

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

**Story Starts**

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**Chapter 10.3 -  
Of Pre-Mature Story Progressions  
and Wagers**

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Clarice Fia Atlee had always prided herself on reading a room.

It was a necessity, really. Court nobles without territory learned early that their survival depended on knowing who wanted what before they said it—and more importantly, what they wanted but would never say. Her father had taught her that before she could hold a teacup properly.

*'Watch their hands, Clarice. Mouths lie. Hands forget to.'*

So when Viscount Bartfort settled into the chair across from her in the student council office—her office now, still smelling of Angelica's perfume and black tea—she watched his hands.

They were still. Resting on his knees. No drumming, no fidgeting, no performative ease.

That was the first warning.

Princess Erica settled beside him, hands folded in her lap, her face a mask.

The second warning was that he'd closed the door himself—after Erica had taken her seat, checking both sides of the corridor before pulling it shut. Not rudeness. Habit. The motion of someone accustomed to checking his surroundings before sealing them off.

"Thank you for accommodating me at the last minute, Lady Atlee, and apologies for being presumptuous enough to handle the handover for Angelica."

"Not at all, Lord Bartfort. Angelica's documentation was..." She searched for the word. Exhaustive didn't cover it. The woman had indexed her indices. "...thorough. She is very responsible."

"She does that. I'm glad that things are better between you two."

Clarice's eye twitched at that. It wasn't a secret that she held Angelica responsible for Julius and his entourage straying from their betrothals. She could admit—privately, and only to herself—that seeing them thrashed in front of the whole kingdom during the Folkvangr had been quite satisfying.

The relationship with the Marmorias, however, was well and truly soured.

A beat of silence. Leon poured tea—three cups, already prepared—while his guardian spirit chose to remain standing behind his chair.

He set Clarice's cup on the desk between them. She picked it up with both hands, fingers curling around the porcelain, then caught herself and took a measured sip before placing it back on the saucer.

*'What are you, Viscount Bartfort?'*

She'd asked herself that question more than once since the Folkvangr.

No—that was wrong. He had been on her mind since well before that. Since the day he'd saved their small group from the second-floor boss in his cosmic dungeon, and the fact that they'd managed to clear most of the mobs and even the final boss together. That had been the first time she'd looked at Leon Fou Bartfort and thought, *'This man does not fit the shape he's standing in.'*

And now, post-Folkvangr, everyone had questions.

The answers were as numerous as the rumours. But Clarice had settled on inconvenient. He was the kind of man who made other people's carefully arranged plans fall apart simply by existing in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Or the right place. Depending on who you asked.

"I'll be direct," he said, and she believed him, because he'd already started drinking the tea. Men who planned to be delicate let the cup sit untouched. "Mid-fight, Jilk Fia Marmoria wagered his noble status and everything attached to the engagement between your houses. Those assets transferred to me as the victor."

Clarice's fingers did not tighten on her cup. She'd been trained better than that.

"I'm aware," she said.

"Then you're also aware that I've been holding an island your family purchased for that marriage, along with a fifteen per cent stake in your racing enterprise."

"Fourteen point eight," Clarice corrected, because precision was the only armour she had in this conversation. "The remaining two-tenths were held in escrow pending the formal ceremony."

Clarice caught the slight elevation of his brow—she already knew the question that would never be asked: *'Why didn't they put the whole thing in escrow?'*

The answer was simple enough. Her parents had intended the income from that fourteen point eight per cent to give Jilk the means to treat Clarice well during their time at the academy. A small kindness built into the contract's architecture. The sort of detail that only mattered when the engagement was still alive.

"Fourteen point eight," he conceded. "Lady Atlee, I have no use for those assets. The island requires maintenance I'd rather not allocate, and the racing stake generates reports I don't read. I'd like to sell them back to House Atlee. At cost."

The room went very quiet.

Clarice set her teacup down with great care, because if she didn't concentrate on the motion—saucer, centre, release—she might do something undignified. Like stare.

At cost.

Not market value. Not the inflated post-Folkvangr valuation that any other noble would have leveraged into a king's ransom. At cost—the original purchase price the Atlees had paid, back when the engagement was still a living thing, and the island was a wedding gift rather than a war trophy.

*'Watch their hands, Clarice.'*

His hands hadn't moved. Still curled around the teacup. Still steady.

