

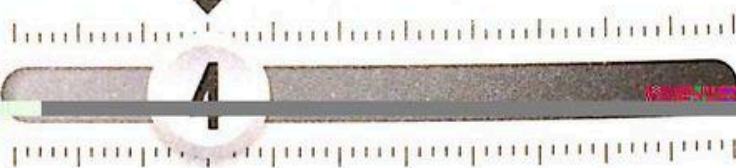
The Struggles Of A Great Leader

偉大なる リーダーの苦悩

マジカルキャンディー集めの競争が
始まるしばらく前のお話です。



ネ タ バ レ メ ー タ ー



アニメ第4話を観てから読むとちょうどいいぽん!



本書のための書き下ろしです。

The group of Magical Girls which Ruler led (also known as Team Ruler) used a run-down temple in N-City's Monzenmae-machi called Ouketsuji as their meeting place. There were no defenses or security in place, and people did not even go there for tests of courage. In addition, few vehicles or pedestrians passed by it, so it was an appropriate place for Magical Girls to set up a base. However, there were more passers-by than usual today, because repairs were being conducted on a nearby gas line.

It would not have been a problem if it was only Ruler, but if it were one of her careless subordinates, they might end up being discovered by regular people. If they triggered a disturbance, Ouketsuji would not be usable for an indefinite period, a development which had to be avoided at all costs. When one led a bunch of dimwitted subordinates, one needed to pay much more attention to risk management.

The work on the gas pipes would not last forever either, so after it was done, they could return to Ouketsuji. Before that, they would meet in various deserted places throughout the city and continue focusing on doing Magical Girl work. For now, she would ignore the Peaky Angels, who were grumbling because they could not find a place to hide and play games.

Today's meeting place was at the Muradana Building of Monzenmae-machi's Kinote-doori. While there were more passers-by here than at Ouketsuji, this was hardly a luxurious building with night patrolmen. The building's roof was best suited for Magical Girls to meet, and Ruler had found it after seeing a message Top Speed left in the chatroom. Sages were those who could glean wisdom from fools.

Ruler sprinted from building to building, jumping from roof to roof, and before long she arrived on top of the Muradana Building. The place was silent, and she could not sense the presence of anyone else. Ruler produced her Magical Phone from her breast pocket, and checked the time. They were supposed to meet now. She exhaled, then inhaled again, muttering "those idiots" to herself, and then she put the Magical Phone away. They were all late. That much was clear however leniently she looked at it. It was ridiculous that nobody apart from the team leader could come on time.

Ruler vented about the quality, morale and discipline of her subordinates. She paced round and round on the roof by herself, but none of her subordinates showed up. Ruler swung her scepter at the metal railing around the roof, but she stopped herself in time when she realized that even smashing the railing would not help her. Instead, she turned and swung her scepter at thin air, but that did not make her feel better; if anything, it just made her more frustrated.

"Ahhhh~ honestly! Why isn't anyone here yet!"

Nobody answered. Ruler took her Magical Phone out again and checked the time. It was already five minutes past the appointed starting time. She produced her schedule sheet, and checked the meeting time and place. She had not been mistaken; they were supposed to meet here, at the Muradana Building. In that case, why had nobody come yet?

Ruler had already paced three circles around the roof, so she paced another three in the opposite direction. She looked to the overcast sky as she thought about the Peaky Angels, and then she looked down to the surface as she wondered about Swim Swim and Tama, but nobody showed up. Ruler stomped the ground in frustration, but the sound it made irritated her, and so Ruler stopped.

Ruler grit her teeth as she leaned against the steel railings; waiting idly for others implied that she was wasting her time on them. Time was a finite resource and waited for no man, not something which could be casually wasted. *Do they even understand that*, she thought, but even if she left right now, the wasted time would not come back. Perhaps they might show up if she waited another minute or perhaps another 30 seconds.

Should she contact them with her Magical Phone? However, making them think she was anxiously waiting for them might damage her dignity. That was not a good idea. When it came to lateness, it was not the leader who should attempt contact first, but her subordinates.

Ruler sighed and looked upon the world below her. Thanks to her superior eyesight as a Magical Girl, she could clearly make out the events on the ground even from the roof of a tall building. A schoolboy left a convenience store while holding a steaming bag; probably oden. After him was a middle-aged male who looked like a salaryman, whose hands were empty. Had he not found what he was looking for, or was he just a customer who stood around browsing? After that came a high school-aged girl, holding a slim magazine in her right hand. Ruler could not understand these people who deliberately shunned plastic bags and walked around with magazines in hand. That magazine was essentially a local free daily newspaper, and it looked very plain. It had begun distribution when Ruler... Mokuou Sanae had started schooling, and it was light reading material filled with ads. Whatever features it had were all along the lines of "Places where you can drink alone", "Ramen restaurants of N-City," and they were effectively glorified advertisements in their own right.

