

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

-=<o>&=-

Chapter 8.2 -

The Blockade

The banquet hall in the palace's eastern wing was a cathedral of noise.

Sachée stood three paces behind and to the left of Queen Amidala, close enough to intervene, far enough to suggest deference. The position was deliberate. Arturia had drilled it into them across dozens of sessions—distance measured not in comfort but in reaction time. Three paces gave Sachée enough room to step forward, to interpose herself between threat and sovereign, to buy the seconds that mattered.

She wore the handmaiden's regalia. The white face paint pulled at her skin when she moved her jaw, and the formal headdress sat heavy against her temples—though not as heavy as the Queen's. That was the point. Their dresses shared the same palette, the same silhouette at a glance, the same veiled obscurity that blurred one face into another across the length of a crowded room. But where Amidala's gown cascaded in layered ceremonial weight, Sachée's had been cut for movement. Hidden seams that wouldn't

bind at the hip. A skirt hemmed two centimetres shorter than protocol demanded, allowing a full stride without gathering fabric. Soft-soled boots beneath, not the lacquered heels the costume department had originally specified.

Shirou had approved the modifications. Arturia had insisted on them.

'The paint is the weapon,' Arturia had said during their first fitting. *'Not the dress. If the dress impedes you, you are a mannequin. Mannequins cannot fight.'*

Sachée adjusted her weight onto the balls of her feet and scanned the hall.

The Chommell Sector Cultural and Harvest Exchange had drawn sixty-four delegations into this space, and the banquet reflected every one of them. Long tables draped in sector-neutral ivory bore platters from worlds across the thirty-six systems. The Jafan roast gualaar dominated the far wall—an entire animal on a spit, its carcass glistening under warming lamps, attended by two Jafan chefs who carved slices with theatrical precision. Arturia had stationed herself near it for the first forty minutes of the banquet before Sachée had gently reminded her that security took precedence over sampling. Arturia had returned to her post carrying a plate stacked with enough meat to feed a family of four and had not apologised. Crystallised honey sculptures from the highland apiaries formed centrepieces along the main table. Karlini smoked fish, sliced paper-thin and fanned across ceramic plates. Wines, spirits, and fermented beverages from a dozen worlds occupied a dedicated station near the eastern windows.

The crowd moved through it all with the restless energy of people who'd spent weeks at negotiating tables and were grateful for an excuse to eat and talk about something other than tariff percentages.

Amidala stood near the centre of the hall, engaged in conversation with Ambassador Torven of Karlinus—a broad-shouldered man with deep-set eyes and the weathered complexion of someone who'd spent decades in the lake settlements. His formal coat strained slightly at the buttons. His expression

held the practised warmth of a career diplomat who understood that festivals were merely negotiations conducted over better food.

His son stood beside him.

The younger Torven—Damen, Sachée recalled from the briefing notes—was perhaps twenty. Tall, sharp-jawed, with the kind of easy confidence that came from growing up in a household where doors opened before you reached them. His hair was swept back in the Karlini fashion, and he'd chosen a formal jacket cut slightly narrower than his father's, emphasising shoulders that he clearly spent time maintaining. His eyes hadn't left Amidala since the introduction.

Sachée recognised the look. She'd been on the receiving end of it yesterday.

The memory was still fresh—and still irritating. Yesterday's rotation had placed her beneath the Amidala paint, seated on the throne during an afternoon audience with the arriving Chommell delegations. Damen Torven had been among the first presented. He'd bowed with practised grace, held the bow two seconds longer than protocol required, and risen with an expression that suggested he'd rehearsed the moment in a mirror. His opening remark—something about Naboo's beauty being well-represented by its sovereign—had been delivered with the polished ease of a line tested on lesser targets and found effective.

Sachée had maintained the mask. That was the job. Amidala acknowledged compliments with measured warmth, deflected personal attention toward policy, and moved on. Sachée had done all three. But Damen hadn't moved on. He'd lingered at the edge of the audience chamber after his father departed, positioning himself where "Amidala" would see him during the subsequent presentations. He'd caught her eye—Sachée's eye, beneath the paint—three separate times. The third time, he'd inclined his head with a small, private smile that was clearly intended to communicate something meaningful.

It had communicated something, all right. Just not what he'd intended.

Sachée had spent the remainder of the audience suppressing the urge to break character and inform the Ambassador's son that his sovereign was a nineteen-year-old revolutionary who could disassemble his tariff proposals in her sleep, not a prize to be won through strategic eye contact and well-tailored jackets.

