

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

### **Story Starts**

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### **Chapter 11.1 - The Offrey Gambit**

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Carla Fou Wayne bit into the nail of her thumb until copper bloomed across her tongue, the nail flushed against the flesh without a millimetre to spare. The communication stone sat in her palm, still warm from the transmission she'd just sent—coordinates, vessel classification, estimated speed, crew complement. Everything Stephanie had demanded she relay to Aldric Draake.

She closed her fist around the stone and pressed it against her sternum, feeling the residual heat bleed through the fabric of her travelling jacket. Done. The message was away, skipping across relay stones towards whatever stretch of contested sky the Blackfleet Flotilla currently haunted. No retrieving it now.

The Blackfleet. She'd grown up hearing stories of Aldric Draake's raiders the way children in the interior heard stories about demonic beasts—distant, terrible, and safely confined to the borders. The Flotilla harassed shipping lanes across three kingdoms, preyed on convoys along the Rachele frontier, and had once—in an act of breathtaking lunacy that cemented Draake's reputation as either brilliant or suicidal—launched a full assault against the Alzer Republic's outer defences. They hadn't penetrated, naturally. The Republic's layered legendary defence stood strong. But the sheer audacity of the attempt had elevated him from regional nuisance to continental legend. Other pirate captains raided merchant vessels and fled at the first sign of military response. Aldric Draake attacked sovereign nations and survived.

And now Carla Fou Wayne, daughter of a baronet vassal to House Offrey, had just handed that man the location and heading of a Holfort viscount's flagship.

She wanted to be sick.

The cabin pitched gently as the transport adjusted course. Through the porthole, the darkened sky stretched endlessly eastward, punctured by the distant lights of settlement clusters on the floating islands below. Somewhere behind them lay the academy, and ahead—past her father's territory, past the shipping lanes where Wayne-flagged vessels had been disappearing for months—lay the contested reaches where the kingdom's authority frayed to nothing and men like Draake operated with impunity.

Carla withdrew her thumb from her mouth and examined the damage. A crescent of torn skin at the nail bed, beading red. She pressed it against her trouser leg and stared at the far wall.

How did it come to this?

The answer, when she traced the chain of decisions backward, was depressingly simple. Stephanie Fou Offrey had asked, and Carla had obeyed. The same as always. The same as every other vassal daughter who'd grown up in House Offrey's orbit, attending their functions and wearing their colours and learning, through a thousand small demonstrations, that the Offreys' wishes and one's own interests were meant to be synonymous.

The Offreys hadn't always been nobility. Three generations back, they'd been merchant-traders—wealthy ones, certainly, with ledgers thicker than most lords' land deeds and trade networks spanning half the continent. But merchants all the same, without title or crest or the right to hold territory. They'd changed that the way they changed everything: with money. Strategic marriages into indebted noble families. Loans extended to houses teetering on insolvency, repaid not in coin but in political favour and marital contracts. A daughter wed here, a son adopted there, each union pulling the Offrey name one rung higher until the Crown itself had little choice but to recognise what gold had already accomplished. The marquise title, when it came, was less an elevation than a formalisation. Everyone understood what the Offreys were. Nobody could afford to say it.

Stephanie had been the one to propose the meeting with Bartfort. She'd laid it out with the breezy confidence that characterised everything she did—the smile that never quite reached her eyes, the casual dismissal of objections, the way she made even unreasonable requests sound like favours she was granting you.

"He's soft," Stephanie had said, examining her nails in that way she had when she wanted you to feel peripheral to the conversation. "Everyone who's dealt with him says the same thing. It's the women around him who bare their teeth. The scholarship girl, the Redgrave daughter, that guild leader's brat from the frontier. Remove them from the equation and Bartfort himself is perfectly reasonable."

"And Angelica?"

"What about her? She's a baroness now. She barely outranks your father. The Redgraves can't shield her forever—they traded her away to recover their own position. Push against her, and she'll fold. She has nothing left except what Bartfort permits her."

