



**THE WORLD OF
OTOME GAME
IS A SECOND CHANCE
FOR BROKEN SWORDS**

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is a Second Chance for Broken Swords**

Story Starts

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Chapter 9.2 -

Of Vigils and Festivals

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Story Starts

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Chapter 9.2 -

Of Vigils and Festivals

The morning air tasted of coffee and sugar-glazed pastries.

Marie Fou Lafan stood at the gates of the capital's lower commercial district, her travelling cloak draped over her forearms, and breathed in the scent of civilisation. Holfort's capital spread before her in tiered layers of pale stone and dark timber, its buildings climbing the hillside towards the palace district like supplicants ascending towards a throne. Airships drifted between the upper spires—merchant haulers, noble pleasure-barges, the occasional military cutter on patrol. Below them, the streets churned with bodies.

She'd made it.

Marie adjusted the strap of her rucksack and walked into the crowd.

Three days early. Three days before the entrance ceremony. Three days before everything begins.

Her pulse thrummed beneath her jaw. Not from exertion—she'd spent six hours on a cramped merchant vessel to reach the capital, and her legs ached from sitting cross-legged on cargo netting—but from anticipation. Pure, undiluted, stomach-flipping anticipation. The kind that made her fingers tingle and her thoughts race in circles that always, always returned to the same destination.

The reverse harem ending.

She'd been working towards it for years now. Seven, if she counted from the moment of awakening—that first disorienting gasp in a child's body, staring at unfamiliar hands, surrounded by voices speaking a language she shouldn't have understood but did. Seven years of grinding, scheming, saving, training, and memorising every scrap of knowledge she'd carried from before.

Before.

Marie rarely thought about before anymore. Not deliberately. The memories existed somewhere in the back of her skull, filed away like the old shed she'd never visited again.

She shook her head. No point dwelling.

This was her life now. Marie Fou Lafan, daughter of a minor viscount whose territory produced nothing of note except mediocre grain and crushing debt. She'd woken up in this body knowing exactly where she was, exactly what world this was, and exactly what she needed to do.

The game. *That* game.

She remembered the day it released. She'd been so excited—the main capture targets voiced by her favourite voice actors, the floating-island setting, the branching routes. She'd bought it on launch day and given up within a

week, defeated by the punishing difficulty curves and cryptic flag requirements.

Shirou and Illya had been the ones to crack it.

During those final months, when the aftermath of Fuyuki had caught up with them and their bodies were failing—both of them confined to adjustable hospital beds, their world shrinking to the size of a shared room—they'd played it together. Route after route. Ending after ending. Working through every branching path whilst Taiga left for work each morning to keep the money coming in, never knowing what they were doing.

They'd completed every ending. Every single one. Including the reverse harem route.

It had been a gift. Their way of saying thank you—the completed save file, every achievement unlocked, waiting for her on the laptop when she came home.

And of course, just as they'd finished—just as they'd given her this one small, perfect thing—

They died.

And then—

Stop.

Marie pressed her thumb against her sternum, a grounding habit she'd developed years ago. The pressure centred her. She exhaled through her nose and refocused on the street ahead.

She'd arrived at the capital three days early for a reason, and that reason was not to stand around wallowing in a past life.

Her mind drifted back, as it always did when she was nervous, to the beginning. The real beginning—the morning after the parade, when her father had brought her home from the capital with his assessment filed and his purse

lighter, and seven-year-old Marie Fou Lafan had sat on the edge of her bed and thought, very calmly: *'Assess. Plan. Execute.'*

The assessment had been quite depressing.

House Lafan's finances made even the poorest barons look prosperous. Their territory sat on a middling floating island with one dungeon that had produced nothing but magic stones—no guardian spirit in over half a century. No significant trade routes. A population hovering around three thousand souls. Marie's father was a quiet man who drank too much. Her mother spent most of her energy managing the household's debts. There were no ships to spare, no adventuring equipment, no connections to the guild, and no money for any of it.

Marie had wanted to fly straight to the coordinates she remembered—the floating islands over the ocean, the hidden dungeons, the caches of Lost Items that the game's protagonist had used to complete the reverse harem ending. She knew where they were. Roughly. The game's map had been detailed enough, and her memory—sharpened by twenty years of obsessive replays—had preserved the critical waypoints with surprising fidelity.

But knowing where treasure lay and reaching it were different beasts entirely.

She'd had to admit, with considerable bitterness, that game knowledge didn't translate to practical navigation. Air travel had no landmarks the way roads did—no signposts, no familiar hills, no "turn left at the old oak tree." You needed charts, instruments, and experience she didn't possess. And that was before accounting for the fact that she had no ship, no money for a ship, and no combat ability beyond kendo forms that were useless against dungeon creatures that didn't politely wait for you to assume a stance before attacking.

