

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

Story Starts

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**Chapter 9.1 -
Of Vigils and Festivals**

The apartment smelled of stale beer and unwashed laundry.

Taiga Fujimura sat cross-legged on her futon, a threadbare blanket draped over her head like a cowl. The curtains hadn't been opened in—how long? She couldn't remember. The only light came from the digital clock on her bedside table, its red numerals burning 14:23 into the darkness. She'd lost track of whether that meant the real afternoon or some ungodly hour her body had simply decided counted as one.

The funeral was last week. Or the week before. Grandfather's face in the casket had looked peaceful, which felt like a betrayal. Raiga Fujimura had never been peaceful in his life. He'd been volcanic and generous and terrifying and warm, and now he was a photograph on a shelf she couldn't see in the dark. The incense from the altar had long since faded. She hadn't replaced it.

She pulled the blanket tighter, pressing the fabric against her mouth until the weave left a pattern on her chin.

Something clattered in the kitchen. A cup, maybe. Or a plate she'd left balanced on the edge of the counter three days ago. The flat was small enough that gravity would eventually sort everything out.

Then the front door opened, and light stabbed into the hallway.

"Oh, for—"

The voice was younger than hers. Sharper, too—the kind of voice that could cut through a crowded gymnasium or a locked bedroom door with equal ease. Footsteps crossed the threshold. A bag dropped. The hallway light clicked on, and the living room followed, and Taiga hissed and pulled the blanket over her eyes as brightness invaded her bedroom through the open door.

"Taiga. It's two in the afternoon."

She didn't answer. The blanket was warm. The blanket understood her.

The footsteps moved through the flat with brisk, military efficiency. Something scraped—the curtain rail. Sunlight punched through the bedroom like a physical blow, and Taiga curled sideways with a noise that was half groan, half whimper.

"Don't you dare 'mmmph' at me."

Through the gap in her blanket, Taiga watched a blurred silhouette collect takeaway containers and empty beer cans from the floor. Three, four, five—stacked into the crook of an arm with practised ease, cans balanced in a column that shouldn't have held but did. The figure moved to the kitchen. Running water. The clink of dishes being rinsed.

"The trash hasn't been taken out or sorted. There's mould on something in the fridge—I'm not opening it to find out what. And you—" The voice returned to the bedroom doorway, backlit and imperious. "—look like you've been composting yourself."

"Go away."

The woman didn't go away. She stood in the doorway for a long moment, arms folded, and when she spoke again the cleaning-voice was gone. What replaced it was quieter. Heavier.

"Twenty years, Taiga."

The words landed like stones in a still pond.

"It's been twenty years since Emiya-kun died. Twenty years since Rin and Sakura—" A pause. Something caught in the voice. Just briefly. Then it hardened again. "I miss them, too, you know. I do—" Another pause. Longer. "But this. Sitting in the dark. Refusing to eat properly. No job. Your grandfather just—"

"I know."

"Do you? Because from where I'm standing, you've been in this exact position since the burial, and the only thing that's changed is the number of convenience store bags on the floor."

The blanket was warm. The blanket didn't lecture.

The figure crossed the room and crouched beside the futon. A hand found Taiga's shoulder through the fabric—firm, calloused, not unkind.

"Look at me."

Taiga didn't.

"Taiga."

She pulled the blanket down to her chin. Her hair was a disaster—greasy and tangled, the colour dulled to something closer to brown than its usual chestnut. Her eyes were puffy. Not from crying. She'd stopped crying years ago. They were puffy from sleeping fourteen hours a day and staring at nothing for the remaining ten.

The woman crouching beside her had aged well—athletic build, cropped hair pushed back from a face that belonged on a sports magazine cover at twenty and a whisky advert at forty. Lines around the mouth spoke of outdoor work and frequent laughter. She wore a tracksuit and running shoes, and her expression was one of exhausted patience.

"When did you last shower?"

"Tuesday."

"It's Saturday."

