

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

Story Starts

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Chapter 8.2 -

The Courtesy of Wolves

The Partner hummed beneath them—a low, constant vibration that Angelica found oddly comforting, the same way she found comfort in the soft pitter-patter of summer rain.

The titanic airship cut through the evening sky at a leisurely pace. There was no reason to rush. The results of her father's manoeuvring would take time to bear fruit, and for once, time was something they had.

Angelica almost let out a chuckle. Leon had unwittingly done her father a tremendous favour simply by bringing this vessel into Redgrave airspace. Every family that had jumped ship when they thought the duchy was doomed—when Angelica challenged the prince and the Redgraves' grip on power seemed to falter—could now see that seven-hundred-metre silhouette docked at the Duke's private harbour. And once word spread that the Baron and his vassals had been invited to dinner? The shift in the political wind would be unmistakable.

Angelica had no doubt that every wayward ally had someone on the estate's staff to keep them informed. They'd be receiving messages before the night was out.

Angelica had asked Olivia and Mégane for some privacy. They'd complied without argument—Olivia with a knowing look that Leon chose not to examine too closely, Mégane with a small bow and a glance that lingered half a second longer than necessary. Olivia's guardian spirits followed them out. Sella steered Olivia by the shoulder before the girl could find a reason to linger at the door.

Angelica nodded at Britomart, who smiled back at her warmly before leaving the room. The broadsword spirit pulled the door shut with a quiet click.

Leon looked at his own guardian spirits—Melt had already found a window seat, Art was examining a shelf of navigational instruments with detached interest, Ria was doing stretches in the corner, and Durga appeared to be reorganising Leon's tea cabinet with four of her ten arms.

Taking the hint, he caught their attention, shrugged, and gestured toward the door with his head.

Art left without comment. Ria followed with a wave. Melt offered a small curtsy. Durga set down the tea tin she was holding, gave Leon a long, knowing look, then smiled and left.

Angelica inhaled deeply as the door clicked shut.

The observation lounge was one of the Partner's few concessions to comfort over function—wide viewports lining the port side, a pair of low couches arranged around a table bolted to the deck, and soft lighting that Luxion had calibrated to something approximating candlelight after Leon complained that the standard illumination made everything look like a military briefing.

Angelica stood by the viewport, her reflection ghosted in the glass against the deepening sky. She'd removed the silver-embroidered jacket from dinner, leaving a simpler blouse beneath. Her hair was still unbound. In the warm light, with the formality stripped away, she felt lighter than she had in months.

She moved to Leon's side. From this vantage, the star-dotted skyline stretched endlessly before them, and far below, clouds drifted like pale islands illuminated by the moon.

"Are you fine with this?" Angelica asked, breaking the silence.

Leon chuckled. "You'll need to be more specific."

She turned. Her expression was composed, but her eyes were doing that thing they did when she was working through something she hadn't fully

articulated yet—sharp, searching, cataloguing his reactions the way her father had catalogued him in the study.

"The contract. Its implications." She folded her arms. Not defensive—structural. Holding herself in place. "You read that clause. You understood what my father did. You signed it without negotiation, without hesitation, without so much as a raised eyebrow."

"Your father's terms were generous."

"My father's terms were a cage."

"A comfortable one."

"A cage nonetheless." Angelica's jaw tightened. "Every future marriage negotiation routes through the Redgraves now. Every house that wants a daughter in your household has to account for my position first. You've handed my father a permanent seat at your table, and you did it smiling."

Leon seemed to consider this for a moment. Then he turned toward her, one eyebrow raised, a slight smile pulling at the corner of his mouth.

"Would you have preferred I haggled?"

"I would have preferred you *thought* about it."

"I did think about it." He held her gaze. "I read that clause three times, Angelica. I understood exactly what your father was building. A framework that protects your position, gives the Redgraves ongoing influence over my household's alliances, and ensures that no matter how many political marriages get stacked on top of me, you can't be displaced or diminished."

He paused.

"And then I thought: *is any of that something I'd object to?*"

Angelica's arms tightened across her chest.

"The answer was no," Leon said. "Protecting you isn't a cost I need to be compensated for. It's something I'd have done regardless. The moment Olivia claimed you as her friend, it was a done deal. Your father just wrote it into law, which saves me the trouble." He shrugged—the action irritating Angelica, but only for a bit. "As for the Redgraves having influence—your father is the most powerful duke in Holfort. Having his house invested in my success rather than my destruction is a net positive by any calculation." He glanced at the viewport. "Besides, I was already expecting some sort of backlash or leashing after the skirmish. Why do you think we gambled against the whole kingdom?"

Angelica's lips pressed together. Not anger—the suppression of something she didn't want to let through. She turned back to the viewport.

"You're very calm about all of this," she said quietly.

Leon inhaled, held it for a few seconds before exhaling.

"Let me ask you something instead," Leon said.

Angelica half-turned. The moonlight caught the edge of her jaw.

"Are *you* fine with this?"

"I asked first."

