

Mavor del Toro leaned back in his chair, exasperated, and with his palms rubbing his face. There was a strong temper in his head which was threatening to boil over. He had, after all, spent weeks investigating the death of Captain Sedna, which was difficult and gruesome work, only for him and his team to be told they would no longer be granted charge of the case.

“It’s nothing personal, Mavor,” he was lectured by a woman named Acuna, who was older, smarter, and higher-ranked than him. He had worked under her for many years, and this latest argument was only the newest of what he always saw as her senselessly loyalty to bureaucracy. “This death just isn’t your team’s lane.”

“Horseshit!” del Toro snapped back. “Nobody could do that with their bare hands!”

“Yet the evidence shows that they did,” Acuna said back dryly. “She wasn’t killed by a *Scene Star*, her body wasn’t moved by one, she probably didn’t even look at one on the day she died.”

Magic is, by definition, a staining of the physical world. It is glamorous; illuminating; eye-catching; mesmerizing in the way of a massive hurricane; genesis wrapped around heat death; and oh did it ever leave a trace.

Scorch marks on the ground; sand heated into a glass; a strong but alluring aroma in the air. Even the scars left on a person harmed by a *Scene Star*’s touch were intricate and beautiful; easily identifiable even at a glance. Early on it was found that the movements of a *Scene Star* tended to leave behind an iridescent goop people called star jelly, and in the modern day it could be detected down to a microscopic level.

And yet this time, there were no such things to be found.

“We appreciate your vigor, captain, but your stated mission is to act against those who use their Star’s Gift to the detriment of humanity. Unless you somehow manage to convince us otherwise, I’m afraid this is just not your job. Nothing personal.”

“Listen to yourself, geniuses!” del Toro slammed his hands on the table. “What are you saying happened to her, then?”

One of Acuna’s meek little underlings piped up “Our present thinking is death by misadventure; the condition of her body being perhaps caused by a bear.”

“A bear,” del Toro scoffed. “Sedna, was a strong woman; noble woman; gold standard of a *Scene Star*,” he ranted, speaking as though he had met the departed a single time in his life. “You are not telling me that she got mauled to death by a *bear*, and then that bear just, what? Got bored of her corpse and tossed her in a tree? Do you think I’m stupid?”

“We’re finished here,” Acuna sighed, standing up and motioning for everyone else to start out of the room after her.

The city outside was cold and bustling. The clatter of streetcars and pedestrians was seamlessly blended with the sound of the winter storm wind. Those present at the meeting were quickly going their separate ways, many of them seeming to flee in terror from del Toro’s tired and judgmental stares.

Acuna wasn’t so lucky, for as she had been about to cross the street, Mavor del Toro had run back up to her, clearly still itching to win an argument.

“Ma’am, listen, you know I respect you, right? And I carry a dim hope that after all this time you somehow respect me. So when I say-”

He was shushed; surprisingly not out of annoyance, but because a more pressing matter had sprung up.

Someone was lurking behind them.

There were about half a dozen people left *on the street* with them, but one was specifically shadowing her. They had stopped in place a couple steps later than del Toro had, obviously trying to mirror his movement but being shaky and imprecise. They stood with odd but purposeful posture: shoulders stiffened, something clearly being clutched to their chest underneath the heavy jacket that shrouded their face with a hood.

“What’s the problem?” del Toro hissed into Acuna’s ear, trying to not be heard.

Acuna cast him back a look which communicated that decades of intuition was signalling a trouble maker to her.

“Are you alright?” Acuna called out, feeling more curious than threatened. For each level decades of a Paladin raised your skill in sniffing out danger, it doubly so raised your ability to not be shaken by it.

The shadower stayed still, so Acuna - not feeling the most patient she ever had - walked back the way she came straight up to them.

She could now see the face of a young lady's arrogant face framed by unkept hair balled up beneath her hood. She lurched backward, flailing her arms out with what she had been hiding under the jacket.

A blade was now pointing its tip straight at the Paladins.

She was wielding a small sabre: its blade a metal sheet that looked perfectly forged, and refused to reflect the slightest scrap of light falling across it.

“Good Stars,” Acuna sighed, pitying the poor child stupid enough to do as she was.

“Hey kid,” del Toro called from behind her.

The blade swung... back at its wielder.

Its tip grazed across her wrist, effortlessly slicing through her skin and beckoning a couple drops of her blood to upon it. They left no stain, looking to be instantly taken into the being of the pitch black metal. It seemed to shake in its holder’s hand, like a rapid animal violently reeling for escape from captivity.

