

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

### **Story Starts**

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### **Chapter 7.7 -**

### **The Storm**

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Jilk surveyed the battlefield with growing dread, his enhanced vision taking in every devastating detail.

Olivia and Angelica were descending from where they'd finished Chris, their power armour gleaming with barely a scratch despite the prolonged combat. They moved with the easy confidence of warriors who knew they'd already won—it was just a matter of time now.

Leon and his guardian spirit approached from another direction, unhurried and certain, moving with the casual certainty of predators who knew their prey was cornered. The baron's heterochromatic eyes swept the field, cataloguing positions, calculating angles. Even at rest, he radiated danger.

And the white construct—that nightmarish thing woven from threads and fury—continued its relentless work, herding the remaining guardian spirits ever closer to their position. Like a rabid beast driving livestock to slaughter. Silent. Patient. Unstoppable.

The noose was tightening.

They were losing. Not slowly anymore—rapidly. The numerical advantage they'd started with had evaporated like morning mist, and now the tide had turned so completely that continuation meant only prolonged humiliation.

Jilk's mind raced through their remaining options. Fight on and be crushed. Surrender and be mocked. Neither outcome was acceptable.

But there was a third option. A desperate one.

*'Pride be damned.'*

"STOP!"

Jilk's voice erupted across Folkvangr, enhanced with every scrap of wind magic he could muster. The word rolled like thunder, reverberating off the floating debris and shattered terrain, echoing across the arena with enough force to make the air itself tremble.

The magical amplification carried his command to every corner of the battlefield—to the combatants below, to the stands above, to the recording crystals capturing every moment.

Impossible to ignore.

To his genuine surprise, everyone did.

Leon paused mid-step, one eyebrow raised in mild curiosity. Olivia halted her descent, exchanging a glance with Angelica that seemed to ask *'What's he playing at?'* Even the monstrous white construct went still, its eyeless face turning towards Jilk as if awaiting instruction—probably at the behest of its maker.

The sudden silence was deafening after the chaos of battle. No clash of steel. No roar of magic. Just the whisper of wind across the ruined battlefield and the distant murmur of the crowd.

Jilk floated forward, positioning himself between the converging forces and his prince. His heart hammered against his ribs hard enough that he wondered if others could hear it, but his voice remained steady through sheer force of will.

This was his gambit. His responsibility. His burden to bear.

He would not falter now.

"I address everyone present—combatants, spectators, and those watching through the broadcast."

He swept his gaze across the frozen battlefield, making sure his words would carry to the stands, to the recording crystals, to everyone who needed to hear this. His voice rang with aristocratic authority—the voice of House Marmorina, foster brother to the Crown Prince himself.

"I can no longer stand this insult. Do you have no shame? You stand against the Crown Prince of Holfort—the future king of this nation. Whatever grievances you believe you hold, whatever slights you imagine you've suffered, there will be consequences for this humiliation."

He let that sink in before continuing.

"Consequences that will extend beyond this arena, beyond this academy, to your families and holdings."

Silence greeted his words, heavy and expectant. The crowd held its breath. Even the wind seemed to still.

Then Olivia snorted.

The sound carried equal parts amusement and derision, cutting through his carefully constructed dignity like a knife through silk.

Jilk pressed on, ignoring her reaction and the flush of embarrassment heating his neck. He'd expected mockery. He'd prepared for it. What mattered was what came next.

"For this slight, I propose new terms."

He straightened his spine, projecting confidence he didn't entirely feel.

"Transform this skirmish into a proper duel—His Highness Prince Julius and I against Lady Angelica and Olivia. Two against two. A contest of skill and honour, decided by personal combat alone. No guardian spirits. No rain of steel."

Just them. Human against human.

*'Please,'* he thought desperately. *'Take the bait.'*

He deliberately did not mention Baron Bartfort.

The man had proven himself capable of matching Karna and Arjuna blow for blow—legendary guardian spirits that had never known defeat in recorded history. Including him would render any duel meaningless. They'd be cut down before they could even raise their weapons.

No. Better to face the two women and pray that they could compensate for their demonstrated skill. It was a slim hope, but it was hope nonetheless.

Jilk gritted his teeth, feeling the weight of his own humiliation. He was begging, and everyone knew it. The proud son of House Marmorina, reduced to pleading for scraps of mercy from a commoner and a disgraced fiancée.

*'For Julius. For Marie. Endure it.'*

Angelica's eyes narrowed dangerously, red irises blazing like embers stoked by fury. When she spoke, her voice dripped with contempt so thick it could have been bottled and sold as poison.

"You wish to change the terms *now*, Lord Marmorina?"

Each word was a lash.

"After your side agreed to this format? After you were given every advantage—twenty-three combatants against our twelve? After Olivia here graciously allowed you to set the rules of engagement?"

She laughed—a sharp, bitter sound that held no warmth whatsoever.

"You speak of honour whilst attempting to wriggle free of a bargain you were handed on a silver platter?"

"Lady Redgrave—"

"No."

Angelica cut him off, her voice sharp as broken glass.

"I remember, Lord Marmorina. I remember all of you mocking me when no one was stepping forward to defend my honour. I remember you and your entourage volunteering as proxies—not to resolve the matter fairly, but to further embarrass me. To grind my face into the dirt for daring to object to my betrothed's infidelity."

Her eyes burned.

"And now—*now*—when we are finally catching up, when your numerical advantage has crumbled to dust, you dare call *us* out? You dare speak of *honour*?"

Jilk's jaw tightened.

She wasn't wrong. That was the worst part. Everything she said was true.

Olivia drifted closer, her head tilting with predatory interest. The motion reminded Jilk uncomfortably of a cat studying a cornered mouse—deciding whether to play with it or simply end things quickly.

"But I'm curious, Lord Marmorina."

A smile spread across her face. Too wide. Too sharp. Too hungry.

"You want to change the game when you're losing? That's... bold. Foolish, but bold." She tapped a finger against her chin in mock contemplation. "So tell me—what exactly are you willing to bet for that privilege?"

Her smile widened.

"After all, we could just ignore you right now and restart the fight. Watch everything fall apart around you. It would be *entertaining*."

At that statement, Jilk took in his surroundings—all the guardian spirits encircling them, watching, waiting. And above them, the previous rain of steel had frozen mid-fall. Thousands of bladed weapons now hung suspended in the air, as if held by invisible warriors. Every single point directed at them.

The torrential downpour of death, waiting to resume.

Behind him, Jilk heard Julius draw breath to speak. Marie's hand reached toward the prince, concern written across her delicate features. He could feel their worry like a physical weight pressing against his back.

"Let me handle this," Jilk said quietly, not turning around. His voice was steady despite the storm raging in his chest.

"Jilk—" the prince began, protest evident in his tone.

"Please, Your Highness." Jilk allowed a note of pleading to enter his voice. "Trust me. Just this once."

A pause. Then Julius fell silent.

Jilk turned back to face Olivia. He met her predatory gaze without flinching, even as his heart threatened to pound its way out of his chest.

"Everything."

The word hung in the air like a guillotine blade suspended mid-fall.

The crowd stirred from afar. Murmurs rippled through the stands carrying through the announcer's microphone. Even Olivia's smile faltered for just a fraction of a second.

"The island gifted to me by House Atlee."

Jilk heard gasps from somewhere in the stands.

"My shares in their racing team—fifteen per cent of the most successful aerial racing enterprise in the kingdom."

More gasps. Whispers spreading like wildfire.

"My inheritance from House Marmoria."

The whispers became a roar.

He paused, feeling the weight of each word, the magnitude of what he was about to sacrifice.

"And my nobility itself."

Silence crashed down like a physical force. Absolute. Stunned.

Even Olivia's smile had vanished entirely now, replaced by something that might have been shock.

"All of it," Jilk continued, his voice ringing clear across the silent battlefield.

"Every scrap of wealth, every shred of status, everything I am and everything I own. All wagered against new terms for this duel."

He spread his arms wide, as if offering himself to the heavens.

"That is what I'm willing to bet, Lady Olivia. Is it enough?"

Olivia's eyes glittered with something between greed and admiration. Her mouth opened—

"No."

He stepped forward, and despite having no magic enhancement, his words carried clearly across the battlefield. There was something in his presence—some weight, some gravity—that commanded attention in a way Jilk couldn't quite explain.

"The point of this skirmish," Leon said, his tone almost conversational, "was never about winning or losing. It was never about your wealth, or your inheritance, or your nobility."

His heterochromatic gaze—one gold, one silver—fixed on Julius with unsettling intensity.

