

# Rescue Hound

## CHAPTER TWO

### Kallie

From the moment Sartha first wakes up, it's a horror show.

She doesn't regain consciousness until Kione and the other survivors can limp back to the rebel position and deliver her safely into their arms. That's a mercy. Once they arrive and dismount, they're rushed to the infirmary for medical attention. Sartha obviously needs it; Kione does too, as much as she'd prefer to play it cool. While an entire crowd of medics huddles around Sartha Thrace, the one who drew the short straw is stuck at Kione's bedside, yelling at her to shut up and stay still so they can patch her up.

Kione won't shut up and stay still. She's trying to get everyone else's attention. She needs to tell them.

There's something wrong with Sartha.

They think they already know that, of course. The rebels know that she's been forced to fight on the wrong side of the war. But they don't get it the way Kione does. She's crossed blades with Sartha—before, and again, now. The medics probably figure it's something

simple. A gun to her head. A bomb in her mech. Hostages. Maybe a drug. They can comprehend that kind of leverage. But Kione has felt it. She knows it's more. Only she understands that Sartha has been transformed into something awful.

Nobody listens to her, of course. They just see what they want to see: their hero. It's all they ever see.

They're idiots. They don't want to think about needing to restrain her. So they kind of deserve it when Sartha opens her eyes, looks around, and then punches the nearest medic so hard her teeth go flying.

Even then, they're slow on the uptake. They figure she's just panicking. A couple more medics end up with broken teeth before they stop trying to calm her down and realize that she's actually trying to hurt them.

It's lucky for them that Sartha is so badly injured she can't even stand. Instead, she just props herself up in the infirmary bed, hunched defensively, teeth bared behind that fucking muzzle, clearly ready to throw herself at anyone who gets too close. Now Kione shuts up. She's spellbound, just like everyone else. She recognizes this animal frenzy from their battle, but she's never seen an actual human being like this. Right now, Sartha doesn't look like a person at all. She's a cornered wolf. Scared as much as violent. She even keeps glancing at the door like she's desperate to make a break for it.

Gods. What did they do to you, Sartha?

The medics try nothing and then they're all out of ideas. What can they do? If it was any other patient, they'd throw bodies at her. Restrain her. Maybe tranq her. But you can't do that to a hero, right? So they just stand around and stare while she looks on their faces get more and more dismayed. They were so pleased to see her, at first.

Now it's like Sartha's died at her own birthday party.

Eventually, perhaps from simple exhaustion, the animal in Sartha's skin starts to abate. She slumps, her frantic, rapid breathing collapsing into a somber rhythm. The few warning growls she forces out are feeble. Her eyelids droop, then close, and when they open again, it's someone else.

It's Sartha. For real this time.

That's what they all think at first. Even Kione. She sees something familiar and clear in those eyes, and wonders if it's her friend again. But then Sartha parts her lips and tears fall from her eyes, and Kione second-guesses herself because she never once heard Sartha cry like that.

She cried, sure. Sartha tasted more than her fair share of loss and defeat. She felt that grief deeper than anyone. But this is different. These aren't a soldier's quiet, stoic sobs. They're desperate, keening wails; high, full-chested, needy. Infantile, almost. She sounds like a child crying for her mother. Like a drowning woman begging the gods.

But she's not begging for her mother or for the gods.

She's begging for *her*.

That's what Kione gathers, amidst the broken pleas and choked, offered bargains, all of them made to a woman who is not here. It's her imperial XO. Someone Sartha's been calling 'sir' and 'ma'am' and other things besides. Only, no imperial officer Kione's crossed paths with would ever inspire this kind of loyalty. They're usually about as charismatic as a dishcloth.

But this? Loyalty seems too small a word. It's consuming. Sartha is swallowed up by it, this sick bond she shares with the woman.

Kione wracks her brain, but she can't land on a word that seems to fit.

Especially when Sartha tucks her head into her chest and cradles the muzzle that's still on her face like a kid with a stuffed toy. What the fuck are you supposed to call that?

Kione doesn't know. Nobody else does either. No one says a thing. Each and every medic just stands there, waiting for it to stop and steadily realizing it might not, not for a long time. One by one, each of them hits their limit. They turn their faces away and slip out the door. Every couple of minutes, someone leaves. Until it's just Kione left in there with her.

Not that she has any clue what to say. She just figures she should be there. Sartha's her friend, right? That's what you do for friends. But eventually, shamefully, it gets to be too much even for her. Kione convinces herself that Sartha might need a private moment. The merc rolls out of bed, grabs a crutch, and limps out of the infirmary and past the confused, alarmed guards posted outside. She doesn't know where she's supposed to go. She just knows she can't be there. Eventually, after tracking down a medic to give her a once-over, she winds up in her bunk, in the paltry quarters the rebels gave her.

