

Fate/Knights of the Heroic Throne

Chapter Intro

Human order: Restored.

History: Preserved.

But what of the ones who made it possible?

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

But a wish was made.

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

Story Starts

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Chapter 6.4 -

The Tyrant's Last Festival

Marren Vollen exchanged a look with Dovan Carest—one weighted with three days of sleepless tension. Behind them, their unit shifted restlessly, hands hovering near holstered blasters with the twitchy awareness of men who'd learned that preparedness and survival were no longer guaranteed. Not when guarding *those two*.

The broadcast had been three nights ago. The palace had been in controlled chaos ever since—not from the dissident movement gathering strength beyond the walls, but from the two prisoners who refused to remain imprisoned.

They'd broken containment within hours of Amidala's speech. Not violently—not *entirely* violently, at least, compared to their body count during the festival. There'd been no casualties among the guards, no overt attacks. But they'd escaped persistently. Infuriatingly. Like water finding cracks in

stone, they simply went where they wished, and no amount of security protocols or reinforced doors seemed capable of stopping them.

The kitchen incident yesterday had been the worst.

Four hours of standoff whilst the petite blonde woman held the double doors as an impassable chokepoint, hurling plasteel trays at anyone who approached with unerring accuracy. Her golden eyes dared them to try. Behind her, the white-haired man cooked in the commandeered space with an almost meditative calm—as though two dozen armed guards weren't beating themselves senseless against his companion's improvised barricade.

They'd eaten. Cleaned up after themselves. Then walked out when they were ready, stepping over the groaning bodies of guards who couldn't quite remember how they'd ended up on the floor, before leaping from a third-storey window and vanishing into Theed's twilight streets.

No one had been able to explain where they went. No one had been able to stop them from coming back.

Now they stood at the gate, caught between the chaos erupting inside the palace and the steady, rhythmic thunder of footfalls approaching from beyond the walls. Not from one direction—from *everywhere*. North side, West side, south approach, the merchant district—every avenue leading to Palace Plaza carried that same coordinated cadence, converging like tributaries feeding a flood.

One figure stepped into the plaza. Then another. Both cloaked in white, faces hidden behind pale masks that caught the dying light.

Then the tide broke.

A sea of black poured through every entrance—hundreds, then thousands, flowing into the plaza with the inexorable patience of water filling a basin. Black cloaks marked the edges of the crowd like a mourning border. Anonymous.

Unified.

Dovan's hand shook on his comlink. Marren steadied his own breathing through sheer force of will, drawing on twenty years of military discipline to keep his voice level.

"Command, this is Gate One." His grip on the comlink had gone white-knuckled, but his tone remained professional. "We have visual confirmation: dissident group assembling as anticipated. All dressed in black, white masks. They're not approaching from the plaza alone—they're coming from every direction. North side, south approach, merchant district—" He paused, watching another wave of figures crest the far stairs. "Command, they've coordinated simultaneous entry from all quarters."

The plaza was filling faster than he could count.

"Numbers significantly exceed projections. Still growing. Requesting immediate guidance."

Silence from the other end. Then a burst of static.

Beside him, Dovan had gone pale. "Sir, they're still coming. What do we—"

Something deep within the palace detonated. The sound reached them a half-second later—a muffled roar that vibrated through the stone beneath their feet and sent a plume of smoke curling up from somewhere near the central spire. The command centre.

Their comlink went dead.

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The command centre had descended into chaos—the controlled kind, or what passed for it after three days of accumulated failure.

Captain Maris Magneta gripped the edges of his seat at the tactical hub, knuckles white against cold metal, refusing to acknowledge the tremor in his hands. The holoprojections flickering across every available surface painted a

picture of systematic collapse: duty rosters showing gaps where guards had called in sick, too terrified to face another shift; security feeds that cut to static at the worst possible moments; city maps bleeding red with incident markers that multiplied faster than his analysts could tag them.

Each marker represented another breach. Another failure. Another moment where his carefully constructed defences had proven utterly worthless.

Behind him, two dozen officers shouted over one another into comlinks, their voices forming a dissonant chorus of fragmenting authority. Maris could hear the fear creeping into their tones—that particular pitch that meant they'd finally realised what he'd known since yesterday.

They were outmatched. Completely, systematically outmatched. The protocols they'd drilled for years meant nothing against opponents who moved like forces of nature. Their training, their numbers, their weapons—all of it amounted to theatre.

King Ars Veruna had been escorted to the throne room ten minutes ago, surrounded by his personal guard. The most trusted. The most capable. Maris had handpicked them himself—veterans all, men who'd served without question, men who wouldn't break under pressure.

He'd seen the way their hands shook as they formed up around the King. The way their eyes darted to every shadow.

They knew what was coming. They all did.

Every other unit was stretched impossibly thin—past the point of effectiveness into something that resembled desperation more than defence. Thirty-two active teams remained, down from forty-seven at the start of this nightmare. They were scattered across Theed, running themselves ragged chasing sightings that were always minutes old by the time they arrived. Thirty reserves had already been activated, men pulled from their beds, from their families, thrust into a scenario no amount of training had prepared them for.

And it still wasn't enough.

Not for what was coming. Not for what was already here—moving through their defences like water through a sieve.

"Captain Magneta!" A young analyst's voice cracked across the room—barely out of the academy by the look of him, face still soft with youth that would age decades by morning. "Confirmed sighting—both terrorists, Emiya and Pendragon, palace gardens, northwest quadrant—"

Maris's jaw tightened. Another sighting. Another moment too late. They were always reacting, never acting—always ten steps behind opponents who seemed to know their moves before they made them.

