

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

Story Starts

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Chapter 5.2

The Days Between

The forest canopy of the eighteenth floor stretched above them in a lattice of luminous blue and pale green, the crystal formations embedded in the ceiling casting a false daylight that filtered through leaves never touched by true sun. Alise kept her sword loose in its scabbard as she walked, eyes scanning the treeline out of habit more than genuine expectation. The monsters down here were sparse and generally docile—crystal butterflies, the odd blue crab scuttling between roots—but after the previous night, nobody was taking chances.

Behind her, the argument continued.

"If you'd committed to the thrust instead of pivoting, we'd have pinned him before he reached the intersection," Kaguya said, her voice carrying that particular clipped precision that meant she was three sentences away from drawing steel.

"And if you'd maintained your position on the left flank instead of breaking formation to chase glory, I wouldn't have needed to pivot at all." Ryuu's tone could have frosted glass. "The opening existed because you abandoned it."

"I didn't abandon anything. I created pressure—"

"You created a gap."

Alise let them go at it. For now. The argument had been simmering since they'd left Rivira, and she'd learnt years ago that Kaguya and Ryuu needed to burn through the worst of it before any intervention stuck. Like letting a pot boil before you lowered the flame.

The rest of the group had arranged themselves in the usual formation that wasn't really a formation—Lyra drifting along the left flank with her hands in her pockets, Neze and Iska walking shoulder to shoulder in quiet conversation, Noin humming something tuneless, and Lyana bringing up the rear with her staff tapping against exposed roots. They'd all heard this argument before. Different battle, same fundamental disagreement: Kaguya's aggressive instincts against Ryuu's tactical discipline.

'They're not wrong, either of them.' The man in black—Vito, he'd called himself—had been Level 4. Against four of them. The fact that they'd drawn blood at all was remarkable. The fact that he'd nearly killed Ryuu was the part that gnawed at Alise's stomach like acid.

She pushed the thought aside. They were here for a reason. The Loki and Dionysus Familias had departed for the surface that morning, their obligations met. Astraea Familia had stayed. Rivira still needed hands, and Lady Astraea hadn't raised them to leave a job half-finished. But rebuilding could wait an hour. Her people needed this.

The trees thinned ahead, and the sound reached her first—water moving over stone, clear and bright. The brook wound through the eastern forest like a silver thread, shallow enough to wade but wide enough that you had to pick your crossing carefully. Alise stepped over the bank and onto the flat stones that broke the surface, her boots finding purchase on the smooth crystal formations.

Their reflections stared up from below. The water here ran over deposits of blue and white crystal that jutted from the streambed at odd angles, some taller than Alise herself, catching and refracting the false light in ways that made the whole brook shimmer. The larger formations—twice her height, three times—stood like enormous blades driven point-first into the earth by some titan's careless hand.

'Swords discarded by giants.' That was what she'd thought the first time they'd found this place. Exploring the eighteenth floor on a rest day, Kaguya complaining about the humidity, Ryuu cataloguing every species of moss, Lyra

already eyeing a tree branch for a nap. They'd stumbled through a gap in the treeline and found this.

It hadn't changed. Not a crystal out of place, not a branch grown or fallen. The forest of light stood exactly as it had then—shimmering spires rising from the brook and the banks, the canopy overhead thinning to let the ceiling crystals pour their blue-white glow directly down. The air tasted clean. Sweet, almost. Like something living and good.

Neze drew a sharp breath beside her. The chienthrope's ears perked forward, and her tail—normally held in careful composure—gave a single involuntary wag. Iska grabbed her arm, and the two of them stared at the crystal grove with wide-eyed delight.

"Oh, I'd forgotten how beautiful it was," Noin whispered.

"You'd forget your own name if Lyana didn't remind you," Lyana said, but she was smiling too, her staff forgotten at her side.

Alise watched them. Watched the tension drain from their shoulders, the way their postures loosened and their eyes softened. They'd been fighting—all of them, constantly—for so long that she sometimes forgot what they looked like without the weight of it pressing down.

The Evilus had stolen so much from Orario. But they hadn't stolen this.

Behind her, the argument was still going.

"—and furthermore, your insistence on maintaining rigid spacing ignores the fundamental reality that combat is fluid—"

"Fluid does not mean chaotic, Kaguya."

"Now," Alise said, turning to face them. She planted her feet, set her fists on her hips, and drew herself up to her full—admittedly modest—height. "Lion. Kaguya. Take a deep breath. That'll calm the two of you down."

