

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

-=&<o>&=-

Book 1 - The Empty Twin

Ch 3.5 Into the Deep

The antechamber swallowed sound.

Shirou's boots struck stone that drank each footfall, returning nothing—no echo, no resonance, just the dull thud of leather on rock absorbed into walls of polished obsidian. Blue flames burned in iron braziers mounted atop pillars spaced at precise intervals, casting the corridor in cold, surgical light. The fire didn't flicker. Didn't dance. Each tongue of flame stood rigid as a blade, as though the dungeon had decided what fire ought to look like and committed to the aesthetic without understanding the physics.

At the far end of the antechamber, a set of double doors loomed. Carved from a single slab of grey stone, veined with something that pulsed faintly luminous in the blue light. Runes—or something adjacent to runes—had been chiselled into the surface in concentric rings, radiating outward from the seam where the two halves met. The doors stood perhaps twelve metres high.

Shirou walked ahead of the group, his eyes fixed on those doors, his mind very deliberately not fixed on the two women behind him.

He glanced back. Just a flicker—a quarter-second check he disguised as surveying the antechamber.

Rose caught it. Of course she did.

Ryuu caught it. Of course she did.

He turned forward again. Kept walking. Scratched at the back of his neck.

The problem with Structural Analysis was that it was thorough. Not visual, precisely—he hadn't *seen* anything in the conventional sense. When he'd grasped their wrists back on the nineteenth floor, the spell had mapped everything. Bone density. Muscle fibre composition. The precise geometry of every organ, every vessel, every square centimetre of skin. Abstract data, rendered into the language of his mind.

But abstract data, when combined with imagination, painted a picture.

He hadn't imagined it at the time. But when Rose had asked the question—*so you just saw us naked?*—the image had assembled itself inside his head before he could protest. Which was why he hadn't objected much after the accusation. He couldn't. The accusation was, in the strictest technical sense, retrospectively accurate.

He glanced back again.

Rose stuck her tongue out at him.

He faced forward, jaw tight. Heat crept up his neck. He focused on the doors. The runes. The faint vibration in the stone beneath his feet. Anything that wasn't—

Stop. Focus.

He stopped walking.

The nine brownies trailing behind him in a loose chevron formation halted as one, their oversized ears swivelling toward him like satellite dishes acquiring signal. Mipsy, leading the brownie contingent, tilted her head sideways at a forty-five-degree angle, her enormous eyes reflecting twin points of blue flame.

Ryuu crossed her arms and turned her head away. A wall of blonde hair swung across her shoulder like a curtain drawn shut.

Rose, by contrast, looked as though she'd processed the entire incident, filed it under *ammunition for later use*, and moved on. Her emerald eyes held the particular brightness of someone who'd already assembled three jokes and was merely deciding the order of deployment.

Shirou scratched at his jaw with one finger. The rasp of stubble against his fingernail was unreasonably loud in the dead acoustics of the chamber.

"We should probably do our final checks on equipment," he said.

"Hmph." Ryuu rotated her entire body forty-five degrees away from him, presenting her back. Arms still crossed.

Rose's mouth split into a grin that could have powered a small city.

"Oh," she said, voice dripping with theatrical innocence. "You're presenting your backside to him."

Ryuu's composure shattered like glass dropped from orbit. She whipped around, both hands flying to cover her rear, knees bending in a half-crouch that satisfied no tactical doctrine Shirou had ever encountered. Her pale skin flushed from jawline to ear-tip—and given the length of those ears, that was considerable territory.

"I—that is not—I was merely—" Ryuu's voice climbed half an octave. She shuffled sideways, rotating to face Shirou, then realised that facing him directly was somehow worse, then turned ninety degrees to present her profile, which resolved nothing. She settled for standing rigidly at an angle that geometry had no name for, one hand still hovering protectively behind her.

"Thank you," Shirou said to Rose. Flat. Dry as old parchment.

Rose flashed a peace sign. Two fingers, palm forward, held at head height with the casual precision of someone who'd been waiting for this exact moment.

"You're welcome."

Shirou exhaled through his nose. A long, measured breath that carried the weight of every poor social decision he'd ever made, which was a considerable load.

He straightened his back. Squared his shoulders. Then bent at the waist—a full ninety-degree bow, hands pressed flat against his thighs, head lowered until his silver-white hair hung forward and the stone floor filled his vision.

"I apologise." His voice was level, stripped of deflection. "To both of you. My intention in using Structural Analysis was solely to check whether either of you had sustained injuries you hadn't reported. That was its only purpose. I recognise I should have asked permission first, and I accept full responsibility for the intrusion."

He held the bow.

"I will accept whatever punishment you both decide is appropriate after we've cleared this floor."

Silence.

Then a sigh—soft, almost inaudible, carrying the particular timbre of someone releasing stubbornness they'd been gripping too tightly.

"Raise your head."

Ryuu's voice had settled back to its natural register. Calm. Composed. The flush hadn't entirely retreated from her ears, but her arms had uncrossed and her posture had shifted from defensive to merely stiff.

Shirou straightened.

"If your purpose was genuinely to assess our health," Ryuu said, her sky-blue eyes meeting his with steady scrutiny, "then I forgive you. And I apologise for my overreaction. A simple inquiry about your technique would have been more appropriate than—" She paused. "—the alternative."

"No, you had every right to react that way. I made you uncomfortable, and that's on me. I should have explained what Structural Analysis entails before I—"

"I understand the reasoning, and I—"

"—still should have asked, regardless of time pressure. The information gathered is comprehensive enough that any reasonable person would—"

"—consider it an invasion of privacy, yes, but the fault lies partially with my ignorance of your magical system's capabilities, so I cannot place blame entirely—"

"—on you, because I knew how thorough the analysis is, which makes the responsibility entirely mine—"

"Oh, for Merlin's saggy left—" Rose stepped between them, one hand raised, palm flat, like a referee separating boxers who'd decided to apologise each other to death instead of throwing punches. "Stop. Both of you. I can't believe I'm the one saying this, but you've apologised enough."

She turned to Shirou. Then to Ryuu. Then back to Shirou. Her lower lip jutted forward in an exaggerated pout.

"Do you realise," she said, "that you've just negotiated away a perfectly good punishment? We could have made him run laps around the camp. Starkers. In front of everyone."

Ryuu's flush, which had been retreating, reversed course and surged back to full intensity. Her gaze darted sideways—an involuntary flicker that lasted perhaps a quarter-second before she locked her eyes firmly on the nearest brazier.

Shirou gave Rose the side-eye. A slow, deliberate rotation of his head that communicated, with crystalline precision: *I will remember this.*

Rose beamed at him. Unrepentant. Radiant. The grin of someone who had found a lever and fully intended to pull it at every available opportunity.

Shirou ruffled his hair. Auburn-red strands fell back into disorder. "Can we. Please. Just prepare for the boss."

Rose's pout intensified for one final, theatrical second. Then she shrugged. "Fine, fine. All work and no play."

She acquiesced, but the grin didn't leave. It merely withdrew—pulled back behind her eyes, waiting.

Shirou turned to the group, rolling his shoulders to shed the lingering tension. "Right. Equipment check. Rose, anything you need me to look at? Weapons, gear, enchantments?"

Rose's hand came up. Between her fingers—summoned from its soulbound state with the ease of breathing—sat the Elder Wand. Pale wood. Fifteen inches. Ancient. Storied.

Intimately detailed in his memory.

She twirled it once between her fingers. "Oh, you want a second look?"

The deadpan expression Shirou returned could have been used to press trousers. "Looks like you got over that quickly."

"I bet it was a *sight* to see." Rose wagged the wand. Her eyes sparkled.

"I only have an abstract impression of its history." His voice was flat enough to lay bricks on. "It's not *seeing* it."

"Well." Rose leaned forward slightly, one eyebrow raised, the wand balanced on her fingertip. "Do you want to see?"

Shirou raised one eyebrow. Said a single word.

"Rin."

The sparkle in Rose's eyes extinguished like a candle in a hurricane. She physically flinched—a full-body twitch that originated somewhere around her

shoulders and propagated downward through her spine. The wand wobbled on her fingertip.

"Joking," she said. Very quickly. "I was absolutely joking. Ha ha. Humour. That thing."

She banished the wand back to its soulbound state with a speed that suggested she wanted it out of his visual range as a matter of existential urgency.

Shirou said nothing. His face gave nothing. But behind the mask—

Rin probably wouldn't mind. Might actually be interested.

The thought arrived unbidden and brought friends. The night when Sakura had been consumed by Angra Mainyu's corruption. The night before Arturia's capture, when desperation and grief had dissolved the careful boundaries between them. That particular evening involving Rin, Medea, Medusa, and Arturia that he categorically refused to think about in present company.

Rin was already a handful. And now he had no excuses left against Illya, who had made her intentions screamingly clear the moment her body had finally matured. And Sakura—where they were still finding their way back to each other through the damage the Grail War had left behind.

He was not going to talk about any of this. Ever.

He sighed. Again. He'd lost count of how many times he'd sighed today. Double digits, certainly.

"Brownies." He raised his voice slightly. "Could you gather round?"

Nine pairs of enormous eyes locked onto him with the unsettling synchronisation of creatures born to service. Mipsy took point, flanked by Volkey and Jolsey—two brownies who'd distinguished themselves during the nineteenth floor with their quick reactions and steady nerves. The remaining six arranged themselves in a loose semicircle, ears erect, hands clasped before them.

Shirou crouched, lowering himself until his golden eyes were roughly level with their heads. Even kneeling, he towered over them—the absurd height differential of this reality turning what should have been a simple briefing into a physical comedy routine.

"Trace on."

The familiar pulse of prana. The blueprint crystallising in his mind's eye. Not Kanshou and Bakuya this time, not Gáe Bolg or Hrunting. Something smaller. Simpler in form, if not in function.

Nine Azoth daggers materialised in a fan around his right hand, each hovering for a moment before he plucked them from the air. Ritual blades—the signature tool of the Mage's Association, designed as crystallised conduits for prana rather than cutting weapons. But these copies weren't identical. He'd woven a different magical signature into each—subtle variations in the prana frequency, like tuning forks pitched to distinct notes.

He separated them into three sets of three, each set sharing one signature.

"Can you feel the difference between these?" He held the first set toward Mipsy, Volkey, and Jolsey.

Mipsy pressed her tiny palm against the flat of the nearest blade. Her eyes widened. She passed it to Volkey, who sniffed it—an oddly canine gesture—before nodding vigorously.

"Each one is singing different," Mipsy said. "Like different bells."

"Good." Shirou handed out the sets, making sure each trio of brownies held daggers of the same signature. Then he Traced three more—one matching each set—and held them up. "These are copies of the ones you're holding. Same frequency. Same signature."

He passed one to Rose and one to Ryuu. Kept the third.

"If you're holding your dagger," he said, addressing the brownies, "and I throw this copy across the room—can you detect it? Its direction? Its distance?"

Volkey clutched her dagger to her chest. Her eyes squeezed shut. Her ears rotated like radar dishes.

