

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

### **Story Starts**

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### **Chapter 4.2**

### **Descent, and Escalation**

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The seventeenth floor opened before him.

The cavern stretched hundreds of metres across, its ceiling lost in a canopy of luminescent crystals that cast the space in pale blue-white light, as though lit by a subterranean sun. Vegetation carpeted the floor in thick patches: mosses of deep emerald, broad-leafed ferns, and clusters of crystalline formations jutting from the earth like frozen geysers.

On the far side of the chamber stood the Wall of Grief.

It dominated the cavern's northern face—a sheer cliff of dark grey stone, its surface carved with patterns that might have been natural striations or might have been something older, something deliberate. Even from this distance, Shirou could see the depression where the Goliath had torn itself free: a crater in the wall's surface, raw-edged and weeping dust.

The Goliath itself stood seven metres tall.

A humanoid mass of flesh and stone, its body rough-hewn as though carved by an impatient sculptor. Its proportions were wrong—arms too long, torso too broad, legs disproportionately short, though Shirou suspected that served a structural purpose. Lower centre of gravity. Harder to topple. One arm hung at a broken angle, cracked through at the elbow where concentrated magic had eaten through the dense material. The other swept in wide, devastating arcs that carved trenches in the cavern floor.

Around it, Dionysus Familia fought.

Twenty figures, arranged in the textbook formation for a floor boss engagement: a forward line of melee fighters maintaining aggro through targeted strikes at the creature's legs and lower torso, a middle guard providing rotation and extraction for anyone who took a hit, and a rear echelon of mages and supporters cycling through their chants. Their coordination was good—better than good. The forward fighters moved with a fluid discipline that spoke of extensive drilling, and the mage line staggered their casts so there was never a moment without suppressive fire landing on the boss's weak points.

Shirou noted the composition. Mostly elves. Nearly all of them, in fact. Their movements carried that distinctive elven economy—each action precise, elegant, nothing wasted. And beyond mere technique, they were—well. Beautiful. Every single one of them. Not in the way that combat made people beautiful, though there was that too, but in a more fundamental sense. Perfect features. Proportioned frames.

Plenty of deities chose their children based on criteria that had nothing to do with combat potential. Beauty was one. Lineage was another. And to be fair, Shirou hadn't encountered an ugly elf in the four months he'd been in this world. They emerged from whatever generational process produced them with a uniformity of aesthetic that bordered on unsettling.

An image of Ryuu Lion's perpetual scowl surfaced unbidden in his mind—the way her brow creased when she looked at him, the way her jaw set like she was physically restraining herself from drawing steel.

A small breath of laughter escaped through his nose.

Near the cavern's entrance—his entrance—two elven women stood apart from the battle. Their arms were crossed, their posture relaxed in that particular way that indicated confidence rather than disinterest. Observers, not participants. Senior members, then, confident enough in their subordinates' ability to handle the engagement without direct intervention. He couldn't make out their faces from this angle—the crystal-light threw odd shadows, and they were both hooded against the floor's ambient moisture.

On the opposite side of the chamber, near the base of the Wall of Grief, a scattering of people watched the fight from a safe distance. Rivira residents—Shirou recognised a few from his trips to the eighteenth floor. Adventurers who lived semi-permanently in the safe zone town and made their living trading with those passing through. They watched the Goliath fight the way spectators watched a sporting event: with interest, certainly, but without urgency. Floor bosses were entertainment down here.

They occasionally challenged the Amphisbaena or the Goliath themselves if no Familia claimed the spawn first. Shirou had joined a few of those raids out of curiosity—though he'd never attempted a solo challenge. That was a reliable way to attract exactly the kind of attention he didn't want, not to mention the phantom ringing in his ears whenever he imagined Rose's reaction if that particular piece of news reached her desk.

Shirou assessed the situation in three heartbeats.

The Familia had the fight well in hand. The Goliath was wounded—one arm compromised, its movements sluggish compared to the initial fury of a fresh spawn. The mage line was keeping it off-balance with alternating elemental strikes. No one appeared to be in mortal danger. This wasn't his fight, wasn't his concern, and interrupting another Familia's floor boss challenge was both rude and potentially dangerous.