She stretched her arms wide, threw back her head, and breathed in with exaggerated depth. Once. Twice. Three times. The crystal-sweet air filled her lungs, and the knot between her shoulder blades softened, and the tightness in her jaw released, and when she exhaled the third time her face had shed its captain's mask entirely.

"There's nothing wrong with pragmatism," she said, looking at Kaguya. Then she turned to Ryuu. "And there's nothing wrong with being ambitious, either. Now that we've settled that, do you think the two of you can relax a little?"

Ryuu and Kaguya glanced at each other. The rigid set of Ryuu's shoulders eased by a fraction. Kaguya's hand drifted away from her katana's hilt. Whatever fire had driven them guttered and dimmed, and they regarded each other not with disdain but with something closer to acceptance.

"...I suppose, for the sake of our captain and this beautiful place, I can forgive you," Kaguya said.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Ryuu's lower lip pushed forward—a pout she would deny to her dying breath.

But the quarrel was already behind them. Neze and Iska exchanged a grin. Noin clapped her hands together once. Lyana let out a breath she'd been holding. Lyra gave a tired shrug and started climbing the nearest tree.

All was well. It was easy to forget, surrounded by lush forest and shimmering crystal, that they were in the Dungeon. The glittering formations and the not-quite-sunlight streaming through branches combined into something calm and healing. Even the distant cries of monsters in place of birdsong sounded peaceful, muffled by distance and foliage into a backdrop no more threatening than wind.

"Nicest place in the whole damn Dungeon by far," Lyra said from her perch, hands clasped behind her head, one leg dangling. "If only the monsters didn't come here, I'd build a house."

"Oh, that's a good idea!" Noin chimed in, her sunny smile widening. "We could set up a proper camp—cooking fires, hammocks—"

"That would be nice. This place is paradise..." Lyana leaned against her staff, braids swinging as she tilted her head to catch the light. "If I die, I want to be burrie—"

"Hey, isn't that Shirou?"

Kaguya's voice cut clean through Lyana's words. Alise turned, following the line of Kaguya's gaze through the crystal formations toward the far side of the brook.

A figure stood in the water perhaps forty medr downstream, where the brook widened into a shallow pool bordered by the largest crystal spires. The false sunlight caught red hair—unmistakable, that particular shade of copper-red—and broad shoulders, and—

Alise's brain processed the image in stages.

Stage one: that was indeed Shirou Emiya.

Stage two: he was standing in the pool.

Stage three: the water reached his waist.

Stage four: everything above the waterline was bare.

He had his back to them, half-turned, scooping water over his arms and shoulders. Muscle shifted under skin as he moved—not the ostentatious bulk of a heavy-weapon fighter, but lean and dense. A body trained as a tool rather than a trophy. Water ran in rivulets down his back, catching light.

Alise opened her mouth.

Two hands clamped over it simultaneously. Kaguya from the left, Lyra from the right. Lyra, who had been horizontal on a tree branch three medr off the ground not two seconds ago. Alise hadn't seen her move. Hadn't heard her land. The prum had simply materialised beside her at a speed that Alise had

never once witnessed during actual combat drills—a fact she intended to raise at the next training review, assuming any of them survived the next thirty seconds with their dignity intact.

They pressed Alise's jaw shut with coordinated precision and made identical hushing sounds, fingers raised to their lips.

"Shh."

A muffled protest died against their palms.

At the same moment, Kaguya's other hand shot out and caught Ryuu mid-step. The elf had gone rigid, her mouth already forming what was doubtless going to be a very loud, very indignant announcement of their presence. Lyra reached past Alise and pressed her free hand over Ryuu's mouth too.

"Not. A. Word," Kaguya breathed, her dark eyes gleaming.

Ryuu's glare could have stripped paint from stone. She made a sound against Lyra's palm that was probably a sentence about propriety and almost certainly contained the word "unacceptable."

"Quiet," Lyra whispered back, entirely unrepentant.

Behind them, Neze and Iska had both clapped their own hands over their eyes. Alise catalogued the scene—captain's habit, even now—and noted that both had left very visible gaps between their fingers. Noin had gone scarlet from collar to hairline and ducked behind a crystal formation, though she was leaning sideways to peek around its edge. Lyana had pressed her back against a tree, staff clutched to her chest, cheeks burning. Her lips were moving in what might have been a prayer.

