

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

Story Starts

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Chapter 4.6

Descent, and Escalation

Shirou gritted his teeth and loosed another arrow.

The blade-arrow punched through a minotaur's chest at three hundred medr, the steel tip finding the magic stone buried behind layers of muscle and bone. The creature burst into black dust before it finished its charge. Shirou's fingers were already closing around the next projectile in his basket, nocking it, drawing, releasing. A mechanical cycle he could sustain for hours—his divinely reinforced circuits saw to that.

Right now, he didn't care if people questioned the volume of steel he was putting into the air. He'd deny everything later. Blame the chaos, the smoke, the poor visibility. Take advantage of their common sense.

But the sounds—

A woman's scream cut short. Somewhere south, past the burning storefronts. A wet crunch that could have been bone or collapsing timber. The distant wailing of someone who'd found a body they recognised.

His hands wanted to move on their own. Every circuit in his body hummed with the urge to flood his magic into a single, overwhelming act. He could do it. He could trace a thousand blades above Rivira and let gravity do the rest. Swords that maimed. Swords that bound. Swords that burned and froze and simply killed whatever they touched. He could blanket the settlement in steel and end this in seconds.

He couldn't.

Friendly forces moved through every street, every alleyway, every collapsed building. Astraea Familia. Dionysus Familia. Loki Familia's elven detachment. Civilians huddled in basements and behind overturned carts. A rain of blades would be indiscriminate. He'd kill as many innocents as enemies.

So he shot. One arrow at a time. Picked his targets. Controlled his breathing. And tried not to think about the people he couldn't reach fast enough.

The rooftop beneath his boots shuddered as something heavy collided with the building's lower floors. Shirou shifted his weight, compensating, and swept his gaze across the settlement.

Things were improving. Slowly, painfully, but improving.

Half of the Dionysus Familia had pushed out from the northern barricade into the settlement proper. He could see Maren directing squads toward pockets of trapped civilians near the western market stalls, her spear resting across her shoulders between orders, ready to come down at a moment's notice.

To the east, the Loki Familia contingent had nearly swept their sector clean. Shirou's reinforced hearing picked up Riveria Ljos Alf's abbreviated incantations, each one followed by the sharp detonation of concentrated magic tearing through monster ranks. Her squad operated with the precision of a unit that had done this a thousand times. They were good. Very good.

But the forest wasn't finished.

Shirou's eyes narrowed as he tracked movement along the treeline. A second wave. Smaller than the first, but more concentrated. Hellhounds and mad beetles spilling from the undergrowth in clusters, their movements too coordinated to be natural. And behind them—hooded figures. Five, six, seven of them, spaced evenly along the forest's edge, herding the monsters forward like shepherds driving livestock.

Evilus. The second wave was deliberate. Timed to hit after the defenders had committed their reserves to the first engagement.

Shirou shifted his aim and began putting arrows into the new formation. A hellhound at eighty medr. A mad beetle at one-twenty. Another hellhound. He targeted the gaps between the monster clusters, trying to break up the cohesion before they reached the settlement's perimeter.

His gaze swept south.

There.

The black-haired elf from Dionysus Familia. The quiet one who'd sat at his counter reading a book and ordered her food without making eye contact. She was four hundred medr out, past the southern barricade, deep into ground that no sane person would occupy alone.

She fought surrounded.

Three hellhounds circled her left flank. A pair of minotaurs pressed from the right. And behind them, two hooded figures advanced through the smoke, their weapons drawn.

Shirou had seen this pattern before. The deliberate distance. The refusal to fall back to consolidated positions. The way she operated at the edge of every engagement, separate from her Familia, as though proximity to her own people were something to be avoided. During dinner service he'd noticed the same thing in miniature—the empty stools between her and Rienne, the conversations that flowed around her without touching her, the way her companions didn't call her over.

He didn't know the reason. He recognised the behaviour well enough—he'd practised it himself for years.

Whatever the cause, it was going to get her killed.