"Dispatch containment team—"

"Sir, the guards aren't responding." The analyst's face had gone bloodless, his datapad trembling in sweat-slicked hands. "Comms just went dead."

The silence that followed pressed down on the room like a physical weight.

Another team down. Another unit rendered ineffective by opponents who treated palace security like a training exercise.

From somewhere deep within the palace—too close, far too close to where they sat in their supposed command centre—came the muted, staccato percussion of blaster fire. Rapid bursts. The kind that spoke of panic rather than precision. Desperate men firing at movements too fast to track.

Then silence. That awful, telling silence that meant another confrontation had ended exactly as all the others had.

The comlink on Maris's console erupted with overlapping transmissions—palace guards shouting over each other, professional composure shattered:

"—white-haired contact moving through the east colonnade—"

"—she's not stopping, repeat, she is NOT stopping—"

"—request immediate backup, multiple guards, down, non-lethal but—"

"—they're heading toward the central spire—"

Maris slammed his palm against the console, silencing the feed. His hand stung from the impact, but he couldn't bear to hear any more. The fear. The confusion. The complete breakdown of everything he'd built.

"Where are the mercenaries the King called in?" His voice came out rougher than intended, betraying the exhaustion he'd been fighting for three days.

"Sir, they've already been directed towards the—"

More blaster fire answered him. Muted explosions reverberated through the palace corridors, each one a reminder of their impotence.

"Send some to reinforce the throne room. The rest to guard the command centre." The order felt hollow even as he gave it—like moving pieces on a dejarik board when the game was already lost.

"Yes, Captain Magneta!"

Three days. Three excruciating days of this torment.

Three days of watching his men get systematically humiliated by two individuals who moved through the palace like they owned it, who treated reinforced security doors like mild suggestions, who made a mockery of everything he'd spent his career building.

The stress had wound everyone past breaking point. Nerves frayed. Judgement compromised. They'd had multiple incidents yesterday where palace guards fired into each other—men so paranoid they couldn't distinguish shadows from enemies, allies from threats. The fear was eating them alive from the inside, turning trained professionals into frightened children clutching weapons they could barely control.

And the bitter irony of it all?

The only casualties on their side were from friendly fire. Their own terror-induced incompetence. The pair harassing them had mostly knocked

everyone out before moving on—almost gentle in their efficiency. They'd also destroyed a significant portion of the armoury's blasters and equipment, methodical in their sabotage, each piece of damaged gear requiring replacement from dwindling supplies.

Soon they'd be defending the palace with ceremonial weapons and harsh language.

'Fitting,' Maris thought bitterly, the irony crawling through his exhausted mind. The pair terrorising them seemed to prefer weapons from a bygone era—ancient blades and archaic combat styles that belonged in holo-documentaries, not modern warfare.

He could have understood Jedi. Those mystical warriors with their lightsabers and Force powers—at least there would be some framework for comprehension, some explanation that fit within the galaxy's established order of strangeness.

But these two weren't Jedi. They didn't need whatever magic those robed monks wielded. They operated on something far more terrifying in its simplicity: speed, precision, and absolute superiority.

They'd rush in faster than his people could react, crossing impossible distances in heartbeats, closing gaps that should have given trained soldiers time to aim and fire. One by one, they'd knock everyone unconscious with almost casual efficiency—sometimes even taking the time to relieve guards of their blasters, setting the weapons to stun before turning them against their own forces.

The same pattern. Every single time. And they had no answer to it. No counter-strategy. No defence.

Just the inevitable wait for the next humiliation.

"Captain—"

Maris rubbed at his temples. The gesture had become automatic over three days of constant disappointment. He already knew the report would be bad news—his subordinate's hesitant tone told him everything before the words formed.

The King had tripled their mercenary forces. Black Sun enforcers with their ruthless efficiency. A handful of Mandalorian warriors with their legendary combat prowess. It hadn't mattered. Nothing mattered against these two. The additional forces had only provided more bodies to be systematically dismantled, more witnesses to their collective inadequacy.

"Sir, all temporary detention centres in Keren—no response. Communications completely severed."

The words hit like physical blows. Keren. The mountain city, the cultural heart of Naboo outside the capital. If they'd lost contact there...

And now the revolt had started in earnest. Even outside Theed, there wasn't any good news to be had. The infection was spreading, metastasising across the planet like wildfire through dry kindling.

"Captain!" A third analyst burst in—Voss, one of the few veterans who hadn't cracked under the pressure. His voice was steady, but his face was grey. "Moenia is reporting a large congregation. Thousands strong. All wearing black cloaks, white masks."

The image formed unbidden in Maris's mind: a sea of anonymous faces, united in purpose, identities hidden behind those damned masks.

Then the floodgates opened.

"Sir—" The first analyst again, voice barely above a whisper. "Kaadara just sent an update. Demonstrations in the southern quarter. Virella refineries reporting workers walking out en masse. Parrlay merchant guilds closing shop and joining the streets."

Another explosion rattled through the palace—closer this time, deep enough to vibrate through the floor, sending tremors up through their bones. Smoke alarms began their shrill keening somewhere in the western wing.

The tactical display updated before his eyes. Maris watched with growing horror as red markers bloomed across the map like bloodstains spreading through water.

Theed. Keren. Moenia. Kaadara. Virella. Solleu. Parrlay.

All at once. Coordinated. Planned.

This wasn't spontaneous uprising. This was orchestrated revolution.

His throat felt dry as dust. "Get me a line to the King," he said quietly. "Now."

His mind was already racing ahead—escape routes, contingency plans. They needed options. "And plan a route from both the command centre and the throne room towards the palace hangars. We might need to eva—"

Slash. Slash. Slash.