Kaguya released Alise's mouth and crouched behind a low crystal outcropping, pulling Alise down with her. Lyra dragged Ryuu into the shadow of a larger formation. The rest of the group found cover in seconds—years of combat drills made instinct of it.

They had never executed a flanking manoeuvre this smoothly.

'We are Astraea Familia,' Alise thought, her face blazing. *'We are sworn to justice. We are Orario's moral compass. Lady Astraea's chosen. Keepers of the peace. And we are hiding behind rocks spying on a man whilst he bathes.'*

She should stand up. She should announce their presence. She was the captain. This was a clear violation of—of something. Several things. She was fairly certain there were Guild regulations. She should—

She should absolutely stand up right now.

Any moment now.

Standing up.

Kaguya's hand settled on her shoulder and pressed her back down. "Stay," she whispered, as if Alise were a dog.

"This is wrong," Alise hissed.

"Then leave."

Alise didn't leave.

'Lady Astraea, if you're watching from the surface, I want you to know that I tried. I want that on the record.'

"We should announce ourselves," Ryuu whispered from behind her crystal. The elf had managed to free her mouth from Lyra's palm, though Lyra remained within arm's reach, ready to silence her again. Ryuu's ears had gone pink at the tips. "This is a gross violation of privacy and entirely beneath—"

"Ryuu." Kaguya didn't look at her. "Your eyes are open."

The pink deepened to crimson. "I'm monitoring the situation."

"Monitoring."

"For threats."

"In the bathing pool."

"He's an unknown combatant with unverified capabilities. Observation is—"

"Ryuu, you're blushing so hard your ears are glowing."

Ryuu's jaw clamped shut. She folded her arms, set her back against the crystal, and stared fixedly at the canopy overhead. Her ears continued to glow. Beside her, Lyra had settled into a comfortable crouch, chin resting on her hands, watching the pool. Placid. Unhurried. As if she were watching clouds.

Neze, still peering through her fingers, leaned toward Iska. "Is it just me," she whispered, "or is he really—"

"Focus," Iska whispered back, though her own fingers had spread a fraction wider.

Noin, from behind her crystal, made a small sound. It might have been a sigh. It might have been her soul leaving her body.

Shirou turned slightly, reaching for something on the bank, and the light caught the front of his torso.

The scar was enormous.

It dominated his chest—a raised, twisted mass of tissue that stretched from just below his left collarbone across to the centre, hovering directly over his heart. The skin had healed thick and uneven, the kind of scarring left by a wound that should have been fatal. Not a slash. Not a burn. Something had punched through him there, or very nearly, and the flesh had knitted itself back together with the ugly determination of a body refusing to die.

His back was no better. As he turned further, Alise caught the corresponding wound—spreading between his shoulder blades in a starburst of pale tissue. Whatever had struck him had gone clean through.

'Over the heart.'

The comedy drained from the scene like water through cracked stone.

Alise's breath caught. Beside her, Kaguya had gone still. The playfulness vanished from her expression, replaced by something quiet and hard. Even Lyra's studied indifference had cracked—the prum's eyes had narrowed, her head tilted at the angle she used when assessing a battlefield.

Ryuu stared. The elf's sky-blue eyes were fixed on the scar, and for once—for the first time Alise could remember—her expression held no suspicion. Just shock. And something that might have been recognition, the way one warrior acknowledges what a wound like that costs.

There were other scars. Alise could see them now—thinner lines along his forearms, a faded mark across his ribs, the remnants of injuries accumulated over years—but they were footnotes. The chest wound was the text.

"That looks like a thrust," Kaguya whispered. "Through and through."

"It can't be," Alise said immediately. "That's right over the heart. Nobody survives that."

She'd seen enough death in the Dungeon to know. Chest wounds killed. They killed fast, they killed ugly, and the closer they were to the heart the less anything could be done about it. She'd watched adventurers die from glancing strikes to the ribs while their supporters scrambled for potions. A clean thrust through the centre of the chest—through and out the back—wasn't a wound. It was a death sentence. No potion worked that fast. No healer's magic could outpace that kind of damage.

"Not a thrust, then," Kaguya said softly. Her eyes hadn't left the scar.

"Something else. But what leaves a mark like that on both sides?"

Silence.

