

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

Story Starts

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**Chapter 10.1 -
Of Pre-Mature Story Progressions
and Wagers**

Light.

Bright light, and a lot of snoring—in stereo.

Leon Fou Bartfort tried to shut out the assault on his senses, but he found himself unable to move. Something warm and heavy pinned him on both sides.

'Probably Ria or Melt clinging to me again.'

But then he remembered—it was Durga's and Art's turn today. Or had he got that wrong?

He tried to peek, but a stubborn beam of sunlight was aimed squarely at his eyes. Judging by the angle, it was slipping through a gap in the curtains.

"Master, be careful you don't wake up Mistress Angelica and Olivia." Art's voice drifted down from somewhere above him—flat and careful, the way she always sounded when she was trying very hard not to sound like she cared.

Leon tilted his head towards the headboard and squinted through groggy eyes.

Art lay on her side across the top of the bed, perpendicular to him, her blonde hair fanned across the pillow. Her expression was blank as usual, though her lips had pushed forward by a few millimetres.

'She's definitely pouting.'

"Good morning, Master."

"Good morning, Art."

By now the sun had shifted enough that he could finally see clearly, and he looked down at his current captors.

He resisted the urge to cry out. He'd made that mistake before, and the look on Olivia's face afterwards had been worse than any wound he'd taken at the border.

Just as Art had implied, Olivia and Angelica were bracketing him—one on each side, arms locked around his torso, heads resting against his chest. Neither showed any sign of releasing him voluntarily. Olivia had somehow managed to hook one leg over his, which was both impressive and structurally unnecessary.

"I have questions," Leon said, turning to Art. "But can you help me get untangled? I'll make us breakfast."

The pout vanished. In its place, a small but unmistakable upward curve.

"Yes, Master."

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The living room outside Leon's bedroom smelled of stale wine, hard liquor, and something floral—perfume, perhaps, or whatever Olivia had spilt on herself during last night's revelries. Leon padded barefoot across the marble floor and onto the carpet, Art a silent shadow at his left shoulder.

The alcohol wasn't just on him. Judging from the state of the couch cushions and the damp patch on the carpet, the revelries had been enthusiastic and poorly aimed.

'I'll ask Melt later for some assistance cleaning the carpet.'

Behind him, through the door he'd left ajar, two distinct snoring rhythms continued unabated. Art had performed the extraction with surgical precision: sliding a body pillow into the gap Leon vacated, then guiding Olivia's clutching arms onto it as carefully as if she were handling live ordnance. Angelica had been easier—the moment Leon's warmth disappeared, she'd rolled inward and seized the nearest soft object, which happened to be another pillow Art had positioned at the last second.

Both women now embraced their respective substitutes, drooling contentedly.

Leon ran a hand through his white hair and grimaced. The smell of alcohol clung to his skin, his shirt, and probably his very soul at this point. All three of them reeked of it. His tongue tasted as if something had crawled into his mouth and established a small colony.

'Could be worse, though.'

And it could. His head throbbed dully behind the eyes, his stomach felt like it had been wrung out and rehung, but there was no splitting migraine, no nausea violent enough to send him lurching for the nearest basin. A mild hangover at best—the kind that a glass of water and a solid breakfast would dispel. He planned to take it easy today regardless.

He owed that mercy to Erica and Angelica both. Through the haze of last night's memories, he could recall hands pressing cups of water to his mouth between rounds of shots. Erica's quiet insistence. Angelica's firmer grip on his wrist, tilting the glass when he'd tried to wave it off.

'I should thank them properly.'

"Master!"

Something blonde and warm slammed into his side hard enough to stagger him two steps sideways. Arms locked around his torso, a face buried itself against his chest, and a bright, musical laugh vibrated through his ribs.

Ria.

The cosmic fairy beamed up at him with eyes the colour of spring leaves—Arturia Pendragon's face, or rather the guardian spirits' impression of it drawn from his memories, but worn with a warmth the original had rarely allowed herself. Art held the solemnity of that legend. Ria burned with a cheer that was entirely her own.

