

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

Story Starts

-=&<o>&=-

**Chapter 11.3 -
The Offrey
Gambit**

Tick.

The brass chronometer bolted above the Partner's helm counted down towards the intercept window, its hand crawling across a face marked in guild-standard hours. Leon stood at the centre of the bridge with his hands clasped behind his back, watching the cloudscape scroll beneath the bow. The troposphere lay below them in banked ranges of grey and gold, lit from the west where the sun had begun its long slide towards evening.

Somewhere in those clouds, a thousand ships waited to kill him.

Tick.

"C'mon, Chris, just one more spar!"

Leon's eye twitched.

"How many times must I say it? No. Bother Setanta if you want a bout. We're nearly at the Wayne border."

"But—?!"

"No."

"Besides, Setanta's no fun. He's too violent. Goes straight for the kill every time."

Tick.

From the bridge, Leon had a clear view of the foredeck three storeys below, where Brad Fou Field trailed after Chris Fia Arclight like a persistent gull. Chris walked the rail with his sword case slung over one shoulder, spine straight, expression carved from the same stone as his father's—their power armour stood open behind them, ready for today's operation. Brad gestured as he argued—both arms, full extension, the sort of theatrical sweep that would've earned applause on a stage and earned nothing at all from Chris.

In the reflection of the bridge's windscreen, Leon caught Setanta lounging against the aft mast. The spirit had both hands laced behind his head and wore a grin with far too many teeth in it for the accusation of *too violent* to be anything but a compliment received.

Tick.

The problem—the entire, skull-splitting problem—was that both of them had left their commlinks open.

Every word. Every whinge. Every flat refusal. All of it piped directly into the ear of every soul on the command channel, crew and guardian spirits alike, at conversational volume, for the past eleven minutes.

Leon had distributed the commlinks himself before they'd crossed into the Wayne approach lanes. He'd explained the channels. He'd explained the toggle. He had, he was fairly certain, explained the toggle twice.

Tick.

"—and anyway, your footwork drills are boring, one more round I think I can perfect the binding array whilst mid-combat, that's the whole point of—"

"WILL THE TWO OF YOU TURN OFF YOUR COMMS!"

Olivia's shriek went through the channel like a spike through the temple. Every head on the bridge tilted in unison. Down on the deck, Brad and Chris both jerked and looked up at the bridge windows with matching apologetic winces.

Then matching confusion.

Olivia stood beside Leon at the windscreen, one hand pressed to her ear, staring down at the pair through the glass. Slowly—governess-slow, each movement enunciated—she tapped her earpiece. Pointed at it. Tapped it again. Mimed the toggle with a twist of two fingers.

Her expression, reflected in the windscreen, had gone entirely blank. Leon had learnt to fear that expression more than any of her grins.

Down below, Brad and Chris exchanged a glance. Both tapped their earpieces.

The channel went blessedly silent.

Then, still visible through the glass, they resumed the argument anyway—Brad's arms windmilling, Chris shaking his head in short, economical strokes—a mute pantomime of the exact same dispute, carried on in defiance of all sense.

Tick.

"I could drop something on them," Olivia offered. "Nothing lethal. A bucket. A small anvil."

"We don't have anvils."

"I'm sure you can trace one for me."

He gave her a pointed stare.

She pouted.

He let the suggestion die of natural causes and returned his attention to the clouds.

The two former heirs of founding houses were aboard on legitimate guild paper—they'd claimed the Wayne pirate suppression commission from the festival board before Nicks could get his hands on it, and when the routes had converged, folding them into the operation had been simpler than working around them. Barret's border posting had toughened them. Chris moved like a

man who'd stopped performing swordsmanship and started using it. Brad had put on muscle and lost the worst of his preening.

Which was why, when Brad had cornered him after the evening meal and asked for a spar, Leon had said yes.

Fifteen minutes. That was all he'd given him—blades only, Brad testing his binding arrays between passes on the aft training deck—and Brad had come away from it flushed and grinning and asking for more.

Leon understood why. He remembered Brad from the game—remembered him vividly, because he'd once spent an entire evening watching Illya swear at a loading screen on the man's account.

