

These Tragic Souls and a Sword Reborn in an Intergalactic Space Opera

Story Intro: "Welcome! I'm an evil god, though not that evil of a god!" is what they woke up to. Join our heroes and heroines, having just met their demise, displaced by an extradimensional event."

Story Starts

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Book 1 - The Empty Twin

Ch 2.4 Development and Delving

(Haruka Azuma POV)

[Part 4 of 4]

Grakkan Empire

System: Leafil | Planet: Unnamed Pair of Theta

Date: Grakkan Standard (GknS) | Local (Leafil) | Galactic Standard (GS)

'Revolution' / 'Prime Satellite' / 'Rotation' / 'Time'

GknS 34k6.rev-70% / 10.rev-43% / 256.rot-31% / 23:02:06

Local: 42k6.12.rev-58% / 8.rev-51% / 293.rot-24% / 19:24:00

GS 13k9.rev-47% / 8.rev-49% / 256.rot-23% / 22:25:23

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The seaside tent billowed in the late-afternoon breeze, its canvas walls swelling and contracting like the lungs of some enormous beast.

Haruka paused at the entrance, looking towards the sinking sun as she inhaled the salty air. She glanced at the makeshift clock they'd assembled that morning to track the length of a full day—and so far, it had taken more than

nineteen hours from sunrise to reach this point, with the sun only now kissing the horizon.

'Hopefully their countdown before doom follows our length of day instead of the normal twenty-four-hour one.'

She could feel her ears twitch as she stepped inside, the tent already filled with chatter. She reached up to rub at them—something she still hadn't got used to. A lot of things had yet to settle within her. She still wasn't accustomed to the changes in her body, the way it moved differently, responded differently.

Though delving into the dungeon had helped quite a bit. At the very least, she no longer felt like an impostor whenever she moved.

She made her way to the centre, where Hermione and Rin were bent over a parchment, discussing the stroke order of a rune. Past them, a whiteboard stood propped on an easel—Hermione had asked the house-elves to bring it over from the main tent. Haruka uncapped the marker Rose had lent her and wrote the date at the top in neat, careful strokes.

Meeting Minutes—Day 2, Post-Transfer. Seaside Tent. All parties present.

She counted heads. Thirteen transferees, plus the representatives. Griphook, Ragnok, and Silverclaw sat cross-legged on cushions at the far end of the table, their dark eyes glinting in the lamplight. Firenze, Bane, and Ronan—the centaur delegates—stood behind the seated humanoids, their equine bodies too large for the benches Shirou had Traced. Three house-elves perched on a raised platform Gabrielle had transfigured from driftwood: Mipsy, Topsy, and Winky as their lead, whose bat-like ears twitched with every sound.

And at the tent's seaward edge, where canvas met water in a seamless membrane that Rose had spent twenty minutes swearing over until Hermione quietly fixed it, three merfolk bobbed with their shoulders above the surface. Their leader, a merman with barnacle-encrusted shoulders and a voice like gravel dragged across coral, had introduced himself as Meridian. Beside him floated a mermaid named Undine, whose silver-green hair fanned across the water like kelp, and a siren called Thessaly—each of them had a bubble

surrounding their head down to the neck, filled with water. Apparently it was necessary for them to communicate clearly with everyone above the surface.

Haruka's ears perked forward as she finished her headcount. Everyone accounted for.

"Right," she said, pitching her voice to carry across the assembled crowd.

"Thank you all for gathering. Hermione and Rin will be leading tonight's debrief. I'll be managing the agenda and recording our decisions." She tapped the whiteboard with the marker. "First item: monster harvest report from today's dungeon expedition. Can we get a summary of—"

Shirou's hand went up. He sat near the middle of the long table, having changed out of his combat gear into a long-sleeved shirt and trousers.

"Can we push the harvest report until after we've eaten?" Golden eyes swept the table. "The food's getting cold, and... I'd rather not ruin anyone's appetite."

Haruka grimaced but glanced at Rin, who waved a dismissive hand.

"We can eat and talk. No reason to delay." Rin's turquoise gaze flicked to the spread laid across the table's centre. "Shirou, go ahead and present whilst people serve themselves."

Hermione and Rin moved forward—Rin grabbing two plates as they approached the table.

Shirou exhaled through his nose but didn't argue.

The spread was extensive. Haruka counted thirteen distinct platters, each covered with cloths that Shirou and Haruhime removed one by one—Shirou with the practised flourish of a man who'd spent his life in kitchens, Haruhime with the quiet grace of someone who'd served meals in a very different setting. Steam curled upward, carrying aromas that were—Haruka's ears twitched—actually quite pleasant. Rich, savoury, herbaceous. Her stomach growled in a way that bordered on traitorous, given what she suspected the ingredients were.

"Everything on the table tonight came from the dungeon," Shirou began, his voice settling into a measured cadence. "Supplemented with spices and a few staple ingredients from the supply stores."

A ripple of discomfort passed through the room. Haruka noticed Lefiya's hand drift to her stomach.

"I'll go floor by floor." He gestured with the tongs. "Lefiya and I have been naming the monsters as we go—nothing fancy. If we find similar species deeper down, we'll refine the classifications later."

He shrugged and pointed to one of the platters. "Floor one. Stone Mites."

Small portions of pale, flaky meat sat in shallow ceramic bowls, dressed with a light oil and finely minced herbs. At the outer edge of the platter sat small portions of what looked like crab cakes.

