

## **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 3.6 Into the Deep**

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The screaming stopped.

Not gradually—not the trailing diminuendo of a voice giving out—but all at once, like a candle snuffed between wet fingers. One moment Shirou's agonised cries bled through the cocoon of malevolent flame that had swallowed him whole. The next: nothing.

Ryuu dropped from the gigantic sword, wind-gliding the descent to land twenty metres from the inferno. Her legs refused to move further. Her sword arm hung at her side, the wooden blade's edge kissing the cracked stone of the arena floor with a faint *tink* she barely registered. The silence where Shirou's voice had been was louder than any scream.

The Weapon loomed at the arena's centre, its mutilated body wreathed in the sickly aurora of the magicite's reconstitution. The cocoon of plasma and dark fire that encased Shirou pulsed with rhythmic malice—a heartbeat, except heartbeats sustained life. This sustained destruction. Through the distortion of superheated air, Ryuu could just make out a shape inside the molten prison. A silhouette. Still.

Not moving.

Not even from breathing.

*He's—*

She couldn't finish the thought. Refused to.

Three hundred metres above them, Rose Potter's broom carved a sharp banking turn. The redhead's face was a mask Ryuu hadn't seen on her in the handful of days they'd known each other—not the mischievous grin, not the sardonic half-smile, not even the focused intensity of a woman in combat. This was something hardened. Something that made the air around Rose feel brittle.

*"AVADA KEDAVRA!"*

The words tore from Rose's throat like something physical—like she was reaching into her chest and hurling pieces of herself at the monster. A bolt of green light, vivid as spring poison, streaked from the tip of her wand and struck the Weapon square in its reconstructing torso.

Nothing.

The green light splashed across the creature's hide like water on hot stone and evaporated. No damage. No reaction. The Weapon didn't even flinch. But Ryuu felt it—felt the bolt's passage through the air like a cold hand dragged across her skin. Whatever that spell was, it felt like the very opposite of life.

*"AVADA KEDAVRA!"*

A second bolt. Same trajectory. Same result. The deadly green light dissipated against the Weapon's flesh as though it had encountered something it could not comprehend. Something that existed outside the spell's jurisdiction.

*"AVADA KEDAVRA!"*

Third bolt. Third failure. Rose's voice had gone hoarse on the final syllable, cracking at the seam where rage met desperation.

The Weapon continued its reconstruction. The magicite embedded in its chest throbbed with that deep, wrong light.

Rose changed tack. Her wand arm snapped forward, her entire body rigid on the broom, knuckles bone-white around the handle. When she spoke next, her voice dropped an octave—low, controlled, trembling with something that was not fear.

"*CRUCIO!*"

The bolt that left her wand this time was not green. It was the colour of infected blood—a deep, bruised crimson that trailed wisps of dark intent like smoke from a funeral pyre. It struck the Weapon mid-torso, and this time—

This time, the monster reacted.

Its four remaining limbs seized. The massive seven-pointed-star sword clattered against the arena stone as the Weapon's grip spasmed open. Its dragonoid head threw back, jaws splitting wide in a soundless shriek. The humanoid torso convulsed, the face between its legs contorting into an expression of alien agony—lips peeling back from rows of grinding teeth, the eyes bulging in their sockets. The bony stumps where its wings had been twitched like severed nerves.

But the flame didn't stop. The cocoon of plasma around Shirou burned on.

Rose held the spell. Her face contorted—not with the effort of maintaining it, but with the rage that fuelled it.

The expression on Rose Potter's face was not cruelty. It was grief wearing fury's skin.

"Don't you dare!" Rose screamed at the Weapon, her wand arm trembling, emerald eyes blazing with reflected crimson light.

The Weapon writhed. Its limbs scrabbled against the arena floor, gouging trenches in the stone. Its magicite flickered—destabilised—and for one breathless moment Ryuu thought the flame might die, that whatever infernal mechanism sustained Shirou's burning prison might fail—

But the Weapon adapted. Its convulsions smoothed. The tremors in its limbs steadied. The agony Rose was inflicting upon it was being absorbed, metabolised, converted into something the creature could process. Its regeneration had not extended to repairing the damage cursed spear had wrought—Shirou's cursed wounds still wept their black and purple ichor—but the magicite's glow was strengthening again. Stabilising.

