

## **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 8.1 -**

### **The Blockade**

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The council chamber swallowed sound. Thick tapestries depicting the founding of Theed absorbed every footfall, every rustle of fabric, every breath that might otherwise have echoed off the vaulted ceiling. Padmé had grown to appreciate this quality over time—the room's appetite for noise granted the illusion of privacy, even when thirty advisors crowded its long table.

Tonight, the table sat empty save for her.

She pressed her fingertips against her temples and exhaled through her teeth. The headdress—an elaborate tiered construction of lacquered shaakwood, gold filigree, and suspensor-thread beading—sat atop her skull like a small building. The thing had its own gravitational pull. She was half-convinced that Rabé, who had designed it, intended it as a test of endurance rather than a symbol of office—that, or she was secretly a Coruscanti operative sent to undermine Naboo's governance through the medium of heavy headwear.

*'Repulsor thrusters,'* she thought, not for the first time. *'Two micro-units threaded into the base frame. Sufficient lift to offset sixty per cent of the mass.'* She pictured Sabé's face if she proposed it. The horrified disapproval.

Padmé shifted the headdress with both hands, settling it a fraction of a centimetre to the left. The pressure redistributed from her right temple to the crown of her head. Marginal improvement.

The datapads fanned across the table's polished surface held her attention more effectively than the headpiece held her skull. She had arranged them in order of priority—three columns, each colour-coded by sector affiliation. Blue for Naboo's internal projections. Green for the broader Chommell Sector delegates she had already contacted. Red for the Trade Federation's contract documentation, annotated in her own hand with marginalia that grew increasingly terse toward the final pages.

She picked up the nearest red-coded pad and scrolled to her most recent note.

*Section 14, Subsection 3: Revenue distribution model. 73% to Federation. 18% to sector governance (distributed via appointed intermediaries—historically corrupt). 9% to planetary extraction budgets. Functionally: Chommell produces, Federation profits, sector starves.*

She set the pad down and rubbed the bridge of her nose.

The double doors parted. No knock preceded them—only two people in the palace dispensed with that formality, and the footsteps that followed were too light and too precise for Shirou.

Arturia Pendragon crossed the threshold in her black-and-white service uniform, the frilled apron still tied at her waist, a faint dusting of flour caught in the crease of one sleeve. The outfit should have looked absurd in the council chamber's austere grandeur. It did not. Arturia carried herself with the posture of someone accustomed to rooms far older and far heavier than this one, and the uniform became incidental—background detail to the stillness she wore like armour.

Two guards flanked the corridor beyond the open doors. Neither moved to intercept. Neither spoke. One—a young woman Padmé recognised from the northern gate rotation—pressed herself a fraction closer to the wall as Arturia passed.

The doors closed.

"Good evening." Arturia's gaze swept the room once, cataloguing exits and occupancy with an efficiency that had long ceased to surprise Padmé. Satisfied, she softened—fractionally, the way stone softens when light hits it at the right angle. "You look as though the crown is winning."

Padmé managed a thin smile. "It has the advantage of mass."

Arturia approached the table and pulled out the chair to Padmé's left. She did not sit. She stood beside it, one hand resting on the carved backrest, and regarded Padmé with an expression that was neither pity nor concern but something closer to clinical assessment.

"How was training?"

Arturia's mouth curved. The expression was small—a contained thing, warm at its centre and sharp at its edges.

"Sabé has been thoroughly caught up."

Padmé winced. The motion was involuntary and immediate, a full-body flinch that started at her shoulders and rippled down through her spine. The memory surfaced unbidden—last week's session, when Sabé had stood on the colonnade balcony in full Amidala regalia, headdress and all, whilst her sisters-in-arms suffered below.

Arturia had increased the drill tempo by twenty per cent.

No one had forgiven Sabé. The bruises took four days to fade. Sachée still limped on humid mornings.

"I see." Padmé chose not to ask for details. Some knowledge was better left unexamined, particularly when it involved Sabé's suffering, which she would hear about in exhaustive, theatrical detail later tonight regardless. "She earned it."

"She did." Arturia pulled the chair out fully and sat, folding her hands on the table's edge. "What occupies you tonight?"

Padmé exhaled. The sound was longer than she intended—a slow release that carried with it the accumulated weight of three days' preparation and six weeks of preliminary correspondence.

"The Trade Federation."

Arturia said nothing. She tilted her head a degree to the right and waited.

This was the thing Padmé had come to value beyond measure. Beyond the combat instruction, beyond the impossible feats of strength and speed that had dismantled a regime in seventy-two hours, beyond even the quiet domesticity of shared meals and borrowed beds—this. The silence. The unhurried, attentive silence of someone who understood that listening was not a passive act but a deliberate one.