And suddenly, the air went dour.

The two Paladins found their eyes stung by some overwhelming, metallic-feeling quality that had been mixed into the wind. Acuna narrowed her vision, both to relieve the stinging and to anticipate their ambusher’s next move.

Surprisingly, she was doing her best to stay still, though still wavering from taking harsh breaths. Her expression looked nearly frightened, though it was hard to read as her eyes were dark and empty.

Acuna started her hand forward slowly. “Young lady, please put that down.”

Just then, her eyes had their attention caught down. Where seconds ago had been a firm layer of powdery snow, one could now see the bare sidewalk. Something had suddenly scraped away the snowfall.

Then, a bit forward and a little to the right, the same happened. No dazzle nor fanfare, just the snow being blown away suddenly,

“What the...”

The stinging vapor in the air suddenly burst into a searing pain all over her shoulders; Gnarled spikes gripping her flesh, pulling themselves down her skin - the claws of a hand never meant to touch this Earth.

She was pierced and ripped apart from the inside, just as she was ripped away from the Earth. Marshall Acuna let out a scream that would never be heard, as her final breath would never be felt.

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Her eyes reflected bluelight, shining like a predator's. Having no desk space spared by half-finished sewing projects, Tsukiko sat curled up in front of her computer on the floor, laying only on top of a small throw blanket she had cured up the edge of around her feet. The dull display from the bulky curved monitor was the only source of light in the room, as the shifting & clicking of the mouse was the only source of noise.

Five months had passed since Tsukiko found Sofia Sedna's dead body; in that time, she had yet to stop thinking about it. The public, in contrast, moved past it pretty quickly, until earlier that week when a KIBOU Nation marshall had been found strung up on top of a radio tower, body in much the same condition. Only minutes before, she had been perfectly well and walking out of a meeting; five miles away. She had gotten into some kind of tiff with a girl on the street, then - so people witnessed - just vanished into thin air.

The much more public circumstances of this second death caused it to become the subject of mass hysteria, and drag the first one back to the limelight with it. Many people were cheering on the wit and grit of Mavor del Toro, who had witnessed the

incident up-close, and seemed haunted by the fact that the culprit - for lack of a better word - had escaped his chase in the confusion. He had been promoted to the victim's position, and seemed fiercely determined to make the most of it.

The gruesome details and seemingly impossible circumstances had filled up imageboards with wild ideas and quips about this incident being destined to end up on the list of "cursed search terms". Tsukiko had been spending nights on end crawling through the cesspool of faceless people posting wildly about bug-shaped aliens, time travel, and cannibal cults of mountain men; The type of thing Ririka would be mad to know she was looking at.

Tsukiko was deeply engrossed in scrolling past a dozzenth dead-end web page, so much that she nearly ignored it when stirring came from behind her.

"Tsukiko," Ririka yawned out like a baby bird chirping, lifting herself out of bed to crawl to her side. "Come to bed sweetheart," she begged. "I'm worried about you."

"Nothing's the matter," Tsukiko tried telling her.

"Do you think I'm stupid?" Ririka huffed. "You can't have gotten a single full night of sleep in the last week! You look like a mess."

"I look my best when I'm a mess," Tsukiko dismissively said.

"Well, I don't think so," Ririka pouted. "I think you look your best when you've washed your face, brushed your teeth," she kept on meekly listing "and done your hair, and gotten dressed up in cute pajamas, and got in bed to let me hug you until I fall asleep."

“Ten more minutes,” Tsukiko promised, dark circled eyes not wavering off the screen even as Ririka pressed the fabric around her shoulders against her skin and gently yet firmly attempted to shake some sense into her.

“Come on, you’re driving yourself cra-” she bit her lip remorsefully, “I mean, I know it’s really messed up. I wanna help you, just get off the damn computer!” Ririka fruitlessly tugged at Tsukiko’s sleeves, relenting only when she had yanked Tsukiko back far enough to spot something hiding in her shadow.

A little square of plastic; a worn photograph, the sight of which made the taste of unease pool in the back of her throat.

“An impossible murder; a Supreme Paladin ripped apart, her body seemingly lifted through the clouds, and yet not a trace of magic to be found. Just a dead body... found by *me*.” Tsukiko turned around now. She looked at Ririka, but - with the only light being behind her - her eyes were lost in the dark. “Do you think that’s a coincidence?”

Tsukiko’s question struck Ririka like a siren’s song towards a sailor. Her breathing grew shallow, and she flung herself around Tsukiko.

“Don’t do this to yourself,” she sniffled. “Do not do this to yourself.”