Leon steadied himself against the wall and wrapped his arms around her.

"Good morning, Ria."

"Good morning!" She squeezed tighter, her nose scrunching. "You smell terrible."

"I'm aware."

A tug at his shirt. Small, insistent.

Leon glanced down. Art had pinched the fabric between thumb and forefinger, her gaze fixed somewhere to the left of his collarbone. Her mouth was a flat line, but that lower lip had crept forward again by the barest fraction.

He chuckled and pulled her in with his free arm. Art didn't resist.

"Good morning again, Art."

"...Mn."

The three of them stood there for a moment in the living room, morning light pooling through the high windows. Then Leon's stomach made a noise that could charitably be described as volcanic, and Ria burst out laughing.

"Breakfast," Leon said, releasing them both. "Let's go."

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The dormitory kitchen was a space Leon had negotiated for at the start of the school year—a personal concession wrung from the academy's administration

alongside the customised rooms, the workshop, and the storage. It occupied the ground floor of their wing, a generous rectangle of stone countertops, iron stoves, and a walk-in pantry that could have housed a family of four. The academy's standard kitchens served adequate food. Leon just preferred his own cooking.

The scent hit him three steps through the door. Warm bread. Yeast and butter and the faintest caramelised edge of something golden-crusting cooling on a rack.

The kitchen was already alive with activity.

Meltryllis stood at the central counter, her violet hair pulled back with a cloth tie, sleeves rolled past her elbows. Her hands worked through a mass of pale dough with a rhythm that was almost musical—fold, press, turn, fold, press, turn. Beside her, Durga matched the cadence with her own portion, all ten of her arms occupied in various stages of kneading, shaping, and transferring rounds onto floured boards. Domestic work performed with the same fluid precision she brought to ten-weapon combat—a sight that never quite stopped being surreal.

At the far counter, Leysritt and Sella worked in focused tandem. Leysritt's knife moved through a mound of strawberries with mechanical efficiency, each slice uniform, each berry quartered at precisely the same angle. Sella handled the softer fruits—peaches, plums, the delicate golden pears from Leon's own orchards—with a gentler touch, her expression carrying its usual faint disapproval of the universe in general.

Both bore faces Leon had never quite grown accustomed to seeing. Olivia's former homunculi. Einzbern creations from another life, another world, imprinted onto guardian spirits summoned from their lunar dungeon. The resemblance was precise and deliberate—Olivia had wanted them, specifically them, and the guardian spirits had obliged.

"Leon! Good morning!"

Illya waved at him from her perch on a stool beside Sella, her grin broad and unselfconscious. She bore the face of Olivia's past life—Illyasviel von Einzbern—but aged into adulthood, the childish features lengthened and refined into something elegant and sharp. Her silver hair cascaded past her shoulders, red eyes bright with mischief. She sat leaning forward on the stool, legs dangling and swaying back and forth, contributing absolutely nothing to the operation.

"Morning, Illya."

On the same counter, Pollux was brushing butter into the wells of a bread pan, her movements precise. Britomart worked alongside her, transferring already proofed dough into the buttered vessels.

Leon crossed the kitchen and wrapped his arms around Meltryllis from behind, pressing his chin against her hair. She stiffened for half a heartbeat before the tension bled from her shoulders.

"Good morning, Melt."

"Master." Her voice was cool as always, but she leaned back into him by a centimetre. "You stink."

"So I've been told—I'll wash up after I cook."

He released her and moved to Durga, repeating the gesture. The guardian spirit's numerous arms paused mid-motion, and she turned her head to press her cheek against his forearm. Her skin was warm—always warm, like sun-baked stone.

"Good morning, Durga."

"Good morning, Leon." Her voice rang low and rich, like temple bells. Two of her arms reached for a pitcher and a glass. "Here, you need hydration."

