

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

Story Starts

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**Chapter 10.4 -
Of Pre-Mature Story Progressions
and Wagers**

(Durga Interlude)

Early this morning...

Durga opened her eyes to a familiar ceiling.

The plaster was plain, off-white, unmarked. Academy standard. She'd memorised every hairline crack across its surface over the past months, the way the early light caught the grain where two sections of render met unevenly. A small comfort, that ceiling. It meant she was here, in this place, alive and present and real—or as real as something like her could claim to be.

She turned her head. The guardian spirits' quarters occupied the room adjacent to Leon's bedroom, accessible through a connecting door he kept unlocked. Four beds arranged in pairs, a long dresser against the far wall, a window that caught the eastern light. Meltryllis had taken the bed opposite, her slight frame curled beneath the sheets with the stillness of deep water settling into a basin. Ria occupied the bed to Durga's left, one arm draped over the mattress edge, fingers twitching against nothing. Art was missing—she had a habit of inserting herself into Leon's bed in the early mornings just to observe him.

The rotation had been disrupted last night. It should have been her turn and Meltryllis's to sleep beside Leon. Instead, Angelica and Olivia had claimed the privilege, apparently convincing themselves through some alcohol-fuelled logic that they are going to massage a sleeping Leon and that they are owed

something reciprocal before passing out. Durga could only shake her head. She'd simply retreated here, shed her festival clothes, and let sleep take her.

She sat up. The sheets pooled around her waist. Her hands—ten fingers, all present, all hers—rested against the cotton. She flexed them slowly, watching the tendons move beneath fair skin.

Hands. Her base form only had the two, but she could summon the remaining eight with a thought.

The form she wore in combat carried ten arms. Twin talwars, khanda, urumi, parasu, dhal, trishul, gada, katar, bagh nakh—a weapon for every limb, a limb for every weapon. That configuration drew from the concept she embodied, the martial aspect of the goddess whose memory shaped her existence. But here, in the quiet of a dormitory room at dawn, she maintained her resting form. Two arms. Two hands. A face framed by silver-white hair that fell past her shoulders in loose waves. Blood-red eyes beneath silver-white brows, and features that belonged to someone else entirely.

She knew whose face this was.

The bonding. That was where it began.

When a guardian spirit connected with a contractor—truly connected—the process operated on principles she could perceive but not articulate. A sympathetic resonance between souls. Compatible frequencies, whether through complement or reflection. The mechanics of how it worked, the system that governed it, the origin of the imprints themselves—all of it sat behind a wall in her awareness. Locked. Not hidden, because she knew it was there, but sealed in a way that made pursuit of the knowledge feel like pressing against stone with bare fingertips.

She didn't know what she was. Not truly. None of them did. Guardian spirits wore the shapes of gods and heroes and legendary figures, carried fragments of their deeds and dispositions, but Durga was not the goddess Durga. She was an imprint. A memory given form and will and the capacity to care about things. Whether some older mechanism had once summoned these echoes of

myth into being—whether the dungeons themselves had absorbed a prior system as this battered planet dragged itself back from whatever cataclysm had reshaped it—remained beyond her reach to know.

And she didn't care. Not about the metaphysics. Not about the origin.

She cared about him.

She'd first perceived Leon Bartfort—Shirou Emiya, in the truest sense of the name, though the world would never know it—during his descent into the Terran Dungeon. He'd already bonded with Meltryllis by then, the two of them pushing deeper into its chambers. A single contractor with a single guardian spirit, moving through a field of monsters, descending into a cave until they reached the next floor.

What caught her attention was the blades.

Not the physical act of fighting, though his technique was precise and brutal and bore the weight of experience far beyond his years. It was the conjuration. The moment his circuits fired and steel materialised from nothing—curved edges, straight spines, paired weapons that sang in complementary tones—something in Durga's core had vibrated like a struck bell. His martial aspect, the way he channelled creation into destruction with the economy of a craftsman who understood the cost of every stroke, resonated so perfectly with the warrior concept she embodied that the bond had formed almost involuntarily.

She'd wanted to reach him. And the dungeon, whatever intelligence governed its depths, had permitted it.

When he stood before her altar and the connection finalised, the full weight of his memories flowed through the sympathetic link like water breaching a dam.

