

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 7.1 -

The Weight of a Name

The dining room hummed with the kind of warmth that no thermal unit could produce.

Arturia sat at the counter's edge, legs crossed beneath the hem of an oversized shirt, and let her gaze drift across the space. Eirtama had commandeered the corner booth, her shoes kicked off, feet tucked beneath her, whilst she nursed a glass of Corellian red with both hands. Sasha leaned against the adjacent wall, half-listening to Su Yan recount some elaborate anecdote that required expansive arm movements and at least three different voices. Mara had claimed the long bench near the window, her head resting on a folded napkin, eyes closed but lips curving at whatever Su Yan was saying.

Arturia traced the rim of the wine glass on the counter beside her with one finger, the motion absent and habitual, the way a sentry might run a thumb along a blade's edge without thinking.

A few hours ago, she had descended the stairs with Shirou at her shoulder, both of them dressed in whatever their hands had found first.

Their particular bathtime sparring session was finished—though it had cost them the heated bath afterwards. They had scrubbed clean in haste instead, and Shirou's hair was still damp when they reached the dining room. Hers, she suspected, had looked no better.

The dining area sat bare in its normal pre-opening quiet. No one had touched the snacks or the alcohol yet. Seven women stood in a rough semicircle near the counter, and the silence that greeted their arrival had weight to it—the density of words rehearsed and discarded.

Padmé moved first.

She had crossed the distance in three strides and wrapped her arms around Arturia's shoulders, pressing her forehead against Arturia's collarbone and pulling Shirou into the embrace as well. The grip was fierce and slightly too tight—the hold of someone who had practised this gesture in her mind for weeks and feared she would lose her nerve.

"I'm sorry."

Two words. Arturia had stood rigid, arms at her sides, because the contact was unexpected and because she did not trust what her own hands might do if she let them move.

Not yet.

Then Tsabin. Then Mara, who was already crying before she reached them, amber eyes spilling over without any of the theatrical buildup one might expect from a woman so fond of holodramas. Su Yan had simply thrown herself at Shirou from a lateral angle that nearly toppled him, burying her face in his chest and muttering something about his stupid noble face making her feel guilty for sixty days straight. Eirtama approached with more composure — a hand on Arturia's arm, a squeeze, a single nod that communicated entire spreadsheets of unspoken regret. Sasha hovered at the periphery, mouth

opening and closing around syllables that refused to form, until Arturia extended one hand toward her and the girl seized it like a rope thrown into dark water.

Rabbine had stood apart at first, hands clasped, watching the pile form with an expression that wavered between longing and the particular hesitation of someone who had not yet earned the right. Then she abandoned the calculation and threw herself into the mess of tangled limbs.

"I was wrong." Padmé's voice, muffled against Arturia's shoulder. "I knew it the moment I stepped back, and I've known it every day since."

The pile became absurd. Limbs tangled. Someone's elbow caught Arturia beneath the ribs. Shirou made a sound — not quite a laugh, not quite a sigh — as Su Yan's grip around his midsection tightened to a degree that would have inconvenienced a lesser man. Mara had somehow ended up with her arms around both Arturia and Padmé simultaneously, which given their respective heights required architectural ingenuity. Tsabin's face was pressed against Shirou's shoulder blade from behind, and Arturia could feel the dampness soaking through the fabric.

They had all flinched. Every single one of them.

At the plaza, when the blood was still wet on Arturia's clothes and Shirou's hands, when the slavers lay broken across the cobblestones — every eye that met hers had carried the same fraction of retreat. Not hatred. Not disgust. Something worse: the involuntary recognition that the people who made their breakfast and poured their wine could also do *that*.

Arturia had understood. She had always understood. A tyrant learned to read the precise distance subjects kept from the throne.

Understanding did not blunt the wound.

But here, now, with Padmé's tears drying against her collarbone and Su Yan squeezing Shirou hard enough to crack ordinary ribs — here was something

Arturia Pendragon, the Once and Future Tyrant-King, had never possessed during her reign.