She'd discovered, with additional frustration, that she had no idea how magic actually worked. The game had abstracted it into menus and cooldowns and mana bars. Reality offered no such conveniences.

So Marie had ground.

Not metaphorically. Literally. Every day, from her eighth year onward, she descended into the Lafan territory's sole dungeon—a regular fifty-floor deep dungeon that the local adventurers used for training and the occasional materials run. The monsters were weak. Slimes, lesser constructs, the odd crystalline beetle. Nothing that would threaten a competent adventurer.

Marie had not been a competent adventurer.

She'd been an eight-year-old girl with a wooden practice sword and memories of kendo from a previous life. The slimes had nearly killed her twice in the first month. She'd crawled home covered in caustic residue, her arms shaking, her lungs burning, and she'd gone back the next morning.

By ten, she could clear the first floor alone.

By twelve, she could clear all three.

The money had come slowly—dungeon drops sold through the guild at pittance rates, odd jobs around the territory, a ruthless savings regime that left her wearing patched clothes and eating whatever the kitchens had leftover. Every spare dia went into two things: hiring adventurers to spar with her, and bribing them to teach her what they knew.

She'd learned swordcraft from a retired adventurer who'd lost her left hand to a mimic. Wind magic from a drunk former court mage who'd been exiled for sleeping with the wrong person's wife. Fire manipulation from a guild journeyman who charged double because Marie was a noble's daughter and he assumed she could afford it.

None of it stuck the way healing magic did.

Marie had discovered her affinity almost by accident. She'd cut her palm on a broken dungeon crystal and instinctively pushed mana into the wound, mimicking what she'd seen priests do in the game. The flesh had knitted shut in seconds. Clean, painless, complete.

She'd stared at her unmarked hand for a very long time.

Then she'd sought out Father Matthias.

The old priest had been living in a cottage at the edge of Lafan territory for longer than anyone could remember. He'd left the Temple decades ago under circumstances he refused to discuss, and the villagers treated him with the wary respect afforded to hermits who might be saints or might be madmen. Marie had knocked on his door with a basket of bread and a smile that could melt iron and asked him to teach her everything he knew about holy magic.

He'd said no.

She'd come back the next day.

He'd said no again.

She'd come back every day for three weeks, each time with bread, each time with that smile, each time with a new argument for why he should help her. On the twenty-second day, he'd opened the door before she knocked, taken the bread, and said, "Fine. But you're sweeping my floor first."

Father Matthias was patient, thorough, and mercilessly critical. Under his guidance, Marie's healing magic refined from brute-force tissue regeneration into something elegant—layered spells that could diagnose, prioritise, and treat multiple injuries simultaneously. She learned to sense the body's architecture through mana, reading damage like a physician reading symptoms.

And then she'd made her own discovery.

If healing magic accelerated natural processes—cell division, tissue growth, metabolic repair—then reversing the polarity should, theoretically, decelerate them. Or invert them entirely. Force cells to consume themselves. Accelerate necrosis. Turn the body's own regenerative impulse into a weapon.

Father Matthias had gone very quiet when she'd demonstrated it on a dungeon slime.

"That," he'd said, watching the creature dissolve from the inside out, "is not something the Temple would approve of."

"Good thing neither of us is with the Temple, then."

He hadn't argued.

Now, at eighteen, Marie could clear all fifty floors of the Lafan dungeon within two to three days, alone. She was no braggart, but she knew her own worth—she was a formidable adventurer. Not the fastest. Not the physically strongest. But she could heal through almost anything, she could un-heal through most of the rest, and she had a depth of mana that most academy graduates would envy.

Now she was here. The capital. And she had one goal in mind.

Well—five.

Five love interests—Prince Julius, Jilk, Greg, Brad, and Chris—all captured before the fourth-year crisis event. That was the core objective. Everything else was support.

The Lost Items would help. Legendary equipment, rare materials, unique weapons—she'd need all of it if she was to be the protagonist of this story.

And then there were the three holy items. The real prize. One held by a notorious pirate confederation beyond the kingdom's borders. One buried in the capital's Grand Dungeon, behind layers of traps and guardians that would require a proper raid party to breach. And the last sat in the Temple's inner sanctum, guarded by the institution's full ecclesiastical authority.

Marie had plans for each. Detailed, step-by-step, contingency-laden plans that she'd refined over years of sleepless nights and dungeon-floor brainstorming sessions.

But all of that could wait.

The catastrophic events—the ones that could end the world—didn't trigger until fourth year. She had time. Three full years to adventure, gather resources, and position herself.