Durga pressed her palms flat against her thighs and breathed.

Two lifetimes. Technically more, if one counted the paradox—the deal struck with a force that sat beyond human comprehension, the version of himself that

had become something he despised. An existence twisted into service, ideals that once burned white-hot bent into instruments of slaughter across an eternity he hadn't personally endured but carried nonetheless. She'd seen it through his eyes, felt the weight of that other self's bitterness settle across her awareness like ash. It was him. It was not him. Both statements held equal truth, and the contradiction had carved grooves into his soul that would never fully smooth.

But the life he'd actually lived—the one before this world—was worse, because it was his.

It had been short and bright and full of a boy's conviction that saving people was worth any price. The war that followed stripped that conviction down to sinew and bone. A cursed artefact—she couldn't name it; the prohibition clamped down on specifics with mechanical precision—had taken everything. The friends turned companions turned lovers, the women he—

Durga stopped herself. Drew another breath.

The prohibition wasn't Leon's doing. He'd never ordered his guardian spirits to silence. Whatever force governed the rules of their existence had woven this particular restriction into their being. She couldn't speak of his past lives. Couldn't whisper it, write it, gesture towards it, or hint at it through implication. The knowledge sat in her chest like a coal that would burn forever without consuming itself, and no amount of will could force it past her lips. She'd tested the boundary once, alone, speaking to an empty room. The words had died in her throat before the first syllable formed.

'Far greater than any order he could give.'

So she carried it in silence. They all did—every guardian spirit bonded to Leon understood, on some level, the shape of what he'd endured. Meltryllis knew. Art and Ria, who'd come later, had received their own measure of the truth upon bonding.

None of them could speak it.

But they could act.

Durga rose from the bed and crossed to the dresser. The mirror above it caught her reflection—the face she wore, the one she had chosen upon gaining form. High cheekbones tapering to a narrow chin. Blood-red eyes beneath silver-white waves of hair. Features that carried echoes of gentleness beneath their composure, traces of warmth that the original owner had radiated before corruption consumed her from within.

Sakura Matou.

Not an exact replica. Guardian spirits weren't constrained to perfect mimicry, and Durga's features carried their own inflection—the set of her jaw was harder, her frame broader through the shoulders, her skin a shade deeper than the pale complexion of the girl whose memory shaped this visage. But the resemblance was there. Unmistakable. Deliberate.

Leon had noticed it immediately. That first moment when she'd manifested before him in the dungeon's lowest chamber, his eyes—gold and silver now, since the transformation—had widened. Something behind them fractured. A hairline crack across glass that was already threaded with fissures. He'd mastered himself within a breath, but she'd seen it.

She saw it still. Brief. Controlled. A flicker of anguish crossed his expression whenever he looked at her face, and something in his memory reached for a person who wasn't there anymore.

Meltryllis bore the same resemblance. Different features, different build, but the same underlying echo woven through her appearance. Neither of them had coordinated the choice. Neither had discussed it. The sympathetic bond had simply drawn forth the shape that his soul needed most to reconcile with, and both guardian spirits had answered that pull without hesitation.

'Because she suffered, and he didn't know.'

That was the wound. Not the war, not the artefact, not the death. The deepest damage Leon Bartfort carried from his life as Shirou Emiya was the

knowledge that someone he cared for had been enduring agony beyond description, and he—the boy who'd sworn to save everyone—hadn't seen it. Hadn't reached her in time. And when the truth finally emerged, when the full scope of what had been done to Sakura Matou became impossible to ignore, the decision that followed had carved away something fundamental from the person he was.

Durga understood. She couldn't articulate the specifics—the prohibition held—but she understood the shape of the wound with the intimacy that the bonding process afforded. A protector who failed to protect. A saviour who was forced to destroy. The contradiction hadn't killed him, but it had burned away the part of himself that believed wholeheartedly in the possibility of saving everyone.

What remained was quieter. More careful. Still decent, still compassionate, but tempered by the knowledge that some prices couldn't be avoided and some wounds didn't heal.

'So we wear this face.'

Not as a torment. Not as a reminder. As a bridge.