He stepped to the side.

The two observing elves were positioned near a flat stretch of ground where the moss grew thin—a natural vantage point elevated slightly above the main cavern floor. Shirou moved past them without crowding, found an adjacent patch of bare stone, and set down his baskets.

From the left basket, he produced a rolled blanket—thick canvas backed with oilcloth to resist the floor's damp. He spread it flat across the stone, smoothing the corners. From the right basket came the wooden display rack he'd built himself: a simple A-frame that held glass bottles at an angle, their contents visible. He arranged six medium potions and four low-grade ones in neat

rows, their blue liquid catching the ambient crystal-light. The Miach Familia's seal was stamped into each cork—a small snake coiled around a staff.

Last came the menu board. A flat piece of lacquered wood, characters painted in clean black strokes. He'd written it in both the common script and the older formal elven notation that Sophie had taught him—good for business when his clientele was a mix of many races.

The prices were listed in columns:

## **EMIYA-YA — DUNGEON SERVICE**

### *Floor 17 — Variable Pricing*

The column broke into four tiers. Shirou had learnt early that the seventeenth floor's economy operated on a rhythm tied entirely to the Goliath's spawn cycle. When the boss was dormant—weeks between spawns—prices dropped to their baseline. When parties began camping the floor in anticipation of a spawn, demand for supplies rose. Mid-battle, when people remembered they'd forgotten to stock potions, prices spiked. And post-battle, when everyone was injured and spent and desperate—that was when adventurers would pay nearly anything for a hot meal and something to close their wounds.

Currently: mid-battle. The prices reflected it.

Potions sat at seventeen thousand valis for a medium, eight thousand for a low-grade. His noodle prices ranged from four thousand for plain kake udon to nine thousand for anything involving protein. The post-battle column showed everything marked up another fifteen percent.

Shirou settled onto the blanket with his legs folded beneath him, arranged his baskets on either side, and waited.

The Goliath roared.

It was a sound like tearing metal amplified through a canyon—deep, resonant, furious. The creature lunged forward, its good arm sweeping in a haymaker that would have flattened a building. Three of the forward fighters broke left

whilst two broke right, the arc passing between them with metres to spare. Practised.

A volley of magic struck the Goliath's midsection—fire, then ice, then something that crackled violet and ate into its stone flesh like acid. The creature staggered. Its damaged arm swung loose, nearly detaching at the elbow joint where the material had been weakened beyond structural tolerance.

Shirou tracked the individual fighters. The frontline leader—an elf with wheat-coloured hair bound in a warrior's knot—wielded an elegant longsword with a leaf-shaped blade. Her technique was clean, direct, built around precise cuts to existing damage rather than attempting to create new wounds through the Goliath's considerable natural armour. Smart. The boss's hide was effectively hardened stone; trying to cut fresh material would dull a blade in seconds.

Behind the forward group, separated from the main formation by deliberate distance, a single figure operated in isolation.

Black hair, cut in a severe fringe that fell like a curtain across her forehead. Her robes were darker than her companions'—charcoal grey where theirs were forest green and cream. She held a short staff. Her hands moved in sharp, economical gestures, and magic responded.

A barrier shimmered into existence—transparent, faintly gold—catching a spray of debris from the Goliath's flailing. It deflected the stone fragments away from two members of the middle guard who'd been caught out of position. The barrier dissolved the moment the threat passed.

Then her hands moved again. Different pattern. Lightning gathered at the tip of her staff like a trapped serpent, white-blue and vicious, and she released it in a concentrated bolt that struck the Goliath's already-damaged arm at the joint. The creature's body convulsed. The arm cracked further.

Capable. Very capable. But alone. No one stood within five metres of her. No one rotated to cover her flanks. The isolation was mutual—she kept her

distance and her companions kept theirs, as though some unspoken agreement dictated a bubble of empty space around her at all times.

The wheat-haired frontliner pressed her advantage. With the Goliath still reeling from the lightning strike, she closed distance with a burst of speed that blurred her outline, and her sword came up in a rising cut that caught the damaged elbow at its weakest point.