The sound cut through his words like the blade that made it. Maris had never heard anything like it—the singing whisper of metal hard enough to carve through durasteel as if it were paper. Each strike precise. Measured. Almost musical in its rhythm.

The blast doors groaned. Protested. Then caved inward as they were kicked through with devastating force—reinforced metal crumpling like foil.

The petite blonde stood framed in the ruined doorway.

Arturia Pendragon.

They'd whispered her name in fearful conversations for three days straight. Now she was here, her presence filling the space far beyond what her small stature should allow.

"As I told you previously, one of these guys probably had an override key. This palace will probably still be used by the next monarch," quipped a baritone voice from beyond the blast doors—casual as discussing the weather.

The white-haired man stepped through the ruined entrance with quiet confidence, as though he'd simply knocked rather than demolished reinforced durasteel. His silver-grey eyes swept across the command centre with detached assessment, cataloguing threats and exits in the span of a heartbeat.

They were clean. Too clean—nothing like the blood-soaked figures from the reports describing the festival's aftermath. The man carried what appeared to be a palace guard's blaster in one hand, the other resting empty at his side. His posture was utterly relaxed.

Maris felt his throat constrict. Three days. Three days of reports describing these two as unstoppable forces of nature, and here they stood in his command centre as if they owned it. The petite woman's golden eyes swept the room with the same cold precision as her companion, and despite her diminutive stature, she radiated an authority that made his skin crawl.

'Not human,' his mind whispered. *'Can't be human.'*

"Are you the one in charge here?" the white-haired man asked. His tone was conversational, despite the unconscious bodies they'd undoubtedly left in their wake—several already littering the space just beyond the ruined doors. "We'd like to have a conversation about standing down your forces before more people get hurt."

The sheer audacity of it—walking into a military command centre and offering negotiations as though they had any right—sent a surge of rage through Maris's exhaustion.

His hand moved to the concealed compartment in his command chair's armrest, fingers finding the smooth metal catches with practised ease. His other hand danced across the built-in console. The familiar controls responded without him needing to look—years of paranoid preparation finally

bearing fruit. Adrenaline surged through his exhausted body, burning away the fog of three sleepless nights.

"You think," Maris said, his voice dropping to a deadly whisper, "that after three days of utter humiliation—after watching you systematically dismantle everything I've spent years building—that I'm going to just *surrender*?"

His thumb found the activation studs, pressing them in sequence.

'They think they're invincible. They think they can walk into MY command centre and dictate terms.'

"You think I'm going to let you walk out of here after what you've done?"

His fingers completed the sequence. Multiple thermal detonators launched from their concealed housings, arcing through the air toward the intruders.

'Let's see how unstoppable they really are.'

He saw the exact moment comprehension dawned on his officers' faces—the widening eyes, the involuntary steps backward, mouths opening in silent screams as they processed what he'd done.

'Too late now. If I'm going down, I'm taking these demons with me.'

The detonation was beyond sound, beyond sensation—pure, overwhelming force that seemed to tear reality apart. A flash of searing white light consumed everything, burning through his eyelids. His retinas screamed in protest. The roar wasn't just deafening—it was physical, hammering through his bones, rattling his teeth, turning his organs to jelly. The blast wave hit like the fist of an angry god.

For a moment, Maris felt his heart skip several beats.

Then—nothing.

Silence so complete it felt unnatural, as if the explosion had torn a hole in the fabric of sound itself. A high, keening note rang inside his skull.

His vision returned slowly, shapes emerging from the white-hot afterglow like ghosts materialising from fog. Through the haze, through the dancing spots of light and shadow, he saw two familiar silhouettes walking through what had once been blast doors. They moved with the same unhurried grace as before, stepping through twisted metal and smoke as if strolling through a garden.

'No.' The thought was desperate denial. *'That's not possible. Nothing could have survived that. NOTHING.'*

As his vision cleared, he became aware of a faint shimmer around him—his personal deflector shield, the emergency system installed at ruinous expense. The field hummed with strain, its generator whining beneath his chair.

But beyond that protective bubble was something that chilled him to his marrow.

The charred remains surrounded him. Body parts scattered like broken dolls—some limbs missing entirely, vaporised in the blast's epicentre, others splattered against walls in grotesque patterns. The smell hit him: burnt flesh and ozone, copper and carbon. His stomach lurched.

But what truly terrified him wasn't the carnage.

It was the sheer, undiluted contempt radiating from the petite blonde standing before him.

"You killed your own men," she said quietly.

Not an accusation. A statement of fact, delivered with the weight of absolute judgement. There was something ancient in her golden eyes—something that had witnessed countless betrayals and found this one particularly repugnant.

Maris's hand scrambled for the console, fingers slipping on surfaces slick with sweat as he tried to trigger the shield's emergency protocols. Dead controls. Useless switches. Dark displays. The generator had nearly depleted itself stopping the blast—he could hear it sputtering, the whine dropping in pitch like a wounded animal's final breath.

The blonde exploded into motion.

Gleaming silver and red—a sword, an actual *sword*—battered against his failing shield. Each strike sent spider-web cracks through the energy field. Each impact rang like a funeral bell. With each blow, the shimmer dimmed further.

"Wait—" Maris raised a hand in futile supplication, all authority fled from his voice. "Wait, I can—I have information! Resources! I can be useful—"

The shield flickered once. Twice. Like a dying candle in sudden wind.

He looked up at anger incarnate. The woman's face was a mask of cold fury, but her eyes burned with something worse than rage.

Disappointment. Disgust. The look one might give to something particularly vile discovered beneath a rock.

The shield failed.

What followed was a strange sensation—pressure releasing, as if something holding him together had suddenly let go. No pain. Just that peculiar feeling of separation.

