

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

Story Starts

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Chapter 3.1

Curiosity Unsheathed

The great door of Stardust Garden swung shut behind them with a familiar groan of old hinges—the mansion, after all, predated their Familia. She should probably ask Goibniu about hiring one of his children for maintenance one of these days.

Astraea watched her children file into the lobby one by one, each carrying the weight of the day in their own fashion. Kaguya moved with that practised grace that never quite slipped, though her sword arm hung looser than usual. Lyra slouched against the doorframe before peeling herself off it. Noin and Neze exchanged quiet words. Iska cracked her knuckles. Maryu yawned wide enough to swallow the moon.

And Alise—

Alise stretched her arms high above her head, arching her back until her spine produced a series of pops loud enough to make Celty flinch. The redhead twisted left, then right, rolling her shoulders in great exaggerated circles, her neck craning side to side as she worked through the accumulated tension of combat, command, and catastrophe.

"Hhhnnngh—there it is." Alise let out a groan of such profound satisfaction that Lyra shot her a disgusted look.

"Must you do that in the lobby?" Kaguya's nose wrinkled.

"My body, my lobby, my rules."

"It's Lady Astraea's lobby."

"Same thing!"

Astraea let them bicker. She closed the front door herself—a habit her children had tried and failed to break her of—and turned the iron latch with a satisfying click.

Home. They were home.

She surveyed her children. Eleven girls in various states of dishevelment, their combat attire streaked with dust and ash and, in a few cases, blood that wasn't theirs. Asta had a bruise blooming along her jaw. Lyana's left sleeve was torn at the shoulder. And Ryuu—

Ryuu stood apart from the group, as she always did. Her wooden sword hung at her hip, and her expression carried that particular brand of severity that Astraea had learned to read as troubled contemplation rather than simple displeasure.

"Welcome home, everyone," Astraea said.

Alise's face split into that sunrise grin. The one that made grown men trip over their own feet and hardened adventurers forget what they'd been angry about.

"We're back, Lady Astraea!"

"We are indeed." Astraea folded her hands at her waist and regarded her Familia with the warmth she had never once needed to fabricate. "You're all weary, I expect. Would anyone like some tea? I believe we still have those honey cakes from Rod's last delivery. Or perhaps a bath?"

A pause. Then—

"Or you?" Kaguya tilted her head, one dark eyebrow arched in a perfect crescent, lips curving into a smile that would have looked demure on anyone who didn't know her.

Astraea pressed both palms to her cheeks and let her eyes widen. "My. Such a bold proposal, Kaguya. You're making me feel like a newlywed virgin."

The lobby detonated.

"A NEWLYWED—"

"Lady Astraea said *virgin*—"

"Did she just—she absolutely just—"

Neze's face had gone the colour of Alise's hair. Iska punched the air with both fists. Maryu clutched her chest with a theatrical expression of devastation. Noin buried her face in her hands whilst Celty's ears perked up in curiosity.

"Wouldn't you like to know," Lyra muttered, earning a sharp elbow from Lyana.

"Lady Astraea, you cannot say such things in front of the younger members!" Ryuu's ears had already begun their migration toward crimson.

"Oh? And which younger members would those be, Ryuu? Everyone here is an adult." Kaguya's smug expression could have curdled milk at twenty paces. "Though I could think of someone who does act like a child. Because from where I'm standing, the only one affected is—"

"Do NOT finish that sentence."

"—a certain blonde elf who—"

"Kaguya."

"A bath!" Alise clapped her hands together with enough force to silence the room. "I vote that we all have a bath. All in favour?"

Every hand went up. Even Ryuu's, though she raised it quite quickly—she wanted Kaguya to move on.

"Motion carries," Lyra drawled. "Unanimously, for once."

The great communal bath of Stardust Garden occupied the mansion's eastern wing—a sprawling affair of stone and tile that Astraea had modelled after the hot springs she'd visited in the Far East just a few months shy of forming the

Familia. Steam rose from the central pool in lazy coils, the water fed by a magic-stone heating array that Kaguya maintained with obsessive precision. Along the walls, individual washing stations lined up in neat rows, each equipped with a stool, a wooden bucket, and a hand mirror.

Having so many girls under one roof necessitated certain accommodations. Stardust Garden boasted four smaller bathrooms for daily use—two on the second floor, two on the third—but the communal bath was reserved for evenings like this. When everyone came home together. When the Familia needed to be a family, rather than a collection of individuals who happened to share a goddess.

The changing room filled with the rustle of discarded armour and peeled-off combat attire. Belts clattered against wooden benches. Boots hit the floor in pairs. Kaguya folded her garments with geometric precision, whilst Alise dropped hers in a heap that Lyra immediately kicked toward the laundry hamper.

