

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 2.3 Development and Delving

(Hermione Granger & Rose Lily Potter)

[Part 3 of ?]

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-26% / 10:38:06

Local: 42k6.12.rev-58% / 8.rev-51% / 293.rot-21% / 07:00:00

GS 13k9.rev-47% / 8.rev-49% / 256.rot-18% / 10:01:23

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They heard the sound of air being displaced before they saw her.

Hermione looked up from the parchment spread across a conjured table—the conjuration itself was flawless, but the spatial targeting had been off by half a metre, which was how one of the legs had ended up squarely on Rin's foot.

Ryuu banked hard over the treeline, her broom tilting at an angle that would have sent Hermione tumbling into the canopy, and touched down on the packed sand with barely a whisper of displaced air.

Her boots didn't even skid.

"I would really want to try that soon." Hermione heard Rin mutter, her turquoise eyes tracking the elf as she dismounted elegantly. Hermione shook her head at that comment.

She and flying had never really got along, and whilst she'd begrudgingly purchased the '*Riding Aptitude*,' she hadn't invested nearly as many points in it as she had in other areas. Ryuu tucked the broom under one arm the way a soldier might carry a rifle.

The elf's expression remained composed—neutral mouth, steady grey eyes—but something about the set of her shoulders suggested quiet satisfaction.

"We found it."

Hermione's pen stopped mid-stroke. She exchanged a glance with Rin, whose ribbons swayed as she turned sharply.

"You found—the dungeon?" Hermione set aside the parchment. "Already?"

"The spire is approximately four kilometres that way." Ryuu propped the broom against the table and pointed back the way she'd come.

"Four kilometres." Rin crossed her arms, one finger tapping against her bicep.

"We'd budgeted three days for aerial survey alone."

"We were quite lucky indeed," Ryuu said, nodding to herself.

"Though we should probably establish where north is first, so we can set up proper coordinates for locations—especially with our farming plans," Hermione suggested.

She pulled a fresh sheet of parchment from her satchel and began noting the direction using relative visual indicators and where the sun had risen. Her mind was already running through the logistics—supply lines, staging areas, rotation schedules for the dungeoneering teams.

"The spire was quite tall—I think it might even be taller than Babel," Ryuu said. "But because of that, as long as you head in the general direction, you'll spot it easily enough."

"If we could set up a portkey, transportation wouldn't be a problem." Hermione paused as Rin and Ryuu both turned to her, the question obvious in their stares. "Oh—it's an enchanted object that serves as a one- or two-way access point between two locations. It essentially teleports you from point A to point B, and it can be enchanted to be semi-permanent, making it reusable."

Rin tapped at her chin with the end of her pen. "Ryuu, you should probably collect Lefiya and the others and do a practical combat exercise in the dungeon instead of the current one they're doing."

"Combat exercise?"

"Fighting a human opponent rather than—" Rin stopped. One hand rose to her temple. "Umm... err—well, fighting sapient individuals like humans, elves, renards—and even our newly awakened goblins, house-elves, merfolk, and centaurs—is probably quite different to fighting monsters, right?"

Ryuu's eyes widened. "Yes, I agree. I should have thought of that, since I'm the veteran in dungeon delving here—"

Rin just shrugged in return, clearly not bothered by it.

"Well, then I'll take my leave."

Ryuu was already mounting the broom—'*Great, are we going to get another Rose Potter?*' was Hermione's exasperated thought, as Lefiya and the others weren't really that far away.

"Oh, Ryuu—" Hermione called out. "Take a good number of the goblins, house-elves, and centaurs with you as well! The more we integrate the groups now, the fewer coordination problems we'll have in the dungeon later!"

Ryuu nodded. "Yes, with everyone present, we could probably clear a floor or two. We might as well do our first harvest."

"You said you could solo explore a dungeon up to a certain difficulty?" Rin interjected before Ryuu could mount the broom again.

Ryuu acknowledged this.

"You should probably take Shirou and explore in advance."

"Yes, take Rose as well, and maybe some house-elves and any goblin or centaur who could be agile," Hermione added.

Ryuu frowned for a moment but nodded in acquiescence, waiting for more.

