

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

Story Starts

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**Chapter 10.6 -
Of Pre-Mature Story Progressions
and Wagers**

The sun had long since sunk below the floating island where the capital and the academy perched, leaving the sky bruised in shades of copper and violet above the western horizon. Leon was on his way to his dormitory. Art and Ria flanked him on his left, still carrying the faint chemical tang of air-bike fuel on their riding leathers—or perhaps the memory of that smell was simply persisting in his mind. Meltryllis drifted at his right shoulder, her violet hair gathered back in the loose tail she'd worn for the race, helmet tucked under one arm—Clarice was gracious enough to let them have the body suit and helmet. Her fingers brushed his sleeve occasionally as they walked—not threading through his arm as she had that afternoon, but staying close. Present.

Durga had met them at the junction between the festival pavilions and the residential quarter, materialising from the crowd with the unhurried confidence of someone who'd had a thoroughly satisfying day. Her silver-white hair was pulled into a heavy braid that hung over one shoulder, and a thin cut along her jawline had already sealed itself—the only visible mark from what she described as a busy afternoon.

Leon noted a slight skip in her step, a looseness in her shoulders that he rarely saw outside of the kitchen. The air of contentment around her was unmistakable—the particular satisfaction of a warrior who'd been allowed to fight without restraint and found the experience nourishing.

"Setanta found me around the fourth hour of the afternoon," Durga reported, falling into step beside Art. "We had three bouts before the proctors asked us to stop breaking the arena barriers."

"Three?" Leon raised an eyebrow. "I told him to behave."

Durga giggled as she grabbed Leon's arm with both hands, her body leaning slightly against him. Leon didn't object. Her skin was warm against his.

"He did behave. He only used the staff and a wooden sword." Durga rolled her shoulders, the muscles in her neck popping audibly. "After that, a handful of guardian spirits from the upper-year students came looking for matches. The one contracted to House Morrow lasted nine exchanges. The paired spirits from House Garrett coordinated well enough to push me to seven arms."

Seven out of ten. Leon filed that away.

There was a reason why he and Olivia really wanted first crack at the dungeons they discovered. Usually, the first summons—given that they were noticed by the spirits—had the best potential. At least, that was how it worked in the game Olivia remembered. But so far, all of their guardian spirits were of such significant quality that most of them could fight Karna and Arjuna without assistance. It also helped that the dungeons they'd discovered were of exceptionally high quality; even the subsequent summonings by the rest of the students, adventurers, and attendants who'd participated that day had produced spirits well above the academy average.

"And the students themselves?" he asked.

"None." Durga's blood-red eyes carried something between amusement and disappointment. "The announcement board listed my contract tier. Most read it and walked away."

That tracked. A guardian spirit capable of matching Karna and Arjuna blow-for-blow wasn't the sort of opponent academy students queued up to challenge. The martial exhibition was meant to be entertaining, not traumatic.

"The crowd enjoyed the spectacle, at least," Art offered. Her blonde hair caught the fading sunlight as she glanced back at Durga. "I could hear the cheering from the racetrack—well, before we started the race."

"Mn." Durga inclined her head, peering past Art's shoulder. "How was the race?"

"We lost," Ria said with cheerful bluntness, her tone entirely failing to match the content of the statement. Leon smiled at that, making a mental note to take his guardian spirits out for more activities like this. They'd earned it—all three of them had ridden hard enough to push professional riders to the limit, and none of them seemed diminished by the result. If anything, they seemed brighter for it.

"Melt almost had them in the final lap," Ria added.

"Almost is a word that does a great deal of heavy lifting in that sentence," Meltryllis murmured, though the corner of her mouth twitched upward.

Leon let the conversation wash over him as they crossed the courtyard. The festival crowds had thinned in this direction—most of the attractions concentrated in the central grounds and the eastern wing, where Olivia's host club continued to operate under the management of the male attendants. The dormitory quarter was quiet by comparison, lamplit corridors and the distant hum of conversation from open windows. The transition from festival noise to evening stillness felt like crossing a threshold—the world contracting from spectacle to something more personal, more manageable.