"Pairs for backs!" Alise announced, wrapping a towel around herself. "Who's got who?"

"I'll take Neze," said Noin.

"Asta and me," Lyana called.

"I've got Celty!" Iska flexed, which served no purpose whatsoever given that she was wrapped in a towel and had nothing to flex at.

"Maryu, you're with me," Lyra said. "And before you ask—no, I'm not washing your hair. Last time I spent twenty minutes untangling it and my fingers went numb."

"Alise and I, then," Kaguya said, which provoked a complicated expression from the captain that was equal parts delight and wariness. "Don't fret. I'll be gentle."

Alise's brow twitched. "That's what worries me," she said, managing a nervous smile.

Astraea smiled and turned to her remaining child. "That leaves you and me, Ryuu."

The elf stiffened. Just slightly—a fractional tightening of her shoulders that most people would never have noticed. But Astraea had spent years reading this particular girl, and she recognised the tension for what it was.

Not reluctance. Preparation.

"Of course, Lady Astraea."

They settled at a washing station in the far corner, away from the main cluster of noise. Astraea took the stool behind Ryuu, who sat with her towel gathered at her front, her back exposed. The skin there was smooth and pale, unmarred by the scars that would have adorned a less careful fighter. Elves healed cleanly, and Ryuu fought cleaner still.

Astraea dipped a cloth in warm water and began scrubbing in slow, methodical circles. The muscles beneath Ryuu's skin were knotted tight—across the shoulders especially, where tension accumulated like sediment in a riverbed.

For a while, neither spoke. The sounds of the bath filled the silence: splashing water, Alise's laughter, Kaguya's dry retorts, Iska and Celty comparing the sizes of their pruning fingers.

"Lady Astraea."

Astraea continued scrubbing. "Yes?"

Ryuu's back straightened by a fraction. Her voice dropped—not quite to a whisper, but low enough that the bath's ambient noise swallowed it before it could reach the others.

"Why did you lie to the Ganesha Familia?"

There it was.

Astraea had been counting the minutes since their return, wondering when the question would surface. She'd estimated Ryuu would hold it until the debriefing. The fact that it came here, in the bath, told Astraea something about the depth of the elf's disquiet.

Before she could answer, a voice cut in from two stations over.

"Our goddess didn't lie." Kaguya spoke without looking up from Alise's shoulders, her hands working the lather with efficient strokes. "She simply didn't tell them the whole truth. There's a distinction."

Ryuu's jaw tightened. "The distinction being?"

"That Emiya carried Lady Astraea and the passerby to safety. That much is true and was reported. What was not reported—"

"—is everything else."

"Precisely." Kaguya rinsed the cloth and wrung it out. "Omission and deception are cousins, not twins."

"In the eyes of justice—"

"Justice has more than one pair of eyes, Ryuu. That's rather the point of a scale."

Ryuu's fingers curled against her knees. The elf's silence carried its own weight—the particular stillness of someone whose convictions were being prodded in a place that hadn't yet calloused over.

Lyra spoke up from across the bath. "Plus, Ardee was there—she also kept quiet when Lady Astraea took point on explaining what happened. I'm sure she'll discreetly tell Shakti and Lord Ganesha about it."

Ryuu fell silent. Her hands, resting on her knees beneath the towel, curled into fists.

From the middle of the bath, Alise's voice carried over the steam. "You've got to admit, though—he was cool."

Several heads turned.

"The way those arrows hit." Alise mimed drawing a bow, nearly losing her towel in the process. Kaguya caught the fabric before catastrophe struck and tucked it back into place without comment. "Did anyone else get a good look at them? They weren't normal arrows. Every single one was solid metal—blade-edge sharp, like someone had taken a sword and bent it into a bolt."

"I saw," Neze said from across the bath. "The ones embedded in the street. When we were pulling the bodies away, I checked. The shafts weren't wood or bone. Solid steel, with edges running the full length."

"The steel was of considerable quality." Ryuu's correction was quiet but certain. "I examined one as well. The metalwork was unfamiliar—certainly not Goibniu's workmanship. The grain of the metal was too uniform, too refined. I've never seen its like."

"Maybe he made them himself," Alise said. "He does have a forge at his place—we saw a team of Goibniu's children build it for him."

A contemplative hush settled over the bath.

Astraea said nothing. She moved the cloth in steady circles across Ryuu's shoulder blades, working a knot loose beneath the left one, and let her mind drift to the image that had lodged itself behind her eyes like a splinter she couldn't quite reach.

'Emiya Shirou.'

Technically, today's encounter at the orphanage was not her first impression of the man. Astraea had known of him for some time, in the peripheral way that neighbours come to know one another in Orario's quieter districts.