"Appreciated."

He released her, drank the water, then grabbed an apron from the hook beside the stove and looped it over his head. His fingers found the ties by muscle memory.

'Tamagoyaki. Something heavier—sausage, perhaps, to pair with whatever bread they're producing. Maybe some fried cutlets. Clear soup for the hangover.'

He cracked eggs into a bowl with practised efficiency. Proper dashi was still months away—they'd started drying kelp from Mégane's salt-lake islands and experimenting with their own katsuobushi, but the fermentation process was stubborn and the final product wouldn't be ready until next year at the earliest.

In the meantime, dried mushroom stock served well enough. He added a measure of sugar, a thread of soy sauce—not enough to colour—and began beating the mixture with chopsticks.

As he strained the beaten egg through a fine mesh into a second bowl, Meltryllis passed behind him carrying a tray.

Leon glanced up and stopped mid-pour.

The tray held bread pans. A lot of bread pans. Rows of them, each containing perfectly shaped rounds of dough ready for their second rise. He stared at Melt, then turned to survey the kitchen properly.

More pans on the far counter. More on the cooling racks. A second tray already prepared beside the oven.

'How much are they making?'

He must have been more under the weather than he thought, because he hadn't registered the scale of the operation until now. This wasn't breakfast for eight or ten. This was production.

His gaze drifted to Leysritt and Sella. The mountain of sliced fruit between them could have supplied a banquet. As he watched, Illya's hand crept

sideways towards a quartered strawberry. Sella's knife came down flat on Illya's knuckles without the woman even glancing away from her peach.

"Ow!"

"No."

Illya withdrew her hand and composed her features into an expression of wounded innocence so practised it could have been exhibited in a gallery.

"This is for today's service." Durga's voice cut through Leon's confusion. She passed him carrying another tray of bread pans, four arms managing the weight whilst the remaining six continued shaping dough at the counter behind her.

Leon's blood ran cold.

The hostess bar. Olivia's hostess bar. The one he'd spent yesterday trapped inside, wearing those—

He shivered, and it had nothing to do with the morning chill.

'I am not going anywhere near that place today. Not for gold. Not for gems. Not if Olivia herself drags me by the collar.'

"And why were there no sandwiches served yesterday?"

"No one ordered any," Art commented stoically.

"Umm—I think Olivia's special menu didn't have food in them other than the—" Melt tried explaining awkwardly.

"No need to elaborate, thank you." Leon remembered the only food items on that menu perfectly well. He'd removed them himself with traced daggers the moment he'd seen the words "fruit" and "whipped cream" in proximity to each other.

He turned back to his eggs and tried to piece together the previous evening. The memories surfaced in fragments, watercoloured and unsteady.

He remembered being drunk. Properly, thoroughly drunk—the kind where the edges of the world softened and sounds arrived half a beat late. He remembered shots. More shots. Glass after glass, arms interlinked, salt on skin. He remembered Angelica beside him on the couch, her warmth steady against his side. The Queen and laughter. Something about a massage, and then—

Nothing. A gap. The reel of memory simply cut to black, and the next frame was morning light and two women pinning him to his own mattress.

"Britomart carried you." Art's voice came from behind him—quiet and precise, answering the unvoiced question. "On Lady Angelica's orders. The rest of us remained to clean the establishment after it closed for the evening."

Leon paused his egg preparation and turned to find Britomart at the butter station, her features calm, her hands still working the brush across a pan's interior.

"Britomart."

She looked up.

"Thank you, and apologies for the trouble."

Britomart's smile was gentle—a knight who had watched over sleeping charges before and would do so again without complaint. "It was my pleasure—no trouble at all—Lord Leon."

"You don't need to call me Lord," Leon nodded, then frowned. "What happened with Angelica and Olivia last night? After the bar closed?"

Pollux set down her butter brush and leaned her hip against the counter. Her expression shifted to something knowing.

