

## **The World of Otome Game is a Second Chance for Broken Swords**

### **Story Starts**

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### **Chapter 9.4 - Of Vigils and Festivals**

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The lower academy corridors smelled of floor wax and fried dough. Nicks Fou Bartfort moved through the crowd with the practised anonymity of a young man who had spent his entire academy career being thoroughly unremarkable, which suited him fine most days.

Most days.

Today the festival had swallowed the academy whole. Streamers in house colours draped from every lintel. Students from the upper and lower classes mingled freely across the grounds, a temporary dissolution of the rigid hierarchy that governed their lives for the remaining fifty weeks of the year. Stalls lined the covered walkways—confections, trinkets, fortune-telling, a questionable puppet show about the founding of Holfort that Nicks had already walked past twice to avoid.

He paused at an intersection to let a group of second-years barrel past, arms laden with fabric bolts for some theatrical production or another, then continued towards the eastern courtyard.

Ever since classes resumed, it had been strange seeing the former Crown Prince and his circle amongst the lower classes.

They were all still sons of founding houses by blood, but the titles had been stripped, reforged, diminished. Knights and baronets now, the lot of them. Posted to the Principality border under Field Marshal Barret's command, which meant they spent most of their time shuttling between active military duty and whatever academy obligations the Crown still required of them.

They looked different. Not physically—though Julius had lost weight around the jaw, and Greg's perpetual swagger had been filed down to something closer to a measured stride. It was the way they occupied space. Before, they'd filled every room they entered. The crowd had bent around them like water around stone.

But they seemed to have a gleam about them.

Nicks didn't linger. He had places to be.

The Bartfort booth occupied a modest stretch of the western market lane, sandwiched between a honey-cake vendor from the capital and a leatherworker's display from one of the mid-tier baronies. Nicks had secured the spot through the academy's festival committee three weeks ago, filling out the forms himself because Leon had been neck-deep in border defence rotations and their father had enough on his plate with the territorial relocation. Leon's household was its own separate branch of the Bartfort name now, but the family still pulled together where it mattered.

That had been the big upheaval. After the Crown assigned Leon primary responsibility for the Rachele border—replacing the Fraser Marquessate, which had held the posting for five generations—Balcus had uprooted the entire family operation. Everything relocated, positioning the Bartfort territory roughly an hour's flight from the border itself.

The Fraser territories sat adjacent. Nicks had expected friction—a marquess displaced by a viscount's family encroaching on their flank—but the opposite had occurred. Their mother and the Fraser matriarch had, by some alchemy Nicks couldn't begin to fathom, become fast friends within a fortnight. He'd walked into the new estate's parlour last month to find the two women sharing a pot of tea and laughing about something to do with embroidery patterns and the particular uselessness of husbands during harvest season. His father had been standing in the doorway with the expression of a man who had just watched two rivers merge and wasn't entirely certain the resulting current wouldn't sweep him away.

The booth looked good. Nicks allowed himself a small flicker of satisfaction as he surveyed it from across the lane. The display shelves held samples of the barony's recent output: the winter wheat Leon had introduced, ground into flour and baked into small demonstration loaves; rice—another of Leon's discoveries, and one nobody else in Holfort grew—shelled and sold in neat sacks; jars of the preserved fruit compote that had become unexpectedly popular with the Fraser household staff; bundles of the hardy root vegetables that thrived in the floating island's peculiar soil conditions; and, occupying pride of place on the centre shelf, three bottles of the experimental rice wine that Luxion's agricultural drones had developed.

Jenna had refused to participate. Flatly. With the particular brand of disdainful certainty that only a nineteen-year-old girl convinced of her own sophistication could produce.

"I'm not standing behind a market stall like some common vendor's daughter, Nicks."

He'd let it go. Their father had sent helpers from the territory instead—two of the commoner families who worked the new orchards, cheerful and competent and genuinely proud of what they'd grown. They were managing the booth now, chatting with browsers, offering samples of the compote on small wooden spoons, doing the work Jenna considered beneath her.

Nicks checked the stock levels, exchanged a few words with the elder of the two families—a broad-shouldered woman named Petra who managed the territory's soil rotation and composting—and satisfied himself that everything was running smoothly.

Then he left.

He was on break. Two hours before his next rotation at the booth, and he had a destination in mind.

