

# Is it Wrong for a Sword to Remain Sheathed Against Injustice?

## Story Starts

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## Chapter 2

### Suspicion Has an (Im)polite Face and a Pocket Picked

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Ryuu watched him through the food cart's serving window.

The man—Emiya, according to the Guild records—moved through the complex's back entrance with an unhurried gait, offering fried potato puffs to the Ganesha Familia member standing guard before slipping inside.

She bit into a piece of kakiage—something Kaguya had eagerly accepted when he'd offered it for free. The batter shattered cleanly between her teeth—light, impossibly thin, holding together julienned vegetables in a lattice that crunched without grease. She'd dabbed it in salt rather than the dark dipping sauce he'd provided, and the choice proved correct. The salt drew out a sweetness from the vegetables she hadn't expected.

It was, by any honest measure, excellent.

This made things worse.

"Lion, you're doing it again."

Ryuu turned to find Kaguya sitting at the opposite end of the cart, eyes closed, poised as she brought a bowl of noodles to her lips and slurped.

"I'm observing."

"You're glaring. There's a difference. One involves your eyebrows doing that—" Alise leaned in from the side, gesturing innocently. "—thing."

"My eyebrows are perfectly still."

Alise brought a singular noodle to her mouth, her hands shaking from the awkward grip, and slurped it. "If you say so."

The hours were wrong.

That had been the first thing. Astraea Familia ran night patrols through Orario's most volatile districts—they returned to Stardust Garden in the small hours, winding down as the city's pulse slowed to its lowest ebb. And it was precisely during those dead hours, when Ryou was cleaning her equipment or about to turn in, that she'd hear the door next to theirs open and close. The creak of wooden wheels on flagstone. Footsteps, measured and deliberate, heading out into streets where no sane vendor would find customers.

She'd mentioned it to Kaguya.

"You're spying on the neighbour now?" Kaguya had said, not looking up from oiling her blade. "He sells noodles, Lion. From a cart. If that's the face of Evilus, we've already lost."

"His schedule doesn't align with any reasonable business model. He departs when there's no foot traffic—"

"He could be selling at the pleasure quarter."

"But—"

"Lion. Go to sleep."

Of course, the next day she'd dragged herself to the Guild.

Sophie—the elf receptionist who'd been Ryou's own adviser when she first registered—confirmed that Emiya was a registered adventurer. Had a Falna. Went into the Dungeon regularly and exchanged drops through official channels. His paperwork was in order.

Sophie had also, unprompted, described his tempura as 'transcendent,' which was notable given Sophie's well-documented contempt for males who were

not of Elven heritage. The woman had once refused to process a human adventurer's drop exchange because he'd addressed her as 'miss' rather than 'madam.' And yet here she was, waxing lyrical about battered vegetables prepared by a human man who looked like he hadn't slept properly in months.

When Ryuú pressed for details—his deity's identity, his Familia affiliation, his residential history—the shutters came down. Not Sophie's. Rose Fannet's.

The werewolf adviser materialised behind Sophie with the silent efficiency of someone who'd been listening from the start. Every query beyond his public registration was blocked. Personal information. Familia details. Prior residency records. All sealed under the adviser's discretion—which was, admittedly, quite standard.

"Is there a formal complaint you'd like to file?" Rose had asked, her amber eyes flat as river stones.

"No."

"Then I believe we're finished."

Arrangements existed, Ryuú knew, where a deity's child lived separately from their god or goddess. It wasn't common, but certain Familias operated that way—particularly merchant or crafting Familias like Hephaestus's.

But that only deepened the question. The mansion beside their dormitory wasn't modest housing. Even Astraea Familia, with a captain at Level 4 and most of their members at Level 3, were still paying off their own residence. Whatever income Emiya earned from dungeon delving and food vending, it shouldn't have been enough—not for a man without so much as a deity-chosen title. He hadn't even levelled up.

She'd gone to Shakti next. If anyone had vetted the man, it would be the captain of Ganesha Familia—the organisation responsible for Orario's internal security.

Shakti had paused, considered the question, and offered: "He's probably clean."

*'Probably.'*

"You've investigated him?"

"We're aware of him."

"That isn't the same thing."