His earpiece crackled.

"Master." Luxion's voice, flat and precise. "I should inform you that your late-afternoon appointment has arrived. She is, however, accompanied by two more guests than expected."

Leon's stride didn't change, but his attention sharpened. "Who?"

"Carla Fou Wayne, of course, accompanied by Brad Fou Field and Chris Fia Arclight. Your brother Nicks admitted them and has been serving tea." A beat. "Additionally—"

"Additionally?"

"Olivia returned to the dormitory three minutes after their arrival. The situation has... developed."

That particular pause from Luxion never preceded good news. Leon exhaled through his nose.

"Developed how?"

"Tensions are rising. Several pieces of the porcelain set your mother gifted you have just been broken."

The barony set. The blue-glazed stoneware his mother had packed for him with her own hands, wrapped individually in cloth and nestled into a crate she'd carried to the carriage herself. One of the few things from the old Bartfort holdings that had made the journey to the border without damage—until now.

Leon's pace increased.

Art and Ria exchanged glances. Durga's hand slipped from his arm, her posture straightening. Meltryllis tucked the helmet tighter under her arm. All four guardian spirits matched his quickened stride without a word, the easy festival atmosphere between them evaporating like dew on hot stone.

"No one acts aggressively," Leon said quietly, his voice pitched for his spirits alone. "Let me handle this."

They reached the dormitory corridor. Leon could hear it before he saw it—a woman's voice, shrill and ascending, aristocratic outrage that treated volume as a substitute for authority.

Leon opened the door.

The common room looked ordinary enough, if you set aside the pool of brown liquid spreading across his table, dripping steadily onto the carpeted floor, and the scatter of porcelain shards beneath it. Two of his mother's blue cups lay shattered on the floor near the serving table, fragments fanned across the carpet in a spray pattern that suggested they'd been knocked from the surface rather than thrown. The matching saucer had broken cleanly in half beside the tea tray, its painted rim still catching the lamplight.

Nicks stood behind the couch where Brad and Chris sat, his posture rigid, his face tight with the helpless frustration of an older brother who'd watched a situation deteriorate well beyond his ability to intervene.

Brad and Chris occupied the guest seating—though *occupied* implied a comfort neither of them possessed. Their eyes were wide, bodies frozen mid-sip, each man holding both teacup and saucer with the careful stillness of people who very much did not want to draw attention to themselves. Leon recognised that posture.

Carla Fou Wayne stood in the centre of the room. She was tall for her age, with navy-blue hair pinned behind her ears, the rest cascading down her back. Brown eyes. Freckles across her nose and cheekbones that her formal visiting attire couldn't quite make severe—the kind of dress worn to deliver messages of social significance, complete with house colours at the collar and embroidered cuffs. She held herself with practised composure, though her colour was high and her breathing hadn't quite settled.

And across from her—Olivia.

Illya had both arms wrapped around Olivia's midsection from behind, her elegant frame braced against the blonde girl's back like a living anchor. Olivia's hands were balled into fists at her sides, her blue eyes fixed on Carla with an intensity that made Leon remember the night they'd first met in a previous life.

"What seems to be the problem?" Leon said.

Every head turned.

Carla Fou Wayne recovered first. She drew herself up, chin lifting, and directed her gaze at Leon with practised authority, currently acting as though she were several ranks above his station.

Carla Fou Wayne held a baronetcy, though as a vassal house to the Offrey earldom, the connection seemed to inflate her own sense of worth.

"Lord Bartfort. I am pleased you've arrived. Your commoner has forgotten her place."

