

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

Story Starts

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Chapter 6.82

The Gale's Justice Demands a Stakeout

Shirou had faced the end of the human order. He had climbed a pagoda full of oni during the Setsubun nightmare—seven floors of drunken demons, collapsing staircases, and Shuten-douji treating the whole apocalypse as a pub crawl. He had cooked breakfast for kings, tyrants, and at least four gods who insisted on tasting everything before anyone else on the grounds of divine privilege.

He had never, in any of those lifetimes, craved alcohol as much as he did right now.

Ganesha was still talking. The god had produced, from somewhere within his loose attire, a small brass bell and was ringing it between pronouncements. The crowd had grown to perhaps two hundred people. Someone had begun selling skewers. Someone else had begun selling seats.

Shirou considered, seriously and at length, simply walking away.

He discarded the idea just as fast. Years fighting beside heroic spirits had taught him precisely how these situations resolved when ignored—they didn't. They festered. They followed you home. He'd watched knights, kings, and deities poured into vessels that wore the faces of women he'd once known—so many familiar faces that Chaldea's corridors had felt like walking through his own memory with the furniture rearranged. Stranger still were the ones who remembered *him*. Miss Edelfelt had greeted him like an old sparring partner from London. Bazett had nodded to him as though they'd shared a war. Their vessels carried memories of a Shirou Emiya who had walked the

Clock Tower's halls and lived some other, gentler sequence of years—a man he had never been. His own path had run from the end of the Fifth War straight into Alaya's grip and Chaldea's rayshift room, no detours, no London, no in-between. Being remembered by people he'd never met was its own particular species of haunting.

Well. Almost enough.

The Throne had still seen fit to hand him Kotomine.

Grigori Rasputin, the summons had said, and then the vessel had turned around and worn *that* face, and Shirou's circuits had lit without his permission for the first time in a decade. To this day he wasn't certain whether Kotomine had actually belonged to the Burial Agency or merely to the Church in general. He'd never asked. Asking would have meant a conversation, and a conversation with Kotomine was a wound that healed slower than mapo tofu burned.

Rose Fannet's tail wrapped around his left thigh.

Shirou looked down. The tail tightened. Rose was staring fixedly at the challengers, her expression a battlefield between mortification and murder, and Shirou suspected she had no idea what her tail was doing. He elected not to inform her. Somewhere in the back of his skull, a chorus of Arturias—Saber, Lancer, the Lion King, the one in the swimsuit with the water pistol—began delivering simultaneous lectures on chivalry, a lady's honour, and the proper conduct of a knight in matters of courtship.

He knew better, now, than to answer back. He'd developed some cheek exactly once, at dinner, and reminded the assembled Arturias of the *reason* Caliburn had broken in the first place. The silence that followed had lasted eleven seconds. The cooking that followed the silence had lasted three weeks and very nearly depleted Chaldea's food reserves as recompense.

Not that resupply had ever been a genuine problem. Each singularity was real enough to trade in. Servants not deployed to the front got assigned to logistics, hauling flour and salt and rice back through the rayshift like the

world's most overqualified porters. Shirou had gladly appointed his counterpart—the Counter Guardian, the other Emiya—as Chief Treasurer, on the grounds that a man who could trace anything could trace currency, and a man with that face deserved the paperwork. Counterfeiting a doomed singularity's money had never troubled Shirou's conscience much. The timelines were resolved and erased regardless, and every yen—every rouble, every drachma—had gone towards the preservation of the human order.

Besides, none of the Gilgameshes would part with so much as a single coin of their treasuries for any cause short of their own whim, and there had been *four* of them at one point. Someone had to balance the books.

Sophie poked his right cheek.

"Huh?"

"Lord Ganesha was explaining the terms," Sophie said. "You've been staring through him for two minutes. It's very impressive. The bell didn't even reach you."

"Can you summarise? I was actively tuning him out." Shirou paused, then supplied the only excuse fit for public consumption. "I was deciding whether to stop giving his Familia discounts."

