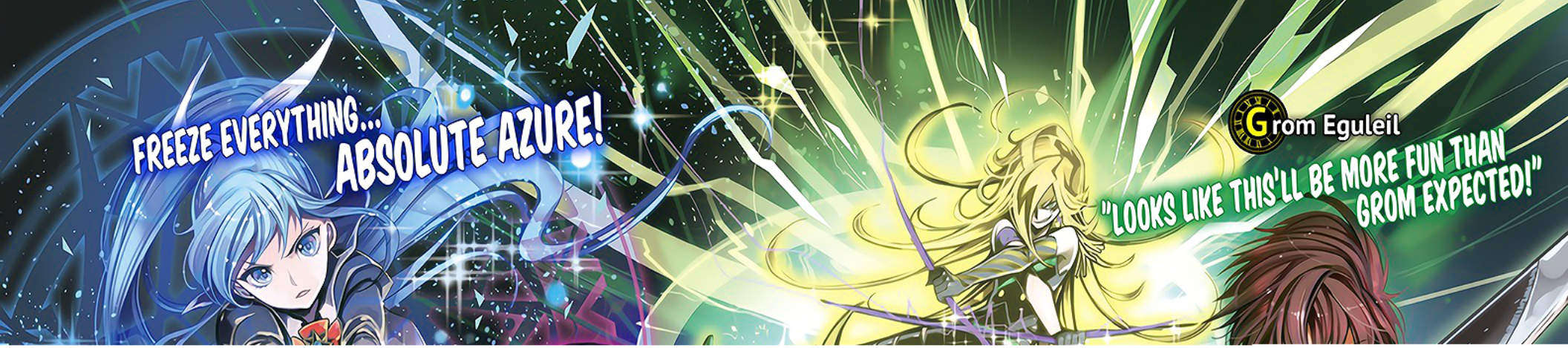

Author:
KENYA ATSUI
Illustrator:
SAORI TOYOTA
Brave Chronicle
THE RUINMAKER


Yukihime Yukigane
"K-KOKUYAAA! LOOK AWAAAY... STOP STARING AT ME! GET OUUUUT!"
"TOWA WANTS A CARNIVORE LIKE YOU TO EAT HER, BIG BROTHER-PYON!"
Towa Kurono


FREEZE EVERYTHING...
ABSOLUTE AZURE!
Grom Eguleil
"LOOKS LIKE THIS'LL BE MORE FUN THAN GROM EXPECTED!"

Contents

Prologue

Still a Reluctant Promise

Chapter One

Yukihime Yukigane: The Strongest Girl in the World

Chapter Two

And the Winner is...

Interlude

On the Night when Destinies Clashed

Chapter Three

The End Draws Near

Interlude

Beyond the Massacres

Chapter Four

All-Out War

Interlude

A Mangled Trail

Chapter Five

The Final Battle, Powered by Memories

Epilogue

From Now On, Forever



Brave Chronicle
The Ruinmaker



汚い海賊

PROLOGUE

Still a Reluctant Promise

“If I win, you have to help me protect our world.”

As she spoke, she stared at me with eyes as blue as sapphires.

Her skin was as white and pure as virgin snow. Long hair just as blue as her eyes slid all the way past her hips to her thighs. Held together with a white ribbon, it fluttered in the wind.

Her name was Yukihime Yukigane.

“Sure. *If* you win.”

“You think you can beat the strongest person in the world?” she asked.

“I don’t care who you are. I have to win this.”

“Does protecting people really sound that bad to you?”

“Yeah, it does. It’s just not for me.”

“...Come on, there’s more to it than that, isn’t there?” Her voice had a twinge of sadness. She must have realized my true feelings about this.

“You already know how I feel, yet you still want me to do as you say. That’s why we’re fighting, right?”

“...Yes, that’s right. I know that you have your own duties, just like how mine is to protect...” Yukihime trailed off. “But I still want you to fight alongside me.”

My duties – Kokuya Kurono's duties – were to take care of the only family member I had left, my little sister... and to avenge my dead parents.

In order to do this, I needed strength. I needed to become stronger than anyone else. I needed to defeat Yukihime and become the world's strongest star sorcerer. I had no interest in protecting people, and an avenger like me had no right to take on such a job anyway.

But she wasn't going to back down just because I said no, which meant I had to fight. And so, I fought...

...and lost.

"Now, fulfill your promise, and help me protect our world."

"Okay, okay... If you insist."

As I spoke, I could see Yukihime smiling contentedly, and it made my heart ache a little. If I hadn't been carrying this burden... would I have been able to walk boldly alongside her, without all this pain? Would I have been able to fight for justice and strive to whole-heatedly fulfill my duty, like Yukihime did?

For some reason, I found myself pondering a meaningless 'what-if.'



CHAPTER ONE

Yukihime Yukigane: The Strongest Girl in the World

“Always be aware of your identity as a guardian of the world, and never refrain from self-improvement.”

Atop the stage, a girl spoke in a dignified voice. She was the headmistress of our academy.

At Star Gate Academy, the definition of a ‘headmistress’ was a bit different. After all, this school also served as a defense academy that trained students to become star sorcerers. Therefore, while the headmistress assisted in managing the academy, her main job was to act as the representative of Star Gate Academy, the organization that preserved world safety.

Long story short, she was really powerful and important.

“Now, I hope you all enjoy your winter break,” Yukihime said, concluding her speech.

A round of applause swept over the gymnasium. I halfheartedly joined in, despite thinking ‘Your Identity as a Guardian of the World’ was an over-the-top subject for the final assembly before winter break.



With the assembly finished, students began to pour out of the gym.

“Headmistress Yukihime always looks so adorable.”

“She isn’t just adorable, she’s beautiful!”

As I joined them, I could hear all the other students singing Yukihime’s praise. She wasn’t just the headmistress, she was the idol of the academy. She was the strongest, got the best grades, and had flawless looks to boot. It was no wonder people worshiped her.

“Ooh, I wish she’d walk all over me!”

“I wish she’d glare at me with those blue eyes and tell me I’m a bad little piggy!”

Nodding to myself, I listened to the voices around me. I could sort of understand how they felt. I didn’t worship her myself, though. After all, we had known each other since we were little kids, and after a certain incident, we’d started living together.

I was privy to this perfect girl’s imperfections. For example, one time when I was going to take a bath...

I opened the bathroom door, only to find Yukihime standing there in her underwear. Instantaneously, our gazes met, and we both froze up for a moment.

So what did Yukihime do next? Instead of screaming, covering herself up, or taking a swing at me... she hid something that she was holding.

“...Did you see that?”

“...Yes.”

Despite her swift actions, it hadn’t escaped my eyes: a pink bra with ridiculously huge cups.

You see, Yukihime was so flat that if I ever found myself in a life or

death situation where I needed to balance a chopping board on a girl's chest, she would be my savior – which meant there was no way that bra belonged to her.

That was my little sister's. She had ridiculously huge boobs. And come on, what good older brother would ever mistake his little sister's bra? It was hers, definitely… So then what was Yukihime doing with it?

"…Are you jealous of her?"

"Don't you ever tell Towa about this…"

The way she glared at me with beet red embarrassment all over her face made me realize this was a death threat. Towa was my little sister's name, by the way.

"Okay, I won't. I'll take it to my grave. But just so you know… Wearing Towa's bra isn't going to make your boobs any bigger, you know?"

"I know that! Now get out of here! And drop dead while you're at it!"

Realizing speed was essential to my survival, I retreated at once.

…So there you have it. Just one of the weaknesses of the girl that everyone considered perfect.

I think small boobs are cute in their own way, but her reactions are so funny that I can't resist teasing her about it. She should have more self-confidence and forget about competing with others… I silently nodded to myself, content with my own conclusion.

"What are you doing?"

Suddenly, Yukihime was standing right next to me.

"…Hang in there." I placed my hand on her shoulder encouragingly.

"...Huh? What's this all of a sudden?"

"Oh, never mind."

"...Hmm? Oh yeah, I think it's your turn to answer the teacher next class."

"Really?"

"I never saw you studying... Are you ready for this?"

"No... Show me yours."

"Ask me like you really mean it, and I'll consider it."

"Please teach me how it's done, Headmistress Yukihime."

I bowed down to a 90 degree angle with every ounce of my strength.

"...Fine, if you insist. But you'd better be ready next time. Otherwise, you'll never make any progress." Yukihime shrugged in exasperation.

Homeroom began when we arrived at the classroom, followed by our first class. It wasn't long before Yukihime, who sat next to me, stood up to answer the teacher's question.

"In the year 2000, construction began on the seastead city that would later become Otherworld City. Four years later, the First Otherworld War began, which threw our world into a crisis. After the war, the star sorcerers revealed themselves to the world, and Otherworld City became the defense citadel it exists as now."

2000 – *Construction begins on Floating City*
2004 – *First Otherworld War. Floating City renamed Otherworld City*
2011 – *Second Otherworld War*

Our teacher began writing the events Yukihime spoke of on the blackboard.

Star sorcerers: Those who possess star power, which allows them to use star sorcery.

They used to be known as sorcerers. While concealing themselves from the world, they used their hidden powers to defeat monsters that invaded from one of the other worlds. But after the large battle that came to be known as the First Otherworld War, the entire world found out about the other world and the massive horde of monsters that had appeared. The sorcerers were the ones who defeated them and won the war.

Afterwards, the sorcerers changed their title to star sorcerers and revealed themselves to the world. They also began recruiting new star sorcerers in order to prepare for the inevitable second war.

We lived in Otherworld City, a man-made island that floated off the coast of Yokohama City. The area had become a battlefield when otherworld gates opened up nearby. When star sorcerers moved to the city in order to gain control over these gates, Otherworld City was born. In order to become a star sorcerer, one needs to begin training at a very young age. Therefore, most of the inhabitants of Otherworld City were students.

...So yeah, Yukihime stood there parroting all that off. Then, with a cool look (it's her way of being like 'nailed it') she sat down again.

It was a simple request from the teacher in order to get class started: 'Tell me something you know about the Otherworld War.' Yet Yukihime had gotten totally carried away and listed off everything that the teacher was about to explain.

Everyone started to applaud, and the teacher showered her with praise. "I should have known not to call on you!"

I also clapped, just because. Clappity clap. Whatever.

"Do I detect some sarcasm in your clapping?"

"Oh, no. Just admiring your skills, what else?"

"Well, I am a step above all the normal people."

“Yeah… Normal definitely isn’t how I’d describe you.”

“…What are you staring at?”

Silently, I averted my gaze.

“Kokuya, you didn’t forget about lunch today, did you?”

“You think I’d ever forget about my own little sister?”

That day, at lunch, Yukihime and I were supposed to hold a special class to help teach elementary and middle school students how to fight using star sorcery. My little sister, a middle school student, said she’d join us, so I was way more pumped up than usual.

“I guess not… But remember, this class isn’t just about her, okay?”

“I know, I know.”

As lunchtime approached, Yukihime and I headed to school arena, where 30 elementary and middle school students awaited us. Perhaps because it was just before winter break, the turnout was a little less than what we had expected.

My little sister, Towa, was also there. When our gazes met, a tender smile rose up onto her face, and she ran toward me.

So cute…

“Big brother! I’ve been so excited for today’s class. Oh, and thank you so much for taking the time to teach us, Yukihime!” Her bright, blonde pigtails bounced as she spoke.

She was the complete opposite of a certain arrogant, cold-blooded, flat-chested girl I knew… Filled with mercy and compassion, Towa’s voluptuous breasts could give any angel a run for her money. And despite how developed her chest was, she was actually a bit short for her age. She always looked so adorable whenever she’d chase after me.

In other words, she was a loli with huge boobs – the best kind of loli there is.

First, let's talk about the loli part. Lolis are the best, of course. Innocence and purity. Constant whispers of true, blind love for her brother, without even a bit of distrust. Her love for me was the only pure thing I'd ever found in this world of lies, and I knew that I needed to be strong for her.

Next, her huge boobs. It should go without saying by now that huge boobs are *also* the best. Any man would agree with that. They're a symbol of motherly love – a symbol of femininity itself! Their size is proportionate to the size of their owner's love, and their tenderness to the tenderness of their bearer's heart. They accept, embrace, and love all they touch. This is what boobs do.

Combine a loli with huge boobs, and what do you get? Omnipotence. Nothing can beat that. It's a simple fact.

Therefore, my little sister was undeniably the cutest thing in the world.

"Yes, I hope this class goes well, too… Kokuya, what's with that stupid expression on your face?" Yukihime's words rang out cold and harsh. But with Towa in front of me, I was impervious to her barbs.

"Well, I don't want to get in the way, so I'll go back to the others, okay?" Towa said, then went back to her spot. Not only was she cute, she was also considerate.

"Awww, Towa's gone…"

"Yes, yes… Cool it with the sister complex stuff already. We're about to begin."

Once I nodded, Yukihime instantly switched her cold glare into a smile. Usually, her furrowed brow and angry countenance was all I ever saw, but she was surprisingly nice to children.



“Hello everyone.”

The students enthusiastically returned her greeting, with Towa sounding just as excited as the elementary kids. It melted my heart.

After a light introduction, Yukihime started to explain about star sorcery, which was the focus of this particular class.

“You all know that star sorcery is powered by star power, correct? Okay, so today, let’s try to learn a bit more about star power itself.”

Yukihime turned her right palm upwards and raised it. A blue light began to emanate – then, a beautiful ice flower bloomed.

“Wooow!” “Cool!” “That’s so pretty!” The students exclaimed in admiration.

“Each person’s star power has its own elemental affinity. As you can see, mine is ice. Ice is a basic element, so many people share this element. I bet some of you are ice elementals too, aren’t you?”

Several of the students raised their hands.

“What element is that guy?”

“His is a bit unusual. He’s a time elemental: a special affinity known as an abstract element that isn’t included in the basic elements.”

The basic elements are fire, water, wind, earth, ice, wood, and lightning. Anything else is categorized as abstract, such as my time element.

“Time? You mean you can affect time? Cool!”

“Stop time for us!”

“…Sorry, I can’t do that. I’m just a G Rank.”

“G?! Lame!” “Even I’m a D already!”

All star sorcerers were ranked from G to A. The G Rank was the lowest, and got assigned to star sorcerers who had star power, but couldn't use it well, if at all. They weren't that different from normal people.

Next came F Rankers: people who could do basic things, such as a fire elemental who could light a match. E Rankers could create as much heat as a lighter, but weren't that different from F Rankers. D Rankers could create fireballs in their palms, while C Rankers were basically human flamethrowers. They were about as powerful as an armed civilian. B Rankers could control fire on an even larger scale than C, and a single one had the potential to do even more damage than a tank. Finally, there were A Rankers. There were only ten of them in the city, and each possessed top class power.

Most high school first years were usually D or E Rankers. Rank was determined by overall star power, activation speed, and range. Not only did I possess a low amount of star power, I also had one other critical flaw: my star power range. I couldn't use my ability to affect anything other than myself, meaning I couldn't even stop time.

"It's true that he's a G Rank... But rank isn't everything when it comes to being a star sorcerer."

"...Hey, Yukihime!"

She was being unusually nice...

"Of course, let's not forget that I'm an S Rank... The only person in the world who's been able to surpass A Rank."

"Whoaaaa!" "You really are amazing, Headmistress!"

...So much for that.

She was right, though. Even though ranks only ranged from G to A, Yukihime was a special exception. She was an S Rank, a class above the rest. She'd even surpassed the ten A Rankers who lived in the city.

And yet I, the lowest of the low, was trying to beat her.

Ever since I decided to surpass her, I kept challenging her and losing. But no matter how many times I lost, I never felt like giving up.

"Well then, shall we begin?"

With the preliminary explanation finished, it was now time for us to continue class by actually fighting. Yukihime and I stood about 15 meters apart on a 30 square meter stage. This star sorcery-enhanced space prevented us from being wounded, but attacks still hurt. A particularly powerful attack could even knock someone out.

"The most important things to a star sorcerer are elements, and…" Yukihime began her final bit of explanation.

"Liberation – Snowbloom."

As Yukihime whispered those words, a blue light burst out from the palm of her hand, revealing a sheathed blade.

"Liberated star armaments like these can be pulled out at will," Yukihime explained, as she hung the sheath on her belt.

I outstretched my right hand and took a deep breath.

"Liberation – Chronoslayer."

A silver light burst out and materialized into a silver twinblade: an unusual sword with two blades extending from opposite sides of the hilt. The side that pointed upwards when I held it was a bit longer – the length of a longsword, while the bottom blade was more like a dagger. The moment I gripped my star armament, my liberated star power caused clock dial patterns to glow in my red eyes.

I brandished my twinblade. Yukihime ordered the students to step back, then returned her gaze to me.

"998. Do you know what that number represents?"

"I dunno. The number of times you wished you had bigger…?"

A huge icicle burst up right next to me. Chills ran down my spine, both physically and mentally. Maybe it was time to stop playing around with Yukihime.

My attempts to insult her were pointless. I'd only be able to salvage my own pride with my blade.

"Alright, let's do this. Battle number 999."

"...Oh, so you do know."

998. Yukihime had asked me what that number represented, and the answer was simple. There's no way I'd ever forget.

It was the number of times I had lost to her. Yet I still hadn't given up.

"You know, I think it's about time I won one of these."

"I hope you haven't forgotten about our little agreement, because you're about to hit 4 digits."

"Oh, you mean the one where you become my slave?"

"Why would I ever become your slave?! You promised to become my slave if I beat you a thousand times!"

"But if I can beat you even once before I hit a thousand, you'll become my sex slave, right?"

"Sure. It'll never happen."

"Alright, if you say so. I'm gonna make you do some crazy stuff, just you wait."

"...What? W-Wait, hold on a second... What did you just say? S... Sex slave?" Yukihime went from white as a sheet to bright red.

"I'm gonna do stuff that's even freakier than what's in those dirty books you read." I lowered my voice so that only she could hear me.

“What could be freakier than those?! …Wait, no! I don’t read stuff like that! I have no idea what you’re talking about!” Yukihime’s face got even redder. She was a pro at digging her own grave.

“I bet you’re real curious about the details. Ready to finish this?”

“I’m gonna shut that big mouth of yours once and for all! En garde!”

That last line sounded like something an evil henchman would say right before they eat the dirt. It was hard to imagine just how strong she was based on how cheesy her lines always were.

“Okay… Here I come!”

I took the initiative, launching myself off the bare concrete and speeding toward her. Since I had no long range attacks, I had no choice but to get up in her face. The same wasn’t true for her, so projectiles came flying at me.

Yukihime opened her hand and created a blue star circle, a geometric configuration used when casting star sorcery. It wasn’t necessary to create one during activation, but they have the power to enhance star sorcery abilities.

A swarm of icicles shot out from the blue star circle, all aimed toward me. Each one was 20 cm long and thick as a thumb.

The barrage of icicles closed in on me. *I won’t be able to dodge them all… What can I do?*

A very simple answer popped up in my mind: *Slash them.*

I locked my eyes onto every flying icicle and cut them down. Even slicing up bullets was an easy task for me. My time element didn’t allow me to stop time itself, but I knew how to employ it in a different way.

First, I sped up my brain. This made it seem like the bullets were moving slower. Then, I sped up my body. By only speeding it up whenever I slashed an icicle, I was able to prevent excess physical

stress and star power consumption.

Ultimately I succeeded in cutting my way past the icicle barrage and closed in on her. I swung my twinblade down toward Yukihime.

"Azure Wall."

A crystalline sound echoed across the stage, and suddenly, my blade slammed into a wall of ice.

"Oh, there it is. Gonna actually use that for once, huh?"

"Just my way of thanking you for irritating me even more than usual before the fight. Now you'll bite the dust without even getting a chance to touch me."

Azure Wall. This ridiculously durable hexagonal structure that had just appeared before my eyes was filled with all the high-quality star power that Yukihime could muster. I'd never been able to break it – in fact, no one had. Did this mean that it had become impossible for me to attack Yukihime? Not necessarily. There was one way to break through. It was a pain in the butt, but I didn't really have a choice at this point.

I started spinning my twinblade clockwise. My star armament, the Chronoslayer, enhanced my star sorcery. Using it while casting made things much more effective, and in this case, spinning it once to the right would double my physical speed. Normally it took time to speed up, but this shortened the process.

Once I reached double speed, I took a step to the right and slashed my longsword sideways. As the Azure Wall blocked it, I immediately stepped backwards and slashed out again, this time with the dagger. The wall blocked the attack again, but this time something was different. It had moved closer to Yukihime.

I leapt back and attacked again from the front, swinging my longsword down from above. Once again, the Azure Wall moved, and this time it lined up right against Yukihime's head.

I instantly swung my blade and moved behind Yukihime. Our

blades clashed. Yukihime had unsheathed Snowbloom. Its azure blade glistened beautifully, and a shrill metallic sound shrieked across the stage.

"The Azure Wall has been defeated."

This time, it was her blue sword that had blocked my twinblade. Yukihime had unsheathed Snowbloom with her left hand and managed to block my blade without even turning around.

"You've improved at getting around it. Everyone usually struggles with that."

Yukihime had programmed the Azure Wall star sorcery so that it would appear automatically whenever someone got near her. However, since she poured most of her resources into increasing the star sorcery's durability, it was a bit slow to appear. If she wanted to put it out quickly, she could only make it so big. It'd probably take a considerable amount of time for her to cloak her body in it, and if she wanted to make a new wall, she'd first have to erase the previous one.

Right, left, front, and back. Suddenly changing directions like that prevented her from keeping up. It required someone who could move fast enough to outrun the wall's activation speed, which meant that only an exceptionally speedy person could pull it off. Of course, moving at double speed put incredible strain on my body, so it was by no means an easy task. Still, it allowed me to break through the defense of the world's strongest's star sorcerer, so I figured it was worth the cost.

"I'm sure you were getting bored of whacking that thing over and over again anyway, right?" The edges of Yukihime's lips curved up into a faint smile. "Here, I'll pull it out for you. You should feel honored."

"Really? You're gonna pull it out for me? But I haven't even won yet…"

"…Huh? What are you talking about?"

"Oh, if you don't get it, then never mind." She was surprisingly

dense considering how much erotic fiction she read.

As she deflected my twinblade, Yukihime spun her body around and swung down Snowbloom with both hands. “Hey, what did you mean just now?”

“I’ll explain if you beat me,” I said, as I blocked the attack horizontally with my longsword.

“I’m going to win and you know it. Roses are red, the sky is blue, I always win. Logic so common that even a child would understand it.”

“That’s why it’s so fun to prove it wrong.”

We continued to banter as we pushed against each other’s swords.

“Common sense never changes. That’s why it’s common sense.”

Yukihime stepped in and shoved me back. The minute we got some distance between us, she shoved her sword straight into the ground.

“Freeze.”

Instantly, the entire stage froze solid, except for the spot where Yukihime was standing. Icicles also shot out toward me. I tried to twist and dodge, but since I needed to be careful not to slip, I couldn’t move how I wanted to.

“I thought you were going to fight me with your sword! What are you trying to end this so quickly for?!”

“Shut up! I’m just being logical!”

She wasn’t playing around here. With this move, she could limit my movements and pick me off from afar.

A swarm of icicles sprung up around Yukihime. “It’s over.”

I could have tried to cut them all down, but if I happened to slip and fall, I’d be done for.

Besides, if I kept using star power to speed up my brain in order to slash the icicles, I'd eventually use it all up.

I couldn't beat her in a game of endurance. I hardly had any star power to begin with, while she had access to an endless pool of it. Unless she used a bunch of powerful moves, she'd never run out, and although I hated to admit it, there was no need for her to use such powerful weapons against me... Which meant there was only one thing to do.



I took off my blazer and rolled up my right sleeve. My bare arm was clad not in skin, but silver. It was a silver prosthetic arm, a star armament just like my twinblade.

Braveright. This star armament was different from Chronoslayer and Snowbloom in that it was permanent, and therefore always present.

As I held my twinblade in my left hand, I bent my right wrist up, then bent it down twice and clenched it into a fist. Instantly, the click of a loaded gun sounded out, and an empty casing flew out from the mechanical part of my right arm with a hollow clink.

The series of movements I had just made with my arm were all in order to eject that cartridge. Unleashing the star power that had been charged in it would allow me to power up one of my attacks by a great deal.

I raised my right arm. A staggering amount of star power was overflowing from within. Then, I slammed it down onto the concrete.

With a rumble, the earth split, and a concrete wall rose up before me. Even though it would soon be pierced by the icicles, it could still buy me a little time.

Cracks spread out from me along the ground, crumbling the frozen surface. The stage was now a mess, but at least I didn't need to worry about slipping anymore.

I picked up my twinblade and sprang out from behind the concrete wall.

"Aww, look what you did!" Yukihime stared at the totaled stage.

This space nullified physical damage against human bodies, but objects could still be destroyed. The teachers would probably get mad at me later, but if it meant beating Yukihime, then it'd be more than worth it.

"Guess it's okay for me to break some stuff too, then."

Suddenly, I felt some intense star power coming down from above. I looked up to see a block of ice that was large enough to cover up half the stage.

Yep… This is a one-hit-kill. I mean, I won't die here, but it'll definitely hurt like hell.

"There it is! The Stardrop!"

"He's dead meat… She wins!"

I could hear the students shouting. Due to its flashiness, this was one of Yukihime's most popular moves.

…Hey, who are they calling dead meat?

"Guess that's it for today."

As the block of ice came sailing down, I spun my twinblade in my right hand and threw it down. I hadn't sped up my body. All I did was boost the speed at which star power was charged into the cartridge in my right arm.

Progress Boost. By boosting my star power charge speed, I could power up one attack to an immense degree. Star power was already charged up in the cartridge, and by ejecting it, I could greatly increase my star power output. Ejecting and Progress Boost were each capable of boosting me on their own, but in order to obliterate this block of ice, I needed to pull out all the stops.

The block of ice eclipsed my vision.

"It's not over…"

I ejected the cartridge, releasing a colossal amount of charged-up star power.

"…till I say it is!!"

I raised my right arm over my head. My silver fist crashed into the crystalline blue ice, and my body was slammed down into the ground.

Even more fissures spread out along the ruined ground in a radial pattern.

We clashed for a moment, then I heard a sharp snap. Cracks began to run up along the ice block, until finally it split in two. A heavy boom echoed through the arena, and was immediately followed by the students' cheers.

That's it, kids. Go wild. I'm about to defeat the world's most powerful star sorcerer.

I had only managed to nullify her attack, yet I already felt like I had won. Then, I started to get a strange feeling. The students weren't looking at me. They were looking *above* me.

"Well, I guess you fought a little harder than usual today," Yukihime said arrogantly. Sheathing Snowbloom, she crossed her arms.

"Why are you acting like you've already won?"

"Look above you."

"Above?"

I looked up. Now there was an even bigger block of ice floating there.

"Really?"

There was no way I'd be able to immediately charge up enough star power to destroy that. I raised my twinblade, spun it, ejected, and... Nope, I wasn't going to make it.

"Now kneel before me and lick the ground. That's what defeat tastes like." Yukihime revealed a sadistic smile, and that was the last thing I saw right before I lost.

"...Soft."

That word was all that existed in my mind.

“Oh, are you awake now?”

“…Huh?”

I could hear a voice. It was such an adorable voice, just hearing it was enough to make strength come surging out from within me. I extended my hand toward the beautiful voice…

Smush.

What was that soft feeling? No, wait, I knew this feeling. How could I ever forget? These were…

“Wah, mm, mmm… H-hey, big brother, why are you touching me there?”

My little sister’s boobs!

“…Good morning, Towa. What are you doing?”

“That’s my line!” Someone smacked me in the head.

“Oww… What are you doing, flattie–err, Yukihime?!”

“Don’t even pretend like that was an honest mistake!”

Yukihime’s smack liberated my little sister’s breasts from my hands. Just what was she? A monster? A demon? A man-eating hag?

“Come on, big brother, Yukihime… You’re overdoing it.” Towa sighed as she stared down at me.

Her blonde hair bounced softly. At that moment, my head was resting in Towa’s lap. The softness I felt when I awoke came from her thighs. Her boobs were soft too, though.

I had lost to Yukihime, fallen unconscious, and rested in my little sister’s lap on the side of the stage. Talk about pathetic… Although I didn’t really mind, since it had given me access to little sister thighs.

“Sorry, Kokuya.”

Yukihime apologized. Now this was a rarity. She was the kind of person who believed the whole world belonged to her, and that every member of the human race was basically her servant, so humility was not something she practiced often. She did have a weakness for Towa, though.

"Don't worry about it," I replied. *I don't need your consideration. Just go back to your usual arrogant self...*

"...Towa, like I've always told you, when Yukihime and I fight we go all-out. There's no way to prevent stuff like this."

"B-But you lost consciousness, big brother..."

"Yeah. It happens all the time. People can't get hurt in there, so it doesn't matter."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah, I'm sure."

Even though the space prevented physical damage, getting hit with enough mental damage to knock someone out over and over again would drive any person crazy. I hadn't gone crazy yet, though. I was used to it. I mean come on, how many times had she beaten the crap out of me? 999?

"Hmm... I'm still worried, though."

"Well, I'm grateful for your concern. You're such a good girl, Towa." I stroked Towa's hair as I rested on her thighs.

"Heh heh heh! Thanks!" Towa grinned goofily.