Shirou possessed it too. Different in texture—his silences were warmer, threaded with the empathy of someone who had carried burdens he would not name—but identical in function. Neither of them pushed. Neither offered unsolicited strategy or political manoeuvring. They listened, and in listening, they gave Padmé space to think aloud in ways she could not with advisors who had agendas, or colleagues who had stakes, or senators who had ambitions.

"Of everything Veruna did," Padmé began, reaching for the red-coded datapad, "of every corrupt arrangement he perpetuated, every law he bent, every alliance he poisoned—there is precisely one matter on which he and I agree." She held the pad up, its screen casting pale blue light across her painted features. "The mining rights."

Arturia's eyes tracked the datapad. Steady. Attentive.

"Not merely the plasma extraction on Naboo. Everyone knows about the plasma—it is the issue that reaches the Senate floor, the grievance that generates sympathy because our planet is visible and our exports are valuable." Padmé set the pad down and spread her hands across the table, palms flat against the wood. "But the Chommell Sector contains thirty-six inhabited systems. Karlinus produces duralium ore. The Atrisian colonies mine cortosis derivatives. Prossus has rare-earth elements essential to hyperdrive manufacture. Every one of these worlds operates under the same framework—a contract negotiated forty-seven years ago by officials who were either incompetent or compromised."

She tapped the datapad. The revenue distribution schematic filled the screen.

"Seventy-three per cent of all extraction profits flow directly to the Trade Federation. Eighteen per cent returns to what the contract terms 'sector governance intermediaries'—appointed positions that have historically served as personal enrichment vehicles for whichever local official held the relevant stamp. Nine per cent is allocated to planetary extraction budgets." Her finger traced the final figure. "Nine per cent. To maintain the mines, to compensate the workers, to repair the environmental damage, to fund the infrastructure that makes extraction possible in the first place."

Arturia's gaze remained on the schematic. Her expression did not change, but something behind her eyes grew heavier.

"Forty-seven years," Padmé continued. "Three monarchs. Eleven governors. Not one formal challenge to the terms. Because the intermediaries profited, the Federation profited, and the Senate—" She caught herself before the word became a weapon. Drew breath. Released it. "The Senate had no incentive to intervene in an arrangement that kept the Chommell Sector quiet and the trade routes stable."

She leaned back in her chair. The headdress shifted. She steadied it with one hand.

"Veruna didn't care about the miners—his atrocities during his reign made that abundantly clear—but he wanted to break the contract. That much I will grant him. His methods—" The word soured in her mouth. "He was negotiating through Black Sun. Leveraging criminal networks to threaten Federation shipping lanes, to create disruptions that would force renegotiation at blaster-point. When that failed to produce results quickly enough, he began diverting planetary defence funds to finance mercenary operations against Federation assets in the outer sectors."

The implications hung in the air between them. Padmé did not need to spell them out. The mercenaries. The Mandalorians. The slavers who had descended on Palace Plaza and upended everything.

"So." Padmé's hands returned to the table. "I inherit the one legitimate grievance of a man who pursued it through illegitimate means. The contract is exploitative. The sector suffers. The Federation knows the terms are unconscionable but has no incentive to renegotiate because the legal framework protects them and the political will to challenge it has never materialised." She met Arturia's gaze. "Until now, apparently."

Silence held the room for several seconds. Arturia absorbed the information the way she absorbed everything—completely, without visible reaction, filing each detail into whatever internal architecture governed her assessment of the world.

Then she spoke. "The other sector heads. You have spoken with them?"

"All thirty-six." Padmé permitted herself a note of grim satisfaction.

"Twenty-nine have confirmed participation in tonight's call. The remaining seven are sending representatives with authority to negotiate. It took six weeks to achieve that consensus. Six weeks of individual conversations, of addressing specific grievances, of promising transparency in whatever arrangement replaces the current one." She paused. "Several of them remember the previous intermediaries. Trust is not a resource I can assume."

Arturia nodded once.

That was all. A single nod, and Padmé felt the knot between her shoulder blades loosen by a fraction. Not because the nod conveyed approval or agreement or strategic endorsement—Arturia offered none of those things uninvited—but because it conveyed understanding.

The console at the far end of the table chimed. Three ascending tones—the diplomatic channel's connection alert. Padmé's stomach tightened.

A second chime followed. The Trade Federation's identifier code scrolled across the console's display panel in blue Aurebesh characters, accompanied by the formal preamble of a sanctioned negotiation session.

They were early. Thirteen minutes early.

*'Of course they are,' Padmé thought. 'Arrive before the host is ready. Establish tempo. Control the opening.'*

She straightened in her chair. The headdress settled into position as though it too recognised the shift from private conversation to public performance. Her hands moved across the datapads, arranging them into precise formation—the contract analysis to her left, the sector delegates' consolidated position papers to her right, her personal notes centred before her.

