

“Does this belong to you?”

Tsukiko had asked, voice curt and sharp, as soon as Fincher had come to answer her taps on the door.

“It’s a piece of your ring, right?”

She was met with a sneering, annoyed face that squinted at the piece of metal presented to her. Fincher’s expression was quickly taken over by surprise, followed by a subtle, shaking fright manifesting in her eyes and a pale flush washing over her skin.

Fincher produced a “Yeah...” that seemed more automatic than anything.

Tsukiko glared at her, then pushed Fincher’s arm back from the door and strolled inside. This seemed to awaken Fincher from her shocked daze and spur her into loudly protesting. Her eyes went from confused to crazed, trembling with fury & disdain. Tsukiko loudly shushed her, then tossed the fragment of ring across the laminate floor, where it bounced and echoed like church bells.

“I got that from someone who found it on a dead body, you know.”

She took a seat on a crummy hotel chair, a queen in her throne. Her presence had transformed the room into a grand court, seating her 1000 metres in the air waiting for her accused to step before her.

“Got you.”

Her prey breathed harshly and furiously grimaced as if she were trying to murder Tsukiko with sheer contempt. "I... I don't know what you're talking about. What do you want from me?!"

"Me?" Tsukiko couldn't help but grin, for she was now living the scenario she had been planning in her head for weeks: the chance to go through with her plan, having fallen right on her lap. "I just need to ask you a question, ma'am."

She delved into her pockets and from within she whipped out the photograph she had laying on her desk as motivation during all her nights of pursuit, its plastic corners cutting through the air like knives. Fincher was continuing to sputter in confusion and agitation but was sharply shushed as Tsukiko stood to walk towards her, holding the picture right before her helical eyes.

"What do you see in this picture?"

Fincher's expression soured like her laying eyes on the photo had infected her with something. Her mouth trembled with anger. "Nothing," she snarled.

"Nothing," Tsukiko repeated, but with the word drawn out and caught being pleased and solemn. "Interesting answer, don't you think? I've asked people that before and they always say something like 'a bridge' or 'that's just an empty walkway.' It's pretty weird to say a photo is of nothing, isn't it?"

Sliding the photo away, Tsukiko's hand went into the other side of her pocket, dropping the bag in and replacing it with a blunt chunk of plastic which clacked as a blade slid out from it. Tsukiko hoisted the boxcutter with a shaking hand, letting it point straight up rather than being brandished.

“It was you, right? You left somebody’s dead body in the woods around a House in Reinhold. Why? *How*, actually?”

“That... No, this doesn’t make any sense! How do you know that?!”

Tsukiko said nothing; the vicious, deliberating look in her eyes said more than words could have.

Fincher suddenly lurched at her, screaming first in anger then from shock as Tsukiko slammed her elbow in her face, pushing her back against the wall of the cramped room and making her kneel to the floor. Limbs moved by jolts of adrenaline, Fincher crawled forward, snaking her hands under the room’s beaten up bedframe and pulling out a shining silver suitcase.

She opened it with the fervor of a vulture digging into a newly slumped over carcass. Two things waited for her inside, both cushioned in blocks of spongy foam: one looked to be a pocket watch with a long chain, other was a small sword, cast of dark metal which sucked in light around it like a black hole, particularly towards the onyx jewel which adorned the center of its hilt.

Fincher brought the sword into her hands, meaning to mutter but actually yelling “No good bitch!” as she wiped her hand across her face and found it dirtied with a blood drop trickling out her nose. “All I need to get rid of you is a drop of myself,” she said coldly, as she traced her thumb over the blade and marked it with red stain.

The colour sank into the ceaseless black, and with its disappearance came something... *wrong*.

Charged became the atmosphere - both poetic and literal. The room was polluted by a strong scent of copper, so nauseating one would nearly swear they could see fumes tinting the light. Every hair along Tsukiko's body was standing up rigid as a pin.

Fincher tilted her stance with the sword, then ran her pinkie along its sharpest edge, leaving a small but deep cut from which she let her blood flow down onto the blade. Rather than dirtying and dulling the pristine metal, the blood was absorbed like water poured over fertile farmland.

The horrible smell in the air was now accompanied by the shrill sound of running high voltage, brought on by the sword being swarmed with vivid streaks and pulses of light bursting out of its guard and swirling around its length. These little wisps piled on top of each other and started bursting forth with such ferocity that they escaped the sword's orbit and floated in midair.

