

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

Story Starts

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Chapter 8.1 -

The Courtesy of Wolves

The silence muffled Angelica's ears like cotton wool.

Thousands of spectators lined the tiered galleries of the academy's duelling grounds, their faces caught in that peculiar stillness between disbelief and dawning horror. Red betting chits—the prince's colour—clutched in white-knuckled fists. A few fluttered to the stone floor like autumn leaves. Nobody stooped to retrieve them.

Angelica stood at the edge of the staging platform in her academy uniform, having changed out of her power armour in the complex beneath Folkvangr along with everyone else before being transported back to Holfort Academy. The cool afternoon air kissed the sweat on her neck. Her muscles were beginning to ache in places she hadn't known existed. Reiterpallasch and Reiterdegen hung at her hips, their barrels still warm.

Across the platform, Marie Fou Lafan crashed into Julius like a swallow finding harbour.

The blonde girl's arms wrapped around the prince's neck without ceremony, without calculation, without the careful choreography Angelica had witnessed at every prior encounter. Marie pulled back just enough to ruffle Julius's blue hair—actually ruffle it, fingers dragging through the sweat-matted strands the way she might tousle a younger sibling's. Then she moved to Jilk, who flinched at the contact before his shoulders sagged. Brad received a pat on the cheek. Greg got both hands clamped on either side of his face whilst Marie inspected him for injuries he no longer carried—Folkvangr's

enchantment had prevented the worst of the damage, and an academy doctor had tended to the rest.

Chris stood apart, arms folded, until Marie simply leaned her forehead against his shoulder. His posture softened by degrees.

Angelica watched all of it.

She waited for the familiar knife-twist beneath her sternum. The hot rush of bile. The trembling jaw she'd trained herself to clench into stillness before anyone noticed.

Nothing came.

Not forgiveness. Not understanding. Certainly not warmth. Just—absence. A room swept clean of furniture, echoing faintly when she breathed. She didn't know what to do with the empty space. Perhaps that was its own kind of answer.

Marie's affection wasn't performed. That was the part Angelica couldn't quite fit into the shape she'd prepared for it. No sidelong glances to gauge the crowd's reaction, no artful positioning to ensure maximum visibility. Marie simply held onto the people she cared about, and the crowd—the entire kingdom, through the broadcast crystals—could take it or leave it.

Angelica turned away.

On the opposite side of the platform, a different scene entirely was unfolding. Leon was retreating step by careful step, his hands raised in a universal gesture of diplomatic surrender. His white hair caught the late afternoon light like frost on steel. Three guardian spirits advanced on him in a loose semicircle.

Karna spoke first, his words inaudible at this distance but his posture unmistakable—that particular forward lean of a warrior who had found something he refused to release. Arjuna flanked his counterpart, dark hair spilling across his shoulders, expression grave and oddly intent. Setanta

completed the triangle, shorter than the other two but radiating a wolfish energy that made Leon's backward shuffle accelerate.

Leon's mouth moved. Even without hearing the words, Angelica recognised the cadence of refusal. His hand came up, palm out, fingers splayed—a barrier more symbolic than physical. Karna took another step forward. Leon's composure cracked as his eyes darted in every direction, searching for an escape—finding none.

A sharp bump against Angelica's hip jolted her sideways.

"Angie."

Olivia materialised at her elbow, still wearing that absurd grin she hadn't shed since Folkvangr.

"Are you alright?" Olivia's voice dropped half a register. Her blue eyes searched Angelica's face for something. "Got it out of your system?"

Angelica exhaled through her nose. A sound that was not quite a laugh.

"I believe I did."

"Good." Olivia bumped her hip again, gentler this time. "Because your knuckles are still clenched and you've been grinding your teeth for the last forty seconds."

Angelica uncurled her fingers. The crescent marks in her palms stung.

"I suppose even if I've come to accept it in my mind, my body hasn't quite caught up."

