



EPISODE SIX - SHOT TO THE HEART

"It's not just me seeing this, right?" Haruka asked Michiru, who was now back on her feet, albeit unsteady.

"I see it too, dear," Michiru replied, as she took in the scene, Hotaru and Vermellia leaning on her for support. "I *feel* it as well... like a chill soaking through my bones."

"Haruka-poppa," Hotaru exhaled weakly. "This malevolent aura of decay and death... it's the same as [REDACTED] ward, though not as intense."

"You mean whatever happened there could end up happening here?" Haruka asked. "But I didn't see any weird shit in the sky there like here."

Hotaru shrugged. "I don't know. But I think the two areas are probably connected somehow. I think we should go back to [REDACTED] and investigate some more."

Haruka nodded, looking over the badly injured Hotaru and Vermellia. "You two stick close by. You're all jacked up and if someone else attacks you'll need us to watch your backs."

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Even though it was daytime, [REDACTED] ward was no less eerie than it had been at night. The borders were still cordoned off, but strangely there was no one manning the security posts. There were no birds in the sky, and there was a strange, eerie silence that seemed to fill the air. The only sounds were the crunching of gravel under the party's feet as Haruka led them to the spot where they had found Gemini Sunrise's blade, the *Red Sun*.

"What the--" Michiru exhaled as she noticed something strange ahead. "Haruka, look."

Bodies were littered everywhere. All the investigators from the various global agencies that had descended upon the ward to investigate it, all lay on the ground, unconscious, foam leaking from their mouths and their eyes rolled back in their heads. While they still seemed to be breathing, the expressions on their faces were disquieting, to say the least.

Each one of the fallen had their face distorted into a grotesque parody of excessive emotion - be it fear, rage, lust, sadness or joy.

"It's like someone overloaded their emotions or something," Haruka pondered. Then she realized. If Mako-chan had been changed into the worst possible future version of herself, then...

"Oh, no." Haruka uttered. "We need to--"

But it was too late. Even as she began to speak, a golden light erupted from the ground, exploding outward like the rays of the sun. From the light, the ethereally beautiful form of the Goddess Venus emerged, clad in an iridescent gold dress, her gold-blond hair waving in the wind as in the famous Botticelli painting, her crystal blue eyes flickering with subtle, controlled anger.



Merely glimpsing her form, Haruka went weak at the knees, feeling a wave of uncontrolled desire wash over her. She could see Hotaru and Michiru suffering similarly. Vermellia, for her part, seemed unaffected, but was too weak to do much more than stand, using Crescent Claw with the blade folded as an improvised crutch.

Venus licked her lips slowly, seductively, eyeing the entire group. She levelled her gaze at Vermellia.

"Little kitty-kat," she purred. "You don't like what you see?" She jutted out a hip seductively.

Vermellia shrugged with her one free shoulder. "Sorry! I'm not into the whole sexytime thng."

Venus chuckled and smiled tautly. "Oh right, you're the 'big happy kid' of the group." Her smile widened, but her expression remained dark. "Well, *lust* isn't the only emotion I know."

She locked gazes with Vermellia, and it was as if Vermellia was magnetically drawn to Venus' eyes, which seemed to become a hollow, sunken black. Then waves of intense fear and regret washed over her. Feelings of loneliness, abandonment, emptiness. Guilt. The guilt and shame she had felt after killing her murderous father back on Energy Nede. The abandonment she felt because her mother was always too busy to ever come see her. Feeling like she was a burden to her big sis Cressida who'd had to give up her childhood to look after her...

Venus calmly, happily continued "Yes, that's right. You know the truth. You should just *die*. The world is better without you."

Vermellia raised her free hand, popping out sharp claws from her fingertips. She pressed them to her jugular. One quick slash, and it would be done. It would be so simple...

"Vermellia-chan! No!" Hotaru cried out.

"I'm sorry," Vermellia rasped as she pressed her claws to her neck. "I--"

Something strong clamped around her wrist, gently but firmly pulling her hand away from her neck with a relentless iron grip that was somehow strong, warm and comforting.

Vermellia looked at her wrist and saw a hand gripping it. Looking up, her eyes met the concerned, yet smiling face of her sister.

Vermellia instantly felt better - at least emotionally. It was as if Cressida's very presence lifted the dark cloud that had been forced upon her.

