

Kari awakened with a start, coughing her lungs out after swallowing a breath full of ashes. Her ears rang painfully. The sun was still beaming down on her, but a thin film of dust like white noise filled her vision. Half-buried under the mediocre weight of rubble, she flexed her aching muscles and pushed debris aside to free herself. As soon as she climbed to her feet, the blood drained from her head. She managed half a step before collapsing onto the fissured asphalt, cutting herself on glass that had melted and fused to the ground.

"Rocky... I need a sigil..."

Nothing but an eerie silence answered her.

The quiet was so familiar. Then it hit her a second later. Kari recalled the destruction wrought by Candy's Rain of Stars and the silence that followed.

Glancing ahead, Jade wasn't too far away. She was on her knees and one hand. With what little strength Kari had left, she crawled forward on her elbows until the body of a human man charred black beyond recognition came into view. The eyes were gone, clothes burnt away, and the limbs were missing their hands and feet.

However, the man still lived. His breath came in quick gasps, hoarse and labored.

"I knew... magical girls... couldn't be... trusted," he whispered, breathing his last and going still.

"I couldn't save them," Jade said, slamming her fist into the ground. "Couldn't save a damn person to make a difference."

"What happened?" Kari asked.

"Flare. That's what fucking happened. Never seen her use that skill before, but it took out my Castle and Gallant Knight like nothing. She just—"

A coughing fit cut short her sentence.

The ground was hot to the touch. Kari's hands came away burned and singed. Something like a heat wave hung in the air. Even though she wasn't in magical girl form anymore, most of her had come out unscathed.

Jade must have used Castle on her. No way would she have come out of a magical blast that powerful alive without it.

"What about our anthems? Sachi?" Kari pressed further, fearing the worst until a metallic crunch alerted her to a car.

Gauntlet crawled out from underneath the upturned minivan, dragging Rocky out with him.

"We're okay... Jade put a Castle over us just in time... My fur is a mess though." Rocky groaned, his previously pristine white coat was dusted a somber gray from ashes in the air and also singed at the tips.

Kari's points drained down by 100,000 as two sigils materialized in her hands. Without any strength to crush them, she smashed repeatedly into the ground until the crystals shattered. Health and magic restored to full, and the magical girl form draped over her once more, she was able to stand on her two feet.

None of them were prepared to see what had happened, but they weren't any more shocked than before. It had become a common sight for them now. Kari levitated into the air to survey the destruction. The entire compound of Camp Sendai had been annihilated. The blocks surrounding it were also leveled, like someone set off a precise bomb that didn't destroy anymore than it needed to. A clear circle was drawn around the destruction. Everything within the vicinity was demolished.

Flare really went and nuked the entire JGSDF. But why?

It didn't make sense until Kari cast her eyes beyond the threshold of the destruction. The many protestors who had come out in force to support Flare's freedom were injured. Those who could move or were conscious pulled people out of collapsed buildings, pressed down on profusely bleeding wounds, and treated burns with water. Sirens blared across the city as police and ambulance screeched into the area.

Then Kari caught the sight of the surviving crowds' stare. They were faces of shock at first, then hate. Spiteful hate.

"You did this!"

"Monster!"

What did it look like to them? Standing before a field of destruction, and the only one to have seemingly come out of it alive was Kari.

"You're wrong," Kari said, vainly trying to convince them otherwise. "Flare did this. Not me! Jade, tell them!"

Jade rose into the sky to join Kari, but her reception was just as cold and scorned.

"Magical girl of Justice my ass!"

"Fuck you, too, Jade!"

"Give us Flare back, monsters!"

They looked at her in the same hateful way for the simple reason being that she wasn't Flare. Barking and snarling, none of them cared who it was unless the hero in their eyes showed up. Yet in spite of their vitriol, Jade let none of it get to her. She was in her own world, somewhere far away.

"Flare played us both," Jade quietly said. "But we don't gotta keep dancing to her tune."

"What are you on about now?" Kari asked.