"Lion." Shakti's expression had carried something between sympathy and mild irritation. "We have a city under siege, factories burning, and adventurers dying in the Dungeon from coordinated ambushes. I don't have the resources to conduct a full investigation into every food vendor with odd hours." She'd shifted her weight, glancing toward the street. "Besides—he regularly feeds members of our Familia. If he were part of Evilus, he could have poisoned or sabotaged us by now."

Ryuu had wanted to point out that members of Ganesha Familia likely possessed Abnormal Resistance—that poison would be a poor vector regardless. But by then, Shakti had already moved on with her patrol.

Kaguya, when she'd learned of Ryuu's continued enquiries, had pulled her aside after patrol.

"Drop it."

"But—"

"I'm not asking."

So Ryuu had dropped it. Officially.

She lifted another piece of kakiage to her lips. The salt clung to the ridges of batter, each crystal a small bright point of flavour against the clean, sweet oil. She chewed slowly, methodically, and hated that it was this good.

To her left, Alise was having a losing battle with her utensils.

Alise held them with the rigid determination of someone who'd been shown the correct grip exactly once and was now trying to replicate it through sheer force of will. Her knuckles had gone white, a bead of sweat forming at her temple. Whether that was from the steam rising off the miso tonkotsu udon or from concentration alone, Ryuu suspected the latter.

Not realising her thoughts mirrored those of the very man she'd been suspecting.

Emiya ducked back into the food cart. He moved to his station and resumed clearing his cooking area without a word, as though he hadn't just hand-delivered food to thirty people across an active rubble site. His hands were quick and precise—cloth over the counter in long sweeps, utensils returned to their exact positions.

"So what are we looking at, Shakti?" Alise asked, slurping a noodle with a flash of triumph she immediately smothered behind professionalism.

Emiya glanced at her—just barely, the faintest twitch of reaction.

Ryuu filed it away. He noticed things. That much was becoming difficult to ignore.

"At first glance, the same as the previous raids," Shakti replied, her voice carrying the weight of someone who'd seen too many similar incidents. "An attack on Orario's magic-stone-item production industry."

She paused. "But thanks to your timely intervention, we managed to survey the factory before everything burned down. This time, we noticed something had been stolen."

Ryuu's fingers tightened around her kakiage. They were discussing operational details—here, at a food cart, with a civilian vendor three paces away.

"Alise," Ryu said, keeping her voice level. Her eyes shifted between Emiya and her captain. "I think we shouldn't be discussing sensitive information in public."

There. A reasonable objection. Any member of the Familia with an ounce of operational awareness would have said the same.

Alise waved her off. "It's fine."

It was not fine.

"And that was?" Alise asked, finally picking up the fork with visible relief—though she made a creditable attempt at making the switch seem casual. It was not casual. Ryu had watched her wrestle those chopsticks for the better part of ten minutes.

"A batch of magic-stone ignition pieces," Shakti answered, her tone grave.

Behind the counter, Emiya's hands stopped moving.

It was brief. A fraction of a second—his cloth stalling against the counter before resuming its path. Anyone else would have missed it. Ryu did not miss it.

*'He recognised that.'*

"Ignition pieces...?" Alise cocked her head, her fork pausing halfway to her mouth.

"Think of them as the switches that activate a magical device," Shakti explained, gesturing slightly. "They're an integral part of all magic items, right down to the humble magic-stone torch."

The example landed. Magic-stone torches—every adventurer carried them. They came in all shapes and sizes, but the internal mechanisms were largely the same. If the stolen components were integral to devices that basic, then the applications extended to anything built on magic-stone engineering.

Which meant the enemy wasn't stealing raw materials. They were stealing the capability.

"What do you suppose the enemy wants with them?" Kaguya asked, leaning forward.

Ryuu looked at Emiya.

He was clearing his cooking area. His movements had resumed their measured, unhurried rhythm—but something had shifted. The set of his jaw, perhaps. The angle of his gaze, directed down at his hands rather than at the conversation happening three paces from him. He was thinking. She was certain of it. Whatever Shakti had just said had connected to something he already knew.

She narrowed her eyes.

He looked up. Met her gaze with that flat, unreadable expression—the one that gave away absolutely nothing while somehow communicating that he was fully aware he was being watched and could not possibly care less.

*'What do you know, Emiya?'*

She held the look for a beat longer than necessary. He didn't flinch. Didn't look away. Just held it with the patience of someone who'd been stared down by far worse than an elf with suspicions and a piece of kakiage.