"Yes." She opened one eye. "Volkey is feeling where the singing goes."

"One more question." Shirou met each brownie's gaze in turn. "If I throw the dagger and it embeds in something—a wall, a pillar, a monster—can you apparate the person assigned to that dagger directly to where it landed?"

The brownies exchanged glances. A rapid, silent conference conducted entirely through ear-movements and eyebrow acrobatics.

"If we be concentrating," Jolsey said, tugging at one ear, "we be doing this very fast."

"Let's test it."

Shirou stood. He pointed toward the obsidian wall to the left of the chamber—a good sixty metres away, lit blue by the nearest brazier.

"Volkey, Jolsey—you're with me and Ryu. Concentrate on our daggers."

He flicked his wrist. The Azoth dagger left his hand in a flat spin, crossed the chamber in under a second, and embedded itself in the wall with a crystalline *tink*. He felt the displacement in his stomach before his eyes registered it—the world folding, space compressing—and then he stood at the wall, the dagger quivering at shoulder height beside him.

A fraction of a second's disorientation. Not as uncomfortable as Rose first described it. Smoother but still it felt like you wer being fed through a tube.

"Jolsey, good work." He yanked the dagger free, spun, and threw it back toward his original position.

Fold. Step. Arrival.

He stood where he'd started. Ryu had already completed her own test—she appeared from a flicker of displaced air near one of the pillars, her expression shifting from surprised to analytically satisfied in the span of a blink.

Rose threw hers with a Quidditch player's arm. Accurate. Fast. The dagger punched into stone and she materialised beside it mid-stride, momentum preserved.

"Brilliant." Rose tugged her dagger free. "That's brilliant. It's like a Portkey without the navel-hook."

"Right." Shirou gathered the brownies again. "Here's how this works for the boss fight."

He pointed to each group in turn.

"Mipsy, Grackle, Tripsey—you three are backup. You stay near the entrance. Do not cross the bridge unless the situation becomes critical. Mipsy, you have overwatch and final discretion on when to call for help from the other group. Tripsey, if Mipsy gives the word, you go straight to Lefiya's team."

Three nods.

"Volkey, Jolsey—you're with Ryu and me in active support. Your jobs are simple. Keep the potion belts topped. Apparate us to throw daggers when called. Retrieve daggers that have been thrown so you can return them to Rose and Ryu for reuse—mine don't need retrieval, I can Trace fresh copies."

He locked eyes with Mipsy. "Your backup group's secondary duty is the same as before—if Volkey or Jolsey are in danger, pull them out first. If all three of us are engaged simultaneously and the brownies can't intervene safely, do not intervene. Stay alive."

Then he faced the remaining four brownies. He Traced three repeating crossbows—compact, self-loading, mechanical. Ugly, functional things with no grace and considerable stopping power. Alongside them, several hundred bolts materialised in neat bundles.

"For the backup team near the entrance. These are for self-defence and suppression if lesser monsters climb the stage from below." He set the

crossbows down where the brownies could reach them. "Don't engage the boss with these. Target anything else that threatens our flanks."

He straightened, rolling his shoulders.

"One more thing." He looked at Volkey and Jolsey. "Don't hesitate to use the daggers or your magic to protect yourselves. Every dagger I gave you is disposable. If something comes at you, stab it, throw it, apparate away—whatever keeps you breathing. Your lives matter more than any weapon. Understood?"

"Yes, Master Shirou." A chorus, high-pitched and solemn.

He turned to Rose and Ryuu. "Anything to add?"

Rose tapped her chin. "The aranea on nineteen had those purple-aura reanimations. If this boss can do something similar, or if we encounter another swarm—"

"—then killing the grunts becomes secondary to disabling whatever mechanism drives the revival," Ryuu finished. "Prioritise identifying and neutralising any regenerative or reanimation ability the creature displays. Either way, if it's another swarm, we go for area-of-effect magic."

"And keep mobile," Rose added. The levity had drained from her voice. The woman who'd been wagging her wand and making innuendos three minutes ago was gone—replaced by the witch who'd survived a war, lost a world, and walked into this dungeon expecting to fight for her life.

Shirou nodded. Turned to the double doors.

"Let's go."

-=&<o>&=-

They pushed the doors open together—Rose on the left, Shirou on the centre, Ryuu on the right, palms flat against stone that thrummed with contained energy. The doors swung inward on invisible hinges, silent as breathing, and

the antechamber's blue-flame intimacy gave way to a vastness that seized the lungs.

The space beyond was not a room.

A bridge stretched before them—wide enough for twenty abreast, supported by pillars that descended into darkness so absolute it might have been solid. The pillars were carved from the same grey stone as the doors, veined with that faintly luminous material, each one thick as a house. They marched away into the distance, carrying the bridge toward something impossible.

A stage. A platform. Held up by pillars of those dark, obsidian-like stone.

Three to four kilometres in diameter, Shirou estimated, his mind automatically mapping dimensions the way it mapped the geometry of blades. Circular. Flat. Set atop pillars so massive they seemed like the bones of a buried titan. The surface was smooth stone, pale grey, unmarked—an arena waiting for blood to give it character.

Beyond the stage's edge: the pit. Shirou stepped to the bridge's railing and looked down. His enhanced vision found nothing. No bottom. No reflected light. Just an absence that went on and on until perception gave up and called it infinity. The walls of the pit rose past the stage's level—massive earthen ramparts that curved inward overhead, creating the impression of standing inside a colossal bowl, or the throat of something that had swallowed the world and kept chewing.

Across the void, at the stage's far side, a second bridge connected to a second door—identical to the one they'd just opened. The exit. The way to floor twenty-one.

And in the centre of the stage, approximately two kilometres from where they stood, something waited.

"Fuck."

"Bollocks."

Shirou and Rose spoke simultaneously. Their profanity overlapped, merged, and hung in the dead air of the cavern like smoke.

Ryuu's jaw tightened. Her hand found the grip of her wooden sword—Alf's Justitia—and squeezed until her knuckles whitened.

"Why," Rose said, her voice stripped of all levity, all warmth, all of the easy teasing that had defined the last fifteen minutes, "is a Weapon the first boss of this celestial dungeon?"

Shirou's mind was already reaching for the answer. '*General Knowledge*'—the skill everyone had purchased from Zelretch's shop—stirred behind his eyes like a reference library staffing itself, pages flipping, indices cross-referencing. He'd had a vague understanding before. Fragments gleaned in passing when he'd studied what to expect from the dungeon.

No one had expected this.

He pulled the knowledge forward. Let it crystallise.

Weapons.

The word carried weight in the context of dungeon taxonomy. Not weapons as tools. Not weapons as swords or spears or the thousand blades that populated his inner world. Weapons as a classification—ultimate monsters, the dungeon's final answer to a question it hadn't been asked politely.

They emerged in dungeons that had been artificially cultivated beyond their natural limits. Specifically, beyond the hundred-floor threshold. The empire's commercial dungeon-farming operations had discovered this the hard way—when you fed a dungeon enough external energy to force the growth of additional floors, the dungeon grew. Obediently. Productively. For a while.

But dungeons possessed a form of will. Not sapient, precisely—'*General Knowledge*' was careful to hedge—but *directed*. A dungeon existed for a purpose, and that purpose was singular: take root in a celestial body, absorb its energy, convert its monsters into a seed, trigger a catastrophic dungeon

break that launched those monsters free of the planet's gravity well, and propagate to another celestial body. An infection. A virus on a planetary scale, with a reproductive cycle measured in aeons.

The commercial operations disrupted this cycle. They culled monsters. They harvested resources. They fed the core energy to stimulate growth, yes, but the growth produced *floors*, not the accumulated critical mass needed for a break. The dungeon directed energy into expansion because its monsters kept dying—there was no point hoarding for a break when your army was being butchered faster than you could breed it.

But eventually—always eventually—the dungeon noticed.

The will of the dungeon recognised the pattern. Energy arriving. Monsters dying. No break occurring. Floors accumulating. The system was being *exploited*, and the will responded with the only tool it had: overwhelming force directed at the source of the exploitation.

A *Weapon* was that force. Born from immense reserves of magical and psionic energy, theorised to be originated from where these celestial parasites came from, shaped by the dungeon's will into a singular purpose—annihilate everything foreign within the dungeon's bounds. Kill the adventurers. Kill the support staff. Kill the communities that had been built within the dungeon walls to service the farming operation. Kill until nothing remains but the dungeon and its monsters, and then absorb the energy released by all that death.

That absorbed energy gave the *Weapon* the means to escape the dungeon. To breach the surface. To lay waste to the celestial body the dungeon had rooted in—stripping it of every last joule before riding the resulting cataclysm free of the gravity well, carrying the dungeon's seed to a new host.

Planet dungeons spawned by *Weapons* were worse. Always worse. The seed carried the memory of resistance, and the new dungeon grew accordingly—harder monsters, deeper floors, more sophisticated defences. An immune system that had learned from the last infection.

That was the theory, at least. General Knowledge was transparent about its gaps. No one had definitively located the source of the energy dungeons used to produce monsters and repair their structures. The prevailing theory posited that planet dungeons were manifestations of an alternate reality perpendicular to this one—a reality that fed the dungeon from the other side, breeding monsters and manufacturing materials in a space that didn't obey the local physics. The dungeon existed in both realities simultaneously, a wound where two planes overlapped.

That theory explained the perpetual monster production. Explained the self-repair. Explained why ancient dungeons—some older than the Grakkan Empire itself—never exhausted their resources.

It also explained why the dungeon needed energy from *this* reality specifically. Monsters bred in the alternate plane needed energy from the local reality to exist here, to persist outside the dungeon, to survive on this side of the wound. The dungeon break wasn't just a military assault—it was a dimensional transit, and that transit had a cost measured in planetary energy.

The theory had its holes. If monsters needed local energy to exist in this reality, why could you carry a monster's corpse out of the dungeon without difficulty? One rebuttal: death severed the connection. A living monster was tethered to both realities. A dead one belonged to neither—or rather, it defaulted to whichever reality currently held its physical remains.

Shirou filed the theoretical gaps away. They mattered for understanding. They did not matter for surviving the next hour.

What mattered was this: a Weapon was supposed to spawn in dungeons that had been pushed past a hundred floors by external interference. No one had been feeding this core external energy. No one had been farming it. No one had been culling its monsters for profit over generations.

So why was a Weapon here?

And if the twentieth floor's boss was a Weapon, what in the name of every blade he'd ever Traced awaited them on the floors below?

He didn't voice the question. Didn't need to. Rose's expression said she'd arrived at the same conclusion, and the tight line of Ryuu's mouth confirmed it.

Shirou focused on the creature itself.

It was a quadruped at its base. Four legs—but 'legs' was generous. The forelegs were enormous, each one thicker than the body of a centaur, armoured in interlocking plates of something that resembled chitin, metal and bone without quite being any of them. Massive claws tipped each foot, curved and dark, the size of a forearm. From each shoulder, a spike jutted upward—single, brutal, the height of a three-storey building.