Leon stepped inside. Art, Ria, Meltryllis, and Durga filed in behind him, spreading across the entrance in a loose line that was not quite a formation and not quite casual. The room's atmosphere shifted—four guardian spirits occupied a great deal of space, even standing still, and the weight of their collective presence settled over the common room like a change in air pressure. Carla's eyes flickered across them—one, two, three, four—and something in her posture tightened by a fraction.

"Forgotten her place," Leon repeated. He crossed to the serving table, examined the broken pottery, and picked up the teapot. Still warm. Still intact. He set it down carefully.

"Go on."

"I arranged this meeting through proper channels—through your brother, with advance notice, as protocol demands." Carla gestured toward Nicks, who gave a single confirming nod. "When I arrived, I was received with appropriate courtesy by Sir Nicks and the two knights accompanying me. Your... vassal..." The word came weighted with distaste. "...returned during our wait and immediately took exception to my presence. She had the gall to suggest that my method of securing this audience was underhanded. That I had manipulated your brother to gain access."

Olivia opened her mouth. Illya's arms tightened.

Carla's voice rose half a register. "How dare she—a commoner of no noble lineage, no house, no name worth recording in any register of this

kingdom—talk back to her better? I am Carla Fou Wayne, daughter of Baronet Wayne, vassal to the Earl of House Offrey, and I will not be lectured on propriety by a scholarship peasant who earned her knighthood through another man's charity."

The room went very still.

Carla wasn't finished. The momentum of her indignation had built beyond the point where self-preservation could intervene, and her next words came out in a rush of venom that had the flavour of something rehearsed—an insult she'd been shaping and polishing before she ever walked through the door.

"Truly, Lord Bartfort, you should train your dog more carefully. I understand why the Redgrave girl keeps her around—every noble household needs a pet to amuse them—but at least have the decency to muzzle her when guests are present. Or is it that you keep her for other uses? She certainly dresses the part." Carla's gaze swept Olivia's figure with deliberate contempt. "I imagine a body like that is the only currency a commoner can—"

The air split.

The sound wasn't a crack or a ring. It was a displacement—the atmosphere itself objecting to something occupying space that had been empty a heartbeat ago. Carla Fou Wayne's words died in her throat as a sword materialised between her and the rest of the room.

It was enormous. The blade stood as tall as she did and nearly as wide across its flat, a slab of dark steel that caught the lamplight along an edge ground to a finish that reflected nothing. The tip hovered in the air before her face, perfectly steady, positioned with surgical precision between her eyes. Close enough that if she swayed forward, her skin would touch metal.

Carla didn't sway. She didn't move at all. The colour drained from her face in a single wave, starting at her hairline and descending to her collar, leaving her skin the shade of old parchment.

Brad rose from the couch. His hand came up, fingers already forming the initial configuration of a defensive ward—

Leon looked at him.

It wasn't a glare. It wasn't a threat. Leon simply turned his head and met Brad's eyes with an expression that carried the accumulated weight of a man who had fought beside legends and against them, who had shattered a plateau with a single arrow, who had matched Karna and Arjuna in open combat and walked away standing. The expression said nothing and everything simultaneously.

Brad sat down.

Chris had risen half a heartbeat after Brad, his body coiling with the instinctive readiness of someone trained by the Sword Saint. His hand had found the armrest and gripped it hard enough to whiten his knuckles. He met Leon's gaze—

And sat down.

The common room held its breath. Nicks hadn't moved from his position behind the couch. Art and Ria stood at the entrance with the stillness of soldiers awaiting orders. Meltryllis set her helmet on the side table without sound. Durga's blood-red eyes watched Carla the way a predator watched something that had stumbled into its territory.

Leon walked forward. Each step measured. The carpet absorbed the sound. He stopped beside the sword—beside Carla—and regarded her with an expression that held no anger, no heat, nothing that could be called emotion.

"Lady Wayne," he said. His voice was level. Conversational. He gestured to the chair opposite the couch. "Please. Sit."

