

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

Story Starts

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Chapter 4.5

Descent, and Escalation

Alicia moved through the wreckage at a brisk pace, Rakta and Line half a step behind. The northern quarter of Rivira still held its shape—buildings standing, barricades intact, the telltale signs of an organised defence rather than the desperate scrambling she'd seen elsewhere. The Dionysus Familia had done solid work.

Smoke rolled low across the ground, acrid and thick from the burning structures further south. Alicia kept her breathing shallow. The sounds of fighting had thinned here—scattered clashes rather than the sustained roar of pitched battle—which confirmed what Riveria had assessed from a distance. The northern approach was stabilising. The monsters that had pushed through the initial perimeter lay in heaps, their magic stones already harvested by the Dionysus members who'd held the line.

Another blade-arrow shrieked overhead. Alicia tracked it instinctively—a dark line cutting through the false sky's amber glow—before it punched into something beyond the eastern ruins. A distant, wet crunch. Then silence from that direction.

The Dionysus Familia's camp came into view. They'd established it beside a two-storey building near the northern passage entrance, one of Rivira's sturdier permanent structures. The ground floor had been converted into some manner of eatery—she could see a counter, stools, the remnants of a kitchen setup visible through an open doorway. Their defensive barrier extended outward from this anchor point, elven mages maintaining a shimmering wall of woven wind magic that deflected stray projectiles and discouraged the smaller monsters from pressing the perimeter.

And there, on the roof of the two-storey building, stood the source of those blade-arrows.

Alicia slowed.

He was tall for a human, with a lean frame that carried no wasted weight. Red hair, dark enough to border on copper in the firelight, though the false sky's illumination caught brighter strands. He stood at the roof's edge with his feet planted wide, his posture anchored and still between shots. No wasted movement. No unnecessary adjustments. He'd found his position and committed to it absolutely.

The bow drew her eye next, and held it.

It was enormous. Nearly the same height as the archer himself, crafted from black metal with sweeping curved limbs that looked less like a weapon and more like something pulled from a siege emplacement. A bow that size, in that material, should have required mechanical assistance to draw—a winch or a lever system. The red-haired archer pulled the string back with his bare hands.

She watched him nock one of those blade-arrows. His fingers settled against the string. His shoulders shifted, drawing back, and the bow's limbs bent inward against the force. Even from ground level, Alicia heard it—a deep, resonant groan, as if the weapon itself protested the strain being forced through its frame.

He held the draw for perhaps two heartbeats. His head tilted fractionally—reading something in the distance that Alicia couldn't perceive from her angle.

He released.

The air snapped. Not cracked—*snapped*, a sharp percussive break that Alicia felt in her teeth. The blade-arrow vanished from the string so fast her elven eyes barely tracked the initial launch. She followed its trajectory by instinct and training, catching the dark streak as it arced over the eastern ruins and

descended toward a target she couldn't see. Another distant impact. Another kill.

He was already reaching for the next projectile before the first one landed.

"How many arrows does this guy have?"

The question came from a Dionysus Familia member near the barricade—one of the few males in the predominantly female group, a half-elf with a short spear and a bewildered expression. He'd directed the question at no one in particular, his eyes fixed on the rooftop.

"Didn't you see the basket of swords he threw up there?" One of the female elves answered without looking away from her sector. Her tone was flat—she'd already processed the absurdity and filed it under things to deal with later.

Alicia turned her gaze to the rooftop. There it was—set behind the archer, a large woven basket that came up past his waist. Its mouth was wide and open, and she could see the hilts and blades of dozens of those repurposed sword-arrows packed tight inside. The container looked heavy enough to require two strong adventurers to lift, never mind hauling it down seventeen floors of the Dungeon and through the passage to the eighteenth. Even accounting for an adventurer's enhanced strength, the logistics were baffling.

And the basket still looked full. Despite the continuous barrage she'd witnessed over the past—how long had it been? Twenty minutes? Thirty?—the container's contents showed no sign of meaningful depletion. There were enough blade-arrows packed in there to arm every able-bodied adventurer in Rivira, and the archer was spending them like copper coins at a festival.

