

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

Story Starts

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Chapter 8.3 -

The Courtesy of Wolves

The Partner's private lounge hummed with the deep vibration of engines pushing the warship at full speed toward the capital. Through the panoramic viewport, the last traces of sunset bled into indigo, and the running lights of distant merchant vessels winked like earthbound stars. Two hours out, give or take.

Leon had argued against taking the flagship. A smaller vessel, something inconspicuous—that had been his preference. Mégane had demolished that notion before he'd finished voicing it.

"Every peer in the kingdom watched your broadcast, my lord. They saw the Partner dock at the Redgrave estate. House Frampton's intelligence network probably has hull dimensions by now—and will have disseminated a threat analysis to every allied house within the week."

She'd been right. Irritatingly, persistently right.

Behind them, in the dark expanse they'd left, his father's airship followed at a respectful ten clicks behind—the vessel Leon had gifted Balcus at the start of the academy term. Nicks, Jenna, Colin, his mother. Zola had already left that first day after breakfast. Margot's own flagship, the Fleur-de-Lance, ran a parallel course further east. Staggered approaches. Three ships arriving from the same direction at the same time would look less like a social call and more like an invasion column. The Partner alone already projected enough menace to make the capital's harbour defences twitchy.

"Mmmnnh—"

The sound pulled at the edge of his concentration. He'd been tuning it out for several minutes now, his thumbs working methodically along the arch of Olivia's left foot whilst she sprawled across the settee like a cat claiming a sunbeam—though without the sun. Her shoes sat in a neat pair on the floor—Sella's doing, not Olivia's.

"—aaahh, right there—"

"Livia." Leon's voice landed flat as flagstone.

Olivia cooed at being called Livia, wriggling her toes against his palm.

"Stop making those noises."

"I'm not making noises. I'm expressing gratitude."

"You're making everyone uncomfortable."

From across the lounge, Melt had positioned herself by the viewport with her back very deliberately turned. Ria was doing stretches she didn't need to do. Art sat motionless, but the tips of her ears had gone pink. Durga appeared to be cataloguing the tea selection with intense focus, all four visible hands occupied.

Sella, naturally, watched the entire scene with the grim vigilance of a woman who had seen where this sort of thing led.

"Angie." Olivia rolled her head toward the adjacent chair where Angelica sat with a book balanced on her knee and a cup of Darjeeling going cold in its saucer. "You should get one next. He's very good with his hands."

Angelica's gaze lifted from her page. A flicker of something—curiosity, perhaps temptation—crossed her features before propriety wrestled it into submission.

"I wouldn't want to impose—"

"It's not imposing," Leon said, before he'd thought about it. He felt Olivia's foot press down against his palm—a silent, gleeful I told you so.

Angelica's lips parted.

"I would like to be next!" Mégane's voice cut across the lounge from the writing desk where she'd been reviewing logistical reports, one booted foot tapping the carpet.

Olivia's head snapped toward her. The warmth drained from her expression like water through a sieve.

"Don't jump the line, Mégane. I asked Angie first."

"You were monopolising him for twenty minutes—"

"We are his vassals and mistress candidates." Olivia lifted a finger, punctuating each word with a wag, then shot Angelica a suggestive look with a grin. "Angie is a cherished member of Leon's household. She comes before either of us."

The emphasis landed with surgical precision. Olivia turned that teasing smile on Angelica, whose cheeks coloured instantly—a blush that started at her collarbone and climbed to her ears. Everyone in this room understood what Duke Vince's wardship arrangement really meant, even if the betrothal clause had been left deliberately unwritten. A formal engagement between the duke's daughter and the baron who'd just humiliated the Crown Prince on a public broadcast would look like a power play of staggering proportions. Better to let the dust settle, let the court's memory grow hazy, and announce it quietly once the political calculus shifted.

But everyone knew.

Angelica lowered her book an inch. "Olivia, that's—I appreciate the sentiment, but you needn't frame it so—"

The deck shuddered.

Not violently—a tremor, like the ship had clipped turbulence. Except the Partner's inertial dampeners didn't permit turbulence. Leon's hands stilled on Olivia's foot. His fingers flexed once. Twice.

Luxion materialised from thin air beside Leon's shoulder, crimson optical lens burning. The AI's voice carried an edge Leon had heard precisely twice in their acquaintance—and both times something had been very wrong.

"Master. Five intruders aboard. Present location: advancing toward the bridge through the port-side service corridor."

The lounge fell silent. Olivia's leg swung off the settee. Mégane's hand found the rapier propped against her chair. Angelica closed her book with a snap that sounded like a pistol shot.

Leon was already standing.

"Guardian spirits, on me. Livia, Angie, Meg—twenty seconds behind."

He didn't wait for acknowledgement. The lounge door hissed open and Leon turned into the main corridor at speed, his boots striking the decking in measured rhythm. Kanshou and Bakuya materialised in his grip—the married blades settling into his palms like extensions of his own skeleton. Above and behind him, seven traced swords shimmered into existence, hovering in a loose constellation that tracked his movement with predatory patience.

"Luxion. How did they board without detection?"

The AI's lens kept pace beside his ear. "Their approach vector exploited a sensor gap in the ventral array. The intruders are physically small—two are guardian spirits, the remaining three are human-sized but arrived in compact power armour configurations that reduced their radar cross-section below my detection threshold." A pause that in a human would have been a breath drawn through teeth. "I will enhance the sensor mesh to account for this vector. It will not happen again."

"Their armaments?"

"The guardian spirits register significant magical output. The humans carry sidearms and bladed weapons. I detect three sets of power armour in standby configuration on the bridge itself—hatches open, recently vacated."

Leon's jaw tightened. They'd shed their armour on the bridge. Made themselves at home.

He rounded the final corner. The bridge's blast door stood forty metres ahead, sealed and dark. Behind him, the sound of rapid footsteps—Olivia's light tread, Mégane's measured stride, Angelica's armoured boots.

He held up a closed fist. The three women halted.

"The bridge has critical systems throughout. I don't want guardian spirits in there unless I call for them—too many bodies, too many things that break." He glanced back. Art, Ria, Melt, Durga, Sella, Leysritt, Illya, Britomart, and Pollux fanned out behind the three women, a wall of power compressed into the corridor. "Hold position. Come when I say."

Durga's four right hands tightened on her weapons. "Master—"

"That's an order."

She subsided. Barely.

Leon faced the door. Drew one breath. The traced swords above him fanned into an assault spread—four at head height, three at centre mass.

"Luxion. Kill the bridge lights and open the blast door simultaneously on my mark."

"Standing by."

Leon closed his eyes.

"I am the bone of my sword."

The words left his lips barely louder than an exhale, but the air pressure in the corridor changed. Mana flooded his circuits, reinforcement saturating muscle and tendon. The married blades in his hands sang with sympathetic resonance.

"Mark."

Darkness and motion.

The blast door split open and the bridge beyond plunged into black at the same instant. Leon crossed the threshold in three strides, the floating swords fanning ahead like hunting hounds. His reinforced eyes drank in the dim emergency lighting—five silhouettes, two radiating magical signatures that scorched his senses.

A blade whistled out of the dark.

