



Goggles and Tortoise

This story was set immediately after MGRP Limited.

A Magical Girl's body was made to be robust; but a Mage's physical strength and self-healing power were not that different from a normal human being. They could treat injuries with their own magic though. Thanks to that, they did not get hospitalized for normal injuries.

So were hospitals unnecessary for Mages?

Not really. Hospitals did have their use. Rather than buying a chicken, cutting its neck, and chanting a long-winded spell just to treat a common cold, having a doctor prescribe a cold medicine would save much more time and money.

And the reason for requiring a hospital was not just for sickness or injuries. In cases of poisoning by magical poison or medicine, a specialized hospital is needed in order to remove their effects. Unlike normal poison and medicine, you could never be too careful with magical ones. Without proper treatments from the experts, there would be long-lasting after-effects.

That was why Mana had been hospitalized immediately after the incident had been settled. She had gone beyond the limits with magical doping, overexerting her physical abilities to match that of a Magical Girl's. The recoil from such a deed was not pretty. After the medicine's effect ran out, she collapsed on the spot with foam at the mouth.

The mentally and physically exhausted 7753, fearing that it would be their last goodbye, had embraced Mana tightly in her arms with tears streaming down her face. She kept crying even after the girl was carried away by the ambulance, her tears did not stop whenever she remembered the incident and everyone who had fought together, and she wept when her boss told her that Mana had been saved.

Contrary to 7753, her new housemate Tepsekemei lived indifferently, never showing any emotion on her face. Taking the "Please think of this as your own home" pleasantry to heart, Tepsekemei acted more freely around the house than even the homeowner herself. It was not big; just a detached single house built over 30 years ago. Tepsekemei used the old study room of 7753's late father as a base, then busied herself with exploring the house or playing in the garden.

At the same time, she also made progress in studying. She would head to the table everyday, reading children's picture books while reading out loud the alphabet "a, i, e, o, u." After mastering the hiragana alphabet, over time, she was able to read children's literature with furigana phonetic aid.

Ever since that time she cried after defeating Pukin, Tepsekemei had never showed tears again. But she was sad. 7753 knew this because she had observed her with the goggles. The girl just did not show her sadness.

In that incident, the town was destroyed, there were many casualties even among ordinary citizens. The things 7753 wanted to protect had slipped through her fingers one by one.

Apparently, the Foreign Affairs Department had denied the rumor that there was a plan to use a weapon of mass destruction. 7753's legs had trembled with shock. For what reason had she taken everyone to the battlefield, helplessly watching them die? *'Since everything had come this far, there was no way Foreign Affairs Department would affirm such a rumor,'* her boss said.

That was true. The Foreign Affairs Department could not speak the truth now. But even if the rumor was true, it did not change the fact that 7753 had killed Kurukuru-hime and Funny Trick and Wedin. There was simply no excuse for thinking Frederica was a negotiable partner, being tempted by the sweet prospect of having her help to destroy Pukin.

Her boss' comfort *'You had done as much work as you could'* could not bring anyone back to life. 7753 had not violated any command, so she would not be punished. But she would rather be punished. She knew she was being let off easily. It made her want to be punished more.

When she had been using her goggles to view those girls' talents, status parameters had not been the only thing displayed, but everything about their person too. What they had been thinking, what they had done, literally all their life, the beautiful and the ugly and the noble and the filthy, everything. Kurukuru-hime, Funny Trick, Wedin. These girls had killed their own fears and had stood up to protect the things they cherished. They had been scared, they had been frightened, they had wanted to run away, but they had decided to fight despite all that. They had trusted in 7753 who kept spitting lies. They had been righteous Magical Girls. They had had a future.

If 7753 could choose, the ones who deserved to survive should definitely have been them, no matter what. And yet the one who managed to cheat death was 7753.

Regrets never stopped eating at her. If her boss had not sent Tepsekemei to her together with the message *'Try taking care of her. She shouldn't be much of a trouble if you have her lamp, but keep check to make sure that she doesn't run on a rampage,'* she might have been crushed living alone.