Erica turned her head toward Leon, her eyes widening by a fraction before she composed herself. The reaction was brief but telling—the princess hadn't known. He hadn't asked anyone about this. Hadn't sought advice or approval.

This was just... him.

"Surely that isn't the real reason. May I ask what the actual reason is?" she said, and was quietly proud that her voice didn't waver.

Leon Fou Bartfort looked at her with those mismatched eyes—one gold, one silver, set in a tanned face beneath white hair that made him look decades older than his years—and said something she hadn't expected.

"Because I regret the way things ended. Between the Marmorias and your house. The wager stripped assets from people who weren't party to the original dispute, and that's—" He paused. Not searching for words. Choosing which ones to leave out. "It's not something I'm comfortable profiting from."

Clarice's chest did something inconvenient.

She knew—objectively, analytically, with every fibre of her court-bred intellect—that this was politics. That Viscount Bartfort maintained relationships the way other men maintained hedgerows: pragmatically, with an eye toward

what might grow there. He laid his alliances like brickwork—patient, deliberate, one course at a time. Her family had collaborated with him and his vassal on the dungeon rehabilitation thesis. He'd provided the Crown with his seemingly sentient lost technology's parentage analysis. He was building something.

She knew all of this.

And yet.

*'It's not something I'm comfortable profiting from.'*

Nobody talked like that. Not in this world, not in this court, not in the aristocracy she'd spent twenty years learning to navigate. People profited. That was what assets were for. The idea that someone would find it uncomfortable—not strategically inadvisable, not politically unwise, but uncomfortable—

*'Who ARE you?'*

She took a breath. Then another.

And then Clarice Fia Atlee did what her father had taught her to do when someone offered you more than you deserved: she made them earn the right to be generous.

"I appreciate the offer, Lord Bartfort. Sincerely." She folded her hands on the desk. Composed. Measured. Every inch the Atlee heir, even if her pulse was doing something ridiculous beneath her cuffs. "But I'm afraid I can't accept those terms."

He blinked. "You—"

"At cost undervalues the assets and, frankly, it undervalues the gesture. My family doesn't accept charity, however well-intentioned." She held his gaze. Gold and silver. Like staring into mismatched coins. "So I'd like to propose an alternative."

Leon Fou Bartfort leaned back in his chair.

She could see it—the moment the retiree gave way to something sharper. Not suspicion. Interest.

"I'm listening," he said.

"A wager."

"A wager," he repeated, flat.

"The festival racetrack is still operational for another two days. I'll provide two identical air-bikes from my family's stable. Your representative against mine. One race. Three laps around the academy circuit." Clarice allowed herself the smallest smile. "If your representative wins, House Atlee purchases the island and the fourteen point eight per cent stake at fair market value. Not at cost. You'll turn a profit, as any sensible Viscount should."

Leon's eyebrows rose by a fraction. "And if your representative wins?"

"Then you grant me a wish."

The silence stretched.

"A wish," he said.

"Within reason, Lord Bartfort. I'm not asking for your hand in marriage or your firstborn." She kept the thought— *'Though my father might.'*—buried deep. "A single, reasonable request concerning the disposition of the assets in question. To be stated after the race."

She watched his hands.

They were still. And then—just barely—the corner of his mouth twitched.

"You realise," he said slowly, "that you've just offered me better terms on a loss than I offered you freely."

"Yes."

He stared at her. She stared back.

And then Leon Fou Bartfort snorted—short and surprised, the look on his face that of a man who'd walked into a meeting and found a chessboard instead.

"Lady Atlee."

"Lord Bartfort."

He set down his teacup. Picked it back up. Set it down again. The first unnecessary movement he'd made since sitting down.

"One race," he said. "Three laps. Identical bikes."

"Provided by my house. You may inspect them beforehand if you wish."

"Not necessary, but I shall do so to avoid insulting you."

"I would expect nothing less."

He stood. She stood. They regarded each other across the desk—the border Viscount with white hair and mismatched eyes, and the court noble's daughter with chestnut hair and a heartbeat she was determined to ignore.

"One of my guardian spirits will most likely volunteer." He exchanged a glance with the one present, who seemed to have a gleam behind her eyes. "Would late afternoon today work for you?"

She nodded.

"I'll see you then."

He left before she could respond. Erica offered Clarice a small, unreadable nod—somewhere between courtesy and sympathy—and followed him out.