First, though, she needed to begin the capture routes.

And that started today.

Marie had checked, of course.

The protagonist—Olivia, the commoner scholarship student, the golden-haired saint-in-waiting who was supposed to arrive at the academy and stumble her way into the hearts of five noble idiots—was nowhere to be found.

Marie had spent the first few hours after arriving patrolling the districts near the academy, checking every inn and boarding house she could think of. Today was a canon event—the inciting scene for the prince's capture route. If Olivia was going to appear, it would be here, now, in the capital, three days before the entrance ceremony.

Nothing. No sign of her.

Strange. Possibly concerning.

And entirely convenient.

The game's protagonist was a cipher anyway—a blank slate for the player to project onto. If Olivia wasn't here, that simply meant the role was unfilled. And if the role was unfilled...

Marie could fill it herself.

'I am filling it myself. That's always been the plan.'

The protagonist's presence was irrelevant to the reverse harem route. What mattered was proximity, opportunity, and the right words at the right time.

Which brought her to a few hours later. And the square.

The Whitecliff Plaza sat at the junction of the capital's commercial and academic districts, a broad cobblestoned expanse ringed by kiosks and vendors and dotted with ironwork benches beneath ornamental trees. Students drifted through in clusters—upperclassmen returning early, first-years exploring the city with wide eyes and fat purses. The air smelled of roasted meat and spiced cider and the particular ozone tang that hung over any city with heavy airship traffic.

Marie moved through the crowd with practised ease. Her cloak was plain, her rucksack unremarkable. She looked like what she was—a minor noble's daughter with limited funds and no retinue.

She bought skewers from a corner kiosk. Four different kinds: spiced lamb, honeyed chicken, peppered boar, and something the vendor claimed was beef but the aftertaste was almost certainly goat. She paid with copper, tucked three skewers into her off hand, and bit into the fourth as she walked.

The lamb was good. Fatty, well-seasoned, with a char that crackled between her teeth.

She wandered. Browsed a trinket stall. Examined a display of second-hand practice swords. Paused at a bookshop window and pretended to read the titles on display whilst her eyes swept the plaza in measured arcs.

'There.'

Her heart lurched sideways in her chest.

A lone figure on a bench near the plaza's eastern fountain. Male, lean, with the build of someone trained in formality rather than labour. Cap pulled low—but not low enough to fully hide the vivid blue hair tucked beneath it. Sunglasses that were slightly too fashionable for someone trying to be inconspicuous. A cloth face mask covering everything from the bridge of his nose to his chin.

He sat with his legs stretched out and his arms draped along the bench's back, the posture of someone who wanted to look relaxed but whose spine

held a tension that betrayed him. His head turned slowly—left, right, left—tracking the crowd with the mechanical regularity of a lighthouse beam.

He was watching everyone.

And no one was watching him.

Marie recognised him immediately. Not from his face—the disguise hid that well enough—but from the way he sat. The particular slouch. The restless fingers drumming against the bench's iron frame. The way his gaze lingered on couples and friend-groups and laughing strangers with an intensity that bordered on hunger.

Prince Julius Rapha Holfort.

Crown Prince of the Kingdom. First in line to the throne. Betrothed to Angelica Rapha Redgrave since childhood. Bearer of a destiny he hadn't chosen and responsibilities he couldn't escape, and a loneliness that the game had rendered in three lines of flavour text but that Marie, watching him now, could read in every centimetre of his body.

He was dreading the academy. She knew that. The game had told her. But seeing it—seeing the way his shoulders curved inward when a group of students walked past laughing about something trivial, seeing the way his drumming fingers stilled and then resumed with renewed agitation—was different from reading it.

'He wants to be one of them,' Marie thought. 'Just a person. Just someone sitting in a square, eating skewers, with nowhere important to be.'

The engagement to Angelica was a chain around his neck. Not because Angelica was cruel—she wasn't, not really, not in the ways that mattered—but because the engagement represented everything. Every obligation. Every expectation. Every door that had been opened for him before he was old enough to choose which rooms he wanted to enter. The academy was supposed to offer freedom, and instead it offered the same cage with slightly larger bars.

Marie's heart hammered. Her palms were damp around the skewer sticks.

'This is it. The first event. The inciting moment. The opening line of the capture route.'

She'd rehearsed it. God, she'd rehearsed it. A hundred times in front of her mirror back in Lafan territory, mouthing the words whilst adjusting her expression, tweaking her inflection, working the delivery until it felt natural. Which was the irony—she was practising spontaneity. Drilling herself in the art of seeming unrehearsed.

