

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 3.2 Into the Deep

Grakkan Empire

System: Leafil | Planet: Unnamed Pair of Theta

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

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

GknS 34k6.rev-70% / 10.rev-53% / 259.rot-49% / 11:52:06

Local: 42k6.12.rev-58% / 8.rev-56% / 295.rot-35% / 13:44:00

GS 13k9.rev-47% / 8.rev-55% / 258.rot-49% / 21:38:23

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"Push!" Ryuu shouted from below. "We can't have the whole floor swarm us with our backs to the wall!"

Rose fired several more *Confringos* at the revived swarm—each detonation punching craters in the tide of pale carapaces, scattering legs and chitin—but the chamber was filling faster than she could thin it. Below her, Shirou and Ryuu were being driven toward the centre, the perimeter shrinking with every passing second. For every aranea that fell, two more skittered from the

corridors to take its place, their movements sharper now, coordinated by whatever intelligence had raised them from the dead.

"I really should research more battle spells," Rose muttered through gritted teeth. Even after the wizarding war, even after the slow demonic incursions that had plagued Project Noah's final years, she'd never had the need to expand her repertoire. She'd fought dark wizards. She'd fought demons. She'd never had to fight *swarms*.

Though there was this one spell.

"Shirou! Rose! Cover me—it'll take less than a minute!"

Ryuu's voice cut through the chaos from below, sharp and certain.

"Aye!" Rose acknowledged, banking hard to avoid a glob of silk. Below, Shirou responded without a word—swords fell around Ryuu in a cage of interlocking steel, each blade as tall as a person and angled outward like the ribs of some brutal iron flower. Nothing was getting through that. Not without losing limbs in the attempt.

"Tipsy and Mipsy, stand by just in case."

"Yes, Master Shirou!"

Rose tipped her broom skyward, raising her wand above her head as if gripping the end of a lasso. From this height she could see the full scope of the problem—aranea pouring in from three corridors, climbing the walls in overlapping waves, their pale carapaces catching the ambient glow like a tide of bone washing upward. Their constant chittering had become white noise beneath the percussive *crunch* of Shirou's Traced blades finding their marks.

"Oh—fuck, I almost forgot." Rose slapped a Bubble-Head Charm on herself, the translucent sphere sealing around her face with a soft *pop*. "Tipsy, give the pair a Bubble-Head Charm. Everyone's going to need it."

"Yes, Mistress Potter!"

"INFLAMO! LUSTRO CIRCULUS!"

Rose twirled her wand in a widening spiral, as if casting out a fishing line—but the line was flame, and it lengthened with every rotation. One revolution. Two. Three. The fire trailed her wand-tip in a growing helix, catching the silk networks first, then the walls, then the air itself as the spell found its rhythm and *bloomed*.

She anchored herself as the centre. Below her, Ryu crouched within her cage of swords. And around them both, the firestorm ignited.

The chamber became an inferno. Fire swept outward in concentric waves, devouring silk and carapace alike, the geometric web networks that had covered the ceiling collapsing into cascades of bright ash. Rose could hear the screeching death-cries of the aranea caught in the storm—dozens of them, their chitinous bodies popping and splitting in the heat—backdropped by the rhythmic *shink, shink, shink* of blades being Traced in rapid succession.

Then the chanting began.

"I am the bone of my sword."

"Astraea Record."

Two voices. Two arias. Rising simultaneously beneath the roar of fire.

Despite the searing heat radiating from her own spell, Rose shivered. There was something about hearing incantations spoken with *that* kind of intent—words that weren't just words but declarations of fundamental nature, each syllable carrying the weight of a soul laid bare.

It was also strange hearing Shirou chant in English. They'd all been speaking Galactic Basic since arriving—Zelretch's blessing made it as natural as breathing—and English had become something else. Something that felt like a phantom limb. Rose knew the metaphor was odd, but it captured the sensation precisely: the feeling of something that had once been integral to

you, mastered and instinctive, now rendered foreign by displacement. You could still feel it—in this case, speak it. But it no longer felt or sounded natural.

Ryuu chanted in Koine—her native language, the one Hermione had seized upon with academic ferocity the moment she'd heard one of the elder sirens speaking something similar. They'd been able to conclude that the two dialects were mutually intelligible in fragments, like two villages separated by a mountain range for a thousand years—but in this case, separated by two totally different realities—some words landed perfectly, others slid past without purchase.

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

Rose could feel the distinction between their magics even through the firestorm's interference. Shirou's was *heavy*. It pressed against the space around him like something being overlaid onto reality—not adding to the world but partially *replacing* it. It felt wrong in the way that a room with no echo felt wrong. As if the air itself had been told it was something else and had reluctantly agreed.