His vision tilted. The world rotated in a way that made no sense. He saw his own body still sitting in the command chair, hands grasping at dead controls. Blood fountained from the stump of his neck in arterial spurts, painting the ruined console in patterns of crimson.

'*Oh,*' he thought distantly, watching his headless corpse from where his head had come to rest on the floor. '*I see. This is how it ends.*'

Then darkness rushed in from all sides, and Captain Maris Magneta thought no more.

Arturia stood over the captain's corpse, a traced Clarent held loosely in one hand. Blood dripped from the blade's edge in a steady rhythm, each droplet adding to the growing pool beneath her feet. The corpse had already stopped gushing—heart no longer pumping, body nothing more than cooling meat. She watched the crimson spread across the polished floor, remembering countless battlefields where she'd stood just like this, surrounded by death of her own making.

Soaked in blood again. Always blood.

No matter how far she ran from her past, no matter how many pizzas she served or floors she mopped, it always came back to this. The weight of the blade in her hand felt sickeningly familiar—like greeting an old friend she'd hoped never to see again.

"Needless," she said quietly, her voice heavy with something that might have been regret. Might have been resignation. The word tasted bitter on her tongue. "All of this was needless."

How many times had she spoken those same words? Standing over corpses at Camlann, watching her kingdom tear itself apart, seeing loyal knights fall to madness and betrayal. And here she was again—the Tyrant-King with blood on her hands, pretending she could ever be anything else.

The domesticity she'd found with Shirou felt like a distant dream now. Something fragile and precious that she'd foolishly believed she could keep.

Though she could hardly complain. Shirou could probably fill a sea with the blood he'd spilt, stack mountains' worth of corpses—all for the sake of humanity's future.

At least her sins were her own. His had been demanded of him.

Behind her, Shirou moved to stand at her side, his expression carefully neutral as he surveyed the carnage.

Arturia couldn't properly count how many subordinates the captain had sacrificed. Young faces frozen in terror. Bodies torn apart by explosions meant for her and Shirou. They'd died for nothing—thrown away by their commander's paranoia and pride.

She'd seen it before. Officers who valued victory over their soldiers' lives.

She'd *been* one of them once, hadn't she?

The thought made her stomach turn.

"What a waste," Shirou said quietly.

She heard the exhaustion in his voice. The weight of too many battles. Too many corpses.

Then his attention snapped to something across the room, and Arturia followed his gaze to one of the few surviving consoles—its screen cracked but still flickering with tactical data. His eyes scanned the displays rapidly, silver-grey irises reflecting the harsh light as he absorbed information still updating despite the chaos around them.

"Arturia," he said, voice sharpening with urgency.

She heard what he didn't say aloud.

"Go," she said. "I'll secure the throne room."

He was already moving—through the ruined blast doors, past the unconscious guards, toward the tall windows lining the corridor beyond. She watched with a mixture of exasperation and fondness as he broke through the glass without hesitation, shards shattering outward in a glittering cascade before he leapt through and vanished into the dying light.

"And he complained about *me* destroying the blast doors."

Arturia took one last look at Captain Magneta's corpse—at the command centre that had become a mass grave—and felt something cold settle in her chest.

She'd killed him cleanly. Mercifully, even. Far more mercy than he'd shown his own people when he triggered that detonator, when he chose to sacrifice everyone under his command rather than admit defeat.

'A commander who throws away his soldiers deserves no soldier's death.'

The sticky warmth of blood was seeping through her clothes. She looked down at herself—not her frilled black-and-white service uniform, but a dress they'd pilfered from one of the palace rooms, the skirt torn for ease of movement. The blood was already cooling, that peculiar tackiness that made fabric cling uncomfortably to skin. She could feel it in her hair too. Taste the copper in the air with every breath.

"I should have bloody asked for a towel," Arturia muttered to herself in English.

The mundane complaint hung in the air, almost absurd amidst the carnage. But that was the thing about being a king who'd survived countless battles—eventually, the practical concerns reasserted themselves. Blood could be washed. Clothes could be replaced.

The dead stayed dead.

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Shirou's boots pounded across the domed marble rooftops, the stolen blaster heavy in his grip.

He leapt from one curved surface to the next, movements sure despite the treacherous footing. The command centre's surviving console had shown him everything he needed: the palace's front gates, the massed crowd in black cloaks and white masks, and the line of palace guards with weapons raised.

Scared men with fingers on triggers. Waiting for orders that would never come from a command centre full of corpses.

'There.'

The front gates were visible from here, illuminated by the plaza's ceremonial lights against the deepening dusk. He could see the protesters advancing—slow, deliberate—a tide of black fabric and pale masks flowing toward the palace steps.

At their head, even from this distance, he recognised Padmé. Not her face—the ceremonial makeup obscured that entirely—but her bearing. The way she held herself. The calm authority in her movements as she led thousands toward armed men.

And between the crowd and the palace stood the guards.

Twenty men. Maybe twenty-five. Blasters raised, formation tight, hands visibly shaking. He could see the terror in their stances even from here—the way they kept glancing at each other, searching for guidance that wasn't coming.

One trigger pull. That's all it would take.

One panicked guard firing into that crowd, and the rest would follow. And it wouldn't just be the blaster fire that killed—it would be the stampede. Thousands of people, crushing each other in blind panic, trampling the fallen, turning a protest into a massacre.

Shirou checked the charge on his stolen blaster. Eighty percent. More than enough.

He'd already set it to stun.

Letting his body slide down the curve of the dome, he found his footing on a narrow ledge overlooking the plaza. The guards were directly below him now—close enough to see the sweat on their necks, the white-knuckled grips on their weapons.

He planted his feet. Raised the blaster.

