

Ririka's colt carried them into away into a grove, cutting through the foliage with a path of horseshoes printed on the snow; it soon emerged on the other side to a small plaza inhabited by neon signs, which were calling out for the patronage of such night owls who chose to wander among the stars after the world went to sleep.

The horse trotted to drop them behind the buildings into a nice, shadowed spot where - after they dismounted it - it reverted back to its original, inanimate shape in a spot where it could sit conspicuously.

Ririka reached around her waist and found her notebook - converted back from the form it had taken for her to transform with - orbiting closely around her, clinging to her by magic.

They stood alone in the dark, words seeming alien to them.

Tsukiko grabbed Ririka's hand and spoke straight into her eyes, smiling, a bit awe struck just from looking at her. "You saved me... Again."

In lieu of speaking, Ririka wrapped herself around Tsukiko and snuggled her chin against her shoulder, pouting & gazing off at the horizon.

"Thank you, my angel." The temperature had fallen with the sun, making Tsukiko's breath turn to dew as she spoke, "You're shaking."

Ririka nodded in admittance.

"Please don't," she pleaded.

“I was scared I was gonna lose you,” Ririka admitted in a metered tone, exhausted by heartache. “Even though... Deep in my heart I knew not to be.” Whether by choice or reflex, Ririka pulled her in tighter, “I believe in you; I always will, promise.”

The melancholy on her face suddenly got slapped off by excitement, and she jumped back, flapping her hands and fiddling with the inside of her dress. “Oh, that’s right! Look, I got it!”

Tsukiko cast a questioning look at her before she pulled out a chained gold disk.

“When I went into that girl’s motel room, I found this in a case on the ground... It looked like it was the same place she was keeping that sword thing.”

“What is that? A watch?”

“Yeah, yeah! Or well,” Ririka put her finger on her chin. “I thought it was a watch too, but it’s kinda, weird.”

“Hm?” Tsukiko opened her palm to take it and have a look as Ririka flipped it open. “It’s, not a watch?” she realised, having the for-her-rare feeling of getting caught off-guard.

Its face was most certainly like a watch, but the features of it were off in most peculiar ways, as if it had been randomly generated from the idea of a timepiece rather than made to actually work as one. The numbers were all spaced differently, owing to the fact they started with 0 at the top of the rotation, and only counted to 10 rather than 12.

Rather than the normal divisions of ticks, between each number were printed a uniform series of nine vertical lines, each marked themselves as decimals with a minuscule number between .1 and .9. Finally, there was only a single hand, so precise it was almost

too small to see, and rather than ticking away the seconds, it stood frozen at the top, head hiding beneath the zero.

Tsukiko moved her thumb to the crown, wanting to try setting the thing. Further mystifying the object, she found the crown did not wind as expected, but was merely a button to press solidly down.

She gave a push, and the gadget whirred to life with the beeping of mechanics unseen. Its sole hand turned forward, waving back and forth with an awful static noise, which looped like a cathode tube's beating heart, until it landed on a mark of 4.6.

"Wha- what is that?" Ririka hopped over inquisitively, holding her hand out against her better judgment, wanting to take it back out of curiosity. Tsukiko released the crown from under her thumb, making it slowly reset to its starting position.

"Have you ever seen anything like this?" Ririka shook her head, trying out the button for herself while Tsukiko paced around, troubled.

"Six-point-five," she read out.

"What?" Tsukiko felt like she could hear herself echo and she froze in her step and turned back.

"That's what it says. The little hand goes to 6.5." Ririka reiterated.

"Let me see it again!" Tsukiko urged. Ririka did so, oblivious as to what the big deal was. Tsukiko waited for the hand to climb back to zero, then clicked it herself once more.

4.6.

She gulped. "Now... You try again."

Ririka did as she asked.

6.5.

"Why... Why is mine higher?"

Tsukiko was silent.

"Why is mine higher?"

"I don't know," Tsukiko conceded, something which Ririka found worrisome to hear from her. Not wanting her to dwell on it any further, she gently pried the enigmatic bane away from her, and shoved it away in her hoodie. "Thank you so much, Lily. What we have because of you is most definitely a defining piece of the story here." She grabbed her hand and walked into the dim light of night shift with her. "Now come on, I owe you a crummy date at a mediocre breakfast restaurant." she giggled.

"Oh, no no." Ririka shook her head dismissively, and blushed suddenly. "I'm such a mess right now. I mean look, I even tore my skirt." She pointed to a strip where the starry sky pattern had been ripped open, flashing the powdered snow white petticoat lifting it underneath.

"Oh here, I can fix that no problem." Tsukiko knelt down to her and waved her fingers across the rip. The sheer white ruffle of petti was encroached by a swarm of shimmers moving out of her fingertips, which painted over it with drops of blue & purple until it - to a passing eye - blended in seamlessly with her outer layers.

