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The Invincible Little Lady

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THE INVINCIBLE LITTLE LADY

–Douyara Watashi No Karada Wa Kanzen Muteki No You Desu Ne–

- VOLUME 5 -

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[J-NOVEL CLUB]

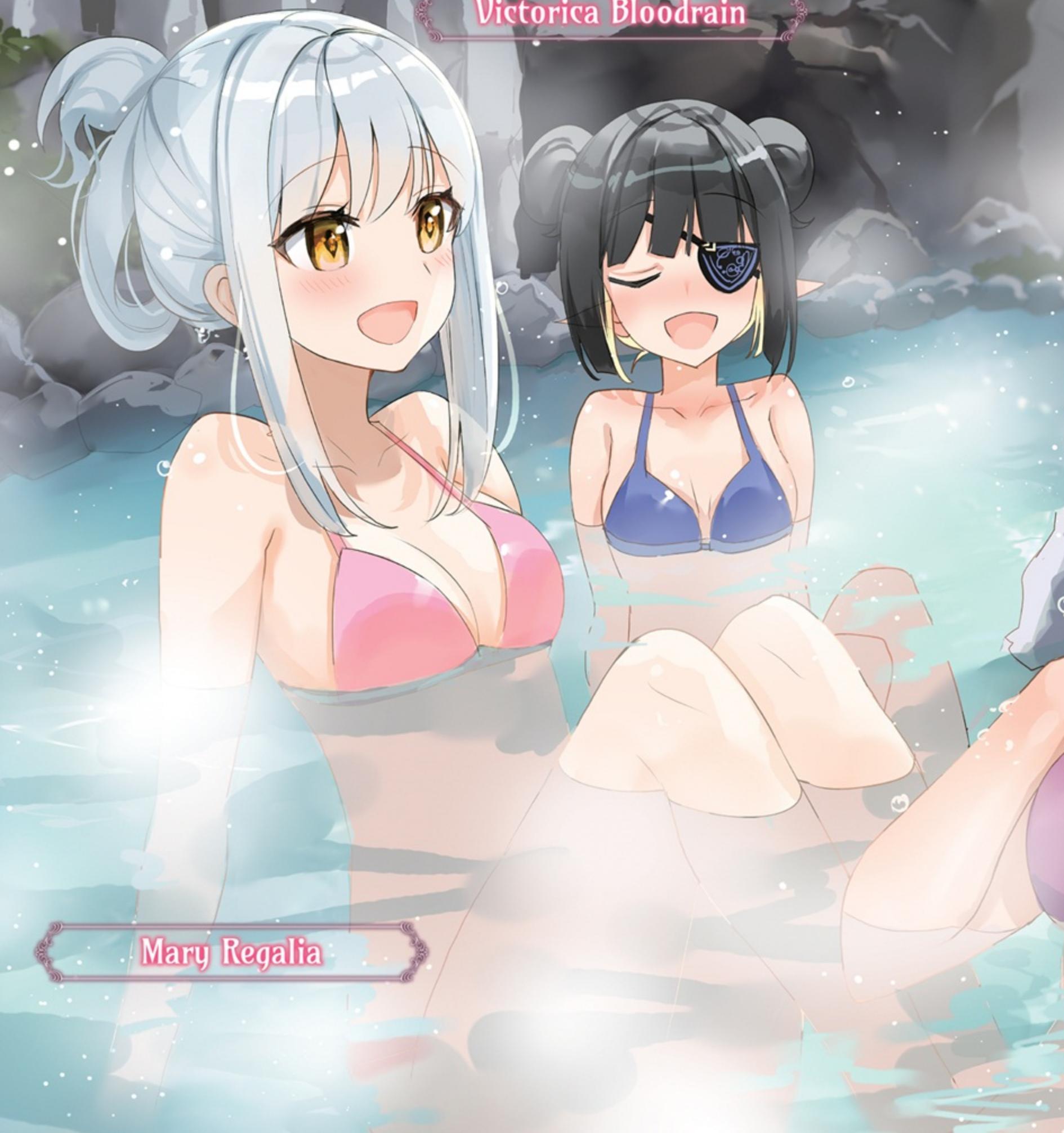
“Aaahhh!”

“My
bewitching
heart glitters
gold! Gold
Heart SR!”

“My solitary
heart glows
silver!
Platinum
Heart SR!”

Characters

Victorica Bloodrain



Magiluka Futurulica



Mary Regalia

CHAPTER 1

ACADEMY ARC—THE MAGIC MIRROR OF HALLUCINATIONS

1. MY FOURTH YEAR

Hi there! I'm Mary Regalia, a thirteen-year-old in her fourth year in the academy.

"Now I've reached this school's highest grade..." I mused as I stared up at the ceiling.

I was enjoying some tea in a lounge of the old school building—but not our usual one, mind you. The room we'd always used had somehow gained a status among the students as the office where class masters meet and conduct their duties. *Meh, it makes sense. Since we used the room as our base, the next set of class masters are just following suit. Not too surprising.*

Speaking of which, the prince and friends were no longer class masters. Generally—barring extenuating circumstances—class master duties were done by third-years, so after we moved on to our fourth year, they passed their work on to our underclassmen, and now they could look ahead to enjoying their last year at the academy to its fullest. All that said, the fresh blood would occasionally visit our new room for advice: since class masters now had more duties than ever as of last year, the role came with heavy responsibility, fulfilling though it may have been.

That wasn't the last thing to change, however: shortly into the year, our self-selected uniforms were also passed on to the next generation.

Because the three class masters had all worn matching clothing, the academy had gradually begun to consider our uniforms class master attire. (Incidentally, Safina and I had apparently been viewed as being in some kind of supporting role.) I'd noticed this all too late—I'd only managed to realize it when, despite our now being fourth-years, students and teachers were still approaching us for assistance. I'd found this to be a huge pain, so I accidentally floated the idea of "Why don't we just make the uniforms and the class master title a package deal?" My suggestion was immediately

approved, so our uniforms were now formally reserved for class masters as of this year.

I've heard so many people say, "I've always dreamed of wearing that uniform!" I wonder when our clothes got so beloved. Thinking about it brought to mind my close shave at the class master succession ceremony—I was about to be written into the pages of academy history as the designer of those clothes, but I managed to muddy the waters and have them chalk it up as another one of the prince's accomplishments. Good work, me!

Currently, I was wearing the blazer outfit I'd made in my first year. After I'd walked around for three years in my uniform, I felt weird attending the academy in my personal clothes—I'd considered making a new set of garments, but I hadn't wanted them to turn into another weird symbol too.

By the way, Magiluka, Safina, the prince, and Sacher had all apparently felt awkward attending classes in their personal clothes as well—although their individual reasons had all surely been different from each other—so they'd asked me to make them their own blazer outfits to match mine. *I know I went and made versions for both men and women, but surely this won't become the academy's official uniform or anything, right?*

To think I once wanted the school to have its own uniform... To be fair, I didn't realize it'd be such an earthshaking idea that they'd want to put me in the academy's history books. Please, anything but that.

"Lady Mary, have you thought about your topic for your research report?" Magiluka asked. She was sitting across from me.

I'd been lost in my thoughts, and her question immediately snapped me back to reality. "Ah, right..." I muttered. I sighed deeply as I considered my current situation and quietly placed my cup onto the table.

"Don't forget, Lady Mary: in exchange for having fewer classes, each Aleyios fourth-year must turn in a research report. Failure to do so would put your graduation in jeopardy."

"Thanks for the detailed explanation," I replied, "but it's not like I can just find a topic off the top of my head..."

I brought my gaze toward the ceiling. *Have I ever been passionately immersed in*

something? I pondered, trying to think up a fitting topic. Hmmm... I think I've only ever been excited when I've thought I've found a way to control my powers.

I reflected on this goal I'd consistently failed to achieve. *Wait! Could I possibly make controlling my abilities my research topic?! Oh my god! That's perfect! I'd be killing two birds with one stone!*

"Did you think of something, Lady Mary?" Magiluka asked, cocking her head to one side.

I'd gotten so absorbed in my brilliant idea that I had been smirking and muttering, "Mwa ha ha." I hastily put a hand over my mouth, broke eye contact for a moment, and cleared my throat to try to calm myself down.

"I-I suppose," I replied. "It might be a common topic, but I think I've thought of one."

"Oh my! May I ask what you're considering so that I can use it as a point of reference?"

"My topic is how I can—I mean, how *users* can control their abilities!"

I balled my hand into a fist and declared my topic with confidence. *Let's pretend that I didn't misspeak and have to hastily correct myself before I said anything foolish... Honestly, this is a case of "If you don't have it / You just gotta make that chance / With your own powers."* I formed a little haiku in my head as I grew excited, in awe of my own intelligence.

"If memory serves, there's an item under the jurisdiction of the Relirexian royal family that can do just that," Magiluka said, referring to the binding shackle that was within the kingdom of demons.

Personally, I'd found the results of that item to be unsatisfactory, but there was indeed a possibility there—surely the binding shackle wouldn't be the be-all and end-all of restraining magic.

"Right!" I exclaimed, fired up. "Exactly! I'll successfully do my research!"

"It's only natural you'd pick such a complex topic, Lady Mary. Even among demons, few if any could ever hope to make progress in that area of magic, yet you're rising to the challenge as an academy student."

“Huh?”

“Even if your results are imperfect, should you achieve even incremental success, you may become the first person to have ever done so in our kingdom.” Magiluka was looking at me eagerly, a twinkle in her eye, thanks to my confident declaration... but little did she know I’d felt all the passion leave my body during her enthusiastic commentary.

“Uh, erm... Never mind! Forget it!” I quickly said with an awkward gasp, waving my right hand in front of me.

I had officially taken back what I’d just said. *That was close! Forget the school—I was about to gleefully carve my name into the history of the whole kingdom. Arghhh! And here I thought that this was a perfect idea!*

“Hm?” Magiluka asked. “Are you going to give up on that topic? I believe you’d be capable of finding something, Lady Mary.”

She looked at me a bit sadly as I quickly shifted gears, but she remained composed nonetheless.

“Ha ha ha!” I laughed heartily. “You’re overestimating me! I should probably find a more realistic topic, don’t you think? Ha ha ha!”

Ughhh! It hurts when I call my own hopes and dreams unrealistic! My poor heart! Ahhh! I smiled at Magiluka while I internally screamed in agony.

“W-Well, let’s leave my topic aside for now,” I said, swiftly changing subjects. “What about you, Magiluka? Have you decided on your topic?”

“Hmm... Well, I do have a few candidates,” she divulged. “I have so many that I’m currently struggling to choose just one.” She placed her index finger on her chin and seemed to be deep in thought.

“Huh. Like what?” I asked.

“Well, I suppose the most curious matter is that Lordrat. How did he obtain those abilities? I’d love to look into it, but I think he’s rejecting me since he flees whenever I come near.”

Magiluka's sparkling eyes quickly gave way to a deep sigh of defeat. I didn't know how to console her. *You know, for whatever reason, I've got a sinking feeling I'm siding with Lordrat on this one.*

"I only told him that I wanted to dissect him juuust a bit for research and analysis purposes..." Magiluka murmured, seeming genuinely confused as to why she was being avoided.

I felt cold sweat run down my back, but I managed to crack a strained smile. "Y-Yeah, Lordrat, huh? We sure did have that run-in with him before. Prince Reifus became a princess and everything back then! Whew, lately we've had our fair share of, uh... *mysteries!* Yeah! Speaking of mysteries, is there anything like the seven mysteries at this academy?"

"Pardon? Seven... mysteries?"

Magiluka stared at me blankly. I'd managed to successfully shift topics, but judging from her reaction, it seemed like the concept of "the seven mysteries" wasn't a thing in this world.

"From the name, I get that there are seven mysteries, but why are there only seven?" Magiluka asked.

"Huh? Uhhh... I-I wonder..."

It was a topic that had just tumbled from my mouth, so all I could do was stare blankly in response to Magiluka's simple question. I tried to think of an answer.

"W-Well, I think there were only seven at the time, and there's no deeper meaning behind it," I answered. "If you simply think of it as a catch-all for any of the unsolved mysterious phenomena that've been rumored to occur within the academy for years, it might be easier to understand." I couldn't find a suitable response to her question, so I'd decided to just nonchalantly wave it off.

"Judging by your manner of speaking, you must know what the seven mysteries are, don't you, Lady Mary?" Magiluka asked.

Aghhh! I think I dug my own grave on this one! My eyes frantically wandered around the room at her astute observation. Since "the seven mysteries" trope didn't exist in this world, it was likely impossible to have Magiluka understand no matter how much

knowledge from my previous life I put to use. Worst case, if I didn't handle this properly, I could come off as cringey and mentally unwell again. I didn't want to repeat that mistake.

"Uhhh... Ummm... Err... That is to say... Well... I forgot!" I said.

I decided to use the old reliable, the tried-and-true: I do not remember.

"I see," Magiluka replied. "So, you're thinking you could investigate them once more and decide whether they're worth using as your topic."

"Hm? Uh... Yeah..."

I wasn't sure how she'd managed to take my pathetic excuses that way, but I decided to just roll with it. I felt the stabbing glares of Tutte, who was watching this entire exchange, but I ignored them. *If I didn't see it, it didn't happen.*

"Now then, shall we go?" Magiluka said, standing from her seat. I'd been breathing a sigh of relief over managing to narrowly escape a sticky situation only for her to unexpectedly ask me to leave with her.

"Huh? Where?" I asked, also rising from my chair.

"If we must do research, the library will be the perfect place," Magiluka said. "I haven't heard of the seven mysteries of the academy, but it could very well simply be due to my lack of knowledge."

"Hm, I wonder..." I mumbled. "I feel like these things spread due to rumors... Oh."

I used knowledge from my past life to casually reply to Magiluka, but I noticed too late that from her point of view, my claims were completely baseless. I braced myself to plunge further into my own grave.

"Is that so?" Magiluka replied. "Then perhaps we should consult our teachers... or my grandfather."

"Huh? No, we don't have to bother the headmaster with such a trivial matter... In any case, is anything the matter? You're awfully fired up today."

I was no longer relieved by how Magiluka was letting my comments slide—I was

concerned about her unusually gung ho attitude.

"Ah, well... Er... Wh-When I was a class master, you helped me numerous times, Lady Mary. So... I want to return the favor." Magiluka trailed off as she averted her gaze from me, her face beet red.

"Aw, c'mere," I said, immediately giving my bashful pal a hug.

Thinking back, Magiluka's been burdened with a busy academy life. And now when she finally has some time to herself, she wants to use it to help me...? I sort of feel bad, but I'm also so happy. Ah, it's so nice to have friends...

"U-U-Um, Lady Mary?!" Magiluka squealed.

Perhaps not a fan of my hug, she tried to squirm out of my embrace. If I'd wanted to, I could've locked her in and held her close, but it wouldn't have been good to force myself on her like that—I released her immediately.

"Eh heh heh. Thank you, Magiluka," I said.

"N-Now then... Wh-Why don't we a-ask a t-teacher who might be knowledgeable about this stuff?"

She turned away from me and walked toward the door blushing ear to ear. I enjoyed the wholesome display with a smile and followed her out of the room.

"You'd like to hear about any unresolved mysterious phenomena that are both said to have occurred in this academy and are the subjects of long-lasting rumors? And the older the rumors, the better?" Professor Fried asked.

Since the phrase "the seven mysteries" didn't seem to exist in this academy, I decided to try to explain what it meant to the best of my ability. For all my efforts, it was clear from Grand Master Fried's paraphrasing that my explanation still needed a little work.

"Th-That's right," I replied. "I apologize for this convoluted question."

"Don't be. You're still searching for a topic for your research report—I don't mind."

My handsome professor smiled at my unreasonable question. The reason I was asking him first was simple: as he'd explained to me earlier, if I simply stated that I was looking for a research topic, I could forgo any troublesome explanations.

Now that I think about it, if any other professors heard my question, they might think I'm some kind of weirdo.

"Lady Mary, I'm always surprised by your novel approach to tasks. You do things quite differently from everyone else, and you seem interested in such unusual topics," Professor Fried said with a smile.

Um... am I being praised here? I've got a sneaking suspicion I'm being thought of as a weirdo anyway. Maybe I'm overthinking it. Though the professor spoke casually, with a carefree, gentle smile dancing on his lips, I felt a little doubtful about where I stood. Be that as it may, I decided to push the conversation along.

"In any case, Professor Fried, would you perhaps have any leads?" Magiluka asked. As she saw me looking a tad hurt, she decided to pose the question in my stead.

"Hmm, let's see..." he replied. "There are certainly numerous problematic issues within this academy..."

He acted slightly troubled and haggard about it all. I guessed it was his way of incorporating dark humor into the conversation, but neither Magiluka nor I could find a fitting response, so we just forced ourselves to smile.

Low-key, the students of Aleyios class have caused quite a few stirs...

"Ah, I know!" Professor Fried finally said. "This really is an old tale, but there was a case that was once looked into yet never solved."

"Errr... A case?" I gingerly inquired. "Is there anything perhaps more... peaceful?"

Professor Fried's position within the academy may have caused him to run into "cases" rather frequently, but I decided to politely decline dangerous-sounding incidents.

"Pardon me," he replied. "I was referring to the Magic Mirror of Hallucinations. But you'd like a different subject, I see..."

"Wh-What is that? Could you please enlighten us with details?" Magiluka eagerly

jumped in upon hearing the professor elaborate—or really, it was more like she was lured in hook, line, and sinker.

Agh... When Magiluka gets fired up like this, there's no stopping her. Ha ha ha... Please, God, spare me from getting wrapped up in some troublesome mess... I glanced at Magiluka, saw her staring at the professor expectantly with sparkling eyes, and heaved a deep sigh.

To summarize Professor Fried's explanation, around ten years ago, a rumor about a Magic Mirror of Hallucinations had begun making the rounds among the students with the claim it was completely true. This magic mirror suddenly appeared within academy premises one day, and those who peered into it would see a reflection of themselves. Their reflection would then try to switch places with the unfortunate victim.

Whoa... Okay, this is starting to sound like a seven-mysteries-style story... but it might be a bit too occult for modern-day Japan. I hate how in this world there's a part of me that thinks, "It might be due to a magic item or something." Ahhh!

The two calmly continued the conversation while I was lost in my thoughts. “I never knew such a story existed,” Magiluka said.

“It remained just a rumor,” Professor Fried replied. “Thus, it must’ve been lost to time.”

“But for a tall tale, it does seem rather realistic,” she confessed.

“I thought the same. I believed that there could’ve been a high-class magic item of sorts left lying around, so I searched for the mirror, but to no avail,” he divulged.

While I was completely on the sidelines, I thought back to the circlet incident. As I’d expected, Professor Fried had also assumed this to be the work of a magic item. Furthermore, the fact that someone could’ve just left such an item lying around felt oddly convincing, attesting to the unique craziness of this academy. *Well, the academy is basically a hotbed for disasters...*

“Authenticity of the rumor aside, what do you think, Lady Mary?” Professor Fried asked. “Has this tidbit offered you any insight?”

“Hm? Er, yes, very much so,” I hastily replied.

With that, he ended the conversation and left.

"W-Well, what shall we do, Lady Mary?" Magiluka asked once the professor was gone.

"Uh, let's see..." I stammered.

Her eyes were very obviously glimmering with curiosity. *Ugh, she's really intrigued. She totally wants to look into this case...* Even if I decided to not proceed with this topic, I was certain that Magiluka would try to look into it by herself. I'd known her long enough that I could easily guess her actions. If, by any chance, the magic mirror turned out to be true, she'd be plunging headfirst into something dangerous. It was worrying to leave her alone. So, I reached my conclusion.

"Well... I guess I'll look into it a little... as a potential topic," I said slowly.

Magiluka beamed happily like a child when I gave her the news. *Yep, she's cute. So, so cute.* And so, in search of my research topic, I decided to stick my nose into an odd rumor.

2. ALL FOR THAT REPORT!

The next day, I started collecting information. I wanted to confirm whether the rumors were credible and ascertain the truth. This was a more straightforward task than it sounded—alongside Professor Fried's notes from when he'd looked into the matter, I simply went around asking the Aleyios class students if they'd heard of the magic mirror.

"We found some students who'd heard of the rumor, but no concrete information or sightings," Magiluka said. Seated in her chair, she slumped her shoulders in disappointment at the results of this effort.

"Well, that's kind of how the seven mysteries work," I explained. "They may or may not exist, and that's where the charm lies. It's starting to get a little exciting."

"Is that so...?"

"For now, our most reliable source of information are these notes we received from

Professor Fried documenting his findings from when he looked into it in the past.”

I eagerly placed the bundle of papers I'd received from the professor onto the desk. Most of his notes were hasty scribbles. Judging by the messy handwriting, it seemed like he'd decided to write down anything he'd heard and try to sort it out later. In other words, he was fine if only *he* could understand his notes, but...

There aren't too many pages, so his chicken scratch shouldn't be a difficult task to decipher, but it also means that there really isn't much information about this mirror...

“All we know is that on a moonlit night, there's a mysterious magical mirror that suddenly appears within the academy, illuminated by the moon. The reflection in the mirror switches places with the person in reality, and that person becomes trapped inside,” Magiluka said.

She took a page from the bundle and scanned its contents.

“Right, I get it,” I nodded. “Nighttime definitely sets the mood for stuff like this.”

“Um, my lady,” Tutte said behind me as I grabbed a few papers and started reading through them. “May I?”

“What's wrong, Tutte?” I asked. “If you've got any ideas, feel free to just shout them out!”

“All right. Well, if people clearly know about the effects of the magic mirror, does that mean that there are people who have fallen victim to it?”

“I wonder...” Magiluka replied. “It might've just started as a plain old rumor that was exaggerated and spread through word of mouth. If there really *had* been any victims, I wouldn't think it would end as just a petty rumor.”

“Heh heh heh...” I chuckled before I continued mysteriously, “The truth might have been covered up by someone such that only rumors remain...”

The two ladies fell silent. They turned pale, perhaps taking my mean joke at face value.

“Oh, uh, I'm joking. Really, I am. Totally a joke,” I quickly said before shifting topics. “I- In any case, true or not, we just need to find that magic mirror.”

I tried to imagine this mirror that I'd never seen before... *Oh, yeah.* "Speaking of which, what does the mirror look like?" I asked Magiluka upon realizing I wasn't able to picture it. "Is it a handheld mirror? Or is it a larger, full-body one?"

"The rumors seem to indicate that it's a full-body type," she replied.

"I see... If something like that just suddenly appeared in the academy, it would obviously stand out. I wonder why no one could find it?" I only had more questions.

"According to the notes Professor Fried jotted down, the rumors indicate that each generation has seen the mirror in a different place," Magiluka observed. "It seems it doesn't have a set location."

"The only common ground each account seems to share is that it's within this academy," I noted. "But this place is unnecessarily huge..."

I was out of leads, but I immediately switched gears. "For stuff like this, if we lay out a map and write in all the supposed sightings, we can usually find some kind of pattern somewhere."

I proudly invoked my knowledge of this extremely common trope and decided to give it a try.

"I-I see," Magiluka replied in awe. "You're amazing, Lady Mary."

"Heh heh heh. You think so?" I said, getting a little too happy about being complimented for that.

"Here's a map, my lady," Tutte said.

I unfurled our academy's map over a table.

"Okay then. Let me just mark the sightings on this map..." Despite declaring my intentions confidently, I stopped once I realized that I was about to vandalize academy property. My hand trembled.

"Would these serve the role sufficiently?" Tutte offered, taking out a few bronze coins and handing them to me.

Yep, it's so nice to have an excellent maid.

“I believe it was here and here...” my excellent maid said, swiftly placing the coins.

“And here and here,” my excellent friend said, doing the same.

I was still trying to confirm the locations as all the work was done for me. *Y-Yeah, I won't let this bother me. Me? Look stupid? Ha ha, no way. Impossible. Yeah, I'm overthinking this. No way.* I waved away the self-doubt creeping into my mind and stared at the map with the coin markers. Magiluka and Tutte joined me.

We silently stared at the map for several seconds. *Arghhh! There isn't anything like if I place another marker, it'd form a hexagram or something! I was totally banking on an emotional revelation, but nothing! I've got nothing!*

Contrary to my hopes, I couldn't see any pattern pop up. I'd spoken with such confidence only for my grand idea to yield no results.

In my extreme embarrassment, I hastily tried to make a claim. “Uhhh... I feel like the clock tower is at the center of all this...” I mumbled.

“Do you? The clock tower is at the center of the academy, so perhaps it just seems that way.”

“R-Right.” I immediately took my words back in response to Magiluka’s instant refutation.

“And yet... none of these markers are particularly distant from the clock tower,” Tutte replied, possibly noticing something from my arbitrary assertion. “Perhaps there is some sort of correlation.”

Now that my maid had supported my claims, the two ladies once again stared at the map in silence. “Since you mentioned the clock tower, my lady, I tried remembering the area around it,” Tutte said. “For example, I believe this marked spot used to be a deserted place—not many students walked nearby.”

I remained quiet.

“Indeed,” Magiluka added. “I’ve also heard that not many students used this area for a while until an annex was built here.”

I felt left behind by these two intelligent ladies, and I could only stand in silent panic

as my mouth opened and closed like a fish.

"Ah, Lady Mary," Tutte said. "Could you have been pointing out an area near the clock tower where the connected road had been deserted?"

"Hm? U-Uh, yeah, right," I stammered.

Though I was the first to suggest this place, only Magiluka and Tutte had apparently formed a deeper understanding. I tried my best to blend in and act like I knew what I was talking about.

"Splendid analysis," Magiluka said. "You managed to glean so much information while we were simply laying out the markers. I've been totally oblivious, and I feel embarrassed for immediately trying to deny your observations."

"Huh? Y-Yeah—I mean, don't be. Nothing to be embarrassed about," I replied. I'd gotten so fixated on agreeing with everything that I almost accidentally rejected Magiluka's humble apology. She looked at me as though to say, "I understand," but I was worried I might've given her the wrong idea.

"I-In any case, now we can investigate a little," I said before these odd misinterpretations spiraled out of control. "Why don't we try to visit those deserted areas?" I chose to flee—I mean, to act—and rose from my seat to head to our first lonely location.

We were currently using the clock tower as our base as we searched for vacant paths.

"Don't you think there's a crowd gathering wherever we go?" I asked. As I looked around, it felt like the students we saw earlier were still here.

"It seems like curious students are wondering if anything is amiss," Magiluka noted as she glanced around, possibly sharing the same thoughts as me.

"Maybe people are curious because two famous students of the academy are analyzing passersby," Tutte said apologetically. "They might believe that something has occurred."

"Goodness, Magiluka. You're way too famous!" I said.

"Oh, not as much as you, Lady Mary," Magiluka replied.

I wasn't sure if she wanted to avoid the term "famous," but she praised me without directly referring to the word.

"No way," I continued. "You produced excellent results as the former class master of Aleyios, and your name has been engraved within the annals of this academy's history. I don't hold a candle to you."

"Nonsense. All my results are contained within this academy—meanwhile, your accomplishments off campus have even gotten people to call you the Argent Holy Woman."

I frowned and pursed my lips. The longer this conversation continued, the worse I felt about our differences in status.

"Pardon me, but I believe you both stand out even more now..." Tutte interjected. "I don't think we can discern how many people normally frequent these places at this rate."

We had no choice but to retreat for the time being. Several minutes later, however, we realized that all would be well if our identities were concealed. Magiluka and I wore robes over our heads and returned to the clock tower, but students soon reported the appearance of two suspicious beings loitering on academy premises. Professor Fried immediately appeared to scold us.

We returned to our lounge after the professor excused us.

"All right then," I said, balling my hand into a fist with gusto. "How can we conduct our research while concealing our identities? We looked suspicious because of the robes. We just need a better disguise that allows us to blend in with the crowd."

Magiluka squinted at me and calmly retorted, "Lady Mary, aren't you forgetting our initial objective?"

"What? Do you have a good disguise in mind then?"

"Why don't we step away from disguises for the time being?"

"Then how can we do our research? Can you turn us into air or something? Tell me if

you can! No, seriously, please. I reaaaally want to not stand out!" I clasped Magiluka's shoulders and brought my face close to hers to accentuate my earnest inquiry, causing her to turn red and try to gain some distance from me.

"Wh-Wh-What are you on about? C-Calm down, please," she stammered.

"Heh heh heh heh," I chuckled. "You better tell me. If you don't, I'll do something even *more* outrageous!"

"H-H-H-H-Hey! S-S-Sto—"

But I didn't listen and drew even closer, holding Magiluka close to my body.

"My lady, I fear you've completely lost the plot," Tutte said, trying to calm me down. For some reason, she approached us and used her hands to blindfold me. "Why don't we take a few deep breaths?"

As my vision grew dark, I stopped, and...

"Hey! Do you think I'm a bird or something?!" I yelled, freeing myself from my maid's hands. Magiluka used this opportunity to flee from my grasp.

"What?" Tutte asked, cocking her head to one side, making my comedic comment a total bust.

Feeling a little embarrassed, I swiftly cleared my throat to change topics. This gave me time to remember my foolish actions from moments before, causing me to feel even more awkward.

"W-Well, jokes aside, why don't we get to the meat of the issue?" I suggested.

"My lady, if you two stand out too much, shall I conduct the research in your stead?" Tutte offered. "I believe I would have more luck in researching the area." She'd quickly caught on to the "Please forget I just embarrassed myself" vibes I was feverishly exuding and shifted topics.

"Th-That's a great idea," I replied. "Is that all right with you, Magiluka?"

"Huh?! I-I believe so, yes..." She was still taking deep breaths from being flustered earlier, letting out an odd squeal before offering her ready approval.

"Um, are you okay?" I asked, a little worried as I approached her.

"I-I am," Magiluka insisted, still looking to be in a tizzy.

"Okay, if you say so..." I smiled and wiggled my fingers as I got even closer. "So, are you *sure* you don't know of a method to turn me into air?"

"I don't!"

She fled from my suspicious movements and gained some distance.

"What's with that reaction?" I asked. "You're just making me curious. You actually *do* know of a method, don't you?"

"I don't!"

I once again inched closer, wiggling my fingers and threatening to tickle her. Magiluka used chairs and tables to defend herself from me. *She's so cute when she looks embarrassed and tries to run from me. It only tempts me to trouble her even more.*

"Ahem," Tutte said, clearing her throat behind me. "My lady, I shall be off."

I snapped back to my senses and decided to put an end to my bullying. I lowered my hands. *Whoa, that was close. Something was about to awaken in me.*

"Uh, right, yeah. Please, Tutte," I replied. I stopped chasing Magiluka around and watched my maid leave.

With Tutte gone to conduct research for us, I finished the rest of my lessons and returned to our lounge as soon as I could. Magiluka was already there waiting for me. Upon giving the room a sweeping glance, I noticed that Tutte had already finished her investigation, but she was facing a corner of the room.

"Magiluka, what's wrong with Tutte?" I asked.

"Ah, erm, it might be best to leave her alone for now," she replied with a dry laugh as she stared at Tutte.

I wasn't ready to drop it, however. If someone had done something to Tutte, I certainly wouldn't be silent about it.

"She seems to be down and muttering to herself..." I observed, unwilling to let this go.

"When she went out to do her research, students noticed her as your maid and it piqued their curiosity," Magiluka explained, looking a little troubled. "She apparently stood out quite a bit."

It seemed that even though Tutte had assumed that she didn't stand out and could go undercover perfectly, she had inadvertently become rather famous. Still, she wasn't well-known enough to gather a crowd.

"Tutte, you don't have to be so down." I consoled my maid who was still facing the wall. "It's rare enough for a maid to be within this academy. I'm sure that's why you stood out."

Tutte turned around and beamed. "O-Of course! It's only because maids are rare here! I didn't stand out because I'm *your* maid or because people were wary of me. Certainly not."



Her phrasing felt odd to me. “Huh? Wait, what do you mean by that...?” I started.

“Forget that,” Magiluka interrupted me, cutting down any hopes of pursuing that topic.
“How was the investigation?”

“How do you expect me to do that!?” I mumbled. I kept myself in check and fought against the urge to argue with her, however.

“Ah, I surveyed around the clock tower and I found a passage that seemed rather deserted,” Tutte replied. “Right here.”

Tutte peeled herself from the wall and pointed to a location on the map.

“Then why don’t we focus on searching near that area?” Magiluka suggested. “Is that all right with you, Lady Mary?”

“Sure,” I replied. “Tonight’s a full moon, so let’s investigate the academy at midnight!”

I raised my fist eagerly, unable to contain my excitement.

“You seem to be enjoying yourself, my lady,” Tutte remarked.

“Well yeah, it’s like a test of courage within this school,” I said. “I’ve always wanted to do something like this.”

Due to my excitement, I failed to notice Tutte growing pale at the idea of visiting the academy at night.

“I know not of what this ‘test of courage’ is, but I would encourage you to refrain from roaming around academy premises in the middle of the night,” Magiluka said chidingly. Her reasoning was sound.

“I’ve gotta do what I’ve gotta do!” I insisted. “This is all for the sake of my research report!”

I wasn’t afraid to use this classic excuse against Magiluka to get my way.

“But, my lady, will you be spending the night here?” Tutte asked. “I find it dangerous to head home in the middle of the night... Your parents will be very worried.”

It was now Tutte's turn to argue against me. And she was right; Magiluka and I were the daughters of a marquis and a duke respectively, and it didn't seem safe to remain at the academy through the night. Although the academy may have provided some protection while we were on campus, that was all the security it had to offer, and this world wasn't safe like modern-day Japan. Though this school had plenty of aristocrats, safety may easily have been the primary reason students had never decided to look into this particular rumor.

As I ruminated over Tutte's words, Magiluka chimed in.

"Shall I ask my grandfather?" she reluctantly offered.

"The headmaster?" I asked.

"Yes. My grandfather stays in the clock tower, which has a room where one could spend the night. He occasionally uses it himself when he must stay at the academy. I can request to use that room and have him act as our guardian for our nighttime excursion. If my grandfather is with us, perhaps your parents will feel at ease, Lady Mary. We'd need his consent first, of course."

The headmaster was a busy man; we would only trouble him with our sudden request, but it didn't feel right to give up without trying. *And this is a completely personal ask... I have the pretense of searching for a research topic, but I doubt he'd go this far for such a thing.*

Magiluka seemed to notice my apprehensions as I frowned.

"It's all for that research report," Magiluka insisted. "I think it's worth asking."

With a wink, she stood up and jumped into action. I sheepishly followed her out of the room.

"I feel bad," I confessed. "I'm just dragging you along with my whims."

"Don't be. As I've said before, I'm doing this of my own accord. I'd like to help you out."

Moved by her words, I tried to hug her from behind. "C'm... ere?"

Possibly expecting my clingy display of affection, she skillfully dodged my embrace. *Ouch... That kinda hurts.* I must've looked devastated—after Magiluka saw my

expression, she hastily tried to explain herself.

"I... Um... I don't dislike your hugs or anything," she said, her face turning red as she mumbled the rest of her sentences. "I-I'd just like for you to know that there's a time and place for everything, and... um..."

"You're adorable."

I turned into a hugging machine and clung to her without listening to her words.

"Come on... Time and place!" Magiluka wailed while peeling me off her.

3. THE ACADEMY AT NIGHT

"Oho, I see... You'd like to investigate the academy at night for your research report, would you, Mary? Well, aren't you quite the little oddball?" the headmaster said.

Magiluka and I had entered the clock tower and placed our request, and now I felt a little down since the headmaster's reaction was about the same as Professor Fried's. *Is everything I do so weird? Is it really?*

"Well, headmaster, may I hear your response?" I asked.

"Hmm... Well, I was planning on staying the night today anyway, so it shouldn't be a problem."

The discussion having gone surprisingly smoothly, Magiluka, Tutte, and I would officially be spending the night at the academy tonight. Tutte immediately entered the room we would be using to make some preparations, and I had the coachman of the carriage that was waiting for me outside leave to tell my parents about my overnight stay. The headmaster took care of alerting Magiluka's family.

"By the way, Mary, what are you all trying to look into within this academy?" the headmaster asked.

We'd only provided a vague explanation about looking around for my research topic, and he wasn't privy to the details yet, so it seemed he'd become a tad curious about

our motives. I was surprised he'd accepted our request with so little information in the first place—it was doubtless that this kind of carelessness was what'd caused this academy to become so chaotic.

"Er, I was thinking of investigating the Magic Mirror of Hallucinations rumor," I replied.

"I see... Ack!"

All of a sudden, the headmaster was reeling like he'd just heard some shocking news and erupted into a coughing fit. *Did I touch on a surprising subject?*

"Are you all right?" I asked.

"Ngh... Yes, I'm quite all right. B-But I understand now. You've brought up quite an ancient tall tale."

"Do you know of it, headmaster?"

"Well, I've heard rumors of it, yes."

He proceeded to avert his gaze. *He's acting suspicious... I'm not sure what he's up to, but he's being shady...* I glared at him doubtfully, but he cleared his throat to break the silence.

"Ahem! Ah, I just remembered that I've got matters to tend to," the headmaster said. "If you need anything, feel free to let me know."

With that, he swiftly left the room. *He's acting really suspicious... but whatever.* The headmaster was basically unsettlingly shifty by default, so I decided to disregard his behavior.

Night fell upon the academy.

"It's time to start investigating!" I declared vigorously.

"Are you really going, my lady?" Tutte said, looking worried. She still wasn't good with horror scenarios—I felt a little relieved to see that even a perfect maid like her had some flaws.

Since moonlight illuminated the academy, it wasn't like we were in complete darkness,

but the passageways of the unlit academy were quieter and darker than what I'd imagined.

Crap... I'm starting to get scared from letting my imagination run wild. Nights at the academy are scarier than expected. I thought I'd toughened up thanks to my run-ins with Instructor Alice, but on the contrary, my fantasies had only become more realized, causing me to grow even more terrified. I stared into the gaping darkness and shuddered, realizing that I no longer had my initial excitement.

"I believe this is the path that you were talking about, Tutte," Magiluka said, walking ahead without a care in the world. She left Tutte and me behind as we trembled.

"You're so reliable, Magiluka," I said.

"Wh-What's with the sudden praise?" she replied, turning around in surprise.

"I was just thinking you seem so fearless."

"That's not true. I have a thing or two that I'm afraid of. As the daughter of a marquis, I've simply learned to stay calm and..."

Magiluka suddenly stopped talking. Her gaze was frozen in fear, like she couldn't stop staring at whatever was directly behind Tutte and me.

Oh, stop that... Don't react like that... I'm too scared to turn around now... I couldn't not turn around in this situation, though, so I slowly did so... only to see the lively, uncanny gait of a hideous winged insect.

"AAAH!" we screamed.

A carapace bug, an armored bug monster, was scuttling about. To me, it looked similar to a cockroach. It might've still been a juvenile because it was about as large as a normal roach, which only creeped me out even further. I'd seen numerous monsters in my life, but that *thing* was too much—I physically couldn't bear to even look at roaches. It just evoked visceral disgust within me.

With the appearance of this unexpected monster, Magiluka and I were terrified and holding each other, as though we'd seen a ghost.

"Ah, a carapace bug," Tutte said without batting an eye. "I suppose the academy can

never exterminate *all* of them given how large the campus is."

"F-F-Fi-Fire..." Magiluka stammered.

"Lady Magiluka, if you use your fire magic here, you may end up torching this entire area," Tutte warned.

"T-T-T-T-T-Tutte! D-Do something! P-P-Please!" I shrieked.

We were faced with anything but a supernatural force—this insect had nothing to do with ghosts or the occult, but Magiluka and I still trembled as we learned that this academy had plenty of terrifying things to offer at night. In a panic, I turned to a calm Tutte and did a rude, unladylike gesture of mimicking swatting the insect with my hand.

"Very well. Excuse me," Tutte replied, glancing around.

She picked up a suitable wooden stick that was nearby and raised it over her head as she approached that horrifying *thing*.

"Hyah!" she said, swinging down without hesitation.

A swift scuttle was all it needed to dodge the stick, then it unfortunately began scurrying straight for us.

"It's coming this waaaaay!" Magiluka screamed with tears in her eyes as she tried to flee. Her earlier calm demeanor was nowhere to be seen.

Perhaps that thing's habit was to chase after fleeing prey—it started to scuttle toward her. Now, what was *I* doing, you ask? I glued my back to the wall and did everything I could to erase my presence, hoping it wouldn't notice me and biding my time to escape.

"T-T-T-Tutte... Please... Help mee!" Magiluka begged amidst the darkness.

"Huh? B-But if I go any farther, it'll be so dark I won't be able to see anything... and I'm scared," Tutte admitted.

While Tutte didn't even flinch at that *thing's* appearance, she shuddered at the darkness in front of her. *Arghhh! I guess each person has their own fears!* *Ahhh!* I was

bad with both the darkness and *it*, so I couldn't blame either of them. Suffice it to say our first foray into investigating the academy at night had become a rowdy affair.

"Ugh... The academy is so terrifying at night..." Magiluka murmured.

"I-I agree..." Tutte replied.

At a glance, it seemed like they were talking about the same thing, but I had a feeling they weren't truly on the same page. The two of them were latching onto me and refusing to let go. There I was, living the fantasy of a lady on each arm most people could only dream of, yet I was feeling so frightful I honestly just wanted someone to cling onto myself. *I-I just don't need to think about scary stuff! So long as nothing sneaks up on me, I should be fine! Stay calm. Stay calm!*

"In any case, this place is a mess," I muttered.

I used my lantern to illuminate my surroundings. Because this part of campus was so deserted, it appeared no one had been keeping it clean.

I found a door leading into the corridor and went inside the accompanying room, and there it hit me why this building looked so abandoned—it was just being used as storage space. The room was filled with various items haphazardly strewn around. I even saw broken items—they had likely been placed here to be disposed of later and then forgotten. Piles of accumulated dust and spiderwebs could be seen.

"I see. I suppose this area is being used to store items that are no longer needed. Since it's not being used for classes, students and teachers don't come here often," Magiluka observed, reaching the same conclusion as I had.

"Well, I hope the mirror isn't buried within all this trash," I said. "That doesn't sound divine at all."

I used my lantern to take a sweeping glance over the room. I wasn't sure if I was lucky or unlucky, but there wasn't a mirror in sight.

"My lady, I feel like over there, deep within the room, everything is piled up unnaturally. It feels quite odd to me—is it just my imagination?" Tutte asked. As a maid, she was the cleaning expert; her observation was something that I would've never noticed.

"It looks fine to me, but if it bothers you, Tutte, I think it's worth investigating," I said while I handed Magiluka the lantern.

"Hup." I approached the area that Tutte had indicated, lifting up a dusty wooden box and placing the pile of objects atop it to the side.

"My lady, isn't that box heavy?" Tutte asked.

"Hm? Not at all—uh, I mean, could you help me?"

"Of course."

I initially couldn't understand my maid's kind offer, but if these items really *were* heavy, it would mean that I was displacing them with ease in front of Magiluka. She was glancing at us as she cleaned the surrounding area, so I quickly asked Tutte for her assistance. *Whew, that was close.*

Following Tutte's instructions, we proceeded to move the items that we thought were in our way. It hadn't even been ten minutes when an item wrapped in a large cloth had made its appearance underneath all the debris.

"H-Hey, could this be the magic mirror?" I asked slowly.

"It's hard to tell since it's under the cloth, but it certainly has a similar shape to one," Tutte replied.

It felt like I'd already hit the jackpot. I'd expected the mirror to have more of a godly flair, so I still couldn't quite process the item in front of me. If this really *was* the mirror, it was already case closed with me digging it up from this storage space—there was no mystery to be had at all.

"Should I remove the cloth?" I wondered.

"I-I'm not sure," Magiluka said cautiously. "If this really is the mirror and our reflections could be seen within it..."

"Wh-What if we just peeled back just a little bit? Just a tiiiny glance at the mirror. We'd be safe, right? Totally not dangerous." I doubled down, burning with curiosity about the item underneath.

"Hmmm... Then maybe... it's fine?" Magiluka replied.

Taking extra care to not appear in the mirror, I gently and slowly peeled the cloth back. I then saw something sparkle, reflecting the lantern's light, causing me to hastily place the cloth over the item once more.

"What did you guys see?" I asked.

"It was... a mirror," Magiluka said with a grimace.

"Huh? Is this the rumored magic mirror?" Tutte asked with surprise.

Well, crap! My eyes weren't playing tricks on me! Come on, is this really the mirror? Really? I just... kinda found it lying around. I expected, like... a flowery, more majestic appearance, you know? I internally agonized over how easily we'd reached our goal.