Early-route Brad had been a liability. All that magical talent bottled behind a thin mana pool, and the boy's insecurities wired directly into the game's mechanics. The tooltip had dressed it up as a personality trait—*Desperate to Prove Himself*—but what it meant in practice was simple: let Brad's mana hit zero without clearing the right relationship milestones, and he slipped the party's control entirely. No orders. No formation. He'd stride out of the back line on his own initiative, determined to contribute *something*, and his soft physical stats and dreadful dexterity meant the something was invariably his own face. Surrounded. Pummelled. Attack animations whiffing past everything within reach whilst the damage numbers stacked up over his head.

Despite the community's complaints, the developers never patched it. Three expansions, two balance overhauls, an entire rework of the affection system—and Brad's zero-mana death march survived every one of them, untouched, as though the code itself had decided the boy deserved his humiliations.

The forums had found a use for it, naturally. The forums found a use for everything. Stock up on cheap healing potions instead of expensive mana draughts, run Brad dry on purpose in the first two turns, and let him blunder into the enemy mass as a walking provocation. Every monster on the field would pile onto him—the aggro logic couldn't resist an isolated target—whilst

the protagonist pumped healing into his battered frame and the rest of the party carved through the beautifully clustered crowd with area attacks. The community had a name for it. *The Brad Battery*. Drain him, throw him, heal him, repeat. It levelled the protagonist's healing skill faster than anything else in the early game, and it had the incidental effect of making Brad—poor, preening, desperate Brad—the single most farmed party member in the entire catalogue.

Somewhere in Fuyuki, in another life, Illya had run that exploit for six straight hours. She'd kept a tally in the margin of a homework sheet—*Brad down: 41*—and refused all food that could not be delivered directly into her mouth, so he'd sat beside her feeding her onigiri and watching the same magnificent idiot charge the same monster line, over and over, unkillable and unteachable, whilst she cackled and the healing skill climbed. She'd only surrendered the laptop when her eyes stopped focusing.

Forty-one deaths. In one evening. For a skill bar.

So yes. He'd felt guilty. Somewhere out there was a version of this man whose entire mechanical purpose had been to suffer for Illya's convenience, and the flesh-and-blood Brad standing on his foredeck had spent months at a brutal border posting quietly fixing every weakness the game had hard-coded into him. The mana pool was deeper now—well, to be fair, even during the skirmish at Folkvangr Brad had been far from his game counterpart—and border rationing had forced further discipline on it. The footwork he complained about was Chris drilling fundamentals into him, the exact fundamentals whose absence had once fed him to six hours of monsters.

The man was repairing himself, rep by rep, without the faintest idea he'd ever been broken.

So Leon had given him his fifteen minutes.

He had not signed on for the encore, or the encore's encore, or the negotiation currently being conducted in furious mime three storeys below.

Tick.

"Master."

Luxion's voice arrived on the private channel—the sealed frequency only Olivia and the guardian spirits shared, because even now, even here, the AI's existence remained a secret held by a handful of people. Leon didn't move. Beside him, Olivia's posture shifted by a hair, weight settling onto the balls of her feet.

"The pirate fleet is holding position approximately five kilometres off our bow. They have descended into the troposphere and are using the cloud bank as concealment. Formation is consistent with an envelopment pattern. The dreadnought sits at the rear, screened by three cruiser wings."

A thousand ships, folded into the weather like a blade into a sleeve.

Leon's gaze didn't leave the clouds. "Hmm."

At the rear of the bridge, near the chart table, Carla Fou Wayne stood where the duty officer had parked her twenty minutes ago—invited up, ostensibly, to confirm the approach vectors to her father's territory. She'd been quiet through the comm fiasco. Quiet through the meal before it. Quiet like she was rationing her own breathing.

Over the past minute she had drifted, by degrees, towards the port viewport. Away from the crew stations. Away from the light.

Leon watched her reflection in the windscreen. Her right hand had slipped into the fold of her travelling coat.

"Hold," he whispered.

Durga, standing at parade rest by the bridge hatch with her silver-white hair bound back for shipboard duty, gave no sign she'd heard. Her red eyes stayed fixed on the middle distance. Only her weight moved, transferring soundlessly from heel to toe.

They needed her caught in the act. Not near it. Not adjacent to it. In it—with the signal sent and the record made and no room left for a baronet's daughter to weep before a tribunal about coincidence and misunderstanding.