She continued, "I shouldn't have blamed you for what happened to Candy. It was Flare all along. All her scheming and hiding, watching from a penthouse safe from the incursions and monsters... That fucking bitch could have saved us, helped us, stopped all this before it started. Those people down there won't know it though. I've had my fair share of talking to knuckleheads. I'm a knucklehead myself. Even if they hate us, we don't gotta let it get to us. Candy would've wanted us to save 'em all the same."

Even though the people down there didn't deserve it, Jade unleashed a volley of javelins with Judgment. People flinched at first, until they realized she was helping. The weapons fired into collapsed buildings and pulled the buried out in seconds, pried open car doors jammed from the blast, and levitated people stuck on rooftops down to safety.

She did this all the while turning a deaf ear to the few gratitude in the sea of anger. Kari knew then, that maybe if Flare hadn't been around, Jade would have undoubtedly exemplified what it meant to be a hero.

Both of them took one last glance at Sendai from above and didn't look back.

The last and final seraph was supposed to be in Sapporo City, Hokkaido. A city that was home to at least three million and had been growing at a rapid rate thanks to tourism, job opportunities, and low cost of living. When the Apocalypse struck, it was among the places hit by an apocalyptic incursion and spawned a seraph-level monster.

However, little was known about what was going on in the city since Hurricane arrived like the storm she was.

"About Sachi," Jade began. "I'm pretty sure I saw her escape before the blast went off. Dunno what happened after that."

"Thank god." Kari sighed.

"You still worried about her even though she knifed you and pulled that shit on us?"

Kari was almost too ashamed to answer.

"Used to be a time when I just needed her to help me kill Flare. I don't know how it happened, but we kinda just clicked, and at some point I didn't want her to die on me either," she said.

"I keep trying to tell Kari it's because they're friends, but she was too dense to realize it until it was too late." Rocky pouted.

Which was why trying to tell Sachi that back in Nagoya only pissed her off more. They *were* friends, and Kari had betrayed her trust.

A frigid gale suddenly blew in, chilling them to the bones as if Hurricane was sending them a warning. Kari shielded her eyes from hail—

Hail?

"The fuck... You guys see what I'm seeing?" Jade stared ahead in awe.

How could she not? Kari was just as awestruck. From a distance, an unnatural stormcloud encompassed the entire region of Hokkaido in a raging blizzard. It was bright and sunny where they were in Aomori, still quite far from the northernmost island of Japan. The shower of rain and sleet was like a curtain over the island, obscuring everything within.

"Explains why the storm over all of Japan vanished. Hurricane pulled it back to only cover Hokkaido. You think she's already spawned a god?" Kari asked.

"Don't think we'd be talking if she did. Must've done it to keep us out. Or Flare," she said, which Kari agreed seemed to be the most likely reason.

Gauntlet and Rocky shuddered at the same time, but it wasn't the cold that caused it.

"This is really it, isn't it?" Rocky slowed to a stop, and the others turned to face him a little ways ahead. Absent was the usual bright and cheery anthem that Kari remembered from the beginning who, as of late, grew disillusioned by her brutal streak. "After losing in South Africa, I still held out hope. Maybe magical girls somewhere might be able to stop the apocalypse together. A lot of people had to die for us to get here, and I... I'm getting worried we might not be able to end it this time either."

There was a bittersweetness to his voice that Kari couldn't quite put her finger on. She flew towards her anthem and lowered a hand atop his head. The fires had made his fur coarse to the touch. Even so, she stroked between the ears, kneading her fingers into his scalp.

"Let's go, Rocky. To do what we're supposed to do and save Makina." Kari grinned, and received a smile and nod in return from her anthem.

As they approached the gust wall that surrounded Hokkaido, the gale winds grew fiercer and battered them back.

"This is definitely not a normal storm!" Kari raised the soul-weapon to shield herself from the frigid winds. The cold bit into her bones like sharp fangs sinking through the flesh.

Health: [320/320 ⇒ 315/320]

Health: [315/320 ⇒ 310/320]

They knew right away staying in one place for too long would be fatal.

"No other choice but to barrel through. Gauntlet— Grand Cavalry!" Jade shouted.