"..."

"Taiga—"

"What do you want me to say?" Taiga's voice cracked. Not from emotion. From disuse. She hadn't spoken to another person since—when? The delivery man, maybe. She'd grunted at him through the intercom and left the door unlocked. "I'm fine. I'm managing—I have grandfather's inheritance, I wouldn't need anything for a very long time."

"You are not fine. You are not managing. You are rotting." The woman stood. Picked up a towel from the floor, sniffed it, recoiled, and threw it into the hallway. "This is what you did after Emiya-kun died. After his funeral, and after every single anniversary since. And I've dragged you out every time, and I'll drag you out again, but I'm asking you—I am asking you—to meet me halfway. Just once."

Taiga stared at the ceiling. A water stain had appeared near the light fitting. It looked a bit like a tiger.

She stared at it for a long time, waiting for it to mean something. It didn't.

"Do you even remember their faces?"

The question was quiet. Almost gentle.

Taiga's jaw tightened.

"Emiya-kun's face. Can you picture it? From memory—the way he looked when he was cooking?" A beat. Softer still. "Sakura's kind smile? Or—"

"Stop."

Silence. The refrigerator hummed in the kitchen. Outside, a crow screamed at something.

"You haven't even visited the Emiya house. The shed where you put all their photos, their clothes—even his kitchen equipment. You haven't opened it. Not once." The woman's voice thinned. "Twenty years, and you didn't even keep a picture as a memento. Only that saved game in your wallet—"

A tinny, electronic chime interrupted her. Then another. A repeating melody—bright and absurdly cheerful, like something from an arcade machine. It came from underneath the futon.

The woman closed her eyes.

"No."

Taiga was already moving. She reached beneath the futon's edge, her hand finding the familiar shape by muscle memory—the battered laptop with its cracked hinge and the sticker on the lid. A cartoon tiger, peeling at the corners, that Illya had placed there a lifetime ago. She pulled it onto her lap and flipped it open. The screen's glow painted her face in pale blue.

"You're going to play that game again."

Taiga's fingers moved across the keyboard. She had alarms set for this—several of them. One for daily play, her quiet routine. One monthly, where she started fresh and chased the reverse harem ending from scratch. And this one. The one that rang during the anniversary week of their deaths.

"Taiga, listen to me. This—this ritual of yours—"

The title screen loaded. An orchestral theme swelled from the laptop's tinny speakers—strings and horns and a soprano voice singing in something that wasn't quite Latin. The logo appeared in gilded letters against a backdrop of floating islands and cerulean sky.

"Playing the same game over and over. The saved game he left you. It's not—" The woman's voice cracked, just barely. "It's not bringing him back. It's not bringing any of them back. It's just you, alone, in the dark, pressing

buttons until your eyes bleed, and then you sleep, and then you do it again, and—"

Taiga pressed START.

"—are you even listening to me?"

Only the clicking of keys answered her.

"I give up." The woman's voice came from somewhere distant now. The hallway, perhaps. Or another room. Or another country. "I'll leave groceries in the kitchen. There's rice and miso in the bag. Vegetables. Actual vegetables, Taiga, not the pickled ones from the convenience store. And I've put fresh towels—"

The game loaded. A familiar cutscene began—the heroine arriving at the Royal Academy, surrounded by handsome young men with elaborate hairstyles and fantastical backstories. Taiga had seen this sequence hundreds of times. Thousands, maybe. She knew every line of dialogue. Every branching path. Every hidden flag and secret ending and obscure achievement.

She could play it with her eyes closed. Some nights she did—drifting off mid-dialogue, hands still moving across the keys, waking hours later to a different scene altogether.

"—in the bathroom. The blue ones. And there's a letter from your co-teachers from the school, which you need to—"

The voice faded. Not because the woman had stopped talking. She probably hadn't. But Taiga's attention had narrowed to a single point—the screen, the game, the only world that still had them in it.

"..."