The flame around Shirou intensified.

And Ryuu stood there. Watching. Her legs locked. Her hands shaking.

*'Again.'*

The word surfaced from somewhere deep—from a place she'd bricked over with purpose and routine and the careful architecture of a life rebuilt after catastrophe. From the part of her that remembered Astraea Familia. That remembered standing in a dungeon not so different from this one, watching people she loved die whilst she stood and watched.

*'Again.'*

Kaguya's face. Alize's face. Lyra's, Neze's, Celty's—one after another, filing through her memory like pages in a book she'd read too many times. Each face carried the same expression at the end. The one that said *I'm sorry you have to see this*. The one that said *live*.

*Thump-thump.*

*Thump-thump.*

*Thump-thump.*

Her pulse hammered against her eardrums. The arena receded—the Weapon, the flame, Rose's screaming—all of it pulling away as though she were sinking into water, watching the surface shrink above her. The brownies were shouting something. Mipsy's high-pitched voice cut through the roar of plasma and the crash of the Weapon's limbs against stone, but the words dissolved before they reached Ryuu's comprehension.

*'What can I do?'*

The question was pathetic. She knew it was pathetic. She was Level Seven. She'd killed the juggernaut, floor bosses, and the monster that had destroyed her familia. She'd carved a path of vengeance through the Evils of Orario that still kept criminals awake at night years after the fact. She was not helpless. She refused to be helpless.

But her legs wouldn't move.

*'I don't like this feeling.'*

The trembling spread from her hands to her arms. To her chest. To the core of her where her mind met something deeper—something that predated thought, that lived in the marrow. The same core that had frozen in the dungeon all those years ago when she'd realised, with perfect horrible clarity, that everyone was going to die and there was nothing she could do about it.

*'I should do something.'*

The thought was almost comical in its impotence.

*'Anything.'*

And then something reached for her.

It came from inside—from the place between her mind and her falna, from the space where her goddess's blessing had once resided before death and rebirth and the severance of all ties to the divine. Except this wasn't her goddess's blessing. This was something else. Something new, or perhaps something very old that had been waiting for this exact moment of breaking.

Wrath.

The word erupted through her consciousness like magma through a fissure. Not anger—not the clean, purposeful fury she'd wielded during her vendetta—but *wrath*. The elemental form of it. The kind that existed before language, before civilisation, before the first mortal drew breath and looked at

an unjust world and raged. It filled her chest cavity like inhaled fire. It burned behind her eyes. It tasted of iron and sulphur and something sweet and terrible that had no name in any tongue she knew.

And alongside it—tangled through it like a vine through a blade—

Hope.

Not optimism. Not faith. Not the gentle reassurance of a friend's hand on your shoulder. This was hope in its rawest, most vicious form—the kind that survived annihilation, that clawed itself out of mass graves, that bloomed in scorched earth because it *refused* to accept that the world was done. It was belligerent. Aggressive. It sank its teeth into the hopelessness that had paralysed her and tore it apart like a dog worrying a rat.

Two presences. Two forces. Distinct yet interwoven, pressing against the inside of her skull, pouring into the channels where divine falna no longer flowed. She couldn't identify them—couldn't name them, couldn't see their faces—but she could feel their nature. One burned with the fury of injustice witnessed and refused. There was no righteousness in it—just rage, pure and scalding, the kind that preceded judgement rather than followed it. The other was colder, but fierce in its own way. A matchstick that dared to flicker in a blizzard. A small, stubborn flame that existed for no reason other than to prove that flames could exist in places where they shouldn't.

WRATH.

HOPE.

Something within Ryuu Lion-Astraea snapped.