"The carapace is inedible—too mineralised—but once you crack it open, there's a pocket of soft tissue underneath. Mild flavour." He paused. "Think of it as a very delicate crab with a hint of shrimp."

Haruka's marker scratched across the whiteboard. *Stone Mites—Floor 1. Mild. Crab/shrimp-like.*

The memory surfaced unbidden: those flat, dinner-plate-sized beetles skittering across the ivory floor, their grey shells blending almost perfectly with the stone. She'd stepped on one by accident during their descent and nearly tripped—the thing hadn't even cracked under her full weight.

"They're easy to dispatch as long as you can penetrate the shell—one solid hit through the carapace kills them outright. Though it's also easy to nick the magicite in the process."

Rin made a grumbling sound at that.

Haruka set down her marker and decided she'd come back to the Stone Mites later.

"Floors two and three. Pale Crawlers."

The second platter held neat rectangles of pink-white flesh, lightly seared and arranged alongside a dipping sauce.

"Once cleaned and processed, the taste sits somewhere between salmon and pork. I've kept the preparation simple—seared with salt and a citrus reduction from stores."

Syr, who had been maintaining a politely neutral expression throughout, went very still. Haruka remembered why. On floor two, a Pale Crawler had dropped from the ceiling directly onto Syr's shoulder. The eyeless, worm-like thing had wrapped its hooked teeth around a fistful of her hair before she'd calmly, methodically, snapped its spine with her bare hands. She'd said nothing afterwards. She'd simply wiped her fingers on her trousers and kept walking.

Syr was now looking at the seared rectangles of Pale Crawler flesh with an expression that could best be described as contained violence.

"Soft-bodied and fragile—a single clean cut with any blade will do the job. The challenge is that they drop from ceilings, so watch above you on those floors."

"Floor three also had Clicking Beetles."

A large bowl of what looked like oversized roasted nuts sat beside the Crawler platter.

"Fist-sized insects. Individually, there's almost no meat, but processed in bulk and roasted, they have a pleasant nutty flavour. Similar to shrimp—think of them as large crayfish. You can pop the flesh out by squeezing and sucking."

"I'm not sure I can get past the legs," Gabrielle said quietly, turning a shade greener, her French accent thickening slightly as it did when she was uncomfortable.

Shirou and Haruhime both exchanged sheepish smiles.

"Um... We'll make sure to remove the legs next time," Haruhime said apologetically.

"Oh, I didn't mean to sound critical, my apologies to those who prepared tonight's feast," Gabrielle said, waving her hand placatingly, then she looked up to Shirou.

"No, it's fine, feedback is good... but let's move on. The Clicking Beetles are quite troublesome—they swarm in groups of ten to twenty, and they're agile. Everyone should look into learning magic that deals spread damage. Rose's Blasting Curse and Lefiya's flame magic worked well today."

"Moving on. Floor four—Marrow Slugs." Shirou paused, and something in his expression shifted. "I'm going to be honest. I don't recommend eating these." He gestured towards the merfolk, centaurs, goblins, and house-elves. "Unless any of the other races here have preparations they'd like to try?"

The representatives shrugged in return, so Shirou simply continued.

Rin returned to the centre of the room, handing Haruka a plate loaded with a sample of everything. Whilst the food looked and smelt surprisingly appetising, Haruka set it down for the moment. She was still working up the nerve.

"The mucus is corrosive and difficult to fully neutralise, and the flesh has an unpleasant aftertaste that no amount of seasoning could mask. However, the mucus itself might have potential applications—Rin and Hermione are already looking into it."

"Combat-wise, they're nothing of note. Slow, predictable. The real hazard is the trail they leave—it'll eat through your boots if you aren't careful. Anyone with a water spell should be ready to wash it off on contact."

"Thank Merlin for small mercies," Hermione murmured.

"Also on floors four through six—Squall Herons."

He uncovered a platter of sliced dark meat, arranged in fans with a berry gastrique.

"Flightless birds, long necks, powerful legs. The meat is rich and fatty. Closest comparison would be goose—and the rendered fat is brilliant with roasted potatoes."

Marin's chopsticks froze halfway to her mouth. Her amber-brown eyes went distant. Haruka knew exactly what she was remembering—the theatrical twirl, the mace connecting with the bird creature's face, the wet crunch of its skull embedding into the dungeon floor. Marin had been grinning at the time.

Marin looked at the sliced goose-like meat. Looked at her chopsticks. Looked at the meat again.

She ate it.

"Oh, that's actually really good," she said, reaching for more.

"Straightforward to kill—lop off the head and it drops. Quick, clean." Shirou sent a raised eyebrow and a pointed smirk in Marin's direction. "No need for theatrical finishers."

Marin looked rather sheepish at that, though it didn't stop her from finishing her piece.

"Floors five and six. Bipedal Boars."

The next platter held thick slices of dark red meat in a rich brown sauce, slow-braised until the fibres fell apart at a touch.

"Gamey, closer to wild boar in flavour. I've done a long braise to break down the toughness. The bone-plate covering the chest cavity makes them difficult to butcher, but the loin and haunches yield well."

Haruka's ears flattened. The Bipedal Boars had been the first monsters that fought back with genuine intent. She could still feel the phantom vibration in her arms from when one had charged directly at her—the impact of its tusked head against the shaft of her naginata had nearly wrenched the weapon from her grip. Lefiya had shouted a warning from behind, and Haruka had

sidestepped just barely enough to let the creature's momentum carry it past, its hooves gouging tracks in the stone floor.

