

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

Story Starts

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Chapter 3.2

Curiosity Unsheathed

Shirou couldn't help but sigh.

"You can't escape—huh?" Alise started with a yell, but her tone shifted to bewilderment mid-sentence. "Hey, Lion, look at this—he's frozen."

"W-what is this?!" the pickpocket yelled. "Release me... please!"

Shirou didn't really know why he'd intervened. He was still resting languidly inside his yatai, chin in palm, elbow on counter—the very picture of a man who hadn't lifted a finger in the last quarter of an hour, serving his single customer aside.

The black key had done its work beautifully.

He'd traced it into a corner's blind spot along one of his usual routes—a shadow pooling against the base of a wall where the angles of three buildings conspired to block every sightline. No one could have seen it appear. No one should have been able to connect it to him.

And yet.

The god was staring at him. Shirou could feel those eyes boring into the side of his head with the intensity of someone who had just witnessed a magic trick and was determined to work out how the rabbit got into the hat. The hooded woman at his counter had also paused mid-bite, her chopsticks hovering with a single strand of udon dangling between them. Her gaze carried a different quality—not curiosity so much as quiet appraisal, the way a hawk might regard a field mouse that had suddenly sprouted wings.

Shirou ignored them both.

The god had most likely felt him process magic. The woman might have had a sensitivity to it—or simply possessed the kind of instinct that came from being dangerous enough to recognise danger in others. Either way, both of them clearly suspected he was responsible.

Which, to be fair, he was. But they couldn't prove it.

'Just look bored.'

He focused on the scene unfolding thirty meters away, where Alise Lovell was circling the frozen pickpocket like a cat that had discovered a particularly fascinating beetle. Beside her, Ryuu crouched at the man's feet, her green eyes fixed on the dark sliver embedded in his shadow with an expression that promised a very thorough investigation.

"Hey, hey, Lion—poke him again."

"I'm not poking him again, Alise."

"But look at his face! It's doing the thing!"

"What thing?"

"The scrunchy thing! Like when you eat something sour. Go on, just one more poke."

"I said no."

Ryuu stood and crossed her arms, studying the immobilised thief with considerably more analytical rigour than her captain. Her green eyes traced the man's posture—legs mid-stride, torso twisted, one arm flung forward as if reaching for balance that would never come. He looked like a statue commissioned by someone with a grudge against the concept of dignity.

"P-please," the man whimpered, his jaw apparently the one part of him still capable of movement. "I can't—my legs won't—what did you do to me?!"

"We didn't do anything," Alise said, crouching to peer at his face from below. "You just sort of... stopped. Were you overcome by guilt? Did the weight of your crimes finally catch up?"

"I think the culprit is—" Ryuu said flatly.

"Justice works in mysterious ways, Lion."

"Justice is not a paralytic agent." Ryuu's voice was clipped. "It's clearly this weapon embedded in his shadow."

"How do you know? Have you ever been paralysed by justice?"

Ryuu opened her mouth. Closed it. Then she crouched, gripped the dark sliver where it was driven into the ground, and pulled it free.

The thief dropped forward—

—and Ryuu stabbed it back into his now-smaller shadow before he could take a single step.

The man yelped. His legs locked again.

"...I'm going to pretend you didn't ask that." Ryuu crouched and leaned in close to the embedded weapon, studying it with narrowed eyes. The man—now frozen in an even more undignified position than before—continued to complain.

Shirou watched this exchange through the narrow angle of his peripheral vision whilst maintaining the expression of a man whose deepest concern was the number of hours left in his shift.

The god took a step towards Shirou's yatai. Then another.

Shirou very deliberately picked up a cloth and began wiping down a section of counter that was already spotless.

"That was quite—"

A blur of light blue hair.

"Emiya!"

Ardee Varma materialised in front of the yatai's counter as though she'd been fired from a cannon. She planted both hands on the wooden surface and leaned forward with such enthusiasm that the entire cart rocked on its wheels. Her grin was enormous. She waved at him with one hand, fingers splayed wide, bouncing on her heels.