Before Olivia could respond, the crowd's murmur shifted—a current changing direction. Footsteps approached across the stone platform. Angelica straightened her spine by reflex, the motion so ingrained it preceded conscious thought.

Marie Fou Lafan stopped three paces away and bowed.

Not a curtsy. Not the graceful half-dip of a lady acknowledging a peer. A bow—deep, from the waist, her blonde hair falling forward to curtain her face. Behind her, Julius inclined his head. Jilk followed suit. Brad. Greg. Chris. One by one, the prince's retinue folded into positions of contrition, the gallery's silence sharpening to a blade's edge as thousands of witnesses held their breath.

"Lady Redgrave." Marie's voice carried the particular flatness of someone who had rehearsed nothing and meant every syllable. "I offer my sincere apology for the harm I caused you."

The others murmured their assent. Julius's jaw worked, but he held the bow.

Angelica regarded the bent heads before her. Months of whispered campaigns. Public humiliations dressed as casual oversights. The slow, methodical dismantling of everything she had built since childhood to stand beside that blue-haired boy who now couldn't meet her eyes.

She nodded. Once. The motion sharp enough to cut glass.

"Your debts are noted. I expect them honoured in full."

Her gaze found Jilk's in particular as he turned away.

Marie lifted her head. Something flickered behind her eyes—relief, perhaps, or recognition—before she gathered her people and withdrew.

The audience, finding nothing further to hold their attention, had begun filtering out of the galleries—muttering about unfairness, about rigged odds, about dungeon expeditions needed to recoup their losses. The grumbling faded into the general noise of a crowd reluctantly accepting that the spectacle was over.

Angelica's breath left her in a slow, controlled stream.

As they left, her gaze found him—leaning against the arched entrance to the duelling grounds' western corridor. Gilbert Rapha Redgrave stood with his arms crossed over his chest, one boot propped against the stone behind him, watching the proceedings with the patience of a man who had seen their

conclusion long before it arrived. His blond hair and sharp features mirrored their father's with uncomfortable fidelity.

He did not wave. He did not call out. He simply met Angelica's eyes and inclined his chin a fraction of a degree—a summons wrapped in the pretence of a greeting.

"There's a pastry shop on Velden Street," Olivia said, falling into step as Angelica turned toward the corridor. "The one with the green awning. Their millefeuille is quite good. Do you want to go there with Leon?"

"I can't. Not today." Angelica's gaze flicked toward Gilbert's waiting figure. "Tell Leon to expect an invitation from my father. He should keep his schedule open."

Olivia's eyes followed the look, and understanding settled across her face. But before Angelica left, she pressed her own blue betting chit into Olivia's palm and winked—her expression lighter than it had been all day, something almost assured in the set of her jaw.

"Don't worry. After all, I have you and Leon if I'm in trouble."

"You've got that right!" Olivia declared.

Angelica's lips twitched. She found Leon's eyes across the platform and smiled at him before straightening her posture.

She crossed the platform with measured strides, her boots striking the stone in steady rhythm. The remaining crowd murmured as they followed the path of the Redgrave daughter.

Gilbert straightened as she approached. Up close, the resemblance to their father sharpened further—the same narrow jaw, the same appraising grey eyes that catalogued everything and revealed nothing.

"Sister." His voice was low, pitched to carry no further than the space between them. "Father is waiting."

Angelica fell into step beside him. The corridor swallowed them both, their shadows stretching long against the ancient stone as the duelling grounds' noise faded behind them.

She did not look back.

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The Redgrave estate sat upon a floating island three times the size of Leon's barony, its terraced gardens cascading down the landmass's edge like frozen waterfalls of manicured green. The manor itself was less a house than a fortress dressed in marble—colonnades thick enough to shelter cavalry, windows narrow enough to serve as murder slits, and a central keep that rose five storeys above the surrounding wings. A duke's residence, and it wanted you to know it.