Now it was braised and sitting in a sauce.

"Actually, for these types of monsters, I'd like to eventually make products like cured meats, sausages, and other preserved goods that might increase their value—since we're developing the planet, we should probably think about what we can offer when we interact with the greater gala—"

He stopped. Haruka followed his irritated glare across the table to Rin, who was sporting a look of faux surprise, and then to Illya, seated right beside her, mirroring the expression perfectly.

Shirou shot them both a flat look.

Rin and Illya chuckled in unison, each sticking their tongue out at him before returning to their plates. Sakura, the quietest of the three, simply covered her mouth and laughed softly to herself.

"Apologies, but yes—sword-for-brains here," Rin said, gesturing at Shirou with her chopsticks, "is actually right. We need to think about the future as well. If we develop products to market towards the greater galaxy, stocking up early will give us a competitive advantage before others can catch up and dilute our position."

"For perishable goods—" Hermione interjected, leaning forward. "We could store them in a warded stasis chamber. Indefinite preservation without quality degradation."

Haruka noticed the tangent forming and coughed into her hand, drawing the room's attention back.

"That's a great point—but before we get sidetracked again, we should probably let Shirou finish the report."

"Actually, before we continue—" Rose raised a hand, a slightly apologetic look on her face. "At the risk of adding to the sidetracking—since we're all here

working towards a common goal and have our lives in the balance, can we agree to call each other by our first names?"

Syr's hand went up immediately. "I wholeheartedly support this."

Marin raised her head from another piece of roasted potato and grinned, mouth still half-full. "I don't mind."

Agreement rippled across the tent—nods and murmurs from the transferees, the centaurs dipping their heads in acknowledgement, even the merfolk raising webbed hands in assent. The goblins acquiesced with some grumbling, Griphook muttering something about "surface-dweller customs" that Ragnok silenced with an elbow. The only objections came from the house-elves, but Rose quietly said not to press it.

"Ahem—right. Floors six and seven also had Thorn Rats."

Shirou uncovered a small platter of thin, pale strips—delicately smoked and arranged in tight spirals.

"Rodents, roughly the size of terriers, with quill-like spines along their backs. They fire the spines when threatened—short range, about three metres—and the barbs carry a mild venom that causes numbness for several minutes." He glanced at Haruka. "The meat itself is lean and clean. Closer to rabbit, with a faint grassy flavour—even if there's no vegetation on that particular floor."

Haruka's hand drifted unconsciously to her left forearm, where a Thorn Rat spine had caught her through a gap in her armour. The numbness had spread from wrist to elbow in seconds—she'd nearly dropped her naginata before Lefiya had yanked the barb out and Marin had stomped the rat flat with considerably more force than necessary.

"They tend to lurk behind larger monsters and snipe from cover. Cowardly, but dangerous if you're already engaged with something else. Check your flanks on those floors."

"Floor seven. Spore Weavers."

This platter was different—thin slices of something dark and earthy, arranged like carpaccio.

"Mushroom-like organisms. Requires thorough cooking to remove the toxins—the same spores that caused disorientation on that floor are concentrated in the raw flesh. But once neutralised, the flavour is intensely savoury. Very umami. They're essentially boletes."

"Those are the ones that made me walk into the wall," Marin supplied helpfully. Haruhime leaned towards Marin and whispered. "Marin, you didn't need to point that out."

But everyone heard it.

"Oh, don't worry!" Marin grinned.

Haruka wrote on the whiteboard: *Spore Weavers—Floor 7. Toxic raw. Requires full cooking. Mushroom/umami.* She underlined *toxic raw* twice.

"From here on are the floors Rose, Ryuu, and I explored ahead of the main group," Shirou said, his tone shifting slightly—more serious. "We didn't fully clear each floor, but we mapped most of what we covered and established a direct route to the stairs on each level. That should make things easier for the clearing team going forward."

He paused to let that settle, then continued.

"Floors eight and nine. Six-Armed Minotaurs."

He uncovered a platter of thin, charred strips. "The meat is tough but has a deep, beefy flavour. Extended cooking is essential—I've done some slow braises, and I smoked a batch of the cuts with high connective tissue, though those won't be ready until tomorrow." He hesitated. "Well, given the length of our day—"

"We'll get to the day length later," Haruka cut in. "It isn't a priority tonight."

Shirou nodded and moved on. "From this floor forward, the difficulty jumps significantly. The minotaurs are smarter, far stronger, and unless you have proper technique and a sharp enough blade, you'll only cut shallowly against their hides. Magic is effective, but it needs to be powerful enough to get past the hide's natural resistance."

He let that sink in for a moment before shifting gears.

"On the subject of their hides—I'd recommend tanning them for use as armour material." He gestured at Marin, who was happily working her way through everything fatty on the table. "Marin has volunteered to help with that. I'm planning to put together a crafting team—Marin, myself, plus some of the goblins, centaurs, and house-elves who are interested—to produce custom gear for everyone."

He set down the tongs and looked around the table. "I can supply weapons easily enough with my abilities, but nothing beats equipment that's been specifically tailored to you and your fighting style. That's what I'd like us to work towards."