The arm separated.

It fell like a toppled pillar, struck the ground, and began dissolving before the impact's echo faded. The Goliath lurched sideways, unbalanced by the sudden loss of mass. Its remaining fist slammed into the ground for support, cracking the stone floor in radiating fractures.

The mage line increased their tempo. Spells struck the creature from three angles simultaneously—fire consuming its left side, ice crystallising along its right, and that violet acid-magic eating into the stump where its arm had been.

Good. They'd finish it within minutes at this rate.

One of the two elves near Shirou turned her head.

She was tall—taller than most elven women he'd encountered—with blonde hair so pale it verged on white, falling straight past her shoulders. Her features held that carved-marble quality common to her race, though age sat more visibly in her eyes than in her skin. Those eyes found Shirou, found his blanket and his potions and his menu board, and something shifted in her expression.

The beginnings of a sneer.

It was reflexive—Shirou had seen it enough times to recognise. That particular tightening at the corners of the mouth, the slight elevation of the chin, the fractional narrowing of eyes. Elves and humans had a relationship complicated by millennia of history he'd only partially pieced together from Sophie's patient explanations. The short version: most elves considered

humans lesser. Not with malice, necessarily. The way a person might view a particularly clever dog.

But the sneer didn't fully form.

The elf blinked. Her head tilted—a fraction, barely perceptible. Her nostrils flared once, twice, as though testing the air. The nascent contempt dissolved into something else entirely. Confusion.

She turned to her companion—a shorter elf with auburn hair pulled into a practical tail—and spoke in low, rapid Elven. Shirou caught fragments despite not actively reinforcing his hearing. The consonants were soft, liquid, like water over polished stone. He didn't eavesdrop. Whatever she'd noticed, whatever had disrupted her initial assessment, wasn't his concern.

The blonde elf approached.

Her stride was unhurried but purposeful—each step placed with the precision of someone accustomed to moving through forest undergrowth without disturbing a single leaf. Up close, her features resolved into sharper clarity. High cheekbones. Eyes the colour of spring leaves shot through with gold. A willowy frame beneath practical travelling clothes—not armour, not robes, but something between the two. A captain's clothes. Functional authority.

"Who are you?"

Her voice carried the faint musical quality inherent to elven speech, though hers was clipped. Direct. Not the languid drawl some elves affected when addressing non-elves.

Shirou gestured toward his display without rising. "Emiya. I sell potions and noodles."

Her gaze dropped to the blanket's contents. The potion bottles. The menu board. The baskets with their cargo of ingredients and cooking implements.

"What are you selling here?"

"Potions." Shirou picked up one of the medium bottles and held it at an angle so the Miach Familia seal was visible. "Miach Familia stock. Seventeen thousand for a medium at current pricing. I've also got noodles if you'd prefer something hot after the fight."

He extended the menu board toward her. She took it automatically, her eyes scanning the columns of prices without apparent interest before returning to his face.

"That isn't what I—" She paused. Recalibrated. "What are you?"

Shirou blinked at her. Shrugged one shoulder.

"I don't understand the question. I'm a regular human."

Her expression shifted—not frustration, but the particular discomfort of someone whose senses were reporting information that contradicted what their eyes told them. Her nostrils flared again.

"You feel—" She stopped herself. Looked away, then back. "There is something about your presence. It's... peaceful. Like the deep forests. The ones where no axe has ever fallen."

Shirou's hands remained still in his lap. His face gave nothing away.

"One of the elf Guild receptionists says the same thing."

Recognition flickered in the blonde elf's eyes.

"Sophie."

"Mm."

Her posture shifted. The wariness didn't leave—elves were too careful for that—but the edge softened. "So you are the human she was referring to." A statement, not a question. Whatever Sophie had said about him, this woman had heard it. "I am Rienne Arvel. Captain of the Dionysus Familia."

Shirou inclined his head. "A pleasure."