She filed those questions away. There would be time later.

Alicia turned from the rooftop and scanned the Dionysus Familia's formation until she found what she was looking for. Rienne Arvel stood near the centre of the camp, issuing quiet orders to a pair of elven mages reinforcing the

barrier. The captain's pale hair caught the firelight as she turned at Alicia's approach, her expression shifting from focused command to measured assessment.

"You're from Loki Familia?"

Alicia pressed her fist to her chest in acknowledgement. "Alicia Forestlight, second-tier combat squad. Riveria Ljos Alf sent us to coordinate the northern and eastern perimeters."

Rienne's posture eased slightly. Riveria's name carried weight—particularly amongst elves, and more particularly still in a situation where the chain of command between Familias needed to crystallise fast. Rienne gave a short nod and gestured for Alicia to continue.

"The monster pressure on this side has thinned compared to the south and west," Alicia said. She kept her voice level, projecting calm authority whilst her peripheral vision tracked another blade-arrow launch from the rooftop. *Snap*. The sound was becoming rhythmic. Almost metronome-steady. "Astraea Familia is pushing through the centre to clear Evilus operatives and protect civilians. Riveria is expanding the secure zone around the settlement's outer perimeter with her remaining squad. That leaves us here."

Rienne glanced toward the southern horizon, where the glow of burning buildings painted the smoke orange. "What do you need from us?"

"Coordination. Your barrier mages are holding the north and east effectively, but we should redistribute forces to cover the gaps. If we pull some of your melee fighters from the northern barricade—where the pressure is lowest—and redirect them to reinforce the centre and the southern approaches, we can establish overlapping zones of control. Rivira's permanent residents have barricaded themselves in the stone structures near the middle. They'll need organised defence, not just individual holdouts."

"Agreed." Rienne's response came without hesitation. No ego, no territorial posturing—just a captain reading the tactical picture and reaching the same conclusion. She turned to her vice-captain, who'd been listening from three

paces away. "Maren. Take Celphia's squad and Auren's group. Push toward the centre—link up with whoever Astraea Familia has positioned there. Veln, take your mages to the southern approach. Shore up whatever defence you find and extend our barrier network."

The named members moved immediately. Rienne continued issuing directives—two scouts sent east to assess the damage from the initial stampede, a runner dispatched to locate any Rivira militia who'd organised independently. Each order was precise and unhurried. Alicia recognised the efficiency—drilled contingency responses worn into reflex.

"Rakta, go with Maren's group. Line, take the eastern approach with their scouts and report back on the structural integrity of the remaining buildings. If any are compromised, mark them for avoidance."

Her two companions acknowledged and departed. The camp thinned as fighters peeled away toward their assigned sectors, leaving the barrier mages, a handful of guards, and the relentless archer on the roof.

Another groan from the bow. Another snap. Another blade-arrow carving its path through the false sky.

Alicia turned to watch the red-haired archer again. She couldn't help it. His rhythm hadn't faltered—draw, hold, release, reach for the next projectile, repeat. His movements were mechanical in their consistency but not in their quality. Each draw carried the same controlled intensity, each hold the same brief stillness of absolute certainty, each release the same devastating transfer of force. He wasn't tiring. Or if he was, his body hadn't yet been informed.

'Two to four hundred medr.' That was the range she had estimated. From this closer vantage, Alicia could see why. The archer wasn't simply loosing projectiles into clusters and hoping for the best. His head turned between shots, scanning sectors with an unhurried sweep that belied the speed of his firing cycle. He was picking targets. Individual targets, at distances where most archers would struggle to distinguish friend from foe, and he was hitting magic stones directly.

She'd seen excellent archers before. Loki Familia had several in its ranks. But excellent archers operated at ranges measured in the tens of medr, supplementing front-line fighters with precision support. What this man was doing occupied a different category entirely. This was artillery with the accuracy of a scalpel.