People who came back.

She sipped her tea. It had gone cold. She drank it anyway.

A smile broke across Arturia's face. Small. Unbidden. She pressed her lips together to contain it and failed.

At the centre table, Padmé sat with her spine curled forward, elbows on the wood, whilst Shirou worked his thumbs into the junction of her neck and shoulders. The white ceremonial paint had been scrubbed away hours ago, leaving her skin flushed and bare, though faint traces lingered at her hairline like chalk dust.

"Maybe get someone to customise a lightweight version of your headpiece," Shirou remarked, pressing the heel of his palm along the ridge of her trapezius.

Padmé groaned—not the polished, restrained sound of a woman who'd addressed tens of thousands that afternoon, but something honest and slightly pathetic. It bore an unfortunate resemblance to sounds Arturia had made in the bath a few hours prior.

"The headpiece weighs nearly four kilograms. Four. And the structural pins dig into—*ah*—right there, yes—into the crown of my skull for hours at a time." She dropped her forehead against her folded arms. "I genuinely considered abdication today on the basis of millinery alone."

"A worthy cause," Shirou said, deadpan. His fingers found a knot and worked it apart.

"Padmé, you are not permitted to abdicate before your coronation." Arturia lifted her wine. "That would set an extraordinarily poor precedent."

"Spoken like someone who wore a crown."

"Mine was lighter—at least in a physical sense."

Padmé turned her head just enough to squint at Arturia with one eye. Something flickered there—amusement, affection, a trace of that old hesitation that hadn't fully healed. But she smiled, and the hesitation receded. Arturia held the look a beat longer than necessary, then drank.

"Moreover, do you not share the same ceremonial appearance as your retinue? Simply rotate amongst each other."

The suggestion drew a ripple of amusement around the room—Su Yan mimed applying lip paint with exaggerated solemnity, and Eirtama muttered something about shift scheduling that made Sasha snort.

The scrape of a chair cut through the noise.

"Excellent idea. But first—" Tsabin stood.

She'd changed into one of Shirou's spare shirts—too long in the torso, too wide in the shoulders—and her hair fell loose and damp from the fresher. The wine in her raised glass caught the overhead light and threw a ruby shadow across her collarbone. The room quieted in increments: Su Yan trailed off mid-gesture, Eirtama lowered her glass, Mara opened her eyes.

"Right." Tsabin cleared her throat. She had no notes, no prepared remarks—just a wine glass and whatever nerve had brought her to her feet. "I'm not good at this. Padmé's the speech-maker, I'm the one who handles logistics and tells people where to stand. But I think—after everything these past weeks—someone ought to say it plainly."

She swept her gaze across the room.

"Thank you. All of you. For every sleepless night, every pamphlet run, every hour spent arguing over font sizes for demonstration banners—yes, Eirtama, I remember the font argument—"

"Aurebesh Bold was the correct choice, and I will die on that hill."

"—and for standing behind Padmé when it mattered. When it was dangerous. When it could have cost you everything."

Tsabin turned to Shirou and Arturia.

"And to our generous hosts." The corner of her mouth pulled sideways. "Who fed us, sheltered us, let us commandeer their home like a pack of entitled Coruscanti diplomats... and who, it turns out, handle a small-scale revolution with the same terrifying competence they bring to breakfast service."

Shirou inclined his head. Arturia raised her glass a fraction in acknowledgement.

Tsabin's grin sharpened. "Also—and I want this on record—you two were caught. Literally. With your trousers around your ankles—well, not really literally, more like your towels around your ankles. In a bath. I want everyone here to remember that Arturia Pendragon, the woman who stared down a throne room full of mercenaries without blinking, turned the colour of a Naboo sunset when seven women walked in on her mid—"

"Tsabin."

"I believe the sound you made was—"

"Tsabin."