"But nothing is definitive just yet," Magiluka insisted, apparently also unhappy with this boring turn of events. "This might just be a simple mirror that happened to be lying in this storage."

"Th-Then sh-should we... peer into the mirror?" I suggested.

I felt like a devil whispering into their ears, goading them into a possibly unfortunate situation. We all gulped nervously.

"B-But..." Magiluka mumbled cautiously.

"It'll be fine," I assured her. "I'll be the only one reflected in the mirror."

If anything happens, worst case, I can probably handle it.

"I-I can't let you go all alone!" Magiluka said, hastily grabbing my hand as I tried to pull the cloth away. "I'll go with you."

"Magiluka..." I murmured.

"So? Have you all found anything?" A voice suddenly boomed throughout the silent classroom.

"AAAHHH!" Magiluka and I screamed in terror.

The owner of the voice tactlessly shattered the heartwarming moment I was sharing with Magiluka. He was standing by the door.

"G-Grandfather... Don't surprise us like that!" Magiluka gasped, looking at our headmaster.

"Ah... That scared me..." I muttered, breathing a sigh of relief.

"M-My lady... Lady Magiluka..." Tutte said, her face pale as she pointed in a certain direction.

Curious, I picked up a part of the cloth that I had in my hands. *Wait, why's the cloth on the ground?* In my shock at the headmaster's voice, I had inadvertently tugged the cloth toward me. I hastily gazed into the mirror and saw my reflection staring back. Magiluka and I were both visible in the mirror.

"O-Oh no!" I cried. "Magiluka and I are in the mirror!"

I reflexively tried to hide my face in an act of self-defense, but... yeah, that would be useless. Upon noticing that nothing was happening, I slowly unfurled myself.

"Uhhh... Is this just a normal mirror?" I asked slowly.

"It seems like it," Magiluka replied. We both stared blankly at the mirror, dazed by how anticlimactic this had all turned out to be.

"Well, it seems like you couldn't find what you were looking for," the headmaster said.
"Why don't we call it for tonight and head back?"

"You're right," I agreed. "I'm exhausted..."

As all the strength left my body, I reluctantly walked toward the door. The other two ladies followed me, looking equally tired.

"I suggest you three take a shower before anything else," the headmaster suggested as we headed outside. "You're covered in dust."

Only then did we realize that we were caked in dust from head to toe.

"Ahhh..." I groaned. I pressed my forehead against the wall of the showers. "We were

all worked up for nothing. I can't believe it."

"If it could be found so easily, I suppose it wouldn't just be a rumor," Magiluka replied from nearby. Her voice sounded like it was coming from the same area of the showers—perhaps she had also consigned her forehead to the wall of regret.

Tutte had headed to the clock tower with the headmaster to get our change of clothes. However, the headmaster had some matters to tend to, meaning that my maid would have to return by herself within the dark academy premises. I offered for us to all go together so that the three of us could at least return as a group, but she politely refused and stated that she would be fine alone. *I know Tutte hates dark and scary places... Will she be okay?*

"Aaahhh!"

While I was worrying, I heard Tutte's scream echo in the air. I immediately headed toward her without a second thought. She was on the ground in the hallway right outside the shower room. She wasn't looking at the door, but at the corridor in front of her.

"What's wrong, Tutte?!" I exclaimed as I rushed to her side. "Are you okay?"

"Th-There was a-a white figure... o-over there!" Tutte stammered as she pointed a shaky finger at the corridor.

"A... figure?" Magiluka asked as she stared in the direction of Tutte's finger. I also looked toward the corridor, but it was empty.

"No one's there," I said.

Suddenly, someone popped out from the corner we'd been staring at, causing us all to flinch in surprise.

"Wh-What's wrong? I heard a scream," the headmaster asked, looking befuddled as he approached us.

I'd been holding my breath, but now I heaved a sigh of relief. I felt my body relax, and I noticed the other two ladies exhale as well.

"G-Grandfather, please don't surprise us like that," Magiluka said.

"Hm? What?" the headmaster inquired.

"Tutte thought that you were a ghost, headmaster," I explained.

"I-I wonder..." Tutte mumbled under her breath. "The figure I saw had long hair..."

"Tutte?" I asked, curious about what she'd seen.

"Ah, well, I apologize for surprising you all," the headmaster said. "But putting that aside, it seems all three of you have promising futures! ♪"

"Huh?" I replied, my attention instantly stolen by the headmaster's comment.

I tried to understand what the headmaster was staring at so intently. *He's looking at...*

Suddenly, Magiluka and I both realized we were naked since we'd jumped out of the showers at Tutte's screaming. And my maid, who had fallen onto the ground in shock, had her skirt in disarray, leaving everything below it on full display for the world to see.



“AAAH!”

The three of us screamed, and our voices reverberated throughout the night skies of the academy. I was about to punch the headmaster, but I managed to keep myself in check and fled the scene. If you asked me, I deserved a pat on the back for my generous restraint.

4. OH DEAR. LADY MARY SEEMS...

Following the tumultuous evening at the academy, Magiluka went back home and then returned a little after lunch. Due to fourth-years having fewer classes, there were times when they didn't have even a single class scheduled for the day.

“Ah, Lady Mary didn’t have any classes today,” Magiluka murmured, sounding a little bored before she tackled her few classes for the day.

Instead of heading straight home afterward, she decided to stay at the academy to do a bit of research. Since the mirror they’d found last night had been a bust, she was determined to find new information—but only as a side project, she reminded herself, since she had her own research topic to consider as well.

Her plan for the rest of the day was to pop into her group’s usual lounge in the old campus building to say hello before heading to the library—however, before she reached the lounge, she encountered a crowd of girls gathering at its entrance. She heard Mary’s name pop up in their conversation, gathering that the girls had been doing something with Mary moments before. Magiluka couldn’t help but be curious—it was supposed to be Mary’s day off today, so she certainly had no reason to be here.

“Excuse me,” Magiluka called out.

“Oh, Lady Magiluka,” the girls replied. “Good day.”

“Good day.” It was then that she realized that the girls looked familiar. “Are you all part of the Clothing Research Society?”

“That’s right. We go beyond our academy studies and think of new fashion ideas every day. Thanks to the new system that you and your friends established, we’ve been able

to broaden our horizons and tackle new creations," one of the girls replied with sparkling eyes, proving Magiluka's deductions to be correct.

"Pardon me, but I couldn't help but hear you mention Lady Mary's name earlier..."

"Ah! She arrived early in the morning to enlighten us with her new fashion ideas, and we handed her the clothes she'd envisioned just now."

"They were hastily made, but I believe they look quite revolutionary. Lady Mary is truly impressive," another student chimed in happily.

"We'd love to use her idea as the foundation for even more clothes," said a third joyfully.

Thinking back, Magiluka realized the clothes she was currently wearing and the class master uniform were all designed by Mary. Magiluka had only familiarized herself with the faces of the Clothing Research Society because they'd often visited the lounge for advice. She thanked the girls and left, learning that Mary had been at the academy.

When Magiluka finally made it inside the lounge, she saw that it was unexpectedly empty and went to the library.

"Lady Mary didn't seem too keen on creating new clothes in the past," Magiluka mumbled to herself. "I wonder what's gotten into her today."

Was Mary truly looking to find a way to vanish into thin air as she had declared before? Feeling slightly anxious, Magiluka glanced out the window when she noticed long silver locks fluttering past.

"Lady Mary?" Magiluka wondered aloud, noticing a Mary-like figure headed for a deserted area and immediately giving chase.

Magiluka's pursuit saw her leaving campus and entering a small forest. After a short while, she found the figure again—this time, the silver-haired girl had her back turned to Magiluka, failing to notice she was being watched from a distance. Magiluka was certain that this girl was Mary, who looked to be hiding from something.

"Lady Mary," Magiluka said, quietly approaching the girl before her.

"Waaaaaaah!" Caught off guard, she let out an odd squeal and jumped up in surprise.



"O-O-O-Oh, it's just you, Magiluka," Mary said quickly. "You scared me!"

Magiluka tilted her head to one side, seemingly confused by how different Mary looked. Indeed, atop the silver-haired girl's head was a cowlick that stuck out like a bird's crest. Magiluka racked her brain, trying to recall if Mary had ever styled her hair like that, but it could've been bedhead or Mary's new attempt at fashion. What was even more curious, however, was Mary's attire—she was enveloped in a mantle from her neck down.

"What are you doing in a place like this?" Magiluka asked. Mary's clothes were odd, but it was even more odd for her to be prowling about in deserted woods.

"Huh? Uhhh... No, it's best if we don't talk about it," Mary replied with a serious expression, shocking Magiluka even further. "Just act like you've never seen me and leave this area at once."

Mary had always relied on Magiluka, but now she was pushing her away. Whatever Mary was up to must have either been of the utmost importance or extremely dangerous. Magiluka couldn't tell, but one thing was clear: Mary wasn't joking.

"I-I can't back down after hearing those words from you," Magiluka stammered.

"If you try to pry further, you'll be stepping into a world of darkness," Mary replied.

A world of darkness? Upon hearing those words, Magiluka gulped, unable to process the crazy words that had come out of Mary's mouth... but she'd already decided that she wouldn't leave Mary's side.

"I-I don't mind," Magiluka finally said. "I-I've told you before. I'd like to be your strength." It was a tad different from what she had said in the past, but her feelings were the same.

Perhaps picking up on Magiluka's resolve, Mary gazed at her, and she stared back in turn.

After a few seconds, Mary gave a reluctant sigh and relented. "Okay, fine. I didn't mean for this to happen, but..." Mary muttered with a forced smile before she quickly gazed into the distance and clasped Magiluka's shoulders, pushing her down. "Duck!"

"Wh-What is it?" Magiluka asked.

"Shhh! Stay quiet. Ugh... I didn't think the organization would come here. I was careless." Mary gritted her teeth in vexation, looking in a certain direction.

Magiluka turned to peek in the same area, but she didn't see anyone there. Then she strained her eyes while crouching and thought she saw a figure dash across her field of vision, causing her to swiftly get even lower to the ground than before. She realized Mary was telling the truth, and she fixated on the entity Mary had mentioned earlier: "the organization."

The ideas of a "world of darkness" and an "organization" certainly implied to Magiluka that whatever Mary had uncovered, it must've been dangerous. However, the two girls were students, and it felt unlikely they would be targeted by a dangerous organization.

Although she wasn't made privy to the details of the situation, Magiluka thought back to the time she and her friends had become entangled in the machinations of the Einholst Papacy's dangerous Annihilation Corps. Did Mary have ties to this dangerous group?

"Lady Mary, are you perhaps referring to *that* organization?" Magiluka asked with emphasis.

"Hm? Y-Yeah," Mary said after a beat of hesitation.

Magiluka understood Mary's awkward pause as her friend agonizing over whether to come clean.

"I'm fleeing from the evil clutches of *that* organization and fighting my way out," Mary confessed.

"But why are you being targeted?"

"I've awakened my powers, and the organization fears that."

"P-Powers?"

"That's right... My powers... to become a magical girl!"

"Magical... what? Pardon?"

Mary balled her hand into a fist with great energy, but Magiluka looked stunned.

"Actually, gaining an ally might be pretty cool..." Mary muttered with a triumphant smile.

Magiluka remained as perplexed as ever. She could only let Mary's befuddling statements slide.

"Magiluka, stay hidden here!" Mary ordered.

"L-Lady Mary!"

While Magiluka was still trying to process the situation, Mary left her behind and leaped out from the brush she'd been concealed in, putting herself in full view.

"My heart becomes my power!" Mary shouted into the air as she took out an intricately designed heart-shaped brooch about the size of her palm and struck a pose.

"Huh?" Magiluka could only look on, mystified at the enigmatic scene unfolding in front of her.

"From my heart!" Mary yelled, raising the brooch to the skies.

She whispered a spell and activated her light magic, causing a brilliant flash of light to envelop her surroundings, blinding everyone present for a split second. Once Magiluka could see again, she noticed that Mary had changed her appearance.

"My solitary soul glows silver! Platinum Heart SRI!" Mary cried.

"Huh?!" Magiluka gasped.

In the next moment, Mary had a side ponytail. Upon closer inspection, Magiluka noticed that Mary's hair had grown much longer, almost reaching the ground—she deduced that Mary was wearing some sort of hair extension that was close to her natural hair color.

Magiluka was shocked by Mary's dramatic pose and eccentric declarations, and her befuddlement only grew as she watched on. Perhaps what confused her the most was Mary's flashy attire. Her outfit was abounding with white frills, but she was nevertheless wearing an extremely short miniskirt with her belly button exposed. She'd also adorned her chest with a needlessly long ribbon, which she'd pinned to her blouse with the brooch from earlier. The whole getup gave Magiluka the unshakable

feeling she was seeing things she wasn't supposed to be seeing.

"L-L-Lady Mary?!" she managed to utter.

"No!" Mary declared. "I'm currently the messenger of light, the one who fights against the world of evil lurking within the shadows, Platinum Heart SR!"

Mary—no, Platinum Heart SR—struck several energetic poses as she spoke with utmost confidence. Suddenly, something emerged from between the brush.

"Huh? A golem?" Magiluka said.

It was unknown who'd summoned them, but several golems rushed toward Mary and her friend. The creatures took the shape of simplified humans, and they were wearing masks that hid their faces. If one were to use Mary's previous world as reference, they looked like masked people in full-body spandex suits. That said, the golems looked a bit *too* rushed, as their joints were noticeably awkward; it may have been difficult to compare them to humans.

"Ugh! These must be soldiers dispatched by the organization! But they're no match for Platinum Heart SR! Hiyah!"

While Magiluka continued to try her best to understand what was going on, Mary charged into the supposed soldiers. Magiluka couldn't help but notice that although Platinum Heart SR claimed to be a magical girl, her attacks were almost all purely physical, punching the golems and crushing them to smithereens. In any case, it was a seemingly one-sided fight, and the golems soon crumbled and returned to the earth.

"...Is it over?" Magiluka asked gingerly once the raging battle had ended.

She was vexed to realize she hadn't reacted at all and had simply watched from the sidelines without offering any assistance. Magiluka vowed to jump in next time... but as she thought as much, she shrank once again upon becoming cognizant of what Mary was wearing.

"It seems like the organization has retreated for now," Mary said. "But that doesn't mean that the battle is over. No... *They'll* appear again."

"Th-Then why don't we turn to others for help?" Magiluka suggested.

"That I cannot do. Being a magical girl is my duty and destiny... I can't drag outsiders into this mess."

"Outsiders..."

Magiluka slumped her shoulders, guessing that she was included in the "outsiders." But Mary approached her, grabbed her hands, and brought her close.

"But I think you're different," Platinum Heart SR said. "Our meeting here wasn't a coincidence. The strings of fate must have destined this outcome. Magiluka, if you unleash your heart that's slumbering within, I'm sure the magical heart will appear before you."

"M-Magical?" Magiluka stammered, unable to understand half the words that came out of an excited Mary's mouth.

"I guess we really should start gathering a few props..." Mary muttered. "We could get the Clothing Research Society to prepare another outfit, and..."

"L-Lady Mary?"

"You don't have classes tomorrow, do you, Magiluka?"

"H-Huh? No."

"Okay, then let's go shopping at the royal capital. Let's meet in front of the fountain at noon."

"B-But tomorrow is..."

"Later, Magiluka! Hiyah!" Mary declared with gusto, immediately leaving and jumping onto a branch of a tall tree. And with that, she silently disappeared from sight, deeper within the forest. Magiluka remained still for a while, staring in the direction where Mary had left.

"Didn't Lady Mary tell me she has classes tomorrow?" Magiluka mumbled to herself. Then, all of a sudden, she heard a rustling in some nearby vegetation...

"Eek!" Magiluka cried with a tremble at the silence in the woods suddenly being broken. Someone had emerged from between the brush.

"Ah, Magiluka. What are you doing in a place like this?" Magiluka's grandfather and headmaster of the academy, Fortuna, asked.

"P-Please don't startle me like that, grandfather," Magiluka sighed, trying to calm her thudding heart.

Fortuna remained silent, waiting for an answer to his previous question.

"I'm not doing anything," Magiluka finally said. "I spotted Lady Mary, so I just called out to her, is all."

"Lady Mary?" Fortuna asked.

"Indeed. She was here..." Magiluka trailed off, wondering if the events that she'd witnessed earlier could be explained to a third party. She decided to quickly rephrase. "Er, nothing. I'd heard that Lady Mary didn't have any classes today, so I was simply shocked to see her at the academy today. She has classes tomorrow, but she invited me to go shopping at the royal capital tomorrow anyway... It simply isn't like her."

Magiluka decided to end her explanation with a rather innocuous observation. The headmaster seemed to ponder over her words for a few moments.

"Hm... Well, perhaps the instructors shifted their schedules," Fortuna reasoned. "In any case, Magiluka, I'd like to make a request of you. Is that all right?"

"What might that be?"

"You know the magic tool shop in the royal capital that I frequent, don't you?"

Magiluka tilted her head to one side in confusion, but she nodded in answer to his question.

"If you're going to the royal capital tomorrow, could I ask you to deliver them a letter for me?" Fortuna asked.

"A letter? I-I suppose I could..."

Magiluka had no intentions of refusing her grandfather's request, but she was perplexed as to why Fortuna had tasked her with this errand.

"I see, I see," the headmaster said with a grin, looking a bit more mischievous than relieved.

Magiluka looked at him dubiously, but the headmaster turned on his heels and left the forest like he was fleeing from his granddaughter's gaze. Magiluka followed her grandfather and left the area.

5. OH DEAR. MAGILUKA SEEMS...

After the magic mirror ended up being a dud, I went home because I didn't have classes the following day, but now I was back the day after that. *I get days off because I'm a fourth-year, I guess... Speaking of which, doesn't Magiluka have a day off today?*

While I was lost in my thoughts, my classes ended unexpectedly quickly—then, with nothing else to do, I decided to drop by the lounge of the old campus building. With a vague glimmer of hope that someone might be hanging out at the lounge, I stood in front of the door and knocked.

"Come in," Magiluka's voice replied back, to my surprise.

Huh? Doesn't Magiluka have the day off today? I cocked my head to one side while Tutte quietly opened the door for me. I decided to not overthink the situation and stepped inside. Lo and behold, there was Magiluka standing in the room alone.

"Magiluka, I thought you didn't have—" I started.

"Aaah! Lady Maryyy!" Magiluka squealed, rushing to my side and giving me a hug. She sounded—and was acting—quite spoiled.



"Wh-Wh-What's gotten into you, Magiluka?" I stuttered.

"Hm? Whatever do you mean?"

Magiluka continued to rub her body against me. *Huh? I thought Magiluka wasn't good with touching. She'd always get embarrassed... Maybe she's just not good at receiving hugs, but can give them?*

It may have been a bit mean for me to be so touchy while knowing that she disliked such contact, but I digress—it was extremely unusual for her to cling to me of her own volition. *Perhaps she's decided to be a bit more forthcoming with her feelings now that she's free of her class master duties? In that case, I don't mind obliging her.*

"Ahhh... Your noble aroma... Haah..." Magiluka murmured while sniffing me.

I-I don't... mind obliging her... My resolve started to waver as my red-faced friend continued to feverishly inhale deep whiffs of the back of my head.

"M-Mgiluka, I thought you didn't have any classes today." I inched back and peeled her away from me as I segued the topic from how I smell.

"No classes?" She put a hand to her mouth and tilted her head quizzically. It was an adorable sight. "Is that so? My head has just been so filled with thoughts of you that I must have forgotten."

Her nonchalance made her seem a bit different from usual. She'd always had an air of intelligence surrounding her, but she currently sounded—for lack of a better word—pretty stupid.

That's when I noticed the cowlick bouncing atop her head. *Wow, it's a cowlick! Huh? Did Magiluka ever have one?* If my memory served me correctly, she'd never had anything of the sort, but that didn't necessarily mean anything. Maybe her hair just ended up this way today somehow, or maybe she purposely styled her hair like this? *Is she trying to be fashionable? Or maybe it's bed head... But I can't imagine Magiluka using the latter excuse.*

"I've been eagerly awaiting you, Lady Mary!" Magiluka gushed. "I've been dying to talk with you! Now, why don't you have a seat? ♪"

While my attention had been grabbed by her cowlick, Magiluka didn't seem to have a

care in the world as she locked her arm with mine and walked us forward.

"Huh? Hey, wait, huh?" I stammered.

Her forcible attitude was anything but usual, and I found myself completely shocked by it. She would normally always wait for my approval, but today she was acting self-indulgent out of nowhere. I was a little unsure how to react to the sudden change in disposition, but I found it to be adorable nonetheless.

Heh heh heh... If this is how she's acting now, maybe I can see what she's like when she's sulking if I push back a little. Ha ha, surely not though, right? I mean, it's Magiluka we're talking about.

"Wait a second, Magiluka," I said. Curiosity had gotten the best of me, so I'd decided to be a little mean. I stopped walking and removed my arm from her grasp.

Magiluka stared at me in astonishment... then her eyes got all dewy in no time flat. She was quite literally about to burst into tears. She had a look of absolute despair, as though the world was crashing down around her, from believing that I didn't want to play along with her.

"L-Lady Mary..." she blubbered. "Y-Y-You rejected... me..."

"Whoaaaa! Sorry!" I hastily apologized. "It's not like I'm upset or anything. But, y'know... like... Uhhh... Erm... I couldn't help but tease you! That's it!" Completely floored by her unexpected reaction, I quickly tried to think of an excuse, but nothing good came to mind.

"You're saying... that you were just trying to be a little mean to me?" Magiluka asked slowly.

"Uhhh... Yeah. I'm sorry," I replied.

Magiluka remained silent.

"Magiluka? Are you mad?" I gingerly asked.

"Eh heh heh. I'm glad. I thought you hated me, Lady Mary."

Magiluka gave me a gentle smile—an expression of hers I usually never saw—and I

was charmed by her face. *She's so cute... But even so, is it just me, or is Magiluka being a bit... too much toward me today?*

"If you hated me, I wouldn't have been able to stand it," Magiluka said. "I would've killed myself right this instant."

Whoa ho ho, slow down there, ma'am! That's a little too much!!! You're being a bit clingy!

"Ah ha ha!" I laughed innocently, attempting to dispel the heavy atmosphere. "Come on now. Surely, you jest..."

I stepped away from Magiluka and took a seat to end this conversation. I wasn't sure how she viewed my attitude, but I was too scared to look her in the eye. *Hmmm... Magiluka's acting weird today. She's so different from usual... but it feels rude to just ask, "Hey, why're you acting weird?"* I gazed around the room pensively.

Magiluka usually sat across from me, but today, she took a seat right beside me.

"Huh?" I grunted.

"Hmm?" Magiluka replied, looking at me quizzically as though she'd done nothing unusual.

I shouldn't let this get to me. If I do, I feel like I'd be losing somehow.

"U-Uh, right! How should I go about my research report?" I wondered aloud to try to shift gears. "Maybe I should pick a different topic." Despite the fuss we'd caused, the magic mirror was a complete bust, so I felt it was best that I find a new topic.

"Do you have any ideas, Magiluka?" I asked, casually relying on my friend for a new topic.

"Nope," she replied with a smile as she stared at me fixedly.

I fell silent. *R-Right. I shouldn't rely on others all the time, I guess. That's my bad.* I reflected on my actions and tried to come up with a new idea by myself.

"Hmm... What should I do?" I groaned. "I'm not really interested in doing anything all that groundbreaking. I'd be fine with a more classic topic..."

Despite my best attempts, I simply couldn't gather my thoughts... partly because Magiluka was staring at me so intently.

"I-I know," I said. "Maybe I can ask around and use other people's topics as a point of reference. What do you think, Magiluka?"

"Sounds great to me!" Magiluka replied almost instantly.

She didn't sound like she'd given it even an ounce of thought before she gave her reply. She'd normally think through what she was going to say for a few seconds before offering her own thoughts. My confusion over her attitude continued to grow.

"My lady, I find it quite doubtful that students will tell complete strangers about their research topics," Tutte advised from behind me. "In the worst case, someone could steal their idea, after all."

I see. She's got a point. Maybe that's why Magiluka sounds so casual... Wait. Huh? Then why did she divulge her research topic to me the other day? Is it because we aren't complete strangers? Did she do it for my sake? Then why does she seem so dismissive now? The more I thought about it, the more I was baffled by Magiluka's behavior.

"Topic aside, you don't have any more classes today, do you, Lady Mary?" Magiluka asked. "If not, how about you go shopping with me?"

"Shopping? I didn't see that coming. Hmm... But I've got my report to think about..."

I was astonished by how Magiluka seemed to be prioritizing playing around over her schoolwork, but as I expressed my apprehension, she looked blatantly disappointed.

"M-Mgiluka?" I asked.

"Hmph... Lady Mary, you've been going on and on about your report and studying. Why don't we talk about something more fun?"

"Huh? But studying is kind of like our job as students. While we're attending the academy, it should be our priority"

Even I thought I was sounding a bit too stubborn and studious—I couldn't help but feel awkward taking the position Magiluka herself usually occupied.

"Goodness... Which is more important to you? School or me?" Magiluka asked.

Whoa, I didn't expect to be asked that cliché question, especially by Magiluka. I felt cold sweat run down my back as she looked at me reproachfully. I struggled to provide a response.

Is this Magiluka's attempt at some kind of joke? There's no way she'd force me to choose between her and my studies like that. If I reply with "school" here, will she cry? That's something I... sort of don't want to see. If Magiluka remained true to her previous statement and tried to kill herself or become hysterical, it would only make matters worse.

"My lady," Tutte chimed in, "perhaps Lady Magiluka is suggesting you can use the royal capital as a source of inspiration instead of continuing to solely draw your ideas from looking around the academy."

"Ah, fair enough," I replied, hitting my other hand with my fist.

If that was Magiluka's intention from the start, I felt like she should've just been more direct, but I assumed that she had her own reasons. My answer was now decided.

"Work!" I declared.

"L-Lady Mary..." Magiluka whined sorrowfully.

"H-Huh? W-Wait, wait! We're still going to the royal capital! Come on, let's go right now! Let's do this, Magiluka!" As I swiftly explained myself to her, I grabbed her hand and stood her up.

With that, we were headed for the royal capital. But of course... I never could've expected what awaited me there...

6. THE ORGANIZATION'S CONSPIRACY?

Magiluka was restless. When she'd agreed to go shopping with Mary in the royal capital, she'd expected Tutte to be tagging along and for the two of them to not be completely alone... yet Mary surprised her by showing up without her maid, causing

Magiluka to be all too conscious of the fact that it was just the two of them together.

Incidentally, Mary was still wearing her cape that hid her clothes—naturally, Magiluka was uneasy about her friend's attire, yet she also couldn't help but be curious about it too.

"H-How unusual for you to be walking around without Tutte," Magiluka managed to say, unable to think of any other topic.

"Ugh..." Mary replied, looking a little troubled as though her friend had touched upon a sore topic. She gazed into the distance. "W-Well... I'm keeping this side of me hidden from her."

Magiluka regretted her thoughtlessness as she saw the lonely look on Mary's face. At the same time, she couldn't help but feel happy that her friend had confided in her a secret that even Tutte wasn't privy to.

"Grrr... If she'd been reflected with us during that time, I could've..." Mary muttered with frustration as she chewed on the nail of her thumb.

"Pardon?" Magiluka asked, unable to make out Mary's mumbling.

"Oh, nothing! I'm just thinking out loud."

"I-I see... Um, and what was it you wanted to shop for, Lady Mary?"

"Right! I want something that sends shivers of excitement to my soul!"

"Your soul? Whatever do you mean?"

"Uhhh... You know, a magical girl kind of thing! You know what I'm talking about, don't you? For sure!"

"R-Right... I-In any case, why don't we go visit stores that you're familiar with, Lady Mary?" Magiluka had no idea what Mary was so excited to seek out, so she could only offer this half-hearted advice to move things along.

"Ghh... N-No, that's dangerous."

"Huh? Dangerous?" Magiluka had begun walking ahead after offering her suggestion,

but Mary had hastily rejected her idea, making her turn around and eye Mary suspiciously.

“Errr... Um... Ah... Hmm... Ahem!” Mary cleared her throat. “I’m currently working undercover. You doubtless understand—I can’t have too many people knowing about this.”

“Lady Mary...”

Mary’s somber reply was a little—no, *very* odd to Magiluka. It simply didn’t make sense. But Magiluka decided to not pry further; perhaps Mary needed to consider circumstances Magiluka couldn’t even possibly begin to understand.

“Then why don’t I show you around?” Magiluka offered. “I’m sure there are stores that even you aren’t familiar with.”

“Th-That would be great. Thank you.”

With a look of relief, Mary agreed with this idea, and Magiluka tried her very best to think of stores that most suited her friend’s taste.

A few hours passed as the two shopped, until...

“Hey, Magiluka,” Mary said. “How long will you be hiding behind those curtains?”

True to her observation, Magiluka was currently hiding behind the curtain of a fitting room within an apparel store she was quite familiar with. For whatever reason, she was being used as Mary’s dress-up doll.

“B-But this is a bit too flashy...” Magiluka murmured. “It’s embarrassing.”

“Don’t worry,” Mary assured her. “I’ve chosen the clothes, so it shouldn’t be a problem. Now, give up and come on out.”

“Ugh...”

Magiluka reluctantly peeled herself away from the curtain.

“Oho... This is much better than I expected,” Mary remarked.



“D-Do you think so?” Magiluka asked. “I-I think the skirt is a bit too short. I can’t help but be bothered by its length. And I feel like this blouse accentuates my breasts a bit too much...”

“Perfect, isn’t it? I made sure to choose clothes that would show off your chest a bit more. I’m glad it’s working out so well.”

“There’s nothing perfect about this!”

“Hmm... I’d like a bit more frills on you. And maybe yellow suits you... No, wait, red also looks good.”

Magiluka was thoroughly embarrassed, and she fell silent in the face of her protests being ignored. Mary was staring at her intently, trying to think of new costume ideas.

“Do you have any clothes with red as the base color?” Mary asked an employee behind her.

For the umpteenth time today, the employee went to go find the clothes that Mary had asked for and left the girls to their own devices. Magiluka wearily watched the employee leave while she continued to fret about the length of her skirt—she kept unconsciously leaning forward to try to cover her front while clutching the skirt’s hem.

“Heh heh heh...” Mary chuckled. “Your current pose makes you look a little erotic. I think you can fulfill the role of a sexy sidekick.”

“Wh-What are you on about?!” Magiluka cried, her ears red from embarrassment. “In any case, why are we shopping for *my* clothes? What about yours?”

“Huh? I’m here today to buy your uniform and a few accessories.”

Magiluka was struck by how casually Mary admitted that. For a moment, she wondered if this had anything at all to do with the battle against the organization, but she couldn’t find the connection, so she was tempted to stop thinking about this so deeply. More than anything else, however, she felt so embarrassed about her situation that she was desperately trying to find a way out of it.

“E-Erm... Oh, I know!” Magiluka suddenly said. “Accessories! You said that you’d like accessories! Why don’t we shop for those?”

“Accessories...” Mary repeated. “Hmm, I wonder if I could find the perfect magic item anywhere around here.”

“What are you looking for in particular?”

“Hmmm... Like a transformation item or something?”

“Transformation? U-Um, if that’s the case, there is indeed a magic tool shop that my grandfather frequents. Why don’t we head there?”

“Huh. A store that even the headmaster frequents, eh? That sounds promising. I’m tempted to go.”

“I see! Then why don’t I lead you there? Please give me a moment! I’ll change immediately!” Magiluka had no idea what Mary was looking for, but if there was a way out of this embarrassing outfit, Magiluka didn’t mind forcing the issue.

“Huh? No, you can stay—”

“I shall change *immediately*.”

With a loud *fwish*, the curtains closed, and Magiluka quickly changed into her usual clothes. Once she finished, she grabbed a corner of Mary’s cloak and practically dragged her toward the magic tool store, although she did so daintily in line with her ever elegant nature.

After a short while, the two arrived at a magic tool store. Mary looked over the store’s inventory while Magiluka, wanting to finish her errand, requested the store owner’s presence.

“Thank you for your patience, Lady Futurulica,” a gentleman said, appearing a short while later.

Magiluka took out the letter and handed it to the man. “I’ve come to send a letter from my grandfather.”

“Is that so? I apologize for the trouble.”

“My grandfather would like you to read it immediately.”

“Hmm? Right now, you say?”

The shop owner looked surprised by how urgent this matter seemed, but he stepped away from Magiluka and opened the letter. She was about to turn on her heel and return to Mary’s side, but she noticed the owner’s look of astonishment and continued to observe the man.

“I-Impossible... It can’t be... No, but that crest...” the owner muttered under his breath.

“Is something the matter?” Magiluka asked.

“Huh? Ah, er, n-n-nothing at all.”

The store owner seemed clearly distressed as he fixed his gaze on Mary. Magiluka wasn’t all that satisfied with his obvious fib, but she felt it wasn’t her place to dig deeper. However, the moment she tried to return to Mary’s side...

“P-P-Please wait, Lady Futurulica!” the owner hastily called out.

“Yes?” Magiluka replied.

“U-Um... Er... Ah! Right, I’ve actually got a magic tool that I must give you. May you please spare me some of your time?”

“Hm? Does that have anything to do with that letter?”

“Huh? Uhhh... Y-Yes, it does.”

“I see. Then I don’t mind.”

“Then please allow me to guide you and your friend to a waiting room. Over here, please.”

“Lady Mary, shall we?” Magiluka turned to her friend with a smile.

“Sure, I don’t mind,” Mary replied.

Breathing a sigh of relief, the shop owner led the two into a room deeper within the store.

"N-Now then, please wait here for a short while," the gentleman said. "I shall be back quite soon." The man swiftly left the room.

Magiluka wondered whether the matter was truly so urgent. The man had looked to be in a state of panic about it, yet she reasoned that if the matter were truly so dire, she wouldn't have been entrusted with the letter to begin with. She racked her brain, but she couldn't find an answer.

In any case, she wasn't in a hurry, so she decided to sit tight quietly on a sofa and wait for the store owner to return. However, Mary took the exact opposite approach and refused to sit. In fact, she sneaked toward the room's exit, acting more vigilant than ever before.

"I know, Fairy Two. It's not a problem," Mary muttered to herself.

Magiluka watched Mary talk to herself and didn't find it odd at all. Indeed, since last year, Mary would often talk with a divine beast called Snow, and it would almost always look like she was mumbling nonsensically to herself. Thanks to her familiarity with the phenomenon, Magiluka was used to Mary's odd movements and hadn't found them suspicious whatsoever.

"Yes, I agree. The organization is likely involved," Mary mumbled. "I'll do something on my end. Don't worry."

Magiluka had managed to ignore Mary's unnatural actions until now, but upon hearing "the organization" pop up once more, she found herself once again curious about her friend's intentions.

"Lady Mary, what do you mean by that?" Magiluka asked. "By 'the organization,' surely you don't mean..."

"Indeed," Mary answered. "Their people are coming toward us. We've been trapped here."

"Huh? N-No, it can't be..."

Magiluka stood up in shock. Mary tried to gently open the door, but it showed no signs of budging.

"I-Is the store owner...?" Even the shop that her grandfather frequented seemed to

have ties with this organization, causing Magiluka even more confusion. She felt fear gnawing at her upon Mary's declaration that the organization had sneaked up on them without her noticing.

"If the letter the headmaster wrote is troublesome to the organization, the store owner will need to wait for further instruction," Mary explained. "He'll need to know how to deal with the letter's messengers."

"A-As sharp as ever, Lady Mary. But how were you able to glean that much information? It didn't seem like you were investigating at all."

"Huh? U-Um..." Mary stammered before she turned away and mumbled, "I know, Fairy Two. Keep gathering information."

Magiluka believed that Mary must have been talking with Snow—or an ally as powerful as her.

"F-For now, we must escape from here," Magiluka said.

"Right," Mary agreed. "And we can't get caught. If only we had cardboard boxes or something..."

"C-Card... bored? Whatever may that be?"

"Heh, it's just the perfect item for stealth missions! Maybe wooden boxes would do the trick though."

"I-I see..."

Despite the organization's apparent involvement, Mary seemed to be enjoying herself, causing Magiluka to become ever more perplexed. Mary slowly opened the door a crack and glanced around the corridor.

"Huh? I thought the door didn't open," Magiluka said.

"Huh? Uhhh... Yeah, but I used my magic to open it," Mary explained.

"I-I see. You seem quite used to sneaking around."

"Er... W-Well, because I run around, you know."

Magiluka thought that Mary's door excuse made little sense, but she decided to put her suspicions aside for now.

Upon further consideration, Magiluka realized another oddity present in her understanding of Mary's situation. She'd been assuming Mary was on the run from this "organization," yet she'd watched Mary use her "magical girl powers" to chase them away. Given she was capable of such a feat, why did she need to flee? Were they simply too strong for her? Magiluka supposed that it wasn't impossible for a force stronger than Mary to exist in the organization... and the idea of such a thing proved truly terrifying for her to consider.

It was in the midst of her contemplation that Magiluka noticed Mary rummaging around. Curious, she pointed her attention toward her silver-haired friend and noticed that she had dug out a large wooden box, removed its lid, and was pulling out its contents.

"Uh, Lady Mary, may I ask what you're doing?" Magiluka asked.

"I'm gonna wear this, of course!" Mary replied proudly.

She placed the opening of the box on the floor and crawled inside. Magiluka felt a little anxious. Surely, Mary wasn't planning on moving around while wearing that box?

"All right. Perfect," Mary said. "This is pretty nice."

"Um, Lady Mary. Are you sure you don't want to just walk around normally?"

"No, that's so boring! This is a stealth game. Come on, Magiluka. Join me inside!"

Mary's words remained a mystery to poor, anxious Magiluka, but she nonetheless managed to crouch and join her friend underneath the box.

So it was that the pair had acquired a wooden box with which they began sneaking around the corridor. From an outsider's perspective, it surely would've been a shocking sight, but luckily for the two girls, no one was around.

Their luck would run out a few moments later, however.

"Hey, isn't that wooden box moving?" a voice said.

Magiluka felt her heart thud with nervousness. At the same time, she realized that this voice sounded familiar to her.

"Hey, what do you think?" the voice continued.

"Huh?" said another extremely familiar voice. "I only have you within my sights, so I haven't noticed a thing."

This made Magiluka even more perplexed, and her internal panic grew. It was then that Mary had proceeded forward with Magiluka no longer in step with her.

"Eek!" Magiluka cried out as the box hit her.

"Look, that box definitely moved. And I heard a voice! Someone must be inside."

Magiluka instinctively took shallow breaths and covered her mouth with her hands. Guilt enveloped her as she felt it was her fault that their disguise had been seen through.

"It is what it is," Mary said with a grin, steeling her resolve. "Magiluka, I'll stand up and fight against them, so flee while you've got the chance."

"I-I can't do that," Magiluka replied.

But Mary didn't hear those words and stood up, carrying the box above her.

"Mwa ha ha!" Mary laughed. "I expect no less from a person of the organization! You saw through my stealth skills perfectly!"

As light filled her vision, Magiluka glanced toward her friend.

"Lady... Mary?" she asked the lady beside her. And right in front of her... was another Mary.

"Huuuh?!" Magiluka shrieked, her thoughts frozen to a standstill and panic completely overwhelming her.

7. FATES TEND TO INTERTWINE

Let's turn back time a bit...

Together with Magiluka, who clung to me like never before, I headed to the royal capital from the academy. I'd been bothered by the cowlick bouncing above her head the entire time, and I was struck with the urge to grab at it. A battle ensued within me as I fought against the impulse.

Once we arrived at the royal capital, Magiluka started shopping around, which had nothing to do with my research report topic—or maybe I just didn't realize her intentions, and she was actually snooping around. I tried to closely inspect her movements, but it seemed like she was just genuinely enjoying her shopping. She was currently extremely hard to read, so I wasn't able to answer her expectations or predict the way she'd think like I normally could.

"H-Hey, Magiluka," I said. "C-Can you take the difficulty down a notch?"

"Hm? Whatever do you mean by a notch?" Magiluka asked quizzically as though she was baffled by my words. "Like this?"

She proceeded to crouch down in place and look up at me. She likely didn't understand what I'd said, but she'd understood the word "down" and tried to lower her position. *Yep, she's cute. She's so, so cute. It's so rare to see her acting this adorably.* I couldn't help myself from smiling at how cute my friend was. Indeed, I was totally helpless before her.

"My lady..." Tutte called from behind me.

"Ack! R-Right, no, Magiluka, you don't have to crouch," I hastily said, realizing that I was having my friend crouch in the middle of the road. "You can forget what I said."

"All right! Then I'll forget it all!" Magiluka said with a smile, extending her hand to me.

It seemed she wanted me to help her stand back up. I still felt like she sounded a bit airheaded, completely unlike her usual intelligent attitude.

"Hmm... I was hoping for some kind of inspiration at the royal capital, but everything feels so vague," I said. "I don't know where to start looking. Maybe I should narrow it

down to things related to magic.”

“In that case, why don’t we visit the magic tool shop that my grandfather frequents?” Magiluka suggested. “It’s a large store with quite a few items to choose from.”

“Huh, that sounds like it’s worth a look. Let’s go.”

I gazed at my reliable friend with gratitude, knowing that I could always count on her. She smiled and approached my side. I felt like she was lowering her head slightly.

“Hm? What’s wrong, Magiluka?” I asked.

“Have I... been helpful to you?” she asked back.

“Of course you have. Thank you.”

She clutched my side, her head still lowered. *Wait, does she want me to pet her? She’s not Safina. There’s no way... This is Magiluka we’re talking about.*

“Have I... been helpful to you?” Magiluka repeated, clearly waiting for a reward that wasn’t just a word of thanks.

Still feeling unsure, I gingerly placed my hand over her head and petted her.

“Eh heh heh heh. ♪” Magiluka giggled, rubbing her face against me happily like a cat.

If she’d truly been one, I would’ve expected her to purr. *If Safina’s a dog, Magiluka’s definitely a cat.*

Soon enough, we arrived at the store that she was talking about. The shop was much larger than I’d expected, and my excitement only grew as the inside of the store grabbed my interest.

“Welco— Huh?!” An employee greeted us before quickly letting out a cry of confusion.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“N-Nothing at all, Lady Regalia... and Lady Futurulica,” the employee hastily said. “Please forgive my insolence.”

Following a deep bow, the employee revealed that he was the owner of this store. I was curious as to why he was glancing at Magiluka.

“That crest... I-It can’t be...” the owner muttered.

I wasn’t sure at all what he was calling a “crest,” but I decided to just ignore that. “May we glance around the shop for a short while?” I asked.

Magiluka was usually the one who would talk to store owners in situations like these, but today she was glued to my side and not saying anything at all. *It's not like she's in the wrong here—I shouldn't be so reliant on her. I always end up counting on her for help because she acts first, but I should keep myself in check.*

“I-If that’s the case, I can bring you a few items that I recommend,” the store owner offered. “Why don’t you relax in a room I’ve got within this store? I’d like to apologize for my earlier actions as well.”

Is this because he feels bad for what he did when he first saw us? Well, there’s no reason to refuse his goodwill.

“Very well,” I replied. “Magiluka, are you fine with this arrangement?”

“Your wish is my command,” Magiluka replied.

“Huh? You don’t have to sound so formal with me.” I decided to point out how respectful she sounded.

“Oh dear... Lady Mary has scolded me...” Magiluka muttered, sitting down and fake crying. Honestly, I couldn’t tell if she was faking or not.

“Ah, sorry. I’m not angry or anything,” I hastily said. “I’m just playing the straight man in our little comedy duo.”

Erm... Magiluka's really acting weird today. It's throwing me off. What's with this change of heart?

“U-Um, may I lead you two inside?” the store owner asked apologetically as he saw our exchange.

“Ah, right. Please,” I replied, following him.

Magiluka, who'd been sitting on the ground weeping moments before, quickly stood up with a bright smile and clung to my side. *Yeah... Magiluka's acting so weird today.*

I looked around while the store owner guided me inside, and something caught my eye. *Hm? Why's there a wooden box in the corridor? It looks out of place.*

My mind filled with unnecessary worries, I continued to gaze at the box, only for me to suddenly notice it move.

I-It moved, didn't it? Am I witnessing a stealth mission in real life? It looks totally unnatural. Huh? Is the person inside a complete idiot?

"Lady Mary?" Magiluka asked quizzically, still glued to my side. I was frozen in place, causing her to find my actions odd.

