

Asari Endou

Illustration by
Marui-no

5

limited

(1)

Magical Girl
Raising Project

An anime-style illustration of a young girl with short, wavy brown hair and large green eyes. She is wearing a dark brown pilot's uniform with gold buttons and a matching cap with goggles. She has a pink heart on her cheek and is holding a pink heart-shaped lollipop. The background is filled with many pink hearts of various sizes. The title 'Magical Girl Pastel Project' is written in a stylized, colorful font on the left side.

Magical Girl Pastel Project

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“That is *not* common knowledge.”

Nozomi had thought that Mine was more straitlaced. She was speaking politely enough, but she was acting very chummy now. Perhaps she felt more familiar now as a fellow magical girl. Nozomi’s sense of dignity as a teacher had crumbled and disappeared. Though it was doubtful she’d ever had any in the first place.

Weddin’s magic was to compel people to keep their promises. No matter how casual it was, if you made any kind of promise to her, then you would have to keep it. If you said, “I’m not going to hit you,” and then raised your hand to try to slap her cheek, your arm would go numb, and you’d be unable to move it.

“That’s some scary magic...,” said Nozomi.

“It epitomizes the fearsome nature of marriage.”

“How can you say something like that when you’re underage?”

“It’s common knowledge.”

“It’s the kind of common knowledge you need to get rid of.”

While they were chattering away, Captain Grace, sitting on the edge of the roof, suddenly brought up something. “Now that we’re magical girls, don’t you guys feel like our names should have a theme or something? When you’ve got a unifying idea like fruits, or colors, or fire/water/earth/wind or something, you feel like a team, right?”

Weddin, Captain Grace, Funny Trick, Postarie, Tepsekemei. They were far from thematically consistent. Their names and outfits were all over the place, as if each one of them was a character from a different story. Kuru-Kuru Hime in particular stuck out like a sore thumb for being the only one whose name was in Japanese, which made sense, given she was a Japanese teacher.

It felt like her name didn’t quite match how cute she looked, festooned with ribbons. If Nozomi had chosen a name for herself, she would have gone with something fancier, though she would have kept in mind how the students saw her.

When she asked Toko, “Why did I end up with a name like this?” Toko puffed

up her chest proudly and replied, “Inspiration struck!” Before the palm-sized fairy’s confident smile, Nozomi didn’t feel like pressing her any further about it. When she asked, “Can I at least change it?” Toko’s response was anything but dreamy: “You need connections with higher-ups for that.”

Weddin shrugged as her lips formed a cynical smirk. “I think it may be fine not to have any sense of cohesion. We’re a ragtag team of odds and ends. That’s undeniable.”

Without missing a beat, Rain Pow countered, “That’s not true! We’re all allies from the same school.”

“No. It’s not as if we’re real friends with trust or anything.” Weddin gave a light nod. “Either way, we don’t need a theme.”

“But, like, don’t magical girls have to have that sort of thing?”

Kuru-Kuru Hime didn’t see anything wrong with Captain Grace’s argument. In the long-running TV anime *Star Queen*, the girls were all named after constellations, and each of them used a special move based on their namesake. With the *Cutie Healer* series, each new series starred new magical girls, and their motif changed for each series, too. Kuru-Kuru Hime understood the desire to have all the names unified on a theme in a group of magical girls.

Weddin touched her middle finger between her eyes, then removed it again, wearing a look on her face that said, “*Whoops.*” She’d probably forgotten she wasn’t wearing glasses and had tried to adjust them. “Are we even magical girls in the first place?”

“What? Of course we are. That’s what Toko said.”

“I think it would be more accurate to say that we aren’t.”

They were girls living in modern Japan—well, aside from the one adult and one animal—but they had acquired mysterious powers, cute outfits, and pretty faces by means of a fairy who had come to them from the Magical Kingdom. What’s more, the fairy herself was using the term “magical girls.” There was no reason not to call them that.

Funny Trick put her finger on the end of her chin. “For better or for worse...I think we are.”

“Toko has explained these things herself,” said Weddin, “and I’ve personally done various experiments, as well. As expected, our physical capabilities have improved remarkably. I wouldn’t say this is characteristic of a magical girl, but rather of a beautiful fighting girl or battle girl.”

Kuru-Kuru Hime tilted her head and went, “*Hmm?* Aren’t we the beautiful fighting-girl type of magical girls?”

“That’s something else, isn’t it?”

“But we were bestowed with magical powers.”

“In this case, the source of our powers has nothing to do with it. Some works still fit within the genre of magical girl even when their powers are ninjutsu or science-based.”

“But Star Queen and Cutie Healer are both magical girls, right?”

“No. Star Queen and Cutie Healer are both beautiful fighting girls, not magical girls.”

Weddin informed them that originally speaking, the magical-girl character type focused mainly on using magic in everyday life, and that they should clearly be distinguished from beautiful fighting girls. With the latter, both their enemies and allies had magic, or at least some power that was close to it. “The only reason the term ‘magical girl’ has come to include a separate genre as well is because their fans are so arrogant.”

Clenching her fists so hard her fingers turned red as she passionately explained, she looked completely different from the girl Nozomi normally saw: the coolheaded class representative Mine Musubiya. The flame of the candle decorating Weddin’s veil blazed higher. Was that candle linked to her mental state?

“When the majority of the show’s cast comprises named characters involved in combat, rules like *You can’t reveal your true identity* and *Magic is a secret* might as well not exist. Does the protagonist’s magic-school classmate count as a magical girl? Does the elf girl who left the forest to become an adventurer because she wanted to see the human world count as a magical girl? No, they do not. They are not magical girls. They are neither beautiful fighting girls nor

magical girls.”

“Um... But, like, even in a fantasy story where magic is commonplace, there are characters with a magical-girl motif, right?” Funny Trick tried to argue back, even as Weddin pressed her.

But Weddin brushed her argument aside. “You would just call that a character with a magical-girl motif. If you take a real person...let’s say Nobunaga Oda. A character based on him is never going to be the real Nobunaga Oda.”

Captain Grace pouted. She did not seem to be happy. Kuru-Kuru Hime could easily see this getting annoying if she didn’t step in, so she attempted to support Grace’s side. “But there are works that have ‘magical girl’ in the title, right?”

“No, Ms. Himeno. That’s just having magical girls as a motif. That doesn’t make it a magical-girl story.” With a cough, Weddin continued. “Plus, though you mentioned thematic names such as those in *Cutie Healer* and *Star Queen*, the trope of themed names is not derived from the magical-girl genre but from *sentai* superhero shows. The genealogy of both those series can be traced back not to magical-girl series, but *sentai* shows. So in other words, you can tell from this that there is a direct relationship between these shows and the beautiful fighting-girl genre.”

“You’re just an *otaku* splitting hairs.” Captain Grace’s single cutting remark knocked down all of Weddin’s argumentation. Grace glared at Weddin, and Weddin gave a slight flinch but glared sharply back at her. Funny Trick tugged at Grace’s sleeve but was brushed aside, while Rain Pow scowled a bit. Postarie was so flustered, you had to feel sorry for her.

Kuru-Kuru Hime clapped her hands twice and stood. “Come on, that’s enough pointless chatter. Let’s start practicing our group tactics next.” She didn’t quite manage to dispel the hostility, but still, pointing out what they were supposed to be doing next should coax their emotions in a new direction.

“Hold on, please.” Weddin raised her hand. “There’s something more important that we have to decide first.”

“...And what was that?”

Weddin stood swiftly enough to make her skirts flutter up and spread both her hands. “We have to decide on a leader!”

After an unproductive debate between Captain Grace and Weddin, it was decided that the question of who should be their leader should be resolved democratically, and Weddin won by a single vote. Weddin instructed them to “go along with the leader’s decision if anything happens.” At first, nobody realized this was part of her magic, so nobody reacted, but after she’d repeated the same instruction three times, everyone finally figured out what she was trying to say. Though some were reluctant, some seemed to hate the idea, others were affable, and others showed no expression at all, they agreed.

It looks like things are settled for now, Kuru-Kuru Hime thought, but right then, she got a poke in the shoulder. She turned around to find Tepsekemei hovering there, legs crossed.

“What about Mei?”

Kuru-Kuru Hime didn’t understand what she was being asked, but she couldn’t reply that she didn’t understand what Tepsekemei meant, either. So all she answered was, “Believe in yourself.”

Captain Grace (Time remaining: eighteen hours, fifty-three minutes)

Captain Grace, a.k.a. Umi Shibahara, had a secret base.

The term “secret base” was indeed pirate-like; the reality, not so much. It wasn’t a treasure island or an underwater cave. It was an apartment building located on the outskirts of B City, in a former flophouse district. It was old enough that anyone who was around when it had been built was long gone, and no one was living there now, either. The location was inconvenient, so even if it were eventually renovated, whether or not people would actually occupy it was anyone’s guess. The same was true for knocking it down to make a parking lot.

Nothing could really be done about this property, which had belonged to her grandfather, so when Umi had pestered him for a secret hideout, he’d handed it over to her. Umi owned it legally, too.

She had been bringing in furniture and household items bit by bit for a long

time now, making it more comfortable to live in. There were locks and working utilities, too. Though it looked run-down, Umi thought it passed for a fine home. As a secret base for magical girls, it was a little lacking, but there was no way around that.

Once their discussions and magic demonstrations were over, the group decided to break for one hour. Grace and Funny Trick were seated facing each other at opposite ends of a mahogany table. On the table were two coffee cups and saucers. Captain Grace had brought these furnishings out from the vessel she could summon with her magic, a pirate ship that could race quickly across the water. Since the ship itself was pretty big, she had to choose the right place to summon it. She'd brought it out on the school sports fields after everyone had gone home, hauled out everything that seemed useful, and then dismissed it. Its furnishings were all magical items that wouldn't break, even when handled with the intense strength of magical girls.

Her expression uneasy, Funny Trick said to Grace, "Listen..."

"What?"

"Don't do that again."

"Do what?"

"You were arguing with Weddin."

"Oh, that." Grace snorted. Kayo had been like this ever since they'd been little. Umi got worked up easily, so it was Kayo's job to placate her and keep her in check. It was an appropriate personality for a partner of hers to have, but sometimes, she could be too timid. Umi wished Kayo would be a little bolder, even if to a lesser degree than Umi herself. "She's just getting cocky 'cause she's a little stronger than before. She said some stuff about being the leader, but it's not like that's official or anything. She's just a smug idiot."

"Maybe you could try to get along more."

"Maybe I should let her have it."

"That's exactly what I told you not to do!"

Captain Grace knocked back her steamed milk and banged her cup back down

on the table. She had been right to predict that a cup for magical girls would not break from such a shock, but the bottom of it hammered a circular indent in the mahogany table. Grace cursed quietly, and this time, she lowered the cup slowly. “You got a problem with what I’m doing, Kayo?”

“I don’t mean that...”

Kayo was timid, but when Umi did something, she would follow. That was what made her Umi’s partner. She hadn’t changed since back when they had read adventure stories together in the elementary school library.

“So you just have to be quiet and follow me, just like always. You won’t regret it. I’ll make sure you won’t come out on the losing end.”

Postarie (Time remaining: eighteen hours, forty minutes)

At Tatsuko’s side were Kaori and one other: the magical girl in the wedding dress. The three of them were sitting in a circle on the roof of the apartment building.

“Now, if you’d please take a look.”

Weddin passed a university notebook emblazoned with a *1* to Tatsuko. When she opened it, she found lines of tidy, small handwriting. It listed the unique characteristics of magical girls: strengthened physical capabilities; night vision; sharpened senses; no longer needing to eat, sleep, or expel waste; an unusual toughness; and that their transformed selves were beautiful girls. Then there were the rules: Try to avoid being seen by regular people as much as possible; don’t reveal your identity to anyone; and make sure to follow Toko’s orders. Recorded together with these things were some fairly detailed and specific numbers. Her handwriting was good. And painstaking, apparently. Every letter, without exception, had a tilt that rose diagonally up and to the right.

“So there’s this many benefits.”

Postarie looked up from the notebook and examined Weddin. There was something argumentative about her tone and her actions, which seemed to contradict her bridal-gown costume and its connotations of indisputable joy. Even her magical ability to force people to keep their promises was contentious.

“Toko promised that if we become full-fledged magical girls for her, then we

can stay that way forever. All these benefits would be a great advantage to our day-to-day lives. Oh! I was also thinking we could come up with a pose for when we all assemble. Do you have any ideas? I'm not quite sure if that's the sort of thing that magical girls do, but since there are seven of us, I think we could use our numbers to emphasize our beauty as a group."

"I see." Rain Pow was frequently offering appreciative interjections, like "Of course" and "I agree," to pacify Weddin, and after they parted ways, she exhaled a single tiny sigh.

"And so..." After splitting with Weddin, Rain Pow and Postarie caught Tepsekemei floating around above the road in front of the apartment building. Her body and her dancing-girl costume from Arabia or wherever were both half-transparent, like vapor, and they could see the building behind her. "You two want to know about Mei's magic."

"Yeah, we do."

It was fair to say that Tepsekemei had the skimpiest outfit of the group. Unlike the other girls, who looked "cute" or "cool," Postarie's first impression of her was "sexy."

Postarie also thought that she was by far the least sociable, too. It wasn't just that she didn't smile. Her expression didn't change at all. She kept a straight face, not showing anger or sadness or anything. It was normal for a group of young women to compete over their looks. And yet even in such an environment, Tepsekemei was unfriendly, blunt, and quite casual, seeming neither entertained nor bored.

Very often, a woman with such an attitude would be excluded from the group. Postarie, with more than ten years' experience of being excluded, knew this painfully well. From Postarie's perspective, Tepsekemei hovered high and away from the crowd, especially given she had not originally been a human. And not just in the literal sense.

"Since becoming a magical girl, Mei has realized something." The wind blew, and Tepsekemei's form wavered. "Mei is Mei. I am not myself. Mei was always Mei."

Postarie looked at Rain Pow beside her. She was smiling, but she must have

been just as baffled as Postarie was.

“Um, what might you mean by that?”

“Mei’s whole life was spent at the bottom of a hell she couldn’t crawl out of. Mei didn’t even notice it was the depths of hell or how everything in it was pain. That’s what Mei means by realizing something.”

Tepsekemei transformed into vapor once more, leaned against a rust-covered pillar, then wrapped herself around a disintegrating cardboard box soaked in rainwater. The box was ripped to scattered shreds with a light snapping sound. “Next thing you know, Mei’s able to do things like this. Mei can’t break anything too sturdy, though.” She slipped into a rain gutter and then ruptured it from the inside. “Mei can deliver messages.” She split into five Tepsekemeis and then again into ten. “Mei can use this to startle someone.” The ten forms fused to become one giant Tepsekemei. “Mei can go back to normal real quick.” She stabbed her pointer finger into her own head, and with a deflating sound, she returned to her original size. “Mei likes banging air into things.” She stretched her arms to five times their length, took the broken gutter in hand, and threw it into the air. Making a gun shape with her hand, she said the word “bang,” and in midair, the gutter burst open.

“Try hitting Mei,” she said.

“Huh? Me?” Rain Pow pointed to herself.

“Try.”

“Hey, I can’t just do that out of the—”

“Just do it.”

“But, like...” Rain Pow scratched the back of her head, turning toward Postarie with the weak smile of someone indeed at a loss. Then, without warning, she stepped toward Tepsekemei and took a swing at her. Before Postarie even had the time to be startled by her sudden move, Tepsekemei’s form changed like some amorphous creature, entwining Rain Pow’s arm mid-punch. When Tepsekemei turned back to normal, she had Rain Pow’s upper body held fast, her right elbow and shoulder in an arm lock. Tepsekemei knocked Rain Pow to the ground and held her down.