Arturia's voice carried the precise temperature of liquid nitrogen. The dining room erupted. Su Yan howled. Eirtama covered her face with both hands, shoulders shaking. Even Padmé—still pinned beneath Shirou's ministrations—let out a muffled, traitorous laugh against her forearms.

Shirou's expression did not change. He continued working on Padmé's shoulder as though discussing weather patterns.

"To be fair," he offered, "the door was unlocked."

"You are not helping."

"I was not trying to."

Su Yan raised her glass. "To Arturia—who really knows how to handle quite the large sword—and to Shirou!"

Arturia closed her eyes.

The howling redoubled.

Tsabin waited for the noise to subside, her grin softening into something warmer. She turned to face Padmé fully.

"But the person who deserves the real thanks... the person who dragged herself out of bed after three hours of sleep, every single day, who rewrote speeches until her hands cramped from typing, who stood on those steps and spoke to people she'd never met as though she cherished them like family—because she did—"

Padmé lifted her head.

"—is you." Tsabin's voice lost its performative edge. What remained was simple, stripped bare. "You asked us to believe in something. We did. You asked Naboo to believe. They did. And tomorrow, they're going to make you Queen."

A silence held, warm and full.

Padmé's eyes glistened. She opened her mouth, closed it, and pressed her lips together.

Tsabin drew a breath.

"Which brings me to this. I think Arturia is right—we should share in the burden." She set down her wine glass and straightened. The shift in her bearing was visible—shoulders back, chin lifted, something deliberate settling into her posture. "Padmé Naberrie is about to become Queen Amidala. She's giving up her name. Not because she wants to, but because the people need a symbol more than they need a person. She understood that before any of us did."

Tsabin looked around the room.

"I've been thinking about what that means. About what it costs to erase yourself so that an idea can live. And I decided that she shouldn't bear that cost alone."

The quiet deepened. Even Su Yan had gone still.

"My name is Tsabin Vareli. It's served me well. But from this point forward—in every document, every official record, every operation we undertake together—I am Sabé." She let the syllables settle. "Sa-bé. Built from hers. Because where she goes, I go. And if she surrenders her name for Naboo, then so do I."

Padmé's hand found the table's edge and gripped it. Her jaw worked. She said nothing.

Then Eirtama rose.

"Eirtaé," she said. Quiet. Certain.

Sasha stood from the wall.

"Sachée."

Su Yan unfolded herself with the languid grace of someone who'd decided something hours ago.

"Yané."

Mara opened her eyes and sat up.

"Rianée."

Each name landed like a stone dropped into still water, the ripples overlapping, building. The handmaidens stood scattered throughout the dining room—in borrowed clothes, with wine-stained fingers and tired eyes—and one by one surrendered the names their parents had given them.

Arturia watched.

She thought of a round table. Of knights who knelt and offered their swords and their lives and their names to a king who could not give them warmth in return. She thought of Camelot's gleaming spires and the hollow throne at its heart, and the silence that had surrounded her like armour she could never remove.

Rabbine remained on her stool by the kitchen doorway, her expression soft and unreadable.

She thought of Padmé Naberrie, eyes bright with unshed tears, surrounded.

Arturia rose.

The chair scraped against the floor tiles. The robe hung loose on her frame, her bare feet pale against the dark wood, and she held her wine glass the way she had once held a goblet in a frozen hall where no one dared meet her gaze.

"Kings and queens," Arturia said, and her voice carried the weight of something older than this room, this planet, this galaxy, "stand alone at the summit. That is the nature of the crown. It separates. It must. The one who rules cannot afford to be merely human—cannot afford doubt, or softness, or the luxury of leaning upon another's strength. That is the lie every monarch tells themselves. I know, because I believed it. I built my kingdom upon it."

She paused. Her golden eyes swept across the room and settled on Padmé.

"I am... glad—profoundly, selfishly glad—that you will not rule alone."

She raised her glass.

