

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

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

Story Starts

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Book 1 - The Empty Twin

Ch 3.4 Into the Deep

A sustained roar of flame, the ring of metal striking metal, and the scrape of tools against chitin filled the nineteenth floor's cathedral hall. Behind Ryuu, the forward team—a mixed company of skrattes, brownies, and centaurs—worked through the carpet of dead aranea with practised efficiency, their curved harvesting knives peeling away carapace sections whilst smaller brownies darted between the massive legs to extract magicite cores. The work had a butcher's tempo to it now: cut, crack, extract, sort. Cut, crack, extract, sort.

Ryuu sat at one of the benches bracketing collapsible steel tables the brownies had erected at the far end of the hall, her back to the stairwell that led deeper. A defensible position. The aranea, if any remained on this floor, would funnel through the corridors ahead of them, and the forward team's sentries had clear sightlines down every approach.

She crossed her arms and let her breathing settle.

An entire floor's worth of aranea. Every single one converging on their position as though moths drawn to fire. They'd handled it—cleanly, even—but the scale of it gnawed at her. Their forward group wasn't meant to clear whole floors. They scouted, they skirmished, they marked paths for the strip-mining teams that followed. What happened on the nineteenth was something else entirely.

Her gaze drifted to Rose, who stood near the hall's midpoint speaking with Skratte Zaartag. The red-haired witch gestured with one hand whilst the other rested on the handle of her broom, propped against her hip like a walking staff. Even at rest, Rose carried herself with the loose-limbed confidence of someone accustomed to being the centre of attention—though Ryuu suspected Rose would deny that assessment with a self-deprecating joke and a wave of her hand.

Still. Rose had impressed her.

Not just the flying, though that alone would have been noteworthy. Rose rode her broom the way Alise had wielded her blade—with the fluid, instinctive grace of someone who'd internalised the mechanics so deeply they no longer required conscious thought. She banked through corridors at speed, adjusted altitude mid-spell, and maintained spatial awareness of both her allies and the swarm simultaneously.

During the worst of the aranea convergence, when silk threads had turned entire passageways into killing funnels, Rose had woven between them on that slender shaft of enchanted wood—raining fire, severing, and blasting curses downward without once clipping a wall or fouling her trajectory.

The storm of fire had been the most spectacular moment. Rose had conjured it when the swarm threatened to overwhelm Shirou's flank, whilst Ryuu was still chanting her aria—a roaring vortex that turned the whole chamber into a furnace, killing aranea caught within by the dozen. The heat had been so intense that Ryuu felt it even from her position, a dry furnace blast that tightened the skin across her cheeks.

But what stuck with Ryuu more than the spectacle was what came before and after it. The precise cutting curses that severed silk anchor lines. The shielding charms that deflected acid spit. The blasting hexes aimed not at the aranea themselves but at the ceiling supports above them, collapsing stone onto clusters before they could regroup. Tactical. Adaptive. Each spell chosen not for maximum destruction but for maximum effect relative to the situation.

Rose had mentioned, during one of their brief rest stops on the seventeenth floor, that she hadn't particularly specialised in combat magic. The spells she knew had been enough to win a war.

"A small civil war," she'd added, as though that qualifier somehow diminished the statement. "Not exactly a large-scale war. More like... a particularly nasty small community dispute that got out of hand. With terrorism."

A civil war fought by children, from what Ryu had pieced together. Rose had been fifteen when it began in earnest, seventeen when it ended. The casual way she referenced it reminded Ryu uncomfortably of the dark ages of Orario—the time when Evilus had reigned, spreading despair and destruction not just through Orario but across the whole of Gekai, after the fall of the Zeus and Hera Familias.

Ryu knew that tone. She'd used it herself, once. The voice that made horror sound mundane because the alternative was admitting it had been extraordinary, and extraordinary things left marks that mundane things didn't.

But in fairness to Rose, her lack of specialisation hadn't mattered. She fought with the adaptability of someone who'd survived by reading the battlefield rather than memorising a fixed repertoire. When the aranea shifted tactics—and they did, coordinating their silk placement and acid volleys with genuine intelligence—Rose adjusted. She didn't need a dozen combat spells. She needed three or four, applied with precision and timing, and the spatial awareness to know where the gaps in their formation were before they became vulnerabilities.

Rose was very good at covering blind spots. Shirou's, Ryu's, even the forward team's harvesters when they engaged smaller pockets. She positioned herself above and between them, a mobile artillery platform that could pivot from support to offence in the space of a breath.

Ryu uncrossed her arms and tapped one finger against the table's steel surface.

The dungeon in Orario didn't produce swarms like this. Monsters spawned from the walls, yes, and they could mass in numbers on the deeper floors—the Great Falls, the Water Capital, the Dragon's Urn—but they fought as individuals or in loose packs. Even the Violas, which could flood a corridor with their sheer bulk, attacked as separate organisms competing for prey rather than as a coordinated force. The closest comparison would be the killer ants from the upper floors, but even they exhibited nothing beyond simple overwhelm-with-numbers aggression. And those swarms only occurred when malicious adventurers deliberately triggered them to target other groups.

The aranea had moved with purpose. They'd cut escape routes, funnelled the group into kill zones, and sacrificed smaller specimens to test defences before committing their larger variants. When the reanimator raised the dead, the revived aranea had changed their approach entirely—abandoning caution in favour of overwhelming pressure from every direction simultaneously.

That wasn't instinct. That was strategy. And strategy implied something directing it—something beyond the reanimator itself, which had struck Ryuu as more conduit than commander.

She wasn't sure her old familia could have extracted themselves this cleanly.

Not that Astraea Familia at full strength couldn't have survived it—Alise, Kaguya, Lyra, and the others had faced horrors in the dungeon's depths that dwarfed a spider swarm. Bell's party too, for that matter. But the specific *shape* of this fight—the three-dimensional chaos of it, the reanimation, the coordinated intelligence—would have tested even their coordination. They hadn't trained for enemies that resurrected. They hadn't planned for corridors that became webs. And they certainly hadn't possessed a mage who could fly above the entire engagement and reshape the battlefield with fire.