"...a..e"

"...a...rie"

"Marie!" A firm hand grabbed her shoulder as she jolted.

"Marie! Honestly, girl—Marie!"

A hand shook her shoulder. Rough, large-knuckled, calloused in a way that spoke of field work rather than swordplay. The face that swam into focus above her was weathered and thin, framed by a beard that hadn't been trimmed in at least a week. Worry lines etched deep grooves from nose to jaw. The eyes were tired. Not unkind, but tired.

Her father.

Her father.

The realisation hit like a bucket of cold water. Not Taiga Fujimura, forty-six, unemployed, surrounded by beer cans in a Fuyuki apartment. Marie Fou Lafan. Seven years old. Daughter of a lower viscountcy that clung to the interior side of the kingdom's holdings—not a border territory, but close enough to feel the draught whenever pirates attacked the borders. Close enough that every levy and tithe notice from the palace arrived like a small funeral.

She blinked. Her hands were tiny. She'd forgotten how small they were.

"Are you feeling ill?" Her father crouched to her eye level, one hand steadying her against the press of the crowd. They were standing on a cobblestone boulevard—wide, tree-lined, thick with spectators who'd come from every district of the capital. Banners in royal blue and silver hung from the lamp posts, and children sat on their parents' shoulders, craning for a better view. "You were staring at nothing. I told you this would be too much—the heat, the crowds. We should have stayed at the inn."

"I'm fine," Marie said. Her voice came out high and reedy. A child's voice. She swallowed.

"You're the one who insisted on coming." He straightened with a grunt, pressing one hand against the small of his back. The other clutched a leather

satchel—overstuffed, its clasp threatening to give. "The prince will be in the parade, you said. We *have* to see the prince, you said. Meanwhile, I have a palatinate assessment to file before sundown, and the queue at the revenue office will be halfway to the harbour by the time we're done here—"

"Papa."

"—and the lodging alone is costing us a full dia per night, which is robbery, Marie, absolute robbery—"

"Papa, it's starting."

A murmur swept through the crowd. Then a ripple—bodies shifting, necks craning, a collective intake of breath. Somewhere ahead, horns sounded. Not the game's tinny orchestral rendition but real brass, deep-chested and resonant, echoing off the stone facades of the capital's central avenue.

The royal procession rounded the corner.

First came the knights clad in power armour, marching in formation. Then the household guard, marching in lockstep, pikes dressed and banners streaming. Then the first carriage—open-topped, gilded, drawn by a matched pair of white destriers whose tack sparkled in the afternoon light.

The Queen sat within, straight-backed and luminous, her silver-white hair catching the sun like spun glass. She acknowledged the crowd with small, precise movements—a nod here, a raised hand there—each gesture calculated to convey warmth without ever quite reaching it. Even from twenty paces, she was magnetic. The kind of beautiful that made you forget you were staring.

Marie barely registered her.

Because behind the Queen's carriage, mounted on a grey palfrey that was slightly too large for him, rode a boy.

Blue hair. Not dark blue, not navy—a vivid, saturated blue that caught the light and held it, the colour of deep water or stained glass. He sat his horse with the

careful posture of someone who'd been drilled in horsemanship ever since he started walking, chin lifted, eyes forward, one gloved hand resting on the pommel. His expression was solemn in the way that only a child trying very hard to look like an adult could manage—brows drawn, jaw set, utterly serious.

Prince Julius.

Marie's breath stopped.

Not because he was handsome—he was a child, and so was she, and neither of them was anything yet. But because she *knew* that face. She'd seen it rendered in a hundred CGs, voiced by an actor whose name she'd long forgotten, written into branching storylines she could recite from memory. She'd watched him confess to the heroine beneath cherry blossoms. She'd watched him duel for her honour. She'd watched him break the heroine's heart, and she'd watched him mend it, over and over, across a thousand playthroughs in a dark room in Fuyuki.

And he was *real*.