The shape of her heart, the forward projection of her as a person. The starry fox in the sky, the mask which hid her tears in the face of a battle. Behind *Foxfur*, like every *Scene Star*, was an ability to shape the world. Sparkling like crystal, this was hers: changing the colors around her; sensing the world as light.

Fincher stood on a cold grated floor. She had blacked out after the encounter with the two magical girls who escaped on horseback, and came to in a hospital with her arm in a sling. She had been in a sterile smelling hospital shirt which was covered in her own blood; a nurse told her she had started coughing up at some point in the night. After further probing, she was informed that she was left outside the emergency room doors in a state of delirium.

In the days since, she had found herself feeling perpetually... *disturbed*. On a surface level, she looked sickly; she had trouble standing up without feeling faint, and could barely stomach a meal. The doctors couldn't find anything to frame as the cause, of course. This went deeper than any simple medical malady. Something deep within her conscious essence had shattered. As much as it frightened her to, she knew she had to return herself to them: both in the hopes of her condition being treated, and because they'd surely catch up with her sooner than later.

So she came crawling back to this dark place. Before her were two women, each carrying their own flavour of menace about them. They were all on a catwalk suspended over a large pit in the ground, that was big enough that one could not see the other end of it before the range of the spotlights ran short.

The more grim-faced of the two spoke to her in short, demanding phrases: "What happened?"

Fincher's throat was clenching up. "I was *ambushed*," she said shakily. Suddenly, her emotions flipped, and she exploded at the pair. "You told us nobody else knew! That nobody else *could see*!"

She was silenced with a palm to her face. "We'll get to the bottom of it!" she was lectured. "Where's your lobe?"

She gulped. "T-they broke it."

"And your counter?"

"I-" she cleared her throat, which turned into a harsh, hacking cough. "He told me it was gone from my room. They must have taken it!"

The woman silently stared her down, and slowly walked away, leaving her in the echoing trail of steps.

"Give me another!" she cried out after her, getting a bit dizzy from quickly turning on her heel. "I'll go after them myself! Just give me another one!"

She was ignored.

"Oh poor thing."

Frightened from the sudden whisper in her ear, she nearly leapt out of her own skin.

It was the other one who was whispering in her ear; she had nearly forgotten a third person was even in the room.

"Don't worry about her. Here, *I'll* give you another one."

She slid something into Fincher's hands: one of the things they called a lobe. It looked no more than a sheet of sharp metal cast into a sword, yet holding it struck her heart with temptation. She had already gone too long deprived of the high of living as the queen of its spawn, and she was so close to reclaiming that; it only wanted her blood.

The lobe shook in her hand.

Come on.

Come on.

Her ears filled with ringing, and her head filled with thoughts of hatred. How much she hated herself for failing; her leaders for being so cold and cruel; those girls, who did all of this to her; that *Foxfire*, who she wanted to rip apart with her bare hands.

She screeched in frustration and tossed the thing to the floor, backing away in shame.

"Hey Tsukiko, do you wanna do me a favour and take my shift at the craft stall tomorrow morning?"

She was being squealed at by Juno, the most grating of the other three girls who lived at the House of the Valley of the Wind. It was typical for her to be nice to Tsukiko only when she wanted something.

"Can't. Ririka and I are going out late tonight, and I don't think I'll be awake that early."

"Messed up!" she whined. "You've been some sorta high horse lately, you know that?"
A few days had passed since her & Tsukiko's high stakes escapade, and everybody around them remained none the wiser to it having occurred. With their trophy - the

strange watch - stashed securely in Ririka's hideaway. It was true Tsukiko was on something of a stride, as if the adrenaline had never quite subsided and was being rationed out into her day-to-day. Tonight was sure to be the height of this peaking mood, however.

Ririka told her that extra cuddles were the only thanks she wanted, but Tsukiko insisted on getting dressed up nice and taking her out shopping a little outside their normal bounds. This made her face light up and cheeks go red, and she had spent the entire day excited about it. It made Tsukiko feel guilty, stringing her along like this, but she didn't want to burden her with the reality of the situation until she had it set in stone.

"Gosh gosh gosh, look how cute this little guy is!" Ririka was fawning over a pitch plush bunny wearing a dress, sitting on the shelf of an antique store.

Ririka plucked the bunny off its seat and spun it around in her hands, making its miniature black dress twirl in the same way her full sized one did as she turned around to show Tsukiko.

"Do you think you're gonna buy that?"

"Mhm." Ririka clutched her newly claimed prize to her chest and asked "Will you check out for me?", voice sweet like a sprinkle.

Tsukiko nodded fast & gently, as if to say "Of course." Her chin ended up resting on her hand, her head tilted and her mouth neutral, but her eyes shining fondly over her love.

Minutes later, Tsukiko gently set Ririka's new friend in her hands, and instructed her to "wait here" once they got outside.

