

Fate/Knights of the Heroic Throne

Chapter Intro

Human order: Restored.

History: Preserved.

But what of the ones who made it possible?

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

But a wish was made.

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

Story Starts

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Chapter 6.5 -

The Tyrant's Last Festival

Finally, Padmé crossed the threshold.

Her first step into the palace was quieter than she'd imagined. No fanfare. No resistance. Just the soft click of her boots against marble floors that gleamed beneath a thin layer of dust and debris, and the vast, vaulted ceilings soaring overhead—beautiful and indifferent to everything that had transpired beneath them.

She'd learned of the troubles brewing within these walls even before the march began. Sio Bibble had pulled her aside just hours earlier, relaying what a contact inside the palace had reported: Shirou and Arturia were systematically taking apart Veruna's defences. Breaking containment. Disabling guards. Destroying weapons. Moving through the palace like water finding every crack in a failing dam.

No casualties—at least not at first. The governor had explained it with characteristic understatement: due to mounting paranoia and frayed nerves, there'd been incidents of accidental friendly fire between Veruna's own forces.

She didn't like that term. *Friendly fire*. There was nothing friendly about it.

But at least the pair had been pulling their punches this time. That much she could be grateful for.

She'd already had to accept something her fourteen-year-old self would have scoffed at—that sometimes, violence was necessary. That idealism, however earnest, couldn't always shield the people who needed protecting most.

The festival had taught her that. Brutally. Irrevocably.

She thought of those slavers opening fire on the crowd without warning or mercy. Thought of how many lives would have simply... disappeared had Shirou and Arturia not been there. Not statistics in some future report. Not cautionary tales. Real people—people she'd spoken to, marched alongside, shared meals with—taken and sold and forgotten by a society too corrupt or too indifferent to care.

Would an apology be enough? The thought surfaced again, uncomfortable and persistent. *What are they to me now—friends? Acquaintances? Former friends?*

She wasn't sure. That uncertainty sat heavy in her chest.

But she knew this much: she couldn't stand at her podium and tell the survivors that their anger was wrong. Couldn't speak on behalf of those who'd lost loved ones and declare that the means by which they were saved was somehow beneath them. Couldn't retreat to comfortable platitudes about nonviolence when the alternative—the reality of what would have happened without that bloodshed—was a life of forced servitude.

Slavery was illegal, of course. The Republic said so. But saying and doing were different things. If those people had been taken, no fleet would have

come for them. No diplomatic mission. No rescue. Their families could have petitioned, protested, *begged*—and been told, gently but firmly, that pursuing the matter would destabilise relations with the Outer Rim, or disrupt trade agreements, or simply cost more than the Republic was willing to spend on people who were, after all, just citizens of a minor Mid Rim world.

They would have become statistics. Forgotten. Their grief quietly filed away so the galaxy could continue pretending the system worked.

No amount of speeches or grand moral positioning would have saved them from that.

Shirou and Arturia had. With blood on their hands and no apology for it.

She owed them the honesty of acknowledging that, at the very least.

Their group split at the intersection. Governor Sio Bibble led half the crowd to the right to secure the armoury, whilst the rest set about restraining the still-unconscious or groaning palace guards. Padmé watched the governor's burgundy robes disappear around the corner, his silver hair catching the emergency lighting, and felt a flicker of something she hadn't expected.

Genuine gratitude.

He hadn't needed to be here. Bibble could have stayed behind his desk, issued measured statements, played both sides until the outcome was certain. Instead, he was here—boots on marble, directing civilians like a field commander who'd done this before.

She almost laughed at the absurdity of it. Not two weeks ago, the governor had barely concealed his disdain for her. Passive-aggressive in every meeting. Dismissive of everything she stood for.

Now he was her most useful ally, striding through a compromised palace with the confidence of a man who'd made his choice and intended to see it through.

She turned back to the corridor ahead and noticed—really noticed, now that the adrenaline had ebbed enough to let her think—that there were far more bodies on the ground than palace guards alone could account for.

Mercenaries. Hired muscle in mismatched, piecemeal armour—nothing like the uniform kits of the Royal Guard. Some bore insignia she didn't recognise. Others bore none at all. Deliberately anonymous. The kind of men who didn't want their employers traced back through their equipment.

'How many did he bring in?' The question gnawed at her. *'How deep does this actually go?'*

She filed it away. There would be time for answers later.

They could see the aftermarks of the chaos Shirou and Arturia had carved through the palace. The damage was ruinous—reinforced doors wrenched from their hinges, durasteel frames bent at angles that shouldn't have been structurally possible. Walls bore deep gouges as though something impossibly sharp had been dragged through them with deliberate force. Others had been torn open entirely, exposing conduit and wiring behind the ornamental stone. Shattered sections of what had once been polished floor traced the path of combat like a map she could almost read.

Broken windows let in slants of pale evening light that fell across the debris in long, quiet columns. Blaster marks pocked the walls in clusters—concentrated around doorways and intersections, the places where defenders had made their stands and been systematically dismantled anyway.