Tsukiko moved her fingers to glaze across the soft fabric of Ririka’s nightgown, which was being stained by teardrops.

“You know, I lied to that del Toro guy,” she confessed. “Only by omission, but... I- it took me a while to go for help.”

Ririka shook, taking a second to resume talking. "Okay, okay! It's okay, that- that doesn't matter, surely." She sprung right back to trying to pull her out from the computer, figuratively and literally.

"In the time people *think* it took that woman to get here, it's really hard to explain how she did it. With how much longer she was actually there, it's impossible."

The two made eye contact, Ririka wavering as she was struck by the look painted across her dear's face.

"You kept that from me... And, you're still keeping something secret," she said, nervously breaking off her gaze and making her eyes dart around the room.

"Not secret," Tsukiko waved off, "I was gonna tell you when I had it figure out."

She too brought her eyes away, seeing the look on Ririka's face.

"It's not even a *thing*! Just," she breathed shallowly, "I feel like I am... onto something. Just an idea, that's all."

Quiet overtook the room.

"Okay," Ririka's voice was barely a whisper, her mouth straining for the will to make the words, "What idea?"

Tsukiko - confused and hesitating - just stared quietly back at her.

"Come on," Ririka said, now pulling with her words instead of her hands.

Tsukiko was jolted like she had just been awakened from an absurd dream. “Just forget it, I’m coming to bed now,” she waved off. “You’re right.”

Ririka grabbed her hand, gently clasping it between both of hers.

“You really do not have to worry about it,” Tsukiko futilely insisted.

“Of course I do; I need to if you are.” Tsukiko could tell Ririka did in fact just want to go to bed together, but the poor thing was more distressed by the idea of Tsukiko shutting her out than anything she could actually be told. “I’d *never* let you be alone. Can you please believe that? I’ll stand right beside you through anything, no matter what. Just tell me what’s going on.”

Tsukiko looked at her and let silence rule the room for what had to have been a full minute. Then she let her voice slash through the night’s wind.

“I think I know who’s behind this.”

Quiet. Even the faint hum of the computer seemed to have silenced itself.

“You mean-”

“I mean I know who killed them, yes.”

Ririka was spooked stock-still, but Tsukiko had already started crawling around, making jittery steps as she went off about her point.

“When I found the body, in her hand... I picked this up without thinking about it,” she explained, adding “I’m being honest,” in reply to Ririka’s incredulous look. “When I went inside I left it in a drawer and didn’t even think about it until later.”

The thing in question was a tiny, jagged piece of metal.

“You know what this is?” Tsukiko asked, waving it about. Ririka, of course, shook her head.

“Neither did I, for three weeks.”

“Three weeks?” Ririka meekly parroted.

“three weeks. I spent three weeks researching, then I figured it out: class ring. Sivgney High School, a place on the other end of Kismet. The graduating class from two years ago: it’s a piece of their ring.”

Leaning over the computer, she clicked over to a picture of a beautiful ring with an amethyst centre. Holding up the piece she took next to it, it was indeed a perfect match.

“So: Sivgney; not a big school; not a big class size. The graduating class that year was 179 students. Thank Stars, someone put the yearbook online. And right there it was: list of subjects, in my grasp. I just had to search for them all. Profile them; lots of people have web pages nowadays, so it’s not that hard to get a good read on somebody. I got good enough at tracing through details of their lives that I’ve been able to rule out at least two a night, depending on how much I suspected them.”

“A-are you serious?”

Tsukiko was looking at her with sleepless eyes, forever trapped deep in thought.

“Calla Fincher, that’s her name. She’s the one: one out of one hundred seventy nine. One matches the person witnessed talking to the marshall before she vanished; one who lives

local to the area where both of the victims were last seen; one who doesn't seem to have many positive things going on in her personal life, and has a bitter disposition. Hell, she was even close to a classmate who died before graduation, which could explain why she would've been wearing the ring even when doing this."

"Doing... what?" Ririka asked, her voice shaking from being scared and concerned and oh so captivated.

Tsukiko took a deep breath. "Messing with things that no good can come from."

Ririka fidgeted anxiously, gasping with her hands over her mouth. A lot of words tried forming in her mouth. Most of them seemed like Tsukiko's name, but in the end she stuttered out "S-so are we gonna tell Luci to tell the Paladins, or something?"

"We can't," Tsukiko barked. "The Supreme Paladins won't help us, you know that."

"What are you doing this for then?"