"He's quite amazing, isn't he?"

Alicia turned. Rienne had come to stand beside her, eyes also fixed on the rooftop. Her expression was warm—not awestruck, but appreciative. One professional watching another at the top of their craft.

"Who is he?" Alicia asked.

Rienne looked toward the red-haired archer. He'd paused—the first pause Alicia had seen—his bow lowered slightly as he scanned the eastern approach. Whatever he'd been tracking had either been eliminated or moved beyond his line of sight. After a moment he reached into the basket, drew another blade-arrow, and resumed his position. The bow groaned. The air snapped.

Rienne smiled.

"He's a travelling noodle and potion merchant."

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The eighteenth floor's false sky had darkened to its nocturnal cycle, and the stars were drowning in smoke.

"Waaaagh?!"

An adventurer scrambled from behind an overturned market stall, his legs tangling beneath him as he clawed at the dirt. Blood pooled across the flagstones—some from monsters, some not. The air tasted of iron and burning timber, and somewhere in the false twilight above, the crystal formations that mimicked stars had taken on the sickly orange cast of Rivira's fires.

Another of those sharp cracking sounds split the air. Steady. Relentless. Another blade-arrow from the rooftop where their neighbour had planted himself like a fixture.

Ryuu drove her wooden sword through a hellhound's jaw and wrenched it free as the creature dissolved into ash. The magic stone clattered to the ground. She didn't stop to collect it. Three more hellhounds circled to her left, hackles raised, flames licking between their teeth. She shifted her weight to her forward foot, mind already calculating angles of approach, when the thought intruded again.

He was here. Of course he was here. A noodle merchant who somehow always arrived before the trouble did. Who happened to be on the eighteenth floor when Evilus launched a coordinated assault on Rivira from four directions. Who carried a basket of swords repurposed as arrows and an enormous black bow that no travelling merchant had any business owning.

"You're doing it again."

Kaguya materialised at her flank, katana already mid-stroke. The blade carved through two hellhounds in a single lateral sweep, bisecting them at the midsection. Ash burst outward. Kaguya didn't break stride.

"Doing what?"

"You're obsessing over our neighbour again." Kaguya flicked ash from her blade. "Our goddess doesn't even see him as someone untrustworthy. Are you sure you don't have a crush on the man?"

Heat flooded Ryuu's cheeks. She sputtered—actually sputtered, her mouth opening and closing without producing anything resembling a coherent denial. The remaining hellhound lunged. Ryuu killed it on reflex, her sword punching through its skull before she'd fully registered the movement.

"That is—I am not—Kaguya, that is an absurd and baseless—"

"The hooded figures are coming in!"

Lyra's voice cut through the chaos from thirty meters to the east. Clear, flat, stripped of everything except tactical urgency. Ryuu's embarrassment evaporated. She turned toward the southern approach where dark shapes were emerging from between the burning buildings, moving in loose formation. Not monsters. People. Robed figures with weapons drawn, advancing through the smoke.

Alise's voice rang out across the clearing.

"To the centre! Now!"

The Astraea Familia abandoned their scattered positions and converged. Ryuu fell in beside Kaguya, their footsteps synchronising without conscious thought. Iska and Maryu flanked wide to establish a crossfire angle. Lyra dropped back to her preferred distance—close enough to support, far enough to throw. Alise led from the front, her blade already wreathed in the faint luminescence of her magic.

They crashed into the Evilus line like a wedge driven into timber.

The first three robed figures fell before they could raise their weapons. Ryuu took the leftmost—her wooden sword cracking across his temple with force enough to shatter bone. Kaguya split the centre man from collarbone to hip. Alise simply ran through the third, her burning sword cauterising the wound before the body hit the ground.

The formation behind the fallen three broke apart. Some scattered into the smoke. Others charged.

Ryuu moved through them. Her sword was not metal—an intentional choice, one that Kaguya had questioned more than once. But this was elven wood, something that could rival any steel forged by any smith.

