

Mahou☆OL: Hopeful Starlight!

by /a/non

I

Koboshi Riko was growing desperate to leave. She had already stayed later than she wanted at the insistence of her boss, but it was out of her good nature that she remained now. Her green eyes glazed over as she reviewed her colleague's presentation slides one last time. They didn't look any different from before, despite her coworker's insistence that she had made some significant changes since Riko had last taken a look a while ago. At least she could get ahead of tomorrow's tasks in the meantime.

Not that the quality of the slides mattered that much, anyway. *It's presentable enough for now*, she thought. She stood, smoothed out her gray pencil skirt and white blouse, and adjusted her glasses. "Mochizuki-san, I think that's enough for today. I'm sure Takahashi-san will be fine with this." She'd been working with Takahashi, the pair's supervisor, since she landed this job out of college and had a pretty good handle on his standards after seven years.

Oh god, it's been seven years... the realization was not pleasant.

"Yeah..." Mochizuki Nagisa, Riko's junior and a new employee at the company, stopped Riko's dread locomotive before it could leave the station. "I guess you're right." She turned toward Riko with a smile—her white teeth shone even brighter against her freshly-tanned skin. "Thanks again for helping me. I've had a lot to catch up on since the honeymoon."

Riko gritted her teeth, faking a smile. *I get it. You just got married. You wouldn't shut up about it the whole time you were engaged. Are you going to torture me with honeymoon stories now? Perhaps you'll regale me with a wonderful walk on the beach that was so romantic?*

Despite her mental tirade, Riko managed to choke up a more political response. "Sure thing, Mochizuki-san. I know it can be stressful to come back after a vacation," she lied. It had been

seven years and Riko had yet to take a break from work longer than two days (when she got sick one time). “Anyway, I’m going to head home. I’ll see you tomorrow. We can review the presentation before Takahashi-san gives it in case we missed something.”

“Oh, I’ll walk out with you!” called Nagisa as Riko turned for the door.

Please, don’t, thought Riko. “Okay, I’ll wait up,” said Riko with another phony smile.

Nagisa slid her laptop into her leather bag. While she waited, Riko let down the messy her dark- brown hair had been loosely bound in. Her thick locks hung loosely over her shoulders, and she ran her fingers up the sides of her head to untangle them.

“So, did I tell you how Hawaii was?”

“Yes,” lied Riko, the facade in her usual, ‘professional’ tone of voice cracking a little at the mention of the southern islands. “And from your tan, I take it you got a lot of sun.”

Nagisa giggled. “Yeah. It was great to spend so much quality time with Haruki, too. We don’t get to see each other much since I work.”

“Mm, I’ll bet that’s hard,” said Riko with some barely-disguised contempt. Nagisa finally stood and the two made for the elevators in silence—Riko hoped her colleague had run out of things to say as she called for a ride down to the lobby.

“So,” Nagisa began, dashing those hopes, “what about you, Koboshi-san? Are you seeing anyone right now?”

Riko put on a brave face, then, but inside she was throwing a proper tantrum. “Right now, I’m just working on myself,” she said. *I’m so, so, so lonely!* cried her heart. *I hate this job, I hate being single, I hate it! Where’s my househusband to greet me with a warm bath and dinner?! Where’s my construction worker husband who can carry me when I’m too tired to walk?! Where’s my office husband who I can get coffee with in the morning?! I’ll take anything!*

“Oh, I see,” Nagisa interrupted the despair with a half-smile, playing with her blonde bob nervously when she realized she’d asked an uncomfortable question.

The ride down from the fifth floor was silent in the most uncomfortable way. The two stood about three feet apart as the muzak filled the room with tension. Nagisa's stare could burn a hole in the floor, she was so afraid to look up. Riko stared off into space as she imagined falling in love with the fireman that might rescue the two of them from the elevator if it broke down.

Tch. With my luck, he'd save Mochizuki first and the cable would snap with me inside.

"A...anyway," began Nagisa as the elevator sounded and the doors slid open, before any tragedy could befall the pair, "thanks again for today. I really appreciate the help. I've had a lot going on...not just with the marriage and all."

Riko started to say, "It's nothing," but a yawn interrupted her. "Sorry. It's gotten kind of late for me. Like I said, I'll see you later." As they stepped out the door, the two split off toward their respective destinations. Riko rented a not far from the office, but Nagisa had to commute by train.

Once the overly-enthusiastic newlywed was out of earshot, Riko let out a heavy sigh, a mixture of relief and frustration. She leaned against the nearest wall that would take her and stared up at the starless sky.

"I wish she'd figure out that no one wants to hear that much about her marriage," she grumbled to herself. Of course, the truth was just that she was jealous of Nagisa's happiness, but what good would acknowledging that do her? "Oh, it's so *hard* to be married and go on beach vacations with my husband! Yeah, right," She mocked aloud.

Through with her griping for now, she checked her watch and saw it was too late to stick around—even if she ran home to eat, she would have to go straight to her dreamless sleep and back to work in the blink of an eye. So, with a heavy heart at the thought of doing it all again tomorrow, Riko plodded toward home.

It was about halfway there that her feet started to ache, or rather that they started to reveal they pain they had been in all day, from which Riko had been distracted. She resorted to carrying her heels and walking with just her pantyhose protecting

her toes, but still they cried out in pain. Her head was swimming with half-remembered tasks and numbers she'd heard throughout the day; she could barely keep track of all the dates, times, and obligations tied to them that comprised her daily duties.

The bags hanging heavy under her eyes belied a greater weight, one borne by her soul, that only grew more oppressive with each passing day. A drink or three could alleviate some of the load at night, but it only compounded the problem by morning with a haymaker of a hangover that lingered throughout the day—even now, she was fighting the last remnants of a headache. The previous day—her 29th birthday—was particularly tough on her. Takahashi scolded her for a minor mistake on an inconsequential project that ended up canceled entirely later that day, and the remarks Takahashi's direct supervisor made about her body were getting more...creative, to say the least. 29!/? *Really!/? I'm surprised they're still so firm! You really are blessed with supple skin, Koboshi-kun!* Even though she normally didn't drink on weekdays, she felt she had no choice last night, especially after another plea for grandchildren from her mother.

Tonight was looking that way too; she deeply contemplated buying a six pack from the convenience store at which she picked up a mediocre, precooked dinner and caught herself reaching for it twice, but decided against it for the sake of surviving tomorrow without a rhythmless drumbeat pounding over her every thought no matter where she tried to escape in the otherwise eerily quiet office. *It's almost like no one else wants to be there, either.*

The rest of the walk home was a barely perceptible, yet painful and annoying blur, and soon Riko found herself at the base of the outdoor stairs which led up to her too-expensive, too-small 1K apartment. She climbed them with an effort, each step harder than the last, wearing an expression that told the world, "I don't want to do this again tomorrow," as plainly as if she'd spoken the words themselves aloud (which she had in this very spot, several times).

She reached for her keys, and...the pocket she usually put them in was empty.

“You’re kidding.” She walked over to the railing and held her purse out in front of her, under the street light. “Where are they!? Did I leave them in the office?” Riko grew more and more frantic as she began tossing things out of her purse and onto the ground below, hoping in vain that her keys would appear magically beneath things like makeup and hair ties which were too small to cover them. She even dumped the contents of her purse at her knees, to which she had fallen in her turmoil, but alas, nothing shiny or metal landed before her.

I know I didn’t leave them at the office...right?** Riko hated the idea of going back there in the morning as it was—to pay it two visits in a single day might just send her over the edge. Still, the empty purse spoke for itself.

She threw her head back and let out a sustained groan. A nearby stray dog howled with her.

* * *

Since she was going to be out all night anyway, Riko decided to check the ground on her way back to the office in case she saw the keys lying somewhere. It wasn’t impossible that she’d just dropped them, right? Maybe they fell out of her purse when she paid the clerk at the convenience store, or perhaps when she paid she pulled them loose and they fell out on the road home later on. She wouldn’t have noticed, lost in thoughts as she was. So, she scoured the ground near the sidewalk she took home for anything that shone against her smartphone’s flashlight, stooping to the ground to check under benches or bushes.

About a third of the way back, she thought she found something, but it was just an empty ramune bottle some kid had tossed on the ground. *Come on*, she thought, letting a sigh speak for her as she tossed the bottle into the appropriate garbage can (which was nearby).

This went on for a long time. She would find *something*, check it out, get disappointed it wasn’t her keys, die a little inside, and repeat. Halfway back to work she took a seat on a park bench

to eat her dinner; upon finishing the now-cold meal she could do nothing but put her head in her hands and beg the gods and Buddha for help. They didn't respond. *Guess they gave up on me, too...*

Since it was so late, no one else was out to ask her what was wrong—not that anyone would have—but she fantasized about a nice man coming to inquire what such a pretty, young girl was doing out alone at this time of night. Yes, and he would be a locksmith, and he would get her back into her apartment...and to show her gratitude, she would invite him in for something to drink...they would fall in love immediately and get married in a month, and she could quit her job and raise their two boys and two girls, or maybe become an artist from home with just one child. Or maybe...

"Maybe I see my keys *there*," she spake, looking up from her hands and fantasies at yet another glinting, but otherwise indistinguishable in the dark, object that lied on the ground across the street. She stood, took up her phone's flashlight again, and shone it on the glimmering object—it was hard to make out hidden under a shrub, even up close, so she got down on all fours and stretched out her hand to reach it. As soon as she touched it, she could tell it wasn't anything like her keys, but she pulled it out of the bush anyway and took a look.

"Some kind of toy," she remarked, making no effort to hide her frustration as she gave the object a once-over. It was pretty well-made. Atop a six-inch long orange stick stood a yellow star, replete with all kinds of ornate decorations and a red ribbon tied beneath its base. The star was translucent and looked like it could be made to light up, but there were no buttons on the side of the wand to turn it on.

Maybe you shake it? Riko thought, engrossing herself in the childrens' toy to distract from reality for just a moment. She waved the wand like a wizard might, and suddenly found her life thrown off the course of misery she'd been coasting on for seven years.

A white light engulfed her vision and a violent tremor sent

her spiraling into unconsciousness. As she faded away, she wondered if she'd been struck by an unseen vehicle, but she awoke a few moments later with her vision returned to her.