Shirou blinked at this, the gesture quite redundant given her proximity, but his hand moved on its own—the cloth still clutched in his fingers—and he waved back.

It was a thoroughly half-hearted gesture, more of a limp oscillation of the wrist than any deliberate communication, but Ardee's smile somehow managed to widen further, which Shirou hadn't thought anatomically possible.

"I knew it was your cart!" she said, slapping the counter. "I could smell the dashi from two streets over! Are you serving? Please tell me you're serving. I just finished a six-hour patrol route, and my feet are screaming, and I could eat an entire—oh!"

Her attention snapped sideways to the frozen pickpocket, then back to Shirou, then sideways again.

At his counter, the hooded woman set her chopsticks down with a soft click—precise, deliberate—and the ambient temperature around the stool seemed to drop by a fraction. She hadn't moved. She hadn't spoken. But the quality of her silence had shifted from quiet indifference to something that suggested Ardee's volume was being noted, catalogued, and filed under a heading that did not bode well for anyone.

Shirou tilted his head toward the commotion a few meters away.

"Ah—hold that thought."

Ardee vaulted the counter—Shirou leaned back just in time to avoid a wayward limb to the chin as Ardee twirled without a care—and landed in a neat crouch before sprinting towards the scene. The god, who had been mid-approach, jerked to a halt as Ardee blazed past him like a blue-haired cannonball.

"Alise! Lion! What's going on?"

"Ardee!" Alise straightened up from her crouch with a broad grin. "Perfect timing! We caught a pickpocket!"

"You caught—he looks stuck."

"He is stuck! Isn't it great?"

Ardee circled the man with a puzzled look—he wasn't trying to escape, wasn't bound, and yet wasn't going anywhere. She bent over, freed the small pouch of valis from his hand, and straightened up.

She looked towards Lion and Alise, offering the pouch. The pair turned in Shirou's direction—or more precisely, towards the god standing in front of his yatai.

Lion froze for a second, the tips of her ears reddening as her eyes met Shirou's.

He offered her the same lazy, half-lidded expression he'd been wearing all morning. She looked away first.

"Right—secure the culprit for now and let's return the wallet to the god," Ardee said.

Alise shrugged. Lion pulled the weapon free from the thief's shadow, and the man sagged the instant his legs unlocked. Lion and Alise seized him by both elbows before he could bolt—or collapse.

"Damn it! My life's over! Just throw me in a cell and leave me to rot already!" The man slumped between them, dead weight, as the goddess-empowered pair dragged him forward as though he weighed nothing.

"Wow—what a refreshing change of pace!" Alise grinned. "I've never met a criminal who volunteered to be arrested before."

"It's not like I had a choice," the man grumbled. Quiet enough to be meant for himself. Loud enough for Shirou to hear.

They reached the front of his yatai just as the silent woman tilted her bowl and drank the last of the broth in one long, unhurried motion. The gesture could have looked crude—drinking directly from the bowl, head tilted back, throat exposed—but she performed it with the kind of grace that made it look regal.

She set the bowl down. Stood. The movement was seamless—stool to standing in a single fluid motion that drew every eye in the square. Even the thief, still dangling between Lion and Alise, went quiet.

She placed two hundred valis on the counter. Then she left.

No word. No nod. No acknowledgement beyond the payment itself.

Shirou bowed at her retreating back. The cloak swallowed her silhouette within three steps, and the grey of Daedalus Street folded around her as though she'd never been there at all.

The silence held for a beat.

"Uh—is this yours?" Ardee broke it first, offering the pouch of valis to the god.

"My four hundred and forty-four valis! My life savings!" the god exclaimed, clutching the pouch to his chest. "Sorry to have caused all this fuss—the fellow came at me from behind. I never saw it coming!"

"Are you hurt?" Alise asked.

"Not a scratch, cutie," the god replied with a wink. "Thanks for getting my wallet back."

