

Fate/Knights of the Heroic Throne

Chapter Intro

Human order: Restored.

History: Preserved.

But what of the ones who made it possible?

Heroic Spirits—echoes of legends, bound to vessels, fated to fade without remembrance.

But a wish was made.

One last miracle from humanity's saviour—
that her fallen companions might live once more.

Story Starts

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Chapter 6.1 -

The Tyrant's Last Festival

Shink. Clink. Swoosh. The familiar symphony of steel sang through the night air as Arturia landed on her feet, the soft thud of her boots against the forest floor barely audible beneath the whisper of wind through ancient branches. She adopted a low stance, knee lunging forwards whilst her other leg extended back in perfect balance, muscles coiled like springs beneath her training attire. The cool night air kissed her bare arms, raising goosebumps that had nothing to do with temperature and everything to do with anticipation.

She lowered her sword until its tip hovered inches from damp earth, blade catching starlight through the canopy. Her posture appeared relaxed—a deliberate façade masking the predatory tension thrumming through her. The weapon's weight felt familiar as breathing.

It was just tit-for-tat, after all. The thought flickered through her mind with dark amusement as she regarded her opponent across the small clearing they'd claimed as their own. Shirou held an equally foolish guard: Kanshou low and

to the front, angled downwards—oh-so-tempting bait that made her fingers itch to close the distance—whilst Bakuya lay parallel to his leg, blade positioned forwards for a quick riposte. She could practically taste the challenge in the air between them, metallic and sharp like a well-honed edge. Well, both blades were blunted.

But even blunted blades could still tear flesh if one wasn't careful.

He'd abandoned his usual wide stance tonight. That posture was only meant for opponents who fought him for the first time and didn't know about his near-suicidal yet seemingly clairvoyant style. Such trickery was rendered moot when this was a nightly routine—especially with new staff helping at the restaurant—so such formalities were unnecessary.

New moon shadow draped everything in velvet black. Their eyes had adjusted, pupils drinking available starlight. This deep in the forest, the canopy swallowed sound. No curious ears would intrude on their steel-song tryst, where restraint could be abandoned.

Loam and decay filled her nostrils, mingling with crisp air and the metallic kiss of their weapons. Distant raptor-cry echoed through darkness, then silence.

Arturia's smirk issued a clear invitation: lead this dance. Golden eyes gleamed, predator waiting to strike.

And so he acquiesced.

Shirou dashed forwards, both arms crossed over his chest in an 'X' formation, the backs of his blades flanking his face like gleaming shields. The starlight caught the metal surfaces, sending brief flashes across the forest floor. Then, with fluid precision, he suddenly hurled the pair through the darkness.

The twin blades carved through the night air with an eerie whistle, their rotation creating a hypnotic spiral that momentarily obscured her view of the fast-approaching former Counter Guardian.

Arturia's muscles coiled as she batted the spinning projectiles away with practised ease, her blade meeting theirs with sharp metallic chimes that echoed through the silent canopy.

But the thrown weapons had served their purpose. Even as the last reverberations faded, Shirou had already planted his back foot firmly against the soft earth, his forward leg angled inwards in perfect form. A familiar long blade materialised in his grasp—far longer than practicality suggested, so much so that its original owner had christened it the laundry-drying pole. He held it at eye level, tip pointing directly at Arturia's heart like an accusation. The forest held its breath.

"Hiken," Shirou intoned, his voice carrying the weight of countless battles, the syllables rolling off his tongue with ritualistic precision as he pushed his front foot forward, closing the distance between them.

"Tsubame gae—oh fuck!" The technique dissolved into very modern profanity as Arturia's instincts overrode any sense of fair play. She had recognised the stance, knew what devastating technique was coming, and refused to let him complete it.

In one fluid motion, she had entered his space like a striking viper, slipping past his extended blade and jamming the pommel of her sword directly into his throat. The impact sent shockwaves up her arms—solid, satisfying contact. Shirou's planned attack crumbled as his airway compressed, reducing his deadly technique to a strangled cough.

Using his momentum against him, Arturia's free hand found her own blade in a half-sword grip. The crossguard hooked his neck as she twisted, using the sword as a lever whilst her leg swept through his stance. Metal and muscle

worked in concert, leveraging him off-balance. Gravity claimed him, sending the former hero tumbling to the forest floor with a muffled thud against the carpet of fallen leaves.

Victory tasted sweet on her tongue as she followed him down, her blade's point finding the vulnerable hollow of his throat whilst he was still hacking and wheezing. "Yield," she declared, golden eyes gleaming with triumph in the starlight.

But even as the word left her lips, she felt the cold kiss of steel against her neck. Despite his compromised position—sprawled on his back, throat still working to draw proper breath—Shirou had managed to trace a fresh Kanschou, its familiar weight now pressed against her jugular in silent threat. A draw, then.

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Padmé settled at the foot of the sleeper, her datapad casting a soft blue glow across her face as she reviewed tomorrow's speech for what felt like the hundredth time. The words blurred together—unity, reform, our shared future—but she forced herself to focus, knowing that every phrase would be scrutinised by both supporters and detractors alike. The weight of tomorrow's demonstration pressed against her shoulders like a physical burden, and she found herself unconsciously tensing as she scrolled through her carefully crafted arguments.

Behind her, Rabbine's gentle touch was a welcome contrast to the anxiety threading through her thoughts. The newest member of their circle worked with quiet diligence, the sonic dryer humming softly as warm air flowed through Padmé's hair. Rabbine's fingers were surprisingly skilled as she wielded both the dryer and brush, sectioning and smoothing with the kind of methodical care that spoke of practice.

"Your hair's so lovely, Padmé," Rabbine murmured, her voice carrying that eager-to-please warmth that had quickly endeared her to them all.

Padmé hummed in contentment as she thanked Rabbine.

"You know, you should probably stop stressing about your speech tomorrow," Tsabin said from behind her, right beside Rabbine.

Beside them, Arturia sat with characteristic poise despite the domestic setting, her own datapad balanced in her lap whilst Tsabin worked behind her with practised efficiency. The blonde's golden eyes moved rapidly across her screen, and Padmé couldn't help but notice the increasingly sharp taps of Arturia's thumbs against the device. The telltale signs were unmistakable—Arturia had found herself embroiled in yet another heated forum debate, her regal composure barely containing what was clearly becoming a rather spirited exchange of views.

Su Yan and Mara were back at their apartment, volunteering to finalise things for tomorrow. Padmé felt a pang of guilt knowing how much work they were shouldering whilst she sat here being pampered. *'They're probably exhausted,'* she thought, imagining Mara's gentle but persistent way of triple-checking everything, her warm voice likely strained from coordinating with volunteers all evening.

Mara would be methodically working through her lists—double-checking their equipment for the medical station, confirming with volunteers who might have last-minute questions or concerns, verifying first aid supplies with the kind of thorough attention that made everyone feel safer. Padmé could picture her friend's amber eyes growing tired as she cross-referenced inventory sheets.

Meanwhile, Su Yan would be channelling her boundless energy into the technical preparations—setting up all of their presentation materials in the holoprojectors, testing equipment with that infectious enthusiasm that made even mundane tasks seem exciting, finalising the datacards to be distributed

to attendees. But she'd also taken on coordinating security arrangements, which meant dealing with logistics that required her to tone down her natural playfulness for more serious conversations. *'She's probably bouncing between her usual bright energy and forcing herself to sound authoritative,'* Padmé mused, knowing how Su Yan struggled when she couldn't just be herself.

'Maybe I could arrange for Shirou to give them one of those amazing massages,' she chuckled softly at the thought. The previous evening flooded back to her—everyone growing increasingly concerned as her stress levels spiralled, their worried glances and gentle suggestions finally culminating in them physically having to drag her into accepting a massage session from Shirou.

She could still feel the phantom sensation of it: his hands working methodically along her shoulders, finding knots of tension she hadn't even realised were there. The scent of the warming oils he'd used—something with jinsol extract and aleudrupe essence—had filled the room with calm. Her muscles had been so rigid from weeks of hunching over planning documents that she'd nearly gasped when he'd first applied pressure to her neck. But then, gradually, wonderfully, she'd felt each band of stress begin to dissolve under his patient, skilled touch.

The way he'd worked down her spine, firm but never painful, drawing out tension that had been building for months. Her breathing had deepened without her realising it, the constant hum of anxiety in her mind finally quieting as warmth spread through her limbs. By the end, she'd felt boneless, her thoughts clearer than they'd been in weeks—as if someone had lifted a weight she'd forgotten she'd been carrying.

'But then again, Su Yan does take advantage of that privilege,' Padmé thought wryly, her lips quirking upwards as she recalled how their foxy member seemed to have an uncanny ability to time her 'exhaustion' with Shirou's availability. The girl would appear at The Empty Pantry with dramatically slumped shoulders and an exaggerated sigh, claiming the weight of

organising youth programmes had left her utterly spent. Within minutes, she'd somehow manoeuvred the conversation towards therapeutic massage, batting those golden-brown eyes with such innocent determination.

An involuntary smile decorated Padmé's face as she looked back on the past two weeks, warmth spreading through her chest at the memories. The Empty Pantry—which was apparently a reference to Arturia's ravenous diet, something that had made them all laugh when Shirou had explained it with that characteristic dry humour of his—had become a second home to their little group.

It also didn't help that the food and their bathing facilities were absolutely top-notch. The thought of Shirou's carefully prepared meals made her stomach rumble softly—dishes that somehow managed to be both comforting and sophisticated. But it was Arturia who had introduced the term she called 'naked friendship'—a concept that had initially made Padmé's cheeks flame crimson with embarrassment. The former king had explained it with such matter-of-fact dignity that it had somehow transformed from scandalous to sacred: everyone, minus Shirou of course, bathing together as some sort of bonding ritual—especially when washing each other's backs.

Plus, it also helped that their heated tub could fit everyone comfortably, the warm water and rising steam creating an intimate sanctuary where conversations flowed as freely as the valia blossom bath oils.

Though Padmé felt a persistent knot of guilt tightening in her stomach as she observed that Shirou took on a much greater burden accommodating them all—the way his shoulders would set with quiet determination as he prepared extra meals, maintained additional linens, and ensured their comfort without ever voicing complaint—she and the girls had offered to contribute to utility and food costs as well. The relief in his silver-grey eyes when they'd insisted had been worth every credit.