But this wasn't a game anymore. The bench was real. The prince was real. The skewers were greasy in her grip and the sun was warm on her neck and somewhere nearby a street musician was playing a fiddle and the melody was off-key in a way no game soundtrack would ever permit.

Marie circled. Casually. She stopped at another stall—ceramic figurines, painted in garish colours—and picked one up, turning it in her fingers without seeing it. Put it down. Moved to the next stall. Closer now. Thirty metres from the bench.

Twenty.

'Breathe.'

Her chest was tight. She could feel her own heartbeat in her fingertips, in the soles of her feet, in the hollow of her throat.

'This isn't about the game. This is about him. A lonely boy on a bench. A lonely boy who hasn't yet done anything wrong. A lonely boy who—in another life, in another timeline—might not ever need to.'

Fifteen metres.

She adjusted her trajectory. Not directly at him—that would look deliberate. An arc that curved past the fountain, bringing her alongside the bench as though she were simply passing through.

Ten metres. Five.

She stopped.

He didn't look up.

Marie studied the top of his cap for a half-second. Blue hair peeked from beneath the brim, and behind those ridiculous sunglasses she caught the faintest movement—his eyes flicking towards her, then away, then back.

She smiled. Not the brilliant, calculated smile she'd practised. Something softer slipped out instead. Something that felt, against all odds, genuine.

"You look trapped and sad."

Julius's head came up. The sunglasses reflected her own face back at her—a girl with blonde hair and bright eyes, holding skewers in both hands like some kind of street food merchant who'd wandered off course.

Marie held out one of the skewers. Spiced lamb. The best one.

"Here. Hope this makes your day better."

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Twitch. Twitch. Twitch.

Leon looked around him. He looked down at his outfit—or rather, the lack of it. He looked back up again, as though the second glance might somehow change what the first had confirmed.

'How. How did this happen?'

He wondered if Olivia had somehow hypnotised him. It wasn't outside the realm of possibility—she'd managed worse feats of social manipulation before, and he'd been foolish enough to lower his guard around her more times than he cared to count. He wondered if he was in a fever dream, the sort brought on by bad shellfish or an ill-timed cold. He wondered if he had finally,

irrevocably snapped, and this was a delusion of his own making—some fractured corner of his psyche constructing an elaborate punishment for every poor decision he'd ever made across two lifetimes.

He wondered, with a growing sense of grim desperation, if Counter Guardian EMIYA had finally given up on the technicality that Leon was a different person in a different body in a different world—and had managed to kill him after all.

And this was hell. Not metaphorical hell. Actual, genuine, bespoke hell, tailored specifically to his suffering.

Yes. That tracks. That tracks perfectly.

Leon closed his eyes. He pinched the bridge of his nose, pressing his fingers hard over his eyelids until the pressure bloomed into random coloured patches of blue and red—phosphenes, if he remembered the term correctly from high school biology. He held them there, counting silently to five, willing the world to rearrange itself into something sensible. But even as the patches of colour faded and he opened his eyes again, nothing had changed. Not a single merciful thing.

He tried pinching himself next—hard, on the inside of his forearm, the sort of pinch that would leave a mark. Still nothing changed. The room remained. The outfit remained. He remained, standing in the middle of it all like a sacrifice on an altar.

Leon looked over to the windows, now covered in blackout curtains—heavy, dark fabric that blocked out every scrap of natural light and, more importantly, any viable escape route. He stared at them with the calculating focus of a man weighing his options. *'If I jumped out of the window, maybe I'd wake up from this nightmare. Third floor. Survivable, probably. Broken leg at worst.'* A broken leg would be a perfectly valid excuse not to—

"Looking good, Leon," came Olivia's voice, dripping with satisfaction and cutting through his desperate calculations like a blade through silk. Her eyes were sharp, glinting with that particular brand of mischief that never boded well for anyone in her immediate vicinity. Her smile was leering—there was no

other word for it—the smile of someone who had orchestrated exactly this outcome and was savouring every second of it.

Angelica was beside her, and the contrast between the two of them was almost painful. A heavy blush had spread across her face, vivid and damning, and her expression kept twitching—caught in an agonising loop between looking away out of propriety and staring with an intensity that suggested propriety had already lost the war. She opened her mouth as if to say something, closed it again, and settled for gripping the cuff of her butler jacket with white-knuckled fingers.

And oh god, Erica was here too.

His gaze caught her standing slightly apart from the others, and the precise moment their eyes met, something in her expression shattered like dropped porcelain.

'Of course she's here. Of course. Why wouldn't she be? Everyone I know has apparently been conscripted into witnessing my humiliation.'

