

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

Story Starts

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Chapter 1

Astraea Familia

Rose finally finished with her initial paperwork, her fingers slightly cramped from gripping the fountain pen her charge had gifted her—thankfully, gone were the days when she'd used quills, otherwise it would be a lot more painful by this point. She carefully filed each document in her outbound tray, making certain they were properly sorted. A trainee would later do their rounds, collecting all the outbound documents from various desks and delivering them to either a supervisor or straight to the Guild head, Royman Mardeel.

To her right sat stacks of ceramic bowls—thankfully empty of their previous contents and, mercifully, washed. The sight of them brought back the memory of a confrontation a month ago, when she'd had to lecture several of the staff who'd left their bowls unwashed for an entire day. Her sensitive nose had protested vehemently at the offensive smell of congealing food remnants and soured sauces. Even now, just thinking about it made her nostrils flare slightly in remembered disgust. Sometimes she cursed her heightened werewolf senses; useful, certainly—especially with Orario's current state, where every extra sense might save your life—but in everyday life, they could be an absolute torment.

"Rose—off towards your early morning date? I'm jealous!" Sophie's voice cut through her thoughts as the elf approached her desk, same as every morning. This time, she brought more bowls, setting them down on Rose's desk with a soft clatter that made Rose internally wince.

"Also, here are everyone's orders. I separated them between morning and lunch," Sophie continued, holding a piece of paper between her index and

middle fingers. She leant against Rose's desk, half-sitting on the edge with that casual grace that only elves seemed to manage without looking ridiculous.

"You know—" Sophie started, her tone taking on that particular mischievous quality that Rose had learnt to dread.

Rose crossed her arms defensively and raised both eyebrows slightly—a silent invitation for Sophie to get whatever she had to say over with.

"You're almost in oestrus, right?"

"...!"

Rose's mind went completely blank for a moment, then erupted into panicked thoughts. With movements perhaps a bit too hurried to be casual, she pocketed the food orders, grabbed her charge's paperwork with one hand, and hefted the stack of cleaned bowls with the other. She made for the private booths at speed, her legs moving of their own accord, desperate to escape before Sophie could elaborate on whatever hare-brained idea the normally aloof elf had conjured up this time.

Unfortunately, Sophie easily fell into step beside her, those long elven legs matching Rose's hurried pace without effort.

"You know, instead of me accompanying you to the red-light district—"

"Sophie, *no*." Rose kept her voice flat, though she could feel cool air passing through her ears—a sure sign they were heating up. She picked up the pace even more, practically power-walking now, not wanting the elf to see her face, which she was certain had turned a shade deeper.

Sophie remained persistent, describing something about making a sandwich—*A sandwich? What in the name of the gods did that have to do with anything?*—but Rose studiously ignored her, focusing instead on the door to the regular private booth. She opened it with perhaps more force than strictly necessary.

And there sat Shirou, relaxed on the couch in a pose of complete ease—legs crossed wide, one arm slung over the backrest, the other suspended at an angle holding a steaming cup of tea. The picture of casual indifference.

Except his ears were slightly red as he turned towards them.

'Oh gods, please no.' Rose felt her stomach drop.

"Rose, think about it. I'd think it'd be fun," Sophie finally whispered before withdrawing, her breath tickling Rose's ear in a way that made her shiver involuntarily. The elf gave her fellow redhead a conspiratorial wink that made Rose want to sink through the floor and keep sinking until she reached the Dungeon's deepest level.

When the door clicked shut behind them, Rose couldn't help but exhale loudly, the sound escaping her lips before she could stop it. The tension that had been coiling in her shoulders since Sophie's mortifying suggestions finally began to ease, though her face still burned with residual embarrassment. She turned to her right, carefully placing the stack of bowls on top of the polished side table beside the door, using the mundane task to gather what remained of her composure.

'Right then. He's not commenting on it, so I should ignore it as well.' She forced her expression into something resembling professional neutrality, though her heart still hammered traitorously in her chest. *'Just another status update.'*

At that last thought, Rose couldn't help but feel a twitch in her eye. Status update. Right. As if this particular charge had ever made anything simple.

She steeled herself, drawing in a breath through her nose, and finally looked up to meet the redhead's gaze. He wore quite an annoying smug look that made her want to throw something at him—preferably something heavy, preferably at his stupid face. He raised a single eyebrow at her as he sipped his tea, the gesture so deliberately casual it circled back around to infuriating.

