

## **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 5.2 -**

**One Must Not**

**Feed Strays After Hours**

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The atmosphere had settled into tranquillity as Shirou made his way back, carrying a vessel of prepared rice. The heated plasteel container warmed his hands through the casing. He acknowledged Mara with a brief nod as she appeared from the refresher. She offered him a particularly gentle smile before matching his pace, the two of them completing their walk to rejoin the others without exchanging words.

Shirou could see loose pairings and trios as conversations drifted into random topics. The soft murmur of voices created a gentle background hum, punctuated by the occasional laugh or the clink of utensils against bowls. Both he and Mara sat down as he scraped the bottom of the pan with methodical precision using a wooden spatula. The tool moved smoothly against the metal surface, mixing the rice with the remaining broth, leftover meat, and vegetables—each ingredient melding together in a way that would waste nothing of what had been prepared.

"Now that we're all here," Padmé announced, her voice carrying that measured warmth he'd noticed earlier as she attempted to draw everyone's focus. The gentle tap-tap-tap of her fingernails against her glass created a delicate percussion that somehow commanded attention without demanding it. "As Arturia mentioned, we've laboured diligently this evening, yet we still haven't properly made introductions."

"Why don't we start with our side?" Tsabin interjected. She tapped her finger thoughtfully against her lips, her legs crossed as she leaned forward into her knees, a mischievous grin spreading across her features that suggested she was already enjoying whatever dynamic was about to unfold. "Let's go by order of seniority, then circle back to me, then Padmé?"

"Uh... should have known," the Eirtama sighed, tossing Tsabin a dirty look—only to get a pointed, childish tongue in return.

"Well, the last time we made introductions, it took several minutes of staring before anyone started, and a few more between each turn," Sasha interjected softly, spooning herself a small portion of the porridge-like concoction—her eyes lighting up as she tasted it.

A small smile touched Shirou's face as he pushed the sesame sauce towards the dark-haired reformist.

"I hereby propose that this be our default introduction order. Aye?" Su Yan suddenly declared, hand raised as if she were in a classroom.

Everyone—minus Rabbine, Arturia, and him—quickly chorused, "Aye!", arms half-heartedly raised.

She shook her head, grabbed the stem of her wine glass, and leant back, swirling the last of the wine before downing it in one go. Then she reached into the cryocooler for another bottle.

“Let me—you’ve been refilling our drinks all night,” Arturia said, taking the bottle—but then handing it straight to Shirou, who only shook his head.

“You know, you should probably learn to open wine bottles eventually. What happens if there are no open ones and no one’s available?” Shirou said dryly, reaching across the table for the wine opener. “Oh—my bad, Eirtama, go ahead.”

Arturia shot him a smug look as Eirtama glanced up from her empty glass, setting it down. Her slim fingers tapped lazily against the table before she gave them a bright, pointed smile.

“Eirtama Ballory,” she said, her voice carrying that warm-but-pointed tone that came naturally. “Though for most of the night, I’ve been called Tarin—my supposed public pseudonym.”

Again, everyone—minus Rabbine, Arturia, him, and this time Su Yan, who was innocently whistling at the side—shot Tsabin a deadpan stare.

“What?” Tsabin asked, instinctively crossing her arms in defence.

“Well, most of our name leaks come from you. We use pseudonyms for a reason,” Eirtama said, turning suddenly to Shirou and Arturia. “Not that we’re calling you two untrustworthy.”

“That is well. In your case, to be known is to be vulnerable, and exposure is your enemy,” Arturia said solemnly. The formal cadence of her words settled over the table like a veil as Shirou passed her the now-opened wine bottle. She started refilling each person’s glass with practised precision, her short stature forcing her to stand and lean over gracefully to reach the far end of the table. Her movements were deliberate, almost ceremonial—each pour measured perfectly, not a drop spilt despite the awkward angle.

“Be that as it may, Su Yan has already been talking about your group since Balron introduced us,” Arturia continued, tone casual, as though remarking on the weather. Shirou, quite amusedly, suspected she hadn’t noticed she’d just passed one hot potato—well, tuber—from Tsabin to Su Yan. “We would likely have connected your names with your pseudonyms either way, given her enthusiasm.”

Su Yan flinched visibly at everyone's collective stare, her shoulders hunching slightly as if she could make herself smaller. Her eyes darted frantically around the garden—to the bright moon of Ohma Dun, the plants, anywhere but the faces now turned her way—whilst she continued her innocent whistling. However, the tune had become notably more off-key and strained.

Both Shirou and Padmé caught the subtle movement of Tsabin's triumphant fist pump beneath the table, her barely concealed glee at the sudden shift in everyone's ire almost palpable.

The leader of their group and the former Counter Guardian exchanged a look across the table—understanding passing between them like a shared secret, followed by twin exasperated sighs that spoke of long experience with the antics of those around them. The soft exhales were lost amidst the gentle clatter of cutlery and the muffled sounds of conversation, unnoticed by both the smug Tsabin and the methodically wine-pouring Arturia.

"Ahem—anyway, let's just be mindful of our pseudonyms in the future... please," Padmé said in mediation, but not before giving both Su Yan and Tsabin a pointed look. The pair donned sheepish smiles at the admonishment.

"Ah, yes—where was I?" Eirtama's voice carried the crisp precision of someone accustomed to boardroom presentations, though her tone remained warmly conversational. "Eirtama Ballory. I mainly handle our group's finances. I, too, am the primary connection to the finance sector of Naboo when it comes to garnering support for our little endeavour." Her long legs stretched forwards beneath the table in a display of casual elegance, yet folded

gracefully over one another, the soft rustle of fabric from the maid's uniform skirt accompanying the movement.

From Shirou's experience during the night's service—and from what he had observed so far throughout the gathering—Eirtama struck him as a more tempered version of Tsabin in many respects. Where Tsabin's wit was sharp, unpredictable, and occasionally cutting, Eirtama seemed to favour light teasing and playful banter in her interactions with the other women who had helped that night.

She was also earnest in her responsibilities; not once during the service did she need to be prompted before acting. She would either ask if there was anything she could do or move to assist someone the moment it looked like they needed help. Yet despite her tall, athletic frame, she was deceptively weak—Shirou, or Arturia, had to help her with several of the wine crates throughout the evening.