He sighed through his nose and doubled his rate of fire.

Draw. Nock. Release. The first arrow crossed four hundred medr in under two seconds and struck the lead hellhound through its open mouth. The beast dissolved. Draw. Nock. Release. The second arrow caught a minotaur in the

junction between neck and shoulder, punching through to the magic stone nestled behind its sternum. Black dust.

The elf reacted to the sudden thinning of her opponents. She didn't look up—didn't search for the source. She simply exploited the opening. Her longsword swept in a lateral arc that bisected the second minotaur from hip to opposite shoulder. The creature's top half slid away from its bottom half, and both dissolved before they hit the ground.

Good technique. She favoured long, sweeping cuts that used her weapon's full reach. Not typical for an elf—most elven swordplay Shirou had observed leant toward precision thrusts and controlled parries. This girl fought like she wanted to keep everything at maximum distance.

A hellhound lunged for her ankles. She vaulted over it, her blade descending in a vicious chop that split the beast's skull. But the movement cost her. She landed off-balance, her weight too far forward, and the third hellhound closed the gap.

Its jaws clamped around her ankle.

The elf's composure shattered. A sharp cry tore from her throat as she drove her sword down into the hellhound's spine, but the damage was done—blood welled through the torn leather of her boot. She stumbled. Her guard dropped for a fraction of a second.

A hooded figure surged forward.

Steel met steel. The figure's short sword locked against the elf's longsword in a bind, pressing her backward. The second hooded figure circled wide, flanking. The remaining monsters closed in.

Shirou's arrow was already in flight.

The blade-arrow entered the first hooded figure's neck just below the jaw. It punched through the cervical vertebrae and exited the other side in a spray of arterial crimson. The figure's knees buckled. His short sword scraped free of

the bind as he collapsed, his blood painting the elf's face and chest in a hot wash of red.

Shirou didn't pause. His next arrow killed the hellhound that had bitten her, the projectile splitting its skull a celch from where her boot connected with the creature's teeth. She yanked her ankle free. Three more arrows went out in rapid succession—a minotaur, a mad beetle, another hellhound—each one finding a magic stone or a vital organ.

The elf recovered. Her face was a mask of blood and fury. She parried the second hooded figure's overhead strike and riposted, her longsword opening a gash across his chest. He staggered. She followed with a thrust that took him through the sternum.

'Keep moving,' Shirou urged silently, already scanning for the next threat. *'Don't stop.'*

She didn't stop. She pulled her blade free and pivoted to face a cluster of three more hellhounds that had broken through from the southeast. Her injured ankle slowed her—he could see the slight hitch in her footwork, the way she favoured her left leg—but she compensated with aggression, pressing forward to meet the beasts rather than waiting for them to surround her.

Shirou split his attention. He put an arrow into the lead hellhound to thin the pack for her, then swept his gaze north to check the Loki Familia's progress. Still holding. Riveria's squad had pushed the monsters back past the treeline on their flank. Good.

West. Maren's group had reached the trapped civilians near the market.

South-east. The black-haired elf cut down the remaining hellhounds. A third hooded figure approached from behind a collapsed wall, but Shirou's arrow found his kneecap before he could close within striking distance. The figure crumpled. The elf finished him with a downward strike.

South. More monsters emerging from the forest. Shirou put arrows into the leaders—a reinforced minotaur with scars on its hide, an abnormally large hellhound—and disrupted the formation.

Centre. The Astraea Familia.

Shirou's rhythm faltered.

Four of them—Alise, Kaguya, the elf Ryou, and the one who threw knives, Lyra—surrounded a single opponent in the intersection near the central plaza. A man in dark robes. He moved between their attacks with a fluidity that screamed high level. At least a level higher than his opponents. Possibly more.

