

Asari Endou

Illustration by  
Marui-no

4

# Magical Girl

Raising Project



# Magical Girl Laising Project

episodes

Asari Endou

Illustration by  
Marui-no

Nemurin's Adventure



Magical Daisy,  
Episode Twenty-Two

Theme songs:

**Hello★Daisy!**  
**Pa-Pi-Pu-Palette!**

Lyrics: **asr.**

Music: **Fav**

Arrangement: **Fav**

Vocals: **Radical Sisters**  
(Magical Records)

Miracle Logical Cynical Magical Daisy!



A Cherna Christmas

“Thanks, Tomoki!”  
“Oh, it’s no big deal.”  
“Once you grow up,  
I’ll let you into  
my family.”



"I'll leave the rest to you," Michiyo muttered, facedown on the ground.

She didn't even have the strength to lift her head.

"Beating her up...is more your kinda job than mine anyway, Himari..."

Meow-Meow @ N City

# Magical Girl Raising Project

episodes

4

Asari Endou  
Illustration by Marui-no



NEW YORK

## Copyright

Magical Girl Raising Project, Vol. 4

Asari Endou

Translation by Jennifer Ward

Cover art by Marui-no

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

"MAHO SHOJYO IKUSEI KEIKAKU episodes" by Asari Endou, Marui-no  
Copyright © 2013 Asari Endou, Marui-no All rights reserved.

Original Japanese edition published by Takarajimasha, Inc., Tokyo.

English translation rights arranged with Takarajimasha, Inc. through Tuttle-Mori Agency, Inc., Tokyo.

English translation © 2018 by Yen Press, LLC

Yen Press, LLC supports the right to free expression and the value of copyright. The purpose of copyright is to encourage writers and artists to produce the creative works that enrich our culture.

The scanning, uploading, and distribution of this book without permission is a theft of the author's intellectual property. If you would like permission to use material from the book (other than for review purposes), please contact the publisher. Thank you for your support of the author's rights.

Yen On

1290 Avenue of the Americas

New York, NY 10104

Visit us at [yenpress.com](http://yenpress.com)

[facebook.com/yenpress](https://facebook.com/yenpress)

[twitter.com/yenpress](https://twitter.com/yenpress)

[yenpress.tumblr.com](https://yenpress.tumblr.com)

[instagram.com/yenpress](https://instagram.com/yenpress)

First Yen On Edition: July 2018

Yen On is an imprint of Yen Press, LLC.

The Yen On name and logo are trademarks of Yen Press, LLC.

The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Names: Endou, Asari, author. | Marui-no, illustrator. | Keller-Nelson, Alexander, translator. | Ward, Jennifer, translator.

Title: Magical girl raising project / Asari Endou ; illustration by Marui-no ; translation by Alexander Keller-Nelson and Jennifer Ward.

Other titles: Mahāo Shāojo Ikusei Keikaku. English Description: First Yen On edition. | New York, NY : Yen On, 2017— Identifiers: LCCN 2017013234 | ISBN 9780316558570 (v1 : pbk) | ISBN 9780316559911 (v2 : pbk) | ISBN 9780316559966 (v3 : pbk) | ISBN 9780316559997 (v4 : pbk) Subjects: | CYAC: Magic—Fiction. | Computer games—Fiction. | Social media—Fiction. | Competition (Psychology)—Fiction.

Classification: LCC PZ7.1.E526 Mag 2017 | DDC [Fic]—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2017013234>

ISBNs: 978-0-31655999-7 (paperback) 978-0-316-56014-6 (ebook)

E3-20180620-JV-PC

**COME PLAY WITH TOP SPEED**

## AKANE AND THE HAPPY MAGICAL-GIRL FAMILY

## KNIGHT ON THE DAY OF THE OFFLINE MEETUP

## THE CASE OF THE MISSING BEEF: THE MAID SAW IT

**MAGICAL ILLEGAL GIRL**

## MEMORIES OF THE BLUE MAGICAL GIRL

## CLANTAIL'S FRIENDS

\*The eight chapters from “Nemurin’s Adventure” to “Meow-Meow @ N City” are revised and improved versions of short stories originally published in the *This Light Novel Is Amazing! Publishing Special Blog*.



# Contents

[Cover](#)

[Insert](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Nemurin's Adventure](#)

[The Robot and the Nun](#)

[Producing the Angels](#)

[Zombie Western](#)

[\*Magical Daisy\*, Episode Twenty-Two](#)

[A Cherna Christmas](#)

[Wonder Dream](#)

[Meow-Meow @ N City](#)

[Come Play with Top Speed](#)

[Akane and the Happy Magical-Girl Family](#)

[Knight on the Day of the Offline Meetup](#)

[The Case of the Missing Beef: The Maid Saw It](#)

[Magical Illegal Girl](#)

[Memories of the Blue Magical Girl](#)

[Clantail's Friends](#)

[Afterword](#)

[Yen Newsletter](#)

# Magical Girl Raising Project



## SNOW WHITE

KOYUKI HIMEKAWA

Can hear the thoughts of those in need.



## RULER

SANAE MOKUOU

Can order those directly in front of her to do anything.



## RIPPLE

KANO SAZANAMI

Can throw shuriken that always hit their target.



## TAMA

TAMA INUHOZAKI

Can quickly open holes in anything.



## CALAMITY MARY

Can power up the weapons she wields.



## NEMURIN

NEMU SANJOU

Can enter others' dreams.

## THE STORY

The super-popular mobile game *Magical Girl Raising Project* can cause miracles: It turns one out of every few tens of thousands of players into a real magical girl. Having been bestowed with magical powers, these lucky girls live each day to the fullest.

But then one day, management sends them its unilateral decree: "We have too many magical girls, so we're cutting the number in half." And thus begins a harsh and ruthless race for survival among sixteen magical girls...



## TOP SPEED

TSUBAME MUKOTA

Uses a broomstick to fly at high speed.



## HARDGORE ALICE

AKO HATODA

Can quickly heal any wound.



## LA PUCELLE

SOUTA KISHIBE

Can change the size of her sword at will.



## SWIM SWIM

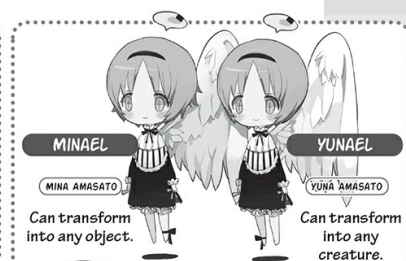
AYANA SAKANAGI

Can pass through any object like it's water.



## MUSICIAN OF THE FOREST, CRANBERRY

Can freely manipulate sound.



## MINAEL

MINA AMASATO

Can transform into any object.

## YUNAEL

YUNA AMASATO

Can transform into any creature.



## WEISS WINTERPRISON

SHIZUKU ASHU

Can create walls anywhere.



## SISTER NANA

NANA HABUTAE

Can draw out the power of the one she loves to its fullest.



## MAGICALOID 44

MAKOTO ANDOU

Receives one useful futuristic tool a day.

# Magical Girl Raising

## THE STORY

Having been bestowed with powers by the Magical Kingdom, these magical girls work hard every day at helping people. But then the girls receive invitations from an unknown sender to a game called *Magical Girl Raising Project*. Trapped in an unfair game where they could die at any time, each of the sixteen girls comes up with a plan to survive, as the figure behind the curtain toys with them...

### PECHKA

CHIKA TATEHARA

Can create really delicious food.



### NOKKO

NORIKO NONOHARA

Can change the feelings of those around her.



# Project

restart

### PFLE

KANOE HITOKOJUN

Uses a magical wheelchair to race at intense speeds.



### DETEC BELL

SHINOBU HIOKA

Can talk to buildings.



### LAPIS LAZULINE

Can use gems to teleport.



### CLANTAIL

NENE ONO

Can transform the lower half of her body into different animals.



### RIONETTA

Can manipulate dolls with her thoughts.



### @MEOW-MEOW

YUMARI TANAHASHI

Can trap things inside paper talismans.



### SHADOW GALE

MAIMORI TOTOYAMA

Can power up machines by modifying them.



### MELVILLE

MASHIRO KUSU

Can change her color at will.



### AKANE

AKANE FUWA

Can cut anything she sees.



### NONAKO MIYOKATA

ANNA SARIZAE

Can make friends with any animal.



### MAGICAL DAISY

KIKU YAKUMO

Can shoot lethal Daisy Beams.



### GENOPSYKO YUMENOSHIMA

KARIN SONODA

Can block any attack with her magical suit.



### MASKED WONDER

KONOMI MITA

Can change any object's weight.



### CHERNA MOUSE

Can make herself really big.



### KEEK

Can do whatever she wants within her personal cyberspace.



C

H

A

R

A

C

T

E

R

S

# Nemurin's Adventure

This story is set around the time when the magical candy competition in *Magical Girl Raising Project* had just begun.



No one could stop the giant monster's advance. No power could keep it in check: not the police, not the Japan Self-Defense Forces, not the American military, not law, ethics, or passion. Of course, handguns and machines were useless, and even tank-mounted cannons and missiles did nothing more than sprinkle the monster's hide with soot. The beast was merciless, even when crushing girls who screamed and cried as they ran this way and that trying to escape.

This monster, this mound of violent impulse, could not stand the presence of the insolent buildings those tiny humans had fussed over making. It tore down the National Diet Building with its black, nubbled forelegs, and with a swing of its tail, it snapped the Tokyo Skytree in half. From its mouth, filled with flashing fangs, it fired a heat ray that blasted the Tokyo Metropolitan Government Building into bits in one shot.

A boy was watching the monster from atop a high-rise building.

His knees were trembling, and he couldn't even stand as he clung to the chain-link fence that circumscribed the building's roof to stop people from jumping off. The black creature and its unfettered campaign of destruction terrified him more than he could take.

Unable to hide its joy in the mayhem, the monster howled loudly, rattling the glass of all the nearby buildings. But it was so worked up, a howl wasn't enough to sate its energies. Its red eyes, filled with violent passion, scanned the area until they met those of the trembling boy on the roof.

The monster was over 160 feet tall. Who knows why such a large creature would lock gazes with a boy not even five feet tall? But it did.

The monster's mouth twisted to bare its fangs. Had it just smiled?

The fiend approached the boy, leaving footprints in the road as its feet slammed down. The boy thought about running, but his legs wouldn't move. Sensing his inevitable death, he screamed.

"H-heeelp!"

"Leave it to me!"

A girl's voice responded just as its owner revealed herself. She stood on the chain-link fence in front of the boy, shielding him from the giant. She was wearing pajamas and holding a pillow under her right arm. Her hair, which was longer than she was tall, swayed in the winds blowing high above the ground.

"You're a vile monster, destroying the city and hurting people! Magical Girl Nemurin is gonna beat you up!" The girl leaped from the chain-link fence and bent over into an acute angle in midair to land a kick between the monster's eyes. The creature wailed, though it hadn't even twitched in response to the missiles or tank-mounted cannons. The girl kicked it, punched it, and whacked it with her pillow, and each time, the monster voiced its pain with truly pathetic-sounding cries.

Then it tried to run away, but the girl was hot on its heels, grabbing its tail to swing it around violently and throw it. *Crash*. The ground pitched. The road caved in, and buildings lurched off center. The monster wasn't only hurt by the impact of its landing—its eyes were spinning after being swung around and around.

Now that her foe was stunned, the girl touched both her index fingers to her forehead, striking a pose. "Nemurin Beam! Zap, zap, zap, zap!"

Beams shaped like jagged, angular lightning shot out of her forehead to envelop the great monster in golden light. Its black hide turned a pale green color, its horns and fangs shortened, and it shrank down a size.

"The evil heart controlling you has now been purified. Go on, return to the Southern Islands."

The monster stood up and bobbed its head in a bow to the girl, then strode away with steps that seemed somehow rejuvenated. The girl spent some time watching the monster go, and then she hopped up into the air and disappeared.

The boy stared at the scene, dumbfounded, but before long, he awakened to the sound of his mother yelling, "How long are you going to sleep? You're going to be late again!"



This place lay on the boundary between dreams and reality.

Fluffy white clouds went on and on, forever and ever. They looked just like cotton candy—and in fact, if someone put some in their mouth, they'd find it tasted a little sweet. There was a canopy, too, made of the same stuff as the clouds, spreading out in four directions, and underneath it sat a sofa and some cushions.

The magical girl Nemurin's long, long hair dangled to the cloud floor as she sat daintily on the sofa, using her magical phone. A hologram of the mascot character, Fav, floated up from its screen. On the magical phone's screen was the number 7,530,685,689,921. That was the amount of magical candy Nemurin had.

"Defeating that monster today made my candy count even more ridiculous, huh?"

"That's what happens when you keep saving Earth and the universe and stuff, pon."

"Is this number capped?"

"You mean, is there a maximum possible value? There might be a limit in the settings, but...no magical girl has ever actually stored up that much, pon."

"Huh. Then maybe Nemurin'll work harder to store up more and become the first magical girl ever to hit the candy limit."

"You might as well do that in reality, pon."

"Doing it in reality is sooo exhausting!"

Magical candy earned in dreams was limited to the world of dreams only. Nemurin may have been getting rich in this realm, but in the real world, her candy values were still at zero. She would probably be the first one to be cut under the new rule that had been announced the other day, that whoever had the lowest number of candy would stop being a magical girl.

Fav had been stubbornly insisting, "You should earn candy in the real world, pon," but Nemurin never listened.

Still holding her magical phone, she flopped over to lie on the sofa.

Nemurin's power as a magical girl was to traverse between the world of

dreams and real life. In dreams, everything was a piece of cake for her, even beating up an evil god or a great monster, but in the physical world, she was bound by the laws of reality.

“Maybe Nemurin can just let the other girls handle the real world,” she muttered.

“You’ve got no initiative, pon.”

“Nemurin’ll work hard in the dream world...”

All of a sudden, the Nemurin Antennae that decorated the ends of her hair cried out, “A MAGICAL GIRL IS DREAMING!” and Nemurin leaped to her feet. It seemed someone she knew was having a dream.

“You’re going to go watch, pon?”

“Of course!”

Nemurin snapped her fingers, and a door rose up from the clouds. The large, thick slab of wood looked old, but there were no nicks or dirt on it. She reached out to the doorknob and turned it. The door was unlocked.

Nemu Sanjou had been a hard-core indoor type ever since she was practically a baby.

She’d had severe asthma that prevented her from playing outside freely, but she had enjoyed listening to her older brother and sister tell her funny stories about what had happened to them: “We had fun doing this today” or “So-and-so told me that.” Nemu was a good listener—or rather, she sincerely enjoyed hearing her siblings talk, and the pleasure she derived from it made them happy, too. So they told her everything: failures, secrets, and all.

Nemu had recovered from her infantile asthma almost entirely by the time she started elementary school, but her nature was basically set in stone by that point. She preferred watching other people do things rather than doing them herself. She didn’t like hard work or conflict.

It wasn’t like she was passive or a poor communicator. She had friends. She just didn’t want to be active. She had more fun listening to people talk about things so she could imagine them rather than experiencing those things for

herself.

Even after Nemu graduated from university, she devoted herself to reading and playing video games, with the excuse that she was “helping around the house.” But neither her parents nor her siblings scolded her for it. The Sanjou family had been big property magnates for centuries, and they owned seven apartment buildings in total, large and small. So her family was financially comfortable; plus, they loved the easygoing Nemu, so they spoiled her.

Nemu first started playing the mobile game *Magical Girl Raising Project* when she heard the rumors of its miraculous power to make one out of every few tens of thousands of players into a real magical girl. And then, even after it turned her into the magical girl Nemurin, nothing changed about her lifestyle. She didn’t like trouble. She didn’t like conflict. If there was going to be a competition between all the girls for candy, then she wouldn’t bother gathering any at all. She accomplished all sorts of things in the dream world, while in the real world, she enjoyed the once-weekly special chat unique to the magical girls.

She listened to the stories of the others who’d gained powers through the game, like Snow White, La Pucelle, and Sister Nana, and she also checked what they were up to via the magical-girl aggregate sites and visits to their dreams.

The world of dreams belonged to Nemurin. When she was at the boundary between dreams and reality, she knew exactly when any acquaintance was dreaming, as long as it was someone she’d met in real life. If one of her colleagues was dreaming, she would immediately rush over to watch, and occasionally, she would participate. It was unusual for a magical girl to dream as her superpowered alter ego, so she always jumped at the opportunity.

Snow White had once debuted as a singing and dancing magical-girl idol. Sister Nana had once been locked in a castle tower and was saved by a prince. Top Speed had won a witches’ broom race at one point.

Nemurin had seen Winterprison flirting with Sister Nana in a room in their apartment. Even Nemurin hadn’t been able to bring herself to watch that. She’d left before it ended.

La Pucelle had fought a dragon once. The dragon had had her on the ropes

when Nemurin had swooped down right in the nick of time, throwing a rock at the dragon in an attempt to save her cornered friend. But her aim had been off, and she'd hit the back of La Pucelle's head instead. Nemurin had panicked and run away, and in the chat the next day, La Pucelle had complained about a big, mysterious lump on her head when she'd woken up that morning. Nemurin had apologized, secretly and silently.

Fav made fun of her, calling her a Peeping Tom and a voyeur and a stalker. It wasn't like Nemurin was completely shameless about it. But she figured any of the magical girls she knew would probably forgive her if she apologized, so she decided to do so mentally and go see this dream, too.

Nemurin opened the big, creaking door and followed the fluffy road out of the pure-cloud boundary realm between dreams and reality and emerged in the world of dreams, which had anything and everything. The soft billows gave way to hard stone floor, people started to appear, and before she knew it, the area was filled with tightly packed crowds. It was so stuffy, it made her want to gag.

It was a Middle Ages Europe-style town abuzz with some event like a festival. Absolutely everyone was excited, and this whirlpool of wild enthusiasm was centered around something specific. Nemurin leaped up to escape the sweltering air of the crowd and went to sit on the roof of a building with a hanging signboard that seemed to indicate the place was an inn.

There was a line of knights and soldiers, court ladies and jesters, and a band playing a rowdy and boisterous song. And riding the palanquin at its head was a princess.

"Hmm?" Nemurin looked hard at the princess. She seemed familiar. But still, it wasn't someone she'd ever met in real life. She could swear she had seen this princess in the magical-girl chat, as an avatar. "That's...Ruler, isn't it?"

She had only come to the chat once or twice, but Nemurin remembered her. It was definitely Ruler. The crowd was calling her name, too. *Great Ruler! Great Ruler!*

Nemurin flicked on her magical phone and summoned Fav.

"Yes, yes?"

“Hey, Fav. That princess is Ruler, right?”

“Yes, it is, pon.”

“Doesn’t dream magic only let me see the dreams of people I’ve met in real life? Nemurin doesn’t remember ever having met Ruler face-to-face.”

“Maybe you’ve encountered her someplace before, as a human?”

“Oh, I guess that’s possible... Wait.” Upon closer inspection, Nemurin could see that the outlines of Ruler on the palanquin were faintly blurred. “Ruler isn’t the dreamer. That Ruler is part of the dream.”

Because Nemurin operated in the world of dreams, she could somehow tell the difference between the person who was dreaming and the characters who populated the dream.

This wasn’t Ruler’s. Someone else was dreaming about her.

Nemurin bumped up the sensitivity of her Nemurin Antennae and scanned the area. Her eyes came to a rest on a certain little girl.

She was alone, separate from the crowd, and as she watched Ruler, she had an air about her that differentiated her from the bubbling enthusiasm surrounding her. She must have been about six years old, and she was quite adorable. She was the dreamer. Though the girl appeared human, the Nemurin Antennae indicated that the dreamer was a magical girl, which had to mean she was dreaming in her regular human form.

Nemurin jumped off the roof of the inn and floated down, doing a spin to land beside the girl. The girl completely ignored Nemurin’s sudden descent; she had eyes only for Ruler.

Nemurin observed the little girl’s face. Thinking about it now, she had the feeling she may or may not have seen a kid like this in her neighborhood. Maybe she had said hi to Nemu on her way to or from school? Or maybe not.

The little girl was gazing at Ruler with sparkling eyes filled with admiration.

“Do you love Ruler?” Nemurin asked. The little girl nodded, eyes on Ruler the whole time. “‘Cause she’s cute?”

“‘Cause she’s cute and she’s cool and she’s a princess.”

“I gotcha. Princesses are really neat, huh?”

“Yeah. When I grow up, I’m gonna be her attendant.”

“‘Attendant’? That’s a real big word.”

“Yeah.”

“Hmm... But what if, instead of becoming her attendant, you became a princess yourself?”

“Huh?” For the first time, the girl tore her eyes away from Ruler. They were wide in surprise, staring at Nemurin.

Nemurin knelt down so she could be at eye level with the little girl. “I’m sure you can become one. All little girls can become princesses.”

“Me...becoming a princess...,” the girl muttered dazedly.

Nemurin patted her head as if to say “*Good girl*” and leaped up.

The fears and aspirations of small children were so incredibly easy to understand in their dreams. They didn’t try to hide behind shyness or vanity the way adults did. Nemurin’s absolute favorite thing was to watch dreams like that from afar...but on that day, she breathed a large sigh.

Even as she flew toward the boundary between dreams and reality, she couldn’t stop thinking about the girl she’d just seen.

“What’s wrong, pon?” Fav’s tone didn’t indicate any concern. He was purely curious, and that simple desire to know was patently evident.

Nemurin sighed again. “Oh...thinking back on how that girl’s eyes sparkled, you know? It’s like suddenly, I feel kinda dirty. I can’t help feeling this way whenever I see little kids.”

“Well, you *are* dirty, actually. You’re the only magical girl with a peeping habit, pon.”

“You’re not gonna even try to console me?”

“Nope, pon.”

“Harsh!”

Nemurin's reason for nonparticipation was that she didn't want to engage in conflicts. She had basically boycotted candy gathering, implicitly stating her refusal to involve herself in a game to compete for the highest candy score.

But now, she kind of felt like her reasons had changed.

That girl had shown straightforward adoration. Pure feelings. Even when she wasn't transformed, she was so overwhelmingly a *magical girl*.

She must have been another magical girl in town. And if she was, she, too, would be forced to gather magical candy. But Nemurin wanted to delay forcing on her the stains and wounds of the candy competition even just a little bit longer. If Nemurin were to do nothing and go back to being a human, then that girl could remain pure that much longer...maybe.

"At this rate, at the weekend chat, you're gonna be the dropout, pon."

"Yeah...I guess my fun as a magical girl is over."

"What'll you do if you retire, pon?"

"Hmm..." Nemurin tilted her neck left, then right, then sucked in a big lungful of air. The air of the dream world was thick, sweet, and somehow suffocating. She looked at her feet as she flew and saw that her right sock was slipping down. Tugging it up, she murmured, "Maybe I'll stop being stuck in my house doing nothing and start looking for a job."

A great sea of clouds, white as far as the eye could see, spread out before her.

*I bet I'll have good dreams today,* Nemurin thought.

# The Robot and the Nun

This story is set when there weren't yet many magical girls in N City, a while before the *Magical Girl Raising Project* game first started.



When Makoto Andou didn't want to do something, she would never, ever do it. Phlegmatic in all things as she was, she failed her high school entrance exams, dropped out of school, and got a job. Her parents said it was meant to be; Makoto herself believed that. When she didn't want to do something, she just didn't, and there was no helping that.

So once she graduated middle school and began lazing around, her parents tried to grab ahold of her and force her into doing things she didn't want to. Then she went around staying at friends' places instead, only coming back home once every two weeks.

She would sneak expired boxed lunches out from the convenience store where she worked. She would quench her thirst at park fountains. When she found edible plants, she would pack them into a plastic bag to take home. She would tag along with her homeless friends to line up at soup kitchens. When she was at a station transferring trains, twenty-nine times out of thirty, she'd resist the smell of the soba stalls.

This sort of lifestyle better suited her nature than buckling down to study like her parents told her to. Even Makoto herself couldn't tell if this meant she had a tenacious personality or not.

Once, a friend of hers told her, "You're pretty cute, Makoto. There's a way to earn more money, y'know?" The friend even added that she'd introduce her to "someone nice." But after that day, Makoto erased that girl's contact from her phone, and they never hung out again.

Makoto had liked her friend's voice, which still sounded a little immature despite its more prominent edge of cruelty and cunning. But Makoto had cut her off because she'd suspected that if she stuck with that girl, she would have been forced into something she didn't want to do.

Makoto was sensitive to these things. In fact, she was indifferent about everything else. She would lie about her age—fifteen—in order to get jobs, she would suck up to nasty people, and when she gambled over mahjong, she would use cheap tricks to rip off the poor. She wasn't proud. She just never did anything she didn't want to.

If the task Makoto *had* accepted from a friend had been something

unacceptable to her, she wouldn't have done it, either. This task wasn't interesting, just "work" and nothing more. But since she didn't really mind, she accepted the task on the condition that she would be allowed to stay the night.

"All right, thanks, then!" her friend said and went off to school.

After that, Makoto was left alone with her friend's smartphone. In the messy apartment filled with sloppy stacks of magazines, Makoto lay down on the sofa with the phone. Her friend had already explained to her how to use it. Since her task was clear, it wasn't a bother.

The colorful logo of *Magical Girl Raising Project* rose on the screen. Makoto input the ID and password her friend had given her, and an avatar appeared on-screen.

Though this was supposed to be a magical-girl game, the avatar was designed to look like a robot. Not one part of it looked like one of the classic heroines: not the boosters on its back, the wings at its waist, nor its red eyes. It really did stand out among NPCs and other avatars. Why had her friend designed an avatar like this? Glancing about the room, Makoto saw that among the mess of magazines were a number of robot-themed monthly manga anthologies. There was even a plastic-model-kit box underneath the convenience store lunch she had eaten the day before.

Makoto hadn't heard that this friend was into robots, but thinking about it now, she *was* the type to be easily affected by the guys she dated. *Aha*, Makoto thought, nodding as she began her task.

Makoto was to fight a certain number of battles within the game's coliseum. This would fulfill the conditions for acquiring a special card. However, the total amount was incredibly high, and it seemed no small number of people had just given up when they found out how extreme it was.

Makoto's friend had not given up. She had persisted, dumping the task of coliseum battles on Makoto instead. Now that Makoto thought about it, when she was a kid, she'd known plenty of people who made their younger siblings level grind for them in RPGs. *I guess this sort of thing doesn't really change even when you get older*, she thought vaguely.

Her task was simple. *Magical Girl Raising Project* sold itself on the fact that it

was completely free to play, but even then, in Makoto's opinion, it was a total waste of time. If you wanted entertainment, there were ways to get your kicks that were actually profitable. It was better to earn yourself some pocket money than to kill time for no pay.

As Makoto went on pressing buttons and musing, *I can't understand people who do this* and *I'd have chosen an avatar that's more like a magical girl*, suddenly, there was a flourish of trumpets. Figuring she must have finished the right number of battles, Makoto looked down at the screen to see a sphere floating there.

"Congratulations! You've been chosen to be a magical girl, pon!"

*What just happened?* Makoto had been mashing buttons and was hardly watching the screen, so maybe she'd pressed the wrong thing. If so, that was bad. It would be fine if she could just redo it, but it would really suck if she'd done something she couldn't take back. Even if her friend wouldn't ask for money to repay her, it would still be a serious blow for her to lose someone who would do nail art on her for free.

"What's wrong, pon? You're not glad to have this opportunity, pon?"

"Shut up for a minute. This isn't the time to be asking that."

"'Shut up'? That's mean, pon."

"Enough with the pon-pon thing. Is tagging the end of your sentences like that supposed to be cute? It's obnoxious."

At this point, Makoto realized she was having a conversation with the sphere inside the screen. The black-and-white orb floated and bobbed, scattering golden scales around it. Its eyes were simple, like a child's doodle, but she could clearly see the light of consciousness within them.

*Oh yeah. There was that rumor about this Magical Girl Raising Project game. People said it had the miraculous power to turn one in every few tens of thousands of people into a real magical girl.*

And that was how Makoto—even though this was not her game or her own avatar—became the heroine Magicaloid 44.



“I’ve met the prince of my dreams.”

Magical Girl Sister Nana made her announcement, her eyes glazed over. She somehow reminded Magicaloid 44 of that one religious type who used to come around proselytizing now and then. This impression was irrelevant.

Her voice bright and clear, Sister Nana gushed about how wonderful this Prince Charming of hers was, cool and beautiful and academic and athletic, how everyone adored her, and how she cared for Sister Nana most of all. Though this bored Magicaloid 44, she listened.

The one who had taken on the mentor role for Magicaloid 44 when she’d become a magical girl was Calamity Mary, an outlaw who aggressively defied both good sense and common sense, so that was part of why, in Magicaloid 44’s head, there was a diagram that read, *magical girls = absurd*.

“I have come to see that your prince is amazing,” said Magicaloid 44.

“You do? Wonderful!”

“So you said you had business with me. What is it?”

Magicaloid 44 had met Sister Nana in the magical-girl chat, and it was there that Sister Nana had requested an in-person meeting. Though Magicaloid 44 had expected her to be a weirdo, she had agreed anyway. Why? Because it seemed interesting.

When she actually met Sister Nana at the designated location—on the roof of a building in Mizushiro—she found the other girl was indeed a weirdo. Her kind expression, sparkling eyes, and costume based on a nun’s habit made her resemble an actual nun, but all her blabbering about her ideal prince wasn’t exactly suited for a convent. She was a weirdo, but her eccentricity took her in a different direction than that of the wild and self-important Calamity Mary.

Sister Nana gave her a beaming smile. The moon and clouds made for a fitting backdrop, but the iron railing and water tank on the building’s roof clashed so badly with the picture, it gave the whole thing a surreal edge. “I’ve been told you’re a magical-girl-type robot from the twenty-second century.”

“Oh yes, that was my character background.”

“And you have a wealth of convenient tools and such.”

“Though I have more tools that are not so convenient.”

“Might it be possible for me to borrow one of them?” Sister Nana continued.

She went on to tell Magicaloid 44 that her ideal prince was quite literally everything she desired except for the one fact that blemished the word: She wasn't a magical girl. What makes a prince an ideal one is the ability to protect a loved one when the time comes, and since she wasn't a magical girl, then Sister Nana would obviously be the stronger one, physically, and the nun would be forced to protect her prince instead. And then this prince could not be perfect, even though standing on the same stage as Sister Nana would make her perfect.

Frankly, Magicaloid 44 didn't really get what she was talking about.

“And that's why I would like to assist her in becoming a magical girl. Could I perhaps borrow one of your tools for that purpose?” Sister Nana pulled out a standard manila envelope. The winds at this altitude made it flutter. “I'm aware this is presumptuous, so I've brought a little something to show my gratitude. Though it isn't much...”

Magicaloid 44 still didn't follow, but what she did understand was that whether she followed or not didn't really matter. She accepted the envelope and checked its contents to find one ten-thousand-yen bill. Thinking about it now, she seemed to recall complaining in chat once: *Being a magical girl is work, but it doesn't make you any money.* Perhaps Sister Nana had remembered that.

“Might you lend me a hand?” Sister Nana was smiling at her brightly, like an angel.

Magicaloid 44 cleared her throat, stuck her hand into the weapon rack at her waist area, rummaged around inside, and pulled out a device. It was the size of an alarm clock, stacked with meters or something all over.

Magicaloid 44 could tell what the object she'd produced actually was. It was an insect sex differentiation device. As the name said, it could help you tell if an insect was male or female. Could this item make a human into a magical girl?

The answer was no. But she wanted money. But she couldn't change the item. What should she do?

"What's this...?" asked Sister Nana.

"Ta-dada-daaa. It is an insect sex differentiation device. As the name says, it is a useful tool with which you can determine if an insect is male or female."

"What purpose could it have?"

"Insects are mysterious creatures. One theory even says the creatures we call insects are visitors from space, or even another world. Through contact with these fantastic organisms, you can increase your potential as a magical girl... although, I perhaps cannot know this for sure..." Magicaloid 44 said the last part very quietly and very quickly.

But Sister Nana accepted the item with great joy anyway. "Really?! That's great!" It seemed she'd accepted the mercenary Makoto's fabricated explanation.

Being a magical girl was not profitable.

The rule that you couldn't reveal your true identity and the system of helping people for magical candy were not suited to making money. Calamity Mary had boasted of how she'd earned rewards by helping out organized crime, but if Magicaloid 44 were to do the same, she would clearly be impinging on Calamity Mary's territory, and Magicaloid 44 didn't have the guts to do something like that.

If she were to assist noncriminal organizations, she could easily anticipate situations that would contravene the rules of magical girls, and more to the point, Magicaloid 44 didn't look human compared with other magical girls. When the others helped people, the recipients came away thinking, *What a beautiful girl!* But when Magicaloid 44 did the same, she just scared people. ("Ahh! A monster!") In her brief time as a magical girl, she had seen such reactions from a number of people. Even if she wasn't crying into her pillow at night, it did hurt in an ordinary way, and it wasn't like it didn't discourage her. On the aggregate sites, Magicaloid 44 occupied a separate category by herself, introduced as "a robot being controlled by magic(?)." She botched her introductions just about every day.

So one might think she should go straight to using her powers for crime, but if she did that, the other magical girls would come after her later, since they would earn magical candy for taking care of criminals who caused trouble for others. Worst-case scenario, someone like Calamity Mary would show up. Taking that into consideration, it was clear that the path of evil was a bad idea.

She had initially believed acquiring these supernatural powers was an unexpected stroke of luck, but instead, the powers were surprisingly useless. So Sister Nana, who had come to her in her hour of disappointment, was a lifesaver in a way.

Magicaloid 44's magic enabled her to pick out one handy gadget from the future out of the 444,444,444 in her possession, once per day. But there were two catches. One, she couldn't choose what would come out of the weapon rack herself. It was completely random. And two, the item was disposable and would only last that one day.

The bug sexer Magicaloid 44 had handed to Sister Nana was a throwaway, too, and it would stop working after a day. So the next day, Sister Nana came to visit her again. "While I was using it, for some reason, it broke."

Magicaloid 44 manufactured a look of happy surprise. She wasn't too bad at this sort of acting. "Oh! That is amazing! My items emit magical power, which gradually depletes. In other words, the rapid depletion means you were absorbing its magical effects incredibly quickly! Congratulations."

Sister Nana, in her total ignorance, was overjoyed. Happy and excited, she bought a new item, the "debris removal manipulator," for ten thousand yen and went home.

After Sister Nana left, Magicaloid 44 leaned against the iron railing and gazed up at the full moon hanging in the sky. Just barely peeking through the gaps between the clouds, it reminded her of a five-hundred-yen coin.

"This is...a truly profitable business."



For a week after that, Sister Nana came to visit Magicaloid 44 every day. Each time, Magicaloid 44 said things like "It's just about time" or "I can see the

signs!” or “It won’t be long before she becomes a magical girl” to get Sister Nana excited and happy. Magicaloid 44 sold her a fully automated cleaning machine, a pen that could draw a manga in a day, an anti-magical-creature ray gun, and more, fattening her purse by ten thousand yen daily. And each day, she smirked as she watched her wallet get heavier bit by bit. At this rate, she might even be able to buy the house she’d dreamed of.

But the honeymoon period didn’t last long. One week after their first meeting, Sister Nana’s “dream prince” ended up becoming a magical girl. Sister Nana said that when she equipped the seventh futuristic item, the magical-power-amplifying earring, her prince had received her powers fairly quickly.

*Ah, so that was what the magical-power amplifier was? Damn it, so then I should not have given it to her.* She was grinding her teeth in regret, but on the outside, she celebrated the event and congratulated Sister Nana.

Sister Nana was thrilled. She grasped Magicaloid 44’s hand and swung it around and then spun her in circles. As the nun twirled in circles on the building’s roof, Magicaloid 44 felt disappointed. Being a magical girl really didn’t pay.

Then Sister Nana gave her an invitation: “I’d like to have a party—as both a celebration for her becoming a magical girl and a thank-you for your help. I’ll put together a little something in the way of treats and drinks, so I would very much love it if you could come.” Magicaloid 44 accepted without hesitation. Eighty percent of the decision was based on the enticing phrase “a little something in the way of treats and drinks.” The other twenty percent was curiosity about this ideal prince.

Sister Nana’s Prince Charming, the magical girl Weiss Winterprison, was indeed quite princely. Between her somber gaze, her cool manner, her fitting name, and her appearance, she was beautifully androgynous. Her nobility was enough to make them completely forget the plainness of her costume, which consisted of a long coat and scarf, along with how cheap their setup was: a simple folding table with snacks and juice in an empty supermarket.

The venue for their party was an out-of-business grocery store, which of course looked old, though it wasn’t dusty. Apparently even now, someone was

taking care of it. Sister Nana may have been the one cleaning it. Magicaloid 44 could see her diligence in the chocolate treats, pudding, and cookies.