She struck a robed woman's wrist, snapping it. Reversed the blade into the woman's jaw. Pivoted to catch a short sword on the flat of her weapon and redirected the wielder into his companion. Both stumbled. She hit the first in the throat and the second across the knee. A third came from her right—she

felt the displacement of air before she saw the movement—and her elbow drove backward into the attacker's nose. Cartilage crunched. She followed with a backhand strike to the temple that dropped him.

But the Evilus operatives were a screen. Expendable bodies thrown forward to occupy their attention whilst something else moved deeper in Rivira's burning streets. Ryuu could feel it—that wrongness in the tactical picture, the gap between what she was fighting and what she should have been fighting.

Then they heard the screaming.

Not the panicked cries of fleeing adventurers. This was theatrical—a performed despair, like death scenes staged for an audience of one.

The Astraea Familia broke through the last of the Evilus screen and emerged into a wide intersection where four of Rivira's main thoroughfares converged. What they found there made Ryuu's stomach clench.

Bodies. Adventurers—not Evilus, not monsters. Adventurers who'd been caught in the open when the stampede hit and hadn't made it to shelter. Some were dead. Others were dying. And standing amongst them, moving between the fallen with a dancer's lightness, was a figure in black robes.

He was killing the wounded.

Not quickly. Not efficiently. He moved from body to body, pausing over each one, his head tilted as though appreciating a painting in a gallery. His dagger—a short, crimson blade—rose and fell with deliberate care. When the victim beneath him stopped moving, he straightened, sighed, and drifted to the next.

"Stand and fight, you cowards!" The man's voice carried across the intersection—melodious, almost pleasant, and utterly wrong. "You don't have to be heroes, but at least show you're worthy of being called adventurers!"

An adventurer near the edge of the clearing tried to crawl away. The man in black noticed. His head swivelled—sharp, birdlike.

"And if you can't do that—" He crossed the distance in two strides and planted his foot on the crawler's back. "—then at least cheer me up!" The dagger rose. "Let me see the colour of your blood!"

"W-waaaagh?!"

The figure pivoted, blade already descending toward another victim. The remaining adventurers in the intersection screamed—not battle cries, but the raw, helpless sound of people who had accepted they were going to die.

"Hands off, stupid."

A flash of steel deflected his crimson blade. Sparks scattered across the flagstones. The man in black leapt back—five meters of distance opening in an instant—and Kaguya stepped into the space he'd vacated, her katana held steady at centre guard, the deflection still ringing through the steel.

Lyra dropped into the clearing from the opposite side, her hands already holding throwing knives between each finger. She positioned herself wide, cutting off his eastern retreat.

"Good thing intelligence was right this time and Finn managed to predict Evilus's movements," Lyra said, her tone conversational despite the corpses at her feet. "What's going on in that head of his? Makes me think about marrying the hero of our people for real."

"It's not going to happen!" Kaguya's composure cracked—not from the killer standing before them, but from Lyra's nonsense. "Finn's a respectable prum; he won't go for a sleazy, cunning little brat like you! Also, shut up when we're fighting!"

The vitriol was startling even by Kaguya's standards. But her eyes never left their opponent.

Alise was the last to arrive, dropping from a rooftop to land in the intersection's western entrance. She took in the scene—the bodies, the blood, the man in

black—and her expression hardened into something that made her look nothing like the cheerful girl who couldn't use chopsticks.

"Leave this to us," she said, pointing westward. "You and your friends, get out of here!"

"Th-thank you!"

The surviving adventurers fled. Their footsteps faded into the smoke.

The man in black watched them go. Then he turned his attention to the four women who'd replaced them. His narrow fox-eyes swept across each one—unhurried, appraising, lingering just long enough to dismiss before moving to the next.

"Who are you?" he mused, almost to himself.

Alise didn't let the opportunity pass.

"We're champions of justice!" She drove her sword point-first into the flagstones and stood behind it, chin raised. "No evil goes unpunished under our watch!"

