

Tsukiko had lost track of the night, and abruptly found that the scant, artificial light she sat in had morning sun bleeding into it. She had been having trouble sleeping since her episode of fright in the woods, not fully shaking off the goosebumps it gave her even several days and a couple check-and-find-nothings in that spot later.

She pressed her back against her chair, stretching to try and smooth out the soreness she felt from sitting hunched over. She stared blankly at her computer, then out the window of her cottage, and finally towards Ririka, who lay sleeping sprawled out on their bed.

Tsukiko rubbed her eyes then held her own face up with one hand. “Starfall,” she muttered under her breath, sluggishly shutting the PC down, peeling out of her seat, and tip-toeing back into bed where she should’ve been for the past several hours. Slowly worming back under the blankets, she gingerly lifted up one of Ririka’s arms and let it fall back down around her, spending a few minutes playing with her love’s hair before she woke up.

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“So I was thinking,” Ririka slinked through the closet which she was prone to taking up most of, looking through her collection of fanciful dresses for something that made her presentable for a day job of trying to inject passion into mending up business suits.

Tsukiko expectantly nodded in sync with the clap of a flat iron, sitting on the edge of their bed.

“Do you wanna start learning how to sew from me again?” Ririka asked, starting slowly with wound-up words before muttering out the relevant question. “‘C-cause I’ve really been on Heraschel’s good side lately and I think I could totally convince him to let you work for him too.” She looked at Tsukiko and smiled, as if to be encouraging. “And that’s- So much better, you know?” She bit her thumbnail, “We would get to be together all day.”

Tsukiko looked at her dolefully. "And you suppose Luci would think that's a good idea?"

Ririka stayed quiet.

"It's sweet of you to daydream, my dear," Tsukiko stood up and sauntered over to a window, gazing into the lush grass and dense forests that lined their village. "Someone's gotta take care of this old place, though; It's my home and it's right for me to pay some things back to it."

Ririka didn't say anything, merely shaking her lips silently while she moved around without doing anything.

"I just like the peace and quiet." Tsukiko stepped back to the edge of the bed. "Are you mad at me?" she asked.

"Not at you," Ririka muttered back. "I just, think it's a little unfair. All Summer you were still the only one who ever did any of the actual work! Juno and Pallas got to go to the Orrery, and while they were gone, Vesta just dallied around the shops and pretended to sweep the shrine," she fussed. "And like, sometimes it feels like the reason they tell you to do all the stuff away from the center is 'cause they think people think you're weird."

"Hey, hey," Tsukiko waved her hand downwards, conducting the concert of her girlfriend's fretting to simmer out. "It's alright," she dismissed, as she sat back down and took her flat iron back to her hair, looking at a blank part of the wall. "It's alright."

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Tsukiko and Ririka's home was a place christened by the KIBOU Nation as The House of the Valley of the Wind. It was what was known as a Heavenly Market, a miniature village built to serve the community and be a place of worship, operated and inhabited by priestesses and their servants. They led what would look to be a very comfy, reassuring life. Spend a clear day working their simple little jobs, then hole themselves up for a night of cuddling, kissing, crouching over their TV and computer, and maybe an hour two of Tsukiko reading aloud while her Princess Lily knit. About every other week they went out on a nice date, but for the most part the world beyond the House of the Valley of the Wind may as well have not existed.

Sometimes, with Ririka's head on her lap, Tsukiko would gaze out the window and feel a yearning, some purpose for her which had been carved out and needed reclaimed, yet she could never come up with any such thing to do, and in the end would decide that she was in fact quite happy with that.

It had become nice to have no need for the discomfort in her inability to connect or fill at ease; She was but a woodland critter, scampering across the snow to tend to wild flowers and statues of revered matrons.

"Here, this will help you make it through the winter," she explained to the flowers as she poured a bag of dry mulch over their roots. As she shook the last of it out, she found herself lingering over one impressive blossom that had lasted through the autumn. "My, how pretty," she gushed, tracing her fingertips along the length of its stem. "You remind me of a girl I know, and I think you'd look at home pinned in her hair." She pinched it between her nails and the crinkled bag and plucked it out of the planter.

She let herself giggle about it as she walked away, until a dozen or so steps later she had her attention grabbed by another stride joining her from the edge of the woods.

A deer had emerged to study the trunk of one of the willows, tilting its head up to point its antlers at the weeping strings of leaves above it. Tsukiko traced her eyes along the path of its horns as they split off and blended with the low hanging limbs of the trees. Bone and wood became indistinguishable at the same rate as present and past did; Every branch and prong was a splitting river driving her away from reality, a rip tide of unforeseen darkness.

A drop of blood fell in the water.

Her flower fell on the grass.