Even with Winterprison right there, Sister Nana still gushed about her, going on and on shamelessly (“She’s so gorgeous, just like her normal form!” and “She’s such a nice person!”) as Winterprison snacked on the chocolate without reproving her. There were two invitees in total, and the other magical girl besides Magicaloid 44 only watched in apparent boredom at the lovebirds’ mushy flirting.

Mentally decrying the pair as an unabashed and annoyingly sappy couple, Magicaloid 44 figured she would at least be compensated for her trouble with some food to take home. Responding with vague *uh-huhs* and *yeahs*, she dropped snack after snack into her weapon rack. When the lovebirds excused themselves, she let out a deep sigh from the bottom of her heart and addressed the other magical girl, who was eating and drinking in silence. “It has been a rough time for you, too.”

“Hmm?”

“Being an awkward third wheel.”

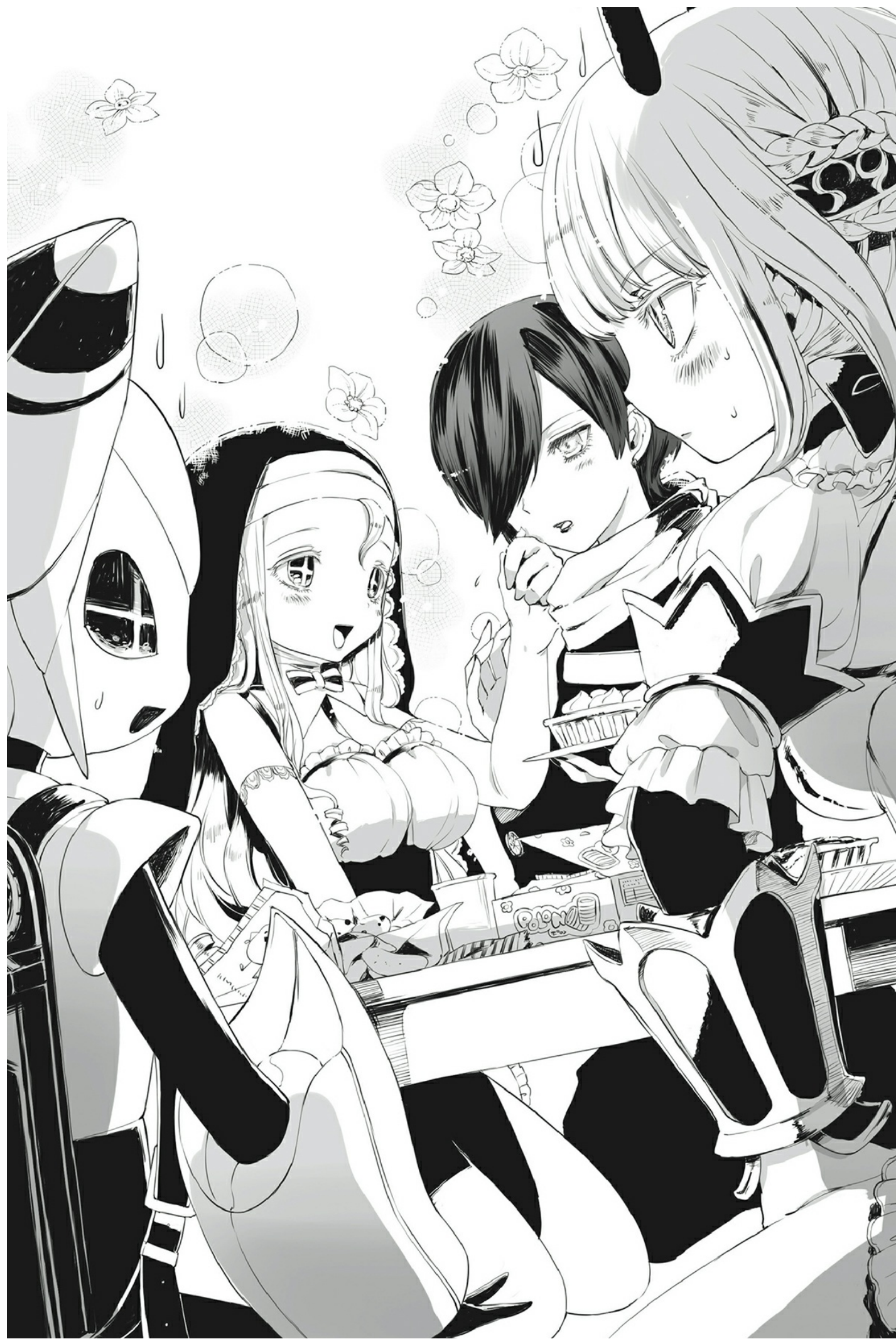
The knight with a tail, La Pucelle, seemed to consider this for a while. But then she said, “Sister Nana is my teacher. As her squire, cooperating with her is a matter of course.”

That this girl called herself Sister Nana’s “squire” must have meant Sister Nana had been in charge of teaching her how to be a magical girl. “Squire” was such a knightly and old-timey term. Magicaloid 44 was also the type who liked to get into character, which she did by speaking in a more robotic tone and cutting contractions and such, so she resonated just a bit with this knight’s choice to use an old-fashioned term.

So she continued the thread of conversation. “What did this cooperation entail?”

“Dressing up in a disguise and pretending to be a bad guy to attack her, stuff like that...”

“Oh, so scenarios where Winterprison can protect Sister Nana?”



“Well, yeah.” The knight was clearly a bit embarrassed about it. It seemed she did indeed resonate with Magicaloid 44.

“Plus...,” the knight continued, “I think love is a wonderful thing.”

All at once, Magicaloid 44’s “possible sympathy” gauge dropped to zero. Anyone who would look at a stupid, gushy couple and then recite the empty cliché that *love is a wonderful thing* was not someone Magicaloid 44 would want to be friends with, frankly.

“Um...are you in love, too, Lady Knight?”

The blush in La Pucelle’s cheeks deepened noticeably. She crushed the juice-filled paper cup in her hand, sending a spray of orange liquid in all directions. Her tail smacked the ground with a *thump, thump*. “Oh, not really, um, I wouldn’t go so far as to call it that. She’s a childhood friend. It’s just, I’m a little interested in her, that’s all. It’s not love or anything like that.”

“What is she like?”

“She loves magical girls, and she’s so nice, and she can never look away when someone is in trouble... Anyway, it’s really not serious enough to be calling it love.”

“I see, I see. That is wonderful.”

Maybe now that Magicaloid 44 was done with Sister Nana, La Pucelle or that childhood friend of hers should be her next mark.

The party had basically just forced them to watch a stupid couple even more sickly sweet than the treats, but now it was over. Magicaloid 44 was about to leave when Sister Nana called out to her to stop her. “Would you perhaps know of any dangerous places, Miss Magicaloid?”

“What? Dangerous places?”

“Yes.”

“Oh, I do. But it is a person, rather than a place: Calamity Mary is dangerous. To put it in terms of a location, that would be the Jounan district, her territory.”

“Miss Calamity Mary, is that right? Thank you so very much for telling me.”

Sister Nana bobbed her head in a bow, then headed back into the supermarket.

Magicaloid 44 pressed the ignition on the backpack-shaped jetpack she wore and zoomed off through the sky. The moon had waned during the past week, unsurprisingly.

She couldn't figure out what Sister Nana's intentions were in asking that question, and Magicaloid 44 had almost asked her what this was about before dropping it. When Sister Nana had raised her head from the bow, she had been watching her with a certain...black and vicious something within her eyes. That was not good. She didn't want to get mixed up with that.

When Makoto didn't want to do something, she would absolutely not do it. Even now that she was a magical girl, that hadn't changed.

She went back to her current crash pad, detransformed, and went to visit her homeless friends, bringing the snacks along as presents. After being forced to endure that awkwardness, she wanted to relax, even just a bit.

"Y'know, pops, chatting with you like this is always the most relaxing thing."

"Oh, I'm glad to hear that, Mako. So then will you marry me?"

"Nope."



Sister Nana was smiling gently, hands placed together on her lap. That smile looked very much like Nana Habutae's, but it had a different sort of appeal, too. This smile inspired in Winterprison a desire to protect her.

Now that Winterprison was a magical girl, she could protect that smile. Nana was a little sad that her prince had gotten her powers from her, but the source of her strength wasn't an issue right now.

"Do you know of a magical girl named Calamity Mary, in the Jounan district?"

"No. You know that I'm a newbie. I'm ignorant about the others in this area."

"I've heard some unpleasant rumors. I believe we should go there and ask about the situation." Sister Nana was smiling, but she must have been seriously considering the peace of the town. She always prioritized others over herself. She really was a holy woman. Her darling. Winterprison wanted to embrace her.

It was because of who she was that Winterprison had to protect her.

Nana had given her the power that now overflowed within her—so she should use it for Nana’s sake.

## Producing the Angels

This story is set shortly before the competition for magical candy begins in *Magical Girl Raising Project*.



There was a mobile game called *Magical Girl Raising Project*.

Rumors said this game caused miracles and made one out of every few tens of thousands of players into a real magical girl. The “completely free to play” element—which some called the height of madness for a mobile game—had definitely enabled the spread of such rumors. But it was a well-known fact that the gossip was based on actual sightings.

The aggregate site dedicated to the strange girls—nicknamed “magical girls”—who were spotted in N City was buzzing with activity that day, as it always was. The furious exchange of information that could be fact or fiction continued as posters endlessly added to the pile of impressions and commentary, as did the exchange of nastiness and scorn regarding said information.

The regulars on this aggregate site were categorized into a number of types: those who had been helped by magical girls; those who loved magical-girl characters; those who were into magical girls, as well as cryptids and UFOs; those who lived to troll; and...the magical girls themselves.

“So what are we gonna do about this?”

“I know, right?”

Mina and Yuna Amasato were sitting side by side at their kitchen table, pressing their faces close in front of a smartphone as they discussed the magical girls.

Most twins diverge in interests, principles, and even appearance as the years pass, but Mina and Yuna were still close, despite being in university. They liked the same things, wore the same clothes, and looked like two peas in a pod. Even their parents couldn’t tell them apart. They had always taken it for granted that they would choose the same university, live in the same apartment building, and do everything together. If they ever had any issues, they always talked them over with each other.

The two of them saw this chat as a serious discussion, but it was really just an endless complaint and condolence circle-jerk, and at the very least, it wasn’t a productive conversation about what to do. The both of them had gotten the

vague sense that this conversation wasn't doing much for them, but it wasn't like they could come up with a solution for their problem, anyway. And if they had no ideas, it was best to just let the conversation drag on.

Talking might lead them to some kind of idea; plus, Mina liked Yuna and Yuna liked Mina, so they didn't mind just chatting endlessly together.

"While we're busy worrying over this, the popularity poll is gonna start!"

"I know! At this rate, we won't be able to win first place!"

"I really wish we had some kinda awesome plan to beat everyone."

"Agreed."

"But like, if it's just you and me, we're not gonna be able to come up with any ideas, are we?"

"Oh! You're so magi-cool, sis, picking up on that."

"If I were, maybe I'd have come up with something."

"You're so magi-modest, sis."

"Should we ask Ruler for advice?"

"That hysterical old bag? No way."

"Yeah. But Fav is useless."

"Then Sister Nana or something? Or Calamity Mary?"

"I'd take Ruler over either of them. We wanna stay away from those types."

"Maybe 'asking for advice' is the wrong way to think about it, anyway."

"Oh yeah. Maybe it's better to think of it like we're using them."

"Or working them like dogs! I like that."

"So then why not *her*? The new one."

"Oh, the puppy dog Ruler brought in?"

"Yeah, yeah."

"Ohhh, I like that. So let's make her give us some ideas. Let's do it!"

"Now that that's decided, let's play some *Momotetsu* to celebrate our idea.

Whoever loses buys dinner for us tonight.”

“All right! I’m gonna put an egg on my beef bowl today, then.”



Even magical girls, as unworldly as they seem, deal with interpersonal relationships like everyone else. When someone gains powers through *Magical Girl Raising Project*, the first thing that happens is a period of instruction from a more experienced magical girl.

When Tama Inubouzaki became her alter ego Tama and met another magical girl for the first time, the impression she got was: *She seems scary*. Though for Tama, about 85 percent of first-time encounters were scary. And after seeing them for a second or third time, 99 percent of those scary-seeming people turned out to be scary people in general.

Tama’s natural-born cowardice manifested itself as a timid personality, and that, coupled with her slow thinking, led people to rank her a rung lower than everyone else. Whether in after-school classes or at school, her teachers would either never bother with her in the first place or eventually give up on her.

When it came to schoolwork, she was the worst of the worst, and athletically, she ranked in the middling region of the bottom tier. She was also worse than average at drawing and singing. She was absolutely terrible at memorization. Her parents neglected her, and her younger brother and sister followed suit, treating Tama like she wasn’t there. Her classmates in middle school thought of her only as a gofer or an extra head when they needed to round out a group.

The only person who had ever listened to her, her maternal grandmother, had passed away six months earlier from acute pneumonia. Her grandma had listened intently to Tama’s awkward stammering, often patting her head and telling her, “You’re such a nice girl, Tama.” During the funeral, Tama had recalled just how warm her hand had been. Devastated, she had cried and cried until she had no more tears to shed.

It was the death of her grandmother that had led her to start playing *Magical Girl Raising Project*. With her grandmother gone, she no longer had anyone who would spend time with her. With some vague thoughts in her head that maybe she could escape from this hopeless mess by becoming a magical girl like the

rumors said, Tama immersed herself in the game, practically clinging to her cell phone.

And in about two months, the mascot character of *Magical Girl Raising Project*, Fav, came to talk to her.

“Congratulations, pon! You’ve been chosen to become a real magical girl, pon!”

And this was how Tama Inubouzaki became the magical girl Tama. She now had the ability to run up walls, crush rocks, and circle the town with a string of continuous backflips. Her sharp senses meant she could see through the darkness of night and hear a pin drop. She had an adorable face and voice, and doglike ears that would twitch back and forth growing from her head. With her magical ability to instantly create holes, she could dig anywhere she wanted.

Once Tama had checked out all of her new magical-girl powers, she was brought to an abandoned temple called Ouketsuji in Nishimonzen, where a more experienced magical girl would teach her the rules and give her an understanding of her role.

In contrast with fluffy, puffy Tama and her doggy ears, doggy tail, hooded cape, and paw gloves, the magical girl Ruler was sleek and slender in every way. She wore a long cape, sparkling tiara, and glass slippers, and she carried an ivory scepter.

As she looked at Tama, swelling with pride, Ruler overflowed with the confidence and dignity of a magical girl befitting her princess-like attire. Tama automatically shrank into herself.

“Now then, let’s begin with what it means to be a magical girl.” Ruler launched into a lecture about how a heroine should not do this and should conduct herself like that, and Tama dazedly watched her mentor’s fast-moving lips until, before she knew it, Ruler’s explanation was over.

Ruler looked Tama in the eye and asked, “Do you understand?”

“...I’m sorry, I don’t really.”

“You *stupid IDIOT!* Moron! Listen up when people are talking to you!” Ruler yelled, suddenly furious. Tears rose in Tama’s eyes as she shrank even smaller.

Once the thorough scolding was over, Ruler sighed. “Well, idiots like you are common enough. That’s why I’ve made this.” She pulled out a booklet that looked rather like a guidebook for a school field trip. It was a stack of printouts stapled together with a drawing of Ruler, staff raised, on the cover. The design was very aesthetically pleasing, and the illustration was good enough to be mistaken for the work of a professional manga artist or illustrator. Above the illustration, the title was written in a large, comical font.

*“‘The Road to Being a Magical Girl’?”*

“Read this, and you’ll understand what we should be like. Well, all you really have to do is remember everything I say, but people with poor memories like yourself are common enough. And it’s a ruler’s role to lead the ignorant masses...”

Ruler began talking again, but Tama only pretended to listen as she opened the booklet. She was getting dizzy just looking at the lines and lines of tiny characters. “Um...”

“Hmm? What’s wrong?”

“I can’t read most of these kanji characters...and there are a lot of words I don’t understand...”

“You ignoramus! Simpleton! Fluff-for-brains!” Ruler raged at her like a storm, and the temple around them groaned under her vicious, angry shouts. With a vein popping on her temple and her shoulders heaving after the harsh dressing-down, Ruler took the booklet from Tama and opened it up. “So? Which kanji can’t you read? Which words don’t you know?”

“Um...”

“Hurry up; out with it! Don’t irritate me any more than I already am!”

“U-um...this...and this...”

The only sound in the quiet, abandoned temple was the skritch of Ruler’s pencil moving. Shoulder to shoulder, the two of them faced the booklet. Tama would point out kanji, and Ruler would write a phonetic spelling.

Once the final page was full, Ruler shoved the booklet at Tama. “All right? No

complaints?”

“Oh, yes. Um...no complaints. Thank you...very much.”

“So then make sure to remember it all. Make absolutely sure. If you don’t, I’ll be angry.”

Tama looked at Ruler with upturned eyes. Her mentor looked incredibly confident and imposing as she crossed her arms and gave a little *hmph*.

“Ruler...ma’am.”

“What?”

“Um...you’re really kind.”

“Sh-shut up! There’s no need for that!” Ruler flushed red all the way to the tips of her ears. Huffing mad, she squared her shoulders and marched out. Her long cape slid over the floor and left a dust-free trail in her wake.

Tama watched her go with a tilted head. Her impression of Ruler had gone from *seems scary* to *definitely scary*, but she also suspected she was a slightly different brand of scary.

“Is she actually a good person?”

But she got the feeling that wasn’t quite it, either. Head still tilted, Tama *hmmmed* uncertainly, unable to put the idea into words.

After that, Ruler summoned Tama to Ouketsuji at every opportunity.

Under Ruler’s instructions, Tama performed tasks like cleaning up the whole temple and repairing the damaged areas. Tama wasn’t the only one there at these times, either—the twin angels were with them, too. This pair—Minael and Yunael, who’d been introduced as the Peaky Angels—obeyed Ruler without whining or complaints. For Tama’s part, she thought of them as a set with Ruler.

Two days earlier, the Peaky Angels had asked to see Tama.



“We wanna be popular. Popular!” “That’s exactly what we’re not, huh, sis?”

They had arranged to meet on the roof of the train station building. As soon as Tama arrived, the twin angels began ranting at her. The pair said nothing but

“Mm-hmm” and “Uh-huh” when Ruler was present, and Tama had never imagined they would yell about anything, so she was surprised.

The Peaky Angels chattered back and forth, not allowing Tama to get a word in edgewise. “So you know that one site, right?” “Like, it’s full of nothing but articles about Snow White.”

“It’s nothing but stuff the ‘magical girl in white’ did.” “What’s up with that? Is there more than one of her or something?”

“There’s just so many sightings of her.” “We can’t take this lying down.”

“Only about a tenth of the stuff is about us, even though there’s two of us.” “It’s weird, right?”

“So there’s this popularity poll coming up.” “On the aggregate site.”

“If we’re gonna be magical girls and all, we want to be popular.” “Obviously, right?”

“So we did a bunch of stuff to try to get popular.” “You’re so magi-cool, sis.”

Minael and Yunael told Tama they’d come up with a plan to boost their popularity by sockpuppeting. Minael had used her own magical phone to create a thread about how she’d been saved by twin angels, while Yunael had used her own magical phone to post a sympathizing response: “They saved me, too! Those angels were so cute.”

This ploy to use both their phones to stir up enthusiasm for the Peaky Angels fell apart because of one unforeseen complication: Though each of the twins had their own phone, identical IDs ended up displaying on the message boards.

“We have two different phones! Why are our IDs the same?!” “Are the two of us a set?!”

“When we complained about this to Fav, he wasn’t bothered at all! He was just like, ‘Oh, really?’” “Give us a break!”

For their transparent ploy, the twins were laughed at, trolled, and driven off the boards. Their next idea was to use their old normal phones to redo the scheme, but the whole brouhaha had burned that bridge for them. Anyone who brought up the twin angels would just be treated like a sockpuppet.

Meanwhile, the sightings of Snow White continued to increase.

“So like, at this rate, things are gonna get real bad, y’know?” “Really bad.”

“Snow White is gonna win by a landslide.” “It’s not good.”

“We thought about having a press conference.” “But apparently, if you reveal you’re a magical girl, you have to quit.”

“We also thought about just voting multiple times for ourselves.” “But if we get caught again, we’ll probably get banned from the site.”

“So do you have any good ideas, Tama?” “Do you?”

“We’re friends, right?” “You’ve got to have some good ideas, right?”

The twin angels were pressing closer and closer, until Tama’s back was touching the iron railing. Feeling the cold metal on her back, Tama thought, *I really don’t get what they want from me, but I do understand they’re counting on me.*

When Tama had been a normal girl, not a single person had ever relied on her. Some might have made fun of her or gotten mad at her, but no one had ever wanted her help. At most, people had only ever ordered her to go buy juice for them or carry their backpack on the way home.

Ever since she had become a magical girl, that had changed. People thanked her. People looked at her with gratitude. The awkwardness and embarrassment made her want to squirm, but she was happy, which felt nice. Helping people made Tama profoundly glad she had become a magical girl. Now she could understand, just a bit, why the ones on TV ran around doing so much stuff for others.

And now, there were two other magical girls relying on Tama. They thought of her as one of the group. One of them. Friends. Tama had shared a deep, loving bond with her grandmother, but she had been family. Tama had never had friends or been part of something bigger. For the first time in her life, someone was calling her part of the group, and what’s more, there were two of them who both relied on her.

The angels were fluttering and rustling their wings, their expressions serious.

“Um...uh... You could work really hard at helping people?”

“We’re already working hard!” “Snow White is cheating somehow!” It seemed they didn’t appreciate her answer.

“What about...asking Ruler for advice?”

“No way! I don’t wanna have to deal with a hysterical old bag!” “She’s so annoying!”

“If we ever get the chance, we’re gonna get her good.” “I’d love to see the look on her face.”

“She’d probably look so offended.” “Totally mortified.”

“She’s awful! One day, I just want to take her down a peg!” “Yeah, she’s so full of herself!” The two effortlessly spouted off a stream of invective toward Ruler. Tama had assumed they did what Ruler said because they liked her, but it seemed that wasn’t the case.

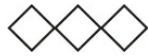
Tama felt a little sad. “Um...if you ask for advice...I think she’ll hear you out, though?”

“No way!” “Forget it!” Evidently, they didn’t want to ask for Ruler’s help, no matter what. Tama had a hunch that if she pushed that suggestion any more, she’d become the target of their ire, so she shut her mouth.

Whatever the two angels thought of Tama’s silence, they pressed her for a response. “No ideas? No ideas?” they asked as they tugged on her sleeves and smooshed her paws. Tama was a middle schooler, and Minael and Yunael were the size of children; Tama was bigger, but since they had her outnumbered two to one, the way they crowded her was pretty scary. Looking closely, Tama thought the two of them didn’t even seem to be blinking, making them even more frightening.

Feeling tears building in the corners of her eyes, Tama looked away. So many things appeared tiny from atop the station building: people, people, and more people walking briskly down the street, a ginkgo tree swaying in the breeze, cars going in and out of the parking lot at a pachinko parlor, the big digital billboards in front of the station. On the screen, a famous idol Tama recognized was singing and dancing.

Something crossed her mind. It was a flash of insight—possibly the first in her life. She yelled, “Y-you could make a promotional video!”



The competition in the popularity poll was reaching its climax.

There was the magical girl in white, who boasted an overwhelming number of sightings, and then there were the twin angels, whose popularity had suddenly shot through the roof when someone uploaded a video titled “Two Angels In Flight Holding Hands” to a streaming site. Support and votes from fans of both made it a fierce, neck and neck contest that long remained a subject of discussion on the site.

Support for the magical girl in white was both broad and deep-rooted, and in the end, she reached first by a hair’s breadth, while the twin angels earned a frustrating second.

Oh, the Peaky Angels were sure to take it out on Tama. They would yell that they’d lost because of her strategy. Believing deep in her heart that would be the case, Tama dragged her heavy feet out to the top of the station building, where they were to meet. There, she was greeted by the angels—who sounded surprisingly cheerful.

The pair held out their hands. Minael took Tama’s right while Yunael took her left, and they shook both her hands vigorously. “Wahoo! Welcome, friend!” “We got second, second! Did you see on the site?”

“Oh yeah.”

“They were giving us so many compliments!” “That big video plan really worked, huh?”

Though they had called it a “promotional video,” it had just been a simple project filmed by Tama with a home video camera and edited by Minael and Yunael on their computer. With Tama forced to be a camera operator for the first time, the filming process had been full of failures: falling over, running out of batteries, and making mistakes with the camera. Without image stabilization, they would never have managed to put the video together in the first place.

“Y-you think?”

“And Fav said, ‘That’s not technically breaking the rules, pon.’” “We got that blob good!”

They seemed glad. Tama breathed a sigh of relief.

“Okay, then let’s play some celebratory *Momotetsu* at our hideout now.”  
“Yeah, let’s!”

“Huh?”

“We’ve got a hideout that’d give even Ruler a shock, first time she sees it.”  
“Yep, yep.”

“Huh? Huh?”

“If I lose, I’ll buy you dinner tomorrow.” “Woot!”

“Huh? Huh? Huh?”

Each of the angels grabbed one of Tama’s arms and floated up into the air with her in tow. You’d think that flying so close together, their wings would beat against each other, but they spiraled up without any trouble. The crowds walking below shrank even smaller. The winds were strong up high, and Tama couldn’t bear to open her eyes. It was terrifying, but also somehow fun.

“Okay, then. A ten-year trial, right?” “No handicaps.”

It seemed Tama had much yet to learn.



# Zombie Western

This story is set around when the survival game in *Magical Girl Raising Project* was reaching its climax.



Magicaloid 44 was a difficult one to evaluate.

In Calamity Mary's mind, an "evaluation" was basically just answering the question of whether someone was strong or weak. Calamity Mary's sense of Magicaloid 44 varied depending on the time; sometimes she was stronger, sometimes she was weaker. For example, if Calamity Mary were to fight Weiss Winterprison, the hairs on the back of her neck would stand up the moment they were within thirty feet of each other, before Mary could even see her. But when dealing with Winterprison's partner, Sister Nana, no matter how close Mary got, she never felt the urge to fight her.

With Magicaloid 44, some days she was like Weiss Winterprison, and others she was more like Sister Nana. It was never clear whether she was strong or weak.

But it was unquestionable that either way, Calamity Mary couldn't let her guard down around the robot girl. Magicaloid 44 had a solid ability to judge where she should go and who she should rely on. The fact that she'd bet on Calamity Mary indicated as much.

And so, now, Calamity Mary was drinking alone. As for why she was unaccompanied: Magicaloid 44 had not returned, even though Mary had been without her for a long time. She kicked the fuzz of the carpet with her boot and flopped down onto the soft leather sofa as she looked up at the needlessly extravagant chandelier.

When Magicaloid 44 had come requesting her protection, Calamity Mary had demanded that she kill one magical girl—it didn't matter who. She would have to do at least that much if she wanted to surrender to Calamity Mary. That was just a matter of course. She didn't need unprepared weaklings.

Calamity Mary rolled over and buried her face in the backrest of the sofa.

Magicaloid 44 had a good head on her shoulders. She'd know what fate awaited her if she were to ignore Mary's demand and run. In other words, she wouldn't. Her good judgment also meant she wouldn't have gone after anyone who was too much for her to handle. She must have planned to kill someone low risk.

Swim Swim's clique had numbers. Sister Nana had Winterprison with her. Ripple and Top Speed were practically joined at the hip. Musician of the Forest, Cranberry was operating solo, but she was strong. Of course, Calamity Mary wouldn't let her win, but a fight against Cranberry would be a struggle even for her.

So the only possible targets left were the newbie magical girl and Snow White. And Snow White, having just lost her partner, La Pucelle, would be a better target than an unknown quantity like the newbie. All Snow White had was a lot of candy, and she wasn't a great fighter. She had no guts, either. She would be the perfect target.

Before giving Magicaloid 44 the order to go kill someone, Calamity Mary had told her indirectly that if she did, it should be Snow White. Despite her considerable demand, she'd been quite thoughtful, in her own way. That was the least she could do as the more experienced magical girl.

One or two Snow Whites wouldn't be a problem for Magicaloid 44. Or shouldn't have been. But for some reason, Magicaloid 44 still had yet to get in touch with Calamity Mary. Two days earlier, the robot girl had left this room. And now she wasn't just failing to make contact; Mary couldn't reach Magicaloid 44 from her end, either. Mary texted and called but got no reply.

"Did something happen?" Calamity Mary rolled over on the sofa, sat up from her reclined position, and turned on her magical phone to summon Fav.

"Yes, yes, what is it, pon?"

"Tell me where Magicaloid 44 is right now and what she's up to."

"Oh...it's not really a question of what she's *doing* right now..."

"If someone killed her, then tell me who." Calamity Mary put her magical phone on the side table and leaned in close to the black-and-white hologram. "Killing someone in my employ means they underestimate Calamity Mary. It'd ruin my reputation if I let this slide."

"Hmm... But wouldn't it be a little unfair for Fav to tell you, pon?"

"Fair, unfair—that's rich, coming from you! I can tell you don't give a damn. If you tell me, I'm sure things will go the way you want them to. I'll guarantee it."



Only three weeks earlier, the announcement had come from management that the sixteen magical girls born through the mobile game *Magical Girl Raising Project* would be reduced to eight. Every week, someone would be cut based on how much candy she held, and the magical girls at the bottom would die, without exception.

Already, three had been cut. Calamity Mary had also heard that one group had ganged up on some other magical girls in order to steal their candy. And then there was the announcement about new items for download—tools for killing one another presented under the pretext of “useful items.”

Everything about this situation was steering them toward a kill-or-be-killed bloodbath.

Middle schooler Ako Hatoda had been suicidal when the magical girl in white had saved her, and that had been the trigger for Ako to become Hardgore Alice.

Suffering under her father’s sin, Ako had agonized over her own helplessness, tormented with the belief that death was her only option. Her savior then had been a magical girl, which she had thought only existed in anime and manga. Her savior had dirtied her pretty, pure-white outfit to find the house key Ako had dropped earlier. The girl had given her such a happy smile that it gave joy to the ones who saw it, too.

Once Ako found out that magical girls were real, she spent some of her savings on a smartphone. She begged her aunt and uncle to pay for a monthly contract so she could start playing the mobile game *Magical Girl Raising Project*—which rumors said could make players real magical girls. Ako’s goal was to gain those powers, nothing else. If she couldn’t do it, she would die. Not only because she was determined. She’d meant to die to begin with. She would only be resuming her original plan in that case.

Ako literally devoted her life to this goal, sacrificing the time she needed for other things—beginning with sleep—to tackle *Magical Girl Raising Project*. She didn’t just play the game to the point of collapse. She kept playing even after she collapsed, and as a result became a magical girl through sheer obsession.

She was a magical girl in black, the opposite of Snow White. Next to each

other, they would surely strike a beautiful contrast. Everyone would be talking about the white and black magical-girl duo. Ako, transformed into Hardgore Alice, would help people together with Snow White.

This was her dream.

Hardgore Alice's magic was quick healing. As an experiment, she pierced her palm with a needle, cut it with a chisel, burned it with a lighter, and more, self-injuring over and over, but any wound would heal up in a flash until it looked just as it had before. With this magic, she could protect Snow White from any nasty magical girls.

And Hardgore Alice had, in fact, succeeded in protecting Snow White just the other night. A robot had cut off her head without so much as a word, but before she could go for Snow White, too, Alice had destroyed it. When Alice had stabbed through the robot's chest with a spear-hand, the robot had transformed into a woman and fallen facedown in a puddle of blood. That was all Alice needed to know the robot had been a magical girl. Alice had also understood that she had killed a person.

She had felt no despair at arriving in the same position as her father. She'd trembled with a sense of accomplishment at successfully protecting Snow White.

Alice had pressed the rabbit's foot, an item that had cost her years of her life, into Snow White's hand and left. Afterward, even once she was home, even the morning of the next day when she went to school, she was still elated. Alice's magic was more powerful than she had imagined. It wasn't just that her wounds would heal quickly. Even if her head was cut off, she wouldn't die. She could walk around with no head and could even quickly regenerate it. This wasn't like a lizard dropping its tail. Not even a protozoon could regenerate like this. This was *real* magic.

With this power, Hardgore Alice could protect Snow White. She could repay her.

The previous night, they had parted ways without resolution. Snow White had vanished before Hardgore Alice could even notice she was gone. Alice figured she would greet Snow White properly that day, for sure. She would take her

hero's hand as an equal to tell her, *"Let's work hard together."*

Night fell, Ako transformed into Hardgore Alice, and she rushed over to Kubegahama. Another bad magical girl could come after Snow White, just like the other day.

Ako jumped onto the back of a small blue truck parked on the shoulder of the road and bounded to a white truck stopped on the opposite shoulder of the four-lane highway, then over onto the roof of someone's house.

There was a whiff of salt in the wind. About one in every two hundred roofs in this area belonged to a tackle shop. The ocean was nearby. She was in Kubegahama. And Snow White was here.

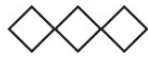
Sister Nana had taught Hardgore Alice that a magical girl's hideout should be away from populated areas. So Snow White would be somewhere people didn't go. It would be an abandoned warehouse, the top of a fishing co-op building—someplace like that. Perhaps it would be in a deserted alley or under power lines. And no matter where Snow White was, if Hardgore Alice wanted to find her, it would be best to search from on high. Magical Girls had exceptional vision and could see well in the dark.

Kubegahama was Ako's home, so she didn't need research to know the location of the highest spot in town. There was a particularly large iron tower on a hill near the swimming beach. The top of that was best.

Hardgore Alice headed for the iron tower, checking the top of the fishing co-op, back alleys, and other places along the way that seemed likely to hide a magical girl. Running atop the chain-link fence around the elementary school grounds, she jumped to the top of a streetlight, then leaped again to grab ahold of the wall of the school building and clamber onto the roof. She could see the iron tower on top of the hill just ahead.

Right when Hardgore Alice was about to jump down, her stomach burst open in an explosion of blood and guts.





The Izhmash Saiga-12 is a shotgun manufactured in a certain chilly nation. As a member of the AK family, it's unsurprisingly cheap and also offers great durability. This semiautomatic carries more cartridges than the weapons they call shotguns in Japan. Powered with Calamity Mary's magic, it could turn even a magical girl's body into little more than a crushed tomato.

Calamity Mary did not forgive insults. Killing Magicaloid 44, who had been operating under her command, was a clear insult. She had to lay down the law, or the others would all treat her with contempt. And if she became the target of contempt, it was over.

Fav had told Calamity Mary that this magical girl, this Alice in Wonderland wearing pitch-black, was named Hardgore Alice. Calamity Mary didn't know where the girl was rushing off to, but her sprinting without looking back had allowed Calamity Mary to get close and nail her with a point-blank spray of shots. Hardgore Alice had not been cautious enough.

Mary didn't know what sort of magic Alice had, but it didn't seem like much. If it had been enough to kill Magicaloid 44, then the loser must not have been that good. Calamity Mary pushed the body away with a kick to the ass and looked up at the sky. She felt like the stars were prettier here than in the Jounan district. It never got dark there the way it should at night. As the starry sky entranced her for once, what brought her back to reality was a sensation of floating.

Her footing didn't feel solid. The ground was above her. Had gravity been inverted? No. Something was tightly holding on to her ankle. Before Calamity Mary even had the time to think, she was slammed into the concrete. She just barely managed to break her fall, but her bones creaked with the severe impact. As fragments of concrete scattered around her, she tried to see who her opponent was, but her body was twisted around. The grip on her ankle held firm. This time, she was swung around horizontally and then flung into the air.

This was the school roof. If Calamity Mary didn't do something, being launched into the air meant falling all the way to the ground. From the special item hanging from her belt, the four-dimensional bag, she pulled a rope and

tossed out one end of it. Given her cowgirl theme, she had of course mastered lassoing. She hooked the loop of the lasso around the iron fence and yanked hard. The fence bent nearly to the point of breaking, but Calamity Mary swung back onto the roof with the help of her rope.

The spray of shots had hit Hardgore Alice all over. And now that Mary was actually facing her, she could clearly see the girl's abdomen was blasted open. But even eviscerated as she was, she was still moving.

Mary dodged a punch and blocked a kick. Alice was fast. And she was strong. In terms of pure physical strength, she outmatched Calamity Mary. She could well be tied with Weiss Winterprison to rank as the strongest among the local magical girls.

And her endurance surpassed even Winterprison's. Even with her internal organs surrounding her, she moved with energy. Calamity Mary fainted a third time without attacking, then a fourth, falling back onto the ground instead. Pointing her gun upward, she aimed for her enemy's head and pulled the trigger. The dark Alice's skull and brain burst open, and she fell backward.