Why was someone in the prime of her life walking around with a magazine like that? In order to keenly observe her from afar, Ruler stared at the girl in a manner which might be considered rude.

Perhaps there was a feature article which had interested her. With that in mind, Ruler shifted her attention to the contents of the magazine, but she was too far away to make them out. Magical Girls had high-performance eyesight, but that did not mean they were omniscient. The girl turned a corner at a junction, and vanished from sight.

Ruler went "hmp" and checked her Magical Phone again. Ten minutes had passed.

The time spent waiting, the time spent being bored, the time wasted, all of them meant nothing to her now. Her interest had been piqued, and so she wanted to make sure for herself. What exactly in that free paper had caught that girl's attention, or was she a unique individual?

Ruler leapt down from the roof into a small alley, jumping from a second-storey window to a first storey window. She somersaulted to bleed off the speed of her descent and finally touched down on top of the stairs leading to the building's rear entrance, where she returned to her human form of Mokuou Sanae. She had transformed in her room before setting out, so she was

in her indoors clothes, and there was nothing strange about entering a convenience store in her indoor clothes. The only problem was that she was a little cold but It would be fine once she entered the convenience store.

She adjusted the collar and sleeves of her sweatshirt and stuck her hands into the pockets over her belly, feeling for the wallet there. There was enough money inside to buy magazines. Sanae nonchalantly stepped out into the street from an alley, and the convenience store came into view. She cut across the road and put a hand on the store door. Then she reflexively glanced behind herself, and what she saw made Sanae cough violently.

The twin angels, the girl in a dog-eared hood and the girl in the white school swimsuit were chatting under the shelter of the building's entrance. Could it be that they had understood "meet at the building" as "meet in front of the building" rather than "meet on top of the building?" Did they need every little detail spelled out for them? How stupid were they?

It might have been late at night, but there were still some normal people walking along the road. Some of them were pointing their fingers and turning their smartphones on them. Intense emotion suddenly filled her, and Ruler planned to walk over and ask them, but then she suddenly remembered that she was not transformed. She could not expose her true identity.

She went over how to deal with this situation in her mind. First, she ought to transform in a place where nobody could see her. After that she would contact them on her Magical Phone and drag them up to the roof of the building for a lecture. What on earth were they thinking, chatting in front of normal people? She would also need to scold them for mistaking an instruction to meet on the building's roof as meeting in front of the building. And then, there were all the other little mistakes they made in everyday life. If she let them pile up, they might become irrecoverable failures; she had to let them understand the link between the two.

She had decided what to do. Now the only thing left was to carry it out. She would return to the alley, and then transform again.

"...Mokuou-san?"

Also, she would have to hammer the principles of living as a Magical Girl into them once more.

"You're Mokuou-san, aren't you?"

Slothfulness and laxity were words used to criticize people who were otherwise proper. Using them on people who were lazy and slack to begin with had a more dire meaning.

"It *is* you, Mokuou-san!"

Someone grabbed her shoulder, and by the time she turned around, the grabber's face was right in hers. She stumbled back unconsciously, her hand plastered against the glass window of a store. She sized up the other party once more; it was a familiar face.

"Henmi...san."

“Long time no see, Mokuou-san.”

“好久不见，木王小姐。”

Mokuou Sanae had been an office lady until recently. She had been exiled to N-City to handle makework, and all she had done there was perform tasks that did not let her show her talents, like photocopying documents, brewing tea and so on. Just as Sanae had begun to truly resent this, she had become a Magical Girl through the social game known as Magical Girl Raising Project. Now that she had no further use for her job, she had quit immediately. Henmi Yuka had been one of her colleagues from back then, doing the same work Sanae did. Even so, she had not shown any unhappiness with her circumstances, and she seemed happy to work every day. All Sanae felt about her was “what a disappointing lack of ambition.”

Yuka did not know what Sanae thought of her, and she had cheerfully spoken to Sanae every day, but Sanae had simply been annoyed by it. People who had to suddenly quit their jobs most likely had some troublesome reason for it, so one would not usually approach them to speak even if one met them on the street. However, that reasoning did not seem to apply to Yuka.

“Mokuou-san, what happened? You should have left your contact info.”