It had sounded so logical. Angelica Rapha Redgrave—demoted, displaced, dependent on the goodwill of a viscount who'd risen too fast to have built the political foundations necessary to sustain his position. The girl who'd been humiliated by the Crown Prince, stripped of her engagement, and reduced to a ward in someone else's household. Surely such a person could be pressured. Surely the weight of a marquise house, however indirect, would suffice.

Carla pressed her thumbnail into the pad of her opposite finger, hard enough to leave a white crescent.

The sword had appeared without warning.

Not a normal blade—she'd seen those often enough, at tourneys and training grounds and in the hip-scabbards of every second noble who fancied themselves martial. This had been something else entirely. A thing that materialised from empty air, enormous and angular and radiating a pressure that made the room feel smaller, the ceiling lower, the walls closer. Its edge

had stopped close enough to her face that she'd felt the displaced air brush her eyelashes.

And behind it, Leon Fou Bartfort had looked at her with eyes that held absolutely no anger. That was what stayed with her. Not fury, not indignation, not even contempt. Just a flat, measured assessment, as though he were calculating the precise amount of force required to follow through and finding the arithmetic trivially simple.

"I will lay waste to your father's territory. The guild will censure me, the Crown will fine me, and by the time the courts have finished deliberating whether my response was proportionate, there won't be enough of your holdings left to argue over."

He'd said it the way someone might remark on the weather. A statement of conditions rather than a threat. If this, then that. Cause and consequence, delivered without heat.

The worst part—the part that kept her thumb between her teeth and her stomach in knots—was that he'd then agreed to help.

She'd expected the meeting to end after the sword. Expected to be thrown out, reported to the guild, perhaps even detained. Instead, Bartfort had dismissed the blade, sat down, and asked her to explain the pirate situation from the beginning. He'd listened. Asked questions—specific ones, about shipping routes, attack patterns, the frequency of Blackfleet raids against Wayne-flagged vessels, whether the attacks clustered along particular transit corridors or struck at random. When she'd finished, he'd nodded once and told her he'd deploy.

He'd even been civil to Brad and Chris.

She'd watched the three of them interact with the wary fascination of someone observing predators share a watering hole. The prince's former retainers—demoted, stripped of holdings, posted to the brutal Principality border under Field Marshal Barret—had sat in the dormitory of the man who'd put them there. And Bartfort had poured them tea. Actual tea, brewed

properly, served in cups that matched. Brad had accepted his with the stiff formality of someone navigating a minefield. Chris had simply drunk it, his expression unreadable. And Bartfort had discussed the pirate threat as though they were colleagues reviewing operational intelligence rather than adversaries with unfinished history.

*'He's soft,'* Stephanie had said.

Stephanie was wrong.

The vessel they'd taken from the capital was one of Bartfort's—a patrol craft, mid-sized, armed but not ostentatious. One of three that Carla had learned were recently commissioned, built to free the Partner for the viscount's direct use. He'd offered passage as a matter of course when Carla explained that her father's territory lay along the route to the Rachelle border. No suspicion. No conditions. Just logistics.

She'd spent three days aboard his ship, eating food prepared by his crew, sleeping in a cabin assigned with the same casual efficiency he applied to everything, and rehearsing her cover story until it sat comfortably in her mouth: grateful vassal daughter, desperate father, pirate-menaced shipping lanes. All true, technically. The raids on Wayne-flagged vessels were real. The losses were real. Three ships in the past month, two more from allied vassal houses. Her father's letters to the regional garrison had produced nothing but polite acknowledgements and promises of eventual patrols that never materialised.

What her father didn't know—what Carla herself hadn't known until Stephanie told her—was that the raids were manufactured. The Blackfleet Flotilla hit Wayne convoys because the Offreys told them to. Every lost vessel, every destroyed cargo, every frightened sailor's testimony before the guild tribunal had been orchestrated to accomplish one thing: make House Wayne desperate enough to seek a protector. And when the Offreys stepped forward to offer that protection—well. Everyone understood how protectorates worked. You kept your name and your territory, but your house colours flew beneath

theirs, your trade routes ran through their ledgers, and your children married whom they were told.

