

MAGICAL GIRL NOIR/ZERO

EPISODE 1: HUNTER

People like to make the world seem a lot more idealistic than it actually is. People like to talk about the 'good', about the 'evil'. There's no room for the middle man because that just complicates things. People don't want to think, people don't want to decide for themselves what's 'right' and what exactly is wrong.

There has to be absolutes in the world or it just becomes too confusing. My personal belief is that there's a reason behind everything, a reason behind the 'why', the 'what', the 'where'. I like to know the answers even if it I'm better off not knowing. Knowledge is power, after all.

That's how I am with everything in this world of ours. That's not why I'm so tired all the time, though.

That's because I work.

Constantly.

I wake up, go to school, go to work at a cafe, go home, I sleep, take care of anything my mother needs, and I go to work at my other job.

That other job is being a magical girl.

A magical girl contracted to Kyubey to fight the monsters called Witches. That's not all, though. I'm part of the Ninth Officio which also goes by the designation of 'The Murderers'.

You're probably asking yourself, what's an Officio? The abridged version is that it's an organization that keeps magical girls from prying each others throats out. If everything is organized, things can run much more smoothly. Remember what I said about having different ideas of 'right' and 'wrong'? If there is a strict code, a set of rules, then chaos can be avoided.

This particular Officio is stationed in Mitakihara, Japan. Another perk of that it isn't too far from my own home. I'm allowed to stay on the premises if I want, but I have to be there for my mom. She still has trouble getting around the house even after I made the wish to relieve her pain.

Oh, that reminds me, I need to stop at the grocery store on the way back from the cafe. We're out of... hm, what are we out of?

"Tatsuragi-san?" I hear a voice. Can't ascribe a face to it, though, because It's all murky. I feel myself slipping further into darkness. Can't think.

SMACK.

Something hits the top of my desk.

I leap up in surprise.

My eyes fly open,. “W-what was that?!” I meet eyes with righteous anger. Big, blue eyes of of indignation. I imagine she’s condemning me for my misdeed of sleeping in the middle of class. “If you’re having a hard time staying awake in class, why don’t you find your way out?” Even if I’m half asleep, I’m good at the guessing game.

I’ve come back to the world of the living. I look around to see that I’m in class with a lot of faces staring at me. Some girls to my right are laughing at my expense. I take a look to the left to see a boy looking out the window, his hand scrunched up on his chin. His head of disheveled black hair. His narrowed red eyes. I feel a smile creep up onto my face just watching him stare out the window with that disinterested expression on his face.

“Tatsuragi-san!”

She hits the desk in front of me with a ruler. Made the same sound as the one that woke me up before.

“Y-yeah?” I look up at the teacher. “Oh right.” I’m so out of it that I can’t even stay focused on one thing. “I’m sorry, yes, I’ll be taking my...”

I get up from the seat.

The world spins.

I’m back down onto my butt. I think I got up a little bit too fast.

“Kawakami-kun!” my angry teacher yells. “Please, take Tatsuragi-san to the infirmary. It seems she can hardly stand on her own.”

“Mmh?” ‘Kawakami-kun’, or rather Eiji Kawakami, looks at the teacher, then at me. I can practically hear the ‘tch’ from here. “Alright, alright.” he gets up from the desk, walks on over to me and throws my arm over his shoulder. “Let’s go.” He acts like a gentleman, grabbing all of my belongings while working to get me out of the class as smooth as possible. Such a sweetheart.

“... What are you staring at?” he looks at me with a furrowed brow. Before I’m even paying attention, we’re outside of the classroom. Now the two of us are strolling down the hallway at a steady pace.

“Nothing.”

“It’s never nothing with you.” he sighs, “Come on, tell me. Work hours again?”

"Bingo." Now I'm fighting to stay awake while walking down the hallway.

"The cafe and that magical girl thing. Are you sure both jobs are necessary? Why not just quit one?"