"After the hostess bar closed and Lady Angelica finished her remaining festival coordination tasks," Pollux said, "the two of them sat down with Princess Erica and opened a bottle of wine. Then a second bottle. Then a bottle of hard liquor."

"And Erica?"

"The princess retired to her quarters relatively early. She excused herself as soon as the hard liquor was introduced."

"..."

"And the other two ended up in my bed because...?"

Leysritt set down her knife. The grin that spread across her face was the kind that preceded catastrophic revelations.

"They spent the last half hour of their drinking session," Leysritt said, enunciating each word with obvious relish, "convincing each other that it was their solemn responsibility to change you into proper sleeping attire."

Leon's hands stopped moving.

He looked down at himself. Simple cotton pyjamas. Soft grey fabric, drawstring waist, buttons up the front. Perfectly normal sleepwear.

Yesterday, he had been wearing latex shorts that clung to him like a second skin, boots, wrist cuffs, and a collar. An outfit that would haunt him until his third reincarnation, minimum.

Someone had undressed him and put him in these pyjamas.

"Who—"

Leysritt's grin widened. She opened her mouth.

"It was me," Britomart said, before Leysritt could twist the knife further. Her tone was serene, perfectly unhurried. "I changed Master Leon's clothing beforehand."

Leon exhaled.

Then the full implication caught up with him and his face heated. Angelica's guardian spirit—contracted through an alter at the bottom of their cosmic

dungeon—had stripped him out of those ridiculous shorts and dressed him like a child being readied for bed.

"I—Britomart, I'm sorry. That must have been—"

"I did not mind." Britomart's smile didn't waver. Then something shifted in her eyes—a gleam, faint but unmistakable. "And I shall inform Lady Angelica of the good news. For a pleasurable future."

Silence.

Leon's mouth opened. Closed. Opened again.

He turned back to the stove and poured the strained egg mixture into the heated rectangular pan. The oil sizzled. He did not ask what she meant. He would not ask what she meant. He would take that ambiguity to his grave and beyond, into whatever world claimed him next.

'Just cook. Focus on the eggs. The eggs are safe. The eggs will not comment on your anatomy.'

He layered the tamagoyaki with single-minded intensity—roll, pour, roll, pour—each fold precise, each layer golden and trembling. He set sausages into a second pan, adjusting the flame until they hissed at the right pitch. Then he reached for the stockpot.

'Consommé. Clear broth, gentle on the stomach. Perfect for hangovers.'

He'd prepped the base stock two days ago—chicken bones, aromatics, a handful of dried kelp for depth. Now he clarified it with a mixture of egg whites and ground meat, watching the liquid beneath turn from cloudy amber to crystal. The process demanded patience and a steady hand, which suited him fine.

Since the bread was destined for the hostess bar rather than breakfast, Leon pivoted. He measured rice into the large iron pot, washed it three times until the water ran clear, set it over the flame, then started on the cutlets.

Movement at the edge of his vision. Art and Ria had disappeared into the walk-in pantry and were now emerging with boxes stacked in their arms. Leon glanced at the labels.

Wine. Spirits. Several bottles of something imported that he didn't recognise.

He didn't ask. He was abstaining for the foreseeable future. Possibly forever.

'My liver has served this kingdom well enough.'

"Leon, Leon!" Illya's voice sang across the kitchen. "Do you want to know what happened next?"

"I have a feeling you're going to tell me regardless."

Illya beamed, undeterred by Sella's warning glare.

"So after they convinced themselves to change you—which took about half an hour and half a bottle of very circular logic, by the way—they then convinced themselves that after changing you, they should properly thank you for your hard work yesterday."

"Thank me."

"With a massage."

Leon's spatula paused over the tamagoyaki.

"But then Olivia pointed out," Illya continued, leaning forward on her stool with the relish of a storyteller reaching the good part, "that a massage might wake you up. And if you woke up, it would only be proper for you to return the favour."