Below, Padmé's eyes lifted toward the rooftops. Toward him.

Their gazes met across the distance—a single moment of recognition, of shared understanding. She knew what he was about to do.

The crowd kept advancing. Slow. Inexorable.

But the guards had noticed. They'd seen where everyone was looking—the masked protesters, their leader, all of them staring upward at something behind the defensive line.

They turned.

That moment was enough.

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Ars Veruna sat alone in his throne room.

He had his guards—twelve men standing at rigid attention around the room's perimeter, the most elite, the most loyal, handpicked by Captain Maris himself. But for the first time in fifteen years of rule, he understood what it meant to be truly powerless.

The throne itself was a masterwork of Naboo craftsmanship: intricately carved perlotte wood inlaid with precious metals, cushioned in royal blue velvet that had cost more than most citizens earned in a lifetime. It had been designed to project authority, to make whoever sat upon it appear larger than life—a figure worthy of commanding an entire world.

Right now, it felt like sitting on a very expensive funeral pyre.

The silence was oppressive.

Maris had been more than just security commander. They'd been friends since university days, back when Veruna was still idealistic enough to believe in reform through proper channels. Maris knew everything—every backroom deal, every silenced journalist, every "disappeared" activist whose body would never be found. The Black Sun arrangements. The Bando Gora contracts for eliminating particularly troublesome opposition leaders. The payments to

Gardulla's enforcers who'd made entire families vanish when debt collections turned political.

Even his wife didn't know the full extent of it.

But Maris did. Maris had helped arrange half of it, had stood watch while the worst decisions were made, had never once questioned or judged.

And now Maris was silent.

"Try again!" Veruna's voice cracked like a whip, sharper than he'd intended.

It had been several minutes since the explosion—a muffled roar that had shaken the palace's foundations and sent smoke curling from the central spire where the command centre was housed. Since then, nothing. No updates. No tactical assessments. Just eerie, damning silence where Maris's constant stream of reports should have been.

"My King, our communications are down. The runner I sent hasn't returned."

Veruna's fingers drummed against the throne's armrest—a nervous habit he'd never quite broken despite years of practised composure. The throne room's double doors stood wide open, a deliberate tactical choice. The broad corridor beyond offered clear sightlines in both directions, an easy defensive position where his guards could see anyone approaching long before they reached the throne.

Outside those doors, several dozen Black Sun mercenaries maintained their positions. He'd tripled the usual complement, bled his accounts dry paying for their services. Professional killers with reputations earned through violence across a dozen systems. They'd even hired three additional Mandalorians.

Their armour gleamed under the palace's ornate lighting. Their weapons hummed with readiness. Their visored helmets concealed their faces, rendering them anonymous and intimidating.

But Veruna could see the telltale signs that betrayed their fear. Hands gripping blasters a fraction too tight. The minute shifts in posture as they constantly

scanned for threats. The occasional glance toward the corridor's far end, as if expecting something terrible to emerge from the shadows.

They were terrified.

And if professional criminals—men who killed for a living—were afraid, what did that say about his situation?

'I should have kept more forces here,' he thought bitterly. *'I should have—'*

But there was no point in should-haves now. The die had been cast.

Attack Damask's compound on Sojourn. Eliminate a financial rival who'd been encroaching on Naboo's plasma trade agreements. Consolidate power while appearing to fight against off-world corruption.

It had made sense at the time. Perfect sense.

He'd already had lasting relationships with the galaxy's criminal underbelly. Black Sun. Gardulla's organisation. The Bando Gora fanatics who were always eager for sanctioned violence. A joint operation, he'd called it. Mutual benefit for all parties involved.

Except now his best forces—the bulk of his Black Sun mercenaries, Gardulla's most capable enforcers, even those unpredictable Bando Gora cultists—were all on Sojourn, committed to an attack that was supposed to have been a quick strike followed by triumphant return.

And he was here. In his palace. Listening to explosions and watching smoke rise from his command centre whilst communications went dead and his hired killers shifted nervously in the corridors.

'Divide and conquer,' he thought with dark humour. *'Except I'm the one who got divided.'*

The irony was bitter. He'd spent years building these criminal networks, carefully cultivating relationships with the galaxy's most dangerous organisations.

Black Sun had been his primary asset—enforcement capabilities, smuggling routes, information networks. He'd paid handsomely for their services, had proven himself a reliable client who understood discretion and timely payment.

Gardulla's organisation provided muscle when Black Sun wasn't appropriate. Hutt enforcers who specialised in making examples. The Desilijic clan might have been more powerful, but Gardulla was ambitious enough to be flexible, pragmatic enough to work with a Naboo king who could offer access to Mid Rim trade routes.

And the Bando Gora...

Veruna suppressed a shudder. Death cultists with fanatical devotion to violence, unnerving practices, complete disregard for conventional restraint. But they were effective. When someone needed to disappear completely, when a message needed to terrify rather than merely intimidate, the Bando Gora delivered results that even Black Sun couldn't match.

He'd used them sparingly. The opposition leader who'd organised those damaging protests three years ago. The investigative journalist who'd gotten too close to the plasma-skimming operation. That noble family who'd publicly called for his abdication—all six of them, including the children, because the Bando Gora didn't do half-measures.

Maris had arranged those contracts. Served as intermediary, keeping Veruna's hands technically clean whilst ensuring the work got done.

Good, loyal Maris. Who'd never once suggested these choices were wrong.

'And now he's silent,' Veruna thought, staring at the comlink that refused to respond. *'Either dead, captured, or abandoned me. And I'm sitting here with a handful of terrified mercenaries, waiting for whatever comes through that corridor.'*

Another explosion. Another round of muted blaster fire—closer this time. The chandeliers swayed overhead, their crystals chiming like funeral bells. Several

of the Black Sun mercenaries visible through the doorway shifted positions, weapons tracking toward the sound with twitchy readiness.

