Luna just stared at the girl on the bed, a girl she had cared for since birth. Serenity watched the older woman's face change from shock, to anger, to the most devastating expression of injury that the Princess had ever seen. Luna dropped the damp cloth she was holding and stood up, her yellow skirts rustling.

"Very well, Princess," she whispered, her eyes downcast. "I apologize." Hands shaking, Luna turned away and left the bedroom, closing the chiffon curtains behind her and leaving Serenity alone in the dim light. Serenity heard muffled voices as Luna encountered the attendant in the sitting room. The voices were cut off as both women left the Princess' chambers and the heavy doors closed with a firm thud.

Princess Serenity shuddered, curling into a ball on her soft bed. She barely knew where that anger had come from, but it was genuine. Even as an engaged future Queen, she was still treated as an ignorant child. She clenched her hands into fists, clutching the sheets in her fingers. At the moment, she wanted

Against All Odds

nothing more than a normal conversation with a person who would treat her like a normal Lunarian.

The Princess climbed off her bed and stood for a moment in the center of the room, uncertain. The door to her chambers was always guarded; how could she leave unseen? She considered the wide balcony that adjoined her bedroom, but she was on the second floor and there were no sturdy trees planted nearby. The same security measures designed to keep intruders out were making the Princess a prisoner.

After a moment of frustration, Serenity shook herself internally. She was an adult, destined to be Queen! Why should she have to sneak out of her own rooms? She was only going for a walk in the gardens; where was the harm in that?

Squaring her shoulders, Princess Serenity marched out of her bedroom and toward the doors, which were opened before her, as always. She could never figure out how the guards knew when someone intended to exit her chambers.

Her white dress and hair flowing out behind her, the young woman strolled between the two guards, who glanced at one another nervously. The Princess never left her chambers alone. For a moment they stood speechless, caught between different definitions of duty, and Serenity thought she might escape unhindered. She was ten paces away when one of the men found his voice.

"Princess...?" the middle-aged man called out tentatively, as if unsure why he was speaking. Serenity whirled around to face them and drew herself up to her full height, short as that was.

"Yes?" Her blue eyes were sharp beneath the crescent moon shining on her forehead; cool, clear, royal.

"Are... is..." The nervous guard faltered beneath his future ruler's cold stare. "Shall we call for an escort?" he finally asked, settling for a harmless question.

"Thank you, but no. Carry on, gentlemen." Serenity hoped she was using the proper language for such a situation. She turned away and continued down the corridor before the guards had a chance to consider it, taking the first turn she encountered to escape their view.

Once around the corner the Princess breathed easily again, heaving several sighs of relief. She shuddered all over. Serenity had not even realized how nervous she had been until the trial was through. She smiled a little smile all to herself. At last, she had been treated as a capable adult.

Serenity hurried through the Moon Castle, her white, nearly weightless skirts clutched in her hands. She kept to the smaller, least-used corridors to avoid being seen, placing her feet carefully to make as little sound as possible. As a child, the Princess had roamed the servants' passages on occasion when she could escape her attendants, and those memories served her well now.

At this time of day, most of the hands were occupied with preparing the midday meal or cleaning the castle's many rooms, and the servants' corridors were deserted. Before long, Serenity had slipped out a rear door and into a nearby hedge maze, and was hurrying through the twisting paths toward the distant corner garden. She only hoped she was not so late that Endou had given up waiting for her.

Of all the tasks he had been faced with in his life, all the cleaning, lifting, carrying, shoveling, and training he had done, Endymion had never imagined that opening a door would be the most difficult thing he ever had to do. He had nearly memorized every line in the panels of wood as he stood there staring at the overgrown entrance. What would be waiting on the other side?

Would there be a half-dozen guards, ready to arrest him for trespassing? The last time he had entered this garden, that very thing had nearly happened. The memory resurfaced within Endymion's mind: the white-haired man, Artemis, towering over him with eyes flashing in anger, his grip tightening on the boy's arm until tears pricked the corners of Endymion's eyes. Artemis had given his warning. Endymion was violating the nobleman's orders merely by thinking about entering the garden.

As usual, the chilling memory was chased away by the clear, sweet voice of Princess Serenity, pleading for Endymion's safety. Surely such an angel would not lead an innocent servant to his doom. Endymion's hand reached out for the door handle, eager to see the Princess again. She had been so kind to him, both as a child and as an adult, ignoring the limitations of his birth. He wanted to speak with her again, to show her that orphaned Earth-children were indeed worth a moment of attention.

He hesitated, his fingers hovering over the curved metal. There was a third possibility, worse yet

Against All Odds

than being imprisoned: the door could be locked. It could all have been the jest of a cruel, teasing Princess. Deep within, Endymion was afraid that was the case. He was afraid to try the door and discover that Serenity was not the person he hoped she was.

And so, his hand dropped to his side once again, one more time in a series of many. The door remained closed.

The garden was empty. Serenity's heart sank. Slowly, she wandered around the small enclosure of brilliantly colored blossoms, looking behind every bush and tree for a hint of dark, silky hair. Eventually she had to face the fact that the garden was indeed empty; she was the only one there. Serenity sighed, standing alone by the fountain in the center.

So, this was the way things were. He had not wanted to meet with her after all. The Princess leaned against the fountain, crestfallen. Now that Endou was nowhere to be found, Serenity realized how badly she had truly wanted to see him.

Absently, she wondered why this meeting was so important to her. She was a Princess, and he was an Earth-born stable hand. Obviously, they lived in completely separate worlds, not meant to collide. It was for the best, really, that he had not come. Serenity could go back to her own world now and forget all this nonsense.

Her own world... a world filled with ceremony and propriety, stiff posturing and a fiancé who wanted to marry her only because his parents had ordered it. Serenity thought of Endou, laughing at her frantic escape from the pond, his midnight eyes sparkling like the night sky. How long had it been since she met someone who dared laugh in her presence? It was a pity, really, that he had not come. With a sad sigh, Serenity gazed at the unlocked door, wishing it would open.

"I suppose I had better lock it again before I leave," she muttered aloud to no one in particular. Dragging her feet, the Princess approached the vine-covered entrance. Her hands reached for the lock, but then they swung downward to the door handle. Just a quick look outside, to make sure...

Endymion shook the tension out of his arms, then shook his head for good measure, his dark hair swinging around his face. This was silly. Enough procrastinating. Either the Princess was waiting for him or she wasn't; he would never find out by standing here. Endymion took a deep breath and reached for the door handle.

Before his fingers had even touched the smooth metal, the latch clicked, and the door began to swing inward. With a startled cry, Endymion leapt backward, nearly losing his balance. His surprise was echoed by a similar cry from within the garden.

After a few pounding heartbeats of resisting the urge to flee, the door creaked open a bit further, and the most beautiful face Endymion had ever seen peered around its edge, a waterfall of crystal hair tumbling to the stones from the buns at its crown.

Serenity looked out cautiously, unsure of who would be standing on the other side of the door. As Endymion's dark complexion slid into view, relief flooded her own pale face. That emotion was swiftly followed by delight. He was here.

"Come in, come in," the Princess urged earnestly, waving Endymion forward with one hand, "before someone sees you."

As if breaking free from a trance, Endymion blinked and hurried into the garden, slipping through the forbidden door for the second time in his life. Serenity quickly closed the entrance behind him, and it clicked shut.

The stable hand looked around slowly, his eyes sweeping over every detail. The garden was exactly as he remembered it, from the vine-covered walls to the bursts of brilliant blossoms lining the paths. There in the center was the small fountain endlessly bubbling clear water, and there beside it grew a certain rosebush covered in blood-red blooms. Endymion breathed deeply, inhaling the sweet scents that had so often filled his dreams.

Standing beside the tall young man, Serenity was reluctant to interrupt. It occurred to her that this

must be the stable hand's first time setting foot in a garden. With inner pleasure, she watched him take in the sights and smells of her favorite place, his enjoyment of the garden so different from her fiance's impassive indifference. After a long moment, Serenity reached out and lightly touched Endymion's arm to draw his attention.

The contact was electric. Serenity jerked her hand back as Endymion jumped and whirled around to face her. Her fingertips had been so soft against his arm, like the fresh powder of newly fallen snow, and yet warm and filled with life, flawless and smooth as the petals of the flowers that surrounded them. The texture of Endymion's skin, toughened by years of labor and sun exposure, left Serenity's fingers tingling with the heat of Sol's energy. They stared at one another as their hearts pounded with the shock of unexpected contact. They both knew something had happened there, something more intense than the previous night's accidental meeting of their hands.

"So..." the Princess began hesitantly as the pause began to become awkward, "do you like it?"

Thinking of the brief flutter of Serenity's touch, Endymion's cheeks reddened, and he averted his eyes, his lips parting without sound.

"The garden," Serenity clarified hurriedly as her mind followed Endymion's down the wrong trail of thought. "What do you think of the garden?"

"It's beautiful," Endymion replied, grasping at the excuse to turn away from the young woman's blue gaze. "It's just as I remem... er, imagined it," he added, catching himself just in time. The Princess didn't seem to notice his slip of the tongue.

"This is my favorite place of all the castle grounds," Serenity explained as she moved to stand beside him. "Thank you for coming to meet with me, Endou."

"It is my pleasure, Princess." Endymion watched as the pale young woman moved away from him toward a cluster of tulips. In one smooth motion, she swept her skirts out of the way and bent down to untangle a few blossoms whose stems had twisted together. So like an angel she was, attending to the fragile blooms with a mother's gentle touch, her hair forming pools of spun silver on the stones beside her feet.

One glimpse of royalty in a lifetime was a rare treat for a servant; Endymion was truly fortunate to have had three encounters with Princess Serenity. He searched for something to say, sorting through all the lessons he had begged, borrowed, and stolen in the past for something to show the elegant heir to the throne that he was no dim-witted Earth-born. She was so beautiful... graceful... like a goddess... but none of those compliments would do. For a moment, Endymion wished he were back among equals, where an exchange of teasing banter often led to friendship, but the ground was far too fragile here for him to risk using such relaxed language.

"It seems you know much about flowers, Princess," the stable hand commented at last, moving closer to watch Serenity arrange the tulips. "Do you care for them yourself?"

Serenity glanced up at her visitor, a bit surprised and yet delighted by his interest. "Indeed I do, when I can," she replied. "Of course, there are gardeners to handle such things, but there are few things as pleasant as a garden you've touched with your own hand." She straightened up and began walking down the path, smiling at the clusters of flowers surrounding her.

"I know them all as if they were my children," Serenity said fondly. "Chrysanthemums for friendship. Orchids for beauty," she continued, pointing to each flower in turn. "Tears of Venus for strength. Titanian Crystals for happiness. Every flower, no matter its planet of origin, has a purpose."

Endymion allowed himself a half-smile. Flowers from every planet, indeed. Perhaps this Princess would be even more accepting of his tainted blood than he had expected. Following in her wake, he approached the familiar rosebush near the fountain. The plant was hardly changed, so carefully had it been tended.

"And these?" he asked softly, looking down at the full red blossoms, each one a universe of self-embracing petals. "These roses, what is their message?"

The Princess stopped short on her journey among the flowers and turned toward the stable hand, although she already knew what plant he was inquiring about. It was a type of blossom she had been avoiding at present. Slowly, she walked back to the bush in question.

"Red roses," she said quietly, gazing at the blushing blooms beside them. "The flower of true love,

Against All Odds

and a promise never to be broken." Endymion watched her pale face carefully as her blue eyes became distant. Did she remember?

The scent of the roses filled Serenity, bringing with it memories of her childhood games. She had often pretended it was her wedding day. She would process through the garden, imagining herself as a grown woman in an elegant white gown. Even as a child, her hopes and dreams for the future had been firmly fixed in her mind.

She had dreamed of a grand ceremony in the Great Hall, which would be decorated with flowers and banners of every color. She would walk down the center of the hall, and a wonderful, handsome young man would be waiting there for her. He would be her best friend and would love her forever, always there to protect her and care for her. When she reached him, she would give him a single, perfect, red rose, to seal their eternal promise of love to one another.

Love. After all this time, the truth had finally been revealed. Love was an impossible dream, reachable only by the common people with no responsibility to the kingdom as a whole.

A pang of guilt and concern struck the pit of Endymion's stomach like a lightning bolt. All the joy had drained out of the Princess, from her flawless face to her slender body, and she stared down at the roses like a person doomed to never again see the sun. Her sapphire eyes, normally so bright and vibrant, had become dull and lifeless.

What was bothering her so? Had it been something he said? Endymion knew he should not pry into the personal lives of royalty - even Sir Marton's business was none of his - but he could not ignore the fact that she was in pain; that the beautiful smile had fled her face. He swallowed hard, then leapt forward into uncertain territory.

"Princess, what is troubling you?"

Serenity whipped her head around to glare up at her companion, immediately on the defensive. Doubtless the stable hand was eager for a bit of gossip about the Moon Princess' private life, so he could boast to his servant friends of his friendship with royalty. She prepared a scathing retort... and was surprised to see only honest concern in the young man's tanned face, the worry his dark eyes as serious as Luna's had been. The Earth-child's sympathetic expression did not falter in the heat of Serenity's glare, which swiftly softened as she realized he meant no harm.

For a moment, she seriously considered trusting this man with the truth. What a relief it would be to reveal to someone the dark reality of her arranged marriage! Yet, the fact of the matter was that her companion was a servant of the castle and a resident of the Moon. News of her reluctance to marry Prince Endymion would be likely to shock him and cause him to worry about the stability of the Moon Kingdom. And, of course, by the next morning the castle grounds would be buzzing with rumors. That was the last thing Princess Serenity needed.

Still, the charcoal-eyed stable hand was so caring, so sensitive to her silent suffering. As Serenity looked up at him, she knew he was seeing her as a woman, not as a Princess. Inwardly, she shook herself. She barely knew this man; had only recently met him. Why did her heart ache for her to trust him with its secrets?

"My fate requires that I do things I do not wish to," Serenity said at last, finding a compromise between confidence and caution. "Red roses remind me of that."

A slight chill rolled through Endymion, and he wondered what unspeakable act the Princess might be referring to. Violating another social grace, he began to walk down the garden path instead of awaiting the Princess' lead. His gamble was a success; Serenity followed him away from the flowers that were causing her pain.

"We all have our duties in life, defined by fate, do we not?" Endymion commented as the crystal-haired girl caught up with him and matched her pace to his. Maybe their worlds had something in common after all. "My destiny is to serve the Queen," he continued, "but there is joy in that fate as well. Have you no joy in your role, Princess?"

Serenity nearly stopped short in amazement, but she forced herself to keep walking. No man had ever spoken to her this way: polite, and yet with the honest interest of a friend.

"There is joy in being of my station," the Princess replied thoughtfully. "When I am Queen, I will have the power to bring happiness to the lives of my people and to protect them. My life will have great

Against All Odds

significance to the well-being of the Moon."

"A noble goal," the stable hand remarked. As they walked, he applied all his training to behaving as a refined courtier would. He almost couldn't believe his situation. Not only was the Princess of the Moon allowing him to bend the rules of propriety, but she was actually opening up to him, sharing her dreams and concerns! It was all Endymion could do to resist leaping for joy. He observed the garden around them, denying his longing to gaze endlessly upon the beautiful woman walking at his side. "With those values, you will be a fine Queen, Princess."

"I thank you." Serenity's heart fluttered nervously in her chest. She was walking with a man, an act strictly forbidden by her mother even if he were not a stable hand, and yet it felt so natural, so ordinary. Surely this was what companionship was meant to be; strolling comfortably beside a young, handsome man taller than she was, strong, and yet caring and considerate...

"You're quite learned, for a stable hand," the Princess observed, absently twitching her white skirts out of the path of her shoes with slender fingers.

"I have spent much of my life attempting to better myself," Endymion explained, being careful not to look at Serenity lest she discover another reason in his eyes. His hands began to shake, but he drew a deep breath and risked his entire life to speak the words he had come to say. "It is my opinion, Princess, that although fate defines our role in life, it does not define who we are."

To his relief, a faint smile touched Serenity's lips. "Very wise words," she commented. "I will surely remember them." Internally, she marveled at the fact that a mere servant, his garments patched and worn, could tell her exactly what she needed to hear. She had to marry Prince Endymion, yes, but she did not have to change for him. After all, he showed no intention of becoming anything but what he was. There was no reason for her to become any more bitter or any less loving than she had always been. Married or no, Serenity could still be the kind of person she wished to be. She did not have to surrender to her fiance's shortcomings. The Princess wanted to tell the stable hand how much difference his words had made, but she had to settle for "Thank you, Endou."

Endymion allowed himself a smile, as much out of relief as pleasure at the Moon Princess' gratitude. There was hope for the society of the Moon yet, if the future Queen agreed that birth did not determine the quality of a person. There was a chance that he might not be trapped as a work-animal hand forever. Hiding a chuckle, he shook his head in disbelief.

"What is so amusing, Endou?" Serenity asked, looking up at him with a wry smile on her blushing lips.

"Well, I..." Endymion's cheeks reddened, and he arched one arm over his head to scratch the back of his neck awkwardly. "I have not had the opportunity to converse with many members of the nobility. I must admit, Princess, you are more pleasant company than I had expected."

Serenity laughed, a light ringing sound that warmed Endymion from his fingers to his toes. "And what did you expect?" she teased, smirking up at the tanned man. "Not all of the nobility are coldhearted masters of propriety!"

"I know that now," Endymion replied, returning her smile.

The Moon Princess started to say something else, but suddenly she whipped around and stared at the tall hedges that marked the entrance to the garden. "Do you hear voices?" she whispered urgently. Endymion had been so caught up in the miracle of the moment that he had not noticed anything, but now in the silence he definitely heard distant voices, growing nearer. Serenity did not wait for his response.

"Go, quickly!" she urged him, waving him away toward the gardener's door. "You must not be found here!"

A cold block of ice settled in Endymion's stomach as he remembered what had happened the last time he was caught invading this garden. The memory rushed back to him, banishing the bliss of his conversation with the Princess. This time, he was no innocent boy, and Miss Amaris would not be there to speak for him. His dark skin broke out in a cold sweat.

"What are you waiting for?" Serenity hissed, seeing the fear seizing his face. "Go, hurry!" With one final gesture toward the wooden door at the other end of the garden, the Princess gathered her light skirts in her hands and dashed away between the hedges, hoping to give Endymion more time to escape by stopping the approaching people further away from the garden. In a flurry of white cloth, she disappeared

Against All Odds

into the hedge maze.

Breaking out of his frozen state, Endymion turned and ran for it, darting between the clusters of flowers scattered around the garden. As he rounded the fountain, something out-of-place caught his eye. It was a bracelet of round orange beads, lying forgotten on the stone path.

Almost without thinking, Endymion scooped the bracelet off the ground and slipped it into his pocket as he rushed toward the door. In another moment, the door was open and then he was through, closing the entrance behind him.

Endymion leaned heavily against the garden wall, pausing to catch his breath. He was outside; he was safe. The grassy hillside rolled away beneath his feet down to the distant pond. Never in his life had the stable hand felt so relieved to be outside walls. When his heart stopped pounding, Endymion left the garden behind and headed back to the stables.

Hurrying around a corner in the hedge maze, Princess Serenity nearly ran headlong into two familiar faces. "Venus! Mars!"

"Serenity! Where have you been?" Sailor Mars demanded, putting her gloved hands on her hips.

"The Queen is worried sick about you," the orange-suited Venus added, looking a bit worried herself. A spike of dread made Serenity feel queasy. Had she been gone that long?

Mars raised her wrist toward her lips and spoke into the red communicator strapped over her glove. "We found her," she announced, "in the gardens."

"We'll meet you in the Queen's office," the voice of Sailor Jupiter replied through the device.

"You were all searching for me?" Serenity exclaimed in disbelief. "Can't I take a simple walk in the gardens without the entire castle having to know about it?"

"You could have at least told *someone* where you were going!" the red-suited soldier of Mars scolded.

"It is our duty to watch over you and make sure you are safe, Serenity," the blonde Sailor Venus added, although her face was softened by a hint of sympathetic understanding.

"With all these visitors from Earth running around, a bit of extra caution is in order," Mars grumbled, folding her arms across her chest.

The Moon Princess pushed past the two Sailor Soldiers and headed for the castle proper, trying not to stamp her feet. She had never realized how suffocating her position was until she tried to avoid it. It was certain she would be severely scolded by her mother.

And yet, it had been worth it. Fondly, she thought about Endou, a mere servant and an Earth-child besides, who had had such gentle and caring words for her. The memory of his smooth dark eyes looking down at her, shining with honest concern, brought a faint smile to her face. It had definitely been worth it.

"All right, what is it?"

Endymion looked up from his bowl of vegetable stew, startled. "Huh?"

"You've been staring into that stew more than you've been eating it," Prien observed from across the table, pointing at Endymion with his spoon. "And you didn't butter your bread, even when the butter was passed around a second time. You never pass up butter. What's on your mind?" The stable hands surrounding the two men at the long wooden table listened for Endymion's response, as they had also noticed his odd behavior.

"C'mon, tell us," Misa urged, elbowing the dark-haired man in the side from her seat at his right. "We're your friends. What's the problem?"

"Not turning into the silent type on us, are ya, Endou?" a large red-haired man called through a mouthful of bread. With a chorus of groans, the servants eating around him tossed their napkins at the bearded man as crumbs sprayed across the table.

"Silent? Endou?" a muscular blonde woman laughed. "The sun'll fall out of the sky before that happens!" A chuckle rolled around the table.

"So, let's have it," Prien pressed, his eyes boring into his Earth-born friend. The group fell silent again, waiting for his answer.

Against All Odds

"It's nothing," Endymion replied, scooping up a spoonful of stew.

"None of that, now," his blond friend protested. "Out with it!"

With a mischievous smirk, Endymion grabbed his chunk of bread and chucked it across the table. It hit Prien's bowl of stew, which flipped over, tipping vegetables and broth over the edge of the table into the young man's lap.

The group exploded with laughter as Prien shot out of his seat, dripping with peas. Diners at several tables around them turned at the noise and joined in the merriment. Prien threw his own bread at Endymion, who caught it smartly and helped himself to a bite.

"Ah, buttered. Just the way I like it," the tanned man teased.

"I'll get you back for this," Prien vowed with a grin, scooping up his bowl and heading back to the serving line for a second helping.

Endymion chuckled and resumed eating as the stable hands around him clapped him on the back, congratulating him on his prank. Thanks to the distraction, Endymion was now free to return to his thoughts. These musings were mainly concerned with the bracelet currently burning a hole in his pocket.

Apparently, the chain of smooth orange beads had slipped from Princess Serenity's wrist at some point during their meeting. It was nothing special; surely she had others, and a possession of the Moon Princess herself was sure to earn a fine price in the Lower Quarter. And yet... returning the bracelet would give Endymion an unparalleled excuse to visit the Princess again.

Princess Serenity. Royalty, yet with compassion and a sense of the meaning of equality. So beautiful, with such bright blue eyes; eyes that looked at Endymion without seeing the dark hair and bronzed skin of an Earth-child. He wanted to see her again, no matter the risk.

That was his last thought before Prien crept up behind him and dumped an entire bowl of stew over Endymion's head.

For Princess Serenity, the remainder of the day was slow torture. After a stern lecture from her mother on the responsibilities and necessary limits of being a Princess, she had spent the rest of the daylight hours at Prince Endymion's side as the Moon Queen led the monarchs of the Golden Kingdom on tour after tour of the castle grounds.

The Earth Prince had not changed since the moment Serenity had met him. If anything, he was worse. He walked beside her, but it was as if she were not even there; his eyes were everywhere except on the woman who wore his engagement pendant. He never offered her his arm as they walked and did not sit beside her at dinner. They were a couple in jewelry only.

When her friends, the Sailor Soldiers, tried to chat with her, Serenity kept her answers short and simple. She did not want to risk slipping up and revealing that she had distracted herself for much of the day by imagining how Endou would have behaved in her fiance's place. By picturing the tall, dark-haired man making a snide comment or wise remark during the endless tours, the Princess was able to bring a smile to her face to maintain the illusion of contentment. At the same time, her heart was sad. They had not had time to arrange another meeting. She wondered if she would ever see Endou again.

Now, as she stood alone on her private balcony beneath the night sky, the barriers came crashing down. Serenity slid to her knees and leaned against the cold marble railing, tears rolling down her fair face. She truly was a prisoner of society, a dove in a gilded cage. She would do her best to maintain her true nature, to deny the coldhearted Earth Prince the victory of filling her heart with bitterness, but it was so difficult! A lifetime without love; how could she endure it?

With swimming eyes, Serenity looked out over the reflecting pool that extended nearly to the base of her balcony. The stars were clearly visible in the still water, a perfect mirror of the sky above. And there, at the apex of it all, was the Earth, the beautiful blue-green globe from whence came the source of her misery.

A faint rustling far below disturbed the Princess from her thoughts. She leapt to her feet, hurriedly wiping the tears from her cheeks. To the right of the small courtyard that was nestled between the castle and the reflecting pool, there was movement in a cluster of bushes.

"Who's there?" Serenity called out tentatively, trying to sound brave. Slowly, she backed toward the

Against All Odds

open doors to her bedroom, ready to cry out for the guards.

From the bushes a hand emerged, clutching a string of orange beads. The rest of the body followed, and a tall stable hand stepped into the earthlight, thrusting the bracelet in front of him like a protective talisman.

"Endou!" Princess Serenity exclaimed. Her heart beat faster at the very sight of him, her forbidden escape from reality.

"You, er, lost this today. I'm just, um, returning it," Endymion called up in a shaking voice. He cringed, dreading her reaction to his bold intrusion.

Seeing his fear, Serenity chuckled. "Don't worry, Endou. I won't call the guards. I'm glad to see you."

"You are?" Endymion replied in disbelief, walking closer to the balcony.

Serenity smiled down at the shabby young man, obviously a low-level servant by his clothing alone. What hardships had he overcome simply to return her lost trinket? Prince Endymion would never show such bravery for her sake.

Her mind flew back to her mother's lecture. The Princess was doomed to be a prisoner during the daylight. But perhaps, at night...

Kneeling on the marble again, Serenity peered down at the stable hand standing below. "Endou-" She stopped, noticing something. "Is your hair wet?"

In what was becoming a familiar gesture, Endymion twisted an arm behind his head and rubbed his neck, his cheeks reddening. "That's a long, strange story..." he muttered with an awkward chuckle. Internally, he cursed Prien for making it necessary for him to bathe before coming here.

The Princess stared down at him intently, determination shining in her eyes. "How did you get here, Endou?"

The fear returned to grip Endymion's heart. "I apologize-"

"Could you make it here again?" Serenity interrupted earnestly. "Tomorrow night?"

Endymion's mouth dropped open before he could stop it. "Well, yes," he replied numbly. "If you wish it, Princess."

"Bring something that can get me down from here," Serenity added. The stable hand shuddered slightly. Was she a prisoner? Was she being punished for meeting with him?

"Quick, go now before the guards hear us," the Princess hissed through the marble posts that supported the railing. Endymion nodded and turned to go, then whirled around again.

"The bracelet!" he whispered, holding it up.

Serenity had to lie flat on the balcony and Endymion had to stretch his arm and toes to their limits, but after a few minutes of effort the Princess managed to pluck the circle of orange beads from his fingertips.

"Now, go," Serenity urged her visitor breathlessly. "Until tomorrow."

"Until tomorrow," Endymion agreed with a bemused smile. The crystal-haired girl got to her feet and crept back into her chambers. After one last, long look at the balcony where she had been standing, the stable hand backed away and ducked into the bushes again, butterflies dancing within him.

Chapter Four

"Usagi-chan!"

The young woman groaned and shook her head, keeping her eyes closed. Someone was shaking her, but she was tired, so tired, and she wanted to sleep.

"Usagi-chan, please wake up! *Onegai...*" It was a girl's voice, and now it was choked with sobs. In the distance, someone screamed, and then there was an inhuman roar, like a nightmare come to life. Something shattered.

"Mako-chan!" the voice cried, and the insistent hands released the half-asleep woman's arms. Footsteps ran away from her.

Princess Serenity slowly opened her eyes. She blinked. She was looking up at the night sky, but the stars were faint and there was unnatural light everywhere. She was lying on a hard surface, and she was dreadfully cold. She felt... naked.

With a gasp, Serenity sat bolt upright. She was in the middle of a huge city of some kind, filled with enormous blocky buildings taller than anything she had ever seen. The ground she had been lying on was made of some sort of rock, but it was all one solid piece stretching as far as Serenity could see, beneath the entire city.

A chill, brisk wind stronger than any the Princess had felt before roared through the area, freezing her to the bone. She wrapped her arms around herself - and discovered white gloves covering her forearms and hands. Serenity looked down, and found only a bodysuit and an incredibly short skirt clothing her. She was dressed as a Sailor Soldier.

"What is this?!" Serenity cried out, flushing hot with embarrassment upon finding her legs were exposed to the world. Desperate for something, anything, to cover herself with, the confused Moon Princess reached back for her hair - and came up with handfuls of gold, blonde hair like spun sunshine. With a gasp of shock, she searched the crown of her head. There was strange jewelry in her hair, but it was still tied into the two buns that were customary for the line of Serenity, and it had the same texture and feel as before. It was her hair, but... different. The golden tresses were shorter as well; the twin streams of hair only reached Serenity's knees.

It wasn't only the hair that was different, either. As Princess Serenity struggled to her feet, she

Against All Odds

realized she felt strange. Younger, somehow. Her legs were shorter, and her breasts were smaller beneath the white bodysuit. Awkwardly, Serenity tried to pull the royal-blue skirt lower, but it stubbornly refused to cover more than her upper thighs.

A shriek distracted Serenity from her confusion and shame, and she turned toward the sound. An enormous monster was in the middle of the street, its hulking form twisting and writhing as it spread destruction in its wake. The young woman-turned-girl stared up at the fearsome creature, a mass of metal and flesh, her eyes wide with shock and terror. Nearby, a voice shouted a garbled phrase and a plume of flame surged toward the monster. It jumped aside, dodging the attack.

The four Sailor Soldiers were there, fighting the incarnation of nightmare. As the Princess watched, her friends and guardians launched one attack after another at the strange being, which roared in pain when they struck. Before her eyes, Sailor Venus leapt into the air and fired a beam of golden light into the creature's eye, landing gracefully with a triumphant smile on her face. Serenity's eyes filled with tears in spite of herself. She knew the monster was a danger and an enemy, but how could her friends take pleasure in causing pain?

Suddenly, the armored thing hunched over into a ball, and a hazy blue glow surged into life around it.

"It's going to fire again!" Sailor Mercury cried in alarm, staring at the screen of her palmtop computer. She and Mars ducked around a nearby block of metal, and Sailor Jupiter slipped behind a tall pole with wires sprouting from its top. Princess Serenity remained standing alone, exposed, stunned and confused.

"Sailor Moon! Look out!" Venus screamed from around the corner of a building.

Sailor... Moon?

The monster exploded. Or so it seemed at first. Countless shards of crystal materialized on its skin and burst outward in all directions, peppering the surrounding area with shrapnel. Serenity screamed and tried to dodge the approaching razor-sharp splinters, but her body felt sluggish and heavy in this alien city. Her legs seemed bulky and strange and she tripped over her own booted feet. The Princess collapsed on the ground, cringing in anticipation of the shards' onslaught, which was certain to tear her exposed skin apart.

Someone leapt in front of her, grunting with the shock of the landing. Serenity looked up. A tall man was standing between her and the monster, his black cloak draped over his arm and pulled across the front of his body to protect them both from the attack. The crisp midnight tuxedo he wore seemed to be made of ordinary cloth, but the crystal shards bounced off the cloak as harmlessly as if they were feathers. The suited man's back was to the young woman cowering at his feet, and she could not see his face.

After what seemed like ages, the monster's attack finally ceased and Serenity's rescuer lowered his cloak.

"I thank-" the Princess began, but the mysterious man charged toward the battle without a word or a glance in her direction.

"Fine time for a klutz attack, Sailor Moon!" Mars yelled as she emerged from her hiding place.

Sailor Moon... Did they mean Serenity? Her, a Sailor Soldier? What was this?

The battle resumed. The Moon Princess got to her feet and watched in mixed awe and horror as the four sailor-suited soldiers, joined by the stranger in the black tuxedo and top hat, attacked the monster from every angle with all manner of magic. Despite their superior numbers, the creature was proving to be incredibly resilient.

Gasping for breath, Sailor Mars stepped away from the fray for a moment. "What are you waiting for, *baka?*" she snapped in Serenity's direction. The Princess bristled momentarily. Friend or no, there was no cause for the violet-haired girl to treat her so.

"Finish it, Sailor Moon!" Jupiter cried, dodging a metallic arm that threatened to pound her into the pavement.

"I don't know how!" Serenity protested in a voice that was not quite her own, which whined even though that was not her intention. Also, that wasn't true. She did know what to do, although she had no idea how she knew. Her arm came up, and she was holding a scepter in her gloved hand. She looked at the monster and knew what she had to do... but how could she destroy a living thing, even if it was an enemy? How could she make the decision to end a life?

Against All Odds

She couldn't do it. Hanging her head, Serenity tried to drop the scepter. It wouldn't fall. She tried with all her might, but her fingers would not open. The slim rod was stuck firmly to her hand. She resisted, but her arm wavered, her body moved, and her throat shouted a strange phrase.

A flood of energy burst forth from the core of Princess Serenity's being and exploded from the scepter in her hand. Inside her, something sparkled and shone as the power flowed out of her soul. With a jolt, Serenity realized she had the Silver Crystal within her body, her mother's ultimate strength. She couldn't explain how she knew this, but she could not imagine power like this coming from any other source.

Glittering power surrounded the massive creature and it screamed its dying agony. The Princess could only watch numbly as a life was shredded by her own hand. The metallic body twisted and disintegrated - but something remained. Freed of the monster's possession, a young man slumped unconscious to the ground. Serenity had healed him, not destroyed him. She heaved a sigh of relief.

Sailor Mercury hurried to the victim's side to check on his health, and the other three soldiers approached their Princess.

"Are you all right?" Sailor Venus asked, her blue eyes filled with concern.

"Yeah, you were acting really weird for a while there," the green-suited Jupiter added.

She was acting strange? Princess Serenity studied her three soldiers, faces she had seen every day for most of her life. There was Sailor Venus, emergency double for the Princess and leader of the Sailor Soldiers, even more Serenity's twin now that the Princess' hair had changed from silver to gold. Beside her, the tall brunette Sailor Jupiter looked on, her hands resting on the green skirt that covered her hips. Mars' sharp tongue was strangely silent as she waited to be sure the Princess was all right. They were the same girls Serenity had always known... but their accents were strange when they spoke, and their eyes... their eyes held the dark, troubled look of warriors who had seen too much too young. Those were not the eyes of soldiers who lived in an era of peace.

"I am fine," Princess Serenity assured them, blushing as she recalled her unusual state of undress, "but what is happening? Where are we?"

Even as she asked the question, she somehow knew the answer. There were tall trees on the street corners, their branches waving in the chill, brisk wind, and the soil, where it showed, was brown. Earth. What were they doing on Earth?

To confirm her theory, Serenity raised her head and searched the night sky for the Moon, eager to see her home from the planet's surface. There, hanging above one of the rectangular structures that towered overhead...

At first, the brilliant white light of the silver Moon nearly blinded her, but after a moment, Serenity's eyes adjusted, and she was able to study the full Moon properly. It was beautiful, shining its bright pure light down upon its Princess, its outline a perfect, unbroken circle. Serenity drank in the silver shine as it poured down around her, blue eyes opened wide to search every white and dark outline on its face...

A cold, sick feeling settled within the sailor-suited girl's stomach. During her studies, Serenity had seen images of the Moon as viewed from Earth. The planet's sole satellite was white, yes, and it glowed with a silver light... but the images did not match with this reality. Where was the great atmospheric dome over the main city, shimmering with the blue-green tint of life? Even from this distance it should have been visible, like a bead of glass upon the white surface hanging above. The expansive seas, also, seemed darker than they should be, more like shadows than rolling bodies of water. It was almost as if... the entire Moon were... dead.

In that moment, Serenity knew. She had the Silver Crystal, her mother's Silver Crystal, thriving within her own body because the Moon Kingdom was gone. Ruined. Dead. Her home, her history, her heritage, had been reduced to a pile of rubble on a lifeless rock, her mother and her people along with it.

Princess Serenity screamed. She stared up at the dead white disk shining in the sky, breathed the cold air of Earth and screamed and screamed until her throat was raw with agony. The horror of what she was seeing overwhelmed her. She pressed her gloved hands to her mouth but the screams kept coming, forcing her pain past her fingers until she could barely breathe. Serenity quaked on her feet with the effort, her eyes locked on the empty shell of the Moon, its light like ice on her skin. She wanted to look away, but

Against All Odds

could not, and always there were the screams, again and again until the sound was ringing in her head...

Strong hands gripped Serenity by the arms and whirled her around, forcing her gaze away from the rock that was once her home. The tall man held her tightly, staring down at her from beneath the black top hat he wore.

"Usa-ko! What's wrong? Usa-ko!"

His voice was filled with fear and his hands shook where they held her. Usa-ko... Serenity did not understand the strange words, yet they filled her heart with a warmth unlike anything she had ever felt before. This man truly cared for her, truly feared for her safety. The cold nausea born of the knowledge of the Moon's demise still sat like ice in Serenity's stomach, but somehow, she knew she could bear the pain as long as this man was there to hold her in his arms.

She looked up at him, her chest heaving in the aftermath of her passionate outburst. The wind still blew against Serenity's bare legs, but the presence of the tuxedoed man warmed her. She breathed and caught the faint scent of roses emanating from his clothing - no, from the man himself.

His eyes were covered by a white mask. His very presence felt familiar to Serenity, but the mask covered that which she most desired to see. She wanted, she needed, to see this man's face. With trembling fingers, Serenity reached up, her gloved hand hovering close to the thin mask that shone white even in the shadows beneath the brim of his hat...

"Princess! Princess, please wake up!" a voice pleaded.

Serenity grunted and her eyes opened. Her personal attendant was bending over her, the girl's red hair loose and in disarray. Serenity blinked, disoriented. She was warm, but she couldn't move. Looking around in a brief moment of panic, she realized she was lying in her comfortable bed, the sheets tightly wrapped around her, fingers gripping the covers until her knuckles lost all color. A dream. It had only been a dream. That man, though, she had almost seen his face...

"Why did you wake me?" Serenity asked crossly, struggling to untangle the sheets that bound her.

"You were... screaming... Oh, Princess, I'm sorry!" the red-haired servant cried, fumbling with the tangled covers of the bed in an effort to assist her mistress. "I was afraid; I didn't know what to do!"

"It's all right, Adele," Serenity said absently, finally flinging the blankets away from her body. "Go and tell the others I am ready to rise." With a swift nod, the short girl hurried out of the room to fetch the rest of the Princess' attendants.

As she waited, Serenity stretched out on her bed and tried to hold on to the details of her dream. That man... Without even seeing his face, she had felt so safe and secure in his presence. Somehow, she had known he was a man who cared about her as a woman, not as a Princess. A man who... loved her. As long as he was there, she had felt she could face anything, even the destruction of her kingdom.

Serenity shuddered at the memory of the bone-white corpse of the Moon hanging in Earth's sky, and of herself, trapped against her will in the role of a Sailor Soldier. She squeezed her eyes shut. It had only been a dream. Only a bad dream.

Later that morning, Princess Serenity and her mother escorted their visitors back to the teleportation chamber for their return to Earth. A small delegation of Lunarian scientists and diplomats were traveling with them, to study the progress the Golden Kingdom had made since all contact had ceased between the two worlds. Prince Endymion was going as well, to finish settling the affairs of his life. In a few weeks, he and his four guardians would return to the Moon to make it their permanent home.

If the Earth Prince was excited to return to the planet of his birth, he showed no sign of it. Their parting was similar to their meeting; a simple kiss on the hand served as Prince Endymion's farewell to his fiancée. Along with her mother, the four Sailor Soldiers, and Luna, Princess Serenity said her goodbyes to the delegation from Earth and the departing representatives of the Moon.

Throughout it all, Luna seemed to stand as far from the Princess as decorum allowed. Although Serenity tried to catch the black-haired woman's eye several times, Luna would not meet her gaze. She was wearing her usual bright yellow dress, but there was no sunshine in her face.

Against All Odds

Even in the crowded room, Luna seemed small and lonely without Artemis by her side. Sailor Venus did as well, for that matter. Absently, Serenity wondered where the platinum-haired man was. It was unlike him to miss any important occasion, especially if Luna was going to be there.

At last, the assembled travelers lined up and faced the teleportation platform, the lower-ranking members of the party arranging baggage on their shoulders and backs. Princess Serenity received a kiss on the hand from her future father-in-law and a brief embrace from Queen Elana in farewell, but Prince Endymion's only final message was a short stiff bow.

A technician pressed a button on the wall panel, and the color of the shimmering column of light that rose from the platform shifted from silver to a soft gold, signifying a successful link with Earth. The departing people marched forward in a procession, climbing onto the platform a few at a time. As soon as they stood fully on the illuminated stone, the travelers vanished in a shimmer of gold light. Soon, they were all gone.

Princess Serenity sagged slightly as she breathed a sigh of relief. Finally, at least for a while, her life could go back to normal. For a precious few weeks, she would be free of Prince Endymion's disheartening presence. The assembled Sailor Soldiers and attendants began to file out of the room, the Princess and the Queen among them.

"Princess," Sailor Mercury called from behind the royal pair. The silver-haired girl sighed and slowed to a stop. Of course; her daily lessons with the blue-haired scholar.

"Wait, Mercury." It was her mother's voice. The Princess turned around to see the graceful monarch approaching her. "With your leave, I'd like to take Serenity under my wing today. Now that she is officially engaged, I think it's time she began training for her role as Queen."

"Of course, my Queen," Mercury replied with a polite bow. The four Sailor Soldiers left the room, leaving only the white-robed royals and the Queen's attendants, including Luna.

Queen Serenity led her daughter to the heart of the Moon Castle, down corridors the Princess rarely set foot in. Soon they reached an area that even the young heir to the Moon had never entered. There were no guards here, and the Queen's attendants rushed forward to open a set of doors inlaid with silver carvings. The group stepped through into a small, comfortable room furnished with simple chairs and sofas; a waiting room of some kind. The doors at the other end of the chamber were made of solid marble, with the image of a jewel emblazoned over the center in polished silver.

Here was where the attendants would be left behind. The assembled servants, who were the Queen's most trusted personal assistants, had obviously been to this place before; they filed into the room and seated themselves without waiting for instructions. Queen Serenity crossed to the marble doors and placed the palm of her hand flat against the gem emblem. Without a sound, the heavy slabs of marble slowly opened outward. Sunlight streamed in.

The Queen beckoned to her daughter, and Princess Serenity followed her mother through the doorway, Luna close behind them. As she crossed the threshold, the Princess' shoes landed in soft grass. They had entered a courtyard at the heart of the Moon Castle, an area open to the dark sky but completely enclosed by walls, cloistered in the embrace of the castle itself.

A few steps across the grass brought the three women onto a smooth tiled surface. In the center of the courtyard stood a small building supported by pillars of marble, with a silver door encrusted with carvings. Princess Serenity looked up, her eyes wide with wonder. Sprouting from the roof of the little temple was a tall crystal spire that climbed toward the sky, the sun sparkling on its smooth curves.

"The Crystal Tower," the young Princess breathed. She had always wondered about this place since she first saw the peak of the tower peering over the domes and roofs of her mother's castle.

"Yes," the Queen confirmed as she approached the entrance to the small structure surrounding the crystal's base. "The tower of prayer." At the door, she turned back to face her daughter and advisor. "I will enter first. Wait here, Serenity, until I call you." The Princess nodded solemnly in agreement.

Her mother pressed her hand to the silver gate, and the ornate door swung open. The interior of the building was completely dark. Queen Serenity stepped inside, and the entrance closed behind her, waiting just long enough to avoid catching her long streams of lavender hair.

Princess Serenity and Luna were left alone in the enclosed courtyard. The younger woman stole a glance at the dark-haired advisor and bit her lip, staring at the tiled floor beneath them. Luna's face was

Against All Odds

downcast and her eyes roamed everywhere but near her Princess. Her fingers twitched nervously over the cloth of her yellow dress. Serenity cleared her throat softly, her heart uneasy with regret.

"Where is Artemis today?" she asked conversationally.

"Artemis is bound to the royal family of Venus, not to that of the Moon," Luna answered briefly. "He is not permitted in this place."

"He was not in the teleportation chamber this morning, either," Princess Serenity pressed, unwilling to fall into silence again.

Luna sighed heavily, briefly closing her eyes in frustration. "Artemis has been sent on a mission," she muttered curtly, "a mission that does not concern you."

A hot blush rushed to Serenity's cheeks, and she hung her head, crestfallen. She knew this sharp-tongued voice. It was the voice Luna had used when the Princess was unruly as a child, when she needed to remind Serenity that Luna was her mother's advisor before she was the Princess' friend. It was her business tone. Serenity had truly hurt her.

"Luna, I..." Serenity trailed off, staring down at her hands. "Luna, I'm sorry. I was upset. I didn't mean those things I said. You are my friend. I mean, I want you to be my friend." After a pause, the Princess took a deep breath and timidly looked up at the older woman. To her relief, Luna was smiling, and the light had returned to her eyes.

"I am your friend, Moonbeam. I will always be your friend." The two women embraced, the warmth of their bodies banishing the chill of ill will. "Thank you," Luna whispered into the ear of her Princess.

"I am glad you two were able to resolve your conflict." Luna and Princess Serenity drew apart, startled, and turned to see the Queen standing in the open doorway of the small temple, a warm smile on her face. For a moment, the Princess bristled with indignance; her mother knew of the previous day's argument. Even her private conversations with Luna went straight to her mother's ear. She had little time to be upset, however, as the Queen called her forward.

"The Crystal Tower," the serene monarch began, "is a relic of the past. Through the tower of prayer, our voices can reach the Ancients." She looked at her daughter, her eyes serious and solemn. "This is a place open only to the line of Serenity. Only the reigning Queen may speak to the Ancients. You must never allow any other to enter the temple, Serenity; not even the Sailor Soldiers or Luna. Not even your own daughter, until she is ready. To do so would have serious consequences for our world, even destroy it. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Mother." Princess Serenity nodded unsteadily, quaking with nervous excitement. She was about to enter a place where only her mother had ever set foot, a special place for those of her blood. At the same time, a shiver of fear rolled through her body at the seriousness of the situation. What would she encounter within the temple? The Princess steeled her resolve. She would show her mother that she was indeed mature enough to be trusted with this responsibility.

Queen Serenity smiled warmly, her eyes sparkling in a way that reminded her daughter of incidents during her childhood days when she accomplished small advances that made her mother proud.

"All right, Serenity," the elegant woman said in the smooth voice the Princess loved. "Now, someday it will be your responsibility to pray for the safety of the Moon, but this transition can not be rushed. For today, please stand back against the wall and observe only. The Crystal Tower must become accustomed to your presence before it will accept your prayers."

The Princess listened intently, the butterflies in her stomach stirring up into a real frenzy.

"The contents of this room will be easier to explain once you have seen them for yourself," her mother continued, indicating the temple with a wave of her pale arm. "Unfortunately, we must not speak aloud within the temple, and it is the only place where we as royalty can truly be alone. Hold your questions until after we have left this sanctuary and I will do my best to answer them."

Her daughter nodded slowly, her blue eyes so wide they seemed to reflect the entire sky. At last, Queen Serenity turned and headed back into the darkness within the temple. The Princess followed close behind, resisting the urge to cling to her mother's skirts like a child.

At first, all was shadow, as dark as the Moon when the sun and the Earth had both fled the skies. As soon as the silver door closed behind mother and daughter, the darkness lifted in waves like heavy curtains. A blast of white light filled the temple and the Princess flung an arm in front of her eyes, biting

Against All Odds

her tongue to keep from crying out in surprise.

The inside of the structure was a simple round room, the tiled floor bare from wall to wall. At the center, the Crystal Tower rose from the dusty surface of the Moon itself, so thick at its base that all four Sailor Soldiers together could barely have embraced it. The smooth spire glowed from within with a soft white light, which was still dazzling even after Princess Serenity's eyes had adjusted.

Heeding her mother's instructions, the Moon Princess stepped to the side of the entrance and backed up against the temple wall, breathing rapidly with apprehension. The Queen approached the root of the tower and knelt on the hard tile floor, arranging her form-fitting white dress around her legs. Claspng her hands in front of her chest, the ruler of the Moon bowed her head and fell into complete silent stillness.

The Princess held her breath in anticipation. She stood perfectly motionless for what seemed a long time, her eyes soaking in the soft white glow of the Crystal Tower. Just as she began to grow tired of standing in one place, the room brightened. The heart of the semi-transparent stone began to glow brilliantly with a pure light that pulsed, throbbed, then steadied, throwing the Queen's shadow sharp against the floor.

The light was brighter than midday sunshine, yet the Princess felt no need to hide her eyes. A warm, comforting wave rolled over her and her body tingled from her fingertips to her toes. In that moment, she felt more at peace than she had ever been.

Her blue gaze plunged into the heart of the Crystal Tower, diving into the light, and the Moon Princess was able to discern the source of the power - a shimmering jewel, every facet symmetrical and perfect, shining brightly from the center of the spire of crystal. Surely this was the root of the power of the Moon, the legendary Silver Crystal. The Princess had often heard about the ancient stone that was her mother's greatest strength, but she had never before laid eyes upon it. She had, however, felt its power. The warm, tingling energy in this room felt exactly the same as what she had experienced in her strange dream.

After a moment, the light dimmed and the Silver Crystal returned to being an indiscernible part of the enormous Crystal Tower. Queen Serenity rose from the floor and led the way out of the temple, darkness descending around them as the silver door opened once again. The Princess stepped back into the open courtyard, the sunshine seeming dim and cold compared to what she had just experienced. Luna was wandering slowly around the area, aware that the royal women would need a moment of privacy.

"That... was the Silver Crystal?" the Moon Princess asked, looking up at the lavender-haired woman.

"Yes. That is the source of all the Moon Kingdom has become," her mother confirmed. "It is our only relic of the Ancients and an item of power so great it has few limits. The Silver Crystal," the Queen explained, "reads your wish, your deepest, most sincere desire, and makes it happen. Every day I pray for the safety and security of the Moon Kingdom and the means to protect its people, and the Silver Crystal grants my wish. When you are Queen, Serenity, that duty will fall to you."

"And the Crystal Tower?" the Princess inquired, her head swimming with the magnitude of what she had just learned.

"The tower acts both as protection for the Silver Crystal and as an amplifier for its power," the Moon Queen replied. "The Silver Crystal itself contains great energy, but it must be combined with an amplifier of some kind before it can release that power. In a pinch, your own body may serve as its temple." At this, the graceful woman's eyes became deadly serious as she met her daughter's bright blue gaze. "However, the Silver Crystal draws on all energy that surrounds it when it is active. If you become its amplifier, my child, you may also become its sacrifice. Never use the Silver Crystal with your own hands unless there is no alternative. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Mother." A chill swept through the Princess' body. If it came to that, would she be strong enough to give her life for her kingdom, for her people? That was the measure of a true Queen.

Queen Serenity nodded in satisfaction. "Then, that is enough for today. You will have daily lessons with me from now on, until you have mastered all the secrets of the Moon Kingdom."

Together, mother and daughter crossed the courtyard back to the double doors that separated them from the Moon Castle, Luna joining them on the ribbon of grass. The Queen again pressed her palm to the doors and they opened, allowing the three women to reenter the waiting room. The attendants inside rose from their chairs to rejoin their mistress.

Against All Odds

Suddenly, as the white-robed monarch glided across the room, her glass shoe caught the fraying fringe of a worn patch of carpet and the Queen pitched forward. Before her daughter could even cry out, one of the servants was already rushing toward the lavender-haired ruler, flinging out an arm in front of the older woman. Queen Serenity seized the offered limb and was able to steady herself.

"See that this carpet is repaired!" Luna snapped to one of the other attendants, who nodded and rushed from the room. "Are you all right, my Queen?" the dark-haired woman asked anxiously.

"Yes, Luna, I am fine." The Moon Queen looked a bit shaken, but turned to the servant who had broken her fall. "Thank you, Sala." Removing a jeweled bracelet from her wrist, Queen Serenity dropped it into the hands of the tall rose-haired attendant, who thanked her profusely.

"Always reward those who go beyond the call of duty for you, my dear," the Queen advised her daughter. "A good ruler ensures that her subjects know they are appreciated."

After the events of the morning, the rest of Princess Serenity's day settled back into a familiar routine. She completed her usual lessons with Sailor Mercury and entertained a few visiting diplomats, fitting in lunch and dinner along the way. At last, evening fell and Serenity was able to retire to her rooms. After dismissing her personal attendant with the excuse that she wanted to learn to prepare herself for bed - a married woman would need such a skill, after all - the Princess once again found herself alone on her balcony, staring out over the reflecting pool and pondering the day's events.

At last, she had seen the infamous Silver Crystal, the stone that made it possible for the entire Moon Kingdom to exist, the jewel that had created life on a dead, dusty rock. She had also learned one of the Silver Crystal's dark secrets: to use its power firsthand could mean death for the wielder.

A small breeze swept across the balcony, and Princess Serenity shivered more violently than the slight draft warranted. Would her mother ever be called upon to use the Silver Crystal's ultimate power? Obviously, the current Queen was prepared to do so if necessary, but Princess Serenity did not feel as confident. What if she were faced with that situation herself? Would she be able to willingly sacrifice her life?

The young woman looked out over the castle grounds. She knew that out there, beyond the clear water and colorful flowers sparkling in the earthlight, lay an entire city - no, an entire world, depending on its rulers for survival. Those people were able to sleep at night due to their belief that Serenity would someday protect them as her mother did. Could she live up to their expectations? Would she fail her people?

The cloud of melancholy was so thick around Serenity that she almost did not notice the rustling of the bushes below her balcony. As she turned to look down, a dark shape darted out from the leaves and rushed to the corner where the balcony met the castle wall. The Princess almost screamed before she remembered.

"Endou!" she exclaimed in a whisper, hurrying to the side of the balcony to peer down at the dark-haired stable hand. He smiled shyly up at her, his charcoal eyes shining in the earthlight. He held a length of slender rope in his tanned hands. Serenity leaned over the rail eagerly. A visit with Endou was the perfect thing to take her mind off the heavy responsibilities that faced her.

Suddenly, she straightened up. By visiting the Princess secretly, this Earth-child was putting his liberty on the line. Surely that was an act above and beyond the call of duty.

"Just a moment!" Serenity rushed back into her chambers, her white dress flying out behind her. Inside, she looked around her bedroom frantically. What trinket could she give this young man as a reward for his service?

Her fingers strayed to the bracelet of orange beads around her wrist. She should probably have told the stable hand to keep it in the first place; perhaps if she gave it to him now... but the memory brought a faint smile to Serenity's pale face. He had come all this way just to return the bracelet to her, had brought it to her personally... had touched it with his own hands...

Why was she thinking that way? The young Princess blushed furiously and shook her head to clear it. Still, she wanted to keep the bracelet as her own memento. Something else...

Scurrying over to her dressing-table, Serenity opened a drawer and lifted out a gold, star-shaped locket. Yes, this would do nicely. It was both valuable and unique, yet Serenity had amassed so many

Against All Odds

trinkets over the years that no one but herself would notice its absence. Besides, she recalled darkly, there was now no hope that the locket would ever work properly. She slipped the smooth object into a hidden pocket of her dress and dashed back out onto the balcony.

"Thank you for coming," Serenity said, leaning against the rail to look down at her visitor. "The castle may be large, but it feels like a prison sometimes."

"It is my pleasure, Princess," Endymion replied. What was he doing here? Again? If he were found here, nothing could save him. He looked up at the young Lunarian bending over the rail, her silver hair pooling on the creamy marble, her pale face bathed in her own shadow. She truly seemed happy to see him, as if a great weight had been lifted from her shoulders. The smile of her rosy lips, the sparkle in her sapphire eyes, made Endymion feel lighter as well. He had no regrets.

"Let's get you down from there... if you still wish it, that is."

"I do." Kneeling close to the railing, Serenity slipped her arms through the marble posts to catch the end of the rope as Endymion tossed it up to her. Following the young man's instructions, the Princess wrapped the rope around one of the railing's supports, letting both ends dangle toward the ground. Despite her efforts to appear brave, the young woman trembled as she climbed over the edge and slipped her foot into a loop Endymion had tied in the rope. As Serenity clung to the cord, the stable hand gently lowered her to the ground. Once again, the Lunarian Princess and the Earth-born stable hand stood face to face.

Serenity had landed quite close to the man, close enough that she had to tilt her head upward to see his face. He was dressed all in black, but it was the dusky deep gray of inexpensive roughly-woven cloth. He seemed to have a perfect tan, and his hair was tossed and disheveled as if he had been running. Looking at his face, the Princess noticed a few very faint scars, memorials to a lifetime of work.

In her daily life, Princess Serenity encountered a great number of people, all of them with smooth, delicate skin and elegant, expensive clothing. This man was unique to her, his alien lifestyle an enigma. There was something about this rough-skinned, rugged man that, somewhere deep within her heart, the pampered Princess found quite attractive.

Endymion was struck silent by the situation, standing so close to the heir to the Moon for the third day in a row. For a long moment he gazed down at the pale, crystal-haired woman, whose cheeks flushed slightly under his watch. She was so beautiful, with her alabaster skin and pure white dress, that she nearly shone. The young man's brow furrowed. In fact, the Princess shone too brightly.

"Do you not have anything... well, darker, to wear?" he whispered awkwardly.

Serenity bristled, her cheeks flooding with red. "How many options do you think I have?" she hissed. "Do you not have anything more formal to wear?"

"Fair enough," Endymion admitted, abruptly conscious of his worn and patched clothing. "I apologize." He reached up to his throat and unclasped his cloak, holding the length of dark brown cloth out to his companion. "If you don't mind, Princess," he muttered, "it will be easiest if we are able to blend with the shadows."

Serenity reached out and took the cloak tentatively. The rough fibers were harsher than any cloth she had ever before touched and she wondered how anyone could bear such coarse fabric against their skin.

"Are you ashamed of me, Endou?" she teased as she wrapped the cloak around her body, trying to ignore the prickling on her bare shoulders and arms.

"Not at all," the dark-haired man replied softly, "but you sparkle like the stars, Princess, and we will be seen." Both of the young people's hearts skipped a beat. What had he just said?

The Princess carefully lifted the hood of the cloak and settled it over the buns on her head, completely covering her shimmering colorless hair. Satisfied, Endymion led the way into the nearby bushes. Behind the hedge, they skirted the garden wall and, after narrowly avoiding a few guards, the pair stole into the labyrinth that was the Royal Gardens.

As the stable hand wound his way through garden after garden, Serenity was secretly impressed by his knowledge of the layout of the grounds. How much time must he have spent the previous night finding his way to her balcony?

As she hurried to keep up with Endymion's longer stride, a flash of white cloth escaped from beneath the cloak, and Serenity quickly wrapped it tighter around herself. The Princess had to admit the rough cloak was warm and effectively kept out the night chill. The cloth smelled only faintly of horses;

obviously the young man was careful to keep it clean. There was another scent embedded in the fabric, a sweeter, velvet scent that was familiar...

Roses. Princess Serenity nearly stopped short in her tracks. The stable hand's cloak smelled of roses. Impossible. The only roses on the Moon grew in the castle gardens, and this cloak would've had to be in the presence of the flowers quite often before it would absorb the fragrance. Yet, there it was.

After what seemed an eternity of panicked flight to Endymion, the two of them finally reached the overgrown gardener's entrance and slipped outside. As Serenity pulled the door closed behind them, the stable hand slumped against the wall, gasping for breath. They were safe. The servants of the Moon Castle were permitted to roam the outer grounds as they wished; as long as nobody recognized the Princess, the two young people would be undisturbed.

Serenity tilted her head back and drank the starlight into her eyes, breathing deeply of the night air. She was outside. Although the outer wall still separated her from the city, she was freer than she had ever been, away from the demands of her station. With a small whoop of delight, the Princess leapt out of the shadow of the wall and into the full earthlight, the lush grass brushing against her ankles. She felt liberated, safe from the public's ever-present prying eye. Throwing out her arms, the young woman began to spin in a circle, laughing. As she whirled, the brown cowl slid off her head and her liquid-diamond hair caught the light of the evening.

At first, Endymion feared he had made a dreadful mistake and the Princess had gone quite mad. After a moment, however, he recognized the joy in her voice and realized she was simply as relieved as he that they had escaped without incident. The stable hand chuckled as he watched her from his place against the wall. Beneath the elegant clothing and years of training, Serenity was a young woman like any other.

As the cloak's hood slipped back and revealed Serenity's ecstatic face, Endymion stood still for an instant, captivated by her beauty. Great Selene, she was gorgeous when she smiled, her entire face alight and her blue eyes sparkling as she twirled in the blue-tinted earthlight, her hair shining like molten crystal. Endymion shook himself. She would soon draw attention to herself this way. He rushed toward the gleeful Princess, who stopped spinning as he approached.

"Someone will see us," he muttered, carefully reaching around the girl to pull her hood back up so it covered her hair. Serenity laughed, but she calmed down and tugged the cowl forward until it hung over the golden crescent-moon mark on her forehead. Both of them still felt a bit lighter as they began to walk together along the garden wall. As usual, Endymion searched his mind for words. What should he say to a woman he wished to befriend?

"How was your day?" he asked hesitantly, cringing inwardly in anticipation of her reaction. To his relief, the Princess didn't seem bothered by his casual question.

"The usual," she sighed, staring down at the ground. "Lessons, diplomacy, that sort of thing. I started some special lessons with my mother today, but other than that..." She shrugged beneath the brown fabric.

"I heard the Royal Family of Earth left for home today, your betrothed among them," Endymion commented, narrowing his eyes. "Is that not out of the ordinary?"

Serenity did not look up. "I hardly know Prince Endymion," she muttered bitterly. "I do not know him enough to miss him. Perhaps, someday... but not now." She cleared her throat before raising her head, painting a warm smile back on her lips. "And your day, Endou?"

The stable hand chuckled. "The usual," he echoed gaily. "My life is certainly more boring than yours, Princess."

"No," Serenity objected, looking up at the tanned man. Her eyes were wide with honest curiosity. "I would like to hear about your lifestyle. Please." Endymion could not resist her beautiful cerulean gaze.

They strolled together beneath the shining Earth, their feet brushing through the grass. The dark-haired man explained every aspect of the stables he could think of, from the smallest task to the most arduous labor. He could not believe how attentively the Princess was hanging on his every word, only glancing away from him occasionally to make sure there were no obstructions in her path. No one had ever shown such an interest in his painfully ordinary life before.

The young Princess noted absently how relaxed she felt in the stable hand's presence. He was speaking about everyday things, a normal day's work for him, and yet she felt as if there were nothing she

would rather do than listen to him. At that moment, she realized how much she had been craving an ordinary conversation.

Why couldn't she have moments like this with her fiancé? Both men were Earth-born, around the same age, similar in many ways. Why was this one so open and friendly and the other so cold and bitter? Serenity's eyes strayed back to the thick grass below her feet, and her hand lifted to play with the blue jewel at her throat. She had to spend the rest of her life with that stoic, unfeeling statue of a man, who refused to even become her friend. If only Prince Endymion would welcome a conversation as trivial as this, just occasionally, so she would know there was a heart beneath his black-robed exterior. That would have been enough.

Beside her, Endymion's voice slowly trailed off as he watched Princess Serenity with concern. Once again, all the light and life had drained out of the young woman, all the sparkle that amazed the stable hand so much. He recalled glumly that she seemed to withdraw into herself at any mention of her fiancé, or love. Endymion had not mentioned either of these subjects, but from the way Serenity was toying with her engagement pendant he suspected she was thinking about the Earth Prince again.

He had never experienced it himself, of course, but Endymion had been around enough amorous couples to know that no woman should be saddened by the thought of her betrothed. With a sinking feeling, he watched the beautiful young woman, an entire kingdom's hope for the future, drowning in a hopeless sorrow born of an event even now being celebrated by her people.

He had to say something. As a stable hand, he was the last person in the entire solar system who had the right to ask the Princess personal questions, but the Lunarian beside him was also a woman with feelings like any other. He could not stand idly by and watch her suffer, no matter the consequences.

"You don't want to marry him, do you."

It was far more a statement than a question. Serenity jerked her head up and stared at the tanned man incredulously. How dare he say such a thing, a lowly servant like him? She was outraged... and embarrassed. Was it truly that obvious?

Her eyes aflame beneath the edge of the brown hood, the Princess opened her mouth to give him a piece of her mind - and stopped short. Although he surely could see her fury, he simply watched her patiently, his face creased with concern. Serenity looked into Endymion's soft charcoal eyes and saw nothing but gentle sympathy. She sagged, defeated, all her anger vanishing. She could not punish him for being smart enough to notice what not even her dearest friends could see.

And, since he had asked... why not tell him? At first, Serenity recoiled at the thought, but really, what would be the harm? As a stable hand, there was no chance he would tell her secret to anyone in the castle, and if he mentioned it to his fellow servants, surely they would not believe him. Yes, he was a citizen of her kingdom, and thus he probably wanted to see his Princess successfully wedded to the Prince of Earth... but he had asked.

"You are right," she whispered, hanging her head again. "I don't want to marry him. I... He..." Serenity's voice broke, and she felt tears stinging the corners of her eyes. She bit her lip and clenched her fists so tightly that her nails dug into her palms. No. She would not cry in front of this man.

"Why not?" Endymion asked gently, carefully keeping the expression of caring concern on his face. It was as he had feared. This lovely, blossoming young flower was about to be trapped forever in an unwanted marriage. Serenity did not respond. Without a word, she turned away from him and continued walking along their path.

"I apologize, Princess," Endymion said, hurrying to catch up with her. "Your reasons are your own." He sighed. "I can not say I know how you feel, but the life of a servant is not without the pressures of class." Somewhere at the back of his mind, Endymion realized his steps were automatically leading them toward the stables; the complex was just around the next corner of the wall.

"Everyone keeps telling me I should be with Misa," the young man explained. "We've been friends since we were children. She's beautiful, kind, and talented. As a stable hand I could not hope for a better match. But I do not love her."

The similarities between their situations slipped past Princess Serenity as a minor detail caught her attention.

"This Misa, she is a woman? And yet you are friends?" She stared at Endymion as if he had

suddenly announced he was a long-lost Prince.

"Well, yes," the stable hand replied, returning the puzzled look. As they reached the side entrance to the stables, he pushed the door open and peered into the dimly-lit interior. It was empty, save for the horses. Without conscious thought, he opened the door further to allow the Princess to step through. "Should we not be?"

Serenity crossed the threshold into the warm stable, looking around curiously. She had often been riding, of course, but the horses had been brought up to the castle for her. She had never seen where the beasts were housed. Luminous crystals set in the walls gave off just enough light to see by, and the Princess could make out the shapes of stalls and pens in the darkness. The air was punctuated by the occasional sound as the animals shifted and snorted in their sleep or stamped restlessly in their stalls. The stable was kept quite clean and smelled more of fresh hay than the beasts who dwelt there.

This was the work-animals section of the stables. Endymion instinctively led Serenity past the shared pens toward the area where the higher-breed beasts were kept. He knew exactly where the royal family's horses were quartered.

"I have never been permitted to befriend any males," the Princess said, keeping her voice low so as not to disturb the animals. "I had assumed that was a rule common to all children on the Moon."

The stable hand looked at her oddly. "I have never heard of such a rule, nor met anyone who was bound by it," he replied. As they passed through a door, the large pens where several animals slept together gave way to neat, well-kept individual stalls. These horses had names and specific owners and handlers. Serenity was silent for a while. Was she the only one in her kingdom whose social life was so restricted?

At the far end of the complex, they entered a small, more private stable, with the crest of Serenity etched in silver on the door. When Endymion opened this room, the Princess discovered a dozen familiar faces.

"Moonshine! Star of Neptune!" The young woman greeted all the horses by name, many of which awakened to return the greeting with tosses of their heads. The full range of Sol system breeds was represented here in the royal family's private collection.

Closing the door behind them, Endymion smiled with pleasure. "I did not know you were so familiar with your horses, Princess," he commented.

"You didn't know I cared for my own garden, either," Serenity pointed out, reaching over the gate of a stall to caress the nose of the most treasured of the black stallions. "There is much you do not know about me, Endou."

"I always thought the nobility was too busy with more important matters to give much thought to lesser forms of life," Endymion remarked with a sly smirk pricking at the corner of his mouth as he wandered the small stable, admiring the magnificent beasts. Serenity returned the smirk, shooting him a sideways glance.

"I always thought Earth-children were greedy, untrustworthy, and cruel." They grinned at one another across the room.

Serenity was beginning to feel uncomfortably warm. She wanted to remove the rough brown cloak, or at least lower the hood, but she didn't dare. Someone might walk in on them at any moment. The Princess was outside the castle, but its walls still bound her. She looked up at the slender jet-black nose of the stallion beside her, its chocolate eyes whispering of freedom. She had already come this far...

"Let's go out for a ride."

"What? But, Princess..."

The cloaked young woman half-turned around, her blue eyes peeking out at Endymion from beneath the rough brown hood. For an instant, her eyes changed and the stable hand found himself gazing into dark cerulean pools of utter despair. Serenity's entire expression was cold and dead, her true suffering showing through, all masks removed. Endymion shivered from his head to his toes as the cage of the Princess showed clearly for the first time. His heart wailed with sorrow within his chest.

He never wanted to see her look like that again.

"All right," Endymion said quietly, his tongue numb in his mouth. Instantly, Princess Serenity's entire face lit up, banishing all traces of the bitter hopelessness that had reigned there a moment before. The mask had returned - but now, Endymion knew it was a mask.

Against All Odds

"I will ride Starry Night," Serenity said brightly, turning away to unlock the latch of the black stallion's pen. What had she just done? What was she thinking, showing her pain to this man? Was she that desperate for an escape, no matter how temporary? "You may choose any of the others, Endou - except for Crystalis, only my mother is permitted to ride her."

"Oh, no, I couldn't," Endymion stammered, staring around at all the high-bred majestic creatures surrounding him. "With your leave, I'd feel far more comfortable on one of the common horses kept for guests." The Princess gave a small nod and he ducked back through the door into the main stables. He soon found a creamy brown gelding that was awake and energetic.

Although he had done this countless times before, Endymion's hands shook as he saddled the Lunarian horse. A ride with the Princess... what was he getting into? Did she intend to flee the city? What would he do then? The stable hand hurried back to the smaller room, gelding in tow - and found Princess Serenity ready and waiting astride the inky-black stallion. The horse was properly saddled, all the fastenings secure, and the Princess had carefully tucked her dress around her legs and arranged the cloak to cover it. For a long moment Endymion just stared, openmouthed, and Serenity's eyes filled with laughter.

"I have learned some useful skills in my training, Endou," she explained with a giggle. "I told you, there is much you do not know about me."

A short while later, the two of them were riding through the training fields adjacent to the castle grounds, safely separated from the shining marble structures by a few rows of trees and bushes set to divide the land. On this side of the castle, the edge of the city's atmospheric dome was especially close. The grounds between that barrier and the castle wall were reserved for military drills and the training and exercise of the beasts.

The sky was clear and the Earth was shining brightly, pouring down just enough light to see by in the absence of the Moon Castle's glow. Princess Serenity had never felt so free in all her life. She had been riding many times, but always in the company of soldiers where slow and steady was the rule. Lazy processions through the Upper Quarter were no comparison to a swift gallop, the muscular steed below her moving in leaps and bounds as the ground flew away beneath its pounding hooves.

As they passed through a small grove of trees, Serenity glanced back at the stable hand riding just behind her. She had been amazed by how quickly the guards at the west gate had let them pass when the young man gave the excuse of these horses being restless and needing exercise. He was a mere stable hand, and an Earth-child besides, yet Serenity had seen such respect in the guards' eyes when they looked at him. They obviously trusted his judgment, at least when it came to horses, and had not even questioned the presence or identity of the cloaked servant riding alongside him. Watching the tanned man's expert handling of his mount, it was obvious that his skills were no ruse.

Endymion threw his head back, reveling in the feeling of the wind rushing through his short hair. True winds blew quite rarely on the Moon, yet he always felt more at home, somehow, when a brisk breeze was sweeping past his cheeks. He leaned with the rhythmic rocking motion of the beast beneath him, the speed sending a ripple of excitement through his body.

A peal of joyous laughter drew Endymion's attention and he lowered his head to glance at the Princess. The heir to the Moon had pushed back the hood of the dark cloak, and her platinum streams of hair were flying behind her, rippling in the wind and shining in the earthlight. Serenity's face was alight in rapt ecstasy as her horse bounded across the turf.

After securing his grip on the reins, Endymion urged his mount forward until he drew even with the black stallion. Noticing him out of the corner of her eye, Serenity, in turn, edged her steed forward, a grin spreading across her face. The stable hand kicked the tan gelding into a run. The Moon Princess did the same. The race was on.

"Do you think you can best the training of the Moon's most accomplished experts?" Serenity called out as the black stallion dodged a boulder in her path.

"I've been working with horses all my life!" the Earth-child shouted back between verbal commands to his own mount. "I know them better than anyone!" The Lunarian horse was a young one, but agile and

strong.

"A Princess never loses to a commoner!" Serenity joked, heading for a handful of trees clustered on the field. Her heart was racing along with the horse's pounding hooves, her hair nearly whipping her in the face as she glanced back to check her opponent's position. The stable hand was truly a magnificent rider, his entire body moving in rhythm with the lightfooted steed. Dark hair tossed about by the wind, loose shirt rippling around his muscular form, he leaned forward as he enticed his horse to keep up with her.

"A Princess never rides as if legions of enemies were chasing her, either!" Endymion teased, his eyes never leaving the crystal-haired goddess ahead of him. The rough cloak had come untucked from her legs and was streaming behind her, exposing the white dress that became nearly luminescent in the blue-green earthlight. With the inky-black stallion flowing beneath her like a living shadow, the pale woman almost seemed to be flying.

"Is it not healthy to bend the rules on occasion?" In a very unladylike gesture, Serenity stuck out her tongue at her companion. Endymion chuckled, shaking his head in disbelief as they passed beneath the branches of the cluster of trees.

Suddenly, the Earth-born stable hand tensed with fear. A wave of inexplicable terror seized his body and made his heart skip a beat. At about the same moment, there was a screamed whinny from the black stallion and a shriek from Princess Serenity. The charcoal horse took off like a shot, wresting the reins from the young woman's hands. Endymion passed the tree just in time to see a creature of some kind, its identity concealed by shadow, retreat into the leaves.

"Serenity!" he yelled out at the top of his lungs as she was carried away from him.

The royal stallion was spooked beyond all control. It bolted wildly across the fields, its body soon glistening with sweat. Holding on to the saddle for dear life, Serenity felt like she would be shaken to pieces. With every jarring strike of the hooves, her teeth rattled in her mouth and her neck nearly threatened to snap. In a desperate move she leaned forward and managed to snatch up the reins from the beast's neck. She pulled with all her might and shouted with all her voice, but it was no use. Adrenaline was fully in control of the stallion's mind now.

Endymion cursed repeatedly as he urged forth every bit of speed that could be had from the brown gelding. Serenity was riding one of the prized black stallions, the most powerful horses in the Moon, perhaps in the entire Solar System. He would never be able to catch up to her.

Then, he saw it. The faint shimmer in the air, beyond which no grass grew and the surface of the Moon was as white as bone. The border, the edge of the atmospheric dome. The boundary between greenery and dust was crisp, clear, and sudden, but Endymion knew the horse would not recognize the barely-noticeable waver in the air as a sign of danger. He also knew the transparent dome was as solid as a marble wall.

Through the shaking, jumping world surrounding Serenity's eyes, the Princess noticed it too. The edge was close, too close; the stallion would collide with it in a matter of minutes. The foul taste of vomit burned her throat as her heart was whipped up into a panicked frenzy. Which would be worse; to crash into the barrier or the hard ground?

Throwing her head back, Serenity cast a terrified glance at the stable hand. She was beyond screaming, but through the haze of fear she could still see him clearly. He rode like the wind through the earthlight, seeming to nearly become one with the gelding beneath him, his clothing and hair torn back by the air. He urged his steed onward with his voice and every motion of his body, intent in his pursuit, face set in determination.

Somehow, she knew just by looking at him that the consequences of harming a Princess were furthest from his mind. She was a person in need, and he was set on rescuing her. At the same time there was something else, the need to save someone who was... special to him...

It was no use. The gelding was tiring and the stallion was still gathering speed. A deep futile despair began to settle within Endymion as he watched Serenity drawing away from him, heading for her death at an incredible speed. In desperation, he flung a hand out in front of him and put everything he had, his entire mind and soul, into one commanding cry of the horse's name.

"Starry Night! *Stop!*"

To his surprise, the runaway stallion actually tossed its head and slowed, its frantic paces calming

Against All Odds

ever so slightly. The difference was small, but it was enough. Endymion's mount drew even with the jet-black horse, and he edged it as close to the stallion's side as he dared.

Without waiting for instructions, the Princess stretched toward him with both arms, her face consumed by panic. The stable hand was grateful for all his years of lifting hay bales as he caught her by the arms and pulled her across to him, to safety. She felt light as a feather, and she shook like a leaf against his chest as the fear released itself in sobbing and tears. The contact between them, once again, was powerful. It destroyed all of Serenity's barriers and threatened to move Endymion to tears as well, but there were more important matters at hand.

Reaching out again, Endymion caught the reins of the panicked stallion and, with the gelding's remaining strength to assist, managed to calm the animal enough to avoid disaster. He released his hold and the now-docile horse trotted gracefully to a stop. Reining in his own mount, Endymion lowered Princess Serenity to the ground and then dismounted himself.

No sooner had his feet touched the grass than the crystal-haired Princess was once again in his arms, clinging to his shirt as she buried her face in his chest. Endymion's shirt soon became soaked with her tears as he held her securely, as relieved as she that Serenity was safe. Their panic and fear gradually drained away as they stood there together, forgetting all differences of class and blood as they struggled to calm the pounding of their hearts.

Once they had rested, Endymion and Serenity headed back toward the castle grounds at a casual gallop. Endymion's palms were sweating where he held the reins of the black stallion. It was important to the beast's training that it be ridden again immediately, but the Princess had been too frightened to ride either horse alone. Endymion's heart was once again racing as he tried unsuccessfully to ignore the slender arms wrapped around his waist.

It was odd how the charcoal horse seemed to carry itself a bit taller than usual as it gaily galloped along, beautiful in all its grace. The tall stallion had even knelt down on the turf to allow Endymion to mount after he had removed the saddle so both of them could ride together. It seemed proud, somehow, to be carrying the stable hand upon its back.

For his part, Endymion was nothing but nervous. The elegant black stallion was taller and stronger than any beast he had ever been astride, and the warmth of the Princess' body pressing up against his back was sending tingles up and down his spine.

"Are you all right, Princess?" Endymion practically croaked, desperate to break the silence.

Serenity opened her eyes to escape from the half-trance that had claimed her. The rocking motion of the horse was soothing, and she was enveloped by an incredible, calming sense of safety. She looked up at the back of the head of the man sitting in front of her. Even from behind, he was still so handsome, his short dark hair drifting in the wind like the mane of the majestic stallion beneath him. Despite the ordeal she had just endured, she felt perfectly secure. As long as he was there, nothing could harm her.

"Back there," she said quietly, "when Starry Night bolted, you called me 'Serenity.'"

Endymion's blood ran cold. Such a careless mistake. She would never forgive him for forgetting his place. With one foolish word, he had destroyed everyth-

"I liked that," the Princess continued. "Please, do not go back to using my title. We are friends, are we not? I would like you to address me as my friends do. My name, not my position."

"As you wish... Serenity." Endymion almost couldn't believe it. He had succeeded. They had become friends. He sat a bit higher on the royal stallion's broad back, breathing a satisfied sigh.

Behind him, Serenity also sighed contentedly as the grass rolled away beneath the horse's hooves. The stable hand's body was so firm and strong beneath her arms, unlike so many pampered courtiers, yet it was still as warm, his blood as hot as any noble birth could give him. Closing her eyes, the Princess leaned against the young man's back, resting her cheek between his shoulder blades. Her heart pounded with the boldness of such an act, but she didn't care. He was her hero, her savior.

For a moment, her eyes flew open again in surprise. It wasn't just the cloak. The man himself smelled of roses.

Against All Odds

After returning the horses to the stables, Endymion and Serenity strolled together along the edges of the castle grounds, too wound up by the night's experiences to part yet. Now it was Serenity's turn to lead, and they followed a tiled walkway along the edge of a wide reflecting pool. As usual, the waters were perfectly clear and still, catching a flawless mirror image of the Moon Castle rising over the other end of the pool. The towers of the castle seemed a soft blue under the night sky, elegant beneath the full Earth hanging above it.

Stopping beside the rail that lined the edge of the walkway, Serenity turned to face the tanned stable hand. Now was as good a time as any. "I have a gift for you, Endou," she said, reaching into her hidden pocket to retrieve the locket.

"That is not necessary, Serenity," Endymion protested, but she placed the gold star-shaped object in his hand. It was about the size of his palm, with five rounded points, and it was lighter than its appearance betrayed. Endymion's curiosity got the best of him, and he carefully opened the circular cover at the center of the star.

A lovely, lilting melody filled the air as the round crystal disk under the cover began to sparkle and shine, the locket coming to life. Within the crystal, a crescent moon shape rotated in a circle in time with the tinkling music. Endymion smiled faintly. A music box like this would bring more money than he had ever dreamed of, but he would not even consider selling it.

Serenity choked on a gasp as the soft melody issued forth from the golden star. It was impossible... but the locket couldn't lie. To cover her half-cry of shock, the Princess giggled lightly, but she could not prevent the blush from rising in her cheeks.

"Thank you for saving me, Endou," she said softly.

"It is reward enough to see you safe," Endymion replied honestly. His arm rose on its own and his hand extended to caress Serenity's rosy cheek. Their flesh tingled where skin met skin, waves of warmth radiating through Serenity's face and down Endymion's arm as the calming tones of the music box surrounded them. The Princess and the stable hand gazed into one another's eyes, both of them seeing a tenderness they would never have expected to find there.

A soft roll of thunder broke the spell and Endymion abruptly pulled his hand away. Princess Serenity looked up at the sky and discovered it had become filled with dark billowing clouds. The bright Earth was hidden and all the stars were obscured.

"The rain!" she realized. "I forgot it was scheduled for tonight! There isn't much time!" The pair of them took off running for the gardens, racing against the gathering storm.

Later, the Moon Princess was back in her chambers, safe in her own rooms. She had made it inside just before the rain began to fall. The rope and cloak had been concealed in the back of a drawer in her dressing-table for future use. As far as she could tell, nobody had noticed her absence. She was safe... but her heart would not stop pounding. Serenity sat down at her dressing-table, staring at her own pale face in the mirror through the darkness as the rain roared down around the castle.

The golden star had come alive in the stable hand's palm. That locket had been a gift from the Queen of Venus when Serenity was a child; she knew its legend. The music box would only play when the locket was given to its owner's true love.

It couldn't be. She was a Princess, engaged to the Prince of Earth. She could not be in love with a common stable hand. It had to be a simple infatuation with the man who had saved her life. Yet, what was this warmth in the core of her being when she thought about him, the rush in her blood when she imagined his dark hair and deep, engulfing eyes? What was this tingling in her cheek where his rough hand had so gently touched her? She felt so free, so liberated, when she was with him; as if she could be anyone, do anything she wanted to do, and he would approve as long as she was happy.

Was this what love was?

She touched the thin chain encircling her neck with a trembling hand and hissed through her teeth. The skin was still sensitive there. Even though her fiance was on another planet, he continued to injure her through the pendant that bound her to him. Numbly, the Princess seized the chain in both hands. Slowly,

Against All Odds

mechanically, she raised it off her throat and over her head. Surely she was not expected to endure physical suffering from the symbol of her engagement. The Prince was on Earth, and she would put the pendant on again in the morning; no one would ever know. Her hands shook as she laid the stone on the dressing table.

Taking deep breaths to calm herself, Serenity untied the buns of hair at the top of her head and removed her earrings, as the servants usually did while preparing her for bed. Next, her hand moved to the bracelet of orange beads around her wrist. Her fingers tingled as she touched it, the same tingle she felt when her secret visitor brushed his skin against hers, and a perfect image of his tanned face and sparkling eyes rose in her mind. The beads were cool and smooth, harmless.

Princess Serenity climbed into her four-poster bed and pulled the blankets up to her chin, drifting into sleep to the sound of the rain pounding against her marble balcony. Her engagement pendant lay across the room on her dressing-table. The circle of round orange beads remained around her wrist.

Endymion rushed inside his hut and slammed the door behind him, water pooling on the floor beneath his steps. Light thunder rolled through the sky, and the air outside hissed with the life-giving downpour of water. He leaned back against the panels of the door and stared into the darkness of his meager home, breathing heavily from his run through the rain. The gold star locket pressed into his palm within his secure grip.

What was happening to him? He only wanted friendship with the Princess, a chance to prove himself and gain opportunities beyond his station. What was this heat in his body, still lingering from the feeling of Serenity's arms around him? The need that he felt in her presence, the need to prove his worth, went far beyond what he had originally intended. He felt as if his entire life and everything he had worked for had been building toward these moments, this relationship. What were these feelings budding inside him?

Chapter Five

The weeks following the near-disaster were anything but ordinary for Endymion and Princess Serenity. During the daylight hours they went about their usual business in their separate worlds, but nights were their chance for freedom.

They met nearly every evening for at least a short time, taking an occasional night apart to catch up on lost sleep. Endymion would creep up to the Princess' balcony, Serenity would cover herself in the rough brown cloak, and they would slip away together. Sometimes they would go riding and sometimes stroll around the grounds, but most often they would just sit somewhere and talk.

Although she did her best to hide it from the rugged stable hand, Serenity could no longer deny that she was quite attracted to him. He was an Earth-child, like the Prince she was engaged to, yet he was everything her fiance was not. Every time she looked at him, her heart skipped a beat and her skin felt as if it had been set aflame. He was so handsome, his smooth charcoal eyes and thick dark hair perfect complements to the bronzed tone of his skin.

Serenity found herself spending more and more time in front of her mirror before their meetings, trying to look her best for him. She was a Princess with power and prestige on her side, but the stable hand was surely surrounded by well-built and skilled female servants. What if Serenity was not good enough for him?

For his part, Endymion was not certain where the border lay between friendship and a stronger, deeper emotion. At first, he tried to rationalize his feelings. She was his Princess and future Queen; it was only natural for Endymion to be attracted to Serenity and want to protect her. He wanted to be her friend so he could escape the prison of his birth.

Even so, Endymion had befriended many a person over the course of his lifetime and none of them made him feel like this. The presence of Princess Serenity was enough to send warm tingles through his body. When they were together, he could not stop gazing at her. He longed to run his fingers through her crystal hair, to hold her in his arms when she was sad. He often found himself leading Serenity somewhere at a run, just to have an excuse to take her hand, to feel the lightning shoot straight from his fingers to his heart at the touch of her smooth skin. Strangely, the Princess was never the first to let go.

Endymion treasured every moment he spent with the Lunarian Princess, and he listened to her

Against All Odds

frustration with the confines of her life with a secret dismay. If he could have, Endymion would have rearranged the Moon itself to keep a smile on Serenity's face, but he was powerless to help her.

"What is troubling you, Serenity?" Endymion asked gently as they sat side by side on a marble bench beside a quiet pond. The Princess seemed more melancholy today than usual, her blue eyes dull and lifeless behind the smile that came with Endymion's presence.

Serenity was impressed. She had been hiding her sadness tonight, trying not to let it ruin her precious few hours of freedom with the stable hand. Only her mother had ever been able to find suffering by her daughter's eyes alone.

"Prince Endymion is returning soon," she sighed. Serenity's heart consistently urged her to trust this servant with her secrets, and she willingly conceded. "My mother is hosting a masquerade ball to welcome him and his four guardians to their new home."

"I thought you enjoyed balls," Endymion commented. Inside, he was sick to his stomach with worry. With her fiance back to stay, would Serenity stop meeting her midnight visitor? What if he never saw her again? Endymion struggled to maintain the illusion of contentment as every fiber of his being cried out for reassurance.

"I do," the Princess replied, "but Prince Endymion will not dance with me. He will barely even touch me," she lamented, staring over the still waters of the pond. "At our engagement ceremony, he wouldn't stay with me a moment longer than absolutely necessary."

Endymion bristled with disgust. Although only the castle servants knew his secret, he felt as if the Earth Prince were ruining his good name. The royal fool. Prince Endymion had the most beautiful woman in the solar system as his future wife - the gentlest, most caring and enchanting goddess alive -and he was taking her for granted.

"Although," Serenity mused, "if he hadn't been so cold, I wouldn't have left the ball... and I wouldn't have met you." She tilted her head toward Endymion and glanced up at him shyly, her large blue eyes half-hidden by her long eyelashes. "I suppose some hardships are worth the result."

"I am glad you think so, Serenity." Endymion blushed as her eyes bored into him, their intensity causing all the blood to rush to his head. "In that case, perhaps I can forgive him for treating you so poorly."

"If I'm already dreading spending one evening with him, how can I manage it for the rest of my life?" Serenity moaned. Leaning forward on the bench, she buried her face in her hands. "I wish I didn't have to go to the ball." Endymion laid a gentle hand on her shoulder, but he wished there was something more he could do to comfort her.

"Look alive up there, Endou!"

The stable hand in question jumped, startled, and looked down at his blond friend from his perch in the hayloft. Prien was glaring up at him; they were falling behind again. Endymion rubbed his eyes wearily and bent over his pitchfork, returning to his task of tossing loose hay over the edge so Prien could spread it across the stable floor.

The other pairs of workers surrounding them were hard at work, their sections of the stable nearly finished. Endymion tried to summon up another burst of energy, but he was tired, so tired. He had barely slept the night before, having spent most of the dark hours lying in his bed thinking about Princess Serenity.

What could he do to make her happy? He was only a servant of the castle, and a minor one at that. No matter how long and hard he mulled over the possibilities, Endymion could not come up with a plausible idea that would make any difference at all.

Gifts were out of the question; he had hardly any money, and the Princess had everything she could ever want anyway. He wasn't a very artistic person, so creative gifts were not an option, and their secret meetings didn't allow much opportunity for travel. Besides, those things would only bring Serenity a brief moment of happiness, which would soon vanish into the oblivion of her growing depression.

He knew what she really wanted, and it was something Endymion could never give her. She wanted

Against All Odds

to be engaged to a man who loved her; a man who would be her friend, counselor, and happy companion. A man who would dance with her at the masquerade ball. It was hopeless.

Endymion froze, his grip tightening on the pitchfork until his knuckles turned white. It was a masquerade. A ball wherein the identity of every attendee would be hidden. Perhaps... but did he dare venture, even invisible, into the jaws of the dragon? The very thought made his blood run cold.

"Endou!" Prien yelled again as the shower of hay stopped falling around him. His Earth-born friend, however, was too lost in his own thoughts to hear him.

The day finally arrived and the Sailor Soldiers were once again standing beside their monarchs in the teleportation chamber, this time awaiting the return of the travelers from Earth.

A tiny groan of dread escaped Princess Serenity's throat as the party shimmered into existence on the stone platform. Although Prince Endymion would be making many visits to Earth, the Moon would be his home from now on. Most of his baggage had already arrived and was set up in a suite of rooms in the royal wing, near to Serenity's own. Closer to the Queen's apartments, larger quarters were being prepared where the young couple would live after their wedding.

Without his parents by his side, Prince Endymion seemed rather small, sad, and alone. He greeted his fiancée with a kiss on the hand, and as he straightened up, the Princess could see the lost and uncertain look in his blue eyes. He had the nervous look of a castaway marooned on a strange world.

This encounter felt different than any of their previous meetings. Princess Serenity was engaged to this Prince of Earth, who had given up his entire life to be here with her, and yet she had spent so many hours at the side of another man and fully intended to continue doing so. She felt dreadfully guilty and could not hold Prince Endymion's gaze without blushing, acutely conscious of the bracelet of orange beads around her wrist.

"Welcome back, Prince Endymion," the Princess croaked, her throat terribly dry. A servant appeared at her elbow almost instantly with a chalice of water, which the crystal-haired young woman eagerly accepted as an excuse to look away from her betrothed.

"Where are your guardians?" Queen Serenity asked, her eyes roaming the assortment of servants gathering the last pieces of luggage from the teleportation platform. "We've heard so much about them." Beside her, Luna collected reports and documents offered by the Moon delegation as scientists hurried past with samples and equipment.

Prince Endymion's face was like stone, more impassive than even his fiancée had seen before. "They had further matters to attend to, with the appointment of new generals and such," he said in a dead voice. "They will be joining me here as soon as they are able."