"Torture?" Neze offered, her voice barely audible. "If someone held something against his chest—a brand, a heated rod—"

"Burns scar differently," Kaguya said. "Flatter. Wider. That tissue is raised and puckered. It healed from the inside out. And it wouldn't explain the matching wound on his back."

"A curse, maybe," Iska whispered.

"No curse leaves a scar shaped like that." Kaguya shook her head slowly. "I've seen thrust wounds. I've seen what a spear does to a body. That scar looks like one. Entry and exit, front and back. But it's right over the heart. So either the wound somehow missed every part of him that mattered—"

"At that position?" Alise said. There was nothing to miss. They all knew it.

The sentence hung unfinished. Because the other option—that the wound had struck true and Shirou Emiya had survived it anyway—wasn't something any of them had a framework for.

Shirou scooped water over the scar without hesitation, without flinching, without any acknowledgement of the mark at all. He washed himself with the same efficient, mechanical movements he used for everything—practical, economical, focused on the task. As though the evidence of his impossible survival was no more remarkable than the callouses on his hands.

'What are you?'

The question was different from *'Who are you?'* Not identity but category. Not name but nature. Because the scar said one thing and the living man beneath it said another, and those two facts could not exist together.

Alise looked at Kaguya. Kaguya met her eyes and gave a single, fractional shake of her head. *Not here. Not now.*

Shirou reached the bank and picked up a cloth, scrubbing his arms with efficient movements. His face was angled away from them, expression invisible.

Kaguya leaned close to Alise's ear. "That scar is old," she whispered. "Years. Whatever did that, it wasn't recent. And it wasn't the Dungeon."

"We shouldn't be watching," Ryu hissed from behind her crystal. The elf had regained her composure—or constructed a reasonable facsimile. Her ears were still crimson.

"And yet," Kaguya murmured, "here we all are."

"This was your idea—"

"I merely pointed out his presence. You're the one who hasn't looked away."

Ryu's jaw clenched. "I was examining the scar. It's tactically relevant. If he has a vulnerability—"

"Oh, *tactically relevant*. Of course."

"Be quiet, both of you," Lyra said, but her eyes hadn't left the brook either.

Shirou stepped out of the pool.

Several things happened at once. Noin squeaked. Lyana's staff clattered against the tree. Neze's tail went rigid. Iska's hands finally dropped from her face entirely—she'd apparently given up the pretence. And Alise—veteran of a hundred Dungeon battles, captain of Astraea Familia, champion of justice and the sworn right hand of a goddess of righteousness—tried to move backwards and stepped on a loose crystal shard.

It cracked under her boot with a sound like a branch snapping.

'Oh no.'

Shirou's head turned.

Golden eyes swept the treeline—flat and immediate. Threat assessment, not curiosity. His gaze locked onto the cluster of crystal formations where nine women were doing an exceptionally poor job of hiding.

Silence.

Absolute, catastrophic silence.

Then Shirou sighed. The sound carried across the water—weary, unsurprised, and deeply resigned.

"Scatter!" Kaguya barked.

The formation broke. Kaguya vaulted a crystal spire and vanished into the trees with a speed that belied her usual poise. Lyra dropped from her crouch and bolted west, low and fast. Noin, Lyana, Neze, and Iska fled in four different directions, crashing through undergrowth with all the subtlety of stampeding war shadows. Alise scrambled backwards, caught her heel on a root, and pitched sideways—but caught herself on a crystal formation and sprinted after Kaguya.

Ryuu turned to run.

Her foot hit a wet stone at the brook's edge.

The stone, slick with moss, offered no purchase whatsoever. Ryuu's leg went out from under her. Her arms windmilled. Her expression—for one glorious, terrible instant—was one of pure, unfiltered horror.

She hit the brook with a splash that sent water cascading over the crystal formations in a glittering arc.

Alise skidded to a halt behind a tree. She turned back. Ryuu sat in the middle of the shallow brook, water up to her chest, hair plastered to her face, cloak billowing around her like a sodden flag. Crystal light played across the surface of the disturbed water. It was, objectively, a very pretty picture. Ryuu's expression suggested she would rather fight ten Goliaths than exist in this moment.

Shirou stood on the bank. He'd pulled on trousers—Alise caught the motion in her peripheral vision and felt a confusing mixture of relief and something else entirely—and was looking down at the drenched elf with an expression she'd seen him wear before. At the yatai, when Alise had dropped noodles in her lap. At the orphanage, when one of the children had hidden a frog in Maria's laundry basket.

