

## **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 7.3 -**

### **The Weight of a Name**

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Pain.

That was all Eirtaé felt. Pain in the muscles that wrapped her shoulders. Pain threading through both calves like hot wire. Pain blooming across her ribs where the obstacle course's climbing wall had extracted its toll in purple souvenirs she'd probably discover later in the fresher.

*Eirtaé*. She let the name sit in her mind, tested its weight against the aching of her body. Not Eirtama. Not Ballory. Eirtaé.

It had been a few months since the ceremony, since she'd watched Rabbine—Rabé—send the documentation to Palpatine's office and add her own name to the list with that quiet, practical efficiency that made her indispensable. A few months of correcting herself mid-thought, of catching the old syllables before they finished forming and reshaping them into something chosen rather than inherited. The others had slipped into their new names with varying degrees of grace. Sabé wore hers like armour she'd been waiting

to don. Yané had simply shrugged and carried on as though names were interchangeable accessories. Sachée still fumbled occasionally in private, then laughed at herself.

Eirtaé was still working at it.

Because it mattered. It mattered in ways that extended far beyond the palace, beyond the throne room, beyond Naboo's gentle rivers and domed cities. Pa—*Amidala*, she corrected herself firmly. Amidala would win her second term. The polling numbers were beyond decisive—Eirtaé had run them herself, twice, because she didn't trust figures she hadn't personally verified. The memory of Veruna was still fresh, and it was the traditional politicians who had laid the groundwork for his rise. The electorate had not forgotten.

But Naboo was small. One planet in one system in one sector in one region of a galaxy that stretched incomprehensibly wide and harboured suffering on scales that made planetary politics look like village disputes. The Outer Rim's slave trade. The Core's institutional rot. The Senate's performative paralysis.

Amidala would not stop at Naboo.

Eirtaé knew this with absolute certainty—not from data, though she was always a numbers person first, but from knowing Amidala. If you knew her, it was already a certainty. And when that day came, when Amidala turned her gaze outward toward the galaxy's deeper wounds, Eirtaé intended to be beside her. Not as Eirtama Ballory, accountant from Theed, but as Eirtaé—forged in purpose, inseparable from the symbol.

She had to embody the name until even the quiet, private thoughts defaulted to it. Until the old name became the alias and the chosen one became the truth.

"The more you bruise in training, the less you bleed in war."

Arturia's voice cut through Eirtaé's internal monologue—the words both making sense and being utterly terrifying in equal measure. The woman stood at the centre of the palace training grounds—a wide courtyard of packed earth

and stone bordered by colonnaded walkways—dressed not in the uniform of the female palace guards, but in her Empty Pantry uniform.

The frilled black-and-white maid dress. The one with the ribbons.

Eirtaé was convinced Arturia chose it deliberately. There was a specific, sadistic artistry to the image of a petite blonde in a frilly service dress systematically dismantling palace guard veterans and a corps of handmaidens. It made the violence feel personal. It made the humiliation architectural.

Her blonde hair was pulled back into a practical tail. Her golden-yellow eyes swept across the assembled bodies with the flat, measuring quality of someone calculating exactly how much suffering she could distribute within the allotted time.

Beside Eirtaé, the rest of the handmaidens stood in various states of exhausted composure. Sachée had her hands on her knees, breathing through her nose with controlled fury. Yané stood straight but pale, jaw clenched in a way that suggested pride alone kept her vertical. Rianée dabbed sweat from her brow with trembling fingers. Rabé looked like she was severely regretting leaving Coruscant.

And Padmé—because here, in this space, outside the throne room and the ceremonial robes, she was Padmé again—stood among them in identical training blacks, her hair tied in the same regulation knot as the rest. Anonymous. Equal. Just another body that ached and sweated and bruised under Arturia's instruction.

The lucky *schutta* was currently seated on the throne.

Eirtaé could picture Sabé's expression with absolute clarity—the barely contained grin hidden beneath layers of ceremonial paint and the composed mask of Amidala's public face. The satisfaction of consulting today's scheduling roster and finding her name beside "Queen" rather than "Training Ground—Pendragon." They had standardised everything by now: the makeup that flattened individual features into the porcelain symbol, the elaborate

gowns whose sweeping hems concealed the height differences between them, the vocal modulation that smoothed Sabé's natural drawl into Padmé's measured cadence. The system worked. It worked well enough that even Governor Bibble had been fooled twice.