"I need both to help Mom. She can't work, Dad is dead. What else do you propose I do?" Now I'm annoyed. "If you have any hairbrained schemes on how I can get more money, please, tell me."

"The lottery?"

"Uh huh, chances of that happening?"

"Chances of having magical powers?" I open my mouth to refute his point, but how can I? He's got me there.

"Two different things. I'd need another wish for that."

"Maybe I could make a wish?"

"Do you have a-" A derogatory remark could go there. It won't. Going to keep the conversations at school as clean as possible. "You can't. That's not how the system works."

"The system is whack, then." he cracks a smile at his lame joke.

"You're pretty lame despite that intimidating glare of yours."

"What? You're losing it."

"No, I think I'm particularly more grounded than you are."

"Considering your spend more time on it than your own feet, I agree." I go silent. My eyes wander around to see white walls, white lights and a white bed. Yeah, seems like we made it to the nurse's office just fine.

I get off of my friend's shoulder. My legs immediately pull themselves out from under me. I direct the backward fall onto the cushioned bed rather than the tiled floor.

Plop.

My body sinks into the fabric. "Aahhhhh."

"You really are tired."

“What was your first clue? The baggy eyes, the ruffled brown hair?” I try to sit up to get eye-level with Eiji. “Or was it these pretty, flawless gold eyes of mine?”

“Flawless gold eyes?”

That was the thing that got his attention? Sheesh, this guy has no tact whatsoever. “Ah, just go.” I don’t feel like having a verbal battle at the moment. I fall back onto the cloud of heaven that will whisk me off to dreamland. “Not in the mood to talk to you now.”

“Alright then.”

I close my eyes.

The light from the room still gets into my eyes even though they’re closed. “Eiji.”

“Yeah?”

“Can you turn the lights off when you leave?”

“Close the lights?” his brow arches upward, “Uh, don’t you mean turn them off?”

“Yeah, that.”

“Alright. Good night, Ayano.”

“Yeah, good night.”

After that last exchange, I’m finally able to sleep.

My memories come back to me when I have a good night of rest. I’m never given the chance for that since I’m always doing something.

If I’m not on some assassination mission, I’m hunting witches.

If I’m not hunting witches, I’m studying for an exam.

If I’m not studying for an exam, I’m taking care of my mom.

The only thing that I can never complain about is never having something to do. My life has been difficult these past few years because of all this responsibility I’ve been entrusted with. Ever since Daddy died, it’s been hard for me - not just for me, but for my Mom too.

I can’t count how many times I’ve woken up in the middle of the night to find her sitting in a chair, alone, crying in front of a framed picture of our once happy family.

I can't count how many times she's sat me down to tell me stories about how they met, how he would crack disgusting jokes that no one but her would laugh it.

I can't count how many times I've felt sad from just seeing her cry.

No matter how many times you see it, it hurts all the same.

That's why I keep doing what I do. If I'm able to make her living easier by taking on this cafe job, by being part of this Officio, I'm fine with it. If it's for Mom, I can do anything.

Don't let this fool you, though, I'm not putting my life on hold to dedicate to my mother. I budget the money I earn with the Officio and the cafe together. I put some in for my college, some into groceries and other necessities and the rest into bills.

Should a highschool student have this kind of life? No, I don't think so. People at this age should work on getting their lives together for the future in a more 'pleasant' environment. Having all of this pressure on you coming from all sides is never a good thing. I'm not even sure how I'm living this down... I guess I'm just a natural.

That's what my friends say to me.

Those friends being Yuki-oh, wait, her name is 'Ruby Rebellion' now. The white haired, blue-eyed girl who never takes anything seriously, and Charlotte Reinhardt, AKA The Dragonslayer, AKA Current Acting Warmaster of the Ninth Officio. The third friend would be someone I met earlier today, Eiji Kawakami. He's both moral and physical support for me. He takes time out of his day to come over to help with my Mom while I'm out working.

He may seem a bit tempered, but he's a really kind person. Actually all of my friends are kind in their own way.