More swords appeared beneath Rose—their blades fanned outward in staggered volleys, each one launching into the burning tide, each one replaced before the gap closed.

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

Ryuu's magic was different. Where Shirou's denied reality, Ryuu's *demand*ed from it. A summons. A call to order. The air around her cage of swords began to shimmer with something that wasn't heat.

"Double Accel."

Shirou blurred. One moment he was at the centre of the formation; the next he was at the edge of the firestorm, an enlarged Kanshou and Bakuya in his hands—the married swords grown to greatsword proportions, their edges catching firelight in alternating black and white. He leapt through the wall of flame and into the aranea-choked corridor beyond.

Rose couldn't see what happened next. But she could hear it.

The wet, rapid-fire percussion of blades meeting chitin. The shriek of steel on stone where a stroke went through its target and kept going. The heavier impacts of something large being thrown—Kanshou's boomerang arc, she guessed, scything through ranks and curving back. And beneath it all, the steady *shink, shink, shink* of new blades being Traced to replace the ones that shattered.

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

Every few seconds, more of the black and white buzzsaws entered the chamber—spinning pairs of Kanshou and Bakuya, each one drawn to its partner in those lethal magnetic arcs, filling the space between floor and ceiling with a lattice of whirring steel. The chamber had become a blender of flame and blade. Rose held the centre of it, twirling her wand in large circular arcs above the carnage—her arm already heavy as lead from the continuous motion, the muscles in her shoulder burning with a dull, insistent ache that she was choosing to ignore. Below her, Ryuu stood within the cage of swords, a large magic circle blazing at her feet, her body wreathed in blue light that pulsed brighter with every line of the aria.

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

The aranea caught between the firestorm and the steel had been reduced to mince—shredded chitin, translucent flesh cooked opaque white by the circling heat, magicite ground to glittering dust. The chamber floor was carpeted in ruin. And still the purple aura flickered at the edges, reaching for fragments, trying to reassemble what was no longer recognisable as a body.

"Justice Returns!"

A bright light erupted from Ryuu—blinding, absolute—and then condensed back into her like a star collapsing inward. When it faded, the blue shimmer that had clung to her skin was gone, replaced by something harder.

Something that sat on her the way armour sat on a knight who'd worn it so long it had become a second skin.

"Shirou! Rose! Now!"

Rose cancelled the firestorm instantly—the flames died in a sharp inward rush, as if the spell had been swallowed rather than dismissed—and dove. Her broom angled into a near-vertical descent, wind screaming past the Bubble-Head Charm as she shot down the corridor after Ryou.

She didn't have time to admire the view. But she caught it in fragments as she flew—the waves of dead aranea being revived and killed almost simultaneously, purple aura flaring and extinguishing in rapid succession like a strobe, the reanimated bodies lurching forward only to be shredded by the wall of steel that followed Shirou like a wake. He moved through the corridor at the centre of a small pocket of empty space, blades orbiting him in overlapping arcs, and behind him he left a trail of embedded steel—swords driven into walls, floor, ceiling, each one a marker of where the line had been pushed.

"*Incendio Maxima!*" Rose dove in on Shirou's left flank, her wand sweeping a curtain of fire across the wall of aranea pressing in from that side. Chitin blackened and curled. She banked, circled, and came back along his right, laying down a second line of flame that boxed the corridor into a burning channel. Shirou advanced through the centre of it, untouched by either fire, his blades carving the path ahead.

"*Agaris Alvesynth.*"

Ryou's voice was quiet beneath the roar. Her body and weapon erupted in flame—not Rose's conjured fire but something older, something that burned with a fury that had nothing to do with temperature. She'd traded her twin kodachis for a wooden sword held in one hand, and she moved through the corridor as if gravity had forgotten she existed. Each step covered twice the distance it should have. Each stroke left a wake of cauterised flesh—bisected aranea falling in two halves, the cuts seared shut before ichor could spill.

With a single slash, a torrent of flame engulfed a cluster of aranea. With the next, she was past them and into the ranks behind, her wooden blade trailing fire like a comet's tail.

Ryuu leapt over Shirou—one hand on his shoulder for the briefest instant of contact—and sent two horizontal torrents of flame down the corridor, one left, one right, pushing the enemy line back another twenty metres.

Shirou hurled the enlarged Kanshou down the corridor—the black blade spinning end over end, scything through everything in its path before embedding itself in the far wall with a concussive *crack*. He threw Bakuya forward in a shorter arc, the white blade curving back toward its partner, carving a clear lane through the aranea between them.