"Outside of spreadsheets, late-night budget recalculations, and a certain someone trying to sneak in Bepin Sparkle as a business expense, I listen to a lot of holonovels—well, not outside, since I listen to them even whilst working," she amended with a shrug and a grin. "I think that's a pretty succinct summary of me. Let me just say, Mr Shirou—"

Shirou raised an eyebrow at the mention of Bepin Sparkle, as he already had an inkling of who that was, and he interrupted Eirtama. "You may drop the mister; that goes for everyone, since Arturia here—ever the mouthpiece—has given everyone permission. You can just call me Shirou."

"Ah, yes, Shirou, the night was truly amazing, and the food—" She paused, her clear blue eyes brightening with genuine appreciation as she gestured towards the steaming porridge between them. "I think there was nothing brought out that I didn't like. Even this hot pot was something I hadn't tried before, yet it was equally moreish." Her voice carried a note of pleasant surprise as she inhaled the fragrant steam rising from the ceramic vessel.

Around the table, heads bobbed in agreement, the soft murmur of satisfaction rippling through the gathered group.

"It's such a shame that there wasn't dessert in tonight's offerings. Shirou here offered me this afternoon a slice of cake and some pastries that were just divine," Tsabin added excitedly. "You lot should try it later—oh, my bad, you're closed today, right? Maybe tomorrow. What was it called again, Shirou?"

At the sound of sweets, more than half of the table perked up, their eyes suddenly laser-focused on Shirou with an intensity that made him acutely uncomfortable. The collective gaze held such naked want—the kind of look he'd seen on faces during food shortages, though thankfully far less desperate—that he instinctively wanted to step back and perhaps find somewhere to hide.

*'This is what happens when you mention dessert to a group of ladies,'* he thought wryly, noting how even the most composed amongst them had developed that telltale gleam of culinary interest.

"Uh—it was the kaaf cream cheese cake and the zeppole," he managed, feeling oddly like he was confessing to some sort of crime rather than simply naming baked goods.

The reaction was immediate and telling. He could practically see the mental notes being taken, the silent vows to return being made around the table. Shirou had the sinking—or perhaps rising—feeling that he had just gained another group of regulars, and he should probably start thinking about rotating or adding more desserts to the menu.

*'At this rate, our quiet little establishment is going to need a proper pastry case,'* he mused—but left that problem for another day.

Arturia's eyes gleamed with excitement as she likely guessed where his mind had drifted—and the fact that, should he make additional pastries, anything

unsold by closing would meet its end in the refuse bin—*ahem*, Arturia's stomach, *ahem*.

"I guess it's my turn," Su Yan said excitedly, bouncing in her seat. "As everyone here already knows—name's Su Yan Calris, thank you," she added, nodding to Arturia for the top-up before sipping half the glass in one go.

She gestured with her wine glass in a casual toast to no one in particular.

"I coordinate youth civic engagement programmes around Theed—teaching kids about leadership, community service, how to actually participate in their own futures instead of just... waiting for adults to maybe fix things." Her voice carried genuine warmth when talking about the work. "Did my practicum with the University Dean, so I've got the whole educational theory background—but honestly? Most of what works is just making sure kids feel like their voices actually matter."

"As you may have surmised, I'm this group's liaison with Naboo's education sector—though the dean has been hesitant about more of their students becoming vocal under the current regime, which is quite understandable given our king's reputation. But we do have their quiet support," she said, giving Padmé a sheepish smile.

"Like I said previously, I already know Shirou and Arturia through my Uncle Balron and Aunt Tessari—the previous owners of this lovely establishment," she said, raising her glass slightly in their direction.

Both Arturia and Shirou raised their own glasses in return. The familiar weight of the crystal stemware reminded Shirou of Tessari's—and by extension, Su Yan's—extravagant taste.

Even their everyday glassware had been imported from Coruscant's finer districts, which fortunately came with the establishment—glassware he always

reinforced before service for fear of increasing costs should the expensive crystalware break.

"I was also the one who recommended your amazing establishment to Tsabin, which led to tonight's festivities. So I'm expecting more extra service in the future," she said with bubbling enthusiasm, her golden-brown eyes sparkling with mischief as she gave Shirou a deliberate wink.

The playful challenge in her voice was unmistakable, and Shirou found himself caught between amusement and exasperation.

"Isn't this already extra service?" Shirou deadpanned, his silver-grey eyes taking in the scene before him with practised assessment. The gesture he made encompassed not just the carefully selected wines now gracing their table, but the hot pot that had transformed into something resembling rich, savoury porridge. "I also specially stock Bepin Sparkle for you, and don't I already give you an additional slice of cake every time you order a bottle?"

His tone carried that familiar dry humour, tinged with the faintest hint of resignation that seemed to characterise most of his interactions with their more regular—and demanding—clientele... and Arturia.

Before Su Yan could reply, a voice interrupted.

"Umm, my name's Sasha—Sasha Malvern. I joined this group not long after watching one of Padmé's speeches at the University of Theed. I'm a distant cousin of Su Yan," Sasha said, her voice wavering at first but finding steadiness by the end as she idly swirled her wine. Her gaze flicked to Su Yan, who met it with a small, reassuring smile.

"Oh, are you from Tessari's side of the family?" Arturia asked, her golden eyes bright with genuine curiosity as she leaned forwards slightly in her chair. The question cut through the atmosphere like a guillotine, and Shirou immediately felt the subtle shift. The easy warmth that had been building

around their table seemed to evaporate, replaced by something colder and more complicated. He noticed shoulders tensing almost imperceptibly, smiles becoming fixed, and members of their retinue exchanging awkward glances.

Rabbine's amber eyes swept the table, her confidence faltering as she struggled to read the sudden tension. Arturia, for her part, easily understood that the tension stemmed from an uncomfortable topic—one she'd unknowingly raised—so she quickly apologised for her faux pas.

Su Yan's reaction was immediate and telling—her hand moved to scratch at her jaw in a gesture that screamed discomfort, her usual bright energy dimming. The playful mischief that had danced in her golden-brown eyes moments before was gone.

"I... sorry, I didn't mean to bring the mood down," Sasha mumbled, her voice barely above a whisper as she seemed to shrink into herself. Her fingers tightened around her wine glass, knuckles white against the pale amber liquid within.

Shirou was glad he reinforced the glasses regularly; otherwise, some of them might have cracked under how tightly everyone was holding theirs.

