Chapter Thirty

-The Question-

"I'm sorry?" I asked, unsure if I heard Everglaive correctly.

"Is being a Magical Girl something you want?" Everglaive gave a gentle shrug. "I believe your contract was an emergency one, yes? After which, you were placed in one life-threatening situation after another. So, I'm curious if you even wanted to be a Magical Girl in the first place, or if your hand was just forced at the time."

"I… D-does it matter?" I fidgeted, a flurry of discordant thoughts rising up inside me. "With the contract, haven't I already agreed to be one?"

Naiad waved her hand in a so-so gesture. "Yes, but there's other things you could do besides fighting on the front lines. Plenty of Magical Girls have either 'retired' or take a non-combat focused specialty like crafting. Magical Girl Index, for example, serves as a sort of knowledge expert on… well, kind of everything, I guess. Magical Girl Hephaestus-chan is a master crafter and enchanter, and Dungeon Master creates defenses and fortifications for cities. There's all kinds of other specializations that don't involve combat available, really."

"There's plenty of options available for roles that deviate from the standard Magical Girl archetype," Everglaive nodded along. "Which is why I ask if you truly want to be what most would consider a 'standard' Magical Girl. While switching paths later is certainly possible, making a decision now when you are still at the beginning of your career would be much more efficient."

I chewed on my lip, feeling a little lost. Ever since meeting Selene, I'd always just assumed that this was my path now. Killing Anathema and doing whatever else it was Magical Girls did. If I really did have a choice though…

What *did* I want?

It seemed like an eternity ago, thinking about my life before the mall. Every day had just been living in the moment, never really giving thought to the future. I'd been looking for a part-time job, but finding one was difficult. Sure, there were plenty of openings for cashiers and other customer service jobs, but…

I was weird *and* awkward. It had taken months for me to just get comfortable talking to Lily, and I still managed to mess up regularly. Even if I managed to get a job somewhere, there was no

way I'd be able to hold it for long, not with the added social pressure and anxiety. I wouldn't be able to handle it, and that would make me bad at the job itself.

Other than trying to find a job to earn the money I desperately needed, I didn't really have any plans for my future. I needed to move out as fast as possible, I guess, but that wasn't likely to happen any time soon. But after that, I had no idea what I really wanted. My future plans had always been dark and nebulous because getting from one day to the next was always the priority.

But becoming a Magical Girl had changed everything.

It had given me the answer to a question I'd never really had the luxury of asking. It was like I'd been handed a future, a path that I could follow and be *proud* of. When I'd contracted, the power had been exactly what I needed to keep myself alive and protect everyone.

But was it what I wanted? Did I really want to fight in life-or-death battles for the rest of my life? To face fears and nightmares made manifest? More than that, was that something I was even capable of?

Then there were all the other aspects of being a Magical Girl that didn't involve combat. Selene had called it being a beacon of hope, but what did that even entail? Talking to people and inspiring them? Interviews and marketing deals?

If that was the case, then I already knew the answer from my failure to find any suitable jobs. My only real hope on that end was maybe I was mistaken about what it involved. Still, if half of being a MG was combat and half was social stuff, and I wasn't sure about either part…

"I…" I slowly started to say before the electronic lock to the room let out a soft beep.

A second later the door was thrown open, banging against the doorstop noisily as a blond girl with pigtails entered, a wide grin on her face. I let out a surprised squeak, pulling the blanket coving me higher over myself as I curled up into a small ball, my heart thundering in my chest.

The girl appeared to be in her mid to late teens and was short enough to barely be taller than me. She wore a complicated short-sleeved dress with a puffy skirt and sleeves. The color scheme was white and black as a base while a red diamond pattern dominated the edges, tapering off near her stomach. Red and black thigh-high socks following the same checkered diamond pattern covered her legs, but I couldn't see what she wore on her feet from my position. Red bows and ribbons adorned her dress, and a scarlet headband rested on her head with lightning bolt shaped pins rising off it.

I only had a second to recognize her as one of the Magical Girls who rescued me before she threw her hands into the air as if cheering.

“The food has arrived!” she announced with a high pitched voice, an excited look on her round face.