"My name is Eren," he continued, though his gaze drifted past the trio—towards the thief.

The pickpocket's eyes darted between the three women who now surrounded him. Alise, captain of Astraea Familia, whose crimson hair caught the late afternoon sun like a war banner. Ryu Lion, whose hand rested on the hilt of the dark weapon she'd pulled from his shadow—held casually, but held nonetheless. And Ardee Varma, a Level 3 adventurer of Ganesha Familia and the younger sister of Shakti Varma herself, who stood with one hand on her hip, bright as ever..

The man began to sweat. Not the gentle perspiration of mild exertion, but the full-body, shirt-soaking deluge of a person who had just realised exactly how catastrophically his afternoon had gone wrong.

"The strong could never understand what we gotta go through just to put food on the table! We can't work, we can't sell shit, and we can barely breathe without someone blowin' up a buildin' halfway across town!" The thief blustered, but the fire was already guttering. "I—I only took a few coins—"

"Theft is theft," Ryu said.

Shirou understood the man's reasoning. He didn't condone it, but he understood it. Daedalus Street had been bleeding residents for months. The ones who stayed were the ones who couldn't afford to leave.

"It was barely anything! Look at that bag—it's practically empty!"

The god clutched his heart and produced a silent, theatrical weep—no actual tears, just the performance of devastation, executed with the commitment of someone who'd had centuries of practice.

The thief found a second wind of self-righteousness and pushed further. "It's all right for you lot, who've got work comin' outta your ears! Why don't you go after the real villains instead of pickin' on little guys like me?!"

The girls' expressions shifted. Not guilt, exactly—but something adjacent. The uncomfortable recognition of a truth they couldn't entirely dismiss.

'They know he's not wrong.'

Shirou could see it in the way Alise's grin dimmed by a fraction, in the way Ardee's hand stilled on the pouch, in the way Ryuu's jaw tightened. They fought Evilus every night. They risked their lives to protect Orario. And the people they were protecting were still starving, still desperate, still stealing pocket change from gods who had even less.

The thief capitalised on their silence.

"That's right," he said, emboldened. "You made us like this! This is all your fault! I'm the victim here! And here you are, arresting me for a pitiful sum!"

"The amount is irrelevant," Lion said, finding her voice. "That's your excuse?"

"L-look, it was already returned—by Ms Blue here. Can't we just let bygones be bygones—"

"My name is Ardee, actually."

"—Ardee took it, so we're square, right? No harm done?"

"Bad things are still bad. If stealing is okay as long as someone else stole from you first, what's stopping your victim from turning around and robbing you, hmm?"

It was Ardee. There was no blame in her voice. No judgement, no condescension—just the plain, patient clarity of someone explaining the way things were, the way a mother might explain to a child why they couldn't keep a stone they'd taken from someone else's garden.

The god, having found the spectacle thoroughly entertaining, settled onto a stool at Shirou's counter. He pointed at the jagamarukun on the menu and held up two fingers, then placed one hundred and fifty valis from his meagre

life savings on the counter with the ceremonial gravity of a man parting with a vital organ.

Shirou set a cup of green tea in front of him and turned to heat the oil. He had piping-hot jagamarukun sitting in his gate—fresh from this morning's batch—but with a god perched at his counter, the last thing he needed was more suspicion. He'd fry them fresh.

The god sipped his tea and watched the unfolding argument with undisguised delight, as though the spectacle before him were the accompanying rice cake to his beverage—the perfect pairing he hadn't ordered but fully intended to savour.

"Your crime just now would have put somebody in the exact same situation if we hadn't stopped it," Ardee continued, turning back to the thief.

"W-well..."

The man wasn't being pressed to explain himself—not physically, not with threats. And yet he flustered with his words anyway, stumbling over syllables as though Ardee's gentle reasoning had done more damage than any interrogation could have.

Ardee gave him a gentle smile.

"So I want you to promise me something."

"What?!"

"Promise you'll never resort to crime again. Promise me that, and we can forget all this nastiness ever happened."