Every morning, Leon looked at Durga and Meltryllis and saw traces of the person he'd lost. And every morning, the flicker of pain in his eyes grew fractionally shorter. Fractionally less sharp. The goal wasn't to replace Sakura Matou—nothing could, and neither guardian spirit harboured such delusions. The goal was to exist before him with this visage, to fight beside him and eat his cooking and argue over bed rotations and *live*, until the day came when he could look at this face and feel only the warmth of the present instead of the grief of the past.

They weren't there yet. But they were closer than they'd been six months ago.

Durga pulled open the dresser's top drawer and retrieved a fresh set of clothes—simple linen trousers, a fitted tunic, sandals. Festival attire, modest enough for the morning's errands but practical enough for the exhibition

matches she intended to attend later. She dressed in silence, gathered her hair into a loose knot at the nape of her neck, and turned from the mirror.

Meltryllis hadn't stirred. Ria had rolled onto her stomach and buried her face in the pillow, a faint noise escaping her that might have been a snore or might have been a protest against consciousness.

The connecting door to Leon's bedroom was ajar. Durga paused beside it, listening. She caught Art's eye through the gap—the blonde-haired spirit lying perpendicular to the sleeping trio—and beneath that tableau, the slow, even breathing of two women who'd drunk themselves into oblivion atop Leon.

She didn't open the door wider. Art had the situation in hand.

Instead, Durga padded through the common room, navigating around cushions that still smelled faintly of spilt wine, and entered the kitchen. The bread dough she'd prepared the previous evening sat beneath a cloth on the counter, risen and ready. The festival supply list Olivia had pinned to the wall featured aggressive underlines and exclamation marks in three different colours of ink.

Durga rolled up her sleeves, washed her hands at the basin, and began punching the dough down with practised efficiency. The day's tasks stacked themselves in her mind: bread and fruit platters for the host club, exhibition preparations, Setanta's sparring engagement with Art and Ria, the cosmic dungeon completion that Mégane had been promised. The people who'd drunk themselves senseless last night—Angelica, Olivia, and several of the young men Olivia had conscripted for her establishment—would not surface for hours yet. They were sleeping at the host club, at least given comfortable cots and allowed to bathe at the gymnasium's shower room.

Which meant the morning belonged to those still standing.

Durga shaped the first loaf with both hands, pressing it firm against the floured board. The kitchen filled with the warm, yeast-thick scent of dough yielding under her palms. Through the window, dawn light crept across the academy's eastern rooftops in bands of amber and rose.

She had work to do.

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The walk from the main festival grounds to the academy racetrack took them through a corridor of vendor stalls hawking everything from fried dough to commemorative pins stamped with the school crest. Leon navigated the crowd with Meltryllis at his left, Art and Ria flanking his right, the three guardian spirits drawing stares and whispered commentary from passing students. Meltryllis had threaded her arm through his at some point during the walk—he'd stopped tracking when exactly she did these things—and her fingers rested lightly against his forearm, cool even through his sleeve.

"You're certain Setanta took the bait?" Art's voice carried the faintest edge of scepticism.

"I mentioned Durga was at the martial exhibition and that she'd probably welcome a proper challenge." Leon sidestepped a pair of second-years carrying an oversized banner. "Knowing him, he's already there swinging that staff at anyone within arm's reach."

"Durga will break him," Ria said with absolute conviction, her lips curving into something between satisfaction and anticipation. "She's been wanting a proper bout since Folkvangr—though we do go somewhat all out when we spar at the border."

"Professor Lucas is refereeing." Leon shrugged. "At least nobody will actually die. Probably."

The martial exhibition occupied one of the academy's eastern arenas—a sprawling affair where students, adventurers, and guardian spirits rotated through bouts in a loose tournament structure. Half the appeal was watching contracted spirits demonstrate techniques their masters could never replicate; the other half was watching overconfident second-years get thrown into the sand by guild veterans twice their age. Lucas Rapha Holfort's presence as

referee ensured nothing escalated beyond controlled violence, though his definition of *controlled* remained generous by most standards.

Durga would be fine. More than fine. Ten arms, ten weapons, and a disposition that treated combat the way a sculptor treated marble—something to be shaped through persistent application of force and precision. Setanta would give her a proper workout. She'd probably have a productive day.