She then released her, took her hand, and pulled her up. Postarie cried out in surprise, clapping her hands, and Rain Pow, now on her feet, followed suit.

“Wow! That was amazing!”

“I didn’t even know how you pulled that last move on me!”

The both of them positively giddy, Postarie said, “That was so cool!” and they turned back to Tepsekemei only to be startled again.

Tepsekemei was looking at them with an expressionless face. “What do you guys think will happen now?”

Rain Pow looked at Postarie imploringly. Postarie gave a small shake of her head, looking back at Rain Pow. She didn’t understand what Tepsekemei was trying to say.

“Haven’t you noticed?”

“Um... Noticed what?”

“We’ve gained something amazing. Mei doesn’t want to lose it. That’s why Mei will fight. Making use of everything. Because of this life. Mei is Mei. Mei can’t die, if Mei wants to still be Mei. Dying was very scary. Mei didn’t know. But you should know. Isn’t that right?”

“Uhhh...yeah. I guess...that’s true.”

Tepsekemei floated cross-legged in the sky. Postarie didn’t know what she was looking at. Her gaze didn’t even seem focused in the first place. She was blinking and her eyes were moving, but it didn’t feel as if she was looking at anything. Her expression seemed fake, too.

“I wonder why. Thinking is so difficult.” Still floating, she rode the wind toward the mountain.

Neither Rain Pow nor Postarie could call out to stop her and so watched her go. Postarie wasn’t sure if, ultimately, she could just chalk this up to being a different species, or not.

Weddin (Time remaining: eighteen hours, twenty-two minutes)

It was safe to assume that Weddin had processed enough information to

satisfy her. She put her pen down and read over her notebook once more. This information should be useful when coordinating with others during combat.

The issue was sharing this information. Kuru-Kuru Hime was a teacher to begin with, so she had a good memory. Rain Pow absorbed things quickly as well, and she would even help Postarie out.

It was the remaining three who were the problems. Captain Grace didn't care to consider the finer details of things. And Funny Trick was always with her, so Weddin could hardly talk to her at all. Tepsekemei was a waste of effort. Weddin couldn't even tell if the girl was listening to what she was saying.

"Funny Trick's magic is to switch two hidden things, and Captain Grace's is a very fast ship. For Grace's magic, rather than just using the boat, using its equipment is the right choice—on land, at least."

"Got it."

"So then, what about your magic?"

"Mei eats air."

"...I don't think that's quite it, but let's go with that. And what about Funny Trick's magic?"

"Who's Funny Trick?"

"Okay. One more time, from the top."

Someone regarded as unintelligent might be called "monkey-brains." But compared to Tepsekemei pretransformation, even a monkey might be considered a genius.

It wasn't as if she had no desire to learn. She just *couldn't* learn. And it wasn't as if she couldn't learn *anything*. There were things she could and things she couldn't.

"Weddin's the leader."

"That's right."

"Why're you the leader?"

"Because it was decided democratically."

“But you’re weak.”

“...You may think so, but please don’t say it. And in the first place, how can you remember *my* name properly when you can’t remember anyone else’s at all?”

“Because you’re Weddin?”

Weddin held her head in her hands. As the class representative, she had tutored classmates with lower marks—to win over her teachers, of course. However, those people were human, and they attended a private school, so they’d all have to have the scholastic ability to get in, at least.

Right now, she was dealing with a being that, until yesterday, had been just a tortoise. Mine had fed it a number of times. She’d even thought it was cute. But she’d never thought of the creature as an equal.

—I mean, it’s a tortoise.

How on earth was she supposed to get her to learn?

As you’d expect, she was smarter now than when she was in her original form. Just understanding human language and being able to communicate took her beyond tortoise level. But question of her intelligence aside, the issue was that she had no habit of learning.

Unlike Grace, Tepsekemei had the desire to learn, so Weddin really did want to help her out somehow. Among all the members of their group, Tepsekemei’s magic could be particularly multipurpose in its use, be it in a support, reserve, or offensive role. So if she could work together with the rest of them, it would really strengthen their forces.

Weddin lifted her head, glancing up to see Tepsekemei staring at her with a terrifying expression, like a beast baring its fangs. Panicking, Weddin backed away, stepped on the skirt of her veil, and fell straight onto her butt. “Wh-what is it? If you’re unhappy about something, could you at least put it into words?”

Teeth still bared, Tepsekemei tilted her head, confused. “Mei is smiling.”

“Nobody smiles like that!”

“How should Mei smile?”

So Tepsekemei didn't know how to smile? Now that Weddin thought about it, tortoises didn't make facial expressions to communicate. Sea turtles would shed tears during spawning season, but they did that to expel salt from their eyes and not because they were sad or in pain.

"Um, well... First, lift your cheeks."

"Like this?"

"No, that's scary. Not like that. The cheeks go like *this*."

"Like this?"

"Ugh! Geez, this is tedious. I'll adjust your face myself, so please just remember how I put it." Touching Tepsekemei's face, Weddin adjusted the positions of her eyebrows and cheeks. When her fingertips touched her cheeks, she was startled by their softness. A magical girl's skin was smooth and silky.

"That tickles."

"Just deal with it."

Somehow, Weddin was able to make a shape resembling a smile. She took half a step back to examine Tepsekemei's face from various angles. It was a little stiff, but you could call it a smile. "Right, then remember this shape."

Before Weddin was done giving that instruction, Tepsekemei's expression returned to its original blank look. She looked up into the sky, muttered, "They're here," and disappeared with a whooshing sound.

Then, as Tepsekemei shot up into the sky, someone descended onto the roof of the apartment building with a *thump* to take her place. She wore a katana on her back and a fluttering scarf, and one of her eyes was closed with a large scar. Her shuriken-shaped hair clip and her costume, despite its chain mail-like parts, was ninja-themed.

CHAPTER 5

SHOWDOWN

Archfiend Pam (Time remaining: eighteen hours, fourteen minutes)

The enemy had let their guard down. They must have gotten cocky after driving away their pursuers once. Or had they judged their side was stronger, because of their numbers? Archfiend Pam hated people like that more than anything. Even when a fight felt easy, you had to give it your all. There was no such thing as certain victory.

The car drove along in the direction Mana's staff pointed, while above, Archfiend Pam caught sight of the enemy in her observations of the area. What looked like a group of magical girls was on the roof of an old apartment building, talking to one another.

On the battlefield, the one who found their opponent first would have the advantage.

Archfiend Pam immediately informed the others of her discovery, and they built their strategy. 7753 and Mana would be on standby in a safe place, while Hana would attack from the apartment entrance, Ripple from the roof, and Archfiend Pam from the sky above.

Archfiend Pam's magical phone rang. That was her cue to strike. She was looking down on the world below, deciding on the best moment to do it. Right when she was thinking, *Okay, let's go*, the opponent struck first. Though Archfiend Pam's attention had been focused elsewhere, she never let her guard down. She'd already been informed that one of their opponents could fly. She slipped out of the way of the enemy attack, which flew at her from below like the wind, and transformed one wing into the shape of a giant fist to punch them in a counterattack. She held back, so as not to kill her opponent.

But as the fist and her opponent crossed paths, the fist sank into her enemy's

face, and Archfiend Pam scowled. She had held back, but she'd never felt any sense of resistance in the first place. Her enemy's crushed face regenerated before her eyes.

Her appearance was reminiscent of an Arabian-style dancing girl. However, her body was faintly transparent.

—*She seems like a strong one.*

Noticing how happy this made her, Archfiend Pam hurriedly shook those feelings off. This wasn't the time.

The enemy threw something at her. Archfiend Pam changed one of her wings into a shield and tilted it to let the projectile slide off. It seemed what had flown at her was a ball of air, only middling in force. Even if it had hit, it probably wouldn't have killed her. *Maybe she's going easy on me*, Archfiend Pam thought as glee bubbled up within her once more.

The balls of air grew larger in number and intensity as they flew at her. Archfiend Pam responded by reinforcing her shield as she circled around the area. The enemy moved, too. She flew freely after Archfiend Pam with strange movements, elongating her torso, detaching her arms and such.

Archfiend Pam's magic was to manipulate her four wings in any way she pleased. They weren't just for flying. She could control every single thing about them at will: size, color, shape, speed, and hardness. She could also separate them from her body and have them act independently.

While Archfiend Pam was engaged with the enemy, she sent out two of her wings. One of them went to the apartment building below. She ordered it to storm in, back up her allies, and attack the enemy. Though it was only one, it was very good at continuous battle. It was slower and less accurate on its own than it was when Archfiend Pam was operating it directly, but it would beat down any normal magical girl, even a group of them. It would be able to support Ripple and Hana.

She turned the other wing into a giant winged eyeball and had it search the area for enemies. It could see as well as a telescope and observe the world below in detail. She ordered it to check on 7753 and Mana's station wagon and to immediately meet and strike back against any attacking foe, while prioritizing

the defense of their forces. She had considered leaving it by the station wagon from the beginning, but her wings weren't that smart when they were acting independently. She didn't know how the situation might change, either, so she wanted to keep her wings close as long as possible.

As Archfiend Pam sent off two of her wings on their own, the attack from her enemy continued. She tried turning her remaining two wings into blades to cut at the enemy, into whirling propellers, and even sticky traps. Although the enemy's form might temporarily come apart, she would return to her original state immediately. It wasn't working.

This enemy was strong. Archfiend Pam broke into a smile.

She enlarged her wings, making a sphere thirty feet in diameter to slam into her opponent.

She made them emit light in an attempt to blind her enemy.

It didn't work. Her opponent slipped through every smashing blow. Meanwhile, the pellets of air the enemy was tossing at her were sharp like blades. Her movements were becoming more and more intense, and she was slipping among her own air blades, trying to get close enough to grab Pam.

Gradually, Archfiend Pam came to understand: The enemy was air itself. Pam could cut it or hit it, but none of that would work. Her foe flew freely and quickly through the sky like wind. She would be captured by no one.

The dancing girl's expression never changed. She wasn't enjoying this, and neither did she seem frightened. She took Pam's strikes dispassionately and countered. Exactly the sort of attitude Archfiend Pam liked.

She was indeed strong. But not someone Pam couldn't beat.

Archfiend Pam took the wing she'd been using as a shield and spread it to cover her whole body completely. She would look like a pitch-black human silhouette. She expanded her remaining wing in a wide disc above her head, covering an area of about one hundred and fifty square feet. She gave this wing no offensive abilities at all.

The enemy was attacking more fiercely now. With nothing blocking them anymore, the blades of air cut the wing suit covering Archfiend Pam to pieces.

Pam took the hits, and by regenerating the suit continuously, managed to weather it. All she had to do was endure. This suit had two purposes: to buy her time by blocking attacks and insulate her. Inside the suit, Archfiend Pam muttered, “*Cocytus.*”

The enemy’s attacks started slowing down. Her blank expression was finally changing. She wasn’t yet at the point of pain, but she was gradually realizing that something was strange. She was flying more slowly, and her blades were growing duller. Once Pam’s wing suit was covered in dense frost, the enemy stopped attacking and suddenly shot up in the air.

—So she’s finally figured it out. But it’s too late.

Her enemy used air. So then all Pam had to do was make the air unusable. By reducing the density of one wing, spreading it out above herself, and vastly decreasing its surface temperature, she’d gradually been lowering the temperature of the whole area. A gas can’t stay a gas if you take its heat away.

Archfiend Pam flew up into the sky after the fleeing enemy.

Toko (Time remaining: eighteen hours, thirteen minutes)

Toko figured it might end up like this. She spat on the ground.

The girls had said such reasonable-sounding things about how they needed to get ready, and they’d improve their coordination and whatnot, but in fact, they’d just been having a bit of fun. They’d been trying to get more enjoyment out of the overwhelming powers dropped in their laps, and after letting their enemy get away after a single battle, they’d decided they knew what all their enemies were capable of and let their guards down.

Toko had let her guard down, too. She’d learned that the enemy had lost their ability to search for them. And since no one approached in the few hours since the barrier had been erected, she’d felt as if perhaps staying quietly hidden away was better than doing anything. There was also a part of her that had been hesitant to incite the magical girls to act.

She could hear cries coming from the roof and fierce clashes from the lower floors. The enemy was attacking from both directions. In which case, she just had to escape through any avenue she could. This room was on the second

floor of the three-story apartment building, and of course, it had windows, too. Putting her full body weight into it, Toko turned the crescent lock and slid the window open. It was rusty, but she managed somehow. She'd gauged the escape routes when she'd first come here.

As Toko leaned out the window, she thought for a moment.

Should she contact her partner? But since this was turning into such a big ruckus, her partner was sure to know they were being attacked. And would she even have the time to accept the call if Toko did make contact? If she had that kind of time, she should be doing something else. Toko felt uneasy about escaping on her own, but if she were to stay on the battlefield, worst case, she might hold her partner back. That would be a disaster. Her partner knew how to survive. If they made appropriate use of their pawns, things should work out somehow.

Toko made up her mind. She would not contact her partner. The barrier already had less than twenty hours left. First, Toko would concentrate everything she had on escaping. If she fled by wing, not many magical girls would be able to follow her.

Toko jumped out of the window, aiming for the sky above, when she made eye contact with a ninja jumping down from the apartment building roof.

Toko's eyes widened as she looked at her opponent. The girl had one arm, and a scar ran down the left side of her face, sealing her eye shut. Her looks were striking. There was no way you'd forget that face once you saw it, but she wasn't familiar to Toko. She hadn't been present when they'd fought in the street. Was she their external backup?

In contrast with Toko's expression, there was not a hint of surprise on the ninja's face as she reached calmly out to Toko. Toko twisted to avoid her, but the ninja's pinkie nail caught on the sash of her skirt, and the fairy lost her balance in midair. The ninja turned her wrist to get her fingers around Toko's torso—but right before she tightened her grip, someone else came in from the side to snatch Toko away.

The rainbow atop the magical girl's back glittered brilliantly even in the dark as she snatched up Toko and dashed off across another rainbow.

“Rain Pow!” Toko cried out.

Rain Pow (Time remaining: eighteen hours, twelve minutes)

Just as her appearance suggested, Rain Pow’s magic was to create rainbows. But these were no ordinary rainbows. There’s hardly a soul who hasn’t seen a picture book or children’s show featuring a rainbow bridge for the characters to cross. What Rain Pow created was strong enough to walk on. Her power was especially magical.

In the starless and moonless night, the pale shine of the rainbow bridge contrasted with the wholesome beauty of its daytime counterpart. It had the beauty of the perilous, subtle and profound—fantastical. It was not flexible, but hard and firm. Even aggressive stomps from the strong legs of a magical girl wouldn’t make it budge. With its five feet or so of width, a magical girl could run across it at full speed, no matter how high she went.

B City could not at all be called a big city, and aside from the entertainment district, there were only a few scattered lights here and there. It wasn’t a particularly eye-catching view. The rainbow bridge stretched out across rows of houses with corrugated roofs, avoiding the radio station building.

Rain Pow made her rainbow bridge and raced toward the far end as it continued to grow.

Timidly, Postarie ran after her. There had been no need for Postarie to force herself to follow, but the two of them had been together when the attack had commenced, and since she was scared to leave her friend, Postarie ended up playing rear guard. Of course, the ninja was chasing after them. It was too late for Postarie to run in a different direction, so she kept going, desperation on her face.