Damn. She never even got that drink with radio girl.

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After that, it's a while before Kione gets to see her again. The word trickles down from whoever's in charge: Sartha is quarantined. Officially, it's for no reason in particular. Just a nebulous 'precaution'. Secretly, they tell Kione and the few others who've seen her that it's so they can run her through some kind of improvised deprogramming therapy. Kione doesn't much like the sound of that.

She's pretty sure none of the rebel shrinks actually know what they're doing, and she suspects the last thing Sartha needs is someone else picking their way through her head.

Unofficially, of course, there's another reason to keep Sartha locked up safe and sound: if everybody got to see what's happened to her, morale would go to shit.

Which is more or less what happens anyway. Word gets around. You can't keep something like that quiet. People start talking. The infirmary staff, maybe. Soon enough, it's on everybody's lips: they broke Sartha Thrace. Predictably, those rumors depress the hell out of everybody.

It's funny how that works. Normally, one of the things the rebels have going for them is fighting spirit. It's not just a tour of duty to them. It's a way of life. They get used to fighting in the worst of circumstances. To finding hope where there's none. It's impressive, even Kione will admit. But living like that does something to you. The rebels need something to believe in. They need heroes. In all the stories they tell about her, Sartha comes across more like some kind of weird saint than an actual, flesh-and-blood woman. Kione always gets a good laugh out of that.

Turns out, that kind of faith cuts both ways.

As such, for several long weeks a dark mood settles across the rebel base—if you'd call it that. Certainly, it's nothing like the big, ugly, fortified monoliths the imperials call bases. Instead, it's a set of loosely interconnected outposts and installations, connected by various trenches, tunnels and paths, all following the natural contours of the blasted landscape. When you're outgunned, it always helps to stay under the radar. Often literally; much of it's underground. The hangar is a huge, natural cavern, excavated out and reinforced as necessary. The barracks and living quarters are like a rabbit's warren, dug into the hillside. Rebel ingenuity at its

finest.

Kione hates it, personally. Living in a hole in the ground is shit, however ingenious. The mud gets everywhere. Normally, she'd be out of there ASAP, roaming around in search of another front, another fight, another job. This time, she has to wait for them to fix *Theaboros* up. Not a quick task, after the beating it took. It requires some slow, careful work under Kione's exacting supervision, plus getting some specialty materials shipped out. The rebel mechanics don't love that, even though she's paying their wages. They flash her the meanest looks as she spends more on a single wing or limb than they'd normally budget for an entire scratch-built mech suit.

Kione loves the mean looks. They make her feel smug as hell.

After the repair, she finds reasons to stick around. Kione takes a quick job escorting a rebel recovery crew to go haul *Ancyor* in for reconstruction. It's the kind of thing she'd normally turn her nose up at but for now, all's quiet in the sector. No other merc work going. She could simply leave, of course, but...

But then, one day, they let her see Sartha.

They think regular contact with a friend will help with her readjustment. That's what the doc who comes to Kione's quarters to fetch her tells her. He says a bunch of other stuff too, but Kione doesn't really hear it. As they walk to the private medical room they've set Sartha up in, there's a growing ringing in Kione's ears, like a bomb just went off too close. And she's realizing she's nervous. Maybe more nervous than she's ever been.

Why? What the hell is wrong with her?

Once they reach Sartha's door—locked, still—Kione starts really wishing she'd listened to the doctor. She doesn't know what to expect behind the door. Will it be the animal? The sobbing wreck?

Or will she be her old self again? She's not sure, and the anxiety is murder. As the key turns in the lock, part of the merc wants to reach out and stop the door from opening. She's not sure she can bear it if Sartha is all wrong again. Kione can't seem to breathe right. It's as close to a panic attack as she's ever had.

Before she can move, it's too late. The door opens. Kione finds herself stepping inside. Oh. What's her face doing? She needs to make sure she's got the right look on her face. Whatever the hell that is.

And then Kione sees her.

Immediately, her heart almost stops. Gods, she looks so much like she used to. Not so battered and bruised. No muzzle, thank fuck. And the look on her face! She's calm. Maybe the docs have her on something; Kione doesn't care. She feels like she's going to burst with gratitude. Sartha looks so pretty when she's like this. When she's calm.

Her friend is going to be OK.

Sartha turns to look at her. She smiles, and the spell is broken.

Why does her smile look so fragile? That's not right.

"Hey, Kione," Sartha says. Her voice sounds fragile too. Hoarse. She's been crying, and not long ago. Kione can tell as much. She knows a brave face when she sees one.