Rose had long since stopped reprimanding him about the tea. It was technically meant for guild staff's exclusive use, but she'd given up that particular battle months ago. If she were being entirely honest with herself, he did make quite exceptional tea. The aromatic blend currently perfuming the air was proof enough of that—though she'd sooner swallow her own tongue than admit it aloud.

Her eyes followed the delicate movement as he placed the teacup on its matching saucer on the low table before them. The soft clink of porcelain against porcelain drew her attention to what sat beside it: a small plush pillow, and perched on top of it, a glinting golden egg that caught the light streaming through the window.

A jackbird egg.

Jackbird eggs were notoriously difficult to obtain—the creatures were fast, vicious, and cunning enough to evade most hunters. Securing one typically required either exceptional stealth, extraordinary speed, or brute force coordinated across multiple adventurers working in tandem to box the elusive dungeon monster in.

Shirou had, apparently, managed it solo. Before breakfast.

Rose, without comment—though a thousand questions burned on her tongue—moved to the seat at the opposite end of the couch, maintaining as much distance as the furniture would allow. She carefully laid down Shirou's documents on the table in front of her, arranging them with perhaps more precision than necessary.

Looking up, she found him still grinning at her—a far cry from the solemn, almost haunted look he'd worn when he'd delivered one of Miach Familia's dead. The transformation was jarring, though not entirely unexpected.

Like most seasoned adventurers, he could shrug off death with disturbing ease—it was a necessary coping mechanism in their line of work. Which was precisely why guild staff usually avoided making personal connections with their charges.

"Rose."

"Shirou."

Gone was the polite adventurer who had called her Ms Fannet when they'd first met—that particular formality had died during an unfortunate evening at the Hostess of Fertility. Even now, the memory made her cringe internally.

It had been a rare night of revelry, especially in these trying times. They'd set up a temporary kitchen right in the middle of the pub, transforming the space into an impromptu arena where Mamma Mia and Shirou had competed for who could make the best dish. The entire pub had served as judges, sampling creations that ranged from traditional Orarian fare to dishes Rose had never even heard of before.

In the end, Shirou had won by a handful of votes—much to Mamma Mia's good-natured chagrin—and Rose had found herself sitting at a crowded table with the victorious adventurer. They'd been joined by one of the Hostess's staff named Syr, a silver-haired girl with a permanent mischievous glint in her eye, and eventually Sophie had drifted over as well. Inevitably, Syr and Sophie had steered the conversation towards how ridiculous it was for Rose and Shirou to still be addressing each other as Mr Emiya and Ms Fannet—especially after several rounds of ale had loosened everyone's tongues.

Quite frankly, that evening had been a first for Rose in many ways. Sophie, who normally detested males of other races with a passion that bordered on the pathological—though she made rather obvious exceptions for females—had easily warmed up to the amicable redhead. It had been shocking to witness, like watching a cat befriend a dog.

When Rose had asked about it later, Sophie had said that Shirou just felt *peaceful* to be around. Though her next description—

"Umm—Rose?"

Shirou's voice pulled her from her spiralling thoughts. He looked like he was preening now, clearly pleased with himself about something. Rose's gaze

darted between the golden egg and the grinning adventurer who had somehow become the source of so many of her recent headaches.

"Typically, we would check for updates on your status at this point," she said, forcing her voice into something approaching professional steadiness, "but that's rather a moot point, given the past several months." She fixed him with a look that demanded answers. "Tell me first about what happened this morning."

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"Amazing as always, Emiya," the tanned, tall, muscled adventurer proclaimed, his weathered hands cradling the now-empty bowl with almost reverent care. Rod, captain of Njord Familia, tipped back the last precious vestiges of dashi into his mouth, savouring every drop as though it were liquid gold.

"I can truly taste the essence of the ocean with this dish," Rod gushed, his eyes closing momentarily as he allowed the flavours to wash over him completely. There was something almost spiritual about it—the way the umami notes danced on his tongue, reminding him of salt spray and morning mists over harbour waters.

"You do know I have other types of udon you haven't tried, right?" Shirou deadpanned, though there was a fondness hidden beneath the exasperation. This conversation had become their ritual, a recurring dance between vendor and customer that played out the same way every time. He'd lost count of how many times Rod had ordered the exact same dish—kake udon and a side of tempura—refusing to venture beyond his maritime comfort zone despite gentle prodding.