I'm alive, at least...but where am I? She found herself surrounded by nothing but thousands of twinkling stars, standing in the void of space. There was no ground beneath her feet, yet she stood in this space of nothing; there was no air in space, yet she breathed as if there was, and that it was rich with oxygen and free of pollution; she was totally nude, yet warm as if she were beneath a kotatsu.

...

Totally nude?

"Haah?" As she looked down she was stricken with the realization that her clothes were missing from head to toe—glasses and all, though she could see as if they were still on her face. She jumped to conceal her nakedness gracelessly, crying like a duck might call when she apprehended her nudity. Her forearm made a valiant effort to cover her ample bosom, but her breasts fought hard to spill out and reveal themselves as she squirmed.

"Fear not, visitor," called a mysterious, and very loud, voice from the distance.

"Who are you? Where am I? Why am I naked?" Riko asked in rapid succession, quaking under what she now felt was a watchful eye. She grew red with shame and squatted down to hide more of herself from whatever sight might belong to that disembodied speech.

The voice rang out in a thunderous peal as if that was the only volume of which it was capable. "I am the great judge, whose duty it is to determine whether you are worthy to wield the power of the Star Wand you have found in your possession. It will be my honor to bestow the right to use its magic on you, if you are worthy. You are in the realm of the infinite space-time, awaiting judgment."

"And my clothes?!"

The voice ignored her concerns about her state of undress and continued. "There are three traits all worthy holders of the

Star Wand will share, and with those three traits she can assume the identity of Hopeful Starlight.

Riko opened her mouth to ask again about why she had to be naked for this, but the voice kept going and she couldn't hope to talk over its prodigious strength. "First, she who wields the Star Wand must be a budding maiden. She must be pure of body, and she must be pure of will. These are the three criteria, and..."

He paused, then made some wordless noises as if he were contemplating something. Riko heard the sound of shuffling papers, then the voice muttered, "Hmm...no, that's not right," under its breath.

"Can I help you?!" Riko shouted to get his attention. She wasn't exactly getting *less* embarrassed with time here.

"Sorry, but there appears to be a mistake here."

"What kind of mistake?" Riko retorted, her voice shaky. All this talk of being 'judged' wasn't sitting well with her—what were the consequences of failure?

The next question only bothered her more. "Are you...thirteen years old?" inquired the voice.

"No!" she yelled; then she cried again when she realized her aggressive answer caused some of her more sensitive places to 'slip out' of the makeshift bikini she made with her arm.

"I thought not, from your appearance." *Ouch*. "Is your name Hoshino Miki?"

"No! Are you kidding?" Just how badly managed was this operation?

The voice hemmed and hawed as it replied. "Hmm...this could be a real problem. You see, what I said a few minutes ago about judging you...er, the thing is, we already *did* all the actual judging. For Hoshino Miki. She was the one who was slated to be the next Hopeful Starlight when she found the Star Wand on the side of the road after losing the ball she was playing catch with. She's a bit of a tomboy, you see, which is a first for us, and—"

Riko interrupted his gushing about Hoshino, the tomboy Star candidate. "So can I go now? I'm obviously not Hoshino Miki

and I'm not thirteen. I was just looking for my lost keys when I found the Star Wand, or whatever you called it."

"Well, we'll see if you are worthy for now, anyway."

"What if I don't want to do it?"

"What?" The voice replied with a quavering tone as if she'd told him his dog had died.

"I mean," began Riko, "I don't really know what all this is about. I don't care about being granted any power and, frankly, I have enough on my plate as it is. I just grabbed the toy by accident."

"Well..." the great judge cleared his throat. "We don't have a stipulation for that in the intergalactic agreements, so that's not on the table."

"What? What do you mean?"

"We didn't plan for anyone to turn the power down. No one has in...well, the whole time I've been doing this. Which is a very long time. In fact, we ensure the candidates we preselect have the psychology to accept without even considering the consequences since they tend to do the best work."

"So, what? Am I stuck doing this?"

"Look, this is all out of order and this kind of situation is new to me too. Besides, you're supposed to be very impressed right now. It's kind of killing the mood, the way you're acting, so can't you just appreciate the moment?" he pleaded.

"No! I want to go home!"

The voice sighed. "Look. Just let me run the test. It's only four questions and it won't take five minutes. If you aren't worthy, your memory of this will be erased and you'll go back to what you were doing before. I'm sure I can do that..."

He didn't sound very confident, but the alternative might be standing naked in space forever arguing with someone she couldn't even see, so Riko agreed. "Fine." She put her hands on her hips, forgetting she was naked for a moment, then remembered and covered herself up again with a squeal.

"Okay, good. Ahem." The voice returned to its original, boisterous tone. "What is the name of the candidate in question?"

Was he reading off the paperwork they used to decide on Hoshino Miki? “Koboshi Riko,” she replied. She heard it scratch something down in pencil.

“Is the candidate pure of heart, kind, and untainted by wickedness or greed?”

“How can I answer that?”

“Just try.”

“I guess I’m pretty nice...?”

“Can you share a specific example of a time you were nice?”

“What is this, a job interview?”

“Yes, basically.”

“I stayed late for my coworker today even though she went on and on about her stupid wedding and she’s only 24 and what business does she have getting married before I do and my mom won’t stop calling me to ask for grandkids and I keep having to make up worse and worse excuses about why she can’t meet my boyfriend and the real answer is because he isn’t real and anyway if Nagisa would just pay attention instead of talking about her ‘fiance,’ or husband now I guess, all day she wouldn’t need to stay back so late and—”

“Alright!” The judge called, louder than before. The sheer volume of his voice shook Riko to her core and took her right back to the discomfiture she felt when she first arrived. “We’ll move on for now.” He cleared his throat. “Is the maiden pure of body?”

“What does *that* mean?” she asked, squirming under what felt like even more intense scrutiny than before.

“Judging by your appearance, I’m guessing no, but...well, I have to ask. Are you a virgin, Koboshi Riko?”

“That’s...none of your business at all!” she blushed.

There was a deep sigh, which seemed to surround her in this spaceless space. “Could you just answer the questions? I did not expect to still be doing this by now, and I have other matters to attend to, you know.” She could hear him tapping his foot against the infinite.

“Ugh...yes...” she said, in the tiniest voice she could manage.

“What? Speak up, please.”

“Yes! I’m a virgin.” Riko shouted, louder than she meant to.

“Really?”

“What do you mean, ‘really’?!”

“Sorry...I was just so sure you weren’t one with that body. I’m shocked, is all.” He was not doing a good job of endearing himself to her, especially as he continued, so she interrupted. “I’m getting cold here. Are we done?”

“Yes, that’s...oh, one more. How old are you?”

Considering she’d just revealed the iron grip she had on her virginity, she wasn’t as ashamed to respond this as she might have been normally. “I just turned 29 yesterday.”

“Hoof.”

“What now?”

“You’re cutting it close there...but I can smooth that over with the committee later. Anyway—great news! You have passed, and I deem you worthy of wielding the power of the Star Wand!”

“What? No, I don’t want—”

He cut her off by clearing his throat again, shaking everything around her in the process, and started reading off a script. “Koboshi Riko...it is with great honor that I bestow upon you the power of the Star Wand and all its wonder. You are a...somewhat...young maiden, pure of heart and body, and with the power I will now bestow upon you, you shall become the Hopeful Starlight of your planet, Earth. Go forth, Hopeful Starlight! Shine your rays of hope and justice on the humble blue star you call home!” He sounded like he was speed-reading to get this over with and get back to what he was doing before she took the Wand from the ground.

“Wait, wait, wait!” Riko tried to interrupt but the voice was no longer entertaining her outbursts in the slightest. Another flash of white light took Riko’s vision from her yet again. A warmth enveloped her like a mother’s embrace, and she was overcome with an emotion she hadn’t felt in many years—hope. Her eyes flitted shut and she found herself spreading her arms automatically—in an instant, her once-nude form was covered in form-fitting white light, which in turn transformed into a

frilly yellow dress whose skirt reached her mid-thigh. It and all its accessories bore a star motif, including the tops of the white thigh-high socks that covered her legs and the hem of the skirt which hugged her hips (a bit too tightly), under which were fluffy, white bloomers. The top of the dress was mostly yellow with a white undershirt beneath the slightly open bodice. The shoulder-length white gloves met the dress's puffy shoulders at her underarms. In this form, Riko fell into a deep slumber, falling away from the infinite space and tumbling back home.

II

The usual foghorn siren of her alarm clock shook Riko awake from the deepest sleep she'd enjoyed in years. She slowly peeled her eyelids apart, but they fought hard to stay shut despite her valiant efforts.

"What a weird dream..." she thought aloud, sitting up in the bed and rubbing her eyes. "I should stop drinking so much before I go to bed, huh?" *At least I don't have a hangover, this time.* She reached over to her clock to kill the alarm and check the time. "Damn." Every day she vainly wished she had set her alarm for the incorrect time so she could go back to bed; every day she was disappointed that she hadn't done so as she slithered out from between the sheets.

Straining against her desire to lie back down, she guided her feet to the tatami, stood, and stretched. It was then that she noticed she'd fallen asleep in the nude last night; normally she at least wore a pair of panties and a too-big t-shirt that reached past her bottom. *Guess I got too drunk and passed out halfway through changing.* Normally, she couldn't sleep at all without a big shirt on.

She couldn't take a shower with one on, though, as evidenced by the growing pile of dirty laundry in the corner of the bathroom she saw when she dragged herself into it. The shower's handle squeaked as she turned up the temperature—soon a cool rain sprayed onto the tile. As always, she had to let the water run for a few minutes before it got warm enough to tolerate, so she brushed her teeth in the meantime.

While she brushed, she noticed a strange, star-shaped mark on the back of her right hand. "Whasch dhish?" she asked aloud absentmindedly, mouth full of toothpaste, as she brought it closer to her face to inspect it. She'd never seen that birthmark

before...and it was such an odd shape, too.

Maybe it's an impression from the sheets or something. Or, maybe I drew it on there and forgot about it, she thought, putting it out of her mind just as she spat out the foam in her mouth. She gargled, then hopped into the now-warm shower.