It was rare for animals to become Magical Girls. 7753 had met around 500 Magical Girls throughout her career, but only three were non-human before their transformation. These girls were often more straightforward compared to humans. They acted promptly upon their thoughts, they were frank with anger and pleasure, and they were clear about friends and enemies.

Tepsekemei did not fit in that template. She showed almost no emotion, and she was calmer than even human Magical Girls. It could be said that she followed the image of a tortoise perfectly.

A few days after the incident, Tepsekemei came to 7753's house with only the imitation lamp as her luggage, and settled down. Not concerning herself with 7753's crying, she went out into the garden from time to time, looking at the sky, digging at the soil and filling them up again.

"I would like you to not go outside when you're transformed."

"It's fine for Mei to transform."

"There's this thing called the neighbors' eyes."

It seemed she understood. Because ever since then, whenever she went out even just to the garden, she would assimilate with the wind, diluting her body to the point one could barely see her.

Also when 7753 was in low spirits, Tepsekemei would make embankments and changing the plants' location, taking liberty with remodeling the garden, not listening no matter how much 7753 called her.

"It's Mei's house so Mei can do as she likes."

"Er, no, this is my house."

"We're cohabitating so it's Mei's house."

"Cohabit- How did you learn that word?"

“From TV.”

At least say that we're housemates. Perhaps Tepsekemei was a male before she transformed. 7753 would be doomed if the first person to ever have lived with her was a male tortoise. She was frightened by the possibility and could not bring herself to check the gender.

Not just the garden, but Tepsekemei also rearranged everything inside the house for easier living. It definitely was not easier for 7753 though, so she could not leave her alone, running around stopping her whenever she could. With this, there was no time for 7753 to collapse. Maybe Tepsekemei wanted to distract 7753 from her negative feelings by causing all this trouble—or so she thought, but after using the goggles to verify, that was not the case at all, Tepsekemei was just doing things on a whim.

Besides, 7753 was not really distracted.

Hana who put up a fight with Pukin even when her life force was running out.

Maou Pam who tried to save Hana.

Ripple who went to save Maou Pam and never came back.

Wedin who cried because she longed for Magical Girls.

Funny Trick who crawled in spite of fatal injuries to attack Pukin.

Kurukuru-hime who undertook the dangerous role of decoy alone.

Broken road signs, bent guard rails, cracked roads, crumbling block walls, rising black smoke, fallen corpses, toppled trucks, a train crashed into a building.

After Mana had been carried away, 7753 and Tepsekemei had headed for rescuing efforts. No matter where she went, people were dying. She tried to help but she could not help. It felt like she was in a nightmare where she could not proceed forward no matter how much she kicked her legs in the water.

While chiding Tepsekemei's eccentric antics, 7753 felt gloomy at being caged in the house. She spent her days like that for one week, two weeks, then after the third week had passed, her boss contacted her.

She was given the hospital's name, ward and room number, and visiting hours.

“I got the permission from team leader Mana’s father. Mana is still under medical treatment, but she is bored because there is nothing to do. Maybe she would be happy if you come visit her. I’m still busy with settling the aftermaths, so I want you to do it.”

A visit. She wanted to see Mana’s conditions. She also felt so ashamed that she could not meet her face-to-face. Both were her true feelings.

“A visit, Mei knows. Saw it on TV. Mei wants to go.”

Tepsekemei wanted to go. Family should be fine to come, but she wondered what Mana herself would think.

The next day, 7753 hid her hair and costume with a coat and a hat, then left the house while avoiding the neighbors’ eyes. Since Christmas was coming soon, fir trees were lined up along the streets of the shopping district and the mall, decorated with electric decorations. Even the pine tree of the tea shop was adorned with illuminations.

Her breath was white. The trees on the street were turning into a dusky brown color and withering. In such a season devoid of life, the only ones who could bask in everything and have fun were humans.

Tepsekemei kept trying to look outside by poking her head out of the shoulder bag, so 7753 could not be careless.

“You promised me to stay still in the lamp.”