Arturia rose from the chair. The movement was fluid and unhurried. She stepped closer—not toward the console, but toward Padmé—and reached across the table's corner.

Her hand found Padmé's. The grip was brief. Firm. The calluses on Arturia's palm pressed against Padmé's knuckles for precisely one second—long enough to register warmth.

Then Arturia released her, stepped back, and walked toward the double doors without looking over her shoulder. Her footsteps were silent on the carpeted floor. The frilled apron swayed with each stride. The flour on her sleeve caught the light one final time before the doors opened and closed behind her.

The console chimed a third time. Insistent.

Padmé drew a breath that filled her lungs completely. Held it. Released it through her nose in a measured stream that carried the last traces of fatigue and doubt with it.

She pressed the acceptance key.

The holoprojector at the centre of the table hummed to life. Blue light coalesced into form—the elongated features, the wide-set eyes, the mottled grey-green skin that appeared almost gelatinous in holographic rendering.

Viceroy Nute Gunray of the Trade Federation gazed at her from across the width of the galaxy. His thin lips were already arranged in the configuration that passed for diplomatic pleasantries among Neimoidians—a smile that reached neither his eyes nor his intentions.

"Queen Amidala." His voice carried the nasal, clipped cadence of rehearsed Basic. "How gracious of you to make time for this discussion."

Padmé's painted face betrayed nothing. Her hands rested on the table before her—still, composed, arranged with the same deliberate precision as the datapads that flanked them.

"Viceroy Gunray." She inclined her head a measured degree. "Naboo thanks you for your punctuality."

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Palace Plaza wore a different face today.

Su Yan stood at the edge of the fountain where the old vendor stalls once marked the eastern boundary, her golden-brown eyes tracing the rows of coloured awnings and banners that stretched across the square. Saffron and teal from Karlinus. Deep violet from the weavers of Erso's Landing. Rust-orange pennants bearing the grain-sheaf crest of the Jafan agricultural collective. Music threaded through the air from somewhere near the northern

colonnade—a reed instrument she didn't recognise, playing a melody that looped and wandered without ever quite resolving.

The Chommell Sector Cultural and Harvest Exchange.

She liked the name. Official enough to satisfy the bureaucrats, festive enough to draw crowds. And crowds had come. Thousands of them, filling the plaza and spilling into the adjacent streets, browsing stalls laden with goods from worlds most Nabooans couldn't place on a star chart. Smoked fish from the lake settlements of Karlinus, packed in wax-sealed wooden boxes.

Crystallised honey from the highland apiaries on Jafan. Spice blends from the mining colonies that orbited the outer worlds, presented in small ceramic jars with hand-painted labels.

Two years ago, this plaza had been a killing field.

The memory surfaced without permission—the shadow of the freighter blotting out the sky, the first crack of blaster fire, bodies falling in the space between one heartbeat and the next. Su Yan's fingers curled against her thigh. She breathed in through her nose, held it, released it. The reed instrument warbled on.

Not today.

She forced the shiver down before it reached her shoulders and turned her attention back to the present.

A Karlini merchant was demonstrating a hand-cranked textile loom to a cluster of Nabooan children, their faces bright with the intensity of discovery. Two stalls down, a heavyset woman from the Jafan delegation haggled with a Theed spice trader over the relative merits of stone-ground versus mill-processed turmeric, their voices carrying the comfortable rhythm of professionals who respected one another's craft.

This was what it was supposed to look like.

The Chommell Sector had always been neighbours in the geographic sense—thirty-six systems bound together by proximity and the administrative convenience of the Galactic Republic. One senator to represent the lot of them, which meant one voice trying to articulate the needs of billions. The system hadn't bred alliance so much as quiet resentment. Whoever held the senatorial seat—and it had been Naboo's representative more often than not—inevitably carried the biases of their homeworld into the corridors of power on Coruscant. The legislative aides drawn from other systems helped, theoretically. In practice, they spent half their time fighting for attention and the other half navigating the political currents generated by whoever sat in the big chair.

Senator Palpatine had been better than most. Su Yan would grant him that. The man had a gift for making each delegation feel heard, even when the outcome served Naboo's interests above all others. Whether that constituted genuine diplomacy or masterful manipulation was a question she hadn't resolved and wasn't sure she wanted to.

But nothing accelerated cooperation like a shared enemy.

The Trade Federation had fed on the Chommell Sector for forty-seven years. Seventy-three per cent of extraction profits flowing offworld. Nine per cent returned. The mathematics alone were obscene, but mathematics didn't account for the generations of miners on Karlinus who'd watched their children leave for Core worlds because the local economy couldn't sustain them, or the Jafan farmers whose export tariffs doubled every renewal cycle whilst Federation-subsidised imports undercut their prices in their own markets.