"Floors nine and ten also had Ceiling Lurkers." Shirou's tone carried a faint note of apology. "Ray-like creatures. Fatty, rich. I've rendered the fat for cooking oil—it's excellent for frying—and the remaining flesh I've prepared as a confit."

He uncovered a small dish of pale, silky meat in its own rendered fat.

Ryuu made a small sound in the back of her throat. According to Rose, on floor nine a Ceiling Lurker had dropped directly onto Ryuu's head, its paralytic underside pressing against her face. She'd frozen—literally and figuratively—whilst Rose had peeled the thing off her with the calm efficiency of someone removing a plaster. Ryuu hadn't screamed. She'd simply stood very still for about thirty seconds afterwards, her kodachi trembling in her white-knuckled grip, before Rose had awkwardly patted her shoulder and said, "That was really brave."

Though she clearly didn't appreciate Rose babbling about it now. Shirou chuckled commiseratively, which earned him a glare from the stoic elf as well.

She was now staring at the confit with the expression of someone being asked to eat their own nightmares.

"Extra vigilance is needed on floor nine—the minotaurs will keep you occupied whilst the Ceiling Lurkers try to take advantage of that. Watch the ceilings at all times on those floors."

"Floors ten and eleven. Bone Serpents."

Delicate white fillets, pan-fried and garnished with herbs.

"The exoskeleton is the challenge—interlocking bone plates that make both butchering and fighting difficult. But the flesh underneath is surprisingly refined. A cross between fish and rabbit, with a slight gaminess." He turned a fillet over with the tongs, exposing the underside. "In combat, there are vulnerable points along the underbelly between the plate joints. Target those."

"And floor eleven also had Hollow Stalkers." Shirou paused. "I don't recommend eating those. The flesh is extremely bitter—I tested multiple preparation methods and couldn't make it palatable. I've set the remains aside for Rin to analyse."

He glanced at Ryou, who took the cue. "They behave similarly to War Shadows—for those unfamiliar, those are monsters from the dungeon in my previous world—but stronger. Agile, intelligent, and they attack from blind spots. However, nothing that proper skill and training can't overcome."

"Bitter how?" Rin asked, her pen already moving.

"Imagine chewing aspirin wrapped in burnt coffee grounds."

"Noted."

Haruka wrote: *Hollow Stalkers—Floor 11. Inedible. Bitter. For research and analysis. Fertiliser?*

"And finally." Shirou paused. Something shifted in his expression—not quite pride, but close. He uncovered the final two platters. "Floor twelve. Ten-Legged Lambs."

The dishes were beautiful. One platter held medallions of dark red meat, seared and arranged in a fan pattern with a reduction sauce drizzled in precise lines. The other displayed chunks of marbled flesh threaded onto skewers, charred at the edges, glistening with rendered fat.

"The lean cuts taste like lamb. The fattier portions are closer to beef. Both take seasoning exceptionally well."

Shirou's expression sobered. He set down the tongs.

"Now—this is the floor I need everyone to pay attention to. The Ten-Legged Lambs are the first monsters we've encountered that fight as a coordinated unit."

The room quietened.

"The standard variants are individually weak. Roughly knee-height, fragile bodies. But they swarm—dozens at a time, from every direction. Floor, walls, ceiling. They have teeth that belong on a shark, not anything remotely ovine, and when one dies, its death-cry triggers a frenzy in the rest. The more you kill messily, the faster they come."

Even Marin had stopped chewing.

"The larger variants are the real problem. Roughly the size of a small car, with flame sacs in their throats. They hang back behind the swarm and spit fire—concentrated enough to scorch stone and blacken the walls. The smaller lambs form a living barricade around them, shielding the fire-spitters whilst they build up heat."

"They're using tactics," Rin said flatly.

"Basic ones, but yes. Shield the ranged attackers, overwhelm with numbers, use fire to control the corridor. The coordination broke apart once we eliminated the fire-spitters, but until then—" He glanced at Rose.

"Lively," Rose offered, reaching for a skewer.

"The critical point is the magicite location. It sits a few centimetres below where the base of the neck meets the body. If you hit it cleanly—one precise strike—the creature drops without a death-cry. No scream, no frenzy trigger. That's how we need to be killing them."

He looked around the table.

"Sloppy kills cost us three ways on this floor. The death-cry draws more of them. The organ rupture spoils the meat. And the damaged magicite loses value." He paused. "Rose and I worked out a system towards the end—she used a Piercing Hex anchored to the coordinate framework to target the core from range, whilst Ryu and I handled the close quarters. It works, but it requires practice."

"So precision training becomes non-negotiable from this floor forward," Lefiya said, straightening in her seat.

"For everyone," Shirou confirmed. "Not just the scout team."

Silence. Haruka's marker hovered over the whiteboard. She'd written *Monster Harvest Report* and listed the floors, but her hand had stopped moving because she was staring at the lamb medallions with a complicated mixture of hunger and existential dread. Those ten-legged things had swarmed like ants. She'd heard the distant echoes of combat from the scout team's floors—the bleating, the explosions, the sounds that she'd been very glad were someone else's problem.

