

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

Story Starts

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Chapter 4.1

Descent, and Escalation

Four months ago...

The wine caught the lamplight like liquid garnet. Freya turned the glass between her fingers, watching the colour shift as the flame behind the crystal threw shadows across her quarters. A Dionysus vintage, older than Orario's current power structure. She'd purchased three cases from the god of revelry when Zeus and Hera still cast their long shadow across the city, when the word *Evilus* drew laughter rather than dread.

She took a sip. The tannins had mellowed over the decades into something almost dangerously smooth.

Those had been simpler times. Zeus, for all his lechery and bluster, had maintained a leash on the city through sheer overwhelming force. Hera beside him, their Familias the twin pillars upon which Orario's golden age rested. Centuries of peace had reduced the malcontents—those scattered cults devoted to gods who revelled in suffering—to little more than graffiti artists and petty arsonists. A nuisance. A joke told between patrols.

Then the One-Eyed Black Dragon had broken both pillars in a single night.

Freya and Loki had seized the vacuum. It wasn't difficult. The devastation Zeus and Hera's hubris had wrought upon their own people made the transition almost welcome. A few well-placed words, the right pressure applied to the right Familias, and the previous rulers found themselves exiled from the very city they'd built. Freya felt no guilt over it.

But there had been consequences neither she nor Loki had fully anticipated. Without the crushing weight of Zeus Familia's martial supremacy bearing down upon them, the scattered faithful of malicious gods had found their courage. Evilus coalesced from a scattered handful of bitter fanatics into something organised. Something that planned. Something that killed with purpose rather than spite.

Freya sipped again and turned her gaze to the window.

Babel Tower afforded her a view of the entire city, and tonight the lamplit sprawl below seemed quieter than usual. Fewer lanterns in the windows of the outer districts. More shadows pooling in the alleys of Daedalus Street. The city was holding its breath.

Then she felt it.

A ripple across the membrane between Tenkai and Gekai—subtle, swift, and unmistakable to any deity paying attention. Someone was descending. Freya set her glass down and pressed her fingertips to the windowpane, her divine senses reaching outward. The disturbance bloomed like a stone dropped into still water, spreading concentrically from a point somewhere outside the walls of Orario, somewhere along the road between Melen and the city.

A pillar of bright light bridged heaven and earth—there and gone in the span of a held breath.

Freya's fingers tightened against the glass.

And then, not even five minutes later, another pillar erupted. The same point. The same direction. Ascending.

The presence withdrew. The ripple folded back upon itself and vanished as though it had never occurred.

Freya's brow creased.

A deity had descended from Tenkai, touched Gekai for the span of a held breath, and returned. Either they hadn't liked what they'd found—which

seemed unlikely, given that one didn't make the journey on a whim—or they had descended to accomplish precisely one thing before departing.

She lifted her glass again, the wine untouched at her lips.

She wished she knew which deity. That alone would have answered most of her questions. The fundamental truth of divine existence—the truth mortals never fully grasped—was that gods and goddesses did not possess free will. Not in the way the children did. Humans, elves, dwarves, beastfolk—they could choose to act against their natures. A coward could force himself to stand. A kind woman could choose cruelty. The capacity for contradiction lived inside every mortal soul like a seed waiting for the right conditions.

Gods could not contradict themselves. They *were* their nature.

Freya, who embodied wild passion, desire, war, and sorcery, could observe Frigg's domains of marriage, motherhood, and the sanctity of the home. She could study those principles. Mimic them with considerable skill. But true comprehension of what drove a goddess like Frigg remained forever beyond her reach, in the same way that a flame could understand the concept of ice without ever being cold.

And yet.

Freya gazed at the reflected ghost of her own face in the dark glass and thought of Odr.

Despite everything she was—despite the war and the wanting and the insatiable hunger for passion in all its forms—she pined. She ached for something she couldn't fully articulate, something that should have been anathema to her nature. Constancy. Devotion. The quiet certainty of being chosen rather than desired.

Sometimes deities wanted what they couldn't have. That was the cruellest joke of all.

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Syr moved through the market district with a wicker basket over one arm, her silver hair tucked beneath a kerchief, her dress plain and practical. She looked like exactly what she pretended to be—a young woman running errands for her employer. Mamma Mia had sent her out for vegetables—supply that had been dwindling ever since Evilus began strangling the trade routes into the city. Fewer farmers risking the roads meant fewer stalls, and the ones that remained charged twice what they had a year ago.