They hovered in front of Tsukiko, clustering together in abstract shapes which warped the air around them, like tiny clouds made up of droplets of the deepest, blackest, stillest water. Each little dark tear containing their own ocean; their own little storm which all drew your gaze in and whispered to your eyes to fill the blank sights with flashes of memories that shouldn't be and visions that never could have been. Dreams and illusions drawn out of your mind and tempted to come leap into their abyss.

An abyss which stared back.

Something had been born of that sword. Hunched like a woodland predator, body flashing with everything imaginable and yet nothing at all. It cocked its head at Tsukiko, every minute movement staining the world.

It howled, screaming like an open valve piping out a steam heated from all the world's cries. It darted forward towards Tsukiko, willed to see to it that she would be erased from the Earth, left nothing more than another drop in the invisible sea.

Tsukiko jumped out of the way.

A simple leap, the most animalistic, rudimentary dodge imaginable, and yet it seemed to freeze the room.

The wretched thing's head warbled as it stared forward with an empty, sickening face; with the visage of a long forgotten figure dredged up in one's deepest nightmare. It dissipated where it stood, the disorientating swirls of colours making it up dimming into nothing as quickly as it had appeared. Tsukiko was taking deep, stressed breaths as she looked forward. Her eyes were wide and wet, her expression drawn from terror but painted over with a look of victory and elation.

Fincher's form seemed petrified as her eyes slid to their left to look at Tsukiko, confused and furious.

"How... how did you see my *Nova*?" Fincher asked with drawn out words in a broken voice.

"Right, I wasn't supposed to be able to see that. That's what I presumed." She was talking to herself more than her enemy, emotions unknowable even to herself. "What was that thing? You called it a... *Nova*?" Tsukiko pointed her boxcutter towards Fincher but stepped backwards away from her. "And it's *yours*?"

"Why the *Hell* do you have a photo of one?" Fincher was clearly in a state of full blown panic, scurrying around her room and riling around the draw of the stock nightstand.

She crouched over it, trying to hide the moves of her spare hand while Tsukiko came tauntingly towards her.

“It makes for a perfect weapon, don’t you think?” Tsukiko mused. “What better way to get rid of the strongest people on Earth than with something they can’t even see? How else do you kill scholars of magic other than with something that’s *beyond magic*?”

“This can’t happen!” Fincher suddenly screeched. “The gift of the *Nova* was given to us! There isn’t supposed to be anyone else!!” Her voice switched from hysterical yells to primal growling, “Who are you?”

“My name is...” Tsukiko slid her left hand into her raised hood, slipping her fingers between her hair and pulling a pair of strands free as she swerved into pointing forward, “*Foxfire*.”

With her words, the room was suddenly flooded with a stark, blinding light, purely white & lacking in the dull tones of the bulbs which were lit beforehand. It was centered around her raised left wrist, streaks of light tracing over her veins expanded into shimmering webs that crawled all over her body; her pupils aflame as her face was framed by the radiance crawling into it. At the spot where it emanated from, the light spewing from her wrist shone so intensely that it piled into a physical form: a silver metal bangle wrapped tightly around her skin. It was long but sleek, surface perfectly smooth save for an indentation on the top and a small cord opposite it on the bottom.

The strands of her fluffed out hair had also exploded into light, leaving in their wake a little stone trinket carved in the form of a fox on the prowl. Tsukiko brought to the divot on top the bracelet, where it fit perfectly inside.

“Cocky fucking *Scene Star*,” Fincher spat, contemplating her sword for a second before holding her palm flat and slashing into it, letting the blade feast on a much greater share of her blood.

The stormcloud, the weapon, the *Nova*, burst back into view, taking up space in the room like static and dead pixels consuming a cracked screen. Tsukiko could sense it staring her down - in whatever sense it had “eyes” and it pointed at her - in whatever sense it had “fingers”.

The distance between her and it warped to zero as she felt herself being slammed backwards. She felt like her soul was fire, and her self was being forced from her body.

Her right hand clutched itself around the ethereal bracelet, its touch seeming to make a soft, calming heat which valiantly repelled the pounding spikes of cold she could feel drilled into her bones.

Likewise, the blizzard of pitch black zipping through her head was melting through to a single clear vision.

The room was lit lowly, with walls and floor alike painted ultramarine and lined with ornate gold trimmings that glistened like stars when they caught the scarce light. Tsukiko knelt in a pool of shallow water, which was surrounded by masked constituents in gorgeous violet robes. With the other housekeepers behind her, Ririka was standing at the far end of the pool, getting the black chiffon of her gorgeous dress wet for the sake of dropping flower buds in the water.

She was in the shadow of Mother Luci Peele, who - with her body cloaked and hair wrapped - looked a spectre of flying fabric and stars.