The gap was visible even from this distance. Alise's burning sword carved arcs of flame that should have overwhelmed any defender, but the man slipped past each strike by centimetres. Kaguya's katana probed and tested, searching for openings that never appeared. Lyra maintained a rain of thrown steel that the man simply weaved through. And Ryou—

Ryou pressed him hardest, her wooden sword driving at angles that forced him to actually parry rather than dodge. She was fast. Faster than the others. But fast wasn't enough against that level of stat differential.

Shirou watched for an opening. At this range, with allies that close to the target, he couldn't risk a shot unless the geometry was perfect. A stray blade-arrow that passed through the target could hit one of the girls on the opposite side.

He turned back to the elf.

'Stay alive. Just a bit longer.'

She was flagging. The ankle wound bled freely, leaving a trail of dark spots wherever she moved. But she fought through it—hacking through a pair of mad beetles that had crawled over the barricade, then whipping her blade

around to deflect a thrown knife from a fourth hooded figure who'd emerged from the smoke.

Shirou killed the knife-thrower. Centre mass. The figure folded and dropped.

The elf's head snapped up. For the first time, she looked directly at him—four hundred medr away, silhouetted against the fire-lit sky on his rooftop perch. Even at this distance, he could see the recognition in her expression. Not gratitude. Something harder and more complicated.

She turned back to the fight. Two more minotaurs bore down on her position. She planted her feet, raised her sword, and met the first one head-on.

Shirou killed the second before it reached her.

'This is supposed to be a vacation,' he thought bitterly, putting another arrow into a hellhound that had flanked the elf's blind spot. *'Rest and exist, Alaya said. Learn to live for yourself. Find peace.'*

He nocked another blade. Drew. Released. A minotaur dissolved into black dust sixty medr from the elf's position.

'Instead I'm playing artillery support in a burning settlement against a coordinated terrorist assault on the eighteenth floor of a monster-infested labyrinth.'

Draw. Nock. Release. A hooded figure crumpled, Shirou's arrow buried in his chest.

'Wonderful vacation. Truly. Thank you, Alaya. Your generosity knows no bounds.'

The elf dispatched the remaining minotaur with a two-handed overhead blow that split it from crown to groin. The monster burst into dust. She stood in the settling cloud of black particles, breathing hard, her sword arm trembling. Nothing moved in her immediate vicinity. The monsters and hooded figures that had surrounded her lay dead or dissolved.

Shirou let out a slow breath.

Then he pretended to reach into his basket of blades—his hand dipping below the rooftop's edge where no one could see—and traced something different. Not a blade-arrow. A blunt-headed shaft with a small sandbag lashed to the tip. Training ammunition. Completely harmless.

He nocked it. Drew. Aimed at the black-haired elf's head.

Released.

The sandbag round crossed four hundred meters and struck the elf squarely on the forehead with a soft *thwap*.

She staggered. Her free hand flew to her face, pressing against the red mark already blooming above her brow. Her head whipped toward the rooftop, and even across the distance, Shirou could feel the intensity of that glare. Dark eyes—nearly black—burned with outrage.

Shirou held up one hand, palm flat, and mimed a *come back* gesture. Then he pointed, deliberately and repeatedly, toward the northern quarter where the bulk of Dionysus Familia held their consolidated position.

The elf didn't move. Her glare intensified. Blood from the hooded figure's arterial spray still covered half her face, and combined with the red welt on her forehead, she looked like something out of a nightmare.

Shirou reached into his basket again.

He traced another sandbag round and nocked it, making sure she could see the motion clearly even at this distance. He drew the bowstring back to his cheek.

The elf moved.

She couldn't have retreated faster if a Goliath had been chasing her. One moment she stood defiant in her ring of destruction; the next she was limping north at a pace that suggested her injured ankle bothered her far less than the

prospect of another sandbag to the skull. She didn't sheathe her longsword as she moved, one hand still pressed to her forehead.

The relief that loosened Shirou's shoulders lasted precisely two seconds.

He turned toward the central plaza.