Kanshou intercepted. Steel screamed against steel. The force behind the blow drove Leon's heel back half an inch—followed by two thrusts in rapid succession. Leon disengaged, pivoted, and launched three of his floating swords as another figure stepped in to intercept. The blades streaked through the air with a sound like tearing silk.

Metal clashed. Deflected. A flash of golden light illuminated a silhouette with a spear.

"Why are they here?!"

A second attacker came from his right. Leon caught the strike on Bakuya's flat, twisted, and drove an elbow into open space where the figure had already vacated. Fast. Impossibly coordinated.

Behind him, Olivia burst through the door. A gunshot cracked the silence—the report of her sidearm followed by the hiss of her degen cutting an arc through the darkness. She'd locked onto one of the three human-sized figures near the helm station and closed the distance in a heartbeat.

"Angie, left flank!"

Angelica swept in with Reiterpallasch and Reiterdegen drawn, twin gunblades wreathed in dim amber. She engaged a fourth silhouette that moved with fluid grace—parrying, retreating, testing. Mégane was half a step behind, her rapier finding the same opponent's blind side.

"I'll cover you, Angelica," Mégane said as the two rushed the other silhouette.

Leon had no time to watch them. Both guardian spirits had converged on him.

The first came in with a thrust that bent the air itself—a lance wrapped in heat that warped the emergency lighting into ripples. Leon caught it between the crossed flats of his married blades and turned it aside, feeling his arms protest the force. The second spirit circled wide and loosed an arrow of compressed darkness that cratered the deck plating where Leon had stood a fraction of a second before.

'Karna. Arjuna.'

He recognised their signatures before his eyes confirmed it. The solar warmth. The void-cold precision. He'd fought them barely a month ago on Folkvangr's shattered plateaus.

Karna pressed. A horizontal sweep that Leon ducked, the lance's trailing heat singeing the hair above his ear. Leon retaliated—sent two floating swords screaming at Arjuna to buy breathing room, then drove Kanshou at Karna's guard. The spirit deflected with an ease that was almost leisurely—savouring it.

"Even without power armour, you keep pace." Karna's voice held neither mockery nor praise. Simple observation, delivered between killing strokes.

Leon didn't answer. He was busy not dying.

An arrow grazed his shoulder—Arjuna, repositioning behind the captain's chair. Leon tracked the trajectory and launched Bakuya in a spinning throw, forcing the archer to dodge rather than draw.

"My, my, little Angie—how you've grown!" a woman's voice purred from the darkness.

Angelica froze. Her face drained of colour.

"E-Everyone—C-CEASE YOUR ACTIONS!" Angelica shouted. "Luxion, turn on the lights!"

Luxion did nothing. Angelica didn't have command authority over the AI—only Leon and Olivia did.

Then a man's voice cut through the stillness, weary and utterly unsurprised:

"Your Majesty, I *told* you this would happen."

The clashing paused. Barely. Leon's blades stayed raised. Several dozen more hovered against the ceiling, ready to fall like guillotines.

The voice rose in volume, shedding weariness for command authority honed across decades.

"All combatants stand down immediately! You are engaging His Majesty King Roland Rapha Holfort, Sovereign of the Holfort Kingdom, and Her Majesty Queen Mylene Rapha Holfort, First Consort of the Crown!"

"Luxion," Leon sighed. "Lights."

The bridge flooded with white illumination.

Leon stood at the centre of the command deck, Kanshou locked against Karna's lance, Bakuya hovering an inch from Arjuna's bow. Four traced swords hung in the air between them, frozen mid-flight.

To his left, Olivia had her construct—degen—locked against a longsword. The man holding it wore a close-fitting interface suit, the kind designed for power armour synchronisation. Blue hair dishevelled, sharp blue eyes bright, and a grin—an actual, boyish grin—splitting his face beneath a regal beard that did nothing to disguise the resemblance to his eldest son. Where Julius was youthful and bright, Roland was weathered and leonine—the same sharp jaw, the same blue eyes, but set in a face that had aged into authority. Long hair fell past his shoulders, a shade darker than his son's, streaked with the faintest threads of silver.

King Roland Rapha Holfort looked like he was having the time of his life.

To Leon's right, Angelica and Mégane had cornered a woman against the tactical display. Reiterpallasch's barrel rested against the woman's sternum whilst Mégane's rapier guarded her flank. But crimson ribbons—conjured from somewhere Leon didn't want to think about—had wound themselves around both girls during the engagement, cinched tight enough to be thoroughly compromising. Angelica's face had gone the colour of her jacket. Mégane looked like she was reconsidering every life choice that had led her to this moment.

Queen Mylene Rapha Holfort stood within the cage of their blades, utterly unperturbed. Silver-white hair fell past her waist, held back by a dark headband, framing a face of porcelain composure and startling blue-green eyes that missed nothing. She was beautiful in the way a drawn blade was beautiful—elegant, precise, and entirely capable of drawing blood. Her gaze drifted from her two captors to Leon, and something behind that composure sharpened. Not warmth. *Interest*. The kind of look that took inventory and liked what it found.

Leon dismissed his traced weapons. They dissolved into motes of light. His guardian spirits and the others peered through the bridge entrance, eyes wide with curiosity.

Olivia lowered her construct. Angelica and Mégane were finally freed from the ribbons. Neither moved. Angelica's hands trembled around Reiterpallasch's grip, her face ashen — she'd had a gunblade pressed against the Queen of Holfort's sternum. Mégane's rapier arm had dropped to her side, her jaw working without producing sound. Both were drenched in cold sweat, their knees barely holding.

Roland sheathed his longsword and rolled his shoulders with the easy satisfaction of a man who'd just scratched an itch he'd been nursing for days. He turned to Olivia and took her hand before she could react—not aggressively, but with the practised gallantry of someone who'd been charming women since before she was born.

"Miss Olivia." His eyes sparkled with guileless appreciation. "I must say—the reports did not do you justice. That swordwork, that composure, those *legs*." He kissed the back of her hand with theatrical flourish, then didn't let go. His thumb traced a slow circle across her knuckles. "You know, the Crown is always looking for exceptional individuals. If you ever tire of the baron's household—I would *personally* see to your comfort. Every night, if necessary."

His gaze dropped. Lingered. Rose again with a smile that didn't pretend to be innocent.

"And I must say—with those hips and quite the bountiful bosoms—you would give me the most beautiful and healthy of heirs."

And with that, Leon snapped—a traced dagger materialised in his hand and launched itself at the King of Holfort.

"Leon, no!"

"Leon!"

"Don't!"

A chorus of objections, but the blade was already airborne.

Mylene caught it without looking. The dagger grazed Roland's cheek before Mylene caught it—a thin line of red blooming along his jaw. Just another small scar to add to the collection. The King and Queen of Holfort were quite the infamous pair, and Roland's face told the story in faded white lines.

Mylene examined the traced dagger she'd caught, turning it between her fingers. She tested the edge with her thumb, a thin line of red welling up.

"My, my, my—the kitten has some bite in him." The Queen's gaze settled on Leon with the focused attention of a connoisseur assessing a vintage. She tucked the dagger into her belt with a proprietary smile. "I'm keeping this."