Across the ring of onlookers, Ardee winced hard enough to be visible from where he stood.

"Terms are simple," Sophie said, and her grin took on a quality he'd learnt to distrust. "First to say monkey loses."

"Sophie."

"Fine, fine. Until one side yields or can no longer stand. So—until you give up, or you're battered black and blue."

"Understood."

"Yep." She popped the *p* like a cork. "Now go and defend our honour. Otherwise you won't get lucky tonight."

Shirou resisted the sigh through willpower alone. It wasn't the implication that bothered him—his history would have made a hypocrite of any protest. One hundred and sixty-nine loops of the same war had produced a great many nights spent comforting Rin, Arturia, Sakura, Medusa, and even Medea at several points—though never Illya; he didn't care how much older than him she technically was—and Chaldea after it had produced a great many Servants who sought his company for reasons ranging from loneliness to curiosity to, in one memorable case, field-testing whether her passive poison could be built up as a tolerance. It could. Serenity had been *delighted*. His liver had filed a formal complaint that went unanswered.

No, what bothered him was the audience.

"As my Ladies wish," Shirou said, and the deadpan in his voice did nothing to stop the crowd's rolling *ooooh* from washing over the plaza.

He turned to Rose, who still had one hand fisted in his sleeve and her tail coiled around his thigh like a mooring line. Her other hand pressed flat over her chest. Her face was red, but underneath the red sat something he saw far less often than her exasperation or her anger—worry. Plain, unguarded worry, for him, over a duel she knew he hadn't asked for.

This side of her was rather cute.

Rose's face detonated into crimson. Both grips released him at once—hand and tail—and she took a full step backwards as though he'd drawn a blade.

"Hey," came Sophie's complaint, "how about me?"

'Oh. Did I say that out loud?'

"Yes," Sophie said, reading his stare with unexpected fluency. "You called Rose cute. Out loud. In front of everyone. Now, where's *my*—"

"STOP FLIRTING IN FRONT OF US!"

"WILL YOU CEASE THIS AT ONCE!"

The werewolf and the elf bellowed over each other, and behind them the crowd's grumbling took on a distinctly hostile flavour—muttered complaints about *some people* getting lucky, about *merchants* these days, about how a man running a noodle cart had no business collecting Guild advisers like stamps. Shirou noted, with detachment, that his supporter base had just evaporated. The odds on the pallum's board shifted from seven-to-one to eleven-to-one before his eyes.

Somewhere in the Akashic Records, the Counter Guardian was smirking. Shirou couldn't prove it. He simply knew, in his bones, the way one knows rain is coming.

Well. If he was going to be hated regardless, he might as well twist the knife.

"Sophie," he said, "you're cute as well."

The groan that rolled through the crowd had physical weight. A man near the front tore up his betting slip. The two challengers bristled in visible increments, steam practically rising off the werewolf's hackles, the elf's grip creaking on his sword hilt. Sophie, for her part, beamed like she'd been handed the deed to Babel.

Shirou stepped forward into the cleared circle and prepared himself for a world of pain.

The mathematics were not encouraging. His years in Chaldea had made him intimate with the experience of fighting opponents vastly stronger and more skilled than himself—it was, arguably, his entire résumé—but experience did not repeal mechanics. His Level 2 body, however honed, would do very little against a Level 3 werewolf's raw output. Strength was strength. Speed was speed. The Falna did not care how many times you'd sparred with the King of Knights.

Which was why he was thankful for the weapon he had traced before leaving his home. He hadn't traced an ordinary bokken.

Though technically, if he ever got serious, he could actually, probably face someone of higher level than him, but he was already uncomfortably in the public eye, and he didn't want to add to it.

The shape that settled into his hand was wooden, yes, and sword-shaped, yes—but its origin lay elsewhere. He'd taken the Monohoshi Zao, the impossible five-shaku blade of the man who hated swallows more than any creature alive, and altered it. Significantly altered it. Shortened it by nearly half its length, converted its substance to dense wood. Structurally, it was a bokken. Conceptually, it remembered being something else.