"It's genuinely good," Shirou said, and the slight strain in his voice suggested he was very aware he'd lost the room. "The flavour profile is—"

"Don't care about flavour profiles," Marin announced, lunging across the table with both hands. She grabbed a skewer in each fist and bit into the first one with the enthusiasm of someone attacking festival yakitori. Her eyes went wide, then narrowed to blissful crescents. "Oh my GOD. Shirou, this is incredible. It's like—what's that restaurant in Ginza—"

"Marin, please don't talk with your mouth full. And Haruhime and the house-elves helped with the preparation—"

"—like wagyu had a BABY with Australian lamb and then that baby was BLESSED—"

Illya, who had been eyeing the spread with the calculating gaze of a woman who'd survived on Einzbern institutional cuisine for less than two decades, picked up a medallion between thumb and forefinger, inspected it, and ate it in two precise bites. Her crimson eyes closed.

"Not bad." She reached for another.

Sakura, who hadn't been in the dungeon and therefore had no traumatic associations with any of the creatures, simply picked up a piece of the Clicking Beetle tempura and bit into it. Her violet eyes widened. She chewed slowly, swallowed, and gave Shirou a small nod.

"It's good," she said quietly. Then she reached for the Pale Crawler without hesitation.

The goblins required no convincing whatsoever. Griphook had begun eating the moment the cloths came off, and Ragnok was already on his third skewer, grease running down his chin in rivulets he made no effort to catch. Silverclaw gnawed on a piece of the Bone Serpent fillet with an expression of grim satisfaction.

Rose, mid-bite on her fourth minotaur strip, caught Lefiya's expression and snorted. "Oh, come off it. We've all eaten worse. I once had to survive on mushrooms and stolen eggs for three months during a war."

"That doesn't make this normal," Lefiya said weakly.

"Nothing about any of this is normal. Eat the lamb—it's brilliant."

Slowly—very slowly—the rest of the table began to serve themselves. Haruka watched Gabrielle take a single lamb medallion, cut it into four pieces with surgical precision, eat one piece, pause, and then eat the remaining three in quick succession. Hermione—who hadn't been in the dungeon and was therefore approaching this as an intellectual exercise rather than a visceral one—started with the Clicking Beetle tempura, which seemed psychologically safer, before graduating to the lamb with methodical curiosity. Lefiya took a skewer at Ryuu's quiet prompting and stared at it for a long moment before taking a small bite. Her ears went pink. She took another.

Haruhime tentatively tried the Squall Heron, her ears slowly rising from their flattened position as the flavour registered. Syr ate the Bone Serpent fillet in neat, deliberate bites, her expression giving nothing away—though she notably did not touch the Pale Crawler.

Haruka set down her marker and picked up a medallion.

It was, she had to admit, excellent. The meat melted against her tongue—rich and clean, with none of the off-flavours she'd braced for. She ate three more before remembering she was supposed to be taking notes.

Haruka returned to the whiteboard and reviewed the full harvest report she'd compiled throughout the presentation:

Floor 1 — Stone Mites: Edible. Crab/shrimp. Low yield.

Floor 2–3 — Pale Crawlers: Edible. Salmon/pork. Good yield.

Floor 3 — Clicking Beetles: Edible in bulk. Nutty, shrimp-like. Low individual yield.

Floor 4 — Marrow Slugs: INEDIBLE. Mucus for reagent use.

Floor 4–6 — Squall Herons: Edible. Goose-like. Good yield.

Floor 5–6 — Bipedal Boars: Edible. Wild boar. Long cook. Good yield.

Floor 6–7 — Thorn Rats: Edible. Rabbit-like.

Floor 7 — Spore Weavers: CAUTION—TOXIC RAW. Mushroom/umami. Full cook required.

Floor 8–9 — Six-Armed Minotaurs: Edible. Beef-like, tough. Extended preparation.

Floor 9–10 — Ceiling Lurkers: Edible. Fatty, rich. Excellent cooking oil.

Floor 10–11 — Bone Serpents: Edible. Fish/rabbit. Difficult to butcher.

Floor 11 — Hollow Stalkers: INEDIBLE. Bitter. For analysis. Fertiliser?

Floor 12 — Ten-Legged Lambs: Edible. Lamb/beef. Excellent. PRIORITY HARVEST.

She underlined PRIORITY HARVEST and stepped back to survey her work.

The tent settled into a comfortable quiet, the only sounds the clink of utensils and the occasional satisfied murmur. It didn't last.

"About the magicite." Rin's palm hit the table. Her turquoise eyes had gone sharp, and she leaned forward with the intensity of a woman who'd just watched someone set fire to a stack of jewels. "Shirou, I reviewed the cores your team brought back. Half of them were shattered. Cracked through. Stress fractures radiating from impact points."

"In combat, precision targeting isn't always—"

"These are crystallised mana repositories. Each one is worth—I don't even have a framework yet for what they're worth in this economy, but I know they're valuable. We can't afford to pulverise them just because someone got enthusiastic with a Piercing Hex."

Rose, mid-bite on her fourth skewer, had the grace to look mildly sheepish.

"Rin's right," Lefiya spoke up from beside Ryuu. She set down her skewer and straightened, slipping into what Haruka was beginning to recognise as her professional mode. "And it isn't only the magicite. When certain organs are punctured during combat—particularly the digestive sacs and the bile glands in the fire-spitting variants—it spoils the surrounding meat entirely. Contaminates it. We lost at least a third of the usable flesh from today's kills to organ rupture."

"So we need dedicated training," Rin said flatly. "A standardised killing method that preserves both the carcass and the magicite."

Shirou nodded. "Agreed. I can run those sessions."

"Lefiya and I will assist," Ryuu added. "We have experience directing hunting parties for material preservation."