"Darling—can I keep him?" she murmured to Roland.

"Patience, dear," Roland said cheerfully, tugging his interface suit straight.

"Tomorrow first. Then we'll see who keeps whom."

"Ooh, I could play with him for a few nights." Mylene's smile widened. She looked at Leon directly—lascivious, dangerous, and entirely without shame.

"Baron, you are always welcome in the royal quarters. I'm quite certain I could teach you things that little Angie here and your future brides would *deeply* appreciate."

Angelica made a strangled sound.

"Your Majesty—" Leon began.

"Ever since Julie-poo and Jilky-poo inherited Karna and Arjuna," Mylene interjected, stretching her arms above her head with the languid satisfaction of a woman mourning a personal loss, "the quality of my bed warmers has declined terribly. I'm glad those two were so eager to join tonight's excursion." She patted Karna on the shoulder. The guardian spirit accepted this with the stoic dignity of someone who had endured far, *far* worse than combat.

Roland let go of Olivia's hand and gave Leon a taunting smile. Mylene's gaze still rested on the baron—the look of a predator, though not one that hunted for his life.

"Oh, yes—please do keep him, Mylene," Roland said, draping an arm around his wife's shoulders with the casual possessiveness of a man who'd long since stopped caring what anyone thought. "Honestly, I'd much rather you have him than go through with the plan to—"

"Honey."

"But our sweet baby Er—"

"*Ho—ney—*"

Mylene's voice was silk over steel. Roland's mouth closed, but his expression didn't concede an inch—the look of a man fighting a war he'd already lost and refusing to sign the surrender.

"She's too young," Roland muttered, just loud enough for the room to hear.

"She's just a year younger than everyone in this room except us, darling."

"She's my *baby*."

"And she'll still be your baby. Just with better political positioning." Mylene patted his cheek—the same cheek she'd let the dagger nick. "Now behave."

Roland gave Leon a look that carried an entire unspoken conversation: *I am the King of Holfort. I have fought wars, brokered treaties, and bedded more women than I can count. And this woman is the only thing in the kingdom I cannot overrule.*

He composed himself and offered Leon a smirk that dared him to ask.

"You'll understand someday, Baron. When you have daughters."

Roland offered his elbow to his wife. Mylene took it, pausing to lean up and press her lips to the thin cut on his jaw—a gesture that was somehow both tender and possessive.

"We got what we came for," the Queen declared.

"Indeed." Roland's grin hadn't wavered. He looked at Olivia one last time. "Miss Olivia—if you ever want the pleasure of breaking the royal bed, you know where to find me."

He winked. Olivia opened her mouth, closed it, and looked at Leon with an expression that said, *'Is this really happening?'*

And before Leon could launch another dozen blades at the King, Angelica seized his hand, her face pleading.

The King and Queen strode to the far side of the bridge where three sets of power armour stood open and waiting. They mounted up with practised efficiency—the interface suits clicking into the armour housings with a series of sharp mechanical snaps.

Roland sealed his helmet, raised one gauntleted fist, and punched a hole through the bridge wall.

Cabin pressure screamed. Papers, data crystals, and loose items whipped toward the breach. Leon grabbed the nearest console and braced himself as the emergency containment fields struggled to compensate.

Through the ragged opening, Roland's armoured form hovered against the night sky. His external speakers crackled.

"See you tomorrow, Baron!"

Mylene blew Leon a kiss through her visor, then rocketed after her husband. Karna and Arjuna followed without a word—two legends trailing their monarchs into the dark like obedient hounds.

Lucas Rapha Holfort stood amid the chaos, his own power armour sealed, his expression the particular blend of exhaustion and resignation that came from a lifetime of cleaning up after royalty. He turned to Leon.

"Let's have tea when school starts. You'll need it."

Then he too stepped through the breach and vanished into the night.

The drones were already patching the hull before the wind died down.

"Master." Luxion materialised at Leon's shoulder. "Permission to turn the palace into a glass wasteland."

Leon exhaled.

"Ask me in an hour, Luxion. Ask me in an hour."

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The dawn has greeted the capital.

The Partner had been docked for hours now—sprawling, ancient, and bristling with the spires of noble houses jostling for prominence against the palace's

silhouette. The royal harbour sat at the city's eastern edge, its berths arranged in concentric tiers sized for vessels ranging from single-mast couriers to full warships. The Partner occupied the outermost tier—the only berth large enough to accommodate it—and even then, its bow jutted past the docking clamps by a good fifty metres. Harbour officials clustered on the quayside, their expressions caught between professional composure and the dawning realisation that the thing casting a shadow over their morning was not, in fact, a small island.

Commoners and nobles near the harbour had woken to find the dawn strangely absent—the Partner's hull blotting out the morning sun like a second night.

Leon adjusted the cuffs of his formal jacket as they descended the gangway. No armour today. No traced weapons. The palace had been very specific in its instructions: the summoned parties would present themselves without guardian spirits. That last stipulation had provoked a fifteen-minute argument with Durga that Leon had won only by promising to bring her back something from the capital's spice market.

Olivia walked at his left in a cream-and-blue ensemble that Sella had selected and Olivia had complained about for the entire morning. Angelica flanked his right, her composure immaculate in Redgrave crimson and white—though Leon caught her adjusting her collar twice. Mégane brought up the rear, her guild coat exchanged for something more formal, her rapier conspicuously absent at Leon's insistence.

Four of them. No spirits. No weapons. Walking into the most powerful building in the kingdom.

'Better to bend than to break.'

Though irritation swelled as his gaze caught the two recently patched holes in the hull—souvenirs from last night's brigands dressed as the King and Queen.

The palace swallowed them whole.

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The throne room of Holfort Palace was built to diminish.

Vaulted ceilings soared forty metres overhead, supported by pillars of pale granite carved with the kingdom's founding myths—adventurers slaying beasts, claiming land, raising the first banners over conquered wilderness. Between the pillars, the noble houses of Holfort stood arranged in tiered ranks, their representatives dressed in house colours that turned the chamber into a mosaic of silk and resentment.

Leon estimated at least four hundred faces. Every major house had sent someone. Most had sent their head. The border nobles—those who couldn't leave their postings—had dispatched representatives or family members attached to the palace administration.

Leon spotted Balcus near the back of the gallery, flanked by Nicks and his stepsister Merce. Zola stood beside them, openly sneering in his direction. Some things, at least, were consistent.

The throne itself sat atop a raised dais at the far end—two seats, side by side, carved from the same pale stone as the pillars. Karna and Arjuna stood on either flank of the dais, motionless as statues, their presence radiating a pressure that made the air feel thick. Behind the thrones, the royal banner hung floor to ceiling: a crown atop crossed swords on a field of ivory and gold.

King Roland Rapha Holfort occupied the left throne. He wore formal court dress—deep blue with gold threading—and bore the Crown of Holfort across his brow. His beard was trimmed, his long blue hair drawn back, and his posture carried the easy authority of a man who owned every stone in the building. He looked nothing like the grinning maniac who'd punched a hole in Leon's bridge twelve hours ago.