"Hey," Kione replies awkwardly. She doesn't know what else to say, so she just goes to sit at Sartha's bedside.

"They told me what happened," Sartha tells her. She widens her smile—or tries to. The effort is palpable. It's not real. She doesn't

mean it. “Thank you for saving me.”

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A few weeks later, Kione and Sartha are in the canteen to get some hot food, and it’s like nothing ever happened. Everything is back to normal.

Yeah, as if.

Not really. Instead, everyone’s just pretending. That’s the latest directive from on high. Let’s all play pretend. Let’s all make believe like Sartha Thrace totally wasn’t captured and brainwashed into betraying everyone and everything she held dear, and isn’t still struggling to claw her way back to some semblance of sanity after a daring rescue mission spearheaded by the prettiest mercenary pilot of the war.

Kione’s sure they put it like that.

She fucking hates it. Everyone does, actually, and the ghoulish, paper-thin pretense of normality makes the rebel base feel even more dismal than it did before they decided to let Sartha out of quarantine. Oh, the rebels all gave it a hearty try—at first. They’d call out to her. Slap her on the back. Cheer for her. They tried throwing a celebration for her like they would any of their comrades who made it back from certain death. All nice. All normal.

Except for Sartha herself. She just couldn’t handle it right. She’d smile, and she’d say ‘hi’, and ‘thank you’, and all the rest of it. But it wasn’t *right*. It didn’t feel right. Her smiles never reached her eyes, and there was the slightest twinge in her face whenever one of her many adoring hero-worshippers gushed at her. Like it hurt. Like she didn’t want it. Like she didn’t want to be there at all, actually.

Naturally, everyone understood. They'd nod sympathetically to each other and console whichever poor soul Sartha had just inadvertently shut down. The excuses came easy. Don't hold it against her. She's been through so much. It must be so hard. She'll be back to her old self soon.

But people never did have much patience for tarnished heroes. They need them to be big and bombastic and larger than life. Not the ghost at the feast. Not walking around like she's a fucking zombie. The rebels all want to help. They really do. But after a while, they run out of things to say.

So, without really meaning to, they all give up. Little by little, just about every rebel soldier at the base slips into the groove of acting like everything is normal, but letting other people actually deal with Sartha until she's better. In the canteen, there's hearty, happy chatter all around, and you'd be forgiven for thinking it really was back to normal until you notice that everybody finds it easier not to look at Sartha as she sits down to eat. And that nobody volunteers to go sit at her table with her.

Except for Kione, obviously.

And it's completely fine with her. As far as Kione is concerned, they can be outcasts together. Not like she fit in on base in the first place, and not just because her dark complexion marks her out as hailing from someplace else. Certainly not because she's trans. Plenty of girls like her in the rebellion.

No, it's the look. Rebels might not have a uniform, but they all trend toward looking equally rag-tag. Short hair, beat-up gear, faded camo. It's what circumstances dictate—but not for Kione. She wears her long, sleek, black hair down because she can. She wears makeup and keeps her nails long and painted because she can. She goes everywhere in her brand-new, high-tech, haptic-feedback piloting jumpsuit because she can.

Kione loves ostentation. She's in it for the money, but she's no miser. Spending money on herself is her one and only hobby. And the glares it earns her are just as sweet as the flushed, sidelong looks of admiration she gets from people who think she doesn't notice.

"Gods," Kione complains to Sartha, as she watches that day's stew drip slowly from her spoon back onto her tray. "It doesn't get any better, does it? Remind me to get some nicer grub shipped out. Sartha, did the imperials give you better food than this?"

One of the rebels sitting at the next table winces. Kione stares murder at them until they pretend not to be paying attention.

"I... don't remember," Sartha replies. Kione sighs. She says that about a lot of things.

"Guess you probably weren't paying much attention to the food," Kione says quietly and starts to eat.

There's this weird tic Sartha has when she sits down with her meal. Instinctively, she reaches up to her face. Like she's trying to take something off. And she's always slow to get started. Clumsy, somehow. The first time Kione took her to the canteen, she spent a long time just staring at her knife and fork. Like she barely knew what they were. Like she was no longer used to eating with them.

Kione doesn't wanna think about it.

"Bet they have nicer quarters, at least," Kione adds, between mouthfuls. "They gotta. Tons of room in those big-ass imperial fortifications. And how were the beds? Any softer than the ones we get?"

Sartha offers her one of those faint, ghostly smiles. "I don't-"

“Remember,” Kione finishes. She sighs again.

She’s heard that a lot. So have the rebel doctors. Apparently, Sartha doesn’t open up about her experiences. At all. Claims she doesn’t remember where she was, or what she was doing, or what it was like, or even why she was out traveling alone in *Ancyor* when Kione and the others intercepted her. That’s no good, and it’s why Kione has made it her personal mission to wheedle a few details out of her friend. You’ve gotta talk about this stuff, right? That’s what Kione figures. That’s the only way it gets better.