The day he had moved into the house next door—a modest two-storey affair with a cracked chimney and a garden wall that listed drunkenly to the west, the two properties sharing a low dividing wall—he had knocked on Stardust Garden's front door carrying a wicker basket. Inside: an assortment of rice cakes, pastries, and sweets. Chestnut tarts with a glaze that caught the light. Honey-soaked sponge cut into perfect cubes. Something dense and dark that Kaguya had identified, with unconcealed delight, as yokan—a sweet from the Far East that she hadn't tasted since leaving her homeland.

"A gift. Please treat me well," he'd said. That was all. No pleasantries, no lingering, no attempt to ingratiate himself. He'd handed the basket to Astraea—who had been the only one home at the time—and walked back to his house without waiting for thanks.

When the girls returned, Alise had eaten three of the chestnut tarts before anyone else got a look at them.

Beyond that, Astraea knew him through Maria's stories. The woman who ran the orphanage on Daedalus Street spoke of him with a reserved warmth—he visited regularly, brought food for the children, and never stayed longer than was necessary. Maria mentioned that he usually came in the company of a silver-haired girl named Syr, who worked at the Hostess of Fertility.

The same Syr who had been with them on the rooftop.

The same rooftop where Emiya's magic had conjured weapons from nothing.

Astraea turned the memory over in her mind. Creation magic—true creation, not the Blacksmithing ability that children of the Goibniu and Hephaestus Familias acquired once they'd reached Level 2—was vanishingly rare. The mortal races could imbue objects with magical properties through craft. Blacksmiths channelled their will through hammer and anvil. Enchanters wove attributes into existing materials. But to produce matter from raw magic, shaped and finished and functional, without intermediary tools or processes—

That was something else entirely.

She had watched him draw a bow that hadn't existed three seconds prior. A bow forged entirely from some unfamiliar alloy—large, heavy, built for strength rather than elegance. Even the bowstring, from what she could glean, was composed of the same composite metal.

She had then watched him nock arrows that had, moments before, been swords—blades sharp and strong enough to embed themselves point-first in rooftop stone. Each one morphed into a projectile in his grip. Each one different from the last—varied in weight, in shape, in the angle of their bladed edges—yet each one struck with the unerring precision of a weapon designed for its exact target.

And his face, throughout all of it.

That was what stayed with her.

Not the magic. Not the impossible arrows. His face.

The expression of a man performing a duty he had performed so many times that the act itself had worn grooves into his soul. There was no thrill in it. No righteous fury, no savage satisfaction. Just a bone-deep weariness overlaid with something that looked, to Astraea's ancient eyes, remarkably like resignation.

He couldn't abide it. That was what she'd seen. Injustice happening within his reach, within his power to prevent—the thought of allowing it was simply not something his nature could accommodate. So he acted. Not because he wanted to. Not because he believed it would change anything. But because not acting was an impossibility for him, as fundamental as the inability to stop breathing by choice alone.

She had known people like that. In Tenkai, in Gekai, across millennia of watching mortals struggle against the darkness they were born into. People who carried the weight of the world not because they'd chosen to, but because their hands wouldn't unclench.

They almost always broke.

When the fighting had ended and the Ganesha Familia patrol arrived—Ardee having sprinted to their compound at a speed that would have impressed even Iska—Emiya had not waited for thanks or acknowledgement. He'd jumped down from the rooftop carrying both her and Syr, and once they reached the orphanage, he parked his cart and began helping with the cleanup without a word.

The dead, he'd stacked with a care that the corpses of Evilus members did not typically receive. The living, he'd bound with rope—something he'd requested from the girls. Hands behind backs. Knees together. Clean knots, tight enough to hold but positioned to avoid cutting off circulation. The work of someone who'd restrained prisoners before.

He hadn't spoken a word.

And when the bodies were sorted, and the rope was tied, and the children were accounted for, he'd looked at Astraea—the look reminding her of what he requested of her on the rooftop.

'What I'm about to do—keep it secret. Both of you. I don't really care for the spotlight.'

Not a demand. Not a plea. Something between the two—a quiet request from a man who understood that he had no leverage to enforce it.

She'd agreed. Instantly, without deliberation. Not because his request was just—though it might well have been—but because something in the quality of his exhaustion told her that this man's secrecy was not a weapon. It was a shield. And shields, in Astraea's experience, were wielded by those who had been struck too many times.

After that, he'd fired up his food cart and started cooking for the orphanage as if the preceding hour had been a minor interruption in his schedule.

Astraea reached for the ceramic bottle of shampoo—one of the small luxuries the gods had introduced to Gekai over the centuries. She worked a measure

between her palms until it frothed, then sank her fingers into Ryuu's blonde hair.

The elf held still. Astraea worked the lather from roots to tips, her fingers gentle against the scalp, careful around the long ears that twitched at the contact.