Almost nothing. When Leon's group entered the chamber, Roland's gaze found him across the length of the room. The corner of his mouth twitched—barely, gone in a heartbeat. But Leon caught it.

'Bastard.'

Queen Mylene sat beside him, silver-white hair immaculate beneath her headband, her blue-green eyes sweeping the chamber with the detached precision of someone cataloguing every face for later use. She wore a gown of deep crimson—the same shade as her ribbons, Leon noted with a twinge of discomfort.

When her gaze reached him, it lingered. Not the predatory focus of the bridge. Something subtler—a black widow watching the caught prey, curious whether it would struggle or accept its fate.

She was twirling Leon's traced dagger between her fingers with expert ease. The same blade that had nicked her husband's cheek. The same blade she'd caught without looking and claimed as her own.

Leon didn't dare dismiss it. Traced objects were real by every standard that mattered, and making the Queen's claimed property vanish from her fingers would be an insult he couldn't afford.

To the left of the dais, Leon spotted Prince Julius and his group. Julius stood stiffly in formal dress, his blue hair combed back, his jaw set in the particular way of someone bracing for a blow they knew was coming. Marie stood beside him—blonde hair pinned up, her expression carefully neutral. Jilk. Brad. Greg. Chris. All of them dressed formally, all of them rigid. Marie's hand rested on Julius's forearm, steadying or steadied—Leon couldn't tell which.

Leon's group took their position to the right of the dais, opposite Julius's party. The arrangement was deliberate. Two groups, summoned to the same audience, placed on opposite sides of the throne. The court would read the geometry and draw conclusions.

Behind Leon, Olivia exhaled softly. "Full house."

"Don't start," Leon murmured.

"I'm just observing."

"Observe more quietly."

A herald stepped forward—a tall, thin man in palace livery whose voice had clearly been selected for its ability to fill a cathedral.

"The court recognises the presence of all summoned parties. Their Majesties will now address the matter of the incident at Folkvangr and its consequences for the Kingdom of Holfort."

The chamber fell silent. Four hundred nobles held their breath.

Roland did not stand. He simply spoke, and the room listened.

"We'll begin with the matter of Prince Julius Rapha Holfort and his retainers."

The King's gaze settled on his son. Whatever warmth existed between father and child had been locked away behind stone. This was the Sovereign addressing a subject who had embarrassed the Crown.

"Before I deliver the Crown's verdict, the founding houses will speak."

One by one, they stepped forward.

The Arclight representative—not Barret himself, Leon noted, but a stern-faced woman who shared Chris's cheekbones—announced that Christopher Fia Arclight had been demoted to knight and relegated to vassal status under the main Arclight branch.

The Sebergs followed. Greg's demotion to knight. Vassal to the main branch.

The Fields. Brad. Knight. Vassal.

Each announcement landed like a hammer blow, the chamber absorbing the sound with the hungry silence of an audience that had come for blood and was being fed, course by course.

Then the Marmorias.

The Marmoria representative—an older man with Jilk's green hair gone to grey—delivered his house's verdict with the clipped efficiency of someone excising a limb. Jilk Fia Marmoria was stripped of all noble status. Cast out. The Marmoria name would no longer shelter him.

Jilk stood motionless. His face betrayed nothing. Beside him, Marie's fingers tightened on Julius's sleeve.

"And the Palace recognises the representative of the Lafan viscounty."

Marie's family representative—a cousin, by the look of him, wearing the expression of someone handling something distasteful—announced that Marie Fou Lafan had been disowned by the Viscount's house. She would retain the name but held no affiliation, no protection, and no claim to Lafan holdings or title.

Marie didn't flinch. She'd known this was coming. Her chin lifted a fraction—the only movement she permitted herself.

The chamber murmured. Leon watched the nobles' faces—muted satisfaction, mostly. Normally these proceedings carried the particular cruelty of people glad it wasn't them. But this time the smugness was tempered. These were children of the founding houses. The families that had built Holfort were cutting away their own flesh, and everyone in the room could feel the weight of it.

Roland let the murmur die naturally. He didn't call for silence. He cast his gaze across the chamber, and each noble fell silent as the King's eye passed over them.

"The Crown acknowledges the decisions of the founding houses and the representative of House Lafan." His voice carried without effort. "Prince Julius Rapha Holfort is hereby stripped of his place in the line of succession. Permanently. He is demoted to the rank of knight."

The word landed like a stone in still water. Whispers rippled through the gallery. A prince, reduced to the lowest noble rank. Several older nobles exchanged glances that said *this hasn't happened in living memory*.

"Furthermore," Roland continued, "all territories held or acquired by the prince's party shall be subject to a punitive levy. The revenue generated by this levy will fund a programme of tax deductibles for those noble houses that suffered financial losses during the Folkvangr wagering. Claimants may recover up to half of their documented losses, distributed over a period of three years."

The murmuring shifted. Leon could see the arithmetic happening behind four hundred pairs of eyes—nobles who'd lost fortunes suddenly calculating how much they might claw back, and from whose pockets.

"The prince and his retainers are hereby posted to the Principality border, under the jurisdiction of the Arclight Marquessate and the direct oversight of Sword Saint Barret Fia Arclight."

Roland paused. His gaze moved across the chamber slowly.

"The Kingdom of Holfort was founded by adventurers. In this kingdom, rank can be inherited, but rank can also be earned. The path to advancement remains open to all who serve with merit and distinction."

He let that settle.

"However, during the interim, the Adventurer's Guild has brought certain recent activities to the Crown's attention. It is noted that the former crown prince's party has not been idle. During the academy recess, they undertook independent expeditions resulting in the acquisition of three floating islands—two containing dungeon instances—and the recovery of a Lost Item: a fortress-class barrier generator."

A fresh ripple of surprise moved through the gallery. Leon saw several nobles lean forward.

"In accordance with Holfort's meritocratic traditions, the Crown recognises this service. Those holding the rank of knight are elevated to baronet. Jilk, formerly of House Marmorina, is elevated from commoner to knight."

Roland's tone made clear that this was not generosity. This was the system working as designed. You fall, you climb. Holfort's way.

"Additionally—" Roland glanced briefly at Marie. "The Crown grants Marie Fou Lafan's petition to accept Jilk as her attendant and vassal."

Marie bowed. Short, precise, the motion of someone who had practised this and was determined not to waste a single gesture.

The verdicts of the founding houses were in. The prince's party had been broken, scattered, taxed, and posted to a hostile border. And then, because Holfort was Holfort, they'd been given the barest tools to build themselves back up.

Which also meant they'd be dropped to the academy's second class. Leon could see Julius's jaw tighten at that—a prince sitting with the lower-ranked students. The small humiliations sometimes cut deeper than the large ones.

"This shall be your vigil. It has no set end."

Roland let that land before continuing.

"Your academy obligations do not excuse you from your border responsibilities. Now—the matter of your inherited guardian spirits." His tone sharpened. "The ritual of inheritance, once performed, lies dormant for half a century before it can be invoked again. Your founding houses cannot reclaim what was given. The spirits remain with you."

A beat.

"However, as those spirits were entrusted by the founding houses, an additional levy shall be imposed—paid by each of you to your respective houses as compensation for the continued use of their hereditary spirits. Once

the fifty-year dormancy has concluded, your houses may enter negotiations for an extension or reclamation of the inheritance."