"It was about Lady Angelica. A woman who was publicly humiliated by her own betrothed." He paused, letting the words sink in. "Twice."

Leon began to pace slowly, never breaking eye contact with Julius. Each step was deliberate, measured—the movements of someone utterly in control.

"Your Highness, I've watched you parade another woman before the entire academy. I've watched you dismiss your fiancée's concerns as though they were the whining of a petulant child. I've watched you purchase an elven attendant for Lady Marie—as though announcing to everyone, publicly and proudly, that your betrothal means nothing to you."

His voice remained calm. Almost gentle.

That made it so much worse.

Julius's face reddened, the flush spreading from his neck to his cheeks. "You don't understand—"

"Did you ever once consider how Lady Angelica felt?"

Leon's voice didn't rise. Didn't waver. The calm was infinitely more damning than any shout could have been.

"Did you ever try to end things properly? Speak to her privately, with dignity and respect? Acknowledge her worth as a human being, let alone as a duke's daughter and your future queen?"

Julius opened his mouth—

"Did you ever stop to think," Leon continued, "that perhaps she deserved better than to learn of your infatuation through whispers and public displays?"

"Marie is—" Julius began, desperation creeping into his voice.

"I don't care who Marie is."

Leon's eyes were cold. Not angry—something worse. Disappointed. Contemptuous.

"I care that you couldn't even give Lady Angelica the basic respect of a proper conversation. You just... discarded her. Publicly. Repeatedly. Allowed the entire academy to mock her, to treat her as a laughingstock, while you paraded your new love before her eyes."

He shook his head slowly.

"What kind of man does that, Your Highness? What kind of *prince*?"

Julius's hands clenched into fists, knuckles white with tension. "You know nothing of what I feel! Of what Marie means to me! Angelica is—she doesn't understand—"

"With all due respect, Your Highness, I don't think you understand *her* at all."

Leon's voice carried a weight of weariness now, as if he were explaining something obvious to a child who refused to listen.

"From what I've heard from my vassal, Lady Angelica did try. She tried to speak with you. Tried to understand. Tried to find a way forward." His gaze hardened. "How about you, Your Highness? Did you even make the attempt?"

Silence.

"Did you ever once ask her how she felt? What she wanted? What she needed?"

More silence.

"I thought not."

"You dare!" Julius surged forward, magic crackling around his clenched fists—

"Julius."

Angelica's voice was quiet. Dangerously so. A whisper that somehow cut through everything else like a blade through silk.

The prince froze mid-step.

When Jilk looked at Angelica, he saw something that made his blood run cold. Her expression had shifted. The anger remained—that burning, righteous fury—but beneath it now lay something harder. Colder. The look of a woman who had finally stopped hoping for things to change.

The look of a woman who had made peace with war.

The prince fell silent, whatever protest he'd been forming dying on his lips.

"Thank you, Baron Bartfort." Angelica's gaze never left Julius, but her words were clearly meant for Leon. "For saying what needed to be said. For putting into words what I... could not."

Leon inclined his head slightly in acknowledgment but said nothing.

The silence stretched.

Angelica turned to Jilk, and something in her expression had crystallised into diamond-hard resolve.

"I accept your terms, Lord Marmoria."

The words fell like hammer blows.

"Your island. Your shares. Your inheritance. Your nobility." A ghost of a smile touched her lips—cold, triumphant, merciless. "I'm sure the Atlees will be *delighted* to learn you wagered their gift so recklessly. All of it goes to Baron Bartfort when we win."

She let that sink in before delivering the final cut.

"Unlike my own vassals, he actually stepped forward to support me. Unlike *you*, Lord Marmoria, he didn't wait to see which way the wind was blowing."

Jilk felt the words like a knife between his ribs.

"I also have a score to settle so let's make a three versus two." Whatever Angelica meant wasn't lost on everyone as her eyes settled on the petite blonde as she winced, her face now coloured with guilt.

"Don't bring Marie into—"

"She has nothing—"

Both Julius and Jilk protested but were interrupted, "No, I accept, Lady Redgrave."

"And when we win," Angelica continued nodding at Marie's acceptance, "I no longer care to separate Julius and Marie. Let them have each other." Venom dripped from every syllable. "What I want is a public apology. Full reparations for whatever aftermath follows this farce. The same terms apply in reverse if you *somehow* emerge victorious."

"A-Agreed," Jilk said, already thinking that Angelica made a mistake with this arrangement, as hope finally filled his heart. With Marie's healing abilities, this'll turn into a game of endurance and even with Olivia's healing ability as long as they—

A figure descended from high above—Professor Lucas Rafa Holfort, who had been observing the entire battle from a distance. His expression was unreadable as he landed between the two groups.

"I shall mediate these new terms," he announced. "State them clearly for the record."

"Lady Angelica and Lady Olivia against myself, Lady Marie, and His Highness," Jilk said immediately. "Baron Bartfort is not included in the duel."

"Objection."

The voice came from above. Karna descended, golden armour gleaming, with Arjuna close behind. Both legendary spirits radiated displeasure.

"I do not care for the petty squabbles of the young ones we have unfinished business with Baron Bartfort," Karna said, his tone brooking no argument. "He faced us both and held his ground. To exclude him now would be... unsatisfying."

Arjuna nodded. "We request a separate contest. Ourselves against the Baron and a guardian spirit of his choosing."

Leon's expression flickered—resignation.

"Whichever team finishes first," Karna continued, "may assist the other. Those are acceptable terms."

Professor Holfort looked between the groups. "Lady Angelica? Lady Olivia?"

Olivia glanced at Leon, who shrugged almost imperceptibly.

"Acceptable," Angelica said.

"Then let the terms be witnessed and recorded." Professor Holfort raised his hand, magic swirling around his fingers.

"The duel shall commence in five—"

"Professor Holfort—my apologies, but we should start immediately." Angelica's voice cut through, sharp and impatient. "As soon as Leon decides which guardian spirit shall accompany him."

Jilk exhaled slowly, trying to calm his racing heart.

"Master!" the stoic voice of the guardian spirit who first charged at Marie's Oberon.

Leon locked eyes with the professor, "Art."

*'This is our chance. Our only chance.'*

He looked at Julius and Marie—at the people he was fighting for.

*'I won't fail—'*

Angelica immediately rushed in towards the prince, her bladed guns already slashed twice as a fire spout erupted between them.

"NO!!!"

As soon as the fire spout erupted, the negative pressure within the magic seized the prince in his regal, gleaming power armour and sucked him into the blazing vortex.

'Good,' Angelica thought bitterly, watching the flames spiral around his thrashing form. *'Let him burn for a moment. Let him feel something.'*

She could see that all the remaining guardian spirits had been whisked away by the same light that saved participants from severe injury or death—Folkvangr's safeguards activating now that the terms had changed. The battlefield had cleared in an instant, leaving only the principal combatants.

To her right, from the periphery of her vision, she caught glimpses of the battle between Leon, his guardian spirit Art, and the two legendary spirits. The clash of steel and light painted the distant plateau in colours that spoke of violence far beyond what their student duel warranted—solar fire against conjured blades, divine-looking arrows against impossible swords.

She filed it away. Leon could handle himself. He had proven that much, at least.

But Angelica ignored that distant battle as her power armour glowed, obeying her whims. The familiar warmth of enchantments responding to her intent, the slight hum of power coursing through the metal plates—it all felt right. Natural. Like an extension of her own fury.

She lifted off, flying towards the prince, who had managed to escape the vortex only to be flung towards a distant plateau. He was disoriented. Vulnerable.

Angelica and Olivia immediately seized the chance.

Jilk tried to intercept them—loyal to the last, throwing himself between the pair and his prince. But Angelica's fire spout caught him mid-flight, the vortex's pull disrupting his trajectory, and a severe slash from Olivia's threaded constructs carved through his defences.

Jilk too was absorbed within the raging flames, his form disappearing into the inferno before being flung in the opposite direction.

Angelica watched with grim satisfaction.

The smart thing would have been to strike at the seemingly vulnerable healer of their group. Remove Marie first—eliminate the factor that could turn this into a battle of attrition. Every practical instinct screamed at her to cut off the source of their endless restoration before it could matter.

Strategy demanded it. Logic insisted upon it.

Angelica ignored both.

Because Angelica was still *pissed*.

The fury burned in her chest like a second heart, hot and insistent and impossible to ignore. Rational thought tried to assert itself, tried to remind her of proper strategy, proper conduct, proper *everything*—and she crushed it beneath the weight of months of suppressed resentment.