The hind legs were smaller. Disproportionately so. The creature's weight distribution was wrong—too much mass forward, not enough behind.

The tail stretched behind it for what had to be several metres—a sinuous, lizard-like appendage that ended in a cluster of blades. Not blade-shaped protrusions. *Blades*. Actual cutting edges, serrated and honed, arranged in a fan at the tail's tip like the petals of a flower designed by something that hated flowers and loved dismemberment.

Between the forelegs—in the space where a chest would be on a quadruped of normal proportions—sat a face. No neck. No separation from the body. Just a monstrous visage embedded directly into the creature's mass, as though something had pressed a gargoyle's head into clay and the clay had accepted it. The mouth was a horizontal gash bristling with teeth that caught the light—each one a different shape, a different size, arranged with no regard for symmetry or function beyond *damage*.

And above that face, growing from it like a parasite that had become the host, a humanoid torso.

Armoured. Massive. The dragonoid head that topped it bore five horns—two spiralling outward from the temples in tight ram's-horn curls, three pointing backwards from the crown in a formation that evoked the upper points of a five-pointed star. The face beneath the horns was wrong in ways that Structural Analysis would have catalogued with dispassionate precision if he'd

been close enough to touch it. He wasn't. From this distance, all he could perceive was *predatory intelligence* behind eyes that burned in the blue-flame light.

Four wings spread from the torso's back. Dragon wings—or the memory of dragon wings, scaled up and armoured. Each membrane was reinforced with what appeared to be metallic bone, giving them the appearance of weaponised architecture rather than instruments of flight.

The *Weapon's* left hand held a crystal. Rainbow-tinted. Shirou could see light refracting through its facets, throwing prismatic shards across the stage's surface. A focus, he suspected. A battery. Perhaps both.

And beside the creature—resting on the stage like a monument—an enormous double-edged sword. Its guard was a seven-pointed star, each point extending outward in a stylised ray. The blade itself was longer than the creature's torso, broader than the bridge they stood on.

Shirou's hands itched.

"It hasn't moved," Ryu observed. Her voice was low, professional. Whatever embarrassment had coloured the last few minutes in the antechamber had been incinerated by the reality of what they faced. "It's aware of us. Look at the torso—the head is tracking our position."

She was right. The dragonoid face had turned fractionally since they'd opened the door. Watching.

"It's waiting," Shirou said. "For us to step onto the stage."

"Or onto the bridge." Rose had her hand raised, fingers spread, wand absent—she was reading the air the way Rin read prana flows, searching for wards or triggers.

Shirou stepped back from the railing. Faced his team. Nine brownies. Two women. Three people and nine creatures against something classified as a dungeon's ultimate biological weapon.

"Rose, Ryuu." His voice settled into the register it found during battle—level, unhurried, warm iron under the surface. "I'm going to take point. Before we cross that bridge and step onto the stage, I'll open with a ranged projectile. Ryuu, start your chant—we'll both support each other, making sure its front is focused on the two of us."

"What do you need from me?" Rose asked.

"Mobility and disruption. You're fastest on your broom—while we're holding its attention from the front, you deal damage to the rest of its body." Ryuu gave a nod, offering no contradiction to Shirou's plan.

"I can do that."

"Brownies." He crouched again. "Same assignments as discussed. Backup team—stay at the bridge entrance. Do not cross unless Mipsy calls it. Volkey, Jolsey—follow Rose and me respectively. Stay hidden until called. If the daggers fly, you apparate us. If the potions run low, you refill. If everything goes wrong—"

"We'll play it by ear," Rose interjected. She turned to the brownies. "Volkey, you ride with me—since we're midair, I'll call the timing for each apparition. Jolsey, you retrieve the daggers I throw and pass them to Volkey."

"Yes, Mistress Rose!" the two brownies replied.

"Grackle and Pockey, you're with Shirou. Topsy and Tilsy, you're with me," Ryuu said.

Another chorus of affirmatives.

Shirou squared his body. Rolled his neck. Felt the circuits beneath his skin warm as prana began to flow—a trickle first, then a steady current, then the familiar torrent that preceded combat.

"I am the bone of my sword."

Ryuu drew Alf's Justitia. The wooden blade caught the blue light and seemed to drink it, the Spirit's Drop jewel in its guard pulsing with a deep green luminescence that matched her eyes.

Rose summoned her broom. It snapped into her hand from wherever soulbound objects waited—that adjacent space that wasn't quite real until you needed it. She mounted with fluid economy, knees gripping the shaft, weight forward, centre of gravity already committed to speed. Volkey jumped on behind her, tiny hands gripping the small space of the shaft between them.

They stepped onto the bridge.

The moment Shirou's boot touched the first stone, he felt it. Not a physical sensation—nothing so crude. A pressure behind his eyes. A notice. The dungeon acknowledged their presence with the indifference of a predator that had heard a mouse step onto its tongue.

"Astraea Record."

"Steel is my body, fire is my blood."

Both of them started their arias as Shirou Traced a large sword with a spiralling blade. He held it in his right hand, body already reinforced, but the mass was still unwieldy despite his increased dimensions. He could feel the weapon's history bleed into his palm—which wasn't much, as this was the precursor to the blade that could shatter mountaintops. But even as a precursor, it had become the legend from which everything that followed descended.

Ancient. Proud. Forged in an age when gods and goddesses walked the earth, and the first hero-king hoarded every treasure worth hoarding.

"Grackle and Pockey, prioritise your safety—you can't help me if you're dead. You already know your assignments."

Somewhere, a certain counter guardian was laughing at the irony of those words.

This spiral sword was not Caladbolg II—the modified version his counterpart, Counter Guardian EMIYA, had favoured. That version was a derivative, reshaped for efficiency at the cost of the original's sheer density. Nor was it the original itself.

This was the prototype. The one that had rested in the Gate of Babylon, filed away among tens of thousands of weapons the King of Heroes had collected and never bothered to use twice.

Shirou hadn't seen it the first time he'd encountered Gilgamesh. Even when faced with his Reality Marble, the King of Heroes had never taken him seriously enough to open his Gate in its entirety.

That changed months before the Aylesbury Valesti Ritual. Another Grail War—held in America. Waver Velvet, or rather Lord El-Melloi II, along with his professor, had been sent to investigate. They'd been forced to participate. Gilgamesh had been summoned, and one of the opposing servants was someone the King considered his equal. His friend. The resulting clash between the two legendary spirits had forced Gilgamesh to open his Gate in full.

A feast for Shirou's Reality Marble. Every weapon, catalogued in a single glorious instant.

He'd been lectured by both Rin and Illya afterwards for third-partying the clashing giants.

But that was neither here nor there.

Shirou compressed the prototype's mass into itself. Fold upon fold upon fold, like hammering steel on an anvil that existed only in concept. The spiral tightened. The mass compacted. The sword became an arrow.

He reinforced his entire body. Circuits blazed beneath his skin, prana flooding muscle and bone and tendon until every fibre sang with contained force. He planted his feet. Traced his bow—the great black longbow—and nocked the spiral arrow against its string.

The Weapon sensed the energy. Two sources—Shirou and Ryu—both building towards something catastrophic. The dragonoid torso reached down with deliberate, almost contemptuous slowness and closed its armoured hand around the hilt of its enormous sword. The seven-pointed star guard caught the light as the blade rose from the stage.

"Duty shall be fulfilled, and the scales shall be balanced."

Shirou overloaded the arrow. Prana flooded the compressed mass beyond its structural tolerance—past the point of stability, past the point of safety, into the territory where a Noble Phantasm ceased to be a weapon and became an explosion waiting for permission. A Broken Phantasm. The spiral arrow screamed in his grip, vibrating with the need to detonate.

"My core is twisted in madness. Caladbolg."

He released.

Rose climbed higher but held back—staying clear of the blast radius, trusting the arrow to do its work.

The arrow crossed the vast space between Shirou and the Weapon in the time it took to blink.

Shirou did not watch it land.

The moment the string snapped forward, he vanished the bow and sprinted toward the stage.

"I have created over a thousand blades."

"Follow. Double Accel."

"Yes, Master Shirou!"

"Bastion of order, crown of the honest, evil-crushing torch."

"Bloody hell!" came the reaction from above.

The detonation was not sound. Sound implied something the human ear could process, categorise, and file under *loud*.

He Traced Prototype Gram. Another blade stolen from the King of Heroes' treasury—the Sword of the Sun, wielded by Sigurd, based on the Original Sin, Merodach. The same sword upon which Caliburn had been modelled. A lineage of legendary blades, each one descended from the last, and Shirou held the oldest surviving branch.

Its weight settled into his hands with the familiarity of a tool he'd used a thousand times, even though this body had never held it before. The muscle memory was in the blade, not the flesh. That was the nature of his origin combined with Tracing: you didn't just copy the weapon. You sympathised with the skill of every hand that had ever wielded it.

Shirou blurred forward. Double Accel compressed his perception of time, and the bridge's grey stones became a smear beneath his boots.

The aftershock hit him like a wall—a physical force that would have sent a lesser body tumbling. He gripped Gram in both hands and slashed at the shockwave itself, the legendary blade carving a pocket of stillness around him as a column of white-gold light erupted from the centre of the stage. The shockwave that followed turned the air into a solid thing that pushed against his reinforced body with genuine malice. Dust and debris fountained upward—a cloud of pulverised stone and shattered chitin that obscured the Weapon entirely.

Shirou had already begun the rain of steel before the dust settled, adding layer upon layer to the obscuring cloud.

Three-quarters of the way to the stage. His boots hit the transition from bridge to platform without breaking stride. The stone here was different—darker, denser, warm beneath his soles as though something pulsed beneath it. Alive.

"In the name of the Goddess, charging through space, bind the star traces to this land."

"*Confringo! Confringo! Confringo!*" Rose was already on her diving run, each Blasting Curse slamming into the dust cloud in rapid succession—she pulled up hard before entering the obscured zone, unwilling to fly blind into whatever waited inside.

Not wanting the Weapon's attention drawn to Rose, Shirou Traced three gigantic blades—each one the height of a small house, broad as siege rams, heavy as collapsed architecture—and launched them into the dust cloud. They tumbled end over end, catching the fading light of Caladbolg's detonation, and vanished into the obscuring haze.

The trio of swords was batted away.

The cloud dispersed as Weapon met Sword—Prototype Gram locking against the Weapon's enormous blade with a shockwave that flattened the remaining dust in every direction. The impact travelled up Shirou's arms and into his shoulders, and for one instant his reinforced muscles threatened to buckle under the sheer mass behind the creature's swing.

The beast's face—the one embedded between its forelegs—growled. The sound was subsonic, felt in the chest rather than heard with the ears. Shirou's ribs vibrated. His teeth ached.

The humanoid torso held its gigantic sword in its right hand. Single-handed. What Shirou needed both arms and reinforcement to match, this thing managed with one limb and contempt.