The racetrack emerged from behind the last row of festival tents: a vast oval of compressed earth and reinforced barriers, its inner field dotted with elevation markers and wind flags. The track itself spiralled upward at intervals, creating three-dimensional sections where air-bikes could dive, climb, and weave between floating pylons anchored to the ground by shimmering tether-lines. Banked curves gleamed with fresh lacquer where repair crews had resurfaced the barriers.

The structure had been part of the academy since its founding—back when air-bikes first emerged as recreational transport for the noble classes and some enterprising administrator decided racing them would teach 'spatial awareness and piloting discipline.' In the decades since, House Atlee had poured considerable resources into maintaining and upgrading the facility. New pylons. Improved barrier enchantments. Timing crystals embedded at each checkpoint that measured speed to the hundredth of a second. All of it served a dual purpose: academy recreation and talent scouting. The Atlee family's racing enterprise lived or died on the quality of its pilots, and where better to find raw talent than a school filled with young nobles eager to prove themselves?

Leon spotted Clarice Fia Atlee standing at the track's staging area, flanked by a retinue of five men in matching racing leathers—burnt orange with silver accents, the Atlee house colours prominent on their shoulders. Sponsored riders, almost certainly. Each carried a helmet under one arm and bore the lean, wiry build of professional pilots: narrow hips, strong forearms, eyes that tracked movement with predatory focus.

Beside Clarice stood a figure that couldn't be mistaken for anything other than a guardian spirit. Blonde hair cut at an angle that fell past one eye, sharp eyes beneath dark lashes, fair skin that caught the afternoon sun without any hint of colour. She wore the academy uniform, technically—but the blazer hung open over a cropped undershirt, the tie loosened to the point of uselessness, one shirttail deliberately untucked. The skirt had been hemmed shorter than regulation permitted. Every element of the outfit screamed deliberate defiance of authority, the kind of studied rebellion that took more effort than actual compliance.

Leon suppressed a wry observation. Back when he'd still been in regular correspondence with Deirdre about border logistics and mutual interests, Clarice had been in the midst of what everyone politely called 'a difficult period.' Jilk's abandonment of their engagement—publicly choosing Marie—had left Clarice oscillating between fury and self-destruction. She'd spoken openly about purchasing several male attendants, a decision that would have scandalised her family and damaged the Atlee name's carefully cultivated respectability. The cosmic dungeon raid had tempered that impulse. The collaborative agreements between his territory, the Redgraves, and House Atlee had given her something productive to channel her energy toward.

But remnants lingered. The guardian spirit's outfit was a mirror—reflecting back the version of Clarice that still bristled against expectations and wanted the world to know it. At least it was a harmless expression. Better rebellious fashion choices than the alternatives.

"Lady Atlee." Leon inclined his head as they approached the staging area. "I hope we haven't kept you waiting too long."

Clarice turned from her conversation with one of the sponsored riders. Her expression settled into something between amusement and patience—a look Leon had grown accustomed to from nobles who dealt with him regularly.

"You're on time, Bartfort. Precisely." She waved one hand in dismissal, her racing gloves creaking faintly with the motion. "Don't apologise for punctuality."

"Noted." Leon glanced across the staging area, taking in the rows of air-bikes racked along the far wall—sleek machines in various configurations, from stripped-down speed models to heavier endurance frames. "The festival seems to be treating you well."

"Council duties wrapped up yesterday." Clarice adjusted one glove, pulling the leather taut across her knuckles. "I've passed everything along to the next rotation. Today's mine." Her gaze swept across his guardian spirits with open curiosity. "The exhibition's been drawing good crowds. I heard Baron Fletcher's second son challenged a guild veteran to a bout this morning and lasted four exchanges before eating sand."

"Four exchanges against a guild veteran isn't bad for a student."

"It isn't," Clarice agreed. "Professor Lucas was kind enough not to laugh."

The small talk settled into a comfortable rhythm. Leon asked after the racing enterprise's preparations for the summer circuit; Clarice mentioned two promising second-year recruits she'd been observing. The guardian spirit beside her—whose name Leon hadn't caught—watched Art and Ria with the lazy attention of a cat tracking birds through a window.

Clarice's expression shifted, a subtle tilt of her chin that preceded deliberate mischief. "Tell me, Bartfort. Are you working the host club today?"