Carla's hand emerged from her coat. A communication crystal sat cupped in her palm, small and pale, the kind merchants used for harbour manifests. Her thumb pressed its facet. A thread of light pulsed once through its core and died.

"Signal sent," said Luxion. "Transmission recorded in full. Metadata archived. The content is a single confirmation glyph, addressed to the Blackfleet command frequency."

Durga crossed the bridge in three steps.

"Hey—! Unhand me!" Carla's voice cracked into panic as fingers closed around her wrist and hoisted it into the air, crystal and all, the way one might lift a poacher's snare for inspection. "What is the meaning of this?"

Every head on the bridge turned. Olivia didn't turn at all; she'd been watching the reflection too.

Leon unclasped his hands from behind his back and walked over. He took his time about it. Carla hung in Durga's grip, up on her toes, her free hand scrabbling uselessly at fingers that might as well have been cast from bronze.

He extended his open palm beneath her fist.

Durga squeezed.

Carla gasped—a short, strangled sound—and her fingers sprang open. The communication crystal dropped into Leon's waiting hand, still warm from the magical pulse it had emitted.

He turned it over once, examining the facets. Good quality. Offrey coin had paid for it; no baronet's daughter carried harbour-grade crystals cut this fine.

"You've been busy, Lady Wayne."

"I don't— I was only—" Her eyes darted to the crystal, to Durga, to the crew, hunting for a story and finding the shelves bare. "That's a personal effect. You have no right—"

"I have a full recording of the coordinates you transmitted to Captain Draake," Leon said. "Timestamped. Along with tonight's confirmation glyph, the fleet position it summoned, and rather more besides." He watched the blood leave her face in a single draining tide. "We've known since before you boarded."

Carla stopped struggling. Her whole frame sagged in Durga's grip, and the horror that spread across her features wasn't the horror of a woman caught—it was the horror of a woman realising she'd been walked here, step by step, every mile of the journey a corridor built for her in advance.

Leon left her to it.

He cycled his magic into the crystal, felt the frequency lattice open, and raised it to his mouth. Across the bridge, the crew had gone silent. Olivia drifted to his shoulder.

"Aldric Draake."

The name went out into the clouds. He gave it a moment to land.

"This is Leon Fou Bartfort, Viscount of Holfort, master of the vessel you've spent the last hour creeping towards through the weather. I'll spare us both the theatre—your lure has been on my ship for two days, your fleet has been on my charts for three, and every transmission between you and your employers now sits in the hands of the Crown. The trap was never yours, Captain. You've merely arrived at it punctually."

Static breathed on the channel. Somewhere in the cloud bank, on the bridge of a dreadnought, a man was learning how the evening would actually go.

"So here is the only offer you'll receive. In the name of King Roland and the Kingdom of Holfort, I order the Blackfleet Flotilla to cut engines, strike colours, and stand by to be boarded. Every soul who surrenders answers to the

Crown's justice. Every soul who takes up arms answers to mine." He let the pause carry. "You have one minute."

He lowered the crystal.

Below, the pair continued their argument, unaware of what was happening above them.

Tick.

-=&<0>&=-

The bridge of the *Carrion Crown* smelled of pipe smoke, gun oil, and forty years of spilt rum that no amount of holystoning would ever lift from the deck planks.

Aldric Draake sat in the captain's chair with one boot up on the binnacle, a cold pipe clamped in his teeth, listening to a dead man give him orders—well, technically he'd been ordered to capture the viscount, but he wasn't bogged down by semantics.

"—every soul who takes up arms answers to mine. You have one minute."

The transmission clicked off. Cloud pressed against the bridge viewports, grey and blind, the running lights of the nearest cruiser wing reduced to smudges of amber in the murk.

Nobody on the bridge spoke. His signals officer—a narrow Rachele-born woman called Vess who'd deserted a naval academy with three of its codebooks—sat frozen at her station with one hand still on the crystal array. The helmsman had gone carefully blank. Around the chart table, his wing captains, piped aboard an hour ago for the final briefing, stood looking anywhere but at each other.