"Oh, children, you're still here!"

Everyone turned towards the melodious voice that cut through the tension like sunlight through clouds.

Goddess Astraea stood at the edge of the food cart's canopy, her walnut hair catching the afternoon light. Her starry blue eyes swept the scene—the half-eaten bowls, the scattered utensils, Shakti's presence—and rather than concern, her expression settled into warm approval. Her children were eating properly. That, apparently, was what mattered.

"Oh, Mr Emiya!" She perked up. "Will you be coming to Maria's Orphanage today?"

Ryuu's gaze snapped between her goddess and the man she'd been watching all afternoon.

*'He knows our goddess by name?'*

"I'll be heading there after we finish here, Lady Astraea."

The words hit before Ryuu could process them.

*Lady.*

Not Goddess. Not even the clumsy honorifics most civilians stumbled through when addressing a deity directly. Just—*Lady*. As though Astraea were a noblewoman he'd met at market, rather than a divine being who had descended from Tenkai.

"That's *Goddess* Astraea to you!"

The snap left her mouth before she could stop it. Every pair of eyes at the cart turned to her—Alise mid-chew, Kaguya with one eyebrow raised, Shakti with the expression of someone who'd just decided this was no longer her problem.

The silence stretched for exactly two heartbeats.

Ryuu felt the tips of her ears redden. She kept her chin raised regardless.

*'It needed to be said.'*

But Astraea simply held her cheek with one hand, tilting her head with a smile that carried not a trace of offence. "But I like being called Lady Astraea." She turned to Emiya with that gentle, impossible warmth. "It has a certain charm, don't you think?"

"I appreciate the lenience," Emiya replied, already turning back to his counter. The ghost of something that might have been amusement crossed his face before vanishing behind his usual flat composure.

Kaguya snorted quietly into her noodles. Alise made no effort whatsoever to hide her grin.

Ryuu's ears burned hotter.

*'I am not wrong. It is a matter of proper respect.'*

She set her kakiage down with careful precision and rose to her feet, brushing salt from her fingers. If Emiya was heading to the orphanage—the same orphanage their goddess frequented, where the children Astraea Familia helped support lived—then that was simply another data point. Another thread in a pattern she hadn't yet untangled.

And if she happened to ensure their goddess wasn't walking there in the company of an unvetted, untitled, suspiciously well-funded food vendor with no visible Familia affiliation, then that was simply good operational practice.

"I'll escort you," Ryuu said.

It was not a request.

Alise opened her mouth—likely to say something unhelpful—but caught Kaguya's eye and thought better of it.

"That's very kind of you, Ryuu," Astraea said, as though her child had just offered to carry the shopping rather than announced a one-woman security detail. "But I already have Neze and Noin here."

She gestured behind her, and sure enough—two of their Familia members stood a short distance back, clearly having accompanied their goddess on the walk over.

"We're almost done here," Shakti interjected, glancing across her own people still cataloguing the site. "Why don't you all take it easy for the day? It's been a while since your Familia had a proper rest."

She turned to Ryuu. "Some of you are probably tense from all the Evilus activity."

Ryuu's ears reddened again.

"Oooh, yeah—let's all come with to the orphanage!" Alise perked up immediately, any pretence of professionalism abandoned.

Shakti turned to her left. "Hey, Ardee—you can retire for the day as well if you want. You've been up since before daylight, right?"

Emiya looked at Ryuu. That same flat, patient expression.

"Sure," he said.

The conversation dissolved into overlapping chatter—Alise already planning what to bring for the children, Kaguya muttering something about needing a bath first, Neze volunteering to run back and let the rest of the Familia know. Ardee's cheerful voice pierced through everything as she **asked** to accompany them as well.

Through all of it, Emiya folded his cart. Canopy down in precise thirds. Tools stowed. Surfaces wiped. Each movement economical, practised, utterly unremarkable.

Ryuu narrowed her eyes.

Kaguya coughed once—sharp and deliberate—and when Ryuu glanced over, that eyebrow was raised again.

Another warning to drop it.

Her ears reddened in response.

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*Tick.*

The tick on Shirou's forehead pulsed with each wobble of the cart's wheels over cobblestone.