"And I answered. Now it's your turn." He stepped back and sat on the couch resting his elbows on his knees—a posture that, had Angelica known, mirrored her brother's from the study.

"You've traded an engagement to the Crown Prince of Holfort for a wardship contract with a baron. A baron who already has two mistress candidates in his household and will almost certainly have more foisted on him before the year is out." He let that hang for a moment. "A contract that is, let's be honest, one signature away from a betrothal. Every house with ambitions is going to dangle a daughter in my direction—the palace included. I'd bet money the Crown is already thinking about which branch family or which..." He paused, choosing the word carefully. "...*convenient* daughter to position."

Angelica's expression hardened. Not at him—at the truth of it.

"You went from being the future queen," Leon continued, "to being a negotiation piece that ties our houses. A household that'll probably get very crowded, very political — especially if Olivia has anything to say about it."

He chuckled, but Angelica could hear the irony threaded through it. His eyes met hers. "Is this fair to you?"

The silence that followed was different from the earlier one. Heavier. More personal.

Angelica walked to the opposite couch and sat. She didn't fold her arms this time. Her hands rested in her lap, fingers laced together, and she looked at them for a long moment before speaking.

"When I was six years old," she said, "my mother sat me down and explained that I would marry Julius Rapha Holfort. Not *might*. *Would*. She described it the way one describes the weather—an inevitability to be dressed for, not debated." Her voice was even, almost clinical. The tone of someone discussing a wound that had long since scarred. "I spent eleven years preparing. Deportment. Politics. Etiquette. Military strategy—because a queen must understand war even if she never fights one. I learned to walk, speak, eat, and smile in the manner befitting the future consort of a king."

She looked up.

"Eleven years. And he discarded all of it for a girl he'd known for two months."

Leon said nothing.

"So when you ask if trading a prince for a baron is fair—" A strange, rough sound escaped her throat. Not quite a laugh. "I don't know what *fair* looks like, Leon. I spent my entire life preparing for a future that was chosen for me, and when that future was taken away, the thing I felt most wasn't grief or anger."

She paused.

"It was relief."

The word hung between them.

"I don't know if I ever wanted to be queen—" She stopped. Her jaw worked. "I don't know what I wanted to be. I was never given the space to find out."

Leon watched her carefully. In the low light, stripped of her armour and her composure and the Redgrave name, Angelica looked like what she was—an eighteen-year-old girl who'd been carrying a kingdom's expectations since before she could read, and had only just set them down.

"So, yes," she said. "A baron with two mistresses and a growing household and a target painted on his back by every ambitious house in the kingdom." The corner of her mouth lifted—barely. "It's an improvement."

Leon exhaled through his nose. A sound not unlike a laugh.

"Low bar."

"You have no idea."

They sat in the quiet for a moment. The Partner's engines hummed. Below them, the world turned slowly in the dark.

"I won't pretend I know where this goes," Leon said eventually. "The contract protects your position, but I can't promise the household won't get complicated. It will. Houses are going to manoeuvre, the palace is going to push, and I'm going to end up in situations that require more political finesse than I naturally possess."

"I've noticed."

"But I can promise you this." He looked at her directly—not with the careful neutrality he'd shown the Duke, not with the sardonic deflection he used with Olivia. Something plainer. Something that cost him, in its own quiet way. "You will not be used. Not by me, not by anyone who comes through that door. Your father wrote that clause to protect your standing. I signed it because I agree

with the principle. You are not a piece on someone else's board. Not any more."

Angelica held his gaze for a long time.

"That's a large promise for a baron to make."

"I've been told I overcommit."

"By whom?"

"Everyone. Consistently." That ironic chuckle again. "I'm fairly certain they'd say it about me across multiple lifetimes. That and being stubborn."

He said it lightly—throwaway, the kind of thing that could be read as self-deprecating humour accompanied by the same chuckle. Angelica tilted her head slightly.

She didn't press.

"Then I'll hold you to it, Baron Bartfort." She rose from the couch and straightened her blouse with a tug that echoed her father's habitual jacket-straightening so precisely that Leon had to suppress a smile. "And I expect to be consulted before any future contracts are signed. Not after."

"Noted."

"And Olivia is not to rearrange my quarters without asking."

"I'll pass that along, but I make no guarantees."

"And—" She paused at the door. Her hand rested on the frame. She didn't turn around.

"Thank you. For what you said to my father. About comrades. About bleeding together." Her voice was quiet. "You didn't have to frame it that way."

"It was the truth."

"I know. That's why it mattered."

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Angelica turned to leave. Just as the door closed behind her, Leon caught it—barely, through the narrowing gap:

Another "thank you."

He almost called after her. He didn't. Some things were better left where they landed.

Leon sat in the observation lounge for a while after that, watching the clouds slide past the viewport. The moonlight painted silver tracks across the deck. Somewhere below, Olivia was probably interrogating Angelica about her mother's favourite foods, and Mégane was probably waiting for the opportune moment to taunt Olivia.