Perhaps, despite everything he'd stripped away, enough of the Noble Phantasm remained to bruise a Level 3.

He drew it—which looked, he realised too late, faintly ridiculous, since he was pulling a wooden sword from a wooden sheath he'd traced in the same breath without ever considering why a training sword would need one. A child in the crowd laughed.

"EXCELLENT!" Ganesha boomed, striding into the centre of the circle and ringing his bell. "COMBATANTS, TO YOUR MARKS! I AM GANESHA, AND I WANT A NICE CLEAN FIGHT! NO HITTING BELOW THE BELT!"

The werewolf—Lowell—clicked his tongue, which told everyone present exactly what he'd been planning.

"NO BITING," Ganesha continued, counting on thick fingers. "NO GOUGING OF EYES! NO PULLING OF EARS, TAILS, OR IN THE CASE OF OUR ELVEN CHALLENGER, HAIR THAT HAS CLEARLY TAKEN HOURS TO ARRANGE!"

"It has *not*—" Aldric began, flushing.

"NO CLINCHING! WHEN I SAY BREAK, YOU WILL BREAK! IN THE EVENT OF A KNOCKDOWN, THE STANDING PARTY WILL RETREAT TO A NEUTRAL CORNER!"

"There are no corners," Ardee said, from behind him. "It's a circle, Lord Ganesha."

"THE STANDING PARTY WILL RETREAT TO A NEUTRAL ARC! THERE WILL BE NO MAGIC ABOVE THE INTENSITY I DEEM SPORTING, NO SUMMONING OF FAMILIA REINFORCEMENTS, NO WEAPONISED CONDIMENTS—"

"That happened *once*," someone in the crowd shouted, defensive.

"—AND MANDATORY WATER BREAKS EVERY TEN MINUTES, BECAUSE HYDRATION," Ganesha declared, one finger aloft, "IS THE TRUE FOUNDATION OF JUSTICE! COMBATANTS! PROTECT YOURSELVES AT ALL TIMES! I AM GANESHA!"

He rang the bell.

Nothing happened, because all three combatants were still staring at him.

He rang it again, harder.

Lowell moved.

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On the rooftop, Ryu Lion watched the werewolf cross eight medr in a single stride and thought, with a calm that surprised her, *'he is going to kill our neighbour.'*

"Star One requests odds be updated," Astraea murmured into the resonance crystal, wine glass in hand.

"Star One should request a *healer*," Ryu said. "That werewolf is Level 3 and drunk enough to forget it. Emiya is—" She stopped. Below, the wooden sword turned the first strike aside at an angle so fine that Lowell's claws passed a finger-width from Emiya's cheek and found nothing but air. "—apparently fine."

"He does that," Kaguya observed, cracking the seal on a fresh bottle.

Ryuu did not answer. Her eyes tracked the exchange below—claw, parry, pivot, claw—and some part of her, the part that had drilled footwork until her soles bled, quietly noted that Emiya was not winning. He was *lasting*. There was a difference, and every swordsman on this rooftop could see it.

She adjusted her spectacles and told herself she was not worried. It was, at best, a partial success.

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Lowell was fast.

Not merely Level 3 fast—Shirou had calibrated for that within the first exchange—but *werewolf* fast, all fast-twitch muscle and low centre of gravity, closing distance in bursts that a human frame simply could not answer with. Drunk, heartbroken, and furious, he'd abandoned technique entirely in favour of volume, and volume was working. Shirou gave ground in measured steps, the altered Monohoshi Zao flickering between them, redirecting claws by degrees because stopping them outright would have shattered his wrists.

'Reinforce.'

Magical energy flooded his arms, his legs, the wooden blade. It bought him parity, barely. It would not buy him victory.

The elf circled the edge of the exchange like a heron, sword low, waiting. Aldric, Shirou noted, was the more dangerous of the two—not stronger, but sober, and patient enough to make his one committed strike count. He was content to let the werewolf spend himself.