Leon adjusted the collar of his formal jacket as the Partner eased into the estate's private berth. The fabric itched. Everything about the visit itched—the stiff clothes, the polished boots, the knowledge that he was a baron walking into the lair of the most powerful ducal house in Holfort.

He'd brought the Partner deliberately. If they were going to prostrate themselves before a duke, they'd do it from the deck of a seven-hundred-metre warship—Luxion's flagship, fully automated, bristling with enough ordnance to level a small nation, and originally built as an ark for the old humans before the world forgot they'd ever existed. The vessel dwarfed everything else docked at the Redgrave berths, its sleek black hull throwing the neighbouring pleasure yachts into unflattering relief. Subtle, it was not. But subtlety wasn't the point. Leon needed the Duke to see what he was buying into.

"Stop fidgeting."

Olivia stood beside him, her hair pinned up in a style Sella had spent forty minutes constructing. The effect transformed her from an impish commoner into something approaching respectable. Almost.

"I'm not fidgeting."

"Your left hand has touched your collar seven times since we docked."

He dropped his hand. Mégane waited behind them both, her posture militarily straight. She wore a sleek gauntlet on her left hand and, at her hip, a rapier... and a riding crop?

'That's hell you're walking into. Ignore it.'

Unfortunately, when he glanced up, Mégane caught the direction of his gaze—and winked.

'Ignore it.'

She'd insisted on attending as his vassal-knight, and Leon hadn't argued.

"We're cleared to dock at berth two-B," Luxion said, floating beside him, his single red lens scanning the estate's defences with what Leon suspected was professional disapproval.

"Thank you, Luxion." Leon took in a slow breath.

"Are you prepared?" the AI asked.

"As prepared as I'll ever be." Leon chuckled. "Hopefully, Angelica's softened up the Duke for me."

"An easy way to get your way in negotiations like this is to sink one of their floating islands and threaten the rest."

Olivia chuckled behind Luxion and bopped the AI on its round chassis. "We are not threatening the father of our second member of the hare—owie!"

Sella's hand had already found the back of Olivia's head before Leon could so much as open his mouth. The guardian spirit's discipline was, as ever, preemptive and precise.

"I thought I was the second member of the harem?" Mégane added, tilting her head as Olivia glared at her through watering eyes. "Though I have yet to be called to my Lord's bedchambers."

Olivia seized Leon's arm. "You are *not* jumping the line!"

"*Plus*," Olivia continued, broadcasting to the room at large with visible pride, "Leon has invited me on a romantic date this weekend."

"Then I should probably organise one with my Lord as well," Mégane said, tapping her lips as she pondered aloud, nodding to herself.

As if a dam had broken, every guardian spirit in earshot surged forward with their own requests—Melt wanted the theatre, Ria demanded a sparring session followed by dinner, Art simply stated she would be accompanying Leon on Tuesday, and Durga produced a list.

"You know, if only you put your foot down more," Luxion chimed from beside him.

Leon pinched the bridge of his nose. "Enough! We'll make a fair schedule for everyone. Alone time, dates, group outings—it'll all be organised properly."

Everyone cheered.

A beat of silence. Then Olivia, with the careful innocence of someone who knew exactly what she was doing:

"Then can I also be included in the bed rotation you have with your guardian spirits?"

Mégane's head turned sharply, her eyes fixed on Leon with the intensity of someone awaiting a verdict.

Leon just sighed as the Partner gave one final lurch, settling into the ducal dock.

'When you give them an inch.'

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The Partner's gangway descended with a hydraulic whisper, and Leon stepped onto Redgrave stone.

The estate's private harbour stretched before him—a series of berths carved into the floating island's northern face, each sized to accommodate vessels of varying tonnage. The Partner occupied berths two and three simultaneously, its seven-hundred-metre hull extending well past the docking clamps that had been designed for something considerably more modest. Beside it, the Redgrave household's private fleet looked like bath toys.

'Subtle,' Luxion had said when Leon suggested bringing the flagship. *'As a sledgehammer.'*

That was rather the point.