"Skratte Zaartag," Rose's voice cut through the ambient noise, "how's the harvest looking?"

The skratte captain straightened from his inspection of a particularly large aranea carcass. He was broad and tall for his kind, but with their increased

height, he still had to crane his neck to meet Rose's gaze. His leather armour bore fresh acid scoring across the left pauldron—Shirou had offered to repair it after he finished cooking.

"Ahead of schedule, Ms. Potter." He wiped his hands on a rag hanging from his belt. "The carapace yield is excellent—dense and uniform. Magicite cores are intact on eighty-three per cent of the specimens."

Rose winced. "Right. We did rather make a mess of things."

"Indeed. But the meat harvest from the undamaged ones is substantial. My team estimates another forty minutes to finish processing this hall."

"And the corridors?"

"Already cleared. We stripped the first three passages on our way in. The silk alone is worth the trip—Brownie Tinka says it takes enchantment better than any fabric she's worked with."

Rose nodded and shifted her weight. "Good. Once food's served, everyone should rotate in shifts. Just make sure each body has a tarpaulin to separate them from the dungeon."

"Of course."

"Mipsy."

A sharp crack of displaced air, and the brownie appeared at Rose's elbow. Mipsy wore a miniature leather cuirass over her tea-towel uniform—a compromise Rose had insisted upon after the second day of entering the dungeon—and her enormous eyes tracked Rose with the focused intensity of a field officer awaiting orders.

"Mipsy is here, Mistress Rose."

"Drop the mistress, Mipsy. We've been over this."

"Mipsy is here, Ms Rose."

Rose sighed through her nose but let it go. "What's the status on the brownies?"

"Everyone be doing good. The injured be assisting with light work."

Rose sighed. She knew it was pointless arguing against the stubbornness of creatures who considered enforced rest a personal insult. "Fine—but once we reach the floor after the boss chamber, they are ordered to take it easy. If they're going to be stubborn about it, then for every hour they work while injured, they'll rest twice as much once they're healed."

"But Mistress—"

"And once they've healed enough to be functional, they can do light work. Nothing more."

The brownie pouted but acquiesced.

One of the centaur leaders—a tall, chestnut-coated mare named Windmere whose front legs bore fresh bandaging—trotted over from where she'd been conferring with her scouts. She dipped her head to Rose.

"My outriders, accompanied by a brownie, report the strip-mining group has reached the twelfth floor—and like us, is on a break as they gather the monsters. They're making good time, but the volume of material once they advance will slow them down significantly."

Rose rubbed the bridge of her nose. "Right. The gap was expected, and to be fair, we didn't expect this type of resistance. We were supposed to plot a straight course directly to the boss's chamber."

She looked around, then backtracked. "But then again, maybe our team is a bit overstaffed—this floor aside. Zaartag, thoughts?"

The skratte folded his thick arms across his chest, one hand coming up to rub his chin. His gaze swept the hall—the work crews, the stacked crates of harvested materials, the defensive perimeter his combat skrattes maintained at each corridor entrance.

"Split the harvesters," he said. "Half would slowly backtrack through the floors above. They clear each floor as they ascend, work methodically, and keep it safe. If you three finish the boss quickly, they'll still be within reach and able to help harvest whatever the boss drops, then push through to set camp on the next floor."

He held up a thick finger. "The other half moves fast. No harvesting, just march. They link up with the strip-mining group, bolstering their numbers. More hands mean faster processing on those heavy floors. Either we meet the strip-miners halfway, or, if the boss fight drags on, they've already doubled the processing rate and can push forward to us."

Windmere stamped one hoof in agreement. "My scouts can escort the fast group. They know the cleared route."

"And we're not leaving anyone without combat support either way," Zaartag added. "I'll keep four of my best with the slow-clearing group. The fast group has the centaur escort plus whatever brownies want to volunteer for guard duty."

Rose looked between them. "Mipsy, can you stay with us for the boss floor? If things go sideways, I want someone who can apparate a message back instantly."

"Mipsy will be staying. Mipsy is not leaving Ms Rose's side." The brownie's enormous ears flattened with determination.

"Right." Rose paused, then turned to survey the hall. "One more thing. I want three brownie volunteers assigned to each of us—me, Ryuu, and Shirou. Dedicated support."

Mipsy snapped her fingers, and three clusters of brownies materialised from the work crews, already assembling themselves into tidy rows of six. Rose blinked.

"That was... remarkably fast."

"Brownies are being prepared, Ms Rose. Brownies is always being prepared."

Zaartag snorted. "I'll coordinate the split whilst you eat. Give me twenty minutes after the meal to brief both groups."

"Windmere?"

"My scouts will be ready."

Rose clapped her hands together once. "Good. Continue on till food is served. Anything else to report?"

Whilst Rose, Zaartag, Mipsy, and Windmere continued to refine the logistics—discussing communication protocols and fallback points—Ryuu turned her attention to the otherside of the hall.

Shirou stood behind a gleaming stainless steel station—far cleaner than Mama Mia's kitchen setup at the Hostess of Fertility, though to be fair, materials like stainless steel weren't readily available in Orario or Gekai as a whole. Mama Mia would have approved of the setup, if not the location. A high-output magical burner—one of those enchanted contraptions Rose and Hermione had jury-rigged from modified heating charms and skratte metalwork—roared blue-white beneath an enormous wok that Shirou tossed with one hand whilst the other reached for ingredients without looking.

The brownies had arranged themselves around him in a choreographed supply chain. One sliced vegetables on a cutting board nearly as large as she was, her knife a blur. Another arranged prepared portions on small plates—diced root vegetables here, julienned greens there, strips of aranea leg meat already blanched and waiting. A third ground spices in a stone mortar with mechanical precision. As each component was ready, the nearest brownie slid it forward along the steel surface to within Shirou's reach.

