

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

Story Starts

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Chapter 9.3 - Of Vigils and Festivals

Chilly and hot.

Leon felt both chilly and hot at the same time.

He shot Olivia a look—the kind that had, on previous occasions, preceded the deployment of Noble Phantasms. Cold. Precise. The look of a man cataloguing grievances for future retribution.

In fairness, he could have simply refused. He could have said "no." But the shots had already started, the Queen was already here, and his capacity for rational decision-making had been steadily eroding since the moment Olivia had said "strip" in that changing room. Anger, at this point, was less an emotion and more a background hum—constant, familiar, and entirely useless.

Olivia, to her credit, read the room with the survival instincts of a woman who had been on the receiving end of that look many, many times before. She immediately ducked behind the bar and handed over a large bottle of liquor to Ria, who looked quite confused, her green eyes turning between Olivia and Leon as if trying to decipher the silent conversation passing between them.

Ria shrugged, clearly deciding this wasn't about food or fighting—the only two categories of human interaction she considered worth her attention. She moved with practised ease in her painful-looking heels, one hand steadying the tray for balance, the other holding it aloft with the effortless grace that came naturally to everything she did. Leon had long since stopped questioning why women gravitated towards such footwear.

From his position on the plush couch—Erica pressed against his left side, rigid as a plank, and the Queen draped languidly against his right with the territorial ease of a cat claiming a sunbeam—Leon watched Ria approach.

He felt Erica stiffen further. Which was impressive, given that she'd already achieved a degree of muscular tension that most physicians would classify as a medical event.

'That reaction again.'

At first, he'd thought Erica simply had a bad experience with guardian spirits—some childhood encounter, perhaps, or a noble family's spirit that had frightened her. But that didn't hold up. Erica was fine around the others. Comfortable, even. She'd shared tea with Durga without flinching. She'd let Melt fix her hair once, and hadn't objected.

It was only Ria and Art. Only ever Ria and Art.

It nagged at him. There was something beneath the surface of that reaction—something more than simple social awkwardness or noble decorum around servants. The way her breath would catch. The way her eyes would flicker with something that looked almost like recognition before she forced it down. He'd have liked to ask her about it properly—sit her down in private and coax the truth out with careful questions. But ever since his ascension to Upper Viscount, he'd never really had the chance. There was always another meeting, another obligation, another fire Olivia had cheerfully set that needed stamping out.

'Add it to the list.'

Despite Ria's bubbly personality—and she was bubbly, relentlessly, almost aggressively so, as if sheer enthusiasm could bludgeon any social discomfort into submission—she, too, had noticed. Leon watched as her smile grew strained at the edges, the brightness dimming just a fraction when Erica's shoulders hitched.

Ria set the bottle on the table and turned to leave.

"Uh... Ms R-Ria?" Erica's voice came out small, both careful and hesitant.
"Can you order a bottle of water for Leon?"

As she spoke, she shifted her weight—and the movement dragged her legs across his thigh, pulling the fabric of his shorts taut in a direction Leon would have preferred it not go.

Twitch.

"What's this?" Queen Mylene interrupted, her voice bright with theatrical concern. "Are your guardian spirits bullying my poor precious daugh—"

Erica panicked. Leon felt it happen—every muscle in her body locking rigid against him, the warmth of her side turning to stone in an instant.

"NO! NO! NO! Leon and everyone have been good to me—"

The words tumbled out in a rush, tripping over each other in their haste to escape. Erica's hand rose to brush at her fringe, fingers combing through the strands as if she could somehow coax them into growing longer on the spot—willing them to fall like a curtain across her flushed face and hide her from the world.

"R-Ria and A-Art... just... look like—"

Leon turned to look at the red-faced princess currently pressed against him. Her eyes were wide, almost desperate, darting between him and her mother and the table as if searching for an escape route that simply didn't exist. Whatever truth had been clawing its way up her throat, she swallowed it back down.