"Hey, isn't that wooden box moving?" I asked.

I pointed to the wooden box, encouraging Magiluka to glance in the same direction. Tutte was behind me, tilting her head to one side and conveying her confusion.

"Hey, what do you think?" I asked Magiluka, my reliable ally and sole beacon of hope.

"Huh?" she replied. "I only have you within my sights, so I haven't noticed a thing."

Damn, no luck. I slumped my shoulders when I heard a loud clatter and a girl cry out.

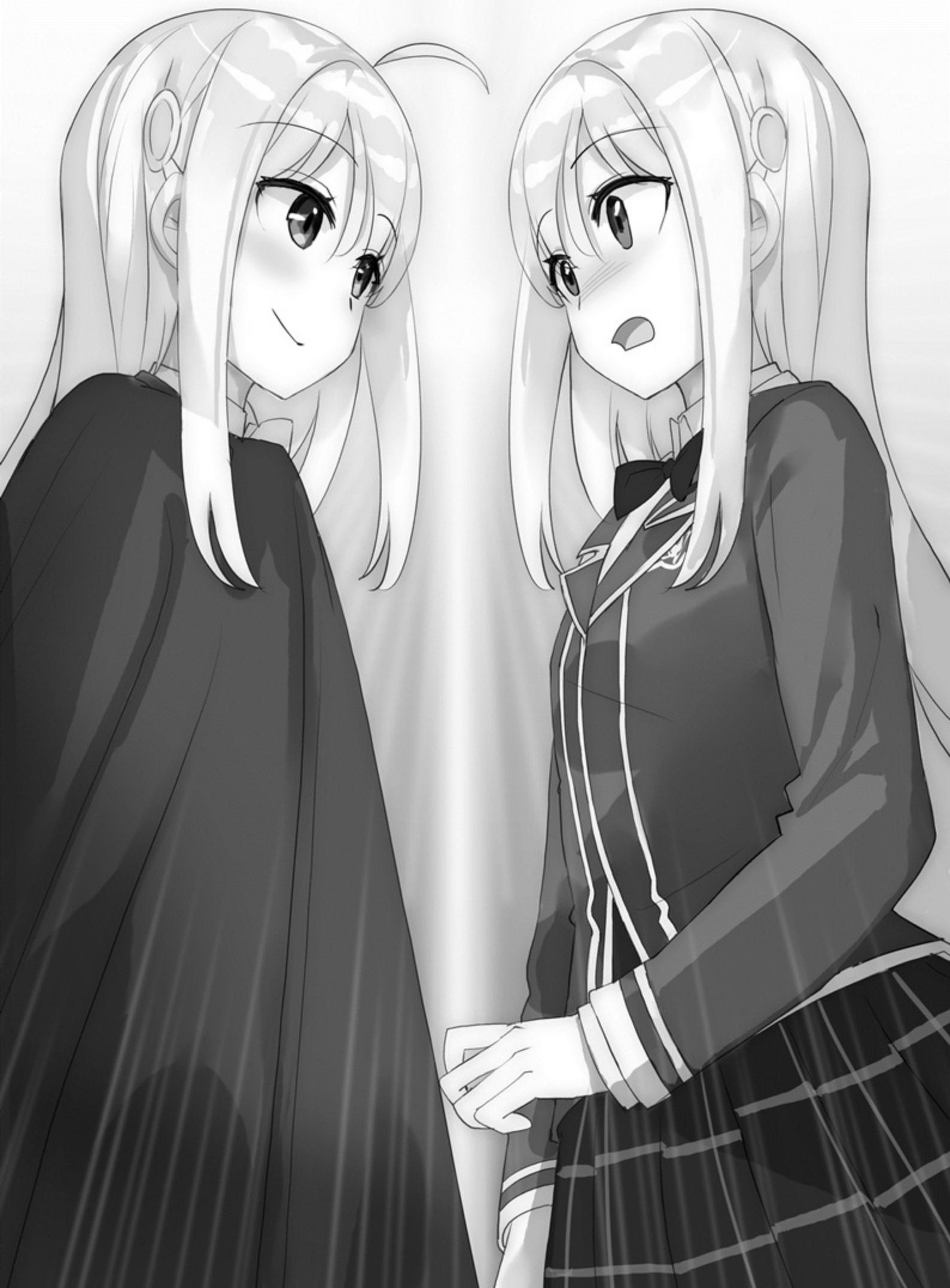
"Eek!"

"Look, that box definitely moved. And I heard a voice! Someone must be inside," I insisted.

I confidently approached the box. *What kind of idiot—ahem, person, could be hiding in a box in this store?* I was curious to find out... and I never could've guessed that this curiosity would be the start of a complete nightmare.

"Mwa ha ha! I expect no less from a person of the organization! You saw through my stealth skills perfectly!" the person inside said.

I was surprised by the sudden laugh as I came face-to-face with the person who used such an idiotic—I mean, unusual—method. The reveal stunned me. *Huh? It's me!*



It was as though I was staring into a mirror. The girl in front of me looked identical to myself, and I was struggling to understand what was going on.

“The enemy’s faltering,” the silver-haired girl facing me said. “Magiluka, now’s your chance! Save yourself and run!”

“Huh?” Magiluka asked while seated by her feet.

“Suuure! ♪” the Magiluka that was glued to me responded in a carefree manner.

However, neither girl fled. Only then did I finally snap back to my senses.

“I’m in front of mee!” I yelled, stating the obvious while rudely pointing my finger at my clone.

“That’s right,” the silver-haired girl said. “I’m the other you, born from that magic mirror.”

“What?” I asked in a monotone, completely ruining the dramatic tension.

I felt the room grow cold—everyone seemed disappointed by my tepid reaction. *Wait, wait, wait! Isn’t it better to drag that bit out and keep people on edge? She revealed it so casually like nothing’s wrong! Come on, that’s the real issue, isn’t it?*

“Y’know...” the other me said, proudly striking a pose without a care for my thoughts. “You’re me, and all that jazz.” Her posing resembled a certain vampire lady I knew, but I decided to let that slide.

“I can see that she’s a bit off and can ruin the tension,” my maid said from behind me. “Plus, she doesn’t do it on purpose, but inadvertently... She’s clearly my lady...”

“Tutte, sometimes you like to drive the knife deeper into the wound and twist it around, don’t you?” I said, slumping my shoulders.

“In any case, my lady, my other lady over there has just told you that the magic mirror had caused my lady to turn into my other lady, meaning that my lady is...”

“All right, calm down. Deep breaths.”

I was late to notice since Tutte was as calm as usual and had even had the spare energy

to give me a few psychological jabs, but she was also quite confused by this all.

“Breathe in... Breathe out...” I insisted, causing my maid to follow my orders and steady her breathing.

I glanced over to the other me and noticed that she was taking deep breaths as well. “You’re doing it too?!” I yelled.

“Heh, I suppose I can’t hide it any longer...” she replied with a smirk. She flipped her hair proudly. “I may not look it, but my heart’s thudding too. I’m, like, super nervous.”

“That’s nothing to be proud about!” I shouted before I calmed down. “But that means... the magic mirror we saw the other day was the real deal. Nothing happened when we were there though... Maybe there’s a time lag before you guys can appear.”

“Oh, I was just thinking about the most dramatic way to make my appearance,” the silver-haired girl said, once again proudly flipping her hair. “And while I was thinking about it, I just happened to miss the perfect timing to pop out.”

“I did *not* want to hear such a stupid reason! You’re making me out to be some sort of idiot!”

“We’re two sides of the same coin. We’re not so different, you and I. We’re in the same boat.”

“I feel like you’re not quite using those phrases correctly...”

“I’m just trying to sound good and verbalizing whatever pops into my head. Don’t worry about it.”

“Of course I’ll worry about it!” It was like we were performing a stand-up skit.

“Er, my ladies...” Tutte said, trying to steer the conversation back on track. “I think we’re going off on a tangent here...”

“Ah, sorry, Tutte,” we both said.

“Ahem... Getting back to the matter at hand, it means one of the Magilukas is also a fake,” I said, looking over the one who was by my side and the one across from me.

At a glance, they both looked identical to each other, but I was able to find one glaring difference.

“A cowlick! One of you has a cowlick!” I declared.

“A cowlick?” the two Magilukas asked while cocking their heads to one side.

One of the Magilukas even formed their cowlick into a sort of question mark-esque shape. My clone also looked just as perplexed, forming her cowlick in the same shape.

“The hair bouncing above your heads!” I said, pointing to my other self, who looked a little dull-witted.

“You’re right!” my clone gasped while feeling the top of her head. “Something feels bouncy!”

I ignored that comment and turned to the Magilukas, who were checking out each other’s heads. I focused on the Magiluka with a cowlick. *Could she be the fake?*

“You must be the Magiluka born from the magic mirror!” I accused her.

“That’s right,” she replied easily.

I’d expected her to cleverly try to skirt the issue (unlike my counterpart) since she was a clone of the intelligent Magiluka, but she admitted to it so easily. “You just came out and said it, huh?”

“I don’t want to lie to you, Lady Mary,” the fake Magiluka insisted in a sweet voice as she sidled up to me.

“Heey!” the real Magiluka shouted, her face red. “What are you doing, other me?!”

“What do you mean? I’m just trying to be closer with my beloved Lady Mary and enjoy my time with her. Ah, Lady Mary... your skin is so supple, and your hands are so beautiful...”

I quickly released my hand from the fake Magiluka’s grip—she was scaring me a bit, so I was determined to gain some distance from her.

“B-B-B-B-Belov...” the real Magiluka stammered, her ears red from embarrassment.

I could've sworn that I saw smoke spewing from her head.

"H-Hey, Magiluka, you all right?" I asked. "Let's take some deep breaths."

"L-L-L-Lady Mary!" Magiluka wailed, fixing her gaze on me. "You couldn't differentiate a shameless girl like *her* from me?!"

"U-Uh... I thought you had a change of heart or something," I replied.

"We couldn't be any more different!"

"Well, why couldn't *you* differentiate *that* girl over there from me?" I tried to distract her—ahem, I mean, I aired my righteous grievance—and gestured in the direction of where my fake should've been... but instead of there, she was...

"Ughhh... Tutte..." my fake said, clinging onto my maid. "They're all ignoring mee..."

"Didn't you say that you wanted to be invisible like the air, my lady?" Tutte consoled her, stroking fake me's head. "This is good, isn't it?"

"I don't want to be like the air. I want to be the center of attention and loved by all."

"Oh my, you're the polar opposite of my lady over there."

"Hey!" I demanded. "What gives you the right to let my Tutte spoil you?!"

"Pbbt! What's mine is mine!" my fake insisted, sticking out her tongue and acting like a stereotypical playground bully.

I couldn't endure her attitude nor how she was claiming my maid for herself. Indeed, I was a bit small-minded when it came to Tutte. "You better step away from her right now!" I shouted. "Or else..."

"Y-You think I feel intimidated by myself?" my fake asked. "Besides, I now know that I need Tutte. I need her for my mental health!"

"I'll say it one more time. Step away from Tutte."

"Heh heh heh... I suppose we were destined to fight." My insolent fake finally stepped away from Tutte and faced me. "Allow me to show you my power..."

With that, she swiftly took out a brooch-like object.

"Hm?" I asked.

"My heart becomes my power!" she yelled, offering the brooch to the skies. "From my heart!"

"Uhhh?"

I wasn't sure what she was planning, but I sure hadn't expected her to use light magic to blind me. She should've known that I wasn't one to falter to such a simple move, but I still wasn't sure where she was going with this, so I silently watched on.

A few moments later, my fake once again came into view—having tossed aside the cloak she was wearing.

"My solitary soul glows silver! Platinum Heart SR!"

"Huuumuh?!"

Just like that, my nightmare had become reality.

8. PEOPLE CALL THIS A DARK PAST

"What is *that*!?" I shrieked. "What do you think you're doing!?"

"What do you mean?" my fake asked. "This is my hidden power."

"A-A-A hidden power?" I was taken aback by how casually she'd said it since I didn't remember having any such power.

"Huh?" Magiluka asked amidst the confusion. "You're not a magical girl, Lady Mary?"

"A-A-A magical girl?" I stammered. "Huh? What's going on?"

"Huh? I thought you'd awakened your hidden magical girl powers and were fighting day and night against the organization."

"Uh? You believed that, Magiluka?"

Magiluka fell silent and awkwardly looked away. I put my head in my hands, dizzied by all this fuss. *I definitely did have a time when I was obsessed with stuff like that, but that was in my previous life, not my current one. Also, not to state the obvious, but... becoming a magical girl in a world where people can use magic is as cringey as it gets.*

"Heh heh heh!" my fake laughed proudly. "Precisely! I am Platinum Heart SR, a solitary magical girl who fights against the organization day and night! In the name of the moon..."

"Wait, no! Stoopid!" I screeched, mortified at my fake self striking a pose while delivering an embarrassing line. I was practically about to go feral, eager to stop my clone at all costs, but...

"My lady, please calm down," my maid encouraged me, rushing to my side and clutching my hands.

"T-Tutte..." I murmured. Her warmth was slowly calming me...

"Uh, anyways, I appear in the presence of evil!" my fake continued with another pose. "Platinum Heart SR! ☆"

AAAHHH! There was no calming me here. I fell to my knees, gazing at my trembling palms.

"M-My lady," Tutte asked. "A-Are you all right?"

"S-So, this is what pain feels like..." I muttered.

"Oooh! I like that line!" my fake said. "Definitely sounds cool! I've always wanted to say something like that before. You sure we aren't on the same page?"

"Urk!" I said with a loud cough. The one person whom I didn't want to earn the approval of was giving me her thumbs-up. I wasn't actually coughing up blood, but I might as well have been.

"M-My lady, hang in there..." Tutte said, supporting me as I almost fell on the spot.

"T-Tutte..." I said with haggard breath. "I-I'm... not like her..."

"Don't you worry, my lady. You're not so different from her. Please don't let it get to you."

"Gah!"

I was sure that Tutte'd been trying to make me feel better, but she had instead delivered the final blow. I once again acted like I was coughing up blood, and with a jolt, I fell limp in her arms.

"Huh? My lady? My lady!" Tutte said worriedly, shaking me as my heart was down for the count.

A short while later, I finally made my decision. "All right, I'll make this all go away," I said, slowly getting up with a smirk. "I'll make everyone here disappear, remove their memories, and make it so none of this ever happened."

"M-M-M-My lady! You mustn't!" Tutte hastily said, clutching me from behind. She practically had me in a nelson hold. "You need to stay calm! Now, let's take deep breaths!"

As I listened to her take deep breaths, I followed suit and tried to do the same. *I think I've calmed down...*

"Heh!" my fake grinned. "You've finally fallen to the dark side. How pitiful. But I won't lose! I have a world that I must protect, you... uhhh... Platinum Heart Black R!"

"Surely you're not talking about me!" I yelled, objecting to her naming sense. "How can you be platinum and black at the same time? That name's confusing! And what's that 'R' about?!"

"It stands for rare, obviously."

"So, you're a super rare while I'm a rare?! Whaaat?! Isn't it extremely unusual for someone to fall to the dark side?! At least make me an SSR!"

"Absolutely not. There's no way *you* can be rarer than me."

"Whazzat?!"

A silly argument ensued.

"Now, now, you two," Magiluka said, gently trying to keep us back on track. "Why don't we calm down and talk this out?"

"Heh, that's impossible," my fake declared. "We're like oil and water. We're part of a sorrowful destiny, two souls forever in parallel."

"I thought you said that we weren't so different..." I muttered.

"Did I? I've forgotten."

"Come on!"

With another stupid fight breaking out, Magiluka's words ended up being little help, until someone apologetically broke the tension.

"U-Um..." the shop owner said. "Why don't we have a seat and talk? I can guide you to a room in the back."

Only then did I notice that we were causing a fuss in a corridor of someone's store. I immediately grew embarrassed of my actions.

"I'm sorry to be so rowdy," I apologized.

"But I refuse!" my fake proudly said from behind me.

"Hey!"

"Why should I listen to someone who's connected to the organization? I know what you're planning!"

"What? 'Organization'? What are you talking about?" I said with a strained laugh before I turned to the shop owner. He was all smiles, but copious amounts of sweat were dripping down his face. "Huuuuuh?!"

"M-M-M-Me? P-P-P-Plan something? N-N-N-No way!" the store owner stuttered.

He's totally panicking! If you act like that, I'll start believing my fake!

"A-Are you really from the organization?" I asked.

"Huh? What organization are you talking about?" he replied, looking calm.

His current attitude was in stark contrast to his panicky demeanor just moments before. It was as though he'd reverted to his usual self. For better or for worse, he was clearly someone who couldn't tell lies. I was worried whether a merchant like him could make it out there in the world, but that probably wasn't something I should've been concerned about.

"Right," I said. "I'm sorry. She's just saying weird stuff."

"Hm, I see, Fairy Two," my fake muttered. "He's not even aware that he's being expertly manipulated by the organization. Hmph, they really have their bases covered."

Magiluka didn't seem fazed whatsoever to see her talking to herself, while her fake was just staring, completely enamored.

I giggled. "Did she eat something weird? Why's she muttering to herself all of a sudden?"

"Huh?" Magiluka replied. "I assume she's just talking with someone. This is quite a common sight. Is it not, Tutte?"

"Indeed. This is very much how you look when you converse with Snow," my maid replied.

I never imagined that this is what I looked like when I talked with Snow. It was obviously weird. I felt dizzy from the embarrassment of thinking about it.

"M-My lady, are you all right?!" Tutte said, supporting me as I staggered.

I knew that I must've looked cringeworthy from an outsider's perspective when I talked with Snow, but this was the first time I'd ever had the chance to see it for myself. I felt completely blindsided by this random reality check.

Ughhh! This is sooooo embarrassing! I covered my face with my hands as I trembled, looking absolutely mortified while Tutte was still helping me.

"My duel with you shall be settled later, Platinum Heart Black R!" my fake declared. "Fate leads me to a new battle once again. Tutte, Magiluka, please lend me your strength. I need you guys."

Owing to the sheer humiliation I was feeling over what my clone had just uttered, I decided I would be ignoring her from now on as I writhed in Tutte's arms.

"My deepest apologies," Tutte swiftly said, rejecting the offer. "But I'm currently looking after my lady right here."

"U-Uh..." Magiluka mumbled, looking troubled.

"I shall always be by your side, of course, Lady Mary!" the fake Magiluka happily said.

I only barely heard their voices, as my mind was still desperately trying to flee from reality.

"Argh! Tutte, you meanieee! But I won't give up, you knooow!" my fake said in a teary voice as I listened to her run off.

"Uh, did she manage to flee from us?" Magiluka asked. The question finally snapped me back to reality.

"Whaaat?!" I yelled, quickly jumping from Tutte's side to hastily look around. The two girls with cowlicks were nowhere to be seen.

"Why didn't you stop them, Magiluka?" I demanded.

"Er, well, I was told that you had a duty to fight against the organization, Lady Mary. I didn't want to get in your way," she replied.

"She's obviously lying. Why do I have to fight against an organization?"

"W-Well... I thought that maybe there was a possibility of you doing that."

"Magiluka, we might need to have a long, serious talk one day."

"I-In any case, we should leave for now!" She ran toward the exit as though she were fleeing from me, and I followed behind her.

We left the store and looked around, but the pair were nowhere in sight.

"They're gone. Boy, do they run quickly," I remarked.

"On second thought, I can't suppress my anxiety when I think about how embarrassing my other self might be wandering around the royal capital," Magiluka said. "Imagine if I met an acquaintance..."

"That's true, but it'd be even worse if they flee to a remote location since we wouldn't really have a way of finding them," I added.

I couldn't let such an embarrassment run wild. Above all, unlike myself, my fake yearned to be in the spotlight and cared for by others. The sheer thought of her letting loose and using my abilities to their full extent terrified me. It was imperative for me to prevent my abilities from being disclosed to the world at large.

"You don't need to worry about that," the store owner told us. "They have to stay within a certain distance of the Magic Mirror of Hallucinations." Talk about letting the cat out of the bag.

"Huh, I see— Hm?" I said, stopping myself. "How did you know that this was done by the Magic Mirror of Hallucinations?"

"Er, I, uh, w-w-w-well, lucky guess," he stammered.

This seemed far more coincidental than just a "lucky guess," and as the owner clearly looked flustered by my question, it was apparent that he had something to hide. *I really feel like he's not suited for this business.*

"Lady Mary had stated that you may be connected to the organization," Magiluka pressed. "Perhaps you really are hiding something..."

"H-Hiding? Not at all!" he hastily replied. "I just didn't want you to know that my store sold the mirror— Ack!"

The owner divulged the information of his own accord. *He really isn't... Never mind.* In any case...

"Magiluka," I said.

"What is it, Lady Mary?"

I approached my friend, hoping to convey something more important than the owner shooting himself in the foot. Magiluka, in turn, looked a little tense as she sensed my

serious attitude.

"I didn't say that," I said firmly. "My fake did. This is a *very* important distinction to make."

She fell silent.

"My lady, I don't believe that's important right now," Tutte countered politely.

Both Magiluka and the owner nodded in agreement, eyeing me like some kind of pariah.

"No, no, no! This is very important to me!" I wailed. "I don't want you to mistake me for that thing!"

"In any case," Magiluka said, ignoring my comment, "you were thinking of doing something regarding the mirror. Hence, you trapped us in that room. Is that not so, owner?"

"Huh?!" the owner stammered. "T-Trap you? Not at all! Sir Fortuna had asked me to—Oops."

While I was displeased to see my protests being ignored, the owner had once again dug his own grave.

"So, my grandfather is involved with this incident," Magiluka deduced wearily. "This store sold that magic mirror to grandfather then. Is that correct?"

"H-How did you?!" the owner gasped in astonishment as he inched back.

That headmaster loves collecting magic items... Anyone who knows his penchant for items could easily reach this conclusion.

"May I ask for you to tell me the details?" Magiluka asked with a smile, closing distance with the owner. It was clear to see the smile was not the sincere kind.

Needless to say, a short while later, the headmaster sneaked into the store and was guided to the room where we were waiting to speak with him.

9. THE TRUTH ABOUT THE RUMORS

"Magiluka, why must I do this so-called 'prostrating' act?" he said.

The headmaster had been taken to the room we were waiting in, and bizarrely, Magiluka had forced him to prostrate atop a sofa. I had personally taught her about this custom.

"Why don't you place your hand over your heart and think about it?" Magiluka said with a smile—one that failed to mask the fury in her eyes.

The headmaster, overwhelmed by her pressure, could only instinctively follow her commands.

"Um, have I done something?" the headmaster wondered.

"The Magic Mirror of Hallucinations," Magiluka replied.

We're the only ones in this room. This feels like an interrogation... Is this the part where I offer him a smoke so he knows I'm the good cop?

"I-I-I have no idea what you're talking about," the headmaster replied.

"The shop owner here has already confessed to everything, grandfather."

"M-M-My deepest apologies, Sir Fortuna," the owner said. "I know your letter had precise orders on how to act and talk, but I accidentally revealed everything—Oops..."

We had the owner stay behind because he was a confessing machine, producing secret after secret and ensuring that the headmaster couldn't escape. True to form, he was telling on himself once again.

"Wh-What are you on about...?" the headmaster muttered, insisting his innocence.

"Need a smoke, sir? Stick of gum?" I asked.

"Lady Mary, whatever are you talking about?" Magiluka asked quizzically.

Unfortunately, it seemed like my good cop routine wouldn't work in this world—no, I

needed to employ a different method. I glanced at the headmaster, who was squirming around on the sofa, and I had an idea. A conniving grin formed on my lips.

"Well, I guess it's come to *that*, then," I said. "It pains me to do this, but I must have you be honest, Headmaster."

I wiggled my fingers and approached him.

"Wh-What are you thinking of doing, Mary?" the headmaster said. "You're supposed to look after your elders, I'll have you know."

He shuddered at my suspicious movements and immediately tried to stand up and flee, but his legs were numb from kneeling atop them, so he couldn't move nimbly.

"M-My l-legs are..." he gasped.

"Headmaster, it's still not too late. Please be honest," I requested.

"I-I have no idea what you're..." he started, continuing to feign ignorance despite my final warning before he cried out. "Aaahhh!"

I poked his numb, tingling legs, causing his pathetic cries to echo throughout the room.

"Pokey pokey pokey! ♪" I said playfully.

"S-Stop! Aaahhh! Stoooop!"

"Now then, Headmaster. Will you tell us the truth?"

"Aaahhh! I-I will! I'll tell you, so stooooop!"

I started to have fun teasing this defenseless man and devilishly continued to poke away.

"L-Lady Mary, you recommended that he prostrate himself because you predicted this outcome, didn't you?" Magiluka asked. "You're terrifying... Are you perhaps used to torturing others?"

"Nope, not at all," I replied. "I just went with the flow of things. That's it. Don't say something so terrifying."

But Magiluka still seemed totally taken aback. "Ah, I see..." she suddenly said, muttering to herself. "There may not be an organization as the other Lady Mary says, but perhaps you *are* fighting against something, hence you're aware of these methods... She may be a fake, but she's still Lady Mary. Surely, not everything she said was a lie."

"M-Magiluka?" I was unable to fully overlook her comments.

"Ah, it's nothing at all," she replied.

"Please don't just smile and try to blow this all over. You're wrong. I don't know what you're on about, but you're wrong."

I desperately tried to reason with her, but she just kept smiling at me, as though conveying that she had her mind made up.

"Now then, let's get back to business, shall we?" she suggested. "Grandfather, could you tell us about the Magic Mirror of Hallucinations?"

"G-Give me a moment," the headmaster gasped pathetically, pleading for a bit of time.
"M-My legs..."

After we waited briefly, he started with his story. It all began around a decade ago, about the time when these rumors had surfaced. The magic mirror originally wasn't a product to sell, but stored as a part of a collection, and it suddenly resurfaced after the store owner accidentally divulged its existence to the headmaster. I couldn't blame the headmaster for his curiosity about it: the mirror was said to be made by fairies, and it was apparently a legendary-class magic item. Apparently, the owner eventually gave in to the headmaster's persistent requests to purchase the item from him.

"Huh? Wait a moment..." Magiluka mumbled.

"Hm? What's wrong?" I asked.

"If my memory serves me correctly, I heard that grandmother had scolded you back then and had forbidden you from purchasing magic items. Is that not so, grandfather?"

Buckets of sweat poured out from the headmaster as he looked at the wall with a thousand-yard stare. Apparently, his fascination with magic items had been much worse in the past, to the point where he'd nearly ended up dipping into the valuable

funds of his domain—although he claimed he'd planned to return them. *Nah, that's a red flag. Crimson. He basically tried to embezzle the hard-earned taxes of his people for his own hobbies... and these items are extremely expensive to boot.*

And so, Magiluka's grandmother had raked her husband over the coals, forbidding him from purchasing any more items in the future. And yet, the headmaster had this magic mirror.

"Headmaster..." I murmured after hearing the story, looking at the man with disdain like he was a total failure of a person.

"I-I had no other choice!" he wailed. "I-It's a legendary item! I had no other choiiice!"

"What should we do, Magiluka?" I asked, gazing at the no-good old man who kept making the same excuses.

"I shall report this to my grandmother," she replied firmly and mercilessly.

The headmaster, completely shocked upon hearing those words, froze in place.

"However, I'm sure grandmother gathered all these items in one place and kept a close eye on them so that something like this wouldn't happen," Magiluka said, shifting her gaze from her grandfather to the shop owner.

The owner gave a jolt of surprise and inched back.

"I-I know nothing!" he cried. "I definitely wasn't told he was being surveilled at home, making me have to sneak it into the academy under the guise that it was some sort of school equipment! Erm..."

Is this man cursed with honesty or something? He keeps shooting himself, I swear...

"The academy, I see..." Magiluka mused. "Supervision would be more lax away from home. But he'd eventually have been found out if he kept it in his office."

"Ah, which is why he hid it in an area of the academy no one would usually set foot in," I guessed, ignoring the frozen headmaster.

"That must be it. And it was unluckily found by students."

"Wait, maybe that's why its location kept changing. Every time someone found it, the headmaster would secretly move it elsewhere."

"That's possible. What happened to those unlucky victims who found the mirror?"

We stopped deducing and turned to the store owner.

"Wh-What? I-I've got nothing to do with this!" he yelped. "I've never tried helping with putting the people born from the mirror back into the item! Ack!"

I was tempted to praise him for once again babbling all of his secrets of his own accord.

"I see. You were helping grandfather, were you?" Magiluka said. "Then could you please tell us how to turn our situation back to normal?"

"Er, well... I simply kept the people who were made from the magic mirror here, so I'm not sure of the details," he admitted.

His response was vague, but judging from his past actions, he was likely telling the truth. I'd only met him today, but I felt like I was able to trust him deeply. *In a sense, I think a customer could build a good relationship with this guy. Wait, does that mean he's actually suited to being a merchant?*

"I see," Magiluka replied. "Then I suppose I must ask grandfather."

Magiluka, possibly reaching the same conclusions as me, easily trusted the owner's words and turned to the headmaster.

"Grandfather. How long are you going to be in a daze for? You heard our conversation, didn't you?"

"Magiluka, your grandfather here has received quite the shock," he chided her. "Can't you be a little more mindful— Um, never mind." For some reason, when he saw Magiluka's face, he immediately stopped sulking and seemed intimidated. I couldn't see Magiluka's expression from my angle, but judging by his reaction, she was undoubtedly showing zero sympathy to this old man.

"What did you plan to do from here?" Magiluka asked.

"During the next full moon, I was planning on activating the mirror and pushing them

inside," he replied.

"Pushing them inside?" I repeated. I was bothered how he didn't use the term "return" and couldn't help myself from interjecting.

"Indeed. If they were obedient, they'd return to the mirror of their own accord, but a majority of the time, they resisted doing so. In such cases, I needed to use force," the headmaster said.

"That sounds quite dangerous," I replied.

"Personally, I consider instances of the mirror activating to be valuable opportunities for me to research and observe the item's power, so I'd like to settle it peacefully, but the object's victims probably want to get it over with quickly. In the end, it usually ends up with me fighting against the fakes to get them back in the mirror. Ha ha ha!"

"Wait, so is the rumor of a person being pushed inside stemming from someone witnessing you doing just that?"

As the truth of the rumors came unraveled, I started to feel exhausted—this was a far cry from my fantasy-esque, occult-like expectations.

"I believe so," Magiluka replied. "As far as I'm concerned, I simply cannot allow my absolutely shameless fake to roam around as they please." Her face grew red and she looked down at the floor while she seemed to recall her fake's actions. I also wasn't willing to let my cringey self stay on the loose—my psyche wouldn't be able to bear it.

"But I wonder why they have those personalities," I wondered. "I thought they would've been carbon copies of ourselves."

"Oh, you've noticed a very good point," the headmaster said. "The results of my research and analysis states that beings born from that mirror will completely copy their victims' appearance, abilities, and knowledge! It's a wonderful item that lives up to its name of being a legendary-class! I haven't a clue as to the logic behind it all, but I suppose we can only be impressed by the fairies."

He spoke excitedly and rapidly, the words passionately tumbling from his mouth as I was a bit taken aback.

"And, fitting for these mysterious fairies, the beings from the mirror don't simply copy

their victims," he continued. "The fairies tinker a little with the reflected personalities! That is to say..."

The headmaster paused, causing me to gulp nervously and listen intently. "When the real one views their fake, the fake will manifest the most embarrassing, disliked possible personality of their counterpart!" he explained. "Apparently, the fake will use their copied knowledge to find the real person's most perfectly hated behaviors!"

"B-But why would the fairies do something like that?"

"Hmm, well, there are a few theories as to why, but the most likely one is..." The headmaster again did a dramatic pause—I only had a bad feeling about this, and I was suddenly overcome with an impulse to not listen to him anymore. "...they thought it would be funnier"

Oh, for Pete's sake! I knew it was a stupid reason! Those jerks! They just take delight in people's reactions!

"In any case, what we must do now is to quietly return our fakes into the mirror before they create a fuss," Magiluka said, showing a terrifying amount of composure.

I, on the other hand, feigned my calmness toward the headmaster's explanation while internally cursing and insulting the creators of this stupid idea. I was definitely for shoving our fakes back into the land of mirrors. However, since they were currently on the run, I had one more question in mind.

"Didn't you say that we needed to return them on the next full moon?" I asked.

"That's true," Magiluka said. "If the power of that magic mirror only activates on a full moon, is it just a normal mirror for other days?"

"Unfortunately, that's the case," the headmaster answered. "Hence, we currently cannot return those two ladies back into the mirror. Thus, I was planning on secretly sheltering them to observe the abilities of the magic mirror..."

He proceeded to cough a few times to hide the fact that his last line was uncalled for while we fell silent. However, we'd heard him loud and clear, and our icy gazes conveyed our contempt toward the old man.

"I see. In other words, you were looking after them, grandfather," Magiluka deduced.

"Thinking back to the night when we saw the mirror, the shadow that Tutte had seen wasn't you, but our fakes. You were just nearby, keeping watch."

"P-Precisely..." he replied.

"Then what were those organization personnel I ran into the other day?" Magiluka asked.

"Th-That was, well... Little Mary told me about some sort of bizarre performance she had in mind and begged for me to make it into a reality. I was watching from afar..."

"Headmaster, that wasn't me but my fake..." I interjected, unable to overlook the two's conversation.

"My lady, perhaps we should let that go for now," Tutte immediately refuted.

I pursed my lips obediently, knowing that my maid was in the right. I had broken the flow of the conversation, but I knew that we now had to find our embarrassing fakes and watch over them so that they wouldn't cause a fuss before we returned them to their world on the day of the full moon. *We have to capture them first. How far have they walked? If she ran at full speed, she could probably be anywhere by now, but she's with the fake Magiluka. She wouldn't go all out while they're together, right? R-Right?* Anxiety loomed over me as we wrapped up our discussion and left the store.

I was immediately met with a surprising incident. My carriage was nowhere to be seen. I didn't need to be a detective to swiftly assume that my fake had casually taken it. It would've been absurd to have expected the coachman, none the wiser, to instantly see through my fake.

"Wh-Wh-Wh-What do we do?!" I stammered.

"Lady Mary, please calm down," Magiluka said calmly. "Even if they used the carriage, they couldn't have gone far. They can't stray too far from the magic mirror, after all. And though my fake is there too, there aren't many locations where the two could run off to without the coachman finding it odd."

I'm so glad she's with me.

"D-Do you have a place in mind you think they're headed?" I asked.

"The academy," she replied. "The magic mirror is there as well, and there are plenty of places to hide. Above all, it's a location the coachman wouldn't find suspicious. I believe your double would come to that conclusion, but am I wrong?"

She tilted her head to one side, waiting to hear my opinion. *This is me we're talking about. Am I that resourceful and quick-witted? I feel like I'd just leave it to the flow of things before panicking about it later.* I simulated the possible outcomes of the situation in my head and came to a conclusion as I placed my fist over my open hand.

"Ah, that's where I'd turn to Magiluka," I said.

In fact, I could almost definitively make the claim that my fake self would turn to fake Magiluka to figure out their future steps to take. If the fake Magiluka then suggested using the carriage to head back to the academy, my fake could absolutely follow that. My friend's fake swooned over me, but she still held Magiluka's intelligence and thus would draw similar conclusions. *In that case, the academy does seem like our best shot.*

"Okay, then let's go to the academy," I said. "Can we borrow your carriage?"

"I don't mind, but if we return now, the sun will start setting," Magiluka replied.

"I don't mind! Worst case, we can just stay another night within the academy! That's not a problem is it, headmaster?"

"Not at all," he replied. "I had preparations made to shelter those two, so you should be set."

He offered a depressing slump of his shoulders, but we paid no mind and headed back to the academy. By my calculations, the academy should've been devoid of students by the time we returned—on the off-chance that our fakes ran wild and did something asinine upon us spotting them, only I would suffer psychological damage while everyone else would be safe from harm. *Ideally, I'd like to avoid that mental damage, so please don't do anything weird, other me!*

10. YOUR ON-OFF SWITCH IS HORRID

As the sun started to set, we returned to the academy. Were our fakes truly here as

we'd guessed? We discussed our next moves as we made our way to the headmaster's office.

"Now then," I started. "Since they know they've been found out, there's a good chance they're hiding somewhere."

"Indeed," Magiluka replied. "However, while locating our doubles is important, I believe we should determine how we'll secure the magic mirror. There's a chance they will attempt to hide it."

"You're right... That'd be troublesome." I stepped inside the office and headed toward the sofa for a short break. "How about we leave the mirror to the headmaster while the two of us chase after our fa—"

"Hm?"

As I was about to sit down, I locked eyes with a visitor who seemed to have gotten here before us—sure enough, I'd stumbled into a staredown with my fake, who was lying slovenly on the sofa. She appeared to have thrown off her embarrassing outfit for more casual clothes. Upon closer inspection, I noticed her jaw was moving, doubtlessly in the midst of eating some kind of snack. She was in total relaxation mode.

My fake didn't seem to expect to encounter me either, which I gathered when she froze stiff upon our making eye contact (sans chewing, of course). After a few seconds, she finally swallowed her mouthful, causing time to advance once more.

"Why are you here?!" we both cried in beautiful synchronicity. "That's my line!" we shouted simultaneously once again—our double act was flawless, if I do say so myself.

I hadn't thought I'd meet her so easily. Unable to find what to say, I first decided to point out a problem that caught my eye.

"Putting that aside, why are you dressed like that?!" I shouted. "How can you let yourself go like this?!"

I took a good look at my fake, who was lounging around in nothing but a thin nightgown. Furthermore, she was reading a book while eating a snack—she was being a hot mess.

"I'm in my own room," my fake replied. "Why wouldn't I unwind a little?"

"This isn't *your* room! It's the headmaster's!" I yelled back. "People come in here all the time, so look a little more sharp! Please! I'm begging you!"

In my panic, I wasn't even sure if I was angry so much as I was desperate—my fake simply looked that sloppy. Her on-off switch'd been flipped to "off" so hard it'd fallen off the wall.

"What are you on about?" my fake asked. "You're always like this at home."

"Hey! Cool it with your wild accusations!" I roared. "I'm not always like this! Only sometimes."

I was so flustered at her exposing my embarrassing side that my panic had reached its peak. Despite Magiluka being beside me, I couldn't suppress my shouting. *Ack! I've gotta explain this to the Magilukas somehow!*

I managed to calm myself down a hair and organize my thoughts as I glanced over to Magiluka... but she was red in the face and her lips were trembling.

"Wh-What are you doing there, other meeee?!" she screamed.

It was a rare occurrence for her to raise her voice, but as I glanced at her fake, I noticed that fake Magiluka was also in skimpy attire, seated on the ground near the sofa, looking a little risqué.



"Eh heh. Heh heh heh! ♪ Lady Mary's foot! Eh heh heh! ♪" her fake said, enchanted by my fake's untidy appearance.

She paid no attention to her surroundings or to her real counterpart's screams—the fake was intently staring at my untidy fake self. You could practically see the hearts in fake Magiluka's eyes, and she did nothing to stop the drool trickling out from her mesmerized smiling. *Am I just imagining things, or would her fake muzzle against my foot if I offered it? I must just be imagining it.*

In any case, it was clear that Magiluka was also on the receiving end of the mischief of the magic mirror, and she wasn't calm enough to pay much heed to what my fake was doing. *Whew, thank goodness. Now isn't the time to be relieved though...*

"Anyway, look sharp! Come on!" I ordered.

"Whyyy?" my fake whined with a pout.

"Don't you take that attitude with me!" I scolded back.

"My lady," Tutte said from behind me, making me realize that I wasn't completely out of the woods yet.

"Ah, Tutte!" I hastily cried. "That's not the real me! I'm not that untidy... I think."

I had no idea why I was making excuses to my maid, but I couldn't stop myself. Then, as I realized that I'd already said that I did this *sometimes*, my voice petered out. *It's not like I've never been this sloppy in front of Tutte. I think it's a bit too late for me to justify myself.* I'd resigned myself to my fate until I suddenly noticed the headmaster behind Tutte.

"Uh, Headmaster, I have a good explanation for this..." I started.

"Ha ha ha! Don't worry, Little Mary," he replied, all smiles. "She's been acting like that for the past two days, so it's no surprise at all."

He dropped another bombshell as he tried to reassure my panicking self. *Aghhhhh! I just want to go dig a hole and bury myself in it!*

"Heh, I'd assumed you all would be deceived by my reverse reverse psychology, so you've done well to make it here," my fake said. "You're good."

I wasn't even to blame, but I writhed in agony, mortified by my fake self as she stood up and grinned at me. I couldn't even bring myself to point out that reverse reverse psychology would just be your usual self, and instead prioritized a different matter entirely.

"If you're going to stretch out your legs, wear proper clothes! It's so embarrassing!" I scolded.

"I'm not bothered by it," my fake replied.

"Yeah? Well I am!"

She was so shameless that I doubted for a moment if she really was my fake, causing me to once again bellow in an unladylike fashion. Indeed, the fairies had crafted my fake quite well, knowing what embarrassed and bothered me the most. *Will she start doing everything I find embarrassing without a care in the world? I'm so scared.* Realizing how terrifying this magic mirror was, I was tempted to find whoever made it and give them a piece or two of my mind. *But if they tell me that it's my fault for being reflected in the mirror, I can't refute it...*

"My lady, as my lady here says, why don't we get changed?" Tutte suggested. "Please come with me. Lady Magiluka too."

"Okay," our fakes acquiesced obediently.

Grrr... She doesn't listen to her real counterpart, but she obediently follows Tutte's orders? Is this all part of taunting me? I gritted my teeth as I saw the two fakes walk into the next room, guided by Tutte. After a short while, the two finished changing and came out. I was wary and had expected them to try to flee amidst the chaos, so I felt a little let down.

"I guess you didn't run this time," I said. She'd embarrassed me so much that I felt like I was allowed to give her a thorny remark or two.

"Heh, I won't run or hide, no matter who my opponent may be. I'll stand tall and face them head-on!" my fake declared. "Huh? Why, you ask? Well... that's because... I'm a magical girl! ☆"

Her cringey attempt to act cute easily blew my taunting out of the water. I felt so ashamed that I simply couldn't put it into words. *Aghhhh! Please stop! I'm begging*

youuu! I covered my face with my hands, trying my best to hide my red face, and I couldn't stomach a reply.

Quite honestly, I was more than ready to give up and throw in the towel. Unfortunately, I didn't expect them to go "Sure, okay," if I asked them to return to the mirror just because I'd given up on this incident entirely. Reality was harsh and cruel. *No, no... I can't cast aside hope! I think someone famous said that before! I can't give up! I've gotta challenge myself!*

"Please be nice and return to the mirror on the next full moon," I asked.

"No," my fake replied instantly.

Ugh, reality's merciless... I slumped my shoulders in disappointment as I sat on the sofa.

"Ahem. Now then. I do believe we must carefully discuss this, but first..." Magiluka said, sitting beside me as she started to tremble, "my fake self, please don't stick so closely to Lady Mary!"

The fake Magiluka, who was across from her, had absolutely not been listening to our conversation and was instead all over my fake.

"Hmph. My oh my, are you perhaps *jealous* that I'm so close with Lady Mary? Is that what this is about?" the fake Magiluka purred with a look of triumph.

"What?!" Magiluka replied in utter astonishment.

"Magiluka?" I gingerly asked.

"Ack! Ah, um, Lady Mary! I'm not jealous of them at all! Not one bit!" replied a red-faced Magiluka.

"S-Sure, I get it. Why don't we calm down?"

I knew that she was flustered from her fake's suggestive remarks, but when she shut down the idea that she was jealous so firmly, I felt a little rejected.

"Ah, but, i-it's not like I dislike sticking to you or anything, Lady Mary! Um, er..." Magiluka stammered hastily, noticing that I looked a little down.

"Why don't we have a cup of tea for now to calm ourselves down?" Tutte said.

She'd likely had this prepared while she was helping our fakes get dressed. The four of us fell silent and drank our tea, the air growing less tense for a moment. Once we regained our composure, Magiluka started up the conversation.

"Why don't we get back to the subject at hand?" she said. "Personally, I wouldn't like to be a part of senseless fighting. I'd like to decide this with a discussion. As Lady Mary stated earlier, I'd prefer that neither of you resisted returning to the mirror."

"That we can't do," fake Mary replied. "I received this magical heart from the Land of Mirrors, and I have a duty to become a magical girl and protect this kingdom from the dark organization!"