They'd also embraced the term which Shirou had introduced, apparently originating from his own country on the planet they'd previously resided on: 'touban'. This person would be responsible for helping Shirou maintain the facilities for a certain number of hours on a designated day.

Her thoughts, of course, drifted to their first night here. A blush formed as she was reminded of Shirou, then Arturia, walking in on Tsabin and her in a very compromising position. Her eyes drifted towards the lounging Arturia, who had revealed that she was a King—not a queen—but a King back in their home—

"Shirou! What happened to you?" Eirtama gasped.

Padmé's thoughts were interrupted as she looked up to see Shirou in his usual restwear bottoms and a loose white shirt. She could hear Rabbine gulp behind her; even though Shirou's shirt was loose, it still emphasised his fit body.

He was towel-drying his short white hair, which lay flat due to dampness, and there was quite a sizeable bruise on his neck.

"Shirou!" Padmé stood up, and both she and Eirtama approached the tall, dark-skinned restaurant owner as he awkwardly rubbed at his neck, shooting a dirty look at Arturia, who averted her eyes when everyone turned to her.

"Tsch... He was about to cheat," she grumbled quietly, but the defensiveness left no doubt about who was the culprit.

"I wasn't—that was a perfectly legitimate technique, and you could have punched or kneed me in the gut... not driven the pommel of your sword into my throat."

Everyone's heads turned between the two during their back-and-forth—another spat that would probably lead to nothing, just another night at The Empty Pantry residence.

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Padmé looked up to the ceiling of The Empty Pantry's humble residence, a small studio apartment meant for two. Lately, their band of seven had been welcomed—typically through Arturia's grace—with such consistency that the gesture itself had transformed into simple courtesy.

About five days into their constant presence—at this point, Eirtama had already pragmatically proposed they should contribute to the mounting expenses by the third day, as it certainly wasn't economical to accommodate seven hungry souls daily, adding to Arturia's already formidable appetite and less than ideal palate—Shirou's left eye had developed a persistent twitch. The telltale muscle spasm accompanied his increasingly frequent muttered complaints about 'feeding strays after operating hours.'

Cost alone would have been manageable, Padmé knew, observing subtle tension in his shoulders as he moved through the kitchen space. But the true burden lay in accumulating responsibilities: endless meal preparation cycle, perpetual tidying of makeshift communal space. Most daunting: bathroom cleaning, where hair had become a problem—with eight women using it almost daily. Even soaps left residue that, uncleaned daily, would harden, stain, and accumulate on their otherwise pristine artificial hot spring—as they called it.

After working hours, she'd organised an impromptu council meeting with their entire ragtag group—including their gracious hosts. Simple proposal: if they were to remain regular guests in this haven, they should shoulder a fair share of domestic responsibilities. Morning meal preparation, evening clean-up duties, occasional late-night refreshments when study sessions stretched into darkness—thus began the 'touban' rotation system.

Of course, they took into account that everyone had their own lives and that each has their own career in addition to their reformist movement. So, they

were able to slot in rotational duties divided by eight as Arturia joined in on the schedule. It wasn't really that problematic, as most of these were ten-minute tasks, like putting the clothes and linen into the autowasher, cleaning an assigned section of the bathing area, occasionally tending the garden, and dusting and cleaning the common areas.

Shirou was so happy with the help that one day he just purchased a far larger sleeper—this one taking up the whole width of the studio apartment, enough space for everyone to sleep comfortably instead of doing rotations between the sleeper and the mattresses on the floor.

Padmé could still recall the way his cheeks had reddened when Eirtama had teased him about 'domestic upgrades,' and Su Yan had asked him if this was him officially asking them to 'move in.' Tsabin had piled on, asking if Arturia was the first wife, who would be the second? Third? Up until the eighth?

It also didn't help that Arturia had said that, if anything, Shirou would be the king's consort—or the queen—whilst the others would be her maidens-in-waiting. Much to Shirou's consternation, this led to all the girls calling Shirou 'my queen' for two days, during which his eye began to twitch again.

Teasing aside, he was also already planning on purchasing cleaning droids to reduce everyone's workload—as his was already far reduced now that they had hired staff.

She turned left to see the two people occupying her thoughts, keeping her awake, mind too restless to surrender despite the late hour. Soft ambient glow cast gentle shadows across peaceful faces, and she found herself studying subtle details rarely observed during bustling daylight hours.

Shirou was currently sleeping supine, his body straight and disciplined even in rest, though one of his arms was curved around Arturia, who had migrated during sleep to use his shoulder as her personal pillow. She was snoring quite

cutely—soft, rhythmic sounds that somehow managed to be both endearing and utterly at odds with her regal bearing when awake. A thin trail of saliva had escaped the corner of her mouth, openly flowing down to soak into Shirou's sleep shirt.

His neck still sported a bruise from their earlier altercation—purpled skin that had made several of them wince in sympathy—but, true to his previous reassurance that he healed quickly and that it would probably be gone by tomorrow, the discolouration was already fading to a yellowish-brown at the edges.

Their previous fight was already forgotten, as that sort of spirited exchange was just one facet of their dynamic that she had observed over these weeks of close quarters. Shirou would grumble sarcastically whilst Arturia traded barbs. Still, everyone could see the glint of amusement in their eyes, the way their mouths quirked at the corners despite their stern expressions, revealing it wasn't really serious at all.

Which brought her back to her current reason for being awake: the sneaking suspicion that she and the girls had already surmised—that the reason Senator Palpatine was silently backing them was so he could position her as the next monarch of Naboo, should King Veruna be ousted.

The very thought sent a chill through her limbs, despite the warmth radiating from the bodies sleeping nearby. Her fingers unconsciously tightened around the edge of her blanket as the weight of potential responsibility settled like lead in her chest. A planet's worth of burdens—about half a billion lives hanging in the balance of her decisions, each choice rippling outwards through generations she'd never meet.

The question gnawed at her with relentless persistence: would she be up to such a monumental task? Her heart hammered against her ribs as doubt crept in like poison through her veins. She'd witnessed firsthand how the machinery of politics consumed even the most well-intentioned souls, grinding them

down until they became mere shadows of their former selves. Would she be able to stay true to herself—to the idealistic young woman who still believed change was possible—or would she inevitably become another cog absorbed into the very system she was fighting to reform?

The bitter irony wasn't lost on her: in trying to save Naboo from corruption, she might lose herself entirely. Which led her thoughts to that first night in the rooftop garden of The Empty Pantry—the night Arturia had revealed that she was previously a king, how her kingdom had eventually fallen, and how later she had taken up arms to rid their world of an organisation so vile that it just wanted to see the world burn.

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Flashback...

"So, is it safe to assume that the two of you aren't originally from Naboo?" Tsabin asked Shirou, who was currently enduring her massage of his shoulders. He was presently flanked by both Su Yan and Arturia, who each held a hand as they gave him a palm massage—which, judging from his face, was quite the pleasurable experience. Unless you counted Tsabin's imitation of a clawed crustacean pinching at his shoulders as pleasurable?

"Hmm—what makes you say that?" Shirou asked, the question rolling off his tongue with careful consideration. He'd said they could use his first name, Padmé reminded herself, though the formality of addressing him properly still felt strange on her lips. "Was it the accent or the different style of cooking that gave it away?" His tone carried clear amusement, warmth crinkling the corners of his silver-grey eyes, but she caught the subtle exchange of glances between him and Arturia—a silent communication that spoke of shared secrets and mutual understanding.

"Well, it's all of the above," Su Yan chirped from his side, her hands still working with eager precision along his palms, fingertips pressing into the worn calluses that spoke of years of labour. "While Arturia's accent may pass as

Nabooan, it also sounds a lot more regal—like someone from Alderaan or even Serenno. There's this crisp precision to her vowels that's almost aristocratic." She paused, tilting her head thoughtfully. "But then again, we haven't seen or eaten your particular style of food anywhere else. The spices, herbs, and ingredients are familiar, but the composition and combinations—completely foreign."

"Well, we are not doubting your legitimacy with how you became a citizen of Naboo, by the way," Padmé added quickly, her words tumbling out faster than intended. "You wouldn't be able to start this business through the proper legal routes so easily if there were any irregularities."

Shirou just chuckled in return, the sound low and genuine. But then his expression shifted slightly, becoming more thoughtful. "Well, we came from a planet in the area your Republic would classify as the Unknown Regions."

Padmé felt her eyes widen at that revelation. The Unknown Regions—vast stretches of space beyond the edges of known star charts, far beyond even Wild Space. She saw the same surprise reflected in everyone else's faces: Su Yan's hands momentarily stilling their massage, Tsabin's eyebrows shooting upward.

"We call our planet Earth—which just translates to 'dirt' in Basic," Shirou continued with a slight shrug, seemingly unbothered by the weight of his revelation. "Apparently, our world was discovered a few thousand years ago by Republic scouts—we were even given a name: Caelus Minor. Well, at least that's where we think our planet was when we looked at the star charts of mapped areas in that region."

He shifted slightly, adjusting his position. "Anyway, contact was never established—our planet hadn't developed any space-faring capabilities at the time, and there was a strict non-interference policy back then. We were just about at the border, but sadly, natural events sealed our region. Gravitational anomalies, unstable hyperspace routes, ion storms, black holes—the works."

Releasing his hands from both Su Yan and Arturia, he reached forward for his glass of whisky and took a sip. "Our little blue planet had about two hundred nations within it, and I came from an island nation called Japan. Though a lot of the food I cook at The Empty Pantry is mostly inspired by food from another nation—Italy."

"So how were you able to somehow reach Naboo?" Sasha asked, her voice carrying that rare clarity that emerged when she encountered something genuinely fascinating.

Both Shirou and Arturia released simultaneous sighs—though whether from exasperation or resignation, Padmé couldn't quite tell.

"Well, there's a short version and a long version," Arturia replied with characteristic stoicism.

Padmé felt her instincts engage, sensing the delicate nature of whatever revelation was about to unfold. These weren't just travellers with an interesting origin story.

"How about we start with the short version first, then we branch out from that?" she suggested diplomatically, her voice carrying the careful neutrality she'd perfected in countless political negotiations. She leaned forward slightly, offering them the gift of her full attention whilst maintaining enough distance to let them control the pace of their revelation.