Half of House Offrey's current vassal network had been acquired the same way. Create a problem. Let it fester. Present the solution. Carla's father, with his mineral catalogues and his irrigation disputes, had never thought to ask why pirates who operated three kingdoms away had suddenly developed such a specific interest in a baronet's modest shipping operation.

But then Bartfort had been given the Rachele border, and the Offreys had seen an opportunity too valuable to waste on a mere protectorate grab.

When the patrol craft had docked at the Bartfort viscounty's harbour, Carla's first coherent thought had been relief. She'd seen the Partner from the academy promenade during the school festival—Bartfort's flagship had cast a shadow across half the capital's port district, its hull stretching from dock to distant dock, gun emplacements lining its flanks in staggered rows, the bridge tower rising from its spine like the crown of some vast metal leviathan. The memory had sat in her chest like a stone for the entire voyage. But the vessel they'd been travelling on was substantial without being monstrous. The kind of ship the Blackfleet had engaged before and won.

Then Bartfort had explained, with the casual indifference of someone discussing logistics rather than military assets, that this wasn't the Partner. This was one of his patrol craft. He was escorting Princess Erica to the Rachele border, and they'd be transferring to the Partner at the forward anchorage.

Carla had nearly kicked herself right there in front of the princess.

She'd forgotten. In all of Stephanie's meticulous planning—the communication stones, the relay schedules, the mercenary contracts—neither of them had properly accounted for the fact that Leon Fou Bartfort was the man the Crown had chosen to hold the Rachele border. That he answered directly to the King and Queen. That a princess of the blood served as his steward. The Offreys had been so focused on his rapid elevation and the political vulnerabilities it

created that they'd neglected to weigh what that elevation actually meant: the Crown trusted him, specifically, with the kingdom's most volatile frontier.

She'd watched him during the boarding process at the anchorage. The way he'd allocated cabins and established watch rotations with the casual efficiency of someone who'd done it a hundred times. The way Brad and Chris had fallen into the rhythm of his command structure without apparent friction, as though the hierarchy established at Folkvangr had simply persisted. Chris had even offered suggestions about perimeter protocols that Bartfort incorporated without comment.

These were men who'd fought each other to the point of near-death on an enchanted island. Now they were sharing a vessel and discussing patrol routes over sandwiches.

The transport shuddered—a change in engine pitch as they began their descent towards the forward anchorage. Through the porthole, Carla could make out the running lights of other vessels in loose formation. Bartfort's patrol craft, and beyond them, the lights of the Fraser territories. The Frasers—a marquise house of equal standing to the Offreys, a family who had held the Rachelle border for five generations before the Crown reassigned it to Bartfort's viscounty. Rather than resent the change, they'd welcomed it. Their territories now sat adjacent to his, their mothers had become fast friends, and the Fraser matriarch had made no secret of her relief at being freed from the burden of border defence.

A marquise house, grateful to the very viscount the Offreys planned to rob.

Carla's stomach made a low, miserable sound. She pressed her palm flat against it and breathed through her nose.

Her father didn't know.

That thought circled back with metronomic regularity, a pendulum she couldn't stop. Baronet Wayne—a man who spent his evenings cataloguing mineral samples and his mornings arguing with his steward about irrigation schedules—had no idea that his daughter had entered into a conspiracy with

the Offrey family to engineer a pirate ambush against a sitting Holfort viscount. He thought Carla had gone to the academy festival to network with her peers and perhaps secure a favourable introduction for marriage negotiations. He thought the pirate raids on their shipping were a persistent but manageable problem—bad luck, poor patrol coverage, the usual hazards of operating trade routes near contested airspace. It had never occurred to him that someone might be paying for his misfortune.

Carla's father was, in many respects, an imbecile. But he was a kind one, and he didn't deserve to lose his territory because his daughter had let Stephanie Offrey convince her that threatening a man who could materialise swords from thin air was a sound political strategy.