"Uh... no, it's nothing," said Erica, her voice trailing off into something small and fragile.

Everyone exchanged glances. The Queen shrugged—though Leon caught the way Mylene's eyes lingered on her daughter a heartbeat longer than casual disinterest would warrant. The woman was sharp. Dangerously so. She'd noticed too. She'd simply chosen to let it lie.

"Are you sure?"

Erica only nodded. A small, tight motion that convinced absolutely no one.

Clap.

"Well!" The Queen's voice purred directly into his ear, close enough that he could feel the warmth of her breath against his skin. "If my daughter's ordering water for Leon, then we should take some shots."

Leon suppressed a shudder. Threat assessment: critical. Escape routes: none. Survival probability: declining.

Ria immediately bowed and rushed towards the bar, dodging one of the attendants who was guiding a very eager student towards one of the private booths. Leon watched her go with something close to envy.

"Daughter dear, I think it's your turn to feed Leon his shot. Do it as your mama did it—plus, this is practice for the future, yes?"

Even without looking, Leon could hear the Cheshire grin in her voice—that self-satisfied, predatory amusement woven into every syllable like silk wrapped around a blade. The Queen of the Holfort Kingdom, architect of social catastrophes, conductor of chaos, the other half of the Hedonist Royals—and apparently determined to ensure that neither her daughter nor Leon survived this evening with their dignity intact.

Leon and Erica exchanged commiserating glances—his resigned, hers mortified, both equally helpless. In that brief meeting of eyes, Leon found something unexpected: a quiet kinship between two people who had long since learned to bend beneath the whims of those more powerful. The kinship of the perpetually outmanoeuvred.

Sigh.

Erica moved. Stiffly, robotically, with the mechanical precision of someone whose body was operating on instructions her brain had not approved. One arm draped around his shoulders. She lifted herself, her legs shifting from

where they'd been resting across his thigh, and repositioned—tucking one leg between his thighs and hers, her weight settling firmly onto his upper thigh until she was practically sitting on him.

Leon stared at the ceiling. The ceiling was neutral. The ceiling had no opinions about any of this.

The Queen, who still had her own legs draped across his other thigh, leaned forward and retrieved one of the previously poured shots and a salt shaker, then handed both to her daughter.

Erica received them with another sigh—something that had been happening with increasing frequency over the past several minutes, each exhalation carrying a slightly deeper note of existential surrender.

She extended her neck and let the shaker deposit a thin trail of salt along her skin. Her eyes locked with Leon's—not with invitation, not with coyness, but with the desperate, imploring look of a woman silently begging him to get this over with as quickly as humanly possible.

Another sigh, this time from Leon. He leaned forward, his arms wrapping around Erica's small back, and licked the trail of salt from her neck.

He felt her shiver. A gasp escaped her mouth—soft, involuntary, and entirely unhelpful to his current project of maintaining spiritual equilibrium.

'Zen. I am zen. I am nothing but a droplet of water within a torrential waterfall.'

From the bar, Olivia was watching them with her hand pressed firmly against her mouth. Her face was scarlet. Her eyes were wide—not with jealousy, not with disapproval, but with an expression Leon couldn't immediately categorise and was absolutely certain he didn't want to.

"Oooh, Leon didn't react that way when he did it with me."

Leon and Erica both turned to the Queen as her gaze drifted deliberately, theatrically downward towards his—

Leon immediately grabbed the shot from Erica's hand and downed it in one go.

This was why he was both chilly and hot at the same time. The room temperature was low—blackout curtains and atmospheric lighting apparently didn't come with adequate heating—and he had barely anything on. The alcohol was doing its work from the inside, though. They'd already finished their first bottle, and the number of shots he'd taken was beginning to blur at the edges.

The host club offered two arrangements for alcohol. In the first, the customer paid for their own drinks, but the attendant—in this case, Leon—was not permitted to partake. In the second, both attendant and guest shared the bottle, but at an exorbitant premium.