"Justice...?" The word seemed to confuse him. Then recognition settled across his features. "Ah. You must be Astraea Familia." He managed to fit an impressive amount of scorn into his gentle voice. "I see, I see. What a foolish, simplistic, and pretentious group."

"Better a pretentious fool than a miserable worm." Kaguya's retort came fast and hard enough to draw blood on its own. "These foolish boots shall be the last thing you see."

"Hah!" His laughter was genuine. Delighted, even. "What a savage thing for a champion of justice to say! You girls are far less boring than I was led to believe." He performed an elaborate bow. "But where are my manners? My name is Vito."

Ryuu studied him. She'd arrived at the intersection's eastern entrance, taking a position that completed the box formation around him. From here she could see every detail.

There was little to work with. His eyes were narrow, foxlike, betraying nothing. His lips were fixed in a smile that had no warmth in it. The dagger in his hand was his only visible weapon, and his black clothes looked more like a priest's vestments than combat gear. He could have been a clergyman on his way to evening prayers.

Except for the blood. The blood was everywhere—on his hands, his sleeves, the hem of his robe. Soaking into the fabric. Dripping from the dagger's edge.

'A priest who offers salvation at the end of a knife.'

"...Why are you hunting adventurers?" Alise asked. Her gaze dropped to the corpse nearest her feet. A young man, perhaps seventeen. His eyes were still open. "Money? Magic stones?"

Vito looked genuinely puzzled. "Why?" he repeated. "I'm not sure I follow. Do you need a reason to gaze upon beauty?"

"Huh?"

Lyra raised a dubious eyebrow. Vito responded with a grand, sweeping gesture—one hand toward the crystal sky above, the other toward the bloodied ground.

"Why do you turn your head to the blue heavens above? Why do you admire the flowers at your feet? What I do is no different. Only..." His smile widened. "In this imperfect world, it is bloodshed that I wish to behold."

The intersection went quiet. Even the distant sounds of combat seemed to recede.

"...You're defective," Kaguya spat.

"Defective." Vito rolled the word around his mouth. "Ohhh, yes. I like the sound of that. Of the many monikers my acts have earned me, I think I like that one the best!"

He laughed. The sound bounced off the surrounding buildings and echoed through the smoke. Then his right eyelid lifted—barely, a fraction—and the scarlet iris beneath caught the firelight. That single exposed eye swept across them, searching, hungry, as though scanning a blank canvas for a drop of colour.

The hairs on Ryuu's arms stood upright.

"Hmm. Yeah, you need to be in a cell for the rest of your life. No doubt about it." Alise pulled her sword from the flagstones and pointed it at Vito. Her voice carried no heat, no bluster—just the flat certainty of a verdict already passed.

Vito flipped his dagger. The motion was fluid—the weapon spinning end over end and returning to his grip as though magnetised. "I'd rather not."

"Then we'll have to take you there..."

Alise, Kaguya, Lyra, and Ryuu all raised their weapons. Four points of a compass. Four angles of attack. The air between them tightened until it hummed.

"...by force!"

They hit him simultaneously.

Kaguya from the north—katana descending in a vertical slash aimed at his leading shoulder. Alise from the west—sword sweeping low to catch his legs. Lyra's knives from the south, three blades spinning through the air in a spreading fan. Ryuu from the east, her wooden sword driving toward his ribs.

Vito moved.

He shouldn't have been that fast. The dagger caught Kaguya's katana on the flat and redirected it outward—not a block, a deflection, using her own force

against her. His body twisted—a dancer's rotation, smooth and weightless—and Alise's blade passed through the space where his torso had been a heartbeat before. Lyra's knives embedded themselves in the flagstones behind him. Ryuu's strike met empty air as he pirouetted past her guard, his robe flaring like a cape.

He completed the rotation facing Ryuu. His free hand shot out—an open palm strike aimed at her sternum. She got her sword up in time, but the impact drove her backward three full steps, her boots scraping furrows in the bloodied stone. The force behind that casual strike rattled her teeth.

He was a full level above them.