Everglaive and Naiad had both snapped their heads around to the door when it was thrown open, Naiad halfway rising out of the sofa. Upon seeing the girl, Everglaive let out a long sigh, shaking her head as Naiad put her hands on her hips and glared at the newcomer.

“Rina! What were you thinking entering like that?!”

“Uh,” the girl blinked sheepishly as she took in the room, “I was thinking that I came bearing food and it would make for a cool entrance? Um… My bad?”

There was a silence before Naiad let out a sigh, throwing up her hands in a gesture of surrender as she fell back into her seat on the sofa, arms crossed.

“Sorry about her,” Naiad grumbled. “She didn’t mean any harm. She just sometimes doesn’t use her brain. Or, ever does, really.”

“Hey!” the girl squawked.

“This is our teammate Thorina,” Everglaive continued over the girl’s protest. “I apologize for her rudeness. Would it be alright if she joined us?”

Slowly, my heart began to slow down, and I forced the tension from my muscles to unwind as I relaxed my posture. I gave an uncertain nod. Thorina grinned at that, walking over and sitting on the couch to my left without ceremony. As she sat and stared at me with a wide grin, I noticed she had startlingly blue eyes with pupils in a thunderbolt pattern. Fidgeting under her gaze, I looked away uncomfortably.

A soft knocking made me look back to the still open door.

“Excuse me,” a deep voice rumbled. “Is everyone in there decent enough for me to enter as well?”

“Oh?” Everglaive murmured with a raised eyebrow. “So Gildscale and Naiad both have the manners and presence of mind to knock before entering a girl’s room, and yet you don’t, Thorina?”

Thorina sputtered, looking at Everglaive in shock.

“But he’s a guy! Of course he should knock!”

“Rina, it doesn’t matter if it’s a guy or girl, *normal* people knock before entering a stranger’s room,” Naiad chided her teammate, shaking her head.

The girl grumbled, crossing her arms and slouching into the sofa with a pout that turned her already soft face even more childish. Everglaive turned to address me.

“Do you feel comfortable with our last teammate joining us?”

I looked down at myself, feeling more self-conscious as I pulled the blanket a bit higher over my pajamas. It was a little embarrassing to be seen by so many people in bunny-print pajamas, but the blanket more or less covered me up as long as I didn’t move around too much.

I nodded to Everglaive, and she smiled before calling out.

“Come in, Gild.”

A man with dark skin entered. He appeared to be in his early twenties with sharp, chiseled features and black hair shorn close to his scalp. His armor was like that of a fantasy knight, but made of golden scales. Every design detail I could see seemed to be sharp and jagged, coming to points like claws or talons. The heavy metal pauldrons covering his shoulders were shaped like that of dragon heads, but beyond that, I couldn’t see the rest of his costume due to the mountain of fast food bags he held cradled in his arms.

I must have made a surprised face, because Everglaive glanced back to the entryway just as the man dexterously used his foot to close the door without even looking. Everglaive’s eyebrow twitched at the sight, and she quickly stood up.

“Would it be alright if I moved some of your items so Gild can set down the food?”

I quickly nodded, and Everglaive went to work relocating my guns and magazines to a different table. Naiad followed her example, shooting a look at Thorina who slouched back into the sofa with an excited expression as she stared at the food.

“You came barging in here without knocking, and you weren’t even the one with the food?” Naiad asked dryly, and Thorina stuck her tongue out.

“Gild offered to carry it all!”

“Only because if you tried,” the Guardian’s deep voice rumbled as he began setting bags on the table, “you wouldn’t be able to see over them.”

“Oh, ha ha, a short joke,” Thorina rolled her eyes. “Very original, never heard that one before.”

“It’s not our fault any other joke we make goes right over your head,” Naiad grinned.

“These jokes may be low hanging fruit, but at least you can see them coming,” Gild agreed.

Thorina’s mouth fell open at the rapid-fire lines, looking between the two Guardians with a look of betrayal.

“Wah- you can’t do this! Look, the newbie is at least as short as me if not shorter! Any joke you make at me might as well be at her too, so who's the one being rude now?!”