A steward in Redgrave livery met them at the base of the gangway—dove-grey coat, silver threading, the crimson rose of House Redgrave embroidered over the heart. The man bowed to the precise degree appropriate for a baron and not a centimetre deeper.

"Baron Bartfort. The Duke expects you in the eastern study. If your companions would follow."

They followed.

Leon walked with Olivia at his left and Mégane at his right, both in their capacity as vassal-knights. Behind them came Art and Ria pushing the floating cart—held aloft by the enchanted floatstone humming within its frame, draped in plain linen that did nothing to disguise its contents. Chests, stacked three high and two across. Blocks of platinum and gold. Coin, gems, and bearer notes packed tight. A sizeable percentage of their Folkvangr winnings. The number would make most nobles weep, and Leon was giving it away.

Sella walked alongside Illya at the cart's rear flank. Leon had chosen his escort carefully—Art and Ria for presence, Sella and Illya for the quiet

suggestion that Olivia, despite her origins and recent ennoblement, was not someone to be trifled with.

The corridors swallowed sound. Portraits of Redgrave ancestors lined the walls—men and women in power armour, in court dress, astride guardian spirits that blazed with painted light. Each frame bore a small brass plaque. Names, dates, battles won. A genealogy of violence rendered in oil and gilt.

'Three hundred years of unbroken ducal authority.' Leon catalogued the portraits as they passed. Every surface communicated the same message: *we have been here longer than you, and we will be here after you are gone.*

Angelica met them halfway along the eastern corridor, dismissing the steward with a nod. She fell into step ahead of the procession, guiding them with the ease of someone who had navigated these halls since childhood. She'd changed since Folkvangr—gone was the power armour, replaced by a high-collared dress in Redgrave purple with silver embroidery tracing the family crest along the sleeves. Her hair was unbound, falling past her shoulders in a way Leon hadn't seen before. She looked less like a warrior and more like the duke's daughter she'd been raised to be.

She hadn't spoken beyond the formal greeting. Leon didn't press. There was a tightness around her eyes that told him everything her words didn't.

Another steward stood before a set of double doors—dark oak, iron-banded, carved with interlocking roses. He knocked twice, received a muffled acknowledgement, and opened them inward.

The eastern study was warm. A fire crackled in a hearth large enough to roast a boar, and the walls were lined not with books but with maps—territorial surveys, naval charts, trade routes marked in coloured thread. A strategist's room. At its centre stood a desk of black walnut, scarred with decades of use, positioned before a floor-to-ceiling window that overlooked the estate's private harbour.

The guardian spirits guided the cart through the doors and positioned it against the near wall — the linen-draped wealth of a barony, displayed without

comment in a duke's private study. Then they withdrew, and the double doors closed behind them.

The Partner stared back through that window like a held threat.

Duke Vince Rapha Redgrave sat behind the desk and did not rise.

He was broader than Leon had imagined. Not fat—*solid*. The kind of frame that came from a youth spent in armour and a middle age spent refusing to let that youth go entirely. Silver threaded through faded blond hair that must once have matched his daughter's. Deep-set eyes, the colour of dark iron, tracked Leon's approach with the unhurried attention of a hawk watching something cross open ground.

He wore no coronet, no ceremonial chain. Just a simple dark jacket buttoned to the throat. He didn't need ornamentation. The room knew who he was.

Behind the Duke and to his right stood Gilbert Rapha Redgrave. Angelica's elder brother was tall and athletic, his blond hair pulled back in a long ponytail that reached between his shoulder blades. He occupied a chair near the hearth, one ankle crossed over the opposite knee, a cup of something steaming balanced on the armrest. He offered Leon a nod—cordial, measured, the greeting of a man who'd already formed three opinions and was working on a fourth.

Leon stopped at the appropriate distance. Olivia and Mégane halted behind him.

"Baron Bartfort." The Duke's voice filled the room without effort. Not loud. Simply present, the way a mountain is present.

"Your Grace."