Forty-seven years of that. Thirty-six systems grinding under it. And not one formal challenge mounted until Padmé—until Amidala—sat down at the negotiating table six weeks ago and placed the consolidated position papers of twenty-nine confirmed system heads before the Viceroy's holographic image.

Su Yan caught herself clenching her jaw and relaxed it deliberately.

The talks hadn't settled yet, she reminded herself. Last night's session had been the latest in a series that Padmé described with careful diplomatic neutrality as "ongoing." Neither positive nor negative. The Viceroy engaged, listened, raised objections, proposed counter-terms that amounted to cosmetic adjustments on the existing framework—the kind of changes that looked significant in a press release and evaporated under scrutiny. The other sector representatives held firm, which was itself a minor miracle. But the Federation hadn't escalated. Hadn't threatened. Hadn't deployed the kind of economic leverage that everyone assumed they would.

Su Yan found that interesting.

She also found it suspicious, but she filed that observation in the same mental drawer where she kept her thoughts about Palpatine's uncanny talent for appearing helpful.

*'Why haven't they just bulldozed their way through?'* The Federation had the credits, the fleet, the Senate contacts. They could bury the Chommell Sector in litigation for a decade without breaking a sweat. The fact that they were still talking suggested either genuine willingness to renegotiate—unlikely—or a strategy that required the appearance of negotiation whilst something else moved beneath the surface.

But that wasn't her problem today. Today was the festival. Today was about making this fragile inter-system solidarity feel real, tangible, worth protecting.

She turned from the fountain and began walking toward the southern edge of the plaza, weaving through the crowd with practised ease. A group of university students recognised her and waved; she flashed them a grin and a thumbs-up without breaking stride. An older woman from the river market district pressed a paper bag of roasted nuts into her hand as she passed, refusing payment with a firm shake of her head. Su Yan popped one into her mouth and immediately regretted the decision—the coating was laced with enough chilli to strip paint.

Her eyes watered. She ate three more.

The logistics meeting with the Merchant Guild had taken longer than expected. Cedor Parnell, for all his charm and commercial instincts, had the conversational habits of a man who believed no point was fully made until it had been restated from at least four angles. Governor Bibble's staff had been more efficient but no less exhausting—they'd flagged seventeen items requiring her attention, ranging from a dispute over awning placement between the Karlini and Jafan delegations to a concern about waste management capacity given the unexpectedly high attendance.

She'd handled all seventeen. The awning dispute was resolved through a compromise involving a shared border-stall concept that both delegations claimed credit for. The waste management concern was addressed by commandeering three additional droid units from the palace maintenance pool, authorised by a quick holocall to Eirtaé that had lasted forty-two seconds including pleasantries.

Su Yan pulled up her sleeve to check the chrono on her wrist. Fourteen-twenty. She had roughly ninety minutes before the afternoon programme demanded her presence at the plaza stage, where she'd be introducing the youth cultural exchange presentations—groups from seven different systems performing traditional dances, songs, and theatrical pieces she'd spent three weeks coordinating.

Ninety minutes. Enough time.

She crossed the alley behind the plaza's southern row of buildings and approached The Empty Pantry's rear entrance. The back door was propped open with a durasteel wedge—Shirou's habit during service hours, allowing kitchen staff to shuttle waste to the bins without fumbling for handles. The kitchen sounds reached her before she crossed the threshold: the rhythmic thud of a knife against a cutting board, the hiss of something frying, quiet conversation between voices she recognised as Lirene and Ronan—two of The Empty Pantry's student part-time workers.

She slipped past the kitchen entrance without disturbing them. The narrow stairwell that led to the upper living quarters was tucked behind the cold

storage unit, its entrance concealed by a curtain of weighted fabric strips that Arturia had installed after complaining about kitchen smells infiltrating her wardrobe.

Su Yan climbed the stairs two at a time, her sandals slapping against the worn wooden treads.

The living area occupied the entire upper floor of the adjacent building—a space that had expanded considerably since the early days when Shirou and Arturia had shared a cramped studio above the restaurant proper. Now there were proper rooms, a communal area with mismatched but comfortable furniture, and the rooftop garden that remained the group's preferred gathering spot.

She smiled as she reached the landing.

Their arrangement. She thought about it more often than she probably should—not with anxiety, but with a warm, slightly incredulous wonder that it existed at all.

Conventional relationships wouldn't survive what they did. What she did, what Padmé demanded of all of them. The palace consumed time the way Arturia consumed shaakburgers—relentlessly, without apology, and in quantities that defied reasonable expectation. A partner who needed regular dinners, predictable evenings, the ordinary scaffolding of a normal relationship—that partner would wither on the vine within a month. Su Yan had seen it happen to colleagues in other offices. Had watched competent, passionate women slowly hollow out their personal lives to feed the machine of governance, until the person waiting at home stopped waiting.