The Adventurer's Guild maintained a satellite office on the academy grounds—a temporary structure of canvas and timber erected in the northern quadrangle, staffed by guild clerks and decorated with the organisation's

crossed-sword insignia. It served as an extension of the main guild hall, providing support for students who wanted to enter the capital's dungeon and posting commissions for those with an adventurer's licence. By second year, almost every student had one—those who didn't were rare enough to draw comment.

Nicks had been visiting the board every day for the past week.

Since the relocation to the Rachele border's proximity, the reality of their situation had crystallised in ways that academy lectures about territorial management never quite captured. The border was active. Demonic armour incursions came in waves—sometimes daily, sometimes with gaps of a week or more—and whilst Leon's operation handled the front line with a competence that bordered on supernatural, the surrounding territories still suffered. Pirates preyed on supply convoys. Bandits exploited the chaos of military mobilisation to raid outlying settlements. Monsters displaced by the fighting migrated into farmland.

Leon couldn't be everywhere. Neither could Mégane, or Erica, or the rotating cast of guardian spirits and adventurers that comprised Leon's household forces. The border was too long, the threats too dispersed, and Leon's attention too consumed by dungeon expeditions and the political obligations that came with his accelerating rise.

Which meant the family needed more than one sword arm.

Nicks wasn't Leon. He harboured no illusions about that. He couldn't project weapons from thin air or unleash attacks that rewrote the landscape. He was a competent swordsman—above average for his year, his instructors said, which placed him firmly in the vast middle ground between mediocrity and brilliance. He could ride an airbike. He was decent with magic. He could shoot straight. He could read a tactical situation and make reasonable decisions under pressure.

Reasonable. Average. Competent.

Words that described a perfectly adequate first son of a minor barony's mistress.

Words that were no longer sufficient.

He didn't resent Leon. That was the truth of it, and he'd examined the feeling carefully enough to be certain. His younger brother had returned from a six-month expedition with floating islands, treasure, and a title. Had fought the Crown Prince to a standstill. Had been elevated to Viscount before his nineteenth birthday. Had accumulated a household that included a duke's daughter, a princess, a guild heiress, and enough guardian spirits to staff a small army.

Nicks didn't resent any of it. Leon had earned every scrap through means Nicks couldn't begin to replicate, and the family had benefited enormously.

But he couldn't just depend on it, either.

The northern quadrangle was busy. Students clustered around the guild office, some browsing the commission board, others queuing at the registration desk where a pair of clerks processed new adventurer applications with assembly-line efficiency. A few actual guild members—grizzled men and women in weathered leather, their presence a deliberate recruitment tool—leaned against the office's timber frame and answered questions from wide-eyed first-years.

Nicks made his way to the board.

The commissions were pinned in rows, organised by difficulty rating and region. He scanned past the easy work—herb gathering, monster part collection, escort duties for merchant caravans on safe routes—and moved to the mid-tier listings. Territory defence contracts. Bandit suppression. Convoy protection through contested airspace.

One caught his eye.

A border territory. Recently and consistently targeted by pirates—three attacks in the past month, each one bolder than the last. The local baron lacked the military resources to mount a proper response and had posted the commission through the guild at a respectable bounty. The difficulty was rated for a party of four to six, experienced but not elite.

Nicks reached for the notice.

A hand entered his field of vision.

It was gloved—fine leather, well-maintained, the kind of equipment that spoke of habitual use rather than decoration. The fingers closed around the edge of the commission paper and pulled it from the board with a sharp, practised tug.

Nicks looked up.

Brad Fou Field stood half a step to his right, the notice already in his hand, his attention fixed not on Nicks but on Chris Fia Arclight beside him. The two were deep in conversation—or rather, Brad was talking and Chris was listening with focused stillness.

"—fourth attack will come from the eastern approach. Pirates always rotate their vectors after three successful runs; it's basic tactical doctrine." Brad's eyes moved across the commission details, his free hand tracing invisible patterns in the air. The former earl's son had always been the strategist of the prince's circle—the one whose instincts ran towards analysis over direct confrontation. "If we position here and here, we can—"

"The bounty is quite small," Chris said. His voice was quiet. Measured. The son of the Sword Saint had never been loud, but there was a new economy to his speech that hadn't been there before. Fewer words. Each one load-bearing.

"But we're acquiring accolades, so we can't afford to be choosy. And our islands are projected to generate solid returns—we just need to be disciplined about it."

"We can sell the pirate ships we capture. Guild takes fifteen per cent; we keep the rest."