The procession moved past. The crowd cheered. Her father was saying something about the revenue office closing early on parade days. None of it reached her.

Everything clicked.

The game. The world. The floating islands she could see drifting above the capital's skyline, vast and impossible, their undersides trailing clouds. The guardian spirits she'd read about in the primer her father had bought to keep her quiet during the carriage ride. The academy she would attend in eleven years. The heroine she would meet. The routes, the flags, the hidden achievements, the reverse harem ending she'd perfected over twenty years of obsessive, grief-fuelled repetition—

It was all real. Every branching path. Every hidden flag. Every secret she'd uncovered in the dark.

Something stirred in her chest. Not joy—she'd forgotten what joy felt like. Not hope, exactly. She didn't trust herself enough to call it hope. It was something older and stranger, like blood returning to a limb that had been numb for so long she'd forgotten it was part of her body. A warmth that started in her sternum and spread outward, slow and tentative, as though it was afraid of being noticed.

Twenty years of grief. Twenty years of playing the same game in the same dark room, pressing the same buttons, chasing the same endings. Twenty years of not visiting the shed, not looking at their photographs, not saying their names aloud because saying them made them real and real things could be lost.

And now she was *inside* the game.

Marie Fou Lafan looked up at the sky—at the floating islands, at the banners, at the impossible cerulean expanse that was exactly the colour of the title screen—and smiled.

It was a small smile. Tentative. The kind of expression a face makes when it's out of practice. But it was real, and it was the first one in a very long time.

'One last run.'

Her father glanced down. "What are you grinning about?"

'One last run, and maybe—just maybe—I can finally let go.'

"Nothing, Papa." She took his hand. His eyebrows rose—she hadn't done that in years, apparently. "Let's go file your assessment."

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The wind carried the scent of cedar and something akin to gunpowder across the mountain ridge. Leon knelt on one knee at the cliff's edge, his coat pinned flat by the updraft, mismatched eyes—one gold, one silver—narrowed against the morning glare.

Below and ahead, the no-man's-land spread to the horizon: a vast stretch of stray floating islands, mostly barren rock and sheer mountainside, too vertical to farm and too unstable to develop. Beyond them, past the haze where the sky turned a shade paler, lay the Holy Kingdom of Rachelle.

Between Leon and Olivia—who lay sprawled across a blanket with a half-eaten apple balanced on her stomach—Luxion's projected screen flickered with the interior of a lecture hall at Holfort Academy. Professor Lucefort stood at the front, chalking something about mana-flow dynamics across a blackboard whilst students scribbled notes. Lucas sat in the back row, arms crossed, occasionally glancing towards the drone terminal mounted on the wall bracket beside him—a small, matte-grey sphere no larger than a fist.

One-way feed. Leon could see them; they couldn't see him. He'd arranged the setup through Lucas a week ago, the professor cheerfully agreeing to host the drone in exchange for another tea session—a small price for staying enrolled without the paperwork of formal absence.

The screen showed Lucefort tapping the board emphatically. Something about elemental saturation thresholds. Olivia wasn't watching. She lay on her side in a white summer dress that was, Leon couldn't help but notice, shorter than strictly necessary, reading a book that almost certainly wasn't from this year's syllabus.

She shifted. Leon looked away. The blush reached his ears before he could stop it.

"Hey, fix your dress."

"Oh, I don't mind. I especially bought this for occasions like this—keep looking as you please!"

He could hear the grin in her voice without turning around. Against every instinct screaming otherwise, he turned his head a fraction. Just to confirm. The white lace was—

"Hah! Caught you!"

"Caught me with what?"

'Deny. Deny. Deny.'

"You did in fact look, Master." Luxion's tone was uncharacteristically chipper, and Leon knew exactly the reason why.

"I have no idea what you guys are talking about."

He felt Olivia stand up and drape herself over his back.

"Oooh... no need to be shy," she whispered into his ear.

Then he saw movement.