They came through here like a force of nature, Padmé thought, and felt the familiar complicated tangle of gratitude and unease that seemed to follow any thought of the two.

She kept walking. Glass crunched beneath her boots with every step.

They ascended the grand staircase in near silence, hundreds of footsteps merging into a low murmur against stone. The damage worsened with every floor. Railings ripped clean from their mountings. Light fixtures dangling from

exposed cables, sparking intermittently. A toppled statue of some ancient monarch lay in three pieces across the second-floor landing, its head rolled against the far wall as though placed there with mocking precision.

The throne room corridor was the worst of it.

Padmé counted twelve palace guards sprawled across the hallway in various states of unconsciousness. Three Mandalorians lay among them—their beskar plate scarred with deep, clean cuts that had found every seam, every joint, every gap between the armour's segments. One still clutched a vibro-lance in gauntleted fingers, the weapon's blade sheared halfway down its length. Mercenaries in mismatched tactical gear filled the spaces between, heaped against walls or draped over rubble like discarded furniture.

None of them were dead. She could see chests rising and falling, hear the occasional groan from deeper in the pile. But the precision of it—the economy of violence required to incapacitate this many armed combatants without killing them—made the back of her neck prickle.

The corridor's far window had been obliterated. Not cracked or blown out—*erased*. The entire transparisteel panel and half its durasteel frame were simply gone, leaving a ragged opening through which cool evening air poured in and stirred the dust.

Then she saw the wall.

The left side of the corridor, just before the throne room's entrance, had been punched through. Not cut—*punched*. Stone and reinforced plaster had cratered outward in a roughly circular pattern, exposing structural beams and conduit behind it. Cracks radiated from the breach like a frozen shockwave, climbing toward the ceiling in branching fractures.

Padmé's stomach dropped.

She caught Eirtama's eye—not wanting to pierce the veil of secrecy by speaking her name aloud—and kept her voice carefully neutral. "Get someone

from the engineering corps up here. Now. Check if that section is load-bearing."

Eirtama understood. She always did. She peeled away without a word, already speaking into her comlink.

"Everyone back," Padmé said, louder now, gesturing the crowd behind her away from the compromised section. "Stay clear of that wall. Keep to the right side of the corridor."

Bodies shuffled. Murmurs rippled through the group. She waited until the crowd had pressed itself against the opposite wall before she turned back to the throne room doors.

They hung open. One had been knocked off its upper hinge and leaned drunkenly inward; the body of a Zabrak lay prone against its base. The other door lay amongst the rubble, torn completely free.

"Wait here."

She stepped through alone.

The throne room of Naboo stretched before her—a cathedral of vaulted stone and tall windows, its ceremonial grandeur now littered with the debris of its last defence. More guards. More mercenaries. Overturned furniture and shattered decorative panels. The throne itself sat untouched at the far end, elevated on its dais, pristine and absurd amidst the wreckage.

And in the centre of the floor, halfway between the doors and the throne, Ars Veruna lay on his side.

A gash split the skin above his left temple. Blood had run down the side of his face and dried in a dark crust along his jaw. His arms were bound behind his back with what looked like a strip of ceremonial curtain, knotted with efficient brutality. He groaned. His legs shifted, knees drawing up as he fought to push himself upright, managed only to roll onto his back and lie there, breathing hard, staring at the vaulted ceiling.

Movement at the far end of the chamber caught Padmé's eye.

Arturia stood in the shadows behind the throne, half-lit by the pale glow filtering through the remaining windows. She was small against the grand architecture—that same compact stillness Padmé had come to recognise over shared meals and late evenings. Less bloody than the night she'd defended the plaza from slavers, but not by much. Her weapon hung loosely in one hand, blade angled toward the floor.

Those golden eyes, steady and unreadable, met Padmé's across the length of the room.

Arturia inclined her head. A single, precise nod.

Padmé returned it. No flinch this time. No instinctive recoil.

Then Arturia turned and walked through the door behind the dais, and the evening swallowed her without sound.

Padmé exhaled. Let the breath carry out something she couldn't name.

She walked forward until she stood over the King of Naboo.

Veruna had managed to drag himself halfway to sitting. He propped his weight on one hip, bound arms straining behind him, his robes twisted and filthy. When he raised his head and found Padmé looking down at him, something shifted in his expression—a flash of recognition, then defiance hardening the lines of his mouth. His jaw set.

But his eyes betrayed him. They slid past her shoulder to the doorway, where dozens of faces now crowded the entrance. Black cloaks. White masks. Citizens of the world he'd claimed to serve, watching him from behind a girl half his age in ceremonial paint.

The defiance flickered. Held. But beneath it—unmistakable, animal, honest—*fear*.

"Ars Veruna." Her voice carried through the chamber without effort. The acoustics of this room had been designed for proclamations, after all. "You orchestrated the deployment of private military forces against your own citizens. You enabled a slave-trafficking operation to land armed combatants in the heart of Theed. You ordered security forces to fire upon unarmed civilians, to detain hundreds without charge, and to suppress lawful assembly by threat of lethal violence."