The understanding settled through Ryuu's body before her mind finished processing it—in the ache of her wrists from absorbing a blow she shouldn't have felt through a guard, in the speed of his counter that had nearly landed before she'd registered the movement. The gap between Level 3 and Level 4 was like the gap between a child and a ravaging bear. The speed, the strength, the reaction time—everything multiplied. A Level 4 could, in theory, fight off a hundred Level 3s. The disparity was that stark.

But Vito wasn't fighting a hundred Level 3s. He was fighting four members of Astraea Familia who'd trained together for years and knew each other's movements as well as their own.

Alise pressed the attack. Her sword blazed—literally blazed, flames crawling along the edge as she channelled her magic. She drove Vito backward with a series of overhead strikes, each one forcing him to parry rather than dodge. The fire was the key—even a Level 4 couldn't afford to let an enchanted blade pass through his guard unchecked. He had to meet each stroke, and every parry cost him a fraction of positioning.

Kaguya flanked right. Her katana probed for openings in his guard—not committing to full strikes, not yet. Testing. Every time Vito shifted to block Alise, Kaguya was there, her blade seeking the gaps between his movements.

A thrust toward his exposed side. A lateral cut aimed at his wrist. Each one forcing him to split his attention.

Vito sidestepped Alise's overhead and snapped a kick at Kaguya's leading knee. She read it—barely—and twisted away, but the displacement of air alone told her how much force had been behind it. If it had connected, the joint would have shattered.

"Oh, you're fast," Vito murmured, his smile widening. "How delightful."

Lyra maintained her distance, feeding a constant stream of thrown weapons into the engagement. None hit. But they didn't need to. Each knife forced Vito to account for another angle, another trajectory, another fraction of attention diverted from the two swordswomen in his face. A blade skimmed past his ear. Another glanced off his shoulder—his Falna-hardened skin turned the edge, but the impact made him flinch. A third forced him to lean sideways, and Alise's burning sword carved a smoking line across the front of his robe.

Close. Not close enough.

Ryuu circled. She watched. In the first exchange, she'd learnt what her wooden sword could and couldn't do against this opponent—it could reach him, but it couldn't hurt him. Not without hitting something vital at full force, and full force against a Level 4 required an opening he wasn't giving her. So she watched.

His left foot always planted before a lateral dodge. His dagger arm dropped a fraction before a counterattack. His weight shifted to his back foot when he intended to create distance. Small tells, nearly invisible at combat speed, but Ryuu had spent years learning to read bodies the way scholars read text.

Alise drove in with a diagonal slash. Vito parried—dagger against burning blade, sparks and embers scattering—and riposted toward her throat. Kaguya's katana intercepted the riposte, steel screaming against steel. Vito disengaged with a backward leap, landed, and immediately had to twist as Lyra's knife passed through the space his neck had occupied.

Ryuu struck.

She'd been waiting for the backward leap—the moment his weight committed to the retreat, the half-second where his feet were leaving the ground and he couldn't change direction. Her wooden sword drove toward the nerve cluster beneath his left ear. A disabling blow if it landed. Non-lethal. Clean.

Vito's hand came up. He caught the tip of her sword between his thumb and forefinger—caught it, a strike delivered at full extension by a Level 3 adventurer, stopped dead by two fingers—and shoved it aside. His knee drove upward toward her midsection. Ryuu threw herself sideways, felt the wind of the strike pass her ribs, and rolled back to her feet three meters away.

Two fingers. He'd stopped her sword with two fingers.

She filed the humiliation away. Adjusted her assessment. And kept circling.

The fight settled into a brutal rhythm. Alise and Kaguya maintained constant pressure—one always engaging whilst the other recovered position, their rotation so smooth it must have looked choreographed from above. Lyra's throwing arm never rested. And Ryuu probed the edges, waiting, testing, cataloguing every tell and every response.

