

Stars cried out in twinkles as they cut through the dark sky.

The Night was their herald, as it coated pitch black over the clouds to the horizon, which let their voyaging light push through.

The Moon shined bright, cascading its glow over rippling lake water and across lush grass, until it came across its kin resting at the foot of a fountain.

Call her Moonchild, as she lay with the reflection of her namesake beaming straight towards her eyes. The lights of eons away took pleasure in dancing across the spouts of water above her before they fell and gracefully etched stardust into her scars. She was pinned to Earth by the gentle hold of her lover, a girl who wore frills on her sleeves and the night sky in her heart. Her dear had fallen asleep playing with the fluff of her hair where its colour turned from orange to stark white, painted up like fox tails.

Their only company was a journal bound in violet buckram, sitting opened to one of many pages filled with amateur reports about astrology and hand-drawn star charts. Sticking out amongst this collection of celestial writings was a dotted heart doodled on one side of the margins; within its outline were their two names next to each other: "Tsukiko" and "Ririka".

They were signed by eternity as wards of the night. Their embrace would forever drive their hearts' desire, and the path they live under the watchful eyes of the Moon, who stood proudly like a mother watching over all - distant though it may be. The Moonchild played with glinting sparks of colour which flew between her nails, feeling herself bonding with the Stars that she held in her soul.

Cold wind blew snowflakes and water drops across her, and tickled her face with her fox-tail bangs. She turned over to her love and found her gently breathing, with her eyes

fallen shut. Looking over the lake at the clouds blowing towards them, she ran a pair of fingers across the darling girl wrapped around her, until they slid across a spot on her cheek they could squish, rubbing up and down until she was literally stirred awake.

Her eyelashes rose up, shaking off a bundle of snow crystals nearly too small to see, and she grounded herself back to the waking world with a delicate yawn. "Tsukiko," she mewled out, calling for her girlfriend out of habit as much as she was actually addressing her.

"Wake up, my dear." Her voice was a deliberate smoke on the air, even the fewest of words sounding like answers to questions she had spent hours pondering.

Ririka talked back faintly, quiet voice asking her "What's wrong?" as she rose from her sleepiness.

"We fell asleep outside, my dear," Tsukiko said, the bemusement in her voice weighed down by the quality having been brought out of one of the better sleeps she had had for a long while. "Looks like it's almost 7:00 now."

Her tender little lover's words went from drowsy and cute to sputtered out and stumbling. "Oh Stars, did I really pass out out here?" She jumped awake, scurrying in place as she reeled her hand back to cover up the line of blush that filed across her face. "Darn it, darn it, I t-totally screwed up!"

"No need to fuss, sweetheart," Tsukiko assured her. "Being asleep in the grass is really cute and charming, don't you think?"

"But what if now our schedule gets thrown off?" Ririka pouted.

“Oh yeah, we’re gonna have to really bolt over to make it to work,” Tsukiko dryly replied; she assumed an exaggerated running stance, before hopping two steps in front of her and waving her arms around to frame the scenery. “Hey look! We made it to work!” she giggled.

Ririka’s anxious mutterings were not deterred by Tsukiko’s gag. “Come on! We never even prayed last night! And it’s all my fault!”

“Was it our turn to do them?”

“Yeah, it was,” Ririka replied, still in full sulk.

Tsukiko gracefully walked up to her and grabbed her hands, “Baby, look, the Moon’s still hanging in the sky; it’s still night,” she reasoned treacly. “We can just go read them now and then swing back around to our place and it’ll be no different than any other morning.”

“But we aren’t in uniform,” Ririka fretted.

“Well,” Tsukiko sighed half-heartedly, “I think the spacefarers will forgive us.”

Ririka relented, starting with her up a trail of moss-covered stone stamped into the ground, which lead from the fountain they had huddled around towards a small but imposing building made of smooth marble.

“Even if we did actually mess ourselves up, Ririka, what’s with the ‘all my fault’? I fell asleep outside too, silly.”

“Well, the whole reason we went out that late is because I wanted to stargaze,” Ririka said, voice cowering.

“Nonsense,” Tsukiko tutted. “It’s our favourite thing to do, after all.”

“Well,” Ririka bit on her nails as she wished she could ever control her constant nervous blush, “it’s more of *my* favorite thing to do, you know?”

Tsukiko shook her head indignantly, her hair spinning a mesmerising spiral of its orange-white gradient. “Any time I’m next to you is time well spent,” her face broke out into an excitedly mischievous smirk as she grabbed Ririka by the shoulders and leaned her down to whisper right in her ear, “*my Princess Lily.*”

This made Ririka so flustered she nearly tripped, heart threatening to run out of her chest even after the thousandth time she had heard that nickname.