Sabé was on the throne, and everyone else was here. In the dirt.

Behind the handmaidens stood the palace guards—forty-seven men and women in training fatigues, arranged in loose formation. These were not the throne room detail; those remained at their posts. These were the rest—the ones who had survived the Veruna transition and proven their loyalty under Panaka's exacting vetting process. Eirtaé had reviewed their files herself. Good people. Dedicated.

Currently, they looked like they wanted to die.

The obstacle course had been first—a sprawling nightmare of walls, crawl spaces, balance beams, and rope climbs that Arturia had designed with what Eirtaé suspected was genuine artistic enthusiasm for human suffering. Then blaster drills, conducted until the training weapons grew warm in their hands. Then circuit training.

Hell on Naboo didn't begin to cover it. Eirtaé had invented new profanity during the third set of burpees. Languages that didn't exist yet would be required to adequately describe the fourth.

Behind Arturia stood their newest recruit—or rather, the one who would be their newest once the formal onboarding concluded this week. Lessa Velassis. Turquoise hair plastered to her temples, arms trembling as she ground through push-ups on the packed earth, her slight frame shaking with effort. She'd made it further than Eirtaé had expected. The girl had endurance, if not yet strength—and a stubborn set to her jaw that reminded Eirtaé of her father, which was either encouraging or a warning.

Eirtaé raised her hand.

Something about the pain, the exhaustion, the fog of physical depletion—it loosened the filter between thought and speech. Or perhaps it was the accountant in her, unable to leave a misquotation uncorrected even when every survival instinct screamed for silence.

"Shirou says 'the more you sweat in practice, the less you bleed in combat.' I miss Shirou's weeks."

The words left her mouth. Floated across the courtyard. Settled into the silence.

Arturia turned.

The grin that spread across the Tyrant-King's face was not a pleasant thing. It started at the corners of her mouth and worked inward, pulling her features into an expression that belonged on predators—the kind that played with food before consuming it. Her golden eyes fixed on Eirtaé with an intensity that made every nerve ending fire simultaneously in a desperate, primal alarm.

"I see we have our first volunteer."

Behind Eirtaé, the palace guards exhaled as one. A collective sigh of pure sympathy—or perhaps gratitude that it wasn't them.

Eirtaé's stomach dropped. "I didn't—"

"Weapons!" Arturia clapped once, sharp as a crack of thunder.

The training rack stood along the eastern colonnade. Blunt swords—thirty of them, forged by Shirou in his workshop, each one weighted and balanced to match the standard-issue vibroswords the guards carried. They weren't sharpened. They didn't need to be. Eirtaé knew from previous sessions that blunt metal travelling at speed produced sensations that rendered the distinction between sharp and dull largely academic.

The vibroswords themselves had been Shirou and Arturia's doing. The palace guard's standard loadout had been blasters alone before they'd volunteered for the training programme. Both of them had insisted—with the quiet,

immovable certainty that characterised every opinion they held about combat—that melee proficiency was not optional. Panaka had resisted for a week. Then Arturia had demonstrated what happened when a blaster-only guard encountered someone willing to close distance. The vibroswords arrived the following morning.

*'What is it with their obsession with swords?'*

Beside the training blades sat the training blasters—modified DH-17s locked permanently to stun, their power cells capped to deliver enough charge to numb a limb without dropping a person entirely.

Eirtaé collected a sword in her right hand. The grip was wrapped in leather—warm, familiar from weeks of drills. She holstered the blaster on her left hip. Arturia's doctrine demanded proficiency with both: sword dominant with blaster support, or blaster dominant with sword support. Choose your primary, but learn both.

Around her, palace guards moved to the rack with the reluctant efficiency of people who knew resistance only prolonged suffering. Metal clinked against metal. Holsters snapped. Seven guards and one handmaiden arranged themselves into a loose semicircle facing the petite blonde woman who stood empty-handed at the courtyard's centre.

"Standard rules." Arturia's voice carried without effort, cutting across the shuffling of boots and the nervous clearing of throats. "One volunteer leads. The rest support. Blasters and blades. Come at me together."