He had an arrangement with Mamma Mia: extra deliveries of fresh fish—arranged through Njord Familia themselves, creating a rather circular economy—would be temporarily stored in the Hostess's magic freezers. The irony wasn't lost on him that Rod's own familia provided the very ingredients that kept drawing him back.

He'd already applied for a magic walk-in freezer unit to be made and installed in his own establishment, filled out all the proper paperwork and paid the deposit. But with Evilus's recent activities throwing the city into chaos, the craftsmen were overwhelmed with reconstruction work. It would take months, possibly longer, before his order could even be considered.

He'd told Mamma Mia that he had a small unit back at home—a white lie that rolled off his tongue with practised ease—and that he'd drop by the day after each delivery to collect his share. In truth, he simply stored the seafood within his gate, where it would remain as fresh frozen as the moment he'd placed it inside. No magic freezer required.

"True, but this clean taste is something I love," Rod continued, his enthusiasm undiminished as he gestured with his chopsticks. "Plus the battered vegetables and fish—crispy and light—truly make me grateful to be part of a familia in Melen. There's nothing quite like tasting the bounty of the sea prepared by someone who understands its soul."

Shirou allowed himself a begrudging smile at the man's sincerity. His Japanese sensibilities made it culturally difficult to accept praise directly—modesty demanded deflection rather than acknowledgement—but at least Rod genuinely appreciated the food.

There was something touching about the captain's devotion to this simple dish, a loyalty that spoke to deeper connections than mere taste preferences.

After Rod and his various familia members finished delivering their catch to the numerous establishments scattered around Orario's sprawling districts, the captain also personally delivered ingredients from the Far East. These precious commodities—soy sauce in ceramic jugs, miso paste wrapped in special preservation papers, and other staples of a Japanese household—included Shirou's personal supply of rice, each grain a small treasure from distant shores.

He might want to add rice to his yatai's menu, his mind already turning over the possibilities. Perhaps omurice, that perfect fusion of Eastern and Western

sensibilities, or simple onigiri with various fillings—portable sustenance for adventurers heading into the Dungeon's depths.

Though, to be fair, the only thing truly *youshoku* about omurice was perhaps the demi-glace and dried parsley on top. One could argue the omelette was French in technique, but the texture of those half-curdled eggs wrapped in a thin blanket of cooked egg was more akin to Chinese scrambled eggs than any French omelette he'd encountered. Perhaps he could do a special during the times he took a half-shift at the Hostess—something he did as thanks for their arrangement.

As they said their goodbyes, Rod clapping his shoulder with genuine warmth, Shirou began the familiar routine of packing away his foldable tables and stackable chairs. Each movement was practised, economical—the kind of thing he could do without thinking.

Today had been quite eventful, more so than usual.

The morning had started with an unexpected encounter—a jackbird appearing the very moment he'd entered the Dungeon's yawning mouth. That had been a pleasant surprise, if only for the egg now sitting in Rose's office.

Then, as he'd been returning from his delve on the middle floors—quite the light exercise, slaying minotaurs—he'd stumbled upon a scene that still made his blood simmer with barely contained anger.

A chienthrope, her distinctive features twisted in agony. A hellhound had her arm clamped fully in its jaws, teeth grinding against bone, seconds from shearing through entirely. Three cloaked figures watched from the shadows, expressions of sick pleasure painting what little he could see of their faces.

He'd reacted before conscious thought caught up. Several of his more lethal weapons shot forth from golden ripples in the air, the blades singing with deadly precision. Lately, he'd been using his gate more frequently—it was more efficient than tracing, didn't require him to impose his reality marble's twisted logic onto the world, that exhausting process of overwriting existence with his own impossible truths.

In the end, he'd managed to save the chientrope. She'd introduced herself as Naaza through her shock, her glazed purple eyes holding a strange mixture of disbelief, gratitude, and wariness—somehow coherent despite the blood loss and trauma.

He'd finished off the surrounding hellhounds, who at that point were—

"Oi, Shirou!" The familiar voice cut through his thoughts like a blade through silk.

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"You have helped us a lot, Shirou!"

Shirou would likely describe Ganesha Familia's captain's younger sister as cute—*'and that's quite the mouthful,'* he thought, the convoluted title rolling awkwardly through his mind. Ardee's tomboyish, pale blue bob gave her a more childlike innocence than the mature beauty of her older sister Shakti, and there was something earnest in her expression that made him feel slightly uncomfortable with the compliment even as he could appreciate its sincerity.