"You dodge well, noodle-monger!" Lowell snarled, spittle flying. "But Rose deserves a man who can *stand and fight!*"

Shirou didn't remember the man ever buying from his cart. He'd probably picked up "noodle-monger" from someone in the crowd.

"I think no one deserves someone who memorised their cycle and stalked them," Shirou said, slipping a raking swipe by the width of a collar. "You said that part out loud, earlier. In public. Twice."

Lowell's follow-through went wide with rage. Shirou stepped inside it and rapped the bokken across the werewolf's knuckles—a crisp, woody *crack* that would have disarmed a human and merely annoyed a Level 3. Lowell backhanded him for the trouble. Shirou caught most of it on the flat of the blade; the remainder lifted him off his feet and deposited him three medr back, boots carving twin furrows in the flagstones.

The crowd roared. The odds shifted again.

'This is unsustainable,' Shirou concluded, rolling his shoulder. Every exchange cost him more than it cost Lowell. Reinforcement was holding his body together, but bodies were only half the equation, and the elf still hadn't committed. He needed to remove the werewolf from the board—cleanly, non-lethally, and fast, before the pincer closed.

There was a technique for that. It belonged to a dead man on the bank of a dry river, a nameless swordsman who had touched infinity with nothing but a too-long blade and an eternity of empty evenings and a particular hatred of swallows. Shirou had recorded it the way he recorded everything, and in Chaldea he'd had the singular experience of the technique's own creator—summoned, sardonic, forever complaining about the swallows—watching him attempt it and offering critique that consisted mostly of laughter, whilst Miyamoto Iori drank sake at the side and laughed along.

The tracing gave him the technique; the swordsman's mocking tutelage was what had carried it towards perfection.

Shirou settled into the stance.

Feet parallel, weight sunk through the hips until his centre dropped a full hand-span. The shortened Monohoshi Zao swung up and back, angled high over his right shoulder, edge facing the darkening sky, parallel to the ground—the posture of a man inviting his opponent to strike him down. Wide

open. Deliberately, insultingly open. His breathing slowed. The plaza noise fell away. There was only the distance between himself and the werewolf, and the three paths a single blade would take through it.

Not one strike after another. One strike, three times, *at once*—the same instant folded over itself until even a swallow's turn had nowhere left to be.

Lowell saw the opening and took it, because of course he did.

He came in low and left, exactly where the stance begged him to, claws leading, jaw split in a grin—

"Hiken—"

The wooden blade fell.

"—*Tsubame Gaeshi*."

Three arcs. One from above, splitting the line of retreat. One from the flank, sealing the sidestep. One rising beneath, closing the ground. For a single suspended instant the shortened Monohoshi Zao existed in three places, and Lowell—mid-lunge, mid-grin—had nowhere in the world left to stand.

Wood met werewolf in triplicate. Crown, ribs, jaw. The three impacts landed as one sound, a flat *CRACK* that echoed off the Amber Veil's frontage, and Lowell's eyes rolled back to white as his lunge died where it stood. He didn't fall. Level 3 endurance kept him upright, swaying, arms slack—stunned into a standing stupor, his brain ringing like Ganesha's bell.

It hadn't dropped him. A true Monohoshi Zao would have taken his head three separate ways; this diminished, blunted, wooden echo had only scrambled him. But scrambled was enough. Scrambled was the werewolf out of the fight for four, perhaps five seconds—

—which was precisely when Aldric committed.

Shirou felt the air part behind his right shoulder and understood, in the fraction of a second available for understanding, that the elf had been waiting for

exactly this: the moment the technique's follow-through left Shirou's blade extended low and his flank exposed. Patient. Less than sober. Twelve rejections' worth of timing.

He twisted. Not enough. The rapier's edge opened his upper arm from shoulder to elbow in a line of cold that turned hot half a heartbeat later, and blood soaked warm through his sleeve.