"Your Majesty," one of his personal guards said carefully, "perhaps we should consider evacuation to the palace hangars. The situation appears to be deteriorating—"

"No." Veruna's voice came out sharper than intended. He forced himself to breathe, to project the calm authority that had served him for fifteen years. "We hold position. The mercenaries will handle whatever's coming."

Even as he said it, he knew it was a lie.

The mercenary forces *should* have been enough. Dozens of Black Sun enforcers whose reputation for violence had been earned across countless systems. Professional killers who'd faced down worse threats than a couple of escaped prisoners.

But that had been before three days of systematic humiliation.

The reports had been almost farcical. Break-ins and break-outs happening with such regularity that his guards had started taking bets on when the next incident would occur. The kitchen standoff—four hours while a petite woman held off two dozen armed guards with nothing but serving trays, all so her companion could cook a meal in peace.

It would have been funny if it weren't so utterly terrifying.

'I should have killed them immediately after the festival,' Veruna thought, though even that was questionable.

The reports from the Plaza massacre were disturbing. Over a hundred dead slavers—Black Sun operatives he'd officially acknowledged as royal security personnel—carved apart by two individuals who moved with inhuman speed and precision.

He'd tried to spin it as terrorism. Tried to paint them as the real threat, as foreign agents come to destabilise Naboo's peaceful society. His propaganda

minister had crafted the perfect narrative: dangerous extremists hiding among reformists, using violence to advance their radical agenda.

It might have worked, too, if he'd managed to execute them quickly. Public trial, swift judgement, very public consequences. Make an example that would discourage further dissent.

But they wouldn't stay captured. Wouldn't stay contained. Just kept escaping, kept humiliating his guards, kept making it increasingly obvious that his security forces were utterly outmatched.

And now his command centre was silent. Smoke was rising from the central spire. And those two were somewhere in his palace, moving toward him with the inevitability of a tidal wave.

The lights flickered. Once. Twice.

Just a stutter at first—illumination holding steady for a heartbeat before wavering again like a dying candle. Veruna's stomach clenched with each flicker, his mind racing through possibilities. Power failure. Sabotage. Something far worse. The palace's systems were supposed to be redundant, triple-backed with failsafes upon failsafes.

This shouldn't be happening.

Then glass shattered somewhere beyond the doors—an explosion of sound that made Veruna's fingers dig into his armrest hard enough to make the ornate wood groan.

One of the Mandalorians flew across the hall.

His elite Mandalorian guards—warriors who'd cost him a small fortune—and one of them was sailing through the air with the helpless grace of a ragdoll, limbs flailing uselessly before crashing into a cluster of Black Sun operatives. The impact sent bodies tumbling like dominoes, armour clattering against marble in a cacophony that made his teeth ache.

Panic erupted. Voices overlapping in terror and confusion as blasters fired in rapid succession. The distinctive whine of energy weapons filled the air, red bolts streaking across his field of vision like deadly fireflies.

Through the narrow frame of the doorway, Veruna saw the remaining two Mandalorians take flight, jetpacks roaring to life in desperate attempts at tactical repositioning.

The second was too slow.

Something seized his ankle mid-flight—a hand, impossibly fast, impossibly strong—and yanked him from the air. What followed made Veruna's blood run cold.

The Mandalorian was slammed into the ground with devastating force. Once. Twice. Three times. Each impact created spider-web cracks in ancient marble that had stood unmarred for centuries. Then the warrior's body was hurled like a projectile toward his flying companion, the two colliding mid-air in a tangle of limbs and armour.

"Tighten up! Confirm number of enemy combatants!" someone barked, trying to restore order to chaos.

From his elevated throne, Veruna couldn't properly see what was transpiring in the antechamber. He caught only glimpses through the doorway—Black Sun mercenaries being thrown across his field of vision, body-slammed with inhuman force, others rushing to the opposite side of the doors only to vanish from sight.

They never returned.

Each disappearance was punctuated by screams cut short, by the wet sound of impact against stone.

His trembling hand reached for his personal blaster, fingers fumbling with the hidden holster beneath his robes while his twelve remaining guards moved forward with practised precision. They pressed themselves against the wall to

the right of the double doors, weapons raised, crosshairs trained on the entrance.

The moment those monsters stepped into view, they'd face a wall of concentrated blaster fire.

"Again—confirm the number of enemy combatants!" one of his guards shouted from beside the doors, voice cracking despite his training.

Then silence descended, thick as smoke before the pyre lights up.

"..."

The quiet stretched on. Each second an eternity.

"..."

Nothing moved in the corridor. Nothing stirred.

"..."

Slash. Slash. Slash.

The sound came from the wrong direction.

To Veruna's absolute horror, the wall where his guards were positioned—solid stone that had protected kings for generations—exploded outward in a shower of debris and dust.

All twelve of his remaining guards were sent flying, knocked unconscious before they could fire a single shot.

A single, devastating move that rendered his final line of defence utterly meaningless.

Through the settling debris—broken marble reinforced by duracrete—Ars Veruna saw the silhouette of a petite woman. He could make out the outline of a large sword, its blade pointed diagonally toward the floor.

She slashed high.

The displaced air cleared the dust like a curtain being drawn, and suddenly she was there—standing in the throne room doorway, framed by emergency lighting and the bodies of unconscious mercenaries.

Blood spattered her clothes—not hers, judging by her utterly relaxed posture. Her golden eyes swept the throne room with cold assessment, cataloguing threats and finding none worth concern.

When they settled on Veruna, he felt something in his chest freeze solid.