"Tag out, sis. I got this," Cressida said confidently, standing in between Venus and Vermellia, letting go of her sister's hand. She winked.

Haruka, Michiru and Hotaru also stood back up, disoriented, but feeling as if some kind of spell had been broken.

Venus frowned slightly at the disruption of her emotional manipulation, but her expression quickly shifted back to one of casual confidence. Just because Cressida had some innate Venusian ability to cancel out emotional control it didn't mean she was able to stand against a true Goddess of Love.

"Well," she began coolly. "If it isn't the granddaughter from the future universe. The useless one who can't even become a Sailor Senshi. Who doesn't even have mastery of her Venus powers. All you can do is punch your problems and hope they go away~"

Cressida inclined her head slightly. If the insults stung, she didn't show it. Instead, she quickly assessed the position of everyone else on the battlefield. Haruka came up behind her, itching to fight, but Cressida waved her off.

"This is a family thing," Cressida insisted. "Take care of sis for me, Uncle Haruka."

"Man, I wanted to finally settle the score with Minako-chan as to who's the better leader," Haruka grumbled even as she complied, taking Vermellia over to the others. "Next time, I get first dibs."

"You got it!" Cressida replied cheerfully.

Venus, for her part, grew increasingly irritated at the banter between the two.

"Are you ready to fight a *goddess*?" Venus demanded with a haughty laugh, raising an arm and summoning a sword made of light. "You can't hope to defeat me, someone who's given her whole life over to duty and fighting to protect the world!" A rainbow aura flared up behind her.

Cressida was unphased, extending one arm, holding her hand palm up and beckoning Venus to attack. "Yo, gramma. Let's go."

Like a fighter in a *wuxia* film, Venus seemed to float off the ground and slide forward at high speed towards Cressida, the tip of her blade pointing forwards, glinting in the light. Cressida sidestepped quickly and ducked low, bringing her hands up to knock Venus' hands out of position in an attempt to make her drop the blade.

Venus threw the blade high up in the air in response, and then dropped to the ground, savagely bringing up a knee to strike Cressida in the chin.

Cressida's neck snapped back, and she flew backwards into a wall, which exploded on impact. Venus flew forward and delivered a Sailor V kick right into Cressida's midsection, causing her to be buried further into the building she'd crashed into to the point where she was buried in the brickwork and piping.

Venus stood back and admired her handiwork, smirking.

The smirk, however, faded, when a glowing golden light began to emanate from the hole Cressida had been driven into. The next moment, the building itself began to shake and rumble. Venus took a pre-emptive step back, but it wasn't enough, as Cressida **BLASTED** out of the hole,

her hair and eyes burning with golden light, a glowing ki aura surrounding her as she smashed into Venus, like a comet, sending the goddess skidding back.

Venus kept upright, her feet digging gulleys in the ground as she was pushed back by Cressida. *How did she get stronger so suddenly?*

Grinning as she saw the look on Venus' face, Cressida kept on the offensive, starting to pepper her with heavy punches and high kicks. She wasn't going to explain that one of her abilities was the capacity to absorb any kinetic impact and convert that energy into offensive force.

Venus parried the heavy blows, able to keep up with Cressida's speed. She leveraged her power as a Goddess to increase the speed and pace of the fight, wondering what Cressida's limit was as it pertained to stamina. She could see that the longer the parrying went on, the less Cressida's powerup was manifesting. *So the less she gets hit, the less powerful she gets, eh?*

Venus hopped backwards to distance herself from Cressida and started to evade the punches completely, hoping to drain the girl of all her energy.

Cressida noticed the switch in strategy, and pulled her punches, smirking. "Oh, you're not getting away that easily, Gramma," she said, scrunching her eyes and punching her fists together, causing them to glow bright gold. "One thing you don't get about me is that just because I don't use Venus powers to shoot beams or hearts or chains doesn't mean I don't know how to use it in my own way~"

She punched the air hard with a shell of golden energy, causing a shockwave of high-intensity plasma to ripple forth that screamed towards Venus, who was forced to defensively bat it away towards a skyscraper, whose base exploded, the abandoned building collapsing into rubble.

Cressida continued punching the air, and Venus drew back under the onslaught, forcing Cressida to advance on her.

"You'll never beat me," Venus declared defiantly, leaning back further. "You can't even land a blow on me anymore."