“Rain Pow! You’re too slow! Go faster! Faster, faster!”

“You’re distracting me! Shut up, Toko!” Rain Pow stuffed Toko down her shirt. She could hear a pained-sounding moan from her chest area, perhaps because she had stuck the fairy in headfirst. But even if Toko was hurt a bit, it was best to leave her in there for now.

The ninja was hot on their heels, not falling back even an inch. In fact, she was

gradually getting closer. There had been twenty yards between them before, but she'd already narrowed it down to fifteen. It was clear why: The ninja was fast—or rather, Postarie was slow. But it was impossible to tell Postarie to run faster. She was doing her best. Rain Pow could hear her panting hard behind her.

Right when Rain Pow's attention was on Postarie, something flew at her from in front. Distracted, Rain Pow was taken by surprise, and she couldn't dodge it. But she couldn't slow down, either, so she just barely managed to kick down the thing flying at her. From the impact against her boots and the sound it made, whatever had been flung at her had been metal.

A second and then a third flew at her. Rain Pow understood what they were. These were ninja weapons: kunai. As the ninja chased them, she was throwing kunai that passed by both Postarie and Rain Pow, spinning in a big circle to fly at her from the front.

Rain Pow kicked away the second one in the same manner as the first and tried to avoid the third, but the weapon changed its trajectory at an acute angle to chase down Rain Pow's leg, slicing open her flesh. Rain Pow staggered, but she couldn't fall here or slow down. Clenching her teeth, she raced over the rainbow.

"A-are you okay?!"

"Don't worry about it!"

Kunai were flying at her one after another. Unable to avoid them, Rain Pow had no choice but to knock them down. And since they were all coming for her legs, she couldn't wave them aside with her hands; she was forced to kick every single one of them down. Every new kunai was now coming at her faster and harder.

All of them were aiming for Rain Pow. The enemy wasn't trying to kill her—she was gauging Rain Pow's strength and trying to disable her. This chase was so easy for the ninja that she could afford to.

Rain Pow glanced down at the ground and the evenly spaced streetlights. There were no other lights. The road below had two lanes on either side, but there weren't many cars going by. It had to be about a hundred feet from the

top of the rainbow down to the ground. With the physical capabilities of a magical girl, the fall wouldn't kill her. The enemy had to be taking that into consideration, too.

Should she dispel the rainbow and jump down? Unlike the rainbow, the ground path wouldn't be a straight line, and there would be cover. It would be easier to evade...no, it wouldn't. The enemy's attacks were homing in on her. Worst case, the kunai would fly at her from a blind angle. And besides, there was her destination to take into consideration. She wanted to reach that location from the sky, if possible. The ground route would be the long way around, and it was bound to make her a target, as they'd catch her while she was going up the building. She just had to buy a bit more time.

"Tsuko! Do the thing!"

"R-r-roger!" Postarie did stutter on her acknowledgment, but she did everything she was supposed to do. She took off her hat, and hammers came falling out of it.

Postarie's magic was postal delivery. When she took something in hand and cast her magic on it, it would grow a pair of wings. Those pure white wings were simple and beautiful, resembling those of a waterfowl, and brought to mind the angels of religious paintings. The size of the wings would be proportionate to the size of the object. They would rise up, flapping furiously, and fly off toward the object's owner. When they arrived, the wings would scatter with a *poof* and disappear. Postarie could also adjust how fast the item flew. There were two options: regular or express post.

Regular post would bob lightly away through the air. It traveled at a speed that a human could catch up to at a run, and it could safely deliver fragile packages, bottles, and dangerous objects. The express post zoomed away. It went so fast that even a magical girl, to say nothing of a human, wouldn't be able to catch up as the item was sent off to its owner at a steady and rapid pace. There were no late deliveries or postal errors. There was no weight limit, either. Neither was there any limit to the number of items that could be sent.

Each one of the hammers that fell from Postarie's hat sprouted wings. Captain Grace had bought them at the hardware store and had let Postarie hold on to

them. That meant once Postarie cast her magic on them, they would fly straight for their owner, Captain Grace. Since they'd run this far in a straight line along the rainbow, of course the hammers would fly straight behind Rain Pow. Postarie's magic was not polite enough to dodge things in the middle of its path.

From behind, Rain Pow could hear the sound of metal colliding with metal. The ninja was striking back against the hammers flying at her. That meant the kunai stopped coming. From the sounds, Rain Pow could tell their pursuer had fallen back a little. If she was going to do it, it was now or never. Rain Pow turned back to scoop up Postarie in a bridal carry and then sprinted as fast as she could along the rainbow. This was much faster than keeping Postarie's pace.

It was just a few hundred more yards to her goal. Running at full speed across her rainbow, the moment she arrived at the roof of her target building, she dispelled the bridge. Leisurely kicking down the final kunai the ninja threw at her as she fell, Rain Pow then ripped off the blue tarp that covered the roof in one pull.

This was the roof of an old, derelict building that hadn't been used in a long time. The only ones who ever came here were maintenance staff and crows. It was a convenient place to hide things.

After their first battle, Rain Pow and Postarie had worked together to hide the station wagon their enemies had abandoned in their flight on the roof of this building. Now, if Postarie cast her magic on it, the vehicle would fly off to its owner.

It was a kind of gamble as to who the owner of the station wagon was. But the chances that the owner was a fighter, like the girl attacking them, were low. If they could just get away from the heat of the fight now, it didn't matter what would happen. Best case, they might be able to catch the enemy off guard and launch a surprise attack.

Arms still around Postarie, Rain Pow tightly embraced the rear bumper of the station wagon. "Do it, Tsuko!"

"R-roger!" Postarie cast her magic on the station wagon. The half-ruined

vehicle, with its broken windows and footprints on the roof, sprouted great wings on either side, and with a boom, it rose into the air.

Kuru-Kuru Hime (Time remaining: eighteen hours, ten minutes)

Kuru-Kuru Hime shot out a ribbon, but Bunny Ears avoided it with a sharp spin in the air. Kuru-Kuru Hime sent out even more ribbons, but all of this was a diversion. She didn't plan to have a straight fight. It seemed very unlikely to her that she could beat this enemy one-on-one, when before she had only barely managed to beat her by ganging up on her with a bunch of allies.

"Settle down! If you don't resist, you won't get kicked or punched!" The bunny girl's oddly specific mention of kicking and punching made her orders sound more like a threat than an attempt to convince her. Kuru-Kuru Hime ran. If she could find some help, at least, then it would work out somehow. Maybe.

Wrapping a ribbon around a telephone pole, she kicked off the ground and pulled. From there, she wrapped another one around an emergency escape ladder installed at the back of the apartment building, and as she pulled that one, she kicked off the telephone pole. With the combined strength of her legs and her ribbons, she could move faster and more freely than normal, but...

"Running's no use! Surrender!" Bunny Ears was keeping close behind her. She had better footwork and reflexes. This meant running wasn't an option.

Kuru-Kuru Hime just had to meet up with someone, anyone. She moved from the emergency ladder to the telephone pole, the telephone pole to the wall of the apartment building, that wall to the roof of someone's house, and from there to the roof of the apartment building. She tried to trip her opponent by stringing a thin ribbon between two telephone poles, but Bunny Ears spun in midair to avoid it easily.

The two of them confronted each other on the roof of the apartment building. The area was about sixty-five square feet. The total lack of maintenance meant it was in a sad state of disrepair, crumbling and cracking to pieces here and there, with weeds sprouting from the cracks.

Here was the ally she'd been looking for. But she was not in the state Kuru-Kuru Hime had hoped. Weddin was splayed out on her back with what looked like pegs stabbing through various places in her costume—sleeves, skirt, veil.

She had been immobilized in the form of a crucifix.

“Kuru-Kuru Hime! I’m so glad to see you! I fought to the best of my ability, too! But that fucking ninja! What a clever trick, immobilizing me with her kunai! Please, save me first!”

Fortunately, she wasn’t hurt. However, she wouldn’t be of any help to Kuru-Kuru Hime. In fact, she’d slow her down. Bunny Ears glanced at Weddin, smiled pleasantly, and said, “I’ll save you, so surrender to me.”

“Huh? Who are you? Is someone else here? The enemy?”

“You too, ribbon girl. Just give in already. Neither of you wants to get hurt, right?”

Grace had insisted that approaching Bunny Ears had caused an unusual ache in her wound and sent her pain off the charts, but they still had yet to grasp what sort of magic Bunny Ears used, specifically. Could Kuru-Kuru Hime even win against an enemy like that on her own?

“You say we can surrender, but there would be conditions for that, wouldn’t there?” Weddin said, still pinned to the ground.

“You also have the option of unconditional surrender.”

“Would our lives be spared?”

“We’re not gonna kill you or anything.”

“Would we be able to remain as magical girls?”

“That’d depend on the person, I think.”

“I can’t surrender without more details on that point.”

“I’m impressed you can talk like that when you can’t even move, as far as I can tell.”

Weddin and Bunny Ears’s unproductive exchange seemed to go on forever. That was when Kuru-Kuru Hime realized. Weddin—Mine Musubiya—didn’t like idle chatter. She did have the *otaku* habit of rambling on and on about topics she liked or her personal opinions, but otherwise, she preferred brief conversations to lengthy dialogue.

“To what extent is my situation here related to our conditions of surrender? I may be incapacitated, but my allies are all safe.”

“Aren’t we talking about *your* conditions for surrender?”

“As their leader, I have the obligation and right to discuss the state of our allies as a whole.”

“The *self-proclaimed* leader.”

“How rude! I’m our official leader, chosen through a democratic process.”

Bunny Ears shrugged with apparent exasperation. Weddin’s voice rose with passion as she spoke. She was trying to drag out the conversation.

Sensing Weddin’s intention, Kuru-Kuru Hime set to work. Smoothly unraveling a thin ribbon hidden behind her back, she lengthened it by connecting several ribbons together. Taking special care to avoid the enemy’s attention, she snaked the elongated ribbon along the ground. The roof was falling apart, with cracks all over the place. She slid her ribbon into one of them, letting it slither underneath the roof’s surface toward Bunny Ears.

“So if I surrender, that means we all surrender. Please put a little more effort into your attempt to win me over. For instance, even if you do steal our right to be magical girls, if you show us other kindnesses, such as financial compensation, then we can feel good about surrendering, can’t we?”

“You’re not in a position to be receiving any financial compensation, though.”

“Then can’t you contact your superior officer now? Discussions to resolve something so important should be left to those in charge, right?”

“Um, but, well, y’know...”

“I’m sure we can reach a compromise that will satisfy both parties.”

The ribbon passed under the concrete to Bunny Ears’s feet, then sprang out of a crack to grab at her leg. Kuru-Kuru Hime couldn’t get a firm grasp on it, but Bunny Ears started to lose her balance. Kuru-Kuru Hime unleashed all her ribbons and shot toward Bunny Ears in one dash. Bunny Ears swept aside the first ribbon and dodged the second, but Kuru-Kuru Hime kept shooting them out one after another, a third and a fourth, tangling up an arm, taking a leg,

taking her target's freedom a bit at a time. As Kuru-Kuru Hime was burying Bunny Ears's arms, legs, and torso in ribbons, Bunny Ears tugged back on them, hard. Kuru-Kuru Hime jerked in closer to her opponent.

Bunny Ears' magic might be to amplify pain. So then if Kuru-Kuru Hime were to get even the slightest injury, she would lose. Of course, she wasn't confident she could withstand unusual pain. She had to be sure to block the enemy's attacks.

Kuru-Kuru Hime unraveled her costume. It may not have looked like it, but her entire costume was made up of ribbons. She undid her pointe shoes, her tutu, and even her crown.

Kuru-Kuru Hime shifted her ribbons around as she felt the chilly November wind against her bare skin. Maintaining the number of ribbons sent out to attack, she also arranged some more for defense. She built them into a wall between the enemy and herself. She also reached out to tie some more around the iron railing of the apartment building in an attempt to stabilize her position.

Ignoring the wall, Bunny Ears tugged again. A number of the strips wrapped around the iron railing were ripped away. Kuru-Kuru Hime braced her legs, but she couldn't hold her ground. She inched closer to Bunny Ears, but the wall was still there. Rooted firmly in the roof, the wall resisted. Kuru-Kuru Hime was still being dragged in, but Bunny Ears couldn't yank her in one pull.

Kuru-Kuru Hime deployed ribbon after ribbon even as Bunny Ears reeled her in, but right when she'd completely wrapped her opponent to restrain her, something strange happened. The smell of exhaust fumes rushed up her nostrils, and intense nausea welled up inside her. Her vision was off. Things receded and then approached again over and over, and she couldn't get a proper sense of where anything was or what it was. Her eardrums shuddered with noise, the shock of it rattling her brain.

Kuru-Kuru Hime hit her knees, but even that impact was too much for her to take, and she let out a cry and collapsed. Her knees throbbed in pain. Agony shot through her all at once, from the top of her head to the tips of her toes.

"Too bad, you entered my area of effect..." were the words she heard right before she lost consciousness.

Captain Grace (Time remaining: eighteen hours, ten minutes)

Commotion sounded from the roof and the first floor, and after that, she heard cries. Should she head up to the roof or downstairs? Captain Grace chose the first floor and rushed down the staircase. The sound of Funny Trick's footsteps followed her.

She jumped down ten steps, heading for the building entrance, where she stopped. No one was there. "Hey, Kayo."

"What?"

"Nobody's here. What's up with that?"

"How should I know?"

Grace spread her palms and cupped them against her ears. She focused her hearing. The sounds of struggle continued. "Okay, let's go to the roof—," she started to say, then looked up. Among the commotion, she could also faintly hear the beating of wings, like something was flapping toward them.

Focusing her eyes in the dark, Captain Grace discovered a strange creature flying their way at a relatively slow pace. *Is this some new type of magical girl?* she wondered, but it wasn't. It was a sphere about three feet in diameter, black all over, seemingly made of a rubberlike material. It flapped two bat-like wings to stay in the air.

"...What's that?"

"...I dunno."

It was no one she knew. Though it was moving, it was doubtful if it was even a living thing. The black sphere stopped above them in midair, about fifteen feet up, and remained there. Grace observed the sphere's movements. It was just hovering. Clearly something magical.

After some time suspended in the air, the sphere started to move. It was going up. Was it aiming for the roof? Grace was annoyed, feeling as if she'd been ignored.

"Hey! Don't ignore me!" She scooped up a piece of concrete from the ground at her feet and flung it at the sphere. The sphere bobbed away to avoid it, like a

balloon blown in the wind. Its light movements seemed in conflict with its sluggish appearance.

The concrete chunk rolled along the road. The sphere halted its ascent and changed shape. Funny Trick yelped, but excitement boiled in the depths of Captain Grace's heart. An eye emerged from the sphere. Or rather, it would be more accurate to say that its eyelid split open. A single, giant eyeball gazed down on them.

It was asking, *Are you an enemy?*

So then Captain Grace would reply. "Come on and attack me already!"

The sphere's giant eye closed, and all traces of it melted away. Its black wings stopped beating, and it went into free fall. As it came down, the wings shrank, and by the time it landed, it had taken the shape of a human. And it hadn't just changed shape. She could tell its mass had clearly increased. It was smooth all over, with no features to speak of.

Captain Grace drew her sword. The black silhouette ran toward her.

She swung the blade, slipping through her opponent's guard to slice open its torso—no, that wasn't right. She hadn't cut it open. A large mouth opened up in it, with teeth on the top and bottom that clenched around her blade to bring it to a halt. She couldn't push it in or pull it out. Its bite had more power than Captain Grace had muscle.