They approached the building at the end of the footpath, which was not a shop or a shelter, but a mausoleum. Tsukiko held the door to the tomb open, letting a little sliver of moonlight stalk across the room. It caught in the eyes which had been slightly judging them: Two dozen pairs of sleek, bestial masks hung on the wall. They decorated the empty space on the walls which weren’t taken up by small but immaculate shrines to the cosmos; underneath each of them was a glass case on a pedestal, safely housing some seemingly random choice of object inside.

This display was a memorial: a wall of honour for their predecessor mages. Those *Familiar* things had been the object of their hearts’ truest trust, and those masks were painted to match the ones carved from their souls to face the dark with the guise of starlight; of hope and faith. They once belonged to some of those with the powers that formed their world, the champions of their faith.

They once belonged to *Scene Stars*.

The door clicked shut, leaving the girls in the dark. Tsukiko reached into her pocket and slipped out her lighter, which she then clicked a flame out of. The darkness was now kept at bay by the comforting orange glow.

The small flame was practically worthless at actually heating a cold stone box, yet as they breathed in through their nose one would somehow feel their very essence being coddled and warmed.

Ririka took a kneel and rolled up her sleeve, pulling the fabric all the way up to her shoulder blade, letting all of the skin on her arm breathe in the dim light. Tsukiko stayed standing - secretly smiling to herself over how cute it was that Ririka was as tall kneeling as she was standing - but too pulled her sleeve up, her skin stinging a bit in the frigid air.

Tsukiko gently set the lighter down - its cap still off and flame still shining - and plucked a little box off one of the levels of the shrine. Speaking delicately, lest her words slam too hard into the little whispers Ririka had begun chanting into the air, she said "I'll go lay them out."

Back out into the cold, Tsukiko slipped open the palm-size box she had taken with her, and let gravity spill its contents between her fingers: three-dozen-and-some cards, each with identical backs but their own beautifully painted portraits on the front, which she shuffled and cast down one of around each corner of the building, ritualistically.

Prayers and fortunes each night for those who had gone to voyage across the stars; this was perhaps the most fantastical of their duties, which mostly consisted otherwise of sweeping and make-work. The reason they had to deprive their arms of the cover of winter season clothing was to identify themselves as the departed's comrades, for the two of them had a place for the majesty of the cosmos not just in their hearts, but etched on their very skin.

Said marks of belonging were rich, brown-inked tattoos: complex, mesmerising designs that were twin to each other.

The illustrations started with the Sun sitting proudly on their shoulder blades, surrounded by a swirling corona. Down in a straight line were the little round rocks who they called her knights, and then - ginormous compared to them but still dwarfed by the Sun - the two residents of the night sky who were seen as her kin, and their court of moons with them. The diagram spanned the entire way down to their elbows, reaching past the frigid devils who hid behind telescopes, no inch of skin spared from being infused with the faint image of to-scale comets, dust clouds, and the distant agents which kneeled to The Sun's orbit rather than championing it.

These were sacred: a continued rite of belonging drawn over in henna every time the moon beamed in full. Far beyond a mere bond for the pair of them, the sleeve of solar system art could be seen on the arms of thousands across the land, from shamans to brigadiers to the heads of state, even lowly housekeepers like the two of them were. Across any calling or hierarchy, those given the privilege to wear this mark were the servants of The KIBOU Nation, the church that had carved itself into the world superpower in all things magical.

They had risen to power in the wake of what they called the Starfall: the end of the world as it had always been known. Their founder was one of the heroes who saved humanity from a dark, untimely end, and promised to create justice and virtue in the lawless land that they had been left in.

For an organisation stuffed with the world's strongest and cleverest mages, the KIBOU Nation styled themselves as innocuous. Even with enough fearsome *Scene Stars* to conquer the world in an afternoon, they never went seeking power - they did not even have their own land, secluding their magnificent capital instead in the middle of a

friendly country called Kismet - nor did they wage war, only letting their military ranks unleash their might in order to snuff out magic used for cruel ambition.

The type of devotee one was most likely to meet in the day-to-day was a housesitter like Tsukiko and Ririka; lowly girls who populated and staffed the Heavenly Markets, little villages built to serve the community and be a place of worship, operated and inhabited by priestesses and their servants; Tsukiko and Ririka's was a particularly small and secluded one, befitting the girls' introverted habits.

Even such a backwater place was held with reverence, though. No matter where you walked, or who you thought yourself to be, one piece of advice would always ring true: do not challenge the KIBOU Nation, for it will not end well for you.

Tsukiko had broken into an aimless wander around the mausoleum, right up to the tree line. The sight of snow-powdered forest spilling into their home brought her to a place of serenity. Even compared to being taken by a clear view of space on a cloudless night, Tsukiko found there was something to be gained from letting her eyes and her mind wander towards the trees.

Those lovely trees, standing in the delicate dark.