Erica's hand shot upward—frantic, instinctive—fingers scrabbling at the back of her head for a hood that wasn't there. The motion was so deeply ingrained, so reflexive, that Leon could almost see the ghost of it: that desperate need to disappear behind fabric when the world became too much. Her fingers closed on nothing but air and the collar of her butler jacket, and he watched the realisation hit her in real time—the flinch, the stillness, the quiet horror of a woman denied her one reliable coping mechanism.

She pivoted on her heel—sharply, mechanically, like a soldier executing an about-face—and pressed herself towards the wall with a rigidity that suggested she was attempting to phase through solid stone by sheer force of will. Her shoulders were locked so tight they might as well have been carved from marble, and the tips of her ears, visible beneath her pulled-back hair, had gone a shade of crimson that bordered on medically concerning.

'She's going to give herself a neck injury standing like that,' Leon thought, and then immediately hated himself for noticing, because noticing meant he was

paying attention to other people's reactions, and paying attention to other people's reactions meant acknowledging that there was something worth reacting to, and that line of reasoning led nowhere he wanted to go.

All of the guardian spirits—bless their souls, truly, every last one of them—were giving him encouraging smiles. The sort of smiles one might offer a soldier marching to his execution. Warm. Genuine. Utterly unhelpful. Though they, too, were sporting heavy blushes, which rather undermined the supportive atmosphere they were attempting to cultivate.

They were all wearing butler outfits. Every single one of them. Very formal, very proper—high collars, long sleeves, gloves, not a centimetre of unnecessary skin exposed. Dignified. Respectable.

And he—

He certainly wasn't.

Twitch. Twitch. Twitch.

Leon wondered again, with the weary resignation of a man who already knew the answer would bring him no comfort, how exactly he had ended up here.

Leon stared at the blackout curtains again. Then at the disco ball rotating lazily overhead, scattering fragments of coloured light across the dimmed corridor like a constellation having a nervous breakdown. Then at the row of plush couches arranged in intimate clusters, each separated by gossamer curtains that provided the illusion of privacy without any of the substance.

'The school festival,' he thought. *'This is a school festival. This is supposed to be a school festival.'*

He had been looking forward to it, in his own quiet way. The academy had transformed over the past few days into something almost unrecognisable from the hostile, whisper-filled corridors he'd navigated during the debacle with Angelica and the Prince. That period—when their small group had stood

against virtually the entire student body—felt like a lifetime ago, though barely a season had passed.

Now the campus thrummed with genuine energy. The martial clubs had secured the duelling grounds early, converting the massive arena into a proper fighting tournament with tiered seating and bracket boards. Leon had caught a glimpse of the schedule pinned to the main hall's notice board that morning: sabre, lance, unarmed, and a rather ambitious "all-disciplines" category that would almost certainly end in someone being launched into the stands. He'd considered giving his more battle-hungry guardian spirits permission to enter, but opted against it—his territory would almost certainly be billed for whatever damage they caused, and the paperwork alone wasn't worth it.

The drama clubs had claimed every available lecture hall and several classrooms besides, staging everything from classical Holfort tragedies to what one poster had optimistically described as "a comedic interpretation of the founding myth." Someone had built a proper stage in the central courtyard, framed by painted wooden flats and draped in velvet—ambitious, if nothing else. He'd heard the rehearsals bleeding through the walls during his evening patrols, the muffled cadences of overwrought soliloquies punctuated by the occasional crash of a dropped prop.

Minor nobles from every corner of the kingdom had descended on the school grounds with the enthusiasm of merchants scenting profit. Stalls lined the main promenade and spilled into the connecting walkways—territorial wines from the southern vineyards, smoked game from the northern marches, honeyed confections from the lake districts, bolts of silk from the eastern provinces. One enterprising countess's daughter had set up an entire miniature forge, demonstrating ornamental metalwork to a gaggle of admiring underclassmen. Another had imported a quartet of musicians from her family's lands, their instruments producing a surprisingly pleasant melody that drifted across the grounds like woodsmoke.

Clarice had commandeered the racetrack. Of course, she had. The woman had an air-bike obsession that bordered on the theological, and the school festival had provided the perfect excuse to indulge it. He'd heard the distant whine of engines during setup yesterday, the sharp crack of sonic barriers being tested and retested. She'd organised a proper race—multi-lap, handicapped by class and experience, with prize money significant enough to attract serious competitors.

The academy was alive. Genuinely, properly alive—students laughing in corridors, haggling at stalls, cheering at competitions. Adults, all of them, which meant the alcohol flowed freely and the atmosphere carried that particular looseness that came with the intersection of youth, disposable income, and a socially sanctioned excuse to forget about coursework.

And whilst all of this had been taking shape—whilst the rest of the student body had been planning their entertainments and marking their territories—Leon had been buried in paperwork.