They're always strong willed, always ready to jump in to give me a hand.

I'm really grateful for them... but there are times when they can get on my nerves.

I remember a few weeks ago where Ruby and I were ordered to take down a Witch that kept abducting people.

The Witch Barrier surrounding us was exotically themed. There were panties being hung up in clothes lines that made up the 'roof' of the barrier. The floor was a beach with the horizon being a nice blue sky. Looked like a scene right out of a postcard.

I transformed into my magical girl outfit to do battle against the offending witch. I should note that my uniform isn't actually that complicated. There's a red scarf around my neck I can use as

another pair of arms, a black undershirt and a red waitress vest- according to Ruby, it's a sign I think about work too much. Over my legs there's a short red skirt and over my feet are nice black boots. Simple and usable. That's how I like it.

The situation was really an unfavorable one. The Witch thought I looked cute so it wrapped its 'tentacles' around me, hoisted me up into the air and started taking pictures. Oh no, I shouldn't say the witch started taking pictures - its familiars did. Which happened to be cameras with womanly legs that wore stockings.

I pleaded with the Witch to let me go... which was pretty stupid since it didn't listen to me.

Another one of the familiars developed the pictures. After that it started throwing them around everywhere in the barrier.

It even got to the point where a familiar handed Ruby a picture.

"Good work, should've gotten more leg," said Ruby while patting the camera familiar on the head.

That Witch's ability was actually to weaken its victims through embarrassment before ingesting them. I'm glad Ruby actually got serious when she did or else I'd have been digested Witch goo by now.

Wait, why am I even thinking about that? I should be waking up.

"Wake up."

"I'm awake, I'm awake..." I mumble the last word while pulling myself out of the comfortable bed. "What's wrong? Who's there?" my eyes take their time adjusting to the light of the infirmary.

"It's me, Eiji. School is over." I slept through the entirety of the school day. If I had to estimate the time that I fell asleep, that'd probably be around ten in the morning. It should be three, three twenty-five now.

"I guess I should get going then."

"Get going where?" Eiji is quick to jump to conversation. Really, sometimes he can get so annoying that I have to force him out of my business.

"The cafe, where else?"

"Wait," his eyes narrow, "What's after that?"

“Going home to check on Mom. And after that? I have to go check in with Charlotte. She called me last night saying that we needed to talk face to face.”

“Charlotte.” Eiji goes quiet just from saying her name, “Becareful.” Instead of going on a tirade about how I should do a good job of not to get myself gibbed, he just lets me go with one word. I can’t say I like that very much.

“Not going to tell me not to get hurt? Come on, Eiji, you can do better than just ‘becareful’.”

He puts a hand on my head, “I trust you not to do something retarded. If we’re talking about between you, Yuki and Charlotte - you’re the only one with a head on your shoulders. I expect you to use it.”

That’s what I wanted to hear, “Thanks. Sorry for putting you on the spot.”

“I’m used to it.” the hand goes off my head and back into his pocket. “So do you want me to walk with you to the cafe?”

“No, I should be good on my own.” I start walking toward the door that leads into the hallway outside. “I’ll call you later tonight after I’m done with my other business.”

“Yeah, yeah, whatever. Go.” he dismisses me with the back of his hand.

“Alright, later!” Like that, I’m free to go to my first job of the day.

There is a maid cafe on the outskirts of Mitakihara called the Red Guild Maid Cafe. The uniform is a standard maid outfit - or what you would think is standard. Black garb that flows down into a short skirt. Over that is a white apron that’s also excruciatingly short. Doesn’t help that I have to wear garter belt too.

“Hey, pretty lady!”

Oh yes. I’m now standing in the middle of the cafe holding a dish with the newest order. The person that you just heard flirting with me is actually a friend I mentioned earlier. “Yes, yes.” I mumble while taking the order, “What is it?”

“Not much, just felt like flirting.”