"If we capture them intact."

"When have I not—" Brad stopped. Glanced sideways. Noticed Nicks for the first time. His expression cycled through recognition, mild embarrassment, and something that might have been an apology in the span of a heartbeat. "Ah. Were you—?"

"Don't mind me," Nicks said.

Brad hesitated. Chris didn't look at him at all—his gaze had drifted to the board, scanning other commissions with mechanical efficiency. Both of them wore their academy uniforms, but the fabric sat differently on them now. The same cut as every other student's, but beneath it the bodies had changed. Harder. Leaner. Border service and stripped titles had burned away whatever softness the upper academy's comforts had preserved.

Brad folded the commission into his jacket pocket, offered Nicks a brief nod that was neither friendly nor unfriendly, and returned to his conversation with Chris as the two moved away from the board.

Nicks watched them go.

He turned back to the board. Scanned the remaining listings. The pirate suppression contract had been the best fit for his skill level and the most relevant to his family's new territorial concerns, but there were others. A convoy escort along the northern route. A monster cull in the lowland forests. A—

"Excuse me?"

Nicks turned.

A girl stood behind him. His age, perhaps a year younger—it was difficult to tell with the festival crowds pressing close. She wore the lower academy's uniform, the cut marking her as a second-year, and her navy-blue hair was

pulled back from her face in a simple arrangement that left her features open and unguarded. Brown eyes. A scattering of freckles across her nose. A smile that was—

His heart lurched.

Not dramatically. Not the thunderclap of romantic poetry or the swooning collapse of festival drama. Just a single, treacherous skip in his chest's rhythm. A hitch. A stumble.

Because she was looking at him. Not past him, not through him, not at the board behind him. At *him*. And she was smiling, and she was pretty in the way that real people were pretty—not the sculpted, devastating beauty of the women who orbited his brother's household like moons around a gas giant, but the kind of pretty that belonged to the actual world, where people had freckles and crooked teeth and imperfect hair.

*'This could actually be—'*

The thought formed before he could stop it, fierce and embarrassing and desperately hopeful. He'd watched Leon accumulate women the way other men accumulated debts—involuntarily, inevitably, with an expression of mounting resignation that Nicks found both sympathetic and deeply, corrosively enviable. Not the women themselves. The attention. The simple fact of being seen. Being sought out. Being the person someone walked towards in a crowd.

The girl's smile brightened.

"Hey, you're Leon's older brother, right?"

Nicks's hopes were crushed.

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Angelica watched the 'Queen's' eyes fly open—wide as saucers—as the water hit her lips instead of the expected burn. A flicker of confusion crossed the

woman's face, then relief, then something softer that made Angelica's chest tighten with secondhand embarrassment.

*'This is getting out of hand.'*

It had been half an hour since she'd sent Erica away to recover. Half an hour since the Offrey girl had scurried out with her dignity in tatters. Half an hour since Julius had gone white as parchment at the sight of his mother draped across a half-naked Leon, before the Queen's bodyguard—the masked woman who'd accompanied her—firmly shepherded him, Marie, and Jilk back to their own butler café on the western wing.

And in that half hour, Leon had been dutifully working through the services Queen Mylene had pre-ordered and pre-paid for in generous quantities. The shot count had climbed steadily. The second bottle of imported grain spirit—the hard stuff, the kind that stripped varnish from furniture and sense from skulls—sat two-thirds empty on the low table between them.

At least Angelica had acted quickly. The moment the curtains had closed around the booth after Julius's departure, she'd caught Meltryllis's eye and made a quiet request—a discreet gesture towards the windows, a mouthed instruction the 'Queen' was too flustered to notice. The lunar spirit had understood immediately, vanishing with Durga and returning within minutes carrying armfuls of heavy blackout fabric they'd liberated from somewhere. Angelica suspected a drama club storage room and chose not to enquire further. The layered curtains now formed an opaque cocoon around their booth, sealing out the festival noise and, more critically, sealing in whatever was happening on this couch.

Because Queen Mylene's reputation preceded her like cannon fire preceded a broadside. The woman's appetites were a matter of public record—or rather, public rumour elevated to the status of folklore. Every noble household in Holfort had at least three stories about the Queen's indiscretions, each more salacious than the last. Angelica had always dismissed the worst of them as political slander—though the truth, she'd come to learn, skirted uncomfortably close.

The woman currently shivering on Leon's thigh was not reinforcing that position.

Except.