Rose swept in from behind on her second pass, Blasting Curses hammering the creature's dorsal ridge in a tight cluster. The rain of steel joined her assault—swords falling onto the Weapon's back in a continuous barrage, embedding in chitin wherever the armour had cracked.

Shirou kicked the face between its forelegs—his reinforced boot connecting with the jaw hard enough to snap the creature's head sideways—and broke the blade lock. He stepped into the opening and delivered a devastating underhau, Gram's edge biting deep into the joint where the beast-body met the humanoid torso.

Rose circled for a third pass, throwing everything she had—flame spells that blackened chitin, ice spells that cracked across exposed joints, water spells that pressurised into cutting jets, Severing Charms that carved lines across the Weapon's flanks. She was adapting in real time, testing which elements the creature's hide resisted and which it didn't, discarding what failed and doubling down on what worked.

Shirou stepped back and surveyed the damage.

Part of the Weapon's left wing hung at an angle—membrane torn, metallic bone cracked. The left flank of its beast-body was mangled, chitin plates buckled inward, the muscle beneath them pulped and weeping dark fluid that might have been blood if blood came in that shade of black-violet. Several interlocking plates along its shoulder had been blown clean off, exposing raw tissue that glistened wetly. Its back bristled with embedded swords—a pincushion of steel, those that had carried enough kinetic energy to penetrate the hide buried to their crossguards, the rest scattered across the stage where they'd bounced off the thicker armour.

Good hits. Solid damage.

Not enough.

The exposed tissue began to close. The embedded swords were forced outward—slowly, inexorably—pushed free by the regenerating flesh beneath them. They clattered to the stage one by one, dismissed by a body that treated legendary steel as splinters to be expelled.

New chitin formed over the wounds like ice crystallising on a pond—spreading outward from the edges, knitting together with a soft chitinous clicking that carried across the distance between them. The torn wing membrane sealed itself, metallic bone straightening with a series of pops that sounded like knuckles cracking. Within seconds, the left flank was whole again. Within ten seconds, the wing had resumed its original spread.

Undamaged. As though the last thirty seconds of sustained assault had been a polite suggestion the creature had declined.

"Great. A healing factor." The words came out as a grumble, bitten off between clenched teeth.

"Why?! I hate this dungeon!" came the complaint from above.

The Weapon growled again—louder this time, a sound that made the stage beneath Shirou's feet vibrate like a struck bell. And then, from the direction of the pit, from the darkness that surrounded the stage on all sides: howling.

Not one voice. Not ten. Hundreds. Rising from below, echoing off the curved walls of the vast chamber, overlapping until the individual sounds merged into a single continuous shriek of hunger and violence.

"Masters, there be monsters climbing the stage!" warned Grackle—or was it Pockey? Hard to tell when both voices carried the same pitch of controlled alarm.

Shirou widened the rain of steel, Tracing Kanshou and Bakuya with his left hand and hurling them in spinning arcs around the perimeter. The married swords pendulumed outward, catching the first wave of lesser creatures—smaller beasts, spider-like, chitinous—as they hauled themselves over the stage's edge.

"Great, this again! You better not hit me!" Rose complained, banking hard to avoid a returning Bakuya.

Shirou could only grunt in reply. He gripped Prototype Gram in both hands, shoved the Weapon's sword aside with a brutal two-handed parry, and delivered a wide gash across its beast-face before checking his peripheries.

Monsters. Climbing. Coming from every direction.

Point-blank, he Traced. Six swords—large, heavy, unrefined, designed for penetration rather than elegance—materialised in the air behind the Weapon's body and slammed into its back like iron stakes driven by invisible hammers. Each one punched through chitin and buried itself to the crossguard, pinning sections of wing membrane to the creature's flanks.

The Weapon roared—not the subsonic growl from before but a full-throated bellow that shook dust from the distant ceiling and sent cracks spider-webbing across the stage beneath Shirou's feet.

"Justice returns!" Ryuu's voice rang clear across the stage, finishing her chant. "*Agaris Alvesynth!*"

At the same time, motes of green-white light erupted above and around Shirou and Rose.

"You know, the two of you make the obstacle courses I ran back when I was a professional Quidditch player look like a bloody walk in the park!"

A dagger embedded itself to Shirou's right. Ryuu materialised beside him mid-stride, already swinging—the brownie who'd apparated her had the presence of mind not to touch the parts of Ryuu's body still wreathed in residual spell-flame, which spoke well of the creature's survival instincts.

Rose, just as she had in the previous chamber when the swarm overwhelmed them, climbed high. She held her wand as if gripping a lasso and began her hurricane of fire.

"I really need more spells. Hermione will never let me live this down."

Below the firestorm, Shirou and Ryuu danced around the Weapon.

They let it pivot between them—every time the dragonoid torso committed to facing one, the other closed in for a slash. The dance looked choreographed, and in a sense it was. Shirou's Tracing had already sympathised with Ryuu's swords—Alf's Justitia, the twin kodachis—which meant his body understood her tempo the way it understood any weapon's history. He adapted to her rhythm instinctively, complementing her fluid, circular style with his own pragmatic aggression. Where she flowed, he struck. Where she retreated, he advanced. Two styles that had no business fitting together locked into seamless coordination.

"Ryuu, from behind!" Shirou called as Ryuu slashed at the Weapon's forelegs, moving aside—the Weapon's blade passing millimetres from her torso as she retreated. It caught the light chestplate Shirou had provided her, shearing through the outer layer and leaving a bright gouge across the surface.

Shirou called forth the name. "Sword of the Sun—Gram!"

A miniature sun consumed the blade. Lightning crackled along the fuller, earthed itself through the crossguard, and arced between the spiral horns of the prototype's elaborate pommel. The sword hummed—a sustained note, pure and piercing, that cut through the growling and the howling and the distant crash of monsters scaling the stage's pillars.

He thrust.

The blade punched through the humanoid torso's chest armour as if it were cloth. Light burst from the wound—entered through the sternum and exited through the back in a lance of crackling energy that briefly illuminated the Weapon's interior. For a fraction of a second, Shirou could see the outline of structures inside the creature—things that might have been organs, channels that pulsed with dark-violet fluid, a lattice of reinforcing bone or chitin or something else entirely that defied classification.

The Weapon shrugged.

It didn't flinch. Didn't stagger. Didn't even shift its weight. The dragonoid head on the torso looked down at the hole in its chest with an expression that, on a human face, would have been mild annoyance. Then the torso lunged—closing the distance off the beast-body's haunches—and swung its enormous sword in a horizontal arc that would have bisected Shirou at the waist if he hadn't already been moving.

"Shirou!"

Ryuu's warning reached him as he threw himself backwards. Not fast enough. The blade missed his torso but the wind-pressure alone opened a large gash across his chest—the sheer force of displaced air parting flesh as cleanly as a

blade might have. The impact slammed into him and sent him skidding across the stage's surface, boots leaving twin furrows in the stone.

"Hey, are you alright?!" Rose called from above.

Shirou could only grunt. He could already feel the pain of his body reknitting itself—a mesh of fine blades forming beneath his skin, threading through the wound like sutures made of steel, slowly closing the gash as they converted back to flesh. The process hurt. The surrounding tissue was slightly damaged by the metallic lattice as it worked, each blade-filament scoring the healthy flesh beside the wound before softening and becoming muscle and skin once more.

But pain was an old friend. He charged in.

"Hey, Mr Grunts-a-lot and Ryuu—I can't hold this much longer!"

The hurricane of fire had been systematically burning the monsters climbing from the pit, complemented by Shirou's continuous rain of steel—but Rose's arms were shaking, her magical reserves draining with every rotation of the vortex.

"Rose, let me," Ryuu called, backing off from close range. Shirou switched Gram for two enlarged Kanshou and Bakuya, covering Ryuu's withdrawal.

An audible sigh of relief from above as the hurricane of flames vanished. In its place, Ryuu gathered the zenith of her magic—multiple orbs of light materialising around them in a dense constellation, each one pulsing with compressed destructive energy.

"Luminous Wind!"

The surroundings detonated. The orbs didn't discriminate—they hammered the Weapon's flanks, obliterated the lizard-like lesser monsters that had reached the stage, and plunged into the pit below in cascading waves of green-white radiance. The explosions echoed upward from the abyss, each detonation deeper than the last, killing everything that was trying to climb.

"Hey, Mr Grunts-a-lot and Ryuu—I can't hold this much longer!"

The hurricane of fire had been systematically burning the monsters climbing from the pit, complemented by Shirou's continuous rain of steel—but Rose's arms were shaking, her magical reserves draining with every rotation of the vortex.

"Rose, let me," Ryuu called, backing off from close range. Shirou switched Gram for two enlarged Kanshou and Bakuya, covering Ryuu's withdrawal.

An audible sigh of relief from above as the hurricane of flames vanished. In its place, Ryuu gathered the zenith of her magic—multiple orbs of light materialising around them in a dense constellation, each one pulsing with compressed destructive energy.

"Luminous Wind!"

The surroundings detonated. The orbs didn't discriminate—they hammered the Weapon's flanks, obliterated the lizard-like lesser monsters that had reached the stage, and plunged into the pit below in cascading waves of green-white radiance. The explosions echoed upward from the abyss, each detonation deeper than the last, killing everything that was trying to climb.

Then the scent hit Shirou.

Not a physical smell. Not something carried by air molecules to olfactory receptors. This was deeper—a primal recognition, hardwired into whatever part of his soul had been forged into a sword. Destruction. Pure, concentrated, building toward release.

The face between the Weapon's forelegs—that embedded gargoyle visage with its horizontal gash of mismatched teeth—was doing something.

The mouth opened wider.

Light gathered in the back of its throat. Bright. Getting brighter. A sphere of compressed energy that cast shadows in the wrong direction, that made the air around the Weapon's chest shimmer with heat distortion.

"Ryuu—it's targeting you!"

The beam erupted.

A lance of destruction—white-violet, screaming, ionising the air in its path—burst from the beast's maw and carved a line across the stage toward the point where Ryuu had been standing a heartbeat ago. Stone sublimated. The beam's path left a trench of glowing slag that stretched thirty metres before dissipating against the stage's edge, sending molten fragments tumbling into the infinite pit below.

Ryuu was already elsewhere. She'd thrown a dagger during Shirou's warning—a flick of the wrist, aimed at the Weapon's right flank—and her brownie had apparated her the instant the beam fired. She materialised beside the embedded dagger already in motion, and brought her flame-enchanted sword down on the Weapon's right side in a series of cuts that left smoking gashes in its chitin.

The system worked. The daggers worked. Three seconds between warning and repositioning—beam fired at empty air, Ryuu already carving into the creature's flank from an angle it hadn't anticipated.

"Great job," Shirou called out. The brownies had been feeding them positional updates throughout—tiny, high-pitched reports on the Weapon's shifting weight and the monsters' movements that arrived just before each attack, giving him the fraction of a second he needed to adjust.

Shirou parried another swing from the torso—Bakuya meeting the Weapon's blade in a shower of sparks—and used the moment of contact to slash horizontally with Kanshou. The black blade opened a gash across the Weapon's chest that ran from shoulder to hip, deep enough to expose the dark structures beneath the armour, wide enough that the wound wept violet-black fluid in sheets.