The Queen, naturally, had opted for the second.

And as if to hammer one final nail into the coffin, a single bottle of water was priced far, far higher than the alcohol.

'How the fuck did Illya know about these practices?!

"Okay, I think I'll avail of the body shot next!"

Shink. Shink. Shink.

Several blades embedded themselves in the menu board, neatly erasing that particular service from the list of available options.

"My Queen," Leon said with a perfectly straight face. "I don't believe we offer that service. Nor do I understand what you mean by 'body shot.'"

The Queen only shot him an amused look.

"So," she said, swirling what remained of her glass, "how are you finding this—what was the term Olivia used?"

Twitch.

"Ah, yes. An *oyako sando*."

This had been Olivia's contribution earlier—whispered in a daze, the cursed combination of words dropping out of her mouth by reflex the moment the Queen had bodily pulled Erica towards Leon, draping the princess's legs across his thigh before settling herself in a mirror position on his other side.

The term was now forever cemented into Holfort's history.

'Nihongo should have stayed a dead language, not survived in cursed limbo through this one phrase.'

"..."

Leon chose not to reply to this. Some weapons were best left unacknowledged.

'Please. I need anything. An emergency at the borders. A meteor striking the capital. Anything.'

"HOW DARE YOU MAKE THIS SWILL! REMAKE THIS NOW!"

The loud, irate voice came from one of the other rooms.

Meltryllis discreetly placed a bottle of water on their table, and while the Queen was distracted by the commotion, Erica seized the opportunity—grabbing the bottle and pressing it into Leon's hands.

Leon drank gratefully. The alcohol had settled into his bloodstream with the quiet persistence of an occupying army, and no amount of cycling mana through his circuits was going to flush it out. In theory, he could reinforce his liver—accelerate its function, force it to process the ethanol faster. In practice, he was drunk, he'd never tested that particular application of reinforcement, and the consequences of getting it wrong ranged from "unpleasant" to "catastrophic organ failure."

He'd stick with water.

He mouthed *'thank you'* to Erica before turning towards the Queen.

"DO YOU NOT KNOW WHO I AM?"

The Queen's expression shifted—the playful indulgence evaporating, replaced by something colder. She looked as if someone had deliberately soured her evening.

She turned to her bodyguard—the veiled woman she'd never bothered to introduce—and gave a single, precise nod.

The bodyguard rose and left without haste, moving with quiet authority, unhurried and precise. Olivia was already at the door, drawn by the commotion.

"HOW DARE YOU! YOU ARE JUST A COMMONER WHO—"

A scuffle. The sharp crack of shattering glass.

"UNHAND ME! HOW DARE YOU—I'M A DAUGHTER OF AN EARL!"

The veiled bodyguard returned with one arm hooked around a struggling blonde. Olivia flanked from behind.

She was young—academy age, certainly—with hair the colour of pale wheat gathered into twin braids that hung past her shoulders, dark purple ribbons cinched at either side. A fringe swept across her forehead above wide brown eyes that burned with indignation. Slim figure, well-developed chest straining against the bodice of her academy dress as she thrashed against her captors.

Leon's gaze lingered a fraction too long.

"Ahem."

Erica's delicate cough cut through the fog like a blade through gauze. Leon blinked, his focus snapping back—and in the same motion, the hand still wrapped around Erica's waist tightened reflexively, fingers pressing into the curve above her hip.

Erica's face ignited. A flush so vivid it reached the tips of her ears.

"My, my." The Queen's voice carried the satisfaction of a cat watching two mice stumble into the same trap. Her eyes had tracked every microsecond of the exchange—the wandering gaze, the cough, the squeeze, the blush—cataloguing each detail with an efficiency that bordered on clinical.

The bodyguard and Olivia deposited their quarry onto the floor before the Queen. The girl hit the carpet with an undignified thump, her wrists bound together by shimmering silvery threads that caught the low light—Olivia's nanomachine filaments. She'd taken to using them instead of her own hair for restraints lately, on the entirely practical grounds that she didn't fancy going bald before thirty.