He didn't break rhythm. His wrist flicked and the wok's contents arced upward in a cascade of steam and oil, the seared aranea meat catching the firelight as it tumbled. Before it landed, he'd already reached left for a palmful of sliced

aromatics, tossed them in, and the sizzle that followed sent a fragrance rolling across the hall that made Ryuu's stomach clench despite herself.

Plate after plate materialised at the end of the station. Rice bowls with glistening strips of meat layered over steamed grain. Smaller dishes of sautéed vegetables seasoned with something sharp and bright. A clear broth that one of the brownies ladled from a pot Ryuu hadn't even noticed Shirou set up. Each dish was arranged with the same deliberate precision—nothing wasted, nothing misplaced, every element serving a purpose.

There had been a brief debate over whether to conserve the ingredients in storage, but Shirou had put his foot down. Sacrificing quality and limiting everyone's calorie intake would only hamper their goals and lower morale.

Rin had given them all a look that said *you will not be winning this argument*. The brownies had simply looked up at Shirou in awe. Rose, seeing the combined stubbornness of Shirou and an army of devoted house-spirits arrayed against her, had given the same look.

Significant doubts, if she was honest. About the composition of their forward group the first time it was proposed. About whether three people, no matter how individually capable, could substitute for tried and tested dungeon-faring adventurers.

In Orario, power came from the gods. A Falna—a blessing inscribed upon the back by a deity's own blood—converted the raw accumulation of excelia into measurable, tangible strength. Levels, stats, skills, magic. The system was absolute. A Level 1 adventurer could train for a lifetime and never match a Level 3 in raw physical parameters. The gap between levels wasn't linear; it was exponential. And the skills granted by a Falna—development abilities, innate magic, unique combat techniques—were gifts that no amount of mortal effort could replicate.

Ryuu herself had reached Level 7 shortly before Orario fell. Lefiya had matched her. Haruhime, at Level 5, possessed support magic that could

temporarily elevate an adventurer by an entire level—a strategic advantage so potent that an entire criminal syndicate had once enslaved her for it.

Even Syr—whom Ryu had never seen fight, not truly, not as Freyja—carried the residual instincts of a goddess of war. Ryu had witnessed Takemikazuchi spar with his own familia members during festival exhibitions, his divine arcanum sealed, fighting with nothing but the martial skill accumulated across eternity. He'd matched a Level 2 adventurer blow for blow using only technique. Syr's mortal body lacked the physical parameters of a high-level adventurer, but from what Ryu had observed over the past three days, the skill that moved that body was something else entirely.

That had been Ryu's preferred team. Lefiya for ranged magical support and her Concurrent Chanting. Haruhime for her Level Boost and healing magic. Syr as an unknown quantity—but one whose potential ceiling was impossible to estimate.

Instead, she'd been paired with Rose, whose magic was versatile but whose combat experience amounted to a civil war fought primarily against other humans, and Shirou, whose abilities she hadn't understood at all for the first two days.

Then the aranea swarmed on the nineteenth floor, and her doubts had burned away like morning frost under a forge's heat.

Shirou.

Ryu let her gaze linger on him as he plated another dish, his movements economical and sure. The same hands that arranged garnish with a chef's care had, less than an hour ago, held weapons that made her skin crawl.

His magecraft—he wasn't insistent on the word, but it was second nature to him, and both Rin and Illya had explained the distinction between magic and magecraft from their tradition's perspective—operated on principles Ryu was still working to understand.

He'd explained it during their second day, whilst they rested between floors. They'd still been delving even during the preparation days leading up to today's push.

Tracing. The ability to analyse an object's composition, history, and construction, then recreate it from magical energy—though from how he'd described it, the underlying mechanics were far more complex than that summary suggested.

Swords, shields, armour, bows, arrows—anything he'd seen, touched, or understood, he could forge from nothing but mana and will. The married swords he favoured, Kanshou and Bakuya, appeared in his hands as easily as breathing. He produced them, fought with them, dismissed them when they broke, and produced them again in the same motion. An endless arsenal cycling through his grip faster than Ryu could track.

But the implications ran deeper than a conjurer's trick. Each weapon he recreated carried the skill of its original wielder. When he swung a blade, his body moved with techniques that weren't his—stances and footwork from warriors who'd lived and died centuries before him, imprinted into the steel like memory pressed into wax. He didn't just copy weapons. He copied their martial legacy.

And he'd mentioned—almost as an afterthought—that most of these abilities, the alteration, the Tracing, and even the ease with which he performed structural analysis on certain objects, were all extensions of a single foundational spell.

Ryu had fought beside adventurers who possessed three, four, five different magical abilities and accomplished less.

He'd tried to downplay it, of course. His alignment didn't accommodate much diversity, he'd said. So he'd simply trained and trained the one thing he was good at.

'The one thing.' Ryu almost smiled at that.

When the aranea converged, Shirou had become something else entirely—she'd caught a glimpse of it during the swarm of lambs on the twelfth floor, but the nineteenth had stripped away any remaining ambiguity. Not a swordsman. Not a mage. Something between.

Blades materialised around him in arcs and volleys—fired like arrows, swung in pairs, planted in the ground as barriers. She herself was a magic swordsman, an adventurer who'd mastered concurrent chanting and the art of the blade—though she still wanted to master concurrent chanting whilst invoking Astraea Record. Like her, Shirou moved through the swarm the way she moved through wind—but where her style was fluidity, his was a relentless barrage of pragmatic violence. Perfectly ordered and executed actions dealing with threats in varying priority, yet simultaneously chaotic.

Ordered chaos.

He'd create space by loosing a rain of blades at the far side of the enemy line. As he closed in, he'd release more of his twin blades—Kanshou and Bakuya pairs that pendulumed through the corridor, slicing anything in their path. Then, at close range, he'd disable rather than kill, letting a different Traced blade finish the aranea as he moved on to his next target.