Clarice Fia Atlee stood alone in the student council office, surrounded by Angelica's immaculate filing system and the fading warmth of three teacups, and pressed her hands flat against the desk until they stopped shaking.

*'It's not something I'm comfortable profiting from.'*

She allowed herself exactly three seconds of something that was not composure.

Then she straightened her collar, opened Angelica's binder to the next page of handover notes, and began planning who would represent her.

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The academy grounds hummed with festival energy—streamers of coloured silk strung between lamp posts, the smell of roasted chestnuts and caramelised sugar drifting from vendor stalls, the constant murmur of hundreds of students and visitors flowing between attractions. Leon walked alongside Erica through the eastern promenade, hands in his pockets, watching the crowds give them a wide berth.

Not subtly, either.

Whispers chased them down the flagstone path. Eyes tracked their movement from behind programmes and pastry bags. A cluster of second-year girls near the ornamental fountain stopped mid-conversation to stare, their heads swivelling in unison as if they were a group of chickens.

Leon chuckled.

"You'd think I'd grown a second head."

Erica's expression remained serene. Perfectly composed. The princess walked with her spine straight, her gaze forward, her silver-white hair catching the afternoon light. The picture of royal composure.

Her left hand, however, told a different story. It rose to her side, fingers twitching towards the edge of her cloak's hood—then dropped. Rose again. Dropped. A tiny war fought entirely below the neck, between the instinct to disappear and the obligation to be seen.

She wanted to pull that hood up and let the fabric swallow the top half of her face.

He didn't comment on it. Instead, he adjusted their trajectory, angling away from the main thoroughfare towards the western vendor row where the territory booths had been set up.

"Nicks should be at the family booth," he said. "We can cut through the practice yards."

Erica fell into step beside him. The whispers followed.

*'—that's the princess, isn't it? With Bartfort?'*

*'—the one who beat the prince's entire—'*

*'—heard she's his steward now, can you imagine—'*

Leon let the noise wash over him. Background static. Erica's hand twitched again.

"The race," she said, her voice pitched to carry only between them. A deflection. He appreciated the craft of it. "Lady Atlee's proposal."

"What did you make of it?"

Erica considered this. They passed a booth selling candied apples, the vendor calling out prices to passersby with theatrical enthusiasm.

"Her refusal to accept your initial terms was honourable," Erica said. "Selling back at cost would have been generous to the point of embarrassment. For a house like the Atlees, accepting that kind of concession from someone of lower rank—" She paused. "It would have looked like pity."

"That wasn't my intention."

"I know. She knows, too, I think. Which is precisely why she couldn't accept." Erica's blue eyes tracked a pair of students who'd stopped dead in the middle of the path, gawking. They scrambled aside when Leon's gaze swept across

them. "A wager restores balance. Both parties risk something. Both parties can claim the outcome was earned."

Leon nodded. The logic tracked. He'd reached the same conclusion in the moment, which was why he'd accepted without much fuss.

"What do you suppose she wants?" he asked. "If she wins."

"That's the part I'm less certain about."

They rounded a hedge-lined corner. The practice yards opened up ahead—wide, flat fields of packed earth where martial demonstrations had been running since dawn. A small crowd gathered around a ring where two students in light armour circled each other with practice blades. Beyond that, the vendor row stretched towards the far wall.

"She could ask for favourable terms on the sale," Erica said slowly. "A payment schedule. Deferred interest. Something that protects Atlee pride whilst acknowledging Atlee finances."

"But?"

Erica brushed a strand of hair from her cheek. "But she didn't specify the wish in advance. That's not the behaviour of someone negotiating a purchase agreement."

Leon waited.

"I wonder," Erica said, choosing her words with care, "whether she might propose a formal arrangement."

He looked at her.

"A partnership between your viscounty and House Atlee," Erica clarified quickly, a faint colour touching her cheeks. "Trade concessions, military cooperation, a betrothal clause—the usual architecture of an inter-house alliance. With Lady Atlee herself as the bridge."

"That's a significant leap from a bike race."

"Is it?" Erica's gaze was steady. "She wagered on your victory at Folkvangr when the entire court bet against you. Her family has been elevated to Lower Earl on the strength of the research you provided. Her former betrothed was stripped of status in a proceeding where you were the principal beneficiary." She let those facts sit. "Lady Atlee has been orbiting your household for some time, Lord Bartfort. A wager simply provides a polite excuse to close the distance."