The contrast with Shirou surfaced unbidden. Shirou, who had never once looked at any of them like a target to be acquired. Shirou, whose attention arrived without agenda—a hand on a sore shoulder, a meal left warming when you came home late, the quiet observation that you seemed tired delivered not as commentary but as prelude to a cup of caf appearing beside you without being asked. Shirou's attention arrived without agenda. Damen arrived with expectations.

And then there was the other dimension—the one Sachée had only recently allowed herself to examine directly. Padmé's hand finding hers under a table during a difficult briefing. Arturia sharing a glass of wine with the unhurried intimacy of someone who assumed you were already hers. The mornings when Sachée woke in the big bed with Rianée's arm across her waist and Padmé's breathing slow against the pillow beside her, and the thought that surfaced wasn't confusion or anxiety but a simple, bone-deep *'yes, this is right.'*

Damen Torven, for all his sharp jaw and practised confidence, existed in a universe where none of that was possible. Sachée almost pitied him.

Almost.

"—and the kelp harvests this season have exceeded projections by fourteen per cent," Ambassador Torven was saying, his hands moving in the emphatic gestures of someone accustomed to addressing large rooms. "The bio-engineers your office recommended have been instrumental. We owe Naboo a debt of—"

"The debt is mutual, Ambassador." Amidala's voice carried its characteristic precision—warm enough to invite, controlled enough to direct. "Karlinus's

commitment to the consolidated position has strengthened every system at the table. The Viceroy responds to unity, not individual grievances."

"Naturally, naturally." Torven inclined his head. "My son here has been following the negotiations with great interest. Damen—share your thoughts with Her Majesty."

Damen straightened. He had the look of someone who'd rehearsed this moment. The jacket pulled tight across his shoulders as he squared them.

"Your Majesty, I've been studying the tariff structures extensively, and I believe there's an opportunity in the secondary commodities markets that the Federation hasn't accounted for." He stepped forward—half a step, just enough to close distance without violating protocol. His voice dropped into a register that was clearly intended to sound authoritative and mature. "If we were to establish a parallel exchange framework, one that routes secondary goods through independent brokers rather than Federation-licensed intermediaries, we could—"

"An interesting observation," Amidala said.

The interruption was surgical. Sachée watched it land—watched Damen's rehearsed momentum hit a wall of polite acknowledgement and crumple. His mouth stayed open for a fraction of a second, the next sentence already formed and now homeless.

"Ambassador, your son's interest in trade policy speaks well of Karlinus's next generation." Amidala's gaze held Damen's for precisely the length of time that acknowledged his contribution without encouraging expansion. Then it moved—smoothly, without pause—back to his father. "I wonder—has he had the opportunity to review the consolidated position papers? The section on secondary commodities aligns with several proposals from the Erso's Landing delegation. I believe Delegate Voss would welcome a conversation on the subject."

The redirect was seamless. Damen's mouth recalibrated and closed. Ambassador Torven's cheeks darkened by a shade—the flush of a father

who'd positioned his son as a suitor and watched the target pivot the conversation back to trade policy without so much as a breath between sentences.

Sachée had watched Padmé perform this manoeuvre dozens of times. The deflection of personal interest into professional channels—so smooth that the deflected party often didn't realise what had happened until minutes later, when they found themselves discussing tariff schedules with someone they hadn't intended to speak to. Damen would replay this conversation tonight in his quarters and arrive at the delayed understanding that he'd been redirected. By then, the sting would have faded into grudging admiration.

Or it wouldn't. Sachée didn't particularly care either way.

Amidala continued speaking. Her tone hadn't shifted. Her posture hadn't changed. She simply occupied a different register of the conversation now, one that included Damen as a junior colleague rather than a potential interest. The ambassador, to his credit, recovered quickly and matched her pace.

At Sachée's right shoulder, Arturia stood with the stillness of carved stone.

The Empty Pantry uniform was, as always, incongruous against the banquet's formal backdrop. Black dress with white frilled apron, the fabric cut to suggest service-industry professionalism whilst projecting an authority that made senators lower their voices when she passed. Today's variant was the summer adaptation—backless, the fabric dipping to the small of Arturia's spine, exposing the musculature of her shoulders and the pale skin between her shoulder blades. Tessari Nyl's parting gift to the restaurant. The previous owner of The Marble Kettle had suggested it as a seasonal uniform during a holocall, and Arturia—despite spending two entire evenings berating Shirou for his "perverted aesthetic sensibilities"—had adopted it without further protest.

She wore it everywhere now. Palace meetings. Training sessions. Market runs. The summer variant had drawn a notably younger clientele to The Empty Pantry when she'd first debuted it, a phenomenon the staff described

with the weary resignation of people watching an unstoppable force collide with their seating capacity.