"It's because he asked."

She said it simply. Without elaboration. Without justification.

Ryuu's hands uncurled on her knees. The elf sat very still for a long moment, the bath noise washing over them both. Then, slowly, her shoulders dropped by a fraction.

She didn't ask anything else.

Astraea continued washing her child's hair, working through a tangle near the nape of her neck with patient fingers. The shampoo smelled of chamomile—Ryuu's preferred scent, though the elf would sooner fall on her own sword than admit to having a preference about something so frivolous.

"I do find myself quite curious about our capable neighbour," Astraea said.

Beneath her hands, Ryuu went rigid. Every muscle in the elf's back locked tight, undoing in an instant the patient work Astraea had spent the last several minutes accomplishing.

Astraea chuckled.

Her dear child. So earnest. So fierce. So utterly, beautifully incapable of seeing the world in anything other than stark black and white. Justice or injustice. Ally or threat. Trustworthy or suspect.

The idea that someone could be genuinely good and simultaneously secretive—that a person might hide themselves not to do harm but to avoid it—sat in Ryuu's worldview like a stone in a shoe. Impossible to ignore. Impossible to accommodate.

She would learn, in time. They all did. The world had a way of introducing grey to those who insisted on monochrome.

"Rinse," Astraea said, and tipped a bucket of warm water over Ryuu's head.

The elf sputtered.

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The living room of Stardust Garden had been built for gatherings. Soft couches arranged in a loose crescent around a low table. Armchairs tucked into corners for those who preferred solitude within proximity. A fireplace along the far wall, unlit in the mild evening but stacked with fresh wood regardless—Noin's doing, always prepared.

Eleven girls settled into their customary positions, still pink from the bath, hair damp and loose. Lyra had claimed her usual couch and was already horizontal, one arm draped over the backrest. Kaguya knelt on a floor cushion with her legs tucked beneath her, back straight, teacup balanced on her knee. Alise perched cross-legged on the largest armchair, which she'd claimed through a combination of seniority and an absolute refusal to sit anywhere else.

Astraea took her own seat—a modest chair near the window—and watched her children settle.

"Right!" Alise sprang to her feet, fists on her hips, chin lifted. "Before we turn in—let's do our usual!"

The groan that rippled through the room was immediate and unanimous.

"Must we?" Lyra dragged a cushion over her face. "Every single time."

"I'm with Lyra on this one," Kaguya said, setting down her tea. "There's a limit to how many times one can perform the same ritual before it loses all meaning."

"It NEVER loses meaning!" Alise jabbed a finger at Kaguya. "That's the whole point! Justice is ETERNAL!"

"So is embarrassment, apparently," muttered Neze.

Ryuu stepped forward. Her cheeks were already colouring, but her voice held firm—perhaps too firm, in the way that only overcompensation could produce. "Everyone, be serious. This oath is our bond as followers of Lady Astraea. I—don't find it embarrassing in the slightest. Not one bit."

The tips of her ears betrayed her completely.

"See?" Kaguya's smile could have stripped paint. "Even you feel embarrassed."

"I do NOT—"

"Your ears, Ryuu."

Ryuu's hands shot to the sides of her head. Too late. The damage was done.

"Can we just—get it over with?" Lyra hauled herself upright with the enthusiasm of a woman being led to her own execution. "The sooner we do it, the sooner I can down a tankard of hard liquor, forget this ever happened, and sleep."

One by one—grudgingly, enthusiastically, resignedly—the eleven members of Astraea Familia rose and formed their line.

What followed was not a casual arrangement.

They filed into position with the muscle memory of something drilled into their bones through sheer repetition. Shoulder to shoulder, feet planted at precise intervals, each girl occupying an assigned spot in what could only be described as a formation. Not a battle formation—Astraea had seen those, and they carried a different geometry. No, this was something closer to what the travelling performance troupes from the entertainment district did before launching into a synchronised dance number. The kind of arrangement where

every person had a designated mark on the floor and a corresponding pose they'd been assigned—or, more accurately, had argued about, swapped, refined, and grudgingly committed to over the course of many, many evenings.

Alise took the centre. Naturally.

To her left, Ryuu snapped to attention with military precision—feet together, back straight, one hand on the hilt of her sword and the other pressed flat against her chest. She looked like a knight-errant from a storybook illustration. She also looked like she wanted the ground to swallow her whole, but commitment to the bit was apparently a point of principle.

To Alise's right, Kaguya—despite her vocal protestations mere seconds ago—swept into a pose of such devastating elegance that it could have graced the cover of a Far Eastern woodblock print. One hand raised, fingers splayed with artistic precision, her chin tilted at exactly the angle where dignity met theatre. The contradiction between her words and her execution was so violent it could have caused physical injury.