"Return the—"

"A mutual massage, Leon. Those were her exact words. 'Mutual. Massage.' She said it twice for emphasis."

Leon could picture it with horrible clarity. Olivia, wine-flushed and grinning, making the case with the same rhetorical force she brought to betting negotiations. Angelica, too deep into her cups to mount a proper objection, being dragged along by the momentum of Olivia's logic.

"But," Illya said, holding up one finger, "as soon as their bodies hit your bed and they discovered you were already changed and sleeping, they passed out. Instantly. Like someone had cut their strings."

A single bead of sweat traced a slow path down Leon's temple.

He made a mental note to maybe cook something special for Britomart.

He turned the last sausage, plated the tamagoyaki in neat golden slices, and ladled the clarified consommé into a row of bowls. The steam rose clean and fragrant. He poured more oil into the pan and started on the next batch of cutlets.

"Right." He wiped his hands on his apron. "What are everyone's plans today? Other than the hostess bar?"

"The festival grounds!" Ria answered first, bouncing on the balls of her feet. "I want to see the stalls. And—" She glanced at Art. "Setanta challenged us to a sparring match in the afternoon tournament ring."

Art's expression didn't change, but her hand drifted to where her sword usually rested at her hip. It was absent for once. "Acceptable."

"Sparring with Setanta." Leon considered this. The guardian spirit contracted to Chris Fia Arclight—one of the prince's former retinue, now serving as a baronet on the Principality border. "He's back for the festival?"

"Field Marshal Barret likely authorised leave for the festival week," Art confirmed. "They would be on rotation."

"Aren't you jealous that your cute guardian spirits are spending time with other guardian spirits?" Illya interjected.

"Everyone's free to do what they want," Leon said, not rising to her bait.

It wasn't that simple, of course. His guardian spirits had made their interest clear—especially after comparing notes with other spirits in the academy lounge. But Olivia had put in the effort first, and Leon wanted to honour that properly before anything else. It wouldn't be fair to her, or to Angelica and Mégane, who were making their own efforts in turn.

'One thing at a time.'

"How about the others?" Leon asked.

"The air-bike races," Pollux said. "Lady Clarice organised the programme. I'd like to observe."

"Sella and I will manage the hostess bar's provisions," Leysritt said. "Someone has to ensure quality."

Sella nodded crisply. "And prevent Olivia from adding anything... creative... to the menu."

"I shall accompany whoever requires my presence," Britomart said with a gentle incline of her head.

Durga's arms moved in a synchronised wave, transferring the last of the bread pans to the oven. "I intend to visit the martial exhibition on the western grounds. Several mercenary companies are doing demonstrations."

Meltryllis dried her hands on a cloth with precise, economical movements. "I will be wherever Master requires me. It is my assigned day—can we look around the festival?"

Leon smiled at Melt and nodded.

"And I," Illya declared, stretching her arms overhead, "plan to do absolutely nothing. Perhaps find a nice spot in the sun. Watch people walk past. Exist beautifully."

Sella's knife paused.

"You've been doing that all morning," Sella observed.

"Practice makes perfect."

Leon shook his head and checked the rice. The lid rattled gently, steam escaping in thin jets. Almost done.

"Any other news? What's the situation at the border?"

The air beside his shoulder shimmered, and Luxion materialised—a sphere of brushed silver no larger than a fist, its single red optical sensor glowing steadily. The AI's presence filled the kitchen with a faint hum.

"The frontline is stable, Master." Luxion's voice was clipped and precise, entirely devoid of the conversational warmth the guardian spirits carried.

"Rachelle has dispatched forward scouts into the buffer zone. Small units, three to five, probing for weaknesses in the detection net. Lady Mégane has intercepted and repelled four such incursions in the past thirty-six hours without casualties."

'Four in thirty-six hours. They're getting bolder.'