This wasn't anger. Wasn't rage or hatred or any of the violent emotions he might have expected from a terrorist come to overthrow a king.

This was something far worse.

Indifference.

The blonde woman—Arturia Pendragon, his files had named her—tilted her head slightly, studying him the way a scholar might examine insects pinned to a board. Specimens. Curiosities. Things already dead, just not yet aware of it.

Then, impossibly, she smiled.

It was the coldest smile Veruna had ever seen. Not cruel, exactly. Just... knowing. As if she understood exactly what he was, exactly what he'd done, and found it all rather predictable.

She'd seen his kind before. A thousand times before. And she'd outlived them all.

"Your Majesty," she said, her voice carrying clearly across the throne room despite the emergency alarms still keening somewhere in the palace's depths. The title dripped with irony. "How lovely to finally meet you properly."

Veruna's hand moved on instinct—fifteen years of survival reflexes firing at once. His blaster came up, finger finding the trigger, barrel tracking toward that blood-spattered figure advancing across his throne room.

He fired.

She didn't slow down.

The last thing he saw was golden eyes, utterly unimpressed, and a sword hilt rising toward his temple.

Then darkness.

It was his final memory on the throne.

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Padmé had led events, gatherings, and even protests before. She'd organised rallies that drew hundreds, sometimes thousands. Coordinated demonstrations that shut down entire districts. Stood before crowds and spoken about justice and reform until her voice went hoarse and her throat burned raw.

She'd faced down Veruna's propaganda machine with nothing but truth and determination, weathered threats from his security forces who'd shown up at their protests, endured countless sleepless nights wondering if tomorrow would be the day they finally arrested her for sedition.

But she had never led an army.

'This is as close to an army as we'll ever be,' she thought, and the realisation settled into her bones with a weight that made her spine straighten despite the exhaustion pulling at every muscle.

Instead of blasters and thermal grenades, they carried only two weapons: anonymity and numbers.

Ordinary citizens wrapped in black cloaks that hid their identities. White masks that transformed individual faces into a singular statement of defiance. When everyone looked the same, no one could be singled out for retribution. The anonymity was its own kind of armour.

And judging by the mass behind her, half of Theed had answered the call—perhaps more. Everyone except the children and whoever had stayed back to watch over them.

Tens of thousands moved behind her. Perhaps more—her mind couldn't fully comprehend the scale, couldn't process the sheer enormity of what they'd accomplished.

A sea of black cloaks and white masks stretched back as far as she could see, flowing through Theed's streets like a dark river that had finally broken its banks.

When she'd first proposed this march, she'd hoped for five thousand. Maybe ten if they were lucky.

But this... this was something else entirely.

This was Naboo itself rising up, refusing to be silent any longer.

The sound was overwhelming.

Footfalls striking stone in rough synchronisation, sending vibrations up through the plaza's ancient paving. Fabric rustling like wind through autumn leaves. The occasional murmured word passed through the crowd in ripples.

But mostly just that rhythmic *thud-thud-thud* of thousands walking in unison, converging on the palace from every direction like tributaries feeding an unstoppable flood.

The sound filled her ears. Her chest. Seemed to synchronise with her heartbeat until she couldn't tell where she ended and the crowd began.

North side. South approach. West through the plaza. Merchant district. Residential quarters.

She could picture it all—the maps they'd studied, the routes they'd planned, the timing they'd coordinated through encrypted messages and whispered conversations. Staff from the Governor of Theed. Members of local

government units. Merchant guilds. Volunteers. All of them helping to guide the crowds, directing the streams of humanity toward their convergence point.

Every avenue leading to the palace carried the same tide of black and white, all moving toward the same destination with the same inexorable purpose.

They'd split the crowd deliberately. To prevent bottlenecks. To make it impossible for Veruna's forces to contain them all. But also to send a message: this wasn't just one angry mob.

This was the entire city converging. Unified in their demand for change.

Her ceremonial makeup felt heavy on her skin. The white foundation that transformed her complexion into something otherworldly. The crimson accents tracing artistic patterns across her cheeks and lips. The careful artistry that transformed Padmé Naberrie the activist into Amidala—symbol of what Naboo could become.

Rabbine's work, applied with practised hands just hours ago whilst Padmé sat perfectly still, watching her familiar face disappear beneath layers of tradition and symbolism.

The robes draped across her shoulders carried weight both literal and symbolic—layers of rich fabric chosen to evoke Naboo's royal traditions whilst establishing something distinctly *not* Veruna. Deep burgundy instead of his preferred gold. Silver threading instead of his ostentatious gems.

And the headdress. A crown in all but name, its weight pulling at muscles in her neck she hadn't known existed. But she wouldn't remove it. Wouldn't show any sign of discomfort.

She'd wear it until this was finished.

Just behind her walked her inner circle—Tsabin, Eirtama, Mara, Sasha, Su Yan, and Rabbine.

All dressed in complementary robes, lighter than hers but flowing in harmonious colours. The same white makeup applied in slightly different

patterns, marking them as extensions of Amidala rather than individuals. Smaller headdresses that echoed hers without competing. Her chosen advisors in this moment of transformation.

She could feel their presence without looking back. Each of them a pillar of strength she could lean on if needed.

The solidarity steadied her. Her circle behind her, the whole of Naboo at her back—it filled her heart with something she'd never quite felt before.

She still had fears. Gods, so many fears. What could go wrong. Who might get hurt. Whether she was leading all these people toward disaster.

But something else had grown within her. Something that burned away the doubt like fire consuming deadwood.

A flame lit inside her chest, spreading through her veins until she felt incandescent with purpose.