"Sorry—one last thing—can you please tell Sakura not to join the exercise group? Send her here instead. I need her with Hermione and me!"

And with one last pause to see if there was anything else, Ryuu mounted the broom and flew upward, surveying the area before turning towards Lefiya and the others.

Hermione turned to Rin, one eyebrow raised. "What do you need Sakura for?"

The corner of Rin's mouth curled upward.

"You're smiling," Hermione observed.

"I'm not."

"You're extremely smiling."

Rin coughed into her fist and straightened her posture. The smile didn't fade. If anything, it deepened.

"When I purchased my inheritance through Zelretch's system," Rin began, her tone shifting into the precise, clipped register she used for magical instruction, "the package included more than the Tohsaka family's magic crest. It also contained the Edelfelt magic crest—both already integrated into my body, the same as with Illya and Shirou."

"The Edelfelt?"

"Finnish. One of the older European lineages in my world. There's a... complicated history between the Tohsaka and Edelfelt families. There may have been some mixing of bloodlines at some point, which is how I inherited it through the system." Rin waved her hand—a fluid, dismissive gesture that somehow managed to convey generations of grudges, alliances, and contested inheritances in a single flick of the wrist. "The short version is that the inheritance consolidated both crests into my possession."

"And that makes you this pleased because...?"

The smile widened. Rin's turquoise eyes caught a faint prismatic shimmer as her mana stirred—not from any active spell, but from sheer self-satisfaction radiating through her circuits.

"Let me explain what a magic crest actually is first. Then you'll understand."

Hermione set aside her coordinate work entirely and drew a clean sheet towards her. When Rin Tohsaka offered to explain something, the information density per sentence rivalled a postgraduate lecture.

"A magic crest," Rin began, "is a magical circuit that's been refined and passed down through a family's bloodline across generations. Think of it as a kind of... accumulated library, but one that's inscribed directly into the body rather than stored on a shelf. Each generation of magi adds their own research, their own refined formulae and optimised spell pathways, before passing the crest to the next heir."

"A physical repository of magical knowledge," Hermione murmured, her quill moving rapidly. "Encoded in the practitioner's body."

"More than knowledge. The crest contains pre-constructed spell circuits—complete magical formulae that the current bearer can activate without having to build them from scratch. A third-generation crest might contain a handful of useful techniques. A crest that's been maintained for five hundred years could hold hundreds of refined, battle-tested magical processes."

Hermione's hand slowed. Something cold and uncomfortable settled in her chest as the implications crystallised.

In the wizarding world she'd grown up in, pureblood supremacists had insisted that blood determined magical worth. She'd spent years—her entire academic career, really—dismantling that argument with evidence: Muggle-born witches and wizards performed just as well, sometimes better, than their pureblood counterparts. Magical ability didn't care about ancestry. She'd believed it fiercely, argued it publicly, and proved it personally.

But this was different.

This wasn't about blood. It wasn't about inherent superiority or some mystical pedigree conferred by genetics. A magic crest was infrastructure. Generational investment, accumulated expertise, tested and refined over centuries, then handed wholesale to the next practitioner. A first-generation magus didn't just lack prestige—they lacked three hundred years of pre-built spell architecture that their competitor could access with a thought.

It was the difference between building a house from raw timber and inheriting a manor.

The advantage wasn't mystical. It was mechanical. Structural. And that made it far harder to argue against.

"You've gone quiet," Rin said.

"I'm thinking about the implications." Hermione tapped her quill against the parchment. "In my world, blood purists claimed that older families were inherently more powerful. They were wrong—but if they'd had something like

magic crests, they might have been right for entirely the wrong reasons. Not because of blood, but because of accumulated magical capital."

"Oh, blood factors in as well," Rin said, leaning back slightly. "Magi value generational improvement in their pathway to the Root, but noble inbreeding has actually been proven counterproductive to that goal—especially with multi-generational concentration of the gene pool." She tilted her head. "They still do thorough vetting of unions to produce an heir who would surpass the current head, though."

"But isn't that—"

"Well, basically, eugenics, yes."