The man looked dumbfounded. It was Ryu who cried out in surprise first.

Alise tilted her head. That grin of hers hadn't diminished one fraction.

"What do you think, Lion? Should we let him go?"

"He should be handed to the authorities."

"Ardee?"

"I am the authorities."

The man made a sound like a punctured bellows.

Shirou turned back to his fryer after dropping the jagamarukun into the oil, letting them sink and sizzle.

"What?!" Lion shrieked. "Ardee, you can't do that!"

"Why not?" Ardee replied, her tone so innocent it could have been bottled and sold as a children's tonic.

Shirou began reorganising his condiment shelf. He moved the soy sauce two celchs to the left. Then two celchs to the right. Then he turned to the fryer—the jagamarukun had already deepened two shades past pale, and he lifted them out before they could tip into golden. The carryover heat would do the rest.

He set the pair on a wire rack and let them finish in their own time.

"Because he committed a crime, and he needs to be punished!" Lion's voice had climbed half an octave. "If you let him off the hook, what's to stop others like him? How would we ever uphold public order if everyone was as lenient as you?!"

But Ardee wouldn't change her tune so easily. "Hmm, I think I have the right to take extenuating circumstances into account," she insisted. "This man isn't lying, and I know stealing is wrong, but..." She smiled. "...we got the money back, so no harm, no foul, right? And nobody got hurt except our friend here."

"Still, a crime's a crime!" Ryu bellowed. "Ardee, you call yourself a member of Ganesha Familia?!"

Alise turned to Shirou, who was setting two small plates of the fried snack on the counter, steam rising visibly from their golden crusts.

"How about you, Shirou?" She used his first name quite brazenly—though he didn't really care. "What do you think we should do?"

Shirou raised an eyebrow at his fellow redhead.

"Why ask me? I'm just a food vendor."

Ardee gave him an uncharacteristic raised brow. Alise pumped her fist. Ryuu could only stare at him with open incredulity.

"Because last night, you saw our pledge—our dedication to justice!"

Lion's entire body flushed a crimson so deep she looked as though she'd been steaming for the past hour.

"A-Alise—" Lion managed, barely above a whisper.

"Ah—yes. The swords and wings of justice."

Lion could only whimper. Alise puffed her chest proudly, thumping her heart with her fist, chin held high, preening with the radiant confidence of someone who had never once in her life felt a single moment of shame. Beside her, her fellow sword and wing of justice looked as though her soul had already departed for the afterlife and was currently negotiating its terms of surrender.

Shirou suppressed a sigh.

"Punishment is a deterrent. It exists so that people who are thinking of committing a crime weigh the consequences before they act."

"See?" Lion whirled on Ardee, her embarrassment forgotten. "Even the food vendor understands!"

Shirou wasn't sure how to feel about being cited as a moral authority by the woman who'd spent the last two days treating him as a potential Evilus operative, but he let it pass.

That sudden vindication put a dent in Ardee's composure. She closed her eyes for a moment, considering.

"The carrot... and the stick. Isn't that what they say?"

"Hmm? What's that got to do with anything?"

"I'm just trying to be the carrot to your stick. After all, too much of the stick wears everyone out."

"...!"

"But—" Shirou didn't know why he continued. He'd already started, though, and five pairs of eyes had turned to him. "Punishment should also include rehabilitation—otherwise, you're just releasing the same person who'd weigh the price of freedom over convenience, or something else more heinous."

The square went quiet for a beat.

Ardee looked at him. The gentle smile returned—but there was something sharper behind it now. Recognition, perhaps. The look of someone who'd just heard their own argument completed by an unexpected ally.

"Excellent showing!" The god clapped his hands together, utterly delighted.

The thief, momentarily forgotten, sagged between his captors.

Shirou offered the trio some twine, but Lion—who had apparently figured out how the weapon functioned—waved it off. She urged the thief to sit on the ground and drove the dark blade back into his shadow.

