

Though they were only half the size of the original Bhairava, fighting one had been hard enough. Now there were eight, each with four arms. Maybe this was a blessing in disguise. **[Collateral]** should take care of them all at once so long as Kari could kill at least one or two.

On the other hand, this thing was a lot beefier than the last one.

"Bring it on!" Kari growled.

Three met her head on, each wielding different weapons that were brutal in appearance. A flanged mace came down hard on Kari's head, an axe struck the side of her abdomen, and a sword sliced her back.

None of which did any damage nor hurt.

"Hoh. What fortitude!" they said together.

Kari swung a full circle, slashing their chests and carved writhing souls out from each. None of them went down, but they retreated to avoid getting hit a second time. The heart sigil on **[Destruction and Ruin]** began to glow.

"I see." Another nodded to himself. "You are unaffected by my physical armaments. In that case..."

A light blue-skinned one flung lava from the bowl in his hand, and a second holding a rosary emitted a pulse that distorted the space in front of them.

Kari barely dodged the attacks. The lava melted the ground and a nearby donation box, and the pulse demolished everything in its path into sand. At only around half health left, she was beginning to doubt whether or not she could take this thing.

Suddenly, deafening blasts from Sniper's rifle went off repeatedly, putting Sachi on the retreat.

Although Bhairava refused to let their battle be interrupted, that didn't mean Sniper and Sister Claire were going to leave Sachi alone.

"Sachi, get out of here! They won't attack me as long as I'm fighting this monster!" Kari shouted.

"But—"

Everything came to standstill when the sound of tanks and stomping boots alerted them to the front gate. To Kari's surprise, though reduced to only a third of their original numbers, was the JSDF unit. However, they weren't here to back them up.

Major-General Sugai emerged from a tank's hatch, struggling as he raised the radio to his mouth and said with a voice full of resentment, "Monsters and magical girls alike. Open fire on all targets!"

The entire courtyard became a warzone. Tank shells pulverized the castle and leveled trees. Anything left standing was riddled with bullets. For Kari, most of them were pebbles bouncing off her empowered form.

To the infuriated Bhairava, they were a nuisance. Two of the Hindu diety's manifestations went to deal with the JSDF, whose assault Kari was only just now realizing had temporarily put a stop to the Messiah magical girls' attacks.

"Sachi, with me!" Kari dashed into the middle of the remaining pack of six manifestations. "Apocalypse Power-Up!"

**Base Physical Strength: [40 ⇒ 120]**

**Physical Resilience: [35 ⇒ 0]**

**Magical Resilience: [35 ⇒ 0]**

A Shrouded Sachi landed next to her.

"Fan of Knives—"

"Wanton Smash—"

Their combined damage annihilated five of the six Bhairavas. Only the one with the shield was left alive, and the two who were cutting up the remnants of the JSDF unit let loose an enraged roar.

Above, Sniper clicked her tongue.

"The seraph wasn't strong enough. Killshot: Spray and Pray!"

At the corner of Kari's peripheral, she saw the barrel of Sniper's rifle poke through the palace's broken rooftop. Along with the stray bullets from the JSDF's panicked firing as they were being slaughtered, the sky also started raining gunfire.

Fed up with being shot at since the apocalypse started, Kari left Sachi behind with the Bhairava manifestation to deal with the Messiah.

"Stampede!" She launched herself in the direction of Sniper.

Sister Claire's voice echoed loudly at the same time. "Crucifixion!"

Blinding crosses took form in a hopeless attempt to impede Kari, but the skill shattered each one until she saw the whites of Sniper's eye and once again stared down the barrel of her rifle. The other magical girl faced Kari with unshaken resolve.

Faster than it should have been possible, before Stampede even struck first, Sniper cleared the chamber and replaced it with a special bullet.

"Total Annihilation: The Big Shot."

The barrel combusted and everything went white.

Kari had crashed to the ground, ears ringing and vision blinded as though she had been staring into the sun. Rocky was jumping on her chest. He was relieved to see her awake, as was she.

"What... happened?" Kari coughed as her lungs filled with smoke.

"Maybe you should look behind you," Rocky suggested.

A deep trench that wasn't there before had formed as far as the eye could see. It was as though a gargantuan worm tunneled through Kyoto and consumed everything in a straight line. Half of Nijo was gone. The JSDF were wiped out.

Sniper's last ditch effort to defeat Kari only took her out of form. She crushed two sigils Rocky put in her hands to restore her health and magic capacity, rendering that effort pointless.

Transforming and flying out of the trench, Kari came upon Sniper, who was knocked out and no longer in her magical girl form. Across the way, Sister Claire was crawling out of the palace rubble.

*Finally.*

"Come Here!" Kari wrenched the nun out of the rubble and into her grasp.

"Cage— ack!"

Without letting Sister Claire utter another word, Kari slammed her into the ground and started wailing into her until she, too, lost magical girl form. The bloodied woman gasped for air and was barely conscious.

"Where's your god now?" Kari sneered, then slugged the nun back into the debris she was crawling out from.