Releasing her sword, she was trying to back away when the enemy attacked. She attempted to block its low kick with her shin, but its leg bent like rubber, attempting to wrap around her shin. She panicked and shook it off. All of its attacks were transformative in nature. When its fist hit her, it bent like a whip to snap at her back, and the front kick she tried to block with her shoulder transformed into a blade that drew blood. Arms, legs, and tentacles like those of an octopus or squid emerged from its black body one after another to assail her.

She had no choice but to focus on evasion, and ultimately, evasion turned to flight. Just barely managing her enemy's attacks, Grace dashed down the street.

Her plan had been to handle this thing quickly, then head over to where

Bunny Ears was and take her down, too. But this opponent was too much for Captain Grace to handle.

Her plan weakly crumbled away.

Desperately, she dodged, blocked, knocked down, and swept aside the thing's attacks, and when she was trying to knock down yet another strike, it changed its trajectory. Its tentacle dodged Grace's sword and plunged toward her, and though she jerked around to avoid it, another strike followed it and injured the top of her foot.

Funny Trick was running for them with a stick raised in her hands, but Captain Grace stopped her with a yell. "Stay back! You've got a different job!"

The black human shape was focused on Grace alone. It was firing off a rapid barrage of attacks on her, completely ignoring Funny Trick. Grace could sense no emotion in its actions. She had the strong impression that it was attacking automatically. She couldn't pick up on any chivalrous urge for a one-on-one fight, nor could she sense it was a rational being with a desire to take out the strongest first.

Grace figured that maybe this thing only saw those that attacked it as its enemies. So that meant Captain Grace was its enemy right now, but it had yet to count Funny Trick as hostile. Funny Trick was free to go where she wanted. While Grace was handling the enemy's attacks, Funny Trick could carry out a task for her.

Funny Trick must have caught on, as she turned back and retreated into the apartment building. "Good," Grace said to herself.

They were battling something strong. Among all the foes Captain Grace—Umi Shibahara—had ever fought, this was the strongest and fastest, with the most unreadable attacks and no weaknesses.

She dodged, blocked, and halted the enemy's assaults but couldn't quite defend herself, and she took more and more injuries. Her attacks were not effective at all. The quality and quantity of its methods of attack were far beyond her. She had to focus entirely on evasion or she wouldn't be able to avoid them properly, but that meant she couldn't attack, of course. The enemy was ruthless, overbearing, and on the offensive. It cut her right upper arm, and

when she recoiled, a tentacle wrapped around her left calf. A needle with a barb like a fishing hook sprouted from the tentacle and dug into her leg.

Grace bit back a moan. Her leg was bleeding a lot, but she could still move around okay. That was the most she could do now. From this point on, she would have to fight with a bum leg.

A sensation she'd never experienced before oozed up from the pit of her stomach.

—Never experienced before?

No, she *had* experienced this before. It was just such an old memory, she'd forgotten the feeling. Grace's brain searched all the way back when she had encountered a wild dog in the mountains at the age of three.

Yes, this was fear. Grace did not take this discovery as a humiliation; rather, she turned it to joy.

Grace was a champion to the bitter end. Bunny Ears had been a fast and stubborn prey, but ultimately, prey. One who had used her magic to successfully escape but was merely a challenger to a champion.

Her opponent now was not the challenger—Grace was. This feeling of fear, her first in ten years, became euphoria that coursed through her body. She drew her dagger.

Right now, she was smack-dab in the middle of danger. She could die at any moment.

The enemy's strikes were fast, even faster than Bunny Ears's. Captain Grace channeled all her strength, all her senses, all her nerves straight into the battle. She smacked down a casual thrust from the creature, read its movements and took a step in, and when it came closer to her in response, she answered with a head-butt. The silhouette creature twisted its neck, and her head struck its shoulder. She attempted to bite its throat, but the enemy didn't like that and gave her a forceful shove. When the enemy struck her leg, she kicked aside with the heel of her shoe and swiped her dagger in its path, but one of its tentacles transformed into a flat blade and parried.

As their clash continued, Grace slowly came to understand her opponent. It

was like a machine, but it wasn't just reacting to what she did; it also predicted her attacks to a certain degree before it made its moves. In other words, she could fake to outwit it.

Grace's eyes turned to the apartment building. The third window facing the road on the second floor opened, and Funny Trick appeared. Perfect timing.

Grace yelled, "Funny Trick!" With her left hand, she pulled out the hook that hung from her waist and threw it at her opponent's chest, then covered the dagger in her right hand with her cape and faced the enemy. It batted away the hook with its tentacle, and with its attention on the dagger, for a split second, it stopped in place.

The inside of Grace's cape suddenly got heavier, and she took a firm step. The dagger in her right hand had transformed instantly into a mounted cannon. She could call this timing perfect. This was her trump card.

Her enemy was a champion. She was the challenger. So she would use everything she could, and that meant *everything*—including her partner Funny Trick and the equipment on her ship.

She was certain she felt her wordless enemy's surprise. With the cape still over it, she fired her magic cannon. As the recoil blasted her backward, she pulled out another hook and dug it into the ground. It crunched and dragged through the asphalt, and when Grace's heels hit the guardrail, she finally came to a halt.

Captain Grace's magic vessel was a pirate ship. When she had summoned it for a test run on the school grounds, she'd checked what sort of equipment it had and taken out a number of potentially useful items. This cannon was one of them. She'd left it in one of the apartments, and Funny Trick had covered it up, then swapped it with the dagger hidden underneath Grace's cape.

Being that it was a magic cannon, the kick was incredible, but Captain Grace's eardrums remained intact, and she had no bruises or broken bones, either. Her right arm was a little numb, but if she was getting off this easy, then she was in great shape.

Smoke billowed up, and something appeared from within it, cutting through the smell of gunpowder that filled the area. The black humanoid shape, its

upper body now gone, staggered as it tried to approach her. Even with half of its body blown away, it was still moving. The fragments were moving slowly, too, attempting to return to their original form.

Though she hadn't experimented with it beforehand, Captain Grace had personally felt the force of that cannonball. Even a magical girl would be mincemeat if they got hit by that thing. The enemy before her could take a lot, but Grace had managed to deal some heavy damage.

But that hadn't been enough to finish it off. The enemy's ability to morph was rendering it immortal, and it was trying to regenerate. If it could recover completely, then Grace doubted she could win. If she was going to finish it off, it was now or never. She plunged her hook into the tentacle wrapped around her leg to rip it apart.

Kicking off the ground, she dashed over to the road sign fifteen feet away. Using this at close range would put herself in danger, too.

Captain Grace's power was to manifest a magic ship that could speed across water. The full length of the ship was about thirty feet. It was shaped like a sailboat, but it didn't actually require any wind power. Of course, in order to use it, she'd need a body of water of at least a certain size.

If you were going to use it the normal way, that is.

Captain Grace faced the enemy staggering toward her and summoned her ship. The overwhelming mass appeared suddenly, burying the enemy and everything around it all at once. It generated a shock and sound just like an explosion, and Grace held down her captain's hat to keep it from flying off.

What would happen if she were to summon the ship in a location that was already occupied? She'd had no idea if it would end up inside the boat, be launched away, or be crushed under it. But now she knew. When she summoned her pirate ship in a place already occupied by something the size of a human, the boat would crush it.

She'd felt something. Though she was using a method less direct than stabbing with a blade or hitting with a fist, she could still feel that she'd defeated an enemy.

When she dismissed her ship, the black thing was no more.

7753 (Time remaining: seventeen hours, fifty minutes)

7753 was standing beside the car parked on the road.

Spending time with a cranky person was always terribly awkward. And that awkwardness doubled when the person occupied a higher social position than you. 7753 had not once seen Mana in a good mood since they had met, but now her irritation was through the roof, even compared to how she'd been before. Sitting in the back seat of the car, she was bouncing her knees hard enough to shake the vehicle.

7753 had stepped out of the car on the pretext of keeping watch, but just being able to sense Mana's intense fidgeting only made being outside even scarier.

Ripple, Hana, and Archfiend Pam had attacked from three different directions while the enemy was off guard. How closely had they followed Mana's instructions to capture and not kill, and just how much time would they even have to listen? There had been no contact.

Mana had to be irritated, both out of concern as to whether they could catch the criminal and annoyance at 7753 for not fighting despite being a magical girl. 7753 felt like Mana was being way too harsh for this just to be 7753's victim complex talking. Some magical girls were suited to combat, and some were not. 7753 was the latter. In terms of character, magic, and physical abilities, she couldn't compete with combat-based magical girls. But still, she would do what work she could. Defending the camp when combat personnel were all deployed was an important job, too. It was something she could be proud of.

But any attempts to convince Mana of that would be interpreted as the excuses of a weakling, and the most that would get her would be some yelling, disparagement, and belittling. So 7753 said nothing, and still feeling awkward, she guarded Mana.

I hope this ends safely, she prayed as she looked up at the sky. The clouds were thick. Tomorrow would be cloudy, too, and it could rain, depending; worst case, it could even snow.

That was when a loud noise split the air and ripped apart the tranquility of the night, coming from the direction of the apartment building that was the enemy's hideout. It sounded like an explosion.

Mana opened the car door and leaped out. "What was that sound?!"

"I—I don't know."

"Damn it... Was that someone's magic?"

Ripple's magic didn't include anything explosive. Neither did Hana's. If any of them had an ability like that, it would be Archfiend Pam. Or was this the enemy's doing? The road where the car was now parked was pretty far from the apartment building. So it had to be quite a noise to reach this far. It was bound to awaken the people who lived in the neighborhood, and it was only a matter of time before the police and fire department showed up.

Mana looked toward the apartment building, and 7753 followed her gaze. A large bird was flying through the air. It was unbelievably huge. Was that just because of perspective? It looked even bigger than an ostrich.



“...Hmm? Huh?”

“What? Did something happen?”

Maybe it wasn't a bird? But by the time that thought hit her, the winged station wagon was already right in front of them. 7753 scooped up Mana and leaped to the side, and the station wagon crashed into the spot where Mana had just been an instant before with a boom even louder than the one from earlier.

☆ **Rain Pow (Time remaining: seventeen hours, forty-one minutes)**

Rain Pow and Postarie, clinging to the rear of the station wagon, jumped off the moment before it crashed. It had been flying so fast, the force of the wind had smooshed and jiggled Rain Pow's face. If a human were to jump off that, they would be worse than hurt. Even a normal magical girl would have ended up injured.

Rain Pow made a rainbow bridge in the air and jumped down, still holding Postarie in one arm. With her other hand on the rainbow bridge, she slowed herself until she landed with a thud. The station wagon landed—crashed—at about the same moment. The mass, speed, and distance they'd covered were all numbers to be reckoned with, and the energy generated by the fall shook the area. The sound was possibly loud enough to make a fainthearted listener pass out. Dust and asphalt particles billowed up thick. It looked just like the scene of an explosion.

“Are you okay, Tsuko?”

“...Yeah.” She didn't seem okay. Her eyes were unfocused, and her mouth was still half-open. She seemed less frightened and more dazed.

Postarie had never been a girl of strong character. In fact, she was on the timid side. Rain Pow had heard that becoming a magical girl would make you mentally stronger, but still, the pretransformation-level mental strength had to be involved. Toko's declarations about “the courage to stand up and face any foe” had really been exaggerated. Maybe more like, “an ordinary person who had never even dreamed of fighting until yesterday wouldn't be rendered totally useless by their anxiety.”

Getting attacked by enemies and chased down by a ninja, fleeing atop a rainbow, and riding a flying station wagon were enough scary experiences to equal ten scream machines.

Rain Pow was just thinking her first order of business was to pep up Postarie when a voice spoke to her from inside her shirt.

“Hey, hey.”

“Hmm? What?”

“Look at that.” Toko, her upper body poking out of Rain Pow’s neckline, pointed her finger. Figures in silhouette were moving within the thickly rising dust. Toko was pointing at two fallen figures getting up. One of them wrapped her arms around the other’s shoulders, flung her person over her back, and ran off.

“You can’t let them get away!”

Rain Pow was about to give chase, but she immediately stopped. Something was standing in her way. The dust gradually cleared, and soon she was able to see the figure clearly, but she still could only call it “something.” The object was all black with a round body, and it hovered in midair flapping its bat-like wings.

“...What is this? Is it a mascot like you, Toko?”

“Of course not! I’ve never heard of anything like this. It doesn’t look like a magical girl, though.”

“Is it alive?”

“I dunno.” Toko glared at the black sphere and cursed briefly. “Whatever it is, this means you have to beat that thing up, or you won’t be able to chase after those guys that ran away, right? If we can capture them, we can use them to help with negotiations. And as long as we can negotiate, we’re good.”

Rain Pow grabbed the bumper of the station wagon and ripped it off. She swung it at the black sphere, but unexpectedly, it swiftly dodged the bumper.

“Whoa, that thing’s fast. Hey, Toko. This isn’t really a magical girl, is it?”

“Absolutely not.”

The sphere changed shape, like some sort of protean creature. Rain Pow swung the bumper again, harder than before, forcing the enemy to dodge. Predicting its movement this time, she stabbed straight into it. The bumper pierced the black something—no, the black thing's body morphed and held the bumper in its orifice. It gnashed and tightened around the bumper, crumpling it.

She had no idea what this thing was, but it was fast. Strong, too. Its body was abnormally pliant and could transform freely. Given that it was blocking the road to prevent her from chasing the pair, it had to be one of the enemy. This could be a real pain of an opponent.

"It's not a magical girl or a mascot, so... Do you think it's alive?"

"I can't say anything, just looking at it. It might not be alive, but I'm certain that magic is involved in some form or another. Probably." Upper body still sticking out, Toko sank back in again, up to her shoulders. She'd noticed its strength, too.

Slowly, Rain Pow looked back. She figured moving too fast would agitate the thing in front of her. Postarie was behind her. She looked frightened. That was an improvement. Apparently, she'd regained her powers of judgment.

"Tsuko, I've got a favor to ask. Is that okay?"

"Huh...? What?"

"Listen..."

Postarie indicated that she did not like Rain Pow's request. She said over and over she was scared and she didn't want to, cried, and begged, "*Don't make me do this,*" but she eventually caved to Toko's threats when the fairy said the thing would eventually kill them if she did nothing.

Slowly, hesitantly, she approached the black thing. Postarie looked absolutely miserable and was clearly crying. Rain Pow instructed her to touch it softly and gently, in a way that couldn't possibly be interpreted as hostile, so with shaking hands, Postarie approached the black thing and touched it.

Instantly, white bird wings sprouted out from it and it flew off like a rocket, ignoring the resistance from the bat wings. It seemed it belonged to someone, after all.

Rain Pow blew a sigh of relief, and at her chest, she could feel Toko's tension draining, too. Postarie turned back to them, wiping her tears with her sleeve. "Hey... I just wanna rest, for now."

"All right. I kinda feel the same way."

There was no objection from Toko. The pair had escaped, and Rain Pow and Postarie couldn't chase them anymore.

☆ **7753 (Time remaining: sixteen hours, twenty-five minutes)**

With Mana on her back, 7753 somehow managed to escape. Simply dodging the station wagon had been like a miracle, and it was probably another that they had managed to escape. On an apartment building roof, 7753 breathed a sigh of relief.