Rose worked the walls and ceiling—Blasting Curses and Severing Charms picking off the climbers that tried to flank from above. Behind them, the familiar whirring of Shirou's storm of steel—the lattice of buzzsaws he'd left in the previous chamber—seemed to rubber-band back into the corridor, the wall of spinning blades catching every recently revived aranea that tried to close the gap from behind.

Rose had to execute a series of sharp dodging rolls as one of Shirou's blades whipped past her—close enough to feel the displaced air tug at her robes—redirecting a buzzsaw that had been on a trajectory to bisect her broom.

"Oi! I almost got split in two!" Rose shouted. "And I'm no starfish—you can't get two of me if you lop off a limb or a torso!"

Shirou growled in acknowledgement as he Traced another pair of blades into his hands without breaking stride. "Let's just hope this is reanimation and not revival."

The words landed heavier than his tone suggested. Rose caught the distinction immediately—the distinction between McGonagall and a necromancer. Reanimation meant puppetry. Something was pulling the strings, and if they found it and killed it, every corpse on the floor would drop.

Revival meant independence. Each monster brought back with its own will, its own drive, unkillable through any means short of destroying the body so thoroughly that nothing remained to revive.

Rose glanced back at the corridor behind them—at the purple-lit corpses dragging themselves upright for the third time, the fourth, chitin knitting over burns and blade-wounds with that sickening sound of cracking ice in reverse.

'Please be reanimation,' she thought. *'Please let there be a puppet master.'*

She wanted to fly ahead—find the controller, end this at the source. But they were threading the needle. If Rose pushed forward, Shirou and Ryuu would lose their aerial support, and the three of them only functioned because each one covered the others' blind spots. Pull one thread and the whole formation unravels.

Luminous orbs gradually filled the hallway in Ryuu's wake, trailing her like a procession of pale green lanterns as she continued her elegant dance of blade and flame.

"My turn. Ryuu, cover for a second—both of you fall back behind me once I give the signal."

Shirou's voice was calm. Too calm.

He threw a freshly Traced Kanshou and Bakuya behind them—the paired blades joining the orbiting buzzsaws that covered their rear, buying a few seconds of respite from that direction.

Then he leapt back and landed in a low crouch. One leg tucked beneath him, the other extended to the side. His right arm stretched outward, fingers splayed, palm open—reaching for something that didn't exist yet.

Rose and Ryuu fell back to their positions, turning the hallway into a convection oven of overlapping flame.

Rose felt it before she saw it.

She could see Ryuu sharpen as well—her ears twitching, her grip shifting on the wooden sword.

A sudden burst of bloodlust erupted from behind them.

It wasn't killing intent in the way Rose understood it—not the cold, calculated menace of a Death Eater or the predatory hunger of a demon. This was something more fundamental. Older. Something that hadn't even taken form yet was already pressing against reality, demanding acknowledgement. Rose's heart hammered. Her throat tightened. Every instinct she possessed—battle-honed, war-tempered, forged in a conflict that had taken everything from her—screamed at her to *run*. As if her heart had already accepted its fate and was asking for a quick end.

"FALLBACK!"

"Ryuu!" Rose shouted, angling the tip of her broom downward and extending her hand.

Ryuu understood instantly. She reached up and clasped Rose's hand, and Rose pushed her broom to its absolute limit—the acceleration slamming her weight backward as they rocketed towards Shirou's position. Ryuu's flames wreathed Rose's body as they flew, and under different circumstances the warmth would have been comforting. Under *these* circumstances, Rose barely registered it.

She had to slam her Occlumency shields into place just to keep moving toward the source of that aura rather than away from it. The bloodlust radiated from Shirou—or rather, from the thing in his hand. A barbed red pole that hadn't been there a second ago.

No. Not a pole. A spear.

'Why the fuck would you make a barbed spear?'

Rose could see the trickle of blood dripping from Shirou's palm where the weapon's haft bit into his skin. His body was tensed like a spring coil forced to

its absolute limit—every muscle locked, every tendon drawn taut, the veins in his forearm standing out like cables beneath the skin.

"Gáe—"

Rose could see the crazed expression on Shirou's face just as her broom flew level with his head—teeth bared, golden eyes wide and burning with something that wasn't entirely his own. The spring unleashed.

He surged forward, the barbed spear held high in an overhead grip, and hurled it with every fibre of his being.

"—BOLG!"

The spear *screamed*.

It left his hand as a single crimson streak—and then it wasn't single anymore. The barbed point split, multiplied, *proliferated*—one became ten, ten became a hundred, a hundred became a rain of killing intent given physical form. Each projectile carried the same barbed tip, the same cursed edge, the same inevitability. They didn't arc. They didn't slow. They struck in a simultaneous downpour of red that filled the corridor from wall to wall, floor to ceiling, leaving nowhere to hide and nothing to dodge.