Those golden eyes moved in slow, deliberate arcs—servers, exits, the dense clusters of guests that could conceal an approach. Her right hand hung at her side, fingers loose, thumb tucked inward. The same position she held behind a service counter. The same position she held before drawing a blade.

A staff member approached from the left. Young woman, palace catering uniform, carrying a tray of stemmed glasses filled with dark ruby liquid.

"Necr'ygor reserve, ma'am. Compliments of the delegation."

Arturia's gaze dropped to the tray. One hand extended, lifted a glass, held it to the light. Her nostrils flared once. Then a measured sip, lips barely parting.

Her chin dipped. A single nod.

She took a second glass from the tray and stepped forward, moving into Amidala's peripheral vision with ease. The wine appeared at Amidala's elbow without interrupting the conversation. Amidala's fingers closed around the stem without looking. A nod passed between them—brief, wordless, complete.

"—and the consolidated voice of the sector is precisely what gives us leverage," Amidala continued to Ambassador Torven, the wine glass held but untouched. "The Federation negotiates with individual systems because individual systems can be isolated. Together, we represent a trade volume that even the Viceroy cannot dismiss."

Torven nodded, his expression earnest. Beside him, Damen leaned forward slightly—the posture of a young man preparing to insert himself back into a conversation that had closed around him.

"Your Majesty, if I may add—the supply chain redundancies I mentioned earlier could also serve as—"

"Delegate Voss has done extensive work on supply chain modelling," Amidala said, her gaze passing through Damen with the frictionless courtesy of

someone acknowledging a piece of furniture. "I would strongly encourage you to seek him out this evening, Damen. His data is comprehensive."

Damen's jaw tightened. A muscle in his cheek flexed. He glanced sideways at his father, who was studying the middle distance not meeting his son's eyes.

Sachée almost felt sorry for him. Almost. But now that she wasn't the target of his interest, she could appreciate the spectacle for its entertainment value. Then she remembered yesterday's third meaningful glance. The sympathy evaporated. The appetite for entertainment did not.

The server turned toward Sachée.

Arturia stepped into the server's path. The glass—her glass, the one she'd already sipped from—appeared at the edge of Sachée's vision, stem pinched between two fingers, extended and unhurried.

Sachée shook her head. Small. Firm. "On duty."

Arturia's expression didn't change. The glass remained extended. Her eyebrow rose by perhaps a millimetre—an increment that, on anyone else, would have been invisible. On Arturia Pendragon, it constituted the full weight of a royal decree.

Sachée held for three seconds. Four.

She took the glass and sipped. The wine was extraordinary—dark fruit and mineral earth, with a lingering finish. She returned the glass immediately.

Heat crept up her neck and across her cheekbones. Not from the wine. From the eye contact. From the intimacy of sharing a glass in public, from the shared rim, from Arturia's thumb brushing her fingers during the exchange in a gesture so small it could have been accidental and absolutely was not. From the knowledge that this—whatever this was—existed in the space where Arturia conducted her personal relationships: without permission, without apology, with the calm assumption that you belonged to her and always had.

Sachée thought of Damen's rehearsed glances across the audience chamber. She thought of Arturia's eyebrow. The comparison was so lopsided it was almost cruel.

Across the hall, Eirtaé stood beside a pillar near the Jafan delegation's table. Her handmaiden paint was immaculate. Her blue eyes found Sachée's over the heads of a dozen dignitaries.

She grinned.

Sachée looked away. The heat in her cheeks intensified. She heard—or imagined she heard—Eirtaé's quiet laugh carried beneath the ambient noise of the banquet.

'It shouldn't be this difficult to say no to a sip of wine.'

But it was Arturia. Saying no to Arturia occupied a tier of difficulty that surpassed even Padmé at her most earnest. Padmé convinced through appeal—through the pull of her conviction, the warmth of her belief that you could be better than you thought. You said yes to Padmé because she made you want to.

You said yes to Arturia because the alternative felt like disappointing a force of nature.

And you said yes to Shirou because he never asked. He simply did things for you—quietly, without expectation—until you realised that the cup of caf at your elbow and the knot worked out of your shoulder and the blanket pulled over you when you fell asleep on the sofa were all the same sentence, repeated daily, in a language he'd never learned to speak aloud.

Damen Torven would never understand any of it. He existed in a world where attention was a commodity you deployed strategically, where interest was signalled through positioning and eye contact and well-timed remarks about tariff structures. Sachée existed in a world where a woman handed you her wine glass and the act carried more intimacy than anything Damen could manufacture in a lifetime of rehearsed glances.

She didn't pity him after all.