"Unhand me this INSTANT! I am Stephanie Fou Offrey, daughter of Earl Offrey! This is ASSAULT on a noble of the—"

The torrent of vulgarities that followed would have made a dockside sailor pause to take notes. Leon, through the pleasant amber haze of too many shots, watched the girl spit and rage with detached fascination. She bucked against the threads, twisted, kicked—accomplished nothing.

Then her eyes landed on the woman lounging on the couch.

The tirade died mid-syllable. Stephanie's mouth hung open, the colour draining from her face in stages—pink to white to something approaching translucent—as her brain processed what her eyes were reporting.

'She probably didn't expect the Queen of Holfort to be here, of all places.'

To be fair, who would?

Mylene shifted. Her legs, still draped across Leon's thigh with proprietary ease, crossed at the ankle—one calf sliding over the other in a motion that was simultaneously languid and deliberate. She leaned forward, elbow settling on her knee, chin resting on the cradle of her palm. The posture was casual. Relaxed. The posture of a predator that had already decided the hunt was over and was merely considering the most entertaining method of consumption.

"Stephanie Fou Offrey." The Queen tasted the name like wine she suspected had gone off. "I was having such a lovely time today. Do you know how rarely I get a lovely time, Stephanie? Between managing the treasury, mediating border disputes, and convincing my husband that invading the Principality for sport is not, in fact, a legitimate foreign policy—"

She paused, letting the silence gather weight.

"—opportunities for recreation are precious."

Stephanie's mouth worked. No sound came out.

"And you interrupted mine."

The girl found her voice, though it emerged several octaves higher than her previous screaming had established as baseline. "Y-Your Majesty, I—I didn't know you were—"

"Mm." Mylene's index finger tapped against her own cheek, once, twice. "You know, my poor husband is all alone in the palace tonight. Terribly lonely. Perhaps you should go entertain him as recompense for my spoilt evening?"

The implication hung in the air like smoke from a discharged cannon.

Stephanie's face performed a remarkable gymnastic routine—blanching, flushing, blanching again—as the full weight of the suggestion settled upon her. Everyone in the kingdom knew about the royal pair. The Hedonist Monarchs, as the more daring pamphlets called them. The stories that circulated through noble courts were the kind that made seasoned courtesans raise their eyebrows.

"I—that's—Your Majesty, surely you don't—"

The door opened.

Angelica stepped through, still wearing the festival committee armband over her formal dress, a clipboard tucked under one arm and a faintly harried expression on her face. She'd been summoned away to the opposite end of

campus barely an hour ago—something about a vendor dispute in the western pavilion that required her authority as co-organiser.

Angelica's gaze swept the room, processed the scene in approximately two seconds, and locked onto the bound girl on the carpet.

"Stephanie." The word landed with exhausted familiarity—a recurring problem she'd hoped had resolved itself permanently. "What did you do?"

The effect was immediate. Stephanie forgot the Queen existed. Her head whipped towards Angelica, and her expression shifted from terrified supplication to something altogether more venomous—the comfortable hatred of a familiar enemy, a grudge worn smooth by repeated handling.

"Oh, look who's deigned to grace us with her presence! The fallen duke's daughter, slumming it with commoners and nouveau riche." Stephanie's lip curled. "Associating with people lower than you—though I suppose that's rather fitting now, isn't it? Since you've fallen so far yourself."

Angelica's expression didn't change. The clipboard rotated once in her grip.

"You're bound on the floor in front of the Queen," Angelica observed mildly, "and you're lecturing me about falling from grace."

Before Stephanie could formulate a response, the door burst open again.

"W-what is the meaning of this?"