Rin nodded, her expression shifting from smugness to something more considered. "In my world, first-generation magi are at a genuine disadvantage. Not because they lack talent—some of the most brilliant magi I've known had no lineage to speak of—but because they're starting from zero. No inherited circuits, no pre-built formulae. No generational knowledge."

Hermione frowned. The parallel to her own world's inequities wasn't lost on her, even if the mechanism was entirely different.

"Even Shirou, for all his combat prowess and what the Clock Tower deemed a magecraft that bulldozes through any rule of equivalent exchange, is still considered third-rate."

Hermione's frown deepened. "Third-rate?"

"The Clock Tower doesn't evaluate magi on combat effectiveness," Rin said, and something older and more weary surfaced in her tone. "They evaluate on magecraft potential. Breadth of application, circuit quality, lineage depth, proximity to reaching the Root." She ticked each point off on her fingers. "Shirou has twenty-seven natural magic circuits—quite above average for someone who was effectively considered first-generation. Though the fact that the inheritance granted him the Muramasa family crest suggests he may actually descend from an older lineage than anyone realised."

"Anyway, his entire magecraft—Projection, or rather Tracing—is built on Gradation Air, which the Association considers a fundamentally useless discipline."

"Useless," Hermione repeated flatly.

"Gradation Air creates temporary copies of objects. Fragile, impermanent, magically inefficient. Most magi learn it in their first year and never touch it again." Rin's tone had gone clipped. "What Shirou does with it shouldn't be possible. He doesn't just copy the shape of an object—he reproduces its entire history, its conceptual weight, and the result is functionally real in every sense. It quite frankly borders on True Magic. The Clock Tower's own frameworks can't properly explain it, so instead of studying it, half of them wanted to dissect him and the other half pretended it didn't count."

"Though that's mostly because of his Origin and elemental alignment," she continued, pulling herself back to something closer to academic detachment. "His entire existence is oriented towards a single concept. Devastatingly effective within that domain, but it means he can't do much else. Standard elemental magecraft, alchemy, even basic bounded fields—all difficult for him without a medium compatible with his alignment. By every metric the Association uses to rank a magus, he's bottom-tier."

Hermione considered this. "So the ranking system measures potential rather than practical application."

"Magi basically care about three things: lineage, circuit quality, and their family's breakthroughs towards the Root. Everything else is secondary."

Hermione had already learnt of the Root during last night's meeting—it had come up after their explanations of Origin and elemental alignment—but they'd taken so many detours that the topic deserved its own dedicated discussion. She'd table it for now.

"Right. Before we get sidetracked again—why did you ask for Sakura?"

"Now." Rin uncrossed her ankles and leant forward, and the smugness returned in full force. "The Edelfelt crest has a particular sorcery trait called Ore Scales."

"Sorcery trait?"

"A unique magical property inherent to a specific family's crest—something that can't be replicated or taught, only inherited. The Edelfelt trait, Ore Scales, allows the crest to be split into two fully functional instances. Two complete copies, each carrying the full weight of the original's accumulated knowledge and spell architecture."

Hermione's quill stopped. She looked up. "You can duplicate the crest."

"I can create a second instance of the combined Tohsaka-Edelfelt crest." Rin held up two fingers, her turquoise eyes bright with barely contained excitement. "Both families' accumulated work. Every formula, every refined circuit, every optimised pathway—duplicated in full. And I intend to give the second instance to Sakura."

"The transplant process isn't simple," Rin continued, the smugness giving way to the focused precision of a surgeon discussing procedure. "A magic crest is, for all practical purposes, a foreign organ. The recipient's body must be compatible at the circuit level, and even with compatibility, rejection is a serious risk. The crest must be integrated gradually—small sections at a time, each given time to bond with the recipient's existing circuits before the next portion is introduced."

"How gradually?"

"Weeks. Possibly months, depending on how Sakura's circuits respond to the initial grafts. If I rush it—if I try to transplant too large a section at once—the circuits could overload. Or worse, the crest could attempt to rewrite her existing magical architecture rather than integrate alongside it." Rin paused, searching for the right analogy. "Think of it as an organ transplant where the organ is also a library, and the library is also alive, and it has strong opinions about how the host body should be organised."