"If it's something sensitive, I think it's best we move on," he said, offering Sasha what he hoped was a disarming smile—the kind that said '*no judgement here*'.

But even as he spoke, he couldn't help but notice the way Padmé and Tsabin had gone very still, their expressions settling into something he recognised all too well. It was the same controlled mask they'd worn when Sio Bibble was in the immediate vicinity or blatantly giving them icy glares—the look of people who knew exactly what they were dealing with and didn't like it one bit.

'*Probably another one of their powerful detractors,*' Shirou thought, watching the subtle interplay of tension ripple across the table. Of course, any movement against the status quo would eventually face opposition.

*'Balron and Tessari did say that they had extensive family connections,'* Shirou thought wryly, pieces clicking into place with the sort of clarity that only came with hindsight. *'How else could Tessari casually gift Arturia a skylane-legal swoop bike on a planet like Naboo? The ease with which that was approved meant connections.'*

"No, umm... It's okay, right, Padmé? Sasha? They regularly meet up with Balron and Tessari—let's just nip it in the bud," Su Yan offered, her voice far from its usual bright tone. Everyone nodded in reluctant agreement, the gesture heavy with resignation.

"Okay, Sasha, do you want me to rip the bacta patch off quickly or do you want to?" Su Yan asked, giving her apparent distant cousin a reassuring smile—the same warm, patient expression Shirou had seen once before, when one of her students from the volunteer programme had visited the restaurant.

Sasha hesitated for a moment, her fingers fidgeting with the edge of her short sleeves. Shirou noticed the shallow rise and fall of her breath. But then, as if a switch had flipped inside her, she steeled herself. Her posture straightened, her chin lifted, and the uncertain young woman vanished—replaced by someone who looked capable of commanding a room.

"I'm Governor Sio Bibble's niece through his cousin, while Su Yan is through his wife's sister," she announced, her voice clear and steady enough to make Shirou blink.

Realisation dawned on him with a near-audible click. "Ah, yes—the governor did ask me to extend an invitation to Balron and Tessari to visit his wife. That slipped my mind." The words felt strange even as he said them. *'How did I forget that?'* It had been just over an hour ago. Blaming it on the long day and the alcohol, Shirou shrugged the thought away.

"Shirou." That single word from Arturia carried the weight of a dozen unspoken questions. Her golden eyes met his, steady and expectant, and he could almost hear the request behind them.

He looked to Padmé and Tsabin, catching the subtle nods they shared—a silent exchange of permission in the careful language of diplomats. The taste of necessity lingered bitter on his tongue.

Turning to Arturia, he said evenly, "The governor isn't a big fan of these two." The words came out flat and matter-of-fact, accompanied by a deliberately casual gesture towards the pair—no need to add drama to what was already delicate.

"I understand," was Arturia's equally succinct reply, delivered with that particular brand of regal composure that conveyed acceptance without need for further context. Her expression remained perfectly neutral.

*Snort, snort, cough, spit.* The sound erupted from someone at the table—Shirou thought it might have been Eirtama, though in the sudden burst of surprised laughter that followed, it was hard to tell. The ridiculous, undignified noise cut through the tension like a blade through silk, and suddenly the whole table was dissolving into giggles and chuckles. The relief was palpable, washing over them like a cool breeze after a suffocating day.

"Yeah, to put it lightly," Tsabin said, rolling her eyes with the kind of dramatic flair that suggested this was a well-worn source of frustration. Her voice carried that particular mix of exasperation and dark humour.

Arturia stood up with fluid grace, her movement drawing everyone's attention as effectively as if she'd called the room to order. She moved with purpose, the soft sound of liquid against glass accompanying her as she topped up everyone's drinks.

Lifting her glass, the amber liquid catching the warm light from the overhead fixtures, she declared, "To detractors—and may their disdain empower our

success." Her voice carried that particular blend of dignity and defiance that he'd come to associate with her more regal moments—not quite the King of Knights, but definitely someone who understood the weight of words spoken in ceremony.

With that inspiring toast, everyone rose as one, the scrape of chairs against the floor mixing with the musical chime of glass touching glass as they clinked their drinks together in solidarity.

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Following Arturia's rousing declaration, she swiftly recovered by proposing to plunder the leftover portions of cheesecake Shirou had tucked away in one of the cooling units near the bar counter.

She was accompanied by Rabbine, who immediately volunteered to help, as well as Eirtama—who offered to carry the remaining porridge; at the very least, she could manage that without much trouble—and Sasha.

Just before they left, Sasha quickly finished her introduction, explaining that she was their liaison with Naboo's environmental sector and that she didn't have many hobbies other than casually reading holojournals and documents related to environmental science.

This earned her a round of teasing from Eirtama and Tsabin—apparently, she did get into heated arguments or discussions when it came to the environment.

Shirou nursed his glass of wine whilst the remaining four talked about random things.

"Shi—"

"Shiro—"

A hand clasped his shoulder. "Shirou?"

A sharp prod yanked him from his musings as he glanced leftwards, discovering a perfectly groomed finger extended from the hand gripping his shoulder—jabbing at his cheek.

It was Su Yan with her typical fox-like smile, her golden-brown eyes sparkling with mischief as her finger lingered against his cheek. "Serves you right for ignoring such beautiful and innocent maidens."

The emphasis she placed on 'innocent' was so deliberately theatrical that Shirou could practically feel the air quotes around the word. She poked his cheek several more times whilst he could sense the barely contained laughter bubbling beneath her tone.

Turning his gaze towards Mara, Padmé, and Tsabin, Shirou dipped his head slightly in a small bow as he said, "My apologies, ladies."

"Hey! Why wasn't I included in that?" Su Yan complained, releasing his shoulder to plant her hands firmly on her hips, her voice pitching higher in mock offence as her brow furrowed and a pout formed.

The other three were covering their mouths as they quietly laughed at the quick gag, their shoulders shaking with barely restrained giggles. Padmé's eyes crinkled at the corners, whilst Tsabin's smirk threatened to break through her composed façade entirely.

"Friends, our plunder was successful. I even found something that was hidden in the larger cooler units," Arturia announced proudly as she emerged from the staircase leading to the kitchen area, her voice carrying the satisfaction of a conqueror returning with spoils. Behind her, Rabbine held a large circular platter of cheesecake with both hands. Sasha followed closely, carefully carrying a plasteel pan.