"Oh yeah?" Cressida grinned and leapt into the air, right arm outstretched to deliver the mother of all haymakers as Venus' gaze met the sky, as if to confirm something.

Venus grinned, Cressida's exposed arm now in range. She raised a hand quickly and grabbed the Venus Sword out of the air, which had finally completed its descent from the heights she had thrown it to.

"Your confidence is your undoing!" Venus yelled, swinging the sword down to cut Cressida's arm clean off.

Except, like her plan, the Venus sword shattered to pieces after impacting Cressida's arm, which was suddenly coated with a skintight golden-covered energy made of a mix of *ki*, Venusian Planet Power and something else.

"Yeah, that's not gonna work," Cressida informed Venus, winking. "There's more than one way to fight, ya know. I've trained in *Iron Soul* martial arts an' mastered mixing Advanced Armament *haki* with Venus power-- eat my *AURIC FIST!*" The next second, she completed her haymaker, knocking Venus clear through three buildings, collapsing a parking garage along the way.

As numerous car alarms went off, Cressida dusted her palms, stretching from left to right as she waited for the inevitable counter. There was no way Goddess Venus was gonna go down that easy.

Sure enough, after a few moments, Venus flew back to the battle, adjusting her jaw and spitting out a tooth, looking slightly impressed.

"You're not as useless as I thought," Venus admitted. "But you're still going to lose to me. I have many ways to fight."

Snapping her fingers, Venus laughed as the hundreds of knocked out people around the area slowly staggered to their feet, zombie-like.

Cressida looked at this scene in shock. "Aww, shit," she said to herself as she saw them rise. Beating the crap out of a goddess was one thing, but all those innocent people... while she could probably incapacitate them one-on-one given enough time, any attack heavy enough to take them down at once would probably mortally injure them.

"That's low," Cressida spat, watching the army of mind-controlled slaves start lurching towards her.

"Life's a battle and I *flay to win*," Venus declared authoritatively.

"I really hope that's one of your malaprops," Cressida huffed as she jumped out of the way of some random citizens who had begun to attack her.

Thinking quickly, she decided to use an attack she'd adapted from her mom, a secret Shinguuji clan attack that let one pass attacks harmlessly through intermediate objects until it hit its intended target.

Pulling back her fist, she punched the air and made another plasma shockwave, calling out "*Hajya Ken Ouka Houshin!*". The wave passed harmlessly through the throng, but unfortunately Venus was able to easily dodge. There was no time to position properly with all the people constantly hitting her and causing her to dodge them.

Clearly, physical force wasn't going to win this, Cressida realized. As primarily a brawler, this did put her at a disadvantage, but she was far from a mindless meathead, despite what anyone said.

There had to be a way to win. She took stock of the situation, dodging some random crescent beams Venus shot at her through the crowds.

Taking a look at the faces of the people in the throng, it was clear that Venus was puppeting them via their emotions. Most seemed to be in a state of angry, lustful bliss. It felt like they were empty, lonely and scared, and being led on with the promise of an empty affection.

Unlike normal Venus senshi, While Cressida was pretty empathic, she didn't really have the ability to control other people's emotions. Still, she knew she had *some* capacity to interact with emotions. After all, she had been able to nullify Venus' grip on her sister, Haruka and the others. But that was only a few people and at relatively close range. And it wasn't something she had consciously done. It was like an aura she was putting out.

There was no time to train whatever that was into something effective. There had to be way to exploit the effect practically. And *now*.

As a student of the Iron Soul school of martial arts, she was trained in the use of *haki*, or applied will, to strengthen her body and augment her attacks. Emotions and Will generally arose from the same wellspring... one cannot effectively use *haki* without mastering one's emotions, after all...

Cressida crashed into a car as Venus hit her with a *Love-Me-Chain* attack and leapt back to keep the people between them as a shield.

"Trying to think of a way out of this?" Venus taunted. "Just give it up, you're just a beet head!"

Cressida just ignored her, continuing to work things out. She knew she was close to a breakthrough. Her Venus powers absolutely did not work like those of other Venus senshi. She was always "off" in that regard. But they *did* seem to be more adapted to her innate skills as a martial arts fighter, maybe because of the bits of Segata Sanshiro in her DNA. So, just because she couldn't manipulate other people's emotions didn't necessarily mean she couldn't manipulate *her own*...