He opened his mouth. She did not let him speak.

"You executed a member of your own command staff for questioning those orders. You funnelled planetary resources into private accounts whilst our infrastructure crumbled. You accused two people who saved over two hundred lives of terrorism—to preserve your own authority."

She crouched. Brought her painted face level with his bloodied one.

"These, amongst many other things. You will answer for all of it."

Veruna said nothing. But his eyes—those calculating, desperate eyes—flicked past her again, toward the windows, toward the sky.

As if he were waiting for something.

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The steps of the Royal Palace had never held so many people.

A sea of black cloaks and white masks stretched before her, the edges blurring into the darkness beyond the plaza's lights. Illumination arrays—normally reserved for torrential rain—combined with portable arc lights to cast the palace steps and plaza in harsh, theatrical brightness.

Padmé stood at the top of the steps. Not as herself. As a symbol.

She was Amidala now. A beautiful flower. A boundless light. Something that had blossomed after the shroud lifted from this planet—the one who would shine a guiding light toward the future.

Or at least, that was what the name was supposed to symbolise. She still had her doubts about whether she'd fit the role she'd been casting herself into.

Palpatine had been guiding her toward it for months, and now Sio Bibble had all but made it official—interim Queen until the elections, when the title would become permanent. *If* she won. Though looking at the sea of Nabooans before her, unless her opponent somehow made her look worse than the tyrant she'd just deposed, it seemed a foregone conclusion.

But foregone or not, she wouldn't take it for granted.

She had deliberately chosen to stand here—above the palace steps, in the open air—rather than the ceremonial balcony behind her where public addresses were traditionally given. This moment belonged to the people, not to tradition.

The open plaza spread before her like a living thing. Black cloaks and white masks filled every inch of visible ground—pressed against the fountain, crowding the merchant stalls, spilling into the side streets that fed into the plaza from a dozen directions. More watched from windows. From rooftops. From balconies draped with hastily-made banners in colours that weren't Veruna's gold.

The emergency holonet broadcast had gone live three minutes ago. Every screen on Naboo would be showing this. Every citizen who wasn't already here in person would be watching from cantinas and living rooms and public squares across the planet.

The King's media blackout had finally been lifted. Media personnel from across the Chommell Sector—and from Coruscant itself—had coordinated with local broadcasting stations to transmit their own coverage in parallel. The galaxy was watching.

She could feel the weight of it pressing against her chest. The expectation. The hope. The desperate need for something to change.

At her feet, Ars Veruna knelt in silence.

His wrists were bound behind his back—proper binders now, not the ceremonial curtain Arturia had used. His robes had been straightened somewhat, the worst of the blood cleaned from his face, but no one had bothered to restore his dignity beyond the bare minimum. He stared at the stones beneath his knees, jaw tight, refusing to look at the crowd that had gathered to witness his humiliation.

Sio Bibble had insisted on this. "The people need to see him brought low," the governor had said, his voice uncharacteristically hard. "They need to see the consequences of his actions with their own eyes. If this isn't done publicly—with spectacle—people will wonder whether justice actually happened. Leave no doubt in their minds that the tyrant was brought to heel."

Padmé hadn't liked it. Still didn't. There was something uncomfortably medieval about displaying a defeated king before the mob, something that sat wrong against her ideals of justice and due process.

But Bibble had been right about everything else today. She'd trusted his judgement this far.

She raised her chin. Let the broadcast microphone carry her voice across the plaza and into every home on the planet.

"Citizens of Naboo."

The crowd fell silent. A wave of stillness spreading outward from the steps until even the distant edges of the plaza had quieted, thousands of masked faces turning toward her in unison.

"Three days ago, I asked you to stand with me. I asked you to choose truth over silence. To choose courage over fear." She paused, letting the words settle. "You answered."

A murmur rippled through the crowd. Not words—just sound.
Acknowledgment. Pride.

"What you have accomplished today is not a coup. It is not a revolution born of violence for its own sake. It is the reclamation of something that was stolen from us—slowly, quietly, over years of corruption and silence. Our voice. Our choice. Our right to determine our own future."

She gestured to the bound figure at her feet without looking at him.

"Ars Veruna will face trial for his crimes. The deployment of private military forces against civilians. The enabling of slave traffickers in our capital. The unlawful detention of hundreds. The execution of his own officers for questioning immoral orders. Corruption of the highest order."

Each accusation landed like a hammer blow. She could see Veruna flinch at some of them—the ones he'd thought were still secret.

Padmé paused, giving the crowd space to react. And react they did. Curses and vitriol erupted from thousands of throats, a wave of fury directed at the kneeling figure who refused to raise his head.

She let them have their moment. Then raised her hand, and the crowd slowly quieted.

"Justice will be done."

Cheers.

"Every crime will be documented."

Cheers.