Returning the chalice to the servant's tray, Princess Serenity turned back to the Earth Prince, her blue eyes soft with pity. She had forgotten about Kunzite and the others, who were supposed to come to the Moon with their master. Without them, Prince Endymion was truly alone on this world. She could not imagine what it would be like to be on a strange planet without the Sailor Soldiers and did not want to experience it. With a feeling of resigned sympathy, Princess Serenity realized that she was the closest thing he had to a friend on the entire Moon. She could not brush him aside.

"Come, Prince Endymion, I will show you to your rooms," she invited warmly, putting on the best smile she could muster for the diminished husk of a man who stood before her. They headed toward the exit, side by side, in silence. Now that he was far away from the shadows of his parents, perhaps the Earth Prince would finally warm up to his bride-to-be. But, Serenity mused with a fresh pang of guilt, did she still want him to?

Gradually, the crowd and the confusion within the teleportation chamber began to disperse. Sailor Venus briefed Mercury and Mars on the Princess' remaining appointments for the day and sent the two soldiers to join the servants accompanying the young couple, then left with Sailor Jupiter to check on the additional security that had been set up around Prince Endymion's apartments. The scientists and diplomats trooped away to their offices and homes, leaving Luna with a stack of reports.

Queen Serenity, however, lingered longer than most of the crowd, leaving with her retinue when only a few travelers remained. Accompanied only by Luna and the few servants who always hovered

Against All Odds

around her, the Moon Queen returned to her offices near the Silver Alliance council chambers. A few ambassadors nodded or bowed to the monarch as she passed, but once the group entered the first room of the royal office suite, they had complete privacy save for the Queen's two personal scribes who waited there.

After giving her servants their instructions, Serenity and Luna crossed into the small private meeting room alone, closing the door behind them. The circular room with its round table and five chairs was empty, as was the expansive angular Crystal Office visible through the open door at the other side.

They did not have to wait long before a soft knock came from the scribes' room. Luna hurried to open the door. A nervous member of the scientific team that had traveled to Earth was standing there, holding a small packing crate in his trembling arms as if it were a priceless treasure. At a nod from Queen Serenity, he gingerly set the wooden box on the floor and slid one side open.

A sleek white cat darted out of the box and across the carpet toward the Queen. At first glance it seemed like an ordinary cat, its snowy hair cropped short against its skin, but even while running the creature had a proud poise that was obvious from the angle of its ears to the way it held its tail aloft.

With a spring in its step that outshone the capabilities of any normal animal, the white cat leapt up to the top of the round table and trotted across to the Queen, bending its head to the smooth surface in a graceful bow. Back at the entrance to the meeting room the scientist hurriedly gathered up the packing crate and scurried away, and Luna closed the door firmly behind him.

"Artemis," Queen Serenity said coolly, looking down her nose at the small cat with the gold-colored crescent moon mark set into the fur on its forehead, "you know I find it uncomfortable to converse with animals."

"Very well, my Queen," the cat sighed in the smooth low tones of an adult man, which seemed out of place coming from a small white feline.

The creature whirled around with a whisk of its snowy tail and jumped back down to the carpeted floor, landing beside Luna's feet. It shook itself briskly. The sleek furry body swelled and elongated, growing larger and changing form all at once.

Luna pressed a button, and a concealed panel in the wall slid open with a faint hiss, revealing a narrow closet filled with familiar clothing: white suits and yellow dresses. She pulled out a white cloak and held it ready as Artemis stretched out his legs and arms, his fur fading into pale skin, the hair on his head growing long in compensation.

He pushed himself up on his hind legs as they lengthened until he rose above Luna's height, and his front paws elongated into hands and fingers. His facial features spread out and redefined themselves into a man's. After a moment, no trace of Artemis' feline form remained save for the golden bald patch on his forehead, which became a smooth reflective crescent moon mark like the one on the Queen's own brow. Artemis took the cloak from Luna and wrapped it around his waist, leaving his sculpted chest bare.

"Did anyone suspect you?" the Queen asked. The white-haired man shook his head.

"I made sure nobody was around when I left the supply crates or returned to them," he assured the monarch, who nodded in satisfaction.

"Now, Artemis, your report," Queen Serenity requested, taking her seat at the opposite side of the table. There was a moment of silence as the man looked uneasy, as if reluctant to speak.

"The situation on Earth is... less than optimal," he said at last, struggling to maintain his professional demeanor.

The Queen's eyes narrowed. "Explain."

"It seems the populace of the Golden Kingdom is a fickle body," Artemis confessed, his face becoming downcast. "Not all of Earth's people are pleased by the new treaty. A significant percentage of the population still believes itself equal to the Lunarians, and thus disapproves of the Earth monarchy's attempt to reconcile our disagreement."

Artemis' long fingers clutched at the fabric around his waist as his face darkened. "Cruel lies are being muttered amongst the servants and even some of the nobility," he growled, his knuckles whitening against the cloth. "They insult your honor, the legacy of the Moon, the blood of the Princess..."

With a heavy sigh, Queen Serenity stared down at the smooth black-accented marble of the tabletop. "I had hoped they had learned the error of their ways," she said quietly. "Will King Arton and

Against All Odds

Queen Elana be able to keep things under control?"

Artemis averted his eyes. "The majority of Earth's people are eager to renew ties with the Moon, but the others feel their rulers are spineless weaklings for catering to the undeserving Lunarians," he practically spat. "The Golden Kingdom is strong, but opinions are not easy to change, even for monarchs."

"Yes, I know," Queen Serenity commented with a distant half-smile. "There are many who do not approve of my daughter being wedded to blood of an inferior planet, royalty or no. My people, however, trust my judgment."

"The dissent is not widespread," the white-haired man said, adding a positive note to his report. "If Earth's monarchy can prevent the rise of a strong revolutionary leader, the opposition should die down on its own. The King and Queen are not ignorant of the situation; Prince Endymion's four guardians have remained on Earth to help derail any potential rebellion."

"I suppose it would only make the situation worse if we were to step in," the Queen mused, leaning back in her chair. "Very well, we will give the Golden Kingdom a chance to resolve its own problems. However, be prepared, both of you," she added with a nod to Luna as well. "I may need to ask you to undertake additional missions."

Luna returned the nod in agreement, but Artemis coughed lightly into his fist. "My Queen, the Royal Family of Venus has authorized me to ask a favor on behalf of my homeworld, Mau, in exchange for my services in this matter."

"And that is?"

"The people of Mau would like to obtain a few feline specimens from Earth for study," Artemis explained, assuming the air of a dignified emissary despite his half-clothed state. "We are always looking to learn about possible ties between us and other species."

"I think that can be arranged," Queen Serenity replied thoughtfully. "Although, I must admit, I'm surprised that Mauans would approve of research on animals."

"Believe me, my Queen," Artemis replied, a dark cloud settling over his face, "our treatment of the cats will be far more humane than the fate of strays on Earth."

Queen Serenity stared up at the tall man in shock for a moment, then composed herself. "The marriage of Serenity and Endymion will bring many changes for Earth, that is certain," she said quietly.

Placing her hands flat against the table, the Queen pushed herself up to her feet. "Thank you for your assistance, Artemis. Please, dress yourself," she continued, indicating the open closet with a wave of her arm. Her gentle gaze flitted back and forth between the white-haired man and his fellow Mauan, Luna, who was still standing close beside him. Quite close.

"I shall be studying reports in my office for a while," Serenity informed them casually, a faint smile tugging at the corners of her mouth. "Luna, I shall not require your services for the next hour." With a twinkle in her eye, the Queen glided through the door to the Crystal Office and closed the door behind herself, leaving Luna and Artemis alone in the privacy of the conference room.

The hilt of the sword felt cold and rubbery in Endymion's fingers as he numbly went through the usual motions. His brain was alive with thoughts of the masquerade ball that was to take place that evening, leaving no room for more than mechanical fencing patterns. Was he really going to go through with his plan? How could he even consider it? Yet, it would be so wonderful to see Serenity's pale face light up with delight. Surely, that would make it all worthwhile.

A sharp twinge of pain shot up Endymion's arm as Sir Marton knocked the sword out of his feeble grasp. The ringing clang of the blade clattering across the stone floor jolted the stable hand back to reality, and he jerked his head up and focused his eyes on the Moon Knight in front of him.

"Where are you today?" Marton demanded, lowering his own sword so that it no longer pointed directly at Endymion's heart. "If your mind is not on your lesson, there are other tasks I could be attending to!"

"I apologize," Endymion said quickly, snatching up his weapon from the floor. "Please, sir, do not end our sessions. I will try harder."

With a chuckle, the older man allowed a smile to spread across his face. "Do not worry about that. It

Against All Odds

is a pleasure to teach you, Endou. Your skills are remarkable."

Surprised by the unexpected compliment, Endymion did not know what to say. He stared at the Moon Knight for a moment, his lips parted, but no words emerged.

"If I had the means, and you the blood, I would make you a true squire," Marton sighed, idly wiping a fingerprint from his blade with a fold of his shirt. "I should not admit this to you, Endou, but your talent surpassed mine long ago."

"W-what?" the bewildered stable hand stammered, his confusion finally finding speech. "I don't understand."

"For the past year," the Moon Knight confessed, meeting his student's dark gaze with steady, sincere eyes, "I have been teaching you techniques that I myself have been unable to master. With a little confidence in yourself, I believe you could best all but the most accomplished Moon Knights in the Guard. I have seen many soldiers, Endou, and none of them have ever shown such a degree of innate ability as you have. It is almost as if an ancient power were lending you strength."

The tanned young man laughed nervously, unsure how to react to Marton's words. Was this some kind of joke?

"I see you do not believe me," the older man said with a wry grin. "Did you never wonder why we stopped sparring during your lessons and simply practiced new techniques instead? Come, I will prove it to you. Let us have a real match." The Moon Knight backed up a few paces and spread his legs, crouching down into position as he raised his sword arm.

Endymion stared at him in disbelief, still stunned by his teacher's words. "Sir, I-"

"Enough," Marton cut him off, but his eyes were twinkling. "Prepare yourself!"

He lunged at Endymion, thrusting his sword toward the Earth-child's torso. Even caught off-guard, it only took a moment for the tanned man to brace himself and raise his own blade to deflect the blow. Throwing Marton's sword aside with an electric squeal of metal on metal, Endymion leapt forward to drive his weapon at his teacher's heart, but the older man jumped aside with practiced agility and had his blade ready to block the stable hand's next attack. They crossed swords and hovered, frozen, for a moment, straining against one another's strength. Both men grinned at each other over their crossed blades, the exhilarating rush of adrenaline pulsing through their veins.

Getting into the swing of things, Endymion decided to try one of the techniques he had recently learned, which was designed for just this kind of situation. Shifting his feet, he gripped the hilt of his sword firmly in both hands and pulled it around in a wide arc - a perfect Crown of Mars - and was so surprised he nearly dropped his weapon as Marton's sword flew out of his hand and slid across the floor. There was a long pause as Endymion, with the tip of his blade against his teacher's throat, stared at the Moon Knight with wide, startled eyes.

Sir Marton began to laugh, breaking the spell. "You see?" he chuckled, spreading his hands in a shrug.

"But... a simple Selene's Star could have defended against that!" the stable hand protested, still in disbelief over his victory. He let his sword arm drop limply to his side and Marton bent down to collect his weapon from where it had fallen.

"I have never mastered that technique," the Moon Knight admitted, straightening up. "It is said that those who cannot do, teach." He clapped a hand to the younger man's shoulder in a friendly manner. "You would have made a fine Moon Knight, Endou."

"Thank you, sir." Endymion's tongue felt like marble in his mouth. Had he really achieved so much? All these years, he thought he was simply learning what any squire would, nothing more.

"Now, I need to prepare for tonight's ball," Marton informed him. "It seems you've had a lot on your mind lately, Endou. Why don't you take this evening off?"

"No!" Endymion burst out, a little too loudly. "That is not necessary," he said in a more normal tone. His plan would be ruined if Marton sent him home without doing his chores. It would be much less suspicious for him to leave late than to return in the still of the night.

"Are you sure?" the older man asked, looking at his pupil curiously.

"I insist," the stable hand replied, trying not to sound too desperate.

"Very well. Don't work too late, all right?" Sheathing his weapon, Sir Marton left the room, leaving

Endymion alone.

The rest of the afternoon passed like a hundred years. Endymion polished every shield and piece of armor three times over as slowly as he could manage, feeling sick to his stomach with apprehension. Even at this point, the moment of truth, his mind was still running wild with uncertainty. It would be so much easier, so much safer, to just leave now and return to his hut.

Why was he even considering this? Why was he risking what little he had? Deep inside, he knew the answer.

To see her smile.

Even the thought of that bright, warm smile brought a lightness to Endymion's heart and calmed his unease. Princess Serenity was truly a special woman, beautiful inside and out. She deserved any small measure of happiness he could provide her.

Before long, Sir Marton had dressed and departed for the ball. The house was quiet. With shaking hands, Endymion laid down the polishing cloth and stood up, standing perfectly still for a long moment. Not a sound, save for his own ragged breathing, disturbed the air. The light had faded from the sky and the room was dark when the stable hand finally headed for the door.

Suddenly, there were voices in the hall and another door slammed shut. Endymion jerked his hand back from the latch and leaned against the wall of the room, trying to calm his pounding heart. He had forgotten the two hired women who came twice a week to clean the Moon Knight's house.

"...absolutely terrible," an uneven middle-aged voice was saying. "Everyone was all smiles to the lords and ladies, of course, but the servants saw the truth behind the illusion."

"Disgraceful," a younger voice commented, her tones growing louder as the women approached the room where Endymion was hiding. "You'd think the people of Earth would be more grateful, after everything Queen Serenity's done for them."

"After all, it was Earth that started the whole thing," the older woman agreed. "I say, if that's the way they're going to behave..."

The voices faded away as the two women headed off down the main staircase. Endymion sighed, half in relief and half in concern. These were not the first servants he had heard tell of distressing events on Earth. He was anxious to speak to Serenity about it; to hear the nobility's view of the situation.

Endymion stood still until he heard the front doors of the house open and close. He knew he should just leave this place, return to his hut, and abandon his insane plan. Taking a deep breath, he opened the door and stepped out into the darkened hallway. He could not change his mind now. He had already gone down to the shops and spent most of his savings on accessories for the evening, including a thin white mask that was waiting for him in his hut. It was too late to take the easy way out.

The stable hand crept down the corridor and into the master bedroom. By the light of the blue-green Earth, he crossed the empty chamber and approached Sir Marton's closet.

The Great Hall was alive with motion, the floor covered in costumed couples whirling the night away. It was an evening of decadence, filled with light music, fine wines, and elegant and elaborate clothing; a celebration of wealth and utopian bliss. At the center of it all danced the hopes and prayers for the society's future: the Moon's future rulers, Princess Serenity and Prince Endymion. The woman in white and the man in black were the perfect image of a fairytale match, their grace as they danced unmatched by any other couple in the hall.

At the beginning of the evening, Princess Serenity had had high hopes. She and Prince Endymion had spent much of the afternoon together, and although the auburn-haired man still barely spoke to her, she remained optimistic. Besides, this time his parents weren't there to guide his actions. At least he hadn't abandoned her as soon as ceremonially possible; the couple was actually completing a dance for the first time.

Still, Prince Endymion hardly said a word, even when spoken to. Serenity tried several times to engage him in conversation, but only got a few words in response. Perhaps it was too soon, and he was

Against All Odds

homesick, but Serenity refused to stop trying. At the same time, she found it difficult to look her fiance in the eye for long. She felt guilty, the face of her future husband reminding her of the nights she had spent beside another man, the bracelet of orange beads burning around her wrist.

The song ended, and the Earth Prince released the hands of his betrothed. Serenity gazed at him imploringly as a new tune began, but he looked around the hall uneasily as if searching for an escape.

"Do you not like dancing?" the Princess asked. "I had hoped we could enjoy your welcoming ball together."

"I find it tiresome," Prince Endymion replied, his blue eyes blank and cold through the eyeholes of the black mask that covered the top half of his face. "I am sorry, Princess, but I am not in the mood for celebration."

"Well, let us sit down for a while, then," Serenity suggested brightly, but her smile became strained. She loved dancing. Was this how it was going to be at every ball for the rest of her long life?

The young couple returned to the dais together, weaving amongst an endless mass of happy pairs of masked dancers. The floor was crowded, and they were jostled and nearly separated several times, but the Prince never once reached back for his fiance's hand or even looked back over his shoulder. At last they reached the throne of Selene and its accompanying high-backed chairs; two richly-upholstered seats had been placed on the top step of the dais and would remain there until the Princess became Queen.

The Moon Princess nearly flopped down in her chair, momentarily exasperated. Prince Endymion seated himself demurely in his own chair beside hers. He seemed a bit more comfortable out of the crowd and raised to the height of royalty, but his face was still set in a neutral expression.

The marble throne was empty. After a moment's search, the Princess located her mother gliding across the dance floor in the arms of the King of Mercury. The Prince and Princess sat there on the dais as two more songs began and ended, and the ruler of the Moon moved from partner to partner, laughing and smiling and enjoying the luxuries of her kingdom.

Princess Serenity was jealous. She hoped some young lord would approach and ask her to dance, as had happened in every other ball she had attended, but with her new fiance present so close to her, it seemed no other man was bold enough to be the first to ask. She glared at the silent Earth Prince out of the corner of her eye. It just wasn't fair.

"A lovely evening, isn't it?" Serenity asked at last, unable to bear the awkward silence any longer.

"Yes, Princess." The apathetic young man did not turn to look at her and kept staring blankly at the crowd below them on the dance floor with a bored expression. Serenity sighed.

"So, if you do not enjoy dancing, what activity do you enjoy? What are your hobbies, Prince?"

"I study. I train," was the response. Serenity waited for him to elaborate, but he did not continue.

"What subjects?" she prompted, squeezing the arms of her chair so tightly she thought her fingers would break. It was taking all the effort she could muster to keep her voice calm.

"History, writing, and the like," Prince Endymion replied after heaving a wearied sigh of his own. "I have also studied all the preferred riding and swordsmanship techniques... although I suppose that training will be useless now," he added under his breath.

"Oh, no, there's no reason to stop doing any of the activities you enjoy," the Princess said brightly. "I'm certain you will find our military facilities to your liking. Our training fields are well-equipped and the Sailor Soldiers may even be able to teach you some new skills. Our stables, as well, are stocked with the finest breeds." At these words, Serenity blushed with shame as the tanned face of a certain stable hand materialized in her mind. Those chiseled shoulders and arms, that gentle smile... She felt strangely warm all over.

"Sailor Mercury can assist you to further your scholarly studies," the crystal-haired Princess continued hurriedly, steering the conversation away from the stables. Distracted by the fire in her cheeks, she did not notice Prince Endymion's body slowly tensing with confined irritation. "The knowledge of the entire Silver Millennium is stored in our library," she rushed on. "I am not fond of studies myself, but even I can find something of interest there. Perhaps-"

"Do you never stop talking?"

It was a muttered hiss that slipped out through clenched teeth, barely audible above the music and laughter permeating the Great Hall, but Serenity heard it. She heard the bitter, irritated frustration, the

Against All Odds

bristling annoyance, the forceful honesty of those words, and it struck her like a sharp slap in the face. She gasped, feeling as if she had been doused with ice-cold water, and stared at her fiance as her lips went numb. Prince Endymion stared back, his eyes wide with horror at the words he had just uttered, but he could not unsay them.

"I... I... Excuse me." Princess Serenity shot out of her chair, turned away from the Earth Prince, and scurried off down the steps of the dais and into the preparatory chamber, leaving her silver eye-mask lying on her seat. Letting the doors bang shut behind her, she flew through the rear door and into the corridor beyond, fleeing up to the royal wing alone. Her eyes stung and her cheeks burned with humiliation. Was that all she was to him? A nuisance?

The hallways Serenity half-walked, half-ran down were dark and empty. Everyone was either attending the ball or assisting behind the scenes. To not participate in one of the Queen's celebrations was unthinkable to servants and nobles alike.

The Moon Princess fled up to her chambers and headed straight out onto the balcony, throwing the doors open so forcefully that they rebounded off the marble walls. It was a clear, cool evening, and Serenity shivered slightly as she swept up to the balcony's railing and leaned heavily against it, resting her forearms on the cold stone.

Why couldn't she be engaged to someone she could be friends with, at the very least? It wasn't that they had nothing in common; Prince Endymion refused even to talk to her, to get to know her and let her get to know him. It had been a month since their engagement ball, and they still knew next to nothing about each other. Her fiance just wouldn't try to improve things between them. Did he hate her that much?

Serenity's throat choked up, but she swallowed the flood of unshed tears. She couldn't stay out here; her absence from the ball would be noticed. Soon, she would have to go back downstairs, and she didn't want to be a red-faced, tear-soaked wreck. She just wanted to stay on the balcony a little longer, to be alone and away from it all just a little longer. Just another moment of peace and quiet, and then she would go back.

Sighing, the Princess gazed up at the night sky, alive with twinkling stars. The Earth was full again, having completed an entire cycle while her fiance was away. The Moon was once again illuminated by the blue-green glow of its anchoring world. As Serenity watched, bright fireworks of pink and yellow burst around the shining orb, a treat for the common people who could not attend the ball.

It had been a night just like this, a clear, beautiful night, when she first laid eyes on her betrothed. That evening, too, there had been a ball, and an upset, and a flight. Serenity turned her gaze away from the Earth and hung her head, tears pooling beneath her closed eyelids. Both nights, intended as evenings of celebration, had brought her nothing but pain.

Well... that wasn't entirely true. She had met two Earth men that first night and although her fiance was a devastating disappointment, the second man was a delight beyond her wildest dreams. While every moment with Prince Endymion was a torturous struggle, the dark-haired stable hand made Serenity feel light and free, bringing happiness to even the worst days.

If only she could see him now, everything would be all right... but he knew of the ball and would not dare come near the castle tonight. Still, she wanted so badly to see him, wanted to hear his soft voice call the name her fiance refused to say.

Lifting her hands from the marble railing, the Princess clasped them together beneath her bowed chin, interweaving her fingers as her mother had done beside the Crystal Tower. If she could make a wish on the Silver Crystal... she would wish to see the Earth-born stable hand, now.

"Princess Serenity!" a voice whispered urgently from below.

Her eyes popped open in surprise and she jerked her head up, searching the ground. Standing by the edge of the reflecting pool, beside a decorative pillar, was a man. He was tall and muscular, and was dressed elegantly in a sharp black tuxedo with a red-lined cape flowing from his shoulders. His dark hair was neat and trimmed, and his stance hovered between pride and nervousness as he clung to the shadows of the pillar. Dressed up as he was, Serenity almost didn't recognize him.

"Endou!" she exclaimed in surprise. The stable hand stepped forward into the light. He wore the tuxedo well, carrying an air of nobility perfectly. She could almost believe he was one of the guests dancing inside the castle.

Against All Odds

"Please pardon me for being late to the ball," Endymion called up to her softly, a smirk playing across his lips. He had come here first because it was a familiar place and had not expected to actually find the Princess on her balcony. It seemed he had been right. Serenity's evening was not a pleasant one thus far, and Endymion was glad he had decided to come. Perhaps he would not have to risk sneaking into the ball after all.

"I have been waiting for you," the Princess replied, her heart feeling light and fluttery inside her chest. All her sadness and frustration had evaporated almost instantly at the sight of him. "I don't know why, since we had not planned to meet tonight, but I hoped you would come. I wanted to see you so badly."

"Serenity, there are some disturbing rumors spreading among the... er, in the city," Endymion said, amending his words in case anyone was listening. "I'd like to speak with you about it, if I may." It seemed wrong to bring up serious matters at a time like this, but the stable hand felt like he needed an excuse for his unexpected visit.

Serenity bit her lip, looking around nervously. "I can't leave here tonight, Endou. I've been away from the ball too long already." High above, a few more fireworks exploded against the stars. What bad news might he be bringing to this night of celebration?

"Perhaps it can wait, then," Endymion replied. "I apologize for disturbing you, Serenity." He turned to leave. It was a stupid idea, coming here.

"No, please, Endou, don't go!" the Princess called out after him. He stopped and looked back at her. "Please, don't leave. I..."

"Who's there?!" A handful of castle guards approached the area, coming down the walkway along the reflecting pool. Endymion nearly jumped out of his skin. He should run, now, he should get out of here... but he had already come so far, and she seemed so happy to see him... He had to go through with his plan.

"At the ball," he called up to Serenity, backing into the shadow of the pillar. "I will see you there!" Endymion whirled around and ran along the castle wall, the black cape flowing out behind him, and disappeared around a hedge.

"Endou..." the Princess whispered, leaning against the railing as he disappeared. The guards rushed across the courtyard below her balcony, chasing after her visitor at a full run. What if they caught him? If they questioned him, could he keep up his disguise? Heart pounding in her chest, Serenity hurried back into the castle.

In the Great Hall, the revelry continued, the masked and disguised dancers twirling in time with the music, enjoying the bounty of the Moon Kingdom. Amidst the crowded celebration, it seemed no one had noticed the absence of their Princess. At the rear of the hall, Serenity nervously descended a side staircase, clutching her skirts in one hand and the marble railing at her right with the other.

Her eyes searched the shifting flood of guests. Could a stable hand really find his way in here? From the stairs, she could see all the way to the dais, and at its base, Prince Endymion was looking as stiff in the arms of Sailor Venus as he had been in his fiancée's. Serenity chuckled to herself. Perhaps the soldier of love would have better luck extracting some emotion from the stoic Earth Prince. On the other hand, the man would certainly not find Venus less talkative than his betrothed.

As she neared the foot of the stairs, a firm grip suddenly seized her hand on the marble banister. Princess Serenity stopped short and looked down with a gasp, startled. There he was, her beloved stable hand, standing beside the staircase in his inky-black tuxedo. The collar of his white shirt was turned up to conceal the silver tattoo that marked his neck, and a thin white mask covered his eyes, hiding them from view. In this guise, he seemed familiar, somehow, but Serenity could not pinpoint the memory.

"Princess, may I?" Endymion squeezed her slender hand gently. The white gloves felt strange against his flesh, but without them, his rough and calloused hands would quickly betray his station. The tuxedo was a stiff, confining thing, but he would gladly wrap himself in broken glass if it gave him another moment beside Serenity.

The Princess' heart pounded in excitement, but she held her face steady. This would be risky enough without her elation drawing more attention to them. She gracefully glided down to the floor of the Great Hall, carefully holding her skirts out of the path of her glass slippers. The masked man moved away

Against All Odds

from the staircase and stood facing her, holding out a gloved hand. Serenity raised her own arm and slowly placed her fingers in his grasp.

"Endou," she whispered. She almost couldn't believe it. This was a dream come true, a dance with a man who truly cared for her. His strong arm tugged her forward and she sailed smoothly into his embrace, her head barely reaching his shoulder as he placed his free arm firmly around her waist.

"Did you not know I could dance, Serenity?" Endymion said quietly with a teasing edge to his voice. They began to move together, swaying from side to side, their feet mirroring each other's steps with little effort. "My life is not all horses and hay."

Gently, the young man pushed the Princess away from him and swung her around by one arm in a wide arc. Serenity let her head fall back, and her eyes slid closed, her streams of hair rippling around her. It felt so natural, dancing with him, her free arm trailing out to her side as she glided through the air. There was no awkward stiffness, no calculated and precise steps. There was only the relaxed pleasure of the dance.

The Great Hall was by far the most enormous room Endymion had ever set foot in. Surrounded by elegant finery, both adorning the walls and clothing the other dancers, he felt terribly out of place. Not only that, but somewhere in this crowd was a man Endymion was rather rapidly growing to hate: Serenity's cold and heartless fiancé. Feeling the pressure of hundreds of members of the nobility, the stable hand confined his dance with the Princess to the far corner beside the staircase. He was masked, and there was a large enough crowd to be lost in, but he didn't want to take any further risks by drawing attention to them.

"Obviously, if I were found here, it would be a disaster," Endymion muttered to his dance partner. "So, please pardon my appearance." He pulled Serenity close again and the Princess slid up to his side, her head hovering beside his right shoulder.

"Do not worry, Endou," she replied, looking up at his masked face. "It is acceptable for any woman to dance with any man at a celebration like this, even an engaged one. No one will suspect you. You look wonderful - perfect - like any other nobleman," she assured him, admiring the smooth angle of his chin and the slope of his shoulders beneath the black suitcoat.

"The time may be coming when being of Earth will be worse than being of common blood," Endymion murmured. Inwardly, he cursed himself. Even at a precious time like this, a dream come true, dancing with a beautiful Princess in the Great Hall of a castle, he could not stop himself from bringing up the negative things that troubled him.

Wrapping one arm securely around Serenity's waist, he dipped her backward, swinging her head so low that her hair pooled like quicksilver on the tiled floor. The Princess automatically raised one leg for balance, her flowing white skirts rippling outward. Even at the bottom of the dip, she lifted her head slightly to look at Endymion with puzzled eyes.

"What do you mean?" Serenity asked when her masked partner had lifted her upright again.

"It seems the delegation to Earth was not given as warm a welcome as they expected," the tuxedoed stable hand replied. The two of them swung apart at arm's length, linked together by one pair of clasped hands, and Endymion's cloak rolled out to the side, revealing the lush red velvet lining on its inside. The man had to admit he rather enjoyed wearing this cape, which was light enough for even the slightest breeze to send it flying. The style of the nobility did have its good points.

The Princess and the stable hand pulled themselves close to each other again. "There is still some bitterness toward the Moon in the Golden Kingdom," Endymion continued.

"Stop." Throwing caution to the wind, Serenity laid her head against her dance partner's chest, one ball of hair pressing into his white shirt. "Please, let's not talk about such things right now," she said softly. "I just want to enjoy this dance, this evening... this time with you."

Her head was warm, even through the starched shirt, and Endymion knew she could feel his heart pounding within his chest. He looked down at her through the thin white mask, and she raised her head, her blue eyes gazing up at him imploringly. Their bodies had not been so close together since the ride on the black stallion, and Endymion felt tingly all over. Before he could hesitate, the stable hand lifted an arm and wrapped it around her slender shoulders. He wanted to stay like this, just like this, forever, just holding her in his arms.

"As you wish, Serenity. I will dance with you as long as you like."

Against All Odds

The Princess leaned into the tall Earth-born man, soaking in his warmth through her cheek, and rested one pale hand against his chest. She had danced with countless noblemen over the course of her lifetime, but now she knew the true meaning, the true purpose of spending hours surrounded by music in the arms of a man. The reason was not the ceremony but the intimacy, the closeness, the enveloping presence of a loved one.

After several dances, it became too risky for Princess Serenity to continue spending the evening exclusively with one man. Yet, she was certainly not eager to return to her fiance's side, nor did she want to leave the stable hand's. Instead, she led her companion out on the balcony that adjoined the Great Hall, and they moved away from the doors to stand between two tall pillars.

From here, they could see an inlet of the expansive Sea of Serenity, which extended from the castle grounds on this side to a distant district of the city, its lights casting flickering reflections on the water. Although the dancing still continued inside, the fireworks had ended for the evening, and the night was still and quiet.

"I am concerned your fiance may not be what he seems," the stable hand confessed. He had removed his mask and stood facing the young Princess beside the railing that lined the balcony. "It worries me that you have heard none of this." He had explained the rumors he had heard amongst the servants, but Serenity heard little of it. Earth, diplomacy, arranged marriages; none of that mattered right now, here in this moment. It was almost like a dream, standing in a beautiful evening like this with the full Earth shining above, alone with this man... the man she loved.

She could no longer deny that this stable hand was her heart's desire. Every word from his lips was poetry, every movement of his body was a dance that spoke to her soul. He was so handsome, in anything he wore, but the elegant black tuxedo added a touch of class that placed him above any other man. Her eyes drank in every detail of him, from the short locks of dark hair that trailed beside his eyes to his strong chin and thin lips. His lips... She could not prevent herself from watching them as they moved, every word seeming like a song written just for her.

Endymion reached out and took the Princess' hand in his. "Promise me you'll be careful around him, Serenity. Will you do that?" The way she was looking at him made it difficult to breathe. Her eyes were shining with a light unlike anything he had ever seen before, as if looking at him was a priceless gift, a treasure. He gazed into those beautiful cerulean eyes, their depths wrapping him in waves of tingling warmth that spread throughout his body. Truly, it was Princess Serenity who was the treasure, an elegant goddess of light and life. His blood did not matter to her. She looked at him and only saw the man he was, a man she liked very much.

"I promise," Serenity said softly, her mind consumed by the feeling of his hand surrounding hers. Her breathing rebelled against her, quickening against her will, her chest rising and falling more rapidly as she tried to control herself. She didn't like this small distance that separated them. She wanted to be close to him again, in his arms again, but she resisted - because that wasn't all she wanted. She wanted more, something more.

"Why did you come here, Endou?" she asked, unable to tear her eyes away from the smooth liquid midnight gaze of the taller man. Her feet slowly slid forward, her shoes creeping across the marble floor. "Why did you take such a risk for me?"

"To make you happy, Serenity. To see you smile." Endymion squeezed the Princess' hand. "That's all I want, in all the Moon." Was it an illusion, or was she moving closer to him? His arms ached for her warmth, his skin burned with the heat of desire, and somewhere, deep within Serenity's eyes, he found an answering yearning. The moment was beyond compare. They were alone, on an elegant balcony beneath the bright earthlight, and the essence of the evening itself seemed to surround them in the embrace of romance. There could be no more perfect time than this.

Endymion made his decision. If he was arrested, executed, or imprisoned for the rest of his days, it didn't matter. He was in love with Princess Serenity, was perhaps the only man who would ever truly love her, and he could not deny her the experience of a pure expression of true love. Nor could he deny it to himself any longer.

Against All Odds

His hand shaking around hers, Endymion pulled Serenity to him and wrapped his other arm around her, enfolding her in his velvet-lined cloak. He looked down at her and discovered her eyes closed, her face tilted up toward his, waiting, anticipating. Asking. He bent toward her, letting his own eyelids slide closed.

Their lips met.

Serenity felt her heart race into a frenzy as a soft liquid heat rushed over her mouth and flooded throughout her entire body. Tendrils of electric energy rushed through her skin, streaming from the velvet softness of the man's lips until even her toes tingled. Her breath stilled, her pulse pounded, and she was surrounded by warmth inside and out as a gloved hand slid around her waist and pulled her close. Her eyes were shut, but there was light everywhere, a rush of blood that roared through her veins and set her flesh on fire.

Endymion leaned into her. His lips had never touched anything so soft and yielding as the mouth of the Princess, nor had he tasted anything so sweet. His blood exploded into song, alight with energy that whipped his pulse into a hammering rhythm, and his hands slid over the supple skin of her shoulders and the smoothness of the small of her back. She fit so perfectly in his arms and he never wanted to let go, never wanted to lose this feeling of ecstasy that raged from his mouth to the pit of his stomach.

It was paradise, and yet Serenity felt liquid pooling beneath her closed eyelids. She wanted nothing more than this, and yet, how long could it last? It was forbidden, eternally forbidden. A tear escaped her long eyelashes and rolled down her pale cheek. Still, she could not resist this feeling. Deep within her body, a flame was smoldering, and then burning. A heat was growing in a place where she had never felt anything before. There was more that could be had here, lots more, and she wanted it. The elation returned and Serenity sighed into him, her lips parted, her mouth opened to admit him-

"Princess? Are you out here?"

Both of them broke off the kiss simultaneously and drew apart, each one gasping for breath, panic flooding their faces. Serenity reached up hurriedly to swipe a tear off her cheek and Endymion stared at her, a knife of dread piercing his heart. She was crying? Had this been a mistake? She had seemed so eager, so hungry for what he wanted to give her...

Her heart pounding, Serenity hurried past the stable hand as footsteps approached on the balcony. Sailor Mercury and Sailor Jupiter came around the bend in the castle wall, dressed as always in the sleeveless bodysuits that were their uniforms, although on formal occasions like this they wore long skirts that brushed the floor. Without the warmth of the young man surrounding her, the Princess felt terribly cold and wondered how the soldiers could bear the endless days in their usual clothes.

"Ah, here you are, Serenity!" Jupiter exclaimed, a relieved smile spreading across her face. "We've been looking everywhere! What are you doing out here?"

"I just came outside to get some air," Serenity replied awkwardly, her mind racing as she struggled to find an explanation for the presence of a strange man at her side. Swiftly, she invented a story. It was weak, but it would have to do.

"This... this is..." The Princess turned to indicate her visitor with a sweep of her arm - and found only empty air behind her on the balcony.

The stable hand had vanished.

Chapter Six

The day after the ball, Endymion went about his daily business like a hunted man. The tuxedo had been back in Sir Marton's closet long before the Moon Knight returned from the ball, but worse transgressions than theft had taken place that night. As he fed the horses and cleaned their stables, Endymion was constantly looking over his shoulder, dreading who might be there. Every time a door opened or a new voice entered a room, he whirled around half-expecting to see armed guards coming to drag him off to the dungeons.

Yet, if he could, would he have undone any of his actions? Not for all the crystal on the Moon. He had kissed the woman he loved, and he did not regret that for a second. Even if it condemned him to spend the rest of his days in chains, at least he would have the memory of that one perfect moment of bliss.

Ah, that kiss. Even now, the thought of Princess Serenity's sweet, tender lips sent a tingle through the pit of his stomach. She had been so warm, so yielding, so hungry with the same desire for love as Endymion.

Still... she had shed tears. Obviously, the Princess believed that kiss was a mistake. He had crossed a line that should have remained unbroken. And so, when the next evening came, Endymion did not go to Serenity's balcony.

Neither did he sleep. Every time he closed his eyes, images of shimmering long hair and azure blue eyes filled his mind, and his arms ached for the warmth of the Princess. Eventually he gave up and abandoned his bed, leaving the empty comfort of his hut to wander the lonely, dark night. Before long he found himself in the stables, the chorus of breathing issuing from the horses a slight comfort to the bitter loneliness that plagued him.

His steps automatically brought him from the work animals' quarters to the high-bred section of the stables, but without the Princess by his side, Endymion did not feel comfortable going near the royal horses. Instead, he headed for the area where the guest mounts were kept and visited a certain brown gelding, the very one that had helped him rescue Serenity from disaster.

Things had changed so much since that night, although no average citizen of the Moon would notice it. He had fallen in love with the most forbidden of women, one both heir to a kingdom and engaged to another man, and he had kissed her. The kiss had been beautiful, and pure, and perfect - but wrong, so

Against All Odds

very wrong. At least yesterday he had had the Princess' friendship; today he had nothing. Endymion hovered on the edge of uncertainty, now unable to decide whether or not to be glad he had kissed her. Was a brief flare of passion, no matter how glorious, truly worth the bitter emptiness of never seeing Serenity again?

Behind him, a door opened and closed. A single set of footsteps entered the stables, but Endymion did not turn to greet whatever squire or stable hand had come to finish lingering chores. He stroked the gelding's mane absently as the horse happily gobbled oats from his hand. With a simple kiss, he had doomed himself to a lifetime of pining over a woman he could never be with.

"Endou?" a voice called, tentative and uneasy, from behind him. Endymion froze. There was only one sound so sweet, one tone so pure, as that voice. He whirled around.

Standing just inside the doorway, the hem of the rough brown cloak brushing against the hay strewn across the floor, was Princess Serenity. She was breathing rapidly, as if she had been running, and her eyes as they peered out from beneath the hood of the cloak were filled with uncertainty. Endymion's arm dropped limply to his side, and the gelding's soft lips began nuzzling his neck as the food supply vanished.

"Serenity? What are you doing here?" Endymion asked in surprise, pushing the horse's questing nose aside as he took a few steps toward her.

"You didn't come, so I climbed down myself and went looking for you," the Princess replied, shifting her feet awkwardly. "I don't think I can lift myself back up to the balcony on my own, though," she added with a halfhearted chuckle and a hopeful glance at the stable hand. He did not respond. Serenity felt sick to her stomach with unease. Had it been a mistake to come here? Had she said something at the ball that offended him?

"Why didn't you come tonight?" she asked at last, dreading the answer.

"I feared... I had done something wrong," Endymion confessed in a rush. "Something inexcusable." His cheeks burned with shame, yet a tiny ray of hope shone through. She had come all the way here just to see him.

"No, not at all!" Serenity burst out, pulling the hood off her crystal hair as she hurried toward the nervous young man. "I wanted... I needed every moment of it," she continued breathlessly, stopping short in front of him. "It was wonderful. All of it was so wonderful."

For a long moment, the two of them just stood there, staring at one another, an arm's length of space separating them. The Princess could barely breathe. He was so close she could feel the warmth emanating from his body, and even beneath the cloak she felt chilled. She wanted his arms around her, his warmth enfolding her, to be as close to him as she had been on the balcony, but he did not move.

For his part, Endymion was floating on a cloud of ecstatic relief. She had enjoyed their dance, their kiss, as thoroughly as he had, and by the look of her, she wanted more. It didn't matter that she was a Princess; the Moon Kingdom itself could have collapsed around them, and in that moment, Endymion would still have felt as light as air. He was in love with her and she had not rejected him.

"Shall we dance?" he burst out, longing to act on his joy, to hold her again.

"What, here?" The Princess blinked her large blue eyes in disbelief, looking around at the wooden stalls and piles of hay surrounding them.

"Yes." He smiled at her, his eyes twinkling, and she felt in another moment she would need his arms around her for support as her knees weakened.

"But... we don't even have any music!" the Princess within Serenity protested. The stable hand reached into his pocket and pulled out the gold star locket. For a moment, Serenity's breath caught in her throat - what if it had all been a mistake and the locket was now silent? - but the beautiful melody rose from the depths of the enchanted object as the man opened it, a testament to the truths of her heart. He gently set the open locket on a stout wooden post and reached for her, and her arms automatically rose to encircle his neck.

This time, in the privacy of the stables, there was no fear, no self-consciousness, no need for custom or propriety. Serenity stepped right up to Endymion, stretched her arms around his neck, and laid her head against his chest. Her slender body seemed to fit perfectly against his as Endymion wrapped his arms around her waist, sliding them underneath the coarse brown cloak. The white dress was soft and silky

Against All Odds

beneath the stable hand's worn hands, her waist seeming impossibly small as he held her. He could feel her breathe against his chest, the silver circles lining her bodice pressing into him. She was so close, so alive, so real, and a warm wave surged through Endymion's blood.

Small piles of hay gathered around their shoes as the young couple swayed together in the close embrace of a slow dance too intimate to be permitted in the Great Hall. The gold star locket sang out its lilting, tinkling melody, surrounding the pair in sweet tones and soft beams of glowing light. Serenity closed her eyes, listening to the rapid but steady pulse of the stable hand's heartbeat beneath her ear. Her feet easily followed his simple steps and a calm and utter peace settled around her. She breathed, and there it was - the velvet sweetness of roses that surrounded the man against all the laws of nature. The scent swirled within Serenity's head, sweeping away every care and concern.

"I love you, Endou," she whispered.

A warm tingle rushed through Endymion's blood at these words, yet it took every bit of willpower he possessed to prevent his body from stiffening around her. She loved him; how badly had he yearned to hear those words? Yet, a false name fell from her lips, a lie the recipient of her affections. How could she truly love him when she didn't even know his name? It was like loving a shadow, an illusion.

Now, however, was not the right time to confess the truth. The Princess had just bared her heart to him, and Endymion could feel her holding her breath as she awaited his response. If he told her his real name now, she would think he was mocking her. She needed to hear the truth, yes, but a truth of a different kind. The truth of his own heart.

"And I love you, Serenity."

How difficult those words had seemed a moment ago, and how natural they felt now!

Princess Serenity raised her head and looked up at the tall man, her eyes shining with happiness and relief. Without hesitation, Endymion bent down to meet her offered lips with his own.

The now-familiar electricity rushed through the pair of them, a glowing heat spreading from their joined lips to their cores. This time, Serenity did not delay in opening herself to him. Her eyes closed, her lips parted, and she leaned into the kiss as the stable hand's tongue slid into her mouth. Her hands tightened behind the man's neck as a blaze of passion erupted into flame within her and he filled her with his breath and the silk of his tongue.

Endymion pulled her slim body close against him, his eyes shut tightly as all the emotion of his heart poured itself into the kiss. Serenity moaned softly against his lips, matching his desire with her own as her soft tongue entered him and explored his mouth in turn. Endymion could feel her fire, her passion, and it further inflamed his own as he eagerly tasted her. For the first time, they both felt truly free; they both wanted this so badly, and they acted on that desire without restraint.

All too soon, however, their lips parted, leaving behind the gentle glow of a time of passion. With a contented sigh, Princess Serenity leaned her head against the stable hand's chest again, and smiled at the sound of the far more rapid heartbeats pulsing inside him.

Endymion began to sway again and the woman in his arms followed his lead. Bending down, the Earth-child gently kissed the shining crystal hair of the Moon Princess, then laid his cheek against the top of her head.

In that embrace, the lovers danced together long into the night as the gold star locket endlessly sang out the melody of their love.

The next day, Endymion felt like a new man. He was in love with a beautiful, wonderful woman who loved him in return. Their dance, their kiss, had been more magical than all the power of the legendary Silver Crystal. He went about his daily chores with reckless energy, feeling as if his heart had wings. Yes, she was a Princess, and their relationship was certain to be filled with strife, but she loved him and for the moment that was all that mattered.

Throughout the day, Prien bided his time as a silent observer of the lightness in his friend's step and the sparkle in his eye. To those less close to Endymion, it might have seemed that the stable hand was simply in good spirits that day, but to his best friend, it was obvious that the man was in love. Prien noted that there was no similar change in Misa's demeanor. Apparently Endymion had been telling the truth

Against All Odds

about having his eye on another woman after all.

It was strange... Prien studied all the servants in the area as he worked, but none of the women cast flirtatious glances in the Earth-born man's direction or seemed unusually upbeat. Who was the mystery girl?

As a man who prided himself on his perceptive nature, Prien resisted the urge to confront his friend outright and demand answers. Endymion's secret would reveal itself soon enough. There was no need to pry - at least, not overtly. It would be far more amusing to let Endymion think himself a good actor for a while.

Princess Serenity was exhausted.

After returning to her chambers at a very late hour, she had lain awake in her bed for the remainder of the night, her mind consumed by turmoil. She was a Princess, engaged to a Prince, and she was in love with a stable hand. There was no way it could work. For the sake of the Moon Kingdom, she had to marry Prince Endymion; she was the Moon's only Princess. Yet, the very thought of ending her relationship with the stable hand was so painful that it caused her to curl up in agony.

He was her heart's only desire. He made her feel alive, like a person, a woman, instead of a figure on a throne. He was her savior, her protector, and her confidant, whose arms held all the suffering of the universe at bay. More than all that, he loved her, he adored everything about her and would do anything to bring her happiness. No other man could ever make her feel the way he did.

Especially Prince Endymion. After breakfast, the auburn-haired Earth man finally worked up the courage to apologize for the things he had said at the ball, but Serenity was too tired to care about diplomacy.

"Do not apologize for speaking the truth. I know where you stand now, and I will not bother you any further." With only those words, Princess Serenity turned away from her fiance and headed off to her morning lessons.

Unfortunately for the exhausted young woman, today's focus was yet another lecture on the history of Earth. Serenity barely heard a word Sailor Mercury was saying as she stared, bleary-eyed, at the blue-haired soldier pointing out areas of a global map. She was too tired even to think about her Earth-born lover or the predicament she was in. Her mind was blurry and the room spun gently around her, her eyelids drooped, her head dropped forward...

"Serenity!"

Her back was against something hard and cold, and someone was gently shaking her arm.

"Serenity! Wake up!"

Her eyes slid open, and she looked into the worried face of Sailor Mercury. Blinking, she realized she was lying on the floor.

"Oh, Mercury, I apologize," she said quickly, rubbing her face. "It's not that your lessons bore me, I'm just so tired..."

"Lessons?" Mercury's eyes narrowed in confusion. "What lessons? Are you all right, Neo-Queen?"

Neo-Queen?

Serenity sat bolt upright. The library had vanished. She was in a castle, but it was not the one she called home. The walls and floor were all made of solid crystal and there was not a scrap of marble to be seen. The hallway she was sitting in was long and wide, sterile and lifeless as frozen glass.

"That was quite a tumble you took there," Sailor Venus' voice said. Whipping her head around, Serenity discovered the blonde-haired leader of the Sailor Soldiers standing behind her.

"Where am I?" she asked uneasily, climbing to her feet. She felt heavy, yet stronger, as if she had had years to become accustomed to the weight of the air. "Not Earth again!"

"Someone fetch the King," Sailor Venus hissed urgently to a small group of servants hovering nearby, who scampered off. Everyone in the area had the rosy complexion of the people of Earth. Venus turned back to Serenity and smiled, but the worry was clear in her eyes.

Against All Odds

Those eyes. Serenity looked at Sailor Mercury and saw it there as well, the deeply-rooted echoes of pain from years of struggle. These were not the eyes of the friends she knew, but they were familiar to her. She had seen these faces in her other dream of Earth.

"It's only a dream," Serenity said with a nervous chuckle, "just another dream!" Still, it felt so real! Every fiber of her brain was alive and active, just as if she were awake. At least this time she was dressed properly. The familiar chain of silver circles hugged the top edge of her white dress and cradled her breasts. The gold-edged blue jewel that represented her engagement to the Earth Prince, however, was missing.

"Dream? What are you talking about?" Venus asked nervously, studying Serenity's face. "Are you feeling all right, Neo-Queen?"

Serenity's eyes widened as she stared down at herself. Her gown seemed caught between the mid-youth cut she was used to and the style of an adult dress. It did not flare out beneath the bodice but crept down over her body, hugging her legs closely. She felt bigger, somehow, although she wasn't any taller. She felt older. Serenity reached behind her back and found thin, delicate wings sprouting from her dress, much like her mother's, and her head felt heavy. Reaching up, her fingers touched a metal tiara resting on her hair.

"What is this?" she asked numbly. "Where is this place?"

Mercury's hand shot up to her temple and activated her computer visor, which slid over her eyes, covering them in semi-transparent blue. She studied Serenity intently as the visor beeped and displayed the data from its scans. Sailor Venus reached out and seized the white-robed woman by the arm.

"Usagi-chan! It's the castle in Crystal Tokyo, don't you remember?" the blonde soldier squeaked, her face filling with panic.

"It's obviously the future, if I am Queen," Serenity mused aloud, "but why Earth? What is Tokyo?"

The two soldiers exchanged fearful glances. Before either one could speak, a door somewhere in the crystal hallway banged open and a small figure dashed out, followed close behind by two servants calling out for the child to stop. It was a little girl with pink hair tied up in two pointed buns. She ran straight to Serenity and flung herself against the confused woman's body.

"Mama, are you okay?" the child wailed, her voice muffled by Serenity's form-fitting white dress. "They said you fell and something was wrong!"

"My apologies, Neo-Queen," one of the servants gasped, out of breath from running after the girl. "I was relaying the news to some of the other hands and Small Lady overheard."

Serenity could not find the words to speak and just stared down in amazement at the pink-haired child clutching her legs. A child. A little girl. She was a mother. Slowly, her arms lifted from her sides and her hands reached out to caress the soft rosy locks pressed against her body. Her daughter, her own Small Lady.

"Don't worry, Mama," the child sniffled into her mother's dress. "Daddy will be here soon."

Serenity stiffened. The father of her child. If this was truly a vision of the future... who would it be? The obvious answer, Prince Endymion, surfaced in her mind, and she shuddered all over. If that was her destiny, she pitied the child in her arms, doomed to be raised in a household devoid of love.

Another door in the corridor opened and Serenity turned in that direction, trembling with anxiety. A man strode out into the hallway and headed toward her at a rapid pace, surrounded by a cloud of attendants.

"Daddy!" The pink-haired girl pulled away from Serenity and rushed toward the man, his servants swiftly stepping out of her path. As she approached, he leaned down and caught the child up in his arms, lifting her to his chest as he continued down the hallway.

"Something's wrong with Mama," Small Lady moaned, wrapping her little arms around his neck. Serenity just stared at him, wide-eyed. He was tall, with short dark hair, and was dressed in a lavender tuxedo with a long, flowing cape. A white mask covered his eyes. His clothes were now the color of evening instead of midnight, but there was no mistaking him. This was the same man who had protected Serenity in her previous dream.

"It's you!" she cried, clasping both hands to her mouth in shock. What manner of dream was this, where her child was fathered by a fictitious man she didn't even know? The tuxedoed stranger stopped short, staring at her stunned and frightened expression over their daughter's pigtails. He handed the child

Against All Odds

to a servant standing nearby.

"Sakako, take Small Lady to her rooms," he instructed the woman, his masked gaze never leaving Serenity's face.

"Daddy, no! I want to stay!" the little girl protested, squirming in the attendant's arms. The man turned and looked at her sternly.

"A proper lady must always do as her father says," he admonished her. "Be a good girl, Small Lady."

"Yes, Daddy." The child buried her face in the servant's shoulder and Sakako carried her away. As soon as the door closed behind them, the man in lavender headed straight for Serenity, reaching out his arms as he approached.

"What's wrong?" he asked hurriedly, his voice filled with worry. "It's me, Endymion."

Endymion! Serenity recoiled toward the Sailor Soldiers as he drew closer, clutching her hands to her chest. He was her mystery man?

"Why are you looking at me with such fear in your eyes? Usa-ko?!" Stepping right up to her, he reached up, pulled off the white mask and tossed it aside. Serenity gasped, staring at his face in disbelief as he gripped her securely by the arms and looked at her with an expression on the verge of desperate panic.

As she beheld the mysterious knight's face in its entirety for the first time, Serenity wondered why she hadn't realized it sooner. The man was a full head taller than her, and well-built, with a mass of short dark hair and a smooth voice like melted chocolate. Now that his eyes were revealed, their deep liquid pools engulfing her, it all fell into place so easily - the angle of his chin, the soft curve of his lips...

"Endou?" she whispered hoarsely.

Now it was his turn to be startled, and his entire body jerked as if he had been slapped. The stable hand in a king's clothing gaped at the woman in his arms, his dark eyes wide with shock, and, shining deep within his gaze, a tiny glint of hope, of recognition, sparked into light.

"Sere?!"

His voice was earnest, yet cautious, as if he barely dared to believe it...

"Princess!"

Serenity leapt about a foot in the air as Sailor Mercury slammed a heavy tome into the table right beside her ear. After a moment of disorientation, the room resolved itself into the familiar surroundings of the monarchy's private library in the Moon Castle. The engagement pendant was once again around her neck. So it was another dream, then. It had felt so real! She had been Queen, but not of the Moon, and... the stable hand, her husband?

"I apologize, Mercury," Serenity said meekly to the blue-haired soldier who was glaring at her disapprovingly. "I haven't been sleeping well lately."

Mercury's eyes softened. She walked around the table and sat down next to her Princess, giving her a sympathetic smile.

"I know all this is hard on you, Serenity," the soldier said gently. "Your fiance is not what you hoped he would be. I wish there was something I could do to change that." Serenity averted her eyes, blushing with guilt.

"Please try to relax, all right?" The blue-haired woman patted her friend's arm in what she hoped was a reassuring manner. "No matter what happens, you will always have me and the other soldiers. Think about all the people of the Moon and of Earth who are eagerly awaiting your marriage. Your union will be celebrated for generations."

Princess Serenity forced a smile to her lips. She didn't want her guardians to worry about her. Inside, however, her heart sank. Sailor Mercury obviously had no idea how to cheer her up. Not even her closest friends truly knew her. The Moon Castle was essentially filled with strangers, and the person who knew her best was a stable hand she could only marry in dreams.

"I just don't know what to do." Sailor Mercury leaned against the wall of Jupiter's sitting-room and rubbed one forearm absentmindedly. "My strength is in books, scrolls, quantitative things. She hurts so

Against All Odds

much and I don't know how to help her."

"It'll be all right," Jupiter soothed her with a warm smile. "That's why there are four of us; to work together as a team."

"She just needs to wake up and accept her responsibilities as the Princess," Sailor Mars said crossly, arranging her red skirt as she settled into a plush green chair. "We all have duties we were born to; it's a part of life."

"How can you be so cold, Mars?" Pushing herself away from the wall, Mercury crossed the sitting-room to a nearby window. "Serenity needs us. We are all she has."

"I'm not so sure about that," Jupiter muttered from her chaise lounge. The other soldiers turned to look at her curiously and the brunette sighed and sat up.

"Sure, she's been sad lately, but... silent," the green-suited soldier explained. "Isn't it strange that she's not complaining to us about her engagement to the Prince?"

"Maybe she's finally accepting the responsibilities of her position," Mercury suggested.

"No, she hates it," Mars mused. "She really hates it. It IS strange, Jupiter. She used to come to us with every problem and concern."

"Well, we don't spend as much time with Serenity as we used to," the blue-haired soldier commented. "There's so much work to be done, so many tasks, for all of us. We don't just sit around and talk anymore."

"It's not easy to suddenly stop depending on others." The brunette leaned forward, resting her elbows on her knees, but her face was turned up toward her fellow soldiers. "I wonder if she's found another friend."

At this, Mercury looked stricken. "Have we failed her so badly?" she whispered.

Sailor Mars looked as if she had been slapped. "Serenity wouldn't lose faith in us, would she? Venus, what do you think?"

Silence.

All eyes turned to their leader, the orange-suited soldier who had been silent throughout the conversation. Sailor Venus was standing alone in the corner, leaning against the pale green wall with her arms folded across her chest. Beneath her thick bangs, the blonde's brow was deeply furrowed in thought.

"There is... something," Venus muttered, her eyes distant as she concentrated on the messages of her heart. As a Venusian, the leader of the Sailor Soldiers possessed an innate sensitivity to emotions - especially those of her loved ones - and her senses were sending her very strange messages indeed.

"It may be nothing," Venus told the others. "I want to investigate more before I explain."

The next few weeks passed without major incident. Princess Serenity and Prince Endymion saw each other very rarely, only spending time together when it was necessary for them to be seen publicly as a couple. They coexisted in completely separate worlds, Serenity going about her daily business as usual and Prince Endymion vanishing into the extensive castle grounds. Serenity had no idea what her fiance did with his days. His four guardians never arrived from Earth.

As wedding plans began, Serenity distracted herself from the cage being constructed around her by visiting her secret lover almost nightly. She spent plenty of days barely awake, wandering her mother's castle like the living dead, but she didn't care. The stable hand was her breath of fresh air when she felt she was suffocating.

With his robust constitution, Endymion had an easier time dealing with the lack of sleep than the Princess. Often he would take her to some secluded area of the gardens and simply hold her while she dozed, his mere presence bringing a far greater peace to his troubled heart than she could ever find alone in her chambers. During those hours he would lie back, gaze up at the starry night, and enfold himself in Serenity's fresh invigorating scent and the feeling of her slender warm body in his arms. At times like this, there was nothing to distract them from the comfort of their love for each other.

And, of course, there were the kisses. Ah, those kisses, when the very Moon itself fell away and they soared together through a universe of color and light. No feeling in the world could compare to the heat and energy of their lips pressed together, their mouths tasting each other, their bodies hungering for one

Against All Odds

another. These moments, spent in the passionate embrace of true love, were worth all the risks they had to take.

Indeed, the risks were growing far greater than Serenity and Endymion knew. Lost in one another's eyes, neither lover noticed the well-meaning friends beginning to pry into their private lives. Prien rapidly became Endymion's shadow and Sailor Venus took more notice of the Princess' schedule, both of them searching for clues to their friends' secrets.

Meanwhile, on a familiar star, another force was in motion; a power and a possibility that no one on Earth or the Moon had ever imagined.

One more wipe with the polishing cloth and it was perfect. Artemis carefully examined the curved piece of crystal under the light, but not even the slightest smudge remained. Rising from his chair, the white-haired Mauan crossed the observatory to the telescope that was aimed at the midday sky. The development of crystal lenses was truly a technological miracle; worlds at the very edge of the galaxy could be clearly seen with an instrument only slightly taller than its operator.

After sliding the clean lens into place, Artemis strolled to the eyepiece and settled into the chair there. An attendant brought him a pen and his record book, turned to a fresh page, and the tall man began his work by bending over the book to record the weather conditions that day.

Signaling to the student astronomers to lower the filtering panels, Artemis focused the telescope on the local star, Sol, known by the general populace as "the sun." He remained nearly motionless for over an hour, shifting only to make notations in his record book and to realign the telescope as the sun climbed higher in the sky.

"Artemis."

The white-haired man bolted out of his chair, so startled that he nearly collided with the telescope. He had been concentrating so hard that he had not even noticed when Queen Serenity entered the observatory. All the students and staff were already kneeling on the marble floor, watching the Queen and her retinue out of the corners of their averted eyes.

Standing in the bright sunlight, her lavender hair shining as it tumbled down her back, the ruler of the Moon looked positively dazzling. Artemis could almost see the power of the Silver Crystal surrounding the white-robed woman, and the reflection of the sun on the golden crescent on her forehead was nearly blinding.

"My Queen," he stammered awkwardly, hurrying forward and bowing deeply. "My apologies. My full attention was on my work."

"I would like to review your progress," the ruler said serenely, her face the mask of tranquility she generally wore when she had something on her mind worth hiding.

"Certainly." Artemis stepped aside to clear the path to the telescope, extending an arm to welcome the Queen to his work area. The monarch glided forward, her grace, as always, impeccable. Turning her head slightly, she acknowledged her assembled subjects with a brief nod, and they rose from the floor and returned to their various tasks.

This was a strange thing indeed. Queen Serenity rarely bothered to climb up to the observatory; Artemis' monthly reports were usually sufficient. The Mauan noted with interest that the Queen's retinue remained at a respectful distance while their mistress approached the telescope.

"The sunspots are increasing in number," Artemis reported, leafing through his notes. Serenity looked over his shoulder intently as he showed her some sketches he had made. "It is fortunate that your power controls our climate, my Queen. The effects on Earth's weather must be intensifying dramatically." Flipping over a page, he displayed some charts of sunspot activity.

"I've just spoken with Queen Acidalia of Mars," the ruler of the Moon murmured beside Artemis' ear. She spoke in low tones so even that her lips barely moved, and Artemis, catching the hint, shuffled his notes around to keep up appearances.

"Her projections have become cloudy," Serenity continued smoothly, speaking of the Martian people's legendary ability to foretell the future. Artemis' eyes widened involuntarily and he was glad to be facing away from the other occupants of the room at that moment.

Against All Odds

"We have not yet determined the cause of the upset," the Queen muttered, "but Acidalia senses it is somehow tied to our sun. Study hard, Artemis, and provide me with weekly reports." Without waiting for a response, Queen Serenity straightened up, turned away and swept out of the room.

"All right, it is safe to speak again now."

"Good. Now, Endou, won't you tell me where we're going?" Princess Serenity snuggled up against the stable hand's back, keeping her arms locked around his waist. Resisting the urge to peek out from underneath her blindfold was becoming excruciatingly difficult.

"Not a chance." Endymion chuckled and prodded the black stallion with his heels to urge the beast into a gallop. Now that they were outside the main grounds of the castle, he could breathe a little easier. He inhaled deeply, relishing the feeling of the cool night air rushing into his lungs as he looked around at the rolling landscape. It was so peaceful, riding over the Moon's surface with the slender arms of the woman he loved encircling him. Endymion could almost imagine there was no castle, no Moon Kingdom, and he and Serenity could just ride away to their destiny together.

Behind him, the Princess carefully adjusted to Starry Night's new pace as the horse galloped across the countryside. With her eyes covered, her other senses were on full alert, and she strained her ears to catch any clue to their destination. Below the regular thumping of the stallion's hooves was another steady sound, a dull rhythmic roar gradually growing louder. It swelled and ebbed repetitively, and along with it came the scent of fresh, moist air. The Sea of Serenity. The Princess smiled, but did not speak; she would let her lover keep his surprise for now.

Soon Endymion brought the horse to a stop. He dismounted, then carefully lifted the blindfolded Princess off the stallion and set her on the ground facing the sea. With a grin of anticipation, he swiftly untied the band of cloth covering the woman's eyes and whisked it away. Serenity gasped in true admiration and was struck speechless.

They were standing on the edge of a small private beach she had never known existed, which was surrounded on three sides by trees and bushes. From here, only the Moon Castle's observatory and the top of the Crystal Tower could be seen above the treetops. It was almost as if the two of them were alone on a deserted island.

It was a clear night and the Earth was once again at its fullest, casting the full force of its blue-green glow over its satellite. A shimmering trail of light danced across the shifting waves toward the beach, glistening over the water as the rest of the sea sparkled with reflected stars. A gentle breeze flowed off the water, bringing the pure scent of the freshwater sea to its visitors. Endymion had patiently waited for a night such as this to bring Princess Serenity to this place.

"This is where the servants of the castle come to swim," he said softly. "It's still within the outer wall, but there is no trail or path leading here, so we don't need to worry about having to yield the beach to noble bathers. We call it Selene's Blessing."

"Indeed," Serenity murmured, gazing around at all the beauty surrounding her. Inwardly, she wondered about the existence of this place; everything under the atmospheric dome had been created by her mother and she could not imagine what reason the Queen had had to design such a secluded sanctuary. For now, however, she put the thought out of her mind and was simply grateful for the privacy.

Kicking her glass slippers onto the grass, Serenity gathered her skirts in her hands and dashed off into the cool sandy beach barefoot, letting out a small cry of delight. The fine sand was soft and powdery beneath her delicate pampered feet, its coolness refreshing after the long ride astride a warm-blooded animal. She ran forward toward the rolling sea, digging her toes into the beach at every step.

Left behind, Endymion hurriedly looked around for a place to tie the black stallion and sighed. He didn't want to miss a moment with Serenity, but the nearest tree sturdy enough to hold the horse was a small distance away. With resignation, he turned back to Starry Night - and found the stallion standing perfectly still, solid as a statue. When Endymion looked at the beast's face, he somehow understood perfectly. The horse would not stray.

"Thank you," the stable hand whispered to his fellow Earth-blooded creature, without knowing exactly why. He patted the horse's neck gratefully, then turned and charged off into the sand after his

beloved.

Reaching the edge of the dry sand, beyond which the fingers of the sea caressed the beach as the waves crashed ashore, Princess Serenity stopped and sank down on the soft cool sand. She unfastened the clasp of the brown cloak that covered her and tossed the disguise aside, letting the sea breeze flow around her bare arms and shoulders. The ocean bearing her name was calm tonight, and the waveline was low, allowing the young woman to sit close to the rolling waters without entering the damp muddy territory licked by the gentle waves. She gazed out over the extensive body of water, which stretched from the city almost to the far end of the atmospheric dome. Not even during the designated winter, when the frozen sea was surrounded by glittering snow, had Serenity seen a landscape as beautiful as this. The beach became more endearing yet as her lover plopped down on the sand beside her.

"It's so beautiful," she exclaimed, drinking in the tranquil earthlit beach with her eyes.

"Indeed," Endymion replied, but his gaze was fixed on Serenity. The Princess blushed and lay back on the sand, looking up at the star-speckled night.

"I love you, Endou."

Ah, those precious words, and that hated false name! Endymion reached out and took his beloved's hand, lifting it to his lips. He kissed her soft skin gently, savoring the feeling of her silky flesh in his rough hand and against his lips. Perhaps now would be a good time to tell her. He moved closer and slowly lay down on his side next to Serenity, propping his head up on one arm and softly caressing her slender hand and wrist with his fingertips. A small smile pricked at the corners of Endymion's mouth as he noticed she was not wearing her engagement pendant.

"These past months have been wonderful," Serenity sighed, turning her head on the sand to gaze up at the young man leaning over her. The light touch of his fingers on her hand was soothing, and at the same time sent shivers through her body.

"I never knew I could be so happy," she continued. "Being with you makes me realize how false my world is. Endou, you are like a breath of fresh air, a reminder of what life is truly about. You are real." She reached over with her other arm to caress the stable hand's cheek and brushed the short dark locks of hair out of his eyes, enjoying the feel of his silky hair slipping through her fingers like the sand beneath her.

With the earthlight shining down on her pure white dress, Princess Serenity was truly radiant. Her hair was spread out on the sand, her blue eyes shining, her rosy lips slightly pursed in a way Endymion had learned to recognize as a signal. She loved him... but did she really know him? She said he wasn't false, that he alone was real, but she didn't even know his name. He wanted so badly to tell her, but he feared her reaction. Of all the names for the Earth Prince to have, why did it have to be his? Endymion's face changed, and he knew it, but he couldn't help it.

"Endou? What is it?" Serenity's eyes narrowed in concern as nervousness shook up her lover's expression. She rubbed the back of his neck reassuringly with her outstretched hand, studying him. "You look like there's something you want to tell me."

"Well - it's just that-" Endymion stopped. The words just refused to pass his lips. Serenity was so beautiful, inside and out, so warm and caring... but her heart belonged to Endou, a man who did not exist. He had no way of knowing whether it could belong to Endymion as well, and he was afraid to find out.

"Just that I love you," he finished awkwardly. Another truth, this one so easy to say. He squeezed Serenity's hand in his as she smiled, the curve of her lips beckoning him. With a small smile of his own, Endymion rolled forward and bent down to her.

The rolling waves and the crashing surf resonated with the churning of the young lovers' blood as they embraced, losing themselves in one another's eager lips. Serenity moaned into the mouth of her beloved as the familiar fire flowed through her body, and she wrapped her arms around the stable hand's neck to hold him closer.

Not knowing how many more of these moments he might have with his love, Endymion threw all of his passion into every kiss. His arms burrowed into the sand and came up beneath her, pulling her slim body to him. His pulse pounded in his temples as his mouth left hers and made a slow journey down the Princess' neck, planting a neat row of kisses along the pale flesh. He could not get enough of the taste of her, and he continued exploring her throat and shoulders with his lips with even more energy as he felt Serenity arch her back and press her neck toward him, her breathing becoming deeper and heavier.

Against All Odds

Burying her fingers in her lover's dark hair, Serenity tilted her head back and closed her eyes, reveling in the soft wet touch of the stable hand's lips and tongue on her neck. His hands massaged her shoulder blades, and his mouth seemed to caress every inch of skin not covered by her dress, sending sharp shocks straight to someplace deeper within her. She found her hands traveling down her lover's back and slipping beneath his rough shirt to explore the toned skin underneath. He sighed against her throat and in that moment she knew he wanted her, all of her, as badly as she wanted him.

Something was happening. Deep inside Princess Serenity something was waking, an intensity and desire that she had never felt before. She felt strangely warm, as if her soul was on fire, and the heat grew stronger with every kiss the Earth-born man planted on her neck. Serenity clung to her lover as the experience intensified. A dull ache was growing within the core of her being, a hunger for more than just kisses, a need for something deeper, stronger, a desire that made her gasp for breath.

It was a strange, alien feeling and it frightened her. With a burst of willpower, she denied the urges of her body and pulled her hands out from beneath the stable hand's shirt, brought them around in front of him, and gently pushed against his chest. The tanned man stopped instantly and drew back from Serenity's skin, lifting his head to look down at her.

For a moment, they stared at each other, both of them breathing hard as they fought to resist the demands of their blood. The beach, the sand, the rolling waves came roaring back in a flood of reality. The stable hand's cheeks were flushed with passion and Serenity knew hers must be as well. She could see the confusion and concern in her lover's eyes as he wondered why she had stopped him. It was a terribly awkward moment. Serenity had to do something. She felt so warm, as if she were burning...

Serenity gave the stable hand a mischievous smirk and rolled out from under him. Stepping a short distance away, she reached down, seized the lengths of lightweight cloth draped around her body and pulled the dress up and over her head, whisking it off in a heartbeat. Before she had a chance to change her mind, she tossed the dress aside onto the dry beach and stood facing her beloved in nothing but her bodice and knee-length bloomers.

Endymion was completely taken aback, to the point where he could not even find a snide or humorous comment to make. He stared at her, the graceful shapes of her long legs revealed to him for the first time, and could not prevent his eyes from roaming up the exposed contours of her body, memorizing every detail of the Princess' form. He only had a moment to look, however, before Serenity turned away and ran full-speed into the rolling sea.

For a brief, chilling moment, Endymion feared the Princess was going to drown herself, but she stopped waist-deep in the surf and gestured for him to join her. Leaving his shirt and boots behind on the beach, Endymion plunged into the water with only his trousers on. Even in the middle of the night, the sea was only slightly cooler than the air, its temperature mediated by the Queen's power. When he reached Serenity, she was past the point where the waves curled over. The water was only as deep as her chest, but she was crouched in the sea up to her neck, letting the gentle waves bob her up and down as they passed around her.

Making a daring move, Endymion dived into the shallow water, completely submerging himself beneath the rolling waves. In the darkness, the Princess could not see him until it was too late. He seized her legs and stood up suddenly, lifting his startled lover up and out of the water, then tossed her backward into the sea. With a shriek of surprise, Serenity crashed into the waves, every trace of her quicksilver hair vanishing into the sea's embrace. Endymion adopted a satisfied pose and a teasing smirk as he waited for her to resurface.

She did not reappear. Seconds ticked by without a sign of Princess Serenity. Endymion waited, but not even a ripple disturbed the rolling waves. A knot of fear tied itself within his stomach. What had he done? He looked around frantically, but his beloved was nowhere to be seen.

"Serenity? Serenity!" he called out, barely keeping the panic from his voice. There was no response. "Great Selene, no!" The Earth was shining brightly, but the waters were dark. How would he ever find her?

Endymion took a deep breath, preparing to plunge beneath the waves in search - and choked as a fountain of spray erupted directly in front of his face. Princess Serenity launched herself out of the water, laughing as she leapt up, clung to the tall man's neck and wrapped her legs around his waist. Although the water was high enough that Serenity's lower body was still beneath the waves, Endymion's hands

automatically slid around her thighs to support her as he widened his stance to keep his balance.

"That wasn't funny, Princess," Endymion said seriously, staring into the woman's eyes as water ran down both of their faces. Serenity pouted, jutting her lower lip out ever so slightly as she angled her chin downward and peered up at the stable hand through her eyelashes. She held that adorable, innocent pose until Endymion shook his head and chuckled, a grin cracking his stern face.

"You, my dear, are positively dangerous," the young man teased as the Princess smiled triumphantly. With her wet clothes and hair, Serenity was rather heavy, and her bracelet of orange beads was cold and hard against the back of his neck, but Endymion had no intention of letting her go. Judging by her firm grip on him she felt the same way.

"Then you, sir, are the knight who comes to my rescue," she replied, punctuating her statement by kissing the tip of his nose.

"Knight? Me? Hardly," Endymion scoffed, trying to hold his arms steady as he struggled to ignore the fact that his hands were on the thighs of the Princess.

"Oh, come now," Serenity replied, idly smoothing locks of damp hair off her lover's forehead with one hand. "You have the manners of any courtier and you take lessons in fencing," she reminded him. "What more do you need?"

"Blood," the stable hand muttered in a low voice, averting his eyes from the Lunarian's face. Her fingertips brushed the silver tattoo that marked his neck.

"Are all the servants as skilled as you?"

"Not at all," Endymion admitted with a laugh. "I'm quite the strange one as far as the other stable hands are concerned."

"Why?" An innocent, honest question. The Princess studied her beloved seriously as she waited for a reply.

"Well," he said slowly, steadying himself against the rolling waves, "when I was a child, I had an experience that inspired me to become the best I could be, in everything."

"An experience? What was it?" Serenity wound her fingers together behind Endymion's neck, keeping her eyes locked on his so she would not stare at the well-defined musculature of his exposed chest. Being so close to so much tanned, toned flesh was making her heart pound. Pressed up against him like this, surrounded by his scent and the intensity of his eyes, she began to feel warm even in the cool water.

"I met someone," Endymion said quietly. "A little girl a bit younger than me."

For the first time in her life, Princess Serenity felt the sour pangs of jealousy. Another girl had been in her beloved's life, one who had motivated him to do great things. After only a moment, however, she pushed the feeling away, locking it deep in a corner of her heart. It had been a long time ago when her love and this unknown girl had met, when they were merely children. Surely she could never take Serenity's place. Besides, there were plenty of female friends in the stable hand's life. This man's heart belonged to Serenity. He was hers, and only hers. Still, she ached for reassurance.

"Do I not inspire you?" she half-whispered in a husky, low voice she hadn't known she possessed, pulling herself closer to him.

"Very much." Endymion leaned forward and kissed her. With only two layers of clothing flattened by dampness between them, the two lovers were closer together than they had ever been. One light kiss led to another, then another, then a deep passionate encounter that left both of them gasping for breath. Their growing hunger for one another returned with a vengeance and they could see it clearly in each other's eyes as they paused momentarily to take in deep gulps of air. After only a few heartbeats, they began again, Serenity's fingertips digging into Endymion's shoulders as he feathered his lips and tongue up and down her neck. His breath was hot in his ear, her mouth insistent on the side of his neck, her lips sought his again and again as they clung to each other in the earthlight-bathed sea.

The aching, fiery longing began to awaken within Serenity once more, but this time she did not resist. She was acutely aware of her lover's rough hands beneath her thighs, and she wanted them elsewhere, everywhere. Between the endless deep kisses, she gasped for air and felt her breasts heaving into his naked chest, and electric tingles shot through her body. The intense desire ceased to be a cause of fear and became something wonderful, an awakening experience that she never wanted to end. Yet, she wanted still more.

Against All Odds

The burning hunger was as intense within Endymion as it was for his eager lover. The seawater was chilly against his exposed skin, but his body was warm and growing hotter by the second. As he tasted Serenity's smooth skin and slid his fingers over her thighs, her body pressed tightly against his, the powerful ache doubled and redoubled inside him. His need began to focus into a tight knot that concentrated low within his body.

Now it was Endymion's turn for fear and nervousness. With Serenity's legs wrapped around his waist, everything physical about him, every throb of his heart and more, was obvious to her. If he did not do something, right now, the Princess would know the depth of his body's demands within seconds. This was a response he could not control.

Swallowing his disappointment at having to end their passion, Endymion broke off their last kiss, smirked at his beloved, took a deep breath and let his legs go limp beneath him. The lovers plunged beneath the waves, breaking apart underwater. Serenity came up growling, and with a wave of her arm she sent a cascade of seawater over the stable hand's head as he surfaced. Endymion responded in kind, slapping at the water with both hands until it literally rained around the Princess. The tension was effectively broken, and the young lovers amused themselves with a water battle for quite some time.

Later, as they waded toward the shore, both of them thoroughly soaked, Endymion wondered why he had not reminded Serenity of the day they first met as children. In his heart, however, he knew the answer; he wanted his beloved to remember on her own. That day had shaped the rest of his life and he hated to think she had forgotten it.

As if she could read his troubled thoughts, the Princess paused in her quest to escape the sea's embrace.

"You are not the only one who met someone special as a child," she said softly. "When I was a little girl, a servant boy wandered into the gardens." She smiled fondly, remembering. "That particular garden was my favorite after that."

Endymion's heart leapt within his chest. She remembered. A sudden chill rolled through him that had nothing to do with the cool breeze on his damp skin. Miss Amaris had called him by his real name that day. How much did Serenity remember?

"Artemis was just awful to him," the Princess burst out, looking at her lover with troubled eyes. "I've always wondered what became of the boy. I know there are hundreds of servants, but if you ever find out who he is, please, try to make him understand that I am sorry about what happened."

The stable hand smiled a warm, genuine smile.

"I will make sure he knows, Serenity. I promise."

At long last, the young couple returned to Princess Serenity's balcony. Endymion's trousers were still soaking wet, but with the ride back and the dry white dress and brown cloak to cover herself, Serenity's damp hair was the only sign of where she had been. They lingered a long time beside the rope that dangled from the balcony railing, exchanging kisses and soft murmurings.

Finally, they gathered the willpower to separate and Serenity placed her foot in the loop at the end of the rope and held on to its length. Endymion seized the other end of the cord and pulled on it, lifting the young woman to the balcony above where she climbed over the railing and took the rope up after her. Blowing a last kiss to the stable hand, Serenity disappeared into her chambers. The young man stared after her for a long moment before vanishing into the bushes toward the gardens.

With a tempest of emotion in her eyes and turmoil in her heart, Sailor Venus left her hiding place behind the hedge along the castle wall and headed back into the building.

Chapter Seven

The Earth was just beginning to wane, slowly succumbing to the swelling darkness of the Moon's shadow as it did month after month. Surrounding the blue-green planet, the stars twinkled and shone as the endless dance of the cosmos spiraled onward. On the gray-white pearl that was the Moon, a young couple sat together on a bench and gazed up at the tapestry of the universe that was laid out above them, but most of their thoughts were focused on each other.

There were so many memories here in the small garden on the edge of the Moon Castle property. Although they were closer to discovery within the castle's inner walls, the young couple felt safer here in this secluded hideaway than they felt anywhere else on the grounds. The sky was clear and the stars shone brightly upon them as they relaxed on the stone bench beside the marble fountain, enjoying the evening and the company of their love.

"Delphi, the Light-Bringer," Princess Serenity recited, her eyes fixed on three bright stars surrounded by an arrangement of dimmer ones. "Alpha, Health and Heart," she continued as her gaze roamed over to another cluster of lights off to the right. "Tell me, what constellations do you know?"

Endymion's head drooped and he turned his glance away from the star-speckled heavens. "None," he muttered, averting his eyes in shame. "Astronomy is not considered an important field of study for servants. We are taught nothing more than what is deemed essential to our work."

"When I am Queen, I will make sure all classes have the opportunities they deserve," Serenity said softly. She reached over with her left hand to take her lover's right, weaving her soft smooth fingers among his rough, calloused ones, and leaned her back into the firm muscular flesh of his shoulder. "For now, I shall just have to teach you myself." She lifted her free arm to point at the dark skies, and the stable hand followed her gesture.

"The images of the Ancients are inscribed in the stars to remind us of our origins," the Princess explained, feeling a touch of pride in her new role as teacher. "At least, that's what the philosophers say."

Endymion smiled brokenly as his beloved pointed out the constellations. He was interested, but at the same time the lesson was a bitter reminder of his inferiority. Not only was he being educated by someone younger than himself, solely because his class prevented him from learning these things years before, but the stories of the Ancients were the very essence of the fundamental difference between the peoples of the Moon and the Earth. While Endymion was the product of eons of common evolution on a rural, primitive planet, the young woman holding his hand was descended from an ancient and enlightened

Against All Odds

race of interstellar travelers. No matter how hard he tried to forget it, so many things reminded him that he was little more than dirt beneath her glass slipper.

"Actually, there is one heavenly body I can recognize easily," Endymion interrupted, desperate to distract his mind. "Serenity, the Goddess."

"But Selene is over there - oh." The Princess stopped and blushed as she realized the stable hand was not looking at the sky, but at her. She let her arm fall to her side and gazed into his dark eyes, feeling them reach into her and explore the depths of her soul. "Serenity is nothing without her guiding light, her companion constellation, the one who makes her complete," she said softly, squeezing her lover's hand. "Her valiant knight, Endou."

She angled her chin upward for a kiss - but once again she noticed it: the brief flicker of her beloved's face before he followed suit, the momentary tension that passed through his body. Before their lips could touch, she pushed away from him and straightened up on the bench.

"All right, what is it?" she asked, a slightly demanding hint invading her usual gentle tone. She had hoped he would tell her himself, given time, but enough was enough.

"What? I don't understand." Endymion blinked, momentarily caught off-guard by Serenity's words and the sudden loss of her warmth against him.

"Lately, whenever I mention your name, you flinch," the Princess explained quietly. "What is bothering you?"

A flash of terror consumed Endymion's features, but in an instant, it faded, and he sagged, defeated. There could be no more hiding this. "I had hoped -"

"What, that I wouldn't notice?" Serenity interrupted. "How could I not notice? I love you, with everything I am. No matter how hard you try to hide your feelings, I will see through it."

Endymion was silent, hanging his head. He was caught. Serenity's eyes bored into him as she patiently waited for his answer. He could not delay this moment any longer.

"I have not been completely honest with you, Serenity," he admitted quietly, staring down at his hands in his lap.

"What do you mean?" The Princess struggled to remain calm while every fiber of her being erupted into fear. What if he said it was all a lie, that he did not love her? Tendrils of cold snaked across her skin and she could barely keep herself from shaking.

Summoning all his willpower, Endymion forced himself to raise his head and look into Serenity's eyes. He could see her fright plainly even though her expression was calm, and he knew then that he had been a fool to think he could hide anything from the woman he loved.

"My name is not Endou," he said, quivers of dread rolling into the pit of his stomach. "It is Endymion."

Princess Serenity blinked. Her face contorted with confusion, and she searched the stable hand with her eyes momentarily to make sure he was not the Earth Prince in disguise. She was caught between relief that it was not the man's feelings that were false and puzzlement over the meaning of his confession. Her mind reeled with possibilities and then went blank.

"What is the meaning of this?" she stammered, unsure of how to proceed. "Is this some sort of jest?"

"Not at all," the distressed stable hand replied hurriedly, her wary expression making him ill with worry. "When the Earth Prince was declared our future King, it was suggested that I change my name."

"I am not amused," the Princess replied, narrowing her eyes. "I love you; do you think it's funny to claim the name of a man who hurts me?" Her mind was spinning, and her voice wavered with brewing tears. She did not want there to be any connection between her treasured beloved and her lifeless fiancé.

"I am telling the truth," Endymion insisted in a pleading tone. "Everything else about me is genuine, I swear it." He reached out for Serenity, but the young woman recoiled from his touch, leaning back on the bench as she stared at him in befuddled disbelief. Frustrated, the stable hand ran his fingers through his hair and turned away.

"This is exactly why I did not tell you sooner," he muttered, cursing himself for not revealing his secret before the Princess discovered it on her own. "I was afraid this would happen. I had to wait until you trusted me, until you believed in me as a person and not a name or position." Turning back to the Princess, he stared into her troubled eyes, unblinking. "If you love me, Serenity, you will believe me."

Against All Odds

"This has gone on long enough," Serenity replied in an irritated tone, crossing her arms over her chest. "I don't know what you're trying to do, but it's foolish to argue this further. I have studied Earth's history extensively and I know that the name of Endymion is reserved for the Golden Kingdom's royal line. It can't possibly be yours." She glared at the stable hand - and softened as she watched his face change into uneasy confusion.

"What?" the young man whispered hoarsely with widened eyes. "How - how can that be? Through my entire life, that name was all I had to hold on to, my only memory, the only relic of my past. How could it be a lie?" His voice cracked and his words became more frantic, and he quaked on the bench and buried his face in his hands. After all this time, all these years of believing, had his own name truly been a mistake? "No, it can't be!"

"You're not joking, are you?" the Princess breathed, pressing one hand to her mouth in horror as her normally reserved and confident lover approached the verge of tears. "Oh, I'm so sorry!" She slid back to his side and wrapped her arms around the shaking man, holding him firmly against her.

"I remember that name, I am certain," Endymion said numbly. "You are mistaken, Serenity. If I know nothing else in this universe, I know my own name, and it is Endymion. No royal house or social law can take that away from me."

"I may be wrong," the Princess conceded as her beloved calmed in her arms. "I have never been the best at memorizing names and facts, as Sailor Mercury is always quick to remind me."

The stable hand straightened up and looked directly into Princess Serenity's blue eyes, his own smooth midnight gaze as calm and sincere as it had always been when he spoke to her. He took both of her hands in his, gently caressing her smooth skin. "My name," he said, "is Endymion. Will you believe me?"

"Yes," the young woman whispered, although her heart was still discontented.

"Then, say it." Endymion lifted her hands to his lips and kissed them again and again, longing to hear the clear dulcet tones of his beloved's voice speaking his true name at last. "Please."

"En - Endy -" Serenity choked on the word, the sour taste it brought to her mouth undeniable. Tears welled up in her large eyes. This name only brought one image to her mind, that of a cold, heartless shell of a man with auburn hair and a bitter soul. "I can't!" she wailed, her beloved's pleading expression driving daggers of regret into her chest. "How can I assign the name of one who hurts me so badly to one I love so much?"

Endymion stared at his lover, stricken, his dark eyes begging to hear that one precious word fall from her lips, and he saw the pain clearly in her face. His was a name she had assigned to a man she disliked. There was no longer any hope that she might be able to speak it with tenderness. Sorrow overtook the young man's heart. He had finally confessed his one secret, and the Princess would still be unable to address him by his true name.

"Endy," Serenity suggested desperately, eager to ease the agony in her beloved's face. "That is not a false name, but it is not his either. May I call you that?"

The stable hand nodded slowly. Endy. It was a start. At least, it was not a lie. Perhaps someday she would find the courage to overcome her aversion to his full name. Still, he could not prevent disappointment from settling over his spirits. Serenity slid toward him and leaned against his body once again, wrapping both arms around one of his as she laid her head on his warm shoulder.

"It's a term of endearment, really," she rationalized aloud, sensing that the man was still not quite happy with the arrangement. "An affectionate nickname, Endy." The couple fell into an uneasy silence, both of them troubled by their own thoughts.

For the moment, the Earth-born orphan swallowed his bitterness at being left with half a name, rationalizing that after lying to Serenity he was lucky she was still by his side. He was, however, immensely disturbed by her words. Searching what little memories he had of his early childhood, he was certain that the name he had been born to was Endymion - but if that was a royal name, then it couldn't be so. Had he been wrong about his name this entire time? That would explain why Miss Amaris was never able to locate his parents, but the thought of having no clue to his origins at all was unsettling.

Princess Serenity was quite unsettled herself. She was relieved that the stable hand's secret had not been more serious. In the grand scheme of things, a name was a relatively minor detail. At the same time, she could not ignore the fact that he had lied to her. Yes, it was a small untruth, but how could she be

Against All Odds

certain he was not hiding more from her? Her lover's body seemed to have lost some of its warmth, and she shuddered. How well did she really know the man she had given her heart to?

There was also the matter of the name itself. Even if he had been born on the Moon, all Earth people were aware of the traditions of the Golden Kingdom; until recent decades there were very few of their race living off their home planet. Certain names were of special significance and were only to be used by the royal family. It was impossible that an Earth-child of common blood would be named Endymion. Obviously, her lover was mistaken about his name, but Serenity had not the heart to insist that was the case. Yet, she had heard him addressed by that name before, although it had not made sense.

"I had a dream about you," she said quietly, staring off into the shadows of the garden. "In the dream, your name was 'Endymion'." She heard the man suck in his breath.

"It was?" A shred of relief penetrated Endymion's worry. He had not heard of any Lunarians having prophetic dreams, but perhaps it was a royal gift. In any case, it was evidence that his memory was not flawed.

"You called me 'Sere'," the Princess continued. "We had a child, a little girl. Our daughter."

Endymion smiled and wrapped his arm around his young lover's waist. If only it could be true. "What was she like?"

"Sweet, and full of energy," Serenity sighed, trying to relax into his embrace. "A beautiful child with a loving heart."

"She would have to be, with you for a mother," Endymion whispered, kissing one of the buns of crystal hair at the top of her head. "Tell me more, Sere."

The nickname sent tingles down Serenity's spine, bringing back memories of the dream and the little rose-haired girl whom she had held in her arms. Small Lady. An impossible child of dreams who could not possibly exist. A lump rose in the woman's throat.

"It was all very unreal, really," she muttered, feeling tears beginning to prick at the corners of her eyes. "We lived in a palace, and the Sailor Soldiers were there, but we were on Earth. It was quite strange. That could never happen, obviously," she added bitterly.

Endymion sighed his agreement. A life with the Princess was a definite impossibility. He loved her with all his heart, but here on the Moon, such emotions mattered only within one's own class. Their days together were certainly numbered. Even if they tried to run away from their destiny, the Moon was not as big and open as the Earth. There were only a few cities, and outside those the surface was uninhabitable. It would be hopeless to try to disappear. He looked down at the lovely young woman in his arms and could not imagine going back to a life without her, nor did he want to. It was a pity, really, that they were not on Earth.

Earth. By all accounts it was a primitive, animal place, a backward world whose people were locked in an endless struggle for survival. Still, with its large size and vast population, the lovers could be free there. Endymion felt he would gladly embrace such a life if it meant he and Serenity could be together.

"Sere?"

"Yes, Endy?"

"Do you ever think about going to Earth?" he asked carefully, idly stroking his beloved's hair with one hand.

"Why?" Serenity replied, puzzled. "It's a dreadful place," she said automatically, before remembering her fiance's rather pleasant description of his home world.

"If we went to Earth, your dream could come true," Endymion said quietly, gently rocking the Princess in his arms. "We could start a new life together, raise a family..."

"If only that were possible," Serenity sighed. The stable hand stopped rocking her.

"Why isn't it?" His heart was trembling in his chest with budding excitement. It could really work. This blissful time with his beloved would never have to end, would never become a mere wistful memory. Serenity sat up and turned to face him.

"Surely you must be joking," she said, but the stable hand's face was more serious than she had ever seen it. He gazed at her with earnest intensity and fire in his dark eyes.

"Think of it, Sere," he urged, leaning toward her. "We could be free of all this, free of the sleepless nights and secrets, free to be together and live our lives the way we choose."

Against All Odds

"Leave the Moon? Endy, I couldn't," the Princess protested, anxiety filling her face. How could he ask this of her? It was a lovely dream, but it could not be more than that.