Not broke. Not fractured. *Snapped*—the way a bowstring snaps when drawn past its tolerance, releasing all its stored energy in a single devastating instant. The paralysis shattered. The trembling stopped. Her legs unlocked. Her grip tightened on her sword until the leather wrapping creaked.

And then she was moving.

*"Agaris Alvesynth."*

The words left her mouth in a voice that wasn't entirely hers—deeper, rougher, resonant with frequencies that made the arena stone hum in sympathetic vibration. The enchantment ignited across her body. Flames erupted from her skin, from her hair, from the soles of her boots and the tips of her fingers—

But they were wrong.

Agaris Alvesynth was Alize Lovell's legacy. The enchantment she'd inherited from her cherished leader, the woman who'd embodied justice so completely that her very magic had been luminous—radiant, dazzling, brilliant white-gold, a fire that warmed without burning, that illuminated without blinding. The perfect expression of Alize's conviction that the world could be made right through courage and compassion.

The flames that wreathed Ryuu now were none of those things.

They were dark. Deep vermillion—the colour of arterial blood viewed through smoke. They crawled across her body like living things, curling around her arms, licking up her neck, pooling in her palms with a heat that warped the air into mirage-shimmer. Where Alize's flames had been a bonfire to gather around, these were the fires of a city put to the torch. Where Alize's enchantment had been justice, Ryuu's was retribution.

Wrath had corrupted the inheritance. Hope had set it loose.

"Mistress, no!"

Mipsy materialised at her left leg, small fingers wrapping around Ryuu's calf below the knee where the darkened flames hadn't yet reached. Volkey appeared at her right, both brownies clinging to her with desperate strength, their enormous eyes wide with terror—not of the Weapon, not of the battlefield, but of whatever they saw happening to the woman they'd sworn to protect.

"Mistress Ryuu must be stopping! Mistress Ryuu is being—"

Ryuu growled.

The sound came from her chest—not her throat. A vibration that rattled her ribs and made the brownies flinch. She shrugged them off with a violent twist of her hips—not gently, not carefully, but with the careless force of something that had stopped caring about collateral. Mipsy tumbled across the stone. Volkey caught herself mid-fall with a crack of apparition.

Ryuu charged.

The arena floor splintered beneath her boots with each stride. The vermilion flames trailed behind her like a comet's tail, scorching the stone black where they touched. Twenty metres. Fifteen. Ten. The cocoon of malevolent plasma loomed before her—a prison of molten light that still held Shirou's body in its burning embrace.

She plunged her hands into it.

The leidenfrost effect. The term surfaced in her mind from nowhere—from one of the two presences still filling her with their combined fury and defiance. A phenomenon where a liquid's own vapour creates a thin insulating layer when it contacts a surface significantly hotter than its boiling point. Her hands moved fast enough, her enchantment burned hot enough, that the plasma couldn't make direct contact with her skin. A microsecond of protection. Enough.

Her fingers found metal.

The cursed spear. Its shaft radiated malice—a deep, primal bloodlust that had nothing to do with the Weapon and everything to do with the nature of the weapon itself. The barbs bit into her palms as she gripped it. The spear wanted blood. It wanted violence. It recognised the wrath pouring through Ryuu's veins and it *sang*.

The leidenfrost effect protected her from the plasma.

It did nothing about the spear.

The metal was superheated—glowing cherry-red from its imprisonment in the Weapon's conjured inferno. The moment her grip closed around the shaft, the heat transferred. Instantaneous. Total. Her palms seared. The flesh of her fingers melted into the barbed surface of the spear, skin fusing with metal, the boundary between weapon and wielder dissolving in a hiss of vaporised tissue. The smell hit her—burnt pork and singed hair, the sickly-sweet stench of her own cooking flesh—and for a single instant the pain cut through even the wrath.

She didn't let go.

She *couldn't* let go. Her hands were part of the spear now, fused to it by heat and damage and the sheer force of her grip. And it didn't matter. The pain was fuel. The wrath consumed it, metabolised it, converted it into forward momentum the same way the Weapon had metabolised Rose's curse.