Vito fought with his whole body. Not just the dagger—his elbows, his knees, his feet, even his forehead when Alise pressed too close. He headbutted her guard hard enough to crack the enchantment on her blade for a full second, the flames guttering before roaring back. His footwork was fluid—each movement flowing into the next without pause or preparation, as though the entire fight were a single continuous action rather than a series of discrete exchanges.

Kaguya scored the first blood. She'd feinted high, drawing Vito's parry upward, then dropped her blade beneath his guard and opened a shallow cut across his forearm. The wound was barely a scratch—surface deep, more an insult than an injury—but the blood that welled from it was proof.

He could be cut.

Vito responded by nearly removing her head. His dagger reversed in a backhand slash that whistled past her ear as she threw herself backward, the tip of the blade shaving a strand of hair from her temple. Alise caught the follow-through on her guard and shoved him back with a two-handed push that used the flat of her burning sword as a battering surface.

Lyra's knife nicked his thigh whilst his weight was still shifting from Alise's shove. He didn't seem to notice.

They were wearing him down. Not physically—his stamina showed no signs of flagging—but tactically. Four coordinated fighters could control the geometry of a battle in ways a single combatant, however superior, could not. They kept rotating. Kept the pressure constant from shifting angles. Kept forcing him to choose which threat to address and which to accept. Every rotation cost him a sliver of positioning. Every rotation pushed him slightly further from where he wanted to be.

The cuts accumulated. A nick on his wrist from Kaguya's backswing. A scorch mark across his hip where Alise's blade had grazed. A shallow puncture in his shoulder where Lyra's thrown knife had found a gap between muscle and collarbone—not deep enough to impair, but deep enough to bleed. Vito's pristine robes darkened in patches. His smile remained, but the ease behind it was thinning.

But skill only carried you so far against raw stats.

Vito surged. No warning—no tell, no shift of weight, nothing Ryou's analysis had prepared her for. He simply exploded forward, covering the distance to Kaguya in a single stride, and his dagger came around in a hooking slash aimed at her stomach. Kaguya parried—but the force of it drove her katana wide and sent her stumbling sideways, her guard blown open. Vito followed with a spinning elbow that caught Alise across the jaw as she tried to intervene. The captain's head snapped sideways. She kept her feet—barely—but blood flew from a split lip and her next sword stroke went wide.

In the space of two seconds, he'd neutralised two of his four opponents.

Ryuu watched it happen and understood. He'd been holding back. Not in power—Level 4 was Level 4—but in aggression. He'd been content to defend, to play, to treat the engagement as entertainment. Now he was showing them what an offensive Level 4 looked like.

Lyra's next throw went for his eyes. Vito snatched the knife out of the air and hurled it back at her. She dove sideways, the blade embedding itself in the wall behind her hard enough to crack the stone.

Kaguya recovered her guard. Alise spat blood and raised her burning sword. They came at him again—because that was what you did, when the alternative was dying. You got back up and you pressed the attack and you hoped that four Level 3s who fought as one could outlast a Level 4 who fought alone.

They kept rotating. Kept the pressure constant. Kept bleeding him in increments too small to matter and too consistent to ignore.

Ryuu's foot caught on something. A crack in the flagstones, hidden beneath the layer of blood and ash. Her weight shifted wrong. Her balance broke—not catastrophically, not a fall, but a stumble. Half a second of vulnerability. Her sword dropped from guard position. Her centre of gravity tipped forward.

Half a second was an eternity to a Level 4.

Vito's head snapped toward her. Both eyes opened—the scarlet iris blazing in the firelight—and the playful cruelty in his expression sharpened into something predatory. He disengaged from Kaguya with a backhanded parry that sent her katana wide and launched himself at Ryuu, closing the distance in a single explosive stride. His dagger rose, angled for her throat.

Ryuu saw it coming. She couldn't stop it. Her body was still recovering from the stumble, muscles firing to correct her balance, and the correction wouldn't complete before his blade arrived. She could see the trajectory of the dagger,

could calculate exactly where it would enter her neck, could feel with absolute certainty that she would not be fast enough—

Crack.

Something struck Vito's forehead and snapped his head backward.

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End

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