I had no idea on what basis she was making all her enthusiastic claims. Now she'd suddenly added a new factor: the Land of Mirrors. It made zero sense. I couldn't help but feel that even *she* wasn't quite aware of the world she was building. Perhaps she still didn't have a clear scenario in mind and was stuck in the phase of pinning down the setting and backstory. Why would I think that, you ask? Because this was me we're talking about here! There was no way I had the chops to establish solid world-building! I was so sure I'd always be changing it as I went, influenced by the factors around me. *Yep, this is me all right! No sense of identity whatsoever! Ah... I feel like crying now.*

As I started to despair and feel the self-hatred creeping in, I glanced at my fake's magical heart (or so she called it?). On the surface, it looked to be well made, and it seemed more like a magic item than an accessory. I wondered how she'd gotten her hands on it, but it seemed possible that she'd begged the headmaster and asked for something that fit the bill. For a split second, I locked eyes with Magiluka. She looked like she wasn't sure what we should do, so I decided to jump in.

"In short, if you defeat this dark organization as a magical girl and protect this kingdom, you'd fulfill your duty and return to the Land of Mirrors, correct?" I asked.

"Hm? Uh, what? Is that it?" my fake replied.

"It is. You're a magical girl from the Land of Mirrors. You're the warrior of light, sent by the queen of the Land of Mirrors to defeat this dark organization that originated from your world to save this kingdom."

“U-Uhh...”

“And once your duty has been fulfilled, you’ll have a heart-wrenching scenario where you say your goodbyes and return home. It’s a moving scene, where everyone will be in tears. Just imagine—you’ll have to suddenly part ways with your important friends that you made in this world. Through your sobs, you’ll need to convince us that you must go, and we’ll smile at each other as we say our farewells.”

My fake gulped. “Th-That’s very enticing...”

Good. She’s being influenced so easily. This might’ve been unfair of me, but I thought it was best to not completely shut her down and instead go along with her plan while casually squeezing in a setting or scenario that would work in our favor. *I can do this all because I know that I don’t have a set scenario in mind! Ha ha ha! Come on, take the bait! I know you don’t have any actual convictions about how your story should go! Ugh... I feel so empty.*

“Lady Mary, I understand what you’re getting at, but what shall we do about this ‘dark organization’ that she’s brought up?” Magiluka whispered.

“Heh heh heh, we’ll just have to prepare that ourselves,” I whispered back.

“I see. So we’d all be dancing in the palm of your hand. Instead of forcefully pushing down on them, we utilize their train of thought and manipulate them to ultimately benefit us. Very impressive.”

“U-Uh, I guess, but I think you’ve got the wrong idea a little...”

I felt like I was on the verge of creating another misunderstanding about myself, but I didn’t know how to justify my actions and trailed off.

Huh? Wait a second... If the real Magiluka noticed my manipulation, then their fake would also notice it too. I glanced at the fake Magiluka, and she looked back at me with a broad smile. *She’s noticed it all right—but she just doesn’t care. Judging by her past actions, she probably doesn’t mind as long as she can be by my side.*

“In that case, I can’t have Magiluka leave my side. She must be with me at all times,” I noted, accidentally mumbling my thoughts out loud in the process.

“L-Lady Mary?!” Magiluka replied in a tizzy. “What d-d-do you mean by that?”

"Hm? Oh, I mean the fake. She's being obedient for now, but we don't know what she'd do if she leaves my side."

"A-Ah, so that's what you mean." Her face was still red, but she seemed to have calmed down.

"Hmm? Did you want it to be you?"

"N-N-N-Not at all! I haven't thought that one bit!"

She turned away as I gave her a mischievous smirk. A fawning Magiluka was cute, but her tsundere version was just as adorable. *Tsundere is justice.*

In any case, it was imperative for me to keep my fake in check before she went off on her own and caused a stir. And to do that, I needed to prepare a dark organization. *I... might need everyone's cooperation for this one. Ugh, I'm not looking forward to it.* With a heavy sigh, I decided to end our conversation.

At night, when everyone was asleep, I sneaked out of my room. Why, you ask? To make sure that my fake wasn't sneaking around during this hour, of course. And as I'd expected, my fake was nowhere to be seen.

"I guess I was too late..." I murmured.

I had checked up on the magic mirror moments ago, so I knew that she didn't steal it away. *It's probably tough for her to carry such a large mirror, but I half expected her to carry it on her back or something.* I decided to stop thinking about it for now.

"Ugh, where did she go? She shouldn't make me work so hard," I grumbled as I left the clock tower and looked around.

Suddenly it hit me that I was all alone on the dark academy grounds. *Aw, shoot. I'm starting to get a little scared.* I trembled for a moment as I started to regret being by myself. *I don't want to drag someone with me and let them see the shameful acts that my fake might get up to. I'd die from embarrassment.*

I shook myself free from my fear and glanced around in the darkness before I finally took a step forward. Suddenly, I saw something move from the corner of my eye—I

reflexively turned toward it and noticed a dark alleyway.

"Hey. I know you're there," I called out faintly while gingerly entering the path. "Give up and come on out."

I set foot in the alleyway, but I found myself unable to step forward due to fear of the darkness. As my cowardly self dawdled, I noticed someone slowly emerge from the dark. *I knew it. I'm glad she came forward without a... fuss...? I breathed a sigh of relief, thinking that my fake self had appeared, but I was instead met with an adult man who was much taller than me. He was enveloped in a dark outfit and was wearing an odd mask.*

"You're just a young girl. I knew you'd let your guard down," he said, his low voice muffled behind his mask.

He had the aura of a person from the dark organization. *Whoops! Is this the guy the headmaster had prepared for me? I guess he mistook me for my fake. I feel a little bad about this one...*

"U-Uh, you see..." I started, trying to explain myself.

"No matter. It doesn't change what I need to do," the man in black mumbled.

Engulfed in the darkness, he unsheathed a dagger and approached me in an instant, thrusting his blade toward me.

A large metallic clang rang through the air. Completely caught off guard, I couldn't react and received the attack. The blade, which was supposed to pierce my chest, crumbled into pieces.

"What?!" the man gasped in surprise, not expecting this outcome.

He hastily retreated by jumping back. Still in shock, I confirmed that he'd backed away before I looked at the blade that had fallen to the ground. It wasn't a dummy knife—it was real cold steel. Which meant...

Wait, was I about to just be killed? Por qué?

As neither of us were able to understand what had just gone on, silence settled in.

11. I DON'T UNDERSTAND ANYMORE

I was in a dark alleyway, facing a suspicious man dressed in black. *Wh-What's going on? Why was I just attacked? My mind can't keep up with all this.* I desperately tried to suppress the frantic beating of my heart as I prepared myself for battle. My foe, who had apparently noticed my change in attitude, took a fighting stance as well.

"Why was my blade..." the man muttered to himself. "Did she have an iron plate in her chest or something?"

"*Whose* chest is an iron plate?" I replied, unable to let that comment slide.

Thanks to that, my confused state of mind suddenly calmed down. I closely analyzed my enemy. *He's dressed in black and wearing a weird mask. Hmm... He's so trope-laden that I thought he was a random extra prepared for me, but I guess I'm wrong. I should try to get an idea of who he is.*

"You must be from the dark organization," I said.

The man visibly twitched upon hearing my claims. *Wait, am I right?* I'd just taken a shot in the dark, so I was surprised by his response.

"How did you..." the man muttered, sounding equally shocked, confirming that I'd guessed correctly.

Huh? What? What's going on? Isn't the dark organization just a figment of my fake's imagination? Are we sure he's not just some actor? Oh my god! What's going on?! I'd been banking on the fact that I'd be wrong, but panic once again washed over me when my deductions were proven true.

"Tch. Another one's joined us," the man said, ignoring me and facing a different direction.

I followed suit and noticed a single ray of light heading our way.

"I'll retreat for today," the man snarled. "But I'll steal your powers without fail and accomplish our goal."

When I heard his clichéd villain lines, I quickly turned back to him, realizing that this

wasn't the time to be looking away, but he was nowhere to be seen. *Did he... run?* I glanced at my surroundings, but there were no signs of the man, and I finally eased up a tad. *Wh-What's going on? Is my fake's imagination becoming a reality? No, there's a chance that an organization like that really exists within this world. Did I just coincidentally run into them? No, that guy said he wanted to steal my powers...* I felt like I was going in circles.

Eventually, the light was beside me. "My lady!" a familiar voice said.

"Tutte? And Headmaster," I replied with a bit of relief.

"Good grief," the headmaster said. "I was surprised when I found you gone, Mary. Are you like your fake, where you have a habit of doing bizarre things in unpopulated areas?"

"N-No!" I insisted, trying to clear up this misunderstanding. "I didn't see my fake anywhere, so I..."

"If you're talking about your counterpart, my lady, she's asleep," Tutte answered. "She did go to the bathroom earlier, however."

"Huh? Wait, really?" I asked.

"Most certainly. She asked me to go along with her."

"Why?"

"Because she's afraid of using the bathroom by herself at night."

"Is she a kid?!"

That brat! I didn't think she went to the bathroom! Tsk, I totally overlooked that possibility. And why is she acting spoiled toward my Tutte? She's being so sneaky! I was tempted to go to my fake, body-slam her, and shout a complaint or two at her. As I'd said before, I was extremely narrow-minded when it came to Tutte.

"All right, let's do this," I said.

"I don't know what you're talking about, but what were you doing here, my lady?" Tutte said, ruining my eagerness.

"Well, I was looking for my fake. Oh, and the dark organization..." As the two adults looked at me quizzically, I decided to explain what I'd just been through.

"Hm. Indeed, I don't remember hiring someone so dangerous," the headmaster said while pondering my account. We'd returned to his office, where I'd told him about my incident. "According to your story, Mary, it seems you weren't up against a complete amateur. But I don't know what his goal is. What does he mean by your 'powers'?"

"I-I wonder..." I muttered.

He better not be talking about my cheat abilities. Wait... I-I'm not busted, am I? I'd love for anyone to try to take my powers away from me, but I can't have them be used for nefarious acts. I'd be happier if my abilities simply disappeared instead of just being stolen away. I internally hoped for a seemingly impossible solution.

"Um, my lady," Tutte said. "Perhaps it has something to do with your sleeping counterpart over there. She's stated something similar, hasn't she?"

"Nah, I doubt it," I replied. "My fake's just imagining things."

As I was feeling a little down, my fake (the root of this issue) and the Magilukas appeared in the room. I *very* reluctantly told them about what I'd just experienced.

"Wh-Whoaaaaa! This! This is it!" my fake shouted, extremely excited.

And this is why I didn't want to tell her. I knew she'd get all eager.

"I'll head outside for a bit!" my fake shouted, immediately rising from the sofa and trying to head outside.

"Wait one second!" I shouted. "Don't you dare!"

"No one can stop me now!"

"Hey!"

My fake completely ignored me and rushed out in high spirits. I knew that she'd be looking for this man in black. *Why is she happily charging into such a dangerous*

situation? She's a ticking time bomb! She might use my abilities that I've been desperately hiding without a care. Feeling a sense of danger, I immediately chose to chase after her, but she returned to the room moments later looking extremely depressed.

"Wh-What happened?" I asked gingerly.

"Th-Th-The academy at night is much scarier than I anticipated," she answered.

I fell silent and pursed my lips, not expecting such a response. I didn't know what to say. I guessed that the magic mirror wanted to show a side of me that was terrified of situations I disliked to give me secondhand embarrassment, and I could only commend the item's powers, though it pained me to admit it.

"Tutte, come with me," my fake pleaded, trying to grab onto my maid.

"Hey! Don't act so spoiled toward Tutte!" I barked. "Shoo! Shoo!"

I immediately latched onto my maid to defend her while waving my hand at my fake.

"What's wrong with that?" my fake insisted. "Tutte's my maid!"

"Don't try to win her over amidst this chaos!" I shouted. "Tutte's *my* maid! *My* maid!"

My fake continued to look for openings to drag Tutte away, but I used my body to cling onto my maid and block these attempts. Tutte looked a little troubled at the scene while the two of us circled around her for a while to fight over her. I didn't care if people thought that now wasn't the time to fight or that there was no need for me to be so aggressive—this was something I couldn't budge on. I know I've been repeating myself, but I was extremely narrow-minded when it came to Tutte.

"Well, aren't you two cute?" the Magilukas said in sync.

One was looking on wearily while the other seemed enamored by the sight. My fake and I grew embarrassed from hearing that comment and stopped our little skirmish.

"Let me confirm one thing," the headmaster said, getting us back on track. "Does the other Mary know anything about this?"

"I do!" my fake replied confidently. We all focused on her in surprise before she

continued. “The dark organization is after the power of the magical heart, which the Land of Mirrors has given me! They attacked us in search of my magical girl powers!”

She spoke proudly about her maximum embarrassing heart, causing me to cover my face.

“No, that’s a magic item that you practically stole from me...” the headmaster started.

“I’m so sorry, headmaster!” My face still hidden, I managed to squeak out an apology despite the fact that I wasn’t actually at fault.

After much discussion, the headmaster decided on investigating this so-called dark organization while sheltering our fakes. For both safety and security reasons, Magiluka and I decided to sleep next to our counterparts. Since there were only two beds, my fake and I slipped into one while Magiluka and her fake entered the other.

“Heh heh heh. When girls gather in one room, we’ve got to gossip a little! Let’s have some girl talk!” my fake said as we were all preparing for bed.

“Nah, let’s go to sleep,” I said.

“Romance! Love!”

“Listen to me!” I yelled, smothering my excited fake atop our bed with a pillow.

However, my fake was determined to continue the conversation and didn’t listen to me at all. “Like, is there a mysterious gentleman who always saves you when you’re in a pinch on the battlefield, but he’s actually a prince from the enemy kingdom and he’s torn between his love and his duties or something?”

“H-Have you ever experienced such a thing?” Magiluka asked while staring at me.

“Huh?” I replied. “This is all her imagination, of course! Why don’t we just all ignore what her crazy mind says...”

I trailed off as I felt another wave of difficult emotions. It was a little depressing to insult myself, even if she was a fake.

“And what about you, Magiluka?” my fake said without a care.

I was still busy feeling down about my own insults.

"H-Huh? Me? I-I've never experienced anything like that!" she stammered.

"You're acting suspicious!" my fake said with a grin before she turned to fake Magiluka.
"Care to tell us the truth, other Magiluka?"

"With a man? Impossible. I've no interest in men at all, you see," fake Magiluka replied, nonchalantly dropping a bombshell.

"O-Oh. I-I see..." my fake and I said, a little taken aback as we glanced at the real Magiluka.

"Sh-She isn't me! This other me... is also me, but... Argh! She's wrong, all right?! She's absolutely wrong!" Magiluka replied, acting uncharacteristically flustered as she desperately tried to justify herself.

This is bad. It's not like it's the real us saying any of these things, but there's a temptation to take what the fakes say as reflective of the people they're copying. It's all the worse that their personalities aim to embarrass us... Maybe they'll even lie without a second thought. While Magiluka was in a state of panic, I shuddered, knowing that the same thing could happen to me at any time.

"L-L-L-L-Lady Mary! Are you sure you've never felt anything like that?" a red-faced Magiluka yelled, trying to change subjects and passing it onto me. "You said it was her imagination earlier, but are you sure you haven't got anyone like that?"

"H-Hey!" I shouted back. "Don't try to hide your shame by pushing this conversation onto me!"

"Hm? Me, you ask?" my fake said, taking over.

"No! Wait!" I yelled.

I turned pale, fearing that she'd blabber something crazy like fake Magiluka had just done. I tried my best to stop my counterpart from talking.

"Hm... I'm going through my memories, but I've got nothing like that," my fake finally said. "I'm completely devoid of anything that bittersweet, it seems. Ha ha ha!"

She divulged the truth as though she were talking about a different person. This was more than enough to embarrass me, and because she spoke so objectively, she wielded a certain amount of trust. *She's telling the truth, so I don't have any way to contradict her. Even so...*

"*You* have no right to say that!" I yelled, throwing my pillow at my fake's face as I trembled in humiliation.

"N-Now, now, Lady Mary," Magiluka reassured me. "You may find someone lovely in the future."

"Certainly," her fake added. "And if there isn't anyone else, there's me."

Why am I being consoled by them?

"All right, talk's over!" I declared. "Let's go to sleep! Good night!"

And with that, I got into my bed. *Don't do this, fake me! You have amazing abilities, but your words and memories are dangerous to me in all sorts of ways. Help me, God!*

12. THE OBLIGATORY TROPE

The next day, Magiluka saw off Mary, who reluctantly boarded her carriage. Apparently, Mary's father, Ferdid, who'd been staying in the royal capital for work, had reached out to her regarding this recent incident.

As she saw her friend off, Magiluka felt a touch of envy seeing Ferdid act out of love for his daughter. Magiluka was, of course, loved dearly by her family as well; however, her father, her mother, and the rest of her family simply had the tendency to prioritize work. Although she had no complaints or any intention of expressing dissatisfaction with this state of affairs, during times like these where she saw how other families worked, she couldn't help but feel a tinge of loneliness pluck at her heart. She chided herself for being immature, and after collecting her thoughts and renewing her resolve to successfully carry out her role while she remained at the academy, she once again scolded herself for her earlier pining.

"First, I must obtain as much information as I can regarding the magic mirror," she

said. "I hope I can run some tests later."

Magiluka felt that it was best to gain insight on the magic mirror since it would surely be useful to her in the future—she also acknowledged to herself that she would've wanted to dig into information on the mirror regardless of whether it was important or not.

When she'd vocalized her thoughts, she'd also turned to face the two fakes she had accompanying her.

"Grrr... I wanted Tutte to stay behind," fake Mary grumbled. "But I can't say anything if people claim that it's odd for me to meet my father without my maid by my side."

"Now, Lady Mary. I'm always by your side, wherever and whenever! Hee hee," fake Magiluka offered to console her.

The real Magiluka was very deliberately attempting to keep her fake out of her sight, but she found this to be a challenging task because her double seemed glued to fake Mary's side. Magiluka gave a heavy sigh, knowing that her fake would remain in her field of vision. *She's a stranger. She just happens to resemble me*, Magiluka kept telling herself, allowing her to maintain her composure.

"Let's change gears! Since the nuisance is gone, we've only got one thing to do!" fake Mary shouted loudly. Magiluka was beset by a sense of restlessness at the comment.

"Lady Mary, please do what you're supposed to do by returning to the clock tower," Magiluka said.

"Okay..."

At first, the real Mary suggested bringing her fake to her father and explaining their situation to him so it would be easier to surveil her double, but fake Mary rejected this idea, stating that she couldn't leave the presence of the magic mirror. Magiluka was skeptical of this claim, for the two fakes had previously been running wild as they pleased within the royal capital, but fake Mary stubbornly refused to budge on this point. Without any other choice, Mary begrudgingly went alone to the royal capital, pleading with Magiluka not to let the fakes run loose. Magiluka assured her she wouldn't allow that to happen.

So it was that Magiluka was responsible for scolding fake Mary to keep her in check—

and to Magiluka's surprise, the two fakes obediently returned to the clock tower. Magiluka supposed that the fake Mary must simply be just as amenable as the real Mary she'd come to know. She let her guard down in relief as a result... and the two fakes proceeded to escape from the tower the moment she wasn't keeping track of them.

"This is bad... Really bad," Magiluka muttered. "What shall I do if they cause a fuss within the academy? Judging from the fake's reaction last night, perhaps they left the academy in search of the dark organization." Magiluka's inference seemed likely since both fakes were gone and fake Mary's costume was nowhere in sight.

The real Mary's actions were so unpredictable and outlandish at times that even Magiluka, who'd been friends with her since their youth, couldn't fully keep tabs on them. Considering that, while Magiluka didn't expect fake Mary to charge headfirst into danger, there was a part of her that couldn't completely disregard the possibility. Her only hope, the headmaster, had chosen the worst timing to be swamped with work, so he couldn't do a thing to help.

Magiluka's only saving grace was that the two fakes couldn't wander too far from the magic mirror. Unfortunately, their precise range was still unknown, and even they didn't seem aware of what would happen to them should they leave their max range. *Why did they know that they couldn't become too separated from the mirror despite not knowing any details? Does the mirror imprint that behavior on them?* Magiluka's curiosity was piqued and she excitedly fantasized investigating the question, but she immediately shook her head, ridding herself of such an imprudent thought.

"I can't search both inside and outside the academy alone."

Magiluka thought of a few reliable friends, but she hesitated showing them her shameless, brazen fake.

"Hey, Magiluka! Whatcha doin'?" She heard Sacher's voice call out to her from above.

In a shock, she looked up and saw the boy riding atop a griffin and slowly descending toward her. She couldn't imagine Sacher ditching class simply because he'd caught sight of her. He was already a fourth-year and a former class master—he wasn't one to act so thoughtlessly without good reason.

"Where'd you get that griffin, Sacher?" Magiluka asked.

"Hm? Oh, I'm just going for a walk," Sacher replied. "This one gets mad if we don't let it out to fly every now and then."

"A walk in the skies, I see. Then have you seen anyone in the skies or flying about?"

If Sacher was simply soaring through, he could've seen something.

"Er... Hm," he replied, pointing toward a certain direction. "Yeah, I did see two people. They were far away, but one had silver hair, so I assumed it was Lady Mary. I kinda just let her fly by, but was that a problem?"

"As I suspected, they flew out from the clock tower to escape," Magiluka mumbled. "The issue now is determining whether they descended and stayed in that region, or if they decided to go elsewhere."

It'd take too much time for her to give chase on foot. She hesitated, knowing that she'd need to fly herself if she were to chase after the duo—and she was afraid of heights. As Magiluka continued to ponder over what steps to take, a loud whoosh of air signaled that Sacher had landed his griffin.

"Get on, Magiluka," he said, extending a hand while still atop his mount. "I don't get what's going on, but something's wrong, right?"

"U-Um..." she stammered.

"I've known you for a while now. I can tell what you're thinking just by looking at you. You want to move quickly, yeah? Then we should fly in the air atop this griffin."

Magiluka felt it was a blunder on her part that her heart had skipped a beat when this boy had sensed her troubles. *If he can tell that much, why can't he remember I'm not good with heights?* She felt a myriad of emotions about her friend who never seemed to quite be able to stick the landing.

Be that as it may, she'd let the two fakes escape on her watch, and she needed to handle it. Magiluka steeled herself, grabbed Sacher's hand, and climbed aboard.

"Please head to the region where you last saw them," Magiluka requested. "Worst case, we may have to leave campus. Would that be an issue?"

"No, we should be fine," Sacher replied with a smile. "We gotta fly over the royal capital,

don't we?" His relaxed demeanor eased Magiluka's tension, and he obediently took to the skies on the griffin and headed for their destination.

She felt herself grow dizzy whenever she looked down, so she found herself tempted to gaze straight ahead. However, there was no point to this exercise if she failed to spot the fakes, so she mustered up the courage to look down.

"So, why are we chasing Lady Mary?" Sacher asked. Magiluka fell silent, prompting the boy to ask again. "Magiluka?"

For a split second, Magiluka hesitated. Could she tell Sacher everything? Was she allowed to do so? It was clear that explaining her situation to him and asking for his cooperation would increase her efficiency. But before she said anything, she found it imperative to give the boy a firm word of warning.

"You must not tell anyone what I'm about to tell you," she said. "And whatever you see from here on out, you must forget it once this is all over. Are we clear?"

Even she knew that she was driving a hard bargain as she scoffed at herself internally.

"I don't get what's going on, but don't worry! I've got a reputation for my poor memory," Sacher declared proudly. "You know just how difficult it is for me to remember things, don't you?"

Magiluka wasn't quite sure if this was something to boast about, but she refrained from saying anything, knowing that Sacher was trying to be considerate in his own clumsy way. And so, she proceeded to tell him the events that'd led up to this moment.

"That's wild," Sacher said. "You'll get another copy of yourself? I'd love to be reflected in that mirror."

"Were you listening to my explanation?" Magiluka asked.

"Yeah, but it's a copy of your current self, right? If I fought and won against my copy, I'd literally be beating myself. If I could do that, I'd become stronger."

She could only commend his optimism, but sighed upon knowing that he could sound so carefree because he'd never experienced the excruciating humiliation.

"In any case, should you meet both Lady Mary's and my fakes, you must not talk about this to anyone," Magiluka said. "Even if you've got thoughts of your own, please don't make it apparent."

"Hm? Well what happens if I *do* make it apparent?"

"Would you like to know?"

"No. I'll do my best to mask my feelings," Sacher said, immediately ending this exchange upon feeling Magiluka's pressure.

She was grateful that he was quick to pick up on these minute differences in the air, though she imagined her having grown used to handling him in the long while they'd known each other had something to do with it.

"By the way, I've been glancing down at the academy, but I don't see anyone resembling Lady Mary here," he said. "If she were here, she'd be really obvious with her silver hair, so I'm guessing she's probably not on campus anymore."

While Magiluka had been talking to keep her mind occupied, Sacher had been putting his unexpectedly excellent eyesight to good use searching for Mary's fake. However, it seemed apparent that Magiluka was in the worst-case scenario.

"I suppose we've no other choice," Magiluka relented. "Let's head off campus. I don't think they've gone too far."

"All right, roger that."

She gave Sacher a disapproving glance—he seemed to be enjoying this situation a bit too much for her liking—as she expanded their search area to outside of the academy. As they left, she noticed that, in stark contrast to the royal capital, she could look over the city streets and plains of the surrounding area for about as far as the eye could see. It wouldn't be difficult for the two of them to spot the fakes from the sky in such an open area—they'd be plainly visible on the ground, after all, and it was easy to see they weren't flying.

"Oh, there they are," Sacher said, pointing below. "Two people walking on the main road. Seems like we've hit the mark."

Magiluka followed his finger and narrowed her eyes, hoping to get a better look. She

proceeded to close her eyes; there was no way she could stomach a panoramic view from such a high elevation.

"O-Okay, please head there," she asked.

"Aw, come on," he said. "Open your eyes and confirm them for me."

"I-It's fine! Please chase after them!" Magiluka couldn't help but raise her voice at Sacher obviously urging her to take a closer look.

He ordered his griffin to fly to their targets, and as he'd claimed earlier, Mary slowly came into view—and she was wearing a cape. The fakes, noticing Sacher and Magiluka, started waving their hands at the flying pair for some reason.

"You guys are here too?" fake Mary said. "I suppose you're also on a journey to destroy the dark organization."

"No, I'm here to bring you back," Magiluka said firmly. "Besides, who was it who threw a tantrum telling Lady Mary she couldn't stray too far from the mirror?"

"Hmm? That was so long ago that I've totally forgotten about it all."

"It only happened earlier today. Now then, let's head back."

"I can't do that—I'm a magical girl!"

Her reasoning made little sense, but the confidence with which she declared it left Magiluka at a loss for words.

As Sacher landed his griffin, fake Mary looked at the beast with great interest. "This is perfect!" she said. "A griffin, huh? I can use it as my personal steed."

The griffin shuddered at fake Mary's curious gaze, and as Sacher dismounted, the beast inched away from the silver-haired girl.

"Wow, you guys really look like Lady Mary and Magiluka," Sacher observed. "Whoa, this magic mirror must be really powerful! Amazing! I'm even more tempted to reflect myself in it."

"I hope we can get along, Aleyion," fake Mary said. "Let's fight together against the

organization."

The griffin was trapped between two varieties of kook, and it'd even suffered getting a terrible new name. The beast glanced around desperately in search of someone with even an iota of common sense. Magiluka, feeling pity for it, kindly gestured it to approach her side, and it happily ran behind her.

"Whoa, that's a cool name you've given the griffin!" Sacher said, happily approaching the fakes. "Oh, and if you're gonna fight against the organization, count me in!"

"But this is a battle between magical girls and the organization," fake Mary said. "I'm not sure if boys are allowed..."

"Quite right! We've got no use for boys! Shoo! Shoo!" fake Magiluka hissed angrily, gluing herself to the other fake.

Sacher fell silent. "Wh-What is it?" fake Magiluka asked.

The boy continued to appear deep in thought as he sized up the angry fake Magiluka, causing her to give him a dubious glare.

"Ah! I knew this felt familiar," he finally said. "This Magiluka acts exactly like Victorica."

"Urk!" Magiluka said as she flinched. Sacher's merciless comment had hurt her poor soul. That vampire was a pervert—well, someone with a *unique* personality, at least—and Magiluka had often recoiled at her antics during the time they'd spent together. Though Sacher was referring to Magiluka's fake, the real Magiluka couldn't help but feel herself crumble away due to shock.

"What's wrong, Magiluka? Why're you sitting down?" Sacher asked, perplexed.

"Sacher, promise me..." she replied in a low voice with a petrifying glare.

"Uh..."

The boy sensed danger and immediately looked away. It was at that moment that the griffin saw something and cried out. While the three girls looked at the beast in confusion, only Sacher followed the griffin's gaze.

"Watch out! Something's coming!" Sacher warned. A loud rustle sounded from the

nearby forest. “Huh? Is it a stray dog?”

He tried to discern whatever had popped out, but his voice sounded uncertain. And who could blame him? A large doglike animal was headed straight for them, but it clearly wasn’t a normal dog. Simply put, it looked like the beast was mixed with something.

This awkward “dog” charged toward the group, obviously looking ready to pounce. Sacher unsheathed his blade, prepared for battle. Determining he was the most suited to stand up front, he had the sorcerer girls stand behind him as he prepared to fight back.

“Heh heh,” fake Mary chuckled. “The organization’s now coming to destroy me with everything they’ve got. But they’ve got zero chance of winning against me—no, *us*. Let’s do this, Magiluka!”

“Yes, Lady Mary!” fake Magiluka replied.

The two fakes jumped in front of a stunned Sacher as they raised their ornate items into the air. The fake Magiluka had an item different from the fake Mary. *She must’ve stolen—I mean, borrowed—that from grandfather*, Magiluka thought, feeling like a bystander.

“My heart becomes my power!” the fakes chanted.

“From— Whoa!” The fake Mary was cut off from her incantation as the stray dog approached them.

“Eep!” fake Magiluka cried.

The two had miscalculated the time needed to finish their introductions and were interrupted as the dog pounced on them.

“Heeeeey!” fake Mary wailed, delivering a roundhouse kick. “Who attacks in the middle of my transformation?! Get a clue, you dolt!”

“What did Lady Mary want to do?” Sacher murmured, snapping back to his senses. “For a split moment, I thought she looked cool.”

“No questions or opinions! Ignore what these fakes are doing and support them!”

Magiluka ordered. She knew she was making an unreasonable request as she turned to support the two fakes. “Freeze Arrow!” Magiluka yelled, causing arrows of ice to pierce the dog.

However, the dog didn’t even flinch as it bore the attacks and ran toward Magiluka. Sacher jumped in front of her, pushing the dog back with his shield and getting a slash in.

“It’s strong for a stray dog,” Sacher said. “Actually, can I even call this thing a dog?!”

As he’d said, even Magiluka herself was unsure if she could consider this animal to be a dog. When she got a closer look, she saw that the base of the animal was a dog, but it was mixed with a different species. Even if this *was* a monster, she couldn’t think of any dog-shaped monsters that fit the bill.

Luckily, this “dog” was a bit weaker than a monster, and their current fighting forces could overwhelm it. Magiluka and her group even had a griffin, so it was a tough battle for this dog aberration.

Eventually, the creature stopped attacking and jumped back as bizarre people shrouded in black and wearing masks appeared.

“I wasn’t aware you even had a griffin prepared,” one of the suspicious people said.

“So, you’ve shown yourselves, dark organization,” fake Mary said in excitement as she pointed her finger at them.

“We thought we saw you enter the carriage, but that was a fake, and you came from the opposite direction. You predicted that we’d launch a surprise attack at you from outside of the academy.”

Magiluka took a moment to make sense of the man’s assessment. He seemed to not be aware there were two Marys.

“That’s right!” fake Mary said proudly without correcting the man. She puffed out her chest as she just rolled with the conversation.

“I see. Unfortunately for you, while you may have tried to trick us, it’s plain to see you no longer have anywhere to run. Quietly hand over your powers.”

"This is the power to save the world! I can't hand it over to forces of evil like yourselves! Let's do this, Magiluka!"

"Okay, Lady Mary!" fake Magiluka answered.

The real Magiluka had lost her timing to squeeze in a remark or two as she wearily watched the two fakes repeat their transformation sequence.

"My heart becomes my power!" Once again, the two raised their items in the air.

"That's what we want," the man said. "We'll take those powers from you."

"From— Whoa!" fake Mary cried, predictably being attacked once more before she could finish her chant. She dodged the attacks. "Heeey! I know animals aren't intelligent enough to understand this situation, but you guys are! Everyone knows this trope! Didn't your mom teach you that you can't attack while people are transforming?!"

Magiluka couldn't understand why fake Mary was shouting angrily, but she quietly dug through her memories, wondering if her mother had ever taught her such a thing.

"Lady Mary, I'll support you," Sacher said. As was his wont, he wasn't thinking about the matter too deeply and just went with the flow of the situation, jumping in to offer his aid. The people in black tried to block him, and the griffin launched an attack toward them.

"Gh... I'd expect no less from a griffin. Just splendid. It attacks wonderfully," one of the men said, jumping back. He sounded elated by—even infatuated with—the creature that'd just staved off him and his cohorts.

The griffin shuddered and hastily jumped back before landing behind Magiluka, finding solace in that spot.

"Tch, we've taken too much time," one of the men facing fake Mary said with an annoyed click of his tongue.

From afar, the hoofbeats of horses were quickly approaching. The academy had likely noticed the fuss, and an instructor like Miss Iks had probably been dispatched to report on the situation.

"We'll retreat," the man said.

"Ah! Hey! Let me transform!" fake Mary shouted.

As the men in black started to retreat, the dog which guarded them at the rear again pounced on Magiluka's group.

"We won't let you escape!" fake Mary yelled, raising her item into the air once more despite being in the middle of battle. "Come forth, Aleyiooon!"

Everyone froze in confusion at this mysterious name, and even the dog seemed puzzled by the sudden change in atmosphere. Magiluka glanced at the griffin behind her, and everyone followed suit. The griffin quizzically tilted its head to the side, unable to keep up with the turn of events.

"I think Lady Mary is calling for you," Magiluka said gently.

The griffin glanced at the fake Mary, who looked teary-eyed as she puffed out her cheeks, causing the beast to hastily cry out and flap its wings toward her, rushing to her side.

"Good boy! Good boy!" the fake Mary said with a smile, satisfied that the griffin had answered her call. She gallantly climbed on the beast's back. "Let's chase after them, Magiluka!"

"Yes, Lady Mary!" fake Magiluka replied as she got on the griffin's back as well.

Magiluka had assumed that her fake would have a fear of heights just like her, but she seemed fine, causing the real Magiluka to feel displeased by the sight.

"Please wait, Lady Mary," Magiluka said. "We mustn't chase them too far. Please return to the academy for now."

"No," fake Mary said. "I'll defeat them right here, or else the students of the academy might be in danger. I won't allow that to happen—I swear it in the name of magical girls!"

Magiluka gave a gasp of surprise. Fake Mary had a point, and despite her crazy antics, she was still Mary to the core, thinking about others—Magiluka was moved by her thoughtfulness. (In truth, fake Mary had simply had this line prepared and had been itching for a cool opportunity to indulge herself by saying it.)

"Sacher, I'll leave this place to you," fake Mary said.

He was currently fighting the dog alone. "Awww... I wanna tag along! This thing can be taken care of by the instructors that'll come soon, no?"

"You idiot!" fake Mary scolded. "This is where you're supposed to say, 'Don't worry about me and go on ahead!'"

"Didn't you say that that was a death flag, Lady Mary?"

"Well, you better snap that flag in two."

"Whaaat?"

"Don't you 'Whaaat?' me!"

Magiluka took their leisurely banter as reassurance that Sacher would indeed be fine by himself. Though they were leaving him behind, they used their communication magic so that they could keep in touch. Once the instructors took care of this area, Sacher would be able to guide them to Magiluka and the fakes.

"Let's hurry, Magiluka!" fake Mary shouted from behind.

The griffin grabbed Magiluka by her collar and threw her into the air.

"Huh? Wah! Aaahhh!" Magiluka screamed.

The fake Mary expertly caught the girl while still being seated, and the griffin took to the skies.

"H-H-H-Hey! L-Lady Mary..." Magiluka managed to squeak out. Getting thrown into the air had already raised her heart rate, but realizing Mary was carrying her like a knight would carry a princess in a storybook put her on the verge of a full-on panic.

"Arghhh! You're just me! I can't believe you can do something that would make me so jealous!" growled fake Magiluka from behind fake Mary. This helped Magiluka calm herself down.

"Just you wait, dark organization," fake Mary said. "You're going to see my transformation if it's the last thing I do!"

Uh, your motive's changed completely, Magiluka thought to herself as they soared in the air.

13. CHARGE!

The sun had already set, and Magiluka and the two fakes were hiding, peeking through the foliage of the dark forest they'd found themselves in to look for the perfect opportunity to emerge.

The dark organization members had had horses on standby as their method of transportation when they'd fled. *Thanks to their horses, we're now a lot farther away than I'd expected we'd be,* Magiluka thought as she glanced around.

Once they'd caught up with the men in black, fake Mary had suggested tailing them until they arrived at their base—Magiluka ended up surprised when the suggestion actually bore fruit and they'd actually taken the girls straight to their hideout.

As a side note, fake Magiluka was currently seated on the ground and pale in the face. It wasn't that she was afraid of the dark, but rather, she'd fainted during their flight and had only regained consciousness moments before. Indeed, the fake feared heights to a much greater degree than the real body, and she had promptly passed out upon looking down from above.

"Why did you tag along if you were so scared?" Magiluka had asked when her fake had come to.

"Because Lady Mary was there," came a reply. They'd still been flying at the time, so when she looked down again after answering, she promptly fainted a second time, bringing us to the present.

Because the griffin would stand out, the group had the beast waiting a short distance away. They used communication magic to tell Sacher about their current whereabouts, so they were sure that backup would arrive soon.

"All right, let's charge in," fake Mary said. She was staring at the ruins of a dilapidated fort which had been abandoned a while ago.

"Lady Mary, this must be a trap," Magiluka objected. "They must be aware that we were following them and brought us here! We should wait until reinforcements arrive."

"If we've been invited, we should accept it. All right, let's go!"

Magiluka's warnings fell on deaf ears, as fake Mary was eager to rush headfirst into enemy headquarters.

"Why are you so belligerent?" Magiluka asked.

"'Why,' you ask? Heh, what a foolish question," fake Mary replied. "Because evil is there!"

Magiluka sighed, noticing that fake Mary had said something quite similar to what her own fake had said before.

"If you're scared, why don't you stay behind?" fake Magiluka asked, squeezing herself between the two ladies. "I'll go along with Lady Mary. Now, then, shall we go? Let's!"

"All right, let's do this, Magiluka!"

Magiluka was unsure if she could convince one of the fakes by herself, and she knew that she didn't stand a chance if the two banded together.

Disguised by the darkness, the pair of fakes headed toward the ruins. Magiluka didn't mind staying behind and waiting for support, but she was worried about the fakes, so she hastily chased after them. She was shocked by the actions of fake Mary, who'd decided to proudly enter from the front.

"Ack! Lady Mary!" Magiluka hissed.

"Heed my words, dark organization!" fake Mary yelled loudly at the entrance. "I know you're in there! Cast aside your weapons and come on out to surrender, or else this magical girl here will deliver the iron hammer of justice upon you!"

Fake Mary had discarded the idea of launching a surprise attack entirely—and Magiluka was alarmed to find there was no response despite fake Mary's loud proclamation. Were they hiding and waiting to launch a feint attack? Magiluka heightened her vigilance.

"Huh? Did no one hear me?" fake Mary wondered. "No one's coming out."

"Perhaps they're hiding and waiting for a chance to strike," Magiluka suggested.

"Then I'll go and scout the area, so wait here."

The fake then casually walked into the ruins. The two Magilukas were astonished at first, then they exchanged a glance and swiftly chased after fake Mary.

"Please wait, Lady Mary. It's dangerous. We should head back," advised Magiluka.

"There's no need to do that. Do as you like, Lady Mary," fake Magiluka countered.

"Please be quiet for a moment," Magiluka scolded her fake.

"What did you say? Why don't *you* be quiet?"

"Now, now, don't fight, you two," fake Mary said.

They were supposed to be the same person, yet their alternate personalities caused them to butt heads so much. Magiluka couldn't help but be struck curious by the observation.

"Welcome to our headquarters!" a loud voice suddenly boomed.

Right on cue, the men in black surrounded Magiluka and the fakes as they emerged from the darkness. Among the men in the clearing was one who was noticeably distinct—he was sporting an extravagant mask.

"Kids will be kids," the man said. "You didn't notice that we lured you out here, and you fell beautifully into our trap. You're all fools, the lot of you."

"How rude!" fake Mary shouted back. "Magiluka knew this was a trap. I just didn't listen to her is all! Apologize to her!"

"Huh?"

"Apologize!"

"Er, uh..."

“I said apologize!”

“I’m so—I mean, no!” The man, overwhelmed by fake Mary’s threatening aura, almost apologized before he stopped himself. “Argh! You really threw me off there! Forget it! Even though you’re all kids, we won’t hold back! Bring *it* out!”

After the indignant man gave his order, a loud thud rang out from within the depths of the fort, followed by a rumbling that seemed to be quickly approaching.

“Wh-What is that?” Magiluka gasped in shock.

A large rabbit, much larger than Magiluka and the fakes, emerged from the darkness. Massive horns sprouted from its head and towered over them. Magiluka immediately noticed that this was one of the weakest monsters she knew, a bone rabbit, yet she didn’t think one would ever grow to such an enormous size. The creatures were known for their unique singular horns, but the one in front of them had three, and it no longer had the bone rabbit’s characteristic adorable gaze—its eyes were more akin to a reptile’s. The most noticeable distinction was the creature’s long “tail” that it lifelessly dragged behind it, which appeared to actually be a snakelike creature.

Such an incomplete and distorted monster didn’t exist to Magiluka’s knowledge. If such an organism existed, it was undoubtedly man-made—she extrapolated a few ideas from the patchwork of monsters in front of her and came to a conclusion.

“A chimera...” she murmured.

“Ah, you’re rather knowledgeable,” the man said. “As you’ve guessed, this is the goal of our organization.”

“Chimeras require one to defile life during testing. Our nation has considered this subject taboo for numerous years. Documents and technology regarding this field have been discarded, and it should be difficult for you to pursue such research.”

“Heh heh heh. You’re quite studied on this, aren’t you? Indeed, it would be difficult to gather research notes and create a facility... in *this* kingdom.”

Magiluka guessed that he must’ve been from a foreign nation. She’d learned a fair bit about the existence of chimeras in her studies of magic, and she called to mind the nations that still allowed research into the subject.

The first country that came to mind was the Einholst Papacy. That nation had seen this defilement of life as a divine practice of “giving birth to another life,” an act that would make one seem like a god. Magiluka had a bad impression of the papacy, and it tempted her to tie this man back to them without evidence, but she knew that she was jumping to conclusions and decided to reserve judgment.

Another question she had was this organization’s ties to Mary. How was fake Mary, born out of the magic mirror, related to this group that created chimeras? Magiluka tilted her head in befuddlement, unable to make the connection.

As if she’d accidentally posed her question, fake Mary spoke up proudly with a response. “But of course! They want the power of the magical girl—the ability which allows one to create new life!” she boasted. She raised her item in the air.

“What are you on about?” Magiluka sighed. “That can’t be—”

“That’s exaaactly it!” yelled the man.

“It is?!”

Once again, Magiluka couldn’t suppress an unladylike shout. According to the real Mary, anything that fake Mary said was just a figment of her imagination and couldn’t possibly exist, so this left Magiluka confused. Was this organization after fake Mary’s fictional item?

“Heh, I knew it!” fake Mary said, showing off the item she’d stolen—no, *borrowed*—from Magiluka’s grandfather. “You wanted my power! You’re after this magical heart, bestowed upon me to become a magical girl!”

The real Mary had claimed that her fake had simply found a heart-shaped item that seemed like a perfect transformation tool, but the item itself had no effects that would transform one into a magical girl. Magiluka’s grandfather had also personally attested that the item had no such effect. *Then what is that item?* Magiluka realized she’d been so taken in with fake Mary’s fiction that she’d never given much thought to what her item actually was, having merely dismissed it as a simple accessory long ago.