Ryuu synchronised with him. She pivoted around the beast's flank, closed distance on the embedded face, and levelled her sword at the maw already gathering energy for a second beam.

"*Arvelia!*"

A lance of concentrated flame roared from the tip of her blade—white-hot, arrow-straight, crossing the gap in an instant.

The Weapon stabbed its sword downward. The enormous blade angled to intercept, and the flame-lance struck the flat rather than the maw. Deflected. The fire carved through the horn on the creature's right forearm instead, splitting it lengthwise with a crack that sent fragments spinning away.

The torso, without removing its blade from the stage, performed an underhau—a vertical cut that erupted upward from the ground, tearing a slab of stone the size of a wagon free and sending it, along with a spray of rocky debris, directly at Ryu and Shirou.

Simultaneously, the right foreclaw swiped at Ryu. Her light armour was ripped clean away, and two gashes opened across her stomach—shallow but bleeding freely, the kind of wounds that accumulated into weakness if left untreated.

Rose swooped in. She threw an empty vial at the dragonoid's face—a distraction, nothing more—after having drained a potion that would restore some of her reserves. Then she levelled her wand and cried "*Depulso!*"—the Banishing Charm slamming into the humanoid torso with enough force to shove it backward a half-step. The recoil hit Rose equally, pushing her broom backward through the air. She followed up with a barrage of *Confringos*, then froze the Weapon's open wounds with ice spells before the regeneration could begin—buying them seconds, maybe, before the chitin knit over once more.

Both Shirou and Ryu threw their daggers at opposite flanks of the Weapon.

"Master Shirou, Mistress Ryu—there be more monsters climbing up the stage!" Mipsy's voice, shrill with urgency, cut through the battle noise.

Shirou glanced toward the stage's edge. Movement. Dozens of shapes hauling themselves over the rim—the same lizard-like lesser monsters.

Behind them, darker shapes. Larger. Things that moved with the deliberate economy of predators rather than the frantic scramble of scavengers.

He looked back at the Weapon. The gash across its chest was closing. The split horn was regenerating. The six swords embedded in its back were being pushed outward by growing chitin, squeezed free like splinters rejected by healing flesh. Within seconds, the damage from their combined assault had been reduced to cosmetic scratches.

Three times his height, the Weapon stood. Bleeding from wounds that healed as fast as they opened. Flanked by a horde of reinforcements climbing the stage. Armed with a sword that could shatter his projections, a beam weapon capable of melting stone, and a crystal that radiated magic he couldn't identify.

Shirou Traced his bow. Nocked another Noble Phantasm.

"Mipsy, you and your team—please attack some of the monsters so they fall before they reach the stage." Ryuu's voice was steady. Professional. Measured. The voice of someone who had commanded squads in Orario's dungeon and knew that panic killed faster than any monster. "Don't draw too much attention to yourselves."

"Hound of the Red Plains—Hrunting."

The blood-red sword compressed into an arrow and screamed from his bow. Hrunting sought its target with the mindless devotion of a hunting dog that had caught the scent. The arrow punched into the Weapon's torso, detonated on impact, and sent a spray of fragmented chitin and violet-black blood across the stage.

Ryuu, already reading his intent, backed away from close range and unleashed another barrage of Luminous Wind. Green-white orbs peppered the Weapon's body, each detonation stripping away regenerating chitin before it could fully form.

Rose encased the dragonoid's head in a block of ice, threw Blasting Curses with abandon, then veered off and swept around the arena's perimeter,

dislodging the rising tide of monsters from their handholds on the stage's edge.

"Unknown to death, nor known to life."

Shirou began Tracing in earnest. Kanshou and Bakuya—the married swords, black and white, yin and yang—materialised in his hands. He threw them. They separated, arced outward, and curved back toward the Weapon with the magnetic attraction that defined their legend. The black blade sought the white. The white sought the black. And whatever stood between them got cut.

He threw another pair. And another. And another.

The air around the Weapon filled with spinning blades—a storm of black and white arcs that wove around each other in figure-eight patterns, each pass carving fresh wounds into the creature's hide. Ryuu moved through the storm without flinching. She'd seen the pattern. Understood it. She wove between the lethal trajectories with the precision of someone threading a needle at full sprint, her own blade adding to the damage with every pass.

"Have withstood pain to create many weapons."

The fifth line. Shirou threw his final pair of married swords and shifted focus. His circuits blazed—white-hot channels of prana beneath his skin—and swords began to rain from above. With his Reality Marble almost at the precipice of being actualised, partially overwriting his surroundings, he could feel the arena differently. Not just see it—*feel* it. He knew that Rose was behind him, conjuring boulders to drop on the lesser monsters. He knew that Ryuu was gathering her orbs for a third barrage. He knew where every brownie stood, how many monsters were climbing the pillars, the exact dimensions of the threat within a sphere that encompassed the arena and extended several kilometres into the pit below.

Beyond that sphere—deeper in the abyss—he sensed only darkness. And within that darkness, movement. More than he could count. For all he knew, there were as many monsters down there as there were swords in his inner world.

"Brace!" Shirou called out, and felt the familiar flinch of recognition from both Ryou and Rose as he Traced Gáe Bolg.

The cursed spear materialised in his left hand—lengthened to match his current height, the blood-red shaft warm against his palm. Bloodlust flooded him like a tide—not his own, the spear's, pressing against his will with the insistent need of a predator held on a leash too short.

He leapt into the fray.

The spear's reach exceeded Gram's by half a metre, and Shirou used every centimetre. He thrust at the humanoid torso's chest—a probing attack, testing the Weapon's response time—and the creature batted it aside with the flat of its enormous blade. But the deflection created an opening. Shirou was already moving.

"Double Accel."

Time compressed. His perception accelerated, his reinforced neural pathways processing input at twice their normal rate. The Weapon's counter-swing, which had been fast, became merely quick. He ducked beneath it, pivoted around the creature's left foreleg, and drove Gáe Bolg into the meat of its flank.

The spear bit deep. The Weapon screamed—a sound that shook dust from the chamber's distant ceiling and sent cracks racing through the stage beneath their feet. Shirou twisted the shaft and pulled free, leaving a wound that wept cursed blood. Blood that would not clot, from a wound that would not close. Not while Gáe Bolg existed.

Ryou replaced him at the front. She surged forward, assisted by brownie apparition assistance, locking blades with the Weapon's enormous sword—her wooden blade against that colossal edge, Spirit's Drop blazing, the enchanted wood holding firm. The clash shouldn't have been possible. A wooden sword against a blade the size of a support beam. But Alf's Justitia held.

Shirou circled to the beast's back and performed a series of arcing slashes—long, sweeping cuts that opened parallel gashes across the creature's hindquarters. The wounds from Gáe Bolg stayed open. The wounds from other weapons closed behind his blade almost immediately, chitin knitting shut like zippers pulled by invisible hands. But the cursed spear's marks remained—weeping, raw, permanent reminders that this creature was not invincible.

Rose was already on another run, throwing hexes and spells against the wounds his spear had made, widening them, deepening them, exploiting the one advantage they'd found.

He culminated his assault by vaulting onto the Weapon's back and driving Gáe Bolg downward into its spine.

The creature's scream hit a register that bypassed the ears entirely and struck something primal at the base of the brain. Shirou's vision whited out for a fraction of a second. Two of the Weapon's four wings snapped toward him—not flapping, *striking*—the metallic bone-struts of their leading edges slicing through the air like axe blades.

He threw a dagger. Apparated. Materialised fifteen metres to the left, near the Weapon's forearm, and immediately began harrying the creature's flank with Gáe Bolg while Ryu took the opening to disengage and pivot toward the beast's embedded face.

Ryu sheathed her sword. Lowered her centre of gravity. Her weight settled into her back foot, her hand resting on the wooden grip above the guard, knees bent, spine aligned. Battōjutsu stance. The art of the drawing cut—where the blade began sheathed and ended through an enemy's body, all in a single motion.

"Grackle, hold a bright light just above me and behind my head," Shirou instructed.

"Yes, Master Shirou."

Shirou twirled his spear again, leaving more gashes across the Weapon's flanks—each one a cursed wound that would not close, each one another chain binding the creature to the inevitability of accumulated damage.

A sphere of warm light bloomed into existence behind and above Shirou's skull. To the Weapon, already tracking the most immediate threat, the light created a confusing silhouette—Shirou's body outlined in glare, his exact position obscured by the brilliance. The creature's dragonoid head squinted. Its beast-face between the forelegs turned toward the light source, distracted for the half-second Shirou needed.

He projected Black Keys.

The sacramental blades of the Church—long, thin, cruciform, designed for exorcism and the pinning of darkness. Seven of them, materialising in the air around the Weapon in a ring, each one angled downward. They fell simultaneously, piercing not the Weapon's body but its shadow.

The effect was instantaneous. The Weapon froze. Not from cold. Not from paralysis. From *fixation*—the Black Keys' secondary property, the ability to nail a shadow to the ground and, through that sympathetic connection, nail the body that cast it. The creature strained against the binding. Chitin creaked. The stage beneath it cracked. But for three seconds—maybe four—it could not move.

Ryuu drew.

"Gokou."

The wooden blade left its sheath in a horizontal arc that transcended physics. Not one slash. Five. Five simultaneous cuts that existed in the same space at the same time, each one arriving from a different angle, each one carrying the full force of Ryuu's Level 7 strength and the accumulated technique of a lifetime spent in the service of Justice. The five god-slashes intersected at the Weapon's beast-face. Chitin, bone, tooth, flesh—all parted before the conceptual weight of Ryuu's ultimate technique.

Shirou matched her.

He'd already driven Gáe Bolg into the beast-face's left eye socket during the approach—blinding it, pinning the creature's attention to the agony of a cursed wound in its most sensitive organ—and in the same motion Traced Monohoshizao. The Drying Pole. A nodachi so absurdly long that its original wielder had joked it was a laundry-drying pole.

The madman had invented a technique so absurd that it touched the Second Magic.

Shirou crouched. Lowered his centre of gravity until his trailing knee nearly kissed the stage. Held Monohoshizao in a two-handed grip with the blade angled upward, edge facing the sky, tip pointing the Weapon.

"Hiken."

He cut.

"Tsubame Gaeshi."

Three slashes. Simultaneous. Occupying the same point in space-time, each arriving from a different vector, each one a killing stroke that existed independently and yet inseparably from the other two. The Second Magic—the operation of parallel worlds—flickered at the technique's edge, borrowing just enough impossibility to make three become one.

The married cuts—Ryuu's five and his three—landed within the same heartbeat. Eight wounds that could not have coexisted opened across the Weapon's body, each one deep enough to expose internal structures, each one spraying violet-black blood in arterial gouts.

Shirou followed through by detonating every remaining Kanshou and Bakuya that still spun in the air around the creature. The married swords struck the Weapon's body and exploded—Broken Phantasms, each one a shaped charge of compressed prana that blasted craters in chitin and flesh.