He rubbed his left arm—the one that had been Archer's, once, in a life that was supposed to have ended in a basement full of swords. The phantom ache had faded years ago, but the habit remained.

'Better to bend than to break.'

He'd bent today. Signed a contract that tethered him to a ducal house, accepted obligations he'd never sought, and took responsibility for a girl who deserved better than the hand she'd been dealt. None of it was what he'd planned when he'd woken up in this world.

But the old Shirou—the one who'd have charged in without thinking, who'd have tried to save everyone and damn the consequences—that boy was gone. Burned away in the Grail's mud, consumed by an arm that wasn't his, buried in a war that had taken everything he loved.

What was left was someone who chose his battles. Who let the small things slide and saved his strength for the moments that mattered. Who understood that you couldn't save everyone, but you could protect the people who stood beside you—and that was enough.

It had to be enough.

He stretched, cracked his neck, and stood. Luxion would have tomorrow's duty roster ready, Olivia would want breakfast at an unreasonable hour, and it was Mégane's first break under his house.

Leon allowed himself a small smile. Then he went to find his copy of the contract before Durga reorganised his desk.

The Partner flew on through the night, its shadow racing across the sleeping world below.

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Morning came as the Partner descended into the belly of Leon's island.

The main island of the Bartfort Barony—his barony, not his father's—housed a central facility accessible only through a concealed entrance on its underside: a massive metal gate that slid open to swallow the flagship whole, then sealed shut behind it. It was the reason no one had known about the Partner. The seven-hundred-metre warship had been hidden inside the island since Leon had claimed the place the summer before the academy.

Probably half of Holfort's aristocracy had received intel on it already—hard to miss a seven-hundred-metre warship parked at the Redgraves' front door.

Leon walked the Partner's corridors in the quiet hours before dawn, his boots striking metal in a rhythm that matched the low hum of the ship's dormant engines. He'd risen at half past four, run through his forms on the observation deck until sweat plastered his shirt to his back, then scrubbed himself raw beneath water cold enough to make his teeth ache. The kitchens sat empty—an oddity that pricked at his sense of routine. Normally, he'd be preparing breakfast for Olivia and the guardian spirits, but today, he'd arranged something different: breakfast at the estate, with Margot, his parents, and his siblings.

He'd half expected to need to drag Olivia out of bed.

Instead, when he rounded the corner to the main cabin, he found them already assembled.

Olivia stood in the centre of the corridor, dressed in a fitted travel coat of deep teal over cream trousers, her hair pulled back in a neat plait that Sella had clearly wrestled into submission. Beside her, Angelica wore a burgundy riding jacket with a high collar, hands clasped before her. Mégane leaned against the bulkhead in her usual blue guild coat, arms folded, one boot tapping the floor with impatience.

The guardian spirits flanked them in various states of readiness—Sella ramrod straight, Leysritt impassive, Art polishing Marmyadose's pommel with her thumb, Ria adjusting the cord in her hair, Melt perched on a storage console with her ankles crossed, Durga sat primly on a corridor bench with all but her two regular arms retracted. Britomart hovered behind Angelica, her luminous form casting pale light across the ceiling. Pollux floated near Olivia, half-translucent and drowsy.

Leon stopped. Blinked.

"You're all awake."

"You told us breakfast was at the estate," Olivia said, as though addressing a particularly slow child. "Did you think we'd sleep through it?"

"I thought I'd need to drag at least three of you out of bed."

"We did stay up quite late," Melt provided.

Leon let the comment pass.

They fell into step behind him, the corridor wide enough for three abreast. Olivia matched his pace, and Angelica drew level on his other side. Mégane trailed half a step behind, close enough to make her presence felt.

"Olivia, did you—"

A sharp elbow caught him in the ribs. Olivia's expression hadn't changed, but something dangerous lurked behind her eyes.

"What did you just call me?"

"...Olivia?"

She growled. Actually growled.

Leon's jaw worked. He could feel the attention of every guardian spirit in the corridor focusing on him with the precision of a targeting array. He cast his mind back—the cosmic dungeon, their first descent with Angelica. The nickname exchange.

"Livia," Leon sighed. "Sorry. I'm still not used to it."

"But you always call Meltryllis 'Melt,'" Olivia puffed, stomping her foot. Leon did his best not to notice the way certain things moved when she did that. Her pout wasn't helping. "You've had her nickname down since day one!"

"Yes, I'll try harder to call you Livia. I promise."

She beamed at him—a flash of teeth that vanished as quickly as it appeared. Then she glanced past him toward Angelica, and the gleam in her eyes shifted to something conspiratorial.

"While we're on the subject of names." Olivia leaned forward to address Angelica directly. "Leon should call you Angie."

Angelica's stride faltered. A faint wash of colour crept up her neck, disappearing beneath the high collar of her jacket. Suddenly the centre of attention, the Redgrave daughter looked rather less composed than she had a moment ago.

"Then it's settled," Olivia—or rather, Livia—declared, seizing Angelica's arm.