Carla's throat worked. Her eyes were nearly crossed, fixed on the blade hovering inches from her face. No sound came out.

"I insist."

As if pulled by invisible strings, the baronet's daughter backed away—rigid, mechanical—and lowered herself into the chair. The sword followed her every movement, maintaining its impossible proximity with frictionless precision.

Leon settled into the chair across from her, hands clasped before him, elbows resting on the armrests.

"Now. Let me see if I understand things clearly." His voice cut through the silence like a cold edge drawn across glass. "You entered my home. You drank my tea. You broke my mother's porcelain."

Carla flinched.

"You were received with courtesy by my brother, even as you brought additional guests without prior notice. You were given the audience you requested—through channels that I would describe as underhanded, given that my brother, as a baronet, would not refuse a house of equal standing backed by an Earl." Leon paused, letting each word settle. "And you repaid that hospitality by calling my vassal knight a dog. You also insulted the sincerity of Lady Angelica Rapha Redgrave, who is under my house's protection and whose life and honour I am duty-bound to defend."

The sword didn't move. It didn't need to. Its presence alone compressed the air in the room until breathing felt like a conscious effort.

"You called her a pet. You implied she earns her place in my household through her body." Leon tilted his head. The motion was slight—barely perceptible—but Carla flinched as though he'd raised his hand. "An insult to those under my protection—those I trust my life to—is a direct insult to me."

Silence.

"So I find myself curious," Leon continued. "What, precisely, did you come here to discuss? Because if your opening position is to degrade the people under my protection whilst seated in my living room, I confess I'm struggling to imagine what productive conversation follows." He let that sit for a beat. "Does the Wayne baronetcy want a skirmish, Lady Wayne?"

It wasn't an idle threat. Conflicts between rival border factions still occurred—mostly between lower nobles, rarely between higher ones, which was precisely why vassalage under a powerful family was preferred. Protection went both ways. But Carla's patron house could only shield her from so much.

Panic flickered across Carla's face. "The House of Earl Offrey—"

"Will not lift a finger for a vassal who insulted a duke's daughter and antagonised the guardian of the Rachele border." Leon leaned forward, resting his chin on his clasped hands. "The best they'll manage is a formal objection in court. The worst I'll receive is a fine in reparations—after I've laid waste to your holdings."

Carla's eyes hadn't left the sword tip. A bead of sweat traced the line of her jaw.

Behind her, Olivia had stopped straining against Illya's hold. The fury in her expression had cooled into something else—something watchful, focused. She was cataloguing every word for later retrieval.

"The sword, Lord Bartfort—" Carla managed. Her voice came thin and compressed, squeezed through a throat locked tight with fear.

"Stays where it is until I decide otherwise." Leon folded his arms.

Brad shifted on the couch. His mouth opened, closed. He glanced at Chris, who gave the faintest shake of his head. Whatever instinct had driven both of them to rise had been thoroughly overwritten by the recognition that intervening now would achieve nothing beyond making themselves targets.

"I—" Carla swallowed. "I came to ask for help."

"And you thought the best way to begin that discussion was to insult my household."

"She provoked—"

"Olivia expressed an opinion about your methods. An opinion I share." Leon's tone didn't change. It remained flat and steady, which made the words land harder. "My brother—a baronet—is not in a position to refuse an audience requested by a house of equal standing backed by an Earl. You knew that when you approached him. Olivia called it underhanded. She was right. You responded by calling her a dog, a pet, and a whore." He let the last word hang in the air, unadorned. "These are not equivalent acts, Lady Wayne. You understand the difference."

Carla's mouth shut.

Leon let the silence stretch. Five seconds. Ten. Long enough for the weight to settle fully on Carla's shoulders, for the sweat to reach her collar, for her carefully arranged navy-blue hair to seem suddenly foolish in the lamplight.

Then he dismissed the sword.