"Well, human order was finally restored after defeating a nameless organisation that wanted to destabilise our whole world," Arturia began matter-of-factly. "But sadly, due to the destabilisation, a lot of facilities weren't working—satellite stations, radar systems, telescopes. Critical infrastructure was unmanned rather than compromised."

"So we were blindsided by a large asteroid that destroyed our planet," Arturia continued in the same measured tone, as if discussing a particularly inconvenient weather pattern. "We were lucky we managed to escape through one of the rare starships that entered our planet at random—probably some space pirates trying to hide from authorities."

Padmé felt her breath catch. Planetary destruction, delivered so casually? She exchanged glances with the others—Tsabin's face had gone pale, Eirtama's eyes were wide with horror. Yet Shirou and Arturia seemed almost... unbothered?

"Our spaceship wasn't really restored properly, so we entered hyperspace randomly," Arturia added with a slight shrug. "Which was quite lucky, since apparently hyperspace travel in our region is next to impossible due to all those gravitational anomalies Shirou mentioned."

The blonde took a sip of her water, completely composed. Padmé found herself struggling to reconcile the magnitude of what was being described with the casual delivery. Had they simply processed their grief? Or...

"Finally, we were picked up by a random bastard named Zelretch," Arturia continued, and for the first time, genuine irritation crept into her voice—more emotion for this mysterious benefactor than for the loss of her entire world. "Who taught us all about the Republic in exchange for helping him with his research for about two years. Then he randomly deposited us into the middle of the bloody Naboo forest, tossed us our identification documents, a credit chip with quite a substantial sum, and some datapads with basic galactic information and left without as much as a 'by your leave.'"

It was Mara who broke first, her gentle voice wavering slightly. "Your entire planet...?" She couldn't seem to finish the sentence, one hand pressed against her chest as if physically holding back the weight of empathy threatening to spill over.

"Yes, that was really unfortunate and quite ironic, since we'd just defeated the blight of our world," Arturia confirmed, pouring the final drops of whisky into her lowball glass.

"Unfortunate? Ironic?" Tsabin echoed faintly, her usual sharp wit seeming to have abandoned her entirely. She'd stopped her aggressive shoulder massage, hands now hovering uselessly above Shirou's shoulders. "You're describing the end of your world as 'unfortunate and ironic.'"

"I'll get another crate of wine," Arturia declared after shrugging in return to Tsabin's statement, standing up as she walked towards the staircase leading to the restaurant's kitchen area.

"But—" Eirtama's voice cracked slightly, her usual boardroom composure crumbling. "Everyone? Your families, your friends, your—" She gestured helplessly, trying to encompass the enormity of it. "Everything?"

Shirou exhaled a weary sigh. "At this point, what was left of the planet was our paramilitary organisation called Chaldea—and maybe a few pockets of leftover civilisation. We're not really making light of it; it's just that we've already moved on from this. The number of lives destroyed by the asteroid was far eclipsed by the devastation our enemy caused. Six billion lives reduced to a few pockets of civilisation and a paramilitary organisation."

He paused, his expression softening slightly. "While a lot of our friends from Chaldea also probably escaped—we saw many of them boarding their own spaceships—we think we were the only ones who escaped the Unknown Regions. For us, knowing that they're probably alive somewhere is enough. Years of fighting were exhausting, so we're actually a little glad that we found peace on this beautiful planet of yours."

"Wait, you guys were military?" Su Yan suddenly asked.

"Oh, Shirou here was a wandering mercenary who'd help people in war-torn areas before Chaldea hired him," Arturia suddenly interjected, holding a case of bottled wine balanced on her shoulders. She placed the case next to the cryocooler and put a few bottles inside.

"And Arturia here was a King before she—"

"A King?!!"

"King?!"

"Not a queen?"

A chorus of questions suddenly burst forth, though Padmé saw both Tsabin's and Su Yan's eyes dip. As she followed their line of sight towards Arturia's crotch—

"Hey! I'm all woman," an indignant Arturia said, stomping her foot. "Tell them, Shirou!"

Grinning, Shirou leaned in conspiratorially, urging them to lean closer as he whispered quite loudly, "She's twice my length and triple my girth."

"I do not! If I'm twice your length, that's about forty-five centimetres, which would just dangle past my ski—" Shirou's face morphed into horror as Arturia unwittingly began revealing things. He stood up quickly, covering Arturia's mouth as she struggled and stomped on his foot. "Disturbing images aside—umm, best we move on. Do you guys want another glass of wine?" Shirou offered, involuntarily hiding behind Arturia as everyone's eyes followed him—hip level.

Taking one of the bottles that had been immediately chilled by the cryocooler, Arturia moved to sit beside Padmé. The cool glass felt pleasantly smooth against her fingertips as she handed it to Eirtama—who had clearly

remembered that the petite co-owner of the establishment couldn't manage corked bottles, judging by Shirou's sheepish, apologetic smile and the way he rubbed the back of his neck.

The lingering awkwardness from Shirou's unfortunate revelation hung in the air like morning mist, but Padmé found herself caught in deeper currents of thought. The word 'King' echoed in her mind, carrying weight she hadn't expected. Her pulse quickened slightly as curiosity wrestled with politeness.

"Umm—Arturia, may I ask something?" The words escaped before she could second-guess herself, her voice softer than intended.

Arturia turned towards Padmé with measured grace, her golden eyes catching the warm light from the overhead fixtures. Eirtama's efficient hands already topped up her glass, the wine catching glints of golden amber. She inclined her head—a gesture that somehow managed to be both regal and encouraging—for Padmé to continue.

The rooftop garden had grown quieter, conversations tapering as Padmé gathered her courage. She could feel everyone's attention focus on her like a spotlight.

"What was it like? Being a king?" The question tumbled out hesitantly, each word carefully chosen yet still feeling inadequate. She could feel her cheeks warm slightly, her question drawing everyone's full attention like ferrous filings to a magnet.

But before Arturia could respond, Shirou's concerned voice cut through the moment like a gentle blade. "Padmé, that might—"

"No, Shirou." Arturia's voice carried quiet authority, though her tone remained gentle. "It's fine."

The blonde set down her wine glass with deliberate care, her golden eyes taking on a distant quality—not lost in memory, but hardened by it. When she spoke again, the warmth had drained from her voice, replaced by something cold and matter-of-fact. "I was a tyrant. All I cared for was my people's prosperity—it didn't matter whether or not I was a hated king."

Padmé watched, transfixed, as something shifted in Arturia's bearing. Despite her petite frame, despite the domestic setting, the woman before her suddenly radiated an authority that made the air feel heavier. This was someone who had commanded armies, who had held the power of life and death, who had worn a crown not as decoration but as burden and weapon both.

"But how could a tyrant—" Padmé began, confusion colouring her voice.

Arturia's dry laugh cut her off, sharp and humourless. "How could a tyrant make a country prosper?" She leaned forward slightly, and Padmé found herself unable to look away from those golden eyes that had gone cold as winter frost. "Easy. By cutting away all the weeds that prevented the plant from fruiting."

She ticked off points on her fingers with the precision of someone reciting a military report. "My people were able to eat full meals every day. They could tend to their fields or pursue whatever profession they chose without interference. They could safely raise families without the fear of adding another mouth to feed during famine. Corruption was slain from root to stem—" Her voice took on a harder edge. "—and I do mean slain. Our enemies at the borders feared us. Trade routes were secure. Crime was virtually non-existent."

"But handling your enemies, even the corrupt ones within your kingdom—do they not have rights?" Padmé asked, her lips quivering, her hands shaking at the revelation.

"Rights? The cretins who would gladly sacrifice a whole town for their own enrichment, for their own greed? I've seen your current monarch, who's openly corrupt. He has rights—but where are the rights of those innocents he trampled on? You told us about those miners—where were their rights then? From what I see here, a centralised government is not far from how I handled my kingdom, but why are the corrupt not punished? Why are they still here? Thousands and thousands of years of republican rule, and the weeds still flourish." Arturia locked eyes with Padmé as she gave her a tired smile.

"I saw my rule as a duty to my people. I didn't care how I was viewed. I stuck to my beliefs and I didn't let anyone cast me astray—it is better to be feared than loved, if you cannot be both, and I was feared."

The words hung in the air like a pronouncement of judgment, and Padmé felt something cold settle in her stomach.

"And I was both right and wrong," Arturia continued, her expression shifting to something more complex—not regret, but weary wisdom.

"I don't understand," Padmé admitted quietly.

"I was right in my rule." Arturia's voice carried absolute conviction. "I have no regrets cutting out corruption my way. I have no regrets giving my subjects good lives, full bellies, safe homes. By every measure that matters—prosperity, security, justice—I succeeded."

Her golden eyes hardened. "But in the end, I was a lone king atop a mountain. No one understood me. Or rather—" She paused, choosing her words with care. "—I never made sure those I trusted could understand me. I should have worked on being loved as well as feared. I should have inspired people, made them understand *why* I did things the way I did, brought them into my confidence instead of simply issuing commands from on high."

The blonde's jaw tightened, old pain flickering across her features. "Maybe then they wouldn't have turned on me when the true threat came. My knights, my most trusted companions—" Her voice went flat. "—abandoned by even Merlin, my advisor. When outside forces began manipulating events, sowing discord, my kingdom tore itself apart from within because there was no... connection. No shared understanding. Just obedience that crumbled the moment it was tested by something beyond my ken."

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"Padmé?"

She startled, blinking. The rooftop garden dissolved, replaced by the dim interior of The Empty Pantry's studio apartment. Arturia had shifted beside Shirou, no longer using his shoulder as a pillow. Golden eyes gleamed in the darkness, alert and concerned.

The blonde was half-propped up, rubbing at her eyes—still groggy, yawning. "Don't you—argh..." Arturia yawned, the sound stretching long and feline. "Have something today? Why are you still up?"

The question hung in the air, and Padmé felt her chest tighten. She could taste the metallic edge of exhaustion on her tongue, feel the gritty burn behind her eyes that spoke of too many hours wrestling with impossible decisions. How to explain the burden that had been crushing down on her shoulders?