There was no relief quite like the hot water that rolled down her skin in waves, the pressure of the faucet massaging her shoulders and back while she stood with her hand against the tiled wall. Of course, it wasn't *all* fun; with a grimace she recognized the small, but painfully noticeable mound of fat on her lower belly that appeared suddenly when she turned 25. She poked it, puffing out her cheeks when it jiggled in taunting reply.

"Guess I need to watch what I eat," she said, ignoring the elephant made from discarded aluminum cans in the next room over. With a sigh she got to work scrubbing herself, lathering from head to toe and rinsing with the detachable shower head (one of the few amenities the apartments offered). Riko found herself lingering below her waist with the it for a while, but resisted the urge to...relieve herself, for now anyway. She didn't want to hear about being late from her boss, after all. "Maybe when I get home...it has been a while." She shut the water off and noticed the star-shaped mark was still plainly visible on her hand.

"That's so weird..." She rubbed it a couple of times, but it remained after a few seconds. "Did I use permanent marker? I didn't think I even *owned* a permanent marker." With a shrug Riko wrapped herself in a towel and made for her wardrobe, pulling out a matching set of underwear (as if anyone would see, she thought with an eye roll) and the first outfit she laid eyes on.

As usual, putting her bra on in the morning was a Herculean task. The hooks just *barely* reached, but she refused to buy any larger ones as a vain plea to her breasts to stop growing any more. Finally she managed to secure them, but not without more than a little grunting and straining.

"Still E-cup...still E-cup..." she panted to herself, victorious

over her chest another day.

Long gone were the days of dressing extra-nice, putting on flattering makeup, and doing her hair up so she could hit it off with one of the cute guys at the office, go for a drink after work, fall in love, get married, produce a soccer team's worth of children...or maybe travel the world together and visit all sorts of places, fighting against their sheer passion to keep their hands off one another in a romantic international date spot...*ah, Paris...*

She pulled up her thigh-high stockings with a snap, which also snapped her out of her daydreaming and back to the grim reality where all her coworkers were women, married, or old divorced men with bad taste in cologne and worse breath. Groaning, Riko stood from the seat she took on her futon to get dressed; as her feet touched ground, so did a quiet thud on the other side of the bed.

"Hm?" She climbed over the bed and peeked at the floor, where she saw the magic wand toy she'd found under the bushes while she looked for her keys last night. *Oh, yeah...I meant to take that to the police box before coming back home after I found my keys, but I guess I forgot.* Everything after she'd left the office yesterday was a blur in her memory, so she couldn't remember where she even found her keys in the first place (she'd mistakenly locked them in her apartment the previous morning without realizing).

She tossed the toy into her purse, ensured she had all her essentials—*especially* her keys—and started to set off on her commute to work.

Strangely, her usual internal tirade about how badly she wanted to do anything but go to work did not come naturally to her at the door. Normally, those thoughts thrust themselves into her consciousness without permission or invitation, but she felt fine, which was alien to her.

Maybe I'm finally getting out of that rut she thought, stepping out and letting the door close itself behind her. The weather was beautiful—the sun shone warmly on her skin; a faint breeze kissed her face; she heard some young children playing nearby over the quiet sound of the wind. She enjoyed the weather for a

moment before trotting down the stairs.

Most of her commutes to work were uneventful affairs consisting almost entirely of a growing pain in her chest that cried, “go back to bed!” Strangers rarely interacted with her, and she had no reason to approach them, so she marched with eyes forward, hiding her desire to go anywhere but her destination beneath a porcelain mask of “professionalism.”

Today was already looking to be an exception—she was enjoying the peaceful ambiance and quiet serenity of the day with no thoughts of work at all until the patter of young feet approached from behind, accompanied by a pair of shrill voices.

“Come on, Yuuta! Let’s hurry! I think I lost it somewhere around here!” shouted a little girl who couldn’t have been much older than six as she ran past Riko.

“I *said*, I’m not helping you look for your dumb toy!” cried a boy from behind who sounded about the same age, his voice growing closer with each syllable. Hana turned toward him and pouted, slowing to a walk.

“But it’s my favorite!” she implored him with the kind of desperation an adult would reserve for dire circumstances.

“I don’t care! You said you would buy me candy, which is the only reason I came along!”

“I will buy you candy...after we find my toy!”

Riko couldn’t help eavesdropping on their little argument with a smile. She remembered that she’d found a kids’ toy yesterday—maybe that was what little Hana was referring to, she thought, so she reached into her purse to grab it.

“That’s no fair! You tricked me, Hana!” barked Yuuta, who had now caught up to Hana. “I’m going to the candy store without you!” He darted off, leaving Hana in the dust.

“Wait!”

“No!” shouted Yuuta, looking back at Hana and away from his path.

When Riko looked up from her handbag, her eyes went wide in horror. Yuuta was so desperate to get away from Hana that he

was bolting right into oncoming traffic just as a delivery truck careened toward the intersection in a blur.

“Watch out!” she called, reaching forward to stop him (vainly, as she was too far away) with the same hand with which she was rummaging through her purse.

It just happened that she had grabbed hold of the Star Wand to hand it to Hana just as Yuuta threw his little tantrum. As soon as she thrust it forward, she felt the warm light from her ‘dream’ the night before envelop her entire being, inside and out.

Time seemed to stop around her. For an instant, she was nude once more—her office attire seemed to disappear into thin air. Before she could react, or get embarrassed, she found the light itself wrapping around her and transforming, piece by piece, into the same, gaudy gown she’d worn at the end of last night’s reverie.

When she blinked, she saw Yuuta running into traffic again—now, in slow motion. The truck’s horn blared uselessly. Unthinking, Riko leapt forward, clearing the panicking crowd and diving into Yuuta’s back. She scooped him up by the underarms and let his legs dangle like a mother cat might carry its kitten, rolled, and landed on her back on the other side of the intersection with the boy in tow. Just as she cleared the charging vehicle time seemed to return to normal.

Riko realized after an interval that she’d shut her eyes in anticipation of getting run over; when she finally opened them, she saw Yuuta’s face buried in her chest. She didn’t realize until the surge of adrenaline wore off that she was out of breath.

“Are you okay?” she asked in a low voice, lifting him up a bit so he could speak.

Before he could reply, Hana came running over (after making sure to look both ways before crossing) and shouted, “Yuuta! Are you okay?”

Yuuta caught himself staring down at the soft pillows he’d just been smothered in, blushed, turned to Hana, and called, “I’m fine,” before scrambling to his feet.

“Are you okay, space lady?” Hana asked, looking down at the heavily panting Riko. It had been so long since she’d done any serious physical activity that a simple jump put her in dire straits.

“I...I think so,” she managed, grunting as she helped herself to her feet. *Space lady?*

Hana smiled. “You were so cool! You saved Yuuta!”

“Yeah...thanks...” muttered the boy, eyes glued to the sidewalk.

Riko gestured to the Star Wand and asked Hana, “by the way...is this the toy you were searching for?”

Hana just shrugged. “Nope. I’m looking for a doll.”

The truck driver scrambled over to the trio and bowed deeply before Riko could reply. “I’m so sorry! I didn’t expect anyone to cross! Thank you for intervening!”

The crowd of onlookers was beginning to grow; Riko felt a mix of anxious to get out of here before someone from work recognized her and excited at all the positive attention.

“Uh...yeah, I...it’s no trouble at all for...someone with my star power!” She flexed her bicep, then realized no one could see it under the long gloves the transformation donned her in. “A...anyway, I’d better go! There’s more justice to be served elsewhere!”

As she turned to flee the scene, Hana grabbed the hem of her dress. “Wait! What’s your name?”

“Ko...ahem...Hopeful Starlight!” She smiled down at the girl, who beamed back up at her. “I’ll see you next time!” She flashed a peace sign, checked for anyone standing in her way, and bolted, ducking into an alleyway to lose any lingering watchers.

She pressed her back up against the brick wall and held her breath, peeking around the corner to see if anyone had followed her. From the looks of things, no one had, so she took a seat on the ground. Her legs were like jelly and cool sweat ran down her brow; she thought for sure that truck was going to be the end of her when she heard its screaming tires so close to her ear.

But still...in the end, I did save that kid. She didn’t notice, but she was smiling bigger than she had since she was in high school.

She wondered if this was what it felt like to do something fulfilling for a living, instead of wasting away under the oppressive fluorescence of the office. It was scary, but...

She shook her head. *You have rent to pay, Riko*, she reasoned, forcing herself to her feet. She could deliberate about whether she wanted to do more with this power, and figure out how it all worked (figuring, for now, that last night's dream was no illusion after all), another time. For now, she had to get to work.

The rest of the commuters that morning seemed to keep a wide berth; Riko wondered if she'd forgotten to apply deodorant, and if all her perspiration after saving Yuuta had made her stink. It wasn't until she reached for the glass door of her office and caught her reflection therein that she realized her clothes had never changed back. By that time, though, she was already inside.

Panicking, she grabbed a flu mask from the box at the entrance. She noticed her vision was perfect without her glasses, which served to better disguise her among peers who had only ever seen her bespectacled countenance. On top of that, the lavish hairstyle was unlike anything she'd ever worn to work. Unless someone looked very close, she was unrecognizable...

"Excuse me...do you have business here today?" the receptionist asked, raising a fair question given Riko's getup.

"Um..." she sputtered, trying to cook up a story to get into the office and find a place to change, her eyes everywhere but the secretary. Before answering, she saw there was an open elevator and took her chance.

"Gotta go!" She ran and, like when she saved Yuuta, was faster than she realized she could be. She was a top runner in high school (though she was forced to quit in college during her unfortunate, chest-only 'growth spurt') and was naturally quick, but even at her fastest and best-conditioned she couldn't approach such blistering speeds.

"Hey! Wait!" the secretary called after her, but Riko savagely mashed the 'door close' button inside, looking up to see if anyone pursued her. As the doors closed before her, she let out a sigh of

relief—before she could get comfortable, though, she saw a figure in the reflection of the steel door behind her.

“Are you okay?” asked a familiar voice; that of Mochizuki Nagisa, the coworker with whom she’d stayed back late yesterday. One who surely knew her face well after sitting so close with her for so long, and so recently. Riko nodded the affirmative, hiding her face from Nagisa. “Are you in the right place? This isn’t a cosplay convention; just a normal office.” Riko stared up at the sign displaying which floor the elevator was on, nodding again to answer Nagisa’s question.