Behind him, through the yatai's serving window, Astraea's gentle laughter mixed with the animated chatter of Noin. Neze and Lyra had been sent ahead

to gather the rest of the Familia. The goddess had settled onto the chairs he'd laid out at the far end of the cart with the ease of someone who'd been offered a palanquin rather than a food cart that smelled faintly of dashi and soy sauce.

Shirou didn't mind the additional weight—he'd put proper suspension on the yatai for exactly this sort of thing. He'd offered, after all.

He just hadn't expected the entourage.

"—and there he was, arse bare as a baby's, clinging to the window ledge three stories up!"

Ardee walked to his right, her hands cutting through the afternoon air as she painted the scene with the enthusiasm of someone who'd shared this particular story with everyone who'd listen.

"Screaming 'I can explain!' while his wife's throwing his boots at him from above and the other three women are arguing in the street about who he promised what to."

Shirou kept his eyes forward. "Isn't it common for adventurers to—"

"Oh, sure, sure." Ardee waved a dismissive hand. "Multiple partners, open arrangements—the gods and goddesses practically encourage it, sometimes joining in. But this lad hadn't told any of them about the others. Four separate women, four separate promises of exclusivity. We got called because the neighbours reported a 'public indecency disturbance.'" She snorted. "The indecency was that backside. Hairiest thing I've ever seen, and I've fought Barbarians on the twenty-fourth floor."

A few paces behind them, Alise's voice rang out clear and bright.

"Kaguya, you're walking too slowly! Your legs are longer than mine—you have no excuse!"

"My legs are carrying the dignity you abandoned somewhere around the third district."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means you lost the battle with the noodles—in front of our Goddess, no less."

"Hey, it wasn't that bad! The cook gave me a fork!"

"And the noodles still slid off. You had to shovel them above the rim of the bowl into your mouth like a four-year-old. It was embarrassing."

Shirou's second tick joined the first.

To his left, Lion matched his pace with military precision. Her hand rested on the hilt of her wooden sword—Alfs Lumina. The history of the weapon had whispered itself to him the moment he'd first laid eyes on it. Holy wood from an elven homeland, shaped by Goibniu's craft. A weapon that carried the weight of a forest's prayer in its grain.

Worthy of respect.

Less worthy of respect was the way she held it. Angled toward him. Hand ready to draw. As though Shirou might suddenly decide that pulling an udon cart through a street whilst a goddess sat in the back, surrounded by second-class adventurers, was the ideal moment for treachery.

He adjusted his grip on the cart handles and said nothing.

Ryuu said nothing louder.

"—so then Shakti had to write the formal citation," Ardee continued, wiping a tear from her eye, "and under 'Nature of Offence' she put 'Involuntary exhibition of posterior to twelve civilians, one cat person, and a member of the Dian Cecht Familia who filed a separate complaint about how they would never look at anything with fur the same again.'"

"Did the complaint go anywhere?"

"The Dian Cecht one? No. Shakti told them it'd fade with time." Ardee grinned widely.

Shirou allowed himself the ghost of a smile. He turned his attention to the route ahead, mentally cataloguing what he still needed.

He'd scored a jackbird's egg that morning—a lucky find—and had already decided to splurge a little for the orphanage. Normally he'd just offload the remaining noodles and dashi; he'd been making large batches ever since Syr introduced him to Maria. But today called for something different.

Before setting up the chairs for Lady Astraea, he'd quietly retrieved the sack of rice from his gate and tucked it into the cart while no one was looking.

Cabbage. He needed several heads—firm ones, the kind that shredded clean into thin ribbons for the bed beneath the cutlets. Bread for the panko—he'd have to buy whole loaves and process them himself, since nobody in Orario sold proper breadcrumbs. Dry the slices, crush them roughly. Eggs for the wash. Flour.

The protein was the real question. Whole chickens would stretch further. He could break them down himself, pound the breasts flat and even, and get consistent pieces for the children. But pork loin... the fat content would crisp better in the oil. Richer. More satisfying. The children at Maria's were thin. They needed calories.

Though if he bought the whole chicken, he could save the bones for paitan—a decent substitute for the tonkotsu.

Both, then. He'd buy both.

"Emiya."

Lion's voice cut through his mental shopping list like her sword through goblin hide.

"The next turning leads past the wholesale market. You're going straight."

He blinked. Adjusted course. The cart's wheels complained as he angled left.

"Thank you."

The elf's eyes narrowed, as though gratitude from him was itself suspicious.