Beyond them, the formation bloomed outward with escalating absurdity.

Iska struck a pose—fist raised to the sky, hip cocked, legs planted in a wide power stance—that she'd clearly borrowed from the hero of a travelling theatre company's production about legendary warriors. Her other arm was extended behind her, fingers spread, as though she expected a burst of light to erupt from her palm. Nothing erupted. She held the pose regardless.

Maryu matched her on the opposite end with a mirror image, though she'd added a wink that she held frozen in place—one eye screwed shut, tongue poking out—creating the impression of someone who'd been struck by a sudden and severe facial cramp.

Celty, caught between the intensity of her seniors, had opted for what could only be described as a prayer pose—hands clasped at her chest, head bowed, ears flattened—as though asking for divine forgiveness for what she was participating in.

Noin and Neze stood back-to-back with their arms crossed, chins raised in opposite directions, radiating an energy that aspired to "cool and aloof" but landed somewhere closer to "two people who'd lost a bet." The synchronisation, however, was immaculate. They'd practised this. They'd clearly practised this.

Lyana and Asta bookended the formation with identical stances—feet apart, hands on hips, chests out—giving the arrangement the framing energy of support dancers flanking the lead act. They wore matching expressions of grim determination, the look of soldiers who had accepted their duty and were going to see it through even if it killed them.

And Lyra—

Lyra simply stood there. Arms at her sides. Face blank. Posture slack. Surrounded on all sides by dramatic poses and theatrical intensity, she radiated the specific energy of a background extra who had wandered onto the wrong stage and decided that moving would only draw more attention.

She was, paradoxically, the most noticeable person in the formation.

They faced their goddess.

Astraea looked at her children and felt her heart fill.

Every single one of them—from Iska's raised fist to Lyra's aggressive nothingness—was giving this everything they had. Even the ones who pretended otherwise. Even the ones whose ears were burning. They stood before her, posed like heroes from a street performance, and meant every ridiculous, wonderful, mortifying second of it.

Alise extended one hand into the centre. The others followed—eleven hands stacked, one atop the other, in a gesture that was either deeply moving or deeply silly depending entirely on one's proximity to the event.

Alise's voice rang through the living room with the clarity of a bell.

"We do our duty! We balance the scales! Until the day we join the stars!"

The words settled into the air like stones dropped into still water. This oath was their proof. Their pride. The binding thread that held eleven disparate souls together under a single banner.

Alise drew a breath. Her eyes shone. Her hand, at the centre of ten others, trembled with conviction.

"Like comets racing across the sky, we leave our starry trails on this earth wherever we go! This I swear, by the sword and wings of justice!"

"BY THE SWORD AND WINGS OF JUSTICE!!"

Eleven voices. One declaration. The sound of it filled Stardust Garden's living room, bounced off the walls, rang against the windows—

—the open windows—

—which faced the neighbouring house.

The realisation landed like a delayed-action spell.

Ryuu's ears went scarlet first. The colour flooded upward from the tips like ink dropped into water, spreading across the cartilage until both ears blazed like signal fires.

Lyra was next. Her face, which had maintained its studied blankness throughout the entire oath, crumbled. A flush crept up her neck and across her cheeks with the inexorable advance of a rising tide.

Kaguya's composure lasted three seconds longer than Lyra's. Then a faint pink bloom appeared high on her cheekbones, and her elegant pose wavered as she became suddenly, intensely aware of how loudly they'd been shouting.

The colour spread like contagion. Neze. Noin. Asta. Lyana. Iska. Maryu. Even Cely, who wasn't entirely sure what she was embarrassed about but could feel the collective mortification radiating from her seniors and responded in sympathetic solidarity.

Alise alone stood untouched, her grin incandescent, her posture unbroken. She lowered her hand from the centre and turned toward the window with the breezy confidence of someone who had never once experienced shame in her entire life.

"Ei! Emiya!" she called, waving. "We were just declaring our justice to our goddess!"

Astraea turned.

The window of the neighbouring house—no more than five meters across the narrow gap between buildings—had its curtain drawn back. Standing behind it, illuminated by the warm glow of an interior lamp, was Emiya Shirou.

He was looking at them.

His brows were raised. Not dramatically—just enough to convey a specific flavour of bewilderment. The expression of a man who had been going about his evening in perfect peace and had, without warning or explanation, been subjected to eleven women in matching poses shouting about justice and comets at full volume.

His eyes moved across the line of posed girls. Across Alise's beaming face. Across Ryuu's incandescent ears. Across Kaguya's frozen, cracking composure. Across Iska's still-raised fist. Across Lyra's aggressive blankness. Across the collective mortification of nine other young women who had just realised, in the same horrible instant, that their windows were open and their neighbour was home.

Emiya held the curtain in one hand.