She thought back to what her grandfather had said of the item—it was apparently extremely rare, and he’d bought it on the spot without knowing much about its name and effects. It was supposedly a tool that had come from a different nation, and he’d only just sneaked it into the academy to secretly conduct some research on it when

fake Mary had stolen it from him.

“Lady Mary, is that item...” Magiluka started.

“Hm?” fake Mary replied. “It’s a magical heart.”

“No, I’m not talking about the random name you gave it—”

“That’s right! We need that magical heart!” the masked man declared.

“You do?!” Magiluka shouted again.

“I won’t hand this over to you,” fake Mary said. “I’ll defeat you all! I swear it in the name of magical girls!”

“Heh heh heh. You should’ve just obediently handed it over...” the man chuckled. “Very well. Then our chimera, Mr. Fluffy Buns the Third, will destroy you!”

Magiluka was still panicking while the conversation was miraculously continuing. There were so many questions and holes to poke into this setting, but it was all so much that she couldn’t bring herself to say a word.

“Ah ha ha! Here it is!” fake Mary yelled with sparkling eyes. “The climax! This is where we show off my true powers! Let’s do this, Magiluka!”

“Huh? Uh, right, Lady Mary!” fake Magiluka managed to say as she felt left behind.

“My heart—”

“Get ‘em, Mr. Fluffy Buns the Third!” the man yelled.

The chimera stomped toward the fakes without giving them a chance to even go halfway through their chant.

“Heeey!” fake Mary yelled angrily. “You’re barely even letting me start our incantation! What’s going on?! Why aren’t you guys following the tropes?! Come on now! Aren’t you embarrassed to call yourself the final boss with that attitude?!”

Fake Mary jumped back, gaining some distance from the chimera.

"Lady Mary, if you'd like to transform, why don't you do so in hiding?" Magiluka asked.

"No way!" came a reply. "Then no one will know I transformed! I want to show them my whole song and dance! It's important!"

"Lady Mary, why have you turned into such a troublesome person?" Magiluka couldn't help but reveal her true thoughts about fake Mary's selfish insistences. "I'll hold them off, so please transform quickly, all right?" Magiluka finally said, carefully analyzing the chimera.

Even though the bone rabbit was known to be one of the weakest monsters, the chimera only vaguely resembled the species. Its colossal body and violent aggression were nothing like the original monster. Luckily, for whatever reason, the men in black silently watched on from a distance without moving an inch.

The chimera, unable to sit still any longer, charged toward Magiluka and the two fakes.

"Earth Wall!" Magiluka chanted, using her earth magic.

A large dirt wall was erected in front of the charging monster, but with its big body, the wall would likely do little to stop it. Magiluka was sure that the chimera would crush the obstacle into little pieces, only allowing her to buy a bit of time. There was a loud thud accompanied by a deafening rumble and thunderous plop.

"Huh?" Magiluka gasped, frozen at the sight in front of her.

The chimera, unable to break the wall, slammed into the dirt before rolling around on the ground in pain. *But it's so big! How could I have expected this outcome? I really couldn't have.*

"Ahhh! Mr. Fluffy Buns the Third! Are you all right?!" the masked man cried sorrowfully. "I keep telling you to not push yourself! Don't charge in like that! You only look powerful! That's your only ability!"

Then why'd he bring out something like that? Magiluka couldn't shake this thought, but in any case, she had managed to buy time for fake Mary. The two fakes, realizing this, stood in front of Magiluka and raised their items in the air.

"My heart is my power! From my heart!"

The two fakes spoke a tad quickly, likely not wanting anyone to interrupt them again. As Magiluka had witnessed previously, a flash of light magic blinded her before fake Mary and fake Magiluka appeared once more. Fake Mary had even removed her mantle.

All too late, Magiluka realized the grave mistake she'd made.

"My solitary heart glows silver! Platinum Heart SR!"

"My bewitching heart glitters gold! Gold Heart SR!" fake Magiluka said.

"Aaahhh!" Magiluka's embarrassed scream echoed throughout the area.

14. WHAT IS A MAGICAL GIRL?

"Whaaaaat?!" the men around them shouted, drowning out Magiluka's shrieks.

The men in black quickly started to whisper to each other in a panic.

"I-Impossible! Th-They transformed!"

"I... can't believe it. Is that the magical heart we're looking for?"

"I obtained information that the item was in the academy. As I tried to find my opportunity to steal it, this silver-haired girl brought it to the royal capital. There's no mistaking it... I think."

"She's calling it a magical heart too..."

The unfolding situation had made the men wonder whether the item they sought had a much different effect than what they'd imagined, leaving them confused. Besides the men, however, there was someone else who'd been thrown off by what she was seeing.

"Wh-Wh-Wh-What kind of outfit is this?!" Magiluka yelled at fake Magiluka, aka Gold Heart SR. She was in a tight-fitting, skimpy little number that was... suggestive, you could say. Magiluka could no longer bear the shame, and she covered her face with her hands, peeking between her fingers to assess the damage in the smallest doses she

could manage.

"What do you mean?" Gold Heart SR replied. "These are the clothes Lady Mary—I mean, Lady Platinum Heart SR designed for me. In other words, I'm enveloped in the thoughts of Lady Platinum Heart SR. Eh heh heh!" She looked over her uniform in pure ecstasy.

"C-Calm down, everyone," said the man in the luxurious mask. "They've simply changed uniforms—it's not the power of the item. I'm almost positive that's the magical heart that can create any chimera and serve as its literal heart, the core that can synthesize any creation... I think!"

Unlike his agitated dark organization underlings and Magiluka, the man, while a little confused, managed to process the situation he'd landed in.

"You've dressed yourself in strange clothes, but you're still only a magical girl!" the man claimed. "Get 'em, Mr. Fluffy Buns the Third!"

The chimera, indifferent to the confused atmosphere, charged toward the two magical girls. Magiluka knew that the monster was only big for show, and she didn't seem particularly concerned by the attack.

"Heh heh heh! You'd best not underestimate magical girls!" Platinum Heart SR said. "I'll give you a taste of my powers!"

"Be careful, Mr. Fluffy Buns the Third! They'll use magic against you!" the man warned.

"Take this! Galactica Eccentric Kiiiick!"

"You're not even using magic!"

The moment the man pointed that out, Platinum Heart SR drove her foot into the chimera—using a move Mary would call a "dropkick" back on Earth—as it stood in place. There was a loud kaboom.

"Huh?!" Magiluka and the two fakes gasped.

Even though the chimera's size was just for show, they were sure that it wouldn't be defeated by a kick of an elegant girl... yet the monster had been blown back with tremendous force. The rabbit flew back so far that it careened deep into the darkest

reaches of the fort, and an eventual sickening squelch was the only available indication it finally managed to stop soaring through the air. Magiluka tried her best to not think about it too much.

“Mr. Fluffy Buns the Third!” the masked man shrieked.

“Sh-She defeated the chimera in one blow...” the members of the dark organization murmured.

“Now do you see the power of a magical girl?!” Platinum Heart SR said triumphantly, puffing out her chest.

Almost everyone in the room simultaneously had one thought: *That magical girl didn't use any magic!* The lone person who hadn't gotten hung up on that was Magiluka, who was perplexed about a different oddity. *Why was that kick so destructive?* she pondered. Platinum Heart SR hadn't cast any spells to enhance her physical prowess, and there certainly wasn't a spell that would allow her to deliver such a powerful strike. Magiluka didn't see any signs of magic being used either. By all accounts, it'd been a normal kick. Magiluka had never known Mary to wield such terrifying power... but perhaps Mary had simply never shown it off? The proud lady in front of her was also Mary, so...

“You're up next, Emperor Walder!” Platinum Heart SR declared excitedly, pointing toward the masked man.

“Huh? Who? Are you referring to me?” the man replied in bewilderment, pointing to himself. His confusion at receiving this bizarre name left him unable to react as...

“Hup!” Platinum Heart SR yelled.

“She's flying!” the men all cried.

The magical girl leaped into the air—instantly, not even bothering with a running start—and soared above the tall walls of the fort where the man was. She did a somersault in the air and thrust her foot downward to kick the man as she descended toward him.

“Atomic Thunderbolt Kiiick!” she shouted.

“You're not even using magic!” the man once again said as he tried to flee from the

attack. However, before he could deliver any more retorts, he was interrupted by a loud boom.

Everyone could only quietly watch the scene unfold in awe. A single kick from this bizarrely dressed girl had driven cracks into the floor below where the man had once been standing, and it looked like the impacted flooring would crumble and fall at any moment.

“Wh-Who are you?!” the masked man managed to utter.

“Platinum Heart SR! I’m a magical girl!” She struck a pose.

The men in black continued to whisper to each other, their speculations running wild.

“So, when she says ‘magical girl,’ she must mean the power that’s letting her kick stuff really hard.”

“Can the magical heart really become the core of monsters besides chimeras?”

“Maybe she’s been synthesized with something.”

“Can we even create a human chimera?”

“Hey, you all!” Gold Heart SR protested as she pointed at them. “You’re in the presence of the great Platinum Heart SR! Please don’t refer to her as a monster. She’s a solitary warrior from the Land of Mirrors entrusted with an important duty. I’m the second soldier accompanying her to fill the void she feels, Gold Hea— Wh-What?!”

A red-faced Magiluka pursed her lips and tried to hide Gold Heart SR behind her before she could strike an embarrassing pose like Platinum Heart SR. The men once again started to whisper among themselves.

“What’s the Land of Mirrors? Is that like another world or something?”

“Oh, so was she summoned to this world using some sort of item?”

“So she *is* a mix of something then, maybe?”

“Makes sense. She’s a chimera. Now I understand where her power comes from.”

"Which means the term 'magical girl' could refer to a new type of chimera we aren't aware of."

Gold Heart SR groaned. "As I said, don't call her a monster! And you, stop getting in my way!"

Magiluka continued to quietly attempt to hide her magical girl counterpart. While the Magilukas were fighting each other, the men had enough of Platinum Heart SR.

"Argh! We just need to awaken *that!*" the man in the luxurious mask bellowed.

The organization members all murmured in shock.

"A-Awaken *that*, you say?" another asked.

"We can't control *that!* It's still unstable!"

"Indeed... If we don't have the magical heart!"

"You all keep them busy! I'll go awaken it!" the man in the mask said before leaving, weaving between the organization members.

"What?!" everyone cried.

"Heh heh heh," Platinum Heart SR chuckled before giving chase. "Very good! This is a great turn of events! Gold Heart SR, I'll leave the mooks to you!"

"Huh?!" Gold Heart SR yelped.

Everyone seemed troubled as they all looked at each other, their leaders having left them behind.

"Wh-What should we do?" one of the men asked.

"That Gold-whatever has the same powers as the Platinum-whatever, right?"

Luckily, the men in black, who'd been shown the power of a magical girl, were wary of the golden magical girl in front of them and couldn't act recklessly. Since no one moved, Magiluka saw her chance.

"I'll leave this place to you," she whispered. "I'll go after the other one."

"W-W-W-Wait just one second, please!" Gold Heart SR whispered back. "There's no way that I'd stand a chance against them!"

"I think if you just pose a little and take a fighting stance, they won't fight back."

"Ugh... But I'm not good at martial arts."

"Yes, I'm well aware... but how about you give it a try?"

Gold Heart SR then took a step forward and did a gallant pose. "Hup!"

The men started to chatter in confusion.

"Wh-What's with that stance?"

"No clue. She's wide open in every which way, and I have no idea what her aim is, but if she's a magical girl like that Platinum-whatever, we can't let our guard down!"

"I-I think you proved my point. Can you come back here?" Magiluka asked.

Since Platinum Heart SR's earlier actions seemed to have worked in their favor, Gold Heart SR carried on posing, raising one leg and both arms in the air in a bizarre, intimidating posture. Magiluka was mortified by this shameful stance and covered her face before telling the magical girl to stop.

"Hm, I suppose I can't do it like how Lady Platinum Heart SR taught me," the golden magical girl said. "Let me try one more time..."

"You've done more than enough! Fall back!"

Magiluka felt sure that if Gold Heart SR continued doing these goofy poses, she could buy time. However, on the other hand, she couldn't help but feel embarrassed when they were done in front of her. She wanted to employ a different strategy, but there was no sign of reinforcements arriving.

There was one other force that she could possibly rely on, but she wasn't sure how she could call out to it. After a moment of thought, she decided to take a once-in-a-lifetime gamble.

"Please come forth, Aleyioon!" she shouted, turning a little defiant.

The hurtful gazes of the confused men pierced through her. She felt so ashamed that her raised right hand started to tremble.

"Kraaaah!"

A short while later, a shrill screech enveloped the silence. The griffin appeared, responding to Magiluka's call.

"A-Aleyion..." Magiluka said with a heartfelt hug, moved by the griffin's arrival. The two had formed an unusual bond as the most normal beings on this adventure, so the beast's appearance had made her happier than ever.

The griffin moved its neck, stepping back from Magiluka's hug and standing between the ladies and the men in black. It glanced back at Magiluka. "Krah," it cried, as though to tell the ladies to leave this area to it.

Magiluka sobbed, her earlier embarrassment now washed away by her awe at the reliable beast's gallantry. "Aleyio— Gah!"

"What are you doing? Let's go!" Gold Heart SR said, dragging her away.

"A-Aleyion! Aleyioon!"

Magiluka continued to shout out the griffin's name—or, at least, the name she knew for it, if not its real one.

Deep within the fort was a large stone staircase that led to the basement. The Magilukas were sure that Platinum Heart SR had descended those stairs without a moment of hesitation. At the end of the stairs was a corridor lined with iron bars—likely a prison that confined beasts and monsters needed for research purposes. The Magilukas gingerly proceeded forward, venturing deeper inside until they finally heard the voices of two familiar figures.

"Your evil deeds end here, Emperor Walder!" Platinum Heart SR shouted. "I, Platinum Heart SR, will crush your ambitions!"

"Argh! Are you telling me they couldn't even delay you?!" the masked man replied. "G-Give me, like, a few more minutes! It's not fully ready yet!"

"That's none of my concern!"

"I-I heard you tout that people shouldn't interrupt others when they're transforming or combining! Shouldn't preparing also be off-limits?!"

"Hm? Huh? D-Do you think so?"

"I-I do! When you're transforming, you're technically preparing, aren't you?"

"Hm. I-I suppose so..."

Magiluka dashed ahead, feeling like she had to interject in this conversation before all was lost. "Lady Platinum Heart SR! You can't go along with what the enemy sa—"

"Fine. I'll wait for you, so hurry up and make your preparations," Platinum Heart SR said. It was all too late—the magical girl declared that fighting would be paused while she waited for her opponent. "Huh? Gold and Magiluka?" she asked all too carefreely as she spotted Magiluka on her knees, her shoulders slumped.

"Wh-Why are you so easygoing?" Magiluka managed to ask. "We must stop him!"

"B-But... I don't want to go against the obligatory tropes!" Platinum Heart SR insisted.

"Then I shall do the honors." Magiluka didn't even try to convince her, assuming it would be a waste of time, and made to finish the job herself. "Free—"

"What are you doing?!" Gold Heart SR shouted, grappling Magiluka from behind. "Lady Platinum Heart SR has declared that she'd wait."

"H-Hey! Let go!" Magiluka replied. "Do you know the situation we're in?!"

"I very much do! But that doesn't matter! Lady Platinum Heart SR's decision is absolute!"

"You big dummyyy!"

Magiluka didn't expect her clone to stop her using such a silly excuse while she

understood the precarious situation they were in. The two ended up in a shrieking war.

"Think about it carefully!" Magiluka shouted. "Is it really justice to let evil deeds go? Justice should stop evil before their plans are complete! Argh! Just cut it out already!"

"Magiluka's right. I was so fixated on the tropes that I lost sight of what's most important," Platinum Heart SR said, causing the two Magilukas to separate. "I'll go ahead and defeat the evil."

"And I'll help you!" the golden magical girl added.

"Indeed. Gold Heart SR, let's show them our power of friendship."

"And our power of love! ♪"

"Hm? E-Er, yeah, sure. Whatever works."

The two magical girls energetically leaped toward the man.

"W-Wait! Give me three—no, two minutes and fifty-nine seconds! Come on!" the man pleaded, hoping for some lenience.

"Denied!" Platinum Heart SR cried. "Kiss my fist of justice!"

At that moment, something completely unexpected occurred.

Magiluka had thought that it would all be over when the two magical girls ran toward the man, but then they both disappeared. To be precise, the clothes they'd been wearing remained, but their bodies were nowhere to be seen. It happened so quickly that Magiluka didn't understand what had just occurred; she could only gaze at the empty spot where the two had been moments before. Silence filled the room, and only the sound of the magical heart falling with a clatter echoed throughout.

15. WE'RE IN A PINCH!

"Th-They're gone..." Magiluka murmured, finally starting to process the situation. "I-Is

this the range of the magic mirror?"

It didn't seem like the man had done anything. The mirror was the most likely candidate to explain the sudden disappearance of the two. Magiluka had been careless. Thinking back, they'd traveled quite the distance, but since they'd soared through the skies, it hadn't felt like they'd covered much land. Also, since the two fakes were completely unaware of the range they had and didn't seem to be at all bothered by nearing it, Magiluka had neglected to give the concern sufficient attention.

"It's like how one becomes no longer reflected by the mirror when they step aside. Once they're out of the mirror's range, they disappear without warning," she muttered.

"Heh heh heh," the man chuckled. "I have no idea what just happened, but I suppose luck is on my side! Ha ha ha! The magical girls disappeared without the need to ever lay a finger on them, and I've got the magical heart in my possession! My lifelong research will finally be complete!"

The man picked up the item while Magiluka was still trying to organize her thoughts. He excitedly raised it in the air.

"This is excellent! Excellent! Since it's now ready, I'll show what the completed form looks like!" he gleefully bellowed.

"I-I won't let you!" Magiluka cried, jumping into action. "Freeze Arrow!"

"Whoops! Hm, seems like one of you remained. But seeing how *you* use magic, I suppose you're not a magical girl!"

And so, it was decided that magical girls didn't use magic.

The man was adept at dodging—he'd managed to evade the magical girls' attacks earlier, after all—and Magiluka's surprise attack thus didn't land on its target. However, since he was only good at avoiding attacks, he never launched a counter... so the large container filled with copious amounts of liquid behind him that Magiluka's attack had struck began leaking its contents. It was clear that some life-form was emerging.

This new organism was at least twice as massive than the rabbit she'd seen before. The towering creature slowly raised its neck. As she laid eyes on its enormous snake head, Magiluka thought that she was faced with a gigant snake for a moment, but she

soon noticed it had several more heads and a body. Was it a hydra, then? No, this beast seemed to walk on all fours... Also, a pair of large wings, one bat wing and one bird wing, were sprouting from either side of its back, as were several tails below them.

This organism truly was like an amalgam of multiple beings—a real chimera. Different parts of multiple beasts had been stitched together to create this melting pot of creatures.

“Cower in fear! This is the strongest and coolest monster that we can create: the DraDra Corn!” the man gloated.

Magiluka knew that now wasn’t the time to offer a word of rebuttal, but she felt that this man had poor taste when it came to naming things.

“E-Er, judging from the name, is it created by fusing a dragon?” she asked. She fought the urge to insult the man and stared at the chimera while posing her question.

“Exactly!” the man shouted. “Dragons are said to be the strongest beasts of all, and they’ve given birth to countless legends! This is a monster filled with dreams! We arranged it a bit according to our imagination to make it cooler and stronger, creating the DraDra Corn!”

“But I feel like there aren’t many draconid parts to this beast. There *are* a lot of reptilian features to it, however—certain parts remind me of snakes or lizards.”

“Well, obviously! I’ve never met a real dragon before, and there’s no way I could’ve obtained any dragon parts. They’re all just imitating the parts of a dragon. Duh! But who cares about the details? We’ve successfully created an organism that’s much better than a dragon!”

He’d spoken with pride, and Magiluka didn’t quite know what to say. She fell silent. The chimera’s body seemed unstable—parts of its body wriggled about, and because its body was poorly balanced, it staggered as though it would fall at any moment. The man had completely ignored mobility and convenience, and it was puzzling to imagine why he would’ve chosen this form. Rather than any definite advantages, the most striking thing about the creature were the myriad negative features of its awkward construction. If Mary were here, she’d surely have declared that this monster was designed with nothing in mind beyond its strength and appearance—akin to a cringey doodle lost to time in a childhood notebook, when one whiled away time thinking of

the strongest, coolest monster they could make.

"DraDra Corn! Accept this magical heart!" the man said, throwing the item toward the chimera.

One of the snake heads opened its maw wide and chomped down before it gave a noisy gulp.

"Whaaat?!" Magiluka cried in astonishment.

Suddenly, the chimera's stomach started to glow, and the creature began to shudder and convulse. Bubbles like boiling water started to form on its body, slowly transforming and changing shape. It looked like the chimera was melting.

While before the creature's constituent parts could be distinctly identified, the seams between the patches of flesh were now dissipating, and its skin melded into one smooth surface. As the chimera's body morphed, its awkward components shifted into more practical positions, enabling nimble use of each member animal's appendages. Although the resulting arrangement was now organized and capable of sophisticated movement, the smorgasbord of organisms was a strikingly hideous mass of flesh, all too apparently the outcome of jamming together an inordinate amount of disparate creatures.

"N-No! Our DraDra Corn formed into something so hideous and ugly! Our dreams! Nooo!" the man wailed, seeing the culmination of their chimera.

The beast, in turn, roared and stomped the ground, drowning out any screams that the man had uttered.

"Eek!" Magiluka screamed.

A crack ran through the ground as the wind blew her backward. The tottering chimera seen moments before was nowhere to be found—the grotesque transformation the monster had undergone struck fear in her body.

"N-No! This isn't the DraDra Corn that we were envisioning— Gah!" The man protested all he could, but before he could say anything further, one of the monster's thick taillike tendrils smacked him into a wall.

Magiluka knew that the monster couldn't be controlled, and she quickly got up to flee

the area. This caused the chimera to notice her presence and glare at her. The moment their gazes met, a shiver ran down her back. Various eyes brimming with ferocity looked back at her as the chimera changed its target from the man. While Magiluka hadn't known this, the chimera was hungry from having just awoken. It especially desired objects with abundant magical energy. To the monster, Magiluka was like a juicy piece of meat, her magical energy making her an appealing feast. She wasn't aware of the chimera's feelings, but she instinctively knew that she was in danger and chose to defend herself.

"Body Protect!"

As the chant left her lips, a heavy impact fell upon her. She was blown back, and she fell onto the floor in a daze for a split second. Just in the nick of time, Magiluka had managed to dampen the intensity of the blow, but it was still more than enough to put her out of commission—unlike Sacher and Safina, she wasn't adept at strengthening her body. Still, she couldn't afford to stay lying on the ground. She managed to lift her aching body and look up at her foe—the chimera was quickly approaching her.

"Freeze Arrow!"

In an attempt to fight back, she unleashed several ice arrows, which pierced the chimera's misshapen snake head. Now feeling pain for the first time in its life, the amalgam roared in agony as it flailed in place. *I don't need to keep fighting just because my attack was effective. Now's my chance to flee!* Magiluka's footsteps were unsteady, but she still managed to get up and head toward the exit.

Suddenly, sharp pain ran through her shoulder. Shocked, Magiluka glanced back and noticed that a snake head around the size of her fist had sunk its fangs into her shoulder. As she strained her eyes, she noticed that the rest of the lithe reptile's body was connected to the chimera, which had undergone another transformation. The wounded head that had suffered from Magiluka's attack was healing right in front of her eyes, yet its body seemed to be melting and gradually disintegrating. Were these the negative effects of the item, or was this failure of a research project set to crumble away at any moment? Either way, she knew she was in danger and had to escape immediately.

As though the snake biting Magiluka's shoulder were a hook on a chain, the chimera tried to slowly drag Magiluka back to itself by retracting its reptilian extension. Magiluka suppressed her agonizing shrieks of pain and gritted her teeth, bracing her

body so that she wouldn't be dragged in. She glared at the space between the snake and the chimera.

"B-Burst!"

She wasn't confident in gauging distance for her explosion spell, but it luckily worked in her favor, causing the snake tied to the chimera to explode. The chimera once again screamed in pain, freeing Magiluka to stagger forward. She peeled the remains of the snake from her shoulder and threw it aside before she raised her head toward the exit. And then, her vision started to blur.

Poison.

Magiluka immediately assumed that the snake's venom had gotten to her, but she was surprised by how quickly it'd acted. The heat and pain from her shoulder slowly emanated throughout her body, and her mind grew fuzzy. *I can't fall.* As long as she could make it to the narrow exit, the chimera's large body wouldn't be able to give chase. *I have to make it there...* She kept trying to encourage herself, taking one heavy step at a time as she sluggishly walked forward.

However, there were yet more trials awaiting her. The ground was unstable and filled with cracks, making it difficult for her to find her footing. The entire floor had been practically destroyed and was starting to crumble away. Because the chimera had flailed around with its colossal body, the chamber's old stone tiles were buckling under the weight they carried. Her situation had gone from bad to worse—the area under the floor she was treading on was hollow, and if she fell in, she surely wouldn't survive this ordeal unscathed.

Nevertheless, Magiluka had to run or she wouldn't make it in time. She knew that, but to her frustration, her body wouldn't listen. Panic started to fill her mind. Loud rumbles were quickly approaching her from behind, causing her to look back. The chimera's form had completely collapsed, and it looked like several legs moving randomly, dragging its lump of flesh forward. As it approached Magiluka, it only caused the floor beneath it to further crumble away.

"F-Freeze... Arrow..."

Magiluka tried to chant another spell to delay the monster's movements, but her mind was too hazy to activate her magic. Noticing that her spell had failed to form, she knew

that she no longer had enough stamina or magical energy to escape from the chimera. She had to somehow fight it head-on.

Just when she thought it all was over, something whizzed past her from behind at a tremendous speed. It pierced the chimera, causing the mass of flesh to lose its momentum as it was hurled back to where it originally was.

A single sword had pierced its body. The blade was ornately decorated, a marvel of design from its hilt to its tip—anyone would think that this was a legendary sword. And Magiluka knew the owner of this weapon all too well. As her mind grew cloudy from the heat, she managed to turn around and see a girl standing at the entrance. The girl was a good distance away, and though Magiluka couldn't make out many details, there was one characteristic that caught her eye—the girl had silver hair. Tears that Magiluka had been suppressing spilled from her eyes.

“Magilukaaa!”

As Magiluka heard her name being called, the ground beneath her crumbled away, as did her consciousness.

16. I HAD A BAD FEELING ABOUT THIS...

I'd had a bad feeling ever since I'd headed for the royal capital. My heart had been beating nervously with no sign of it settling down. And so, I'd decided to head back to the academy. It was a stroke of luck that Snow had dropped by to kill some time.

When I'd returned to the capital, I'd realized that there was a bit of a stir. The prince had told me that in the opposite direction, outside of academy premises, a fight had broken out. There'd been confirmed sightings of Magiluka, Sacher, and myself. The moment I'd heard the news, I'd immediately climbed on Snow's back.

I have a bad feeling about this.

I'd had Snow track them down from the skies, and when I'd met with Sacher, I was told that Magiluka and the fakes had gone ahead into the fort ruins. I'd pleaded with Snow to run full speed ahead toward the location. All the while, the dread within my body grew and my heartbeat quickened.

When I arrived at the ruins, I noticed that the griffin was fighting men dressed in black. When I descended upon the battle, the men started to quizzically murmur, "Why's the magical girl here?" They couldn't hide their panic. From their voices of surprise, I pieced together that Magiluka and the rest had gone inside of the fort—I left this area to the griffin and Snow as I headed inside.

I heard loud tremors and rumbles within the ruins and immediately sensed that something large was running loose below. After a moment of hesitation, I headed for the basement, descending the stairs as quickly as I could. I saw a girl with golden locks from afar, but I was less relieved as I found out why my heart had been filled with dread. Magiluka was so badly wounded that she couldn't even use her magic. When I saw a deformed monster heading straight for her, I immediately threw my sword at it.

"Magilukaaa!"

As soon as I called her name, she looked at me with a gentle smile before the ground crumbled beneath her, causing her to fall.

Wait, fall?

My mind couldn't tolerate the scene in front of me and refused to process what had just occurred. I unconsciously ran as fast as I could, reaching superhuman speeds. I didn't even give it a second thought—my mind was filled with something else entirely. I wasn't sure if the building had been designed to be like this or if it was some awful coincidence (nor did I care), but a huge gaping hole appeared under the collapsing ground. Magiluka had been so weakened that she couldn't use floating magic as she started to fall.

"Magilukaaa!"

Without a moment of hesitation, I dove inside the hole that Magiluka had fallen into. Luckily, I'd jumped in immediately after she fell, and there wasn't much distance between us.

"L-Lady Mary..." she murmured, opening her eyes a crack and meeting my gaze.

I breathed a sigh of relief. *We'll be fine. I'll grab her and use my floating magic to—*

“Gaaah!”

At that moment, I heard a loud roar as a large organism pounced on me. To my shock, this monster had a pair of wings sprouting on its back and seemed to be mobile even in the air. It moved around without a care despite my sword still piercing its body. It bared its fangs and tried to bite down on my side, but its teeth shattered without standing a chance. However, I couldn’t stop it from flinging me out of its mouth toward the wall, creating a gap between me and Magiluka.

“Get outta my waaay!” I bellowed, my voice filled with impatience and irritation.

I violently grabbed the snake’s mouth and ripped it away from its body. My actions were anything but ladylike, and a bit inhumane, but I didn’t have enough time to care about that. I didn’t care if Magiluka saw what I was doing. If I could save her, I’d do anything.

I used the monster as my footing and jumped toward Magiluka as she fell toward the ground. From behind her back, I could see she was nearly about to slam against it.

“Make it! Come on!”

I stretched my arms out as far as they would go and grabbed Magiluka’s body. I brought her over to me as I enveloped her body with mine, never letting her go. The ground was now right in front of my eyes. A loud boom and rumble echoed throughout the darkness. In the nick of time, I managed to carry Magiluka and stand on the ground. We’d fallen from quite the height, but I managed to grab her and land unscathed without the assistance of any magic or support.



"L-Lady Mary..." Magiluka said, cracking her eyes open and gazing at me.

She'd likely seen the entire scene unfold in front of her while her mind was still fuzzy. She could only vaguely tell what had gone on.

"Are you all right, Magiluka?" I asked, trying my best to sound calm as I confirmed her injury.

The wound on her shoulder was concerning. It looked as though something large had pierced or bitten her, and it was turning purple. *This must be why she's got a high fever. Is it poison? That weird monster did have a snake head. A-Am I supposed to do that legendary scene where I suck out the poison from her wound and spit it out as an emergency measure? I-I'm supposed to put my lips on her shoulder and... No, wait, I think you could only do that immediately after they're bitten.* Now wasn't the time to be thinking about this, but as I saw Magiluka's bare shoulders, I gulped like a creep.

While I was wondering if I should put my mouth on her shoulders, a loud rumble resounded throughout the pit, a massive pile of flesh swooped near us.

"Please... be careful..." Magiluka managed to groan. "That chimera... can regenerate."

She must've been suffering from a horrible fever, but she still managed to see the situation I was in and offer a word of advice. As she'd said, the head that I thought I'd ripped to shreds had turned into a wriggly mound of meat. It was mixed with so many monsters that I no longer knew what this hideous, grotesque being was supposed to be.

"Wait just a little, okay, Magiluka?" I asked. "I'll end this in a second."

I gently laid her down onto the ground, turning my back on the beast, and the chimera-like monster took this chance to use its head and strike. I grabbed it with one hand and stopped it in its tracks.

"Fire Ball."

I launched the attack using my hand that had grabbed the monster, causing it to shriek and scream and step back. The fire gradually extinguished, then its wounded area started to bubble before returning to its original form. *So I guess I can't burn this thing... But its powers remind me of a hydra. I don't want to take too much time—I'll finish it off in an instant!*

"Heed my words, sinful soul! The path laid upon this place is absolute, and I shall offer thee my mercy. Let God bestow upon you the open gates of purgatory!" My magical power washed over me in time with my chant, and I created four magic circles that completely surrounded the chimera. Flaming doors emerged from each circle. "Thy sins and thy defilement shall be pardoned, as my flames shall purify thy soul!"

The fiery doors opened wide, and flaming chains burst forth from all four directions, wrapping around the chimera and restraining it. The monster hung in the air as a cross-shaped flame channeled through the chains and burned it. Its agonizing screams and the rumbling of the fire filled the entire area.

"Purgatorial Flames of Purificationooooon!"

As if to heed my call, larger and grander doors of flames appeared above the chimera as it writhed under the burning chains. With a low rumble, the doors creaked open and fire spewed from the gap between them, combining with the flaming chains to produce an inferno that swallowed the chimera whole.

"This is the end!"

The massive pile of burning flesh ascended between the flaming doors. Once it passed through, the doors gave a low creak as they closed.

After the doors disappeared, nothing remained of the abomination—there were just some vestigial embers from the spell, my sword, and the item my fake had brought to the fortress with her.

I collected my sword and the item and confirmed we were safe, then I rushed to my friend's side. "Magiluka!"

Her eyes were closed, but she was still breathing, and I heaved a sigh of relief. I picked up Magiluka and used my floating magic to return to the surface.

A short while later, Miss Iks and the troops approached us. I left Magiluka to the healing magic instructor who'd tagged along with Miss Iks and sighed deeply once more. I let myself calm down and release the tension in my body... and that's when I realized that I'd been too wrapped up in the moment and had saved Magiluka without figuring out what was even going on. *I guess all's well since Magiluka's safe.*

Hmm? Wait, what happened to our fakes that caused all this fuss? I gazed at the item

that my fake had. *Why was this item inside the chimera in the first place? Hmm? Wait, were they swallowed whole, maybe?* I grew pale because I'd never considered that possibility before.

"No, no, no. That can't be it... right?"

As I dismissed my unlikely conjecture, I decided to walk away from the fort. The rest could be left to the adults, and any details I needed to know could be gleaned from Magiluka later. *I didn't burn my own fake along with that chimera, did I, God?*

17. I...

"Hmm? You'd like me to stay the night here?" I asked, confirming what Miss Iks had just told me. It was currently midnight, and the adults were all scrambling about. We were still at the fort ruins, and they were preparing to camp out for the night.

Miss Iks had stated that on her way to the ruins, she'd run into what looked like members of the dark organization who were fleeing from the place. Unlike the members who'd remained at the ruins, they'd seemed to be rather adept at running, and she'd decided to let them escape, prioritizing rendezvousing with Magiluka and the clones. She wanted to avoid running into those fleeing organization members again at night, although she concluded that it wasn't likely they would return to the ruins because there weren't any important documents left behind.

Incidentally, it was likely one of those fast runners was the man who had attacked me that fateful night at the academy. The members whom the adults captured at the ruined fort all seemed to be researchers instead of fighters, and they felt vastly different from the man I'd met within the academy.

While Magiluka had been treated for her wounds and her poisoning had been cured, her body and heart were still exhausted and weak. She was resting inside of a room within the ruins. For her body's sake, it was likely best to spend the night.

"So, Regalia, could I ask you to spend the night with Futurulica?" Miss Iks asked. "We've only got one usable bed, but you two should be small enough to fit on it. Tutte, I leave them in your care."

"Certainly. I understand," Tutte replied.

With that, Miss Iks left, likely needing to tend to other affairs.

"Spend the night with her?" I pondered. "What should I do, Tutte?"

I gave her a troubled look as she made preparations for the night. My maid then took her own bedding and tried to head out of the room.

"My lady, I shall be sleeping outside your room," Tutte said. "If you need anything, please don't hesitate to call me."

"Huh? You don't have to go outside. Sleep with us. We've even got a bed."

"I don't think the three of us could squeeze into one bed. I shall be sleeping on the floor."

She proceeded to lay out her bedding on the ground, and I was all alone as I stood in front of the bed where Magiluka was resting.

"U-Uh..." I stammered.

Unsure of what to do, I looked at Magiluka. Perhaps feeling my gaze, she slowly opened her eyes and turned her head toward me.

"I... apologize for causing... so much trouble," she whispered faintly.

Her voice sounded awfully weak, and she seemed to be exerting herself simply talking. I felt a twinge of pain in my chest at her attempt to be considerate. *Ugh! What's wrong with me?! Why am I making a wounded person worry about how I feel?* I shook my head and rested one knee atop the bed. *Hm. I'm not against sleeping with her, but wedging my way into a bed someone else is using makes me feel oddly nervous.* I took a deep breath, hoping to relax my nerves.

"E-Excuse me..." I muttered.

I wasn't sure if these were the right words to say, but I quietly slid into bed, making sure that I wasn't in Magiluka's way. If I were at a slumber party, I could've easily joined her bed while I was swept up in the moment and the excitement of it all, but I felt nervous since my current situation was anything but that. The room was quiet, and I

listened to my thudding heart beats while I stared up at the ceiling.

"Ah ha ha, this reminds me of the time when we stayed at the academy. You too?" I asked, trying to ease my nerves. To my shame, I realized too late that I'd tried to strike a conversation with a wounded person who needed rest.

"I didn't think we'd get wrapped up in something like this," Magiluka whispered back, continuing the exchange.

"Same. I never could've imagined we'd come face-to-face with copies of ourselves. Speaking of them, where'd they go?"

"They disappeared... My hypothesis is that they must've been out of range of the mirror's effects, so I'm not quite sure if they're actually completely gone. But what I know for sure is that they aren't in the vicinity anymore..."

"I see." Those two were a rowdy pair, but now that they were gone, I felt a hint of loneliness.

"Lady Mary... May I ask... one question?"

"Hm? What is it?"

"What is a Galactic Eccentric Kick?"

"Ugh!" I couldn't suppress a cough. Magiluka must've noticed that I was growing a little sentimental and had kindly decided to change the subject. "Wh-Where'd you hear that?"

"The other Lady Mary shouted it when she kicked the enemy. I wondered if it was some kind of technique."

Why did she choose such a stupid, cringey name? And why'd she have to go and shout it out afterward?

"She also mentioned an Atomic Thunderbolt Kick..." Magiluka added.

"Why does she only have kicks? Good grief... I'm sure those were just regular old kicks. She probably just gave them names because she felt like it. I don't know of any embarrassing moves like that," I replied wearily with a forced laugh.

"I see... So it only took a 'regular old kick' for you to defeat a massive bone rabbit chimera."

"Huh?"

Her quiet voice created an air of tension that was different from what I'd felt before. I turned toward her and noticed that she was gazing at me as our eyes met. My heart skipped a beat. I realized from her serious demeanor that she wasn't asking me these things lightheartedly.

Thinking back, I realized that ever since Magiluka had been rescued and healed, she'd never told the teachers the details of what'd happened. She must've wanted to talk to me first and confirm a few matters. At that moment, a single thought flashed across my mind.

She knows.

Sweat formed on my brow as I fell silent. I hadn't expected this development, so my mind went blank.

"I had thought that perhaps I was ignorant of these techniques and you, as the real Lady Mary, may be privy to the details... but I suppose I was wrong," Magiluka murmured.

I felt like prey pinned down by the glare of a predator and froze in place. I couldn't tear my eyes away from her intense staring, nor could I muster any excuse—all I could do was wait quietly for whatever she was going to say next.

"Lady Mary, you were unscathed by the chimera's attacks and tore it apart with your own powers."

I listened silently.

"And your magic... That high-class spell can't be used by normal people."

She'd seen through everything. My heart ached like it was being squeezed tightly, and I was so afraid of looking Magiluka in the eye that I turned in bed, trying to flee from our conversation. I knew it could be seen as admitting she'd spoken the truth, but I couldn't help but turn my back toward her. *I felt ready to face the music if she saw me back when she was in danger, but now that the time has come, I'm scared. I'm terrified!*

My relationships that I've built until now might be shattered... I might be rejected by everyone that I know and love.

My mind raced with flashbacks of the time I'd spent with Magiluka until now. From the first time we'd met, to our tea parties, to visiting her house and going on journeys with her... Even after I'd entered the academy, I'd always relied on her. I thought back to the Academy Festival, and how she'd looked when I'd hurt her feelings back then... I'd shared so many memories with her throughout my youth.

Even I was surprised at the sheer terror I was feeling, at the fear and anxiety racking my brain to the point I was trembling. It was an inescapable truth that I possessed power beyond human understanding—and I wasn't sure I could take it if that fact coming to light meant all those smiles Magiluka had beamed at me over the years would now be washed away with eyes full of fear. I struggled to even imagine it—my mind was desperate to reject that as a possible reality. *No! No... I don't want that to happen... I don't want it to.*

I squeezed my eyes shut as I felt a tear roll down my face—the nerves and the fear had caused me to cry. It was then that I felt something touch my back.

"I'm sorry... I didn't mean to corner you. I'm a horrible woman, aren't I? I just... simply want to know more about you. That's all."

"M-Mgiluka..."

She put her hand on me and squeezed tight. Her voice sounded close, and I guessed that she had her forehead pressed upon my back.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry..." Magiluka said with a sob.

I hastily turned around and looked at her. "Why are you apologizing? I'm the one who should be sorry."

"Because... I mustered up my courage to ask, but I'm just so, so scared... If, by any chance at all, I've stepped too far into your personal matters and caused you to hate me, I... But... But I was just so curious and..."

Perhaps something had caused her nerves to snap. The usual, mature Magiluka was nowhere to be seen—she was acting meekly childlike.

"It'll never happen," I reassured her. "I'll never, ever, *ever* hate you."

I squeezed Magiluka's hands and placed my forehead onto hers. That one simple act calmed me down. *She mustered up the courage to ask me. I ought to respond in kind.*

"Magiluka..." I started.

"...Yes?"

"I received an invincible body from God—a body that won't lose to anything." Within that quiet room, I confessed the truth to my precious friend.

CHAPTER 2

ACADEMY ARC—THE STEAMING HOT SPRING

1. I KNOW! LET'S RECUPERATE

Alongside me and the rest of the Aleyios students in their final year who were busy with their research projects, the other classes' fourth-years were also busy with work that needed to be done, including the prince, Sacher, and Safina. The prince and Safina in particular were swamped with tasks, as they needed to help out with their families' duties along with their schoolwork. The prince went off to the royal capital while Safina was in the Ancient Forest getting some hands-on experience. My friends and I could no longer gather and laze around often like we had before, and it left me feeling a little lonely, but it was what it was.

A few days had passed since the incident at the ruined fort, and the kingdom and the academy were all busy dealing with the aftermath. Since I was a concerned party to the case, I'd obviously been questioned to divulge my story, but since my fake was the one who had started this entire thing in the first place, even I couldn't provide any details—I was in a tricky position. The other involved party was Magiluka, but out of concern for her health, she was currently refraining from attending the academy.

The more I heard words like "sickness," "injury," "treatment," "recuperation," and whatever else had you, the more I grew restless. The impatience and unease continued to pile up inside me day after day—I yearned to see Magiluka again and have the chance to calm myself down.

So, with that thought in mind...

"There was no need for you to go out of your way for me... And you even rode atop Lady Snow!" Magiluka scolded me.

"But I couldn't endure the— I mean, I was worried about you!"

"Lady Mary..."

"I don't want to hear any 'buts' from you, young lady! This is oppression! Oppression! I may not look it, but I'm a divine beast, I'll have you know! I demand some improvements in the way I'm treated."

I tried to act shy in front of Magiluka, but Snow was behind me, protesting by patting my head with her paw. We were currently having tea in the courtyard of her estate. Magiluka's condition had improved tremendously, and she claimed that she was eager to return to the academy, but her parents worried for her and wanted her to recuperate for a bit longer. When she told me about her parents' decision, she sounded a little troubled but also a little happy. *I'm glad she's doing well. We haven't had a chance to talk since that night, come to think of it...*

To me, it felt like a long while since I'd seen her. I felt relieved thinking of that night.

We were in a dark room when I'd confessed the truth to her, and silence had filled the space.

"A body... that won't lose to anything?" Magiluka had asked.

"Yeah. Simply put, I possess power beyond human understanding."

Magiluka gazed at me, and this time, I locked eyes with her without running away. She grew quiet.

"Are you scared?" I asked.

I couldn't endure the silence for much longer, and I smiled to try to hide the sense of self-loathing I was feeling. Magiluka gave a very small shake of her head.

"Not at all," she replied. "It's a blessing you received from God, Lady Mary."

"A blessing?" I asked.