A silence stretched. The Duke let it hang—a deliberate thing, the quiet of a man who understood that whoever spoke next conceded ground. The fire popped. Gilbert sipped his drink.

Leon waited. His father's barony was modest, but it was still a barony — he'd been trained for moments like these, even if no one had ever expected those moments to involve a duke.

Vince inclined his head a fraction. "Sit."

Three chairs had been arranged before the desk. Not two. Not four. *Three*. Someone had counted.

Leon took the centre. Olivia sat to his left, Mégane to his right. The guardian spirits remained outside, as Leon had anticipated. Angelica took up a position near the door—standing, hands clasped before her. Closer to their side of the room than her father's, though whether that was deliberate or instinctive, Leon couldn't tell.

"I watched the skirmish," the Duke said. His voice was low, unhurried. "The full broadcast. The replays."

He paused, as though expecting a response. Leon offered none.

"My military advisors have watched it seven times." The Duke's fingers tapped the desk once. "You demolished a prince of the blood and his five retainers with a party of three and nine guardian spirits against twenty-three. You did so whilst every noble household in the kingdom watched."

Another pause. Longer.

"Why?"

The question landed like a stone in still water. Not *how*—*why*.

Leon met the Duke's gaze. "Because it was the right thing to do."

Gilbert set his cup down. The ceramic clicked against the armrest.

"Elaborate."

"Angelica is our comrade. She bled with us in the cosmic dungeon—fought beside us floor after floor, faced things that would break most people, and earned her guardian spirit through her own will and courage." Leon kept his

voice even. "When the prince humiliated her publicly and she was left standing alone, we stood with her. That's the whole of it."

The Duke studied him for a long moment. Then his eyes moved to his son.

Gilbert uncrossed his legs and leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. His ponytail swayed with the motion. "A noble sentiment, Baron. I'll grant you that." His tone was conversational, almost casual—the more dangerous register. "But I have to ask. If this had been done to a different person—someone you hadn't fought beside, someone you had no bond with—would you have stepped in?"

Leon considered the question honestly. He owed them that much.

"If I were the person I used to be," he said quietly, "I'd have done it again within a heartbeat. For anyone."

A pause.

"But right now? It would depend on the situation. The stakes, the people involved, what I stood to lose." He held Gilbert's gaze without flinching. "I won't pretend otherwise."

Gilbert's expression didn't change, but something in his posture loosened—the faintest release of tension, as if the honest answer satisfied him more than a heroic one would have.

"And the prince himself?" the Duke asked. "What is your assessment?"

Leon chose his next words with care. "His Highness spoke a great deal about freedom. About the academy being a place where rank shouldn't matter, where he could choose his own path." He paused. "With respect, Your Grace—that's the talk of someone who has never once had to earn what he holds. Freedom without consequence isn't freedom. It's privilege. And the consequences of his actions extend well beyond a broken engagement."

He let that settle before continuing.

"The upper nobility watched their future king publicly discard the daughter of his most powerful ally for a girl with no political connections. They watched him marshal five retainers and their guardian spirits against her when she protested. Whether or not I'd intervened, the Crown's relationships with its aristocratic base will be brittle for a generation once Julius ascends the throne." Leon's voice was steady, measured—the voice of a man who had thought about this and arrived at conclusions he didn't enjoy. "Every house with a daughter of marriageable age saw what happened to the Redgraves and drew their own conclusions."

The Duke's fingers had stopped tapping. His stillness was absolute.

"Julius didn't just humiliate your daughter, Your Grace. He told every noble family in Holfort that their alliances with the Crown are disposable."

Silence filled the study. Outside, a bird called somewhere in the estate's gardens. Through the window behind the Duke, the Partner's black hull dominated the harbour—a leviathan among minnows, its weapon arrays catching the afternoon light.

Duke Vince Rapha Redgrave rose from his chair.