"We've already had an inkling for a while, but the Senator for the Chommell sector just told us that he wants me to run for the next monarch of Naboo, once the current King has been ousted."

The words felt strange in her mouth—too large, too consequential. They seemed to echo in the intimate space, bouncing off the warm walls with their

soft lighting. She could hear her own heartbeat in her ears, rapid and unsteady.

"..."

"Oh... was that it?" Arturia said flippantly, then fell back onto Shirou's shoulder with a soft thump, pulling the blankets up to her chin like a cocoon. The casual dismissal should have stung, but there was something oddly comforting about it—as if the enormity of her situation was just another Centaxday evening conversation. "Yo...sh'll be fine," she said, almost back to sleep, her words slurring together like honey.

"Unlike... my—pashelf. You. are... not... alone," her voice trailing off until it was replaced again by her soft, cooing snores, a gentle rhythm that seemed to slow Padmé's racing pulse.

And with that sleepy declaration, the knot in her chest loosened. She looked to her right at her team—Eirtama with her sharp practical wit, Rabbine with her eager energy, Sasha with her quiet strength, and Tsabin with her unwavering loyalty. She could see their faces in the dim light, each one familiar and trusted. The warmth of their presence, the knowledge that she wouldn't have to face tomorrow's challenges alone, settled over her like a blanket.

And with Su Yan and Mara back at their apartment, probably curled up together discussing youth programmes or escaping into holodramas, she had something Arturia had lacked—connection. Understanding. People who would tell her when she was wrong, who would stand with her when she was right, who would keep her anchored to the ground instead of floating alone on some untouchable mountaintop.

The soft sounds of breathing around her, the gentle warmth radiating from the group, the lingering scents of good food and friendship—it all combined to finally quiet the voices in her head. And with that thought, with the reassurance of not being alone, Padmé Naberrie finally found sleep.

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For the first time in a while, silence settled over The Empty Pantry like a comfortable blanket. The familiar hum of the cooling units provided a gentle backdrop as Arturia moved through her morning preparations, the stone composite floors coated with epoxy resin squeaking lightly beneath her dragging foot.

It was about half an hour before opening, and they weren't really expecting many customers in the restaurant proper today, given that the Festival of the Merchant's Boon would draw crowds to the Palace Plaza. Still, Shirou had arranged with the assistant of Cedor Parnell, the head of the Merchant Guild of Naboo, for them to secure a booth at the festival itself.

At this very moment, Shirou was at the Palace Plaza—just about a three-minute walk from the Pantry—with their relatively new employees, setting up that booth amidst the controlled pandemonium of festival preparation. They would mostly be selling pizza slices—simple, portable, and utterly irresistible when served hot from their thermocrates, which could double as a display whilst keeping the food at the right temperature. Burgers and fried tubers would round out the offering, practical choices for festival-goers who wanted something substantial they could eat whilst walking.

They had planned to add some of their signature shaak cheesecake as well, but the extra display case Shirou had ordered remained frustratingly absent. The vendor had promised delivery three days ago, leaving them scrambling to adjust their offerings. Such was the nature of business—adaptation in the face of disappointment.

Currently, she found herself tending to the tuber buns for the shaak burgers, though she was idle for the moment as she monitored their progress through the transparisteel. The heat of the ovens radiated warmth through the kitchen—

"Hey! Look who I ran into," Shirou's voice rang out from the restaurant's back entrance, carrying that particular note of pleased surprise that made Arturia's heart lift slightly. The door's familiar squeak announced their arrival, followed by the light patter of footsteps on the threshold.

In came a cheery girl whose presence seemed to brighten the very air around her. Lessa's turquoise hair caught the kitchen's bright overhead lighting, creating an almost ethereal nimbus around her head. Her eyes, that same dazzling aquamarine that never failed to remind Arturia of shallow tropical waters, sparkled with unmistakable mischief. Her skin bore just the right amount of sun-kissed warmth, speaking of hours spent outdoors beneath Naboo's generous sun, and her athletic build moved with the easy confidence of youth and vitality.

She wore a simple sundress that reached mid-thigh, the fabric light and airy in deference to the day's promised warmth. The garment's cheerful pattern seemed to dance with each step she took. In her hands, she carried a hat woven from dried straw.

"Lessa!" Arturia's face transformed with genuine delight, the careful composure she typically maintained dissolving into something far more natural and warm. Her voice carried a note of surprised pleasure as the two met halfway across the restaurant's kitchen floor, arms opening instinctively for an embrace.

Their hug was enthusiastic and unguarded. Arturia felt the familiar comfort of Lessa's presence, that easy camaraderie that had developed between them over countless shared evenings watching holodramas and their shared obsession with perusing the forums.

"Oh, what's this hard thing?" Arturia inquired with innocent curiosity, her brow furrowing slightly as she felt something solid and unfamiliar pressing against her leg during their embrace. The unexpected object seemed oddly positioned and distinctly metallic.

Across the restaurant, their employees moved with quiet efficiency as they prepared for opening. Tirsia Calven and Isar Pellan, their stalwart full-time staff, worked with the smooth coordination despite it only being their second week. Meanwhile, Lirene Marisi and Ronan Deyvar—their student part-timers who had applied together and maintained an easy friendship—chattered quietly whilst the sounds of tables and chairs being arranged rang through the access door to the dining area.

Lessa's response was characteristically direct as she began to lift her skirt with casual unconcern—

"Hey, Lessa, you might not want to start flashing people as there are others here," Shirou's voice cut through the moment with dry amusement. He continued his work at the plasteel prep tables, placing freshly baked tuber buns on cooling racks with methodical precision.

"So it's fine if it's just you and Arturia?" Lessa shot back with characteristic cheekiness, her voice dancing with barely contained laughter.

Despite Shirou's mild protest, she proceeded to lift her skirt partially, revealing the toned muscle definition of her thighs—evidence of her active lifestyle and regular swimming excursions. Strapped securely to her right leg, positioned for easy access yet concealed beneath her dress, was a compact blaster that gleamed dully in the kitchen's bright lighting.

"Oh, it's just this little beauty," Lessa said with casual pride, deftly unfastening the weapon from its holster and presenting it to Arturia with the care one might show a prized possession. "A Kestrel-12 sidearm. Compact, reliable, and perfectly legal for civilian carry."

The blaster was indeed small, designed for concealed carry rather than intimidation. Its sleek lines spoke of quality engineering and practical design.

Arturia found herself studying the weapon, turning it over, noticing that it was no larger than her petite hands.

"My father insisted I carry this during the festival," Lessa continued, her expression growing more serious as she secured the weapon back in its holster. "Tensions have been rising across Naboo recently, and there's word that things might escalate today. We've heard rumours of a planned political demonstration at the Plaza—father nearly withdrew from the booth he'd reserved at the last minute when those reports started circulating."

The change in her demeanour was subtle but noticeable, the carefree exuberance of moments before tempered by genuine concern. Her fingers lingered on the blaster's grip for a moment longer than necessary, betraying an anxiety she was trying hard not to voice.

Both Arturia and Shirou exchanged a meaningful glance across the restaurant, their expressions carefully neutral even as understanding passed between them like a silent current. They knew with uncomfortable certainty that there would indeed be a demonstration today—their quasi-roommates were at this very moment at the Palace Plaza, making final arrangements for what promised to be a significant political gathering.

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"Here, my good sir, dear madam, would the lovely pair care for a taste?" Arturia's voice carried across the bustling festival grounds with practised elegance, her words crisp despite the ambient chatter and distant music. She held the polished plasteel tray with both hands, its surface dotted with carefully arranged sample slices that still radiated warmth through the metal. The familiar weight of her black-and-white frilled service uniform felt reassuring against her skin, the starched fabric a comforting reminder of routine amidst the festival's cheerful chaos.

"Oh, what are these?" The woman's voice sparkled with genuine interest as she approached, her yellow short-sleeved dress fluttering in the gentle breeze.

Her eyes, bright with curiosity, fixed upon the tray's contents whilst what Arturia presumed was her partner lingered just behind her shoulder, his attention wandering distractedly across the festival's myriad attractions.

Arturia straightened slightly, drawing upon years of regal bearing as she began her practised explanation. "These are this hour's selection from The Empty Pantry's pizza offerings—essentially flatbread adorned with rich tomato sauce and our own handcrafted shaak-cheese mozzarella." She gestured with subtle precision to each variety, her movements economical yet graceful.

"We have our foundational sauce and cheese here." Her open palm pointed to the simplest slice, its golden cheese perfectly melted—fat not separated. "Here you'll find our proprietary sausage blend complemented by sweet roasted peppers that have been caramelised to perfection." The peppers gleamed like jewels between bits of charred skin against the melted cheese.

"Whilst this selection features cured puffer pig belly—thin-sliced and delicately seasoned—paired with earthy mushrooms that were purchased fresh this morning."

Each sample slice had been crafted as a perfect morsel—small enough to be consumed in a single, appreciative bite. The woman's fingers hovered momentarily over the offerings before selecting the sausage and pepper combination. As her teeth sank into the warm slice, Arturia observed the telltale progression: the initial surprise at the flavour's intensity, followed by the slow, dawning appreciation that always marked another victim of Shirou's exceptional cooking. The woman's eyes widened, a soft, involuntary coo of pleasure escaping her lips as she turned to her distracted companion, still holding the remaining half of the sample.

"Darin! You absolutely must try this." Her voice carried an urgency born of culinary revelation.

Without ceremony, she thrust the remaining portion directly into his mouth, catching him mid-protest. Darin's initial complaints—muffled by the unexpected intrusion of food—gradually subsided as his jaw worked mechanically. Arturia watched with quiet satisfaction as his expression transformed, the familiar pause of recognition settling over his features as he covered his mouth instinctively. His brows drew together in concentration as he processed the complex layers of flavour, whilst his partner observed with the knowing smile of someone whose opinion had been thoroughly vindicated.

"See? It's remarkably good, isn't it?" The woman's tone carried the satisfied triumph of shared discovery.

Tugging at her neck, Arturia fished out a data chip that had a polymer string attached to it. "Here's our restaurant's details. We do deliveries, catering, and sit-in dining." Arturia dangled the data chip in front of her as the man named Darin brought out his datapad, quickly inserting it into the proper receptacle, copying their restaurant's details.