Damen was still talking. Something about inter-system logistics hubs. His father's expression had migrated from embarrassment through resignation and was now approaching the quiet acceptance of a man watching his son fly a speeder into a cliff wall in real time.

Amidala sipped her wine. The Necr'ygor reserve—a product directly affected by the tariffs they were negotiating. The gesture was deliberate, Sachée knew. Everything Amidala did in public was deliberate.

"Ambassador Torven, products like the Necr'ygor delegation's wines are among the finest in the sector," Amidala said, lifting her glass slightly. "It would be a tragedy if the Federation's tariff structure continued to suppress their distribution. Products like this deserve wider markets—and the artisans who produce them deserve fair compensation."

Torven's chest expanded. "Certainly, Your Majesty."

Damen opened his mouth.

"Your Majesty, if I may—"

The klaxon hit.

The sound tore through the banquet hall—a deep, oscillating wail that rattled the stemware on the tables and killed every conversation simultaneously. Sachée's hand went to her waist before the second pulse. Not for a weapon—she carried none openly—but for the datapad holstered at her hip, its surface already alive with incoming data as the palace systems dumped alerts through the handmaiden network.

She pulled it free and swept the screen.

Her eyes widened.

ORBITAL SENSOR ARRAY: MULTIPLE CONTACTS—TRADE FEDERATION
SIGNATURES—DESCENDING FORMATION—LANDING CRAFT
CONFIRMED C-9979 CLASS—COUNT EXCEEDING SENSOR CAPACITY

THEED NORTHERN PERIMETER: GROUND CONTACT—DROID
DEPLOYMENT—INFANTRY FORMATION—ADVANCING
SOUTH-SOUTHWEST

PLANETARY DEFENCE GRID: OFFLINE—COMMUNICATIONS RELAY:
PARTIAL DISRUPTION—HOLONET ACCESS: BLOCKED

The banquet hall erupted. Not into panic—not yet—but into the brittle confusion of people who recognised an alarm but couldn't place its meaning. Glasses set down too hard. Chairs scraped. Voices rose in overlapping questions that no one present could answer.

Ambassador Torven had pulled his son behind him instinctively. Damen's confidence had evaporated—his face was pale, his rehearsed composure stripped away, leaving something younger and more frightened underneath. His hand gripped his father's sleeve. Across the room, Sachée caught fragments of reaction—a Jafan delegate gripping her partner's arm, a cluster of Erso's Landing representatives moving toward the windows, the palace catering staff frozen mid-service with trays still balanced on their palms.

Captain Panaka cut through the crowd.

His red-and-black uniform was immaculate, his bearing rigid, but Sachée caught the tension in his jaw—the clenched muscle that betrayed the professional calm. He moved directly to Amidala, leaned close, and spoke into her ear.

Whatever he said took a moment.

Amidala's face changed. Not visibly—not to the room, not to the delegates who were watching her for reassurance. But Sachée stood three paces away and she saw it: the warmth bled from her eyes. What remained was iron.

"Captain." Amidala's voice carried no tremor. "Send a burst transmission to Senator Palpatine's office on Coruscant. Full situation report. Route it through every available relay and encode it for diplomatic priority. If the Federation has established a communications blockade, use the emergency packet protocol—compress the message and scatter it across multiple frequencies. Something will get through."

Panaka's jaw tightened further. "It may take a day. Perhaps two, depending on the blockade density."

"Then it takes a day. Send it now."

Panaka turned on his heel and was gone.

Sachée's comlink chirped. She pressed it against her ear.

"Sachée, Sachée, respond." Sabé's voice, tight with control.

Before Sachée could answer, Arturia stepped forward. She hadn't moved during Panaka's approach—hadn't shifted her weight, hadn't reached for anything. But her presence had changed. Sachée had learned to recognise it over two years of training and proximity. The air around Arturia didn't shift or crackle or do anything so dramatic. She simply became more *there*. More present. The way a blade becomes more present when you draw it from the sheath—same object, same weight, same metal, but the intent behind it transforms everything.

"Tell Sabé," Arturia said, her voice pitched for Sachée alone. Gold eyes fixed on a point beyond the windows, where the sky had filled with descending silhouettes. "If she is with Shirou, they are to handle the plaza evacuation first. Then the throne room."

Sachée keyed her comlink.

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

Static swallowed the response. The signal was already degrading.

Sachée looked up from her comlink. Around the hall, the confusion was hardening into fear. The Karlini ambassador had both hands on his son's shoulders—protective now, the diplomatic posturing gone, replaced by the older and simpler instinct of a father standing between his child and danger. The Jafan chefs had abandoned their carving station. The word *Federation* passed from mouth to mouth across the banquet, gathering weight with each repetition.