The screeching death-throes of the aranea filled the hallway—a sound that Rose would hear in her nightmares for weeks, a chorus of hundreds of creatures dying in the same instant, their bodies pinned to every surface by barbed crimson lances. The floor was shredded. The ceiling was shredded. The walls bore craters where the spears had punched through stone and kept going. The army of aranea—every last crawling, clicking, chittering one of them—was eliminated in a single breath.

Silence.

Then the spear returned to Shirou's hand, and the duplicates dissolved into motes of red light that faded like embers.

Unfortunately, that was only the corridor.

From deeper within the labyrinth, the chittering began again. Distant at first—then growing louder, layering over itself, building toward the wall of sound they'd already learned to dread.

"Push!" It was Shirou this time, the barbed spear gripped in both hands as he charged forward without waiting for acknowledgement. Whatever the weapon had done to his composure, he'd wrestled it back under control—his expression was set, focused, the wildness from the throw locked away behind clenched teeth.

Rose glanced behind them as they moved. The violet aura flickered across the felled aranea in the corridor—but something was different. The bodies Gáe Bolg had struck weren't reassembling. The barbed wounds resisted the purple glow, the cursed edges refusing to let flesh knit back together. The aura pulsed, reached, and failed—sliding off the injuries the way water slid off oil.

'Unhealable wounds,' Rose noted. Whatever that spear was, it didn't just kill. It made death *stick*.

Behind them, though—further back, where the firestorm and steel had done the killing rather than the spear—the older corpses were beginning to stir again. Purple light bloomed across burned chitin and severed limbs.

Rose extended her arm. Ryuugrabbed it without a word, and they followed after Shirou.

"Mipsy, check on the others—make sure they're okay. Tell them not to push until we give the all-clear."

Mipsy—one of the trio assigned as their escape contingency if things became untenable—acknowledged Rose's order with a sharp crack of apparition.

"I have created over a thousand blades," Shirou intoned, and followed it with: "Double Accel!"

The corridor branched into a T-junction.

Rose banked hard, her broom listing forty-five degrees as she cleared the archway—and the full scale of the nineteenth floor's true threat revealed itself. The junction opened into a vast crossroads—four corridors converging on a central hub the size of a cathedral nave—and every surface crawled with pale chitin. Aranea covered the walls in overlapping ranks, clung to the vaulted ceiling in clusters thick enough to blot out the ambient glow, and filled the corridors ahead in a tide of bone-white carapace that stretched beyond the reach of Rose's wandlight.

"Oh, you have got to be taking the piss."

There were more of them. Far more than the hundreds they'd killed in the chamber. Far, far more than the hundreds they'd cut through in the corridors. Every aranea they'd slain on this floor—and perhaps some from the parts of the floor they have not explored, drawn by whatever signal the reanimator was broadcasting—had converged on this junction.

Below her, Shirou hit the crossroads at a dead sprint, the barbed red spear spinning in a continuous figure-eight that carved a sphere of empty space around his body. Every rotation caught something—a leg, a thorax, a lunging pincer—and every kill sprayed ichor in a wide arc that painted the ivory floor in glistening streaks. The spear's bloodlust pressed against Rose's Occlumency shields like a hand against a window, a constant thrumming *want* that tasted of old copper and fresh murder.

Behind him, the corridor they'd just cleared was filling again. The purple glow bloomed across the fallen bodies like mould spreading on bread—rapid, inevitable—and with each revival, Shirou's steel answered. She could see the pattern from above: a blade would embed itself in an aranea's thorax, the creature would collapse, the purple aura would begin its work, and before the wounds finished knitting, another blade would replace the first. Not the same sword—a different one, already falling, already in motion before the prior had dissolved.

Rose watched Shirou's rain of steel multiply.

Each projectile spawned from the air above the swarm in staggered waves—faster now, the gap between Traces narrowing until the swords fell in a continuous curtain. The blades that struck home dissolved into motes of blue light the instant their target died, but as the purple aura wrapped the corpse and began dragging it upright, a new blade was already descending to replace it.

Kill. Dissolve. Revive. Kill. Dissolve. Revive. An endless, violent loop that held the line but gained no ground.

"There are more of them!" Rose shouted, veering to avoid a glob of silk the size of her head. "There's no way this is just the nineteenth floor's population—we've probably killed around a thousand at this point. There's twice that down there!"