"To Amidala. And to those who refuse to let her forget that she is also Padmé."

The room answered her. Glasses rose—some nearly empty, some sloshing over rims—and the sound that followed was not the polished cheer of a court

banquet but the rough, fractured noise of people who had survived something together and were only now realising it.

Padmé covered her face with both hands. Her shoulders shook.

Tsabin—Sabé—moved to her side and wrapped an arm around her, pressing her forehead against Padmé's temple. A murmur passed between them, too low for anyone else to hear.

Shirou caught Arturia's eye across the room. He said nothing. The corner of his mouth shifted—barely—and he inclined his head. She understood.

'Well done.'

Arturia sat back down and took a long drink of wine.

In the settling quiet, Rabbine—who had been perched on a stool near the kitchen doorway throughout, her amber-gold eyes watchful and warm—uncurled herself and clapped her hands together once.

"Right. So." She tucked a loose curl behind her ear, her dimple deepening with a bright, practical smile. "New names. That means new documentation, backdated records, updated pseudonym registrations with the Chommell privacy bureau—the whole administrative cascade. I can have the paperwork drafted by morning."

She pulled out her datapad, fingers already moving across the surface.

"I'll send everything to Senator Palpatine's office as well. He has the connections to backdate the filings through Coruscant's registrar so the names hold up to any scrutiny. The Senator's been incredibly supportive—he'll want to ensure everything is airtight before the coronation."

"Rabbine, you are a miracle," Sabé said, not lifting her head from Padmé's shoulder.

Rabbine's smile brightened another degree. "I'm still learning. But this part I can do."

Her stylus tapped against the screen. The list took shape beneath her fingers: Sabé, Eirtaé, Sachée, Yané, Rianée. Five names, five women who had just remade themselves.

She added a sixth—Rabé—and allowed herself the smallest flicker of private satisfaction. *'Built from hers. Just like the others.'*

Rabbine attached a brief cover note, flagged it priority, and queued the transmission for Senator Palpatine's private channel.

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The chronometer read 02:53.

Shirou's hand moved before the thought completed, fingers closing around the device and pressing the silence tab two minutes ahead of the alarm. The faint click of the mechanism disengaging sounded louder than it should have in the quiet room.

No drool on his shoulder tonight. A minor miracle.

Instead, Tsabin's arm lay draped across his chest, her fingers curled loosely against his collarbone. Her breath came in slow, measured pulls against his neck, warm and wine-scented. On his other side, Su Yan had managed to wedge herself into the narrow gap between Shirou and the wall, one leg thrown over his hip, her skin cool where her thigh touched his exposed stomach. Her forehead pressed into his bicep. A strand of light brown, almost auburn hair had found its way into his mouth at some point during the night. He carefully extracted it with his free hand.

Beyond Tsabin, Eirtama lay stretched to her full length—which was considerable—on her back, one arm flung above her head and the other tucked beneath the pillow. Her red braids had unwound during the night and fanned across the sheets. And there, curled against Eirtama's side with both arms wrapped around the taller woman's waist, was Arturia. The once and

future tyrant-king of Britain, conqueror of twelve kingdoms, wielder of Excalibur Morgan, reduced to a small blonde shape burrowed into Eirtama's ribs like a determined cat.

Shirou pressed his lips together to contain the sound that wanted to escape. The laugh stayed in his chest, shaking his shoulders just enough that Tsabin mumbled something unintelligible and tightened her grip on his shirt.

He held still. Counted to thirty. Tsabin's breathing evened out again.

02:55.

He'd set it five minutes before three. Experience had taught him to budget for extraction.

Two years. Give or take a few weeks, depending on whether one counted from their arrival on Naboo or from the day they'd opened The Empty Pantry's doors. Shirou settled his head back against the pillow and let his gaze trace the ceiling, where faint moonlight painted silver lines through the curtain gaps.