Marie Fou Lafan stood in the doorway, cheeks ablaze, her green eyes wide as dinner plates as they darted across the room—the dim lighting, the velvet furnishings, the barely clothed male attendants moving between booths, the bottles of spirits glinting on every table. Behind her, Jilk's composed face betrayed a single raised eyebrow, and Julius—former Crown Prince Julius—peered over Marie's shoulder with an expression of mounting horror.

Leon recalled, through the comfortable gauze of inebriation, that Marie's group had reserved one of the large function rooms at the opposite wing of this floor. They'd submitted their festival plan through the proper channels—a butler

café, which was actually one of the more conventional offerings at academy festivals. Back in his previous life, it would have been a maid café, but Holfort's matriarchal power dynamics inverted the convention. Butlers held the same appeal here that maids held elsewhere.

Their presence on this floor wasn't surprising. Their presence at his door was another matter.

"W-what is this debauchery?" Marie's voice climbed as she catalogued each offence. Her finger jabbed at the room in sequence. "Alcohol! Almost-nude males! Table service with—with—"

Her finger completed its arc and landed, trembling, on the couch where Leon sat.

Where the Queen of Holfort had her legs draped across his thigh on one side. Where Princess Erica was pressed against him on the other, her face buried in her hands, her ears crimson above her fingers.

Julius's brain appeared to short-circuit.

Leon watched it happen in real time—the way Julius's gaze tracked from his mother, to the legs, to Leon, to Erica, back to the legs, to Leon's bare torso, to the empty shot glasses on the table, to Erica's proximity, and then back to the legs one final time as if hoping the image would rearrange itself into something less catastrophic on the return journey.

It did not.

"W-what is the meaning of this?!"

Julius's voice cracked on the final word. The former prince stepped past Marie into the room, his hand instinctively reaching for a sword that wasn't there—academy grounds, no weapons—and instead finding only the fabric of his trouser leg, which he gripped with white-knuckled fury.

"Mother. MOTHER. Why are you—why is Erica—why is HE—"

On the floor, Stephanie Fou Offrey assessed the chaos with the survival instincts of a rat in a flooding hold. Every eye had turned to the doorway. Olivia's attention had shifted. The threads binding her wrists—clever things, responsive to their creator's focus—slackened by a fraction.

It was enough.

Stephanie twisted, the filaments sliding over her skin as she compressed her hands together and pulled. She wriggled free with a fluency that suggested prior experience and scrambled to her feet. Without a word, without a backward glance, she bolted past Marie, past Jilk, past Julius, and vanished into the corridor beyond.

Everyone watched her go.

Leon shook his head. Olivia shook her head. Angelica pinched the bridge of her nose. The Queen sighed theatrically. Even Jilk, whose composure under fire bordered on the supernatural, allowed himself a small, incredulous exhalation.

"—AND FURTHERMORE," Julius continued, apparently having not noticed Stephanie's escape at all, his attention still welded to the scene on the couch, "this is ENTIRELY inappropriate! Erica is a princess of the realm! She cannot be seen in an establishment that—Mother, have you been doing the same thing?!"

Julius could see into the neighbouring booth, where an eager young student was having an attendant drink a shot from between her—

The Queen peered into the booth with interest, then reached for the menu card on the table.

"Was that the body shot? My menu seems to be missing that particular service," came the Queen's voice, teasing and predatory, as she raised an amused smile at Leon.

"Mother!"

"Hmm, let me see what else they offer." She ran her finger down the laminated card with the studied concentration of a woman selecting courses at a state dinner. "Hand massage—oh, that sounds lovely. Back massage. Love shot—what's a love shot? Oh, is that mouth-to-mouth? How delightful. Couple's—"

Leon opened his mouth to object. To explain that he had, in fact, already excised several items from that menu via projectile weaponry. To point out that the establishment's service catalogue had been curated by a madwoman, and that this particular card—labelled, in Olivia's unmistakable handwriting, *Olivia's Special Service Menu*—did not reflect his personal endorsement of—

The Queen stood.