Months of smiling through humiliation. Months of maintaining dignity while the academy whispered behind her back. Months of watching the man she'd devoted her life to parade another woman before her eyes.

*'No more.'*

*'She doesn't understand, he says,'* she thought angrily as both she and Olivia loomed over the prince, who was struggling to gather his bearings on the shattered plateau below. *'As if loving him was easy. As if it were a choice I made freely.'*

She had been *assigned* to love him. Trained to love him. Moulded since childhood into the perfect future queen, the perfect complement to his royal existence.

A pillar of golden light erupted around Julius as Marie's magic reached him from across the battlefield. The radiance washed over his form, mending whatever damage the vortex had inflicted, restoring his strength in an instant.

A sinister smile coloured Angelica's noble countenance.

'Good.'

She wanted him at full strength. Wanted him to feel every blow, remember every strike. Wanted him to know—truly *know*—what he had thrown away.

Both she and Olivia charged down, gravity and power armour combining to make Angelica's downward slash far more devastating than it would normally have been. The blow carved a massive gash across the plateau as the prince scrambled to dodge at the last possible moment, stone shattering beneath the force of impact.

The jolt travelled up through her arms, and it felt almost *cathartic*.

She wanted to break something. She wanted to break *him*—not just his body, but that insufferable, high-and-mighty certainty he carried like it was a second crown. That unshakeable belief that he was always right, always justified, always the hero of his own grand romance.

'Let me show you what your certainty is worth.'

Olivia flanked from the other side, firing curse after curse through her outstretched hands—black bolts of gandr streaking through the air like malevolent starlight. The prince dodged each one whilst blocking Angelica's slashes with his broadsword, his movements still bearing that infuriating grace that came from years of the finest tutors and the best equipment money could provide.

Even now, even outmatched and outnumbered, he moved like royalty. Like someone who had never truly known defeat.

That was about to change.

Angelica dodged left as an arcing white magical slash flew towards her, the wind of its passage ruffling her hair. She barely registered it. Her focus had narrowed to a single point—the man before her.

The prince she had loved.

The fool who had thrown her away.

They locked swords, steel screaming against steel, faces close enough that she could see the sweat beading on his brow. The prince absorbed another volley of curses from Olivia, but the damage was mitigated by the golden glow that suddenly surrounded his body—Marie's protection, constant and unwavering.

Always there for him in ways Angelica had never been permitted to be.

*'She gets to stand beside him,'* Angelica thought, the bitterness sharp enough to taste. *'She gets to heal his wounds. She gets to be needed. And I was told to step aside. To accept my replacement gracefully.'*

The injustice of it burned like acid.

"You dared mock my effort!" Angelica roared into the prince's face, their locked blades trembling between them. "Telling me that I do not *understand!*"

The words tore from her throat raw and ragged, stripped of all the courtly composure she had spent a lifetime cultivating. This was not Lady Redgrave, the Duke's daughter, a model of aristocratic grace.

This was Angelica. Just Angelica. Bleeding out years of pain through every syllable.

Angelica drove her knee into the armoured thigh of the prince as she stepped in closer, the impact ringing through her leg. The blow was inelegant, brutal, entirely unbecoming of a duke's daughter.

She didn't care.

This was a moment of honesty—no longer hiding behind noble stoicism or magnanimity, no longer wearing whatever facade propriety demanded. Just raw, honest fury, delivered with fist and steel.

"You dared throw away all the years I sacrificed!" Each word was punctuated by a strike—slash, parry, thrust. "Training to be your future bride! Learning how best to support you, to support your eventual rule, to support your eventual kingdom!"

Each word was a blade she had kept sheathed for too long, and now they poured from her in a torrent she could not have stemmed even if she had wanted to. Months of swallowed protests. Months of bitten tongues. Months of smiling when she wanted to scream.

All of it, flooding out at once.

From above, she could hear Olivia intercepting Jilk as the two exchanged blows mid-air—magical and physical, curses and steel clashing in rapid succession. The sounds of their combat filtered through her awareness like distant thunder.

Present, but irrelevant.

Olivia could handle herself. Right now, Angelica had a prince to break.

"I made an effort to love you!" Angelica snarled, parrying the broadside of Julius's sword with her Reiterdegen and thrusting with her Reiterpallasch. The familiar weight of her weapons felt like the only honest thing in the world—steel that did not lie, that did not make promises it had no intention of keeping.

"And you threw it back at me!"

"I learned your favourite foods!" She punctuated the word with a slash that he barely blocked.

"I memorised the names of every noble family you might need to court!" A fire lance forced him to dodge left.

"I studied military strategy because you admired it!" A punch caught his shoulder guard, denting the metal.

"I became your mother's attendant to shadow her and learn things practically whilst serving her!" A kick swept at his legs, making him stumble.

Each accusation was a blow. Each memory, a wound she was finally inflicting back.

The prince's face twisted into anger—finally, *finally* a reaction beyond that infuriating noble calm. He weaved into her space with sudden aggression, throwing a punch at her stomach.

The blow connected solidly, driving the breath from her lungs even through her armour's protection. Pain blossomed through her midsection, sharp and immediate.

Angelica keeled over—but she tightened her core, refused to fall.

Instead, she delivered an elbow straight to His Highness's face.

The impact was deeply, viscerally satisfying—armoured vambrace against royal bone, stripped of all pretence of civilised combat. She felt his head snap to the side, felt the crunch of impact travel up through her arm, and something fierce and ugly sang in her chest.

*'Yes. Feel that. Feel what I've felt.'*

The prince clutched at his reddening cheek, staggering backwards—and then was enveloped by another pillar of golden light. Marie's healing, ever present. Ever faithful.

The bruise faded. The pain vanished. As if Angelica's blow had never happened at all.

"Love me?!" Julius's voice cracked with indignation, his composure finally shattered. "You *love* me when you had no trouble getting in my way? You who instigated this battle!"

His eyes blazed with self-righteous fury.

"If you truly loved me, you should have just bowed out gracefully—!"

Angelica stood there, looking down coldly at the prince as he ranted. Her expression was carved from ice even as her heart screamed inside her chest.

She listened to his words. Each one confirming what she had suspected for years now.

He had never seen her at all. Never looked beyond the title of 'fiancée' to the woman beneath. Never wondered what she might want, might need, might *feel*.

She had been furniture to him. Decorative. Functional. Replaceable.

But Julius's rant was cut short.

Olivia's monstrous white construct—that silent behemoth of woven fury—kicked Jilk into the prince with devastating force. Both men went sprawling across the shattered stone of the plateau, limbs tangled, armour scraping against rock.

Before Jilk could recover, the construct grabbed him by the head.

And proceeded to drag his body across the plateau.

The sound was horrific—metal scraping stone, a muffled cry of pain and protest—whilst Olivia stood above, firing curse after curse after curse into his helpless form. Black bolts of gandr splashing across his armour, his exposed face, anywhere she could reach.

"Jilk has retired from the battle!"

The announcer's voice rang across Folkvangr, and Angelica felt a surge of grim satisfaction. One more obstacle removed. One step closer to the end.

She charged her armour, power thrumming through the metal plates as she prepared to finally finish the prince. Every enchantment sang with readiness. Every fibre of her being focused on the man struggling to rise before her.

But as she stepped forward, her path was blocked.

Marie.

The petite blonde stood between Angelica and Julius, holding a single-bladed sword. For a moment, Angelica caught a flash of guilt crossing Marie's delicate features, something that might have been regret flickering in those wide eyes.

Then Marie exhaled. And when she looked up again, her expression had hardened into something serious. Something determined.

The healer had become the prince's shield.

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Art immediately closed the distance, hands gripping twin longswords whilst the gigantic floating blade Leon had forged for her during their contracting hovered at her back like a patient guardian. Marmyadose's replica—a weapon seemingly too large for her small frame to wield directly, but perfect for autonomous strikes guided by her will.

One of the weapons wielded by Herakles, something Archer encountered during his time as a counter guardian, a hollow version of it resting within his marble—which he used as a basis when he forged it for Art.

Three strikes in rapid succession towards Arjuna, the dark-skinned archer forced to abandon his bow and draw his own blade to parry. Steel sang against steel, Art's cosmic fairy strength driving him back step by step.

Meanwhile, Leon parried Karna's gigantic lance with a heavy shot—a traced sword fired like an arrow, the impact deflecting his large lance just enough to create an opening.