Rose joined the barrage from above—spell after spell raining down, Blasting Curses and Severing Charms and fire and ice, each one targeting the wounds Shirou and Ryuú had opened, each one exploiting the gaps in the creature's armour before regeneration could seal them.

Overlapping detonations rocked the stage. The Weapon staggered—actually *staggered*, for the first time since the fight began, its massive forelegs shifting to maintain balance, its wounded beast-face leaking fluid from five intersecting gashes that steamed in the cool air.

Shirou reclaimed his spear and overlapped every new wound with a slash and thrust from Gáe Bolg—cursing each injury, sealing each gash against the Weapon's healing factor, systematically removing its ability to recover from the latest barrage.

Then he smelled it again.

Destruction. Pure and concentrated. Building.

"Ryuú. Brownies. Stay behind me."

The Weapon's body convulsed. A surge of energy—raw, undifferentiated, violent—erupted from its form in a spherical shockwave. The remaining Black Keys snapped like twigs, their cruciform blades disintegrating, their shadow-binding broken by sheer force. The shockwave expanded outward, a wall of concussive magic that hurled debris and blood and shattered chitin in all directions.

Shirou braced.

The Weapon raised its left arm. The rainbow crystal caught the chamber's blue-flame light and fractured it into a thousand prismatic shards that danced across the stage like manic fireflies. Energy gathered in the gem's core—visible as a brightening glow that shifted through the spectrum, red to orange to yellow to white.

Shirou stabbed Gáe Bolg into the stage floor. Extended his right arm forward, palm facing the Weapon, and braced his wrist with his left hand.

"Rho Aias."

The shield manifested between one heartbeat and the next. A flower of light—seven petals, each one a layer of absolute defence, pink and translucent and shimmering with the conceptual weight of Ajax's legendary shield that had withstood the greatest hero of Troy. Seven barriers. Each one equivalent to a fortress wall.

The crystal discharged.

The initial wave hit him first—a wall of raw force that slammed into the outermost petal and drove him backward three metres, boots carving furrows in the stone, his reinforced body absorbing an impact that would have liquefied an unprotected human.

Then came the fire. A sea of it—not natural flame but magical conflagration, white-violet and all-consuming, pouring from the rainbow gem in a sustained torrent that struck the first petal of Rho Aias and *pushed*. Shirou's boots slid backward. The stage cracked beneath him. The first petal held, but the strain travelled through the conceptual link between shield and wielder, manifesting as a pressure behind his eyes that tasted like blood.

"Mistress Ryuu, behind you!" Mipsy's scream cut through the fire's roar.

Ryuu dodged. A claw—belonging to something that looked like a smaller, cruder version of the Weapon's lower body—swiped through the space her head had occupied a moment before. More of them. Monsters that had climbed the stage during the fight, drawn by the violence, emboldened by the Weapon's display. Ryuu engaged three simultaneously, her wooden blade a blur of green-lit arcs.

The fire kept coming.

Another beam struck Rho Aias from below—the beast-face's maw, angled upward, targeting the shield's base. The first petal cracked. Not shattered—cracked. A web of fracture lines spread across its translucent surface like ice breaking under a boot.

Then it shattered.

The backlash hit Shirou like a fist to the sternum. His ribs creaked. His vision greyed at the edges. Blood vessels in his left eye burst, flooding his sclera with red. He tasted copper.

Six petals remaining.

He assessed.

Behind him: Ryou, fighting a swarm of lesser monsters that grew larger by the second as more climbed the stage. In front: the Weapon, pouring an endless torrent of magical fire from its crystal while its beast-face charged another beam. Above: Rose, circling on her broom, Volkey clinging to the shaft, both of them raining curses and brownie magic on the horde below—but unable to engage the Weapon directly while the fire barrage continued.

Not good.

But from somewhere deep inside him, something flared. Not prana. Not circuits. Something older. Something that didn't belong to Shirou Emiya the magus but to whatever Shirou Muramasa-Emiya was becoming.

"Well, this looks hopeless," he muttered. The sarcasm was reflex. A survival mechanism. If you could still joke, you weren't dead yet.

The second petal shattered.

Rose tried barraging the Weapon from multiple angles. The spells splashed against the creature's hide without visible effect—its attention fixed entirely on breaking through Rho Aias, every resource committed to the sustained assault.

Backlash. His left shoulder dislocated. The joint separated with a grinding *pop* that he felt more than heard, and his left arm dropped to his side, useless.

The third petal cracked.

"Ryu and Rose, take the brownies and leave."

The words came out flat. Not heroic. Not self-sacrificing in the dramatic, trembling-voiced way that stories painted such moments. Just practical. A tactical assessment delivered in the same tone he'd use to suggest a change in formation.

"Shirou, NO!"

"Fuck that!"

Ryu's scream was raw—stripped of her composure, of her professional calm, of the measured discipline that defined her. Rose's rejection was immediate, volcanic, and held no room for argument.

Shirou heard them both through the roar of the fire and the shriek of the shattering shield and the howling of the horde, and it almost made him flinch.

He didn't look back. Couldn't afford to.

The third petal shattered. The fourth cracked immediately.

His body was breaking. Not metaphorically. The backlash from each shattered layer of Rho Aias fed directly into his circuits, and his circuits fed the damage into his flesh. His right forearm—the one extended toward the Weapon—was a ruin of burst blood vessels and fractured bone held together by reinforcement magic and stubbornness. The skin had split along three parallel lines, and what lay beneath was not entirely muscle anymore. Metal glinted in the wounds—fine filaments of steel, woven through the tissue like thread through fabric, his body's autonomous response to catastrophic damage. His origin asserting itself.

"Quadruple Accel."

Time slowed to a crawl. His perception quadrupled. The fire's advance became visible as individual tongues of flame, each one a distinct entity that moved with dreamlike lethargy through a world that had agreed, temporarily, to wait for him.

"Trace on."

Thousands of swords. In the expanded time of Quadruple Accel, his circuits processed the blueprints at a rate that would have burned them out in normal time—but normal time wasn't available, and he'd worry about the cost later. If there was a later. Swords materialised above the stage in a canopy of metal—point-down—and fell. Not just around the perimeter this time. Everywhere. A carpet-bombing of blades that struck the horde from above, pinning, impaling, crushing, turning the stage's surface into a forest of embedded steel.

At the same time, he re-summoned the seven-layered barrier.

"Rho Aias!"

Fresh petals. Uncracked. Each one a renewed conceptual defence that pushed back against the fire with the full weight of its legend. The strain was immediate—his body was already damaged, already bleeding from the previous shield's destruction, and the new one demanded the same structural integrity from a frame that no longer had it to give.

The fourth petal of the new shield held. For now.

The Emiya Crest—the network of magical circuits inherited from the store, refined by decades of use, embedded in his spiritual core rather than his physical body—was overclocking. He could feel it. A heat that started in his chest and radiated outward, cooking him from the inside. His internal temperature was climbing. Sweat evaporated before it reached his skin's surface. The prana flowing through his circuits had taken on a feverish quality, each pulse carrying more energy than his body could safely conduct.

"No. I'm staying." Ryuu's voice, behind him. Closer than before. She'd fought her way through the swarm to reach his position, her blade dripping ichor, her enchanted flames guttering low—almost spent. "We are getting out of this together."

"I second that motion." Rose dove into the swarm of lesser monsters below, dodging one as it leapt for her broom—the creature sailing past and tumbling into the abyss.

Their tone permitted no argument.

"Mipsy, order one of the brownies to call for backup! Grackle, do you have any healing salves that can help Shirou?"

Panic threaded through Ryuu's voice now—the composure cracking like the petals of his shield, fracture lines spreading through the professional calm she'd maintained for the entire fight.

Another petal shattered. The fifth.

Shirou had been too focused on the Weapon to look at himself. The sustained Quadruple Accel, the continuous projection, the repeated summoning and destruction of Rho Aias—each one extracted its price from his body, and the prices had been accumulating.

He felt hot air flowing inside him. Not around him. *Inside*. As though his lungs had been replaced by bellows stoking a forge that occupied his chest cavity.

He looked down.

A large section of his left side was gone.

Not wounded. Not cut. *Gone*. Blown away in the moment between shields—the fraction of a second when Rho Aias had shattered and the replacement hadn't yet formed—the flesh simply absent, replaced by a cavity that exposed everything a human body was supposed to keep hidden. His heart hung from a strip of pericardium, beating—still beating, impossibly

beating—each contraction visible, the muscle red and wet and working despite having no business doing so.

And around the wound, in the space where flesh should have been: blades.

Microscopic swords. Thousands of them. Filling the cavity like crystalline growths, grinding against each other with every heartbeat, against the remaining organs, against the exposed ribs. The sound was not something ears should process—metal on metal on metal, a grinding whisper that came from inside his own body. Each tiny blade damaged whatever it touched. And then the damage healed—not with flesh, but with a mesh of even smaller blades that knitted the gap shut in a lattice of interlocking metal. Which then, slowly, agonisingly, was replaced by actual tissue as his body fought to reassert its biological nature over the sword that was his Origin.

A cycle. Damage. Metal repair. Flesh repair. Damage again. The eternal argument between the man and the concept that defined him, playing out in real time in the open wound of his torso.

Another petal shattered. The sixth. One remained.

Something wet hit his boots. He didn't look down again. He didn't need to. He could feel his intestines pressing against the remaining wall of his abdominal cavity, could feel the moment that wall gave way, could feel the slick heat of his own viscera spilling onto the stone beneath him.

"Mistress Ryuu, I be not knowing what to give Mister Shirou." Grackle's voice was high, thin, stretched taut as wire between panic and duty. "He be healing quickly but the healing is also be harming."

"HOLY SHIT!" Rose's panicked voice came from behind him. She'd landed. She was right there. "And your back is glowing!"

Shirou heard them moving. Grackle and Rose, panicking, knelt beside him—Rose reaching for the loop of intestine that had slipped free of his abdominal wall, instinct to fix overriding any rational assessment of the situation.

"Argh!"

"Bloody fuck! My hands! Why the fuck are there blades in your intestines?!"

Both screamed. Rose jerked her hands back—her palms bleeding from a dozen tiny cuts where she'd gripped tissue that was more steel than flesh.

"Mistress Ryou, Lucksy be splinching—he be leaving left foot, but he be successful with leaving." Mipsy's voice, shrill, from somewhere behind the sword-forest. Splinching. One of the brownies had pushed their apparition too far and left a piece of himself behind.

"Argh." The grunt was Shirou's own. Frustration, not pain. Pain had become background noise—a constant that his brain had simply stopped processing in favour of more actionable data.

Rose conjured cloths to wrap around her bleeding hands.

"Rose, don't touch any part of my body. Your current priority should be helping Ryou. I'll hold the line."

"But—"

"Go!" Shirou roared.