It wasn't that she was trying to be cute; she simply was, in that effortless way some people naturally managed.

They'd been circling the large compound where various members of Ganesha Familia combed through the rubble of another magic-stone factory, destroyed by Evilus. This was likely what had interrupted his morning meeting with Rose—though he had managed to tell her the location of the bodies he'd left before she'd rushed off to coordinate the response.

He'd also left all his loot with Rose, telling her to handle the conversion on her own time. He could return for it the following day.

Shirou looked around to see that most members were cleaning up, piling rubble onto one side with a methodical efficiency that spoke of grim familiarity—they'd done this too many times before, the task rendered

mechanical through sheer repetition. A select few guarded bound prisoners kneeling on the other side.

The guards' faces were professional, but Shirou caught the occasional flash of anger in their eyes when they glanced at their captives.

He understood that anger. From what he'd learnt, members of Evilus weren't driven by political ideology or genuine belief. It was something they simply *wanted* to do—to sow chaos, death, and destruction for its own sake. Some people just wanted to watch the world burn.

Shirou studied the prisoners, who wore expressions of bored indifference rather than remorse. Their cloaks were identical to the three he'd encountered that morning—dark, nondescript things designed to swallow identity whole. The same clothes as those he'd reported seeing on figures burying something on the floor where Amphisbaena lurked. The same problematic people he'd spotted randomly milling about the middle floors, pretending to be ordinary adventurers whilst planning gods knew what manner of destruction.

His jaw clenched involuntarily at the memory.

He turned back to his cart, distributing jagamarukun to the weary Ganesha Familia members who'd earned a break. The familiar rhythm of cooking helped settle his nerves, giving his hands something productive to do whilst his mind processed everything that had happened.

Jagamarukun—that was what the locals called them, anyway. Shirou figured the name had probably come from a god or goddess who'd decided to share the recipe, or perhaps from someone in the Far East who'd been really into marketing. Either way, the name had stuck, and honestly, he found himself rather liking the sound of it. *Jagamarukun*. It had a certain ring that 'croquette' simply didn't capture.

He made sure to form his into spheres rather than the typical ovoid shape. A small distinction—but *jagamarukun* meant "round potato." It only made sense.

"It wasn't a problem. Plus, you're paying me," Shirou said, waving off Ardee's praise with practised ease. He'd never been good at accepting gratitude.

"But you're giving us quite a discount!" Ardee exclaimed, her voice carrying across the destroyed courtyard and drawing attention from everyone working around the ruined factory. Several heads turned their way, curiosity evident in their expressions.

Ardee seemed entirely unbothered. She waved back at the onlookers with a cheerfulness that seemed almost inappropriate given the circumstances—yet somehow it worked. People smiled back, returned to their tasks with slightly lighter shoulders. She had that effect on people.

"Oh, thank you," said Ardee as she bent down towards a large piece of rubble—something she'd been helping with despite her position as an adventurer rather than a labourer. Seeing that the concrete slab might be too heavy for her alone, though she was almost certainly stronger than him physically—even a single level of Falna made all the difference in this world—Shirou circled to the opposite side..

He bent down, feeling his muscles protest slightly, and together they carried it to the nearby pile.

"Ah, yeah, I keep forgetting that you have a Falna," Ardee smiled, knocking her head in an exaggerated gesture of forgetfulness.

Shirou just grunted, not wanting to justify why he didn't feel the need to find a patron deity—he already had those talks scheduled almost daily with Rose. He returned to placing the last batch of jagamarukun on the strainer, turning off the burner with a practised flick.

Ardee was one of the few people in Orario who knew about his unusual circumstances. Her, Shakti, and Ganesha himself.

It had been unavoidable. When he'd first approached the city gates four months ago—alone, without a familia, bearing a Falna from a deity no one recognised—the guards had been rightfully suspicious. Standard protocol for

unknown adventurers entering Orario during the Dark Ages meant verification, and verification meant Ganesha.

The elephant-masked god had been stationed at the gates that day, his booming "I AM GANESHA!" announcing his presence long before Shirou reached the checkpoint. Shakti had been there too, passing lunch to Ardee, who'd drawn the short straw for gate-rotation duty alongside her familia's notably *enthusiastic* patron.

Ganesha's divine ability to discern truth from lies made him invaluable for screening potential Evilus infiltrators. When he'd asked Shirou directly whether he meant harm to Orario, Shirou had answered honestly: no. When asked about his patron deity, he'd said: "She returned to Tenkai." Also true.