"Reanimation doesn't just raise the ones we killed," Shirou called back, his voice tight with exertion, the spear shearing through two aranea simultaneously as he pivoted at the intersection's centre. "Whatever's controlling them is pulling in every aranea on the floor. Living and dead."

"So we poked the nest and now the entire bloody hive is here. Wonderful."

Rose dropped altitude, her broom skimming two metres above the swarm. She extended her hand downward.

"Ryuu! Grab on!"

Ryuu had been matching Shirou's pace on foot, her wooden sword wreathed in enchanted flame, each stroke leaving cauterised bisections in its wake. She reached up without breaking stride—her fingers closed around Rose's wrist, and Rose hauled her broom upward, the acceleration pressing Ryuu's weight against her arm like a sack of lead.

She deposited the elf at the intersection's widest point—a raised section of floor where two corridors met at an obtuse angle, giving Ryuu elevation and sightlines down three approaches.

"Right." Rose climbed back to ceiling height. "We need to thin this before—"

"The orbs are ready." Ryuu's voice carried that particular calm that Rose had learned meant violence was imminent. The elf stood with her wooden sword held vertically before her face, eyes closed, the luminous green spheres she'd been seeding throughout the corridor now suspended in a constellation above the intersection—hundreds of them, maybe more, each one pulsing with compressed light.

Ryuu opened her eyes.

"Luminous Wind."

The orbs descended.

Not in a single mass but in waves—concentric rings that dropped from the ceiling in cascading tiers, each ring detonating a fraction of a second after the one above it. The first ring struck at the perimeter, its explosions overlapping into a wall of green-white radiance that vaporised everything within its radius. The second ring hit deeper. The third deeper still. Each detonation punched a crater in the swarm, flinging bodies outward, the shockwaves compounding as ring met ring met ring.

Rose shielded her face against the glare. Even through her Bubble-Head Charm, the concussive force rattled her teeth. Below, the intersection transformed into a kill-zone—aranea dying by the dozen, then the hundred, pale carapaces shattering like porcelain beneath the cascade of light.

When the last orb detonated, the intersection was cleared. A circle of devastation fifty metres wide, the ivory floor scorched black, the walls cracked and pitted. Aranea corpses lay in heaps at the periphery—those that had been outside the blast radius, stunned and twitching but alive.

The silence lasted three seconds.

Then the clicking resumed from every corridor, and the tide surged inward again.

"I saw something." Shirou's voice cut across the din. He stood at the centre of the scorched intersection, the barbed spear gripped in both hands, golden eyes fixed down the leftmost corridor. His expression had twisted into something that wasn't quite a grin and wasn't quite a snarl—the spear's influence, Rose reckoned, its bloodlust pulling at whatever restraint he normally wore like a mask.

He twirled the spear in a wide overhead arc, the barbed haft spinning so fast it blurred into a red disc. The movement carried him forward two steps, and each rotation caught aranea that had been closing from the sides—pincers sheared, legs severed, one unlucky creature bisected vertically from cephalothorax to spinnerets.

"Down that corridor—" He jerked his chin left without stopping the spin. "Something big. Something different."

"Which direction?" Rose brought her broom alongside Ryuu.

"*Iruvute!*" Ryuu answered by pointing the tip of her wooden sword down the left corridor and loosing a lance of concentrated flame. The spell tore through the swarm in a straight line—a column of fire two metres wide that carved through dozens of aranea and illuminated the corridor for its full length.

Rose followed with a *Lumos Solem Maxima*—an orb of pure, concentrated sunlight that she launched over the flame lance's trajectory. The orb sailed past the burning swarm and detonated fifty metres deeper, flooding the corridor in white brilliance.

And there, behind the tide of pale chitin, Rose saw it.

A monstrosity.

The creature dwarfed every aranea on the floor. Its spider-body alone was the size of a small house—eight legs as thick as tree trunks, carapace the dark mottled grey of weathered granite rather than the bone-white of its lesser kin. But that wasn't what made Rose's stomach lurch.

From the thorax, where a spider's cluster of eyes should have been, rose the upper half of a humanoid body. Armoured. Plate mail that looked grown rather than forged, segmented chitin shaped into pauldrons and a breastplate with the organic precision of an insect's exoskeleton adapted to a human silhouette. Where its face should have been—nothing. A smooth oval of grey chitin, featureless, eyeless.

It held a staff.

The staff glowed purple. The same purple that wreathed every reanimated corpse. The same purple that even now was blooming across the fresh dead at the intersection's edge, dragging them upright, knitting wounds, restoring mobility.

"Ryuu, get behind me!"