The movement was fluid, unhurried, her legs sliding off Leon's thigh with a whisper of silk. She crossed the short distance to Julius in three steps, her hands rising to cup his face with maternal tenderness that was somehow more terrifying than any threat she'd uttered all evening.

"Julie-poo."

Julius flinched as if struck. Behind him, Marie's scandalised expression melted into something that looked suspiciously like suppressed laughter, and Jilk had the good grace to study the ceiling with intense academic interest.

"Julie-poo, darling, you're making a scene."

"I—Mother, don't call me that in—"

"Shh." One finger pressed against his lips. "You're supposed to be running your own café, aren't you? A lovely butler establishment, I heard. Very traditional. Very proper." Each word carried the gentle, implacable force of a glacier advancing on a village. "I was planning to visit you next, you know. Your mother was going to come see her son's hard work and spend money and be proud."

Julius's righteous fury deflated like a punctured airship. His mouth opened. Closed. Opened again.

"But if you'd rather stand here causing a commotion in front of your sister and embarrassing the family name further—"

"I—that's not—"

"—then by all means, continue."

Silence.

Erica, recognising the window of opportunity for what it was, extracted herself from Leon's side. She shifted her weight off his thigh—where she'd been perched for the better part of the last hour—and settled onto the couch cushion beside him instead. Proper. Upright. A full hand's width of space between her hip and his.

It was, of course, the worst possible thing she could have done.

Julius's attention snapped to the movement. His eyes tracked from Erica's previous position—on Leon, functionally in his lap—to her current one—beside Leon, conspicuously not in his lap—and the implication of the transition wrote itself across his face in bold script.

"Erica."

"Mother made me—"

"His LAP!?"

Clap.

The Queen's palms came together with the decisive crack of a judge's gavel. The sound cut through the room, silencing every voice, every half-formed accusation, every spluttered defence.

"Enough."

One word. Spoken quietly. Carried with absolute authority.

Julius's jaw clicked shut.

Leon blinked.

Something was different.

He frowned, the thought swimming through layers of alcohol before finding purchase. The Queen had been standing in front of Julius, her back to Leon, with the bodyguard somewhere behind and to the right—facing him from the far side of the room. He distinctly remembered that configuration. The Queen's silver-white hair, the line of her shoulders, the bodyguard's veiled silhouette in his peripheral vision.

But now—

Now the Queen faced him. The bodyguard stood where the Queen had been, back turned, positioned between Julius and the rest of the room.

They'd switched places.

When? During the clap? Before it? Leon's inebriated mind churned through the sequence of events, attempting to reconstruct the last thirty seconds with any fidelity, and found only fog. He'd been watching Erica move. He'd been watching Julius react. He'd been—

'Too drunk to notice. That's all.'

The Queen smiled at him. It was a warm smile. A reassuring smile. A smile that had no business being as steady as it was, given that Leon could now see—

She was shaking.

A fine, barely perceptible tremor ran through her hands as she lowered them from their clapping position. Her fingers curled against her palms, stilling the vibration through force of will alone. When she returned to the couch, her movements carried their usual feline grace, but the hesitation was there—a

microsecond's pause before she placed her legs back across his thigh, as if the contact required more courage than it had an hour ago.

'Strange.'

Leon's mind—dulled but not dead, never quite dead, though the premium Holfort spirits were making a spirited attempt—filed the discrepancy away in the corner reserved for things he'd examine when sober.

"N-Now then." The Queen's voice had recovered some of its purring confidence, though Leon thought he detected a faint brittleness beneath—like porcelain that had been glued back together and was hoping no one would tap it. "Julius, darling, Marie, Jilk—go back to your café. I'll pop in shortly and be your most generous customer. I promise."

She turned to the bodyguard.

"Please escort them."

The veiled figure inclined her head—a silent acknowledgement—and moved towards the doorway with an economy of motion that was almost too graceful for hired security. One gloved hand gestured towards the corridor. An invitation that was not optional.