Her thoughts were drawn into the landscape; her fingers began mindlessly fidgeting with her hair.

Those sprawling trees, crowding each other inside the wide and long dark.

Something compelled her to take step after step closer to the edge, then through it, having to use her hand to fend off stray branches and falling clumps of snow from smacking her in the eyes.

Those gnarled, mocking trees, framing a landscape that grew with spiteful pride in being built from dark.

She was now just barely far enough into the treeline that you couldn't spot her from outside it. Had she been watching someone else do the same, she'd have thought their movements odd and foolish, but something had tempted her into joining the foliage for just a brief moment. Her eyes felt almost forcibly transfixed onto the shadows of several trees overlapping.

The branches swayed from a force other than the wind; the leaves were trampled by a weight which did not belong. The spot where the tree limbs blocked out moonlight harboured a stomach-turning sensation, like a flickering curtain was inviting her to be drawn in behind it and swept out of all that she knew and all that felt real.

Something else was there with her.

No little animals, or even crawling insects; they had all been frightened off. Being in its presence was being stabbed with a sharpened, cold knife that mercilessly cut out any will to move - even stand - before it. It was ethereal; intangible; a little horde of a hundred little things, while also something unbelievably massive.

She stared at it - *it*; breathing static; fright manifest - for a second, maybe even two, before she bolted backwards, so desperately she nearly stumbled and snapped her own ankles from the force with which she ran.

Fleeing felt like it should have been a gruelling trial, so Tsukiko felt disoriented when she snapped back to her right mind and found she was back in front of the mausoleum only a couple seconds later still. Her eyes darted around, expecting to find something evil or foreboding behind her, or maybe catch a glimpse of such in the trees. Nothing

was there. As quickly as her fright had started up, she was calming down. Shaking off what had just happened, and trying to replay it from an objective point-of-view.

“I don’t get what triggered that,” she glumly cursed to herself, writing off the experience as a play of neurosis which had sprouted up as a result of nothing more than being left to her own devices for too long; even if “too long” was such a small length of time.

Much to her relief, she heard Ririka - the distinct sound of her dainty little skip-steps - walking back outside.

“Hi Tsukiko!” she cheered as if the last time they saw each other had been significantly longer than five minutes. “Everything alright?” she asked, initially meaning as a general question but then making it sound worrisome when she saw the look on Tsukiko’s face.

“Yeah, yeah,” Tsukiko assured. “Sorry, I just let my mind wander and freaked myself out.”

“Oh honey!” Ririka grabbed her, her embrace warming Tsukiko’s face so much that the snowdrops melted off her face. “Come on, let’s go inside.”

The couple walked back to their cabin, a small building built nearly as a cube, trimmed with pale yellow framed windows and a porch which served to beckon one towards it from the wide courtyard on which it sat. Once nothing more than a disused hut, it had come to be claimed as the girls’ own, its interior becoming distinctly them-flavoured. One little spot to house all that they had to be happy about, including each other, and shut out the world around them. It was precisely what Tsukiko needed, not that she intended on saying so.

Walking inside, Tsukiko made a concentrated effort to relax herself, not wanting to keep Ririka worrying about her.

She made for their bathroom, craving a warm shower, but Ririka stopped her with a grab to the wrist and pulled her over instead to their bed, which she promptly fell into, taking Tsukiko down with her.

“I know what’ll cheer you up,” she winked. She slid her and Tsukiko’s hands together, and reached them to brush up against a heavy quilt of her own design, which sat folded up at the foot of the mattress.

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Light suddenly flared from between their fingers. There was of course the radiant glitters which painted the air and could pop out against anything, characteristic of all such mage’s tricks; on top of that, though, was true starlight. Five radiances appeared to dot the blanket, lined together with a little zigzagged shape that was drawn out from their light.

To their whim, the mass of the quilt began to shift; all of its fibers tensed and coiled up, being shaped by invisible hands from a soft, square lump into something much more intricate.

The quilt had become a fox.

Perfectly detailed, with a bushy tail and pointed ears, down to the last crease on its paw. It had been imbued not only with the image of life, but too the spirit; the fibers pranced around of their own accord, then - beckoned by a little wave of Ririka’s hands - lovingly leapt on top of Tsukiko, nuzzling her with comfort. With her darling and her starlight to keep it at bay, the thought of Tsukiko’s fright in the woods was pushed to the back of her mind, even if she couldn’t seem to entirely rid herself of it. Even as that blight hung

over her, or maybe over everything they touched and walked over, they revelled in the morning's light; a blessed mixture of emerging sun and departing moon.

This was humanity's miraculous triumph; this was the gift of the cosmos, which the KIBOU Nation studied and revered; this was magic; this was her power, birthed from the peaking souls they called *Scene Stars*.

Perhaps, with it, they'd be able to make the world shine forever more.