It didn't fade or dissolve. It simply ceased to exist—the steel vanishing between one heartbeat and the next, leaving nothing behind but the memory of its edge and the sound of Carla exhaling a breath she hadn't known she was holding.

Olivia slipped free from Illya's hold, her posture relaxing. She looked ready to comment—her lips parting, one eyebrow lifting in that way that preceded either brilliance or catastrophe.

Leon held her gaze. *'Not now.'*

Olivia pressed her lips together. Nodded once.

Leon turned back to Carla. The woman had recovered a fraction of her composure—enough to straighten her spine, though her hands remained clasped in her lap, knuckles white.

"But I can be reasoned with." Leon's voice shifted—not warmer, but no longer carrying the edge of a blade. "I'll have fresh tea brought. We'll begin again."

And this time, you will speak to every person in this room—regardless of their birth, their rank, or their title—with the respect that a guest owes their host."

He paused.

"Are we clear?"

Carla Fou Wayne sat motionless, her back rigid, her jaw clenched, her eyes bright with the dawning realisation that the minor Viscount she'd come to negotiate with was not, in fact, minor.

"Crystal," she said.

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The darkness behind her eyelids was warm and thick, like being wrapped in velvet. Angelica scratched at the corner of one eye, the crust of sleep flaking away beneath her nail. Her head no longer throbbed. The nausea that had plagued her through the morning till noon had receded to a faint sourness at the back of her throat—manageable, almost pleasant in its absence.

"Good evening, Master. Leon has provided some broth for your hangover."

Britomart's voice came from somewhere to her left, steady and clear as a bell struck in an empty hall.

Angelica sat up. Her eyes remained shut. The mattress shifted beneath her as she raised both arms above her head, fingers spread wide—the universal gesture of a child demanding to be lifted.

Britomart's laugh was a bright, crystalline thing. "Such a troublesome master I have."

Arms slid beneath Angelica's knees and behind her back. She was lifted with no more effort than one might expend on a bundle of linen, and she hooked her own arms around Britomart's neck, pressing her face into the warmth of a shoulder. The motion of being carried rocked her gently—step, step, step—and her groggy mind registered the details in fragments.

Something was missing. The thought surfaced and then submerged again, too slippery for her dulled senses to catch.

A smell reached her. Rich and herbaceous, underlaid with the deep savour of beef stock reduced to its essence. Something woody and earthy—thyme, perhaps, or rosemary. Her stomach, which had spent the day in open revolt, issued a tentative ceasefire and sent up a cautious signal of interest. Angelica leaned further into the shoulder, breathing through her nose.

A door opened. Another few steps. Then the door shut behind them, and Angelica's mind circled back to the absence she'd noticed earlier. Something about the shoulder, no. It was the absence of several things. What those were, she couldn't fathom.

She was lowered onto something soft. The cushioned seat in the alcove by her window—the one she'd had brought from the Redgrave estate, wide enough to curl up on with a book, deep enough to sink into. Her back settled against the padded arm. Her legs stretched across the seat.

"You may let go of me now."

The voice was deep. Not Britomart's register at all.

Angelica's eyes opened.

Leon's face was very close. His mismatched eyes—one gold, one silver—held a quality she could only describe as thoroughly entertained, the corners creased with the effort of suppressing something larger than a smile. The moonlight from the window caught the white of his hair where it fell across his forehead. She was still holding onto his neck.

"Britomart?"

He straightened up, and Angelica's arms fell away from him as though the tendons had been cut. He chuckled—a low sound, brief and genuine, and she found it quite nice despite the circumstances.

"She left just after putting the broth on the table," he said, stepping back.

Angelica's hands flew to her face. The skin was hot beneath her palms. She became acutely aware of every detail of her current state: the wrinkled nightgown she'd been sleeping in since midday, the tangle of blonde hair she could feel brushing against the back of her neck where it had escaped its braid, the pillow-creased warmth of her cheeks.