"Charming."

"If everything goes well—if her circuits accept the graft without significant rejection—Sakura will have access to the full combined crest within three to six months. The early stages are the most critical, though I expect compatibility won't be an issue. Sakura is a Tohsaka by blood, and the Edelfelt line connects to ours distantly as well."

Hermione blinked twice.

"Oh—right, yes. I think we should prioritise both the farms and extracting the people in stasis." She set down her quill and pulled a fresh sheet towards her. "Actually, I think I have a theory on how to accelerate the process."

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The floor smelt like wet stone and something older—mineral and faintly salty.

This floor was bigger. The ceiling vaulted upward into darkness that no light source seemed to reach, and the corridors branched in three directions from the landing. The walls were the same ivory as the spire above—smooth, seamless, not quite stone—with a faint luminescence that pulsed in an irregular rhythm.

"Same layout pattern as the floor above," Ryuu said quietly, already several paces ahead. "But wider junctions."

"More room to manoeuvre," Shirou observed from Rose's left.

"More room for whatever's on this floor to manoeuvre." Ryuu paused at the junction and tilted her head, listening.

Behind them, three soft cracks announced Mipsy, Tripsy, and Pockey apparating from one side of the hallway to the other. Mipsy overshot by a metre and stumbled into Tripsy, and both of them crashed into Grackle—the other house-elf in the scouting group—who caught them by the collar with the practised air of someone who'd stopped expecting better.

"We is almost having it," Mipsy said, with great dignity.

"You is landing on Grackle and the goblins again," Pockey observed.

Rose watched with a twinge of envy. The house-elves could apparate now—albeit with visible miscalculations and only within line of sight—which was more than she could currently manage.

She quickened her pace to match Shirou, who seemed remarkably relaxed despite the setting.

When they reached the next junction, Shirou gestured for Ryuu to take the lead. The elf chanted "*Luminous Wind*," and gusts of air engulfed her as she lifted off the ground and glided swiftly into the wide passageway ahead.

"Mipsy, Grackle, Pockey—can you three keep up? You'll be the ones tasked to backtrack and inform the harvesters where we're headed."

"Yes! Master Shirou, sir!" The trio of house-elves looked both excited and determined.

"We be keeping up, masters and mistresses, sirs and ma'ams!" Mipsy added, bouncing on the balls of her feet.

"Good." Shirou nodded at Rose, then at the contingent of additional house-elves, goblins, and centaurs trailing behind them—the harvesting team, tasked with collecting anything the scouts encountered. Some specimens were to be stored whole in expanded pouches for later study—though at the pace Ryuu had set, they might have to just chuck the lot in and sort it out later.

Rose glanced behind her. "If the pace becomes too fast, just stuff the lot in. We have expanded trunks within the pouches as well."

The goblins, house-elves, and centaurs acknowledged her.

Then, like Ryuu, Shirou pushed off and burst forward after her, covering the distance in a handful of strides.

Shirou had already explained his magecraft to her that morning—three core mysteries, as he called them, that his entire combat style revolved around. Tracing, Alteration, and Reinforcement—the last of which was currently letting him keep pace with Ryu as she zipped down the passageway.

'I should probably ask him for lessons on that Reinforcement thing if I want to keep up,' Rose thought, already falling behind. She summoned her broom with a flick of her wrist—grateful, not for the first time, that she'd had the foresight to Soulbind it—and mounted mid-stride, accelerating down the corridor after them.

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"*Confringo!*" Rose shouted the Blasting Curse as she pitched up from the dive. She was glad the passages were large enough for her to fly; otherwise, she'd have been a sitting duck—or left in the dust entirely.

Beneath her, Ryu and Shirou wove through the monsters with a grace that made the whole thing look like a choreographed action scene from a film.

Shirou was hurling those eastern-looking paired swords—one black, one white—that seemed magnetically drawn to each other. He'd throw one pair in a spinning arc whilst leveraging the pair still in his hands, letting the thrown blades pendulum back and forth around him in wide, lethal sweeps. Between throws, he Traced—she still wasn't used to that word—additional swords as projectiles, each one punching clean through the magicite core of whatever was in front of him. Once he'd identified where the core sat in a new type of monster, every subsequent throw was a single, clean kill. No wasted motion. He simply moved on, keeping the pace.