Leon exhaled through his nose. Politics. Always politics. He'd have preferred a straightforward sword fight.

"To be fair, Olivia was the genius who conceived the thesis. The Atlees were the ones who facilitated the experiment alongside the Redgraves."

Then, grumpily: "She always passes the credit to me. Something about not wanting the paperwork or the responsibility."

Erica giggled at that. It wasn't an unpleasant sound.

They walked in silence for a few paces. The vendor row came into view—a line of wooden stalls draped in territorial colours, each displaying produce or crafts from their respective holdings. The Bartfort booth sat midway down the row, identifiable by the modest banner and the cheerful faces of the commoner families who'd volunteered to manage it.

"You know," Leon said, "when she mentioned the wish, there was a part of me that just—" He made a vague gesture. "Appreciated the clean structure of it. Win, lose, done. No ambiguity."

"And now?"

"Now I'm remembering that nothing in this kingdom is ever that clean."

Erica's lips pressed together. Not quite a smile. Close enough.

"On an unrelated matter," Leon said, changing direction before the conversation could spiral further into matrimonial speculation. "When you

ascend ranks—and I say when, not if—have you given thought to the naming conventions?"

Erica tilted her head.

"Not for you," he clarified. "For me. When I next ascend—if I next ascend—I should probably petition for my own house name."

"Oh." Erica blinked. "Yes. That would make sense."

"It's already confusing enough. My father's barony is Bartfort. My viscounty is Bartfort. Half the correspondence from the palace gets routed to his desk by accident." Leon scratched the back of his neck. "Luxion's had to intercept three separate tax assessments meant for my father's holdings in the last month alone."

"What name would you choose?"

He'd been thinking about it, actually. In the quiet hours between border skirmishes and academy lectures, when there was nothing to do but watch the stars through Luxion's observation deck and let his mind wander. If he reverted to a name from his past—

Emiya.

The word sat in his chest like an old stone. Familiar. Heavy.

"I'm still considering," he said.

*'Though Olivia would probably like having her father's surname revived in this reality.'*

Erica nodded, quiet understanding behind her eyes.

"I'll think about it," Leon said. "After the border stabilises. After the dungeon contracts expire. After—"

"After everything else."

"Exactly."

They shared a glance. Leon let the corner of his mouth lift.

"Speaking of futures," he said. "Are you looking forward to starting at the academy next year?"

Erica's composure flickered. Not much. A fractional shift in her shoulders, a slight widening of her eyes. But on a face as controlled as hers, it was practically a shout.

"I—" She stopped. Started again. "It's a shame, really."

"How so?"

"Everyone's in different year groups. You, Olivia, Angelica, Lady Bellefleur—you're all a year ahead. By the time I start, you'll be second-years. Different classes, different schedules." Her voice stayed level, but Leon caught the undertone. The careful flatness of someone listing facts they wished were different.

Then she caught herself.

Colour bloomed across her cheeks—sudden and fierce, climbing from her collar to the tips of her ears. She turned her face away, and her hand rose to her hood before she forced it back down.

"That is to say—" She cleared her throat. "Last night. Talking with Olivia and Angelica and the others. The guardian spirits. It was—"

She seemed to search for the right word, sifting through options and discarding them.

"Fun," she said finally. Simply.

Leon raised an eyebrow.

"Even with the drinking," Erica added. "Even with—" She grimaced. "Even with Olivia being the direct cause of yesterday's incident with my mother."

"You're being diplomatic. She practically threw you at me whilst I was wearing shorts and a collar."

Erica's blush deepened. She pressed her lips together hard.

"The point," she said with a precision that suggested she was constructing the sentence in real time to avoid landmines, "is that it felt natural. Nobody was performing. Olivia was—she's always exactly what she appears to be, even when what she appears to be is catastrophically inappropriate. And Angelica was warm. Genuinely warm. And the guardian spirits spoke to me as though I was just... a person in the room."

She stopped walking.

Leon stopped with her.

Erica stood very still, her blue eyes fixed on something in the middle distance—past the vendor stalls, past the festival crowds, past whatever she was seeing.

"I spent two years at the Fraser territory," she said quietly.

Leon waited.