Roland's gaze moved to Marie.

"As Baronet Marie Fou Lafan has claimed Jilk as her vassal, the levy for Arjuna's inheritance shall fall to her."

Leon could see Marie wince at that.

"Now, are there any objections?" The King addressed his subjects.

The silence that followed was telling. Even the nobles who'd been preparing to voice outrage thought better of it as the stone faces of the founding families and the royal couple swept the gallery.

Leon understood the calculus. The founding houses had arranged for children born around the same time as Julius—future retainers, future allies, the next generation of ties binding the great families to the Crown. Chris, Greg, Brad, Jilk—each one a carefully positioned piece in a generational chess game that had taken decades to construct.

And they'd all thrown it away for a girl.

The founding houses had punished their own children publicly, in front of the entire court. No noble in this room could object without implying that their house held itself to a lesser standard. The precedent was set. The message was clear.

Leon glanced toward the gallery. If he didn't hold his own barony, he had no doubt Zola would have jumped at the chance to publicly disown him as well.

Roland's gaze settled on his son. "Do you accept the Crown's verdict?"

Julius stepped forward. His back was straight, his voice steady—whatever this cost him, he would not let the court see it.

"I accept, Your Majesty. Without reservation."

He stepped back. One by one, the others followed.

Chris was first. He bowed—crisp, military, the motion of someone who'd grown up watching his father do the same. "I accept." No hesitation. He was returning to Arclight territory. To his father's border. Leon wondered how that conversation would go.

Greg stepped forward with the heavy grace of a brawler forced into formal shoes. "I accept." Two words, bitten off clean. He didn't elaborate. Greg had never been one for speeches.

Brad bowed quietly. "I accept." His voice barely carried. Of the group, he'd always been the least visible—the one who followed rather than led. But he followed without complaint, and there was something to be said for that.

Jilk's turn. He had no house to bow for, no name to invoke. He stepped forward as a commoner—stripped of everything but the clothes on his back and the spirit he couldn't return. His bow was deeper than the others. It had to be.

"I accept."

Marie was last.

She stepped forward, and something in her bearing shifted. It was subtle—a straightening of the spine, a lift of the chin, a settling of weight into her stance that hadn't been there a moment ago. Not the careful neutrality she'd worn throughout the proceedings. Something older. A glint in her eye that wasn't there before.

"I accept the Crown's verdict," she said. Her voice carried further than it needed to—clear, unhesitating, pitched to reach the last row of the gallery. "And we will hold each other to account. Every one of us. Whatever debts we owe, we will repay through our own hands. That is my promise—not as a baronet, but as the person responsible for the people standing beside me. We shall defend your borders with all we have. And what we've broken—we intend to earn back."

The chamber was quiet. Not the hostile quiet of before. Something more uncertain—the silence of people recalibrating an assessment they'd already made.

Though the Queen cast a curious gaze at that declaration. "See that you do."

Leon watched her. For a moment—just a fraction of a second—something about Marie Fou Lafan's bearing tugged at a place in his memory he couldn't reach. A familiarity he had no framework for.

Then the moment passed, and Marie stepped back into line beside Julius, her expression carefully neutral once more.

"Now," the Queen said, and the chamber's attention shifted like a blade turning. "The matter of Baron Leon Fou Bartfort and Angelica Rapha Redgrave."

The herald stepped forward. "The Redgrave Dukedom wishes to address the court."

Vince Rapha Redgrave rose. His countenance was granite—solid, unhurried, without a trace of doubt.

"Angelica Rapha Redgrave shall be reduced to the rank of baronetess, holding a minor house created under the Redgrave banner. She shall serve as vassal to the Dukedom."

Leon straightened. Beside him, Olivia went still. They already knew what would happen.

Mylene's blue-green eyes found his across the length of the throne room.

Murmurs travelled across the throne room. Angelica's reduction wasn't equal to the prince and his entourage, but then again, she was the aggrieved party. She'd only challenged Marie—it wasn't her fault the prince and his cohorts had jumped in to escalate things.

"Before we address the Baron's circumstances," she said, her voice carrying the same effortless authority as her husband's, silencing the crowd, "the Crown wishes to announce a matter of fiscal policy."

She paused—the practised pause of a woman who understood the value of silence.

"The Crown has recently received a substantial financial contribution intended for the betterment of the kingdom. Two hundred million dia."

Leon didn't react, but the value of platinum, gold, and jewellery he had brought to the Redgraves was two hundred and fifty million dia—he had kept more than fifty million, as his total winnings were a figure that started with a three and ran to nine digits. Less a sum of money and more a serial number.

'So the Redgraves, the palace, or both pocketed the remaining fifty million.'

The number landed like a cannon shot. The murmuring didn't just stop—it evaporated. Four hundred nobles stared at the Queen, then at each other, then—inevitably—at the white-haired viscount standing to the right of the dais.

Mylene didn't look at Leon. She didn't need to.

"The specifics of the donor shall remain confidential." Her tone made clear that this was a courtesy, not a mystery. "These funds will be established as a standing investment pool, available to nobles, merchants, and commoners who present viable proposals for economic development. All applications will be subject to due diligence, projected returns, and Crown oversight."

She let the arithmetic settle behind four hundred pairs of eyes before continuing.

"The return on investment is subject to an annuity programme that depends on your proposal. Returns generated by the pool belong to the Crown and are not eligible for offset against the earlier-announced tax-deductible programme. The pool will be replenished through these returns and further contributions, creating a self-sustaining engine of growth for the kingdom."

Leon ran the numbers in his head. The only real winners were the Crown. The tax-deductible programme looked magnanimous—until you realised it was funded entirely by Julius's group. The palace hadn't spent a single dia of its own. And now they held two hundred million in capital, loaned out to nobles who'd come crawling for funding, tying half the kingdom to the Crown as debtors.

The Redgraves got their cut. The palace got its cut. The nobles got the illusion of recovery. And Julius's party got to pay for all of it from a hostile border posting.

'Well, there's one other winner—the bookies,' Leon thought.

Leon kept his expression neutral. Olivia's hand brushed his—brief, grounding.

"Now." Mylene's gaze settled on Leon directly. "To the matter at hand."

She produced a document—or rather, a herald produced it for her, presenting it on a velvet cushion with the reverence usually reserved for holy relics.

"During the previous academic term, Baron Bartfort and his vassal-knight submitted a research thesis to the Crown and the Redgrave Dukedom concerning the degradation of dungeon productivity across the kingdom. The thesis proposed that dungeons situated at higher altitudes had experienced diminished output over generations, and that relocating them closer to the planetary surface would trigger a rehabilitation cycle—restoring both material yields and, critically, guardian spirit production."

The chamber was silent now. Not the hungry silence of earlier. Something more attentive.

"The Crown, through the Atlees' guidance and in partnership with the Redgrave Dukedom, conducted trials based on this research. The results have been..." She permitted herself the faintest smile. "Promising. A dungeon that had not produced a guardian spirit in over a decade generated one within months of altitude adjustment. The implications for the kingdom's long-term military and economic capacity are significant."