He cycled between these combinations endlessly—mixing, matching, adapting. One man holding vanguard, midrange, and long-range positions simultaneously.

At first, Ryu had been wary of the myriad of blades circling, raining, and penduluming around her. But whenever something veered too close, it was either diverted by a thrown Kanshou or Bakuya, or it dispersed into motes of light before it could touch her. He was tracking every blade. Even the ones he'd seemingly forgotten about.

She estimated more than half the kills were his. She was certain of that. Shirou's pace had been relentless. Not frantic. Not desperate. Relentless. The pace of someone who understood exactly how much force was required and applied precisely that amount, over and over, without flagging.

And then, when the reanimator had brought the dead crawling back and the swarm had doubled in an instant—

Ryuu suppressed the shiver that threatened to crawl up her spine, but her body remembered before her discipline could intervene. A slight tightening of her jaw. A twitch in her fingers. The involuntary response of a veteran recognising a predator's tool.

Gáe Bolg.

A spear of dark crimson, barbed and thorned along its entire length, and the moment it existed in physical space, the air in the corridor had changed. Not temperature. Not pressure. Something less quantifiable and far more primal. A weight had settled over the hall like the promise of a storm, and every living thing within range—Ryuu included—had felt the sudden, absolute certainty that something in their immediate vicinity wanted them dead.

Not Shirou. The spear.

The weapon carried intent. Bloodlust was encoded into its very concept, woven through every barb and thorn like poison through a vein. Ryuu had felt killing intent before—from monsters, from the Juggernaut, from Jura Halmer's distorted eyes when he'd cornered her in the sewers beneath Orario. This was different. Those had been the killing intent of beings that *chose* violence. Gáe Bolg didn't choose. It simply *was*. Violence given form and purpose, as natural and inevitable as gravity.

And when Shirou had hurled it, the spear hadn't simply struck its target. It had proliferated—multiplied—bombarded everything in front of him. The sound—wet, sharp, the cracking of chitin and the tearing of flesh in rapid staccato—had continued for three full seconds after the throw. When it stopped, the corridor and everything within it had been laid to waste. Nothing moved again.

The aranea impaled by those spears didn't reanimate. Even when the multiplied projectiles vanished. Even when the original spear leapt back to Shirou's hand, greedy for the resumption of violence. Whatever curse the

weapon carried, it didn't just kill. It forbade revival—as though the concept of death had been enforced so absolutely that the reanimator's purple magic simply couldn't overwrite it.

Then there was Hrunting.

The sword-turned-arrow. Less viscerally horrifying than the spear, perhaps, but Ryuu's instincts had screamed at that one too. When Shirou had nocked it—a full-sized blade compressed and reshaped into a projectile, which was absurd in itself—the weapon had hummed with a low, hungry resonance. Not the spear's cold promise of inevitable death. Something warmer. More eager. A hound catching a scent. Hrunting wanted to find its target. The concept embedded in the blade was pursuit—once loosed, it would not stop, could not be dodged, would track and correct and chase until steel met flesh.

When it struck the reanimator, the creature simply ceased to exist. Not exploded. Not shattered. *Ceased*. The arrow had punched through the spider-humanoid's thorax and kept going, carrying enough force and conceptual weight to unmake everything in its path for another twenty metres of corridor behind the target.

Two weapons. The entire nineteenth floor pacified.

Ryuu unclenched her jaw and breathed out slowly through her nose.

She didn't want those weapons pointed at her. That was the plain truth of it—unadorned, unqualified. She was Level 7. One of the pinnacles of adventurers in Orario's history, surpassed only by the long-dead legends of the Zeus and Hera Familias, and in recent years by Bell, Ais, and Ottar before the end.

She'd faced the Juggernaut and survived. She'd cut her way through the Evils of Orario and walked out the other side carrying the names of her dead familia like armour. And the bloodlust radiating from Gáe Bolg had made her want to step back.

Not fear, exactly. Recognition. The recognition of a professional who understood, with crystalline clarity, where she stood relative to certain weapons. Alise had once told her that the bravest thing an adventurer could do was acknowledge their limits honestly, because honesty kept you alive long enough to surpass them.

Ryuu was honest. Those weapons exceeded anything she could defend against.

And Shirou wielded them with the resigned familiarity of a craftsman selecting the appropriate tool for a task. No relish. No hesitation. He'd produced Gáe Bolg the way a carpenter reached for a saw—because the job required it, and he happened to have one.

Which raised a question Ryuu had been carefully not examining too closely: how many weapons like that did he have access to?

She'd seen the married swords, the bow, the spear, the bloodhound blade. Five distinct armaments in three days, each with unique properties and embedded techniques. She'd also seen him supply arms to everyone—even the skrattes, centaurs, and brownies. Many of those weapons were unique. She knew the swords he'd given Marin—well, if you could classify the mace-looking thing as a sword—were of the same quality as what Shirou used himself. One even bore the same name as a weapon in his own arsenal.

So the question was: how large was that catalogue?

Ryuu decided, deliberately, to stop following that line of thought. Some questions were better left for quieter moments, when the answers couldn't distract her from the fight ahead.

A ceramic plate settled onto the table in front of her with a gentle *thud*.

Ryuu blinked. A bowl of steamed rice sat before her, crowned with strips of seared aranea leg glazed in something dark and fragrant. Sliced vegetables fanned along one side, their edges still bright with colour. A small dish of clear broth occupied the corner of the tray, wisps of steam curling from its surface.

She raised her head.

Shirou stood over her, another platter balanced on his opposite hand for the skratte sentries at the nearest corridor entrance. His apron—Traced, she assumed, given the speed with which it had appeared—bore oil spatters and the faintest dusting of ground spice across the front. The sleeves of his undershirt were rolled past his elbows, exposing forearms latticed with fine, pale scars.