Shirou's shout carried a command weight that Rose hadn't heard from him before—raw, immediate, the kind of tone that bypassed argument and went straight to the hindbrain. Ryuu obeyed without hesitation, leaping backward over a cluster of aranea and slashing three of them on the way through, her flaming blade leaving arcs of cauterised flesh in her wake.

Rose pulled her broom high and wide, giving Shirou a clear lane.

He dismissed the red spear. It dissolved into motes of crimson light that scattered and faded before reaching the floor, and in the same motion his right hand reached forward and closed around something that solidified from the air like a blade condensing from morning fog.

A sword. Black as pitch, edged in red, its crossguard curved forward like the horns of something predatory.

The bloodlust hit Rose like a wall.

It wasn't the same as the spear's influence—that had been manic, a screaming red need that clawed at everything in its vicinity without discrimination. This was different. Focused. Surgical. It didn't radiate outward;

it *aimed*. Rose felt it pass through her—not at her, *through* her, like a searchlight sweeping past and finding her uninteresting—and lock onto the humanoid-spider monstrosity at the corridor's end.

The sword vibrated in Shirou's grip. Not from instability—from eagerness. Rose could hear it. A low, resonant hum, like a tuning fork pressed against stone, rising in pitch as if the weapon could sense the distance between its edge and its quarry and resented every metre of it.

'*A solo predator stalking its prey,*' Rose thought, and the accuracy of the image unsettled her.

Shirou's left hand moved. Another Trace—this time a bow, massive, dark, scaled to match his height. He lifted the black-and-red sword toward the bowstring, and as he did, the blade *changed*. Its form compressed, elongated, the crossguard folding inward, the blade narrowing and sprouting fins, reshaping itself into something sleek and aerodynamic—an arrow forged from a sword's bloodlust.

Shirou nocked the altered blade. Drew. His entire body locked into the pull—feet planted, spine straight, every muscle in his arms, shoulders, and back drawn taut against the bowstring's resistance.

"Hound of the Red Plains—Hrunting!"

The release produced a sound like a cannon shot.

The arrow left the bow so fast that Rose's eyes couldn't track it—one instant it was nocked, the next it was a red-black streak tearing down the corridor at a velocity that shattered the sound barrier and kept accelerating. The sonic boom hit Rose a half-second later, a concussive wall of displaced air that nearly knocked her off her broom and sent every aranea in the corridor tumbling sideways. The smaller ones were flung against walls. The larger ones skidded, legs scrabbling for purchase against the ivory floor as the pressure wave rolled over them.

The corridor between Shirou and the monstrosity was emptied—not killed, just *moved*, pushed aside by the sheer violence of the arrow's passage.

Rose watched the red-black streak close the distance. It didn't arc. It didn't deviate. It flew straight and true and hungry, and it found its mark.

The detonation was absolute.

No fire. No explosion in the conventional sense. Just a sphere of annihilation that bloomed outward from the point of contact and consumed everything within it—the humanoid torso, the staff, the massive spider-body, the floor beneath it, the walls around it, a section of the ceiling above it. Gone. Deleted. As if reality had simply agreed to forget that particular volume of space and everything inside it had ever existed.

The sphere collapsed inward, and the air rushed to fill the void with a thunderclap that echoed through every corridor of the intersection.

Rose braced against the secondary shockwave and looked down.

Every aranea on the floor dropped.

It wasn't death—not the violent, thrashing finality of a killing blow. It was absence. A switch thrown. Every spider-form in Rose's field of vision collapsed simultaneously, legs folding beneath their bodies, pincers going slack, the frenetic clicking silenced in a single instant. They hit the ivory floor like marionettes whose strings had been cut, settling into motionless heaps across the scorched intersection and the corridors beyond.

The purple aura that had been flickering across the recently dead—reaching, mending, *insisting*—guttered and died. The glow drained from every corpse like water soaking into sand, leaving nothing behind but pale chitin and silence.

Rose hovered. She counted to five. To ten. No movement. No clicking. No revival.

She let out a breath she didn't realise she'd been holding.

"Oh." Shirou straightened from his archer's stance. The bow dissolved from his left hand. He blinked, golden eyes sweeping the field of motionless aranea with an expression that shifted—rapidly—from battle-focus to confusion to something dangerously close to embarrassment. He scratched the back of his head.

"I guess they were getting reanimated and not revived."

Rose stared at him. She opened her mouth. Closed it. Opened it again.

"That was kinda anti-climactic."

Shirou had the good grace to look sheepish.

Rose dismounted her broom mid-air, dropping three metres to the scorched floor and landing in a crouch beside a pile of dead aranea. Her legs protested—she'd been clenching her thighs around the broom shaft for the better part of an hour, and the muscles had opinions about that.