“Mei wants to see the outside.”

“I’ll let you out at the hospital room, so please wait until then.”

On the way, she bought a bouquet at a flower shop. With a wonderful peach-colored* boat orchid standing out proudly at the center, she tried to make a gorgeous flower combination around it, then gathered them up with a ribbon.

(*: the color of Mana’s camisole)

More than that, she also bought chocolate mousse at a confectionary shop. It was a famous store that was introduced in a TV program. What she bought was a popular item that would get sold out in the morning if she did not make any reservation in advance. The cream and the strawberry on it looked seriously lovely.

“Something smells delicious.”

“I told you not to poke your head out.”

She ordered a cheesecake in addition and stuffed it in the bag to shut Tepsekemei up. Magical Girls should not need to eat nor drink, so why was the girl so attracted to smells? Was it because she was an animal?

They arrived at their destination by taking a connecting train to cross the prefectural boundary. The hospital was so big that it would take an hour just to walk around it. Its pure white outer wall had not a single stain... As if. If you took a closer look, there were bird droppings stuck on it.

This hospital was one of the branch offices of the Land of Magic. They had all the facilities needed to remove magical poisons from Mages. But they also accepted normal human patients. Actually, rather than the rare magic-related patients, normal humans made up the main demographic here.

"Mei doesn't like this smell."

"There are not many people who like the smell of disinfectants. Be patient please."

Passing through the parking lot from the main gate, crossing over the metal net covering the street gutter, she entered the hospital. Small decorations such as the wreaths and santa ornaments helped fuel the Christmas mood. Since it was not isolated from the world, you could feel the continuation of the outside even inside the hospital. Doctors and nurses passing by felt like they were fluttering around.

Confirming the present location and locating the destination room, 7753 first entered a vacant lounge.

"Pee?"

"How did you get that idea in the lounge of all places?"

The mirror showed the image of 7753 with her goggles on. She tried to switch the setting from "Sadness" to "Suffering" then to "Loneliness" after that. Nothing came out. She knew it. The mirror only reflected the image of 7753. It was not 7753, but just a mirror in the end.

She sighed at her foolishness and at the sentimentalism of the act, then removing the goggles and putting it in the bag. If there was no emergency, it was not good to keep her goggles on when seeing a superior. Then she remembered meeting Mana for the first time in B-City. She had been scolded for not being transformed as soon as she had greeted the girl.

"Why are you grinning?"

"...I'm not grinning or anything."

After checking in the mirror that her hair and costume were still hidden properly, 7753 left the lounge. The sound of her shoes against the linoleum floor was strangely loud, so she reduced her walking speed, stepping forwards slowly and quietly. Her feet felt heavy. Or rather, it was her feelings that were heavy. The closer she got to the hospital room, the heavier it felt. Her throat was dry, while all the moisture seemed to have gathered in her palms.

What was Mana thinking about right now? What did she think about what happened back then? 7753 had been thoroughly yelled at back then, but she was also aware that being yelled at was the only thing she had to suffer. Maybe she would get another tongue lashing now. But she guessed she would also feel more at ease that way.

She knocked on the door. After hearing the “Come in” prompting voice, she entered the room.

Her eyes went around the room after coming in. Colorful magical formations—lavished with fluorescent colors—invaded all sides of the room. The ceiling, the floor, the walls, all was covered in large and small magic circles. The room was fully equipped with a large LCD television, a thermos, a refrigerator, a cushioned leather couch, a bed, and everything in between.

The canopied bed was placed in the center of the room, and she could see the small body of a young girl lying there.

“Oh, it’s just you.”

The girl softly blew her nose and readjusted her glasses. Seeing that tearful figure, 7753 rubbed her eyes.

“Um... Have you been well?”

“Idiot. How could a hospitalized person be well?”

Mana turned her face to the window. But even though she turned away from 7753, she did not kick her out. 7753 was relieved when she heard a little voice saying “sit anywhere you like,” so much so that her tears nearly came out again. These lacrimal glands had really become loose lately, she could not do anything about it.