Leon stood, the comedy draining from his posture in a single motion. His right hand reached out without looking. Fingers closed around a familiar grip—one of sixteen Hruntings embedded point-first in the rocky soil beside him, pre-traced that morning. The crimson blade hummed against his palm, eager, as if it could taste what was coming.

His pupils contracted. Reinforcement flooded his optic nerves, sharpening the world into surgical clarity. Twelve kilometres out, a figure in black chitinous plate launched from one of the floating mountains—rising fast, trailing a wake of disturbed air. The armour's surface crawled with veins of dull violet light and eyes, dozens of them, scattered across the plate like blisters, organic and pulsing and alive. Demonic integration. The figure crossed the line Luxion had lovingly designated as the killzone.

Leon drew the bow he'd projected earlier—EMIYA's elegant black longbow—and nocked the Hrunting against the string. The blade shrank, condensed, its mass compressing into arrow-form with practised ease.

"Hound of the Red Plains."

He drew. The bowstring sang against the wind.

"Hrunting."

Release.

The crimson streak punched through the air with a sound like tearing silk, arcing over the valley in a shallow parabola before snapping into a terminal dive. At twelve kilometres, the target had perhaps half a second to react after the sonic crack reached them.

They didn't react.

The distant flash was small. Almost gentle.

Simultaneously, the Partner—that vast automated warship suspended three hundred metres above the ridge like a steel thundercloud—discharged a volley. Seven beams of concentrated light lanced downward in precise, staggered arcs, each targeting a separate heat signature Luxion had flagged across the border zone. The beams struck in sequence, left to right, methodical as a pianist working through scales.

"Thirty-three Luxion, eighteen Leon."

Olivia bit into her apple. Juice ran down her chin.

Leon's jaw tightened. "This isn't a competition." He pulled the next Hrunting from the soil, turning it slowly in his hand. "And keeping score is a poor way to honour the dead—even these ones."

"It very much is." She wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. "And you're losing."

"I am endeavouring," Leon said through his teeth, "to conduct a border defence operation."

"Luxion's conducting a border defence operation. You're conducting target practice." Olivia rolled onto her side, propping her head on one hand, curled up like a kitten in the sun. Her blonde hair fanned across the blanket. "There's a difference."

Above them, the drone sphere that served as Luxion's local terminal bobbed closer. Its single red eye pulsed with what Leon had come to recognise as satisfaction.

"Mistress Olivia raises a fair point, Master. My targeting systems operate at a substantially higher efficiency threshold than manual archery." The eye brightened. "I should also note that my current elimination count includes three specimens exhibiting Stage Four integration—significantly more dangerous than the Stage Two variant you overkilled with your bloodthirsty projectiles."

Leon shook his head. Arguing with the pair of them was pointless; they fed off each other like wolves circling the same kill.

Sometimes Leon forgot who she'd been before either of them woke up here. Not the girl on the blanket with apple juice on her chin—the other one. The Einzbern homunculus who'd sicced Berserker on him the second time they met, whose family had spent her entire existence sharpening her into a weapon for a war she never asked to fight.

Leon pulled another Hrunting from the ground.

"I have created over a thousand blades."

The aria fragment left his lips like a prayer. He released—and in the same breath, several hundred swords erupted from the air behind him, streaking outward in a widening arc alongside the crimson blur of Hrunting, each blade finding its own target across the border zone.

"Score: Tie." Luxion's red eye pulsed twice, rapid and bright. It didn't particularly care who won as long as every demonic suit on the field stopped moving.

Something tugged at his trouser leg. Leon glanced down. Olivia had hooked her toes into the fabric and was pulling with the lazy persistence of a cat batting at a dangling thread.

"Come," she said, her voice pitched into a theatrical whine that dissolved into a grin halfway through the word. "You clearly don't need to stay vigilant. Luxion is perfectly happy defending the border on his own." She stretched her arms forward, the white lace from earlier on full display and entirely unbothered by it. "Why not cuddle with your cute little vassal?"

