

Chapter 3: Can I Join In?

☆ Class 2F

“There’s only one jelly left!”

The entire class glanced over when they heard that shout and saw Mepis Pheles, in braided ponytails and glasses, protecting the last remaining jelly cup.

“Hey, wait a minute.” Ranyui, the girl with a ponytail, approached her. “Whatcha gonna do? Eat the last jelly yourself?”

“Yeah, no shit. I’m saving up my share. Last time this happened, *someone* stole the last dessert.”

The rest of the class turned their eyes to the long-haired beauty who was twirling her spoon. The leader of Group Three, Princess Lightning. She was smiling quite elegantly and tapped her chin when she noticed everyone observing her.

“Hm? Something wrong?”

“Duh! You stole the last orange last time!” said Mepis.

“I don’t recall there being any rule against that. Anyone could’ve taken it without complaint.”

“Oh yeah! That makes total sense!” said Ranyui, though the others—especially Mepis, who slammed her desk—weren’t convinced.

“Officially there isn’t, but unofficially, it’s common courtesy to at least *tell* people!”

“Maybe it is to you, but that doesn’t concern me. How should I know what you would do?” asked Lightning.

Everyone could imagine Mepis’s reaction to Lightning’s provocative statement, so before she could do anything, Thunder General Adelheid stepped forward and put her arm out in front of Mepis.

“Alright, calm down, y’all. Past is past. Point is, Miss Calcolo’s at lunch now, and there’s only one jelly left. We can’t possibly split it evenly among us, so one of us has gotta have it all. Any takers?”

A petite dark-skinned girl, Ark Arlie, raised her hand.

“Rock-paper-scissors!”

Her identical twin Drill Dory also raised her hand.

“Fight!”

A black-haired girl with a bob cut, Tetty Goodgripp, sat the two of them down. Her friend, a similarly black-shorthaired girl known as Kumi-Kumi, spoke up.

“It’ll take forever for... rock-paper-scissors... and we can’t fight... not right now...”

A girl with unkempt dark hair and deathly pale skin, Classical Lillian, then spoke. “How about a different method then? Like—”

“Like something that settles problems quickly! We can’t have everyone fight all at once, so let’s just have everyone pick a representative, and *they* fight it out. After that, the winner gets to decide if the jelly gets shared with their team or if they keep it all to themselves.” A girl with medium cut hair, Sally Raven, suggested. The wavy-haired girl beside her, Psyche Plains, cleared her throat to get her attention, but Sally Raven ignored her and continued, “Hm... how about... musical chairs. Wouldn’t that be perfect?”

When Mepis heard the strange and sudden suggestion of musical chairs, her gaze went to the tattooed girl with the mohawk, Diko Narakunoin, who folded her arms behind Sally. Sally made it sound natural, but in reality, her group was relying on their ace-in-the-hole, Diko, to win this challenge of physique.

“Ha! Bring it,” said Mepis. “You’ve got a trump card? Well, you forgot we have our own trump card.”

“That’s right. You forgot about *me*.” Kana, who was still in magical girl form, stood up beside Mepis and tapped on her own chest.

“What. Not *you*, dumbass, sit your ass back down,” Mepis whispered harshly. Kana then silently sat back down. Sometimes Kana was a little *too* eager.

“Musical chairs, huh? That’s all well and good,” said Mepis. “But you wanted to use Diko because she’s tall and strong, and those kinds of people have an advantage in a game like this, right? Heh, challenge accepted.” Mepis went near Adelheid and patted her on the back. Adelheid smiled with pride. At 170cm tall, she was the tallest girl in class. Diko only beat her in height because of her mohawk’s size.

“Hey hey, don’t forget about *us!*” Wrappy Tip, who was covered in makeup with brightly colored hair, stood and shouted. “We’ve got the best musical chairs player out there! Miss Lille, if you would~”

The plump girl named Miss Lille stood up. She wasn’t as tall as the other two, but her weight and volume exceeded them both.

“Musical chairs is a game of pushing people off, right? So the more weight you’ve got, the better you’ll be!” said Wrappy with a grin.

Miss Lille smiled. She was curt and gracious, and though she was usually very quiet, she had some pride when she was introduced.

With Calcolo absent, Tetty prepared the classroom by removing the tables and extra chairs. Eventually, there was only a single chair in a wide-open space. The other girls surrounded the three contestants. Some of them balled their fists in anticipation while others cheered for their own representatives.