The fight between Astraea Familia and the robed man had shifted. The four girls had pushed him back—Shirou could see fresh cuts on his arms and a shallow gash across his ribs where Alise's burning blade had scored. They were hurting him. Not enough, not nearly enough, but they were drawing blood from someone who outclassed them in raw stats and seemed to be enjoying himself despite the accumulating wounds. Sheer coordination and persistence were keeping them in the fight.

Then Ryu stumbled.

A crack in the flagstones—Shirou saw it from his elevated position, the split in the stone hidden beneath blood and debris. Her foot caught the edge. Her balance broke. Her sword dropped from guard position.

Half a second of vulnerability.

The robed man was already moving. He disengaged from Kaguya with a contemptuous parry and launched himself at Ryu, his dagger rising toward her exposed throat. The distance between them collapsed in a single explosive stride.

Shirou's hand closed around a blade-arrow from the basket. He didn't think. Didn't aim. His body moved on the instinct drilled into it across a hundred and sixty-nine loops of the Holy Grail War, years of deployments as Chaldea's Master, and more battles than he'd bothered counting against enemies that should have killed him.

He drew and released in a single motion.

The blade-arrow crossed the distance to the central plaza in a heartbeat. It struck the robed man dead centre of his forehead.

And bounced off.

The impact snapped the man's head back. His charge arrested for a fraction of a second—not from pain, but from sheer surprise. The blade-arrow spun away, deflected by the man's Falna-enhanced durability, tumbling end over end until it clattered against a wall thirty medr behind him. The steel hadn't even broken his skin. A faint red mark on his forehead was the only evidence it had connected at all.

Level 4. At minimum. Shirou had no direct frame of reference for fighting one—but he'd seen enough Level 3s in action to recognise what happened when the numbers jumped beyond their reach.

The problem with adventurers above a certain threshold was straightforward and infuriating. Their Falna reinforced their physical bodies to such a degree that mundane weapons—even well-crafted ones—simply couldn't penetrate. A Level 4's skin could turn aside steel that would punch through plate armour. Shirou's blade-arrows were excellent work, finely forged and balanced, but they were still mortal steel. Against a Level 4, they were blunt instruments. Annoyances. Mosquito bites.

But mosquito bites could still disrupt timing.

Astraea Familia capitalised on the fraction of a second Shirou's arrow had bought them. Ryu recovered her footing and threw herself backward, opening distance. Kaguya surged into the gap, her katana a silver blur that forced the man to redirect his attention. Alise pressed from the opposite angle, her burning blade carving a line of fire across his retreating path. Lyra's knives—proper combat steel, Familia-forged weapons with the quality to bite even through enhanced durability—scored two shallow cuts across his back.

He snarled. Actually snarled, his teeth bared and his composure cracking for the first time.

Shirou nocked another blade-arrow and sent it at the man's head. It struck his temple and ricocheted. The man flinched—more annoyance than pain—and

Alise drove her sword into the opening, her burning edge slicing a line across his upper arm that actually drew blood.

Good. The girls' weapons had the quality to wound him. Familia-forged blades, properly enchanted or simply superior in make, could bypass the passive defence that mundane steel couldn't. Shirou's arrows couldn't cut him, but they could rattle him.

So Shirou kept shooting.

Arrow after arrow. He peppered the man with steel, targeting his face, his hands, his joints—anywhere that would provoke an involuntary flinch or force him to adjust his guard. None of them penetrated. None of them needed to. Every arrow that bounced off his skull was an arrow that disrupted his rhythm. Every deflection was a fraction of a second where his dagger wasn't threatening someone's throat.

The man growled as another blade-arrow slammed into his shoulder blade and spun away. He twisted, scanning the rooftops, his mismatched eyes finding Shirou's position.

Shirou sent another arrow at his face.

The man caught it. Plucked it from the air with his free hand and crushed the steel shaft like a dry twig. He bared his teeth at Shirou across the distance, rage and contempt warring in his expression.

Kaguya's katana opened a cut along his ribs while his attention was on the rooftop.