What they had was different. Arturia had started it, which made a peculiar kind of sense in retrospect. The woman who had once ruled a kingdom and lost everything understood better than any of them what happened when duty devoured the human being beneath the title. She'd proposed the arrangement with characteristic bluntness over dinner one evening, laying out the logic with

the same tone she used when explaining kitchen safety protocols—measured, precise, faintly terrifying in its clarity.

"None of you will have conventional lives. None of you should pretend otherwise. What you require is a home that does not demand your presence to remain standing, and people within it who understand that absence is not abandonment."

Shirou hadn't been present that night, but Arturia had assured them he would be receptive—albeit on his own timeline. She'd urged patience. She'd also, with the serene confidence of a woman who had conquered twelve kingdoms, urged everyone to simply wear him down.

The physical dimension had developed organically. Morning tangles where someone's leg was across someone else's waist, and the warmth of it was too good to question. Hands finding hands under blankets. Shirou's breath against a collarbone when he shifted in sleep. Nothing forced, nothing performed. Just the slow erosion of boundaries between people who already shared meals, shared danger, shared a cause.

Su Yan with Arturia at the swoop track outside the city—or what everyone bluntly called the Theed forest—where Arturia's driving had prompted Su Yan to grip the woman's waist so tightly she'd left finger-shaped bruises that Arturia wore like medals for the night. Group outings that blurred the line between friendship and courtship until the distinction felt academic.

Shirou noticed. He reacted. He was also spectacularly bad at initiating, which the entire group had independently concluded and which Sabé had once described, after two glasses of wine, as "the most endearing and infuriating character flaw a man has ever possessed."

Especially after she'd described the night they walked in on Shirou and Arturia in the bath—the carnal sparring session—and confirmed that Shirou was not, in fact, gentle about everything.

Su Yan pushed open the door to the communal area—and stopped.

Sabé lay face-down on the massage table that Shirou had built from reclaimed timber and restaurant-grade cushioning foam. Her top was off. Her bare back glistened under the warm overhead lighting, slick with oil that caught the amber glow, turning her skin to something approaching liquid bronze. The muscles along her spine were visibly loosened, the tension lines that normally bracketed her shoulder blades smoothed into something approaching relaxation.

Shirou stood beside the table, sleeves rolled past his elbows, his hands working the oil into the junction between Sabé's neck and left shoulder with the precise, unhurried pressure of someone who understood anatomy well enough to weaponise the knowledge. His white hair was pulled back with a cloth tie. A faint sheen of perspiration sat at his temples.

Sabé's face was turned sideways on the cushion. Her eyes were half-closed. Her expression occupied the territory between bliss and unconsciousness.

"You absolute villain," Su Yan said from the doorway.

Sabé's eyes opened fully. Not with alarm—with the resigned awareness of someone who'd known this moment was coming and had hoped to extract five more minutes of paradise before it arrived.

"Go away," Sabé mumbled into the cushion.

"You're meant to be at the palace."

"I'm meant to be wherever my broken body requires me to be, and right now that is here."

Su Yan crossed her arms and leaned against the doorframe. "Still in pain from yesterday?"

Sabé could only grunt.

Su Yan winced sympathetically, then redirected her attention to Shirou. "It's my turn."

Muffled protests from the cushion.

Shirou's hands paused mid-stroke. He glanced up, grey eyes registering her presence with the faint half-smile he reserved for situations where he was outnumbered and aware of it.

"Shouldn't the two of you be heading toward the palace?"

"We've got an hour. Maybe ninety minutes." Su Yan pushed off the doorframe and entered the room properly, dropping onto the sofa opposite the massage table. She kicked her sandals off and tucked her feet beneath her. "The youth presentations don't start until sixteen-hundred, and Padmé's got the agricultural policy panel until at least fifteen-thirty. Nothing requires us before then."

Sabé lifted her head an inch. "What she said."

"The festival," Shirou continued, his hands resuming their work along Sabé's spine as if the interruption hadn't occurred. "Everything running smoothly?"

"Seventeen logistical fires, all extinguished." Su Yan reached for the water pitcher on the side table and poured herself a glass. "Parnell talked for forty minutes about awning jurisdiction. Bibble's people flagged a waste management shortfall. A Karlini delegation tried to set up a mobile distillery inside the children's activity zone."

"Did you let them?"

"I moved the children's activity zone."

Shirou's mouth twitched.

"It's going well, though," Su Yan added, softening. "Really well. There are people from systems I've never met anyone from, just... here. Eating each other's food, watching each other's performances. The kids are incredible. There's a group from the Erso's Landing settlement doing this thing with shadow puppets and luminescent dye that's going to be quite interesting to watch." She took a long drink of water.

He nodded. The gesture was small but weighted in the way his gestures always were.

"The banquet's set up in the eastern wing of the palace," Sabé said, her voice muffled by the cushion. "Sixty-four restaurants from across the sector. Arturia was quite excited to get her fair share of the samples."