Shirou groaned as they found the pan from his first attempt at making tiramisu—the distinct aroma of kaff wafting downwind towards the group as they perked up at the smell.

"Arturia, you do know that the tiramisu has caf in it, right?" Shirou deadpanned.

"Which is why we are balancing it out with this," Arturia said proudly, holding a bottle aloft like a trophy whilst balancing a tray of lowball glasses with practised ease.

A squeal erupted from Shirou's left—high-pitched and filled with pure delight—as Su Yan leapt from her seat like a spring had been released. She practically bounced across the small space towards Arturia.

"I didn't know you stocked the good stuff! And it's aged as well," Su Yan breathed reverently as she gently extracted the bottle from Arturia's grasp, cradling it against her chest like a precious artefact. Her fingers traced the label with evident appreciation, and she actually nuzzled the bottle of eighteen-year-old Corellian whisky against her cheek.

"Argh, fine. Is everyone still up for more? Make sure you drink water as well," Shirou said, gesturing towards the water dispenser that could double as an ice maker, on the other side of the cryocooler. "I can only get hold of that particular whisky once every month, so if Balron and Tessari come back early, you'd better explain why their favourite drink was unavailable."

"Yes, Mother," Su Yan and Arturia chorused in perfect unison, their voices blending into a single mocking tone. The moment the words left their lips, both women burst into delighted giggles at their sudden synchronicity, sharing a conspiratorial glance of spontaneous rebellion against Shirou's nagging.

Shirou groaned as others joined in whilst they laid out the desserts—Arturia distributing the lowball glasses whilst Eirtama handed out the small plates and forks she'd been carrying.

The moment the desserts touched the table, eager hands reached forwards with barely restrained enthusiasm. Forks clinked against plates as everyone simultaneously abandoned any pretence of restraint, diving into the sweet offerings with the fervour of diners who had discovered treasure.

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As the group found their places, cradling their whisky glasses—several chose to take it neat like Shirou, Arturia, Tsabin, Su Yan, and Eirtama, whilst the others diluted theirs with water and ice. Following their first portion—during which everything abruptly disappeared from their vantage point, though from Shirou's perspective, it was simply them messily devouring everything after that opening taste.

It was Su Yan, Arturia, and Tsabin who lectured the rest about savouring the dessert as if they were mountain sages imparting wisdom upon the common masses. Shirou just shook his head at their antics, inwardly grumbling at Arturia and Su Yan's description of his apparent mother-henning.

He smiled at the sight. He'd allowed Arturia's extension of hospitality towards the group, hoping it would help her find more friends. Other than her usual circle of holodrama watchers—primarily composed of aunties—her only other friend in her age group was Lessa, the daughter of Garron Velassis, who'd been the first to extend a hand to the displaced Heroic Spirits now inhabiting mortal bodies.

'*Well, roughly her age group,*' Shirou mentally amended, remembering Arturia had perished sometime in her thirties; her perpetual youth stemmed from the enchantments woven into Caliburn and subsequently Excalibur—Avalon hadn't helped either. This was in contrast to her alternate selves, who'd

selected Rhongomyriad over the Holy Swords, and who consequently possessed considerably more developed physiques.

Golden-yellow eyes entered his vision as he was suddenly caught ogling, her gaze narrowing as he involuntarily checked out Arturia's physical features whilst remembering the developed bodies of her alternate selves. He tried not to show any weakness—physically, at least—given that the Excali-chests did have some insecurities when compared to the Rhongo-busts of Chaldea. Shirou inclined his head, giving Arturia an innocent smile as he raised his glass and clinked it against hers. Her eyes narrowed further in suspicion. *'Can our connection send thoughts or intentions through our link?'* Shirou wondered.

*'Rhongo-haves versus the Excali-have-nots,'* Shirou tested, and a tic formed on Arturia's temple.

"Oh, I'd forgotten—I suppose it's my turn." A sweet, melodic voice thankfully stayed Shirou's potential execution as Mara sipped her whisky, a sound of contentment following as she took another spoonful of the tiramisu and pressed her cheek with a smile.

"As you already know, name's Mara Solune," she said, giving everyone a sweet and bright smile.

"I handle community outreach—mostly in the lower districts and around the hospital network." *She* paused, taking another sip of her whisky, a slight red glow already forming on her cheeks. "I did my practicum under the director at Theed General, so that means I'm the group's liaison with Naboo's health department, private and public hospitals, and community outreach programmes."

Her eyes lifted upwards as if thinking, raising her glass level with her face, elbow dug into the chair's armrest, ice clinking against the glass. "I don't know what else to say about me other than I also coordinate charity visits and help

connect families to resources when the official systems fail them. Oh—I also love listening to holonovels and holodramas."

This, of course, caught Arturia's attention, and she suddenly brought up her favourite holodrama. Everyone joined in—it was mainstream media, after all—as they discussed their theories on what the protagonist would do now that he had already admitted to himself his love for the heiress of the conglomerate he'd vowed to topple.

Shirou winced as Arturia violently pinched his side, some vague sense of him deserving it floating at the back of his thoughts.

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"How can he abandon his vow for vengeance when it was because of *her* family that his mother and father perished!" Sasha declared, her voice rising as she gripped a glass half-full of neat whisky. The amber liquid sloshed dangerously close to the rim as she gestured emphatically.

"Yeah, how could he do that?" Tsabin interjected, grinning widely as she looked at the trio. She smoothly plucked the glass from Sasha's hand and took a sip, settling in to watch the chaos she and Su Yan had orchestrated. "No, the best revenge is to *live*—embrace Celestine, embrace love..."

"Could we sit here?"

Shirou looked up to see Padmé and Rabbine—likely returned from the fresher—gesturing towards the empty seats. He nodded, and they sat flanking him. Looking back at the now-standing trio, he realised their introductions had devolved into a forum on Arturia's current favourite holodrama—which had, inevitably, escalated into heated debate.

"Oh—they're still at it," Padmé said, voice warm with recognition as she settled left.

"...his vow and achieving justice—whilst simultaneously maintaining his relationship with Celestine, who, if I recall correctly, has herself expressed distaste for her family's more... questionable business practices," Arturia emphatically said, as she took another swig of her whisky.

"Yeah, why not both?" Su Yan nodded her support as she grinned, winking at Tsabin and Eirtama. Tsabin looked like a cat playing with their prey, whilst Eirtama just shook her head as she slowly nursed her drink.