The restaurant bore almost no resemblance to what it had been. That cramped kitchen where Arturia had nearly immolated herself and their livelihood—gone, absorbed into a proper commercial operation that would have made old Tessari weep. They'd acquired the building to the east first, navigating a tangle of permits because a narrow street ran between the two. The compromise: an arched bridge connecting the upper floors, the street left clear for foot traffic below, the rooftops joined above.

It gave them what they needed—an expanded living area with a communal kitchen, additional rooms that the others could call their own for work or for the nights when someone needed solitude more than company. The bathing space had evolved into something between a ritual gathering hall and a confessional. Mostly for the girls.

One hundred covers now, spread across the main floor. Leather booth seating along the windows for the readers and the lingerers—students from the university who arrived at opening and stayed until close, their datapads

propped against sauce bottles, nursing single orders of caf for hours. Shirou didn't mind. They bought cheesecake eventually. Everyone bought cheesecake eventually.

The side counter had been Su Yan's idea. A walk-up window facing the plaza foot traffic, offering a stripped-down menu for workers who wanted sandwiches, fried tubers, or a slice of pizza without committing to a sit-down meal. It did twice the volume of the dining room on festival days.

Three booths on the river market in Theed. One in Keren. One in Moenia, staffed by a local named Tass who had appeared at the interview, eaten the trial meal, declared it the best thing in the Mid Rim, and proceeded to outsell every other location within his first month. Shirou still wasn't entirely certain how Tass managed the fry station with only two hands, but the numbers didn't lie.

And now the ship. Arturia had circled the listing on her datapad with such aggressive precision that the stylus had nearly cracked the screen. A modified YT-1300 freighter—ugly, reliable, and large enough to haul cargo between systems. They'd talked about it over morning prep, flour on their hands and ambition in the air. Not just expansion. Exploration. The galaxy stretched in every direction, and neither of them had seen any of it—not really. They were strangers here. They wanted to see what else was out there.

The story they'd told Padmé—a destroyed homeworld called Caelus Minor, the flight, the crash landing—contained enough truth to satisfy questions and enough fabrication to prevent further ones. Their actual origin defied explanation in any framework this reality possessed. No Throne of Heroes. No Counter Force. No Holy Grail Wars or Singularities or Lostbelts. The Age of Gods had never occurred here because these gods had never existed here. The mana that Arturia channelled and the circuits Shirou projected through operated on principles native to a reality that wasn't this one. They still functioned—Shirou could trace a blade as quickly as he ever had, and Arturia's mana burst had lost none of its force—but the process felt *off*. Not

slower. Inefficient. Like swinging a perfectly balanced sword whilst wearing someone else's gloves. The results were the same. The sensation wasn't.

It was improving, though. With every practice session, every projection, every burst, the friction diminished by some small measure. Their abilities were adapting to this reality, or this reality was adapting to them. Shirou hadn't decided which.

At least it still felt like mana. That was enough.

They'd agreed early: the past didn't matter. Not the specifics of it. Whether one had been a king who crushed her kingdom beneath an iron heel or a Counter Guardian who'd spent eternity murdering on behalf of humanity's collective survival instinct—none of it translated. The resonance existed only between them, in the bond they shared, in the weight of memories that had no audience.

What mattered was that Arturia wanted gyudon for breakfast on Tuesdays and that Shirou's ongoing quest to find ingredients analogous to their old reality kept him busy enough to feel useful.

What mattered was this room. These people.

Chaldea surfaced unbidden—as it did, sometimes, in the small hours when the boundary between reflection and regret grew porous. That white facility buried beneath a frozen mountain, crammed with Heroic Spirits and desperate humans all labouring to stitch the fabric of time back together. One couldn't live through that without the lines blurring. Proximity and mortality—or the memory of mortality, for Servants—compressed what might have taken years of acquaintance into weeks. He'd sparred with Cú Chulainn in the morning and shared sake with him at night. He'd traced blades alongside Musashi, argued philosophy with Sherlock, and let Mash fall asleep against his shoulder during debriefs that stretched past midnight. And yes, some of those connections had crossed into something more tangible. Something physical. Bodies seeking warmth and release.