Hurry up...she pleaded. Her antsy knees shifted back and forth as the box slowly climbed up to floor five.

“Huh...I wonder if there’s some kind of event or something today. What are you here for, cosplayer-chan?” Nagisa took a step toward her, trying to get a look at her face.

“It’s, uh...” Riko managed, hoping the mask and the impression she did of a cutesy girl did enough to hide her real identity. “I was asked to help with a catering event, but it seems I arrived a little early...” she turned away from Nagisa’s prying eyes.

“Hmm...from where?”

Why don’t you ask this many questions about work, Mochizuki-san?

“Hey, did you hear me? What kind of food are we getti—”

Mercifully, a metallic *ding* interrupted the lazy muzak. The doors slid apart and Riko wasted no time in jetting out of them, clearing them before they were even fully open although she wasn’t sure yet where to go. Her sheer speed, born from a desperation to get far away from the tan blonde, broke the sound barrier with a gunshot-like snap.

“Woah! Wait!” called Nagisa, but Riko was already too far away, leaving a hurricane of dropped reports and spilled coffee in her wake as she barged into the ladies’ room, finding a stall to hide in while she figured out how to get back into her usual attire.

No one else was in the bathroom, so she had a chance to catch her breath (for the second time today, at least) and assess the situation. She was dressed like an over-the-top cosplayer in the middle of work, her only disguise a thin paper mask and a mousy

voice that she didn't think she could sustain for long. Dozens of people just saw—or felt—her rocket past them into this bathroom and would doubtlessly begin investigating any minute.

She held the Star Wand before her in both hands, staring intently into the translucent star on top. “Change me back!” she said, chanting like it was a spell, moving the wand back and forth to try and channel her will into it. Nothing happened.

“Um...transform!” Again, nothing. “Presto?” Still nothing, so she tried miming some kind of magical dance. She spun in a circle, tapped her feet, clicked her heels, all to no avail as she remained clad in the yellow dress. Then she heard the crowd appear at the bathroom door, and soon after the door was opened.

“What a mess she's made. I had big plans this evening, too...Are you sure she came in here?” said Nagisa, her low vocal register standing out among the other office ladies.

“I am,” replied another female coworker. “She knocked my coffee right out of my hand when she ran past me.

“Hello!?” called the former, cupping her hands around her mouth. “Are you in here, cosplayer- chan? We just need to talk to you!”

Desperate, Riko started shaking the wand back and forth after climbing on top of the toilet to hide her feet from anyone who might peek under the stalls. *Do something!* She closed her eyes tight and clenched her teeth as she begged the rod to get her out of this mess. Nagisa knocked on the stall door next to the one Riko was hiding in. “You in there?” There was no reply.

“Come on, come on,” Riko whisper-yelled into the star. “Get me out of these clothes!”

Finally, there was a brilliant flash of light that, by some miracle, only Riko seemed to see. When she blinked, she was still squatting atop the pot, but one look at her hands told her that she was changed out of the Mahou Shoujo getup.

Nagisa's knock came for her stall next. “Anyone here?”

“Um...” muttered Riko. “I'm still in here...” She stood to open the stall door but when her feet touched the linoleum, she realized they weren't shod. In fact, she wasn't wearing any clothes.

A chill ran up her spine from her heels as they hit the cool floor. She inhaled sharply.

“Cosplayer-chan? Is that you?”

“N-no...I mean, I don't know what you're talking about.” Riko gulped, cracking the stall door as slightly as possible. From the looks of things, only Nagisa was there; the other woman seemed to have left it to her to investigate the bathroom. Given Nagisa's martial arts training (which, she always bragged, her husband had taught her personally), that made sense.

“Oh, it's you, Koboshi-san! Sorry, we were just looking for...say, did you see anyone come in here after you?”

Riko shook her head. “I've been in this stall the whole time.”

“Tch. I guess we lost her.” Nagisa rubbed the back of her head, one eye closed, while she tried to figure out where the mysterious cosplayer could have run off to. “Well, if you see anyone wearing a star-spangled yellow dress...” she paused as she looked at Riko again. “Say, where are your clothes?”

Riko sputtered, shutting the door harder than she meant to so she could hide her sudden, extreme blush. “I'm...I just...I go to the bathroom like this, okay?!” *What are you saying? Do you want her to think you're some pervert?!*

“Uh...huh. Well, I won't judge, but...just make sure your clothes don't get dirty, okay? And don't forget anything you might have taken off.” Riko was grateful she couldn't see the expression on Nagisa's face—whether it was pity, disgust or just confusion, she was glad not to know.

After her junior walked off, Riko returned her attention to the Star Wand. “Why did you think I meant *this* when I asked you to get me out of those clothes?!” she demanded. Naturally, as an inanimate object, it did not reply verbally, but she could swear she saw it flicker a little as if it winked.

“Oh, you think you're funny?” She held the wand in one hand and pointed an accusatory finger at it with the other. “If I get fired because of you, you're going in a woodchipper! Dress me back in my office clothes!” She shook the wand again and, in a flash, her pencil skirt and thigh-highs were back. In another instant the

rest of her attire had returned, including her glasses and other accessories. Just to be sure, she checked for her panties. *Present.*

“Now,” she said, pointing aggressively at the wand after putting it back into her purse, “no more pranks or jokes! I don’t need ‘public nudist’ going around the rumor mill.” It was going to be bad enough with Nagisa thinking she had a weird complex about using the toilet with clothes on...

III

It was impossible not to notice the sidelong looks and intense, burning stares some of her coworkers sent her way, dressing her up in the ostentatious garb she'd worn when she burst into the office earlier that morning. There was no doubt she was secretly the prime suspect, but there was no way to prove it—she surely couldn't have hidden such an elaborate outfit inside her purse or briefcase, and her office clothes were almost painfully plain by comparison—but that didn't stop people from considering it, even if they didn't ask her directly.

Normally, no one sent so much as a glance her way, so all attention to which she was unaccustomed gave her cause to consider leaving the office early for the day. She declined to do so, however—it would surely arouse further suspicions. Unfortunately, her only recourse was to grin and bear it for the day (probably the next several days) while acting just as flummoxed as everyone else about the identity of the woman who tore through the cubicle hallway that morning.

Eventually, without further incident, Riko found herself heading home on a detour, rather than the usual direct path she took back to her apartment most days. For one, she managed to leave while the sun was still up and wanted to try to enjoy it for once; on top of that, she didn't want anyone to recognize her on the path home while the truck incident that morning, when she sprang into action and rescued Yuuta, may have been fresh in everyone's minds.

She caught herself biting her nails absentmindedly on her extended commute, clearly still anxious about the prospect of getting caught. She shivered when she thought of the salvo of questions about what exactly she was doing dressing like a character from a children's anime and making a mess of everyone's

work. That kind of thing could cost her job altogether in the worst case; even in the best she would have to endure meetings, trainings, and other compulsory, corrective action.

While she considered cutting or dyeing her hair to further distance her image from that of the mysterious cosplayer, as whom she hoped to never appear in the office again, Riko's ear picked up a crash in the distance. It sounded like a thunderclap, then stony rubble crashing into asphalt, and without consideration she started to power-walk in that direction. She realized what she was doing and stopped, digging her heels into the concrete to brake.

That isn't the way back, she thought, turning toward her apartment again. *I doubt I could do much to help even with whatever powers the wand gives me, anyway. Assuming it actually gives me powers in the first place.* She took two steps before the screaming started—what sounded like a young girl's cries for help—and as if possessed by some instinct she didn't know she had, she kicked off her office shoes and sprinted full-tilt toward the source of the noise. On the way, she withdrew the Star Wand from her bag.

"Help!" cried the voice from before, clearer now that Riko was closer. "Let me go!" she plead.

A somewhat familiar voice Riko couldn't quite place replied, "You can free yourself, Hopeful Starlight! Show me the power I know you're capable of!"

"I don't know what you're talking about!" insisted the girl, just as Riko arrived on the scene. She saw a middle-school girl, still in her sailor uniform, suspended in the air by mysterious, jet-black tendrils which sprouted from the ground and appeared to be the source of the crash earlier. They coiled and writhed about her limbs, pulling at their ends so she resembled a letter X.

"Don't play the fool!" the other, older woman, whose attire Riko couldn't see from behind thanks to the flowing, purple cape behind her back, seemed to be growing impatient. "I know well that you inherited the Star Wand, and I know you have already used its powers once! You could rip yourself out of this in an in-

stant!”

Riko clutched the wand in her hands, hidden between two tall buildings. She grimaced as the tentacles pulled the girl's limbs more tightly, slithering toward her torso an inch at a time, eliciting another gut-wrenching scream from her throat.

Before the slimy coils could reach any further, Riko decided to put to the test just how quickly Hopeful Starlight could tear this monster to pieces. She held the wand in front of her with both hands and concentrated on the star atop it. *Please, let me save this girl!*, she implored, and it responded in kind, filling her with power and changing her into the getup in which she had ripped through the office that morning.

Just like then, she sprinted toward her target, and just like then, she left a frightful mess in her wake. With a flash of the Star Wand, which transmuted into a sword of light as soon as she considered 'cutting' with it, the slithering tendrils were sliced to ribbons, falling harmlessly onto the road below with wet, squelching slaps. The girl, who was suspended a few feet into the air, yelped as Riko caught her before she too fell against the unyielding pavement.

“Are you okay?” asked Riko, holding the other girl in a princess carry.

She nodded. “I am now...”

Riko set her down and turned her attention to the assailant. The tan-skinned woman had a vaguely recognizable voice, but she wore a mask and Riko couldn't discern her identity. The assailant looked as surprised as she did angry about this turn of events.

“Was I lied to about *that*, too?” she asked aloud, seemingly to herself. “Hoshino Miki was supposed to be the next Hopeful Starlight. That clearly isn't you,” she spat.

“Leave her alone,” demanded Riko. “I don't know what you're after, but it has nothing to do with this girl!”

The blonde, whose skimpy, bikini-like getup could hardly be called an outfit with how little it covered, put her gloved hands on her hips and laughed derisively. “Don't worry, Hope-

ful Starlight. I'm not after some powerless girl like that." She pointed to her would-be victim, Hoshino Miki, with contempt. "I'm after the power of that Star Wand you're holding. Hand it over, and I promise we won't meet again."