"She did mention that," Shirou said. "Twice. With a list of dishes she intended to sample."

"How long was the list?"

"I don't think there was anything that wasn't on it."

Su Yan snorted. "Is the Pantry's showcase ready?"

"Isar and Tirsa are handling service. Arturia approved the menu last night. She tasted everything twice." A pause. "Three times, for the desserts."

"Quality control," Sabé murmured sagely.

"She ate an entire tray of the miniature cheesecakes and called it 'establishing a baseline.'"

Su Yan laughed—a bright, unguarded sound that filled the room in a way she didn't bother to restrain. She watched Shirou's hands move along Sabé's lower back, his thumbs tracing the muscle groups flanking the spine with a precision that bordered on surgical. Sabé's breathing had deepened. Her fingers, dangling off the edge of the table, twitched occasionally.

"Seriously though," Su Yan said, pulling herself to the edge of the sofa. "My turn. My shoulders feel like someone strung cable through them."

"You'll have to wait."

"I've been coordinating seventeen crises since breakfast."

"Sabé was hit in the sternum with a wooden sword."

Sabé raised one finger in confirmation without lifting her head.

Su Yan pouted. "Arturia hits everyone in the sternum. That's not special."

"She hit me in the sternum and then swept my legs, and I landed on my tailbone on the stone floor," Sabé clarified. "Whilst she stood over me and said, 'The consequences of running your mouth.'"

"That does sound like her."

"She was smiling."

"She's always smiling when she says things like that. It's her favourite part."

Shirou finished a long stroke down Sabé's back and stepped away, reaching for a towel to wipe the excess oil from his hands. "Five minutes, then I'll start on you."

Su Yan pumped her fist.

Sabé groaned and rolled onto her side, one arm draped across her chest. The oil made her skin catch the light in ways that Su Yan's gaze lingered on for a beat longer than strictly necessary. Sabé noticed. Her mouth curved.

"See something you like?"

"Always." Su Yan met her look squarely. "But right now I'm mostly admiring the bruise on your ribcage. That's a gorgeous shade of purple."

Sabé glanced down. A splotch of violet-blue spread across her left side, roughly the size of a Meiloorun fruit. "Arturia's love language."

Su Yan sprang off the sofa and crossed the room in three strides. She pulled her tunic over her head in a single motion, folded it with deliberate care—Arturia's influence, that; she'd never folded anything deliberately in her life before meeting the woman—and arranged herself on the table. The cushion was warm from Sabé's body heat. It smelled of oil and something faintly floral that she couldn't place.

Shirou's hands settled on her shoulders.

The first press drew a sound from her throat that she didn't authorise. Something between a sigh and a whimper, entirely undignified, which she would deny producing if questioned under oath.

"That bad?" Shirou's voice carried the faintest edge of amusement.

"I've been standing since five," Su Yan groaned into the cushion. "My feet hurt. My back hurts. Parnell's voice gave me a headache that's still echoing around the inside of my skull."

His thumbs found the knot below her right shoulder blade with unerring accuracy. She made another sound.

Sabé had migrated to the sofa, tugging on a loose shirt she'd pulled from the communal laundry pile. She sat cross-legged, watching them with the languid satisfaction of someone whose muscles had recently been returned to a functional state.

"How was the Viceroy last night?" Su Yan asked, her words half-absorbed by the cushion.

Sabé's expression shifted—not dramatically, but enough. The satisfaction faded into something more guarded.

"Accommodating."

"That's not an answer."

"It's the answer Padmé gave us, so it's the one I'm giving you." Sabé reached for the water pitcher. "He didn't escalate. He didn't concede. He listened, he responded, he proposed modifications that amount to nothing substantive. The other representatives held their positions. Nobody walked out."

"So... stalemate?"

"Controlled stalemate. Which is better than collapse." Sabé drank. "Padmé's concerned about the lack of pressure. She expected economic threats by the third session. We're on session eight and Gunray's still being polite."

"Maybe they actually want a deal?"

Sabé's look conveyed what she thought of that possibility without requiring words.

Shirou's hands worked down Su Yan's spine in measured strokes. "When's the next session?"

"Tomorrow evening. Padmé wanted to allow the sector heads a day to enjoy the festival before returning to the table. Good faith." Sabé paused. "She also wanted them to see each other's cultures. Hard to negotiate as a unified bloc if you don't actually know who you're standing beside."

"Smart."

"She's always smart. It's the rest of us who scramble to keep pace."

Su Yan shifted her head on the cushion to look at Sabé more directly. "You look tired, Sabé."

"I look magnificent."

"You look tired and magnificent."

"Better." Sabé set the glass down. Her fingers drummed once against her knee. "Speaking of appearances—have either of you seen the banquet hall? The Jafan delegation brought an entire roast gualaar. Whole animal. On a spit. The thing barely fit through the service entrance."