He wasn't naive about what was happening now.

The dates had started—when, exactly? Three months ago. Four. Tsabin first, because Tsabin approached everything in life with the directness of a woman who'd read the menu, made her selection, and was merely waiting for the server to bring it. She'd appeared at the kitchen pass one evening after close, wearing something that was technically a dress in the same way that a napkin was technically a tablecloth. She informed Shirou that she was taking him to a wine bar she'd been wanting to try.

"Arturia approved," she'd added, as if that settled every possible objection.

It had, mostly.

Su Yan had been different—a walk through the river market that turned into three hours of her dragging him between stalls, feeding him samples of things he could have prepared better, and laughing with such unguarded warmth that the cooking critique died on his tongue each time. Eirtama had suggested a concert—classical Nabooan chamber music that she claimed to enjoy, but spent the entire performance whispering acerbic commentary about the cellist's fingering into his ear. Sasha had challenged him to a shooting range. Mara had invited him to a holodrama screening and cried on his shoulder during the third act. Rabbine had asked him to teach her knife work, which evolved into a quiet afternoon of conversation about guilt and purpose, leaving both of them somewhat lighter.

And Padmé. Padmé had sat across from him at a noodle shop near the university, eaten two bowls of his recommended order, and talked about governance for ninety minutes without once mentioning policy. She'd talked about doubt. About the distance the crown created between herself and every person she spoke to. About how she missed being Padmé instead of Amidala.

"You, Arturia, and the girls are the only people who look at me and see someone who isn't useful," she'd said, chopsticks paused mid-lift.

Arturia, for her part, had conducted her own campaign with characteristic directness. She'd taken Tsabin sparring—actual sparring—at the training ground Panaka maintained beneath the palace, and the two of them had

returned flushed, bruised, and speaking to each other with noticeably less formality. She'd accompanied Su Yan to a food festival in Keren and eaten her way through eleven stalls without apology, dragging Su Yan by the wrist to the twelfth when the younger woman suggested they might stop. She'd sat for Mara's holodrama marathon and offered tactical critiques of the villain's military strategy that Mara found inexplicably attractive. She'd even accompanied Sasha on an ecological survey of the Gallo Mountains, returning with mud on her boots and a quiet respect for the girl's knowledge of native flora.

With Padmé, it had been different. Quieter. Arturia had simply begun joining her on the evening walks she took through the palace gardens after long sessions of governance—entering through the passage that connected The Empty Pantry's cellar to the palace's lower corridors, appearing without announcement, falling into step beside her. They spoke about leadership, about sacrifice, about the specific loneliness of being the person upon whom all decisions ultimately fell. Sometimes they didn't speak at all.

Nothing physical had happened with any of them. Not beyond the casual intimacy that had become ambient—the shoulder touches, the shared meals, the way Su Yan leaned into him when she was tired or Eirtama rested her chin on his head when standing behind his chair. The way Tsabin's fingers lingered when passing him a glass. The way Padmé's hand found his forearm during difficult conversations and stayed.

Yet here they all were. Not every night—the palace kept its own schedule, and the handmaidens' duties didn't bend to sentiment. Some weeks Shirou and Arturia had the bed to themselves, the room quiet and familiar, and those nights carried their own comfort. But when palace obligations released them—when the legislative sessions ended, or the diplomatic calendar offered a gap, or Padmé herself dismissed them with the sigh that meant... *'I need sleep more than I need protection'*—they came through the passage. Arriving through the passage. One by one or in clusters, already changed into something comfortable. Seven women with perfectly serviceable rooms of their own, choosing instead to pile into a bed that Shirou had purchased

specifically because he'd recognised the trajectory weeks before anyone stated it aloud. A bed large enough for—well. For this. For the heap of limbs and breathing and stolen blankets and someone's cold feet pressed against his calves at three in the morning.