"*Yield*," Aldric demanded, recovering to guard, chest heaving. "Yield, human, and renounce your claim upon Lady Sophie's company—"

Lowell chose that moment to reboot.

The werewolf came back to consciousness the way drunks and Berserkers did—all at once, with no memory of why he was angry, only the certainty that he was. His kick caught Shirou square in the ribs before Shirou had finished turning from the elf, and the world tilted sideways.

"SHIROU!" Two voices rang out, sharp with worry.

Shirou skidded. Boots first, then one knee, flagstones grinding past beneath him for six medr before Reinforced legs killed the momentum at the very edge of the circle. His ribs reported cracked. His arm reported worse. The bokken was still in his hand, which he counted as the evening's sole unqualified success.

He also wondered whether they'd still call him Mario Mario after this.

The crowd had gone very loud. Somewhere within the noise he could hear Sophie shouting something that was probably not helpful, Rose shouting something at Sophie, and Ganesha ringing his bell whilst bellowing about neutral arcs.

Shirou spat grit, planted the wooden blade, and began to lever himself upright.

'One Level 3, one patient elf, cracked ribs, and a bleeding sword arm,' he inventoried. 'I've had worse. I've had considerably worse. There was that Christmas event with the—'

Light swallowed him.

It came from no direction and every direction at once—soft, white-gold, warm as a hearth in midwinter, pouring over him and through him. The line of fire along his arm cooled and closed. His ribs knitted with a sensation like a held breath finally released. Every bruise from Lowell's backhand, every ache from the skid, the grit in his knee, the ringing in his skull—all of it lifted away as though the last ten minutes had happened to somebody else.

The plaza fell silent.

Shirou stood in the fading glow, fully healed, wooden sword in hand, and stared at his own unmarked sleeve where the blood was already drying around a wound that no longer existed.

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On the rooftop, nobody spoke.

Nine pairs of dark spectacles stared down at the street, where a Level 3 werewolf sat on the cobbles re-evaluating his relationship with reality, and an elf stood equally baffled beside him—his rapier still red with blood whose wound no longer existed.

Celty found her voice first. "Did anyone else see—"

"Three," said Noin. "There were three. At the same time. I think."

"So he wasn't just specialised in ranged combat," Lyra said, in the carefully neutral tone of a woman revising a threat assessment in real time.

"The Dionysus Familia did say he traverses the Dungeon in his capacity as a noodle and potion merchant," Alise added. "Ranged combat doesn't really translate to the tight corridors of the upper floors. He'd need something for close quarters, or he'd have died on his first delivery run." She paused. "I suppose we just watched the something."

A pause.

"...So like Kaguya's thing," Maryuu said.

"It did resemble the Vice-Captain's technique," Celty agreed, hesitantly.

"The—the multiple-cuts-at-once thing. The one she achieved upon reaching Level 2."

"It was similar," Alise said, and for once her voice carried no theatre at all.

Ryuu glanced along the ridgeline; her captain was leaning forward over the parapet, weight on her forearms, reading the street the way she read a battlefield. "Same family of impossible. Different school. A divinely blessed skill." Her head tilted. "He does have the same roots as Kaguya, doesn't he? Shirou Emiya—that's a Far Eastern name, right?"

"It was not similar."

Kaguya's voice cut across the frequency, flat and precise. She had not touched her wine since the strike. The glass sat full beside her on the slate, abandoned—which, Ryuu reflected, was the single most alarming detail of the entire evening.

"Mine is five."

Silence.

"...Star Two?" Alise prompted.

"His was three cuts. Mine is five." A pause, and then, with the wounded dignity of a craftsman whose masterwork had just been compared to a rival's, "Five is more than three. I merely wish this noted for the record."

"Noted," said Lyra. "Logged. The Vice-Captain is winning a competition no one entered."

"Thank you."

"She's rattled," Lyana whispered.

"I am not rattled. I am cataloguing." The wine glass was retrieved. A long, deliberate sip travelled the frequency. "The Far East has stories about a three-cut sword. Old stories. The kind old grandmasters tell their students when they wish to remind them that the mountain has no top." Another sip. "The stories also agree the technique died with its maker."