A guard—Eirtaé recognised him as Corporal Vehn, broad-shouldered and experienced, though only recently transferred to palace duty—raised his hand. "Ma'am, where's your weapon?"

Everyone around him winced.

Arturia crossed to the wall beside the sword rack. Leaning there, apart from the metal blades, was a wooden sword. Slender. Unvarnished. Utterly

unremarkable in appearance, and featured prominently in the nightmares of every person present.

Tora-shinai.

Shirou had given it to Arturia during their first month of training sessions. It had no edge, no weight distribution worth mentioning, and no business being as terrifying as it was. But Arturia wielded it the way she wielded everything—with the absolute conviction that the tool was irrelevant and only the hand behind it mattered.

She picked it up. At her hip, a training blaster sat holstered, already set to stun.

Eirtaé braced herself and exchanged nods with the palace guards flanking her. Seven professionals and one accountant, armed with metal and energy weapons, about to engage a woman holding a stick.

"Begin when ready."

Eirtaé exhaled. Drew her blaster with her left hand. Seven guards fanned out behind and beside her, forming a crescent of steel and particle weapons around their instructor. This was the exercise they'd drilled: coordinated assault, overlapping fields of fire, melee engagement on staggered timing to prevent friendly-fire incidents.

They'd never won. Not once in months of training. But the gap was closing. Last week, Sachée had nearly landed a strike. *Nearly.*

The grounds had been reconfigured since last session—modular terrain and cover rearranged into an unfamiliar layout. Arturia never ran the same puzzle twice. Standard drills built muscle memory; these sessions built something else. The ability to assess, adapt, and act under pressure when the optimal solution wasn't available and the best one you could find in a heartbeat would have to do. Everything was recorded. Everything was reviewed afterwards. And the recordings were never deleted—Arturia's one concession to

sentiment, though she'd never admit it. The footage of their improvement was, in its own way, a record of trust.

"On me," Eirtaé called. Her voice came out steadier than she felt. "Group one, suppressive fire. Group two, close left flank. Group three, blades right. Stagger your—"

Arturia moved.

Every blaster in the crescent snapped up, tracking—but she was already behind cover, a shoulder-height barricade of reinforced plastoid that swallowed the first volley of stun bolts in a cascade of blue sparks.

"Adjust!" Eirtaé pivoted, keeping her sights on the barricade's edge. She signalled group two to follow her approach from the left whilst group one maintained suppressive fire on the position.

They were three metres from the barricade when Arturia kicked it off its moorings.

The slab of plastoid launched outward—not toppled, *launched*—and the two guards at the front of group two caught it across their torsos before the stun setting on their vests even registered the impact. They went down in a tangle of limbs and modular terrain.

In the split second it took Eirtaé to process this, Arturia was already through the gap. Blaster in her left hand, tora-shinai in her right. She swept the wooden blade across the nearest guard's legs, folding him at the knees, and double-tapped him with stun bolts before he hit the ground.

"You could have staggered your approach more," Arturia offered, already moving to the next target.

"Increase suppressive fire! Move! Move! Move!"

Arturia locked blades with one of the remaining guards, positioning his body between herself and group one's firing line. Suppressive fire ceased—no one would risk stunning their own. In the same motion, she hooked the pommel of

the tora-shinai around the guard's blaster hand, wrenching his aim skyward, and shoved him bodily toward Eirtaé.

Eirtaé sidestepped the stumbling guard—*sorry*—and fired. Three rapid shots, triangulated to limit escape vectors. Arturia didn't dodge them individually. She simply wasn't where any of them arrived. The spaces between stun bolts became corridors she threaded with a dancer's economy.

"Close! Close the distance!" Eirtaé's voice broke higher than intended. She charged.

The previously stunned guards had recovered and converged simultaneously—the best coordination they'd managed, a rehearsed manoeuvre that left no angle unattended. Swords swung from six directions. Arturia met the first blade, deflected it into the path of the second, ducked the third, and stepped inside the fourth guard's reach to deliver a precise strike to his wrist that sent his weapon clattering free. Her foot hooked behind the fifth guard's ankle. He went down. The sixth swung hard—overhead, committed, desperate.

Arturia caught it on her blade, edge to edge, and held. The guard pushed. She didn't move. A hundred and ninety centimetres of trained soldier bearing down on a hundred and fifty-four centimetres of former king, and she didn't yield a single centimetre.