"Now that the distractions are out of the way, maybe we can finally finish our bout?"

Kari spun around to see Bhairava still alive, body on the verge of falling apart and walking with a limp. He was back to his original, singular humanoid form.

"He also took Sniper's big attack earlier. There shouldn't be much left in him," Rocky whispered.

"Good, I'll finish him." Sachi staggered forward, having also survived the blast.

"You're in no condition." Kari used **[Destruction and Ruin]** to block her from going any further. "Stay back, and I'll—"

"Shroud!" Sachi went invisible and flung her soul-weapon. "Assassin's Shiv!"

The invisible dagger whistled through the air. Bhairava attempted to deflect it, but the projectile proved too fast and plunged into his chest, where Sachi proceeded to slice upwards. The seraph stumbled back, then collapsed with a loud crash and moved no more.

"It's... It's actually dead!" Rocky exclaimed joyfully. "Sachi killed it!"

The millions of points that a seraph had to offer was gone in an instant.

Kari raced up to Sachi and grabbed her by the arm.

"What the hell's gotten into you?"

In the first ever show of hostility and defiance, Sachi wrenched away.

"If it hadn't occurred to you, I also need to get stronger if I want to be able to fight toe to toe with these things. Or what? You're going to take every point for yourself? Look, I can even fly now." Sachi levitated unsteadily into the air, but didn't go any further than a foot off the ground.

Those points could have easily helped Kari reach the next level, bringing her one step closer to unlocking the final **[Siegemaster]** subclass skill. She dragged Sachi down, fury showing in her eyes.

"If I tell you don't next time, then don't. That clear?" Kari asked.

"Yeah... crystal." Sachi glanced away before answering.

"Stay out here and keep an eye on the gun chick. I'm going to deal with the nun," she said on her way into the ruined castle.

Sister Claire was no longer in her magical girl form and lying in the wreckage of the palace. Broken pieces of wood had punctured her arms, thighs, and abdomen. She tried to pull one out, only for the pain to bring her to tears. The once pristine habit was mostly in tatters.

When Kari approached the nun, her foot kicked a gun. The same gun that killed Minato.

"We've been... fighting a war against our own souls," Claire said, breathing through her teeth and toughing out the pain in order to speak. "There is only one evil, and you have seen it. You allow it to fester and cloud your judgement."

Voices not of Kari's own began to echo within her mind.

*Yes. Kill her. Deliver her to oblivion where nothing awaits.*

Kari picked up the gun.

"If you have any last words to say to your god, now's the time—"

"Why can't you see that we're trying to save people?" Claire shrieked.

The enraged outburst startled Kari.

"I've seen first hand how a disease can ravage a nation because of a handful of naysayers. Morgues filled to the brim, freezer trucks parked at every corner of the block, and churches packed with unanswered prayers... Wildfires and tornadoes can tear through cities, but god forbid if we try to solve the issue at their core, everyone reaches for their pearls. Like a good girl, I prayed for guidance. But unlike the masses, I received an answer from God— He said *we are the disease*. Hurricane showed us that only we can treat the sickness."

"By killing everyone?" Kari asked.

"Find an infected flower, the whole field must be plucked clean, root and stem. Some— like you— cling tightly to the dirt, and so the Messiah has to be the hand that rips them from the soil. I'd do it a million times over if I had to," she said.

*Do not listen to prattle. Kill her. Obey. Kill her, then kill the rest. What are you waiting for? Take your revenge.*

An intense pain traveled up Kari's spine and head. She endured it all. Everytime whatever the entity was out there inflicting torment on her, it seemed to lessen each time. Like the hold it had on her was slipping.

That didn't stop her from hurting. It took every ounce of willpower not to let it show.

"I want to know what you mean by a 'war against our own souls'. What is that supposed to mean?" Kari asked, fighting back the agony that was like hot spikes drilling into her body.

Claire steadied her breath. "A holy war is being waged for our souls. I'm sure you know how fragile yet malleable souls can be. They make for unfathomably powerful weapons. Look at what ours turned into. We're living weapons. Those things you call monsters... they are the Lord's holy soldiers."

Kari knew alright. How each monster had souls that could be carved. How Principal Nishida was turned into something other than human.

*All the same, but molded in different shapes.*

This wouldn't be the first time the mention of 'war' came up.

"And? Who's the other side that's got their foot in the war?" Kari pressed further.

"Why are you asking me? You're on their side, Kari. The weapon in your hand... it was never meant to hurt monsters. Isn't it obvious what you're really using it for? History... won't remember you as a hero." A break in the swirling maelstrom above shined a light upon Claire, and her lips twitched into a relieved smile despite her grievous wounds. "But for me, for the rest of Messiah, we'll be rewarded for our service. So go ahead. Deliver me to our maker!"

*Kill her. Show her there is nothing on the other side. Send her to oblivion.*

"A little voice in my head tells me there's no saving our souls. I saw what it was like to die, and there's no coming back where we're going," Kari said, then fired one shot into Sister Claire's head the moment her demeanor twisted into despair.