She let that sink in.

"In recognition of this contribution—and in acknowledgement that the vassal-knight Olivia has, for the second time, waived all claims to rank advancement arising from joint endeavours—the Crown promotes Leon Fou Bartfort to the rank of Upper Fifth Viscount, with a formal path to Earldom contingent on continued service."

The murmur that followed was different from the ones before. Not anger. Not satisfaction. Calculation. Four hundred nobles recalibrating their assessment of the white-haired baron who'd gone from academy upstart to Viscount in a single term.

"As contributors to this breakthrough, the Crown recognises House Atlee and House Redgrave. House Atlee, who facilitated the trials and whose guidance proved integral to the results, shall ascend to the rank of Lower Earl."

A murmur rippled through the gallery—surprised but not unwelcoming. The Atlees were better known for their dominance on the racing circuit than for academic pursuits, but the same obsessive engineering that produced the fastest bikes in the kingdom had apparently found a more consequential application. That they'd stumbled into a breakthrough of this magnitude was, if anything, entirely in character.

"House Redgrave has waived all claim to commendation."

The murmur died. Four hundred nobles processed the implications of a ducal house declining a royal commendation. That didn't happen. Dukes collected power—they didn't refuse it.

"Instead, they have credited their vassal, Baronetess Angelica Rapha Redgrave, as the driving force behind the partnership." Mylene's gaze found Angelica. "She shall ascend to the rank of Baroness."

The silence broke into three distinct currents. The first was confusion—nobles exchanging glances, unsure whether the Redgraves had just committed an act of extraordinary generosity or an incomprehensible blunder. The second

was grudging respect from the older houses, who recognised the move for what it was: Vince Rapha Redgrave ensuring his daughter's standing without spending a single coin of political capital. He'd turned a punishment into an elevation in a single session, and made it look like someone else's idea.

The third current—quieter, more dangerous—was the recalculation happening behind the eyes of every house with a marriageable daughter. The baronetess they'd dismissed as a disgraced duke's castoff had just been promoted in open court on the strength of a kingdom-shaking research contribution. She was no longer a piece in someone else's game. She was a player.

Leon felt Angelica go rigid beside him. Her composure held—years of Redgrave training ensured that—but her breathing had changed. Shorter. Faster. She hadn't known.

On the far side of the dais, Leon caught Vince's expression. The Duke hadn't moved. Hadn't reacted. But the faintest crease at the corner of his mouth suggested that everything—every single piece of this—had gone exactly as planned.

But Leon didn't relax; that was the carrot—quite the significant carrot—he was waiting for the noose to tighten.

'Now here comes the stick.'

"Additionally," Roland said, leaning forward with his hands clasped, hiding a grin that Leon could still read from the creases around his eyes, picking up from his wife with the seamless timing of a couple who'd been doing this for decades, "the Crown has determined that the defence of the Rachele border requires reinforcement."

Leon felt the shift in the room. The Rachele border. Every noble knew what those words meant.

"The Fraser Marquessate has defended this border with distinction for generations," Roland continued. "The Crown acknowledges their service and their sacrifice. Effective immediately, the Fraser territory will be relocated

behind the Bartfort holdings, transitioning to a support and reserve role in the interim—later to be relocated to our kingdom's bosom. Their long vigil is ended."

Somewhere in the gallery, Leon heard what might have been a muffled sob. The Fraser representative, perhaps. Or someone who understood what those words meant to a family that had bled for generations on the kingdom's most dangerous frontier.

"Let us all stand in applause for the generational contribution the Fraser Marquessate has given to the kingdom." Roland rose from his throne and extended his arms, and the gallery followed—four hundred nobles rising in a wave of rustling silk and clattering chairs.

The applause faded. Roland remained standing.

"Viscount Bartfort will assume primary responsibility for the Rachele border."

The chamber held its breath.

Roland's gaze found Leon across the throne room. The grin was gone. In its place was something that, to anyone watching, looked remarkably like sincerity.

"The Crown has every confidence in you, Viscount Bartfort." He paused. "Every confidence."

The words were warm. The repetition was not.

There it was. The stick. Wrapped in the velvet of a promotion, disguised beneath the language of honour and service, but unmistakable to anyone who understood the assignment. The Rachele border—where the Holy Kingdom of Rachele deployed Empire-backed demonic suits, where every Head of House Fraser had developed ulcers from the unrelenting pressure, where the kingdom sent people it wanted to use up.

The Frasers had guarded the Rachele border for five generations—a posting that had begun as punishment for a scandal so old that no one could

remember the specifics, only the sentence. What everyone did remember were the results. Marquis Elijah Rapha Fraser was the fifth consecutive Head of House to develop chronic ulcers before the age of forty. His father had died of a stress-induced stroke at fifty-three. His grandfather had lost all his hair by thirty and spent his final decade unable to sleep without medication. The Rachele border didn't kill the Frasers outright—it hollowed them out, year by year, generation by generation, until what remained was a family of gaunt-faced, iron-willed defenders who'd long since stopped asking when their vigil would end.

The palace provided reinforcements. The King and Queen had personally deployed to the border on multiple occasions. But the daily burden—the constant probing raids, the Empire-backed demonic suits that screamed across the frontier like metal locusts, the knowledge that every dawn might bring a full incursion—that weight fell on the Frasers alone.

And now it would fall on Leon.

'The public reads punishment. The inner circle reads a chess move. And I read both.'

"Guild Master Margot Fou Bellefleur and the Bellefleur territory will accompany the Bartfort holdings in this transition," Roland added, almost as an afterthought—though nothing Roland said in a throne room was an afterthought. "The Crown is confident that two of the kingdom's finest will serve the border well."

Two of the Big Four. One on the Principality border. One on the Rachele border. Roland had just fortified both frontiers in a single session, whilst making it look like punishment and reward, respectively.

A scoff cut through the settling murmur. Marquis Frampton.

"The Crown recognises Marquis Frampton," the herald announced.

The man who stepped forward was lean and weathered, dressed in charcoal silk. Deep lines carved his face like old battle scars, and sharp eyes glinted

beneath heavy brows with the predatory patience of a man who'd been scheming since before Leon was born. A pointed beard and waxed moustache framed a mouth that seemed built for sneering.

"The Crown's generosity toward this... baron... is noted." Frampton's lip curled around the title. "However, I must voice my concern—and the concern of several allied houses—that a single viscount, however recently promoted, should retain possession of military assets far exceeding his station."

He swept a hand toward Leon.

"A seven-hundred-metre warship. Multiple sets of unique and strong power armour. A Lost Item of old-human origin. And guardian spirits of considerable power." His voice rose, playing to the gallery. "These assets represent a concentration of military capability in the hands of one man that this kingdom has not seen since the Founding. I propose that, in the interest of the kingdom's stability, these assets be seized and redistributed among the houses that have long supported the Crown."

His allies in the gallery murmured their assent—a rehearsed chorus of agreement that rippled through the ranks.

Leon said nothing. He watched the Queen.

Mylene regarded Frampton the way one might regard a fly that had landed on a dessert plate.