With a sigh, Calamity Mary rose to her feet—and then immediately, her breath caught again. The moment Mary stood, Hardgore Alice, headless, stood up as well and charged her. This wasn't just about simple endurance anymore. Mary leaped backward to dodge Alice's rising attack.

Alice's face was in smithereens, which obviously should have prevented her from seeing, but it didn't seem to bother her. She kicked, punched, threw slabs of concrete, and ripped the twisted iron fence off the roof to sweep it around at her enemy. Calamity Mary crouched immediately, but she failed to dodge entirely, and it sent her ten-gallon hat flying through the air.

She fired the Saiga 12 from her hip, aiming for Alice's ankles to stop her from running around. Then again. Facing her fallen opponent, Mary fired and fired until her clip was empty, transforming Alice from a crushed tomato into meat sauce.

With her enemy finally incapacitated, Calamity Mary felt relieved—and as soon as she realized that fact, she was irritated. She was about to give Hardgore Alice one last kick when she noticed something. The corpse in front of her was

moving. It wasn't the spasms of the dying. It was struggling, with intent to move.

"You piece of shit." Mary drew her Tokarev and fired until it was empty, and then emptied the clip of her AK, too. The roof of the elementary school was flooding with blood. And then, right as Mary was thinking, *She's got to be dead now*, the thing that should have been a corpse *twitched*. Despite having been destroyed to the point of unrecognizability, it was still alive.

Calamity Mary pulled out multiple hand grenades, pulled the pins, and tossed them all over the roof as she jumped down to the ground. After exactly three seconds, there was a huge explosion. Those had been more than mere hand grenades. They were super weapons, powered up by Calamity Mary's magic. Watching the wreckage of the roof fall down, Mary was certain that this *must* have killed Alice. Running up to the roof again, she found the explosion had not blasted only the roof. Even the classrooms on the floor below had been blown open, and in the center of one of those rooms was a squirming lump of meat.

A fat vein popped out on Calamity Mary's temple.

Drawing her army knife, she sliced the meat into ten parts and scattered them. Nine of the pieces stopped moving, but the largest part continued writhing. Its wounds healed so fast, she could see it happening. It was trying to re-form its human body.

Calamity Mary pulled out a bottle, cautiously opened the lid, and poured the contents over the meat. This was concentrated sulfuric acid imbued with Mary's magic. It would do worse than burn and inflame the skin. Smoldering white smoke rose from the flesh, and an awful smell, the kind that would hit your stomach directly, wafted up and dispersed in the wind. The acid opened a hole in the floor of the classroom, but the lump of meat was still moving. Mary poured out a second and then a third bottle of the acid. She would erase this thing and make sure not even dust was left.

The acid burned all the way from the third floor to the first, and Calamity Mary followed it down, pouring on more and more. The meat melted, the lump disappeared, and Mary pumped her fist in victory. She was wiping the sweat off her forehead, thinking she could feel relieved and go, when she realized the

meat was re-forming within the sea of sulfuric acid. It was moving.

She felt dizzy. *I've got to be mistaken.* But even when she rubbed her eyes, the lump of meat wouldn't go away.

Calamity Mary pulled a jug of gasoline from her bag, poured it out, struck a match, and threw it in. The fire flared up with near-explosive strength. But even burned to cinders, the lump of meat still writhed. Calamity Mary stomped on it again and again, but yes, it was still moving.

She gave a thin smile. She'd never been so humiliated in her whole career as a magical girl. She pulled an oil drum out of her bag. As long as she could carry it, anything would fit in her four-dimensional bag—even a big oil drum or liquid concrete. Mary stuffed the meat into the oil drum and then poured liquid concrete out from her bag on top of it. She filled the drum, then stuffed it back into her bag.

Calamity Mary could hear sirens wailing outside. She had to get away—now. She was headed to the harbor. She would sink the drum to the bottom of the ocean and end her work for the day. Then it would be over. Done. Finished.

A few days later...

When the dropouts were announced in the chat, all Fav said was "This week's cut was Magicaloid 44." No other names were called.

Calamity Mary laughed. Alone in a club VIP room, she cackled until her shoulders shook.

A dark feeling was settling on the bottom of her soul. She had to blow it all away. For that, she needed a party. Not just a kill. This demanded an extravagant, bombastic, blood-splattering, flesh-scattering tragedy.

The thought of Ripple ran through her mind. But she alone wasn't enough. Calamity Mary needed more sacrifices to quiet her heart.



Winterprison was relieved.

They had found two other magical girls who sympathized with Sister Nana. Calamity Mary wasn't worth talking to, Cranberry had attacked them out of the

blue, Ripple was uncooperative, and Top Speed didn't want to rock the boat. All their other encounters so far had wounded Sister Nana's heart. Now, finally, they may have gotten a start, at least.

Snow White and Sister Nana were shaking hands, both looking excited as they agreed to work together. Behind them, Hardgore Alice was observing them intently.

Winterprison brought her willowy eyebrows together just slightly and sniffed. She smelled salt. She looked toward Hardgore Alice, and their eyes met. The smell of the sea was wafting around her.

"...Did something happen?" asked Winterprison.

"No, nothing really." Hardgore Alice broke eye contact with her and looked over at Snow White and Sister Nana again.

If Alice herself said it was nothing, then it had to be nothing. Winterprison gave a small nod.

## *Magical Daisy, Episode Twenty-Two*

This story is set quite a while before *Magical Girl Raising Project: Restart*.



Daisy: Augh...

Palette: What's wrong, Daisy? You're sighing.

Daisy: Of course I am. I'm sad 'cause I have to spend my weekend digging a hole.

Palette: Your mom asked you to dig a hole for some garbage, right?

Daisy: Why can't I just make one with my beam? It'd be faster.

Palette: You can't use your magic for something like that. Just use a shovel like normal.

Daisy: You just wanna make things harder for me, Palette.

Minako: Listen, listen! Big news! Sae found a treasure map in her closet!

Daisy: Huh? Really?!

Minako: Really, really! We're all gonna go look for the treasure. You should come with us, Daisy.

Daisy: For sure! I'm coming right now!

Palette: Hold on, Daisy! You're not done digging that hole!

Miracle Logical Cynical Magical Daisy!

She's a fighting princess from the flower country

Ripping through the wind with her Daisy Punch! (*whoosh*)

Smashing rocks with her Daisy Kick! (*whack*)

And her ultimate move is...Daisy...Beam! (*ba-boom!*)

Come on! Everyone's waiting! Let's go, right now!

Halfway through the opening theme, she turned off the TV. With the touch of a button, the vividly colored animation on-screen went black.

For Kiku Yakumo, watching the *Magical Daisy* TV broadcast was almost ceremonial, and she never missed it. This was partly because she took a serious and formal approach to watching the show with gratitude and pride in her heart; however, because a third-year student in middle school openly watching

a Sunday morning anime every week without missing an episode would be seen as childish, she was discreet about this secret ceremony.

But that day, there was a reason she had to skip the viewing for once.

“Are you ready?” asked Palette, the small, weaselly, mouse-like animal that was her mascot character, poking out of her pouch bag.

“I’m ready.” Kiku nodded.

It had been one year since Kiku Yakumo had turned from just another kid in middle school into the heroine Magical Daisy. She’d accomplished a lot as Daisy, and not just safe little good deeds like detransforming to take a lost child’s hand and bring them back to their parents. She had done dangerous things, too, like grabbing a truck and waking the driver when he was asleep at the wheel as his vehicle rolled backward.

And along with these activities, she’d also lived a normal life as a middle school student. Kiku had plenty of friends, and others would come seeking her advice. Resolving those issues for them was also a part of her role as a magical girl. Some pubescent worries had no solutions, but just being a listening ear did wonders.

Every day was hectic for Kiku, filled with work that was busy, fun, and worthwhile.

Magical Daisy’s determination to overcome her difficulties, maintain her training, become stronger, become kinder, and be an even better magical girl had caught the attention of an auditor who had come secretly to observe her. This was reported to the higher-ups, and...now an anime had been made about her. It reproduced Magical Daisy’s exploits fairly faithfully, aside from some dramatized aspects, like the premise that she was an exchange student from the World of Flowers.

Palette, the mascot character who was always with Daisy, told her that the number of magical girls who got anime based on them were just one bit of a handful who were filtered and melted down and refined and polished by the hand of an artisan into ultrarare legends. Daisy got lost halfway through that spiel, but she could tell from Palette’s proud expression that it was very unusual and a high honor. Listening to Palette explain, she felt she was truly fortunate to

be commended with an anime based off her life when she hadn't even been a magical girl for very long. Each and every day, as she used her powers to make people's lives better, she never forgot to be grateful.

"Are you nervous, Daisy?"

"Yeah, well, a bit." She was more confident than others her age, and she was aware of her own gutsiness—even when she wasn't transformed.

All her efforts as a magical girl had changed not only Magical Daisy, but Kiku Yakumo on the inside. Experience had turned to confidence, and confidence to a firm, strong core of strength.

And now, Kiku was nervous enough to write out the kanji character for "person" on her palm with her other finger, the standard little trick to calm down. A different magical-girl challenge than the sort she'd experienced so far awaited her. She changed into her school uniform and called, "See you later!" as she went out the front door. As for why she was in her uniform—she didn't know what to wear when meeting someone important, so the safest thing was her school uniform. Pushing her arms through the sleeves of her traditional sailor outfit—an old-fashioned design that was unpopular with students—she'd had a staring contest with the mirror while she arranged her scarf.

Yes, she would be meeting someone important that day. She'd been told they were coming from the Magical Kingdom to make sure she was doing proper work as a magical girl. This was supposed to be different from an audit; it was more like she was meeting a producer or director.

Due to the nature of the work and the fact that they couldn't allow themselves to be seen by ordinary people, magical girls generally worked at night. That day, however, she'd be on the job first thing in the morning...but still, she couldn't transform now. So as Kiku Yakumo, wearing her uniform, she headed out to the spot where she'd be meeting this important someone.

It was a five-minute walk to the station, where she got on the train moving away from the city center, riding it to a commercial area two stops away. The important person would be waiting at the hotel by this station. Kiku had written the name of the hotel, the room number, and the name the person was using in the human world on a piece of paper.

Unable to keep calm on the train, she pulled the memo out of her pocket repeatedly to check what it said. Just meeting a VIP in the magical-girl world was enough to make her uneasy on its own, and it was especially anxiety-inducing when she didn't know what this person was like.

Palette had never met this person, either. "I've always been on the front lines as a mascot, so I don't know anyone that important."

"That just means you get worked like a dog because you're at the bottom of the ladder, doesn't it?"

"Most people'd be uncomfortable saying that, but it's merely second nature for you, huh, Daisy?"

By the time Kiku arrived at the front desk of the hotel, the pounding of her heart was so loud, even she could hear it. To her, this humble business hotel by the station seemed like a distinguished lodging with a history of serving royalty and titled nobility. Kiku told the name and room number to the front desk so she could be let in, then went up to the room and gulped. She knocked twice.

"Come in." A woman's voice—no, a girl's. So, a magical girl?

"Pardon me." Kiku's hand on the doorknob was damp with sweat. She'd stiffened automatically, so she did her best to relax her voice and face before she opened the door.

Her eyes scanned the room. It was small. On the right-hand side were the bathroom and toilet, and directly ahead was the bed. The sheets and blanket were in disarray, and a motley collection of small articles was scattered on top. As a whole, it was a mess.

The figure sitting on the chair in front of the TV turned to Kiku, extending her right arm. "Come on, sit down."

*Where?*

There was only one chair in the room, and it was occupied. A mess covered the bed, and there was nowhere for Kiku to step, either. Of course, neither was there anyplace for her to sit.

She looked back at the other girl. She might have been in her midteens. A VIP

with that apparent age had to be a magical girl. Her attire was startlingly bizarre, the sort only a magical girl would wear. Her hair was green, styled as poofy curls mixed with dreadlocks. She wore a baseball hat to hold it all down and big sunglasses, too. But even with her eyes concealed, Daisy could tell her features were beautiful. That meant she had to be a magical girl.

The long legs beneath her leopard-print miniskirt were crossed, her arms folded, and her lips tightly pursed. Together with her tone, her body language seemed to indicate she was in a bad mood. Kiku panicked. Displeasing a VIP was really not good.

There was no time for hesitation. The only place Kiku could sit was the floor. So she knelt there and looked up at the girl in front of her.

The girl nodded and muttered, “Good.” She was awfully arrogant for someone of her apparent age, so she had to be important after all. “You don’t have to be so formal. I just came here today to make sure the *Magical Daisy* anime was being done properly.”

“Oh. All right.”

You’d think the phrase “You don’t have to be so formal” on its own would sound kind enough, but the girl still seemed grumpy.

Palette nosed its way out of Daisy’s pouch bag. “Nice to meet you. My name is Palette, and I’ve been serving as Daisy’s mascot character.”

“So, while I waited, I checked over all the broadcasts so far.” She tossed a stack of papers onto the desk. Kiku’s eyes flicked across the pages. It looked like a script for *Magical Daisy*. “Last week’s broadcast. What was *that*?”

“There was a drug deal going on in a warehouse in the city,” said Kiku.

“And why were you exposing a drug deal? That’s not what a magical girl should be doing, is it? Tell the police about it. That’s what our tax dollars are for.”

“Um...”

“And you fired your beam, too, didn’t you? You’re not supposed to use your killer move on humans.”

“Um...” Kiku faltered, so Palette took over.

“We did beat them up the normal way. But just putting that fight as is into the anime would be bland, artistically speaking, so they dramatized it some and added in a Beam. Ultimately, it was just for drama.” Palette had recorded Magical Daisy’s activities on video, then handed that over to an ally at the TV station. From there, it was passed along to the production company that made the anime. Palette was the one making decisions about which parts of the video to keep and which to discard, it explained, and the production company also relied on its opinion on how best to dramatize the story.

The VIP’s lips curled in an angry pout. “Lies.”

“Huh?”

“Don’t give me that. It’s lies. You’re putting stuff you didn’t actually do into the anime. That’s a betrayal of the children who believe Magical Daisy is real.”

“Um, well, but—”

“You have nooo understanding at all of what magical girls are! Magical girls need to have kindness, charm, consideration, friendship, earnestness, and all sorts of things! Who wants a fight with a drug cartel?! Nobody wants to see *that* first thing on a Sunday morning!” The VIP smacked her stack of papers on the little desk, making Palette duck its head back into the pouch while Kiku cringed. She wished she could just crawl into a hole and disappear.

The VIP blew out a sigh and continued, “And besides, there was something funny about the story of how you came to find out about this drug deal. You heard some local rumors from a classmate? Isn’t the coincidence a little too convenient?”

Palette, who had ducked away, timidly pushed its head out again. “About that. The station helped us out. When Daisy’s classmate was walking through the shopping district on her way home, they made sure to talk about those rumors loud enough for her to hear.”

“It was *faked*!” The girl smacked the table again, and Palette once again hid. “I was shocked. When I reviewed all of the episodes so far, they were all like this. Do you have no code of ethics or anything? You think you can get away with

this? *This*? You could easily have your qualifications stripped, you know? Do you get it? An anime is faaar more important than you think. It's one of the few opportunities we have to show people what magical girls are. We can't allow these opportunities to be squandered."

"I'm sorry..."

"It's not *me* you need to apologize to, is it? You need to apologize to all the people who've gotten the wrong impression about us. Isn't that right?"

"I'm sorry...to all the viewers..." Still on her knees, Kiku stared hard at the VIP's toes. She hadn't been told that they'd be having a discussion like this. Kiku could have sworn Palette had told her this meeting was ultimately just a social nicety, so she had walked in with that in mind. And now Palette was hiding inside her pouch bag and wouldn't come out. *How long is this going to go on?* she wondered as she hung her head.

"I understand you feel remorse. So you have to do something concrete about it."

"Yes, ma'am..."

"We're going out now. Transform."

"Huh...? But it's the middle of the day."

"So?"

"I thought magical girls were supposed to avoid being seen."

The VIP smacked the stack of papers three times. "Why do you think I'm dressed like this? I'm hiding my appearance with this crazy getup so people can't tell I'm a magical girl. It's just like a masked wrestler wearing the mask wherever he goes. When a magical girl goes out, she's always a magical girl. So change into this." The girl handed Kiku a paper bag. Inside were a dress shirt, a baseball cap, and a pair of overalls. "Put those on. We're going to head out now to do some magical work. I'll do the recording. Things have gotten all messed up because you leave this stuff to your mascot."

"But—"

"Don't *but* me! Just do it! Now!"

Kiku put on the dress shirt and overalls and pulled the hat low over her eyes. Once she had wrapped a white towel around her face, nobody would think she was Magical Daisy. They'd probably take her for some weirdo or a robber. Seventy percent of the people she passed by gave her startled looks, doing double and triple takes, which seemed to support the hypothesis. Another 20 percent would get flustered and look away, only to find the shocking sight of someone with poofy green hair walking beside her, while the final 10 percent looked for a TV camera.

At the end of their outing down the street, which had felt like pure humiliation to Kiku, they reached a deserted house.

Even though this house was in the middle of town, it was clearly empty and dilapidated. It wasn't just old. It must have been someone's home once, but there was no sign of anyone there now. It was tilting, sooty, and overrun with weeds, and a part of the corrugated roof had come off. The VIP held a camcorder in her right hand as she stepped over a chain with a No TRESPASSING sign hanging from it and unlocked the front door. The air inside was stale and dusty.

"Now we're going to clean this up. Make sure to give it your all."

Ten minutes later...

"Bring those over here, Daisy, and put them all together in this cardboard box."

"Oh...okay. Hey, Palette, when is this going to be over?"

"I don't know..."

"Come on! If you have time to babble, you have time to work!"

Thirty minutes later...

"Um, this tatami is rotting..."

"Then put it over with the other trash."

"The floor underneath the tatami is rotting, too..."

"Pull out the baseboards. We'll repair it."

One hour later...

“Yes, yes, that’s how you hammer the nails. Finally, you get it, Daisy.”

“Th-thank you very much.”

Two hours later...

“We’re out of nails, so run down to the hardware store to buy some. I’ll give you the money.”

“Okay. I’ll get some garbage bags while I’m at it, too.”

Five hours later...

“Daisy Beam!”

“Good, good. Now all the garbage is gone.”

“The rice and pork miso soup is done!”

“I’m impressed you can cook when you’re so tiny, Palette.”

“Ha-ha-ha! It’s just a matter of experience.”

Working all the way through till morning, the three of them restored the dilapidated building...well, not quite, but they made the place livable. The old lady who owned it was extremely grateful, squeezing Daisy’s hand and saying, “Thank you! Thank you!” which made her feel rather glad, too.



Karin Sonoda, a twenty-one-year-old newbie manga artist, tilted her head. She watched *Magical Daisy* every single week, and this episode was just weird. *Magical Daisy* hadn’t used her magic at all. She’d just done a normal cleanup and repair of an old, run-down house.

The episode the week before, for example, had started off with Daisy digging a hole and then going on a treasure hunt. It was common in anime in general, not just in *Magical Daisy*, for an adventure to start with casual, mundane events. When the episode had begun, Karin had been expecting things to go in that direction, but the show had ended with nothing more than repairs and cleaning up. The old woman who owned the run-down old house had thanked Daisy, they’d all smiled together, and Palette had ended the show with, “If you

repair old things, you can still use them”—like some educational program you’d be forced to watch in ethics class. Fade to black. No punch line.

What’s more, Daisy hadn’t been wearing her usual costume but a normal, long-sleeved shirt and denim overalls, her face covered with a cloth and a baseball cap on her head. She’d looked like a chainsaw-wielding murderer from some rural American town. *That’s no magical girl*, Karin thought.

Despite being an early-morning show, *Magical Daisy* had an avant-garde appeal—there were no evil overlords or sinister secret organizations; rather, she had serious conflicts with real-world criminal organizations. That was the reason Karin enjoyed watching the show, and that was also the reason for its popularity with the general public. That week’s episode had completely missed the whole appeal of *Magical Daisy*.

What had caused this to happen?

When Karin went onto the general magical-girl website to check the *Magical Daisy* reaction thread on the message boards there, she found that the fan rage had reached an unprecedented level. Unlike other anime running that season, the *Magical Daisy* thread tended to be gentle and calm, a comfortable place to spend your time, but this combined with the influx of trolling surging in from somewhere or other to create a gruesome spectacle that would make you shield your eyes.

Karin lumbered across the room, pulled a bag of potato chips from the cupboard, and opened it. Her diet had only lasted until the previous evening, and she’d already lost all desire to commit. Relieving the stress of this blunder with *Magical Daisy* was the priority here.

Karin’s assistants would show up in the afternoon. Her deadline was close. A manga artist who had yet to secure her position had to work harder than a successful one or else she would lose her footing. But first, she had to release this building stress.

With a storm of crunching chips, she hit the keyboard. There was a mountain of things Karin had to say about that week’s episode—as a magical-girl enthusiast, and as a fan of *Magical Daisy*. The comments welled out of her in an endless stream.

Even as she let her objections be known, as the long-standing user named Genopsyko, she was obligated to protect the peace of this message board. She was charged with many duties. She had to get to work defending *Magical Daisy*.

“Yeah...maybe I’ll start a petition.”



She looked through the window up at the sky, where a white vapor trail was running across the great wall of blue. It was the sort of magnificent color that would make a beautiful painting as is. If she hadn’t been so frustrated as she looked up at the azure canvas, it surely would have been a pleasant view—even if it was from inside a messy hotel room.

*I’m not wrong at all*, she thought, and the feeling was building inside her.

She took off her baseball cap and tossed it onto the bed. Taking off the poofy wig, she put on her glasses and white coat, hung her Rubik’s Cube from her neck, and pulled on her shorts.

She had been fired.

She loved magical-girl anime, and that was exactly why she was so passionate about it. They hadn’t understood her passion. She had worked so hard to assist in the production of that episode because she wanted people to know about the right kind of magical girl, but reviews had trashed it, and the Magical Kingdom had ordered her to return immediately. But the real *Magical Daisy* had only just begun. She was supposed to work the anime avenue to reveal what magical girls should really be doing. But the masses hadn’t accepted the anime designed under her guidance, protests and complaints had flooded in, and the TV station had panicked and returned to the old crime-focused *Magical Daisy*.

The masses were ignorant. This was populism. Pandering and gratification.

The girl tried to open the hotel window, but it wouldn’t budge. It was made not to open, for safety’s sake—a fixed window.

“I hate magical-girl anime!” The girl—Keek—yelled at the window that wouldn’t open, and the glass shuddered.

# A Cherna Christmas

This story is set just a little before the game in *Magical Girl Raising Project: Restart* begins.



A person needs only one thing to become a magical girl: magical potential. Although traits such as intelligence, kindness, courage, self-restraint, endurance, and strength of heart are all next in line, they are not necessary for being chosen.

To put it another way, as long as they are possessed of the vaguely defined, numerically inexpressible trait called magical potential, then anyone can gain powers. Age, sex, and race are no barrier. And though very rare, it's possible to overcome even greater hurdles...



Takanaka Butchers sold two different kinds of croquettes. The normal ones were a hundred yen each. The burned or broken or duds were fifty yen each. They had started selling these fifty-yen croquettes ever since the owners' son had returned from Tokyo to work in the shop, and the chronically broke students and low-wage office workers appreciated them. They called the normal ones the "fancy croquettes," while the duds were the "normal croquettes," and they preferred buying the latter. Takanaka Butchers' croquettes were cheap, tasted good, didn't skimp on the meat, and had batter that was fried up nice and crispy, and most of all, they were large.

Lately, there had been days with no duds, and some customers bought the fancy croquettes with heavy hearts, even as they commented on the improving skills of the owner's son. So in that sense, Tomoki Tatehara was lucky for getting ahold of six fifty-yen croquettes.

But Tomoki didn't feel lucky. Sitting on the swing at the park, he likened himself to the middle-aged office worker who couldn't tell his family he'd been laid off and so just kept on going to the park, pretending he was at work.

It all started with Tomoki's big sister. She was supposed to come straight home after her club time was over, but she had been an hour late. And Tomoki knew why. Baseball. His sister wasn't playing—no, she'd stopped to watch a casual game on the way home from her school.

When Tomoki's sister had started middle school, she'd developed an interest in watching baseball games. He figured it was probably due to the influence of someone at her school. She'd never said a word about the sport before then. At

least, not to Tomoki.

In his opinion, when his sister had started middle school, she'd looked like an elementary school kid who'd put on a middle school uniform by mistake. He'd even been worried that such a gangly girl might end up getting bullied. But thinking about it now, the concern seemed unnecessary.

Tomoki's sister did not play baseball. She only ever watched. She was such an athletically disinclined person, and for as long as he could remember, she'd always been the type to cite reading as her hobby, so he had no idea what was going on in her mind now. And to Tomoki, this habit of hers was an incredible bother.

The two of them had promised they would take turns watching the house, but now his sister's late returns had wasted Tomoki's weekend. Thinking he might just barely make it if he left right away, he'd pedaled his bicycle as fast as he could and arrived at the game shop thirty minutes late. The card tournament had already begun, and his friends seemed to be having a great time dishing out and taking damage.

—But there was a special card they would be handing out that day for the winners only!

Winter vacation had only just begun. This was beyond a bad start to the holiday. And it was all that uggo's fault! Ugly, ugly, ugly, ugly!

But cursing his sister in his head was not going to turn back time.

It wasn't like it was his friends' fault, nor the shop's, but continuing to watch the card tournament had grated on his nerves. So Tomoki had thrown his leg over his bicycle and gone back the way he'd come. Irritated as he was at wasting his time on this pointlessness, his cycling got more aggressive until his handlebar caught on a telephone pole and almost knocked him over, which only upset him even more.

That was when he noticed the smell of croquettes wafting out from Takanaka Butchers. Sunday afternoon was the time when growing children were hungriest. Going to look, he saw there was a whole stack of normal croquettes beside the fancy croquettes.

Tomoki still had the money for the tournament entry fee in his wallet. Stress eating might make him feel better. It had been a long time since he'd last had croquettes from Takanaka Butchers, too. If he were to miss out now, he didn't know when the normal croquettes might be up for sale again.

These thoughts floated through his mind one after another, and before he knew it, he'd bought six of them and was sitting in the park, holding the brown, oil-stained wrapping paper in his hands. The year was nearing its end already, and it was the second day of winter vacation.

It was cold out, of course. Tomoki knew he'd be warmer if he went home to eat the croquettes, but he was also thinking, *Why do I have to look at my sister's face while I eat? Just thinking about her pisses me off.* He would eat them all before he went home.

His friends would be playing that card game right about now. Maybe they'd noticed Tomoki wasn't there. He could easily imagine their dumb comments: "Oh yeah, so what happened to Tatehara today?"

*Augh, I'm so, so mad!*

He forcefully ripped open the wax paper, opened his jaw up as far as it would go, and was about to bite into a croquette when, right before his upper and lower teeth met, he heard a great noise. Heavy, loud, and shuddering, like it was coming from deep within the bowels of the earth. It was the sound of a stomach rumbling.

It wasn't *his* stomach. He might be hungry, but he didn't make such big, bearlike sounds. Tomoki stopped before he took his bite, slowly pulled the croquette away from his mouth, and examined the park.

A slide. Swings. Iron bars. The jungle gym. Then he looked up and found it—someone squatting on top of the streetlamp. There was no mistaking it. It was a person. And the top of that streetlamp was fifteen feet up.

The figure hopped down and landed without a sound. Tomoki stared hard. It was a girl. She must have been around the same age as his sister, perhaps a little closer to high school-age. Her getup being what it was, he didn't really have a clue.

Her outfit looked fluffy and soft, with round ears coming out of her head. Printed on her shoulders were symbols indicating “no cats.” It looked like she was wearing a mouse costume suit. But her face was exposed. Seeing it, Tomoki took a step backward. It wasn’t that her appearance was scary, and she wasn’t anyone he recognized. She was frighteningly beautiful. Strands of faint pink hair slipped out from her headpiece, fluttering in the breeze. A big white bag dangled from the grasp of her right hand. It was like Santa Claus’s sack.

There was strength in her eyes. She didn’t even blink as she stared at Tomoki—at what was in his hands.

Noticing her gaze, Tomoki looked down at his hands to see that in his right was a croquette, and in his left were the rest of them, wrapped in paper. He glanced over at the girl, lifting the croquettes and tilting his head. The girl nodded vigorously a bunch of times, staring intensely at the food. When Tomoki timidly offered out the croquette in his hand, the girl approached him to bite into it. She bit the hand that held it, too, and Tomoki yelped.

“It just smelled so good, Cherna figured it had to be yummy. And then when Cherna did eat it, it really was that good.” The girl had scarfed down Tomoki’s croquette in the blink of an eye, then snatched away the wrapping paper, devoured the rest inside, and bowed her head at the dazed boy in thanks.

Tomoki gave the girl a sidelong glance. She was now sitting on the bench, rubbing her stomach in satisfaction. He’d long forgotten the pain in his hand.

“Cherna’s got a good nose, and it never makes mistakes!”

“Um... So your name is Cherna?”

“Cherna is Cherna. Who’re you?”

“I’m Tomoki Tatehara.” She was probably older than him, so he tried his best to act polite. But he really didn’t know what sort of person she was. Was Cherna her first name? Was it one of those “unique” names parents were giving their kids these days? Wait, maybe she wasn’t even Japanese. Something about her face suggested that might be the case. “Cherna” might not even be her real name, anyway. It could be a character name or an entertainer’s stage name.

Looking at her outfit once again, he thought she seemed like some kind of

store mascot or a comedian or some unique pop idol or something. Definitely the type who'd have a stage name.

"Cherna was so hungry. So that stuff was yummy."

"Oh, uh-huh. Really?"

"But Cherna isn't the only one hungry."

"Oh, really?"

"Cherna's whole family is hungry." And then Cherna began to explain. A lot of her language sounded rather off, making Tomoki think that perhaps "Cherna" wasn't a stage name after all and that she was actually a foreigner.

Cherna had a family. She had grown up with her friends in the same hometown, but they were now scattered all over Japan. A strong leader had the responsibility of supporting a big family, so as the strongest one of all, Cherna had the responsibility of supporting the biggest group, she said.

"Family." She used the English word. She was gathering food from all over Japan in order to support her large family. So she had a huge clan? She'd struggled through a lot? These details didn't convince him, but neither did she appear to be lying, bragging, or deluded.

"So the special day is coming."

"Special day?"

"On that day, the leader has to go around visiting everyone in the family to give them presents, you know. They have to have presents that are way, way better than normal stuff, or they won't be the leader anymore."

So...Christmas? Or was this like New Year's money? He got the feeling it could be either.

"And so..." Cherna took Tomoki's hand and squeezed it. Even in the cold, wintry wind, he could feel its faint but certain warmth and the soft, silky smoothness of her skin. Tomoki's heart rate shot up. Blood rushed to his head. "Cherna's looking for tasty things."

Still holding his hand, she broke into a run. She was sprinting so hard that Tomoki wasn't just following after her—she was dragging him.

“H-hey! Stop, stop!”

And she did. The momentum carried him forward until Cherna caught him. Her body was far softer than the palm of her hand had been. “Why stop?”

Before her softness could send him into a total trance, Tomoki shook himself out of it. “You’re looking for good food? So where are you going to go?”

“Cherna wants more of those things from before. ’Cause those were good. So tell me where to get them.”

“Uh...well, I don’t have any more money.”

“Why not?”

“‘Why not’?”

She gave him a surprised look. “You’re an adult, Tomoki. You’ve got to pull it together.”

“No, I’m not an adult. I’m a kid. I’m still in elementary school.”

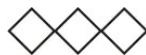
“Huh?! You’re a kid?!” Again, she seemed surprised. Tomoki felt sorry, somehow, for failing to meet her expectations, but this was clearly her fault for believing he was an adult. Objectively speaking, he was very clearly an elementary school kid.

“Oh...you’re a kid... So you don’t have any more of those tasty things?”

“Well, no. I don’t.”

“Oh well, then. Let’s look for something else.”

Before the *Huh?* could even cross his mind, Cherna took his hand and pulled him along.



After Cherna found out Tomoki was a child who couldn’t offer her any more croquettes, he had assumed he’d be relieved of his duty. He’d felt rather strange about it, even reluctant to part with her, but he had figured they would part ways. Once he was home, he’d tell his sister about how he’d met this really unbelievable girl.

But for some reason, Tomoki was still with Cherna.

“So are there any convenience stores or family restaurants around?” she asked.

“I know where some are, but do you have money?”

“So which is better: sneaking in, or digging through the trash?”

“Uh...both are bad.”

“They are?”

“Yes.”

“Oh...’cause these are supposed to be special presents, so it can’t just be the usual stuff, right? That’s it, right?”

“Yeah...let’s just leave it at that.”

“Cherna took a survey. Asking what everyone wants.”

“So how did people respond?”

“They said they want to try cat meat and stuff.”

“That’s...a little, uh...”

“Oh, and there was one who wants to slice up the Musician.”

“What does that mean?”

“One of the kids in Cherna’s family lives in a hospital and said a ‘inpatient’ has been saying that. Cherna doesn’t really understand what that means, either. Do you know, Tomoki?”

“I have no clue.”

“Um...why’re you getting undressed?”

“All that running made Cherna sweaty, so Cherna was thinking a swim would be nice.”

“In this cold?”

“Oh yeah. Cherna doesn’t have any fur right now. It’d be really cold for sure, huh?”

“Yeah, well, probably.”

“You’re so smart, Tomoki.”

“...Thank you.”

“Hide!”

“What’s wrong, Cherna?”

“Look at that person.”

“That old lady? The one with the rose corsage?”

“She’s super-scary. You’ve got to watch out for her.”

“She’s scary?”

“Cherna knows you can’t fight people who have flowers on them. Cherna doesn’t really remember why, but Cherna’s got this feeling that something really serious happened.”

“Um, I don’t really get it, but all right.”

“Oh yeah, so why’re you dressed up like that, Cherna?”

“Shhh! You’re not allowed to ask that!”

“Huh...? Why not?”

“If you try to figure out Cherna’s identity, you’ll get erased!”

“Huh? Uh...huh? A-all right.”

“Hey, where are you going?”

“That guy said he’ll give me something if I come with him.”

“Y-you can’t go off with some stranger because he said that! Cherna! Hey! I said you can’t go with him! Officer! Officeeer!”

They searched all over town, Cherna dragging Tomoki the whole way. Each time Cherna tried to do something inappropriate, Tomoki desperately tried to stop her. But even if she hadn’t been doing anything, her appearance alone would have called attention. Her behavior just made her stand out all the more. The two of them might well be the talk of the town by the next day.

They visited all sorts of places, but they couldn’t get their hands on the food Cherna wanted in the normal way. The reason was simple: Neither of them had

the cash they needed. In the end, the two of them returned to the park where they had first met. In silence, they sat down on the bench together.

The sky was already growing dark. It seemed to have gotten a little colder, too. Was that just in Tomoki's head, or was it actually chillier? Probably both. It was starting to get him down.

Feeling like he'd wasted all his time, he sat underneath the cold sky and wondered what he'd just been doing. Then he looked beside him to see Cherna hanging her head. Though the light had grown dim, Tomoki could see a sparkling flow of something from her eyes.

He panicked. "A-are you okay?"