The fight ground on. The man adapted—just as Shirou had hoped he would. At first, Shirou's arrows had disrupted him through surprise—he hadn't expected ranged harassment during a melee engagement. But after the sixth or seventh projectile bounced harmlessly off his body, he stopped reacting. The flinch response dulled. He began treating Shirou's arrows the way one treated rain: present, persistent, irrelevant.

He stopped parrying them entirely.

Shirou watched this progression and allowed himself a small, cold smile.

'Thank you for the lesson, old man.'

The trick was simple. Kiritsugu Emiya—not the broken man who'd pulled Shirou from the fire, but the Heroic Spirit summoned to Chaldea, the Assassin with dead eyes and a smoking gun—had explained it once during a quiet moment between singularities. The principle behind his Origin Bullets, stripped to its tactical essence.

'Establish a pattern,' his father's spirit had said, his voice flat and clinical.

'Make them believe the threat is negligible. Then change the variable.'

Shirou's hand dipped into the basket one final time.

But this time, he didn't pull a blade-arrow from the wicker container. His hand dropped below the rooftop's edge, hidden from every angle, and his circuits flared as he traced something different.

Not mundane steel. Not a repurposed sword beaten into arrow shape.

A Noble Phantasm.

It was a minor one. A sword without a famous name, carried in the depths of Gilgamesh's treasury among thousands of similar weapons—blades forged by forgotten smiths for forgotten kings, each one a crystallised mystery from the Age of Gods. This particular sword was barely worthy of the designation. A bronze-age falcata, its edge blessed by a river deity whose name survived in no written record. In the hierarchy of Noble Phantasms, it ranked barely above the threshold. A D-minus at best.

But D-minus was still a Noble Phantasm.

Shirou altered its shape. Compressed the blade. Extended the tang.

Reshaped it into a projectile that would fly true from his bow. The transformation was straightforward—the tracing itself cost little—but holding a

Noble Phantasm's conceptual weight whilst simultaneously reshaping its physical structure put a different kind of pressure on his circuits. Not the steady burn of sustained output, but a sharp, focused strain, like gripping something that didn't want to change shape. He held it anyway.

The result was a blade-arrow that looked no different from the dozens he'd already fired—but Shirou could feel the difference humming through the grip. A density that went beyond mass. An edge that existed on a level mundane steel couldn't reach.

He nocked it. Drew. Aimed.

The man in the central plaza had just deflected Alise's burning slash and was driving his dagger toward Kaguya's midsection. His back was half-turned to Shirou. His body language screamed confidence—he'd dismissed the rooftop archer as a non-threat, a distraction to be endured rather than feared.

Shirou released.

The Noble Phantasm crossed the distance between rooftop and plaza in less time than it took to blink. It struck the man in the back of his right shoulder—not the head, not the heart, deliberately off-centre—and this time it didn't bounce.

It punched through.

The blade buried itself three inches into the meat of his shoulder, the blessed edge slicing through Falna-reinforced flesh and muscle as though they were cloth. The man's composure finally, truly shattered. He screamed—a raw, animal sound that echoed off the surrounding buildings. His right arm spasmed. The dagger clattered from fingers that had lost their grip.

'Alive,' Shirou reminded himself, even as his hands reached for another arrow. *'He's important. Evilus operative, likely an officer or commander. They need him alive for interrogation—'*

The world turned white.

The explosion came from the east—no, multiple points. Three detonations in rapid succession, each one powerful enough to send shockwaves rippling through the settlement. Buildings that had survived the monster assault erupted outward in sprays of stone and timber. Fire bloomed. The shockwave hit Shirou's rooftop like a physical wall, forcing him to crouch and brace against the impact.

When he straightened, Rivira was burning fresh.

Not from monster attacks. From within. The explosions had originated inside buildings—establishments that civilians had sheltered in, structures that the defenders had assumed were safe. Rigged charges. Planted before the attack, probably days or weeks in advance. The monsters and the hooded figures had been the distraction. The real weapon had been waiting inside the walls the entire time.

Shirou's stomach dropped.