"I thought those two were the quietest of your group?" Shirou asked, turning his head to Padmé and then Rabbine.

"Oh, don't look at me," Rabbine said, waving her hands in front of her. "I'm new here—in fact, I only arrived today... err, I meant yesterday." She pressed one hand theatrically to her chest as she gave Shirou a cutesy smile before standing to reach for the whisky bottle. Her skirt lifted dangerously as she stretched, prompting Shirou to avert his eyes.

"Technically, they are the quiet ones—relative to this lot," Padmé offered. "But they're also the most stubborn when they dig in."

"...not just 'some pretty heiress,'" Mara protested, her cheeks flushed pink as she leaned forwards earnestly. "It's *Celestine!* The woman he loves! The whole point is that revenge won't fix what was broken—it'll just break *him* too. The best revenge against the conglomerate is to refuse to let them destroy his capacity for love!"

They shared a warm laugh at their friends, the sound knowing and comfortable between them. The familiar rhythm of Arturia, Sasha, and Mara's debate created a pleasant backdrop—their cyclical argument had already completed its third lap by Shirou's count, each revolution bringing the same passionate points with slightly different inflections. He found himself oddly charmed by the predictability of it, as if he were witnessing an endearing

trainwreck—except the train had somehow managed to derail onto the same track three times in a row.

The scent of aged whisky drifted between them as Rabbine shifted closer. "Here, do you want more? Padmé? Mr Shirou?" she asked, her head tilted at an endearing angle as she held the bottle poised over Padmé's glass, the cork resting in her other hand.

"I think I'm good for the night," Padmé said, standing to reach for her glass of water. Like Rabbine before her, her skirt lifted dangerously high, and Shirou once again averted his eyes—only to find himself facing a grinning Rabbine, who had clearly witnessed his reaction.

Coughing into his hand, Shirou simply said, "Yeah, I'll have some more." Her grin softened into something sweeter as she poured the amber liquid—three fingers into each tumbler. Lifting her own glass, she waited for the others to join her toast. The three vessels met with a gentle chime—Shirou and Rabbine with their whisky, Padmé with her water—before each took measured sips.

"There's something I've been wondering," Shirou said as he placed his glass back on the table. The question had been nagging at him since their first meeting, and the whisky had finally loosened his tongue enough to voice it. "Are you and Tsabin related somehow, Padmé?"

Both women laughed at Shirou's question, their amusement harmonising warmly. Padmé wiped at the corner of her eye with an elegant finger, her mirth genuine and unguarded. "That was the very same thing Eirtama asked when Rabbine first introduced herself yesterday," she managed between residual chuckles. "Word for word, actually. We should probably prepare a standard response."

"Not related—just similar-looking," Rabbine confirmed, tucking dark hair behind her ear in unconscious echo of Padmé's earlier gesture. "My family's

been on Coruscant for generations. Pure coincidence. With only so many ways faces arrange themselves and trillions of humans in the galaxy, lookalikes are bound to happen."

Shirou kept his eyes carefully neutral. Lookalikes or not, Rabbine had inherited certain proportions her counterparts distinctly lacked.

"Oh—I heard you talking about it earlier," Shirou said, his curiosity piqued despite himself. The conversation had drifted past him in fragments whilst he'd been focused on other things, but now he found himself genuinely interested. "What's it like living on a city-planet?" He paused, searching for the proper terminology he'd heard in passing. '*An ecumenopolis—wasn't that the word?*'

"...that's naive romanticism!" Sasha shot back across the rooftop, nearly knocking over her glass in her enthusiasm. Tsabin swiftly grabbed it before the whisky could spill, taking another swig for her trouble.

"In plenty of ways, Coruscant is an amazing place," Rabbine began, her amber eyes lighting up with genuine enthusiasm. "Endless amenities and conveniences, a true melting pot of the galaxy where you can find cuisine from a thousand worlds on a single level. Every layer has its own distinct history, its own culture. You could spend a lifetime exploring and never see it all."

But as quickly as the brightness had appeared, it dimmed, shadows creeping across her expression. "Though it's far from perfect," she continued, her voice taking on a more measured tone. "Certain sectors run rampant with crime. CorSec either avoids those areas entirely or turns a deliberate blind eye. The deeper you go, the more lawless it becomes."

The shift in her demeanour was subtle but noticeable—the way her shoulders tensed slightly, how her gaze flickered downwards before meeting their eyes again.

"Which is why I'm so grateful to be here," Rabbine said, her voice brightening again with what seemed like genuine relief. Her eyes darted meaningfully towards Padmé, a gesture that didn't escape Shirou's notice. "Grateful to be noticed by... well, noticed by one of the movement's silent supporters." There was something carefully calculated in how she phrased it, as if she'd rehearsed the words.

"Good—at least you're not picking up bad habits from Tsabin," Padmé said with obvious fondness, causing a delicate blush to bloom across Rabbine's cheeks.

The young woman fidgeted under their combined attention, her hands clasp and unclasp in her lap. "Well, it's only my first day here," she admitted with a self-deprecating laugh. "But yes—as I mentioned earlier, I'm truly grateful that someone noticed my work on Coruscant and recommended me for your group. The competition there could be absolutely toxic. Cutthroat, even."

She paused, gazing out towards the view from the rooftop garden where Naboo's gentle landscape lay shrouded in night. "Naboo is such a beautiful planet," she said softly, genuine appreciation warming her voice. "Lush forests, pristine lakes, architecture that actually breathes with the landscape rather than consuming it. It's such a shame that the current monarch is so... problematic." Her tone grew more pointed, the political awareness beneath her youthful exterior surfacing.

"...not how it works!" Sasha insisted, her hands gesturing wildly. "The moment he starts tearing down her family's empire, she'll hate him! It doesn't matter if she agrees with him in principle—that's her name, her legacy!"

"Then perhaps her legacy deserves to burn," Arturia replied coolly.

"Ooh, spicy," Su Yan commented from the side-lines, reaching over for the bottle refilling Sasha's glass—which was currently being used by both the dark-haired girl and Tsabin—with obvious glee.

She faced Padmé again, intent. "What made you start this movement? I want to understand where it all began."

Padmé's gaze grew distant, though something more complex flickered behind her eyes—Shirou caught the subtle tightening around her temples, the way her breathing shifted to something more controlled.