"Why not?" Endymion demanded, his voice becoming louder than he meant it to. "I know it's a strange, cruel world, but I would be with you. We could find our way together." He reached toward her, but Serenity left the space between them.

"How could we get to Earth, anyway?" she argued. "The public teleportation stations won't be reconnected to Earth until after the wedding."

"You have access to the royal facilities, do you not?" Endymion reminded her. The more he thought about it, the better the idea sounded. It would be hard for them on Earth, but not as hard as living without Serenity.

"Endy, what you're asking me to do is... is... ludicrous," she burst out, shaking her head in disbelief. "I have responsibilities. I can't just walk out on my role as Princess."

"What other options do we have?" Endymion shot back, growing frustrated. This was the perfect solution, why wouldn't she even consider it? "We can't go on like this forever. You will be married to the Earth Prince within months. Is that what you want?"

"No! You know that is not what I want." Princess Serenity wrung her hands in her lap, wishing she could tell her beloved what he wanted to hear, but it was unthinkable. Every moment of her life so far had been dedicated to her future role as Queen. Without that, she was nothing, and the thought of going to Earth frightened her more than anything. "I love you, Endy, and I want to be with you, but-"

"Well, what then?" the stable hand interrupted, his frustration sowing the seeds of anger. "After your wedding day, we never see each other again? Or did you plan to keep me as your secret lover when you are Queen, just another servant at your beck and call?" Endymion did not know where these cruel words came from, but there they were. Had these doubts been lurking inside him the entire time?

"Now you're simply being unfair." Unlike her engagement, there were no rules of propriety governing this relationship. This man was closer to her than even the Sailor Soldiers, and Serenity was free to act and speak as she pleased around him. For once in her life, she did not have to take the heat lying down. "I have an entire world depending on me to become its Queen. I can't just ignore that. I would never treat you like an object, Endy. You mean too much to me."

"You mean everything to me. Everything." Unable to bear her crystal blue gaze any longer, Endymion got up from the bench and wandered over to a nearby rosebush, staring down at the soft red blooms whose petals enfolded and embraced one another. "What are your plans for our future, then, Princess?" he asked bitterly. Going to Earth was their only chance for happiness and she had dismissed it so easily.

"I don't know!" Serenity glared at the man's back as she rose to her feet herself. She wasn't ready to make decisions like this. She just wanted to be with her lover and forget about reality for a while. Why did he have to bring up the difficulties of their relationship?

"I know what I want," Endymion said, caressing a rosebud with his fingertip. "Why don't you?"

"I have more to think about than what I want!" the Princess protested, clenching her fists at her sides in irritation. "You don't understand what it's like to be trapped from the day you were born!"

"Don't I?" Endymion whirled around to face her, and Serenity gasped in spite of herself under the withering fire of his glare as his eyes flashed in anger. His entire body tensed, and an icy cold rolled off of him, spreading in all directions. "Why, because I'm a stable hand? Or because I'm an Earth-child? As far back as I can remember, my entire life has been determined by those two things! What I would do, where I would live, who my friends would be, everything!"

He was shouting now. He hadn't meant to say so much, but now that the gates were opened, the words flowed out of him in a flood, and he could not hold them back. "No matter how much I learn, no matter how skilled I am, I can never escape what my birth has decided for me! I have no future! What does a pampered Princess, with the right and power to do anything she pleases, know of that?"

"Yours is the life of freedom, when compared to mine," Princess Serenity hissed, quaking with an unreleased anger that continued to grow. "From the moment of my birth, I have shouldered the responsibility of someday becoming Queen, of being accountable for the health and safety of every Lunarian who breathes, balancing the Silver Alliance and protecting the entire solar system from outsiders! Do you

Against All Odds

have any idea how much I've wished for a life free of that anxiety?" She recalled many sleepless nights of worry, and several incidents during her adolescence when she burst into tears for seemingly no reason at all. At the moment, however, she was too irritated to show such a weakness to the stable hand. How arrogant of him to assume that only the lower classes suffered!

"My days are planned by a team of advisors," she snarled, glaring up at the tanned man. "Everything I do, everything I study, even the man I will marry is decided by someone else! What power I have exists only to serve the Moon Kingdom. My cage may be prettier than yours, but it is still a cage!"

"Then why not escape that cage and go to Earth with me?" Endymion demanded. "If you hate it so much, then leave!"

"Do you have so little love for the Moon, the world that raised you and provided for you?" the Princess said accusingly. "You would so easily leave everyone and everything you ever knew?"

"I thought our love was more important than that." The Earth-child sagged slightly, the fire in his eyes fading to a flicker. For a moment, the fury and tension in the air ebbed, and they stared at each other with pained and sorrowful expressions.

"It's not so simple for me," Serenity muttered, hanging her head to gaze at the smooth stones beneath her feet. "I have the needs of an entire race and the future of an entire world to consider. Would you tell me our love is more important than that? More important than all of them?"

Endymion opened his mouth. He wanted to tell her it was, that their love was a gem that should not be shattered, but his mind was filled with the joyous faces of his fellow servants as they celebrated the betrothal of the Princess, and he could not speak the words. There was a painful moment of silence.

"So," the man said slowly, "what do we do?"

"I don't know!" Serenity's head snapped up, and she whirled around, turning away from Endymion. Why did he insist on continuing to ask a question for which there was no answer? Why did they have to solve such a painful problem now?

"Well, we have to do something!" Endymion stared at his beloved's back, the smooth curves of her shoulder blades running toward the border of silver circles lining her dress, her twin streams of crystal hair flowing down beside fists clenched in frustration. He loved her so dearly, so much that even now his arms ached to hold her, his lips longed for hers... and yet the seething anger would not go away. "We can't ignore the issue forever!"

Serenity swung around to face him, her blue eyes sharp as she reached the breaking point.

"If it's such a problem," she raged, "we should just end it now!"

"Fine!" The word exploded past Endymion's lips before he had a moment to consider it.

Fine?

A single innocent syllable, but it hit the two lovers like a rush of cold, sobering water, jarring them out of their anger and back to the reality of what had just been said. An expression of utmost shock and fright overcame the faces of both Serenity and Endymion, but the words had been spoken. The Princess looked at her beloved, who was just as startled as she, his dark hair hanging into his wide eyes. Her heart cried out for her to run to him, to bury herself in his arms and forget everything in the light of his love... but there would always be a time when she would have to let go and remember reality again. Serenity swallowed hard.

"Fine," she whispered. Without another word, the Princess turned and hurried out of the garden, gathering her skirts in her hands as she went. She was around the corner into the hedge maze before the tears came, silent at first, flowing relentlessly down her cheeks as her heart was torn asunder and half of it left behind. Endymion did not follow her.

By the time she neared the castle itself, she was running, sobbing aloud, not caring if anyone heard or saw her. Her feet screamed as her shoes rubbed hard against her tender skin, but she did not stop until she reached the rope hanging from the balcony. Oddly, she did not encounter any guards.

As she reached out her arms for the rope, Serenity realized she was carrying the rough brown cloak that had belonged to Endymion. She had probably picked it up from the bench out of habit; she did not even remember taking it. With trembling hands, the Princess pressed the scratchy cloth to her face and breathed deeply. The man's scent was still there, the mysterious aroma of roses. Serenity shuddered violently with grief and dropped to her knees, clinging to the rope as she sobbed in anguish. She had thought he loved her.

How could he end it this way?

When she found the strength to stand again, the miserable young woman fastened the cloak around her throat and seized the rope. She hauled on it, but her feet stayed firmly on the ground. Serenity was light, but the education of a Princess contained little strength training. It took all the strength she could muster to lift herself even the smallest amount.

She struggled for what seemed an eternity, weeping and sobbing as the rope cut into her hands and the evening's ordeal cut into her heart. Bit by bit, she pulled herself toward the balcony above, her thin arms trembling, her vision clouded with tears. The tempest of emotion raging within her soul gave her the strength she needed, and at long last, she hauled her weary, aching body over the balcony railing. By the time she dragged herself, the rope, and the cloak into her chambers, Serenity was so exhausted that she collapsed on her bed and fell asleep instantly.

After watching Princess Serenity rush away from him and out of sight, Endymion wrapped his heart in anger so he would not feel it breaking. Turning around, he stormed out of the garden and slammed the old wooden door behind him. Fine, then. If it had to end, better it did so now. By the sound of things, they would never have been able to see eye-to-eye anyway. The stable hand stomped across the castle grounds, fuming. After all this, all the love they had shared, their relationship still broke apart so easily. What was the point of it all?

When he reached his hut, Endymion kicked the door open so that it banged against the inside wall and rebounded. As he plunged into the darkness within, a flash of color caught his eye. There on the small table, where it had stood for years, was the perfect blood-red rose his beloved had given him before they even knew each other's names.

Endymion clenched his fists. It all came down to names. He had risked everything to reveal his only secret to the woman he loved, and thus planted a seed of doubt that fanned the flames of their argument. And now, he had found out where Serenity's loyalty truly lay.

In an eyeblink, Endymion snatched up the flower in its crystal vase and flung it against the opposite wall with all his strength. The transparent receptacle shattered, fragments of sharp crystal exploding in a burst of glittering shards that scattered across the bare wood floor. The rose, a tender blossom of dark red surrounded by sparkling crystal, tumbled into the shadows at the base of the wall and disappeared from view.

With this impulsive act, Endymion felt as if all the life had drained from his body. Breathing heavily, he slumped against the nearby wall. His knees weakened under him as the walls of anger crumbled, and Endymion sank to the floor, buried his face in his hands and cried.

There was a strange, irregular pounding. It ceased for a while, then began again, erratic, insistent, a loud thumping sound that refused to leave the world in peace. There was also someone shouting.

"Endou," a voice called. Then, louder: "Endymion!"

The stable hand in question forced his heavy eyelids open, but his body felt numb and refused to move. The room was at a strange angle; he was lying on the floor. All he could manage was a feeble groan. The door opened and a flood of sunshine came cascading into the dim hut.

"What, did you drink too much Moon Nectar aga..." Prien's voice trailed off as he stepped inside the one-room dwelling and noticed the empty bed. The broken crystal scattered across the floor. The barely-conscious young man lying motionless at his feet.

"Great Selene, Endymion, what happened?" The blond-haired Lunarian quickly shut the door behind him and knelt at his friend's side, taking Endymion by the shoulders. "Are you hurt?"

"Prien," the Earth man muttered heavily. As the feeling began to flow back into his body, so did the memories of the previous night. Endymion rolled onto his back and his friend helped him to sit up. "It's all over. I've lost her."

Prien's heart sank. Endymion had had a falling-out with his mystery woman. It was a pity; he had seemed so happy. "Do not worry so. Whatever it is, I am sure you can work it out."

Against All Odds

"No," Endymion replied, letting his head loll limply from side to side. "It is really finished. Ended. Gone." He felt utterly empty, as if his heart and soul had been torn out of him. "I'll never see her again. Never... touch her again," he sighed, bending one knee up to his elbow and burying his head in his arm. "Never hear her voice again, never kiss her again."

The Lunarian stable hand sat down heavily on the floor beside his friend, unable to prevent his mouth from gaping open. As a sociable man, he had soothed his share of broken hearts, and even nursed one of his own, but he had never seen an ended relationship change someone this badly. Endymion was a mess. His cool, collected demeanor had vanished, and he had become a broken man with disheveled hair, the flesh of his face and arms imprinted with the grain of the wood he had slept on in yesterday's clothes. It had been a bad enough sign that he had been late for work. Endymion was never late. Whatever love affair he had been engaged in, it was serious.

"Who was she?" Prien asked gently, hoping he might have a chance at mending relations with the woman. Endymion blearily looked up at him through cloudy charcoal eyes. He blinked. Then he shrugged and sighed.

"Princess Serenity."

Prien smiled sadly and shook his head. "I know, they all seem like princesses, don't they? Tell me her name; I might be able to-"

"No," Endymion interrupted. "She's Princess Serenity, the real one. We ran into each other by chance a few months back and..." He trailed off as he felt a lump beginning to form in his throat and swallowed it.

His friend stared at him for a long moment, waiting for the Earth-born man to crack a smile and confess it was all a joke, but Endymion just stared right back, his miserable dead expression never flickering. Prien took a deep breath.

"All right, Endou, I'll go and tell Miss Amaris to fetch the healers," he said carefully. "Just wait here." Prien started to get up, but Endymion swiftly seized his arm to stop him, suddenly desperate for someone, anyone, to believe him and share his secret.

"I am not insane, Prien," Endymion said in a voice filled with fierce intensity. "By the Goddess Selene, I swear it. I am in love with the Moon Princess and she is - was - in love with me." Prien flopped down on the floor again, his mind reeling, and his friend released his arm.

"Look, Endou," Prien said after a moment, "I want to believe you. You know I do, but you have to admit the odds are against you here. The world of the Royal Family is completely separate from ours. It is unthinkable that you would even catch a glimpse of the Princess!"

"Nevertheless, I did," Endymion insisted. "We've spent countless hours together. Look, she gave me this." Reaching into his pocket, the dark-haired man pulled out the gold star locket, which felt smooth and cool against his palm. "It's a music box," he explained as he handed it to Prien, whose eyes widened when he felt the object's weight. As the blond man's fingers moved to lift the circular lid in the center of the star, Endymion closed his eyes and turned his face away, bracing himself to hear the music that would remind him of the woman he had loved and lost.

There was only silence.

Endymion's eyes snapped back open, and he jerked his head up. There sat Prien, an arm's length away, looking at his friend with a confused expression. The locket lay in the palm of the man's hand, open, the cover fully raised on its golden hinge. It was completely silent and dark, a lifeless paperweight.

"No," the Earth man whispered, his voice trembling. His arm darted out reflexively, and he snatched the star out of his friend's hand, horrified that it might be broken. To his relief, as soon as the locket touched his skin, it revived, the lovely light melody bursting forth as the shifting beam of light emanating from the heart of the star blazed to life. The dim hut was filled with a warm glow as the locket sparkled and shone, and Prien's face lit up as the peaceful music reached his ears.

"Was I not holding it right?" The Lunarian took the device back from Endymion, but the music immediately ceased and the soft lights vanished. Prien stared at the gold star in his hands. "It only plays for you," he breathed. "There is magic in this locket."

That sealed it. Such a treasure was too valuable to come from anyone but the top of the nobility and too precious to be given away for anything less than true love. It could not have been stolen, either, or its

Against All Odds

mysterious charms would not work for Endymion. Prien had no choice but to believe his friend's story.

Suddenly, he threw the locket back into Endymion's startled hands and leapt to his feet, pacing the floor of the small hut as he struggled to come to terms with what he had just learned. The star locket began to play its melody again, but Endymion quickly snapped the cover shut.

"She's the Princess," Prien muttered incredulously, running his hands through his wheat-colored hair as he walked.

"Yes, I know," his friend answered from the floor, his voice echoing the mind-boggling fact.

"She is engaged!" the Lunarian continued, his steps increasing their pace.

"Yes, I know!" Endymion burst out, irritated. "Unfortunately, the heart doesn't pay much attention to matters like arranged marriages! I did not choose to fall in love with her, Prien, it just happened. And could you please stop that pacing? You're making me dizzy."

"This... this is... What are we going to do?" Prien wondered aloud, the vast array of consequences running through his mind.

"We don't have to do anything," the Earth man replied wretchedly, tightening his grip on the star locket. "It's over, remember? We had an argument." Now Prien stopped and looked over at his friend with a touch of sympathy.

"Couples fight," he said gently.

"Not like this." All the light and life had gone from the man sitting on the floor. Prien turned to gaze down at the rose lying among the scattered shards of crystal against the far wall.

"Wasn't that a gift from the Princess?" he asked. "Now that I think about it, even as children you had a connection, almost like destiny."

At that, Endymion jumped to his feet and hurried over to the fallen flower, as if remembering it for the first time. Bending down, he tenderly brushed the remains of the vase away from the blood-red petals and lifted the blossom in his hands. Miraculously, the rose was slightly wilted but otherwise unharmed. Prien thought it strange that such a fragile flower would survive such violence without the loss of a single petal, but he attributed the event to the magic of the Princess and said nothing as Endymion carefully placed the rose in a mug of water. Was it only his imagination, or did the flower regain some of its health when Endymion touched it?

"Miss Amaris can not know about this," the Earth-born man muttered as he surveyed with dismay the remains of the vase spread across the floorboards. "That gift was worth a fortune."

"Well, she'll be in here herself in a moment if we don't show up in the stables soon." Prien strode over to Endymion and clapped an arm around his shoulders. "What do you say we get to our chores? Some hard work will take your mind off of things, at least for a while." Endymion nodded gloomily.

"Serenity?"

"Go away." The Princess barely lifted her face from her pillow long enough to say those words before burying her head in the feathers again to block out the light of the sun. Nevertheless, she heard a slight rustling as the chiffon curtain that separated the sitting room of her suite from the bedroom was moved aside and someone entered her presence.

"Are you not feeling well, Princess? You've missed half your morning appointments." The voice was familiar, but thankfully not the Queen's. Serenity was not ready to face her mother yet. She turned her head on the pillow to see an orange-suited Sailor Soldier standing at the top of the steps leading to her bedroom. Venus. The blonde soldier's expression was relaxed, neutral, but Adele, the Princess' attendant, was standing just behind her with a face full of apprehensive worry. Serenity squinted in the sunlight.

"Adele, the curtains," Sailor Venus instructed. The red-haired girl nodded and hurried to close the drapes, and Serenity followed her with her eyes as far as she could without turning her head. How many years had Adele been faithfully serving her mistress, yet the Princess had never before noticed how pretty the young girl was, how eagerly and efficiently she tackled every task she was assigned? Despite her constant presence in Serenity's chambers, Adele had always been just another servant. No longer. For the first time the Princess found herself wondering what the attendant's hopes and dreams were, if she had a lover, if she had ever been to Selene's Blessing...

Against All Odds

"Serenity, you have not been yourself lately," Sailor Venus said gently. She moved closer and sat down on the edge of the bed, absently arranging the short orange skirt around her thighs. "If you need someone to talk to, I am always here to listen."

Serenity's heart felt dreadfully heavy under the burden of her secret. The offer was tempting, but impossible. She could not tell the leader of the Sailor Soldiers that she was in love with a common stable hand. Venus sighed.

"You know I have the ability to sense emotions," said the soldier. The Princess tensed. She had forgotten that Venus could see more than what was on her face. A gloved hand began to caress Serenity's back lovingly, but she dared not look up at the soldier's eyes. After a moment of silence, the hand paused.

"Leave us," Venus instructed Adele. The young servant dipped her head and left the two women alone in the bedroom.

"Serenity, I am your friend," Sailor Venus began, and the Princess was shocked to hear her voice break on the verge of tears. "I can not understand why you would refuse to trust me, especially with something like this."

"I don't understand," Serenity said in what she hoped was an innocent tone, but her heart was pounding in her chest, and it was a struggle to keep her breathing regular. She'd been so careful. Venus couldn't possibly know. It had to be something else.

"You are in love, and not with your fiance," the soldier said quietly. Serenity's heart skipped a beat.

"That is ridiculous," she forced herself to say, although her mouth was dry and her tongue was like stone. The blonde soldier sighed in exasperation.

"Please, stop hiding!" she begged, leaning over the Princess. "I - I saw you together!"

At this, Serenity sucked in her breath, rolled over on her back - and was greeted by a sharp onslaught of pain as every muscle in her body protested the movement. She had strained her tissues to the limit pulling herself up to the balcony the previous night and now it felt as if her entire body was bruised. There were blisters on her feet and dried blood on her palms where the rope had cut into them. Although she bit her lip, she could not prevent a whimpering groan of suffering from escaping as she fell back stiffly against the pillows. Not only that, but she had fallen asleep in her dress, and in her exhaustion, she had neglected to hide away the brown cloak and length of rope, which now lay on the bed beside her.

"You spied on me?" Serenity managed to hiss through clenched teeth as her muscles throbbed.

"I was worried about you, so I watched your balcony," Sailor Venus confessed. "It's taken me two days to gather the courage to speak of it to you. Goodness, how were you injured so? I will tell Adele to fetch the healers." The soldier tried to get up, but Serenity caught her by the arm.

"If you do that, Mother will want to know how I was hurt." Her eyes narrowed as she studied the blonde woman's face. "Or have you already told her?" Venus sank down on the bed again.

"I wanted to speak to you privately first," she said in a voice bitter with irritation. "I may be a Sailor Soldier, Serenity, but I am also your friend. I have not even told the other soldiers."

"Thank you," the Princess muttered, releasing the blonde's arm. "I apologize." The anger and panic she had been feeling ebbed and the sadness and despair came rolling back. "Did you follow us?" she asked quietly.

"No." Sailor Venus readjusted herself on the edge of the bed, reached over, and began massaging the sore muscles of Serenity's legs. "Those moments are your own." The Princess winced in pain, but breathed deeply until she was able to relax as the orange-suited soldier eased the tension out of her calves.

"Serenity," Venus said carefully, "you know that I have to report anything that threatens the stability of the Moon Kingdom to the Queen."

"There is no need," the Princess said bitterly, although every word sent a dagger of pain straight into her heart. "It is finished between us." She squeezed her eyes closed and clenched her fists, but the tears still came, overcoming her willpower as they welled up beneath her eyelids and choked her throat closed. Venus paused in her ministrations.

"Why?" she asked quietly. "Did he not make you happy?"

"He did," Serenity squeaked, wishing the blonde would stop talking, hoping she could keep fighting the sobs that were threatening to burst out of her chest, longing to run out of the room and never look back as the pain kept growing inside her. "We were just too different. We believe in different things. He's so

Against All Odds

selfish, really, and stubborn, and... and... oh, Venus, I love him so much!"

"I know, Serenity, I know." Sailor Venus seized the Princess by the shoulders, pulled her into a sitting position and wrapped her arms around the crystal-haired girl as she cried, quaking and sobbing into the orange and white uniform. Venus held her like that for quite a while, rocking Serenity gently and trying not to cry herself from the echoes of the young woman's pain. When the Princess finally calmed, the soldier drew a basin of water and helped her get herself in order for what remained of the day.

"It's for the best, you know," Venus said kindly as Serenity rolled the rope into the brown cloak and stashed it away behind the wardrobe. "Imagine me, born on a planet famous for its legendary love stories, saying something like that!" She laughed halfheartedly.

"You're right, though," the Princess sighed. "It was destined from the beginning to end in heartbreak." She drew herself up, trying to stand properly despite her protesting muscles. "I am the heir to the Moon Kingdom. I have a responsibility to my people."

Marching boldly over to the dressing table, Serenity picked up the engagement pendant and hung it in its rightful place around her neck. It was beautiful, the smooth blue stone complimenting her eyes, sparkling in the thin rays of sunlight that peeked through the curtains covering the windows...

Princess Serenity stared at her reflection and saw a slave in chains. She burst into tears.

So began Serenity and Endymion's first day devoid of the promise of love. It seemed unreal, like a nightmare they could not wake up from, and it had all happened so suddenly that it was almost easy to forget.

On an errand for Miss Amaris in the city, Endymion caught sight of a star chart in a shop window. It showed the outlines of all the Ancients in the heavens, along with a paragraph of information about each one. Buying it would cost him what was a small fortune for a stable hand, but Serenity would be pleased if he were to study - then he remembered.

A merchant driving a cart along the road had to rein in his horses quickly to avoid running down the young man who had stopped suddenly in the street, his purchases falling out of his limp arms and scattering forgotten on the ground around him.

As she sat in the private library studying the founding of the Silver Alliance, a page approached Princess Serenity bearing a folded message. Sailor Mercury took the note from the servant and opened it, absorbing its contents with a practiced eye.

"Your voice lesson after dinner tonight has been canceled," the blue-haired soldier reported. Serenity nodded casually, hiding her pleased smile. That was her last appointment of the day. She would have plenty of time to unwind before meeting with End - then she remembered.

Serenity's vision wavered, but she blinked her tears away. Mercury was in the room. She waited until she was certain the soldier wasn't looking before carefully shifting her weight in the chair. It didn't help. Despite Venus' morning massage, Serenity still ached from her neck to her ankles, and huddling over books all afternoon had only made matters worse. She spent the entire day hiding her suffering, forcing her agonizing muscles to move normally, and the physical pain coupled with the emotional trauma she was bottling inside made her weak with nausea. Every smile was a lie, every word a false tone of brightness sculpted by years of training for a life in the public eye. Serenity hated it, but she had no choice. This was the best path for a woman in her position.

Endymion did not fare much better. Everything reminded him of the Princess, even when it did not make sense. The hay in the stables was golden and coarse, but it still reminded him of her silky pale hair. The sky was a deep royal blue with a few stars shining through the sunlight, but it still reminded him of her bright cerulean eyes. And, of course, he had to work all day in the shadow of the Moon Castle where she lived, so close but forever lost to him.

Throughout the day he forced himself to repeat the thought that it was better this way, however painful the separation was. A life on Earth would have been difficult, full of uncertainty and struggle; that was not the kind of life Endymion wanted for his beloved. Their relationship had been doomed to pain and sorrow. Of course ending it was the best decision for all involved.

Wasn't it?

Chapter Eight

It was an evening outlined in blue on the calendar that sat on the desk in Queen Serenity's office. And so, it rained. The sun went down, the sky clouded and the stars were blotted out, the thunder rumbled a warning and the water came down from the sky. Throughout the gardens, the plants, accustomed to rain being a rare boon granted arbitrarily by the Queen, swiftly stretched out their stems and spread out their roots beneath the ground to drink up the blood of life as it fell on the surface of the Moon. With the waning Earth hidden by the clouds, it was dark and gloomy, and the rain came down swiftly in sheets so it could be over as soon as possible. It was a perfect night to be miserable.

Alone in her bedroom, listening to the rain pound against the marble balcony outside, Princess Serenity lay on her bed and did just that. Although she had had more free time than usual this evening, she had refused all company with the excuse of illness; even that of Sailor Venus, who knew the truth. Serenity knew she could not keep this up for long, especially after her lateness that morning. Her mother would soon grow worried and send healers to her. For the moment, however, she didn't care. In her entire life, she had never felt as much pain as she did on this night.

Her entire body still ached. Her muscles were stiff and sore, and her palms and feet throbbed painfully. It had been an exhausting day of forcing herself to walk properly in glass slippers despite her blisters and keeping the rope marks on her hands carefully turned away from all eyes. When Serenity had finally retired and was able to remove the painful shoes, she had been glad of the long skirts of her dress; she discovered her feet had been rubbed raw and bloody.

Still, she suffered in silence, keeping her wounds a secret from everyone and bearing the pain that she considered a fit punishment without complaint. Destiny had given her the gift of true love and she had thrown it away for a life she dreaded.

That Endou - no, Endymion. What was he thinking, putting so much pressure on her all in one night? All Serenity wanted was to be with him and he just would not stop reminding her of the obstacles in their way. He was her sanity, her distraction, her-

Her distraction. The bitterness in Serenity's stomach rolled away, to be replaced by shame. She had been using Endo - no, Endymion - to distract her from her unhappiness, as an excuse to forget her responsibilities for a while. Every day she had to go back to the world of frills and propriety, but at night,

Against All Odds

with End - Endymion, she was free. Her lover was her air supply as she drowned in a cold and empty life. Desperate only for that release and reveling in it, she had not taken the time to think about anything else. Indeed, when had she last put some serious thought into any of the issues that cluttered her life? Endymion had offered distraction and she had eagerly accepted.

What a fool she had been. Princess Serenity rolled her stiff body onto its side and curled up into a ball. Had she thought she could continue this indefinitely, never having to choose between her lover and the life she had been born to? Never facing the consequences of her actions? Her time with Endymion had been a dream, but it could not last forever.

Endymion had known that. While Serenity was ignoring reality in favor of temporary pleasure, he had been thinking of ways to save their relationship. Which of them, then, had a true sense of responsibility? A deep feeling of guilt came over the Princess. Surely Endymion had friends and a life here on the Moon, but he had been willing to give it all up for their love. For Serenity. And she had thought him a fool.

For a brief, terrifying moment, Serenity wondered if she truly loved Endymion at all. Her heart trembled in her chest and the rain seemed to beat harder and colder on the Moon outside. Would she have fallen for any man who offered her tenderness and understanding? The chill of uncertainty crept over her body, and she pressed her hands to her face.

There, she found reassurance in the bracelet of orange beads around her wrist. Not every man would have braved a maze of gardens filled with guards to return a trinket such as this. Endymion was more than just any man, and Serenity loved him for it. She loved his sweetness, and his compassion, and the way he leaned around her to hold doors open. She loved how he teased her and dared laugh in her presence although she could easily have imprisoned him for it. She loved the way his hair constantly brushed the corners of his eyes and his habit of rubbing the back of his neck when he felt awkward. Most of all, she loved the way she felt in his arms, when he surrounded her with his warmth and his security and his love and for a few moments made her feel as if nothing in the entire universe could harm her. No other man could ever make her feel like that.

What had she done?

Before she knew it, Serenity had climbed off her bed, hurried over to her wardrobe and reached into the small space against the wall behind it. Her fingers closed on a bundle of cloth, and she tugged it out of its hiding place. The rough brown cloak unfurled in her grasp, the rope wrapped within it tumbling to the floor.

With shaking hands, the Princess pressed the tough material to her face and breathed deeply. The scent of roses, the fragrance of her beloved, filled her lungs and swirled through her head. Just breathing that scent brought all the lovely memories of her love affair back in a rush: the horseback rides, the conversations, the walks through the garden, the comfort of his arms and his scent surrounding her...

Shuddering from head to toe, Serenity sank to her knees on the floor, clutching the cloak against her chest and crying bitter tears into its scratchy fabric. With every breath came the smell of roses and the miserable regret it brought, as well as the knowledge that it was too late to go back to the way things were. She had made her choice and now she had to live with it.

Rain, Endymion decided, was exactly what he needed right now. He stood outside on the grass beside his hut, his face tilted up toward the dark, overcast sky, letting the rain pour down its torrent upon him. It was often said that rain was the essence of life, a blessing to be treasured, but Endymion had always found rain days gloomy. At the moment, it certainly fit his mood.

The rain splattered against his face, running into his eyes, soaking his hair and his clothes until both were plastered against his body. He slowly relaxed, forcing his tense muscles to yield to the battering of the raindrops, letting his arms hang limply from his shoulders as streams of water ran from his fingertips. He accepted the punishment of the heavens without resistance, although the warmth of his home beckoned from behind him.

It had been a rainy night like this one when Endymion had first felt that he loved her, although he had not admitted it to himself at the time.

Against All Odds

Why couldn't he stop thinking about her? The stable hand squeezed his eyes shut more tightly and clenched his fists, but he could not banish Princess Serenity from his mind. The rain could not wash away her rosy smile, her bright blue eyes, her silky pale hair. He longed for the sound of her voice and the touch of her hand as much as the grass beneath him hungered for the rain. He had wanted to be with her forever, to see the light of love in her eyes every day for the rest of their lives, but he had not meant as much to her.

Ah, yes, the pretty pampered Princess in her lovely world of crystal and glass. He had been a fool to think she would leave all that for an Earth-born stable hand. He was nothing to a woman of Serenity's education and breeding; why would she choose him when she was being handed a crown? He was little more than a shoulder to cry on, a temporary comfort.

Endymion flinched at the memory of the many nights he had spent holding the Princess as she wept. Whatever else may have been false, he could not deny that those tears were real. He sighed, hanging his head, letting the rain-soaked strands of hair cling to his face. Serenity did not want to marry the Prince of Earth; he knew that for certain. Yet, she was choosing to marry him just the same, even when Endymion offered her an escape. Why? Because other people told her to? What kind of mother would arrange a loveless marriage for her daughter anyway?

His beloved's mother, the Queen of the Moon. Queen Serenity. Endymion shuddered from a chill that had nothing to do with the rain. He knew his beloved was a Princess, which, obviously, made her the daughter of a Queen, but he had never given much thought to what that meant. For the most part, he did not want to think of it.

Queen Serenity, the woman that the people of Earth worshipped as a goddess. As the servants never saw their elegant ruler, but all knew of her power, many of them believed in her divinity as well. Endymion was in love with the daughter of a goddess, a woman with divine blood in her veins. The very thought made him tremble. Princess Serenity was so like other women when he was with her, all emotion and body just like any of her future subjects, that it was easy for Endymion to forget what he was really dealing with. There were those in the stables who would consider his love sacrilege, if they knew.

Yet, Endymion knew firsthand that the Princess was flesh and blood, a woman with wants and needs like everybody else. It was the citizenry of the Moon Kingdom that saddled her with the roles of ruler and goddess. That was a tremendous responsibility for a young woman and Serenity had endured it throughout her entire life. The people of the Moon depended on her to take care of them.

What would happen to the Moon Kingdom if Princess Serenity abandoned her home? The Queen had matters well in hand, but the kingdom would be left without an heir. Endymion did not know what powers the monarch possessed, but she had lived a long time; it was more likely than not that she would be unable to raise another successor. What would follow then? Anarchy at worst, bitter rivalry at best, and without the power of the Silver Crystal behind the throne the Moon could not remain habitable for long. Not to mention the Earth's reaction to the disappearance of its Prince's fiancée; war would be likely.

With these chilling thoughts, the cold and damp of the pouring rain finally began to set in, and Endymion retreated to the warmth of his hut. With a few logs of the dense long-burning wood that the kingdom imported from Jupiter and some kindling from Saturn, he soon had a meager but very warm fire crackling in the small stone hearth built into the hut wall. Endymion sat close to the fire for a long time, staring into the flickering flames, but the chill inside him did not go away.

Of course Princess Serenity would refuse to go to Earth with him. No matter what her own feelings were, she was not selfish enough to throw entire worlds into chaos for her own personal happiness. If she were, Endymion would not have fallen in love with her.

His eyes kept straying to the rose in its plain mug of water on the table - such an unsuitable container for such a precious gift. Even as a child, the Princess had ignored his rosy skin and shabby clothing and had seen only a potential new friend. Her choices had nothing to do with Endymion's blood or position. He had been foolish to ever imagine it could be otherwise. Serenity was beautiful and elegant as the rose, an elite among flowers, but she was also as tender and fragile. What he had said to her had been nothing short of cruel.

And now it was over and he had never even told her that he was the boy she still wondered about. Yes, he could try to go to her and apologize, but if they could not be together, wasn't it better this way? If she remained angry with Endymion, it might be easier for her to move on.

Against All Odds

Of course, there was no way for Endymion to ease his own guilt and pain. In the end, he was alone and he had lost the woman he loved with all his heart. Without Serenity, there was a bitter emptiness inside him that gnawed away at his spirit, a yawning hunger that could never be satisfied, a deep loss that could never be forgotten. When he closed his eyes, all he could see was her smile, and when he opened them, her hair danced in the flames that flickered before him. He knew his heart would never be rid of her and the coming years of life on the Moon would be excruciating. Endymion would live out his life in the shadow of his beloved's home as she married, had children, became Queen and forgot about him. Perhaps Endymion would go to Earth alone, once the public teleportation stations on the planet were reopened. There was always a chance that he could find his family.

Still, at that moment, it was hard for Endymion to imagine that he might ever be cured of Serenity's smile. He lay back on the wood floor beside the hearth, staring up at the ceiling of the small hut he called home. Setting the gold star locket on his chest, Endymion opened it, closed his eyes and listened to the light lilting melody long into the night. A few stray tears slowly slipped from the corners of his eyes.

He had no way of knowing the simple fact that the locket still sang proved Serenity still loved him.

It was an uneasy, awkward breakfast. None of the Sailor Soldiers could fail to notice Princess Serenity's unusually quiet and somber mood. When they asked if she was still ill, the Princess assured them she was well again, but she merely nibbled at her food through most of the meal, and her eyes were downcast. The soldiers tried to engage her in conversation, but Serenity answered their questions as briefly and neutrally as she could. Several times, Sailor Mars tensed and looked about to demand to know what was troubling her Princess, but a touch on the arm and a jerk of Mercury's head stopped her. There were servants present.

As the attendants began clearing the dishes away, the double doors of the private dining room opened and Queen Serenity glided into the room. The Sailor Soldiers got to their feet immediately and turned to face the monarch. The Princess looked up from the untouched goblet of juice she had been holding.

"Are you ready, my dear?" the Queen asked her daughter. Her attendants were gathered just outside the room, ready to leave again. The Princess shot to her feet. She had completely forgotten; today she was to pray to the Crystal Tower for the first time.

Venus, of course, knew the Princess' schedule by heart.

"Are you sure you feel up to this?" the orange-suited soldier asked gently, giving the Princess a meaningful look.

"I am fine," Serenity insisted firmly. "Arrange for me to take luncheon with my fiance today, will you, Venus?" she added, turning away from the blonde warrior. If she did not go forward with the day of prayer as planned, her mother would grow even more suspicious. Indeed, the skepticism was plain in the Queen's eyes as her daughter approached. Princess Serenity focused her gaze on the woman's nose, hoping to hide the emotions her eyes would betray.

"Serenity, look at me." The Ruler of the Moon reached out a hand to tenderly brush a stray lock of hair off the golden crescent on her daughter's forehead. Inwardly, the Princess cursed her mother's gift of perception. Delving deep into all the resources she possessed, drawing from all the years of training she had been through, Princess Serenity banished all thought from her mind, pulled the best mask she could muster over her face, and looked bravely into her mother's eyes.

Queen Serenity blinked. Her eyes narrowed as she peered at her daughter, searching, questing for what lay beneath the practiced blank look. The Princess waited calmly, unwavering.

"Are you sure you are all right?" the Queen asked at last.

"Yes, Mother." The young Princess barely dared breathe, but she forced herself to stay relaxed. The intensity faded from her mother's face.

"Very well, then. Let us go." The monarch turned and left the dining room. Her daughter hurried to her side as they moved through the corridors of the castle within a cloud of attendants. Princess Serenity felt a bit guilty. She had won, or so it seemed, but at what cost? Her mother had always been able to see what really lay in Serenity's heart no matter how hard she tried to hide it, but that lack of privacy had led

Against All Odds

to many a heartfelt and comforting conversation. If the Princess began keeping her sorrows secret now, would her relationship with her mother grow cold?

On the other hand, it seemed to Princess Serenity that her feelings mattered less and less to her mother as time wore on. The last time she had confessed her true emotions to the Queen had been the night of her engagement, and her mother had done nothing to help her. It seemed the Princess was now expected to accept what she was given without question, so what could be gained by complaining?

Still, although the Queen's face as they walked was as neutral and serene as always, the Princess somehow got the distinct impression that her mother sensed the growing space between them as well and was saddened by it. Now that the Princess considered it, who on the Moon was her mother close to? Who was by Queen Serenity's side, supporting her through the difficult times?

There was Luna, of course, and Artemis, but they were Mauans who dwelled on the Moon only because of a contract that could be renegotiated at any time. None of the Queen's servants could truly be called friends, and in the life the ruler's position allowed, there was really no one else, save a few long-distance acquaintances among the royal families of the other worlds in the Silver Alliance. If she and her daughter could not be friends, Queen Serenity would be very much alone.

The Princess shuddered slightly. Was such a lonely life her fate as well? She had the Sailor Soldiers, but lately they seemed to be growing apart, and the odds of her husband-to-be becoming a close companion were almost nothing. Her best chance at a lifelong friend and partner, the stable hand Endymion, had been wasted.

Endymion...

Serenity drew herself together before sad thoughts could cause her to falter in her steps - the blisters on her feet were still painful and it took most of her concentration to prevent herself from limping - and resolved not to think about the stable hand any more. That relationship was over and it was best if she moved on before anyone else began to suspect it existed. If she did not want to be lonely as Queen, the most important task ahead of her was to win over the Earth Prince, at least as a friend.

Now they reached the waiting room where the Queen's entourage would remain until their mistress returned from the Crystal Tower. Over the past months, this place had become very familiar to Princess Serenity. She waited politely while her mother opened the heavy marble doors to the grassy courtyard hidden at the heart of the Moon Castle. Along with her mother and Luna, she entered the sacred place, which was beginning to feel almost like coming home after a long journey.

"Now, you know what to do," Queen Serenity instructed her daughter as they stood beside the entrance to the inner sanctum, the small building from which the tower of prayer rose into the sky in a flawless spire. The lack of ceremony seemed strange for such a momentous occasion, but the secrecy and restrictions surrounding the sanctuary made formality pointless.

"Clear your mind of all thought save for the continued safety and stability of the Moon Kingdom," the ruler continued. "The Silver Crystal will read the desires of your heart and will make them reality."

Unbidden, an image of Endymion's smiling face materialized in the mind of the Princess. She quickly shoved it aside and concentrated on what her mother was saying. What was she doing thinking of him at a moment like this?

"The first time you commune with the Silver Crystal may be an intense experience," the Queen warned, "but do not fear. I will be with you." Luna gave the Princess an encouraging smile. The younger girl nodded, trying to remain calm, but she was dreadfully nervous. This was only the first of the new duties she would undertake as Queen and she wanted to get it right.

Queen Serenity pressed her hand against the ornately-carved silver door, and it swung open, revealing only darkness within. She gestured to her daughter to enter first. The Princess took a deep breath and stepped forward. No matter how many times she entered this place, she always felt uneasy stepping blindly into complete darkness. She crossed the threshold into the temple and her mother followed, the door closing behind them.

As usual, when the door clicked shut the shadows lifted away and a white glow illuminated the room. When Princess Serenity entered this place for the first time, the light had been nearly blinding, but over time the Silver Crystal had learned to recognize her as the Moon Queen's daughter and the shine that greeted her now was soft, gentle, and friendly.

Against All Odds

Clenching her hands into fists to stop them from trembling, the Princess approached the wide base of the Crystal Tower as she had seen her mother do. She gathered her skirts in her hands and slowly knelt down in front of the glowing spire, ignoring the stiffness of her muscles, her eyes watching the tower warily for signs of rejection. She did not sense her mother nearby but she could feel the Queen's eyes on her; most likely she was standing by the wall in the Princess' usual place.

The young heir to the Moon bowed her head, pressed her lacerated palms together in front of her chest and closed her eyes. Forcing herself to breathe calmly, Serenity focused her thoughts and desires on the health and security of her kingdom, mentally directing them toward the Crystal Tower as best she could.

For a long moment, nothing happened. Princess Serenity began to feel sick with worry, wondering if she was doing something wrong, but at last the tower of prayer responded.

Her eyes were closed, but light exploded everywhere and a tingling, warm wave of energy flooded through her entire body. The lingering dull, throbbing ache in her muscles and feet vanished and she felt as if she were floating in a gentle sea of warmth. The pressure of the floor against her knees faded away and, through her closed eyelids, a perfect flawless jewel sparkled into view.

There were faces, too, ghostly images that danced on the edge of her mind's eye, figures that vanished whenever Serenity tried to see them properly but reappeared a moment later on the boundaries of her view. They danced around the glittering Silver Crystal, whispering without sound, speaking without words, welcoming the successor to the throne of the Moon Kingdom and asking for her wish.

Remembering her mission, Princess Serenity concentrated on the kingdom she would one day be responsible for and prayed with all her strength for its continued safety and prosperity. The voices surrounding her paused to listen as she fervently wished for the Moon Kingdom to last forever.

The faces doubted her. They looked into Serenity and saw something deeper, something hidden. She prayed for the Moon with all of her mind, but not with all of her heart. The voices asked again, demanding to know her true wish.

The Princess resisted, focusing her thoughts on the Moon as she had been taught, praying for a successful marriage to Prince Endymion and another era of peace and security for her kingdom and all the planets of the Silver Alliance. That was what she wanted.

The ghostly beings refused to believe her. That was not her true desire!

Serenity argued back, concentrating more fiercely on the future as her mother wanted it. Yes, yes, it was!

The Silver Crystal would grant no favors to liars who denied the truth of their own hearts. The faces lunged. Princess Serenity recoiled, sealing her secrets tightly, covering them up and sequestering them away, but the shadowy figures battered against her efforts and the voices howled away her strength. The Silver Crystal attacked her defenses relentlessly, demanding the truth.

What was her true desire?!

It escaped. An image slipped from Serenity's grasp and floated to the surface, blazing its message in bold colors and lights, refusing to be hidden any longer.

A happy life with the man she loved. Endymion.

Yes, yes, that was what she really wanted, more than anything!

At this confession, the voices and faces immediately fell back, satisfied. The glow of the Silver Crystal once again became warm, comforting, friendly. As the light began to fade, Princess Serenity was given a final warning: to ask nothing that she did not ask with all her heart. The Silver Crystal could see straight into her soul.

Suddenly, there was pressure on her shoulder. The world came rushing back, reality flooding in like a wave as the floor rematerialized beneath Serenity's legs and the silence of the temple returned. She opened her eyes. The light in the room had gone back to normal, the Crystal Tower faintly incandescent, and her mother's hand was on her arm.

Overwhelmed and trembling, the Princess unclasped her hands and let her mother help her unsteadily to her feet. To her surprise, her shoes no longer hurt her. All of her injuries had been healed. Her mind, however, was badly shaken. She felt weak, drained from the inside out, and a dreadful shame was settling in as she realized what had just happened in the embrace of the Silver Crystal. She had not

Against All Odds

done what she had been charged to do.

The Queen was looking at her with a stricken expression of worry and concern. Princess Serenity reached up to her own face and discovered tears rolling down both cheeks, soaking her skin. She opened her mouth to speak, but the Queen swiftly placed a finger over her daughter's lips to silence her. They could not talk in this place. Quaking as she clung to her mother's arm, the Princess allowed herself to be led out of the sanctuary.

When it came time for lunch, Serenity was still too unsettled to eat. She picked at her food as she and her fiance avoided each other's gaze. She had had good intentions for this meal when she asked Sailor Venus to arrange it, but things were different now. The Silver Crystal had forced her to stop denying the true desires of her heart.

She loved Endymion, the stable hand, and she did not want to lose him. A life without him by her side was not a life she wanted. All things, even the Moon Kingdom itself, paled in comparison to her yearning and need for him. No number of years or duties could make her feel differently.

As if that were not a disaster in itself, she had said as much to the Silver Crystal. She had wished selfishly, and she dreaded the results more and more with every passing moment. Serenity had lied to her mother and said she had prayed properly, but she had wished for a happy and peaceful life with Endymion instead. She had betrayed her mother's trust.

Serenity looked up at the Earth Prince across the table and pitied him. He seemed so young, so unready for this, and he was all alone on a world of people whom his subjects worshipped as gods. Not only that, but he was bound to marry a woman who could never love him. Serenity had blamed the Prince for the lack of emotion between them, but now it was her feelings that doomed their union.

He leaned his auburn-haired head heavily on one hand and stabbed a fork at his plate with the other, looking utterly miserable. Prince Endymion's blue eyes were downcast and Serenity felt she could almost recognize a bit of her own sadness in his demeanor. She shook herself inwardly; there was no reason for her to treat him so heartlessly.

"I trust you have been able to find ways of amusing yourself here on the Moon, Prince?" she asked timidly, breaking the silence.

"Sometimes," the blue-eyed boy muttered, barely glancing up at his fiance. "It is not easy alone." Serenity blushed with regret. She could not deny that she had been avoiding him.

"I apologize," she said quietly. "My duties have kept me busy of late. I will try to make some time to spend with you, if you wish."

"Do not concern yourself," the Prince replied shortly after swallowing his last bite of bread. "My guardians should be joining me soon."

"Still, until then-"

"There is no need." The young man began to eat noticeably faster, obviously eager to escape the company of the Princess. Now Serenity remembered why she disliked him; remembered that he was a rude, brusque stone with a bitter heart. Her grip tightened on her fork and knife.

"You are not exactly making this easy," she muttered in annoyance. "We are going to be together for a long time, Prince."

"What do you want from me, Princess?" her fiance sighed. "I told you I can never love you. I thought we had an understanding on that."

"Is friendship too much to ask?" Serenity asked, barely keeping her voice from becoming a hiss. "Or even a single civilized conversation?" Had she really given up a magical relationship with a man who truly loved her for the lifelong company of this heartless shell?

"You told me to be honest with you," the Prince reminded her, narrowing his eyes. "Do you want to go back to feigned courtship, to play out the public roles that have been scripted for us in private as well?"

"No, but after all I've sacrificed for this, I would appreciate a little respect!" Princess Serenity grabbed the stone hanging around her neck and shook it at her fiance. "These chain us together for life! We might as well make the best of it!"

"Do you think you're the only one who feels that weight?" Prince Endymion demanded, gesturing at

his own pendant. "Do you think this is the life I wanted? I was the heir to the most powerful kingdom on Earth! I have sacrificed my throne, my freedom, my friends, all hope of love-

"You, Prince Endymion, do not know the meaning of love." The Moon Princess glared at her fiance as her heart cried out for the company of the stable hand who shared his name. They stared at each other over the table, fuming, fire in their eyes and anger in their hearts. The Earth Prince's face, twisted with fury, was suddenly eerily familiar to Serenity. He and Endymion rather resembled one another when they were angry. As the stable hand's expression was usually gentle and the Prince's was usually stoic, she had never noticed any similarity before.

"I, Princess, understand love and sacrifice quite well," the auburn-haired man spat. He snatched his napkin off his lap and slammed it down on the table with such force that the goblets and plates jumped, then got out of his chair and stomped out of the room.

Serenity watched him go without making a single move to stop him. Somewhere in the back of her mind, she realized she had probably destroyed whatever small chance remained of their becoming friends, but she did not care. She knew what she wanted, and it was not Prince Endymion.

Evening approached. Although the dome of atmosphere on the Moon was thin and artificial, it still caught and bent the light as the sun slid toward the horizon, spreading an orange and pink glow across the landscape. As the shadows lengthened, the buildings of the city took on a fiery hue that shifted and changed over time, and the streets became lazy rivers of gold.

With his eye pressed against the telescope in the castle observatory, Artemis ignored the picturesque beauty of the sunset. He had sent the assistants home for the night long ago but continued working alone, focusing on the sun as it faded from yellow to orange, filling page after page of his record book with notations. The sunspot activity had been increasing steadily all day and now, oddly enough, the dark regions seemed to be collecting on one area of the sun's surface.

Artemis had already sent word to observatories in other cities, but the most advanced equipment was here in the castle, and soon the Moon would enter the Earth's shadow and the sun would be lost to them all. This was terribly poor timing for a Day of Shadow, known to watchers on Earth as a lunar eclipse, when every point on the entire Moon would be plunged into darkness for hours. Although he was a scientific man, Artemis could not help wondering if this was more than mere coincidence.

Fortunately, due to Queen Acidalia's influence, the Ruler of the Moon was as concerned about the activity on the sun as her Mauan advisor. Queen Serenity had agreed to alter the Moon's rotation slightly to provide more time for observation. Throughout the afternoon the spin of the Moon had gradually slowed, the change so slight that it was imperceptible to the average citizen. The day and the following night would seem long to the Lunarians, but by the next morning, time would again be flowing normally. Artemis had one extra hour to observe; after that, communications from the other planets would have to suffice.

As it was, his hour was almost up. The orange star was falling toward the rim of the world, the bottom edge of the glowing disc about to impact the distant ridges that marked the borders of ancient craters. Artemis' eyes hurt from staring through the lenses, but he could not tear his eyes away. Another sunspot darkened, then another and another, until a corner of the sun almost seemed to be boiling with them...

Suddenly, there was a brilliant flash of light at the center of the bruise that had developed on the star. Something flaming erupted from the sun's surface and streaked away from its point of origin. It was small enough not to be visible to the naked eye, but through the telescope Artemis could see it clearly, a blazing ball of fire that shot like a comet across space. His mouth hanging open, the Mauan traced the sun-born object's path through the sky. It seemed to be heading for the Earth, whose hulking blue-green body was following the sun toward the horizon on its way to block out the star.

As Artemis watched, his pen having fallen to the floor as he went limp with shock, the light dimmed during its journey through the void. The edges remained flaming longest, forming an outline of utter blackness that cut across the sky. Even with his advanced equipment, Artemis could not find any distinguishing marks whatsoever on the object's surface. As it cooled in the vacuum of the cosmos, the flames flickered and died out, and the coal-black mystery vanished against the background of darkness

Against All Odds

formed by outer space. It had still been following a direct course for Earth.

The white-haired man straightened up, blinked, and rubbed his eyes. He was alone in the room and had no sketches of the event. Had he hallucinated the fiery object after staring at the sun too long? This worry was short-lived as the communications panel against a nearby wall began to beep. Correlating reports were coming in from other observatories.

Sailor Mars was irritated.

She was a Sailor Soldier, part of the keystone of the Moon Kingdom's military and the right hand of the Queen - and she didn't know what was going on.

It was obvious that there were secrets afoot in the castle. Artemis had come down from the observatory with a thick book full of notes and a face as white as snow, and had stolen Sailor Mercury right out of the Sailor Soldiers' meeting. The other three of them waited patiently for the Queen to summon them for their briefing on the situation. Darkness fell and the light crystals flickered into life. No summons ever arrived.

Mercury returned hours later, well into the night, and apologetically explained that Queen Serenity had sworn her to secrecy on the matter until all the facts were in. The meeting ended bitterly.

It had not been a productive meeting to begin with; Sailor Mercury was not the only one keeping secrets from her fellow soldiers. They all knew there was something going on with the Princess, but Venus was stubbornly silent on the matter, saying only that the problem had resolved itself. By the sound of things, Jupiter was jealous of her leader's sudden special closeness to the Princess, and Mars had left the meeting incredibly frustrated. They were supposed to be a team. How could they work together if they kept secrets from each other?

Annoyed at being left out of the loop, Sailor Mars resolved to do a little investigating on her own. She returned to her chambers alone and, retrieving a silver key from its hiding place, opened the door to the special room Queen Serenity had prepared for her when she first came to the Moon Kingdom.

It was a small version of a Martian Temple of the Infinite, designed to focus one's psychic abilities and duly consecrated by a spiritual advisor visiting from the home world. It was dark, the walls and ceiling painted shades of red and black, and the floor had been dusted lightly with sand from the surface of the fourth planet. Sailor Mars sighed with pleasure as she stepped into the comfort of her home away from home, glad to be placing her shoes in the soil of her planet and surrounding herself with artifacts and artwork from her people.

After tying her long violet hair back with a ribbon, Mars added a few short square logs of the precious alta wood to the small round fire pit in the center of the room and knelt on the soft sand in front of it. It was considered disrespectful to light the fire directly with her powers, but a slight effort of concentration was all that was needed to set a nearby splinter of wood alight, which the soldier then used to kindle the edges of the logs into flame.

The outer surface of alta wood was extremely flammable and the fire crept around the logs quickly, but the denser wood inside could burn for hours. Sailor Mars closed her eyes and breathed deeply as she waited for the flames to settle into the alta, opening her lungs to receive the first tendrils of fragrant smoke that rose from the sacred material. The burning wood produced a sweet and spicy odor that permeated the rose-tinted smoke it released, which soon filled the small chamber and brought memories of home to Mars' mind. The thin smoke could cause disorientation and hallucinations in the untrained, but for Martians it was a powerful enhancer that gave them clear, strong views through their inner eye.

When the alta smoke was singing in her blood, Sailor Mars was ready to begin. Reaching down to her waist, she unfastened the red stone that was attached to the dip in her uniform where the white bodysuit met the skirt. The brooch was a gift from Queen Acidalia and augmented the soldier's natural talents with the ancient strength of the Royal Family of Mars. She pressed it between her gloved palms and lifted her arms, bowing her head to bring the stone near her forehead. In this position, Mars opened her mind to the Infinite.

The entire flow of the cosmos became tangible to the red-suited soldier, and as she knelt on the sandy floor she could feel the very flow of time itself rushing past her. Events spiraled off into the past,

Against All Odds

vanishing into oblivion, and ahead loomed the shadowy indistinct shapes of incidents yet to occur. Most concerned about the subject of Artemis' urgent meeting with Queen Serenity, Sailor Mars first focused on the fate of the Moon Kingdom.

In her mind, she pulled back from the smoke-filled room where she knelt and soared high above the surface of the Moon, looking down on the castle and the city that surrounded it. Trusting in the red brooch to guide her, Mars let time spin forward gently, watching the sun rise and set and the kingdom continue about its business as usual. She had done this many times before, watching the realm she protected continue its peaceful existence until the fog of uncertainty grew too thick to see through.

This time, however, the soldier was not watching for long. Almost immediately the grayness of undetermined fate was gathering, blotting out her view. Within mere weeks, an uncertain future plunged the entire Sol system into an indistinct blur. Confused, Sailor Mars focused all the effort she could muster on her red jewel, but it was the same. The future was closed to her.

Another dead end. Frustrated, Mars drew her consciousness back to her body and the feeling of the sand beneath her and the smoke filling her lungs came flowing back. After taking a moment to reorient herself, the soldier refocused her efforts. If she could not discover what was threatening the stability of the kingdom, she could at least make sure the Princess was all right. Taking a deep breath of the alta smoke, Mars began again, this time focusing on the young woman she was sworn to protect.

The first sense that came to her was a feeling of utter despair, an overwhelming sadness and loss that nearly shook Mars out of her trance with its intensity. Princess Serenity was hurting terribly. Despite what Venus had said, the issue was definitely not resolved.

Deeply concerned now, Sailor Mars delved into the cosmic record, desperate to find out what had hurt Serenity so badly. The red brooch grew hot between her palms and a vision shimmered into the view of her mind's eye. It was the face of a young man with dark hair, stormy eyes, and the tanned skin of an Earth-born laborer. Behind the image, various scenes flickered by: a pond, a stable, a field, a beach, a balcony - and a kiss. Several kisses.

Sailor Mars' eyes shot open.

In the darkness of her chambers, Princess Serenity lay awake in bed, eyes wide open and staring at the ceiling. The thought of actually trying to sleep had not entered her mind; there was no room for it. She had lived through the evening as if in a dream. Adele had washed her, dressed her in her nightgown and brushed out her long pale hair, but Serenity was only vaguely aware of the process. Now she lay like the dead beneath her blankets, unable to think of anything but the warmth of his arms and the softness of his voice and the aching of her heart.

She had thought she could go back to her normal life and eventually put all that had happened out of her mind, but it was impossible. Without him, she was nothing. His eyes were the sky, and his hair was the sea, and his flesh was the world they lived on. Without them, what else was there? All the beauty of the Moon Kingdom was pale and empty without Endymion by her side.

She longed for him, wanted him desperately with everything she was. Her lips burned for his kiss, ached to feel his mouth pressed against hers, his breath on her cheeks and his tongue meshing with her own. Just the thought of it was enough to make her sigh with desire. Could she really endure the rest of her life never again experiencing the intense rush of passionate love?

No. It was impossible. Her fiance was cold to her, her friends were too busy for her, and her mother cared only for the succession. Endymion was the only one who truly loved her for who she was, who made her feel like a woman. She could not survive a life without seeing him, nor could she let their relationship end the way it had. She had to apologize, to tell him how she felt. She had to see him again.

Throwing the blankets aside, Serenity climbed out of bed and hurried to her dressing table. It took a few tries, especially in the darkness of night, but she managed to tie her hair up properly in its twin buns. If she left it down, it would hinder her climb down the rope. Then she crossed the room to her wardrobe and reached between it and the wall to retrieve the rope and the stable hand's brown cloak.

They were not there.

Serenity crouched beside the furniture and groped around behind and under it, searching with her

Against All Odds

arm for the rolled-up bundle, but she found nothing. There was only empty space. Her means of escape was gone.

A dreadful emptiness settled into the Princess' stomach. She was trapped in a marble cage. Numbly, she rose to her feet, returned to the dressing table and sat down heavily in the chair. Perhaps this was a sign that she had been about to make the wrong decision.

With trembling fingers she lifted the engagement pendant off the table and hung it slowly around her neck, then stared at her reflection in the mirror. It was a beautiful stone, and it matched her eyes perfectly, giving her an air of elegance even in only her simple silk nightgown. Her face was solemn and empty, but she was every bit a grown woman, a mature adult with all the training of a worthy ruler.

Serenity, Queen of the Moon, with Earth's Prince Endymion as her King. Perhaps that fate would not be as unpleasant as she feared. She would have a daughter of her own, after all. The blessings of the Ancients decreed it. Perhaps they would become close...

The small silver bell hanging beside the main door of Serenity's chambers jingled, a signal from the guards outside that someone wished to enter. The Princess leapt out of the chair and rushed back to her bed, yanking the covers over her body as Adele's footsteps left her room and crossed to the door. The door was opened. There were quiet voices in low tones, and then someone entered the sitting room and the door closed behind them.

"Leave us." It was the voice of Sailor Venus.

Serenity bolted upright in her bed, her mind racing with possible reasons for the Sailor Soldier to be visiting her at this time of night. She heard Adele's door close, and then a white-gloved hand pushed the bedroom curtain aside. Sailor Venus entered, her gentle face set in a solemn expression of resignation. In her arms, she carried a bundle of cloth. Stepping toward Serenity, the blonde soldier tossed the bundle onto the bed, and it unrolled into a rough cloak and a length of rope.

"V-Venus," the Princess stammered, staring at the secret items and the woman who had brought them. "What-

"I took them," Venus confessed, hanging her head and averting her eyes. "I wanted to stop you from changing your mind and going back to him. I tried to convince myself that it was only an infatuation, just a game that you would be better to forget, that there was no possible way you could truly love him. Only a few minutes ago did I realize that I was wrong."

Sailor Venus moved closer and sat down on the edge of the bed, glancing at her Princess out of the corners of her eyes.

"Love is not a simple thing," the soldier continued. "It can come from anything - a word, a glance, a touch, even - even a picture." At this, Venus looked away, and a slight blush colored her cheeks. Serenity furrowed her brow curiously, but the orange-suited soldier did not explain.

"I have not met this man of yours," Venus said, "but I know what my senses tell me, and you do truly love him. You are an intelligent woman, Serenity. You deserve the freedom to make your own choice." She looked over at the Princess, in bed in her nightgown but with her hair properly styled for an outing. "From the look of you, you have already made it."

Serenity bit her lip and nodded her head slowly, her fingers reaching out to grasp the edge of the rough brown fabric sprawled over the silk sheets of her bed. Venus gave her Princess a warm smile.

"Well, then, you had better hurry."

Sailor Venus helped Princess Serenity out of her nightgown and into her usual dress and glass slippers, both of them ignoring the usual frills and extras that went with the clothing in favor of haste. Serenity breathed deeply as she wrapped herself in Endymion's cloak. The scent of roses was still there. Butterflies raged in her stomach, but she did her best to remain calm as the leader of her guardians hugged her and carefully lowered her to the ground, leaving the rope tied beside the wall as usual. Serenity hurried off into the gardens, trying to ignore the worry that threatened to consume her.

What if Endymion did not forgive her?

There was a slight bite to the air this night, the sort of faint chill that was not quite cold but made those outdoors glad of their cloaks. Not having one, Prien stuffed his hands in his pockets and wondered

absently if the Queen was planning to bring winter soon. He bowed his head against the breeze as he hurried into the cluster of buildings where he and the other castle servants lived. The settlement was nearly deserted; the next day was a day of rest for most of the workers, and they were entertaining themselves in the city. Prien had been at the tavern himself, but it just wasn't the same with his friend Endymion in such low spirits.

Thinking about the distraught young lover, Prien could not help but sigh. Endymion was devastated. He had started the day well, sharing friendly smiles with his fellow servants as usual, but by the afternoon, his light was gone. His steps were as heavy as his heart, his eyes were downcast, and even simple tasks seemed like an impossible struggle for him. Throughout the day, Prien had lent a sympathetic ear to an endless stream of lamentation: If only he could see her again. If only he could hold her one more time. If only he could tell her he was sorry. After Endymion left him, Prien wandered about on his own for a while, racking his brain for ways he might help his friend. There was a long road ahead of them and he did not know if they would ever reach the end of it.

Rounding a corner, Prien came across a strange sight. A small figure covered by a dark cloak was wandering among the huts, alone and obviously confused. A woman, Prien decided by the stranger's quick lightfooted movements and slight build beneath the cloak. She seemed lost, flitting from house to house and looking around wildly, yet she shrank into the shadows if anyone came near.

The hooded cloak was too long for her and dragged along the ground. Even from a distance, Prien could tell it was the kind owned by many of the servants, but the woman did not carry herself like a commoner even though she was trying to be inconspicuous. Now that he thought about it, Prien had not seen Endymion wear his cloak in quite some time.

Prien nearly choked. Could it possibly be? Although he knew of Endymion's relationship with the Princess, nothing could have prepared him for the reality of her presence. The heir to the throne of the Moon, the most powerful position in the Silver Alliance, was a mere few huts away from him.

Vertigo made the blond man unsteady on his feet as he hurried forward, his first thought to prevent the Princess from exposing herself. She had to be looking for Endymion's hut. She wasn't far off; Prien glanced over and found his friend's home just across the way and a few huts down. To his relief, there was light flickering in the windows. Endymion was at home.

Heart pounding in his chest, Prien shook out his arms in an attempt to stop his hands from trembling. Maybe he was wrong. Perhaps she was a servant of the Princess, trying to deliver a final message to her mistress' lover. Maybe she was not connected to the Princess at all. Still, she definitely looked out of place. Whoever she was, he would do his best to help her.

When the cloaked woman glimpsed Prien heading toward her, she hurried in the opposite direction looking for escape. Prien called out to her to stop, but she paid him no heed. As if that were not enough of a clue to her identity, as the woman ducked around the edge of a hut she momentarily lost her grip on the front of the brown cloak that covered her. For an instant, a flash of white showed.

Now he ran toward the hut she was hiding behind, desperate to reach her before anyone else. If Prien didn't help her, she might wander around this community all night without finding Endymion. He did not want to face his friend in the morning knowing that he could have done something.

Thinking ahead, Prien hurried around the far side of the building. Sure enough, he nearly ran into the cloaked woman just past the first corner. Unable to avoid this confrontation, she stopped short, but kept her head bowed so the hood completely covered her face.

A string of greetings ran through Prien's mind as he wiped his sweaty palms on his trousers. He didn't know for sure yet if she was the Princess and didn't want to frighten her if she was, yet he did not want to be disrespectful either. After an uncomfortable moment, he settled on what he hoped would suffice.

"Miss," he said softly, but clearly, "it's over there." Prien raised an arm to point across the cluster of huts. "That one at the end of the row, with the blue marker on the door." The hooded head turned to look, but only a confused shy silence reached Prien's ears.

"That is Endymion's," he explained in a low voice. At that, the woman sucked in her breath, and Prien knew he had hit the mark. A cautious arm as white as snow emerged from beneath the cloak and rose to the edge of the brown hood, pushing it up ever so slightly.

Prien quickly swallowed his gasp of admiration as he caught a brief glimpse of a perfect pale face,

Against All Odds

smooth and flawless as a porcelain doll even through the shadows of the hood and the night. There were cherry-red lips slightly parted in curiosity, and round blue eyes brighter than any daytime sky, and above that, a flash of gold like a ray of sunshine. Then the vision was gone, concealed once again beneath the worn rough material.

"Thank you," Princess Serenity whispered.

The cloaked woman ducked around Prien's frozen form and headed in the direction he had indicated. For a moment, the young man stood in a daze, and he understood completely Endymion's absolute devotion to the alabaster goddess. Just a glimpse of the future Queen was enough to experience her loveliness and even a half-whisper of her voice was a song. If he survived his role in this conspiracy, Prien would certainly have an impressive story to tell his future children.

Coming out of his trance, Prien whirled around to make sure the Princess reached the right hut. She had. The door was open, outlining the cloaked woman standing on the stoop in a halo of flickering golden light. Endymion was standing in the doorway, his arm still on the door, blocking entry. Prien stared at them, silently willing Endymion to swallow his pride and do as his heart told him.

Endymion looked up. His gaze fell on the blond Lunarian standing by a hut at the other end of the community, watching him. Hoping his friend could see him well enough in the dark, Prien smiled his broadest smile and gave Endymion an encouraging nod, gesturing with both arms for him to take his visitor inside. Endymion returned the smile with a small grin and stepped aside, allowing the cloaked woman to enter his hut. The door closed behind them.

"Good luck, my friend," Prien murmured to himself. "That is truly a precious jewel you have there, however briefly." Shoving his hands back into his pockets, he headed for his own dwelling, whistling.

As soon as the door was closed, Serenity unhooked the fasteners at her throat and let the cloak fall to the floor. Creeping through the servants' village with only a piece of brown cloth to conceal her identity had been a harrowing experience. Her heart had nearly leapt out of her throat when that blond man stopped her. She had been lucky indeed that he only meant to help.

Now she was standing in her beloved's home for the first time. It was small and meager, just a one-room hut, but it was cozy and comfortable, and the fire warmed her bare arms and shoulders from across the room. Before her stood her heart's only desire, Endymion, looking as alluring as she had ever seen him with his dark hair slightly disheveled and his patched work clothes. She wanted nothing more than to leap into his arms right then and there, to banish the chill that had settled into her heart, but she resisted. There was no guarantee that he had missed Serenity as much as she had him.

"Serenity," he said flatly, looking down at her.

"Good evening," she replied in just as neutral a tone.

There was a long moment of uncomfortable silence as they stared at each other, both unsure of the other's feelings. Such regrettable things had been said at their last meeting that neither one of them knew where to begin.

Endymion ached to hold his beloved, each moment they stood with this distance between them a pang of excruciating agony, but he hesitated, afraid to do or say anything that might upset her further. She had come looking for him, yes, but most likely it was to say her final goodbyes. For the moment, he contented himself with just looking at her, admiring her smooth pale hair and alabaster skin, both surprised and elated to have the chance to gaze upon her beauty one more time.

"You weren't in the stables," Serenity said at last. "I was afraid I'd never find you."

"How did you get here?" Endymion inquired. He had never even pointed out where he lived to the Princess, ashamed of his tiny old hut, but it was too late for that now.

"The blond man, he showed me," the Princess replied, rubbing her left arm with her right hand awkwardly, wondering if she had made a mistake. "A friend of yours?"

"Prien." Endymion stiffened with guilt. She knew he had revealed their secret. "He is the only one who knows, Sere, I swear it! He-"

"It's all right," Serenity assured him quickly, taking a step closer to the stable hand. "If he hadn't helped me, I would have been lost forever. Besides, I told someone as well, just one person," she admitted.

Against All Odds

"I couldn't keep it to myself any longer, I just couldn't. It hurt so much..."

The young woman's voice broke, and her eyes filled with tears. At this distance, she could smell it, that lovely scent of roses that flew in the face of all logic and whispered of the delights of true love. His eyes stared into hers, the deep charcoal pools gazing straight into her, seeing the core of who she was and all that she had the potential to become. As long as he was there, nothing else mattered.

"Oh, Endy, I love you so much!" she wailed, breaking down as tears rolled down her cheeks. "Without you, the world is cold and empty and dead. I need you more than anything. I'm sorry, Endy, I'm so sorry! I-"

Endymion stopped her apologies with two fingers pressed against her lips. Serenity closed her eyes and shuddered from head to toe, his light touch sending warm tingling waves throughout her body. She choked on her tears as they kept rising beneath her eyelids, concentrating on the delight of feeling his touch again, even if it was for the last time.

"I know," Endymion said hoarsely, the velvet softness of her lips beneath his fingers like a refreshing splash of cool water after a day's labor under the summer sun. Great Selene, even shaking like a leaf with tears pouring down her cheeks she was beautiful. "I am sorry as well, Sere. I should not have asked the impossible of you. I was wrong."

He let his fingers fall from her lips and gently laid his hands on her shoulders, giving them a reassuring squeeze. No sooner had he done so than Serenity pushed through his grasp and into his arms, unable to bear the distance between them any longer. Automatically, he drew her into his embrace as her hands slid around behind him, and his heart pounded in elation as they both returned to the place where they were meant to be.

"I love you, Sere," Endymion whispered. "Please don't leave me again." Serenity reached up, wrapped her arms around her beloved's neck, and pulled herself up to him with newfound strength.

This kiss was an explosion of passion, the release of all the hunger and longing they had both been feeling for the past two days. They were consumed by fire, melded together in an embrace that no force could separate. The lovers had tasted the bitter emptiness of separation and loss, and thus the joy of their reunion surpassed all the pleasure of any previous meeting.

Endymion reveled in the feeling of Serenity's dress and skin beneath his hands as he wrapped his hands around her, the emptiness in his soul once again filled with her warmth and her softness. The Princess pressed her mouth against the stable hand's with seemingly boundless energy, refusing to let go until she had drunk enough of his passionate flame to melt the freeze that had taken hold of her soul. Now that they had been apart, they knew the true value of what they shared together, and the need and desire that only the other could sate returned in abundance.

At last their lips separated, although their bodies did not, and they gasped for breath as they stood in a solid embrace, staring into each other's eyes as if they were the last man and woman alive. Serenity drank in the sight of him, from his coal-black eyes to the set of his jaw. How could she have ever thought she could live without seeing this face again? It would be like trying to live without water, food, or even air, thrown into the void of space. She could not endure the despair of the past two days again. She needed to be with Endymion, always.

"I will go to Earth with you," Serenity whispered. Her mother was a powerful woman; surely she could find a way to protect the kingdom without this Princess. Besides, if longing for Endymion prevented Serenity from praying to the Silver Crystal properly, she could never be Queen.

"Sere, don't-"

"No," she cut off Endymion's protest. "I want to. I want us to be together for the rest of our lives, whatever it takes." She squeezed her lover firmly in her arms, never wanting to let go. "I mean it, with all my heart." Reaching up, Serenity lifted the engagement pendant in her hands and pulled it off, tossing it aside. It clattered across the floor.

Despite the seriousness of the situation, Endymion could not stop his face from breaking out into a broad smile. He would never have to be without his beloved Serenity again. His strong hands gripped the Princess around the waist, and he lifted her up and spun her around and around in the center of the hut, kissing Serenity again and again as she giggled with relief and happiness. It would be a difficult life, and leaving their loved ones behind would be sad, but as long as they were together, they knew they would be

all right.

When their spinning came to a stop and they separated briefly, laughing, Serenity found herself facing the joined blocks of wood that served as Endymion's table. There, standing in a rough mug, was a perfect blood-red rose. Curious, the Princess approached the blossom. Had her lover taken it from her garden? No, she was most devoted to the crimson roses over all the other flowers in her favorite place. If even a single bloom was missing, she would have noticed.

Behind her, Endymion watched his beloved and held his breath as she studied the rose.

The petals were of the lush velvet texture Serenity knew like an old friend. This rose was certainly from her garden, but no red roses had been taken from there in quite some time. She knew every flower that left that place as well as Endymion knew the horses in the stables, all the way back to the one she had given a little servant boy many years ago...

Come to think of it, that boy had been an Earth-child with dark hair and skin, like the man who was now standing behind her. Since meeting her blue-eyed, auburn-haired fiance, Serenity knew not all Earth men looked like her lover. She thought back to the night she and Endymion had spent at Selene's Blessing. He had mentioned a girl he met as a child and had sounded like he knew the boy she spoke of from her own memories. It was too much to be coincidence.

Serenity turned around and there he stood, the little servant boy all grown up into a man she loved more than she had ever dreamed possible.

"It was you," she whispered, her eyes widening as Endymion smiled. "It was you!"

"That little girl inspired me beyond any other experience of my life," the stable hand replied, looking on his beloved with tenderness. "I loved her then, even before I knew what love was, and no woman since has been able to compare. Her smile, her voice, her kindness stayed with me always and I did all I could to become a man who would be worthy of her. Of you, Serenity. Everything I am, everything I have learned and accomplished, was for you."

"I always wondered about you," Serenity said, her eyes brimming with tears of joy. "I thought about you every day. Oh, Endy, I would have loved you even without all that trouble." For the first time in her life, her heart finally felt complete. Endymion gathered her into his arms, and they kissed with nothing held back.

Eagerly, the lovers explored their passion with all the energy of two hearts finally freed from all restriction. All thoughts in their minds were focused on each other, their only desire to be in this moment and celebrate their love. Serenity clung to her beloved's shirt as he held her around the waist and his lips roamed away from her mouth and down her neck. She had missed this so badly, the tingle of his moist lips and tongue on her flesh and his firm grip on her body, and she leaned into his caresses as his kisses sent shocks deep into her center.

Endymion couldn't get enough of her, his touch gentle but insistent as he relished the slightly salty taste of her skin against his tongue. After days of believing she was gone forever, Serenity was back in his arms, warm and eager and undeniably real. He trembled as her hands climbed over his shirt and slid behind his neck, pulling him firmly against her in a silent plea for more. Endymion happily obliged, letting instinct lead his lips over her shoulders and along her collarbones. His entire body was coming alive, becoming charged with the energy of irresistible desire. He wanted to hold her, touch her, taste her forever.

Serenity wove her fingers into her lover's hair and lifted his head to kiss his lips, opening herself to let their tongues meet. As he dived into her, she felt it again; the dull aching need that began small and rapidly grew more intense. This time, she made no attempt to fight the wave of desire as it doubled and redoubled while her lover explored her mouth. Serenity loved this man, and there was no longer anything to fear from that love.

In fact, their usual expression of the power that drew them together was no longer enough. Serenity wanted more; she wanted Endymion's caring hands elsewhere on her body and an experience stronger than a passionate kiss. She wanted her beloved to have all of her, to lavish as much adoration on her entire body as he did her head and neck.

Gently, Serenity broke their kiss, a slight smirk curving her lips as she saw Endymion's reluctance to end their embrace. Slowly, he allowed her to pull away, although the heaving of his chest and the hunger in his eyes made his desire clear. Hoping she was reading her lover's signals correctly, Serenity seized the

Against All Odds

aching rush of desire that was consuming her and gave her lover her best alluring smile. Stepping sideways, she walked around Endymion and strolled across the room toward the bed. Her hands were shaking with anxiety when she reached the full-size wooden bedframe, but she breathed deeply to steady herself, setting her face in an expression of confidence before turning to face Endymion again. They were meant to be together. They were meant to share this moment, this act, together.

Endymion turned around to find Serenity standing at the foot of his bed, and he watched numbly as she sat down on its edge and pulled her body backwards across the blankets, smiling as she settled into the center of the pillows and held her arms out to him. His heart was racing as he approached the end of the bed, his mind spinning as if he were in a dream. Of course he wanted her, all of her, he ached for her deepest embrace, but she couldn't really want...that, could she?

"Serenity," he rasped through a throat so dry it nearly choked him, "are you sure? Is this truly what you want?"

The young Princess was dreadfully nervous, but more sure than she had ever been of anything in her life. She swallowed hard and renewed her welcoming smile.

"Yes," she replied confidently, reaching toward him, "with all my heart. I love you... Endymion."

The stable hand closed his eyes briefly as his true name fell from his beloved's lips for the very first time, letting a small wave of ecstasy tingle through his body at the sweet sound of his name being spoken in love by the most lovely voice in existence. Slowly, he reached for the fastenings of his trousers.

A short while later, the lovers became one. For Serenity, there was a brief flash of shooting pain, but it faded quickly, replaced by a swelling wave of pleasure that climbed ever higher with each passing moment. She had never imagined that love could feel this way. Her body was aflame with her beloved's touch and every kiss and caress drove the growing feeling to new intensity.

Endymion was flying, soaring through the heaven that was his lover's body on wings of fire, trembling in his passion as Serenity shuddered beneath him. The power of their joining coarsed through his veins like a sweet drug far more potent than any Moon Nectar, and it burst all boundaries of restraint as he passed the point of no return and charged forward into a shining realm of crystal and silver.

There was a perfect moment of absolute ecstasy.

In that instant, their souls suddenly became, for a heartbeat, one. Both Serenity and Endymion cried out together in surprise as a searing heat that had nothing to do with their bodies blazed to life within their hearts. The room was filled with light, their very flesh illuminated by a pure glow from within them. Through the haze of passion, neither one could be certain that they were not imagining it all. It seemed they were more than a man and a woman; they were two worlds, shining orbs of life, one blue-green and one pearl-white, meeting and melding and blending powers they had not known they possessed. For a breath, they were truly joined, one soul in two bodies, and every thought and sensation was shared between them.

Then it passed, as quickly as it had appeared, and there was only their entwined bodies and the mundane desires that drove them.

Afterwards, Serenity and Endymion entered the realm of dreams in each other's arms. The lovers, at last satisfied, slumbered as deeply and peacefully as if they had not slept in years.

Chapter Nine

The bed was cold.

It was the kind of slight chill that was not severe enough to jolt a person from sleep, but instead set in gradually, disturbing slumber and eventually causing the dreamer to tremble with cold. Through a tired haze, Endymion rolled over and reached out for the warmth of his lover's body. His arms found only empty sheets beside him.

Rubbing his eyes, the stable hand forced himself into consciousness and sat up, letting the sheets slide down to his waist. It was morning and sunshine was streaming into the hut through the small windows. Blinking blearily, Endymion located Serenity across the room beside his wash basin and the meager mirror that hung above it. She was still undressed, but her hands were busy detangling her waves of hair with her lover's comb. For a moment, Endymion was again struck speechless by her beauty and could do nothing but drink in the flawless curves of her body as she retied her pale hair into its customary balls.

As she tucked the last few pins into place, Serenity noticed her beloved's rapt attention in the mirror and could not help but smile. When she was finished, she turned and headed back toward the bed, enjoying a feast for her own eyes as her gaze roamed over the tanned and sculpted chest of her lover. A smirk curved her lips at the sight of Endymion's disheveled hair, and she smoothed it absently with one hand as she leaned over the bed to give him a good-morning kiss.

Endymion accepted the token eagerly, the memories of the previous night fresh in his mind, and a brief peck on the lips quickly developed into a passionate kiss that set both lovers' blood singing. Serenity sighed into his mouth, the meeting of their lips bringing back her own memories of the evening they had spent together, but when Endymion reached out to draw her back into bed, she pulled away.

"We can't, Endy. I need to go back to the castle," Serenity explained as she headed for her dress, which lay in a heap near the door. "It is still early. There is still time."

"What?" Endymion was wide awake now, and he threw the blankets aside and climbed out of bed. "But... but I thought..."

"Don't worry." Serenity stepped back to her beloved's side, dress in hand, and smiled reassuringly. She reached out to caress Endymion's face. "I will still go to Earth with you, but we can not exactly sneak

into the teleportation chamber in broad daylight, can we?" After he nodded in reluctant agreement, the couple separated to dress themselves, the Princess pulling her gown on over her head and the stable hand tugging his discarded trousers up to his waist.

"We only need to make it through one more day," Serenity continued as she adjusted her dress in the mirror. She was fortunate that the light fabric was the expensive sort that resisted creases. "Meet me in the garden tonight, and I will take you into the castle." She turned back to Endymion, who had just finished fastening up his trousers. The lovers shared one more kiss which seemed all too brief, the warmth that melted their lips as soft as ever, both of them relishing the taste of the other.

"I love you, Sere," Endymion murmured into her hair as they embraced. "I want to be with you forever."

"You will be," the Princess replied, trailing her fingers over her lover's smooth chest. "I will see you tonight." Endymion helped his beloved wrap the rough brown cloak around her body and she pulled the hood up over her crystal tresses.

"I love you, Endy," Serenity whispered. "Goodbye." She slipped out the door and into the morning sunshine.

The sun had only just risen above the horizon, but the servants in the community were already moving, many of them well into their daily routines. The Princess only passed a handful of people rushing here and there, but fortunately nobody took much notice of the girl in the brown cloak as she hurried out of the servants' community and slipped through the door into her secluded garden.

Safe within the Moon Castle walls, Serenity removed the cloak and folded it over her arm as she walked briskly through the gardens. It was early yet; few would be awake in the castle except for guards and attendants. There was still time for Serenity to make it back to her chambers before her absence was discovered. She wasn't sure how she would get back into her rooms without assistance, but she resolved not to worry about that until she reached her balcony, her mind at the moment preoccupied with thoughts of the previous night's adventure and the new journey she would undertake that evening.

As it turned out, the Princess did not have to climb back up to her balcony at all. When she turned the last corner of the hedge maze and emerged in the courtyard underneath her balcony, she came face to face with her mother. Queen Serenity was standing just in front of the marble overhang, twisting a familiar length of rope in her elegant hands.

"Mother!" the Princess blurted out in surprise. She almost stopped short as her heart began pounding in her chest, but recovered at the last moment and kept her stride casual as she entered the monarch's presence.

"Where have you been, Serenity?" the Queen asked smoothly, although her gaze on her daughter's face was intense. "It is not like you to be about this early."

"I couldn't sleep, so I went for a walk in the gardens," the younger woman replied with confidence. She had been prepared for such a question, although she had not expected her mother to be the first to ask it. A cold, sick feeling began to grow in the pit of her stomach. Queen Serenity had found the rope. She suspected something, at the very least.

"Alone? And without informing your guards?" The monarch gestured toward the balcony with the coiled rope in her hand. "Not an advisable act for someone of your station, my dear."

"I did not want to worry anyone," the Princess explained, summoning all the courage she could muster to prevent the rising fear from showing in her eyes. "It is nice to be alone on occasion; having guardians around all the time can become tiresome. I don't know how you can stand it, Mother." She chuckled lightly, but her mother did not smile.

The odds of Princess Serenity getting out of this situation were shrinking by the second, as if being evaporated by the heat of her mother's stare. Suddenly, she realized how alone the two of them were at that moment. There were no guards and even the Queen's ever-present cloud of attendants was noticeably absent. The entire situation was uncomfortably alien.

"You were wise enough to go in disguise, I see." Before the Princess could react, her mother's hand had darted forward and whisked Endymion's cloak out of her arms. The Queen unfurled the garment and examined it in the light, and her daughter could not prevent a slight blush from rising in her cheeks. The hooded cloak was anything but fit for a Princess. It was obviously old and worn, made of a cheap rough

fabric that even had a few small holes.

"Not from your wardrobe, certainly," Queen Serenity commented with a sideways glance at her daughter. "Where did you get this?"

The barely-restrained panic was now so extreme that the Princess felt about to vomit. The gardens were deathly still, and quiet, too quiet. For the first time in months, they were alone outside the Crystal Tower's sanctuary. Everything about it felt dreadfully wrong. If Queen Serenity did not already know the secret - and her daughter could not imagine how she might have found out - then there was something very serious afoot.

"Mother, what is wrong?" Princess Serenity asked, unable to stop her voice from shaking. "What is this?"

"This," the Queen replied, dropping the ragged cloth on the ground, "is a chance for you to be honest with me. Tell me the truth, Serenity," she insisted, staring into her daughter's eyes.

"I am not lying," the Princess replied boldly. "I only went for a walk. Why is that such a serious matter?" The lavender-haired woman's fists clenched at her sides.

"Very well, then." Her words were bitter with frustration. "Serenity, where is your engagement pendant?"

Had Princess Serenity expected this question she could easily have provided a believable excuse for the jewelry's absence, but it caught her completely off-guard. Her hand automatically flew to her empty throat, and her eyes widened as she gasped in realization. She had been in such a hurry that morning that she had completely forgotten to locate the blue stone on its filigree chain, which she had tossed aside so carelessly the night before. It was still in Endymion's hut.

In that brief moment of weakness, Queen Serenity saw it all. Her suspicions confirmed, she reached out, grabbed her daughter by the arm and yanked her bodily toward the doors beneath the Princess' balcony. The stable hand's brown cloak was left lying on the ground outside.

"How did you know?"

"In my kingdom, Serenity, very little goes on that I do not know about." The ruler of the Moon sat down beside her daughter on the couch. They were alone in the grand office beyond the conference room. All of the attendants waited outside even though it violated all rules of sense and security. "I am the Queen. It is my business to have eyes and ears everywhere."

Princess Serenity was silent, staring down at her hands in her lap as she baked under her mother's gaze. She could think of only one reasonable explanation: Sailor Venus. After everything that had passed between them, the blonde soldier had still chosen her loyalty to the Queen over her friendship with the Princess.

The crystal-haired woman waited for her mother to speak, but the monarch just watched her quietly, setting the responsibility of the next move on her daughter. The Princess tried to remain silent but she could feel the older woman's eyes on her, waiting patiently, endlessly. The steadfast gaze burned into her, compelling her to speak, to choose a path and set the tone.

"I love him," Princess Serenity said bravely, raising her head but still staring straight ahead.

"You can't."

"But I do!" Now the Princess turned to face the lavender-haired monarch, her eyes blazing. All the frustration, all the anger that had driven her to choose to abandon her homeland came rushing back into the young woman's memory, and the urge to rebel became too strong to suppress. "He is my soul, Mother. He completes me and makes me whole. I am nothing without him and he is all I want, all I need."

The Queen sighed and averted her eyes from her daughter's face. "I thought I had taught you better than this, Serenity," she muttered. "We are royalty. Our choices, our hearts, must be limited for the good of our people."

"I have had enough!" The Princess jumped to her feet, glaring down at the woman on the couch. "How can you do this to me, Mother? How can you expect me to choose a life chained to a heartless Prince, who cares only for my title, over a man who loves me as a woman?"

Why was her mother so quiet? Princess Serenity had expected anger, an outburst of fury; she was

Against All Odds

prepared to be yelled at... but the Queen seemed more disappointed than angry, and when she looked up at her daughter her eyes were sad, almost pitiful.

"The situation on Earth is not good, Serenity," the serene ruler admitted in a soft voice. "We offer our guidance and our help, but the people of Earth still reject and mistrust us. They have great potential, but don't understand that it may be dangerous for them to continue their evolution without supervision." Her eyes were calm and clear, and she remained seated as she spoke, leaving the position of dominance to her daughter. The Princess was finding it difficult to remain angry. She had never seen her mother look so vulnerable before.

"The people of Earth need us to shepherd them," Queen Serenity explained, "but they will not trust us while our worlds remain separated. We need this marriage to Prince Endymion, Serenity."

Gathering her last shreds of resolve, the Princess managed one last biting comment. "I am your daughter," she hissed. "How can you choose politics over the happiness of your child?" Before she could break under her mother's regretful stare, Serenity turned on her heel and rushed out of the room, flinging the door open so hard that it nearly struck the opposite wall.

The Sailor Soldiers were waiting in the conference room. Princess Serenity pushed through them without a second glance at any of their faces, but the four warriors surrounded her anyway, accompanying the heir to the Moon out of the room and into the corridor beyond.

Alone in her office, Queen Serenity rose from the couch and strode over to the large windows behind her desk. Outside, the sun was shining on the main courtyard of the gardens, sparkling on the fountain that sat at the foot of the stairs below. She and her daughter had often watched the Earth rise from there.

"How, indeed?" the Queen murmured to the glass. "Manipulating my own daughter with tailored words... What am I coming to?"

Princess Serenity stormed through the corridors of the Moon Castle, trembling half from anger and half from fear. She was discovered. The game was over. Her mother knew about her secret romance.

What was going to happen to her now? Certainly, she would be punished severely, although she could not begin to guess what the method might be. Serenity had always been forbidden even to associate with the opposite sex, let alone carry on an intimate relationship. Not only that, but she had violated the promises that had been made to the Royal Family of Earth. The consequences were sure to be dire. Her mother was merely biding her time, most likely only acting sympathetic to regain Serenity's trust.

"Serenity?" Sailor Venus asked timidly from her place at the Princess' elbow. The sound of the soldier's voice reminded Serenity of where she had placed the blame for all that was about to happen to her. Venus, the nosy gossip. Serenity stopped short and turned on her.

"How could you?" she snapped accusingly. "I trusted you, Venus! You're supposed to be my guardian and my friend, and you sided with my mother!" Fury kept the tears away as the Princess continued her tirade, the other soldiers looking on in shock. "What happened to letting me make my own choice?" she demanded, staring the stricken blonde in the face. "Was all that kindness a lie?"

"I didn't-"

"No more lies," Serenity hissed. "I do not want to hear it. You betrayed me, Venus." Whirling around, the furious young woman pushed through her other guardians and continued down the corridor toward her chambers. She had thought she at least had a friend in Sailor Venus. Without her, who was there? In her anger, she did not notice Sailor Mars hanging her head, her face flushed with guilt and shame.

The Princess had not gone far when her guardian soldiers once again caught up to her, surrounding Serenity in their customary square. She tried to walk faster but there was no escaping them.

"Our apologies, Princess," Sailor Jupiter said quietly, "but we have been ordered to accompany you at all times from now on."

Ah, so here it began. Serenity had violated her mother's trust and had lost the privilege of solitary time. She wondered what other consequences would follow. By the time she reached her chambers, however, the Princess was consumed by an entirely different kind of fear. The guards opened her doors and the Sailor Soldiers allowed Serenity to go to her bedchamber alone, but they left the dividing curtain open

so they could keep an eye on the distraught young woman as she flung herself down on her bed.

It was all over. She would never have an opportunity to run away now. Queen Serenity would have guards watching over her daughter day and night to make sure the forbidden romance did not continue. The Princess was now truly a prisoner and would likely remain so until it was too late for her to abandon her duties. Worse yet, she had no means of telling Endymion what had happened. He would be waiting for her that night and she could not go to him.

Endymion. With no status or family to protect his freedom, Serenity's lover was the one in greatest danger. Did her mother know who he was? Venus had seen the stable hand at Serenity's balcony. Had she seen clearly enough to be able to recognize him? Even if not, the Queen would certainly increase security around the castle. Endymion would be caught and most likely charged with treason. Nothing less than exile or imprisonment awaited him, and at worst, execution.