Ryuu landed beside her with considerably more grace, the enchanted flames around her weapon and body guttering out as her aria's effects dissipated.

"Right, then." Rose rolled her shoulders, wincing at the knot that had taken root between her shoulder blades. "Before the debrief—what's the deal with the weapons that want to murder everything? First that spear felt like it wanted to drink my blood and play pincushion with my heart, and then that sword—"

She stopped.

Shirou wasn't listening. He stood at the centre of the intersection, his right hand raised before his face, palm up, fingers slightly curled. He was staring at it with an intensity that Rose associated with Hermione reading a particularly vexing research paper.

Rose could see the wound. The barbed spear had left its mark—the palm was torn in several places where the thorns along the haft had bitten deep, flesh ragged, blood still wet. But as she watched, the edges of each laceration began to draw together. Not gradually. Not with the slow, itching knit of

magical healing. The flesh *moved*—pulled inward as if stitched by invisible hands, the muscle fibres reconnecting, the skin sealing over fresh pink tissue.

An unnerving sound accompanied the process. Metal on metal. A high, thin screeching, like a blade being drawn across a whetstone at the wrong angle. Rose's teeth ached just hearing it.

She almost asked about it. But the sound stopped, the wounds closed, and Shirou continued to stare at his unmarked palm as though it had betrayed him.

Ryuu reached him first.

"Are you okay?" The elf's voice carried a careful neutrality that Rose had come to recognise as concern disguised as professionalism. "What's wrong with your hand? A moment ago it was bleeding quite a bit."

"Two lines." Shirou murmured it without looking up.

"Two lines?" Ryuu pressed. Rose stepped closer.

The question seemed to snap him back. The intensity drained from his posture, replaced by his more familiar awkward self-consciousness. He ruffled the back of his head—a gesture Rose had catalogued as *Shirou is about to say something he's uncomfortable with*.

"Oh." He dropped his hand. "I was just... both amazed and concerned at the fact that it only took me two lines of my aria to Trace that spear."

"Isn't that supposed to be amazing?" Rose frowned. "And I'm fairly sure I heard you say three lines."

Shirou shook his head. "I was on line two when I Traced Gáe Bolg. Two lines. For that weapon."

"I'm guessing two lines is bad?"

"Two lines is impossible—or at least was impossible." He said it flatly, without drama, the way someone might state that water was wet or that Rin was terrifying before her first cup of caffeine. "That spear was forged from the

bones of Curruid—a monstrous sea creature of mythological significance—and imbued with causality-reversing properties by a war goddess during an age when gods walked the earth and their interference with the natural order was commonplace."

He paused, as if checking whether he'd lost them. Rose made a *go on* gesture.

"Even with my boosted mana capacity in this reality, even with every skill and enhancement I purchased from that shop, I shouldn't have been able to Trace Gáe Bolg without chanting most of my aria and suffering significant physical backlash." He looked at his healed palm again. "The easiest way for me to manifest that spear is inside my Reality Marble, where the rules are mine to set."

The last words came out in a near-whisper, pitched low enough that Rose almost missed them: "Maybe it's due to me no longer being considered human."

Rose caught it. She saw Ryou catch it too—the elf's ears twitched, a micromovement that would have been invisible on a human but on an elf served as a tell as obvious as a flinch.

Neither of them commented. Some doors, Rose had learned, needed to be opened by the person standing behind them. Pushing wouldn't help.

Instead, Rose latched onto the term he'd dropped.

"What's a Reality Marble?"

Shirou blinked. The question seemed to ground him—pulled him out of whatever spiralling internal assessment he'd been conducting and deposited him back in the present, where a former witch was asking him to explain his magic in language she could follow.

"It's..." He paused. Reformulated. "Most of my magic—the swords, the bow, the bombardments—they're all just extensions of one mystery. One

foundational ability that everything else branches from." He held up his right hand, fingers spread, and Rose watched silver motes of light drift between his fingertips like dust caught in a sunbeam. "I have an inner world. A landscape inside my soul that reflects my fundamental nature. When I project that inner world outward—overwrite the surrounding reality with my own—that's a Reality Marble."

"You... overwrite reality."

"Temporarily. In a limited area. And only for as long as I can sustain it." A dry, self-deprecating half-smile. "Inside that space, every weapon I've ever analysed already exists. I don't need to Trace them individually—they're just there, waiting. That's why my strongest techniques work best when the Reality Marble is deployed. Outside of it, I'm working uphill. Each line of my aria is a negotiation with reality, convincing the world to accept something that shouldn't exist—where my perspective and reality gradually blur with each line."