“Name yourself for them, child,” she spoke, firm but comforting.

"Tsukiko, of the KIBOU Nation," she huffed.

"And for the title of your soul?"

"Foxfire."

That was its name. The name of the essence inside her, the stardust that flowed through her veins; the face brave enough to face the night; The means of fulfilling the mission bestowed by the gods on the eve of starfall.

Save your heart; save this world.

"Star Change!"

Tsukiko's fingertips reached the cord stuck to the bracelet, and pulled it to slide against her skin underneath the intangible metal.

Foxfire burst forth.

Beams of light shot out from every angle like frenzied gunfire. They draped new colours over everything in sight, while Tsukiko was pulled in the embrace of the stellar waves clouding into the illusion of a screaming fox head, painted in the greens & purples of the Arctic north sky.

It bit down on her, all of the stardust wrapping around her body, changing her clothing and cloaking her entirely in space-coloured fabric, each stitch shining with ethereal infinity. The strike from the *Nova* had sent Tsukiko straight through the room's door, but with the power flowing into her she landed gracefully on the snow coated asphalt outside. It was late and the sky was dark, but Tsukiko's silhouette illuminated the scene with bright streaks emblazoned on her changed clothing.

Only her scarf had survived the transformation, blowing behind her like it was a tail. Her hoodie was replaced by an orange robe , adorned with the pattern of vulpecula, the stars whose light armoured her. While her arms were fanned with ruffled silk that belled out around her wrists to wave in-sync with her scarf, her legs were guarded by bundles of fluffy fur that had wrapped up her calves like high wooled boots.

Her wrath, fear, and exhilaration were all hidden behind a mask: the visage of a cunning fox, painted bright orange. Spanning across the top of her head - with pointed, tufted ears - and wrapping around to where only the white tip of her hair stuck out the back. It was adorned with twin tassels, a crescent moon painted on each side and streaks of red on the front, and wispy eyes - ragged like fox tails - which shone yellow so intensely they seemed to give off smoke.

She stood proud, grit and courage crawling out of her and facing down the demons. She was a *Scene Star*. She was *Foxfire*.

She felt as though she took a deep breath, yet in this state she did not truly need to breathe.

She stepped on top of the door that she had thrown against, the force from coming into contact with surging magic having blown it clean off the hinges; one chunk of it had even broken off.

Fincher had followed her outside, the *Nova* shadowing her, unravelling its form behind her like a great pair of wings.

The *Scene Star's* glowing eyes stared right past them, and she took a small kneel, pointing towards a chunk of the wall that had been blown apart like a tree limb struck by lightning.

SAGITARRIUS

The rugged slab of plaster suddenly dotted with little stars. The solid material was eaten up by swatches of galaxy which poured over it like liquid. It became malleable, being sculpted by invisible hands. Its broad shape was filed down into a thin form which arched out at its tip. It had reformed into a lightweight crossbow, magically elastic strings already drawn to shoot a serrated bolt.

Foxfire approached it, taking her newly gifted weapon and aiming towards the demon.

The crossbow's ammo went soaring towards the *Nova*, jabbing itself in the middle of the swirling mass.

It stumbled, warbling forwards towards Tsukiko with wrath. Its shape became coiled as it darted across the air like a feathered serpent.

It laid a hand against *Foxfire's* robe, briefly clashing against the starlight. Its winding body broke the space around them, and as Tsukiko stumbled backwards she abruptly tensed and felt off-balance. She was now standing on a slant and looking down towards a rough fall; within the time it would take to blink, she had been taken to the hotel's roof.

The *Nova* in front of her seemed to stop and breathe, subtly blowing Tsukiko's scarf backwards around her neck. If she turned around and looked down, she'd see Fincher gladly making another cut on herself to feed the thing with; instead, she was entranced by how close it was to her, and how she seemed to comprehend more of its form now. She could see it clearly.

It was horrible.

The bolt in its neck lost its stars and dissolved back into pieces of rotted wall, Tsukiko cursing as her crossbow did the same. Newly invigorated, the apparition lurched up with a repulsive chirping sound, driving Tsukiko to leap backwards towards the ground.

Her feet crashed back to the severed door. She was stunned for a second, but the cradle of *Foxfire* meant she could brush off an ordinarily bone-breaking fall.

LYNX

As the *Nova* came soaring back down towards her, the door too was consumed by stars, a little zig-zag pattern of them which shone as it sprouted paws and fanged jaws. Tsukiko stepped aside as the radiant illusion of a bobcat fiercely jumped onto the monster.