Somehow I doubt that, thought Riko, hoping the other party didn't recognize *her*. She felt that giving her the Star Wand would only lead to trouble, so she shook her head. "You'll have to take it from me, if you want it." Miki pumped her fist.

She clicked her tongue, disappointed. "You're lucky I used so much of my power to capture the girl." Riko noticed, then, several holes along the street that the black-clad woman must have opened in an effort to get a hold of a fleeing Miki. "There's no way I could pry it from your hands now...but rest assured, I will reclaim that power from you, Hopeful Starlight!" She scowled, glaring daggers at Riko. "Remember the name of Lunar Eclipse!"

Riko ran at her to stop her from getting away, but the latter concealed her scantily-clad figure with her her cape, spun, and disappeared an instant. Riko swiped at the air with the Star Wand.

"Where could she have gone?" muttered Riko before deciding to survey the damage she'd done. There were about a dozen holes in the ground, each nearly a foot in diameter. Some parked cars were pierced through where the tentacles had sprouted, as well, but thankfully Riko had made it before anyone was seriously injured.

"Are you sure you're alright?" she asked, returning her attention to the grinning redhead.

"I'm great, now!" she said, oddly cheerful for someone whose life was just in danger. "Thank you so much for saving me!"

"It's...it's nothing, really," Riko said, trying to appear humble. The elation was plastered all over her face, though; it was rare for her to hear so much praise in a single day, after all. Still, her expression was unbecoming for a heroine.

"No way! I was in real danger!" Miki insisted, seemingly ignorant of Riko's reaction.

“Well...I’m glad you’re okay.” Coming to her senses, Riko placed a hand on Miki’s shoulder. “Do you want me to take you home?”

“It’s okay! Really, I’ll be fine.” Miki put a hand on one of her shoulders and rotated it, which apparently meant that all was well. “Thank you again!” With that she bolted down the street, leaving Riko with an outstretched hand and a confused look on her face.

“The voice wasn’t kidding when it said she was a tomboy,” Riko said, then shrugged. “Well, I’d better head back home myself.”

Only after Miki fled did Riko realize the sheer size of the throng that had gathered. Wanting nothing more than to get away before people started asking questions, she used her new-found speed to jet back between the two buildings from which she’d emerged to rescue Miki.

Once she’d darted between enough buildings to lose any potential pursuers, Riko held the Star Wand up and commanded it once again to change her clothes. There was a flash, and Riko double-checked to ensure that she wasn’t totally naked this time. She wasn’t, but...

“Where is the rest of my outfit!?” she demanded in a shouted whisper, glaring at the blinking Star Wand. It removed most of the Hopeful Starlight outfit, but it seemed like it had stopped halfway. She wore only a low-cut, sunflower-yellow bra with a star motif, matching panties (which had a childish star mark right on her ass), a garter belt and the white stockings. “Quit messing with me!”

The wand flickered as if it was winking again...then it stopped, and went totally dark.

“What? No way...it isn’t battery powered or something, right?” She shook the rod as hard as she could, but nothing happened. “What am I gonna do now?!”

“Is someone in there?” called a man from the street. “Are you okay?”

Please, not like this! She saw no way to escape as his footsteps drew near...until she looked up.

"Hmm...I must be hearing things," he muttered, rubbing his bald head in confusion.

Riko had begun to scale the buildings by making footholds out of trimms and grabs in the bricks, somehow avoiding any damage to the fragile cloth that covered her feet. Once she got to the top, she took a moment to orient herself, inhaling sharply. Since she'd saved Miki, the sun had set. As the stars began to shine, dim though they might have been in the urban setting, the Star Wand appeared to kick into gear again.

"Is it...star-powered?" In retrospect, that made total sense, she thought as it once again rearranged her attire. She was back in her office uniform and, given her newly heightened physical prowess, it was a trivial effort to reach the ground below with a hop.

It wasn't until she landed that she realized things weren't going to be so simple. The Star Wand flashed again, and she found herself wearing just her blouse—*just* her blouse. Then, with another flash her clothes changed again, and again, and yet again.

With no recourse, Riko did the only thing she could think of—run home, ducking between cars and buildings all the way. She flashed from fully clothed, to Hopeful Starlight, to Hopeful Starlight in a pencil skirt, to *only* wearing a pencil skirt, and a variety of other mismatched ensembles as she slipped into and out of cover.

Miraculously, she had gone undetected so far—surely, in part, thanks to the ludicrous velocity at which she ran—and her apartment was only a climb of the stairwell away...

"Koboshi-san?" said the kindly voice of an elderly woman.

Not the landlady! "Um, yes, hello..."

"I just wanted to make sure that was you, dear. My eyesight isn't so good these days..."

The faulty magic of the Star Wand rapidly threw Riko into various states of undress before the squinting eyes of the old woman, whose diminutive stature put her right at Riko's chest.

“Y-yep, it’s me!” Riko tried to play it casual, tip-toeing toward the steps between furtive glances to check for onlookers.

“You ought to come home earlier...staying at work so late will do a number on your health.”

“I’ll keep it in mind, thanks!” Riko agreed before flying up the stairs, completely naked as the wand’s powers fizzled out completely.

IV

She panted as she slammed the door behind her, resting her bare, sweaty back against the cool wood.

No one saw...right? She checked the peephole in the door to see if anyone came up to her apartment after her, but saw no one. Exhaling a breath she hadn't realized she was holding, Riko took up the Star Wand and examined it more closely (to distract herself from the embarrassment of being a public nudist against her will, which she spent the rest of the night trying not to think about).

"If it can run out of power, there has to be a way to charge it..." she mumbled aloud, rotating it in every possible direction to see if there was a plug or a meter—anything to give her an idea of how to restore power to the thing. *It seemed to react to the stars before, right?*

She poked her lip, and when she moved her arm she realized her chest was still bare. Then, it occurred to her that she was in dire need of a bath, thanks to sweating both from activity and anxiety. She crept into the bathroom and stepped once more into her apartment's shower (after, of course, letting the water warm up). The steamy water soothed her sore, under-worked muscles.

Muscles? Riko opened her eyes and looked more closely at her body, to which she normally paid little mind (other than irritation at her chest's seemingly endless growth spurt), and saw a sight that she hadn't since she quit swimming competitively in college—muscular definition! She didn't have shredded six-pack abs or a pair of bulging biceps, but there was a "sleekness" to her figure that was lost after years of drinking, sitting, and stress.

"Hehe~" she giggled, tracing the faint line that appeared in the middle of her torso, where yesterday sat a lump of unwelcome fat. She guessed the sudden improvement in her physique

was a side-effect of the magical powers granted by the Star Wand...after all, she still hadn't technically untransformed completely. Then again, with luck, this would be a permanent change. At least, as long as she kept it up...

"But do I want to do that?" She pondered her decision aloud while the water flushed the sweat from her skin.

On the one hand, it was hard on her. Her body was sore all over—no doubt from all the high speed sprinting, jumping, and crawling—and, she realized now, she was more mentally exhausted than she was after even the worst days at the office. Seeing people in such danger, saddled with the responsibility of saving them against her will, might be a greater burden than she could afford to bear.

Then again, Yuuta, Hana, and Miki's gratitude that day...she couldn't deny the warm feeling in her heart when they thanked her. Throughout her life, up to that point, nothing had ever felt quite so gratifying or fulfilling. Not even top-level competition in nationals gave her such a thrill as the danger of diving head-long into oncoming traffic or going toe-to-toe with a potentially dangerous enemy, either.

So, what will it be? Riko asked herself.

Still unsure, she shut the water off and emerged from the shower, wrapping a towel around her soaked hair like a swami's turban. Another towel hugged her torso tight as she strode into her living room, wherein she left the Star Wand. Its faint glow had yet to return, despite her leaving it on the windowsill to try and expose it to the stars above. Riko wondered if there was even a choice to be made here—after all, if the Wand didn't have any power, there wasn't much she could do from this point.

"What's your secret, huh?" She held it up with one hand, poking at the star symbol with the index finger of the other. "How can I charge you back up?" For a laugh, she tried to lay it on the wireless charging pad she used for her smartphone, but it was (unsurprisingly) fruitless—there didn't appear to be any plugs on it at all, and in fact the handle was made of some kind of wood, rather than the plastic typical of such toys.

She saw her clock in her peripheral vision and realized that it had gotten late: between the shower and all this experimenting (not to mention the laborious trip home), she would need to pass out right this instant to get even five hours of sleep.

With a shrug, Riko laid the Star Wand on her windowsill and flopped into bed without bothering to get into any clothes, tossing the towels into a pile on the floor. The cool sheets wrapped around her bare skin and, combined with just how taxing the day had been, gave her the best sleep she'd enjoyed in years.

* * *

Riko awoke the following morning in an awkward (to say the least) position, face-down on her knees in what could have looked like a dogeza, but with her butt higher in the air. Luckily, no one was around to see, and she righted herself by pushing her torso up with her arms.

"Ouch..." she grunted, struggling to use any of her sore muscles after using them so much yesterday. The shower had helped, somewhat, but her body still ached from head to toe. It had been a long, long time since she'd worked her body that hard. She took inventory and confirmed that the definition that had shown up yesterday was still there.

Despite all that soreness, she felt great. Her usual morning desperation was nowhere to be seen (already greatly diminished the day before, too), and in fact, even with all the physical soreness she felt 'light,' as if she could run a mile without even breaking a sweat. Her routine passed faster than it ever had, and before she knew it she was at the door and ready to head out for the day.

"Oh, right..." she recalled the Star Wand and took it from the window, giving it a brief once-over. Its glow had returned, and in fact it was a solid light now, rather than a flickering glimmer.

"Maybe it shares a battery with *me*," she wondered aloud, scratching her head. For now, she jammed it into her purse and strolled out the door, spring in her step. *Not that I'm thrilled about work*, she thought, remembering that today would feature yet

more collaboration with her newlywed colleague, Nagisa. She was feeling good now, but the incessant reminders that she was still single were surely going to sour her mood.

While she pondered whether she could put on her polite smile and continue to congratulate her younger coworker for a marriage that grew less recent by the day, she heard a patter of footsteps behind her. Fearing another kid would dive head-long into a busy intersection like yesterday but *without* the wand seeming to work right, Riko turned to meet the runner.