Leon watched Angelica's expression cycle through surprise, consideration, and something softer that she suppressed before it could fully form. Her gaze flicked to him—held for a fraction of a second—then dropped to the floor.

"It would be... appreciated," she said quietly. The blush deepened. "If that's acceptable."

"Angie it is, then."

"Yes! And for every time you mistakenly call me Olivia in an informal setting, you're adding an extra thirty minutes to our date!"

"That's completely unfair—"

"Then you should call me Meg!" Mégane surged forward, inserting herself between Leon and Angelica with the subtlety of a battering ram. "And I want the same arrangement!"

"Absolutely not," Olivia cut in, pivoting on her heel to face Mégane with her arms crossed. "You haven't earned it."

"Haven't earned it? I contributed two dungeons to the barony! I pledged my sword, my magic, and my—"

"Your what? Your skipping-classes-to-lurk-in-Leon's-dormitory privileges?"

"That was reconnaissance!"

"Reconnaissance of *what*? His bookshelf?"

The two of them carried their argument through the hatch, down the boarding ramp, and into the cavernous interior of the central facility. Their voices bounced off metal walls and industrial piping, gaining an echo that made them sound three times louder than they actually were.

Angelica fell into step beside Leon, her composure restored, though a trace of warmth still lingered at the tips of her ears. She smiled—not the practised, measured smile of a duke's daughter, but something smaller and more genuine.

"I should probably get used to this, shouldn't I... Leon?"

Leon sighed.

"It's a veritable madhouse."

Angelica giggled, covering her mouth with her hand. It was such an unexpectedly girlish sound that Leon almost missed a step.

"So," she said, composure reassembling itself with visible effort, "I heard there's a dating schedule."

Leon suppressed a groan. Another one conscripted to the cause of making his quiet life significantly less quiet.

Ahead of them, Olivia and Mégane's bickering showed no signs of ceasing. Behind them, the guardian spirits followed in an amused procession, their gazes ping-ponging between the two arguing girls with the rapt attention of spectators at a tennis match.

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The central facility sprawled around them—a vast underground chamber carved into the island's bedrock, all clean lines and ancient metal plating that Luxion had restored over the past year. Support columns thick as mature oaks marched in rows toward the docking cradles where smaller vessels sat in varying states of maintenance. The air smelled of mineral oil and ozone—typical of the stratosphere.

A silver sphere detached itself from the shadows near the ceiling and descended to hover at Leon's shoulder. Red light pulsed behind its lens.

"Morning, Luxion. Status report."

"The mountain terracing on the northern face has reached the fourth tier. The agricultural drones completed the latest rice paddy rotation three days ago. Current germination rate is ninety-four per cent." The AI paused, lens rotating as it processed additional data. "The plum orchards on the western slope have entered their second fruiting cycle. Yield projections exceed initial estimates by twelve per cent, likely due to soil composition adjustments and the mana-enriched irrigation channels."

Leon nodded. The rice paddies had been his pet project—or perhaps his indulgence. Nobody in the Holfort Kingdom cultivated rice. He'd had Luxion synthesise the seeds from genetic templates stored in the old-world database, then spent weeks calibrating the growing conditions to match the island's unique climate. The plums had been easier. Margot's guild contacts had sourced saplings from a merchant house in the eastern provinces, and the volcanic soil on the island's western face took to them with enthusiasm.

"Livestock?"

"The cattle shipment arrived from Bartfort territory four days ago. Forty head, quarantined and cleared. The poultry enclosures are operational as well—two hundred birds, a mix of layers and meat stock. I've allocated Drone Unit Seven for animal husbandry oversight."

"Drones managing chickens." Leon pinched the bridge of his nose. "Make sure to delegate some of the tasks to our people."

"Dungeon status: the terran dungeon remains stable. Of the three cosmic dungeons, obviously, the first is fully cleared, and the second and third we'll be starting our reconnaissance. All exclusivity contracts are active."

"Additionally," Luxion continued, its tone carrying what might generously be called satisfaction, "construction has commenced on a private open-air hot spring installation along the mountain ridge bordering the island's eastern edge. The geothermal readings indicated a viable source at seventeen metres depth. I've diverted a mineral-rich aquifer to feed the pools. Current completion estimate for the full installation: forty-eight hours. However, the primary pool is already usable."

Olivia's head whipped around so fast her plait nearly struck Mégane in the face.

"An onsen?"

"A hot spring," Luxion corrected.

"An *onsen*." Olivia's eyes went wide and bright with a fervour that Leon had learned to associate with either genuine enthusiasm or schemes that would end with someone getting hit. She seized Angelica's hands. "Angie. We have to go. Tonight. Under the stars. The steam rising off the water, the mountain air—"

There it was. That gleam. That particular luminous quality in Olivia's gaze that spoke not of innocent enjoyment but of calculated intentions involving insufficient clothing and proximity.

Leon caught Sella's eye over Olivia's shoulder. The guardian spirit's expression had already hardened into the flat mask of pre-emptive disapproval.

"We'll discuss bathing arrangements later," Leon said. "Breakfast first."