Behind Rienne, the Goliath bellowed. The sound had changed—raw now, desperate. The creature was dying and it knew it. Its single remaining arm swept in wild, unfocused arcs that lacked the power of its earlier attacks. The forward fighters had pulled back to safe distance, content to let the mage line finish the work. But the desperate flailing had consequences: two members of the middle guard who'd been too slow in retreating bore fresh wounds. One clutched her side where blood darkened her tunic. The other limped, favouring her left leg.

"Your people have injured." Shirou nodded toward the battlefield. "The potions are effective. I also accept monster drops of equivalent value if you like most prefer not to carry valis this deep."

Rienne's attention snapped to the wounded fighters, then back to Shirou. The assessment in her gaze was calculating now—a captain weighing options.

"What brings you this deep alone?"

"I run a small establishment in Rivira. Opens every few days when I'm in the area." He adjusted one of the potion bottles on its rack—a minor fidget, nothing more. "I sell food and supplies on the way down. Gives me consistent clientele."

Rienne studied him a moment longer.

"A human. Alone. On the seventeenth floor. Selling noodles."

"And potions." Shirou kept his voice mild.

The Goliath shuddered. A massive tremor ran through its remaining structure, stone cracking and splitting along fault lines created by accumulated magical damage. It swayed like a tree about to fall.

Lightning struck it.

The black-haired elf had repositioned—standing well clear of her companions, her arm raised, staff pointed at the monster. The bolt that left her wasn't the controlled lance she'd used before. This was raw power channelled through

precision—a column of white-blue energy that struck the Goliath's chest and didn't stop. The creature convulsed. Its mouth gaped in a gargled death-rattle that echoed off the cavern walls, a sound like grinding boulders mixed with something almost animal, almost pain.

In the same heartbeat, the wheat-haired frontliner moved.

She closed the distance in a single burst—three steps that covered twenty metres—and her sword came up in a perfect ascending arc that took the Goliath's head from its shoulders. The cut was clean. The blade met weakened stone and passed through it the way a heated knife parts cold butter.

The head tumbled.

The body stood for one eternal second, headless, arms slack, and then it collapsed. The impact shook the floor hard enough that Shirou's potion bottles clinked against each other on their rack. Dust billowed outward from the fallen mass, and a ragged cheer went up from the Rivira spectators on the far side of the cavern.

Dionysus Familia's members didn't cheer. They were too disciplined for that—or too tired. The forward fighters lowered their weapons and breathed. The mages let their hands drop. The middle guard began moving among the wounded, assessing damage.

Rienne watched it all with the composed satisfaction of a captain whose plan had executed within acceptable parameters.

Shirou was already packing.

He rolled the blanket's edges inward, corralling the display into a compact bundle. His movements were efficient, practised—this wasn't the first time he'd set up and broken down in a combat-adjacent environment. The potion rack folded flat. The menu board slid into its slot in the basket's interior frame.

"Wait."

Rienne's voice. Shirou paused, looked up.

The auburn-haired elf had joined her captain—smaller, rounder-faced than Rienne, with a sprinkle of freckles across her nose that seemed almost incongruous on an elven woman.

"Maren Lindel," she said. "Vice-captain."

Shirou nodded. "Emiya."

"We'll take potions." Maren's eyes were on the wounded members of their Familia now making their way back from the battlefield. Some walked under their own power. Others leaned on companions. The one with the side wound was being carried. "How many mediums do you have?"

"Six."

Rienne and Maren exchanged a glance. Quick, wordless—the shorthand of people who'd worked together long enough that entire conversations could happen in the space between blinks.

"Six, then." Rienne reached for the coin purse at her belt.

Shirou frowned.

Six mediums at seventeen thousand was one hundred and two thousand valis. A considerable sum, even by dungeon economy standards. And looking at the group now approaching—eight with visible injuries, several more likely nursing bruises and hairline fractures beneath their armour—six might not be enough. The injured needed treatment. Waiting until they reached Rivira meant another floor of travel whilst wounded.

"Twelve thousand each."

Both elves looked at him.

"First purchase discount," Shirou said flatly. "Twelve thousand per medium. Seventy-two thousand for the lot."