"We also have a booth near the entrance of the plaza," Arturia pointed in a direction behind her, conveniently positioned near their own establishment. "We also offer sandwiches and salted fried tubers."

The pair thanked her as they quickly headed in the direction she'd pointed. Arturia moved on, walking around the bustling festival, taking care to balance her tray, offering her sample platter to anyone who caught her eye.

She caught her friend's eye—Lessa, who was currently manning their booth of items, goods, and products from around the planet—and waved back.

This morning, due to their family business picking up, she'd excitedly talked about her parents sending her to university. At the same time, her brother—Tenno—was finally able to take his first step towards becoming a pilot.

"Greetings, citizens of Naboo—"

Arturia's head snapped upward towards the podium, her trained gaze immediately assessing the figure she recognised as Padmé. The young woman stood resplendent yet solemn in what appeared to be a flowing ceremonial gown elegantly merged with elaborate wrapped robes, the rich fabrics catching the afternoon light.

The Palace Plaza faced westward—perfectly positioned to frame speakers against Naboo's famous sunsets—though the midday sun now hung high overhead, casting sharp shadows across the assembled crowd. A ceremonial half-mask adorned her face, leaving only the lower portion exposed, lending her an air of both mystery and authority that befitted the gravity of the moment.

The bustling festival atmosphere evaporated instantaneously at her greeting, as if someone had drawn a curtain across the plaza. Arturia felt the shift like a physical weight—the sudden hush of hundreds of voices, the cessation of laughter and movement. She could practically taste the tension in the air. From her position amongst the crowd, she observed the rigid set of Padmé's shoulders, the way her hands gripped the podium's edge just a fraction too tightly. The girl was steeling herself, drawing upon reserves of courage that reminded Arturia uncomfortably of her own younger self before battle.

"My name is—"

The words died as an enormous shadow swept across Palace Plaza. Arturia's blood chilled as she craned her neck skyward, her instincts screaming warnings even before her mind processed what she was seeing. An enormous freighter hung suspended above them, its bulk blotting out the sun and casting the entire festival into an ominous twilight. The acrid scent of fuel and heated metal drifted down from its engines, mixing with the lingering aromas of festival food in a nauseating cocktail.

The crowd fell into a stupefied silence, hundreds of faces turned upward in collective shock. Arturia heard someone's breathing catch, the soft thud of dropped parcels hitting the ground, the distant whimper of a child who sensed the adults' fear. Then came the mechanical grinding of the cargo bay door opening, followed by the sharp hiss of depressurising atmosphere that sent a shiver down her spine.

Before the first civilian had even begun to process the threat, Arturia's battle-honed reflexes had already catalogued the danger. Armed figures emerged at the bay opening—mandalorians clad in distinctive armour, their angular helmets and flowing capes marking them as followers of some militant sect. The sight of their raised blasters, dark muzzles trained on the helpless crowd below, sent ice through her veins.

"LIORA!" Arturia's voice cut through the stunned silence—not forgetting to use her pseudonym whilst she was publicly incognito—like a blade drawn from its sheath, her command ringing with bone-deep authority. The sound reverberated off the plaza's marble columns, carrying the weight of absolute command that brooked no hesitation. "Organise your team and guide everyone to safety!"

Her body shifted into a combat stance even as the words left her lips, every muscle coiling. The familiar weight of battle settled over her shoulders like an old cloak, and she felt her breathing steady into the measured rhythm she'd learned through years of warfare. The acrid scent of ozone and heated metal from the freighter's engines filled her nostrils, sending her mind briefly to memories of Camelot burning.

The Mandalorians opened fire without warning or mercy, their blasters spitting death in brilliant crimson streaks that painted the twilight air. The harsh crack of energy discharge split the air, followed immediately by the distinctive whine of superheated plasma cutting through the atmosphere. But just as the opening volley erupted from their weapons, a projectile whistled through the air from somewhere to Arturia's right—the familiar sound of Shirou's archery,

the sharp displacement of air by projectiles flying faster than the speed of sound.

She watched with grim satisfaction as the arrow found its mark, embedding itself in the narrow gap between helmet and gorget where the lead Mandalorian's neck joint lay exposed. The warrior's body jerked once, a marionette whose strings had been abruptly severed, before toppling from the cargo bay. The metallic clatter of beskar armour striking marble echoed across the plaza like a death knell.

And with that single shot, bedlam erupted across Palace Plaza like water through a burst dam.

"Everyone, get down!" Arturia bellowed, her voice somehow cutting through the sudden cacophony of screams, blaster fire, and the thunderous rumble of repulsorlifts. The sound tore at her throat, but she forced every ounce of command into those words, willing the civilians to heed her even as panic began to take hold.

At the same time, several grapple lines unfurled from the open bay door like metallic serpents seeking prey, their durasteel cables glinting in the eerie light cast by the freighter's hull. The lines sang with tension as armed figures began their descent—humans, Rodians, Twi'leks, Niktos, Devaronians, and Zabraks dropping into the chaos below with military precision. Meanwhile, the remaining Mandalorians took to the sky on jetpack trails of blue flame, their weapons trained downward as they provided covering fire for their comrades' insertion.

Arturia could taste the acrid smoke on her tongue as she shoved a woman beside her out of the path of another volley, feeling the heat of a near-miss blaster bolt sear past her cheek.

"Everyone follow the organisers, escape in an orderly manner!" she commanded, her voice carrying the iron authority that had once rallied knights

to impossible victories. "We do not want any more needless deaths and injuries—LIORA, NOW! Shirou and I shall hold them off."

Without breaking stride, Arturia grabbed the remaining food samples from her tray and shoved them into her mouth. She seized the serving tray with one hand, feeling its reassuring weight, then hurled it with all the strength her compact frame could muster. The makeshift projectile spun through the air like a discus before striking a descending Devaronian square in his horned skull.

The impact was tremendous—the alien's body went limp instantly, his deadweight pulling down the humans and Nikto sharing his grapple line. All four crashed to the plaza stones in a tangle of limbs and equipment, their weapons clattering away across the marble. Arturia allowed herself a moment of fierce satisfaction before rushing forward, her low-heeled pumps ringing against the stone.

Finally, she heard Padmé's clear voice cutting through the chaos, directing the crowd with the same calm authority she'd shown during the demonstration. "This way! Move toward the northern exits!" The security forces had formed a protective cordon, their energy-based riot shields crackling with power as they returned disciplined volleys at the attackers. The sharp reports of their blasters created a counterpoint to the more chaotic fire from above.

Unfortunately, the festival's security detail was woefully inadequate to withstand a coordinated assault. Several crimson bolts found their marks despite the shields, and Arturia winced as she heard screams of pain from the crowd.

Several more projectiles flew from Shirou's position—she could feel his presence like a calm anchor in the storm of violence. His arrows found their targets with mechanical precision, striking the freighter's weapon emplacements and forcing the airborne Mandalorians to break formation as they sought cover, throwing canisters of smoke screen to block the line of

sight. The distinctive thrum of his bowstring was almost musical against the harsh discord of blaster fire.

"Arturia, catch—I'll assist the security forces!" Shirou's voice carried clearly across the battlefield, and something dark flew towards her through the smoke and chaos.

She caught the case with both hands, feeling its familiar weight—the contingency they'd prepared after Lessa's urgent warnings about rising unrest on the planet. The reinforced container absorbed several blaster bolts as she knelt behind it, the impacts sending vibrations up her arms. Her fingers found the latch by muscle memory, and the case opened to reveal Clarent nestled in its protective foam.

The blade seemed to drink in the crimson light of the blaster fire, its edge gleaming with an almost eager hunger. How ironic that this ceremonial sword of peace bore such a bloody legacy—but there was no time for philosophical musings when lives hung in the balance.

With practised efficiency, she kicked the empty case forward, watching with predatory satisfaction as it struck a charging Devaronian in the shins and sent him stumbling. In one fluid motion, she drew Clarent and brought it down in a devastating diagonal slash that caught the alien from shoulder to groin.

The blade parted flesh and bone with terrible ease, and arterial blood erupted in a crimson fountain that painted the marble stones. The metallic tang filled her nostrils as the body split in two, viscera spilling onto the plaza's floor.

A hush fell over the immediate area as friend and foe alike witnessed the petite woman's devastating display of lethality. Even the sound of distant blaster fire seemed muted in that moment of shocked silence.

"Fierfek! She's a mons—" The curse was cut short as Arturia's blade found another target, her movement so swift it seemed to blur. The second terrorist's

torso separated cleanly from his hips with a wet, sliding sound that would haunt the nightmares of any who heard it.

Shirou continued his deadly harassment from the flanks, his bow singing its lethal song as sword-arrows found their marks with uncanny accuracy. The quiver at his side seemed bottomless, each projectile perfectly crafted for maximum lethality. From the corner of her eye, she saw him overturning vendor tables and reinforcing them with his structural magic, creating impromptu barriers to break the terrorists' lines of sight.

Arturia grabbed the fallen human's blaster, feeling its unfamiliar weight in her off-hand whilst she drove Clarent point-first into the still-warm corpse. Using the skewered body as a grotesque shield, she advanced on her following targets, crimson bolts spattering against flesh and bone as she returned fire with methodical precision.

"For kriff's sake, shoot her down! Shoot her down! Shoot her down!" a voice bellowed from somewhere in the smoke.

"Sir, she's hiding behind all those she killed, using them as shields!" came the panicked response.

The reek of seared flesh and spilt viscera filled her nostrils as she pressed forward, her makeshift shield growing heavier with each absorbed impact. Blood ran down the blade's fuller and onto her hands, making her grip slippery but somehow more certain.

From above her, she could see Mandalorians flying overhead as they rushed towards the escaping crowd, some falling victim to Shirou's projectiles, whilst several explosions followed.

"Kark it all, spread out then, surround—"

But that tactical decision proved fatal as another of Shirou's arrows punched through the Zabrak commander's chest plate with a sound like breaking pottery. The alien toppled backwards, his orders dying with him in a wet gurgle.

"Where are our karking backup?" someone screamed. "Why isn't the freighter firing?"