The Princess grabbed the wash basin off its stand beside her bed and vomited violently as images of her beloved's death filled her mind. The wave of intense nausea continued even when her stomach was empty, and the sounds of Serenity's choked dry gagging quickly brought Sailor Mercury to the steps of her bedchamber.

"Leave me," Princess Serenity moaned, abandoning the soiled basin on the floor and curling into a trembling ball on her bed. "He'll be dead and nothing else will matter after that. He is my heart and soul and by loving him I've killed him. I've killed him. I've killed him."

Wracking sobs burst forth from Serenity's chest, filling the entire room with her misery. Why hadn't she realized earlier that Endymion's punishment would be the most dire? She would never have gone to him the previous night had she known it meant certain death for her lover.

Helpless in the face of Serenity's pain, Sailor Mercury turned away and looked at her fellow soldiers with an expression stricken with emotional agony. Out of all the possible explanations for the Princess' behavior, the blue-haired scholar had never imagined a secret love might be to blame. She had always believed Serenity's dedication to the Moon Kingdom was greater than that. Mercury had done her best to support the Queen's agenda in her tutoring sessions.

Now that it was too late, the soldier had no idea how to comfort the heartbroken young woman. Her eyes fell on Sailor Venus, who was sitting in a chair with her head bowed and tears running down her cheeks, a mirror to Serenity's suffering.

"You knew?" Sailor Mercury asked the leader of the Sailor Soldiers, unable to prevent an accusing tone from creeping into her voice. Sailor Venus nodded silently.

"How could you keep something like this from us?" Jupiter demanded, leaning forward in her seat to glare at the orange-suited soldier. "Did you think it was unimportant?"

"It was Serenity's decision to make," Venus replied, her eyes snapping open in defiance. "It is her life that will be affected by this arranged marriage."

"How can you say that?" Mercury exclaimed, stepping toward the blonde soldier. "Serenity's marriage to Prince Endymion is critical to relations with the Earth and the continued safety of the Moon Kingdom, especially under present circumstances."

"And those are?" Sailor Jupiter stood up with a pointed glance at the blue-suited soldier standing at the foot of the stairs. "I don't believe you've filled us in on the threats the Moon is facing, Mercury. Or perhaps I'm the only one not permitted to share in secrets around here," the brunette added bitterly, glaring at each of her fellow soldiers in turn.

"Look, if the royal house asks us to keep a secret, we must," Venus cut in, coming to Sailor Mercury's defense.

"That didn't stop you for long," Jupiter retorted. "How long did you feign secrecy before you told Queen Serenity what her daughter was doing?"

"I didn't!" Sailor Venus protested, standing up to the brunette's towering form. "I told no one, not my closest friends nor the Queen. No one. I don't know how she found out."

Throughout all of this Sailor Mars was sitting silently in her chair, listening to the choked wailing of the young woman in the bedroom and growing more and more disgusted. Surely, Princess Serenity had known this would happen. Mars had expected some sadness and tears when the romantic fantasy came to an end, but the woman was crying like her heart had been torn out. It was a shameful overreaction.

Against All Odds

Sailor Mars jumped to her feet, pushed through the other three soldiers, and strode up the handful of stairs to the Princess' bedchamber. Serenity looked up through eyes clouded with tears as the soldier of fire stopped beside her bed, her gloved hands on her hips.

"Stop that this instant, you stupid child," Mars hissed through clenched teeth. "You are the Princess of the Moon. You are more than some love affair with a servant." Serenity stared up at the seething soldier with wide, shocked eyes, her arms trembling around her pillow.

"Mars-

"I did it," the violet-haired woman interrupted. "I told the Queen about your foolish tryst and I am glad I did. To think you would jeopardize an entire system of planets for the whims of your heart! How could you abandon your people, Serenity? How could you shame your family name so?"

"I love him," the Princess proclaimed, sitting up on the bed as tears dripped from her chin. "We are meant to be together, Mars. I am nothing without him."

Sailor Mars lifted her arm and drew her hand back-

-only to have it caught at the wrist in Jupiter's iron grip. Mars whipped her head around to glare at the tall brunette who was suddenly standing behind her, but Jupiter did not relent.

"Although I agree with you, Mars," Jupiter said coldly, without a glance at the trembling woman cringing on the bed, "she is the Princess. No matter how deserving of it she may be, we may not strike her."

"Enough!"

The four Sailor Soldiers turned around to see Luna striding into the room, her brow furrowed and her eyes narrowed in disapproval. She crossed directly to the bedchamber, her skirts rippling around her thighs, her waves of dark hair following like a storm cloud.

"Such shameful behavior," Luna scolded, her anger directed solely at the Sailor Soldiers as she moved between them and the Princess. "Get out of here, all of you."

Venus drew herself up. "The Queen has ordered us to keep watch-

"I will be with her," the Mauan advisor cut in. The soldiers hesitated, uncertain.

"What, do you think I'll help her escape?" Luna sputtered, irritated. "I am the Queen's right hand! Ridiculous," she muttered. "Here, two of you on the balcony and two outside the door if it worries you so."

Reluctantly, the soldiers complied. Mars and Jupiter went out on Serenity's balcony, closing the door behind them, while Sailor Mercury followed Venus out the front doors. When they were alone, Luna sat down on the edge of the Princess' bed and gave her a sad smile.

"You really love him, don't you, Moonbeam?" the dark-haired woman asked gently. Serenity lay down again and turned her face away from Luna without a reply.

"I am sorry you have to endure all this," Luna sighed, reaching out a hand to caress the Princess' back. "You may not believe this, but I know something of the pain of hidden romance. As ambassadors, it would be inappropriate for Artemis and I to become a couple, however we may feel about each other." In fact, it was the Queen who generously made it possible for the Mauans to have romantic meetings in private, but Luna did not mention this aloud.

Serenity turned her head back toward Luna, and the sight of the Princess' tear-streaked face nearly broke the woman's heart. Clearly this was no rebellious game. It was true love.

"Talk to your mother, Moonbeam," Luna pleaded, bending over the distraught young woman. "She may be able to help you. I know she'll understand."

"Understand? Mother?" the Princess scoffed bitterly. "Mother is a cold-hearted woman who cares only for her kingdom. What could she know about love?"

At this, Luna's face tightened, and she frowned at Serenity, her hand tensing on the Princess' back.

"Do not presume so," she scolded in a dangerous voice. "Queen Serenity understands more than you think. Do you truly believe she lives without a lover by choice? That you are the first of the royal line to know love and sacrifice?"

Now Serenity rolled over and sat up, looking at the Mauan curiously. Her mother had certainly reacted to the news of the secret romance with more pity than anger, but Luna couldn't mean...

"Why do you think the Queen forbade you to associate with boys, even as a child?" Luna asked. "She wished to spare you from the pain that she herself suffered. The pain of forbidden love."

Shocked beyond comparison, Princess Serenity could not even speak. She could only stare numbly,

wide-eyed and open-mouthed, as Luna settled herself more comfortably on the edge of the bed and began to explain.

"As you know, the founding of the Moon Kingdom was not without struggle," the older woman said, idly arranging the folds of her yellow dress around her legs. "Early on, there was a raid on the Queen's settlement and a lowly private in her army helped Serenity to escape into the wilderness. As they made their way to safety, they fell in love." Luna smiled a distant smile as she recalled the story. "It was a romance straight from fireside tales. When the Queen asked what reward he wished for his valor, he requested a kiss."

"What happened to him?" the Princess asked in a trembling voice, afraid to hear the answer.

"The Queen was building a society based on the respect and reverence earned by noble blood," Luna sighed, her gaze focused on her lap. "Her advisors warned her that marrying a common soldier would undermine all that she was trying to create. She tried to make it work, but, for the stability of the new kingdom, the relationship had to end. Heartbroken without her, Serenity's lover killed himself."

The Princess gasped in horror and clasped her hands over her mouth as a deep wave of pity for her mother consumed her. She could not imagine how devastated she would be if Endymion took his own life, nor did she want to. Tears welled up in her wide eyes, stinging as her vision became clouded with them.

"Why?" she blurted out in a choked voice. "Why didn't she stay with him?"

Luna turned her head and stared at the Princess intently, her gaze boring into Serenity's swimming eyes.

"This system was a region consumed by war," the Mauan reminded her. "Hundreds of lives were being lost every day, many of them on Earth, where the barely-sentient beings that would someday become humans were being caught in the crossfire. Compared to that, what was one love affair?"

Serenity shuddered under Luna's serious stare. "Could it happen again?" she asked weakly. "If... if the throne stood empty?"

"I would like to say that the planetary kingdoms have grown beyond those old rivalries," Luna sighed, "but it is most likely that the peace would not last long. Your burden is light compared to your mother's, Serenity, but it is still a necessary one. After her lover's death, the Queen had to continue on through her loss without batting an eye, through her grief and loneliness, for the sake of millions of people. It is that pain that she wished to protect you from."

Princess Serenity collapsed against her pillows again, pressing her hands to her head. "But it's too late," she muttered.

"Is it?" Luna asked softly. "There is never a point of no return. You always have a choice, even in matters of the heart."

The sun was shining, a gentle breeze was blowing, and Endymion could not have been happier. He had the most precious of all things: a love that would never die. It gave his heart wings despite the heavy crates of horseshoes and nails he was hauling around. The stable hand worked through the entire morning in a cloud of bliss so thick that he took no notice of the black stallions' new habit of willingly lifting their hooves for him to shoe.

Throughout the day, the other servants seemed especially jolly around Endymion, shooting him knowing smiles or mischievous smirks, but he did not think twice about it until Miss Amaris caught him by the arm as he made his way to the midday meal.

"Look, son," she said gruffly, leaning toward him, "I'm glad you've finally found someone, we all are, but... we don't need to hear it personally, you know?"

Endymion froze as solid as a block of ice. She knew. Miss Amaris knew. How had his secret been revealed? Had someone seen the Princess among the huts and started a gossip chain? Had Prien let it slip to someone? He opened his mouth, but even his racing mind could not find a word to say.

"Hey, it's nothing to be ashamed of, my boy," the portly woman assured him with a hearty slap on the back, misreading Endymion's reaction. "I'm sure she's worth it, whoever she is. Just... try to have a little more control next time, eh? The walls are thin, you know, and there are some things that knee-high stable boys don't need to be hearing quite yet, especially in the dead of the night," she added with a brief

Against All Odds

wink. Nearby, a pair of women giggled as they passed.

The young man exhaled heavily; it was not as he had feared. His fellow servants did not know the identity of his beloved. However...

Endymion blushed beet-red as he realized what Miss Amaris was talking about. In the heat of their passion, the lovers had given no thought to the travel of sound. The matron of the stables patted the Earth-child's burning cheek with a plump hand.

"I'll be expecting an invitation to the wedding," she chuckled brightly before turning away and continuing down the path to the dining hall. Endymion followed, but more slowly, hoping the red would be gone from his face before he got there. Despite his embarrassment, his heart was warmed by the obvious fellowship among the servants. There were sly grins and giggles all around, but nobody teased him outright.

Poor and lowly though they were, the servants' community really was a family of sorts. Endymion smiled fondly as he thought back on all the memories he had made there, both happy and sad. The work could be hard, but they were all good people with caring hearts, and they supported each other through any difficult times. He would miss them, all the friends whose faces he was used to seeing each day, and the shining glory of the Moon Kingdom. This place was the only home he had ever known and, as restrictive as it was, he loved it. Yet, Endymion loved Serenity more. If fleeing to a backward planet was the only way he and the Princess could be together, he would gladly do so.

Still, as he ate his lunch of bread, fruit, and cheese at a table with a dozen men and women who had been his lifelong companions, Endymion found it hard to focus on the bliss of his love affair. He ate slowly and silently, quietly absorbing the conversations and laughter surrounding him. From the most trivial joke to the most serious advice from one servant to another, Endymion was acutely aware that this was one of the last times he would experience a gathering like this. He and Serenity were headed for a life of secrecy and exile, far from anything or anyone they had ever known.

"Last night not all you hoped it would be, Endou?" Prien asked from across the table, seeing his friend's gloomy expression. Endymion could not help but smile at the memory.

"It was everything, my friend. Everything and more," he replied. "Thank you," he added sincerely.

"I'm always glad to help two hearts come together," Prien commented with a mischievous smirk. "Why so glum, then?" he asked, taking another bite of his fruit.

Endymion sighed and stared down at his plate. He did not want to leave his best friend forever without any explanation, but he did not dare tell Prien the truth. Prien was a romantic, but he was still Lunarian, and Serenity was his Princess. Endymion could not be certain how the blond man would react to his friend's plan to take the future Queen away forever.

Fortunately, at least for the moment, Endymion was saved from the decision by a growing commotion around him. Dishes were being gathered and servants were getting to their feet. The lunch break was over.

"Serenity? May I come in?"

The Princess rolled over on her bed to see Sailor Venus standing in the doorway, the chiffon curtain pushed aside with one hand. It was her turn to keep watch over Serenity from the sitting room; Jupiter was outside the front door to the Princess' chambers and Mercury and Mars were standing guard on the balcony. Seeing Venus' saddened face, Serenity sat up and nodded for the soldier to enter.

"I am sorry I accused you of betrayal, Venus," the Princess blurted out as the soldier sat down on the edge of her bed. "I was upset, and frightened, and-"

"Do not worry yourself," Venus said kindly, giving her Princess a small smile. "You have plenty of other concerns."

"Yes." Serenity fell silent for a moment as the cage fell around her again. She was surrounded by soldiers and doomed to be forced into a lonely life enslaved to the people of the Moon. Her head jerked up, a last desperate hope shining in her eyes. "Will you help me again?"

"I can not." Sailor Venus hung her head. "I, too, have duties I can not escape, no matter how badly I might wish to."

Against All Odds

Turning away, Serenity flung her body back down on the bed, despair turning her disappointment into bitterness. After all they had shared, Venus was still a willing participant in the imprisonment of her Princess. How could the soldier who claimed to be her friend sit idly by while Serenity suffered? Venus had made it possible for her to experience the ultimate pleasure with her beloved, only to assist in taking it away. Serenity thought of Prien, who had done all he could to secure his friend's happiness. Why couldn't she have a friend like that?

"A message, then," the Princess mumbled into her pillow. "I have to tell him what happened. I have to warn him. Can you help me to-"

Serenity stopped short as she heard the main doors of her chambers open and several pairs of feet walked inside without a word. Dreading who she would see, the Princess bolted upright on her bed and tried in vain to calm her pounding heart.

She stiffened and her breath caught in her throat as her mother stepped into view, the curtain held aside by one of her attendants. Sailor Venus immediately got to her feet and bowed to Queen Serenity. The Lunarian ruler stood stiff and stern, resolute, a pillar of unshakeable authority.

"Serenity, come with me, please."

For a moment, the Princess considered refusing to have anything to do with the woman who was controlling her life, but as she looked at her mother, all she could think about were the secrets Luna had shared with her earlier. She now knew that even the powerful Queen of the Moon was no stranger to the pain of forbidden love. Indeed, she had suffered an agony and loss greater than any her daughter had so far endured. Despite Queen Serenity's cold, neutral demeanor, the Princess knew there was an aching heart hidden beneath by necessity, and she pitied her mother as much as the monarch pitied her.

Luna and Artemis met the Queen and Princess at the enormous marble double doors that were the front entrance to the Moon Castle. This gate was very seldom used by the castle's inhabitants, and most often only stood open for ceremonial occasions when it was more seemly for guests to enter through the most impressive foyer. Princess Serenity herself had passed through these doors less times than she could count on one hand.

Accompanied by her mother's usual entourage as well as the Sailor Soldiers, Serenity's mind was running wild wondering where they were headed in such a crowd. With the main entrance involved it had to be some sort of public appearance. Did the Queen intend to shame her daughter in front of the entire Moon?

To the Princess' relief, no large assembly greeted the group as they passed through the lines of guards at the doorway and stepped out onto the grand marble staircase. There were quite a few servants rushing about, however, and at the base of the stairs the Queen's royal coach was waiting.

It was a large contraption, all white with accents of silver and sparkling crystals set into every joint. The bottom half of the carriage was a wide oval bowl, large enough for four passengers to ride comfortably, and four stout posts held the rectangular roof aloft overhead. All four walls could be enclosed by curtains that hung from the edges of the roof, but the chiffon drapes had been drawn aside and tied to the support posts so the passengers would be seen clearly. Two of the black stallions had been hitched to the front of the coach. At the sight of the horses, the Princess automatically looked around for her lover, but work-animal hands like Endymion were too lowly to prepare Queen Serenity's carriage.

The Princess looked at her mother curiously as they descended the stairs, surrounded by a cloud of activity. She had never ridden in the royal coach before.

"We are going out into the city, Serenity," the Queen informed her. "It is time for you to meet your future subjects."

Into the city! Princess Serenity's heart skipped a beat, and she nearly stopped short in the middle of the staircase. Although she had lived her entire life on a hill overlooking the metropolis where most of the Moon's population lived, she had never entered the heart of the city. The highest of the nobility lived on the edges of the castle grounds, and that was the closest Serenity had ever been to the lives of the common people.

Shaking with anxiety, the Princess waited on trembling legs as her mother stepped lightly up into

the carriage before she allowed the footmen to assist her as she placed her feet on the small steps at the coach's door for the first time. The seats of the carriage were thickly cushioned, but the comfort did little to calm Princess Serenity's nerves. Luna climbed up behind her and the two of them shared the seat across from the Queen, who took the forward-facing seat alone for the journey.

All but one of the Queen's usual attendants would be left behind, their roles served by the footmen who climbed onto various ledges on all sides of the coach. Artemis took his place on the driver's seat at the front and the four Sailor Soldiers prepared to walk alongside them, two on either side of the carriage. Any observer would know at first glance that this vehicle held the ruler of the Moon.

With a shout from Artemis, they were moving. There was a sharp jerk as the horses stepped forward, and then the carriage was rolling down the wide marble avenue that led away from the Moon Castle. The ride was relatively smooth, but the coach did rock and wobble a bit. Princess Serenity found herself wishing for the control and uniform movement of riding on horseback. The guards who were on duty opened the gates in the outer wall and in moments, they were outside.

The Princess could not help but twist around in her rear-facing seat to watch the city roll by. They passed through the High Quarter first, an area she knew fairly well from fancy dinner parties and balls held by noble families that were favored by the Queen. Elegantly-dressed lords and ladies stopped to bow to the carriage as it passed, although there were few of them about on foot. Carriages and carts of all sizes stopped to let the royal coach through.

The High Quarter was small and filled with estates that, while dwarfed by the Moon Castle and its expansive grounds, were quite large. They had passed into the Upper Quarter within minutes, the home of the prosperous middle class. Here, a visit from the Queen was quite rare. Children stared and pointed as the white carriage rolled by and quite a few adults did as well. The serene ruler of it all smiled and waved indulgently to her subjects, who immediately reacted with excited whispers to one another.

This area of the city was crowded and busy, and the royal coach had to slow its pace several times to avoid collisions even though the masses automatically drew back from the stern Sailor Soldiers. Princess Serenity looked around obediently, certain that these were the subjects her mother had wished her to meet.

The people were dressed in meager clothes ranging from the sort her beloved wore to the fine tailoring of the lesser nobility. Had Serenity not fallen in love with a stable hand, she would have thought them poor, but these people seemed better off than the servants who worked behind the scenes in the Moon Castle. The Upper Quarter was alive with activity, from merchants doing business openly on street corners to people rushing in and out of shops. Most of them were Lunarian, but the Princess noticed quite a few immigrants from other planets and even a handful of rosier faces from Earth.

"I understand, Mother," she said slowly, sitting more properly in her seat as the bustle of the city began to tire her. "The Moon is a hub of commerce and trade in the Silver Alliance and it could not exist without its Queen. All of these people would lose their livelihood if..."

"Our journey has not ended yet, my dear," Queen Serenity said softly, looking at her daughter with calm eyes. "It is not these people who need us most."

As the Princess opened her mouth to ask for an explanation, she was interrupted by a sharp jolt as the carriage rolled over a small hole in the road. Luna leaned over the edge of the coach and called up to Artemis to slow down.

"New paving stones," the Queen dictated when Luna had resettled herself. The dark-haired woman nodded as she pulled out a tablet and began making a list.

"Missing lamp crystals, again," the ruler added, still as calm as ever.

"They're lighting a few shanties, I'd wager," Luna muttered as she added the item to the list.

"Desperate people will seize any opportunity," Queen Serenity murmured, gazing out at the world surrounding the elegant coach. "I do not begrudge them that." The Princess had not spoken since the sudden change in the smoothness of the road, unable to tear her eyes away from the poverty of the Lower Quarter.

The buildings here were crowded close together and in various states of repair. Some lots were merely hollow ruins filled with makeshift shacks and tents. The road beneath them was rough, and the carriage advanced slowly among people dressed in little more than rags with everything they owned tied to their backs. Even Endymion, lowliest of the Moon Castle servants, enjoyed a life far richer than this.

Against All Odds

Shouts rang out throughout the Lower Quarter as the carriage and its high-bred escort rolled into view, followed by an increasing storm of footsteps filling the streets. The four Sailor Soldiers instinctively drew closer to the carriage and Princess Serenity jumped, startled, as Luna's hand firmly gripped her wrist protectively.

"Calm yourselves," the Queen admonished them all. "We have nothing to fear from my people."

And people there were. They surrounded the coach on both sides, entreating hands reaching out toward the serene ruler seated on the cushions within. This crowd was of every race, and there were more Earth faces among them than anywhere else in the city. They were dirty and loud and rowdy, and the Princess automatically recoiled against the comforting familiarity of Luna's body, but her mother showed no fear. In fact, she reached out toward the masses in return.

"My Queen, the nights are cold, and my mother has no blanket..."

"My shop is failing..."

"Our roof leaks and we have no more mortar..."

"My children have no shoes..."

The elegant ruler of the Moon Kingdom gave each pleading voice a few coins from a sack that sat beside her in the coach, caring not for soiling her own delicate flesh as the citizens gripped her supple hands in gratitude. Each entreaty got a smile and a coin or a word in response.

"The east well is dry, my Queen," one man called out from the crowd. The monarch nodded and gestured to indicate that she had heard.

"Have some technicians sent down," she instructed Luna, who added the task to her growing list.

"My baby is ill," cried a woman in a tattered dress running beside the carriage with a listless infant in her arms. "It's three days to see the healers. Please, my Queen, just touch her, heal her!" she begged. Princess Serenity leaned forward curiously as her mother reached out to caress the child's pale cheek. She had never heard of the royal line possessing any supernatural powers beyond the ability to use the Silver Crystal.

"Your child will recover," the Queen told the woman, who thanked her profusely and fell back, satisfied. Catching her own daughter's questioning eyes, the monarch brought her head back inside the carriage for a moment. "Later, I will pray to the Crystal Tower for the babe's health," she explained in a low voice. "Luna, see that any available healers are dispatched to the Lower Quarter. I see more sick than usual today."

Looking at the Princess again, the lavender-haired woman's eyes narrowed. "That reminds me; the Silver Crystal's been acting strangely since your morning of prayer, Serenity. Did anything unusual happen when you communicated with the Crystal Tower?" The Princess was saved from answering by a fresh wave of citizens clamoring for her mother's attention.

Princess Serenity sat back heavily in her seat, her pulse racing. Had that one misdirected prayer been enough to influence the Crystal Tower's behavior? The entire Moon Kingdom depended on the Silver Crystal to exist. What if her traitorous heart had somehow damaged the precious magic her mother controlled? Her hands trembled against her dress, but Luna was too busy making notes to notice.

"I could easily dispatch servants or officials to perform this duty," Queen Serenity announced, jolting her daughter out of her thoughts, "but I prefer to show a personal interest in my subjects. What other world, what other kingdom, would give these people even a second glance?" She leaned over the polished-silver edge of the carriage to hand a coin to a small girl clutching a tattered rag doll.

"Even magic has its limits," the monarch sighed. "No matter how crowded the city gets, I cannot expand its borders. There will never be steady work for every citizen on the Moon, yet they keep coming, fleeing their native planets for a place where their ruler cares about them. Despite their poverty, they are happier here."

Now that her initial revulsion had worn off, Princess Serenity noticed that the crowd around the royal coach was relatively small and the people did not push or fight or impede the carriage's progress. For every pleading beggar, there were five equally pitiable citizens standing at a respectful distance, smiling and waving at Queen Serenity's entourage. Once the supplicants received a response from their monarch, they immediately backed away to allow others forward, always with a contented smile. Their lives were not easy, but they still loved their ruler and believed she would do everything in her power to help them.

Against All Odds

Soon, Artemis turned the carriage around, and the citizens of the Moon cheered their Queen all the way out of the Lower Quarter. Princess Serenity sat quietly as they rolled back toward the Moon Castle, her cheeks wet with tears. She had not known there were so many people in her mother's kingdom who still needed help so desperately.

"It is not only a matter of politics, my dear," Queen Serenity told her daughter with a sad smile and a serious tone. "For thousands, it is a matter of life and death. The Moon is a beacon of hope for those who would starve in the streets on other planets. Those were the faces of the people who will be destroyed if you do not rule after me, Serenity. Do you understand?"

"Yes," the Princess whispered. If she left the Moon, there would be no one else to take care of those people. There would be no home, no place of safety for them. How could she have been so selfish? She could not choose one stable hand over thousands of equally deserving innocents, no matter how true their love for each other.

"Then you know what you must do," Queen Serenity prompted.

"Yes," her daughter replied, her voice breaking. "I will marry Prince Endymion and become Queen."

The words made perfect sense in her mind, but they tasted like acid in her mouth, burning her heart with despair. Fresh tears poured out of the corners of her eyes despite her efforts to be strong. Her mother reached across the space between them to take the Princess' hands in hers.

"The choices of royalty are never easy," the Queen said gently, squeezing her daughter's trembling fingers as Luna wrapped an arm around the crystal-haired girl. "That you are able to make the right decision proves you will be a wise and just ruler, my dear." The Princess struggled to swallow the rest of her sorrow, nearly choking.

"When were you to see him again?" her mother asked.

"Tonight," the young woman answered in a strangled voice, wiping the tears from her face. The Queen straightened up in her seat as the carriage rolled through the gates and back onto the castle grounds.

"Although you may not think so, Serenity, I do believe there are situations in life that everyone has the right to handle themselves." She reached out and tenderly wiped a stray tear from her daughter's cheek. "Tonight you may go to your lover, tell him it is finished, and bid him farewell. Then you will return to the castle, your birthright, and your fiance."

Princess Serenity nodded wretchedly as her broken heart bled freely into her chest.

Chapter Ten

The stars were shining brightly, filling the night sky with glittering diamonds. Standing beside the fountain in his beloved's favorite garden, Endymion gazed up at the blue-green pearl that was the Earth and wondered what the stars would look like from the planet. There would be new constellations to learn, and the phases of the Moon would mark the passing of time from now on.

He breathed deeply, savoring his remaining moments in the fragrant fresh air of the flower garden. A sharp breeze swirled through the bushes and Endymion drew his thin coat tighter around himself, mindful not to damage the red rose pinned carefully to its inner lining. It had pained him to remove Serenity's first gift from its life-sustaining water, but a full mug would be too much of a hindrance to carry, and the living flower he would be holding in his arms for the rest of his life was far more precious than any rose. Once they reached Earth, he planned to dry and preserve the childhood relic.

Shifting the sack that contained everything he owned, Endymion focused on the sky above him, trying not to think about all he was leaving behind. This was the last time he would stand in the shadow of the Moon Castle, the last time he would see the ice-blue earthlight spread over the silvery waters and alabaster stones.

"Endymion."

Turning around, the stable hand beheld his cherished lover. Princess Serenity was standing at the entrance to the garden, her pale hair shining in the starlight. She walked toward him, her dress tinted an eerie blue by the light of the Earth. Endymion blinked in confusion. Serenity was dressed in her usual silver and white gown and she had no baggage with her.

Standing in the presence of the man whose dreams she was about to shatter, Serenity's heart ached so badly that she could barely breathe. He was so beautiful, from his dark hair to his strong legs, the hope and excitement shining in his eyes too precious to destroy. As she approached Endymion held out his arms, and she entered his embrace automatically, trembling as she clutched his clothes and pressed her head against his chest. The sweet fragrance of roses surrounded her, and beneath that, the steady throbbing of her beloved's heart pulsed against her ear.

"Sere, what is it?" Endymion asked slowly, dread bringing a waver to his voice. "Where are your things?"

Against All Odds

She loved him. By the Ancients and all the power of the Crystal Tower, Serenity loved this man and she knew at that moment that she could not, would not, live without him. Standing there wrapped in his arms and his scent, the Princess could not imagine ending their romance and never seeing him again, never feeling this again. She needed Endymion more than the air, more than the Moon itself, more than anything or anyone. She simply could not go on without the man she had joined with in their night of pure unrestrained passion. Serenity shuddered violently as she realized she would be expected to be that intimate with the Earth Prince. It was impossible. She could never share her body without love.

Blinking away the tears that were threatening to escape the corners of her eyes, the Princess looked up at the stable hand.

"I don't need anything from this life," she said, her voice firm and steady. "Only you, Endy. You are all I need."

Endymion smiled, breathing a bit easier. He felt a slight twinge of disappointment; he had hoped Serenity would bring some trinkets they could sell on Earth, but most of all he was relieved that she had not changed her mind about fleeing the Moon.

"Come, we must go, quickly." Taking her lover by the hand, Serenity pulled him toward the hedge maze, her heart pounding in her chest. Escape would be tricky, now that their romance was no longer a secret, but her mother did not know they planned to run away this night. With luck, they could reach the teleportation chamber without -

An abundance of light flooded the area so suddenly that it seemed a tidal wave was sweeping away the darkness. Princess Serenity stopped short and shielded her eyes until her vision adjusted, but as the scene became clear, she almost wished she had been struck blind. The four Sailor Soldiers stepped out of the hedge maze, each skirted warrior carrying a crystal lantern. They stood firm, their faces cold and stern, two on each side of the garden's exit.

For a brief moment, Endymion considered turning to flee, but the thought was short-lived. Although he had never seen the Sailor Soldiers before, every inhabitant of the Moon knew enough about them to recognize them on sight in their distinctive white bodysuits and brightly colored skirts. Beyond that, the power they held simply radiated from their bodies in waves. Endymion could feel the invisible energies crackling across his tingling skin. Any one of them could strike him dead before he had taken two steps toward the old gardener's door. Even if he could escape, there was nowhere to run to.

As he struggled to prevent fear from setting in, Endymion could think of only one thing - the sole person he had trusted with his most precious secret. Prieun. How could his dearest friend have betrayed him to the authorities, when they had shared their entire lives with each other? The bitter seed of anger planted itself in Endymion's stomach. Serenity shrank back against him, but protectively, extending her arms behind her as if to shield her beloved from the wrath of her guardians.

The Sailor Soldiers were not the only ones standing in the lovers' path. From between them entered the white-robed, lavender-haired form of Queen Serenity herself. All the pity and sorrow her daughter had seen in the monarch's face earlier was gone, replaced by a stone-cold look of decisive, unshakeable resolve.

"Mother," Princess Serenity gasped as the powerful ruler stepped forward to stand in the center of the square formed by the Sailor Soldiers.

From the beginning, Endymion had known who his beloved's mother was, but no amount of knowledge could have prepared him to stand face to face with his Queen for the first time. She was shorter than the stable hand, but her perfect posture and elegant manner made her seem to tower over all others present. Her eyes were like ice, staring at Endymion with an intense gaze that did not flicker or waver. From the crescent moon on her forehead to the form-fitting white dress that hugged her body, she practically glowed with power and majesty. Endymion's legs buckled beneath him, and he fell to his knees involuntarily, unable to tear his eyes away from the cold beauty of the living goddess.

"Serenity, you disappoint me," Queen Serenity said in a calm and quiet voice.

"I couldn't do it, Mother," the Princess confessed, trembling from head to toe. "I wanted to do the right thing, but I couldn't send him away. I just couldn't!"

"You must realize that there is no choice in this matter," the Lunarian monarch replied, her eyes flickering back and forth between her daughter and the Earth-born man kneeling on the stone path, "for either of us."

Against All Odds

At this, the Mauans Luna and Artemis emerged from behind the Queen and strode forward. Luna wrapped an arm around the shaking Princess while Artemis approached the cowering stable hand with a set of metal shackles. Terror gripped Endymion's heart as, for the second time in his life, the man in the white suit bent over him with a face cross with anger.

"Don't hurt him!" Princess Serenity pleaded as Luna firmly pulled her away from her beloved's side.

Something flickered in Artemis' eyes and for a moment, Endymion feared he would remember that he had already ordered this particular stable hand to stay out of the gardens. After a moment, however, it faded. To the white-haired nobleman, all servants were the same. Artemis grabbed him roughly from behind, and Endymion shuddered as cold irons were fastened firmly around his wrists. This time, Miss Amaris could not save him.

"No!" The Princess lunged against Luna's grip, but Sailor Jupiter and Sailor Mars were at her side instantly, their gloved hands as unyielding as chains on her arms. "You can't! I won't let you!" Fear and desperation gave Serenity extra strength as she struggled against the three women, determined to protect Endymion's life with her own. She shot pleading glances at the two soldiers restraining her but found no sympathy there.

"Calm yourself, Serenity," the Queen ordered, giving her daughter a disapproving glare as she stepped toward the kneeling stable hand. "He will live." The Princess stopped struggling at this news, relieved that her beloved would not be executed, but she continued to watch Endymion with frantic eyes.

Artemis' firm grip on the shackles that bound Endymion's hands behind his back kept him still as Queen Serenity approached, drawing closer until the hem of her dress was scarcely an arm's length from his knees. With wide eyes, Endymion stared up at the monarch he had served his entire lifetime, the most powerful woman in the solar system. If death was not his sentence, what punishment awaited him? What would the Queen do to the man who dared defile her daughter?

As she stood over the cringing young man, something in Queen Serenity's eyes softened. She gazed down at his tanned face, so alive with love despite the fear running rampant within him. No amount of sympathy, however, could alter the situation or change the decision the monarch had already made.

"He is to be banished to Earth," Queen Serenity announced firmly. Endymion's heart sank into his stomach. He would be going to the planet of his origin after all, but alone.

"No!" the Princess wailed, pressing her hands to her face. "Mother, please!"

The consequences of this sentence cut into both lovers like a knife. If Endymion were jailed, Serenity could find some way to visit and possibly even free him, but if he were sent to Earth, she would never see him again. The tortured outbursts of his beloved brought a fragment of hope to Endymion's heart. If anyone could convince the Queen not to go through with this, it was Princess Serenity.

"Serenity, dear, we have already discussed this," the Queen said more gently, turning around to face her frantic daughter. "Have you forgotten your people so soon?" Leaning closer to the Princess' ear, she added, "Without you, the Moon Kingdom is as good as dust."

Endymion could not hear all that was being said, but he saw his beloved's face change into pained but solid resignation. As she sagged, her pale shoulders drooping, the stable hand knew he had lost. When Princess Serenity raised her head again, there were tears slipping down her cheeks.

"I'm so sorry, Endy," she said in a half whisper, her blue eyes swimming with pain. "Ours was a lovely dream, but reality leaves no room for love."

On the last few words, her voice broke, and the Princess buried her face in her hands, shoulders quaking as she began to sob uncontrollably. Queen Serenity waved a hand at Luna, who swiftly returned to the distraught girl's side and began leading her out of the garden. Endymion could only watch helplessly as, without another word, the light and joy of his life was taken from his sight.

As the last traces of the Princess' crystal hair vanished around the corner, Artemis readjusted his grip and hauled the stable hand roughly to his feet. The Queen turned to face him, and Endymion took a deep breath, prepared to endure her wrath.

"Moonbeam, stop!" a woman's voice cried from within the hedge maze.

Princess Serenity came running back into the garden, shoes gone, skirts clenched in her hands, a vision of white and silver with teardrops flying from her cheeks and spinning off into the air. Before anyone could react, she had barreled through the startled Sailor Soldiers, ducked around her mother and leapt up

to wrap her arms around Endymion's neck, pressing her lips firmly against his in a desperate kiss.

All at once, the love they shared surged to the surface, pouring all their passion into this moment of unity. With his arms bound, Endymion could not hold her, could not feel her soft skin beneath his fingers, but Serenity made up for it by seeming to caress his entire body with her fingertips as they embraced. The kiss ached of longing and pain, and tasted of the salt of the Princess' tears, but she was as soft and warm and yielding as ever as she opened herself to Endymion's eager lips and tongue and melted against him.

The four Sailor Soldiers surged forward, but Queen Serenity stayed them with a gesture, signaling to Artemis as well not to interrupt the young lovers' desperate embrace. The entire group stood as still as stone as the Princess clung to her beloved and tasted his mouth as deeply as if she could draw her very soul into herself, never to be parted from him. All else was forgotten in the heat and fire of the moment, banished for an instant by the smooth touch of the Princess' hands against Endymion's skin and the softness of her mouth like sweet nectar against his lips.

Then, as suddenly as it began, it ended. The blonde Sailor Soldier crossed the garden and gently laid her hands on the lovers' shoulders, bringing them back to reality. An instant after touching them, the orange-suited soldier jumped back suddenly as if shocked by the contact, but the spell was broken. Serenity stepped back from Endymion, her fingers lingering on his arms, and at last she let go.

"Sere-"

The Princess stopped Endymion with two fingers pressed against his lips. He could not help but close his eyes momentarily, savoring the light touch of her fingertips against him, the heat of her soft skin soothing despite the trembling of her hands. When he opened his eyes again, Endymion saw in his beloved's tear-streaked face that the kiss had changed nothing and was merely a final farewell. He wanted to do something, to shout out a protest, to stop this from happening, but he knew all his efforts would be futile. Instead, he took advantage of his last few moments with Princess Serenity to drink in every detail of her face and store it away in his memory.

"I love you, Endy," the Princess whispered. "Farewell."

Luna came forward and took the crystal-haired woman by the arm. The blonde guardian accompanied the pair out of the garden, glancing back at the Princess' lover with a strange look of wonder. This time, as she was led away, Serenity turned her head to keep her gaze locked on Endymion's stormy eyes until the last, savoring every second she could look upon him like the last drops of an elixir she would never taste again.

Then she was gone.

Even in the light of the lanterns and the ethereal glow of Queen Serenity, the garden seemed to darken, consumed by a suffocating gloom in the absence of Endymion's beloved Princess. Loneliness and fear surged up with a vengeance. Endymion's lover had left him and he was a mere stable hand alone with Lord Artemis, three Sailor Soldiers, and the Queen of the Moon Kingdom.

As Queen Serenity turned her attention back to him, Endymion's knees weakened, and he dropped to the ground again. Artemis roughly grabbed his hair from behind and yanked it back, forcing him to look up at the woman who would decide his fate. The green-suited soldier marched over and snatched up Endymion's pack from the ground.

"He may keep his possessions," Serenity announced, not taking her eyes off the ragged Earth-born man crouched at her feet. Endymion stared up into eyes like glass, flawless and empty, as emotionless as crystal. Having no idea what the Queen was thinking was more unnerving than the rage he had dreaded to see. The brown-haired soldier looked uneasy.

"But, my Queen-"

"Whatever he has taken is of no consequence," the Queen interrupted, still gazing down at her daughter's lover, "save one item. Where is Serenity's engagement pendant?"

Endymion opened his mouth and tried to speak, but only air passed his lips. He was frozen, stunned into silence by the loss of his beloved and the unblinking statuesque stare of the goddess incarnate.

"Answer your Queen, boy!" Artemis snarled impatiently, punctuating the statement with a sharp kick to the small of the stable hand's back. Pain exploded up Endymion's spine and through his kidneys, but he bit his tongue, refusing to cry out as the white-hot shock sent a wave of nausea through his stomach and ignited sparks in front of his vision.

Against All Odds

Now the Queen's face changed. It was brief, barely an eyeblink, but a lightning flash of outraged fury escaped the monarch's restraint before her emotions were buried again.

"Artemis," she snapped, her tongue as sharp as daggers, "return to the castle. Now."

The Mauan advisor started to protest, but one fiery glare from the Moon Queen instantly changed his mind. With a mutter of assent, he released his hold on Endymion, slunk around the assembled women and retreated into the hedge maze.

"The pendant," Queen Serenity repeated when Artemis had gone. "Where is it?"

"On the table in my hut," Endymion managed, although his throat was dry and his voice rasped as if his mouth were full of sand. "The one with the blue marker on the door."

The lavender-haired monarch turned her head slightly and nodded at the Sailor Soldiers. The guardian wearing a blue skirt and tall boots broke away from her companions and headed toward the gardener's entrance behind Endymion. If his current situation had not been so dire, the stable hand would have laughed at the thought of his fellow servants' reaction to a Sailor Soldier in their midst. As it was, even the departure of the blue-haired one left two equally deadly women a mere few steps away from him.

Queen Serenity's arm moved and something clinked to the ground just in front of Endymion's knees. Looking down, he discovered a small drawstring pouch lying on the path, undoubtedly filled with coins. At this, a shred of pride mustered itself deep within Endymion and he lifted his head and boldly glared up at the powerful ruler.

"Keep your charity," he hissed through clenched teeth. "You can not buy me off at any price."

"Show some respect, you miserable worm!" the soldier in red snapped from behind her Queen.

"What more can you do to me?" Endymion challenged, the emptiness in his heart that had been filled by Princess Serenity's love beginning to ache so badly that he was consumed by bitterness and despair. "Take my life? You have already done that," he added, his voice breaking despite his efforts to appear strong. "You cannot hurt me any more than you already have."

The stable hand and the Moon Queen stared at each other for what seemed a long moment, although it was barely a heartbeat. In that single glance, Endymion tried to express everything that was in his heart: all the love he felt for the Princess, how much she meant to him, how meaningless his life was without her, and how little he cared for his own fate now that she was gone. Boldly, he glared at the elegant ruler who had caused such pain to his beloved, letting contempt show through now that there was no redeeming himself in her eyes. He resisted the tears as much as he could, but they were still there, welling up from the hole that had been torn in his soul and stinging the corners of his eyes until he could no longer swallow and his vision blurred. The image of the Queen became a cloudy smear, but Endymion still held strong, refusing to blink and release the tears to roll down his cheeks. His agony was far more than mere sorrow and he would not cheapen it by weeping.

"Leave us," Queen Serenity ordered, looking around at the two remaining Sailor Soldiers.

"What?" the green-suited one protested incredulously. "My Queen, that-"

Serenity silenced her with a glance. The soldiers withdrew, but only to a far corner of the garden where they could still keep an eye on the prisoner. The fierce glares of the two warriors sent shivers down Endymion's spine.

"Rise."

Endymion was getting to his feet before he even processed the command, his legs unfolding almost automatically upon the Queen's word. At his full height, the Moon Queen was barely eye-level with his shoulders. She was only a bit taller than her daughter, but her age and maturity showed far more in her demeanor than her size. Endymion found himself wanting to stoop so he would not be looking down upon her, but he forced himself to stand firm, boldly facing his fate. He refused to apologize or beg for mercy; he did not regret loving the Princess and he would not act sorry for it.

"So, you are the man who has earned Serenity's heart," the Queen said quietly, looking him up and down. Endymion was momentarily startled by her choice of words. He might have expected "stolen," or "tainted," but never "earned."

"Might I have your name?" Again, an odd use of decorum. Endymion blinked, confused. Here was a woman who held his life and many others in the palm of her hand, yet she appeared at that moment to be just a concerned mother meeting her child's beloved for the first time.

Against All Odds

"End - Endou," Endymion stammered, deciding there was no sense in risking whatever fragile sympathy the Queen had developed for him by claiming a Prince's name. The next moment, he wondered why he bothered to care what happened to him. His life was worthless now that he had lost the woman he loved. Whatever existence awaited him on Earth, it would most likely be a brief one. He could not endure this emptiness for long. Queen Serenity's eyes narrowed for an instant, as if she suspected there was more he was not telling, but it faded quickly as she accepted the lie.

"Don't be a fool," the monarch said suddenly. Her face hardened back to the firm expression of a Queen; solid, immoveable. She bent down, snatched up the coin pouch from the ground and reached for the stable hand's pack. Endymion cringed to see his ruler's perfect, delicate hands touching the tattered filth that was the battered old satchel, but without hesitation she opened it and placed the money inside.

"I don't want your-"

"This is not meant to buy off your love." Queen Serenity stood up and looked Endymion straight in the eye. "Do you think I want to abandon you to Earth with nothing, to sink or swim in a world of strangers? I am truly sorry it must be this way." The soft look returned to her eyes, an expression of pity or regret that was quite out of place on the face of a monarch.

"Why must it be, my Queen?" Endymion asked quietly, emboldened despite the cold shackles around his wrists and the watching Sailor Soldiers. "Serenity - the Princess - is happy with me. All I want is her happiness."

"I wish I could say the same." The Queen trembled slightly, as if from a chill, then quickly composed herself. "However, those of royal blood must always do what is best for their people. For us, happiness is a dream we give to others, not a thing we keep for ourselves. You are fortunate, Endou, that you are as you are. You may find happiness yet."

"Without Sere," Endymion countered bitterly, "no joy remains for me. A life without her is meaningless, without-"

"Don't be a fool," Queen Serenity repeated in a biting fierce tone. "Endou, I give you your life. Live it. If you choose your own end, she will know. No matter how far apart you are or how much time passes, she will know, and it will destroy her."

Something sad flickered through the Moon Queen's face then, a deep, aching depression that cut straight to the center of Endymion's soul, so empty and longing that he could not even speak. As the monarch turned and called to the two Sailor Soldiers to return, that dreadful look of utter abandonment and loss stayed with him, blocking out all else to the point where he did not hear Queen Serenity's final words to him or her orders to her soldiers. As they led him through the gardens toward the Moon Castle, Endymion resolved to live whatever life he was given as best he could. He knew the separation would hurt his beloved Serenity, but he could never cause her the pain her mother hid behind an alabaster mask.

When they reached the castle wall, at a point far from the Princess' balcony, a cloud of attendants that had been waiting there swiftly surrounded Queen Serenity and escorted her inside. Endymion could not help but notice the high quality of the servants' clothes and the haughty, superior looks they gave him, although there was not a drop of noble blood among them. As an Earth-child and a stable hand, he was nothing more than a common criminal, even to those of his same station. At least he was going to a world where his would be the dominant race, primitive as their society was.

The two Sailor Soldiers, who Endymion now identified as Jupiter and Mars from his memories of conversations with the Princess, led their captive toward a door far smaller and plainer than the entrance the Moon Queen had passed through. They pushed him inside and for the second time in his life, Endymion entered the Moon Castle.

Even the servants' passages of the extensive marble structure were far richer than anywhere Endymion had ever lived. The corridors were flawlessly clean and as pearl-white as the castle's outer walls, seemingly endless with branches in all directions and lit by glowing crystals that hung from the ceiling. At this time of the night, the passages were nearly deserted, but here and there a startled face peered out at the pair of grim-faced Sailor Soldiers and the solemn man being marched along between them.

Endymion walked with his head hanging in shame, trying to ignore the sting of wondering eyes upon him. The shackles were heavy on his wrists, a constant reminder of what was about to happen to him, but that was not the most pressing thing on his mind. He had lost Serenity, his beloved, the only woman he

Against All Odds

had ever truly loved. His life was as good as over, yet he was bound to it, unable to give up for the sake of the lover he would never again lay eyes on. If only they could have been making this journey together, arm in arm on a new adventure. Endymion would have given anything to have the Princess at his side.

After what seemed an eternity of ducking through twisting corridors, Sailor Jupiter pushed open a door that was quite different from the others, a pristine white instead of plain wood. Endymion stepped through onto a smooth polished surface and looked up in amazement.

These were the main hallways of the Moon Castle, where the highest-born of the kingdom spent their days. The ceiling here was so high it was nearly lost in the shadows above, and the corridor seemed wide enough for fifteen people to walk side-by-side. Every surface was of the purest white marble polished to perfection, accented by carvings and miniature sculptures at the corners. The passages were dark, but as the Sailor Soldiers and their captive progressed down the hallway the light crystals set into the walls around them flared to life, illuminating only the area where they stood and flickering off again once they passed. They had not gone far when they reached their destination.

As Jupiter opened another door, Sailor Mars shoved Endymion roughly into the teleportation chamber. It was smaller than he had expected, just another room nowhere near the scale of the main teleportation station out in the city. Clearly, the design of this room was purely functional. It was bare of any decorations or furnishings beyond the round gray slab on the floor that produced the portal between worlds.

Something struck the back of Endymion's legs, and he dropped to his knees with a grunt. Sailor Jupiter flung his pack to the floor beside him as she walked forward and turned around to face the captive. With her arms folded over her chest, she was quite an intimidating figure, her natural height made all the more impressive by her high-heeled green boots and the hard-edged glare emanating from beneath her dark brown hair.

"You have been charged with trespassing and high treason with regard to the training and upbringing of Princess Serenity," the green-suited soldier announced without a trace of sympathy on her face. "By the decree of Queen Serenity, you are hereby banished to Earth and are forever barred from the Moon. So ordered, so done."

A sizzling sound at Endymion's side drew his attention. Sailor Mars was standing there, holding a metal rod with a cross of two short bars at one end. In one of her hands flickered a live flame, so real that the kneeling stable hand could feel its heat, but the soldier's white glove was undamaged. Endymion could not help but watch in wonder at the small display of magic as Mars brought the flame to the rod and held it so the blazing tongue of fire engulfed the metal cross. Within seconds, the end of the instrument was red-hot, glowing a bright orange within the soldier's intense flame.

Sailor Mars looked up from her efforts. Her deep violet eyes met the dusky gray gaze of the man kneeling beside her. Her face twitched. Her lips curved ever so slightly into the hint of a sinister smile. Endymion's eyes widened in horrified realization, but it was too late.

In a calm, practiced manner, Jupiter seized the stable hand's arm in one hand and grabbed him by the hair with the other, her gloved grip like a vice despite her lack of emotion. Endymion gasped at the pain her strength inflicted, her slender fingers digging deeply enough into his flesh to bruise. The pain of compressed skin and broken blood vessels roared through his upper arm, and Jupiter's other hand pulled his hair back so tightly that his scalp felt as if it would tear loose from his skull. The soldier tugged Endymion's head toward her, exposing the silver tattoo on the other side of his neck that marked him as a Moon Castle servant and served as proof of his right to be on the grounds.

In one swift, smooth motion, Mars pressed the glowing brand against Endymion's tattooed skin.

Halfway across the castle in her chambers, Princess Serenity jolted upright and screamed.

Endymion's skin burned and blistered instantly. Fire exploded through his neck, singeing and melting the tender flesh where Queen Serenity's emblem had stood undamaged for so many years, crossing out the symbol of loyalty in a wave of searing heat.

Against All Odds

The pain was beyond anything Endymion had ever felt in his life. It shot straight down his spine to his stomach, making him nauseous with agony as his entire body twitched violently in Sailor Jupiter's grip. The stable hand's mouth gaped open and his eyes squeezed shut so tightly that stars sparked in the darkness beneath his eyelids, but he refused to cry out. He would not scream like a victim. He would not beg for mercy. Surely, it would be over soon.

In spite of his determined hope, the torture only continued.

"Mars, isn't that enough?" the soldier in green muttered over Endymion's head as he twitched in his suffering. "It only takes a few seconds to-"

"Do you really think it will all be over after this?" Mars hissed through her teeth. "You saw the Princess! She's absolutely smitten with this - this common-blood scum! Before he interfered in her life, she was a good girl, ready to shoulder her responsibilities, but now - her heart belongs not to her kingdom, but to some Earth-born servant!"

Throughout her tirade, the red-suited soldier kept the burning metal firmly pressed against her captive's neck. With every passing second, it seemed to grow hotter and heavier until it felt as if Mars were leaning against it with all her weight and Endymion could smell his own flesh burning. Jupiter's grip on his convulsing body grew ever tighter and the more he struggled to remain silent, the more his lungs ached to scream in twisted agony.

"Mars, you know I feel as you do," Jupiter assured her partner bitterly. "This worthless wretch out for a taste of power deserves far worse than exile," she spat in Endymion's direction, "but you saw how the Queen reacted to Artemis' rough treatment of him."

"Yes," Mars replied, her lips twisting into a smirk, "but the Queen is not here and we are the last faces of the Moon this man will ever see."

To the horror of the prisoner caught between them, the brunette echoed her companion's logic with a cruel smile of her own. With a grunt, the green-suited woman wrenched her captive's arm behind his back so sharply that Endymion thought it would break, his entire body consumed by agony.

"Did you think you could hurt her and get away with it?" Sailor Jupiter's low voice hissed fiercely in his ear. "Did you think she was a toy you could play with and then toss aside? Did you?"

Blinded by the searing pain of red-hot metal pressed against his skin, Endymion could not even think, let alone speak to defend himself against the accusations. He felt hot liquid trickle down his neck as his flesh peeled away beneath the brand.

"Fool!" Mars snapped. As she berated the captive, the fire against his neck seemed to double in its intensity. "Why didn't you choose some nameless peasant girl to feign love with, to satisfy your lust? What have you done to her? Have you sullied her body with your filth?!"

Both soldiers jumped as the door to the room flew open suddenly, banging sharply against the wall.

"What are you doing?!" a strange voice cried.

The terrible pressure on Endymion's arm and neck vanished. He collapsed face-first on the marble floor, gasping for breath as his scalp throbbed and the blood flowed back into his arm. The Earth-child's neck, however, still burned with a fire that felt like it would seal off his throat entirely. He gritted his teeth against the pain and opened his eyes, but they watered so badly that the orange-suited Sailor Soldier who had entered the room was little more than a blur.

"It is the policy of the Moon Kingdom to mark exiled criminals so they can not return," Sailor Mars said matter-of-factly, dismissing her own behavior with a toss of her long hair.

"Not like this!" Sailor Venus crossed the room toward the man cowering on the floor. Involuntarily, Endymion shied away from her in the wake of his ordeal, even though the blonde's face was filled with concern. The potential for cruelty that lurked within the Sailor Soldiers had been revealed and a fear had been created that could never be erased. However, these gloved hands were gentle as they helped Endymion back to his knees.

"Yes, we brand banished servants, but this man has broken no laws and does not deserve to be treated so cruelly." Venus was breathing heavily, as if she had been running. As the stable hand's vision cleared, he saw the soldier cringe as she examined his wound, and as he watched she paled and began to look as if she would be sick. Endymion was glad he could not see the seriousness of his injury, although the burning in his neck was still so severe he could barely see straight and something warm was trickling down

to his shoulder.

"If anything, he is a victim," Venus muttered. "This sort of violence does not become you, Mars. I would think you, of all people, would show a little more mercy toward this man after what you did to him before ever laying eyes upon him."

"How can you defend him?" the soldier of fire demanded. "He led our Princess astray with false promises of love!"

"If only we had realized it sooner," Sailor Jupiter lamented quietly.

"When the Queen hears of this..." Venus began in a threatening tone, glaring up at her fellow soldiers. With eyes as cold as ice, Mars and Jupiter approached with arms folded across their chests, looming over the blonde and the half-choking captive.

"She will never hear of it," Jupiter said in a voice filled with daggers, "unless one of the three of us tells her."

Sailor Venus' eyes widened under the sharp unwavering stares of the women who should have been her subordinates. Taking a deep breath, the orange-suited soldier opened her mouth and seemed about to argue, but after a moment she sagged, reconsidering her words.

"Just get him out of here," Venus muttered bitterly. "That's what we've been ordered to do, is it not?" The blonde straightened up and crossed the room to press a series of buttons on a panel set into the wall. The teleportation platform roared to life with a hum that started low and rose into a wail that seemed to make Endymion's bones tingle. Silver light rose from the platform in a vertical column that vanished into a receptor disc set into the ceiling. The shining beam swirled with a multitude of colors for a few moments, then settled on a smooth golden glow that indicated its destination: Earth.

Sailor Jupiter seized Endymion by the arms and hauled him to his feet, dragging him roughly toward the platform. Without knowing why, the stable hand began to struggle. Something about the shimmering light frightened him, something he could not explain. He was no match for a Sailor Soldier however, especially in his weakened state with his arm bruised and his head throbbing and feverish from the burn on his neck.

In one fluid motion, the tall brunette released the shackles from his wrists and shoved him onto the platform. The golden light enfolded him in its glow, and Sailor Mars tossed his bag of meager possessions up beside him. Staggering on shaking legs, Endymion turned around for one last glance at the world that had raised him and the three faces expelling him from it forever - two angry, yet satisfied, and one filled with anxious pity.

Then the power of the magic-augmented technology took him.

The golden light brightened, blurring out the room completely and paling to a blinding luminescence that seemed to penetrate all the way to the back of Endymion's skull. Pastel colors burst and faded, until he was surrounded by a maelstrom of energy that seemed to sweep him up in a powerful whirlwind. At the same time, Endymion began to feel as if his entire body were fading away, the sensation in his fingers and feet vanishing and spreading inward until he was little more than a mind.

Suddenly a wave of intense terror rose from the depths of his memory and struck him like the cold fingers of death itself. He tensed in fear. This was dreadfully familiar, all of it, and he knew what would happen next - there would be pain, burning, ripping agony and then -

"No! Mama! Papa!"

Who was screaming? A little boy, frightened, lost, crying out in shock as the light devoured his body...

No, it was his own voice, his own throat crying out as his forehead burned with fever and his neck blazed and throbbed as hot liquid rolled down his skin and the universe finally stopped spinning, the lights and colors vanished and Endymion was once again a whole body standing on a platform of stone. The journey itself had turned out to be painless. Why had he been so frightened?

He caught a brief glance of a dim room, walls of gray stone lit by torches and covered with tapestries, and armored soldiers, regular palace guards, flanking the wooden door. Endymion swayed, struggling to regain his balance. He felt strangely heavy and the air was cool and tingly on his tongue as he took his first breath of Earth's atmosphere.

Then it hit him.

Against All Odds

It came like a blow to the chest, an invisible force that slammed into him like being trampled by a horse. Endymion was seized by an unknown power that gripped his entire body, holding him immobile as something deep within his torso awakened from a deep slumber and roared. It cried out with a voice not heard by the ears but rather felt by the soul, and Endymion's muscles spasmed with its strength as white-hot energy blasted through his veins in an explosion of tingling power. Deep inside his chest, something was shining. Something gold.

For one brilliant moment, he felt bigger than anything and more alive than he had ever been, filled with power and knowledge and strength beyond any creature on the planet. It was as if he could sense everything; every creature that moved and every plant that grew and every wave that rolled on the surface of the Earth.

Energy pulsed through his bloodstream.

He felt like a Sailor Soldier.

He felt like a god.

After only a few seconds of growing intensity, the unexpected rush overwhelmed his unprepared mind. Darkness flooded Endymion's vision, and he collapsed on the teleportation platform, the cold stone a shock to his feverish body. The light faded from his eyes and everything went black.

Endymion was surrounded by softness. He lay floating in a cloud, utterly peaceful and content, all pain and suffering gone. Beside him was a source of warmth, and a comfortable heat spread over him. Rolling over, Endymion reached out a hand toward the heat source - and his fingers touched the smoothness of bare flesh. His eyes popped open.

He was lying in a bed larger and more luxurious than any he had ever seen, wrapped in soft sheets and thick blankets. Sunlight was pouring in the windows of the room and as Endymion blinked in its brightness, he realized the bed was filled with gold. He was not alone. A young woman was sleeping with her back to him, her long blonde hair spilling over the pillows and folded among the blankets. The sheets were only pulled up to her waist. She was naked, and by her skin tone, obviously not Lunarian.

As Endymion sat up, confusion sending his head spinning, he realized he was naked as well and in bed with a complete stranger. Dread churned in his stomach in a rising wave of nausea. What had he done?

Perhaps more importantly, where was he? Endymion buried his face in his hands, searching his memory. The last thing he remembered was a room, a gray stone room... on Earth.

It all came rushing back, from the cruel smirk on the face of Sailor Mars to the sudden rush of power that hit him as he stood on the planet for the first time. He had been exiled. Nothing that he remembered happening to him, however, explained how he had ended up in bed with a strange woman.

Looking around, Endymion beheld a room as large as the hut he had left behind, but it seemed to be designed solely for sleeping, with no furniture except the bed and several chests of drawers. A low table with a mirror hanging above it sat against one wall. This was the woman's room, then. A closed door hid any adjoining rooms from view.

A soft sigh beside him made Endymion jump, startled, and his heart began racing in his chest as the sheets rustled and the woman rolled over, turning to face him as she pulled the blankets back up to her shoulders. Her eyes opened and she smiled at Endymion sweetly without a trace of surprise.

"Ohayo, Mamo-chan."

Snatching up a sheet to wrap around his waist, Endymion jumped backward and leapt from the bed, backing away in shocked confusion. The woman began to sit up, looking at him in concern.

"What is this?" Endymion demanded, rubbing his face with one hand as if he could make the strangeness of the situation resolve into something familiar. Someone was playing with his mind, trying to trick him with this false mockery of his beloved Sere.

She was Serenity, yet she was not. The structure of her face was all there, from the smooth curves of her jaw to her small button nose, and her large eyes were of the purest, brightest blue... but she was not the Moon Princess. Her skin, while still lighter than his, was a creamy rose, and her long hair was the gold of noon sunshine. There was no crescent moon on her forehead beneath the soft curls of her bangs. Still, the warmth of her presence was painfully familiar and Endymion felt surrounded by the same caring light he

Against All Odds

had always sensed in the presence of the Princess.

"Serenity?" he asked warily, still keeping his distance from the bed. To his surprise, the woman's eyes filled with tears and she looked at him with such sadness that his pounding heart sank clear to his toes.

"Mamo-chan, you said you wouldn't call me that," the blonde image of Serenity protested, her lip trembling. "It's bad enough I'm going to have to be Queen soon. I don't need to hear it from my own husband."

Husband! Queen? Even the words that made sense weren't adding up.

"I don't understand," Endymion muttered, pressing his fists into his eyes until he began to see sparks. "Where am I? Who are you?"

Now the woman hauled herself out of the bed and hurried toward him, a blanket wrapped around her body. She rushed up to him, her face stricken with panic, and Endymion was torn between wanting to comfort this person who looked so much like Princess Serenity and wanting to escape her strangeness.

"Mamo-chan, don't tease me; not like this," she begged desperately, reaching toward him as he shrank back from her. "It's me, your Usa-ko. Don't you remember me?" Her gaze was steady, but she was clearly fighting frightened tears.

"I don't know," Endymion mumbled, confusion overwhelming him. "You're my Sere, and yet... you're not! What's going on?"

Trembling from head to toe, the blonde pushed past him and dashed over to the table beneath the mirror. Pulling open drawer after drawer she began a frantic search, tossing hair ornaments and cosmetics wildly over her shoulders as her breath became choked with restrained sobs. Finally, she found what she was looking for: a small object that fit into the palm of her hand, which she spoke to.

"Ami-chan, something's wrong! *Onegai*, get here quickly!" As she dropped the object and turned around, a few tears slipped down her pale cheeks, but she forced herself to smile at the befuddled dark-haired man.

"Don't worry, Mamo-chan. Everything will be all right." Something in the woman's voice was indeed reassuring despite her trembling. Serenity or no, she still possessed the comforting aura of Endymion's beloved. Crossing the room again, she began to pull clothes out of a closet and Endymion automatically turned away to give her privacy.

His attention was automatically drawn to the mirror. Remembering the burn Sailor Mars had inflicted, Endymion stepped over to examine the damage. Oddly, his neck did not hurt at all.

To his surprise, there was no trace of the injury. Not only was there no brand marking the exiled servant's skin, there was no silver tattoo either. All evidence of his years of service under Queen Serenity was gone, and not merely the marks on his neck. Endymion's skin tone was lighter and his reflection was smaller than he was used to; he was still the same height but had lost some of the muscle mass that came from years of hard labor. His hands, as he reached up to touch the unmarked flesh at his throat, were far smoother and softer than they should have been, free of the rough calluses he had developed over the years.

This could not be real. Still, this fantasy did not feel like a dream. There was touch and taste and scent, and all of his senses were fully alive. Never had he dreamed so vividly.

"I can't go through this again," a soft voice whimpered.

Endymion turned around. Princess Serenity's Earth-born twin, her back to him, was pulling a shirt over her upper body. It was far too large for her and hung halfway to her knees. Her golden tresses were now tied up into a familiar pair of tight buns at the top of her head.

"Not this," she mumbled to herself, her shoulders quaking. "Anything but this, not now!" She pressed both hands to her face and sank down on the edge of his bed.

"Sere, I am sorry," Endymion said quietly. Even if she wasn't his Princess, or merely an illusion, he did not want to see her suffer. The woman did not respond, but now he could hear her crying. With a regretful groan, Endymion crossed the room, walked around the bed and knelt beside the distraught half-stranger.

"Sere, I-" He stopped short. With the bulky blanket gone and only a thin shirt covering the blonde's torso, the slight bulge of the strange woman's abdomen was strikingly obvious. She was carrying a child.

Noticing Endymion staring at her rounded stomach, the woman who was not quite Serenity reached

Against All Odds

out, seized his arm and pressed his hand flat against her belly.

"Please, please remember, Mamo-chan," she pleaded, fresh tears in her eyes. "I'm your Usa-ko, your wife, and I love you. I need you. So does our child."

Endymion had never touched the belly of a pregnant woman before. His hand slowly caressed the warm, taut skin, still a small bulge but firm and round with the promise of the baby inside. Suddenly, something within thumped against his hand and he gasped in wonder as the bump struck his palm twice more.

"See," the mother-to-be whispered. "Our little bunny needs you too."

A lump began to form in Endymion's throat and he looked up at the blonde woman, tears beginning to cloud his own vision. She smiled hopefully, but his growing emotional response was not due to any returning memories. He was thinking only of Princess Serenity.

If only this cruel fantasy could have been their reality. If only this could be their life together, he and Serenity, married and happily expecting their first child. As he held his hand against the woman's rounded abdomen and felt the kicking of the infant inside, he wished it was his beloved Serenity sitting there, her long silver hair pooled on the bed and her alabaster skin tight from the growth of their baby...

As he sank into his wistful thoughts, the room around him began to blur with a severity beyond the wavering of tears. A tunnel of darkness began to surround Endymion, carrying him away from this place, but until the last bit of light vanished, he concentrated on the feeling of warm, taut skin and the thump of a tiny foot against the palm of his hand.

"Endymion."

It was still utterly dark, a blackness devoid of any feeling or sight, but out of nothing came the voice. It spoke to him softly, gently, but with the wisdom of experiences beyond any the stable hand had ever known.

"Endymion. Awaken."

His eyes were open, but there was nothing to see, nothing beyond the inky blackness that seemed to pour into his eyes as he strained to discern anything out there in the void. After a moment, something seemed to gather, coalescing into a faint blur that resolved into a dim golden glow.

"Who's there?" Endymion called out into the darkness. He knew he should be afraid, but he was not. Whatever the presence was, it was peaceful and gentle. The glow moved closer and seemed to be emanating from a spire of gold. Beneath its base, a pair of warm amber eyes smiled at him in the gloom.

"Long has the Earth waited for your return," the voice continued, and now Endymion could tell the words came from this mysterious being with copper eyes and a golden horn framed by pale hair. "You must prepare for the coming of your destiny."

The light winked out. Once again, the exiled servant sank into oblivion.

With a sudden gasp, Endymion sat bolt upright, his heart racing in the aftermath of what he had just experienced. He struggled to catch his breath as yet another unfamiliar scene surrounded him, but this time, his shabby clothes and the dull throbbing in his neck quickly convinced him that this vision was real.

He was once again in a strange bed, but it was little more than a cot suited for only one person, with a handful of worn blankets covering him. The room was dim, the only light coming from a fire flickering in a corner. Endymion winced slightly in the red-orange glow, which was brighter than the firelight he was used to. The fire on the hearth was also much larger than any domestic fire he had seen on the Moon, yet it produced less heat. A small kettle simmered over the flames.

The chamber was small and sparsely furnished, a one-room home as Endymion's own hut had been, but it seemed to be part of a larger building. The two walls with windows and the corner where the hearth sat were stone while the other walls and floor were made of wood paneling.

Despite its lack of furnishings, the room was quite full. Old tattered books were piled in the corners, and odd statuettes and trinkets covered nearly every surface. Strange symbols were hanging from the ceiling, many of them metal, flickering orange and white in the combination of firelight and the glow

Against All Odds

filtering in from the windows. As Endymion looked around, a breeze swept into the room and the amulets jingled together in an array of flashing lights.

"Ah, you're awake."

A thin curtain at one end of the room was pushed aside, and a young woman emerged from what seemed to be a storage area, carrying dishes and utensils in her arms. She was of average height, and had the slender but solid build of a worker. Amber-brown hair rippled down to the small of her back, and she was clothed in a simple tan dress. Round green earrings dangled from both ears as she stepped forward.

"Where am I?" Endymion asked, automatically shrinking back from the unknown girl. Although he knew this was no fantasy, his dreams had made him wary. "Who are you?"

"Talma," she replied, dumping the dishes rather unceremoniously on the table. "You're in the Golden City, capital of the kingdom. On Earth."

Earth.

Hearing it spoken aloud sent reality crashing into Endymion like a cartful of stone. This was no dream. The air in his lungs was thicker and he felt heavier, every movement hindered by the unfamiliar gravity. A brisk breeze was blowing in the stone windows, the air a bit too cold and tainted with the scents of animals. He had been banished to a primitive planet, far from everything he had ever known. Far from -

Endymion flung the blankets aside and leapt out of the bed, ignoring Talma's pleading for him to rest. Nearly buckling under Earth's gravity, he stumbled across the room to a window, pressed his hands against the sill and leaned through to look outside.

It was the dead of night. The streets of the Golden Kingdom's capital were empty and dark, lit only by the occasional lamp. Most of the light that touched the narrow avenues crowded with erratic buildings did not come from the lamps. High above the city, the full Moon was shining.

The bottom dropped out of Endymion's world as he beheld the satellite that had been his home as a celestial body for the first time. It was much smaller than the Earth had looked from the Moon, yet he could still see the great Sea of Serenity clearly, sprawled across the surface in a stain of royal blue against the bone-white face of the Moon. Beside it lay the great pearl, the shining atmospheric dome that covered the capital city. It was one of many domed cities on the satellite, but it was by far the largest, a glittering jewel beside the enchanted waters.

Somewhere beneath that dome was the other half of Endymion's soul. He was doomed to suffer this torment for the rest of his days, to gaze upon the place where his beloved Serenity dwelled yet never to see her sweet face again. The Moon was so close, so clear in the night sky, yet so far away, eternally unreachable. Its shining face seemed to mock his yearning, a relentless reminder of his loss.

Endymion screamed.

He stared up at the glowing white orb and let out an aching howl of longing, an impulsive burst of pain that echoed across the empty street. The light of the full Moon burned into his eyes, the stone windowsill ground into his palms and his throat grew raw from the cry that poured out all of the emotion he had been holding in check.

As the Moon's pale surface began to remind him of Princess Serenity's hair, Endymion turned away, unable to bear the sight of it any longer. As he faced the room again, he discovered Talma staring at him, openmouthed, utterly stunned by his outburst. An overturned bowl lay at her feet where she had dropped it in surprise.

Outside there were shouts and doors creaking open and slamming closed as various citizens of the Golden City ventured outside to investigate the noise. Above, footsteps pounded across the ceiling and down flights of stairs, and fists hammered against Talma's door. Shaking off her shock, she hurried to the door and opened it a crack.

"Yes, yes, everything's fine," she reassured her various neighbors. "My guest's just woken up, and he's a bit confused, that's all. Go back to your beds." Closing the door, Talma turned back to Endymion with her hands on her hips. "I'll thank you not to do that again," she scolded, her face more serious than angry. "There are other homes in this building."

"I apologize," Endymion said sincerely, bending an arm back over his head to scratch his neck in embarrassment. "It's just that... How did I get here?" Even as he asked, his eyes roamed the room in search of potential exits, in case his hostess proved not to be as friendly as she seemed. The people of the Golden

Kingdom were supposed to be quite untrustworthy.

"Since the engagement, we've hardly gotten any exiles from the Moon," Talma explained, retrieving the fallen bowl and moving toward the fire. "Usually, criminals from Selene's kingdom are arrested until our courts determine if they are a threat to our society, but when you arrived, you were so unwell it did not seem right to send you to prison." She chuckled as she stirred the simmering pot with a wooden ladle. "Most of them show up indignant and furious, not weak as water and burning up with fever. Namrin almost didn't know what to do with you."

"Namrin?"

"A friend of mine in the Guard; the lieutenant who was on duty," the Earth girl explained. "Luckily, I was assigned to clean that section of the palace that night. Namrin let me take you home to care for you. It's odd," she mused aloud as she ladled some thick broth into the bowls, "that he would leave an exile in my care with no knowledge of your crimes, but from the moment you arrived there was a feeling that we should help you. We all sensed it."

Endymion listened numbly, the words barely registering in his mind. Whatever he had expected to find on Earth, a kind woman caring for him was definitely not it. Could he really trust this stranger?

Suddenly, a nagging concern at the back of Endymion's brain leapt to the surface. His eyes grew wide, and his gaze searched the room frantically until he finally spotted the battered old pack sitting in a corner. Heart racing, Endymion lunged for it more desperately than he meant to, shooting a suspicious glance at Talma in case she tried to stop him. Of course, she would not have gone to all this trouble for nothing. She must have taken whatever payment she wanted from what little he had. What if she had chosen the gold star locket, all he had left of his beloved Serenity?

"It's all there," Talma said reproachfully as Endymion searched through the bag in a near-panic. "Is the Moon such an insecure place?"

After some frantic rustling, the former stable hand had to admit she was telling the truth. From his tattered worn clothes to the enchanted locket wrapped carefully in a piece of fabric, it was all there, even the pouch of coins the Moon Queen had given him.

One item, however, was nowhere to be found, but it had not been in the satchel to begin with. Endymion searched the old coat lying beside the bag, but it was gone, pins and all.

"The rose," he said sharply, looking up at the young woman with danger flashing in his eyes. "What have you done with it?"

"Hey, calm down," Talma said nervously, setting the bowls on the table and raising both hands to placate her edgy visitor. "It's over there. By the time I spotted it, it was too late for water. Hasn't been drying very well, though," she commented as Endymion crossed the room to where the flower hung upside-down from a string tacked to the wall. The edges of its petals had begun to wilt, but the blossom was still as rich and full with color as ever, a perfect deep blood red. The layers of enfolding velvet were just as thick as Endymion remembered; it appeared as if not a single petal had fallen.

With a melancholy half-smile, the exiled lover reached up tentatively to caress the edges of the rose with his fingertip.

Something warm and tingling rolled down his arm and flowed into the red bloom.

Endymion jumped, startled, and stared at his fingers, but nothing seemed amiss. Yet, he felt a bit lethargic, as if part of his life had been sucked away.

Now he recalled what had happened to him as he took his first breath of air on Earth, the sudden rush of power that had overwhelmed his consciousness. As he thought about it, he could feel that something about him had indeed changed. Deep inside Endymion, something warm was glowing, a strange heat that seemed to pulse outward to his limbs. What was happening to him?

As he looked up again, considering, his gaze fell back to the rose. He blinked. He rubbed his eyes, but the illusion did not change.

All traces of impending death had vanished from the old flower. Life had returned to the edge of every petal, banishing the wrinkled, dried-out tissue that had been spreading there only moments ago. The rose now looked as healthy as it had the day young Princess Serenity first plucked it from its bush.

Taking a deep breath, Endymion shook his head hard. Surely he must have imagined the signs of weakness, the crippled and wilted petals, the brittle stem. Flowers did not just miraculously heal

Against All Odds

themselves, even on the Moon. Whatever had happened to him on his journey was making him see things.

"So... um..." an uneasy voice said from behind him. "Might I have your name?"

Endymion turned around and found Talma standing nervously beside the table, watching him with an unsettled look. The former stable hand sighed regretfully. He had not treated his hostess well and clearly she was beginning to wonder if taking him in had indeed been a mistake.

"I am sorry," he said, apologizing for the second time that night. "I am Endou," he added, noting with some dismay how easily the lie came to him. "Please understand this is all very strange to me." He expected to be thrown out immediately like the unwelcome burden he was, but Talma brightened at this exchange and sat down at the table with a welcoming smile.

"Come, eat," she invited him. "You must be hungry. You've been asleep two days."

"Two days!?" Endymion stumbled to the table and sank down in a chair before his legs could collapse from the shock. Two days! What had befallen his beloved Princess in that time? What had Miss Amaris been told?

Of course, it mattered little now. He was on Earth and would never see them again. In his misery, food was the last thing on his mind. As he looked down at the stew steaming in the bowl in front of him, however, Endymion realized he was indeed ravenous. Snatching up a spoon, he began to eat with such gusto that he did not even taste the food.

"Namrin thinks the connection we felt was simply because you were not like the others," Talma said awkwardly, trying to ignore her visitor's unexpected rudeness as he sloppily gobbled up the stew. "You're human... but I think it's more than that. Even now, there's something about you that... that..." She gave up, unable to associate her earlier feelings with this wild man spilling broth down his chin.

A strange word caught Endymion's attention, and he stopped and swallowed. In the pause, he realized how uncouth he was being. He hurriedly wiped his mouth and the area around his now-empty bowl with a napkin, clearing his throat awkwardly.

"Hu-man?" he repeated, stumbling over the unfamiliar term. Talma nodded.

"It's our word for ourselves as the people of Earth," she explained. "The Freedom Voice - that's the group that most dislikes the Moon Kingdom - started spreading it around after Queen Serenity closed the teleportation system to us." She stood up, took Endymion's bowl from him and returned to the fireplace to refill it. "Has a bit more dignity than 'Earth-child,' don't you think?"

A chill breeze swirled in through the windows, circling the room in a swift breath of fresh air. Endymion shivered in the unfamiliar cold, eagerly wrapping his hands around the warm bowl of stew as Talma set it in front of him again. The various trinkets hanging from the ceiling jingled in the wind, clinking against each other in an erratic melody. Strange patterns of reflected light danced around the room. The brunette Earth girl straightened up and closed her eyes, listening to the music they made.

"A portent of impending disaster," Talma intoned ominously. Startled, Endymion dropped his spoon and looked up at his hostess, dark eyes wide. The flickering firelight gave the young woman an orange glow that contrasted eerily with the spinning objects above her.

"Or... a seasick farmer is selling bad fruit." Opening her eyes, Talma sighed and sagged, her shoulders drooping. "I'm never going to master the art of wind interpretation. There is magic in the universe, I know it. I just need to find the right path..."

She slumped back into her chair and the pair resumed their meal. Now that the edge was off his hunger, Endymion was able to calm down and eat more properly. The stew turned out to be quite good, creamy and filling with just the right amount of spice. For a heart-stopping moment, it occurred to him to wonder if it might be poisoned, but he quickly banished that notion as he observed Talma was eating food taken from the same pot. Perhaps the people of Earth were not quite as treacherous as he had been told.

"Who is Sere?" Talma asked suddenly.

Endymion looked up sharply, sucking in his breath as his grip tightened on the spoon. The sound of his beloved's nickname falling from the lips of another cut into him like a knife, especially when spoken by a stranger who should have known nothing of recent events on the Moon.

"How do you know about her?" he demanded.

"You were calling your name in your sleep," the Earth woman replied gently. She leaned forward slightly, and her smooth hazel eyes focused on Endymion's furious gaze with cool patience. "Who is she?"

Against All Odds

For a long moment, they simply stared at each other over the table as Endymion tried to decide how to respond. An indignant, sharp-tongued snap rose to his lips immediately, but it died in his throat. Talma had been nothing but kind to him for no reason at all; she meant no harm. Besides, was there any point in keeping his love for the Princess a secret any longer? All that had happened to Endymion weighed heavily on his mind and he ached to have it all out in the open, whether his hostess believed him or not.

"My one and only true love," the exiled man sighed, summoning all his willpower to prevent his voice from breaking. "Princess Serenity."

Talma blinked. "You had a fancy for the Moon Princess?"

"No," Endymion replied slowly, taking a deep breath to fight off the nervous nausea rising in his stomach. "We fell in love. Both of us. We had been meeting secretly for months when we were discovered."

"The daughter of the Goddess," the brown-haired girl said flatly, her expression skeptical as she watched her guest carefully. The dark-haired man's hands tightened into fists.

"Queen Serenity is no goddess," he muttered. "There is a power that surrounds her, but she is also a woman just like any other." Talma stared at Endymion, waiting for him to admit he was only joking, but the man returned her gaze just as patiently with utter seriousness. Finally, she pressed both hands to her face in disbelief.

"No wonder you were exiled!" she breathed. "If the Royal Family knew of this..."

"There is no need to worry," Endymion said quietly. "Princess Serenity will go through with the marriage to your Prince Endymion." The words burned his tongue like flame. His beloved had chosen to spend the rest of her life in the arms of another man.

"Not everyone on Earth is eager for that to happen," Talma informed him. "I am not sure how much the Lunarians know, but the loss of our crown Prince to the Moon Kingdom is not popular among humans."

Endymion nodded. "I had heard rumors."

"At first it was only the occasional whisper, here and there," the brunette explained, getting up and collecting the dishes. "Now I hear mutterings about it every day, with almost every step I take outside the palace. Almost everyone thinks the marriage is a sham, meant only to give the Moon control over the Golden Kingdom." After setting the bowls in a washtub, Talma gave her visitor a sideways glance. "Is it?"

"No!" Endymion burst out indignantly, the need to defend the kingdom he had loved automatic. Yet, even as he denied it, Queen Serenity's blank mask swam in his memory and the cruel eyes of the Sailor Soldiers burned into him.

"I... I don't know." The exiled man buried his face in his hands, leaning on the rough tabletop. "All I know is what Sere has told me, and if it is indeed a plot, she is innocent. The Princess merely does as her mother tells her."

"What is it like, life on the Moon?" Talma asked quietly, sitting down at the table and placing a cup of water in front of her distraught guest. "They say the streets are paved with silver and every home is a mansion." Endymion glanced up, prepared to chuckle at the joke, but he discovered the brunette's eyes shining with eagerness as she awaited firsthand news of the fairy-tale utopia.

"The Moon Kingdom has its share of poverty," the man informed her. "It is peaceful, but not perfect. Queen Serenity herself is an enigma. Even standing face-to-face with her, it is impossible to guess her thoughts. After all," he added bitterly, "one moment she seemed to pity me and the next she ordered her soldiers to... to..." A shaking hand rose automatically, cautiously, to his own neck. His fingertips brushed the edge of a dressing that had been stuck there.

"It's a special healing salve," Talma explained. "Your injury..." She shuddered visibly at the memory. "It was worse than any brand I've ever seen. None of the other exiles were ever burned that severely. You're lucky to still have full mobility in your neck."

Spotting a small mirror on one wall of the dim room, Endymion got to his feet. As he approached the reflective glass, he gingerly ran his hand over the bandage - and nearly stumbled as, once again, a tingling warmth rushed down his arm and sank into the covered wound. The dull throbbing vanished. By the time he reached the wall, the former stable hand was already pulling at the edges of the dressing, his breath catching in his throat.

"Don't!" Talma protested, rising from her chair, but the sticky herbal salve was already peeling free from Endymion's neck. It stuck rather firmly to his flesh, yet he felt no pain as the substance gave way.

Against All Odds

Slowly, he turned his head until he could see the affected patch of skin in the mirror. As his gaze roamed over his neck, he was seized by vertigo and his mind reeled in disbelief. The shock was so complete that Endymion forgot to breathe.

"Impossible," Talma croaked hoarsely from somewhere behind his elbow.

There was the silver tattoo, plain and shining against the dark tan of Endymion's skin, now marred by a neat cross of white scar tissue as pale as if it had been there for years. The injury Sailor Mars had inflicted could never be fully erased, but the wound was completely healed.

Empty spaces always seemed larger at night. Ceilings loomed impossibly high, corridors extended far into the infinite, and every tiny sound in the shadows seemed to be a trap ready to spring. It was dark and lonely, and the stone walls made the hallways resemble an endless tomb, but the lone figure continued its wandering. Queen Elana needed some more time alone with her thoughts before she would be ready to return to her bed.

This night, as well as the previous two, her sleep had been restless and disturbed. Strange dreams consumed Elana's sleeping hours, filled with the cries of a young child echoing in the distance and a mass of shifting multicolored light. She had not endured these nightmares since the first few years after the loss of her firstborn son. Why had those memories returned to her now?

She had not spoken of this to Arton, but instead left him sleeping peacefully as she walked through the palace and waited for her heart to stop racing. The guards at the doors to her chambers did not like allowing Elana to wander around unescorted, but she was their Queen and they could not disregard her wishes. Pacing the endless deserted corridors with only a candle to light her way, the Queen of the Golden Kingdom distracted herself from the painful memories with thoughts of her living son.

It saddened her that she would soon lose her second child to another world, but Elana knew the alliance it would secure with the Moon Kingdom would bring rewards beyond any they could ever imagine. Why did her people not understand that? Surely even the most common residents of the Earth could tell that conditions on the planet were deteriorating. Even if Prince Endymion suddenly obtained the ancient Earth powers now, it would be difficult, if not impossible, to recover without outside help.

The Queen scowled into the darkness beyond the candle's light. People were such fickle creatures. First, they cried out for help; then, when their monarchy brought itself to its knees for their sake, they cried out against its cowardice and weakness. If it weren't for her son's guardians keeping a military presence in key areas, they might already have riots on their hands. The citizenry had to be shown that their rulers would not bend to their every whim and that their faith in the Moon was not a foolish trust. The marriage of Endymion and Serenity had to go through.

As she passed a tall door, one of many, Elana suddenly shivered as if she had walked through a ghost. A cold shudder rolled through her body and she was strangely reminded of days gone by from long ago. The Queen's dreams forced their way back into the forefront of her mind and refused to be ignored. She stopped short and turned around.

In the darkness, Queen Elana could not tell at first glance where in the palace she was. The door was dark wood accented with simple carvings, just like any other, and she peered at the small plaque on the wall beside it in the flickering candlelight.

The teleportation chamber.

There were not even any windows in that rarely-used room. Why did she feel such a chill? Without hesitation, Elana pushed open the door and stepped inside. There were always guards posted here, so whatever the cause of her unease, she had no reason to be afraid. Surprised, the group of sentries greeted their Queen and bowed... but by that time, Elana could not longer hear nor see them.

The room looked the same as it always had, plain stone walls decorated with tapestries depicting the history of the Earth and a lush carpet leading up to the stone teleportation platform, no different from any other time Elana had stood there.

The change was in the air.

No. It was impossible. He had died, years and years ago. She had heard the screams, watched his tiny body being shredded by light until he vanished into nothingness, never to be heard from again. He

Against All Odds

could not have survived. No one survived destruction such as that, least of all a helpless little boy barely old enough to remember the events of each passing day.

In defiance of all logic, however, it remained, buried beneath the scents of carpet and cloth and sweat and metal and soap: the fragrance of flowers where none should be. The smell of roses, faint, but there; a distant velvet musk that filled Queen Elana's senses and brought tears to her eyes as she stood trembling violently in its meek power. To anyone else, it would not even have been noticed, but to a mother, it was a scent unique from any flower in the garden, familiar yet without equal in all the universe.

Elana smelled... him. A scent she had once breathed every day of her life on a small form cradled lovingly against her chest. A little boy with dark hair and gray eyes like his father, a fragrance she had never expected to smell again.

Her firstborn son.

Endymion.

Chapter Eleven

Technology was, above all, a blessing. It was nice to have running water and musical instruments and communication screens that could send messages all the way to Pluto. She had to admit that. After all, her daring plan would be hopeless if it weren't for teleportation technology. However, from time to time Princess Serenity found herself wishing her mother had not built quite so advanced a society.

Now, for instance. Even in the dead of the night, trying to sneak down a corridor unnoticed was rather difficult when the lights automatically turned on upon sensing her presence. Serenity had considered sticking to the servants' passages, but she would have had to disguise herself, and a stranger caught wandering the Moon Castle would have a far more difficult time escaping than a Princess. So, she had settled for hurrying from one doorway to the next as the light crystals flickered on and off above her, muscles poised to sprint into the nearest room at the slightest sound. So far, fate seemed to be on her side; the corridors were deserted.

Despite her fear of being discovered, the thrill of danger pulsed through the Princess' veins, and she felt exhilarated. After all the oppression, all the bending to her mother and the needs of the Moon, Serenity was again acting on her own desires. Right now, that desire was to see her beloved Endymion again.

For days after the stable hand's exile, Princess Serenity had remained in her chambers under the excuse of illness. That lie was not far from the truth. The young Princess had been bedridden, her sorrow so deep that it caused her physical pain, and she often cried so hard that she became violently ill. At times, it seemed she would literally die of heartbreak. This was far worse than the two-day separation that had followed the argument on the night the stable hand told her his true name. That time, there had at least been the dream of reconciliation. Now, Serenity and Endymion had been separated by force and nothing would ever be the same. There would be no more midnight meetings; no more earthlit rides to Selene's Blessing.

At first, Serenity's pain was mainly a longing for companionship; an empty loneliness that settled around the Princess now that she no longer had the option of visiting her beloved stable hand. The Sailor Soldiers were there, of course, and they did their best to encourage Princess Serenity to confide in them from now on, but it was not the same. They could not give her the freedom to truly express herself, to be whatever she wished. They did not know the secrets of her soul and the desires of her heart. They were not

her Endy.

As her tears ran dry and she spent day after day lying listlessly in her bedroom, heedless of her guardians' entreaties to eat or get some fresh air, a different kind of loneliness began to set in. A deep, almost painful desire slowly consumed the Princess, a need that could not be ignored nor satisfied. She ached for Endymion's touch, to feel his lips on hers, his rough hands on her body. Her nights, when she was able to sleep, were filled with lustful dreams of desperate passion, sprung from a hunger nothing but physical love could sate. She had tasted the fruit of ecstasy and it was not a flavor that could easily be forgotten.

And then there was the guilt. Serenity was haunted by the stricken expression that had been on Endymion's face as she left him to his fate. Thinking about it now made her sick to her stomach with regret. What foolishness, what idiocy to imagine they could still flee to Earth when her mother and the Sailor Soldiers knew about her secret love! If the Princess had only done what she had promised to do and ended the relationship for good instead of trying to escape with her beloved, Endymion would still be here on the Moon. Now he was a banished criminal, all because of Serenity's selfishness. She had not even fought for him when they were caught. Endymion had risked everything to be with her and she had abandoned him, bowing to the whims of her mother over the life and liberty of the man who loved her.

The Sailor Soldiers could only watch helplessly as their Princess sank further into her depression. They all clung to the belief that time would heal Serenity's wounds and tried to interest the ailing woman in things that once delighted her. Only Sailor Venus seemed to believe there was more to the broken romance than a meaningless tryst. Of all the soldiers, Venus was the only one who never tried to pretend everything was normal and who never tried to force the Moon Princess to distract herself from her pain. Her eyes were always a mirror to Serenity's suffering.

Finally, Princess Serenity simply couldn't take it anymore. Even if she had to marry the Earth Prince and become Queen, she needed Endymion in her life. She had to see him again, to feel his arms around her, to know that he was there for her even if they could not be together. Their forced parting had left jagged edges that could not be ignored or overcome by time. At the least, she had to tell him she had been wrong, to apologize for leaving him at her mother's mercy.

And so, there she was, running through the corridors of the Moon Castle in the middle of the night like an intruder in her own home. Princess Serenity was the heir to all the majesty that surrounded her, but as long as she defied her mother's wishes, she was powerless, forced to creep about like a thief in the night. Bitterly, she resolved that such an oppressive system was not worth conforming to.

After what seemed an endless journey, the Princess finally reached the teleportation chamber. Miraculously, she had not encountered a single person on her midnight journey. Heart pounding, Serenity carefully pushed open the door. Had her mother stationed guards there?

The room was empty. Serenity breathed a sigh of relief and went inside, leaving the door ajar behind her. Apparently, the Queen did not expect her daughter to follow her beloved. The Princess stood still for a moment, her eyes roaming the blank marble walls. Endymion had been taken to this very room to be exiled to Earth. It was here that... it... had happened.

Serenity's hand drifted to her throat and she caressed the side of her neck below her ear. None of the Sailor Soldiers would tell her what had happened to the stable hand, but she knew it had been something dreadful. The memory of the pain that had struck her own body still made her shudder with its force. Venus had left the Princess' chambers immediately to investigate and had returned... changed, somehow. Subdued. Beaten.

The Moon Princess took a deep breath and turned back to the control panel set into the wall. At her touch on the flat crystal, the teleportation platform hummed to life, a bright column of light erupting from its center and flowing upward into the ceiling. The glow shone with every color of the rainbow, shifting and twisting like a kaleidoscope, awaiting the Princess' command to specify which planet it should link to. At the control panel, Serenity pressed the key combination for Earth.

Nothing happened.

Shaking out her trembling hands, Serenity steadied herself and entered the code again, more carefully this time.

The system did not respond. The shaft of light over the teleportation platform remained stubbornly

Against All Odds

neutral, an indistinct swirl of all the planets' signature colors. Princess Serenity began to feel sick. Trying to remain calm, she pressed the control panel again and again to no avail, her breath becoming choked with restrained tears. This was the only barrier and the only gateway, and it would not open.