He smiled. Not the dry, measured expression he wore during combat briefings or the careful neutrality he maintained when Rin was lecturing. Something simpler. Warmer. The uncomplicated satisfaction of a person who'd fed people and found the act sufficient.

"Hunger is the enemy."

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Shirou delivered the last platter to the skratte sentries posted at the eastern corridor junction, exchanged a few words Rose couldn't catch at this distance, then wound his way back through the makeshift camp. He'd commandeered a flat section of collapsed wall as a serving counter, and the brownies had conjured additional tables and benches to accommodate the harvesting rotation. The nineteenth floor's cathedral-scale corridors dwarfed the furniture, lending the whole affair the look of a doll's tea party set inside a church nave.

He sat. Untied his apron—Traced, Rose decided, given the stitching along the hem had the same uncanny precision as everything else he materialised—folded it, and placed it beside his tray.

The three of them ate.

Silence stretched between them, broken only by the distant clatter of harvesting teams and the rhythmic scrape of chitin being pried from the aranea dead. Rose's jaw worked through the glazed aranea meat, which had no business tasting as good as it did. Like most of the insectoid monsters they'd encountered, the aranea tasted like a marriage between crab, lobster,

and something distinctly not-of-this-world, and Shirou had prepared them with the ease of a chef who'd spent a lifetime making the inedible delicious.

She glanced sideways at Ryuu, who ate with the measured, precise bites of someone raised in a culture that viewed meals as rituals rather than refuelling stops. The elf's gaze, though, kept drifting to Shirou's right hand where it gripped his chopsticks.

Rose's attention followed the same path.

"How's your hand?" Rose asked.

"Your hand—is it healed?" Ryuu said at nearly the same instant.

They looked at each other. Rose snorted. Ryuu's mouth twitched—the closest to a smile the elf permitted herself during working hours.

Shirou had been mid-shovel, rice halfway to his mouth. He paused, lowered the bowl, and set the chopsticks parallel across the rim, then he turned both palms face-up on the table.

Clean. Unblemished. Not a scratch, not a callus out of place—well, no *new* callus. The old ones from years of swordwork remained, but the ragged lacerations the barbed spear had carved into his fingers and palm were gone as though they'd never existed.

"Minor damage," Shirou said. "I—umm heal pretty quickly."

Rose studied those palms for another second before accepting it. She remembered some sort of small grinding metal sound coming from Shirou whilst his hands stitched itself back together as he healed. He'd been staring at his hand then too, but the bewilderment hadn't been about the wound. It had been about how quickly and easily he'd produced the weapon that caused it.

Two lines. He'd needed two lines of his aria to Trace a weapon that had single-handedly pacified an entire floor of undead spider-horrors.

"That spear," Rose said. She picked a strip of meat from her rice and chewed it slowly, watching his face. "What was it, exactly?"

Shirou had already moved on to the next piece of aranea, working the translucent shell away from the white flesh beneath with practised efficiency. He laid the cleaned portion on his rice before answering.

"Gáe Bolg. The Soaring Spear that Strikes with Death—also called The Gouging Piercing Spear of Carnage."

"Cheery name." Rose swallowed. "And you said—back when you first explained Tracing to me—that weapons made from phantasmal creatures are harder for you. Why? What makes the spear's materials different from, say, those swords you throw around like playing cards?"

She caught herself and added the mental correction: *Traced*, not *conjured*. Because conjuration produced magical constructs—temporary assemblages of magic shaped by will and doomed to unravel the moment the magic sustaining it ran out. What Shirou did was something else entirely. When he Traced Kanshou, the blade was *real*. It had weight, history, metallurgical composition. You could run an analysis on it and identify the grain structure in the steel. Hermione had tested this on the second day and gone very quiet for approximately three minutes, followed by an hour of questions that Shirou had answered with the patience of a man accustomed to being interrogated by brilliant women.

Shirou finished arranging his rice and set his chopsticks down again.

"Like I said earlier, the original Gáe Bolg was fashioned from the bones of Curruid—a sea monster from Irish mythology. In my reality, it was classified as a phantasmal species." He paused, selecting his words. "Phantasmal creatures are... beings that exist partially outside ordinary physical law. They're composed of and sustained by Mystery—the accumulated weight of age, of the world's own magical density. It's hard to explain, as back then the laws of physics weren't the governing law. The further back in time you go, the denser the Mystery, and the more powerful these creatures became. A

phantasmal beast isn't just a large animal with magical properties. It's a creature whose very existence warps the rules around it. Their bodies are repositories of condensed Mystery. Bone, blood, hide—every part carries that conceptual weight."

He tapped the edge of the table. "When I Trace a mundane sword, I'm replicating steel, carbon, forging technique—physical properties I can analyse and reproduce. When I Trace something made from a phantasmal creature's remains, I have to replicate the Mystery itself. The conceptual density. That's what makes it harder, and that's what used to require my full aria."

"Used to," Rose repeated.

The muscle along Shirou's jaw tightened fractionally. "Used to."

Rose let that sit. She understood the shape of his worry even if she couldn't fully map its edges. Something was changing inside him—or have already changed—and the change made things easier that should have stayed difficult.

"Well," she said, aiming for levity, "we have dragons."

Shirou's chopsticks froze midway to his mouth.

"In stasis. Loads of them, actually." Rose waved a hand vaguely. "Several breeds. They're in the shrunken bags—the extension-charmed ones. We got the technique from a magizoologist named Newt Scamander. Brilliant bloke, absolutely barking mad. He'd worked out how to fit entire habitats inside a leather suitcase. We adapted his method for the Seeds and for the creature preservation programme. Dragons, hippogriffs, phoenixes, nundus, thunderbirds—the full menagerie."

Shirou's left elbow slid off the table.

His bowl tipped. Rice lurched towards the rim. His hand shot out and caught the ceramic before a single grain escaped, but not before his entire body had jerked forward with the wild-eyed urgency.