And... she is getting better. Kione has to believe that. The doctors seem to. Obviously Sartha’s traumatized as hell. You don’t need to wear a white coat to figure that much. It’s common enough, albeit not at this level. But after a couple of weeks of freak-outs, Sartha seems to have settled down. Yeah, she doesn’t talk about what’s going on with her, but what are you gonna do? Keep her locked up? Better to let her live again. Time heals all wounds, or whatever.

Kione really does wish Sartha seemed like she was trying, though. At healing. At talking. At anything. But she doesn’t engage—not with the shrinks, not with her comrades, barely with Kione. Whenever she’s out of her quarters, she just goes through the motions of a basic routine. Whenever she’s in her quarters, Kione isn’t sure she does anything at all.

Honestly, it really gives her the creeps.

“Hey, uh,” Kione attempts. “Have they said anything about getting you back in the saddle?”

Sartha freezes up. This time, even Kione winces from the look on her face.

“I don’t think...” Sartha replies slowly, unhappily. “They don’t...

think that would be a good idea. Yet.”

Kione snorts as she takes a drink. “Sounds like bullshit to me. I mean, sure, you’re still a little unsteady. Whatever. But you gotta get back in the action! Get back in *Ancyor*. At least get the feel of it again.”

She’s never seen Sartha more uncomfortable. It makes sense, of course, and her obvious pain makes Kione want to drop it. But no. She needs to push her friend, at least a little. If she won’t, who will?

“Well...” Sartha attempts another smile. “Unfortunately, *Ancyor* took a real beating. I don’t think it can-“

“Nope,” Kione interrupts. “They’ve already got it patched up for you. Not quite battle-ready, but close enough for a joyride.”

“But...” It’s painfully obvious Sartha is casting about for another excuse. “Uh...”

“C’mon.” Kione reaches across the table and claps a hand on Sartha’s arm. She smiles at her. “You’ve got this, OK? I still remember that time we were side-by-side at Hebros Ridge. You were like a dancer out there. I still can’t believe some of the things you could make that mech of yours do. You don’t just lose something like that. I promise: once you’re back behind the controls, you’re gonna feel right as rain.”

“You... actually believe that?”

The forlorn look in her eyes makes Kione’s chest hurt.

“Of course I do,” Kione answers lightly.

She does. She needs to.

Sartha looks down. After a moment, the smile that appears on her face is almost genuine. "Hebros, huh? That was one of the good ones."

"Fuck yeah!" Kione laughs. She's keen to encourage this. "You gave them hell, Sartha."

"I guess I did." Sartha loses herself in the memory for a moment, before refocusing on Kione. A wolfish grin comes to her face. "You weren't so bad yourself. As I recall."

Kione's face settles into a smirk. "You're damn right. And, as always, I looked better doing it."

"Maybe you should worry less about how you look," Sartha retorts slyly. "And more about how you fight. What was your tally, that first day?"

"Jeez," Kione says flippantly, although she's grinning from ear to ear. Never been happier. The rhythm of their old banter comes back effortlessly. "Flexing the kill count?"

"C'mon," Sartha needles. It's almost genuine. Almost there. She still feels like she's performing herself but in all the weeks since the rescue, it's never been closer. "What was it?"

"Fourteen," Kione tells her. She throws her hands up. She knows what's coming.

"Nineteen," Sartha announces, motioning at herself. She looks proud of herself. Gods, it's so heartening. Then, she tilts her head a little. "Though, it's funny. I seem to remember you saying something else to that cute engineer you pulled off the line to service your mech."

“Whoa, whoa, whoa!” Kione almost chokes on her stew for laughing. “Look, hey. You can’t blame a girl for-”

“Thirty,” Sartha quotes, imitating Kione when she’s laying it on a little too thick. “Maybe forty. It’s hard to count out there, you know? On the battlefield. In the chaos. I wasn’t there to count. I was there to win.”

“Gods! Alright, already!” By now, Kione is blushing a little. “Well! It worked, didn’t it?”

“It worked,” Sartha agrees. A little of that old cockiness comes roaring back to the fore. “But it didn’t stop you slipping out of her bunk and coming to mine as soon as I called, did it?”

Now, Kione is blushing much, much more than just a little.

Yeah, they had hooked up. A couple of times. A few times. Every time Sartha wanted.