Instead of a small child, though, she saw a middle school student heading her way—not just any student, but the same one she’d rescued from the mysterious woman yesterday, dressed in a white-and-blue sailor uniform, her short, red hair struggling to keep pace with her. Riko pretended she’d never seen her before and faced forward, stepping slightly to the left to make room for the running teen.

“Good morning!” Miki called, slowing to a walk as she caught up with Riko. “I can’t believe we have a similar morning commute!” Her bright smile was almost infectious, but Riko was a little concerned that she recognized her.

“Um...do I know you?” Riko asked, trying to put on the facade of the unassuming office worker. “I think you have me mistaken for someone else...”

“I couldn’t possibly,” corrected Miki. “Not after you saved me yesterday, Hopeful Starlight!” she beamed, her hazel eyes shimmering with adoration.

Riko’s own eyes shot wide open. “There’s a misunderstanding,” she tried.

“See? Look at that star mark! It’s the same one that was on Hopeful Starlight’s glove!” Miki enthusiastically took Riko’s hand and pointed at the mark.

Riko panicked and covered her wrist. “I don’t know anyone with that name...”

“Hmm...no, it’s definitely her. I would recognize that face anywhere.” She appeared to be talking to herself, rather than Riko. “She must not want people to associate her with Hopeful

Starlight...” Suddenly, with a snap of her fingers, Miki chirped, “Oh! It’s a secret identity, right? *That’s* why you’re wearing those glasses! I was wondering, because it was obvious from how precisely your Hopeful Starlight Cross Cutter attack sliced those tentacles yesterday that you have perfect vision, but it makes total sense if they’re a disguise!” she gushed, looking at Riko expectantly.

Riko attempted to mollify Miki, growing increasingly nervous that the kid was going to blow her cover in front of a coworker as they drew closer to the office (and thus, to other commuters). Also, what was with that attack naming sense? “I really don’t know what you’re talking about. I need these to see.” In truth, her vision was worse with them on now, but she was so used to wearing them she’d donned them out of habit.

“Don’t worry,” whispered Miki, getting a little too close to Riko. “Your secret’s safe with me.” Her sun-kissed cheeks reddened as she approached, masking her freckles.

“Ah...well, that’s...” she trailed off. There was clearly no convincing her, and this was better than having the girl loudly ask her how Hopeful Starlight was doing.

“So, where are you headed now? Off to fight more bad guys? Maybe you’re going to deliver justice to that Lunar Eclipse lady for threatening innocents?! Are you going to save a kitten from a burning building, or maybe a drowning child?!” Miki’s voice grew louder with every possible scenario she imagined Riko in, stars glimmering in her blue eyes. “You’re so cool, I bet you could do that without even getting in the water!”

“Work.” Riko said it so plainly that it stopped Miki’s wild train of thought in its tracks. “I’m just going to work for now.”

“R...right,” Miki stammered with a half-smile. “I guess I got carried away. Sorry.” The girl rubbed the back of her head and chuckled nervously.

“No, it’s fine,” Riko insisted. “I just didn’t want you to think I was on some kind of mission.” She waved it off, but the atmosphere was a little awkward after that and the two walked together in silence for a few paces.

“So, what’s your job like?” Miki asked out of the blue.

“Uh...I just do reports and paperwork for my bosses, mostly.”

“Oh, that’s kind of like what my parents do. They never tell me the specifics, but they’re busy all the time so I know they’re working hard.” She smiled. “It’s amazing that you can balance that kind of thing with saving people! It takes all they have to get me something to heat up for dinner, never mind going to my kendo meets.”

Riko frowned a little; she had bitter memories of her own father missing her track events for work-related reasons. She thought about her own marriage to work and frowned more.

“...I wonder if I could do it,” Miki said quietly, looking up at the clouds as if she had something on her mind.

Riko began to realize why Miki had been the one initially chosen to be Hopeful Starlight when she saw her wistful countenance in profile. There was an almost heroic beauty to her somewhat somber expression as the faint breeze played with her hair. Riko felt pretty bad considering she’d stumbled into the power by mistake, but decided in that moment, looking at a vulnerable girl who had lost her chance to be the hope the world needed, to do what she could as long as the power was hers. She put a reassuring hand on Miki’s shoulder.

“I’m sure you could. You seem like a strong girl.” She smiled, meeting Miki’s blue eyes with her greens.

“Th-thanks,” Miki managed, suddenly clearing her throat in exaggerated fashion. “Anyway, I gotta turn here to get to school.” Seeming to Riko like she’d perked up, Miki split off behind her and started jogging toward school.

“It’s Koboshi Riko, by the way!” she called after the teen, waving her off with a smile. The rest of the walk to work went by in a blur.

V

“Koboshi-san?” Nagisa sat across from Riko in a meeting room, the latter of whom had lost herself in thoughts about the previous day and about her newfound duty as Hopeful Starlight, as nebulous as it was to “shine rays of hope and justice” onto the world. As a result, very little work was done that day.

She stirred when Nagisa waved to her. “Sorry, I was just thinking about something. What did you say?”

“Well, I was asking what you thought about this line...”

Riko tried to let herself get absorbed in her work for a while. She knew she was going to have to stay back with Nagisa regardless, but she wanted to get as much done during working hours as possible so she could get home early.

Whittling the hours away with talks of margins, performance indicators and client satisfaction, Riko found herself strangely energized for work well into the long day; normally, by lunch time she was taking 30-second naps at her desk against her will and contemplating ‘falling ill.’

She watched the sun set out of the office window, the scenery below bathed in an orange glow. Soon after, most of the office had filed out to go home (or, out for drinks) for the evening.

Nagisa held her head in her hands, her blonde hair peeking through her fingers. “I just don’t get it...” she muttered, squeezing her eyes closed tight.

“What is it, Mochizuki-san?” Riko asked, walking from the windows to Nagisa’s side of the table they’d been sharing for most of the day. It was now dark outside, the sun only a memory as the crescent moon and stars revealed themselves with a glint.

“I just can’t figure it out!” Nagisa propped herself up on her palm, elbow on the table. Riko noticed some bags forming under

her eyes and worried that work was starting to get to her—or, perhaps, her marriage was on the rocks already. “Take a look at my screen. Maybe you’ll be able to explain what I’m missing.”

Riko walked over, her heels tapping softly against the thin carpet.

“Why do you get to have that power, when I had it taken from me...?” By the time Riko realized what she’d just read on Nagisa’s screen, the latter had sprung from her seat and grabbed her by the wrists, shoving her against the white wall behind her. The fluorescent lights went out as Riko’s elbow hit the switch.

“I had a feeling it was you, the other day, tearing through the office like a fool,” spat Nagisa, a familiar venom lacing her words. “What did you do, Koboshi, to get that power?”

“I, I don’t know what you’re saying! Please let me go!” Riko was panicking—despite her slim figure, Nagisa was *strong*, and Riko couldn’t push herself free, lacking the strength without the Star Wand’s help.

“Don’t act stupid, you sow,” Nagisa cursed. “I saw the star-shaped mark on the back of your hand this morning. I *know* you’re Hopeful Starlight. I can’t believe I didn’t realize as soon as I saw the ‘cosplayer’ in the elevator with me. I didn’t want to believe it was you when you cut down my tentacles yesterday, but the mark confirms it.” Her grip tightened around Riko’s slim wrists. “Now, *how* did you obtain the Star Wand’s power?” Nagisa’s voice grew more febrile and frantic with every word, her breathing ragged as she easily smothered Riko’s resistance.

“I just found it!” admitted Riko, hoping Nagisa would let her go when she did. “It was lying in the bushes on my way home from work. When I touched it, I—”

“I know what happened,” Nagisa retorted. “The same thing that happened to me when I first found it ten years ago. You were taken into space, judged, and granted the power. Right?”

Riko swallowed the lump forming in her throat. She’d never been so afraid. “Yes.”

“Give it back to me, then,” demanded her junior, whose sclera practically glowed in the dark room. “Or I’ll take it by force.”

Riko trembled, unsure of what to do. If she told Nagisa the wand was in the purse at her desk, there was no doubt she would beat her there. But...

“I didn’t bring it to work!” she lied.

“What?! What would you have done if there was trouble, then?”

“The wand stopped working yesterday. I thought it was just a one-time thing.”

“Stopped working? What are you—”

Just then, Nagisa’s cell phone started to ring, the screen’s illumination showing through her skirt pocket. Distracted for an instant, she released her grip on Riko’s wrists just slightly; with a bit of room to breathe, Riko took her chance to butt heads with Nagisa—literally, this time, rather than the usual, ‘professional’ rancor when they disagreed about work. Her forehead struck her assailant in the nose.

“Ow! What the hell!?” Instinctively, Nagisa clutched her face in her hands. “That hurt!”

Riko was already out of the room, and in a second she was carrying her purse out of the office. She blitzed toward the door, leaving behind a cursing Nagisa as she fell into the elevator.

“Haah...haah...” she panted, sitting on the floor of the lift as it took her down to the lobby. As soon as it chimed to announce its arrival she dove out and charged through the exit. It took a few blocks of running before she realized that Nagisa hadn’t pursued her, at least not obviously. That made her more nervous, but she decided to slow down for now. *I think that phone call saved me.*

That, or she’s got other plans for me. Riko started running again and didn’t stop until she made it inside and locked the door behind her.

Once she’d overcome the initial anxiety of hunted prey before a hungry predator, Riko realized she had behaved as just that—a hapless victim. How ‘*Hopeful Starlight*’ of me, she thought derisively.

Riko changed into evening wear, contemplating how to handle running into Nagisa on Monday if nothing happened over

the weekend. Upon inspection, the unused Star Wand shone a little less brightly than it had that morning—perhaps its power really was tied to her own vitality somehow. Riko stared at the star on top, brow furrowed, after finally removing her glasses so she could see clearly. *Would I have had the courage to take Nagisa on if I'd used this back there? And, would that have been wise? Would that even help?*

She set it down and made for the fridge, bending over at the waist to grab a can of beer, her one true friend in the seven years she'd watched melt away. She recalled what Nagisa had said earlier, about having had the power 'taken' from her and 'given' to Riko, and considered how she might act if her solitary comfort, or source of hope, was taken from her. *If I lose the Star Wand, will I turn out like Nagisa?* Riko shivered at the thought of attacking people...she was especially concerned about fitting into Lunar Eclipse's attire, or lack thereof.