"An interesting proposal, Marquis." Her voice was pleasant. Conversational. The tone of a woman sharpening a knife. "You suggest we strip the Viscount of his military assets before sending him to defend the kingdom's most dangerous border."

"The assets could be operated by—"

"By whom, Marquis?" Mylene tilted her head. "The Rachele border faces Empire-backed forces deploying demonic suits. The Fraser family held that line for five generations—a burden that would have crushed any lesser

house." She paused. "Who among your allied houses would you nominate to take Viscount Bartfort's place?"

Silence.

"Perhaps you'd like to volunteer House Frampton for the Rachele vigil? I'm certain the Crown could accommodate the transfer."

Frampton's ruddy complexion deepened several shades. "That's—I wasn't suggesting—"

"No," Mylene agreed. "You weren't."

Roland leaned forward in his throne. His expression had shed every trace of court formality.

"Marquis, if you want to volunteer your house for the Rachele border, I'll have the paperwork drawn up before lunch."

Frampton's mouth opened. Closed. He retreated into the ranks of his allies, none of whom seemed eager to meet his eye.

The matter was closed.

Roland settled back. "Are there any further objections?"

The throne room answered with silence.

"Then the court is dismissed. The affected parties will remain."

The gallery began to empty. Four hundred nobles filtered toward the exits, their whispered conversations blending into a low roar that faded as the great doors closed behind them.

The throne room shrank to its principals.

Leon nodded at Balcus and Nicks as they exited the throne room. His father's expression was severe—more than Leon had expected.

Leon could also see Zola's face, which was quite sour, as if she didn't know whether to find what had happened something to be happy about or to be angry about. After all, Zola's original arrangement would have sent Leon to the Rachele frontier while she—his significantly older, wedded wife—collected his earnings from the comfort of the capital. Now the frontier was real, but Leon was no longer hers to leech from.

Leon. Olivia. Angelica. Mégane.

Julius. Marie. Jilk. Brad. Greg. Chris.

Duke Vince Rapha Redgrave and Gilbert, who had materialised from somewhere in the gallery with the quiet efficiency of people who'd been waiting for exactly this moment.

And on the dais, the King and Queen of Holfort, with Karna and Arjuna at their flanks.

The doors sealed. The echoes died.

Mylene uncrossed her legs, leaned forward, and smiled.

"Now then. Let's talk properly."

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The silence that followed the court's departure was a different creature entirely from the one that had preceded it. The public silence had been performative—hundreds of nobles holding their tongues whilst their eyes screamed. This silence was intimate. Dangerous. The silence of a family about to have a conversation they couldn't have in front of guests.

Mylene descended from the dais. She didn't rush. Each step was measured, deliberate, her crimson gown slit high to the waist, revealing a slender, toned leg with each stride. The dress trailed behind her across the polished stone. Roland remained seated, one leg crossed over the other, his crown slightly

askew in a way that was almost certainly deliberate—the image of a king who'd shed formality the moment the doors closed.

She didn't stop before Julius. She walked past him—past Marie, past Jilk—and settled herself against Leon, one elbow on his shoulder, her head tilting to rest against it with the casual possessiveness of a cat claiming a warm surface.

She smelled of smoke and spice layered over something floral. The combination was deliberate—everything about Mylene was deliberate.

Both Julius and Olivia stiffened, but Angelica immediately seized Olivia's arm, preventing her from reacting.

No one stopped Julius.

"Mother!"

The prince looked apoplectic. Marie remained at his side, her hand no longer on his sleeve—she'd withdrawn it the moment the doors sealed, as though physical contact might be held against them in this smaller, more dangerous court. But now she was tracing circles on his back with her hand, trying to calm him down.

"Julie-poo."

Julius flinched. Actually flinched. The nickname landed like a slap in the confined space.

"Mother, I—"

"I'm not finished." Mylene's voice was soft. Worse than shouting. She released Leon's shoulder and turned her full attention on her son, which somehow made the softness more dangerous.

Julius opened his mouth to protest further.

"Oh, you will keep quiet for a bit, Julie-poo."

The tone was light. The warning beneath it was not. Julius stiffened and closed his mouth.

Leon glanced at Roland to see if any of this was a problem for the King. Roland looked bored. The Redgraves—Angelica included—merely sighed, as though this were a performance they'd sat through before.

Mylene let the silence settle, then began.

"We arranged a bride for you. A Redgrave. The backing of the most powerful ducal house in the kingdom, secured through a betrothal that took your father and me three years to negotiate." She paused. "Three years, Julius. Do you know how many state dinners were involved? How many concessions your father made to Duke Vince? How many letters I wrote to Angelica's mother?"

Julius said nothing. His throat worked.

"Yes—and not to mention subjecting poor young Angelica to your mother's whims for training." Roland shot from the throne.

Mylene just grinned and waved the barb away.

"You could have had everything. The throne. The backing of the founding families and the Redgraves. And if you'd simply exercised the barest minimum of discretion—" Her gaze flicked to Marie, then back. "You could have had Marie as well. A consort. A companion. No one would have objected, least of all Angelica, who understood perfectly well how these arrangements work."

Angelica's expression remained carefully blank. Leon caught the faintest tension in her jaw.

"Instead," Mylene continued, "you declared your freedom in front of the entire kingdom, humiliated the Duke's daughter on a public broadcast, and rallied five retainers and their guardian spirits against her when she dared to protest. And what's worse—you lost." The softness in her voice had hardened to something brittle. "You didn't just embarrass yourself, Julius. You embarrassed

the Crown. You embarrassed this family. And you handed every hostile power on our borders a propaganda victory that will take a generation to undo."

She turned to Jilk.

"And you, Jilky-poo."

Jilk's composure cracked. Just barely—a tightening around the eyes, a slight pallor.

"You were his foster brother. His closest confidant. The one person in that group who should have pulled him aside and said no." Mylene's voice dropped further. "That was your role. That was why we placed you beside him. And you failed."

Jilk bowed his head. "Yes, Your Majesty."

"Don't 'Your Majesty' me in private, Jilk. You've known me since you were five years old." Something flickered behind her composure—genuine disappointment, quickly mastered. "I expected better."

"And after all that, when the palace called for you to explain, you went gallivanting off on adventures." Mylene's lip curled. "At least this time you have something to show for it."

She looked at her son for a long moment. The political mask slipped—just for a breath—and what was underneath wasn't anger. It was something worse.

"I used to tell people that my son would be a great king." Her voice was quiet. Almost conversational. "I told the Redgraves. I told the founding families. I taunted the ambassadors from Rachele and the Principality, who would have loved nothing more than to see our succession falter." She paused. "I told them with absolute conviction, Julius. Because I believed it."

Julius's composure broke. Not dramatically—not a sob or a shout. His eyes reddened. His jaw trembled once before he locked it shut. Marie's hand pressed flat against his back.

"You will earn that belief back," Mylene said. "Or you won't. That is no longer my decision."

She turned away from her son. The Queen was back. The mother was gone.

Roland spoke from the throne. His tone was deceptively casual, but his knuckles were white against the armrest.