Leon's shoulders locked. A full-body stiffness that travelled from the base of his spine to the muscles bracketing his jaw. The memory of last night—the shorts, the collar, Queen Mylene's hands on his arm, Erica's mortified face, the endless queue—rose unbidden.

"I would rather face Karna and Arjuna without power armour," he said flatly, "than return to that particular hell on earth."

Clarice laughed. Not the polished, restrained sound she produced in council meetings or formal gatherings—a genuine, unguarded thing that creased the corners of her eyes and made her shoulders shake. The blonde guardian spirit glanced at her contractor with something resembling surprise.

"That bad?"

"Worse. I can't discuss it without reliving it."

"Well." Clarice composed herself, though the amusement lingered in her voice. "I should mention that Deirdre went to the host club this morning. She was hoping to catch you there and hire you as her personal host for the evening session."

Leon absorbed this information with the careful neutrality of a man who had already accepted his life was no longer his own.

"Shall we discuss the race?"

Clarice's lips pressed together—suppressing another laugh, clearly—but she nodded. "By all means."

"I was hoping my guardian spirits might take a preliminary lap." Leon gestured toward the track. "To determine which of them will represent me in the match."

He turned slightly as he spoke, and the motion brought the spectator benches into his peripheral vision. They weren't empty. In fact, they were filling rapidly—clusters of students and faculty settling into rows, some carrying snacks from the festival stalls, others craning their necks to get a better view of the staging area. A group of what appeared to be third-year girls occupied an entire section, several holding small banners in Atlee orange.

Leon looked back at Clarice.

"I may have mentioned the match to a few people." Clarice met his gaze without apology. "Word travels. Might as well make things interesting for everyone, don't you think?"

Of course she did. An audience turned a private wager into a spectacle. A spectacle generated buzz for the racing enterprise. Buzz attracted investment and talent. Everything House Atlee did circled back to the track eventually.

"Naturally," Leon said.

Clarice studied him for a moment, her head tilting. The calculation behind her eyes was visible—she wasn't trying to hide it, which Leon appreciated. Straightforward ambition was easier to navigate than hidden agendas.

"Actually," she began, folding her arms across her chest. The racing leathers creaked. "I've been thinking. A one-on-one race might be a bit too... simple for the crowd. Two riders, three laps, one winner. Clean, yes. But boring."

Leon waited.

"What if we made it a team event instead?" Clarice's gaze moved to Art, Ria, and Meltryllis in sequence. "Three against three. My riders against yours. More variables. More excitement. More for the audience to follow." She tilted her chin toward the filling benches. "And frankly, more entertaining for us."

Leon turned to face his three guardian spirits.

Art stood with her arms crossed, her blonde hair catching the afternoon light. The massive ornate sword she typically carried was absent—left at Nicks's booth, and Leon had already asked Luxion to have one of the other spirits retrieve it when they were free—but her posture carried the same weight regardless. Her golden eyes fixed on the air-bikes racked along the far wall with undisguised interest.

Ria bounced slightly on the balls of her feet, her twin ponytails swaying with the motion. She'd already spotted the track's elevation changes, and her gaze tracked the floating pylons with the intensity of someone mapping attack vectors. Her lance—equally absent—would have been impractical on an air-bike regardless.

Meltryllis released Leon's arm and stepped forward, her violet hair shifting as she tilted her head. Her expression remained serene, unreadable, but her fingers had curled at her sides in a way Leon recognised as anticipation.

"Three on three?" Art said. "Against professional riders?"

"Against sponsored riders from the Atlee racing stable," Leon clarified. "On identical machines from their family's fleet."

"Identical machines." Ria's grin widened. "So raw piloting skill decides it."

"That's the idea."

Art's crossed arms tightened. Then she nodded—a single, sharp motion.

"Good."

Ria's nod came with considerably more enthusiasm, her whole upper body rocking forward. "Yes. Absolutely yes."

Meltryllis simply inclined her head, her serene expression cracking just slightly at the corners. "I've wanted to try one of those since we arrived."

Leon turned back to Clarice. "They're in."

"Excellent." Clarice's smile sharpened—not unkind, but competitive. The expression of someone who'd just gotten exactly what she wanted. She raised one hand and snapped her fingers. Two of the sponsored riders broke away from the group and jogged toward the bike racks, beginning to wheel out the machines.