Unfortunately, due to the angle of the late afternoon sun, both Ardee's and Alise's shadows had stretched long enough to intersect with the thief's.

The weapon sank into the pooled shadow with a soft, almost inaudible *thk*—the sound of a needle piercing silk.

Three things happened simultaneously.

The thief's legs locked rigid. Expected.

Ardee's spine went ramrod straight, her arms freezing at her sides as though she'd been dipped in quick-setting plaster. Not expected.

And Alise Lovell, captain of Astraea Familia, mid-gesture in what had been shaping up to be a particularly emphatic point about the nature of mercy, stopped dead. Her right arm hung in the air, index finger extended, mouth open around a syllable that would never arrive.

"I—I can't move!"

"What—what's happening?! My legs! Lion, what did you do?!"

"I didn't—" Ryuu's hand jerked back from the weapon as though it had bitten her. She stared at the dark blade, then at the two paralysed women, then at the shadow on the ground where all three silhouettes merged into a single dark pool beneath the late afternoon sun.

The thief, who had been successfully immobilised for the second time, managed to summon enough spite to look smug about having company.

"Ha! Not so fun, is it?!"

"Shut up," all three said in unison.

Shirou set out three jars of sauce for the jagamarukun—his own tonkatsu sauce, mayonnaise, and mustard—and maintained the carefully calibrated mask of mild disinterest he'd spent four months perfecting. Brows slightly raised. Mouth neutral. Eyes half-lidded in a way that suggested he found the entire affair about as riveting as watching paint dry.

The black key's mechanism was straightforward enough. It pinned a target's shadow to a surface, and the shadow's metaphysical connection to its owner translated that binding into physical paralysis. The problem was that shadows weren't discrete objects. They bled into one another, pooled and merged wherever light couldn't reach. In the late afternoon, with the sun stretching every silhouette into long, overlapping tongues of darkness, Lion hadn't accounted for the overlap.

An honest mistake. An inconvenient one.

The god—Eren—had risen from his stool. His tea sat forgotten on the counter, steam curling upward in a lazy helix. He wasn't looking at the paralysed women. He wasn't looking at the thief.

He was looking at the black key.

His eyes had narrowed to slits, and behind that narrow gaze moved something Shirou recognised with the bone-deep familiarity of a man who'd spent lifetimes surrounded by beings of vast and terrible intelligence. Curiosity. Not the idle, passing curiosity of a mortal encountering a novelty—but the deep, gravitational pull of a god who had just witnessed something that didn't fit neatly into his understanding of the world.

Shirou refilled the god's tea.

Eren blinked. The intensity vanished behind a genial smile, and he sat back down with a theatrical sigh.

"My, my. What an exciting weapon! I haven't seen anything like that before."

Shirou said nothing. He picked up his cloth and began wiping the counter for the fourth time that hour.

"Lion!" Alise's voice carried a note of genuine distress. "Fix this! I can feel my nose itching and I can't scratch it!"

"I'm working on it!" Ryuu crouched beside the embedded weapon, her green eyes tracing the line of the blade down to where it vanished into the shadow. She gripped the handle—thin, wrapped in something that looked like dark leather but wasn't—and pulled.

The black key slid free with a faint resistance, as though the shadow itself were reluctant to release it.

All three captives staggered. The thief pitched forward onto his hands and knees. Alise windmilled her arms, nearly toppling into Ardee, who caught her

by the collar with the reflexes of someone accustomed to preventing Alise-related disasters.

Ryuu straightened, holding the weapon between her fingers like an entomologist examining a particularly unusual specimen. She turned it slowly, letting the dying sunlight catch its edge—then glanced down at the ground, at the overlapping shadows that had caused the problem.

"Move," she said to Ardee and Alise.

"What?"

"Step away from the thief. Your shadows are overlapping."

"Oh!" Alise hopped three paces to the left. Ardee dragged the thief two paces to the right, depositing him in a patch of cobblestone where his shadow fell alone.

Ryuu drove the weapon back in.

Thk.