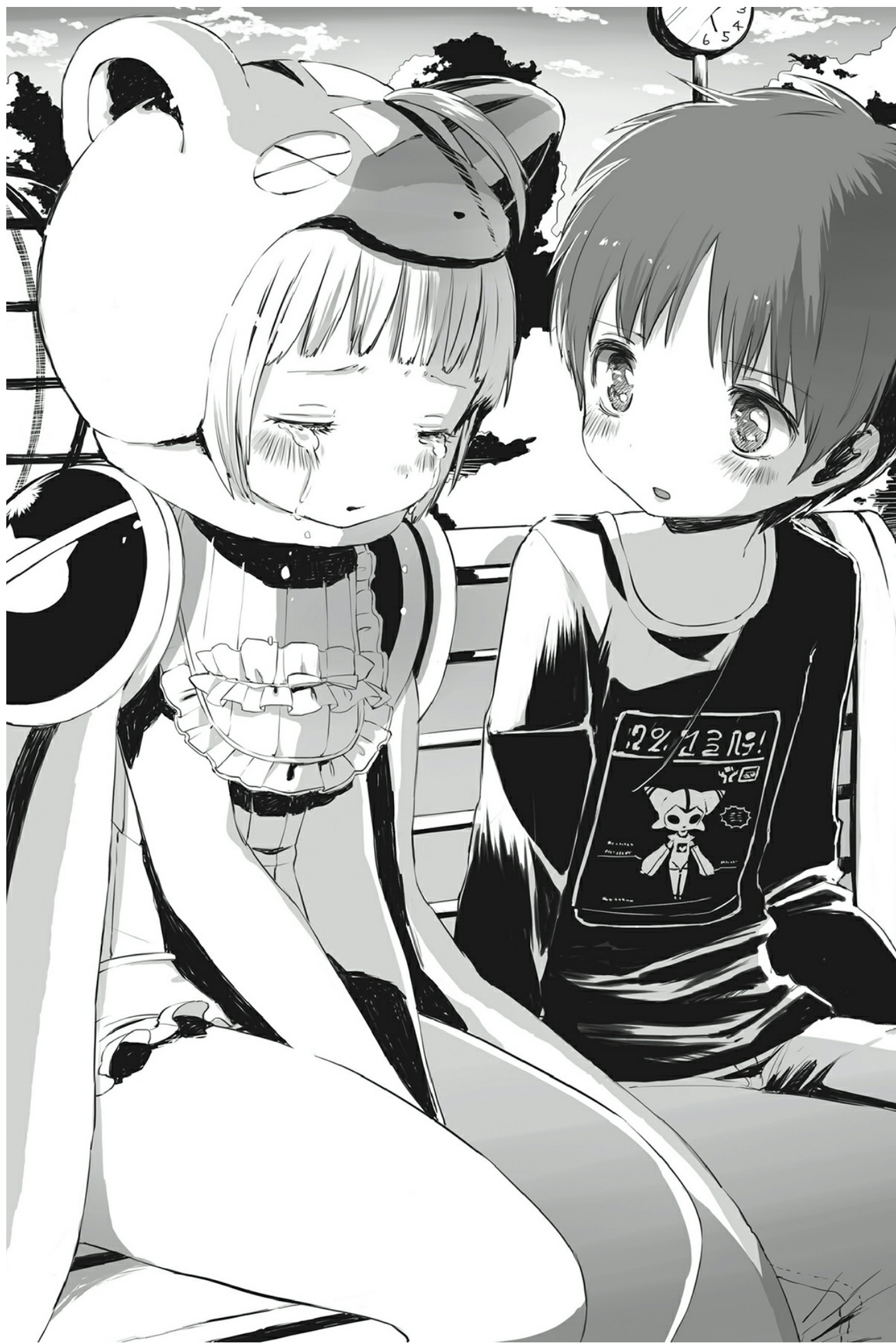
"Maybe Cherna won't be able to find any presents..." Cherna was only about the same age as his sister, maybe a little older, but she was desperately trying to support her starving family. Crying, she bore the weight of her own helplessness. Even after he had witnessed her innocence and slight excess of determination, now she was crying.

*This...hits really hard.*

That streak of tears was like a knife to Tomoki's heart.

Cherna was crying. Something hot and thick welled up inside him, from the pit of his stomach, and he couldn't put it into words. A voice was yelling at him, *What are you doing?* And then, *This isn't the time for that!*

As if urged by some call, Tomoki stood. "Please wait here. I'll come back right away."



He threw his leg over his bicycle and pedaled away as hard as he could. It didn't take him long to arrive at his house.

Tossing his bicycle aside at the front door, he ripped off his shoes and headed for the kitchen. This wasn't the time to be worried about trivial things like his parents getting mad. He pulled a garbage bag out of the drawer and started yanking food out of the fridge, freezer, and cupboards, stuffing it all in.

"...What are you doing?" he heard his sister say from behind him, but that didn't matter right now.

He packed it in.

"Hey. What are you doing?"

*Pack it in. Pack it in.*

"Hey, Tomoki."

"Don't stop me. I need food."

"Mom and Dad are gonna yell at you."

"I don't care if they get mad." Tomoki shook off his sister, who was still trying to stop him. It was almost New Year's, but there were hungry kids out there. And there was a girl running around trying to find some food to give them as presents. What was so wrong about doing what he could for them?

Loudly shouting all this at her, Tomoki continued to stuff food into the bag, then he tied it off. He had one and a half forty-five-liter bags. It wasn't a lot, but this was the most he could do right now. Slinging it over his shoulder, he turned around to go take it to Cherna, only to see his sister carrying even more than he was.

"Sis...?"

"Urk...t-take this, too." She dropped the mountain of food before Tomoki with a thud. There was so much, he'd probably need five or six forty-five liter bags for it.

"What is this, sis?"

"I don't really know what's going on here, but if there are people in trouble,

then I can't just do nothing, right?"

"There's, like, spiny lobster and a whole roast piglet in there, too, uh... Where did you get all this?"

"Don't worry about that. Go on. You have to hurry and take this to them."

"Yeah...thanks!"

How many years had it been since he'd last thanked his sister for anything? It may have been the first time he could recall that he'd felt so good about thanking someone. The two of them scooped up the food and shoved it onto the bicycle trailer their grandfather normally used for yard work. It made the trailer heavy, but the weight made him glad.

"Wow...wow!" The moment Cherna saw the mountain of food nearly overflowing from the plastic bags, she jumped for joy, breaking into a smile as she opened the closest bag and bit into a whole roasted turkey.

"Hold on! You can't eat that, Cherna! You have to take it to everyone!"

"Oh yeah, yeah. Whoops. It just looked so good." Cherna tied up the sack again, and then she hooked each bag in the bicycle trailer onto her fingers. The weight dangling from her fingers had to be enormous, but she didn't seem to struggle with it at all. She was overjoyed, and a beaming smile lit up her face. "Thank you, Tomoki!"

"Oh, it's no big deal."

"Once you grow up, I'll let you into my family!"

"Ah-ha-ha. Thank you."

"Let's make babies and raise them together!" Cherna nimbly jumped from the top of the wall to a roof as if the weight were nothing. And then, with a bright grin at Tomoki, she waved and disappeared beyond the roof.

"...Babies?"

He was starting to think that final remark had been something outrageous.



Seeing the baffling situation in her bedroom, Anna knit her brows.

She was sure she'd locked the window, but for some reason, it was now cracked open. What's more, lying in the cage of her beloved pet hamster—its name was Tama—was an object she had no memory of putting there, and Tama was nibbling furiously away at it. *What on earth is this?* she wondered, opening the cage and pulling it out, only to find it was the head of a Japanese spiny lobster.

*"Pourquoi?"* she asked, but no answer came.

Anna loved Japanese culture. For many years, her friends had been calling her a weeaboo. Her obsession was so extreme that when she had been chosen as a magical girl, she had instantly picked out an ultra-Japanese name and an aesthetic based on a Japanese shrine maiden. But even Anna wouldn't give spiny lobster, a staple of high-end Japanese cuisine, to a hamster as food. There shouldn't have been any of it anywhere in the house in the first place.

Had a robber come in and left behind a spiny lobster head? No way.

*"Has Père Noël* come to give me a present, since I've been a good girl?"

Inside its cage, Tama squeaked.

## Wonder Dream

This story is set about a year after the survival game in *Magical Girl Raising Project* ended, but before the game in *Magical Girl Raising Project: Restart* began.



The men in black fanned out around a single girl and drew their firearms in unison.

“This is the end for you! Say your prayers!”

“My apologies, but I don’t believe in gods or Buddhas.”

“Then just die! Get her!”

Following their leader’s signal, the lackeys in black opened fire with their machine guns, and the spray of bullets broke open wooden crates, thudded into the concrete walls, shattered window glass, and ricocheted around the thirty-foot-square room until one hit the leader in the thigh.

He screamed, blood gushing from his leg. “Cease fire! Stop! Stop!” he ordered as he crumpled on the ground, clutching his thigh, and his men relaxed their trigger fingers.

The gunpowder smoke gradually cleared to reveal the owner of the hazy silhouette. “I don’t believe in gods or Buddhas, but I do believe in my sense of justice. As long as I, Masked Wonder, am committed to justice, mere bullets can’t kill me.” Standing among the scattered cartridges on the ground was an unyielding woman with a fluttering cape. Not a single wound marked her body.

“G-goddamn it! You’re a monster!”

“Give it up! If you resist, you’re going to get hurt!”

Two and a half seconds after that declaration, she’d already beat down the men who had drawn knives on her. It was an instant KO.

Right as she was piling all the fallen men together in the center of the room and breathing a sigh, she heard the sound of someone clapping. There was a girl outside the window giving furious applause. “Nice! Amazing! Very superhero-like!”

“Thank you very much.”

The girl outside the window gave a few satisfied nods. Konomi—Masked Wonder—nodded, too.

It had already been one month since Konomi’s training had first begun.

Compared with how she'd been before, she was like a completely different person.



Before Konomi Mita had started her secret training, she had been a religiously by-the-book sort. And the “book,” in this case, consisted of the optimal methods devised by those who came before—at great pains, through trial and error. While coming up with her own approach would be the more creative choice, putting it into practice necessitated even more trials and hardship than her predecessors suffered. So rather than spending all her time on that, it was best to show her respect to those who had come before by emulating existing procedures.

That was logical. And Konomi liked logic and efficiency.

It was just like how businesses would always run according to rational principles when they were in trouble. Eliminating the unnecessary and placing emphasis on efficiency was the shortcut to success. Everyone respecting and complying with standard operating procedure to reliably get things done was, in Konomi's mind, logic in its highest form.

When Konomi was in kindergarten, her friends had hardly stuck to the class rules. They hadn't washed their hands or gargled, and as a result, everyone had gotten sick. It was a big hullabaloo, and the kindergarten had temporarily closed down. Fortunately, nobody had died, and they'd all laughed about it afterward, but to Konomi, who had been tearfully alone while her friends were holding their stomachs and moaning, it hadn't been funny at all. She had panicked, hesitated, cried, and trembled. The hellish sight of her friends writhing in pain had left a deep impression on her.

It was fair to say the event had formed a foundational part of Konomi's ego. Because she had been the only one to adhere to the class rules, she'd avoided getting sick and instead was able to relax at home with no stomachache.

You couldn't go wrong if you just obeyed the rules. So Konomi thoroughly memorized the contents of her textbooks, never forgot a single equation or important date, accepted the rules, and refrained from selfish behavior. She always scored 100 percent on her tests, and her parents and teachers all sang

her praises.

Konomi was proud. They had acknowledged that she was right.

She knew that people called her a nerd and a teacher's pet behind her back, but that didn't bother her. There were always more and more books for Konomi to learn and follow. Not just textbooks—reference books, workbooks, collections of past exam questions, all sorts of tests—they popped up one after another like bamboo shoots after the rain. She had to carefully learn and memorize each and every thing. She didn't have the time to get bogged down with her classmates' backbiting. Konomi didn't have friends, but she didn't need them anyway.

Her parents were not particularly strict about scholastic success, but they also didn't stop their daughter if she wanted to study. They gave her what she wanted without reserve. Many times, they tried to invite her out: "Why don't we see a movie together?" or "Why don't you try skating?" or "Should I buy you some manga?" or "You don't want to play any video games?" or "Why don't we rent some anime DVDs?" But Konomi refused all of these things, and in the end, her parents stopped trying to force entertainment on her.

Konomi didn't want entertainment. She wanted to study. New reference books and workbooks were more useful to her.

Both her parents had come from good families and had easygoing personalities, so they took no offense, acknowledging that it was just who she was. Despite their concerns about her report card evaluations describing her as "prefers to be alone, has no close friends," they let their daughter do as she pleased. They laughed at how this pair of featherbrains had somehow raised a genius.

Konomi moved up to one of the top university-oriented middle schools in the country, but even there, people would call her a nerd behind her back, and she remained unable to make friends, absorbed in her studies.

Konomi wasn't quite sure what had led her to become a magical girl or the details of how it happened. Since it was the biggest and most important event of her life, it should have been a very emotional time, but for some reason, her memories of it were vague. She couldn't remember it. Perhaps the shock had

simply left her stunned.

Why could she turn into a different person? Why did she have superhuman physical abilities? How was it that she transcended the bounds of physics, the law of conservation of mass?

In response to her questions, Konomi was simply told, “That’s just what magic is.” With only the basic rules of “Keep your identity a secret and go help people,” she felt abandoned. She had no textbooks, no reference material, and not even a teacher. As a by-the-book person who’d had her manual stolen away, she was forced to fumble her way forward.

Quickly, Konomi found herself at an impasse. She couldn’t do it.

She didn’t really understand what magical girls were supposed to be in the first place. She knew there were shows on TV, but the only shows she ever watched were the news, and she always did so with a notepad in hand in case current affairs questions came up on any exams. She didn’t know any tropes or magical-girl standards, and she couldn’t take even a single step forward in her duty. She rented various magical-girl DVDs to watch, but she never understood what to do. There was too much variance from series to series in what the heroines did and could do.

It had been explained to her that her alternate form had been her choice, but Konomi couldn’t help doubting that she herself had actually liked and wanted such a bizarre getup. It seemed to her to be just a physical manifestation of a vague mental image: “Basically this, I guess.”

The mask and cape, the voluminous blond hair, voluptuous bust, and shapely, curving hips all seemed familiar to her, but also somehow unfamiliar. Whether she’d seen it before or not, and despite the fact that it was her own body, it was hard to feel emotionally connected. She sincerely wondered, *Did I have to change myself into this?*

She sent message after message to the Magical Kingdom asking for instructions, but it was like flinging rocks into a void. She got no replies. The line between what she should and shouldn’t do was so ambiguous, she was left frozen. But still, she couldn’t help feeling like doing nothing would run counter to the instructions she’d been given of going out to “help people.”

As she stayed trapped by her own rigidity, time passed.

Konomi had no friends to ask for advice, and this wasn't something she could discuss with the teachers at regular school or cram school. When she asked her parents in the most indirect way possible what magical girls were and what they did, her parents were overjoyed. "Have you gotten an interest in that now, Konomi?" they asked, and then the conversation jumped from the magical-girl anime they'd watched long ago to TV dramas and movies. Most of what they talked about wasn't useful to her and did nothing to resolve her worries.

Konomi considered. She had become a magical girl in her first year of middle school, and she was in her second year now. She'd already begun preparing for high school entrance exams. She would be entering what would probably be the most difficult period of her life. Magical-girl work was a form of community service, really, so it would be best to do it when she was free, between periods of study, right? In other words, once she had passed her high school entrance exams, she should make her debut as a magical girl.

She was aware that she was making excuses to herself, but this rationale seemed convincing in its own way. Konomi swore off transforming for the time being and devoted herself to studying for entrance exams, passing with flying colors to make it into a selective high school.

It was when she stuck her arms through the sleeves of her high school uniform, looking at the new Konomi reflecting back at her, that she remembered it was finally time for her to be a magical girl. She'd been putting it off for so long, but she still couldn't figure out what she was supposed to do.

Still worrying about her course of action, Konomi curled up in her bed, and before she knew it, exhaustion from studying for the entrance exams had carried her into sound sleep.



The place Konomi visited was very much like a dream. White clouds covered the ground, like a carpet that went on and on forever. *Does the line between cloud and sky count as a "horizon," or would you call it something else?* No matter where she looked—ahead or behind, right or left—it was all nothing but clouds.

*This is a very dreamlike dream*, she thought as it dawned on her that this wasn't reality. Happening to glance at her feet, she saw a TV and DVD player on the ground, along with a stack of DVDs piled up in a rack.

The TV and DVD player turned on, though Konomi hadn't touched a thing—or more to the point, she wasn't even sure where an outlet could be. A DVD case rose up from the rack and popped open, and the disc inserted itself into the player. Clouds fluffed up in front of the TV, forming the shape of a sofa. Did this mean she should sit down?

Konomi sat down on the cloud sofa, and the DVD began to play. She'd been thinking about nothing but magical girls as she'd fallen asleep, so she figured she had to be dreaming about watching magical-girl DVDs, but she was wrong. It was an old special-effects-heavy live-action superhero show, one old enough that it had first aired before her father was born.

In it, a young man was captured by an evil organization, and his body was remade into something stronger. They tried to brainwash him, too, but he escaped it right in the nick of time. With his modified body as his weapon, the man fought back against the organization.

Konomi kept on watching the DVD. Once it was over, the disc switched over to a new one, the final episode came to a close, the credits rolled, and Konomi realized she was crying. Then she woke up.

Afterward, she forgot the dream. All she had left was the vaguest feeling that she must have dreamed something. But still, she somehow remembered something deeply affecting her heart. Then when she went to sleep that night, she found herself in the same place again.

The DVDs showed her anime, special-effect shows, and various other types of media, and Konomi watched it all, kneeling on the sofa. A cyberized human being riding on a motorcycle, scarf fluttering behind him. A unit of fighters, each wearing a different color costume, all battling together. An alien fighting in hand-to-hand combat with a giant monster. Cyborgs fighting black-market weapons dealers. Superheroes in live-action movies based off of American comics who wore skintight suits that resembled Konomi's magical-girl form.

Konomi had of course been emotionally moved before by her pursuit of

knowledge. The joy of accomplishing things you hadn't been able to do before and learning new things is vital for anyone.

But studying had never brought her to tears. Whether she'd felt frustrated or glad, she had directed those feelings into her next task. She had gotten as far as she had by pushing on and on without ever crying.

So what was it that she felt now?

At every turn, she had remembered her friends who had suffered after ignoring the kindergarten rules, thinking that if she could be efficient and rational, she could have a safe life. But the lives of the protagonists of these stories were far from efficient or rational. They might be the targets of condescension or laughter, but in spite of that, they would go out and do things with the welfare of others in mind. They would risk their lives for intangible things like the smile of someone important to them, calling on courage and guts alone to face opponents far stronger than they.

This was not the way Konomi preferred to live her life. Looking at these ideas with a cold eye and saying, "Do it as far away from me as possible" was how she always operated—or so it should have been. So then what was this excitement in her chest?

Right now, she was a magical girl. She had power. If she were to fight shoulder to shoulder with the heroes of these stories, she would be no lesser than them. She'd gained a rare opportunity.

When the DVD was over, she found she'd unconsciously started clapping. Then she heard another set of hands clapping with her. Turning around, she saw a girl in pajamas who carried a pillow under one arm joining her in the applause.

She was about to ask, "*Who are you?*" when she stopped. From underneath the girl's pillow protruded the same sort of heart-shaped magical phone Konomi herself had.

"You put on these DVDs?" Konomi asked.

"Hmm, I think so."

"You think so?"

“I don’t really remember.” The girl in pajamas scratched her head, and the fluffy decorations on the ends of her hair swayed. “I think something special happened to make things end up like this...but I can’t remember what.” She shook her head from side to side, and this time, all her hair swayed with her. It was moaning, going, “HMM, HMM.” “I can’t go in and out of dreams when I want, which makes me think my magic has to have gotten weaker, and plus, I can’t get out of dreams for some reason, either...but hey. This was something you needed right now, right? Somehow, I understand that.” The girl pointed at the DVD player.

Staring at the girl, Konomi hesitated a little, then shook her head as if to clear her confusion and then gave one last, firm nod.



When Konomi revealed her situation to the girl in pajamas, the girl said, “I don’t really get what’s going on, but I think I can help you.” Though she had no basis for that assertion, she seemed confident about it.

The name of the new magical girl was Masked Wonder. Her true identity was unknown. Her principle was justice. She was a hero among heroes, who brought down great evils and reached out to the weak. She had special, S-level powers to control the gravity of all matter. The prime minister was an old friend of hers and had relied on her on many occasions when the fate of the nation had been in peril. No matter how challenging the mission, the word “impossible” was not in Masked Wonder’s dictionary.

“...Is this character background necessary?”

“Absolutely! Having a character background will be a real plus when the Pentagon or the FBI or the Vatican calls you up!”

When Konomi woke up in the morning, she forgot the whole dream, the character background they’d come up with included. Or she should have, but she found herself unconsciously scribbling the information down in her notebook during class. *It’s a really good thing nobody noticed me doing that*, Konomi thought, breathing a great sigh of relief.

“I am Masked Wonder, and I’ll take down my enemies.”

“No, no, no! Don’t talk like an English textbook! Be more haughty!”

“I am...Masked Wonder?”

“It’s not a question!”

“I—I am Masked Wonder! Bad guys get no mercy from me!”

“More like American comics!”

“My name is Masked Wonder! You won’t get away with this!”

“Yeah! Like that!”

There were ten men in black total, and all of them had machine guns in hand, muzzles pointed in her direction.

“Um...isn’t this dangerous?”

“Don’t worry. This is a dream, after all.”

“Augh...”

“Once you win this one, I’ll double and triple the numbers. All right, then, everyone! I’ll leave her to you!”

“Yes, ma’am! Leave it to us! You’re dead, Masked Wonder!”

“Don’t mess with us, you bitch.”

“Do you know how much you’ve cost our organization?! Just thinking about it pisses me off!”

“I’m not so sure about this...”

The girl in the ten-gallon hat and revealing cowboy outfit smiled.

“Tee-hee-hee. My name’s Calamity Mary. Howdy, Li’l Miss Wonder.”

“All right!” the pajama girl declared. “Time for mock fight with the beautiful Calamity Mary number thirty thousand!”

“Beautiful...?” said Masked Wonder.

Once, Masked Wonder joined the pajama girl to go observe another magical girl’s dream.

“I should be able to go visit anyone’s dreams whenever I want,” said the girl,

“but now, I can only veeeery occasionally see people’s dreams, just in bits and pieces. So if we miss our chance today, I don’t know when we’ll get another one.”

It was super-rare for a magical girl to dream in character, and the pajama girl said that watching this one was sure to get them some useful information. They tiptoed around the dream with quiet footsteps so as not to be noticed.



They were in a forest, and a girl was sitting under a big tree with her eyes closed. With her unique, all-blue outfit and her charming face, if *she* wasn't a magical girl, who was? So was she meditating? She came off rather like an ascetic monk.

The magical girl in blue suddenly opened her eyes and saw Masked Wonder hidden in the shadow of the trees. "Huh? Are you a comrade?"

Not at all impeded by the darkness shielding Masked Wonder under the trees, the magical girl approached the one who was trying to shrink away, took her hand, and squeezed it. Masked Wonder looked back, unsure what she should do, but the pajama girl was gone.

"This ain't a dream, right? You're a real-life magical girl, ain'tcha? My master taught me to train in my dreams, but man, I didn't think anyone else could do it! We're kindred spirits! Totally. It kinda sucks that we won't remember any of this once we wake up, but somethin' about it always kinda sticks with ya, eh? It's funny, ain't it? I guess that's what they call sleep-learnin'." She seemed to have formed a particular attachment to Masked Wonder.

Having been caught in the dubious act of peeping, Masked Wonder couldn't say no to the magical girl in blue and so was compelled to spar with her until she collapsed from exhaustion.

The pajama girl made Masked Wonder polish up her character background and master the conduct of a superhero, trained her in battle, and also had her cast her magic on a variety of items in order to increase her magic's precision.

Konomi forgot her experiences in the dreams upon awakening. But it wasn't like they left her entirely. She remembered them in her body and in the depths of her heart. Somehow, she had come to understand what it was magical girls did. She would take care of drunks, clean up garbage, erase graffiti, and more.

Once, she pulled an empty can that hadn't been separated out of the garbage, held the can on her palm, and by making its elements lighter and heavier with exquisite balance and control, she instantly crushed it into a sphere less than an inch in diameter, in the blink of an eye. She tilted her head, having no memory of learning this skill, and tossed it into the unburnable trash.

The one point of dissatisfaction for her was the absence of an opponent. The heroes in those stories had striven toward a face-off with a nemesis, which didn't exist in the real world.

Once, just once, she'd had a chance at something like that. She'd found a high school student, probably on the way home from cram school, surrounded by a few nasty-looking youths who were jabbing him in the face. The boy, on the verge of tears, looked familiar to her. He was in Konomi's class.

First, Masked Wonder climbed on top of a telephone pole so she could jump down from it for a dramatic entrance. She didn't give the bullies a moment to react—in a split second, she'd knocked them all out with swift punches to the jaw, leaving the boy there standing dumbly as she promptly left the scene. She might have come off like a mugger or a random attacker, but in her head, she was doing a victory pose. Magical girls were supposed to avoid attention as much as possible, but they couldn't be worrying about that stuff when they had to save someone from an attack.

And then it was the following day. When she went to school as usual, she found a crowd in the classroom. In their center was that boy she'd saved the other day. It looked like he was telling everyone what had happened.

"I ran into this real freaky exhibitionist type."

*Freaky exhibitionist?*

"She showed up out of nowhere and then just ran off again."

"You're not really making sense, man."

"She was wearing this crazy getup. It was like, I can't believe you leave the house wearing that."

"So was she hot?"

"Oh...I don't remember. She had massive tits, and I was so busy looking at those, I never even noticed her face."

"What an idiot!" the boys laughed. "Ewww!" the girls tittered. As everyone else was laughing, Konomi inconspicuously returned to her seat.

*No! I'm not a pervert! No way!* She trembled with humiliation over how he'd

cut out the part about her saving him to make a joke about her unusual outfit. *I'm never going to save you again*, she declared in her head, and she spent the rest of the day angry.

"Well, that's not good." After hearing Masked Wonder's report, the dream teacher expressed her concern, frowning cutely with folded arms. "It might be best for magical girls to avoid being eroticized as much as possible."

"Personally, if I could avoid that, I would love to. The size of a superheroine's chest has nothing to do with anything," Masked Wonder replied, biting her lip. She was now quite familiar with the process of developing the character of her magical-girl form.

"But, well..."

The pajama girl stared intently at Masked Wonder's chest. She looked somehow longing.

"They're very noticeable."

"I can't do anything about that."

"Yeah...hmm..."

They brainstormed a bunch of ideas, like binding her chest with a wrap or changing her costume into something loose-fitting. But one particular idea struck them as the way to go. The pajama girl grinned, and Wonder clapped her hands.

"I am the Masked Wonder! A magical girl, the embodiment of justice and strength!" She struck a pose with her right hand raised above her head and her left bent across her chest, legs spread wide. The proud, cool, majestic, and very heroic pose would leave a deep impression on her audience, and best of all, she could restrain her boob-jiggle in an incredibly natural-looking way.

"I love it! Let's name your victory pose!"

"Now no one will call me juvenile names like *freaky exhibitionist* ever again!" Masked Wonder did the pose over and over. The last time, her chest jiggled just a little.

"You didn't bend your arm quite right on that last one."

“Hmph! I was careless.”

“You pay less attention when you’re happy about something, so watch out for that.” The girl clapped her hands together. “As long as you can be careful, I just know you can become the greatest magical girl.”

But then a sudden bout of dizziness made Masked Wonder wince, and her vision dimmed. She rubbed her eyes, but nothing changed. The girl before her and the clouds around her wavered and became blurry. “What...?”

“Now it’s time for me to say good-bye.”

“Huh...?”

“Do your best and keep up the good work.” Even her voice was growing distant.

“You still haven’t taught me everything!”

“I’m just sleepy... I’m feeling like I’ve gotten weaker...”

“That can’t be!”

“This kinda feels like a climactic final farewell, but I’ll be in the dream for a little while longer...probably...since I’m kind of like a dream myself now... If you’re ever in trouble again...then...call me in your dreams...”

Konomi woke up. Her right hand was grasping at something in the air. She blew out a breath and lowered her arm. When she rubbed her eyes, she found they were a little wet.

By the time Konomi was up, her parents were already out. *Oh yeah, they said they were leaving early.*

Exactly one year had passed since her cousin—that would be her parents’ niece—had died. This day was the memorial service for the anniversary of her death.

She had died of a sudden heart attack despite her young age. She and her family lived far away, so Konomi had only met her three or four times, but she recalled she’d been fairly shocked by her death.

Her name was...if she remembered it right...Nemu, from the Sanjou family.

“Well, anyway.”

As Konomi stuffed her cheeks with a sandwich for breakfast, she mused. She felt like she’d just had a really strange dream, but she couldn’t remember it at all. Just what kind of dream had it been?

## Meow-Meow @ N City

This story is set quite a while before *Magical Girl Raising Project: Restart*, just a little before the events of the first book, *Magical Girl Raising Project*.



“Whoa, magical girls! Awesomesauce!”

“It says you’re supposed to pick a name, huh? What’re you gonna choose?”

“All right, first up to bat is me, Himari Tanahashi! I will now close my eyes, and whatever letter I hit will go in my magical-girl naaame!”

“Oh man, Himari.”

“All right! Dooo eet, dooo eet! You could get ‘poop’ or ‘mosquito’!”

“Now then, let’s start the roulette! Ticka-ticka-ticka-ticka...click!”

“Whadja get? Whadja get?”

“Um...@?”

“Bwa-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Now you’ve done it! This girl has gone and done it!”

“Awesome as usual, Himari.”

“Then you go next, Micchii.”

“Uh...I’m passing it off to Masako.”

“Whoops, and Masako completely ignores the pass.”

“That’s dirty! Foul play! Why are you two forcing me to do all this? Come on!”

“I mean, that’s kinda your thing, eh, Himari?”

“Yeah, yeah, we’re doing this ‘cause we don’t wanna take your thing from you, Himari.”

“Aiyaaa! No fair! You cheata!”

“A cheetah? If I were that fast, we’d all have our names decided by now!”

“Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Cheetah? That one was lame, man. Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

Michiyo, Masako, and Himari were good friends, and all on the girls’ soccer team, so the class had titled them the “three stooges of the soccer club.” Each of them occupied different positions in the club—one was a reserve player, one had just barely made regular during the last tryouts, and one had been their ace attacker since first year. Still, they clicked when it came to getting excited and having a good time, regardless of their positions on the team or whether their

plays were any good.

They had so much fun together, they would quite literally laugh over anything, slapping each others' shoulders or holding their stomachs laughing. At school, club, or on weekends, they did everything as a group.

Himari, at least, had fun being with her two friends. It felt so fitting, like this was the way things should be. Even when their head coach yelled at her for missing a pass or when the heat made her unconsciously slow down while she was running laps and the coach scolded her for it, even when the teacher rebuked her for falling asleep in class, and even that one time in the first round of the national tournament when their opponents had made a comeback for a win, as long as the three of them were there, they could turn it into something to laugh about.

Perhaps the time they laughed the most was when all three were chosen as magical girls. They'd all acted so crazy and excited, you'd have thought they were drunk or high—Himari didn't have experience with either sensation, but she figured it was probably something like that—as they picked out names for themselves. And then, the mood did a one-eighty from the name-choosing, and they solemnly swore to help one another as much as possible on their test that would decide who would be an official magical girl, to make sure one of them would be chosen.

In the exam, Himari was chosen as the official magical girl, @Meow-Meow, while Michiyo and Masako had all their memories of magic erased and were sent back to their old lives...and then, on the way home from the exam, they were both killed in a traffic accident. Himari, who had stayed behind at the exam site to receive a lecture as an official magical girl, had avoided misfortune and was now left behind, alone.

Her memories of the event were vague. That had to be because she didn't want to remember any of it. Or perhaps she had been in a daze as it had all ended.

Himari passed the entrance exams to get into the school she'd been aiming for, too. She had friends. She had a decent enough relationship with her parents. She figured her life was going fine, more or less.

But still, when she remembered Michiko and Masako, something deep in her chest ached as if something were squeezing it. Whenever she kicked a soccer ball, whenever she made someone laugh, whenever she did magical-girl things, she couldn't help remembering the two of them.

Himari quit soccer. She would still laugh at other people's jokes, but she stopped trying to make them laugh herself. She stopped doing the voluntary part of her role as a magical girl, but the Magical Kingdom wasn't so considerate of her feelings.

Himari—@Meow-Meow—could use her magic to seal things away inside paper talismans. She couldn't do this to living things, but she could tuck any inanimate object into a slip of paper, regardless of its size. Her magic was ideal for transportation and delivery, so it was not unusual for the Magical Kingdom to summon her and command her to transport things for them.

Every time they contacted her for a job, she was afraid of remembering her dead friends and disappointed in herself for that fear.



It was around the time of year when New Year's and winter vacation had just ended, and the world was winding up again. Himari concealed her status as a magical girl by wearing a long coat over top of her costume, covering up her tail as well.

Starting early in the morning, she transferred from train to train to arrive at an ironworks in the Tokyo metropolitan area.

She had two jobs to complete that day. The first was to transport some materials from a factory in another prefecture. She was to ship magical machines and the parts for them, dangerous magical chemicals, magical heavy equipment, large magical containers, and other things that required time, money, and specialist expertise to transport.

"Oh, and sorry for adding extra work while you're at it, but can I ask you for one more thing?"

After Himari had sealed all the goods into her talismans, her client had approached her, hands pressed together. He wore worn-out work clothes, a

hard hat, worn work gloves, and muddy steel-toe boots. That, combined with his looks, his tone, and his gestures, made him look like just your typical blue-collar, middle-aged man. The residents and allies of the Magical Kingdom lived all over the place, pretending, like him, to be normal people.

“It’s this thing.”

The man jerked his gaze over to the cardboard box he carried in his right arm.

Himari was going to be carrying materials to a certain H City located on Japan’s coast. The man said he wanted her to deliver this cardboard box to N City, in the same prefecture.

“They’re holding a magical-girl exam right now over in N City. I hear it’s gonna be a little bit different than usual, so they’re introducing some experimental new magical phones. They’re saying they have some new functions, like the ability to download items and whatnot. So once you’ve delivered the materials, I’d like you to send this box to the examiner.”

“Well, I can...”

“Sorry. I owe you one.” The worker made a chagrined remark about how stingy the Magical Kingdom was, trying to skimp on shipping fees. Then he handed her a cardboard box full of dozens of magical phones and forced an envelope into her hands. “Get yourself a bite to eat.”

After parting ways with the worker, Himari discreetly checked the contents of the envelope to find two thousand-yen bills inside. She bought herself a to-go lunch at the station and worked her chopsticks as she watched the landscape outside the window flow by.



The great consolidation of four years earlier had made the port town of N City the largest municipality in the area. But though it may have been the largest, that was only on a regional level, so Himari’s impression as a visitor coming from the Tokyo suburbs on the limited express train was more like, *Ah, this is the country.*

Finishing up her delivery to H City, Himari sat rocking on the slow train to N City. Being on the train reminded her of field trips, and remembering field trips

made her think of Michiyo and Masako, whether she wanted to or not. They'd gone to Kyushu for one of their school trips. They'd sneaked out of their hotel at night to change into their swimsuits and go in the ocean, even though it was already winter. Even now, Himari clearly remembered the beauty of the night sky above the sea as they floated in the water.

Before long, she arrived at N City. Checking the map that had been sent to her magical phone, she headed toward Takanami Mountain.

"Welcome, welcome! Good of you to come, pon."

Near the summit of Takanami Mountain was a resort hotel that had seemingly been abandoned halfway through construction. A magical phone sat alone in the ruined lobby with a hologram projected above it. It was a sphere, divided into black on the right and white on the left, with butterfly-like wings growing from it.

Himari tilted her head. "I've met you somewhere before, haven't I?"

"Oh, no... I think this is the first time we've met, pon." The image claimed they'd never met. But Himari couldn't help feeling as if she'd seen it somewhere before. "Fav is mass-produced. So maybe you've met another mascot of the same type, pon?"

"Oh...maybe that's it."

The mascot character, Fav, boasted about how the new magical phone was far cuter and more functional than the old one. It seemed quite excited, despite its lack of facial expressions, as if the project were its personal pride. "All right, I'll tell you where all the magical girls are, so please handle distribution, pon."

"Huh?"

"If the master were here, I'd have her do it, but unfortunately, she isn't, pon. Fav can't carry things, and this is just the kind of task a kind magical girl would do for us, right, pon? The Magical Kingdom will pay for your train fare anyway, pon."

"Yeah..."

"Oh, and you can't tell the others about the exam. It won't be a surprise test if

they know it's coming. And if you're gonna have an exam, you've really got to make it a pop quiz."

"Yeah..."

Now she had more work.

So number one was on the roof of a love hotel, a magical girl who was literally a robot. Himari first thought the robot was a mascot character, but...

"I have heard about you. I am Magicaloid 44, magical girl. Greetings." Apparently, she was a magical girl.

And since she'd given Himari her name, Himari had to introduce herself, too. "Hi, I'm @Meow-Meow."

"'At'? That is a strange name."

Himari had ended up with that name as the result of an in-joke gone too far, and it was embarrassing to introduce herself to people. Every single time, people would remark on its strangeness, and more than once, people had snapped at her, saying she should take such a decision more seriously. And each time, Himari had no choice but to dodge the issue with a laugh, and then once she went home, she'd gloomily remember her two friends.

"Magicaloid is a cool name."

"A friend was the one to come up with it, though."

Himari had once had friends, too. She could just be herself and talk about anything with them. Now they were gone.

"You will be going to deliver these to the other magical girls as well, right, Meow-Meow?"

"That's right."

"Then you do not have to go to each individual girl to deliver the phones. Many of them hang out in groups, so you can visit them all at once. I will write them down for you, so please use it as a reference."

"Th-thank you."

"I will distribute phones to those who live in this neighborhood. Top Speed is

close by air, so I will take one to her. Also, Calamity Mary's place can be rather dangerous, so I will take one to her as well. Nemurin is also a special case, so you can let me handle her."

The mascot character had been quick to abuse her labor, but this magical girl was kind. Himari bowed her head again in thanks, and when she lifted her head, she saw an arm with a plastic-like feel extended before her.