"Arturia's going to lose her mind," Su Yan breathed.

"Arturia is probably already losing her mind. She left for the banquet two hours ago and I haven't received a single message since, which means she's either in a state of transcendent culinary joy or she's challenged someone to an eating contest and is too focused to communicate."

Shirou's hands paused for a fraction of a second—the tell of a man calculating whether he needed to intervene—before resuming. "She promised she'd represent the Pantry's showcase professionally."

"She will," Sabé said. "Professionally, and in quantities that redefine the word."

Su Yan grinned into the cushion. Shirou's knuckles worked a particularly stubborn knot near her left shoulder, and her grin dissolved into a hiss of mingled pain and relief.

"So," Sabé began, her tone shifting into the register that Su Yan recognised as the precursor to something provocative. "How often do you manage to get Shirou alone these days?"

"I don't think I'm alone right now."

"You know what I mean."

Shirou's hands didn't falter. "I'm standing right here."

"I'm aware." Sabé smiled. "That's what makes the question fun."

Su Yan turned her face just enough to catch Shirou's expression from the corner of her eye. His features held the stillness of a man who had long since accepted that the women in his life would discuss him as though he were a weather pattern—observable, inevitable, and beyond any single person's control.

"We went to the riverside market last week," Su Yan offered.

"Romantic."

"It was, actually. He went full housewife and haggled over the ingredients for that night's dinner."

Sabé leaned forward. "Ah, yes. The house matriarch strikes again."

A disapproving noise from Shirou.

"..."

Shirou cleared his throat. "The tomatoes were overpriced."

Su Yan and Sabé burst out laughing.

"If you say so, mother," Su Yan teased.

Sabé's laugh deepened—rich and unguarded, the kind she rarely permitted herself outside of this space. She stretched her legs out on the sofa and let her head fall back against the cushion.

"Padmé and I managed dinner on the balcony three nights ago," she said. "Actual dinner. Sitting down. With plates and everything. Thirty-seven minutes before Eirtaé commed about a scheduling conflict with the Erso's Landing delegation."

"Thirty-seven minutes. That's nearly a record."

"We made it count."

Su Yan reached back and swatted in Shirou's general direction. "You could learn from Sabé's efficiency."

"I could," Shirou agreed, his hands not breaking rhythm. "But I prefer thoroughness."

The room went quiet for exactly one and a half seconds.

Sabé buried her face in a cushion. Su Yan felt heat climb up the back of her neck. Shirou continued working the muscles along her spine as though he hadn't just detonated a fragmentation charge into the conversation.

"That," Su Yan managed, "was unfair."

"I have no idea what you're referring to."

"You knew exactly what that sounded like."

"I was discussing my approach to massage technique."

Sabé's shoulders were shaking against the sofa cushion. Whether from laughter or residual pain, Su Yan couldn't determine and didn't care.

"One day," Su Yan declared into the cushion, "you're going to flirt on purpose, and the resulting shockwave will flatten buildings."

"I'll take that under advisement."

Sabé resurfaced, wiping her eyes. "On the subject of efficiency and thoroughness—" she tapped her chin with performative thoughtfulness, "—I seem to recall a certain morning about a week ago. Everyone still in bed. Someone's hand was somewhere it shouldn't have been at five in the morning."

"That was Arturia," Shirou said immediately.

"I wasn't talking about hands on the snooze button, Shirou."

Su Yan pressed her forehead into the cushion and let the warmth of the memory wash through her alongside the flush of embarrassment. Mornings in the big bed were—complicated was the wrong word. Organic. Bodies finding comfortable arrangements in sleep that waking minds would have overthought into oblivion. The half-aware tangle of limbs and warmth that existed in the amber space between sleep and consciousness, where inhibitions dissolved not through intention but through sheer proximity and trust.

"We should talk about the afternoon programme," Shirou said, with the decisive tone of a man performing a strategic retreat.

"We should," Su Yan agreed, grateful for the pivot. She shifted on the table, resting her chin on her crossed forearms. "The youth presentations start at sixteen-hundred. Seven groups, ten minutes each with five-minute transitions. I've got the Erso's Landing shadow puppet troupe closing because they're the strongest act and I want people leaving with that impression."

"Sound setup?"

"Handled. The plaza stage crew ran checks this morning. Lighting's natural—we're using the angle of the afternoon sun, which is perfect for the shadow work." She paused. "There's a vocal ensemble from the Keren highlands doing something with harmonic resonance that made three of my volunteers cry during rehearsal. In a good way."

Shirou's thumbs pressed into the small of her back, and she arched involuntarily.

"The banquet runs concurrent?"

"Parallel track. Banquet's in the eastern wing; cultural programme's in the plaza. Attendees can move between both. Arturia's been briefed that the cheesecake station is not a personal supply depot." Su Yan paused. "She acknowledged the briefing."