Everyone but Thorina had just finished setting the variety of takeout bags on the table, and they froze for a second, Naiad shooting a warning scowl at Thorina before glancing at me worriedly. I felt a prickle of frustration mixed with embarrassment at the mention of my height, but Thorina seemed completely oblivious as she turned to face me.

“You’re under five feet, right? Or, uh, under 150 centimeters, about? If my conversion is right?”

“Rina…” Everglaive drew out her name in something like a warning, and I saw the girl visibly tense up at the frost in Everglaive’s voice.

“You don’t have to answer that,” Naiad quickly added, sitting down on the sofa and giving me a worried look.

I felt the feeling inside me intensifying, a blush starting to form on my cheeks. Looking away from the three figures, I decided to just give a quick nod. It’s not like they couldn’t *see* my height, so I wasn’t sure why this girl was asking in the first place. I didn’t think she was trying to embarrass me judging by the innocent, excited expression on her face, but that hardly mattered when that was the effect she was having.

“Hell yeah!” Thorina threw her hands up in victory. “Let it be known that the alliance of below average height gains another capable warrior this day! We may be tiny, but we are *fierce*! And us shorties gotta’ stick together. Am I right or am I right, new girl?”

She held out her hand in a fist to me, and I blinked in surprise. I was frozen for a second before she wiggled her fist, an expectant look on her face. More on autopilot than anything else, I nervously reached out, gently tapping her fist with mine.

“Awesome,” Thorina grinned, clapping her hands together excitedly. “Now onto the food and-”

“Just… slow down a moment,” Everglaive sighed, her normally restrained voice fraying. “You still haven’t properly introduced yourselves.”

“Ah, apologies,” the young man in golden armor dipped his head to me in greeting. “I’m Gildscale, but most people just call me Gild. I serve as the Archer for our team.”

I bowed my head slightly deeper than him, stopping myself from giving my name on reflex. Now that I could see him better, I noticed he had faint golden scales on some of his skin. Combined with the spikes and design of his armor, it gave him a draconic visage.

The hyperactive girl gave me a wave, a bright, lopsided smile on her face.

“Yo, I’m Thorina, but my friends call me Rina. I smash things for our team.”

“Striker is the term you’re looking for,” Naiad shook her head.

“Eh, what does it matter what it’s called so long as the Anathema ends up as crushed hamburger? Oh! Speaking of hamburger…”

Thorina pointed to the food on the table, practically bouncing up and down. Naiad was just giving her a disgusted look, and Everglaive gave a quiet, restrained sigh.

“Well. I suppose anything else can wait. Gild, what did you pick up?”

“Thorina made the point that we didn’t know what our new friend wanted, so we decided to get a little bit of everything. We have a variety of burgers in these three bags, fried chicken and wings in those two, various Chinese meals in these three, and then some salads in the last two.”

Everglaive nodded at him with a small smile, before turning and gesturing to me.

“Go ahead. Take your pick.”

Feeling a little overwhelmed—mostly from the ball of energy that was Thorina—I stared at all the food bags. A sudden, deep worry began gnawing at my guts. They'd gotten so much food, and I already owed them more than I knew how to repay. Accepting food would just be adding to my debt. While they seemed kind enough, I barely knew them… I couldn't just accept more things from them.

My stomach rumbled, and I clenched my teeth together hard as I squeezed my abdominal muscles tight, trying to quell the growing hunger. I wasn't sure if the sound was audible to the rest of them, but Naiad tilted her head inquisitively.

"What's wrong? If there's nothing you like, we could get something else."

"Oh, no, it's just…" I chewed over my words before I continued. "I already owe the four of you so much. I don't really know how to begin repaying you. I can't accept this unless I can give you some points or…"

I trailed off as I saw the strange looks I was getting. Naiad and Gild were both watching me closely while Everglaive simply sat expressionless. Thorina gave me a baffled expression, though, letting out a snort.

"Owe us? You don't owe us anything. We're Magical Girls, saving people is what we do."

"But… I just… You risked your lives when you didn't have to, and… I don't know how many points you spent or how much this cost, but…"

The pressure inside me was building, making me fumble over my words as a pulsing headache began to form. Arguing with Lily about things like this was one thing I'd grown accustomed to, but this was completely different. I didn't know how to make them understand. I *did* have a debt to them, and that was something that had to be paid.