"My fee is only one thousand yen. A bargain, right?"

After paying the thousand yen, Himari's next stop was an abandoned temple. There were four magical girls there.

"Hmph. So these are the new magical phones."

Though four were present, only one was actually talking. The other three seemed to be doing something outside. Ruler, the magical girl dressed like a princess, twisted her lips. "Why is the screen still heart-shaped? I thought I told Fav to make the design more functional."

"Oh, but I'm told they're higher grade. Like there's new functions now."

Though she wondered why she had to defend this phone when she was just the delivery girl, seeing Ruler's ill-tempered smile made her panic and think she had to justify this stuff.

"That much is obvious. But that's not the issue here."

Then the door banged open and the faces of the twin angels popped through. "Bad news! Tama fell into her own hole!" "We can't see the bottom, and we can't hear her voice, either!"

Ruler yelled, "That idiot!" and stormed out. Left alone and unable to take any more complaints, Himari slipped away out the back gate.

Her next delivery was atop an iron tower.

"Thanks."

"Thank you so much for coming all this way."

The knight and schoolgirl pair expressed their appreciation. They made a much better impression than the other magical girls Himari had met so far.

The knight-themed heroine with a large sword slung over her shoulder offered Himari a can of something to drink. “I just bought it from the vending machine over there, but you can have it, if you like.”

“Thank you very much. I will.” Himari felt like this was the first kindness she’d been shown since she came to this town. Breathing a sigh, she sipped the hot black tea.

The magical girl in the school uniform took her new magical phone in hand with excitement. “Wow, it’s so cute! The new ones are white!”

“It’ll fit your color scheme, Snow White.”

“It looks like they’ve added a bunch of new things, but...I don’t really understand them all.”

“You just have to get used to it, and you’ll get over that, right?”

“But it’ll be hard until I’m used to it.”

“The chat’s tomorrow, so you could ask someone then.”

They were charming, somehow. “Thanks for the tea. I appreciate the sentiment,” Himari said, and she left the can there.

The next spot was an abandoned supermarket.

“Thank you very much for coming all this way.” A nun-themed magical girl, Sister Nana, bowed her head deeply. “These are such wonderful magical phones.”

“Oh, no, it was nothing.”

“Hey, Nana.” Weiss Winterprison, a magical girl in a long coat and scarf, scowled when she saw the screens. Her old data should have been transferred to her new device. So had something gone wrong? “What is this?”

“Is something the matter?” Sister Nana looked at the screen Winterprison was pushing toward her, and she broke into a smile. She was as glad as Winterprison wasn’t. Himari got the feeling that siding with either would worsen things, so she just gave an elusive smile.

“Yes, that photo of you sleeping is one I took last week.”

“No, that’s not what I mean,” Winterprison said, her tone stiff.

“You mean the outfit? I simply couldn’t resist the urge to see you in a skirt, just once. You seemed to be fast asleep, so I slipped it on.”

Winterprison pressed her index finger to her forehead and practically moaned, “This is more than just a skirt... What kind of cosplay is this...?”

“I’ve been thinking for quite some time that it just had to look good on you. It’s Another Diuseia from *Cutie Healer Excellent*.”

Himari muttered, “I appreciate the sentiment” and began packing away her things by herself.

At last, she returned to the abandoned hotel on Takanami Mountain one more time.

“Thanks very much! Now we’ve got all the new magical phones distributed, pon.”

“Oh, it was no big deal.”

Fav spun around once, scattering golden powder. “Those new magical phones will bring the girls even closer together, pon.” The mascot seemed cheerful, as usual.

Right as Himari was leaving, she happened to look back. Watching the hologram, which even projected onto the dust in the air within the hotel, made her shiver for some reason. “But only one is chosen in the exam, right?”

“That’s right. What about it, pon?”

“Even if they get closer and become friends, all but one will lose their memories in the end, right?”

“That’s exactly what makes it meaningful, pon.”

Something was so close to welling up within her.

All of them had seemed close. Ruler’s group of four. Snow White and La Pucelle. Sister Nana and Weiss Winterprison. Those kids would be opposing one another.

They were just like Himari and her friends. Competing for the sole seat of

magical-girl-hood, friends becoming foes... Foes? They would be rivals at most, right? Plus, she knew they'd sworn to each other that they'd cooperate—

Something wanted to spill out from inside her, but even as it writhed in search of an exit, there was none. Himari took a long, hard look at Fav, and Fav looked back at her.

Himari left N City and headed home. She didn't buy a boxed lunch from the station for the train ride back. She just left the thousand-yen bill in the envelope and watched the scenery the whole time. All that flowed by were the dots of building lights and streetlights, and it wasn't as interesting as the daytime view, but she still turned her gaze outside.

Even as her eyes chased the images, she couldn't get the magical girls she'd met that day out of her head. They'd all been close. They'd been having fun, as far as she could tell. Seeing them had been like having a flashback of herself and her friends. Himari couldn't go back to that time anymore. Her friends were gone, and she was certain she'd never have another relationship like that ever again.

The next day, Himari handed in her notice of retirement and quit being a magical girl.



*How long has it been since I retired?*

*Magical Girl Raising Project* made Himari remember that she had once been @Meow-Meow.

The lost memories came back to her from the other side: the feel of her smooth skin, her bones, the flexibility of her muscles, her cheongsam-themed costume, and even how she had to pull her tail aside before she sat down. She still felt like she was forgetting something, but for now, she would leave that aside.

She knew the reason she had lost her memories—she had retired. She'd requested of the Magical Kingdom that she be allowed to quit, and surprisingly, the request had been accepted fairly quickly. All her memories of magic had been erased, and she'd lived her life not as @Meow-Meow, but as plain old

Himari Tanahashi.

She'd passed the entrance exams of her chosen school. She had friends. She had a decent enough relationship with her parents. She'd figured her life was going pretty all right.

But despite that, there had been times when she'd felt that something was missing. Sometimes, she would suddenly feel sad, like a hollow had opened up in her chest, and she hadn't been able to figure out what it was about.

"So this was what it was, huh?" Losing her identity as a magical girl had made her feel that emptiness in her heart.

Himari had questions about why she was being forced to participate in a game for magical girls when she had already retired, but thinking about it, she recalled that the Magical Kingdom could just be unreasonable sometimes.

Apparently, she was inside of a game.

It appeared to be reality, but that must have been the "Magical Trace System controls that feel just like real life!" and the "Amazing, ultrarealistic graphics!" in action making it look real. She didn't fully understand it, but she could get a vague grasp of it. Taking the laws of physics and twisting them, surpassing them, destroying them, mocking them, violating them: That was magic.

What she couldn't understand was how a retiree, Himari Tanahashi...or rather, @Meow-Meow, was being forced to participate in this "mobile game for magical girls" or whatever.

She looked up at the sky.

The southern sky she'd seen on that field trip had been deep and thick with layer upon layer—when it was crisp, dry, sunny, and blue; at night, with the stars spilled across it; and even when it had been cloudy.

*This* sky was flat and smooth, like a plank of wood. There was no depth. The sun had so little presence. And then there was that group of walking skeletons she'd just run into. They had been very gamelike. Plus, every single one of the messages on her magical phone had seemed like something from a game. The reward sums were unrealistic, too—were they really going to receive that? If they were, she had to admit she found that enticing. You always needed money

in life.

Himari headed for the town, figuring that for now, she'd do what the messages in her phone said. Her situation was baffling, but there was no other course for her to follow. Making full use of her magical-girl stamina, she ran around the vast wasteland for a while until she caught sight of a cluster of buildings—probably the town—and turned in that direction.

The “town” was in actuality less a cluster of buildings and more an assortment of dilapidated structures. The houses here were only slightly better than the abandoned high-rises that dotted the wasteland, the streets were empty of people, and the road surfaces were unpaved. Cautiously, Himari made her way through the town, figuring a monster might jump out at her from the shadows. Then she came out in a town square, or something similar. In its center was a dried-up fountain, and someone was sitting on its edge.

“Ohhh! You’re a magical girl, too?” The girl wore a bodysuit, as though she’d jumped out of a special-effects show. She was very pretty, she had said “too,” and they were in a mobile game for magical girls, so she had to be a magical girl herself. Her attire wasn’t exactly fitting, though. “Oh man, this is the first time I’ve met another one here!” The girl held her hand out for a shake, so @Meow-Meow smiled back at her vaguely and shook it. She seemed friendly.

@Meow-Meow was about to introduce herself when, suddenly, she remembered. Oh yeah. She’d picked her name as part of an in-joke, and it made her embarrassed to introduce herself. The “Meow-Meow” part was fine. The problem was the @ symbol.

As @Meow-Meow was wondering just how she was going to introduce herself, the magical girl in the bodysuit jabbed her right thumb at herself and enthusiastically made her introduction. “My name is Genopsyko Yumenoshima!”

*Genopsyko? Yumenoshima?*

Himari had not misheard that. The girl had clearly said “Genopsyko Yumenoshima.” Apparently, Genopsyko was her given name and Yumenoshima her surname. While Himari would hesitate to say this, it was a crazy name. Himari didn’t get the feeling it had been forced on her. She’d said it cheerfully

and eagerly when she'd introduced herself, not the slightest bit embarrassed or bashful. She seriously didn't mind.

Why had she ended up with a name like that? Was it a story similar to @Meow-Meow's? Or was it something completely different? Himari had so many questions.

Genopsyko grinned as she looked at @Meow-Meow. In that expression, Himari saw the two friends she'd once had. Would she be able to build the same kind of friendship she'd had with Michiyo and Masako with this girl? Could she decide such a thing so arbitrarily, based purely on the other girl's taste in names? The thoughts kept spinning around and around in her head. She thought and thought and thought...

*"I'll leave the rest to you," Michiyo muttered, facedown on the ground. She didn't even have the strength to lift her head. "Beating her up...is more your kinda job than mine, anyway, Himari..."*

*Michiyo was losing so much blood. It was too much. There was no way to save her now. Himari howled. Why did this have to happen to Michiyo? And Masako had no reason to die.*

*"Come on."*

*Someone was beckoning to Himari, a black, shadowlike silhouette, and she couldn't see what they looked like.*

*"If you'd like revenge for your friends, then now is your chance."*

Suddenly, the scene before Himari's eyes changed. She'd nearly fallen, somehow keeping herself upright by drawing her right leg back.

What had just happened? Had she just witnessed something from somewhere else?

It was unclear. Coming into the game, regaining her memories from before she retired...it was all so unclear.

Before her was another magical girl, smiling broadly. She'd said her name was Genopsyko Yumenoshima, hadn't she? It took Himari a few more seconds to realize the other girl was waiting for her to introduce herself.

Some kind of memory had come back to her—and it had probably been about Michiyo and Masako. She figured it had to be about them because of the way Genopsyko's bold grin was just like her friends'.

@Meow-Meow smiled. Maybe Genopsyko's smile had brought it out of her. Or maybe she was smiling to keep herself from giving in. Maybe it was to cover up how she was ready to burst into tears. She didn't really understand it herself, but she smiled anyway and pointed at her chest.

"My name...@Meow-Meow!"

## [Come Play with Top Speed](#)

This story is set just before the competition for candy in *Magical Girl Raising Project* begins.



Ayana Sakanagi was seven years old, in her first year of elementary school. And right now, she served a princess.

The princess was very important, so nobody was allowed to disobey her. One day, the princess said, “I’m sick of seeing nothing but your boring faces day after day. So to give my eyes something pleasant and beautiful, we’re going on a picnic to go see the fall leaves,” and not a single one of them could oppose her. Especially since she’d bookmarked the whole day for the event, bought a bunch of snacks for it, and was already getting excited about what to bring.

The two angels had grumbled about how going to see fall leaves was something old ladies did, but this was a first for Ayana. Basically, it was like a field trip, right? She was really looking forward to it. As she gazed at the night sky, praying the next day would be sunny, her magical phone rang. Wondering who was calling, she looked and saw it was from Tama.

“What?” Ayana answered.

“Huh? ...What’s going on, Swim?”

“What do you mean?”

“Where are you? Everyone’s already here.”

She didn’t understand what Tama was talking about.

“Ruler said we’re going to see the leaves today, right?” said Tama.

“...Isn’t that tomorrow?”

“Huh? It’s today. We’re meeting up at the souvenir shop at the bottom of Mount Meishou.”

Ayana hung up the phone. Had she made a big mistake?



Tsubame didn’t like the expression “I played around when I was young.”

You play around when you’re young *and* when you’re older, too. No matter how many years go by, whether you’re past forty or sixty or eighty, you relax and have fun. It doesn’t just end once you’re an adult.

To Tsubame Murota, “play” meant relaxing the heart, an approach to life that

was more than just working to eat and living for the sake of existing.

Tsubame's husband, Shouichi, who worked for the publicity department at city hall, hated that expression, too, but for different reasons.

"Basically, you're either making an excuse or you're bragging. As an excuse, it's like, *I did all that fooling around when I was young, and now I'm stuck like this. My life would be easier if I hadn't played around.* And if it's not that, then they're bragging. *I did fool around when I was young, but now I'm so mature. Amazing, right?* It's just a cue that they're going to launch into a story about how they turned out after wasting the period of prime opportunities to learn. *You're the only weirdo out there keen on wasting your whole life.*"

When Tsubame asked him if he spouted this ill-mannered argument at the workplace, he snorted with a *hmph* and replied, "I mean, it's true."

She wondered why she had ever married this man when she *should* have learned her lesson over and over, ever since he'd moved next door when she'd been in elementary school. She also found it baffling that this stubborn man had made her his wife. She could have sworn they'd both hated each other as kids. Tsubame had always seen him as her friend's nagging big brother, and from his perspective, she had to have been the little brat who was a bad influence on his sister. On more than one occasion, they'd directly butted heads. "Don't buy candy to stuff your face right after school," he would say, and she would fire back, "Don't talk like you're a big deal just 'cause you're seven years older, four-eyes."

But now, things were different. When Tsubame looked at her husband with his proudly twitching nose, he looked so adorable, she wanted to give him a big hug.

"Love makes ya crazy..."

"Hmm? Did you say something?"

"No, nothin'. By the way, are you gonna be late again tonight?"

"Yeah. I don't want to go drinking, but I can't say no." Shouichi always talked about how drinking with newspaper reporters and magazine writers was part of his job.

When Tsubame had first heard about this, she'd yelled, "City hall's colludin' with the media!" and he'd calmly and lazily replied, "Ohhh, Tsubame."

"I know I don't need to tell you this," Shouichi said, "but right now is an important time—"

"You're doin' some kinda promotional campaign, right? Or was there a regional mascot design contest taking applications from all over the country or somethin'? Our city's mascot is that thing, ain't it? The long, pointy guy that kinda looks like somethin' else?"

"That's not what I'm talking about. I mean your health." Shouichi looked at Tsubame's stomach with just the slightest smile on his face, one only those familiar with him would recognize.

Mildly embarrassed, Tsubame cleared her throat. "You don't need to remind me about that stuff. I just hafta take it easy, right?"

"Yeah, you just have to take it easy."

"Yeah, yeah. I know."

Shouichi looked ready to say something more, but she gave him a good-bye kiss and pushed him out the door.

He was worrying way too much over every little thing. It was obvious just how worried he was, because instead of going straight to drinking after work, he'd come all the way back home to check on her first. He told her his superiors teased him about being a newlywed, too, but he deserved that.

Her husband wasn't the only one. Everyone was acting like this. Tsubame's mother and the neighbors were all anxious about Tsubame and the baby in her stomach. Even the old shop owner at the deli where she worked, who had bitterly complained about her "rushing to make a goddamn baby at a busy time like this" had told her, "Listen, I'll put out a chair for you, so don't push yourself right now. You're not allowed." She had also made her promise to take maternity leave when she was close to the last month of her pregnancy. She was getting treated too well for just a service worker.

Everyone was so concerned about Tsubame, but she'd had practically no morning sickness, and she wasn't showing much at all. She could still get around

fine, but everyone was acting like she was deathly ill, with everyone telling her to stay still and not move around. This was her first baby, so she did have concerns and anxieties. Every time she heard stories about pain or difficulty, she thought, *I don't want that* and *I'm scared*. But the attempts to control her like this made her feel rebellious.

For Tsubame, the best kind of “play” at times like this was *Magical Girl Raising Project*. It was more thrilling than any other way she'd gotten her kicks before. It wasn't that clicking away on her smartphone was more fun than playing tag with police cars. What fascinated Tsubame was the mystical happenings the game had brought about.

After sending off her husband, Tsubame did the cleaning, laundry, and dishes; then, making full use of the skills she'd learned at the deli, she put together a boxed meal for her husband, as well as her own lunch. Toast, milk, and shredded cabbage with tomatoes and fried eggs would make a fine breakfast. Now she was free to do whatever she liked until the next afternoon.

She then pulled out her phone—not her normal smartphone, but her magical one with its characteristic heart-shaped screen. Now was not the time for the housewife, Tsubame Murota—it was time for the magical girl Top Speed. Humming, she pushed the buttons and transformed, acquiring a wide-brimmed pointy hat, a flying broomstick, a witch dress, and a black leather cape. Her full and glossy blond hair was gathered in a braid, her skin glowed, her face was gorgeous, and most of all, she was young.

There were rumors that the mobile game *Magical Girl Raising Project* could turn you into a real magical girl, and it had been about eight months earlier that it had made Tsubame one. Her first concern upon gaining her powers was that a magical girl couldn't be a married nineteen-year-old!

When Tsubame had been in high school, she'd been the leader of Empress, a gang that drove and partied around the Kitayado area of N City. Even back in middle school—no, as far back as elementary school—she'd hung out with kids of the same stripe. She'd been a so-called juvenile delinquent, and anime and manga hadn't been a part of her life at all. The main reason she'd tried out *Magical Girl Raising Project* was because it was free. But even then, she'd known that magical girls were elementary or middle school-age, or the age of

high schoolers at most.

After the rumors came true and Tsubame had gained magical-girl powers, the first thing she'd done was face the hologram that had introduced itself as "the mascot" with her hands pressed together. "I'm sorry, but could ya ask someone a little bit younger?"

"That's not an issue, pon. Well, if you look in the mirror, you'll understand, pon."

She checked her reflection, then went to the washroom to look at her whole figure in its full-length mirror. Finally, she gave a thumbs-up and called to the holographic mascot, "Good job!"

After that, she conceived, and she discovered that the pregnancy didn't carry over into transformation but that when she turned back, the baby was still safe. So in other words, as long as she was transformed, she could fly and jump around and it wouldn't affect the baby at all. After she confirmed that with Fav, she did a little fist pump. Now she could go all-out with her playtime: being a magical girl.

And that was how the magical girl Top Speed was born. Astride her broomstick, she sailed freely through the skies of Kitayado. Her flying broomstick could maneuver in all the ways a motorcycle couldn't and was far faster than any automobile.

"Okay, then. First, I'll give Ripple a shout..." But right when Top Speed was about to open up her messages, her phone rang.

*Has Ripple ever contacted me first?* she wondered. She thought back on every interaction since they'd first met, but no, Ripple hadn't, not even once. The number displayed on her screen was an unfamiliar one. "Magical girls wouldn't make prank calls, right? ...Hello?"

A pause, and then a voice said, "I want you to help me." It was a young woman.

"Huh? What was that?"

"I want you to help me. I want you to take me to Mount Meishou."

“Who are ya?”

“Swim Swim.”

Swim Swim. She’d heard that name before. She seemed to recall that one of Ruler’s lackeys had a name like that.

Top Speed figured if this girl was one of Ruler’s, then it’d be logical for her to ask for help from her boss. But she’d gone to the trouble of calling Top Speed instead, and they weren’t at all acquainted, so it must mean this favor was either something Ruler couldn’t do or something she didn’t want Ruler to know about.

She wasn’t gonna think too deeply about this. That was Tsubame’s style—Top Speed’s style.

Helping people out was the rule of this “game.” So she had to do just that. Top Speed had never helped out another magical girl before. How much candy would this get her? It had to be quite a bit.

“All right. I’ll come to you. Where are ya?”

“Nishimonzen...on the roof of the apartment building with a convenience store on the first floor.”

“Uh...oh, there, eh? Ya turn by the station at the scramble intersection and head a li’l way down?”

“Yeah, there.”

“All righty then, I’ll zoom right over. Hold on just a minute.” Top Speed opened her window, got on her broom and jumped out. She flew about fifteen feet through the air before she reconsidered. *Even if it’s the fifth floor, it’s a bad idea to leave the window open when ya go out, I bet.* Flustered, she went back to close the window, then thought, *But it’d be a bad idea not to lock up, right? I’ve heard some thieves’ll break into your apartment from the veranda.* So she changed her mind again and went back into apartment, locked the window shut, then came out the door to lock that as well before jumping out a window by the stairs.

Unlike back in her reckless youth, now that she’d become a wife in charge of a

household, unfortunately, she had to be careful about a lot of things.

The girl waiting for her atop the high-rise building wore a white school swimsuit. Pretty skin, smooth hair, and perfect facial features were the standard for magical girls, so she'd expected as much beforehand. What surprised Top Speed was the girl's fashion sense.

Her appearance was that of a girl around her second year of high school—and she was very well developed. She beat Top Speed in the volume, oomph, and plumpness of her breasts and rear. On the inside, Top Speed groaned over her stylistic choice to pair that body with a pure-white school swimsuit. Maybe she was trying to make something different by putting together two incongruous elements? It could be described as “chic,” “attention-grabbing,” or “a fashion statement.”

But despite her judgmental opinions, Top Speed had her own preferences when it came to her costume.

She was dressed to kill, what with her magical-girl version of the long jacket with “No Gratuitous Opinions” printed on the back, which she'd worn to indicate she was in a gang back in the day, charms for safety in transit and safe birth hanging from her neck, and her broomstick tastefully outfitted in biker-gang style. Her rebellious fashion sense made a silent statement: *Don't you take me for one of those stale old broom-riding witches, you numb-nuts.* The avatars in *Magical Girl Raising Project* were very customizable.

*This might just be the first time I've ever met a magical girl with similar fashion sense!* Top Speed was a bit excited as she lowered her broom and dismounted.

“Sup! Nice to meet ya! I'm Top Speed. Here to help.”

“Swim Swim.”

“Huh, that name's pretty tame. Oh, you've told me it before, though. So ya called me here today 'cause ya need somethin', right? You wanted me to take ya to the mountain?”

Swim Swim nodded, then began explaining the situation in a murmur.

She told Top Speed about the leaf-peeping picnic Ruler had arranged, and

that because of some misunderstanding or miscommunication, Swim Swim had gotten the day wrong. She'd really been looking forward to the trip, and she wanted to go. But even if she were to start heading for the mountain now, she might not make it in time, and she didn't know if she'd be able to meet up with the others or not. And Swim Swim couldn't defy Ruler's orders. She was the princess.

"I gotcha. So that's why ya called me up for help."

"Ruler said to use anything that can be used."

"Ha-ha-ha-ha! And you're gonna say that to a lady right before you use her, too? I thought we were gonna be friends! C'mon."

"Ruler said that leaders and followers have a relationship, but it's not as sloppy as friendship."

"Wah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!" Top Speed liked this girl's fashion sense and her blunt honesty, too. And while she was at it, she was fond of her perfectly unwavering personality.

Top Speed had a playful nature, so it followed that she needed a playmate. If someone asked for her help, she'd give it. That went double for someone she liked. It was how she got on in the world. "Okay. I'll take your request. Mount Meishou, right?"

"Uh-huh."

Top Speed pulled out her magical phone and sent a message to Ripple.

Empress had been a small gang—just five people; so small it barely counted as a gang—but they'd maintained their status as the fastest in N City up until their retirement. If you're going to race faster than anyone, you don't just need skills and a machine: You need to pick the right course, too. You intercepted radios, swapped info with other gangs, and picked roads that were good for racing. That attention to management was exactly what had made them the fastest.

Top Speed may have retired from active service to her gang, but she still did things the same way. She started with choosing the fastest route.

If she was going from Nishimonzen to Mount Meishou, then between them lay the Jounan district. That was Calamity Mary's territory. It wouldn't benefit anyone to step in there thoughtlessly and create problems that would bite her in the ass later.

Choosing to detour would be an amateur move. First, Top Speed called Ripple over. Just the other day, Ripple had walked out of a fight with Calamity Mary that had nearly become a battle to the death. Top Speed would have Ripple take a gift to Calamity Mary to apologize for that. Meanwhile, Top Speed and Swim Swim would pass through the Jounan district and cut toward Mount Meishou. This was a great plan, and it'd benefit everyone involved.

"Heya, Ripple?"

"...What?"

"Listen, I'd like you to go apologize to Calamity Mary."

With a click of her tongue, Ripple hung up. Top Speed panicked and dialed her again, but Ripple wouldn't answer. When Top Speed texted her after a thirty-second wait, she got a text in reply. The reply read, ...Tsk.

Glancing over to the side, she saw Swim Swim looking at her intently. Top Speed didn't know what to say.

After some thought about what she should do, Top Speed took her magical phone in hand once again to make a call. "Hey, Magicaloid? Yeah, it's me. Listen, I've got a request. Could ya give Calamity Mary a call? Yeah, I just need ya to distract her for a minute... Gotcha, I'll pay ya later. Five thousand? Come on, three thousand, tops... Yeah, okay, then four thousand. Sorry. Thanks. I owe ya."

Top Speed turned off her magical phone, tucked it into her pocket, flung a leg over her broom, and pointed to the back. "My plan's perfect! All right, we're jetting over to Mount Meishou! Don't fall!"

They rose upward. It felt like even her insides were floating up, too, which can be a confusing sensation if you're not used to it. Leaning forward, looking straight ahead through the windshield, Top Speed accelerated in a sudden burst. In the blink of an eye, the scenery around them was completely different.

The school, which had looked obnoxiously large when she'd been attending it, was now so small. She could hear the wind whooshing past her ears. She didn't even feel any air resistance. No matter how many times she experienced this, it always felt good.

"How 'bout that? Pretty great, huh?"

"It's fine."

Under Top Speed's control, the magical broomstick Rapid Swallow zoomed through the sky at supersonic speeds. Even a magical girl would get badly hurt if she were to fall from such a high-speed vehicle.

On the rear seat, Swim Swim was holding on to Top Speed tightly, and she was in no apparent danger of falling. The feeling of her pressing against Top Speed's back was overwhelmingly sensual.

"Maybe I shoulda made my avatar a little bigger..."

"...What was that?"

"Oh, just talkin' to myself. It's nothin'." Top Speed needed to think about the task at hand, here, not distractions.

Mount Meishou was big. Even with a magical girl's vision, if they were going to spend time looking for Ruler's group once they arrived at the mountain, they might not make it there before the picnic started. So Top Speed had to predict what course Ruler would take. Judging from her personality, Top Speed figured she'd just head for the highest spot. "They do say idiots smoke, and people in high places...like high places."

"Which one is Ruler?"

"Obviously, she's...she's in a stupidly high place."

Also, they might not be able to escape flak for arriving on Top Speed's broom. In fact, she'd bet Ruler would criticize them for it. She could easily imagine the other girl launching into a sarcastic diatribe. *"Oh, you must be such a VIP, if you're coming in late in your personal vehicle."*

Ruler was easy enough to handle, as long as you acted like she was the boss. So it would be best if Top Speed could give her a gift. She had a boxed lunch

with her, which she'd brought along when she'd left the house. Originally, she'd made it for her husband, but she'd sneaked it along with her. Right now, she had it hidden behind her windshield.

Top Speed knew it would taste good. She was a talented enough cook to bring just the barest smile to Ripple's surly cheeks. So it should be perfect for this outing, and it'd be sure to improve Ruler's mood.

"That'll mean no boxed lunch tomorrow, though," Top Speed muttered.

Swim Swim must have thought Top Speed was talking to her, as she replied, "I get lunch from the cafeteria."

"Cafeteria?"

"They serve it every day. I don't need a homemade lunch."

If she was somewhere that had cafeteria lunches, that had to mean either she worked at a school or she was going to school. And she had a hunch the magical girl behind her wasn't staff. "Do ya have a good guess of what'll be on your midterms?"



“What are midterms?”

She was in elementary school.

She had thought that Swim Swim had given some rather blockheaded answers to her questions, but now it all made sense. She kind of deplored a world in which an elementary schooler was spending her time playing a cell phone game, but it was free, so whatever. Besides, she had the feeling it was way more appropriate for an elementary schooler like Swim Swim to be a magical girl than a married and pregnant nineteen-year-old.

Top Speed adjusted her grip on her broom and addressed the girl behind her. “Ya just said you don’t need friends, right?”

“That’s what Ruler said.”

“You gotta have friends.”

If someone wanted to have fun, they needed people to hang out with. In the past, Top Speed had had her gang, and now she had Ripple and...her husband? Maybe her husband didn’t really count.

“Ruler said you don’t need friends.”

“That’s not true. Even Ruler’s got friends.”

“...Who?”

“A cute magical girl named Top Speed.” Top Speed grinned, but then quickly realized that Swim Swim couldn’t see it, being behind her. “Well, whatever. Just keep holdin’ on tight. We’re already at the mountain. We’ll find them quick enough.”

“If you’re Ruler’s friend, then—”

“I’ll prove it to ya soon enough. Don’t talk or you’ll bite your tongue.”

“So what are those charms?”

“You’re a kid with a lot of questions. Safe birth and safety in transit...I’m askin’ the gods for my baby to be born healthy, and to keep me from gettin’ into an accident.”

“You’re going to have a baby?”

“Yep.” She’d been keeping it a secret from Ripple because she’d been embarrassed, but now it just popped out of her mouth. Were her lips getting loose because she was talking to a kid?

Mount Meishou, which had been deep green all over through the summer, was now dyed in red, gold, and brown with only a few speckles of green remaining. Even when it was dark, a magical girl could still enjoy the foliage.

Anticipating the route Ruler would pick, Top Speed’s gaze moved to the area around the summit. This was up high, not on the normal hiking route, and steep enough that only a magical girl could climb it. Circling above the fall leaves, Top Speed stared hard and discovered a couple of figures floating gently in the air.

“Bingo!”

Glowing halos and angel wings. Those were the Peaky Angels. Top Speed couldn’t tell which was Minael and which was Yunael, but that didn’t matter.

“I told ya I’d find ‘em right away! This is what they call the *power of adulthood*,” Top Speed called back to the rear seat, and not even a moment later, they’d arrived at their goal. There were Minael and Yunael, eyes wide and looking toward them, while another gazed up at them, pointing arrogantly—that was Ruler. The dog-eared one yelping in surprise was Tama. It looked like they’d spread out a picnic blanket.

“What happened, Swim?” Tama asked.

“You’re not AWOL?” “Does AWOL mean skipping out?”

Ruler stood up, and thumped the ground with the end of her staff. “You’re late! Don’t be late, you big lug! And why is *she* with you, too?!”

“Why’d ya have to say it like that? Don’t be so mean!” Top Speed let Swim Swim down to the ground, then stepped off the broomstick herself. With a beaming smile, she put her hand on Ruler’s shoulder. “You and me have a rapport.”

“Hey. You. Don’t be so friendly and touchy with me.”

“But we *are* friends.”

“Who are you calling friends?!”

“Me and you. Oh yeah. I brought a boxed lunch, so let’s all chow down.” Top Speed offered her the lunch, and Tama and the Peaky Angels gathered excitedly. Red-faced, Ruler swung her staff around, but Top Speed didn’t really take her seriously, turning back to Swim Swim to give her a wink. The young girl didn’t react, but she probably got the message.

“All righty, then! It’s time to enjoy the fall leaves! We’re all pals here, so don’t be shy!”

# Akane and the Happy Magical-Girl Family

This story is set quite a while before the game in *Magical Girl Raising Project: Restart* begins.



The family meeting that day was a mess.

Messy though it was, however, it wasn't an argument. The table had been set with a hot plate and bubbling hot pot at dinner, and it was now entirely cold. One family member was resting her cheek on her hand as if she was bored, while another had her arms grumpily folded while she and the others prodded one another with issues they couldn't find solutions to.

Nobody wanted to compromise, so they couldn't solve the problem. And even knowing this, they still couldn't bring themselves to make concessions.

The eldest girl in the Fuwa household was Aoi, thirty-one years old. She worked as a clerk at a law office in a neighboring city. She was good at being solicitous and managing paperwork. Some even said the practice would fall apart without her.

The second girl in the Fuwa household was Asagi, twenty-five years old. She was a domestic helper. She could do just about anything better than most people, and her hobby was earning difficult-to-obtain qualifications and licenses. Her current favorite book was the compendium of laws and statutes.

The third girl in the Fuwa household was Akane, seventeen years old. She attended a high school in the city and captained a veteran kendo club with a history of making it to nationals. She was a long-standing first on the list of second-year students you didn't want to piss off.

The fourth girl in the Fuwa family was Ai, thirteen years old. She attended middle school in the city. She was the neighborhood mascot, known for her lovely face, adorable mannerisms, and charming behavior.

The head of the Fuwa household was their mother Ayako, fifty-two years old. She managed a construction company, having inherited it from her deceased husband. Her acumen was feared, and they said that when Ayako stepped into an auction, the atmosphere changed.

Akane was the only one facing forward, glaring hard at the tabletop. Aoi, Asagi, Ai, and Ayako were all looking off in different directions, refusing to meet her eyes. Nobody would give in.

Akane stood up and hit the table hard. "Eyes forward! Listen to me!"

This would cause a timid person to cringe and crumble, but the four didn't even twitch. Still leaning on her hand, Asagi muttered, "I'm listening."

"What? If you have something to say, Asagi, then say it loud and clear."

"I think you're probably right, Akane. But just because you're right doesn't mean we all have to do what you say, you know?"

Asagi was wearing her high school tracksuit like a slob, and Akane glared at her. "It's not about doing what I say! I'm just telling you to stop doing something that isn't right!" Her head whipped back and forth between the others, but none of them were looking at her. Even the middle-school-aged Ai had her feet up on the table, her attitude extremely insolent and insincere.

Akane smacked the table with her palm again.

"It's just not okay to use your magical-girl powers for your own selfish ends!"

This had all begun about five months earlier, at the end of the previous year... back when Akane had first received her powers.



Akane Fuwa was aware that people saw her as a serious and straitlaced person. And it made it easier in many ways to keep the kendo club together when that was the general perception of her, so she didn't correct them.

She didn't even know herself whether she was actually serious or straitlaced. Maybe it was just that her life would fall apart if she weren't, so she was pretending to act that way out of necessity.

All the other members of the Fuwa family were prone to being irresponsible. That was undoubtedly the case for the second-eldest, Asagi, who was completely lazy when it came to anything aside from her personal hobbies, and as well as for the eldest, Aoi, and their mother, Ayako. Those two would keep it together when they were outside the home, but once they were in the front door, they'd throw off their masks and decide that as long as they were having fun, anything goes. Akane couldn't help feeling that even the youngest of the four sisters, Ai, had definitely inherited those tendencies. If Akane let her guard down, Ai would be reading manga magazines during mealtimes.

They had always been like this, even when their father had been alive. Then

he had passed, and *someone* had to be the one to keep them in line, and the buck had been passed to Akane. She wasn't doing it because she wanted to. She was doing it because she just had to. It seemed the other family members didn't feel the same.

Akane had resigned herself to this: *Well, there's no way around it.* It wasn't as if being the responsible leader of the family was painful to her, and though she still wasn't quite sure if this was who she really was at heart, it was fine. It was rough coming back exhausted from her club to take charge at home, but it was thanks to the money her mother and Aoi earned for them that she was able to spend all that time with her club in the first place.

And so it had been the end of the previous year when Akane was scouted as a magical girl.

Musician of the Forest, Cranberry had come to observe the national tournament in search of talent, and apparently Akane's skills with the sword and the magical power hidden within her had caught her eye.

Frankly, Akane didn't really get the point. She didn't have a firm grasp on the idea of magical girls in the first place.

"It's not like being a mage?"

"It's a little different from that."

Akane's knowledge of how the world worked was shattered once she saw physical abilities that far surpassed human limits and magic that ignored the laws of physics. Though she managed to grasp that these fantastical beings existed, she couldn't quite get why you would call them "magical girls." Were they called that because they were girls who used magic? Why was it only girls? Why did they have to be girls?

"There's no need to think so deeply about it right now. You may come to know eventually, however." Cranberry smiled. It felt like she was laughing at Akane for being overly serious, and Akane was a little offended.

"Just think of us as heroes who help people from the shadows," said Cranberry.

"Yeah, yeah, they're cool and beautiful! The ultimate heroines, pon," Fav said,

as if he was trying to get her excited about this, but his words went in one ear and out the other.

Akane recalled the final round of the singles section in the national tournament. If she'd had the power to stand her ground, if her strikes had been even sharper, if her footwork had been even faster, then she might have been the one to win that match. She could have made a triumphant return, championship pennant in hand.