The god had studied him for a long moment—longer than comfortable—before nodding slowly.

"I AM GANESHA! AND I BELIEVE YOU!"

Shirou's ears had rung for an hour afterwards.

He'd requested discretion about his godless status, and to his relief, all three had agreed without much resistance. Shakti had simply shrugged—she had bigger problems than one odd adventurer. Ardee had been curious, but a gentle look from her sister had curtailed the questions. And Ganesha had just laughed, clapping Shirou on the shoulder hard enough to leave a bruise.

"A MAN'S SECRETS ARE HIS OWN! I AM GANESHA, AND I RESPECT THAT!"

Of course, this security protocol—effective as it was—only covered the main gates. It did nothing to prevent people being smuggled through the sewers, over the walls at night, or through any number of routes that Evilus had clearly been exploiting for years. The prisoners kneeling across the courtyard were proof enough of that.

Still, Shirou was genuinely grateful for their silence. Having even a few people who knew yet chose discretion meant more than he could properly express.

He had enough problems without adding divine curiosity to the list.

"Do you still want to try the new dish?" he asked, pushing aside his wandering thoughts.

"Ah, yes! You said it was spicy, right?" Ardee's anticipation was palpable, pulling him back to the present.

Last week, he'd finally secured a steady supply of sesame paste courtesy of Rod and Njord Familia—a victory that had taken weeks of negotiation. With it, he'd recently added dandan udon to the menu.

He served it especially during his food runs to the eighteenth floor, where adventurers seemed particularly grateful for something hot and filling.

Every few days he'd leave his yatai with the Guild as usual, but instead of his standard setup, he'd bring two large baskets tied on a rope, carried with a long wooden pole balanced on his shoulders.

He'd traverse the Dungeon's winding paths, selling snacks and potions to weary adventurers until he reached the eighteenth floor—where he maintained his own designated space, a small corner that had become something like a second home. There, he'd open a modest booth for food and drinks.

It also served as a convenient cover for his drop items and magic stones. Rose would have an absolute conniption if she discovered he was regularly fighting monsters around Amphisbaena's territory—and beyond—during his stays on the safe floor. Whenever she asked, he simply claimed desperate adventurers had paid him in drops rather than valis. After all, everything cost more down in the Dungeon.

While Shirou possessed the raw strength and speed of a Level 2 adventurer, he still retained all his experience and skill—years of combat against beings

far stronger and more skilled than anything the Dungeon had thrown at him yet. Centuries of facing impossible odds, of standing against creatures and legends that could level cities. All of that knowledge lived in his muscles, in his reflexes, in the way he could read an opponent's movements before they'd even committed to making them.

On top of that, he had weapons that didn't care what his level was. Noble Phantasms could maim and kill monsters far above his supposed tier without breaking a sweat.

There was a reason why, at lower levels, adventurers were advised against purchasing weapons meant for first-class fighters. If a superior blade let you cut down a monster with half the skill and effort, then only half the effort would translate into excelsior—or at least, that was how he understood it. Hard to be certain when he didn't have a deity to process what he'd earned.

Regardless, the principle was simple: as long as he didn't get hit, he could fight well above his level.

The margin for error was razor-thin. But then again, when hadn't it been?

Ardee circled around the yatai and peered over his shoulder, curiosity evident in the way she leant forward.

Shirou had already emptied the frying oil into a separate container and was heating the wok again, a second wok of water simmering beside it. The familiar ritual of cooking centred him, each movement precise and practised.

He placed some of the heated water in a ceramic bowl, letting it warm gradually while he passed his index finger over the surface to gauge the temperature. Not quite hot enough yet.

With his ladle, he splashed just a little more oil into the wok, smoke instantly wafting from the heated fat in delicate tendrils as he sautéed some minced meat. The sizzle filled the air, that satisfying sound that meant everything was at just the right temperature.

He added what he'd discovered were equivalent spices—not quite the same as back home, but close enough to make his heart ache with memory. Eastern-styled pickles for the acidic bite. Soy sauce to deepen the umami. Wine that hissed as it hit the hot metal. He tossed the meat with practised wrist flicks, ensuring every piece was evenly coated and cooked.

He turned off the heat beneath the wok, setting the minced meat aside, then lowered a bundle of fresh noodles into the simmering water beside him. He watched them soften and separate in the gentle bubbling. At the last moment, he added bok choy, the green leaves wilting beautifully against the pale noodles.