"It's fine, really," Thorina waved a hand dismissively. "It was a good fight, anyway. Been a bit since I was in a siege battle, so it was nice to shake the rust off. No worries about anything like that."

"That's not…"

I struggled, anxiety making my heart skip. I took a deep breath, trying to calm down. They needed to understand, but I couldn't seem to find the words.

"Besides," Thorina laughed. "It's just a couple dollars, so-"

“It’s not *just* a couple dollars!” I raised my voice, half rising out of my chair. “It’s a *debt*, and that *needs* to be paid back!”

The room went utterly quiet. Staring at the confused girl, it only took me a second to realize what I just did. Horror welled up inside me as I took in their surprised expressions. A pit formed in my stomach, and I sat back down, panic making my hands jitter as I readjusted my blanket.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered quickly, looking down.

Thorina recovered first, letting out an amused breath of air. “You’re fine. I just don’t get-”

“*Thorina,*” Everglaive snapped, her voice arctic.

Thorina’s mouth almost audibly clicked shut, and she shot a confused look to Everglaive. The other girl merely let out a slow breath, leaning forward slightly as she addressed me.

“I believe I understand your feelings,” she began slowly, “and that kind of emphasis on integrity and returning another’s kindness is a truly wonderful thing. However, I believe there is some miscommunication going on. You see, you’ve *already* more than paid whatever debt you feel you might owe to us. The same goes for whatever you may feel you owe Error Machina as well.”

I frowned at that, my racing pulse slowly calming as I listened to her speak.

“I don’t understand.”

“Perhaps it would be easier to look at it this way: We didn’t help you simply because we wanted to but because we were hired to.”

Naiad gave Everglaive a look like she’d gone crazy, and Thorina seemed equally baffled. Gildscale simply lifted his eyebrows but seemed otherwise unbothered.

“By who?” I asked carefully.

“The System, of course,” Everglaive gave me a soft smile. “You see, it wasn’t just us acting on our own desire to help, all of us were also offered quests to help you. My main quest alone was worth 20,000 points, and that doesn’t even include the other points we earned from defeating Anathema.”

I tried not to let my jaw draw open as my mind stuck on the number. She'd gotten nearly twenty times the number of points as me? Even though my quest was a Death Wish…

[Quick point of clarification,] Selene interjected smoothly. *[Fantasy Fatale received more points from their quest rewards due to their level. As I explained earlier, there is a limit to how fast a Soul Gem can grow. Every hundredth level you achieve will increase the amount of possible points that can be rewarded to you through quests.]*

"Indeed," Everglaive gave a respectful nod to Selene. "And, as for the food, you were subjected to rather intense amounts of magical healing. Both casting spells and having healing magic cast on you takes a lot of your body's energy. Seeing as Naiad unilaterally took you on as her patient…"

Everglaive turned to Naiad, giving her an expectant look. Naiad had a wide-eyed expression of something like understanding, and she nodded quickly.

"That's right! Usually I try to ask before healing someone, but it was kind of an emergency. Now that you're my patient, though, your health is my responsibility. Any and all expenses belong to me alone, and I'm being more than compensated through the experience my Skills and Class are gaining. Eating food to rebuild your energy reserves is part of your recovery treatment, so please, don't feel like you're imposing! Everglaive's right, all of this was more than paid for already."

I bit down on my lip, glancing between the group. None of them seemed upset at me yelling at them, and their words seemed oddly calm and reassuring. I knew better than to completely trust their outward reaction, but I didn't see any of the body language that usually set off alarm bells in my head. They seemed relaxed except for Naiad who had clasped her hands on her lap tightly. As for the logic of what they were saying…

It probably made sense? It kind of felt like a loophole to me, even if I couldn't figure out why. It was more a reframing of the situation than anything else. I hadn't really thought to consider the quests as jobs, but that's more or less what they were in video games. Just because the System was the one handing them out instead of people didn't really change that.

They were just doing their jobs and attempting to follow through on them.

After another moment of indecision, I gave a reluctant nod.