"Are you two done yet?" Yukihime glared at us out of the corners of her eyes.

"I dunno. I could keep this up forever."

"Lunchtime is going to end, you know?"

“You really think I can escape from the softness of these thighs?”

“I can’t believe you can say that with a straight face.”

“But I’m serious.”

“Come on, stop being silly, big brother. Want to go to the infirmary?” Towa stood up.

Towa’s thighs slipped away from my head. *Farewell, my love!*

Afterwards, Yukihime finished up the class, and all the students started to leave.

“You looked pretty awesome out there!” “Don’t give up!” “You’ve got a huge sister complex!”

I did my best to send fake smiles back to the middle school students who shouted stuff at me on their way out. It seemed like I had earned myself a better reputation than what I started out with, but it was partly due to a rather embarrassing reason.

...I mean yes, I know I have a sister complex, but still.

Right after school ended and I was getting ready to head home, I got a text.

My Lovely Sister: Want to walk home today?
Big bro: I love you
My Lovely Sister: Communicate!
Big bro: ok
My Lovely Sister: I need to talk to you about buying something that I want to keep secret from Yukihime.
Big bro: buying what a bra
My Lovely Sister: No!
My Lovely Sister: If it was, then I wouldn’t invite you to come along...
Big bro: why not

Big bro: invite me
My Lovely Sister: Communicate!
Big bro: ok
Big bro: so a date just the two of us after school?
My Lovely Sister: Fine, whatever, just come and meet me in front of the school gate!
Big bro: yes, my dear sister
Big bro: I'll be there after I lose the flattie **My Lovely Sister:** Stop saying mean things about Yukihime! No more boob jokes!
Big bro: ok

And that was that.

"What are you smirking about? Did you get a text from Towa?"

"How'd you know?"

"The only time your perv face gets even creepier is when she's involved somehow."

"I guess."

"What did she want?"

"Oh, nothing. I'm gonna walk home alone today. Got something to take care of."

"Oh. You're going straight home?"

"Probably. If it turns out that I'll be home late, I'll let you know."

"Okay."

"See ya."

At the time, Towa, Yukihime and I were living together due to an unfortunate situation involving Towa. Usually I'd always walk home with Yukihime, but it seemed like Towa had something she wanted to talk to me about alone. I wondered what it was. Maybe she finally wanted to cross the boundary of brother and sister?

Oh no… If that's the case, then who can I ask for advice?

"Hey, Yukihime."

"What? What do you want now?"

"What should a big brother do if he just loves his little sister so much that he finds himself stuck in the rift between brother-sister love and morality?"

"Drop dead?"

I waited for Towa in front of the school gate. Soon, she came trotting toward me.

"Sorry, did I make you wait?" she asked.

"No, I just got here."

"Yeah, I saw you arrive."

I really had just arrived. I just felt like saying something date-y.

We started walking side by side.

"So, what's this shopping thing you want to keep secret from Yukihime?"

"Well, Christmas is coming up, right?"

Oh… Right. It was December 19th, and Christmas was right around the corner.

"Don't worry, Towa. You've been a good girl, so you'll get presents."

"You always just put weird stuff under my pillow every year, big brother…"

"Weird stuff?!" How dare she call Santa's presents weird!

“Why would you put knee socks there? And you hid them inside of another sock…”

“Well, hiding presents inside socks is a Christmas tradition…”

“I thought people just hung those up as decorations.”

“Are you saying you don’t want a present this year?”

“Well, I liked the present itself…”

A mischievous smile slid onto Towa’s face, and she snapped one of the knee socks she was currently wearing. I had just given her those recently, and she knew just how to repay her big brother’s kindness…

“Anyway, that’s not why I’m here, big brother. Christmas should remind you of something else, remember?”

“What could I possibly have to remember besides your Christmas presents?”

“Bzzt! You just lost two love points from me. I’m going to move 20 cm away from you now.”

Towa took a step back from me.

“What? No way! Two whole points, just for that?”

“…Are you playing dumb, big brother? Did you really forget?”

“No, of course not. It’s Yukihime’s birthday, right?”

“Correct. You just gained two love points from me!”

Towa took a step toward me.

“…If I get more points, Miss Towa, will you walk arm in arm with me?”

“Hmm, I dunno… I’m still testing out this new system, after all.”

“I see… So, we’re going to buy Yukihime’s birthday present today?”

“Yeah. I know we do this every year, but let’s make this one special!” Towa grabbed my hands and struck a pose.

“What do you want to get her this year?”

“Hmm… I haven’t decided yet. That’s why I want you to come and help me pick something out.”

“Leave it to me. I know everything about Yukihime. Which sock she puts on first, even her measurements…”

“You’re not supposed to know her measurements…”

We continued to talk until we reached the bus stop. From there, we got on a bus and headed toward the commerce district. Otherworld City was split into different areas that were focused around different purposes, and you could buy pretty much anything in the commerce district.

As the bus drove on, we watched the scenery change. Soon, we turned onto a dazzling street lined with advertisements projected into the air in gorgeous illuminations. The trees along the street were also decorated, and I spotted an idol in a Santa outfit carrying some Christmas-related products. It seemed to be another projected advertisement. Everyone I saw walking along the street looked so radiant.

In other words, I was surrounded by a ton of people with actual lives. This was one of Otherworld City’s most famous date spots, so I guess I should have expected as much. I would have never come here if it wasn’t for Towa, and her being here with me made everything different. It felt like I really was going on a date with her, which was like heaven.

“Oh look, it’s Rabino!” Towa said as she stared at an advertisement.

For some reason, the idol in the Santa outfit was also wearing rabbit ears. I didn’t really understand what it was going for, but it was cute. Rabbit ears are nice. Now, if only she had been a bunny girl… I really like bunny girls. Not that it matters. Despite how cute the idol

was, she was no match for Towa.

"Who?" I asked.

"You're always so out of touch, big brother... Rabino is an idol who's been gaining a lot of popularity lately. Haven't you ever heard her catchphrase? 'Rabino-pyon wants to get eaten by a carnivore like you-pyon!'"

Towa mimicked ears with her hands, tilted her head a little, and said the line in a fake cute voice. I figured it was just some line the idol said a lot.

"Hey, that was pretty cute. Do it again."

"N-No. It's embarrassing..." Towa was cute even when she looked embarrassed.

"You're way cuter than that Rabino girl."

"...St-stop it... You'd better not say that in front of her fans, or they'll get mad at you."

"No, I'll get mad at them, because I'm your fan!"

"You're so weird, big brother..."

This went on for a bit longer until we reached the commerce district bus stop. Once we got off, we started strolling through the streets and gazing at the different stores. Then, Towa stopped in front of one and said she was going to go inside. Behind the display glass, I could see various costumes.

"A cosplay shop?"

"Yeah. You know how the middle school students do a costume party for Christmas every year? This'll be my last year in middle school, so I might do something special with my friends."

"Really? Can I go and watch?"

“You should go to the high school party.”

“I want to be a middle school student…”

“You already were, up until last year.” Towa casually shot me down as she scanned the costumes within the store.

“I’m going to try a few on, so tell me how they look.”

“Sure, leave it to me. How about this one?” I asked, handing over a costume that was near me.

“Okay, I’ll try this one on too, then.” Towa took it and went into the changing room.

After a bit, she popped her head out from behind the curtain.

“Big brother… There’s this zipper in the back here…”

“…Huh? It’s okay for me to come in?”

“Yeah, just don’t look around too much.”

“I won’t, I won’t.”

Of course I would.

Towa was wearing the same miniskirt Santa outfit that the idol had been wearing in the advertisement. *Now* it was beginning to look a lot like Christmas.

Towa blushed as she turned around. The zipper was stuck around her hips. I had to admit, it was really sexy how I could see her back and the pink straps of her bra.

“It feels a little tight around my chest…”

I bet she said that about every piece of clothing she wore.

If Yukihime heard that line, she’d go berserk. I did my best to yank the zipper all the way up.

“Mm, thanks… Now, for the final touch,” Towa said, putting on a Santa hat. “Wh-what do you think?”

“Please be my Christmas present.”

“I mean about the clothes…” Towa frowned.

“Looks good to me. Christmasy and cute. Oh, and if you ever want to put it on again, just call your big brother in!”

“I’ll ask a friend.”

“I see…”

“Okay, time for the next one! Get out!”

“Roger that.”

I did as I was told and left the changing room. After a bit, Towa popped her head out again.

“I-I changed…”

For some reason, she was blushing even more than she had been before. What could be more embarrassing than having your big brother zip up your dress?

“Why did you give me this costume, big brother…?”

Oh… She’s wearing the costume I gave her. Suddenly, it all made sense.

“I figured you could surprise everyone. You know… No one would expect you to go to a winter party in that.”

“It’s weird…”

“I like it.”

“It’s perverted…”

“Yet you still put it on.”

“I guess the atmosphere of the store made me a little numb to it… Especially considering the previous costume I wore, it didn’t seem that different at first… But then when I actually put it on, I realized how weird it was…”

“It’s too late now.” I yanked open the dressing room curtain.

“No, big brother! Stop!” By the time she said that, my eyes were already feasting on her.

A school swimsuit. That’s right. I had given Towa a school swimsuit. And now, the navy blue swimsuit enshrouded her body. Her arms and plump thighs were completely bare. Yes, it certainly looked good on her. It was beautiful. I wish I could have written her name on the nametag on her chest. I bet it would have gotten really distorted. You know, because of her boobs. Now that’s what you call artistic.

“But I’ll be shivering in this!”

“Trust me, they’ll love it.”

“I mean physically! Physically cold!”

“Just psyche yourself out, and you’ll warm up.”

“What if I catch a cold?”

“Towa, hurry up and change out of that. Warm yourself up.”

“You’re unbelievable… Y-You’re the one who made me wear this…”

“Oh, wait a second. Is it okay for customers to try on swimsuits in this store?”

“Don’t worry. I still have my underwear on. See?”

Towa slid the shoulder strap and crotch area of the swimsuit to the side, showing me the pink underwear she had on underneath. She did stuff like that so innocently… That’s what made her such a force to be reckoned with.

So sexy. Towa just gained a trillion love points from her big brother.

"...What's wrong, big brother?"

"Oh, nothing. Guess we'll just have to save the school swimsuit for summer, huh? Your health takes priority over all else, Towa."

"Phew... You act crazy most of the time, but I'm glad you can still manage to be serious every now and then, big brother."

My own sister thought I was crazy.

"I'm going to put on the next one now, so close the curtain, okay?"

"Do I have to?"

"I'll call for help."

"Closing now."

I closed the curtain and waited for Towa to change again. I could barely wait to see what was coming next. The Santa outfit and the school swimsuit had both looked so nice... But Towa looked amazing no matter what she wore. I was sure her next outfit would look super cute as well. There I stood, eagerly awaiting what she was going to show me next.

Suddenly, the curtain opened again.

"Whoa, that was quic... Whoaaaaaa!" I bellowed out suddenly.

Towa was wearing... a bunny girl costume.

"Towa wants a carnivore like you to eat her, big brother-pyon!"

The shock nearly knocked me unconscious.

I was awestruck. Cute white bunny ears that bobbed whenever she moved her head. A red leotard that revealed the curves of her shoulders, back, and thighs to an inappropriate degree. The chest part

was also cut wide open, allowing full view of Towa's deep, ponderous cleavage. I felt like I was going to get sucked right into them. And let us not forget her small, round tail. Oh, and what would the costume be without the cuffs, collar, and bowtie, all neatly arranged despite how much of her skin was showing? It was charming as a naked woman wearing only gloves, socks, or a necktie. "So much of you is exposed, yet you're hiding that one part." "So much of you is exposed, yet you went out of your way to put that one accessory on." The mismatched, unbalanced feeling of it all was truly magnificent. It was the antithesis of functional beauty, and utterly useless accessories only enhanced its eroticism. Now then, back to the bunny girl. Towa's plump thighs were shrouded in black stockings. Even though this lowered the overall exposure of her body, it made her look even sexier. I know we're straying from the topic of bunny girls here, but stockings are fantastic in their own right. Black stockings are famous for making legs look more beautiful due to being a slimming color, but there was much more going on here. When something is 'shrouded' in something, it gains a sacred essence. Legs, one of the most fetishized parts of the body, shrouded in black. Her legs were inviolable now, and the moment they became shrouded in black, they reigned. Oh, I wish I could rub up against them… No! I wish I could beg for the sweet mercy of rubbing up against them. They had vaulted up to great heights as an object of envy. Her legs were noble now. From there, a normal person who saw them would be struck by one very common desire: They would want to be stepped on. They would want the legs shrouded in black to step on them. Did a sweeter pleasure exist? Perhaps if those legs were to restrain a certain part of the male body? I suppose Yukihime would be better suited for something like that. Let me get back to the matter at hand: Towa. Towa in a bunny girl outfit. Why were bunny girls so sexy to begin with? Their bunny ears? Their tails? The degree of exposure? Oh, it was all so wonderful. But let's think about this on a more fundamental level. What is the origin of the bunny girl? Bunnies can reproduce all year round, and it's said that their mating season lasts forever. Perhaps that's the true idea behind the costume – to send a message that the wearer is prepared to take in a man at any time. In other words, bunnies are perverted. And girls who wear bunny girl outfits become perverted. Probably. I doubt Towa was aware of these details concerning the outfit's origin, though. And maybe I was the biggest pervert because I'd memorized it all. It was like Towa wasn't even aware of what she was truly wearing.

The costume was sexy enough on its own, but it got even more hare-raising when you learned about its origins. See what I did there? Anyway! Bunny girls were the sexiest beings in existence, which also made them the best! Bunny girls were the beeeest!!

"Big brother... You need to give me some feedback, or else I'll just feel really embarrassed..."

"It's perfect! Towa, I'm buying that for you!" I said, as I gave her a thumbs-up.

"Y-you really like it that much?!"

"You bet I do!"

"Huh? Oh no, big brother, your nose is bleeding! And why are you crying?"

My love for bunny girls was simply so great that I was starting to scare my little sister.

"We stayed here longer than I thought we would."

"You're just too good at egging me on, big brother. And I always let you..."

"Towa, your cuteness is *your* sin..."

"Stop trying to change the subject."

After spending way too much time in the cosplay shop, we rushed out and started looking for Yukihime's presents.

"What should I get her this year? I got her gloves last year, right?"

"Yeah. She liked them so much that she ended up wearing them every day."

"Really?" I asked.

"Yeah. You two are so close."

“Close? Me and Yukihime?”

“Don’t act like you don’t understand.”

“But I really don’t.”

“Must be tough when both of you are tsundere…”

“She’s a tsundere, but I’m a deredere! Toward you, Towa!”

“Yeah, yeah. I guess it would be silly to call a tsundere a tsundere and expect them to say ‘You bet I am!’” She really seemed bent on labeling me as a tsundere.

“…Oh!”

“What’s wrong?”

Frozen in place, Towa was staring at a mannequin in a shop window.

“I just thought that would look good on Yukihime.”

“What would?”

“That scarf.” The mannequin was wearing a white scarf with a snowflake pattern on it.

“A scarf, huh? Heh heh. Sure, why not?”

“Why are you laughing?”

“I-I wasn’t laughing! I think it’s good! Let’s buy it!” All of a sudden, I was panicking and pushing her to buy the scarf. What exactly was I trying to cover up for?

As I decided to buy Yukihime a scarf as a present, I realized what had happened. I had imagined Yukihime wearing it. It would definitely look great on her. Her face was the one good thing she had going for her, so most items complimented it.

Towa also found her present within the same store: a hairpin

shaped like a snowflake.

With our presents in tow, we headed home. *I hope she likes her presents this year, too.*

"Welcome home… Hey, what's with all the bags?" Yukihime asked, the moment she saw us come home.

"Guess we bought a bit too much."

"Yeah."

"How come?"

"Tee hee! You'll find out later, so get excited!" Towa stared at Yukihime and smirked.

Yukihime cocked her head to the side in confusion. She glanced at me, but I didn't understand why Towa was smirking either. If it was just about the presents, then why did she say 'later?' I cocked my head as well, signaling that I had no clue.

Afterwards, something happened during my daily training.

"Y-You've gotta be kidding me! There's no way…"

"You'll be fine! Big brother loves stuff like this!"

I overheard Yukihime and Towa talking, so I went to their room and knocked on the door.

"What are you two doing? Can I come in?" They both replied in a flash.

"Sure!"

"No way!"

Interesting. Of course, I had no choice but to do as my little sister

said, so I entered the room.

Inside, I saw Yukihime in a bunny girl costume – white bunny ears, a blue leotard, and black stockings that made her slim legs look even more beautiful.

"Wh-whaaat?!" This was the second time in one day, so I was determined to keep my cool. Still, that surprised cry escaped my throat.

"K-Kokuyaaa! Look away... Stop staring at me! Get out!!" Yukihime pleaded in a weak voice, in complete contrast with her usual tyrannic ways.

I ignored her. And ogled her, of course. I was shocked. I'd always loved bunny girls, of course, but there was more to this. I would have never expected her to put on something like this at home, and – this is probably the biggest reason why I was so shocked – it looked good on her. Really good.

Of course, Towa had also looked fantastic in a bunny girl outfit. That fact will never change. But here, I'd like to raise a question. Small boobs or big boobs – which do you think would look best in a bunny girl outfit? Most people would probably say big boobs. And this may be the logical answer, especially when you consider the nature of the costume itself and where it normally would be worn.

However. *However!* I think small boobs in bunny girl outfits possess their own special charm.

To begin with, bunny girl outfits leave a lot of the body exposed, and also emphasize figures. Normally, when people think of bikinis, or any other kind of swimsuit, they usually agree that big boobs look better in them. (The logical next step here would be to discuss the wonders of school swimsuits, or small boobs in bikinis, but since I don't want us to go off track, we'll skip that part.) The fact that big boobs look good in bunny girl outfits is a given, which is why purposefully making a girl with small boobs wear such a costume is wonderful and amazing in its own way. With a bunny girl costume, the girl's thin, petite body becomes visible for all to see. Naturally, this

will embarrass the wearer – especially if they already believe that bunny girl outfits should only be worn by women with big boobs. That's why it's so powerful. 'Shame' is the best weapon to use against small boobs. I think that small boobs possess other charms apart from this, but shame is truly a magnificent thing, especially combined with the humiliation of being forced to wear such a costume.

I looked Yukihime in the face. I never knew a person's face could get so red. Her mouth was clamped shut, her eyes were spinning, and small tears were welling up in the corners of her eyes. At that moment, I felt like I had uncovered a whole new truth. *Yes... Big boobs in bunny girl outfits and small boobs in bunny girl outfits are both the best.*

I gave a thumbs-up to my little sister, who had been key in unlocking this truth, and she returned the gesture.

"...Hey! Siblings! What's that supposed to mean?"

"Why do you sound so scared?"

"Ahem... I thought I told you not to look at me. Actually, didn't I tell you not to come inside in the first place?"

"It looks good on you."

I thought I heard a loud thump. Then, though I didn't think it possible, Yukihime's face got even redder.

"See? What did I tell you, Yukihime? Big brother likes this kind of stuff!"

"..." Yukihime flicked her head to the side and sat down in the corner of the room. Her bunny ears drooped down with her.

"Aww, you made her pout..."

"Don't fret, little sister. Just act normal," I said, as I used my phone to snap a picture of Yukihime.

"...Don't take pictures of me."

“Please look this way!”

“No.”

“But it looks good on you.”

“...Really?”

“Totally!”

“I think this sort of outfit would look better on Towa.”

“Not necessarily.”

“If only my body was more like hers...”

“Your body has its own appeal.”

“...R-Really?”

“Really. Now, just look this way...”

“Stop taking pictures of me!” Yukihime chopped me right in the head.

“Oww...”

“Big brother... How could you keep doing that when she was clearly telling you to stop? You’re the worst.”

“Stopping now.”

Prompted by my little sister, I reluctantly brought Yukihime’s photo shoot to an end.

After the bunny girl fiasco, we ate dinner and took turns in the bath. All we had left to do now was go to sleep. I was feeling a little thirsty, so I headed for the kitchen, where the fridge was. There, I found Yukihime pouring hot water into a mug.

“Coffee?”

“That’s right.”

“Gonna drown it in milk and sugar as usual?”

“Shut up. What do you care what I put in my coffee?”

“Where’s Towa?”

“Already asleep.”

“She always goes to bed so early. A well-slept child is a well-grown child, I guess.”

“Just shut your mouth already… Is that all you ever think about?”

“But I haven’t even said anything yet.” I guess I had racked up enough bad karma that it didn’t really matter, though.

“Are you staying up? Gonna study?” I asked.

“Yes.”

“Such a hard worker. An inspiration to us all!”

“Are you going to sleep, Kokuya?”

“Yeah.”

“…Pfft.” Yukihime gave me a belittling smirk.

“What?”

“Did you manage to finish tomorrow’s homework?”

“…Could you pour me some coffee, too? And tell me the answers to these questions…”

“Hm? I didn’t hear you say ‘Please, Headmistress Yukihime, the most beautiful woman in the world?’”

“Please, Headmistress Yukihime, the most beautiful woman in the world.”

“…You’re so quick to abandon your pride when you’re in a pinch.”

“Some things are more important than pride.” Like homework.

“You’re pathetic… Fine, let’s just get this over with.”

Yukihime and I opened the textbook on the table. Even though it was annoying how she always made fun of me and acted like she knew everything, Yukihime was a great teacher. She really knew how to teach people things. She still annoyed me, though.

“You don’t even understand this?” I must have heard that line about five times before we got to the end. “Where did you and Towa go today?”

“Why are you suddenly interested in that?”

“She made me wear that weird costume, so I got curious.”

“I need to explain the details of my date with my little sister to you now?”

“Your date? Please…”

“What else would you call it when two members of the opposite sex who love each other go somewhere together?”

“…A guy with a sister complex.”

“What’s wrong with a big brother loving his little sister?”

“There are limits to how far it can go… Understand?”

“Love is limitless.”

“…You’re such a pain.”

“I know you are, but what am I?”

Yukihime gritted her teeth and glared. I smiled back and let it wash over me.

Yukihime let out a sigh. “Fine, whatever… Seemed like Towa had fun, though.”

“Yeah.”

“…It’s already been nine whole years.”

I didn’t need to ask what she meant. It had been nine years since Towa and I first met Yukihime – which reminded me, I had just been talking to Towa about the same thing.

“Towa’s really changed,” Yukihime said.

It was true. She hadn’t always been this cheerful. Well, she had been up to a certain incident, but after that, she had stopped smiling altogether.

“I’m, uh, grateful, you know.”

“My, you’re unusually earnest tonight. If only you acted this way all the time, you’d make the perfect servant.”

“I’m always earnest when it comes to my little sister.”

“…You’ve changed a bit, too.”

“Me? How?”

“You had a lot more rage when we first met.”

“Oh, well, yeah…”

A lot had happened, and it was all connected to the reason why I had started living together with Towa and Yukihime.

After our parents died when I was six years old, Towa and I were taken in by a friend of our father’s. It turned out that he was a member of the Phanatics, a criminal organization composed of star

sorcerers who used their powers for illegal purposes. When he first took us in, we had no idea that we had just fallen into the clutches of a man who belonged to a criminal organization. But during our time with the Phanatics, we had no one else to trust. The man who took us in was always off on missions, and rarely ever came to visit us at the organization's school.

It's no wonder I had a lot of rage back then. Without anyone to trust, I was just trying to survive and protect Towa all on my own. She would always stay in our room while I was forced to fight other star sorcerer children. Age didn't really matter in these battles – power was everything. All anyone cared about was becoming strong enough to serve the organization.

"Thankfully, things... aren't so bad now."

"...Yeah."

Maybe I wasn't being honest enough. Things weren't just 'not bad,' they were actually good. I hoped these days would continue on forever. I wished that I could just go on teasing Yukihime and getting scolded by Towa until the end of time. Fighting Yukihime and losing over and over... Wait, no, I didn't want to just keep losing. It was about time I beat her already.

"You don't care about it anymore?" My heart skipped a beat. She was talking about getting revenge.

Ten years ago, my parents were murdered. I still dreamed about it sometimes. I had vowed to avenge their deaths, and when I was with the organization, that was pretty much all I ever thought about. The same was true for when I first met Yukihime, and I think I'd caused her a lot of trouble.

"...I don't know. I don't think about it all the time like I used to, but I doubt I'll ever be able to completely forget it."

"...Oh." Yukihime nodded and smiled gently. Geez, that's so unlike her. "Well, let's get back to your homework."

"...Okay." Seemingly embarrassed, Yukihime suddenly changed the

subject.

I felt just as embarrassed, so I followed suit. The only reason I had this life now was thanks to her, and I felt very grateful.

I wonder when I'll muster up the courage to say that straight to her face?

CHAPTER TWO

And the Winner is...

It was December 20th, five days before Christmas, and we were in the middle of battle training class.

"Come on, Kokuya, it's time for your 1,000th loss."

"Yeah right. I hope you're ready to start calling me master."

Yukihime and I were exchanging taunts like we always did – well, maybe the atmosphere was just a bit more tense than usual. Then, suddenly...

"Could you hold off on that for a bit?"

A lone figure came and interrupted us. He had jade hair, long bangs, and his right sideburn was long and swirly. "Urgh, not Sakisaki!"

"Kurono... How many times do I have to tell you to stop calling me by that strange nickname?"

He was Sakito Nagisaki, a member of the Nagisaki family – one of the Seven Great Mage Houses, otherwise known as the Seven Houses.

Back when star sorcerers were known as sorcerers and mages, the Seven Houses aimed to keep sorcery hidden from the world. Powerful spells and the rights to use them were split up between these seven families, and they still possessed them to this day. They were also the ones who built and managed Otherworld City.

All decisions regarding Otherworld City were made by the Council of Seven Houses, which was comprised of the representatives of the

Seven Houses along with the Headmistress. Incidentally, the Yukigane family was also one of the Seven Houses.

Nagisaki was a student from the next class over. Whenever our classes had group battle training, he'd always come straight for me. He was a real pain.

Oh yeah... Today's group training day.

"What do you want, Sakisaki?"

"Didn't you hear what I said just now?! I'm going to defeat you today, once and for all."

"..."

"What's wrong? At least give me a reply!" Nagisaki pointed his finger straight at me.

"...Yukihime. Is this how I act towards you?"

"What do you mean?"

"You know, being annoying and arguing over every little thing you say."

"I don't think so. I don't mind fighting with you. It's actually quite stimulating. You do a lot of annoying things that have nothing to do with your fighting, though."

"Oh." I ignored the second half.

The moment Nagisaki tried to pick a fight with me, I was already annoyed. I was here to fight Yukihime, after all.

"I'll be happy to fight you after Nagisaki," she said.

"Oh. Alright then, let's go, Sakisaki."

"I disapprove of how lightly you're taking me... But so be it. Take your place on the battlefield, Kurono."

Shaking my head at his choice of words, I stepped onto the stage. Soon, we were standing opposite each other.

"That reminds me," I said.

"What?"

"Why don't you ever challenge Yukihime? Everyone would be way more impressed if you defeated her instead of me."

"So? The opinions of others bear no importance to me." Nagisaki glanced at Yukihime, who was watching us from the sidelines.

"…Besides, I'm not fit for her yet," Nagisaki said, as his cheeks turned slightly red.

It was so obvious. Yes, he had a crush on Yukihime. Apparently, he thought that he wasn't allowed to fight her until he became 'fit' for her. And in order to achieve that, he needed to defeat me. That was his logic. I had no right to get in his way, but I wasn't just going to let him beat me. His thought process was a bit similar to mine, so that made me all the more stubborn.

There was another reason, though: the Star Gate Academy rankings. Students were ranked by their raw strength as star sorcerers along with their strength in actual battles. Yukihime was 1st, I was 2nd, and Nagisaki was 3rd. It made sense that Yukihime was 1st, but I had really worked my butt off to nab that 2nd spot. Unlike the ranks that Otherworld City based on their own standards, students could rise up to higher ranks within the academy as long as they tried hard enough. Well, there was one guy who couldn't rank-up no matter what, but he was a special exception.

Nagisaki was an A Ranker. Based on the Otherworld City ranks, he was the highest, and I was the lowest, so I definitely didn't want to lose to some high ranker like him.

"Ready?" I asked.

"Yes, let's get started. *Liberation – Tempestas Falx.*"

“Liberation – Chronoslayer.”

I gripped my twinblade and stared down at Nagisaki. His star armament was a giant scythe with a beautiful jade blade.

“I’m going to make the first strike, Kurono!”

Nagisaki swung his scythe in a straight horizontal line. Wind star power that had been compressed into the shape of a blade came zooming toward me at a shrieking speed. But I had started running before Nagisaki even started swinging, and took a slide right before the blade swooped by. Afterwards, I immediately stood back up, completing a dodge.

The wind scythe’s range, speed, and power were all frightening, but it moved just the same as any other big scythe. As long as I timed my dodge with the beginning of each attack, I’d be okay. Since I could speed up my thought process, this wasn’t a difficult task at all.

I started out about five steps away from Nagisaki, but he closed that distance with a single step by letting the wind carry his body. I was surprised to see him appear right in front of me, but I wanted to get close to him as well, so it worked out. After all, I didn’t have any long-distance weapons like his wind blade.