Ryuu pivoted. Twisted her entire body—hips, shoulders, the full rotational force of a Level Seven adventurer whose muscles had been enhanced beyond anything the natural world could produce. She drove the spear—and by extension her own fused hands—through the cocoon of plasma, hooked the barbed point around the shape inside, and pulled.

Shirou's body came free.

It rolled across the arena floor like a discarded thing. A charred, blackened shape that bore almost no resemblance to the man who'd cooked her dinner and Traced her weapons and scanned her body with embarrassing thoroughness not thirty minutes ago. The flesh that remained was cracked obsidian—split in places to reveal dull red beneath, like cooling lava. His hair was gone. His clothing was gone. The lines of his magical circuits, usually invisible, now glowed through the charred skin like fault lines in a volcanic plain, pulsing with a rhythm that was either the last echoes of life or the first stages of something else entirely.

His chest didn't move.

Not a rise. Not a fall. Not the smallest flutter of breath.

"Rose!" Ryuu's voice ripped from her throat, raw and commanding, stripped of every layer of composure and courtesy. "Tend to Shirou!"

Rose, still hovering above on her broom, her wand still trained on the Weapon, snapped her head toward the sound. For a fraction of a second her expression fractured—rage giving way to horror as she registered the charred shape on the arena floor. Then the horror hardened into something brittle and sharp and functional—the face of a woman who'd seen worse and survived it, who could fall apart later, who had a job to do *right now*—and she banked her broom into a dive.

She landed beside Shirou at speed, dismounting before the broom had fully stopped, her boots skidding across the stone. Her wand was already moving—sweeping over the ruin of his body in quick diagnostic arcs, her lips forming words Ryuu couldn't hear over the roar of her own heartbeat.

The Weapon stirred.

Ryuu turned to face it. The spear—*her* spear now, fused to her hands, its barbs embedded in her melted flesh—thrummed with eager violence. The darkened flames of her corrupted enchantment licked along its length, vermillion and hungry.

The creature was a wreck. Their combined assault had been devastating, and the damage the cursed spear had inflicted couldn't regenerate—those wounds still gaped, still wept their viscous black-purple ichor, still refused to acknowledge that healing was an option. Three of the five horns on its dragonoid head had been snapped to jagged stumps. Several jaw-sections from its primary maw were simply gone—torn away or shattered, leaving exposed bone and glistening tissue. Its wings were obliterated save for a single skeletal spur jutting from its back like a snapped mast. The face between its legs—that grotesque secondary visage—was cratered and mangled, one eye socket caved in, the other leaking fluid that steamed where it touched stone.

The large gash that Shirou's last attack had carved from chest to groin still gaped, refusing to heal. The magicite sat exposed above this wound—a fist-sized crystal pulsing with sickly prismatic light, its facets cracked in two places, one of them weeping a thin trail of luminous fluid.

The Weapon's body laboured. Whatever Rose had done to it—that crimson curse, the one that demanded cruelty to fuel it—had left marks the magicite couldn't simply erase. Its movements carried a stiffness, a hesitation, as though each limb required conscious effort to command. Its breathing—if the ragged bellows-action of its torso could be called breathing—hitched and stuttered.

Weakened. In pain. Vulnerable.

The wrath surged.

Ryuu charged.

She covered the distance in three strides—each one a detonation of force against the rubble-strewn stone, each one leaving a crater-print behind her. The Weapon saw her coming—its dragonoid head swivelling, its remaining jaws splitting open in a hiss of superheated air—but it was slow. Damaged. The curse-stiffness in its limbs cost it half a second of reaction time.

Half a second was a lifetime for a Level Seven elf at full sprint.

Ryuu wasn't versed in the use of a spear. She'd trained with swords—long and short, single and paired—and her body knew those patterns the way her lungs knew how to breathe. The spear in her fused hands was a foreign instrument, too long for her ingrained distances, too weighted toward the tip for her muscle memory's expectations. So she held it like what she knew. Like a very long sword. The shaft's barbs served as an adequate cutting edge; the length gave her leverage she'd never had with a blade.