“You’re despicable.” I set the two strawberry sundaes down onto the table. “Now can I ask what this second one is for?” I have a vague idea already since Ruby came into the store alone. Like always.

"You. A Master should treat their maid once and a while, right?" She flashes me this try-hard Casanova glare. Between her white, short hair and blue eyes - this would work. And by that I mean it would work if I didn't know her from when we were children.

"Hm, yes, so are you going to shove a straw up your nose and start shooting the icecream everywhere?"

"If you're into that kind of thing, sure." Ruby leans back in her seat, completely unfazed by the blast from the past.

I sigh, "Don't you have anything better to do than hang around here?" I move to the front of the store to set down the saucer. After that, I walk back over to where Ruby is to sit down.

"Nope, not until night. I made sure I was going to be with you for the debriefing." Ruby slides her red duster coat off to let it hang on the chair behind her. Really, that girl needs a more expansive wardrobe than just the coat, white shirts and pants.

"You could go shopping for some more clothes. Did that ever cross your mind?" Might as well bring that up before this conversation goes back to 'work'.

"Sometimes. I don't really care, to be honest. As long as my hair is clean, my pits smell great, and I'm warm, none of it matters."

"You're such a slob." I take out a spoon to dig into the ceremonial strawberry sundae.

"Wouldn't go that far." Ruby digs in around the same time I do.

"I would." I take another bite, savor the taste, and go for a second bite. "By the way, you're paying for these."

"I planned to." She frowns, "What do you take me for, some kind of cheapskate?"

"I take you for someone who doesn't know the value of money." I lean across the table, "How many times have you borrowed money from me? From Charlotte? From Eiji?"

"H-hey, I'm working on paying you guys back. A bit of my paycheck goes directly to you every payday so it's alright, right?" I fall back into my chair.

"I suppose so. As long as I get my money back, I can't complain." Making this living with two jobs is already hard enough. I would go on a tirade eventually if Ruby never gave me every yen back that I forked over to her. Good thing she was smart enough to get other people to make the transaction rather than trusting her own self to do it. Her sense of self-control only goes so far.

“That’s the way to look at it.” I hadn’t paid much attention to Ruby’s sundae. Apparently, while having this conversation of ours, she had ingested more than half of it. Am I really losing sense of my surroundings or is Ruby just a monster?

In an effort to make myself seem just a tad bit more sane, I’ll go with the latter. “Hey, you alright, Ayano? Your face went all pale.”

“Yeah, fine.” I inadequately pick at the sundae in front of me. “Well, not really. Don’t feel like eating now.”

“If you don’t eat anything - wait.” her blue eyes turn to slits, “Have you eaten anything?”

“Yes, I’ve eaten breakfast, lunch and now part of this sundae. I guess I’m just getting sick.” I’m pretty sure magical girls can get sick. They can, can’t they?

“Take it easy, then. You don’t need to be eating something like this if you’re getting ill. I’ll just take that off your hands.” she leans over the table to steal away the ice cream that she was already paying for herself.

“No objections here.” I push myself away from the table. “Just give me a bit of time to get changed into my school uniform then we can head out.”

“Huh?” Ruby takes a glance around the cafe. Much to her shock, there was no one here but me and two other maids. “Time went by that fast?”

“I really wish you’d pay attention. Just wait outside for me, alright?” I go into the back room where my clothes are. The owner of the maid cafe knows that people can get ‘antsy’ so there’s a changing room in the back for us girls. The solution could be that we didn’t have to wear uniforms like this to begin with but then the place loses its appeal. “Ugh.” I sound my disgust while throwing off the apron.

Eight or so minutes later, I’m outside the Red Guild Maid Cafe with my long time friend Ruby. After some asinine conversation and a taxi ride, we come to the QB Heavy Industries Tower, the heart of the Ninth Officio. That’s where my employers are, the strange creature called Kyubey and the Warmaster Charlotte Reinhardt.

“We going in?” Ruby looks back to me, her hands relaxing in her coat pockets.