Concentrating, Cressida tapped into her memories, drawing out the feelings of love and family she had for her mother and father. Her Grandmother and Grandfather. Her cousin she'd raised as a sister. Uncle Artemis. All the happy times and all the things that made life worth living for her even through the roughest patches. She focused intensely, making the feelings as visceral as possible.

Then, she began charging her fists with Venusian Ki. Not too much, not enough to do more than sting a little. But she then willed herself to mix the feelings she was experiencing into the ki, causing the golden energies around her fist to take on a slight rainbow hue.

Pushing as much joy and positivity into the aura around her fists as possible, she unleashed a series of quick energy punches at the people, aiming not to hurt but rather direct the positive emotional energy she'd built up into people Venus was controlling, countering the sadness and emptiness they felt with concentrated waves of love, friendship, and happiness.

The effect was instant. Venus staggered back in disbelief as her control over the people wavered, and they broke free from her influence, confusion taking root as they struggled to understand what was happening.

Cressida knew she had to act quickly before Venus had a chance to counter. She repeated the same process as before, putting all of her energy into one last *Auric Fist* attack, imbuing it with all her most personal and powerful memories of her family and the happiness it had brought her. If Venus was this bitter and aggressive because she'd been shouldering all her burdens alone...

"VENUS! *GRAMMA!*" Cressida yelled out, leaping forward as quickly as she could over the crowd, angling down and slamming her fist into the center of Venus' chest, right over her heart, calling out "*ACCEPT MY FIST OF LOVE!!*"

A rainbow-colored shockwave of energy slammed out from Cressida's fist and blasted through Venus, completely suffusing her. Rather than flying backwards from the force, Venus seemed to absorb it all, eyes widened in shock.

Dropping to her knees, Venus slumped into Cressida's arms and then looked up into her eyes, smiling as realization struck her. This granddaughter from another timeline she barely knew... in that other universe she, Aino Minako, had been able to have it all. A loving family and generations of descendants who loved her and were there for her. Where they all managed to fight for peace and justice and still maintain the bonds that mattered.

Cressida could feel the void in this strange version of her Grandmother. She intuited her feelings, because for a brief time in her life, Cressida too had been torn between duty and her desire to have a life. Luckily, she'd been able to strike a balance.

"You don't have to go it alone, Gramma," Cressida said gently, running a hand through her hair as Venus began to bawl, letting out decades of suppressed sadness. "You *can* have it all. Don't let anyone tell you otherwise. You're *Aino freakin' Minako*. You've got the talent and the energy. Don't ever forget it!"

Venus' form slowly evaporated, leaving behind present-day Minako, who looked drained and tired, but much, much happier.

"I thought I told you to call me 'Mina-P,'" Minako chided. "'Gramma' makes me feel old, and I'm young and hot!"

"But you let my mom call you 'mom'," Cressida protested.

"Because that makes me a hot *MILK!*" Minako declared, winking and punching the air.

Cressida's mouth opened slowly and then closed again as she decided not to correct her on that one.

"You know," Minako continued softly, gently punching Cressida's shoulder, "if my family in the future will turn out to be as awesome as you, maybe it's all right for me to try having one instead of being a lonely brooding crimefighter like the Bartman."

Cressida laughed heartily. "That's right! And that's 'The Batman'."

Out of energy, Minako collapsed in Cressida's arms, a key falling out of her pocket.

As her grandmother from another universe slept blissfully on the hood of a car, Cressida considered the key carefully, wincing at the dark energy she felt wafting from it.

"What the heck is this thing?" she asked in confusion, trying to take a read on it with her Vortex Manipulator. But just as with the version of Chibiusa she'd encountered in the future the key gave off no readings at all.

Looking around her, she saw the vague outlines of shadowy cityscape hovering just behind that of Tokyo's. The Vortex Manipulator got readings from it, but they were wildly contradictory and made no sense.

"It's happening here too," Haruka remarked. "We saw this same shit back in Nerima."

Cressida frowned. "This is way over my head, and I've seen some *stuff*. I think it's time I asked the *waifu* to get involved."

"We going back to the HOTEL?" Vermellia asked weakly, barely able to stand.

"Sis?" Cressida asked in a panic as Vermellia collapsed, seemingly physically all right, but fading in and out much like the key.

"Sis!?"