"The arrangement was my father's idea. The Frasers held the Rachele border for five generations. A thankless posting—constant incursions, limited resources, barely any rotation. My father wanted to show the Crown's appreciation. The plan was simple: if the Fraser matriarch bore a son, I would wed him. A direct union between the border's guardian house and the royal family." Erica's voice was even, almost rehearsed. A story she'd told herself enough times to smooth the edges. "It would have solidified their alliance, rewarded their loyalty, given the Frasers a permanent connection to the palace."

"But?"

"But Lady Fraser had been bearing daughters for almost twenty years." Something that wasn't quite amusement crossed Erica's features. "Eighteen,

to be precise. Eighteen daughters. Not a single son. And the matriarch was, in her own words, 'thoroughly sick of being pregnant.' She told me this directly, over tea, on my third day at the estate. I believe her exact phrase was 'if my husband looks at me with that particular intention one more time, I shall relocate his intentions permanently.'"

Leon snorted.

"When the palace reassigned the Rachele border to your viscounty and made me your steward, the Frasers didn't complain about losing the connection. They were—" Erica paused. "Relieved isn't the right word. They were gracious about it. But you could see the weight lift. My father offered that one of his sons from his mistresses could marry one of their daughters, to maintain some thread of alliance. They accepted. Everyone was satisfied."

She resumed walking. Leon fell into step beside her.

"They treated me like a princess the entire time," Erica said. "Every moment. Every meal. Every border patrol I accompanied." Her hand brushed her fringe downward—a gesture Leon had seen her repeat several times now, almost unconscious. Pulling her hair towards her eyes, wanting to be hidden. "Even when I was helping reinforce the barrier wards or standing watch during incursions. Princess Erica. Always."

"And that wasn't—"

"It wasn't bad," she said. Firmly. Fairly. "They weren't cruel. They were kind and respectful and proper. But it was—" She searched again. "Constant. The title was always in the room before I was."

They reached the vendor row. The Bartfort booth was twenty paces ahead. Nicks wasn't visible yet, but the commoner families waved at Leon as he approached.

"I like," Erica said, and her voice dropped to something barely above a whisper, "that nobody here treats me like a princess."

Leon glanced at her.

"Olivia called me 'Erica' within five minutes of meeting me. Not 'Your Highness.' Not 'Princess.' Erica. And Angelica—Angelica argued with me about tea preparation methods last night as though I were her equal, not her liege's daughter." Erica's fingers curled at her sides. "And I can walk wherever I want. Without guards. Without an escort. Without someone three paces behind me noting every interaction for a report."

Leon considered telling her the full truth and decided she deserved it.

"You know one of Luxion's drones is following you right now," he said.

"Cloaked. About four metres above and to your left."

Erica looked up. She couldn't see it—the stealth field was beyond even magically enhanced perception—but she looked anyway, and then she looked back at Leon, and she smiled.

It was a small thing. Barely there. But real in a way that the composed mask wasn't.

"I know," she said. "You told me during the briefing on my second day. But it's not—" She spread her hands. "It doesn't follow me into rooms. It doesn't stand behind my chair. It doesn't clear its throat when I talk to someone it hasn't vetted." Her smile widened by a fraction. "I feel quite free, Lord Bartfort. Genuinely."

Leon let that settle. Then he looked ahead, towards the booth, towards the festival noise and the afternoon light.

They walked a few more paces. The crowd thinned near the booth, people flowing towards the more glamorous attractions at the centre of the festival grounds.

"I regret what happened between Julius and Angelica," Erica said.

The words came without warning. Dropped into the space between them, sudden and heavy.

"My brother was wrong. I know that. He hurt someone who spent years preparing to be his partner, and he did it publicly, and he did it without the basic courtesy of a private conversation first." Erica's jaw tightened. "But I also understand—not condone, but understand—what it feels like to have someone else's expectations shape every decision you make. Every relationship. Every public appearance."

She looked at Leon.

"Having a role chosen for you before you're old enough to understand what you're agreeing to. Being told this is your purpose, this is your path, this is the person you will become." Her blue eyes held steady. "I don't excuse Julius. But I refuse to pretend I don't recognise the pressure that warped him, or the salvation—or maybe the key releasing his shackles—that Ms Lafan provided."

Leon met her gaze. Held it.