The pounce made the *Nova* wail in agony from absent mouths. It was a choir of all human torment, making Tsukiko's stomach feel like it was trying to crawl free through her skin. The celestial lynx tried injuring the creature with its bites, but the thing's form just fell apart like it was digging into a pile of dry clay. There was no skin or blood, no vitalities of a living being, only layered, paradoxically lifeless pieces that sloughed off and faded away into a distortion of light and distance.

Suddenly the *Nova* cried one last time, the soundwave nearly feeling tangible as it went rippling through the air. The lynx collapsed back into a door, and Tsukiko had her view of the fight slip away, accosted by her visions of the past.

-hot-

-scared-

-heartbreak-

-heartbreak-

-a lot-

-hate this-
-end it-
-hate it here-
-hate it there too-

“Did I fuck up this badly? Do I die here?”

-pretty-
-what is she-
-how did she-
-hugged-
-comforted-
-helped-
-saved-
-loved-

“She’ll save me again...”

“My Lily...”

Tsukiko had been inrapured by the *Nova*, which knocked her to the ground and had a grip on her shoulders. She could sense something awful wanting to burrow into her, held back by her transformed state. She wormed around in an effort to cover her wrist; if she kept her bracelet from being broken she’d stay transformed and protected.

Fincher was standing over her, kicking her as she was held ensnared. Despite being made only moments ago, the cut on her hand looked cleaned and scabbed over.

“Take pride, you vermin,” she coughed, blood spilling from her mouth before she cackled and wiped it off. “You’re due to become another martyr for the new world.”

“Martyr?” Tsukiko stalled, “You’re just gonna kill me like that? Aren’t you worried about where I came from? Why I can see your invisible monsters? Maybe there’s a whole army of people like me coming for you as we speak,” she taunted.

Fincher sputtered for a second. “You’re bluffing! Shitbag! We’ll be long gone by the time anybody comes for you, little fox. Right now you’re feeling rather helpless, all tied up, not able to use your power. What kind of magic is that anyway? You can change objects, huh? Bring them to life. Hm, I suppose it’d be a shame if something were to tear your arms right off so you could never use your power again.”

Tsukiko was jerked forward across the ground by the *Nova*, while Fincher pointed her sword down at her in intimidation.

SERPENS

Fincher suddenly tensed up, her entire body jolting as she felt a sharp double-puncture against her neck, followed by her windpipe getting constricted, a crystal smooth form tightening itself around her entire neck.

“Got you.” Tsukiko smirked beneath her mask. “Unfortunately for you, it seems you’ve made a fatal mistake, and just the one I expected you to, at that.”

“Darling!” a candy sweet voice cried out from inside. Walking over the broken glass with the steps of a doe came a girl who looked to have walked out of a storybook, clutching a little purple book in her hands.

Ririka’s eyes shined red like a creature of the night, glassy & deep like a gemstone & reflecting with tears as they found Tsukiko, never wanting to lose her again.

Fincher jabbed her sword up to her chin, wedging off her binding: a pale serpent made out of glass, which broke back apart as she gasped for air, staring dumbfounded at Tsukiko's rescuer.

"The truth is, I was never fighting you alone," Tsukiko gloated. "My angel has been with me the entire time, from the moment I locked eyes with you." Ririka knelt beside Tsukiko, reaching for her wrist as she stared in horrid awe of the being they would conquer over. "I had her hide, but she's been waiting for me the whole time we fought."

Brushing aside the trailing fabric on her arms, Ririka grabbed hold of the switch underneath Tsukiko's changer and pulled it, igniting *Foxfire* to glisten with revolving orange streaks, eyes burning like twin rising suns.

"She has the stars in her heart. That's her power: drawing the shape of constellations on our reality, and calling upon their form." Overflowing with strength, Tsukiko rose and pulled out of the *Nova's* grasp, scarring its arms as she stumbled backwards, caught by Ririka's arms. "She's my greatest love, and my greatest weapon."

Straightening herself into a predator's stance, Tsukiko pulled her changer again, dashing forward.

MOONBOW

Born full grown in the night sky

A flare of colour standing proud against the black

Much as the same as her heart proves noble and romantic

Beneath her predator's mask

Charging straight past the *Nova*, she rather put her fist forward towards Fincher herself, letting it collide with her sword as she instinctively raised it to block. All of *Foxfur's* energy was fed into it, as it quivered & broke apart, shattering into uncharacteristic

splinters which dissolved before they even hit the ground. Behind them, the same fate befell the Nova, its body tearing away & vanishing.

Fincher stumbled backwards, falling to her knees and cradling her head as she wailed in pain and misery; like something foul was injected in her and she was trying to scream it out, she laid on the asphalt in agony - almost pitifully.