Leon circled the residual fire spout from Angelica's earlier attack, using the heat distortion as cover whilst several traced blades orbited around him like steel satellites. Karna watched him with predatory interest, the legendary spirit's golden armour gleaming with inner fire, the prince's stolen visage twisted into an expression of eager anticipation.

Then Karna rushed forward, head-on, grinning.

He batted aside the first orbiting sword with casual ease. The rest followed him, tracking his movement, but he weaved between them with the grace of someone who had fought entire armies and emerged victorious.

Leon needed something more.

*"Unknown to death nor known to life."*

For some reason, this sword sang to him—a resonance he couldn't quite identify that pulsed with recognition. His empty hand reached out, and steel answered.

The blade materialised in his grip: an elegant greatsword with a silver blade. Silver ornate cross-guard with decorative flourishes and a cross motif at the centre. Intricate filigree patterns running down the fuller like frozen lightning.

A weapon bathed in the blood of the phantasmal it slew, wielded by a legend. Both demonic and holy—a contradiction made steel.

It felt *right* in his hands. As if it had been waiting for him.

Karna's body glowed as fire erupted around him, golden flames wrapping around his lance like a serpent coiling for the strike. The heat was intense enough to distort the air, to make Leon's skin prickle even at this distance.

Leon channelled mana into his blade, feeling the greatsword respond eagerly. Blue-white energy radiated from the silver-bright steel, twilight light blooming along the blade's edge.

Ethereal blue met fiery red.

They clashed.

The displaced air radiated outward from where their weapons met, a shockwave that pushed the orbiting swords aside and sent loose debris tumbling across the plateau. The ground beneath Leon's feet cracked from the sheer force of the exchange.

For a moment, they were locked—legendary lance against phantasmal greatsword, solar fire against twilight steel.

Then they broke apart, circling.

From afar, Leon caught glimpses of the other battle. Olivia engaging with Jilk mid-air, curses and constructs versus wind blades and desperate defence. Angelica clashing with the prince, her fury evident in every strike.

*'Will everything be alright after this fight?'* The thought surfaced unbidden.

He traced several more greatswords—standard blades, nothing special—and launched them upward towards Arjuna, forcing the archer to break off his engagement with Art and focus on defence. Arrows of light intercepted the projectiles mid-flight, explosions of steel and radiance blooming across the sky.

Art seized the opening, disengaging from close combat to flank Karna instead. She moved with fluid grace, the floating Marmyadose replica providing excellent defence as she retreated—the massive blade intercepting retaliatory arrows from Arjuna that would have skewered her otherwise.

Leon stepped into Karna's space, driving his sword's crossguard forward in a pommel strike aimed at the spirit's face. But Karna was faster—he batted the attack away with his bare hand, the impact ringing like a bell, then adjusted his grip on his lance. Holding it near the base now, shortening his leverage but making it far more effective for close-quarters combat.

They exchanged a rapid flurry—thrust, parry, slash, dodge—neither gaining clear advantage.

*'Would Angelica actually get closure after this?'*

A blast of solar energy hit Leon square in the chest—Arjuna recovered and retaliated from range. The impact drove him backwards, boots carving furrows in the stone, his reinforced body absorbing what would have been lethal damage to anyone else.

Art capitalised instantly, slashing twice at Karna's exposed back whilst pivoting to bat away a volley of arrows from the recovered Arjuna. Her twin longswords were a blur of motion, and the floating Marmyadose beside her slashed horizontally at Karna's midsection.

The legendary spirit dodged at the last second—barely. A thin line of the spirit's ichor appeared on his side where the massive blade had grazed him.

First blood.

Karna's grin only widened.

Leon pressed the attack, sword singing through the air as he drove Karna back towards where Art waited. His mind, working overtime—fighting and thinking simultaneously.

*'I can respect a person's agency,' he mused between exchanges. 'Their right to find their own way, their own love, outside of social pressure and societal expectations.'*

Parry. Thrust. Dodge the counter.

*'Julius wants Marie. Fine. That's his choice.'*

Trace three swords. Launch them in a spread pattern. Force Karna to defend.

*'But the way he went about it...'*

Art engaged Arjuna again, keeping the archer occupied whilst Leon focused on Karna. The legendary spirits were strong—terrifyingly so—but they were also *enjoying* themselves. Holding back just enough to prolong the entertainment.

Leon would exploit that.

*'Typically, I wouldn't care,'* he admitted to himself, deflecting a lance thrust that would have taken his head. *'A far cry from my teenage self—literally a short lifetime ago.'*

Slash. Parry. Reposition.

*'Now that my sense of justice has been stained by the end of the Holy Grail War—their deaths—and Archer's memories... I've let a lot of minor injustices slide.'*

He traced Kanshou and Bakuya, hurling them in converging arcs. Karna batted both aside, but the momentary distraction let Leon close distance again.

*'All I care about now is my immediate vicinity. My own personal world.'*

Karna's lance came in low, aiming to sweep Leon's legs. He jumped, traced a platform of swords beneath his feet, and used it to launch himself higher—above the legendary spirit, sword raised for a devastating downward strike.

Karna met him mid-air, lance blazing with solar fire.

They clashed again. Separated. Clashed once more.

*'But Angelica entered my sphere through Olivia,'* Leon thought, *'and old instincts flared that night at the ball.'*

He remembered standing in the crowd, watching the prince parade Marie before the entire academy. Watching Angelica's face—the careful mask she wore, the pain she couldn't quite hide.

*'I just couldn't stand how they went about it.'*

Art swooped in, Marmyadose carving a burning arc towards Karna's back. The spirit twisted, deflecting the massive blade with the shaft of his lance, but the opening let Leon land a solid kick to his chest.

*'Though instead of jumping in immediately, I observed. Waited. Wanted to see whether the academy would support or condemn the injustice.'*

Arjuna fired a rapid volley—six arrows of light in the span of a heartbeat. Leon traced a fan of blades to intercept whilst Art closed the distance with the archer, forcing him back into melee where his bow was a disadvantage.

*'Unfortunately, the herd didn't care for anything other than self-preservation and their own entertainment.'*

Karna came at him again, lance wreathed in flames that left afterimages in the air. Leon met each strike with his blade, meeting flames with a blast of condensed mana.

*'The casual cruelty. The enjoyment of seeing someone from a higher position brought low. Made worse by the prince and his entourage treating it so callously.'*

They broke apart. Circled. Art harried Arjuna in the distance, the sounds of their combat a staccato rhythm of steel and light.

*'Though 'herd' isn't really the right metaphor for Holfort's noble class,'* Leon mused, tracing more blades to replenish his orbiting arsenal.

Karna launched a beam of concentrated solar fire—not at Leon, but at Art. Leon intercepted it with a hastily projected Rho Aias, the seven-layered shield blooming into existence just in time. The impact shattered three layers before the attack dissipated.

*'A pack of hyenas would be more accurate. Once one has taken their pound of flesh, the others leap in to feast upon the carcass.'*

He dismissed the damaged shield, feeling the familiar ache of backlash throb through his body. Several gashes formed around his body plus a stinging sensation behind his left eye was its equivalent backlash.

*'But that's just normal. It's pretty human, actually.'*

Art seized the opening Leon had created, driving both longswords towards Arjuna's chest. The archer twisted, taking a glancing blow to the shoulder instead of a killing strike, and retreated to create distance.

Karna pressed Leon, their exchange intensifying—thrust, parry, slash, counter, neither giving ground.

*'Which is why I don't act on every injustice I see,'* Leon thought, blade singing as it deflected another lance strike. *'The petty cruelties between students. The casual abuse of lower nobility.'*

He ducked under a horizontal sweep, traced a sword, and hurled it point-blank at Karna's face. The spirit deflected it with his bare hand—but the distraction let Leon score a cut along his forearm.

More golden ichor.

*'It's better to bend than to break.'*

Karna's eyes flickered towards the distant plateau where the other duel raged—just for a moment, just a fraction of a second's distraction.

Leon exploited it ruthlessly.

His sword carved an arc towards Karna's neck. The spirit blocked—barely—but the force drove him backwards, and Art was already there, Marmyadose sweeping in from behind.

Karna spun, deflecting the massive blade with his lance, but took a slash from one of Art's longswords across his back.

*'But when breaking is not an option...'* Leon thought, pressing the advantage.

*'So far, ever since waking up in this reality modelled from a video game I played during my dying moments, I've only chosen not to bend twice.'*

Arjuna rejoined the fight, dual-wielding his bow as a staff and a blade. Now it was two against two in earnest—legendary spirits versus a projection magus and his cosmic fairy guardian.