"Okay."

Naiad gave a smile as I reached for the bags, and Thorina grinned excitedly.

“Awesome! Here, let me help get these unpacked on the table so you can see the full selection.”

Thorina hopped to it, and Gildscale let out a chuckle as he began to help her. It didn’t take the two of them long to have a veritable feast of foods lined up on the table, and the smell made my stomach clench painfully again. Thorina gave me an expectant look, gesturing.

“Go ahead, you get first pick.”

There were a few things I’d never tried before, so I just stuck to what I knew and grabbed a burger. I wasn’t really picky about toppings or anything, I just wanted food.

Once I’d taken my pick, it was like a signal went off, and everyone began grabbing things for themselves, eating without a second thought. I joined in, and most conversation died out for a bit. At first, I was worried about how fast I wanted to eat my burger, but I watched in equal parts awe and horror as Thorina finished her first one off in less than a dozen seconds before reaching for another.

The others seemed to be eating at a more sedate pace, but with Thorina there, I felt less bad about easing up and just focusing on the food. It wasn’t often that I got to eat fast food, just when Lily bought some for me really, and I wasn’t going to let the opportunity go to waste. I knew the food wasn’t healthy, but that didn’t change the fact it was insanely tasty.

It was a bit shocking how much everybody was able to eat. I ate by far the least while Thorina and Gildscale seemed to be competing using a fast versus slow method respectively. By the time the five of us finished, the mountain of food had been reduced to almost nothing. Thorina seemed to have fallen into a food coma two-thirds of the way through, letting out something between a groan and contented sigh as she fell back onto the sofa. I felt similarly stuffed, but I wasn’t going to let it show.

“Well then,” Everglaive said, still slowly eating a salad. “I suppose we can get back to matters at hand. While we ate, I was thinking about the question I asked you, and I realized you probably don’t know the intricacies of what being a Magical Girl entails, do you?”

I shook my head. “No… Not beyond fighting the Anathema, I mean.”

“If only that were the whole job,” Thorina groaned, and Gildscale chuckled.

“Fighting is about half of the job,” Everglaive nodded. “The other half is a mix of patrolling, training, managing your fame, and promoting peace, hope, and joy. Or any other positive emotion, really, but those are considered the major three.”

“How do you do that, exactly?” I shifted uncomfortably.

“There are multiple ways Magical Girls go about it, but it all more or less boils down to being an ‘idol’ of some sort. Some do exactly that, going the traditional route and performing concerts. On the other end of the spectrum, some Guardians stream their battles against the Anathema. Livestreaming has become popular for a variety of activities, actually, and some Guardians engage in everything from playing video games to hosting talk shows. There’s virtually a limitless amount of ideas, but it all boils down to making people feel safe and happy.”

“I play violin and dance, for example,” Naiad smiled. “Everglaive’s a really talented singer. Sometimes we team up.”

“I stream my battles,” Thorina shrugged. “It’s what I’m good at and enjoy, so I double dip rather than go around trying to cheer people up.”

Everyone turned to Gildscale, and he sighed, clearing his throat before he spoke.

“ASMR,” he rumbled, his voice somehow becoming so deep I could feel it in my bones. It sent tingles down my spine, and I shivered. Thorina let out a giggle at my reaction, pumping her fist in victory while Naiad smiled.

“Sometimes, the four of us come together to play as a band,” Everglaive continued. “We’ve had years to build our skills to a passable level, and taking on hobbies is a necessity for any Guardian to relieve stress.”

“Except Thorina,” Gild pointed out.

“Except Thorina,” Everglaive agreed.

“Complete and utter battle maniac,” Naiad nodded sagely.

“Pfft, don’t listen to them,” the Magical Girl in question scowled at her team. “I mean, yes, I’m a hopeless battle maniac, but there’s nothing wrong with that. And I do have a hobby! It’s figuring out how to kill Anathema as efficiently as possible! And leveling! Those count, right?”

The rest of the group seemed largely amused by her reaction, and I could tell they'd had this conversation many times before. Seeing them getting along did feel a little weird, partly because I was the odd girl out, but I was used to that feeling. I just watched on, keeping the smile mostly off my face as they teased her.