The morning wore the colours of wet stone and overcast sky, and her thoughts kept drifting back to the night before. That ripple between Tenkai and Gekai. The twin pillars of light. A deity descending and ascending in the span of a held breath, leaving behind—what? A gift? A warning? A mistake?

She'd stood at her window in Babel long after the wine was finished, turning it over. She still had no answer.

Which was precisely why her attention sharpened the moment she saw him.

He stood at the jagamarukun cart three stalls down, steam curling from the spot where he'd bitten through the golden crust of a freshly fried dumpling. He wore a long-sleeved shirt the colour of faded charcoal, trousers tucked into sturdy boots, and a standard Guild-issued pauldron over his left shoulder—the mark of a registered adventurer. On both hips hung twin daos, basic models, not Guild stock but nothing remarkable either. Functional weapons chosen by someone who valued utility over aesthetics.

The red hair was what caught Syr's eye first. It had the colour of rust after rain, hanging just past his ears in uneven lengths that suggested he cut it himself. His skin carried the faint bronze of someone who spent time outdoors. And his eyes, when they caught the light as he turned his head, were gold. Not amber. Not hazel. Gold, like coins left too long in sunlight.

None of which explained why Syr had stopped breathing.

Because the hair and the eyes and the weapons were merely the vessel. What Freya saw—what she *always* saw—was the soul beneath.

She had imagined Odr a thousand times across a thousand years. In her fantasies, her destined beloved burned with a pure, incandescent light, a soul so clean and bright that it would balance the wildness in her own nature. Something serene to tame her storm.

This was not that.

This soul was a landscape. A *place*. An endless grey field stretching beneath a sky choked with gears and mechanisms she couldn't name, and from every inch of that barren earth—spotted with brown grass and rare patches of stubborn green—rose swords. Not weapons in the martial sense—these were crystallised convictions, ideals hammered into steel and driven point-first into the ground. Thousands upon thousands of them, rusted and broken and whole and gleaming, each one a choice made, a principle held, a battle fought. The field went on forever. The sky pressed down upon it like a hand trying to crush something that refused to stay flat.

It was not pure. It was not serene. It was not the soul of a being who would bring peace to Freya's chaos.

It was *magnificent*.

And it was tired. Bone-deep, marrow-deep, *soul*-deep exhaustion radiated from that grey field like heat from spent coals. The swords still stood, but many of them trembled. The landscape held its shape through sheer stubbornness rather than vitality, the way a soldier stayed upright on a battlefield not because he had strength left but because he had forgotten how to fall.

Something within Freya, something ancient and vast and hungry, stirred.

She had wanted balance. She had wanted purity to counter her wildness.

What she found instead was a wildness that matched her own—not of passion, but of *purpose*. A soul that had burned itself hollow in service to something and was now standing in its own ashes, confused by the absence of flames.

Syr wanted to see it in all its splendour. Not dimmed. Not weary. She wanted to see what that field of swords looked like when every blade caught the light.

The red-haired man bit into his jagamarukun again. He chewed with the slow deliberation of someone who wasn't tasting the food so much as analysing it—his brow furrowed, his jaw working methodically, his golden eyes distant and calculating. He held the dumpling up at eye level and examined the bite mark as though the cross-section of meat filling and fried potato contained the answers to questions philosophers had debated for centuries.

Syr arranged her face into the practised mask of coy curiosity she wore like armour. She smoothed her dress and crossed the distance between them with the unhurried gait of a girl who had nowhere particular to be.

"Hey, mister."

He turned. Grey eyes met gold.

The jagamarukun froze before his lips. Up close, the weariness she'd seen in his soul manifested in the faint hollows beneath those remarkable eyes, in the way his weight settled into his heels rather than the balls of his feet—the posture of someone conserving energy as a matter of habit rather than necessity. He looked at her the way one might look at a shopkeeper's greeting: acknowledging, polite, but expecting nothing of consequence.

"Can I—"

"Oi. Freya."

The memory shattered like dropped glass.

She blinked. The market stall dissolved—the jagamarukun cart, the red-haired man, the grey morning four months gone—and in its place settled the warm wood panelling and roasted-lamb air of the restaurant. Present day. A glass of wine before her, half-finished. And a trickster goddess standing two feet from her table with her arms folded and one vermillion eye twitching.