Arturia's grim smile widened into something more feral as she hurled her latest 'shield' at a cluster of enemies, the dead weight of fifty kilograms of lifeless flesh and bone crashing into their formation with a sickening thud. Bodies scattered like pins before her macabre bowling ball, limbs tangling in a grotesque heap as armoured figures stumbled and cursed. The metallic scent of blood mingled with the acrid smoke that hung heavy in the air, coating her tongue with copper and ash.

Without pause, she leapt after her grisly projectile, Clarent singing through the air as she carved a path of devastation through their scattered ranks. Each swing of her blade was accompanied by the wet, tearing sound of parting flesh and the sharp crack of breaking bone. The metallic tang of spilt blood filled her senses completely now, painting her world in shades of crimson and violence. Her low-heeled pumps squelched against the blood-slicked marble beneath her feet, each step sending small sprays of gore across the once-pristine plaza stones.

"Arturia—incoming!" Shirou's voice cut through the chaos, sharp with warning. She had barely a second to react as she crouched low, her muscles coiling like a predator's. With fluid precision, she delivered another cleaving slash, this time sweeping Clarent in a vicious arc at her enemies' feet. The blade caught legs and ankles, sending screams echoing across the plaza as bodies toppled.

A circular tabletop suddenly whistled overhead, cutting through the air with deadly purpose as it carved a swath through a group of niktos and humans

bundled together. The improvised projectile embedded itself in the marble with a grinding crash, followed by several more that littered her surroundings. The tables stood like bizarre monuments to violence, their plasteel surfaces now dented and scarred, providing her with much-needed cover from the crossfire.

Perfect, she thought grimly, her tactical mind already calculating angles and approaches. The scattered furniture made it far easier for her to pick off the remaining enemies, creating chokepoints and blind spots she could exploit.

"There are more incoming from the south. I'll handle them," Shirou shouted from across the cacophony of blaster fire and screaming. His voice carried that familiar note of grim determination that she knew so well. "The freighter is shifting northward!"

The words barely registered through her battle-focus as she pressed her advantage, every instinct honed by countless conflicts driving her forward.

"Kriffing hells! This is a slave run!" someone declared from behind her, the panic evident in their voice. But Arturia was too preoccupied to assist or even look in that direction—there were still about twenty more enemies surrounding her position, their blasters spitting crimson death as they tried to pin her down behind the makeshift barricades.

She kicked one of the tabletops Shirou had sent as cover, the heavy furniture sliding across blood-slicked marble as she pushed it towards another group of attackers. Using the distraction, she swung Clarent in a devastating arc at yet another cluster of enemies, her blade finding purchase in flesh and armour alike. More victims fell to her relentless assault, their blood joining the growing pool that stained the plaza's once-beautiful stones.

"No, Serin! Veyra—" Padmé's amplified voice suddenly cut through the noise like a knife, her cry of helpless anguish ringing out across the battlefield. The sound was cut off as Padmé's struggle sounds rang out. The sound chilled her

to the bone—she had heard that same tone in her own voice too many times, the desperate cry of a leader watching her people fall.

Arturia ducked behind cover, her heart hammering as she risked a glance towards the source of that tortured scream. Shirou was still preoccupied with the terrorists pressing from the south, his arrows finding their marks with mechanical precision. But from the north, another group had broken through, systematically cutting down the contingent guard with ruthless efficiency. Bodies in ceremonial blue and silver lay crumpled across the marble, their blood mixing with that of civilians and terrorists alike.

The crowd was scattering in blind panic, but many weren't fast enough. She watched in growing horror as groups were gradually captured and herded at gunpoint towards the freighter that now flew low over the plaza, its loading ramp extended and touching the ground like the tongue of some mechanical beast.

Her blood turned to ice as she spotted a familiar shock of turquoise hair in the crowd—Lessa's distinctive locks unmistakable even in the chaos. The young woman was being ushered at gunpoint towards the waiting vessel, her hands raised in surrender as armoured figures pressed blasters against her back.

'Lessa.' The name echoed in her mind with dreadful finality. Sweet, curious Lessa, who laughed at holodramas and asked endless questions about the galaxy beyond Naboo's borders—things they perused through the holonet. Now she was being herded like livestock towards a fate that made Arturia's stomach churn with rage.

'*Fuck holding back,*' Arturia thought, her restraint finally snapping like an overtaxed cable. The air around her seemed to grow heavy and oppressive as energy began to form around Clarent's blade, the very atmosphere crackling with barely contained power. Her golden eyes blazed with inner fire as she channelled her fury into raw magical force.

With a sound like thunder, she unleashed one sweeping mana blast that tore through the air like a scythe of pure destruction. The enemies harassing her from behind her cover were instantly vaporised, their screams cut short as the wave of energy reduced them to nothing more than ash and memory.

The sudden silence that followed felt deafening after the constant cacophony of battle. Turning back around, her blood singing with purpose and rage, Arturia rushed towards the northern part of the plaza. *'I'm coming, Lessa. Tabin. Rabbine. Padmé. Hold on.'*

Her feet pounded against blood-slicked marble as she raced to save her friends, Clarent gleaming with residual magical energy as she prepared to unleash hell upon anyone who dared stand in her way.

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"Kriffing hells! This is a slave run!" someone shouted from behind him, their voice cracking with terror and disbelief. The words hit Shirou like a physical blow, crystallising the horror of what was unfolding around them. His hands moved with practised precision as he shot another volley of sword-arrows towards a cluster of slavers, the familiar weight of his traced weapons a comfort against the chaos erupting around him.

The sound of repulsors roared overhead as a Mandalorian suddenly jet-packed directly in front of him, the warrior's boots striking the marble with a resounding clang. The armoured figure brought out a vibro-machete, its blade humming with lethal energy, and Shirou couldn't help but raise his eyebrows at the supposed warrior. The Mandalorian's stance spoke of confidence, probably thinking Shirou wasn't suited for close combat—a fatal miscalculation that would cost him dearly.

Without hesitation, Shirou reached behind him, his movements fluid and deliberate as he seemingly pulled out Kanshou and Bakuya from behind him. In reality, he simply traced the married blades just as he had with his sword-arrows, the familiar thrum of prana—well, at least it feels like

prana—flowing through his circuits. The weight of the twin swords materialised in his hands, their perfect balance a testament to countless battles fought and won. He could only hope that none of the combatants around him would notice the subtle blue glow of his magecraft, the telltale sign of weapons born from memory and will rather than forged steel—at the very least, he hopes that none who saw shall survive the day.

His thoughts flickered briefly to The Empty Pantry, where he had already sent his employees racing back with urgent instructions. They would be frantically preparing sandwiches, burgers, and pizzas—anything they could manage whilst letting stragglers flood in for protection before sealing the restaurant against the violence spilling through the streets, as his body moved to intercept the Mandalorian's attack.

Not waiting for the armoured warrior to make the first move, Shirou rushed forward with the fluid grace of a seasoned combatant. Bakuya rose to meet the Mandalorian's overhand strike, the clash of blade against vibro-machete sending sparks cascading through the air. The impact reverberated up his arms, but he pressed his advantage, delivering a calculated slice at the warrior's armour with Kanshou. To his surprise, the armour held firm against the Noble Phantasm's edge—even the vibro-machete showed similar resilience. His structural analysis immediately provided the answer: Beskar, the legendary Mandalorian iron, probably composed the entirety of both weapons and armour.

"No, Serin! Veyra—" The desperate cry tore from his throat as his peripheral vision caught the nightmare unfolding behind the Mandalorian. Padmé and her contingent were being dragged bodily towards the freighter now hovering ominously low, its boarding ramps yawning wide like the maw of some mechanical beast. The slavers shoved the young women into the vessel with brutal efficiency, their hands rough and careless as they treated human beings like cargo. Other groups were being herded into a similar spacecraft that suddenly flew in from the north with the same callous disregard for their humanity.

The sight of Padmé's terrified face, of Tsabin's fierce struggle against her captors, of Rabbine's wide-eyed panic—it all crystallised into a single moment of absolute clarity. Something snapped inside Shirou's chest, a cold fury that he recognised from the darkest chapters of his past. Simultaneously, he felt the unmistakable sensation of Arturia's dragon core being unleashed somewhere in the distance, her power washing over the battlefield like a tide of barely-contained destruction.

His movements became sharper, more purposeful as he charged at the Mandalorian before him. Each slash and parry served a dual purpose—to overwhelm his opponent whilst simultaneously manoeuvring him into the perfect position. Step by calculated step, Shirou guided their deadly dance until he achieved the reversal he sought, turning his back to the north so his enhanced vision could catalogue every enemy within striking distance.

"I have created over a thousand blades," he intoned, his voice carrying the weight of countless battles and the authority of one who had walked among legends. This was something he had learned recently through painful trial and experimentation—the ability to invoke specific portions of his aria for targeted magical effects, each word a key to unlock devastating power.

The air itself seemed to shiver with anticipation as another of his sword-arrows suddenly coalesced directly in front of each visible enemy. For a split second that stretched like eternity, their minds struggled to process the impossible sight of gleaming steel materialising from nothing, hovering motionless in the air before them like a promise of swift judgement. Then the blades moved as one, rushing towards each target's exposed neck with the inevitability of falling stars, ending the lives of every slaver within sight in a single, perfectly coordinated strike.

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The cacophony of battle died away like a candle snuffed out, leaving behind an eerie silence that seemed to press against eardrums accustomed to chaos.

All eyes—slaver and civilian alike—turned toward two figures advancing with inexorable purpose through the smoke, debris, and scattered bodies.

Arturia and Shirou moved in perfect synchronisation, their footsteps creating a rhythmic counterpoint as they pushed an overturned festival table before them. The heavy plasteel surface scraped across blood-slicked marble with a grinding shriek that set teeth on edge, the sound cutting through the sudden quiet like a blade drawn across stone. Scorch marks from absorbed blaster fire scorched the table's underside, testament to its recent service as improvised armour.

Behind the makeshift shield, Clarent gleamed wetly in Arturia's grip, its blade still dripping with the lives it had claimed. Shirou's hands remained empty but ready, his stance suggesting coiled violence waiting for the perfect moment to spring. The married blades had been placed within his quiver, his bow slung upon his shoulder.

The crowd of captives—perhaps two hundred souls pressed together like cattle—had gone deathly still. A quarter of their number had already been forced into the newly arrived freighter to the north, its boarding ramp extended like an accusatory finger. The original vessel hovered to its left, its hold packed with Padmé's reformist contingent and other unfortunate festival-goers.