But the one she'd saved was apparently not thankful at all. Mana was furious. In fact, it was fair to say she had lost it. 7753 had no idea how to tell a mage's real age, but her apparent age was midteens, and since kids at that age were known for being unpredictable when they gave in to their emotions, it was quite frightening when she was this angry.

"What the hell do you think a magical girl's strength is for?! Plus, aren't you supposed to be my bodyguard?! Are you guarding me so that you can run away?! You dumbass! If I wanted to run, I could've done it alone! You should've attacked with the rest of the group!" Mana barked, yelled, and snapped in her tirade against 7753. She seemed like she might even physically lash out at her, too, but 7753 somehow managed to pacify her.

7753 told Mana that fleeing had been the best plan for that moment, and since they weren't good fighters, even if they had stayed and engaged, they were bound to have ended up burdening everyone as hostages. What she couldn't say was that her boss had told her, "It doesn't matter if you have to force her, just take Mana and run as fast as you can." And so, stuck between a rock and a hard place, she bowed her head, saying, "I apologize, I'm sorry, I had no choice, it was the best available option."

Venting her anger must have helped Mana regain some calm; even though she was still in a bad mood, she stopped yelling, screaming, and spraying spit, and instead looked down at the world below and spat, "Fucking boondocks."

They had picked out this apartment building as an emergency meeting place if the need arose, and since it was one of the few tall buildings in the city, you could see just about everything in the town from its roof. For an apartment building covered in room-for-rent signs, it wasn't a bad view.

However, sadly, she was forced to agree with Mana's assertion that this place was the "fucking boondocks." 7753's arrival here, everything she'd been forced to do since, and the epitome of an economically depressed rural town made for a disheartening combination.

Mana glared at the town, took out her magical phone, and turned it on to use. "It won't connect."

"...What?"

"What the hell's going on? I can't reach Hana's magical phone anymore."

"Um... Maybe she can't answer because she's fighting right now."

"Or she's been captured by the enemy." Mana glowered at 7753 as if to blame her retreat for this.

"But, well, Hana, of all people..."

"And just what the hell do *you* know about Hana?!"

Suspecting that any answer would get her yelled at, 7753 closed her mouth.

"Damn it... Hana, you idiot. Where the hell are you, and what are you doing...?" Mana started to pace back and forth on the roof. She wouldn't settle down.

7753 tried phoning Ripple. Just like Hana, she wouldn't answer. So she sent a text for the time being. She realized her fingers were trembling as she typed out her message saying they were waiting at the meetup point.

Neither Ripple nor Hana were answering their phones. 7753 tried calling Archfiend Pam, but that got her nothing, either. They weren't coming to the meeting place, and they wouldn't even send a single text. She felt an icy chill slowly make its way down her spine.

She sent her message to Ripple and hugged her magical phone.

Still no reply. Mana continued to pace back and forth. One lap, two laps, three; 7753 idly continued to count, and once the count was over a hundred, she gave up.

Mana continued pacing for a while after that, until ultimately, she stopped. “Why aren’t they coming?”

“Huh?”

“Why aren’t they coming? They aren’t contacting us. Why can’t we get in touch with them?!” Mana rushed up to 7753 and grabbed her by the collar. 7753 had the slightly larger physique, meaning Mana ended up pushing her up from below. 7753 was standing near the edge of the roof, and since there was no wall or fence or anything behind her, she panicked and dug in her heels. Mana was pushing her so hard that not only might she shove 7753 off the roof, it was as if Mana didn’t mind falling with her. 7753 grabbed Mana’s hands.

“Is she dead?!”

“Dead? They couldn’t be—”

“So why aren’t they coming back?! Why can’t we contact them?!”

“Maybe there’s been some kind of mistake—”

“What mistake?!”

Hana was a veteran magical girl with a history of combat experience. She was strong enough to have been assigned to catch the assassin on her own, even without Mana and other noncombat personnel.

“No, I mean—”

“You don’t mean shit!”

“But—” 7753 couldn’t argue any further, and Mana shoved her hard.

“But what?!”

Reflexively, 7753 shook her off. Even if she was a magical girl from Magical Girl Resources, 7753 was way stronger than Mana. Mana was thrown lightly backward, flying straight back over the roof and into the entrance door. The door dented into the shape of her back, but she quickly got up again.

“I-I’m sorry, you just kept pushing me, so I suddenly...”

“Damn you... *Goddamn* you!” Tears gathered at the corners of Mana’s eyes. Her lower eyelashes kept them in check for a bit, but eventually, the dam burst, and tears streaked from her eyes. Mana cried as she shouted unintelligible curses. 7753 couldn’t do anything. Mana wept, wailed, and pointed her finger at 7753. “Why are you crying?!”

7753 lifted her goggles up to her forehead and gently swiped under her eyes. They were wet.

“You’ve got no right to cry!” Mana ran up to her again, putting the momentum into a slap on 7753’s cheek, then hit the opposite cheek with the back of her hand in a double slap. 7753 reflexively slapped Mana in turn, and the events of moments ago repeated themselves as Mana was launched backward, her back hitting the door.

Yelling incoherently, Mana stood up. Before 7753 could even apologize, Mana rushed toward her, and this time, Mana hit her with a closed fist to the cheekbone and jaw, and 7753 knocked Mana down with a fist from above. This was more clearly a strike, unlike the first two times where her hands had just suddenly lashed out.

Mana trembled facedown on the ground, splayed like a frog being dissected. She moaned like a beast as she shook. 7753 checked on her through her goggles to make sure she wasn’t seriously hurt. It didn’t seem as if she’d fallen because 7753 had hit her in a bad spot, either.

7753 exhaled deeply, and as she did, the tears came.

Hana, Ripple, and Archfiend Pam weren’t coming back. There had been no communication. No matter how many times 7753 and Mana called, they couldn’t get through. Had they been captured? Or...had they been killed? *Why? Why?* she asked herself endlessly. When 7753 sniffled, Mana jerked her head up.

“I said, you’ve got no right to cry!” She got to her feet to kick and head-butt 7753, and when 7753 staggered, Mana punched her in the gut. The strength of her blows aside, she was attacking rather vulnerable targets. She was moving like a child having a tantrum, but she was weirdly good at this. 7753 wondered

if she should maybe pin Mana down, but looking at Mana's face, messed up with tears and a bleeding nose, she lost the urge. She just covered her head and patiently endured it until the attacks stopped.

Lowering her guard, 7753 lifted her face.

"...What are you doing?" came a sudden voice.

7753 turned around. Ripple was grabbing the iron fence to nimbly hop up onto the roof and land on the concrete. She made a face when she noticed the red rust on her palms.

Having found a new outlet for her anger, this time, Mana screamed at Ripple. "And where the hell have—?!" But before she could finish her sentence, she went silent. Timidly poking her face out from behind Ripple was a ballerina-style magical girl covered in ribbons.

CHAPTER 6

THE BEGINNING OF THE END

☆ **Weddin (Time remaining: seventeen hours, thirty-eight minutes)**

“Ms. Himeno! Can you hear me, Ms. Himeno?”

Kuru-Kuru Hime had undone her transformation and was lying on the ground. The teacher was not responding at all to her calls. Her chest was moving up and down, so she did seem to be breathing, but she had been completely knocked out. It didn't seem as if she'd be able to help get Weddin out of this pinch.

Weddin strained with her limbs. She held her breath until her face was hot, channeling all of her strength into trying to rip up the ropes that bound her. She continued to strain right until she was nearly out of oxygen, but still, the ropes wouldn't loosen. She'd already done this many times.

All she could do now was lie on the floor. Bunny Ears had finally moved away from her, but Weddin wasn't strong enough to take advantage of this opportunity.

She understood that Bunny Ears had done something to Kuru-Kuru Hime, but she didn't know what. Even though Kuru-Kuru Hime restrained their opponent completely, she'd moaned and fallen over, undoing her transformation to return to the human Ms. Nozomi Himeno. Being part of her costume, her ribbons had disappeared at the same time. Now free, Bunny Ears had stood and walked up to Weddin, who was immobilized in a crucifixion pose.

Understanding that her plan had failed, Weddin addressed Bunny Ears. “Come on, like I said, let's stop with all this violence.”

“It's okay. There won't be any more violence here.” Using a rope she had pulled from her sleeve, Bunny Ears tied up Weddin's arms and legs, removing each kunai pinning her down, one by one. Weddin hadn't been strong enough to even make them budge, but when Bunny Ears put her back into it, they

slowly loosened and eventually came out.

“Isn’t this violent?”

“I’m trying my best to be gentle, aren’t I?”

“I wouldn’t call that ‘trying.’”

Bunny Ears finished pulling out all the kunai around Weddin, tied her up completely, and rolled her on her side.

Next, Bunny Ears went to tie up Ms. Himeno. Her back was facing Weddin. Weddin strained her limbs, trying to move them, but the rope was tied tight. Even with the strength of a magical girl, she couldn’t rip it up.

Bunny Ears glanced back at Weddin to make sure that she was still bound, then returned to her task. “This is special magic rope made by our team chief. I think you’d have a hard time tearing it.”

“So then could you untie me? I won’t struggle.”

“You seem like the type I’d want to be careful with.”

“That’s not true. People know I’m a person of character.”

“You talked to me a lot to distract me before, too, didn’t you?” Bunny Ears picked up Ms. Himeno with her right arm, and with her left, she took Weddin by the leg and flung her over her shoulder, upside down.

“Hey, at least put me right-side up.”

“I’ve decided not to chat with someone who talks with the intention to deceive, like you do. So no matter what you have to say, I’m not going to listen. I’ll have an easier time learning about the situation from this girl anyway.”

Frustratingly enough, she was basically right.

Weddin continued to chatter, trying to talk Bunny Ears into just one verbal promise, if possible. But Bunny Ears wasn’t paying any attention at all as she carried Weddin and Ms. Himeno. “I’ve gotta get out of here before the human police come around.” She hopped off the top of the apartment building to the roof of a house.

It seemed Bunny Ears was planning to meet up with someone. She traversed

the roofs of houses and commercial buildings, as well as telephone poles, to arrive at a crumpled station wagon on a destroyed road. There was a car parked on the shoulder there, too. The locals were gradually gathering down there.

Bunny Ears looked as if molten lead had just been poured down her throat as she watched the spectacle on the road from atop the building. Then suddenly, she pulled out her magical phone and attempted to make a call. But no one picked up. Bunny Ears's expression tensed even more, and she muttered, "Maybe the signal's no good" and "Maybe I should head straight to the emergency meetup point?" and so on as she moved over to the edge of the roof and tried to call again.

This is it, thought Weddin. Bunny Ears was clearly upset. She had her eye off Weddin, so if Weddin could just deal with the one issue here—the rope—she might be able to sneak away. With that thought, Weddin struggled, wriggled, and tried to talk to Ms. Himeno, passed out beside her, but nothing worked. Weddin just wasn't strong enough to loosen the rope.

She could feel the chill of the concrete seeping through her back all the way to her bones.

In this business, was strength everything, in the end? On the other side of the roof, Bunny Ears was still fighting with her phone. It seemed even a strong magical girl like her had her own struggles to deal with, too.

Softly, Weddin breathed a sigh.

"Weddin, Mei's tired," came a sudden voice.

Weddin almost yelped instinctively, but she bit her lip and managed to hold it in. Tepsekemei was looking down at her. She was floating, cross-legged.

Weddin spoke to her as quietly as she could. "Where have you been?"

"The enemy came, so Mei was fighting. She was strong."

"Did you defeat her?"

"Mei couldn't. She was too strong."

"So in other words, you ran away, huh? Well, that doesn't matter right now. More importantly, could you do something about this rope? I just can't undo it

myself.”

“Mei already cut it. Yours, and that lady’s over there.”

Weddin moved her hands. The rope fell gently. The cut clean, like the work of a very sharp blade. “Nice. Now I can run—”

“No.” Tepsekemei wasn’t looking at Weddin. Her attention was focused in a completely different direction. When Weddin turned her head to follow her gaze, her eyes locked with Bunny Ears’s. Bunny Ears was looking at them with her magical phone in hand.

Weddin got up and jumped off the side of the building. She could hear Bunny Ears’s footsteps coming after her. They were terrifyingly fast—way faster than hers. This was no use. Weddin would have to either surrender again or fight together with Tepsekemei.

Tepsekemei was flying by Weddin’s side. It seemed running wasn’t yet a struggle for her. “You’re slow, Weddin.”

“We all have our individual differences!”

“You’re slow, so Mei will help.” As Weddin ran, Tepsekemei grabbed her collar and yanked her up, sweeping Weddin into her arms. “This is faster.”

Tepsekemei sped up in a burst. But Bunny Ears, in pursuit, was just as fast. She lost no ground as she chased them. Tepsekemei went all over to try to get away somehow: the front of the farming cooperative storehouse, the parking lot of a big bookstore, the street behind the pachinko parlor. She even darted into narrow roads at sharp angles, but Bunny Ears still kept chasing.

“Can Mei fight?”

“Um... No fighting. Let’s run.” Before, Bunny Ears had fought evenly against multiple opponents, including Tepsekemei. Against just the two of them, Bunny Ears would be more than they could handle. And besides, they didn’t even know how she’d defeated Kuru-Kuru Hime.

Tepsekemei didn’t slow down, but neither did Bunny Ears.

“Get off the ground, Tepsekemei. If you fly, she won’t be able to follow.”

“Mei can’t.”

“Why not?”

“Because you’re too heavy.”

“Geez, rude!”

☆ **Kuru-Kuru Hime (Time remaining: seventeen hours, twenty-one minutes)**

She remembered everything until she’d passed out in front of Bunny Ears because of that mysterious sickness. That had been on the roof of the apartment building. When she came to again, she was lying on the roof of a completely different building, and Weddin and Bunny Ears were both gone. What’s more, she wasn’t Kuru-Kuru Hime but back as the human Nozomi Himeno, chilled to the core and trembling under the cold sky.

I’ve got no idea what’s going on, but I should run. Everything was terrifying.

Nozomi transformed into Kuru-Kuru Hime and started running. She didn’t care where; she just had to get away. She sprang off the car parked on the road’s shoulder and climbed up a telephone pole to the power line, then went up to the chamber of commerce building. From there, Kuru-Kuru Hime ran on top of the downtown arcade, took a running leap just barely short of the farming cooperative building. She flung out a ribbon to catch the edge, and from there, she slipped between combine harvesters and kicked aside weeds as she followed a beaten path through a farmer’s field. She ended up racing through the forest, not caring if she was on an animal trail or a hiking path or no path at all, swinging between trees on her ribbons like Tarzan, until eventually, in the middle of the mountains, her face slammed into an invisible wall. She fell to the ground and rolled around, scattering dead leaves as she writhed in agony.

She was not only shocked by the impact. A sickening feeling like something had directly churned up her brain was running through her whole body. Her legs wouldn’t move, her back felt weak, and she couldn’t stand.

Now that she thought about it, she recalled Toko had told them that an invisible barrier surrounded the whole city. So this had to be the one. Kuru-Kuru Hime lay curled up for a while holding her nose, then picked up a leaf to wipe the blood from it. It was a good thing her legs had begun to weaken from the long run by the time she’d hit the barrier. She shuddered to think how much

worse she could have been hurt if she'd collided with it when she'd been going at a dead sprint with full energy. Still, she shuddered again at the fact that she couldn't escape from this town.

She wove together her ribbons to make an impromptu seat with a sawtooth oak as its base and sat down on it, leaning back against the tree.

Bit by bit, the pounding of her heart and throbbing pain in her nose faded, as did her terror. Something was strange.