Loki's flat chest strained against a tunic that had seen better decades. Her red hair fell loose past her shoulders, and her narrow face wore the particular expression she reserved for moments when Freya's attention wandered to places that excluded her.

"You've been staring at your wine for three minutes. I said your name four times."

Freya set the glass down and allowed the mask to slide back into place, offering Loki a smile that contained precisely the right measure of apology and warmth.

"Loki. Do sit down."

"Don't 'do sit down' me." Loki pulled the chair out with a scrape that drew glances from two tables over, dropped into it like a sack of grain, and immediately signalled the waitress for ale. "You picked the time. You picked the place. And now the other three are late and you're wool-gathering."

'Not wool-gathering,' Freya thought. 'Remembering.'

The field of swords flickered behind her eyes—grey earth, rusted blades, a soul that had forgotten how to fall—and then she let it go. For now.

"Astraea and the others?" she said aloud.

"Late. All of them." Loki's eye cracked open a fraction wider, which for her constituted a glare of considerable intensity. "Astraea, Ganesha, and that snake Hermes. We're supposed to be discussing the Evilus situation and I'm sat here watching you daydream about—"

"I AM GANESHA!"

The declaration hit the restaurant like a battering ram. Glasses rattled. A waiter dropped a tray. The couple at the window table clutched each other as though Orario were under bombardment. In the doorway stood the elephant-masked god himself, arms spread wide, filling the frame with the absolute certainty that the world had been waiting for his arrival.

Behind him, Hermes slipped through the gap between Ganesha's arm and the doorjamb with the fluid grace of someone accustomed to entering rooms through whatever opening presented itself. His wide-brimmed hat cast his face in shadow, but the wry curve of his mouth caught the lamplight. He carried a bottle of something under one arm.

"Apologies," Astraea said, appearing behind them both with the quiet inevitability of dawn following night. Her walnut hair framed a face that held genuine contrition. "I had a meeting with one of the Guild staff after visiting the orphanage. It ran longer than I anticipated."

Hermes offered no excuse. He simply shrugged, pulled out a chair, sat, and placed the bottle on the table with a soft clunk. "Started without us, I see." He nodded at Freya's wine.

Ganesha claimed two chairs—one for sitting, one for resting his arm upon—and beamed behind his mask with the serenity of a man who believed punctuality was a construct invented by lesser beings.

Loki watched them settle with the patience of a burning fuse. Her ale arrived. She drank half of it in one pull, wiped her mouth with the back of her hand, and set the tankard down hard enough to command silence.

"Right. Now that everyone's decided to grace us with their presence." She leaned forward, both elbows on the table, and the last trace of humour drained from her face. "Let's begin."

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Shirou collected the bowls from the thankful adventurers, stacked them with practised efficiency—large beneath small, rims aligned—and placed them on the side of the deep wicker basket reserved for used crockery. The chopsticks and spoons went into the narrow compartment built into its flank, wooden handles clicking against each other as they settled.

"Cheers, Emiya. That maze udon's something else."

The dwarf—stocky even by dwarven standards, with a beard braided into three ropes and singed at the tips from some encounter Shirou hadn't asked about—probably a hell hound—patted his belly with both hands. His companion, a pallum woman barely reaching the dwarf's shoulder, was already adjusting her pack straps and checking her short sword.

"We'll see you on the way back up?"

Shirou shook his head. "Heading down."

The dwarf's eyebrows rose into his helmet. The pallum tugged his sleeve.

"Come on, Brom. We've got the haul to exchange before the queue gets stupid."

They paid—eight hundred valis each, which neither protested. The deeper one went, the higher the prices climbed. Simple economics. Carrying fresh food into a place that wanted to kill you warranted a premium, and the adventurers who frequented these middle floors understood that implicitly. Shirou pocketed the coins into the leather pouch at his belt and cinched it shut.

"I've got potions if you need them. Health and mind, both."

The partnership with Miach Familia was still fresh enough that the words felt slightly rehearsed. Just a day since he'd stood in that cramped shop on the north side of the market district, the blue-haired god smiling at him with an earnestness that bordered on painful. Miach had seized both his hands. Shirou remembered the god's grip—warm, firm, trembling with a gratitude that went beyond mere social obligation.