He didn't say a word.

Slowly—with the deliberate, unhurried motion of a man who has decided that the most merciful course of action is to pretend the last thirty seconds never happened—he drew the curtain shut.

The fabric swished. The lamp-glow vanished.

Silence.

Astraea pressed her fingers to her lips.

The laugh that escaped was small and warm and utterly uncontainable. It bubbled up from somewhere deep in her chest—the kind of laugh that comes not from mockery but from pure, undiluted delight. The kind of laugh that goddesses are supposed to have, but rarely do, because the heavens are a much less amusing place than the world below.

"L-Lady Astraea, please don't laugh—"

"He saw everything—"

"The poses. He saw the poses."

"He saw *my* pose—" Iska's voice cracked. She stared at her still-raised fist as though it had personally betrayed her.

"I'm never doing this again. I'm never—"

"Kaguya, your hand is still on your hip—"

"SHUT UP."

"Noin, we're still back-to-back—"

"I KNOW."

Astraea laughed harder.

Her children crumbled around her—Lyra face-down on the couch, Kaguya's composure in ruins, Ryuu standing stock-still with her ears burning bright enough to read by, Neze and Noin clutching each other in shared horror, Maryu quietly sliding behind the couch as though she could retroactively remove herself from the formation.

And Alise, still grinning, utterly unrepentant, already turning back to the group with a cheerful—

"Same time tomorrow?"

"NO."

Astraea wiped a tear from the corner of her eye and looked once more at the closed curtain of the neighbouring house.

Curious indeed.

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The morning light struggled through Daedalus Street's narrow gaps, thin and grey as dishwater. Shirou rested his chin against his palm, elbow planted on the worn wood of the yatai counter, and watched the labyrinth's crooked rooftops blur into each other.

He'd been pushing the cart through these streets for the better part of an hour. Daedalus Street had a way of folding in on itself—passages that looked like shortcuts looped back to where you started, stairwells descended into nothing, and archways opened onto the same junction you'd left three turns ago. The first time he'd come here with Syr, she hadn't said a word as she let him haul his cart in circles for a full hour before he'd finally tapped her on the head and told her to show him the way. Any newcomer to this part of Orario would have been lost for hours on their first visit—assuming they didn't get mugged first.

That was three months ago. Now he knew this tangled quarter like the back of his hand.

Fewer and fewer people had been coming to Orario lately. Rose had mentioned it in passing weeks ago, and Shakti had noted that the gate patrols were processing a fraction of what they used to.

Even places beyond the walls weren't safe. Rose never said it outright. She'd gesture at reports stacked on her desk, or let a sentence trail off mid-thought, and the silence filled in the rest. His suppliers painted a grim picture as well—people going missing at random outside the city, caravans arriving lighter than they'd departed.

A metaphorical weight seemed to press on Shirou, but he shrugged it off as he continued pulling his yatai.

This morning had been unpleasant.

Rose had been waiting for him at the Guild's service entrance before the sun was up, her arms crossed and her tail rigid behind her. Shakti stood beside her, dressed in off-duty clothes but carrying the formal bearing of someone about to conduct an interrogation. Which, as it turned out, was precisely what happened.

He'd prepared for it. Ardee had been present during the orphanage attack. Ardee adored her sister. The odds of Ardee keeping that encounter to herself were roughly equivalent to the odds of him—well, right now he couldn't think of something equivalent, but the odds were zero.

So they'd gone to a private booth, and he'd told them the truth. Most of it.

"The members of the Astraea Familia asked me to take the Goddess to somewhere safe. I found a high vantage point—rooftop, good sightlines. Brought my bow and arrows in case anyone followed us."

"And this Syr Flova?"

"She saw the attack and tried to find someone for help."

Shakti had written this down.

"And the projectiles that struck down multiple Evilus operatives from several hundred meders away? The arrows that destroyed a reinforced transport cart?"

"I'm a good shot."

Shakti's pen had paused. Then resumed.

He'd explained that Syr had helped him during his first month in Orario—shown him which shops wouldn't swindle a newcomer, introduced him to Maria and the orphanage. He'd explained that from the rooftop, he'd spotted

caravans positioned in the surrounding streets, clearly escape vehicles for the kidnappers, and that he'd chosen to intervene.

"Provide support fire" was the phrase he'd used. Clinical. Detached. The kind of language that didn't invite follow-up questions about why his arrows punched through stone walls and destroyed wooden carts.

Shakti had closed her notebook, given him a long look, and left.

Then Rose had laid into him.

"Do you have any idea how difficult it is to keep your status under wraps when you keep doing things like this?"

She'd paced the length of the booth, her ears flat against her head.

"Lord Miach has already sent a formal inquiry to my desk. Some of Lady Freya's children have been asking questions—and those aren't people who ask questions casually, Emiya."