"Six bikes from the same production run," Clarice said, already moving toward the staging area proper. "Identical frames, identical enchantments, identical output. The only variable is the person sitting on them." She paused, glancing over her shoulder. "Your spirits have ridden before?"

"Art and Ria have logged hours on patrol air-bikes at the border." Leon fell into step beside her, his spirits trailing behind. "Meltryllis has mostly ridden around the territory to sightsee."

"Nor have my riders raced against guardian spirits." Clarice's tone suggested this made things even. "Standard rules: three laps of the full circuit, including the elevation sections and the pylon weave. Team scoring—first across the line earns three points, second earns two, third earns one. Highest total wins, but if they tie, we add another lap."

"Straightforward."

"I find complexity in rules usually masks weakness in competition." Clarice stopped at the edge of the track, where a line of six identical air-bikes now waited—matte grey frames stripped of all house markings, their enchantment cores pulsing with identical amber light. "Choose your mounts."

Art was already moving, her stride purposeful as she circled the nearest bike. Her hands ran along the frame with professional attention—checking balance points, grip width, the angle of the acceleration rune arrays. Ria picked the bike furthest from Art, swinging one leg over the saddle to test the seating position. Meltryllis approached the remaining machine with more deliberation, studying its lines before settling onto it with fluid grace.

Three of Clarice's sponsored riders moved to their own machines. Leon noted their builds: one tall and rangy with close-cropped red hair, one compact and muscular with burns across his knuckles, one of average height but with forearms corded like ship cable. All three moved with the easy confidence of people who'd spent more hours on air-bikes than off them.

"Your team captain?" Leon asked.

Clarice indicated the tall redhead. "Fenn. He's led our circuit team for two seasons."

Fenn offered a polite nod in Leon's direction, his expression neutral and focused. Professional. No swagger, no posturing. Leon respected that immediately.

Art returned the nod. She settled lower in the saddle, her weight distributing forward in a racing crouch that looked entirely natural despite—Leon was fairly certain—being the first time she'd sat on this particular model.

The crowd in the spectator benches had doubled since they'd arrived. Leon caught sight of several faculty members in the upper rows, and what appeared to be a betting operation running from the end of one bench, chits passing between hands with practised discretion.

'Of course there's betting.'

The guardian spirit beside Clarice—Jane, the rebellious blonde—leaned against the barrier railing with both elbows, watching the preparations with half-lidded interest. She hadn't spoken once since Leon arrived.

"She's not racing?" Leon asked, indicating the spirit with a subtle nod.

"Jane doesn't race." Clarice's answer was clipped—not rude, but final. The kind of tone that closed a subject. "Though she loves speeding on an air-bike without a care in the world."

Leon didn't press.

A track official emerged from the timing booth, carrying a flag in one hand and a communication crystal in the other. He exchanged words with Clarice, received confirmation, and moved to the starting line. The six riders guided their bikes toward the marks—three grey machines on the inner row, three on the outer, alternating by team.

Art took the innermost position, her posture coiled and still. Fenn settled beside her on the outer mark, his red hair visible beneath a half-helm he'd pulled on. Ria occupied the middle inner slot, vibrating with barely contained energy. The compact rider with burned knuckles positioned himself on her outside. Meltryllis took the final inner mark, her fingers wrapped around the handlebars with deceptive looseness. The cable-armed rider completed the grid.

"Three laps," the official announced, his voice amplified by the communication crystal. "Full circuit including elevation and pylon sections. Team scoring applies. Standard contact rules—no deliberate ramming, no magical interference with other riders or machines. Riders ready?"

Six hands raised in confirmation.

Leon stepped back to the barrier beside Clarice, having handed them their helmets and wished them luck. The crowd had gone quiet—that particular hush that preceded velocity.

"Interested in a side wager?" Clarice murmured, not looking away from the track.

"I thought we already had one."

"That's business." Her lips quirked. "This would be personal."

Leon considered. "What did you have in mind?"

"Loser buys the winner dinner. Somewhere decent but casual."

Simple. Harmless. The kind of casual stake that existed purely to sharpen attention. Leon almost smiled.

"Done."

The flag dropped.

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End

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