“Yes.” I nod while taking the lead into the building. The guards nearby don’t stop us from getting inside. Instead, they salute us as we pass on by. “I’m never going to get used to that.”

“What? THAT’S the thing you can’t get used to?” Ruby laughs, “Man, fighting and killing? Dealing with Witches? Assassinations? Nah, that’s all well and good. Getting saluted? Red alarm going off.”

“Shhh.” I plug Ruby’s mouth up before she says something that would tip anyone off nearby. There are people that work here that don’t deal with the ‘dark’ side of things here. The last thing that Ruby needs to do is squelch on that. “Shut up.”

“Whatever.” nonchalant as always despite my warnings. “I’ve been working here three more years than you have. If I’ve survived that long then there’s nothing for you to worry about.”

“I’m going to guess that’s because you’re one of the few people who can contend with the Warmaster.”

“That may have something to do with it.” she shrugs, “What about it?”

“Nothing.” I sigh and walk on.

“Oh, don’t clam up on me.”

The two of us head on to the single elevator that leads up to the penthouse. That's where I'm going to get my assignment, say my goodbyes, and get on with my day. After I leave here, I have to take care of Mom. In the past she couldn’t bathe without my help. Now she's able to get around the house without much difficulty - I'm there to make sure that she doesn't hurt herself with her frail body.

It was much worse before I made my wish. Before that, I dedicated my entire being to school the cafe, and homelife. I was never able to hang out with Ruby or Charlotte anymore because they had this job. Another bright side to this contract is that I’m able to see them much more often.

The double-doors open up. Ruby walks in and leans against the wall with her arms crossed. I roll my eyes and walk in.

The tiny cube shakes slightly as it pulls us up to the desired floor. There isn’t any exchange between Ruby and myself. Just complete silence. This is only complimented when the door opens up to reveal a room of complete white.

“The second thing I’ll never get used to.” I’m the first one to walk out.

“Your priorities are really skewed.” Ruby couldn’t resist making at least one more remark.

“Guess they are. I’m friends with you two, aren’t I?”

"You two?" Ruby raises her eyebrow, "Who's the second?"

"Charlotte. Who else?"

"Ohoooo?" that voice. I turn around to see Charlotte. Oh right, not just Charlotte. The Dragonslayer. The Warmaster. "Was that an insult, Eversor Ayano?"

"No." I sigh, "It's just I've had a long day. A very long, very tiresome day."

"I wonder whose fault that is." her eyes immediately shoot to Ruby. "What have you been putting this poor girl through?" she puts her arm around me to bring me in close. She starts pulling on my cheek like I'm some infant.

"Oh, nothing. Just being a friend. You wouldn't know what that's like." my white-haired, stupid friend seems content with starting a fight right here in the penthouse.

"I wouldn't?" Charlotte smiles a sadistic smile. Teeth that should be human take on a bestial look. They sharpen on the spot. Her golden eyes become dilated. "What makes you say that?"

"Usually too much of a busy body to hang out. You usually just stay in that office of yours and goof around, forcing poor Vintage to do all the work."

Yes, here we go.

"The pot calling the kettle black." Charlotte steps forward. Ruby matches her. Their foreheads collide.

Our coworkers stop their work to watch the sparking brawl. "Please, you two." I enter the lion's den. I put my hand up against Charlotte's stomach and Ruby's forehead. I do my best to pry them apart. "Warmaster, I just came here to get my assignment. You called me and said you needed to talk?" Please let this change of subject get them from pulling each others spines out.

"Oh, that's right, I did." she blinks a few times in realization. Yes, whichever deity is watching over us, I thank you for this boon. "Come, Ayano." she takes hold of my hand and starts leading me to her office. Ruby follows after us. Charlotte must be okay since she doesn't stop her.

Once we get to the office, the doors close.

I look around to see that it's as I remember. A bookshelf with rows of neatly organized manga, a clean trashcan and a spotless desk. "Vintage really knows what's up." I mumble.