He'd bowed. He was good at bowing. He'd had lifetimes of practice.

"And this morning—this very morning—I received a letter from one of Astraea's children. Their goddess would like to speak with me, and I don't think she just wants to have some casual tea."

He'd bowed lower.

He'd apologised. He was good at apologising too.

Rose had exhaled through her nose, straightened the stack of papers on her desk, and lifted a small chest onto the table.

"One million, forty-three thousand, seven hundred valis. The jackbird egg fetched nine hundred and sixty thousand. Normally it'd be more, but things are quite tight. The remaining balance is from yesterday's magic stone submissions."

The thud the chest made had been considerable. He'd stared at it for a moment—he'd deposit it into his gate later.

Rose was deceptively strong. Sophie had once mentioned that most Guild staff came from the school district and were blessed with a Falna—some had even reached Level 2 without setting foot in the Dungeon.

He'd already done his round through the winding streets, pulling the cart along Daedalus to see if anyone wanted to buy food. Aside from his two regulars who'd purchased some fried goods, the streets had been silent—the same uneasy quiet that had preceded yesterday's attack.

Everyone was spooked.

Today was supposed to have been his rotation on the eighteenth floor. He maintained a small establishment there—a modest counter built into an alcove near the safe zone's eastern edge, where he served adventurers between expeditions. The income was steady, the clientele too exhausted to ask personal questions, and the eighteenth floor's perpetual twilight suited his preference for working in relative obscurity.

It also served as his cover. Whenever Rose questioned why he was submitting magic stones from monsters well above his registered capability, he'd offer the same excuse: some adventurer had used them as a substitute for valis. Rose would give him her signature narrow-eyed stare. He'd maintain his innocent expression. She'd grow visibly irritated. The cycle continued.

Shirou chuckled at the memory and made a mental note to prepare something special for his wolf adviser.

But Maria's Orphanage sat in his chest like a stone.

The children's faces when Astraea Familia had arrived. The way the smallest ones clung to Ryou's legs after the fighting stopped. Maria's hands shaking as she counted heads, counted again, counted a third time because she couldn't believe the number was right.

He'd gone to the orphanage first thing. Maria had opened the door with dark circles beneath her eyes and a smile that cost her everything she had left. He'd pressed about half the valis into her hands—five hundred thousand and change.

"Emiya-san, I can't—this is too much, I absolutely cannot—"

"The children need new beds. The eastern wall needs reinforcing. You mentioned last week that the well pump was failing."

"But this amount—"

"I had a good day in the Dungeon."

She'd stared at him. He'd stared back. Eventually, she'd taken the money, and her eyes had gone wet, and before she could say anything else, Shirou had broached the idea of commissioning Goibniu's Familia for renovations—having adventurers work on the building would add some measure of defence to the area while construction was underway.

So after completing his round, here he was. Yatai parked in a small square where three of Daedalus Street's twisted arteries converged, the counter open for business in a neighbourhood that couldn't afford business. He wasn't expecting customers. He wasn't expecting anything. He was just a few meders from the orphanage.

He gave a nod to the pair of Ganesha Familia members assigned to guard the orphanage—he recognised them from the magic-stone factory, when he and Ardee had been distributing jagamarukun.

Shirou lazed at his counter and stared into the distance.

'Looks like it's going to be a quiet day.'

The sound of footsteps reached him before the figure did. Measured. Deliberate. Each step placed with the economy of someone who knew precisely how much force was required and refused to spend a single ounce more.

Someone sat at one of the stools.

Shirou straightened up and gave the woman a cursory glance.

The woman—and she was unmistakably a woman, though the hood of her travelling cloak shadowed most of her features—hadn't made a sound when she settled onto the seat. No scrape of wood, no rustle of fabric. The stool simply went from empty to occupied, as though reality had edited itself around her presence.

She was tall. Taller than most women he'd met in Orario, and she carried herself with the particular stillness of someone who had moved past needing to prove anything to anyone. Her hands rested on the counter—slender, pale, precise. The nails were clean and trimmed short.

What little he could see of her face beneath the hood was striking in the way a blade was striking—beautiful in its purpose, sharp in its lines. Silver-white hair escaped the edge of the hood in loose strands that caught the grey morning light. Her skin was pale to the point of translucence, and the shadows beneath her eyes spoke of something deeper than missed sleep.

She didn't speak.

Shirou had faced people of legend. He'd crossed blades with heroes whose names bent the fabric of the world. He'd stood before beings that could unmake reality with a thought and a gesture.

This woman carried something similar. Not the bombastic pressure of a god descending to the mortal plane, not the crackling menace of a berserker's rage. Something quieter and infinitely heavier. Like standing at the base of a mountain and realising, with perfect clarity, that it could fall on you whenever it pleased.