"So what does that mean?" Cely asked.

"It means," Kaguya said, "that his Falna granted him a lesser skill of the same lineage as mine. Or he learned it from a master." A beat. "If it is the latter, I should like to know which graveyard the master teaches from."

"He did say a chant," Noin interjected. "Tsubame Ga-esii? If I recalled correctly."

Kaguya didn't comment.

Ryuu turned the syllables over. It fitted, in its way. Divinely blessed skills demanded an activating chant—a word, a phrase, or in Riveria Ljos Alf's case an aria that ran longer than some prayers. If the man carried a skill in his Falna, a two-word invocation was unremarkable. Even the resemblance had an explanation ready to hand: like Kaguya's god-slash, perhaps his soul had simply been primed for the same species of technique. Souls shaped by the same homeland, blessed along the same grain.

It was a tidy explanation. It required only that everything they believed about him already be true.

Ryuu adjusted her spectacles and chose, for the moment, to find it sufficient.

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Below, the duel had not waited for the gallery to finish processing—not even for the healing light that had wiped away the last damage the two had managed to land.

Now they were working together.

They came in together this time. Properly together—high and low, staggered timing, the drunken elf's blade covering the werewolf's drunken mad rush, coordination assembled out of pure shared grievance.

"MARIO MARIO!" Lowell bellowed, swinging. "STAND STILL!"

The werewolf's fist caught him across the shoulder and sent him skidding. The crowd oohed. The bookmaker adjusted the odds.

And another pale gold light bloomed over Shirou's shoulder, knitting the bruise closed before he had finished sliding.

The street went quiet.

Shirou looked at his shoulder. He looked at the side lane. He sighed the sigh of a man whose evening had stopped pretending to be salvageable.

"Heith."

The rain barrel at the mouth of the lane shifted. From behind it rose a girl with light red hair—almost pink—in twintails, both hands still glowing, wearing the expression of someone who had rehearsed her cover story extensively and abandoned it mid-breath.

"I wasn't following you!" she announced to the entire pleasure district. "I was—there was an errand! A completely unrelated—oh, forget it—" she planted both fists on her hips "—you're being beaten up by TWO people and you're not even fighting back properly! I leave you alone for three weeks and THIS—"

"WHO," said the entire operational frequency.

"The twintails from the alley," Ryuu said slowly. "She's been following the targets since before the Amber Veil."

"Since before—" Lyra's voice climbed. "We've been running a surveillance operation inside someone else's surveillance operation."

"How many people are following this man?" Noin asked, with genuine alarm.

"Freya Familia," Kaguya said quietly.

The frequency went still.

"The healer. Pink hair, twintails, that calibre of restoration magic on reflex. That's Heith Velvet." A pause. "Freya Familia's healer is following our neighbour through the pleasure district. On her own initiative or otherwise."

Ryuu felt the evening tilt. Somewhere beneath the comedy, something with weight had just moved.

Below, Sophie had recovered first, as Sophie always did.

"Another one?" Her voice carried up from the crystal and the street alike, bright with a delight that had knives in it. "Shirou. Shirou. Look at me. How many healers in this city have you helped?"

"That's not—"

"How many healers have you seduced with noodles? I want a number. Rose wants a number. The GUILD wants a number—"

"IT WAS PLAIN KAKE UDON!" Heith shouted from across the street, as though this were exculpatory. "AND HE PROTECTED MY BODY AS I FELL THROUGH A HOLE AROUND THE 16TH—"

"Her *body*—"

"Rose, are you writing this down—"

"Every healer," Rose said, in the voice of a woman watching her paperwork achieve sentience. "Airmid. Naaza. Now Freya's. He's collected every notable healer in Orario. There are only so many, Sophie. There is a finite number and he has found them ALL—"

"There are other healers in Orario," Shirou said. "Dian Cecht and Miach's Familias alone have dozens more."