'Three days ago I was just an activist,' Padmé thought, and the absurdity of it almost made her laugh. *'Now I'm leading a revolution.'*

They'd heard it as they approached—a muffled roar that echoed across the city, followed by a plume of smoke rising from somewhere near the palace's central spire. The command centre, if she had to guess. Then the distant, staccato percussion of blaster fire from within the palace walls. Rapid bursts. Panicked.

The crowd had faltered at the sound, uncertainty rippling through the ranks. But Padmé had kept walking, and so they kept walking too.

'Shirou and Arturia, perhaps?' she'd thought, watching the smoke curl against the sunset.

The tower still stood intact, but something had gone very wrong for Veruna's forces. By the time they reached the palace gates, the blaster fire had faded to sporadic bursts, then silence. Whatever was happening in there, it was nearly finished.

The palace loomed ahead, its elegant architecture gilded by the setting sun. Shades of gold and amber painted every surface—beautiful, serene, a monument to Naboo's artistic heritage and democratic ideals. Its domes and spires reached toward the sky like prayers made manifest in stone and crystal.

All except for the smoke. A dark smudge against the golden light, still rising from somewhere near the central spire. Still marking whatever violence had occurred within.

Now occupied by a tyrant who'd corrupted everything it represented. Who'd turned those sacred halls into a den of corruption and fear.

The contrast made her chest ache with grief that quickly transformed into anger.

The main gates loomed open as they ascended the palace steps—ceremonial, decorative, never designed to actually repel an assault. Naboo had never needed such things before.

Palace guards lined the entrance in formation. Twenty-five men, perhaps, arranged in precise rows, their armour gleaming in the fading light. Blasters raised. Dark mouths pointed directly at the approaching crowd.

Padmé felt the crowd slow behind her. Felt the shift in atmosphere as thousands of people simultaneously registered the threat. The rhythmic footfalls grew uncertain, uneven, as individuals began calculating distances and angles and odds.

Would those guards actually fire into an unarmed crowd?

She could practically feel the fear rippling backward through the masses. People wondering if they'd made a terrible mistake. If this was where Veruna would show his true colours and turn the palace steps into a killing field.

'They're terrified,' she realised, reading the guards' body language with eyes trained by years of political negotiation. *'Look at their hands. Look at their stances. They're as scared as we are.'*

Scared men with weapons. The most dangerous combination in the galaxy.

She raised one hand.

The crowd behind her stilled completely. Thousands of people freeze mid-step, holding their breath, waiting for her signal. The sudden silence was eerie—all those bodies, all that collective breath, suspended in anticipation.

Padmé took another step forward. Just one. Testing.

The guards' formation tightened. Blasters tracked her movement with jerky precision—frayed nerves, trigger fingers hovering too close to firing studs.

But she couldn't stop. Couldn't back down.

This moment—right here, right now—would define everything that followed. Turn back, and Veruna wins. The movement fractures. Hope dies. Naboo returns to the slow suffocation of corruption and tyranny.

Walk forward, and maybe—just maybe—those guards would see reason. Would recognise that firing into an unarmed crowd wasn't a defence. It was murder. Would remember they were Naboo citizens too, with families and friends who might be wearing those black cloaks and white masks.

She took another step.

Then something made her look up.

A flicker of movement on the rooftops. A silhouette against the dying sun, perched on one of the palace's curved domes overlooking the plaza.

White hair caught the fading light.

'Shirou.'

Relief flooded through her chest so suddenly that it nearly stole her breath. He was alive. Free. And positioned directly behind the guards who had no idea he was there.

She wasn't the only one who'd noticed. Around her, masks were tilting upward, anonymous faces tracking the figure on the rooftop. A murmur rippled through the crowd—recognition, hope, something electric passing from person to person like a current finding ground.

The guards noticed the shift. Noticed thousands of eyes looking past them, above them, at something behind their defensive line.

"Contact! Rooftop, six o'clock!"

They turned.

That moment was enough.

Shirou moved.

Blue bolts rained down from above—precise, methodical, impossibly fast. Guards crumpled one after another, their formation dissolving into chaos. Shirou was already moving as he fired, leaping sideways, taking cover behind the curve of the dome, returning fire without pause.

By the time they'd fully turned, twelve were down. Another six fell as they raised their blasters. Three more as Shirou dodged right. Two as he dodged left. One as he leapt backwards toward the far side of the dome. And finally, one more as he appeared from the opposite side of where he'd taken cover.

It was over in seconds.

Twenty-five guards. All down. None dead—she could see their chests still rising and falling, limbs twitching with residual stun charge.

The blaster fire stopped. Silence settled over the plaza, broken only by the soft groans of unconscious men and the distant crackle of something burning within the palace.

Shirou surveyed the surroundings one last time, then looked directly at her.

Padmé met his gaze—one of the pair who had been the catalyst for Naboo to look into the mirror. Guilt crept into her chest as she remembered the

rejection. The way they'd flinched when he'd saved them. The way Arturia's relief at seeing them safe was met with fear rather than gratitude.

Shirou nodded at her.

She returned the gesture.

'There's no room for that right now,' she told herself. 'You're leading a revolution.'

The crowd moved forward. Those at the front collected the fallen guards' weapons, passing them backward hand over hand. They'd reach the rear of the crowd eventually—far from any danger they might cause.

Just before entering the palace, Padmé glanced up at the rooftops.

Shirou was gone.

Another pang stabbed at her heart. She was sure Tsabin and the others felt it too—that quiet ache of owing a debt they could never properly repay to people they'd wronged through instinct and fear.

But she steeled herself.

"We are all Amidala!"

The crowd roared the words back at her, and for a moment she felt the weight of every mask behind her, every person who had chosen to stand.

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End

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