“No, um—”

“You vanished all of a sudden! After you left, the only people who remained were all uncles and aunts. I was so lonely, Mokuou-san.”

“Ah—”

“Mokuou-san, at least tell me your e-mail address. We’ll go have fun together next time, okay? Where should we go? How about karaoke? You have a lovely voice, Mokuou-san. You’re really good at singing.”

“Henmi-san. Can we talk about this some other time? I’m very busy right now.”

“Eh? You are?”

Yuka tilted her head, and her twintails swished slightly. Sanae followed Yuka’s gaze to herself, and suddenly remembered that she was still dressed in her indoor clothes. Saying that she was “very busy” had very little persuasive power in this outfit. What could she possibly be busy with if she was wearing a sweatshirt with a belly pocket?

“Ah, don’t tell me... you were planning to have tea at that shop?”

She followed Yuka’s line of sight once more. That was when Sanae realized that the glass window she was had one hand on was actually the door of a cafe... or rather, a coffeeshop would be more appropriate.

“That, that’s right. I was just about to step inside for a drink. Then, I’ll see you a—”

“Let’s have a drink together, then. Just so happens I’m thirsty.”

“No, hang on—”

Sanae entered the coffeeshop amidst the jingling of bells as Yuka pushed her in from behind. There were no customers inside, and the storekeeper was polishing his glasses at the counter. He did not even look at them, simply muttered “welcome” in a singularly unwelcoming tone by way of greeting.

“What should we have? Oooh, how about a deluxe parfait?”

Yuka produced a pair of glasses from her spectacle case and merrily perused the menu. Sanae looked outside; the quartet of the twins, the dog-eared girl and the white school swimsuit girl were still chatting outside the building.

“Mokuou-san, what are you looking at?”

“No! Nothing! I’m not looking at anything at all!”

“What’s wrong? You’re shouting all of a sudden.”

“No, ah... look, ever since I quit, I haven’t spoken to anyone else in a long time...”

“Ah, I’ve heard of things like that. They say that it’s hard to control your tone.”

While she had successfully managed to divert Yuka’s attention from outside the window, that had instead caused Yuka to look sympathetically at Sanae. Sanae clenched her fists under the table; *why do I have to be insulted with pity?* This was all her incompetent subordinates’ fault.

“Alright, I’ve decided. It’s the deluxe parfait for me, after all.”

“Then I’ll have a blended coffee.”

The storekeeper repeated their order in a gloomy voice, then slowly trudged back into the kitchen. Was it the dismal aura around the owner that had made things so bad? Had he fallen into depression because there were no customers? Or was it simply because of the time? Regardless of the cause, she did not want to linger in this place for too long. Currently for Sanae, she had reasons not to linger here even before taking the atmosphere of this place into consideration.

“It was so sudden the way you quit, Mokuou-san..”

“Mm.”

Careful not to let Yuka notice, she swiftly peeked outside the store, and saw the twin angels hovering in mid-air, whereupon Sanae banged her forehead on the table.

“What’s wrong, Mokuou-san?!”

"It's nothing! Nothing's wrong!"

"How could there be nothing wrong? You're hurting yourself!"

"Don't worry about it. I just slipped."

"Could a simple slip result in something like that?"

"Well, the timing was bad and so was my luck."

"Eh, I see... that's scary."

What on earth were they doing?! Without Ruler to instil order and logic in them, Team Ruler was just an unruly bunch of rag-tag misfits. She had always felt like that, but now she was clearly reminded of it. Those useless Magical Girls needed to be led by Ruler. She had to leave this place as soon as possible.

The reason she could not was because she was unable to shake Yuka off. As long as she remained in Yuka's line of sight, she could not transform, use her Magical Phone, or contact the idiot quartet.

"Ah, I need to go to the washroom..."

Just as she thought of standing up, she saw the twin angels taking one of Tama's arms each and flying through the air in front of the building, whereupon Sanae pounded the table with her fist.

"What, what happened?"

"Sorry about that, there's nothing wrong at all."

"Eh? Didn't you say you were going to the bathroom?"

"No... Ah, there was a doll hanging in front of the bathroom over there, I wanted to say it was kind of cute."

"You mean that cursed voodoo doll? It's cute? You think that doll's cute?"

This was bad. Going to the bathroom now would be very bad. Right now, nobody seemed to have noticed the angels flying in the sky, but if Sanae left her seat now and Yuka shifted her attention outside due to boredom, there was a very high chance a great commotion might break out.

She ought to sit down now. She sipped the bad-tasting blended coffee which the shopkeep brought to them while she made the appropriate responses to Yuka's words.