Sally’s magical phone then played the opening to Cutie Healer’s first season. The battle for the last piece of jelly had begun.

☆ **Koyuki Himekawa**

After school, Koyuki made her way to the nearest Gate to the Examination Division. After that, she went through another Gate which led somewhere much closer to her house. From there, she had to take two train stops to finally get back home. She did all this in reverse every morning.

As the train sped forward and swayed her body, Koyuki recalled what happened today. During lunch, the class had a musical chairs battle to decide the fate of the last jelly. Everyone was having fun—Even Lillian, who was usually quiet, and Tetty, who was usually serious, were a lot more relaxed and cheerful. The only one who wasn’t cheerful was Psyche, who was cursing at the other two representatives, but that was just another way of supporting her home team.

Koyuki was the odd one out. It felt lonely. On the outside, she was happy and enjoyed floating around the groups, but on the inside, she was secretly envious of their close relationships and was just a little bit sad.

She was assigned to investigate the magical girl class, and that was originally meant to be her first priority. She didn't expect to actually have fun and enjoy school again. In times like these, she tried to close her heart to feelings like joy and attachment, even when she was still smiling on the outside.

Everyone in her class had their own unique backgrounds. Adelheid and Diko prioritized their own missions when they could, but when it came time to have fun, they could let loose. Kumi-Kumi was under the influence of Frederica, and dealing with *her* was like navigating a maze, but even Kumi-Kumi was a hard-working and serious student. Ranyui was obsessed with being recognized by her master, Lazuline, yet she too worked as hard as any other. Tetty and Miss Lille meanwhile, were simply perfect students.

Originally, they had wanted to send in Snow White as a teacher, but she felt sorry for Calcolo and convinced them to send her as a student instead. Now that she thought about it, she could've probably avoided all of this sentiment to the students if she were a teacher.

They all had something in common. They all had a future they were looking forward to.

In comparison, Snow White felt like a 20-year old, or even a 30-year old, when she was conversing with them. She was the faker. She was the one infiltrating their lives. Even so, she pretended. She laughed at Wrappy's jokes, played with Arlie and Dory, and generally kept in mind her surroundings.

She could hear their fear of the *magical girl hunter*. She couldn't stop hearing it. Her powers didn't work that way. Snow White knew she wasn't the kind of person they imagined her to be, but she couldn't stop the voices. It wasn't just the magical girl class either; at one point, she also heard Princess Deluge, too. Back when Snow White was under the influence of Puk Puck, she fought and almost killed Deluge with the weapon of her best friend, Princess Inferno. While brainwashed, she fully intended to kill Deluge. But, by a stroke of luck, Deluge's vitality kept her alive. Yes, it was pure luck that saved her.

Deluge was blinded by revenge, and it was this single-minded vengeance that would cause her defeat. Afterwards, she took some time for introspection and began to think about things beyond herself and her own circumstances. She had developed a newfound respect for Snow White, and it was this respect that Snow could constantly hear. The last thing Snow wanted was to hear her respect, but in the end, it helped to guide Deluge down the right path.

Remembering all of what happened made Snow White want to hold her head and scream. Though she was not held liable for all the deaths she caused while under Puk Puck's control, she remembered every single detail, every single voice of those that she sacrificed in the name of Puk Puck. Back then, she ignored those voices, but those memories echoed in her mind. She remembered that horrible, traumatic moment in time. Now, she focused only on the three people that kept her going—Inferno, La Pucelle, and Hardgore Alice, who believed that she could be the best magical girl out of all of them. In times of crisis, she had to grit her teeth and push forward.

There were, after all, people she still needed to save. Ripple and Fal were both out there and needed her help. So, no matter what happened, no matter how much she wanted to scream and stop, she couldn't.

The train announced that she was nearing her stop. She glanced at the familiar yet strangely distant scenery before her. She remembered that, in class, her powers never seemed to reach the school courtyard. How should she best investigate that? Once again, she was back on investigation duty.

☆ **Pythie Frederica**

There were those unassociated with the magical girl school making untoward moves, and they had to be dealt with. For now, though, it was better to leave such matters to Asmona.

She had reached the limits of her research on incarnations for the moment, and she had yet to receive the latest reports from the magical girls in class. It had been a week since Adelheid last reported on Snow White—far too long—and Frederica was concerned her reports were no longer up-to-date. At this rate, it would be better for Frederica to ask Kumi-Kumi instead, whom she had just recently met prior to the homunculi outbreak. She couldn't spy on Snow White anymore, after all.