The massive scythe came sailing down from above. Swinging my blade to the right and deflecting it was the only choice I had. If I had tried to catch the scythe’s handle with mine, the curved blade would have pierced me. Due to its shape, all Nagisaki had to do was change the trajectory of the blade a tiny bit in order to hit me and prevent me from catching it.

The scythe may have looked cumbersome, but the shape of its blade was dangerous. Just like with a spear, I simply needed to get close to Nagisaki in order to defeat him, but he wouldn’t allow it. He remained just far away enough to deliver his blade to me, and continued to slash out over and over again. Every time I tried to close the distance, he’d use a wind step to create even more space between us. He could also quickly close long distances, which made it impossible for me to predict any of his movements. It was scary.

If he kept this pattern up, I'd be the one to lose. I didn't have much star power to work with, so battles of endurance were out of the question. I had to break through this deadlock somehow, even if it meant using a little force.

The scythe came zooming down at me diagonally from the right. I grabbed the end of his blade with my right hand, something I could only do to thanks to my prosthetic star armament.

"You're done for." I swung the twinblade in my left hand.

"No." Nagisaki boldly hoisted my entire body up with his scythe. *"You* are."

In a flash, he swung his scythe down, planning to slam me straight into the ground. Just before the swing ended, I let go of the blade, flinging myself off into the air.

Then, a thought popped into my mind. *Oh no*. There was no way to dodge a vertical scythe attack in mid-air. I managed to block the scythe's blade with my right arm, but the powerful swing sent me flying.

Just before I went flying off the stage, I lodged my twinblade into the ground. Sparks flew as it cut through the tile, slowing me down and keeping me within bounds.

As I stood up, I pulled my blade out and tried to close the distance again. Gusts of wind blew out from ahead as Nagisaki surrounded himself with a violent whirlwind. Blades of wind shot out at me, but I managed to dodge them all and get in close. I swung my long blade down, and then it happened.

An extremely powerful gust of razor-sharp wind shot out, distorting my blade's trajectory. More wind continued to pour out, and I could feel my body sliding backwards.

"It's not ideal, but I suppose I'll have to win this way."

More wind blades came flying toward me. I crouched down, dodged them, and muttered: "That's what you were planning?!"

He wanted to pick me off from afar without letting me close the gap again. It was basically the same thing that Yukihime had tried yesterday, when she froze the ground to paralyze me and started shooting icicles. Since I had no long-range attacks at my disposal, there was no way for me to fight back when I was far away. But...

"...How stupid do you think I am, Sakisaki?!"

I spun my twinblade with my right hand and sped up my body. In an instant, I was behind him. He was still surrounded by that violent whirlwind, though, so I had no way to attack him.

I channeled star power into my twinblade and twisted the hilt. With that, the blades disconnected from the hilt, and the twinblade split into two separate blades. I gripped the dagger in my right hand, filled my right arm cartridge with star power, sped it up, and ejected it. A cartridge shell flew out, and I could feel star power overflowing from my right arm.

With the massive star power pulsing, I performed a powerful throw. My blade cut through the wind and stabbed Nagisaki in the shoulder just as he was turning around.

"Ggh..." A groan slipped out from Nagisaki's mouth.

The wind had knocked my blade off its target, so that single attack wasn't enough to win it for me. I wasn't really surprised, though. That wasn't a real long-distance technique, but something I had done out of desperation. I couldn't have expected it to be perfectly accurate. But it did manage to stop the wind, if only for a moment. I didn't miss this chance, and quickly threw my long blade. Without enough time to fill it with star power, it was weaker than my last throw, and Nagisaki simply used his scythe to deflect it. But the opening he made when he did so – that was what I had been waiting for.

Before my long blade even left my hand, I had already kicked off from the ground in order to fully close the distance. Another cartridge went spinning into the air as I ejected it. After swinging his scythe again, Nagisaki was wide open, and I swung my fist down hard. His body flew off the stage and went crashing into one of the arena's walls.

A soft *clink* echoed as the cartridge shell hit the ground.

“I win.”

The moment I said that, Nagisaki staggered to his feet. “I-I… I’m going to win next time, you hear me?”

“You say that every time.”

Suddenly, I realized that Yukihime and I also said the exact same things every time.

…No. I’m going to beat her today, once and for all.

Soon, Yukihime and I were staring each other down again.

“Nice fight. Ready to do this?” she asked.

“Yeah. Did you practice saying the word ‘master?’”

“Did you decide on the color for you collar? I’m merciful enough to let you have a say on that.”

“Hah. Yeah right… C’mon, let’s do this!”

It was our thousandth battle. And the winner was…

“Big brother… What are you doing?”

With a thud, Towa dropped her bag on the ground.

When Towa got back from school and saw Yukihime and I inside the house, her eyes grew wide, and that question coldly slipped out from her mouth. It came as no surprise, though. After all, I was on my hands and knees, and Yukihime was sitting on my back.

“Welcome home, Towa,” we both said.

“I-I’m home…”

I locked eyes with my little sister. Yukihime was sitting on my back and doing her homework. I was also doing my homework, albeit on the ground.

“Big brother.”

“What?”

“Can I ask you again?”

“Sure, ask me whatever you want.”

“What are you doing?”

“Don’t keep asking me that…”

“Make up your mind.”

“You can ask me anything that doesn’t have to do with my current situation.”

“But that’s the number one thing I want to know…”

Yukihime spoke up. “Towa. I’m sorry, but as of this day, your brother, well, he’s become my servant.”

I had fought with Yukihime, and I had lost yet again. Thus, I was now her servant. I just couldn’t beat her…

“Y-your… your servant…?”

“It’s okay,” I said. “It’s okay. Towa. I’ll be back to normal soon.”

“Big brother…”

“What?”

“Can I take a picture of you?” Towa already had her phone out.

“What? Why?!”

“It’s so rare to see you at Yukihime’s mercy like this.” Towa

chuckled.

She was just so adorable. *But why, dear sister? When did you ever awaken to such a twisted fetish?*

"Hey, Towa, that almost makes it sound like I'm at his mercy most of the time."

"But it's true–" Before I could get the rest out, Yukihime spanked me.

"You are to remain silent until I give you permission to speak."

"Yes, mistress..."

"Towa, you can take as many pictures as you want. As his mistress, I give you full permission."

"Okay!" And so, Towa happily documented me as I crawled along the ground.

"You really like Kokuya's new appearance that much?"

"It's just kind of nice to see someone who always pushes his luck get humiliated like this," Towa explained happily.

It appeared that my little sister had some problems of her own. Although I guess I sort of understood how she felt. After all, I loved humiliating Yukihime, who also had an inclination for getting carried away.

Ohh, we're so alike... She really is my sweet little sister, through and through... I just wish she wasn't enjoying my humiliation so much... No, seriously...

"I'm finally free..." I muttered, alone in my room.

Yukihime had been getting back at me for all the times I had toyed with her. I had become her plaything... But now, Yukihime was taking a bath, and Towa was in her own room. Once Yukihime got out, I was sure that she'd start messing with me again, so I racked my brains and

tried to think of some way to escape.

“Eeeeeeeeek!” Suddenly, Yukihime shrieked.

“What happened?!” I shouted, and hurried to the bathroom. I opened the door, and Yukihime grabbed on to me – with her bra unfastened, and her panties pulled down, that is.

Not only that, but her hair had been freed from its ribbon. Her snow white skin and bony, slender body were in full view. Her chest and her butt were both small, but I saw beauty in their ephemeral natures.



“Ko, Ko-Ko, Koku, Koku, kuya, ya, Ko, Kokuya! Kokuyaaaa!” Yukihime crowed like a mad hen.

“What? What happened?!”

“In here! There’s one in here!”

“One… what?”

“One of the skittery things!”

“Skittery things?”

“They’re black!”

“Black?”

“Starts with a C!”

“C? …Oh, you mean a cockro–”

“Don’t say it out louuud!” She punched me. “Koku-Koku-Kokuya! Kill! Now!”

I nodded sagely, embracing my new name. Yukihime was so panicked that she was speaking in baby talk.

“Okay, I’ll exterminate it for you. On one condition.”

“Wh-what?”

“You know what. ‘Master.’”

“…No. You must be out of your mind if you think–”

“I’m tired. Goodnight.” I feinted a heel turn.

“Please, master.”

“Will you obey me for the rest of your life?”

“The rest of my life?!”

“If not, then I’m going to sleep.”

“Okay! I will, I will…”

“So be it. Step aside.”

I pushed Yukihime out of the way, and prepared to do battle with the ‘creature’… Until I saw what had become of it.

“…Yukihime.”

“Wh-what?”

“Did you… freeze it?”

“Of course I did! Otherwise it would have kept moving!”

Well, yeah. Cockroaches move. Yep. I stared at the cockroach-cicle, then realized something.

“…Oh.”

“What’s wrong?”

“Oh, nothing.”

The ‘creature’ inside the fist-sized block of ice was just a toy. And not just any toy, but the one I bought yesterday. It wasn’t going anywhere, even without the ice.

Yesterday, I hid Yukihime’s present in the bathroom cupboard where we stored the laundry detergent, since I figured she’d never look there. I must have dropped the toy when I did… Besides, it was winter. You rarely saw cockroaches in winter.

I wrapped the frozen toy up in paper and threw it away. It was a waste of a good toy, but that was a small price to pay if it would allow me to turn the tables on Yukihime. I did feel a little guilty, though.

“K-Kokuya… Is it safe now?”

“Yep, totally safe.” I patted Yukihime on the head. “Now hurry up and get back in the shower, or you’ll catch a cold.”

The moment I said that, Yukihime finally realized the state she was in, and turned beet red.

“Don’t look at me!” After punching me, she ran into the bathroom. How dare she treat her master that way!

Afterwards, the three of us gathered and sat down at the dining table.

“Am I done being your servant now?” Yukihime asked nervously.

“Hmm…”

“H-hey, come on… We’re done, right?”

“I haven’t made up my mind yet.”

“You’re such a…”

Towa chuckled softly as she watched us.

“Hey, Towa, this isn’t funny!”

“Oh, yes it is,” I said.

“I’m sorry, but you two are always so funny together,” Towa said. “You really get along so well!”

“What?!” Yukihime and I both shouted.

“See?” Towa laughed again.

“We’re just no match for you, Towa,” Yukihime joked.

“Yeah, I guess we *are* pretty close,” I added. “A master and his servant should strive to stay on good terms, right?”

“Would you knock it off already?” Yukihime growled.

“Wh-what are you planning to do? It’s not gonna work on me!”

“The promise you made for losing to me a thousand times is still in effect, isn’t it? Which means that you’re my servant!”

“Says who? That was just overturned back there in the bathroom. You’re my servant now!”

“No, you’re mine!”

“No, you!”

“Pfft…” Towa laughed again as she watched our futile bickering.

Yukihime and I glanced at her, then turned back to each other.

“…Want something to eat?”

“…Yeah.” I nodded.

I didn’t expect that these peaceful days would just continue on forever. Towa, Yukihime and I each had obligations that kept us from being completely free, but I did assume that we’d be able to go on living together for at least a little while longer.

I never would have imagined that destruction was waiting right around the corner.



On the Night when Destinies Clashed

I was seeing a dream – a dream that always ended with one particular sentence.

I'm going to kill you.

Inky black bloodlust. I felt like it was going to swallow up my entire mind.

◆

Today's the best day ever, I thought, as I awoke and stared at what had been left by my pillow.

A popular video game and a sword. It was December 25, Christmas morning. A star armament and a video game. Santa… er, Dad must have put them there while I was sleeping.

Of course, I knew that Santa Claus had been Dad the entire time. After all, I was already six years old. Dad had been acting so fidgety, asking me about what kinds of things were popular with kids these days, and all the game and toy advertisements he had been reading pretty much gave it away.

I wouldn't have been able to figure it out if I was five, but I was now a fully grown six-year old, an elder in the kindergarten world. My five-year old sister Towa probably still believed that Santa was real, but as her older brother and elder, I wasn't about to shatter her dreams.

First, I picked up the game. I had told Dad about how it was super popular with all my classmates. I couldn't wait to play it. I wanted to get really far so I could brag to my friends.

But that would have to wait. The real present was sitting right next to it... The sword. Talk about a generous Santa – not one, but two presents. Dad probably considered the sword to be the real present, but he was also kind enough to give me what I asked for, too. I would have been more than happy with just the sword, and felt really grateful to my generous Santa – er, Dad. Holding it, I could feel the weight of the permanent training star armament, and mentally sent him my thanks.

Thank you, Dad... I'll have to thank you properly later. Oh no, wait, I can't let him know I've figured out he's really Santa.

"Look, big brother! Look, look!"

Suddenly, my door burst open, and a pitch black creature came in. For some reason, its voice sounded just like my little sister's.

"Whoa..." I almost swung my new sword into the air. But right before I could do so, I realized that the black thing was a stuffed animal... and an ugly one, at that. What was it? A dog? A bear?

"Towa, what's going on?"

"Look! Did you see it?!" Towa peeked out from behind the huge, ugly stuffed animal.

"Yeah, I can see it. It's really huge..." It wasn't as big as her, but it was close.

"Isn't it big? And cute?"

"Y-yeah... Super cute."

Cute? Really?

"Don't you think it looks kind of like you?"

“Uhh…?”

I cocked my head and stared at the ridiculously huge, black thing once more. I honestly had no idea what it was, but it seemed to be squinting as if it was tired or grumpy, and its face didn’t look the least bit cute. Yet she said it looked like me. If it really did, then that was kind of depressing.

“You’re right, it really does look exactly like me. It’s even just as handsome!”

“Yeah! Santa really has good taste!”

“He sure does.”

I stared at the brazen-faced stuffed animal. Mom must have picked it out. Her tastes were always a bit… off. And Towa was exactly like her, so it was no wonder she loved it.

“I’m gonna go show Mom and Dad!” Towa shouted, as she trotted out of the room.

“You’re gonna take that huge thing with you? Don’t slip and fall!”

“I won’t!” Towa called back cheerfully. I still felt a little worried, so I went after her.

I figured Mom and Dad would be at the table anyway, and I needed to let them know that I was grateful for what Santa had brought me.

“Good morning, Kokuya. Did you get a visit from Santa?” The moment Dad saw me, he smiled and asked me that question. He was really playing dumb.

“Morning. You bet I did! Next time you see Santa, tell him he’s the best, and give him a big thank you!”

“Oh, good, I’m glad. Okay, I’ll let him know. I bet he’ll be happy to hear it. You were a good boy all year, so I’m not surprised.”

“Really?”

“And it seems like you’ve been working hard at your training lately.”

“I guess. But I’ve still got a long way to go. Oh yeah, the present! I wanna try it out, so can you help me train a little?”

“Hmm. Your mom and I need to go to the lab… So I guess we can do it at the usual place.”

Mom and Dad were both star sorcery researchers. Mom focused on the research, while Dad did research along with testing out the new star armaments they made. He was really strong. And he taught me that star sorcerers fought to protect the world and everyone in it.

I felt like Dad had taught me more than that as well… Basically, star sorcerers were cool, strong, awesome, and exactly what I wanted to be. I wanted to become a top class star sorcerer, just like Dad.

“Are you coming out to the lab too, Kokuya? We should just bring the cake and have the party there,” mom said.

“Huh? There’s a cake?”

“Well, it *is* Christmas, after all. I made sure to get a big one!”

“Yaaay! Cake!” Towa cheered in a childish voice. Honestly, I wanted to do the same.

“Is it okay to bring Towa to the lab?”

“I figured it’s about time we measured her star power anyway.”

“Oh, right. She’ll be in elementary school next year, right?”

Children aiming to be star sorcerers all got their potential measured before they turned six. I got mine measured too, but…

“When I saw your results, Kokuya, I nearly fell off my chair,” Dad said.

“Shut up! It’s only potential. It doesn’t mean anything. I already decided that I’m going to become a star sorcerer no matter what.”

“That’s the spirit!”

I hardly had any star sorcerer potential to speak of. They’d even told me that due to a certain critical deficiency, I might not be able to become a star sorcerer at all.

“Besides, we’re all basically the same compared to people like the Yukiganes. I’m not worried. I just want to inherit your strength, Dad.”

“Well, yeah… Okay. If that’s the path you’ve decided on, then it’s fine by me.”

The Yukigane house was an especially distinguished family of star sorcerers. They had a daughter who was the same age as me, yet she was already stronger than every single adult star sorcerer.

…I might not be able to beat her now, but I will someday. Even though I’ve never actually met her… If she’s really that strong, then I’m sure I’ll run into her eventually.

◆

“I think that’s enough for today.”

“…I’m not… done yet…” I tried to sound tough as I lay face up on the ground. I wasn’t even sure how much more I could swing the brand new star armament in my right hand.

We were in the laboratory where my parents worked. This was one of the rooms where they tested new star armaments.

“We could keep going, but remember, we have a party to attend. Towa might get mad if you show up looking like a wet noodle.”

“Hmm… Okay, let’s stop here.”

“Yeah.”

“...Hey, Dad.”

“What?”

I lifted up my worn out body and stared at my sword. “Will I really be able to become a star sorcerer like you?”

“...Sure. I bet you’ll even be able to surpass me.”

“Really?”

“I wouldn’t lie to you. I’m sure of it,” Dad said with a smile. “It won’t happen for a while yet, though.” And with that, he stood up and left the room. He had done just as much exercise as I, yet he didn’t look tired at all.

“Hey, wait!” I shouted, as I chased after his long shadow.

◆

“That should do it. Now for the cake.”

“...Can I just eat one piece?” I extended my hand toward a big piece of fried chicken that was lined up with the rest of the food.

“Just hold on a bit longer. I’ll go call Towa and your mother.”

“I’ll go with you.”

“They should be nearby...” he said, as we traversed the lab together.

No one else was inside. My parents were in charge of this block and usually worked here with their subordinates, but since it was a holiday, we were the only ones present.

“...That’s strange.” Dad suddenly stopped.

“What is?”

“Kokuya, wait here for a minute.”

“…Huh? Why? What’s going on?”

“Just wait here! I’ll be right back!” he said, as he ran down the hallway.

He ran so fast, there was no way I’d be able to catch up. *What made him panic all of a sudden?* I stood there for a bit, racked with helplessness and fear.

Towa and Mom were supposed to be in the room where I had gotten my star power measured earlier. I figured that must be where Dad had gone, so I decided to go after him – but before I did, I turned and went back to get my brand new sword. I was starting to get a bad feeling, so I wanted a weapon just in case.

I grabbed my sword and ran… and ran… And… then, I saw her.

My mother was on the ground, covered in blood. Standing in the room were two men I had never seen before. They both had swords, one of which was covered in deep red blood – my mother’s blood.

Dad was brandishing his own sword toward the two men, but he was already covered in wounds. Towa cowered on the floor behind him. The room was dim, and the only source of illumination was the moonlight that slipped in through the skylight.

It was all so sudden, I couldn’t even process it. All I knew was that the men Dad was fighting were bad, and I needed to protect him and Towa.

Suddenly, I dashed toward the men with my sword raised high.

“Get back, you idiot!” Dad shouted.

The other man stepped in front of the one I was heading for and swung down his blade, which was enough to send me flying to the other side of the room. My back slammed into something hard, and I

let out a pained moan. Simultaneously, I heard a hollow 'clink' as my sword fell to the ground.

...But that wasn't the only thing to hit the ground. Next to my sword, I saw a severed right arm. *That arm...* The moment I realized it was mine, intense pain enveloped my right shoulder. Then, before I could scream, something even more shocking happened.

A sword skewered my father.

I couldn't understand what was happening in front of me. *Just... what is this?*

The man pulled his sword out from Dad's body. There was a splatter of freshly drawn blood, followed by an impossibly thick river of red. Dad fell down into a pool of red, right next to Mom.

Then, the man turned his eyes to Towa. Without giving it a second thought, I picked up my sword with my left hand and tried to run in front of him. But I soon lost my balance and fell back to the ground with a pathetic thud.

"B-big brother..." Towa's shaky voice trailed out from behind me.

"It's okay. It's okay..." I said, without any conviction in my voice.

Towa touched my left arm – and suddenly, I felt an immense power behind me.

Huh? What's happening? I could feel a far greater amount of star power than Dad had ever displayed rising up behind me. I turned around and saw nothing but Towa – and a silver prosthetic arm that had materialized in place of the one I had lost.

I stared at my new right arm and tried to move my hand. It worked. When I clenched my right hand into a fist, I could feel incredible power rushing through me.

It'll do. I can kill them with this. The moment that thought occurred to me, I heard a voice echo through my head.

Kill.

It kept getting louder, until I could think of nothing else. I stared at the man who had just killed my father. *I have two enemies. Did the man who killed Dad also kill Mom? Maybe it doesn't matter. I'm going to kill them both regardless. But I'm going to start with the one who killed Dad, since he's right in front of me.*

The bloodlust consumed everything.



CHAPTER THREE

The End Draws Near

I was seeing another dream – a dream about the first time I ever killed someone.

A dream about when Towa awakened as the Ruinmaker.

The Ruinmaker was a humanoid anti-star godment, the strongest weapon in the world. If used, it could eradicate our planet, and was without a doubt the most powerful star armament in existence.

Towa was human, but she was also a star armament. On the day my parents died, Towa transformed into a star armament and replaced my right arm. Then, I used her power to take revenge. I killed one of the men who had killed my parents.

I had one other person to kill, but the man who cut off my arm had suddenly disappeared. The one I killed had probably cast some star sorcery on the brink of death which had allowed his partner to escape.

The man who directly killed Mom had died, but both of them had been fighting Dad when I entered the room, and I was determined to make the other one pay.

...No, no. I shook my head and tried to banish the black thoughts from my mind. I couldn't forgive them, but I was afraid of letting murderous rage germinate inside me. The more I thought about it, the more it ate me up. I was starting to lose my mind. The moment I had seen that man stab Dad, I had let my desire to kill take complete control. But right before that, I had heard a voice.

"Kill." A voice that pushed me to murder.

Apparently, the Ruinmaker had the power to amplify its user's negative feelings, such as murderous intent or hatred. This process acted as a supplement to one of the Ruinmaker's other abilities: the power to steal star power from whoever it killed. If I had merely wanted revenge and nothing more, the quickest way for me to achieve my goal would've been to go on killing people and stealing their power in order to strengthen myself.

Regardless, I had killed someone that day. I also stole his star power. It may have happened as a result of the Ruinmaker amplifying my desire to kill, but I wasn't about to push all the blame on to her. Even if my desire hadn't been amplified, I'm sure I still would've wanted to kill that man.

I had no choice. It was the only way to protect Towa. But I wasn't trying to rationalize any other murder, and I didn't want to rely on killing people and stealing their power. I wanted to get stronger on my own, and use that power to avenge my parents.

I had another reason to become strong: I wanted to defeat Yukihime. I'd been challenging her ever since we met, but I'd never won a single battle. The reason Towa and I were living with Yukihime was so that she could guard Towa, the Ruinmaker, but I wanted to guard Towa on my own.

It wasn't that Yukihime was unreliable – after all, she was the strongest star sorcerer in the entire world. If she couldn't do it, then who could? That didn't matter. I was Towa's big brother. I had a duty to protect her. Besides that, it just frustrated me. I hated losing so much, it made me want to die.

On top of that – and this was so embarrassing that I'd never be able to tell her – I wanted to become a man who was fit to stand by Yukihime. If I remained weaker than her, I'd never have any right to fight by her side.

...Why am I having this dream now, though? I haven't had it in a while... And it never gets any easier. Even though it was the middle of winter, my back was caked in sweat. *Is it because Christmas is just around the corner?* It was December 21. Four days away. For better or

worse, it seemed like my destiny was linked with Christmas. It was the day when my parents were murdered, and the day I met Yukihime. Christmas was her birthday, too... But I guess that didn't really matter.

I just hope nothing happens this year...

❄

That morning, Yukihime left the house earlier than usual. It wasn't uncommon for her to head to school alone, since she had a lot to deal with as the Headmistress. Normally, someone like her wouldn't have any time to spend with me, but I guess she was so competent that she could finish her duties and still have time to spare. With that in mind, I assumed that day would be the same as any other, but...

When I got to class, I saw Yukihime drooped over in the next chair over, grimly muttering to herself. "This is bad..."

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"...I'll tell you later." She seemed different than usual. It was rare to see her so dispirited.

Why can't she just tell me about it now? I was starting to worry, but I decided to wait until she was ready.

After school, Yukihime called me to the Headmistress' Office. It was lined with luxurious furnishings. I had no real concept of the value of furniture, but even I could tell right away that the sofas in the center of the room were super expensive.

"Is this dragon leather or something?" I asked as I sat down.

"Of course not. I think it's cow."

"Aww, cow?" Still way more than I could afford, probably. "So,

what gives? You look like something bad's happened."

Yukihime sat down across from me, then closed her eyes and remained silent for a few seconds. Finally, as if she had just made a huge decision, she started speaking in a very serious tone.

"I'm going to a meet with Khaos Schwartz tomorrow."

"Wha... Y-You're kidding, right?"

"I truly wish I was."

I was so shocked that I couldn't even form a coherent sentence.

Khaos Schwartz: One of the other worlds that existed alongside ours. There were a total of five, including our own.

#1, Blue: Azur Étoile, the Core World
#2, Black: Khaos Schwartz, the World of Chaos
#3, Rainbow: Semuleice, the World of Illusions
#4, Silver: Machina Silvaria, the World of Silver Creations
#5, White: Paradisos, the World of Sacred White

Inhabitants of the other worlds called our world Azur Étoile. Normally, worlds never interfered with each other, and for a long time, humans didn't even know that there were other worlds out there. Khaos Schwartz changed all that.

16 years ago, when Yukihime and I were born, the First Otherworld War took place. Then, nine years later, Yukihime's parents died in the Second Otherworld War. Khaos Schwartz invaded our world and began both of those wars.

As far as I knew, only people from Azur Étoile, Khaos Schwartz, and Semuleice traveled to other worlds. The fourth and fifth worlds made absolutely no outside contact. Semuleice was a friendly world that was on good terms with us, while Khaos Schwartz was the only world that had ever invaded any other ones. On top of that, the men who killed my parents were also apparently from Khaos Schwartz. There was no way to identify them, though. It was dark that night, and I hadn't even seen the killers' faces.

Khaos Schwartz was a world that had several different countries and forces. The people who were coming to visit us now could be from a completely different force from the ones who killed my parents, but there was still a chance that they could be connected somehow.

Yukihime and I had both lost our parents to people from that world. We had no history with the rest of the worlds, but things were different with Khaos Schwartz.

"...Why do they want to have a meeting all of a sudden? There must be some reason. Nothing like this has ever happened!"

"Okay... Just calm down and listen to me. Khaos Schwartz, they..."

"What?"

For a moment, it was silent. Then, Yukihime continued. "They want us to hand over the Ruinmaker... Towa."

"Are you kidding me? That's insane!"

"They must be in serious trouble. Otherwise, they'd never make such a crazy demand."

"...Damn it. What did the Seven Houses say?"

"Some of them were stupid enough to request we quietly hand Towa over. Even putting personal feelings aside, there's no way we could just hand her over to them. It doesn't matter how much they claim that they'll take care of her. If she were to be used in a war, there's no telling what could happen, and besides, if they take her... They might never return her." She went on. "On top of that, to us, losing Towa means losing crucial military strength. If we hand over our most powerful weapon, we're basically inviting our enemies to come and attack us."

She was right. She was right, but...

"...I'm sorry. There's no way I'd ever hand Towa over to anyone," she added.

"I know that..."

Towa was a weapon, but I refused to see things that way. *Yes, she's extremely powerful, but so what? That just means I need to get strong enough so that we don't need to use her anymore!* That's the sort of fantasy I was chasing. *I know that I need to prepare myself... I know I need to give up on this, but...*

"But Kokuya, we need to think realistically this time."

Yukihime...

"This could lead to war. And if it does, we may need to use her."

She confronted me with the very reality I didn't want to face.

"Nothing's set in stone yet. It all depends on how the meeting goes tomorrow. But there's a very high possibility that things may come to that, so I want you to prepare yourself... so you can make the right decision when the time comes."

"Okay, I will," I said.

"I'm sorry we had to discuss this."

"...It's okay. It's not your fault."

"That may be so, but I still wish I didn't have to say these things to you. I know how much you treasure Towa..."

"Thanks for thinking of me... I'm really glad that you became Towa's guardian. Thank you, Yukihime."

It was a little embarrassing to say, but they were my true feelings. *You have to be honest with stuff like this.*

"...Why are you acting so weird all of a sudden?" Yukihime blushed.

"I'm not. I'm just saying, if someone more selfish was in your position, they might say 'We need to fight to prevent a war' and that'd

be the end of it, right? I could easily picture a different person acting like that if they gained control over Towa. I mean, most strong people are jerks, right?"

"....Uh, hmm. Does that mean you realize just how amazing I am now? Took you long enough."

"If only you didn't say stuff like that, I would have figured it out much sooner..."

"...Sh-shut up."

"Sorry, can't help it."

"You could at least try to. Anyway, thank you, too."

"For what?"

"B-Because... I'm glad that someone like you is Towa's big brother, and..." Embarrassment caused her words to momentarily trail off, but she went on. "That you're the Finalfist, the one who can use her."