"You brought Naaza back to us. You brought her back alive. I cannot—Emiya-san, I cannot express what that means."

Shirou had told him no repayment was necessary. Meant it, too. But Miach had pressed, and pressed again, and eventually Shirou recognised the pattern—a god whose pride had been worn thin by his recent loss, and the

thankfulness that it wasn't more, who needed to give something back not for Shirou's benefit but for his own. So Shirou relented.

The arrangement was clean. Miach supplied potions at a hair above production cost—far below retail, far below what Dian Cecht's operation charged for comparable quality. In return, Shirou sold monster drops with pharmaceutical applications directly to Miach at rates above the Guild's exchange but below open-market procurement. Both parties saved. Both parties benefited. No favours owed, no debts accumulated.

Rose had stared at him for a full ten seconds when he'd told her.

"You made a business deal."

"Yes."

"You. Made a business deal. Voluntarily. With a god."

"It's not a Falna. Just a business partnership."

She'd pressed her palm flat against his forehead, checking for fever. He'd swatted her hand away.

The dwarf waved off the potion offer with a grin. "Appreciate it, but we're heading topside. Got enough juice left for the climb."

Shirou nodded. "Safe travels."

"Same to you, mate. Watch yourself—we wouldn't want our favourite travelling noodle merchant to suddenly fall prey to the Dungeon."

Shirou didn't point out that he was the only travelling noodle merchant who delved into the Dungeon. He'd built up a fair share of regulars on the middle floors—adventurers who operated between the thirteenth and seventeenth, the range where Level 2s could grind Excelia in relative safety and anything beyond the nineteenth demanded a full party. He'd wondered, early on, why they called it the "middle" when the deepest recorded descent had reached the seventy-first. But the logic was functional rather than geometric: these

were the intermediate floors, the threshold between what a small team could handle and what required real investment.

They departed down the corridor, their footsteps and the pallum's quiet commentary fading into the Dungeon's ambient hum.

The carrying pole rested against the wall where he'd propped it. Smooth bamboo—or this world's near-equivalent, a hollow woody grass that grew in the forests east of Orario. He'd shaped it himself, sanding the nodes flat, fitting leather padding where the pole sat across his shoulders. From each end hung a basket, counterweighted with care. The right one held the used crockery. The left held his operation: a portable magic-stone stove no larger than a bread loaf, a sealed iron pot of water, cloth-wrapped bundles of fresh noodles, and the ingredients that made the descent worthwhile.

Two dishes today. The maze udon had been the morning's centrepiece—thick wheat noodles tossed without broth, coated in his maze sauce. The sauce was the trick. Soy base, rice vinegar, chilli oil, a measured pour of that dark, oyster sauce he'd finally secured through Rod's supply chain. The minced meat—pork, stir-fried until the fat rendered and the edges crisped—went on top, followed by sliced green onions and a scatter of toasted sesame seeds. Mixed at the table by the customer. No spoon required; chopsticks did the work, turning the noodles through the sauce until every strand gleamed.

The second dish ran in the same family. Dry dandan udon—a variation he'd developed after the sesame paste became available. Similar architecture: noodles without soup, dressed in a sauce built from sesame paste, chilli oil, soy, black vinegar, and Sichuan peppercorn ground fresh that morning. The minced pork sat in the centre, a small crater holding an onsen tamago that the customer broke and folded through. Richer than the maze udon. Heavier. The kind of meal that settled into your bones and told your body it had earned something.

The onsen tamago rounded out the inventory. Dozens of them, packed in straw inside a sealed wooden box in the left basket. Slow-cooked eggs, their whites barely set to a custard-like softness, the yolks warm and flowing. They

went into the udon as additional toppings—simple, universally welcomed. Adventurers on the middle floors had been fighting for hours; a warm egg with a silken centre was sometimes all the persuasion they needed to sit down and spend.

Shirou lifted the pole, settled it across his shoulders, adjusted the balance with a slight shift of his hips, and moved.

The sixteenth floor stretched around him in corridors of pale blue-grey stone, the Dungeon walls faintly aglow with the bioluminescence that characterised this tier. The ceiling rose higher here than on the floors above—fifteen, perhaps eighteen metres in places.

Shirou was used to them.