Frederica looked into her crystal ball to find Kumi-Kumi, but all she could see was pure darkness. That was strange. When trying to observe Snow White, she hadn't been able to use her magic at all, but with Kumi-Kumi, it resembled a black screen. She should've been home already. Had something happened?

Frederica slumped on the sofa and began thinking. As a rule of thumb, when her crystal ball showed a black screen, it meant her target had died. Had Kumi-Kumi been killed like Chimiera?

Frederica turned and buried her face into the sofa. This time, she sent a message to Kumi-Kumi's magical phone, just in case. She was ninety percent sure she was dead; if she didn't respond in the next five minutes, Frederica would work under this conclusion. Against all expectations, though, Kumi-Kumi responded.

Frederica tilted her head in confusion. What was going on?

She stood up and paced throughout the various rooms in her apartment—along the way, she kicked a bag that happened to be in the way. No, this was weird. Kumi-Kumi would've reported if she'd survived some attack, and yet she didn't. However, Frederica couldn't see Kumi-Kumi. Her powers were telling her that Kumi-Kumi was dead.

She spent half the day checking the perimeter of Kumi-Kumi's apartment. There were no disturbances. No spies or enemies keeping watch. There wasn't even any traffic passing by the front of her apartment. Eventually, she decided to use an auxiliary stand of hair to drop nearby her apartment without detransforming.

Frederica probably shouldn't be doing this; if Asmona found out, she would endlessly scold her. However, Frederica was far too paranoid. She'd already confirmed that Kumi-Kumi was "alive" with the text message, but she still had to see it with her own two eyes.

Frederica had prepared plenty of excuses. After all, she couldn't just say she was dropping by to make sure Kumi-Kumi was alive. In the end, she didn't need to use any, as Kumi-Kumi answered the door without so much as a hint of confusion on her face. She was completely normal. She wasn't even surprised at all. Perhaps she expected Frederica to visit randomly without calling in first. Frederica let herself in and examined

every nook and cranny of Kumi-Kumi's apartment, but found nothing strange at all inside of it.

So why couldn't Frederica's powers see Kumi-Kumi?

Kumi-Kumi made some barley tea for Frederica. It wasn't particularly good, nor was it particularly bad. As she sat on the cushion, she took a deep breath. Was the barley tea bad? No, something else was off. Kumi-Kumi glanced at Frederica, clearly suspicious of her, but Frederica ignored her. She sipped at her barley tea several more times, and each time she did, she wondered why something felt so strange about this visit.

Frederica stood up and circled the table before stopping in front of Kumi-Kumi. She examined her from head to toe. Kumi-Kumi was clearly confused, but Frederica even moreso. Frederica felt discomfort, and couldn't put a finger on why.

"Detransform, please."

As ordered, Kumi-Kumi detransformed into her human form. Frederica patted Kumi-Kumi's head a little roughly. The reason why was because she wanted to get a firm feel of her hair, which Frederica could use to differentiate people and extract information.

"Transform again."

Kumi-Kumi sighed and did as she was told. Frederica then removed her hand from Kumi-Kumi's head and deeply sniffed her hand. It was the exact same hair.

Frederica circled the table again and sat down, completely shameless for what she had just done. She casually inserted a strand of Kumi-Kumi's hair into her pocket and cleared her throat with the other.

"It's been a while since I came to visit."

"Oh. Yes."

"How is school? How are your friends? The staff?"

Frederica observed her speech mannerisms and gestures carefully as Kumi-Kumi spoke. She seemed real enough, and furthermore, if the school had no issues, then most likely nobody else had noticed the anomaly that Frederica had.

Frederica wasn't particularly fond of Kumi-Kumi, but she was still a magical girl, and when someone tampered with magical girls, it made Frederica angry.

☆ Kana

For three days since Ranyui's return, Kana had been busy gathering information on her well-being. She eavesdropped on Diko, who kept careful watch of her; Lightning, who clearly had some sort of interest in her; Psyche, with whom Ranyui spent time with; and Sally, whom Ranyui seemed to be jealous of. She was relieved to find out that Ranyui had completely recovered. She had been so close to death, and if she'd died, she wouldn't be able to come back. But she didn't die, so she came back.