When she had been in magical-girl form, she hadn't questioned fighting. Moreover, with her mysterious magic and superhuman physical abilities, she'd tied up and twined her ribbons around her opponent like it was the natural thing to do. Returning to human form for a moment had made it unbearably incomprehensible to her how she could have done such a thing. She had no idea what would have happened to her had she lost. The word "death" rose to her mind, and she clutched her trembling body in her arms.

She wasn't just cold. She couldn't stop shivering. There had been malice and desire to kill. There had been something raw and vivid that should not be in the lighthearted life of a magical girl.

She couldn't even consider going back. The overwhelming violence had crushed her idealistic belief that a teacher should ensure all her students escaped before she was allowed to run herself. Despite what a deplorable state she knew she was in right then, she couldn't move. She was frightened and scared and confused as to what was going on. After running this far, she was finally able to think carefully, but she still couldn't bring herself to consider going back. *At least let them be safe*, she thought and tried calling Toko, Weddin, Captain Grace, Funny Trick, Tepsekemei, Rain Pow, and Postarie, one after another, but not a single one picked up. She sent them a message saying, *I'm safe, let's meet up somewhere*, and returned her magical phone to her pocket.

—*Calm down. Calm down. Calm down. Calm down.*

She took out her magical phone one more time and checked the time. It was already late at night.

Some of the students might never return to their homes again. She clenched

her jaw and squeezed her fists. Her ribbon chair was trembling.

She checked her messages. No replies from anyone.

The leaves on the trees rustled. Right now, Kuru-Kuru Hime was like cornered prey. A magical girl's ears were sensitive enough to pick up even the smallest rustling of leaves—unlike Nozomi Himeno, who would carelessly fall asleep in the staff room directly beneath where the concert band practiced.

She rose slightly out of her seat and looked toward the source of the sound. She had anticipated that it would be nothing in the end, that she would smile at her own cowardice and sit down again, but her expectations were betrayed. In the shadow of the trees, there was a female ninja with one arm and one eye. The scarf covering her mouth fluttered in the wintry mountain wind, and her one open eye was gazing steadily at Kuru-Kuru Hime.

She was clearly a magical girl but not one Kuru-Kuru Hime knew. In other words, she was an ally of Bunny Ears's.

Kuru-Kuru Hime put her ribbon chair away and began running, scattering tree leaves as she went, but before even one second, she hit the invisible wall again and tumbled to the ground. This time, she hit not just her nose, but her front teeth, too. Her brain felt ready to somersault.

Her nose, teeth, and lips hurt, but it wasn't the time for that. She held her face with her hand and used her elbow to lift herself up. Then, just as she was trying to somehow get herself off the ground, she froze. The ninja was right there. She was standing on Kuru-Kuru Hime's left side, looking down at her. Then she suddenly squatted, reaching out to take Kuru-Kuru Hime's arm. She pulled her to her feet and patted off the leaves stuck to her rear and back.

Still ready to bolt, and yet also unable to do so, Kuru-Kuru Hime just stood there. The ninja wasn't doing anything, necessarily, but she did keep hold of Kuru-Kuru Hime's arm, unwilling to let her go. Should she use her ribbons? But she really doubted she could beat the ninja in reflexes or speed. She felt like if she made any sort of move, she would get punched or thrown first.

Both of them remained silent, not budging at all as they looked at each other without backing away. Unable to take the silence, Kuru-Kuru Hime spoke first. "Um... How did you know where I was?"

“...I could see you running off, so I followed you.” The ninja’s scarf was hiding her mouth, muffling her words slightly, though her lovely voice still carried. But her tone, her way of talking, came out in dour, gloomy mumbles.

“Did you follow me?”

“...I did.”

“Why?”

“...If I had called out to you, I wouldn’t have known what to say,” came the rather foolish reply. It didn’t quite match up with her ninja image.



No, if her reply was foolish, then Kuru-Kuru Hime's question was just as foolish. Leaving aside whether this was a good time for questions at all, if this girl was going to answer, then Kuru-Kuru Hime had to ask what needed asking. "Why...did you people come here? Why are you trying to capture Toko?"

The ninja pulled in her chin, burying her face even deeper into her scarf, and her gaze turned to the roots of the sawtooth oak. Her mouth stayed closed, and her silence made Kuru-Kuru Hime think she'd asked a question that couldn't be answered. Apparently it wasn't that she didn't intend to reply, but rather that she was thinking. "We came...in order to...capture a criminal."

"A criminal? Are you people the police?"

"Some of them...are like police... I'm just helping."

"Helping?"

"I just came for an interview...but I got dragged into this..."

"If you were just dragged into this, you should have said no."

"If I say no, I can't get ahead in my career..."

She wanted to get ahead in her career? Kuru-Kuru Hime started to feel an affinity for this ninja. It was less out of sympathy and more thanks to the humanizing revelation that the ninja had such a worldly-minded desire. She was not a fully automated battle machine just expressionlessly swinging its sword and tossing shuriken.

The two of them continued their conversation, standing there awkwardly. Kuru-Kuru Hime learned that Ripple and her allies were trying to capture a murderer who was killing people connected to another world called the Magical Kingdom, and that Toko was connected to the murderer. Kuru-Kuru Hime also told Ripple frankly of her own situation.

She no longer worried how honest she should be with Ripple. She'd never been able to trust Toko, since she'd made the students her hostages; she felt an affinity with Ripple; and most of all, waiting here would just leave her in a deadlock. Ripple listened to her wish to have her students escape somewhere safe, then shook her hand as they stood there in those unnatural positions.

Ripple's chilly palm felt nice.

☆ **Postarie (Time remaining: seventeen hours, twenty-six minutes)**

Postarie made a call to Weddin, then to Captain Grace, Funny Trick, and Tepsekemei, but she couldn't get through to any of them. It wasn't just that they weren't picking up. There was this unpleasant, grating interference almost like a scratching sound, and she couldn't even hear the call. It wasn't just Postarie's magical phone having this problem. The call functions on Rain Pow's phone weren't working anymore, either. When she tried dialing her home phone number to test, the same thing happened. She couldn't make calls anymore, to any kind of device.

When they tried asking Toko what was going on, all she had to say was, "No clue." The fairy had been quite useless for a while now.

After getting rid of that black thing, they left that area for the time being, making sure that nobody was chasing them. Relief and fear welled up simultaneously inside her, and Postarie slumped down on the spot.

An enemy attack, a shuriken-throwing ninja, their flight across the rainbow bridge, their trip clinging to the station wagon as it flew through the air—all of those had been fairly scary experiences, but the encounter with that black thing to top it off had sent Postarie's heart well past the breaking point. She cried for a while on the ground on all fours, but Rain Pow rubbing her back somehow relaxed her. She was so grateful for the warmth of Rain Pow's palms on her back, she wanted to cling to them.

With the concrete-block wall at their backs, Postarie and Rain Pow sat side by side, and Toko, who had retreated into Rain Pow's shirt, also joined them to talk about what had just happened. They came to no conclusions. Though they understood that the enemy had come to them, neither Postarie nor Rain Pow knew what the heck it was. They'd never really understood what sort of being it was in the first place.

What was important to Postarie was that they never get involved in this matter ever again, and she would have no regrets if doing that required quitting being a magical girl. Not so for Rain Pow. She insisted that she wanted to resolve this, and in doing so, make her powers permanent. Of course, Toko also

supported her endeavor.

“I mean, it’d be a waste. We’re so strong and cool now, with mysterious powers...and we’re magical girls! You’d never get to be something like this living a normal life.”

“Yeah, yeah! That’s right. I like the cut of your jib.”

Postarie understood that Rain Pow didn’t want to let go of these mysterious powers. But Postarie would rather stay alive.

Even if they were stronger than humans, ultimately, it was a relative thing. It had been proven by this point that Postarie’s powers were not that great relative to other magical girls. So it was better to live her ordinary life as a normal human being, just as she always had, rather than get some semi-superpower and fight with dangerous opponents. It wasn’t as if she had been at all unhappy with her life thus far.

But still, it wasn’t as if Postarie had any great ideas as to how to get out of their current situation, either.

Postarie had the feeling that even if they tried to find someone to save them, the enemies they faced right now would be able to hold their ground against not only the police but even the Japan Self-Defense Forces armed to the teeth with tanks or planes.

Rain Pow not only told her that they couldn’t rely on the police; she also disapproved of revealing their identities. She protested that she wanted to continue being a magical girl, talked about how so many things would go to waste if they were found out. So she refused any intervention from society. Of course, Toko also endorsed that argument.

“C’mon, Tsuko. Let’s do it! We can’t give up now!”

“That’s right! There’s no way I’m letting you give up halfway! No way!” Adding Toko to the conversation meant they ended up circling the same place, in the end.

Postarie mainly spoke to Rain Pow. They let Toko talk all she wanted, too, but Postarie wasn’t actually listening to her.

Postarie and Rain Pow's discussion was close to a quarrel. It didn't seem there could be any compromise between their views, and no matter how they tried to argue their points, neither ever got through to the other. Plus, it wasn't as if either girl had any firm plans for a solution. Though this was ostensibly a conversation, it was their first fight since they had become friends. To Postarie, Rain Pow was just coming off as reckless and crazy. Postarie wondered if maybe she should just abandon her, say "Do what you want!" and plan her escape alone. But all she did was wonder. She couldn't bring herself to actually do it. When Postarie tried to run away, she couldn't shake off the memories of Kaori's ever-changing expressions, the sound of her joyful laughter, the first time they'd gone to an arcade together, the warmth of Kaori's palms rubbing against her back, and more.

Until Kaori had become her best friend, Postarie—Tatsuko—didn't have a single person she could call a friend for her whole ten-odd years. She'd always wanted a friend as much as anyone did, but once she made one, for the first time, she understood. This was like a curse.

Postarie's shoulders drooped. It was hard for her to accept how aggressive Rain Pow was acting, but she couldn't leave her, either.

Something was happening—but they didn't know what. Since the three of them were isolated without help, unable to contact anyone, they decided to follow Rain Pow's suggestion and try going back to the apartment building next. Of course, they were not returning as magical girls. They would undo their transformations and go back as humans. Then they would check out what had happened one more time. Police cars, ambulances, and fire trucks would probably be there by now. The local newspaper and maybe national online mass media would have come. There was bound to be a crowd, and it had to be big. This was a small town with little entertainment, incidents, or accidents; if something happened, even this late at night, people would join the throng just because it was there. Once there was a crowd, they could slip in among them. As long as they didn't transform into magical girls, the enemy should not be able to identify Postarie's and Rain Pow's faces.

If one of their allies had been captured and was being tortured into revealing the identities of their allies, including Postarie's and Rain Pow's, then they

might get caught. But if that had happened, then they were going to get caught soon enough anyway.

These unproductive, pessimistic fantasies were bad for her stomach and heart. The physical heart of a human was not as sturdily made as that of a magical girl. This was surely also true for the human spirit.

The three of them were now headed for the road where the station wagon had fallen. As they had anticipated, the road was now closed. A big crowd surrounded it, and police cars were parked nearby. They detoured around the road, wearing expressions that said, *“We’re just harmless middle schoolers passing by.”*

The crowd at the apartment building was even bigger. There were a lot of police cars, an ambulance, and even a fire truck. The wail of sirens echoed all around, and their red lights repeatedly asserted themselves in the darkness of the night. They were joined by plenty of rubberneckers, too. Some were wearing pajamas, and some weren’t.

There was also a collection of media people with cameras and microphones. The area was blocked off with tape, keeping out everyone but the police, so they couldn’t see what it was like on the inside.

An old man in a down jacket with a mike pointed at him was spraying spittle as he raved: “A car flew through the air! I swear I saw it! There’s no way I was imagining things!”

Rumors from the crowd reached their ears. It seemed other people had witnessed a flying car, too. There had been a rainbow, even though it was nighttime. A boat, too, for some reason. And someone had fired a rocket launcher. No, it wasn’t a rocket launcher—it was a cannon. A mysterious group of cosplayers had started a loud brawl on the road nearby, and maybe this was connected to that. But it seemed nobody had been caught yet. What was going on here, causing such a big commotion?

Tatsuko looked at Kaori, who stared back. Her eyelashes were trembling slightly, her eyes moist, and her whole face was pale, even her lips.

Nobody had been captured. In other words, no one was left here. But they couldn’t get ahold of them. So then where did they all go? Horrible thoughts

floated up in Tatsuko's mind, then receded.

Aware that both of them looked awful, she tugged her knit cap down low over her eyes, pulled together the collar of her coat, and wrapped her scarf around her neck tight. Kaori's shoulder bumped someone in the crowd, and a middle-aged man who looked like a factory worker spat at them. "Watch it!"

Tatsuko tugged Kaori's sleeve and pulled her out of the crowd. "It'll be okay... The other kids and Ms. Himeno and Mei are all strong," Tatsuko said quietly, as if trying to console herself. "They're just hiding somewhere right now."

She was so transparent. Even she didn't think they were just hiding.

She took Kaori's hand, and they left the scene. The two of them sat side by side on a bench at a nearby children's park and gazed up at the sky. The clouds were thick and black and went on forever. It didn't look as if it was going to clear up.

They were the only people in the park. Illuminated by the streetlights, the promenade was missing many bricks, and the playground was rusted and creaking in the blowing wind. This town was the same everywhere. A sigh slipped from her. There was nowhere to go.

"Are you magical girls?" someone suddenly called out to them.

As Tatsuko was processing that in her mind, she panicked and looked back, tripping over her feet. As she started to fall, she grabbed the back of the bench and somehow managed to catch her balance.

A magical girl was standing at the park entrance. Her long dress coat, middling-length khaki scarf, Panama hat, and big sunglasses all looked suspicious. For a magical-girl costume, it was mismatched overall and lacking in style, but there was no mistaking her face and aura. Most importantly, she was using the term "magical girl."

Kaori gave Tatsuko a sidelong glance as she went on guard, facing the magical girl. She appeared extremely cautious.

The magical girl's eyebrows tilted up, and one of her cheeks rose. As Tatsuko thought about what that expression meant, she heard the magical girl sigh, and Tatsuko realized she was disappointed.

“What are you doing?” The newcomer approached them readily, casually raised her hand, and slapped Kaori’s and Tatsuko’s cheeks. It wasn’t the sort of attack that would send them flying—nor enough to even call it an attack in the first place. But still, Tatsuko’s cheek stung, and she cradled it as she looked back at the magical girl, dumbfounded.

“You two aren’t transformed right now. I’d like to yell at you and demand why the hell you’re on the battlefield out of costume in the first place, but no matter. There are times when you’re forced to go human for covert missions and such. But that aside.” This time, she slapped their other cheeks. She hadn’t even given them enough time for the heat from the first strike to fade, and now both cheeks stung. “What do you think you’re doing, going on guard when someone asks if you’re magical girls? Huh? You might as well be publicizing your identity. How can you let the enemy know you’re a magical girl when they’re already transformed and you’re not? You’re never going to survive on the battlefield if you do things like that. You’ll be squashed like insects.”

The magical girl stared closely at them. She wasn’t really glaring, but her gaze wasn’t friendly, either. Unable to determine what the look was, Tatsuko smiled mildly at her, and this time, the magical girl brought her fist down on Tatsuko’s head so hard she saw stars.

“What are you doing?!”

“Are you in the position to be complaining?!” The magical girl crushed Kaori’s brave resistance with a double slap. Seeing Kaori collapse onto the bench, Tatsuko firmly closed her mouth. “Attention!” the girl ordered, and Tatsuko snapped her back straight. The girl turned her gaze to Tatsuko, then next looked at Kaori, who lay on the bench with her shoulders trembling, and kicked up at Kaori’s thigh. “Why are you lying there?! If you’re told *attention*, then stand, at least!”