The beer opened with a loud pop, There was a desperation in Nagisa's voice to get the power back, despite the strength and magical abilities she clearly still possessed. Riko wondered if it was part of the deal that went unmentioned when the cosmic judge conferred the Star Wand on her. Then again, Nagisa was disgruntled that the power was lost to her at all—taken from her, as she put it. If she didn't give it up willingly, then how?

She rubbed her chin. *What were the requirements again? A maiden...I met that criteria, so she surely does. Pure of heart...not anymore, but I think that happened after she lost the wand. What was the last one again? Pure of body...?*

"Oh." As soon as she recalled the final stipulation, it was obvious—Nagisa lost the power of Hopeful Starlight on her wedding night when she lost her virginity to her new husband, Haruki.

Riko took another drink. "So she's all up in a huff because she lost her power in exchange for a husband, huh? But she's obviously so happy with him. I guess it's hard on her. Still, to lose control of yourself like that..." She wondered, as the alcohol sent her to sleep, how she might bring Nagisa back to her senses—if

she even could.

VI

Riko stirred, the steady rapping at her door serving as her alarm clock for the day. It was Sunday, her day off, so she was a bit disappointed to awaken so early (and, she realized with a grimace, with such a painful hangover). She sat herself upright and yawned loudly, stretching her sore back while the morning sun bathed her in gentle light.

The knocking at her door grew more intense, and the interval between sets of knocks reduced with each strike. Her eyes went wide and she stopped herself from answering; fearing that Nagisa had found her home and sought to threaten her over the Star Wand again, Riko kept silent and shuffled to the peephole to see who was knocking.

“Koboshi-san! Are you home?!” called a familiar voice, muffled by the door.

“C-coming,” said Riko timidly, propping the door open and poking her aching head out to find Miki standing there, panting as if she’d run all the way here. What was she doing *here*? “Hoshino-san? Aren’t you off school today?”

“Koboshi-san! You’re awake! Good,” said Miki, looking a little relieved. “You have to come quick! Lunar Eclipse is up to something terrible!”

Riko wore her disapproval plainly on her face. *You had to act up on our day off, Nagisa?*

“Hurry! There’s no time to waste!” Before Riko could even say anything, Miki had grabbed her hand and dragged her out of the half-open door.

“Wait!” she managed to grab hold of a railing and stop Miki from pulling her along before they descended the stairs. “I’m not dressed, and I don’t have the Star Wand with me. Give me a sec—”

Miki, whose tank-top t-shirt exposed her surprisingly muscular shoulders to the warm summer sun, didn't let Riko finish her sentence before charging into the apartment. "I'll go get it," she said, rummaging around before the other could begin to protest.

"Hold on—" Riko started, but before she could even complete her sentence Miki had returned with the Wand in hand, tossed it to her, and started pulling her down the stairs again.

"It's not far from here, luckily. It looks like she's planning to do something to a day-care center!" Miki, who had obviously run all the way to Riko's apartment, was visibly sweating.

"How do you know what she's doing?" Riko managed, falling behind a little despite Miki literally carrying her forward as she tried to prevent too much bouncing or unwanted pantie exposure.

"She made a big deal of announcing it," Miki replied, "every news station must be showing what she's up to!" The girl produced her smartphone from her shorts pocket and handed it to Riko. It was a live broadcast from a news station's YouTube channel, where Riko could see Nagisa in the Lunar Eclipse "outfit" hovering over a group of cowering children, daycare employees standing guard around them in a tight circle.

"Well? Are you coming to save them, Hopeful Starlight? Or will you let me have my way?"

Surrounding the huddle of would-be victims were a half-dozen green piles of sludge that squirmed toward them. They...didn't look terribly threatening, with their speed and general appearance. "If you don't hurry, my slimes will trap the children inside, where they'll be stuck forever!" Lunar Eclipse threw her head in derisive laughter.

"See? It's really bad!" Miki said, eyes forward.

Riko wasn't so sure...the slimes were moving awfully slowly. It would be a long time before they actually reached the kids. Hours, even. She had a feeling that Nagisa was doing this to call her out, not for the sake of encasing children in slime prisons. What would she even gain from that?

Of course, she couldn't do *nothing* about it, but there was really no hurry—not like the kind Miki appeared to be in, anyway. She'd like to get dressed first—her white shirt was starting to become more translucent than she was comfortable with; her navel was easily visible as it stuck to her skin. She had a feeling she couldn't convince Miki, though, and the daycare center wasn't far anyway, so she did her best to keep pace with the tomboy holding her wrist.

Riko's stomach was cramping from exercising so hard without a warmup, and her unshod feet ached from pounding the hard pavement. On top of that, her hangover was killing her. She bent over and put her hands on her bare knees to support herself, breathing hard. She thought she might lose last night's dinner if she didn't catch her breath.

"Oho, you finally made it!" called Lunar Eclipse from above, looking down on the children and now Riko and Miki like so many insects. "I was wondering if you really believed in your justice, Hopeful Starlight!" She laughed her sinister laugh again, blonde hair tousled by the high wind.

"Hold...hold on..." Riko held up a hand to stop the conversation while she steadied her raspy breath. "I need a second."

"What? Was waking up so early on your day off inconvenient for you?" mocked Nagisa with a wry smile.

"Go...to hell," managed Riko.

"I guess you really were worried about these children, weren't you? So worried, that you fell right into my trap!"

Miki gasped in audible surprise. "A trap?!"

"Hang on," Riko interrupted again.

Nagisa tapped her foot impatiently against the firmament beneath her feet, arms crossed in front of her chest. "Are you caught up now, auntie? I'd like to hurry up and thrash you so I can take back what is rightfully mine."

Before Riko, who was learning just how much less physically capable was without the direct influence of the Star Wand on her physiology, could act, Nagisa snapped her gloved fingers. On cue, the slimes vaulted toward Riko, creating limbs from their

gelatinous form and ‘walking’ over to her with a single, giant step, combining into a single, massive, humanoid slime once they reached her.

The slime monster towered over Riko, who grit her teeth in anticipation as it reared back a massive, gooey fist. She took up her wand and concentrated on the star atop it, holding it before her in both hands.

“Watch out!” cried Miki, helpless to stop the strike before it connected with Riko with a sickening thud. She watched Riko get absorbed by the opaque, dark-green slime with terror in her eyes.

Nagisa laughed as the Star Wand fell to the ground. “I’ve won! That was even easier than I thought...what a pitiful display.” She floated toward the fallen star with delightful anticipation in her eyes, licking her lips.

Miki tried to get to it first, but she was too slow—Nagisa took up the wand and held it before her like a gift bequeathed to a queen by a kneeling servant.

“Finally! I’ve missed you!” She held it like Riko had, and concentrated on the tip...but nothing happened. “Is it out of power? Impossible...it’s glowing, so...”

In horror, she turned toward a sudden, thunderous squelching sound. The slime monster she’d summoned went from standing triumphantly over a defeated enemy to a pair of detached legs standing over nothing in an instant, and the resultant explosion covered everything nearby in a thin, green film. Where its torso had been, nothing remained...except Koboshi Riko, clad in the star-spangled robes of Hopeful Starlight.

“What?! Impossible!” Nagisa vainly tried to activate the Star Wand and take away Riko’s power, but it was too late—as swift as a rocket, Riko arrived in front of Nagisa’s panicking face before the latter could so even blink, never mind flee. She tried to turn and run, but Riko caught her by the wrist, looking down with a mixture of contempt and pity.

“Let me go!” Nagisa demanded, pulling futilely against Riko’s iron grip.

“That’s what you should do,” retorted Riko.

“What?”

“Why haven’t you let it go?”

“What are you talking about?! Unhand me!”

“I’m talking about all this!” Riko gestured with her free hand to the scene around them. “You’ve resorted to ambushes and surprise attacks, for what? Power? Why?”

“Shut up! I said, release me!” She tried pushing against Riko with her feet to no avail.

“How do you expect to bring hope to the world like this, Nagisa!?”

After another moment of thrashing about in vain, Nagisa stopped, blinking as if she realized something. She righted herself, and the wrist Riko held went limp.

“...it’s not fair.” she managed. “Why do you get to skirt the rules, huh?!”

Riko raised an eyebrow. “Skirt the rules?”

“You’re...a virgin? At your age? And anyway, aren’t you in your thirties? I thought—”

Before she could finish her sentence, Riko’s palm struck home, knocking her unconscious. Even without the news cameras, everyone in the area would have heard that slap.

* * *

“I lost it because I got married...I thought I was ready to lose it. I knew what would happen, but...there was an accident not long after I got back from my honeymoon. I couldn’t stop it, but I *know* I could have if I’d still had the Star Wand. When the reality of my decision hit home...it was like a shadow blotted out the hope in my heart.” Nagisa, who had yet to revert to her normal attire, tearfully recounted her motivations after she came to, hands bound by Riko’s magic. The news helicopters and cameras were still hovering nearby; she had only been unconscious for a few minutes.

Riko nodded, sympathetic. "I know what it's like to lose something like that...to be unable to do something that used to be second-nature. It was hard, right? Especially after you'd had the Wand for so long." She was squatting next to Nagisa, who on her knees in the grass.

Nagisa nodded. "I guess...I got carried away."

"Carried away!?! You could have—"

"It's alright, Miki." Riko stayed the hotheaded teen with a wave of her hand. "I know how you feel, but anger isn't going to help anyone right now. Besides, she's punishing herself more than we ever could." Miki relented, but her fists were still clenched tight.

"I just thought I might be able to redeem myself if I could save one more person. To do that, I need the wand..." She peered at the tool, clutched in Riko's hand. "Give it back!" In a last, desperate gambit she tried to shove Riko with her shoulder, but the other saw it coming and dodged effortlessly. Nagisa fell into the dirt face first, tears streaming down her cheeks.

Riko sighed, disappointed. "It's over, Nagisa. You have to let go. Your life hasn't ended; it's just getting started." She knelt down and rubbed her crying kouhai's back.

"I know, but..."

"Let it go. You can do it..." She helped Nagisa to her feet and wiped the dirt off her face before releasing the magical shackles that bound her.