Consumed by desperation, Serenity did not notice the door moving until a head of blonde hair appeared around its edge. She started guiltily, springing back from the wall and wiping the budding tears from the corners of her eyes as Sailor Venus stepped into the room. She faced the soldier boldly, trembling with many emotions, none of them regret. Serenity would not deny the truth of what she wanted to do.

"The codes were changed that same night," Sailor Venus informed her in a quiet voice, her eyes downcast, veiled by long pale lashes below her gold tiara. "I am sorry."

"Let me through," Serenity demanded in as firm a tone as she could manage, her fists clenched at her sides. "I have to see him."

Slowly, the orange-suited soldier raised her head. Her blue eyes filled with pity as she took in the sight of her Princess, pale and shaking from weakness and illness yet as bold and determined as any monarch could ever be. Serenity had tried friendship, she had tried evoking sympathy, and now she tried strength.

"I cannot." With those words, Sailor Venus swallowed a curse on her duty, her title, her oaths and the very structure of the Silver Alliance itself, a cruel world where the innocent yearnings of two hearts were denied by the hands of lifelong friends.

In that moment, the bars slammed down around Serenity for good, the last hope of escape gone. She was trapped, a prisoner in marble and silver, a plaything of destiny doomed to always be controlled by others. Frustrated rage boiled up from her confined soul, the aching longing that plagued her day and night seething into anger. With a dreadful shudder, Princess Serenity screamed.

All her restraint shattered. She wailed and shrieked, tears boiling down her cheeks as she fluttered between fury and despair. She beat her fists against the control panel, the walls, the floor. She howled in her agony as her soul cried out its ceaseless demand for the company of Endymion, a wrenching desire she could not sate. When her fingers began to tear at her own white dress and the lengths of silver hair at her sides, she felt several firm pairs of hands upon her.

Despite her struggles, the four Sailor Soldiers wrestled the hysterical woman to her feet and held her arms tightly so she could not injure herself. Serenity writhed as if possessed by a demon, but the combined strength of the warriors was more than enough to control one Lunarian.

They could not, however, calm her. No soothing words had any effect on the anguished Princess and her cries echoed throughout the marble corridors as she was half-led, half-carried back toward her chambers. The soldiers could not say the only words that could cure Serenity. They could not tell her she would see her lover again.

The journey to the Princess' rooms seemed to take an eternity. Frightened servants awakened by the noise peered cautiously out of doorways, but at the sight of the Sailor Soldiers, they immediately returned to their beds to lie awake and wonder. Sailor Venus gritted her teeth as she did her best to shield the wailing Moon Princess from view. It would be almost impossible to prevent rumors from spreading now.

By the time they reached the guarded suite, Serenity's misery had dissolved into a burst of tears, a behavior far easier to manage. Sailor Mercury had her arm around the crystal-haired woman and was speaking to her in quiet, calming tones, and it seemed to be having an effect. Leaving the Princess in Mercury's capable hands, Venus lingered outside to collect her thoughts as the other three soldiers escorted their charge inside.

Ignoring the sentries posted on either side of the large doors, the blonde sailor-suited soldier leaned back against a nearby wall, heaving a deep sigh. The chambers of the nobility were soundproof and the corridor was now silent, but Venus knew Princess Serenity was just beyond the marble still drowning in her misery. She shuddered with the force of Serenity's pain, its depth still sending shocks through her empathic senses despite the current distance between them. Venus knew what the unfortunate young woman was feeling far more intimately than anyone else; every time she laid her hands on the Moon Princess, a hollow and aching despair filled her heart.

The unease Venus felt was made worse by the knowledge that loneliness and sadness were not the only feelings causing the turmoil in Serenity's soul. There was something else, a deeper, more primal need

surging beneath the emotions, and it had been growing steadily stronger until it nearly burned the orange-suited soldier with its intensity. The Princess suffered from a desire for her lover in the truest sense of the word; she hungered not only for his company, but his body and the pleasures of the flesh. The awakening of her adult longings could only mean one thing. She had given herself, her entire self, to her Earth-born beloved.

It was to be expected, really. Venus knew she should not have been surprised. Serenity was in love, true love, and she was an adult, perfectly capable of making her own choices about her body and its passions. Still, she had been such an innocent before - or had the potential for this flame been there all along, just waiting for a spark? If the Queen ever found out -

"Venus."

The blonde soldier was so severely startled by the unexpected voice that she felt as if her heart would stop, but she calmed herself as quickly as she could manage. Venus had been so absorbed in her own thoughts that she had not even noticed the small entourage approaching, but judging by the firm, practiced, straight-backed stance of the door guards, there had been nothing sudden about it. Taking a deep breath, Sailor Venus turned to face Queen Serenity, the very last person she wished to talk to when she had just been thinking about the sexual exploits of the Princess.

"My Queen."

"How is she?" the monarch asked quietly. As she looked at the leader of the Sailor Soldiers, the Moon Queen's usual mask faded away, leaving an anxious and sorrowful mother terribly worried about the state of her child. Venus hesitated, uncertain of how honest the Queen wanted her to be.

A brief, meaningful glance from Queen Serenity had the door guards and her own retinue retreating to a respectful distance. Completely honest, then.

"Shattered," Sailor Venus admitted heavily, knowing that a couple who chose to unite their bodies could never truly be separated by force.

"Were we too late?" the lavender-haired woman inquired apprehensively, her hands clasped tightly together as if she were trying to avoid wringing them. Venus nearly choked, her mind still focused on the physical yearnings that had been ignited within the Princess. How could she tell any mother that her child had taken that step, let alone the Moon Queen?

"Was their love... true?" Serenity wondered aloud. Ah, so that was it. The Sailor Soldier disguised her heaved sigh of relief as the heavy exhalation of a weighty burden. Unfortunately, the answer to that question would be just as difficult for the Queen to accept as the physical nature of her daughter's relationship would have been.

"From the moment they met, it was too late to separate them," Venus confessed quietly. "They are soulmates."

The Queen stared at her for a long moment, unable to mask her disbelief and surprise. The blonde soldier hung her head, unable to tolerate the piercing eyes of her monarch as the truth was finally brought forward.

"You cannot be serious," Serenity prompted.

"In the garden, I laid my hands on them," Venus reminded her. "Their hearts beat as one, my Queen."

"That is impossible," the Moon Queen scoffed dismissively. "She is Lunarian. Our pulse beats faster than the hearts of Earth-children."

"I am aware of that, my Queen, but it is true," the soldier of emotion insisted, trying to keep her voice low enough not to be overheard by the nearby servants. "His pulse is slightly quicker than normal, hers slightly slower, both hearts compromising to meet the other. Against all odds, they are destined lovers, planned by the stars themselves. I am Venusian, my Queen. This sort of miraculous match is the stuff of our oldest legends."

For the first time in quite a while, the lavender-haired woman did not know how to respond. It was unthinkable. Had destiny truly chosen her daughter as its pawn, to defy the Queen's own direction at every turn? If what Sailor Venus said was true, nothing in anyone's power could shatter Princess Serenity's love for that Earth-born servant, not even the Silver Crystal itself. Nevertheless, the Queen could not permit their romance to continue. Fate could not win this time.

Against All Odds

"You know my hands are tied in this matter," the Moon Queen said. Sailor Venus simply looked at her, sad blue eyes expressing more than words could say. True love was sacred to Venusians, and the breaking of a destined romance was a quite grievous sin.

"The situation in this system is approaching the breaking point," Queen Serenity reminded her daughter's chief guardian, beginning a leisurely walk down the corridor. "Queen Elana is more than willing to share information, but I suspect she is ignorant of much that is happening within her own borders."

"Artemis tells me the four generals of Earth have returned to the Golden City," Venus commented. Although the misery of the Princess was rapidly becoming a painful thorn in her side, she was eager to escape that line of conversation before the Queen could question her further. "Surely the military presence they have established will be able to restore order?"

"Let us hope so," the Queen replied. "You have confidence in their abilities, Venus? Have you completed your study of the four men?"

"Indeed." Struggling against the hint of color that rose to her cheeks, the blonde cleared her throat awkwardly. She had spent quite a bit more time than the Queen expected examining the profile of one Earth general in particular. "I have no objections to their taking up residence on the Moon," Venus rushed on hurriedly. "They are what are referred to as 'mages' on Earth, but even their strongest abilities should be no match for the Sailor Soldiers."

"All right, then." If Queen Serenity noticed the woman's slight blush as she spoke of the Earth generals, she showed no sign, staring straight ahead as they strolled down the corridor with the monarch's attendants following at a distance. "Something is stirring on that planet, Venus; something dark that I cannot identify. The force that was spawned from the sun definitely struck Earth, but my informants have brought me no details thus far. Mercury is doing her best with Artemis' limited data. Have the other soldiers been briefed on the situation?"

"We were awaiting your approval, my Queen." It was not only that. Since the night of the stable hand's exile, the supposed leader of the Sailor Soldiers had felt ill at ease around Jupiter and Mars. Even now, the memory of that dreadful night chilled her, the image of the sadistic scene she had interrupted sending shivers down Venus' spine. She was not eager to speak to anyone capable of wearing such a gleeful expression while causing someone pain.

Oblivious to the orange-suited soldier's thoughts, Queen Serenity paused beside an open balcony, still pondering the mysterious solar activity. Her eyes swept the midnight landscape beyond the Moon Castle walls, from the gardens to the distant lights of the city; lights that represented civilization, life, countless people who depended on her to keep them safe from harm. How could she protect them from an enemy she did not understand?

"You may explain matters to the Sailor Soldiers at your earliest convenience," the monarch said at last, turning to face Venus once more. "In the face of the unknown, it is best for all key players to be prepared."

At sunrise, Sailor Jupiter met Mercury at the doors to Princess Serenity's chambers. Jupiter's eyes were dull with weariness from sitting watch all night, but she was still as awake and alert as it was possible to be under the circumstances. Even so, she was relieved to see her replacement had arrived on time.

"Any change?" Mercury asked quietly, slipping into the sitting room. Jupiter shook her head.

"She's been silent as death all night. Don't worry," the green-suited soldier added quickly as Mercury's eyes widened in horror. "I looked in on her a few times. She's only sleeping."

"At least she's finally getting some rest." The blue-haired woman squeezed the books in her arms as if for reassurance. "I'm hoping to interest her in resuming her studies today."

"Good luck." Sailor Jupiter headed for the door. "I'll see you at the meeting."

When she was alone in the room, Sailor Mercury moved to the curtain that hid Serenity's bedroom from view and knocked lightly on the doorframe.

"Princess? Are you awake?"

Slowly, she pushed the chiffon drapery aside - and nearly dropped her books in shock. Serenity was

Against All Odds

not only awake, she was dressed and washed and nearly finished tying her hair into its usual buns. Seeing her visitor in the mirror on her dressing table, she turned around with a pleasant smile.

"Ah, Mercury!" she exclaimed warmly. "Is it that time already?"

"Princess!" the soldier burst out, unable to hide her surprise. "Are you all right?"

"Yes, yes," Serenity replied, waving a hand dismissively. Seeing Mercury's expression, she added more somberly, "I was being dreadfully silly, wasn't I? Don't worry, Mercury. I've realized there's no sense in dwelling on things that cannot be changed. I have a long life ahead of me and I need to stop wasting it." Her eyes were sad for a moment, but soon brightened again.

"Do me a favor, Mercury, and see that the Prince meets me for breakfast? I need to start spending more time with this man I'm going to marry!"

Caught completely off-guard, the blue-suited soldier could do little more than stammer an assent and stumble away to obey. Serenity turned back to the mirror to finish tying her hair, her heart filled with the delight of once again having a goal to accomplish. She was a woman on a mission.

The juice was far too sweet. It stuck to Princess Serenity's lips and tongue like treacle, coating her throat until she could barely speak. Or was it nervousness that was making her words raspy? No, she could practically see tiny crystals floating about in the red liquid. What, had they used an entire sack of Jovian sugar cane? She was amazed the goblet had not been stained.

"Enjoying your breakfast, Prince?" she asked with a smile as sweet as the repulsive juice in her hand.

"It is excellent as always, Princess," was the reply. Clearly he was lying. Not even Earth-children could possibly find this syrup disguised as a beverage palatable. Serenity could easily have requested an alternative, but on this occasion the juice served as a convenient test. Prince Endymion was still a slave to the whims of the Moon, at least in front of the servants. Although he did not want this marriage, he would not do anything to jeopardize it.

"I was thinking," Serenity said casually, "that I might ask Artemis to organize a hunt for you. I hear it's a pastime widely enjoyed on Earth and I'm sure several of the lords would love the opportunity to meet you."

The Earth Prince glanced up and Serenity caught a wistful look in his eyes, but his gaze soon became cold and empty again.

"Thank you, Princess," he said, returning to the plate of strange flat cakes he had added to the castle chef's repertoire, "but I would prefer to wait until my guardians can join me. It would not be the same without them."

Serenity nodded as sympathetically as she could manage, but she could no longer allow herself to feel much pity for this man. When she tried to show understanding, his responses were as cruel and heartless as ever. There no longer seemed to be any point in trying to get through to the Prince. Besides, with what she was about to do, she could not afford to bring empathy into the equation. She had to focus on what she wanted, and it was not this Endymion. He was a means to an end now and nothing more.

"It has been a while since you came to the Moon," she commented as she buttered a piece of bread. "Will your guardians be arriving soon?"

"As soon as they are able," Prince Endymion said dismissively, immediately raising the goblet of over-sweetened juice to his lips. This the Princess noted with interest. His manner was altogether too casual. Clearly he knew something, but was not about to reveal it. Her diplomatic training cried out for further analysis, but she pushed the curiosity aside. She had more important concerns at the moment.

"Well, you visit Earth often, do you not? I know it's not the same as having them here, but I trust that helps." She forced a gentle smile to her face and hurriedly set down her slice of bread as she realized she had nearly squeezed it flat. This was no time for nerves. It was the moment of truth, her chance to see if all her lessons had been truly learned.

"When is your next visit planned?" Butterflies swarmed in Princess Serenity's stomach and threatened to leap up her throat. She swallowed them. It was just as she had practiced: wide, glassy eyes and a pleasant, innocent smile. It had worked on Sailor Mercury and it would work on this man as well.

Confidence was the key.

"Next week." The Prince was cutting his sentences short again, the usual sign that he was tired of Serenity's conversation. His plate was nearly empty; she had to make her move soon or lose the chance. Taking a slow breath, she forced herself to say the words before she could reconsider.

"I would be pleased if you would invite me to accompany you," the Princess said, rather amazed that the words came out as smoothly as they did. It seemed she had some of her mother's skills after all. "I would like very much to see Earth." She tightened her grip on the dining utensils to prevent her hands from shaking as Prince Endymion stared at her for a moment, clearly caught off-guard.

Now she would find out if he would choose the easy or the difficult path. Serenity had no doubt that he wanted nothing more than to refuse her, to keep the Golden Kingdom as his sanctuary of freedom from the unwanted betrothal, but could he deny the Princess of the Moon? Would he risk exposing his dislike of his fiancée when several pairs of eyes and ears were focused on him, or argue that it was too dangerous, thus revealing whatever trouble was keeping his guardians on the planet?

"I would not want to distract you from your duties," the Earth Prince said at last. His eyes had hardened; he had chosen a course of action. Serenity laughed gaily as she tried to determine what tactic he had selected.

"Contrary to what you may believe," she said lightly, "a princess' time is seldom filled, even on the Moon. Not with anything important, anyway." She tried a mischievous smile, but the Prince's face remained as impassive as always.

"Your days are filled enough that I see you less than my guardians, I daresay."

So, once again this was his tactic, a plot that was now familiar to Serenity. Prince Endymion knew the Moon Princess had a kind heart and sought to distract her from her request by turning her thoughts into regrets.

This time, however, Princess Serenity's smirk did not flicker, not even for a moment. There was a time when such words would have made her pause with guilt, but she knew better now. She had tried to befriend this man, had shown him nothing but kindness, and on more than one occasion he had shot down her gestures with scorn and clear refusals. Enough was enough. A more important man was waiting for Serenity, counting on her not to fail. Resolute action was her only chance to see her beloved again. It was time for more drastic steps.

Princess Serenity raised the goblet of syrupy juice to her lips and drained the revolting draught. It took a few extra swallows to clear the thickness from her throat, but it had to be done. Sure enough, as soon as she set the chalice down upon the table one of the servant girls approached to refill it. Serenity's breath caught in her throat as the liquid poured into the goblet. Her heart pounded so loudly in her chest that it seemed the entire room could hear it. She tried to swallow but the storm of butterflies was too great. It was now or never.

She kept her eyes locked on Prince Endymion's impassive face as her hand moved slightly and the chalice toppled over.

Thick red liquid gushed over the tabletop. There was a gasp above Serenity's shoulder as the servant quickly pulled her pitcher of juice upright, but it had happened so suddenly that quite a bit of additional liquid poured out over the table. It spread over the Princess' plate and the bread board, swiftly soaking everything within reach.

At the last moment, the Moon Princess remembered to leap out of her chair in feigned surprise, backing swiftly away from the table before the red juice began dripping over its edge. All would be ruined if she were hustled away to her rooms to change a stained dress. The rest of the attendants surged forward with cries of dismay and ready towels, descending upon the mess with the fervor of horrified embarrassment.

Steeling her resolve, Princess Serenity glided smoothly to the other end of the table, where Prince Endymion sat now looking as if all four Sailor Soldiers were bearing down on him. She could not see her own face and indeed, she was glad of that, for she knew if she caught a glimpse of her own severe, determined expression she would be frightened by how much she resembled her mother.

With all the servants busily soaking up puddles of liquefied sugar and berating the poor girl holding the pitcher, the royal couple-to-be was quite forgotten for the moment. No eye even roamed in their

direction as Princess Serenity leaned close to Prince Endymion's ear. He jolted away, as if frightened of what she might do, but the sturdy chair held him prisoner.

"I want to go to Earth," she said in a smooth low voice. She clenched her fists at her sides to stop them shaking, the blood that was rushing in her ears nearly deafening. "You will take me there, or I will tell my mother that I wish to break our engagement."

Obviously, this was an empty threat; Queen Serenity would drag her daughter to the ceremony personally if she had to, but Prince Endymion did not know that. One wide-eyed look of horror from the Earth Prince was all it took to confirm this fact.

Before her shell could crack with sympathy, Princess Serenity turned away from him and distracted herself by rushing to defend the innocent servant girl from the harsh words of the head attendant. She was not yet so desperate from love that she would let a helpless young woman take the blame for something that was not at all her fault.

The official invitation was issued that very afternoon. Princess Serenity's plan was a success. Any guilt she may have felt over blackmailing the Earth Prince was soon erased by excitement. She was going to Earth. She had a chance to see Endymion again.

All the politics that had locked Princess Serenity into an unwanted marriage now worked in her favor. Although her mother suspected Serenity had a hand in this invitation, she could not deny Prince Endymion's request without insulting the Golden Kingdom, unless she could provide an indisputable reason for the refusal. The Moon Queen was not about to reveal that her daughter had a secret lover or that that Moon Kingdom was aware of the unrest on Earth. Without those factors, Prince Endymion's request that his fiance visit his home planet was perfectly reasonable. There was no way around it. Fortunately for Queen Serenity, nobody would think it strange if all four of her daughter's guardians accompanied her on the trip.

When the day of departure finally arrived, the Moon Princess could hardly contain herself. Exiled lover or no, the opportunity to travel to another world was a rare thrill indeed and she was so excited she could not help but fidget as she waited in the teleportation chamber.

They had all assembled there: the four Sailor Soldiers, the Prince and Princess, and a small band of servants who were currently engaged in piling the royal couple's baggage on the teleportation platform. The servants would not be accompanying them on their trip; the travelers' needs would be met by the staff of the Golden Kingdom's royal palace. There was, however, one hidden addition to the party - a small white cat with a crescent moon on its forehead, crouched silently within a padded crate.

Queen Serenity had come to see them off, or rather, to issue a final warning to her daughter.

"Do not think I do not know what you are doing," she muttered beneath the hubbub of the Sailor Soldiers giving last-minute instructions to the various staff members under their command. Smiling innocently, the Princess began to move away, but her mother caught her by the elbow.

"The soldiers will be at your side whenever possible," Queen Serenity said in a low, even voice, "and Artemis will have his eye on you at all other times. Do not get any foolish ideas."

"Why, Mother, I'm sure I don't know what you mean," the Princess said brightly, putting on her sweetest smile. Elation at her first triumph over her mother had made her bold. Nothing could prevent her from going to Earth now. "I'll only be gone a few days, I'll be perfectly safe."

Queen Serenity's eyes narrowed, but she could not speak freely in the presence of the servants and the Earth Prince, who stood waiting on the platform.

"Do not forget your place, daughter," she said in a dangerous voice. The Princess tried to keep her expression neutral, as she had practiced, but her smile faltered. Never had the Queen looked at her the way she was now. This was more than disappointment. It was cold, bitter, angry determination. Her mouth was set in a firm thin line, her eyes devoid of any spark of warmth. This was the face of an enemy of war.

Princess Serenity hurriedly looked away and stepped forward, but the look on her mother's face refused to fade from memory. It was undeniable now. The rift between them had become permanent.

It was far too late to worry about such things, however. The Moon Princess shrugged her shoulders in an attempt to shake off the tension as she approached the teleportation platform, trying to concentrate

instead on events at hand. She was going to Earth. For the first time, she would walk upon the planet in the Moon's sky and see its wonders with her own eyes.

Forcing a serene smile back to her lips, she stepped up to the platform and took her place beside her fiancé. Prince Endymion was not bothering to mask his expression. His features were caught between eager impatience and nervous dread. The Princess' elation was such that she could not bring herself to feel even a twinge of guilt. He was her ticket to Earth, and besides, he had taken up residence on her world; why should she not visit his?

She kept her eyes locked on a point slightly to the left of her mother's face as the Sailor Soldiers assembled behind her on the platform. Even in her moment of triumph, she could not bring herself to meet those furious eyes again.

A technician keyed in the proper code and a soft golden light rose around the group on the platform. Princess Serenity suppressed a giggle of childlike delight at the shimmering column now surrounding her, turning her pale skin a sweet bronze more like that of Earth-children.

It was not as rich a tone as her beloved Endymion's, however. His smiling face with its deep shadowy eyes was the sole thing on her mind as the technician pressed the button that would send her to the planet of his origin.

The light grew brighter, blindingly brighter, erasing Queen Serenity and everything else in the room with a vibrant, blazing flash. The Moon Princess felt as if she were being erased as well, her entire body being disintegrated by the light, her frantic pulse vanishing as even her heart dissolved into the nothingness of the void. There was no pain, but for one terrifying moment she did not exist.

A beat later, reality came rushing back. The light vanished. Air rushed into Serenity's lungs as sensation was restored to arms and legs that had suddenly reformed into being. She breathed deeply, clenching and releasing her fists just for the sake of feeling her fingers again as she relished the pressure of the solid floor beneath her feet.

It was dark, and not only due to the absence of the teleportation beam. Princess Serenity glanced around at walls of gray stone, devoid of windows and illuminated only by torches of open flame set in mounted holders. Colorful tapestries covered much of the gray, but compared to the white marble and light crystals of her mother's castle, it felt rather oppressive.

The Moon Princess took a step forward - and stumbled as her foot did not lift as high from the ground as she had willed it to. Sailor Jupiter was at her side immediately, one arm wrapped securely around Serenity's waist to support her.

"I'm afraid the Earth's gravity is stronger than that of the Moon," a voice explained. Looking up, Serenity discovered King Arton waiting to welcome them, accompanied by half a dozen servants.

"I thank you for your hospitality," Princess Serenity said hurriedly, anxious not to offend the rulers of Earth. Although Lunarians were considered the superior race, she had no right to assume power over the monarchy of this world, nor did she wish to. Repulsive as their son might be, she had no quarrel with the King and Queen of the Golden Kingdom. Serenity dipped into a curtsy, but her limbs felt so heavy that Jupiter was obliged to lift her by the arm so she could rise again. The Princess' cheeks burned with embarrassment, but Arton seemed to have been expecting this.

"It is our pleasure," he said smoothly, nodding to Serenity in return. Although he spoke in the plural, he was the only other member of the royal family present. Queen Elana was nowhere to be seen. Prince Endymion seemed to notice this as well.

"Father," he said by way of a greeting as he stepped forward off the platform. The two men exchanged nods, but did not embrace. "Is Mother otherwise engaged?"

The Earth King's dark eyes flickered over all of the visitors briefly before he returned his attention to his son.

"I'm afraid Queen Elana is... not well." The pause was incredibly brief, barely a break in Arton's voice, but Serenity caught it. There was more to the Queen's absence than a mere illness.

"There is no need for concern, my son," King Arton continued swiftly upon seeing the alarm in Prince Endymion's expression. "She is resting today, so it would be best if you did not visit her just now, but I am certain she will be fit to attend the ball this evening."

"A ball!" Sailor Venus said brightly, smiling at Princess Serenity. "That sounds lovely." King Arton's

Against All Odds

serious expression became slightly warmer.

"Indeed, we must properly welcome our visitors," the dark-haired ruler commented. "I will not have it said that high society is any less grand in the Golden Kingdom than it is in the Silver. In fact, you may find our nobility is more pompous, I daresay."

All those present who were of high birth chuckled a bit at this. Now that she was chained to a partner who loathed to touch her, Serenity no longer found balls as enticing as she once had, but she forced herself to smile all the same. It would not do to insult the Golden Kingdom and seal off her ability to visit the Earth.

"Christophe will show you to your rooms," King Arton announced, extending his arm to indicate a handsome young manservant in blue silk robes trimmed with gold.

At this, the assembled servants hurried forward to gather up the luggage that was piled on the platform. Serenity was forced to lean heavily on Sailor Jupiter's arm as she walked toward the door, her back aching with the effort of holding herself upright. She noted with a twinge of jealousy that none of the Sailor Soldiers seemed affected, accustomed as they were to traveling among the worlds.

At this rate, the ball that evening would be more of a chore than a pleasure, regardless of her fiance's attitude toward her. Perhaps the Earth Prince would be more inclined to dance with Serenity when the pressures of his home world's society were on him. Even so, she knew she would be looking for her own excuses to avoid spending more time with Prince Endymion than propriety required. He was not the reason she was here.

Endymion. Her exiled lover had passed through this very room not long ago. In his absence, it seemed everything reminded Princess Serenity of the Earth-born stable hand. Even the dark hair and charcoal eyes of King Arton, oddly enough. Strange that she had not noticed the similarities between the two men before. Of course, her longing for Endymion was surely exaggerating whatever slight resemblance there might have been.

The Great Hall of the Golden Kingdom's palace surely rivaled that of the Moon Castle, at least in size. The walls were still dark stone, but above the tapestries tall windows stretched to the ceiling, letting in the freshness of the cool evening air. Fireplaces set into the walls gave off a warmth that balanced well with the breeze, keeping the room at a comfortably neutral temperature. For tonight's festivities, the hall had been decorated from top to bottom, gold and silver bunting lining everything from the buffet table to the high arches beneath the roof. Dancers from all the Earth's kingdoms filled the floor, skirts and suits of every color twirling in patterns that made the room resemble a whirling flower garden.

Despite it all, Princess Serenity was bored. It wasn't from lack of dancing; King Arton's disapproving stare had pinned Prince Endymion to the dance floor until Serenity herself finally begged for a moment of rest. It was the entire situation, every detail of it. All the preparation and ceremony of formal occasions had once entranced the Moon Princess, but now she found it meaningless and tiresome. There was no peaceful solitude, no moment to relax. She had not even had a tour of the grounds yet. The entire afternoon had been spent on introductions and preparations for the ball in stuffy elegant rooms.

Endymion had always thought her beautiful even without hours of primping.

Now she leaned listlessly on one arm of her chair, trying to look content and dreaming of the following day when she might slip away and explore. It seemed Earth society regarded royalty as separate and unapproachable. Although plenty of nobles had crowded around to be introduced to her as she danced with the Prince, now that she was seated no one came near.

She had given her fiance leave to go and converse with his father, who was seated in one of the twin thrones at the center of the dais. The Earth Prince had been scanning the room as if looking for someone and although he tried to hide his search, the jerking motions of his head had been getting on Serenity's nerves. At least in his absence she had some semblance of a moment's peace. The collage of swaying dancers was nearly hypnotizing, until a familiar orange and white uniform broke free of the crowd and headed in her direction.

Sailor Venus was in full form this evening. As one of the Princess' guardians and an emissary of the Moon, she was determined to make the best possible impression, which to Venus meant plenty of the

endearing pheromones her people were famous for. Even at a distance, Serenity could feel the glamour on the orange-suited soldier and had to chuckle as Venus disappointed several would-be dance partners on her way to the Princess' seat. It was rather unfair, setting a Venusian on an ignorant world unprepared for her charms.

"I'd tone it down a bit if I were you, Venus," Serenity remarked in a low voice. "Break too many hearts and you'll have my first visit leaving a sour taste in the Golden Kingdom's mouth." She smirked a bit, but Venus' captivating smile was immediately replaced by a concerned expression.

"Too much, do you think?" she asked seriously.

"Don't worry so over the Earth's opinion of you," the Moon Princess said lightly. "You're from the Moon; they're grateful just to have you among them." Indeed, dressing Serenity for the ball had taken twice as long as necessary, being that the servants were utterly awed by her presence. "Besides, if you keep on like this you'll have marriage proposals lining up by midnight," the Princess teased.

"Well, where's the harm in that?" the blonde challenged, the dazzling smile that captivated so many lighting up her face once more. "A lady needs to keep her options open. It's all for the good of Venus."

She punctuated this statement with a flashy wink and a blown kiss in Princess Serenity's direction. The Princess smiled and laughed even as the shell of false happiness she wore inside cracked. Even the most minor flirtations had to be for the good of one's planet. Even those of a representative of the planet of love.

Sailor Venus saw through the mask. Serenity could see the change in the soldier's eyes. It seemed her polished queen's demeanor needed more practice.

"Hey, now," Venus said brightly, her cheery glow not fading for a moment. "What is this trip but a chance to be free and enjoy ourselves for a while? There are hundreds of new people to meet and new things to do! Let's take advantage of it!"

"That's good advice," said a strange voice. A small group of uniformed men passed Venus and Serenity on the dais on their way to the King and Prince, but one of them had stopped just behind the orange-suited soldier. The soldier whom, at the first syllable from the man's mouth, had frozen as still as stone. Serenity stared up at Venus expectantly, but the blonde had gone absolutely stiff, her blue eyes distant and unblinking, her smile half-faded.

After a moment the man cleared his throat. "I don't believe we've been introduced," he prompted.

"Oh!" Sailor Venus blinked, the familiarity of protocol shaking her back into reality. Still, Serenity saw her take a deep breath and pull herself together before she turned to face the man for the first time. Was that a blush on the soldier's cheeks?

"I am Sailor Venus, leader of Queen Serenity's Sailor Soldiers," the blonde rattled off, but her words were not quite smooth. She dipped her head respectfully to the man before extending her arm toward the crystal-haired woman seated beside her. "Allow me to present Princess Serenity of the Moon Kingdom."

"I am pleased to make your acquaintance at last," the man said, bowing low before the Moon Princess in a polished swoop. "I am Kunzite, the Golden Kingdom's Middle-Eastern commander."

"The pleasure is mine," Serenity said automatically, the ritual of words allowing her the freedom to focus her attention on Sailor Venus' strange behavior. The soldier seemed torn between trying to demurely look away from the Earth-born commander and being unable to tear her eyes from him. Serenity couldn't understand it. Kunzite was not bad-looking for an Earth man, with his long snowy hair and sharp gray uniform, but Venus had certainly seen better. It was not like her to be so easily thrown off form by a man.

"I do hope you are enjoying yourself, Princess. I would hate for your first impression of Earth to be a poor one." The man's face seemed pleasant enough at first glance, with the hovering half-smile that played upon his lips, but Serenity recognized the eyes of a seasoned diplomat. Here was a man who cared foremost for his kingdom and his position in it, like everyone else with noble blood. She would treat him, then, how he expected to be treated.

"No need to worry; the ball is lovely," the Moon Princess assured him with a practiced smile of her own. "I fear the gravity of Earth is a bit too much for me, however. I needed to rest for a while." Kunzite nodded understandingly.

"I hear the Moon's gravity is so gentle, one can nearly fly from place to place," he commented. Serenity's response to this was a ripple of light laughter.

Against All Odds

"I'm afraid not, although that sounds delightful," the Princess said. "It is quite a bit lighter than Earth, enough so that I still notice the difference now. Here, even my hair is an uncomfortable weight," she bemoaned, lifting a stream of silver in one hand. Indeed, it was nearly giving her a headache. She understood now why no one on Earth had hair as long as hers.

"I am sorry to hear that, Princess," Kunzite said politely. "I do hope you will be able to adjust." Serenity gave him another pleasant smile.

"I'm sure I'll be fine after a little rest," she said brightly.

"In the meantime, perhaps Sailor Venus would honor me with a dance." Kunzite turned toward the orange-suited soldier, who until now had been standing in uncharacteristically awkward silence. For a moment, Venus looked as if she had been punched in the stomach, but she recovered quickly.

"Certainly," she said, inclining her head in a slight nod. "Serenity, won't you and the Prince accompany us?"

"Perhaps later; I'm afraid I'm not up to more dancing right now," the Princess replied honestly. Her legs still felt as if bricks had been tied to them.

"Well, I wouldn't want to leave the Princess here alone," Venus said then, a bit too casually for someone who should have been disappointed. She sounded almost relieved that Serenity had refused.

"It's quite all right, I'll be fine on my own," the Moon Princess assured the orange-suited soldier, but even as she said the words she wished she hadn't. There was a smile on Sailor Venus' face but the eyes she had turned to Serenity were filled with a desperate panic. What was wrong? Did Venus know something dreadful about Kunzite that she had not shared with Serenity? The soldier was usually so smooth and in-control around men, but she was acting as timid and nervous as Sailor Mercury.

Indeed, it was the blue-suited soldier's misfortune to approach the group at that very moment. Sailor Venus nearly pounced on the surprised woman, linking an arm through one of Mercury's before she had even greeted them.

"Do you have a partner for my friend, Kunzite?"

The general didn't miss a beat.

"Of course. Kindly wait here a moment." With a slight bow to the Moon Princess, Kunzite turned and strolled off toward the men now clustered around the Earth King and Prince.

"What was that all about?" Serenity asked as soon as the general was out of earshot. "Venus, are you all right?"

"If you think I'm going to dance with some Earth-born stranger, you are sorely mistaken," Mercury added, folding her arms.

"I'm sorry, Mercury!" The other women had never seen Venus so distressed. She fidgeted ceaselessly, wringing her hands. "I hoped I could dissuade him, but it seems he's more stubborn than I thought." Mercury's eyes narrowed.

"I don't see the problem," the blue-suited soldier said, confused. "You've always been the most eager to explore relationships with the nobility of other worlds and the commanders of the Golden Kingdom certainly seem worth your notice. Besides, haven't you been investigating them for the Queen?"

This was news to Princess Serenity, but after a brief moment of surprise, it made sense. These were the four guardians who were to join Prince Endymion on the Moon. Of course her mother would want to know every detail about them.

"That's exactly the problem!" Venus protested, her eyes darting nervously in the direction of the men. "As I've been studying them, they've all become, well, familiar, to me, and... Kunzite... It would be awkward," she finished uneasily. Now it was Serenity's turn to be confused.

"Wouldn't that make it easier?" she asked. Serenity leaned toward the soldiers and lowered her voice. "You've always said that men are easy to manipulate once you understand them," she added, blushing.

Undeniably useful as Venus' power was, Serenity had never quite approved of the way the soldier coerced men who were practically strangers into doing her bidding. As the innocent Serenity had been a year ago, it had embarrassed her to witness it. Now that she had experienced love, she found herself mildly offended on behalf of the helpless males Venus so easily controlled.

"Anyway, that glamour of yours-"

Against All Odds

"Won't work on him," Venus broke in. "Not on Kunzite. It just won't, I know it," she said quickly before her friends' puzzled glances could turn into questions. "Please don't send me out there alone with him, Mercury," she pleaded. A hint of her usual mischief returned to the blonde's blue eyes. "If he finds you a partner, you won't be able to refuse. It will reflect badly on the Moon Kingdom."

"Yes, I suppose you're right about that," Mercury grumbled, glaring at her fellow soldier. "You are positively dangerous, and not only to men," she added in response to Venus' relieved grin of triumph. "If he steps on my feet even once, watch yourself around water from now on."

"You may not need to worry, Mercury," the Moon Princess commented, glancing over at the Earth men crowded around the throne. "It seems they're no more eager to dance than you are."

Indeed, even from a distance it was clear that Kunzite was having trouble convincing any of his fellow generals to partner the soldier in blue. The glances the Earth-born men were shooting at the women and their Princess were far from friendly. It was clear that the Earth's mistrust of the Moon Kingdom was not limited to the common citizenry.

The only one not looking at the visitors with disdain was King Arton, who smiled pleasantly at the women when he noticed them watching. He seemed to be at ease, enjoying the ball as much as any of the guests, but the second throne beside him was noticeably vacant. Despite what Arton had said upon their arrival, Queen Elana was not in attendance. Something was definitely amiss.

Princess Serenity knew her mother would expect her to find out the secret, for the benefit of the Moon Kingdom. At this point, however, Serenity didn't care. The last thing she wanted to spend her visit doing was helping the woman who had separated her from her one true love. Her hands clenched into fists on the arms of her chair as she remembered that horrible night in the garden. The woman who was supposed to love her the most had caused her the most pain.

The Moon Princess shook her head firmly. Now was not the time to dwell on such things. Kunzite was speaking intently to one of the other generals, a rather young man with long blond hair tied in a ponytail. The blond looked about to object, but the Earth King added a few words and the man finally nodded.

"What's all this?" a familiar voice asked from Princess Serenity's elbow. She turned to discover the other two Sailor Soldiers had joined Venus and Mercury on the dais.

Serenity set her jaw and her eyes grew cold. Since the day her beloved Endymion was banished to Earth, the Princess had not felt comfortable around Jupiter and Mars. Venus showed some understanding of her pain and Mercury just wanted her to be happy, but the other two women who had once been among Princess Serenity's best friends had become hardhearted strangers. Before all this began, she would never have imagined Sailor Mars might lay a hand on her in anger. Now she knew it was only her future crown that prevented Jupiter from doing the same. Still, the Moon Princess could not allow the people of Earth to notice the rift that had developed between her and two of her guardians. Although she maintained a resolute silence, a pleasant expression was fixed firmly to her face.

"Don't tell me you're tired of dancing already, Venus!" Jupiter exclaimed incredulously.

Despite her discomfort in the presence of the darker half of her team, Venus' face lit up upon seeing their numbers had now increased to four. Her triumph was short-lived as, anticipating her next move, Kunzite immediately convinced the remaining two Earth generals to join him. By the time Venus glanced back toward the men, all four were heading in her direction. A smug grin was tugging at Kunzite's face, and the skill with which the other generals were hiding their dismay would have won awards from Queen Serenity.

"Princess, Sailor Soldiers, allow me to introduce my fellow commanders," Kunzite said smoothly, dipping into another elegant bow. "We would all be honored if you would join us for a dance." Serenity's trained ears caught the slight emphasis on the word "all," as well as the fleeting roll of the ponytailed man's eyes. Despite his hidden distaste for the visitors, the blond stepped briskly up to Mercury and offered her his arm.

"Zoisite, European commander," he announced. "Might I have your name?"

"Sailor Mercury." The soldier had to stifle a giggle. Surely everyone on the ten worlds could identify the legendary Sailor Soldiers by suit color alone. Clearly this attention to protocol was some sort of rebellion against the unwanted contact with Queen Serenity's warriors. Still, Mercury's cheeks reddened a

bit as she slipped her arm through Zoisite's. She usually only danced when it could not be avoided; romance was not one of her main pursuits.

Not openly, anyway.

By contrast, Mars and Jupiter seemed all too eager to return to the dance floor, although the looks on their faces made it clear they viewed this as a task to be gotten over with. The two women pulled their partners down the steps of the dais before they could even introduce themselves. As Mercury and Zoisite followed, only Venus and Kunzite were left with the Moon Princess.

"Are you sure you won't join us, Princess?" Kunzite asked. "I am certain Endymion won't object to another dance with his lovely fiance."

A shiver ran through Serenity's body at the reminder of her unwanted engagement, but she forced herself to stay still, fighting the urge to bristle visibly. She felt her grip tighten on the arms of her chair. This was the first time she had heard the Earth Prince referred to without his title, which was a name that had previously been reserved for her true love.

Kunzite was watching her. His face still held that pleasant half-smile, but his eyes were intense, studying her reaction. Serenity was instantly struck by the knowledge that this was a critical moment. She felt the familiar glassy smile roll over her face like a curtain, all the lessons of her upbringing returning to hand.

"Quite sure," she said calmly, without a trace of unease in her voice or expression. "I'd like to rest a little while longer. Besides," she added, deciding to throw a playful twist and a slight smirk into her demeanor, "traditionally, it falls to the gentleman to ask the lady to dance, does it not?"

Now the intent look in Kunzite's eyes was replaced by a twinkle.

"Don't wait too long," he said lightly. "The Prince is actually quite shy." With a final polite nod, he turned and headed for the dance floor, leading Sailor Venus by the arm. Princess Serenity found herself desperately hoping whatever was troubling the blonde soldier wasn't clouding her judgment. It was obvious there was more to this encounter than met the eye.

It was all Venus could do to keep from trembling as Kunzite took one of her gloved hands in his and rested his other hand lightly on her waist. The musicians began a new song, and the pair slid into the crowd with barely a ripple, lost within moments among the sea of long skirts and fine suits. Venus felt Kunzite's gaze upon her and cursed the uniform she was bound to wear as a soldier. While practical in times of battle, the tight-fitting bodysuit left little to the imagination. At least she was granted the small blessing of the floor-length formal skirt.

She stole a glance at her partner's face and immediately looked down again as a blush began to burn her cheeks. Kunzite was just as she had imagined him, smooth and sure of himself with feet that moved gracefully despite his heavy boots, and he looked exactly like the picture in the files on the desk in Venus' office back on the Moon.

The picture which, instead of being neatly stored in a file drawer with the soldier's other documents, was kept near to hand on top of the desk. The picture that Venus had spent more time gazing at lately than she had ever spent on a report. The picture that had captivated her heart.

It was so silly. She, the very soldier of love, caught up by such a frivolous infatuation! If her fellow Venusians knew of this they would have laughed until the sun fell from the sky. She didn't even understand what it was about the Earth general that enticed her so, but she could not deny the attraction. She knew every detail of that now-faded and creased picture, and here the image had come to life and was holding her in its arms.

Its strong, muscular arms. Sailor Venus' blush smoldered with fresh intensity as thoughts of those arms in less innocent places filled her mind with fire. She tried to forget the identity of her partner, to make him blend in with the dozens of other men she had danced with only this evening and the hundreds she had flirted with in her lifetime.

It was no use. Even with her eyes averted from Kunzite's face, she could still see the mane of long silvery hair that was so uniquely his trailing behind them as they spun across the dance floor, and now there was so much more to entice her. The warmth of his hand holding hers aloft, tangible even through the

gloves they both wore. The pressure of his arm against her waist, gentle yet firm as he guided her expertly through the steps of the dance. The sound of his breath and the scent of a brisk wintry day that surrounded him. The knowledge that if she looked up she would see the face that so often filled her dreams.

All she could think about was how that hair might look hanging over her, how those hands might feel against her bare flesh, how his breath might sound when quickened with passion, and wish she could be pressed tightly against him rather than held at arm's length as she was now.

"Come now, milady," said the voice whose tone felt as familiar as Queen Serenity's even though Venus had only heard it for the first time tonight. "We will both be residents of the Moon soon enough. Let's not be uneasy with one another."

The blonde soldier's stomach twisted. What sort of first impression was she making? She took a deep breath and forced herself to look up as Kunzite steered her around another swaying couple. Fortunately for Venus, the Earth general chose that moment to sweep her into a graceful dip, efficiently saving her from the embarrassment of stumbling as her knees weakened and her heart fluttered. Great Selene, he was beautiful.

Impulsively, her grip on Kunzite's hand and shoulder tightened as the low dip placed her totally at his mercy. He had her completely off balance, not merely in the physical sense, and it was a most uncomfortable feeling.

"Careful, milord," she murmured, a wry grin spreading across her face. "Do not forget yourself. We have only just met."

"Ah, now there is the Sailor Venus I've heard so much about," the white-haired general remarked with a smile. He pulled her upright again. "The last thing I was expecting upon meeting you was timidity."

"And what exactly were you expecting?" Venus asked, welcoming the familiarity of wordplay. He was just a man; just another man to be learned and controlled...

...just a man who turned her heart to butter...

"It is said the leader of the Sailor Soldiers can enchant a man with a glance." The teasing smirk played across Kunzite's lips like the trilling notes of the musicians. "I don't feel enchanted yet, milady."

"As I said, milord, we have only just met."

Kunzite spun her out at arm's length, and Venus felt her heart spin as well. She felt so light it seemed as if the sheet of blonde hair flying out around her would carry her off into the sky. She had never imagined it would be like this. She tried desperately to keep her feet on the ground, silently urging herself to continue the conversation as a distraction from the reality of these hands and those eyes...

"We will have plenty of time to get to know one another," Kunzite commented, pulling the blonde soldier back into his arms. "Our monarchs will be married soon. Where the Prince goes, I am there. I assume it is the same for you and your Princess."

Venus nodded, but the dedication in his words struck her as strange given recent circumstances. The reason for the separation of Prince Endymion from his guardians must have been very serious indeed.

"You will be joining him soon, then?" she inquired, carefully matching his steps with her own. "We have all been wondering at the delay." She couldn't prevent the electric thrill that rolled through her body at the thought of being able to see Kunzite every day. With that kind of time, even without glamour it wouldn't be long before he was hers.

"Yes, our business here is nearly concluded."

Venus opened her mouth to ask what that business might be, but Kunzite swung her around in a wide arc that took her breath away.

"I do hope Endymion is not too lonely in our absence," the general remarked. "I trust the traditions of the Moon Kingdom do allow him to pass time with his fiance?"

"Of course," Sailor Venus answered. "They may see each other as often as they like."

"And Endymion does take advantage of the opportunity, does he not?" Kunzite tugged the soldier close, and for a long moment they stared at one another, pausing in their dance. The snowy-haired general's eyes had become piercing and intense. Venus felt as if she were being interrogated by the Queen, as if Kunzite were memorizing every detail of her face, studying her reaction. Her expression must have changed, as his visage suddenly softened and he began to lead her in the steps of the dance again.

"As I mentioned earlier, he is shy," the man said by way of an explanation.

Against All Odds

"Unfortunately, my duties keep me elsewhere most of the time," Venus said evasively. "I do not monitor the Princess' appointments." The casual look was back on Kunzite's face, but that brief intense moment had gotten under her skin, and her entire body crawled with the disturbance.

"Oh? And what duties might those be, to keep you from your Princess' side?"

Venus nearly dropped his hand as it all fell into place. His determination to dance with her and the Earth King's encouragement. The way he questioned her and changed the subject if she asked any questions of her own. He was investigating her and the Moon Kingdom, just as Venus had been investigating the Earth generals, and he was succeeding. Until a moment ago, she would have told Kunzite anything. It was he who had enchanted her.

Venus had accepted this dance for love. Kunzite had proposed it for information.

She felt the glamour bubble up inside her, rising like a wave to envelop and bury the sudden stabs of hurt and embarrassment. A fresh glow brightened her skin as the ancient Venusian magnetism hit the surface, the sparkle in her eyes and blonde tresses nearly as blatant as the twinkle of the stars.

Sailor Venus would not be beaten at her own game.

As Kunzite spun her around in a twirl, the orange-suited soldier let the glamour take over, its pheromonal magic smoothing her movements into supernatural grace. When she turned to face her partner then, she knew Kunzite's were not the only eyes focused on her. The indignant grumbles of the women dancing nearby confirmed this.

Kunzite blinked. For the briefest of moments, his steps faltered. Then he shook his head slightly and the playful smirk returned to his face. Venus had been right; somehow he was able to overcome Venusian glamour.

No matter. Now that she was on to him, Kunzite would get no further information from her. Once this dance was over, she would not grant him another opportunity.

As they danced across the room, the blonde soldier shining with allure, one of the male faces that turned in her direction was Zoisite's. Sailor Mercury had to hide a smile as her dance partner's attention fixed itself fully on Venus as she passed by. Mercury could not blame him for his rudeness; she knew the power of her fellow soldier's glamour well enough to recognize when Venus had turned on the heat full blast.

Besides, she did not mind the respite from the shallow and awkward conversation that always resulted when two strangers were thrown together. Fortunately, Zoisite had turned out to be an acceptable dancer; Mercury found herself free to let her mind wander as the Earth-born general guided her smoothly across the dance floor. She busied herself with analyzing the previous night's utility usage statistics until Venus and Kunzite had passed and Zoisite's mind was his own again.

At least the man had some sense of propriety. The face that turned back to Sailor Mercury wore a confused and apologetic smile. It was clear that Zoisite had no idea what had possessed him and he was intent on making amends.

"May I ask your thoughts, milady?"

It was a familiar question, an often-used icebreaker in polite society. Although Earth was isolated, its nobility certainly seemed educated in the ways of the Silver Alliance. Of course, the experience of dozens of balls had taught Mercury that honesty was not always the best policy. Noblemen were interested in forging contracts, not detailed design specs for the latest triple-phase beam generator.

"I was just admiring the decorators' efforts," the blue-suited soldier said, a neutral but conversation-sparking response that had served her well in the past. To her surprise, Zoisite looked disappointed.

"I was told yours was the finest mind in the Solar System," he said. "Are those the thoughts that occupy the Moon Kingdom's legendary genius?"

Sailor Mercury found herself both flattered and offended by the general's brash comments. She was overcome by an irresistible compulsion to prove herself. Obviously, her private thoughts were none of Zoisite's concern, but if she indeed had a reputation for intelligence, ruining that would damage the image of the Moon Kingdom.

Besides, she had to wipe the smug grin off Zoisite's face.

"If you must know," Mercury said curtly, "I was going over recent utility data for the Moon's main

cities and recompiling it with the previous month's measurements." Again to her surprise, Zoisite's face lit up, and he nodded knowingly.

"Ah, the new circular crystal bridging technology?" he asked eagerly. "How are the tests going? I've meant to ask you how you've overcome the instabilities in the positioning matrix."

The blue-haired Mercurian blinked, impressed despite herself. "Diamond-wire stabilizers," she found herself explaining. Perhaps not all Earth people were the fools she had been led to believe. Perhaps, like herself, the blond general had been reluctant to dance for fear of another mind-numbing exercise in posturing. Perhaps this encounter would not be an annoyance after all. In fact...

"I have a question of my own if I may, milord," she said. "A few weeks ago we noted with much interest the path of an unusual comet that appeared to be of solar origin. Unfortunately, it was a Day of Shadow and we could not follow its full trajectory. Do you know anything about it?" she asked casually, carefully keeping the details vague.

Zoisite's face changed. It was a brief flash, a fleeting shadow of unease that vanished as soon as it came, but Sailor Mercury caught it. The Golden Kingdom knew of the comet, that was certain.

"Nephrite would know more about such a thing than I," the blond man said smoothly, having restored a pleasant smile to his face. "His eyes are always on the sky, while mine are in books. Unfortunately, it seems we will have to discuss it later. Nephrite is occupied at the moment."

Indeed, he was. At that moment, the man known as Nephrite was at the opposite side of the hall with Sailor Jupiter in his arms. To the few guests present who did not know them, the pair seemed almost like relations with their similar lengths of wavy chestnut-brown hair, Jupiter's tied in its usual neat ponytail while Nephrite's hung loose to his shoulders.

Although they had known each other for only a few minutes, the green-suited Jovian had to admit she was rather impressed with her Earth-born partner thus far. While Jupiter enjoyed the company of men as much as Sailor Venus did, she was far more at home among soldiers and knights than the stiff pampered suits of the noble classes. Balls were often a painful torture as the men who partnered her found themselves unsure how best to treat a warrior often taller than they were. There was always the awkwardness, the hesitant hands, the inevitable joke of whether or not Jupiter would prefer to lead.

Nephrite, however, had done none of those things. To begin with, he was slightly the taller of the pair, a detail that pleased Sailor Jupiter greatly. He held her with proper confident firmness, a drastic contrast to the countless men who had touched her as if they feared she might break their arms. He treated her like a lady, leading her smoothly through the dance unafraid to try a few flashy moves, and his eyes never wandered as if seeking an escape. For an Earth-child, Nephrite was surprisingly refined.

"Tell me about your home world," the general suggested, gradually guiding Sailor Jupiter toward the front of the room. His voice had the tone of a dreamer, fluid and airy yet smooth and even. "I have never been to another planet and I have long wondered about the world that shines so brightly in our night sky despite its distance."

"You can see Jupiter from Earth?" As soon as she said the words, the soldier silently scolded herself for her ignorance. If a planet could be seen from the Moon, of course it was visible on Earth.

"Oh, yes," Nephrite replied. If he had noticed her mistake, he kept it to himself. "With telescopes, we are able to view all the planets, but as king of the worlds, Jupiter is visible to the naked eye. What is it like there?"

"Stormy," the Jovian replied with a brief chuckle as Nephrite swung her around in a gentle arc. "That about sums it up. Queen Lysithea's terraforming keeps things under control, but just barely. Jupiter is a wild planet that doesn't much like to be tamed. If it weren't for us, the entire planet would be one gigantic storm before long." Her eyes grew distant as images of her birthplace rose in her mind. How long had it been since she last visited home?

"With the terraforming, most of Jupiter is covered with thick forests," the soldier continued. Nephrite's attention was still fully focused on her. Either he was a talented actor or he was genuinely interested in what she had to say. Sailor Jupiter was in delightfully unfamiliar territory with this man. "Under the high winds and constant storms, only the toughest plants survive. Our trees are tall and strong, unlike the wispy things on the Moon."

Nephrite nodded at this. "Yes, I have heard that Jovian wood burns cleaner and longer than any

other in the solar system." He glanced over at the nearby wall, where a team of servants was busily adding logs to each of the fireplaces warming the Great Hall. "Perhaps when the Prince and Princess are married, trade can be established between our worlds."

"I would be happy to assist with the negotiations if need be," Sailor Jupiter found herself saying. As Nephrite twirled her toward the dais, she smiled at the brown-haired general. Earth-born though he was, Jupiter would not mind seeing more of this man.

A short distance away, the fourth blind pairing was not getting along quite as well. Sailor Mars was not yet sure what to make of the man who had introduced himself as Jadeite. He seemed nice enough, with an enthusiastic spark that enticed her, and she flirted with him as she would with any other man, but there was something strange about him that she could not identify. A sense of something awry lurked beneath the surface of that smile.

As the general spun Mars around in a brief twirl, she took advantage of the opportunity to casually brush her free hand against the red brooch that was fastened to her waist. Then, when she touched Jadeite's shoulder again, she felt it, clear as day.

The man was filled with a fierce dedication to his planet, a worldly loyalty stronger than any Mars had felt before.

Her eyes narrowed. What was wrong with that? It was perfectly normal for a general of the Golden Kingdom to feel that way. What was it about Jadeite's passion for the Earth that set Sailor Mars' teeth on edge?

"Something troubling you, milady?" Intense eyes within a corona of short blond hair searched the Sailor Soldier's face. Mars tried to set aside her concerns for later study, but the sense of wrongness continued to lurk just beneath her skin.

"Not at all," she said, pasting a smile to her face. "So, tell me about your role as Far-Eastern commander."

"Oh, it's nothing interesting," Jadeite said lightly. He pulled Mars close as they swayed together. Their steps were not as crisp as those of the more formal couples dancing around them. "Just supervising troop movements, resolving minor disputes in the region, that sort of thing." There was that intense gaze again, focused on Mars' own eyes.

"Are all Martians as beautiful as you, milady?"

"You overstep your bounds, milord," Mars chastised him, pulling away to a more respectable distance, but she could not prevent her pulse from quickening slightly at the flattery. She did not need Venusian glamour to turn the head of a man. Her back straightened, and her chin lifted automatically.

"I apologize, milady." Jadeite's hand was firm against the red-suited soldier's hip and before she knew it, Mars was just as close to him as before, her eyes lost in his. "For all the elegant balls, it is still rare to dance with someone as lovely as you."

"You flatter me, milord," the soldier murmured truthfully. And she had expected Earth men to be rude! Surely someone this gracious and well-mannered could not be hiding dark secrets. Still, the strange feeling Jadeite gave her refused to go away. Could her instincts be wrong? Unless...

"Your eyes are like the sky after the best sunsets," the blond general said, gazing at her as if enraptured. He was certainly laying it on thick now. Too thick.

He was trying to distract her from whatever it was that had her on edge.

Mars' mind cleared as if a wintry blast had hit her. Jadeite knew about her Martian talents, knew about his own secret, and was using flattery to prevent her from discovering it. Her eyes hardened and her mind worked furiously, examining every angle of what it was she felt as she resisted the urge to growl. Treacherous Earth-children!

"Something is troubling you," Jadeite insisted. He seemed to have gathered that his plan was failing; he allowed Sailor Mars to pull back from him, and they resumed dancing as formally as the rest of the guests. "Share it with me. Perhaps I can help."

It was too late for such an offer. The red-suited soldier continued the dance as if forced to at knifepoint, watching Jadeite warily as her every thought struggled to unravel his mystery. Frustration soon claimed her as the blond general proved impossible to read no matter how hard she focused. There was an allure about Jadeite that put her off-balance, a magnetism that she did not understand yet fell

Against All Odds

helplessly victim to. Every time Mars' inner eye seemed to be getting close to a revelation, she was thrown back into the abyss of confusion by a twinkle in his eye, or a touch of his hand, or a word from his lips.

Left alone on the dais, a growing temptation was beginning to build within Princess Serenity. Her four guardians were absorbed in dancing with the four generals of Earth and she had been left to her own devices. Those of the soldiers who were not lost completely to her sight in the crowd were only rarely glancing in Serenity's direction. Perhaps if she moved quickly, she might be able to-

"Princess."

Swallowing her sigh of disappointment, Serenity turned and looked up at the face of her fiance, who had moved to stand beside her.

"Would you care to dance?"

His hand was held out toward her, but he was still standing as stiffly as he always did, his face frozen in the emotionless expression he had worn on the night of their engagement. Serenity's quick glance to Prince Endymion's side discovered King Arton watching them intently. Apparently, the Earth King had decided it was high time his son paid more attention to his fiance. The window of opportunity was closed. There was no reason not to commit herself to one more dance.

Soon they were all blended in with the assorted nobles and dignitaries, five couples serving as a diverse example of the unity that was soon to take place between the Earth and the Moon. Unnoticed in the shadows of a corner, Artemis watched the proceedings, his long white tail twitching from side to side. His attention was focused, not on the matches between the worlds, but on the rest of the guests who watched the pairs with interest as they passed by.

On some faces he found smiles, but on a disturbing many he found disapproval. Even with the demonstration of the Earth's commanders dancing with the Sailor Soldiers, distrust and wariness were still rampant among the nobility of the Golden Kingdom. It was clear that Princess Serenity, daughter of the goddess though she was, was still thought to be an unfit match for the Earth's Prince Endymion. Several of the guests present looked at the Moon Princess as if she were a malicious temptress come to steal their future ruler away.

At the back of the Great Hall, unseen even by Artemis, a shadowed figure peered out from behind a pillar and focused on Princess Serenity and Prince Endymion as they danced stiffly across the room. This Earth-born observer was filled not with disapproval and annoyance, but pure cold fury. Eyes burning with anger and pain glared at the Moon Princess, hatred consuming all else as a pair of thin lips curved into a confident smirk and a low voice uttered a cold resolution.

"He will never be yours."

Chapter Twelve

The door opened.

A blast of chill wind blew in a new patron, tall and dark with the hood of his cloak pulled up to shield his face from the night's cold. For a moment, every eye rolled in the newcomer's direction, but as he lowered his hood and headed for the bar, the tavern's occupants quickly lost interest. There were no shouted greetings, no friendly invitations, no extra chair pulled up to a game of cards. There was barely a ripple in the low murmur of conversation that permeated the area. The atmosphere remained unchanged: a steady, subdued, low melancholy. That was what Endymion liked best about this place.

A heavy haze of smoke hung in the air, now disturbed by the fresh swirl of wind let in by the newcomer. Most of it had not come from the large fireplace that squatted in the corner. At first, Endymion had been quite confused by several of the Earth-children's - no, the humans' - habit of inhaling the smoke produced by burning weeds in small tubes and pipes. The exiled stable hand still did not quite understand the allure of the activity; he had tried it himself once and it had choked him badly and made him quite ill for a long while afterwards.

He did, however, like the smoke. It hung as heavily in the air as the despair on his heart, and made any room a perfect mirror to his inner misery. Plus, although the habit was severely looked down upon on Earth, it was completely unheard of on the Moon. At this point in his life, anything that was not Lunarian pleased Endymion.

It was said that the smoke was poisonous. So much the better.

The dark-haired man sat leaning back in his chair, alone at a tiny table against the wall, nursing a tankard of liquid the humans called "ale." For a while, it had left him with quite a headache the following morning, but Endymion was growing accustomed to it. He came to this tavern nearly every day after working long hours at the shipyards and stayed until the Moon was hidden behind the palace.

Although plenty of time had passed since his exile, Endymion had no friends here. He did not want any. He worked only because Queen Serenity's coins would not last forever and he had to earn a living somehow. He existed, but he did not live.

From time to time, the former stable hand found himself staring out over the endless swells of the ocean, unable to think of anything but how easy it would be to throw himself beneath the rolling waves. No

Against All Odds

matter how he fought it, at these moments he was stopped by the memory of Queen Serenity's face.

She had said if Endymion gave up, Princess Serenity would know. Endymion tried to believe it was just a ploy, aimed at punishing him further by forcing him to live with his misery without hope of escape. Still, the expression on the Moon Queen's face refused to leave his memory. She had looked like someone who knew from experience.

The thought of that chilled him. He could never give his beloved cause to wear a face like that.

Serenity.

Endymion ground his fists into his eyes, but not even the bursts of stars and colors that brought could drown out the images that swarmed in his mind. Princess Serenity. His Sere. Her eyes, blue as a crisp clear morning. Her lips, red as the roses in her favorite garden as they smiled. The touch of her smooth fingertips, soft against his skin.

The rippling of her long white dress as she walked away.

He gritted his teeth and focused on that memory, the nightmare that was his last evening on the Moon. The stable hand had loved the Princess with his whole heart and she had abandoned him to suffer the fury of her soldiers. When all was said and done, yet again she chose her kingdom over him. Again, their love was so easily tossed aside.

He focused on this to avoid the despair that threatened to consume him. He focused on anger and used it to fill the hole left by the absence of Princess Serenity's love. It was a circle he traveled again and again, every evening in this silent, smoky tavern.

It was not quite so silent tonight. Endymion was drawn out of his bitter musings by an unusually loud conversation being carried out at the bar. The newcomer was having a rather spirited discussion with the man next to him, or indeed, with anyone who would listen. Endymion would have tuned it out had the Moon Kingdom not been mentioned.

"They've invaded the palace!" The speaker was a wild-looking man, with a mass of black hair that hung haphazardly over his ears and into his eyes. He gestured broadly with his tankard of ale as he talked, so that the hunched figures on either side of him leaned back defensively at every statement.

"Oh, give over," a tired-looking woman grumbled from a corner of the bar. "They were invited. You're acting like it's a declaration of war."

"Isn't it?" The enthusiastic man waved his arms again, narrowly avoiding giving a surly grunt of a man a shower. "The four most powerful soldiers in the system and their Princess, under the same roof as our King and Queen? Doesn't that worry you?"

Endymion nearly choked on his ale. Had he heard correctly? Princess Serenity, here on Earth? He felt lightheaded. His heart fluttered in his chest. He had thought his beloved would always be as distant as the stars, and now she was once again a mere brief walk away.

"Why should it?" an irritated voice called out from somewhere in the shadows. "It's just a visit, and I'm sure our rulers have got quite enough protection within the walls of their own fortress."

"Are you?" The wild-haired man took a long swig of his ale, then slammed the tankard down on the bar to be refilled. "Drives me to drink, it does! Our ignorance! They pull one over on us, and nobody notices! Nobody cares!"

"See here, you," the bartender growled, sweeping the jug away from the man and stashing it under the bar. "I think you've had enough. You're upsetting my customers."

"They should be upset!" the stranger raved. He eyed the mugs of the drinkers next to him, but they were swiftly shuffled out of his reach. "My brother, now, he just come down from the palace. Works there. Big gala for those Moon creatures on." He spat the name of the celestial body as if it were poison. "Know what they're doing, right now, right this minute? Seducing the Four Generals! They're turning the heads and stealing the hearts of our strongest and highest, just like their Princess stole our Prince!"

There was some grumbling at this, not all in annoyance at the speaker. Endymion didn't notice. His grip had tightened so hard on his drink that his fingers were beginning to throb. After his ordeal, he was hard-pressed to imagine the Sailor Soldiers seducing anyone, but that was not the allegation that had set his blood boiling. The exiled man glared into the liquid as if his fiery gaze could set it aflame, his breath hissing through gritted teeth.

"It's a trick!" the black-haired man continued. "It's been planned this way all along! Their false

Against All Odds

goddess Queen, she says our worlds can be friends," he scoffed. "She doesn't think of us as equals. This treaty, this marriage is a sham, meant to bring the Golden Kingdom under the Moon's control!"

"That's a lie! Queen Serenity is a kind and just ruler!"

Endymion was amazed to discover that these words had burst from his own mouth. He was on his feet, his fists clenched at his sides, breathing heavily as if ready for a battle. All the tavern's occupants had fallen silent and were staring at him.

The indignant response had been automatic. He had been raised a citizen of the Moon and some part of him still cried out against his Queen being slandered. The man at the bar looked surprised.

"Such loyalty to Selene in a human?" he wondered aloud. "Why, brother? What has the Moon done for you?"

More words struggled to escape Endymion's lips but he bit them back, not wanting to reveal his past to a tavern full of strangers. The Moon Kingdom had taken him in when he was lost. It had raised him and provided for him when he had no home to go back to. It had been his home and his family and his support throughout all the years he could remember. It had given him love.

So, also, had it taken that love away.

The Moon had cast him out, shunned and banished him. Through no fault of his own, he had fallen in love, and his world had abandoned him for it. He had given his entire life and the Moon had taken it from him.

Queen Serenity's face swam within Endymion's memory, impassive and cold as she ordered his exile. This was the woman he was defending? This was the system he was upholding as trustworthy and good? After all he had given, what *had* the Moon done for him?

"Nothing." The word was heavy, dull, dead, and hung like the haze of smoke in the air. Endymion sat down numbly, his gaze falling to the floor.

The wild-haired stranger's triumph was short-lived. There were several believers of Selene present and they had not taken kindly to the harsh words about the Goddess. Before long, the raving patriot was banished from the tavern. The comfortable gloomy silence did not return, however. For a long while after the raver's departure, an uneasy muttering rumbled throughout the room. Not all of the tavern's patrons felt the man's words were lies.

Endymion was thoroughly unsettled, and before long he stood up and walked out into the street. It was earlier than he usually left the tavern, and the Moon, symbol of all Endymion's misfortune, was still in the sky. He cringed involuntarily as he walked, as if the light burned him, but his mind was active enough to distract him from the history hanging in the sky.

Princess Serenity was on Earth! The very thought was enough to make Endymion stumble, his knees weak as if the ground were crumbling away beneath him. He had thought his beloved was forever separated from him, and now she was here, so close that less than an hour's walk would bring him to her. She had followed him to the place of his exile. The possibility of seeing Serenity again lightened Endymion's step and quickened his heart far more than he could have anticipated.

But was there even a possibility? The exiled man raised his eyes, and his gaze fell upon the tall and above all forbidding walls of the palace, illuminated for the night's festivities and towering over the Golden City. He couldn't just march up there and ask to see the Moon Princess. His hand came up, and his fingers traced the raised scar that canceled out the emblem of the Lunarian royal house. In Serenity's kingdom, Endymion had been one of her servants, however remotely. Here, he was an exiled criminal. Less than nothing.

Princess Serenity was as close as ever, but she might as well have been in another galaxy.

With a sigh, Endymion let his feet carry him to the public gardens, an expansive green space nestled in the heart of the city. It lay just down the street from the palace, but the high walls and decorative arches and columns were enough to hide the seat of royalty from Endymion's immediate view. At first, he had avoided this place, thinking that gardens could only remind him of his lost beloved, but when he finally set foot there, he found the area strangely comforting.

Even now, in the late evening, the rustling of the wind in the trees seemed to welcome Endymion. The flowers were closed, but their bending stems waved to him, their lingering scent embracing him. It was as if he could feel the very heartbeat of the Earth through the soles of his boots, as if everyone else

Against All Odds

wandering the gardens had vanished and there was only Endymion and this wide green planet. The sensation gave him strength, made it seem as if he could accomplish anything. He wondered why any Earth-child - any human - would abandon such a feeling of motherly love for a life on the Moon.

"Here you are! I've been looking everywhere."

Endymion turned around to discover Talma standing on the pathway behind him. She smiled, but it was an uneasy smile, and her eyes kept darting from side to side as if she were looking for someone. Still consumed by his own thoughts, the former stable hand just nodded and waited to hear what she had come to say.

"I've just come down from the palace, special duty for the ball," Talma explained urgently. "Listen-"

"I already know," Endymion interrupted in a weary voice. He had no desire to hear the story again and again. "She's here, at the ball. Sere."

Talma blinked. "Well, yes," she said, somewhat confused. "That announcement's been all over the city for days. I assumed you were aware. That's not why I came, Endou."

Now Endymion took in the woman's agitated state; the way she breathed heavily, as if she had been running, and searched the area to make sure no one was near them before she continued.

"Endou, we understand each other, don't we?" Talma's voice quavered slightly, her eyes uneasy. "I took you in, helped you get on your feet here... If you were mixed up in something, something terrible, you'd tell me, wouldn't you?"

"What is it?" Endymion asked, made uneasy himself by her strange behavior.

"It's our Queen, Elana," the Earth woman finally explained. "The official word is that she's ill, but the rumors say the King hasn't had any healers in to see her, and... and... she's got her ladies investigating every exile sent from the Moon since her visit there."

Endymion's heart leapt into his throat. Could it possibly be him that the Earth Queen was searching for? Had she found out about his romance with her son's fiancee? What would she do to the man who threatened to destroy her precious treaty with the Moon Kingdom?

"Don't worry, no one's said anything about you," Talma said hurriedly upon seeing his expression. "Namrin's spoken to the other guards and they've agreed to keep your arrival secret... as long as the safety of the Earth is not in jeopardy," she added pointedly. Endymion shook himself free of his concerns.

"It's all right," he assured her. "I was exiled for loving the Princess, nothing more. I swear it." Talma nodded her relief.

"Then you'll remain our secret," she vowed with a smile. "Love is not a crime."

The next morning dawned bright and clear. At first, Princess Serenity did not remember where she was. She awoke feeling heavy and weary, as if she had spent the night pressed beneath a rock, and unusually bright light was pouring through the windows. The blankets covering her were thick and strange, and the room surrounding her was unfamiliar. It was only when she noticed the crest of the Golden Kingdom carved into the foot of the bed that she remembered she was on Earth.

"Good morning, Serenity."

The Moon Princess sat up. She found she could breathe a bit easier than she had yesterday; it seemed her body was beginning to adjust to the higher gravity of the planet. Sailor Mars was perched on a chair against one wall of the room, one leg crossed over the other, her bright red uniform startling against the gray stone of the palace.

On a table beside the chair sat a white cat, its tail twitching against the wood. It seemed that Serenity had interrupted a conversation between the cat and the soldier. Now that she was awake, Artemis leapt down from the table and left to find a hiding place in another room of the suite. As a male, even in his feline form it would be improper for Artemis to be present when Serenity rose from her bed. For now, however, the Princess stayed where she was, pulling the blankets up around her. The fire on the hearth had gone out in the night, and there was a chill in the air this morning.

How troublesome it was to be a resident of the Earth! The air seemed perpetually cold, despite its fluctuating temperature. Serenity had been told that this was early summer, but it grew so cold at night! So many nuisances were necessary to keep the people comfortably warm - heavy clothing and blankets,

eternal fires that crackled and popped all night, and metal pans filled with hot coals stuck between the sheets to keep her feet from freezing. It was all very bothersome and strange to the Moon Princess.

"Artemis is collecting our perceptions of the Prince's guardians," Mars explained. "Venus' study was all reports and records. Last night's ball was the first time any of us met them in person." She shifted on her chair, her eyes becoming distant. "That Jadeite... Something about him makes me uneasy."

Serenity did not respond. She leaned on her knees and gave the red-suited soldier a cold stare. Thanks to her mother's orders, one of the Sailor Soldiers had to be with her at all times, but the Princess would have rather been greeted by the awe-struck complete strangers of the palace staff than Sailor Mars.

"Still, the ball itself was rather nice, wasn't it?" the violet-haired soldier commented to break the silence. "A primitive setting, of course, but Earth can't be expected to meet our standards."

The Moon Princess still did not speak. Her blue eyes bored into Sailor Mars, her face coldly serious. No one at the ball would have noticed anything amiss between the Princess and her guardians; the mask of royalty had served Serenity well. In private, however, there was no need for her to hide her contempt for the red-suited soldier. It was Mars who had betrayed her. It was because of Mars that she and Endymion had been separated. In the face of the Princess' silence, the soldier sighed.

"Look, we really do have your best interests at heart," Mars said softly, leaning on her knees. "Think about it, Serenity. The choice should have been simple. The crown of the Silver Millennium, or..."

She trailed off as the Princess' stare became a fierce glare that rivaled any fire Sailor Mars could produce. Nothing the soldier could say would have an effect now. Mars could never understand. Serenity loved Endymion, and while her duty was clear, it was not the only thing that weighed on her heart. She would see him again, and try to make amends for what had happened. Until then, everything else could wait.

The soldier's expression hardened. "You are a stubborn one, aren't you?" she said quietly. "Very well." Mars got to her feet, smoothing down her red skirt as she reassumed the stance of a proper soldier.

"Mark my words, Princess," she uttered in a warning tone, staring down at the woman in the bed with narrowed eyes. "There was no choice after all, nor is there now. We are under orders from Queen Serenity, who still has what's best for the Moon Kingdom in mind even if you do not. Someday you will understand that this course is the right one. Until then, you will never leave our sight. We will finish this charade of a visit and return to the Moon without incident. Now, you have a full schedule ahead of you."

These words said, Mars crossed the room and pulled the rope that would summon the palace servants to attend to the Moon Princess.

The following hours were what seemed the slowest morning of Serenity's life. When she made her plans to visit Earth, she had forgotten that she would be the first Lunarian to set foot on the planet in years. Not only that, but she was the Princess, daughter of a woman many Earth-children still viewed as a goddess. For the people of the Golden Kingdom, this was a momentous occasion indeed, and they were careful to take advantage of it as fully as possible without offending their visitors.

There were dignitaries to be introduced, and they were numerous. It seemed everyone with a title or property to their name had pulled out all the stops to secure a meeting with Princess Serenity. They were everywhere, seizing every opportunity to make an appearance. When Serenity went to breakfast, it was served in a full-sized dining room filled with people who just happened to have spent the night as guests of the palace. When she and the Sailor Soldiers were given a tour of the grounds, not a single room was without a smiling face eager to say hello. Nephrite, their guide, soon gave up trying to explain away each meeting as a coincidence. The Princess endured the tedious introductions with forced pleasantness, all the while pondering how she might escape to look for the man she was really here to see.

Throughout it all, Prince Endymion was by Serenity's side, looking as uncomfortable as ever in his formal black clothes. For the sake of appearances, he had offered her his arm and made sure to personally introduce the Moon Princess as his fiance to those of high enough rank. For the most part, however, he barely spoke to his betrothed or even looked at her as they were led from room to room, their linked arms chaining them together like the pendants around their necks.

In fact, the Earth Prince's attention was entirely diverted whenever he was not speaking to

someone. At first, Princess Serenity attributed this to the boredom of being stuck on a tour of places he had known well for years, but soon she noticed it was far more than that. The uneasy distraction that had consumed Prince Endymion at the ball the previous night had returned. He stepped into every room with slight hesitation, and once inside searched every corner with his eyes, as if he expected to encounter someone he did not want to face. Serenity was curious and wondered what the Prince could possibly have to be nervous about in his own home, but more than that, she clung to his behavior as a sign of hope that he might not be opposed to separating from her when she had a chance to slip away.

Her opportunity finally came at the end of the tour, when Nephrite led the group to the palace gardens. At first, however, Serenity's secret mission was temporarily forgotten when the chestnut-haired general brought them around the last corner and the beauty of the gardens was spread out before them. Around the Princess, the Sailor Soldiers let out gasps of wonder that mirrored her own.

Earth is... more alive.

Now that she beheld the planet's natural glory, Serenity had to agree with what her fiance had said the morning after their betrothal. The first thing that struck the Princess was how green it all was. Trees taller than any she had ever seen towered over patios and pathways paved with polished stones. There was a fresh, fragrant breeze that had the entire garden in motion. Seemingly endless branches covered in lush foliage waved and danced overhead against a brilliant blue sky, filling the air with a delightful rushing sound like a river of life.

Below the trees were flowers of such variety and vibrant colors that the memory of Serenity's own favorite garden paled by comparison. Her eyes widened as her gaze fell on red, purple, yellow, orange - flowers of every color and every size. She felt no matter how long she looked she would never know them all. A sweet scent joined the rustling of the leaves, tossed about on the wind along with the occasional stray petal. After the confining gray stone walls of the palace, this was a glimpse of paradise.

"If it pleases you, Princess, the midday meal may be served out here on the veranda," Nephrite offered, smiling at the wide-eyed amazement on her face.

"Oh, yes, that would be wonderful," Serenity breathed. The breeze chilled her bare arms, but it also felt deliciously refreshing, and she was willing to endure any amount of cold if it meant she could spend another hour in this beautiful place. Nephrite gestured toward a nearby patio beside a leaping fountain and the women filed past him, looking around at all the garden's majesty. As Sailor Jupiter crossed his path, he fell into step beside her.

"Not a match for your home planet, I daresay, but I hope it pleases you."

Jupiter was surprised by the unexpected personal attention, but she found herself smiling. There was something about Nephrite that pleased her, something about his eyes that made all the weight of being guardian to a rebellious Princess fade away on the midday breeze.

"It is better than the Moon," Sailor Jupiter admitted, reveling in the sound of the wind in the trees. Their majesty could not rival the colossal sturdy forests she had known as a child, but it was nice to have some branches overhead and see some trees she could not topple with one punch.

It seemed Nephrite had anticipated that Princess Serenity would agree to an outdoor meal; tables and chairs had already been prepared for the group and servants were busy setting out the luncheon as they arrived. Zoisite, his long blond hair again tied in a neat ponytail, was there also, supervising the arrangement of the meal. As the Lunarian visitors approached, he straightened up and bowed to them.

"Good afternoon, Princess, ladies," he greeted them. "Please be seated."

Serenity did so eagerly, relieved to see there were no mysterious dignitaries waiting to be introduced. For the first time all day, she was to have some time free of the hassle of new faces speaking the same tired old practiced words. Nephrite and Zoisite joined them, taking seats at a small table with Jupiter and Mercury, but the Princess had only to deal with Prince Endymion in addition to Venus and Mars. At least this was a man she had plenty of practice in enduring.

The meal they were served was interesting in itself, at least to those of the party who had never before tasted Earth food. As at the previous few meals, curiosity was the order of the day as the visitors from the Moon examined the strange dishes that were set before them. First, there was fruit, slices of something red-skinned and solid that was firm and crisp when they bit into it yet pleasantly sweet. Along with this came things their Earth-born hosts called "sandwiches," thin pieces of meat and cheese pressed

between slices of bread.

At first, Princess Serenity poked at the food awkwardly, confused by the absence of utensils from the table. Out of the corner of her eye she watched the behavior of the only Earth-child at hand, Prince Endymion. The man eagerly distracted himself from the burden of his fiance's presence by diving into the meal, picking up his sandwich with his hands.

The girls quickly followed suit before anyone could notice their hesitation. How strange it was to be eating with one's fingers! With all the majesty of the garden and the manners of the courtiers, Serenity had almost forgotten the people of Earth were said to be a backward, primitive race.

While the conversation at the other table seemed equally balanced among the four diners, at Serenity's table it was dominated by herself and Sailor Venus. Prince Endymion was being his usual silent disagreeable self, his gaze still restlessly flitting about the garden between bites. After recent events, the Moon Princess was still not eager to speak to Sailor Mars more than was necessary, and for her part the soldier seemed content with that.

In fact, the violet-haired soldier of Mars was distracted. She was seated facing the palace, and halfway through the meal a familiar figure appeared in the shadows of the sitting room that bordered the veranda. No lamps had been lit inside the palace, but the sunlight that filtered into the room through its windows was enough to highlight the man's short blond hair. It was Jadeite.

Despite the interest he had shown in Sailor Mars the previous night at the ball, the Golden Kingdom's Far-Eastern commander made no move to join the group for luncheon. Mars was not even certain if he knew she had noticed him. He just stood there, motionless, watching the visitors from the Moon intently.

The uneasy feeling Jadeite gave the Martian soldier returned in earnest. She still could not quite identify what it was about the man that unsettled her so, but it was real and stronger than ever. Just looking at him caused strange tingles to creep across her skin, and she felt cold even in the warm sunshine.

An unusually loud burst of laughter from the other table brought Mars back to reality for a moment, and she glanced over at Jupiter and Mercury, who seemed to be enjoying a private joke with Nephrite and Zoisite. At least, Jupiter and Nephrite were laughing; Zoisite had folded his arms with a sullen expression and Mercury appeared to be sympathizing with him. Sailor Venus' attention had been drawn to that group as well and Mars caught a familiar look in the blonde soldier's eye. The seeds of something deeper than friendship were being planted at that table.

Was it possible the soldier of Mars was falling into a similar trap? Could it be these strange feelings that came over her when she thought about Jadeite stemmed from an attraction to him?

Impossible. Ridiculous. The very thought was enough to make the red-suited warrior shudder. Something drew her to the blond general, but it was certainly not love. There was a strangeness about the situation that got under her skin. Still, what was it? All she had sensed in Jadeite was fierce loyalty; what was wrong with that? Wasn't it possible that she was using suspicion to distract herself from other, more carnal feelings?

Wasn't it?

Now filled with a different kind of unease, Sailor Mars turned back to the palace. An empty room greeted her eyes. Jadeite had disappeared.

Princess Serenity was rather distracted as well. Throughout the meal, her attention was inexplicably drawn to a large tree growing all by itself in a corner between the palace and the garden wall. It was a young tree by Earth's standards, still thin enough for a person to embrace with one arm and only as high as the palace's third-story windows, but it was still bigger than any on the Moon. Serenity could not explain it, but every time she looked at the tree she thought of her beloved Endymion.

As soon as they had finished eating and the group spread out to enjoy the garden, the Moon Princess headed over to inspect the tree more closely. It seemed to draw her in as she moved closer, but once she was beneath its outermost leaves, a knee-high fence prevented her from going any further. Oddly, the tree was the only thing growing in the circle of grass within the fence, and Serenity did not see any ponds or animals or anything that would make such a barrier necessary. This tree was separate and isolated, for no apparent reason.

It was silly; there was nothing about this ordinary-looking tree that should have reminded the

Against All Odds

Princess of her banished lover, but when she gazed on it, she could think of nothing but Endymion's face. All of a sudden, he rose up in her memory, and her eyes were filled with his tanned frame and his charcoal eyes and his dark hair, and her nose was filled with the scent of roses. She closed her eyes against the tears that threatened to gather there and tilted her head back, indulging in the memory for a moment. When a breeze rustled the leaves of the mysterious tree, Serenity opened her eyes, watching the sunlight dancing on the swaying branches.

A movement to her left caught the corner of her eye. The Princess turned her head to see a figure watching her from a second-story window of the palace. Serenity gasped, startled, and pressed a hand to her mouth, but the figure did not react. Once she had recovered from her surprise, the Moon Princess looked more closely. The stranger did not appear to be watching Serenity, but the tree instead, and somehow seemed familiar.

After a moment of contemplation, the Princess gasped again, this time in wide-eyed horror. It was Queen Elana, and she seemed barely a shadow of the strong woman Serenity remembered. Even at this distance, the Lunarian could see that she had grown thin and pale, her hair undone and unkempt and her dress hanging haphazardly from her body. Her face was solemn and sad, and she stood motionless, gazing at the tree with one hand pressed against the glass.

It was strange; despite the Earth Queen's deathly pallor, she stood so still and firm that she did not appear to be ill, and during the tour that morning, the visitors had been told the apartments of the royal family were on the opposite side of the palace. What was Elana doing at this window, and alone?

"Princess?"

Queen Elana was not the only anomaly of the afternoon. Serenity turned around at the sound of her fiance's voice, but his summons came in an oddly uneasy tone. Her eyes fell on Prince Endymion standing quite a distance away from her, well beyond the shade of the isolated tree. Behind him, Nephrite and Jupiter were watching. It was clear someone had decided it was time the Earth Prince paid some attention to his betrothed.

The white-robed Lunarian cast one more glance at the upstairs window and found it empty. Had she imagined seeing Queen Elana there? Shaking her head, she turned back to the veranda and moved toward her fiance, who did not take even one step to meet her. Another mystery was raised when Serenity reached him; Prince Endymion's eyes were focused on the tree behind her and he watched it warily as if he expected something to happen.

"Is there a story here?" the Princess asked hopefully, gesturing toward the tree and its enclosure.

"That area is off-limits," Prince Endymion replied brusquely. He slid an arm behind his fiance's back to guide her toward the veranda, and as he started walking, Serenity had no choice but to accompany him. What was it about this tree that made her so content but the Earth Prince so uncomfortable?

The Moon Princess slowed her steps as they approached the patio where their meal had been served. The air out here was so refreshing and fragrant, and she was reluctant to go back inside the palace.

"I would very much like to see the gardens more fully," she protested.

"Yes, you would, wouldn't you?" Prince Endymion muttered grimly, more as a statement than a question. Serenity knew he had no desire to be dragged about among the flowers on her arm, and the distracted, flighty look had returned to his face. He was once again glancing around as if looking for someone. The Princess saw her opportunity and jumped on it.

"Oh, don't let me burden you," she said airily, putting on her sweetest smile. "I am quite at home in any garden; I promise I won't get lost. I am sure you have important matters to discuss with your guardians."

Princess Serenity wasn't the only one who had been hoping for an escape. A light sparked to life in the Earth Prince's eyes.

"Well, if you are certain," he said casually, trying not to sound too eager. "There are some matters of state to be discussed that I am sure would not interest you. Do not let me detain you, Princess."

For the first time since they met, the Prince of the Earth and the Princess of the Moon shared a private and slightly mischievous smile.

They separated, the Prince heading toward the table where Nephrite and Zoisite were still sitting and the Princess veering off toward the gardens. Sailor Venus and Sailor Mars were deep in conversation

Against All Odds

beside a wall covered in flowering vines, so Princess Serenity chose the path furthest from them and plunged into an enclosure of rosebushes, mustering all her willpower to keep from walking too fast. At the table, Sailor Mercury was engrossed in conversation with Zoisite and missed the Princess' swift exit, but Jupiter got to her feet.

"What is your hurry?" Nephrite protested, stretching out an arm to invite her to sit down again. "I was eager to hear about the Jovian spring festival."

"The Princess-"

"Surely there is nothing so dangerous in our gardens that all four Sailor Soldiers are needed to protect her?" the chestnut-haired general asked with a smirk. "The five of you do separate on occasion, I trust?"

By this point, Venus and Mars were heading into the gardens, following the path Serenity had taken. Sailor Jupiter looked down at Nephrite, his smile now warm and inviting, so much more attractive than chasing a headstrong Princess about the grounds. Nodding her agreement, she reclaimed her chair.

It was a beautiful afternoon, by Earth standards. The hedges and walls kept out a lot of the brisk wind that was blowing, and the sun was warm on the paths and benches. The air was filled with the delightful fragrances of thousands of flowers, which all blended together into a lovely perfume. Here on the Earth were colors and scents Princess Serenity had never before seen or smelled, but at the moment she could not allow herself pause to enjoy them. Every fiber of her being was focused on escaping the palace grounds and finding Endymion.

If she did not succeed now, she would never have another chance. The gardens here were as much of a maze as the ones on the Moon, and as soon as the Princess had rounded a corner, she took off as fast as her glass slippers could carry her. Muttering voices were audible in the direction of the palace, so Serenity knew she was being pursued, but the Sailor Soldiers would not dare shout openly after her and reveal to anyone who heard that they had lost their Princess.

Serenity took the most twisting and unusual paths she could find through what seemed endless hedges and flower beds, hoping to lose her pursuers. Finally, when she reached a small marble pavilion surrounded by tiny purple flowers, she paused and held her breath, listening. She was surrounded by silence.

The Moon Princess slipped into the pavilion and pressed herself against one of its pillars, still waiting. Had she been successful in throwing the soldiers off her trail? The pillar was cold against her bare shoulders, and the decorative string of large pearls that was wrapped around it was digging into her back, but Serenity did not dare move just yet.

Off in the distance a bird was singing and somewhere a fountain was burbling. There was no other sound. The Princess breathed a sigh of relief and turned to leave the pavilion behind.

"Found you!" a satisfied voice called out. "Princess!"

Serenity cringed and then sagged, stopped in her tracks. The white-robed fugitive turned around slowly, her expression irritated but resigned. To her surprise, it was Sailor Venus who stood in the clearing beside the pavilion. Hers was not the voice she had heard. The Princess' eyes roamed downward and fell on a small white cat standing at the orange-suited soldier's feet, a satisfied expression on its feline face. Of course. Artemis had tracked her and brought Venus with him.

"You were going to see him, weren't you?" the soldier asked. Princess Serenity looked up at Sailor Venus' face again and found, not anger or disappointment, but pity and concern. The white cat beside her, however, was not as sympathetic.

"How can you not understand?" Artemis demanded, his long tail lashing back and forth in agitation. "I know you're infatuated with that man, but continuing to see him... It's dangerous, for two entire kingdoms! Don't you see that?"

Princess Serenity trembled from head to toe. She had been so close, so close to escaping, so close to being able to see Endymion one more time and tell him all the things she'd been longing to. So close to his warm arms and his musky scent. So close to being able to sate the hunger that had been gnawing away inside her since his exile. At that moment, she didn't care about her responsibilities, her birthright or her

kingdom. She cared only about her love for Endymion, and once again her true feelings were being ignored, and she had had enough.

"It's not infatuation!" Serenity shouted. A slight blush colored her cheeks as she lashed out at those who usually advised her, but she pressed on. "Venus, Artemis... Being that you've never fallen in love, you can't understand my feelings!"

In a burst of juvenile rebellion from the years before her engagement day, Princess Serenity stuck her tongue out at the blonde soldier and her feline companion. Before either of them could recover from their surprise, the crystal-haired Lunarian whirled around and dashed off through a gap in a hedge.

"Princess!" Sailor Venus gritted her teeth, momentarily taking offense to Serenity's accusation. At a time like this, when she was facing daily contact with the silver-haired Middle-Eastern commander, the Moon Princess accused her of never falling in love!

"Oh... I have too," muttered a soft sour voice at her feet.

The soldier's gaze shot downward and her wide eyes locked on Artemis, the only voice within hearing range. Artemis, in love? When had this happened? How could Sailor Venus have missed it? Sure, the cat had been gone on a lot of missions lately and Venus had been focused on the Moon Princess' love affair, but they were partners!

"Artemis!" The cat coughed, sensing the blonde's eyes on him, and shook himself briefly but did not look up.

"Never mind that, let's go!" he ordered. Together they gave chase down the path Princess Serenity had taken. Although Sailor Venus' uniform included dress shoes with short heels, their flexible material and her years of experience gave her the advantage over the fleeing Princess in glass slippers.

As it was, Serenity did not really expect to get away. Her best chance had been the initial breakaway from the palace. As soon as she heard Artemis' voice she knew it was over. Still, the Princess could not help but indulge in a bit more juvenile behavior, and she laughed as the soldier and the white cat chased her through one small garden after another. Sailor Venus was rather cross when she finally caught up with Serenity.

"Princess!" she snapped, seizing the crystal-haired woman by the shoulder. "Enough of these games. Come on, we're going back." Serenity groaned, but submitted without complaint. She could see that Venus did not like performing this duty, but as long as Artemis was there she had no choice.

"It must be tough having a Princess so full of curiosity," said a voice.

Sailor Venus froze. A tingle rolled down her back and settled in her stomach. Now that she had finally heard him speak after such a long period of study from afar, she could never forget the sound of that voice. Kunzite.