Then the palace communications console at the far wall came alive.

Rianée crossed the hall at a pace that fell just short of running, her handmaiden robes gathered in one fist. She reached Amidala and spoke in a rapid undertone.

"Your Majesty—incoming transmission. Federation channel. It's the Viceroy. He's requesting a direct audience."

A beat of silence. Amidala's chin lifted.

"Patch it through."

Rianée moved to the hall's main holoprojector—built into the eastern wall, typically used for ceremonial addresses and diplomatic conferences. Her fingers worked the controls. The projector hummed, flickered, and resolved into the life-sized image of Viceroy Nute Gunray.

He stood with his hands clasped before him, his mottled green-grey skin smooth beneath the ornate robes of his office, his wide eyes blinking in the slow, deliberate cadence of a Neimoidian who wanted you to know he was comfortable. The mitre on his head cast angular shadows across his features. Behind him, the sterile interior of a Federation command ship stretched into antiseptic distance.

"Your Majesty," Gunray said, and inclined his head. His voice carried the lilting cadence of Neimoidian courtesy—each syllable rounded, each pause measured. "I trust this evening finds you well."

The hall had gone silent. Every ambassador, every aide, every delegation member had turned toward the holoprojector. Sachée could feel the fear pressing against the walls—not panic, not yet, but the taut, electric stillness of a room full of people holding their breath.

Amidala stood alone before the projection. The ceremonial paint rendered her expression unreadable to anyone who didn't know where to look. Sachée knew where to look.

Padmé was furious.

"Viceroy Gunray." Amidala's voice cut the silence cleanly. "Your landing craft are deploying armed forces on sovereign Nabooan territory. Your vessels have established an orbital cordon that is disrupting civilian communications and commerce. Explain how this constitutes anything other than a violation of Republic law."

No preamble. No diplomatic softening. She'd skipped the overture and gone straight to the accusation. Sachée watched it hit Gunray's expression—a micro-flinch, quickly suppressed. He'd expected the protocol dance. The formal expressions of concern. The measured escalation that would give him room to manoeuvre.

Amidala had denied him the room.

Gunray recovered. His thin lips arranged themselves into something that might have been a smile on a species that expressed warmth.

"A regrettable necessity, Your Majesty. The Trade Federation has obligations—security obligations—to protect its considerable investments in the Chommell Sector. Recent instabilities in Naboo's political environment have raised concerns among our shareholders." He unclasped his hands, spread them in a gesture of openness that fooled no one in the room. "The deployment you observe is merely a precautionary measure to safeguard Federation assets and personnel during this period of... uncertainty."

He let the word hang. *Uncertainty*. Sachée heard the implication beneath it: *you are the instability. Your renegotiation is the threat. This is your fault.*

"There is no uncertainty, Viceroy." Amidala's response came without pause—immediate, controlled, each word placed with the precision of a surgical instrument. "Naboo's government is stable, its institutions are functioning, and its citizens are at this moment hosting a multi-system cultural exchange in the spirit of inter-sector cooperation. The only instability present is the army you have landed on our doorstep."

Gunray blinked. Slow. Reptilian. His hands reclasped.

"But you see, Your Majesty, the Trade Federation's perspective differs somewhat." His voice dropped half a register—the tone of a patient elder explaining economics to a child. "Eight sessions of negotiation have produced no satisfactory resolution to the tariff dispute. Our patience—and the patience of our shareholders—is not inexhaustible. Surely you understand that commerce requires... stability."

The condescension was deliberate. Sachée recognised the technique—she'd seen Governor Bibble deploy a subtler version in council sessions when he disagreed with Padmé's proposals. Frame the other party as naive. Make experience sound like wisdom and youth sound like recklessness. Gunray was betting that a nineteen-year-old queen would bristle, would defend her age and competence, would shift from accusation to justification.

Amidala did not bristle.

"The negotiations remain open, Viceroy. Naboo has not withdrawn from the table. The Chommell Sector's representatives have maintained their positions in good faith across every session." She paused—not from uncertainty, but to let the silence frame what came next. "If the Federation's patience is exhausted by eight sessions of lawful negotiation, one wonders how thin that patience was to begin with."

Gunray's right eye twitched. A small movement—involuntary. Sachée catalogued it.

Sachée's fingers moved across her datapad. Panaka had materialised at her shoulder—she hadn't heard him approach. He leaned close, his breath warm against her ear.

"Burst packet sent. Multiple frequencies, compressed, encoded. Best estimate—arrival at Palpatine's office within thirty to forty standard hours, assuming the blockade hasn't caught all the relay paths." He paused. "There's a full droid army assembling in the northern grasslands. Reports from the other continents—same pattern. Landing craft, droid deployment, perimeter establishment. This is planetary scale, Sachée. Every major population centre."