She had asked Leon Fou Bartfort to carry her. In her sleep-addled state, she had wrapped her arms around his neck and pressed her face into his shoulder and been carried like a child to her reading chair.

Leon reached into his uniform jacket—the formal academy cut, charcoal with silver piping—and withdrew a folded napkin from the inner breast pocket. He crouched before her. With a care that bordered on surgical precision, he pressed the cloth to the corner of her mouth and dabbed gently along the line of her jaw.

Saliva. A trail of it, from sleeping with her mouth open.

"I look dreadful," she said. It came out as a croak, her voice still thick with sleep.

"You look like someone who was trying to experiment with wind magic and failing."

"That isn't—"

"It's a bit cute, actually."

The heat in her face intensified to the point where she was certain it was visible even in the dimness of the room. Leon folded the napkin and tucked it away, then rose and crossed to the small side table where a covered pot sat beside a stack of bowls. He lifted the lid, and the smell of broth intensified—filling the room with warmth, cutting through the staleness of a day spent sleeping off excess.

The moment his back was turned, Angelica whipped her head towards the window. The glass was dark, the room unlit save for moonlight, and the

surface gave back only a vague impression of her reflection. Enough to confirm her worst fears. Her hair was a disaster—half the braid undone, loose strands going in directions that defied the basic principles of gravity. She attacked it with both hands, raking fingers through the tangles, twisting the loose sections back and tucking them behind her ears. It was hopeless without a brush, but she managed something that at least approached presentable before the sound of the ladle against ceramic warned her that Leon was turning back.

He carried the bowl in both hands, steam curling from its surface. He placed it on the low table beside her seat, then gripped the table's edge and dragged it closer until it sat within easy reach.

"Shall I feed you as well?"

Angelica fixed him with a glare.

It did not land. She could feel the heat still sitting high on her cheekbones, could feel the way her lips were pressed together too tightly, could feel that the overall effect was closer to a pout than a withering rebuke. Leon's mouth twitched.

She picked up the bowl with both hands and brought it to her lips.

The first sip was extraordinary. The broth was clear but dense with flavour—beef bone reduced for hours, sharpened with fresh herbs and a whisper of black pepper. It coated her throat and settled in her stomach like a balm, the warmth radiating outward through her chest. She hadn't eaten since the morning, she realised.

"Do you like it?"

She nodded, not trusting herself to speak without her voice breaking.

"Feeling better?"

"Much," she said. Then, after another sip: "Thank you."

Leon settled into the chair across from her—the straight-backed wooden one she used for her desk, dragged to face the alcove. He sat with the easy posture of someone accustomed to waiting, one ankle resting on the opposite knee, his hands folded in his lap.

Silence settled between them. Not the strained variety that demanded filling, but the kind that existed comfortably in the space between two people who had grown used to each other's company. Angelica drank her broth in small, measured sips. The room was dark, lit only by the moon—which hung enormous and pale beyond the window, its light painting silver rectangles across the floor.

From somewhere distant, carried on the evening air, came the sounds of the festival's final hours. Music—a fiddle and a drum, the melody too far away to identify but the rhythm unmistakable. Laughter. The occasional sharp crack of a vendor's starting pistol from one of the shooting galleries. The academy's grounds would be packed with students and visitors making the most of the last evening before the stalls were dismantled and the bunting came down.

"Did anything happen today?" Angelica asked. She kept her voice neutral, conversational, as though she hadn't spent most of the day unconscious.

Leon leaned back in his chair. "Clarice won the race."

"You had a race with Clarice?"

"Her team against Ria, Art, and Melt. Team event. Three on three. Melt came second in the final lap by half an arm's length." He rubbed the back of his neck. "Close thing. Clarice's riders were professional. Art and Ria gave Melt every advantage they could, but Fenn was simply the better pilot on the day."

"And the stakes?"

"She gets to decide what she wants done with Jilk's former assets. We're discussing it over dinner."