Between the two spacecraft, the remaining civilians huddled in terrified clusters, surrounded by armed slavers whose weapons had suddenly lost their certainty.

The slavers themselves seemed caught in collective indecision, their earlier confidence evaporating like morning mist. Those nearest to Arturia and Shirou took involuntary steps backwards, boots scraping against marble as they retreated from the approaching pair. Blasters that had been trained on cowering civilians now wavered, torn between targets.

One slaver—a Rodian with distinctive green scaling—found his voice first. "Stand down!" His Basic carried a Rodese accent thick with barely-concealed panic. "Stand down or we start executing hostages!" The barrel of his blaster swung wildly toward a Twi'lek woman clutching a young child, then to an elderly human man, then to a cluster of teenagers frozen in terror.

As if his words had broken a spell, dozens of weapons snapped into new positions with mechanical precision. No longer aimed at the two advancing figures, the slavers' blasters now formed a ring of death pointed inward at the helpless crowd. The message was brutally clear—one wrong move, and innocent blood would paint the plaza stones.

"That's right, that's right," another voice called out, this one belonging to a human male whose armour bore the scorch marks of recent combat. His blaster remained trained on a young woman in the crowd, finger resting on the trigger. "You back off, let us finish—"

The slaver's words died as Shirou, seemingly at random, brought out his bow with fluid grace and fired directly upward into the open sky. The arrow arced high, climbing towards the glaring sun above the plaza.

"Wha—what are you doing? Stop that!" The human's voice cracked with confusion and rising panic, his weapon wavering between hostage and the inexplicable threat above.

Arturia tensed beside him, clearly uncertain of his plan, while the slavers grew agitated by the seemingly pointless action. Several tracked the arrow's trajectory skyward, distracted by the curious display.

Shirou fired again. Then again. Arrow after arrow streaked upward in rapid succession, each one vanishing at its apex as he dismissed the traced projectiles mid-air. To any observer, it appeared as meaningless provocation—a warrior wasting ammunition on empty sky whilst hostages' lives hung in the balance.

But it was misdirection, sleight of hand performed in front of civilians and slavers alike.

While their eyes followed the visible arrows climbing toward the heavens, Shirou's actual work manifested unseen. High above each slaver's position, traced blades coalesced in absolute silence—hovering motionless, invisible against the sun's glare, waiting. Dozens of sword-arrows, each one positioned with geometric precision above an exposed throat, a vulnerable neck joint, an unprotected skull.

He didn't give a signal. Didn't announce his intent. The blades simply fell.

All at once, every exposed slaver dropped as if their strings had been cut. Projectiles punched through skulls, pierced necks, and found the gaps in armour with surgical accuracy. Bodies crumpled to the marble in a grotesque wave of simultaneous death, their weapons clattering uselessly from lifeless hands.

The silence that followed was absolute—broken only by the wet thud of corpses hitting stone and the terrified gasps of hostages realising they were suddenly, impossibly, free.

"Kriff!" The scream came from the northern freighter's bay door, where a Twi'lek in scarred armour clutched the entrance frame with white-knuckled terror. His earlier bravado had evaporated, replaced by the raw panic of someone who'd just watched his entire ground force die in three seconds. "Vexa, tell yours to lift off now!"

From the southern vessel's hold, a woman's voice crackled over comms: "Already on it!"

"Rynar—" The Twi'lek's voice broke into desperate screaming at his pilot. "Kark it—lift off! Lift off NOW! NOW! NOW!"

Both massive freighters' engines roared to life simultaneously, their repulsorlifts cycling from idle to emergency thrust with a deafening whine. The deck plates beneath them vibrated as tons of durasteel fought against gravity's pull. Bay doors began grinding shut with mechanical inexorability, hydraulics screaming as emergency protocols kicked in.

"Left," Shirou declared.

"Right," Arturia agreed.

Both former heroes moved as one, angling toward where the two massive freighters hovered side by side.

Arturia burst right in a mana-enhanced sprint, her low-heeled pumps barely touching marble as she rocketed toward the rightmost vessel. The vessel had barely lifted three metres off the ground and was accelerating upwards, its bay door three-quarters closed. Without breaking stride, she channeled prana through her legs and leapt.

The jump carried her impossibly high—eight metres up—her petite frame arcing through smoke-filled air like a missile. At the apex of her trajectory, Clarent blazed with dark-violet light as she channelled a precise mana blast. Not the devastating wave she'd used before, but a focused cutting edge that extended the blade's reach tenfold.

The empowered slash caught the right freighter's cockpit like a hot wire through butter. Transparisteel and durasteel parted with a shriek of tortured metal as she carved clean through the vessel's forward section. The cockpit separated from the main hull in a shower of sparks and venting atmosphere, tumbling away as the rest of the freighter lost all control and began listing dangerously.

Meanwhile, Shirou cut left, reinforcing his body with every scrap of prana he could channel, feeling his muscles and bones strengthen beyond human limits. The left freighter mirrored its twin—already eight meters up and accelerating, its bay door now just a two-metre-wide gap of light against darkness.

He ran three steps and launched himself upward with explosive force, the marble cracking beneath his final footfall from the sheer power of his jump. Wind tore at his face as he climbed—five meters, seven, ten—arms outstretched toward that shrinking rectangle of light.

Not going to make it, his mind calculated with cold precision. Too high, too fast—

His body began to descend, gravity reasserting its claim. *No!*

Mid-fall, Shirou traced Herakles' stone sword-axe beneath his feet—but instead of letting it simply materialise, he imparted an accelerated vector *upward* as it coalesced. The massive weapon shot skyward like a launched missile with Shirou balanced atop it, his reinforced legs absorbing the sudden acceleration as he rode the conjured platform higher.

Five meters became eight, then ten, then twelve—the traced blade carrying him well above the freighter's hull before he kicked off and dismissed it in the same motion. The sword-axe dissolved back into nothingness as Shirou's arc brought him alongside the rising vessel.

He traced Kanshou and Bakuya mid-flight, immediately biting down on Bakuya's handle to free one hand for what came next.

His fist clutching Kanshou slammed into the freighter's hull plating with a resounding thud, using the impact to arrest his momentum and swing his body inward. His free hand shot out, fingers hooking the cargo bay door's edge just as the hydraulics ground toward their final centimetre of closure.

Reinforced strength straining against mechanical force, Shirou wedged himself into the narrowing gap. Metal screamed in protest as his body forced through the impossible space, shoulder and hip pressing past yielding mechanisms. Then he was inside, rolling forward across the deck plating as the door finally sealed behind him with a pneumatic hiss.

Bakuya freed from his teeth as he rose. Both married blades properly gripped now, singing through the air in perfect sync—black and white arcs crossing like scissors.

Two slavers nearest the entrance never processed the impossible. Kanshou and Bakuya passed through their necks with surgical precision, sharp enough that for one heartbeat, nothing happened.

Then the heads separated. Wet finality. Bodies crumpling. Shocked expressions frozen on faces rolling across the deck plating.

The cargo hold fell into stunned silence. Corpse-thuds. Muffled hostage scream too close to the spray. Rabbine passing out from the gory scene.

"Close your eyes," Shirou called to the reformist group—separated from the others, targeted. This wasn't just a slave run. The slave run *was* the cover.

He didn't wait. Shirou rushed forward, blades singing.

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Numb. Tired. Confused. And guilt—always the guilt, churning through Padmé like a relentless tide as she forced herself to maintain composure. Her hands remained steady as she sorted through donated supplies, but the tremor lived deeper, somewhere in her chest where no one could see it shake her apart from the inside.

At least they'd been able to bathe in rotation with the team. The water had run red at first, diluted blood swirling down the drain—though whether it belonged to victims or perpetrators, she couldn't say. The distinction felt meaningless when scrubbing it from beneath her fingernails.

She worked alongside Governor Sio Bibble now, and that itself felt surreal. The man who'd made his disapproval of her and Tsabin abundantly clear—his resentment over his niece Sasha and Su Yan joining their reformist group simmering beneath every stiff interaction—had shed his usual cold formality like an ill-fitting cloak discarded in crisis. His sharp blue-grey eyes, which typically regarded her with barely concealed irritation, now carried an unexpected softness as he treated her with genuine respect. His normally imperious voice had subdued to gentle efficiency, directing volunteers with the same authority he'd once used to dismiss her concerns in council chambers.

"Stack the thermal blankets separately from the standard ones," he instructed a young volunteer whose hands trembled as she worked. His tone held patience rather than his typical impatience. "The injured will need the warmth more than those in shock."

The crisis had stripped away the personal grievances, leaving only the shared purpose of helping their city recover. He didn't smile at her—that would perhaps be too much to expect—but he also didn't glare. For now, in the face of tragedy, it was enough.

The logistics of tragedy were overwhelming in their mundane necessity. While their group organised relief goods—blankets that felt too thin against Naboo's evening chill, medical supplies that seemed woefully insufficient against the scale of suffering—another team moved through the wreckage with datapads and grim determination. They were documenting the living and the dead.

The scratching of styluses against datapads created an eerily methodical soundtrack to grief. Each mark represented a life accounted for, a family that

would receive notification, a person whose fate was no longer unknown. They cross-referenced names with city records, hunting for anyone who might be missing, anyone who might still need help, anyone whose absence hadn't yet been noticed in the confusion.

Mara worked tirelessly nearby, her golden hair dulled with dust and ash, the elegant waves that usually framed her face now matted and tangled. Even in exhaustion, she moved with that natural grace that drew people to her, her warm voice cutting through despair as she directed various relief efforts. Medical personnel from Theed General followed her instructions without question, responding to the quiet authority she wielded through compassion rather than command.

"We need more gauze in section three," Mara called out, her voice steady despite the strain visible in the set of her shoulders.

Right now their station was distributing food donated by The Empty Pantry. The irony wasn't lost on Padmé. Simple meals arrived in insulated containers, still warm, smelling of home and comfort in the midst of devastation. Sandwiches wrapped carefully in flimsy, pizza slices, burgers, and even cookies that someone had taken the time to package individually. Food that spoke of care, of someone understanding that small gestures of normalcy mattered.