The thief's body locked in his sitting position. He groaned. Nobody else froze.

"There," Ryuu said, dusting her hands.

Eren bit into the jagamarukun with evident satisfaction, the golden crust crackling between his teeth—and then his eyes went wide. His mouth opened around the steaming mouthful, breath coming in quick, sharp puffs as he tried to cool the molten interior without surrendering any of it. He chewed in careful, open-mouthed half-motions, air hissing between his teeth, his expression caught somewhere between genuine pain and a stubborn refusal to spit out something that tasted too good to waste.

"Delicious," he said. "You have real talent."

"Thank you."

"No, I mean it." The god swallowed and fixed Shirou with a look that was warmer than anything he'd shown so far. "Food made with care is rare in this city. Most vendors treat cooking as a means to an end. You treat it as something worth doing properly."

Shirou had no response to that. He inclined his head in acceptance.

Eren turned his attention back to the scene, where the debate had reignited with renewed vigour. The thief, still pinned, had apparently decided that if he was going to be stuck here regardless, he might as well advocate for his own freedom.

"Look—the blue-haired one already said she'd let me go! That's a binding verbal contract!"

"It absolutely is not," Lion said.

"It felt pretty binding!"

"Feelings are not legal precedents."

Ardee raised her hand. "Actually, in my capacity as a member of Ganesha Familia, I did offer him conditional release in exchange for a promise to abandon criminal activity. That's a recognised form of discretionary leniency under section—"

"Ardee, please don't cite law at me."

"—section fourteen, subsection three of the Ganesha Familia Enforcement Guidelines, which grants individual officers the authority to exercise clemency in cases involving first-time offenders, minor property crimes, and extenuating socioeconomic circumstances."

Ryuu's left eye twitched.

Alise leaned against a wall, arms crossed, watching the exchange with the serene contentment of someone who had front-row seats to the finest theatre in Orario.

"Young ladies!" The god raised his hand, one jagamarukun still clutched in the other. "Might I offer a perspective?"

All three heads turned.

"If this poor fellow were my follower—which he isn't, but hypothetically—I think I'd want to understand why he stole before deciding what to do about it." He took another bite, chewed thoughtfully, and continued around the mouthful.

"Punishment without understanding is just violence with extra steps. But forgiveness without accountability is just enabling with a smile."

He swallowed.

"The ideal, surely, lies somewhere in the middle. Where the offender is held responsible for what they've done, but given the tools and opportunity to become someone who wouldn't do it again." He smiled. "But what do I know? I'm just a god who got his pocket picked."

The square fell quiet.

Shirou's hands stilled on the counter. The god's words landed with a precision that felt deliberate—each phrase placed like a stone in an arch, each idea building on the last until the whole structure stood complete and self-supporting.

It was, objectively, an elegant argument. It was also the kind of argument that a god made when he wanted to appear reasonable whilst simultaneously steering the conversation exactly where he wanted it to go.

"That's..." Ardee began.

"...actually quite sensible," Ryuu finished, her tone carrying the faint bewilderment of someone who'd just agreed with a person she'd been prepared to distrust.

Alise nodded slowly. "So what you're saying is—we make him apologise, warn him properly, and then let Ardee's offer stand. But with conditions."

"I'm saying nothing of the sort. I'm merely a victim offering his opinion." The god smiled beatifically. "But if you were to reach that conclusion on your own, I certainly wouldn't object."

The three women exchanged glances. Some silent negotiation occurred—the kind that happened between people who'd worked together long enough to communicate in micro-expressions and raised eyebrows. Ardee gave a small nod. Alise shrugged. Ryuu's jaw clenched, released, clenched again—and then, with visible effort, she inclined her head a fraction.

Ardee crouched in front of the thief.

"Here's what's going to happen. You're going to apologise to this gentleman for stealing his money. Then you're going to promise—and I mean really promise, not the kind you make when you've got your fingers crossed behind your back—that you won't steal again. And if I catch you breaking that promise, I won't be as understanding next time."