The Finalfist was the title given to the person compatible with the Ruinmaker. No one really knew how Ruinmakers were born or how they worked, but every world had one, and they were all girls. This was apparently because back in a mythic age, a goddess named Ruin took on the form of a girl and pushed the world to the brink of destruction. Eventually, she was sealed away, and her soul was split into five different parts.

There were no traces of this age to be found in our world, but myths about Ruin existed in Khaos Schwartz and Semuleice. The goddess Ruin had appeared in the form of a girl, therefore, only girls could become vessels for the parts of her soul. She possessed many great powers, and each Ruinmaker could use part of them.

It was also said that Ruin had been sealed by a hero with a prosthetic arm known as the Finalfist, a 'fist capable of ending everything.' Some people doubted the legends that were inscribed on documents in the other worlds, but it was clear that the Ruinmakers existed, which proved that it wasn't all fantasy.

Towa had inherited part of Ruin's soul and gained the power to destroy the world. She was the Ruinmaker, the strongest weapon, and I was her Finalfist, the one who could best use her.

On the night when our parents were murdered, Towa had awakened as the Ruinmaker, and a voice had echoed inside my head. Since it kept encouraging me to kill, I imagined it was probably the voice of Ruin, who lived inside Towa.

And so, I had borrowed Towa's power and killed one of the murderers. Murdering didn't really make me feel anything. I simply used the immense power of the Ruinmaker to erase a human life. But despite my numbness, the truth remained in my mind. I had used my little sister to kill someone.

It was my sin, mine alone, and I was prepared to bear it for the rest of my life. I never wanted to push any sort of weight onto her. I didn't want to use her in another battle, but it seemed like I didn't have a choice this time.

Yukihime went on. "If the Ruinmaker had fallen into the wrong hands, it could have gone from the world's best method of protection to the worst weapon of mass destruction that our world had ever seen. Things could have easily gone awry at any moment."

The Phanatics had been trying to push us to become just that, but they failed. Because she saved us. The girl sitting in front of me saved us all on her own.

"Anyway, it's nice to know that we both feel grateful to each other. For now, though, we need to focus on the matter at hand," I said.

"Yeah..."

"Did you talk to Towa?"

"There's no telling what may happen at this point. I wanted to talk to you about it first."

"...We need to hurry up and tell her, then."

There was no way I could use Towa in a battle without letting her know first. I needed to tell her the truth. It made me sick to my stomach, but I knew there was no other way.

With my mind made up, I stepped out of the Headmistress' Office.

"I want to fight, too."

That was the first thing Towa said after we relayed the news to her. "I don't just want to be protected all the time…"

"B-But Towa…" I said.

"No buts. You think I'm just going to hide somewhere and pretend nothing's happening while you and Yukihime get hurt?"

"B-But…"

No buts. Towa was right. Wanting to keep her out of danger was nothing but selfishness, and it wouldn't fly here. Yet I still didn't want to make her fight… even if it meant putting the entire world in danger. To me, my little sister was more important than the world itself.

"Big brother…"

"…Yes?"

"I believe in you. That's why I want you to use me to protect the world, together with Yukihime."

"Looks like Towa prepared herself for this even quicker than we did. She seems a lot firmer in her resolve, too," Yukihime said.

"I guess so…" Towa looked at Yukihime, revealed a pained smile, and let out an exasperated sigh. "For ten years, I've done nothing but let you protect me… I always told myself that when a time like this came, I wouldn't run away. I've been ready for the past nine years…"

During our time with the Phanatics, Towa and I became targets for the other students. The new people always got picked out, and if you didn't have the courage to do something about it, you'd just end up

becoming a plaything. I was able to use my strength to make the others accept me, but things were different for Towa. Somehow, they had heard a rumor about Towa's powers, and decided to pull it out of her using fear. No one knew how to activate her powers, so they just kept trying to scare her over and over.

There were others who targeted her for sexual reasons. They came after me, too. Age and gender didn't matter to those people, and a shockingly large number of them had twisted sexual preferences. Some of them only got excited at the sight of a five-year old – Towa's age at the time. I fought them all off, and even hurt some of them to the point that they'd never be able to commit any more atrocities.

The Phanatics were nothing but a group of degenerates. I had a hard time believing that some of them were even human. There were some sane people there, of course, but they always died first. No one was able to retain their sanity for long.

"I want to go home... I miss Mom and Dad..."

I still dreamed about it – Towa, staring at me with hollow eyes, whimpering the same thing over and over. Whether I was awake or asleep, Towa just kept crying.

And so, I vowed to protect her. I vowed to kill the people who did this to us – the people who killed our parents.

"Up until now, I've done nothing but let you protect me... Now it's my turn to help you, big brother," Towa said, staring straight at me as she continued to speak. "If I can't help out in times like these, then what am I here for? Why did I even get this power in the first place? At least let me believe that I was given this power to help you in times like these."

"...Fine." I couldn't run anymore. It was time to act. "But don't do anything rash. That's the one thing your big brother won't allow, got it?"

It was December 22 – the day of the meeting. School had been

canceled, since the two envoys from Khaos Schwartz were coming to meet us right at our very own Star Gate Academy. Aside from its status as the world's top star sorcerer academy, the school also administered four Star Gates underground, which connected our world to the others. One of them led to Khaos Schwartz, and two envoys would be coming out of it at any minute.

"Big brother, Yukihime... Be careful. And come back safely," Towa said.

"We will," I replied.

"Don't worry. We shouldn't have to face any danger today. We'll be back soon," Yukihime added.

After Towa saw us off, we headed toward the academy. We had walked this way so many times, yet now it felt strangely foreboding. Once we arrived, we headed straight for the large tower inside the campus, where the Council of Seven Houses usually met.

"Kokuya, stop."

"Wh-what is it?"

"We need to go and meet the envoys from Khaos Schwartz before we head to the meeting room. Follow me. You're my bodyguard today, remember?"

"Roger that, Headmistress."

With that, we headed to the academy basement, which housed the Star Gates.

"This place always gives me the creeps," I murmured.

The room had an otherworldly atmosphere to it. It was a Crack, a rift that existed between worlds. Deep within pitch black darkness, I could see distant stars shining. It looked like outer space. Cutting through the darkness was a pathway of white stone, and beyond it sat four doors. No one knew who had created all this, or when.

On the far right sat the Black Gate, which led to Khaos Schwartz. Next came the Rainbow Gate, the door to Semuleice, then the Silver Gate, the door to Machina Silvaria, and finally the White Gate, the door to Paradisos.

Suddenly, I felt a huge amount of star power emanating from the Black Gate on the right.

"Here they come," Yukihime muttered.

As apprehension rippled through me, I took a deep breath. An ominous sound echoed out, the gate opened, and from it emerged two people dressed in black.

One of them was a woman. She had purple hair that came down to the tips of her shoulders, with an extra bundle in the back that flowed down like a tail. Her drooping eyes looked calm, and there was a mole under her left eye.

It also looked as if her voluptuous breasts were about to spill right out from her deeply plunging outfit. *Otherworld people are really crazy... What do you have to eat to get breasts that big? It looks like she's got a bust size of at least 90 cm...*

She had a tattoo on her left breast, and was wearing a long skirt with a slit that went all the way up to her waist, revealing a bit of the garter belt she wore underneath. Everything about her was just so sexy, including the confident smile on her lips.

The moment she saw me, she drew near. "My, my, aren't you a little cutie?" she said, then suddenly hugged me.



"Gggh?!" *I... I can't breathe! Because of her boobs...!*

"Hey, what are you doing?!" Once Yukihime barked that out, the woman let go of me and stared blankly at her.

Then, that gentle smile returned to her face. "Oh, sorry. I just can't resist children. Do you want one, too?" She stared at Yukihime and opened her arms.

"...No, thank you," Yukihime replied.

This is playing out much differently from how I imagined it would. I thought that we'd be coming face to face with two scary, hostile people... But this just looks like a sexy, older woman.

The other envoy looked to be a boy around Towa's age. He had long, blond hair, and a black mark that looked like a lightning bolt near the center of his forehead. He also had lightning bolt earrings, a lightning bolt tattoo over his left eye, and was dressed in a customized military uniform.

"Are you the two envoys from Khaos Schwartz?" Yukihime asked.

"Yes, that's right. I'm..." As the woman began to answer, she was interrupted.

"Of course we are. Who else would we be?!" the boy shouted in an irritated voice.

At first, Yukihime and I were too surprised to retort.

"Umm... Maybe the translation star sorcery isn't working properly." Yukihime tried to pass it off, but the boy went on.

"What do you think Grom just came out of? The gate that leads to Khaos Schwartz, of course. Or are you mistaking Grom for a piece of Semuleice trash? Are all Azur Étoilians this stupid?"

Yeah, it probably had nothing to do with the translation star sorcery.

“You’re the stupid one here!” the woman shouted, then swung a white-gloved fist down on the boy’s head. “Sorry for the late introduction. I’m Elemia Argyros, one of the Seven Wicked Knights who directly serve Lord Redge, the Dark Emperor who rules the Granz Empire, the capital of Khaos Schwartz’ human realm. And this…” She grabbed the boy’s head and raised it up. “Go on, tell them your name.”

“…Grom Eguleil, from the same place,” the boy said grumpily.

“I’m Yukihime Yukigane, Headmistress of Azur Étoile.”

Elemia interjected. “Over here, the representative of your defense agency/star sorcerer training facility also acts as the representative of your world, correct? So strange.”

“Is that why these two kids are here? So this isn’t just a joke? She’s really their representative? Grom thought they were just trying to insult us.” After Grom spoke, a loud ‘wham’ sounded out as another one of Elemia’s powerful fists collided with his head.

Elemia cleared her throat. “Who’s the other kid?”

“Kokuya Kurono, my bodyguard,” Yukihime answered.

“Ooh, so your name is Kokuya?” Elemia peered into my eyes, and I quickly averted them… right to her deep cleavage. I felt like I could dive right in.

“…What are you looking at?” Yukihime whispered, then administered a lightning-fast chop to my head.

I had thought they were acting way too casual for two envoys who had the weight of their world on their shoulders, but I guess my captain wasn’t much different.

Just give it up, captain. You’re no match for an otherworldly bust like that no matter what you try. Don’t take it personally.

“So, where should we talk?” Elemia asked.

“I’ll guide you to the meeting room. But before that… Can I take your star armaments, like we agreed earlier?” Yukihime replied.

“Oh, right… Star armaments, was it? Tee hee…” Elemia gave us a suspicious smile. *“Liberation – Sand Scorpios.”*

In Elemia’s hand appeared a silver, wide-bladed sword, which she gave to Yukihime. Both parties had agreed to keep their arms out of the meeting room. If the star sorcerers had access to their weapons, all kinds of ambushes would be possible.

“You too,” Yukihime said to Grom.

“What? No. Grom came here as her bodyguard, after all. Don’t worry, Grom will be nice and quiet as long as you two don’t try anything stupid. Man, this is gonna be so boring…” Grom glared at me. Grom was short and looked very young, yet his glare betrayed a spine-tingling malice. “You can keep your weapon, too. We’re just doing this as a courtesy, right? I mean, you people could hide soldiers all over this place if you really wanted to. Grom would be able to murder them all in a flash, though…”

The kid certainly had a mouth on him. Even though we hadn’t planned anything like that, he was right. We could promise that we had no intent to fight, but there were still many other star sorcerers lurking about in our world. Still, he had quite the confidence. I imagined he probably possessed enough power to back up his arrogance.

Khaos Schwartz was split between two rival races who were locked in a furious struggle: humans and monsters. Unlike Azur Étoile, the star sorcerers of Khaos Schwartz were always at war. The only two star sorcerer wars we’d experienced had been the Second Otherworld War nine years ago, and the First Otherworld War sixteen years ago. My generation started training after the second war ended, when the academy started gathering star sorcerers to prepare for the next war. We became star sorcerers during peacetime, so we didn’t know what war was really like.

In the past two wars, we had fought against Khaos Schwartz. Not

the two standing in front of us right now, but a different force from their world who had attacked us. The enemy hadn't taken it seriously, though. They had just figured Azur Étoile would be an easy world to conquer. Despite that, our star sorcerers had fought desperately in order to protect our world.

Khaos Schwartz had many more star sorcerers than us. Their military strength was far superior to ours. If we tried to fight them head-on, we'd surely lose. Their world was simply on a different level than ours in terms of power. They had their own problems to deal with, though. With their world always at war, they were never able to deploy their full power in an all-out attack on us. Basically, if they fought us with all they had, we'd lose. But since that would probably never happen, we always had a chance at survival. This knowledge was a combination of what I had learned in my time with the Phanatics, and what Yukihime had taught me.

"Well then, shall we head to the meeting room?" Yukihime asked, as we put the Crack behind us.

While the meeting began, Grom and I stood outside the room. Next to us were Yukihime's Snowbloom and Elemia's weapon.

"...Hey, you. What was your name again?"

"...Kokuya."

"Right. Kokuya, Kokuya. Okay, Grom's probably got it memorized... Hey, Kokuya. What do you think's gonna happen here?"

"What are you talking about?"

Grom grinned as he stared at me. "You know, are you guys gonna end up fighting us?"

"...That all depends on you."

"That's Grom's line! This would all be over if you'd just hand us the Ruinmaker!"

Stupid kid...

“You Azur Étoilians are too cocky. Weaklings like you should just do as you’re told!”

“If we’re so weak, then why do you want to steal our weapon?”

“Why does Grom need to explain that to you? Elemia’s probably already explaining it inside… Man, this is so boring. Hey, let’s fight!”

“What did you even come here for?”

“Grom told you! Grom’s the same as you! A bodyguard! Bo-dy-guaaard…”

“Then just shut up and wait for them to finish talking.”

“What’s it gonna be, though? Are you guys gonna hand over the Ruinmaker or what?”

“That’s what they’re discussing inside.”

“You’re not just some flunkie, are you? You gotta at least know that much. Better tell Grom, or Grom might go a bit wild here…”

“…We’re never going to hand the Ruinmaker over to you.”

The moment I muttered that, Grom’s smile grew wider.

“…’zat so? Ah well. If you put up a fight, we’ll just steal it by force, and then it’ll be playtime. Then Grom will get to play with you, Kokuya.”

Grom’s words sent fear into my heart. He was an ass, but I could sense something dangerous in his words. He wasn’t just spouting off nonsense. He had the bite to back up his bark.

As I glared back at him, I felt like he and I were bound to clash eventually.

After the meeting, Yukihime had a ton of things to do, so I followed her around. The sun had set before we made it home.

Basically, negotiations had failed. We tried proposing alternatives and compromises for their demand to hand over the Ruinmaker, but they refused everything. Khaos Schwartz was currently stuck in a power struggle between humans and monsters. Originally, the humans had possessed Khaos Schwartz's Ruinmaker, but when the monsters managed to steal it, the humans had fallen into severe danger. They needed another Ruinmaker in order to turn things around.

Just like Yukihime said yesterday, if they took our Ruinmaker, our world would lose a huge chunk of its strength, and we'd become unable to protect ourselves from otherworld invasions. Even if I ignored how precious Towa was to me, she was still vital to our world's safety. We couldn't accept their demand, but they couldn't back down, either... which meant the only thing left to do was fight.

I'll never forget the ear-to-ear grin I saw on Grom's face after the meeting ended and Elemia told him what had happened.

"I knew I'd get to play with you soon." He slit his eyes and gave me a smile that was as innocent as it was sadistic.

Unlike Earth, Khaos Schwartz was a world that had been split in two. Elemia currently stood in the meeting room in Strahl Castle, which acted as the core of the Granz Empire. It was the most important stronghold the humans possessed.

"It looks like we'll be proceeding with your plan as scheduled, Lord Redge," Elemia said, as she finished her report. The silver-haired man she spoke to was the one who ruled the empire and commanded its greatest weapon, the Seven Wicked Knights. His name was Redge Ferimento, also known as the Dark Emperor.

"The other knights are still carrying out their missions, but no problems have arisen so far. May I carry out the plan as-is?" Elemia asked.

"Fine."

"As you wish, my lord," Elemia said, then left the room.

Once alone, the man muttered to himself. "...So close now."

Memories of a certain night ten years ago filled his mind. He saw images of his mentor, the one he had vowed to surpass, crumbling before his eyes. He saw a dark room, a small boy, and a silver arm enveloped by golden light – the Ruinmaker.

His powerful, determined voice slipped softly through the darkness. "...I will not fail again."

On December 23rd, the day after the meeting, Yukihime, Towa and I stood in the academy's second arena. Our usual arena had various stages in it, but this place was a huge sphere, and over a hundred meters wide from end to end. We could probably even play baseball inside it.

Khaos Schwartz gave us a day to finalize our answer, but Yukihime said she had already made her decision. *"We're never going to hand Towa over to them, no matter what. Which means we've no choice but to fight."*

Luckily our Headmistress wasn't a coward. Apparently, the other heads of the Seven Houses prioritized their own immediate safety and suggested we hand over Towa as soon as possible.

We had come to Arena #2 so I could practice using Towa's Ruinmaker powers... although it was more like rehabilitation.

Towa awoke as the Ruinmaker ten years ago. It had been nine years since I last used Towa's powers, so I was worried about whether or not I'd still be able to use them to their full extent. I needed to use the little time we had to re-learn how to use her properly. Since the Ruinmaker was meant to protect us, I was only allowed to use her in certain situations. We'd never encountered any serious danger in the past nine years, and I had hoped this peace would just continue on forever.

When I last used Towa nine years ago, I had been fighting Yukihime. The Seven Houses had been aiming to seize and arrest the entire Phanatics organization, and Yukihime took part in the assault. Despite the fact that she was still only seven years old, she had pretty much already become the world's strongest star sorcerer.

At the time, the man who had taken me in said that as long as I stayed with the Phanatics, I would have a chance to find the other murderer and get my revenge, and I believed him… even though I also hoped the Phanatics would get crushed beyond all recognition. I decided that once I completed my goal, I'd just crush 'em myself. But I knew I had to go on using them until I completed my goal, so when Yukihime came to destroy us, I had no choice but to fight her.

I fought her, and…

"Hey, Kokuya… I've beaten you 1,000 times, and…" I knew what she was going to say next. But she was wrong. "You've beaten me once, right?"

"You've gotta be kidding me. That time doesn't count."

I had defeated Yukihime only once before – a long time ago, when we first met, I defeated her using Towa's power. I only won because I teamed up with Towa, though. It had been the Ruinmaker's power that won that battle, not mine alone. As far as I was concerned, I had lost to Yukihime a thousand times, and that was it.

"If you insist. It still doesn't change the truth – you have the potential to become stronger than even the strongest person in the world."

"It wasn't me. It was all Towa's power."

"Either way, we need that power now. We need to make sure we can do this, for the sake of our world."

"Yeah… Ready, Towa?"

"Mm… I'm ready, big brother." Towa extended her right hand.

After removing Braveright, my prosthetic right arm, I grabbed Towa's right hand with my left. The Ruinmaker didn't need to be liberated, and was similar to a permanent star armament like Braveright, except that its name needed to be chanted just like Chronoslayer and Snowbloom in order to unleash its power.

Gripping Towa's hand, I opened my mouth. *"Liberation – Ruinmaker."*

Instantly, a mesmerizing golden aura covered Towa's body. Her contours faded, she disappeared, and her body shifted into the light that formed my new right arm. It looked the same as Braveright, save for one difference: a gold line, the color of Towa's star power, ran down the center of the silver arm.

Ruinmakers were star armaments that belonged to the humanoid anti-star godment category. They were the only ones in this category, and every world had its own unique Ruinmaker. I had no idea what sort of abilities the other Ruinmakers possessed, but I could transform Towa into any weapon I wanted. She became as strong as I wished her to be, but there was a limitation: I could only transform her into the shape of a weapon that I'd used before.

There had been *one* exception. When I first used her, I had suddenly wished for a new right arm to replace the one I lost, and Towa had granted that wish. Even though I had no idea how to use her, I still managed to unconsciously activate Towa's power on the night my parents were murdered.

Transforming into weapons wasn't all that Towa could do, though – in fact, her other ability was her main strength. Whenever she transformed into a weapon, Towa gained a massive amount of total star power, way more than I could ever hope to generate – and since she never ran out, she could use a lot at once. That allowed her to easily cover for my weaknesses: my lack of power and stamina.

"Looks like I managed to do it." Unlike when I first used her, I didn't hear a bloodthirsty voice in my head this time.

"It's been so long since we've done this… It feels kind of strange."

Behind me, Towa appeared in a semi-transparent, ghostly state. With her body transformed into a weapon, she was nothing but pure star power now.

I moved my hands toward Towa's floating breasts. Then, just as my fingers were about to touch her voluptuous silhouette, they passed right through.

"...What are you doing, big brother?"

"Yeah, what *are* you doing?" Yukihime chimed in.

"Uhh, I thought I might be able to touch her... Guess not."

"Stop goofing around and begin the next step."

"The next step?" Yukihime moved ahead of me and turned around.

"Fight. What do you think we're here for?"

"I have to fight already? Seems kinda sudden..."

"We don't have time to let you ease back into the swing of things, now do we?"

"...Guess not."

"Liberation – Snowbloom." Yukihime gripped her azure blade. "Here I come."

"Bring it on."

Yukihime swung her left hand down, and a barrage of icicles shot out toward me. They were closing in fast, and there was no way I could dodge them all. I thrust my twinblade out in front of me and began spinning it at a rapid rate. As it started deflecting the icicles, I sped up my mind and body.

The moment I tried to get closer, Yukihime created a huge star circle. Out of it slid a hulking block of ice, ready to run me over like a train. I could dodge sideways, but the thought had only just crossed

my mind as icicles came shooting out of the ground on both sides. I was being attacked from three different directions at the same time. I thought about jumping back, but I wouldn't be able to escape the block of ice in that direction. Jumping upwards was also out of the question, since I wouldn't be able to move when in mid-air. Which meant...

I injected star power into my twinblade, twisted the hilt, and split the blade in two. When I swung both of the glowing blades at the same time, two golden slashes shot out and destroyed the icicles on both sides of me.

Normally, this move was impossible for me, but Towa's power freed me from the critical limitations of having no star sorcery range. I managed to get rid of the icicles on the right and left, but shaving off bits and pieces of the ice block that was coming from ahead wasn't getting me anywhere.

I gripped my blades, poured more star power into them, then released one of the gigantic star power slashes that Towa was so skilled at creating. My slash collided with the ice block and eradicated it. Now I could finally move toward Yukihime – but she was no longer in front of me. *Where did she go?*

"Big brother, above you!" Towa called out.

I quickly looked up and saw Yukihime kicking off a square panel of ice. She raised her sword over her head, then came sailing down toward me. I crossed my blades upward and prepared to block the attack from above.

We clashed. In the next moment, Yukihime instantly created a block of ice behind her and used it to jump back into the air. Now she was behind me. Before either of us could turn around, I thrust my longsword backwards. Likewise, Yukihime thrust her own blade backwards, blocking my sword once again. After we clashed back to back, I ran out to create some distance, then swung my blades and shot two slashes into an empty space.

Yukihime squinted in suspicion. It must have looked like I was

doing something pointless, but these actions were necessary for the star sorcery I was about to activate. Yukihime didn't seem to care, and came running – right into my trap.

"SlashSet – Release."

The moment Yukihime's body entered the trajectory I had swung along, I chanted the words necessary to activate my star sorcery. Suddenly, the two slashes reappeared and sliced up Yukihime's uniform.

"…What?" Yukihime froze.

That was the correct decision. If she took another step forward, she'd fall into another one of my slash traps. SlashSet was a star sorcery that allowed me to cause slashes to reappear where I had swung earlier. By using my time elemental star sorcery, I waited until Yukihime ran across the right spot and wound time back to where my slash had still been active. The star power in my slashes allowed them to retain their attack power when time was reversed, which meant that anyone standing there would get sliced up.

"That's a pretty crafty move for you."

"It's all thanks to Towa."

I would have never been able to use that move without her. The only things I could do on my own were speed up my mind to make things appear slower and speed up my body to make me move faster, although it tired me out. I could also use Progress Boost, which sped up how quickly my star power charged and allowed me to launch a really powerful attack, but that was about it. All I could really do was speed up and strengthen myself, the most basic of abilities.

"Gotta move cautiously, or I'll get slashed again, right? No matter. I've already thought of several ways to get past this," Yukihime said.

"Oh yeah? Let's see 'em."

Yukihime raised her left hand into the air. "No, I think I'll save them for now and just force my way through instead."

"...Why would you do that?"

"Because I'm not about to let you test me." Her gentle smile sent a chill up my spine.

In the next instant, I felt star power above me. I glanced up to see a gargantuan block of ice – the move Yukihime used to defeat me two battles ago.

The Stardrop, which earned its name from the fact that Yukihime dropped a block of ice large enough to be a meteor.

"You think that's gonna work?!" With ease, I shot a slash upward and cleaved the ice.

"How about this?" Suddenly, an even larger ice block appeared. *Can I actually cut through that?* I hesitated for a moment.

"Just fast forward!" Towa's voice echoed.

"Yeah."

I combined my twinblade again and quickly spun it several times, but not in order to speed up my body. I followed through with what I usually did to speed up, but stopped right before I activated the star sorcery itself. Then, I threw my twinblade straight at the ice block. I was going to activate this star sorcery from a distance.

The moment my twinblade pierced it, I activated the star sorcery and sped up the ice block as fast as I could. This caused the ice to melt. No matter how big that block of ice was, it couldn't last forever. If enough time passed, it would melt away, and I could make all that happen in the blink of an eye with a little acceleration. This had been what Towa meant when she said 'fast forward.'

I caught my twinblade as it fell, then prepared to close in on Yukihime once and for all.

"I knew you two would give me a good fight... Guess I'll have to get serious now."

As she said that, a staggering surge of star power emanated out from Yukihime. It felt like something even more powerful than her Stardrop was coming... then, just as I recovered my stance–

"You can't block this, can you?"

She slashed me. Yukihime stood in front of me with her blade out. *What did she do to me?* The moment I saw her disappear, I got hit. I couldn't even tell when she had seemingly teleported and reappeared. There was no trace of where she had moved, or when she had attacked.

"And that makes my 1,001st win. In terms of fighting you and Towa together, I have one win and one loss. Ahh, finally... I finally beat you." Yukihime revealed a content smile.

"...What was that just now?"

Yukihime answered my question. What she unveiled to me was a star sorcery so frightening, I could do nothing but stand aghast.

That night, Yukihime and I sat across from each other in the living room. Often, after Towa fell asleep, Yukihime and I would sit here and talk about things that we normally weren't able to.

"Can I ask you a question?" Yukihime spoke up suddenly.

"What?"

"...If the person who killed your parents and cut off your arm was taking part in this battle, would you want to kill them?"

"That again? What do you know that I don't?"

"Just answer." Yukihime looked very serious.

"...If I had to, then I would. For example, if Towa was in danger, I wouldn't hesitate for a second."

“What if you didn’t have to?”

“…I don’t know. The old me wouldn’t have hesitated. It was basically my whole reason for living. But then, when I met you, things changed.” I wanted to say more, but I had trouble putting it into words. Eventually, the rest trickled out. “After I met you, and we started living together, I… I stopped having that dream so much.”

“…The one about your parents?”

“Yeah…”

The dream about my parents being murdered. I still saw it every now and then, but it became less frequent. When I was a kid, I used to see it every night, and it made me afraid to go to sleep. It was all thanks to Yukihime, who had taught me other ways to use my powers aside from just thinking about killing. She showed me another path.

That’s why I…

“Yukihime, I’m really grateful to you.”

Grateful. Yes, I’m grateful.

I still hadn’t defeated her on my own, and until I did that, I wasn’t going to allow myself to feel anything other than gratitude – for example, the pure fondness that Nagisaki felt for her. I had no right to feel such things.

“Knock it off. I don’t need your thanks…”

“Remember what you told me when we first met? That if I didn’t know how to use my power, I should just focus on using it to protect other people?”

Yukihime understood exactly what her duty was. She belonged to the Yukigane House, one of the families that had built Otherworld City and worked to protect us from otherworldly invasions. Yukihime knew that from the moment she was born, it had become her duty to dedicate her life to protecting others.

I didn't want to have anyone decide anything for me – let alone having something decided from birth. I felt that there were an endless amount of factors capable of influencing a person's life, like the environment you grew up in and your experiences. My entire life changed over a single night.

I was someone who couldn't accept his own fate, while Yukihime was someone who had completely embraced her duties. No, it actually seemed like she longed for it. She took pride in her duty, and I was envious of that. She probably never once felt that someone else had decided her life for her.

"I'm happy to see you've grown wiser over the years," Yukihime said.

"Back then, I didn't understand a thing."

When we first met, I thought she was an annoying jerk. She acted all high and mighty and lectured me on the most insignificant things. I hated how she'd always go on about the importance of duty and how important one's birth was. Boy, did she irritate me… Because she had everything I didn't. Everything I'd lost.

Yukihime said that her duty was her own, but her parents had taught her how to deal with it. I could understand what she meant. Even though I didn't have an astronomical duty like protecting the world, I had still learned a few things from my own parents.

"Kokuya. Men shouldn't throw punches over trivial things." Dad once said that to me after I got into a fistfight with a friend.