They exited the central facility through a reinforced door that opened onto a stone-paved path cutting through dense woodland. Morning light filtered through the canopy in golden shafts, catching the dew that clung to fern fronds and spider silk. The air tasted green and cool—a stark contrast to the sterile interior they'd left behind.

A small open-topped vessel waited on a cleared patch of grass, its hull painted a practical grey-green that matched the surrounding foliage. Leon stepped aboard first and offered his hand to each of the others in turn. The guardian spirits either floated or leapt into the vessel—except for Durga, who flew alongside it.

The vessel lifted off with a soft hum and banked eastward, skimming the treetops. Below, the island unfolded—terraced fields carved into hillsides, clusters of worker housing with smoke curling from chimneys, the dark geometric lines of irrigation channels stitched across meadows. In the distance, Leon could make out the plum orchards, their branches heavy with fruit, and beyond them the first green shoots of the rice paddies catching the morning sun like tiny mirrors.

"It's beautiful," Angelica said. She stood at the rail, the wind pulling loose strands of hair across her face.

Leon watched the landscape pass beneath them and felt something settle in his chest—not pride, exactly, but the quiet satisfaction of work that had taken root. Literally.

The vessel set down on the landing pad behind his family's estate, a modest manor house of timber and stone that sat on a low ridge overlooking the main settlement. His father had expanded the original structure over the past year with funds Leon had provided—new wings for the growing household, a proper kitchen garden, and stables.

Balcus Fou Bartfort stood at the rear entrance, his broad frame filling the doorway. His mother, Luce, appeared at his side a moment later, wiping her hands on an apron. She'd been cooking.

"Leon!" His father's weathered face split into a grin. He clasped Leon's hand with both of his, pulling him into a brief embrace that carried the scent of pipe tobacco and morning dew. "Good to have you back, boy."

"It's only been a few weeks, Dad."

"Feels longer when I hear the stories."

His mother kissed his cheek, her eyes moving quickly over his face—checking, cataloguing, searching for damage the way she always did. Whatever she found satisfied her, because she nodded once and turned her attention to the others.

"Olivia, dear. You look well."

"Lady Bartfort. The plums are looking magnificent from above."

"Oh, aren't they? We've been making preserves aside from the pickle and the alcohol—I'll send a jar back with you."

Leon guided the group inside, through the entrance hall and into the dining room. The long table had been laid for a dozen, plates and cutlery arranged with the sort of careful precision his mother brought to everything. Covered dishes lined the centre, and the smell of fresh bread, cured ham, and something richly savoury—stew, perhaps, or a slow-cooked braise—filled the room.

Margot Fou Bellefleur occupied the chair at the far end, opposite the head of the table. Her arms were crossed, her staff propped against the wall behind her, and her expression carried the particular intensity of a woman who had been waiting for information and growing increasingly displeased about the delay.

"Bartfort."

"Margot."

"How did the meeting with the Duke go?"

Leon pulled out a chair, gestured for Angelica to take the one beside him, and sat down. He placed his hands flat on the table.

"Duke Vince Rapha Redgrave has agreed to a wardship arrangement. Angelica's rank has been reduced to that of a baronetcy. I've pledged tribute to the ducal house in exchange for their protection and political sponsorship." He paused. "The contract includes a clause ensuring Angelica's position in my household cannot be diminished by any future arrangements. Effectively, the Duke has secured influence over my marriage prospects."

Margot's eyes narrowed. "You accepted that."

"I did."

"Without negotiation."

"The terms were fair."

Margot held his gaze for a long moment, then exhaled through her nose and unfolded her arms. "We'll discuss the details after breakfast."

"All my allowance," came a voice from the far side of the table, thick with indignation. "Every last coin."

Jenna slumped in her chair, her chin resting on the table's edge. Her eyes were red-rimmed and accusing.

"I bet everything on the prince. Everything. Father only gives me a pittance as it is, and now it's gone."

Leon raised an eyebrow but said nothing. Jenna didn't need to know that it was his money funding that allowance, not their father's.

Olivia, settling into her seat across from Jenna, did not share his restraint.

"Perhaps next time you'll consider backing the winning side."

"You—!"

"Jenna." Balcus's voice carried the weight of a man who had mediated one too many arguments between his children. "Not at breakfast."

"But Father—"

"Not. At. Breakfast."

Jenna subsided, though her glare could have curdled milk. Colin, seated beside her, seemed to be enjoying the spectacle immensely. Nicks, further down, kept his eyes on his plate with the discipline of someone who had learned when to stay invisible.

Luce began uncovering the dishes—eggs in three preparations, thick slices of ham from the new livestock, fresh bread with butter and honey, a root vegetable hash seasoned with herbs from the kitchen garden, and a pot of grain porridge that steamed when the lid came off. Leon reached for the bread first, tearing a piece and passing the basket to Angelica.

Margot turned her attention to her daughter. "Mégane."

Mégane, who had been reaching for the ham, froze with her fingers extended.

"How are your remedial classes progressing?"