The broth bowl paused at Angelica's lips.

'Dinner.'

She lowered the bowl slowly to the table and kept her fingers wrapped around its rim, studying the dark surface of the liquid. The moon's reflection floated there, distorted by the faintest tremor in her hands.

Clarice Fia Atlee had won a dinner with Leon. As a wager. Which meant she'd engineered the entire race specifically to create a private setting for negotiation—or something beyond negotiation. The woman had always been sharp, sharper than her station demanded. Daughter of a newly elevated Earl, betrothed to Jilk until the prince's circle abandoned their obligations, and now circling Leon's orbit with the focused attentiveness of someone who'd identified an opportunity and intended to seize it.

"How nice for her," Angelica said. The words came out with more edge than she intended.

Leon's expression didn't change, but something in his posture shifted—a fractional tilt of the head, the kind of movement that meant he'd noticed and was choosing not to comment.

"What else?" she asked, steering the conversation forward before the silence could make her irritation conspicuous.

"Carla Fou Wayne came to see me."

Angelica's fingers tightened on the bowl. "The Wayne baronet's daughter. She's Offrey's vassal."

"She is. Arrived with Brad and Chris in tow. Nicks arranged the meeting—though 'arranged' is generous. She leveraged his rank to force an audience." Leon's jaw set briefly. "And then she called Livia a dog."

The bowl clinked against the table as Angelica set it down. "She did *what?*"

"And questioned your sincerity in your friendship with Livia."

"A dog. A pet. And several other things I won't repeat in polite company."
Leon's tone was flat, stripped of the humour that usually coloured his speech.
"I made the situation clear. Then we started over."

"And after the new beginning?"

"Pirates. The Wayne territory's been losing merchant vessels along their trade corridor—three in the past month, plus two more from minor houses under Offrey's umbrella. They don't have the naval capacity to suppress it, and the Earl's been slow to respond. Carla came to request assistance."

Angelica reached for the broth again, though she held it without drinking. Her mind had already begun working through the implications, the pieces arranging themselves with the ease of long practice. She'd spent eleven years being groomed for court politics. The instincts didn't simply vanish because the title had changed.

"And you accepted."

"I did."

"Despite her insulting Olivia and myself in your own living room."

"Despite that, yes."

Angelica studied his face in the moonlight. The sharp lines of his jaw, the pale hair that still startled her when it caught the light at certain angles—so different from the dark-haired boy she'd met in the cosmic dungeon, and yet unmistakably the same person beneath.

"The deployments," she said, shifting to the practical. "How are you managing coverage?"

Leon counted them off on his fingers. "Everyone except Meltryllis, who volunteered to accompany you as additional guard. Olivia's lending Illya for the academy and our holdings here. Erica returns to the Rachele border with Mégane—Pollux and Ria volunteered to go with them."

"Ria volunteered?"

Angelica noted, of course, Erica's ongoing hesitance with the two cosmic fairies.

"Insisted, actually. Something about wanting to ensure Princess Erica's safety personally." Leon shrugged. "I think she just wants to reduce the awkwardness through her own means. I didn't press."

Angelica filed that away.

She frowned instead at the name that had started this chain of implications.

"Leon."

"Hm."

"The Wayne request."

"Brad and Chris escorted her. According to them, they accepted her request through the guild, which puts a little more legitimacy behind it."

"The Offrey daughter." Angelica set the bowl down with deliberate care.

"Stephanie. You remember her from the host club—she caused a disturbance that required the Queen's intervention. And after that, all throughout the festival—" She stopped, choosing her words. "She's been posturing. Publicly. Against me, against Olivia, against your household. Small provocations, nothing actionable, but consistent."

Leon's eyes narrowed a fraction.

"And now her patron house's vassal arrives seeking military assistance from the very person Stephanie has been antagonising." Angelica let the implication hang. "That's either a remarkable coincidence or someone is testing the waters."