Foxfire's garments and ethereal glow scattered off of Tsukiko, leaving her in her regular clothes as she readjusted to the wind blowing against her bare skin. "Just like I thought," she said, "The monster and the sword were linked together. Destroying one got rid of the other." She pulled up her hood and looked down ruefully at Fincher writhing on the floor. Her changer faded away from her wrist, the remaining glitters of *Foxfire* fading back into the shape of hairs which floated around her feet. "Needless to say, you were completely outfoxed."

Fincher had ceased writhing on the ground, now fruitlessly limping away from the hotel entrance and back around the building's dirtiest, a motion which seemed like more a denial of what just transpired than a genuine effort of escaping it. Tsukiko walked in step behind her, having become an ominous shadow.

"We'll be making ourselves scarce soon," Tsukiko told her, ignored. "The way you talked... I know you're just an underling, right? Tell me who else is behind this."

Fincher said nothing, and an agitated Tsukiko was about to start badgering her further when she came to a sudden stop, her foot hovering midair like displacing one pebble on the asphalt would rock the entire world.

"When you were rooting around in that drawer, am I right to guess you were using a phone to call one of them for help?" Tsukiko said out loud, less speaking to Fincher and

more distraughtly reminding herself of her own earlier conclusion. She gulped, “and right now,” she raised her arm to point past Fincher, “they’re hiding behind that corner, aren’t they?”

Tsukiko’s vision went dark, replaced by the sensation of merely feeling the entire world around her. Feeling an imposing interloper draped in red running straight towards her. The pounding of black combat boots on the ground, every dust cloud kicked up polluting the air with a little hint of gray.

And their hand, resting on the handle of a sword. That sword, far far longer than her meek little box cutter, easily thrice the length of even Fincher’s accursed dagger, a blade shining with the light of the rising moon, primed to tear through anything in its path.

Anything, such as her.

It seemed like she had gone somewhere else, when really somewhere else had gone to her. Her fear-stricken body was left to act on impulse, as it reached forward and grabbed on to the first thing it could as a shield. It was a caramel brown, and had a pleasantly fuzzy texture.

She had dug her nails into Fincher’s coat, dragging the woman backwards and pivoting her to be in front of her.

With her scream, Tsukiko’s vision of her surroundings faded back into her. Fincher’s shoulder was dug open, the attacker having sliced through it to avoid fatally injuring her.

Their broad, imposing body was wrapped in heavy black fabric, face tauntingly hidden. They yanked Fincher away from Tsukiko with a bare hand, just as she hoped for; if they were a *Spark Star*, they had the bravado to fight without transforming. With her out of

the way, their sword was raised at Tsukiko, who winced with one eye and looked past the weapon & up their arm with the other, wavering on their fingers.

“The Whispering Stars!”

All three looked over at Ririka, who was running for dear life towards Tsukiko as her own shining bracelet of change clamped itself over her lacey sleeve, and her journal faded into light and reshaped itself to the shape of a trio-petaled flower, before being combined with her changer. She almost incoherently screamed “Star Change!”, sounding more like a howling animal than a brave hero.

Jumping in front of her love, her body was consumed by the electrifying light, warding back the swordsman with petals made out of radiance. They wrapped around her while an entire sky of stars appeared over her head, falling down onto her as she, *The Whispering Stars*, blossomed forth.

Unlike the sleek look of Foxfur, Ririka’s transformation carried over all of the ruffles, frills, and whimsical detailing of her normal manner of dress. Dotted by a million stars, it was all held together by vines, which curled up her body until they bloomed into her helmet, plated by the full form of a dazzling princess lily.

Ririka spun like a ballerina, *Whispering Stars*’ skirt poofing out like a rose bud as she waved her hands back to the trash bin in the distance.

EQUULEUS

The bin rumbled to life, splitting open and leaving its bagged contents behind as it was reassembled into the shape of a gallant foal, cantering onto the scene at the behest of its summoner. It whinnied and reared its legs, bucking the swordsman to the ground and

bowing to Ririka like she was a beastmaster, letting her climb on its back to make it her mount.

Tsukiko looked up at her, tears clearing themselves from her eyes. Ririka reached her hand down, grabbing Tsukiko's sleeves and pulling her up to her. Tsukiko sniffled, and settled on the metal horse with a snuggle against Ririka's back.

Their attacker had regained his footing, ready to strike the two even with their braying ally in play. Thankfully, the horse followed Ririka's instinct to fly over fight, leaving him behind in a cloud of stardust as the couple's stead took them fleeing away into the cover of the night.