The question landed like a physical weight. Mégane withdrew her hand and straightened in her chair.

"They're fine."

"Fine."

"Professor Halloran says my etiquette scores are improving."

"And the rest?"

A pause. "The remedials run until the end of the school year."

"The end of the school year." Margot repeated each word with surgical precision. "You're telling me that you've accumulated enough missed coursework to require remediation for the entirety of the remaining term."

"It's not my fault the professors—"

"It is entirely your fault. You skipped seventeen classes in a single month."

"I was on an adventure—"

"That still didn't excuse the absenteeism."

Mégane's jaw worked silently. Olivia covered her mouth with her hand to hide what was unmistakably a grin.

The dining room door banged open.

Everyone turned.

Zola Fou Bartfort swept into the room like a storm front—all rustling silk, clinking jewellery, and barely contained fury. Her hair was pinned in an elaborate arrangement that had survived whatever journey she'd made to

arrive here, and her face was flushed the particular shade of red that Leon associated with sustained outrage.

"Not a single soul at the dock! Not one attendant, not one maid—I arrive at my husband's estate, and there is no one to receive me!" Her voice filled the dining room, bouncing off the walls and rattling the cutlery. "Balcus, what is the meaning of this?"

His father rose from his chair slowly, the way a man might rise to face an incoming wave he knew he couldn't stop. "Zola. We weren't expecting you."

"Weren't expecting—I am the lady of this house! I should not need to announce myself like some common merchant!" Her eyes swept the table, cataloguing faces, and locked onto Leon. "You."

Leon took a bite of bread. Chewed.

"Do you have any idea what you've done? Challenging the Crown Prince to a duel—the Crown Prince! Every family connected to the royal household has severed ties with us. My credit line at Valmonte's has been cancelled. Cancelled! Twenty years of patronage, gone!" She jabbed a finger at Balcus. "I told you that boy would bring ruin on this family. I told you the day he came back with those ridiculous islands. And now—now!—my investments have collapsed. I've had to sell three attendants just to cover my debts!"

Balcus opened his mouth. Zola rolled over him without pausing for breath.

"All of my money, Balcus. Gone. Because your son decided to play soldier against the heir to the throne. Are you proud? Is this what you raised him for?"

Leon set down his bread and raised an eyebrow. He'd let Zola run herself out. She always did, eventually.

Zola's gaze snagged on the figure seated to Leon's right. Angelica sat with her back straight, her burgundy jacket crisp, her hands folded on the table before her. She had not reacted to Zola's entrance. She had not flinched at the volume. She watched the older woman the way one might observe weather.

Zola's lip curled.

"And who is this? Another one?" She looked Angelica up and down with open contempt. "Did you pick up another lowly mistress on your little adventure? Some baron's spare daughter, no doubt, willing to spread her legs for a title and a—"

Angelica's gaze turned to ice. Not a flash of anger—something colder. The temperature in the dining room dropped by several degrees, and it had nothing to do with magic.

"I would advise you," Angelica said, each word precise as cut glass, "to finish that sentence very carefully."

Zola blinked. The sheer composure of the response seemed to wrong-foot her, but she recovered quickly, drawing breath for a fresh assault—

"Lady Zola."

Margot's voice cut through the room like a blade across silk. She hadn't moved from her chair. Her arms remained crossed. But the weight of her attention settled on Zola with the gravity of a judgement.

Zola's head swivelled. For the first time, she registered Margot's presence—the guild leader's staff propped against the wall, the emblem of the Adventurer's Guild on her lapel, the calm authority radiating from every line of her posture.

"Guild Master Bellefleur?" Zola's bluster cracked, just slightly. "I didn't—what are you doing here?"

"Having breakfast." Margot uncrossed her arms and gestured toward Angelica with one hand, palm upward. "Allow me to make an introduction, since you've neglected to ask. The young woman whose character you just impugned is Lady Angelica Rapha Redgrave. Daughter of Duke Vince Rapha Redgrave. Former betrothed of Crown Prince Julius." She paused, letting each word

land. "Currently under Baron Leon Fou Bartfort's wardship by formal contract with the ducal house."

The colour drained from Zola's face in stages. First, the flush retreated from her cheeks, leaving them sallow. Then her throat went pale. Then her hands, which had been gesticulating moments before, dropped to her sides and trembled.

"The—the Duke's—"

"The Duke's daughter, yes." Margot's expression didn't shift. "You were saying something about mistresses?"

"I—that is—I didn't—" Zola's eyes darted from Margot to Angelica to Leon and back again. Perspiration beaded at her hairline, darkening the powder she'd applied. "I had no idea—naturally, if I'd known—the Duke's household is—I would never presume to—"

"And yet you did."

Zola swallowed. Her mouth opened and closed twice without producing sound. She looked at Balcus, but he offered nothing—his expression flat, arms at his sides. No rescue coming from that quarter.

"I—my sincerest apologies, Lady Redgrave. The journey was—I was overwrought—the stress of recent events—"

Angelica regarded her for a moment longer, then turned back to the table and picked up her fork.