"When are we allowed to throw punches, then?"

"When you're protecting something important to you, I guess."

"How do I know when that is?"

"For example, what would you do if a bad person attacked Towa?"

"Beat the crap out of 'em."

"Ha ha... That sounds a little dangerous, but I guess you've got the gist of it."

Dad's words still remained in my heart. If Yukihime's duty was a blessing, then my fate was a curse – a curse of revenge. The only reason I had ever wanted to get strong was to kill people. However, a while after I first met Yukihime, one particular event caused me to start doubting myself.

One day, Towa got kidnapped. Yukihime and I immediately went to go save her. Yukihime nearly lost her life in the process, but she managed to save Towa. Before that, Yukihime had sworn to protect Towa no matter what happened, but I had stubbornly insisted that I would protect her on my own. That incident ended up changing my mindset. I realized that Yukihime was someone I could trust, and took an interest in learning what 'duty' really meant to her.

Afterwards, I asked how she could risk her life for duty, or for someone who wasn't even a family member. I couldn't understand it at all. *Is it simply because she was born into that sort of family? Is that what allows her to go so far?*

"But it's easy. After all, I'm just doing what my mom and dad told me to."

Yukihime's parents helped end the Second Otherworld War, but lost their lives in the process. They defeated countless enemies, including leaders of the invading army, and never stopped fighting until they took their last breaths. Entrusted with her own duty to protect, Yukihime respected her parents from the bottom of her heart for having died doing exactly that. All she ever talked about was wanting to become just like them. She wanted to keep getting stronger so that she could fight and save the world.

Since she was the one who had saved my beloved sister, and continued to help me protect her, I aimed to be like Yukihime. So when she said things like that with such conviction, I longed to feel the same way. Then, one day, Yukihime showed me a new path.

It happened when we were still in middle school. We decided to

make a bet and fight each other. If Yukihime won, I'd have to help her protect the world, and if I won, I'd get to order Yukihime to do something. I lost, of course.

"Now, fulfill your promise, and help me protect our world." I could still remember her words when she won. Maybe it's thanks to those words that I didn't end up as a vengeful demon. Revenge and duty, killing and protecting... Those two sides were always clashing inside me.

Someday, I'll find an answer. I'll catch up to her. I'll become someone who's truly fit to walk beside her... and then...

"What's wrong? You're turning red," Yukihime said.

"It's... nothing."

"...You sure?"

"Hey, Yukihime..."

"What?"

"I was just thinking, maybe it wouldn't be so bad if I had to protect the world with you for the rest of my life." As of now, the promise we made was more important than ever before.

"...Now that's what I like to hear. Don't go changing your mind, though."

"I won't. We're going to protect the ones we love, no matter what."

"Of course we are. Who do you think you're talking to?"

"Miss Yukihime Yukigane, the strongest star sorcerer in the world, and Headmistress of Star Gate Academy, the organization that guards our world."

"Looks like you've finally learned how to talk like a true servant."

"Huh? But you're *my* servant right now."

“Excuse me?!”

After the conversation digressed into our usual bickering, Yukihime abruptly spoke up. “Mind if I change the subject?”

“What is it?”

“What’s your favorite color, Kokuya?”

“My favorite color? Uhh… silver?”

“…S-silver?” Yukihime paled for some reason.

“Uhh, I guess black and red are cool, too.”

“Red?”

“Yeah, I like red.”

“…Oh! Good, good. I like red, too. Heroes always wear red, right?”

“Is this going anywhere?”

“N-no, uhh, never mind.” She was so bad at playing dumb. “Anyway, we should get to sleep. Once we give them our answer, it won’t be long before the battle begins. We should begin our preparations tomorrow morning.”

For some reason, Yukihime looked really happy. I wasn’t sure what was going on with her, but it didn’t seem like anything bad, so I decided not to pry.

“Okay… Good night, then.”

“Good night.”



Beyond the Massacres

I hated dreaming. Besides, all I ever saw were nightmares. I think it was the same for my big brother. I saw a lot of different nightmares, but there was one nightmare that really stood out...

◆

The girl possessed immense power. She could transform into weapons, and even steal star power from the people killed by her wielder. And she *loved* killing. She loved letting other people use her as a tool to commit murder. Killing, killing, killing. Over and over and over again. A never-ending cycle of death. With every life she took, she grew stronger, and with every new ounce of strength, she became more efficient at killing. It made her happy, since it meant she could indulge in her favorite pastime even more.

The girl never got hurt, but her wielders kept dying. Whenever they did, she'd just find a new wielder and start killing again. Many different kinds of people wielded her in order to kill. One was the leader of a gang of thieves, another a martial artist who sought strength. One was a king, while another was a dark lord who wished to destroy the planet. Once, she was even wielded by a hero who saved the world.

Eventually, the girl grew so powerful that she could easily destroy the entire world on her own. People came to call her the Ruinmaker, the one who sought ruin. Soon, she was no longer a girl. She had become Ruin – an evil goddess of destruction.

CHAPTER FOUR

All-Out War

Whenever I saw that nightmare, I'd always wake up and go running around in a panic. I had to make sure I wasn't standing on a mountain of corpses or in a huge puddle of blood.

Phew. This is my room. Everything's normal.

I looked at myself in the mirror. I had to make sure that it was me.

It's okay. I'm scared. I'm not some monster, I'm just my usual cowardly self.

Once I calmed down, I left my room and went to my big brother's. He had gotten up much earlier than I, and was already in his school uniform. I could tell he knew what was wrong just by the sight of me, but he didn't give any of his usual weird remarks.

Silently, I hugged him. He gently hugged me back without saying anything. When I felt his big, bulky body embrace me, I was finally able to convince myself once and for all. *Yes. I'm really me right now. I'm a coward, so there's a lot I'm afraid of... But now isn't the time to worry about nightmares. People are about to start a war over me. My big brother, Yukihime, and other people might get hurt. I might get taken away to another world and be turned into a tool of war... But feeling my big brother so close puts me at ease. I know that he'll be able to protect me from everything I'm afraid of.*

"...It's okay, right?" I asked.

"Yeah. You don't need to worry one bit." Despite how vague the question was, my big brother still managed to put me at ease.

On December 24th – Christmas Eve – it began.

Star Gate Academy stood right at the front of Otherworld City's southernmost district, which contained a barren wasteland as far as the eye could see. That's where our enemies had invaded from during the First and Second Otherworld Wars, and it had become the battlefield for both.

Apparently, it was very easy for two worlds to connect in this area. Normally, one would have to go to the gates underneath the academy in order to travel to another world, but there existed a star sorcery capable of creating shortcuts, and certain Khaos Schwartz star sorcerers knew how to cast it.

Star sorcerers from our academy were stationed at predicted enemy entry points within the southernmost district, while Yukihime and I waited in the academy's underground monitor room. In this room, a map of the southernmost district was visible on a movie theater-sized screen. The map was filled with red dots, which were detailed in a separate pop-up window.

Yukihime muttered as she stared at the screen. "Gross..."

I had to agree with her. Visible in the pop-up window were grotesque monsters with stark white bodies and smooth faces. They had mouths, but no eyes, and staggered on two shaky legs. Their hands and legs were thin, while their skin looked shriveled up and wrinkly. There were others who looked similar, yet smaller, and walked on four legs. I saw many more of these.

Behind these smaller monsters stood an even more grotesque horror. Basically, it looked like a giant earthworm. As thick and long as a school hallway, it came squirming toward us. Aside from that, there were other dragon-like creatures with worms for heads.

These monsters came pouring out of star circles that had appeared in the southernmost district. Suddenly, we saw a huge blip on the screen that looked bigger than all the others. The size of each red dot was determined by star power density rather than physical size, and it

wasn't long before we got details on this new intruder – the woman with the bewitching smile, Elemia.

"There she is." Yukihime glared at the screen.

Then, we saw another red dot just as big as Elemia's, right next to one of the underground gates. Grom had appeared.

"He's heading straight for us?!"

"Since they obviously had ways to get to us without using the gates, I didn't station many star sorcerers down here... Take care of him, Kokuya."

"Roger that."

"...You know what to do if things get rough, right?"

"Yeah."

I didn't want to use Towa, especially since she was so scared, but I had to be prepared for the worst, regardless of the risks.

"Be careful, you two," Towa said.

Yukihime and I nodded.

"Bye for now."

"See you soon."

With that, we both headed off to our separate battlefields.

Sakito Nagisaki locked eyes with the monsters. After listening to the adults' stories about the war and the grotesque monsters they had fought, he'd known this day would come eventually.

He had read books about them and studied pictures, yet the terror of seeing one in real life still surpassed all his collected data.

But so what, thought Sakito. *What else have we been training ourselves for all this time?*

A sea breeze passed over his cheeks. He was afraid, but he wasn't about to run. *"Liberation – Tempestas Falx."*

Sakito gripped his great scythe and swung its jade blade horizontally, sweeping down all that was in front of him. A massive wind blade burst out and instantly cleaved dozens – no, over a hundred monsters that were marching ahead. Still more of the pale creatures poured out from behind, paying no heed as they stomped over the mound of corpses in front of them.

While the other star sorcerers around him also began fighting, Sakito trudged forward, slicing, dicing, and knocking back the sluggish, zombie-like creatures and their four-legged counterparts. A gigantic dragon-shaped monster lumbered in, baring sharp fangs and claws as it shook the ground with its trunk-like legs. White wings extended out from its white body, while its tail split into multiple points at the end. Just like all the other small monsters, its face was as smooth as a worm's.

Gnashing a gaggle of sharp teeth, the dragon opened its massive mouth and extended its stretchable neck. With the help of his wind, Sakito dodged backwards, while the dragon's fangs dug into the asphalt and sent pieces of rubble flying. This area had originally been scheduled for redevelopment, but all the construction had been mercilessly pulverized in the previous war.

Aiming for the dragon's neck, Sakito swung his scythe. A wind blade shot out and expertly severed the creature's neck from its body, but things didn't end there. In the next instant, the dragon's severed stump bubbled up and regenerated its neck and head at a lightning-fast speed. Even its teeth had all returned to pristine condition.

"...Fine, try this!"

Sakito swung his scythe frantically, cutting off the dragon's neck, wings, and legs all at once. Still, the monster was somehow able to regenerate them the blink of an eye.

“This is never going to end…” Sakito tightened his grip and thought about what to do next.

Suddenly, a bipedal creature’s fists came flying at him from the side. Sakito noticed just in time and quickly severed the creature’s legs, but it was too late. Simultaneously, a four-legged creature leapt onto his back and sunk its fangs into his shoulder.

“Gwah!” Sakito cried out in pain and chopped at the beast with his hand. Laced with star power, his hand easily cut off the creature’s head. While he had been fighting the dragon, the two- and four-legged creatures had surrounded him. Two four-legged creatures leapt at him at the same time. The dragon’s tail was also drawing close to him. Sakito released a whirlwind to blow all the monsters away, but the dragon’s tail cut through the wind and allowed it to keep pressing forward.

This is bad!

The moment Sakito resigned himself to his fate, huge icicles rained down from the sky and skewered all the monsters around him.

“You okay, Nagisaki?”

“…Yukigane?”

Standing behind Sakito was the girl he had a crush on, the headmistress of Star Gate Academy, and the strongest star sorcerer in the world, Yukihime Yukigane. She’d severed the dragon’s tail. Each of her icicles had also accurately skewered every small monster in the area and killed it, without accidentally stabbing any of her allies. The dragon’s body was now pinned to the ground, pierced from head to toe.

“Be careful, Yukigane, that big one regenerates at a frightening speed!”

Despite the icicles that had skewered it, the dragon continued to move. The icicles ripped through its body, but it simply regenerated the holes and forcibly escaped from its bonds.

“Well, that’s certainly a pain.” Yukihime snapped her fingers, and in the next instant, the dragon’s body was frozen solid.

Following this, Yukihime created a huge star circle high above the dragon’s head. Soon, an ice block as big as the dragon’s body materialized and came sailing down, shattering the frozen dragon’s body into pieces.

“Guess it can’t regenerate that fast.”

Thanks, captain obvious.

The dragon’s body now lay in scattered, frozen pieces along the ground. Regardless of what sort of abilities the dragon had, there was no way it could recover from that. There was no telling what would happen when the ice melted, but the area appeared to be safe for the time being.

Yukihime tried crushing one of the ice pieces. The white flesh inside it didn’t budge an inch. It seemed that dicing up the creature did indeed prevent it from regenerating.

“Nagisaki, can I leave the rest of the little ones to you?”

“…Sure. What are you going to do?”

“There’s someone I need to defeat. I’m counting on you, okay?” With that, Yukihime was off.

Even though Sakito had intended to keep fighting from the start, hearing that request instantly filled him with more power than even before. And so, Sakito swung his great scythe and continued cleaning up the small fries.

Razing the monsters that stood in her way, Yukihime blazed through the battlefield. At the southernmost point in the southernmost area, where only the sea was visible as far as the eye could see, Elemia awaited, surrounded by star circles overflowing with monsters.

Yukihime launched some icicles. They went flying straight into each of the star circles, dissipating them on the spot.

"Do you regret making the wrong decision now?" Elemia asked.

"Of course not." Yukihime smiled as she replied. "In fact, I'm just about to prove the contrary."

"Hmm… Maybe you'll only understand after I defeat you here?"

"That goes both ways. Now that things have come this far, fighting is the only way we'll settle anything."

"True enough. Shall we get started, then?" Elemia's soft whispers sounded as sweet as honey. *"Liberation – Sand Scorpios."* She gripped her silver blade.

"Liberation – Snowbloom." Yukihime's sheathed, azure blade appeared at her hip.

"Oh, that's right," Elemia said. "There's one thing I should tell you about. Each of the Seven Wicked Knights have two names, one that refers to their sin, and the other to a part of the animal that represents them. My sin is lust, and my animal part is the scorpion's tail."

"Thanks for being so kind to explain that to me, but I'm not going to remember all that."

"So be it… But just so you know, we only divulge this information to someone who we're serious about killing. So you don't need to remember… Just prepare to die, that's all."

"Oh… Well, you'd also better prepare to die, then. When I announce my name, it means I'm prepared to carry the entire weight of the world on my shoulders."

Elemia whistled in mock-admiration – and then her seductive smile shifted over into ferocious grin.

"I am Elemia Argyros, the Tail of Lust, 3rd of the 7 Wicked Knights! Now it's your turn to introduce *your* self, lady of Azur

Étoile!”

“I am Yukihime Yukigane, the Headmistress who protects Azur Étoile, and I vow to defeat you!”

Elemia brandished her blade, while Yukihime unsheathed hers. Once both had sworn to go all-out on each other, they collided.

Underneath Star Gate Academy, I stood in the spacious chamber that preceded the star gates. It was just a bit smaller than a gymnasium, and Grom stood across from me, returning my glare. Tension spread as we waited to see who would attack first.

“Hey, Kokuya… Do you know what people usually do before they fight?” Grom suddenly asked me in a bored voice.

“Don’t talk about pointless crap?”

“No, stupid, that’s what they do *after* they start. Before they start, they gotta introduce themselves. You wouldn’t wanna get killed by someone without even knowing who they are, right?”

“I have no plans to die here.”

“Yet people still die in battle! Besides, you gotta let your victims know your name before you kill them, or else they won’t be able to scream out your name in anger when they die. Grom always loves that part…” Grom said happily, as if he was talking about falling in love. “Anyway, shall we?” He grinned, then introduced himself. “The name’s Grom Eguleil, the Spine of Greed, 4th of the Seven Wicked Knights. You’d better make this fun, or else Grom’ll kill you right away!”

“Well, I don’t have any over-the-top title like that… I’m just Kokuya Kurono, and I have no intention of enjoying this. I’m going to end it as quickly as possible!”

“Liberation – Blitz Hedgehog.”

“Liberation – Chronoslayer.”

We both brandished our weapons. Grom was holding hedgehog spines – four in each hand, for a total of eight. He was the one who attacked first. It was rare for someone to get the jump on me, and I was just about to attack when I saw him throw the four spines he held in his right hand. He probably had a lot of confidence in his speed.

Before the spines reached me, I sped up my mind, which made it look like the spines were moving at a much slower speed. He had aimed for my left eye, my throat, my heart, and my left thigh. The first three spines were probably just decoys to distract me from what he was really after. If I panicked and tried to protect my most vulnerable spots, that final hit to my thigh would end up greatly limiting my movements. I used my right arm and the twinblade in my left to deflect all four spines. Clinking sounds echoed through the room as they hit the ground.

“What a pleasant surprise. Looks like this’ll be more fun than Grom expected!” Grom said, then threw the spines in his left hand.

I deflected them all again – but by the time I’d done that, Grom was no longer in front of me.

“Whatcha lookin’ at, slowpoke?”

I knew he was behind me before I even heard his voice – but even though my mind could keep up with him, my body could not. I twisted my hips and thrust the dagger end of my twinblade behind me. A clang sounded out as it clashed with one of the spines. As my dagger deflected the spine, I spun my twinblade to the right, like a clock’s hand moving forward.

The Chronoslayer allowed me to activate star sorcery quicker than when I only used my right arm. It also reduced the amount of star power I needed, and boosted activation speed. When I spun the twinblade to the right, it doubled the speed of everything, but due to the stress it put on my body, activation speed, and star power consumption, I could only maintain it for about ten seconds. These ten seconds would be essential.

With my enhanced speed, I spun and swept my sword across.

"Whoa!" Grom quickly leapt out of the way.

I immediately closed the distance and swung down my twinblade. He blocked my attack – not with those thin spines he had been using up until now, but two large ones. Holding a spine in each hand, he crossed them and pushed me back. It appeared that he not only had a limitless supply of spines, but could also manipulate their sizes.

"Yeesh! You got really fast all of a sudden!"

As Grom spoke, I kept my assault going, slashing at him from different angles with both ends of my sword. He blocked every hit, talking all the while. Even though I was moving at twice the speed, he seemingly had no trouble keeping up with me.

Are all of Khaos Schwartz's Wicked Knights this fast?! I can't believe he's this strong… Hell, he's probably even stronger than me. Our blades clashed yet again, and we forced each other back. *If only I could push him back enough so he'd stagger, then I could get on top of him…*

Suddenly, I heard a soft snap – and felt intense star power emanating from Grom.

Oh no. I jumped back just as a powerful wave of electricity burst out from Grom's body. It sparked out in every direction, destroying the nearby walls and stairs. If I had been even a second slower, it would have hit me head-on.

Out of the basic elements, lightning was especially powerful, and one of the fastest. Strong electric attacks were even more dangerous, not to mention fast enough to keep up with my enhanced speed. My greatest strength, the ability to speed up my body, was virtually useless against him.

No, maybe it's still a bit too early to say that…

"Yeah! Yeah! Attaboy, Kokuya! This is really getting fun now!

Whenever someone fights with Grom, they usually either get burned to a crisp before playtime starts, or get turned into a pincushion… But you're gonna let Grom have some real fun today, arencha?!"

I heard another snap as Grom laced his hand with electricity and placed it on his chest. Soon, a golden aura enveloped him. Despite the sparks flying off his body, Grom looked perfectly fine.

An evil smile rose to his lips. "Alright, time to crank things up a bit. You'd better not fall behind now, y'hear?!"

He's already able to keep up with my double speed, and now he's going to get even faster?! As chills ran up my spine, Grom started to move. Instantly, I spun my twinblade to the right. I had just used up my first ten seconds, but I was already going to double my speed again. I knew it would be strenuous, but I had no choice. It was the only way to keep up with him.

Grom threw both of the giant spines he was holding straight at me. I dodged one and deflected the other, which went spinning into the air.

"Oooh, you shouldn't have hit it that way."

Grom raised his right hand as if he was going to throw something, but he wasn't holding anything. Instead, an electric shockwave burst out from his palm – and it wasn't aimed at me, but the spine over my head. The electricity crackled as it collided with the spinning spine, which created an even fiercer burst of lightning.

"Kaboom!"

I wasn't able to dodge it in time, and took the burst head-on. I coughed and wheezed as my body went numb. Due to the paralysis, I couldn't even scream, and my breathing had all but stopped. Intense pain caused my mind to flicker – I felt like I was about to collapse. Because I placed my right hand over my head and covered my body in star power just before the attack hit me, I had managed to escape death, but I had still taken an enormous amount of damage.

"He's still alive!"

The next thing I knew, Grom was right in front of me, with two huge spines in his hands. He thrust them straight towards my head and my heart. I forced my numb body to move and tried to deflect them. I wasn't able to push the one aimed toward my heart far enough away, so it ended up slicing my shoulder. It was laced with electricity as well, so I could feel intense heat, pain, and numbness spreading out from the wound.

"Urggh! Aggggh…" The pain was so intense that I could only slur out my cries of pain.

"Grom likes the sound of that! More! Let Grom hear more!" Grom retracted his spines, then violently thrust them at me again.

Defeat.

Death.

Those words passed through my mind. I could see Yukihime's face. I had to catch up to her. I had to get stronger. I could see Towa's face. I had to protect her.

I… can't lose here…

"I can't die here!" I spun my twinblade and deflected the spines.

I still had a few seconds left of double speed. What would happen if I spun my twinblade again? My speed would be tripled, of course, but so would the burden placed on my body. And it only lasted for five seconds.

"This ends here." I gripped my twin blade and sliced upwards with all my might. *"Progress Boost."*

With that, I released the star power I had been storing up in my right arm since the battle began. Grom staggered backwards. *Four seconds left*. I caught the opening Grom had created as he staggered, and sliced out at his right hand. As he blocked it with his spine, I could feel his power waning. *Three seconds left*. I extended my right hand and grabbed the giant spine from Grom's right hand. I now had

two weapons: my twinblade in my left, and Grom's spine in my right.

I thrust out my twinblade. Grom gripped his remaining spine with both hands, then thrust it up and knocked my blade off its course. *Two seconds left*. I used the spine in my right to stab Grom in his left leg.

"Graaaah!" Despite the pain that warped his face, Grom was still able to swing his spine downwards.

One second left. I gripped my twinblade with both hands again and parried the spine. As my longsword clashed with it, my enhanced speed ran out.

A tortured gargle escaped my throat as a horrifying amount of blood splurted out from within. The taste of copper filled my mouth. Then, the burden of enhancing my speed racked my entire body.

No... I'm still not done yet... I swung out my twinblade and slashed frantically at Grom's extremities. Right arm, left arm, right leg, left leg, and then a wide slash to finish it all off.

"...Asshole," I spat.

Grom fell to the ground, painting it with his blood.

"I win," I said, as I struggled to stay on my feet. Then, as I turned to leave, I felt a hand grab my ankle.

"Wait, Kokuya... Let's play some more... Grom's still stronger than you..."

"You're strong. But unfortunately, I refuse to lose to shallow jerks like you."

I had slashed through each of his limbs. He was done fighting.

Back above ground, Yukihime and Elemia were just about to begin their battle.

Elemia held out Sand Scorpios, her silver sword. It was lined with a number of joints that allowed it to extend, contract, and change shape at will. With a flick of her wrist, the weapon extended ten paces ahead to where Yukihime stood.

A brief clink sounded out as Yukihime deflected the silver blade. After unsheathing her sword at a lightning-fast speed, she quickly took a step forward and then dashed straight for Elemia.

However, the Sand Scorpios refused to allow her passage. It quickly changed its trajectory and assaulted her again. Due to the way it could change shape at will, it was virtually impossible to predict where it would come from. Still, Yukihime continued to deflect it with ease, defending herself as she moved forward.

“Fine. In that case…” A silver light flashed in Elemia’s left hand, then transformed into an identical sword.

This time, two silver swords came snapping at her, and Yukihime stopped in her tracks. As she was no longer able to defend herself by simply deflecting them, she started leaping backwards and dodging. Through this, the two grew farther and farther apart, which allowed Elemia to remain as the sole attacker.

“What’s wrong? Are you going to let me slice you up without even getting a single attack in?”

“Heh. Yeah right.” Yukihime let out a cold chuckle as her left hand began to glow. Out from the blue light came an ice sword. “Sorry I couldn’t think of a more creative counter.”

With Snowbloom and the ice sword in both of her hands, Yukihime easily cut through Elemia’s ferocious attacks. Sparks flew and blades clanged as she broke into a dash, preparing to close the distance once and for all.

Once she got near Elemia, Yukihime threw the ice sword straight at her. Elemia deflected it, and it went sailing into the ground far away from the two, leaving Yukihime with only one blade.

The Sand Scorpios’ shapeshifting nature allowed Elemia to extend

and contract it at will and instantly block attacks at both mid and close range, something that no normal star sorcerer could do. Close range, however, was Yukihime's specialty.

Yukihime swung down Snowbloom hard, but Elemia crossed her blades and took it head-on. Still, Yukihime kept pushing, so hard that she managed to shove Elemia back. The Wicked Knight staggered for only a moment, but it allowed enough time for Yukihime to launch a powerful horizontal swing. Elemia quickly held up a sword and tried to block, but the swing had gained too much momentum. The sword was knocked out of Elemia's hand, but Yukihime had already launched a new upward swing.

Elemia was stuck on defense – Yukihime had proved herself superior when it came to close-range combat. Realizing that Yukihime was clearly the better sword fighter, Elemia clacked her tongue and took a huge leap backwards.

"Afraid of getting cut up?" Yukihime asked.

"Don't get cocky just because you know a thing or two about swinging a sword."

"Oh, I'm not. Do I appear that way to you?"

"...That attitude of yours is really starting to piss me off."

"Yeah, your smile's gone, and your eyebrows are furrowed."

"I'm going to wipe that cocky grin right off your face." Elemia stomped her foot and created a star circle in front of her.

But that wasn't all – soon, a dozen star circles spread out along the ground. Out from each came a huge earthen hand, like giant ghouls reaching up from their graves.

They swarmed toward Yukihime. In response, she extended her hand and created her own star circle. Icicles flew out and pierced the hands, but by that time, Elemia had created even more of her own circles, and the number of hands was only increasing.

“This is never going to end…” Yukihime shrunk back from the earthen hands, held Snowbloom upside down, and touched it to the ground. “Freeze everything… *Absolute Azure!”*

Instantly, a cold wave of star power exploded out from Yukihime. It covered everything, creating a frozen world, as if time itself had come to a screeching halt. Frozen was every last leaf on the trees, which had just been shivering in the wind. Every inch of the ground was covered in a thick slab of ice, and every last blade of grass now looked like sharp ice knives.

Of course, Elemia’s earthen hands had been frozen as well. As she passed her eyes over what had happened, Elemia’s eyes widened… Not out of surprise, but joy.

“Looks like you’re at least strong enough to go head-to-head with Neige.”

“Would you please stop comparing me to someone I don’t even know? Besides, I’m sure I’m stronger than them.”

“Still so cocky. One of my fellow knights is an ice elemental, too… But fine. I’ll admit it, you know your way around the battlefield. I never expected you’d be able to make it this far… We’re pretty much on the same level.”

“Fine, keep talking down to me if it makes you feel better. I could care less how much stronger you think you are,” Yukihime spat, then kicked the ice beneath her feet. “You done playing around with dirt now? Can those mud clods of yours break through my ice?”

Everything was frozen as far as the eye could see, leaving Elemia with no more earth to manipulate.

“Let’s play a different game now,” Elemia said, as she let her sword melt into mud.

Once the sword dissolved, the remaining silver squirmed on the ground, as if it was alive. The tiny puddles merged into one, then began to transform into a giant hammer.

“Are you going to break through my ice with that?”

“Wrong,” Elemia said, then swung the silver hammer in the air. Naturally, since she was so far away from Yukihime, it didn’t hit anything.

“H… Huh?!” Suddenly, a powerful force slammed into Yukihime and knocked her backwards. She fell onto the ice, then bounced a few times before slowing to a stop.

The silver hammer squeaked against the ice as Elemia dragged it towards her prey. “My star power is terra elemental. It means I don’t just have power to manipulate earth… Understand?”

“…Abstract star sorcery,” Yukihime muttered as she stood up. “Terra elemental… Earthquakes?”

“Exactly. I can manipulate the abstract concept of ‘earthquakes’ as I please.” Elemia raised her hammer. “Now then, ready for another bounce?”

Elemia swung her hammer again. The space around Yukihime trembled violently, and another shockwave shot out toward her.

“I never fall for the same thing twice.” Yukihime extended her glowing left hand.

Out of the blue light appeared a wall of ice. The hexagonal ice wall took Elemia’s shockwave head-on without budging an inch or even taking any damage.

“That looks pretty hard… Okay.” Elemia raised her hammer and ran toward Yukihime. “Let’s see what happens when I hit it head-on, then!”

A loud clang boomed out as silver collided with ice. The wall remained unscathed.

“There isn’t a single person in this world who can break through my Azure Wall.”

“And how does it feel to be the queen of trash?”

“We’ll see who’s trash here.” Yukihime grabbed the wall and tossed it at Elemia.

Elemia instantly dissolved her hammer and turned it into silver body armor. The ice wall collided with her – then fell to the ground, leaving both parties unscathed.

“You’re pretty hard yourself. Okay then.” Yukihime sheathed Snowbloom and extended her right hand.

In the next moment, ice spears attacked Elemia from every angle. They all shattered the moment they hit her silver armor. Next, Yukihime raised her right hand. Simultaneously, a giant icicle shot up from below Elemia’s feet. Her body was knocked into the sky, where another icicle appeared right next to her. She took another hit, then went plummeting to the ground.