Tatsuko would absolutely never say, “*But aren’t you the one who knocked her down?*” The magical girl dragged Kaori to her feet, where she stood on the verge of tears. Tatsuko had no intention of protesting.

The suspicious-looking newcomer raved about just how dangerous it was to face a magical girl when in human form. It seemed she wasn’t going to kill them

or anything, but she could slap them again at any time, and Tatsuko couldn't quell her anxiety.

Toko remained safely silent within Rain Pow's clothing. It seemed she was pretending she wasn't there. That was probably the right choice.

"The person approaching you was transformed. You were not. In this situation, if someone asks if you're a magical girl, then play dumb. Treat them like a freak. Say, '*What the hell are you talking about?*' I don't know how well that will work, but it's far better than doing something so *suicidal* as openly bracing for a fight when you're in human form. And though it's out of the question to go on guard as a human, don't even think about transforming there to fight back, either. Do you know how long it takes for a human to think about transforming and then to carry that out? With the reflexes of a magical girl, I could kill you a hundred times, or a thousand. Do you understand now that transforming in front of another magical girl is foolish? If you have, then transform."

Tatsuko was considering what she had just been told when her cheek was slapped again. Tears leaked from her eyes.

"Transform! Do what you're told immediately!"

Tatsuko panicked and transformed, and her cheek was slapped again.

"Were you not listening to me when I told you not to transform?!"

"U-um, but—but we went on guard already, so you already know, and there's no point in playing dumb, right?"

"Don't talk back!"

Rain Pow was knocked down onto the bench again. Even as Postarie wondered why her friend hadn't learned, she hated herself for how quickly she was getting used to this unreasonable treatment. The magical girl stared at Postarie and Rain Pow appraisingly. Finally, she snorted. It seemed like she didn't think much of them, and that made Postarie vaguely angry. Of course, she didn't let that show on her face.

"Not like I didn't know already, but you're amateurs. Students at the local middle school?"

“Yes, ma’am.”

“You’ve only just been made magical girls by Toko.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Did Toko trick you?”

Postarie was unable to respond to that immediately. She couldn’t recall ever being deceived. Some things had been vaguely suspicious, but she couldn’t say for sure. She looked over at Rain Pow’s chest, but there was no reaction from Toko.

In response to Postarie’s apparent hesitation, the magical girl snorted once again, pulled out her magical phone to push a button, and put the phone to her ear. Then she scowled. “It won’t connect.”

“Um... We haven’t been able to get through for a while now, either.”

Her reply was a slap. The magical girl muttered, “Now I can’t contact the team chief,” and then she turned back to Postarie and Rain Pow. “I am Archfiend Pam. I’m a member of the inspection team that’s infiltrated this town in order to arrest the assassin hiding here. So you two girls opposed us because you were deceived by her accomplice, Toko... What are your names?”

“Postarie.”

“I’m Rain Pow.”

“Postarie and Rain Pow. I’ll give you one chance. If you cooperate with us, we won’t inquire into the crimes you’ve committed thus far. I would have preferred to inquire with the team chief before doing this if possible, but I can’t get through, so there’s no helping that. I guarantee this, on my honor, so you don’t need to worry.”

As Postarie was desperately sorting out this information, wondering just what this all meant, another slap flew toward her.

“How do you answer?!”

“Yes, ma’am!”

“Y-yes, ma’am!”

“All right. Good answers, for amateurs. So then starting now—” Archfiend Pam suddenly glanced away to look at the park entrance. Postarie’s and Rain Pow’s eyes were also drawn to the same spot. A little girl in her pajamas was staring at the three magical girls. Archfiend Pam’s relentless and tight expression suddenly relaxed, and she waved at the child. “Sorry! We’ll get out of the way soon!” Her gentle smile and carefree manner of speech made her seem like a completely different person from before.

Postarie gave her a look that said, “*What’s with you?*” But when Archfiend Pam turned back again, she panicked and looked away.

“What is so funny?!”

Rain Pow had apparently smiled, so Archfiend Pam hit her again. It hurt about the same transformed as it had in human form, which had to mean she was good at holding back.

—*What is with this lady...?*

☆ **Captain Grace (Time remaining: seventeen hours, fifty-nine minutes)**

When the hammers she’d given to Postarie to hold on to flew toward her, she knew that they were fighting the enemy, too. *I’ve gotta go save them*, Captain Grace thought eagerly, running toward where the hammers had come from.

She and Funny Trick dashed over the downtown arcade, moving from the roof of the credit union to a residential area, to stop on the roof of an old house. They encountered no allies or enemies. Captain Grace pulled out her magical phone, confirmed once more that it was useless, then tossed it away. It rolled down the corrugated roof to come to a halt in the gutter.

She couldn’t get ahold of anyone. She couldn’t use her magical phone anymore. What use was it if it was broken? They didn’t have the technology to repair it here, either.

Funny Trick picked up the magical phone Grace had thrown. “Listen, if our magical phones aren’t working, then why don’t we use our normal phones?”

“Kayo, d’you even know everyone’s numbers?”

“Well... Then we could check and see how things are going at their homes or

something.”

“I dunno their addresses. Do you?”

“...No, I don’t.”

The apartment building was bustling with rubberneckers and police. Most likely, neither their enemies nor their allies would return there. The two of them tried going to the school, too, but all that did was remind them that the school at night was a lonely place.

“We should’ve decided on a meeting spot for times like these.”

“If that idiot Weddin wanted to play leader, she should’ve done that stuff right, at least.”

Defeating that black thing had been truly exhilarating. Everything after had been lacking in excitement. Searching and searching unsuccessfully for the allies who’d been fighting with them only made her frustrated.

“What do we do...?” Funny Trick sank down on the peak of the roof.

Captain Grace hated seeing her in such a state. “Don’t give me that! We’ve just gotta meet up with someone. It doesn’t matter who.”

“It doesn’t matter who, huh? ...But it’d be nice to find someone reliable, if possible. If we meet up with Toko, she might be able to explain what’s going on.”

This was the reason Captain Grace was getting so irritated. Funny Trick was uneasy. She was scared, frightened, and trembling in cowardice, even though her partner, the one she should rely on the most, was right there with her.

Captain Grace was different. Captain Grace, the great pirate who had sailed the seven seas, who was also a magical girl who wielded mysterious magic, would always bravely continue to fight. That was true even now. Even as they searched for allies, she was simultaneously seeking out enemies. She was going to find an enemy as strong or stronger than that black thing and take them out. Speaking of which, she wanted another fight with Bunny Ears. Now that she had leveled up with one do-or-die fight as a magical girl under her belt, she wouldn’t let Bunny Ears get away again.

“C’mon, we’re not resting forever. Next, we’re gonna go look around the Teramachi area.” Captain Grace grabbed Funny Trick’s arm and hoisted her up.

☆ **7753 (Time remaining: fifteen hours, fifty-two minutes)**

The magical girl with the ribbons introduced herself as Kuru-Kuru Hime. She said she was a teacher at the local middle school and explained that Toko had made her and a number of her students into magical girls. She hadn’t liked the idea of sending her students out into danger, but Toko had said her memories would be erased if she opposed the plan, so she had obeyed. She seemed to be blaming herself more than making excuses.

As 7753 listened to Kuru-Kuru Hime’s story, words were continuously displayed in her goggles, instructing 7753 how to prompt her: *Absolutely do not blame her; put your hand on her shoulder; discreetly check Ripple’s and Mana’s expressions; turn the discussion toward Mana, etc.* 7753 obeyed every one of these minute instructions, but then halfway through, it suddenly cut off.

It can’t be—it’s not just the magical phones? Even the goggles are broken? Perhaps it was one of her boss’s reckless modifications. It was a convincing enough theory to scare her. But while she was getting worked up, a new message appeared. Her relief that the goggles weren’t broken lasted only a brief instant as her heart was cast into a yet deeper ocean of distress.

Some serious criminals had escaped from magical-girl prison to infiltrate B City for some reason. These escapees, led by Pythie Frederica, would of course have some kind of goal in mind, and though 7753’s boss didn’t know if that target was the assassin or the inspection team or something else, it was certain that the situation in B City had grown even more dangerous. Military personnel among the upper ranks of the Magical Kingdom felt the gravity of the current situation and emphasized that they must take out Frederica’s party before the barrier erected by the Department of Diplomacy wore off, no matter what it took. Depending on the situation, they might not even be able to avoid injuring innocent bystanders.

7753 had never heard the name Pythie Frederica before. The message from her boss continued to stream across her goggles.

Pythie Frederica had previously been a scout for magical girls. Though she had

not been directly involved with Musician of the Forest, Cranberry, she'd been heavily influenced by her and had deviated from her proper role; she had been arrested under suspicion of having made magical-girl candidates kill one another, then been imprisoned. It was thought that Frederica had gained knowledge of the dark side of the Magical Kingdom by using her magic, which allowed her to observe things from a distance. It was also rumored that it may have been the reason she had been sentenced to the ultimate punishment of being sealed away.

7753 didn't really understand this, but what she did get was that some frightening magical girls had been unleashed in the world. This was clearly not information that she could keep to herself. But still, if she were asked how she had gotten this information, she would be unable to reply.

The message from her boss continued.

I'm aware that your magical phones are broken, but the cause is unknown. It's believed the prison escapees are using some method to interfere with them. Share this information with the others and tell them, "I received an e-mail from my boss before my magical phone broke, but I only just noticed it now."

Oh, so I could do it like that.

7753 told the others that she was going to try a little more to see if she could get her magical phone to work and left the circle where the rest of them were discussing. She pulled out her phone, created a suitable fake e-mail, and gave a deliberate yelp of surprise. "Oh! I had an e-mail!" Praying, *Please let them not find out*, she told them all the information she'd gotten from her boss.

Her expression serious, Mana rubbed her eyes, which were red and swollen from crying, and bit her lip.

Ripple looked worried and muttered, "It's her..."

That made Mana suspicious, and she turned over to Ripple. "What? Someone you know?" Ripple nodded, and Mana exploded. "What the hell's going on?!"

"Frederica..."

Mana grabbed Ripple by the collar and shoved her. Ripple's back hit the iron fence, making red rust sprinkle down from it. "You're friends with an escaped

criminal?!”

Ripple patted off the dirt from her back. “...Someone me and my friend captured,” she finished.

Mana tried to press even closer to Ripple, but 7753 stopped her. If she let Mana do this on the edge of the roof, one of them was going to fall. “Mana, please calm down. She’s more of an enemy than an acquaintance, right?”

“Shut up! And you! You captured Frederica, didn’t you? Then capture her this time, too! With Hana on your side, you can do it easy, can’t you?!”

Holding Mana’s hands behind her back, 7753 peeled her off Ripple. Kuru-Kuru Hime looked frightened as she watched. *Well, of course she’s frightened*, thought 7753. Ripple, under attack, also had her eyes on the ground. 7753 felt sorry for her, too. Mana was worried about Hana right now, which had gotten her so worked up she was having trouble leading. She was so mentally off balance that 7753 wouldn’t be surprised if she tried to get them all to do something reckless.

Just like with magical girls, you couldn’t tell the age of a mage based on appearance alone. She might actually be the age that she looked. 7753 felt bad for her, but she couldn’t allow her to force them all into a suicide mission. Seeing Mana’s tearful rage, she also thought, *I can’t let this girl kill anyone*.

And then another message appeared in her goggles.

Frederica has brought out two vicious criminals who were arrested one hundred and thirty years ago.

The one in patchwork rags is Sonia Bean. The fencer is Pukin. These magical girls ran rampant through England a hundred and thirty years ago, until they were sealed away in the same prison as Frederica. Adding their body counts together would total more than a thousand victims, and they went down in history as the worst criminals the Magical Kingdom had ever seen. Their combat abilities were top class, even compared to modern magical girls, and Sonia’s ability to crumble whatever she touched was an indomitable fortress that operated as both defense and offense, while Pukin’s magic sword, which could give delusions to anyone it cut, enabled some extremely high-level mental manipulation.

7753 repeated this information verbatim as it flowed into her goggles. As she explained, she despaired. They seemed like unbeatable opponents.

“And Tot Pop, Frederica’s student... Even within the revolutionary faction, she’s known as a militant. It’s believed that these are the four who have entered the city.”

“How could they get in?! The barrier still hasn’t been broken!”

“With Frederica’s magic, if the conditions are fulfilled, she could ignore the barrier...right?”

Ripple nodded deeply, and 7753 followed the message in the goggles. “The problem is who to prioritize: Frederica’s party or the assassin.”

Kuru-Kuru Hime gave a very deep nod, and 7753 continued following her goggles’ message. “Letting Frederica’s group run free would allow the worse harm than the assassin would do. We have to catch them quickly. We should prioritize them over the assassin.”

“Bullshit! So then what would you have us do?!”

“We have to meet up with Hana somehow. She doesn’t know the escaped prisoners have been unleashed in the city. She’s in danger.”

“Hana is... Shit!” Mana shut her mouth. The way she was glaring at the ground, it seemed less that she had calmed down and more that she was holding in her anger.

7753 continued reading the message from her boss. “And Archfiend Pam, too. With Archfiend Pam, the Department of Diplomacy’s ultimate weapon, we can face them... Huh?” 7753 hesitated, then looked at Ripple, whose eyes were still on the ground, and continued. “With Archfiend Pam, who was a teacher to Musician of the Forest, Cranberry.” She knew that Ripple had lifted her head. She could feel her intense gaze. “I’m sure we’ll be able to stand against Frederica’s group of four.”

Mana lifted her jaw and opened her lips to say something, still gritting her teeth, then blew out only air.

7753 continued reading the words before her. “The reason we were saving

Archfiend Pam's strength was because we were afraid of killing the criminal. If we're using her not to arrest the culprit but instead to suppress Frederica, then there's no problem—at the very least, as long as she causes no damage to the area."

Mana closed her eyes. The streaks of her tears were not yet dry. 7753 gingerly let go of Mana's arm, and Kuru-Kuru Hime heaved a deep sigh. Mana didn't stir at all, nor did anyone else for a few minutes more, and right when 7753 was thinking that she had to do something, Mana pulled out her staff. "First, we look for Hana. Once we've found her, we go for Archfiend Pam."

Now they might finally manage to break out of this situation. 7753 was thankful to her boss for sending her all that information.

☆ **Archfiend Pam (Time remaining: sixteen hours, thirty-five minutes)**

The two magical girls she had caught in the park were total amateurs, but they didn't appear to be villains to the core. They weren't targets to be fought but kids she should be safeguarding.

Archfiend Pam was not in the position to be laughing and calling others amateurs, either. She'd been doing nothing but make mistakes ever since she'd come to this town. She was unquestionably an amateur when it came to investigation.

Although Archfiend Pam was attached to the Department of Diplomacy, she wasn't very fond of their methods. They had deployed a combat specialist as external help so they could control the scene with force. They hadn't changed one bit since Pam had first become a magical girl.

The way the special inspection team saw it, it must seem like clear, unnecessary meddling from outside forces. And as field staff, this job was not a joy to her. She'd had some interest in this assassin—not out of a sense of justice or ethics, but rather because she was very curious about the assassin's strength.

Having worked a long time as a magical girl, Archfiend Pam knew herself better than anyone. Her interest in strong magical girls was a problem because, even being aware of it, she couldn't quite keep it under control. She hadn't changed one bit since she was a newbie, not even now that she could call herself a veteran.