She swung.

The first blow connected with the Weapon's torso—a diagonal cut that raked the barbed shaft across the creature's already-ravaged midsection. Not a killing blow. Not even close. But the darkened flames of her enchantment leapt from the spear's surface to the Weapon's flesh, and Gáe Bolg's curse bit into new tissue. Fresh wounds opened that would not heal. The Weapon staggered.

Ryuu didn't relent.

She drove the spear point into the face between the creature's legs—once, twice, three times in rapid succession, each thrust accompanied by a snarl that belonged more to an animal than an elf. The barbs caught flesh, tore it, left ragged channels in the grotesque visage that wept dark blood. The face's remaining eye bulged, its mouth gaped in a silent scream, and the Weapon's entire body shuddered as whatever perverse nerve cluster that secondary face contained was savaged.

The creature's sword came around in a horizontal arc—massive, heavy, the seven-pointed-star blade whistling through the air with enough force to bisect her at the waist. Ryuu threw herself sideways, rolling under the swing, the spear's length making the evasion ungainly but sufficient. The blade passed over her close enough for the displaced air to tug at her hair.

She was on her feet before the Weapon could recover its swing. Drove forward again. Slashed the spear across its thigh where Shirou's earlier attacks had already carved deep furrows. Stabbed at the gash in its torso, aiming for the exposed magicite but falling short as the Weapon pivoted its bulk away with a speed that a creature its size should not have possessed.

*"Iruvute!"*

Flames erupted from her hands—not the luminous green of her usual magic but the deep vermillion of her corrupted enchantment, channelled through the spear and hurled at the monster's magicite. The fire splashed against the crystal's surface and the Weapon shrieked—a sound felt more than heard, a subsonic vibration that made her teeth ache and her vision swim. The

magicite flickered. Destabilised. For one heartbeat its prismatic glow guttered like a candle in wind.

But the Weapon recovered. Lurched forward with its remaining sword in a clumsy overhead chop. Ryu sidestepped—barely—the blade cratering the stone where she'd stood, and retaliated with a savage upward thrust that caught the creature under what passed for its chin. Gáe Bolg's barbs sank deep. The creature's jaw cracked. Dark fluid sprayed.

She called the orbs forth. Not carefully. Not strategically. Not in the measured accumulations she'd been trained to maintain. She *vomited* them into existence—dozens, scores, a constellation of vermillion-stained light that orbited her body in chaotic ellipses, each one pulsing with the wrath that had replaced her depleted reserves.

She didn't let them build. Didn't let them grow or synchronise or achieve their maximum yield. The moment each orb coalesced it was launched—hurled at the Weapon in a constant, unending barrage. Light and fire and concussive force, one after another after another, a stream of violence that made no distinction between precision and waste.

Stab. Fire. Light orb. Stab. Slash. Two orbs. *Iruvute*. Stab. Three orbs detonating against its knee. Slash across its remaining horn-stump. Fire. Fire. *More fire*.

Dust erupted from the impacts—pulverised stone, vaporised ichor, particles of shattered chitin and scorched flesh filling the air in a choking cloud. Ryu's line of sight vanished. The Weapon disappeared behind a curtain of debris so thick she couldn't see her own hands. She didn't care. She knew where it was. Could feel it through the vibrations in the arena floor, through the sympathetic resonance between Gáe Bolg's curse and the wounds it had already inflicted. The spear *knew* where its prey was wounded. And it told her.

She stabbed blindly into the dust. Felt the barbs find purchase. Twisted. Tore. Launched another volley of orbs at point-blank range, the detonations buffeting her own body, the shockwaves cracking her ribs and splitting the skin

of her forearms. She felt the bones break. Felt the flesh part. Didn't care. Couldn't care. The wrath had no room for self-preservation.

More. More violence. More fire. More fury.