"Hm... this parfait doesn't quite meet my expectations..."

“Really?”

“There’s a bit too much coffee jelly and flakes in this. According to the menu, there’s supposed to be a long stretch of ice cream, cream and fruits in the parfait, but the coffee jelly and flakes are taking up two-thirds of the whole thing.”

“Isn’t that good too?”

“I don’t get it, I don’t get what you said at all. I won’t settle for this. Alright, I’ve decided. Excuse me, I’ll have a triple berry pancake, please.”

She made a sound like a squashed frog. Was she *still* going to eat? Was she *still* going to hang around here? She wanted to finish this as quickly as possible; how much would she have to eat before she was satisfied? As a grown woman, was she not afraid that she would get fat on account of eating so many desserts at night?

“Mokuou-san, you’re good at cooking too, aren’t you?”

“Did I get a chance to show you my cooking before?”

“You did, when we went to that yakiniku restaurant for the year-end party. You knew exactly when to stop cooking the meat and gave good instructions. Back then, I thought that if I followed you around, I’d be able to eat delicious yakiniku. You seemed so reliable back then.”

“That... counts as cooking?”

“Yakiniku is cooking, right? Only the people at your table got to eat good yakiniku, Mokuou-san. Section Chief’s table was just sad, his meat was all charred, and I felt sorry when I saw the people who couldn’t even complain to the chief about the charred meat. Well, it wasn’t a year-end party so much as unpaid overtime. Speaking of which, I had overtime today too; perhaps you couldn’t tell because I came out for a stroll at this time. Ever since you left, things got super busy, so people can’t help grumbling about you, Mokuou-san.”

She ate and she talked and she ate and she talked and she ate and she talked and she ate and she talked. Her mouth did not stop moving for a single moment. Whether she was lost in her dessert or her discourse, Sanae hoped that she would finish soon. She still had to go and scold those idiots.

“Nobody could fill the hole you left behind, Mokuou-san. At least, I couldn’t. Chief kept sighing and saying we’d lost a rare talent.”

While she had thought she would just go along with anything she said, there were still some things which caught her interest.

“...Is that true?”

“Yeah, Chief kept sighing all the time.”

It felt quite good to know that they were sighing over an employee who had quit due to poor treatment.

“Hmm...”

“Look, didn’t we have that talent show at the flower-viewing?”

“Hm? Ah, yes, we did.”

“Back then, I ended up in the same team as you, Mokuou-san. It was just a talent show but I was about to cry, all I could think of was, ‘what should I do, what should I do’, but you were actually prepared for it, Mokuou-san. I was totally amazed by how you managed to impersonate so many people.”

“Hm? Ah, well, that did happen, but so what?”

“That was just amazing, you did so many funny impressions but they were all top-quality. I helped with changing costumes and reciting a few lines. You pulled the other flower-viewers over too, and they mistook you for a pro entertainer, and they laughed as they tossed you money. Chief once said that nobody was as talented as you, and losing you was a waste.”

Listening to her so earnestly was foolish. Sanae rested her jaw on her hand as she looked outside, and then her face contorted. The girl in the white swimsuit was handing out snacks to the twin angels and the dog-eared girl—

“Mokuou-san, did you see something?”

“No! I didn’t see anything!”

“You’ve been shouting ever since just now.”

“Like I said, I can’t control my tone too well yet.”

“Really?”

“Yes, really.”

“Doesn’t your throat hurt from shouting so much?”

“That’s true, it surprised me too.”

Sanae took a sip of the blended coffee that had long since gone cold, and then she glanced outside the window once more. The Magical Girls were eating snacks while arrayed around a leisure seat.

“Pffft, koff, koffkoffkoff—”

“Slow, slow down, Mokuou-san! Pull yourself together! Here, have some water!”

“Ahh... thank you... koff.”

What was *wrong* with these people? Where had they come from and where were they going? What had they done to end up eating snacks in front of the regular people on the road? Sanae kept coughing even as she drank the water, and so Yuka went behind Sanae to pat her back while she used her paper napkin to wipe away the spilt coffee on the table.

“Are you feeling unwell?”

“Come to think of it... I might be a little ill.”

“Should I call an ambulance?”

“That’s fine, there’s no need to go that far, I’m alright.”

“I’m glad you can say that... but you look pretty miserable, Mokuou-san.”

“Like I said, I’m fine.”

“You helped me out in a lot of ways, Mokuou-san. Therefore, I want to return the favor by doing as much as I can for you, so long as I can actually do it. You can count on me for anything.