This was the other half of his routine. Not the predawn dives where he descended alone into the dark with blade in hand, killing what spawned, harvesting stones and drops, accumulating Excelia that piled up inside him like sediment in a river with nowhere to flow. Those runs were work. Necessary, profitable, physically demanding in the way that kept his body sharp and his instincts honed.

This was different. Every other day, he loaded the baskets and walked down. No combat unless it found him. No particular urgency. He cooked for whoever crossed his path, charged fair prices, now selling potions at a markup over Miach's rates, and continued descending until he reached the eighteenth floor—the safe zone, Rivira, where he operated a semi-permanent establishment.

The pub. His pub, technically, though calling it that felt grandiose. A corner space in the settlement's market area. He'd furnished it himself over several months. A counter. Six stools. A cooking station. A hand-painted sign that read, in common script and in the Eastern characters he'd taught himself to adapt to this world's writing system: **Emiya-ya**.

Not a pub, really. An izakaya. Though one would argue that they're the same thing, just thematically different. A place to sit, eat something hot, drink

something cold, and exist for a few minutes without the Dungeon trying to digest you.

He passed through a junction where three corridors met. The walls here bore fresh gouges—claw marks from something large, probably the minotaurs that patrolled these middle floors. No blood, though. Whatever had passed through had moved on. Shirou noted the damage, filed it, kept walking.

The adventurers he'd served—Brom and his pallum partner—had been resting in one of the cleared zones that dotted the sixteenth floor's main routes. Standard practice. When a party needed to stop, they'd clear the immediate area of monsters, then deliberately damage the surrounding walls. Deep gouges, cracked stone, whatever it took to draw the Dungeon's attention. The labyrinth was alive—or something adjacent to alive—and it prioritised healing its own structure over spawning new threats. Damage the walls badly enough and you bought yourself a window of relative peace. Twenty minutes, sometimes thirty, before the stone knitted itself smooth and the spawning resumed.

Shirou had set up in their cleared zone, boiled water, served two bowls, collected payment, and moved on. Efficient. The rhythm was second nature now.

The corridor narrowed, then widened again into a natural gallery where the ceiling vaulted upward and clusters of crystal formations jutted from the walls. Beautiful, in the way the Dungeon occasionally managed beauty—accidentally, indifferently, the aesthetics of geological process without intent. Though intent was perhaps the wrong word to deny a structure that demonstrably responded to damage and spawned creatures with territorial awareness.

Shirou didn't think about the Dungeon's nature too deeply. That way lay philosophical tangents that served no practical purpose.

The route to the seventeenth floor from here required navigating a descending series of galleries connected by sloped passages—not quite stairs, not quite

ramps, but something between that the Dungeon had carved into existence. He knew the path well. Four months of almost daily descent had branded it into his spatial memory with the permanence of a structural analysis.

He adjusted the pole on his shoulders. The crockery basket clinked softly with each step. The ingredient basket was silent—he'd packed it too well for that.

His thoughts turned, unbidden, to the meeting that morning.

Rose's booth at the Guild Headquarters. The familiar scent of paper and ink, the faint scratch of her pen as she processed his earnings from the previous day's dive. Shirou sat across from her, nursing a cup of tea that had gone tepid.

Rose had been mid-sentence—something about adjusted exchange rates for minotaur horns following increased demand from Hephaestus Familia—when the booth's curtain tore open and Sophie's grinning face appeared like a jack-in-the-box with malicious intent.

"Rose! Shirou!"

Rose's pen stopped. Her chienthrope ears—usually pressed flat against her hair—twitched upright.

"Sophie. I'm with a client."

"Perfect timing, then." Sophie had slid into the booth uninvited, wedging herself beside Rose on the bench and forcing the smaller woman to compress against the wall. *"So. The Dionysus Familia filed their expedition paperwork this morning. They're challenging the Goliath today—it spawns on seventeen, and they've been camping the floor for a week."*

Shirou had looked at Rose. Rose had looked at the ceiling.

"That's... relevant to my client's route planning, I suppose," Rose managed.

"Absolutely. Very relevant. Also relevant—" Sophie's grin widened to dimensions that shouldn't have been anatomically possible, *"—is that Rose*

and I have this yearly tradition, and it would be more fun if you joined us. Three days from now. You, me, Emiya-san. The Hostess of Fertility has a new mead imported from the Kaios Desert, and Mamma Mia owes me a favour."