Sachée transcribed the key points on her datapad as Panaka spoke, her stylus moving in the shorthand notation the handmaidens had developed for exactly these situations—a compression system Eirtaé had designed, tested, and declared "adequate" after three rounds of revision. She stepped forward—not into the conversation, not between Amidala and the holoprojection—but to the edge of Amidala's peripheral vision. Close enough that a glance would catch the screen. She held the datapad at waist height, angled upward.

Amidala's eyes didn't move from Gunray. But Sachée saw the micro-shift in her posture—the fractional tilt of her head that indicated she'd read every word.

Planetary scale. Every major population centre.

"Viceroy," Amidala said. "Let us dispense with euphemism. You have deployed a military force to occupy a sovereign Republic world. You have blockaded an entire sector's communications and commerce. This is not a precautionary measure. This is an invasion."

"Such strong language." Gunray's tone carried the practised injury of a merchant accused of short-changing a customer. His hands spread again—palms up, the universal gesture of wounded innocence. "The Trade Federation merely seeks to protect its interests whilst a resolution is reached."

We have established a temporary cordon around the Chommell Sector—temporarily, of course—to ensure that all parties remain committed to the negotiating process."

The words landed in the hall like stones dropped into still water.

The Chommell Sector. Not Naboo. The entire sector. Thirty-six systems, ringed by Federation vessels, their trade routes severed, their communications disrupted.

Sachée watched the ambassadors' faces. She saw the colour drain from them in sequence—Torven first, his grip tightening on Damen's shoulder until his knuckles whitened. Then the Jafan delegate, whose hand found the edge of the nearest table and held it. Then a ripple spreading outward through the crowd as the scope of what Gunray had just said registered across every face in the room.

"A blockade of the entire Chommell Sector." Amidala repeated the words without inflection, letting them hang in the air where everyone could hear them clearly. "Thirty-six sovereign systems. Billions of citizens. You have imprisoned an entire region of the Republic to resolve a tariff dispute."

"Imprisoned is—"

"Accurate." The word cut. No volume increase. No dramatic emphasis. Just the flat, final sound of a door closing. "Your vessels prevent free passage. Your forces occupy sovereign soil. Your disruption of communications isolates these systems from the Republic at large. By any legal definition, Viceroy, this is an act of aggression against member worlds of the Galactic Senate."

Gunray's expression rippled—the irritation breaking surface for a moment before he smoothed it back beneath the diplomatic mask. His clasped hands tightened until the joints of his long fingers stood out against the mottled skin.

"Your Majesty is, as always, passionate." The word *passionate* deployed as a weapon—diminishing, patronising, reducing her argument to emotion rather than law. He paused, letting the condescension settle, then shifted his

posture. His chin rose. His voice took on the measured cadence of a man delivering terms he'd prepared well in advance. "However, the Trade Federation is prepared to offer a resolution that addresses the concerns of all parties."

He turned his gaze from Amidala to the assembled ambassadors. His eyes moved across them with the slow, appraising sweep of a buyer examining stock.

"To the esteemed representatives of the Chommell Sector—your systems need not suffer for Naboo's intransigence. The Trade Federation values its relationships with each of you individually. We are prepared to lift the blockade from your systems immediately—all of your systems—on a single condition."

The hall held its breath.

"Retract your support for the proposed renegotiation of the existing trade framework. Return to the established arrangements. The Federation will, in turn, offer revised terms—more favourable terms—for your respective systems. Terms that reflect the value we place on long-standing partnerships."

He let the offer settle.

Sachée watched it work. Watched the calculation ripple through every delegation—the mental arithmetic of survival versus solidarity, of mouths to feed versus principles to uphold. The Karlini ambassador's jaw worked. His grip on Damen's shoulder had loosened, and his hands now hung at his sides—the posture of a man whose body had forgotten what to do because his mind was running too many scenarios at once. The Jafan delegate exchanged a look with her aide—the silent, compressed conversation of people who'd been poor long enough to know the price of pride. The Erso's Landing representatives had drawn together into a tight cluster, their heads bent inward, murmuring.

Then Gunray's smile widened by a fraction.

"Naboo, however, presents a unique challenge. The disruption to our operations caused by Queen Amidala's aggressive renegotiation efforts has cost the Federation considerably. The blockade of Naboo shall remain until a more... comprehensive arrangement is reached."

There it was. The blade beneath the courtesy. Isolate Naboo. Offer the rest of the sector enough to make abandoning their strongest ally survivable. Divide the consolidated position into thirty-five systems willing to deal and one left standing alone.