If you really want to repay the favor, then hurry up and finish that pancake. She thought that, but she could not say it.

“You took care of all your usual tasks quickly and cleanly, you helped a lot during the talent show, and you even helped draw for the window pop posters. You’re just like a professional.”

“I’m sure a real professional would be better at it.”

“As if! The way you draw is good enough as it is. I certainly couldn’t do that... whether it’s work, the show or the art. And then there was the time you knocked down nearly 200 pins during the company’s bowling meet, to the point they told the ladies’ team that they weren’t going to give them a handicap any more, and how you took first place in all the sports events you participated in, and how you set a new record during the bread-eating contest.”

“That company had too many recreational activities.”

“Well, the boss liked it that way... more importantly, Sanae-san, there was a rumor back then about how we’d be getting a super elite employee from Tokyo who punched her boss and loved to quarrel.”

“Well, I didn’t punch him.”

“Frankly speaking, you were more amazing than what the rumors said.”

On the flip side, without these recreational activities that let her show her stuff, then she would have had nothing but depressing memories before becoming a Magical Girl. No matter how enthusiastically Yuka spoke of them, they had all lost their lustre to her.

As she put Yuka's words out of mind, Sanae recalled how she had been as an office lady, and she sighed quietly. If she had not been saved by becoming a Magical Girl, she would have continued rotting there. No, she might have been pickled to the point where she could not even rot instead. Working as a minorly famous office lady in a parochial affiliate company, someone who was only counted on during events — Sanae slowly slurped the rest of her blended coffee and looked out the window. The twin angels were grabbing each other while Tama-chan and Swim Swim tried to pull them apart.

"Those stupid..."

Yuka turned a puzzled look at Sanae as she suddenly rose to her feet.

"What's wrong, Mokuou-san?"

"No, um... it's, ah... stupidly painful... my stomach, that is."

"Eh? Will you be alright?"

"Mm, if I go home and warm my tummy... I guess, I guess I'll be alright. Mm. I'm sorry. but please help put away this coffee in my place. I'll be making a move first."

"Ah, hold on a bit. Tell me your LINE."

(TL Note: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Line_\(software\)\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Line_(software))))

"Ah, er, sorry, I didn't bring my smartphone with me today."

"Then I'll write down my ID on a paper napkin."

"No, I can't—"

"Just wait a bit, I'll be done right away. Come on, please..."

Now that Yuka had tears welling up in her eyes, it was difficult to break free of her. However, if she did not get in touch with the members of her team as soon as possible; and get the twin angels under control, it might lead to unimaginable consequences. As far as Ruler knew, the two of them had never fought before; why was it that they had started fighting, here and now?

Sanae quickly glanced outside the window to check. The twin angels were still struggling with each other, their wings flapping as they rose in a spiral path, until they vanished from her field of view. Tama-chan looked dumbly into the air, while Swim Swim yawned loudly.

There was nothing to be done about it any more. Sanae could not cry even if she wanted to. She would have to take care of the problem here first in order to take care of the problem over there. Yuka had probably finished writing her ID down, because when Sanae looked back to her,

she found Yuka staring out the window as well. Sanae felt like her legs had collapsed from under her, as she thought, “Ah, it’s all over now.” Sanae sat on the sofa and nodded to Yuka.

“It’s from a game called Magical Girl Raising Project. It seems pretty popular.”

“Ah... mm.”

“The cosplayers recently have been really talented.”

“Mm, cosplay... hm?”

“Here, here, look at this.”

The item Yuka took from her handbag was the same slim regional magazine which the high school girl from earlier had been carrying. The headline on its cover was printed in a striking font, and it read: “Incredibly Popular! What IS the Magical Girl Raising Project?” She then flipped through the magazine until she reached a black and white page which displayed a screenshot from Magical Girl Raising Project, which was accompanied by various subheadings that read, “Large numbers of cosplaying girls are appearing in N-City”, “This social problem has experts concerned”, “Emergency interview with A-san, who was hospitalized after falling into a drain while playing a mobile phone game” and so on.

The twin angels descended back to earth and rose back into the sky, still fighting with each other.

“It’s called a drone. How nice, I wish I had one.”

Yuka had a look of admiration on her face. In the meantime, the passers-by turned their mobile phones on the squabbling twins, after which they walked on like nothing had happened. They did not even slow their pace. Sanae blinked, and then sank into her seat.

“Henmi-san.”

“What is it?”

“The people in this city are weird.”

“Really? You think so? Doesn’t feel that way to me.”