Maren's eyebrows rose. "That's—"

"Good business. You come back next time needing supplies, you already know where to find me."

Rienne's expression was unreadable for a long moment. Then something that might have been amusement—or might have been respect—touched the corners of her mouth.

"Drops acceptable?"

"Absolutely."

The exchange was quick. Maren produced a pouch from her pack—magic stones from the floor's regular spawns, collected on their way to the Wall of Grief. A handful of minotaur stones, two ligurian crystals, and a cluster of monster drops. Shirou assessed them by weight and colour—structural analysis did the rest, cross-referenced against months of watching the Guild's vetting process. He knew their value without instruments.

"This covers four mediums. The rest in valis?"

Rienne added a second pouch—this one containing three stones of deeper purple, larger, denser. Boss material. Fragments shed from the Goliath during the fight, collected by their support members. Shirou hefted them.

"That covers the remaining two. We're square."

He handed over the six medium potions. Rienne and Maren distributed them between themselves, then turned as the black-haired elf approached.

She moved with the same deliberate isolation Shirou had observed during the battle—a straight line from the battlefield to her captain, passing through the middle of the group without acknowledging any of them. Her companions stepped aside as she came. Not fear, exactly. Wariness.

Up close, her features were sharp. Angular jaw, dark eyes beneath that severe fringe, skin paler than her companions'. Beautiful—undeniably so—but it was a cold beauty. Marble in winter.

Her expression was blank. Controlled. The face of someone who had learnt to show nothing because showing something would cost her.

Shirou recognised the look.

He'd worn it himself.

He nodded at her—brief, neutral—the same way he'd nod at any customer. Then he reached into his pack and produced two additional bottles. Low-grade potions, their blue lighter and less concentrated than the mediums.

"These as well." He set them beside the six mediums. "On the house."

Rienne's gaze sharpened. Maren opened her mouth to protest—or thank him—but Shirou was already moving. The blanket rolled tight. The rack folded. The baskets settled into their positions on either end of the carrying pole, and the pole rose to his shoulders with the ease of long familiarity.

"I descend to the eighteenth floor every few days," he said, settling the weight across his back. "Emiya-ya, in Rivira. I sell on the way down, usually camp the route between floors fifteen and eighteen for adventurers who need supplies. If your Familia would like to avail themselves—" He adjusted the baskets' balance with a roll of his shoulders. "I have dishes suited to elven palates. And wine, if you'd like."

Rienne tilted her head. "You cater to elves specifically?"

"I cater to everyone. But yes—I stock options without meat or dairy, and my broths can be prepared without animal base." He paused. "Sophie was particular about that when she helped me design the menu—though a lot of elves do like my regular dashi, which is generally made from seafood."

Something warm passed through Rienne's expression at Sophie's name. Brief, quickly contained, but genuine.

"We may visit."

Shirou nodded at her. At Maren. At the black-haired elf, whose dark eyes hadn't left his face since she'd arrived.

Then he turned and walked.

The Dionysus Familia parted around him without ceremony. Some of them were sitting now—collapsed onto the moss-covered ground with the boneless exhaustion of post-combat adrenaline crash. Others stood in clusters, passing waterskins and checking each other's wounds. The wheat-haired frontliner was cleaning her blade with methodical strokes, her breathing still elevated. The mages had their staves planted in the ground like walking sticks, leaning heavily.

They barely glanced at Shirou as he passed through. A human with a carrying pole and baskets, walking alone through the seventeenth floor. Unremarkable. Beneath notice.

He preferred it that way.

The path to the eighteenth floor descended through a series of natural passages—stone corridors worn smooth by centuries of foot traffic, their walls studded with the phosphorescent crystals that served as the Dungeon's ambient lighting. The air grew warmer as he descended, carrying with it the particular mineral-and-green scent of the safe zone below. No monsters spawned on this transition route—one of the few mercies the Dungeon extended to those travelling between the middle floors and the eighteenth.

Shirou walked. The baskets swayed gently on the pole. Behind him, the sounds of the seventeenth floor's aftermath faded into silence.

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**End**

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