She didn't speak, so he replied with the same courtesy.

He poured a glass of water from the earthen pitcher and set it before her. Then he placed the menu beside it—a simple wooden board with the day's offerings chalked in neat script.

She didn't touch the water. She studied the menu with eyes he couldn't quite see the colour of beneath the hood's shadow. One finger rose and tapped a single item.

Kake udon. Onsen tamago.

Simple. Plain broth, plain noodles, a soft egg. The kind of order that meant the person wanted comfort or something light and simple.

Shirou nodded and turned to his station.

The dashi was already warm in the pot—he'd prepared it out of habit when he'd set up, despite expecting no one. Kombu and bonito, steeped and strained, then seasoned with soy and mirin. He brought it to a proper simmer whilst setting a separate pot of water to boil for the noodles.

The noodles went in. He watched them soften, stirring once with long chopsticks to prevent clumping, then lifted them out and rinsed them under cold water before portioning them into a bowl. The hot dashi went over them in a steady pour. He sliced spring onion with three quick strokes—fine rounds, uniform, scattered across the broth's surface—then set the soft-poached egg at the centre, its yolk still liquid beneath the opaque white.

He placed the bowl in front of her and turned away.

His elbow found the counter again. His chin found his palm. The crooked rooftops of Daedalus Street blurred back into their familiar muddle, and for a while the only sounds were the distant murmur of the neighbourhood stirring and the soft pull of noodles being lifted from broth.

She ate in silence. He stared in silence. The arrangement suited both of them.

Some minutes passed—ten, perhaps, or fifteen. The grey overhead thinned in patches, allowing brief stabs of pale gold to touch the square's flagstones before the clouds closed ranks again.

Then:

"Ha-ha! Yoink!"

The shout came from a side street to Shirou's left—high-pitched, cackling, the voice of someone who thought themselves very clever.

"My 444 valis! But that's my entire life savings! Somebody, stop that thieeef!!!"

Shirou's gaze tracked the commotion without his posture changing. A wiry figure burst from the alley mouth at a dead sprint, something small and jingling clutched to his chest. Behind him, a man with dark, dishevelled hair staggered into the square, one arm outstretched in the universal gesture of someone who'd just been robbed.

The victim was a god. The particular quality of his aura—muted but undeniable, like a candle flame viewed through frosted glass—marked him as divine even in his deliberately shabby state. His hair was long and unkempt, a streak of grey running through it, and his robes hung off him as though they'd been borrowed from someone slightly larger.

Shirou didn't move.

The thief was already twenty meders away and accelerating, feet slapping the cobblestones with the desperate rhythm of a man who'd done this before and knew his windows. The god—Shirou couldn't place the face, and the man's divine aura was too restrained to identify at range—was making absolutely no effort to give chase, instead opting for the apparently more productive strategy of standing in the middle of the square and wailing.

"Won't somebody help a poor, defenceless god?! Four hundred and forty-four valis! Do you know how long it takes to earn that on a divine stipend?!"

Three seconds.

Two.

A flash of red hair appeared at the intersection, followed immediately by a very familiar voice.

"You can't escape us! Prepare to be cuffed!"

"That girl with the red hair—that's Scarlet Harnel?! Dammit, why did I have to run into Astraea Familia?!"

The thief was already far away. If he knew Daedalus—and he moved like someone who did—he could vanish the moment the line of sight broke.

Shirou's posture didn't change. His chin stayed in his palm. His eyes stayed on the rooftops.

Beneath the counter, his circuits pulsed once—brief, contained, invisible.

Twenty meders away, something materialised in the thin shadow pooling at the base of a wall. A dark, blade-like sliver—more concept than metal—drove itself point-first into the thief's shadow where it met the cobblestones.

The man's legs locked mid-stride. His momentum carried his torso forward whilst his feet stayed rooted, and he pitched face-first into the ground with a crack that echoed off the surrounding buildings.

"Hey! Why can't I suddenly move?!" the thief shouted, arms flailing, legs straining against an invisible anchor.

Shirou hadn't moved. His elbow was on the counter. His chin was in his palm. The same lazy, half-lidded stare into the middle distance—the portrait of a man who hadn't so much as shifted his weight in the last quarter of an hour.

He could feel two gazes directed at him. The god, who had stopped wailing and was now studying Shirou with an expression that had shed its theatrics entirely—replaced by something shrewd, appraising, and far too alert for a man who'd just been robbed of pocket change. And the woman at his counter,

who hadn't turned her head—but whose stillness had acquired a different quality. The stillness of attention, rather than indifference.

Shirou ignored both of them and continued staring at the rooftops.

'Quiet day.'

-=&<o>&=-

End

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