A blush crept over her face, but she had no choice but to turn around. Kunzite was standing beside a leaping fountain in the center of a square hedge, his long hair waving smoothly in the breeze. His silver eyes were fixed on Venus, the smirk was back at the corner of his mouth, and the long cape that hung from his shoulders swirled around him like a cloud. The blonde soldier felt her knees weaken and she could not speak.

As soon as Kunzite appeared, Artemis dashed under a nearby bush. It was crucial that he not be seen, especially by the leader of the Earth's generals. The white cat crouched beneath the leaves, watching and growing increasingly frustrated. Why didn't Venus say something? His green eyes narrowed as he focused on the white-haired man in gray. There was something odd about Kunzite's stance and expression. He seemed innocently curious, but there was something else behind that demeanor, something cunning and inquisitive. Something that hungered for the truth.

"Venus?" Sailor Mercury entered from another garden. "Oh, you've found her! Why didn't you contact anyone?" she asked in an irritated voice. A confused look came over the blue-suited soldier's face as she looked between the blushing blonde and the smirking Kunzite. "What's going on?"

"Oh, nothing, nothing," Venus said hurriedly, turning away from the Earth-born general and shaking herself back to reality. "Yes, I found the Princess. Just another one of her little games," she added lightly, throwing in a casual laugh. However she might feel about Serenity's love affair, or Kunzite, it would be a disaster if the general discovered the Princess' secret. Mercury seemed to realize this priority as well, and played along.

Against All Odds

"Very well," she said with a smile and a nod. "Let's go and tell the others that the game's over, then."

"You go on ahead, Mercury," Sailor Venus replied. "I'd like a private word with the Princess, if you please." At this, Kunzite politely turned away and took a sudden intense interest in a patch of lilies. Sailor Mercury, however, hesitated, her face becoming uncertain. After a moment, Venus heaved an irritated sigh.

"What, you don't trust me now?" she grumbled in a low voice, leaning close to the blue-haired soldier so not even Princess Serenity could hear her words. "Don't think I'd do anything foolish. I'm just as worried as the rest of you. I know she has important responsibilities," Venus continued. "Watching over Earth, protecting the Silver Crystal, and one day becoming Queen... I know that's more important than anything."

The blonde's eyes became distant and she glanced over at the young Princess, who was now engaged in inspecting the garden's irrigation system. "Besides," she said softly, a deep sadness spreading through her expression, "even though she's in love, she's only going to get hurt this way."

"All right." Satisfied, Sailor Mercury nodded her head. "Don't be too long." After a smile and another nod to Serenity, the blue-suited soldier turned around and disappeared into another garden.

"You too, Artemis," Venus said in a low voice through gritted teeth. There was a small feline sigh from beneath the bush and the Mauan slipped out from under the leaves and headed after Mercury, keeping close to the ground so Kunzite would not see him. It was to the white-haired general that the blonde soldier turned next.

"Please excuse us, milord," she said with a polite bow. Kunzite responded with a slow respectful nod, the familiar smirk still hiding at the corner of his lips. Sailor Venus shivered slightly as she seized Princess Serenity by the wrist and tugged her through an opening in a hedge into a neighboring garden. The Earth-born general's expression was far too wise for Venus' peace of mind. What did he know, or think he knew?

The two women were barely out of sight when Serenity found her voice.

"Venus, I-"

"Don't," the soldier interrupted, stopping beside a babbling fountain so the bubbling waters would further cover their voices. "We don't have much time."

The Princess' eyes widened as Sailor Venus produced a short pink rod with a translucent jewel on one end. To the casual observer, it looked for all the world like an elegant pen, perhaps a gift from the Moon Queen to the leader of the Sailor Soldiers. It had indeed come from Queen Serenity, but was far from mundane. It was this object that made it possible for Venus to fulfill her role as the Princess' security double by magically disguising her as Serenity's twin. The Moon Princess knew the item on sight, having seen the blond Venusian use it on several occasions.

"Venus!" she gasped, hardly daring to hope. "You can't possibly be considering..."

"And why not?" the soldier replied in a near-whisper. "I don't know what your intentions are, Serenity, but it was cruel to forcefully separate you from your lover like that. At the very least, you deserve a chance to speak with him privately, to break it off on your own terms if nothing else."

For the moment, the Princess ignored Sailor Venus' last few words. She was being given a chance to see Endymion again and that was all she cared about. She wanted his arms around her one more time. How the reunion ended was as unimportant at that moment as the number of stars in the sky. Overjoyed, she pulled Venus into an enthusiastic embrace and hugged her tightly.

"Thank you," she whispered into the blonde's ear.

"It's the least I can do," the soldier replied, smiling at Princess Serenity as they separated.

"No," the other woman argued. "It's the most."

Sailor Venus gave the Princess' upper arms a reassuring squeeze. Then she glanced briefly into the neighboring garden to make sure they were alone. Kunzite had vanished. Satisfied, the blonde soldier lifted the little pink wand close to her lips.

"Moon Power!" she said as loudly as she dared. "By the grace of Selene, grant me the image of the Princess!"

Princess Serenity cringed, shielding her eyes from the rosy light that erupted from the jewel at the tip of Venus' wand. It appeared the magic of the Moon Kingdom worked just as well on Earth. Ribbons of

energy wrapped around Sailor Venus in a skintight embrace until it seemed her flesh was luminescent. For a heartbeat she was covered from head to toe in the shining glow, and then the power abruptly vanished. The Moon Princess found herself staring into her own face.

This was far from the first time Serenity had witnessed her guardian using the disguise magic, but it was still, for a moment, disorienting. The Venusian's hair had lost all its color and lengthened, and was tied into twin buns to match the Princess' own, the soldier's familiar red bow having vanished. The orange and blue uniform was gone as well, replaced by a duplicate of Serenity's maiden-gown, complete with its silver accents and bows. With Sailor Venus' naturally blue eyes, there was little else that needed to be changed. Only one detail was missing.

Serenity needed no prompting as the decoy Princess handed her a tube of metallic gold makeup and a tiny brush. The true Princess could barely keep her hand steady as she carefully painted a crescent moon mark in the center of Sailor Venus' forehead. This was, beyond a doubt, the most daring and dangerous thing she had ever done. Still, as Venus smiled with Serenity's own face, the Moon Princess could feel little more than excitement. To see Endymion again, she was prepared to do anything.

Almost as an afterthought, Princess Serenity removed the blue pendant on its gold chain and handed it to Sailor Venus. The Lunarian opened her mouth to say something to the woman who had proven to be her truest friend, but she was interrupted by an earnest and impatient whisper from a nearby garden.

"Princess? Venus?"

It was Artemis' voice, from under another bush by the sound of it. The others must have been growing very impatient indeed if the Mauan was willing to risk calling out to them while in his feline form. The Moon Princess took a breath, but her false twin gestured for her to be silent.

"I'm coming, Artemis," Venus said in Serenity's voice. The disguised soldier settled the engagement pendant around her neck, and then, after a final smile and a wink to her true Princess, headed through the gap in the hedge to meet Artemis and left Serenity alone.

Upon seeing what appeared to be the Moon Princess emerging from the neighboring garden, the white cat poked his head out from beneath a patch of lilacs. His eyes narrowed upon seeing the woman was alone.

"Where is Sailor Venus?" he asked in a low voice, his twitching tail betraying his suspicion.

"She's gone for a walk with Kunzite," the disguised soldier said smoothly, having had that excuse ready in her mind. Kunzite was the solitary type, and Venus was willing to bet everything that he would not approach the Lunar visitors unless ordered to, at least for a while. Artemis looked disturbed by this news, but he seemed to accept the explanation.

"Perhaps I should be keeping an eye on Venus as well," he muttered, keeping close to the hedges and leaves as he accompanied the white-robed woman on the path toward the palace. The Venusian nodded solemnly, restraining herself from playfully swishing the long skirt of the maiden-gown around her legs. This dress was so light and free compared to the uniform of a Sailor Soldier!

"Perhaps you should," she said, biting back a grin. "Sailor Venus is certainly more mischievous than I."

"I am under orders, Princess," Artemis reminded her. "I won't be gotten rid of so easily."

"No," Sailor Venus agreed in secret triumph. "I expect you won't."

Serenity was not the only one on the grounds with a secret rendezvous on her mind. Elsewhere in the gardens, the Earth Prince Endymion was taking full advantage of the temporary separation of the group. He had wandered purposefully to one of the most secluded areas, a handful of cherry trees surrounded by lilies. The person on his mind had been watching him all morning; the Prince had sensed her eyes upon him even when he could not determine which door or pillar she was hiding behind. Surely she would appear as soon as he was truly alone.

"Endymion."

A smile spread across his face automatically at the rich, low tones of the familiar voice. How he loved to hear her speak calmly to him, her voice soothing no matter what troubled him. No one could ever utter his name like she did.

Against All Odds

He turned around, his eyes hungering for her beauty even before they beheld it. His beloved's dark hair and rosy skin were refreshing after days spent among the pale Lunarians. He drank in the sight of her as she wove through the lilies and approached him, but his heart was not fully uplifted. He knew the despair of the task that lay before him.

"Beryl."

"I thought you'd never get away from them," the woman said breathlessly, running the last few steps to the Earth Prince's side and throwing her arms around him. Prince Endymion could not help but return the embrace, his fingers winding themselves into the soft wavy tresses of her hair, the familiar scent of the jasmine blossoms she wore there going straight to his head. She was warm and soft, and fit against his chest as if they were made to hold each other. The Prince never wanted to let her go. Still, although his heart ached so badly he felt it would burst, when she lifted her chin to kiss him he pulled away.

"Endymion? What's wrong?" Beryl's eyes grew dark with disappointment and confusion. Deep, violet eyes, the color of evening. The last thing the Earth Prince wanted was to see those eyes grow sad. Despite this, he knew what he had to do, and no matter how much he loved Beryl, he could not let his heart turn him aside from his duty.

"We can't keep doing this," Prince Endymion said heavily. The words were like poison in his mouth, but they had to be said. Even so, he could not quite bring himself to release the black-haired woman from his embrace. "We have to stop seeing each other, Beryl."

"What?" the woman breathed in barely more than a whisper, her expression overrun by desperate disbelief. Her hands trembled as she gripped his clothes with her thin fingers. "Why?" Prince Endymion had to avert his gaze; the pain rising in his beloved's eyes was too agonizing.

"It's becoming too dangerous," he explained, his eyes following the lilies as they swayed in the afternoon breeze. Their petals were the same snowy white as the tiny blossoms in Beryl's hair, but their scent could not be more different. No matter what his preferences were, Prince Endymion was being forced to exchange one for the other.

"If we keep meeting even when Selene's people are here, someone's bound to get suspicious," he said even as his senses reveled in the long-absent fragrance of jasmine that he had missed so badly. "My guardians have been keeping a closer eye on me of late. I'm certain they disapprove of this, and if my parents find out I'm still seeing you..."

"Who cares what anyone else thinks?" Beryl burst out pleadingly. "I love you!" Pulling him closer, she again stretched up to kiss him, but Prince Endymion turned his face away. He took her gently, but firmly, by the arms and held her at a less intimate distance, his blue eyes still downcast.

"You know I love you, Beryl," he sighed miserably, "but we have to start facing reality. I have to be faithful to my fiance." He felt the woman stiffen in his grip as a storm whipped up in her eyes.

"You're really going to marry her, aren't you?" she asked flatly, a touch of anger in her voice.

"I must," the Earth Prince replied. "My parents have decreed it, for the good of the Golden Kingdom. From the day it was announced, you must have known it could not be any other way."

"And that's it, is it?" Beryl demanded, her voice beginning to tremble. "All the years we've spent together, all the time we've loved each other, it all disappears like it was nothing? You promised we'd always be together, Endymion! You promised you'd make me your Queen!"

Hot tears of anguish and fury welled up in the dark-haired woman's eyes and began slipping down her cheeks. The Earth Prince tried to draw Beryl close, but she wrenched herself free of his grasp and turned her back on him, her body quaking as she struggled to control her grief.

"Sometimes things don't work out the way we want them to," Prince Endymion said helplessly, staring at Beryl's wavy hair as it trembled in the breeze and in her sorrow. He wished that he had either done this sooner or put it off until later; anything to not be standing in this wretched moment in time.

"Did you even try?" Beryl choked out accusingly, still facing away from him. "Did you fight for me, Endymion, or did you just accept your parents' word as law?"

"My parents are the King and Queen," the Earth Prince reminded her, bristling with slight irritation. "Their word IS law."

"Love should be above the law!" Beryl cried out, whirling around to stare at the man in near-frantic anguish. Prince Endymion's building frustration was swept away by the pain on his beloved's face. She

searched him with her eyes as if trying to find the man she loved beneath a cruel exterior, as if he had betrayed her, as if he had become a stranger in only a few minutes. He would have given anything to be able to tell her it was a lie, that they could be together, but that was the one thing he could not say.

"Has she enchanted you?" Beryl asked suddenly, a desperate hope sparking to life in her eyes. "That snake Serenity, she's bewitched you to no longer love me, hasn't she? I'll defeat it, I'll break the curse-

"No, Beryl," Prince Endymion said gently. "I am not under a spell." He wished he were; it would have made it all easier. Beryl hesitated, her hands half-raised, her face pleading with him more than any words ever could, but after a moment she sagged. Beryl was one of the most skilled mages on the Earth. If there were any enchantments on the Prince, they would have been as obvious to her as a storm cloud in a clear blue sky.

"Well," she whispered, hanging her head and clenching her fists at her sides, "I suppose there's nothing more to be said, then."

With those words the entire situation somehow became more real. Prince Endymion was suddenly overtaken by the cold truth that he was forever losing the woman he loved. Pain and terror gripped his heart and he was overcome by the horrible thought that he might never see Beryl again. The very idea was unbearable.

"Listen," he said earnestly, taking a step forward, "there's no reason why we can't still see each other socially. I'll be living on the Moon, but there are bound to be numerous occasions when the Earth and the Moon mingle. As long as you're at court..." Prince Endymion trailed off in the face of Beryl's strangled bitter laughter.

"Do you really expect me to bear your presence while you hang on the arm of another woman?" she said wretchedly. "It would be worse than a thousand deaths, Endymion. If you let me go, you let me go completely." Sweeping a stray strand of ebony hair out of her face, Beryl turned to watch the cherry trees sway in the breeze. "Besides, I will not be at court much longer."

Now it was the Earth Prince's turn to be shocked. "What? I have not heard of this!"

"Well, you haven't exactly been around to hear, have you?" Beryl challenged with a brief glance at her companion. Seeing his expression, she softened slightly. "I am wanted back home," she explained.

"The Dark Kingdom?" Named for its long winter days devoid of sunlight, that distant land was the northernmost kingdom on the planet. It was Beryl's homeland, but she had not been there since its rulers sent her to the Golden Kingdom's court. Her skill as a mage was part of the tribute the Dark Kingdom paid to the Earth's dominant realm. Beryl had always spoken as if she planned to remain in the Golden City for the rest of her days... but that was when she and Prince Endymion were together. Now she only nodded solemnly.

"I've been summoned to investigate a mysterious object that fell from the sky," she told the Earth Prince. "It seemed like a normal shooting star at first, but the mages have been sensing strange signals from it and it may be connected to some odd monuments that have been appearing in the kingdom. It's all very puzzling and His Majesty wants all his experts to investigate. King Arton has given me leave to go. I was going to decline, but..."

Isolated on the Moon as he was, Prince Endymion had not heard much about the strange comet that had come from the sun, but as Beryl spoke of it, a cold chill came over him. A sense of dread unlike anything he had ever felt gripped him with icy fingers, and he was afraid.

"Be careful," he said almost desperately, without really knowing why. "Whatever that thing is, stay as far away from it as possible. Better yet, do not go at all!" The auburn-haired Prince reached out for Beryl, but she drew back indignantly.

"Who are you to tell me what to do now?" she demanded, letting anger override the aching of her heart. "You, who chooses a life on another world as some controlling temptress' prize over your own kingdom!" Tears welled up in Beryl's eyes, but she blinked them away, glaring at her beloved with the fury only bitter anguish could bring. "What do you care what happens to me, if I am nothing to you now?"

Beryl could not stand there another minute without breaking down, and she did not want Prince Endymion to see the true depth of her pain. Before the Earth Prince could say another word, the dark-haired woman turned and fled, leaving him alone in the garden with his guilt and grief and the scent of jasmine.

Against All Odds

The distraught Earth woman ran from one garden to the next, no longer fighting the hot tears as they overflowed their boundaries and dripped from her chin. She loved him so much! How could he choose another woman after everything they had shared?

Soon, she was wandering blindly, caring for nothing but getting as far away from the Prince as possible and trying to muffle her sobs. The colors and landscaping of the gardens held no beauty for Beryl anymore. All she could see was Prince Endymion's face as he told her he would make the Moon Princess his wife. The betrothal had come as a shock when it was first announced months ago, but Beryl had always believed everything would work out somehow. The Prince had seized every excuse to visit Earth and meet with her despite his engagement. She had never imagined he would give up on their love.

As Beryl turned a corner, a flash of white caught her attention through the blur of tears. She stopped short and scurried close to the nearest hedge, not wanting anyone to see her in her current state. Looking around, Beryl noticed she was close to the edge of the palace grounds. Why would anyone else be out here?

Wiping the tears from her face, she peered around the leafy branches. There was a gardener's shed tucked into a corner against the garden wall and someone was inside, but the angle of the open door prevented Beryl from seeing the occupant. Her eyes narrowed. There was no equipment anywhere in sight, not even a watering can. It would be unusual for the gardeners to be out during daylight anyway. What would a thief want with landscaping tools?

In another moment, the mysterious person emerged from the shed in another flash of white, and Beryl was so shocked she nearly collapsed. It was the Moon Princess, Serenity. What manner of trick was this? Why would the Princess be here unescorted and rooting through a gardener's shed? It seemed impossible, but there was no mistaking the long white dress and flowing colorless hair.

As Beryl watched, hardly daring to breathe, Princess Serenity pulled a long rain cloak out of the shed and wrapped it around herself. By the practiced way in which the Lunarian adjusted the cloth to cover her dress, Beryl judged this was far from the first time the Moon Princess had crept about in disguise. Serenity clearly had a secret, and in that moment, with her heart aching from the pain of losing her beloved Prince Endymion to the Moon, Beryl resolved to discover what it was. If her lover would not fight for her, at least she might still have revenge.

Ignorant of the burning eyes upon her, Princess Serenity raised the hood of the cloak over her hair and pulled it forward until it covered the crescent moon mark on her forehead. Satisfied, she slipped through a door in the wall and found herself on the streets of the Golden City.

After a moment, Beryl followed.

Chapter Thirteen

It was a beautiful afternoon on Earth. The sky was clear, the sun was shining, and a gentle wind prevented the air from becoming too hot. The weather was perfect and the residents of the Golden City were taking full advantage of it. The business district was teeming with people of all classes going about their daily affairs, from the richly-dressed lord with his entourage to the child in ragged breeches with his mother's pennies. Parcel-laden figures bustled in and out of shops, and the air was filled with haggling arguments and peddlers' shouts. In these few streets, the entire city was alive. Everyone was far too busy to notice the cloaked shape wandering anxiously through the throng.

If ever Princess Serenity doubted the depth of her love for Endymion, she had her proof now. She had to be insane with devotion to go wandering the surface of the Earth alone. The rain cloak effectively concealed her identity, but it also erased any power or respect that identity might have commanded. Out here, she was nothing and nobody, and all the strength of her mother's crown could not protect the Princess if the Earth-children decided to make her a target.

Blue eyes darted from side to side constantly as the Moon Princess dodged carts and tried to keep out of the way of the small groups of people that were milling about. She wished she could see in all directions at once. Everyone knew the Earth was a chaotic place, filled with the lawless and unruly; at any time the Lunarian might be robbed, abducted, or even murdered -

Someone bumped into her.

Serenity recoiled, wrapping the cloak securely around herself and widening her stance. When the man attacked, he would not find her defenseless -

"Do excuse me, miss," the Earth-child said with an apologetic smile. Readjusting the bundles on his shoulders, he touched his hat respectfully and continued on his way without a second glance.

Princess Serenity was so taken aback that she froze for a moment, all the traffic on the street flowing around her as if she posed no obstacle. Such politeness from a man who had likely never set foot on a civilized world? It was unheard of! How could a courteous person survive on a savage planet such as this?

"Are you all right, miss?"

A young woman had stopped and was looking at Serenity with what seemed to be genuine concern. The Moon Princess shook herself; it would not do to let anyone look at her closely enough to notice her pale

Against All Odds

skin. Mumbling an apology, Serenity hurried off down the street.

Again, such unexpected kindness from an Earth-born stranger. This world was turning out to be quite different from the picture painted by Lunarian rumors. The streets were dirty and narrow, but the shops and homes Princess Serenity passed were clean and well-maintained. People grumbled beneath the weight of their belongings, but they were not rude or cruel to one another. There was quite a crowd, but it was not a mob. All in all, it was not so different from the Lower Quarter of her mother's city.

There were some differences. As the Princess made her way out of the marketplace, she began to notice the figures in the shadows. There were adults, children, old men, people of all walks of life dressed in rags and dirty from head to toe. They slept in doorways and huddled in alleys. Many of them coughed, or shivered from fever, or had bandages wrapped around their limbs. Serenity's heart ached to look at them.

So this was what poverty was. Could the rulers of the Golden Kingdom not provide for their subjects? Where were the medicines, the staple foods, the shelters? Was this the fate that befell a world shunned from the Silver Alliance? The Moon Princess nearly wept as she passed a small girl with a metal cup begging for coins and wished she had something of value to give her. Was this child not as deserving of the generosity of the Alliance as any other citizen of the Solar System?

The planned treaty with the Moon Kingdom could change all this, Serenity knew. The very treaty whose existence she was risking to satisfy her own selfish desires. She knew she should turn back, but her feet kept moving, her legs kept carrying her further and further away from the palace. The Princess had done so much to be here; she couldn't leave without completing her mission, no matter what the consequences.

With difficulty, Serenity put the plight of the Golden Kingdom out of her mind and refocused her thoughts on the task at hand. Every minute that passed was a minute in which the soldiers might be searching for her. How was she to find her beloved stable hand in this massive city?

As one unfamiliar face after another passed the Princess by, her goal seemed more and more hopeless. She had been truly foolish to seek Endymion blindly on an alien world. If it were not for the massive height of the palace looming over the city, the Moon Princess would have already been completely lost.

Wandering from one street to another in futile hope bordering on despair, Serenity's eyes fell on a signpost at a crossroads. Her eyes scanned the first several labeled arrows blankly; there were so many unfamiliar places, none of which gave her any clue to where Endymion might be. She knew it was pointless to expect a sign to direct her to an individual, but the Princess was beginning to feel the tears brewing in her stomach. She knew if she gave up hope, even for a moment, she would be overcome by grief.

Toward the bottom of the signpost Serenity's eyes caught a word that at least was familiar. A green sign pointed the way to the Central Gardens. After wandering the crowded streets for what seemed like a lifetime, the thought of being once again surrounded by flowers and trees was comforting. Besides, Endymion had always loved the gardens on the Moon...

Attempting to quash the seed of surely foolish hope that was sprouting within her, Princess Serenity drew herself together and hurried off down the street that the arrow indicated. Unfortunately, the gardens lay in the direction of the palace, but at this point it was a risk she was willing to take. If she did not find Endymion soon, she would have to return to her escorts anyway. Sailor Venus could not maintain the deception forever.

The route to the gardens seemed endless. Serenity rushed down the street as rapidly as she dared, the importance of not drawing attention to herself barely preventing her from breaking into a run. Dodging knots of people, she hurried past dozens of buildings and nearly identical streets, crossing block after block of alien shops and homes and faces. All the while, the palace loomed ever closer and the fear of discovery grew ever more insistent. Was it possible that the Central Gardens were actually on the palace grounds? Would the Princess have to abandon her search without finding her beloved? Would all she had done to secure a visit to Earth be in vain?

Finally, as she pushed her way through a small crowd, the first relief the Princess had felt in what seemed like years rolled through her like a wave. She had come to the edge of a courtyard and just across it stood a tall arch of stone that outlined an opening in a large hedge. A sign beside the gateway proclaimed this the entrance to the Central Gardens.

Against All Odds

The palace was quite close now. Although the hedge border extended quite a distance to Serenity's left, large manors that obviously belonged to lords and ladies surrounded the gardens on all other sides. In such an area, one mistake could mean discovery. The Moon Princess wrapped the gardener's cloak securely around herself before crossing the courtyard and passing through the arch.

Although she was so nervous that her pulse was racing in her ears, Princess Serenity could not help but pause a moment to admire this paradise hidden in the center of the Golden City. This was clearly a public space, as it was the most open garden the Moon Princess had ever seen, with avenues wide enough for a dozen people to walk side by side.

Flowers and hedges were not the only beauty of this garden. Tall trees towered overhead at intervals and sculptures had been placed at strategic points. Pillars, archways, and decorative walls divided the garden into sections. From the entrance, a clear avenue ran straight from the courtyard outside to a great sweeping staircase and carriage circle at the far end of the garden - the main gate of the Earth Palace itself.

It was quite a distance away, but Princess Serenity gasped and hurried to her left to duck into the nearest enclosed space. Once there was a solid stone wall between her and the palace, she allowed herself pause to catch her breath. The Lunarian was disguised, but there had been guards standing at attention on those distant steps; if an alarm had been raised they might be on the lookout for suspicious figures.

It was quite a long moment before Serenity stopped shaking. Her quest had led her right back to where she had started! The Central Gardens had seemed a likely place to search, but they were in the most high-class area of the city, in the very shadow of the palace. Even on his home planet, her beloved Endymion was no nobleman. Would he even be permitted in this place?

As if in answer to her question, a trio of small children in shabby clothing ran past the disguised Princess, laughing and calling out excitedly to one another. An exhausted woman in a worn and patched dress staggered after them, looking as if she had been on the chase for quite some time. A moment later, a richly-dressed nobleman and his lady paraded by at a more serene pace, surrounded by their retinue and looking just as happy as the children.

As the Moon Princess looked around, she saw representatives of every class and caste, sharing the gardens in apparent harmony - although they were careful not to cross paths with one another. Serenity smiled despite her unease. In some ways, the Golden Kingdom was more advanced than the proud civilization that orbited its world. This was a place where anyone could fit in, even a princess from the Moon.

More relaxed now, Serenity began to aimlessly wander the gardens, as much enjoying her surroundings as looking for a certain familiar face. She was so absorbed in the lovely feeling of being one anonymous person among many that when her gaze found that face, it almost passed on by without recognizing him. When her brain caught up with her heart's excited leap, she found herself pressed against a wall fighting tears.

It was him.

Princess Serenity forgot to breathe as her eyes devoured the sight of the tanned dark-haired man, her gaze roaming his body from head to toe. He was standing beneath a tall arch supported by two elegant pillars, and deep shadows cloaked his face, but Serenity would have known it was Endymion even if it had been midnight. He was gazing blankly past a pair of decorative urns atop a nearby pedestal, his short hair dancing in the breeze.

The mere sight of him was enough to weaken Serenity's knees, and she leaned against the wall and gasped for breath. Endymion seemed different, somehow. He was as strikingly handsome as ever to the eyes of the Moon Princess, but he seemed bigger, stronger, nearly glowing with restrained energy. Had they been separated so long that Serenity's memories of her beloved no longer did him justice?

For several minutes, she stood there staring, the sheer joy of seeing her long-lost stable hand enough to sate her longing for the moment. He was all right; he was healthy, he was whole, he was safe. Beneath the flood of relief a familiar fire was rising within Serenity's stomach, the smoldering spark of her love reignited into a fresh inferno of desire.

At the same time, a dreadful hesitation was stealing into her mind. Since Endymion was taken from her, Princess Serenity had thought of nothing else but her longing to be with him again, but what if he

did not feel the same way? She remembered now his expression as she willingly left him. What if he could not forgive her, or had even moved on? Was it right to burst into his life again, after he had already endured so much? Beyond that, there was duty to consider. If she went to him now, would she be able to let him go? Would it be like that last night on the Moon, when his presence flooded out all rational thought? Sailor Venus was waiting for her... Two kingdoms were counting on her...

Could she even consider leaving without speaking to him, now that she had found him?

The growing ache deep within Princess Serenity answered that question for her before she had even finished forming the thought. Before she could dwell any further on her doubts, her body was leaning forward, her legs were leaping ahead, her arms were reaching out. Tears slipped from her bright blue eyes as she crossed the distance separating them at a run, all concern for her disguise set aside, the rough cloak flying behind her and her dress flashing white in the sunshine. Without a word, she flung her arms around Endymion's neck and pressed her lips against his.

The startled man started to pull back, but the warmth of the young woman against him and the taste of her kiss were more familiar than any face or voice. His arms wrapped around her and he surrendered to her passion.

The Moon Princess was in ecstasy. She was in Endymion's arms again, enfolded in his strength and his scent, wrapped in her own private rose garden with the heat of his lips against hers. Serenity's entire body tingled with the rush of their reunion, her veins pulsing with a heat she had feared she would never feel again. The color and light rushed back into her life and she felt alive again, the clouds of loneliness rolling away and the sunshine bursting through. She wanted it to last forever, but Endymion broke the kiss to gaze at her in ravenous disbelief.

"Sere."

The husky wonder in his voice coupled with the sound of her cherished nickname sent an electric chill through Princess Serenity, and she pulled the Earth-child back down to her before he could utter another word. This time, her lips parted and her tongue pressed against her beloved's mouth until it opened to admit her. She dived into him, consuming the familiar longed-for taste of him, refusing to let go until she had filled the gaping hole that had opened within her in his absence. Endymion's arms tightened around Serenity's waist and he returned her eagerness with equal abandon, moaning against her as he sated his own desperate hunger.

Several giggling and cooing admirers passed by at a respectful distance before the reunited lovers had drank enough of one another to part. Their lips separated, but they did not release their hold on each other, both lovers clinging to one another as if they were illusions that might vanish at any moment. Faces a mere finger-length apart, they gazed into each other's eyes for the first time in what seemed an eternity, blue meeting black in a storm of emotion no words could express.

"Sere," Endymion said again, his voice trembling in disbelief as he hurriedly pulled the fallen hood of her cloak back up over her telltale colorless hair. "What are you... How did you..."

The Princess giggled despite herself, amused to have once again caught her lover off his guard. She ran her fingers through his short black hair, which at that moment seemed softer than the finest silk.

"I have my ways," she teased gently. "I have told you many times, there is much you do not know about me."

The Earth man clearly wanted answers, but Serenity had no desire to spoil the pleasure of this meeting by making him as nervous as she was - although, now that they were together, the Moon Princess' fear had all but evaporated. When Endymion did not press the point, she knew he felt the same way. They were reunited; that was all that mattered. Serenity's very soul was filled with the joy of Endymion's presence, and it was difficult now to remember the agony of their separation.

The smile faded from Princess Serenity's face as she recalled the unhappy events that led to this happy meeting. It was her fault the stable hand had been banished to a strange alien world, away from everything and everyone he knew. All he had done was love her, and it had destroyed his life.

"Endy," she said softly, fresh tears welling up in her eyes as she caressed his face, "I am so sorry. Can you ever forgive me?"

"You are here," Endymion replied, running his fingers down the slope of her chin. "There is no longer anything to forgive."

Against All Odds

He bent down to her again, his lips finding hers as if drawn by magnets. She sighed in rapture, her eyes sliding closed again and sending her tears rolling down her cheeks. After a few brief kisses, Endymion turned his attention to removing those marks of sorrow, his lips and tongue collecting every salty drop from her smooth skin. The Princess' arms tightened around her lover's neck as he continued downward, feathering kisses over her neck and shoulders beneath the hood of her cloak. She had missed this so desperately; the roughness of his touch, the softness of his mouth against her flesh... It was all she had dreamed of since the night he was banished.

"Endymion," Serenity groaned as a familiar ache began to intensify deep inside herself. "So warm..." She gasped for breath as his tongue traced her collarbones and his hands caressed the small of her back. There was something strangely invigorating about being in the Earth-born man's embrace, something that lifted away all the clouds from the Moon Princess' life and brought a crystal clarity to her spirit. He filled her with strength. She felt as if she could do anything, face anything, as long as she had the love of this man. Serenity wanted nothing more than to be there in his arms, with his breath hot on her neck and his lips against her skin, for all eternity.

Her knees were weakening and an insistent heat was rising in a place that longed to be touched, but they could go no further in a public garden. The Princess slid her arms around until her hands grasped Endymion's shoulders, and she reluctantly pushed him upright.

"Is there somewhere we can go to be alone?" The heaving of her chest and the hunger in her expression told Endymion all he needed to know. Gesturing toward a distant exit, he slid an arm around Princess Serenity's waist and guided her down a path.

The former stable hand was eager for a more intimate encounter as well. It was like a dream. Endymion had known the Moon Princess was on Earth, but he had not seriously expected her to find him. He had been so certain he would never see her again, and now here she was, beside him once more. His joy was too great to walk in silence. He needed to hear her speak, needed to hear her voice again after so many nights of hearing it in his dreams.

"What do you think of Earth?" he asked, turning to Serenity as they followed a winding walkway among lilies and violets. "Is it what you expected?"

"Not at all," the Princess admitted, adjusting the hood of her cloak so she could glance sideways at her lover's face. "On the Moon, everyone thinks... Well, you know the beliefs Lunarians have." She found herself blushing, unwilling to even speak of the stereotypes that had proven to be untrue, especially now that Endymion was a part of this world. "The people here are friendly and refined... and it's not only that." Serenity frowned, another difference suddenly occurring to her.

"It's odd," the crystal-haired Princess remarked, gazing around at all the greenery that surrounded them. "From the Moon, this planet looks like a blue crystal ball... but there is scarcely any water here, anywhere. It's all green."

Endymion smirked at this and tightened his arm around his beloved's waist as they headed onto one of the wider avenues that cut through the gardens.

"You're just not looking in the right places." He pulled her onto another path suddenly, as if on a whim, leading her away from the exit they had been aiming for and heading deeper into the gardens.

"Where are we going?" Serenity asked, but she did not expect an answer, nor did she really want one. Endymion's little spontaneous surprises were one of the things she missed most in her structured life without him. She grinned in anticipation as their steps took them into the grass and up a small hill, the hedges falling away as they climbed a slope facing away from the palace.

The Moon Princess was not disappointed. They passed between two pillars and emerged on a green hillside that overlooked a large portion of the Golden City. From here, the land sloped gradually downward for miles, and the heart of Earth's civilization was spread out before them. Sunlight sparkled on roofs and trees and roads, highlighting every clear space in the crowded city. At the very base of it all, the ocean stretched outward to infinity.

Princess Serenity had never seen such a sea. It rolled and tumbled as it played with the wind, white caps topping every wave, the endless swells rocking the boats docked in the harbor. It glistened blue and green in the light, and the shadows of the clouds drifted across its surface in great patches of darkness. The Moon's Sea of Serenity was large, but this was an unbroken expanse that extended to every horizon and

Against All Odds

beyond. Compared to this ocean, any continent was a mere island.

Just looking at the landscape brought an incredible calm to the Princess' troubled heart. "Feeling the wind blow here, looking at the sea like this... it gives me peace of mind," she mused contentedly. The Earth certainly had a special allure of its own.

As she scanned the far-off waters, Serenity's eyes narrowed. One region of the water was far darker than it should have been. Out on the horizon, a strange darkness was hanging in the air. At first glance it looked like a gathering storm, but there was no lightning, and the clouds were not large and swollen with rain but wispy like outreaching shadows. Just looking at the dark bruise on the sky sent a shiver down Princess Serenity's spine, and she leaned against Endymion for warmth.

"Those..." she began, and stopped, unable to find an appropriate word to describe the darkness that was giving her such an uneasy feeling. "What are those black clouds?"

"I don't know," the Earth-born man confessed. His eyes narrowed as he stared at the shadows in the air. They were concentrated in the north and were a long way off, but it seemed to him the patch was growing gradually larger. He had not been on Earth long, but somehow Endymion knew those clouds were nothing of this planet's nature. When he looked at them, he felt weakened, as if the very sight of them poisoned him.

"For some time there has been darkness over there, and clusters of huge monoliths have appeared." Endymion pointed to a small cave a good distance east of the docks. Tall irregular stones rose out of the sand and the shallow water like jagged teeth, black as midnight and clustered together in a forbidding huddle. The Moon Princess shuddered when her gaze fell upon them and clutched at her beloved's chest for comfort, although she did not know why the rocks bothered her so.

"They appeared suddenly, and from what I've heard, the phenomenon has been spreading over the planet," the former stable hand continued uneasily. Only a few days ago, the odd arrangement of stones had appeared mysteriously overnight, and not even the boldest of the Golden City dared go near them for reasons they could not explain.

While working in the shipyards, Endymion had heard disturbing tales of boats that had vanished after passing too close to the strange monoliths or the northern darkness. Worse yet, some had returned, but the sailors had been reduced to lunatics raving about monsters. There was an evil power rising on the Earth, and it was growing stronger.

"Let's not look at them anymore," Serenity pleaded, turning her face away. "Please, Endy."

Endymion shook himself free of his thoughts and wrapped the cloak tightly around the trembling young woman in his arms. He had not realized how much the ominous sight bothered his beloved. Settling one arm around Serenity's waist, he led the Princess back down the hillside, through the gardens and out into the Golden City.

The lovers were so absorbed in the bliss of each other's company that neither of them noticed the black-haired woman following them at a distance, gnashing her teeth in rage.

Walking through the city was far more pleasant with Endymion at her side, but even so, Serenity was glad when their journey came to an end. The former stable hand had led her to a neighborhood midway between the palace and the docks. The streets here were narrow and crowded with apartment buildings several stories high. The structures were shabby but clearly habitable; there was scarcely a window without a flower box or a line of washing hanging from it.

With so many people about, Princess Serenity was relieved when Endymion finally brought her up a steep flight of stairs to the room where he lived. It was only that, a room. It was smaller than the hut he had had as a stable hand on the Moon, and it had only one window and a thin curtain to separate the bed from the living space. Endymion had not been here long and had few possessions, but a small smile lit up Serenity's face as her eyes fell on a familiar red rose hanging beside the window. The gold star locket she had given her beloved lay on the windowsill nearby.

Endymion bustled about the room for a moment, a faint blush reddening his tanned cheeks as he tidied up discarded clothing and blankets. The despair of his exile had all but destroyed his usual tidy habits, and he had never imagined he would receive visitors here, let alone the Moon Princess. Standing

Against All Odds

awkwardly just inside the doorway, Serenity lowered the hood of her cloak and searched for a topic of conversation.

"How do you prepare your meals?" she finally asked, noting that there was no fireplace or kitchen space in the room.

"This is a boarding house for single workers," Endymion explained, shoving several rumpled shirts into a basket and pushing the basket behind the wash basin's stand. "The landlady provides two meals a day."

"How is your life here?" Serenity asked next, wringing her hands as she stepped forward. "Is everything... Are you..." Her voice broke as she surveyed the poor surroundings of the life to which her dearest love had been reduced. Endymion had been one of the most promising workers in her mother's stables, and because of his love for the Princess, he had lost everything. It was all her fault.

The tanned Earth-child straightened up and crossed the room to her, his charcoal eyes filled with concern. He caressed her cheeks and rubbed her arms with his rough hands, and forced himself to smile gently.

"I'm all right," he said in what he hoped was a convincing tone. Endymion had so longed to see Serenity again; the last thing he wanted now that she was finally here was to see her cry. She gazed up at him with eyes that were quivering pools of unshed tears, the exiled man her greatest desire and her greatest shame.

"I'm so sorry," she whispered, unable to speak any louder for fear her voice would be choked and broken. "I should never have let this happen to you. I should never have let them take you."

"It's all right," Endymion insisted, wrapping his arms around her slender form and pulling her against his chest. "You are here now, and that is all that matters. We are together now." His hands stroked her soft pale hair. Princess Serenity pressed herself against him as the grief spilled over and his shirt became wet with her tears. Endymion's heart pulsed against her ear. They were reunited, but how long could it last? She loved him so desperately; could she bear another separation?

Feeling the dampness on his chest, Endymion drew back slightly and lifted Serenity's chin with his fingers. Again he kissed away her tears, her sorrow salty on his tongue. Now that they were together, there was no need for sadness. Why was her grief so strong?

"No more tears," the tanned man insisted, wiping away their last remnants as he caressed her face. "I love you. There will only be happiness now."

These words brought a fresh rush of pain to Serenity's heart, but she submitted to Endymion's kisses as he bent down to her. Now that they were alone, his passion was enough to drive all of Princess Serenity's concerns away, and she wrapped her arms around the Earth-born man and returned his kisses with equal enthusiasm. His lips and tongue were like melted sweetness against her, and she sighed with contentment as a familiar tingle swept through her body.

Soon the pleasure of Endymion's touch became a desperate hunger as the aching within Serenity returned with a vengeance. She breathed heavily into his mouth, her chest heaving as his hands swept over her shoulder blades and down to the small of her back. How she had missed this feeling! Inside the Princess, a wave that had slumbered in misery was waking, rising in a growing tide that increased by the second. Her heart pounded as she buried her fingers in Endymion's hair to draw him more firmly against her.

Endymion had nearly forgotten the depth and power of the river of passion that commanded him when he was with the crystal-haired Lunarian. He couldn't get enough of her, his tongue exploring her mouth to the fullest and still wanting more, his muscles tensing as Serenity pulled him so hard against her that it hurt. They sighed and moaned together, these kisses forging a unity of shared breath that renewed the bonds of two hearts that beat in time.

Through a haze of passion, Endymion realized Princess Serenity's hands had slid down to his waist and her fingers were now fumbling with the lacings of his trousers. Forcing himself back to reality, he pulled his head back, breaking the lock her lips had held on him. The Earth man stared down into a pale face filled with a ravenous expression unlike anything he had ever seen. The Princess' desire burned like an inferno, radiating from her in scalding waves that would have made her intent obvious even had her hands not been pulling Endymion's shirt off over his head.

Against All Odds

"Sere-"

"Don't speak." Serenity pushed her lover back toward the narrow bed that stood in the corner as the lacings of Endymion's trousers finally gave way to her insistent fingers, and she descended upon him.

Their union was every bit as fiery as the first time they made love, and more so, their passion ignited to a new level by the agony of their time apart. They writhed together, every movement increasingly desperate, every moment an effort to unite their bodies so completely that they could never be separated again. This time, there was no mysterious rush of power as their ecstasy neared its peak, but the sheer pleasure of the encounter itself was more than enough.

Some time later they were lying together beneath the thin covers of the rickety bed, Serenity enveloped in Endymion's arms. The Princess' eyes were closed and her mind was empty of everything save the bliss of being in her lover's presence. She listened to his heartbeat with her head against his chest and adjusted her breathing to match his, wanting only to make the unity they had shared last a little longer.

The inner peace did not last long. Before there had only been the longing for Endymion, a burning ache that overruled all other thoughts and feelings. Now that need had been filled, that desire sated, and reason and logic were beginning to return to the surface of the Princess' mind. As she lay against the warmth of her lover's body, Serenity became more and more conscious of the flow of time with every passing second.

How long had she been here? Surely it had been hours since Princess Serenity left Sailor Venus in the garden. More likely than not, the soldier's ruse had been discovered by now and the true Moon Princess was being sought with all haste. Surely they would not advertise her disappearance by sending out town criers, but the palace guards might be making inquiries and the Sailor Soldiers could be anywhere. In her joy at finding Endymion, Serenity had paid little attention to concealing her identity; it was possible she had been seen by someone. What would happen to Endymion if they traced her here?

She glanced up at the exiled Earth-child, who was dozing lightly in the aftermath of their passion. Princess Serenity's eyes filled with tears once more at the sight of his peaceful, lovely face. He was so like an angel, and watching him made Serenity feel more and more like a demon. Her selfish desires had once again put Endymion in danger. It would be wrong to risk the exiled man's new life by staying any longer.

She slid from the bed and collected her dress and undergarments from the floor, clothing herself as swiftly as she could. Feeling the sudden chill at his side, Endymion awoke and sat up muzzily.

"Where are you going?"

"I cannot be found here." The Princess laced up her bodice as best she could; it would not be nearly as tight as was proper but it would have to do for the rest of the day. She hurried to the tiny mirror propped beside the wash basin to untangle her hair.

"It's all right, you're safe here," Endymion assured her, snapping fully awake as cold dread settled in his stomach. She could not be leaving when he had only just gotten her back! Climbing out of bed, the tanned man pulled his trousers on. "There is no need to hurry. I have some money left; tonight we can slip away, we can go anywhere."

At these words, Princess Serenity was overcome by guilt. She had wanted only to see Endymion, without sparing a thought for the consequences or what would come afterwards. Her plan had ceased with finding him; she had not even considered the question of staying on Earth. How foolish she had been not to realize Endymion would assume that was her intent! She turned around, grief twisting her features into a heartbreaking expression.

"I cannot stay here, Endy," she said quietly. As she gazed upon her lover, the Moon Princess' heart ached to remain with him always, but this time she forced herself to put her emotions aside in favor of logical thought. Before Endymion's exile, she had agreed to go to Earth with him, but that was before she had seen the other side of the coin with her own eyes. Now her mind was filled with the faces of the sick and hungry she had passed on the streets of the Golden Kingdom. The people of Earth needed her marriage to their Prince even more than the Lunarians did. Remaining with Endymion would be as cruelly selfish as

endangering his life to see him.

"You are leaving me again?" the former stable hand demanded, his hands curling into fists at his sides. He trembled as a storm of emotion rose inside him. Without Serenity, his world lost all color, his life lost all meaning. She could not leave him again, not now, not after everything Endymion had endured. He needed her like he needed the air.

"Oh, Endy," the Princess sighed mournfully, stepping toward him. "There is nothing I want more than to spend the rest of my life with you, but it cannot happen this way."

"Why did you come to me, then?" A dreadful rage was rising to a slow boil within Endymion, pushing the twisting pain aside. Why did Serenity not leave him in peace, if she had planned the entire time to leave him once more? Why had she given him cause to hope again, only to take it away? Something Sailor Jupiter had said on his last night on the Moon popped up in his memory, and Endymion's lips twitched in a bitter half-smile as he realized to whom they best applied. "What do you want of me? Am I a toy, to play with when you will and to cast aside when inconvenient?"

"No!" Serenity cried, genuinely shocked. She clutched her dress to her chest, desperate for something to cling to. Why could this man not understand, why could he not be content with the precious time she had gone to such lengths to give him? "I love you, Endy; I cannot go on without you in my life. When I am Queen I will be able to reverse my mother's decision and bring you home!"

"I am home!"

The words passed Endymion's lips before he even realized what he was saying. The lovers stared at each other for a long moment, equally surprised. Endymion's blood was boiling, and with it, strange thoughts and feelings were roaring through him. On the Moon he had been an outcast, an orphan, a class below even the deepest poverty, a prisoner of his birth. He had been betrayed by the Moon Kingdom's people and tortured by its soldiers. Now he was among his own people, free of the limitations Lunarians had imposed upon him and he possessed a new strength and energy he had never felt on the world that had raised him. On Earth, he felt like a Prince.

"How can you say that?" Princess Serenity gasped. "The Moon is where you grew up! It took you in, fed you, clothed you, sheltered you, loved you!"

"Loved!?" Endymion burst out, his voice so suddenly sharp that Serenity took a step back, momentarily frightened. "After all that has happened, you dare to say that?"

"My mother loves all her subjects," the Moon Princess said in a small voice, shying away from her lover's fierce expression.

"Is banishment an act of love?" Endymion swept his hair back and turned the side of his bare neck toward Serenity. Without the high-collared shirt he had been wearing to cover his shame, the scarred silver tattoo was plainly visible in the sunlight that filtered through the window. "Is this an act of love?"

The white dress slipped from Princess Serenity's fingers and landed in a heap on the rough floor. She stared at the mark on her beloved's skin, her mouth hanging open, her eyes wide with horror. After a moment, she pressed her hands to her mouth and choked on a scream, hurrying forward as disbelief clouded her vision.

"What did they do to you?" she squeaked, her blue eyes locked on the two white lines of raised scar tissue that obscured the mark of her house.

"The soldiers do this to everyone who is exiled from the Moon," Endymion muttered, feeling rather guilty about drawing the Princess' attention to the injury as an attack on her kingdom. He tried to turn away, but Serenity gripped his shoulder with surprising strength. "It would be a security breach to leave open the possibility of criminals infiltrating the Moon Castle under the guise of servants," he explained. The soldiers of Mars and Jupiter had gone much further than was necessary, but Endymion had no desire to reveal that to Princess Serenity, appalled as she was by what he had already told her.

"It's barbaric!" the Princess protested, her gaze still focused unwaveringly on the scar that marred her lover's flesh. "Surely there must be a more humane method of... of..." Her voice trailed off as a detail of Endymion's explanation sank in. "Soldiers..." Serenity recalled aloud. "Not *my* soldiers!?"

She stared up at Endymion, her eyes boring into his. The exiled man hesitated just a bit too long.

"How could they?" Serenity cried out, her face filling with grief and anger. She turned away, fuming, and snatched up her dress from where it had fallen. "They will be made to pay for this!" she

growled in a dangerous voice.

"They were performing their duties," Endymion reminded her in an attempt to calm the crystal-haired woman. That was not quite true, but the Princess' fury was alarming. He had not meant to spark such a drastic reaction.

"You are not a criminal!" his beloved declared, yanking the dress over her head and adjusting it roughly. "They might have gone a bit easier on you! Had I been there, I would never have allowed it! When did they..." Serenity fell silent, remembering the terrible night of Endymion's exile. She did not need to ask when the Earth-child had been branded. Her thoughts flew back to the white-hot pain that had shot through her neck so suddenly as she lay weeping in her bedchamber.

A deep chill rolled through the Princess' body as she realized she had actually felt her beloved's pain, but she pushed the shock of that revelation aside, concentrating instead on the memory of the agony. It had hurt so badly that she could do nothing but scream, and it had continued for quite a while after Sailor Venus had left the chamber to investigate what was happening to Endymion. There was no reason why it should have taken so long for the brand to be made permanent.

"They didn't go easy on you, did they?" Princess Serenity breathed, her eyes widening. "They were even worse than they would have been with a criminal. Because you loved me, they tortured you."

Endymion tried to speak, but his mind was a blank. He could not lie to her, and he searched in vain for words that might soften the terrible truth. In the end, he could only stand there numbly as the crystalline world of the Moon Princess dulled and cracked, the knowledge that her friends were capable of such cruelty hitting her like a stone to glass. For a long moment she simply stood there, her eyes becoming distant, her face a mirror to the horror and disbelief that were at war within her mind.

"Sere," Endymion finally forced out in a hoarse voice, "are you all right? Please, it is not as bad as that."

"They will not be allowed to get away with this," Princess Serenity said faintly. Her expression hardened. Her eyes focused and flashed with anger, and she began to tremble with restrained fury. "It is unforgivable. I will destroy them!"

The ferocity of the vow set Endymion off-balance. He knew Serenity had a fire that lurked beneath her demure exterior, but never had he seen it flare up in vindictive rage. Was this the same woman he had fallen in love with, her passion now churned into unstoppable wrath? The tanned man finally found the courage to speak again as the Princess pulled the gardener's cloak around her shoulders.

"Do not go," he pleaded, reaching toward his beloved. "Stay with me."

"I must go." A regretful sadness set Princess Serenity's fury aside for a moment. "I can not leave the Moon Kingdom in the hands of soldiers without hearts, nor can I condemn the Golden Kingdom to an isolated struggle. I have stayed too long already."

Princess Serenity gazed mournfully at the handsome lover she was leaving behind, once again forced to choose the path of duty over the pleasure of love. Why did it have to be this way? She loved Endymion; why could it not be as simple as following the path of her heart? If she were anyone else, there would be a choice, some other road but this one. As the Moon Princess, she was the one person in the Silver Alliance for whom there were no options.

Serenity had been truly foolish to come here, knowing she would have to leave again. Her dreams of a life with Endymion had been just that: dreams. Although she could not resist the desire to see him, could not kill the urge to be with him, it would always come down to the same outcome time and time again. They were trapped in a love that could never be. There would never be a resolution to this dilemma. There would never be an end to this pain. Still, the Princess knew she could not say goodbye forever. Endymion was as much a part of her as the crescent moon on her forehead.

Watching her, Endymion knew all this as if she had spoken her thoughts aloud. As much as he hated it, Princess Serenity's words were truth. She was the Silver Alliance's only hope for a ruler that would unify the ten worlds and save the Golden Kingdom from its downward spiral. Endymion no longer cared for the Moon, but he had grown to care for the Earth, and his tryst with the Moon Princess would bring only misery and suffering to millions of innocent people. Although emotion cried for their unity, logic demanded their separation.

One thing was certain. They could not go on like this. A split life would only doom them both to

Against All Odds

eventual utter disaster and most likely spark an outright war between the Earth and its satellite. It fell to Endymion to shoulder the duty that he knew Serenity would never have the strength to bear, the duty to do what was necessary for the good of all the peoples in the solar system. His expression hardened.

"Then, this is the end," Endymion said quietly. His dark eyes dropped to the floor as the crystal-haired woman froze in the act of pulling up her hood.

"What?" A slight tremble was audible in Serenity's voice.

"We can't meet like this anymore." The Earth-born man wanted nothing more than to keep staring at the uneven floorboards, but he forced himself to look up, to meet the clear blue of his lover's gaze so she would see he was serious. Endymion's heart ached so badly he thought it would burst in his chest, but he could not unsay the words, nor did he truly want to revoke them. Continued visits like this would only bring danger for them both. If Serenity was going to choose her life as a Princess over a life on Earth with Endymion, it would be best if she committed fully to that decision now.

"Why?" the Princess whispered, stepping closer to the dark-haired man. He shied away, and his eyes slid to the floor once more. Serenity's chest tightened. This could not be happening. They could never be married, but she needed Endymion in her life; there was nothing else that could lift the crushing weight of responsibility from her soul. How would she survive, without the Earth man's love to hold on to?

"It's clear now that a relationship between us is impossible," Endymion said wretchedly, ignoring a tiny voice within him that was beginning to scream. "The people of Earth and the Moon should not be in contact with each other. That's the law of the Ancients. They can't fall in love."

"But it's too late!" Tears pouring down her cheeks, Princess Serenity rushed across the floor, seized Endymion by the hands and kissed him desperately. The dark-haired man's left hand came up as if to push her away, but the Princess pushed back, refusing to release his fingers. Finally, his right hand slid around her shoulders and held her close.

Endymion's eyes closed. Tears welled up beneath his closed eyelids as he savored the kiss, knowing it would be their last. This time there were no angry Sailor Soldiers to distract him from the taste and scent and feel of her, and Serenity's warmth seeped into him and redoubled the aching of his soul. The end of every meeting was pure torture. Endymion could not endure it again and again. He had to let her go.

"I love you," the Moon Princess whispered between brief kisses, her soft lips salty with tears. "I love you, I love you, I love you. Please, don't do this."

"Stay with me." Endymion knew his repeated request was in vain, but he had to stand firm. Not only was this best for both their kingdoms, but he was beginning to build a new life of his own now. He was no longer one of Serenity's subjects. He could not spend the rest of his days as a slave to her fancy, sacrificing everything to be there whenever she wanted his love. Either they would always be together and damn the consequences, or they needed to move on with their separate lives.

"You know I can't do that!" The crystal-haired Princess broke away from him, indignance mixing with her anguish. "I can't just disappear into a crowd like you can! Look at me!" she cried, waving her hands to indicate her alabaster skin and colorless hair. She pointed at the golden crescent on her forehead. "This marks me always as the Moon Princess, no matter what I do! Do you want me to spend my entire life in hiding, never able to feel the sunshine on my face for fear of being recognized?"

"Do you want me to spend mine forever waiting for a woman who marries and bears the children of another man?" Endymion countered. Serenity was mistaking the reasons behind his ultimatum, but if she would not accept that their relationship had to end, perhaps there was no other road open to the Earth man but the path of cruel words. Serenity's face crumpled at the reminder of what she would be forced to do for her kingdom.

"I would visit you as often as I could," she protested.

"I would be your private plaything, while you devoted your life to someone else."

"You have my love. Isn't that enough?"

"Not if it isn't enough for you."

"How can you be so cold?" the Princess demanded accusingly, her heart pounding in frustrated suffering. "I do not do this because I want to!"

A sudden burst of loud voices outside on the street cut through the lovers' argument, adding nervous dread to Serenity's emotions. Might they be searching for her? Every moment she stayed increased

Against All Odds

the risk of discovery. She didn't have time to debate this any further. Princess Serenity wrapped the old cloak tightly around her body.

"Please, give some thought to what you are saying," she begged. "I will return when I can."

"No." Endymion's conviction wavered, but he forced himself to stand firm. "You must decide now. Stay with me or leave forever."

"I must go," Serenity said quietly in a voice choked with grief, "but it doesn't have to be the end. Please, Endy."

The exiled Earth man turned his face away. His eyes closed tightly as he prepared the words he had to say. It hurt more than any physical pain, but it had to be done, and this time for good. It was necessary, for both their sakes and more.

"Return to your kingdom, Princess," he uttered in a voice like cold stone. "I never want to see you again."

Serenity staggered under the sudden weight of her beloved's words, all the strength within her evaporating like smoke. Nearly blinded by imminent tears, she took a step forward, reaching out imploringly toward the man she loved.

"Endy-"

"Go!" The man's head shot up and he glared at Princess Serenity with a fire in his dark eyes that she had never seen before. His face was fierce and more serious than it had ever been; his features as chiseled and compassionless as those of her stoic fiancé.

Terrified by the change that had come over her beloved stable hand, Serenity backed away, stumbled through the door, and fled. Endymion waited, motionless, for a long moment. When he was certain she had left the building completely, he wept.

A few people going about their business in the streets of the Golden City looked up as a door slammed open and a hooded figure rushed down the steps of a building. After a moment, most of the onlookers returned their attention to their own affairs. Only one pair of eyes remained locked on the figure as it plunged into the crowd and headed in the direction of the palace.

Beryl emerged from the shadows beneath the wooden staircase and hurried after the disguised Moon Princess, her agitated hands twisting the white wrap that hung around her waist. She was beside herself with rage. Her beloved Prince Endymion had broken her heart so he would not be unfaithful to his Lunarian fiancé, and here was the Moon Princess, consorting with a common Earth man! And in his private chambers, no less! Beryl was disgusted and outraged. Lunarians were supposed to be pure, untouchable goddesses, and their Princess was behaving like a common whore. Beryl's lover was devoting himself to the white-robed heiress, and she was nothing more than scum, violating her betrothal contract in broad daylight!

The Dark Kingdom mage was determined that Princess Serenity would not get away with this deceit. If she was set on taking the Earth Prince, she would not keep her reputation! Had Beryl been free to remain in the Golden City, she could have worked covertly to discredit her rival, but now that she was being recalled to her own kingdom, she was forced to resort to more overt methods. Keeping her eyes locked on the cloaked figure, the dark-haired woman began to mutter an incantation under her breath.

Choking on her tears, Princess Serenity struggled through the crowded streets. How could Endymion be so selfish? Couldn't he accept the necessity of her duty without throwing away their love for each other? After all Serenity had gone through to see him, the Earth-born man had turned her out as if she meant nothing. If she was that easy to toss aside, the Princess was glad she had not chosen to abandon her title! All the Lunarian wanted now was to return to the elite world she knew, and if possible, the Moon.

A slight stab of shame lanced through Serenity's despair as she realized she had overestimated the need for haste. There were no more guards about than there had been when she last passed through these streets, no anxious messengers, no angry women in white gloves and short skirts. What difference would it have made, though, if she had stayed longer with Endymion? The outcome would have been the same.

Serenity would still be rushing through these streets alone and heartbroken. She would still be feeling as if she had given up her only reason for living.

Had the journey to Endymion's apartment taken this long? The disguised Princess was hurrying as fast as her legs could carry her under the Earth's unfamiliar gravity, glancing up often to make sure she was headed toward the palace, but the towering symbol of the monarchy never seemed to get any closer. The crowds were growing thicker, jostling Serenity and forcing her away from her path. She found herself tripping over other people's feet and getting caught in the center of moving knots that she could not escape.

Something strange was definitely going on. The Earth-children surrounding the frustrated Princess seemed as confused and irritated as she was, and their annoyed shouts were becoming a din. Serenity was trapped in the center of a mass of bodies. The air seemed to press down on her ever harder, and it felt thick and suffocating in her lungs. She was desperate to escape, but there was nowhere to go. All the overwhelmed woman could do was cling to the gardener's cloak and try to keep from screaming.

Suddenly someone seized the back of Princess Serenity's hood and tugged it off, exposing her pale face and hair for all to see.

"Look!" cried a voice that somehow managed to cut through the chaos of the crowd. "It's the Moon Princess, daughter of Selene!"

There was a dreadful moment of silence. A hundred heads turned toward Serenity. Two hundred eyes locked on the golden crescent on her forehead. The Lunarian whirled around, hovering on the verge of panic. Her eyes scanned a hundred shocked faces - and stopped on one that smiled.

Directly behind the Princess, so close that they were nearly touching, a dark-haired woman in a black dress was sneering at Serenity with a vindictive grin of pure loathing. Her violet eyes sparkled triumphantly and her lips parted.

"Long live the Queen."

Then the world exploded. Someone screamed. The black-haired woman vanished into the mob as the people closest to the Moon Princess tried to back away and the people behind them tried to press closer. Several members of the crowd fell to their knees. Serenity's heart jumped as she felt hands tugging at her dress and fingers in her hair. She looked around frantically for an escape, but there was none. More hands were reaching toward her now, turning the crowd into a sea of wriggling fingers, and people were shouting.

"It's the Goddess!"

"Have mercy!"

"Let me away!"

"Forgive us, Selene!"

"Let me through!"

"Heal me, oh Goddess!"

Not all the voices were crying words of reverence.

"Leave us in peace!"

"Enchantress! Release the Prince!"

"We don't want your kind here!"

"Why do you spy on us?"

"Go back to your paradise!"

All the while there were the hands, reaching toward the exposed Lunarian, grasping at her. Some were open in entreaty, and others were closed in anger. Serenity heard prayers and curses, pleas and condemnations. She saw desperation and fear, indignance and fury. And still there was no escape.

"Princess Serenity!"

None of the crowd had yet called the Lunarian by her proper name and title. The Moon Princess turned instinctively toward the sound, hoping against hope to see one of the Sailor Soldiers there. It was an Earth girl in commoner's clothes, with brown hair and hazel eyes. The girl reached out over the people, extending a hand as if to offer help.

"I am a friend of Endou," the Earth-child called out. Serenity's heart leapt, but she hesitated. She was surrounded by hostile, frantic strangers. How could she be sure this girl was trustworthy? Anyone might know the stable hand had been banished to this planet; she had no proof this person really knew him...

"He calls you 'Sere'."

Princess Serenity seized the brunette's offered hand. The girl yanked her forward with surprising strength, tugging the Lunarian free of the grasping hands, and proved herself an expert at escaping crowds. They passed through gaps in the press of people that Serenity would never have realized existed, somehow finding themselves again and again in holes created by those who were frightened of the Lunarian frantically trying to avoid her touch. They dodged outreaching arms and tangles of legs, weaving through the shouting mob in leaps and bounds.

Suddenly they broke free and were running down the uneven street, the Earth girl still pulling the Moon Princess along by the hand. Serenity was exhausted, her head aching and her body weak as water from so much activity under the planet's gravity, but she forced her legs to keep moving by sheer will. There was no time now to prevent the gardener's cloak from flying out uselessly behind her, and from the cries and pounding footsteps at their backs it seemed the entire Golden City was chasing the crystal-haired girl in the white dress. All the Princess could do was trust in the brunette stranger and hope her lungs would not burst.

Who was this girl? Had Endymion sent her to help Serenity? A deep heartache compounded the Lunarian's pain as she recalled their parting. After that dreadful exchange it seemed unlikely the former stable hand would care about the fate of the Princess. Unless, of course, he did care, and was merely unwilling to come himself..

Serenity clamped down on the flicker of hope that arose at this thought. He had told her he never wanted to see her again, and there had been nothing but conviction in his face. Even now, the Princess shuddered to remember that moment. It no longer mattered what Endymion thought of her. Their secret romance was really and truly over. The brightest star in the Lunarian's life was extinguished.

Finally, her Earth-born rescuer ducked into a side street and flung herself against a door. It slammed open, and she pulled Princess Serenity in behind her and barred the door after them. They were not a moment too soon. Almost immediately the hammering of fists on wood echoed throughout the room, accompanied by the shouting of the crowd outside.

The Moon Princess collapsed on a chair, unable to move any further, her lungs struggling for breath. The Earth girl hurried to shutter and bar the windows. All the light was blotted out, leaving Serenity only a shadowy glimpse of what appeared to be a rough office of some sort, with a table for a desk and several wooden chairs.

"The matron's out," the girl said briskly, crossing the room to the Princess, "but we don't have long." Already, there were additional shouts coming from the upper floors of the building and footsteps in the rooms above.

"Who..." Serenity managed to gasp, her lungs still burning with every breath.

"I am Talma," the brunette replied. "I took care of Endou after he arrived here."

"Endy..." Princess Serenity's emotions overflowed. She crumbled into sobs, tears pouring freely down her cheeks as she pressed her hands to her face and bent over, trembling, in her chair. The Princess of the Moon could have borne the madness of the crowd outside, the demands of Lunarians and Earth-children alike, all the responsibilities of her station, had she still had the warmth of Endymion's love in her heart. Without that comfort, it was all too much for her to withstand.

Talma hesitated for a moment. Did she dare cross the boundaries of propriety with the daughter of the Goddess, now that the immediate danger had passed? After a few heartbeats, concern and compassion overrode society's laws. She reached out and took the Princess' slim body in her arms. Serenity clung to her automatically, her fingers grasping Talma's dress as she sobbed into her shoulder. The Earth girl's heart was pounding, but the Moon Princess was as warm as a human woman, her pain just as real.

"It's all right," Talma said soothingly, rubbing the Lunarian's back. The weeping woman shook her head against the brunette's chest.

"It won't be all right, not ever again," she whispered. "He no longer wants me."

Talma took Princess Serenity by the shoulders and pulled away, holding her at arm's length as she studied the woman's pale face. It was all written clearly in the Lunarian's bright blue eyes, everything that had happened that day. The Princess had found Endou, and for whatever reason, he had ended their relationship. Talma was briefly shocked by the depth of Serenity's pain. She had only seen faces like that

Against All Odds

on grieving widows.

"I'll speak to him," the Earth girl promised. She had seen firsthand how much the exiled man was suffering without the love of his beloved; there had to be more to these events than met the eye.

"Why are you helping me?" Serenity wondered aloud, wiping the tears from her face. After her encounter with the crowd outside, it was odd to be in the presence of an Earth-child who treated her like an ordinary person.

"I don't know," Talma confessed. She straightened up and averted her eyes, focusing on smoothing her rumpled clothing. "The wind told me to, although some would call me traitor for helping someone who steals our Prince to take control of our world."

"I am not my mother," the Moon Princess said quietly.

The two women stared at each other. Talma was surprised to see Princess Serenity looking at her like an equal, without a trace of the superiority merited by her royal blood, even in the aftermath of the Earth-child's bold and potentially dangerous words. This was a Lunarian who actually understood that the value of a person was not determined by blood.

The shouts on the upper floors were growing louder and footsteps were pounding down the stairs. Talma shook herself alert and pulled Serenity to her feet, running toward a door at the back of the room. She threw it open, revealing a long hallway dimly lit by a tiny window at the far end. The two women rushed down the corridor, passing numbered doors that marked different apartments. A few doors opened and their occupants peeked out curiously, but no one stopped the pair's flight.

When they reached the end of the passage, Talma opened an unmarked door. The street outside was nearly empty; they had crossed to the other side of the building, and the Princess' pursuers were still crowded around the front entrance. The Moon Princess looked out at the palace towering over the Golden City. Her best option, her only option, was to return to her guardians.

"Thank you." Serenity gave Talma a small, sad smile, and ducked through the doorway and out into the street. The Earth girl caught her by the wrist. Princess Serenity turned and focused on a face that was a battlefield of confused inner conflict. Talma was burning with questions, but she had time for only one.

"Those people out there, pleading for your help..." The brunette's eyes were suddenly distant and sad, as if she remembered a time when she might have been among them. "You couldn't help them, could you? It wasn't that you didn't want to, or that you were afraid... it was that you couldn't."

Now it was the Moon Princess' turn to look distant and filled with memories of the past.

"I am not my mother," she said again, and this time her tone was not defiant but regretful. Talma released her wrist, and Princess Serenity pulled the hood of the cloak up over her head and hurried off into the Golden City, following the shortest route to the palace.

Chapter Fourteen

It was a warm night, an unexpected change from the cool evenings the Moon Queen had been favoring lately. The air was still and moist - a throwback to midsummer - and all was silent as the city slumbered in the ethereal glow of the Moon Castle. The kingdom's sleep, however, was not as peaceful as it had once been.

Only a few days had passed since Princess Serenity and her entourage returned from Earth, but faint rumors were already reaching the Lower Quarter, passed from noble to commoner by the workers who served the houses closest to the royal family. Nothing was known for certain, but it was being said that the Moon Princess had been found wandering the Golden City in disguise, and that the proposed alliance with Earth was on shaky ground. Speculation was running wild over secluded tables in shadowy pubs.

Up in the castle on the hill, the Sailor Soldiers had gathered to discuss the situation. This was the first meeting they had managed to arrange since returning to the Moon Kingdom, and already tensions were running high. Two of the four chairs in Sailor Venus' office were vacant. Sailor Jupiter was pacing restlessly, strolling from the bookcase against one wall to the cabinet on the other. She had spent much of what little free time she had had since their return on the training grounds, loathe to sit still. Only Sailor Mercury was making a serious attempt to keep the meeting going.

"The Golden Kingdom certainly has intellectual potential," the blue-haired soldier said, although she was largely talking to herself. "Zoisite, for example, is well-versed in the technological theories of the other planets, despite Earth's long isolation."

"Maybe they've been spying on us," snapped the red-suited warrior in the chair across from Mercury. She was leaning tensely to one side in her seat, her fingers drumming the arm of her chair, her violet eyes troubled.

"Come now, Mars, you know that's impossible," Sailor Mercury replied, startled by her fellow soldier's terse tone. "I observed nothing on Earth that indicated any espionage or subterfuge at work."

"That man, Jadeite; he bothers me," Mars muttered, shifting in her chair. "He seemed friendly enough on the surface, but there's something wrong about him. Something I can't quite put my finger on."

"Do you think he'd do something to sabotage the alliance?" the blue-suited soldier asked, now concerned. "Is he against the treaty between the Earth and the Moon?"

Against All Odds

"I don't know," the other woman confessed. "There is fierce loyalty in him, but it seemed skewed somehow; misfocused. He is dedicated to the Golden Kingdom, but..."

Sailor Mars trailed off as her thoughts reorganized themselves. One hand flew to the brooch at her waist. She closed her eyes, chasing the elusive revelation. Recognizing the familiar gestures, Sailor Mercury waited patiently without speaking. Finally, the red-suited soldier's eyes flew open and she bolted upright in her chair.

"That's it," she proclaimed. Now that Mars was away from Jadeite's influence, her senses were finally clear and she was caught between relief at finally solving the mystery that had plagued her and apprehension at what the answer might mean. "His loyalty is to the Earth, not to its royal family. He feels no real love for Prince Endymion or the King and Queen. It is the planet's best interests he serves, not its rulers."

"What difference does that make?" Sailor Jupiter broke in, pausing in her pacing to lean on the back of her forest-green chair. "What's best for the rulers is what's best for the planet, every kingdom knows that!"

"Earth is not like the other worlds," Mars reminded her, glaring up at the woman who was so quick to dismiss her analysis. "It can support life without the magic of a ruling Queen."

"Are you saying Jadeite would betray his rulers if he thought that was best for the planet?" the green-suited soldier scoffed incredulously. "I know they're only Earth-children, but it seemed to me the Four Generals are as closely bonded to their King and Queen as we are to ours."

"Perhaps if you'd spent more time focusing on your duties instead of flirting with that Nephrite man," hissed Mars, clenching her gloved fists in irritation, "you might have noticed something other than how pretty his eyes were!"

"Are you accusing me of neglecting my responsibilities?" Jupiter demanded, nearly shouting as her skeptical gaze became fierce with sudden fury. "Perhaps all your suspicion is just a cover-up for your own interest in Jadeite!"

"Stop it, both of you!" The normally soft-spoken soldier in blue leapt to her feet, her abrupt cry startling the other two into silence. Sailor Mercury hurled the notepad she had been holding to the floor in frustration, her expression hovering between anger and sorrow.

"What's happened to us?" she asked her fellow soldiers, looking from one to the other with distressed eyes. "We used to be friends! Not long ago we would have been teasing each other about casual romances like this! When did playful flirtations become fuel for cruel accusations?"

"Times have changed, Mercury," Sailor Mars said bitterly, glaring at the floor with her fists trembling on her lap. "The world has changed."

"We were a team," the blue-haired soldier protested, searching her fellow soldiers for signs of the friends she once knew. "Now we fight amongst ourselves and keep secrets from one another and... and..." She trailed off helplessly and waved a hand in the direction of the fourth chair in the circle, the one accented in yellow.

All three of the soldiers stared at the vacant seat, symbol of the one of their number who was absent. Being in Sailor Venus' suite without her being present added a measure of discomfort to the tension, but it was the Sailor Soldiers' meeting room and they had all agreed to continue using it despite the circumstances.

"Sailor Venus is a traitor," the tall soldier of Jupiter muttered. "She chose to forsake her vows of loyalty."

"Perhaps she is the only one upholding them!" Sailor Mercury shrank back as this outburst brought incredulous stares from the other sailor-suited warriors. "All right, what Venus did was wrong," the woman in blue amended, bending under the heat of the soldiers' eyes, "but the Princess was our friend. We grew up together. We loved each other and trusted each other. I can't help but feel we should have been more compassionate, more considerate of her feelings."

"She is the Princess!" Sailor Mars burst out defiantly. "There are more important considerations than her feelings!"

"She is a woman as well, and she was our friend," Mercury shot back, a fresh spark of anger emboldening her words. "Nothing should be more important than that! As her friends, we could have

brought her to accept her responsibilities. Who among us can help her now?"

At these words, Mars and Jupiter were forced to look away from the soldier's blazing blue eyes in shame. Princess Serenity would no longer tolerate the presence of either of them, let alone speak to them. Whenever either of the soldiers who had banished her lover came near, Serenity flew into a violent rage and could not be calmed until they had left her presence. Mercury glared from one of the shunned women to the other, seething with the tension of a dam about to burst.

"Venus dug her own grave," the blue-suited soldier admitted, "but so have the rest of us." Without another word, she strode out of the circle of chairs and left the room, slamming the door behind her. There was a long moment of silence before the two remaining soldiers could bring themselves to meet each other's eyes.

"I didn't know Mercury had it in her," Sailor Mars said at last.

"She's right, you know." The tall brunette swung herself around her green chair and sat down heavily, slumping beneath the weight of her worries. "Whatever impact we may have had on the Princess, our influence is worthless now."

"What choice do we have?" Mars fired back indignantly. "We are Sailor Soldiers, bound to protect and obey the Queen! We cannot set aside our oaths to the Silver Alliance. If Princess Serenity will not willingly do what is best for the Moon Kingdom, it is our duty to do our best to make her." At these words, Jupiter looked at her oddly.

"Is that so different from what you sensed in Jadeite?" she asked quietly.

Sailor Mars shot out of her chair, fresh fire roaring in her violet eyes. "How dare you?" she demanded, gripping her skirt in her hands in an attempt to resist the urge to strike her comrade. "How dare you compare me to that... that..."

"Perhaps we are going about this the wrong way," the brunette soldier mused, ignoring Mars' outburst. "A blade of grass cannot be pressed through a wall by force. Given nurturing patience, however, it can penetrate even the hardest surface." Her eyes fell once again on the orange chair standing vacant in the circle. "Although our goals were noble, our methods may have been wrong. Perhaps Venus-"

"Venus is a traitor!" Sailor Mars glared down at Jupiter, seething, unable to believe what she was hearing. Mercury was weak, sentimental, but Jupiter had always seemed strong. Could the Jovian soldier really be implying their figurehead leader had done the right thing by betraying and deceiving them all? "Do you want to share her fate, Jupiter?"

The green-suited soldier was silent as the memories flooded her mind. It was treason, what Sailor Venus had done; the worst possible transgression for any citizen of the Silver Alliance, let alone a Sailor Soldier. Still, the blonde had stood firm, remorseless, when she was discovered to have replaced the Princess. Her pride and conviction had not wavered in the least when she was shackled and taken to the dungeons upon their return to the Moon. As far as the other soldiers knew, she was still in a cell somewhere under their feet, awaiting the judgment of the Alliance and not speaking a word to save herself.

"Princess Serenity is no longer a child," Sailor Jupiter said at last. "Her mother will not always be there to hold her in check. Before long, the Princess will be Queen and we will serve her and her alone. With Venus gone, who among us can reach her?"

"She will not always be this way," Mars said dismissively, reclaiming her chair.

"She is in love," the brunette soldier reminded her. "She has suffered a wound that will not heal easily."

The observatory of the Moon Castle was dark, starlight and earthlight falling unheeded on instruments that had been shuttered and covered for the night. The light crystals in this room were not automatic, for the benefit of the researchers who needed freedom from the interference of unnatural light, and the switches that operated them were untouched on their panel. The observatory's sole occupant preferred the darkness.

A figure in white stood alone near the edge of the floor at the observatory's open wall, the earthlight bestowing upon it a blue-tinted glow that shifted and teased the eye. The figure itself was motionless, hands clasped over its breast, face uplifted toward the shining planet hanging in the dark sky above. The

full Earth poured down its light upon pale skin and colorless hair and white cloth. It had been doing so for the past several nights.

Princess Serenity stood as if she were a statue, a marble pillar of aching misery. Her life now hovered between empty nothingness and desperate pain. There was no relief from the agony, save a retreat into herself and an extinguishing of all her thoughts and feelings. If she hid from the Earth, she wept from the need of it, her very soul aching to lay eyes upon the blue-green globe where her beloved spent his hours. When she did look upon the planet, every fiber of her being was soon seeped in despair, her body freezing for his warmth and her skin tingling for his touch and her heart screaming for the comfort of his love. There was no escape from her suffering.

It had been like this ever since Serenity was rushed back to the Moon Kingdom upon her return to the palace on Earth. She was a true prisoner now, and would not be allowed to return to the planet as long as her mother's word was law. Not that it mattered.

I never want to see you again.

Endymion's words echoed hollowly in the void in Princess Serenity's soul as she gazed up at the shining world, her eyes filled with the tanned man's face and hair and form. The brightest light in her life had been extinguished, and by her own hand. There was nothing left now save the chains of responsibility that bound her to her kingdom; the chains for which she had sacrificed her heart. There was nothing to be done but wait for her life to organize itself for her, to wait to grow cold and numb as her mother the Queen had done, and hope against all logic that she might someday see her beloved again.

The days of the Princess were now more empty than they had ever been. Her movements were severely restricted, although there was no longer any need for her to escape. She moved through her waking hours as if in a trance, following where Luna bade her go, spending her free moments staring lifelessly into empty space. There were no tears now. There was only the pain, the dull ache of loss that consumed Serenity whenever she allowed herself to feel. She ate mechanically when instructed to do so, slept when she was too exhausted to dream, and existed without truly living.

There were no more lessons with Queen Serenity. The Princess vaguely remembered rage, and a hand striking her across the face, and tears that were not her own, but since then she had not seen her mother. Nor had she seen Sailor Venus, although, in her despair, Serenity had not spared a thought for the soldier's fate.

In her current state, the Moon Princess was unfit to entertain anyone. Any attempt at continuing her general education was useless, so her days were largely filled with nothing. The only activity the heartsick woman was remotely conscious of was the preparation for the wedding.

The event approached steadily and relentlessly, like an advancing invasion force. The events on Earth seemed to have only accelerated the wedding plans. Princess Serenity stood through hours of fittings and measurements and adjustments as the castle tailors prepared her adult dress. For the most part, she was excluded from decisions regarding the impending ceremony, but from time to time swatches of cloth and bunches of flowers were waved in front of her face. Servants were forever running here and there throughout the Moon Castle with supplies and deliveries and lists of instructions. When the first lengths of bunting appeared in the Great Hall, Serenity began to subconsciously avoid that place. When she drew too near it, the engagement pendant around her neck choked her with its weight.

Still, the Moon Princess withstood it all as the plaything of the nobility that she was. For the most part, she withdrew into herself so thoroughly that she could not even hear the words of the people beside her. In the evenings, when there were no further demands on her time, Serenity climbed the steps to the observatory and gazed up at the Earth until sheer exhaustion claimed her. As the only Sailor Soldier the Princess would still permit to enter her presence, it was Sailor Mercury's duty to watch over her during these pilgrimages.

Tonight, the blue-suited soldier stood in the shadows near the observatory's exit, watching her Princess with sad eyes. Not a year earlier, all four guardians had been smiling and laughing together, helping a woman they called their friend prepare for her betrothal ceremony. Now the Sailor Soldiers were reduced to three, and their beloved Serenity was a broken shell of the energetic star she had once been.

A movement in the doorway caught Mercury's eye and she spun around swiftly, one arm half-raised in a defensive pose. The soldier both relaxed and tensed further as Queen Serenity appeared, outlined in

the faint light shining up the stairwell. Sailor Mercury turned to call out to the Moon Princess, but the Queen laid a hand on her gloved arm and shook her head to stop her.

"How is she?" the monarch asked quietly. Her voice was nearly a whisper, but she needn't have bothered to conceal herself. Nothing could distract Princess Serenity during her nightly vigils.

"The same." Sailor Mercury cast a pitiful glance at the white-robed figure under the earthlight. "Utterly lost. Will you not speak to her, my Queen?"

"There is nothing to be said." The Lunarian's eyes rested on her daughter, sorrowful but resolute. "I have done all I could to convince her to choose the right path for herself, and she still forsook the duties to which she was born. The only option now is force. Under such circumstances, I doubt she would be any more receptive to me than she is toward Jupiter and Mars."

These words brought another concern to the monarch's mind, and Queen Serenity paused a moment before speaking again.

"Do you know what passed between my daughter and your fellow soldiers, Mercury?" she asked at last. "I cannot imagine what could have made such enemies of lifelong friends. Venus knows something, I suspect, but she will not say a word."

"Whatever may have caused this rift, I am not privy to it," the blue-suited soldier said stiffly. For the first time, Mercury was glad to have been left out of the secret, as it freed her to deny information to the Queen without the treason of lying. The Lunarian's attitude was beginning to get under Mercury's skin. Queen Serenity was a mother, but she offered no comfort to her daughter in the girl's hour of need. If she wanted to know the details of her child's life, she could ask the Princess herself. Sailor Mercury wanted no part of the persistent distance between the women of the Moon Kingdom's royal line.

It was in itself odd that the Queen needed to ask at all. Mercury had never known the lavender-haired ruler to be in the dark about anything; in fact, the Lunarian Queen prided herself on always being on top of anything that happened in the Solar System. By the time the first rumor formed on a peasant's lips, to Queen Serenity it was already old news. Why should she need to ask a Sailor Soldier for information?

The Queen's skills of perception were certainly unchanged. A wry smile curved the corners of her lips as she correctly interpreted Mercury's expression.

"Why need I ask, you wonder," she said knowingly. "I must admit I've been rather distracted by other matters lately. Are you certain you've told me everything you learned of the object that fell to the Earth?"

"Yes, my Queen." After the runaway Princess fiasco, the visitors to the Golden Kingdom had had to return to the Moon so quickly that Mercury had not had time to press the generals for information. Her report on the matter had been painfully brief.

"I have an informant on Earth investigating the matter, but thus far, he has uncovered precious little." Queen Serenity's expression was so troubled that the blue-suited soldier's stomach became queasy with unease. The ruler of the Moon had always been calm and collected in every circumstance. If she was unnerved, the cause of her concern must be serious indeed.

"I will leave you to your duty," the Queen said, leaving Mercury's unspoken questions unanswered. The Sailor Soldier could only bow respectfully as the lavender-haired monarch turned away and headed down the stairs.

Escaping Mercury's presence gave Queen Serenity the freedom to remain vulnerable. She had allowed the soldier to see weakness in her, something she had avoided at all cost in the past. There would be consequences, there always were, but at the moment the Moon Queen was too unsettled to bottle away all her concern beneath a tranquil mask. She had left before Mercury could question her further, and descended the softly-lit staircase with her worry showing plainly on her face.

It would have helped if the Queen could have pinned down exactly what was bothering her so. True, all was not well in her realm; her daughter and one of her guardian soldiers had rebelled against her, but the Queen had the rest of her life to get Princess Serenity to see the light. There was a mysterious force at work on Earth, but it was only a matter of time before Queen Serenity's informants would discover all there was to know. The power of the Silver Crystal was absolute in any eventuality. The Moon Kingdom had endured without any apparent damage thus far.

Against All Odds

Despite this logic, the Moon Queen was filled with a terrible sense of dread she could not shake. It didn't help that the foreboding was spreading to the other worlds. Aside from Queen Acidalia, whose continuing inability to forecast more than a few days of the future was rapidly becoming a cause for alarm, the rulers of the other planetary kingdoms had admitted to encountering bad omens of their own. Queen Serenity attempted to reassure them by labeling it paranoia, but she could not banish her own inexplicable feeling that the era of peace was drawing to an end.

It was in this mindset that she encountered Luna at the foot of the observatory stairs.

"My Queen!" The Mauan woman dropped a hurried curtsy in surprise. Serenity was just as surprised to see Luna.

"What are you doing about at this hour?" the monarch asked, her troubles momentarily forgotten. "Weren't you with my daughter all day?"

"And will be tomorrow," the dark-haired woman assured her. She wished she had the right to ask the Moon Queen a similar question. It was clear at a glance that the ruler was deeply troubled, but although she had been the Serenity's advisor for many years, she was bound by propriety to wait for the Queen to freely offer information.

"I couldn't sleep," Luna continued. "I thought I'd check on the child."

"She is hardly a child anymore," Queen Serenity reminded her, but she smiled gently. No matter what else happened, Luna was a constant presence of stability and support. There was no better person to watch over the distressed Princess. "Walk with me a moment, will you?"

The request was an unusually honest one, carrying a trace of a sincere desire for companionship that was nowhere to be found in Queen Serenity's public persona. Even if she could have refused, Luna would not have considered it for a moment.

The two women strolled slowly down the corridor, their dark and light hair of equal lengths reminiscent of the opposite sides of the Moon. At that time of night, the castle was utterly silent; all the servants had finished their various housekeeping duties. Luna automatically adjusted her pace to match the Queen's, waiting with practiced patience for the monarch to speak.

"You would protect my daughter, wouldn't you, Luna?" the lavender-haired woman asked at last.

"With my life," her companion answered truthfully, although she could not hide her surprise. She had not expected such a question. No explanation was forthcoming as the pair walked on for a while in silence. Out of the corner of her eye, Luna saw Queen Serenity clasp her hands above her breast, her expression distant and distressed. The Mauan forced herself to remain calm, trying not to notice how much Serenity resembled her ailing daughter in that pose. What was weighing so on the Queen's mind?

The Lunarian opened a door and Luna received yet another shock. Queen Serenity had led her to the heart of the Moon Castle and they were entering the anteroom of the Crystal Tower's sanctuary. Luna waited for the Queen to say something, but the monarch just kept on walking, crossing the darkened room and opening the great silver doors on the other side. They stepped through into the grassy enclosure that surrounded the Crystal Tower.

Luna had never been here at night. It was still and calm, and the earthlight shining down from above gave the white stone of the surrounding walls a blue-green hue. Their footsteps were the only sound as they approached the small temple, the crystal spire that extended through its roof a striking sight against the black sky.

"The Crystal Tower," Queen Serenity said suddenly. "The tower of prayer." After their journey in silence, Luna was startled by the monarch's voice. She looked over at the Moon Queen, whose attention was fully fixed on the translucent pillar that rose over the castle. Serenity turned to face Luna, a half-smile on her lips, but there was no light in her eyes.

"In her current state, my daughter is unfit to commune with the Crystal Tower," she said heavily. "You cannot enter the temple, but you have stood outside its walls every day for many years. The Silver Crystal knows and trusts you. You believe in this kingdom, don't you, Luna?"

The Queen's voice was little more than a whisper, but her tone was insistent and clearly pleading. Luna hardly dared to breathe, shaken to her core by the Lunarian's strange behavior. Queen Serenity was a rock, an unshakable pillar of strength. She had carved out a kingdom from chaos and dust. What was facing the Moon Kingdom that was so terrible it could cause the monarch such fear?

Against All Odds

"Of course, my Queen," Luna vowed, mustering all her willpower to prevent her voice from shaking. "I swear it." Inside she was screaming, her heart aching to demand an explanation for this unsettling conversation. She had always trusted in the Moon Queen's power over all things. How was she to take this new side of her ruler?

"If anything should ever happen to this world and the ones we love, pray to the tower." Queen Serenity's hair was an eerie indigo in the earthlight and cast shadows over her pale face that were almost as disturbing as her words. "If you do that, the Crystal Tower will protect its children, and our moon, even if the Silver Crystal is no longer inside it. Will you remember that, Luna?"

All the Mauan could do was nod a nervous response. After another moment, however, she could no longer keep the words she really wanted to say from spilling out.

"What is happening, my Queen?" she asked, trusting in her long record of service to grant her permission to break protocol. Surely even monarchs needed a friend to confide in on occasion. "Is the Moon Kingdom facing a threat?"

Queen Serenity did not answer. She looked at Luna, her constant in an ever-changing world, and did not dare burden her any further than she already had. Surely there was nothing to her fear. Surely nothing could overcome the Silver Crystal's power. The stone had not been as responsive to the Moon Queen of late, but surely if the entire civilization were threatened, it would not fail to protect them.

The uncertainty, however, was more than Serenity could bear. There was one thing precious to the Lunarian ruler above all else, one star that had to outshine any darkness if the utopia she had created was to endure. Regarding that, she could not be too careful.

"You have served me well, but Princess Serenity is your true mistress," the Queen said to Luna. "Always protect your mistress. Even if the time changes, even if her form changes, protect your one mistress." She turned to face the Crystal Tower again, symbol of a power only those of her line could wield, the power to create life when there was nothing but death.

"As long as she lives, there is hope."

"The Moon Kingdom is lying to us!"

The unease plaguing the planetary kingdoms was not limited to the Silver Alliance. An unsettling sense of dark times on the horizon was spreading in the Golden Kingdom as well. No one was ignorant of the unrest now, from the highest nobleman to the lowest beggar. Some citizens lay awake in their beds at night and worried silently. Others were more vocal.

"The alliance is a sham! They mean to enslave us with promises of equality!"

Today's rabble-rouser was an earnest young man with bold eyes and the athletic build of a lifelong worker. At first, only drunk raving drifters spoke against the Moon in public, but now that members of the more respectable working class were joining the cause, it was becoming more difficult to dismiss the speakers' words as madness.

"Do you honestly think the Earth will be admitted to the Silver Alliance? That they will share the secret of longevity with us? Do not be deceived!"

The criers were becoming braver, as well. What had been whispered mutterings in darkened rooms had become bold speeches shouted from upturned crates on the very edges of the palace grounds, and the audiences were growing. The impassioned Earth-child currently preaching at the entrance to the Central Gardens had already drawn quite a crowd, and the evening exodus from work to home was only just beginning.

"They will never accept us as equals! Even now, their spies walk among us, uncovering our weaknesses, plotting our destruction!"

Several people who had stopped to listen to the man's words grumbled their agreement, and a good number of bystanders looked more concerned than skeptical. In this respect, the speaker was at least partially correct. One of the Moon's spies was, in fact, watching him that very moment, although he was far from the cloak-and-dagger shadow of the night the Earth man was imagining.

"They are taking our Prince, and we will have no choice but to bow to their rule!"

From his hiding place beneath a nearby bush, Artemis watched and worried. On his earlier visits to

the planet, it had seemed the disgruntled Earth-children were a small portion of the citizenry, a voice certain to fade away over time. Now something had stirred the controversy into a new frenzy, and the authorities were doing little to combat it. Where were the soldiers who should have been encouraging the growing mob to disperse? A mere week ago, no dissenting speaker would have been able to gather such a crowd.

"And what awaits the Prince on the Moon? No innocent devoted bride, that is certain!"

Artemis' fur stood on end as he snarled involuntarily at the harsh words against his Princess. He dug his claws into the dirt to prevent himself from springing upon the speaker right then and there. The Earth-child did not dare speak his meaning plainly, but Artemis knew well what was being implied. Somehow, the true motivations of Princess Serenity's visit to Earth had become the stuff of rumor in the Golden Kingdom.

Try as he might, Artemis could not unravel the mystery of how such sensitive information had been leaked to the public. Serenity had been seen by dozens of common citizens while she was loose in the Golden City, but the exiled stable hand had been nowhere nearby. How had it been inferred that she was meeting with a secret lover? Although Artemis could not fathom how, it seemed someone on Earth had discovered the truth and was determined to make it known to the entire planet.