Kione had a certain reputation as one of *those* ace pilots. The kind that cruised newbie pilots, mechanics, and support staff without a hint of shame. But with Sartha it was... different. She scratched an itch those other girls couldn’t, even if it made Kione flustered as hell to admit it. She was special. And if she’d ever needed to take a turn on the bottom bunk, so to speak, she’d never let on about it.

Kione was pretty sure Sartha had absolutely zero inclination in that direction. As in all things, she was one in a million.

“Whatever,” Kione choked out lamely. “Not my fault she was a bad lay. I wanted some decent company.”

“Decent company.” Sartha cocked an eyebrow. “I remember you

being a little more enthusiastic about it than that, Ki.”

Her flirting was getting Kione even more worked up than usual. It had been a while, she guessed. Maybe sometime soon, if Sartha was starting to feel better...

Gods. She needed to stop blushing right in the middle of the canteen. It was going to ruin her reputation.

“A-anyway,” Kione recovered. “See? Isn’t this just like old times? I’m telling you, it’s the same deal with piloting. We just gotta get you back on the horse. How about some time I take you down to the training ground? We can spar, just like we always used to. Make a competition of it.”

Sartha looks away. “Maybe.”

The cocksure grin slips from her face, and Kione is left feeling like she said the wrong thing until she notices just how quickly the mood passes from Sartha. In its wake, she’s numb. Thin. Ethereal, like she’s made of nothing more than smoke. Kione is struck by the disconcerting impression that Sartha hadn’t been back to her old cocky, flirty self at all, not even for a moment. She’d just been trying it out, the way you’d try out an old piece of clothing to see if it still fit.

And it didn’t.

Before Kione can get to grips with that, things get worse: a fangirl shows up.

“Hey, Captain Thrace,” says the bright young thing. Kione all but groans at the look of wide-eyed, nervous awe on her face. “Mind if I... uh... is this seat taken?”

“Actually, yeah, we were just-“ Kione starts to say, but it doesn’t matter, because Sartha is already nodding mechanically, and she’s the only one the fangirl has eyes or ears for.

Kione hates it when this happens. She thought they’d all given up by now. They didn’t want to make Sartha uncomfortable, and they certainly didn’t want their own fantasies shattered. Maybe this one was a new transfer.

“Captain,” the fangirl says, scrambling to sit down at Sartha’s side. “My name’s Pela. I just wanted to say, I’m so glad you’re back with us. When I heard—I mean, when we all heard—it was like a miracle. I always knew you were still out there. You wouldn’t go down that easily, right?”

Under the table, Sartha’s leg starts shaking.

“I don’t know what we’d do without you, Captain.” The fangirl is still talking. Why is she still talking? “I saw you fight, in Oltenia. You hit the battlefield like... like a falling star.”

Kione is mildly impressed she can come out with something like that without a hint of self-awareness. The ridiculous, starstruck on her face is faintly nauseating.

“Like an angel!” Pela adds suddenly. That’s even worse. “I just know that with you on our side, we’re gonna win this. All the way. We’re never giving up. Not with Sartha Thrace on our side!”

She sounds like she thinks she’s cheering Sartha up. Kione wonders if she knows all she’s doing is cheering herself up. Can’t she see how miserable Sartha looks? She’s staring down at the table like she wishes she could get down and hide under it.

“I... heard from the others that you’ve been having a hard time, since you got back.” Pela adopts what she probably thinks is a

patient, understanding, heartfelt tone. “Gods, I can’t even imagine what they put you through. It must have been awful.”

She pauses. Waiting, perhaps, for something affirming from Sartha. A nod. A smile. There’s nothing. Sartha is trying not to be here. It’s working. Kione can see it. Her eyes are vacant. She has shrunk into herself.

The fangirl powers on.

“But!” Pela plucks up all her optimism. All her faith in Sartha. Gods, it’s like this girl was born to be in some kind of cheesy propaganda flick. “It’s all going to be OK. You stuck with us. Got us through some tight spots. So we’re all sticking with you, ‘cause we know that before long, you’re gonna be back on the front lines, saving all our asses and getting your own back on those imperial freaks. Yeah?”

Can’t she see Sartha’s about to break down and cry? Or... actually, Kione isn’t sure she’s going to cry. It might be something worse. There’s a light in her eyes again, but it’s something twisted. Anxious dread paralyzes her for a little too long, and part of her can’t help but want to see what Sartha might do.

Sartha opens her mouth. “Please. Stop. I’m no-

“Hey!” Kione springs to life. She kicks the underside of the table, and suddenly all eyes are on her. “What are you, stupid? We’re in the middle of something here.”

The way Pela’s expression becomes jagged ice as she turns her head to look at Kione is all too familiar. Kione thrives on that contempt. Revels in it. Leaning back in her seat and smirking comes so naturally to her.

“Maybe you should have said so,” the fangirl hisses. “Now I’m

talking to her.”