Two lifetimes of being told who he was supposed to be. The Counter Guardian. The Ally of Justice. The Sword. Archer had known that pressure well enough to want to kill himself over it.

"Erica."

She straightened.

"You're free to be whatever you want to be." He said it plainly. Without flourish. Without ceremony. The way you stated facts. "Here. In my household. At the academy. Wherever. Whatever you decide that is—scholar, adventurer, administrator, someone who just wants to read books in a garden—you'll have support. From me. From Olivia and Angelica. From every guardian spirit in the household."

Erica's hand rose to her hood.

This time, she didn't fight it. She pulled the fabric forward, letting it shadow her forehead, and beneath that shadow, her eyes were bright and wet and fierce.

"Thank you," she said. Quiet. Steady. Meaning it.

Leon nodded and turned towards the Bartfort booth—

Steel screamed.

He moved before thinking. Arm up, fingers closing around a hilt that existed between one heartbeat and the next. The black blade of Kanshou materialised in his grip, its curved edge catching a wooden staff mid-swing with a crack that split the air.

The force behind the blow was considerable. Not lethal—calibrated to bruise, not break—but enough to send vibrations singing through Leon's wrist and forearm.

On the other end of the staff, a young man grinned. He'd been told "no" many times. He found the word inspirational.

Setanta.

The guardian spirit's wild blue hair framed a face that radiated nothing but naked, uncomplicated joy. His bare feet were planted wide on the flagstones, his staff locked against Leon's traced blade, and his grin stretched ear to ear.

"Found you," Setanta said.

Leon's left eye twitched.

"Art," Leon said, his tone flat.

A blur of blonde hair and pale armour descended from somewhere above—a rooftop, a tree, Leon didn't see and didn't care—and a small, armoured fist cracked against the crown of Setanta's skull with mechanical precision.

The impact drove the guardian spirit's chin towards his chest. His grin didn't falter. If anything, it widened.

Art landed beside him, her expression flat with disapproval, her diminutive frame coiled tight—the look she got when someone bearing her face had been provoked before breakfast, and she was deciding whether one hit would suffice.

Leon felt Erica stiffen behind him for a moment before relaxing again.

"Setanta," Art said. Her voice carried the warmth of a glacier. "You were told. Twice. This morning."

"I was told not to challenge him during the festival activities," Setanta said, rubbing his head with one hand whilst keeping his staff braced against Kanshou with the other. "He's currently just walking around. Therefore—"

"The instruction was broader than that and you know it." Art's hand remained raised, promising a second strike.

Leon dismissed Kanshou. The black blade dissolved into motes of light.

"Viscount Bartfort!" Setanta pivoted, staff spinning once before he planted it at his side like a banner pole. "A bout. Just one. The festival grounds have a ring right there—" He jabbed a thumb towards the practice yard they'd passed.

"No."

"Three minutes. Two minutes. Sixty seconds."

"No."

Setanta's expression shifted to something approximating a kicked puppy—an effect somewhat undermined by the fact that he was built like a compact siege engine and his eyes held the gleam of someone already calculating how to turn a refusal into an ambush.

Art clocked him again.

"I'll tell Durga not to come tomorrow," Ria warned, materialising at Leon's right. She'd been following the whole time.

Setanta's shoulders slumped as he acquiesced.

Leon turned to Erica, who was watching the exchange with wide-eyed bewilderment.

"He's always like that," Leon said. "I'm glad Arjuna and Karna aren't here. They'd have joined in."

"Karna and Arjuna?" Erica's brow furrowed. "They were always stoic and well-behaved."

"They're anything but. Your parents, alongside Karna and Arjuna, broke into the Partner and attacked us whilst we were on our way to the capital. As a greeting."

Erica winced.

Setanta, meanwhile, complained loudly that it was no fair that Karna and Arjuna got to have fun whilst he was stuck being disciplined.

Ria fell into step on Leon's right. Behind her, Meltryllis appeared—silent, balletic, her hips swaying with each step—and beside her walked Art, her expression settled back into its usual guarded neutrality.

"Melt," Leon said. "Any word from the others?"

"Durga's at the martial exhibition," Meltryllis said, her crystalline voice carrying a note of amusement. "She says, and I quote, 'If it involves hitting something, I'll be there in three minutes. If it involves sitting on a machine, find someone else.'" She paused. "Pollux is watching the air-bike qualifiers with Leysritt. They'll return to the host club shortly."