Then she twisted.

The guard's sword flew from his hands. He stumbled forward into empty space.

Eirtaé had used the chaos—slipped through the gap created by the six-person assault—and now she swung hard at Arturia's exposed left side, blade horizontal, putting her hips into it the way Shirou had taught her.

The impact shuddered up her arms, through her shoulders, rattled her teeth. Arturia had blocked without looking—blade angled precisely to catch the strike, positioned before Eirtaé had fully committed to the swing.

Golden eyes found hers. Close. So close Eirtaé could see the individual lashes, the faint trace of old fatigue beneath composed features, the absolute, terrifying calm of someone who had fought down a whole slave raid with nothing but a melee weapon.

"Good angle," Arturia said. Conversational. "But you telegraph with your shoulders."

She pushed. Eirtaé slid backward across packed earth. More guards charged in—a wave this time, abandoning coordination for sheer volume. Every remaining blade was swinging whilst others fired stun bolts in overlapping patterns.

Arturia became motion. Nothing more. She ceased existing as a person and became instead a series of positions, each one impossibly connected to the last—here, then there, then somewhere else entirely—blade singing against blade, footwork carving geometries across the courtyard floor. Guards dropped: winded, disarmed, tripped, struck in padding-covered joints that buckled under precisely measured force.

She pulled her punches. Eirtaé knew this. The bruises tomorrow would confirm it—purple and painful but superficial. Not broken. Not ruptured. Controlled. Every strike calibrated to teach without permanently damaging.

Somehow this made it worse.

Eirtaé circled, firing her blaster in short bursts—leading the target, anticipating the pattern the way Shirou had drilled into them. One bolt came close. Close enough to ruffle blonde hair. Arturia's gaze flicked to Eirtaé with something that might have been approval.

Then she closed the distance.

Two steps. Two impossible steps that covered four metres of courtyard as though the earth contracted beneath her feet. Eirtaé swung her sword—a rising cut, defensive, meant to create space. Arturia batted it aside with such

casual force that Eirtaé's grip faltered. The blade spun from her hand, arcing end over end before clattering against the colonnade five metres away.

Eirtaé raised her blaster. Last resort. Point blank.

Arturia's blade touched her wrist—gentle, almost. A tap. Not enough to bruise. Enough to say *I could*. Eirtaé's fingers opened reflexively. The blaster tumbled free.

A kick—precise, economical, barely more than a push with the ball of her foot—sent the blaster skittering across the courtyard to join the sword somewhere in the colonnade's shadows.

Silence settled across the training ground. The remaining guards had stopped advancing. They stood breathing hard, those still upright leaning on weapons or each other, watching.

Arturia stepped back from Eirtaé. She lowered the tora-shinai to her side and raised her voice so it carried to every corner of the courtyard, every guard slumped against columns, every handmaiden watching from the sideline, every aching body that had hoped this hour would end sooner.

"Before you offer someone the chance to yield. Before you extend mercy." Her sword pointed at the ground where Eirtaé's weapons had been. Then at the colonnade where they'd landed. "Make sure you have disarmed them first. Mercy extended to an armed opponent is not compassion. It is negligence. It is how you die." She let the silence hold for three heartbeats. "A cornered enemy with a weapon is not defeated. They are simply not yet dead."

She turned back to Eirtaé. The severity in her golden eyes softened—minutely, barely perceptibly, the difference between stone and stone that had been warmed slightly by sun.

"Do you yield?"

Eirtaé stood weaponless, arms hanging at her sides, every muscle burning with the specific exhaustion of someone who had given everything and found

it insufficient. Her training blacks were streaked with dust. Her breath came in ragged pulls.

She thought about the name. *Eirtaé*. Forged in purpose. Inseparable from the symbol.

She thought about what Arturia had just taught them—not the lesson about mercy and disarmament, but the one underneath it. The one that said: *You are better than before.*

"I yield."

Arturia nodded once. The tora-shinai lowered. Something shifted in her posture—the Tyrant-King receding, the instructor emerging, the line between them blurred as always.

Behind them, the guards exhaled collectively. Someone sat down without ceremony. Someone else made a noise that was either a groan or a prayer.

Lessa had stopped her push-ups at some point. She sat cross-legged on the packed earth, turquoise hair plastered to her temples, staring at the aftermath with the expression of someone who had just received a thorough education in what she'd signed up for.