Angelica's eyes narrowed as she watched the 'Queen' fumble the shot glass with trembling fingers. The woman's flush extended from her cheeks to the tips of her ears and down her neck, disappearing beneath the high collar of her formal attire. Her breathing was shallow and quick. Her gaze darted between Leon's face and the far wall as though searching for an escape route that didn't exist.

None of this tracked with the Queen Mylene that Angelica had spent eleven years studying.

The real Queen Mylene—the one who'd appeared at countless state functions, who'd hosted foreign delegations with razor-edged charm, who'd once reduced a Rachele ambassador to stammering incoherence with a single arched eyebrow—that woman did not tremble. She consumed. She commanded. She took what she wanted with the casual entitlement of someone who'd never been refused.

This woman was terrified.

Angelica had noticed the discrepancy almost immediately. The mannerisms were right—the posture, the vocal cadence, the particular way she held her wine glass by the stem rather than the bowl. But the substance beneath those mannerisms was hollow. Like watching a gifted understudy perform a role she'd rehearsed a thousand times but never inhabited.

She'd noticed something else, too—that peculiar moment during Julius's interruption. The Queen and her bodyguard had switched positions. A mask produced from somewhere, donned in the space between one breath and the next. A veil removed. And when the chaos had settled, the woman on the couch was no longer the woman who'd arrived.

Angelica was one of five people outside the royal family who knew the truth. Had known since she was twelve—since her first day as an understudy and attendant to the Queen, placed there to learn the graces she'd need as the future wife of Prince Julius. During that first morning, the Queen had called her into her private quarters, closed the door, and revealed that the woman who sat beside King Roland on the throne of Holfort was not born Mylene Rapha Repard.

She was Mercelyne.

The real Mylene—the gentler twin, the one who was supposed to be traded like livestock to satisfy Rachele's territorial appetites—lived in the Queen's shadow. A ghost with the same face. A mirror that reflected everything but the fire behind the glass.

And that ghost was currently sitting on Leon's thigh, three sheets to the wind, looking as though she might expire from sheer overstimulation.

*'This wasn't really the plan.'*

Originally, Leon wasn't supposed to be one of the attendants at all. He was meant to assist with drink service—nothing more. The outfit, the menu, the host club theatrics—those were for the purchased attendants. Olivia's actual scheme had been smaller in scope: after hours, once the paying customers had left, the four of them would share a bottle together. Olivia would wait until Leon was pleasantly drunk, then jokingly suggest he try being their personal attendant for the evening as thanks for their hard work. Hence the special menu with Olivia's name on it—a prop for a private joke, not a public spectacle.

Angelica hadn't objected. She'd wanted an evening like that—casual, close, the kind of intimacy that came from sharing something slightly ridiculous. She could admit, privately, that she was jealous of the ease between Olivia and Leon. There was an invisible wall between herself and Leon that politeness and propriety kept firmly in place, and she'd thought that maybe—maybe—a night of drinking and foolishness might crack it.

But she hadn't anticipated the Queen arriving. Hadn't anticipated the Queen's demands escalating the evening beyond all recognition. And she certainly hadn't anticipated returning from her festival duties to find that the woman on Leon's couch was no longer the woman who'd walked in.

The switch must have happened during Julius's confrontation—or perhaps just before. Angelica had been focused on Stephanie and Julius, and by the time she'd returned to the booth, the bodyguard—or rather, the real Queen posing as her bodyguard—had departed with the prince's group. The 'Queen' had been left behind with a near-empty bottle, two fresh bottles of spirits just placed on the table, and an expression of mounting panic poorly concealed behind a regal mask.

Which meant Mercelyne—the bold one, the one whose reputation was entirely earned—had waltzed off to manage her son whilst leaving her gentle twin alone with a half-naked man, two bottles of alcohol, and a pre-paid menu of increasingly intimate services.

Angelica was going to have words with Her Majesty. Pointed, carefully phrased, diplomatically devastating words.

But that was for later. Right now—

"Leon, here—" Angelica reached across the table, deftly swapping Leon's refilled shot glass with the water she'd prepared. She'd been performing this substitution every other round, alternating real alcohol with water to slow his intake. Leon was a large man with considerable physical conditioning, but even that had limits, and this particular grain spirit was brutal.

"Hic—Shanku, Angie."