“Figured it was obvious,” Kione says lazily. “Apparently I overestimated you.”

“You’re just a gun for hire, right?” the fangirl retorts. “Captain Thrace is one of us. We’re her friends. Maybe you’re the one who doesn’t belong here.”

Kione’s grin grows so wide it almost hurts. “Yup, I’m a gun for hire. Exactly. That’s why I was just talking to Sartha here about how much saving her sorry ass is worth. I figure that’s gotta earn me a sweet bonus, right?”

The young rebel bares her teeth, and audibly sucks air through them. “Scum,” she spits.

Kione looks her dead in the eyes. “You’re damn right.”

What can you say to someone that shameless? Nothing, and Sartha’s fangirl knows it. She looks at Kione roughly the same way you’d look at a slug, before turning around and making for another table. No doubt so they can all gossip about how disgusting she is.

Good riddance.

Kione is more than used to their disgust. Even if it bothered her, it would all be worth it to hear Sartha say, in a quiet, fragile voice: “Thank you, Kione.”

“Don’t mention it,” Kione nods.

These people don’t know how to help her. The shrinks, the fans—they’re all the same. Sartha’s just a hero to them. Kione’s no psych doctor, but if anyone has a clue what Sartha needs, it’s her.

“Hey,” Kione says. Time to stop hesitating. “Tomorrow, I’m taking you down to the training ground. Just you and me, no spectators. You need a good sparring session. And I’m not taking ‘no’ for an answer.”

Kione is absolutely sure a little taste of mechanized combat will bring her friend back to herself.

No matter what it looks like, Sartha’s still got that dog in her.

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Kione really doesn’t take ‘no’ for an answer and so despite Sartha’s many attempted evasions, the next day Kione manages to corner her and drag her down to the hangar. There, both *Ancyor* and *Theaboros* are being rebuilt. You wouldn’t want to take either of them into a warzone, not yet, but they’ll do for a light workout.

As soon as she sees it, Sartha stops in her tracks and stares at *Ancyor* like it’s her open coffin. It’s clear as day that she wants to bolt, but she knows Kione won’t stop pushing her. And besides, Kione has one hell of an incentive to offer.

“Beat me, one-on-one,” she says, as she beckons Sartha into the hangar, “and I’ll drop the merc work. I’ll join the rebels. For real.”

That gets her attention.

It’s been an issue between them for years. Sartha keeps asking her to. Not demanding; that would be easy to blow off. Just asking and encouraging, in that annoying way of hers. Preying on what pesky few angels of Kione’s better nature remain. Somehow, she makes the idea of belonging to a cause sound nice. Sometimes Sartha Thrace is awfully pretty, and that makes her extremely

persuasive.

Thus far, Kione has invariably managed to remind herself that money can buy pretty, too.

“OK,” Sartha replies. It’s like she’s searching for the enthusiasm she knows she should feel. “Fine. You’re on.”

“That’s more like it!”

Kione can’t stop grinning as she clambers into *Theaboros* and leads Sartha, inside *Ancyor*, down the brief trek that leads from the hangar to the small hollow the rebels have been using to train, its muddy ground long since stamped flat and hard by the footfalls of war machines. Grinning is stupid, really, given everything she has to lose. But Kione can’t help it. Getting to fight Sartha is always a treat. Even when she loses, which is always.

In this instance, though, it’s a calculated bet. Kione has been keeping tabs on the repairs. *Theaboros* is in better shape than *Ancyor*. Sartha is one hell of a pilot, but the gulf between them isn’t so great that mech performance won’t level the playing field. As their encounter on the bridge proved, Kione can beat her if the circumstances are right.

That particular fight didn’t count, obviously. Kione had other pilots on her side. Those ruin the sanctity of a duel. It’s not a victory she can be proud of. Not her precious first win against Sartha Thrace.

She isn’t just a friend. She’s a rival.

“Got your mech legs back?” Kione asks over the radio.

*Think so*, Sartha replies. She sounds deeply reluctant. That’s fine. She’ll warm up to it.

Sartha never lets her down. Sartha never gives Kione a poor performance. Kione knows her first win isn't going to come easy.

"Weapons check?" Kione prompts, as the two of them lumber into position at opposite ends of the training ground. It's a little insulting to ask of an ace, but it won't hurt to make sure Sartha's doing it right.

*Check*, comes the reply.

A pause. Kione's heart is already pounding. She hadn't quite realized how much she was looking forward to this. "Ready?"

A longer pause. Then: *Ready*.

"Then let's go!"