The silence that followed had texture. Weight. Rose's face cycled through several distinct phases—confusion, comprehension, horror, and something Shirou chose not to identify.

"Sophie, that's—we can't just—he's a client, and I—that's completely—"

Rose had sputtered. Actually sputtered, the words fragmenting on her tongue as her ears went from flat to upright to flat again in rapid succession, her tail—usually kept carefully still beneath her Guild uniform—thumping once against the bench.

"I don't—it's not—you can't just invite—"

"Sure."

Both women had turned to look at him.

"What?" Rose's voice came out strangled.

"Sure. Three days from now works. I'll bring something for Mamma Mia."

Sophie's grin achieved a quality that transcended mere facial expression and entered the realm of spiritual weapon. A gleam settled into her eyes—sharp, calculating, the look of someone who had manoeuvred all pieces into position and was now contemplating her victory with relish.

"Wonderful! It's a date, then."

"It is NOT a—"

"Eight o'clock. Don't be late, either of you. Rose, wear the blue one."

"THE BLUE—Sophie, get OUT of my booth!"

Sophie had departed with the satisfaction of a siege engineer watching the first wall crumble. Rose had sat rigid, her face a shade of red that Shirou associated with certain varieties of chilli pepper, her mouth opening and closing without producing sound.

Shirou had taken a sip of his tepid tea.

"The minotaur horn rates," he'd said.

Rose had stared at him. Then, with the mechanical precision of someone whose higher brain functions had temporarily shut down, she'd picked up her pen and resumed writing.

They had not discussed it further.

Shirou shook his head as he walked, the ghost of the interaction settling behind his ribs with a warmth he refused to examine closely. That was a problem for three days from now. Future Shirou could deal with whatever Sophie had engineered. Present Shirou had udon to sell and a pub to open.

The passage angled downward. He was close—the natural boundary between the sixteenth and seventeenth floors. The air changed too, growing warmer, heavier, carrying a faint sulphuric tang from the thermal vents that characterised the lower middle floors.

He turned the corner.

Minotaurs.

Eleven of them. No—twelve. The thirteenth was partially concealed behind the bulk of the nearest, its horned head lowered, nostrils flaring as it caught his scent. They filled the corridor shoulder to shoulder, a wall of muscle and dark fur and curved horns that gleamed with the wet sheen of freshly-birthed monsters. Each stood over two metres tall. Their eyes—small, deep-set, burning with the dull red intelligence that made them dangerous rather than merely large—locked onto him simultaneously.

Shirou stopped. But he didn't set the baskets down.

He looked left. Right. Behind. Listened.

No one else here.

"Trace on."

Twenty-seven circuits flared to life inside him, the familiar thrum threading through his nerves like liquid copper. The sensation was a constant—not painful, not pleasant, simply present and warm, the fundamental architecture of his being asserting itself.

Normally, he would have used the Gate. A ripple of gold, a weapon retrieved from dimensional storage, and the problem solved with inventory he'd already projected and stored. Efficient. Clean. No additional drain on his od.

But he hadn't restocked recently, and with Evilus escalating, he'd rather keep what he had in reserve than spend it on corridor trash. Better to trace fresh and save the Gate's contents for something that warranted them.

The air around him shattered into blue-white light. Thirteen swords materialised in a corona—no, not materialised. That word implied they appeared from nothing. They were *forged*. Built from the inside out in the space between one heartbeat and the next. Blade spines first, then the crystalline lattice of steel molecules arranging themselves according to blueprints etched into his soul. Edges sharpened to geometries that no whetstone could achieve. Hilts wrapped themselves in leather and wire. Pommels solidified from motes of light.

Thirteen blades. Thirteen different designs. A straight-backed falchion with a fuller running two-thirds of its length. A narrow estoc with a diamond cross-section. A heavy chopping sword with a single edge and a recurved tip. A paired set of short swords—one black, one white, their weight distributions mirrored. And others, drawn from the infinite catalogue that Unlimited Blade Works had compiled across lifetimes.

None of them Noble Phantasms. None of them anything more than exceptionally well-crafted mundane weapons, elevated by the precision of his

tracing to a quality that any blacksmith in Orario would struggle to match. Good enough.

The minotaurs charged.

The swords shot forward.