He surveyed the battlefield. *Bleak* didn't cover it. Ryou behind him, holding the swarm but losing ground—her enchantment nearly spent, her movements still precise but slowing by fractions that only a trained eye would catch. Rose, who begrudgingly took to the air again, circling lower as her curses grew more desperate—her reserves draining, her accuracy maintained only through sheer stubbornness. The brownies scattered across the stage, splinching when they pushed their apparition range, burning through healing salves on each other. The Weapon in front, pouring fire from its crystal, its beast-face charging another beam, its wounds healing, its sword ready.

One petal remaining.

"Fuck it." The words were quiet. Almost gentle. The calm that came after you'd already accepted the worst and found it boring. "Brownies, I rescind all orders regarding the limitation of your use of magic. Go all out and support Ryuu and Rose as much as you can. Destroy all our enemies."

"Yes, Master Shirou."

No hesitation. No quaver. The brownie's voice dropped an octave and gained an edge that hadn't been there before—the difference between a servant following instructions and a warrior given permission to fight.

"Everyone, operate behind the sword I'm about to summon, and take note when it's about to break." He pushed his circuits further. The heat inside him intensified—forge-hot now, the kind of temperature that warped metal and cracked stone. "And I'll count down from five. Once it reaches one—Pockey, teleport Ryuu to the guard of the sword. All other brownies, follow. There will be an explosion that will affect the entire stage."

He did not wait for acknowledgement. There was no time for acknowledgement. The last petal of Rho Aias was fracturing, hairline cracks spreading across its surface like a windshield struck by a stone, and behind those cracks was nothing but fire and the beast and the end of everything.

He braced. He grabbed Gáe Bolg with his limp arm, forcing his muscles to hold on to the shaft despite the damage and the dislocated joint. His fingers wouldn't close properly—the tendons had been severed and re-knitted with blade-filaments that didn't quite replicate biological function—so he hooked his wrist around the shaft instead and held on through sheer structural rigidity.

"Trace on."

"Five!"

"Luminous Wind!" Ryuu, behind him. Another barrage of green-white orbs slamming into the horde. The sound of shattering chitin. The sound of victory in miniature, repeated a dozen times, meaningless against the scale of the problem.

"Four!"

The brownies screamed a collective battle cry. *Crack-crack-crack*—apparition displacements, each one followed by an explosion. Brownie magic, unshackled. The sounds were different from wizard spells—sharper, wilder, carrying an overtone of furious joy that had nothing to do with elegance and everything to do with beings who'd been told they could finally stop holding back.

"Three!"

"We be escaping this!" Volkey declared. The brownie's voice rang across the stage with the conviction of a general rallying troops, and Shirou felt something in his chest—not blades, not broken ribs, but something warmer—respond to the sheer bloody-minded defiance of it.

"Two!"

"Mipsy and Tripsey be joining the fight!"

Just as the countdown reached two, Shirou Traced.

The object was enormous. Not sword-enormous. This was a different category of scale entirely—the kind of scale that belonged to myths about mountains being carved by divine blades, about landscapes reshaped by the idle swings of gods.

Ig-Alima. The Mountain-Felling Sword.

The original would have been the height of a skyscraper—one of the divine constructs from the Age of Gods, a weapon that existed at the intersection of armament and geography. What Shirou projected was a diminished version—hollowed, structurally compromised, perhaps thirty storeys tall rather than the true weapon's mountain-cutting dimensions. Even so, it was the largest single object he had ever Traced. The sheer volume of prana required to materialise it burned through his circuits like acid through paper, and somewhere inside him a circuit that had been overclocking for the past ten

minutes finally gave out—a bright, sharp pain behind his left eye that he filed away and ignored.

The sword appeared above them. High. A shadow that blocked out the blue-flame light entirely, casting the stage into sudden darkness. Its blade was a single edge of stone and metal, grey-white, rough-hewn, ancient. Its guard was a ring of interlocking geometric patterns that cast rotating shadows as the weapon descended. Its pommel was a sphere of compressed earth that trailed dust and debris like a comet's tail.

And then it fell.

"One! Teleport!"

A brownie grabbed Ryuu. Another grabbed Rose. The remaining brownies seized each other in a chain—tiny hands gripping tiny wrists with desperate strength. A cascade of *cracks* echoed across the stage as every allied combatant vanished from the impact zone and reappeared at the guard of the descending titan-sword, clustered on the massive geometric ring like sailors clinging to a ship's railing in a storm.

Shirou cancelled Rho Aias. The last petal disintegrated, and the Weapon's fire poured through—but he was already moving. He launched himself backward, the movement more controlled fall than acrobatics—certain organs shifting inside him with a wet, horrible looseness as he twisted in the air. He caught the edge of Ig-Alima's blade with one hand, the other still hooked around Gáe Bolg's shaft, and hauled himself onto the flat of the falling sword's surface with a jolt that rattled what remained of his skeleton.

The stage rushed up to meet them.

He pointed Gáe Bolg at the Weapon.

"Gáe—"

The spear left his hand. His wrist—the one he'd hooked around the shaft because his fingers no longer worked properly—released with a flick that sent pain screaming up his arm and across his shoulder.

"—Bolg."

The cursed weapon struck the Weapon's torso at the same instant Ig-Alima hit the stage.

The kinetic energy of several thousand tonnes of hollowed divine sword falling from height produced an impact that redefined the chamber's geography. The stage—four kilometres in diameter, carved from stone that had endured since the dungeon's creation—buckled. A shockwave expanded from the point of impact in a perfect circle, moving faster than sound, lifting everything in its path—stone, chitin, bodies, blood—and hurling it outward. The pillars supporting the stage groaned. Some cracked. The sound they made was geological—the voice of stressed rock giving way, of architecture designed for eternity discovering its limits.

The monster horde ceased to exist. Not defeated. Not scattered. Erased. The kinetic shockwave and the cursed spear's explosive proliferation combined into a single event that reduced every lesser creature on the stage to scattered fragments of chitin and dissolving matter.

Shirou crouched on Ig-Alima's surface, one hand flat against the stone blade, the other cradling the arm that had thrown Gáe Bolg, and watched the dust settle.

The stage survived. Barely. The upper crust had been pulverised—replaced by a field of dark rubble, chunks of stone that seemed to absorb light rather than reflect it. The pillars still held, though several bore cracks that ran from base to capital. The pit surrounding the stage was unchanged—infinite, patient, hungry.

And the Weapon was still alive.

It lay flat on its belly. Its enormous sword had been driven into the stage like a piton, the blade buried to its guard, and the Weapon had clearly used it as an anchor against the shockwave. Its body was riddled with wounds—gashes from the kinetic blast, punctures from Gáe Bolg's proliferating barbs, burns from Ryuu's flame enchantments. The cursed wounds wept openly, dark fluid pooling beneath the creature in a spreading lake. The non-cursed wounds were already healing, but slowly—the accumulated damage was taxing even the Weapon's regeneration.

It was struggling to stand. Its forelegs slipped on the rubble. Its hindquarters, still bearing the unclosable gash from Gáe Bolg, dragged uselessly. The dragonoid torso strained—pulling itself upward using the embedded sword as leverage—and each movement produced a growl of pain that vibrated through the rubble.

Gáe Bolg snapped back to Shirou's hand. The spear returned with the loyalty of a hound that had finished its task and wanted praise. He closed his fingers around the shaft—the ones that still worked—and felt the weapon purr against his palm, sated but not satisfied. Never satisfied.

The wounds dealt by Gáe Bolg could not heal while the spear existed. That was the weapon's nature—its conceptual truth, hardwired into its legend by centuries of belief. Wounds made by the Hound of Culann's spear were final. No magic, no regeneration, no divine intervention could close them while the barbed death that caused them still walked the world. Dispelling the Noble Phantasm would release that lock—the wounds would become ordinary injuries, subject to ordinary healing. Which was why Shirou kept it materialised. The spear was their only permanent answer to the Weapon's regeneration.

He leapt from Ig-Alima's surface and landed on the rubble-strewn stage. His body screamed objections through every nerve it had left. The wound in his left side had partially closed—the blade-mesh-flesh cycle continuing its gruesome work—but the organs beneath were still exposed, still grinding against microscopic swords, still rebuilding themselves one agonising layer at

a time. His left arm hung at his side, the shoulder still dislocated, the fingers still non-functional. His right forearm was a patchwork of burst skin and metallic filament, held together by reinforcement magic that was running on fumes.

He was, by any medical standard, a corpse that hadn't received the memo.

The Weapon's dragonoid head tracked his descent. Even prone, even wounded, even anchored to the stage by its own sword, the creature's eyes burned with intelligence that had nothing to do with bestial instinct. It was watching him the way a general watched an opponent who'd committed their reserves—with the calculating patience of something that knew the battle was far from over.

"Everyone. It's time to finish this."

A chorus of voices answered him. Ryuu's, sharp and resolute—she'd apparated down from Ig-Alima's guard and landed on the rubble ten metres to his right, her wooden blade drawn, her enchanted flames reignited with what must have been the last of her reserves. The brownies', fierce and high-pitched—a chorus of defiant squeaks that would have been comical from creatures standing less than a metre tall if it hadn't been accompanied by the crackle of magic building in tiny fists. Rose's, from above, accompanied by the whistle of a broom in a power dive—she'd climbed to ceiling height and was now descending at an angle that suggested she intended to use velocity as a weapon in its own right.

Shirou sprinted toward the Weapon. The creature saw him coming. Its beast-face—embedded between the forelegs, still bearing the five intersecting gashes from Ryuu's Gokou—opened its maw. Light gathered in the back of its throat again. The beam weapon, recharging. The rainbow crystal in its left hand pulsed, feeding energy to the regeneration and the beam simultaneously.

"Oh no you don't. Enkidu!"

Golden chains erupted from the air. Not projected—Traced, which meant they were copies, diminished by the gap between original and reproduction, but still carrying the conceptual weight of the weapon that had bound gods and tamed divine beasts. The Chain of Heaven—forged to restrain the Bull of Heaven, wielded by the King of Heroes as his answer to divinity itself. The chains were tipped with spearheads that bit into the Weapon's flesh and held. They wrapped the creature's body in a golden web—spiralling around the maw of the beast-face, forcing its jaws shut, sealing the beam weapon behind a cage of divine restraint. More chains pinned its arms to its sides, lashing the humanoid torso's limbs against the beast-body's flanks.

The Weapon thrashed. The chains held. Barely—Shirou could feel the strain through the conceptual link, could feel the chains stretching, the Noble Phantasm's reproduction struggling to contain something that was neither god nor beast but something entirely foreign to the legend's context. Enkidu was designed to bind the divine. This creature possessed no divinity. The chains held not because the Weapon qualified as their intended target, but because the sheer mass of prana Shirou had poured into the Trace compensated for the conceptual mismatch.

Brute force. Inelegant. Effective. For now.

But they held. For now.

Ryuu appeared at the Weapon's flank. A brownie had apparated her—the crack of displacement followed immediately by the sound of her wooden blade striking chitin. She wove around the creature's body, her flame-enchanted sword leaving smoking trails across every surface it touched, singeing and slicing with the mechanical efficiency of someone who had been doing this for a decade and a half.