**[+1,500,000 Apocalypse Points.]**

As blood poured from the hole in Claire's head, Kari felt no joy. Shot after shot, she pulled the trigger until the smoking gun had nothing left to fire.

"Is this what you wanted?" Kari quietly asked as the column light slowly faded. "For me to fight your war for you? Now I get what you meant back then. That ancient war, or whatever you called it, you need us magical girls to fight it."

It had nothing to say now. It didn't need to anyway. The silence was enough of an answer.

Kari exited the palace to find Sniper conscious.

"Did you make her suffer?" Sniper asked.

"Less than she deserved," Kari said. "Answer my questions, and I'll make it quick for you, too. I want to know where Candy and Hurricane are."

"My name is Julia Bernard-Tennison. I live in Westbrook city, Maine. Finest damn lobsters I've ever had," she remarked nostalgically.

All this time Sniper only shouted her skill names and spoke in short sentences. Now she had more to say?

"If I have to ask again, I'm knocking all your teeth out first." Kari grabbed her by the collar of her uniform.

"Don't mind me. Just reminiscing before I leave. Damn shame though. Five years ago, the States curbed fishing in the North Atlantic. Well... See you, Kari Tachibana." Julia cracked and gulped something down, then began choking within seconds.

"Hey!" Kari was about to punch a hole through Sniper's stomach to get her points, but the American magical girl was already dead, face purple and foaming at the mouth.

*See you?*

Someone started applauding from above. They gazed up to find Flare clapping enthusiastically.

"Nice job! Well done! Very good! Come on, Blaze. You have to clap for them, too!" Flare's patronizing laughter was joined by her anthem's half-hearted applause.

"I could do without seeing your face. Guess it's too optimistic to think you're here to help?" Kari clenched her jaw.

With a wave of a hand, Flare sent a blanket of dancing flames across Nijo that incinerated every dead thing, leaving Kari, Sachi, and their anthems unharmed. Sniper— Julia and Sister Claire's body also remained. Now that the ground was clean, the celebrity magical girl finally landed at a distance away from them.

"Do I need a reason to drop in and see my junior magical girls?" Flare asked. "Hey, Sachi~ Haven't seen you in a hot second. It's too bad you weren't with your parents when they died. What kind of daughter lets her parents die without seeing them one last time?"

"Fuck you, bitch! You took everything from me— Assassin's Shiv!" Enraged, Sachi flung her dagger at Flare.

"Sachi, no!" Kari dove in front of Flare and took the shiv to her chest instead.

No longer in the empowered form of Destruction Incarnate, Kari recoiled from the massive blow.

**[Health: 200/200 ⇒ 107/200]**

As soon as Sachi appeared at the handle, her expression was filled with shock.

"Kari? What are you—"

Kari drove a fist into Sachi's gut, shoved her to the ground, and ripped the dagger away.

"Looks like I came at a bad time," Flare began, massaging Kari's shoulders and lowering her voice to a whisper. "Oh, what a sweet little soldier you are. Haven't told Sachi about our deal? Why not?"

"Get out of here before I lose my shit. If I end up forcing you to kill me, you won't have anyone to do your dirty work for you," Kari snarled.

Flare let go and took a step back.

"Feisty! I bet Makina loves that kind of lovin' you give her. The only reason I'm having you kill Chu Hua and Hurricane is because those two are the only ones who can kill me. *Only ones*. It also helps that I don't have to be known as the magical girl who killed other magical girls when this is over. A whole lot of their blood is already on your hands, right? What's a few more?"

When Kari turned around to face Flare, she winced at the sight of the fiery magical girl's distorted face. No, not quite distorted. Almost like there was smoke billowing from her head. The image of Jaws flashed through Kari's mind and the voices returned.

*Kill her, too. She is no ally. Not to anyone. A free agent of chaos. A threat to **everyone**.*

"If anything happens to Makina, this deal is off," Kari said, staying her hand.

"Don't worry about Makina. I left insurance back in Okinawa. You just focus on what I want you to do, and we all get out of this alive. Well... *some* of us will get out alive. Ciao for now~"

Insurance?

Once Flare had gone, Kari collapsed to her knees. The attack from Sachi just now took a lot more out of her than expected. Assassin's Shiv. A skill that dealt 500% of her physical damage. What kind of insane attack was that? It would have dealt even more if she had been shrouded.

"Why did you stop me? I could have killed her— we could have killed her!" Sachi cried from the ground, voice trembling.

"You think Flare is the forgiving type? Do you have any idea how lucky I am to survive pissing her off twice? Think, Sachi! We're in the middle of the fucking apocalypse, and you're trying to pick a fight with *her*?" Kari yelled now that they were alone.

"You're lucky. You still have someone, but I... I don't have anyone left. I'm sorry— Shroud!" She went invisible with Iggy and flew off in a hurry.

"Sachi, wait!" Kari reached out to try to grab her, but clutched empty space instead. "You still have..."

It was no use. Sachi was too fast. She was already gone.