Tonight it was four. Tsabin, Su Yan, Eirtama—and Arturia, who was always here. Padmé had a pre-dawn briefing with Governor Bibble. Sasha was on overnight security rotation with Panaka's detail. Mara had drawn the short straw on an early diplomatic reception for a visiting Karlinus trade delegation. And Rabbine was likely still awake in her own room, on a late call with the Senator for the Chommell Sector—it would be office hours on Coruscant.

Arturia's involvement in all of this was not subtle. She possessed many qualities, but subtlety in pursuit of something she wanted had never numbered among them. She'd been the one to suggest the rooms. She'd also been the one to leave her door open every night. She'd mentioned, with theatrical casualness, that the Corellian bed manufacturer offered custom sizing—a much larger bed than the one they'd previously squeezed into.

'Ever the tyrant who wants everything.'

He couldn't fault the impulse. At Camelot, she'd had nothing but subjects. At Chaldea, she'd had comrades but no permanence. Now she had something between the two—people who chose to be here, who came back after seeing the worst of her, who argued with her about holodrama plot points and teased her about her appetite and fell asleep tangled in her limbs without flinching.

She wanted to keep all of them. Shirou understood that desire with a clarity that ached.

He wanted to take his time. These weren't Servants whose existence was tethered to a summoning circle and the knowledge that tomorrow might bring dissolution. These were people with lives, careers, a political movement that demanded their energy and attention. Whatever this was becoming, it deserved the patience of something built to last.

A rustle beside him.

Tsabin shifted in her sleep, rolling fractionally onto her back. Her leg drew up, knee bending, and her thigh came to rest across his hip—higher than Su Yan's, positioned with an accuracy that sleep should not have permitted. The borrowed shirt—his shirt, he noted with resignation—rode up with the movement, the collar slipping sideways to expose the full line of her throat, the hollow above her collarbone, and the curve beneath that the fabric had apparently decided was no longer its responsibility to cover.

Shirou fixed his gaze on the ceiling.

02:58.

He catalogued the cracks in the plaster. There were seven. The longest ran from the northeast corner to approximately the centre of the room, branching once near the light fixture. He'd been meaning to patch it. He would patch it tomorrow. Today. Later today. He would purchase sealant compound from the hardware merchant on the river market, and he would patch every single crack in this ceiling because that was a productive use of his—

Tsabin's breath hitched. Her fingers tightened on his shirt. The leg adjusted itself—marginally, impossibly—upward.

'This woman is not asleep.'

The certainty landed with the weight of battlefield intuition.

He turned his head just enough to confirm. Tsabin's lashes rested against her cheeks, her expression perfectly slack, her breathing calibrated. Textbook.

Too textbook.

Her leg moved again.

'Getting harder and harder to hold back.'

The thought surfaced raw and unvarnished, stripped of the careful rationalisation he usually wrapped around it. Because it was. Every morning he peeled himself out of this bed and padded downstairs to knead dough and

light ovens and ground himself in the honest labour of feeding people, and every morning the distance between discipline and desire narrowed by some imperceptible measure.

He exhaled through his nose. Slow. Controlled.

Then he lifted Tsabin's leg with careful hands, placed it back on the mattress with the gentleness one afforded unexploded ordnance, and rolled sideways over Su Yan—who grumbled but did not wake—extracting himself from the bed with the practised silence of a man who had done this many, many times.

He paused at the bedside. Leaned down. Flicked Tsabin once on the forehead.

"Go back to sleep."

Her eyes remained closed. Her breathing didn't change. Her lips twitched—once—and she pulled the blanket over her shoulder with the practised innocence of a woman who had absolutely no intention of acknowledging what had just occurred.

Shirou shook his head.

Feet on cold floor. Spine straight. Kitchen downstairs.

Dough wouldn't knead itself.

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End

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