And she had a distinct feeling that if this went wrong, House Wayne would take the fall. Houses like the Offreys didn't absorb consequences. They distributed them.

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The plan was straightforward—at least, it had sounded straightforward when Stephanie outlined it over afternoon tea, using sugar cubes to represent fleet positions on a linen napkin.

Draake's fleet would intercept the Partner in the transit corridor between Wayne and Rachele territories—contested airspace where kingdom response times stretched to hours. The Blackfleet would engage at range, pinning the vessel and drawing out its defensive capabilities. Under cover of the bombardment, a boarding force—a dozen suits of power armour operated by veterans cashiered from various military services, mercenaries the Offreys had contracted through three layers of intermediaries—would breach the hull and engage Bartfort directly. Whatever guardian spirits he'd brought would be occupied by the Flotilla's own bonded combatants. Numbers and concentrated firepower would do the rest.

Once Bartfort was subdued, the Offreys would negotiate his ransom through back channels. The demands would be precise: dungeon access rights,

territorial concessions, perhaps even the wardship of one of his companions. The ransom would be paid, Bartfort would be "rescued" by loyalist forces that the Offreys had helpfully mobilised, and House Offrey would emerge as indispensable allies to the Crown—the family that had marshalled resources to recover a kidnapped viscount when the military couldn't respond in time.

And the Partner—that vast, gun-studded cathedral of a warship—would quietly change hands. After all, the Crown could hardly leave such military power in the custody of a viscount who'd been irresponsible enough to lose it to pirates. The Offreys would volunteer to administer it. Temporarily, of course. These things had a way of becoming permanent.

Stephanie had laid each sugar cube with the precision of a chess player, her smile never faltering, her tea growing cold beside her.

Carla uncurled her fist and stared at the communication stone again. Its surface had cooled to ambient temperature. Just a polished grey rock, indistinguishable from a thousand others. She turned it between her fingers.

The plan had sounded clean. Controlled. The kind of operation that powerful houses conducted as a matter of course—the invisible machinery of aristocratic politics grinding along beneath the surface of polite society. The Offreys had done similar things before. Everyone knew it. Nobody said it.

But that had been before Carla sat across from Leon Fou Bartfort and watched him conjure a weapon that made every hair on her body stand on end. Before she'd looked into mismatched eyes that calculated destruction with the detachment of a surveyor measuring land.

*'Hopefully the pirate fleet and their hired help will be enough.'*

The thought rang hollow even as she formed it. Like striking a bell and hearing the crack that meant the metal had already fractured. She knew—in the bone-deep way that bypassed rational analysis and spoke directly to the animal brain that had kept her ancestors alive on the floating rocks—that something was wrong with this plan. Not a specific flaw she could articulate. Nothing she could point to and say *there, that's where it fails*. Just a pervasive

sense of wrongness that had settled into her stomach during the meeting at Bartfort's dormitory and refused to leave.

The sword. The tea. The way he'd accepted her request without hesitation, as though he'd been waiting for someone to give him a reason to patrol that specific stretch of sky.

Carla bit her thumbnail again, tasting copper.

The transport's descent alarm chimed—two short tones, then a long one. They were approaching the forward anchorage, where the Partner waited. She'd have to leave this cabin, walk to the boarding ramp, and step onto the flagship of the man she was conspiring to destroy. She'd have to smile. Maintain her cover as the grateful vassal daughter whose father's shipping lanes needed protection. Brad and Chris would play their parts without knowing there were parts to play—the rehabilitated knights seeking to prove their worth through guild commissions, doing honest work for a man who'd given them honest tea.

And somewhere in the dark sky beyond the border markers, Aldric Draake and the Blackfleet Flotilla would be moving into position. Waiting for her signal.

Carla pocketed the communication stone and stood. Straightened her jacket. Checked her reflection in the porthole glass—navy-blue hair escaping its pins, dark circles under brown eyes, and a bitten-raw thumbnail that she tucked into her fist.

She looked, she thought, exactly like what she was.

Someone in over her head.

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**End**

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