Ryu was no less efficient. The elf glided alongside him, twin short blades trailing faint green luminescence as she carved through anything that drew close—decapitating or maiming each creature and leaving it bleeding out on the dungeon floor before she'd already moved to the next.

By Rose's count, they'd reached the twelfth floor, and neither of them showed any sign of slowing down.

Gone were the bipedal boars and six-armed minotaurs of yesterfloors. Now they faced ten-legged lambs with dual square-shaped irises set within each eye—creatures that behaved like ants, swarming from all directions, their bleats echoing across the dungeon floor and calling more to join the frenzy.

Rose dove on her broom, pulling level with Shirou—who, with a wave of his hand, sent another rain of steel down on the incoming horde. Below, the luminous green orbs that had been accumulating around Ryuu pulsed once before the elf called out a single word.

"Luvia."

The orbs detonated in a cascading ring, tearing through the rest of the swarm.

But judging from the distant echoes of angry bleating—the blighting buggers—there was a far larger horde incoming.

The bleating grew into something guttural—a chorus of rage that vibrated through the ivory walls and rattled Rose's teeth. She caught Shirou's eye and gave him a teasing wink before pulling up on her broom and banking hard left as the first wave poured around the corridor's bend like wool-covered locusts, their ten legs clicking against floor, walls, and ceiling in a horrible skittering rhythm.

"Right, so they're angry now," Rose called down. "Cheers for that, you two. Really subtle work."

Neither Shirou nor Ryuu replied, but both raised an eyebrow at her. Rose paused. Right. The Blasting Curse she'd just thrown hadn't exactly been quiet either.

"Ah yes. Pot and kettle."

Shirou had already planted his feet, catching the returning white sword as it arced back to his grip. Ryuu shifted her stance two metres to his left, both

blades angled low, her eyes tracking the wall-crawlers with mechanical precision.

Rose counted. Fourteen, twenty-six, forty... she gave up. The corridor filled with matted grey bodies, jaws splitting open to reveal rows of teeth that belonged on a shark, not anything remotely ovine. The larger specimens lumbered behind the first rank, their bodies swollen to the size of small cars, legs thick as fence posts. One of them opened its maw and a gout of orange flame spat forward, licking the walls black.

"Oh, brilliant. They breathe fire now." Rose snapped the Elder Wand forward. "*Protego Horribilis!*"

The shield bloomed across the corridor's width, a shimmering plane of pale gold. The fireball struck it, shattering into embers that hissed against the ivory stone. Two more of the bloated creatures reared behind the first, their throats glowing cherry-red.

"The large ones spit flame," Ryuu observed, as though reporting the weather.

"Yes, I noticed."

Shirou was already moving. He released the black blade in a spinning arc that carved through three of the smaller lambs in a single pass, their death-bleats triggering another surge of fury from the horde. The paired white sword in his left hand yanked forward as if pulled by an invisible cord, and the black blade snapped back to meet its partner—the pendulum arc bisecting two more that had been climbing the wall to flank him.

Rose watched the mechanics of it with grudging admiration. The paired blades orbited him like satellites, each throw calculated to bring the other into killing range on the return. He didn't waste a single motion.

The fire-spitters let loose simultaneously. Three streams of flame converged on the corridor floor where Shirou stood.

He wasn't there. Reinforcement carried him six metres sideways in a single push, and Ryuu was already gliding through the gap he'd vacated, her body low, her short blades trailing green luminescence. She cut through the smaller lambs without breaking stride—not aiming for killing blows but severing legs, dropping them writhing to the ground where their own stampeding brethren trampled them flat.

Rose banked overhead, counting the larger specimens. Seven. No—nine. Two more squeezed through from the rear, their bulk scraping the walls and leaving trails of something viscous and foul-smelling.

"Reducto! Reducto! Reducto!"