When Cranberry invited her to become a magical girl, Akane gave a silent nod.

But when she actually became a magical girl, she dropped the idea of using her powers in a tournament. As she already knew, she was so much stronger than normal humans. If pretransformation Akane Fuwa were to fight the magical girl Akane, not even a hundred billion of them together would stand a chance of winning. The difference between the two was just that great. Fighting a human using these powers would be unfair and immature.

Ultimately, Akane decided to simply patrol the city, as Cranberry had instructed her to do. She was extremely cautious to avoid being seen as she went around resolving small problems, just as regular Akane did at home. It was a little sad but also rather funny that she was still doing the same things even as such an extraordinary creature.

She'd been worried she'd end up with a garish embarrassment of a costume like Cranberry's, but those concerns vanished when she discovered her outfit was subdued, more-or-less traditional garb with a samurai motif. There were some decorative elements here and there, but to a tolerable degree. And on top of that, she was beautiful.

As Akane did her duties as a magical girl, she also polished her skills with magic and the sword. Her magic was a slice that could cut anything as long as it was within eyesight. It was a violent ability, but she could use it when someone was aiming at her from afar with a gun, for example. It would nullify the disadvantage of distance and allow her to slice her enemy's weapon and disarm them. You could say that was a legitimate, peaceful application of her powers.

When using this magic, Akane had to swing her sword. Swinging it faster improved the magic's strength and ease of use by a proportionate level.

There was a reason Akane wanted to strengthen her magical powers.

Cranberry had said that once they had enough magical girls, a selection exam would start, and only one would pass to be granted official status.

Part of what motivated her was that, if possible, she didn't want to lose this newfound power she'd only just discovered. But more than that, Akane loved to compete. Of course she was competitive about kendo, but she also took the same attitude toward athletic festivals and choir competitions and dragged her classmates along with her. She knew people sometimes found this irritating, but something about competitions lit a fire in her.

What's more, she would be competing with other magical girls who shared the same common-sense-defying powers. Just imagining it got her excited. Making herself even a little bit stronger for these as-yet-unseen rivals was only the polite thing to do. Of course, strength alone surely wouldn't be enough to make her an official magical girl, but it was bound to help. These were her thoughts as she continued her magical training along with school, her club, family, and hero work. Even though she just practiced the same things she did at club and on her own, so much was different as a magical girl: the movements of her muscles, the speed of her thoughts, the weight she could bear, the keenness of her five senses, and everything else. The heft and feel of a real sword was completely different from that of a bamboo or wooden sword. She had to get used to each and every one of these things.

Each day was fulfilling as she sensed her own progress. But then suddenly, it all came to an end.

Magical-girl work was done at night. Akane could vanish into the darkness and act clandestinely, and she could also leave the house without her family discovering her. She would sneak out, do her business, and then sneak back home. With the physical capabilities of a magical girl, it was easy enough to go in and out of the window of her second-floor bedroom.

That day, Akane came in through the window as usual and was about to detransform when suddenly, her ears pricked up. She could hear voices. It was past three in the morning. Her whole family should have been asleep.

She focused her hearing. Yes, she could hear people talking. There was a

young woman...a girlish voice. It wasn't from a TV or radio. It was someone physically present. And what's more, it was unfamiliar. It didn't sound like any member of her family.

The word "thief" passed through her mind.

She could hear the voice coming from the kitchen. It was no louder than a murmur, but you couldn't fool a magical girl's ears. Walking with her feet never leaving the ground, as she'd been trained in kendo, Akane maintained perfect silence as she slipped down the hallway and descended the stairs, step after step, making her way soundlessly along. The closer she got to the kitchen, the louder the voices got.

Someone was conversing with someone...two of them? Three? Four?

"At the next flower race..."

"Even if she did say that..."

"Cranberry will..."

*Cranberry?*

"...have to tell...but even if Akane..."

Orange light was seeping out from under the kitchen door. Akane closed the last distance in a burst of three steps and smacked open the door. Four girls were sitting around the table in a huddle. The faces that turned toward her in surprise were entirely unfamiliar to her. But she did understand that something was happening.

Not trying to hide her irritation, Akane glared at the startled quartet. "Will you tell me what's going on?"



"It's not as if your sisters and I were trying to hide anything."

"Yeah, yeah. It's not like we were trying to hide stuff. We just never found the right time."

"It's not like we were trying to shun you or anything."

"We just figured you'd get mad if we told you, y'know?"

“Come on, Asagi, don’t say it like that.”

“Enough! Just be quiet a second.”

Akane scanned the four faces as they obediently closed their mouths. Between their frilly, fancy costumes, their flawless faces, and their well-proportioned figures, they were all unquestionably magical girls. Except for their conversation, which was par for the course for her normal old family. Akane felt she was going to lose her mind. Perhaps the madness had already begun. So was she the crazy one? Or was it her family? Or was it both?

“Could you just undo your transformations now? With you guys like this, I won’t know who’s who.” All of them, including Akane, detransformed. Now, finally, their dinner table was back to normal. “Huh? Mom? You were the one with the shortest skirt?”

“Come on. What’s the problem? I *look* young, anyway.”

“Wearing that getup, at your age...”

“I’m in my twenties, so I’m still okay, right?” Asagi interjected.

“No, you’re definitely out, too, Asagi. I’m in middle school, so it’s allowed for me, though,” Ai said.

“These days, you still count as a girl in your thirties, you know,” Aoi commented.

“I think it’s fine to be a girl, even in your fifties,” their mother added.

Akane wanted to hold her head in her hands.

She wasn’t the only one to get powers. The whole family—the eldest, Aoi; the second child, Asagi; the youngest, Ai; and their mother, Ayako—had all become magical girls. Akane looked completely different when she transformed, but if the whole family had turned into beautiful girls—the older three of whom who were definitely way too old for the title—the world must have gone mad.

Apparently, Cranberry had scouted them not long after Akane. They said that once Akane had caught Cranberry’s eye as a promising candidate and become a magical girl at her behest, Cranberry had gone to check on Akane’s family as an examiner, only to find out that all of them had the potential to be magical girls.

“The Musician seemed surprised, too. She said it’s common for magical potential to be genetic, but it’s rare for a whole family to have it.”

“So if it’s genetic, then doesn’t that mean you can take the credit for this, Mom?”

“Or grandma or great-grandma.”

Having become magical girls, the four said that while they’d been considering whether to tell Akane, they had been continuing their magical-girl activities.

“But this is convenient, eh? We don’t need to detransform,” Aoi said.

“You were gonna keep all this to yourself, Akane?! That’s not fair!” Ai complained.

“She’s always been like that,” Aoi said.

At this point, Akane wanted to hold her head in her hands, but this was when the *real* headache began.

Their mother, Ayako, said that young men would hit on her and fawn over her when she walked down the street at night. “Relax, I never crossed that line.”

The eldest, Aoi, said she’d joined up with some street musicians to sing and dance. “Back when I was in kindergarten, my dream was to become an idol, you know.”

The second-eldest, Asagi, said she’d been holed up at home studying to pass some test. “I love not having to sleep.”

The youngest, Ai, said she’d been going deep into the woods to fire powerful light beams all over the place and zap boulders and stuff. “Beams are awesome. I’ve heard it said that nobody who can shoot a beam out of their body can be a bad person, and it’s true, you know. You remember this, too, Akane. Beams are awesome.”

Akane’s head hurt. Her mother and Aoi were clearly both using their powers for ill. It sounded like Asagi wasn’t causing trouble for others but was basically just hogging her powers for herself. Ai was using the quiet forest for her own stress relief, destroying the environment. They were all up to no good.

“Why are you doing this? Didn’t Cranberry tell us that magical girls are

supposed to help people?”

“But, well, only one of us can become a magical girl, right?” Ai pointed out.

“And aside from the one person who passes the exam, we’ll all have our memories wiped, too, right?” said Asagi.

“So it would be a waste not to do the things we want to do before our memories get erased,” said their mother.

“It would!” Aoi agreed.

Now that things had come to this, Akane was helpless. She could yell and curse, but none of the others would concede or bend. They’d just keep doing whatever they wanted. The emergency family meeting that day ended without any resolution.



Akane understood there was a balance of power within the family. When she wanted to make someone listen to her, she just had to find one other family member (or members, depending on the situation) to convince that person or negotiate with her. But now it was four against one. No matter how she tried to convince them to bring their unbridled antics to a halt, they were unlikely to comply.

Could she threaten them by boycotting house chores? She got the feeling that if it was magical-girl stuff versus chores, they’d choose the magical-girl stuff. And since every member of their family could pull off anything if she put her mind to it, Akane figured they’d just get the chores done perfectly anyway, Akane would be the only one suffering, and that would be that.

She thought about reporting it to Cranberry, but that would be like snitching on her own family, and that pricked her conscience. But still, so did doing nothing.

At the very least, once the exam was over, these irresponsible magical girls would obviously not be the ones appointed, so their greedy magical-girl lifestyles would end then. But Akane didn’t know when the selection exam was starting. If they got up to something even more outrageous before then, Akane might not be able to patch it up.

*How can they be magical girls when they act like that?* Akane wondered, but she didn't know any more about the topic than they did. Was she getting the wrong idea, up here on her high horse as an ignorant person herself?

As Akane wore herself out worrying over these things, five days passed. Perhaps she wasn't straitlaced but simply indecisive. She failed to come to any conclusions and was ready just to wait it out, hoping the exam would begin soon when—

"Captain!"

Startled by the sharp yell, Akane's head jerked up. One of her club members, a first year, was bent over, looking down at Akane.

"What's wrong? You're zoning out."

"Oh...it's nothing, really."

The sound of smacking *shinai* and attack yells resounded through the dojo. Though it was Sunday, a high proportion of members were present. Was this the fruit of her leadership? Or were they just afraid of her?

It was embarrassing that Akane was the only one taking a break to think about things when the rest of the club was so into their training. Flustered, she took a towel and rubbed her face vigorously to hide her reddening cheeks.

"Oh, I know. Were you thinking about the flower race today? It's gotten nice and sunny, huh?"

"The flower race? Oh, so that was today, huh?"

"I heard the track club's taking a break from practice, and they're all going. None of the kendo club members are flaky like that, though."

Akane casually nodded back at the proud-looking first year and slung her hand towel over her shoulder.

Every year, during flower festival season, the nearby women's temple held an event called the "flower race." They'd hijacked a tradition of young nuns traveling the dangerous, difficult path from a distant head temple to deliver talismans of gratitude and turned it into an event where women would deliver paper talismans from the temple's gate to its main building.

You would pay a participation fee to receive a talisman and deliver it to the main temple. In theory, it was a sedate little walk, but rumor had it that whoever delivered their talisman first would have their wish granted, so the event had come to attract athletic women who prided themselves on their strong legs. Participants would gather from both the local area and from outside the prefecture. These days it was a major affair, with people jostling against one another and local police and security on the scene, too.

*Oh yeah, now that she mentions it, I just realized I wasn't hearing the track club yelling over on the field. I'm impressed they're heading out to such a crowded event,* thought Akane, disinterested.

And then suddenly, the thought hit her. *Wait... I've heard the term "flower race" somewhere recently. Wasn't it when...?*

"Ahh!" Automatically, she stood up.

That was it. In the kitchen, her mother and sisters had been talking about something. She could swear the words "flower race" had been a part of the murmuring she'd overheard.

Akane had forbidden herself from using her magical-girl powers against normal people. But had those four made the same vow?

*"If we turned into magical girls and participated in the flower competition, we'd make an easy win, don't you think?"* she could imagine Aoi saying.

*"Oh! That's a good idea!"* Asagi would agree.

*"Ai's gonna do it, too!"*

And their mother would be like, *"I've always wanted to run at the head of the flower race just once, too."*

Akane had a feeling they'd be just that casual about joining the event.

She imagined the voices of various flower-race competitors:

*"I'm gunning for first in the flower race to cheer up my sick mom."*

*"I've trained all year for today. This time, I'll win first place."*

*"I've come all the way from Tokyo! This is my first time in the race, but I'm*

*gonna do my best!”*

Or so the participants would say, and then *they* would transform into magical girls and trample all over their feelings. Who was “they”? Akane’s family!

Akane had to stop them. She was the only one who could. The clock in the dojo read five minutes to eleven. If she remembered right, the flower competition started at eleven sharp. Even if she started running now, she probably wouldn’t make it.

*But!*

“I’m going to go get some air. You handle the rest.”

Akane left behind her startled club members and ran. Her gear and *hakama* were in the way, so as soon as she left the dojo, she transformed into her magical-girl form and raced up the stairs as fast as the wind, slicing the door lock in two with a single swipe to come out onto the roof. The direction was north-northwest. Tall buildings were in the way, preventing her from seeing the temple gates.

It was the middle of the day, and the chances that someone would see her were high. She might well be infringing upon what Cranberry had told her was the law of magical girls: Avoid attention as much as possible. But she didn’t have the time to worry about that now. If she wanted to avoid being seen, she’d just have to move so fast no human would notice her.

Running, Akane lifted the hem of her *hakama* and leaped.

People saw her as the straitlaced type, but she wasn’t actually, Akane thought. The only reason she was club captain was because she had a knack for bossing others around, and she just acted the way she did with her family because everything would fall apart if someone didn’t take things seriously.

She was quick to get fired up about things. She was competitive. If she’d grown up in a different situation, she might have turned into a mad gambler.

No, she was not straitlaced. But still, there was one thing she couldn’t surrender: her sense of responsibility. Maintaining this sense was what allowed her to be who she was. It was precisely because she loved kendo that she felt responsible toward it. And being a magical girl...she couldn’t yet say she loved

that, but she did love her family. They might cause her trouble, but she would never hate them for it. And it was her love for them that made her feel responsible for them.

Akane raced up the wall of a high-rise building to the roof. She'd come about two and a half miles from her school to this building, and from this building to the temple gates was about two more miles. But even from this distance, with her magical-girl eyes, she could pick out the people there.

There was a crowd. Big cameras that probably belonged to the media were present, too.

She could predict what they would do. They'd avoid drawing attention to themselves before the race started. Springing from the very back up to the front would be the most appealing option, and with the physical capabilities of magical girls, it would be possible.

The position of the cameras was important, too. Where would they look the best when they burst ahead of the pack?

*Found them!*

Away from the crowds, in the shadow of a pine tree. The pine needles were getting in the way, but that fancy, frilly sleeve was the very one Akane had seen the other day. It was mixed up in a group of other eccentric costumes. Her older sister was there, among the cosplay runners that joined the race every year. To her right was their mother, and then her other older sister, and then her little sister. She'd pinned down their positions. This contest would be over in a second.

With her right hand, Akane slid her blade past the catch at the mouth of the sheath, slowly drawing it. The fingertips of her left hand drew her *wakizashi*, too. She'd never tested a two-sword style in kendo practice. And she'd be sure to stop any club member who tried it.

But as a magical girl...

Her bangs swayed. She blew them away from her face. Swinging her *wakizashi*, she cut the pine needles. And then, before anyone could notice the scatter of pine needles fluttering down, with her right arm, she swung her

katana.

Magical-girl powers were not for hurting people. Of course, they weren't for hurting her family, either. What Akane aimed for was the paper talismans the four of them held. Without those, they couldn't win any rank in the race. She sliced right, left, right, aiming for the talismans only. *I'll go pay my respects at the temple and bring an offering, so please give me no divine retribution for this.*

A heartbeat, and then her bangs dropped again. At the temple, about two miles away, the talismans the four held scattered into bits and pieces, fluttering to the ground, which was still patchy with lingering snow. She couldn't hear their voices, but she could see they were yelling and wailing. Eventually, their mother looked toward her and pointed, and all four of them looked up at Akane with expressions that said, *"She got us!"*



Akane lifted her sword to study her face reflected in the blade. Under the beautiful, clear-blue sky, the look on her face said, “*Gotcha!*” When had she last worn an expression like this? Not since Halloween last year? Maybe April Fool’s. She’d always been the one getting got, so she hadn’t felt this great in a long time.

She sheathed her katana and *wakizashi* with a *click, click*, imitating a certain actor she’d once seen in a period drama. She was already thinking about what she’d do when she got home. *Once I’m back, how am I going to lecture them?* she wondered.

# **Knight on the Day of the Offline Meetup**

This story is set a few months before the competition for magical candy in  
*Magical Girl Raising Project* begins.



An *off-kai*. An offline meetup.

A gathering where people who knew one another through online chat, message boards, or MMORPGs eat, drink, sing, chat, and hang out in real life.

He'd thought about going to a meetup more than just once or twice. Souta Kishibe had a secret love of magical girls, so the chat board on the general fan site was the one place where he could loudly proclaim his love for them.

The general magical-girl site Magi-magi Cal-cal covered media from every possible source on the topic, and it had a message board boasting the largest number of posts not only among magical-girl sites but among all anime sites, as well as a great variety of threads.

He knew all the regulars on this message board, as well as who liked which shows, which characters, and which sorts of stories. Sometimes they'd fight over the theories behind the works; other times they'd debate interpretations, pore over magical-girl history, or talk about their passions to make one another into better fans.

Every time a meetup was planned and then actually happened, Souta would read the reports with a sober eye: *Hmph! Well, aren't they cozy?* Sometimes he'd think, *If they want to talk, they could just do it in chat or on the message board.* But at the same time, he'd also think, *Aw, they look like they're having fun or If I'd been there, I wonder what we would have talked about.*

Souta had signed copies of the first-edition *Cutie Healer* manga. He had the gold version of the PlayStation edition of *Star Queen*. He had the *Hiyoko* transformation set, which had quickly ended up recalled due to numerous people getting their fingers stuck in the joint parts.

Only people who shared his interests would understand the value of these rare items, and he wanted to brag about them. In his real life, he didn't have anyone he could even admit it to, never mind bragging.

Souta was in his second year of middle school. This was the age when kids were most concerned about image. The whirlpool of values he lived among told him nothing was worse than being uncool. To make it worse, Souta was in the soccer club. He had always been a jock. And the current captain of the soccer

club in particular was the hard-line jock type who would mock indoor types at every chance with comments like, “Why’s the glasses count in the science club so high?” And these days, the whole soccer club had basically become like that. Souta just went with the flow and basically ignored it, but he didn’t even want to think about what would happen if they found out he liked magical girls.

Some of the guys in the club liked anime and manga. But even those *otaku* boys weren’t purely devoted to magical girls like Souta was. The eyes of the world would surely be kinder if he were into *shounen* manga and similar interests. But not with this. The world would only perceive him as a creep panting over underage animated girls.

To Souta Kishibe, being exposed as a magical-girl fan was basically social suicide. He absolutely could not let this secret get out.

This was the first reason he couldn’t go to any meetups. If he went, someone he knew could see him and ask, “Huh? Kishibe? What’re you doing here? What kind of meetup is this?” And if he failed to come up with a good lie, from the next day forward, he could be sure there would be no place for him at school.

There was one more reason. On the site, Souta had lied about his sex. He was a so-called G.I.R.L.—Guy In Real Life.

He wasn’t trying to catfish anyone, and it wasn’t like he had any twisted desires, as far as he could tell. He’d just settled down into the position without even realizing it, and at some point, he was pegged as a woman, and everyone had ended up calling him “sis.” Maybe it was because of his user name, “Magical Girly.”

Souta had heard plenty of funny stories about a girl meeting someone at a meetup and finding out it was a middle-aged man, but he’d never imagined that person being himself. He was not bold enough to join in with a laugh: “*Well, I’m actually a boy in middle school.*” He was actually on the sensitive side, in his pubescent way.

In real life, he hid his interests, and on the Internet, he couldn’t talk freely about everything. He walked the path of a lonely fan. And it was at that stage, six months earlier, when Souta had encountered the mobile game *Magical Girl Raising Project*. He had become a real magical girl about two weeks ago.

There had been rumors about the game, saying that people who played it could acquire real magical powers.

However, Souta hadn't been playing the game with that expectation in mind. Since he wasn't a girl, even if he were to get magical powers, he'd look like a total disgrace. He could predict just how it would go by imagining himself cosplaying as Cutie Healer or Star Queen. Enjoying a game was one thing, but becoming a real magical girl—or in this case, a magical boy—was just not an option. Souta just had a pure interest in enjoying the game. As a fan, designing his ideal magical girl had to be fun.

But then he'd done it. He became a magical girl.

"Um, I can't do this. I do like magical girls. But it's not like I want to be one myself."

"Well, that's a problem for us, pon. A boy magical girl is such a rare find."

"It's not a *rare find*. There's no demand for it!"

"There certainly is, pon."

"No, there's not."

"Oh, there is, pon."

"No, no!"

"This is getting annoying, so could you just look in the mirror, pon?"

"Gross."

"How can you be so stubborn about this when you readily accepted that magical girls are real, pon?"

"I mean, they *are* real. They actually exist."

"Hey, do you get a lot of people telling you that you don't listen, pon? I mean, notice your own voice already."

After that, Fav made a dedicated attempt to persuade him, and Souta did look in the mirror, find out about his magical powers, and conduct his own examination to confirm that he had actually become a girl. And so Souta Kishibe accepted the identity of the magical girl La Pucelle.

Magical girls. Ever since kindergarten—when Souta had first watched an anime about them with his childhood friend—they had captivated him with their big dreams, mysterious magic, hard work to make people happy, and sometimes, battles against evil. Now he had become one.

For his first week as a magical girl, he was incredibly busy. He was only using his spare time to help people, so he couldn't be *that* busy, but he just wasn't used to it. All the various tasks he had to do, like networking with senior magical girls and keeping his identity hidden as he helped people, were mentally exhausting.

However, after that week, he started getting the hang of it. It became part of his daily routine to sneak out of his bedroom window at night to go search the town for people in trouble, help them out, earn candy, and then return in the morning.

When you get used to things, you gain some extra time. And once you've got extra time, you end up thinking too much.

Souta had believed a boy like him could never become a magical girl, so he'd been wildly overjoyed to become one, but with some time, that had cooled down a bit. Now that he'd regained some calm, he thought that perhaps he could use this power for ill.

The first thing that came to his mind was *I could be a robber and absolutely never get caught*. But then he panicked and erased that thought. It wasn't like such a thing had never happened in slapstick magical-girl gag manga, but for a real heroine, engaging in criminal activity was inexcusable. In the *Cutie Healer* series, Dark Cutie had once attacked a bank, but that had ultimately been the act of a villain. There was another one called *Baby Crown*, which featured a phantom thief who stole things with magic, but that was a different character type from the pure, noble knight La Pucelle.

Having reached the conclusion that theft was bad, the next thing Souta thought about as he lay in bed was *If I transform, I could get into the women's bath*. And then he felt ashamed of his own pettiness for coming up with that idea. But even as he was ashamed, he took that thought one step further.

If he were to transform...then couldn't he go to an offline meetup?

There were two reasons he hadn't been able to go before: One, if someone he knew happened to see him, he'd be in trouble, and two, he'd been lying about his sex online. But both of those problems would be solved by transforming into La Pucelle, right? He might be able to go to a meetup just like he'd always wanted.

With that thought, he looked at La Pucelle's figure, reflected in the mirror. She had horns. That was a problem. Normal people didn't have those. She also had a tail. Another wrench in the works. As he had tweaked things here and there in creating his ideal avatar, he had added dragon-like elements to a plain knight, resulting in this.

But if he could hide these two things, couldn't he go to the meetup?

Souta detransformed and booted up his computer. The next one would already have been scheduled. He checked the date and time of the upcoming event in the meetup thread on Magi-magi Cal-cal. It was exactly one week away. Sunday. It would be at a family restaurant in the city. The plan was apparently to go to the restaurant in the afternoon and then head off to a second and then third location in the evening.

*I...I wanna go...*

Thinking about how he might be able to do it really made him want to join in. He wanted to talk about magical girls. He wanted to chat. He wanted to argue pet theories with the others. He wanted to brag. Oh, and he'd heard that the last time, they had planned some kind of magical-girl niche trivia tournament. How far could he go with his knowledge? Even if he couldn't win, he could rank pretty high up there, couldn't he?

He couldn't even sit still thinking about all this. Before he knew it, he'd sneaked in a message on the meetup thread, saying he wanted to go.

*So Magical Girly is coming. First time?*

*I'm glad Magical Girly's coming.*

Souta got these kinds of comments in response to his declaration he would go. There was no backing out now. He had no choice but to steel himself and go to the meetup.

He would transform into La Pucelle, take off his magical-girl costume, change clothes, and pretend to be your everyday, average girl, then head out to the meetup. That was the strategy he had come up with.

The horns and tail would be in the way, so he would hide them.

*I can just hide the horns under a knit cap...* Or so he'd thought, but they turned out to be longer than he'd figured and poked right through. A cap was no good. He needed a real hat—one that was as tall as possible, too. Then he could hide the horns.

Souta looked. He didn't have anything like that.

He could borrow one, but there was no one for him to borrow it from. None of his friends or acquaintances were the fashionable types who would have a lot of hats. And since he was an only child, he had no siblings to lend him anything, and he couldn't count on his mom or dad, either. If he asked any of the girls in his class or that girl who was his childhood friend, "*Hey, can I borrow a hat?*" they might treat him like a pervert. Sister Nana, the senior magical girl he knew, might have a hat like that, but still, how could he ask her for one? If he were to tell her he wanted it to hide his horns, he'd obviously be forced to admit his reason for hiding them. His pure and noble image as a knight would crumble, and Sister Nana would feel sorry for him, mock him, or condescend to him, and he didn't want any of those reactions.

He could wrap a towel around them like a turban? Or harden his hair with wax to hide the horns? Or wear a veil like Sister Nana's? None of these ideas really felt quite right.

Should he give up on the meetup? But he had a feeling that if he bailed now, he'd never be able to go to another for the rest of his life.

Souta opened up his short wallet and pulled out the cash card tucked inside. On that card was money for a new pair of soccer cleats. He'd scrimped and saved for this, tucking it away slowly, bit by bit, from his allowance, from New Year's money, and from the little extra his mom gave him when she got him to go shopping for her.

Souta looked at the card. Now he was standing at a crossroads.

Down one path was magical girls. Down the other was soccer. Both of these things occupied important positions in Souta's life. But he had to choose. He couldn't pick both. He didn't have enough savings for that right now.



Souta chose magical girls.

Soccer was important to him. He still hadn't abandoned his dream of becoming a pro and playing in Europe. But at the current point in time, he was already a pro magical girl. So he should prioritize that...probably.

He used a seasonal discount ticket to connect between limited express trains until he reached Tokyo Station, which was so big, it made his head spin. Multiple times, he had to ask a station employee about which platform to go to, and after a number of stops, he arrived at his goal. He was wearing a hat called a "cloche," which hung down over his whole head to cover his horns, and he could pull it down to hide everything above his eyes. The shape of his lower body he concealed with an ankle-length skirt that flared out. This kept his tail under wraps.

He'd bought all these things from the neighborhood department store, so there was no helping the overall cheap-looking aesthetic, but it did work more or less. Underwear was the one thing he just couldn't bring himself to buy, so he used La Pucelle's costume as is for that.

He'd come from his house to Tokyo in this outfit. He wanted to believe that the occasional glances he got were not because he looked weird. He was pretty sure there were only a few minor things about him that were off—like the mismatched look with his sneakers and travel backpack, and how the size of the sneakers was a bit wrong, making him walk sort of funny.

*Maybe I should have gotten changed somewhere after all.*

He'd thought about going into some bathroom to get changed, but it would be weird if Souta Kishibe were to go into the bathroom and then come out as La Pucelle. He was sure the best way to do it was to wait for the moment when both his parents were out of the house, transform, and then sneak out so that no one would see him.

Such worries had plagued Souta on the way as he was rocked on the train, but when he arrived at the family restaurant that was the venue for the meetup, he found a number of people who looked like they'd come for the event had arrived and were chatting pleasantly. He recognized the words they were using.

When he approached the group, they all suddenly went quiet and looked at La Pucelle. Nervous, he bowed his head. "Um, is this the meetup?"

"Yes, it is."

"Nice to meet you. I'm Magical Girly."

"Oh, you're Magical Girly?"

"Wow, you're just like I imagined! You startled me!"

"You've got such nice skin!"

The welcome made him breathe a sigh of relief. He shuffled to a seat among the group and sat down. If the captain of his soccer club had been there, he would have said of the crowd, "*The glasses count here is way too high!*" But they were the people Souta most wanted to see right then. This family restaurant was no different from the branch in his hometown, and their corner of it had become a gathering spot for magical-girl talk. *So this is a meetup*, Souta thought, heart pounding.

"Hello, hello, I'm Genopsyko."

"Oh. You're Genopsyko? Thanks so much for all you've done for us."

Genopsyko was a central figure on the message board. She was a somewhat round young woman. She was basically what Souta had imagined. She gave him a beaming smile as she reached out to a large serving of fries. "I thought you were the type who wouldn't come to these things, Magical Girly."

"Ah-ha-ha."

"You're really pretty."

"Oh, not at all."

"You're not in the business, are you? You've got the face, and the body type, and...the vibe."

“Pardon?”

“Oh, if you don’t get what I’m talking about, then please, don’t worry about it... I wish Pelette could’ve come. Then we’d have the full set of regulars.”

“Does Pelette not come to meetups?”

“They’ve never come before.” Genopsyko’s voice got quieter, and she leaned in toward La Pucelle. “I think they’re probably someone from the production side. If they were to show their face here, some of us would recognize them, so they can’t go to meetups. That sort of deal.”

“Ohhh, that sort of deal.”

Pelette was another regular on the message board who knew even more about magical girls than Souta did. They were a big fan of *Magical Daisy* in particular, and a certain post of theirs beginning with the line “*Magical Daisy* is over, and so is my youth” had become a meme.

This tidbit from Genopsyko kinda sounded like gossip, but it also had a subtly realistic edge to it... Souta felt like Pelette had often talked about behind-the-scenes stuff, like interference from sponsors, the relationships between voice actors, and company plans. Mostly in relation to *Magical Daisy*.

“Even people in the anime business comment on the message boards and stuff, huh?”

“I heard there’s a bunch of people. And then there’s me...heh-heh-heh.”

“Huh? You’re in the business, too, Genopsyko?”

“Ohhh, I can’t really answer that question. Heh-heh-heh.”

Souta moved around to many different seats, introducing himself over and over and chatting.

“You’re not playing *Magical Girl Raising Project*, Kanossa?”

“I’ve heard about it. But I just can’t bring myself to be interested.”

“It seems like there aren’t many people in Tokyo playing it.”

“It’s unusual for a mobile game to be popular in just one particular region, isn’t it? From what I’ve heard of it, it seems interesting, but for some reason, I

just can't get excited about it. It's strange. It's a magical-girl game, so there's no way I *wouldn't* want to play it. And it's free, too, right? It's just weird that I'm not into it. I really don't get it. Maybe it's age."

Talking to people, he started to see a little of what their relationships were like, too.

"Watch out for Misoyaki," one girl said.

"Oh?"

"He gets a little too excited around cute girls."

Souta glanced over at Mr. Misoyaki. He was a man with a rather unique sense of fashion: He wore a brand-name summer jacket paired with a fan that had the four characters of "magical girl" written on it in elegant grass script. His beard was vaguely sketchy-looking.

"I think we should just ban him. But Genopsyko is lenient when it comes to this stuff."

"Oh...I'll be careful." Souta glanced over at Mr. Misoyaki one more time, and their eyes met. When he gave a little nod, the guy smirked and stood up. Maybe he meant to come over here. Having just been told to watch out for him, this felt a little awkward. Maybe it'd be better to head this off.

Souta said "Pardon me" as he cut through the crowd with a slicing hand and switched to another seat. "Nice to meet you. I'm Magical Girly." He introduced himself with a smile, but the girl sitting beside him just gave him a little head bob. "Um..."

The girl was looking at La Pucelle with a slightly confused expression. It seemed he was making her uncomfortable, which made him uncomfortable. He grasped for a conversation starter, but she wouldn't get into any talk about magical girls, or the message board, or even the weather that day. She just nodded or tilted her head and didn't reply.

"What do you think about that show?"

"..."

"Good thing it's sunny today."

“...”

“Magical girls are great, huh?”

“...M’yeah.” That was the only word he got from her their whole conversation.

After that, Souta asked Genopsyko, “Who is she?”

But Genopsyko shook her head and shrugged. “I dunno? Maybe some newbie? I mean, anyone can come if they pay for entry.”

He was just curious about the girl, somehow. She continued to eat alone in silence without participating in the conversation. Something about her reminded Souta of his childhood friend. It wasn’t like their faces were similar, and this girl was quiet and timid, which wasn’t really like his friend, either. Maybe it was her vibe.

Souta was curious, but he didn’t have any more time to spend with her. After chatting up a storm about magical girls, bragging about the rare items he’d brought wrapped in packing material, playing magical-girl word games, getting some souvenirs, then regretting he hadn’t brought things to give out, too, and gently rejecting guys who were giving him too many compliments on his looks, it was already time for his train.

There were still so many things he wanted to talk about, and he was curious about the after-parties, but he had to go home now or his parents would get there before he did. If he got home as La Pucelle and ran into his parents, it’d be a catastrophe. But if he got changed in some bathroom on the way home, he would be forced to walk out of the girls’ side, and that would be a catastrophe, too.

“I really had fun today,” he told everyone.

“I had a great time, too.”

“See you on the boards.”

“We’ll have more meetups, so I hope to see you then, too!”

“Let’s chat about the new *Cutie Healer*.”

As Souta was leaving, he glanced at the silent girl. She was looking at him, and

—though it was very faint—she smiled. Feeling vaguely pleased, Souta left the family restaurant.

There were places he wanted to stop by and things he wanted to see, but Souta didn't have the time. Telling himself he'd see the sights of Tokyo another time, he checked the path to the station on his map, figured it would be faster to cut through a back alley, and after about five minutes of walking, someone tapped his shoulder from behind. He turned around, surprised.

"Hey, where are you going?" It was Mr. Misoyaki. He was wearing really big sunglasses that he hadn't used inside the restaurant, making him seem even more suspicious.

"Um, why?"

"You're asking why I'm here? Well, I can't let a girl walk back alone, right?"

"No, I'm okay."

"Don't be shy."

He wasn't being shy, but it didn't seem this guy would listen.

"Hey, before you go back, why don't I show you around the area? I live in Tokyo, so I know the place, you know?"

Even Souta, a middle school kid, could put together this guy's reputation, attitude, and expression to figure out he wanted something. But Souta had no interest at all in giving him what he was after. "No, I have to make my train."

"It'll be fine."

"I have to go home."

"Going home? That's no fun."

"That's not the issue."

"Let's go out to eat somewhere nice, not just a family restaurant. What do you like, French or Italian?"

Souta couldn't hit the guy, but it didn't seem like he would shut up and listen, either. Souta could turn around and head to the station, but the guy might keep on following him anyway. And that would really suck.

Souta had never in his life experienced a man persistently trying to hit on him. Of course, he'd never thought about what he might do in this situation, either. His heart started racing. What would a woman do in a situation like this? The more flustered he became, thinking, *What should I do? What should I do?* the more he panicked. And then, right when he was totally at a loss with no idea what to do...

"Stop right there!"

A girl stood there with the sun at her back. She was wearing a full-body suit like she had jumped out of one of those cheesy special-effects shows, and even with the light behind her, you could clearly tell her face was beautiful. Souta knew she had to be a magical girl.

"Persistently dogging a girl in a deserted alleyway is inexcusable!"

"Wh-what the hell is that outfit?" Mr. Misoyaki stuttered.

"You're *supposed* to say, 'Who are you?!'"

"That's not the discussion here. And this has nothing to do with you. Butt out."

"You don't get that she doesn't like what you're doing?"

Mr. Misoyaki and the magical girl were arguing. Across the older man's shoulder, the magical girl winked at Souta. In other words, she was telling him to hurry up and run away.

So the heroine watching over this area must have come to help him since he was in trouble. Souta bowed to her, then ran for the station as fast as possible. Yes, he most unfortunately ran as fast as possible.

Arriving at the station, he looked over at his backpack to pull out his ticket when he noticed what was wrong.

A magical girl's costume is specially made to withstand her activity. She can fly far faster than the speed of sound or dive deep underground, but her costume won't rip or fray. By comparison, human clothing was not made to be worn by magical girls. This was no problem when they ambled along at a normal human pace, but normal clothing didn't have the durability to withstand full speed.

His skirt had shredded, his hat had split open, his shirt was a mess, and his backpack, contents and all, was now fit only for the trash. When Souta realized what had happened to his rare items, he wailed. The people around who heard the outcry turned to look at him, which made him scream again. His first cry was a “*Yaaargh!*” and the second more of an “*Eeeeeek!*”

Did he instantly cover his chest out of reflex? Or was it instinct?

Since now he had no ticket or wallet, he couldn't take the train back. Worse than that, now he had no clothes. He was so mortified, he couldn't move his legs. As he slumped there on the ground, a hand rested on La Pucelle's shoulder.