Beside them, a nearly identical sound—Ryuu's bowl scraped across the table as the elf's own elbow gave way. She caught it one-handed, her reflexes saving her lunch where her composure had failed, sky-blue eyes wide.

"Dragons," Shirou said. His voice had gone flat with the careful control of someone actively preventing themselves from shouting. "You have *dragons* in those bags. As in—living specimens of phantasmal species. The pinnacle of Mystery-bearing organisms. Creatures that bend the fabric of reality by *breathing*. Entities that, in the Age of Gods, stood above divine spirits in raw conceptual weight. You have those. In *bags*."

"You stored dragons," Ryuu said, her tone equally measured and equally strained, "in luggage."

Rose looked between them. Both had gone rigid—Shirou gripping his bowl like a lifeline, Ryuu with one hand still bracing against the table. The expressions weren't fear, exactly. More the stunned disbelief of two experts confronted by information that didn't fit any category they possessed.

Rose coughed into her fist. A flush crept up her neck.

"Right. So." She cleared her throat again. "I think—I think maybe the words *phantasmal* and *magical* aren't... quite synonymous? In our reality, dragons are magical creatures, yes. Extremely dangerous. Fire-breathing, armoured, capable of flight despite wing-to-body ratios that shouldn't work. But they're... essentially..." She searched for the least embarrassing phrasing available.

"They're basically overgrown, fire-spitting, flying lizards. Brilliant, vicious, incredibly hard to kill—but physical. Biological. They eat, sleep, breed, and die like any other animal, just with scales thick enough to deflect most spells and breath hot enough to melt stone."

She paused. The flush deepened.

"I outflew one when I was fourteen. On a broom. During a tournament. It was a Hungarian Horntail—one of the nastiest breeds—and my strategy was essentially 'be faster than it and hope for the best.' It worked." She scratched the back of her head. "Barely."

The tension drained from Shirou's shoulders. He exhaled through his nose, long and slow, and set his bowl back on the table. Ryu's posture softened in parallel, the elf's hand releasing its white-knuckled grip on the stone.

"Magical lizards," Shirou repeated.

"Very large magical lizards."

"Not reality-warping paragons of accumulated Mystery."

"No. Just... big and angry. Breathe fire, mostly—some spit poison."

A beat of silence. Shirou picked up his chopsticks and resumed eating. Ryu did the same.

Rose decided the topic of dragon taxonomy could rest.

She pulled the conversation back. "The spear, though. Gáe Bolg. When you threw it into the corridor, it multiplied, what was that? Why didn't the reanimator's magic work on the ones you killed with it?"

Shirou chewed, swallowed, considered.

"The curse woven into Gáe Bolg is comprehensive. Any wound inflicted by the spear resists healing by conventional means. Magical regeneration, natural healing, alchemical mending—the barbs aren't physical obstructions. They're conceptual ones. The wound *insists* on remaining a wound. It rejects closure." He paused. "And when used as I used it—thrown, with force and intent—every strike it makes is lethal. Every barb finds a vital point. The curse doesn't wound to slow. It wounds to end."

He set down his chopsticks and folded his arms.

"The reanimator's magic worked on a specific principle. It wasn't truly resurrecting the aranea—those creatures were dead. The purple aura was puppeting the corpses, using whatever remained of their magical circuitry to animate them. Like pulling strings on a marionette. But Gáe Bolg's curse doesn't just kill the body. It establishes a *fact*—the target is dead, the wound is

lethal, and no force short of extremely high-level magecraft can argue otherwise. My theory is that the reanimation magic couldn't override that conceptual weight. The spear's curse was simply more *authoritative* than the reanimator's enchantment."

Rose turned that over. "So the dead aranea that Gáe Bolg killed were *definitively* dead. And the puppeteer magic couldn't pick them back up because the spear had already stamped 'deceased, no returns accepted' on the receipt."

"...That's one way to phrase it."

"But the rest—the ones we killed with normal attacks—they were just physically dead. The bodies were intact enough for the reanimation magic to grab hold of."

"Correct."

Rose hummed. "We'd classified the creature as a reanimator, but it was really more of a puppeteer."

"Functionally, yes. A distinction that matters more in theory than in practice when you're surrounded by hundreds of them getting back up."

They exchanged a look. Both shrugged, nearly in sync.

"Hermione will work it out," Rose said.

"Rin will figure out the mechanism," Shirou said.

The words overlapped. Rose blinked, then a laugh bubbled out of her—sharp and bright in the vast stone corridor. Shirou raised one eyebrow and returned to his meal without comment, though the corner of his mouth lifted.

"The spear itself," Rose pressed, leaning forward with her elbows on the table. "You said it was a noble phantasm. Belonging to...?"

"Cú Chulainn. The Hound of Ulster."

Rose tilted her head. Beside her, Ryu mirrored the gesture.

Shirou glanced between them. "Ireland's greatest hero. Their equivalent of Herakles."

Two identical tilts in the opposite direction.

"...Hercules."

"Oh." Shirou straightened abruptly, his expression shifting from contemplation to something sheepish—the look of a man who'd just remembered he'd left the stove on. "I should have asked earlier. How careless of me."

He reached across the table. Both hands, one towards Rose, one towards Ryu. His fingers closed around their wrists.

Rose felt it immediately.

A current of magical energy flowed through her skin, spreading outward from the point of contact like warm water seeping through cloth. It passed through muscle, bone, organ. Not painful. It didn't feel invasive, at least not exactly. But *thorough*.

"Any injuries from the fight? Either of you?"

"I'm fine," Rose said, blinking at the sensation. "Just the bruise on the hip, and that was my own fault."

"No injuries sustained," Ryu said. Her voice sounded normal, but Rose noticed—because she was very good at noticing—that the elf's cheeks had pinked.

Ryu's gaze dropped to the table. Specifically, to where Shirou's hands still rested on their wrists.

"Emiya-san."

"Hm?"

"What did you just do?" A pause. The pink deepened. "And could you let go?"