Leon tilted his head sideways, and from her angle on the couch she could see his pupils blown wide, the dark centres swallowing the gold and silver of his irises almost entirely. A flush sat high on his cheekbones, warming his skin from its usual pallor to something almost alive. He was angled away from her, turned towards the 'Queen', his fingers working methodically along the

tendons of her palm in firm, practised strokes—a hand massage, the fourth item on the service menu.

A trickle of water escaped the corner of his mouth. Traced the sharp line of his jaw. Slid down the column of his throat. Continued its unhurried journey across the planes of his chest, following the channel between muscles that the ridiculous host-club outfit left entirely, criminally exposed, descending past his navel to where his abdominals tensed above the waistband of those absurd short shorts, which were—

Which—

"...!"

Angelica wrenched her gaze upward so violently that something in her neck clicked. Heat detonated across her face and ears. She stared fixedly at the blackout curtain six inches from her nose and willed the flush to subside through sheer aristocratic discipline.

It did not subside.

She reached forward, poured herself a shot of the actual liquor, and threw it back. The alcohol scorched a line from throat to stomach, and the warmth that blossomed outward was at least a warmth she could attribute to spirits rather than—

Rather than.

Across from her, the 'Queen' sat with her legs still draped over Leon's thigh, her stockinged feet dangling. She had gone uncharacteristically silent. Her face burned red—from the shots, from the proximity, from the large warm hand currently kneading her palm with the focused competence of someone who understood pressure points the way other men understood flattery.

Leon, thankfully, was too drunk to notice any of the signs. He was focused entirely on finishing his duties, his attention narrowed to the task with the dogged determination of the magnificently inebriated.

This woman moaned, then flinched when Leon's thumb found a knot below her index finger.

This woman's blush spread to the tips of her ears and down her throat in a pattern that was shy rather than performative.

This woman had, when Leon first took her hand, made a small sound—a tiny, startled *oh*—that belonged to someone unaccustomed to being touched with care.

*'That's why I volunteered.'*

The moment she'd spotted the trembling hands, the fractional hesitation before each quip—Angelica had known. And she had slid into the seat beside Leon with a bright smile and an iron determination to keep this situation from spiralling into catastrophe.

She was failing.

"Sho—we're done wiz da hand massage... hic."

Angelica discreetly poured water into both shot glasses whilst their attention was elsewhere.

The 'Queen' reached for the glasses with trembling fingers. Her coordination was suffering; she nearly knocked one over before catching it, liquid sloshing against the rim.

The next item on the service menu was a love shot.

The 'Queen' studied the receipt. Her eyes widened. Her blush, which Angelica had thought physically incapable of deepening further, somehow found new reserves of crimson.

The illustration showed two figures drinking simultaneously, arms interlinked at the elbow. Nothing more. Nothing less.

But the 'Queen' had either missed the image entirely or her alcohol-addled mind had leapt to a different conclusion, because she clasped her hands in

front of her chest, squeezed her eyes shut, and puckered her lips with the rigid determination of someone bracing for a cavalry charge.

*'She thinks it's a kiss.'*

Angelica's hand froze halfway to the water jug.

*'She thinks Leon is going to kiss her.'*

*'And she's letting him.'*

The seconds stretched. The 'Queen' sat there, eyes screwed shut, lips pursed, shoulders hiked up to her ears, trembling like a leaf in a gale—and waiting.

Leon blinked at her. His dilated eyes focused, unfocused, focused again. Something in his expression shifted—not recognition, exactly, because he was too drunk for that, but a kind of instinctive gentleness that rose up through the alcohol like a reef through shallow water.

He reached out and took her arm.

The 'Queen' jolted—a full-body flinch that nearly sent her off the couch. But Leon's grip was steady, his fingers wrapping around her forearm with careful pressure that arrested her momentum without bruising. He guided her arm upward, threaded his own through the gap at her elbow, and intertwined their limbs until they were linked—his hand holding her shot glass, her hand holding his.

Then he tilted her glass towards her lips, and drank from the one she held for him.

Water. Both glasses. Angelica had made certain.

The 'Queen' opened one eye.

Then the other.

She stared at their linked arms. At the glass touching her lower lip. At Leon's throat working as he swallowed the contents of the other glass in a single smooth motion, his head tipped back, the lamplight catching the water's residue on his mouth.

"...Oh," the 'Queen' said, very quietly. "Oh. That's... that's what a love shot is."

"Mm." Leon set down his empty glass with exaggerated care. "Issa... is an arm-link drink. Livia probably put it in to—hic—trick the customers into thinking it was something else."