Sachée's mind processed the structure the way it processed ecosystem-collapse models—identifying the leverage points, the cascading failures, the moment where one system's withdrawal triggered the next until the whole framework disintegrated. Gunray wasn't negotiating. He was engineering a collapse. Remove one supporting element—Karlínus's trade volume, Jafan's agricultural exports, Erso's Landing's manufacturing capacity—and the consolidated position lost mass. Remove three, and it became structurally unsound. Remove ten, and Naboo stood alone against the largest commercial military in the Mid Rim.

She could see it working. The ambassadors' eyes shifted—from the holoprojection to each other, to the floor, anywhere but at Amidala. Guilt and relief and self-preservation competing on faces trained to conceal all three.

Nobody in the Chommell Sector had the military power to oppose the Trade Federation. That had always been the sector's vulnerability—thirty-six systems that had never needed standing armies because the Republic's framework was supposed to make armies unnecessary. The Federation, operating under the cover of "security requirements" along the Outer Rim trade lanes, had built a droid army that dwarfed most planetary defence forces combined. They'd lobbied the Senate for the right, secured it through years of patient credit-spreading and political cultivation, and now held a seat in the very body that was supposed to regulate them.

The silence in the hall was suffocating.

Sachée watched Amidala.

When Padmé spoke, it was not to Gunray.

She turned to face the ambassadors.

"Ambassador Torven." Her voice was clear. Unhurried. It carried across the hall without effort, reaching every corner, every ear, every person who was trying not to look at her. "Ambassador Sareen. Delegate Voss. Representatives of every system gathered here tonight."

She paused. Not for effect. For breath. Sachée saw her ribcage expand beneath the ceremonial robes—one deep inhalation, held for a heartbeat, released through the nose. The pause that followed was not performance. It was the silence of a woman assembling the hardest sentence of her life.

"Accept the Viceroy's offer."

Shock. Sachée felt it move through the room—a physical wave that broke against every face she could see. Torven's mouth opened. The Jafan delegate's grip on the table tightened until her knuckles matched the ivory cloth. Even Damen—forgotten, irrelevant Damen—flinched.

"Your Majesty—" Torven began.

"You carry the lives of your people in your hands, Ambassador. Every fisherman on Karlinus's lakes. Every farmer in Jafan's highlands. Every miner, every artisan, every child in every school across your worlds." Her voice held steady. No tremor. No crack. "They did not send you here to share in Naboo's suffering. They sent you here to protect them."

Sachée's throat tightened. She knew what this was costing. She'd sat beside Padmé during the late-night sessions when the consolidated position was being built—had watched her draft individual messages to each system head, tailoring every argument, addressing every concern, spending weeks of personal capital to forge something that had never existed in the Chommell Sector's history. Unity. Real unity, not the administrative convenience of

shared Senate representation, but the deliberate choice of thirty-six worlds to stand together.

Padmé was dismantling it with her own hands.

"The Chommell Sector need not starve for Naboo's quarrel with the Federation. Accept their terms. Protect your people. Go home to them."

The Jafan delegate's eyes glistened. Ambassador Torven's throat worked—the visible swallowing of a man fighting the urge to argue, to refuse, to stand beside the queen who was releasing him from an obligation he hadn't asked to be released from. Beside him, Damen had forgotten his ambitions entirely. He stared at Amidala with his mouth slightly open, his rehearsed confidence stripped away, replaced by something raw and uncomprehending. The expression of a boy who had walked into this hall believing he understood power and was discovering, in real time, that he had never seen it before.

"We will remember this, Your Majesty," Torven said. His voice was rough.

Amidala inclined her head. "Remember your people. That is enough."

One by one, the ambassadors nodded. Some looked away as they did it—the reflex of people who couldn't bear to watch themselves make the choice they were making. Some met Amidala's gaze and held it, searching for something in the painted face. Permission. Absolution. Confirmation that survival was not betrayal. Amidala gave each of them the same steady regard—no condemnation, no reproach. Just acknowledgement.

Sachée's chest ached. Not from the headdress. Not from the paint. From the knowledge that Padmé had just sacrificed the work of months—years—to protect people who were about to leave her behind. And she'd done it without hesitating.

Amidala turned back to the holoprojection. Gunray had watched the exchange with the patient satisfaction of a man whose trap had sprung precisely as designed.

"Viceroy." Amidala's tone shifted. The warmth she'd extended to the ambassadors was gone. What remained was steel. "You have heard the ambassadors' decision. Will you honour your terms? Will you grant safe passage to every ambassador and visiting citizen currently on Naboo, and remove your blockade from their systems?"