Everyone stood to greet Ranyui the day she returned, and she seemed shocked. It was clear why she was shocked. At some point when Ranyui was hospitalized, something happened, and the class had changed. How? Kana couldn't put words to it. She could probably ask someone about it, though.

But Kana was *not* going to ask them how it changed, because Kana was now reformed, not the lawless magical girl that went to prison. In fact, Kana was now sure

the difference in the class atmosphere was because Kana had been reformed from a prisoner into a good student. She was just seeing the world in a new light.

That day, after Ranyui came back, Kana saw everyone busily eating with each other. Kana, of course, was the only magical girl who was transformed. She finished her lunch earlier than the others and sat down with her group.

“Hello. Let’s talk about what we should do.”

Kumi-Kumi was in the middle of trying to stick her straw in her milk carton. Adelheid and Mepis were in the middle of discussing the latest manga chapters. Lillian seemed to be wondering if she should help Kumi-Kumi. Everyone suddenly stopped and looked at Kana.

“What we should do? What do you mean?” asked Mepis.

“Like... philosophically?” asked Adelheid.

“What we should do... as magical girls...?”

“I’m sorry, Kana. Could you be clearer? Sorry.”

“Jeez, don’t apologize, Lillian,” said Mepis.

Kana realized she had failed. She wasn’t clear enough with her expression, and so she had failed her friends. Yes, clearly communicating was important for friendship, so she had to think of a way to express what she wanted to say. They had resolved the problem of Kumi-Kumi’s straw and were now waiting for Kana to start talking.

“The middle school. Not the one we attend, the other one,” said Kana.

“Ah, Umemizaki,” said Lillian.

“Why? What’s up?” asked Adelheid. That was strange. Adelheid was usually the more attentive one, so how had she not noticed? Kana had decided that if she saw something that her group didn’t know, she would tell them, just as they would tell her.

“I saw something on the way here. The students at Umemizaki were building a large arch gate.”

“Oh, that! That’s for the school culture festival. It’s an anniversary, you see?” said Lillian.

“Yes. I had seen ‘culture festivals’ in the manga I borrowed from Mepis, and just to be sure, I asked Calcolo if that was what was happening, and indeed, it was preparations for a culture festival. I have also discovered that it is a way to showcase the resourcefulness, pride, and abilities of your class.”

Mepis, who for the longest time had been very confused, suddenly widened her eyes. “Oh. Are you saying we should participate or something?”

“Of course.”

Mepis gripped her glasses, Adelheid folded her arms and stared at the ceiling, Kumi-Kumi sipped from her straw, and Lillian grew quiet. Kana tilted her head, confused. “Your reactions are all strange.”

“Well, yeah, we’re not s’posed to get involved with Umemizaki,” said Adelheid.

“I didn’t know that,” said Kana.

“That’s just obvious,” replied Mepis.

“I don’t think... we’re allowed to... anyway... it’s pointless...”

“I do not think it’s pointless,” said Kana. “After all, we are still part of Umemizaki, having rented their unused building. We are repaying them for their generosity by joining in their festival.”

“That just seems selfish. ‘Oh, sorry, but your festival sounds fun, don’t mind if we join in’ and all that,” said Mepis.

“Actually, from their point of view, it would be selfish of us to withdraw without telling them anything. If the problem is whether or not we should do it, then we can simply ask,” Kana rebutted.

“Who would we even ask?”

“We could ask Calcolo, but she wouldn’t have the final say.”

“That’s true... therefore the only person you could ask is...”

“Oh *hell* no!” Mepis shouted, rapidly shaking her head. “You are *not* gonna ask the principal. I never wanna see that bitch ever again!”

“Oh yeah, you met the principal once before, didn’t you, Mepis? You’re the only one of us who’s got a reason to talk with her,” said Adelheid.

“More like the fucking opposite! I think I need to stay the hell away from her!”

Naturally, as the leader of the group, Mepis should have been the one to represent them. Seeing as she didn’t want to talk to the principal, they would need to pick someone else.

“Then we need someone other than Mepis who is willing to talk with the principal,” said Kana. Nobody stepped forward, however. “Alright, I’ll do it. I regret that my powers are passive, and so she may be suspicious. However, I shall try my best to refrain from doing so.” Kana stood up and left.

“Hey, where are you going! Wait!” Mepis shouted.

“Uhh, let’s not rush this now, Kana.” Adelheid stood up.