“Can Mei come out?”

“Oh right. Yeah, you can come out.”

Tepsekemei came out of the bag, but for some reasons was wearing the goggles.

“What are you doing?! Don’t use the goggles!”

7753 hurriedly took her goggles back after saying so, and threw it in the bag. Tepsekemei dignifiedly lay down on the couch, not looking the least bit guilty.

“No punching yet?”

“Huh? Punching?”

“A visit is for punching.”

“Nonono! This is not that kind of visit!”

“No tasty food yet?”

“No, um, this is for Mana... I brought it as a present... Err, Mana-san. Please have some if you’d like to. And I also have this...”

There was nothing in the big glass vase next to the water jug.

“May I put it in?”

“Do whatever you want.”

7753 did not feel like staying still. She wanted to distract herself with motions. She put water in the vase with the built-in washroom. There was not a single drop of water inside the dry vase. A private room with built-in toilet and washroom. Kind of a VIP facility. The porcelain washbasin was well-polished, this room was huge and well-furnished, everything was so extravagant, and yet there was no flowers.

She could sense a somewhat loneliness after exiting the washroom. Tepsekemei was arranging the chocolate mousse on paper dishes. Tepsekemei was not the type who would voluntarily set up the table. Not to mention, she also poured hot water from the thermos and prepared the tea bags in the cups. Mana must have ordered her. 7753 took a glimpse at Mana. The girl was still looking outside the window. She looked neither angry nor sad. 7753 closed her eyes and straightened her spine.

“Christmas colors are everywhere outside now. Look, even these flowers feel like that.”

She must be careful not to make Mana think her bright voice was on purpose.

After sitting down next to Tepsekemei, receiving a paper dish and tea, she looked at Mana’s face. Her eyeglasses glowed with the light pouring in from the curtain, so 7753 could not see

her eyes. Her characteristic ringlet hair had returned to their straightened state, reaching down to the blanket. She was wearing a sweater that looked like it was sold in a mass merchandise store, not something you would expect on a long-term hospitalized patient.

With her gaze firmly on the outside of the window, Mana ate a mouthful of the mousse, then two mouthfuls. 7753 wondered if it was due to the light from the sun, but Mana's complexion looked very white.

"And you, how's it been?"

"Nothing seems to have changed much. But my superior has been busy dealing with the aftermaths."

"Is that so... When your boss is no longer busy, I would like to meet her. Can you relay what I say?"

"Yes, I'll do whatever I can."

"I want to investigate more about this incident."

Mana cut the mousse and ate another bite. Her face seemed to have regained a little color.

Clouds were drifting outside the window. The air in the room was somewhat heavy. What would be okay to talk about? There was only one thing to talk about when she was face-to-face with Mana. The incident. About Hana and Maou Pam and Ripple. About Funny Trick and Kurukuru-hime and Wedin. But 7753 would not touch that topic.

Mana moistened her mouth with some black tea.

"There are still things I want to know, things I want to examine. I'll make my moves as soon as I get out of here."

"Things you want to know, huh."

"*'A single point of view, that alone won't let you understand.'* Hana often said that."

Mana looked up at the ceiling, then grabbing the TV remote control and staring at it, then putting it away.

"I just want to make sure."

Mana repeatedly clenching and releasing the edge of her blanket. Then she put both hands on her own cheeks and applying some pressure. 7753 was not too sure what exactly Mana was doing.

Mana put some mousse in her mouth, and sighed.

“How to say...”

“Yes?”

“How do I say this...”

“Yes?”

7753 put her cup of tea away.

“How to say, how to say...”

“Yes...?”

“Nobody came to visit me.”

7753 already suspected so after seeing the dry vase. But being bluntly told that by the person herself was quite something, and it gave her trouble as to how to react properly. While 7753 was hesitating, Tepsekemei answered her with “Mei and 7753 are here.”

“Only you two. Papa did come here, but that guy is a researcher idiot so he never brought anything for me. Not even my clothes nor minimal necessities.”

Her voice was trembling. Mana poutingly put the rest of the mousse in her mouth all at once.