The first minotaur took the falchion through its left eye. The blade punched through skull bone, through the dense cortex of monster flesh, and erupted from the back of the creature's head trailing a spray of dark ichor. The estoc buried itself in the second minotaur's throat, severing whatever passed for a carotid artery in dungeon-spawned biology. The chopping sword caught the third across the chest in a diagonal cut that opened it from shoulder to hip.

The fourth minotaur—faster than its fellows, smarter perhaps—tried to dodge. It threw itself sideways, horns scraping the corridor wall in a shower of sparks and stone dust. The paired short swords were already committed to their trajectory—so Shirou traced two more and drove all four into it from both flanks simultaneously.

The thirteenth minotaur managed one more step.

Three blades found it.

Silence returned. Thirteen massive bodies hit the floor in rapid succession, the impacts sending tremors through the stone. Ichor pooled. The Dungeon's ambient glow caught the spreading liquid and turned it into dark mirrors.

Gold rippled outward from Shirou's hands.

The Gate of Avalon opened—not visibly, not to any external observer, but Shirou felt it in his chest where Avalon resided, the dimensional space yawning wide to accept. The swords, still buried in monster flesh, wrapped themselves in aureate light and dissolved. Not destroyed. Retrieved. Pulled into the Gate's interior where time stopped and entropy had no meaning. They would wait there, perfectly preserved, until he called them forth again.

The corridor was quiet save for the wet sound of minotaur bodies settling.

Shirou traced half a dozen more blades and sent them into the surrounding walls—deep gouges, cracked stone, enough damage to buy himself time. The Dungeon would prioritise healing over spawning. He dismissed the blades into the Gate once they'd done their work, then set his jaw, lowered his baskets, and crouched beside the nearest corpse.

He drew a knife from his belt and cut into the minotaur's chest with the efficiency of long practice, parting fur and hide and the dense grey-purple musculature beneath until his fingers found the magic stone.

It came free with a sound like a cork pulled from a bottle. Small for a minotaur—the size of his thumbnail, clouded purple, warm to the touch. He dropped it into the leather pouch at his hip. The moment the stone separated from the body, the corpse began to dissolve. Not rot—dissolve. The flesh lost cohesion, became translucent, then vaporous, then nothing. Within seconds, only a dark stain on the stone floor remained, and even that was fading.

He moved to the second. Cut. Extracted. The body vanished.

Third. Fourth. Fifth.

The knife did its work. The magic stones went into the pouch. The minotaurs ceased to exist.

Shirou cleaned the blade on a cloth, sheathed it, and straightened. Thirteen stones. Moderate quality. Perhaps three thousand valis total at Guild exchange rates—more if any of the horns had properties Lord Miach could use for his potions. He'd check later.

He retrieved the pole, settled the baskets, and resumed walking.

The noise hit him at the transition to the seventeenth floor.

It started as a vibration—not through the air but through the stone itself, a rhythmic concussion that pulsed up through his feet and into his knees. Then the sound caught up: a deep, percussive booming, like someone striking an enormous drum with a battering ram. Interspersed with it came the sharper

sounds of combat—steel on stone, shouted commands, the distinctive crack of a spell discharging.

The Goliath.

Sophie's information had been accurate, as it almost always was. Dionysus Familia's roster was predominantly elven, and elves preferred elven Guild advisers—which meant a good number of their lower-levelled adventurers sat across Sophie's desk on a regular basis. She'd known about the expedition paperwork before the ink was dry. The Familia had filed a formal challenge against the floor boss of the seventeenth level. The Goliath spawned from the Dungeon wall at irregular intervals—a massive humanoid of stone and rage that served as the guardian between the middle floors and the safe zone below. Defeating it was a rite of passage for Familias pushing toward the deep floors, and Dionysus's people had been camping the seventeenth for a week, waiting for the spawn.

From the sound of it, they'd found what they were waiting for.

Another boom. Closer now. The walls of the corridor trembled, and a thin rain of dust fell from the ceiling. Shirou adjusted his grip on the pole and kept his pace steady.

But the noise was growing, which meant either the Goliath was moving—unlikely; floor bosses tended to anchor themselves near their spawn point—or the battle was spreading. A fighting retreat, perhaps. Or the Familia was kiting the creature through the floor's larger caverns to create space for their mages to work.

Shirou reached the entrance to the seventeenth and stepped through.

-=&<o>&=-

End

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