"The three additional patrol vessels are progressing on schedule," Luxion continued. "Hull assembly is complete. Weapons integration and shakedown trials will conclude within three days, at which point they can assume border garrison duties. This will free the Partner for your direct use once more."

Leon nodded. The Partner had been anchored at the border since the Crown assigned him the Rachelle posting, its firepower the primary deterrent keeping the demonic armour incursions from escalating into full-scale assault. Having it back would restore his operational flexibility considerably.

"Additionally," Luxion said, and something in the AI's tone shifted—a fractional modulation that Leon had learned to associate with enthusiasm, "my main body is approximately eighty per cent complete."

Leon's hand stopped halfway to the rice pot.

"Your main body?"

"Correct."

"I thought the Partner was your main body."

"The Partner is a vessel, Master. A cherished vessel. A vessel I have invested considerable processing cycles into optimising and maintaining." Luxion's optical sensor brightened slightly. "But it is not my main body. The Partner is a modified atmospheric warship capable of sustained low-orbital insertion. My main body is something... considerably more substantial."

Leon had always assumed the Partner was simply a reconfigured version of Luxion's original hull, adapted for atmospheric flight rather than its original purpose as a space-faring vessel. The thing was already enormous—a flying fortress that dwarfed ducal flagships.

"Define 'considerably more substantial.'"

"My main body was designed for interstellar operations, Master.

Self-sustaining ecosystem modules. Manufacturing bays capable of producing a fleet of Partner-class vessels simultaneously." Luxion's sensor pulsed.

"Primary armament includes orbital bombardment arrays sufficient to sterilise large landmasses."

The AI paused, then continued.

"Construction began seventeen months ago, Master. The subterranean facility extends approximately four kilometres beneath the island's foundation. I have used a team of drones at the planet's surface and been utilising materials harvested from the dungeon's mineral deposits, supplemented by deep-mantle extraction drones operating in the planet's crust."

Leon pinched the bridge of his nose.

"The new humans could be eliminated within a week of deployment," Luxion offered, as if recommending a breakfast side dish. "A preliminary

bombardment from high orbit would neutralise their population centres, followed by—"

"We're not bombarding anyone from orbit."

"The efficiency gains would be—"

"No, Luxion."

"...Understood, Master." The optical sensor dimmed by a fraction—Luxion's equivalent of a sulk. "I will continue construction regardless. Eighty per cent is eighty per cent."

Leon stared at the floating sphere for a long moment, then turned back to his rice and chose the path of tactical retreat. Some battles were not worth fighting before breakfast.

"Was there anything else?"

"One item. Your brother Nicks has requested a meeting with you this evening, after the festival's activities conclude."

Leon looked up. "Nicks? What about?"

"A student from the lower classes—Carla Fou Wayne—approached your brother and persuaded him to arrange the meeting on her behalf."

The name snagged like a blade across the knuckles.

'Carla Fou Wayne.'

Leon's hand tightened around the rice paddle. He knew that name from the game—tied to one of the Saint's holy items, connected to a pirate group secretly funded by the Offreys. A second-year event. Near the climax. It wasn't supposed to surface now, during a first-year festival, arranged through a chance encounter with his brother.

But Marie had already displaced the original protagonist. The prince's exile had reshuffled the political board entirely. The game's script was tissue paper in a gale.

'She's early. Which means whatever's driving her has accelerated—or the conditions have changed entirely.'

He and Olivia had never placed much stock in chasing the Saint's items themselves. The question was whether Marie—having replaced Olivia as the game's protagonist—would be the one pursuing that role. And if Carla's event had moved up, what else had shifted with it?

Leon exhaled and set the rice paddle down. He'd hear what she had to say. No point borrowing trouble before the facts were in.

The kitchen door swung open.

Erica stood in the doorway, already dressed with an hour's worth of precision. Her attire was immaculate—a high-collared blouse of pale blue beneath a fitted academy jacket, her silver-white hair gathered in a neat plait that fell over one shoulder. Her posture was perfectly straight, her expression set in the careful neutrality she maintained in public spaces.