From inside the yatai, Astraea's voice drifted forward, warm and clear.

"Shirou, would you like to split the cost with our Familia?"

This was the most he'd exchanged with the goddess. They usually visited the orphanage at different times, and Maria had only briefly introduced him while he and Syr were finishing the udon distribution.

*'Maria must have told her about me.'*

"That would be kind but unnecessary, my lady. I came into a significant amount of valis this morning. But I'm sure the orphanage would appreciate anything extra."

He could feel Lion's glare sharpen at how he'd addressed the goddess. Again.

Astraea was quiet for a moment. When she spoke again, the warmth hadn't left, but something heavier sat beneath it.

"What will you be preparing?"

"Pork and chicken cutlets, steamed rice, and cabbage to balance out the grease, my lady."

"We'll make sure to help with the preparations!" Alise declared from behind him.

"With your help, you'd probably poison the orphanage," Kaguya replied.

Shirou couldn't help but shake his head as they made for the wholesale market before entering the Daedalus labyrinth.

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The Daedalus Street labyrinth swallowed them whole. Crooked buildings leaned against one another like drunks after last call, their upper storeys blocking out the sky in a patchwork of rotting timber and stained plaster.

Shirou knew these streets well enough—more than two months of deliveries to Maria's had burned the route into muscle memory—but familiarity did nothing to dispel the wrongness that settled over him like a second skin.

Too quiet.

Daedalus was never quiet. Even during the worst of Evilus's campaign, the labyrinth's residents clung to their routines with the stubborn tenacity of people who had nowhere else to go. Washing lines should have stretched between windows. Children should have been darting through the narrow passages. Old women should have been shouting at each other across the gap between buildings barely wide enough for his cart.

Nothing.

The washing lines hung empty. Doors sat closed. Shutters drawn tight in the middle of the day. The only movement was a stray cat that bolted across their path and vanished into a crack in the masonry.

Shirou's hands tightened on the cart handles.

Behind him, the conversation had died. Alise and Kaguya had stopped bickering. Ardee's easy chatter had fallen away. The soft, greased-up creak of his yatai's suspension felt deafening against the stillness.

Then—distant. Faint. A sound carried on the still air between the leaning buildings.

Screaming.

Not one voice. Many. High-pitched. Young.

Kaguya's head snapped toward the sound, her dark eyes wide. Her jaw went tight.

"The orphanage."

The word hit them like a physical blow. For half a heartbeat, nobody moved. Then everything happened at once.

Alise drew her sword. The blade caught what little light filtered through the overhead maze and threw it back as molten gold. Her jaw set hard, that easy warmth in her eyes replaced by something Shirou recognised. He'd worn it himself, once. A thousand times.

"Move! All of you, now!"

Kaguya was already running. Ardee half a step behind. Noin vaulted from the yatai and hit the ground running, falling into step behind Kaguya without breaking stride.

Alise turned to Shirou. Her red hair whipped across her face as she pointed back toward the cart.

"Emiya! Get Lady Astraea somewhere safe—away from here!"

"You cannot be serious!"

Ryuu's voice cracked through the chaos like a whip. She stepped between Shirou and Alise, her hand white-knuckled on her weapon's grip.

"He is unvetted. His Familia is unknown. His presence here could be—"

"Ryuu."

Astraea's voice was quiet. Not raised. Not sharp. Simply present, in the way that a stone is present at the bottom of a river—immovable and certain. The goddess had risen from her seat inside the yatai, her starry blue eyes steady.

"Go. The children need you."

Something passed across Ryuu's face. A war fought and lost in the space between heartbeats. She turned to Shirou, and the look she gave him could have stripped paint from ironwork.

"If a single hair on her head is harmed, Emiya, I will find you. And what follows will not be quick."

She didn't wait for his response. Her legs coiled, and she launched upward, catching the edge of a second-storey windowsill, then a gutter, then the roofline—each movement precise, economical, brutal in its efficiency. Within seconds, she was a blur against the skyline, leaping between buildings toward the screaming.

Shirou couldn't help himself.

"'I will find you' isn't much of a threat if I'm your neighbour," he called after her rapidly shrinking back.

The misstep was subtle—a fractional hitch in her landing on the next rooftop, barely a stumble. But he'd seen it.

Good. She'd heard him.