"I see." The 'Queen' drank. Her face was so red it was practically luminous. "I see. Yes. Of course. I knew that."

She had not known that.

Angelica exhaled through her nose and poured herself another actual shot, because at this rate she was going to need it.

The next item on the receipt was compliments.

"One," Leon said. His voice was softer than before. Less slurred. As though some part of him understood that this mattered. "Your hands."

The 'Queen' blinked. "My... hands?"

"Mm. When I was doing the massage. You've got... calluses. Here—" He touched his own palm, indicating the base of the fingers. "Sword calluses. Old ones. Layered. You've been training for years. Decades, maybe." A pause. "Most people in your position would've stopped. Would've let someone else hold the blade. But you didn't."

The 'Queen's' expression froze. Not with displeasure—with the particular stillness of someone who has been seen, suddenly and without warning, in a place they thought was hidden.

"That's... that's not a compliment," she managed. "That's an observation."

"S'both." Leon's mouth curved. "Two. You smell like lavender and old paper. Books. You read a lot?"

"I—yes. I do."

"Good." He said it simply, as though it were self-evident. "Three."

He paused. Tilted his head. The lamplight caught the mismatched gold and silver of his eyes—one warm, one cool, both focused on her with a clarity that had no business existing at his level of intoxication.

Angelica's eye twitched.

Leon was flirting.

She didn't know when the switch had been flipped. One moment they'd been doing a love shot—water, thankfully—and the next Leon had been holding Mylene's hand and talking about her calluses with low, earnest intensity.

Angelica had never seen this side of Leon before. Olivia had warned her, though—had said, with the weary authority of long experience, that Leon sometimes said things with such devastating sincerity that it was totally unfair to whoever was on the receiving end.

Angelica was beginning to understand what she'd meant.

And judging from the way Mylene was gazing at him—lips slightly parted, eyes soft, her body unconsciously leaning closer—it was working.

"You're brave," Leon said.

*'Oh no.'*

"You're here, and you're scared, and you came anyway. That's what brave is."

Mylene's eyes welled. Her hands pressed to her face. A sound escaped—half laugh, half sob—muffled and raw.

*'Oh no, oh no, oh no.'*

This was exactly the kind of moment that would become a catastrophe if Leon remembered it in the morning. Mercelyne—the real Queen—could absorb flirtation like water off a duck's back. But if Leon woke up tomorrow with hazy memories of the 'Queen' trembling and crying and gazing at him like he'd hung the moon, and then encountered the actual Queen behaving with her usual predatory composure—

The mismatch would register. Leon was drunk, not stupid. And drunk memories had a terrible habit of surfacing at the worst possible moments.

Angelica needed to dilute this. Immediately.

"Here—" She reached forward with bright, aggressive cheer, pouring water into two glasses and pressing them into their hands. "You two should drink more water. Hydration is very important."

Leon and Mylene both accepted their glasses. Looked at each other. Looked at the glasses. And without a word of coordination, interlinked their arms and performed another love shot.

With the water.

Angelica's eye twitched again.

*'I am going to kill Olivia for putting that on the menu.'*

"Right!" Angelica clapped her hands together—a little too loudly. "Everyone's quite drunk now. I think we should quickly finish the remaining orders so we can all get some rest."

Mylene's gaze drifted towards the receipt. Her eyes moved down the list of remaining items—past the completed entries, past the ones Angelica had quietly crossed out, to the next unchecked service.

Her body went rigid.

Her eyes darted between the receipt and Leon. The receipt and Leon. The receipt. Leon.

She stood up so fast that her knee caught the edge of the table. The empty shot glasses rattled.

"Uh—I—apologise—"

Angelica winced. The Queen never apologised. Not for anything. Not to anyone. Mercelyne would have read the next item aloud with theatrical relish and watched Leon squirm. This woman was practically vibrating.

"I promised my son that I would visit his booth." The 'Queen' held her face perfectly straight, staring at the blackout curtains as though they were the most fascinating textile achievement in the history of the kingdom. She did not look at Leon. She did not look at Angelica. She did not look at the receipt.

"A-Angelica, dear, you should receive the remaining services. C-consider it a gift from the Crown."

And without waiting for a response, she turned and walked towards the exit with the rigid, deliberate gait of someone who was concentrating very hard on not breaking into a run. Her ankle turned once on the carpet—a stumble she corrected instantly, squaring her shoulders and lifting her chin as she forced dignity back into her stride through sheer, desperate willpower.