"It wasn't just one moment—it was a series of events," she said quietly, her voice carrying the careful cadence of someone who'd told this story before but still felt its barbs. "Trade route negotiations that somehow always favoured off-world interests. Infrastructure projects announced with great fanfare that never quite materialised—promises of new schools, improved transit systems, upgraded medical facilities." Her fingers pressed against the table's edge. "Royal appointments going to cronies rather than qualified candidates, watching competent administrators replaced by sycophants who wouldn't question orders."

The evening breeze stirred around them, carrying the faint scent of night-blooming flowers. Shirou noticed how the wind caught stray strands of Padmé's hair, sending them dancing across her face as her expression grew more haunted. "I suppose the tipping point was a labour dispute a year and a half ago at one of the plasma refineries—workers asking for basic safety improvements after three deaths in as many months."

The memory seemed to settle over her like a shroud. Her jaw tightened almost imperceptibly, and Shirou could see the effort it took to keep her voice level. "Veruna sent security forces to 'maintain order.' Tsabin and I went to observe, to document what was happening." She paused, and in that silence Shirou heard the echo of helpless rage. "We watched royal guards—meant to protect Naboo's citizens—break up a peaceful gathering with shock batons and

threats. Families torn apart, workers beaten for asking not to die for their wages."

Her fingers traced the rim of her water glass with unconscious precision, the gesture absent and contemplative, but Shirou noticed the slight tremor in her hand. The cool night air carried voices from the streets below—early risers like Shirou preparing for the day, workers returning from night watch, groups stumbling home after a night of revelry—distant sounds that seemed to mock the gravity of her words. "Veruna seemed different at first. Reformist, even. I campaigned for him, believed in his promises of transparency and accountability." Her voice grew bitter.

"But power has a way of revealing character rather than changing it. The scandals, the corruption, the casual brutality—they were just symptoms. The disease was deeper—a system that allowed one person to hollow out our institutions for personal gain whilst everyone looked the other way, too comfortable or too frightened to speak."

"But all it takes is one whisper, right, Padmé?" Tsabin suddenly interrupted as she, alongside Su Yan, Eirtama, and the holodrama debate team, approached the trio.

"For it to echo into the people's hearts," Su Yan finished, hands clasping Tsabin's shoulder.

Padmé smiled at the pair, raising her glass of water in acknowledgement.

Shirou turned to the group of six, eyebrow lifted, and deadpanned, "So who won the debate?"

Mara and Sasha seemed to blush in embarrassment, involuntarily stepping behind the smaller Arturia.

"Oh, they turned their debate into a bet," Eirtama deadpanned.

"How about you—which swoop bike will you back?" Su Yan asked Padmé and Rabbine, her eyes gleaming with mischievous anticipation. The question hung in the air like a challenge, and Shirou could practically feel the trap being set.

"Yeah, come on—join in solidarity," Tsabin cajoled, her voice carrying that particular tone that meant trouble was brewing. As she spoke, Shirou noticed Eirtama frantically shaking her head whilst crossing both index fingers into an 'X' behind the duo's backs, her blue eyes wide with warning. The accountant's pale complexion had gone even paler, and she was mouthing 'no' with the desperation of someone watching a speeder hurtle towards a cliff.

"Which one will the holodrama end with?" Tsabin continued, warming to her theme with theatrical flourish. "Will Kael Torven give up his plans for revenge and fully devote himself to his love for Celestine? Will it end with him burning everything for the sake of his pledge, even if it hurts the one he loves in the process? Or finally, will it end with Celestine betraying her family as she helps Kael destroy the conglomerate root and stem?" She paused dramatically, savouring the moment. "Any ending closest to these three scenarios shall be accepted as the winner."

Both Su Yan and Tsabin stepped forwards in unison, their combined presence towering over the seated Padmé and Rabbine. The movement was clearly choreographed, blocking the two women's sight lines from Eirtama's increasingly frantic warning gestures. Su Yan's golden-brown eyes sparkled with barely contained glee, whilst Tsabin wore that particular smirk that meant she was thoroughly enjoying herself at someone else's expense.

Eirtama, seeing that her silent warnings were pointless against the duo's determined enthusiasm, sighed in defeat. Her shoulders sagged as she locked eyes with Shirou, and he offered her a commiserating smile.

Padmé and Rabbine exchanged uncertain glances, their expressions caught between curiosity and wariness. The bright light of the setting Ohma Dun

caught Padmé's features, highlighting the slight furrow of her brow as she processed whatever machinations were at work. Rabbine's amber eyes darted between the two instigators.

Finally, worn down by persistent badgering and perhaps sensing that resistance was futile, both women acquiesced. They chose the third option.

"Excellent!" The pair celebrated with infectious enthusiasm, Su Yan clapping her hands together whilst Tsabin pumped her fist in the air. "So that means Eirtama, Arturia, Padmé, and Rabbine have all opted for the love-and-vengeance ending!" Su Yan announced with the air of someone declaring planetary election results.

"Meanwhile, Tsabin backed Mara, who's on team pure-love, whilst I backed my dear distant cousin Sasha, who's firmly in team vengeance-above-all!"

Shirou felt a chill that had nothing to do with temperature.

"Good—no take-backs!" Su Yan declared, grinning with the satisfaction of a predator who'd successfully cornered her prey. She produced her datapad with a flourish, the screen's glow casting her features in sharp relief. "Losers shall serve Shirou here as thanks for tonight's hospitality—for one whole weekend, dressed as a Twi'lek dancer!"

The image on her datapad made a tic form on Shirou's temple, whilst the tricked pair gasped beside him. It showed a graceful Twi'lek dancer posed elegantly, but her outfit was... minimal, to put it kindly. The costume consisted of what he could only describe as a golden metal bikini top that provided barely adequate coverage, connected by delicate chains to matching bottoms. A translucent pelvic curtain of gossamer fabric hung from a jewelled belt, offering no illusion of modesty, revealing far more than it concealed. Golden armlets and anklets completed the ensemble, along with a collar that seemed more ornamental than functional.

Shirou felt his face flush crimson as the implications crashed over him like a tidal wave, the evening air suddenly feeling stifling against his heated skin, and he could feel his pulse thundering in his ears. *'Of all the ridiculous—how did I become the centre of this madness?'*

"Don't worry—I was assured by Arturia here that this also suits Shirou's perverted proclivities," Su Yan added with a wicked grin, her voice dripping with mock innocence as she gestured theatrically towards his partner.