"I know."

"You accepted anyway."

"That's the reason I accepted."

She blinked.

Leon leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. "If there's a trap buried in this request, I'd rather spring it now—on my terms, with my people deployed in positions I chose—than let Offrey and Wayne spend another month building something more elaborate." His fingers laced together.

"So you're being proactive."

"Yes."

Angelica picked up her broth again. She drank slowly, considering. The logic was sound—characteristically so.

But it still sat poorly with her. The Offrey name carried weight in the court faction that had aligned against Duke Redgrave during the succession disputes, and Stephanie's provocations—however petty—bore the hallmarks of someone testing boundaries on behalf of a patron rather than acting on personal spite.

"Be careful," she said. "Offrey doesn't move without calculating the cost first. If their vassal is asking you for help, it's because someone decided the benefit of placing you in their debt outweighs the risk of you discovering whatever they're hiding."

"Noted." Leon's voice carried that quality it assumed when he'd already reached the same conclusion and was simply allowing someone else to arrive there independently. She found it both reassuring and mildly infuriating.

A shriek split the air.

Angelica's hand went to her hip—where Reiterpallasch would have been, had she been wearing anything other than a nightgown. The sound climbed higher, a thin whistling keen that vibrated in her chest, and for a single frozen instant the room was still.

Then the window blazed white.

The explosion came a heartbeat later—not the sharp crack of ordnance but the deep, resonant thump of something detonating high overhead. Colour flooded through the glass. Red first, then gold, then a cascade of green and blue that painted the walls and ceiling in shifting bands of light.

Fireworks.

The second rocket followed the first, a spiral of silver sparks that corkscrewed upward and burst into a chrysanthemum of violet and white. Then a third, a fourth, a volley of them climbing in staggered sequence until the sky beyond the window was alive with colour and sound.

Angelica exhaled. Her hand dropped from her hip. She turned to the window and watched the display unfold above the academy grounds—great flowering spheres of light that bloomed and faded, their reflections rippling across the glass and the surface of her abandoned broth.

"The closing ceremony," she said softly.

"Mm." Leon had risen from his chair. He stood beside the alcove, his shoulder against the window frame, watching the sky with an expression she couldn't quite read. The fireworks painted his white hair in alternating washes of colour—crimson, gold, emerald, violet—each burst transforming him momentarily into something from a stained-glass window.

"Well, you kept your promise," she said.

He glanced down at her.

"Britomart beat me to it," he said. "Or rather, she woke you and then left me to deal with the consequences."

A rocket burst directly above them—close enough that the boom rattled the window in its frame. White light flooded the room, and for an instant every detail was visible: the rumpled sheets on the bed behind her, the steam still

rising from the broth pot, the napkin Leon had used to wipe her face now folded neatly in his breast pocket.

She became aware, in that moment of perfect illumination, that she was smiling. Not the practised smile she wore in court or the brittle one she'd maintained through months of the prince's public rejections. An unguarded thing, small and warm and entirely involuntary, born from broth and moonlight and the simple fact that Leon Fou Bartfort had kept a small promise on a festival night.

The light faded. Colour returned—a cascade of golden rain drifting downward in slow arcs, trailing sparks that winked out one by one like dying stars.

"It's beautiful," she said.

Leon said nothing. He watched the sky, and the fireworks reflected in his mismatched eyes like distant battles—bright, fierce, and gone before you could hold them.

Angelica pulled her knees up and wrapped her arms around them, settling deeper into the cushioned seat. The broth sat warm in her stomach. The festival's final chorus of explosions rolled across the grounds below, each detonation sending fresh waves of colour through the darkened room. She watched them all—the spirals and the chrysanthemums and the great spreading fans of white phosphor that hung in the air for impossible seconds before dissolving into smoke and memory.

Somewhere beneath the sound and colour, in the spaces between each burst, the distant fiddle played on.

==&<o>&=-

End

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