"Quite so. When we're born, I've heard that God bestows upon us a blessing which we call 'talent.' Whether we use that or not is apparently up to us and our lives. It's our potential. Do you remember the Oracle Rite? This is the power you received, Lady Mary. That's all. I may be a little surprised, but I absolutely won't shun you for it."

"Magiluka..."

This was a cheat ability I'd received generously from God due to a little misunderstanding. I was too immature and lowly to call this ability a blessing from God or a talent that I was born with. I was like a petit bourgeois who had suddenly received a massive amount of money to do with as they wished but didn't know what to do in the face of such generous freedom. Magiluka's words felt like a weight was being lifted from my shoulders.

"Er, this might be a bit insolent of me, but may I ask one more question?" Magiluka inquired.

"Sure. Whatever you want."

As she sheepishly mumbled in bed, I couldn't suppress a smile by her adorable actions.

"The magic you used to defeat the chimera... Lady Mary, what order spell was that?"

"U-Uhhh... I-I think it was a sixth-order... spell..."

I'd acted like I was ready to answer any question she'd asked, but I was already trailing off and shrinking away from her. I looked away, scared of Magiluka's reaction to my answer.

"Sixth-order...?" Magiluka muttered.

I silently waited for her reaction.

"That's amazing, Lady Mary. Could you perhaps comprehend spells above that, or even all spells possible?"

"Huh? A-All?" I stammered. "No... I don't think so. Aside from what I've learned at the academy, I only know a few other spells."

Magiluka approached me, curiosity in her eyes as I saw my troubled self reflected in her gaze. I gave a strained smile while inching away from her.

"I see," she replied. "But the possibility is there, is it not?"

"H-Huh? Maybe?"

"Then why don't we travel the world and learn all kinds of spells to unravel the

mysteries of the as-yet unprecedented eighth-order spells? Such a journey might lead to improvements in our kingdom's general magical capabilities. The legendary sage Mary Regalia shall be born! Eh heh heh. How wonderful. The higher the aim the better—”

“No one like that will be born. I won't become a legendary hero or a sage or anything that sounds so dangerous, and I think it's fine for me to not aim for such a thing. Let that go, Magiluka. I only wish for a normal life.”

She was making a face like a maiden dreaming of some fantasy as she spouted her dangerous suggestions. In turn, I told her something similar to what I'd told Tutte years before.

“Awww...” she whined.

“Don't you ‘Awww’ me...”

She puffed out her cheeks and pouted adorably, and I couldn't resist poking her and letting the air out.

“I just want to live a normal life without standing out,” I said. “So I'd like for you to keep my abilities a secret.”

“Hm? A normal life without standing out?” She quizzically cocked her head to one side.

“Y-Yup... A normal life,” I stammered. “Promise me!”

I stuck out my pinky for a pinky promise while Magiluka looked on, befuddled. *Ugh, she's so cute, dammit! I mean, right, this world doesn't have this custom.*

“Lady Mary, what are you doing?” Magiluka asked.

“Um, this is a gesture for making a promise you swear to keep. Sorry, I guess I just did that on my own there.”

“A promise... Excellent. Why don't we do that? What shall I do?”

“Uh, we first intertwine our pinkies...” I explained, causing her to twist her pinky around mine. “Pinky swear, pinky swear, whoever lies will be forced to swallow a thousand needles to make it square.”

Magiluka seemed to be enjoying my little incantation. "So, if I break the promise, I must swallow a thousand needles," Magiluka said, looking a little troubled as she seemed to be deep in thought.

I'd made a completely one-sided promise. "Ah, sorry! I just wanted to try doing that once, but if it made you uncomfortable, we can just pretend this never happened."

"Oh, it's nothing like that at all. It just seems like a bit of a task to prepare a thousand needles."

"*That's* what you're bothered about?"

"I am. Of course, I have zero intentions of breaking our promise, but I was simply a little curious. If we must prepare a thousand needles, perhaps magic would be easier, would it not? Must it be needles? Is this some kind of magical ritual?"

"W-W-W-W-Wait! Let's calm down for a little, Magiluka. You're off in your own world."

I'd sort of always dreamed of doing a pinky promise, but I'd never expected this level of interest. As I hastily tried to calm her down, the nervousness that I'd felt moments ago had completely dissipated. I was endlessly grateful that Magiluka was acting like her usual self. *Don't you have something more to focus on instead of this pinky promise stuff?* I chuckled at Magiluka's curiosity.

"Whatever is the matter, Lady Mary?" Magiluka asked dubiously.

"Hm? Oh, it's nothing!"

I petted Lily, who was curled up on my lap. Enticed by the warm sunlight, she yawned wide, and as I stroked under her chin, she squinted with joy. *Aah, it's so soothing. I'm tempted to just have myself a lazy afternoon.*

"I know! Let's recuperate," I said while gazing at Lily, who was settling in.

"Why the sudden suggestion?" Magiluka asked.

"I guess watching Lily made me think about it. You're still healing from your wounds, so why not go somewhere while we've got the chance? That's all."

"To recuperate...? I see. Do you have a place in mind?"

"Hmmm, let's see... Well, I can't think of a city, but... Ah! What about a hot spring? I think that'd be perfect!" I placed a fist over my palm, finding this to be a nice idea.

"A hot spring?" Magiluka asked, sounding puzzled as usual.

Yep, I guess hot springs don't exist in this world. Wait, no, they might actually exist and she just doesn't know about them. There's no way hot springs don't exist, right? Right, God?

"Hot springs are like, when, uh, there's water warmed by the heat of the earth. They're naturally made baths made from hot water," I explained.

"A naturally made bath? I don't think I've heard of anything like that around me..."

When humans are told that they can't have something, it only makes them want it even more. It was initially only a passing thought, but I now desperately had the urge to enter a hot spring.

As a side note, I'd never heard anyone around me mention one in this world either—if they had, I would've already been frequenting it to my heart's content. *Well, you need a volcano for a hot spring. Is there one nearby?* I racked my brains for an idea.

"Heya, Mary," Snow said languidly while patting my head with her paw.

"What is it, Snow? Can't you see I'm in the middle of an important discussion? If you want seconds on your snacks, I'll deal with that later."

"How rude! I'm not a glutton like you!"

"Oho? I can't let that comment slide. You've chosen war today."

I slowly got up and smiled at her, and she lowered her tail while sliding back.

"Stop! Stop! I'm against violence. I'm just saying that I'm familiar with hot springs."

"Wait, Snow, really? Do you know of a place?"

"Y-Yeah. I once saw smoke rising from a spring, so I dipped my front paw in out of

curiosity, and it was hot water. I remember it well because I was so surprised."

"Seriously? Wait, where? Where was it?"

"Ahem! Pop quiz. Where do you think it is?"

"Huh?"

"Hint: you've been there before."

"What? I've been there before? If there was a hot spring, I definitely would've taken a dip. Argh, could I get another hint, please?"

"Magiluka has never been there."

"Wait, Magiluka's never been there? So did I visit there personally? C-Can I get another hint?"

"Ummm... My impression of this place isn't really a mountain, but a valley."

"A valley... I've been there but Magiluka hasn't... Ah! I know! I know! Castle Bloodrain!"

"Ding ding ding! For your prize, I bestow upon you the leftover crumbs from my delicious snacks."

"I don't need that!"

I noticed Magiluka and Tutte looking at us with gentle smiles.

"Wh-What?" I asked.

"Oh, nothing. It's just cute," Magiluka and Tutte both answered.

I grew embarrassed. From an outsider looking in, I probably looked like someone who talked loudly and excitedly to myself. I was undeniably worried about how I'd grown accustomed to this practice.

"Ahem. A-And you're telling me that Castle Bloodrain has a hot spring?" I asked.

"Well, it's not at the castle, per se. It's just in that region. When I was on standby at the

castle, I wandered around a little."

"I see. That place *is* surrounded by mountains. But ugh... if it's near Castle Bloodrain, won't I meet Victorica again?"

I looked up, lost in my thoughts. Quite honestly, I didn't want to go anywhere near that rowdy vampire. Every time we met, I knew I'd get wrapped up into something troublesome.

"Uh, perhaps we don't need to force ourselves to go to this hot spring," Magiluka logically said as I displayed my reluctance.

"No, I'd love for you to enjoy your stay at a hot spring and learn how wonderful it is," I answered. "And I want to take a dip too!"

"I feel like the second part is the one you're most concerned with..."

"Y-You're imagining things!" I'd clearly been seen straight through, and I tried to play it off by turning away from her. "Besides, hot springs episodes are every bit as classic as beach episodes! We'd be fools not to have one!" In my panic, even I wasn't quite sure what I was saying.

"I have no idea what you're on about, but I don't want you to force yourself for me," she replied. "If you insist, perhaps you can go by yourself..."

"You don't get it, do you? You don't get it at all, Magiluka! My figure's just a bundle of straight lines! If you're not there in the shot with me, the camera won't have anything to focus on!" I felt like I'd totally lost the plot, and in so doing, I'd no choice but to endure my own self-inflicted burn with tears in my eyes and fists clenched.

"I understand both your passion for hot springs and that you've just said something incredibly rude to me," Magiluka replied, eyeing me disappointedly.

I fell silent, recognizing that my passionate speech hadn't resonated with her. Things were looking a little shaky, and I started to panic.

"I wanna go! I wanna! I wanna! Hot springs! Now! I wanna go to a hot spring with youuu!" I wailed, activating my final weapon: the sacred technique known as throwing a tantrum. Providing a convincing argument was no longer within my repertoire.

“I understand! All right! Please calm down!”

“Really?! Hooray! Eh heh, I love you, Magiluka!”

As I’d expected, Magiluka conceded the argument, and I immediately beamed brightly, my face forming a broad smile. I knew that I had a troublesome personality, and I was grateful for how kind Magiluka was, no matter how much she might complain.

“Goodness, you’re such a smooth talker...” she said, her cheeks pink as she turned away.

Having known her for a while, I knew that she wasn’t mad, but rather embarrassed.

“All right then,” I said. “Our next plan is how to visit the area without Victorica noticing us!”

“Oh no, we should properly say our greetings to her,” Magiluka replied.

“Awww...”

“Good grief, you...”

Our roles were reversed, but I felt an odd feeling of déjà vu and chuckled.

“In any case, is the hot spring in the castle?” Magiluka asked. “Or is it in a nearby village? Or is there a random hot spring somewhere?”

“Oh, good question,” I replied. “Any ideas, Snow?”

“Yummy! Yummy! ♪ These snacks are sooo good! You can make larger ones to match my size, you know!”

The divine beast ignored my question as she was gobbling down on the buffet of snacks Tutte had offered her.

“Hey there, you glutton! Don’t eat other people’s snacks!”

“Nom nom... Chomp... Nom nom...”

“Oh dear, Snow. Why don’t you choose to either eat or talk...” I said kindly before

quickly changing my tone. “Screw that! Did you really think I’d say something so polite?! You’re not even talking with your mouth!”

Snow still had her mouth full. *“Oh dear, I was simply copying what you always do!”*

“All right, I commend your courage! Let’s take this outside!” I slowly stood up once more.

“Uh, Lady Mary, I’m not quite sure what your conversation is about, but perhaps we’re going on a tangent,” Magiluka said wearily. “Why don’t we bring the conversation back on track?”

“U-Uh, what was it again? The precise location, right? U-Um... It’s not within the castle, but I don’t think it’s too far away. I was flying, so I’m not sure of the precise distance, but it seemed like a deserted area.”

“Hm, so there aren’t any villages nearby,” I said. “Ugh, what a shame! If there were, I would’ve just ignored the castle and gone there!”

“Now, now, why don’t we come to a compromise? You’ll be able to go to a hot spring,” Magiluka consoled me.

“Well... Yeah... You’ve got a point. Yep. All right. Let’s go to a hot spring!” I raised my fist in the air and cheered to amp myself up.

I saw Tutte and Magiluka bowing their heads. Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed that they looked a little troubled while they spoke about something, but I decided not to think too much about it. *Well, I want to enter a hot spring! And now that I know it exists, no one can pump the brakes on me!*

And so, under the guise of recuperation, I forcibly decided for us all to have a hot springs trip.

2. LET’S GO TO THE HOT SPRINGS

The next day, we had Snow take us to Castle Bloodrain in the blink of an eye, and we took the shortcut to enter inside.

"And here I am! ♪" I said.

"What the heck is going on here?! And don't you dare try to act all charming, you creep!" the vampire shouted.

"Don't call me a creep! We came all this way to visit you! What's with that attitude?"

"You haven't so much as sent me a letter, yet you act all righteous? Are you an idiot? Oh, you certainly must be! You idiot! Idiot!"

"The one who calls others an idiot *is* the idiot!"

"What did you say?!"

Yep, we got into an argument within two seconds of seeing each other.

"I knew this was going to happen," Tutte said.

"Indeed..." Magiluka said.

They both sighed, but who could blame me? The conversation just naturally turned into an argument. This was Victorica's and my way of communicating, and I just needed the two ladies to accept that.

"My lady, taking such an attitude with a guest will sully the name of House Bloodrain," Orbus chided her.

"Indeed. My lady, as the daughter of Duke Regalia, please act with a little more grace," Tutte reproved me.

"Ugh..." Victorica and I groaned in unison and froze as we were both scolded by our personal servants.

"Wherever has my adorable lady gone? Moments before, you were excitedly saying that you had to make preparations for your sudden guests and show your hospitality. You were looking forward to it," Orbus muttered.

"Waaaah! Raaaah!" Victorica shouted, red-faced, waving both hands in the air and trying to drown out her butler.

Oho. Despite her remarks, she's quite adorable. What a tsundere. While I was chuckling at Victorica's cute side, Tutte didn't hold back either.

"I could say the same," Tutte remarked. "You were worried about not sending a letter and got so excited about choosing the perfect souvenir for her. You were looking forward to it. Wherever has my adorable lady gone?" my maid said.

"Waaaah! Raaaah!" I shouted, making the same movements as Victorica as I grew embarrassed.

"Quite so. If I hadn't known better, I'd have thought you were trying to annoy me as you agonized over the perfect gift, wondering if this was good enough or if she would enjoy it. And that's what we've brought with us today," Magiluka added.

"Gyaaaah! Magilukaaa!" I shrieked.

As my humiliation reached its apex, I couldn't bear to look at Victorica, but I was curious about her reaction to my gift and tried to sneak in a reasonable amount of peeks. She must've had the same thoughts as me as we kept making eye contact and quickly looking away from each other several times over.

Within this awkward atmosphere, Victorica started taking deep breaths to calm herself down, and I found myself following suit.

"So? What business do you have here? Surely you're not just here to fool around?" Victorica finally asked.

"Huh? Uh, no, we really are here just to have some fun," I replied.

"Huh?"

"Er, um, to be precise, we came to recuperate and visit the hot springs."

I quickly explained myself to the stunned Victorica. We were guided to our rooms as I told her about how we ended up here.

"I see... You've been through quite a bit, Magiluka. I'm glad to see you doing well. In any case, a hot spring... I see..." Victorica looked pensive as she appeared to think

through how best to be considerate of Magiluka. “Orbus.”

“Yes, my lady?”

“What is a hot spring?”

You toooo?! The vampire looked so serious as she posed her question to her butler that I refrained from saying my comment out loud.

“Hmmm... I feel like I’ve heard of such a thing before, but it’s not coming to mind,” Victorica murmured.

“It’s a natural spring that spews hot water,” Orbus explained. “There isn’t one around here, but there is one in the faraway mountains. You inspected an area nearby quite some time ago, so perhaps that’s why it rings a bell.”

“Ah, right! Yes, yes, it’s all coming back to me now. However, be it natural or man-made, it’s just a bath, is it not? I assume it does not make too much of a difference...”

“Objection!” I yelled, cutting into their conversation. “A hot spring isn’t just boiling water. I hear most of them have some great effects.”

“Effects? Like enhancing magic?” Victorica asked.

“I don’t think it’s magical or anything... Wait, or is it?” I tried thinking about it; this was a world filled with magic. It wouldn’t be odd if a natural hot spring had some sort of mystical effect that I wasn’t aware of.

“Well, to my knowledge, it makes your skin smooth and clear. You get beautiful skin,” I said.

“Beautiful skin?!” gasped Magiluka and Victorica.

They’re maidens, all right.

“I think they’re also good for improving blood flow. They could ease hip, shoulder, and muscle pain as well,” I added.

“Shoulder pain?!” Magiluka reacted for whatever reason. I wasn’t quite sure why. Yup. I didn’t have a clue. Not at all!

"H-Hmph... Is that so?" Victorica said. "W-Well, since we have an opportunity here, if you beg, I suppose I wouldn't mind tagging along. But perhaps you need to take a certain attitude if you would like to file such a request."

"All right, let's go to the hot spring! Come on!" I said.

I completely ignored her arrogant remarks and took Magiluka's hand to head outside. Victorica froze in place.

"H-Hey! Do not go on ahead! I shall come with you!" the vampire wailed.

She'd tried to hold herself back for a split second, but she'd quickly reached her limit and hastily stood up to chase after us. The tears in her eyes made her look adorable.

We decided to head to the hot spring that Snow had apparently spotted. At first, I was happy to hear that it mustn't be far from the castle, but as I gazed at the landscape on my way, the hot springs view that I'd seen on TV or the internet back in Japan slowly started to fade away. The environs surrounding Victorica's castle were dark and terrifying. If there was a spring in this area, I was confident that I would try to evade it, thinking that it was a dangerous swamp. Then there was another dash of reality that subverted my expectations.

"*Here we are!*" Snow said with a proud huff.

"It's tiny!" I gasped.

Indeed, this "hot spring," if I could even call it that, was small. *This is completely different from the hot springs that I imagined. I imagined something larger where we could all take a dip. I'm not even sure if a small child could fit in this.* But ultimately, I was at fault for not confirming the size first, and I collapsed onto the floor.

"No, Snow... You've got it all wrong... I was hoping for something bigger!" I wailed, complaining even though I knew it was futile.

"A larger one...? Then perhaps we should ask those living in the area. They might know something," Victorica said.

"There are people living in the area?" I said, immediately getting up happily. "Oh, if

there's a village nearby, you should've just told me! Wait, huh?"

Victorica had opened her mouth wide for no discernible reason, and I looked at her bewildered.

"What's wrong, Victorica?" I asked. "You're opening your mouth awfully wide. Are you yawning? Are you sleepy?"

I instinctively placed my finger in her mouth, and she instinctively chomped down.

"Nom!" she said before she opened her jaws again. She took a step back. "You! Hey! Peh! Blech! I'm not yawning! I'm calling out to my minions! Do not get in my way!"

"Oh, like an ultrasonic wave that bats do. Pardon me," I replied.

"Ultra what now? Ugh, well, never mind. Can you two raise your arms to the side?"

Victorica then posed like a scarecrow. Magiluka and I exchanged a glance before we hesitantly spread our arms out. I heard the flapping of wings growing louder, and then a weight on my arm. When I looked to the side, I noticed bats—two, to be precise, hanging from my outstretched arms.

"Erm... Is this what you meant by those in the area?" Magiluka asked.

I was still in a daze as I stared at my arms. I looked at the bats hanging from Magiluka, then back at the ones on me.

"Quite so," the vampire replied. "These are the locals who wander around this area."

I wasn't sure if we could call a bunch of bats "locals," but I had a more pressing question to ask. "Why are they dangling from our arms?"

"It is only natural they would when they have nothing else nearby that they can hang from," Victorica replied.

"I can forgive them for treating me like a tree, but they could've just landed on my arm, right? Why not do that?"

Visually, if an animal landed *on* my arm, it would've made a much better image—having them dangle from my limbs looked totally lame. I didn't like it. I wanted a do-

over.

"Heh, amateur..." Victorica scoffed, striking a pose and trying to act cool. "Bats look much better when they hang upside down, I'll have you know!"

As if, you sorry excuse for a vampire! "You—" I started.

"Um, these bats are heavy, so please get this over with quickly," Magiluka interjected.

She had a point, so I managed to suppress my retorts. "Go on," I said, gently shaking my arms.

Victorica gave a look of dissatisfaction as she spoke to the bats. The bats started to screech in reply. *She can hold a conversation with them? I guess I shouldn't be surprised—they don't say vampires are the strongest undead for nothing.*

"Mm-hmm, I see... I don't get it at all," she said.

"What do you see—your large intestine?! You can't actually talk to them at all, can you, you second-rate vampire?! I can't believe I was impressed for a second!" I roared.

"Wh-What?! Who are you calling second-rate?! I *can* communicate with them, of course! I simply don't know what they are talking about! Keep yourself from jumping to conclusions, you second-rate holy woman!"

"Ah, got it. Okay, sorry. But who're you calling a holy woman?! Take that back!"

"That's not where you are supposed to be angry about! Point out the second-rate part, you wannabe!"

"Now listen here! I have more of a problem with the other portion, all right?!"

"That's simply absurd! Why are you more worried about being called a holy woman than a failure for one? Are you an idiot? Oh, you certainly must be! You idiot! Dummy!"

"The one who calls others an idiot *is* the idiot!"

"Arghhhh! I hate that phrase!"

As Victorica and I continued to bicker over the stupidest of topics, I knew that I

must've looked so silly with bats hanging from my arms.

"Enough, you two!" Magiluka scolded. "Tutte and Orbus told you to not fight, didn't they?"

We both turned glum. It seemed we weren't the only ones surprised, as the bats hastily flew off.

"Victorica started it..."

"Mary started it..."

With my arms finally freed from the animals, Victorica and I pointed at each other and started to voice our excuses.

Tutte, Orbus, and Lily were waiting for us back at the castle. We were only trying to find the site of the hot spring, so we didn't think it would take us long. Tutte was usually with me, making sure that I wouldn't screw up, but she had stayed behind—Victorica had asked Orbus to make preparations to welcome us back, and we'd needed my maid's human touch instead of the castle's undead tastes. It was a difficult decision to make, but we'd needed Tutte to assist the rest of the servants. I didn't even want to imagine how it would go if the arrangements had been left up to Victorica and her followers.

Something that gave me pause was that Tutte and Orbus immediately took Magiluka aside and began to lecture her on when she should scold me and Victorica. I unfortunately wasn't able to hear the details. *Do they think we're problem children?*

"All right, apologize to each other and make up," Magiluka said.

Victorica and I fell silent, stubbornly refusing to say the magic words.

"I said, 'Apologize to each other and make up!'" Magiluka repeated with a smile, approaching us.

We felt her overwhelming pressure upon us.

"S-Sorry," we both said, facing her.

Magiluka sighed deeply. "Now then, Lady Victorica. Have you found anything new?"

"They told me, 'No hot spring, but yes ruins,'" she replied.

"Why are you speaking in broken sentences?" I said wearily.

"Hmm, simply put, they must believe there are no large hot springs nearby, yet there are ruins," Magiluka deduced. "I don't quite understand why they would inform us about the ruin, however. Perhaps they're trying to say that the ruins have something similar to what we're looking for?"

"Whoaaaaa." Victorica and I gasped in awe as we gave her a round of applause.

"Oh, I'm sure you both could've come to the same conclusions with a *bit* of thought."

We fell silent, lips pursed and gazing to the side as Magiluka stared at us reproachfully—just as she'd said, Victorica and I had stopped trying to think at all. During times like these, I normally had someone behind me who would casually offer me a word of advice. *I've been relying on her too much.* Victorica must've been having some similar thoughts since she didn't offer a word of rebuttal either, and I decided to quickly continue the conversation.

"A-Are there really ruins nearby?" I asked.

"Hmm..." Victorica replied. "Ah! There are indeed! When my father was the leader, he decided that nothing suits the undead better than having nice ancient ruins to roam around in, so he created some, I believe. When I went to inspect the area near the ruins once, I do remember hearing about a hot spring."

"Huh... I see. Can you really just *create* a ruin though? I feel like that's not how that works, but am I just overthinking it?" I couldn't help but feel like these "ruins" Victorica seemed so fond of sounded a lot like some kind of tourist trap.

"Ruins are hardly found just conveniently lying around," Victorica replied. "It's only natural to make them yourself, correct? Of course, his desire that no one watch his process of creating the ruins and his insistence on working in secret ended up causing his efforts to go unknown and unvisited after he'd finished. He wound up getting sulky about the failure of the ruins to catch on and abandoned them."

"So it *is* a tourist trap," I replied. "You can't just hope people take notice of those kinds of things! No one will come if you don't spread the word—life's not like some kind of urban legend."

“Pardon? An urban... what? Putting that aside, could I have more details about that?”

“Huh? About what?”

“Spreading the word, of course. What else? I wouldn’t wish for the ruins to be promoted too openly, you see. I’d rather they be like a hole-in-the-wall place where only those in the know are aware of them. How does one go about getting just that right amount of attention?”

“Well, uh, ummm... I don’t know.”

“Tch. You useless holy woman.”

“And I keep telling you to not call me a holy woman!” I gave Victorica an iron claw as payback.

“Owww!” she cried.

Magiluka heaved a deep sigh as she watched us go at it. “All right then, don’t fool around. Shall we visit these ruins?”

“W-We’re not fooling around!” I protested.

“Q-Quite right!” Victorica added. “I would much rather fool around with a skeleton than with *her*.”

“Oho, well said. So you choose war.”

“Argh! Very well,” Magiluka groaned. “I’ll go on ahead while you two stay here and have your little playtime. Shall we, Lady Snow?”

She wearily walked ahead with Snow in tow.

“W-Wait, Magiluka!” I cried hastily.

“I-Indeed! Please wait for me!” Victorica said.

We both chased after Magiluka in a panic... but in hindsight, there was no way that she knew where the ruin was, so she couldn’t have actually left us behind. She’d only acted like that to bring us in line, but I would only realize that much later. I had to hand it to

her—she'd gotten much better at handling me.

And so, we walked toward the knockoff ruins that Victorica's father had created many years ago. *Wait, I just wanted to enter a hot spring. Isn't this situation becoming a lot more complicated?*

3. WHAT IS URBAN EXPLORATION?

The ruin was surrounded by mountains and located in a place that was difficult to spot. It seemed like the previous leader had gouged out a part of a mountain, and when I first laid eyes on the place, I felt a sense of exhilaration, as though I were part of some kind of adventure movie. I couldn't suppress my gasps of awe.

As we ventured deeper inside, we were greeted by a large dome-shaped ceiling with various beautiful stone statues and pillars that had been weathered by time, leaving behind only a trace of their former glory. It set the perfect mood—at a glance, one would believe that this place was built many years ago.

Be that as it may, this was just a fake ruin. Let me reiterate: this was just a knockoff, and there was no intrigue to be found about any prior civilizations who'd lived here.

"Uh, so I might be a bit too late to point this out, but why would there be a hot spring in this ancient ruin?" I asked.

"I wonder..." Victorica replied as she walked ahead of me. "My father usually acted before giving things much thought—he would often declare that we can think things through after we finish what we're doing. Perhaps he'd found a hot spring vein during construction and decided to change course."

"What a happy-go-lucky person..."

I had a few comments about her father's behavior, but I thought it'd be imprudent to stick my nose into the affairs of other households. I decided to not think too hard about this vampiric house. *If my experiences with the Relirex Kingdom have taught me anything, it's that people there don't ask, "Why?" They ask, "Why not?"*

"Ahem." I cleared my throat. "Er, in any case, this place is really quite detailed. If I

weren't aware of how it'd been created, I might've really seen this as an ancient ruin."

"Mweh heh heh. This is simply what you should expect when House Bloodrain goes all out," Victorica declared proudly, as though she had personally done this all herself. I wasn't sure if someone going all out like a master craftsman to create an impressive faux ruin was sufficient cause for me to chalk up another win for the vampires though.

"Indeed... Even adventurers might mistake this for a genuine ruin, and perhaps a few scholars might have visited this site," Magiluka supposed, offering her praise.

"Oh yes, I am sure they have! This is what happens when House Bloodrain goes all out!" Victorica repeated, becoming even prouder.

Are you really fine with being praised like this, Miss Vampire?

"Scholars exploring ruins, huh?" I said. "You'd call them archaeologists, I think. What kind of people are they? I always imagined researchers and the like to be thin, gentle-looking, and wearing thick glasses."

"Huh?!" Victorica gasped. "Whatever are you on about? Archaeologists venture into dangerous ruins laden with traps and monsters. They must be beefy and muscular to survive."

"No, no, no, they'd usually leave that to the adventurers. You're so ignorant, Victorica."

"No, no, no, in terms of funding and efficiency, it is far preferable to go in by yourself. Oh, you certainly are an ignorant child, Mary."

Although we continued to butt heads over what an archaeologist would be like, we made sure to smile at each other all the while since Magiluka told us not to argue. However, the veins on my temple were starting to twitch, and I was set to explode at any moment.

"Hmm? I *thought* I heard voices. Hey, you all! What are you doing here? It's quite dangerous here!"

A loud man's voice echoed throughout the area as Victorica and I were still exchanging our opinions. We hastily looked around, but there was no one in view.

"Ha ha ha! Sorry to startle you. I'm above you! I'm currently in the midst of researching

this ruin. Give me a bit. I'll head down."

"Up?" I asked as I looked above me and noticed something moving near the tall dark ceiling. It was clear that he'd been looking into something up there.

"He's researching the ruin?" I wondered. "Could he be an archaeologist? I didn't think I'd get to meet one so soon."

"Mweh heh heh. How convenient! Now we can see which of us is in the right once and for all!" Victorica cackled. She glanced at me, grinning provokingly.

"Heh, you're on! You—"

"Hiyah!" the man shouted.

"Hiyah?" The three of us parroted him in a daze, completely not expecting him to say something like that.

We watched the man descend to the ground with a deafening boom. Since he'd been near the ceiling, I'd expected him to be using a rope or some kind of floating magic with which he'd gracefully land, but he simply just fell. He was so high up that I didn't think he'd be safe falling. We all silently looked on.

"Hmm? Ah, I didn't expect such adorable ladies to wander into this place," he said.

We couldn't find the words to respond—the man had just landed solidly from such an absurd height, after all. It wasn't just his striking entrance though—his appearance left Victorica's and my mouths agape. He had a thin face, upon which sat a pair of round glasses, and his long, messy hair was tied back. From the neck up, he looked like exactly the sort of gentle young man I'd depicted earlier... but then the rest of his body gave me total whiplash. He was much taller than my hypothetical archaeologist, and he was so buff and muscular that he'd give my father a run for his money. He was wearing a light, tight-fitting shirt that looked like it was about to burst at its seams, further accentuating his muscles. If we'd never seen his face, I would've assumed that a brawny, mighty warrior had just thrown off his armor.

In short, he looked to be a hodgepodge of both Victorica's and my imaginations. I hadn't imagined that one man could look so delicate yet so beefy, but here was this guy with a lean, handsome face atop of a bodybuilder's physique. It made my brain short-circuit.

"H-Hello..." Magiluka replied meekly while Victorica and I were still speechless. "Are you perhaps an adventurer?"

"Ha ha ha! My name is Falgar. I get asked that question a lot, but as you can see, I'm just your average, run-of-the-mill archaeologist." He spoke in a cool, refreshing tone.

"You're—" Victorica and I started before we stopped ourselves. We almost both shouted, "You're lying!" but we managed to clap our hands over each other's mouths, for we thought it'd be rude.

Our imaginations aside, since the archaeologist had introduced himself, I felt our introductions were also in order. I wasn't sure if Victorica could reveal her identity, so I glanced at her questioningly, but she mistook it as a look of encouragement and proudly stepped forward, her chest puffed out.

"Mweh heh heh! Tremble with fear and despair upon hearing my name! I am Victorica, the strongest and oldest vampire, master of the Bloodrain clan!"

This no-good vampire didn't give an ounce of thought toward my worries and exposed everything to a normal person. Victorica was an intelligent vampire and was always open to negotiations and talks, but common legends of vampires depicted them as evil human-bloodsucking monsters that threatened to lead civilization to ruin. In other words, vampires were the antagonists of many stories, and we had no way of knowing if Falgar would accept her for being one.

"A-A vampire? From the legendary Bloodrain clan?" Falgar murmured in shock.

I'd expected this reaction. If this man ever saw us as dangerous, I would subject that vampire to a punishment of sunlight to prove our innocence. It worked with the elves, so it was worth a shot this time around too. I nonchalantly stepped behind the proud little lady, ready to spring into action if need be.

"I see," Falgar finally said. "You must be interested in vampiric legends, young lady. But you mustn't proudly name yourself as a fictional being. It'll do you no good. Calling yourself a master to boot *might* be exaggerating matters a hair too."

"Who are you calling fictional?!" Victorica demanded. "I am the honest-to-goodness oldest—"

"Ah ha ha! Isn't she such a handful, introducing herself to strangers like that?" I

interrupted her while covering her mouth. “I’m so sorry! She just loves vampiric legends so much she’ll even play pretend about them. I’d be grateful if you don’t get too hung up on it.”

“Ah, I see, I see. I understand where she’s coming from. I once chased such a dream so far that I became neck-deep in my own imagination,” Falgar said with a gentle smile as he looked off nostalgically. “Ah, pardon me! I think vampires exist. I’m sure of it.”

I was glad that matters didn’t escalate, but it looked like I’d ended up casting Victorica as some kind of role-playing eccentric. *I feel bad for Victorica, but it’s better for her to just embrace being seen as cringey for now.*

“M-May I ask why you’re here, Sir Falgar?” Magiluka quickly said, changing the subject.

“Ha ha ha! No need for such formalities. I’m no ‘Sir’ at all—maybe a ‘Mister’ at best! I’m here to do research, of course. I never knew there was a ruin around here! I’d never heard of such a thing.”

Yeah, because this ruin is fake... Falgar chattered excitedly as I kept the truth tucked away in my head.

“And why are you ladies here?” he asked.

“Well, we’re here for a hot—” I started.

“Aaahhh!” Victorica said as she covered my mouth this time. “We’re also here to investigate the secrets of these mysterious ancient ruins!”

We turned our backs toward Falgar and started frantically whispering.

“Hey, what are you on about, Victorica?”

“Promotion, remember? Instead of telling that self-proclaimed archaeologist the truth about my father’s creation, we can have him tell others about this place under the pretense that it is a genuine ruin! Mweh heh heh! A brilliant idea, if I may say so myself!”

“You’re *also* a happy-go-lucky person, aren’t you...”

“*You* were the one who told me this place just needed promotion, I might add. If you

have any other alternative, do tell me! Come now, I'm listening!"

"Ugh... I don't have anything."

"Then hush!"

"Urghhh... Magiluka, Victorica's bullying me!"

"N-N-N-N-Now! Lady Mary, please don't cling onto me!" Magiluka gasped.

I tried to latch on to Magiluka, who was watching over us as Victorica shut me down.

"Hmm, you ladies are at this ruin..." Falgar mumbled while gazing at us and Snow, who was casually cleaning her fur. "Ah, is it possibly related to what you said earlier? You even have a divine beast..."

Hmm... I don't want things to get any messier. We'd better get a move on to the hot spring.

"Um, is this area all there is to these ruins?" I asked.

"Well, about that... There doesn't seem to be another place where we can proceed forward," Falgar explained. "I did find a passageway, but it was a dead end."

That wasn't at all what I'd expected to hear from my attempt to subtly get info on the hot spring's whereabouts. The three of us again huddled together and started to whisper.

"What's going on, Victorica?" I demanded.

"Well, my father is the one who created it," she replied. "I have never set foot here, so I have not a single clue."

"The wall of that dead end is fishy, I'll add," Falgar said excitedly as he walked on. "I thought that I'd find a hidden door or something if I investigated further. I'm currently trying to see if there's any sort of hint."

We followed him while asking Snow to stay behind just in case something occurred. In fact, this no-good leopard had clearly found this entire ordeal to be troublesome and had started to take a nap, asking to be called if we ever found the hot spring we

were looking for.

A short while later, the four of us arrived at a large wall. I gazed up in awe at the delicately created piece of architecture. It *did* seem like a large door of sorts, but this wall had no knobs, and it wouldn't budge an inch even if we pushed or pulled on it.

"Lady Mary, please don't trip and accidentally break this wall," Magiluka whispered.

"Magiluka, are you using reverse psychology on me?" I asked.

"Of course not."

"Right, yeah, of course."

We had a lot to whisper about. She looked at me reproachfully, and I understood that I'd read too far into things as we continued to stand behind Falgar.

"Huh? This is..." Victorica murmured as she stared intently at the wall.

"Oho? You noticed it so quickly. I suppose it's no fluke that you've found your way to this ruin," Falgar said with a grin.

Magiluka and I tilted our heads in confusion—we'd been completely left behind.

"I believe that this is an ancient text left behind by the civilization that lived here," he said. "I've never seen these symbols before, so it's just speculation, of course." He coolly pushed his glasses up as he spoke, and I was still so bothered by the mismatch of his face and body.

True to his words, the wall was engraved with mysterious symbols that I'd never seen before. If someone had told me that they were letters, I would've believed them—I couldn't tell where these symbols had originated from.

"Ah, I see," Victorica said, pounding her fist into her open palm. "Right, right. Yes, I do believe this is the dead language of the people who once lived here."

It was clear that she was just going along with the conversation. *Are you sure you're cut out to fake a discussion like this?*

"Hmm? Judging from your phrasing, can you ladies perhaps read these letters?" Falgar

asked.

Oh, crap, we're caught in the cross fire.

"No, it's got nothing to do with us," I said with a smile, ditching the vampire. "If any of us could read these letters, it would probably be Victorica, though!"

I wasn't lying; I really couldn't read these letters anyway. Magiluka frantically nodded in agreement, then everyone stared at Victorica.

"Huh? Er, um..." Victorica stammered before she gathered herself. "Mweh heh heh! I am impressed by your brilliant deductions! Very well, then I shall specially translate the text using my memories of wisdom!"

"Oh? You've got such an ability?"

"Unravel, my memories of wisdom!" With a shout, she gazed up at the ceiling, lurching backward while placing her right hand toward the ceiling and her left hand on her eyepatch. She raised one leg in the air and took a bizarre pose as she gave a sidelong glance at the wall.

I was tempted to ask why she was doing such an awkward pose that made her tremble and look ready to tip over in seconds. *Cringe. So cringe. Victorica, I would've appreciated it if you had at least used a spell or two. You're already thought of as an awkward girl by Mr. Falgar, but now you're just being top to bottom cringey.*

"Oh? What's this? Are you perhaps performing some sort of ancient ritual that's been passed down through the ages? Interesting," the archaeologist said.

I expected him to find Victorica weird, but it seemed he had his own skewed views and opinions. I started to feel like he might not be entirely the archaeologist we were cracking him up to be. *I'm not imagining it, am I?*

"Mweh heh heh! I have translated the text, but it's so complex that I require the help of these two ladies to further simplify the words! I shall consult them!" Victorica said, undoing her trembling pose and swiftly approaching us.

Uh, so she probably doesn't know where to go from here and is asking both of us for help, right?

"I may not be much, but perhaps I can lend my aid as well," Falgar offered.

"Mweh heh heh! Our noble and divine domain is not open to outsiders! Do not dare eavesdrop on us! Stay put!" Victorica hastily said.

Noble and divine domain? And she even said "our." We're casually being roped into her mess. I had a few complaints to file, but she grabbed Magiluka's and my hands before walking away. We formed another circle and started to talk.

"See? I told you that you should put more thought into this," I whispered. "Those aren't even letters, are they? Why not just obediently apologize to him?"

"How very rude! Those engravings certainly were letters! They were symbols that only the Bloodrain clan is aware of! We call them the Dark Letters of Darkness."

"Dark Letters of Darkness? You can't be serious..."

"I had no idea that such letters existed. Are they perhaps a special code that's been hidden away and passed down through only the vampiric clans?" Magiluka asked curiously. She sounded a tad excited.

"No, it is nothing that grand," Victorica answered. "It is simply a language that my father created over three days and nights without any sleep. He bragged about it to me, saying that it was a totally cool and very original language that he'd designed. Only father and I, who can see the coolness in the symbols, can read it, however. Mweh heh heh."

"So your dad does the whole cringey edgelord role-playing thing too?" I asked, unable to help myself.

"Edgelord...? What?" she asked.

"Sorry, it's nothing," I hastily replied. "Continue."

"In any case, if you can read it, why not translate it to Mr. Falgar?" Magiluka suggested.

"No," Victorica replied. "There is no way I can tell him it says *that* after I worked so hard to liven things up."

Despite her previously stating that the details were complex, it seemed what was

actually written was nothing more than tomfoolery. She was reluctant to be truthful.

"Well, what does it say?" I asked.

"Welcome to the ancient ruins of your dreams! Those who wish to enter, please go to the receptionist by the entrance," the vampire replied.

"Hmm, okay, sorry, I'm confused. What does your father think an ancient ruin is?"

I felt like he'd mistaken a ruin for a theme park. Indeed, it completely shattered any air of mystery and made this place seem like nothing more than a tourist attraction.

"I agree wholeheartedly!" Victorica agreed. "He finally made stunning ancient ruins, then he included such a tepid message to welcome visitors! Preposterous!"

"Hmm, okay, sorry, I'm confused. What do *you* think an ancient ruin is?" I closed my eyes and hung my head while placing a finger between my brows. We clearly had some kind of misunderstanding going on.

"If you feel that way, then by all means, please tell me what it should say to resemble what *you* think a ruin should be like," Victorica asked.

"Huh? Uhhh..."

On second thought, I didn't know much about what a ruin was. I only had knowledge from movies and anime. Were there actually welcome signs engraved in ruins? Was I the one lacking common sense here?

"Wh-What do you think, Magiluka?" I asked.

My reliable maid was gone, and I could only count on my friend now.

"Well, if you'd like to give a more 'ruins' feel to it, perhaps you should avoid direct speech and convey the words in a more roundabout manner like a riddle," Magiluka said.

"I see!" Victorica and I said.

"Well, if he's expecting a riddle, how about I give him one? Mweh heh heh!" Victorica cackled. She headed toward Mr. Falgar and waved her hands before placing them close

to her face, striking a weird pose. “I have translated the text! Listen well!” she said.

Does she have an illness where she always needs to make a funny pose before saying anything?

“U-Uh, o-over there is the entrance, and, uh, well, if you look around, there’s, like, something that might open this place... or something?” she stammered.

How the heck was that a riddle?! You even ended it in a question! She sounded so confident, but the end result was a completely straightforward statement. I couldn’t suppress my internal grumbling.

“Indeed, that truly is a mystery,” Mr. Falgar said with a pensive expression.

No, it ain’t! I was tempted to say, but I successfully managed to suppress my intrusive thoughts. Maybe—or quite rudely, it wasn’t a maybe at all—he had a completely different thinking process from me. I started to think that perhaps we were the ones who lacked common sense; weren’t riddles supposed to be more complex and roundabout?

As I continued battling with my thoughts, Mr. Falgar seemed to have noticed something. “Ah! I see now!” he said. He started inspecting the wall. “This must be it! If those symbols are letters, then we might be able to solve this mystery. Parts of the symbols we saw earlier match with the ones right here. Is it a coincidence, or is there something here?”

I’m guessing those symbols mean “receptionist” or something... He seemed like a scholar who was unraveling a mystery, but he was so beefy from the neck down that I could only get an adventurer vibe from him. Suffice it to say as well, since I knew the true meaning of the symbols, I was left completely unexcited by his deduction.

“Hmm... Is there some kind of contraption somewhere?” Mr. Falgar mused as he touched the walls.

I was watching him from a short distance away when he stopped in his tracks. He carefully pushed a portion of a wall. A large clacking noise echoed through the area, as though something had fallen out of place. Suddenly, a door-sized portion of the wall dislodged and began falling toward him.

“Mr. Falgar!” I yelled. “Watch ou—”

“Hmph!” he grunted, easily supporting the heavy stone door that no normal human could prop up. He tossed it to the side. “Nothing to worry about! Stuff like this happens all the time in ruins. I’ve kept doing this, and I’m now able to carry these doors with ease.”

He gave me a refreshing smile and a thumbs-up, but I was at a loss for words and could only offer him a dry laugh. My laughter soon dissipated, however, as an animate skeleton appeared behind Mr. Falgar after he’d turned to face us.

“Behind you, Mr.—” I cried again.

“Hmph!” he said, acting before I could finish my sentence, delivering a roundhouse kick to his apparent assailant. “Nothing to worry about. Stuff like this happens all the time in ruins. I kept beating them up, and I’m now able to defeat them with ease.”