She didn't know how long it lasted. Time had ceased to function in any linear sense—there was only the rhythm. Thrust and cut and burn and blast. The spear in her fused hands had become an extension of her wrath, and the wrath was bottomless, fed by the two presences still filling her with their combined fury and defiance.

When the dust cleared—not gradually but all at once, dispersed by a final volley of orbs that detonated outward in a ring—Ryuu saw what she'd done.

The Weapon was mutilated.

The word was inadequate, but no better one existed in any language she spoke. Its torso was a lattice of overlapping wounds—Gáe Bolg's cursed gashes layered over the burns of her enchantment, layered over the cratered impacts of her luminous orbs, layered over each other until the original surface was no longer identifiable. Black-purple ichor coated every surface—the monster's body, the arena floor, Ryuu's hands and arms and chest. The face between its legs was barely recognisable as a face anymore—a pulped mass of torn tissue and shattered bone, one jaw hanging by a single tendon, the eyes reduced to weeping sockets.

Its sword arm trembled. Its remaining legs—two of the original four, the others having been severed at various joints during her onslaught—buckled under the weight of a body that had sustained more damage than any organic structure should be capable of absorbing.

The magicite still pulsed. Damaged. Flickering. But still there, still broadcasting its prismatic light, still feeding the Weapon's stubborn refusal to die.

*'Finish it. Finish it now.'*

Ryuu raised the spear. Drew back for a thrust aimed directly at the crystal—

And the Weapon raised its sword.

Not at her.

At itself.

The first cut bisected its own lower body—a vertical stroke that cleaved through the remnants of its quadrupedal rear, through the ruined face between its legs, through the junction where humanoid torso met bestial haunches. The sound was—

Ryuu had heard many sounds in dungeons. The screams of dying adventurers. The wet crack of bone giving way. The bubbling hiss of acid dissolving flesh. She had catalogued them all, filed them away in the portion of her mind where unpleasant truths were stored for later processing.

This was worse than all of them.

The Weapon was eating itself.

The secondary face—the mangled, destroyed visage between its legs—had not been as dead as Ryuu had thought. As the creature hacked its own body apart, the face's remaining jaw unhinged and began to *consume*. Chitin, muscle, bone, ichor—all of it disappeared into that gaping maw with a wet, grinding efficiency that defied biology. The severed quadrupedal section didn't fall away. It was pulled in. Absorbed. Integrated. The face chewed and swallowed with mechanical relentlessness, and with every mouthful, the creature's upper body *grew*.

The remaining two legs straightened. Thickened. The joints cracked and reformed with sounds like gunshots, the musculature beneath the chitin plates swelling as it redistributed the mass it was consuming. The torso elongated—growing taller, broader, the hunched posture of its previous form giving way to something more upright. More bipedal. More *deliberate*. The

dragonoid head remained, but the proportions changed—the neck shortened, the skull widened, the remaining two horns curving forward like a bull's.

The secondary face finished its meal and sealed itself—disappearing beneath fresh chitin plates that slid across its surface like tectonic plates rearranging a continent. The bony wing-stump on its back absorbed into the shoulder mass. The creature stood.

*Stood.* Fully upright. Two legs. Two arms. One still gripping the seven-pointed-star sword. The other—the left, the one that had held its magic focus—now ended in a fist of compacted chitin and bone, the fingers fused into a single mass that radiated heat visible to the naked eye.

It was taller now. The consumed mass had added to its height, its bulk, its density. The wounds Ryu had inflicted—the ones that *could* heal—were gone, buried beneath new armour plates that gleamed with the wet sheen of freshly grown chitin. Only the cursed wounds remained: the gash from chest to groin, the puncture wounds in its upper torso, the black-weeping channels where the spear's barbs had torn irreparable damage into its flesh.

The magicite pulsed from within the chest gash—exposed, vulnerable, but now protected by a body that had sacrificed half its mass to become something harder to kill.

The hope within Ryu faltered.