“Yes, she’s the best Equerry any Warmaster could ask for.” Charlotte says so in a sing-song tone, “But down to business.” her gloved hand falls upon a stack of papers that are stapled together. “Here’s your assignment.” the paper is thrown through the air straight to me.

I catch it, “W-what exactly is it?”

“Retirement mission.” That’s the clean term for ‘go out and kill a magical girl that’s no longer of use to us’. I know because I’ve heard Ruby talk about her own accounts on missions like this. Mind you, she’s probably not the ‘constant’ that you should use for comparison since her idea of an even match is the Warmaster. So now I guess it’s my turn to throw my hat into the ring. “Anything you need to know is in the dossier.”

I look over the dossier of the person that I would be 'retiring'. The picture is of a smiling girl wearing dress of frills and lace, mostly made up of greens and yellows. Her name is Nagisa Kurofuchi. She has less than a year in service. The contract was to 'be the sister that her brother wanted'. Total missions stand at 11, 23 hostiles killed. She fights with a crossbow that shoots sparks of energy at the enemy. Utilizes an ability to teleport with these energy bolts to throw the enemy into disarray.

On the 'People of Importance' section of the dossier, it's completely empty.

"What?" I flip back and forth. There's nothing there.

Throwing this disturbing discovery away, I look at her Projected Schedule of Activity. She hunts witches at night and in the middle of the evening, times where she thinks they're most likely to appear. There's even information on the route she takes each night. If I use this, I'm definitely going to have the upper hand but...

“Ayano?” Ruby puts a hand on my shoulder. “You alright? You’re going pale again.”

“Yes, I’m fine, I’m fine.”

“Ruby.” Charlotte speaks up.

“Yeah?”

“Let Ayano do this one on her own. You can protect her, but don’t do all of the work.” her voice is clear. “I obviously know what you’ve been doing every time a mission like this has come up since Ayano’s joined us.”

“Wasn’t exactly hiding it.” she shrugs.

“What’s going on?” I look at the two of them.

"The genius here thought she could protect you from doing these retirement missions by hogging them all herself." Charlotte chuckles a little bit, "Mind you, she always performs the jobs well."

"Why would I need protecting from that?" Now I really want answers. "Ruby?"

"Because some of the retirees are magical girls that you used to work with. I didn't want you to have to endure that pain." Well, that answer was uncharastically blunt of her.

"... I see."

"That's what I wanted to talk to you about, Ayano. We're called the Assassinorum for a reason." she walks over to me, putting her mouth to my ear.

"It's kill or be killed. Survive or die." I see her placid face out of the corner of my eye "This isn't a game."

The way she said that sends chills down my spine. I hesitantly nod. I know that I can die at anytime on these jobs. I know that so why did I just shake? She was telling me what I already knew.

"No point in scaring her, Charlotte." Ruby interjects with her arms still folded.

"Fear is something she can savor as long as she's alive." she shrugs, "Isn't that right?"

"Yeah, Ruby, the Warmaster is correct." I look down to the ground then gather my resolve. "I'll take the assignment. I'll do my best to make you proud."

She runs a hand through my hair to get any stray ends out of my face, "You already have, Ayano. Just keep being your stubborn self and I'm sure you'll be fine."

"Heh." I tightly grasp the dossier in my hands. The dossier said that at night she goes out so I think I'll go with Ruby to get her tomorrow. "Is that all you wanted...?"

"Hm? Oh yes, that's all. You're free to go." now she shoos me off with the back of her hand. "Good luck out there."

"Yeah." I nod while walking out of the office. "Good night, Warmaster."

"Later." Ruby walks out of the room after me.

“Good night, you two~” she closes the conversation with a sing song tone that you could expect from only her.

With a heavy head on my shoulders and fatigue on the rise, I go home to enjoy a well-deserved sleep. On the way out of the building, I remember that I have to drop by the grocery store.

EPISODE 1: HUNTER
[---TO BE CONTINUED---]