Leon winced at the reminder.

He pinched the bridge of his nose.

"So it's you three," he said, looking between Art, Ria, and Meltryllis. "Plus Illya, who's—"

"Sleeping," Art confirmed. "And will remain sleeping until she decides otherwise. I'm not waking her."

"Right." Leon filed that away. "The race with Lady Atlee. Three laps around the festival circuit on identical air-bikes. I need one of you to compete."

Ria's eyes lit up. Art's expression shifted by a carefully measured degree towards interest. Meltryllis simply tilted her head.

"Before that," Ria said, "could we do a preliminary race? Between ourselves?"

Leon blinked.

"All three of us," Ria clarified. "One lap. To determine who competes in the actual match." Her smile was bright and entirely guileless in a way that meant she'd already decided she was going to win. "It would only be fair."

"And entertaining," Meltryllis added.

Art said nothing. But her hand closed at her side.

"I'll need to ask Clarice first," Leon said. "Whether the track can accommodate a preliminary heat, whether it interferes with other scheduled events—"

"Of course," Ria said.

"—and whether adding a three-way guardian spirit race to the programme is going to cause a riot."

"It might increase attendance," Meltryllis observed.

"That's what I'm afraid of."

Leon turned towards the Bartfort booth. "But first, we need to find Nicks. He set up a meeting with the Wayne daughter, and I need to confirm the details before we commit to anything else today."

They walked the final stretch to the booth. The commoner families—the Muellers, the Havens, the Derwents—had done good work. The stall displayed jars of preserved fruit, wheels of sharp cheese, bundles of dried herbs, and sample bottles of the honey mead that Bartfort's relocated apiaries had begun producing in surprising quantity. A hand-painted sign read BARTFORT TERRITORY — RACHELLE BORDER in letters that wobbled slightly at the edges.

Nicks stood behind the counter, sleeves rolled to his elbows, halfway through wrapping a paper parcel of dried apricots for a customer. He looked up as Leon approached, and his expression did something complicated—gratitude warring with wariness, the stiffness of an older brother still learning what to do with the distance between them.

"Leon."

"Nicks." Leon rested his hands on the counter's edge. "Good crowd?"

"Better than expected. The mead samples are moving fast. Mrs. Mueller wants to know if we can get a second cask shipped before the festival closes." Nicks finished wrapping the parcel, handed it to the customer with a nod, and wiped his hands on a cloth. His gaze moved from Leon to Erica to the three guardian spirits arranged behind them, and his expression flickered towards something that might have been awe before he buried it.

"You mentioned a meeting," Leon said. "With Lady Wayne."

Nicks straightened. "Carla Fou Wayne. Second-year, lower academy. Her family controls shipping through the southern passages—three trade routes that connect the border territories to the capital's logistics network." He produced a folded note from his breast pocket. "She requested a meeting with you through me. Said she'd prefer a casual setting rather than formal correspondence."

"Through you specifically?"

Nicks's jaw tightened. Just barely. "She approached me at the guild board yesterday. I was looking at postings." He hesitated. "She knew who I was. Asked about you. And unfortunately, I wasn't able to refuse her when she asked for an audience."

Leon took the note, unfolded it, scanned the contents. Neat handwriting. Concise. A proposed meeting time—late afternoon, after the racing events—and a location in the academy's garden terrace.

"She's smart," Erica said quietly, reading over Leon's shoulder. "Going through your brother instead of through formal channels. It bypasses the gatekeepers—Olivia, Lady Bellefleur, myself—and establishes a personal connection before anyone can screen the approach."

"You sound impressed."

"I sound cautious. There's overlap."

Leon folded the note and slipped it into his coat pocket. "Nicks, confirm the meeting for late afternoon. But we'll have it in my quarters, not the garden terrace."

Nicks nodded.

"And Nicks—"

His brother looked at him.

"Nice booth."

Something loosened in Nicks's shoulders. The corner of his mouth lifted—not quite a smile, but close.

Leon turned from the counter, gathering his retinue with a glance. Erica settled her hood back into place. Art positioned herself at Leon's left shoulder. Ria drifted to his right. Meltryllis fell in behind, quiet and unhurried.

"Right," Leon said. "Let's find Clarice and see about this race."

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**End**

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