Marie, to her credit, had already begun retreating. Whatever she'd come to investigate—noise complaint, curiosity, competitive reconnaissance—she'd clearly decided that further proximity to this particular situation would yield nothing but complications. She grabbed Julius's sleeve and tugged.

"Your Highness—ah, I mean—Julius, let's go."

"But—"

Jilk materialised at Julius's other elbow. Between the two of them, they manoeuvred the sputtering former prince out of the doorframe and into the corridor. The bodyguard followed, pulling the door closed behind her.

The latch clicked.

The room settled into something approximating quiet—the muffled sounds of the host club's other patrons filtering through the walls, the distant clink of glassware, the murmur of conversation from booths where academy girls were extracting every copper's worth from their purchased time.

Leon looked at the Queen. The Queen looked at Leon. Neither spoke.

The tremor in her hands had stopped. Or she'd hidden it better. Leon couldn't tell which through the warm fog that had settled behind his eyes.

"Well!" The word arrived with brittle brightness. "That was excitement enough for one evening, wouldn't you say?"

The door opened before Leon could respond.

Angelica stepped back in—she'd slipped out during the chaos, Leon realised, though he couldn't pinpoint exactly when. She'd shed the festival armband and clipboard somewhere in the interim, and her expression had shifted from harried administrator to something softer, more deliberate.

Her eyes moved across the scene—the Queen, the bottles, Leon's state of undress, Erica's rigid posture—and settled on the princess with gentle precision.

"Erica."

The girl looked up. Her eyes were glassy—not from alcohol; Leon didn't think she'd had more than two shots all evening—but from the accumulated strain of an experience that had tested every boundary of her comfort simultaneously.

"Would you like to take a break?"

The eagerness with which Erica nodded nearly dislodged her from the couch. She was on her feet before Angelica had finished drawing breath, smoothing her butler outfit with trembling fingers, ducking her chin so the fringe fell over her eyes.

"Yes—yes, please, I'd—a break would be—yes."

Angelica extended her hand. Erica took it. The grip was tight—Leon could see the whitened knuckles from where he sat—and something passed between the two women in that brief contact. A reassurance. A promise.

Then Angelica released Erica's hand and sat down in the space the princess had vacated.

She settled beside Leon with none of Erica's stiffness, none of the Queen's theatrical draping. She simply sat. Close enough that her shoulder brushed his. Close enough that the faint scent of the jasmine soap she'd been using since moving into the barony reached him through the haze of alcohol and perfume.

"You look terrible," Angelica observed, eyeing the collection of empty glasses.

Leon's inebriated head swam. Something was off. Something had been off for a while now—the switch between Queen and bodyguard, the tremor in Mylene's hands, Erica's persistent reaction to specific guardian spirits, the bodyguard he'd never seen without her veil, the whole chain of events that had led to this exact configuration of people in this exact room at this exact moment.

His thoughts churned. Slow. Thick. Like trying to trace a blade through honey.

Something was wrong. Something didn't fit. A piece out of place in a puzzle he couldn't see the edges of.

His gaze drifted across the room, searching for the source of the dissonance.

It landed on Olivia.

She stood behind the bar, polishing a glass with a cloth, her expression one of studied innocence—the kind of innocence that had, historically, preceded some of her most catastrophic interventions in his life. She caught his eye. Smiled.

Leon glared at her.

Because when something was off—when the world tilted at angles that defied his comprehension, when the comfortable predictability of existence warped into something strange and unrecognisable—it was almost always Olivia's fault.

The glare carried every ounce of accusation his alcohol-addled mind could muster. It said: *I know you did this. I don't know what this is, or how you did it, or why, but I know—with the absolute certainty of a man who had been burned by this exact fire too many times—that you are responsible.*

Olivia's smile widened.

She set down the glass and mouthed two words across the room.

"Love you."

Leon's glare intensified as Olivia ducked again behind the bar.

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End

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