Gauntlet enlarged himself, growing in size and strength to withstand the blizzard. Kari had no other choice but to stuff her anthem into her robes and hope he didn't die by the time they got through.

With Jade guiding the way, they pressed through the storm as shards of hail pummeled and cut into them. Kari could hardly see in front of her until a golden javelin multiplied and created something like a glowing tunnel to shield them, but it didn't stop their health from ticking down.

"I think we're almost there," Jade muttered through chattering teeth.

Health: [115/320 ⇒ 110/320]

"You better be right!" Kari grabbed ahold of a healing sigil just in case.

The javelin tunnel formed from Jade's Judgment vanished. Behind them, the blizzard continued to rage on, but they had made it past the damaging barrier.

Kari cursed the need to use a health sigil. Since they were getting closer now, she empowered herself with **[Destruction Incarnate]**, and before slipping into enrage mode from the health threshold, she crushed a health and magi sigil to restore herself back to full. Going by her total number of points, there were still plenty of sigils to be purchased and used. Hopefully it would be enough.

She threw a look over to Jade, expecting her to heal up, but the other magical girl was distracted by something. When Kari followed her gaze, she went wide-eyed and shivered at dread made manifest.

It was a towering, gargantuan tree in the direction of Sapporo city, larger than anything they had laid eyes on before. What really caught their attention wasn't just the sheer immensity of the tree, but what grew out of it. Instead of branches, there were countless gnarled arms of varying sizes and number of joints, some muscular and others as skinny as twigs, which all writhed and swayed to the breeze. They all shared one thing in common— they clutched an eyeball in each hand.

"I-I don't know if we can bring something like that down," Gauntlet stammered.

"W-W-What's wrong, Gauntlet? You're normally not afraid!" Rocky tried to poke fun at his fellow anthem, unaware of how terrified he was himself.

"That's rich coming from the scaredy-hare!" the panda fired back.

They flew straight for it. The roots of the tree were so thick and far-reaching that some stretched for kilometers over the land, snaking through the earth like worms hellbent on devouring everything. Every eyeball above appeared to follow them in their approach. When

they finally got to Sapporo, another eerie silence welcomed them. No one, not even monsters were around.

Although the city was mostly unscathed, the kilometer and a half-long Odori Park and the blocks immediately around it had bursted out where the tree grew from. From down here, they had to crane their necks to look up. The tree looked like it was made of wood, but the 'branches' were clearly human-like arms.

"There, Kari! Look!" Rocky, who had his head popped out of her collar, pointed to the base of the tree several meters from the ground.

Makina.

Kari didn't waste a second. She made a beeline to Makina, who was attached to the tree, body partially embedded into the trunk. Her relief seeing that she was fine lasted momentarily. Although unconscious, Makina was breathing rapidly and twitching as if trapped in a nightmare.

"Makina! Can you hear me? Makina, wake up!" Kari cried. She dug her fingertips into the wood to try and peel her out, but they wouldn't budge. If that didn't work, then she still had **[Destruction and Ruin]**.

With a hand pressed to the back of the weapon, Kari forced the bladed edge of **[Ruin]** into the trunk. It plunged a meager inch into the tree, then a deafening groan assailed their ears

"She won't wake up."

Their gaze snapped upwards. Hurricane descended calmly from the canopy of eyes and limbs. Gone was the military uniform she wore the first time they had met. Now she was dressed in a blue and white magical girl outfit. Hers was much different than what Kari was used to seeing. The sleeveless white suit had gold trims, a skirt made of feathers and seemingly interwoven with threads of glinting ice, and a trail of frosty vapor followed wherever she moved.

Hurricane, a walking incarnation of nature.

"What did you do to her?" Kari growled.

"I didn't do anything. Makina came to fight me, lost, then the seraph pulled her in. Even I don't know what it's planning to do with her," Hurricane said.

"Wait... did you just call this thing a seraph? This *tree* was what the monster turned into?" Jade asked, hand clutching the javelin so tightly that her knuckles turned white.