Gunray inclined his head with exaggerated courtesy. "The Trade Federation is, above all, an institution of its word. The blockades on the remaining systems of the Chommell Sector will be lifted within the standard day."

"And the safe passage?"

Gunray blinked. Slow. His smile widened.

"Ah." The syllable hung in the air. Not a word. A door opening onto something worse. "Safe passage. Yes. An entirely reasonable request, Your Majesty. Under normal circumstances, the Federation would of course facilitate the departure of all visiting dignitaries without delay."

He paused. The pause was deliberate—long enough for hope to form, long enough for the ambassadors to begin calculating departure trajectories and hyperspace routes, long enough for the tension in the room to ease by a fraction of a degree before he closed the trap.

"However, the present situation introduces certain... complexities."

The word *complexities* landed like a second klaxon. Sachée saw it register across the room—the hope curdling, the brief exhale reversing into held breath.

"The occupation of Naboo has not yet been formalised through the appropriate legal channels. Until such formalisation occurs, the Federation cannot guarantee that individuals departing Naboo are not, in fact, Nabooan citizens disguised as foreign delegates—smuggled out of the system before our administrative processes are complete."

The temperature in the hall dropped. Not literally. But Sachée felt it—the collective understanding spreading through the room like cold water through fabric. The ambassadors weren't being released. They were being *leveraged*.

"I would therefore urge—" Gunray's voice carried the solicitous tone of a man offering assistance during a crisis he'd engineered, "—the esteemed ambassadors to assist the Federation in resolving this matter swiftly. If Queen Amidala were to sign the appropriate agreements ceding administrative oversight of Naboo to the Federation, the occupation would be formalised, all legal ambiguities resolved, and the ambassadors and their citizens free to depart."

He spread his hands. Palms up. The gesture of reasonableness. The gesture of a man holding a knife behind a handshake.

"A simple signature. Everyone goes home."

The silence that followed was absolute.

Sachée understood. She understood with the cold, systematic clarity that surfaced when the stakes exceeded the threshold for hesitation—the same part of her mind that processed ecosystem-collapse models and projections of environmental devastation. This was the same logic. Extraction. The target was different—plasma instead of timber, trade routes instead of waterways—but the mechanism was identical. Isolate the resource. Eliminate alternatives. Force the compliance of the weakest party by leveraging the suffering of everyone connected to them.

The ambassadors were hostages. Not because their bodies were confined, but because their presence on Naboo—their citizens' presence on Naboo—was now the lever the Viceroy would use to force Amidala's hand.

She watched it land on Ambassador Torven's face. Watched the man's jaw set against it—the instinctive refusal of a person who recognised coercion even when it wore courtesy's mask. But she also watched his eyes move sideways to his son. Watched Damen's pale face. Watched the calculation that

followed—the father's arithmetic, older than politics, older than trade, older than any institution in the galaxy. *My child is in this room.*

Sachée hated the Viceroy with a precision that surprised her. Not rage. Not the hot, reactive anger of someone who'd been wronged. Something colder. More architectural. The hatred of someone who saw the structural elegance of the trap and despised it specifically because it was well-designed.

Amidala's gaze had turned to ice.

Not the iron from before. Iron was warm compared to this. What Sachée saw now was the expression Arturia sometimes wore when she spoke of her kingdom—the stillness of someone who had stared into something vast and dark and refused to look away.

The paint on Amidala's face caught the holoprojector's light. Her eyes were fixed on Gunray.

He stared back.

Neither spoke.

A moment passed.

"Captain Panaka." Amidala's voice carried no warmth and no tremor. "Escort the delegates and their citizens to a secure shelter. Transmit the coordinates to the Trade Federation directly." Her gaze didn't leave Gunray. "I trust the Viceroy will ensure that the safety of his valued partners is not compromised by his forces' presence on our soil."

Gunray's lips twitched. He inclined his head—a concession dressed as courtesy.

"Provide the delegates with direct communications to the palace and sufficient supplies for the duration."

"Yes, Your Highness."

"I will accept the isolation of my system, Viceroy." Each word landed with the weight of something final. "But Naboo will not capitulate to threats delivered through the suffering of our allies. You will not use their presence to compel my signature. And you will not have it."

The holoprojector hummed between them. Gunray's smile had flattened into something harder. For the first time since his image had appeared, he looked at Amidala and saw something he had not accounted for.

Sachée saw it too.

Not a nineteen-year-old queen. Not a girl playing at governance. Something older. Something that would not bend.

-=&<0>&=-

End

**Follow me on my other socials
and stack additional voting
points on the story of your
choosing.**

[XTwitterX](#)



[t Tumblr t](#)