“...Huh?” The color of his body changed, creating a collar, sleeves, patterns, pockets, and fasteners. At a glance, it would look like skintight clothing.

He rose to one knee and looked behind him. Nothing. Nobody.

“It be no maesterwork, but it'll 'old till ye reach 'ome.”

He turned around on his knees, then stood up to check everywhere, but there was no one there after all. Still, that voice had not been a hallucination.



Every button or zipper he touched turned out to be his own skin. If you looked closely enough, you'd probably be able to tell that he wasn't wearing any clothing. But this should be enough to fool people.

He couldn't understand what had just happened, but it was painfully clear that all eyes around were still locked on him. He had no choice. La Pucelle shook off their gazes and ran. It was a long way home, but if he sprinted along the railway line, he should be able to make it.

But...what was this?

There was no way anyone but a magical girl could have done this. Was Tokyo a city full of them, where one would pop up every time there was a problem? Was that because of its population density?

The next day, Souta read the report on the meetup, which said that Magical Girl was cute, and smiled weakly.



She'd believed the hotel pamphlet when it said you could see the Tokyo Skytree from the window, but now that she was there, a building under construction was in the way, and she wasn't able to see even the tip of the tree. Pressing up against the window, she'd thought maybe, somehow, she could see it, but the only result was a mark from her cheek on the glass.

Sitting on the bed of the business hotel, Mashiro Kuji was in low spirits.

Cranberry had given her an order: "Melville? I have a request of you, do you mind? A certain magical-girl website is planning a meetup soon, and I'd like you to infiltrate them. They say many of these fans possess aptitude for the role. If you find anyone with potential, then scout them... Oh, no, it will be quite all right. I know you can do it. So do your best! Go!"

And things had gone fine until she'd actually managed to sneak into the meetup. But she had felt too awkward to talk to people, and to make it worse, La Pucelle, a participant in Cranberry's current exam, had shown up in transformation at one point. In a panic, Mashiro had hardly been able to do her job at all through to the end of the meetup. Cranberry had made this request of her because she'd believed in Mashiro...in Melville, the magical girl. But at this

rate, she couldn't even make an excuse to Cranberry.

La Pucelle had talked to her about a bunch of things, and Mashiro, concerned for her, had followed her out, but the one to save her had been Genopsyko Yumenoshima. Still invisible, Melville had missed her opportunity to appear. The one thing she had accomplished was saving La Pucelle when she'd lost her clothes. If Melville had done nothing and left La Pucelle helpless, it might have hindered Cranberry's exam in some way. In other words, Melville had been useful to Cranberry...probably. She wanted to believe that.

Mashiro reflected on her day. She wasn't good at talking to people, and she was even worse at mingling with groups of strangers. But if she just decided she was bad and left it at that, she wouldn't grow. She made up her mind not to be shy about her accent and to do her best to try talking to people.

# The Case of the Missing Beef: The Maid Saw It

This story is set about a year before the game in *Magical Girl Raising Project: Restart* begins.



The bus riders were clamoring in excitement, everyone snatching the mic from one another as they sang anime songs and hit songs. All these kids were from different grade levels and schools and had only just met, but they laughed together as if they'd been friends for a decade. This summer camp was sure to be a lot of fun.

Noriko Nonohara was one of those excited passengers. In fact, it could be said that it was precisely because she was having fun that the atmosphere was humming like this. Noriko Nonohara—the magical girl Nokko—had the magic power to transmit her own feelings to those around her. She would influence everyone, without exception, with both her negative and positive feelings. If Noriko was enjoying herself, so was everyone else.

And this occasion was different from when she was at home, when she was at school, and when she was working as Nokko. Her mother and father had sent her off, telling her to “go have lots of fun,” and Noriko intended to do so. Normally, when she was transformed into Nokko and going through her typical day, she would restrain and control her emotions to lead her class in a better direction. At this camp, she planned to let her feelings go and prioritize her own enjoyment. She would do what she wanted, aside from the minimal level of control necessary to erase suspicions about her transformation and reduce the impression her appearance created.

“Oh! I can see it!” A boy sitting in the seat in front of her stood up and pointed. Beyond the winding mountain road, they caught a glimpse of a reddish-brown building. It was square and flat on all sides, like a giant matchbox. That was the place they'd be staying.



Shinobu Hioka was a magical girl, as well as a detective. How many people these days actually believed detectives only handled the bizarre cases you read about in mystery novels? Most people had to believe that most detective work was common and vulgar, like searching for runaways, doing background checks, and gathering evidence that a spouse was cheating.

But the reality didn't even live up to that.

The work Shinobu Hioka had been assigned by her boss was, to be precise,

not even work.

“Um...so in other words, this is volunteering, right?”

“Yep. You got it.”

Shinobu meant for her face and tone of voice to convey the silent message, *“What the hell is this bullshit, old man?”*

But her boss was utterly unmoved as he sipped at his coffee. “We’ve got to send them someone from our office. One of the people running this thing has done a lot for us, so we can’t refuse.”

Shinobu scowled at her boss. He looked back at her coolly. She dropped her gaze to the knees of her pantsuit, changed her expression to a doubtful one, and jerked her head up again. “Why me?”

“It’s training. This was how you got to become a full-fledged detective, back in the old days. I did all this, too.” His tone brooked no argument. The way he said it gave Shinobu the impression he assumed she would never consider refusing in the first place. And the fact was, though she could complain, she couldn’t say no.

Thus, it was decided that Shinobu would serve as staff in a children’s camp.

“Shinobuuu, go help with setting up the campfire.”

“Okaaay. I’m goiing.”

“Shinobuuu, make sure the times on all the clocks match.”

“Okaaay.”

“Shinobuuu, do roll call, pleeeeease.”

“Eeeeveryone’s accounted for.”

Shinobu didn’t know how her boss had explained her presence, but she couldn’t help feeling as if she was being treated as the lowest underling among the staff, a gofer to do everyone’s bidding. She was sure her boss would have made some glib comment: “She’s a newbie at my agency. This is part of her training to be a detective, so work her hard, please.” That was the sort of boss he was.

This summer camp gathered applicants from all over the country. It was large-scale because of the breadth of its recruitment, and there were a lot of kids and comparatively few staff. Each person had plenty of work to do, and the underlings in particular felt the full effects of this.

Shinobu sat down on a cabin bench, canned coffee in hand, and breathed a sigh. The brilliant green lawn that covered the whole gently sloping hill rippled in a refreshing breeze. Here and there, children were laughing and playing. Even though they'd only met that day, they'd already made friends.

The atmosphere appeared peaceful, but the people managing it were having a rough time. The little kids ran around wherever they wanted, casually pulling stunts that got their supervisors yelling, *"That's dangerous! Stop!"*

Shinobu stood up, blew her whistle, and pointed a finger. "Hey, you! I said no climbing trees, didn't I?" The kids shrieked with laughter and scrambled away. The struggle was never-ending.

The children were resilient, too. After being forced to yell nonstop all afternoon and evening, Shinobu was already exhausted, but the kids were loudly demanding the next event. Even when she told them, "It's nighttime! So why don't you go to bed already?!" none of them would listen.

"All right, next up is the test of courage. Shinobu, you help with prep."

"Huh? Me?"

"We'll be dimming the lights in the building to make the course. They'll be coming in from the entrance, following directions to the cafeteria, where they get their proof that they've made it, and then it's over."

"Which part am I in charge of?"

"You scare the kids at the end in the cafeteria. Your boss told me you're good at this sort of thing, eh?"

If Shinobu were to take the legal route and sue her boss for spreading around half-truths about her, could she win?

*Damn it. Damn it. I'll do it. I just have to do it, don't I?*

It was her boss who she was mad at, and because he wasn't there, her fist cut

through air. So someone else would have to bear the brunt of her anger: those kids who had been driving Shinobu crazy since the afternoon with their endless disobedience.

After dinner, prep took about thirty minutes.

Shinobu was tired and irritated, but she'd never want anything horrible to happen to the children, of course. Ultimately, she was just going to scare them. This was the task assigned to her, and it had to be what the kids wanted, too. From the outside, she could hear kids saying, "Tests of courage are never scary anyway, right?" and "These scares are so obvious."

The hallway leading to the cafeteria had been decorated with toy monsters and paper ghosts made by staff. It was all indeed pretty obvious. It would have been better if they could have sent the kids out into the forest, but apparently, they hadn't been able to get permission for safety reasons, so they'd ended up doing a cheap version.

*But...don't you underestimate adults! You little brats!*

Deployed alone in the cafeteria, Shinobu transformed into the magical girl Detec Bell. Detec Bell's magic was to converse with buildings.

When Detec Bell kissed the wall of the cafeteria, a big face emerged from the whole wall. It was an old face, and the way the light hit it made it look vaguely eerie, too.

"What is it?" asked the face.

"Some kids'll be coming here soon. Scare them."

"Why?"

"We're doing a test of courage. And they've been making fun of you, saying the scares here are too obvious."

"I don't like people making fun of me."

"Right? So then scare them nice and good. But you're not allowed to hurt them or anything like that." She instructed the face to disappear until a target appeared, and then she hid herself in the shadow of some curtains. Excited, she waited five minutes before someone came in.

From Detec Bell's position, she could only see the kid from behind. It looked like a girl. Probably around middle school-age. The girl was just about to reach out to take one of the proof-of-completion slips on the cafeteria table—when the face appeared on the wall and licked the girl's face with its long tongue.

Shinobu must have spent a full five seconds pumping her fist and thinking, *Yes!* The girl screamed and ran from the cafeteria, and for some reason, Shinobu felt terrified, too, and ran out after the girl. The sounds of screams and yells rang out from everywhere, and the hellish wails echoed through the mountains until it wasn't just the kids anymore. Even the adults were running around in confusion, crying, some jumping into their rooms in the cabins to lock the doors from the inside, while others trembled under tables and yet others ran around until they exhausted themselves. By eleven at night, the uproar had settled, and all the children and staff were confirmed to be safe.

Not even given the time to wonder why on earth the uproar had gotten this big, Shinobu continued to chase down children. Once they'd put the kids to bed, all the staff gathered in the hall, and the leader raged at her that she had clearly gone too far. Shinobu made herself as small as she could.



All the other girls in Noriko's room seemed to have fallen asleep. She'd heard that during these overnight events, you would stay up late to talk about crushes and stuff, but it was already late now, and everyone was tired, too. Mainly because of her.

Noriko brought the blanket up over her chin.

She'd totally let her guard down. She was a magical girl. Her physical abilities far surpassed those of a normal human, she could see through darkness, and no matter what attacked her, she'd be able to deal with it. And there was no way she'd ever get scared over some baldly obvious test of courage that wouldn't even scare a baby. Or so she had thought. She'd been arrogant.

She didn't know how they had pulled that off, but it had been truly terrifying. Normally, Noriko could keep herself under control and restrain any disturbances in her heart, but that thing had been scary enough to make the entirety of her composure evaporate. The movement and sensation of that

tongue had been horribly real.

Driven by terror, Noriko had scampered about in confusion, transmitting her fear everywhere and causing a huge panic. She'd nearly caused a total disaster. It was a small mercy that no one had gotten hurt.

But still. That tongue, that face... Just what sort of trick had they used to make it like that? At the time, she'd been too busy being terrified, but now, she was unbearably curious.

She opened her eyes a crack, thinking about it, only to see a face in the wood knots on the ceiling. It reminded her of the giant human face that had emerged from the wall of the cafeteria, and she panicked and closed her eyes.



Even after that huge uproar, the next morning, the kids were disgustingly full of energy. In fact, it actually seemed like they were happy about the incident. The adults, however, were unhappy compared with how they'd been the day before. They were acting a little cold toward Shinobu, too.

If news of this were to be passed on to her boss, he was guaranteed to rail at her about how she couldn't even do work that wasn't work. So she had to do everything from this point on properly to raise her now rock-bottom reputation by at least a fraction of an inch.

"Shinobu, please check the meat."

"Roger. Right away."

The plan for the day was orienteering and then a barbecue. They were up high on the mountain, but it being summer, it was pretty hot, and the rays of the sun beat down hard even in the morning. *How can they bear to walk around in this sun?* Shinobu wiped sweat from her forehead with the back of her hand. She pulled the plastic pack of meat out from the jumbo-sized fridge. The coldness felt nice.

There were a lot of people, so it followed that there was also plenty of meat. It had to be the first time in her life she'd ever seen so much.

"Whoa, man!"

“Hey, is this for dinner today?” Having finished their breakfast, kids were coming to gather. Was it the nature of children to form a horde whenever something was happening? Shinobu had to have been a child once, too, but she couldn’t remember anymore.

The kids had only just finished their breakfast, but they nonetheless chorused with cries of “It looks so good!” and “I wanna eat it!” Listening to them made hunger well up from the pit of Shinobu’s stomach, too. It did indeed look good. She wanted to eat it. She wanted to fry it and wolf it down. No, right now, she’d even take it raw. *They’re not going to notice if I just eat a little bit*, she thought, and her hand was reaching out when she came to her senses. If she nibbled at this meat along with the children, her already rock-bottom reputation would sink below ground level.

“Hey, this is for later! Get ready for orienteering now!” Shinobu somehow managed to drive the kids away and sighed. Maybe she was more tired than she’d realized. No matter how hungry she was, it was crazy to think it was a good idea to eat raw meat.

At any rate, her examination of the meat was done for now. She couldn’t leave it sitting out at room temperature, so she looked over to the tabletop, about to clear it away—and tilted her head.

The meat that had been there just a moment before was gone. Shinobu looked under the table and inside the fridge, and she even pulled open the drawers and the freezer, but it wasn’t anywhere. Anxiety gradually rose within her, then ballooned all at once. Restraining her impending panic, she looked around one more time, but the meat truly wasn’t anywhere.

It was gone.



“Stingy!”

“At least let us touch it.”

“You’re overreacting.”

The staff lady drove the kids away. Though each of them grumbled their complaints, they dispersed. Noriko was part of the dissipating group, but she

didn't complain. She took it for granted that the staff wouldn't let them touch the food, and though the lady had spoken rather sharply, that may have been because she hadn't gotten a proper sleep the previous night, which was basically Nokko's fault.

"What're we doing next, again?"

"She said orienteering."

"So what's this orienteering thing?"

"I dunno, really, but I heard it's kinda like a treasure hunt."

A treasure hunt! It sounded like there was still more fun in store.



It had been there until just a moment before. Shinobu was certain of that. She hadn't put it away. In other words, it should still be there. But it wasn't. She didn't understand why, but she did understand this was very bad.

This was a case. It was time for a detective. Though she knew this situation was bad, her heart was racing.

"Shinobuuuu! If you're done there, come over here and help!"

"O-okaaay!"

After making sure the windows were locked, Shinobu closed all the curtains and the entrance to the cafeteria, too, pulling a mop out of the cleaning closet to wedge it through the door handle. Now nobody would see her. She transformed into Detec Bell and kissed the wall.

Transforming into a magical girl calmed her down a little. This was probably just a kid's prank. While Shinobu had been herding them away, a different group must have carried off the meat. That story fit. But even if that had happened, she had still searched the cafeteria and come up empty. If they'd hid it in here, they'd been really clever about it. If they'd taken it out of the cafeteria, then first, she had to make sure that was actually what had happened. She would check that before she chased them down.

At any rate, Shinobu figured all she had to do was ask the cafeteria directly, so she kissed its wall...but no face emerged from it.

“...Huh?”

She'd only just been calming her head, but now, she got agitated again. This had never happened before. Detec Bell's magic would even work on crumbling old abandoned buildings. Though no building would tell her anything that would be disadvantageous to its owner, this was the first time no face had emerged at all.

Her muddled mind desperately pursued the possibilities. What was going on here? Not only was the meat mysteriously missing, but a face for the cafeteria hadn't appeared for some reason. It was strange. She couldn't figure out why this was happening.

Was this a test for Shinobu because she'd relied too much on her magic? Was the god of detectives telling her to try solving this theft without her magic?

The culprit was probably a child. So was their motive hunger? Or was this a prank?

The gears of Detec Bell's baffled brain continued to turn.

The idea that the culprit was a child was nothing more than an educated guess on her part, a likely possibility. It could be someone else. Yes...like an animal. In the book that was recognized as the first detective novel in history, the culprit had been an animal. As mystery novel theories went, it wasn't so odd. They were up in the mountains, so a bear or something? Wolves...were extinct here, huh? So then a tanuki or a fox? No, neither of those. So, what—mice? Cockroaches? It was way too much meat for such small creatures to carry away. That would necessitate disaster-movie-level swarms, and there was no way she'd have failed to notice that. So then maybe...another of the staff? What for? To set her up?

Detec Bell pulled out her auxiliary item, her magnifying glass. If she couldn't talk with the wall, then she just had to find some other proof. She directed the magnifying glass at the spot where the meat had been and noticed something shining faintly. It looked like a liquid. She rubbed it with her finger, and found it was gooey. When she leaned her nose toward it...it stank.

“What the heck is this...drool?”

If the culprit had been drooling, did that mean hunger was the motive after all? That seemed plausible for either a child or an animal. It seemed unlikely an adult would drool, so she could probably cross the staff off her list of suspects.

Nothing else caught her eye. She could send this saliva over to forensics for DNA analysis and find the culprit that way—

“Shinobuuuu? You’re not done yeeet?”

“S-sorry! I’m coming now!”

Of course she didn’t have that kind of time. Detec Bell’s brain got into gear again.

She’d narrowed it down to either an animal or a child. So then which was it? Were there any other possibilities? A goblin? A ghost? A demon? Such unscientific ideas...but, well, magical girls were real, so could she really cross off ghosts and demons? This building wasn’t that old, but it did have an atmosphere to it. Shaped like a giant matchbox, it seemed like it could be the setting for a “mystery in the mansion”-style incident. And during the test of courage the night before, though she’d been one of the people who was supposed to do the scaring, she’d felt a little something—

“...Hmm?”

Something was bothering her.

Detec Bell drew back the brim of her hunting cap and strolled around the cafeteria. She wasn’t walking around looking for evidence. She was trying to probe the thing in her head that was bothering her. The heels of her shoes tapped against the linoleum of the floor with a high-pitched noise.

Something had happened in the cafeteria the previous night. A panic? Not that. There had been something before everyone had panicked. She had done something. The original cause of it all had been...

“Ahhh!”

Bell remembered.

Bell’s magic was to make a face appear on any building and to converse with it. She had to kiss a building to activate it and kiss it again to undo it. After she’d

summoned the cafeteria's face in the test of courage the day before, everyone had freaked out, and she'd forgotten to undo her magic. In other words, when she'd kissed the cafeteria just now with the intention of summoning the face, she'd ended up giving it the undo kiss. So it was no wonder the face hadn't come out.

Suddenly, she felt exhausted, but this case wasn't solved yet. Bell kissed the wall, and the same face from the previous day emerged. Now she knew her deductions had been correct. "I should have just kissed you again..."

"You look quite tired," said the face.

"Never mind that. Tell me who the thief is, the one who stole the meat."

The face twisted into a wrinkled expression. It seemed apologetic and also embarrassed. As far as Detec Bell knew, no building face had ever made such an expression. "Well, I do know who the culprit is... Yes, I do." The face spat up something from its big mouth with a *ptoo*. It was the pack of meat. It was sticky and wet with saliva.

Detec Bell was temporarily dumbfounded, then angry, leaning in toward the face. "What the heck were you doing?!"

"Well, I'm not quite sure. For some reason, I just suddenly wanted to put that meat into my mouth so badly. And before I knew it, I'd reached out my tongue and snatched it up. It's so baffling to me, really. I've never felt this way ever before... And now that feeling, like I want to put the meat in my mouth—it's gone, too."

"Save the excuses for later! Anyway, I've got to wash this thing!" Detec Bell turned on the faucet in the sink to run some water. Fortunately, it looked like the plastic pack hadn't ripped. "Why would you do something I didn't order you to do?"

"Hmm... I'm sorry."

"I didn't think you guys even *could* eat things."

"I can't. If I could, then the meat obviously wouldn't still be intact. I was just putting it in my mouth, really."

“Huh. That seems like something you could use as a trick in a locked-room murder mystery...”

Bell’s mind, ready to wander off to this unseen locked-room mystery, was pulled back to reality by a call from outside.

“Shinobuuuu! You’re still not done?!”

“I-I’m dooone! I’m coming nooow!”

*This is what happens when you’re a real-life detective after all*, she thought as she rinsed the pack of meat.



Even as Noriko walked around the woods doing orienteering, she still couldn’t forget the meat she’d just seen. She’d never seen so much before.

Her parents had taken her to a *yakiniku* restaurant a while back, and the meat they’d had there had been so good. This would be the first time she’d ever had barbecue, but it had to be about as good as that *yakiniku*, right?

“O-over there!” A girl walking with her pointed at a cedar tree. An orange marker was tied around its trunk.

“Let’s finish this fast and go eat that meat.”

“For suuure!”

“And make it well-done!”

“It looked so good!”

Maybe Noriko’s thoughts about meat had gotten transmitted around by her magic. All her friends were smiling and talking about how they looked forward to the barbecue. When she had seen that meat earlier in the cafeteria, the boys had reached out toward it, and the girls had devoured it with their eyes. They might have been influenced by Noriko’s magic, too.

“But that’s fine, right? Thinking about how it looks good is sure to make it taste good for real.”

“Hmm? What’re you talking about?”

“Nothing. Come on—let’s hurry and get that stamp.”

# Magical Illegal Girl

This story is set a few weeks before the magical candy contest in *Magical Girl Raising Project* begins.



It was in the past year that the Jin Bang Mei had started operations in N City. Originally, N City had been occupied by the Fujianese Li Xin Yuan. Their organization took on miscellaneous tasks in N City, things that local syndicates needed done or lacked the know-how to accomplish—such as falsifying passports, smuggling, and so on—and this specialization allowed them to subsist independently. For some slightly complicated reasons, the Li Xin Yuan had come to be replaced by the Jin Bang Mei.

The Shanghainese Jin Bang Mei and the Fujianese Li Xin Yuan had been at odds for quite a while—basically since before the Vietnam War—and butted heads repeatedly. Over many years, in various locales, they'd fought with both words and fists, but Jin Bang Mei's boss getting replaced after thirty years was the trigger that led the leaders of both groups to shake hands.

However, they hadn't simply set aside their conflict. What was most important to both parties was face. In order to create an outcome in which neither ended up the loser, they arranged a give-and-take based on a highly detailed set of arrangements to exchange responsibility and control. All so that both sides could stand proud, believing they had won.

So Jin Bang Mei inherited Li Xin Yuan's businesses in N City. If this had just been a simple inheritance, then no issues would have arisen from this, since they'd established a division of territory with the local organized crime syndicate, the Tetsuwa-kai.

The problem was the way the Li Xin Yuan presented itself to the Tetsuwa-kai, as opposed to what they were really after. Superficially, the Li Xin Yuan and the Tetsuwa-kai were on good terms. The Li Xin Yuan didn't touch the Tetsuwa-kai's sources of income, profiting only on passport forgery and smuggling aid...or so they made it seem. In reality, they sold quasi-legal drugs, had an illegal bookie at the racetrack, and ran a private mahjong gambling ring. The Tetsuwa-kai was not a collection of fools. They hadn't failed to notice this; rather, they had been overlooking it, figuring it was so minor, it wasn't worth taking them to task.

But then the Li Xin Yuan and the Jin Bang Mei switched places. And even though the Li Xin Yuan explained to the Jin Bang Mei what sort of work they did and how they did it, they weren't able to educate the Jin Bang Mei on all the

subtleties. So the Jin Bang Mei started enthusiastically tackling job after job, and to the Tetsuwa-kai, it looked like the rising power replacing the Li Xin Yuan was trying to take over the town.

So the Tetsuwa-kai gave the order to their bodyguard magical girl to attack the Jin Bang Mei's base. The cowboy-style magical girl crushed their base all by herself, and Jin Bang Mei's forces were eliminated from N City.

"It would all have gone so much faster if that were the end of it, but that's not what happened." The old man paused for a moment, tilted the glass in his right hand, then moistened his throat with the final gulp of red liquid. "The Jin Bang Mei are aware of the nature of the humiliation they've suffered, and they're plotting revenge."

"So what?"

The old man shot a worried look at the telephone receiver in his left hand. "You sound as if you don't care one whit. I've made this call because I'm concerned for you, friend. N City is dangerous. I can't call it a good place for a magical girl to lie low."

"I've no need of friends. They're just a hindrance to me. And you're nothing more than a business connection." The voice of the girl coming through the receiver sounded low and calm, in contrast with her ultrafeminine vocal mannerisms.

The old man set the glass in his right hand on the table. "It stings to have unrequited feelings at my age," he said sorrowfully, but the girl on the other end of the line didn't react. "By the way, what did come of that matter of the Mermaid Tear?"

"Are you trying to start a quarrel with me? I'm busy, and I don't have the time for this nonsense."

"Of course not. More importantly, as I've told you, N City is no place for you to be. You should relocate."

She hung up on him. The old man brought his brows together, looking at the receiver, but then he adjusted the collar of his dressing gown and left the receiver on the table. He pulled his eye patch out two inches to snap it in place

again, leaned into the backrest of his wheelchair, and gave a deploring sigh. Then he stretched his back to turn to the man in a suit standing next to him. “Hey, Totoyama. You’re my friend, right?”



Ripple stood atop the roof of a department building in Nakayado. She told herself that she wasn’t getting moody. At nighttime, this department store roof, and especially the hundred-yen rides and popcorn kiosks, just made you sentimental.

It had been a week since she’d become a magical girl. She was getting used to the job and was gradually earning more candy.

Calamity Mary hadn’t shown her face again. If they never ran into each other, then they’d never fight. Top Speed visited her every other day. She was annoying and a bother, but she was a good cook. Still, Top Speed was the type who’d get real carried away if you gave her any compliments—

*Hmm?*

A voice. Even from the roof, she could hear yelling coming from down in front of the Nakayado department store, a spot that was typically empty of pedestrians late at night. Gazing downward, she saw multiple people there. The man who’d yelled reached out his arm, and someone grabbed it and threw him, while a large suitcase sent another man flying—Ripple jumped over the fence and ran down the wall of the building. It might be a pain, but it was time for a magical girl to arrive on the scene.



The Mermaid Tear was the start of all this mess. It was some aquamarine or sapphire once beloved by the noble families of the Tudor or York court or whatever. And some nouveau-riche oil baron had pilfered it and sold it off to a fence. The plan had been for Rionetta to accept this gem as compensation for her work.

She had no particular affection for jewels. It was simply that some wealthy individual, an acquaintance of her late father’s, wanted the Mermaid Tear for the petty reason of giving it to his granddaughter as a present. It would make

good money if she pretended to be a dealer and sold it off quickly to him. Or it should have.

Her employer claimed they'd given her the gem. They insisted that a magical girl carrying a doll had shown up at the appointed time to carry it away. Rionetta knew that was a lie. At the time of their appointment, there had been no one there to make a deal with.

Due to this discrepancy between their claims and the fact that neither of them would back down, Rionetta was now on the run from her former employer. According to them, this incident made Rionetta a thief for trying to take a double reward. Rionetta could yell *"You're the one who's failed to compensate me!"* all she wanted, but there was no one to listen to her. It was the nature of the world. Might makes right.

That had been the case even before Rionetta had become Rionetta. If this world were the simpler kind where righteousness made you right, then surely she would still have been a pampered rich girl.

When her life as a fugitive began, Rionetta went to N City to lie low, but a wealthy acquaintance of her father had warned her that N City was no place for her to be. She couldn't bring herself to like the man, but she figured for the time being, she would take his advice and leave N City. But then, right as she was leaving her hideout, someone had showed up to challenge her. And not the people who had been looking for *her*, but an organization searching for a magical girl over some other matter... They were probably the Jin Bang Mei, who'd come up in that earlier conversation.

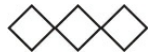
She couldn't be wasting time in a place like this now. Facing three gangster types, she tossed one aside and punched down another. Right when she was about to kick the last one flying, a soft palm restrained her doll's shin, stopping her leg on the spot.

*What on earth...?*

She saw geta, a red scarf, and a shuriken-shaped hair clip holding sleek black hair in a side ponytail. The three gangsters yelped and ran off, but Rionetta wasn't even looking at them anymore.

That strange, ninja-themed costume. That perfect face. And most

importantly, she had been able to stop Rionetta's kick. In other words, this had to be a magical girl. Rionetta dashed off at lightning speed, not slowing even slightly as she ripped window shutters, bent iron bars, and shattered glass at the entrance of the department store to break into the building. She sensed the presence coming after her. She was being pursued. There was no mistaking it.



It wasn't a human. It was a moving human-sized doll.

An exquisitely designed doll that resembled a human girl at first glance had been tossing and punching men and had been just about to kick another. Ripple had simply come between them with the casual intention of stopping the fight. Then, startled by the rare sight of an animate doll, she had been unable to keep the thing from fleeing, and it escaped into the department store.

By now, the alarms would be ringing at the security company. But Ripple couldn't just leave. That doll girl had leaped into the department store so immediately that Ripple had failed to react, then run off so fast she would have a hard time catching up. Ripple didn't know what this doll girl really was yet, but at the very least, it wasn't an opponent humans could handle. And just now, it had been attacking humans. Kano Sazanami's tendency was to shrug off anything that wasn't her business, but now that she was Ripple, she couldn't be like that anymore. The magical-girl lifestyle really was an annoying pain in the butt.

Ripple rushed up the steps, taking ten at a time, kicking aside the furnishings inside the store as she cut through. A mannequin leaped at her from the side, startling her, but she tossed a kunai back at it, and then she had to chase her quarry around until she came out on the roof.

The doll girl was looking at her, chain-link fence at her back.

Ripple blew out all the breath she'd been holding in her lungs.



Rionetta's preferred method of fighting was to start by throwing dolls at her opponent. If she used dolls, no matter how many of them got wasted, *she* wouldn't get hurt. Dolls were not her allies, friends, or comrades. They were

just things. It wouldn't affect her if they were destroyed.

She observed how the magical girl reacted when she was attacked by a doll... rather, a mannequin, this time. The girl was agile. She had good judgment, too. But if her skill in a fight was all she had going for her, Rionetta could manage.

The problem was the unique magic each magical girl possessed. If her magic was incompatible with Rionetta's, or if it was beyond simply incompatible and was just absolutely powerful, then she would probe out a weakness in that magic power or avoid the fight entirely.

But this was not one of those times. Her opponent threw a kunai at the mannequin, and the weapon's trajectory twisted around oddly to hit its target. That sort of bend was not caused by spinning or air resistance. That had to be the girl's magic. This power would be easy for Rionetta to manage.

Her pursuer was still a young magical girl. Her experience hadn't yet caught up with her powers. Rionetta had years on her. She had been killing and killing and nearly been killed herself, working for money and using the powers of a magical girl for personal gain. She had abandoned helping people long ago and had made it through far more carnage than this girl ever had.

It had begun with her father. There was no way she could repay his debts by lying around and working a normal job, and thus the little princess of a wealthy family had been unable to continue living without getting her hands dirty. And once her hands had been stained by that nasty work, she couldn't get out. The red of the blood had seeped into her and wouldn't wash away.

Rionetta had not begun this work out of a desire to save her father from dire straits. She had no wish to go through such hardships for garbage like him. It was simply because the lender she was dealing with forced on her his rationale: "No matter what's happened to the father, the daughter will repay the money he's borrowed." Rionetta didn't care what happened to her father, and she didn't need friends, companions, or allies. All that bound her was her own personal safety and money. Though she might play the friend and act chummy, when the time came, she would kick anyone off a cliff. She had done something similar many times, in fact.

Rionetta was making it seem like she was running around, but she was casting

her magic on every doll in the department store. She would lie in wait for her pursuer on the roof and send all the dolls in the building to attack her from behind. It would be a pincer attack. Mannequins, stuffed animals, mascot dolls. Rionetta's magic was puppetry. And she could still control plenty more.



The doll girl should be cornered now. Ripple kicked open the door to the roof to confront her. But when she saw the girl's smirking face and mannequins attacked her from behind, she realized this was a trap. She sent one mannequin's head flying with a roundhouse kick and fired a kunai into another's shin, punching and whacking until they were destroyed. But more came. Dolls appeared one after another at the door that led from the roof to the interior of the department store. The bare roof was only as wide as a playground with a few rides, but it was now as crowded as an amusement park parade.

Flying and leaping, Ripple hopped from place to place, staying in motion so as not to be surrounded. Some small creatures ran between her legs. One of them tripped her. About to fall, she put a hand on the wall, but something grabbed it.

It was a puppet, the sort you'd normally manipulate by tugging their strings. They were moving on their own, swarming around trying to tangle Ripple in their strings. All the string must have had magic cast on it, because it was considerably stronger than normal.

Next, the stuffed creatures came to attack her. They looked like adorable, cartoonish renditions of animals, but each and every one of them held razor-like blades in their paws. With these thin, sharp blades, they cut Ripple all over. As her feet caught in the strings, leaving her unable to walk easily, blood spurted from her cuts.

Scolding the fear in her heart, Ripple ranted at her limbs for weakening. Like Gulliver struggling against the Lilliputians, she yanked the strings, swinging the puppets around as she drew and swiped with the katana at her back.

She sliced up the stuffed animals, kicked away the puppets that still surged toward her, and rolled to avoid a mannequin's fist. She turned aside a kick, dodged a knife-hand strike, and pointed her katana at the pair of

reinforcements that had arrived at the entrance.

The two dolls were both life-sized: an old gentleman in a white suit and a clown with big curly red hair. *Oh yeah, I passed by some fast-food places on the way here, too.* Though the general assumption was that they didn't get along, the two statues attacked Ripple with superb coordination, each covering for the other's weaknesses. Despite taking a few hits, Ripple somehow managed to pull through to find that a group of mannequins had appeared. Some were half-dressed and some were naked without a single scrap of cloth on them, but all were expressionless as they gradually gathered at the entrance. How many were there? At a glance, Ripple gave up on counting. It was no use.

Something was moving around in the shadow of the mannequins. It was fast, and it was nauseatingly intimidating in a way the other dolls weren't. It moved from shadow to shadow to hide behind the clown, and from there it swiped out at Ripple with its claws. She couldn't dodge them entirely. They ripped open her cheek, and blood gushed out.

It was the very first doll. The ball-jointed doll made to look like a beautiful girl attacked her with claws on her right hand. Then she swiftly hid in the shadow of the mannequins, vanishing once again.

The reason Ripple had failed to dodge that attack entirely was because of her opponent's ball joints and accordion-like arms. They made her reach much greater. Her strike had gone farther than Ripple had anticipated—the arm had reached out and bent more than it was supposed to and slipped past Ripple's katana. If Ripple hadn't bent backward, those claws would have torn her carotid artery right open.

The swarm of stuffed animals came together, piling up like a human pyramid to become one single wall. The moment Ripple realized what was happening, the claws swung out, piercing through the wall of plush.

She reacted reflexively—not with her katana, but with her left hand. She blocked the claws with her left palm. The claws pierced it, slicing through to her wrist. Blood sprayed from her hand, but Ripple kept clenching onto those claws.

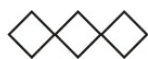
She'd caught the doll girl. Ripple flipped the katana in her hand around into a reverse grip, swinging it at her—but right at that instant, there was a clicking

noise as the doll girl detached her own right wrist to take a step back, and Ripple's blade cut through air. She was taken by surprise, her stance was broken as her blade missed, and that was when the swarm of dolls, now a massive lump with the pharmacy mascot frog at their head, body-slammed her.

Ripple was launched upward. In midair, she caught sight of the doll girl and her mocking jeer out of the corner of her eye. Bright-red anger, the color of blood, began filling her body. Still in the air, Ripple spun, landed on the fence, and then leaped into the air again, over the heads of the dolls, to come down on a bench situated to the right of the center area of the roof, and from there, she ripped the bench from where it was nailed down, breaking the legs to lift it up.

The doll girl, the mannequins, the clown and the gentleman, the stuffed animals, and the puppets were all pressing close. Ripple was furious. She was angry at the army of the absurd descending upon her, and she sent that anger into her bones and muscles. Keeping the bench in hand, Ripple spun around in a circle like a top, rather like what the pro wrestling world would call a "giant swing," once, twice, three times, mowing down the oncoming rush of dolls with the bench as she built momentum to fling it at the entrance to the roof. There was another bench in arm's reach, and she tossed it in the same manner, haphazardly destroying everything within sight. Concrete scattered into sand and dust, billowing up thick until a gust of wind carried them away.

Ripple had beaten down the dolls and blocked the entrance from which reinforcements had been coming. But there remained one opponent. The doll girl casually jumped off the back of the bench Ripple had thrown at her and landed. Her most powerful foe was still standing.



To be young also means to be overflowing with energy. Rionetta couldn't imitate that wild, bench-throwing style of fighting. That had surprised her—but this was over.