"I'm..." she glanced at Miki before averting her eyes in shame. "I'm sorry."

With that, there was a brilliant flash of light, not unlike that which Riko saw when she transformed into Hopeful Starlight for the first time. After the glow settled and their vision returned to normal, they saw that Nagisa was no longer clad in the Lunar Eclipse "outfit" she'd worn just a few moments ago. In fact...

"I'm so sorry!" she dropped into a dogeza. "I promise, I didn't want to hurt anyone!"

"Um...Mochizuki-san?" Riko managed, suddenly very nervous.

“Please!” Nagisa’s eyes were clenched shut as she lowered her bow further.

“That’s...” Miki tried to blocked the cameras by holding her arms out to her sides.

“Don’t hold back! I’ve done something terrible!”

“That may be so, but you’re naked right now!” Riko exploded, louder than she meant to.

Nagisa’s eyes shot open. She looked under herself and saw that, indeed, her entire body was exposed, including the untanned bottom she was sticking into the air. She let out a girlish scream and shifting into a sitting position, easily covering her modest chest with one arm and her nether regions with the other.

“How humiliating...first I make a fool of myself in front of the entire country, and now this!”

Riko thought it best to get the naked girl away from the news cameras and, in a flash, scooped both her and Miki up to carry them off. Even with two girls in tow, she was too fast for the helicopters to track after a couple of evasive maneuvers.

They arrived at Riko’s apartment a few seconds later, Nagisa still naked as the day she was born. Riko set her down in front of her door along with Miki and ushered the two inside.

“Here,” Riko said, tossing Nagisa a towel after changing back into normal clothes. “I doubt my clothes will fit you, but you can at least cover yourself...”

“Th...thanks,” Nagisa managed, still red as a beet.

“What’s Haruki’s number? I’ll call him to pick you up.”

“What? Aren’t you going to have me arrested or something?”

“No way. I’m not finishing Takahashi’s project on my own. Besides, I think *this* is punishment enough.” She held her smartphone, tuned in to the same news broadcast as Miki’s was earlier, up to Nagisa’s face. The latter’s eyes went wide in a mixture of shock and horror as STREAKER AT A DAY CARE CENTER*PARENTS BEWARE flashed across the screen along with a crystal clear shot of the instant her clothes disappeared. Miki, who peeked at the screen over her shoulder, stifled a laugh.

“I’m finished...” Nagisa slumped onto Riko’s tatami floor. “Everyone will know that’s me.”

“Not after the tan wears off. It could be a lot worse; at least no one can see your face.” Riko shrugged before calling Haruki to let him know that Nagisa had come over to her place for something work-related and spilled coffee on her clothes, ruining them. Once the call ended, Nagisa spoke up.

“I just don’t get it...I could have hurt someone. Why aren’t you aren’t going to tell him?”

“Because,” Riko smiled, “you need him right now. I’m sure you’ll tell him some day, right?”

Nagisa stared at her reflection in the glass of water Riko had brought her. “Okay. I will.” Without realizing it, she smiled.

“It’s a promise, then.”

* * *

Haruki arrived soon after, collecting the towel-clad Nagisa and driving her back home. He happened to be the type to not watch the news, so he didn’t know about her nudism. (She ended up telling him not long after, but he just thought it was funny; Riko learned later from Nagisa, with whom she ended up becoming good friends, that he teased her about it all the time).

Riko and Miki were left alone in the apartment after that.

“Well, I guess I’d better go,” Miki said, breaking the silence that had formed while Riko tried to figure out the right way to approach the conversation she wanted to have with her.

“Wait.”

“Hm? What is it, Koboshi-san?”

“Take this.” She held the handle of the Star Wand out to Miki.

“What? Why?” She reached slowly for it, but didn’t grab it yet. “It’s yours, isn’t it?”

Riko smiled. “Right now it is. But it was supposed to be yours. After seeing everything you did today, I’m sure of it—you are far more cut out to be a hero than I am.”

“Supposed to be mine?”

Riko nodded. "I just happened to find it on the ground, but it was meant for you. Nagisa knew that, somehow, and that's why she came after you before."

"I don't know...I don't think I could do what you do."

"You can," Riko declared, smiling sadly. A part of her didn't want to let it go...but she knew if she held onto it too fiercely, she would end up another Lunar Eclipse.

Miki, with some trepidation at first, finally took a firm grip on the wand. "Okay. I accept."

A whirlwind whipped up inside the apartment as a torrent of magic flooded Miki's body. A moment later, there was a blinding flash of light; just like Riko, her clothes disappeared for a moment before the Hopeful Starlight ensemble replaced them.

Riko felt the magic leave her through her fingertips; she could actually see it flowing into Miki. She expected the mental and physical changes she'd enjoyed the last few days to leave along with it; she envisaged her daily despair over her dead-end job and lack of romantic prospects to promptly replace the optimism that had coursed through her since she found the wand.

But they didn't. Despite the absence of the Starlight within her, Riko was still Hopeful.

Epilogue

Hoshino Miki's nightly patrol as Hopeful Starlight was, as usual, uneventful. When she first learned of the existence of real ma-hou shoujo, she had a different picture in her mind than the reality—generally, her duties were mundane and rather easy to take care of. Seldom did a grand villain like Lunar Eclipse, or even a weak monster, threaten the people.

Still, she liked helping people with little things. Holding elders' arms to guide them across the street, resolving fights between children, rescuing abandoned animals, even returning lost items to the police station...all these were enough to spread a little hope in the world. That was her mission, after all, and she intended to see it through as long as she could.

Even so, tonight was *especially* quiet. "Maybe I'll pack it in early."

Just as she turned toward home, however, a rumbling in the distance reminded her to keep vigilant, even when things were easy.

"An earthquake?" she asked herself aloud as she bounded over buildings with prodigious jumps toward the source of the din. Dozens of voices cried out from that direction as the ground thrashed.

At the scene in mere seconds thanks to her great speed, Miki found more damage than the relatively mild vibrations would have suggested. There was a split in the foundation beneath a grocery store; the building itself was in two, as if a bullet train had run through its front door.

A horde of people were clustered in large groups on either end of the broken structure, away from the split, but Miki saw a single straggler near the fracture—a woman, from the looks of it, who was dangling over the edge as it sunk further.

Did she faint? What's she still doing there? Miki thought to herself, already rushing toward the fracture in the fault. As she approached, squinting to keep the billowing concrete dust out of her eyes, she realized that the woman was holding on to something, though she couldn't make out what.

"I'm coming!" she called, "hold on!"

The woman pulled as hard as she could manage, now righting herself and offering both hands to the dangling...*that's a kid!* Miki realized as her vision cleared and she saw a little boy desperately hanging onto the woman's hands.

She sprang forward, jumping like an Olympian toward the newly formed cliff in the tile floor. The woman and child strained to hold on to one another as the building continued to shift in the aftershocks, tilting downward now into the crevice below. The woman slid against the store's linoleum floor, digging the toes of her shoes as hard as she could into the slick surface to no avail... She slipped off, finally, and cried out her son Hiro's name as she fell into the pit below. Miki grabbed the woman by the ankles, barely catching her, and heaved; with a single pull the pair were out of immediate danger and back on the relative safety of the dusty floor. Miki took one of them under each of her arms and leapt back up to the parking lot, which was still stable.

The store was still full of people, so she didn't have much time. "Are you alright?"

"Thank you, Hoshino-san," said the woman. Miki's eyes went wide—getting exposed as Hopeful Starlight would disrupt her day-to-day life as Hoshino Miki dramatically. Did this person recognize her? "Or, should I say Hopeful Starlight? I wouldn't want to blow your cover," said Koboshi Riko, holding tightly onto her young son's hand. The panic left, then came relief, then nostalgia as Miki laid eyes on her old friend for the first time since she bestowed the power of the Star Wand on her.

"Thank you, lady!" said the boy with a toothy grin.

Miki wanted badly to stay and chat with her hero, but a scream from the still-crumbling store reminded her why Riko

gave her the power in the first place. So, as always in situations like this, she just nodded, smiled, and dove back into the fray.

Riko waved Miki off with a smile, and turned back to her own duties. “I guess we’ll have to get some take out for dinner. What do you think your papa would want?”

THE END

Afterword

Even though I really liked the idea for this story, I have had a hell of a time writing it. Every time I sat down I found myself going in a totally different direction, and as a result things are a bit messy here. I tried hard to clean it up and make it somewhat coherent, but only time will tell whether I have been successful in that endeavor or not.

It started out much less serious (as serious as this story could be in the first place), with Riko “enjoying” much more accidental nudity and bringing Nagisa to her senses by bonking her on the head. She also didn’t do it out of a desire to save her—she was just pissed off that her Sunday was ruined. Maybe that would be better for some, but it left a bad taste in my mouth to make a total joke out of the theme here (the tarot card The Star, which stands for hope in the face of despair). I tried to incorporate the tarot theme into Nagisa as well (acting as The Moon, which is a card that represents being consumed by fear and anxiety) as an added bonus, but I don’t know if that came through.

I also tried to make something more than “hehe, boobies” out of the ENF scenes—the idea is that the clothes Riko, Nagisa, and later Miki wear reflect their inner selves, and that Riko’s rapid-fire changes represent a subconscious uncertainty that comes to the fore later on in the story, but I think that’s a bit of a stretch to interpret as such (and I’m the author). If you find it a bit smutty or in bad taste, I don’t disagree, but I also like naked girls too much to cut it out.

There was a brief moment where Miki was romantically interested in Riko after she was saved by her, but I decided to cut that out because it never went anywhere and never could go anywhere with my planned motherhood ending for our heroine. I don’t think there are any leftover traces of that dropped plot line

in the story, but if there are, sorry it doesn't go anywhere.

Nagisa was originally not even meant to be a relevant character and just served to highlight Riko's single OL despair. I ended up deciding to make her less desperate after getting the Star Wand, so that didn't work...rather, it didn't make sense for her to still be in despair after getting the Wand, at least not in my conception of its metaphysics, so I changed that around. In the end, I think Riko saving Nagisa is what gave her the hope to continue even after she lost the magically-induced optimism (which didn't even work that well on her, given her personality throughout the story) from the wand.

In any case, I hope it was fun to read. Frustrating as it got to be at times, I enjoyed writing it.

Thank you for reading my story.

—Anon