"I believe the ham is getting cold," she said.

Zola stood in the doorway, her mouth working, her hands clasped together as if in prayer. The silence stretched. Then Margot gestured toward an empty chair at the far end of the table with a motion that was less an invitation and more a directive.

Zola sat. Rutart and Merce followed quietly, slipping into seats without a word. Breakfast continued. Zola did not speak again for the remainder of the meal.

The perspiration never quite dried.

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Steam rose from the open-air pools in thick, languid columns, curling against the darkening sky. The onsen occupied a natural shelf carved into the mountain's eastern face, ringed by smooth stones that Luxion's drones had arranged with geometric precision. Two pools sat side by side, separated by a wall of bamboo lattice dense enough to block sight but thin enough to carry sound. Mountain pines pressed close on three sides, their branches heavy with needles that scented the air sharp and clean. Beyond the edge of the shelf, the island fell away into evening mist, and the distant lights of the settlement glittered below like scattered coins.

Olivia sank into the larger pool with a groan that bordered on indecent. The water closed around her shoulders, mineral-rich and hot enough to turn her skin pink within seconds. Pollux bobbed on the surface beside her, half-dissolved into translucent light. Sella occupied the far corner with Leysritt, both submerged to the chin, their expressions identical masks of guarded relaxation.

Meltryllis sat at the pool's edge, her feet dangling in the water, crystalline patterns forming and dissolving across the surface wherever her skin touched it. Durga had claimed a flat rock jutting from the pool's centre, seated primly like a bathing goddess holding court, all but her two regular arms retracted beneath the water. Art leaned against the stone rim, Marmyadose propped beside her within arm's reach—she'd refused to let the great sword out of her sight since Folkvangr. Olivia had noticed but hadn't asked. Some things had their own timing.

Ria floated on her back, eyes closed, dark hair spreading across the water like ink.

Britomart hovered above the surface, her luminous form casting rippling light across the stone.

And Angelica.

Angelica stepped into the pool with the care of someone entering unfamiliar territory, one foot testing the temperature before committing. She wore a bathing cloth wrapped around her torso—the only concession to modesty she'd managed after Olivia had cheerfully informed her that proper onsen etiquette required nudity. The cloth clung to her as the steam worked through it, outlining the curve of her waist, the length of her—

A hand cracked across the back of Olivia's skull.

"Ow!"

Sella had appeared behind her without sound or warning. The guardian spirit's expression could have been carved from marble.

"Your eyes were wandering."

"I was admiring the stonework."

"The stonework is behind you."

Olivia rubbed the back of her head, scowling, and slid deeper into the water until only her nose and eyes remained above the surface. Bubbles rose in a sulky stream.

After a moment, she surfaced again and drifted toward Angelica, who had settled against the far wall with her eyes half-closed. The heat had loosened the tension in Angelica's shoulders, and her hair—unbound—fell in damp waves across the stone behind her.

Olivia leaned close. Her voice dropped to a whisper.

"Angie."

"Mm?"

"The divider."

Angelica's eyes opened. "What about it?"

"Leon's on the other side."

A pause. Angelica's relaxed expression sharpened.

"Olivia, no."

"Just a peek—"

"Absolutely not."

"We could—"

"No."

Mégane's head broke the surface beside them. Water streamed from her hair.

"I'm in," she whispered.

"You see?" Olivia gestured at Mégane with vindicated enthusiasm.

"Consensus."

"Two people do not constitute consensus—"

"Three if you count Ria."

From across the pool, Ria raised one hand from the water in a lazy thumbs-up without opening her eyes.

"Four if—"

"Sella."

Leon's voice carried through the bamboo divider with absolute clarity. Flat. Unimpressed. The kind of tone that suggested he'd heard every syllable.

Silence fell across the women's pool like a physical weight.

On the other side of the divider, a splash. Then Leon's voice again, quieter now but still perfectly audible in the mountain stillness.

"I can hear everything."

"Of course you can." Olivia stood up, baring everything to the mountain air without a shred of self-consciousness. "C'mon—just a little bit of naked friendship between everyone!"

"This is a must," she added emphatically, hands on her hips. "To improve our bond and camaraderie!"

Mégane stared up at her, struck speechless for once in her life. Several guardian spirits found their gazes drawn involuntarily upward as Olivia gesticulated with wild enthusiasm, certain assets following the motion with a physics all their own.

Smack.

Sella settled back into her corner, hands beneath the water, expression serene.

"Honestly," the guardian spirit said. "All of you."

Olivia sank beneath the surface again, blowing bubbles of defeat.

"You guys are no fun."

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The terran dungeon's exit stood tall and imposing behind them. One by one, they stepped through onto the stone platform that marked the dungeon's surface entrance, squinting against the abrupt shift from the dungeon's perpetual twilight to the island's late-afternoon sun.

Leon rolled his shoulders, dislodging the particular stiffness that came from hours of sustained reinforcement. His coat was dusty, his boots scuffed, and a thin cut on his left forearm had already sealed itself shut courtesy of Olivia.