“No, umm...”

“I am not loved by anyone. Hana-oneechan is... no longer here.”

Mana sniffled right then. One after the other, large drops of tears fell out from her pair of eyes, and 7753 raised from her chair.

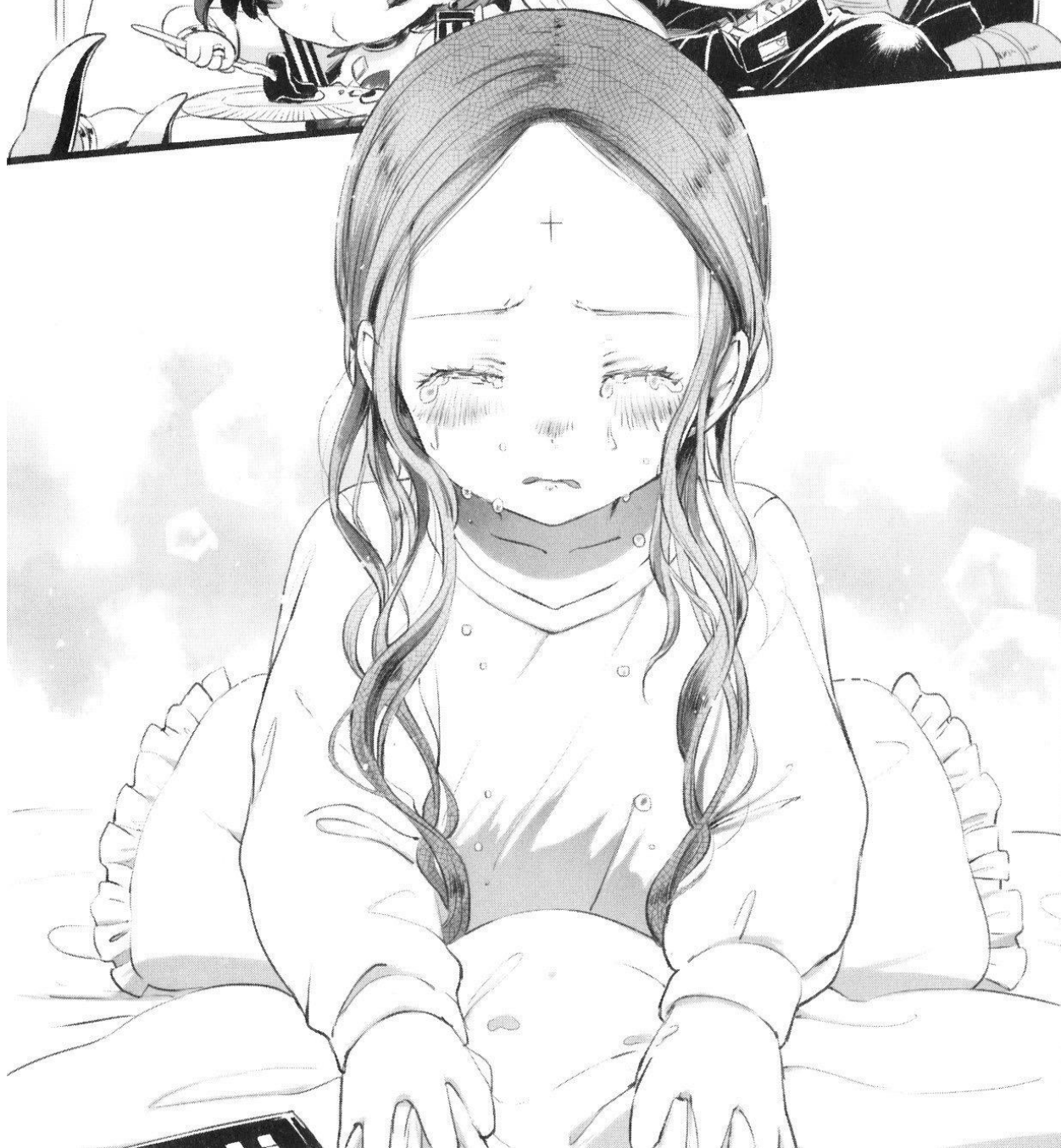
“A-Are you... okay?”