Massive icicles converged on her, but Elemia still remained unscathed.

“We both have pretty strong defenses… I guess this leaves me no choice,” Yukihime whispered in a defeated tone. Of course, it wasn’t the battle she had given up on, and soon, her body was emanating with even more star power than when she had activated Absolute Azure. “I didn’t want to use this, but it looks like I’ll need to go all-out to defeat you,” she said, in a tone colder than any of the ice that covered the ground. “You’re going to see what happens when I use all of my strength… and then this battle is going to end.”

Yukihime raised her hand up high, and a gigantic star circle appeared in the sky.

Rods from God – In our world, there exists a weapon that can fire a metal rod from a space satellite at ten times the speed of sound. It was as powerful as a nuclear bomb, and could become even more powerful if used in the right way. The moment Yukihime learned of its existence, a thought popped into her head. *One day, science may surpass star sorcery itself…* And then: *But not just yet.*

After all, Yukihime already possessed a star sorcery that was both more efficient and more powerful than any of that. There was no need for her to drop down a rod from outer space – for she could already materialize an even bigger chunk of ice in an instant.

"Level 1 Prohibited Star Sorcery – Azure Judgment: Starpiercer."

That was its name. Yukihime possessed two spells that first required permission from every member of the Council of Seven Houses, and Azure Judgment was one of them.

Yukihime let the chunk of ice fall from the sky. It was a simple spell, but it was just as powerful as a meteor. At that moment, Yukihime could have caused hail to rain down on the entire world and destroy everything – for she had received permission beforehand.

Luckily, Yukihime could adjust the power of the spell. If she went all-out, it might end up destroying Otherworld City itself, let alone the southernmost district. At its current power, it should have been more than enough to defeat the opponent in front of her.

Down came heaven's judgment. A chunk of ice big enough to blot out all of Elemia's sight slid out from a huge star circle in the sky and came plummeting down upon her.

Elemia gaped. Her confident smile had been replaced by utter shock.

"No... way..."

Mere moments ago, Elemia had admitted that Yukihime Yukigane was no weaker than any member of the Seven Wicked Knights. But that was as far as she went. She had seen Yukihime as an equal, nothing more, and in a battle of equals, Elemia was still confident that she would come out on top.

Neige, the ice elemental that Elemia had spoke of earlier, was the 7th Wicked Knight. Elemia knew that she'd never lose to Neige. But what Elemia witnessed now made her realize that Yukihime was not only stronger than Neige, but far stronger than Elemia herself. And not only that, but – Elemia didn't even want to consider such a

thought, but there was no denying it – Yukihime might have even been stronger than Redge, the leader of the Wicked Knights, and the ruler of their world.

Elemia couldn't win. She was far too outclassed.

"So what?!"

Still, she refused to back down, even if Yukihime was stronger than the Dark Emperor of Khaos Schwartz. In fact, that was precisely why she couldn't.

For an instant, old memories washed through Elemia's mind. Her entire life had been nothing but a cruel joke. Abandoned by everyone she ever knew, she had no choice but to let vulgar strangers violate her with their dirty hands in order to survive... that is, until *he* saved her.

That's why. "I won't let you..." That's why she couldn't lose. "I won't let you stand in his way, you puny little girl! I won't let a single grain of sand cloud Lord Redge's path!"

As if to encourage her shaking legs, Elemia roared. Then, she transformed her silver armor back into a hammer. After pouring every last ounce of star power into her weapon, she shattered the ice at her feet with a single strike.

Through the cracks in the ice, Elemia could just barely see the ground. Instantly, she created a star circle. Mounds of dirt shot up, ripping through the ice. Soon, all the dirt clumped together, until it resembled a giant made out of earth and stone.

The giant swung its fist up at the chunk of ice. The punch was large enough to easily flatten several houses, yet it was still dwarfed by the size of the ice. And so, its fist crumbled upon impact. Moments later, the giant itself was mercilessly flattened. The difference in scale was simply too great.

Finally, the chunk of ice reached the ground. Moments away from being crushed, Elemia felt neither fear nor despair.

“I’m so sorry… Lord Redge…”

A deafening boom erupted through the area, followed by a violent wind. The entire district quaked as the ice chunk eclipsed it. Dirt beneath it was blown up into the sky, creating clouds of dust. A shower of mud and ice followed, and soon, the entire area had been sullied.

Far beyond the limits of Absolute Azure, a flock of birds flew over a mountain of monster corpses. Azure Judgment had also eclipsed the spot where Yukihime was standing, yet she remained unscathed. When Yukihime said that no one in the world could destroy her Azure Wall, she meant it, for she was no exception to the rule. After the attack ended and she deactivated her wall, she took a look around.

A huge crater now lay where Elemia had been standing. Panting heavily, Yukihime traversed the warped terrain. Huge beats of sweat dripped down her face as she approached the crater. Casting that spell had exhausted both her star power and her body.

Finally, she reached the edge and peered down. The crater was very deep, and littered with drops of silver liquid. *Probably the remnants of Elemia’s weapon,* she thought, when suddenly the silver began to squirm. Startled, Yukihime watched it move. It didn’t look like the type of weapon that stayed active after its owner died, which meant that Elemia must have survived the attack.

So then where is she?

Instantly, Yukihime figured out the answer. As disbelief washed over her, she realized the silver liquid wasn’t Emelia’s weapon, but Elemia herself. Soon, every last drop gathered up and reformed into a female torso.

“…That’s some astounding tenacity.” Now, a different kind of sweat began to drip down Yukihime’s forehead.

As Elemia’s torso extended its arms and began to crawl out from the crater, the rest of the silver liquid gathered up behind her, completing the rest of her body. Yukihime ran down the side of the

crater, unsheathed Snowbloom, and thrust it at Elemia's hands. Within them, she could see tiny silver blades. It appeared that Elemia still wanted to fight.

I know I limited the power of the spell, but still... Even though it wouldn't kill her, I thought it would at least end the battle. Elemia's tenacity had surpassed Yukihime's expectations so much that she found herself feeling a bit of respect for her foe. *I don't want to kill her... But not because I'm afraid of murdering people. If I kill Elemia here, their goal will change from kidnapping Towa to getting revenge. I don't want to kill them... I want to make them give up.*

But now, when she saw how determined Elemia was to achieve her goal, Yukihime started to realize just how difficult that would truly be. As she stood there in hesitation, Elemia's body continued to regenerate, and so, Yukihime sent star power into Snowbloom and froze Elemia's body right there on the spot.

The moment her regeneration stopped, Elemia's left hand suddenly turned into a blade and shot out toward Yukihime. Since she assumed that Elemia would no longer be able to move, Yukihime was wide open. The blade lightly slashed her right hand, and blood trickled out. Yukihime frantically grabbed Snowbloom with her left hand and chopped off Elemia's right arm, then finished freezing the Wicked Knight's body, preventing her from making any more counterattacks.

Suddenly, she felt another presence, and a massive slash shot out straight between Yukihime and Elemia.

Sensing star power nearby, Yukihime instantly leapt back. The ground was carved up, as if a massive blade had slashed through it.

A chill ran down Yukihime's spine, and in the back of her mind, she saw her body skewered on a blade. Without a single thought, her body instinctively moved backwards to the edge of the crater.

Fear. Overwhelming fear that surpassed any kind she had ever felt

before. *What… is this?* Near the center of the crater, right next to Elemia, Yukihime felt a strange presence.

She looked down to see a silver-haired man touching Elemia. Cracks appeared in the ice that imprisoned her, and soon, it shattered.

“I deeply apologize for falling into such a pitiful state, on top of losing… I will accept any punishment.” Elemia regenerated her lower half, then knelt and bowed before the man.

A voice as sharp as a blade echoed out. “Just make sure you stay alive, and rest for now.” After showing this bit of mercy, the man focused his eyes on the other person present.

Yukihime was in his sights now. Just feeling his eyes on her was enough to send another shiver up her spine.

A split-second later, the silver-haired man was standing in front of her. Held together with a silver strap, his silver hair looked as sharp as a bunch of hanging blades. He was handsome, with beautiful white skin, and his tall figure was clad in a jet black military uniform. Despite how lean he looked, Yukihime could tell that well-trained muscles lay hidden beneath the fabric.

“I can’t believe you actually managed to defeat Elemia,” he muttered softly. His movements looked strange, as if parts of his steps were invisible.

“Are you… the Dark Emperor of Khaos Schwartz?” Despite how obvious it seemed, Yukihime still asked the question.



This was the leader of Khaos Schwartz, and the one who led the Seven Wicked Knights – Redge, the man who sought to kidnap Towa… and Elemia's star power seemed like nothing compared to his.

"Indeed, the Dark Emperor is what they call me. And you're the queen of Azur Étoile, correct?"

"Calling me a queen would be inaccurate."

"You're the most powerful being in Azur Étoile, yes? I find it hard to believe there are many in this world who could fight on equal footing with my subordinates."

Redge looked around, then fixated his eyes once more on Yukihime. His gaze made her feel like blades were pushing up against her throat – but she didn't have time to feel afraid.

"If I defeat you, this war will end," Yukihime said.

"Humorous. You mean to tell me that we're this close, yet you still can't sense my power? Or do Azur Étoilians find meaning in hoping for the impossible?"

"Guess that means I can't convince you to back off, huh?"

"A foolish question. I have a duty to protect my people, and I have no intent to return empty-handed."

"Well, I have a duty to protect my people, too."

"No ruler is allowed to retreat. If a king halts, his kingdom falls. If marching forward requires sacrifice, he should not shirk away from it… Even if it means clashing with another ruler who has a duty to protect her own kingdom. This is what it means to rule."

"Yeah… Wanna get started, then?" Yukihime tightened her hand around Snowbloom.

"Yes, what a battlefield needs is not words, but swords." Redge brandished his giant blade. "Since you sit on the throne of your world,

you surely must know how to start a battle properly."

Yukihime stared straight at her foe and shouted. "I am Yukihime Yukigane, the Headmistress who protects Azur Étoile!"

"And I am Redge Ferimento, the Dark Emperor who rules Khaos Schwartz. Yukihime, was it? This is your chance to stake everything on your blade… and learn that there are some heights you will never reach no matter how much you risk."

Yukihime slashed out toward Redge – and cut nothing but thin air. Just before that, Redge had swung his own sword down, but their weapons hadn't touched. Redge had also disappeared.

Yukihime turned back to see Redge standing diagonally behind her. *Is he just fast? No, this has nothing to do with speed… I couldn't see any sort of movement. What was that just now? Did he disappear the moment I slashed at him?*

Yukihime spun around and slashed out at Redge. Suddenly, fresh blood splurted out from multiple points on her body. She hadn't been hit, yet she could feel cuts all over. Redge still hadn't lifted a finger.

If this is some kind of star sorcery, then how does it work? It doesn't make sense… As Yukihime was caught up in thought, her wounds were only increasing. She tried taking a step back. The damage stopped. *Does this mean I stepped out of his star sorcery range? Either way, I can't let myself get close to him again.*

Yukihime swung her left hand and fired a dozen icicles. Instantly, they were all cleaved, as if a sword had passed right through each of them. Not a single one ever reached Redge.

Is he a wind elemental? She thought of Sakito Nagisaki, the 3rd strongest at Star Gate Academy. He could also use wind to create invisible slashes similar to the ones she was experiencing. *But then why isn't there any wind blowing? How could a wind elemental do anything without wind?*

Wind also didn't explain Redge's teleporting, for which he had

seemingly needed no preparatory motions. There was a possibility that he possessed a unique element, but it seemed like wind was out of the question. After all, there was no evidence that he was using any wind star sorcery.

Another thought popped up in Yukihime's mind. There existed an abstract element known as 'space,' which had been utilized by a Khaos Schwartz star sorcerer to pulverize the Azur Étoilians during the First and Second Otherworld Wars. *That might explain his impossible movements…*

"Yes… Spatial control." The moment Yukihime muttered those words, she saw a sliver of emotion rise onto Redge's face – it almost looked like anger. Seeing that, Yukihime knew she was mistaken. *But if that isn't the answer… then what could it be?*

As if to shake off her confusion, Yukihime let out a powerful shout and stepped forward. The moment she slashed, Redge instantly teleported far into the distance.

Fear – Yukihime had felt this emotion many times, but the fear of fighting someone stronger than her was something virtually unknown to Yukihime. She hadn't known how powerful Elemia was until she fought her, but from the very beginning, her instinct had told her that she would win. It had been there when she fought Kokuya and Towa… but that same instinct was silent now.

Still, Yukihime refused to back down. "Just wait, you'll be sweating soon enough," she said. Unwavering, her blue eyes became even sharper as she glared at her foe.

"You have strong eyes," Redge said, as Yukihime began to run toward him. "But now you're in my range."

Instantly, Redge's star power exploded outwards. It sliced the air, the sand and rubble that cluttered the ground, and the remains of Yukihime's ice. They also sliced into Yukihime – or so it seemed, initially.

"Oh?" Redge muttered quietly.

Just before Redge's star power touched Yukihime's body and slashed it up, icy star power glittered up around her body. Yukihime had activated an automatic defense star sorcery, and as a result, a multitude of tiny hexagonal ice walls had formed.

Cracks sounded out around her as the tiny ice walls split apart, but Yukihime kept running until she got close enough to draw her sword.

"Knowing what you know, you still dare to enter my range? You're either brave, or merely reckless. But if you insist on fighting me in close range, then I'll be happy to play along." A clear smile rose onto Redge's lips as he raised his massive sword.

Along the huge blade, Yukihime could see a second, smaller blade that had been attached to it. Its handle was also unusually long. A blade half the size would have been more than enough for a longsword, but for some reason, it was double.

Steel cried out as Yukihime's blue blade clashed with Redge's monstrous weapon. Fresh blood squirted out from new wounds on Yukihime's body.

My star sorcery isn't perfect… And since I tried to retain as much star power as possible when I created these ice walls, they can't fully protect me from his attacks. Quickly, Yukihime thought up a brand new spell: one that would instantly create an ice wall the moment an opponent's star power touched her. *It's a thin veneer to mask my lack of a proper defense, but that doesn't matter. I'm in close range now, which means I no longer have to run around like a fool.*

Desperate, Yukihime gripped her blade. *But how much more desperate do I need to get in order to win? This doesn't make sense… and there's no end in sight. But that doesn't matter now. I just need to keep my eyes on what's in front of me.*

"Absolute Azure: Slashdance – Dancing Mad Blades."

This was a variation on the spell Yukihime had used to stop Elemia, where she had frozen everything in sight. In an instant, she became surrounded by a slew of ice swords. Yukihime had taken the

amount of star power necessary to freeze an entire area and instead poured it into these new weapons.

Yukihime poured all the energy she could muster into Snowbloom and slashed outwards, pushing Redge back. Then, she threw her star armament high into the sky. As it arched upwards, it began spinning.

A high-speed swordfight had begun.

First, Yukihime grabbed the two closest ice swords and threw them at Redge. Following that, she grabbed two more and moved in to pelt Redge with a series of quick strikes. He had a very large sword, and certainly outclassed her in terms of power, but she was hoping to overwhelm him with a greater number of attacks.

Downwards slash, push in, thrust. Redge caught every attack with the side of his blade. Still, Yukihime continued to push him back. The two swords she had thrown had landed next to Redge's feet and a step behind his current position. The one that she had aimed at him had been cleaved before it even reached him, while the other now pierced the exact point where she had wanted it to land.

It seemed that Redge's ability to slash anything around him affected a specific radius when he emanated it, but when he was focused on fighting Yukihime, its effects disappeared. Of course, it seemed that Redge could also focus it on a certain direction, like he was doing now in order to block Yukihime's attacks. That's why the other sword that Yukihime had purposefully thrown away from Redge hadn't been cleaved.

Redge's sword technique made Elemia look like an amateur, but then again, Elemia had never seemed like a true sword fighter. Yukihime could tell that Redge was extremely well-trained when it came to swordsmanship – as if his strange ability wasn't bad enough, his physical technique alone was enough to make him a monstrous opponent.

Yukihime picked up Snowbloom, grabbed another nearby ice sword, then ran back up to Redge. She crossed her blades as she approached, and he caught them head-on.

Now. Yukihime stomped her foot on the ground, and a thick icicle exploded out from the ice sword she had thrown behind Redge. It should have stabbed him right in the back – but she had no such luck, for Redge was no longer standing there. He had teleported once more.

Quickly, Yukihime threw Snowbloom into the sky again and pulled out two more ice swords. She could feel intense star power coming from behind, but she was ready.

"You lose," Redge said, as he swung down his silver sword.

"Azure Wall."

As Yukihime's unbreakable wall blocked his attack, she muttered something else without turning around, and a different spell activated.

"You lose."

Yukihime deactivated the ice walls and spun around. Both of her ice swords went zooming toward Redge's neck and chest, but they were instantly diced into dozens of pieces. Then, something fell down from the sky.

Yukihime reached up and caught her beloved Snowbloom.
"Absolute Azure: Slashdance – Flashdance."

As soon as she said that, Snowbloom's blade expanded, covered in ice as strong as any Azure Wall. It had now become a blade that no one could break, and Yukihime swung it in a flash.

The azure flash sailed toward Redge – and he caught it. Yukihime's blade clashed with Redge's sword, and they came to yet another stalemate.

Good. This is exactly what I was waiting for.

Casting several flashy spells in succession had averted Redge's eyes from Yukihime's true intentions, and now she had his blade locked behind the indestructible weapon she had created with Flashdance.

I used up a lot of star power in my battle with Elemia… I won't be able to fight another long one here. I need to end this now!

"I thought you said I was going to lose," Redge retorted.

"You are. Right now."

Finally, it was time to unveil the other spell that Yukihime had activated back when she blocked Redge's attack with her Azure Wall – and in his current condition, there was no way he could escape it.

"Azure Judgment."

Yukihime had put so much work into fighting Redge at close range, in order to keep his eyes on what was in front of him, rather than what was above him. The reason she threw Snowbloom into the sky was not only so that she could use two ice swords, but so that Redge's eyes would focus on that instead of the star circle in the sky. She had also made sure to make the circle itself smaller than when she used it on Elemia. The ice chunk she dropped was also smaller, which would decrease its range, but it had to be that size in order to keep Redge from noticing it right away. Additionally, by keeping Redge in one place with her sword attacks, Yukihime had been able to make up for the loss in coverage. In order to defeat an enemy like this, she needed to pull out the stops, and since she couldn't drag out the battle, this was her best option.

And so, Azure Judgment descended from the heavens once more. The moment the ice chunk left the star circle, a deafening boom crackled through the sky. By the time Redge noticed the danger approaching from above, it was too late. The massive chunk of ice was plummeting down at a shocking speed.

Despite the fact that it seemed like he was seconds away from death, Redge showed Yukihime nothing but a wide grin, then began to speak in a delighted voice. "I suppose I owe you an apology, Yukihime. You are indeed a powerful warrior. It's no wonder you were able to defeat Elemia. You definitely have what it takes to rule."

Redge teleported ten steps away from Yukihime. It seemed like he

had no intention of running away. *If there are are no limits to that space-severing teleportation move of his, then my plan will end in total failure. Judging from the way he's moved up until now, it seems like he can only move so far with each teleport…*

Redge lowered his massive sword to his side, and it began to take on a silver glow. Yukihime could sense an unbelievable amount of star power within it, steadily rising to a level that she'd never seen before.

"There isn't anything I can't sever. Before my blade, all of creation is no more durable than a piece of paper."

You've got to be kidding me… Yukihime paled. *Don't tell me he's actually thinking about cleaving Azure Judgment… It's impossible!* Azure Judgment was composed of special ice produced by a star sorcery spell. It wasn't as durable as an Azure Wall, but it was far stronger than normal ice. Even if he managed to shave off a few layers of the surface, it would mean nothing. *Just let it hit you already…*

Yukihime got ready to create an Azure Wall. She was even prepared to delay it from activating so that both of them would be trapped, just as long as it would keep Redge from escaping. Meanwhile, Redge swung his silver blade up toward the great chunk of ice in the sky.

A silver slash flew upwards. It slammed right into the center of the ice – and kept moving, expertly cleaving the chunk of ice in two. But the spectacle didn't end there. Chopping the ice in half didn't make it any less a threat, and so Redge kept swinging his sword, as if he meant to split the very sky itself.

Silver slashes flew up one after another, at lightning fast speeds. As she watched, Yukihime could barely believe what she was seeing. Each slash diced up the ice, until it was no more than a clump of hail.

If it had been a normal fight, this would have been the point where Yukihime fell to her knees and stiffened up like a corpse. She may have soiled herself. She may have cried like a baby. She may have screamed for mercy. She may have turned her back and run away. She may have even put her sword to her neck and quietly killed herself.

That was how ridiculously insane this whole situation was.

But this was a special case, and Yukihime Yukigane would not turn her back on her pride or her duty, even if it meant dying at the hands of a god.

“No… I can’t lose here!” Yukihime exploded out towards Redge and violently swung her blade sideways. It was the most skillful slash she’d ever performed – but not even that was enough to reach him.

Redge’s great sword flashed, and Snowbloom was cleaved. Its blue blade went spinning into the air – this time without the rest of the sword.

“Im… possible…”



Snowbloom was just as strong as an Azure Wall, which no one had ever penetrated, yet Redge had sliced through it like butter. The durability did drop when it was formed into a blade instead of a wall, but at this point, that sounded like nothing but an excuse.

"The only difference between bravery and recklessness is whether or not one is successful in the end. You made no mistakes… except becoming my opponent." Redge raised his silver blade once more.

A new shade of despair washed over Yukihime. *"Azure Wall!"*

As he watched her flounder, the respect for her that had started to show in his eyes was replaced with disappointment. Yukihime's frantic attempt at resistance proved futile, for Redge cut through her last defense with ease.

The shattering sounded so clear and pure. It was the sound of her own despair.

Redge was right. There was nothing he couldn't cut through. Yukihime's unbreakable defense was no more, and there was no longer anything to stand in the way of Redge's blade.

A wound that ran from Yukihime's shoulder to her hip split wide open, decorated with a splatter of blood. The pain burned, but thanks to the Azure Wall, the wound was a shallow one. She had barely escaped instant death. If she had taken the full brunt of that sword, it would have easily severed her torso from her body.

Am I going to lose? As the pain brought her to the brink of unconsciousness, a single thought floated up in Yukihime's mind. *In this war, loss means death.*

"Kokuya… I'm sorry."

What am I apologizing for? Losing? Failing to protect everyone?

Yukihime possessed two Level 1 Prohibited star sorcery spells. The first was Azure Judgment: Starpiercer, while the second was something that might kill her if she used it in a weakened state. *No,*

I'm sure it'd kill me if I used it now.

It was assured suicide, but it would be better than dying silently.

Redge got in position for an upwards strike. If that hit her, it would surely mean the end.

In response, Yukihime unleashed a product of abstract star sorcery – the most powerful spell she possessed.

"Absolute Zero."

Time stood still. In the simplest of terms, Yukihime had frozen time itself.

In good condition, she could keep this spell active for ten seconds, but currently, she would only be able to maintain it for five. This was the star sorcery she had used to defeat Kokuya and the Ruinmaker – the ultimate star sorcery, which could surpass the goddess of ruin herself.

Ice slid out from the broken end of Snowbloom, recreating its blade. It wasn't as durable as an Azure Wall, but that didn't matter at this point. She first needed to be able to defend herself before she worried about breaking another weapon.

Yukihime raised her ice blade towards Redge. He was wide open.

She never regretted not using this from the start. Absolute Zero would always be dangerous, no matter the state she was in. After expending a considerable amount of star power in her battle with Elemia, she had completely given up on using it.

Yukihime swung her blade down – and instantly, her mind flinched. She stumbled, and her blade faltered. The wound was too shallow.

Yukihime tried swinging down her sword again. Suddenly, Redge's right hand reached up and grabbed it.

How? It hasn't been five seconds yet. Did I use up too much star

power? Did I miscalculate the amount of time–

"You dont get it, do you?" Redge snapped the blade he held in his hands. "There isn't anything I can't cut... even time itself."

"If that's true, how did you do it *after* I stopped time?!"

"Just before you activated that time stop star sorcery, I sensed a different type of star power. I merely emitted some of my own star power in sync with it, and mimicked it."

Redge had created a star sorcery that automatically reacted to his opponents' star power, which allowed him to counter abstract star sorcery with mimicry. It was so ridiculous that Yukihime couldn't even muster up any sense of shock. She had played her last card, and she was all out now. No, it was more like every last one of her cards had been ripped up into unrecognizable shreds. He was on a completely different level, and had utterly defeated her.

"Farewell, Yukihime. You reminded me how uplifting a true battle can be. I am proud to know that the glory of Khaos Schwartz will rise to new heights thanks to warriors like yourself."

Praising the battle, Redge raised his silver blade high, then brought it down one final time.

But just before the sword could slice through Yukihime's body–

"I don't think so!"

A black-haired boy suddenly appeared and sent a lighting fast fist straight toward Redge. Before it collided, Redge yanked back his sword and deflected the punch, which sent the Dark Emperor skidding back from his prey.

Clearly, this battle was far from over.

Right after defeating Grom, I headed back to the monitor room. As I watched Yukihime fighting Elemia on the screen, I happened to

notice another red dot pop up nearby. It was far larger than Elemia's, Grom's, and even Yukihime's.

"What kind of a monster is that?" Not only did it possess a massive amount of star power, it was also heading straight toward Yukihime.

"Towa, I need to get to Yukihime!"

"...I'm going, too."

"But..."

"Remember what I said? I'm joining in this time. Yukihime said that I can't hesitate when the time comes. And that time is now!" She clearly had no intention of stepping down.

"Fine... Let's go!"

With a wild punch, I managed to knock back the man with the massive star power. I probably hadn't hurt him, though.

Towa was hiding in the shadows behind me. I needed to get a solid hit in and then rescue Yukihime, so I hadn't used any of Towa's unpredictable powers.

I managed to rescue Yukihime, but...

"Hey, Yukihime! Who is that guy?! I've never seen anyone with so much star power!"

"I know someone... You, when you use Towa's powers."

"You mean he's as strong as the Ruinmaker?"

For a moment I thought that he was the one who wielded their world's Ruinmaker, but they were here in order to steal ours, so that didn't make sense.

"That's their leader..." Yukihime muttered. "Redge, the Dark Emperor of Khaos Schwartz... Kokuya, listen carefully."

Yukihime quickly explained to me what had just happened. Spatial teleportation, invisible slashes, and powerful attacks that could even cut through Azure Walls and nullify Absolute Zero.

"But that isn't fair..."

"That doesn't matter now. We need to defeat him, or we'll never win this war!"

"So he's the last boss, huh?" I took a step forward. "Get some rest."

As far as I could tell, Yukihime had used up way too much star power. There was no way she could go on fighting, and the silver-haired man named Redge was already heading our way.

"I thought I felt Grom's star power dissipating," he said.

"Yeah, I just fought him."

"...And your name is?"

"Kokuya Kurono. I'm the second strongest in the world, next to her." I motioned toward Yukihime with my right thumb.

"Then you have no hope of defeating me."

"Sometimes people still need to fight, even if they have no hope." I knew I was no match for him, but I also knew that I couldn't just run away. "Here I come..."

The moment I started running toward Redge, he disappeared. *Is this what she meant by teleportation?!*

Suddenly, he appeared right in front of me. I swung out my right fist – and missed. Redge teleported again. This time he appeared to my immediate right, with his sword raised high.

The glowing silver sword came whooshing down. I heard a sickening slice, then watched as it chopped through my right shoulder. My right upper arm fell to the ground with a loud thud.

“The end.”

Redge quickly pulled his sword back and then swung it sideways at me. Frantically, I spun my twinblade in my left hand and leapt back as soon as I sped up. He was too fast. On top of that, he had somehow cut off my right arm. If he was powerful enough to destroy an Azure Wall, that meant I had no way of defending myself against him. I would just have to dodge every single attack he threw at me.

...But how? Without my right arm, I had little means of attack. I had also used up most of my star power in the battle with Grom. If I kept going like this, I’d either run completely out of star power, or my body would reach its limit. Was there any way to defeat him with what little I had left?

...No. I can’t beat him.

Then, just as I began to accept my defeat–

“Big brother!” Towa ran towards me.

“Stay back, stupid!”

“You’re the stupid one, big brother!”

She was right. I had nothing to retort with.

Towa reached out to me. “Stop hesitating. Hurry!”

“...Okay.”

I pressed the switch on my shoulder, removing my prosthetic arm. As the remaining part of my severed right arm fell to the ground, I began the chant that would turn my little sister into a weapon.

“Liberation – Ruinmaker.”

Towa’s body began to glow, then disappeared. Her light gathered around my shoulder and transformed into a new silver arm.

I clenched my right fist once more. “Let’s do this.”

"Okay."

Behind me, Towa's ghostly apparition appeared. As soon as Redge saw this, his eyes widened.

"Azur Étoile's Ruinmaker..."

He was staring at my right arm. When we first clashed, it had seemed like he was very calm, composed, and powerful, but as I saw the bloodlust that seeped out of his eyes now, I started to feel like I had gotten the wrong impression.