Tsukiko's thoughts were yanked back to the waking moment from noticing the fur around the deer's mouth, which was being stained red drop-by-drop from above. Its tongue instinctively lapped it up bit after bit, until Tsukiko suddenly trembled forward and spooked it into running back to the forest.

Her mind felt like it was cut away from her legs, which moved forward simply because that seemed like the thing to do. They felt small and nervous, moving so gently that barely a blade of grass was pushed out of place by them. She had now taken the deer's position, tiny drops of crimson spinning down onto the ends of her hair and polluting their huelessness.

She looked up, bangs covering her eyes as if they were a young child's parent shielding her sight from things better left unknown. Above her were the soles of boots, well worn and only ever cleaned by melted snowfall. Tsukiko exerted herself to reach up and touch them, jumping a bit to grab hold of the cold ankles they were worn around.

It was enough of a disturbance that the branches crudely holding the scene together gave way, letting the body hiding within them slide down the length of the tree, blood

from its eviscerated back smearing across the trunk until it landed right before Tsukiko, smacking crystals of red-tinted snow across her.

The dead woman was dressed familiarly, a uniformed KIBOU Nation paladin, but her face was not seen in Tsukiko's memories. Her curled hair's brown colour was fading, and now it had been packed with cracklings of sticks. Her eyes had become heavily lidded by years of proud work, yet their final visage was spent dilated with fear.

Tsukiko's heart quaked, twenty emotions trying to pour in at once and blocking each other from being realized. Her vision blurred and air swirled her inside her throat, but her tears and her scream were both too frightened themselves to come out. She lifted the dead woman's hand up, feeling an extra chill sent up her arm by the touch of something small, cold, and metal clutched in the dead woman's palm. She thought to check her pulse, but as she took in more of her body's condition, it was clear that there was no use to that. Instead, Tsukiko's knees stiffened as much as the arm in her grasp had, and she collapsed kneeling to the ground.

She forced herself to make eye contact with the corpse, ignoring how mangled most of it below the neck was. She stared close enough to see how an infinitely subtle casing of ice had formed over its face, which Tsukiko broke by pushing her eyes shut. Still holding onto a lifeless hand, her fingers wrapped tightly around it. Tsukiko laid down, the willow tree's shadows forsaking the sky from her vision. She didn't know how long she was going to lay there. Her mind was not willing to process the prospect of stopping; of ever letting go of that hand. It was as if when she did the last little ghost of the person sprawled next to her would be carried away, and only then would somebody have truly died.

Maybe she was a corpse too, and now she could finally keel over and rot.

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Time had made itself a stranger to her, but at some point she bit her lip and melancholically let the hand fall back to the ground, as she limped towards the main shrine. Her view seemed out of a camera, vision blocked out with flashes of pure white. She couldn't firmly count how many people were present under the Valley of the Wind's gate, but was able to pick the Mother Priestess out of them thanks to dazzling patterns of the cloak she wore trailing behind her. Luckily she was unoccupied in the moment, letting Tsukiko slink up behind her unnoticed. She meant to tap on her shoulder to grab her attention but accidentally leaned all the way to balancing on her for support.

"Luci... my radiance." It took a bit of stuttering for her to orientate her words with proper honor.

"Goodness, what's the matter?"

Tsukiko wasn't even cognizant of whatever she answered, but she couldn't imagine it was quite so precise as "One of our sistren has been gored and tossed away in a tree." More likely it came out as a non-specific murmuring about following her to the sight of something bad, maintaining the hope that they'd walk back to find nothing but an accosted lily and a littered bag; that in a couple minutes Tsukiko would be politely ordered to go lay down through the rest of her episode.

It was still there.

The body was well and truly planted around the tree trunk just as Tsukiko had left it, down to the shape of the blood smear, not that she'd know it. Tsukiko only caught a glimpse before she lost the will for another confrontation with death, instead casting her eyes straight to the ground as the panicked yelling of her head priestess kicked up.

Reality was shaking, and thinning out. A tall barrier of ringing walled out every noise, and light was siphoned from sight, casting darkness enough that shadows of times gone by manifested to claw towards her.

There was a single drop of colour permeating through still. It was the flower she picked earlier, the brilliant natural ombre of its petals still catching light in full glory.

Tsukiko leaned down and grasped it between her fingers again, carrying it away to escape with her.

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“Tsukiko!”

“Tsukiko-Tsukiko-Tsukiko-Tsukiko!”

Sound came back to her in the form of pleading yells, each repeat of her precious name coming a little closer to her.

Ririka ran towards her so frantically she nearly tripped in front of her. Tsukiko fell back into her surroundings, seeing she had mindlessly crawled back to be seated on their porch, watching lily petals twirl like a ballerina by the will of her fingers.

“Hello my darling.” While her mouth formed into a tiny smile, her eyes were still locked on the flower, until Ririka grabbed her by the chin and gently forced her head up to hers.