"Every victim will be heard."

Cheers.

"Justice will be done—not in shadows, not in back rooms, but in the full light of public accountability—"

Shirou crouched on the western balcony of the palace's upper level, one floor above the ceremonial steps where Padmé addressed the crowd.

He'd positioned himself here deliberately—high enough for a clear view of the plaza, close enough to intervene if something went wrong. Arturia had taken a position near where Padmé stood, having borrowed a cloak and mask, her golden eyes scanning the crowd for anyone who might choose to act on behalf of the deposed king.

Though, the person who'd lent her the cloak seemed to be quite tall—he could see quite a bit of fabric pooling at the stone floor around her feet.

As if she could hear his thoughts, Shirou saw Arturia turn toward his direction. He deliberately looked away, focusing on the crowd.

He could feel her glare burning at the side of his face, judging him guilty despite his actual guilty thoughts remaining safely unspoken.

But he focused on the task at hand.

The crowd below was enormous. Tens of thousands packed into the plaza, spilling into every adjacent street, filling the spaces between buildings like water finding its level. He'd seen large gatherings before—festivals, markets, the chaos of urban warfare in a dozen different eras—but something about this one made his instincts prickle.

Too many variables. Too many angles. Too many places for a threat to hide.

He scanned the rooftops methodically. Window by window. Balcony by balcony. The harsh artificial lighting made the shadows treacherous, turning every architectural detail into a potential ambush point. His eyes caught movement a dozen times—birds, flags shifting in the breeze, civilians leaning out for a better view—and dismissed each one.

Padmé's voice drifted up from below, amplified by a broadcast microphone.

"...not a revolution born of violence for its own sake..."

He allowed himself a small, private smile. She was good at this. The cadence, the conviction, the way she held the crowd's attention like a conductor directing an orchestra. He'd known soldiers who couldn't command a room half as well.

Movement.

Eastern quadrant. Rooftop—no, balcony. Third building from the corner, upper floor. The silhouette triggered every instinct he had. He traced his bow and a simple sword-arrow, mindful of the crowd packed even at the base of that building.

The shape moved again. Resolving into fragments his brain processed in rapid succession: the same armour he'd seen in the palace corridors. The same helmet. The familiar glint of a T-shaped visor.

A weapon rising—

'Sniper.'

"Arturia!"

He loosed the arrow.

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"—and in accordance with the emergency provisions of our constitution, I have accepted temporary stewardship of the throne until free elections can be held within—"

"Arturia!"

Padmé's world slowed.

She heard two distinct sounds. The first was familiar—the whisper of Shirou's projectile cutting the air. The second overlapped it. Not a blaster. Something sharper, harder. A crack that split the air like breaking bone.

Then a black-cloaked figure stepped into her vision, blade already raised. Ceremonial in appearance—but Padmé had seen that sword cleave a man in two at the festival.

Thud.

Veruna crumpled.

No dramatic fall. No last words. Just collapse. A puppet with cut strings, folding sideways onto the palace steps, blood already pooling beneath him.

For one frozen heartbeat, Padmé couldn't process what she was seeing. Her mouth was still open, shaped around the words "sixty days" that would never come. The crowd was still silent, still waiting, still watching her with those thousands of identical white masks.

Then the screaming started.

"Rein in the crowd!" Arturia ordered, her voice distinct even behind the white mask. She raised her sword in a guard position, the flat of the blade facing outward—defensive, not aggressive. Ready for whatever came next.

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Too late.

He watched his sword-arrow embed itself in the gap between the Mandalorian's armour plates—he'd been getting too familiar with this type recently. Warriors from a society that had been forcibly muzzled and defanged.

But the time between his arrow launching and the armoured figure raising his weapon wasn't enough. The assassin fired first—a sharp crack, not a blaster's whine. A slugthrower. Gunpowder and steel.

Shirou loosed two more arrows in quick succession. Despite the injury, the Mandalorian disappeared into the building before either could find their mark.

No line of sight. Nothing he could do but leap down and close the distance, jumping from rooftop to rooftop.

The assassin was smart. He'd probably scouted ahead, known about Shirou's position. That's why he hadn't simply jetpacked out—too obvious, too exposed.

Then the sound of engines.

A Firespray-class patrol craft rose from behind the building, its angular silhouette unmistakable against the night sky. The Mandalorian must have exited through a balcony on the far side—the ship was already banking, nose tilting upward.

Below, the crowd was panicking. Thousands of bodies surging in every direction.

He traced something heavier. A projectile that could punch through starship armour—

And stopped.

If he fired and missed, the debris would fall into the crowd. If he hit and the ship crashed, it would be worse.

'Damn it.'

His hands clenched at his sides as the Firespray's engines flared once, twice—then the ship shot upward, accelerating beyond the atmosphere in seconds. Probably jumping to hyperspace before anyone could scramble a pursuit.

Gone.