*'The more you bruise in training, the less you bleed in war.'*

Eirtaé lowered herself into the dust. She corrected the quote in her head. Then let it go.

Arturia's version was probably more honest anyway.

Clapping.

Slow. Measured.

And to Eirtaé, mocking.

Every head in the courtyard turned.

Queen Amidala descended the colonnade's shallow steps. Crimson and gold cascaded from narrow shoulders in architectural folds. The ceremonial headdress—that monstrous construction of lacquered wood and precious metal that Padmé complained about incessantly—caught the afternoon light and scattered it across the courtyard in fragments. White paint transformed features into porcelain. Lips carved in perfect vermillion.

And beneath it all—beneath the layers of silk and symbolism and carefully applied cosmetics—Sabé radiated smugness with the intensity of a small sun.

Eirtaé felt it immediately. A prickle across the back of her neck that had nothing to do with exertion. Beside her, Yané, who had approached to check for injuries, stiffened. Across the courtyard, Sachée lifted her face from the stone, dust-streaked and murderous—but hid it just as fast as Eirtaé caught it.

Captain Panaka walked half a step behind and to the left of the Queen, hands clasped at the small of his back, spine rigid in the formal posture of escort duty. His expression was professional. Composed. Entirely appropriate for a man accompanying his sovereign on an inspection of the training grounds.

His jaw, however, worked in small lateral movements that betrayed the teeth grinding happening behind closed lips.

Panaka was one of three palace staff entrusted with the handmaiden rotation—the knowledge that the woman beneath the paint was not always the same woman. His family had served Naboo's monarchy for four generations, a lineage of service that predated Veruna's corruption and would outlast its memory. He had not chosen to serve a tyrant; he had served the throne, and when the throne changed hands, his loyalty transferred with seamless grace.

That loyalty currently manifested as an unwillingness to visibly express his irritation at being commandeered for what was transparently a victory lap.

The handmaidens rose. Training dictated it—when the Queen appeared, you stood, regardless of whether your legs felt like they'd been replaced with wet towelling. Eirtaé hauled herself upright and felt something in her left calf voice

strong objections. The palace guards scrambled into loose formation, those who'd been horizontal achieving verticality with varying degrees of success.

Sabé's painted lips curved.

That curve. Eirtaé could read it like a balance sheet trying to hide transactions it didn't want seen. It said: *I spent the last hour seated on cushions whilst you crawled through dirt.* It said: *I had tea.* It said, with crystalline clarity: *Better you than me.*

Rabé caught Eirtaé's eye from across the formation. The amber gaze held a question: *Are you seeing this?*

Eirtaé returned the slightest nod. *Oh, I'm seeing it.*

Already her mind was working—not with training scenarios or combat assessments, but with the far more satisfying arithmetic of retribution. Sabé's weekly massage allocation from Shirou. Her preferred breakfast order. The specific vintage of Gallo Mountain wine she favoured after long sessions in the throne room. All privileges. All of them could be collectively... *withheld.* A unified front. Five handmaidens, one sadistic restaurant owner, and the actual Queen herself in silent consensus that Sabé would receive nothing until she'd suffered proportionally.

The numbers balanced beautifully in Eirtaé's head.

Arturia stepped forward. The tora-shinai rested against her shoulder—casual, unhurried. Her frilled uniform was barely disturbed despite the systematic dismantling she'd just performed. She inclined her head toward Amidala with a precision that spoke of courts and crowns and centuries of protocol bred into bone.

"Your Majesty." The words carried weight—not performative, but reflexive. The respect of one sovereign acknowledging another. "Your squires have shown considerable improvement since last session. Their coordination under pressure has tightened. Their instincts sharpen week by week."

*Squires.*

Eirtaé pressed her lips together. Arturia had been calling them that since the third training session—when Sachée had asked what they were to her in martial terms and received the answer with such matter-of-fact delivery that no one had found the courage to correct it. They weren't knights. They weren't yet warriors. They were squires.

Eirtaé shook her head. The terminology was ridiculous. Anachronistic. It belonged to a world of castles and heraldry that existed only in historical holodramas.

It also fit perfectly, and that was the worst part.