The man looked at her. At Ryuu, whose hand rested on her sword. At Alise, whose grin had sharpened into something that suggested she was perfectly capable of being considerably less friendly than she currently appeared.

"...I'm sorry," he said to the god. "I shouldn't have taken your money."

"Apology accepted!" Eren beamed.

"And I promise I won't steal again."

"Good," Ardee said. She looked at Ryuu. "Pull it out."

Ryuu gripped the black key.

Shirou severed the connection.

The weapon came free—and in Ryuu's hand, it shivered. The dark blade flickered, its edges blurring as though seen through heat haze. Ryuu's eyes widened. She held it up, turning it—

The black key dissolved.

It came apart in a cascade of pale motes, each fragment of mana separating from the structure like ash lifting from a dying fire. The particles hung in the air for a heartbeat—luminous, ephemeral, impossibly delicate—and then they were gone. Nothing remained. No blade, no handle, no residue. Just Ryuu's empty fingers, curled around absence.

The square was silent.

Ryuu stared at her hand.

"It..." Ardee's mouth hung open. "It disintegrated."

"The enchantment must have expired," Alise said, though her voice carried a note of uncertainty. "Magic weapons do that sometimes, right? When the magic runs out?"

"Not like that," Lion said quietly. Her fingers closed into a fist, opened again. "Not that cleanly."

Ardee's expression fell. "Well—there goes our chance of having Goibniu examine it."

"Perhaps it was a limited-use item," Alise offered. "Like those fire daggers."

"Perhaps." Lion didn't sound convinced. Her gaze drifted—inevitably, inexorably—towards Shirou's yatai.

He was washing a bowl.

Lion watched him for three full seconds. He could feel the weight of those green eyes on the side of his face like a brand.

He rinsed the bowl and set it on the drying rack.

The thief, now free, scrambled to his feet and bolted down the nearest alley before anyone could reconsider. His footsteps echoed off the narrow walls and faded into the labyrinth of Daedalus Street.

"Well!" Eren dusted crumbs from his fingers and rose from the stool. "What an excellent display from the champions of this city's justice!"

He spread his arms wide, and the gesture carried the theatrical weight of a curtain call.

"And what are your names? I overheard this young lady was from Ganesha Familia, Ardee, right?—" he nodded towards Ardee "—but what about the rest of you?"

"I'm Alise Lovell!" Alise declared, chest puffed with pride. "Captain of Astraea Familia!"

"...And you may call me Lion. I'm also part of Astraea Familia."

Shirou noted the introduction. Family name only. Elvish tradition demanded privacy, and in a city where information could be weaponised as easily as a blade, keeping one's true name close was simple common sense.

"Astraea Familia," Eren mused. "The followers of the goddess of justice..."

He paused. His eyes moved between Alise and Ryuu with an appraising slowness that made Shirou's fingers tighten against the counter. There was something about the way this god looked at people. Not hostility—Shirou had intimate familiarity with hostility, had lived inside it, had worn it like a second skin—but something adjacent. Something that sat in the same neighbourhood but occupied a different house entirely.

Interest. The kind that weighed and measured and found potential.

"...I see, I see! Real, live emissaries of justice, then! It's a good thing we met, I tell you!"

"...Hmm? What are you talking about?" Ryuu's expression tightened.

Eren ignored her and turned towards Shirou. "And you—does the shop owner have a name?"

"Emiya."

"Far Eastern—though you don't look quite Far Eastern to me."

"..."

"It feels like there's a question there somewhere." The god gave a closed-mouth smile, his eyes squinting from the action in a way that made it a shade more sinister than the amiable aura he was projecting.

"..."

"Go on. Do ask your question," the god encouraged.

"Was he lying?"

"Yep," the god replied cheerily, popping the 'p.'

The trio's faces froze. The slow, dawning horror of three women realising they'd just released a criminal who hadn't been remotely remorseful—and that they'd taken him at his word without once checking with the god who could tell if a mortal was speaking truth.