He closed the gap with the skeleton his kick had blown back and flashed us another reassuring smile before proceeding to clobber the poor thing. Every blow he landed was heavy, and the skeleton started to crack and crumble before our eyes. *It feels like he’s also crumbling my image of an archaeologist into tiny pieces.*

“Um,” Magiluka whispered as she saw the scene unfold in front of her. “Is it just me, or does it look like that innocent skeleton was waiting at the receptionist desk and heard the bell ring, so it came outside to kindly guide us inside when it was suddenly kicked and punched into pieces?”

“Maybe monsters lurking in the ruins are fighting against these misunderstandings on the daily...” I agreed sadly.

Since Magiluka had pointed it out, I could no longer unsee it.

“Now then, usually, these undeads would contain the key for the next puzzle...” Mr. Falgar said, completely ignoring our conversation as we mourned the skeleton’s sacrifice. He rummaged through the shattered skeleton for a clue. “Hmm? Is this it?”

He took out a stone tablet about the size of a person’s palm. It was engraved with the aforementioned mysterious symbols, and I guessed that the word “key” had been etched on the stone tile.

“Erm, did he just punch an employee and forcibly steal the key to—” Magiluka whispered.

"Don't say anything more. Or else this'll start to feel awkward," I interrupted her hastily.

If I heard any more, I would no longer know how to feel when I listened to adventure stories in the future.

"Hmm, can we use this somewhere?" Mr. Falgar wondered, proceeding ahead as we watched in a daze.

To him, this was likely an unexpected start to his journey, but once he was in the groove, things were going as planned. He peered around the corner where the skeleton came from without hesitation in search of answers.

"Found it!" he gasped. "The hole here seems to match this stone perfectly. If we insert it..."

We continued to watch from a distance, and we heard another dull clack. With a loud rumble, the wall that was seen as the entrance started to lower itself. Usually, we would jump with joy, squealing, "Yay! It opened!" during this situation, but I honestly couldn't be so elated. I mustered another forced laugh. *We probably could've just gone to the entrance, called for an employee, and had them use the key to open the doors for us...* I no longer felt a sense of adventure when unraveling the "mysteries" here.

Could there actually be a lot of ruins like this where, in the end, it was just a series of misunderstandings? I decided to halt this train of thought, wanting to prioritize the feeling of excitement and tension. *This isn't a ruin, but a hot spring. Yep, this isn't a ruin at all. Okay, I should be fine now. I won't be surprised no matter what comes my way.* I continued to tell myself that as we set foot into the entrance.

4. THE PATH TO THE HOT SPRINGS IS...

Once we went through the entrance, we were greeted by another large room with a high ceiling and a mysterious statue enshrined in the middle. I wasn't all that adept at art, so I didn't know how to judge this piece... but speaking frankly, it was a unique piece of work that made me think a child's drawing had been turned into a statue. Beyond gleaning that, I sort of got the sense that it was trying to resemble some sort of living creature. *It kind of looks like it has weirdly wavy limbs, or maybe I'm just trying*

to see it that way...

"Erm, what can I say? This is a one-of-a-kind statue..." I said, a little taken aback.

"Lady Victorica, what could this be a depiction of?" Magiluka asked. "Is it perhaps something that relates to the history of vampires?" Her eyes were sparkling with curiosity as she tried her best to keep her voice down.

"I-It's nothing that grand... at all..." the usually arrogant Victorica replied as she looked away.

"Hmm? What's this? You're acting suspicious," I said, my interest now piqued. "Come on, tell us. What is this?" My eyes were sparkling now too—not like Magiluka's though. For me, it was more like... I had a hunch this was gonna be *good*.

"...my father..." Victorica mumbled.

I only caught the last few words of her sentence. "Huh? What'd you say?" I asked, like a person who was hard of hearing.

"It is a picture of my father that I drew when I was a child," she said, pouting and pushing her two index fingertips together sheepishly. "I never would have expected to encounter such a distant memory come to life like this... The original drawing remains framed in his room to this day, and I am just so embarrassed by it..."

We didn't know what to say and fell silent. *That is embarrassing. I think I'd faint in agony if people saw things I did as a child.* Considering my circumstances, I'd had a pretty high mental age from birth in this world, so I didn't think I had anything too completely humiliating from this life's childhood. *I think I'm in the clear... Hopefully.*

Seeing as Victorica's father had brought it out after so many years, it seemed clear that he'd been absolutely ecstatic when he'd first received the drawing. I could understand his urge to create a statue of it, but I didn't understand why he'd specifically chosen this location. I decided to not pry further.

"I see..." Mr. Falgar said as he stared at the statue and seemed to come to some sort of understanding. "Usually, statues like these would symbolize something of the ancient civilization. Is it perhaps something religious? But I've never seen something so uncanny. Maybe the civilization idolized some sort of wicked deity or eldritch entity. Hmm... What could this be a depiction of? I'm very interested."

That's Victorica's father! Don't pry any further! Please, Mr. Falgar, no more—you can stop now! It's over! His unusual opinions were poking at Victorica's already bruised mental health, and she looked ready to faint. I gingerly watched over her as she withered ever further.

"Lady Mary, isn't that a basin of water circumscribing the statue?" Magiluka asked. "It looks like hot water, no less."

I gasped and turned my attention to the statue. As she'd said, there was water surrounding it, and as I approached the area, I saw warm steam rising out of it.

"How hot is it exactly...?" I wondered as I tried to reach out.

"Wait, Lady Mary! I shall confirm the water," Magiluka said.

"Huh? Why?"

"If this water were hot enough to burn you, what would you do?"

In my case, I would likely not be in danger even if the water was scalding. However, if Mr. Falgar had seen that, I might only cause greater confusion.

"Ah, Magiluka, you notice these details so well," I said. "I'm relying on you."

"Tutte informed me that you fail to pay sufficient attention to your casual actions on a daily basis and that I should be careful to do so for you."

"I see. I'd expect no less from her. I think I'll have to teach her a thing or two about tactfully expressing yourself at a later date, but what do you think, Magiluka?" I couldn't help but squint a little from my displeasure at the accusation.

"I-In any case, I'll check the water." She quickly looked away and ran toward it as though to flee from me. "It's at a perfect temperature. Is this what a hot spring is?"

"Hm, well, it's larger than what Snow found, but it's not deep enough for us to take a bath."

I decided to check the water as well and noticed that it wasn't very deep—at most, the hot water would only go up to our knees.

"Wait..." I mumbled. "Up to our knees? Knees... Legs... Ah! A footbath!"

"Foot... bath?" Magiluka asked, cocking her head to one side.

"We dunk our legs in the water and relieve our exhaustion. You've been walking all the way here. You're tired, aren't you? This is perfect."

I wasn't quite sure of the details either, so I tried my best to provide an explanation while I recalled what I knew about hot springs from my past life. I looked around and tried to find a seat where we could dip our legs in the water before taking my shoes off.

"Whew," I said, sliding my legs into the water. "Just like this. Why don't you try it out, Magiluka? It feels great."

"I suppose I shall. Please excuse me," she said as she hastily removed her own shoes and gingerly sat beside me. "Ah, this is quite nice. A footbath, you said? It truly is soothing after a long day of walking."

"Exactly!"

"The surroundings make it hard to relax, however..."

"Yeah, I guess the view isn't fitting for a hot spring."

Magiluka forced a smile as I shifted my gaze toward the horrific sculpture above us.

"Hey!" Victorica said, sounding upset by our laid-back attitude. "Why do you both look so relaxed? Have you forgotten these are ancient ruins? Perhaps we should be a bit more tense and..."

"Why don't you join us? It feels nice," I offered, splashing water onto her with my foot, enticing her to get in.

"V-Very well... If you're begging so desperately, I suppose I must," she replied.

I didn't want to give her annoying personality room to breathe, so I made to shut her down. "I'm not really—"

"Ah, I see! I see! You want me to get in *that* badly, do you? Very well, I will keep you

waiting no longer.”

“Victorica!” Mr. Falgar called. “Apologies, but it seems like there are letters etched on this wall as well! Could I trouble you to translate them for me?”

Just as she’d made to take off her footwear and join us, our resident scholar, who wasn’t even paying attention to us, called on her to assist him. He was enthusiastically exploring the place.

“You heard him! Anything to promote this ruin, right! Go right ahead! ♪” I gave her a smile and a wave as she froze in place.

She gritted her teeth as she reluctantly headed toward Mr. Falgar.

“Right here. Do you know what this says?” he asked.

“Let me see...” the vampire replied. “This is in regards to a certain object that lies ahead.”

Wait, what happened to her weird pose and stuff? Does she not mind letting her story get so half-baked? She seemed a little miffed she’d been interrupted from entering the footbath and displayed a bit of impatience, quickly translating the text while dropping her earlier theatrics.

“Oh? And is there anything else?” Mr. Falgar asked.

“There’s a treasure chest in the back. It recommends you grab an item from there to equip before walking down a different path.”

Uh? Hello? What happened to the riddles? It just sounds like you’re just telling him the rules of this attraction.

“I see...” he replied pensively. “This must be some sort of trap, or perhaps it was written to lead us on in some way. How very mysterious...”

Even though I was personally able to poke so many holes in Victorica’s world-building it now resembled Swiss cheese, Mr. Falgar seemed to have no qualms carrying on with this mess of a story. He’d already bought into the idea that he’d stumbled upon an ancient ruin, so this faux ruin equipped with a hot spring seemed genuinely full of incomprehensible mysteries to him.

"You mentioned a treasure chest? I'm curious about that," I said. "I feel so tempted to open it."

"I understand that feeling completely! That's the beauty of exploring a ruin!" Mr. Falgar said from a distance away, giving me a thumbs-up in agreement.

I wasn't sure if I should be happy or sad to hear his opinion, but in any case, it stood to reason that just as people were prone to pulling the levers of traps, so too were they drawn to opening treasure chests. *Or maybe that's just me...*

I eagerly got out of the footbath and walked over to Victorica barefooted. I peeked into the room ahead and saw another skeleton employee. Let it be known that Mr. Falgar once again clobbered this skeleton without giving it a chance to explain itself. *Uh, well, you know, it kinda looks like it was just wiping down the chest and cleaning it... My condolences.* I internally joined my hands in prayer toward the skeleton.

"Whew! It's only natural for skeletons to be guarding a treasure chest," Mr. Falgar said. "Now then, what was it guarding, I wonder?"

I don't think it was guarding the chest, just cleaning it so that visitors could use the items with ease.

"Ah, it looks like a trap will activate once I open the chest," he said. "This happens all the time in ruins. Stay here while I open the chest."

Okay, so I feel like that's just an anti-theft device, and if you ask an employee, they'd just open it without any problems. It's not just me that's thinking this, right...? I was on such a dramatically different wavelength than Mr. Falgar it'd made me feel a pang of doubt about what I understood to be true.

He didn't even try to disarm the traps—he just ripped open the chest forcibly and grabbed the weapon that flew at him as a result.

Ha ha ha. I don't even know what an archaeologist is anymore... My image of an archaeologist had morphed into something weirder than this ruin.

"Are these... clothes?" Mr. Falgar said with bemusement as he rummaged through the chest. He took out an item.

"Wait, isn't that a bathing suit?" I asked.

When I'd gone to the Relirex Kingdom, I'd suggested a design for women's bathing suits, and Mr. Falgar had taken out an article of clothing that closely resembled my design. This made little sense—in terms of fashion trends, this bathing suit was rather recent. Why was it inside of this chest?

Upon closer inspection, there were bathing suits of all sizes, and while a majority of them were for women, there were a few suits for men, though most of them were old and tattered. Because many of these bathing suits seemed new, I realized that someone had been diligently changing these outfits or maintaining this area very well. I was impressed, but at the same time, I couldn't help but view this situation from their eyes, causing me to feel a little down. *This is bad... It's too much for me...*

"Bathing suits in an ancient ruin? What could it mean?" Mr. Falgar wondered before he gasped. "Could it be? Is this the old ruin staple? A trial that'll guide me to the heart of this place?"

I have a sneaky feeling that it's just so that your clothes won't get wet in the hot spring—you know, a bit of considerate hospitality.

Still, I was just assuming all of this. "Is this really a trial?" I whispered to Victorica. "There isn't a weird curse or anything, is there?"

"None at all," Victorica whispered back. "It just says that you may wear a bathing suit or no clothes at all if that's your preference. It even states that it would be greatly preferred if women chose the latter..."

"Uh, your father seems to have been brimming with ulterior motives."

"Quite so. I do not plan to defend my father in this regard."

"Then the newest bathing suits in here are..."

"It was likely that my father left behind orders to *only* keep up to date with regard to the swimwear. Haah... This is why men are so..."

"Hm? Did you say that we don't have to wear anything?" Mr. Falgar asked, eavesdropping on portions of our conversation. "Very well. Then I'll face that trial head-on!"

"Huh?!" Victorica and I gasped.

“Hmph!”

For whatever reason, he took all his clothes off right then and there and proudly stood completely naked.

“Aaahhh!” I screamed.

“Why are you stripping in front of young maidens?! You perveeert!” Victorica shrieked.

Indeed, we’d witnessed something we’d never expected to see, and I ran out screaming while Victorica roared in fury and launched a flying kick toward Mr. Falgar.

5. HOORAY! A... HOT SPRING?

“That’s... quite a disaster, I suppose,” Magiluka said sympathetically with a troubled expression.

We were telling her about what’d happened as we chose our bathing suits. When we scolded Mr. Falgar about his nakedness, he claimed that he didn’t mind, warranting him another kick from Victorica. He realized that we minded, so he donned some cloth around his waist before he waited outside for us while we changed.

“In any case, do you think we really ought to be exploring an ancient ruin in bathing suits?” I asked.

“It is quite revolutionary, is it not?” Victorica replied. “We of the Bloodrain clan do not shy away from trailblazing!” She’d changed into a bathing suit immediately and puffed her chest out with pride.

“But perhaps there’s no need for us to be dressed in bathing suits,” Magiluka said.

“Well, I suppose we should think about the employees who kept this place maintained every day...” I replied. “Don’t you feel like we should do it for them?”

I finished putting on my suit and checked how it fit as I offered my condolences to the late employees. Magiluka must’ve felt just as much pity because she said nothing more and started changing. *The bathing suits here are mostly bikinis—actually, are any of*

these not bikinis? Am I just imagining things here?

"Thank you for your patience, Mr. Falgar..." I called after the three of us finished changing.

He was stuck to the aforementioned statue like a gecko as he felt around. *I guess I shouldn't be surprised after we met him while he was wandering around on the ceiling. Is he just always like this? I didn't think an archaeologist was supposed to traipse about this way. If this is considered normal, I'll probably crumple on the spot and weep.*

"Hm, well, I was looking into this statue since it doesn't correlate with any civilization that I'm familiar with," he replied. "It's very interesting, so I was trying to take a closer look."

Well, yeah. It's a child's drawing. If there's any civilization that uses art like this... wait, I guess that does make me a little curious.

"I can look into this later. Why don't we go on ahead for now?" he said.

He gracefully jumped from the statue and landed in front of us before he eagerly walked ahead into the corridor. We walked past the changing room and were greeted by a surprising sight.

"Wooow!" I shouted with joy. "It's a huge bath! Is this all a hot spring?!"

The large baths were a pleasant surprise. I'd felt like we'd come so close yet so far in terms of hot springs, and I was moved to see something that finally fit the bill. My one problem was that there was only one enormous bath, indicating that men and women were to bathe together in one area.

"Hmm, a hot spring. This means..." Mr. Falgar said, puzzled by the bath within the hot spring. He checked the temperature of the water as he seemed deep in thought. "I see. This place had an abundant source of hot water that helped the ancient civilization thrive. They might've seen a hot spring as a god or an object of worship. Then is that statue out front a hot spring deity? Hm, is that bizarre form supposed to be tied to the hot springs somehow?"

I thought that he'd finally noticed that this was all a farce, but his thoughts had run wild.

"Why don't we leave the expert be and take a dip?" I suggested.

"It feels a little odd to bathe while wearing a bathing suit..." Magiluka muttered.

"Then do you want to strip?" I knew how she felt and placed a hand on her suit...

"Let's go in, Lady Mary."

...but she quickly fled from me and headed into the hot spring.

"There might be traps here too, so be careful," Mr. Falgar warned as he continued his investigation.

At a glance, there was nothing suspicious. I carelessly entered the bath and slid into the water.

"Wow, so *this* is a hot spring! It's so large!"

As the water went up to my shoulders, I faced up to lie down, letting the water float me to the center of the area.

"Lady Mary, you mustn't move around in that attire. It's really quite unladylike," Magiluka scolded me as she carefully bathed in a corner.

I sat up and glanced at her. "We're at a hot spring. It's such a waste to use only a small corner of it. Come on, let's bathe in the center! Hm?"

As I got to the middle of the hot spring, I noticed a circular platform on the floor. We could sit on it and only keep half of our bodies in the water. *This is great!* I sat on the platform without a second thought. The moment I did so, however, there was a low rumble as it lowered just a bit. Right on cue, the interior rumbled loudly, and the entrance was quickly blocked off by a stone wall.

"Huh?" I said.

I had no idea what'd happened as I gazed at our closed exit, unable to react.

"Oh no! This must be a trap!" Mr. Falgar said, understanding the situation we were in. "For whatever reason, a trap must have been activated!"

He seemed a little excited as he glanced around, and I froze in my seat. I started to sweat, and it wasn't due to the hot water. *Crap, is this one of those floor traps you see in games where a certain amount of weight is required to activate it?*

"Lady Mary?" Magiluka asked puzzledly. She must've been confused as to why I was so still despite this emergency situation.

"Y-Yes?!" I shrieked. "N-N-N-No! I didn't do it on purpose! I didn't think they'd put a weight-activated switch within a hot spring! We're buoyant in water, so this is absurd! Ah, wait, it's not like I'm especially heavy or anything!"

"Calm down, Lady Mary. I can't understand what you're trying to say when you speak so quickly. Take deep breaths."

In my haste, I'd forgotten to breathe as I'd tried to justify my actions, and even I didn't know what I was talking about anymore. I inhaled and exhaled, calming myself. It was then that a loud clack echoed throughout the room.

"Look up at the ceiling. Those are iron stakes. While we're trapped inside, the ceiling will keep lowering itself, eventually skewering us if we stay here. That's what that spiky ceiling is all about," Mr. Falgar said, kindly explaining it all to us.

His voice had a tone of excitement. I'd never expected to actually experience a scene from the movies, and my panic only increased.

"Wh-Wh-What do we do, Magilukaaa?!" I screamed.

"C-Calm down, Lady Mary— Wah!" Magiluka yelped all of a sudden.

"I'm sorry! I'm sooo sorry! It's all my fault!"

"H-Hey! My bathing suit's slipping!"

I imagined the worst-case scenario that happened in movies as I clung on to Magiluka and dove into the water with her. I continued to apologize within the water as we both splashed around.

"Ah, I see. I see how it is," Victorica said, putting her hands together nonchalantly. She seemed to have come to some sort of understanding.

"How can you still be enjoying the water at a time like this?" I growled. It was human instinct to complain when someone was calm while you were panicking, after all... Or, well, that was probably just me...

"Well, before I entered, I read a sign that read, 'Skewered Ceiling Hot Spring. Enjoy the thrill of the sharp ceiling trap closing in on you while relaxing in the baths.' I had been wondering what that was all about, but now I know," she replied.

"Enjoy it?! How can we enjoy something like that?!" I was in an emergency situation—do forgive the lapse in my usual ladylike grace.

"There's always a way to disarm traps like these. Please search for the solution!" Mr. Falgar said. "I'll do my best to delay the ceiling from falling on us as much as possible!"

The three of us were still in a shouting match in the center of the hot spring. When he mentioned delaying the falling ceiling, I'd expected some sort of ingenious plan, but the archaeologist had decided to brute-force it. He jumped onto a convenient platform, grabbed one of the stakes on the ceiling with both arms and flexed his muscles with a grunt, pushing the platform back. For better or for worse, this caused me to calm down.

"Why don't we use magic to destroy the rock that's blocking the entrance?" I asked.

"You can't do that!" Mr. Falgar and Victorica both yelled.

"Wh-Why not?"

"This ruin is in the middle of a mountain, and it looks to be rather aged and fragile. The impact of the magic might cause this entire area to crumble, causing us to be buried alive. Not to mention I found this mysterious ruin all by myself—I want to write a proper report documenting everything I've found, so I'd like to keep everything as is!" the archaeologist reasoned.

"I see," I replied. "That's all well and good, except I think you might care more about the last part. Am I imagining things, Victorica?"

"That does not matter!" she replied. "Who do you think pays for the maintenance costs here? The restoration costs that would occur from your attack would earn me a scolding from Orbus!"

"Wait, are you valuing a scolding and money over human lives?" I couldn't let this comment slide.

This reminds me of Emilia. Why do the people I know from the Relirex Kingdom get so obsessed with money sometimes?

"I-In any case, we must disarm the traps," Victorica said, walking away and ignoring my inquiry.

I turned to Magiluka, who was fixing her bathing suit and floating away from me as well. I was scared of the ceiling, so I went on all fours and swam toward Magiluka.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I won't do that anymore, so please forgive me."

"A-All right," she answered before scolding me. "L-Lady Mary, you should stop acting so abruptly and calm yourself down first."

I couldn't give her a confident nod. "I-I'll do my best."

"Lady Victorica, is a way to disarm this ceiling written down somewhere?" she asked, crouching just like me.

"There was, but I do not think it's a viable method," Victorica replied. She also followed suit and swam toward us on all fours.

"Wait, why?" I asked. If there was a method, there was no reason not to use it.

"It says to pull the lever on the other side of the door to disarm the ceiling," she replied.

"Why would they have such a mean solution?! They should've prepared a much nicer method! They should've! They should've! They should've!" I started throwing a tantrum and clasped Victorica's shoulders before shaking her.

"S-Stop that! I can feel my brain sloshing around..." she pleaded.

"Hey, Mary! Open up! You found a hot spring, didn't you? I'd love to go in!"

Right as I was about to panic, I heard a carefree voice in my head. I turned toward the stone door with such energy that the other two ladies looked shocked.

“Snow!” I cried.

I remembered that no-good leopard—I mean, divine beast that we’d left behind and dashed to the door. Mr. Falgar had been doing his best, but the ceiling continued to fall down on us. I knew that we were still nowhere close to the spikes, but I couldn’t help but crouch a little.

“Snow! Open the door!” I yelled through the door.

“Huh? You guys should be opening this place for me. Stop being mean! Open up!”

I could hear her scratching away at our exit.

“Nooo!” I yelled. “We’re trapped inside and we can’t get out!”

“Yeah? Well, whatever. You should be fine. You won’t die so easily.”

“I might be fine, but everyone else won’t be, and it’ll be all my fault!”

“I see, I see. So you screwed up again, huh? Listen well, my lady! You must be more vigilant on a daily—”

“Stop trying to mimic Tutte to scold me! Just hurry up and get the door open! There should be a lever nearby!”

“Hm? A lever? Let’s see... Ah, is it this chain dangling from a ring inside the cavity of the wall?”

“I think so! Pull it down!”

I breathed a sigh of relief, hoping that my mistake would yield the minimum amount of casualties possible.

“Snow?” I asked.

“Mary, my front paw won’t fit inside of the cavity, so I can’t pull the chain.”

“Show some willpower! Come on, just shove your paw in there!”

I then heard a thud from the other side of the door.

"Oops. I think it broke."

"You fooool!"

I didn't even need an explanation to imagine what had occurred on the other side. I didn't care if people heard me as I bellowed with fury.

"All right, then. Let's break it."

"W-W-W-Wait, Miss Snow, what are you talking about?"

"Yah!"

I felt the door shudder loudly with Snow's voice. I immediately knew that she was tackling the stone. I saw both the door and its surroundings start to crack.

"Hey! Idiot! Stop it!"

"Yah!"

I sensed danger and swiftly jumped to the side. A loud rumble soon followed as the door was broken into bits and a large fluffy white animal jumped in.

"Aaaand it's open!" Snow said gallantly as she stood proudly before us.

"You idiooot!" I screamed. **"Why'd you do that?!"**

I heard Mr. Falgar and Victorica shouting behind me, but I decided to ignore that for now. As the archaeologist had guessed, cracks ran from the broken door and spread throughout the area as the passageway we'd come from completely collapsed. We had stopped the trap, but with no way out now, we were trapped inside of this ruin.

"Okay, let's destroy this entire place," I said, speaking my mind.

"Hey! You're one to talk!"

A loud thud shook the entire room, and the ceiling stopped.

"I-It stopped..." Mr. Falgar said as he was still trying to push the ceiling back.

He was the first to notice the change as he jumped off the platform.

"Because the ruin has collapsed, it may have coincidentally stopped the trap as well," he surmised.

I approached Victorica, wanting to know the truth.

"What really happened?" I whispered.

"It's not a coincidence at all," she answered proudly. "It is common sense for traps like these to have a safety measure should an accident occur. Traps should stop immediately to prevent any further mishaps."

"There's nothing common about that sense..." I wasn't shocked because I'd expected as much, but I couldn't help but wonder if it was fine to just let it go.

"Oh, and if we must repair this trap, an employee will emerge to guide us..." she added.

A portion of the wall slid open and a skeleton appeared. Needless to say, Mr. Falgar obliterated it within seconds.

"Whew, that was close. A double trap, I see. How impressive!" Mr. Falgar said. "But don't worry, I found a new path. Let's leave from there."

"Okay," I said.

I accepted that Mr. Falgar and I would never see the world the same way and acquiesced to just following him outside the half-destroyed hot spring. *God, I pray that there's another hot spring somewhere out there that doesn't have weird traps like this one.*

6. THE SHOCKING TRUTH IS REVEALED

Like an adventure movie, we'd run into a number of unwelcome incidents as our so-called adventure continued. For example, we'd approached a room with a treasure chest, and as I'd opened it, a pitfall had appeared below me, allowing me the pleasure of enjoying a bath filled with various animal skeletons floating on the water around

like rose petals. Then there'd been another hot spring with a large swinging blade above it, offering the thrill of a bath with constant bobbing and weaving away from getting your head chopped off.

In any case, we'd experienced quite a bit. "But Mary," I hear you say, "you've got nothing to worry about!" Sure, but tell that to my clothes. What scraps remained were in danger of getting washed away or tearing off from friction, and I was terrified. In a manner of speaking, the deadliest trap that I'd yet to spring was my outfit. *I could cry thinking about how I'm probably the one who's best equipped to enjoy these hot springs...*

"This place... is different from the rest," Mr. Falgar said as he stopped ahead of us and stared at the wall before him. As he'd said, this entrance had a unique thick double door.

"I don't think there's been any doors since the entrance," I said. "Maybe there's an employee somewhere—"

"Huh? An employee?" he asked.

"U-Uh nothing! Nothing at all!" Victorica answered in my stead while covering my mouth, stopping me from spilling the beans.

"Lady Victorica, what could be written here?" Magiluka asked.

"Well... this is the only place without any sort of sign," the vampire replied, removing her hands from my mouth.

I stared dubiously. "*This* is where they've decided to stop playing nice? This place sucks."

"Mweh heh heh. It appears you fail to understand. This must be the final area. We must use the wisdom and courage that we have gained during our journey to overcome our last trial! That must be what this door is saying!" she declared vigorously, clenching her fist resolutely.

"You're exactly right, Victorica!" Mr. Falgar replied, creating a fist as well.

"I see. That's fair," I replied, convinced. Mr. Falgar, Victorica, and I were getting all fired up. "Judging from the patterns we've encountered—"

"Er, Lady Mary, this door simply opens," Magiluka said casually.

"Huh?" the three of us said.

Snow lightly pushed, causing the doors to open with a dull creak. The three of us pursed our lips and watched on.

"W-Well, I guess we don't need a sign if it just opens normally," I said. "I'd expected this door to have some sort of trap that we'd need to overcome using the wisdom and courage we'd gained over the course of our adventure, but I guess we shouldn't be too hasty with our assumptions."

"Oh dear, Mary. A bit overexcited, were you not?" Victorica said.

"Well, that happens too. No worries, Mary!" Mr. Falgar said.

"Hey, don't act like you two have nothing to do with this!" I replied. My teammates had immediately betrayed me, foisting all the embarrassment for this fiasco on me alone. "We were in this together!"

"Wh-Why don't we walk ahead! Let's march forward!"

"Quite right!"

The two fled from my glare and walked toward the door. There was no use sulking here, so I reluctantly followed them and entered the room.

I was greeted by a chamber that was much larger and more spacious than the previous areas. In the far reaches of the room stood a pedestal atop a staircase, adjacent to which were alcoves housing massive suits of armor that looked poised to emerge and protect the pedestal at any moment. It really did feel like we'd reached the end and were about to approach some sort of hidden treasure.

On closer inspection, the object on the pedestal that the armors were surrounding was a large sphere around three meters in diameter. When we approached it, we noticed that it was already activating, and a faintly glowing geometric pattern appeared from above.

"What... is that?" I muttered.

"I feel an immense amount of magical energy," Victorica replied. "It must be a rather high-class magic item."

"That must be the hidden treasure of this ruin! My archaeologist's spirit draws me to it!" Mr. Falgar cried excitedly.

I was still feeling petty about the way the two of them had just betrayed me, so I chose to take their opinions with a grain of salt as I began to calmly analyze the enshrined sphere. It was glowing, and though it was hard to tell from afar, it was actually translucent, allowing us a view of its insides—the ball was hollow and contained some sort of bubbling liquid, and a pipe led from within the ball to below the ground.

"Magiluka, I might just be imagining things, but... is that sphere what I think it is?" I asked with a strained smile.

"Yes, I suspect it's exactly what it looks like," she answered, wearing a similar explanation.

"That magic item is boiling that liquid?"

"And the liquid is water, I believe."

"W-Wait! No way! We're jumping to conclusions, right? Maybe it's just a container to hold all the water!"

"I-Indeed. It must simply be a storage device. This ruin is so large, after all."

We both fell silent, unwilling to accept this outcome. We both tried to think of a different reason for this item, but we soon ran out of excuses. *Maybe there weren't any signs here because they couldn't show this to their guests. They should've at least had an "Employees Only" sign or locked it then.*

As my irritation was beginning to surface, I noticed Mr. Falgar was observing the area with interest, and Victorica was staring intently at the item until she suddenly froze. *Ah, she's noticed it too.*

"Whoops, I totally forgot to lock this area!" a man's voice suddenly echoed throughout the room.

We readied ourselves for whatever might be coming and turned toward the voice, and

before long, a middle-aged man entered the room. He was slender yet muscular, and he had a relatively deep voice. In addition to his handsome features, he was dressed in workwear—he was such an unexpected sight in the middle of these ancient ruins we all had to take a second to go “Huh?”

“Hm? Oh wow, customers? Hey, you know you’re not supposed to just come back here, right?”

Along with his clothes, his casual manner of speaking was totally opposite from my mental image of dandy middle-aged men. I’d gotten used to having my expectations betrayed due to Mr. Falgar though—I was even prepared to go as far as to say the ways he’d broken the mold were charming to me.

“Lady Mary, that person’s eyes and fangs... He must be a vampire,” Magiluka whispered to me calmly while I was lost in my thoughts.

As she’d noted, the man had black eyes with red irises, a unique trait of vampires, and sharp fangs protruding from his mouth. It was commonly said that vampires were good-looking, and this man was no exception.

“A-And you are?” I asked.

“Hm? Me? Oh, I’m just a dude that manages this place!” he replied.

“‘Manage’? Is he perhaps a gravekeeper? No, he doesn’t look human. Those characteristics! A-Are you a vampire?!” Mr. Falgar yelled.

“Hm? Yeah, I’m a vampire. Why’re you asking?”

“I-Impossible! S-So this ruin must be a vampire’s... That’s why humans know nothing of this place.”

The archaeologist and the manager continued to converse, but I could tell their conversation was doomed to never get anywhere. Thinking it was best to tell the truth, I glanced over at Victorica.

“Hey! You over there! Would you care to explain what *this* is?!” Victorica roared angrily instead of spilling the truth. She pointed to the large sphere.

“Ah, you saw that? I guess I shoulda locked the doors. My bad. Well, no helping it

then..." the manager said with a sigh.

"Be careful, everyone!" Magiluka shouted.

The vampire man placed a hand on the wall, and I reflexively grabbed Magiluka's hand, brought her close, and jumped back, hoping to protect her. Suddenly, the floor where I just was opened with a clack. The fissure was wide enough that no normal person would have managed to have jumped away in time to evade it—as a result, Mr. Falgar had thus fallen in. Snow, possibly having reacted to Magiluka's warning too, had leaped away and managed to stay with us. Victorica had almost fallen, but she'd used her flying ability that she was so proud of to keep herself above the pit.

"This is a trap hole..." I observed.

"He kept glancing at the wall every now and then, so I thought that he was going to do something..." Magiluka replied.

"I'm impressed with how perceptive you are! You saved me."

"I should be saying that to you—all I do is notice things. You've saved me again, Lady Mary. I'm so sorry." She turned to me apologetically.

"No need for apologies. I've always been relying on you. It'd actually be great if you could rely on me even more during times like these—nothing could make me happier. I'll protect you with everything I have. I'm invincible, you know?"

I grinned and held her tight. It was a little embarrassing to say, but I didn't want to shy away from telling her my genuine feelings.

After I let Magiluka loose from my grasp, the floor beneath us closed back up as though nothing was amiss. The manager kept his hand near the switch on the wall as he looked at us in shock.

"I'm surprised," he said. "I wanted you all to leave this ruin before things got troublesome, but I didn't expect you to dodge that. I suppose it's only fair since you've come this far."

Leave? So Mr. Falgar was just sent outside? I think he'll be fine no matter what, though...
I gave a forced smile as I remembered the muscular archaeologist.

"Wh-Wh-What is the meaning of this?" Victorica said, still floating slightly just in case as her brows started to twitch.

"Well, you almost found out that we just boil the water, y'know?" the manager replied.

It was just what we'd expected, but I hadn't wanted to hear the awful truth revealed so casually.

"You *boil* the water?! The hot spring is a fraud?!" Victorica shouted.

"Huh? I thought you noticed it already. It used to be a normal hot spring, but we kind of arbitrarily made it bigger and didn't have enough water, so..." the manager replied, divulging the ugly truth.

"Of your own accord?"

"Yep. I wanted to mix together traps, hot springs, and young ladies in bathing suits. After many years of imagining the ideal institution, I started adding more and more facilities. I then realized that I didn't have enough hot spring water for it all, so I used a magic item to add more water for free. And surprise surprise, I ended up being able to lie about the maintenance fees and skim a little off the top. Whew, I sure am glad that the current master's completely indifferent toward this place! Thanks to them, we're really raking it in off next year's budget! Ha ha ha!"

Uh, who's gonna tell him he's revealing all this in front of that current master he's dissing?

As I'd expected, Victorica laughed loudly along with the manager. This was her signal that she was about to lose her top.

"I admire your courage! Now, dig the earwax out of your ear and listen veeeery well! Who do you think I am?! I am the master of the Bloodrain clan, the oldest and strongest vampire, Victorica Bloodrain! Bow down, whelp!"

Instead of tugging her eyepatch away with gusto, she gently removed it while making some dynamic movements with a grin. She bared her fangs and her revealed red eye glittered, giving her an impressive appearance. I couldn't imagine I was the only one who was tempted to bow down to her like some part of historical drama.

"The master... of the Bloodrain clan?" the manager murmured in shock as he stood in

place.

This was Victorica's first visit to this facility—even if the manager had heard of her, he likely hadn't been able to identify her as the master at a glance. I could only offer a word of condolence at this scenario.

"Ha ha ha! Now, now, you mustn't lie! How could the current master be a little squirt like you, hmm?" he replied with a laugh.

"Who are you calling a squirt?!" Victorica roared.

I had no idea what to do in this situation.

"Don't think I don't know! I've heard that the current master isn't a kid like you, but a bewitching, voluptuous lady! Full of curves!" the manager declared, illustrating his point using raunchy hand gestures. Truly, his handsome face was wasted on him.

It sounds like he's taken liberties with his mental image of the current master, grafting his imagination onto whatever information he's received.

"How rude! I am bewitching and full of curves! Look!"

Ah, whoops, sorry. I guess it wasn't his own imagination—the current master had simply fed him the wrong information.

"Curves? Pfft..." he snickered after sizing her up.

Victorica jolted in anger, a vein popping up on her temple.

"Hourglass physiques are more like..." the manager said, his eyes wandering over to me. "Ah, nope, not you."

My mouth twitched in fury.

He then looked over at Magiluka. "Oh, look! That lady over there seems like she has some decent prospects—"

"Fire Ball!" Victorica bellowed in anger.

I had no intention of stopping her or scolding her; in fact, I felt quite refreshed by her

actions. Why, you ask? Well... I'll exercise my right to remain silent.

"That was close!" the manager yelped, gracefully dodging the attack. "Hey, you're forbidden to use fire here! Do you know how dangerous it is if something lights up?!"

"Like I care!" Victorica yelled while launching more attacks.

"No, we should listen to him. It's dangerous, right?" I said.

"Damn it! I thought we'd finally gotten customers, but it's just you mischievous brats! This is awful! It seems like you even destroyed part of our facilities! If you're gonna keep wrecking the place, fine! I'll just use *that*!"

The manager continued to dodge Victorica's attacks as he dashed toward a certain direction and opened a box stuck to the wall.

"Guardians! Get theeeeem!" he shouted while banging the side of the box.

Clangs of metal reverberated throughout the room, causing Victorica to also pause her barrage.

"Lady Mary, the suits of armor around the walls are all..." Magiluka gasped while pointing.

The massive metallic suits slowly started to move as though they had wills of their own.

"*Those are living armors! This is bad!*" Snow cried.

"Living armor... The armor of dead spirits... Interesting," I replied.

"*Heeey! This is no time to get all doe-eyed about encountering a new creature!*"

"Ha ha ha, when I first entered this room, I sort of expected them to move in the end. I'd half given up on that hope, but look! Was I right or what?!"

I'd gotten so at my wit's end that I was trying to brag about my intuition for no discernible reason. *God, I'll no longer make selfish requests like wanting to bathe in a hot spring. Please let this fuss die down now.* My time in the baths seemed like a distant dream as I looked up toward the sky.

7. JUST IN CASE...

"I applaud your courage for trying to throw these at me!" Victorica yelled with a fearless smile. "I shall crush them into smithereens!"

Talking and negotiating was no longer part of the equation as the master of the Bloodrain clan stood in front of the suits of armor.

"Summon Minion!" Victorica chanted.

A large magic circle appeared, then a colossal dragon-shaped heap of bones slowly emerged with loud thuds, emanating an aura of terror.

"A-A bone dragon?!" the manager yelped in astonishment. "I-Impossible! I only know one person who could summon that beast... I-Is that mischievous brat really the master?!"

He stood there stunned as he tried to process the conclusion that he'd just reached. Victorica huffed and smiled, standing proudly with her feet apart.

"Th-This is a scam!" he screamed, pointing a finger at the clan master.

"*You would know a thing or two about that!*" Victorica shouted back furiously.

Well, it sounds like she really did mislead others about her image, so I won't defend her there...

"Bone dragon! Destroy him!" Victorica commanded.

It gave a nod and a thunderous roar. Its head rammed into the ceiling and a large pipe with gusto. While I'd crushed the beast when I'd gone against it, this monster, though made of bone, was still a dragon. It was destroying the facility with ease.

"Ack!"

The bone dragon's horn had likely gotten stuck—every time it shook its head, the pipe started to groan and bend, causing the inevitable to occur.

"Mweh heh heh. Shudder in fear at my abyssal powers and bow to— Gaaaah!"

Victorica had struck a cool pose, but a waterfall of hot water gushed on top of her head.

Needless to say, this was the work of the bone dragon, who'd broken the large pipe. The dragon, seeing that it had screwed up, quickly shifted away from its master, making a face like "Oh crap! That was my bad!"

Despite being under the massive amount of water that gushed from the broken pipes like a small waterfall, Victorica maintained her pose and endured it. She was oddly resilient in certain situations, but her clothes surely couldn't take this abuse.

"Victorica, you should come on out before you have an accident with your clothes," I called out.

"Waaaah!" she said, gasping for air as she hastily ran out from the waterfall. Her face was red as she gritted her teeth. "C-Curses! How could he launch such an insolent attack?! Such an act is worthy of death!"

"You kinda hurt yourself of your own accord on that one!"

"Silence! That pervert! Go, bone dragon! If you mess up this time, no more snacks for you!"

Her way of ordering her minion was childish. I wasn't even sure if bones required snacks, and I couldn't stop wondering about it, but the dragon hastily jumped forward to fight against the armors. Judging from its reaction, snacks seemed important. *Huh... The world of the undead is full of surprises.*

The suits of armor stood fearless in the face of the dragon's roar as they swung their large blades. One swept its massive weapon at the dragon's foot, and a dull clang rang out as the sword was repelled—then the minion twisted its body to deliver a sweep of its tail in return. Another suit of armor stepped in, using its shield to block the tail attack. I was overwhelmed by the intense battle and gulped.

"Lady Mary, your holy magic!" Magiluka advised, pointing at a suit of armor remaining still.

I snapped out of my daze. "Right, right! Turn Undead!"

I reflexively cast holy magic onto the armor that she'd pointed at. I'd expected the metal to be surrounded in light and purified, but it only staggered a little and nothing

more.

"Wait, it doesn't work..." I said.

"Gah ha ha! Just in case, I made these suits of armor resistant to holy magic! Just in case!" the manager said triumphantly.

"But it doesn't mean that your attacks are completely ineffective," Magiluka reasoned. "Lady Mary, can you use a higher-order holy spell? When you were at Lady Victorica's castle, you sneaked out to read a few books, did you not? When I asked you about it, you stated that you wanted it to be a secret so you could say the words 'just in case.' Were you perhaps..."

"Er... That was ice magic..."

I'd been in high spirits at the time and I'd eagerly pored over some new spells just in case they'd be useful. However, the spells I'd learned weren't convenient for this situation, and I felt embarrassed that my plan had evidently been a bust. Furthermore, my enemy had succeeded in his preparations, causing me to feel even more humiliated.

"I'm sorry, Magiluka..." I said. "I'm so useless... From now on, I'll consult you regarding spells that I should learn..."

"Ah, of course. I understand. Please don't look so down. I'm also at fault for relying on you."

Mortified, I started to sulk, and Magiluka petted my head to console me.

"You two! Stop flirting in the middle of battle! I also want to do all sorts of things with a beautiful older sister while the fiery passion of fighting still remains within my heart. Hee hee hee hee..." Victorica had started to scold us, but her indulgent delusions surfaced before long, and she laughed creepily.

Who even is the older sister she has in mind? Never mind, I shouldn't think about it.

"W-We're not flirting!" I insisted. "And you should stop that creepy laugh in the middle of battle!"

"C-Creepy?! How could you say that to me?! You useless woman!"

"Oh, you wanna go there, huh? You really went there, didn't you? All right, it's war! Step outside!"

"Outside? Do you plan to lead the way? You don't even know where the exit is! Pffft! Yeah, go outside, if you *can!* Ha ha ha ha!"

I bared my fangs at Victorica to hide my shame as we left the bone dragon to do all the fighting for some reason. As we continued to bicker...

"Watch out!" Magiluka cried. "Earth Wall!"

I ducked around the bone dragon and turned toward a suit of armor as a wall of dirt blocked its path. Because the thing required a moment to change its trajectory, there was more than enough time for us to fight back.

"Outta my way!" Victorica and I yelled, each of us landing kicks on the armor.

It soared beautifully through the air. We breathed a sigh of relief when we noticed that the armor was flying toward a certain large sphere.

"Oops..." we said, perfectly in sync.

A large crash resounded as the armor flew into the sphere and landed with a rumble. I watched on nervously while everyone fell silent.

A massive rumble like never before echoed throughout the room.

The sphere broke the silence as it started to vibrate. *Oh god. Oh no, no, no. That looks like a bad vibration.* Buckets of cold sweat ran down my back as Victorica and I continued to watch. Even the suits of armor and the bone dragon had stopped fighting to stare at the sphere.

Gradually, the rumbling subsided, then the item went quiet.

"It... stopped," I said with a gulp.

"It did," Victorica agreed, gulping herself.

In the next moment, however, an enormous cascade of water, exponentially greater than the geyser that the large pipe had spilled when the bone dragon had destroyed

it, started to gush out. The water level of the room rose at once, going up to our ankles.

"Wh-What's... Ack, it's so hot!" Victorica yelled, raising one leg in pain.

Even I started to feel the sweltering heat as the hot water drastically rose in temperature. Steam and hot water were surging forth from the sphere and enveloping the room—what felt like the worst imaginable scenario had suddenly become our reality.