“Oh no... we’ve set up a bomb... it’s going to blow up in our faces...” Kumi-Kumi fretted.

“Group meeting! Emergency group meeting! Kana!” Lillian shouted as well.

☆ **Tetty Goodgripp**

That day at lunch, Group Two was talking so loudly that you didn’t even need magical girl hearing to overhear them. Kana suggested joining the school festival. The group disagreed, and it ended with the dangerous idea that Kana should walk up to the principal.

“There they go again,” said Wrappy. Unlike her tone, her expression was quite happy. Wrappy was loud. Not as loud as Group Two was, but loud enough. “Kana’s just that kinda girl, y’know? Can’t leave her alone for a second. But people underestimate her. Remember at the fight that she just dove in to protect Kumi-Kumi. She didn’t even think twice!”

“Well, what about you, Wrappy? You came in to protect *me*, didn’t you?” said Miss Lille.

“Awwww, Lilly, you’re making me blush!”

The two of them laughed, and Tetty nervously laughed with them. Arlie and Dory had no idea what any of this school festival stuff meant, so they asked Snow White, who explained it to them. Tetty, meanwhile, was thinking about something else.

Only a few people had directly met with the principal. Mepis *had* met her before, but it wasn’t exactly a pleasant encounter. Then there was Kana, who got an audience with the principal because, unlike the rest of the class, she transferred from prison.

From a certain point of view, you could say Kana was close with the principal, but, having come from prison, she couldn't really be trusted. In fact, it was more likely that the principal wanted to keep an eye on Kana so that she wouldn't cause any more problems. Tetty had no relations with the principal, but she did know Miss Sato, whom she suspected had some relation to the principal.

Back when she was in elementary school, Tetty would do so many different things for her culture festival. She'd map the old buildings in her hometown, collect local stories and legends, and many other things she did with her classmates. She'd even use the money she earned cooking udon to renew her school's animal farm. She remembered how much fun she had with her friends. She saw Snow White talking to Arlie and Dory and Wrappy and Lille laughing together. Other than Snow White, Tetty was sure she could get along with all of these girls and have fun. As for Snow White, Tetty still wasn't sure what kind of person she was, but maybe she could discover that at the festival.

Tetty glanced at Mepis, who was still trying to convince Kana not to go. Perhaps this was something the class president should handle. When she saw Mepis grab Kana's shoulders and shake her head violently, Tetty decided that she was going to go to Miss Sato. After all, she had an interest in her relationship with Mepis. If Miss Sato worked together with her, then maybe she could make up with Mepis.

☆ **Sally Raven**

Perhaps she should've expected this, knowing Group Two's leader, but their conversation was so loud that everyone could hear them. She picked up on the fact that there was a school culture festival happening.

"Oh, it's happening soon, hm?" asked Lightning, who would've never paid much attention to it.

Knowing that neither Diko nor Psyche would be the type to jump on this opportunity, Sally took advantage and answered, "In two weeks!" As soon as she said that, despite no one asking the question, she posited a thought to herself. *What if people thought it strange that I knew so much about Umemizaki?* And then immediately answered back in her own thoughts. *Well, obviously! There was an archway in front of the school, after all. Anyone would realize there would be a festival happening soon! I, for one, possess endless curiosity, so I like doing my homework on these things.* Lightning sipped her drink and took a bite from her bread. "Hmm... I've never experienced it before."

"What? School festivals?" asked Ranyui.

"Mhm. Have you?"

"I've never had the opportunity, haha," said Ranyui. Diko remained silent but nodded, and Psyche cleared her throat.

"I did once, but I didn't have fun," said Psyche.

When she said that, Sally remembered her own time in elementary school.

Ever since elementary school, and of course, even now in the magical girl class, Sally Raven had honed herself to perfection as a magical girl. She dedicated herself to training and magical girl activities, leaving little room for socializing, friends, or clubs. That was because she wanted to become the pinnacle of all magical girls, like Cutie

Healer. Anything other than magical girl activities would lead to laziness and would close that path from her. Of course, this wasn't what made Sally special. All the Cutie Healers in the PR Division were like this. No, what made Sally special was that she was able to balance her life as a magical girl *and* her school studies. She was able to make friends while still training to be a magical girl.

With all that in mind, one would think she would have also participated in school festivals, but she hadn't.