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The water ran warm against Shirou's shoulders, pooling in the stone basin before draining through the coated perlotte grating beneath his stool. Steam

curled upward through the high window pane, catching silver moonlight and dissolving it into the humid air. He worked the cloth across his forearm with mechanical precision, scrubbing away the day's accumulated grease and flour residue.

Sixty days.

He wrung out the cloth. Watched the suds spiral.

The morning after King Ars Veruna bled out on his own palace steps, Shirou had risen at 02:27, silenced his chronometer before Arturia could hurl a pillow, and descended to the kitchen. The dough needed pulling. The fryers needed oil. Tubers required slicing. The universe had shifted on its axis, and the bread still needed baking.

Their staff had arrived that first morning in various states of breathless excitement. Ronan had practically vaulted the counter, demanding to know whether Shirou could actually shoot projectiles that curved around buildings. Lirene wanted details about the swords. Tirsa and Isar had simply stood in the doorway with tears in their eyes, thankful that everything was back to normal.

"Heroes of Theed," they called them now. The holonet loved a clean narrative. Two restaurant owners, foreigners with mysterious pasts, who had stood between slavers and civilians when the palace guard turned weapons on its own people. Who had dismantled an entire security apparatus over three days whilst subsisting on stolen kitchen rations. Who had surrendered willingly, then escaped repeatedly with such theatrical flair that the guards' own incident reports read like adventure serials.

Business had become obscene. Queues stretched around the block before opening. The "Empty the Pantry" challenge had a waiting list measured in weeks. Arturia's competitive streak found outlet in crushing aspirants with mechanical efficiency, the "Ria" chant from regulars now thunderous enough to rattle windows. They were in negotiations for the two adjacent buildings—one to expand seating, another for proper kitchen facilities that

didn't require Shirou to perform spatial miracles with a prep area designed for half his current output.

The river market stall had been established with the help of Cedor Parnell, Head of the Merchant Guild. Pizza slices and fried goods, nothing elaborate. Arturia handled deliveries on her swoop bike, weaving through Theed's streets with a recklessness that Shirou had long since stopped commenting on. They'd hired additional staff to manage that particular expansion.

Their friendship with the Velassis family had deepened as well. Garron still supplied their fish; Lessa still visited for holodramas with Arturia. But changes were coming. Tenno had finally committed to the flight academy—he wanted to join Naboo's Royal Space Fighter Corps. Lessa, inspired by Padmé, had enrolled in higher education and even applied for a position on the temporary Queen's staff.

Shirou dipped the cloth again. Ran it across his neck.

The fallout from Veruna's regime had consumed the planet's attention for weeks. Every databank the palace yielded birthed fresh scandals. Senators, trade officials, Merchant Guild officers—the investigations branched like fractures in ice. Fourteen politicians faced formal charges. Twenty-three business figures sat in detention awaiting tribunal.

Governor Sio Bibble, to his credit or survival instinct, had emerged relatively clean. His obstruction of Padmé's reform efforts appeared rooted in genuine ideological disagreement rather than corruption. Su Yan's family connection to the man remained a source of uncomfortable dinner conversation, but the investigation cleared him of criminal complicity.

Tomorrow—no. Today. Past midnight already.

Today was the election.

The holonews projections were unanimous. Padmé Naberrie, running under the name Amidala, commanded a projected eighty-nine percent of the popular vote. A landslide so overwhelming it bordered on coronation.

Her opponents lacked either the momentum or the credibility to mount serious challenges. Satine Naserriene ran on an abolitionist platform that, whilst principled, alienated the economic moderates whose support Padmé had already consolidated. Ayesha Dholci, a fellow reformist, found herself redundant—everything she proposed, Padmé proposed with broader coalition backing and the weight of a revolution behind it. Nadal Raan represented the traditionalist faction, their base haemorrhaging support as each new Veruna scandal validated everything Padmé had claimed.

And then there was Marelda Veruna. The former Queen's campaign to 'restore the family's honour through institutional reform' drew more pity than votes.

Shirou set the cloth aside.

That day. The flinching.

He could still map the exact geometry of it. Arturia reaching toward Padmé with blood-dark fingers. The involuntary recoil—not just Padmé, but Tsabin, Rabbine, all of them drawing back like they'd touched something scalding. Arturia's hand hanging in empty air. The fraction of a second before her expression sealed itself behind that porcelain composure she wore like armour.

They'd been busy. Of course they'd been busy. Padmé had a planet to reassemble. Tsabin coordinated logistics for a transitional government. Eirtama managed financial oversight committees. Su Yan ran youth voter registration drives throughout the planet and its moon Rori. Mara established emergency medical supply chains. Sasha temporarily handled media relations. Rabbine shuttled between Theed and Coruscant, carrying documents that required the Chommell Sector's Senate Representative's attention.

Shirou knew all of this because Governor Bibble still visited the restaurant occasionally—the man had taken a liking to him ever since that private party Tsabin had organised. One late evening, over kaaf and cheesecake, he'd shared more than he probably should have.