"How can our rulers support this?" the enthusiastic young man demanded of the world at large. "How can they sell their people to a false goddess? Are they in league with those who wish to destroy us?"

"All right, that's enough!"

At last, a guard appeared on the scene, stirred into action by the accusations now being levied against the Earth's King and Queen. She had only two companions with her, however; not nearly enough to handle this crowd. Where were the reinforcements that should have been sent by a higher authority? The Four Generals were in the Golden City; why were they not performing their duties?

"What of the darkness to the north, and the monoliths appearing right on our doorsteps?" the dissenter called out, refusing to be silenced. "It's a sign!" Scowling, the guard reached out and pulled the man down from his crate, but all that earned her were the jeers of the crowd. Artemis edged out from beneath the bush, watching the scene warily. If something didn't happen to turn the situation around, it looked as if things were going to get ugly. Unfortunately, the Mauan didn't get to hang around to watch the outcome as a new voice struck true terror into his feline heart.

"Kitty!"

With the lightning reflexes only a cat could possess, Artemis spun around and sped off into the Central Gardens at top speed. He did not risk even pausing to investigate the source of the small bright voice. One of the children in the crowd had spotted him, as often happened. The Mauan's feline form was ideal for slipping through windows and lurking near doorways, but while the adults whose conversations Artemis wished to hear took no notice of him, children always did.

The white cat shuddered all over as he darted through a gap in the stones of the palace wall and headed into the royal gardens. The last thing he wanted was for some grubby common child to get her hands on him. He wished he were back on the Moon where he belonged. With her darker fur, Luna was better suited to hiding unseen, but now she was needed to watch the Princess on a daily basis. Besides, Artemis could hardly refuse this duty when the Sailor Soldier who had been his partner had proven to be a traitor.

A deep shame that was becoming as familiar as an old friend stole over the white cat. He had never expected Sailor Venus to jeopardize the stability of the kingdom she was sworn to protect. What had possessed her to disregard the orders of Queen Serenity in favor of the emotional whims of the Princess? Artemis tried to cling to anger, but it kept being overrun by guilt. He had been Venus' partner, yet he had not a clue what motivated her. Even though the Moon Queen demanded much of his time, he still should have been a friend to the Venusian soldier. Maybe if he had made more of an effort to bond with her, he could have turned her aside from her destructive path, saved her from condemning herself to a dungeon cell.

Artemis shook himself as he skirted a pillar and dashed across an open space. He needed to focus on his mission, and stop dwelling on-

Strong fingers seized him by the nape of the neck and lifted him into the air. Artemis struggled and

snarled, but the hand refused to let go and he could not twist enough to scratch or bite. The Mauan was both furious and shocked. He had never been caught before. Who was fast enough and strong enough to catch and hold onto a moving cat?

The hand turned him around, and Artemis got his answer. Kunzite, the Golden Kingdom's Middle-Eastern commander. The Mauan paused only a split second before resuming his frantic struggle to cover his surprise, but the man's piercing eyes narrowed. He had seen the moment of recognition, had been watching for it. He suspected this white cat was more than a mere animal.

Still writhing in the general's grip, Artemis cursed his poor luck. Of all the Earth-children who might have captured him, it had to be Kunzite. Of course, Artemis could have easily escaped by shifting into his human form, but if there was any chance Kunzite could still be prevented from learning the truth about him, he had to pretend to be a normal cat. Queen Serenity would never forgive him if he revealed himself. Proving to the leader of the Four Generals that the Moon Kingdom did indeed have spies on Earth would be disastrous. Artemis struggled with all his might, hoping to break free.

Kunzite responded by tightening his grip. He squeezed the loose skin of Artemis' neck between his fingers until the cat yowled with pain, white-hot fire consuming his body. The Mauan had to stop his writhing as lights began to dance in front of his eyes. He surrendered and hung limply from the general's hand, but glared up at him openly, no longer caring if the Earth man saw the intelligence behind his feline eyes. Clearly he had underestimated the cruelty Kunzite was capable of.

The general marched through the palace gardens at a brisk pace, his long hair and cloak flowing out behind him. He held the cat at arm's length so Artemis' claws could not reach his flesh, and his eyes never left his captive. The Mauan began to feel the first tendrils of fear creeping into his heart. This man was far too sharp for Artemis' peace of mind. In a world gone mad, Kunzite had matters well in hand. A man like this could spell disaster in the developing crisis if he ended up on the wrong side.

At first, Artemis feared the gray-suited general was taking him directly to the rulers of the Earth, but after entering the palace, Kunzite turned aside from the main corridors and headed down a staircase. As they turned corners and descended past two levels, the white cat found an entirely new reason to fear. A sound was growing louder, a din that struck terror into his heart at a purely instinctive level. The barking of dogs.

Kunzite pushed open a door and carried Artemis down a long row of cages. Within each one, a sleek hunting dog growled and lunged against the bars. Several servants who had been feeding the dogs looked up, startled by the sudden appearance of the Golden Kingdom's highest-ranking officer. The Mauan went stiff as a board, too terrified to move. He stared up at Kunzite with wide eyes filled with dread. Was the man so cruel he would throw Artemis to these vicious dogs?

The cat struggled briefly in panic as Kunzite stopped and bent down, but the man merely picked up an empty cage and straightened up again. The general immediately turned around and strolled back to the door, but Artemis did not relax again until the barking animals had been left far behind. Kunzite smirked down at his captive when the room and the servants inside it were out of earshot.

"We are not as savage as that."

After such a scare, Artemis hung obediently from the white-haired man's fingers as he was carried down a long corridor. Nothing Kunzite might do to him could possibly be worse than what Artemis had imagined in that room.

They passed stables and training equipment, and room after room of men and women exercising and sparring. Clearly this was the section of the palace where the word of the Four Generals was law. Every servant that noticed Kunzite bowed his head to him, and every soldier stood tall and saluted. For the most part, they passed through the hallways undisturbed, as there were relatively few people here. The ground on this side of the palace was lower, and through the thin windows lining the walls, Artemis caught glimpses of military exercises being carried out on the fields outside.

"Nephrite!"

The white cat craned his neck to look ahead of them. The chestnut-haired general was at the far end of the hall, frozen in the act of reaching for a doorknob. He let his hand fall and stood aside as his fellow commander approached.

"Kunzite. I was just looking for you."

Against All Odds

"Well, that's one of us found, at least," the older man muttered grimly. He strolled past Nephrite and pushed open the door, carrying Artemis inside. A desk covered in neat piles of documents and scrolls sat in the center of the room, surrounded by filled, but organized, shelves. Evidently, this was Kunzite's office.

"What's with the cat?" Nephrite inquired, following the Middle-Eastern commander into the room.

"It's a spy for the Moon Kingdom."

Artemis was saved from trying to prevent an uncatlike reaction as Kunzite set the empty cage down on his desk, opened it, and shoved the Mauan inside. Artemis leapt to his feet and lunged, but it was too late. The latch of the cage door clicked, and he was trapped. Well, his secret was out, but even if he gave up and transformed now he would never escape this room. Artemis was no Sailor Soldier. He could not overpower two of the Golden Kingdom's strongest mages.

Besides, even if Kunzite knew the truth, he had no evidence, and the Mauan was not about to provide any by changing shape in front of a witness. The look on Nephrite's face proved he was not about to take such a wild tale on Kunzite's word alone.

"It's a cat," he said flatly.

"It has the mark of the Moon Kingdom on its forehead," Kunzite replied as he turned several of the documents on his desk face-down so Artemis could not read them. Nephrite approached the cage and crouched down to peer inside. The Mauan meowed plaintively and pawed at the door of the cage, trying his best to look like an innocent animal. The indignity of it made Artemis cringe with shame, but he had to keep the damage to his cover at a minimum.

"It's just a bald spot," Nephrite insisted, straightening up. "Look, you know I'm worried about spies too, but a cat?"

"It's not just a cat!" Kunzite burst out in frustration, slamming his fists against the surface of his desk. "Earth has not been separated from the rest of the worlds for so long that all has been forgotten! It is a well-known fact that there are people in this galaxy with the ability to change shape."

"That is true." Nephrite looked down at the white cat again, brow furrowed in concentration. Artemis casually turned away and began washing himself. He had finished his entire right foreleg by the time the man spoke again.

"Well, spy or not, we have more important concerns at present," the chestnut-haired general said, returning his attention to Kunzite. "Has there been any sign of Jadeite?"

The Middle-Eastern commander made a harsh noise in his throat and jerked his head warningly toward the cage. Artemis' ears pricked up, but he remained intent on grooming his other foreleg. Jadeite was missing? Perhaps that was what was distracting the generals from the unrest in the Golden City.

"Oh, come now, Kunzite! Are we to have no safe haven, for fear of ears in the walls? It is safer to speak here than out in the corridor. If the cat's a spy, unless its other form is a giant monster, it's not going anywhere." The white-haired general was silent for a moment, considering, but at last he nodded.

"All right. No, there's been no word," he informed Nephrite. "I have Zoisite out searching for him."

"Are you sure that's wise?" the younger man asked, looking concerned. "You know Zoisite has been as displeased with the situation as Jadeite..."

"We all are," Kunzite admitted, "but you can't truly think... We are the Four Generals! We are loyalty over personal opinion, always! We do as our rulers bid us."

"But are we not lacking in our duties if we do not protect our rulers from themselves?" Nephrite asked quietly. "What if the decision they have charged us to uphold is the wrong one? The stars have told me the marriage of Prince Endymion to the Moon Princess should not go forward."

"You know I've never put much stock in the sayings of the stars, Nephrite," Kunzite muttered, collapsing heavily in the high-backed chair behind his desk. "I need evidence." In the cage, Artemis had moved on to grooming his hind legs, but his mind was working furiously. What was he hearing? Were even the Four Generals losing faith in the Golden Kingdom's King and Queen? Had Jadeite actually defected?

"But you are suspicious," the North American commander challenged. "You believe there are spies among us; how trustworthy can the Moon be if that turns out to be true? You must suspect there are things the Moon Kingdom is not telling us. You would not have lavished so much attention on that Sailor Soldier otherwise."

Against All Odds

Now Artemis stiffened and bristled from head to toe, but the Earth men were too absorbed in their conversation to notice. Sailor Venus had clearly been off her game whenever Kunzite was present, and the last thing her Mauan partner wanted to hear was that the Earth general had been using her. What if Kunzite's treatment of Venus has contributed to her betrayal? The white-haired general was the last person Sailor Venus had interacted with before taking the Princess' place. If Kunzite had had a hand in the soldier's self-destruction, Artemis would never forgive him.

"Nothing justifies betrayal," Kunzite insisted, but his eyes were troubled. One gloved hand clenched into a fist, and he struck the surface of his desk in sudden frustration. "Curse that Jadeite! Why now, of all times? The Queen ill, the Moon breathing down our necks, the monoliths and the darkness frightening the entire population half to madness... This is no time for us to be spending time searching for one of our own!"

"In such times, perhaps all we can count on is each other," Nephrite responded evenly. Silence fell as the two men stared at one another, and Artemis, captivated by the moment, forgot to feign a catlike disinterest. Finally, Kunzite heaved a deep sigh and got to his feet.

"I need to make my rounds before my conference with the Prince," he announced. "Stay and keep an eye on the cat, will you? When I get back, we'll decide what's to be done with it." Nephrite nodded and stood aside as Kunzite headed for the door, twitching his cape into position behind him.

"Don't tell him," Nephrite said suddenly. The older man paused, his hand on the door handle.

"I don't plan to," Kunzite replied after a moment, "but you know he'll ask." The chestnut-haired general's only response was to look away in resignation. His fellow commander opened the door and left the room without another word, leaving Artemis to puzzle at the meaning of the cryptic exchange.

When Kunzite was gone, Nephrite pulled over a chair and sat down facing the cage on the desk. He focused on the cat crouching inside, his eyes searching, curious, but still skeptical.

"So... read any good books lately?"

On the Moon, it was once again late evening. A warm wind was blowing, promising a pleasant night ahead. Much of the population of the capital city was out enjoying the comfortable weather, many of the kingdom's people seeking to distract themselves from the unrest that was growing in the Silver Alliance. Words had a way of seeping through unseen cracks. Although communication between the Earth and the Moon was still very limited, somehow everyone knew the proposed alliance was not progressing as planned. Despite the unsettling rumors, the citizens of the Moon did their best to set their concerns aside, trusting in Queen Serenity's ability to handle any crisis.

Of all the people on the blessed satellite, it was the pair on whom all hopes were hanging who were most ill at ease. Princess Serenity was once again maintaining her vigil, staring up at the blue-green globe in the sky with empty eyes and a heavy heart. Within the castle, her Earth-born fiance was not much better off. He, too, knew the anguish of being separated from the one he loved.

It was a perfect evening, but the balcony doors of Prince Endymion's chambers were firmly shut. He had no interest in the artificial environment that passed for nature on the Moon. The Earth Prince had dismissed his servants for the night, but he had not yet dressed for bed. Even had he not had a scheduled conference with Kunzite, he was far too restless to sleep.

The auburn-haired man paced from one room of his luxurious suite to another, his eyes passing over the plush furniture and elegant hangings as if they were nothing but bare walls. Nothing on the Moon held any beauty in the eyes of the Earth Prince. He sat down, then immediately stood up again and resumed his pacing. He took a drink from the goblet he was carrying in one hand, but his favorite wine was like water, tasteless. The world was an empty void.

He could think of nothing but Beryl. When he closed his eyes, she was there, her dark hair and cherry-red lips so real that his heart ached more than he could bear. When he opened them, she was still there, a phantom in black and white that overwrote reality and a ghostly voice that whispered in his ear. Now that he had lost her, every waking moment and every vivid dream was filled with her, constantly reminding him of the sacrifice he had made.

Prince Endymion dwelled on the question until he could scarcely think of anything else. Had he been a fool to set Beryl aside? Since the day his parents informed him that he had been promised to the

Princess of the Moon, the Prince had known this outcome was inevitable. Even so, clinging to his doomed relationship with Beryl had preserved some of the light in his life when everything else he cared about was taken from him. He was alone on the Moon, utterly alone, and knowing Beryl was waiting for him on Earth had saved Prince Endymion from feeling completely isolated. Now she was gone, and he was a man abandoned on a world of gods.

The Earth Prince had always done as he was told. He had always trusted in the judgment of his parents, bravely accepting his responsibility to make personal sacrifices for the good of his kingdom. Now he was alone on a strange world, separated from the people he was supposed to be serving, and he had hurt one of them - the person he loved most - in the name of a goal he did not fully understand. He had given up everything, and he had gained nothing.

For the first time in his life, Prince Endymion found himself doubting the wisdom of his parents' orders.

A soft chime sounded from the suite's small office. Endymion hurried into the room, eager for the distraction from his troubling thoughts. He set his goblet on the desk and sat down facing the slim communication screen hanging on the wall above it. The device, a thin panel of transparent crystal, had been given to the Prince by Queen Serenity for his private use. At least the Moon Queen understood his need to keep in touch with the Golden Kingdom.

A panel set into the desktop was flashing gold. Prince Endymion reached out and touched it, and the communication screen sparked into life. The light blotted out the wall behind the flat crystal and resolved itself into an image of Kunzite, the Earth's Middle-Eastern commander. The white-haired man's face was slightly to the right of center; he had not yet mastered the use of the screen that had been installed on the planet. Despite Kunzite's well-practiced self-restraint, the Prince knew him well, and the technology was perfect enough for him to recognize the tightness of the General's expression. Things were no better, then.

"There's still no sign of him?" Prince Endymion asked before the man could even greet him. Kunzite sighed heavily.

"None," he confessed. "None of Jadeite's senior officers have heard a word, either."

"Where could he have gone?" the Earth Prince wondered aloud, turning away from the screen for a moment. He searched his memories of Jadeite for any clues to the man's disappearance, but he could recall nothing suspicious, no hints that the Far-Eastern commander might be considering abandoning his duties. Surely none of the Four Generals could be taken from the Golden City against their will. Prince Endymion slammed his fists against the arms of his chair in frustration. He had been separated from his guardians for far too long. Had he remained on Earth where he belonged, Jadeite would surely have confided in him.

"I sent Zoisite out to search all his usual haunts," Kunzite informed his Prince, "but I fear the situation is worse than we anticipated. Zoisite has not checked in this evening."

The auburn-haired man froze. His eyes rolled to stare at the Middle-Eastern commander, wide with horror and dread. Was it possible there WAS someone capable of overpowering the Golden Kingdom's strongest warriors? Were the Four Generals being abducted?

"Be careful, Kunzite," Prince Endymion said earnestly, the thought of losing all four of his best friends making him sick to his stomach. "You and Nephrite, watch out for yourselves. Watch out for each other. I want to hear from you twice a day, understand?"

"As you wish, Prince," the white-haired man replied with a nod.

"Keep an eye on my parents as well," the Earth Prince continued as his fear expanded. "My mother, how is she?"

Now Kunzite looked clearly unnerved. His silver eyes became openly troubled, and it was his turn to look away.

"No one really knows," he said heavily. "The King still won't permit anyone to see her. She's been locked away since your last visit, Endymion."

The Prince's heart was pounding. His mind was racing, and although he clenched his fists on his knees, he could not stop them from trembling. Agitated, he leapt to his feet and began pacing the length of his office, running his hands through his short hair in overwhelmed frustration. Before all this business with the Moon began, the Golden Kingdom had been in decline, but at least its power structure had been

firmly in place. Now, instead of improving, the situation seemed to be spiraling into chaos.

"What is going on down there?" the Earth Prince finally burst out, whirling around to face Kunzite's image. "Is the kingdom itself coming apart?"

"Could very well be," Kunzite muttered. Prince Endymion stopped dead in his tracks at these words. "I won't lie to you, Prince," the general continued. "These are dark times. Your engagement to the Moon Princess was not the saving grace we hoped it would be."

"Would it be better if I returned?" the auburn-haired man asked quietly. One hand rose to toy with the moonstone pendant hanging around his neck. His parents wanted this marriage, but surely, if it were best for the Golden Kingdom...

"I fear we would fare no better," the general replied. "What you are considering would only confirm the rumors that the Moon Kingdom cannot be trusted. It could lead to war. We should not speak of such things over this channel, Prince. We don't know who might be listening."

"Spies?" Endymion's blue eyes narrowed, and he looked around suspiciously, searching all corners of the room.

"There may be truth to some of the rumors." Kunzite's expression had become even more serious than usual. "I believe I may have caught one snooping around the palace grounds. I beg you to watch out for yourself as well, Endymion."

The Earth Prince returned to the desk and sat down again, leaning on its edge. "Things seem stable here," he said. "Do you really think there is cause for concern?"

"If they are investigating us secretly, there is," the general answered. "We don't fully know the Moon Kingdom's motives, Endymion. We can't rule out the possibility that the Lunarians have something to do with the current situation on Earth. A lot of strange things began happening after we restored contact with them."

"I thought much of that had been attributed to the comet from the sun," Prince Endymion commented.

"It has, but we cannot be certain the Lunarians are not somehow involved with that as well," Kunzite argued. "Queen Serenity has power beyond mortal imagining. We have no way of knowing what she might be capable of. The monoliths, the darkness, the disappearances... It could all be a tactic meant to scare us into submitting to the Moon Kingdom's control."

The Earth Prince leaned back in his chair and drummed his fingers on the desk. Kunzite's words were troubling. Prince Endymion had no love for the Moon, but with the exception of Princess Serenity's recent behavior, he had been treated with nothing but kindness and respect by the Lunarians. Although it was understandable that common citizens might suspect such things, Endymion found it difficult to believe the people of the Moon might wish the Golden Kingdom harm. In any case, this was definitely something they should not discuss if there was any possibility their words might be overheard. It was something to consider, but for now it was best to stick to topics that were common knowledge.

"Let's not jump to any conclusions," he finally said. "Have we received any report yet on the Dark Kingdom's investigation of the comet?"

There was a telling pause.

"What is it?" Prince Endymion demanded, sitting bolt upright in his chair. There was a strange expression on Kunzite's face now, one that the Earth Prince had never before seen on the normally calm and collected general. It was the face of a man who was reluctant to deliver difficult news.

"There has been no communication at all from any of the northern kingdoms in several days," the general admitted at last. "The darkness there is growing deeper and spreading, and no one who goes there returns."

"Beryl," the Prince croaked out hoarsely, his throat suddenly full of sand and his lungs refusing to take in air. "What of Beryl?" The face on the crystal screen looked away, silent. "Kunzite!"

"No word since her caravan crossed the border," the white-haired man said quietly. "I am sorry, Endymion."

"A search party!" the Earth Prince burst out. "An investigation! Doesn't Father care what's going on up there?" This could not be happening. Beryl was a powerful mage. She had to be all right. She could not be lost forever.

Against All Odds

"Several teams have already vanished," Kunzite informed him. "King Arton has declared the Dark Kingdom off-limits. Several mages are attempting a distance investigation."

"That's not good enough!" Prince Endymion shouted, jumping out of his chair and glaring at the screen in front of him. "She - they could be in trouble! You have to help h - them!"

"We are doing all we can," the general said firmly. His silver eyes were sympathetic, but his face was taking on the hard-set expression Kunzite always adopted when he thought the Prince was behaving improperly. "You must be patient, Prince. There is more at stake here than one woman."

"Find her," Endymion insisted, burying his fingers in his hair. "Just find her!" He should never have let Beryl go. Now she was lost in a cloud of nothingness, and no one was helping her, and he was marooned on another world. The last thing the Earth Prince wanted was to hear condescending words of reason. One hand darted out and jabbed at the control panel. Kunzite's face flickered and disappeared. The communication screen became once again a benign rectangle of transparent crystal.

Prince Endymion dropped heavily into the desk chair and buried his face in his hands. All he could think about was what might be happening to Beryl, what horrors she might be enduring. What was out there, lurking in the Dark Kingdom? What if Beryl's magic was not strong enough to combat it? What if she was caught in a struggle for her life, in desperate need of help, and none was forthcoming? How could the Earth Prince sit quietly in a peaceful kingdom when such an unspeakable evil was loose on his planet and his beloved was caught in the middle of it?

He had to do something.

Late that night, a lone figure in white wandered the deserted corridors of the Moon Castle. It was that rare hour when the latest night owls had retired and the earliest early birds had not yet risen, when not a soul was stirring. Princess Serenity drifted silently through the eerie emptiness of the dead hour, heedless of the light crystals that flashed one and off to illuminate her path. For the first time since her flight through the gardens on Earth, she was alone.

The Moon Princess had risen after a few hours of empty unconsciousness to find Sailor Mercury asleep in a chair. The Sailor Soldier had been putting in long hours during the day analyzing data for the Queen and attending meetings, and the quiet solitude of monitoring the Princess during one of her rare sleep periods had proven to be too much for Mercury. Serenity had been able to escape her rooms alone with little difficulty.

It was not as if the constant surveillance was necessary. Princess Serenity no longer had anywhere to go. Her beloved Endymion was on another planet and he no longer wanted her. All the reasons for her rebellion were gone. She went through the motions of life with empty eyes and an empty heart. Perhaps someday Endymion would contact her again. Perhaps someday he would love her again. That hope was all the Moon Princess had to cling to.

The Earth was not shining tonight, so there was no reason to make the climb to the observatory, but wandering aimlessly through the castle was preferable to staying in her rooms. If Serenity stayed awake in her sitting room, Sailor Mercury would try to talk to her, and if she remained in her bedroom, she would fall asleep. Sleep was the last thing the Moon Princess wanted. When she slept, she dreamed. Waking from another dream so real that she could feel the soft warmth of Endymion's lips on hers was the only thing that could still make Princess Serenity cry. She could not bear another such fantasy. By remaining always on the edge of complete exhaustion, the few hours of slumber Serenity allowed herself would be too deep for dreams.

The anguished Lunarian drifted from one wing of the Moon Castle to the other, numbly wasting what time remained before dawn. After a while, she found herself beside the door to the teleportation chamber, the room that stood as both gateway and barrier. If she could not gaze upon the world her beloved Endymion now inhabited, at least she could stand where only technology and light separated her from him. She opened the door and slipped inside.

The chamber was not empty. Surprise cut through the fog of despair surrounding Princess Serenity's mind as Prince Endymion froze in his tracks and stared back at her. The teleportation platform was alight with gold, the link between it and the palace on Earth activated. The auburn-haired Prince was

Against All Odds

caught halfway between the control panel and the glowing platform, and as Serenity watched, his expression slowly shifted from shock and guilt to hardened resolve.

"Well?" Prince Endymion demanded when the Moon Princess did not speak. "Are you going to stop me?"

"You're going to Earth..."

The code had been changed, but of course it would have been given to the Earth Prince. He was not a prisoner like Serenity was. A strange tempest of emotion bubbled up within the Princess. Leaving in the dead of the night, alone... There could only be one explanation. Prince Endymion was leaving for good, forsaking the alliance that was to be forged by their betrothal. After all Serenity had suffered, after all she had sacrificed for this marriage, it was being broken by the very man who had been most insistent it succeed! For what, then, had all her tears been shed? For what, then, had so much pain been endured? Although it was somewhat of a relief that she would not have to spend the rest of her life bonded to this man, Princess Serenity could not help glaring at him in unbridled outrage. After all this, how could he?

"I am sorry." Prince Endymion backed toward the teleportation platform, a touch of fear creeping into his expression in the face of Serenity's wrath. "This isn't easy for me, but I have to do this. I... They..." The man sagged slightly, resigning to the truth. "She needs my help."

"Your mother?"

"No." The betrothed heirs stared at each other for a long moment. Now Princess Serenity took in his haggard look, the circles under his eyes, the marks of long hours spent in agonizing internal debate. This had indeed not been an easy decision for him. What attachment could be strong enough to turn such an obedient Prince away from his sworn oath? If not his mother, then...

"You have a lover?"

"Yes." Prince Endymion's face became filled with a pain unlike any Serenity had ever seen, save in her own mirror. On a man she had only known to be as emotionless as a stone, it was striking and deeply unsettling. Before her eyes, the Earth Prince became an entirely different person, at once a complete stranger and more familiar than anyone else the Princess had ever known.

"I am sorry," the blue-eyed Endymion repeated in a mournful voice. "I meant no deception. I thought... I thought..."

"You thought if you just stuck to your duty, it would go away," the Moon Princess said softly, her expression becoming gentle as all the fury drained out of her in a rush. "You thought, for the good of your kingdom, you could live without love." Suddenly the world made a great deal more sense. Prince Endymion's warning that he could never love his fiancée, his cold behavior toward Serenity, his reluctance to bring her to Earth... It all came together in this revelation, and the foggy landscape of their relationship was suddenly crystal clear.

"You understand," the Earth Prince breathed in surprise. "Then you... do you also..."

"Yes." Princess Serenity smiled as tears welled up in her eyes for the first time in days.

"He is on Earth," the auburn-haired Prince guessed after a moment of thought. Serenity nodded.

"Banished there after my mother found out," she said. A dry, hollow laugh overpowered the urge to sob. "Ours is a difficult lot, is it not?"

Prince Endymion glanced over at the column of shimmering golden light sparkling behind him. He bit his lip, his hands twitching at his sides as he considered. Finally, he turned back to his Lunarian fiancée.

"You could come with me."

Serenity's heart leapt, and it took all her self-control to prevent herself from bursting into overwhelmed tears. No one was here to prevent her. She could go to Earth. She could leave all the constraints and pressures of her role behind forever. She could find her beloved, and never leave him again.

I never want to see you again.

Endymion's last words sounded like thunder in Serenity's memory, assaulting her with the cold truth. The Earth man had been serious when he said those words, more serious than he had ever been. No matter how much the Princess wanted to believe otherwise, her heart told her that was the case. Endymion had made the decision to put their love aside. If their relationship was to be restored, it had to be his decision.

Besides, if the Moon Princess left like this, it might be believed that Prince Endymion had abducted

Against All Odds

her. Queen Serenity would seek her with all the power of the Silver Alliance. The Princess would never be safe, and the lives of the Earth Prince and his lover would likely be destroyed as well. There would be war, with no guarantee that Princess Serenity would be rewarded with the lasting reunion she desired. There was also Sailor Mercury to consider, whose moment of weakness had provided the Princess with this opportunity. Could Serenity condemn her only remaining friend to a traitor's fate, as she had Venus? It was time for her to accept the reality of what could and could not be, and to respect the decisions of the man she loved.

"Thank you, Prince," Serenity said at last, "but I must remain here." How ironic that it would be the Earth-child who broke their betrothal vows, and the lovesick Lunarian who voluntarily remained in her cage! The auburn-haired man nodded solemnly.

"We belong on our own worlds." The Earth Prince reached up and took off the moonstone engagement pendant, solemnly removing the symbol of their intended union. Serenity's decision could not have had less to do with an attachment to the Moon, but it would be easiest if Prince Endymion believed his own explanation. She lifted the sapphire pendant off her own neck, and handed it to the Earth-child as he set its moonstone twin in her palm.

"Farewell, Prince, and good luck." Before she could hesitate, Princess Serenity leaned forward and kissed Endymion lightly on the cheek. When she pulled away, the man was smiling the first genuine smile she had ever seen grace his face.

"I am glad to have met you, Princess." The Earth Prince's blue eyes glowed with sincerity and a warmth Serenity had never expected to see in him, and she could not help but smile. At least one of them would be happy.

Prince Endymion turned around and crossed the room to the waiting teleportation platform. He climbed the few steps, an unhidden eagerness adding a slight bounce to his stride. For a moment, he stood on the stone slab, his skin tinted caramel by the golden light that was the color of his house. Then his body shimmered, wavered, and was gone.

Princess Serenity stood alone in the empty chamber, watching the column of light sparkle as it flowed from platform to ceiling. With the silver-edged moonstone pendant dangling from her fingers, she slowly walked to the control panel and pressed a button.

The golden shine winked out, irrecoverable. Serenity felt as if her heart would stop as well, but it stubbornly kept on beating.

Chapter Fifteen

There was darkness.

It was absolute and it was everywhere. It was the utter blackness that sucked at the eye, seeming to take away everything, even the contents of one's own mind. It spread in all directions, without limits or barriers, without beginning or end. Only in one place was it challenged.

Far off in the distance, there was light. It shone brightly and defiantly, a pure white glow where none had any right to be. Its source was small, but its rays stretched out far into the eternal night, a beacon for any who might be lost there. The darkness fought against the light, attempting to suffocate it through sheer oppressive presence, but the glow refused to be extinguished.

On the other side of nowhere, Endymion struggled toward the light. He waded through the darkness as if it were water, and with every step the shadows grew thicker until it was as if he were swimming through tar. He fought against it, gaining ground bit by bit, ignoring his growing weariness. His eyes were fixed on the light, starving for it, clinging to it as if it could pull him from this quicksand. He could almost make out its source now, could almost see the flowing white dress and streaming crystalline hair within the dazzling glow...

Another light was trying to get his attention. Off to one side, a golden glow was shining, dancing in the shadows as it tried to catch Endymion's eye. He ignored it as he always did, focusing all his efforts on striving toward his goal. Silver always shone brighter than gold. His Serenity was there, waiting for him, calling to him with her light. Endymion would get to her. If he just kept trying, he would reach her. He would not allow anything to distract him.

Something strange was happening. After so many repetitive struggles, the darkness was a familiar adversary, but there were creatures within it now, living things that writhed and clutched at him. The unseen forces clung to Endymion's arms and legs, pulling at him, weighing him down until he feared he would be lost to the darkness. He focused on the white light ahead of him and struggled on, concentrating on taking one heavy step after another. Bit by bit, he drew closer to his shining angel. Not even the creatures of the shadows would stop him. Endymion was near enough now to see Serenity was holding out her arms to him.

The grasping hands were growing weaker as the Earth man got closer to the light, but so was

Against All Odds

Endymion. His arms and legs felt as if marble blocks were attached to them, and they ached with the strain of fighting the heavy darkness and its minions. Every staggered step was an overwhelming effort, and although Endymion tried his best to focus on Serenity's shine, his eyes were growing dim. The shadows were beginning to rise up in front of him and when he tried to lift his right leg for one more stride it would not budge. The exhausted man dropped to his knees, unable to fight it any longer. The white light had shrunk to nothing more than a faint glow. It was hopeless.

Suddenly, the bold cry of a horse rent the air. A brilliant golden glow tore apart the darkness in front of Endymion and a new shine appeared in the form of white wings on a snowy stallion. It reared and tossed its head as if slashing at the shadows with the golden horn that adorned its forehead. Its great feathery wings beat the air, driving the darkness back.

The shine of its horn was a nearly blinding brilliance. It seemed to be everywhere, like sunshine cutting through the dead of night. Endymion felt a strange warmth growing within his chest. He looked down, and his heart seemed to be answering the winged horse with a shine of its own, a golden light in his chest sparkling just as brightly as the beast's horn.

There was a shriek that seemed to come from everywhere. The invisible creatures of the shadows released their hold on Endymion and fell away, driven back by the golden light. He was free to get to his feet, but the darkness was still all around him, a void of nothingness. The shining winged horse came closer, its glow pushing the darkness away. It focused on Endymion with intelligent amber eyes.

The familiarity of that face registered with a shock. It was the same mysterious entity that had spoken to Endymion in his dream when he first arrived on Earth. The shadows were growing thicker, closing in. The dark-haired man leapt forward and swung himself onto the horse's back, wrapping his arms securely around its neck.

The great beast reared again, but not in an attempt to throw Endymion off. Its snowy wings pounded the air and, with a cry of defiance, it broke contact with the ground and climbed upward. The shadows pulled at its legs and fought against its wings, but stroke by stroke the horse rose higher. Soon the darkness was no longer absolute but tainted by a faint glow.

"Serenity!" Endymion cried, suddenly remembering. He twisted around on the beast's back and searched the darkness below, but there was no trace of the white light.

Be still!

The commanding voice sounded directly within Endymion's brain. Out of shock, he straightened up and got a firm grip on the horse's mane.

You will never reach her in this place, the voice continued, more gently. *I apologize for the intrusion, but I cannot speak aloud when I am in this form.*

Now the Earth man connected the mysterious voice with the amber-eyed entity. It was more hollow than it had been the first time they met, and it echoed slightly within his mind, but the tone was the same.

"Who are you?" Endymion asked hesitantly, looking down at the great beast. Its wings were still steadily beating the air, carrying it and its rider upward in a series of leaps and bounds. There was light now, and they were surrounded by the pale blue of a boundless sky. The horse's golden horn flashed brightly as if kissed by an invisible sun. There was a long pause. For a moment, Endymion feared he had broken the connection they shared by speaking.

I cannot tell you now, the beast finally answered, and there was a regretful edge to its communication. *I am sorry. There is much you should know, and there is no longer time to share it with you. I tried to reach you often in your dreams, but you had eyes only for her.*

Serenity. Thinking back, Endymion remembered seeing the flash of the winged horse's horn often as he struggled through the empty darkness, but he had always ignored it in favor of his beloved's white light. He glared down at his mount's snowy mane, suddenly angry at himself. That bond was broken, that romance was over, and still he could not let Serenity go. Now he sensed he was on the verge of a revelation greater than anything he had ever imagined, and due to his love for the Moon Princess, the answers would not be revealed to him. The relationship he had hoped would free him had only been a different prison.

Do not blame your love, the horse admonished him. Endymion was startled out of his thoughts. Could the beast read his mind as well? *I was willing to wait for you to come to me, but I fear you and I have run out of time.*

Against All Odds

"Those things in the shadows," Endymion recalled aloud. He shuddered at the memory of unseen hands grasping at him, pulling him down into the inescapable darkness. He had dreamed often of struggling through that eternal night, but those creatures had never been there before. The white horse tossed its head in an equine nod.

Yes. A dark force is at work on Earth. The light of your love held it at bay, but it has enslaved most of the planet, and if not for my aid I fear you would have been lost to it as well. It must not claim you, Endymion.

The exiled stable hand shivered at the sound of his true name. He had told no one his real identity since his arrival on Earth. "How do you know that name?" he demanded.

I knew you before you were born. The great head turned, and one amber eye rolled upward to look at the bewildered young man. The look in this eye was far from animal. It spoke of mysterious power, endless wisdom, and words that longed to be said.

"Will you not tell me who you are?" Endymion pleaded. "I beg you, tell me something, anything! What do my strange dreams mean? Why do I suddenly have powers unlike anyone else's? Who am I? What am I?" All the answers were there in that bright eye, everything he ever wanted to know and much more. The beast turned away, refocusing its sight on its unseen goal.

Those answers would only bring more questions, and there is no time for that now, it said resolutely. Ahead there was a light, a glow that spread and grew larger with every beat of the horse's wings. They galloped through the fading sky with ever-increasing speed, and Endymion began to feel a strange disorientation creeping over him.

Listen, please listen. The faint echoes of the voice in Endymion's head were growing stronger as the world began to fade to white around him. *As long as you are free, the Golden Kingdom may rise again. The darkness must not catch you, or all hope is lost. You must leave this city, Endymion. I will protect your mind, but you must hide your body where the war will not find you. When the crisis has passed, I will tell you everything. I swear it.*

The light was everywhere, blotting out what little there was to see. Endymion could no longer feel the horse's body under him or the softness of its mane beneath his fingers. In fact, he could no longer feel his fingers at all. There was still the rustling of beating wings, but he could not feel the wind on his face.

We cannot stop this, but the world may yet survive. Protect yourself, with that hope.

The beast's voice was growing faint within his mind, fading out like a dream.

You are more than your life has made you, Endymion.

Endymion's eyes popped open. He bolted upright in his bed and sat there a moment, blinking, struggling to pull his confused mind together. A dream, only a dream. Just another dream... but it had been so different from all the others...

Outside there were voices, shouts, and dozens of running feet pounding the pavement. Endymion whisked his blanket aside, jumped out of bed and hurried toward the window. He had fallen asleep in his clothes again; he'd worked the late shift the previous night and had arrived home too exhausted to do more than fall into bed. He felt as if he had slept forever, but the sky was strangely dark. What time was it?

Endymion reached the windowsill and looked out on a world gone mad. People were everywhere, filling the streets, running here and there in a chaotic throng. Some of them looked frightened, but for the most part, this mob was angry. A disturbing many were carrying weapons. Men, women, and children were down there, old and young alike, either rushing along with the crowd or being forced along by it. A cold chill sickened Endymion's stomach as he surveyed the chaos consuming the city. The frustration in the Golden Kingdom had finally reached the boiling point. A full revolution had broken out.

The exiled man raised his dark eyes and they widened in growing horror. Several buildings had been set afire. Endymion recognized the closest as a government center and a guard house. They burned brightly against the dark sky, casting the flickering red and orange glow of anarchy over the rioting citizens they had once served. The firelight was eerily brighter than it had any right to be at this hour. It was indeed early afternoon, but the sky was as dark as evening.

It seemed to have grown darker in the mere few minutes Endymion had been watching. It appeared

Against All Odds

the darkness that had sprung from the north had spread over the entire city, and it filled the air with thick clouds no light could penetrate. The sun was shining bravely in the northwest, but as Endymion watched, the clouds grew visibly thicker until it was blotted out. The distant burning buildings and the torches several citizens were carrying became the only light. Endymion couldn't believe his eyes. The northern darkness had been growing, but just yesterday it was still quite far off. How had it spread so far so fast?

Something was moving in the sinister clouds. Lumps of dark mist shifted and bulged, the billows rolling rapidly although there was no wind. Suddenly the clouds seemed to rip apart, several gashes splitting open and glowing a blood-chilling dark red.

It was a face. It smiled.

Endymion leapt back from the window and toppled backward onto the floor, scrambling away from the terrifying sight as fast as his arms and legs could carry him. The darkness was alive! What evil was this, that the world turned black and the skies themselves became the domain of monsters? What was that horrible thing?

On the streets outside, there were a few scattered screams, but the cry of fear was not taken up by the majority. Instead, it was drowned out by cheers. Hundreds of voices raised a whoop of elation, calling out their support of the creature of darkness hanging over them. The sound chilled Endymion more than the sight of the thing's sinister red face.

Something was dreadfully wrong here. No matter how disgruntled the citizens of the Golden Kingdom were, no living thing should have been able to look upon that storm of evil and not be afraid. Endymion's nighttime visitor had been right. Whatever the creature was, it had the power to bend the people of Earth to its will, to blind them to the horrible reality.

You must leave this city.

The winged horse's plea struck Endymion's memory like a hot blade, and he jumped to his feet to do just that. He did not know who or what the horse really was, but it was certainly not in league with the demon in the clouds. The frightened man was ready to trust anyone who opposed that evil thing.

The beast had said there was hope if Endymion survived. He could not imagine why he was so important, but perhaps the white horse had a plan, some method of saving the people of Earth that the former stable hand could help with in some way. Perhaps it was gathering an army somewhere...

Endymion paused in the act of collecting the few necessities he had at hand. His fingers hovered over the golden surface of the star-shaped locket sitting on his windowsill. The world it represented seemed an eternity away. Only a few weeks ago he had been a happy, productive citizen of the Moon, and now he was on another planet, about to flee a city on the verge of destruction.

The locket symbolized a society he no longer embraced and a love he no longer possessed. Should he leave it behind as part of the ashes of his former life? Endymion started to turn away, but his feet refused to take a single step. After a moment of internal struggle, he was forced to concede. His love for Princess Serenity was still a part of him, no matter how much he wished it were otherwise. The memory of the Moon Princess would always be with him. It would be wrong to abandon the relics of the happy times they had shared. Despite all he had suffered, Endymion still did not regret his love.

The gold star locket went into his pocket, and he took a deep breath of the ancient rose's everlasting fragrance before pinning it securely to the inside of his thin coat. He snatched up a small loaf of bread that was to have been his breakfast, picked up his sword, and hurried out the door, leaving yet another life behind him.

The chaos was even more overwhelming at street level than it was from above. People were running here and there, calling out to others to join them as they waved whatever weapons they had been able to get their hands on. From merchant to beggar, they mingled in a growing unified mob. There were even fewer citizens who looked properly frightened now, and most of those were being guided along by encouraging warmongers. Gathering his courage, Endymion looked up at the sky. The horrible red face was gone, but he knew it was still up there, watching the proceedings from the churning clouds.

"Come, brother, why do you hesitate?"

Endymion tore his eyes away from the heavens. A young man with wild brown hair was standing at the bottom of the boarding house steps, looking up at him with an enthusiastic grin. Endymion did not know this man, but he had seen him on occasion in the pub he frequented, and was hard-pressed to admit

this was the same person. He vaguely remembered a quiet, solemn man who mostly kept to himself, friendly when spoken to but largely a subdued loner. The person at the base of the staircase was loud and filled with spirit, and there was a disturbingly wild look in his eyes. If it weren't for the distinctive scar on one cheek, Endymion would not have recognized him.

"Today is the day!" the brown-haired man proclaimed, waving a rusty spear in the air. "We'll no longer cringe beneath the boots of the other worlds, my brother! Today is a day for celebration! Today the Moon, tomorrow the universe!"

"The Moon?" Endymion's blood ran cold. He stumbled down the few steps, clinging to the railing for support.

"Fear not, brother!" The exuberant man seized Endymion by the arm and steadied him. His grip was surprisingly strong, even for a hardened laborer. "We have been joined by a power greater than Selene! Our victory is guaranteed! We will obtain that which grants wishes and become immortal gods! The Silver Crystal!"

Now Endymion stared incredulously at the man, who had not released his hold on the former stable hand's arm. How did an Earth-dwelling human know of the Silver Crystal? Endymion had thought this revolution was meant merely to preserve the integrity of the Earth, but this man was speaking of war against the entire Silver Alliance. Was the evil force in the sky bending using the people of the planet to pursue its own unholy goals?

"Nothing can defeat Queen Serenity," Endymion found himself saying. As he said the words, he fervently hoped they were true. Although he was no longer a citizen of the Moon, Endymion had left friends there. He did not want to imagine Miss Amaris and Prien being forced to rise up against the ruler they loved. Surely the Silver Crystal was stronger than any force of evil.

"I see you have not yet witnessed the power of our new ally!" The brown-haired man clapped his free arm around Endymion's shoulders and led him firmly down the street, keeping to the edge of the frenzied throng. "Nothing is beyond the strength of Metalia!" The sound of that name set clamps of ice around Endymion's heart, but he walked on numbly, both frightened and curious. "Metalia has returned our Prince to us, and has given us a proper Queen to lead our revolution!"

The Earth Prince was back in the Golden Kingdom? For a moment, Endymion wondered at the fate of the Prince's fiancée, but all thoughts were driven from his mind when he saw where they were headed. Down the street from the boarding house, one of the monoliths Endymion had seen on the beach had sprouted right through the paving stones. It was more than twice his height and as utterly black as the darkness that filled his dreams. The edges of the stone were jagged and irregular, and there was something inexplicably sinister about its inert form. As Endymion drew nearer to it, a deep ache began to throb in his bones.

Ahead of him, a struggling woman was being forced into the shadow of the monstrous spire. She was terrified and fought the enthusiastic masses, but before long they overpowered her and pressed her hands against the surface of the black stone.

The change was immediate. After only an instant of contact, the woman went limp in the arms of the crowd. When they helped her to stand again, she had become bold, resolute, and angry. She cheered along with her fellow revolutionaries, and when one of them pressed a knife into her hand, she immediately joined the exodus toward the palace.

"Just touch one of Metalia's monuments," the man beside Endymion said encouragingly, "and all will be made clear."

Endymion swung his sword around and struck his guide across the stomach with the flat of the blade. The man grunted and bent double, loosening his hold on the former stable hand. Endymion twisted out of his grip and took off running, dodging the half-dozen brainwashed citizens that reached out to stop him.

He ran blindly for several blocks, wanting only to put as much distance as possible between him and those who would sacrifice him to that terrible monolith. If anyone looked at him, he raised his sword and cried "Death to the Moon!" or whatever the masses nearby happened to be yelling. As long as he pretended to be one of the crowd, the endless slaves of evil left Endymion alone.

Again the winged horse had been proven right. There was no force on Earth that could stop this.

Against All Odds

The monoliths were everywhere; Endymion dodged several as he ran through the crowded streets. He had to get out of the Golden City before he fell under the same power that now commanded most of his countrymen.

Something was banging awkwardly against his leg. Endymion put his hand down and his fingers closed on the bumpy shape in his pocket. Slowing, the exiled man ducked into an alley out of sight of the crowd and pulled out the gold star locket.

For a long moment, the exiled lover stood there turning the object over and over in his hands. He did not dare open it, for fear someone would discover him, but Endymion did not need to hear the locket's melody to remember the bond it represented. The entire population of the Earth was gathering to rise up against the Moon Kingdom, the realm of his beloved Serenity. The thought of what this maddened crowd might do to her made him shake so violently he nearly collapsed, and he forced the ugly images out of his mind before they could cause him to panic.

Was Serenity really in danger? Endymion tried to tell himself the Moon Princess was perfectly safe; she was on another world, with the Sailor Soldiers and the Silver Crystal to protect her... but still, he was filled with dread. The enemy was a thing of pure evil with the power to turn day to night and brainwash millions. It was entirely possible it might find a way to open a passage to the Moon. All magic aside, the citizens of the Earth far outnumbered the Lunarians, and there were mages among the human population with untold powers. The outcome of the coming battle was far from certain.

Gripping the locket tightly in his free hand, Endymion left the alley and ran toward the palace at top speed. He had ended his relationship with Princess Serenity, but for the preservation of a society that was not likely to exist after this day. Serenity had her guardians, but none of them knew her as Endymion did. None of them loved her as he did. None of them would fight to protect her as he would.

Endymion loved Serenity, more than everything, and no matter what happened, he always would. If she was in danger, he was going to protect her. If he was going to flee into the wilderness to save himself, he would have her with him.

The inside of the palace was just as chaotic as the streets. What soldiers there were had been sent out to face down the growing mob at the gates, but the hallways were still busy with messengers running here and there and frightened residents searching for a place of refuge. Kunzite strode through the mayhem like an unstoppable force parting restless waters. Not even a page on the most urgent of missions would have dared cross his path.

He descended the staircase like a wave of imminent death, his cape flying out behind him and a furious scowl displayed openly on his face. Kunzite had finally escaped a terrified ambassador after assuring him for the hundredth time that yes, they were doing all they could. The barely-restrained rage in the general's expression now was enough to dissuade anyone else who might have attempted to interrupt his journey.

The Middle-Eastern commander glared at the darkened windows as he strolled through the deserted training floor. All hell was breaking loose on the planet, and Kunzite knew of only one place that possessed the power to create such chaos.

Fueled by his fury, he kicked open the door to the storage room next to his office. The pair of guards inside leapt to their feet and arranged their uniforms hurriedly, looking first ashamed and then terrified by the sight of their commander. Kunzite ignored the playing cards spread out on a nearby crate. He couldn't blame the soldiers for being bored; guarding a caged cat was hardly a compelling task. There was a growing rumor in the ranks that the leader of the Four Generals was finally losing touch with reality.

"Go and join the defense force!" Kunzite barked. The two soldiers were all too eager to comply. After gathering their helmets and pikes, they were off and running, leaving the white-haired man alone with the cage on the floor.

The general strode forward, picked up the cage, and slammed it down on a pair of crates so hard that Artemis was thrown roughly against the bars. Kunzite glared at the Mauan with a face so fierce that the white cat shrank back involuntarily.

"What is going on?" the Middle-Eastern commander demanded. "First our Prince vanishes, and now

the entire planet has been taken over by madness! The Moon has a hand in this, admit it!"

Recovering from his shock, the Mauan glared back at the Earth man. If Kunzite wanted to believe such lies, Artemis would make no move to prevent him. Like as not, it was the Earth causing all the trouble, and the general was simply trying to trick his captive into revealing himself.

"Speak!" Kunzite roared, his silver eyes flashing. "I see the intelligence behind your eyes! You've been watching us from the beginning, plotting against us! What have you done with the other generals!?"

Frustrated and furious, the snowy-haired man snarled and drew one hand back. The air around his fingers darkened and began to glow a deep violet. Artemis shrank back against the bars of his cage, eyes wide with horror. Would the general really go so far as to use magic against him?

"Don't waste your energy on animals, Kunzite." The voice had a chuckle and a slight echo. The general whirled around, the power he had been collecting vanishing harmlessly into the air. There was no one in the room except him and the white cat.

"Who are you?" he demanded. "Show yourself!"

There was more laughter, this time from several voices. Finally, three whirlwinds of dark energy sprang up in the room. Kunzite leapt to the side, got a solid wall at his back, and crouched into a defensive stance. As the energy clouds coalesced, he straightened up with a gasp of surprise. The three missing generals materialized out of the swirling darkness.

"What..? How..?" Kunzite stammered, looking from one familiar face to another.

"Disturbing to see us do something you can't, is it?" Zoisite teased with a laugh.

"Kunzite, it's all right," Nephrite said in a more serious tone. "We finally have the power to defend our planet. You can share in it as well."

In the cage on the crates, Artemis arched his back and hissed. He was no magic user himself, but like all Mauans he had a sensitivity to supernatural energy, and he knew dark power when he sensed it. These three men were not the same generals who had entertained the Sailor Soldiers on their visit. They had become wilder, bolder, darker, and there was a light in their eyes that was purely alien. Their auras reeked of tainted energy.

Kunzite also seemed to notice something was amiss. He stood casually, but did not approach his comrades. "What is this power of which you speak?" he asked.

"It is incredible!" Zoisite burst out, excited. The European commander who had been surly and bitter could now barely contain himself, intoxicated by his newfound strength. "It is all we ever dreamed of and more!"

"And when we have the Silver Crystal, we will be invincible," Jadeite added. The hunger in his eyes was all too plain. Artemis' fur stood on end. They could not be planning to strike against the Moon!

"Yes, we must get the Silver Crystal," Nephrite agreed in a voice that was suddenly distant, as if he were reciting something. Kunzite's eyes narrowed.

"Who told you this? Where did this power come from?" Artemis leaned as close to the conversation as he could, eager for the same answers.

"You were right, Kunzite," Jadeite said, ignoring the man's questions. "The Moon has been spying on us, trying to steal our Prince, planning to enslave us! With Metalia's help, we will show all the planets the true power of the Earth! It will be the Earth that rules all, not the Moon!"

"Metalia?" Now Kunzite's face became dark with anger. "Have you forgotten your oaths to your rulers so quickly?" Artemis could hardly believe his ears. For all the time he had spent listening in on the Golden Kingdom's most private conversations, he had heard not a whisper of such an ambitious usurper. Was this Metalia somehow connected to the mysterious falling star the Mauan had been investigating?

"We no longer recognize the Golden Kingdom's King and Queen," Zoisite said smoothly, folding his arms over his chest. Neither of the men beside him showed any sign of challenging this bold statement.

There was a silken sound as Kunzite drew his sword from his sheath. "Traitors!" he roared.

"I told you he wouldn't understand," Nephrite sighed, turning to Jadeite. "We should have waited for him to come to us willingly, so Metalia could have communed with him." Artemis searched the chestnut-haired general for any trace of the man who had carried on an amiable one-sided conversation with the caged cat and found none. The gentle mood Nephrite displayed now was as false as the wooden practice swords in a nearby crate.

Against All Odds

"There was no time," Jadeite replied. His cool attitude, by contrast, was all too familiar. "We attack soon and Endymion needs all four of us."

"Endymion?" Kunzite paused as a flash of hope pushed his anger aside. "You have found the Prince?"

"He came to Metalia, as we all did," Zoisite explained. "Even now, he is gathering an army to march on the palace. He will be King soon, with a Queen who deserves the throne of Earth - Beryl."

For a moment, Kunzite hesitated. "I must admit the thought of Endymion remaining on Earth and marrying the woman he loves is a pleasing one," he said at last, "but what of the King and Queen?" Now the faces of the other three generals hardened into cold, resolved expressions.

"It is our rulers who are the traitors," Jadeite said in a voice like ice. "They sold us to the Moon Kingdom as slaves. They even gave up their only son."

"They must be punished." Zoisite's lips curved into a chilling half-smile. Kunzite took a half-step backward and raised his sword, looking at his fellow generals suspiciously.

"And Endymion sides with you against them? I do not trust this Metalia you speak of, nor do I trust what it has made you. If I must choose between rulers, I choose those who do not ally themselves with darkness."

"Come now, Kunzite," Nephrite said gently, stepping forward and raising his hands placatingly. "I know you were as displeased with the way things were going as the rest of us. All we're asking is for you to turn away from the rulers who were poisoning the Golden Kingdom and embrace the ones who want what's best for it."

"I have served King Arton and Queen Elana since before the rest of you began training," Kunzite reminded them. "I cannot do that."

"Then we must give you a demonstration of the power granted to us by Metalia," Jadeite said grimly, but the hint of a smile was teasing the corners of his lips. The three generals lined up facing their former leader, who resumed his defensive stance and readied his sword. Artemis shrank back as far as the bars of his cage allowed, hoping not to be noticed and trying not to panic. The storage room was not very large. Even were he free of his prison, Artemis would not want to be anywhere near the almighty fight that was about to break out.

As one, the three servants of Metalia raised their hands. Beams of dark energy burst from their fingertips and shot toward Kunzite. The Middle-Eastern commander's blade flashed blindingly as he deflected each blast, moving with reflexes even the white cat could not boast. Scattered energy flew everywhere, ricocheting off the stone walls and sinking into the floor. Several shots struck various crates, which exploded, raining down splintered wood and scraps of cloth and shards of metal. The room filled with dust, and still Kunzite's blade kept shining as it blocked every strike.

"You can't keep this up forever, old man!" Zoisite crowed from somewhere in the mess.

"I am not yet so old that I cannot beat the three of you." Compared to the manic tone of the younger man, Kunzite's voice was as smooth as tranquil waters. Finally, the corrupted generals ceased their assault in favor of a different plan of attack. Feet shuffled forward through the blinding cloud of debris. There was a grunt, a rush of air, and a heavy thud.

"You fool!" Nephrite's voice scolded. "Never challenge Kunzite to hand-to-hand combat!" There was the metallic sound of weapons being drawn, and then the air was filled with sparks. The dust was beginning to clear, and Artemis glimpsed the short-haired Jadeite rolling away from where Kunzite had thrown him. Nephrite was charging at the white-haired general, jabbing at him with a knife in each hand, but so far Kunzite was blocking every stroke.

Zoisite was edging closer to the Middle-Eastern commander from behind. Suddenly Kunzite whirled around and thrust out his free hand. A blast of violet energy from his palm hit the ponytailed general in the chest and sent him flying backward into a wall. Nephrite and Jadeite seized the opportunity to fire off renewed energy bolts of their own, and the battle of the mages resumed its earlier ferocity. The room was once again filled with dark blasts and the occasional burst of violet light.

Shaking off his pain, Zoisite chose that moment to demonstrate one of his new abilities. Clenching his fists at his sides, the blond man rose smoothly into the air.

"Not so high now, are you?" he jeered, raining what appeared to be shards of black crystal down on

Kunzite from above.

Artemis did not linger to see the outcome of the battle. A stray energy blast struck the cage that held him, melting half its bars and sending it crashing to the floor. The door popped open and the Mauan leaped out. Without a backward glance, Artemis darted from the room and tore off down the hallway as fast as his feline legs could carry him. He had to get to the Moon and warn Queen Serenity before it was too late.

Upstairs on the ground floor of the palace, a different kind of battle was taking place. A small group was making its way through the dark corridors. The hallways were nearly vacant now, most of the palace's usual occupants having joined the defense lines or fled into the city, but the handful remaining were not finding it easy to reach their destination. One member of the group was resisting.

"He is here!" Queen Elana cried, pulling back from the others with all the strength she possessed. "We can't just leave him!"

"The entire city is on our doorstep," Arton reminded her, refusing to relinquish his hold on his wife's wrist. "Once this madness blows over, we can send back servants to investigate, whatever you want, but right now we have to get away!" The royal couple and a half-dozen of their most trusted attendants were headed toward the rear of the palace, where a carriage and an armed escort were waiting.

Although the Earth Queen tried to wrest her arm free, the King was too strong for her. She hauled with all her weight, but dress slippers and stone floors did little to hold her and she was dragged forward despite her struggling.

"How can you be so cold?" Elana demanded. "He is your son!" At this, Arton paused and yanked his wife close.

"He is dead," he hissed. "That's what you told me, for all those years! Every time I voiced the slightest hope, it was you who told me to give up, to focus on the present instead of the past!"

Elana gazed up into the coal-black eyes and dark hair that were the hallmarks of her lost son and saw the anguish that had been locked away at her request. She looked away, overcome by guilt.

"I was wrong," the Queen said softly, her eyes filling with regretful tears. "Please-"

"I will not listen to you now," King Arton said firmly. "You're not well." He turned away and strode resolutely down the hallway, yanking Elana along beside him. The servants hurried to keep up, weighed down by the various supplies their monarch had gathered upon deciding to leave the palace. There wasn't much time. The rabble outside were common citizens, but they vastly outnumbered what soldiers were on hand.

"We can find him!" Queen Elana insisted, refusing to give in. "Let me go!"

Her shrieks and struggles drowned out the light footsteps hurrying down nearby corridors. By the time the Earth King heard them, it was too late. The small party stopped abruptly as the shadows around them suddenly filled with swords. A few of the servants dropped what they were carrying and turned to run, but they were surrounded.

The wall of blades advanced, and several of their bearers stepped into what dim light remained in the corridor. Both rulers gasped, all other concerns momentarily forgotten. These were not disgruntled commoners. They were uniformed guards, soldiers sworn to protect the very monarchs they were now threatening. Many of them had been assigned to police the palace gates only a few hours before.

"What is the meaning of this?" King Arton demanded. He thrust his wife protectively behind his back, but retained his firm hold on her wrist. The braver ones among the servants drew close to their rulers, forming a human shield as best they could. These soldiers were not the loyal men they had been. They sneered and laughed menacingly, and there was something about their eyes that was not quite human.

"These men are no longer yours to command," a familiar voice announced. The wall of blades parted and Prince Endymion strode forward into the circle. His sword was drawn, he was fully armored, and his once-tranquil face was filled with contempt. His lips curled and he glared at his parents with a look of disdain. Elana's knees weakened as horror crept over her.

"My son-"

Against All Odds

"Do not address me so!" the Earth Prince snapped, his blue eyes filling with fire. "What kind of parents send their only son to be the plaything of another world? What kind of rulers sell their own people as slaves for their own security?"

"You know that was never our intent," King Arton said angrily. "Who has been feeding you these lies? Why would you betray us after all this time?"

"I have finally found the strength to do what I should have done long ago," Prince Endymion replied. His grip tightened on the hilt of his sword and his lips twisted into a ravenous smile. "At last, I will take what is mine."

Endymion ran through the side corridors of the palace, straining his ears to catch the slightest sound. Most of the massive structure was deserted and silent, but he had been outside and knew the horrible truth. The soldiers assigned to guard the palace were falling victim to the same evil that had taken control of the rest of the population. The Earth was being conquered without a fight. The mob that was gathering in the Central Gardens was growing by the minute, and it was only by pretending to already be one of them that Endymion had avoided being recruited himself.

By the time he reached the palace walls, the entrances were unguarded; the soldiers that had tended them had gone to join the rebel ranks. Even so, Endymion had chosen a service gate that opened into the kitchens. He had heard talk of the Earth Prince being sent to the palace on a special mission and did not want to risk encountering him or his guard.

The former stable hand stuck to the servants' passages as long as he could, trusting in Talma's description of the place to keep him going in the right direction. It was strange; although Endymion had been unconscious nearly the entire time he had been in the palace, something about it seemed familiar. He chose doors and corridors without fully knowing why. Something in his heart led him confidently onward.

Finally, it could no longer be avoided. He had to climb to the main level to proceed further. Choosing a nearby staircase, Endymion ascended in leaps and bounds, his naked sword ready to challenge any enemy he might encounter.

The man's luck held. When he burst through the door at the top of the staircase, he found himself in an empty chamber. Endymion paused for a minute to catch his breath and get his bearings. The darkness had come so suddenly that no lamps had been lit, and he had to comb the room intently with his eyes before he felt certain there was no one lurking in the shadows.

In the dark and the silence, the palace felt abandoned, and the large empty room did nothing to ease Endymion's discomfort. This was a grand and stately chamber, with great stone pillars supporting the ceiling, but it seemed to exist solely for show. There was no furniture and not even a single fireplace to provide comfort in the winter. Turning around, Endymion finally spied the chamber's only decoration against the back wall. An alcove had been carved into the stone, and inside it a suit of armor was hanging on iron hooks.

It seemed the only purpose of the entire room was the display of this armor. Tapestries hanging on either side of the alcove depicted warriors in battle wearing what appeared to be that very armor. Clearly it was an heirloom of some kind. Endymion slipped the gold star locket back into the pocket of his trousers and eyed the suit thoughtfully. He was charging alone into an imminent war and had no time to find the palace armory. He could certainly use the protection of a breastplate, if nothing else. It was obvious that stealing this armor would be a serious crime indeed, but the government of the Earth was in shambles, and there was not likely to be much left of the Golden Kingdom to notice its absence...

Making his decision, Endymion put his foot on an uneven piece of wall and pulled himself up to the alcove. The armor was black with silver accents on the breastplate, and its shoulder guards were polished to a mirror shine. There was not a speck of dust or tarnish on any piece of the suit despite apparent years of disuse. It included everything from plated boots to a cape lined with red velvet. Apparently this armor was intended for a high-born hero, perhaps a top general. Today, it would have to make do with a lesser-born wearer.

Endymion's eyes narrowed in puzzlement as he studied the suit. There did not seem to be any buckles or fastenings of any kind on the armor's various plates, nor any seams at all on the suit's upper

torso. How was a person to put it on? Confused, he reached out to touch the breastplate.

There was an eruption of golden light. Endymion cried out briefly in involuntary shock as he was blinded by the sudden glow. A now-familiar heat flared in his chest, and he tingled from his fingers to his toes. The metal of the black breastplate flashed hot against his hand, and then abruptly vanished. The light winked out.

Endymion steadied himself against the cold stone walls of the alcove and blinked furiously, the sudden brightness having destroyed his night vision. As his eyes readjusted to the darkness, he found himself staring into empty space. The armor was gone.

He turned around, and his body felt strangely heavy and confined. Endymion looked down. The suit of armor had somehow attached itself to his body. From the black shirt and pants to the metal plates over them, the entire ensemble was now a shell over his skin. Startled and confused, the former stable hand pulled at the strange clothing, frightened by its unexpected display of magic. The armor stuck to him firmly, refusing to release its hold on his body. Endymion jumped down from the alcove and the armor moved with him, as versatile as if it were a natural part of him.

After a moment of panic, the exiled man stopped struggling. He had wanted armor; now he had armor. That it happened to be magical was of little consequence. He knew now why it was displayed so reverently, at least. Just wearing it made him feel stronger, bolder. He wondered vaguely at the momentary golden glow that signified a reaction in his still-mysterious powers; what did it mean?

There was no time to analyze that puzzle now. Endymion had stayed too long already. At any time, the rebel army might burst into the palace or the Prince's team might find him. The sheath bound to the armor's waist was empty, but it fit the former stable hand's sword like a glove. After sliding the blade home, Endymion ran from the room, marveling at how easily the armor adjusted to his movements.

He barreled down the empty corridors, now focused solely on reaching the teleportation chamber as quickly as possible. The cape flying out behind him was an unexpected nuisance; Endymion kept glancing back to make sure the flapping cloth he was hearing wasn't a pursuer. With red fabric streaming from his shoulders and metal boots striking the flagstones, he was no longer as invisible nor as silent as he had been, but once he reached the Moon it would not matter.

The now-armored man turned one corner after another, once again following the instinctive directions of his heart. Odds were Endymion would soon be hopelessly lost, but all he could think about was Princess Serenity. Had the war already reached the Moon? Was Serenity all right? Were the Lunarians even aware of the force being raised against them?

Suddenly, the running man became aware of an odor that made him sick to his stomach and chilled him to the bone. The hallway was filled with the smell of blood. With every stride he took it grew thicker, until every breath he drew choked him with it. Whatever the source was, Endymion was headed straight for it. He slowed down as the dread began to grow in his gut, fearing what he might stumble across. Although he listened intently, he heard nothing, but he still drew his sword before walking around the next corner.

A terrible sight met his eyes. A battle had taken place in this hallway. By the look of things, it had been more of an execution. A half-dozen motionless human bodies lay scattered around on the floor, most of them dressed in the simple clothing of palace servants. Parcels and bundles of cloth spattered with blood were strewn across the area. All the bodies lay in pools of dark red, and not all of them were whole.

Endymion pressed the back of one hand to his mouth as his stomach churned. Was this what the brainwashed people of Earth were capable of? Was this what they would do to anyone who opposed them? He tried to look away from the bodies, but his eyes simply leapt from one still form to the next, until each and every one was engraved into his mind. Swallowing the bile that rose in his throat, he gingerly stepped around the lifeless corpse of a dark-haired man in fine robes, and shuddered as if the grave being crossed was his own. The very air tasted of blood.

Someone groaned. Endymion sheathed his sword and hurried toward the sound. A woman was lying face-down a short distance from the others, as if she had been cut down while trying to escape. Kneeling beside her, the former stable hand gently reached out and took hold of her shoulders. The woman's skin was warm to the touch, but when Endymion turned her over and lifted her in his arms, he knew there was no hope. Blood was oozing from a wound in the woman's chest, and a stream of dark red was trickling from

the corner of her mouth. It was only a matter of minutes. There was not even any reason to attempt to make a bandage.

Endymion set his jaw. It was not quite hopeless. There was yet a chance. Shifting the woman's weight in his arms, he gently placed one hand on the wound in her chest and focused. There was a slight stirring inside him, and a faint warmth flowed through his fingertips, but it wasn't enough, not nearly enough. He gritted his teeth and searched desperately for the healing power that had come so easily to him at other times, but he could not muster the strength to heal such a grievous injury.

The exiled man had to give up when his head started spinning, and he was left frustrated and angry. What good was his mysterious power if he could not save this innocent? Surrounded by the silent dead, Endymion felt like a living man trapped in a cold tomb. His mind screamed urgency, every beat of his heart marking another second passing by. He had to get to the Moon quickly, to prevent more carnage like this... but if he could not save this woman, he would not leave her to die alone.

Like the man he had passed at the other end of the grisly scene, this victim was dressed in fine clothing. She wore a green gown trimmed in gold, overlaid by a thick robe that had surely cost more than Endymion had earned in his entire lifetime. She shook briefly in his arms as her breath rattled in her chest, and the exiled stable hand shivered as he watched her life slipping away. Rich or poor, common or noble, everyone died the same way.

The woman stirred weakly, and something flashed on her chest. A gold emblem had been affixed there, and although it was largely stained with blood, it was a symbol Endymion knew well. He had seen it on every guard and soldier in the city. It was the royal crest of the Golden Kingdom.

Now he noticed the circlet in her auburn hair. Now he took in the clothing, the servants, the scattered supplies, and put it all together. The shock was so great he nearly dropped the dying victim. This woman was Queen Elana.

She moaned again, and her eyes opened. Endymion stared into the clouded blue pools with renewed horror. The maddened rebels had murdered their own King and Queen. Whatever controlled the people, it would stop at nothing to achieve its goals. What chance did even a beloved ruler like Queen Serenity have against such an enemy?

Elana's eyes widened. She stared up at the young man, taking in his dark hair, charcoal eyes, and black and silver armor. Her gaze traced every line and detail of his face, drinking him in as if he were life-giving water. Her lips parted and moved silently for a moment before she finally managed a sound.

"Endymion," the Queen gasped. She breathed, and her blue eyes slowly filled with tears. "My son...!"

The former stable hand grieved so badly for the dying woman that he could barely resist the compulsion to look away. In her delirium, the Earth Queen thought he was her son, the Prince. Endymion almost wished he had just left her there and moved on, anything to not be facing the impossible task of breaking a dying woman's heart.

"I knew you were alive," Elana continued, a pained but joyous smile spreading across her pale face. "How glad I am to see you again, if for the last time."

A thin hand, trembling from the effort, rose and reached up to caress Endymion's face. He shuddered at the woman's touch, but did not pull away. Perhaps it was wrong to allow Elana's delusion to continue, but he could not bring himself to tell her he was not her Endymion. He was not about to deny the dying Queen the last comfort she craved, nor could he burden her last moments with the horrible truth that her beloved son had most likely joined the side of evil.

The soft flesh of the noblewoman's hand was cold, but strangely, something within Endymion was warmed by it. He had never had a mother. He could almost imagine that he really was the son Elana was looking for, that the tenderness in her touch and the love in her eyes were really meant for him.

"Can you ever forgive me?" the weakening Queen whimpered, her voice breaking as the tears ran down her cheeks. "I never really stopped believing, not even when I convinced everyone else to give up on you. At last... you've returned to prove my heart right in the end." Her arm dropped heavily, and Endymion found himself catching her hand in his and squeezing it tightly, although by the chill in her skin she could no longer feel him.

"I thought... it was for the best," Elana wept, her chest shuddering as she fought for the breath to

Against All Odds

say what she was desperate to express. Her eyes were growing dim, but never once did they stray from Endymion's face. "Please... forgive me... my son..."

Endymion squeezed his eyes shut for a moment, fighting the lump that was rising in his throat. It should have been Prince Endymion here, not some common-blooded orphan who happened to stumble upon the Queen when it was too late to save her. It should have been her son here to tell her what she wanted to hear so badly. Endymion cursed the Earth Prince internally with everything he had, cursed the man's coldness, his cowardice, his lust for power, whatever it was that had driven the heir to the throne to side with darkness against his own parents.

Then he opened his eyes and smiled.

"I forgive you, Mother," he said softly. Queen Elana's face flooded with relief. The pain drained away from her expression and was replaced by an incredible tranquility. For a brief instant, her eyes sparkled once more.

"I always... loved you... Endymion..."

Elana's eyes slid closed, and she went limp in the young man's arms. Endymion clutched the lifeless body to his chest for a moment, no longer caring that by society's law he was unfit even to stand in her presence.

"I am sorry, my Queen," he whispered, a deep pain filling his heart. The Queen of Earth had died at the vicious hands of her own countrymen, and even as one of her subjects, in a hero's armor with strange magic on his side, Endymion could do nothing for her but pretend to be her son. Regardless of whether or not Elana had been a good Queen, she was a human being and deserved better than this. Humanity itself deserved better than to be used and manipulated by a creature of darkness.

It was too late for the Golden Kingdom. Its rulers were dead, its heir was a tool of evil, and in trying to avoid becoming slaves of the Moon its people had become slaves of something else. Endymion was only one man. He could no more right these wrongs than drink the ocean. As one man, the most he could hope to do was save one woman.

Reverently, Endymion laid the body of Queen Elana on the floor and got to his feet. Gazing down on her serene but still face, the exiled man's heart began to pound. If the rebels had already passed through here, it was likely they had reached the Moon Kingdom by now. What if he was already too late?

A dreadful image of Princess Serenity took the place of the dead woman at Endymion's feet, crystal hair strewn about and white dress stained with blood. With a strangled cry, the exiled lover whirled around and fled the tragic scene, resuming his run down the corridor. It couldn't be too late, it couldn't. She had to be all right. He had to get there in time.

A pale light ahead called to the running man. He followed it around a corner and through an open door, and found himself in the teleportation chamber at last. The platform was already alight; apparently someone in the invasion party had the proper access code. The silver shine of a link with the Moon Kingdom filled the room with an eerie light, making the stone walls seem almost metallic.

Seeing the gateway to the Moon standing open with no travelers or guards in sight was extremely unsettling. Endymion drew his sword and took a deep breath. He had committed himself to a life on Earth, and now he was preparing to return to a world that had caused him unspeakable pain, to fight on its side in a war against his own people.

Before he could hesitate another moment, Endymion charged forward and leapt onto the platform. The silver light engulfed and sank into him, whisking him away from the planet he had come to call home.

The things he did for love.

Chapter Sixteen

It was the end of an era. For more years than most of the population could number, the Moon Kingdom had known nothing but peace and prosperity. Now, from the physical structures of the city to the idyllic hubris within its citizens' minds, all was being destroyed. The world that had known only light now knew only darkness. The stars had been chased from the sky by thick black clouds, and an army from nowhere had the entire city under attack. It was utter chaos. The Moon Knights had been mustered and sent out, but the enemy seemed endless. All the training grounds were soon emptied and common citizens were taking up arms. The Moon needed every soldier it could get.

It was for that reason that Sailor Mercury had slipped away from her comrades and was hurrying down the long staircase at the heart of the Moon Castle. It was easy to cling to conventions of right and wrong during peacetime, but in war, the greater good overruled all. Perhaps the blue-suited soldier would share her leader's fate for what she was about to do, but if she did not act, there might not be a kingdom left to judge her.

Mercury was thrown against a wall as the castle shook, a deep rumble rolling from its towers to its deepest foundations. A few stones dropped from the ceiling and bounced down the staircase, disappearing into the darkness. There wasn't much time.

As soon as the floor stopped pitching, the lone Sailor Soldier hurried on, leaping down the stairs two or three at a time. Deserted corridors flashed past, lit briefly by what few light crystals were still working. Assorted debris was scattered across several hallways, odds and ends dropped by fleeing servants. The doors to the massive armory stood open, the chambers beyond nearly emptied. Countless loyal citizens had risen up to defend their kingdom, most of them sadly inexperienced. Sailor Mercury could not let one of their most powerful warriors sit idle when so many brave civilians were fighting and dying. At least down here she couldn't hear the screams.

Finally, the blue-suited soldier reached the bottom of the stairs, the deepest and most secure level of the Moon Castle. A transparent wall of shining energy filled the doorway at the foot of the staircase. Sailor Mercury charged straight through, her status as a Sailor Soldier granting her instant access.

Just being in the dungeons was enough to make the Mercurian shiver. In a sharp contrast to the alabaster marble halls above, the lower levels of the castle were built of dark stone. At this depth, the chambers were far from the warmth of the sun, and the natural chill of the Moon sank into the skin within seconds. There were few lights. The mere thought of being imprisoned in this cold, dark place drove most of what few citizens were foolish enough to break the law to plead forgiveness and agree to any penance.

Against All Odds

Those whose hearts were too hard for remorse were usually exiled. Although the dungeons were vast, they were rarely used. At the moment they contained only one prisoner.

Sailor Mercury ran down the long passage between the rows of empty cells, the dim glow of distant light crystals barely illuminating her path. What a horrible place! Even a few moments here seemed like an eternity. Truly no one had sacrificed more for the Moon Princess than Sailor Venus. Only Venus had given up everything for Serenity, and she was the one who had been branded a traitor. Mercury could only hope that loyalty would overwhelm any desire for revenge, deserved though it would be.

At the rear of the main chamber, a small stone staircase descended a passage into darkness. Mercury paused beside the wall and pressed her palm against a nondescript brick at shoulder height. After a heartbeat, the gray rock shimmered and vanished, a mere illusion. A small alcove was revealed, in which a ring of iron keys were hung on a hook. Mercury yanked them from their place and leapt into the descending passage, trusting her instincts to guide her steps as the light faded away behind her.

There were no guards. If the sort of prisoners kept on the second level could not be contained by magic and iron, no Lunarian soldier would stand long enough to sound the alarm. Despite the lack of surveillance there was little to fear. No one had ever escaped from the Moon Castle's dungeons.

From the sound of things, their current occupant was determined to be the first to succeed. As Sailor Mercury ran down the stone staircase, her path was momentarily lit by a brilliant flash of gold from the chamber beneath. The electric rush of power being gathered whistled through the air, followed by a thunderous crash.

In the sudden darkness that followed, Mercury had to reach out for the wall. In the absence of her interrogators, the prisoner was far from silent. Try as she might, however, no one could break free from this place. The blue-suited soldier herself had had a hand in designing the safeguards that secured it. Widespread wards weakened all magical power to the point of uselessness, and the bars were too strong for even Sailor Jupiter to break.

Another transparent barrier glittered across the foot of the stairs, and again the Mercurian soldier passed through it as if it were harmless light. Turning a corner just inside the doorway, she at last came into view of the high-security cells. They were small and isolated, each one separated from the walls and from each other by the length of several strides. Sailor Mercury could feel the weight of the wards on her, sapping away her energy, but the bars on these cells were simple solid iron. Within the central cell, a flash of gold and white vanished into darkness.

As Sailor Mercury stepped closer, two light crystals of nearly blinding brilliance fired up on either side of the cell, leaving no shadows to hide in, no potential for secrets. Even so, Sailor Venus leapt back from the bars she had been attempting to break and pressed herself against those at the rear of her cell, putting as much distance as possible between herself and her potential interrogator. For a moment, Mercury could do nothing but stare, her heart flooding with pity and horror.

The leader of the Sailor Soldiers had been reduced to a level beneath even the most impoverished resident of the Lower Quarter. Her orange and white uniform was so filthy that its colors could barely be distinguished, and her long blonde hair was dusty and disheveled. The only thing about her that was still a proud soldier was her face, which was yet as alien to Mercury as her disarrayed appearance.

The gentle, empathetic expression the soldiers were accustomed to seeing on their supposed leader's face was gone. The eyes that focused on Sailor Mercury now were cold and fierce, unwavering and unbroken. Her jaw was set, her lips thin with restrained fire. Venus crouched against the back of her cell, but betrayed no weakness, and the display of power Mercury had heard and sensed as she approached was proof it was no ruse. The change was unnerving, but understandable; in Sailor Venus' situation, everyone was an enemy.

The castle shuddered again and Sailor Mercury snapped back to the task at hand. Raising her arm, she let the key ring dangle from her fingers. Venus relaxed visibly at the sight of the symbols of her freedom. Mercury had not come as an interrogator, but as a liberator. She straightened up and approached the door of her prison.

"Queen Serenity is quite forgiving in times of need, I see," the blonde soldier commented as Sailor Mercury searched the iron ring for the correct key.

"Not Queen Serenity," Mercury replied quietly. She did not meet her comrade's eyes as Venus

stared at her in growing realization.

"Mercury!" the gold-suited soldier burst out finally when the other woman did not say more. The Mercurian warrior had always been quiet and reserved, never one to stir the waters, fierce only in her devotion to duty. Sailor Venus could not bear to think of this gentle soul sharing her traitor's fate. "I beg you, consider what you are doing."

"I have considered it very carefully," the blue-haired woman replied evenly. "There are times when certain duties outweigh others. Besides," she added grimly, at last selecting a key and fitting it in the lock, "at this rate there may not be anyone left to punish me."

Venus' heart skipped a beat as her stomach filled with the icy chill of dread. "Is it that bad?" she asked hoarsely. The captive Sailor Soldier had felt the castle shaking all the way to its foundations and knew the situation was serious, but no known power in the galaxy was stronger than Queen Serenity's. Still, Sailor Mercury was not the type to exaggerate. The blue-suited soldier's face was deadly serious as she turned the key and the cell door swung open.

"We need every soldier we can get."

Venus did not waste any more time on questions. Lunging forward, she took her first step outside the cell in days. So eager was she to escape this place that Sailor Mercury found herself running to keep up. Only when they approached a security barrier did the blonde soldier pause to let Mercury take the lead; the blue-suited woman's hand on Venus' wrist was the only thing that would allow the prisoner safe passage through the shimmering energy. For the rest of the journey through the dungeons Venus set the pace, climbing the stairs in leaps and bounds until the sprawling dark chambers were far behind her. Despite her imprisonment, the thrill of escape and the pressing demands of duty gave Sailor Venus fresh energy.

"Tell me about our enemy," she demanded, years of training snapping a polished professional manner into place. "Who are they? Invaders from another system?"

Mercury caught her breath briefly even as her limbs pumped forcefully to propel her up the stairs. This was the news she had been hoping to withhold as long as possible. The Mercurian could scarcely believe it herself, and she had been there to see it with her own eyes. Even now, speaking it aloud seemed too impossible to be anything but a lie. Despite all that had happened over the past few months, the Moon Kingdom had never expected this.

"They're Earth-children, Venus," Sailor Mercury finally said. The orange-suited soldier's steps faltered at this shocking news, but she caught herself in an instant and ran on.

"The Golden Kingdom?" she asked incredulously, shooting a glance back at the Mercurian. "Are you certain?"

"There is no mistaking it," the warrior in blue answered. "They-" Mercury stopped short as the Moon Castle trembled violently and the quaking staircase threw her against the nearby wall. Several of the light crystals on their path flickered and went out. Dust cascaded down upon the two soldiers as the stone blocks above their heads ground against each other. Sailor Venus steadied herself against one of the light crystal mounts as the tremors died away.

"Surely no force on Earth is capable of *that!*" she protested, staring at Sailor Mercury with dread. The quakes were getting stronger. Whatever was causing them was gathering strength. The blue-suited soldier's serious face was eerie and unnerving in the dimming light.

"They've been joined by a higher power," Mercury informed her colleague, pushing past Venus to continue her run up the stairs. "A creature of darkness, unlike anything anyone has ever seen. Its eyes... like fire in the clouds..."

Venus was silent for a moment, putting all her effort into running as her mind raced. There was no doubt that the Earth-children resented the Moon Kingdom. It was only awe and fear of Queen Serenity's supernatural powers that turned that resentment to reverence. With strong magic of their own on their side, the Earth-children's headstrong belligerence might indeed prove dangerous. Venus gritted her teeth, cursing the hubris of the Silver Alliance. The nine kingdoms believed they would always be superior to the Earth. None of them were prepared for a rebellion of this scale.

"The allied kingdoms!" the orange-suited soldier burst out suddenly. "Surely, with reinforcements from the other eight worlds-"

"There are none," Mercury interrupted, placing her steps carefully as they ran through a stretch of

complete darkness. "The teleportation centers were the enemy's first targets. Ships have been launched, but that technology has not been used in ages." For a moment she was glad of the darkness; she did not have to see the horrible realization creeping over the blonde soldier's face. "They will not reach us in time, Venus."

Sailor Venus shivered in mid-stride. She did not have to question Mercury further to grasp the seriousness of the situation. The population of the Earth was many times greater than that of the Moon. Even with the power of all four Sailor Soldiers, if the enemy had the entire Earth on its side, the advantage of numbers was too great. All they could do was hold out as long as possible and trust the Silver Crystal to save them.

"Tell me what happened," she said at last.

"The Earth Prince disappeared two days ago," Sailor Mercury began. "We can only guess that he must have gone to Earth in the middle of the night." Her mind still reeled at the thought of the chaos that had reigned since the following morning. Hour after hour, the Mercurian had slaved over security logs and sensor records, searching for the slightest clue. Eventually she had been forced to conclude that Prince Endymion had left the Moon of his own free will. The entire castle had been in an uproar, as had the nobility of the Golden Kingdom when the Prince failed to check in with Kunzite at his regular time.

"The Queen was addressing the full court in the Great Hall this evening when Artemis and Luna rushed in, running as if a legion of demons were chasing them." Mercury's lips twitched briefly in an involuntary smile at the irony. They had been attempting to gage public opinion on whether or not the marriage contract between Princess Serenity and Prince Endymion should be officially cancelled. The arrival of the Mauans had rendered the entire discussion meaningless.

"A moment later, we were under attack," the blue-suited soldier continued. "A company of Golden Kingdom soldiers burst in on us, led by Prince Endymion himself. He had brought them through the castle teleportation chamber, and he... he was... different."

How could she find words to describe the frightening change in a man she had known only to be quiet and reserved? The eyes of the Earth Prince had flashed with an unnatural light, his face had been wild and hungry, and the way he took his sword to anyone within range had been nothing short of horrifying. Mercury shuddered to remember it, every shadow of the twisting staircase reminding her of the darkness that had descended on the Earth-born man. Although her lips moved, she could not bring herself to speak even one more word about it. Fortunately, her fellow soldier did not ask her to do so.

"Continue," Sailor Venus said crisply, focusing on the all-important goal of getting the most information in the briefest time. So, the Earth Prince was now an ally of darkness and an enemy of the Moon. How long had he been so? Had this outcome been his intention since the beginning? The soldier's blood boiled as she imagined Princess Serenity's heart having been broken for such underhanded trickery. If Prince Endymion was truly guilty of such a crime, it would be unforgivable. Now was not the time to consider such things, however.

"It was... a slaughter," Mercury forced out, the word sending a wave of nausea through her stomach. "They cut down innocent men and women as if they were nothing. And they... they..."

They reveled in it. Try as she might, Sailor Mercury could not tell her fellow soldier of the horrors she had witnessed in that room. Her running steps slowed, and her vision clouded as her nose was once again filled with the smell of blood and a wave of red rolled through her memory. The Earth men had smiled. They had grinned as their blades sliced through cloth and flesh and sent sprays of blood across the tiled floor. They had laughed at the screams of fear and the gurgles of the injured and dying. Their eyes had shone as they hewed a path through the panicked crowd, leaving carnage and destruction in their wake. Prince Endymion, a man who had never said more than two sentences together, had whooped and hollered and cheered his butchers onward as if each murder gave him a fresh burst of energy.

The memory was too horrific for words. Sailor Mercury felt her hands trembling, and the stairs beneath her feet pitched although there was no tremor. Setting her jaw, she clenched her fists and jerked her head sharply, forcing the images out of her mind for what felt like the hundredth time. She couldn't think about that now. She was a soldier. She had duties that were more important than her feelings. Steadying herself, Mercury took a deep breath. When she spoke again, her voice was strong, steady... mechanical.

Against All Odds

"We tried to fight them," she explained, once again keeping step with Venus, "but the hall was too crowded for us to safely use our powers, and without weapons of our own, hand-to-hand combat was impossible."

Sailor Venus nodded to herself, understanding the predicament and carefully ignoring the internal struggle that had taken place beside her. Although they were soldiers, all their years of training had been peaceful. No simulation could fully prepare a warrior for battle, especially during the Silver Millennium, when death was more a distant nightmare than a reality. Sailor Mercury had had her first exposure to the horrors of the battlefield. She needed time to come to terms with what she had witnessed, but unfortunately, the current crisis would not afford her that time.

Under the circumstances, Mercury had no choice but to seal away the emotions warring inside her. Venus felt her own senses growing numb as she subconsciously prepared to do the same thing. How would she react to her first taste of war? Sailor Venus could only cling to her businesslike manner and hope she would prove to be as strong as Mercury.

"Queen Serenity ordered everyone to clear the area," the blue-suited soldier went on. "Everyone fled through the main gate, but when we got outside we found things were even worse out in the city. The war was everywhere, and the sky was darker than a Day of Shadow. The creature..."

Even with her emotions sealed away, Mercury found she could not speak of the evil that had filled the sky and blotted out the stars. The mere thought of it made her blood run cold and her legs shake beneath her, threatening to break the dam of self-restraint altogether.

"It's dreadful, Venus," was all she was able to say. "You'll have to see it for yourself. Whatever the enemy is, it has the power to teleport Earth-children to the Moon. The city is full of them, and more arrive every minute. The Moon Knights have been mustered, but even if every common Lunarian took up arms I fear it would not be enough. As soon as I saw the situation, I had to come for you, Venus. Crime or not-"

Sailor Mercury stopped short as the orange-suited soldier suddenly veered away from their path. A flickering light crystal revealed the room she had entered was the armory. The entrance stood open, and Mercury quickly followed her colleague inside.

The floor of the cavernous chamber was strewn with discarded blades, armor plates, and loose arrows. The soldiers' footsteps echoed in the absence of much of the inventory. Despite the grave situation, Mercury felt her heart stirred by a faint warmth. No matter what the Earth thought of them, the Lunarians still had enough pride in their Moon Kingdom to fight to protect it.

Even so, an untrained rabble could not stand long against the entire population of the Golden Kingdom. The Sailor Soldiers needed to get back to the surface quickly. What mundane armaments could Sailor Venus possibly need?

As the blonde soldier ran to a secluded alcove at the far end of the armory, Sailor Mercury's question was answered. A sinking feeling stole over her as Venus thrust aside the thin curtain that concealed the alcove's contents. The Mercurian had known the situation was serious, but somehow this act made it even more real. This was now a battle for the very existence of the Moon Kingdom.

Pausing at the threshold of the alcove, the same thoughts ran through Sailor Venus' mind. Her eyes traced the length of the stone sword hanging proudly on its braces, symbol of a period of violence no one had ever believed would return. With this blade, Queen Serenity had carved out the foundations of the Moon Kingdom, forging an era of peace from a vicious war. It was rumored to have powers no one fully understood, and an edge that could penetrate any substance without ever growing dull.

As leader of the Sailor Soldiers, it was Sailor Venus to whom the Moon Queen had entrusted the sword, along with the charge to always defend the royal house. It was to be used only in times of direst need, when the survival of the royal line itself was at stake. She had not touched it since the day it was installed in the alcove.

Stepping forward, Sailor Venus reached out and wrapped her hand around the hilt of the sword. There was no security here. Not even the most senior general would dare touch this weapon. The hilt was cold and smooth under her hand, a symbol of unshakable strength. Was it Venus' imagination, or was the hard stone tingling?

She lifted the sword from its braces and stood for a moment hefting its weight in her hands. There was no sheath that could hold this blade. With the burden of this weapon came the weight of its

Against All Odds

responsibility. For a heartbeat, her hand trembled. Was she strong enough for this duty? The symbols etched into the blade blurred before her uncertain eyes. Was she ready to bear this burden?

Without a sound, Sailor Mercury approached and laid her hand on Venus' shoulder.

The moment of uncertainty passed. Sailor Venus straightened up. Her hand steadied and tightened on the hilt of the sword. She wasn't alone. Although she'd been branded a traitor, and both worlds she called home had turned their backs on her, there were still those who believed in her. The power of this sword belonged to Venus and Venus alone, entrusted to her as the leader of the Sailor Soldiers. She was the most powerful warrior of the Silver Millennium, and she would fight for those whose faith in her had never died.

Not Queen Serenity. The ancient monarch had chosen a path that had led her people to destruction at the hands of the Earth. Sailor Venus had sworn her loyalty to another, one who understood the importance of matters of the heart. With that one on the throne, the Moon Kingdom was still a realm worth saving. It was for her and only her that Sailor Venus would fight.

She turned to face Sailor Mercury, her eyes once again cool, collected, and confident.

"Where is Princess Serenity?"

Several stories above, on the surface of the Moon, Endymion was wondering the same thing. As he struggled to maintain his balance on the trembling ground and dodged falling stones, the urge to panic was mounting. It didn't help that a blanket of chaos had transformed his former home into an alien landscape.

Endymion had emerged from the teleportation chamber to find the Moon Castle being shaken to pieces. Corridors that had once awed him with their majesty now lay littered with debris and supported by cracked pillars. Entire rooms had collapsed, and the exiled man had to navigate a labyrinth of toppled columns and shattered marble. It was shocking how easily the structure seemed to be coming apart, as if the entire legacy of the Moon were being dismantled from the ground up. Although Endymion passed through countless chambers, he encountered not a single living soul.

Not knowing where else to look, the former stable hand tried to head for Princess Serenity's chambers, but it was not long before he found his path impossibly blocked by crumbled masonry. With the castle shaking above him, it seemed too dangerous to remain beneath untold tons of unstable marble. Choking on the rising clouds of dust, Endymion stumbled out through a door in the outer wall as another tremor rolled through the ground beneath him.