It begins at once. Not the shooting. Not the lunging and charging. Just moving. Jockeying for position. Playing for what little terrain there is to play for. In Kione's hands, *Theaboros* moves like a ballet dancer. Those rebel mechanics did right by her babygirl in the end, and the feedback from her new jumpsuit, electronically jacked in, makes movement and balance easier than ever. The flight system isn't fully online, though, so Kione restricts herself to light hops and short jumps, using the maneuvering thrusters to change direction rapidly as she moves.

Sartha, by contrast, looks a little clumsy. A little slow off the mark. But she's starting to find a rhythm. She matches her movement to Kione's, and the brute strength in *Ancyor*'s legs is every bit a match for *Theaboros*'s dainty agility. Before long, the two mechs are spiraling toward one another, each pilot holding back just a little. Daring the other to make the first move. Playing chicken.

Gods, Kione thinks. Doing this with Sartha is almost as good as

getting fucked by her.

Kione can't contain her eagerness for long. She opens up with a quick spray from *Theaboros*'s chest-mounted vulcan guns—dummy rounds, obviously, and in any case, these guns are low caliber. More to distract or disorient than to damage. Sartha steps out of the way, although not cleanly. Surprisingly, Kione's gunfire rakes up *Ancyor*'s leg, even if it does little more than scratch the paint.

When Sartha opens up in reply, Kione lets out a great whooping cheer as she wheels back out of the line of fire. It feels amazing to dance with her rival once more.

This is the Sartha she's been missing.

Which means it's time to stop holding back. Especially now the two mechs are almost at arm's length from one another. At Kione's command, *Theaboros* brandishes its spear. Even powered-down, it can do some real damage; Kione is prepared to pull her punches, but it would be a crying shame not to gun her mech's engines all the way as she boosts straight at Sartha.

Kione brings her spear down into a low guard as if she's ready to throw all her weight into a great, wide sweep. But that's just a feint. The moment Sartha moves—to evade, it looks like, not parry—Kione throws herself forward with reckless abandon and thrusts, leading with the blunt butt of the spear. In the hands of a mech like *Theaboros*, anything is a weapon.

The force of the impact is more than enough to buckle armor plates and shove *Ancyor* off-balance. Kione seizes on the moment, leaping atop her opponent and spinning the spear so she can plant its tip at one of *Ancyor*'s vulnerable joints and claim her...

Victory?

Wait, what the fuck?

It worked. Why did that work?

Her Sartha isn't supposed to fall for something like that.

*Well*, Sartha radios in after a moment. The way she actually sounds relieved churns Kione's gut. *I guess you finally got me, Ki.*

Is that what she thinks Kione wants to hear? It's the very last thing.

"Damn," Kione says lightly, even though she's gripping *Theaboros's* controls hard enough her knuckles are turning white. "Mechanics must have fucked up some of your servos. Why don't you run a quick diagnostic, see if we can get you a quick fix?"

There's a long pause before the radio crackles again. *Kione, that's not... Anycor's fine, I just...*

"Got it." Kione cuts her off before she can say something that'll hurt. She steps backward in *Theaboros*, giving her rival some room. "You're still warming up, right? You've been out of action for a hot second. That's my bad. You'll get me next time. That one didn't count, yeah? Let's say best two out of three."

*Kione*, Sartha pleads. She sounds choked up. She sounds pathetic. *I-I don't think I can do this anymore.*

The air of finality in her voice freezes Kione's blood. "What does that mean?" she demands. "Hey. Sartha. What does that mean?"

These long pauses are killing her. In the intervals between radio messages, something hot and angry wraps tighter and tighter around her chest.

*I don't know*, Sartha replies eventually. *Just forget it. For now, how about this: you win.*

“No!” It boils over, and Kione punches the screen in front of her. Hard enough to crack the glass. Hard enough to bruise her knuckles. “Don’t fucking say that to me, Sartha. That’s not how this goes. You don’t go down this easy, right? You’re better than this. You are so much better than this. So I don’t ‘win’ until I put you in the dirt after a real goddamn fight. Understand me?”

OK.

After a long moment, Kione realizes that’s all she’s going to get out of her friend. And she still isn’t moving *Ancyor*. Kione hangs her head. She’s ashamed of her anger, and even more ashamed of Sartha.

“Whatever. Let’s just head back.”

The trek back up to the hangar is silent and miserable. Kione can’t imagine what’s going on in Sartha’s head. She just knows the inside of her own is nothing but static.

Guilt? Is that what she feels? That’d make sense, yeah. Clearly she pushed Sartha too hard.

But if she doesn’t, who will? Who else is even trying? Not Sartha, that’s for sure. She’s not trying with Kione, or with the rebel docs, or with her old comrades. It’s like all she wants to do is fade away into nothingness.

Well, too bad. Kione isn’t going to let that happen.