Behind him, Olivia emerged with Pollux cradled in her arms—the guardian spirit had overtaxed herself on the fourth floor and was now sleeping with the determined obliviousness of a cat. Angelica followed, Britomart at her shoulder, both of them covered in a fine crystalline dust that glittered when it caught the light.

Folkvangr had been gruelling, but a full day of dungeon-clearing was its own kind of punishment. They'd been at it since dawn—harvesting magic stones from the terran dungeon for Folkvangr's restoration, and running reconnaissance on the dungeons they hadn't yet opened to the public. The exclusivity clock was ticking.

Mégane came last, her blade still drawn, her guild coat singed along one sleeve.

"That's the terran dungeon cleared for the day," Leon said, accepting the canteen Luxion extended on a mechanical arm. He drank deep and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "What's our status with the restoration of Folkvangr?"

"Seven hundred and forty-two grade-three magic stones," Luxion reported. "Two hundred and nine grade-four. Sufficient to restore approximately eighteen per cent of Folkvangr's structural lattice."

Leon did the maths. At this rate, full restoration would take another month of daily harvests. Margot would want it operational before the academy term resumed—the enchanted island was her jurisdiction, after all, and every day it sat damaged was a day the guild and the palace couldn't use it for sanctioned exercises.

"We'll need to double our rate," he said. "Schedule another run tomorrow morning. Dawn."

Mégane groaned.

But today's real work was already behind them. The terran dungeon was familiar ground—cleared and mapped, its rhythms predictable. This morning,

before the stone harvest, they'd spent three hours on reconnaissance inside the cosmic dungeon's unopened seventh level.

Leon turned to face the group, his expression shifting from casual to measured.

"Recon summary. The seventh floor follows the same spatial pattern as the previous six: three-dimensional void, crystalline constructs, and gravitational anomalies. But the density is higher. Significantly higher. The constructs are clustering in formations we haven't seen before, and there's something at the centre that Luxion couldn't scan past."

"A shielded zone," Luxion confirmed. "Consistent with a boss chamber, but the interference pattern suggests multiple-layered barriers rather than a single threshold."

"We have exclusivity on these dungeons for one year from the date of contract," Leon continued. "That clock is running. We've cleared the second cosmic dungeon through floor six, and we believe that the final floor is either the next one or the one after that. We still have three more dungeon instances to clear, plus the two Mégane contributed from her own conquests. Six total. If we want to claim the deep-floor rewards before the exclusivity window closes, we need to accelerate."

Angelica brushed crystalline dust from her sleeve. "What's the priority order?"

"Cosmic dungeon floors seven through whatever lies at the bottom. Then the remaining three unclaimed instances in the sequence of projected difficulty." Leon glanced at Mégane. "Your two—what's your assessment of their depth?"

"Mid-tier at most. Plenty of floors, but difficulty-wise, nothing like the dungeons you discovered."

"Then we save those for last. More efficient to clear the high-value targets whilst we have the team assembled."

Olivia set Pollux down on a flat stone, arranging the sleeping spirit's limbs with maternal care. "We should bring Margot's guild members to the lower floors. Train them up. The more people who can clear these independently after our exclusivity ends, the more value the barony extracts long-term."

Leon nodded. Sound reasoning. He opened his mouth to respond—

The sound reached them first. The whine of an airship engine, high and sharp, cutting through the mountain air from the southeast. Leon's hand moved to his hip on instinct before he caught himself. Not a threat. The engine signature was too clean, too well-maintained.

A small courier vessel crested the treeline and banked toward the platform, its hull painted in colours Leon recognised immediately—ivory and gold, trimmed with the royal crest of Holfort.

Palace colours.

The vessel touched down on the stone platform with practised grace. A ramp descended, and a man in formal court dress emerged—middle-aged, lean, with the pinched expression of someone who had spent too many hours in transit and not enough in a comfortable chair. He carried a leather dispatch case pressed against his chest.

"Baron Leon Fou Bartfort?"

"That's me."

The courier descended the ramp, reached into his case, and produced a document sealed with wax bearing the royal sigil—a crown atop crossed swords, pressed in deep crimson.

"By decree of Their Majesties, King Roland Rapha Holfort and Queen Mylene Rapha Holfort, you are hereby summoned to present yourself at the Royal Palace at your earliest convenience." His gaze swept across the group and settled on Angelica. "Lady Angelica Rapha Redgrave is requested to attend as well."

Leon took the document. The wax was still warm.

He broke the seal and scanned the contents. Formal language, layered with the particular verbosity that palace scribes used to make simple requests sound like cosmic edicts. But the core message was clear enough.

The King and Queen wanted to see them.

He folded the decree and slipped it into his coat.

"Earliest convenience," he repeated. "How early?"

"The Palace expects you and your entourage by tomorrow, my Lord."

Leon looked at Olivia. Olivia looked at Angelica. Angelica's expression had gone very still.

Mégane sheathed her blade.

"Then we're leaving tonight."

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End

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