Shirou looked down. His brain appeared to catch up with his hands approximately two seconds later. He released them both as though the contact had burned, jerking back to his side of the table with a speed that sent his chopsticks rolling off the edge and clattering to the floor.

"Sorry." He rubbed the back of his neck, which had gone red. "That was—I apologise. Structural Analysis. I used it to scan for injuries. It's second nature; in the field I always checked my team after engagements. I should have asked before—"

"Hold on." Rose held up a hand. "Wait, wait, wait. I know you can scan objects. You've been analysing weapons and monster parts since day one. But what *exactly* does Structural Analysis do to a person? Walk me through it. The full version."

Shirou took a breath. He settled into the measured, methodical cadence he used when explaining magecraft—the teacher's voice, the one that reminded Rose uncomfortably of Lupin on his best days.

"Structural Analysis is fundamentally an act of comprehension. When I apply it to an object, I perceive its complete material composition. Every layer, every compound, every flaw in the structure. But it goes beyond chemistry. I perceive the object's history—how it was made, who made it, what techniques were employed. I perceive its intended purpose, its current state of wear, and the stresses acting upon it. For a sword, that means I know the steel's carbon content, the forging temperature, the smith's hammering pattern, the battles it's fought, the hands that held it."

He paused. Rose could see the exact moment he realised where this was going. His mouth opened. Closed. Opened again.

Too late.

"When I apply it to a living body—a person—the principle is the same, but the scope is... broader. I perceive the physical structure in its entirety. Skeletal

alignment, muscular condition, circulatory function, and the state of every organ. I can identify fractures, internal bleeding, torn tissue, poisoning—anything that deviates from the body's baseline state of health."

Rose let the implications assemble themselves. Physical structure. *Entirety*. Skeletal alignment, muscular condition, *every organ*—

She grinned.

The grin was slow, deliberate, and full of teeth.

Rose crossed her arms over her chest in a dramatic, exaggerated motion—the theatrical outrage of a pantomime dame discovering the villain behind the curtain.

"So what you're saying," she said, her voice pitched to carry, "is that you just saw us naked?"

Ryuu's reaction was instant. The elf's hands flew to her own chest and she twisted sideways on the bench, putting an extra thirty centimetres between herself and Shirou. Her ears had gone from pink to the colour of ripe strawberries.

"It's—that isn't—the perception is structural, it's not—" Shirou's composure shattered like dropped porcelain. Red crept up from his collar to his ears. His hands came up in front of him, palms out, the universal gesture of a man who knew he was already convicted and was appealing to the court's mercy. "I wasn't looking at—it doesn't present visual imagery in that—it's more like a—a schematic—"

"A schematic," Rose repeated, savouring the word. "A schematic. Of our bodies. In their *entirety*."

"You're not denying it!"

She was, in point of fact, quite proud of what she looked like. The twenty-two per cent height increase had scaled everything proportionally—two hundred and twenty-six centimetres of lean muscle, full bust, legs that went on forever.

She hadn't survived a war, three years of professional Quidditch, and the collapse of wizarding Britain without maintaining the one asset she had full control over. Being seen didn't bother her.

Being seen *without permission*, however, was excellent ammunition.

"Pervert." Ryuu's voice came out clipped and sharp. She'd shifted another fifteen centimetres down the bench—she was running out of bench—her shoulders angled away from Shirou like a cat whose tail had been stepped on.

"Massive pervert," Rose agreed, leaning in. "Scanned us without asking. Saw everything. Probably has it *memorised*. Those golden eyes aren't just for show, are they?"

"I don't memorise—Structural Analysis doesn't—" Shirou looked physically pained. His scar-laced hands were still raised in surrender, and the flush had reached his hairline. "I am genuinely sorry. In a combat zone, checking for injuries is—I should have asked. I know I should have asked. I'm sorry."

"He's sorry," Rose said to Ryuu, in the tone of a magistrate addressing a jury. "Do we accept his apology?"

"He violated our privacy through magical means," Ryuu said stiffly. She snuck a glance sideways—not at Shirou's face, but at his hands, as though reassessing their threat potential. Then she inched further down the bench. She was now sitting on approximately four centimetres of seat.

"You know," Rose said conversationally, propping her chin on her hand, "in our reality, using magic to see through someone's clothes is a criminal offence. The Wizengamot takes a very dim view. Very dim."

Shirou made a sound that was not quite a groan and not quite a whimper.

"Structural. Entirety. Your words, Emiya."

He buried his face in both hands. Rose watched his ears turn a shade of crimson that rivalled her hair and felt a warm, vindictive satisfaction that had nothing to do with genuine anger and everything to do with the simple joy of

watching someone who could casually deploy reality-warping spears reduced to incoherent sputtering by the suggestion he'd seen a woman's body.

It was, she reflected, deeply reassuring. A man who could be embarrassed like this wasn't one who'd done it deliberately.

Ryuu, meanwhile, had completed her migration to the absolute far end of the bench. She sat with her back ramrod-straight, hands folded in her lap, bowl abandoned on the table two metres behind her. Her blush had settled into a persistent rose-pink across the bridge of her nose and the tips of her pointed ears. She wouldn't look at Shirou.

"I will ask before performing any further analysis on a living subject," Shirou said into his palms. "Without exception. Every time. I swear it."

"Good," Rose said. "See that you do."

She picked up her chopsticks and resumed eating, her grin fading into a satisfied smirk.

And then her mind, which had the unfortunate habit of following threads long after she should have dropped them, circled back.

I perceive the object's complete history.

How it was made. Who made it. What techniques were employed.

The battles it's fought. The hands that held it.

Her gaze drifted sideways. Her wand sat beside her plate—the Elder Wand, soulbound to her since she woke up in this reality, placed there because she always kept it within arm's reach during meals. Habit from the war. Paranoia that had saved her life often enough to justify itself.