"Hermione and I can help on the magical side," Rose volunteered.

"As can I," Rin said. "Between the three of us, we should be able to develop ranged techniques precise enough for clean extraction."

Haruka wrote quickly:

ACTION: Combat training sessions—focus on clean magicite extraction and organ-safe kills. Led by Shirou, Lefiya, and Ryuu. Magical precision support from Rose, Hermione, and Rin. All dungeon team members required.

Murmurs of agreement circled the table. Even the goblins grunted in approval, though Haruka suspected their motivation had more to do with intact loot than culinary preservation.

"Good." Haruka underlined the action item. "Moving to the next point: forward planning."

She turned to Hermione, who straightened her notes and addressed the room.

"Our current vegetable and fruit stores won't sustain our numbers for long. Winky's inventory this morning confirmed what we suspected—at our current

consumption rate, and accounting for everyone we've woken from stasis so far, we have roughly three months of produce before we're entirely dependent on dungeon protein." Hermione's brow furrowed in the way it did when the numbers displeased her. "And with the day length being what it is, it may be closer to half that. Even if we start farming immediately—with growth acceleration wards and potions—it won't reach sustainability in time to support us."

"Which means we need to find a dungeon floor with a viable biome," Ryuu concluded. "Greenery, ideally—edible plants, fruiting trees, anything we can forage from. *General Knowledge* references dungeon biome floors appearing at irregular to regular intervals, typically every ten to twenty levels."

"We've cleared to twelve," Shirou said. "If the pattern holds, we could hit a biome floor somewhere between fifteen and twenty."

"Then we need a forward team pushing down as quickly as possible." Rin's gaze swept the room. "Rose, Ryuu, Shirou—you three have the mobility and combat capability to advance rapidly. Supported by your current auxiliary team."

"Agreed. Though the clearing team should be able to pick up their pace as well—we have a lot of hands," Shirou said. "Let's split everyone between clearing, production, and support, and rotate them around so we don't create single points of failure from injuries." He paused. "I won't be able to help with training as much going forward if I'm pushing deeper."

"I'm quite skilled with the blade and the bow, if I do say so myself," Syr interjected smoothly. "I'll pick up the slack."

Haruka couldn't help but notice Ryuu stiffen slightly at Syr's offer. She let it pass.

Griphook's dark eyes glittered. "My kin will keep pace."

"As will ours," Firenze said, his deep voice carrying easily over the table. "The lower corridors may widen enough for us to fight properly."

"Mipsy and the others can apparate supplies and wounded out," Mipsy chirped from her driftwood perch. "As long as Mipsy can see where she's going!"

Rose leaned forward. "I think we need to do more than just apparating supplies. From what I've seen, the three of them can be quite agile as a unit. They need to be a synced team that can cover for each other on the spot—even our auxiliary team needs dedicated preparation." She looked at Mipsy. "Give it three days to a week?"

Mipsy's ears perked straight up. "Mipsy will make sure we is ready!"

Haruka's ears perked in turn. She looked up from the whiteboard.

"That's actually worth noting," she said. "Mipsy, you mentioned earlier that you and the other house-elves can now apparate within line of sight?"

"Yes, miss! Mipsy tried it four times today! As long as Mipsy can see the spot—*pop*—Mipsy is there!"

"That's a modified version of their original ability," Hermione explained, tucking a curl behind her ear. "Back home, house-elf apparition wasn't limited by line of sight—they could apparate to any location they'd bonded with. Here, the range has contracted, but the fundamental skill remains."

"Could the rest of us learn something similar?" Haruka asked.

The room went quiet. Rin tilted her head. Hermione's expression shifted into that particular mode where Haruka could practically see equations forming behind her eyes.

"Spatial translocation tied to visual confirmation rather than coordinate-based targeting," Rin murmured. "That sidesteps the biggest problem with conventional teleportation in an unmapped environment." She waved a hand. "That's outside my expertise, though—our resident witches would know better."

"I think we can teach the concept," Hermione said slowly. "Everyone here has *Conceptual Crossover*, correct?"

Haruka nodded, as did everyone else. She turned to the board and added:

ACTION: Investigate and train non-house-elf personnel in line-of-sight apparition adaptation. Research leads: Hermione, Rose, Rin.

FORWARD TEAM: Rose, Ryuu, Shirou + goblin, house-elf, and centaur support. Objective: locate biome floor (est. floors 15–20) for produce foraging and maybe cultivation samples if compatible with surface environment.

"Next item," Haruka said, turning the whiteboard to a fresh section. "Logistics. Specifically—base of operations."

She drew a quick sketch: two circles representing the island camp and the dungeon spire, connected by a line she labelled $\approx 4 \text{ km}$.

"Currently, our forward team flies to the dungeon each morning and returns each evening. That's manageable at four kilometres, but as we push deeper, the round trips will cost time and energy. Do we relocate to the dungeon island, or do we find a faster transit method?"

Gabrielle raised her hand—a deliberate, almost formal gesture that drew the room's attention. The platinum-blond Veela sat beside Illya, and the two of them exchanged a glance that carried the particular energy of co-conspirators who'd been workshopping an idea.

"Illya and I discussed something last night," Gabrielle began, her French-accented Basic clear and precise. "A portkey—a magical transport device—could solve the transit problem entirely. But the conventional approach requires fixed spatial coordinates."