Leon did not look down. Leon looked at the horizon. The horizon was safe. The horizon did not have white lace.

To be honest, the past few days had been harder than any border skirmish. The immediate crises were settled—the throne room, the postings, the contracts—and what remained was the part nobody warned you about: the quiet. And in the quiet, the women.

His guardian spirits had long established a rotation for who slept beside him at night—something he hadn't agreed to so much as failed to prevent. At the time, he'd felt guilty for leaving Durga and Melt behind in his territory when school started, and the spirits had seized on that guilt with alarming efficiency. Olivia and Mégane's invitations to make them legitimate mistresses had progressed from teasing to pointed. And now Angelica and Erica orbited the edges of whatever this was becoming, one bound by contract and the other by Crown arrangement, neither of them simple.

He wasn't going to rush it. He wasn't going to take advantage of anyone's feelings, or the power dynamic that came with being the head of a household full of women who—for various political, contractual, and apparently enthusiastic personal reasons—were invested in his future.

He'd already taken Olivia out properly. A candlelight dinner at the facility, the one overlooking the onsen. They'd gone to the hot spring together afterwards—towels on, of course—and he'd held her while they shared a drink, the steam rising around them, her head against his shoulder. It had been genuinely lovely. He'd told her that, and she'd laughed and called him old-fashioned, and he'd said nothing because she was right.

'It's not that I don't want to. It's that I don't know how to do this properly.'

His experience with romance had been a blood-soaked fortnight where the world was ending. That wasn't a foundation. That was a fever dream with a body count.

'...'

Somewhere in the back of his consciousness, a voice that sounded suspiciously like a certain twintailed magus whispered that he'd bedded Sakura and Medusa, then Arturia and Rin, within the span of two weeks and hadn't seemed to have any trouble figuring it out then.

'Shut up, Rin.'

"C'mon, it's quite chilly up here on this mountain!"

"Hey! It's not even your turn today!"

The voice cut across the ridge like a thrown blade. Olivia harrumphed and withdrew her foot, crossing her arms with exaggerated displeasure.

Mégane and Erica crested the path together—an unlikely pair if ever there was one.

Erica moved to his side, her hood drawn low despite the morning sun. Leon's guardian spirits trailed behind them—Ria and Art in tow—and he couldn't help but notice the way Erica's shoulders tightened whenever one of them drifted too close. She hadn't said anything about it. She wouldn't. But the discomfort was there, quiet and constant, like a splinter she refused to acknowledge.

Mégane's eyes narrowed for just a second—fixed not on Erica, but on the large scythe slung across the princess's back. The look was brief, appraising, and gone before anyone else would have caught it.

'Hopefully there won't be any problems between the girls.'

Leon already had his hands full managing the spats between Olivia and Mégane. Adding Erica's quiet intensity and whatever Mégane had just seen in that scythe was not going to simplify matters.

Erica had dressed practically for the border—dark shin-high boots, thigh-high leggings, a grey plaid skirt over a black shirt, and the hooded cloak she was never without. She looked less like a princess and more like someone who expected to be asked to kill something before lunch.

"Do you have everything?" Mégane asked, glancing between the scattered Hruntings and the blanket Olivia was still sprawled across.

Erica gave a small nod.

"Luxion should be able to hold the border while we're gone," Leon said, more to himself than anyone. "Unless Rachelle has significantly stronger units in reserve, the killzone coverage is sufficient. And he's already producing additional airships to expand the patrol range."

It had only been a week since the long break ended—one single day of classes at the academy before Luxion's alert had pulled them out here. Movement on the Rachelle border. Leon had gathered Olivia, Mégane, and Erica. They'd donned power armour and come immediately.

Angelica had stayed behind. The school festival was approaching, and she had responsibilities she couldn't abandon—committee obligations, social appearances, the sort of duties that kept a baroness visible and accounted for. They'd left Melt, Durga, and all of Olivia's guardian spirits with her for protection. The gambling losses from Folkvangr still rankled among certain noble families, and not everyone had forgiven Leon for the financial carnage.