"How could you do this?!" the manager yelled. "You caused the magical energy to run berserk, so now the item's starting to heat up uncontrollably! The water output is screwed up too, so it's running wild! This entire ruin will flood, or worst case, this room won't be able to endure the heat and it'll explode!"

"If you understand it so well, stop the magic item!" I shouted back.

"What, you think I know how to handle this thing?!"

"If you don't, then don't use it!"

"You guys are the ones who caused this! Take responsibility and do something!"

As the manager and I started a shouting match, the water level had quickly started to rise. The sphere began to shimmer as its surface temperature continued to spike.

"Argh! We're getting nowhere!" the manager said, cutting off the argument. "Then I'll do *this*!"

He quickly rushed toward the sphere. I breathed a sigh of relief, thinking that despite it all, he still had an emergency plan to help us escape. He stopped in his tracks and immediately changed directions. He was headed toward the exit.

"I'm running!" he declared, dashing through the open exit while making loud splashes as he disappeared into the distance. For a split second, we were all stunned by his actions.

"H-Heeeeey! Don't run!" Victorica shouted. She was the first to snap back to her senses.

"Victorica, we should run too!" I suggested.

"We must stop that sphere!" she insisted. "With an item that big and its magical energy running berserk, an explosion is no joke!"

"H-How big would the explosion be?"

"At the very least, it could easily destroy this entire ruin. You both may flee. As the master of my house, I shall do something about it."

Her words were commendable, and I felt like I shouldered part of the responsibility. I was compelled to cooperate with her. *Responsibility is a scary word...*

"A-A-A-A-All right! I'll go over there and punch that thing into bits!" I stammered, sounding like the manager as I crumbled under pressure.

I clenched my fist and glanced at the sphere. Despite this perilous situation, the animated suits of armor were fulfilling their duties and fighting against the bone dragon.

"This tone of voice is quite unlike you," Victorica said, looking at me warily.

"Lady Mary, significant shock might cause the magic item to explode," Magiluka advised, placing a hand over my fist. "Lady Victorica, this might be a forceful method, but is it possible for us to cool the item to prevent it from growing any hotter?"

"Cooling... That is indeed worth trying out, but judging by how hot it is, any normal spell would immediately be swallowed up by the heat. Not to mention the suits of armor are in the way."

I took deep breaths to calm down while the other two ladies continued to hash out a plan. Magiluka, perhaps worried about me, would occasionally glance my way.

"Ahem, er, do you know of any high-order *ice* spells, Lady Victorica?" Magiluka asked.

"Gr... Unfortunately, since I didn't want to be compared to *that* princess with her insane firepower, I haven't learned magic of that element," Victorica said, gnawing on her thumbnail.

I had no idea what princess she was referring to, but I could easily imagine that she was referring to a princess of some other species, and gave a dry laugh. Magiluka once again glanced my way like she was trying to tell me something. *Is she still worried*

about me? Maybe I should tell her that I'm all right now.

"Magiluka, I'm calm now. I'm fine," I said.

"Th-That's wonderful to hear. Do you have anything else you'd like to say?" she asked.

"Huh?" I tilted my head to one side.

What? Should I apologize for causing this situation? I don't think Magiluka's looking for one though. She didn't seem to want an apology, but I was still feeling the weight of some kind of expectation. It made me so confused that I started to panic. *Wh-What do I do? What does she want? Calm down—remember our previous conversations!* I soon realized what she was waiting for. *I see now! Good going, Magiluka! I'll grab your baton and take it to the finish line!*

"Heh heh heh. Don't worry, Victorica!" I said with a fearless smile.

"Wh-What is this, now? Have you gone crazy from the heat?" she asked me, slightly taken aback.

E-Errr... You know what, I'll overlook her rude remarks for now.

"Ahem!" I said, clearing my throat. "Heh heh heh. Juuust in case, I actually learned h-height order..."

"Heh. Trouble spitting it out?" Victorica snickered.

Yep, that was me, Mary Regalia, the girl who stumbled over her words during important moments like these. Please join your hands in a prayer. *Arghhhh! To think Magiluka went out of her way to set the stage for me!*

8. THE FINALE FOR EXPLORATION STORIES HAS TO BE...

"I-In any case, why don't we rely on Lady Mary and the spells she prepared just in case?" Magiluka quickly said, bringing the conversation back on track.

I was still internally agonizing over my blunder.

"Wh-What? You predicted this outcome?" Victorica asked. "I would expect no less from my rival!"

"Heh heh heh, I figured something like this might happen," I said proudly, letting it get to my head.

Well, it's honestly all a coincidence, but I've always wanted to say this line! Yep!

"Your foresight is impressive... No wonder Lady Elizabeth holds great interest in you," Victorica said. "Ah! Could you perhaps be receiving revelations from God as the Argent Holy Woman?"

"Nope. Not at all. Also, don't call me that." You'd think I'd have been happy to be praised for all my hard work, but somehow I couldn't bring myself to accept her compliments.

"Very well, I shall leave that aside," she said. "For the time being, we must disable that magic item."

I wasn't completely pleased with her phrasing, but there were matters of greater importance at the moment.

"Return, bone dragon!" Victorica chanted, creating a magic circle by her minion's feet. It slowly slid underground, as though it were sinking into a swamp.

"Why'd you return it?" I asked.

"I do not wish for my pet to get caught up in your magic, you see. Large as it is, it may be difficult to keep it outside the zone you will affect... Let me just say I would hate for it to suffer one of your 'oopsie' moments," Victorica replied.

"I see."

I agreed with her statement, but I felt like she'd just casually implied that I was a klutz. *Am I reading into things too much?*

The suits of armor, having lost their opponent, started to target us, and I didn't have time to think about it too hard.

"Snow, let Magiluka onto your back and protect her!" I requested.

"Okey dokey!"

Snow, who'd been watching us from the back, approached Magiluka and motioned for her to get on her back. Magiluka locked eyes with me in bewilderment, then she glanced at Snow and finally at the suits of armor and Victorica.

I smiled. "I'll leave the armors to you. I'll do something about that sphere!"

I stood up energetically, but the water had come up to our knees and we were all in bathing suits, so the whole scene looked more awkward than anything else. *I hope I'm not the only one feeling this way...*

"I will leave the magic item in your care!" Victorica said, all fired up. "Diamond Dust!" She launched her ice magic at the armors, but as predicted, all her ice crystals instantaneously melted from the heat, creating a mist that obscured our vision.

"L-Lady Victorica! We can't see through this haze!" Magiluka yelled. "Wind!"

"Uh, I thought I might've had a chance, you know? I suppose it was no good after all."

I endured the urge to give her a scathing remark or two and focused. If possible, I wanted to drag the suits of armor into my attack as well—I doubted anyone would question my excessive ambition.

I wasn't sure whether the armors thought I was dangerous or that I was maybe an easy target because I wasn't moving, but in any case, they all started to head toward me—four in total.

"All right, allow me to bid our unwelcome guests adieu!" Snow, with Magiluka still on her back, came in between me and one of the suits of armor and sent it flying with her front paw.

"Air Bullet!" Magiluka chanted, launching a burst of air, causing one of the suits of armor to raise its shield and stop in place.

"Perfect! Don't let the door hit you on the way out, number two!" Snow turned toward the armor that stood in place and punched it with her paw, blowing it back. Neither had planned this out beforehand, yet they were in sync and were working together well. I started to feel a bit of jealousy, but I immediately shook my head to calm myself down. While I looked away from Magiluka and Snow, I glanced at Victorica.

"Grrrrrrr! Why must *I* do manual labor?!" she growled through gritted teeth.

The two remaining suits of armor swung their blades, but she blocked each of them with one hand. It was clearly taking a toll on her, however—though her physical prowess was greater than a normal human's, even she had her limits. In addition, she was more of a spellcaster than a physical fighter, and she was a shut-in at her castle home. She also slept a lot.

"Maybe you're not exercising enough," I mumbled.

"How dare you!" she fired back furiously, proving how keen her ears were. "What a rude thing to say!"

She pushed back the greatswords and swung them to the side. The suits of armor staggered, not expecting a being smaller than them to resist their strikes. They were wide open for an attack.

"Air Bullet!" Magiluka said, knocking one back.

"Sonic Blade!" Victorica chanted, taking care of the other.

Once all the suits of armor were out of my way to one side, there was nothing between me and the sphere in the far reaches of the room.

"Now!" Victorica called.

"Lady Mary!" Magiluka yelled.

The two rushed behind me, and I placed my right hand in the direction of the armors and the sphere before closing my eyes.

"I shall bestow upon thee silence," I chanted as a magic circle formed around me. Icy wind blew at the sphere.

"Look into mine eyes. Be captivated and shudder in ice."

I slowly opened my eyes as a freezing breeze appeared above the sphere. The icy winds crystallized into a pair of massive eyeballs, which opened wide as they met my gaze.

"At thy beginning, I shall offer tears of blessings. At thy end, I shall offer tears of grief."

Shards of ice started to drip from the first frozen eye as though it were weeping. The shards fell onto the ground and shattered, creating waves of frost rippling outward. The other eye also began to cry frozen tears, and the accumulating ice in the room grew thicker and thicker. Billowing steam gushed from the red-hot sphere as it gradually began to fizzle, and the armors' dense coatings of ice slowed their movements to a crawl.

I raised my right hand and covered one eye. "At thy virtue, I spill tears of praise. At thy evil, I spill tears of resentment."

Behind the first pair of frozen eyes, another pair of eyes coalesced, and they too spilled frigid tears. With every icy droplet that hit the ground, the ripples of frost centered over the sphere grew larger and taller, and the surrounding armors creaked as they froze in place. Eventually, the ball was completely frosted over.

"Thou hast been cleansed. Entrust thy body and soul to a sleep eternal." I slowly removed my hand from my eye, then I used it to point at the sphere while glaring fiercely.



“Glacial Lamentations of the Four Undying Watchers.” As I finished the incantation with the most commanding voice I could manage, I balled my hand into a fist, after which the four frozen eyes slowly closed and descended toward the ground. A massive pillar of ice engulfed the sphere and the suits of armor, and when I tapped it, a large crack ran through the frozen block, and it shattered. Silence then fell upon the room, as though not even sound itself had been able to escape my frigid encasement.

“It’s over...” I said, lowering my fist and turning on my heel as I gazed at Magiluka and Victorica.

“Y-You’re amazing, Lady Mary... is what I’d like to say,” Magiluka started gingerly.

“Are you sure you didn’t overdo it?” Victorica finished.

“Did I?” I wondered, gazing behind me. All the sources of flowing water I could see were slowly solidifying into ice and diffusing outward. Put simply, the freezing effect that was consuming this flooded room was also traveling along the water through the pipes and spreading throughout the rest of the ruin.

“H-Huh...” I said.

The ice crystals began to pierce through the walls and even started to freeze our footing. I hastily jumped out as the entire room started to rumble and groan, and before long it began to crumble. *I guess my magic might’ve destroyed this place much faster than the item going berserk would’ve.*

“*We’re running!*” Snow said, repeating a phrase that I’d heard before. Magiluka was still on her back as she hastily headed for the exit, and I did the same.

“Do you not know anything about holding back?!” Victorica shouted while flying beside me. “This is why I hate people with insane firepower!”

“Argh, sorry!” I said as I ran. “But if you could hold back while you’re using a spell, I don’t think we’d classify them in different orders! If you’ve got any complaints, say it to magic!” I swiftly shifted the responsibility away from myself with some absurd logic.

Just in time, we managed to flee through the exit before the chamber collapsed. We didn’t stop and turn back; we continued to run until we were a good distance away. Judging from the looks of it, I didn’t think I could do anything to break through that world of ice and destroy the sphere—it would be buried alive. Since all the water

surrounding it had frozen over, it certainly wasn't going to flood the ruins at least. *I-I guess all's well that ends well. We just need to get out of here.* Had everything truly been solved and all was fine and dandy, I wouldn't need to panic, but my heart was filled with anxiety and worry. Snow likely felt the same, for she continued to walk on ahead, and I followed her.

"Snow, you're walking in front, but do you know where to go?" I asked.

"Heh heh heh. Who do you think I am? As a divine beast, guiding you out is easy peasy! I can do it effortlessly since I'm a divine beast! You should worship and revere me more, Mary."

She gracefully walked ahead with a proud huff, and I could only stare in admiration at her divine beast glory.

"Lady Mary, it seems like when the manager fled, he took a few things with him," Magiluka explained, unable to hear my full conversation with Snow. "You can see a few items rolling around here and there, so she must simply be following that path."

"Oh... I see," I said, giving Snow a look. She quietly turned away.

"That man was not only engaged in corruption, but he dared to mock me! I shall find him..." Victorica said, chewing on her thumbnail as we entered a room with open doors.

"Ah," a familiar man's voice and Victorica said simultaneously.

I stopped and peered inside, where I found the manager trying to pry a large sack that'd been frozen to the floor off the ground. I guessed that he'd been resting here or searching for something when he'd placed his stuff on the ground, which is how my magic had managed to freeze it there.

"Ah, good day, master..." he started with a friendly smile.

"Here comes your divine punishment!" Victorica said, her flying knee landing squarely on him, sending him flying. His belongings were left behind.

"Wait, if the ice is already here..." Magiluka pointed out from behind us, still on Snow's back.

The manager staggered to his feet, but the wall behind him started to crack, and ice was seeping out.

"We're running!" Snow yelled as we all once again started to dash away. It goes without saying, but Victorica and I immediately started arguing as we ran.

Eventually, we managed to make our way out of the initial entrance to the ruin, and by the end of it I was only managing a sluggish running pace. There was no water or ice present, so I figured we were safe at last.

"Ugh, I'm exhausted. What did we come here for?" I muttered wearily. It'd been a while since we'd seen the outside, and the sun had already set.

"I'm sticky with sweat," Victorica said. "I would love to take a bath."

"Are you really saying that right now?" I replied with exhaustion.

The manager, who'd guided us out, had been slapped across the face ten times per cheek, and his face was swollen. At first, I thought this was a rather light punishment given what I knew about demon society, but I was told that this was simply to temporarily quell Victorica's anger, and Orbus would later sentence the manager to a proper punishment.

"Are we returning to the castle in this attire?" Magiluka asked as she dismounted from Snow. "Perhaps we should change."

Victorica and I looked at each other before nodding in agreement, but I was reluctant to change clothes while I felt sticky and filthy.

"But I can't change like this," I whined. "Magilukaaa, I want to take a bath! I want to take a shower!"

"But the hot spring facility is almost completely destroyed, and even if it weren't, all the hot water has been turned to regular water. You must endure it," Magiluka replied, sounding tired.

I fell to the ground before we decided to change. I considered jumping into the water like a pool party, but my exhausted and aching body wanted to get into a hot spring,

not a pool. I was ready to throw a tantrum as my urge to relax in a hot spring began to boil over again.

"A hot spring..." Victorica said pensively as she stared up at the night sky. "It would surely be lovely to take a bath while gazing at the beautiful moonlit sky."

I looked up as well to enjoy the nighttime view... but suddenly, something jumped in front of the moon from a nearby cliff.

"Wait, what?" I gasped, immediately standing up to check my surroundings.

"I'm finally back. Ah is that you, Mary? And your friends too! You're all safe," a burly man said.

I knew that Mr. Falgar, the self-proclaimed archaeologist, wasn't one to be discouraged in the face of adversities. *Also, did he just get down from that cliff completely barehanded?*

"Mr. Falgar! You're also safe—" I began to say, until I was able to see him fully illuminated by the moonlight. It was then that I realized that his final line of defense for his lower body was gone, and my resultant screams rang throughout the night skies.

"Ugh... Magiluka... I saw a pervert... A pervert who likes to expose himself," I said, clutching onto my friend with tears in my eyes. She consoled me by stroking my head. Victorica was baring her fangs at the archaeologist, and whenever he came close, she loudly hissed at him in intimidation.

After what'd happened, Mr. Falgar had gone off to change and had come back after managing to put together something to cover himself up a little. Incidentally, we were all still in our bathing suits, but I was too busy being depressed to worry about that.

"Ha ha ha, sorry. Pardon me," he said. "When the floor beneath me opened up, I was carried away to the bottom of a valley, and by the time I'd finally managed to climb my way up, I ran into you guys again. I didn't have time to worry about my attire."

"Please make time for things like that," Magiluka replied with a sigh, the only one of us with yet untainted eyes. She continued to pat my head.

"By the way, what happened to the altar and stuff?" Mr. Falgar asked.

"Altar?" Magiluka asked. "Ah, yes, we destroyed the ruins. It'd be dangerous to return there, so I recommend you not approach the area."

"D-Destroyed? What happened?"

"Mary over there used her magic to freeze every single thing inside. As she had put it, it was a spell she had prepared for just such an occasion," Victorica said, her voice dripping with sarcasm.

"W-Well, I had to, or else it would've been a disaster!" I insisted.

"I see, Mary's magic did it..." the archaeologist replied. "In other words, that vampire's ambitions were stopped. Something may have been hidden or sealed within those ruins... and you predicted that that would be the case..."

By vampire, is he referring to the manager over there who's convulsing with swollen cheeks and about to pass out?

It seemed like Mr. Falgar had interpreted the tool that boiled water as a mysterious item that was shrouded in conspiracies. I started to worry for him.

"Um, Mr. Falgar, what happened in there was—" I started.

"Oh, no worries. I know, I know. You don't have to tell me. I should've noticed it from the start when Victorica had called herself a vampire. Pardon me," he interjected.

He seemed to have drawn his own conclusions, but I was pretty confident that he was completely wrong.

"Uh, no, what I'm saying is..."

"Well, leaving Victorica aside, there's something I'd like to ask you, Mary."

"Hm? Wh-What would that be?"

I once again failed to correct Mr. Falgar's misunderstandings as I braced myself for his sudden question.

"Every now and then, you start talking to yourself when no one is around," he said. "Is that related to the ruins in any way, or are you perhaps tired and..."

"It has nothing to do with the ruins, and I'm not neurotic! I'm just talking with Snow!" I hastily replied.

This oddity hadn't been pointed out recently, which had caused me to forget, but to an outsider, I clearly looked like a weirdo mumbling to myself. This was through no fault of the archaeologist.

"Snow?" he asked.

"The divine beast over there." I pointed to her. It was finally dawning on me that thanks to Victorica, I'd never introduced her to him.

"A-A divine beast?!" he gasped. "I'd thought it was someone's pet or a familiar or something. Now that I think about it, I've recently heard stories of a girl with white hair accompanied by divine beasts..."

I didn't even know what I'd done to deserve this, but the worst was about to happen. I may have subconsciously avoided introducing Snow to him because I hadn't wanted him to reach a certain conclusion.

"I-I'm not the Argent Holy Woman or anything!" I quickly said, cornering myself.

"A vampire's ruin, a divine beast, and a saint... Ah, okay. I see. Mm-hmm. I get it now. I see, I see..." Mr. Falgar said, as though he'd finally fit puzzle pieces together in his head. He looked refreshed, which made me panic and made my mind go blank—I had no idea what to say.

"Uh, um, so," I stammered.

"Don't worry. I get it now," he said. "You don't have to say anything. I won't get in your way, and I won't stick my nose into your business. I know you're the saint who refuses fame and saves people from danger before they see it coming... Ah, whoops. Sorry, forgot it."

I will worry. Everything about you makes me worry! You've started to sound more polite too! You're clearly acting weird! As I started to fret, Mr. Falgar gave me a gentle smile and bowed his head as he walked away. Unfortunately, I could only watch on. Judging

by his past actions, I knew that it'd be an extremely difficult task to convince him he had it wrong. I could only pray that he'd stay quiet about this incident for the rest of his life.

"Lady Mary, shall we get changed?" Magiluka kindly said, placing her hand on my shoulder.

I clenched my fists. "Ugh... If only we could at least enter a hot spring somewhere... Then I'd feel like this wasn't all for naught..."

"You're looking for a hot spring, ma'am?" Mr. Falgar said, stopping in his tracks. "I believe I saw one where I fell."

I was enticed by his wonderful words. "Is it a natural hot spring?! It's not laden with weird traps, is it? How big is it? Can we take a dip in it? Also, you don't need to start treating me so politely!"

"U-Uh..." the archaeologist looked a bit startled as he soon dropped his polite act. "I think it was pretty big—at least large enough for you guys to take a bath. There were rocks surrounding the area to form a small wall, but I don't think anyone's touched it aside from that. It looked really simple."

"All right! Let's go! Right now! Even if I have to jump from this cliff!" I dashed ahead from the ruin, clinging on to a sliver of hope.

9. HOT SPRINGS ARE WONDERFUL

My excitement couldn't be stopped, and I was about to seriously jump off the cliff when Magiluka held me back. I calmed down and used floating magic so we could slowly descend as we approached the waterfall. The moonlight illuminated the quiet area, and as Mr. Falgar had said, it was a simple outdoor bath surrounded by rocks. I didn't let my guard down and carefully inspected the surroundings, ensuring that there weren't any weird traps lying about.

"There's nothing! We're in the clear! No weird objects, no switches, no treasure chests, and no pipes, Magiluka!" I confirmed rejoicingly.

"I-Is it really that exciting?" she replied.

"It's a simple hot spring! A natural hot spring! We just obtained a hidden treasure!
Whoopeeeee!"

Magiluka could only give a forced laugh at my enthusiasm as I raised both hands in the air.

"Come on, let's go in right now!" I insisted.

"Ah! L-Lady Mary!" Magiluka stammered, noticing me grab my bath suit. "Are you planning on stripping in a place like this?"

I looked around. "Mr. Falgar's atop the cliff, and it looks like there isn't anyone nearby. Besides, it's nighttime, so no one can see us from afar," I reasoned, offering my honest opinion.

"If you are so concerned, shall I use my minion to stay on guard to prevent anyone from peeping?" Victorica offered, trying to dispel Magiluka's fears.

"We'll politely decline that offer," Magiluka and I said at once. The most likely outcome of her bringing out her pet was some kind of accident happening and destroying our final sliver of hope. Victorica didn't seem to mind our refusal as she prepared to enter the hot spring, in any case.

"Come on, Magiluka. Don't be so tense. Let's enter the hot spring, hmm?" I said.

"...You're right."

And so, we were finally going to be able to take a dip in a normal hot spring. *Ah! Normal hot spring! What a wonderful phrase!*

"I'm first!" Victorica shouted.

While I was lost in my thoughts and removing my swimming suit, Victorica suddenly got competitive and ran to the hot spring. *Heh, what a kid.* But there was a part of me that couldn't help but rise to her challenge.

"Hey, no fair! I want to get in first!" I said.

"Stop acting like children, you two. Running like that is quite unseemly," Magiluka called out.

Victorica and I froze in the middle of our running poses. Magiluka walked past us, splashed some hot water onto her body, and entered the hot spring. Victorica and I watched her graceful entrance and glanced at each other. We regretted our childishness and decided to do a take two as we cleared our throats.

"Aaahhh! That's the stuff!" I said, dipping into the water. "It makes me feel so alive!"



There wasn't any one right way to enter a hot spring, but I thought that this was a phrase everyone said when they got in the water.

"Mary, were you an undead?"

"Victorica, you're supposed to say 'You're too young to say something like that'! Try again!" I chided her.

"Since when?!"

We were up to our shoulders in hot water as we soothed our aching minds and bodies. Both Victorica's and my banter lost its bite as we relaxed. So many things had happened up until now. I was so happy that we'd finally managed to enter the hot spring I'd been imagining, and both my mind and body felt like they were melting away in the comfortable water.

I looked over at Magiluka, who seemed wary of her surroundings—she would glance around every now and then. "Magiluka, we're finally enjoying a hot spring," I said. "Come on, relax. Relax... Blub blub blub..."

I was lazing around so much that I almost let my head dip underwater.

"Y-You're right," Magiluka relented. "I was staying alert since I never know what you two will do when I let my guard down, but perhaps I was thinking too deeply about it. I'm sorry."

"That's right. You're overthinking... Hm?" I was glad that she seemed less tense and agreed to go with the flow, but I immediately forced myself to snap back to my senses. "Magiluka, what do you mean by that?" I silently swam toward her with my shoulders below the water, like a predator aiming for her prey.

"Huh?" she gasped.

"Quite right, Miss Magiluka. I understand saying that about Mary, but how could you group me in with her?" Victorica demanded.

"Er, um, I..."

Victorica and I had cornered Magiluka, causing her to give a strained smile and slowly back away.

"Eh heh heh... Perhaps you're due for a punishment," Victorica said, standing up and raising her hands, wiggling her fingers in the air.

When I followed Victorica's gaze, she was clearly aiming for Magiluka's well-shaped melons. Magiluka likely noticed that as well, as she quickly folded her arms over her chest.

"Haah... Haah... When I first laid eyes on you, you had such beautiful soft skin," Victorica said, her breathing growing louder. "And now, thanks to this hot spring, your skin has turned ever so pink, and you look so fresh and juicy... You look so delicious that I'm tempted to take a bite... Ahhh... I can't imagine how exciting it'd feel to sink my teeth into your tender flesh... Heh heh heh." She was inching closer and closer to Magiluka with every word.

"Stop that, you perverted vampire!" I said, putting her in a choke hold from behind. "Only I'm allowed to touch her there!" It wasn't fair to Magiluka, but a little of my possessiveness slipped out when I moved to help her.

I'd apparently managed to successfully assist Victorica in returning to her senses, as she calmed down and gave a tap of surrender. I released her from my grip.

Victorica gasped a few deep breaths. "I was about to go down completely! How could you do this to me? Please do not interfere with my fun time with Miss Magiluka."

"'Fun time'? Yeah right! I won't let you lay a finger on her!"

"Heh heh heh. I suppose we're fated to be incompatible. Why don't we battle for Miss Magiluka's chest?"

"You're on!"

We both struck immodest fighting poses within the water.

"Please stop, you two," Magiluka said with a smile, emanating intense pressure. "I told you that you mustn't fight, didn't I? And please don't treat me like a prize to be won while completely disregarding my feelings on the matter."

She might be smiling, but the look in her eyes is ice cold! Yikes!

"Sorry," Victorica and I apologized almost reflexively.

Magiluka sighed wearily and retracted her terrifying aura. “Good grief... I really can’t tell if you two get along or not.”

“Well, I can think of one thing we both agree on,” Victorica said suggestively while wiggling her fingers.

“I see...” I replied, clapping my hands together to say I was picking up what she was putting down.

“No, you don’t!” Magiluka shouted. “I’m done with you two!”

Her face turned red, and she turned away from us and swam off.

“Sorry! Magiluka, we’re just kidding!” I called.

“I-If you’re so interested in being touchy-feely, you can just do it with each other!” she said out of embarrassment.

I gave a forced laugh. “Miss Magiluka, bigger is better in cases like these. I’d just feel sad having to settle for Victorica’s tiny, well, you-know-whats...”

“Eh heh heh heh... I’m totally fine with small ones too!” Victorica said, changing targets and wiggling her fingers at me. “Is it because of the hot spring? You look so juicy too, Mary—delectable, even. Slurp...”

“G-Get away, you perverted vampire! Also, don’t call mine small!” I shouted.

And so, Victorica and I ran around within the hot spring for a while. *I thought we were supposed to relax here! Why did this happen?*

“Argh, I’ve had a horrible time at the hot spring thanks to you, Magiluka,” I groaned. Once I’d outlasted Victorica’s pursuit, I took a seat next to Magiluka to gaze up at the night sky.

“I believe you’re the one to blame for that,” Magiluka replied with a sigh.

So, what made Victorica give up, you may ask? She got dizzy from staying in the warm bath for too long.

I decided to cool down while sitting on one of the rocks surrounding the hot spring. I thought back over everything that'd happened up till now and felt bad. "I'm sorry," I said. "We came to the hot spring so that you could recuperate, but it ended up becoming a huge mess."

"I'm not bothered at all," she replied. "I'm used to it. You've always been like this since you were young, Lady Mary."

"Should I be happy or sad to hear that?"

We looked at each other and giggled.

"In any case, what will you do now, Lady Mary?"

I quizzically cocked my head to one side upon hearing this question. I had no idea what she was on about.

"Huh?" I asked. "What do you mean? I'll probably enjoy the hot spring a bit more before we go back and change. I planned on staying another day at Victorica's castle so that I could bring Tutte here too."

"That's nice and all, but what about your report?" she asked with a forced smile.

"Report?" I repeated in confusion.

"We came here in the first place to find a theme for your report, Lady Mary. Did you forget?"

I fell silent and closed my eyes, trying to organize my thoughts. "Aaaahhhh! You're riiiiiight!" I'd thought that everything had been resolved and was taking my sweet time in the hot springs, but I screamed upon realizing that I hadn't actually done anything.

"Oh, and in regards to the magic mirror, our disappeared clones didn't get teleported back to the mirror," Magiluka said solemnly. "My grandfather stated that he hadn't seen anyone near the mirror during that time frame, and there have been no sightings of them afterward. A likely possibility is that they disappeared when they went outside of the mirror's range. However..."

"However?" I gulped.

“Since your clone copied your abilities, those powers may have caused something outside our expectations. Perhaps one day we’ll hear rumors of a silver-haired girl running around the academy during the night of the full moon.”

“H-Ha ha ha... No way. That’d be like something you’d hear from a seven mysteries legend. That kind of thing wouldn’t happen to us... Probably.”

I felt cold sweat run down my back at Magiluka’s terrifying hypothetical—after all, thanks to my powers, I couldn’t guarantee nothing would happen.

“So, what shall we do? Shall we delve further into the magic mirror and make that into your report?” she asked.

“I think... I won’t do that. Nothing good will come from aiming for uniqueness. I’d like something a bit more normal...” I slumped my shoulders as I paddled my legs, gently splashing water.

“I see. Then I suppose we’re back to square one,” Magiluka replied, splashing water with me.

I was faced with a harsh reality. *So I’ve only got one option to take here.*

“Um, Magiluka... will you help me find a theme for my report again?”

I poked my index fingers together meekly. That’s just who I was in the end—a no-good girl who immediately turns to others for assistance.

When I sheepishly glanced at my friend, she smiled gently and offered a typical reply. “Of course. I’ll be by your side until you find something.”

SIDE STORY

WHAT IF...

After we returned from Victorica's castle, we managed to have some tea at the academy; it'd been a while since we were all able to gather. I told Safina and the others about the mirror and the hot spring over a cup of tea.

"Huh, a hot spring? I'd love to go as well," Safina said excitedly.

"Then when we've all got the time, let's go," I quickly replied, already scheduling a next visit for the hot spring.

"Sure, the hot spring sounds nice and all, but I'm more curious about that mirror," Sacher said, touching on a topic I was reluctant to talk about. "I'd love to fight against another me."

"Were you not listening to Lady Mary's story?" Magiluka scolded. "They may be our copies, but their personalities will absolutely humiliate you. Goodness... Just remembering about it makes my cheeks grow warm."

"But we've got the same abilities, right? I'm willing to close my eyes on the personality bit."

"You simply do not understand. If you keep receiving blows to your psyche, you won't be able to exert your usual power."

"Huh? Seriously? Is it that bad?"

Sacher gulped while Magiluka nodded.

"Try imagining yourself quivering and cowering in fear like a small animal," I said.

Everyone fell silent as we all tried to envision a terrified Sacher.

"Yeah, that might creep me out a little," Sacher mumbled with a look of disdain.

Once I saw that, it was too tempting not to tease him. “Really? Let’s make it happen then. I’d *love* to see that side of you.”

“Hey, stop that! Sorry! I’m sorry.”

“Weren’t you raring to go just a second ago?”

“Well, I’ve changed my mind. Why don’t you ask the prince?” He passed the baton in no time flat to get me off his back.

“Hmm… A side of myself I wouldn’t want to see…” the prince pondered. “Ah, but the experience would let me see myself from an objective viewpoint, and it’d be a perfect simulation to enlighten me on how a change in personality could affect my surroundings.”

“S-Sir Reifus, you’re far too brave,” I said.

The prince may have been half joking, but I could only look at him in admiration. The thought of analyzing myself and testing things had never crossed my mind.

As I wanted to relieve the tense atmosphere, I happened to lock eyes with Safina. “I-I wonder what you’d do, Safina,” I said.

“M-Me?” she replied. “What *would* my double be like…?” She adorably tilted her head to one side as she thought about this hypothetical situation.

I was the one who’d involved her in this topic, but I couldn’t imagine her personality being distorted negatively, nor did I want to.

“Well, my clone would be optimistic, cheery, powerful, and reliable, so I suppose I’d feel embarrassed to see myself like that,” Safina said with a sheepish chuckle.

She was so adorable that I gave her a hug. “You’re so cute,” I said, patting her head. “Really, you are. I’m sure you could become someone like that—no, you already *are* someone like that.”

“Er, L-L-Lady Mary… Eep!” She sounded a little panicked, but she didn’t try to turn away from me, shyly allowing me to pet her to my heart’s content.

She was so cute that I was tempted to pet her for eternity. *There’s no way I’m the only*

one thinking that.

"Well, now I want to see another adorable side of Safina, so how about we do visit the mirror after all?" I suggested.

"Lady Mary, I'd appreciate it if you were more prudent. Please refrain from creating an even greater fuss," Reifus said, scolding me unexpectedly.

"I will. I'm sorry."

My curiosity immediately left me and I calmed down. I must have looked especially eager to use the mirror. *I should be more prudent, huh?*

"By the way," Magiluka said, staring at the maid behind me. "Aside from us, Tutte could've also appeared in the mirror. I wonder what would've happened then."

Indeed, Tutte had coincidentally managed to evade the mirror—it felt a little bit unfair, honestly. I wondered what she'd have to say about it.

"Personally, if my clone would've possessed the same abilities I do, I imagine I would've been ecstatic to support my lady twice as much," Tutte said. "In terms of personality, if the only issue would've been that she embarrassed me, I wouldn't have minded, but if she would've affected my lady negatively, I certainly couldn't have let her be."

"Negatively?"

"For example, if she were to dislike you or show any indifference... Huh? My lady? My ladyyy!"

I'd only briefly imagined Tutte taking that attitude with me, but my mental state couldn't take even that. My psyche had taken such heavy damage that I'd collapsed onto the sofa.

Ahhh! It hurts! I'm so glad Tutte wasn't copied. If she ever acted that way toward me, I'd have a breakdown!

AFTERWORD

Everyone, it's been too long! This is Chatsufusa speaking.

So many things happen in life. My mental state is softer than tofu; even when I expect something to occur, once it does, I can't help but panic. And sure enough, many things have happened, but I was finally able to prepare volume 5 of *The Invincible Little Lady* for your reading pleasure. I'm so happy I was able to do so.

Thank you everyone for buying and supporting this series. Anyone reading this deciding whether they'll purchase this volume, I'll just let you know that we've got Mary and her friend in cosplay (kind of) as well as a hot spring scene. So, you know, just some light encouragement there. Eh heh heh.

Now then, I'd like to talk a little about this series. So, how did fake Mary even come into being? Well, when I was on the phone with my editor, we got into a discussion about "Is there anyone Mary can have an actual fight with?" Eventually, we concluded that "The only one who can fight Mary is Mary... right?"

I tried imagining it a bit, but since neither Mary would be affected by the other's attacks, I figured they'd only cause destruction to their surroundings. I doubted the two would ever go through with a fight. Then the question was "Well, how *can* Mary be damaged?" Thus, I ended up with "Emotional damage, of course!" Naturally, she can't be affected by mentally damaging spells from outsiders, so the damage would have to be her tormenting herself with her own thoughts.

So, that's how fake Mary was born. And, well, please don't ask how I ended up with the story that introduced her...

If Mary was a character who passively gets dragged into things, I thought that fake Mary should be one who aggressively charges into things. I feel like I ended up creating an interesting person. Of course, they're both mentally fragile and klutzy, but that's just their default state.

All right, next up is you, the one who thought for a brief moment, "How did the author think of the hot spring part?" Yeah, I'm talking to you. You know who you are. But the answer is simple: I gave into my greed and wrote what I wanted to. Yeah...

Please don't ask how I ended up with that hot spring arc. I'm begging you here...

Mary's constant bickering with Victorica is an unusual side of her, so I had a lot of fun writing it. And I had fun having Mary flirt with Magiluka.

Well, that's this book in a nutshell. I'd be thrilled if even a fraction of you got a kick out of reading it.

Before I go, I'd like to thank Micro Magazine for their help with the publication of this book. Despite my slow pace, they patiently waited for me. Thank you to Mr. I for always helping me out. I cannot express my gratitude enough.

Thank you to fuumi, who took on the unreasonable demand of drawing the characters in magical girl cosplay and designing them so cutely, as well as providing illustrations where the characters showed a bit more skin. I made one of the illustrations into my wallpaper, and I express my gratitude every day while praying to it. (And just between you and me, I'm always grinning at the illustration every time I glance at it. Keep it a secret, you hear?!)

Thank you to everyone who's been involved in the publication process. And lastly, from the bottom of my heart, thank you to everyone who's cheered me on and who's purchased this book.

I pray that we get to meet again! Until then, I'll be off.

BONUS SHORT STORY

SPLASHING WATER IN THE HOT SPRING

As I was fully indulging myself in the hot spring that I'd finally found, I was nervously trying to find an opportunity to play a little game: squirting some water with my hands. I'd been unable to do this in my previous life, but at long last, the time had come for me to unveil my technique.

Truthfully speaking, now wouldn't be my first time giving this a try—I'd sometimes tested to see how good I was at it in my bath at home when I was alone with Tutte. The problem was that I was incredibly bad at controlling how much strength I was putting into my hands, so I still hadn't been able to get it down. *But if not now, when?! I'm gonna make my long-awaited wish come true!*

"Hey, Magiluka, lookie!" I said.

"Whatever is the matter, Lady Mary?" she asked.

I took a deep breath and put my hands together like I was doing a handshake with myself, then I made a small opening by my thumb and allowed the water to seep in. *All right! I'm gonna splash some water on her face, then she's gonna shriek in surprise, and we're gonna squeal together and have some fun! Heh heh heh!* My heart danced with excitement as I prepared to clench my hands together and enjoy the horsing around I'd always dreamed of doing in my past life.

Huh? Wait a sec... Will it really be safe for me to force water out of my hands with my power? I've never gotten as far as aiming at another person before, so I've never given the danger any thought...

Crap! Now that I'm worried, I don't feel like I have control over my strength...

"Why do you have your hands together, Lady Mary?" Magiluka asked as she approached me. "Do you have something in your hands?"

I was frozen with my arms out while I was working through my internal strife. *Argh!*

Now's not the time for me to be so timid! I've been secretly practicing this move all for this day! I have to trust in myself!

I amped myself up and slowly squeezed my hands together. I moved as slowly as I could and... tried to divert my aim away from Magiluka. *Nope, I'm gonna screw up! The one thing I can't trust is controlling my own strength!*

"Wow, water just squirted out of your hands!" Magiluka cried. "It doesn't seem like magic. How did you do that?"

Despite my pessimism and low expectations, I'd technically managed to show off the move in front of Magiluka. She stared at my hands in awe. *Yay! Thank you so much, Magiluka!*

Since I noticed her eyes were glimmering with curiosity, I happily showed her how to squirt water using her hands.

"L-Like this?" she asked.

"Right."

Then she squeezed her hands and splashed water onto my face. "Whoa!" I yelped. The way I'd drawn things up, the roles were reversed, but I didn't mind it turning out this way.

"Oops. I'm so sorry," Magiluka said. "Uh, Lady Mary? What's wrong?"

"Oh, don't worry about it," I replied. "I'm just emotional because I've been wanting to do this for the longest time."

As I basked in the warmth and fuzziness, Magiluka looked at me quizzically and proceeded to splash more water on me. It seemed she thought that I was happy to get splashed on.

"S-Stop, Magiluka! Here's payback!"

"Eep!"

I was so overjoyed at seeing her look this adorable that I reflexively squirted water onto her as well. What's more, I managed to splash her like a normal girl. *I did it*

normally! Nothing happened! This was an important moment for me, so it bore repeating.

“Yes! I did it! I did it, Magiluka!” I crowed. “I managed to do it well! Hooray!”

“Wh-Why do you look so happy about that, Lady Mary?”

“Uh, well, because, you know... I’m not good with controlling my strength. Since you know how this hand squirting thing works, surely you can understand—the water I splash might kill you or something. So what I just did feels like a miracle, you know?”

She fell silent as I mumbled my true thoughts. After a moment of thought, she quietly swam away from me.

“Argh! I’m sorry, Magiluka! It went well earlier, didn’t it? So it’s fine!” I hastily said.

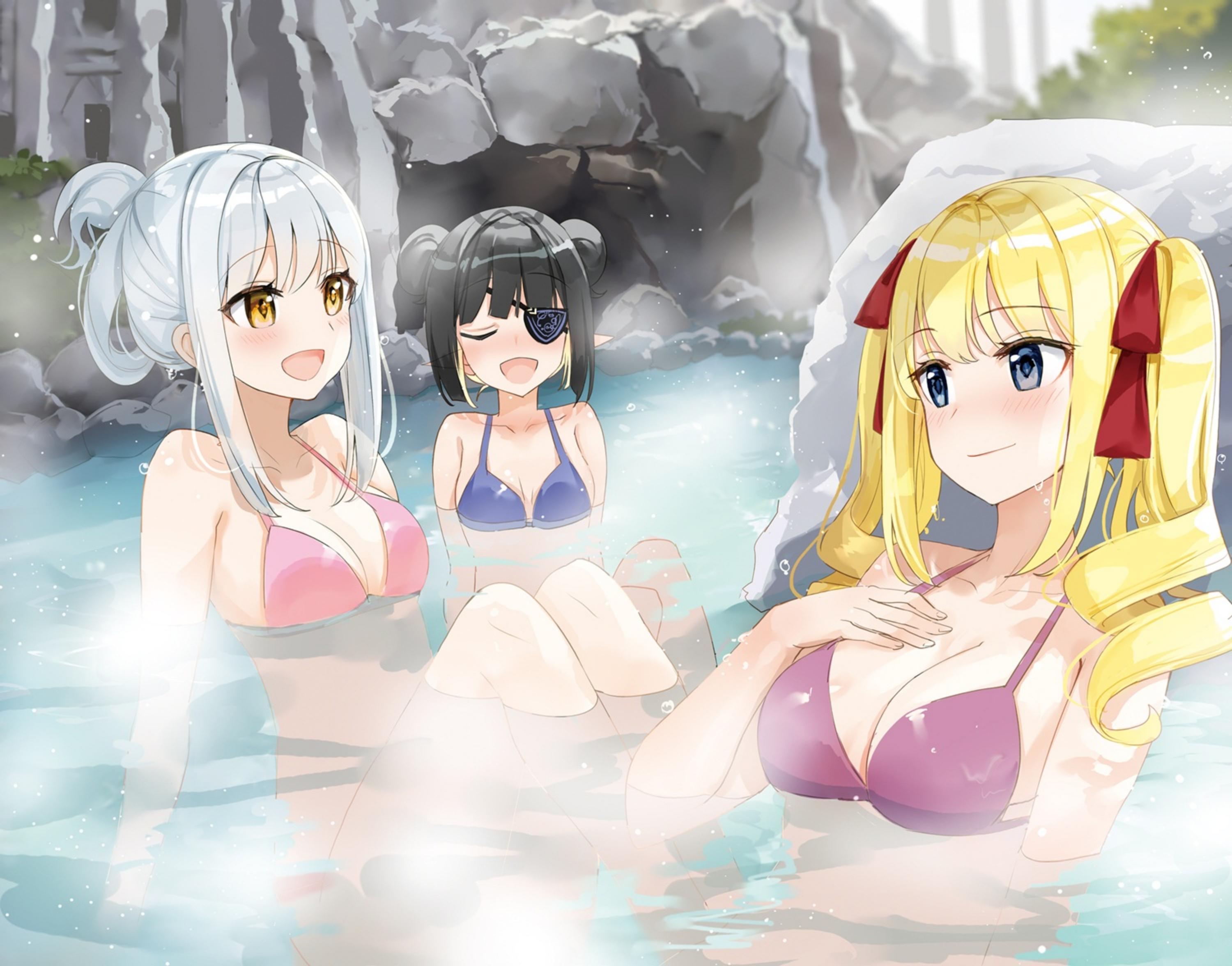
“Are you sure?” she asked.

“I think so...” I forced myself to smile.

Though I’d planned to enjoy the rest of my time at the hot spring, for whatever reason, Magiluka decided she’d be my teacher and we’d continue to practice my water squirting maneuver.









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