The castle grounds were an equally dreadful sight. The pathways and gardens had all been torn up, and the broken flagstones beneath Endymion's feet were covered in scattered petals and shards of rock. To the exiled man's horror, the sky was as black as pitch, just as it had been on Earth.

Off in the distance, Endymion could hear the roar of battle. From the sound of it, all the survivors were at war down in the city. Lord Marton, his former mentor, was most likely there fighting with the rest of the Moon Knights. If the situation was as bad as it seemed from the state of the abandoned Moon Castle, Prien, Misa, Miss Amaris and the rest might very well be down there fighting for their lives as well.

Endymion closed his eyes for a moment, steeling himself against the urge to join the battle. The Lunarians were no longer his people. The Moon was no longer his world. It was not the Moon Kingdom he wished to save, but the Earth. To do that, he had to do as the planet's mysterious winged guardian had asked and protect himself. Endymion was already doing a risky thing by coming to fetch Serenity.

A low rumbling brought the former stable hand back to reality. It was an odd sound, as if the Moon itself were grumbling. Strangely, it seemed to be coming from above. Endymion looked up.

Directly above him, the black sky was torn into jagged glowing rips in an eerily familiar pattern. As Endymion watched, the crimson gaps shifted and bent into the same sneering face he had seen above the Golden City. Somehow, the creature of evil that had poisoned the population of Earth had reached the Moon. The great red eyes rolled, searching the satellite's surface.

Endymion was seized by terror. For an instant, everything - the war, the winged horse, the Princess he was seeking - vanished from his mind, leaving nothing but an overwhelming desire to not fall under that demon's gaze. The Earth man ducked his head and ran, his legs pumping with all the strength he could muster. With his body now accustomed to the heavier gravity of his home world, and the strange new

energy he possessed filling him with power, Endymion ran faster than he had ever moved before. The ground trembled beneath him, but fear spurred him onward, driving him past burning flowerbeds and around broken stones until the castle's remaining towers stood between him and the dreadful face in the sky.

Finally, Endymion was able to get a grip on himself. What good would he be to Princess Serenity if he could not face their mutual enemy? He straightened up and squared his shoulders. He was no longer a servant boy whose role in a crisis was to scatter and hide. He was an armored and armed warrior, ready to fight for the freedom of both the worlds he had called home. He had a Princess to save, and blood or not, he would be her Prince.

Of course, he still had no idea where to find her. Something in his heart was tugging him forward; could his instincts be trusted? Endymion resumed his run toward the wing of the castle where Princess Serenity lived, keeping as close to the building's crumbling walls as he could. He had not gone far, however, when he felt eyes upon him. Cringing, the Earth-born man frantically searched the skies above him, but there was no sinister red face in the clouds overhead. From the distant roar of battle, the war seemed to have moved to another part of the city.

There was someone watching Endymion, though. He whirled around, combing the scattered wreckage with his eyes. Finally, his gaze fell on a tall man in a gray uniform standing on a toppled pillar. His clothing was unfamiliar, and as Endymion knew the style of all the various Moon Kingdom uniforms, he immediately realized this man had to be an Earth-child. The former stable hand drew his sword and crouched into a defensive pose, but the man did not move. He was silent and still, yet radiated an aura of restrained strength waiting to be called upon.

"Who are you?" the stranger asked at last. His voice was faint and distant, as if fighting its way through levels of resistance. Endymion straightened up, but kept his grip tight on the hilt of his sword.

"A soldier of Earth," he answered. He wasn't here to fight; maybe the ruse that had gotten him safely to the Earth Palace would work on this man as well.

"Not in that armor, you're not." The man's silver eyes swept over Endymion from head to toe, as if he could see something the exiled man himself could not. "That aura... Is that how you were able to possess it? Or are even our most sacred relics losing their strength?"

Endymion had no idea what the white-haired man was talking about. By the look of him, the speaker barely knew himself. The man's eyes strayed to the ground and his lips moved absently as if he hovered on the verge of sanity. Endymion's heart pounded in his chest. He knew he should take advantage of the Earth man's distraction and flee before he could react, but something held him rooted to the ground. Something within him yearned to know more about this officer - by the cape flowing from the older man's shoulders, Endymion guessed he might even be a general - no matter the consequences. The white-haired man seemed inexplicably familiar.

"Who are you?" the stranger demanded again, visibly dragging himself back from whatever darkness held him. "Your presence pulls a general away from the battlefield, why?"

With a giant burst of willpower, Endymion forced himself to remain calm. The man was indeed one of Earth's top generals. The former stable hand did not dare get his hopes up, but it seemed the silver-haired man was somehow fighting the evil shadow's control. Perhaps all was not yet lost. If this man could be freed, together they might free others as well. At the very least, rescuing the Princess would be far easier with two than one, and then Endymion would have more time to discover what it was about this man that called to him.

"You are a general of Earth," he said carefully. "Why are you involved in this?" For a moment the man looked blank. He blinked, puzzled, as the sounds of the battle went on in the distant city behind him. Endymion's blood was racing in his ears. He was wasting time, precious time - but he couldn't leave this man, not when there was a chance he might be saved, even if he didn't know why. The general stiffened suddenly, and something in his expression changed.

"I should be the one asking that," he replied. Endymion shifted his sword warily. The man's tone had lost its uncertainty and had become cold with resolve. "You are as human as I am, and you stand in defense of the enemy. How can you support the underhanded methods of the Moon Kingdom, a realm that sends spies to inspect its supposed allies? We've had enough orders from the Lunarians!"

Against All Odds

Now Endymion bristled as his dormant loyalty to the world that had raised him reared its head. The Moon was far from perfect, but he could not bear to hear it insulted based on lies and mind control.

"When did help and guidance become orders?" he burst out. "Lunarians may act superior, but they never wanted to destroy the Golden Kingdom! Look at this madness!" he cried, indicating the ruins surrounding them with a sweep of his arm. "How will destroying the Moon Kingdom help the Earth? Don't you see what's going on here? You're being used by that - that thing!"

As if in response to Endymion's words, a roll of thunder crackled through the dark clouds above them. A cloud passed over the stranger's face as well. He blinked and swayed, once again fighting his own internal battle. Then his silver eyes narrowed and his expression became sharp and fierce.

"You lie!" he bellowed. "Metalia needs the Silver Crystal to save our world! Die, traitor!"

The man flung out his hands. Darts of violet energy materialized in his palms and launched from his fingertips, hurtling toward Endymion with blinding speed. Despite all his training, Endymion had no defense against magic. Not knowing what else to do, he pulled the red-lined cape of his stolen armor in front of him and waited for death.

Shockingly, none came. The deadly bolts glanced off the black cloth as if they were mere light, leaving Endymion startled and astonished but very much alive. He straightened up just in time to see the Earth general launching himself at him, sword drawn, fingers blazing with energy, and eyes glowing with a light that was far from human. Endymion raised his own blade, but he was too slow, far too slow-

A blast of golden light struck the general from the side and sent him tumbling to Endymion's left. The exiled man whirled around, and his heart sank clear into his boots. Two Sailor Soldiers had appeared on the scene. The blue-suited one was headed toward him at a full run, while the one in orange prepared another blast of energy from atop a nearby rock. Endymion crouched into a ready position and willed his legs to stop shaking. There was nothing he could do now but focus on surviving as he prepared to do battle with two of the strongest warriors alive.

Once again, he was stunned by surprise as the blonde soldier on the rock launched her next attack, which missed him by a wide margin. The blue-suited one dodged around him as she summoned up her own energy. Endymion turned just in time to see the short-haired woman release a burst of icy vapor that froze its target in its tracks - the Earth general Endymion had momentarily forgotten.

After a moment of startled gaping at the block of ice that had formed around his now-incapacitated attacker, the former stable hand raised his sword and prepared to become the Sailor Soldiers' next target. However, the greeting he received was far from a battle cry.

"Are you all right?"

Endymion blinked. "What?"

"We don't have time for this nonsense," the blue-suited soldier sighed impatiently. "There's a war going on out there! People are dying! Do you need medical assistance or not?"

"What? I - no," Endymion stammered, lowering his weapon hesitantly. He had expected the Sailor Soldiers to be his enemies; why were they helping him? Perhaps they didn't recognize him in the stolen Earth armor. Even so, he clearly wasn't Lunarian. The destroyed tattoo burned on his neck. If either of the soldiers noticed it, there was no telling what they might do. He backed away nervously, holding his sword in front of him and wishing he had a shield.

"It's all right, Endou." The orange-suited soldier appeared at Endymion's elbow, a soft but sad smile on her face. "We are not all as petty as Jupiter and Mars."

Now Endymion recognized that these two women were not the ones who had branded him. Neither were they quite the same soldiers he had met in the garden on the night of his exile. The blonde beside him - Sailor Venus, if he remembered correctly - was dirty and tattered, and the other soldier wore a haunted expression unlike anything he had ever seen.

"Class should not divide us; we are all dedicated to the Princess," the orange-suited soldier went on. A sick jolt struck Endymion's stomach. He still had no clue as to Serenity's fate, and here were two of the soldiers that should have been protecting her.

"Where is Sere?" he asked Venus, trying not to dread the answer.

"A question traitors need neither ask nor answer," said a new voice.

The trio turned to discover the other two Sailor Soldiers striding toward them from the direction of

the castle's residential wing. The fear returned to Endymion with a vengeance, gripping his heart in ice-cold talons. These were two faces he would never forget, for they haunted every one of his nightmares that wasn't consumed by darkness. Jupiter and Mars, the very spirits of prejudicial cruelty. Endymion shrank back automatically, withering under the soldiers' disapproving glares. There was something alien in Jupiter's eyes, but the exiled Earth-child was too terrified to notice it.

"He is not our enemy," the blue-suited soldier asserted boldly. "Nor is Sailor Venus."

"They are traitors, as are you for helping them," Mars replied coldly. "Stand aside, Mercury."

"There are more important things to worry about right now!" Sailor Venus burst out. "Anyone who would defend the Princess is an ally! How could you leave her unprotected? And you call US traitors!"

"We are following the Queen's orders," Sailor Jupiter growled, now incensed. "We are needed most urgently at the heart of the battle, and Princess Serenity is far from unprotected. The Queen's magic will shield her as long as she does not step outside. Now, we are wasting precious time!"

"Agreed." Sailor Venus turned to Endymion, who stood transfixed by the rift between the soldiers. "Endou, the Princess is in her chambers. Go to her. Keep her safe." Endymion did not need to be told twice. Before Venus had finished speaking, he was off and running over the uneven ground.

"How dare you?!" Sailor Mars leapt forward, set to chase after the exiled stable hand.

"Mars." Venus did not raise her voice, but something in her tone stopped the red-suited soldier cold. Mars turned slowly to see the blonde's arm pointed directly toward her, a deadly glow intensifying on her fingertip.

"You wouldn't dare," Mars scoffed, but as she searched her former leader for signs of hesitation, she found none.

"Do not assume what a traitor would or would not do," Sailor Venus said evenly.

"Trouble in the ranks? How splendid! Our task will be all the more simple, then!"

All four Sailor Soldiers whirled around. Three uniformed figures stood on the toppled pillar that isolated the section of courtyard, a trio both familiar and alien. They were the same generals of Earth in body, but the Sailor Soldiers did not need Mars' muttered curse to detect the new air of malicious power about them. Sailor Mercury was particularly unnerved; Zoisite's cool demeanor of sheltered intelligence had vanished into a sea of sadistic glee. The smile he beamed toward her was reminiscent of the stories told to Mercurian children to warn them against the evil creatures of the universe.

"Don't let us stop you," Nephrite said smoothly. "If you destroy each other, we'll be able to return to the battle much sooner. On the other hand, that would deprive us of the pleasure of ending your lives ourselves." His casual air sent shivers down Sailor Jupiter's spine. This could not be the man who had renewed her faith in his gender. He spoke so lightly of killing the woman he had treated so kindly...

"The Sailor Soldiers will always stand together against a common enemy." Venus said the words, but could not banish the worry that they might turn out to be untrue. Had the rifts between the soldiers grown so deep that not even the most desperate situation could unite them? She stepped forward boldly, but the air at her back felt unnervingly empty.

"You would be foolish to challenge us," the orange-suited soldier continued to distract herself from her insecurity. "Even two of us were able to make short work of one of you!" Venus could not bear to look back - whether it was the unsupportive soldiers or the sight of Kunzite that pained her, she could not say - but she gestured toward the frozen general with a sweep of her arm.

The response was a peal of jeering laughter from Zoisite, and a smirk on the faces of the other two men. Jadeite took a step forward on the pillar, but Venus screwed up her courage and stood her ground. The Sailor Soldiers were stronger than these men, no matter what had happened to them. No Earth-born mage could rival the power of the Silver Alliance's legendary warriors.

"We do not fear you anymore," the Far-Eastern commander announced. "You are no match for the power of Metalia!"

"Venus!" Sailor Mercury said urgently. The blonde soldier turned to see Kunzite breaking free of the ice prison Mercury had forged, very much alive. In the moment she stood frozen by shock, the ice binding the Middle-Eastern commander's arms shattered, and she could see his trapped legs straining for their own freedom. Kunzite's silver eyes were glowing with an unnatural light, and they were fixed on Sailor Venus.

An Earth-child had surmounted the power of a Sailor Soldier. Before any of the women could grasp

the magnitude of it, the other three generals had leapt from their perch and were upon them.

Sailor Mars was ready. She met Jadeite with a blast of flame from her hands that sent him flying into a pile of crumbled rock. He was up again in an instant, and retaliated with a wave of dark energy Mars was barely able to block with her gloved forearms. The force of it nearly pushed her over; it was unlike any power the Sailor Soldiers had ever encountered and reeked of the taint of darkness.

"I told you!" she yelled out as Jadeite lunged at her with fists flying. "I warned you all, but you wouldn't listen!"

"This isn't the time, Mars!" Sailor Jupiter was having a far more difficult battle. It was easy to dodge Nephrite as he slashed at her with a pair of long knives, but her mind was reeling. What had happened to the gentle stargazer she had met on Earth? Was this cold enemy hiding inside him the entire time? By the smirk on Nephrite's face, he was merely toying with her...

The green-suited soldier's suspicion was confirmed as the North American commander thrust out a hand and struck her full in the stomach with a bolt of energy. Jupiter swallowed a scream as she tumbled backward, automatically curling into a ball as pain burst in her abdomen. The earnest anticipation on Nephrite's face as he struck burned in her mind.

Not a match for your home planet, I daresay, but I hope it pleases you.

I was eager to hear about the Jovian spring festival.

On the other hand, that would deprive us of the pleasure of ending your lives ourselves.

Was this the consequence of opening her heart to a man?

With hot tears stinging her eyes and a cry of rage burning her throat, Sailor Jupiter raised her arms and summoned a mighty lightning strike from the turbulent clouds. It struck Nephrite full-on with an intensity that should have melted him to the paving stones, but after only a moment of agonized twitching, he got to his feet and charged at her again. The cruel smile on the general's face only grew wider.

Nearby, Sailor Mercury was suffering a similar internal battle. No matter how many barriers of ice she threw up between her and Zoisite, the European commander tore through them all as if they were liquid water. He charged at her relentlessly, but she could not bring herself to deal a more deadly blow. Zoisite's manic laughter ran in Mercury's ears, so unlike the reserved man she had known.

"What happened to you?" she burst out as a hail of crystal shards tore into her blue and white uniform. Zoisite paused in his laughter just long enough to answer.

"I finally have everything I ever wanted." The declaration was punctuated by a fresh shower of razor-sharp crystals from the general's hands. Sailor Mercury's expression grew focused even as the shards bit into her skin. If that was the way it was, she would harden her heart.

Yet there was no heart on that battlefield as hard as that of Sailor Venus. Kunzite was free and furious, and all his efforts were focused on the soldier who had stopped his assault on the mysterious Earth man. It was fortunate that Venus had retrieved the legendary blade from the armory, as Kunzite's weapon of choice was his sword. Sparks flew as the orange-suited soldier blocked the general's powerful thrusts. Every strike jarred Venus clear to her shoes.

The months of distant admiration, the Golden Kingdom's ball, the encounter in the garden were farthest from Sailor Venus' mind. Whatever Kunzite had been, he was now an enemy, a threat to the Moon Kingdom and its Princess. It was her duty to defeat him, regardless of her feelings.

The tears would have to wait until later.

Mercury had been right; there was clearly some greater power at work here. The legendary stone sword should have cut through Kunzite's blade on the first strike, but somehow the Earth man's weapon was still holding up. The man himself was definitely possessed of an unworldly power. Sailor Venus had been researching the Four Generals for a long time, and she knew them better than anyone else in the Silver Alliance. Dedicated and calculating as Kunzite was, he would never have behaved this way. Everything about him now screamed malice and vile ambitious greed, and the strength behind his blows was far beyond the capability of any Earth-child. Metalia, whoever that was, had changed these men to suit a dark purpose. Kunzite was no longer the man Sailor Venus had admired, and it was that knowledge that freed her to treat him like the enemy he was. Even so, she could not bring herself to look at his face as they fought, could not bear to see his silver eyes tainted by evil.

With a sharp shout, Venus took the offensive and brought her sword around in a mighty blow.

Finally, the legendary blade lived up to its name. With all the Venusian soldier's strength focused behind it, the weapon bit into Kunzite's sword and sliced it cleanly in half.

For a heartbeat, the Middle-Eastern commander paused, staring at the broken blade in his hands. That moment's hesitation was all Sailor Venus needed. Tossing her own sword aside, she reached down and whisked off the golden chain she wore around her waist. The flash of the polished links in the darkness caught Kunzite's attention, but by then it was too late. A mere flick of the soldier's wrist had the shining chain wrapped tightly around the Earth man's torso, pinning his arms to his sides.

Stronger men than Kunzite had been brought to justice by Sailor Venus' Love Chain. It was a sacred treasure of the Venusian royal house and was said to be a piece of the chain that had held the planet's first islands together. Once it bound an enemy, there was no hope of escape. Venus straightened up, holding one end of the chain securely in her gloved hands.

The only question now was whether or not she would kill him. Her mind raced. Even had she been given a million years, it would not have been enough time to make this choice, and she had only seconds. The other soldiers needed her.

Sailor Venus' thoughts were derailed by a grunt from Kunzite. By the time she looked up it had become a chuckle, which escalated into a torrent of rolling laughter that made the Venusian bristle from her head to her toes. She yanked harshly on the chain, which should have tightened it to the point where her captor could barely breathe, but the general's laughter only became more defiant.

Kunzite flexed. His brow furrowed, his laughter stopped, and his muscles rippled visibly beneath his uniform as he strained against the chains that bound him. It was Venus' turn to chuckle; no man could break these bonds, and certainly not an Earth-child.

Suddenly a chill rolled over the Venusian soldier, as if all the warmth had been sucked out of the air. Kunzite threw back his head and roared, veins bulging in his neck as he drew on all the power he possessed - both natural and unnatural.

The Love Chain shuddered in Venus' hands. Then it snapped.

Bits of gold went flying in all directions as several of the chain's links shattered. The coils of metal dropped uselessly to the ground, leaving Kunzite free and triumphant, his expression wild with the adrenaline of his victory.

Venus stood numbly staring, clinging helplessly to the fragment of chain wound between her gloved fingers. It was impossible. It couldn't be. The legendary chain that bound worlds together could not be broken by a mere mortal.

But Kunzite was not a mere mortal, was he? From the beginning, he had been a mage, one of Earth's strongest. He had become possessed by powers of darkness no one had ever seen before, that none of them could understand. He had stolen the heart of the unattainable Sailor Venus, had defeated her glamour, and had set her off-guard time and time again. Now he had broken her strongest weapon, an ancient treasure of her people, and in the end it was he who stood unscathed and Venus who was worn and helpless. She was defeated.

Kunzite had won.

Sailor Venus dropped to her knees, the sharp shock of the marble tiles barely registering in her mind. The entire universe disappeared, from the shadowed sky to the battle continuing around her. The soldier's blue eyes remained numbly focused on Kunzite, the elation in his silver gaze holding her frozen and helpless before him. For the first time in her life, Venus had been beaten.

Kunzite's hands came up. A violet glow began to gather around his fingers and his eyes sparked with anticipation. The orange-suited soldier could not even bring herself to bow her head.

"Venus!"

Sailor Mercury barreled into the blonde Venusian from the side, shoving her clear as Kunzite released his deadly blast. The two soldiers rolled to safety behind a fallen block of marble.

"What are you doing?!" Mercury demanded, seizing her leader by the shoulders. "I did not free you just to see you give up! Think of the Princess!"

The Princess...

Truly, Princess Serenity had faced more trials than the well-prepared but rarely-used Sailor Soldiers. She had entered a betrothal in which there was no love. She had maintained that contract even

Against All Odds

after falling in love with another man. She had never lost that love, no matter what obstacles arose to prevent it. Time and time again, the constraints of her birth had thrown seemingly insurmountable barriers between her and her heart's desire, but Princess Serenity never forsook her love. No matter what happened, no matter what danger threatened, the Princess never gave up.

It was Sailor Venus' duty to strive to be worthy of protecting such a courageous heart.

She stood up. She strode out from behind the marble, toward the man smirking in anticipatory mockery of her next move. Her hand came up.

"Crescent Beam!"

An explosion of energy unlike anything Venus had felt before raced down her arm and burst from her fingertips. Kunzite whisked his cape around himself, but when the blast struck him he was flung several steps backward. As he lowered his arm, his face was momentarily twisted by shock and pain.

Leaping back, Kunzite rose smoothly into the air, his wide silver eyes locked on Sailor Venus. "Nephrite! Zoisite! Jadeite!" The other three generals broke away from their battles to join him, leaping into the air out of the Sailor Soldiers' reach. Of course, their magical attacks could have bridged the distance, but at the moment they were all too startled to continue the fight.

"How did you do that?" Sailor Jupiter demanded, jogging over to where Venus stood staring at her own hands.

"I don't know," the orange-suited soldier confessed, her voice distant and soft with awe. "It just happened."

"What were those words you shouted?" Sailor Mercury asked, wearing a familiar inquisitive look. Mars had her eyes on the sky, watching for another attack, but she leaned closer to hear Venus' response. The blonde raised a hand to her throat, as if only now realizing the strange phrase had come from her own lips.

"Crescent Beam..." she whispered absently. Even now, the words had a strange power about them and tingled on her lips as if filled with untapped energy. "I don't know where it came from. I was just thinking about the Princess... and suddenly it was there."

"If we could all do that, we'd have a chance against these enemies," Jupiter observed, grinding her fist into her palm. Even in these frantic moments, Sailor Venus took notice of the Jovian's avoidance of the generals' names and titles. When Venus looked at her, the pain was clear in her green eyes - an oddly distant pain, the eyes of grief set aside. To Sailor Jupiter, Nephrite was already dead.

A brief stab of heartache welled up afresh in Venus' chest, and she swallowed it firmly. It would be best if she regarded Kunzite in the same way. She was a soldier, this was her duty -

"Some leader you are," Sailor Mars muttered.

"What is the meaning of that?" Venus demanded, whirling to face the soldier in red. Suddenly she was filled with rage. After everything she had suffered and sacrificed, Sailor Mars still doubted her. At this hour, when their kingdom crumbled and she was forced to seek the death of the only man she had ever loved, Mars insulted her!

"Just what I would expect from a Venusian," the red-suited soldier snapped. Even as her tongue lashed acid, her eyes stayed locked on the blond man hovering above her. Just like her, his eyes stayed locked on his adversary while his comrades hurriedly conversed. Mars stared at Jadeite and burned with guilt and shame. How could she have let him get to her? How could she have let him make her doubt herself?

"Flighty as always," Mars went on, her clenched fists trembling at her sides. "It was your job to investigate the Four Generals, to discover if they were a threat, and here they are attacking us!" The Martian knew she was going too far - the evil force that had corrupted these men was as visible to her as stars in the sky - but she could not stop the angry words. "Now you possess the power to combat them, and you refuse to share it with us!" All the frustration, all the pain, all the outrage at what had befallen the Moon Kingdom poured forth from Mars in a tirade against the woman she had called her leader and friend. "One might think you were plotting against the Moon from the beginning, derailing the kingdom's stability by encouraging the Princess to break her betrothal vows!"

"When will you learn that Serenity's love for Endou is not evil?!" Sailor Venus shouted, unable to contain her frustrated fury. "We were wrong to oppose it! Endou was safe on Earth, yet he returned to

Against All Odds

protect the Princess, while the man she was to marry became our enemy!"

"He wouldn't have attacked the Moon had his fiance been faithful to him!" Despite her words, Endou's face fixed itself in Mars' mind. In the midst of attack, he cared only for the safety of the Princess, just as any of the Sailor Soldiers would have done. Just as any of them *should* have done, anyway - only Endou had actually rushed to Serenity's side, while her sworn guardians stood arguing about things that no longer mattered. Sailor Mars' resolve faltered and her eyes slipped from the hovering Jadeite. A tiny doubt that had been lurking inside her all along rose to the surface. Was it possible she had been wrong about Endou?

"In the end, love forges stronger bonds than duty," Venus said firmly, noticing Mars' moment of weakness.

The red-suited soldier stiffened. If she had been wrong, then... Memories flooded her mind, of her harsh words to the Princess, of the time Mars had almost struck her, of Endou writhing beneath her fiery touch. If she had been wrong, she was a traitor of the worst kind. No. It couldn't be. Everything Mars had done was for the good of the Moon Kingdom. It would all be for the best in the end. She couldn't be wrong when everything she had been taught told her she was right! The tragedy she had foreseen had come to pass because Mars had failed to hold Princess Serenity to the right path. Because Sailor Venus had failed to help her!

"Have you no-"

"This isn't the time to argue!" Sailor Mercury cried. Mars whipped around to protest the interruption, but the blue-haired soldier's eyes were on the sky. Their enemies had seized the moment to make their move. Mars had only time to brace herself before Jadeite was upon her, unleashing an energy blast that pushed her backward into the dust. The red-suited soldier gritted her teeth against the pain and rolled to her feet, her mind still churning in anger and indecision. If only Venus would share her secrets. If only Princess Serenity hadn't betrayed her mother and her kingdom.

Nearby, Sailor Mercury held her ground against Zoisite's storm of razor-sharp flower petals and fought the tears that were stinging her eyes. They were failures, all of them. Despite all their training, the first time the Sailor Soldiers were tested they fell apart. They had lost sight of what should have been most important to them. None of them loved the Princess as deeply as Endou.

Even their best hope, Sailor Venus' new power, was useless to them if the soldiers could not stop fighting long enough to learn the skill from her. Mercury struggled on, absorbing far more blows than she dealt, trying not to think of all the innocents lying dead in the Great Hall at her back. The Sailor Soldiers had failed to protect them, as they were failing to protect the Princess now. All Mercury could do was hope to hold out until Queen Serenity used the power of the Silver Crystal to save their world.

Queen Serenity could not be certain if it was the ground or her legs that were trembling. A strong arm reached out to steady her, and she managed to give Artemis a brief smile of thanks before hurrying on. Only the two Mauans were at the Moon Queen's side now; she had dismissed all the attendants to look after themselves and their families. It was good to have Artemis back. Serenity wished it were under better circumstances.

How had it come to this? She had had warnings of darkness on the horizon, but what Queen Serenity was facing now was nothing less than the complete destruction of her kingdom. Hers was the strongest world of the Silver Alliance; if it fell to this evil, there was no doubt the rest of the Solar System would be at risk. The Earth, which the other planets viewed as little more than a pet, was on the verge of enslaving its masters.

Of course, none of that would have been possible were it not for the entity of darkness that had engulfed the blue-green world. Truly, the mysterious evil force Artemis had labeled "Metalia" was the real master here. The Earth-children were just as much slaves of Metalia as Serenity's people were destined to be. They needed her help as much as the Lunarians.

Whatever the cause of the current crisis, the ultimate solution was clear. Queen Serenity hurried through the small waiting room and out into the courtyard that held the Crystal Tower, the two Mauans hot on her heels. Within the small sanctuary they could almost forget about the war raging outside, but the

dark clouds overhead and occasional rumble of the ground reminded them of the need for urgency.

Queen Serenity hurried across the grass - and was thrown to the ground as the turf pitched violently, the entire castle shaking to its foundations as an intense strike of dark lightning pounded down from the sky. The dense scent of dirt and grass filled her nose, and Luna and Artemis flung themselves over her, shielding the Queen with their own bodies. The Moon shuddered and cracked, a thundering rumble deafening the three of them as blocks of marble broke and tumbled to the ground. In the open space around the Crystal Tower, they were safe, but ancient structures were turning to rubble all around them.

At last, the dreadful attack stopped. The weight on Queen Serenity's back lifted, and strong arms raised her to her feet. She glanced up - and nearly collapsed again as she beheld what remained of the Crystal Tower, a broken stump barely half the height of what it had been. Luna clutched at the Queen's arm, protocol forgotten in the face of the tragic shock. The small courtyard was choked with broken stones, the temple that had housed the crystal spire reduced to a scatter of timber and torn cloth. The tower itself was little more than a stub emerging from the pile of rubble. True to its ethereal nature, the broken half of the crystal had vanished entirely.

The Moon Queen stared up at what remained of her greatest strength and nearly gave up right then and there. Metalia had destroyed the very symbol of everything Queen Serenity had created, everything she had hoped to preserve. If not even the Crystal Tower could stand against the evil force, what hope was there that it might be defeated? Was Metalia truly stronger than the power of the Ancients after all?

"My Queen?"

The voice seemed a long way off, muffled into the roar of the wind and the rumbles of distant destruction. It faded into the imagined screams of her people that were ringing in the monarch's ears, consuming everything, until her legs trembled from the sound. Her vision was filled with the stump of the broken tower, jutting out from the debris like a shorn-off limb. Her kingdom was in ruins, and even this, her last resort, was gone, gone, gone-

"My Queen." The voice was sharper now, and although it still spoke words of reverence, its subordinate tone was gone. For the first time since the rise of the Moon Kingdom, Queen Serenity heard a voice without a trace of fear or deference. The last person who had ever dared speak to her that way had been... him.

He was dead, and even in her shock she knew that, knew the voice was not the same, but the memory of him was enough to bring Serenity out of her daze. She turned to face the speaker, anguish showing plainly on her face for the first time. Artemis stood staring back at her, solid and stern.

"Your orders, my Queen." Not a question, but a statement of fact; there was no doubt in the Mauan's mind that there would be orders. Artemis still believed in her. Luna's weight was firm on Serenity's arm. Luna still believed in her. For the belief that she could build a kingdom worth saving, Serenity's lover had fought to protect her, and for the preservation of that kingdom, he had died. Who was she to give up now, when so many still placed their hopes in their Queen?

Shaking Luna off, Queen Serenity whirled around and strode purposely toward the broken tower. Her jaw was set, her stride firm, her steps unwavering even as the ground trembled anew beneath her feet. There was always hope, as long as there was the Silver Crystal and someone to wield it.

The Mauans cried out in warning as the Moon Queen began to pick her way across the sharp shards of rock, but she did not let their concern hinder her. Soon she was at the base of what remained of the Crystal Tower, hauling away slabs of stone with hands far too delicate for such work. The tower was only an extension of the power within. Her mission had been altered, but not diverted.

Before long, the cracked face of the crystal lay bare before the Queen, its treasure plain even to the eyes of the Mauans standing at a distance. The Crystal Tower had gone dark and cold, but the Silver Crystal still sparkled, shining through the pillar as a beacon of hope in the darkness. Stilling her mind for a moment against the chaos reigning in her world, Queen Serenity took a deep breath and stretched out her hand.

The seemingly solid surface of the Crystal Tower parted like water beneath her fingers, rippling aside to allow the Queen to reach into the pillar's depths. Her hand closed around the solid lump that was the Moon Kingdom's greatest treasure, and emerged dry, the tower resolidifying as if it had never been

penetrated.

The Silver Crystal was cold, chilled as a chunk of rock, which was odd; normally the stone's light was as warm as sunshine... but it still shone brightly, brimming with the power to turn fate itself around.

"Queen Serenity... you can't..."

Luna's hesitant voice brought the world back to Serenity in a deafening rush. She turned to look at Luna, and found on the dark-haired Mauan's face the same knowledge the Queen held in her heart. The Silver Crystal had to have an amplifier. Without the Crystal Tower, it was Queen Serenity's body that would provide a base for its power. Defeating Metalia was no small feat. It was likely to take a longer burst of energy than Serenity could sustain.

If she used the Silver Crystal, she would die.

The two women stared at each other for a moment. Luna's expression was frantic, conflicted, torn between her devotion to her Queen and her knowledge of the reality of the situation. By contrast, Queen Serenity was filled with calm acceptance. Even in this secluded sanctuary devastation surrounded her, and she was acutely aware of the vicious battle happening somewhere beyond earshot. It was clear what had to be done, and the Moon Queen was the only one who could do it.

As long as Princess Serenity survived, all could yet be saved.

The Queen raised the Silver Crystal over her head. Luna gasped, but did not speak, unable to protest the inevitable. Artemis moved to stand at his fellow Mauan's side, and they clutched at one another, the decorum that had governed their public behavior for so long as distant as a fading dream.

There were no farewells to be said, no final orders to be issued. Luna and Artemis would survive, and Queen Serenity had complete faith in their ability to guide her daughter. The only person the monarch had words for could not hear her.

She closed her eyes, focused on the stone in her hands, and wished - wished with all her heart for the evil to be destroyed, for the world she had sacrificed so much for to be saved. She thought of everyone who stood to lose if Metalia won, from the Moon Princess to her lover's countrymen on Earth to the lowliest shoe-polisher in the kingdom of Pluto, and wished for them all to continue living in safety.

Nothing happened.

After a desperate moment of confusion, Queen Serenity lowered the Silver Crystal before her eyes and stared at it in disbelief. The stone had been resisting her lately, but every wish she had ever given it had come to pass. Now, when the very existence of everything it protected was threatened, it remained still and cold in the Moon Queen's hands. It shone as brightly as always, boundless energy sparkling just beneath the faceted surface, but although Serenity shouted her orders until her voice was hoarse it would not obey.

The Silver Crystal would not release its power.

It seemed as if the Moon itself was crumbling. The ground shook repeatedly as the darkness in the sky sent tendrils of rot into the soil. The clouds twisted, tainted lightning flashed, and towers toppled. Fires raged in the city, and here and there a scream managed to make itself heard over the storm of war.

Princess Serenity had a clear view of it all from her balcony.

She had been ordered to stay inside her chambers, out of sight, but somehow she found herself outside the wards her mother had set. When the entire population of the Moon was risking its life, the Princess could not sit idly by in safety. Still, there was nothing she could do to help her people. She stood trembling in the shadow of the darkness that had devoured the sky, staring numbly over the living nightmare that had consumed her world. The shock of all she had seen that evening was nearly too much to bear.

The sudden storm gathering overhead, the clouds darker than anything in nature. The ground trembling, sending Serenity tumbling to the flagstones. Sailor Jupiter, bound to accompany the Princess on her melancholy stroll through the gardens, shielding the white-robed young woman with her body as loose stones tumbled from a nearby wall. And then, the panic.

Detached as she was from the world she had come to despise, Princess Serenity had felt only a dim interest herself, but the panic was tangible in the air. Jupiter had pulled her to her feet and they were

running before the chaos could even register, fountains cracking and statues tumbling around them. Then Sailor Mars was there, looking so haunted and pale Serenity scarcely recognized her. And then...

Then the Earth-children came.

Not soldiers, but ordinary people, faces Princess Serenity had seen on the streets of the Golden City. They were men and women and children, people of all ages from all walks of life. They seemed to materialize out of nowhere, and wandered around corners acting disoriented at first, but when they saw the Lunarian Princess and her guardians, they all had one thing in common. They were all consumed by hatred.

The memory of the battle that had ensued caused Serenity to shudder. Sailor Jupiter had moved reluctantly, and only after the Earth-children proved to be hostile, but Mars had laid into them as if they were deadly foes. Only Serenity's frantic lunge to seize the red-suited soldier's arm had stopped the Martian from dealing a killing blow. The eyes Sailor Mars had turned on her then still chilled the Moon Princess to the bone, eyes that had seen death and were desperate to prevent more at all costs. Eyes like those Serenity had seen in her strange dreams. Mars had calmed quickly, but it was clear that their world was already irrevocably changed.

At that point, the two soldiers realized they would never be able to fight properly in Princess Serenity's presence. Before she knew it, the Lunarian had been rushed back into the castle where her mother's power prevented the enemy from teleporting inside. The Princess was taken to her chambers and left with strict orders to remain there. Guards were posted outside the doors, special wards were set on her rooms, and she became one of the prizes of the mysterious wargame.

From her balcony, Princess Serenity looked out on a world in collapse. The marble trembled beneath her feet as dark energy made rubble of another section of the castle. Somewhere out there, the women who had been her lifelong companions were fighting for the survival of the Moon Kingdom. Serenity, on whose shoulders the bulk of the responsibility had always seemed to rest, was left alone and helpless.

War was a horror beyond anything the Moon Princess had ever imagined, but she found herself wishing she could join in the fight. In her dreams, she had freed a man from the monster possessing him. If she were a soldier like the other women, maybe there would be something she could do to help the people of Earth.

Princess Serenity seemed to be the only one who noticed the Earth-children were not themselves. She had walked among them in the Golden City, had seen they were kind people like any of the races on the supposedly more civilized worlds. They had spoken of rights and independence, but none of the people Serenity had encountered were ready to wage war. The people in the garden had been wild, frenzied by a strange, irrational hatred. An evil had consumed them and their planet.

A fear was settling in Serenity's stomach, a fear that had nothing to do with the war raging on her world. If the Earth had been taken over by evil, what fate had befallen its royal family? What of Prince Endymion and his lover?

What of her own beloved Endymion?

A shudder ran through the Moon Princess, and she clasped her hands together over her chest and squeezed her fingers tight. No. She wouldn't think about that happening to Endymion. He was faithful and strong-willed; surely, even if an evil power got to him, even if he'd broken off his relationship with Serenity, he would never attack the Moon... would he?

Somewhere close, a particularly strong blast of dark energy struck the castle. The entire structure shuddered violently, and the cracking of stones coming loose and tumbling to the ground was nearly deafening, but Princess Serenity squeezed her eyes shut and held her balance. If the world was ending, if everything was to be destroyed and nothing could be done about it, she hoped at least her beloved would be safe. The Silver Crystal was far away now, most likely being wielded against the enemy by the Queen, but the Princess focused her will and pleaded with the unseen jewel to protect the man she loved. Even if she never saw him again, she could die content if Endymion still had a chance at happiness.

An electric whine cut through the rumbling of the collapsing castle. Princess Serenity's eyes flew open to see a burst of red light coalescing in front of her, hanging in midair over the edge of her balcony. In a moment, the light vanished, and Serenity stepped back involuntarily with a gasp of horror.

Against All Odds

A woman was hovering where the light had been, cloaked in a dress the color of evening and clutching a long scepter. Her cloud of red hair and ornaments were unfamiliar, but the rebellious Moon Princess recognized her face instantly. It was the woman she'd encountered on the streets of the Golden City, the unknown enemy who'd pulled off the Princess' disguise and sneered at her with malice before leaving her to be overrun by the Earth-children. There was no mistaking the string of white flowers hanging from her waist, nor the scent of jasmine that came from them.

Yes, it was the same face... but Serenity was hard-pressed to believe it was the same woman. She radiated a power that had the Princess' skin crawling, and it had clearly changed her. Her face had become pale and drawn, her hair and eyes red as blood, her fingers sinewy claws. She smiled wickedly as her gaze fell on the Moon Princess, and the teeth between her thin violet lips were sharp fangs.

"So, I have found you at last," she announced. "Princess Serenity!" Her voice, too, had become harsh and sharp.

The Moon Princess stumbled backward, every fiber of her being screaming at her to get away from this woman and the power that was like acid on her skin. Was this what happened to the people who were consumed by the evil force? No, the Earth-children in the garden had seemed normal, aside from their blinding hate. Serenity's eyes fell on the crown on the woman's brow and the scepter in her hand. Her words to the Princess on Earth rose in her memory.

Long live the Queen.

This was the leader of the invading force. Princess Serenity's stomach dropped clear to her toes. She had crossed her mother's wards, and the enemy had found her, and the Sailor Soldiers were nowhere nearby. Serenity was no warrior. With a pounding heart, she knew this was the end. At least, perhaps, if the war ended now with her death, Endymion, wherever he was, would be safe.

"Who... who are you?" the Princess managed to gasp through a throat that seemed filled with sand. If she was about to die, she would at least have her enemy's name and the reason behind all this.

"I am Queen Beryl." The woman seemed smug at first as she delivered her new title, but when Serenity showed no reaction, her eyes narrowed. "Do you not know who I am?" she demanded, her voice rising. "After all I have done, after everything you have done to me, do you still not know who I am?!"

"I... I know you are of Earth," Serenity stammered, her mind racing over countless social events and stuffy introductions. She was certain she had never met this Beryl before that day in the Golden City. How had Serenity wronged her? Was it possible that all of this, all this destruction and death, was due to some unknown personal grudge?

Beryl's face twisted. Rage boiled up until her eyes flashed and her lips curled, and her claw-like fingernails drew blood from her own palms.

"You shatter lives, and don't even bother to remember whose dreams you've broken!" she roared, pointing her scepter accusingly at the Princess. "Vile temptress! I will destroy that pretty face of yours!"

Endymion had never run so hard in his life. The Moon Castle seemed impossibly huge, and it took even longer to get anywhere when the ground kept shaking and was littered with debris. Through it all, his heart pounded harder and harder in an earnest that had nothing to do with his running. He had a dreadful feeling that Princess Serenity was in mortal danger, despite whatever protection she was supposedly under. With every passing second, the feeling grew stronger, until it took all his willpower to resist the urge to start calling out Serenity's name.

At last, Endymion rounded a corner and the Princess' balcony came into view, still familiar despite the cracks in the marble and the broken trees littering the ground. He'd planned to find an entrance here and then find a way up to Serenity's chambers, but as soon as his eyes fell on the balcony, he saw his worst fears confirmed.

To Endymion's horror, Princess Serenity was outside, and she wasn't alone. A towering woman he had never seen before was looming over the crystal-haired Princess, and her posture was far from friendly. A sick jolt struck Endymion's stomach as he realized the woman was hovering in midair. Clearly, she was a servant of the evil force darkening the sky overhead.

He forced his aching legs to pump harder, but the balcony seemed impossibly far away. He shouted,

but the mysterious woman was yelling as well, and amid all the destruction no one heard him. Suddenly the woman lunged toward Serenity, tearing the sky apart as she dove for the Princess' throat. Endymion wasn't going to make it in time. With all his newfound power, he could never run fast enough. If only he could distract the enemy, just for a moment - if only he had something to throw - the sword was too heavy - but -

Groping inside the breastplate of his borrowed armor, Endymion's fingers closed on a familiar thorny stem. He drew out the rose Princess Serenity had given him when they were children - the flower he'd treasured all his life, the symbol of the bond they shared - and threw it with all his might.

A silly gesture, really; a rose couldn't possibly fly that far that fast - but somehow it shot from Endymion's hand to the balcony in the blink of an eye, and rocketed directly between the possessed woman and the Moon Princess.

Then it exploded.

The energy of years of tenderness and devotion burst out of the rose, flooding the balcony with crimson light. Serenity and her attacker were both thrown back by the stored power as velvet petals flew everywhere. Endymion didn't waste a moment wondering how the miracle had occurred. Gathering the energy that had been growing stronger in him ever since he was banished to Earth, the exiled man reached the foot of the balcony and leapt upward. He cleared the railing in one jump and landed smoothly on the trembling marble, the power of his home world tingling throughout his entire body.

For an instant, Endymion's eyes met Serenity's. There was a chilling moment of fear - did she hate him for what he had done? - but the Princess' face flooded with joy and relief almost immediately, a rush of happiness sweeping her own terror away. Endymion's heart leapt with new strength. If she still cared for him, all his efforts were well worth it. He longed to run to her, to hold her in his arms, but there was still a threat to be dealt with.

The creature menacing the Princess turned toward Endymion, still hovering just over the balcony railing. His knees weakened at the sight of the strange woman, twisted and alien and radiating the same chill he had felt from the monoliths on Earth. Was this the incarnation of the thing in the sky? Endymion was in far over his head; he had only wanted to find the Princess and take her somewhere safe. What power he had was no match for this woman and the destructive force she commanded.

The former stable hand drew himself up. He was a servant by birth, but this woman had no way of knowing that; in the armor he'd taken from the palace on Earth he might pass for a great warrior. At the very least, if he got the alien talking, it would give him time to come up with a plan.

He threw out an arm in what he hoped was a confident way and tried not to look at Serenity as he announced, "I will not forgive you if you lay a single finger on the Princess!" The twisted woman looked both shocked and confused.

"Who-"

Endymion leapt, still riding the wave of energy coursing through his blood. He soared across the balcony and came down in front of Serenity, landing lightly and flinging the cape of his armor protectively in front of her. He hoped he looked braver than he felt as he stared into the furious red eyes of the alien.

"Go back to whatever dimension you came from!" he commanded. It was odd how easily an authoritative voice came to him, despite spending his entire life in the lowest class of society.

Not surprisingly, the enemy's response was a peal of horrid laughter. Endymion's cheeks began to burn; she knew he was no warrior, she could see right through his act-

"Dimension?" the witch cackled, as if the very suggestion was hilarious. "Is my home as distant as that to the citizens of the Moon? Can you no longer recognize a human?"

"She says her name is Beryl," the quiet voice of Princess Serenity said behind him. "She is - was - an Earth-child." Endymion couldn't stop his eyes from widening in an incredulous stare. The wild-haired, fanged thing in front of him was human? In a swift sweep, he took in the claws, the tapered ears, the horns sprouting from the woman's shoulders. Was this the fate of all those taken over by the evil force, or a consequence of trying to harness it?

Meanwhile, Princess Serenity was caught between terror and elation. She could barely resist the urge to fling herself against Endymion and throw her arms around him. She drank his scent and felt her spirits lift despite the chaos that surrounded her. He had come for her, he had not forgotten her. It was

possible... although she barely dared entertain the thought... that he still loved her.

Yet, there was a strangeness about Endymion that sent a nervous thrill through Serenity's core. This was not the same man she remembered. He was stronger, bigger somehow, filled with a power unlike anything the Moon Princess had ever felt before. His aura shielded her from the tainted energy radiating from their hovering enemy, and Serenity felt invigorated, as if there was nothing she could not do with Endymion there to support her.

The eyes of the creature calling herself Queen Beryl narrowed as she glared down at the lovers. "You are of Earth," she observed, her eyes roving over Endymion's dark hair and tanned skin. "Why do you protect the Princess of the Moon?"

Heartened by the fact that he was still alive, Endymion took a deep breath and decided to make one last effort. Maybe the woman would listen to a fellow human.

"Beryl," he announced in a firm, clear voice, keeping a tight grip on his sword, "you have been misguided by the evil energy of Metalia. Do you really believe the destruction of the Moon is in the best interests of Earth? Wake up! Rid yourself of the evil mind!"

A tentative hand crept up Endymion's back and squeezed his shoulder tightly. He longed to spin around and make sure Serenity was all right, but he had to stand firm, had to resist any hint of weakness...

The self-proclaimed Queen chuckled coldly. "With the power of Metalia I shall have all that I ever wanted - all that is rightfully mine! All that she stole from me!" Beryl ranted, with a fierce glare at the pale white face behind Endymion. "What would you know of such things, you... you..."

The fire-haired witch trailed off and her eyes narrowed. Endymion's heart hammered in his chest and his mouth ran dry, but he could not think of a thing to say as he watched the slow realization dawn across Beryl's face. Her gaze darted from Endymion to Serenity, to her hand on his shoulder, and the woman's eyes widened as they blazed like rubies in the darkness.

"*You!*" Beryl roared. Endymion nearly staggered. He knew she had guessed but had not expected as violent a reaction as this; she couldn't possibly recognize him...

"Filth of the streets, and a thief besides!" the menacing creature shrieked, her avenging anger turning to rage. "You dare question me after what you've done? I will kill you too, traitor!" She thrust an arm forward, pointing her scepter straight at Endymion's head. He couldn't help wincing and taking a step backward, but at least he would die protecting his beloved Princess Serenity...

Nothing happened. Endymion looked up at a strange sight. Beryl was trembling, the clawed scepter now held loosely in her hand, and had turned her head to the side with her eyes tightly shut. Her violet lips moved as she muttered words Endymion could not hear. For a moment, he feared she was casting a spell, but Beryl's arm jerked as she appeared to struggle to keep it pointed at the lovers. She seemed to be arguing with herself, fighting against an unseen force.

Scarcely believing his luck, Endymion reached back with his free arm, and warmth flooded his body as the Moon Princess immediately put her soft hand in his. All was not lost; as long as they had each other, there was hope. For Serenity, he was prepared to do anything, fight anyone, but at the moment it was wisest to run away.

Endymion whirled around and ran toward the doors of the Princess' chambers, pulling Serenity along with him. Behind them Beryl shrieked with rage, yelling out words Endymion could not make out over the roaring of his own blood in his ears. If they could get into the castle, the Moon Queen's barrier would protect them -

A bolt of dark lightning stopped Endymion in his tracks. He pulled Serenity to his side as an armored figure materialized in front of the double doors. It was hidden in shadow and Endymion could not see its face, but he could sense the corrupt energy radiating from it like the stench of rotting flesh. Truly this was the darkest enemy save Beryl herself.

Thinking only of securing his beloved's escape from that place, Endymion turned again and ran for the far edge of the balcony, away from both threats. He had scarcely taken a few steps, however, when a rush of wind swept past him and the new arrival again blocked his path. Endymion skidded to a halt as the castle shuddered under him. Serenity gasped in his ear, and her hand both tightened and trembled in his.

"Prince Endymion..."

The exiled stable hand's eyes locked on the Prince of Earth for the first time. He hadn't expected

Against All Odds

him to be so young. Endymion had always heard the Prince who shared his name also shared his age, but this man had to be at least a year his junior. He wore his aura of evil like a mantle, relying on power to make up for the traces of boyhood still clear on his face. His grin was hauntingly manic, and the corona of auburn hair on his head reminded Endymion painfully of a certain woman lying dead on the distant planet. He gritted his teeth.

"Yes, this will be a more fitting end," Beryl jeered from her perch in the air. "Destroy those who would keep us apart, my love, and we will rule the universe together!"

There was an echoing crack. Endymion did not dare turn around, but a lessening of the heaviness in the air told him Beryl had disappeared. He risked a brief sideways glance at Princess Serenity - and was shocked to see her face wet with tears.

"You... and Beryl?" she asked softly, taking a step toward the Earth Prince. "Prince Endymion... I..." Her grip on her beloved's hand slackened.

"Sere, no!" Endymion cried out as the Prince's eyes flashed. This was hardly the time for sympathy. The auburn-haired man thrust out an arm, and Endymion barely pushed Serenity out of the way in time. The blast of dark energy carved a trench in the balcony between them and crashed into the Queen's barrier with a deafening thunder.

Staggering to remain on his feet, Endymion thought only of getting the Prince away from his beloved before her compassionate heart got her killed. Before the corrupted Earth man could react, Endymion launched himself at the Prince with a roar, and they both toppled over the balcony's railing.

The two men separated in midair, both equally eager to break contact. The Earth Prince's touch was like poisoned needles that sent Endymion shuddering. They pushed away from each other and tumbled toward the ground, Princess Serenity's scream tearing the air around them.

Endymion's newfound power served him well. He twisted upright and landed on his feet, his unusually strong legs automatically bending to absorb the jolt. He pushed off the ground with one hand and was standing in a heartbeat, drawing his sword in the next. His opponent seemed to be gifted with similar agility, and the two men found themselves facing each other across the small courtyard beneath the balcony.

Above them, the Princess was yelling something, but Endymion was fully focused on his opponent and the shining sword in the Prince's hand. Everything he had ever learned from Sir Marton came rushing back to him, crashing over him in waves with each beat of his pounding heart. He was so focused on correcting his stance and grip that he almost missed what was said when the Earth Prince finally spoke.

"That armor," the auburn-haired man said slowly. "How did you... when I never could...?"

Endymion wasn't sure what the Prince was talking about, but his mind flew back to the dark room where he had found the mysterious armor. Already it felt like it had happened years ago, when it had scarcely been an hour. The Earth Prince was eyeing the suit hungrily. Perhaps it was a treasure of the Golden Kingdom's royal family, an enchanted heirloom that chose its own master... but why, then, had it chosen Endymion? Because there was no one else untainted by evil?

"It was waiting for a wearer who was worthy of it," Endymion said aloud. He didn't know if the words were true, nor did he care; they had the desired effect. Prince Endymion bristled and his sword arm shook. The two men began to circle one another, their steps sliding smoothly across the flagstones as their gazes remained locked together.

"How dare you?" the Earth Prince snapped, tightening his grip on the hilt of his weapon. "Peasant scum! How dare you insult the legacy of my house? Who is more worthy than the Crown Prince?"

"It is you who insults it," Endymion shot back boldly. The words were unimportant, even if they happened to be true. What mattered was the Prince's reaction. When his lessons first began, Sir Marton had often gained the upper hand by riling up Endymion's emotions. An angry opponent was a foolish one. "Is this how a Prince serves his people? By selling them into slavery and bending to the will of an evil force?"

"There is no standing against Metalia!" the Earth Prince spat. "The Earth will be stronger for it in the end! It was this or be destroyed!"

Endymion felt the man's tainted aura crackling over his skin. The Prince's rage would drive him to make mistakes, but it also made the darkness that ruled him stronger. Endymion had learned much from

Against All Odds

his mentor, but he had no idea what skills the Crown Prince of the Golden Kingdom was taught. Would the strange armor and his mysterious powers be enough to save him?

It was time to find out.

"Coward."

The word was calm and quiet, barely audible in the rumbling of the city, but the Prince's reaction was an explosion. He lunged toward Endymion with a roar of rage unlike anything the former stable hand had ever heard, sword hurtling forward in a single straight thrust. Endymion parried, swinging his own blade to knock the Prince's aside. The auburn-haired man was thrown off-balance, but recovered quickly, and whirled around to aim a swipe at his enemy's back. Endymion was already spinning away long before the blade neared him, turning to face his opponent and beginning an attack of his own.

Princess Serenity was yelling something again, but over the crash of blades Endymion could not hear, and to glance away even for a moment would mean death. He was fighting what he now realized was his most hated enemy, the embodiment of everything that had limited his life. Here was a man who, simply by being born to the right parents, was entitled to everything Endymion desired whether he deserved it or not - his training, his respect, his beloved, even his name. At last Endymion had the chance to fight all that he hated on even ground, and to prove he was worth as much as any Prince - no, that he was worth even more.

"Hypocrite!" Prince Endymion shouted accusingly. He pushed back from the dark-haired man and they broke apart for a moment, both gasping for breath. "For your lover, you would have done the same! Admit it!"

"Never," Endymion snapped, his blood boiling indignantly for a moment. "I would never choose the path of evil - nor would my beloved ever give me cause to do so! True love is a force of creation, not destruction!"

"Do you doubt my love?" roared the auburn-haired Prince, his eyes flashing. "If you knew all I have done, all I have sacrificed-"

"I would tell you it was all worth nothing!"

The Earth Prince charged again, his pale face now violet with fury. He seemed to know magical attacks were useless against Endymion's enchanted armor; this battle was a match of swordsmanship alone. Endymion danced backward, blocking the impassioned swipes with the Jovian Silver Wall technique. The Prince was skilled, but his anger made him clumsy, and he was facing a man with the ancient teachings of nine worlds behind his blade. It all came back to Endymion so easily, flashing from his memory to his sword arm with barely a thought... Uranian Feint, Selene's Star, Titan Two-Hand, Crown of Venus... everything he needed to defend when necessary and attack at all the right times. If he ever saw Sir Marton again, Endymion resolved to give him a night on the town... if there were any towns left.

The former stable hand was tiring, however, while Prince Endymion's energy seemed boundless. Every crash of swords sent a painful jar up to the dark-haired man's shoulder, and he found himself resorting to more and more two-handed techniques. Finally, there came an attack he was barely able to block in time. The two men locked swords in a duel of strength, their faces barely a half-arm's length from each other. The Earth Prince pushed against Endymion's blade with what seemed the strength of ten men, and the exiled lover found himself staring into the deep blue eyes of what he was growing to fear was his death.

They were so like the eyes of his enemy's mother, the Queen. All that differed was the light within them; these eyes glittered with taint and malice, while Elana's had shone with love and pain. She had died believing the best of her son, and here the Prince was fighting with monsters on the side of evil. A pang of sorrow on the Earth Queen's behalf twisted within Endymion's heart.

"Your mother is dead, do you know that?" he spat harshly, half hoping to jar the Prince back to his senses with the news of the direst consequence of his actions, but hoping mostly to hurt him. Endymion's arms were shaking as his muscles screamed in agony, but somewhere he found the strength to hold on. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Princess Serenity finally tear her gaze away from the struggling men and disappear into the chambers behind her.

"I know," Prince Endymion replied. A terrible grin spread across his face, and for a moment, the former stable hand feared the man would transform into a true creature of nightmare. "I killed her."

Against All Odds

For one heartbeat Endymion nearly faltered, the shock sending a brief pause of weakness from his fingers to his toes. In the next, blinding rage redoubled his strength. The Earth Prince was gifted with so many things Endymion could never possess, and he had squandered it all with his inexplicable greed for more power. Now Endymion found the man had destroyed the very thing the former stable hand craved the most, and the most unattainable - a loving family, a mother and father who treasured him. Had Queen Elana known the identity of her murderer? Had she known, as she begged his forgiveness with her last breath, that the beloved son she believed in so strongly was responsible for her end?

Endymion charged forward with an anguished cry, fresh energy flooding his limbs. Where the Earth Prince let anger shake him, Endymion focused his into strength. His sword, not an heirloom gift but a tool he had worked and saved for, flashed blindingly as it slashed and thrust at its wielder's loathed enemy. If Queen Elana's own son had repaid her loyalty with betrayal, Endymion would avenge her.

The Earth Prince seemed startled by his opponent's sudden fury, and it worked against him, slowing his steps and hindering the motion of his blade. He stumbled backward against a pillar, and this time, when their swords locked together, it was Endymion who had the upper hand.

"How dare you?" the auburn-haired man hissed, glaring up into Endymion's charcoal eyes. "I am the Prince of Earth!"

"I am more a Prince than you'll ever be." Endymion flicked his wrists, and his opponent's sword flew out of his hands. Without hesitation, the former stable hand raised his arms and plunged his blade down the neck of Prince Endymion's armor. The Earth Prince gasped, eyes wide, and his body went rigid as disbelief flooded and then drained from his face. Endymion pulled his sword free as the Prince slumped against the pillar, and watched the blood drip from its blade as the younger man collapsed and lay motionless at his feet.

Endymion had never killed before. A shadow of sorrow touched his heart, but before he had time to feel it, a blood-chilling shriek stripped him to the bone. He whirled around to see Princess Serenity standing in the castle doorway beneath the balcony, utterly stricken with horror. Her wide blue eyes were focused on the lifeless body of her former fiance, her pale hands were pressed to her mouth, and she was screaming as if her very soul was being torn in two.

The sound of it ripped into Endymion's heart like a thousand needles. Throwing his sword aside, he ran toward his beloved, but she backed away from him as if he were the face of evil itself. She stared at him with a mix of utter despair and revulsion, and Endymion was suddenly filled with a remorse so deep he wished he were the one lying dead in the courtyard.

"Serenity," he croaked in a voice full of sand, "I-"

"How could you?!" the Moon Princess screamed, choking on budding sobs. She launched herself at Endymion and began beating him with her fists, her blows landing harmlessly on the enchanted armor as tears poured down her cheeks. "How could you?!"

"I had to," Endymion answered numbly, feeling as though the chill inside him would be with him forever. "He would have killed us both."

"Couldn't you tell he was being controlled?" Serenity demanded, her fists still raining on her lover's chest. "We could have helped him, we could have saved him! We could have brought him back! And now you... you..."

Blood was appearing on Serenity's fingers. Endymion seized them gently, looking down at her with genuine regret. For her, he had defeated the enemy, but that was not the kind of victory his Princess wanted. Despite all the pain Prince Endymion had caused her, Serenity had still wished for his salvation over his death.

"I am sorry," the exiled man said quietly, knowing that no words could never be enough. "I saw no other way."

"There is always another way," Princess Serenity said fiercely, looking up at him with desperate indignance in her eyes. "Promise me you will never take another life!"

With the Moon Kingdom collapsing around them, it seemed an impossible request. How could Endymion protect his beloved if he could not fight their enemies? Surely no warrior had ever been bound by such a restriction. As he looked into his beloved's eyes, however, Endymion knew he could not refuse. Throughout his entire life, he had striven to become a man worthy of the Moon Princess, a man she could

love. He could no more deny her this than he could change the color of his hair.

"I promise."

Serenity crumpled against him in relief, and Endymion held her for what felt like the first time in years. He leaned down to press his cheek against her soft colorless hair, closing his eyes to let the warmth of her seep into his skin as her tears soaked his breastplate. She felt smaller in his arms than he remembered, more fragile. Had her skin always been so pale?

For her part, Princess Serenity was utterly overwhelmed. Since leaving Earth, she had been numb to the world around her, immune to its joys and sorrows, caring little if she lived or died. Now that Endymion had returned to claim her, all the walls that surrounded her heart had shattered into dust. Scent and color were restored to the world, and new life flooded her veins with fresh energy. Only now did she fully realize how cold and empty her existence had been. The thought of ever returning to that darkness was dreadful. In that moment, Princess Serenity resolved never to be separated from Endymion again. Wherever he went, even if he ordered her away, she would follow.

The Moon trembled. Serenity opened her eyes as the last of her tears slipped away. Fresh fear was sinking into her now that her reason for living had been restored, but she felt ready to face any danger as long as Endymion was by her side.

"What do we do now?" she asked, not yet raising her head from Endymion's chest, not yet ready to put any distance between them. Endymion breathed her sweet scent and felt her soft skin, and could not imagine leaving that place without her.

"Come to Earth with me."

Princess Serenity turned to him, and Endymion got his first good look at her since the day she came to the Golden City. His mouth went dry. Serenity's eyes were still the same, clear and blue like pure water, but she was thin and pale, nearly ghostlike, with hollow cheeks and faded lips. Endymion had suffered during their separation, but Serenity seemed to have literally wasted away without him. He had thought he was doing the right thing by ending their relationship, but looking at the Moon Princess now, he could not imagine what she had been through. Endymion's grip tightened on his lover's thin frame. It had been wrong to turn her away. He would not make that mistake again.

"Please, Sere. Come away from here with me."

"To Earth?" The Moon Princess bit her lip. She had Endymion back, but nothing had really changed; her duty to her kingdom was still the same. To make matters worse, her world was still under attack. How could she leave when the Moon needed her most?

As she looked around the ruined courtyard, however, Princess Serenity found it hard to believe it was her the kingdom needed. She had no powers like the Sailor Soldiers; what could she do to fight this evil? Queen Serenity had the Silver Crystal; surely it was only a matter of time until all the darkness and destruction was swept away by its light. The role of the Princess had been to secure peace through marriage to the Earth Prince. With Prince Endymion corrupted by evil, and now killed, what more could Princess Serenity do for the Moon?

Her sad eyes turned from her beloved and fell on the lifeless body crumpled beside the broken pillar. Despite all the pains of their betrothal, Prince Endymion had been honest with Serenity before he left her. He had died because he had gone to seek his love, and had fallen victim to the evil that had already taken Beryl... but wasn't it better to die following your heart than to live denying it? After all she had been through, the Moon Princess was beginning to think so. She had followed the rules and tragedy had struck, but if they had all been honest about their feelings from the beginning, together they might have averted it. It seemed a dishonor to Prince Endymion's memory not to follow her heart now.

"All right. I will go with you."

As she said the words, Princess Serenity felt a strange strength enter her heart. This wasn't like her previous attempt to flee with Endymion, a mere lover's fancy half-entrenched in doubt. This was a life decision, a firm conviction she could proudly stand on without trembling. Serenity had finally decided once and for all that her future lay with Endymion, and wherever that took her, she was prepared to follow.

Despite the chaos raging around them, they kissed.

The destruction of the world where Serenity and Endymion grew up faded into the background, ever-present but secondary to this moment. From different worlds and opposite ends of society they had

Against All Odds

found each other, and nothing mattered more than that miracle, than the unity of two hearts beating in time. Princess Serenity felt only peace, Endymion's arms steadying her against the shaking of the ground beneath her feet and his warmth warding off the growing chill in the air. With this heart and these arms and these kisses, she could survive anything, and anywhere would be home. Even if they died right there in one another's embrace, Serenity's life would be complete.

Until we break and shatter, just keep holding me.

It was Endymion who pulled back first, reluctantly, fighting the urge to lean back for another taste of his beloved's lips. Although he felt as if nothing could harm him as long as they were together, the danger was very real. He gazed longingly into the pools of Serenity's eyes but forced himself to speak.

"There will be plenty of time later," he said, reminding himself as much as Serenity.

"Yes," his beloved replied, taking his rough hand in hers. "The rest of our lives."

Princess Serenity averted her eyes while Endymion retrieved his sword and wiped it clean on the grass. He sheathed it when he was finished, nodding to acknowledge his lover's silent plea not to use it. He could only hope they would make it to a place of safety before Endymion's promise was tested.

A moment later they were running, hand in hand, clumsily navigating the labyrinth of detritus scattered by the crumbling castle. Serenity could not help but feel a slight unease - why was her mother hesitating to use the Silver Crystal? - but none of that mattered now.

"How will we get to Earth?" the Princess asked as Endymion helped her across a rocky stream spewing from a broken fountain. "The teleportation centers are so far..."

"The castle platform is still active," Endymion told her. "When I arrived, it was unguarded. With luck, it will be that way still."

He squeezed Serenity's hand, the touch of her soft skin warming him from head to toe. It seemed unbelievable. Endymion's mission had succeeded, he had found the Moon Princess, she was safe, and they were always going to be together from now on. A distant piece of him was saddened by the state of the Moon and worried about the friends he had had here, but it was all overwhelmed by the happiness bubbling inside him. Serenity was coming to Earth. They were going to have a life together. Perhaps when they were out of harm's way, the winged horse would reappear and explain all the lingering mysteries to him. With his beloved by his side, Endymion would be ready for anything it had to say.

The Moon Princess was excited as well, if a bit fearful of the unknown, but it was not as easy for her to push her other emotions aside. They were running around the outside of the Moon Castle, as most of the passages inside were choked with debris, and Serenity found herself bidding a silent farewell to the only home she had ever known. There had been happy times here, when she was younger, and seeing the gardens she had loved reduced to rubble brought stinging tears to the Princess' eyes. In these courtyards she had played with her guardians, the Sailor Soldiers... They had been at odds, but it was a pity she would not be able to see them one last time... to show them once and for all that she would not be separated from Endymion, if nothing else.

Suddenly the world shuddered as a wretched scream filled the air. It howled in Serenity's ears like the shrieking of the very soul of a planet, making her heart leap into her throat and her muscles convulse in shock. She tripped, and Endymion caught her, but from the terror on his face Serenity knew she wasn't the only one to hear the terrible sound. They huddled together for a moment, trembling, as the scream cut into their bones and made them feel they would never hear properly again.

In the heart of the castle, Queen Serenity heard it and hurried toward the sound, fearful of what it might mean. The two Mauans shifted into their feline forms and ran ahead.

In a ruined garden, the Sailor Soldiers heard it and likewise ran toward the source despite their protesting hearts. Their opponents, the Four Generals, also heard it and knew instantly what had happened. Filled with a fresh rage, the tainted mages also began to seek the cry's origin.

The scream went on and on, seeming to stretch into forever, rending the sky apart with anguish. In the city, Lunarians and humans alike paused in their struggle, unable to do more than suffer beneath the onslaught of the sound.

When it stopped, everything fell eerily silent. The ground stopped shaking. The dark clouds stopped rumbling and flashing. The Moon went black, but nothing made a sound, nothing moved except Princess Serenity's heart, which pounded so wildly she thought it would burst from her chest. She was filled with a terrifying sense of frantic urgency. Something was coming, something terrible, something filled with rage and pain and rapidly drawing closer...

In unison, the lovers leapt to their feet. Serenity felt Endymion's hand sweating in hers and knew he sensed it too, the need to flee, the overwhelming darkness bearing down upon them. They did not pause to speak or ask questions but immediately began running, hearts pounding together as they fled their approaching foe. In an instant, the last corner of the Moon Castle was behind them and the great front staircase stretched out before them, rising from the lovers' feet to the grand double doors high above. The pair did not hesitate to rush up the marble steps, but something deep inside them wailed that there was no hope, cried out that this was as inevitable as the fates they sought to escape.

"Yoooooou!"

The Moon Princess stopped short and pulled Endymion back as a familiar red glow erupted at the top of the staircase, between the lovers and the grand entrance to the castle. Endymion shielded his eyes from the blood-red brightness, but Serenity clung to his arm as the tall shape of Beryl materialized before them. The force of the woman's fury nearly sent Serenity stumbling back. Her angular face was twisted with anguish, and she seemed caught between screaming and sobbing.

"You killed him!" Beryl shouted, her talons drawing blood from her own palms. "You killed him!"

"You set him on us," Endymion croaked defensively. His hand went to the hilt of the sword at his hip, but he remembered his beloved's tearful face and left the weapon in its sheath.

"You monster!" the woman calling herself Queen roared. "I'll kill you!" Beryl took a step forward, and Endymion backed down the staircase, pushing Serenity behind him, hoping his armor would protect them both... but the dark Queen stumbled to a stop and her hands jerked convulsively.

"Why do you stop me?" Beryl cried to no one in particular. Her head rolled on her neck, her tiara sparked with crimson light. Suddenly her entire body jerked violently and then stilled. Beryl raised her head. She smiled sweetly, fangs curving over violet lips. She blinked at Endymion as if seeing him with new eyes.

"Why do you choose that girl?" Beryl asked in a voice that was not quite her own. It shivered with a tainted echo that whispered of shadows and tangible nightmares. Her hair seemed eerily redder, the horns protruding from her shoulders longer. "Join me, child," she implored in a tone that was more a hiss than a purr. Endymion was struck by the sudden sense of countless years, of an ancient presence far older than the woman standing before him.

"Join me and fight against those that would keep you down." Beryl began to descend the stairs toward the lovers. She moved jerkily, like a puppet. Endymion stepped sideways as he backed away, not willing to be driven further from their goal but not wanting to be any closer to this creature. She allowed them their space, descending at a distance until they stood on the same stair.

"I will not listen, demon." Endymion squeezed the Princess' hand and judged the distance to the top of the staircase out of the corner of his eye. If they ran, could they make it? Did the Queen's protection cover this section of the castle, or would they still be vulnerable inside?

"The Moon is not your friend, child," the thing that was not quite Beryl continued. It clutched its scepter awkwardly, as if it had never had hands before. "It made you a servant when you should have been a King. It kept you from your proper place for all these years. Join me, and your title will be restored to you. Your true name, Endymion - I know it well. You are the true Prince of Earth."

Endymion's heart skipped a beat, but an automatic chuckle of disbelief burst from his lips. He tingled from head to toe, his fingers went numb and he could no longer feel Serenity's hand in his - but it was such an obvious ploy. He had proven himself to be a skilled fighter, and now the enemy sought to secure his allegiance with promises of power.

"You lie," he spat easily. Something inside him was burning, but Endymion pushed it aside and shook himself until he could feel his beloved's warmth again. There was no response from Beryl. She was once again trembling, her eyes tightly closed, fighting an internal battle against something no one could

see. Endymion had just made up his mind to run when Beryl let out a sudden shout.

"Metalia!" This cry was in Beryl's own voice. Her eyes opened and they were hers again, but her attention was focused somewhere inside herself. "What is the meaning of this?" the Earth woman demanded fiercely. "I do not want this - this scum!" she hissed, gesturing at Endymion with disgust. "How dare you give him my Prince's name! You promised Endymion to me, Metalia - you promised if I joined with you, we could be together!"

A flash of indignant pride flared within the elder Endymion, fueled by a sense of self-worth he had not realized he possessed. He might not be a Prince, but he was as good as one, better in fact than the man who lay dead beneath the Princess' balcony. He was protecting his true love, which was more than the Earth Prince had ever done.

"I *am* Endymion," he said sharply. "Grant me that, at least."

"Yes." Beryl shuddered again, and the false smile returned to her face. Her eyes became glassy and empty as the fire within them was replaced by shadows. Something in the expression became searching, hungry. "You carry the light the other one did not," the thing said. "You are the Earth Prince Endymion. You must know it to be true, the power is within you."

"You lie," Endymion said again, but this time he was not so sure. He had never known his origin. Being on Earth had given him powers he did not understand and could not explain. Beryl - or the thing that had possessed her - knew that, and his true name. Could it be possible?

"Join me," the lips of Queen Beryl insisted, sensing his uncertainty. "Leave her..."

"No." It had to be a trick. Even if it was not, he would never ally himself with this dark creature. Endymion would learn about his powers and his past on his own, with Serenity by his side. She was all he needed. "I will never join you. Sere is more valuable to me than anything - even a crown."

Endymion tried to back away from Beryl, but met resistance. Princess Serenity had not moved. She held her beloved's hand as if it were a lifeline, but her gaze was focused on Beryl, and her clear blue eyes were wide with horror and tears. For love Beryl had given herself over to evil, for love she had sacrificed everything she had, for love she had even surrendered her own body. Metalia had promised her nothing more than what the Moon Princess wanted for herself, and now not even Beryl's mind was fully her own. Was Serenity really all that different? Were she in Beryl's place, might Serenity not have done the same?

Although Endymion tried to pull her back, the Princess took a step forward. Her face shone with concern and sympathy. The thing that was both Beryl and Metalia looked at her oddly, as if unsure what to make of her.

"It's all gotten out of hand, but it's not too late," the Moon Princess said gently. "You can still escape." Her eyes roamed over the twisted body of the self-proclaimed Queen, the chain of white flowers around Beryl's waist a sad remnant of the beautiful woman she had been. "Look at you. Prince Endymion wouldn't have wanted you to come to this."

Metalia did not have to fuel Beryl's reaction. Her face contorted in a rage that was all her own, her red hair sparking with dark lightning as her eyes flashed.

"How dare you?" she hissed. "How dare you presume to know what my beloved would have wanted?! Foul creature! How dare you speak his name?!" Beryl reached out. Dark clouds gathered between her hands and solidified into a black blade steeped in shadow. "Because of you, all this has happened. Because of you, I have lost everything! How dare you offer me mercy? Me, who will be Queen of all the worlds?"

Endymion tugged at the Princess' hand in alarm, but she would not move. He drew his own sword with his free hand, but what could he do? Even were he not bound by his promise not to take another life, Beryl was protected by more magic than he could fathom. If they ran, they would never reach the castle doors alive.

A foul wind was beginning to blow, and the Moon rumbled afresh beneath their feet. A wild grin slowly spread across Beryl's face. She hefted the sword in her hands. A dark mist began to gather behind her, as if the sinister clouds overhead were pouring down from the sky. Violent red rips appeared in the mist, forming a grin that mirrored Beryl's. Endymion's breath caught in his throat and his heart pounded until its rushing in his ears was louder than the wind.

"I will have my revenge, on one if not the other!" Beryl declared, her fangs glinting and her eyes glowing. "If we must have this stable boy as Prince, I will at least take his beloved from him as he has

taken mine!"

Beryl raised the sword over her head, eyes locked on Princess Serenity, murder in her heart. In an instant, Endymion made his decision. He was forbidden to kill, but neither could he let his beloved Princess die, not when anything could be done to save her. He could only hope she would have the sense to save herself when it was all over.

He squeezed the soft hand in his and yanked it toward him. As Beryl lunged, Serenity tumbled into Endymion's arms and he pulled her around, putting himself between his lover and her would-be murderer. With his back to the oncoming strike, he gazed down at the pale and startled face of the Moon Princess and etched every feature into his memory, from the crescent moon on her forehead to her parted rosy lips.

The blade hit him like the crushing blow of a horse's hoof. White-hot pain ripped into Endymion's spine, and he threw his head back so Serenity would not see the agony on his face. His lungs tried to gasp, but his muscles refused to obey, his entire body seized by the shock of the strike. A chilling numbness swept from his neck to his feet in a sickening wave and his heart choked in his chest. The Princess' warmth was still pressed against him, but it was fading, as were the light and the air.

Endymion found himself staring at the darkening sky above him. It was choked with sinister clouds, but somewhere past them was the Earth, and the answers to all the questions he would never hear. Somehow none of it mattered anymore.

It was fitting, really...

As he had lived for her, so he died for her...

The last thing Endymion heard was Princess Serenity's scream ringing in his ears.

Serenity clung to her beloved as he went limp in her arms, his hands falling away from her, his legs crumpling beneath him. She dropped to her knees as his weight bore her to the ground, his head lolling limply to the side.

"Endymion." The Moon Princess seized him by the shoulders, touched his cheeks, stroked his hair. "Endymion! Open your eyes!"

A deep chill was spreading within Serenity, flooding outward from a place in her heart that was suddenly empty and cold. Beryl was standing over her, once again struggling with the force that controlled her, her body shaking with spasms as she was punished by something unseen. In the distance, the four Sailor Soldiers were running across the flattened gardens toward the Moon Castle. Behind them, the Four Generals hovered frozen in midair, stopped in their tracks by the sight of the body on the stairs. Princess Serenity noticed nothing but the deep red liquid dripping down the marble staircase, and the face in her lap that was paler than it had ever been.

"No! No, no, no, no, no!" Serenity was seized by nausea, and the Moon spun around her as she grasped at her beloved's motionless form. This couldn't be happening. Endymion had come for her, and they were going to Earth. They were going to live on Earth together, away from all this, and be happy. It was a trick... Endymion was only pretending, to fool Beryl. "Endymion! Open your eyes!"

Even as she pleaded with him, the crystal-haired Princess knew somewhere within herself that Endymion could not hear her. He was gone, not only from the body in her arms but from somewhere inside her, somewhere that could never lie. Even the scent of roses that had surrounded the Earth-born man as long as Serenity had known him was fading, borne away by the rushing wind. Serenity shuddered all over, the cold inside her deepening and spreading until she felt it would utterly consume her.

"*No! Endymion!*" The scream tore at Serenity's throat as she pressed her hands to her head, as if she could stem the tide of emptiness inside her, as if her beloved would hear her cries and come back to her. Tears stung the corners of her eyes, but the pain was too much to feel, too intense even to weep from. The most precious part of her life was gone, and with it the most precious part of herself. She was alone.

What was left for Serenity now? She looked up at the world around her with clouded eyes. Her kingdom was broken and shattered. Her friends were nearly strangers to her. Her mother had sacrificed love for duty and expected the Princess to do the same. None of them could ever understand, and the one person who had...

Serenity gazed down at the broken and lifeless body on the stairs. Her eyes roamed from

Against All Odds

Endymion's pale face - so serene, as if he were merely asleep - to the sword that lay beside him. As if in a dream, she reached out and caressed the hilt with her fingers. Such a dreadful thing, a weapon that caused such pain... but also an instrument of change, a tool that made things happen. There was no one else to act for Serenity now. The Sailor Soldiers were drawing nearer, running and calling out, but for the moment Princess Serenity was completely on her own. What should she do?

Her fingers closed around the hilt of her beloved's sword and pulled it close. She looked up at the woman who had taken Endymion's life. She was still caught in her struggle with Metalia, not even watching Serenity. Clearly, Beryl expected nothing from the pampered Moon Princess. Serenity regarded her numbly for a moment. She could have the blade through Beryl's chest before the Earth woman even noticed she had moved. But what would happen then? The cycle of revenge would continue, and while it turned, Serenity would be locked back into a life of duty and responsibility, a life that was not her own. She could not face that without Endymion.

The face of her beloved was so peaceful, so tranquil. Endymion was free, safe from all this, far from the anguish and the choices and the fighting. Serenity wanted that peace, hungered for it, longed for freedom from the aching numbness in her body and the screaming of her heart. She could have it, if that was what she truly wanted. Her grip on Endymion's sword tightened.

It was said that souls could be reborn, that people could live new lifetimes again and again. If only they had been born on the same planet, they might have lived happily together. Perhaps next time, Endymion's life would be happy... but Serenity did not want him to start a new life without her any more than she wanted to continue hers without him.

Someone was calling her name. Through swimming eyes, the Moon Princess saw her mother standing at the top of the grand staircase, the cats Luna and Artemis at her feet. Opposite them, the Sailor Soldiers had reached the bottom of the steps and were racing upward, fear and determination on their faces. When they reached the Princess it would all be over, her moment to make her own choice would be at an end. She had only a moment to decide - her kingdom, or her lover?

It was not really a choice. Princess Serenity had already resolved to follow Endymion to the end of her days, wherever that might take her. Her duty to him had long ago surpassed any other, and she could no more go on without him than she could live without air.

She lifted her beloved's sword in both hands and rested the point against her chest. The blade was well cared for and sharp; a bead of crimson blood welled up as its point bit into the Princess' flawless alabaster skin.

"Endymion."

Princess Serenity firmed her grip on the sword's hilt, closed her eyes, and thrust.

For a moment, the pain was more intense than anything Serenity had ever felt. The sword cut into her as if she were little more than smoke, and for a dreadful instant she struggled against the desperate instinct to pull it out. Blinding agony flooded her chest and stole her breath away, but Serenity bore it without crying out, determined to be as strong as her lover had been.

Her ears were filled with screaming, but none of it was her own. Princess Serenity swayed as her life's blood poured out over her white dress, taking with it all her energy but also all the pain. A blessed numbness stole over her, and she tipped forward, her head landing on Endymion's motionless chest.

Through blurred eyes she saw Sailor Venus charging toward Beryl, her face streaked with tears, the legendary stone sword of the Moon Kingdom raised in her hands. The air was filled with cries and strange words, but all of it seemed muted, muffled, far away. The Moon and its struggles were none of Serenity's concern anymore.

The Princess closed her eyes as the world began to darken and her heart and lungs struggled in her chest. The sword stuck out awkwardly, but she couldn't feel it anymore. It was all over, all the struggle and pain and suffering. Wherever she was going, Serenity and Endymion would go there together. No one could separate them anymore.

Endymion... Next time, we will be reborn on the same planet, and we will be happy.

With her last thought, Princess Serenity focused on the Silver Crystal, wherever it was. As her mind slipped into silence, she prayed it would hear her last wish.

Protect us, and next time, make us happy.

Epilogue

The daimon straightened up, laughing. Its violet tail twitched as it towered over the four Sailor Soldiers lying crumpled at its feet. Mercury, Mars, Jupiter, Venus... they had all fallen to Nekonell's whiplike tail and lay groaning on the floor of the abandoned house, unable to muster the strength to get up again.

"Everyone!" Across the room Tsukino Usagi crouched helplessly, cradling Mihar's unconscious form. Usagi was all that stood between the daimon and the child now. Mihar's pure heart crystal had already been proven not to be a talisman - whatever that was - but who knew what Nekonell might do now that its mission had failed?

The daimon twisted around. Its spotted violet tail lashed out, and before Usagi could react, it was wrapped around her neck. The teen kept a firm hold on Mihar even as she struggled to breathe, the impossibly long tail tightening around her throat. Nekonell began to pull Usagi toward itself, dragging her across the floor. Was this how it was fated to end? The Silver Crystal's light gone, her transformation locket unresponsive... After all she had survived, a common monster would get the best of Sailor Moon?

The daimon flicked its wrist, catlike, and the bells on its dress jingled as if mocking its prey - so powerful as a soldier, so helpless as a girl.

Suddenly, the pressure on Usagi's throat was released, the tail dissolving into puzzle pieces that scattered across the floor. Usagi looked up to see a familiar red rose sticking out of the tiles, its petals still quivering from its flight.

"Who is it-nell?" Nekonell demanded, looking up furiously. Usagi knew without looking, the sudden leap of her heart signaling the arrival of her beloved savior.

"Tuxedo Kamen!" she cried with eager relief. He was standing on a high windowsill, arm raised and ready to throw another rose. The red-lined cape of his familiar black tuxedo swirled around him, creating the air of mystery and majesty that had enchanted Usagi from the very beginning.

"Those who toy with pure hearts will someday be brought to justice by pure hearts," Tuxedo Kamen announced. Some found his speeches futile and meaningless, but Usagi never tired of them. It was as if he found all the meaning in the world and knew just how to put it into words that Usagi would understand. New confidence flooded into her. He would always be there to protect her. Even if she couldn't transform,

there was nothing to fear.

Tuxedo Kamen leapt down from the windowsill and landed in front of Usagi. She gently laid Miharuru down and stood up, but it was too much to hope that he would even glance at her. Tuxedo Kamen was always so focused during battle...

"Nekonell!" The self-named daimon whirled around. Again its tail lashed out. Usagi gasped and shrank back, but Tuxedo Kamen stood firm and assumed a fighting stance. He was always so brave, her Chiba Mamoru, no matter what happened.

The enchanted black cane extended from Tuxedo Kamen's gloved hands, shattering Nekonell's tail as it stretched across the room. Its tip plunged into the daimon's abdomen and pushed it back against the wall. The masked fighter held firmly to his end of the cane, and for a moment, the creature was still, hanging limply over the rod in its stomach.

Then Nekonell smiled. Its red eyes opened, and the foul thing licked its lips, as if savoring the sweet taste of its victory to come. It seized the cane protruding from its middle and snapped it off at the end, causing the rest of the enchanted stick to shrink back to its normal size. The daimon tossed the broken end toward Tuxedo Kamen, who batted it harmlessly away, but when the creature launched itself into the air vicious claws sprouted from its fingers.

Usagi braced herself as Tuxedo Kamen pulled his cape in front of them both. Nekonell came down and struck. The daimon's talons slashed the man's cape to ribbons and swiped his mask from his face. His top hat tumbled to the tiled floor. Clearly the new monsters were just as dangerous to Tuxedo Kamen as they were to the Sailor Soldiers. Usagi cried out, but her protector kept his feet, unwilling to expose her to the enemy.

"Run, Usa-ko!"

Run? Impossible... Usagi was a soldier; it was her job to tell others to run, not to flee herself. She was afraid, but she could not abandon the people she loved.

Nekonell charged again. Tuxedo Kamen threw another enchanted rose and it hit the catlike creature full in the face. For the moment it fell back, the shock of the impact interrupting its deadly onslaught.

"Now, Usa-ko!" Tuxedo Kamen insisted urgently as rose petals filled the air. "At least you should get away from here!" His energy fading, the dark-haired man dropped to the ground, barely managing to remain upright on one knee as his head drooped.

At least you... Could it really be that serious? The Sailor Soldiers had overcome so many enemies. It could not all end here, there was always something... but even the Silver Crystal had gone dark. Still, Usagi could never leave her friends, no matter how hopeless things seemed.

"I can't do that!" Usagi knelt beside her boyfriend and reached out to put her hands on his. He could just as soon ask her to put out the sun. Wherever Mamoru went, she would follow...

A strange phrase; it felt like an echo from far away...

"Hurry and run!" Now Tuxedo Kamen looked at her, and Usagi saw the familiar sadness in his eyes. Mamoru's eyes always seemed sad, even when he was smiling and laughing. Usagi often wondered about it, but there was no time for that now. She knew what he really meant, and knew just as clearly why she could not do what he asked.

"No!" Usagi felt the tears starting in her eyes, but she fought against them, desperate to make her conviction clear. It always came down to this, when things were at their worst. Against normal enemies they all fought together, and the other girls came down hard on Usagi if she did not pull her weight, but when things were at their darkest, all illusion of equality vanished. Tsukino Usagi was the reincarnation of the Moon Princess Serenity, and to her friends, that meant her life was more precious than any of theirs. Again and again Usagi came up against the barrier of that truth, and again and again she fought it.

"I want to protect everyone!" she insisted, tightening her grip on Tuxedo Kamen's hand. "And you, my dear Mamo-chan, too..."

Was this the fate of a Princess? To stand helplessly while her loved ones died to protect her? Tuxedo Kamen's expression softened as Usagi's eyes filled with tears. She might have been a Princess once, but now she was Tsukino Usagi, and she would not accept such a cruel fate. Life was not worth living without Mamoru and her friends, and the duties of a Princess were nothing compared to that. If her loved ones had

to fight, Usagi would fight too. If they were in danger, she would protect them.

"I will fight with everyone..."

Usagi was abruptly conscious of her ordinary blouse and plain skirt. If she could not transform into Sailor Moon, how could she protect the people she loved? Why had the light of the Silver Crystal gone out? She had always hated fighting... she had always wished to be an ordinary girl... but if her friends could not be with her, none of that mattered. Being a soldier had always been an unwelcome burden, thrust upon her by destiny, but now, for the first time, Usagi wanted to be Sailor Moon with all her heart.

She raised Tuxedo Kamen's hand in hers and closed her eyes. *For my beloved Mamo-chan... please, Silver Crystal, shine again! Please, Moon Kingdom watching over me, make me a soldier again! Please... I want to protect the people I love!*

Usagi felt her hands grow hot with a sudden warmth. She heard Nekonell yowl in pain as it charged again and was thrown back by a mysterious force. Somewhere Luna was yelling something, and the warmth was spreading, growing larger until Usagi felt herself pulsing with it. Still, she kept her eyes closed, not wanting to disturb whatever magic was happening. It was keeping her dearest one safe, and for the moment, that was enough.

I want to fight... to protect my dear Mamo-chan, who I love!

Usagi opened her eyes to see her beloved opening his as well. Had he been wishing with her, wishing the same thing? Mamoru's clothing had changed. The slashed tuxedo had vanished, replaced by plates of armor and a fresh cape. Usagi's ordinary clothes, too, were gone, replaced by a flowing white dress she knew well. A shadow of their past lives had come to the present, an echo of the time when they had existed as Endymion and Serenity.

The towering marble of the ancient Moon Castle towered over them. Was it all an illusion, or had they been momentarily transported to the Moon? A rosy spark of light burst from the highest tower and soared down to envelop the joined hands of the reincarnated couple. It burst outward, enveloping them both, and the coalesced into something solid that forced their hands apart and hovered between them.

It was a slim rod, longer than Usagi's forearm, bright pink with a gold-edged red heart at its top. Usagi caught her breath, hardly daring to believe it. Had the Moon itself heard her call and sent her a new item? It sparkled between her and Mamoru with unknown power, nearly too dazzling to look at. Mamoru stared at it with amazement to match Usagi's wonder.

"This was born from our combined power?" the reborn Princess breathed. From their love, their mutual desire to protect each other, the reincarnated lovers had summoned a great magic from the distant past.

"The legendary rod..." Luna's voice, filled with stunned disbelief, reached Usagi's ears. It seemed they were all sharing the dream, all experiencing the echo of the long-lost world they had once inhabited.

"The Spiral Heart Moon Rod!" Artemis proclaimed from wherever the cats were standing.

Together, Usagi and Mamoru reached out and took hold of the rod. The illusion was fading, the dark walls of the abandoned house returning around them. Their eyes met. Mamoru seemed to be searching for something in Usagi's face, waiting for her to speak.

"The legendary Spiral Heart Moon Rod?" she repeated. That was an odd phrase... If this was a new item, why would it be legendary? The searching look faded from Mamoru's face.

"Nekonell!"

Usagi snapped back to reality as the long white dress of her past life was replaced by her modern street clothes. There would be plenty of time for her unanswered questions later. Right now, there was an enemy to be defeated, and she was determined to do what she had promised to do. The enemy, shattered into puzzle pieces by the rosy light, was reforming itself and yowling a fresh challenge.

"Usagi! Transform!" Artemis yelled from across the room.

"I'm sure you can do it now!" Luna called.

Usagi seized her transformation locket and discovered the object itself had been transformed. The Silver Crystal had not only restored its strength, but had evolved into a new shape with new power. With this, Usagi knew she could become a soldier strong enough to protect her friends.

"Moon Cosmic Power!" she cried out. The locket opened, and the jewel inside shone with the rosy light of Usagi and Mamoru's shared wish. "Make Up!"

Against All Odds

The crystal flashed. Ribbons of warm energy wrapped around Usagi's torso and limbs, forming the sailor suit that gave her the strength to fight. She was going back to war again. She had given up an ordinary life and accepted the fate of a Sailor Soldier... but this time, it was a path she had chosen.

She knew, as she seized the Spiral Heart Moon Rod and shouted the words that would destroy the daimon, that she had made a great sacrifice. With her own will, she had summoned this weapon, and the destiny of a soldier could not so easily be put aside. If her loved ones would be with her, however, it would be no burden.

The echo of her past life flowed through her, and it fueled the new power she wielded, but she would not allow it to control her future. She had been Princess Serenity, a jewel to be polished and protected and given away. Now she was Tsukino Usagi, a girl who understood love and friendship were more important than anything, and would fight to defend what she held dear.

Now she was Sailor Moon.

The End

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