“We heard yelling then like five people called Heraschel at once and he closed shop and we both ran back here and they told me to come check on you and I don’t know what’s going on but-” she shook her head, clearing off a bank of piled up thoughts, and focusing her eyes on making contact with her girlfriend’s. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine, my sweetheart,” she shook off, making Ririka tenderly grab her by the wrist.

“Don’t lie if you’re not!” she begged. “I’m here for you.”

“I told you, I’m fine,” she reassured. “I...” She took a deep, troubled pause. “I don’t really... feel anything right now.”

Ririka’s lips trembled, unsuccessfully searching for words before she simply reached both her arms around Tsukiko and pulled her up into her embrace. Tsukiko’s eyes fell into the soft fabric over her shoulder.

She did not immediately return the hug; Instead, one arm grabbed Ririka’s wrist and squeezed it three times in the rhythm of a heartbeat, while the other guided its flower underneath one of the ponytails behind her ears, letting it join the cosmos coloured waves of her hair.

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The usually quiet House of the Valley of the Wind had been startled into bedlam. Every visitor who had been there rushed out - while any who newly came by were turned away - while solemn officers of the KIBOU Nation came pouring in to take their places.

Her radiance Luci Peele, mother priestess of the House, stood unfettered. She was a woman with a captivating presence, dressed in a white halter and wrapped in a baby blue scarf that made her match nicely with the colours with a sky approaching dawn.

She had been made to wait for the Paladin captain who would be heading the ensuing inquest. The death of one of their own, in such a gruesome manner, would certainly warrant the Supreme Paladins’ full attention.

The discordant murmurs and shouts that had been filling the air were all suddenly united. They had turned into wild clamouring over a single man strolling up to the

scene. He had an air of self-imposed authority, and a face with chiseled features but a ratty disposition.

Stopping in his steps, he seemed to glare at the priestess for a second, before announcing to his entourage "Let's get to work."

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It had been around an hour since Tsukiko and Ririka retreated inside, or maybe it was two; neither were keeping track. In any case, a stern knocking on their door was letting the outside's ugly head rear back at them. Ririka scampered up to open it, and it was only once she pulled it in that Tsukiko decided to look over.

While the outside light made the tear rolling down her cheek sparkle like glitter, she took a look at who had appeared in their doorway.

"Good afternoon, girls." He took liberty to step inside, scanning his eyes around the very cluttered and personalised decor. "Captain Mavor del Toro, of the Asaph Squadron," he introduced himself.

His barging in had visibly upset Ririka, who remained silent towards him as Tsukiko softly stood up and approached the detective herself.

"Welcome in, sir," she growled, not feeling like being very receptive to his presence. "This is Ririka, and you'll have to excuse her, she isn't very good with talking sometimes." Tsukiko gently pat her on the shoulder. "But, that's alright, because I imagine I'm the one you're here for anyway."

"So, you're the unlucky body-finder, then?" he asked insensitively, to which Tsukiko nodded in confirmation. "And what's your name then, little lady?"

"Tsukiko," she answered bluntly. "Kibou."

Del Toro looked a little surprised at her answer. "That's pretty old fashioned sounding for a kid like you; I haven't heard a housekeeper taking the name of the Nation in years."

Tsukiko rolled her eyes at his comment. "Hey, shouldn't we be going to a police station for this, at least?"

Del Toro scoffed and waved his hand at the air. "Eh, big formal things like that aren't really my style. There's no need to interrogate you when you aren't a criminal; I'm just in the business of asking you some questions about our unfortunate victim."

For the first time in the encounter, Tsukiko felt genuine emotion as she looked up at him. "Who is she?"

"Hm, that's something I was wondering about. Well, not who she is, but that you didn't know her?"

Tsukiko shook her head. "No, I don't think I ever saw her once in my life."

Del Toro scratched his stubble, "Right, that adds up. Her name was Sofia Sedna, and she was a Supreme Palatine, like me," he explained, before throwing up his hands. "But the thing is, her being part of the KIBOU Nation is where her connections to this House begin and end. She lived two cities away, and so far it seems like nobody can figure a rhyme or reason why she ended up here."

Tsukiko looked away from del Toro, finding her own faint reflection in a framed painting hung on the wall.

"Do you two watch the news?" del Toro asked as a way to continue, although he did not allow either to actually answer. "Lately my team and I have been investigating threats

against people in the KIBOU Nation from people possessing illegal guns. Did you two hear anything last night that sounded like gunshots?"

Ririka merely shook her head, while Tsukiko's breathing teetered.

"Are you kidding?" she slammed her hand on a table. "Did you see her? That wasn't bullet holes, that was-"

"Riiiiight then - I wanna hear it from you. About how you found the body, I mean."