Though, according to Angelica's last call, opinion was split roughly even. For every noble nursing a grudge, there was another asking whether Leon would be holding tea ceremonies in the near future.

When the first incursions came, Leon had tried a different approach.

He'd taken the field with Olivia, Mégane, and Erica—all four in power armour—and captured several of the enemy alive. Non-lethal takedowns. He wanted information. Was this Rachelle testing the new border guard? Or something larger?

Erica had warned him it wouldn't work. She'd said it quietly, the way she said most things, resting her scythe across her knees while they watched the prisoners being transferred to the medical bay. The corruption was too far advanced, she'd told him. By the time a soldier was deployed in demonic armour, there wasn't enough of the original person left to interrogate.

Leon had wanted to see for himself.

Luxion had been apoplectic at the first close inspection of the demonic suits—Leon had needed the better part of an hour to talk the AI down from proposing immediate sterilisation of every Rachele staging ground within sensor range. But he'd managed, and the analysis had proceeded.

Erica had been right.

The demonic armour, once it achieved full neural integration, became indistinguishable from the host's own tissue. Separating the two was functionally identical to separating a person from their central nervous system. The corruption didn't merely inhabit the body—it replaced it, cell by cell, thought by thought, until the original occupant existed only as a fading echo providing locomotive templates for something that wore their face.

The captured soldiers were half-crazed by the time they arrived, spouting Rachele propaganda in voices that slurred and stuttered as the armour ate deeper. They couldn't answer questions. They could barely form sentences.

All prisoners were dead within seventy-two hours.

The first had screamed for six hours before the corruption finished consuming her brain stem. Leon had sat outside the medical bay the entire time, listening.

He hadn't tried non-lethal takedowns since.

Every demonic suit that crossed the killzone died the moment it was identified. Leon didn't call it combat.

While he called it border defence, he also called it mercy.

"Leon!"

Olivia's voice cut through the memory like a blade. He blinked.

"Oh. Sorry—got distracted."

"You should probably go," Mégane said, shifting her weight and planting her hands on her hips. "I'll handle the frontline for now."

They'd agreed early on that despite Luxion being more than capable of holding the border alone, at least one of them should be present at all times. Or near enough to all times. Mégane had volunteered for this rotation without complaint—partly because she took the duty seriously, and partly because the alternative was worse.

She waved them off. "I'm still on remedials, so I can't even enjoy the festival. I'll attend the lectures through Luxion's stream." A grin spread across her face. "I might as well enjoy the fresh air rather than be cramped in a room with the professor."

Then, just as they turned to leave—

"Oi! Leon, don't forget your promise! We have a date after the festival!"

Leon chuckled. "Yes, yes. Don't worry about that."

Their "date" was a two-person descent into the second cosmic dungeon. Mégane had been very specific about the terms.

"Yes. After all, I want my first time..." She paused, letting the silence stretch. "...with you." She winked.

Olivia growled. "First time contracting a guardian spirit. Don't jump the queue!"

Mégane held her stare with a knowing smirk.

Erica stood to the side, her gaze darting between the two of them with the quiet alarm of someone who'd walked into a conversation three layers deeper than she was prepared for.

Leon sighed and offered his elbow to the princess. "Ignore them. Luxion's prepared a smaller vessel to take us to the capital—your mother specifically asked me to bring you along."

Erica pulled her hood lower and brushed her fringe aside with one hand before taking his arm.

The pair left the bickering vassals behind. Art and Ria followed quietly, flanking them like pale shadows.

"Oh—Leon, don't forget, we need all of the male attendants. The ones whose contracts we bought out from the other students." Olivia had caught up, falling into step beside him with the ease of someone who hadn't just been sprawled on a blanket in her underthings. "They need to be at the festival."

Leon blinked. "...Why?"

Olivia just smiled.

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End

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