The curtain fell shut behind her.

Angelica released a breath she didn't know she'd been holding. Her shoulders dropped. The tension that had been coiled at the base of her skull for the past hour unwound by a single, merciful degree.

*'Problems reduced by one.'*

She glanced at the receipt to see what had sent Mylene fleeing.

The next item read: *Full Body Massage — 45 minutes.*

Below it, in Olivia's unmistakable handwriting: *Customer may specify areas of focus. Attendant will use oil provided. Please remove outer garments for optimal experience.*

'...Ah.'

Angelica folded the receipt and tucked it into her jacket pocket. For safekeeping. Purely for safekeeping.

*'Well. At least I'm getting a massage out of this.'*

She'd been wholly tempted ever since Olivia had offered one during their ride towards the capital when they'd been summoned to the throne room. At the time, Angelica had declined on the grounds of propriety. Propriety now seemed like a distant and somewhat foolish concern, given that she was sitting in a host club booth beside a man wearing a collar and short shorts.

She turned to Leon to inform him of the schedule change.

Leon was unconscious.

At some point during Mylene's hasty departure—during the two seconds Angelica had taken her eyes off him—Leon Fou Bartfort, Upper Fifth Viscount, holder of the Rachele border vigil, master of a household that included a princess, a baroness, two vassal knights, and an arsenal of legendary weapons—had simply stopped being awake. His body had tilted sideways with the slow inevitability of a felled tree, his head coming to rest against Angelica's shoulder. His eyes were closed. His breathing had gone deep and even. A thin trail of drool was beginning its unhurried journey from the corner of his mouth towards her collarbone.

Angelica stared at the ceiling.

The ceiling had no opinions about any of this.

Sigh.

His weight was warm against her side. Heavier than she'd expected—dense, solid, the weight of someone whose body had been forged through physical challenges. His white hair fell across her shoulder, catching the low light. His face, stripped of consciousness and composure, looked younger than his years. Softer.

She could feel his heartbeat through the thin fabric where his chest pressed against her arm. Steady. Slow. The heartbeat of a man who had, despite everything the evening had thrown at him, decided that this shoulder was safe enough to sleep on.

'...'

She didn't move.

The curtain twitched. Parted. Olivia's head appeared through the gap, her expression bright with anticipation—the look of a woman arriving to survey the glorious wreckage of her master plan.

Her eyes swept the booth. The empty bottles. The passed-out viscount drooling on Angelica's shoulder.

The anticipation curdled.

"You're kidding." Olivia's voice was flat. "He's *asleep*?"

"Mm."

"I had—there were still—the couple's massage was supposed to—when the Queen left—I thought that you we could..."

Her hands made several inarticulate gestures that conveyed, in rapid succession, devastation, betrayal, and the particular anguish of an architect watching their cathedral collapse before the final stone was laid.

"He signed your paperwork, drank your alcohol, wore your outfit, served your customers, and performed every service on your menu up to and including complimenting a stranger's sword calluses." Angelica's voice was mild. Pleasant, even. "He has earned his rest."

"But—"

"Olivia."

"..."

"Go clean up the bar."

Olivia opened her mouth. Closed it. Opened it again.

Then she looked at Leon—at his sleeping face, at the drool, at the way his hand had, at some point during his descent into unconsciousness, found Angelica's and loosely wrapped around her fingers.

Olivia's expression softened.

Just for a moment. Just a flicker—something warm and unguarded that passed across her features like sunlight through clouds. Then it was gone, replaced by the usual mischief, and she withdrew her head through the curtain with a theatrical huff.

"Fine. But I'm putting the massage on tomorrow's schedule."

The curtain fell shut.

Angelica looked down at their joined hands. His fingers were slack around hers—not gripping, just resting. The kind of unconscious contact that meant nothing and everything simultaneously.

She adjusted her position carefully, shifting just enough to support his weight without waking him. Her free hand reached for another shot.

She drank it quickly and savoured the burn as heat spread throughout her body.

Outside the curtained booth, the festival continued—muffled laughter, distant music, the clink of glasses and the murmur of voices living their uncomplicated lives. Inside, the lamplight was warm, and Leon's breathing was steady, and the drool was going to leave a stain on her jacket that she would absolutely make him pay for.

But that was tomorrow's problem.

Angelica smiled.

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End

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