"So... *you* killed my mentor..."

Even if you gathered up all of the hatred and resentment that filled the pits of Hell, it still would have sounded weaker than the enraged miasma that spilled out with Redge's cold, determined words.

Mentor? Me? I had no idea what he was talking about. But there was no denying the genuine emotion I could feel behind Redge's voice. Either I or Towa, or perhaps both of us, were clearly connected to his mentor somehow.

This man was from Khaos Schwartz... And he had changed the moment he saw Towa become my right arm.

Suddenly, one possibility popped into my head – and the moment it did, I understood why he had become so upset, and felt my own rage bubbling up from underneath.

I struggled to retain control and opened my mouth. "Ten years ago, a man and woman were killed in a laboratory here in Azur Étoile... You were there when it happened, weren't you?"

Redge laughed. It was a very hollow laugh, as if to say 'Yes, I'll be happy to play along with your little charade.'

He stared at me with indifferent eyes and nodded. "Yeah... which means you must be the one who used the Ruinmaker back then."

Formal confirmation. Our connection was now clear.

"...Thats's right, I am."

A moment passed, and then he spoke again. "Ten years... I've been waiting ten years for this." Emotion slowly began to warp his face. Hatred, rage, and joy. "Now, I can finally kill you with my own hands, and avenge my mentor!"

At that point, he had ceased to be a ruler – he was brandishing his sword for purely personal reasons. That's how much he hated me.

My smile probably looked as hollow as his. I struggled to keep my laughter down, and instead erupted with an uncontrollable bellow of rage.

"You invaded our world, killed my parents, and now you have the nerve to say that?!"

He's the one who killed them. He's the one who stole all the joy from our lives. He's the one who pushed a cruel fate onto Towa. "What could possibly make you think that you have the right to get revenge?!"

I could feel my mind drowning, submerged in a color darker than any shade of black, overflowing with murderous rage. It was the same feeling I had gotten that night, when my parents died before my eyes.

Kill. That voice echoed in my mind again.

I kicked off the ground and instantly sped myself up. That movement alone was faster than anything I had displayed so far. I was faster than I'd ever been, because I had access to way more star power. I was like a completely different person.

I swung down my longsword from above, and Redge blocked it. He unleashed his star power as well, and I felt multiple cuts make their way across my body. *So these are the invisible slashes Yukihime was talking about.*

I leapt back. He seemed more capable than me when it came to close-range fighting, but this was the only option I had.

I spun my twinblade to the left. *I think I've figured out a way to beat those invisible slashes of his…*

Spinning my twinblade to the left slowed time down. Usually, I had no use for this, but now that I had Towa's power, I could send my star sorcery out beyond my own body.

I shot my star power out into the atmosphere, slowed time down around Redge, then ran up to him again. The wounds created by his invisible slashes now appeared to be much slower, and Redge himself had also slowed down.

I thrust my longsword out. Redge caught it with the side of his greatsword, so I quickly pulled back and slashed out again. This time, I aimed for his neck, and it felt like I was going to hit – but then Redge suddenly sped up and blocked it with his greatsword again.

No, he didn't speed up. Blood gushed out of numerous places on my body. *The flow of time just went back to normal.*

The slowdown usually lasted for five seconds, but this time, I hadn't even been able to maintain it for three. Absolute Zero hadn't even worked on him, so in a way it made sense that time slowdown was no exception.

I leapt back out of his range, while Redge swung his sword sideways. It was glowing with a silver aura, and as it flashed across the air, a silver slash shot out. Redge and I were standing over ten meters apart, but his silver crescent of light covered the entire distance. Immediately, I poured star power into my twinblade until it began to glow with a golden light. As the slash approached, I swung my glowing blade and created a golden slash to match it. It was a long-distance attack, which I would have never been able to use without Towa.

My golden slash collided with Redge's silver slash. A blinding flash preceded an ear-splitting boom as the two slashes canceled each other out.

Immediately, I swung my dagger and sent another golden slash

flying toward Redge. As if to mock me, Redge lazily swung his sword with one hand and sliced my slash in two.

At this rate, it'll never end. I doubted I would run out of star power in this state, but there was no telling when my body would give in. I just wasn't built for long battles, which meant I needed to finish this fast.

But how? What should I do? The way this is going, I'll lose for sure. I couldn't even beat Yukihime with Towa, and she lost to this guy! There's no way I'd be able to win.

It seemed impossible – which meant that I simply had to do the impossible. I recalled what Yukihime had told me. Redge had nullified Absolute Zero, but she had still been able to attack him. It had been a shallow strike, and incapable of defeating him, but it appeared that even though Redge could nullify time manipulation, it at least took him some time to do so.

If I can stop time, then I can attack him.

Even though I was time elemental, stopping time was no simple task. Usually, since I couldn't affect anything other than myself with my star sorcery, it was absolutely impossible. Apparently, my father knew how to do it, but since it required so much star power, it prevented him from using any other star sorcery afterwards. It also put an incredible burden on his body, and he could only maintain it for one second.

It made him cough up blood, prevented him from using any other star sorcery, and only lasted for a single second. That was how hard it was to stop time. It made me realize how incredible Yukihime was.

There's no way I'll be able to stop time here. It isn't the sort of spell you can just cast on the spot… But slowing down time… If I could slow down time to an extreme degree, I might be able to emulate the sensation of stopping time. I'll just have to keep slowing time down, until even he can no longer handle it!

I spun my twinblade to the left. Once, twice, thrice… I just kept on

going. Without Towa's help, I would have already run out of star power.

My star power clashed with Redge's, and I could feel mine being nullified. Regardless, I continued to send out my slowdown star sorcery towards him – then, I spun my twinblade once to the right and dashed forward.

Stop, stop, stop! I pleaded over and over as I continued to unleash the spell. *More! Faster! More, more!* Simultaneously, I sped up my own body. I moved in as close as I could, then released a golden slash.

Of course, Redge blocked it. But right after that, just for a moment, he slowed down. I moved right up next to him and slashed my longsword upwards. He blocked it with his blade, so I pulled back and swung down my dagger from above. He blocked that, too, but I wasn't worried. I used the momentum he gave me when he deflected my twinblade and spun it to the left. At this point, I was forcibly slowing down time, with total disregard for the stress it placed on my body.

Just stop!

In the next moment, I sensed silence. Time hadn't stopped, but my star sorcery was working, and things had slowed down to an incredible degree. Redge would surely nullify it soon, but as long as I got one little chance to attack, it would be worth it.

"Progress Boost."

I released the star power I had been storing in my right arm since the beginning of the battle and unleashed a single attack. *As long as this hits, it'll be worth it.*

I threw out my fist, and the minute it connected, my star sorcery wore off. Redge's body was blown violently backwards, and bounced off the ground a few times before it came to a stop.

I panted heavily. I had been using a crazy amount of star sorcery nonstop ever since my battle with Grom. All I could taste in my mouth now was raw, coppery blood.

My all-out attack had struck its target. If Redge stood up now, I'd be done for.

As my vision blurred, I fell to my knees. Despite my fatigue, it still felt like my body was overflowing with star power. The Ruinmaker truly was incredible… But my body couldn't keep up. No matter how much star power I possessed, it meant nothing if I was too weak.

Suddenly, Redge rose to his feet. Hacking up puddles of blood, he glared at me like a bloodthirsty wraith.

You gotta be kidding me… One more… I just needed to get one more attack in. He was barely standing.

My legs quivered. *I need to stand up… I need to stand up and kill him!*

I tried to regain my strength, but there was nothing there anymore. My body moaned in response to the strain I'd placed on it, and I hacked up more blood.

As I slipped on the red pools that had come out of my body, Redge swung his blade and shot out another silver slash.

I swung my twinblade and tried to create my own golden slash, but I didn't make it in time. Instead, I took the brunt of the silver slash with my glowing longsword, which snapped in two.

The top part of my twinblade was now only half as long as it used to be. The sword itself was shaped like clock hands, and if I lost either hand, I became unable to both accelerate and slow down time. There was no longer any way for me to go on fighting.

Meanwhile, Redge swung his greatsword up yet again. I could feel an immense amount of star power gathering around the glowing silver blade.

Guess I was fated to die either way. Even with my twinblade, there's no way I'd be able to block that.

I'm dead.

It was so clear now. I couldn't move, and I no longer had any way to escape or block his strike.

I deactivated Towa.

"Why, big brother?!"

"Towa, you need to run away."

"No! I can't just leave you here!"

"Sorry... But I can't move anymore."

"I'll just take you with me, then!"

Towa stumbled as she tried to pull me with her. No matter how hard she tried, it was impossible.

"Hurry up and go! You can escape on your own!"

"No! I... I'll never..." Tears welled up in Towa's eyes.

There was no point in crying. But what else could we do? *If only I could get Towa away from here...*

Redge swung his silver blade down, crushing my hopes. His silver slash was right on course to perfectly slice me in two. *I'm dea–*

"Azure Wall!"

Yukihime jumped in front of me and blocked the strike. But her wall was no match for Redge's slash, and it cut straight through, shattering the ice and ripping into Yukihime's slender body.

"Ahh... Ahh..."

As I watched Yukihime bleed, I was speechless. Her body collapsed in front of my eyes, and crimson blood gushed out from a massive wound. I could tell with one glance that she'd never survive.

"You idiot... Why..."

“You’re the idiot. I told you… I have a duty…”

“That doesn’t make any sense… How could you die just for some stupid duty?”

I sounded crazy. Yukihime’s duty was to protect Towa. I could never ask her to sacrifice herself for that. Neither could I choose between Yukihime or Towa. I should have been the one to die.

“Oh, easy,” Yukihime replied. “And I’m not just dying for my duty… You’re here too, remember?”

“Why would you die for someone like me?!”

“Someone like you? You’re my best friend, my partner, my rival, my servant, and…”

Her words trailed off as more blood spilled out from her.

“Hey, stop talking! Your wound will open up…”

“Kokuya…” Yukihime ignored me and continued to speak. “I see this dream sometimes. It’s such a nice dream. My parents and your parents are still alive, and we’re all there with Towa. Everyone’s smiling…”

Yukihime reached her slender hand out toward me. I pulled my body toward her, and her beautiful white hand stroked my cheek.

“My dream will never come true, but there’s still hope for you and Towa… And for all the other people in our world… You need to make sure their dreams come true.”

“I can’t. Are you crazy? Without you, I can’t do anything…”

“Shut up and do as your master says… Get a hold of yourself… I’m entrusting my duty to you now.”

“Why? Why me? Come on, this isn’t what we talked about… We’re supposed to protect the world together!”

“Stop being selfish… You need to keep protecting it even after I’m gone… You promised… Relax, I know you can do it…”

“I can’t! Not without you…”

“Yes you can… Oh, there was still so much more I wanted to say, so many more things I wanted to do… But I guess this is it for me. Can I say one last thing?”

“No! This isn’t the end! Don’t talk like that!”

“…Kokuya, I… I love you.”

For a moment, I thought that time had stopped. I became color blind and deaf at the same time. In that moment, everything other than her simply faded away. Those were the words I had wanted to say so many times, but I just kept swallowing them down.

“Your stubbornness, the way you try to act tough, how you can never be honest about things, how you hate to lose, how you always get so focused on certain things, how you’re surprisingly easy to get disheartened, how you’re an idiot and a pervert, how you keep trying to get stronger, I love it all…”

They were the words I kept pushing deep down inside, lying to myself about how I wasn’t fit for her yet.

“Me too! I love you, too!” I said it. “I love everything about you, too. How stupid you are, how ridiculously proud you are, how you always get depressed about the tiniest things, how you try to act cool in the dumbest places, how you always get so easily scared, everything… Your hair, your eyes, your voice, the beautiful ice you create, I love it, I love it all!” Once I started, I just couldn’t stop. “I was never able to tell you until now, but I’ve always…”

“…Idiot. I already knew that.”

“I’m sorry it took me so long.”

“It’s okay. You managed to say it now, right? We both should have been more honest with each other…”

"...Yeah."

I know I took way too long, but please... Just please don't die.

"Would you knock it off already?"

I lost track of how many times I'd said it. And yet he kept walking up to me – Kokuya Kurono. I was the one who challenged him first. It was just so frustrating after he beat me with the Ruinmaker. I felt sure I could beat him when he wasn't using it, though.

"It isn't that hard to understand."

"..."

"I'm the strongest star sorcerer in the world, and you're a G Ranker. You could never beat me, not even if you turned the entire world upside down."

"Shut up."

"...What did you say?"

"I said shut up. You're the strongest? And I'm a G Ranker? Who cares about stupid ranks? I'm going to turn your entire world upside down, right here and now."

"Where do you get all that stubbornness from?"

"I promised I'd protect her."

"Your little sister? Why don't you just leave that to me?"

"Towa's my little sister. I need to protect her. Me, and no one else."

He really seemed hung up on his little sister for some reason. Towa Kurono was the Ruinmaker, a weapon capable of destroying the world. Since I was the strongest, it was my duty to protect her and make sure she didn't fall into the wrong hands. I didn't understand what he could possibly have a problem with.

But Kokuya continued to challenge me. Day after day, he fought and lost to me, but he never gave up. All the other students at the academy made fun of him. *"He'll never beat her. There's no way. Can't he see how much stronger she is?"* He had to listen to that every day. I'd even thought similar things myself.

Still, there was one thing I understood that the others didn't – Kokuya would do anything for his little sister. He was obsessed with her, it almost seemed like he was crazy. I sort of understood, though. After all, I'd do anything for my parents. No matter how impossible something may have seemed, I didn't care. Just because something was impossible at the time didn't make me want to give up one bit. If I couldn't do it once, I'd just have to keep trying until I did – just like how he insisted on fighting me until he won. We were the same, in a way.

He was also the only one who treated me like an equal. When I was born, so many things were instantly decided for me. I was to become the world's strongest star sorcerer and the Headmistress of the academy. It was all planned before I even spoke my first word. I even heard people calling me the 'finest masterpiece of the Yukigane house.' Since I was born from exceptional parents, it was my duty to be exceptional as well.

I could understand why some people felt that deciding things based on heritage is a bad thing. It's not like I was a fan of having others decide things for me either. But what if those things happened to coincide with what you wanted to be? What if you *liked* the path they set out for you? I was proud of the path my parents had set out for me, and the duty they entrusted me with.

I had my share of complaints, though. The people around me only ever saw me as the daughter of the Yukigane house, and only treated me as such. Some respected me, some envied me, and others desperately tried to curry favor with me. No matter which attitude they assumed, every single person only saw me as the daughter of the Yukigane house, and nothing more.

He was the only one – Kokuya was the only one who paid no mind to those things and saw me for me. He didn't care that I was the

daughter of the Yukigane house, or even that I was the strongest star sorcerer in the world. He just kept challenging me because he knew that I was stronger than him. And it made me so happy. It made me so happy to know that in his eyes, I wasn't the daughter of the Yukigane house, but Yukihime Yukigane.

In his eyes alone, I could truly be myself. He took me from the top of the world and turned me into just another normal girl.

It felt like I was watching a kaleidoscope. Old memories of the time I'd spent with Kokuya flashed through my mind one after another – then I saw it. Redge, firing his silver slash.

If I was to fulfill my duty as the Headmistress, I needed to protect Towa with my life. We could always find another compatible user, but there was only one Ruinmaker.

In other words, I should have let Kokuya die. But I didn't. There was no way I could have.

In that moment, I was no longer acting as the Headmistress. I was doing what *I* wanted to do. I was just a run-of-the-mill girl, prepared to do anything to protect the one she loved.

I had no regrets… No, that was a lie. I failed to fulfill my duty with him. I had wanted to stay by his side forever.

And yet, strangely enough, I felt satisfied – for I knew that he would inherit and finish all that I had started.

Blood gushed out from my body. Next to me, I could see Kokuya, wailing as tears streamed down his face. I knew I was a goner… I knew it. But…

"I was never able to tell you until now, but I've always…"

"…Idiot. I already knew that."

"I'm sorry it took me so long."

"It's okay. You managed to say it now, right? We both should

have been more honest with each other…"

I squeezed out the next words. If I was going to die here, I knew what I needed to say next.

"But I'm satisfied."

I told him how I really felt. I could finally close my eyes.

At last, I managed to say it, right before I died.

"But I'm satisfied," Yukihime said, as she kissed me.

Her lips felt cold and soft.

She grabbed my left hand, which was gripping the remains of her sword, then, moved it up toward her chest.

"I want to give everything to you. My love, my life… I did all the hard work up until now, so if you don't win this, you're gonna have to answer to me…"

Yukihime thrust the sword toward her chest and made my hands grip it.

Why? But I already knew the answer. And soon, a great power began to fill my body.

The Ruinmaker had the ability to steal star power from whoever she killed.

Just before she died, Yukihime gave me all her strength.



“That’s some look you’ve got on your face.”

Slowly, he appeared in front of me, dragging his greatsword behind him. Redge – the man who killed Yukihime.

“You…” I glared at him.

He slitted his eyes and glared back at me. “I see that woman meant a great deal to you.”

“…What’s your point?”

“Don’t misunderstand. I didn’t kill her in order to retaliate against you. The death of a great warrior shouldn’t be corrupted with such things… But I suppose it may look that way, by coincidence.”

“By… coincidence? Are you completely insane?! You people are the ones who invaded our world and started ordering us around!”

“Zol and I were merely forced to come here on a mission. You’re the one who chose to seek vengeance for your parents. Not that I could blame you. Just like you, I seek vengeance for my mentor, therefore, I have no right to judge you. We both want to murder the one who took someone precious from us. That’s all there is to it. Our relationship is quite simple, really.”

He just went on and on. He murdered Yukihime, while his mentor murdered my parents. *If only the two of them had never shown up…*

He’s going to pay.

“In that case, you’re going to die. I’m going to kill you,” I said.

“As you wish. If it’s a meaningless death you want, I will oblige.”

Again… I could feel murderous rage taking over again.

Redge raised his greatsword. I no longer had any way to block it. Towa had provided me with unlimited star power, as had Yukihime. I would never run out, but my body simply couldn’t handle it any

longer. I couldn't do anything.

Am I really going to die here? Without killing him?

Suddenly…

"I'm going to make sure you pay for what you've done." Towa walked in between Redge and I, raised up both of her arms, and glared at him. "You hear me?" I'd never heard her talk like this before.

Redge narrowed his eyes. "Ruinmaker… What could you possibly do in that form?" he scoffed. "Unfortunately, I can't humor you. I need to take you back alive." Redge dropped his sword and reached out for Towa.

"Towa, you idiot! Run!"

In the next moment, a wind blade shot out toward Redge, only to be sliced to bits by an extended silver sword.

"Lord Redge!"

"Kurono!"

Nagisaki and Elemia stood side by side.

"We should retreat for now, sir! If we regroup, we'll be able to come back and steal the Ruinmaker in a flash!" Elemia ran up to Redge.

"Don't worry. I'm about to end everything right now." Redge shrugged off Elemia's plea and tried to continue the battle.

But Elemia kept talking. "Valt was assaulted on her way back. At this rate…"

As he heard this, Redge stopped moving.

"You're not getting away!" Nagisaki swung down his scythe toward Elemia, who deflected it with her sword.

Redge stared at me with his silver eyes and screamed. “Mark my words – we’ll be back to finish this very soon!”

After hatred rang out in his voice, Redge disappeared along with Elemia.

They left us with nothing but tattered remains. Shattered ice. A huge crater. Hundreds of pale monster corpses. Countless scars of war.

I bent down before the one I had killed – before the remains of my beloved – and cried.



A Mangled Trail

One day, at a remote town in Khaos Schwartz, a pregnant woman began to experience a bizarre phenomenon. All of a sudden, strange wounds appeared all over her body. Upon seeing them on her arms and hands, she thought she must have simply cut herself and not realized it. However, the wounds kept increasing with every day, until she found them on her cheeks, stomach, and even inside her mouth. She had no recollection of ever cutting herself there on these places.

Assuming that it must have been some kind of disease or curse, she went to visit several doctors, but none of them could tell her why it was happening. When she talked to her husband, who was a star sorcerer as well as a distinguished military official, he told her: “Occasionally, when children with extremely potent star power are born, their abilities affect their mothers.”

People became afraid of the mangled woman, and even spread rumors about how she was going to give birth to a cursed child. Despite that, the woman never gave in to the pain or the rumors, and fought for the child she had created with her beloved husband. As the birth drew nearer, the wounds increased, each one deeper than the last. Sometimes, she even coughed up blood. It seemed that the wounds were appearing inside her body as well.

As the child grew, she began to sense star power from within. Everyone knew that children who possessed star power from birth always grew up to become powerful star sorcerers, so her husband was overjoyed.

Finally, the woman succeeded in giving birth from her mangled body. She named her child Redge.

◆

Redge was a very kind boy, but kindness wasn't his only trait. Sometimes, one could catch a glimpse of a very powerful will beyond his kindness. His mother's kindness and his father's strength – he had inherited his parents' best qualities.

But the other children feared him. One day, he saw a girl from the next town over getting bullied by several boys. Redge got angry, but first tried to use words to stop them. In response, the boys decided to gang up on him and beat him to a pulp. As they converged on him, every last bully was instantly mangled to shreds.

In Khaos Schwartz, there existed a great number of star sorcerers, and many children could use star sorcery. Since Redge could do what he did without using any wind star sorcery, he frightened them. It wasn't until later that they discovered his star sorcery was blade elemental, an element that incorporated the abstract concepts of 'blade' and 'severance.'

Depending on how much star power he used, Redge could sever anything, even star sorcery itself. He could also cut through space, which allowed him to teleport.

Redge didn't know how to control this power. This was a problem that powerful star sorcerers often faced. If he had been a fire elemental, he might have suddenly set nearby things on fire by accident. Therefore, he understood why people were so afraid of him. Many abstract elements were one of a kind, and no one had ever heard of another star sorcerer who was blade elemental. In Redge's case, things nearby would suddenly get cut in two without him noticing.

It also happened when he argued with his mother. One day, he asked her why she always had so many scars on her body. His father was a military official, but as far as he knew his mother had never been on a battlefield. Yet for some reason, it looked as if her entire body had been carved up by blades.

She didn't answer him, but Redge learned the reason soon enough when he heard the other children talking about a certain rumor. His mother had gotten strange cuts and lacerations while she was pregnant with him, which meant that he was a cursed child.

Redge's mother was always very kind to him, and he loved her. He hated the fact that he had hurt her simply by being alive. Cursing his ability, Redge decided to kill himself and sliced his own throat.

At the last moment, his mother came in and embraced him. *"You can hate me as much as you want,"* she said. *"Just don't hate yourself."*

Redge's mother bound his silver hair in a special clasp that she had a friend of his father make. It was crafted out of rare materials that suppressed star power.

After that, Redge vowed to control his power and use it to help people. In order to keep that vow, he decided the best thing to do would be to join the military like his father, so that he could get a chance to protect good people like his mother.

◆

When tragedy struck, Redge was powerless.

One night, a band of monsters attacked his village. Khaos Schwartz was split into two kingdoms: one controlled by humans, and the other by monsters, and the two halves were constantly warring.

Monsters – inhuman beings. Goblins, orcs, and vampires were among the many non-human creatures that existed. They were stronger and smarter than humans, possessed their own special abilities, and looked upon humans as inferior beings. In order to fight them, the humans had no choice but to use star sorcery.

What Redge saw that day was hell incarnate. The village he had played in ever since he was a small child had been burned to the

ground and painted in blood. Some were killed, others were taken away, while still others were devoured and ravaged. He saw monsters toying with his father as they killed him, while his mother became a sexual plaything for grotesque beasts. Both those who had been cruel and kind to Redge were all tortured equally.

That's when Redge realized – *This is why I have my power*.

After losing everything, Redge dashed around the village, ripping the vile monsters to shreds. However, he was still a young boy. His ability was rare and powerful, but it still wasn't strong enough to defeat the elite monsters. Redge was captured, and would have been punished severely for killing so many of the other monsters – but something else happened.

Just before they sliced off Redge's head, a lone man appeared and destroyed the rest of the monsters in one fell swoop.

His name was Zolminal Radius, and he became the boy's new guardian.

◆

The man who saved Redge claimed to be a friend of his father's. They had fought side by side in the wars, so he was just as saddened about the tragedy that had befallen Redge's village.

In response, Redge screamed at him. *"Why didn't you come sooner?! Why didn't you save everyone?!"*

Zolminal responded. *"If there is anything I can do to atone for this, please, let me know."*

But Redge had nothing left – Nothing to protect, nothing to call his own. So he chose revenge.

"I want to kill as many monsters as I can."

"Then you should become a soldier," Zolminal said.

And so, the boy started training with the man.

The days Redge spent with Zolminal allowed him to momentarily forget the sadness of losing everything, and the horrors he had experienced during the tragedy. This man provided him with a wealth of knowledge – how to use a sword, how to use his power, how to fight, and how to live.

◆

"...Zol, is revenge a bad thing?"

"That depends on the person and the situation. It can be both good and evil, so you should just decide the answer for yourself. Even I sometimes do things just for the sake of pissing someone off, rather than some lofty ideal."

"How can I get strong like you?"

"Make enemies. Basically, you need to find a goal, but finding an enemy is probably an easier way to look at it. Find someone you can't forgive, or someone who you want to defeat. That's bound to make you more motivated. Although, if you're the kind of wuss who turns tail and runs after he loses, it won't matter what you do."

"Then I want you to be my enemy."

"You're a cheeky one, aren't you? You've got guts... And kids with guts always end up getting stronger."

"Why did you become a soldier?"

"For the money."

"...Not for your family, or for the empire?"

"Who cares about that? I don't even have a family. They were

killed by monsters when I was a kid, just like you."

"Is that why you saved me?"

"No. Just thought I might be able to use you. Thought you might come in handy at some point. I owed your father a lot, too."

"...What do you think family really means?"

"How should I know?"

"I wanted to become a soldier to protect my family. I wanted to protect my mom, like my dad did... But now..."

"You want someone to protect?"

"...Is it easy to find someone like that?"

"Probably not. I can't be your mother, but I may be able to become your family. You can even call me pop if you want."

"Knock it off, Zol."

"Cheeky little brat."

◆

Much later, Redge grew strong enough to become Zolminal's subordinate, and the two began teaming up on missions. By this point, they had already gone through quite a lot together.

One day, Zolminal was chosen to become one of the Seven Wicked Knights, the elite squad that directly served the leader of the Granz Empire, the largest nation on the human side. They attended a special military academy, and also met the man who would later become the first member of the Wicked Knights, and Redge's right hand man. Later, on a mission together, they saved a girl who had been enslaved, and she became attached to them.

Their last day together came abruptly. They were told that it would be a simple mission, but it was clearly more than that.

"What we're about to do here is evil. It's no different from what the monsters always do... But if we succeed, it'll allow us to win all the coming wars with ease. We'll be able to save thousands of people."

Their mission was to invade Azur Étoile and steal the Ruinmaker. Zolminal was confident that it wouldn't be too dangerous, and that the two would be able to succeed without any trouble. But when Redge heard that what they would be doing was no different than the monsters, he hesitated a bit.

The monsters were the ones who had stolen everything from him. At first, he had been fighting only to get revenge, but as of now, he truly wanted to protect the empire. And in order to do that, he couldn't go on clinging to ideals. Sometimes, it was necessary to dirty one's hands a little.

A small sacrifice could save thousands. All he had to do was sacrifice one little girl from some other world in order to save his homeland. It was an easy choice. A small price to pay.

And so, Redge buried his reservations beneath deceitful rationalizations. For the sake of his mentor, his homeland, the people he wanted to protect, and the vile monsters he wanted to destroy, Redge had no choice but to do it.

He changed his focus from his excuses to the mission at hand, and invaded another world. Khaos Schwartz had invaded Semuleice before, but never Azur Étoile, so there was no telling what would happen. It was said that Azur Étoile was an underdeveloped world in terms of star sorcery, so it couldn't be considered a threat.

...Or so they thought.

In the end, Zolminal lost his life during the mission, and they failed to steal the Ruinmaker. Before they left their world, they had received a report stating that the Ruinmaker had not fully awakened,

and that a compatible wielder hadn't been found – but that hadn't been the truth at all.

Redge blamed himself. He'd become intoxicated with a cheap sense of justice, and failed to fulfill his duty in a calm, composed manner. He should have emptied his mind and taken on the foe with all his might. Even if things had ended up in the same manner, he would have at least known that he had done all he could.

Instead, he lost sight of his goal – and lost his one and only mentor. He would never be whole again.

"I can't believe he lost to a star sorcerer from some underdeveloped world." The members of the faction that had clashed with Zolminal mocked his death, without any knowledge of what had actually transpired that day.

Redge couldn't let it go. And so, he made a vow. He would complete the mission that Zolminal had started, and restore his reputation. Then, he would get revenge on the Ruinmaker wielder who killed his mentor.

After that incident, Redge continued to rack up military successes, and climbed the ranks at an unprecedented speed.

◆

Redge sat up. It felt like he had just seen a very long, ponderous dream.

"Lord Redge, how do you feel?"

"...Fine. Give me the latest report. Where are the remaining Knights?"

"Fortier and Typhon are out on a mission, as are Meile and Neige. Grom has been recovered, and I think Valt should be finished healing him soon."