He quickly emptied the ceramic bowl, now perfectly warmed, and began building the sauce. First came his own chilli oil, ruby red and glistening. Then the precious sesame paste. Soy sauce, dark and rich. Sugar to balance the heat. Spices he'd ground himself. Numbing peppercorns that would make the tongue tingle pleasantly. And finally, minced garlic to tie everything together.

He lifted the noodles from the water with chopsticks in one smooth motion, laying them atop the sauce. A ladleful of starchy cooking water to help everything cling. Then the minced meat was crowned on top like a finishing flourish.

"Here." Shirou placed the bowl on the flat surface at the front of the yatai, steam rising invitingly from the dish.

"You can add this to change the flavour a bit," he said, offering a bottle of black vinegar. "Make sure to mix it first. It'll cut through the richness."

He stepped outside and positioned himself between the handles, feeling the familiar weight settle against his shoulders.

"You said this is the second-to-last place. Just direct me to the next one so we can finish up."

"There." Ardee leant over the window of the cart, her finger extending towards a vibrant group of blue, red, green, pink, and maroon that stood out against the grey industrial backdrop of the factory district. "You can just park it by the back entrance of the factory."

"—who cut through the enemy lines!"

The voice carried on the wind, sharp and indignant. Shirou recognised his neighbours from afar—that particular combination of boisterous personalities was unmistakable even before he could make out individual faces.

'Ah.' He suppressed a sigh. *'Them.'*

"I'm the one who secured the warehouse before anyone else! Tell me, where did I fall short?!" roared the elf, her voice cracking with frustration.

Shirou didn't hear what the Yamato nadeshiko said back—her voice was too soft, too controlled to carry across the distance—but from the rigid set of the elf's shoulders and the way her hands clenched into fists, she wasn't amused.

Shirou manoeuvred the cart with practised ease, turning it a hundred and eighty degrees to ensure the service window wouldn't be blocked by the factory's outer walls. He laid down a few stools in front of the window, each placed without wasted movement.

"You moroooooooooon!!!"

The shout exploded across the courtyard. Ardee immediately leapt out of the cart whilst Shirou was still positioning it, her movements fluid and eager as she beelined towards her sister, ignoring the chaotic scene entirely.

"Did I find fault?!" The black-haired lady in a kimono scoffed, her voice dripping with disdain. "You bumbled your way through everything!"

Ardee brought the bowl and fork with her—Shirou noticed she wasn't keen on the chopsticks. She moved towards Shakti with purpose; the captain was deep in conversation with a familia member by the back entrance of the complex.

Shirou exchanged a quick nod with Shakti, whose eyes briefly met his with a warmth that belied her stern expression. She glanced at the arguing pair, and he saw the exact moment her patience frayed—jaw tightening, shoulders squaring. Whether it was due to the bickering pair or something her subordinate had said, he couldn't tell. She shook her head at something the familia member reported before turning to address Ardee. The subordinate straightened with military precision and declared, "Yes, ma'am!"

"Wha—?!" The elf's voice climbed an octave in disbelief.

"Who do you think has to clean up after you every time you let your emotions get the better of you? Me! So don't get uppity with me, you trash pixie!"

"Trash?!" the elf asked indignantly, her whole body trembling with rage as she faced the black-haired beauty—or at least, that was how Shirou remembered her. Elegant even in fury, though she currently had her back towards the cart.

"You oblivious, tunnel-visioned, mindless little numbskull! How dare you speak as though you've done a good job, you child!"

Shirou tried to ignore this as he turned on the burner with a practised flick. The familiar whoosh of flame brought him a moment of calm. He poured lard into the wok, watching it shimmer as it heated—cooking provided an anchor amidst the chaos. He started another batch of jagamarukun.

Ardee caught his eye. She raised ten fingers and flipped her palms back and forth twice—twenty more croquettes for this side of the factory.

Despite the initial discount he'd offered Ganesha Familia, a standing offer as thanks for their work, he'd be making good money with these orders.

"I—I wasn't the only one who went on a rampage out there! I would very much like to know what part of your response you considered proportionate punishment!"

Then Ardee mimed slurping noodles with exaggerated motions, pointing at her bowl and flashing two fingers. Her eyes sparkled with amusement at the ongoing drama.

Shirou nodded, his hand automatically pointing at the menu sign above the service window. Enough noodles, plenty of broth, toppings were fresh—

"Now you've done it, you trash pixie!!!"