"Guess I just wanna know," Tsukiko glared at the photoprint she had sitting next to the computer. "If I could just meet her once," she thought aloud, now pacing through the room, "I'd be able to test my theory nice and easy. I honestly don't have a clue where this is going, but my heart is beating to tell me that if I keep going I can uncover something that will explain what's behind this; something that will explain *everything*."

Ririka nodded glumly. "And what if you're right?" Ririka asked in bated breath.

"Then, my darling," Tsukiko's face lit wildly, grabbing her and keeping her in a close embrace. "We would have to do what the *Scene Stars* do best." She locked their left hands together and lifted them into the fringe of her own hair. She wrapped their interlaced fingers around a lock, guiding them to twirl like a ballerina and spin strands around it

tighter and tighter until only a few taut hairs remained, plucked away from their kin as Tsukiko brought their hands down to rest at her heart.

“Preserve beauty in the sky; uphold KIBOU’s mission.”

Tsukiko’s fingers pressed into Ririka’s skin as the strands of white hair burnt up like a comet, vanishing from sight. As her whole being sparkled and radiated a cosmic energy, Tsukiko released her grasp and unfurled her palm, revealing a small statuette that seemed cast of pewter left in the hairs’ wake, carved in the shape of a yelping fox.

“We will fight until we colour the world to our will.”

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The girls stood under a street light, which had become a scarce beacon in the evening overcast. They were waiting on the sidewalk outside a circle of buildings, within which was a crummy restaurant that Calla Fincher was a waitress at.

Tsukiko had dressed simply in striped leggings and with favourite hoodie to cover her face along with her scarf.

Ririka was dressed up fancifully, which was impractical but helped keep her comforted. The cloth of her dress started around her shoulders & collarbone as a pitch black, blending straight down to her knees from navy blue to a flowery pastel violet, progressively showing a mesmerizing pattern of constellations spanning around each and every skirt.

“She’ll be walking by us any minute now,” Tsukiko assured Ririka; the two had been staking out the plaza for hours beforehand, and had seen Fincheer emerge from the light rail station they were waiting outside of. As they had seen for themselves, Fincher

had a spiteful little face and seemed cursed to walk with a persistent bitter wind swirling around her straightened icy blonde hair.

“Here she comes,” Tsukiko said under her breath, grabbing Ririka’s arm and ducking down the stairs into the station with her. By the time they made it down every step and reached the platform proper, Fincher had joined them in the shadows of the concrete roof.

“Okay, so now we just catch her off-guard and ask her about the ring, right?”

Tsukiko was nodding her head, when suddenly the hairs on her neck stood up and froze it in place.

“Don’t move,” she suddenly cut in, her eyes wide and her face turning pale.

Ririka grabbed Tsukiko’s shoulder and gently shook her in such a manner that Tsukiko knew to interpret as her asking “What’s wrong?”

“We’re public,” she said, words a frightened hissed. “What if she hurts someone.”

“Ma-, um,” Ririka bit her nails, not prepared for this train of thought.

“Shit, what was I thinking?!” Tsukiko cursed at herself. “We’re getting on the train. We have to trail her to wherever we can corner her alone.”

“Do you think that’s necessary?”

Tsukiko bit her lip. “Yes!”

Ririka looked easy. “What if she just hurts us instead?”

“You’d rather she go nuts in a train station?”

Ririka flinched.

“You and I will be able to protect ourselves. Nothing will be able to stop *us*.” She grabbed both of Ririka’s hands, gently rubbing their fingers together as if to make up for briefly going off on her. “You keep our passes in your bag, right? Let’s go get on the train.”

As the girls made it through the ticket gate, Ririka paused for a second, looking at Tsukiko intently. “Are you sure you know what we’re doing?”

“We’re doing what only we can, dear; trust me.”

“Okay,” Ririka swallowed her fear, as they stepped onto a train to who-knew-where, “I trust you.”

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Who-knew-where turned out to be a dingy motel five stops away. The sign in front was missing letters, and the walls’ dirty sand paint was clearly chipping. Fincher looked quite out of the place as Tsukiko and Ririka watched her from afar, staking out in the parking lot.

Eventually she returned from the front desk to a room in the middle of the row of dilapidated doors, slinking inside.

They waited a few minutes more, before Tsukiko started creeping up to the door. Both hands were buried in her hoodie pockets: one set of fingers’ touch was divided between

the jagged medal of class ring fragment and the smooth plastic of a printed photo, while the other grasped a retractable boxcutter, like it was a noble's weapon of antiquity. "Last chance to call this off," Ririka mused.

Tsukiko looked back at her.

"Go time?"

"Go time," she relented.