Of course, she wanted to experience these things, in spite of abandoning a normal school life. Cutie Healer had, after all, gone to school festivals and seasonal events, and all of her fans loved her for it and wanted to experience it with her. Sally, however, needed to be more than just a fan, so she had to give those activities up to pursue her dreams.

The others must've been the same. Lightning, Ranyui, and Diko were all elite magical girls, so they'd have no time to participate in school activities and daily life. As for Psyche, she may not have enjoyed her festival experience, but that was probably because of her own specific personality. If she were to participate now, Sally was sure she could make it fun for her.

"Well, let's try it! It'll be fun, don't you think?" asked Sally.

"Hmm, it does look fun," agreed Ranyui.

"Whatever, I don't think it will be..." said Psyche.

"Oh Psyche, you're always like that. You'll never know if you don't try! C'mon!" said Sally.

Psyche responded with a dull nod. Sally couldn't wait. She couldn't hold back her excitement to join festivals like the Cutie Healers of old.

"Then let's try it," Lightning said to no one in particular. Sally was already one step ahead of her, thinking just how to go about it as she ate her soup.

☆ Lapis Lazuline III

Lazuline was cleaning the public bath of the Lazuline Candidate Training Facility. It was a wide bath, and no matter how hard she scrubbed over and over, its water stains just wouldn't come out. It was the size of a school pool, so even as a magical girl, cleaning it spotless would take some time. If she had a magical sponge, it would be a lot quicker, but alas. Being a Lazuline candidate didn't exempt you from the grind of chores. Her master was very strict about this. Yet, even her all-powerful master still had her own difficulties, such as the Artificial Magical Girl Raising Project. She had a difficult time cutting through the bureaucracy of the Research Division. She had a lack of money, personnel, and resources. Perhaps she started off with the assumption that she would find an influential collaborator somewhere along the way. Not just someone with money and influence, but someone who would be willing to fulfill the Artificial Magical Girl Raising Project. Someone who would shake the very foundations of the Land of Magic.

Pfle fulfilled all of the conditions. She wanted the power to take on the Land of Magic, and through her hard work, she became the head of Human Resources. Though her master would probably deny this if Lazuline asked, Pfle was also a Child of Clamberry. Yet, despite all that she had accomplished, she lost everything when she

was killed during the Puk Puck incident while protecting Shadow Gale. Lazuline was quite surprised at that turn of events and wondered why Pfle would risk so much over her. Her master would say that Pfle was weakened by her sentiments and emotions. Pfle's objective wasn't even to take down the Land of Magic, nor was it the Artificial Magical Girl Raising Project. It was to keep Shadow Gale safe and to separate her from the Land of Magic's influence. In the end, all that she had accomplished was for the sake of that one girl.

Lazuline knew Pfle's true intentions now. She had examined the memories that she had reluctantly pulled from Pfle at the behest of her master, though she regretted that she didn't separate the traumatic and crushing memories from the clearer and calculating ones.

Some time ago, her mentor recaptured an Osk Faction artificial magical girl who had participated in the raid on the Artificial Magical Girl Facility by Grim Heart, one of the Osk sage incarnations. By utilizing the same technology reverse-engineered from that magical girl to create a body and infusing that body with the memories of Pfle, they were able to create Princess Lightning, the ultimate Princess. But of course, it was never that simple. Lightning was *supposed* to be the perfect version of the Princesses, but now she was acting off on her own. Lazuline just hoped she could delicately influence Ranyui and Diko.

Lazuline never worshiped her master, unlike the other Lazuline candidates. But she didn't hate her, either. In fact, she liked her, at least until recently. Lately, she felt that her master's actions were unusual at best and unsettling at worst. She didn't know why she judged her master this way, but thinking back, it was most likely when she saw Pfle's memories. Lazuline had complete control of her own powers of course; she would never allow herself to be influenced by the candies she took. But then, sometimes, she would get flashes of Pfle's memories. For example, she was cleaning right now, and whenever she thought there was no point to these dull chores, thoughts of Shadow Gale would surface, and she'd smile. That felt strange, considering Shadow Gale was safe with Deluge.

These small changes to her mind were both eerie and yet also interesting. The emotions she was feeling had to be Pfle's. Perhaps they had more in common than she thought.

☆ **Pythie Frederica**

Kumi-Kumi was *not* Kumi-Kumi. Frederica had honed her senses in order to identify magical girls solely by her own five senses. Everything screamed to her that Kumi-Kumi was off. Thus, her conclusion was that Kumi-Kumi was no longer herself; she was no longer the original Kumi-Kumi.