"Stop calling me that!!!"

The argument turned physical with explosive suddenness—a flurry of movement that would have been graceful if it weren't so ridiculous. Kimono sleeves whipped through the air. Blonde hair flew in an arc as they grappled.

"Oh, here we go again," the short pink-haired prum said, shrugging with the resignation of someone who'd seen this too many times before.

Shirou ignored it all. He had to—it was madness over there, and the oil was currently at the perfect temperature. He tested it with the tip of his long cooking chopsticks.

He pointed to the sign for jagamarukun, mirroring Ardee's previous hand signs, then indicated the dandan udon with two raised fingers.

"Another swearin' match between our hardheaded elf and our far-eastern princess," said the prum, her accent thickening with resignation. "I wish you'd spend all that effort buildin' each other up instead of tearin' each other down!"

"I like it!" said his fellow redhead, hands on her hips. "They make a good match for each other, don't you think?"

Shirou stared deadpan at that comment, his hands pausing momentarily. 'A *good match*?' It was like watching Ishtar and Ereshkigal all over again—all passion and fury with no resolution in sight. Or better yet, since it had devolved to physicality, like watching Jeanne and Arturia's alternate selves go at each other's throats.

'Some things never change, no matter the world.'

"Please stop them instead of lookin' so proud, Captain..." the prum sighed deeply.

The pair of blue-haired sisters approached the noisy group as Shirou started heating water for the noodles. The pot began to bubble. He checked the oil to his left—the surface shimmered just right—and placed the first batch of five jagamarukun in the wok. The satisfying sizzle filled his ears as he turned on two more burners and began preparing the dandan noodles.

"Thank you for getting to the scene early, Alise," Shakti said, addressing the redhead as the sisters approached. Her tone was formal but warm.

Behind them, the fighting pair continued—the black-haired beauty now holding the elf in what looked like a rather effective headlock. The elf's face was turning an interesting shade of red.

The pink-haired prum scoffed. "And you call yourself the city watch!"

"Lyra!" The now-identified redhead chided the prum with the authority of leadership. "Ganesha Familia are very busy watching over other parts of the city! Don't say things like that."

The defence was immediate and heartfelt.

Shirou started stir-frying the minced meat, the familiar motions soothing. The meat sizzled and popped, releasing its savoury fragrance. He added seasonings with practised flicks—a dash of this, a pinch of that, all measured by instinct.

A sudden silence made him look up. Everyone was staring at the fighting pair.

The black-haired lady had the elf completely prone on the ground, one hand pinned behind her back, knees pressing into the elf's lower back. The elf thrashed futilely, looking like a fish out of water.

Then Kaguya's nose twitched. Her head turned sharply towards the cart, nostrils flaring as she caught the scent of sizzling meat and familiar spices on the wind.

She promptly released the elf—who slumped on the road, groaning softly—and rose with perfect poise, as though she hadn't just been wrestling someone into submission moments before. Her violet eyes met Shirou's golden ones across the distance, and he could have sworn he saw a flicker of embarrassment before it was replaced by dignified composure.

"Um—Kaguya?" Lyra asked tentatively as they watched her approach the stall.

Everyone slowly followed, drawn by the smell of cooking food. Shirou bowed slightly at the approaching customer—he sometimes got this reaction from adventurers from the Far East. The familiar courtesy seemed to ease something in their homesick hearts.

Here in Orario, especially recently, there weren't many establishments that truly offered anything eastern on their menus. While he'd like to say he'd noticed the gap in the market immediately upon arrival and everything had gone according to plan... it had simply been luck.

Everyone looked at each other in bewilderment as they followed the now-identified Kaguya. *'Three for four,'* he tallied mentally. Only the elf remained unnamed, though he suspected that would come soon enough.

The kimono-wearing far easterner sat primly on one of the stools, her posture perfect despite the dust from her recent scuffle. She ordered a simple kake udon with an onsen tamago, her voice soft and cultured—a stark contrast to her earlier shouting.

Shirou confirmed her order with a small nod, offering her tea as he finished plating the two bowls for Shakti and Ardee.

"Ah, this is Shirou Emiya, he—" Ardee began.

"THE NEIGHBOUR!!" Alise exclaimed, pointing at him with such enthusiasm she nearly fell off her stool.