There had also been an investigation, of course. When building a government on the foundation of trust and accountability, they couldn't simply wave off Shirou and Arturia's actions during the revolution. A formal inquiry. Interviews. Documentation.

In the end, they were cleared of everything and summarily thanked by the interim government.

But nothing was resolved.

Messages had been exchanged. Polite, careful messages. Gratitude for services rendered. Promises to visit when schedules permitted. The kind of correspondence that maintained the architecture of friendship without inhabiting it.

Gone were the boisterous nights when Shirou grumbled about feeding strays.

He could not blame them.

The bathroom door slid open. Shirou didn't turn. He recognised the cadence of bare feet on wet floor, the particular weight distribution of someone who balanced as though perpetually ready to pivot into a guard stance.

Arturia moved behind him wrapped in a towel, pale skin luminous against the moonlit steam. She settled on the stool at his back without announcement.

"Give me the cloth."

Not a request. Shirou passed it over his shoulder. Her fingers brushed his as she took it, and then the warm fabric pressed between his shoulder blades, tracing circles with firm, deliberate strokes.

Silence held. Comfortable. The kind that had taken them months to cultivate after lifetimes of noise.

"Do you think they're fine?"

"The projections suggest inevitability."

Arturia's hand paused mid-stroke. "That is not what I asked."

"Yeah, they're probably fine."

The cloth resumed its circuit. Down along his spine. Across the ridge of his left shoulder.

"I miss the noise," Arturia said. Quiet. Almost reluctant.

"The after-hours crowd."

"Tsabin's commentary. Su Yan's dramatics over the whisky. Mara and Sasha arguing about that insufferable holodrama." The cloth stilled against his lower back. "Rabbine asking you to explain ingredients as though you were conducting a lecture at university."

"Padmé, reading her speeches aloud and stressing over the demonstration."

"Yes." A breath. "That as well."

The cloth dropped. Arturia's arms slid around him from behind, her forehead pressing between his shoulder blades. The towel bunched against his back, damp and warm. Her fingers interlaced across his chest, and he felt her pulse against his spine—steady, insistent, alive.

"Arturia."

Her grip tightened. She said nothing.

He covered her hands with his own.

Then she was moving, shifting around him, and the towel caught on his elbow and slipped entirely as she settled into his lap. Golden eyes met his, close enough that the moonlight caught the amber flecks he'd catalogued a thousand times and still found unfamiliar. Her legs wrapped around his waist. Her fingers threaded into his hair, still damp.

She kissed him. Not gently. There was hunger in it—two months of tension channelled through the press of her mouth, the scrape of teeth against his

lower lip. His hands found her waist, impossibly small, the athletic musculature taut beneath skin that felt like cool silk, and pulled her closer.

She drew back half an inch. Golden eyes blazing.

"It has been entirely too long."

"We've been—"

"Busy. Yes. An inadequate excuse."

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Arturia reached down and wrapped her fingers around him, the familiar warmth and weight of him twitching against her palm. A breath shuddered through her—anticipation, need, something fiercer than both. She aligned herself with deliberate care, and both their gazes dropped to where her lips spread as she took him entirely in one smooth motion.

The fullness was immediate, overwhelming—a sharp completeness that stole the thought from her mind. Arturia gasped, her teeth finding the hard curve of his shoulder, biting down as her hips began to move.

Shirou's hands gripped her hips, steadying the rhythm she established—urgent, demanding, her spine arching as moonlight painted silver across her collarbones. His fingers pressed into her skin hard enough to leave impressions, and she relished it, the bruising certainty of his hold. *'More,'* she thought, though she would never say it aloud. Her pride would not permit it. Her body, however, had never cared much for pride.

He lifted her. She gasped—the sound echoing off wet stone as he drove into her—and she answered with a moan that abandoned every pretence of regal composure. A sound so raw, so utterly unguarded, that some distant corner of her mind recoiled in mortification.

The rest of her did not care. Could not care. Not when he moved like that. Not when every thrust sent lightning forking through the base of her spine and into the hollow of her throat.

Shirou stood, carrying her as though she weighed nothing. *'She is so light,'* the thought drifted through his mind between the haze of sensation and the pounding of his pulse. Arturia hung suspended between her arms wrapped tight around his neck and her legs locked around him, heels digging into the small of his back with a strength that reminded him—even now, even here—that this woman had once shattered armies.

With her grip secured, Shirou pressed one hand flat against her lower back, anchoring her. His mouth found her throat—the soft, pale column of it—and he felt her pulse hammering beneath his lips, rapid and unguarded. His other hand rose to cup her breast, his thumb tracing across the peaked centre, and the sound she made in response was something between a whimper and a command.

"Eep—!"

Her tightness, her heat—everything felt extraordinary as he continued to move within her. Every nerve sang. Every breath she released was a fractured, half-formed word, and each one undid him a little further. Her moans echoed around the bath, reverberating off the stone and the perlotte and the steam-clouded air until they seemed to come from everywhere at once.