Three bolts of crackling blue-white light punched into the lead fire-spitter. The first cracked its skull. The second blew through the cracked bone. The third detonated inside the cavity, and the creature burst apart in a spray of grey matter and crimson ichor. Its death-scream was louder than the smaller ones—a shrieking bellow that made the entire horde lurch forward with renewed savagery.

"Potter," Shirou said without looking up. His voice carried that flat, measured quality—like a man commenting on an overcooked roast rather than standing knee-deep in monster viscera. "Every kill-cry accelerates the swarm."

"I'm aware. What do you suggest, ask them nicely?" She banked around a gout of flame. "Oh, and just call me Rose... wait, you were calling me Rose just this morning."

"Old habits." Was his succinct reply.

He Traced a third pair of the black and white swords into existence, hurling them in a crossing arc that scythed through six lambs simultaneously. The corpses hadn't finished sliding before Ryuu vaulted off one, using its back as a springboard to drive both blades into a fire-spitter's throat from above. The creature gargled flame that scorched the ceiling, and Ryuu twisted free, rolling beneath its collapsing bulk with a dancer's economy.

"Targeting magicite directly," Shirou called up to her. "One clean death instead of a prolonged one. They scream less. It's a few centimetres below the point where the base of the neck meets the body."

Rose blinked. That was almost conversational by his standards.

"Right. Magicite shots. Got it." She adjusted her aim, drawing the Elder Wand in a tight figure-eight to establish her coordinate framework—the trick Shirou had taught her that morning, anchoring her intent to spatial points rather than visual targeting. The wand hummed its approval.

"*Perforo.*" Normally she'd have cast silently, but anchoring the new coordinate system whilst maintaining precision required the verbal crutch. Besides, it wasn't as though she was duelling a fellow witch.

The Piercing Hex flew straight and true, punching through a fire-spitter's flank and striking the faintly glowing node visible through the gash. The creature dropped without a sound. No death-cry. Just a wet thud and the clatter of ten legs folding.

"Better," Shirou said.

"Was that a compliment? Mark the date, Ryuu."

Ryuu didn't respond. She was three corridors' worth of lambs deep, a pale blur trailing afterimages of green light. The woman fought like water finding cracks in stone—flowing around each attack, never meeting force head-on, always cutting at joints and tendons. The smaller lambs couldn't touch her. Rose watched one launch itself from the ceiling directly at Ryuu's back and somehow—*somehow*—the elf shifted a quarter-step left without looking, let the creature sail past, and opened its belly with a backhand slash that deposited its magicite on the floor in a neat pile.

Another down.

Two fire-spitters charged side by side, filling the corridor with a wall of flame. Rose threw up another *Protego Horribilis* and felt the shield buckle under the sustained pressure. These were stronger than the first wave.

"Shirou! The big ones on the left!"

He was already there. The black blade drove into the first creature's eye socket whilst the white one severed the foreleg of the second, sending it crashing sideways into the wall. Shirou wrenched the black blade free and brought both swords down in a scissoring motion that sheared through the second creature's spine.

The remaining fire-spitters hung back, their throats pulsing with building heat. The smaller lambs swarmed forward in their place—dozens of them, climbing over each other in their frenzy, coating the walls and ceiling in a rippling carpet of grey wool and clicking legs.

Rose pointed the Elder Wand at the ceiling above the densest cluster.

"Bombarda Maxima!"

The explosion brought down a section of ivory stone the size of a dining table. It crushed eight lambs outright and scattered another dozen. The death-cries overlapped into a single sustained shriek that made Rose's vision swim.

"That was loud," she muttered, shaking her head to clear it.

Ryuu appeared beside Shirou, barely winded. A thin line of dark blood traced her left forearm where a stray tooth had caught her, but she'd already wrapped it with a strip torn from her sleeve.

"A little more than sixty remain," Ryuu said. "Four large variants."

Rose stared. "You've been counting?"

"Situational awareness is fundamental."

"We're going to get along famously."

The four remaining fire-spitters had clustered together, the smaller lambs forming a living barricade around them. Rose could see the intelligence in it—or whatever passed for intelligence in creatures driven by hive-rage. Shield the ranged attackers, let them build up flame, overwhelm the corridor with fire.