"And two lines of negotiation got you a god-touched spear made of sea-monster bones."

"Precisely."

Rose chewed on that. All she managed was a voiced-out: "Cool?"

And he wasn't human anymore. The status screen had been explicit about that—??Processing??/Sword Incarnation (Updating). Whatever he was becoming, it was something that could manifest weapons of legend with increasing ease. He'd implied that the process should be harder, should take a toll. The fact that it *wasn't* was what frightened him.

Before Rose could formulate a follow-up question—and she had several, each one more pointed than the last—a sharp *crack* of apparition split the air beside them.

Tipsy materialised below Shirou's elbow, ears perked, expression bright.

"Master Shirou! Mistress Rose! Mistress Ryuu!" The brownie bobbed a bow that managed to encompass all three of them simultaneously. "Topsy is calling the others since the coast is being clear now, sir! Mipsy is confirming that all teams are safe—Tripsy and Pockey are having small injuries from a surprise spider, but nothing that rest won't be fixing."

"Good. Have someone escort them back to camp. They rest until they're cleared." Shirou's tone shifted—the awkward theorist vanishing, replaced by the quiet pragmatist who'd been feeding and organising people since the day they'd arrived. "Once they're at a hundred per cent, light duties only until I say otherwise."

Topsy nodded so vigorously her ears flapped. "And the harvesting teams, sir?"

Shirou surveyed the intersection. Dead aranea stretched in every direction, carpeting the floor in overlapping layers of pale chitin and tangled legs. The corridor where Hrunting had detonated was simply... empty. A smooth-walled tunnel where the reanimator had been, scoured clean of everything.

"Send them in. Full teams, standard procedure. And—" He turned to the brownies. "Tell our kitchen team to set up the mobile station here. This is a good central point."

Rose raised an eyebrow. "You're cooking? Now?"

"Everyone needs to eat. We've been fighting for over an hour." He said it as if the answer were self-evident—which, knowing Shirou, it was. The man's priorities in any crisis ran: ensure nobody dies, ensure nobody goes hungry, ensure nobody's equipment is damaged, and then—far down the list—attend to his own concerns. Mother-hen didn't begin to cover it.

Brownies began apparating in—first in pairs, then in groups. The sharp *crack-crack-crack* of displaced air filled the intersection like popping corn as dozens of small figures materialised across the battlefield, each one carrying tools, tarpaulins, or the components of a mobile kitchen that Shirou and a team of brownies had apparently designed and assembled over the past three days.

Rose watched as Shirou directed the setup with the easy competence of a man who'd run field kitchens before—which, knowing his background, he probably had. A folding worktop here. A preservation ward there. A heating array that one of the brownies calibrated with a snap of tiny fingers.

The skrattes arrived next, apparated in by their brownie partners, carrying the heavier equipment—cleavers, bone saws, collection vats. They descended upon the nearest pile of aranea corpses with the businesslike efficiency of professionals who viewed the carnage not as horror but as inventory.

Ryuu oversaw the harvesting teams, directing traffic with clipped instructions that the various crews obeyed without question. She'd earned their respect over the past three days—partly through competence, partly through the quiet authority she carried like a second skin.

Rose found a section of clean-ish wall and leaned against it, legs aching, arms heavy. She cancelled her Bubble-Head Charm with a tap of her wand and took a breath of air that tasted of scorched ivory, monster ichor, and—already—whatever Shirou was heating on that portable stove.

She'd ask about the Reality Marble later. She'd ask about the bloodthirsty weapons later, and maybe ask whether Shirou was genuinely worried about losing his humanity or just cataloguing it as another data point.

Later.

Right now, she could hear Shirou arguing with a brownie about which aromatics they'd use for the monster-bone stock, and the normalcy of it was so absurd against the backdrop of hundreds of dead spider-monsters that Rose laughed—a short, involuntary bark that drew a glance from Ryuu and a puzzled ear-twitch from the nearest brownie.

Shirou looked up from his stock pot and met Rose's eyes. He opened his mouth, closed it, then settled on the expression she'd learned meant *I've just thought of something that's going to make someone angry.*

"Anyway—do you think Rin and Hermione will mind that they won't get a sample of that reanimator?" He gestured vaguely toward the empty corridor where Hrunting had erased the creature from existence. "Hopefully that wasn't a unique one-off."

Rose pictured Rin's face. Then Hermione's.

"Oh," she said, "they're going to kill you."

"Not unless we tell them."

Rose started laughing. Shirou followed after.

Both turned to Ryuu, their eyes gleaming with conspiratorial intent.

Ryuu, involuntarily, took a step back.

-=&<o>&=-

End

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