"Shirou—"

His name in her mouth. Not a title, not a designation. Just his name, stripped bare of everything but want.

The rhythm quickened. Steam clung to their skin like a second veil. Arturia's breath came in fractured syllables against his ear, her fingers knotting in the white hair at the nape of his neck, her body clenching around him as—

"Hey guys, did you see them? I think they may be in the forest sparring?"

The voice echoed up the stairwell like a bucket of ice water dropped from orbit.

Tsabin, Su Yan, Eirtama, Sasha, and Mara appeared in the bathroom doorway and froze—the source of that earlier *eep* now painfully, catastrophically obvious.

Behind them, Padmé and Rabbine rounded the corner and stopped dead.

Seven faces. Seven distinct expressions of absolute horror.

None of them looked away nearly fast enough.

Shirou and Arturia remained exactly as they were. Connected. Mid-thrust. Arturia's toes curled against Shirou's lower back. His hands gripped her thighs. The moonlight provided illumination that bordered on theatrical.

A single drop of water fell from the showerhead into the stone basin.

The sound was enormous.

Eyes traced from neck, down across Shirou's chiselled torso, down to where they were joined.

Tsabin recovered first. A grin split her face like sunrise over the Gallo Mountains.

"Well, well. Now we're even."

"Looks like Arturia wasn't lying when she talked about your size," Su Yan added, entirely unrepentant.

Padmé's mouth opened. Closed. Opened. Nothing emerged.

Rabbine covered her eyes with both hands but spread her fingers.

"We—" Mara's voice cracked upward by an octave. "We came to apologise. About—about the flinching. And everything. We should have come sooner and—"

"We're so sorry for interrupting," Sasha managed, already backpedalling. "We truly thought you were sparring. In the forest. With swords. As one does. At midnight—"

"There certainly was a sword involved!" Tsabin quipped.

"We'll just—we'll go, obviously we'll go—" Eirtama grabbed Sasha's arm and began physically dragging her toward the stairwell.

The others remained rooted, caught between the instinct to flee and the inability to process what they were witnessing.

Arturia's face had achieved a shade of crimson that Shirou had never observed on her in any timeline, any Lostbelt, any singularity. Her hands pressed flat against his chest. She was shaking—fury or mortification, impossible to distinguish.

"Get. Out."

Six women scrambled for the exit.

"But wait."

The retreat halted. Arturia's jaw worked. Her eyes darted between the doorway and Shirou with the desperate calculation of someone trying to solve two contradictory equations simultaneously.

Tsabin leant against the doorframe, arms crossed. One eyebrow climbed toward her hairline.

"What, you want us to watch?"

"I will end you, Vareli."

"Should we join?" Su Yan added. "Because honestly, from what I saw, his technique—"

Arturia groaned while Shirou turned his back to better shield them both.

"DOWNSTAIRS." Arturia's voice hit a register that rattled the window pane. "All of you. Downstairs. There is wine on the second shelf and cheesecake in the cooling unit. You will sit. You will eat. You will wait. And we will—" Her voice faltered. She gripped Shirou's shoulder for balance, acutely aware that any movement in their current arrangement would be catastrophic for her dignity. "We will join you. Shortly."

"How shortly?" Tsabin called from the stairwell.

"—half an hour!"

"Heroes of Theed, legendary stamina, and an arse you could bounce a credit chip off. The holonet undersold you, Emiya."

"LEAVE."

Footsteps thundered down the stairs, punctuated by muffled laughter and at least one collision with a wall.

Silence reclaimed the bathroom. Steam curled. Moonlight persisted.

Arturia pressed her forehead against Shirou's collarbone and exhaled.

"Dumb Shirou. You did not lock the door."

"You were the last to come in."

She bit his shoulder. Not gently.

From below, Su Yan's voice floated up through the floorboards: "Is the eighteen-year Corellian still in the cupboard?"

Arturia groaned. But when she lifted her head, the faintest crack appeared at the corner of her mouth.

"One must not," Shirou said quietly, "feed strays after hours."

The crack widened into something perilously close to a smile.

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The meditation chamber atop the Jedi Temple's central spire offered an unobstructed view of Coruscant's endless cityscape—a galaxy of lights stretching to every horizon. Master Yoda preferred it here during the quiet hours, when the Temple's thousand voices faded to whispers and the Force flowed with something approaching clarity.

Or at least, as close to clarity as these troubled times permitted.

Tonight, like recent nights, that clarity eluded him. But there was something more than the usual vagaries of the Force.

Mace Windu stood at the chamber's edge, arms folded, his reflection ghosting across the transparisteel viewport. He had arrived without summons, which told Yoda everything he needed to know.

"You felt it too," Mace said. Not a question.

"Felt it, I did." Yoda's ears flattened slightly. "Describe it, can you?"

"Something raw and powerful." Mace turned from the viewport. "I felt it twice, then it was gone. Should we investigate?"

Yoda's eyes opened. Ancient. Weary. Troubled in ways he could not name.