He snapped his gaze back to the central plaza. The robed man was gone. The space where he'd stood moments ago was empty save for a splash of blood and the dropped dagger. Alise stood at the centre of the intersection, her burning sword raised, scanning the smoke-choked streets. Kaguya had her katana up, covering Alise's back. Ryu and Lyra were already moving toward the nearest explosion site.

The man had vanished. Used the chaos of the detonations to disengage and retreat.

Shirou's jaw clenched hard enough to ache.

'Should have aimed for the spine.'

No. The call had been right. Taking the man alive would have yielded intelligence—names, locations, plans. Dead men didn't talk. But it didn't matter now. The opportunity had passed.

Shirou slung EMIYA's bow across his back and dropped from the rooftop.

The fall was three storeys. He reinforced his legs on impact, the landing sending a jolt through his knees and hips that his enhanced body absorbed without injury. He was moving before the dust settled, sprinting toward the nearest collapsed building where screams emanated from beneath the rubble.

No more archery. This was close work now.

Around him, Rivira burned. Structures that had weathered the monster stampede now sagged and crumbled from internal detonations. Smoke poured from shattered windows. Somewhere to the west, a secondary collapse buried the sound of voices beneath an avalanche of timber and stone.

Shirou reached the first building and began pulling rubble away, his reinforced arms shifting stones that would have taken three normal men to move. Two civilians—a dwarf and a human woman—crawled from the gap he created. He pointed them north, toward the consolidated Dionysus Familia position, and kept digging.

'The settlement's compromised,' he thought, hauling a beam out of the wreckage. *'We can't keep people here. Every building could be rigged. We need to evacuate everyone—out of Rivira entirely, onto the open floor. The crystal ceiling gives enough light. The floor's too big for the remaining monsters to threaten a consolidated group.'*

He pulled a third survivor from the rubble—a pale elf with a broken arm—and directed them after the first two.

Evacuation. That was the priority now. Get everyone out of the buildings, out of the streets, away from any structure that could be hiding another charge. Consolidate on open ground. Let the combat-capable Familias establish a perimeter whilst the wounded and civilians gathered in the centre.

Shirou moved from building to building, checking structures, pulling survivors free, marking buildings that still had intact charges with quick scratches on their doorframes. His structural analysis—the same instinct that let him read a weapon's history through touch—extended naturally to architecture. He could

feel the bones of each building through his circuits, sense where the support beams held and where they'd been compromised. And where something that didn't belong had been wedged into the foundations.

Two more buildings had charges. He scratched warnings into their frames and moved on.

He also needed to collect the blade-arrows. Each one was a traced weapon that couldn't be dismissed without dissolving into motes of light—and that particular sight would raise exactly the kind of questions he wanted to avoid. Physical retrieval was the only option. Tedious, but necessary.

He collected seven blade-arrows from walls, corpses, and rubble piles as he worked his way through the southern quarter, yanking each one free and shoving it into his belt or tucking it under his arm.

"This'll be a long night," he grumbled to himself, shifting the bundle of recovered arrows against his hip.

A pair of dark eyes met his from across the street.

The black-haired elf from Dionysus Familia stood twenty medr away, half-obscured by smoke. She'd made it back to the northern quarter as he'd directed—she must have, because Rienne's squad had clearly treated her ankle wound, fresh bandages visible beneath her torn boot. But she'd come back south. Back to the fighting. Back to the rubble and the screaming.

The red welt on her forehead was vivid. A perfect circle of irritated skin right between her eyebrows, already darkening toward a bruise that would take days to fade.

She glared at him.

Pure, distilled, unfiltered resentment. She had been shot in the head with a sandbag by a noodle merchant, and she was not prepared to forgive the indignity any time in the foreseeable future.

Shirou gave her a small, crooked smile.

Her glare intensified.

He turned away, still smiling despite himself, and jogged toward the next collapsed structure where a voice was calling for help from beneath the debris.

It was going to be a very long night indeed.

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End

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