"They're coordinating," Shirou said. His golden eyes narrowed. Another pair of the black and white swords appeared in his hands—Rose had lost count of how many he'd Traced at this point.

"Can you curve those swords around the front line?"

"No need. Ryuu, fall back." He threw the pair into the mass.

"Just checking. Communication. Teamwork. All that." She gestured vaguely with her broom hand. "We only met yesterday—felt like we should actually talk during these things."

The ghost of something crossed Shirou's face. Not quite a smile. More like the memory of one. Ryuu, without question, leapt back as the thrown blades carved into the fray—a whirling dance of black and white that shredded through the barricade like twin buzzsaws.

"Wouldn't that be a distraction?" Shirou said, already Tracing what looked like a large metal bow. He Altered it to match his current height, then drove four heavy broadswords into the ground at his right like fence posts.

"Fair point—what are you doing?"

Shirou picked up one of the broadswords. As Rose watched, he Altered the massive blade—compressing and streamlining it until it resembled an oversized arrow—and nocked it on the bow.

'He's using swords as ammunition,' Rose thought. *'Of course he is.'*

Ryuu gathered more of her luminous green orbs, the stardust swirling in lazy orbits around her outstretched hand.

Three lambs broke free from the whirling blender of black and white and rushed straight at them.

Rose took the opening. "*Perforo! Perforo! Perforo!*"

All three Piercing Hexes struck home—not dead-centre on the magicite, but close enough. The lambs crumpled mid-charge. In the same breath, Shirou loosed his first arrow. The compressed broadsword punched clean through one of the four remaining fire-spitters, striking the magicite dead-on. The creature folded without a sound.

"Nice shot!"

The smaller lambs scattered. Without their heavy support, the coordination broke apart. They fled in every direction—walls, ceiling, back down the corridor—bleating in what Rose chose to interpret as panic rather than rage.

"*Luvia*," Ryuu uttered.

Her luminous orbs detonated amongst the scattered lambs in bursts of green stardust.

In that span of time, Shirou loosed two more of his improvised projectiles. Rose could hear the metal of the bow screaming in protest with each draw, though Shirou himself barely grunted with the effort.

The last of the smaller lambs tried to flee up the wall. Ryuu flicked one blade in a casual underhand throw that pinned it through the core. It slid down the ivory surface and went still.

A final sound of displaced air, and the last arrow embedded itself in the remaining fire-spitter's flank.

Silence. Or something close to it—the distant drip of ichor and the fading echo of the last bleat.

Shirou had already dismissed the whirling blades, the bow, all of it. The conjured steel dissolved into motes of fading light, leaving his hands empty.

He surveyed the corridor—the carpet of grey bodies, the scorch marks, the cracked ceiling—with the expression of a man inspecting a moderately untidy kitchen.

"Masters and Mistresses!" The call was preceded by a *pop* as Mipsy bounced on the balls of her feet. "Mipsy be told by Topsy, who be told by Cuspy, who be told by Mistress Lefiya that they be calling it a day!"

"Well, we should help collect the magicite and whatever's usable from this slaughter," Shirou said, looking around the carnage.

"Ever the pragmatist." Rose dismounted and stretched her shoulders. The Elder Wand thrummed warm against her palm—satisfied, if a wand could feel such a thing. She glanced between her two companions, both already moving to harvest cores with practised efficiency.

One day. She'd known these people for one day.

Ryuu knelt beside a fire-spitter carcass, her knife finding the magicite with surgical precision. Shirou worked three bodies down, his calloused hands separating crystal from flesh with the ease of a butcher breaking down a carcass.

Mipsy conjured tarpaulins whilst Rose levitated the carcasses onto them. The house-elf then popped away—most likely to inform their harvesting team of goblins and house-elves where they were.

Rose pulled out a conjured sack and began collecting the harvested stones. "For what it's worth," she said, dropping a magicite the size of her fist into the bag, "not bad for a first proper outing."

Ryuu inclined her head a fraction. Shirou grunted.

Rose grinned. Stoics, the pair of them—well, at least during battle. She'd crack them eventually.

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END

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