*'The betrayal cut deep,'* Shirou thought sarcastically, his eye twitched as he slowly turned his gaze towards Arturia, who had suddenly developed an intense fascination with the terrace stonework. The weight of six expectant stares pressed against him like a physical force, and he could smell the lingering sweetness of dessert wine mixing with the night-blooming jasmine from the gardens below—a combination that now seemed almost mocking.

"Starting two days from now, Su Yan is banned from The Empty Pantry, and no more food challenges for a whole month," Shirou declared, his voice cutting through the night air with crystalline precision. His face assumed the mask of stoic composure he'd perfected over countless battles, arms crossing with military precision despite the chaos raging in his thoughts.

"Hey! Why isn't Tsabin included? This was all her idea!" Su Yan protested, her voice climbing an octave as panic crept in.

Arturia's dramatic wail of "No!" pierced the air, her golden eyes wide the horror as if she learnt that it was the end of the world.

"Fine. Tsabin is banned as well," Shirou added with the inexorable finality of a judge passing sentence.

"For kriff's sake, Su Yan!" Tsabin cursed, her voice thick with exasperated disbelief.

Within moments, all three conspirators had dropped to their knees before him, hands clasped in supplication, their previous mischief replaced by genuine remorse. The sight was so absurd—these formidable women reduced to pleading—that Shirou felt his anger for a brief moment begin to crack around the edges, warmth seeping back into his chest despite himself.

But that was just for a moment.

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Everything had wound down, night settling into that peaceful quiet following a successful gathering. Cool morning air carried lingering wine scents—fermented grapes on the breeze with rich, fruity notes of shared laughter and raised glasses. Beneath lay whisky's subtle bitterness, complex and warming, aged character recalling charred Vweliu wood and master distillers who knew some things cannot be rushed.

After considerable grovelling, cajoling, and shoulder massage—Tsabin still felt the surprising tension knotted beneath his shirt—plus steady drink refills whilst Arturia produced another wine case with that quietly pleased expression, they'd finally negotiated Shirou down from his month-long ban.

Mara's suggestion, the massage, delivered with a knowing smile. Watching Shirou's resolve dissolve under combined apology and touch was entertainment itself. Protests weakening with each careful press until he melted beneath their ministrations.

Everyone knew the game—Shirou was merely pouting. Silver brows furrowed in mock severity, arms crossed with theatrical indignation, whilst fighting his smile, betraying everything.

*'He does have a cute side,'* Tsabin confirmed, giggling to herself as she sat alone on the rooftop garden, nursing the final sips of her now-ambient wine. The liquid had lost its crisp chill half an hour ago, but the deep, fruity notes still

danced across her tongue with each measured sip. Her skin felt pleasantly warm from the alcohol, a gentle flush that started in her chest and radiated outward to her fingertips.

The rooftop garden offered a perfect view of Theed's sleeping districts, the soft glow of scattered lights creating a tapestry of gold against the dark stone buildings. A gentle breeze rustled through the carefully tended herbs and vegetables, carrying with it the green scent of growing things and the distant sound of a lone speeder humming through the night streets.

It was about an hour before first light, and Shirou, together with Rabbine—who could surprisingly hold her alcohol well, maintaining her sweet composure even as her amber eyes grew bright with wine—Padmé, and Su Yan, had helped carry Eirtama and Mara. Poor Mara had been slipping into giggly incoherence midway through the second crate of white wine, her usual composed warmth dissolving into endearing rambles about her latest holodrama obsessions. Eirtama, meanwhile, had simply announced she was at an 'economic decline' and promptly passed out against Su Yan's shoulder with a soft snore.

Arturia's offer stood: sleepover at the studio apartment. Extra bedding for the floor. She was retrieving bedding from their early days, when the dining area doubled as a bedroom.

Finishing her drink, Tsabin grinned, a mischievous glint shining in her eyes. She spied Padmé heading towards the fresher, her best friend moving with that particular careful grace of someone who was definitely feeling the wine but refused to show it, each step measured and deliberate. The sight of Padmé in the restaurant's uniform—something Tsabin had been trying not to focus on all evening—sent a familiar warmth curling through her stomach that had nothing to do with the alcohol.

She stood up, her own balance slightly unsteady as the wine made her limbs feel loose and warm, and followed her longtime best friend.

Entering the small outhouse separate from the baths, which had three separate, very private stalls—it was quite a thoughtful design, offering real privacy rather than the cramped, barely-enclosed spaces most establishments provided.

Whistling as she waited, Tsabin felt her pulse quicken. Wine had loosened her usual restraints, replacing careful composure with something primal and honest. After the telltale flush, the door clicked open. Padmé emerged. Their eyes locked.

Tsabin wiggled her eyebrows whilst drinking in the sight of Padmé in the restaurant uniform. Black dress with crisp white frills hugged curves in ways that dried her mouth—sweetheart neckline framing modest cleavage, short skirt showing smooth bare legs, fitted bodice emphasising narrow waist. White apron tied in a neat bow completed the effect: innocent and utterly enticing.

*'I should probably never tease Shirou about his supposed perverted proclivities,'* Tsabin mused, her own thoughts turning decidedly appreciative as she drank in the sight of her best friend looking thoroughly dishevelled and beautiful.

Desire lit up in both their eyes as they met midway, their lips crashing together with the desperate hunger of wine-loosened inhibitions and long-suppressed want. Tsabin could taste the sweet residue of white wine on Padmé's lips, could feel the soft warmth of her breath as their mouths moved together. Their hands found the backs of each other's heads simultaneously, fingers tangling in hair as they pulled each other closer with gentle desperation.

The kiss was messy, urgent, all tongues and soft gasps as Tsabin pushed Padmé back into the stall she'd just vacated. She could feel Padmé's heartbeat against her chest—or maybe that was hers—rapid and fluttering, matching the rhythm of her own pulse that thundered in her ears. The small space enclosed them in intimate privacy, the walls close enough that Tsabin

could brace one hand against the smooth surface whilst the other remained buried in Padmé's hair.

Closing the fresher lid with her free hand, Tsabin switched positions with practised ease, settling herself down and pulling Padmé onto her lap. Padmé went willingly, settling sideways across Tsabin's thighs with a soft exhale—relief and want equally measured. Tsabin's hand found smooth thigh, palm sliding against fever-warm, incredibly soft skin.