The little gift shop they had perused was a few blocks away from a lush green field, open to the public, that was only separated by a long chain fence from a runway, filled even in the twilight hours with private jets & commercial airliners waiting for takeoff.

Tsukiko stepped in, striding past various people gathered to watch the planes lift off for fun, quickly taking sight of who she knew would be there. It only took a little bit of digging through him talking to the media to him talking about going every Thursday evening as a tradition.

“Mavor del Toro!”

He was leaning against the fence, turning to Tsukiko just as the sounds of a passenger craft’s engines blasting to life filled the air.

“Do I know you?” he asked, so dismissive that he barely bothered to speak up over the plane.

Tsukiko scowled, and nodded. “I found Sofia Senda’s body.” She glanced down, towards his hands, and smirked. “Funny running into you here.” She held out her arm, socially forcing him to shake her hand, which he did half-heartedly.

“Yeah, hope you’re holding up well,” he said, nonplussed by how quickly she began walking away before he could even finish saying “I’m not allowed to talk about the case, but we’ll catch who did it.”

The plane took off behind them, rising over the fence.

Satisfied, Tsukiko had quickly left him in the dust, only half-surprised to some frills holding a plushie running at her.

Ririka grabbed her and pouted. She tried to talk, but gave up and instead angrily texted “WHAT ARE YOU DOING?????” to Tsukiko’s phone. She noticed & recognized del Toro behind her, visibly getting more agitated and adding “Whatever this is about you’re making me mad.”

“That guy. You see his hand?” Tsukiko whispered as quietly as she could. “Look at his pointer finger, on his nail.”

Ririka, confused, squinted and did as she was told, rather obviously to anyone who would’ve been paying attention. After only a second of this Tsukiko dragged her away to around a corner where nobody was in sight or sound.

“Did you see? Maybe you couldn’t, but he has one of those little white spots on his nails, a perfect cross of one.”

Ririka took a deep breath, tapped her foot, then typed again.

“AND?????”

“It’s a mark of a traitor.” Tsukiko’s voice became that of a storyteller, an aura to her that could’ve captivated an audience of wild animals. “I’m sorry, I kept another secret from you. I knew from the start things couldn’t end with Fincher. The whole reason we went after her was to lay a trap.

“I felt like something was off about him since I laid eyes on him. He acts so impassioned about solving these crimes, yet not only does he fail to, he’s been benefitting from them. The public revere him; he’s gotten more power. It sounds crazy, but I couldn’t shake the feeling that he couldn’t be trusted. So I thought, however high up the ladder he is in this scheme, he’d be the person who’d come saving their assassins if they were in a bind, so

we forced him to show himself, and when he swung a blade at me, I painted that cross on his nail myself. And, it looks like I was right.”

Ririka was feverishly typing, constantly erasing over herself before Tsukiko put a stop to it by grabbing her hands, and plainly stating things for her. “We really *are* the only people in the world who can stop, because the person who is supposed to is in on it.”

Her scarf blew in the wind, her hair being ruffled like branches on a tree. “I’ve made up my mind, I’m pursuing him and anybody who’s with him to the ends of the Earth, through Hell if I have to. I’ll go to war with the entire Supreme Palatine if it means having the truth of what they call *Novas*, and making sure that they never again hurt a single human soul.

“The only things I have are illusions, and my dreams. And you, my dear.” Her hold on her hands trembled & broke, turning into a tight hug. “You’re my world, Ririka. Your constellations are my greatest weapon; you even are the reason I have that watch, that’s my one advantage now, being able to figure out what it is... You deserve better than this, you should run far away and forget you ever met me, but I’d be happy forever if you keep helping me.”

Ririka felt time freeze around her, her face flushed looking down into Tsukiko’s radiantly determined eyes.

She giggled, laughing out her anxiety filled lungs, like each exhale put more of her faith in her love. The chain on her throat broke again as she had the rare privilege of knowing exactly what she should say.

“Tsukiko, don’t be an idiot!” She grabbed Tsukiko’s face, an infinite wellspring of love & joy held together by her soft, warm skin. “Of course I’m with you on this! T-t-those, things... I see them too, and I have no clue why. Maybe it’s just a sign of being

c-cursed..." teardrops fell onto her cheeks, her face turning red. "I have no clue; I have no clue about anything, e-except when I'm with you! That's the one thing I know I can always believe: that I love you, Tsukiko!"

Tsukiko looked up at her princess lily, wrapping her arms around her shoulders to get her to lean down. She pushed herself up so close that Ririka's tears broke against her skin, and brought their lips together. To each other, their kiss felt like the strongest thing in the world. As long as they could share such an embrace, no matter what eternal night or burning damnation could befall them, they would come out on top because of what the two of them had forever in their hearts: Dreams & Illusions, and Love & The Stars.

TO BE CONTINUED