When the incident with Cranberry had been exposed, all she had thought was *Oh, I see*. Archfiend Pam had understood how Cranberry must have felt. She must have just wanted to fight strong magical girls so much. Her arguments about reform, like that the conventional exams were too lenient, were just a pretense. The true nature of the problem was elsewhere.

Cranberry was slave to nothing and so had taken extremes, while Archfiend Pam was bound by ethics and emotions and unable to do such things. That was the only difference between them.

And although Archfiend Pam had the same desires as Cranberry, crushing the weak underfoot felt loathsome to her. Many of the examinees Cranberry had crushed had to have been such weaklings. That was another thing that made them incompatible.

Though Pam had told no one of these complicated feelings, being the teacher who had given Cranberry the title of Musician of the Forest made her position within the organization unstable—although it was quite a long time ago that she had been Cranberry's teacher, and in fact, she did not end up being demoted. As a result, while she was a veteran with a degree of status, as a difficult magical girl to deal with, she was made to fight on the front lines.

She had felt remorse about the incident, but even so, she didn't feel as if she had educated Cranberry any differently. Those who chose to go out and fight were all playmates. Whether they killed or were killed, there were no regrets, and any sadness was fleeting. The same had been true for Cranberry, too. She had been a playmate. That was an undeniable fact. The problem with Cranberry was that she had dragged those who were not playmates into her games. Archfiend Pam didn't feel something like that could be any fun.

Archfiend Pam reflected on herself. If she'd been in the same position as Cranberry, would she have done the same thing? Probably not. But she couldn't say that with any certainty.

That was why Archfiend Pam did not resist orders from above. If she were to act on her own judgment, she might go wild. The ones who stood above her would surely direct her better than she would direct herself. She obeyed mechanically and blindly, never thinking for herself. She would become

equipment. Every time she remembered Cranberry, she was deeply reminded of the necessity of this.

It was the same with this job, too. She obeyed her superiors' orders. Even if she could see through the official instructions to their hidden intentions, she pretended not to. She would not deliberate over political machinations or the pulling of strings. Even if she meant to act intelligently, that might not necessarily lead to good results.

The dancing girl she had fought with in the sky when they had attacked the apartment building had ultimately gotten away from her.

Pam had completely forgotten the barrier up high in the sky. Once she got the chance to start fighting a strong enemy, she dropped everything else to focus only on the battlefield. That was exactly what had enabled her to survive this long, but with a mission of this sort, that habit was more problematic.

Chasing her opponent, she'd cut through a thick cloud, and when she'd emerged from its top, she'd remembered. She couldn't see it, but when something might cause her harm, she would feel its presence. She immediately sensed the barrier wall and came to an abrupt stop. Flustered, she looked around, but the dancing girl was gone. She might have hit the barrier and fallen to the ground. Pam continued to search the area for a while but never found her. So then she recalled her job and flew back down to the world below.

Alighting on the ground, Archfiend Pam called all her wings back. For some reason, one of them had sprouted white bird wings and returned to her at intense speed. It seemed some sort of magic had been used on it. Another wing didn't return, apparently destroyed. There had to be a fairly powerful enemy on this battlefield, capable of taking out one of Archfiend Pam's wings. Just thinking about that made her heart jump with glee.

Calming the excitement welling up in her heart, she split one of her wings in half to return the number of her wings to four. Four was simply the upper limit for her number of wings, and it wasn't as if the missing wing wouldn't come back. Archfiend Pam's wings could be manipulated in absolutely every way she wanted.

Pam gave each of her wings the ability to see and hear and conferred them

with simple intelligence, enabling them to act on their own. She ordered them, “Once you find those who seem to be enemies, inform me. If they attack you, I give you permission to attack.”

This was the battlefield, and carelessness would lead to a swift death. She transformed one of her wings into a black dress coat and wrapped it around her body, then headed to the apartment building where the enemy seemed to be staying, remaining alert to her surroundings as she went. She wanted to check on things there before she headed to their emergency meeting spot.

It was right around then that she discovered the two magical girls. The apartment building was swarmed with reporters, news staff, and rubberneckers making a commotion, but among all this, two girls whose movements seemed unnatural caught Pam’s eye. With restless eyes, they checked inside the apartment building, but their ears were perked up to listen to every voice around them. The fact that both of them were wearing school uniforms also made them stick out from their surroundings. Most of all, they had the air that all detransformed magical girls shared. After some hesitation, Archfiend Pam came down to the ground.

Archfiend Pam meant to safeguard the two magical girls, but the pair themselves had most likely gotten a different impression. Pam was angry—not at them but at Toko for just turning them into magical girls with hardly any training at all and then tossing them out onto the battlefield. Toko had simply made some throwaway pawns for the sake of her own escape. Just what did she take magical girls to be?

When Archfiend Pam had been working in the special teaching corps, things had been different. Newbies, be they good or bad, had been treated carefully and with affection. Recalling her time in service, Archfiend Pam informed the two about the rules of magical girls. Raising her voice, slapping their cheeks, she taught them kindly, carefully, and thoroughly what a sitting duck a detransformed magical girl was and just how dangerous what they were doing was.

Looking at the two of them respectfully standing in front of her, they didn’t seem at all like the enemies her allies had just been fighting. They were frozen stiff. They looked scared. When she asked them some questions, they answered

honestly.

Eventually, she figured she had to contact the investigation team chief now, so she tried calling with her magical phone, but she got nothing but grating static and couldn't get through.

—*Something is happening.*

It would be dangerous for the newbies to undo their transformations right now. It seemed something unexpected was going on, but being away from the center of the situation, Archfiend Pam had not quite figured out what it was. But still, if she dragged around these two while they were transformed, they would be hopelessly obvious.

“There's no helping it... *Sabbath.*” Archfiend Pam transformed two of her wings into coats. She changed their color to brown, gave them the texture of cloth, and also added buttons and hoods and such. “Wear these while you're out. Pull the hood down over your eyes.”

Having them wear these coats made from her wings meant they wouldn't stand out so much, at a glance. And if the time came to fight, she could use the wings to protect the two girls. She didn't want to involve children in a battle, but abandoning them here would be a lot more dangerous than imprudently dragging them into this mess.

Rain Pow looked at the coat suspiciously and hesitated to put it on, so Archfiend Pam slapped her cheek. Now they would be able to get moving—for now. Her current goal was to meet up with the inspection team.

She reproved Rain Pow for a comment to Postarie (“Who the heck is this lady?”) with another slap to the cheek, and after warning them to stay on guard, she began walking.

As they walked, she asked them questions. The two of them had been told that the inspection team were “evil mages” and had apparently fought with them. It seemed they were being used by Toko, after all. Their group had attacked the inspection team on the street and had been attacked in turn at the apartment building. The two of them had withdrawn for the time being but then returned to the apartment building to check on what was happening, and that was when Archfiend Pam had caught them.

Archfiend Pam still didn't know if Hana and Ripple were safe, and she still didn't know why she couldn't get ahold of the team chief, in the end. The girls told her their magical phones weren't working now, either. Rain Pow suggested, "Maybe they all broke at once on coincidence..." and so Archfiend Pam punched her.

☆ **Weddin (Time remaining: sixteen hours, forty-one minutes)**

They just ran. They ran and ran and kept on running. But they couldn't escape.

"Can't you go any faster?!"

"Mei can't. Weddin is heavy."

"You don't have to keep saying that!"

They traversed sudden curves, winding mountain roads, and complex intersections. Tepsekemei knocked over a bucket that had been sitting behind a ramen shop, scattering the contents, and blew away a pachinko parlor banner as they shot past. But Bunny Ears still stayed hot on their heels.

Outrunning her seemed unlikely. When Weddin lifted her head to look behind them, she saw Bunny Ears's expression was still calm and her pace was steady. She didn't seem out of breath, either.

So if they couldn't rely on endurance, and they weren't fast enough to break away from her, then what should they do?

"Oh, I know!"

"What is it, Weddin?"

"You're flying, right, Tepsekemei?"

"Yeah. Mei is flying."

Tepsekemei had said she couldn't fly any higher because Weddin was too heavy, but she could still manage to float about four inches above the ground. She was sliding along at that height.

"Then you should head toward the port."

"Why?"

“You should go onto the ocean.”

“What’s the ocean?”

“I even have to teach you that? Um, how should I put it now...? It’s a big puddle beyond a place called a port.”

“Why would we go there?”

“You can float on top of the water, but she can’t walk on it, so she’d have to swim. I doubt that rabbit can swim as fast as she can run. If that were possible, the Hare of Inaba would never have been skinned.” *That’s a good idea, if I do say so myself*, Weddin mentally complimented herself.

But Tepsekemei shook her head. “Mei can’t.”

“Why not?”

“Earlier, Mei flew up very, very high, touched it, and fell.”

“You what?”

“This place is all wrapped up now. We can’t get outside. So we can’t go to the ocean beyond.”

“Wrapped up?”

“It hurts a lot when you touch it. Mei won’t touch it again.”

Oh. Now Weddin recalled how Toko had told them B City was encircled by a barrier. So in other words, their game of tag was restricted to this city only. They couldn’t run out to sea.

So then what about a river? A large river flowing through the city...didn’t exist. Though it was cloudy, it didn’t rain much, and the last time she’d heard talk of rising water flooding rivers was summer of last year.

So what should they do? They were boxed in. Bunny Ears had easily knocked Kuru-Kuru Hime unconscious using something they didn’t understand...probably magic. Even though Bunny Ears had been completely restrained, too. Weddin knew Tepsekemei was strong. If they were to fight, she couldn’t say there was absolutely no chance of victory. But could they win when they didn’t even understand how the enemy attacked?

Should she make Tepsekemei stop so they could negotiate? But their trust levels were at rock bottom. Bunny Ears had said it herself: *"I won't listen to what you say anymore."* No matter how she wheedled—no, it was certain that any talking would make Bunny Ears more likely to ignore her.

"Hey."

The voice that addressed her was unexpectedly close, startling her. Weddin craned her neck around to confirm the identity of the magical girl diagonally behind her. "Captain Grace!"

"Geez, guys! You gotta make it easier to find you when you're runnin' around!" The pirate-style magical girl grinned boldly. Funny Trick was behind her. Tepsekemei was with them, too.

"Huh? Tepsekemei? Why? Huh?"

"Mei sent out five other selves. And made them look for the others."

With a hissing sound, the Tepsekemei behind Funny Trick shrank, then disappeared. Now that Weddin thought of it, Tepsekemei could create copies of herself. She'd said they couldn't move as freely as her main body, and they could only be used as messengers, but yes, they were definitely useful.

"Wait, if you could do something like that, you should've had them fly the other way to buy us time!"

"You said not to fight."

Tepsekemei gradually slowed, and Captain Grace and Funny Trick matched her, until they all stopped in front of an abandoned factory that had shut down after the economic bubble burst. In this town, which was in decline overall, this region was the most desolate. The streetlights were broken and abandoned without any repair.

"So we finally meet. I'm not letting you get away again." Captain Grace unsheathed her cutlass and pointed it at their enemy.

With the blade pointed at her, Bunny Ears smiled wryly and went into a fighting stance. "Oh, dear. Fighting four at once. I'd like to give my team chief a call, though."

“Four at once? What a sad thing to say. Just me’ll be enough.”

“Hey! Umi! That’s dangerous!” Funny Trick practically shrieked.

Weddin nodded, too. “She’s too much for you to try to fight solo just so you can look cool. She knocked out Kuru-Kuru Hime using some method I couldn’t even understand. We should all fight her together.”

“Whoa, Kuru-Kuru Hime, huh. So is she still alive?”

“Yes, she was breathing but unconscious.”

“Well, that’s good. Then let’s fight one-on-one.”

Funny Trick’s shoulders drooped, and Weddin sighed as Tepsekemei let her down. Captain Grace’s brain was made of muscle and magic.

“Ohhh, well I’m quite grateful you say that.” Bunny Ears’s strained smile turned into a lighter one, and Captain Grace grinned broadly.

“Nobody interfere. I’m gonna finish this good, so you just—”

The trash pile in front of the factory shook and moaned. Weddin furrowed her brow. A hole had opened in the entrance of the factory, which had been nailed shut with boards and completely sealed off before.

The hole was unnatural. It didn’t look as if it had been broken open by punches or kicks, nor did any heavy machinery or chain saws appear to be involved. And if Grace had used her blade to cut a hole, it would have been shaped differently. The hole was a good size larger than a human, and the edges were flaking and crumbling away like charcoal. It was something like rust or rot.

The other side of the hole was dark. Something was wriggling. Weddin couldn’t see through it, even with the keen eyesight of a magical girl. A hand came through from the other side of the hole to grab the edge. The black charcoal sprinkled to the ground and disappeared. Slowly, a human figure emerged from inside the factory. Weddin’s expression softened slightly.

It was a swordswoman. Her eccentric clothing and beautiful face made it clear she was a magical girl. Unsure what was happening, Weddin fixed her eyes on the girl’s face.

The girl smiled, showing off her beautifully straight teeth, and unsheathed the sword at her waist. If a wild beast were to smile, it would surely look just like that.

Weddin smothered a scream.

The swordswoman who emerged first spoke in a foreign language, and a magical girl carrying a crystal ball followed her.

“It seems you’re enjoying your game of tag. We will be taking this opportunity to join in, as latecomers. Why don’t we take on the role of ‘it’? We will pursue you, so you all should run as well as you can...says General Pukin. And so, since we’ll be showing no mercy to those who oppose us, I recommend doing your utmost to avoid resisting. You don’t want to get hurt, do you?”

Afterword

Long time no see—or nice to meet you. I’m Asari Endou. I love magical girls. I was told to write this within thirty minutes. This is becoming a trope with my afterwords.

The thing that always happened in previous volumes hasn’t happened in this one. It’s unusual. In part two... Well, I should probably talk about part two when it comes out, shouldn’t I?

So then what should I talk about? My love of magical girls? Like, “so-and-so is my *waifu*” or something? Such declarations are liable to make me enemies but not necessarily any friends. I’ll abstain.

Should I talk about story elements I wasn’t able to fit into the book? So, something like, “among all the magical girls who have appeared thus far, the tenth strongest in pure physical strength is Sister Nana,” would be good, right? How about mentioning magical girls who did not appear in this volume?

Oh, I know. I’ll talk about the magical girls who did appear in this volume. Pythie Frederica, whose name is mentioned in *Restart II*, appears in the online short story set before the events in this book. Those who have not yet read it, please, please take a look. You can go read it on KonoRano Publishing’s official site.

Okay, now that I’ve included some advertising, I’m allowed to be a bit silly.

I’m not? Oh, is that right? Yes, of course. That makes sense.

So let’s be serious. This volume is called “Limited,” which means the setting involves limited time and space. There are sixteen people in there, so it’s jam-packed. Cramped. Very harsh. And here unfolds the youthful drama of these girls locked together in combat. It’s so nice. I’m jealous of the locking together part, but it’s fundamentally painful stuff, so I think I’ll stick to being in the audience. And so, please bear with me.

To S-mura-san and everyone in the editorial department: Thank you very much for your guidance. Serious props to S-mura-senpai for plugging along at work as I indulge in laziness. You're awesome.

Marui-no-sensei, thank you for your work in this book, as always. Those worries about whether Pukin's design should be plan A or plan B are now pleasant memories. I will love the design we couldn't use in secret.

And to all my readers: Thank you very much for buying this book. Until we meet again in one month.

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