Rose swept in from above. She'd conjured something—a massive boulder, twice the size of a carriage, levitated above her broom and guided with her wand—and released it directly onto the Weapon's already-damaged dorsal ridge. The impact cracked chitin and drove the creature's belly against the

rubble. Before it could recover, she followed up with a sustained *Incendio* directed into the cracks, superheating the interior.

Shirou stopped before the creature. Extended his right hand—the functional one—toward the darkened ceiling. And Traced.

The weapon that materialised was not elegant. It was not beautiful. It was not a work of art or a masterpiece of metallurgy. It was a slab of grey stone, roughly shaped into the outline of a single-edged axe-sword—more cleaver than blade, more monument than weapon. Its surface was unfinished, pocked, scarred by what might have been the impacts of lesser weapons that had shattered against it. Its weight was obscene.

The axe-sword of Berserker Heracles. The weapon of a demigod whose physical parameters exceeded what human mythology could accurately record. A weapon that, in its original wielder's hands, had moved like a willow switch despite weighing more than a horse.

Shirou's reinforced muscles accepted the load. His enhanced body—transformed by the transfer, strengthened by purchased aptitudes and awakened circuits—gripped the stone hilt and lifted the weapon overhead with both hands. His dislocated shoulder ground back into its socket with a sound like wet gravel shifting, held in place by blade-filaments that had woven through the joint and refused to let it separate again. Not healed. *Pinned*. The Sword Incarnation's answer to orthopaedic medicine.

"Get behind me."

Ryuu performed one final slash—a diagonal cut that severed the Weapon's tail and one of its hind legs in a single stroke, cauterised by the residual flame enchantment. Mipsy and Tripsey appeared in twin cracks of apparition and cast fire—not wizard fire, not enchanted flame, but brownie fire. Wild. Furious. Fire that came from a place of righteous indignation and burnt hotter for it. The flames cauterised the severed stumps before the regeneration could engage. Volkey, Grackle, and the rest screamed—a raw, wordless battle cry that would have been comical from creatures standing less than a metre tall if it hadn't

been accompanied by lightning that arced from the brownies' fingers in blue-white streams, earthing itself in the Weapon's bound body with the enthusiasm of beings who had been told they could stop being polite.

"Trigger off."

The four of them vanished—brownie apparition pulling Ryu and the others to safety behind Ig-Alima's embedded bulk.

Shirou breathed in. The air tasted of blood and iron and something that might have been ozone.

"Set."

"Nine Lives Blade Works."

Upper arm. The stone blade bisected the humanoid torso's left shoulder, severing the arm that held the rainbow crystal. The limb fell—still clutching the gem, still glowing—and hit the rubble with a sound like a chandelier striking marble.

Collarbone. The return stroke caved in the right side of the torso's chest, pulverising armour and the structure beneath it in a spray of violet-black fluid and splintered chitin.

Throat. A horizontal cut that opened the dragonoid neck from ear to ear—if the creature had ears—spraying violet-black blood in a fan that painted the rubble in glistening arcs.

Temple. The pommel, reversed mid-swing with a wrist rotation that belonged to a demigod's muscle memory rather than Shirou's own, crushed the left side of the dragonoid skull. Horn fragments scattered like shrapnel, embedding themselves in the stage around them.

Diaphragm. A downward chop that split the torso from sternum to navel, exposing the cavity where human anatomy would have housed lungs and liver—and where this creature housed something pulsing and alien that Shirou's Structural Analysis couldn't classify even mid-swing.

Ribcage. A lateral sweep that shattered every visible rib analogue on the right side, folding the torso's armour inward like crumpled parchment, the chitin cracking with a sound like a ship's hull breaking on rocks.

The beast's maw. The blade descended on the sealed jaws of the embedded face, breaking through Enkidu's chains and the chitin and the teeth and the bone beneath in a single catastrophic stroke that split the face vertically. The two halves fell apart like a fruit cleaved by a butcher's knife—symmetrical, clean, final.

The forearm's large muscle. A reverse cut that hamstringed the creature's remaining foreleg, severing the primary muscle group in a spray of dark fluid and dropping the Weapon's front end to the rubble with a ground-shaking impact.

And finally: a lancing thrust. Straight through the chest of the humanoid torso—through the split sternum, through whatever remained of the internal structures, through the back—the stone blade emerging from the other side glistening with violet-black blood and fragments of chitin that slid from the edge like water from oiled steel.

Eight strikes and a thrust. One breath. All practically simultaneous—the speed of a technique that carried the memory of killing a hydra whose heads regenerated faster than they could be severed. The technique of the greatest hero of Greece, borrowed by a man who was no longer entirely human, executed in a body that was held together by swords and spite and the stubborn refusal to fall down.

Silence.

The brownies cheered behind him. Shrill, triumphant voices raised in celebration—their joy infectious enough that even the rubble-strewn, blood-soaked, half-destroyed battlefield seemed briefly less bleak. Ryuu's voice joined them—not cheering, but breathing hard, the sound of relief so profound it was almost a sob. Rose laughed somewhere above—the sharp,

disbelieving bark of someone who'd been certain they were about to die and had just discovered they weren't.

Shirou exhaled. His arms trembled. The stone axe-sword was buried in the Weapon's chest up to its crossguard, and the creature's body hung limp around it—the humanoid torso slumped forward, the beast-body collapsed, the severed limbs twitching in the rubble. The golden chains of Enkidu dissolved, their purpose served, their copied existence expiring into motes of light that drifted upward and faded.

He began to withdraw the blade.

The stone edge dragged through the Weapon's chest, widening the wound, splitting the cavity further as it came free. Internal structures parted before it. And there, exposed in the ruin of the creature's core—where the beast-body's face met the humanoid torso's base, in a space that should have housed whatever passed for a heart—lay a magicite.

Large. Larger than any core Shirou had encountered in the dungeon's upper floors. The size of his torso. Multifaceted, crystalline, refracting the chamber's blue-flame light into a kaleidoscope of colour that painted the surrounding rubble in shifting hues.

Bright.

Brightly glowing.

Not dimming. Not fading. Not transitioning to the duller colour that signified a dead monster's depleted core.

The magicite was getting brighter.

Light pulsed from its facets—not steadily, not rhythmically, but in accelerating bursts that grew more intense with each repetition. The crystal hummed. The rubble around it vibrated. The air above it shimmered with heat that wasn't heat.

'This was a mistake.'

The thought arrived with the clarity of absolute certainty. Not doubt. Not fear. Just the recognition—cold, mechanical, the product of a mind that had survived enough catastrophes to recognise the precursors of the next one—that he had broken the container without killing the contents.

"Apparate toward the guard of the large sword!"

He screamed the order. Didn't wait for confirmation. Didn't check if they'd heard. The glowing core was pulsing faster now, each flash brighter than the last, each hum deeper, each vibration stronger. The rubble around the Weapon's body was beginning to levitate—small stones first, then larger chunks, drawn upward by whatever force the magicite was unleashing.

He should have finished his chant. Should have spoken the remaining lines of his aria, pushed his Reality Marble toward deployment, and unmade this thing with the endless blades of his inner world.

Instead, he'd wasted the breath on a warning.

"So as I pray—"

The Weapon stiffened.

Every muscle in the creature's ruined body locked rigid. The severed limbs stopped twitching. The slumped torso snapped upright—pulled by invisible strings, yanked vertical with the jerking, puppeted motion of something that was no longer operating under its own power. The split beast-face—carved in half by the seventh strike of Nine Lives—opened both halves of its maw simultaneously and howled.

The sound was language.

Not any language Shirou recognised. Not Galactic Basic. Not Japanese. Not English or Latin or Sumerian or any of the tongues his Traced weapons carried in their memories. The sound was shaped—carried intention, grammar, meaning—but it was meant for something other than human comprehension. Something vast. Something that existed below them, in the

darkness of the pit, in the roots of the dungeon, in whatever waited at the bottom of a spire that had been sick since before they arrived.

The magicite detonated.

Not outward. *Inward*. The light collapsed into a sphere of absolute density—a point of white so intense it burned afterimages into Shirou's retinas through his closed eyelids—and then expanded in a wave of force that was not physical, not magical, but *conceptual*. It rewrote the air. It rewrote the stone. It rewrote the Weapon's body, pouring into the ruined flesh like molten metal into a mould, filling every wound, every cavity, every gap that Nine Lives and Gáe Bolg and Gokou and every other weapon had carved.



Pain.

Not from the wounds he'd already sustained. Not from the broken bones or the exposed organs or the microscopic swords grinding through his flesh. This was new. This was different. This came from somewhere deeper than his body—from the circuits themselves, from the Reality Marble that sat at the core of his being, from the endless field of blades that was his inner world.

The magicite was doing something to him. The light pouring from its facets was not just light—it carried information, intent, a will that pressed against his consciousness like fingers probing the seams of a locked door. The dungeon's will. Directed. Focused. Seeking. It had found the wound in his side—the

exposed cavity where blades and flesh fought their eternal war—and it was pouring itself in through the gap like water through a cracked hull.

"Unlimited—"

The word left his mouth and the pain redoubled. Tripled. His vision went red. Not the grey of oxygen deprivation or the white of concussive flash. Red. The colour of his inner world's sky during a forge-cycle, the colour of the gears that turned above Unlimited Blade Works, the colour of iron heated past its tolerance.

He screamed.

The sound ripped from his throat without permission—raw, animal, carrying none of the restraint that defined Shirou Emiya. He screamed because his body was being invaded. The magicite's energy was pouring into him through the wound in his side—through the exposed cavity where blades and flesh fought their eternal war—and it was rewriting.

Not healing. Not damaging. *Changing.*

His circuits flared. The Emiya Crest overclocked beyond any parameter he'd ever pushed it to—beyond the limits of human magical architecture, beyond the tolerances the Crest had been designed to withstand, into a territory that belonged to something other than a magus. The heat inside him passed forge-temperature and entered territory that had no name because nothing biological survived long enough to report it.

The swords inside him sang. Not metaphorically. The microscopic blades that filled his wound, that knitted through his organs, that replaced his flesh when his flesh gave out—they resonated. Vibrated. Harmonised with something in the magicite's energy, as though recognising a frequency they'd been waiting to hear.

He screamed again. And again. And again.

Red.

Red everywhere.

The pain crescendoed—climbed beyond what his nervous system could process, beyond what Quadruple Accel could dilate, beyond what any amount of combat experience could contextualise as *endurable*—

And then—

Darkness.

Silence.

And from somewhere impossibly far away and impossibly close—from the sheath that rested in his soul, from the bridge between worlds, from the field where warriors who'd earned their rest awaited the call to rise again—

A voice.

Warm. Ancient. Sad in the way that only eternal things could be sad—not from loss, but from the weight of having loved too much for too long.

"Wake up... Færing."

==&<o>&=-

End

**Follow me on my other socials
and stack additional voting
points on the story of your
choosing.**

[X Twitter X](#)