Valt Mastigio was the fifth of the Seven Wicked Knights. Since she specialized in healing star sorcery, she was considered to be especially valuable. Valt was to be on healing duty after Redge's group returned from Azur Étoile, so she began her journey back to the castle while they were gone. On her way back, she was attacked by monsters, so Redge was forced to hurry back to Khaos Schwartz and save her.

"Good work. As soon as the healing is finished, we'll immediately head back to Azur Étoile."

"...Yes, my lord." It seemed like Elemia wanted to say something else, but she remained silent.

She probably wanted to suggest that Redge rest for a little longer, but he wouldn't stand for it.

Just a little more... I'm almost there, Zol...

At long last, the revenge he had been waiting for was just around the corner.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Final Battle, Powered by Memories

I first met Yukihime Yukigane in the worst way possible. As soon as we saw each other, we fought a violent battle, until I managed to win with the Ruinmaker's help. For a while after that, I thought she was a total jerk. Even after we started living together, she'd get on my case about every little thing. It seemed like she was really bent out of shape over being defeated for the first time in her life.

I fought her so many times. But no matter how many times I tried, I could never beat her without the Ruinmaker. I lost again and again, and at some point, I started challenging her on purpose. At first, I was just frustrated – even when Towa got kidnapped. Yukihime and I fought desperately and saved Towa. But of course I had been desperate. She was my only remaining family member, and we had been together since birth, so I was on the verge of losing my mind.

For as long as I could remember, I had wanted to protect my sister. Perhaps it was my instinct as her older brother, or even the whole reason I was alive. I didn't need a reason, though – protecting Towa was something I did unconsciously.

And there was more to our relationship than that. Whenever I saw her smile, it filled me with power. No matter how much pain I was in, thinking of Towa gave me the strength to continue on. That's why it should have been my job to save her... but Yukihime beat me to it.

It wasn't fair. It hurt even worse than whenever she beat me in a fight. Why did *she* get to save Towa? Also, I just couldn't understand it. Why did she have to go so far? I wished we could have traded places. How could she sacrifice so much for the sake of her duty?

A while later, she explained why. And all of a sudden, I realized I

had fallen in love with her. Not because she saved my sister – I fell in love with the way she lived her life... and...

When I awoke, I was crying.

As my mind faded back into reality, I remembered what had happened before I collapsed – Yukihime's final moments.

She looked so happy, so satisfied.

"...Why, Yukihime?" I muttered. Tears spilled out from my eyes.

I awoke in a hospital bed. I was in the academy infirmary, and Towa was sleeping face down next to me.

"Mmm..." Towa slowly sat up. She stared at me with drowsy eyes, and the moment she fully opened them, she started to cry. "...Big brother!" She came in for a hug, but the moment she touched me, she froze. "...Oh no, wait. You're all hurt, aren't you?"

"It's okay."

"It won't hurt?"

"I don't care if it hurts."

I pulled Towa toward me, and hugged her. I was covered in wounds, but my heart was in even worse condition. It had been ripped to shreds, crushed beyond all recognition. But I still had Towa. Towa was still alive. As if to ascertain this, I clutched her with my left hand.

"Big brother... Yukihime, Yukihime, she..." Towa sobbed.

"It's okay. You don't need to say anything." I started to cry.

And so, we cried in silence, all alone.

Towa always spoke very politely to everyone but me, and Yukihime was no exception. After we lost our parents, Towa didn't open up to anyone. She couldn't trust people anymore. After watching her parents die right before her eyes, and witnessing pure evil in that

organization day after day, Towa's heart had been completely shattered.

Until she met Yukihime. Until that day, I thought I'd never see Towa laugh or cry again. I thought that reliving our days of happiness in my mind would be the only solace I'd ever have.

When she met Yukihime, Towa changed. I think I changed, too. Yukihime even said it herself. We both changed, and she's the one who made it happen. I thought that Towa would never open up to anyone aside from me ever again, but that hadn't been the case with Yukihime. There was no way we'd ever be able to thank her for all she'd done for us.

"...Hey, Towa. What do you want to do now?" I asked Towa, after we shared a cry.

"What do you mean?"

"I want to defeat that guy."

"...Me too."

"Will you lend me your power again?"

"Of course."

Towa and I nodded deeply to one another. Then, we heard a knock on the door.

"Have you awakened, Kurono?" Nagisaki asked as he came in. "Sorry to call on you so soon, but I'd like you to come with me."

After changing into my school uniform and attaching a temporary prosthetic arm, I followed Nagisaki out of the infirmary. I had a feeling as to where he was leading me.

"...Yukihime told me that if something ever happened to her, she wanted you to become Headmaster."

Headmaster. The leader of the academy, tasked with defending the world against otherworld invasions.

"Since you're Rank #2 within the academy, I'm sure the Council of Seven Houses will approve it."

"You want me to become Headmaster?" *So that's what she meant when she said she was entrusting her duty to me…* "…Sorry, but that's not for me."

"Yeah," Nagisaki quietly agreed. "Now I'd like to talk to you about a personal matter." He stopped walking and turned to me. "…What I'm going to say to you now is nothing more than an awful, petty, conceited way of taking my anger out on someone," he said, then grabbed my collar and screamed: "Why didn't you protect Yukihime?!"

With his hand still on my collar, Nagisaki slammed me into the wall. "I'm weaker than you… So I couldn't stand by her side… So I have no right to judge you. But that's why I want to say this… You're the only one I can say it to! Why, Kurono?! Why… You're stronger than me, and you were right next to her! Why…"

I couldn't fault Nagisaki, no matter how awful, petty, or conceited he thought he was being. And so I listened. It was all I could do. Not only did he have feelings for Yukihime, just like I did – we both admired her strength, too.

"…Sorry. Apologizing is all I can do now…"

If I had been stronger, this would have never happened.

"I don't need your apology."

"Then what do you want me to do?"

"I could become the Headmaster, you know. I'm the leader of the Nagisaki House, and Rank #3 within the academy. In terms of social status, I'm more fit for the post than you are. But…" Nagisaki began, as he stared at me with tears in his eyes. "I want you to do it. I don't care if you don't think you're cut out for it. You don't need to

apologize to me. Just make sure you finish everything that Yukigane wasn't able to."

I'm sure he wasn't lying about how he was taking his anger out me. But that wasn't all there was to this… Nagisaki was trying to encourage me as well. He really did care for Yukihime. He understood why she was such an amazing person. He was a man who had loved the same woman I did – How could I refuse him?

"Okay… Thanks, Nagisaki."

"No need to thank me. I was only speaking my mind."

…Yet another person who needs to be more honest with himself.

I followed Nagisaki to the meeting room where the Council of Seven Houses met. There, I was instated as the new Headmaster. After the meeting, Nagisaki handed me a long attaché case.

"What's this?" I asked.

"Just open it," he said.

Inside was a metallic blue twinblade.

"It's your star armament," Nagisaki said. "I had the star sorcerer smith division repair it as quickly as possible. They used parts of Yukigane's star armament to finish it off. Apparently, its new name is Chronoslayer: Glacies."

"Parts from Snowbloom…" I murmured.

I gripped the metallic blue blade. It melted into light and dissolved. Just like the original Chronoslayer, I could store it and bring it out whenever I wanted to.

Now we'll always be together.

For a moment, I almost thought I heard Yukihime's voice. It felt so strange – like exactly the right cogs had fit together inside me. I hadn't experienced this with the man who Redge called Zol, who

happened to be the last person I killed. Yukihime's power must have made some special link with me. It was an exception to the norm.

Now, I had a metallic blue twinblade, and the power Yukihime had given to me. Suddenly, a star sorcery spell flashed in the back of my mind. How much star power did I need to devote to it? How much did I need to emit? What sort of preparation did it take, and what sort of effect did it have? Immediately, I understood everything.

This is what Yukihime gave to me. This is what I inherited from her.

The spell's name was Absolute Zero – the ultimate star sorcery spell, which had the power to stop time. *This is the key to defeating Redge*. I unconsciously clenched my right hand.

"You'd better win this, Kurono."

"Leave it to me."

I thrust out my fist. Nagisaki did the same, and our fists bumped together.

Afterwards, Towa and I went back to our house and made preparations. We decided to spend the night at the academy so that we'd be able to react immediately whenever Redge returned.

"I told Nagisaki to leave it to me, but… How am I going to fight this guy? How can I beat him?" Even though I had gained Yukihime's power, I couldn't just run in there without a plan.

"Actually, big brother… I've been keeping a secret from you."

It turned out that Azur Étoile's Ruinmaker – Towa – had one special feature that other Ruinmakers didn't. It was something that supplemented her ability to transform into anything, as long as her user possessed enough star power and wished hard enough.

Towa's unique power allowed her to instantly regenerate any part

of her that got destroyed. Normally, star armaments rarely got damaged that badly, but in order to regenerate a broken one, a star sorcerer would have to first release it, then wait for it to recover. With Towa, there was no need to wait at all. “Why didn’t you tell me about it until now?”

“…Because you’re so overprotective. If there was a chance of me getting destroyed, I figured you’d just get mad and tell me to stop and rest instead of regenerating.”

“Yeah, I guess I would. You’re right. I wouldn’t say it now, though, because I’d need you to keep fighting while I rest…”

In order to activate the regeneration, the Ruinmaker needed to first be deactivated and then transformed back into a weapon – which could be done in a split second. *If this goes well, it’ll be the perfect way to corner that guy.*

I also had access to Absolute Zero, the time freeze star sorcery I inherited from Yukihime. To use it, I first needed to break my twinblade. It was an integral movement, since breaking the blades representing clock hands was like forcing time itself to stop flowing. Since I had just two blades, I could only do this twice. And once I did it, I would no longer be able to speed up or slow down anything for the remainder of the battle.

Instant regeneration and the ability to stop time… With both of those on my side, maybe I really can defeat someone who seems invincible. As I tried to suppress my excitement, I saw Towa walk out of Yukihime’s room carrying a present.

“I’m not sure it’s okay for *me* to give this to you, but I know it was meant for you.”

Inside the wrapping was a crimson scarf. There was also a message card inside.

Become a man who looks good in this, it read.

“…” My eyes shot to the calendar.

Oh yeah… Today's Christmas, isn't it? Geez… You got me a scarf, too?

"Towa, you knew about this?"

"Yeah, she asked me for advice…"

So that's why Towa kept suggesting I buy a scarf when we went shopping together.

"I thought it'd look really nice if you had matching ones," she said.

"Yeah, I bet it would have…"

Yukihime had said she liked the color red, since it was the color that heroes always wore. She didn't have her own red scarf, though. She said that red didn't look good on her… I disagreed.

I understood what this present meant. Yukihime wanted me to become a hero.

Oh, I will. Just you watch.



With a silent promise in my heart, I put on the scarf.

It truly felt like our battle was just around the corner now. We returned to the academy several hours later. The sun had sunken down, and the sky was bathed in twilight. Suddenly, I felt intense star power, and I knew exactly who it belonged to.

“Towa, we need to win this.”

“...Yeah. We can do this, big brother.”

This day was supposed to be for her. Instead, we were celebrating Christmas without her.

And so, the final battle began.

“Back so soon?” I asked.

“I have a skilled subordinate who can use healing star sorcery,” Redge replied.

“...No wonder you look like you’re in perfect condition.”

It had only been one day, yet he looked completely healed. As he said, he must have had very skilled subordinates on his side. We had some skilled people at the academy as well, but my body was still hurting in several places. I had used too many spells that put a strain on my body, and one day wasn’t enough to recover from all the damage, even with the help of healing star sorcery.

“I told you I’d be back in no time to end this,” Redge said. “It doesn’t matter how much damage I may have accrued... I came here to kill you as quickly as possible.”

“Fine by me. I want to end this just as much as you do.”

“Liberation – Khaos Ende Schwert.” Redge brandished his massive blade.

“Let’s go, Towa.”

“…Okay!”

“Liberation – Ruinmaker.”

Towa’s body faded into light, then transformed into my right arm. I clenched my right fist, and again, that voice echoed in my mind.

Kill.

“…Shut up.” I forced the side effect of the Ruinmaker’s power out of my mind. *This is my… no,* our *battle. It has nothing to do with you, Ruin.*

Then, I extended my right hand. *Yukihime… Lend me your strength.*

“Liberation – Chronoslayer: Glacies.” I brandished my metallic blue twinblade.

“I never told you my name, did I?” Redge asked.

“Go ahead. I have a name to give you as well.”

Redge swung his sword down and began to speak in a commanding voice. “I am Redge Ferimento, the Dark Emperor of Khaos Schwartz. The man you killed was Zolminal Radius, and I have come to avenge my mentor’s death!”

“I’m Kokuya Kurono, the Headmaster of Azur Étoile. I’ve come here to finish what Yukihime started!”

“Oh? You succeeded her on the throne? I don’t think you’re fit to inherit that title… Time for you to die and relinquish it.”

With that, our battle began.

The golden line that ran down my silver arm was glowing blindingly bright. I spun my twinblade to the right and sped up my body. When I stepped forward, my immense star power created a

small crater below me. Like a bullet, I shot forward and instantly closed the distance between us. My unprecedented speed made Redge's eyes widen, but it wasn't enough to make a man like him falter. As soon as I reached him, Redge's silver star power burst out, creating a hurricane of invisible blades.

I quickly spun my twinblade to the left in order to slow down the space around me. This would lower the amount of times his star power would hit me. I couldn't reduce it to zero, but I'd be able to prevent most of damage.

Blood splurted out from my cheek, chest, and thigh. *This is nothing compared to what Yukihime felt.*

With a powerful shout, I swung down my longsword hard enough to split his blade in two. A piercing clang echoed across the battlefield. Redge had turned his sword sideways to block mine. In the next moment, I shot behind him. His mind couldn't possibly keep up with this. I slashed out at him from behind – then, Redge instantly disappeared.

He reappeared five steps away from me, then disappeared again. Teleportation. I kept feeling his presence pop up in different spots. When he teleported in succession like this, it was impossible for me to get a grasp on his location.

Suddenly, I felt star power surging out from behind me. Quickly, I swung my twinblade backwards, just in time to catch a powerful slash. Several other slashes followed it, knocking my body straight through a wall.

"You certainly are fast."

"…What you're using has nothing to do with speed," I said as I stood up. He wasn't moving quickly. He was just disappearing. "It's insane…"

"And you'll die without ever understanding it."

"I don't need to understand it to beat you," I spat, then punched through the wall in front of me with my right hand.

We were now standing in a cramped alleyway between some buildings. It was perfect. I kicked off the wall in front of me, then leapt onto the roof of the building I had come out from. I could get behind him here.

Then, as I took another step, the entire roof caved in.

What just happened? I sped up my mind and looked around. Soon, I understood. Redge had slashed through every last building in the area. Every building in front of him, as far as the eye could see, had been perfectly cleaved.

As I felt myself fall, I struggled to keep my body in an upright position and landed safely.

"Those movements are starting to annoy me," Redge grumbled, then twisted the hilt of his blade.

Suddenly, the unusually long hilt split apart, and its blade broke into two. Redge slid the extra blade into the free half of the hilt. He had just split his huge sword in two.

Redge swung the blade in his left hand. We were 20 meters away from each other, and the blade wasn't glowing, so it didn't seem like he was about to fire a slash at me.

Then, he disappeared – or so it seemed, until he appeared on my immediate right and swung down the blade in his right hand. I quickly caught it with my longsword. *I've never seen him teleport this far. I thought 10 meters was his limit… Does it have something to do that sword swing? Maybe he needs to swing his sword in order to teleport long distances?*

Redge pulled back his right blade and swung his left horizontally. I deflected it with my dagger. I only had one sword – my twinblade, but I had confidence in how many attacks I could make with it. *He's not going to get the jump on me just because he has two swords now*. Or so I thought.

Redge swung down both swords at the same time, but didn't slash

anything. It appeared to be a useless motion, until he disappeared immediately afterwards.

I felt his star power behind me. I swung my longsword back and turned around just in time to see Redge swing down at me. I managed to block it, but then he disappeared again. Now, Redge could apparently teleport multiple times in a row. It seemed that normally he would need to wait some time before using it again, but splitting his sword into two somehow eliminated that.

...Maybe he needs to swing his sword in order to teleport like this? I've seen him teleport without that motion, so it might affect his activation time or distance... The swing must be an enhancement.

A cycle had begun. Redge would disappear, reappear only long enough to slash out at me, then disappear again, leaving me unable to counterattack. Eventually, he reappeared right in front of me. His greatsword could reach me, but my longsword wouldn't be able to reach him.

I stepped in and swung my longsword horizontally. It cut only air. He was gone.

A split second later, he reappeared at my side – the perfect spot.

"SlashSet – Release."

Redge was standing right outside of the arc I had just slashed along. But before my slash could hit him, he unleashed a powerful burst of star power from within. Everything around us got slashed to bits, and the slash I released was also caught up in the destruction.

So far, I had managed to do nothing but defend myself. *In order to turn this battle around...* "...I'm going to have to do something a little crazy."

I spun my twinblade twice and tripled my speed, just like I had done in the fight with Grom. Redge reappeared near me once again and swung his blade down. Halfway along its arc, I deflected it with my longsword, then quickly slashed upwards with my dagger. My

blade lightly sliced Redge's chest, splattering the ground with his blood.

Instantly, Redge disappeared – but my counterattack had been successful. It had been worth the risk. Even though the slice had been a shallow one, it had still managed to connect. I also figured out that my triple speed was fast enough to keep up with his high-speed teleportation combos. Due to the severe strain, I couldn't keep it up forever – if I cared about physical stress, that is.

I'm just going to ignore it. Five seconds, ten seconds… I'm going to keep it going for as long as I can. I don't care if I hack up my guts while doing it – I'm not going to let Redge get the jump on me.

And so, I put my triple speed to the test against his teleportation. As we traded blows, both of us slowly grew more and more wounded.

Suddenly, Redge stopped moving. Blood was dripping out of my mouth, and my entire body was covered in wounds, but he had incurred a fair share of his own.

"I see you've managed to keep up with me… In that case, I'll end this battle with a different move."

Redge teleported backwards, combined his blades back into one, then raised it up as if he wished to pierce the sky. Silver star power began to gather around the blade, and it was like nothing I had felt thus far. The light stretched up so high, it really looked like it was going to slice through the atmosphere.

If Redge swung that sideways, he would have easily been able to cut down every last building in the area, but this attack felt much stronger than the one he had used earlier.

And this time, he was going to aim it toward me.

This was the silver energy that killed Yukihime. Once he swung it down, I wouldn't be able to escape no matter how far back I ran. I wouldn't be able to dodge it to the left or right, either. *What can I do? Is it impossible to avoid? Should I just try to destroy the attack itself?*

What if I threw my twinblade at him? No, that'd be useless, and it probably wouldn't kill him even if it hit.

As Redge held up his massive, glowing weapon, his silver eyes pierced me. I no longer had any time to hesitate.

I spun my twinblade to the right, and restarted the triple speed boost that had worn off when Redge stopped moving. It felt like my entire body was burning up – but I pushed the pain out of my mind. If I focused on that, I'd get sliced right in two. Regardless of the direction I retreated in, I was dead, which meant I had to run toward him.

This is my chance to end it. In order to get a solid hit in, I had to use the time freeze star sorcery. Even if he nullified it several seconds after I activated it, there would be enough time to hit him, especially if I slowed down time like I did in the previous battle.

Stopping time is the only way…

"You're ready to do this, right, Towa?"

"I know we can do it as long as we're together, big brother!"

We'd only get one chance at this – and it would only last for a moment.

It all comes down to this!

With a roar, I ran straight toward Redge. Instantly, I saw disappointment in his eyes. He probably thought I had given up, and was just running blindly ahead. *Good. I can't wait to see the look on your face when I'm done with you.*

I aimed my longsword at his glowing silver blade and slashed. Of course, my sword got cut in two. The broken piece went spinning into the air, and in that instant, time froze. The moment my longsword was broken, the spell had activated.

I knew that the spell would wear off in a few seconds, so I needed to attack him as soon as possible. I quickly swung my twinblade back

up and slashed him with the dagger end.

It connected. As blood gushed out from Redge's body, time began to flow once more. The spell had worn off quicker than I expected, and I had only been able to make one attack. But I wasn't finished yet.

Redge instantly swung down his blade. I quickly swung my dagger up to meet it, and the other side of my twinblade was cleaved.

Time stopped once more – this was my last chance. I swung my right arm back – *Progress Boost* – and unleashed all the star power that was stored within.

When I used this move before, it had been limited. If I charged up too much star power, the pressure would end up crushing my right arm – but with Towa, that was no longer an issue.

"It's over!" I screamed, and unleashed my final attack on Redge.

Suddenly, a silver slash shot across. Redge had somehow instantly pulled his sword back down and was now swinging it at my right arm. The time freeze spell had worn off much quicker this time. *But why? Did he awaken to a new power right in front of me?*

Redge sliced straight through my arm.

"It's not over yet!" Towa shouted out from her ethereal form.

Instantly, I sped up my body to its limit. I had lost my twinblade, but as long as I had the Ruinmaker's power on my side, I would be able to keep speeding up time. The next moment felt like a lifetime. I released Towa once more, in the hope that I would be able to immediately regenerate her. My severed arm disappeared into light, and she appeared in its place.

"Urgh!"

The moment Towa phased back in, she hacked up a horrifying amount of blood. Right away, I understood why. She hadn't lied to me about being able to regenerate, but she *had* hid one important fact from me. When she took damage in her weapon form, the damage

transferred to Towa herself as soon as she reverted back. She knew that if she'd told me that, I would have hesitated. She kept it from me so that I'd be able to act quickly when the time came.

Despite the shock in my eyes, Towa grit her teeth in pain and reached out to me. Then, she let out a shout, blowing away any shock I might've felt.

"I want to win, too! I want to give you strength! For Yukihime!"

Yeah... For Yukihime.

I reached back with my left hand and clasped Towa's right. I had pushed her so far – I couldn't screw this up.

I let out a shout as well, then chanted the words in order to make my final strike – words powered by all the memories Towa, Yukihime and I had shared together.

"Liberation – Ruinmaker!"

Towa's body faded into light and reformed into my right arm. I had successfully transformed her into a weapon again, and she looked as good as new.

Now it was time for the *real* final strike.

"Redge, I'm going to end you."

I poured all the star power I had left into my fist, swung back, and then–

Go. I've given you all of me.



Yukihime's smile drifted into the back of my mind, along with her words. I could feel her nudging me, pushing me ahead.

Redge was slouched down, his sword on the ground. He was wide open.

And so, my final fist exploded.

Redge's body fell flat on the ground.

...I won, Yukihime.

Despite the fact that he was lying motionless on the ground, Redge's eyes still burned with bloodlust. "Why are you standing still? This is your chance to get revenge."

If we had been in opposite places, he surely would have swung down his sword without any hesitation.

"...I inherited Yukihime's duty – her duty to protect the world. It has nothing to do with killing you."

If I hadn't met Yukihime, if I hadn't inherited her duty, I surely would have killed him right there on the spot. I still hated him to the extent that I wished I could kill him several times over.

"Don't ever come back to our world again."

"What if I say no?"

"...Then I'll beat you again. And again, and again, and again," I said, as I stared down at him. "Your world, your empire, is in a crisis, right? Put all that power of yours to some use and figure out a way to handle it on your own."

Right after, Elemia appeared from a star circle and recovered Redge. I didn't stop her. If I killed him here, his subordinates would only come to get revenge, and the war would never end.

This is how it has to be...

I had defeated the man who killed Yukihime, at the very place she'd passed away, and saved the world. Suddenly, I realized I couldn't hear that murderous voice in my head anymore. The desire for revenge that had been eating away at my heart for the past ten years had completely vanished. My fury, hatred, sadness, and pain were all still there, but my appetite for revenge was gone. I had something more important now – the duty I had inherited from the woman I loved.

EPILOGUE

From Now On, Forever

After the battle, several days passed.

As the human side of Khaos Schwartz continued their furious struggle against the monsters, Redge returned home from his battle with me. Once recovered from his wounds, he displayed a level of power unlike anything anyone had seen before, and saved his people from the monster invasion.

Personally, I didn't like Redge, but we both had a duty to protect a large number of people. Neither of us could stand to watch innocent people suffer. From that standpoint, I should have been happy to hear that Redge's army was winning against the monsters... But there was one important difference between us.

Redge had compared my world with his own and decided that he didn't care what happened to ours. If I had been faced with the same problem, I may have made the same decision – but I had my own responsibility, and my own duty to fulfill now. Both of us had no choice but to go on fighting and protect our loved ones.

"Headmaster... Headmaster! Hey, Kurono!"

Those were the thoughts that filled my mind as I listened to Nagisaki's report. I had just taken over Yukihime's duties as Headmaster, and was in way over my head. Since Nagisaki had also been a candidate, he had a deep understanding of the Headmaster's duties, so he taught me as much as he could. It was a bit pathetic, but I was grateful for his help. Lately, he'd been calling me 'Headmaster' more than 'Kurono.'

I heard the news about Khaos Schwartz from Semuleice, a world

that we were on friendly terms with. Out of all the other worlds, Semuleice and Khaos Schwartz shared the most traffic, so they were very up to date on the latest news. No world up until now had ever gotten involved with another on a large scale. Communications were always handled privately through a very limited number of people – until Khaos Schwartz broke tradition with what we called the Otherworld Wars.

The first one had been 16 years ago, and the second took place seven years later. Then, there was the war I had just fought in. Apparently, Semuleice had suffered a similar fate – it seemed like their wars had been even more violent than ours. It was clear that as time went on, Khaos Schwartz had begun launching more and more invasions. Regardless of what Redge truly wanted, this trend would most likely continue in the future. Therefore, while we made preparations on our side, we also needed to strengthen our relations with Semuleice.

"Kurono, are you paying attention?"

"...Oh, sorry, what?"

"Gimme a break... Are you for real? Why did Yukigane pick *you,* of all people?" Nagisaki sighed. "Fine, I'll explain it again. We're going to have a meeting with Semuleice soon, so we need to discuss the topics and policies that we want to bring up..."

Gotta focus here... I pushed all the other things out of my mind and focused on what Nagisaki was saying. I was still a far cry from what she had been, so I had to hurry and catch up. I promised that I'd finish what she'd started, after all.

"Oh, you're awake!"

I opened my eyes to see Towa standing next to my bed with her arms out.

"Huh? Good morning, Towa."

"Good morning, big brother. Looks like you're finally able to wake up on your own now."

"Yeah, today, at least… There are a lot of people who'd get on my case if I didn't."

Yukihime often had to wake me up whenever I slept too late. These days, it was Nagisaki who got mad at me when I overslept.

I still couldn't get used to life without Yukihime. Every time I awoke, I'd remember her coming in to wake me up. Every single morning, we'd start bickering over the tiniest things. I used to wish she'd just shut up.

Now, when we ate, it was just me and Towa. There was always one seat left open, and it felt so lonely. At night, Yukihime and I used to stay up and talk after Towa fell asleep. We'd usually just talk about random things, but sometimes we'd get into some deep stuff. She'd also nag me to do my homework and stop sleeping during class – but now, I was set on cleaning up my act. As the Headmaster, I sort of had to.

…See? I told you I wasn't cut out for this.

In the end, I lost to her 1,001 times. She claimed that she lost to me once, but I didn't count that. I had wanted to beat her with my own strength… But instead, she beat me and disappeared.

I still have so much stuff to get off my chest. Guess I'll have to list it all off later.

Today, I was going to see Yukihime.

"During the funeral, Nagisaki cried his eyes out… It was like two rivers of tears just streaming down his face."

As the chilly winter days set in, I stood with Towa in front of Yukihime's grave. I was wearing a red scarf around my neck.

"You cried, too, big brother," Towa said with a smile. Well, yeah, but not as much as Nagisaki.

Are you really that lonely without me? I could hear a strong-willed voice. I had been hearing it quite a bit recently. It wasn't real, of

course. Yukihime was dead. Just like how my parents never came back, I'd never get to see Yukihime ever again.

But…

I gripped the scarf.

We'll still be together forever.

As long as I kept her memories in my heart, she'd live on forever.

I put the scarf and hair ornament that Towa and I had bought together in front of Yukihime's grave. I hadn't been able to give her my presents, but she managed to give me hers. I gripped the scarf tighter.

Christmas had passed, but there would always be next year.

You've got a whole bunch of presents coming. Just you wait.

THE END

AFTERWORD

Hello there, I'm Kenya Atsui.

I like characters who fight using their fists. That's why I chose this pen name. ('Ken' uses the character for fist.) I also like swords and stuff, so I had my main character use both in this novel.

I got a lot of help from various people while working on this piece. First, I'd like to thank my editor, who kept whispering "Make a spin-off with Redge..." to me. I'm very sorry for all the trouble I caused you.

Next, Saori Toyota, who drew all of the beautiful illustrations. "Towa's boobs! Yukihime's embarrassed face! Kokuya looks so cool! Redge is way too handsome!" ...are some of the things I shouted when I saw them.

I'd also like to thank the proofreading and design companies, my friends T and M, who always gave me great advice, and Y, P, S, H, and C, who always hung out with me.

Lastly, I'd like to thank all of my readers. I really have a lot of people to thank...

I look forward to meeting you all again someday – hopefully in volume two.

October 2015
Kenya Atsui