"And that's the problem," Illya picked up, leaning forward with her elbows on the table. "Coordinates on a planetary surface aren't fixed. The planet rotates. It orbits its star. The star orbits the galactic centre. Every 'fixed point' is actually hurtling through space at absurd velocities. A portkey calibrated to

absolute coordinates, without a higher system guiding it, would deposit you in empty space within hours of creation."

"We considered what Shirou suggested this morning about personal coordinate systems," Gabrielle continued. "If the portkey doesn't target a location but instead targets a *beacon*—a magical anchor that the portkey is sympathetically linked to—then the actual coordinates become irrelevant. The portkey follows the beacon, not the maths."

"Like a homing signal," Hermione breathed, her amber eyes lighting up. "The beacon handles the positional drift automatically because it exists at the destination. The portkey just needs to find *it*."

"Exactly." Illya's crimson eyes gleamed. "We'd plant a beacon at the dungeon entrance and another here at camp. Instant transit, no broom required."

The room buzzed. Meridian slapped the water with his tail in what Haruka took as approval. The goblins muttered amongst themselves, and even Bane—who had maintained an expression of stoic displeasure throughout—shifted his weight in a way that suggested grudging interest.

But Haruka noticed two reactions that cut against the enthusiasm. Rose's grin had faded. She sat very still, one hand wrapped around her skewer, staring at the table surface.

"No more flying," she said softly.

And across the room, Ryuu's long ears drooped—just a fraction, just for a moment—before she caught herself and returned them to neutral. A tiny tell that Haruka filed away, her own ears twitching in sympathy. She understood. The broom flights had been the one part of this new world that felt like pure, uncomplicated joy.

"We'll still need the brooms for scouting and emergencies," Haruka offered, keeping her voice neutral. "The portkey-beacon system would be for routine transit. The brooms aren't going anywhere."

Rose's shoulders relaxed a degree.

"Right. Moving on." Haruka wrote *PORTKEY-BEACON SYSTEM – Gabrielle & Illya to develop prototype* and turned to the next section. "Farming."

This opened the floodgates.

"Rice," Sakura suggested, though Haruka noticed she looked a bit under the weather compared to this morning—paler, with faint shadows beneath her violet eyes. "If there's any chance of cultivating rice, we need to prioritise it."

"Potatoes," Rose countered. "Hardy, calorie-dense, grows in almost anything. And you can make chips."

"*Pommes de terre*, yes," Gabrielle nodded. "And carrots. Onions. Garlic—essential for cooking."

"Tomatoes," Shirou added. "Bell peppers. Leafy greens—spinach, lettuce if the climate supports it."

"Strawberries!" Marin's hand shot up. "And—okay, yes, practical stuff first, but also strawberries."

"Soybeans," Haruka said quietly, and several heads turned. She felt her ears warm. "For miso. Soy sauce—though we'd need wheat for that. The byproduct of miso is tamari, though. And tofu. They're incredibly versatile."

"Yes, and wheat for bread would be welcome," Rose added. "And potatoes!"

"You've said potatoes twice," Hermione noted.

"And I'll say it again if I have to."

"Herbs," Hermione listed, ticking off fingers. "Basil, thyme, rosemary, coriander. Medicinal plants too—we should cross-reference what's available in the seed stores."

"Tea," Rin said, in a tone that brooked no debate. "Tea is non-negotiable."

"Wait—if tea is non-negotiable, then I demand coffee!" Gabrielle interjected.

Haruka wrote furiously. The list grew: wheat, barley, various legumes, root vegetables, fruit trees that would take longer but provide eventually. Haruhime suggested daikon and burdock root, which earned an approving nod from Shirou. Lefiya mentioned elvish herbs from her world—species that might not exist here but whose closest analogues could serve similar purposes.

"Wait. Wait. Wait!" Haruka put her foot down—figuratively, though she was tempted to do so literally. "Hermione, am I to understand that you and Rin will be developing the systems for the accelerated growth wards and potions?"

"Yes," Hermione said. "But we need to farm for the potion ingredients as well, so we'll start with the wards first."

"Right. Can you produce both a technical and a practical document outlining the specifications?" After Hermione's nod, Haruka continued. "I suggest everyone forms teams based on what produce they want to enter into production. Once we have the document, you can plan individually around it. Though we should compile a priority list of essential crops before Hermione and Rin's document is finished—give them something to design around." She looked between the two of them. "How long will that take?"

Hermione glanced at Rin, who shrugged. "A day or two."

Haruka let out an exhausted sigh. "Excellent. Now we can move on."

Then Meridian raised a barnacled hand from the water.

"We've been scouting the local waters," he rumbled. "The sea is largely empty—plankton and very small crustaceans, but nothing substantial. We could likely start farming fish from our reality, though."

Undine surfaced beside him. "But they'd need containment. If we simply release them, they'll scatter into open ocean within days. We'd need a cordoned section—netted or warded—where a breeding population can establish."

Thessaly signed rapidly, her webbed hands cutting precise shapes through the air. Undine watched the gestures, then turned to the room.

"Thessaly suggests the northern cove of the island near the dungeon," Undine translated. "Sheltered, shallow, with a natural rock formation that already creates a partial enclosure."

"We can ward the area," Hermione said. "A permeable barrier that allows water flow and marine life to pass through freely, but blocks specific genetic signatures—essentially keyed to the species we want to contain." She paused. "Though with all our ongoing projects and no ley lines to draw from, our magicite harvest becomes that much more important. Every ward we erect is mana we're spending."