The ninja seemed to have used up her strength on those drastic moves, as she was staggering and ready to collapse. Seeing this was her chance, Rionetta dashed ahead, leaning forward. Kicking up concrete as she ran, she clicked in a

new right hand from the wrist joint to replace her old one. She clenched that hand, then opened it again.

Ten kunai flew toward Rionetta. Every single one of them defied the laws of physics as they zoomed at her. They were fast, and they had weight, too. But she could read their movements.

Her right hand smacked one kunai, which dropped another kunai in turn. With her left hand as her shield, she blocked three more, dodging another by ducking her head. That one succeeded only in ripping her bonnet as the claws on her left hand shot out to knock two more kunai from the air. The remaining two kunai failed to reach her, plunging into the ground at her feet.

Rionetta's enemy must have mustered her last burst of strength to throw those weapons; her knees folded and she thrust out her right hand to support her body.

Rionetta took one more step out to finish the girl off—and pitched forward. The space between the two kunai stuck in the ground sparkled. Tied between the two weapons was a transparent screen. So this girl had undone the puppets' string, tied these two kunai together, and made it seem as if she had missed when in fact she had been aiming for the ground? What for?

To make Rionetta stumble.

Instantly, Rionetta broke her fall with a hand on the ground, but that meant her right hand was now occupied and unable to block the shuriken flying at her from the right side. It tore her face open.

Someone with a normal body would have died then. But Rionetta, with her puppet body, still had extra chances. She raised her head just as the katana was about to swing down on her.

She stuck out her right arm to protect herself, and it was cut off from the elbow.



Ripple was no longer questioning who her opponent was. Before her was an enemy trying to kill her, and the truth was that she was trying to kill her opponent, too. When the doll girl got up, Ripple kicked her, and when her

upper body bent backward, Ripple sliced at her, too, cutting right through her beautiful doll clothes to gouge deep into her wooden body. But the doll girl still didn't stop moving.

With her right arm, which was gone past the elbow, the doll girl blocked Ripple's katana. Her sleeve ripped in a shower of wood fragments, and her arm got even shorter. The doll girl forced her way forward. This was handy for Ripple.

Ripple chose to move together with her enemy's momentum, letting the doll girl push her back to the fence. Now a doll couldn't take her by surprise from behind. Her foe's attacks were becoming wide and sloppy. Ripple repelled and dodged them. The doll girl's accordion arms reached out, but Ripple turned them aside with the dull side of her blade. She heard the sound of the fence behind her getting cut up. The doll girl's string of attacks was only hitting the fence.

Ripple kicked her opponent's left arm hard, seizing the moment when her stance broke to throw a kunai at her left knee and wedge it into her joint. She raised her sword up above the doll, and right when she was about to bring it down—someone wrapped around her from behind. The cold sensation of metal stabbed through Ripple's skin. Her katana wouldn't move.

But she'd destroyed all the dolls. She'd blocked the entrance where more dolls could appear, too. There should have been nothing but fence behind her. The claws thrust at the confused Ripple, and just as she twisted her body to avoid them, a roundhouse kick flew at her from her blind spot to hit her right in the back of the head. Realizing the claw strike had been nothing more than a feint, Ripple passed out.



Her pursuer had been a truly strong magical girl. She'd been prepared to kill or be killed, and even when backed into a corner, she'd kept the dark fire deep in her heart smoldering. Given three years, or two years, or even one, Rionetta might have been the one to go down. But this time, Rionetta had won.

Rionetta canceled the magic she'd cast on the doll holding up her pursuer's body, and it turned back into the chain link and crumbled to the ground. In the

last stage of the game, Rionetta had pretended to be flailing with desperate attacks while she had actually been cutting the fence at the ninja girl's back into the shape of a doll. Even if it was hastily and roughly made, ready to break apart at any moment, a doll was a doll. By manipulating the fence cutout, Rionetta had held her pursuer's hands behind her back.

Rionetta approached the girl, fallen and still. The damage to Rionetta's left knee was serious, and her movement was stiff, but she could still finish her off, at least. If she didn't kill her now, then one day, the time would come when she would lose.

"Wait, please."

Rionetta had felt no presence at all. She sank into a low crouch, almost touching the ground, turning to face the source of the voice. It was a young woman. With the moon at her back, she threw a long shadow onto the wreckage of the roof.

Rionetta's left knee wouldn't move smoothly. Her right arm was in tatters. All her dolls had been wiped out. She didn't have much strength left.

"I'm quite sorry, but could you let this one pass? It's almost time for her exam." The girl had vines wrapped around her legs and roses over her shoulders. Even for a magical girl, she looked fancy. This newcomer, whose voice and appearance was totally unfamiliar to her, made her tremble in the depths of her heart. "If you simply *must*, then I'll be forced to fight, too. If you wish, I could be your opponent once more. The outcome might just be different from the last time."

Rionetta's instincts understood—they told her that if she were to fight now, she would lose. She slowly dragged herself backward.

"But fate is strange. Are we inevitably destined to meet each other? I've heard this happens quite often to magical girls..."

Rionetta turned away and scampered down the wall of the department store like an animal. She raced away with single-minded intent, shaking off the shivers that threatened to rise up from her feet. She told herself that she wasn't going to get into fights she wasn't getting paid for.



There was the sound of sirens—from both police cars and an ambulance. A crowd of rubberneckers had gathered in front of the department store, too. Shoulders heaving, Ripple looked below. The roof, which had been a place of rest, was now utterly destroyed, and mannequins and stuffed animals that had been knocked off the roof were scattered around the department store building.

“Hey...what the hell was goin’ on here?” A slight edge of fear colored Top Speed’s tone from where she sat in the front seat.

When Ripple had come to, she’d found herself on Rapid Swallow’s rear seat. Top Speed said that by the time she got to the roof, Ripple was lying there alone.

Ripple had lost. Internally, she was trembling with humiliation and anger, like window glass in the middle of a typhoon. Most of all, she was angry at herself for wondering if she’d have won if Top Speed had been there. Giving in to anger, Ripple whapped her mentor over the head.

“Ow! What’re ya doin’?! Hey!”

Ripple focused her irritation and exhaustion on the tip of her tongue and clicked it as hard as she could. It tasted like blood.



“Oh, you’ve returned alive? Splendid. So now that’s that. About the Mermaid Tear—”

She hung up on him. The old man looked at the receiver for a while, muttered, “Magical girls, eh?” and then, losing interest, dropped the receiver with a clunk. Suddenly, his expression changed, and with a chipper look, he said to his granddaughter, “Do you like magical girls, Kanoe? There’s an animated film playing about them now, isn’t there?”

The old man’s granddaughter smoothed her curls with her left hand, pushed down the hem of her uniform skirt, crossed her legs in the other direction, and placed her saucer down on the round table and her teacup on top of it. “You’re not going to tell me how you’d like to see a movie with your adorable

granddaughter before you die, are you?"

"Don't expect your grandfather to be so admirable. I'm merely curious."

In response to her grandfather's question, the girl's eyes gleamed with a light even more mature than her manner of speech, even though she looked far younger than that very tone would suggest. She blinked slowly, and when she opened her eyes again, the light was gone. "So many magical-girl stories nowadays are violent. I personally prefer sweet, romantic stories."

Without a word as to the light that had flickered in the girl's eyes, the old man spread his arms in a jesting manner. "Romance, eh? Do you think you'd have fun watching something like that with your grandfather?"

"I think it might be enjoyable to watch with a friend."

Facing each other, the two of them gave similar smiles.

# Memories of the Blue Magical Girl

This story is set partly before the game in *Magical Girl Raising Project: Restart* begins, and partly after the game is over.



You mean me? Huh? The Magical Kingdom? Is this by chance related to magical girls? No *way*!

Oh, I'm sorry. Um, it's just that coming up to talk to me when I'm walking around isn't the most magical way to do it, I guess... Oh, that's not what I mean. I just got caught up in my own ideas about that stuff. I had these fantasies about a big owl bringing me a letter, or a witch on a broom coming to deliver a message or something... I'm sorry, really.

Huh? Oh, right. I do have time. Hey, let's go to that café over there.

Blue Comet? Oh yeah. I actually have met her. Of course I haven't forgotten. I guess it was two years ago. Um, one, two... That's right. It was two years ago. Um, would I get in trouble for this? That's not what this is about? So then what is this about?

I just have to talk about how I met her? Okay.

Um, two years ago, I was in my third year of middle school. As for what I was up to, well, studying for entrance exams. That was the main worry on my mind at the time. I was doing my best studying, but my grades had been going down, and every day I was anxious I might have to go for a lower-ranked school.

Oh, I'll have a café au lait.

...Where was I? Oh yeah. Entrance exams were no fun, and I was wondering if maybe my life would never be fun again. I was really bored, but of course I didn't have the courage to go and blow off steam to feel better, either.

That day was especially awful. The chain came off my bicycle. I'd studied hard at the library and right when I was like, *Okay, it's closing—time to go home!* I rolled up onto the curb by the gutter and the chain just dropped off. At the time, I didn't know how to fix bike chains. Nobody was walking by, either, so I couldn't ask for help.

It was already dark out. I walked my bike up to a streetlight, and I was like, *Maybe this? Maybe that?* but nothing I tried would work. My hands got all black, and right when I was just like, *Ahhh, what do I do?!* someone came up to talk to me.

“Heyaaa! You in trouble?”

I turned around, and she really knocked me for a loop.

She had short, straight-cut black hair and gentle, pale-brown eyes. Taking those features out of context makes it sound like she’s the demure type, but she was totally gorgeous. I just zoned out, staring at her like, “*Whoaaa.*” Plus, her outfit was amazing. She had this traditional blue dress, white over-the-knee socks, and this pure-white, fluffy fur cape. Before I started studying for exams, I went through a whole bathtub’s worth of anime and manga and light novels. I’d seen tons of stuff like this in those stories, but this was the first time I’d ever seen someone wear a cape in real life. And then she had this...accessory, I guess it was? Thinking back on it now, maybe it was the real thing. She even had a black-and-white-striped tail, like a white tiger.

It was like, here comes a mysterious beauty in cosplay! I was so confused. I mean, if we were in Akihabara or someplace like that, that’d be one thing, but why in this neighborhood? But the girl pushed me aside and touched my bicycle. Even now, I still remember perfectly how nice she smelled when she pushed me out of the way.

“Oh, it’s the chain, huh? Lemme see for a sec.”

I was anxious. Not ’cause some stranger was touching my bike or anything like that. But what if she got her clothes dirty? I mean, they looked expensive. I knew that costume had to be pricey.

The girl hooked the chain in diagonally and spun the pedals, fixing it up in a flash.

“Th-thank you.”

“Oh, no, no, I’m just glad I could help ya out. More importantly...” She held both her hands out to me. Her fingers were slim and her palms were white and pretty, but they were black with bicycle oil. I freaked out and pulled out my handkerchief to scrub at her hands. But I’d forgotten—since I’d been fiddling with the chain myself, my own hands were all black, too. Handkerchief aside, everything my hands had touched were blackened, and I was freaking myself into a panic.

“Um, that ain’t what I meant,” she said. “Well, for now, let’s just go wash up.” She tugged me by the hand to a nearby fountain, where we washed side by side. Man, seeing her up close, she was *so* cute. Oh, and she had a mole like a teardrop. I was zoning out, thinking, *Man, she’s so adorable*, when suddenly, she looked at me. That sure startled me. I think I actually jumped. But she didn’t seem to mind at all as she said, “Oh yeah. I have to give ya this, don’t I? Sorry.”

As she waved her hands to flick off the water, she plopped something into my hands—it was clearly some of those fugashi snacks. Not the plastic-wrapped, store-bought kind, but the type you’d find at a little candy shop run by some old lady... They were all different sizes and shapes.

I looked back at the girl with this awful half smile, like, “*What the heck would I do with this?*”

She seemed confused, too, but not as much as I was. “I wanna trade you this for somethin’.”

“Pardon?”

“A trade. Like an exchange. Please? Anythin’s good.”

This conversation barely counted as a conversation, but as we talked, the girl was still shaking water off her hands. But focusing on the conversation must have distracted her. It was like something suddenly occurred to her, and she shook her hand right into the telephone pole, hard, and part of it ripped clean off with a *bang!* The concrete exploded like a shotgun shot...not like I’ve ever seen a shotgun, though. The flakes of concrete made dents in the wall of the library, *thunk, thunk*.

The girl looked back and forth between the telephone pole and the wall with an expression on her face like, “*Oh crap.*” I looked at her, and...I dunno. At any rate, I was surprised and I guess kinda glad, too. It was the first time in my ten-odd years of life that a manga scene had happened to me. Thinking about it now, I suppose I was really happy about it.

I jumped on that as hard as I could. I think my eyes were probably sparkling. “Are you an Esper? Mutant? Superpowered? A visitor? Alien? Superhuman? Cyborg? Robot? Dimensional traveler? The chosen one? A god? Experimental subject? Sorcerer? A different species?”

“Pardon?”

“Super-soldier? Immortal? An awakened being? An apostle? Divine vassal? Ninja? Magical girl?”

“Huh? How did you know I’m a magical girl...?”

“Magical girl?! You’re a magical girl, huh?!”

“Uh, well, um...”

“Please. I won’t tell anyone. So could you please tell me your story?” I was so enthusiastic about it, I don’t really know if I was grabbing her or begging her. I doubt I’ve ever been that hungry for anything in my life. I didn’t want my first manga-like experience to end there. I was just totally, single-mindedly desperate for this.

“It really is a secret,” she said, and she told me her situation.

The girl’s name was Blue Comet.

“Th-that’s an awesome name.”

“Well, it’s kinda like a stage name.”

I had thought magical girls were only fiction, and now that I’d found out they were real, my heart was fluttering hard as I listened to her story.

Blue Comet was being tested to see if she was qualified to inherit the name of her teacher, Lapis Lazuline. The test was for her to help people in trouble around town and make trades with those people until she could upgrade what she had into something better. If she could get ahold of an amazing item that would satisfy her master—she hadn’t been told precisely what would qualify—by the end of the day, she would pass the test.

Listening to her explain this stuff so politely to me, I was sure she was the real deal. If I missed this chance, I’d never get another one. I’d live a good life or a bad one, and it’d end without any wondrous or fantastical experiences. No matter how good or bad my life turned out, I knew it’d be ordinary.

“Blue Comet.”

“Yeah?”

“If we’re doing a trade, then take this.” I took my fountain pen out of my bag and showed it to her. I’d bought it with my New Year’s money that year. I think it cost about 5,000 yen. It was pretty comfortable to use, and it was super valuable to me. But if this was the price I had to pay for a taste of real wonder, I wasn’t going to skimp. I offered what was probably the most expensive item I owned to this girl.

“Ohhh, that’s a full rank up from fugashi snacks. Thanks so much.”

She reached out to take it, but I pulled the fountain pen back, bringing it to my chest. “So...there’s one thing I want to ask of you.”

“What is it?”

“I’ll trade this item with you...so in exchange, could I go with you?”

I was sure she’d say no. While I was thinking about how to complain when she did, she actually agreed. “If that’s your condition for the trade, I’ve got no choice, then.”

I called my mother to tell her that a friend’s parents were off at some relative’s funeral, so I’d decided to stay over to hang out and study. I’ve basically always been a straitlaced daughter, so I don’t think she was suspicious of me. And I got Blue Comet to pretend to be my friend and talk on the phone. I was a little uneasy about that, since her casual “Heyaaa, ’sup!” greeting was not like anything a friend of mine would say.

“Oh yeah,” Blue Comet said then, “I ain’t asked your name, huh?”

“Oh, it’s Miharuru Yatsu.”

“Ohhh. Miharuru-cchi, eh?”

“Um...cchi?”

“If a name ends in *ru*, ya add *cchi*. If it ends in *ko*, then *chan*, right? And when it’s *yo*, ya end it with *shi*.”

Frankly, I didn’t really understand what she was talking about, but made it look like I did and nodded. I mean, I didn’t even get what magical girls were in the first place. Maybe the real thing wasn’t what I was familiar with. So I thought, *Oh, so this is a magical-girl rule.*

Magical girls really are mysterious. I could catch up with her eventually if I pedaled my bicycle as hard as I could, but I think I was slowing her down anyway. She would stop and glance back at me with a look that said, *"You coming?"* She seemed like she felt sorry for me, like, *"Sucks that bicycles can't climb up telephone poles or get up on roofs, huh?"*

I was wondering how she tracked down people who were in trouble, so I asked.

"My intuition tells me, y'know? It's like, *Oh, I think there's one around here,*" she answered vaguely.

And maybe she really did just have an amazing intuition. She pointed in one direction, then kept on running that way for fifteen minutes. In front of this little train station, there was an old woman talking with this white guy who looked like he was a backpacker. The old lady was tiny, and the white guy was kinda scary. He was two heads taller than me, and his voice was loud, too. He was trying to complain about something, but the old woman didn't seem to understand and was just confused. A bunch of people around were watching, but all they did was give concerned looks, and nobody came in to help.

Blue Comet zipped in between them and started talking to the guy. Well, it was less like they were talking and more like...I dunno. It was baffling, like they were both speaking two totally different languages, but for some reason, they could communicate...pointing to the ticket vending machine, pointing to the railway platform, and then at the end, the two of them smiled and hugged, and the foreign guy cheerfully waved at her as he disappeared, heading off to the platform.

"Um...what was that?"

"He didn't know how to get to the station he wanted, so I gave him directions."

"Did you understand what he was saying?"

"Nope, not at all. But well, my intuition just gives me a sorta vague idea."

Her intuition. Is this a power magical girls have?

Blue Comet told the old lady what was up, keeping the important parts secret.

The old lady was like, “Kids these days play such interesting games,” and traded the fountain pen for her handkerchief. It was a white one, with elegant violets embroidered on it...it looked pretty expensive.

After that, Blue Comet kept on trading up from one item to the next.

She ran up buildings like, *da-da-da-da!* Yeah, she wasn’t climbing them—she was running up them. She’d zip on up, and then—*zoom!* She’d vanish only to *zoom!* appear again in search of people in trouble. It took everything I had just trying to keep up with her.

For a fussy kid who refused to budge, she sketched up an illustration of a character and gave it to them as a present, then she did a spoon-bending trick... I think what actually happened there is that she was just crazy strong, but she stopped the kid from crying.

“You’re good at drawing, huh?” I said to her.

“Well, a magical girl can’t make her livin’ just by bein’ a magical girl. My master said if ya learn a skill, then you’ll be set at times when ya need it.”

When she ran into an office worker struggling in the bathroom because she couldn’t figure out how to do her makeup quickly when she had to hurry to make it to a mixer, Blue Comet put together a new look in a flash. I saw what the lady looked like before, so I can say this—she was like a different person, like way too pretty, I mean, it was practically fraud. The lady seemed touched.

“You’re good at makeup, too, huh?” I said.

“Even when you’re transformed into a magical girl, your real face kinda shows through. So I’ve gotta hide it with makeup, or you could figure out my true identity. That’s another somethin’ my master taught me.”

A couple of guys came to try to pick us up. Both of them had really bright-colored hair.

That was exciting in a different sort of way than mystical fantastical stuff. I didn’t even know any girls in my class who’d gotten hit on in the street. Maybe partly because I went to this straitlaced private school or maybe ’cause middle school is too early for that...I think.

I was wondering, *Does getting picked up count as helping people?* But the two guys were like, “Let’s hang out, just for a little while!” and “Think of it like you’re helping us out.”

Blue Comet was stoked about this, like, “If this is helpin’ out, then I’ve gotta do it!” and she pulled me by the hand to karaoke... It was the first time I’ve ever gone to karaoke without an adult, so I was so tense. I don’t remember what I sang or how. I just tried to fill the time by eating pizza and pasta.

Blue Comet guzzled down drinks, forcing the guys to keep up with her as they sang hard, and before I knew it, the two guys were so drunk they were nearly ready to pass out. When Blue Comet said she wanted to make a trade, one guy offered this silver, dully shining chain...I guess you call that stuff sterling silver? So he held that out to her, and then in less than five minutes, he was lying on the sofa, snoring loudly.

“Toxins generally don’t work on us, so no matter how much I drink, I won’t get drunk.”

“Oh.”

“And if ya sing while you drink, ya get drunk faster. My master taught me that drinkin’ someone down like this and then takin’ ’em home is... Oh, I’m not doin’ it this time, y’know? This is for when there’s someone you’re really into.”

“O-oh...”

*What sort of master is this?* Probably no one good.

Compared with that, I think grabbing the collar of a little kid who’d thoughtlessly hopped out into traffic on his way back from cram school to save him was more respectable. Before I could even think, *Ah!* she’d already done it. She was so fast, I couldn’t see her.

“Our spinal reflexes are way faster and can do way more than normal humans, and if ya train it up, you can make it so that when the time comes, you can act fast...or so my master said.”

“That’s pretty amazing.”

“Apparently, if ya master it, ya move without even thinkin’ ’bout it. My

master said that even if your brain stops completely, you can move just a little. I think she was jokin', though."

"Ah...ah-ha-ha..."

When Blue Comet made that kid stop crying, she'd exchanged the handkerchief for a scarf from the kid's mother, and when she did the lady's makeup, she swapped the scarf for earrings, and when they sang karaoke and ate and drank, she got the silver chain for the earrings.

Then she'd saved this elementary schooler. But there was no way a kid on the way home from cram school would have anything good, right? But she had to trade with him. So she gave the kid the silver chain and got a tiny doll in exchange. It was a figure of a character from a *shounen* manga...one of those things you get with *ramune* candy. Basically, a cheap toy.

Ultimately, I'd found out about this game 'cause of the fugashi, then I'd gotten involved, so I guess it's appropriate that we ended up with a toy that comes with candy, sorta... The kid seemed happy about the silver chain, though. He was like, "This is so cool! Awesome!" But we'd spent all that time gradually getting better items only to jump right back to square one, basically.

It was already pretty late at night. My cell phone displayed the time ten thirty. Right when I was thinking, *If she starts over now, will she make it on time?* Blue Comet broke into a run.

"Hey!" I said. "What is it?"

"I've got a feeling there's something good over this way!"

I stubbornly pedaled away on my bicycle. Blue Comet was probably slowing down for me, but I still had a hard time keeping up. I was out of breath and pushing my thighs, and I was bound to be in pain the next day.

I'm not sure how far she ran, but before I knew it, we were out of the downtown area, and as the streetlights thinned, we came to a place where you'd be more likely to hear stray dogs howling than people talking. Here and there, the asphalt had peeled away, so it wasn't a good place to be riding a bicycle after dark. I got off my bicycle right about the same moment Blue Comet stopped...and I think it was less than a minute after that when the man stepped

out of the shadow of a building.

I was startled. I inched back without even thinking. The man's head was shaved, and he wore a black suit, gold-and-silver-striped necktie, and a deep-red shirt...basically, like he was on the wrong side of the law. And considering where we were, it didn't seem like he could be anything else.

The man approached Blue Comet seemingly without hesitation. Seeing him up close, his suit looked ready to burst. He was bulging with muscles, and I trembled by myself, wondering who would be able to stop him if he lost it.

"Are you the 'magical girl'?" His voice sounded no less threatening than I'd assumed.

"Yep," said Blue Comet.

"Is that so? It's a little early for our appointment, but...it helps me out that you're early."

"Glad to be helpful. 'Cause helpin' people is my business," Blue Comet replied cheerfully, as if she didn't acknowledge him as a scary person.

The scary guy's shoulders shook with muffled laughter. "I like that. Yeah, your business is helping people, I guess. I heard your calling card was a doll, though..."

"I do have a doll."

When Blue Comet showed him the character figure from the candy pack she'd just gotten from the elementary school kid, the scary-looking guy muttered, "A puppet-master, huh," and nodded twice, then handed over a Duralumin case. "I've told the master of your request. The reward is just what you asked for. If you need to convert it to cash, feel free to do it yourself."

"Oh, I can't take cash."

"Well, now you have it."

Still facing us, the scary-looking man was about to shuffle off backward when Blue Comet called out, "Hold on. I'll be in trouble if ya don't take this doll."

"Uh, I don't need it."

“Ya said I helped ya out, ain’cha?”

“Yeah, you did.”

“Then we trade. That’s the rule.”

“Is that...so? I ain’t really followin’, though.” Glaring at the toy with a serious expression, just as he had when he’d come out, the scary-looking guy disappeared into the shadow of the building... Actually, I think he was more than scary-*looking*. The whole time I watched the scary guy disappear, I’d been holding my breath—even though I was totally out of breath from all that constant cycling.

“Was that...someone you know...?”

“Nope. Total stranger.”

The Duralumin case was not locked. When Blue Comet opened it, there was a soft-looking wine-red cloth spread inside. The center of the eight protrusions firmly held a gem. Yes, it was a gem. Just as I was finally able to breathe, my breath was taken away again. The stone was blue, about the size of a baby’s fist, and cut beautifully... Well, there’s no way it was real, right? I mean, how much would that even be worth? Or maybe depending on the stone, even a big one could be cheap, I guess. I don’t know a lot about gems, though, so I have no idea.

Blue Comet gently shut the lid of the Duralumin case and extended her hand to me. I kinda vaguely shook back, but maybe what she’d wanted was a high five. I remember clearly how soft her palm was.

“Mission complete! This’ll be enough to satisfy my master!”

“C-congratulations.”

I’d thought for sure she was going to fail, but the way she just forced her way to success at the end was like, I dunno... I dunno. Maybe that’s what magical girls are all about.

And that was the end of my mysterious, fantastical experience. After that, me and Blue Comet went to an always open family restaurant to eat and chat... It was fun, but it wasn’t a very mysterious or fantastical ending.

I haven't had any mysterious experiences since that day. Good things have happened, like I managed to pass the entrance exams for the school I wanted into...but I don't have a boyfriend, no.

I still feel like I'd like to become a magical girl. I mean, she really seemed like she was having so much fun, being one. But it must be hard. I wonder which is harder—that or getting a boyfriend?

So then I...I... Huh? What was I just talking about?



Letting her white-streaked hair down to her back, she passed her arms through her deep-green jacket. The middle-aged woman left the cafe, the automatic door whirring shut behind her. She folded her arms, then raised them up over her head, still folded, to stretch her back. You could hear it cracking.

“Hey, hey, master.”

The woman glanced to her side to look at the girl in a school uniform. Her eyes seemed to sparkle with expectation.

“Was it a good idea to erase her memories?”

“Those memories of hers you read were everything, based on what she told us, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Then it's best to erase them.” The “master” began walking through the commercial district, where closed shutters called some attention to themselves.

The girl followed after her. “Won't it be sad if nobody remembers the second anymore?”

“Don't you bother with that sentimentality. You don't want the second's misconduct to be adversely affecting you when you're about to become the third, do you? It seems to me as if she was lacking when it came to trying to hide her true identity. She didn't get the idea that a magical girl should keep herself secret and out of view.”

“Isn't that because of the way you taught her?”

“Yes, that might be the case. And so to avoid incurring the censure of the Magical Kingdom, I really do have to erase the girl’s memories of Blue Comet.”

“I don’t know...”

“I do.” The master stopped walking and turned back to the girl. The way her eyes drooped seemed sad, but the way the corners of her mouth lifted made her seem glad, too. Wearing that expression, she said this:

“Everyone else may forget, but I will remember that girl. That’s enough, isn’t it?”

## Clantail's Friends

This story is set immediately after the game in *Magical Girl Raising Project: Restart* ends.



She got out of the bath, scrubbing at her hair with the towel as she checked her magical phone to find she'd received a message from the Magical Kingdom. It said they wanted her to measure her height and weight before and after transforming into a magical girl and reply with that information. They said they were putting together statistics on differences in physique before and after transforming.

She'd been getting a lot of messages like this lately. Someone had told her that since there were a lot of magical girls causing problems, the Magical Kingdom would just pretend to check on them by sending them pointless messages. She got the feeling it was Pflé who had told her this, but maybe it was Shadow Gale. She was really bad at remembering who said what.

Either way, Nene Ono wondered what a magical girl should do if her height and weight did indeed vary.

While she blow-dried her hair, she reread the message.

"Neneeee, make sure not to catch a chill after your bath."

"I knooow."

Someone called from outside the bathroom, and Nene replied as she reread the message one more time. If this message was just for show, then they probably didn't care about getting anything that accurate. So then it should be fine to just send them the measurements of her most standard transformation, the pony. But when she considered the negative effects a careless reply could have on the statistics, it seemed less fine.

So should she record the two extremes of her sizes and compose a reply that referenced the possibilities, like "Height between 3~35 feet"? But if they were putting together statistics, that could change the numbers, too. So maybe she should measure the size of each and every animal she could transform into, calculate the average and send that information to them? She really didn't know what to do.

"Neneeee. If you're done with the hair dryer, then put it back beside the washing machine."

"I wiiill."

Maybe the best answer was a reply asking what she should do. But wouldn't that irritate them? If these messages weren't genuine, what if they got annoyed at her for overthinking it?

Troubles like this constantly plagued Nene. People might tell her to "read between the lines," but how were you supposed to read something you couldn't see?

Lots of people thought she liked animals, but she wasn't actually that obsessed with them. She just saw them as normal. At the end of the day, she found them all average—both the ones people tended to hate, like spiders, centipedes, cockroaches and earthworms, and the cute ones, like dogs and cats. It seemed that as other people saw it, simply approaching them all equally made it look as if she loved them.

She sat down in her chair and looked around her room at all the stuffed animals, spiders, snakes, and other things that overflowed over her dresser and bookshelves. She hadn't bought all this. Her parents had it in their heads that she liked such creatures, so every time they found a stuffed animal, they would buy it for her, and that's how her room had ended up in this state. Not because she had a special love for them.

"Neneeee. Which would you rather have for dinner: taro stem with *kasujiru* soup, or *nozawana* greens with *kasujiru* soup?"

"*Nozawanaaaa.*"

But maybe she did love animals, relatively speaking, compared with how she felt about humans. She clearly wasn't good with people.

First of all, she had a bad memory for faces. Everyone in the same age group all looked the same. And once people found out she didn't remember them, they'd get offended. What's more, she often stuck her foot in her mouth and upset people. Because of that, she figured it was best to just say nothing, but it wasn't. Others would call her unsociable and get mad over that instead. Nene meant well and acted with good intentions, but it was not taken that way.

Being around people was hard. She'd lived with her parents for fourteen years, and she couldn't reach a complete understanding with them. And even her mother and father, who had been together since before she was born,

didn't understand each other perfectly. They often butted heads over whether some comedian was boring or funny, or some actress was beautiful or not... Fortunately, this didn't seem to mean their relationship was a bad one.

Being with animals was more comfortable. Nene understood the idiosyncrasies of each and every one of the neighborhood stray cats, including where they liked to be petted. She could even see individuality in the spiders in her yard from their color, gloss, size, and the shape of their webs. You couldn't do this with humans.

It was only just recently that Nene had made her first human friends. In the game, she'd just behaved the same as she always did, but she must have appeared taciturn and calm, since the role of leader had been thrust upon her. Commanding a group had been very difficult, painful, and scary, and none of her memories of it were good, but it had also been fun, and remembering the good times made her sad.

Back then, she'd turned her sadness into anger. She'd had to, or she surely would have lost. Now she couldn't do that anymore.

"Neneeee. Dinner will be done in five minuuutes!"

"Okay."

Nene wondered if maybe she wouldn't be able to make any more human friends. Currently, her candidates for new friends were Pfle and Shadow Gale, but she couldn't help feeling that when she'd met with them the other day, she'd made Shadow Gale angry.

On that day, Nene noticed that Shadow Gale had black lines drawn around her eyes with a magic marker, like glasses rims. Nene had stared at her, wondering what the heck it was, which had probably hurt Shadow Gale. She couldn't help feeling that her new friend had been in a bad mood the whole day.

In the end, even if she avoided saying anything, her thoughts would show on her face. Even though she wasn't exactly in any place to be complaining about someone's fashion sense.

*If only I were the kind of person who could speak more, well, tactfully...or be*

*more tactful...*, she thought, but she also figured that this was just the sort of person she was. She didn't like being such a worrywart, but without this anxiety, she wouldn't be herself, she was sure.

If Pechka were there, then what would she say? She would cook for her, most definitely. Pechka had known that was the most comforting thing. Nonako would have laughed it off while Rionetta would perhaps have said something snarky: "My, how unpleasant."

The magical phone in her hand rang. Shadow Gale was calling. Nene had only just been feeling bad about her, so she was a little startled but answered anyway. Were they going to have a meeting about their grave visits?

"Can I come over right now?" Shadow Gale burst out without so much as a greeting. She sounded intense. She rattled on. "I just can't take living in close quarters with someone like *her* anymore. I don't want to see her face right now. Can you believe this? She just said she did it because it got interesting reactions out of people! And that prank went on for over a week, you know! Scribbling on my face! She's not a little kid! And she devised all these schemes to make sure I'd never once find out, stealing away any opportunity I'd have to look in the mirror or erasing the scribbles right before I looked... And then when I finally noticed and got mad at her, she was like, 'You're so immature, Mamori.' Damn it! Just remembering it makes me mad! I *refuse* to live with that devil anymore. I've made up my mind to live my life as a *human being*. That jerk-ass! I'm so sorry to cause you any trouble, but could I possibly ask this favor from you, even for just a few days? I'll take the time to come up with what to do next, somehow. I'm honestly very sorry. You're the only person I know who I don't think would report me to that fiend. You're the only person I can count on."

"I'll be waiting."

"Thank you! I'm in your debt! I'm coming right away!"

Nene hung up the phone.

Pfle and Shadow Gale really were close.

"Neneeee. Dinneeer."

"Coming!" Figuring she'd have to tell her parents she had a friend coming,

Nene rose from her chair. Her mother must have thought she didn't have any. She imagined her surprise when she saw her daughter had a friend from school coming over. It wasn't bad.

## Afterword

Heya, hello, hello. It's been a long time. This is Endooou.

I've switched things up this time by doing some short stories. Yes, this is my first collection of short stories. It's fifteen treats for the price of one. There have been some edits and such made, so it's different from the stories that were posted online. Comparing the two might be a little entertaining for you. I hope you enjoy the exploits of these thirty-three magical girls.

Yes, thirty-three. That's the number of people you need for a tournament, if you count one as a reserve player or have her barge in halfway through the games. Or you could make her a commentator or a judge, or depending on the character, perhaps first aid responder or ring girl would work. But anyway, when you have this many characters, you start off with, "Starring the whole cast of magical girls!!" and add in the fun tagline, "You don't need a huuuge novel for this!" as you bring out all the characters within your allotted page count.

The idea of making all thirty-three magical girls appear was suggested to me as I was close to the final stages of writing these short stories. I was feeling casual about it at first, thinking, *It'll be a blast! Lots of fun! Yeah, let's do this!* But it was actually really hard. Thirty-three characters is basically twice the normal number. Even if I didn't have to kill anyone, it's not an insubstantial number of people. It's so many, even the great samurai Mataemon Araki would collapse with exhaustion before he could finish.

So I asked my editor, S-mura-san, "Um, can I cut out the afterword? I don't think I can fit all thirty-three in there."

"Please don't cut out the afterword."

"But I don't have enough pages."

"So then just put them in the afterword (lol)."

S-mura-san granted me the rare honor of most distinctly feeling the (lol) in a

real-life conversation. S-mura-san, thank you very much (monotone).

Fortunately, it turned out that no poor magical girl was forced into the afterword for the sake of meeting a quota. Thank you, magical girls.

I have one announcement. Aside from the short stories in this book, I have a short story called “Short Story in Commemoration of the Short Story Collection Release,” which seems like it would cause the term “short story” to lose all meaning, and the plan is for it to be published on the “Monthly KonoRano” section of the official site of KonoRano Publishing soon after this is released. Unfortunately, due to circumstances with page count, this story, which stars Ripple and Snow White, has been pushed out. It’s long, compared with these other short stories, so I hope that makes it just that much more substantial reading! Please do read it.

To everyone at the editing department who’s given me guidance and to S-mura-san, who even showed concern over my stomach and throat because I got myself sick somehow (perhaps reading this afterword will make that seem less believable, but seriously—really!), thank you so much.

Marui-no-sensei, thank you very much. I know I placed a particularly unusual burden on you this time around. But the illustration of Detec Bell and Lapis Lazuline switching costumes made me pump a fist. And it’s got Cherna Mouse, too, so the whole party is there, huh? I think the other girl has gone transparent and is hanging around the center of the illustration.

And finally, to all my readers: Thank you very much for buying this book. Please wait just a little while for further developments.



**Thank you for buying this ebook, published by Yen On.**

To get news about the latest manga, graphic novels, and light novels from Yen Press, along with special offers and exclusive content, sign up for the Yen Press newsletter.

**Sign Up**

Or visit us at [www.yenpress.com/booklink](http://www.yenpress.com/booklink)