*'The first time was when my stepmother wanted to marry me off to one of her cohorts.'*

Leon parried Karna's thrust, sidestepped Arjuna's slash, traced a dozen swords above them all and let them fall like rain.

*'And the latest was with Angelica, when I stepped up against the prince and his entourage.'*

Both legendary spirits danced through the falling blades, deflecting what they couldn't dodge, moving with the synchronised grace of warriors who had fought together for centuries.

*'Two times. In eighteen years of this new life, only two times have I refused to bend.'*

Art engaged Arjuna in a whirlwind of steel—her twin longswords and the floating Marmyadose keeping the archer-turned-swordsman on the defensive. She was as stoic as ever, Leon noticed. But there was a gleam that showed she was enjoying this herself, despite the stakes.

*'I wouldn't have done this for Marie,'* he admitted, locking blades with Karna again. *'Even if the crowd had turned on her instead. She's too far from my sphere, and she brought this situation upon herself.'*

Karna's lance blazed. Leon's steel answered with twilight flame.

*'I wouldn't have done this for my sister. Despite blood ties, there's no true kinship between us.'*

An exchange of blows—three, four, five in rapid succession. Karna was faster, but Leon had Archer's experience, Archer's instincts, Archer's endless library of weapons.

*'I wouldn't have done this for Daniel and Raymond. They're friends, yes, but we mostly bonded over commiserating about the life of male lower nobles.'*

Trace. Project. Launch. Repeat.

*'I wouldn't have done this for Deirdre, nor even Clarice—whose predicament mirrors Angelica's almost exactly.'*

"Jilk has retired from the battle!"

The announcement echoed across Folkvangr. One of Angelica's opponents was eliminated. Good. She was making progress.

Arjuna broke free from Art's assault, loosing three arrows of light in rapid succession. Leon deflected two with traced swords; the third grazed his shoulder, leaving a line of searing pain.

He ignored it. Pain was familiar. Pain was manageable.

*'Hell, I might not even have done this for Olivia—not unprovoked.'*

The thought felt like a betrayal, but it was honest.

*'She can handle herself. She's strong in ways that have nothing to do with magic or combat. I'll support her when she asks—after all, she's quite important to me.'*

Karna came at him again, solar fire blazing. Leon met him head-on.

*'And that's exactly why I stepped in.'*

Art flanked Karna whilst Leon held his attention, her Marmyadose carving a devastating arc towards the spirit's blind spot. Karna twisted—impossibly fast—and caught the massive blade on his lance. The impact drove him back several metres, boots carving furrows in the stone.

*'Angelica is a cherished friend of Olivia's,'* Leon thought, pressing the advantage. *'And I knew Olivia alone wouldn't be able to support her against the prince, his entourage, and the entire school.'*

Sword sang as it carved towards Karna's chest. The spirit parried—barely.

*'So Angelica stepped into my sphere. Trojaned in through Olivia.'*

Another exchange. Another stalemate.

*'A sphere that contains only my parents. My two brothers. Olivia. My guardian spirits. Olivia's guardian spirits.'*

Trace. Slash. Dodge.

*'And now, by extension—Angelica.'*

The four combatants separated, catching their breath. Karna's golden armour was scored with cuts now—nothing serious, but damage nonetheless. Arjuna bore similar marks. Art was breathing hard, her twin longswords steady in her grip, Marmyadose hovering faithfully beside her.

Leon himself had taken hits—the burn on his shoulder, bruises beneath his armour, the familiar ache of overextended circuits, and his separate mana pool gradually being emptied. Nothing he couldn't handle.

*'My current standards may be whimsical and unclear,'* he admitted. *'But at that moment—when the whole banquet of first-years didn't protest against the prince parading his privilege and authority, misguided and disguised as freedom—'*

Karna raised his lance, solar fire gathering.

*'Something just made me step forward.'*

Arjuna drew his bow again, an arrow of pure darkness coalescing on the string—something different from before. Something final.

*'It felt like those wishes and regrets that swirled around my mind before sleep claimed me,'* Leon thought. *'During the aftermath of the Heaven's Feel Ritual. In those last moments before death.'*

He traced more blades. Prepared himself.

*'My wish that I could unburden Arturia of her crown. Give her a normal, quiet life.'*

Art positioned herself beside him, ready.

*'My wish that I could give Rin back her family.'*

Karna's lance blazed brighter.

*'And finally—my wish that I could have turned back time. Whisked Sakura away long before Zouken sank his claws into her.'*

The memories ached. They always would.

*'Wishes I couldn't grant. People I couldn't save.'*

"You're distracted," Karna declared, floating high above with Arjuna beside him. Both legendary spirits radiated power now—the playful restraint from before gone, replaced by something serious. Something deadly.

"Perhaps," Leon admitted.

Art dropped her twin longswords, letting them embed into the stone flooring of Folkvangr. Her hands gripped Marmyadose's hilt directly now, the massive blade no longer floating but held ready. Wisps of starlight surrounded her—cosmic energy gathering for something significant.

"But I've made my peace with distraction," Leon continued.

*'Angelica will not meet the same end as in the game.'*

The thought crystallised into certainty. Into resolve.

*'Not while I'm here. Not while I can still fight.'*

Leon raised his sword, twilight energy blazing along its edge. The dragon-slayer's sword, ready to fell another legend—well, as close as he could get.

Art swung Marmyadose in a devastating arc, cosmic fire radiating in its wake.

Above them, Karna and Arjuna unleashed their attacks—solar lance and dark arrow descending like the wrath of gods.

Leon met them head-on, sword's twilight wave erupting upward.

*"The wicked dragon has fallen."*

Light consumed everything.

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Both women faced each other across the shattered plateau.

The ground beneath them was scarred with the remnants of battle—craters from fire spouts, furrows carved by desperate dodges, the scattered debris of broken stone. But neither paid any attention to the destruction surrounding them.

Their eyes were locked on each other.

Marie held her katana—something she'd asked to be specially made for her. A tether. A reminder of a past life she could never speak of.

Her dainty hands gripped the hilt at stomach height, the tip of her blade pointed directly at Angelica's throat.

The stance was chudan-no-kamae. Middle guard. The most balanced position in kendo—though Marie had long since adapted it for live steel rather than bamboo shinai.

A viscount's daughter was expected to learn combat, after all. Even one from an impoverished territory. Even one whose family could barely scrape together the expected contributions to the palace.

She'd managed, though. Secured funding through their territory's dungeon, hired adventurers for training and sparring practice. Made do with what she had, the way she always did.

A far cry from her previous comfortable life.

Angelica dual-wielded her gunblades—Reiterpallasch longer, Reiterdegen shorter—both specially forged by Leon. She held the shorter blade forward,

poised to parry, while the longer was ready for a quick flick, a thrust, or with better leverage, a devastating slash.

Fire still licked at the edges of both weapons, responding to her simmering fury. The flames cast dancing shadows across her face, highlighting the cold determination in her eyes.

Neither moved.

The wind swept across the plateau, carrying with it the distant sounds of Leon's battle with the legendary spirits. Explosions of light and steel painted the sky in colours that belonged to myths, not academy duels.

But here, in this moment, there was only silence.

Two women. Two blades. One inevitable clash.

Marie exhaled slowly—the way she had before every match she'd won in a previous life. The way she did before every sparring session with the hired adventurers in her parents' territory.

*Centre yourself. Find your breath. Let everything else fall away.*

The guilt that had flickered across her features moments ago was buried now, beneath the calm focus of someone who had spent years in a dojo before she'd ever learned to walk in this body.

Ever since she'd woken up in this reality, she had only wanted one thing.

Happiness. Simple, uncomplicated happiness—the kind she'd glimpsed in that otome game during her final years as Taiga. The kind that had seemed so attainable when it was just pixels and choices on a screen.

But the way things had turned out...

*'I didn't want this,' she thought. 'I never wanted to hurt anyone.'*

Angelica wasn't a villain. Marie knew that.

In the game—that wonderful, heartbreaking otome game she'd played obsessively in her past life—Angelica had been the "villainess." The obstacle. The woman standing between the heroine and her prince.

But games weren't real life. And real people weren't obstacles.

Angelica was a woman who'd been publicly humiliated by the man she'd spent her entire life preparing to marry. A woman who'd done everything right and still lost. A woman whose only crime was being in the way of Julius's heart.

*'If only she'd behaved more like the villainess,' Marie thought bitterly. 'If only she'd been cruel, or petty, or any of the things the game said she was supposed to be.'*

But Angelica hadn't been any of those things. And that made everything so much worse.