Padmé's throat tightened as she spotted the familiar figures entering her peripheral vision.

Shirou and Arturia moved through the aftermath with solemn purpose, their movements careful and deliberate as they carried shrouded forms between them. The covered bodies of the dead, treated with dignity even in tragedy, were transported towards the makeshift morgue, a temporary tent brought in by the volunteers.

They'd been doing this for hours, she realised. Carrying the dead with the same care they'd once used to serve meals at their restaurant. Never rushing, never careless, treating each shrouded form as precious cargo rather than grim necessity.

Her guilt twisted deeper, a knife turning in her chest.

Even after Shirou had successfully saved them from the slavers—no, that phrasing was inadequate. He'd massacred his way through the freighter. Though perhaps that word was unfair, too loaded with judgment she had no right to pass, not after all hope had seemed lost as she'd felt the freighter lift off.

He'd somehow managed to enter the vessel mid-flight. He'd fought through armed criminals to save and protect them, had done what was necessary to prevent them from being sold into slavery in some distant system where no one would ever find them.

But the word still fit. Massacre.

She could still see it with perfect clarity, a memory that would probably never fade, no matter how much she wished it would. The interior of the freighter was painted in violence—blood splattered across bulkheads in arterial sprays, bodies scattered like broken dolls across the deck plating, the metallic reek of death so thick it had made her gag. And standing in the middle of it all was Shirou—his kind face transformed into something alien beneath a mask of multicoloured blood.

She remembered his approach, that careful shuffle forward with his hands partially raised in what should have been a reassuring gesture. His expression had been concerned, gentle even, as if he were approaching frightened animals rather than the people he'd just saved. She remembered him reaching out towards Tabin, who'd been shackled closest to him, his blood-slick fingers extended to help release the magnetic binders.

And she remembered how they'd all flinched away. All of them. Even Tsabin, who never backed down from anything, who'd faced down corrupt officials and angry mobs with her chin raised in defiance—even she had recoiled from those helpful, gore-covered hands.

The hurt that had flashed across Shirou's face lasted only a moment before being quickly covered, but Padmé had seen it.

Instead of showing that hurt, he'd smiled. And Maker help her, that had been worse—that smile stretching across a face covered in other people's blood, teeth showing white against the crimson and blue and green. It was a grotesque parody of his usual warm expression, transformed into something that belonged in nightmares.

"I'm sorry," he'd said, his voice rough from exertion or emotion or both. "I'm sorry you had to see this. Let me get these off you."

His hands had been steady as he'd released each set of binders, working his way through their group with methodical efficiency even as they'd all pressed themselves back against the bulkheads, trying to maintain distance from his gore-covered form. He'd respected that unspoken request for space, never moving closer than necessary, never forcing his help upon them despite their obvious need for it.

When he'd finished, he'd bowed. Actually bowed—as though offering a formal apology for the violence he'd committed on their behalf—before turning and walking back across the deck plating towards the exit. His footsteps had left bloody prints across the metal, a trail of death following him out of the cargo hold.

Then Padmé had seen Arturia waiting outside, positioned near the boarding ramp. The blonde had been equally covered in gore, her black and white service uniform transformed into something unrecognisable beneath layers of

dried blood. But her face had brightened when she'd seen them emerge safely—genuine relief and joy changing her features despite the horror coating her skin.

That expression had lasted until she'd registered their faces. Until she'd seen the way they all flinched back from her approach, the way even Padmé—who'd shared meals and conversation and comfortable silences with her—had taken an involuntary step backwards.

The hurt in Arturia's golden eyes had been profound, a wound that cut deeper than any blade. Her small frame, which had always seemed refined rather than threatening despite her strength, had somehow diminished further in that moment. She'd looked almost fragile, vulnerable in a way that contrasted grotesquely with the violence she was painted in.

Shirou had approached her then, moving with careful deliberation as he'd placed both hands on her shoulders. He'd leaned close, speaking words that Padmé couldn't hear from her position, his voice low and urgent. Whatever he'd said had made Arturia's face transform—that hurt crystallising into something harder, more resolved. She'd nodded once, sharp and decisive, before turning to give Padmé and her group a curt nod of acknowledgement.

Then they'd both turned and walked away, moving through the crowd of rescued hostages. Padmé had watched them go, noticing how the people of Naboo gave them a wide berth despite their role as saviours. Civilians who'd been freed from slavery pressed themselves back to let the blood-covered pair pass, grateful but afraid, rescued but repulsed.

Heroes and monsters, all at once. Saviours covered in the proof of their violence.

Marching steps suddenly echoed throughout the plaza, pulling Padmé out of her thoughts as everyone's hearts visibly sank. The threat mirrored the chaos

from that afternoon—they were surrounded, the Royal Naboo Protection Corps and Theed Honour Guard forming a perimeter around the relief effort.

One man stepped forward, his blaster rifle secured against its strap as he fished out a datapad. His voice rang loud in the uneasy silence of the crowd.

"ATTENTION, CITIZENS OF THEED:

By order of His Majesty King Ars Veruna, Naboo is now under a state of planetary emergency. A curfew is in effect from 2000 to 0600 hours. All media communications are subject to royal oversight.

Warrants have been issued for the arrest of Shirou Emiya and Arturia Pendragon on charges including mass murder, terrorism, and conspiracy against the Crown. These individuals are responsible for the deaths of—"

The guard's voice hitched. His face went pale as he stared at the datapad, clearly struggling to process the number he was being ordered to read aloud.

"The—these individuals are responsible for the deaths of one hundred and twenty-three royal security personnel who were deployed to protect citizens during today's festivities." His eyes suddenly darted around the silent crowd, fear creeping into his voice.

"De—despite appearances, these locals are not heroes but dangerous vigilantes whose extreme violence endangered civilian lives. They are to be apprehended immediately.

Any citizen harbouring or assisting these criminals will face prosecution. A reward of fifty thousand credits is offered for information leading to their capture.

Return to your homes. Comply with all security personnel. Your safety depends upon your cooperation.

BY ORDER OF THE KING."

The tension in the air shifted—thick, electric—as the Guard's words hung over the plaza like a suffocating shroud. Padmé felt the change ripple through the crowd—a collective intake of breath, the subtle straightening of spines, the way shoulders squared despite trembling hands. She could taste the metallic tang of fear mixed with something far more dangerous: righteous fury.

A murmur began somewhere near the fountain, low and rumbling like distant thunder. Then another voice joined it, and another, until the sound swelled into something that made the stones beneath her feet seem to vibrate. These people had been there. They had seen the first volley of blaster fire tear through innocent festival-goers. They had witnessed the supposed royal guards turning their weapons on unarmed citizens without provocation or warning.

And they had also seen two strangers—these supposed "dangerous vigilantes"—throw themselves into harm's way without hesitation, asking for nothing in return. Even now, the two volunteers were still organising aid stations, still distributing food to those who had lost everything, helping carry the deceased, still tending to the wounded with supplies donated freely by neighbours who barely knew each other's names.

Padmé could feel their anger building like pressure in a sealed vessel, ready to explode. As jeers rose, the Protection Corps and Honour Guard tensed, hands tightening on their plasma rifles as the crowd began to turn.

But before anything spilt over, two individuals walked forward, arms raised in surrender.

"We submit to your authority—willingly and without resistance."

And then the floodgates opened. The crowd erupted—not in violence, but in voices. Protests rang out from every direction, a cacophony of outrage against injustice so blatant it bordered on obscene.

Two members of the Honour Guard panicked, raising their rifles toward the surging crowd. Before anyone could process the threat, Shirou and Arturia moved—faster than thought, their hands closing around the barrels of each weapon and forcing them down with inexorable strength.

The guards' eyes went wide with shock and terror. When Shirou and Arturia released the weapons, both barrels were visibly bent, warped metal testimony to strength that transcended human limits.

The crowd fell silent, not from fear, but from awe.

Arturia's golden eyes swept across the civilians with one imperious look—not threatening, but commanding in a way that brooked no argument. The anger that had been building found no outlet; instead, people straightened, nodded, recognising something primal in that gaze. She acknowledged them with a slight nod, as if they'd passed some unspoken test, before turning her attention back to the trembling guards.

Under their combined gaze, the Honour Guard clutching the arrest warrant trembled as he fumbled for binders.

"You need not bind us—we've already submitted willingly," Arturia stated, her voice carrying the weight of absolute authority. "If you're afraid, have your men point their blasters at us." She paused, letting that sink in. "Now escort us to tonight's... hospitality. And you shall not separate me from my partner."

"Yes, ma'am!" The guard bowed instinctively—decades of training responding to that command presence despite the absurdity of it all.

As the pair was escorted toward the palace, Padmé watched them walk with heads held high—prisoners who somehow looked more regal than the king who'd ordered their arrest.

Her hands had stopped trembling. The guilt remained—and the trauma would not fade quickly—but something had crystallised in that moment: Arturia commanding silence with a look; Both bending steel yet choosing submission over violence.

Power wasn't about force. It was about choosing when to use it and when to yield it.

Veruna had the crown, the guards, the law's authority. But standing amid the wreckage of his lies, Padmé realised one thing: he didn't have the people—not anymore.

And on Naboo, that was going to matter.

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End

AN: I'm really not good with serious and heavy; I had a lot of rewrites here. Mind you take note, using the knowledge they inherited when they woke up in this universe—plus research—they spun a tale around when they awoke in this universe on their background. They want it to reflect their own background but dodging the fact that they were from a different universe.

Also fuck, I chose Salter, while the original version is just Arturia corrupted by Angra Mainyu, she has a whole totally different back story in FGO that's not expanded on, so I took some liberties. Hope you like this—and next part:

ACTION IS COMING!

SPOILER

AN2: Okay, here I'm currently loopy from editing this, plus I opened up a bottle of cheap brandy. I really like the idea of Padmé, but also I want Padmé to be a lot more than cannon Padmé. I want her to be the type to sue for peace, but at

the same time she can admonish Satine Kryse for her disavowing thousands of years of Mandalorian culture. I want her to be an idealist but eventually a practical idealist.

Next story will be Release that witch... and wizard?!, this one I probably will not go full send. Mind you I'll still do more than average chapters 4k-8k, depending on the situation—this is my feel good story, where I don't need to think much about plot as I'm following the webnovel.

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