"Originated where, the disturbance did?"

Mace grimaced. "Mid Rim, perhaps. Possibly Vish, Tyus, Quess, or Chommell. I can't be certain."

"Hmm." Yoda was quiet for a long moment. "Watch, we will. Meditate. If returns this presence does, clearer the path may become."

Mace nodded slowly. "And if it doesn't return?"

Yoda turned his gaze back to the viewport, to the endless city-light sprawling beneath them, to the galaxy that grew stranger with each passing year.

"Then hope we must, that gone it truly is."

Neither of them believed it.

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Hego Damask—known to a select few as Darth Plagueis—stood in the centre of his compound's main courtyard, surrounded by the dead.

Bando Gora cultists lay in twisted heaps, their death-masks frozen in expressions of ecstatic agony. Black Sun enforcers sprawled across the flagstones, their expensive armour scored with wounds so precise they seemed surgical. Gardulla's men—Weequay and Nikto hired muscle—had fared no better, their bodies scattered like broken toys discarded by a petulant child.

Plagueis stepped over a Bando Gora priest whose chest cavity had been opened with a single vertical strike. The Muun's elongated fingers were still slick with blood—not his own. He had not needed his lightsaber. His manipulation of the Force was without par.

A silvery protocol droid picked its way through the carnage, its photoreceptors flickering with distaste that its programming should not have permitted.

"Master Damask. A transmission has arrived. Flagged priority."

"Source?"

"Naboo, sir. Relayed through your secure network from the asset designated Hunter-Seven. He has successfully completed his mission but has attached a file."

Jango Fett. The Mandalorian had been positioned on Naboo for five days now, waiting for the optimal moment to eliminate Veruna. The king's usefulness had expired; his knowledge of certain arrangements made him a liability. Fett was insurance—expensive, but reliable.

"Display."

The droid projected the holoivid into the blood-scented air.

Plagueis watched.

A plaza. Civilians scattering. Slavers—Black Sun assets deployed through Veruna's coordination—firing into the crowd. And then...

Movement. Too fast. A blur that resolved into two figures carving through armed combatants with the casual efficiency of apex predators culling prey. One wielded a sword—silver and red, catching the light as it cleaved through armour and flesh alike.

The other provided support fire using crude projectiles, but seemed no less effective.

Then the moment that had summoned this transmission.

A slaver's landing craft—Loss-class, reinforced hull, engines already firing for emergency extraction—lifted from the plaza. The smaller figure, the one with the sword, turned toward it. Raised her blade.

And something happened.

The holo's resolution degraded, static washing across the image as energy readings spiked beyond the recorder's parameters. When clarity returned, the landing craft hadn't even climbed as high as the surrounding structures before it thudded back onto the ground—not exploding, not burning, simply dropping with terrible force. It struck the plaza stones with a crunch that the audio captured perfectly.

Plagueis watched the sequence three times.

He had felt the unknown shift in the Force and had pinpointed its origin as Naboo. It coincided, conveniently, with his arranging the assassination of Ars Veruna.

What he had felt was raw, wild, and powerful. Neither dark nor light.

"Connect me to Coruscant. Secure channel. My apprentice."

The droid complied.

Moments later, a hooded figure materialised in a blue-tinged holographic projection. Senator Sheev Palpatine's face was composed in an expression of mild curiosity, but Plagueis knew his apprentice well enough to see the tension beneath.

"Master. The Black Sun lead—"

"Watch." Plagueis interrupted his apprentice as he transmitted the file.

Silence stretched as Palpatine absorbed the footage. When he spoke again, his voice had shed its senatorial warmth entirely.

"What are they?"

"Unknown. The Force offers no insight."

"That should not be possible."

"And yet." Plagueis gestured at the carnage surrounding him. "I have just finished entertaining guests who believed me vulnerable. Veruna's work, I suspect—a clumsy attempt to eliminate a rival whilst attention focused elsewhere. The king has outlived his usefulness."

"Fett has done his job."

"Good. But these two—the ones in the holo— they are on Naboo. Learn everything. Who they are. Where they came from. What they are capable of."

Palpatine inclined his head. "It will be done."

"One more matter." Plagueis allowed himself a thin smile. "The Mandalorian. Fett. His performance has been... adequate. But I find myself considering a larger role for someone of his talents. The army project requires a template. Someone resilient. Combat-tested. Genetically sound."

Palpatine's expression flickered—understanding, calculation, appreciation.

"You believe Fett suitable?"

"I believe he merits evaluation. Observe him. We will discuss terms for a longer arrangement."

"As you wish, Master."

The hologram dissolved.

Plagueis stood alone among the dead, the holo vid still playing on loop—that moment of impossible energy, that craft falling from the sky, those two figures moving through violence like water through sand.

'I will know what you are,' he thought, watching the smaller one raise her sword. *'And then I will own you—or erase you from existence.'*

The Force offered no guidance.

For the first time in decades, Darth Plagueis found that silence troubling.

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End

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