"Kelp farming too," Meridian added. "And shellfish—those are simple enough to cultivate within a contained area."

Haruka's whiteboard was running out of space. She flipped it—the surface rotating at a touch—and continued on the blank reverse.

AQUACULTURE: Merfolk to identify suitable species from stasis stores. Cordon northern cove near dungeon island. Ward construction (Hermione). Net construction (house-elves + goblins). Kelp and shellfish cultivation within containment.

AGRICULTURE: Priority crops—rice, potatoes, soybeans, wheat, assorted vegetables and herbs. Growth acceleration wards and potions (Hermione + Rin—document in 1–2 days). Teams to form around individual crop production.

She underlined that last parenthetical. Several people noticed and chuckled. Rin coughed into her hand.

"One more item before we open the floor to other concerns," Haruka said, and her voice carried a weight that quieted the room. She set the marker down and turned to face the table fully. Her ears angled forward—attentive, serious.

"Naming conventions. Specifically—for the house-elves and goblins."

Griphook's eyes narrowed. Winky's ears went rigid. The room's temperature didn't change, but it felt like it did.

"I reviewed the *General Knowledge* entries last night," Haruka continued, keeping her tone measured. "There are dungeon monsters in this galaxy classified as goblins. They're a hostile species. Reviled. The galactic community treats them as vermin—kill-on-sight in most jurisdictions."

Griphook bared his teeth. Not a smile.

"Our goblins are nothing like those creatures," Haruka said firmly, meeting his gaze. "But when we eventually make contact with the wider galaxy, the name alone will cause problems. Misunderstandings at best. Violence at worst."

Ragnok set down his skewer. "You're suggesting we abandon our name."

"I'm suggesting we discuss alternatives. For safety."

A heavy silence. Silverclaw exchanged words with Griphook in Gobbledegook—sharp, guttural syllables that Haruka's language proficiency parsed as *This is not unreasonable, but it stings*.

"And the house-elves?" Mipsy piped up from the platform, her enormous eyes fixed on Haruka.

"A different problem. There are elves in this galaxy—several varieties. One in particular." Haruka paused, feeling the weight of what she was about to say. "The Ael'vari. They're the oldest elven race. Reclusive. Powerful. And by all accounts, extremely proud."

Lefiya shifted in her seat. Ryuu's expression didn't change, but her ears rotated a fraction—tracking.

"If a species calling themselves house-elves appears on the galactic stage," Haruka said, "the Ael'vari won't interpret it as a cultural term. They'll see it as a diminutive. A mockery."

"Winky is not ashamed of what Winky is," Winky rasped, drawing herself up to her full height on the platform—which brought her roughly to Haruka's elbow. "Winky served the Crouches and the Grangees. Winky's kind have served for centuries."

"And no one is asking you to be ashamed," Hermione said gently—carefully—with the tone of someone navigating old wounds. "But Haruka's right. The political implications could be severe. Not just for your people, but for all of us."

Mipsy tugged at one of her ears. "Mipsy doesn't mind what Mipsy is called, as long as Mipsy is still Mipsy."

"We don't need to decide tonight," Haruka said. She picked up the marker and wrote on the board in clear, unhurried strokes:

DISCUSSION ITEM: Naming conventions for house-elf and goblin communities. Cultural sensitivity re: Ael'vari elves and galactic goblin species classification. Representatives to discuss internally and propose alternatives. No deadline—but before any external contact.

She underlined *before any external contact* twice.

"I'd suggest each group discuss it among yourselves first," Haruka said. "Bring proposals to the next meeting. We want names that your people are comfortable with—names that carry your identity, not just a disguise."

Griphook studied her for a long moment. His dark eyes held something that might have been grudging respect, or might have been the calculation of a banker assessing collateral.

"We'll discuss it," he said.

Mipsy tugged at her ear again. Then nodded once, firmly.

Haruka turned back to the whiteboard and began writing the summary in clean, organised blocks—actions, owners, deadlines where applicable. Her marker moved steadily, the soft squeak against the conjured surface the only

sound in the tent beyond the gentle lapping of water against the merfolk's section.

"To summarise," she said, reading from her notes. "First—combat training for clean kills and magicite preservation, led by Shirou, Ryuu, and Lefiya, with magical precision support from Rose, Hermione, and Rin. Second—forward team consisting of Rose, Ryuu, and Shirou with goblin, house-elf, and centaur support pushes to locate a biome floor for produce. Third—Hermione, Rose, and Rin to research line-of-sight apparition adaptation for broader team use. Fourth—Gabrielle and Illya to develop a portkey-beacon prototype for dungeon transit. Fifth—agricultural priorities established; teams to form around individual crop production once Hermione and Rin's ward document is complete. Sixth—merfolk to identify aquaculture species and begin cordoning the northern cove. Seventh—naming convention discussions for house-elf and goblin communities before any external contact."

She set the marker down and surveyed the room.

"Anything I've missed?"

Silence. Then Marin raised a skewer like a sceptre.

"Motion to officially name Shirou as our Head Chef. All in favour?"

"Marin. Plus, Haruhime and the house-elves helped."

"That's a unanimous yes. I'm counting the groan."

"We should do a rotation—lead cook and helpers. Make it like a toban system."

"What's a toban system?" Rose asked, her mouth full.

Haruka had two guesses what was filling it.

End

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