Amidala descended the final step, robes pooling momentarily before she gathered them with practised fingers. "We are pleased to hear of their progress." The royal *we*—Sabé deployed it with relish. Her gaze swept across the assembled guards and handmaidens, lingering just long enough on each bruised face to catalogue the damage. "The safety of the throne relies upon such dedication."

"Indeed." Arturia's posture was relaxed. Conversational. Her golden eyes rested on the painted face with an expression of pleasant neutrality that Eirtaé had learned to distrust absolutely. "The group exercises have become notably more cohesive. Eirtaé in particular has developed sharper tactical instincts. Sachée's footwork approaches competent. Rabé adapts well under shifting conditions."

She listed them. Each name delivered with genuine assessment, genuine acknowledgement of growth. Panaka shifted his weight—barely perceptible, a lateral transfer from left foot to right that might have been discomfort or might have been the suppressed urge to excuse himself from whatever was about to unfold.

Amidala's chin lifted. The headdress caught light. "Such progress speaks well of your instruction, Lady Pendragon."

"The credit belongs to dedicated students." Arturia paused. The pause lengthened. It stretched past comfortable and into deliberate. Her head tilted—fractionally, as one might tilt to examine an interesting insect. "It is such a shame that Sabé could not attend today's session."

The courtyard's ambient noise—the shuffle of boots, the quiet murmur of guards comparing injuries—ceased.

Amidala's smile held.

It held the way a bridge holds before the supports give—rigid, fixed, the structural integrity maintained through sheer refusal to acknowledge the cracks spreading beneath.

"Yes." The word emerged slightly higher than the previous register. Amidala—Sabé—adjusted immediately, smoothing the pitch back to regal composure. "Yes, it was such a shame. She had some important duties to attend to."

Arturia nodded. Sympathetic. Understanding. The picture of reasonable accommodation. "Of course. Duty must take precedence." She rolled the tora-shinai from her shoulder, letting it tap once against her palm with a sound like a full stop at the end of a sentence. "I shall ensure that next session, Sabé catches up with everyone's improvement. *All* of it. We would not want her falling behind her sisters."

The emphasis on *all of it* landed with surgical precision.

Eirtaé watched Amidala's painted face. The white cosmetics concealed most tells—that was their purpose, after all, to flatten expression into symbol—but Sabé's throat moved. A swallow. Barely visible above the high collar's ornamental beading.

"That is..." Amidala's hands clasped before her. The gesture was serene. Practised. Absolutely disguising the fact that those fingers had just tightened against each other. "Most considerate, Lady Pendragon. We are certain Sabé will appreciate the attention."

"I look forward to it." Arturia smiled. It was a small, contained expression that did not reach her eyes so much as sharpen them. "One must not allow gaps in training to compound."

The silence that followed was several heartbeats long.

Amidala turned with the measured grace of ceremony—the sweep of robes, the precise angle of rotation, the unhurried elegance that said *I am departing because I choose to, not because I have been routed*. Every line of the movement was technically flawless.

She was also moving faster than protocol strictly dictated.

"Captain Panaka." The name carried a fraction more urgency than royal addresses typically permitted. "We must return to the audience chamber. There are petitions awaiting review."

Panaka's jaw ceased its grinding. Something flickered behind his eyes—not quite amusement, not quite sympathy, occupying the precise middle ground between the two. He fell into step beside his queen with professional efficiency.

"Of course, Your Majesty."

Their departure was dignified. Composed. The crimson robes swept up the colonnade steps without haste or hesitation.

The headdress vanished around the corner.

Eirtaé kept the chuckle internal—a private warmth behind her ribs that had nothing to do with the aching muscles or the afternoon heat. Across the courtyard, Sachée had buried her face in her hands, shoulders shaking with what might have been laughter or might have been the final surrender of someone who had witnessed perfection.

Rabé's dimple appeared. Just the left one. Just for a moment.

Arturia tapped the tora-shinai against the ground twice. The sound brought forty-seven guards and six handmaidens back to attention.

"I am pleased to see that the Queen appreciates our progress." Her golden eyes swept across the formation. The tora-shinai came to rest against her shoulder. "Let us not disappoint her, then."

The warmth drained from the courtyard like water from a cracked vessel. Forty-seven guards and six handmaidens remembered, simultaneously, where they were.

"Who shall be our next volunteer?"

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**End**

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