But in the end, Marie now had something she was willing to give her life to protect. It didn't matter that all the ugliness of it had come out. It didn't matter that she'd been cast as the villain in someone else's story.

*'We'll just have to strive to be better people after this,' Marie concluded. 'All of us.'*

The boys had been too zealous in their defence of her—she knew that now. Too eager to tear down Angelica when Marie could have gone toe-to-toe with any of them herself. She should have reined them in. Should have been stronger.

*'At least with Angelica publicly declaring she no longer cares to get back with the prince, I no longer need to strive for the Saint's position.'*

Small mercies.

It had been twenty-two years as Taiga since Shirou and Illya had died.

And eighteen additional years as Marie.

Forty years of living, and she could still barely picture the last time they'd smiled at her from their bedridden state. The memory had faded, worn soft at the edges like an old photograph handled too many times. She clung to it anyway.

She'd kept everything of them in storage—every memento, every photograph, every scrap of their existence she could preserve. Everything but the saved game they'd left in their wake.

That, she'd played. Over and over, until she'd memorised every route, every ending, every possibility.

And then she'd woken up inside it.

She knew how she'd always been described, back when she was a young homeroom teacher in Fuyuki. Cheerful. Clumsy. Irresponsible. A mooch who showed up at her student's house for free meals.

Fuji-nee. Tiger. The woman who never quite grew up.

But she would stay the course. In memory of their last gift to her. For her own happiness.

*'Selfish,'* a voice whispered in the back of her mind.

Maybe. But she'd also learned, over forty years of living, that sometimes selfishness was survival. Sometimes you had to fight for what you wanted, even when the world told you that you didn't deserve it.

Even when you knew your actions had hurt people.

Not just Angelica. Clarice, too—Jilk's abandoned fiancée. And all the others caught in the wake of their choices.

The guilt was there. It would always be there.

But guilt didn't change anything. Only action could do that.

Now all she needed to do was show her resolve. Stay the course. Take responsibility for the path she'd chosen.

*'Let me receive all your anger, Angelica Rapha Redgrave.'*

It was the least she could offer. The only atonement available to her right now.

She would not apologise for loving Julius. She would not apologise for wanting to be happy.

But she could acknowledge the pain she'd caused. She could stand here and face it, blade to blade, without flinching.

*'Hit me with everything you have.'*

Marie shifted her foot forward—just a few centimetres. A subtle adjustment of weight, invisible to untrained eyes.

Angelica moved in response, her own stance tightening. She'd noticed. Of course she had.

The distance between them was shrinking. Not physically—not yet—but in intent. In readiness. The moment before violence, stretching like a held breath.

Angelica studied her opponent with cold calculation. Something about the girl's stance bothered her. It was too... settled. Too rooted. The grip, the posture, the way her weight distributed perfectly between both feet.

This wasn't the stance of a support healer, and an enchanter forced into melee combat. This was someone who had trained in close quarters. Truly trained. For years.

She vaguely remembered Marie rushing towards the boss back in the cosmic dungeon—part of the vanguard team before the battle had taken a turn for the worse.

But Angelica didn't care.

Skilled or not, trained or not, it didn't matter. Her rage still boiled within her—a furnace that had been stoked for months, finally given permission to burn freely. Flames burst around her body, her power armour's enchantments responding to her emotional state, wreathing her in fire that matched the inferno in her heart.

She had words she wanted to say. Accusations. Condemnations. A lifetime of grievances she could have hurled at this woman who had stolen everything from her.

But what was the point? Words hadn't helped before. Words hadn't stopped Julius from parading Marie at the ball. Words hadn't preserved her dignity, her engagement, her future.

So instead of words, Angelica chose steel.

She charged.

Fire exploded from where they met.

Marie's golden enchantment flared as their blades connected—the tip of her katana locking with Angelica's Reiterdegen whilst the section near the tsuba caught Reiterpallasch. A double bind, neither woman able to withdraw without ceding advantage.

The fire intensified between them as Marie stepped forward and drove a kick into Angelica's side.

But Angelica clenched down and endured. She turned up the heat even more, flames erupting around them both until they were wrapped in a fire spout of her own making—but this time, they stood in the eye.

A cage of fire, with both of them trapped inside.

"MARIE!" Julius cried as the pair was engulfed by the roaring flames.

He was healed again—something Marie had done the moment she'd stepped in to block Angelica's path. Even now, even fighting for her life, she'd still found time to restore him.

Julius flew towards the fire spout, intending to disrupt the pair, to save her—

"Oh no, you don't!"

Olivia dropped into his path, arms crossed, that infuriating smirk plastered across her face. Behind her, the monstrous white construct loomed—five metres of silent, woven fury, its eyeless face somehow radiating malevolent intent.

Olivia's smirk widened as the prince gritted his teeth.

"Do not get in my way!" Julius snarled.

"Oh, is that an order, my prince?" Olivia goaded, her voice dripping with mock deference. "But unfortunately, Angelica wishes for reparations and apologies to be made."

Her eyes glittered dangerously.

"So it's high time we collect."

Julius felt chills race down his spine as the looming behemoth surged towards him—silent, relentless, inevitable.

He engaged his power armour and shot straight up.

But unfortunately for him, both the beast and the scholarship student followed. They shot upward in pursuit, the construct's massive form cutting through the air with impossible speed for something its size.

*'At least the construct is no longer holding that devastating weapon,'* Julius thought, making himself more streamlined as he climbed. He wove through the air in evasive patterns, black bolts of dark curses streaking past him, each one promising agony if it connected.

Julius shot several fireballs in return, having enough practice and control to manifest the magic's origin point from his feet rather than his hands. The flames bloomed behind him like a trail of destruction, forcing his pursuers to dodge or be burned.

With his manoeuvres and the fireballs potentially intercepting those malevolent-looking curses, he could fly uninterrupted. His target was high above—the tip of the fire spout where Marie and Angelica fought.

He had to reach her. He *had* to.

At the edge of his vision, he caught glimpses of the clash between Karna, Arjuna, Leon, and Art. Something that sent actual shivers down his spine—the reverberations from their private battle could be felt even from his position, even with the wind rushing against him as he climbed higher and higher.

*'What kind of monsters are fighting over there?'*

He pushed the thought aside. Marie needed him.

Meanwhile, within the eye of the inferno, Angelica and Marie continued their dance.

Angelica charged at Marie, pushing her just a little closer towards the boundary of the inferno surrounding them.

Steel rang against steel as she pressed forward, her twin gunblades carving blazing arcs through the superheated air. Marie glowed golden as she parried with economical precision, her katana moving in tight, controlled motions that spoke of countless hours sparring against people—a different skill entirely from fighting monsters in dungeons.

Sweat beaded on Marie's brow despite her enchantment's protection. The ambient temperature alone would have been unbearable for anyone else.

The inferno surrounding them roared higher, responding to Angelica's fury. Flames licked at the edges of their combat space, hungry and patient, waiting for one of them to make a mistake.

Angelica feinted left with Reiterdegen, then drove Reiterpallasch forward in a vicious thrust aimed at Marie's shoulder. Marie twisted, deflecting the longer blade with the flat of her katana, but the momentum carried her backwards—towards the wall of fire.

Her enchantment flared gold as her armour-clad arm grazed the spout's edge. The flames bit through both protections and heated the metal, searing flesh for a brief, agonising instant—before golden light washed over the wound, knitting skin back together as though it had never been damaged.

Self-healing. Instantaneous and seemingly effortless.

Angelica raised an eyebrow at the display. "Tsch. Typical."

A healer who could mend her own wounds mid-combat. Of course it wouldn't be that easy.

But she didn't relent. She pressed harder, faster, driving Marie back with a flurry of strikes that left no room for breathing. Her power armour's enchantments amplified every movement, every slash trailing ribbons of fire that lingered in the superheated air like afterimages of violence.

Marie blocked, parried, deflected. Her stance shifted constantly, adapting to Angelica's aggressive style with the fluid responsiveness of someone who had sparred against far more varied opponents than academy students typically faced.

Adventurers. Hired swords. People who fought to survive, not for sport.

It showed.

Then Marie's free hand came up, fingers curling in an unfamiliar gesture.

White energy coiled around her palm.

Angelica barely registered it at first—a pillar of light, the same as the healing magic Olivia and Marie had used throughout the battle, enveloped her.

Then pain blossomed through her body.