He, Angelica, and Erica had spent the better part of two weeks coordinating the entire affair. Angelica's position as student representative demanded it, and Leon had volunteered his support before realising quite how much "support" would entail. Erica—not yet formally enrolled, her admission scheduled for the following school year—had nonetheless thrown herself into the organisational work with the quiet, meticulous intensity that characterised everything she did. She wasn't obligated to help. She'd simply appeared at their planning table one morning, produced a ledger and a quill, and begun cross-referencing vendor applications against available floor space without a word of explanation.

Between the three of them, they'd managed to wrestle something approaching order from chaos. Negotiating vendor booths had been its own particular brand of warfare—the minor nobles jockeying for prime positions along the main promenade, the clubs disputing room allocations, the catering services demanding exclusive supply contracts. Leon had handled the financial

negotiations whilst Angelica wielded her family name like a siege weapon and Erica quietly ensured every agreement was documented in triplicate.

The academy's cut had been the thorniest issue. The administration wanted fifteen per cent of all vendor revenue. The vendors wanted five. They'd settled on nine, with a sliding scale for stalls exceeding a certain turnover threshold—a compromise that satisfied no one, which Leon took as proof it was fair.

They'd even coordinated with the bookies.

That had been an interesting meeting. The academy's gambling establishment—officially termed the "recreational wagering office" in documentation that fooled precisely nobody—had welcomed Leon with the warmth typically reserved for returning war heroes or exceptionally generous patrons. Which, in a sense, he was both. The skirmish against the Prince's faction had been the single most profitable event in their operational history. The head bookmaker, a portly woman named Mrs. Thorpe with ink-stained fingers and spectacles perched permanently on the tip of her nose, had told Leon as much over tea and biscuits.

"Twenty-three years," she'd said, tapping her ledger with evident satisfaction. "Twenty-three years I've been running odds in this academy. The only event that came close was the Westbrook-Carmichael air-bike rivalry—two lads, both utterly mad, racing each other every weekend for an entire semester. The whole kingdom was watching by the end. But your little dust-up?" She'd leaned forward, spectacles glinting. "Blew it clean out of the water. We're still processing payouts."

The bookies had been more than happy to cooperate with festival logistics after that. They'd set up shop in a ground-floor parlour, running odds on the martial tournament, the air-bike race, and—Leon had noted with weary resignation—a special board dedicated to "Viscount Bartfort's Festival Activities," with odds on everything from how many dances he'd accept to whether he'd destroy any academy property before sundown.

All of this. All of this careful, diligent, exhausting work—the vendor negotiations, the room allocations, the financial spreadsheets, the coordination meetings that ran past midnight—and not once, not a single time during the entire process, had anyone mentioned to Leon what Olivia had been planning with the eastern wing.

She'd rented the entire thing. The whole eastern wing, third floor. Every room, every corridor, every lavatory. She'd filed the paperwork properly—he'd checked, afterwards, with the grim thoroughness of a man searching for a legal technicality that might save him—and the forms were immaculate. Olivia had even secured the appropriate entertainment licence, the alcohol distribution permit, and a noise ordinance exemption that he was fairly certain didn't exist until she'd created it.

'I signed that exemption,' Leon realised with dawning horror. *'She buried it in the middle of a stack of forty vendor contracts. Page sixty-seven. I signed it without reading it because she'd brought me coffee and Erica had been asking me about the racetrack security arrangements at the same time.'*

He'd been played. Expertly, surgically, with a precision that would have made a battlefield tactician weep with admiration.

And so Olivia had transformed the entire eastern third floor into a host club.

Not a café. Not a tea room. Not even a themed restaurant, which would have been eccentric but defensible. A host club. Complete with blackout curtains over every window, disco balls casting kaleidoscopic patterns across darkened corridors, dimmed atmospheric lighting that turned the academic hallways into something resembling the kind of establishment Leon would have crossed the street to avoid in his previous life. The couches—plush, deep, upholstered in dark fabric—were arranged in semi-private alcoves. The gossamer curtains between them moved with every breath of air, translucent enough to see silhouettes but opaque enough to suggest intimacy.

And the male attendants—the ones whose contracts they'd purchased from the nobles who'd lost the gambling debt during the skirmish—were serving as

hosts. Every single one of them. Olivia had conscripted the lot, dressed them in the same outfit Leon now wore—the same black, shiny short shorts, the same separated cuffs, the same collar with ribbon, the same boots—and stationed them throughout the wing with trays of drinks and platters of snacks.

'She bought those attendants for this. She planned this months ago. The whole time we were negotiating vendor contracts, she was measuring them for shorts.'