Shirou shook his head and stood in the empty street, caught in a particular quandary. His cart sat behind him. The goddess stood inside it. And somewhere ahead, children were being taken.

*'Don't.'*

The word rose from somewhere deep. The part of him that wanted the quiet. The part that had chosen to drift through Orario, coast by, keep his head down. The part that was screaming at him right now: *'This is public. Very public. This isn't passing information to Rose. This isn't pulling some adventurer from a small Familia out of trouble on a half-empty floor.'*

He shook his head. Once. Hard.

His eyes swept upward, scanning the roofline for elevation. There—a tenement block three streets east, its chimney stack rising above the surrounding mess of architecture like a broken finger pointing at the sky. High enough. Clear sightline.

He moved toward the cart to retrieve Astraea, and a figure burst from a side street directly into his path.

Syr.

She was breathing hard, her grey hair plastered to her forehead with sweat. Her serving apron was still tied around her waist—she'd run here from the direction of the orphanage, or near enough. Her eyes were wild, darting between Shirou and the direction of the screaming.

"Shirou—the orphanage—"

"Why are you here?"

"I was bringing supplies for Maria when I saw people in robes heading toward—"

"Stop."

He cut her off. There was no time. His mind was already three steps ahead, plotting trajectories, calculating angles. He turned to Astraea.

"My lady, I apologise for what I'm about to do."

Before either woman could respond, Shirou pulled Astraea from the yatai—hurried but gentle, one hand steadying her shoulder. Then he swept his right arm beneath the goddess's knees and his left beneath Syr's, and lifted them both off their feet. One in each arm, half-cradled against his chest. Astraea weighed almost nothing. Syr made a sound like a startled bird.

He reinforced his legs.

The ground cracked beneath his feet as he launched skyward. Wind screamed past them. Syr's fingers dug into his shoulder as she let out a strangled shriek. Astraea's walnut hair streamed upward like a banner. The roofline rushed to meet them, and Shirou landed on the tenement's flat top with a crack that split the nearest roof tile clean in two.

He set them down. Gently. Both women stared at him—Syr with her mouth hanging open, Astraea with an expression he couldn't read.

"Please." He looked at them both. "What I'm about to do—keep it secret. Both of you. I don't really care for the spotlight."

Syr nodded. A small, jerky motion.

Astraea held his gaze for a long moment, then inclined her head. Once.

Shirou turned toward the orphanage.

He reinforced his eyes. The world sharpened. Colours brightened. Details that should have been blurred at this distance snapped into focus with painful clarity.

The orphanage's front door hung from one hinge. Robed figures flooded the street outside—more than twenty, dark cloth wrapped around their faces. Several dragged struggling children by the arms whilst others raided the neighbouring dwellings, pulling out fathers, mothers, daughters, and sons. Further back, near the alley that connected to the main Daedalus thoroughfare, two more figures stood watch.

And beyond the building, through a gap in the walls, he caught movement. More robes. More children. A cart with a covered bed, the kind used for transporting livestock.

His blood went cold and still.

Shirou planted his feet. Four hundred meders. Crosswinds mattered little at this distance—not with his bow, not with the weight of the projectiles. Maybe give or take, fifty depending on the target. His circuits hummed to life, magic flowing through channels etched into his soul across lifetimes.

Steel sang into existence.

Several swords materialised to his right, driving point-first into the rooftop stone with sharp, ringing impacts. Identical make—plain, weighted for penetrating power rather than elegance.

Their heft was nothing compared to the Noble Phantasms he'd launched as arrows before. A particularly heavy blade from a certain Irish legend came to mind.

Behind him, Syr gasped. Astraea said nothing.

He lifted the first blade from the stone, and it changed in his grip. The crossguard folded. The blade narrowed. The pommel elongated into a nock point. What had been a sword became a bolt—a sleek, finned projectile designed for one purpose.

His bow traced itself into his left hand. The same one his counterpart had wielded. An alloy forged in a future beyond his own time—bow, string, and all. Every component metal, every component specialised, every component requiring an inordinate amount of strength to draw.

The first robed figure was dragging a girl—couldn't have been older than six—by her hair.

Shirou didn't hesitate.

He loosed.

The crack that followed broke the air open over the empty streets of Daedalus—a sound like thunder condensed into a single point.