He turned his back on them and looked out the window. Leon could see the Duke's reflection in the glass—jaw set, eyes fixed on the warship that dwarfed his private fleet. The man stood there for ten seconds. Twenty. Long enough that the silence became its own kind of statement.

When he spoke, he didn't turn around.

"Do you understand the position you're in, Baron?"

"Exposed."

"*Violently* exposed." A fraction of something—not quite approval—crossed the Duke's reflected face. "Every house with territorial ambitions now views you as either an asset to acquire or a threat to eliminate. The Crown will want you leashed. The border lords will want you deployed. The merchant guilds will

want your adventuring capacity locked into exclusive contracts." He paused. "And those are the *friendly* parties."

Leon felt Olivia shift beside him. Her fingers had curled against her thighs.

"That's why we're here, Your Grace."

"Yes." The Duke turned from the window. His gaze moved across the three of them, then past them to where his daughter stood by the door. Something shifted behind his expression—brief, private, gone before it could be named. "I know why you're here."

He did not sit. Instead, he looked at his daughter for a long, weighted moment. The kind of look that carried entire conversations in the space between blinks.

Angelica stepped forward.

She walked past the three chairs, past Leon, past Olivia and Mégane, and lowered herself to one knee before her father's desk. Her head bowed. Her hands folded against her chest.

"Father." Her voice was steady, but the steadiness cost her something. "I ask that you hear Baron Bartfort's petition. He and his companions risked their standing, their safety, and their futures on my behalf. I will abide by whatever terms you set."

Leon rose from his chair. Olivia and Mégane followed a heartbeat later. All three bowed—deep, formal, the supplication of a lesser house before a greater one. Leon kept his eyes on the carpet. Beside him, he could feel Olivia's breathing—controlled, deliberate. Mégane's posture was rigid with military precision.

Four people, bowing before a duke. Three of them asking for shelter. One of them asking her father to give it.

The quiet stretched.

"Gilbert."

A single word, spoken without shifting his gaze from the four bent heads before him.

Gilbert set his cup down, rose from his chair, and crossed to a side table where a leather folio waited. He brought it to the desk and opened it, revealing a document written in precise legal hand on heavy parchment. Two copies, side by side. The ink was dry. This had been prepared before they arrived.

"Rise," the Duke said. "All of you."

They straightened. Angelica stood, her expression carefully neutral. Leon caught her eye for a fraction of a second—she gave nothing away.

Vince returned to his seat and laid one hand flat on the open folio.

"The Crown must see consequences," he said. His voice carried the flat weight of a man delivering a verdict he'd spent days composing. "My house must be seen to have disciplined its own, just as the prince will answer for his conduct. Angelica's rank will be reduced. She will hold a baronetcy—a minor house of Redgrave, created for this purpose."

Angelica's jaw tightened. A muscle worked beneath her ear. She said nothing.

"At the same time." The Duke tapped the document once. "This is a wardship and vassalage agreement between House Redgrave and the Barony of Bartfort. You will pledge a percentage of your winnings—the sum on that cart will serve as the initial payment—in exchange for ducal patronage and the protection of my house."

He turned the document toward Leon.

"Read it. All of it. I'll wait."

Leon stepped forward and looked down at the parchment. The language was dense but precise—clauses arranged with the care of a man who'd spent decades drafting instruments exactly like this one. He read through the standard provisions methodically. Obligations of tribute. Expectations of

service in times of conflict. Mutual defence commitments. Access to Redgrave trade networks. Legal representation under the ducal banner.

All reasonable. All expected. The terms of a baron sheltering beneath a duke's authority—generous, even, given the circumstances.

Then he reached a passage set apart from the rest, written in the same precise hand but given its own space on the page, as though the drafter had wanted it to breathe:

The patron house entrusts Angelica Rapha Redgrave to the petitioning party's household. The petitioning party accepts full responsibility for her welfare, standing, and dignity, and guarantees that her position within the household shall not be diminished by any future arrangement.

Leon read it twice. Then a third time.