"You've all heard your sentences. You know where you're going and what's expected. I won't repeat it." He uncrossed his legs and leaned forward, elbows on his knees. "Your mother and I have no qualms about who you choose as a partner—after all, we've treated our own kingdom as our personal buffet." He gestured loosely between himself and Mylene. "We've certainly toed the line. Burnt bridges. Soured relationships. But we knew the cost, and we paid it." His expression hardened. "What you did wasn't bold, Julius. It was just idiotic."

"The Principality border is not a holiday. Barret will work you until you bleed, and then he'll work you some more. There will be no relief from that posting until someone replaces you. And it may take generations."

His gaze lingered on Julius. The casual mask cracked—just for an instant.

"Don't make me regret giving you this chance, son."

"Yes, Father." Julius's voice was steady, but the steadiness cost him everything he had.

"Good." Roland sat back. The hardness in his bearing shifted—not softened, but redirected. He glanced at his wife.

Mylene nodded, almost imperceptibly.

"There is one more matter," she said, and her tone changed entirely. Lighter. The shift was so abrupt that Leon felt whiplash. "A personal one."

She turned toward the side of the dais.

"Erica, darling. Come forward."

A figure stepped from behind the far pillar—slender, quiet, moving with the careful precision of someone who preferred not to be noticed. She wore a hooded cloak of muted grey-blue, the hood drawn up to shadow her features. The fabric pooled around her shoulders in a way that obscured her silhouette, and her steps made almost no sound against the stone.

Something stirred in the back of Leon's mind. Not recognition—nothing so clear as that. A sensation, faint as a half-remembered dream. A hooded figure, glimpsed briefly at the periphery of another life. A quiet presence standing behind a man with tired eyes and a cigar—

But the moment he reached for the memory, it burst—a bubble of smoke with nothing inside. All that remained was the faint certainty that there had been something to remember.

The hooded figure stopped before the dais and bowed. A strand of silver-white hair slipped free from the hood.

"Mother. Father." Her voice was low, measured. Formal in a way that suggested habit rather than affection.

"Everyone," Mylene said, her smile widening in a way that made Leon's instincts prickle, "this is our daughter. Princess Erica Rapha Holfort."

Julius stepped forward immediately. "Mother, whatever you're planning—"

"Hush, Julie-poo."

"Don't call me that in front of—Mother, you can't seriously be—"

"I said hush."

Julius hushed.

Mylene turned to Leon. That look was back—the one from the bridge, the one from the throne. Inventory. Interest. The satisfaction of a plan coming together.

"Erica has served on the Fraser border for the past two years, assisting with defence operations and administrative coordination. She is, by all accounts,

exceptionally capable." Mylene's hand came to rest on her daughter's shoulder. Erica didn't move—didn't lean into it, didn't pull away. Simply endured it with the stoic patience of someone well-practised at enduring maternal contact. "With the Frasers transitioning to a support role, Erica requires a new posting."

Leon could feel it coming. The way the air pressure shifted before a storm.

"I would like you to accept her as your steward, Viscount Bartfort."

The word steward sat in the air between them. Everyone in the room understood what it meant. Everyone understood what it would become, given time and political convenience.

Leon didn't answer immediately. His eyes moved to Duke Vince.

The Duke stood with his arms crossed, Gilbert at his shoulder. His expression was unreadable—or rather, it was readable if you knew the language: the slight relaxation around his eyes, the absence of tension in his jaw. He'd expected this. Of course he had. Vince Rapha Redgrave hadn't survived three decades of ducal politics by being surprised in throne rooms.

The calculation was simple. The palace was staking its own claim on Leon's household—a princess, placed as steward, with the unspoken trajectory toward something more. The Redgraves' Angelica clause still held. Any future arrangement had to account for Angelica's position. Erica's presence didn't threaten that—it reinforced it. Now both the Crown and the Dukedom had a permanent stake in Leon's success. Neither could undermine him without undermining their own investment.

Vince shrugged. One shoulder. The most eloquent shrug Leon had ever witnessed.

'Do what you will. I've already accounted for this.'

Leon turned back to the Queen.

"I accept, Your Majesty." He paused, then looked directly at the hooded princess. She hadn't raised her head since the introduction—her face still half-shadowed, her posture rigid with the particular discomfort of someone who wanted very much to be anywhere else.

"Princess Erica."

She looked up. Blue eyes met his from beneath the hood's shadow—cautious, guarded, searching for the catch.

"I swear to you that your safety, your dignity, and your place in my household will be protected. You have my word—not as a viscount, but as a person."

The blush that crept across Erica's visible features was immediate and devastating. She pulled her hood down further—a reflexive motion that hid everything below her eyes. Her fingers clutched the fabric's edge with white-knuckle intensity.

"I—that is—" Her voice, so measured moments ago, had fractured into something small and flustered. "Thank you, Viscount. That is... most... I accept."

She bowed so quickly she nearly overbalanced.

"THAT'S MY BABY GIRL YOU'RE—" Roland was halfway out of his throne before Mylene's ribbon tendrils pulled him back down with a force that belied her slender frame.

"Darling. We discussed this."

"I didn't agree to him being—" Roland gestured wildly at Leon. "—*that*. With the eyes and the—who says things like that?! In front of her father?!"

"You proposed to your third consort during a state funeral," Mylene said evenly. "You have no ground to stand on."

Roland's mouth worked. He pointed at Leon. "I'm watching you, Bartfort."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

"Every. Single. Day."

"Understood, Your Majesty."

"Father, please." Erica's voice emerged from beneath her hood, muffled but carrying a note of mortification that transcended all barriers of cloth and composure. "You're making this worse."

"I haven't even begun to make this worse—"

"Roland." Mylene's hand tightened on his shoulder. The King subsided, but his glare remained fixed on Leon with the searing intensity of a man who had just watched a stranger make his daughter blush and would never, ever forgive it.

Julius, for his part, had gone through several stages of reaction—outrage, disbelief, and something that looked suspiciously like sympathy directed at Leon. He caught the baron's eye across the room.

For the first and possibly only time in their lives, prince and baron shared a moment of perfect understanding.

'Welcome to the family,' Julius's expression said. *'It's awful.'*

Mylene released Roland's shoulder and smoothed her gown as though nothing had happened.

"Wonderful. Now that that's settled—" She again stepped into Leon's personal space. Too close. Her perfume reached him—something floral, layered over something warmer. She tilted her head and studied his face with open appreciation.

"You know, Baron, the offer regarding the royal quarters still stands." Her voice dropped half a register. "Give me a month and I'll make sure Angie and Erica's first time is qui—"

"Mother!" Erica's voice cracked from beneath the hood.

"Mother, stop!" Julius added.

Roland's knuckles had gone white on the armrest.

"Leon, how dare you plan on taking my pure daughter's inno—"

"Father!"

"But baby!"

Leon looked at the ceiling. The founding myths carved into the stone pillars offered no guidance for this particular situation.

"Your Majesty," he said carefully, "I believe we have border logistics to discuss."

Mylene laughed—a genuine sound, bright and unguarded, that briefly stripped away the predator and revealed the woman underneath. She patted Leon's cheek.

"You'll learn, Viscount. They all resist at first."

She returned to the dais, settled beside her husband, and crossed her legs.

"Now. About that border."

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End

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