She remembered the island. Three days ago—or had it been four? Time blurred in the dungeon. The first day on Theta, when Shirou had found the celestial dungeon's spire and the two of them had landed near its base. He'd glanced at her wand—a passing look, nothing dramatic—and gone pale.

He'd mentioned the aspect of death within her focus.

He'd *known*. Not guessed, not deduced from context.

Because he'd used Structural Analysis.

And Structural Analysis showed him an object's *full history*.

The Elder Wand's history was long, violent, and soaked in blood. Centuries of murder, theft, and betrayal. Hands beyond counting. Rose had made her peace with that—the wand served her now, and she served no one.

But the Elder Wand's *recent* history—the part that belonged to Rose—

Her eyes moved from the wand to Shirou.

Shirou's gaze was already there. He'd followed Rose's glance to the wand and now sat frozen, chopsticks suspended, golden eyes fixed on the pale wooden shaft with the expression of a man who'd just realised he was standing on a landmine and both feet were already down.

Their eyes met.

Shirou blushed. A deep, thorough, catastrophic blush that started at his collarbones and swept upward like a tide.

He looked away. Fast. His chopsticks jabbed into his rice with sudden, intense focus, as though the arrangement of individual grains had become the most fascinating engineering problem he'd ever encountered.

Rose's brain completed the connection.

Full history.

Every use.

Every. Single. Use.

The vibration charm she'd learned from Angelina and used almost daily. The various phallic conjurations she'd made for... specific applications. The

tentacle-like animations she'd experimented with during a phase she'd sworn she'd take to the grave. The things she'd done with Tracey in her dormitory using that wand as an intermediary. The variation on certain sensory charms she'd perfected during her three months of post-breakup seclusion, when firewhisky, creative spellwork, and a rotating cast of Muggle men and women she'd taken home had been her primary coping mechanisms.

And of course—*of course*—the toe-curling, sheet-grabbing sessions she'd given herself almost nightly. Including the one the night before this mission. And the one just hours before they'd found the celestial dungeon.

He'd known for *three days*.

He'd known, and he'd said *nothing*, and he'd looked her in the eye every single day since and not once let it show.

Rose's face went from its normal porcelain pale to a crimson so deep it could have competed with her hair for colour saturation. Heat flooded from her chest to her hairline. Her ears burned. She was fairly certain she could have fried an egg on her own cheekbones.

"You—" Her voice cracked. She cleared her throat. "You—when you said you see an object's full history—"

Shirou's chopsticks were moving with mechanical precision, shovelling rice at a rate that suggested he was trying to fill his mouth quickly enough to make speech physically impossible.

"—you saw everything the wand has been used for."

He chewed. He did not look up. His ears were the colour of a sunset.

"Pervert." This time, the word came out stripped of performance. Rose's voice was thin, tight, and blazingly sincere. "You absolute *pervert*."

Ryuu glanced between them, her brow furrowed. She opened her mouth, appeared to think better of it, and closed it again. Whatever was happening between these two, her expression said, she wanted no part of it.

Rose grabbed her wand from the table. Her fingers tingled where they gripped the wood—the wood that he had *read*—and she shoved it back into her soul with a thought, banishing it from physical existence as fast as a flinch. Gone. Safe. *Private*.

He'd known all this time. Three days of combat, meals, strategy discussions, casual conversation—and he'd been carrying the knowledge of her wand's complete sexual autobiography in his head the entire time without saying a word.

Which was, on reflection, the only decent response. But that didn't make the burning in her face any cooler.

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Rose grabbed her wand from the table. Her fingers tingled where they gripped the wood—the wood that *he had read*—and she shoved it back into her soul away from his perceiving perverted eyes, with a thought, banishing it from physical existence as fast as a flinch. Gone. Safe. *Private*.

He'd known all this time.

Which was, on reflection, the only decent response. But that didn't make the burning in her face any cooler.

Shirou swallowed his mouthful. "I—"

"Don't."

"I sincerely—"

"*Don't*."

"—apologise."

The three of them ate.

Ryuu maintained her position at the far end of the bench—approximately two metres from her own bowl, which she made no move to retrieve. Every bite was precise, her gaze fixed firmly on her own plate. Shirou ate with the hunched-shoulder posture of a man weathering artillery fire and waiting for the barrage to lift. Rose chewed her aranea meat and stared into the middle distance, her face a beacon of embarrassment, radiating heat like a low-grade *Incendio*.

The silence stretched. Three minutes. Five. The sounds of the harvesting teams filled the space—chitin cracking, carts rolling, a brownie swearing in Galactic Basic as a crate lid refused to cooperate. Normal sounds. Working sounds. Sounds that had nothing to do with the mortifying revelation that someone had magically read the sexual autobiography of her wand.

Crack.

A brownie materialised at the end of the table, ears quivering, small chest puffed with importance. Rose recognised Mipsy—one of the three assigned to their forward team, barely reaching her knee now that everyone had scaled up twenty-two per cent.

"Ms Rose! Ms Rose!" Mipsy bounced on her heels, her voice cutting through the awkward silence like a bell through fog. "Grackle is finding the stairs! The stairs to the boss chamber! He is seeing the big doors with the glowy bits and the scary carvings!"

Rose set down her chopsticks. The embarrassment didn't vanish, but it shifted—compressed, boxed, shoved into the same mental compartment where she kept memories of Umbridge's detentions and that time she'd accidentally set Seamus Finnigan's eyebrows on fire in second year. Problems for later.

She stood. Her knees ached from sitting on the low bench. Her face still burned.

Shirou was already on his feet, apron vanishing into motes of light as the Traced fabric dissolved. His expression had reset to operational

neutrality—the stoic mask of a man who'd spent a lifetime using combat readiness as an escape from social catastrophe.

Ryuu rose with the fluid economy of motion that made everything she did look choreographed.

Rose looked at both of them. The pervert and the embarrassed elf.

Her team.

"Right," she said. "Boss chamber. Let's go."

==&<o>&=-

End

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