He understood exactly what it was. Not a trap—a *framework*. A father's clause written into law. Any house that wished to marry a daughter into Leon's household would need to account for this provision. And any house that ignored it would find themselves in legal conflict with the most powerful ducal house in Holfort.

The Duke didn't need a veto over Leon's future marriages. He didn't need to say the word *courtship* or *betrothal* or *engagement*. He just needed this single clause, and the weight of his name behind it, and a permanent seat at every negotiation table that would ever involve Leon Fou Bartfort.

Leon looked up. The Duke's expression was impenetrable—the face of a man who had placed his most important piece on the board and was waiting to see if his opponent understood the move.

Leon understood.

And he didn't mind.

"I accept, Your Grace. And I thank you."

The Duke produced a quill and ink without ceremony. Leon signed both copies. Vince countersigned, his hand steady and unhurried. Gilbert witnessed—his signature flowing beneath his father's in a practised hand, his face betraying nothing.

The Duke set the quill down and leaned back. For the first time, something resembling weariness crossed his features—brief, quickly masked, but present. He looked at his daughter, then away.

"A great many of our allies failed to step forward during this affair, Baron." His tone shifted—harder now, the voice of a man taking inventory. "Houses that owed us debts of honour chose silence. Houses that swore oaths of solidarity discovered pressing business elsewhere." He straightened a sheaf of papers on his desk with deliberate precision. "There will be a reckoning. A cleaning of house."

He let the implication hang. Then his gaze settled on Angelica.

"My daughter will accompany you when you depart. Her household effects will be forwarded to your barony within the week."

Angelica bowed her head. "Yes, Father."

Leon saw the Duke's jaw tighten—just once, just briefly. The micro-expression of a man who was doing the right thing and hating every second of it.

Then Vince rose, and the hardness in his bearing softened by a single, barely perceptible degree.

"But not tonight." He straightened his jacket with a tug that was almost—*almost*—self-conscious. "Her mother would have words with me if I sent our daughter off without a proper meal. And she has expressed..." He paused, selecting the word with care. "*Considerable* interest in meeting the people Angelica has chosen to stand with."

He looked at Leon, then at Olivia, then at Mégane.

"You will stay for dinner. That is not a request."

Leon bowed. "We would be honoured, Your Grace."

The Duke nodded once and moved toward the study doors. Gilbert collected the signed contracts—tucking them into the leather folio with the care of someone handling something far more valuable than parchment—and followed. At the threshold, Gilbert paused. He glanced back at Leon over his shoulder.

"Baron." A beat. The corner of his mouth moved—not quite a smile, but the ghost of one. "Well fought."

Then they were gone, and the study doors closed behind them with a sound like a vault sealing.

Olivia exhaled so hard her cheeks puffed out. Mégane's rigid posture dissolved into something almost human. Leon unclenched hands he hadn't realised he'd been squeezing.

Angelica stood in the centre of the room, staring at the door her father and brother had just walked through. Her hands hung at her sides.

She turned to face them. For the first time since Folkvangr, something raw broke through the composure she'd been wearing like armour. Her eyes were bright. Her lips pressed together, then released.

She opened her mouth.

Closed it.

Opened it again.

"Thank you," she said. Quiet. Rough at the edges.

Olivia crossed the distance between them in three steps and seized Angelica's hands.

"Come on. I need you to tell me absolutely everything about what your mother is like so I don't embarrass myself at dinner."

"You will *absolutely* embarrass yourself at dinner."

"At least let me know what I'm working with!"

Their voices faded down the corridor as Olivia dragged Angelica toward the eastern wing, already firing questions at a pace that would have exhausted a professional interviewer. Mégane watched them go with a faint, private smile, then turned to Leon.

"A good contract, my Lord."

Leon looked at the desk where the ink was still drying on his copy of the document. Through the window, the Partner sat in the harbour like a sleeping beast—its hull dark against the evening sky, its weapons cold, its purpose served.

"We'll see."

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End

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