On the rooftops between him and the orphanage, the members of Astraea Familia froze mid-leap. Every head turned back toward the source.

The projectile crossed three hundred metres in less than a second. It struck the figure centre-mass with enough force to lift him off his feet and send him skidding across the cobblestones. The child fell, scrambled, and ran.

Second blade. Nocked. Drawn. The figure at the cart—and the wheels beneath it. Loosed.

The shot punched through the wooden sideboards and the man behind them.

Third. The one kicking open doors. He turned at the sound of the first impact, his head swivelling toward the source. Shirou put the arrow through his chest before the turn completed.

Fourth and fifth—the two sentries at the alley mouth. They broke into a run. One toward the orphanage, one away.

The runner made it four steps.

Shirou reached for the sixth blade.

The sixth blade left his bow and found the runner's back between the shoulder blades. The man pitched forward and didn't rise.

Shirou scanned the street. The immediate threats in his sightline were down. But the figures inside the orphanage—inside the neighbouring buildings—were beyond his angle. Too many walls. Too many civilians packed too close to the targets.

He couldn't shoot what he couldn't separate.

His jaw tightened.

On the rooftops ahead, the Astraea Familia had recovered from their shock. He watched Alise land on the orphanage's roof and drop through a window without breaking stride. Kaguya hit the street at a dead sprint, her blade already drawn—a flash of dark steel that caught no light at all. Ardee and Noin flanked left, cutting off the alley. And Lion—

Lion carved through the nearest cluster of robed figures like a scythe through dead wheat. Alfs Lumina sang in her grip, each strike precise, each movement flowing into the next with the kind of economy that spoke of someone who had fought in close quarters so many times it had become language. She didn't waste a single motion.

*'Good.'*

The thought surprised him. He pushed it aside.

More figures were pouring from the orphanage's side entrance now—some dragging children, some empty-handed and running. Shirou tracked them, calculated angles, and loosed twice more. Two clean hits. Two figures down. The children they'd been holding broke free and scattered.

He was running out of traced blades.

Three left.

He nocked another. Drew. Held.

A robed figure stumbled out of the orphanage's front door, a boy tucked under one arm. The child was kicking, screaming, biting at the man's wrist. Behind them, Shirou could see Alise engaging two more inside the doorway, her golden blade throwing sparks off the stone walls.

The figure turned. For a fraction of a second, the child's body shifted—exposing the man's left shoulder and the side of his neck.

Shirou loosed.

The bolt took him in the shoulder. The man spun, dropped the boy, and crumpled. The child hit the ground, scrambled to his feet, and ran back inside toward Alise.

Two blades left.

Shirou lowered the bow. The immediate extraction had been disrupted. The cart was destroyed. The sentries were down. And the Familia was in the thick of it now—close quarters, building-to-building, the kind of fight where his arrows would do more harm than good.

He let out a breath.

Behind him, Syr hadn't moved. Her hands were pressed over her mouth, her grey eyes enormous.

Astraea stood at the rooftop's edge, looking down at the street where her children fought. Her expression was calm. Too calm. The kind of stillness that

held something vast and terrible in check—not rage, not grief, but something older. The quiet fury of a goddess watching injustice unfold against those she'd sworn to protect, whilst bound by her own covenant not to intervene.

Her hands, folded at her waist, were trembling.

Shirou turned away. He dismissed the bow. The projectiles already embedded across the street would need retrieving later—another problem for another hour.

He said nothing. There was nothing to say.

Far below, the fighting was ending. He could hear Alise's voice—sharp, commanding, directing her Familia through the mop-up with the efficiency of a captain who'd done this too many times. Kaguya's blade had gone quiet, which meant her targets had stopped moving. And Lion—

Lion was standing in the middle of the street, surrounded by fallen robed figures, her wooden sword held at her side. She was breathing hard. Her free hand was on the shoulder of a small girl who was clutching Ryuu's leg and sobbing into the fabric of her combat attire.

Ryuu didn't sheathe her weapon. But her other hand came to rest, very gently, on the child's head.

Shirou watched for a moment. Then he sat down on the edge of the rooftop, legs dangling over the side, and tilted his head back toward the sky.

*'Rose is going to kill me.'*

From somewhere below, a child's voice—small, wavering, but unmistakably alive—called out for Maria.

Then another.

Then another.

The orphanage was still standing. The children were alive.

It was enough.

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End

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