Not the sharp agony of a blade, but something deeper. Something that felt like her very essence was being corroded from within, her vitality draining away with each heartbeat.

She stumbled, gasping.

*'Of course,'* Angelica realised through the haze of pain. *'If she can heal, she can harm. Two sides of the same coin.'*

Marie didn't press the advantage. She simply watched, katana held ready, as golden light flickered around Angelica's form—the automatic healing functions of her nanomachine armour working to counteract the curse.

A moment of respite. Unasked for. Unearned.

*'Why?'* Angelica wondered. *'Why hold back now?'*

"You're stronger than I expected," Marie said quietly.

Her voice carried no mockery. No triumph. Only acknowledgement—one warrior to another.

Angelica spat blood onto the scorched stone.

And charged again.

This time, she was smarter. She watched Marie's hands, not just her blade. When those fingers began to curl, Angelica broke off her attack and circled, forcing Marie to turn with her, disrupting whatever spell she'd been preparing.

She'd observed previously that Marie needed to be stationary when using that particular magic—when healing her comrades, she'd always stopped moving first. It stood to reason that using the same magic offensively would require similar concentration.

*'Keep her moving. Don't let her focus.'*

Though apparently, that limitation didn't apply when Marie healed herself. That particular magic flowed as naturally as breathing, requiring no pause, no preparation.

*'Annoying,'* Angelica thought grimly. *'But not insurmountable.'*

The firewall was closer on Marie's side now. Angelica could see sweat beading on the smaller woman's forehead, golden enchantments flickering more frequently as the ambient heat threatened to overwhelm her defences.

Good. The inferno was doing its work.

Angelica pressed that advantage ruthlessly. She drove Marie back step by step, her gunblades singing through the air in patterns designed to leave only one escape route—backwards, into the flames.

Herding her. Corraling her. Giving her nowhere to go but into the fire.

Marie's greaves touched the fire spout's edge.

She didn't flinch.

Instead, her body glowed brighter—enchantment magic strengthening flesh and bone beyond mortal limits. She stepped *into* the flame, letting it wash over her for a single heartbeat, absorbing the pain—

And launched herself forward in a devastating counter-thrust.

Angelica twisted aside at the last possible moment. The katana's tip scraped across her chest plate, leaving a furrow in the crystalline surface that hadn't been there a second ago.

*'Too close.'*

They separated, circling each other once more. Both breathing hard now. Both watching for openings.

The fire roared around them, indifferent to their exhaustion.

Another glow began to surround Angelica—Marie attempting that draining curse again. But Angelica was ready this time. She re-engaged immediately, leaping forward, rationing her breaths so she wouldn't be caught flat-footed.

*'No time to cast if you're busy defending.'*

Angelica threw an underhand slash with Reiterdegen, forcing Marie's guard high—then pulled the trigger on Reiterpallasch at the opportune moment.

The gunblade roared.

The blast caught Marie square in the chest, lifting her off her feet and hurling her towards the fire spout's wall.

Luckily for her, she wasn't drawn into the vortex—instead, the impact angle sent her tumbling upwards, out of the inferno's eye rather than into its hungry flames.

Angelica lifted off and flew after her, fire spell after fire spell erupting from her outstretched gunblades. Lances of flame streaked through the air, each one aimed at Marie's tumbling form.

Marie met her in the air, letting her body absorb the flames—gritting her teeth against the pain as she restored herself mid-flight. Their blades locked at the apex of Angelica's arc, steel screaming against steel.

For a moment they hung there, suspended by magic and momentum, neither willing to give ground. Two women, airborne, blades crossed, eyes locked.

Then a shadow fell over them both.

Julius descended through the eye of the fire spout like a falling star, his power armour blazing with magical light, his face contorted with desperate determination. He'd climbed so high, fought so hard against Olivia's pursuit—all to reach this moment.

To save Marie from Angelica's wrath.

He never saw the white threads until they wrapped around his ankle.

The monstrous construct—that silent nightmare woven from stork knights and fury—caught him mid-descent. Its grip was inexorable, yanking him downward with terrifying force, arresting his heroic dive in an instant.

"JULIUS!" Marie screamed, breaking away from Angelica's blade lock.

But she couldn't reach him. The behemoth was already moving, already dragging him down, already—

It slammed Julius against the plateau with bone-jarring force.

Once.

Twice.

Three times—each impact cratering the stone beneath him, his power armour sparking and groaning under the abuse.

Then it dragged him across the ground towards the fire wall, his armour grinding against the superheated boundary of the spout. Julius's screams echoed across the plateau as flames licked through gaps in his defences, searing the flesh beneath.

The Crown Prince of Holfort, reduced to a ragdoll in the grip of a monster.

The construct released him at the last moment—right at the edge of the fire spout's pull.

The flames caught him. Lifted him. Hurling him outward like a stone from a catapult, his burning form arcing across Folkvangr's sky before the vortex spat him out high above.

Gone. For now.

Olivia landed beside Angelica, her monstrous creation taking position to sandwich Marie between them. The white behemoth loomed silently, its eyeless face turned towards its prey.

Marie stood alone now, her katana trembling in her grip.

Three against one.

"So," Marie managed, her voice strained with exhaustion, "how about taking turns?"

She gave a weak chuckle—the kind of laugh that came when there was nothing else left to do.

Angelica just gave her a deadpan stare, the flames around her flaring even stronger. No mercy. No negotiation.

Olivia grinned ferally, threaded constructs of swords hovering around her like a crown of steel.

"Well, I tried." Marie's katana came up again, steady despite her exhaustion. "What's your group's obsession with swords, by the way?"

They attacked together.

Angelica came from the left. Olivia from the right. The beast from behind.

Marie's blade blurred as she desperately parried strikes from multiple directions, her enchantment and healing magic straining to keep pace with the coordinated assault. Curses and flames filled the air around her. Golden barriers flickered and failed under the relentless pressure.

She gave ground steadily, her perfect stance crumbling under the weight of two opponents working in ruthless harmony.

So Marie flew up—the only direction left to her, the only escape from the closing trap.

And then she saw it.

A large, blinding arc of light streaked towards her from somewhere beyond the fire spout.

*'Julius—!'*

The world exploded.

Everyone scattered as Julius's magical strike tore through the air—a desperate attack launched from wherever he'd landed outside the fire spout. The beam of pure white energy carved through the inferno like a blade through silk.

The fire spout simply... ceased.

Wind rushed in to fill the vacuum, scattering embers across the plateau. The sudden absence of heat was almost shocking after so long within the inferno's embrace.

The blast had caught Olivia's threaded beast construct in its path—the white behemoth dissolving into scattered threads that drifted away on the wind like dandelion seeds.

The three women floated scattered across the sky, looking down at the destruction below.

The plateau had been split in two.

A massive fissure ran through the stone where Julius's attack had carved its path, the edges still glowing with residual heat. Smoke and steam rose from the wound in the earth, obscuring whatever lay beyond.

For a moment, no one moved.

Then—

*Thud.*

Marie looked down, horror-stricken, as Julius crashed onto the plateau—the same plateau his own attack had split moments before.

The sound hadn't been his body breaking. It was one of his power armour's failsafes activating—a system designed to register when its user passed out or suffered head trauma. The armour absorbed the kinetic energy of the fall, ensuring the body within wasn't damaged, or at least mitigating the worst of it.

The same reason he'd survived the threaded beast bashing him against the ground.

Yet despite the prince losing consciousness, Folkvangr's teleportation hadn't triggered. The arena's safeguards didn't register mana depletion as a valid condition for removal.

He was still in the fight. Technically.

Marie descended towards him without hesitation, not caring if the pair followed her.

They did.

She reached Julius and pulled him onto her lap, cradling his head as a golden pillar bloomed around them both. For a moment, it looked like it was working—colour returning to the prince's pale face, his breathing steadying.

Then nothing.

The healing simply... stopped.

Marie's eyes widened as she noticed the pillar of light around them had grown brighter. Much brighter than her magic alone could account for.

"That application of healing was quite interesting," Olivia's voice came from above, mocking and impressed in equal measure. The blonde descended alongside Angelica, both of them landing a few metres away. "A negative application of the same concept. Clever."

Angelica had both blades ready. Olivia's threaded constructs hovered over the prone pair like guillotines waiting to fall.

Then Marie felt it—her own energy draining, reserves that had already been pushed to the brink now fizzling towards nothing. The pillar surrounding them dimmed as the negative healing field took hold. A technique Olivia had reverse-engineered with just a glance.

"You truly are the protagonist," Marie whispered to herself, the words barely audible.