Frederica had taken the hair she'd plucked from "Kumi-Kumi" and sent it to the Caspar Faction for inspection. They say that they'd have their results in two days, but since the Caspar Faction didn't have nearly as many resources as the Experimental Site, their reports wouldn't be conclusive. During those two days, Frederica pondered and hypothesized what could've happened to Kumi-Kumi.

She came to the conclusion that Kumi-Kumi was a homunculus.

Everything about her magical girl self—her powers and transformation—were fueled by the homunculus’s innate magical capabilities. This wasn’t just any old black-silhouetted homunculus. This was a superior version that not only copied the appearance of the subject, but their mannerisms, movements, and personality. This wasn’t just a copy, it was Kumi-Kumi.

But what if the homunculus *wasn’t* copying her? There were plenty of subtleties that couldn’t be mimicked by just anyone. What if only the container was the homunculus, and its contents were the real Kumi-Kumi?

The only group that had ever used such lifelike homunculi was the magical girl class, who used replicas to protect their school. That was why the outbreak even happened in the first place. The Information Bureau, in charge of the magical girl class, could’ve been working with the Experimental Site to create homunculi that could replicate sage incarnations, but it seemed none had yet succeeded. Could they be trying to transfer souls into this project?

Frederica stood up and glanced at her chandelier. Magical girls were dancing in the light. The sight calmed her. She then kicked the bag at her feet and ignored its squirming as she took out her magical phone. It was unthinkable to replace a magical girl with a homunculus. It wasn’t just because Kumi-Kumi was her subordinate, but also because tampering with a magical girl made Frederica unbelievably *angry*. She was a magical girl enthusiast. She wanted to see them shine.

She contacted Asmona. While she didn’t have the ability to make these grand assumptions as Frederica did, she was far more rational and logical at making decisions.

“Just confirming this, but is it impossible for you to observe the class?” asked Asmona.

“No, not impossible, just very difficult,” replied Frederica. At first, it was because of the presence of Snow White. She had been pleased with Snow White’s ingenious way of preventing her from watching, but now this was actually interfering with her work.

“Alright. It’s important to keep watch of the class, even if there’s someone preventing you from direct observation, which is *why* I’ve been telling you to stop going through Kumi-Kumi. Just use someone else. Not Kana, though. One of the other guards. Adelheid! That girl is always on time, reports regularly, and has never failed an assignment. Kumi-Kumi is an amateur. Adelheid may be young, but she’s far more mature for her age. She takes after her mother, that girl.”

Asmona would know. She was Adelheid’s mother’s senior when they were both at the Mao School, which would make her Adelheid’s great senior. She wanted to push her friend’s daughter, obviously, and she was right. Mepis was far too emotional, Kumi-Kumi always took a long time to make decisions, and Lillian tended to make half-hearted choices, often placing too much weight on pleasing everyone.

“Hm... you could be right. Very well, I’ll consider it. Anyone but Kumi-Kumi and Kana.”

“Will that be all? I’m sure you must be *very* busy,” said Asmona.

Frederica ignored her sarcasm. “I want to check on something. Try and see if something is off about Kumi-Kumi. She may have been replaced by a homunculus, and I don’t think they’ll stop there. I think if we change up the type of orders we give, we’ll be able to pinpoint who’s been replaced and who hasn’t,” Frederica continued, “I have to

figure out what happened to Kumi-Kumi. It's difficult for me to explain how different Kumi-Kumi is, but I need to make sure nothing else has changed, and I'm the only one I can trust to grab hair. Ah, you're right, Asmona. I *am* busy."

Asmona lightened her expression.

"I'm going to check on the rest of Group Two," said Frederica. "We have to pray they're still themselves, but it will be difficult if I can't directly observe the class. I'll need an inside collaborator. I'll stop giving information to Kumi-Kumi, check on them much more often, and prevent them from sharing information with each other," said Frederica.

"Why not just extract Kumi-Kumi?"

"That would be too obvious. We need to be subtle... and besides, having the group together is good. Don't you think it's just like in an anime, when a group of bad guys gather together in a room to discuss their plans?"

"Bad guys?" asked Asmona, focusing on the one word Frederica didn't expect she would.

"That's right."

"You're saying we're the bad guys?"

Frederica nodded.

"We're public enemy number one, Asmona."