"Neighbour? Do you no longer live in the Hostess, Mr Emiya?" Shakti asked with genuine curiosity. She was someone he regularly passed on his daily rounds whilst she conducted her patrols. Their brief exchanges had become a comfortable routine.

Shirou saw the elf finally stand, dusting herself off with wounded dignity. Their eyes met for a second, and hers narrowed in suspicion.

'What did I do?' He kept his expression neutral.

"No, Ms Varma—"

"Hey, I told you to call us both by our first names," Ardee complained, her voice coloured with mock irritation.

The bowl was immediately replaced with two more steaming bowls of dandan udon, which Shirou placed side by side as the sisters sat in synchronised motion.

Lyra and Alise—followed begrudgingly by the still-unnamed elf—sat at the front of his stall. The two studied the menu with intense concentration, their eyes scanning the foreign words. They knew jagamarukun, of course—everyone did—but the rest might as well have been another language entirely.

Shirou boiled noodles for the latest order and heated the dashi for the kake udon. The rich aroma filled the air, making several stomachs growl audibly.

Using his long cooking chopsticks, he lifted the newest batch of jagamarukun, letting them drip before transferring them to the draining rack. Without missing a beat, he fried another batch—ten more before the order would be complete.

He laid down a fork for Shakti and positioned the container of black vinegar between the sisters' bowls. Moving to the side, he poured Kaguya a cup of steaming green tea.

"I recommend either the curry udon or the miso tonkotsu udon for Alise and Lyra," Ardee pondered, tapping her chin. "While for Lion—you might also want what Kaguya ordered if you want something clean."

'Lion.' Shirou filed away the final name, completing his mental roster whilst keeping his hands moving steadily through their tasks.

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After serving the girls their orders, Shirou stepped out to hand the jagamarukun to the still-working members of Ganesha Familia. He could see the exhaustion etched into their faces as they gratefully accepted the warm food. Ardee was supposed to handle this—it was her task, after all—but he'd told her to stay put and finish her noodles. He even threw in a complimentary side of kakiage and some whitebait tempura.

Alise, captain of Astraea Familia, crouched stubbornly forward over her bowl as she battled with her chopsticks. She held her mouth close to the rim, her entire body tensed with concentration, fearing the singular noodle would slip from her visibly shaking grip.

The way she held them suggested someone who'd been taught the proper technique but hadn't quite mastered the muscle memory. Her knuckles were white with effort, a small bead of sweat forming on her temple—whether from the steam of the miso tonkotsu udon or sheer concentration, Shirou couldn't tell.

"So what are we looking at, Shakti?" Alise asked, quickly slurping the noodle with a triumphant expression she immediately tried to hide behind professionalism.

Shirou almost raised an eyebrow at the image as he stepped back into his yatai.

"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."

Shirou discreetly placed a fork in front of Alise as he went about his work. He noticed the elf—Lion—cycling between shooting him suspicious looks and enjoying her kakiage, dabbing it in salt rather than the tentsuyu sauce.

The suspicious glances were becoming increasingly frequent. *'What exactly is her problem with me?'*

"Alise," Lion started, her voice carrying a warning tone as her eyes shifted between Shirou and the captain. "I think we shouldn't be discussing sensitive information in public."

Shirou couldn't blame her. Information had a way of spreading in Orario, especially information discussed openly. But Alise waved her off with casual confidence.

"It's fine."

"And that was?" Alise asked, finally picking up the fork with visible relief—though she tried to make the switch seem casual.

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

Shirou's hands stilled mid-wipe of the counter.

This morning, Rose had informed him of what the investigations had turned up regarding the things he'd reported—objects being buried on the floors where Amphisbaena lurked. The connection formed instantly. Ignition pieces stolen from factories above. Blaze rocks buried in the Dungeon below.

He didn't like where that equation led.

"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."

Lion's expression shifted—something in Shakti's example had clearly clicked. The item in Shakti's example was something any adventurer would recognise—they came in all shapes and sizes, but the internal mechanisms were largely the same. The implication was clear: the stolen parts were vital to constructing any magic-stone item.

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

Blaze rocks and ignition pieces. The combination sent a chill down Shirou's spine. Blaze rocks were volatile, dangerous on their own—combine them with a reliable ignition system, and you had the makings of something catastrophic.

He looked up from clearing his cooking area to find another narrowed look from the elf.

Shirou met her gaze with his usual deadpan, keeping his expression carefully neutral despite the alarm bells ringing in his mind.

'I really need to talk to Rose.'

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

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

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End

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