"That's right." She nodded and placed a hand on the trunk. "This seraph transformed a while ago, consuming magical girls, monsters, and people alike. Soon, it will bear fruit from all the souls it has been gestating to become a vessel. Maybe it's taken a liking to Makina and wants to use her body—"

"Come Here!" Kari pulled Hurricane toward her and swung **[Ruin]** for the kill.

The blade stopped inches away from cutting Hurricane's throat, blocked by her own weapon, Mjolnir. Wielded by the Norse god of thunder, Thor, now in the hands of a magical girl, the hammer surged with the strength and lightning of storms.

Hurricane shoved **[Destruction and Ruin]** away and smashed Mjolnir into Kari's chin.

[Health: 320/320 ⇒ 290/320]

"This is for Candy— Judge, Jury, and Executioner!" Jade fired a screeching javelin at Hurricane, but that too was deflected with a simple swing of the hammer.

"Two versus one isn't very fair. How about we even it up? Sachi!" Hurricane called out.

"Sachi?" Kari gasped.

Hearing the familiar blades singing as they cut through the air, Kari turned around in time to block two flying shivs with the flat side of her weapon. The metal shivs clattered off with a spark, then vanished and returned to Sachi, who continued to fling the soul-carving weapons. Kari could do nothing but take it, because hiding behind her weapon was all that kept her safe from being sliced into.

"Sachi, what about Makina? After you bullied her to the point of tears, she still forgave you! That means nothing to you?" Kari tried reasoning with her again.

"Not until Flare is dead! You saw what happened? Even after that, she's still alive somewhere! Can *you* promise me the same thing?" Sachi tearfully asked, brandishing both daggers and showing no signs of letting up.

"No, I don't know if I can. But for what it's worth... I thought you died during the explosion, so I'm glad you're alright. I wish I could have been a better friend to you!" she exclaimed.

Sachi choked down a sharp, quivering breath, and the hail of daggers stopped.

"Calamitous Storm!" Hurricane chuckled a bolt of lightning into the swirling clouds.

Lightning crashed down all around them. Dodge as she might, her haste wasn't high enough to avoid the thunderous strikes. One caught Kari by the legs and electrocuted her, and as she stumbled, they zapped her unceasingly.

[Health: 290/320 ⇒ 243/320]

[Health: 243/320 ⇒ 196/320]

[Health: 196/320 ⇒ 149/320]

[Health: 149/320 ⇒ 102/320]

Kari seized up and fell to the ground, where Jade was also lying as a smoking mess.

As they pushed themselves up, Hurricane flew down next to them and raised the electrified Mjolnir above her head.

"Wind Tunnel!"

Impossibly powerful winds forced them back to the ground, leaving them helpless to resist. But not Kari. Thanks to **[Destruction Incarnate]**, she got to her feet with ease.

"Sachi, finish them with your shiv. Carve their souls and end it!" Hurricane ordered.

The assassin wouldn't budge.

"I... I can't... I don't want to hurt Kari or Makina anymore!" Sachi cried.

"Fine, I'll do it myself!"

Lightning struck Mjolnir, supercharging the weapon.

"Apocalypse Power-Up!" Kari pointed the soul-weapon at Hurricane as physical strength surged through her. "Stampede—"

"Frost Armor—"

The impact broke the sound barrier. Kari slammed into Hurricane, but Mjolnir blocked her blade again. This time, Hurricane couldn't withstand the hit. It sent her crashing into the tree.

"Judge, Jury, and Executioner— Judgment!" Jade launched her javelin at great speed which split into multiple projectiles in mid-flight.

The volley of steel pinned Hurricane to the tree. However, the threads of ice on her robes had formed something like a suit of armor and taken the brunt of the attack.

Kari lost her grip on **[Destruction and Ruin]** and fell to her hands and knees soon after. The shocks from Calamitous Storm's lightning strikes left her body numb.

"Kari!" Sachi raced up and knelt beside her, cheeks stained with tears. "I'm sorry! I'm so sorry..."

"You know... now that I think about it, you're a lot like Makina when you cry," Kari joked.

"Shut up." Sachi stifled a laugh and offered a weak smile.

Rocky and Iggy flew circles, chasing each other.

"You jerk, why did you and Sachi turn on us to begin with!" Rocky yelled.