Padmé's arms wrapped around Tsabin's shoulders as she leaned in, deepening the kiss, fingers finding that sensitive nape-spot that always made her shiver. Wine and want filled the space between them, creating a private world where only they existed, where politics and responsibility dissolved into simple, honest need.

Tsabin's fingers worked with practised efficiency, quickly loosening the crisp white blouse that had been driving her to distraction all evening. The fabric yielded under her touch, and she tugged it down with perhaps more haste than grace, freeing Padmé's breasts to the warm, golden light filtering through the stall's ventilation slats. The sight sent a jolt of pure want through her—Padmé's skin was flushed and responsive, the stiff peaks catching the amber glow like precious gems. Tsabin could smell Padmé's body wash mingling with the musk of arousal, creating an intoxicating perfume that made her head spin.

Her free hand mapped the familiar territory of Padmé's thigh, fingers trailing upwards with deliberate slowness until she found the heated core that awaited her touch. Padmé's sharp intake of breath was music to her ears, the sound vibrating through the small space as her best friend's body responded with immediate, honest need. The slick warmth beneath her fingertips was evidence of just how much Padmé had wanted this, had been thinking about this even as they'd sat through tedious committee meetings and policy discussions.

Padmé's own hands weren't idle—they freed Tsabin's breasts from their confined frames, cupping and massaging, fingers finding the sensitive peaks and rolling them with a touch that sent sparks shooting down her spine. The sensation made Tsabin's breath catch, her vision momentarily blurring with the intensity of it all.

With trembling fingers, Padmé bunched up her own skirt, her lust-darkened eyes fixed on Tsabin's face as she watched her best friend's digits slide deeper into her centre. Her moans were stifled but desperate, each sound making Tsabin's own arousal spike higher. The scent of want filled the air between them.

"Kriff, I'm going to ask Shirou and Arturia if I could buy one of their uniforms," Tsabin declared breathlessly, her voice thick with desire as she gazed up at Padmé's flushed face. The sight was too tempting to resist—she leaned forward and captured a nipple between her lips, revelling in Padmé's immediate response, the way her friend's back arched and a proper moan escaped despite her attempts at quiet.

"Oh—fuck, sorry!" A warm baritone voice suddenly cut through their heated morning encounter, the words carrying genuine mortification and surprise. Both women froze instantly, their eyes snapping towards the now-open door where Shirou stood, his own body rigid with shock at the tableau before him.

Tsabin became acutely aware of their compromising position—Padmé's exposed breast still glistening from her attention, her own fingers buried deep inside her friend's core, the evidence of their passion written across both their faces in flush and dishevelment.

Looking back up at Shirou, whose silver-grey eyes had already politely averted, Tsabin watched him raise his eyebrows and shake his head in what could only be described as exasperation mixed with embarrassment. His movements were quick and efficient as he pulled the door shut, though his muted voice carried clearly through the thin barrier.

"Lock the door next time, you two."

The mortification lasted exactly three seconds before Tsabin felt a wicked grin spread across her face. She looked up at Padmé, whose cheeks were burning crimson but whose eyes held a spark of mischief that matched her own.

"Looks like that was tacit permission for me to ravage you this morning, Ms Naberrie," she purred, her voice dropping to that husky register that always made Padmé shiver.

Shirou's voice drifted through the door again, this time carrying an unmistakably teasing tone despite the muffled quality. "And oh yeah—I can refer you to the tailor who customised this uniform, if you're serious about that request."

Pausing another moment until they heard the stall two doors down close with a decisive thud, Tsabin pressed her palm more firmly against Padmé's slick heat, sliding another digit deep inside her. The sensation of Padmé's inner walls clenching around her fingers sent a thrill through her own core, the intimate connection sparking fresh desire along her nerve endings. She captured Padmé's lips again in passionate hunger, tasting the salt of exertion and the sweetness that was uniquely hers. Padmé's hips rose to meet each deliberate thrust, her breath hitching against Tsabin's mouth as pleasure built between them like a gathering storm—

"Oh—it appears I might have interrupted something," a stoic voice cut through their heated moment for the second time, though this interruption carried an entirely different energy than Shirou's flustered retreat.

Tsabin's head snapped up to find Arturia standing in the doorway, her golden eyes taking in the compromising scene with what could only be described as regal composure. The blonde's expression remained perfectly controlled—that mask of noble dignity firmly in place—yet Tsabin caught the unmistakable glint of mischief dancing behind those amber depths. There was something almost predatory in the way Arturia's gaze lingered on their entwined forms, an

appreciation that made heat coil low in Tsabin's belly despite the awkwardness of being discovered yet again.

"As you will," Arturia pronounced with deliberate formality, inclining her head in a gesture that somehow managed to be both dismissive and encouraging. Her voice carried that particular cadence of royal permission, as though she were granting them leave to continue their private congress. "Though you probably should lock the door."

Before they could resume their intimate congress, muted voices drifted through the still-unlocked door—a pointed reminder of their continued lack of privacy. The familiar cadence of Shirou's dry observation carried clearly through the thin barrier: "Ah, you interrupted them as well. Did they still not lock the door?"

Both women flushed crimson at the comment, recognising the deliberate volume as one of Shirou's constant indulgences in sarcasm—allowing his pointed remark to be heard by its intended targets. The mortification was exquisite, made worse by the knowledge that their lack of foresight had now become a running jest between the pair beyond their door.

"Indeed," came Arturia's measured response, her voice pitched with that particular blend of regal authority and barely concealed amusement, making it impossible to determine whether she felt disapproval or entertainment. "One might suggest that political strategists possess superior planning skills in all endeavours. Though perhaps passion renders even the most meticulous minds... momentarily scattered."

Elegant delivery of the barb—just enough formality maintaining plausible deniability whilst ensuring maximum impact—sent fresh embarrassment waves through both women.

"Now, do wait for me, as Su Yan and I were promised massages just before bed," Arturia continued with the imperious tone of someone accustomed to having her desires fulfilled without question.

They could practically hear the resigned sigh and the gentle shake of Shirou's head in weary acquiescence to his partner's demands—a sound that spoke of countless similar surrenders to her particular brand of benevolent tyranny. The soft shuffle of footsteps moving away from their door finally granted them the privacy they should have secured from the beginning, as Tsabin finally reached forward to lock the door.

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**End**

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