It didn't vanish—not entirely—but it flickered, guttered, the way a candle flame wavered when a door opened and let the cold air in. The creature before her was not the same creature she'd been fighting. It was leaner, faster, more compact. Its stance spoke of predatory intelligence—weight balanced, sword angled, that fused left fist raised in a guard position that any warrior would recognise. Whatever animal cunning had guided its previous form had been refined by the self-surgery into something sharper. Something that *learned*.

The wrath in her chest—the bottomless furnace that had sustained her charge, her assault, her relentless barrage—

Snuffed.

Not slowly. Not by degrees. It went out like a flame deprived of air. One moment it was there, filling her with its darkened fire, and the next it was simply absent—leaving behind a hollow space that ached with the memory of its presence. The two forces that had poured themselves into her—wrath and hope, fury and defiance—withdrew. Not gently. Not with apology. They simply *left*, as though their attention had been pulled elsewhere by something more pressing, and Ryu was no longer relevant to whatever calculation they were performing.

She stood in the arena, her hands fused to a cursed spear, her body battered and broken and running on nothing but the dregs of adrenaline, and she felt—

Empty.

The vermillion flames of her corrupted enchantment flickered. Dimmed. The orbs that had orbited her in their chaotic constellation winked out one by one, like dying stars collapsing into themselves.

The Weapon watched her. Its remaining horn-adorned head tilted at an angle that was almost curious—almost *amused*, if something without recognisable emotions could be amused. As though it recognised that whatever force had been driving its opponent had withdrawn. As though it was waiting to see what would happen when the puppet's strings were cut.

Ryu's knees buckled. She caught herself on the spear—drove the butt of the shaft into the ground and leaned on it, her fused hands screaming as the barbs shifted in the melted flesh. Her ribs ground against each other where the orb-detonations had cracked them. Her forearms were split open and weeping. Her reserves were gone—not low, not diminished, *gone*, scraped to the absolute bottom by the corrupted enchantment and the orb barrage and the fire and the fury.

The magicite pulsed.

The Weapon's chest expanded.

The gash began to glow.

And from somewhere deep within Ryuu's consciousness—from a place that was not her own mind, that existed in the space between thought and divine resonance, in the liminal territory where mortal will brushed against something infinitely larger—

A voice.

Melodious. Light as blown glass. Carrying the faint harmonic of cosmic distances—the sound of starlight, if starlight had a sound. It was amusement and exasperation and a very specific flavour of maternal disappointment, the kind that said *I expected better and I still expect better and you will deliver better because I have not finished with you yet.*

"Oh my, those fiends don't have any staying power at all."

A second voice answered the first—warmer, rounder, carrying the crackle of a hearth fire and the smell of bread baking and the particular quality of a home you return to after a long journey. A voice that made you want to sit down, take off your boots, and admit that you were tired.

"Yes, just because the whole of Sloan isn't embroiled in a never-ending war doesn't mean they can simply drop any potential follower willy-nilly."

The first voice again, edged now with something that was not quite anger but lived in its neighbourhood—the irritation of someone who expected standards and had just watched them go unmet: "How disappointing. We even stepped aside, as I acknowledge that some of my justice falls under your purview of violence."

"True," the second conceded, with the philosophical equanimity of someone who'd had this argument before and would have it again. "Even home and hospitality fall under your purview of hope. But not so much change."

A pause. The kind of pause that carried weight—that contained a conversation conducted in a language that predated sound, in the space between one

heartbeat and the next. Ryuu felt them conferring. Felt the two presences—not the ones that had filled her with wrath and hope, but these new voices, these *different* voices, these beings who spoke of justice and violence and home and hope as though they were discussing departmental responsibilities at a particularly frustrating divine committee meeting—assess what had happened, find it wanting, and arrive at a mutual conclusion with the decisive efficiency of women who had no more patience for half-measures.

"Anyway—"

Their voices merged. Became one. Not harmonised—unified, two instruments playing the same note at the same frequency with perfect synchronisation, the combined resonance powerful enough to vibrate the marrow in Ryuu's bones, to rattle the spear in her fused hands, to make the arena floor *hum* beneath her broken body.

"BEGONE."

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End

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