They were rattled. He could smell it under the pipe smoke. Not by the threat—threats were weather in this trade—but by the frequency. Bartfort hadn't shouted at the sky and hoped. He'd spoken down the Blackfleet's own

command lattice, through their own encryption, into their own bridge, arriving in Vess's ear as though he'd been sitting on the channel for days.

Which meant the girl was blown. Which meant the coordinates were bait. Which meant the viscount had been reeling them in whilst they thought they were stalking him.

Draake took the pipe out of his teeth and began to laugh.

It started low, somewhere under his ribs, and rolled up through him until it filled the bridge—a big, unhurried sound, the laugh of a man being told a joke he'd heard before and still enjoyed. His wing captains exchanged glances. Vess's shoulders came down an inch.

"Oh, he's *good*," Draake said. "Give him that, lads. 'The trap was never yours.' Written that one down in advance, hadn't he? Rehearsed it in the mirror." He levered his boot off the binnacle and stood, rolling his shoulders until something cracked. "You know what I hear, when a man takes the trouble to tell me how thoroughly I've already lost?"

Nobody answered. They knew better than to step on the line.

"I hear a man who'd rather talk than shoot." He crossed to the forward viewport and set one scarred hand against the frame, looking up into the roof of cloud above them. "A man with the guns to end a conversation doesn't open one. He knew we were coming, fine. Knowing's not stopping. The Alzer Republic knew we were coming too—saw us on their augur-glass three hundred kilometres out, scrambled every hull in their outer ring." His teeth showed around the pipe stem. "And I still put my colours on their harbour wall before we left."

That got a ripple through the wing captains. The Alzer raid was scripture in the Blackfleet. Half the men on this ship had signed on because of it.

"Captain." Vess had found her voice. "If our lattice is compromised—"

"Then he's heard an hour of approach chatter and knows our spacing. Doesn't change the arithmetic." Draake turned from the viewport. "One hull. One thousand of ours. I don't care if the man's got saints chained to his mast—arithmetic like that doesn't lose. Our employers—" a small, cold pause, because he knew full well whose gold sat in his hold, and knew better than to say the name aloud on a compromised bridge; the Wayne lass may be burned, but that didn't mean he had to hand the viscount the rest of the chain—"want the ship whole and the man breathing. So we do this the way we always do it."

He walked back to the chart table and planted both fists on it, over the marked position of the Partner, five kilometres up and ahead.

"Every navy in three kingdoms builds the same way," he said, and though every soul present had heard the sermon a hundred times, they leaned in anyway, because this was the part that came before the money. "Armour on the crown of the ship. Guns on the broadside. Watch officers scanning the horizon and the sky above, because above is where honest pirates come from—drop out of the sun, rake the decks, away before the escorts turn. So they hang their nets high. They point their glasses up." He tapped the underside of the Partner's silhouette with one thick finger. "And they leave the belly soft. Keels, fuel trunks, intake vents, cargo doors—every tender thing a ship owns hangs off its underside, and not one gun in twenty can depress far enough to defend it. No watchman stares at his own floor. Nobody sees the sea coming up at them."

He straightened.

"That's the whole trade, lads. The sky's too big to watch all of it, so they watch the half that's ever hurt them. We are the other half."

He put the cold pipe back in his teeth, returned to his chair, and dropped into it.

"Signal the fleet. All wings—ascend. Full climb, battle spacing, weapons free the moment we clear the cloud deck. First crew to put a grapnel in that hull

drinks free for a year." He bit down on the pipe stem, and the grin around it was the grin that had made him a legend from the Rachelle frontier to the Alzer wall. "Let's go and answer the nice viscount."

Vess's hands moved across the crystal array. The order went out through the compromised lattice—because compromised or not, it was the only lattice they had—and the answer came back not in words but in sound: a roar, rolling in through the hull from the gun decks below, picked up ship by ship across the formation until the whole cloud bank seemed to shake with it. A thousand crews, cheering in the blind grey murk.

The *Carrion Crown* shuddered. Her engines came up from idle to full ascent, and around her, wing by wing, the Blackfleet Flotilla began to rise.

Fifty-eight seconds after Leon Fou Bartfort finished speaking, a thousand ships came up out of the clouds like the floor of the world giving way.

==&<o>&=-

End

**Follow me on my other socials
and stack additional voting
points on the story of your
choosing.**

[XTwitterX](#)