"But still—all I'm saying is, it's a good thing you three saved me. I know I already said this, but bravo, really. Bravo." The god continued without waiting for acknowledgement, and the praise landed like salt in a wound; the trio's faces soured, keenly aware that they hadn't done much other than release the thief. "As for what I'm impressed by, it was that discussion on justice the three of you had. The morality of grey, beyond good and evil... I couldn't stop listening! Especially to you, elf girl."

"Me...?"

"Yes, you. Noble and uncompromising, yet unable to come to a clean solution. Like a baby bird, struggling to make sense of the world." His voice softened—but it was the softness of a hand closing around something fragile. "Your heart is the purest here by far."

Shirou's hand stopped mid-wipe.

He knew that tone. He'd heard it before—from beings who sat above the mortal plane and looked down at the struggles of those below with the detached fascination of a child watching ants navigate a puddle. Gilgamesh had spoken that way—even his more amiable female counterpart, or his less irritating younger selves. Kirei had spoken that way.

Alaya had spoken that way, at the very end.

The god's eyes glittered as the streets darkened towards evening.

"I want to see what you make of this age—and what this age makes of you. Ahhh, I just can't wait to see what answers you reach."

Ryuu stood rigid. Shirou could read the tension in her shoulders from his position behind the counter—the way her fingers whitened around her sword's grip, the almost imperceptible backward shift of her weight onto her rear foot. She was unsettled, and Ryuu Lion unsettled was Ryuu Lion dangerous.

Then Alise moved. She stepped in front of Ryuu and spread her arms wide, red hair flaring.

"I don't like the way this guy talks! Get back! I bet he's a freak whose laugh sounds all *bwuh-huh-huh!*"

"Oh, don't say that! I'll really be offended! I'm not like those other two-bit gods, I tell you!"

"Yeah, that's what they all say!" Ardee shouted.

"Oof!" Eren doubled over theatrically. "What a blow! I had you pegged for a peppy tomboy, but to think you're an airhead to boot..."

The raspy, deflated voice was so different from his earlier grand pronouncements that even Shirou's mouth twitched. The shift was too perfect—too precisely calibrated to defuse the tension his previous words had created. The timing, the register, the posture—all calculated to transform himself from an unsettling presence into a harmless eccentric within the space of a single sentence.

Shirou had known manipulators who couldn't manage that kind of pivot. This god did it the way other people breathed.

"...In any case," Eren said, straightening. "I'd love to stay and have some more fun with you girls, but it's getting late, and I have things to do."

"Will you be all right by yourself?" Ryuu asked, her suspicion apparently battling with her sense of duty. "I don't see any of your followers around. Perhaps we could escort you back to your home."

"Oh, that won't be necessary."

A light wave. A genial smile. And then the god turned—

—and his gaze swept across the yatai one final time.

It passed over the counter, the condiments, the stock pot, and settled on Shirou with the weight of a falling stone.

"Thank you for the food and the show, my friend." His voice carried. "You know, this little encounter has been far more interesting than I expected. That elf girl's fascinating, of course—but you..."

He paused.

"You're interesting too."

The words hung in the evening air.

Shirou's spine went rigid. Not visibly—the muscles locked beneath the skin, hidden beneath his apron and his carefully maintained posture of disinterest—but the reaction was immediate and involuntary. His circuits flared, dormant pathways surging to half-activation before he clamped down on the response.

Eren's eyes held his for one second. Two.

Then the god smiled—wide and warm and absolutely empty—and walked off down a side street, his silhouette swallowed by the deepening shadows between buildings.

Shirou's hand gripped the edge of the counter. The wood creaked.

Ryuu was staring at him. Alise was staring at him. Ardee was staring at the alley where the god had vanished, her brow furrowed.

"What," Ryuu said slowly, "did he mean by that?"

Shirou released the counter. The wood bore four shallow impressions where his fingers had been.

"No idea," he said. "Would you care for a bowl of noodles?"

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End

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