The attendants, to their credit, were handling the situation with remarkable professionalism. Several appeared to be genuinely enjoying themselves, chatting with early arrivals at the wing's entrance and mixing drinks with practised ease. One had developed a rather impressive cocktail-shaking routine that involved tossing bottles over his shoulder. Another had discovered a talent for card tricks. A third was playing a stringed instrument in one of the larger alcoves, the melody threading through the dimmed corridors with a melancholy sweetness that felt entirely at odds with the establishment's aesthetic.

Leon envied them. Not their circumstances—those were identical to his—but their apparent capacity to accept those circumstances without suffering an existential crisis.

He looked down at his outfit again.

Black, shiny short shorts that left absolutely nothing to the imagination regarding the general topology of his lower body. Boots that came up to mid-calf—black, polished, with a slight heel that he refused to acknowledge made his legs look longer. Separated cuffs at each wrist, purely decorative, serving no functional purpose whatsoever. A collar—a *collar*—around his neck, fitted with a black ribbon tied in a bow.

That was it. That was the entire outfit. Everything from his collarbones to his hip bones was bare skin. His shoulders, his chest, his stomach, his back—all of it, simply out. Present. Visible to anyone with functional eyes.

He traced back the sequence of events that had led to this moment, searching for the precise point where he could have intervened—the decision tree's branching node where a different choice would have produced a different timeline, one in which he was wearing trousers.

It had happened fast. Distressingly fast. He'd been standing in the eastern wing's entrance, reviewing the alcohol licence one final time, when Olivia had materialised at his left elbow and Angelica at his right. Angelica's expression had been apologetic—genuinely, painfully apologetic, the expression of someone who had been recruited against their better judgement and lacked the fortitude to refuse. Olivia's expression had been the opposite of apologetic. Olivia's expression had been the expression of a general watching the final piece of a years-long campaign slot into place.

They'd each taken an arm and steered him into a small changing room with the coordinated efficiency of a military escort. The room was barely larger than a wardrobe—just enough space for a person to stand and a basket on the floor.

"Strip," Olivia had said, with the casual authority of someone requesting the time.

"What."

"Clothes off. In the basket. Now." She'd snapped her fingers.

Angelica had been looking at the ceiling. "I'm so sorry," she'd murmured, the words barely audible, her cheeks already burning. "She has—there were—I couldn't—"

"Angie, darling, you're stalling."

"I'm sorry, Leon. Truly."

And he'd done it. That was the part that haunted him. He'd actually done it. Some combination of surprise, conditioned obedience to Olivia's particular brand of commanding insanity, and the sheer disorienting speed of the

operation had bypassed every defensive instinct he possessed. His fingers had moved to his buttons before his brain had finished processing the request. Jacket off. Shirt off. Belt unbuckled. Trousers pooled at his ankles and stepped out of. Each item folded—because even in a state of advancing shock, he folded his clothes; some habits transcended existential crisis—and placed neatly in the basket.

The basket had been attached to a rope.

He'd noticed this detail approximately half a second before it mattered, which was approximately half a second too late. The rope went taut. The basket—containing every stitch of clothing he'd worn that morning—shot upward through a gap in the ceiling and vanished with a speed that suggested mechanical assistance. Possibly a pulley system. Possibly one of Olivia's constructs. Possibly divine intervention from a cruel and capricious universe.

Through the gap, before it sealed shut, a bundle dropped into his hands. Black, shiny short shorts. Boots. Cuffs. Collar. Bowtie.

Leon had stared at the items. He had stared at the sealed ceiling. He had stared at the items again.

'I could trace clothing.'

That thought would arrive two days later, in the quiet hours of the morning, and Leon-of-the-future would lie in his bed and stare at the ceiling and hate Leon-of-the-past with a bitterness usually reserved for sworn enemies. He would, in that moment, finally understand why Archer EMIYA had wanted to kill his past self.

Standing in that changing room, stripped to his undergarments and holding a handful of accessories that would have made a courtesan blush, the obvious solution—the blindingly, painfully obvious solution of simply projecting a full set of formal attire from his near-limitless arsenal of materialised objects—had not occurred to him. The shock had been too complete. The ambush too well-executed. His higher cognitive functions had shut down like a ship losing power deck by deck, leaving only the primitive, animal brain that understood

two things: he was mostly naked, and there was clothing in his hands, and clothing went on bodies.

So he'd put it on.

And now here he stood, in the corridor of a host club that occupied an entire wing of a prestigious academy, wearing less fabric than most people's handkerchiefs, surrounded by similarly attired attendants and fully clothed women, whilst a disco ball scattered light across his bare chest like glitter on a sacrifice.

Twitch. Twitch. Twitch.

Then he heard it.