"So you know them all?" Sophie's head swivelled towards him. "Did you seduce them as well?"

"OI!" Lowell's roar cut across the reunion. He jabbed a claw at Heith, then at Shirou, then at the golden shimmer still fading off the vendor's shoulder.

"That's cheating! You can't have a healer! We're duelling!"

"Two against one," Shirou pointed out, parrying the rapier that arrived mid-sentence, "was apparently fine—"

"THAT'S DIFFERENT! THAT'S LOVE!"

"HOW IS THAT—"

"LORD GANESHA!" Aldric appealed to the god, disengaging with a flourish.

"We protest! The healing violates the sanctity of the duel!"

All eyes turned to Ganesha.

The god of the masses regarded the scene: two challengers, one vendor, one small healer with her fists on her hips and her chin raised in defiance of the entire street. The elephant mask tilted. Considered.

"YOUNG HEALER!" he thundered. "WHY DO YOU HEAL THIS MAN?"

Heith's face went through several shades of red before landing on the darkest one. "BECAUSE—BECAUSE HE'S AN IDIOT WHO NEVER LOOKS AFTER HIMSELF AND SOMEONE HAS TO!"

A pause.

"PASSION!" Ganesha's fist met his chest like a thunderclap. "HONESTLY DECLARED! GANESHA HAS ALREADY RULED ON THIS MATTER TONIGHT, AND GANESHA'S RULINGS ARE CONSISTENT! THE DUEL IS SANCTIONED BY PASSION—THEREFORE THE HEALING IS SANCTIONED BY PASSION! ALL PASSION IS ADMISSIBLE!"

"THAT'S NOT A LEGAL SYSTEM!" Ardee's voice cracked audibly on the second word.

"IT IS NOW!"

"He's just extending the same excuse," Lyra said, awed despite herself. "He's built an entire body of law out of one precedent and the precedent is 'passion'."

"Justice built on worse," Astraea murmured, and drank.

The duel resumed at full absurdity: two challengers hammering at one vendor who dodged, blocked, apologised, and periodically glowed gold as Heith patched every graze from thirty medr away, her healing arriving with the aggressive punctuality of a woman making a point. Shirou was losing ground—each retreat measured, each hit budgeted—but the arithmetic was tightening. Two on one, with the crowd pressing the ring smaller, and the challengers angry enough now to coordinate properly.

"MARIO MARIO!" Lowell had him cornered against a lamp post, fist drawn back. "ANY LAST WORDS—"

Aldric's rapier came in from the other side, both challengers converging, Shirou a few celch from being driven back down to the cobbles—

"WHAT IS THE MEANING OF THIS?!"

Two voices. Perfect unison. Arriving from opposite ends of the lane and cracking across the street like matched whips.

Everything stopped.

At the western mouth of the lane stood Riveria Ljos Alf, staff in hand, jade eyes sweeping the scene with the rising cold of a glacier discovering it had been personally inconvenienced. A golden-haired girl orbited at her hip at chest height. Beside them, a trench-coated figure in dark spectacles was attempting, very slowly, to sidle out of the picture.

At the eastern mouth: Rienne Arvel of the Dionysus Familia, spring-green eyes fixed on Aldric with a captain's particular disappointment, Filvis Challia half a step behind her with her arms folded and a somewhat muted yet visible

bruise still gracing her forehead. Beside them, a second trench-coated figure had adopted the posture of street furniture.

"Latch," Astraea whispered. "Anvil. Report status."

"...Anvil requests extraction," Iska whispered back.

"Latch also requests extraction."

Ryuu looked down at the frozen street—at the challengers mid-swing, at Heith mid-heal, at Ganesha mid-pose, at the noodle vendor who was visibly finding the day more absurd by the minute—and pulled her hat brim down as far as it would physically go.

The reckoning had arrived. And she had given it directions.

Then the golden-haired girl beside Riveria pointed at Shirou.

"JAGAMARU-SAMA!"

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End

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