Resignation. Faint, grudging amusement.

He shook his head.

Ryuu sat in the brook. Water dripped from her ears.

Neither of them spoke. The moment stretched. Somewhere in the trees, Alise heard Kaguya's barely suppressed snort. Neze's tail was visible behind an inadequate shrub.

Then Shirou extended his hand.

Ryuu stared at it. Her jaw worked. Something flickered behind her eyes—pride warring with practicality, dignity wrestling with the undeniable reality that she was sitting waist-deep in a brook.

She took his hand.

He pulled her up with a single smooth motion, steadying her as she found her footing on the slippery stones. Water streamed from her cloak and boots. She released his hand the instant she was stable and took a deliberate step back, chin raised, composure reassembled through sheer force of will.

"Thank you," she said. Each syllable was clipped enough to cut.

Shirou gave a half-nod. He looked past Ryuu into the trees where the rest of Astraea Familia was doing an abysmal job of pretending they weren't there.

"You're still here for the rebuilding?"

His voice carried through the grove—level, unhurried. Not a question that demanded an answer so much as one confirming what he already knew.

Alise stepped out from behind her tree. There was no point hiding. She brushed bark from her sleeve and squared her shoulders and walked back toward the brook, ignoring the heat in her cheeks through pure stubbornness.

"That's the plan," she said. "Loki Familia headed up this morning. Dionysus too. We stayed on to help with what's left."

Kaguya materialised from the treeline. Lyra ambled back from the west, hands in her pockets, face arranged in studied indifference. One by one, the others drifted out of hiding—Neze and Iska side by side, Noin still pink, Lyana clutching her staff like a lifeline.

Nine women arranged in a loose semicircle on one side of the brook. One man standing on the other, shirtless, water still beading on his shoulders.

Shirou looked at them for a long moment. His expression was unreadable. Then something shifted—not a smile, not quite, but a softening around the eyes. The closest thing to warmth she'd seen from him.

"Where are you sleeping?"

"We were going to find space in one of the standing buildings," Alise said.

"The ones that aren't being used for the wounded."

"Don't." Shirou bent to retrieve his shirt from the bank. He pulled it on over his head in one motion, and the scar vanished beneath dark fabric. "My place survived the attack. Ground floor's got tables and a counter, but there's enough open space for bedrolls once you move the stools aside. Kitchen's functional. Better than a burnt-out shell."

Alise blinked. Emiya-ya. He was offering them his restaurant.

"We've slept in worse," Kaguya said.

"I know. Doesn't mean you have to."

He said it simply. No weight behind it, no ulterior angle. The same way he set down bowls of udon at his yatai—here, take this, it's ready. The offer sat in the air between them, unpressured.

Alise looked at her Familia. Kaguya's eyebrow was raised, but her posture was relaxed—curious rather than guarded. Lyra had already developed the distant expression that meant she was calculating sleep quality versus tactical positioning. Neze's tail was wagging again. Noin looked like someone had offered her a birthday present.

Ryuu stood in a growing puddle, arms crossed, jaw set.

"That's kind of you, Shirou," Alise said. "We'd be happy to take you up on it."

Ryuu's head snapped toward her. "Captain—"

"Lion." Alise held up a hand. "The man's offering us a roof and a kitchen. Not a blood oath."

Ryuu's mouth opened. Closed. Opened again.

"...Fine."

Kaguya's lips twitched. She hid it well.

Shirou gathered his things from the bank—a cloth, a bar of soap, a knife he tucked into his belt—and started back toward Rivira. "It's not far. Ten minutes through the forest."

They followed. Alise fell into step beside him, matching his steady pace. Behind them, her Familia arranged themselves in a loose column that was—she noticed—considerably more relaxed than it had been an hour ago. The argument between Kaguya and Ryuu had been thoroughly derailed. Whether that was worth the cost of their collective dignity remained debatable.

"Shirou," Alise said quietly, pitching her voice below the chatter behind them.

"Hm."

"That scar on your chest."

His stride didn't break. His expression didn't shift. But something tightened in his shoulders—small, brief, controlled.

"Old," he said.

"I can see that." She paused. "Kaguya says a wound like that—over the heart, through and through—should have killed you. She's not usually wrong about these things."

The silence that followed was different from his usual deflections. Those were practised, smooth, doors closed with routine ease. This one had texture. Weight.

Shirou just shrugged.

She let it go.

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End

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