"What did you say?" Olivia tilted her head, uncertain if she'd heard correctly.

"Olivia, stop it for now," Angelica interrupted.

The draining light fizzled out. Marie gasped as the pressure lifted, though exhaustion still weighed heavily on her limbs.

In the distance, the clash between Leon, Art, and the two legendary guardian spirits continued—explosions of light and steel painting the horizon in colours that didn't belong to the mortal world.

"So, Angelica." Olivia crossed her arms, studying the defeated pair with something between curiosity and amusement. "What do you want to do now?"

Angelica's expression was unreadable. Her gunblades still blazed with residual heat, flames licking at the edges. She could end this now. Drive her blade through Marie's shoulder, force the teleportation, claim total victory.

Instead, she said: "Please heal both of them until the prince wakes up."

Olivia blinked.

"Wait, what?"

But when Olivia saw the seriousness in Angelica's face, she sighed and acquiesced.

The golden light of healing washed over Julius and Marie both. It only took twenty seconds before the prince's eyes fluttered open, looking up into the face of his beloved.

His smile was sincere and sweet as he reached up to cup her cheek.

"Good morning, belo—"

Then memory crashed back.

The rain of steel descending like divine judgement. Jilk's desperate gambit, wagering everything they had. The fire spout that had caged Marie with Angelica. Being grabbed by that nightmarish white beast, slammed against the ground again and again. The searing pain of flames licking through his armour. His desperate attack—pouring every scrap of mana he had left into one final strike to save Marie.

And now... waking up in her lap. With Angelica and Olivia standing over them.

They'd lost.

"Why?"

Angelica's voice was cold. Tired. The flames around her gunblades had finally died, leaving only smoke-stained steel.

Julius looked up at her, confusion written across his face. "Why... what?"

A sigh escaped her. Something in her posture shifted—the rigid fury softening into something more exhausted. More human.

"You truly do love her, Your Highness."

It wasn't a question.

"Yes—I do," Julius said, conviction burning in his voice despite his prone position. "Marie is—"

"DON'T."

The word cracked across the plateau like a whip.

"DON'T YOU DARE USE THAT TONE WITH ME. NOT NOW. NOT AFTER WE DEFEATED YOU. NOT AFTER ALL YOUR HIGH AND MIGHTY POSTURING."

"You did this." Angelica's voice trembled—not with weakness, but with the strain of holding back years of suppressed rage. "You humiliated me. Publicly.

Repeatedly. And I didn't even warrant the basic respect of a private conversation."

She began to pace, her boots crunching against the scorched stone.

"Do you have any idea what it was like? Standing in that ballroom while you paraded her in front of everyone? While your friends—your *loyal retinue*—mocked me to my face? While the entire student body watched and laughed because the great Angelica Rapha Redgrave was being cast aside like refuse?"

Her voice rose with each accusation.

"I trained my entire life for you. I learned your favourite foods. I memorised the names of every noble family you might need to court. I studied military strategy because you admired it. I became your mother's attendant—not because I wanted to, but because I thought it would make me a better queen. A better *partner*."

She stopped pacing, turning to face him fully.

"And what did I get in return? Public humiliation. Whispered mockery. The entire academy treating me like a joke because the Crown Prince had found someone *better*."

Julius opened his mouth—

"I'm not finished."

He closed it.

"The worst part?" Angelica laughed—a hollow, bitter sound. "The worst part is that no one stopped you. Not the professors. Not the other nobles. Not even my own allies. They all just... watched. Some of them even joined in, eager to curry favour with the future king by kicking his discarded fiancée while she was down."

She gestured at the ruined plateau around them.

"This. All of this. The duel, the wagers, the destruction—it didn't have to happen. If you'd just *talked* to me. If you'd shown me even a fraction of the consideration you show *her*." She jerked her chin towards Marie. "But you couldn't even do that, could you? Because I was never a person to you. I was just... an obligation. A duty. Something to be tolerated until you found what you actually wanted."

The silence that followed was deafening.

When Angelica spoke again, her voice had gone flat. Empty. The rage had burned itself out, leaving only ash.

"I'm tired, Your Highness. I'm so tired of being angry at you. Of hating you. Of caring what you think or do or say."

She sheathed her gunblades.

"So yes. You love her. Congratulations. I hope it brings you everything you've ever wanted."

Julius pushed himself up, Marie helping him sit. His expression was complicated—guilt, relief, confusion all warring for dominance.

"The agreement," he said slowly. "You said... you said you no longer cared to separate us. Does that mean—"

White threads erupted from Olivia's hair, coalescing into the beginnings of another monstrous construct. The blonde's smile had turned sharp, dangerous.

"Olivia." Angelica's voice cut through. "Stop."

The threads froze mid-formation, then reluctantly retreated.

"Yes," Angelica said, looking Julius directly in the eyes, her red eyes filled with steel. "I no longer care what you do. Marry her. Make her your queen. Do whatever you want. It's not my concern anymore."

Relief flooded Julius's face—

"However."

The word fell like a guillotine.

"I will hold you to the agreed losses." Angelica's voice was ice. "Jilk's island. His shares. His inheritance. Him giving up his nobility. All of it goes to Baron Bartfort, as promised. The public apology. The full reparations. Everything that was wagered."

Julius's expression crumbled. "But—"

"Yes, Lady Redgrave."

Marie's quiet voice cut through Julius's protest before it could form. She placed a hand on his arm—gentle, but firm. A warning.

"We accept full responsibility for the reparations and the public apology. As agreed."

Julius turned to her, disbelief written across his face. "Marie, you can't just—"

"We lost, Julius." She met his eyes steadily. There was no anger in her voice. No resentment. Just the calm acceptance of someone who understood consequences. "We wagered. We fought. We lost. Now we pay what's owed."

She turned back to Angelica and bowed her head—not deeply, but enough.

"You fought well, Lady Redgrave. We'll honour the terms."

Something flickered across Angelica's face—surprise, perhaps, at the graceful surrender. She'd expected protests. Arguments. The same entitled resistance she'd faced all year.

Instead, she got dignity.

"...See that you do."

She turned away.

"Resign from the battle. Both of you. It's over."

Marie helped Julius to his feet. The prince looked like he wanted to argue, wanted to protest, wanted to do *something*—but what was there to say? What was there to do?

They'd lost.

"Marie Fou Lafan has resigned from the battle," the announcer's voice echoed across Folkvangr.

A pause.

"Prince Julius Rafa Holfort has resigned from the battle."

Angelica didn't care to watch them recalled by Folkvangr's safety system as they declared their loss. She walked towards the edge of the cliff instead, where the plateau dropped away into empty sky. Olivia fell into step beside her.

In the distance, Leon's battle with the legendary spirits was reaching its crescendo. She could see him—a small figure against the vastness of Folkvangr's skyline—holding a great sword between his hands. Beside him, Art gripped Marmyadose directly, the massive blade no longer floating but held ready, wisps of starlight gathering around her small frame. Even from here, Angelica could feel the power gathering around them both.

His voice carried across the battlefield, clear and resonant despite the distance.

*"The wicked dragon has fallen."*

"Angelica."

Olivia's voice was soft. Careful. The mocking edge she usually carried had vanished entirely.

"Are you okay?"

Angelica didn't answer immediately. She watched as twilight energy blazed along the edge of Leon's sword, watched as cosmic fire radiated from Art's

Marmyadose, watched as the legendary spirits responded with attacks of their own—solar fire and dark arrows descending like the wrath of heaven.

"Call me Angie."

Olivia blinked. "What?"

"My friends call me Angie." Angelica—Angie—finally turned to look at her. There was something fragile in her expression. Something raw. "I'd like it if you and Leon did too."

*"The world has now reached sunset. Be felled by this attack."*

Before Olivia could respond, the world lit up.

"You can call me Livia," she managed, shielding her eyes against the brilliance.

**"BALMUNG!"**

Two beams of magical destruction erupted from Leon and Art—twilight blue intertwined with cosmic starlight—meeting the legendary spirits' combined assault head-on. Gold-and-black clashed against blue-and-silver, their collision painting Folkvangr in colours that had no name. The shockwave that followed sent both women staggering, wind tearing at their hair and clothes.

When the light finally faded, silence fell across the arena.

Complete. Absolute.

Then Olivia—Livia—grinned.

"We'll get Leon to call you Angie as well," she said, watching as Professor Lucas Rafa Holfort descended from above, most likely to declare the skirmish concluded.

Angie allowed herself the smallest of smiles.

"I'd like that."

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End

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