“Hana-oneechan... Hana-oneechan...”

Mana's body trembled, and then she cried like a baby with a shaken voice. Her face was red. She looked like she had been stimulated. 7753 looked over at Tepsekemei, but the latter just silently ate her mousse as if everything was right in the world. Should she call the nurses?

Mana kept crying like a child, 7753 was helplessly stupefied, Tepsekemei reached out for 7753's plate of chocolate mousse, and right then, the door opened.

"Aahh, you ate something bad again!"



A bear... not. A middle-aged nurse with a bear-like body lumbered into the room. She picked up the paper dish with chocolate mousse on it and took a sniff, then a frown appeared on her face.

“Alcohol! What were you thinking?!”

“Er, umm, I...”

“Mages are delicate. It’s not rare for chemicals entering through the mouth to exert dangerous effects on them. Besides, why did you bring alcoholic sweets to visit a Mage who was hospitalized for de-poisoning of all things.”

This gigantic nurse must have specialized in treating Mages in order to carry such knowledge. 7753 had not noticed until it was pointed out. She panicked and put her nose close to the dish. Her sense of smell had been deceived by the disinfectant smell permeating throughout the hospital, but there certainly was traces of alcohol.

“Being done like this... Poor girl.”

The gigantic nurse hugged Mana, Mana clung tightly onto her and cried loudly.

“To do such a thing, Magical Girls have no delicacy at all!”

“Y-Yes. I’m sorry. It’s all my fault.”

“Get out please!”

“P-Please excuse me!”

She was almost kicked out.

Speaking of which, Hana did mention “the team leader is easy to get along with when she’s drunk.” Even though she remembered it now, it was already after the fact. Bringing alcoholic sweets to a patient who was vulnerable to alcohol even before they were hospitalized... 7753 definitely was a jerk with a shortage of delicacy.

7753 hung her head in shame in the privacy of a toilet. She had failed. She had done unnecessary things. They should have been able to talk more, there were lots of things she wanted to talk with Mana about. She wanted to know the boring things about the girl. She wanted to know what kind of food Mana liked and what type of person Mana preferred and whatever else.

“What does it mean if the red decreases?”

Hearing a voice from the bag, 7753 lifted her face. What did Tepsekemei feel about being kicked out? Probably nothing, just as always.

“...What red?”

“The ones with big round tips.”

Tepsekemei got out of the bag, and the tiny toilet got cramped immediately.

“They came on here.”

On Tepsekemei's offered right hand was 7753's goggles.

“Ah, you mean the hearts.”

“Mei had been watching it. When Mei and 7753 entered, the visited girl's hearts dropped like flies. Mei is concerned what happened to the visited girl.”

The goggles' parameter was “Loneliness.” 7753 had set it so before entering Mana's room.

“Mei is very concerned.”

Just as swiftly as when she got out, Tepsekemei flew back into the bag.

7753 gazed at the goggles. It reflected the lighting in the toilet and shined a cheesy yellow.

She got her drunk with the alcoholic mousse, she made her cry, but even so, even just a little bit, maybe it helped? Mana's loneliness had decreased. The same was true for 7753. As soon as she saw Mana's face for the first time after a while, her loneliness diminished. She knew it even without the need to look at herself with the goggles.

“Let's go in again, one more time. We may be kicked out again, but we can just arrive at a later date in that case. Because I still have a lot to talk with her about.”

“Mei would also like that. Mei would go at it like Grace.”

“...Grace?”

“Grace is not like Wedin. Grace is a barbarian.”

Rather than being mistaken for someone, 7753 had the feeling that she was just told something very rude. However, now, she could not care to correct Tepsekemei nor make her remember. Since she could do it anytime later. Right now, she had a mission.

Mana said that she wanted to investigate the incident. *If so, let me help you with it.*

7753 turned the door knob to Mana's room.