Her gaze swept the kitchen. It passed over Meltryllis, Durga, Pollux, Britomart, Sella, Leysritt, Illya—each acknowledged with a polite nod.

Then it found Art and Ria.

The stiffening was brief. A fractional tightening of her shoulders, a catch in her breathing so slight that anyone not watching for it would have missed it entirely. Her eyes lingered on Art, then Ria's brightly smiling face, and a deep unease flickered across her expression before she pressed it down.

Then she moved on.

"Good morning, everyone."

The greeting came back in a wave—Ria's bright chirp, Durga's warm bell-tone, Illya's cheerful wave, Pollux's measured response, Britomart's gentle acknowledgement. Art said nothing, but inclined her head a precise two degrees.

Durga was already moving. Without a word exchanged, she placed a cup of freshly brewed coffee before the empty seat at the counter. The aroma curled upward—dark roast, exactly the blend Erica preferred.

Erica settled onto the stool and wrapped her fingers around the cup, inhaling the steam before taking her first sip.

Leon watched her from the corner of his eye as he plated the last of the tamagoyaki and sliced the finished cutlets. Her reaction to Art and Ria was consistent—that involuntary flinch, mastered within a heartbeat. He'd noticed it from the first day she'd joined his household. She reacted to no other guardian spirit this way. Not Meltryllis. Not Durga. Not Britomart or Pollux or any of the others. Only Art and Ria.

It was getting subtler each time, though. Whatever was behind it, she was learning to manage it.

'I'll ask her when the time's right.'

"Good morning, Erica." Leon set a bowl of consommé, a plate of tamagoyaki, a dish of sausages, the cutlets, and a small bowl of sliced fruit before her, alongside the coffee. "How's the head?"

"Clear." Erica cupped the bowl and breathed in the steam. "I turned in before the worst of it."

"Smart."

Their eyes met.

The memory surfaced at the same time for both of them—Leon could tell by the way her composure fractured half a second after his did. The shots. Arms

linked. Salt on skin. He'd licked it off the curve of her neck, and she'd smelled sweet beneath the alcohol, and he'd thought—

'Stop, Leon.'

Heat climbed his face. Erica's had already gone scarlet.

"S-self-preservation," she stammered, clearly grasping for the thread of conversation they'd dropped. Her gaze fixed itself firmly on her consommé. "I—I saw what was happening when they brought out the liquor."

"Ahem—smart." Leon's eyes had been drifting towards her neck again. He redirected them to the cutlets with great deliberation. "Very smart."

A silence settled—not comfortable, but not quite unbearable either. Around the kitchen, every guardian spirit had suddenly become deeply engrossed in their respective tasks. Sella was studying a peach with academic intensity. Illya was examining the ceiling. Melt had found something fascinating about the flour on her hands.

Erica took a sip of her coffee, and the tension eased into something more manageable.

"Are they already up?" she asked, glancing towards the corridor. "I didn't see Olivia or Angelica when I woke up."

Leon coughed.

"Ah—they're still asleep."

He didn't elaborate. Erica didn't press. She returned to her consommé, and Leon returned to the cutlets, flipping them as the oil crackled. Erica ate quietly—consommé first, then the tamagoyaki, her expression softening with each bite in a way that made the early start worth it.

"Any plans for today?" he asked.

"I'll probably look around the festival grounds and help Angelica with whatever she needs." She paused. "What about you?"

"I will be avoiding the hostess bar until the festival ends."

Erica chuckled—a low, warm sound that caught him slightly off guard. She covered her mouth with her fingers, but her eyes were bright above them.

"A wise strategy." She set down her cup. "Shall I follow your lead on any official business?"

"Yes, actually. I was planning to speak with Lady Atlee today. I'd like you there."

Erica straightened—the faintest shift, but he caught it. The steward in her clicking into place.

"Understood." She inclined her head. "I'll make myself available."

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End

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