A sound that began at the far end of the corridor—distant at first, then building, swelling, compounding like a wave gathering mass as it rolled towards shore. Squealing. High-pitched, breathless, unrestrained squealing, the sort produced exclusively by large groups of young women confronted with something that overwhelmed their capacity for dignified response.

Leon turned his head slowly—very slowly, with the measured caution of a man who suspected that what he was about to see would damage him in ways that were difficult to quantify.

The opposite end of the wing. Behind a row of velvet stanchions connected by braided rope—when had those appeared? Had Olivia installed queue management infrastructure?—stood a line of academy girls. Not a small line. Not a modest gathering. A line that stretched from the stanchion barrier, curved around the corridor's bend, and presumably continued for some distance beyond his line of sight. Dozens of them. Upper-class, lower-class, students he recognised and students he'd never seen before in his life, all pressed together behind the velvet rope with expressions ranging from predatory anticipation to barely contained hysteria.

Several were holding numbered tickets.

'She sold numbered tickets. She sold numbered tickets to this.'

The squealing intensified as the crowd noticed him noticing them. Fans appeared—actual decorative fans, held before faces in a gesture of theatrical coyness that fooled absolutely no one. Money changed hands somewhere in the back of the line. Someone dropped a purse.

Then, abruptly, the noise stopped.

Not faded. Not diminished. Stopped. Completely, instantly, as though someone had severed the connection between every throat in that corridor and the air passing through it. The silence was so sudden and so total that Leon could hear the disco ball's motor clicking overhead.

At the far end of the queue, two figures had moved aside one of the stanchions and stepped through.

They walked shoulder to shoulder, matched in height and build—tall, straight-backed, moving with the unhurried certainty of women who had never once in their lives been asked to wait in a queue. Their outfits were similar in cut: formal, elegant, layered silk and embroidered jackets that spoke of tailors who charged by the stitch. But where one woman was immediately, unmistakably recognisable—

'The Queen. That's Queen Mylene. That is the Queen of this kingdom walking into a host club in the eastern wing of the academy. That is the Queen of this kingdom walking towards me whilst I am wearing short shorts and a collar.'

—the other's face was completely hidden. A mask covered her features from forehead to jaw—ornate, pale, expressionless. Above it, a headdress of dark fabric and silver thread obscured her hair entirely. A veil hung from beneath the mask's edges, layered and opaque, concealing everything from chin to collarbone. Not a single identifying feature was visible.

Leon felt something inside him die. Not dramatically, not with fanfare. Quietly. The way a candle gutters out in a draught. A small, tired part of his soul that

had been clinging to the possibility of dignified survival simply let go and drifted away.

Queen Mylene reached the front of the corridor, paused, and surveyed the establishment with the approving eye of a woman evaluating an investment property. Her gaze swept across the dimmed lighting, the disco balls, the curtained alcoves, the plush couches, the attendants in their minimal attire. Her lips curved into a smile of such profound satisfaction that Leon felt a chill run through him despite the corridor's warmth.

Then her eyes found Leon, and the smile widened.

"My," she said, her voice carrying with effortless clarity through the silent wing, pitched to reach every ear present. She pressed one hand to her cheek in a gesture of theatrical delight. "What a lovely establishment. Such atmosphere. Such... presentation."

The Queen turned to Olivia. "If you ever build an establishment like this in the capital—or better yet, in your liege's territory—I would very much like to invest."

Olivia, who had made no secret of her distaste for the Queen after their first meeting—or their second—found her expression doing something complicated. Principle warred with profit. Profit won in approximately two seconds.

"Your Majesty," Olivia said, with a warmth that hadn't existed thirty seconds prior, "I believe we can come to an arrangement."

Her gaze swept down. Then up. Then down again, more slowly.

The masked woman beside her made a strangled sound—barely audible, muffled by the veil, but unmistakably the sound of someone who had just swallowed their own tongue.

Queen Mylene placed one hand on her companion's shoulder. The contact seemed to serve a dual purpose: public affection, and preventing the masked figure from turning and bolting.

Then she moved towards the figure currently pressed stiffly against the wall—Erica, who had not moved from her position since her attempted phase-through-stone manoeuvre—and gripped both her shoulders, turning her bodily until the princess stood facing Leon.

"I am here to announce that my daughter Erica and I shall be Viscount Bartfort's first customers of the day."

Erica's head snapped towards the Queen with a speed that suggested whiplash.

A muffled, desperate whisper escaped the veil—too quiet for anyone but Leon and Mylene to catch, carrying the distinct cadence of a daughter who had been profoundly and irreversibly betrayed by her own mother.

Mylene patted her shoulder.

"Come along, darling."

-=&<o>&=-

End

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