"Acknowledged isn't agreed."

"I'm aware."

Sabé stood from the sofa and stretched her arms overhead, the borrowed shirt riding up to expose the bruise that painted her ribs. She moved to the window and looked out across the rooftops toward the palace's eastern wing, where the banquet hall's tall windows caught the afternoon light.

"It's strange, isn't it?" Sabé said, quieter now. "All of this. Two years ago we were printing pamphlets and hiding from security patrols. Now we're hosting a multi-system cultural exchange and negotiating trade contracts with one of the galaxy's largest commercial entities."

"And getting hit with wooden swords," Su Yan added.

"And getting hit with wooden swords." Sabé's reflection smiled in the transparisteel. "At least some things are consistent."

The chrono on the wall read fourteen-forty-three.

Su Yan calculated. Forty-five minutes of massage if she was greedy. Thirty if she was responsible. Fifteen if she was honest about the preparation time needed before the programme began.

She was going to be greedy.

"Shirou."

"Hm?"

"Lower back. Please. I think something died in there."

His hands shifted downward, and Su Yan exhaled until her lungs were empty. Sabé returned to the sofa, picked up one of the datapads scattered across the side table, and began scrolling through what Su Yan assumed was either diplomatic correspondence or holodrama reviews. With Sabé, the odds were even.

The minutes stretched. Warm oil, steady hands, the ambient noise of the festival filtering up through the floorboards as a pleasant, indistinct hum. Su Yan's thoughts drifted toward the youth presentations—the nervous thirteen-year-old from Karlinus who'd asked her yesterday if the audience would laugh at his accent, and the fierce reassurance she'd given him that had left them both slightly teary.

*'This is what it's supposed to feel like,' she thought. 'Not the absence of threat, but the presence of something worth building.'*

Then the alarm went off.

The sound was sharp, insistent, and wrong. Not the chrono chime. Not a comlink notification. A deep, oscillating klaxon that reverberated through the building's structure—the planetary alert system, a sound Su Yan had heard only during evacuation drills. There was nothing scheduled today.

She was off the table before conscious thought engaged, her hand catching the tunic she'd folded on the chair. Shirou had already moved to the doorway. Sabé was on her feet, datapad forgotten on the sofa.

No one spoke. They moved.

Su Yan pulled her tunic over her head as she climbed, her fingers fumbling the hem into place. The klaxon continued—that deep, pulsing wail that vibrated in the bones of her jaw.

Shirou was the first one out. He pushed through the door and stepped onto the garden terrace, where Arturia's herb planters lined the railing and the pergola cast geometric shadows across the decking.

Su Yan emerged behind him.

And looked up.

The sky above Theed was full of ships.

Not dozens. Not a squadron. *Hundreds*. They descended through the atmosphere in staggered formations, their hulls catching the afternoon sun as they dropped below the cloud line—a procession of angular silhouettes that darkened the sky in waves. C-9979 landing craft, their broad, flat profiles unmistakable even at altitude.

The first landing craft were already touching down. Not in the plaza—the city centre was too dense, too populated. They were settling in the grasslands and forests beyond Theed's northern perimeter, their landing struts crushing the tree line flat as they disgorged columns of battle droids that marched in mechanical lockstep toward the city's edge.

Su Yan gripped the railing.

Beside her, Shirou stood rigid. His right hand was half-raised, fingers curled around something that wasn't there—a gesture she'd seen before, in the seconds before violence, when his body reached for weapons by reflex. His jaw was set. His eyes tracked the descending ships with the focused, systematic sweep of a man cataloguing threats.

Then he breathed.

One breath. Deep, controlled, drawn through the nose and released through barely parted lips. His hand lowered. His shoulders settled. The shift was subtle and total—the transition from instinct to calculation, from the man who reached for weapons to the man who decided whether reaching was wise.

His expression went flat. Not empty—operational.

"We need to assist with the evacuation first before we head for the palace," he said. His voice was level. "Now."

Sabé already had her comlink out. "Sachée, Sachée, respond."

Static. Then: "—Sabé, I see them. Are you with Shirou? Handle the evacuation, then get to the throne room. All of you."

Su Yan stared at the ships. The landing craft kept coming—wave after wave, their repulsor wash flattening the forest canopy into concentric circles of devastation. She thought of the Karlini merchant demonstrating his loom to children in the plaza. She thought of the thirteen-year-old boy worried about his accent. She thought about the festival-goers who had come from across the sector to share their food, their music, their shadow puppets and crystallised honey.

She thought about settling things peacefully.

The distinct profile of a Trade Federation landing craft cleared the tree line to the north, close enough now that she could see the individual droid ranks filing out of its hold in perfect, terrible unison.

*'So much for not bulldozing their way through.'*

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**End**

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