Tsukiko sat back down, hugging herself as she recollected, "She was strung up in a tree; I found her because of her blood dripping down..."

Del Toro looked on coldly, even him seeming a bit shaken by the image. "And you went for help right afterwards?" he assumed.

"Yes," Tsukiko lied.

"And you seemed pretty sure that she didn't die by gunfire, how come?"

Tsukiko looked him in the eye, frustrated. "Haven't you seen for yourself? She was... torn apart; eviscerated! It looked like a wild animal did it. All her..."

"All her?" del Toro raised his brow.

"On her torso, her ribcage..." Tsukiko was distressed to think back to it; she had tried not to look very hard to begin with. "I think her legs were like that too... Her bones underneath just- *pulled out*."

Their cabin fell silent. Del Toro was listening with interest, but seemed oddly unphased by the report. Ririka had scuttled back over to Tsukiko, gently rubbing her hands up and down her shoulders like she was trying to wash the sorrow out.

“So that means,” Ririka began quietly talking in Tsukiko’s ear, barely audible to the rest of the room. “I mean, it had to be a *Scene Star* who did it, right?”

“Good guess, High Reacher,” del Toro responded loudly, looking up at Ririka before she shrunk back behind her love. “Though it’s frightening to think if some rando could have won a fight against a KIBOU Nation veteran...” Del Toro chuckled, “Ah that’s for me to worry about, now isn’t it? You two cute things don’t gotta dwell on it.”

Tsukiko looked blankly, ignoring him outright.

“That’d be awful.”

She was stared at by both of the others with her.

“Your power as a *Scene Star*, it’s the output of your heart,” she mused. “What kind of terrible heart would be able to do that to a person? I don’t wanna believe a person like that could exist.”

She sat straight up, tilting her head back and letting her eyes be concealed by the tips of her fox tails. “They would have to be something subhuman.”

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“Here Tsukiko: I’d like you to have this.”

A few evenings later, Tsukiko was sat on a little loveseat, curling up against the gentle checkerboard cover. She lay with her face painted cobalt by setting sunlight passing

through the mosaic ceiling of the head priestess' room, while her reverence Luci Peele herself had been standing over her.

Luci pulled a small ceramic block from within her cornflower blue cloak and placed it in her hand, making it a point to let Tsukiko's fingers linger on the warm firmness of her skin.

"It's an incense holder I bought in The Grand Orrery. Can you tell me about what's on it?"

Tsukiko held it up to the light. It was shaped like an open palm, and a series of pointed white dots were painted within the lines of the orange clay used to make it.

"I believe that's," she paused, taking a second to breathe deep and look at the room around her; the supernovas painted on every surface and the tranquil animals carved around the rim of wooden wheels which hung on the wall. "It's Monoceros," she answered back, identifying the constellation drawn of the stars in the hand.

Luci nodded, moving forward. "Would you like to help me make some incense tonight, Tsukiko? I think the smell of lavender and the chance to craft something yourself would both go a long way to helping get your mind off things."

Tsukiko shifted up in her seat. "Do I... *need* to get my mind off things?"

Luci looked at her expectantly.

"What I mean to say is - like I was telling you earlier - I *know* I was bad the day of, but since then I've felt a little... reinvigorated. I get that I should feel scared, but... I feel like there's a fire inside me now. Something ignited and it burned me, but now I can see a way forward."

“Forward towards what?”

Tsukiko couldn't think of a reply for a few minutes, but wasn't prompted again.

“Answers, I guess? Something that's been missing from me.”

Luci wrote something down in her notebook.

“You're always very passionate, Tsukiko; it's something I think should be admired about you. What I want you to do is take that passion - that fire inside you - and put it into something *new*. Ririka told me she's been offering to show you her craft in sewing lately, right?”

“And you told her that's codependent of her?” Tsukiko asked, although she felt it was a given.

“That's not what I mean to talk about,” Luci recapitulated, “My point is that, much as the power of the Stars is in us and tells us to cast our magic onto this Knight of the Sun we call home, you should be using that virtue of yours to find something that can be a new space for yourself, instead of it making you ruminant on your past.

“Even something simple and playful, like sculpting and heating up clay, can let you make a mark as a person who brings beauty and faith and happiness. Don't make a cage for yourself, Tsukiko. I know you can be someone who brings hope; onto yourself just as much as others.”

“Tsukiko the hope-bringer, huh?” Tsukiko gave a despondent chuckle at herself, while she gripped the stick burner.

“You live with the name of KIBOU, after all. You can make her proud.” Luci encouraged her, trying to shove her out of hesitation. “I think she’d have been fond of you.”

Tsukiko’s free hand played around in her hair, flicking and curling its fox furred fluffiness. She made her bangs dance and get caught up around her nails, plucking a few strands out and letting them rest in her palm until they melted into radiant stardust.