"My magical girl isn't the one going around killing other magical girls!" Iggy countered more fiercely.

"Dunno what made you change your mind, but I sure as hell ain't complaining," Jade said from above, keeping her eyes on Hurricane.

Sachi pulled Kari up with an arm around her shoulders and turned to Hurricane who began laughing to herself.

"It was you, Kari... It was always you. I know Flare wanted this. She's still out there somewhere, watching all this unfold with a happy smile on her face. You... were always meant to be the wrench that she throws in my plans. Why can't you see I'm trying to save everyone?!" Hurricane cried, blood and spit flying from her mouth.

"You think killing people is saving them. You're just as bad as me," Kari taunted.

"I'm not like you..." Her eyes twitched. "You're the one that's as bad as Flare— Discharge, all magic!"

A tingle of electricity skittered across Kari's skin and made her hair stand.

"Shit— Castle!" Jade conjured a fortification, but it was shattered as soon as it went up.

All of them saw white.

[Health: 102/320 ⇒ 0/320]

Lying on her back against the side of a building and newspaper stand, Kari gasped for air as her lungs fought against the paralysis of the electrical discharge that nearly killed her. Sachi was lying unconscious by her side.

The only one left standing was Hurricane. Shards of ice that once protected her cracked and chipped off her robes.

"Fine. It doesn't matter— I was always willing to be the one to do it... to shoulder everything. Because if you stop me now, all those lives I've taken, all the friends I've sacrificed... I can't let it be for nothing."

Screaming from her very core, Hurricane smashed Mjolnir into the side of the tree. It creaked and groaned in pain. She clutched her weapon with two hands and struck the tree again, and again, and again, each strike emitting a ripple of magical energy visible to the naked eye. The final smash was strong enough to split the trunk from the base all the way to the top, and even the wood around Makina began to splinter.

Ghostly tendrils spilled out of the crack and, like snapping whips, they latched violently onto Hurricane. She erupted with an ear-splitting shriek as they made purchase on her chest, then out the back like it was spears that plunged through her. The cries of pain were unceasing, and there almost appeared to be a look of regret from her wide, bloodshot eyes.

"Kari! Whatever the hell she's doing, we ain't letting it happen! Come on!" Tsubasa crushed a sigil and returned to magical girl form.

"Here... take... your sigils..." Rocky muttered from underneath a toppled tree.

Desperate to protect Makina, Kari put her all into crushing two sigils and together with Jade, they flew towards Hurricane with weapons drawn. Volleys of golden javelins soared ahead, but a gust of wind scattered them away. Jade thrust her soul-weapon Justice into Hurricane's chest from the front, and Kari swung **[Ruin]** for a decapitation from behind. Both their weapons came to an abrupt stop.

Hurricane had grabbed each of the weapons by the shaft, just a hair's breadth from carving into her flesh. She spun in place, flinging Kari and Jade to the ground again.

"How is she still so strong?" Kari asked, prying herself from the earth.

"We're too late..." Jade growled.

Hurricane hunched over as two ivory protrusions sprouted out the sides of her head, then straight up like right-angle horns. The magical girl outfit bleached entirely white and extended into long, flowing robes reminiscent of a wedding dress. She began to claw at her own blonde locks as they wrapped around her face, then fused and thickened into a porcelain masked helmet with slits that opened where the eyes should be.

When they didn't think it could get any worse, Hurricane let loose a howl that shook the fabric of reality and distorted their vision. Her back blossomed with feathered wings painted red with blood, and hundreds of eyes snapped open between each plume.

Flying above them, with the tree of limbs and eyeballs behind her, was a monster in the shape of an angel. Hurricane was no longer the incarnation of storms. Nothing about her previous form remained except Mjolnir in her right hand.

The monster pointed her soul-weapon at them and spoke in Hurricane's calm voice, but with an otherworldly undertone of cacophonous ambience that sounded like a mad and deranged beast.

"When this world is born anew, you and the likes of Flare will have no place in it. I will tear apart what's left of your souls and cast it into the abyss where it belongs! Like the monster you are, Kari!"