"Regardless of that questionable assertion," Everglaive continued, "the point remains. Outside of combat, most Magical Guardians find a duty to perform for citizens. Many of us share our hobbies as a way to both relax ourselves and accomplish the goal of easing their minds."

"Is there some kind of requirement?" I hesitantly asked, but Everglaive shook her head.

"No. Some Guardians prefer to be completely off the radar and fight without gathering any attention. This method, however, does mean they earn less points. The System offers plenty of quests for helping civilians out, and although you might not get many at once, it adds up. You also earn a small amount of experience for inspiring people, but you are unlikely to notice it except at the early levels or if you perform something like a large concert."

I tried not to show how relieved the lack of requirements made me feel. I had no idea what I would do if there was one. I didn't really have any natural talents, and while I'd gotten decent at cooking, I didn't see how that was going to help anybody.

"Other than that, there's managing your fame. As you become more famous or powerful, it's natural you'll develop a fanbase. Things like commercials, merchandise deals, interviews, cameos, and other such experiences are all things we have to deal with. I'll leave the details for the academy, as they have an entire class on managing your Guardian image. Just be aware that as a Magical Girl you'll be under a microscope when you're seen in public. Anything problematic you do could have more than just a detrimental effect on your social status but also on the population's emotional status as a whole. We are in the business of building hope, not fear."

"It's a pain at first," Naiad added, "but you get used to it pretty quickly. Contrary to popular *behavior*, it's not all that hard to avoid being a jerk to people."

I nodded, but I wasn't too worried about that aspect. Going under the radar was second nature to me. Even if people were paying attention to me, I was used to keeping everything hidden behind a carefully crafted mask.

"Now, such a brief explanation of what being a Magical Girl entails obviously can't fully convey how it *feels*," Everglaive said, a small smile tugging up the corner of her mouth. "And so, I think before you give me your answer, we need to do two things. First, after you've set up your Astral

Shift, I want to take you out on a ‘patrol.’ It’s a fancy way of saying we’re going to walk around the city being seen by people. It makes people feel safer, and it keeps us mobile in case an Usurpation happens. By going out together, I can show you how to handle being recognized on the street as a Magical Girl.”

“Okay,” I agreed. It didn’t sound that complicated, but doing it with a veteran for the first time would still be nice. More than anything else, I was interested in finally getting my Astral Shift.

“Wait,” Thorina perked up, giving Everglaive a confused look. “If we take her out and patrol with her, won’t it be *super* obvious she’s the newbie from the Death Wish? I thought Command told us to try to avoid that?”

The three other Guardians in the room stared at Thorina incredulously until finally Everglaive shook her head.

“Normally, yes. That’s exactly why the experienced teams have been taking *all* the newbies out on patrols. We’ve already done this with over two dozen of them, and although people asked about it at first, they realized we were just training the new Guardians and left us alone.”

“Oh, a smokescreen, I get it…” Thorina blinked a few times, then made an outraged face. “Hey, wait! How come I never got any newbies to train?!”

“We tried,” Naiad said dryly. “But every time we asked, you told us you were too busy training or leveling. Besides, would you really have wanted to give up hours of your time patrolling when you could be fighting Anathema?”

Thorina opened her mouth, closed it, then let out a huff of air.

“Yeah, okay, fair enough.”

Naiad chuckled. “Anyway, Rina brought up a good point. Since the invasion, all of us senior Guardians have been taking out the newbies on training patrols. We usually wait to do this until after the academy begins, but with all the daily Usurpations happening, it was seen as more advantageous to get them experience as soon as possible. Nobody should suspect you were the Guardian we saved more than the other girls we’ve been mentoring.”

Nodding, I glanced at Thorina. I hadn’t even thought of the implications of patrolling with Fantasy Fatale, and I was kind of surprised Thorina picked up on it. Then again, for how carefree she seemed, she was still an elite Guardian. I doubted anybody truly absentminded made it to her level.

“What’s the second thing we’re doing?” I asked, turning back to see Everglaive giving me a vacant smile.

“Well, it’s simple really. We’re going to throw you back into the first suitable Usurpation we find.”