So when she dismounts from *Theaboros*, the first thing Kione

does is storm down the mounting pier toward *Ancyor*, fists clenched.

“What the fuck was that?” she demands, as soon as Sartha’s feet touch down on the deck.

“I...” Sartha doesn’t know what to say, that much is obvious. “Kione, I’m sorry. I just...”

“You can do better than that!” Kione yells. Thank the gods there’s no support crew around to stare. “You have done better than that, time and time again. So what gives?”

“I don’t know.” Sartha shivers uncomfortably.

“C’mon.” Kione won’t let her off that easily. “What? Am I just not worth trying for? Huh?”

“I didn’t say that!” Sartha looks so wounded. Somehow that just makes Kione angrier.

“Then what?” Kione demands again. “I’m your friend! I’m here for you! So just tell me!”

Sartha squeezes her eyes shut as she tries to summon an answer. Her shoulders tense, then relax as she decides, Kione senses, to offer her something.

“I can’t, because... the one who’s supposed to sit up there? In that?” Sartha nods up at *Ancyor*. “That’s not me anymore. I mean, it is. Kind of. But it’s not... it’s not Sartha, you know? There’s like... there’s this other part of me. Part I wasn’t even aware of until they... you know. But now it’s gone. I can’t find it anymore. Trying to pilot now, without that? It just feels so wrong. Hell, everything feels wrong.”

Kione nods slowly as she tries—and fails—to process that.

Frankly, it doesn't make a lick of sense to her. It doesn't match up with the Sartha she's known for years now. Another part of her? What the hell does that mean?

"OK." Kione rubs at her temples. "There's another part of you, and you need it to pilot again. Right. Sure. And how exactly are you supposed to get at this other part?"

Sartha looks away. "I don't think... I'm not sure you'd understand."

"Try me."

"I... I need..." Kione's never heard Sartha speak with such reluctance. "I think I need... H... um... H..."

She cuts herself off. She can't quite bring herself to say it. Not to Kione's face. Both of them hear the unspoken word of reverence on Sartha's lips.

*Her.*

The last of Kione's patience vanishes. Her anger doubles. She doesn't know why she let this self-pitying nonsense go on for even this long.

"Stop bullshitting me," she seethes. Sartha flinches at her anger. "Look, I get it. They did something to you. But you need to get past it, alright? Stop indulging whatever sick shit they planted in your skull."

"But I..."

"Stop!" Kione yells. Another flinch. Kione can't believe she's actually scaring Sartha Thrace like this. It feels like shit. But it kind

of feels really good, too. “Gods, what’s wrong with you? Don’t you get it? All these people,” she gestures toward the rest of the rebel position, “need you! They need you in fighting shape. Doesn’t that mean anything to you anymore?”

“Right.” Sartha grips her own arm. She looks like a child being scolded. “Sorry.”

“They believe in you. They need someone to believe in.” It pours out of Kione before she can stop it. “They need a hero, Sartha! That’s you, got it? Remember that girl, yesterday, in the canteen? She needs you. You didn’t see how bad it was when you got scooped up. People like her, they don’t have a lot of reasons for hope. They’re clinging to whatever they have, just to keep fighting every day. If they don’t have their heroes, they have nothing—and the rebellion falls apart. So you need to start acting like one again.”

“Right. Sorry.”

“Gods, and then there’s me! What do you think I’m still here for, Sartha? For the food? For the company? No! I’m here for you. Understand? You. Cause you, with your crazy fucking heroics, make me feel like selling myself out on this side of the war isn’t a complete and total lost cause. Am I just wasting my fucking time, Sartha? Or are you gonna start giving me something to believe in again?”

“Right. Sorry.”

Then it clicks. The repetition. The look on Sartha’s face. It’s beyond shame. It’s simple resignation.

She’s not accepting what Kione’s saying. She’s barely listening. She’s just waiting for it to stop.

Another surge of anger. Kione wants to hit Sartha so bad. Before

she can, she snaps: “Whatever. Just get the fuck out of my sight.”

Mercifully, she does. Without another word, Sartha turns and trudges away—no doubt simply back to her quarters, to stare at a wall until Kione comes to fetch her out again. It’s pathetic. Not that Kione’s in any better state. She’s left standing there in the hangar, hands balled into fists, eyes threatening to brim up with tears.

What is she, a stupid kid? Kione does her best to swallow the feeling. No way. She’s not like the others. She’s not a rebel. Not a hero-worshiper. Just a merc. She goes where the money is. Sartha’s a friend, and that’s it.

Just a mercenary. That’s right. What’s she getting so worked up about?

It’s as easy as that to stop feeling anything much. But clearing her head isn’t so simple. Kione’s thoughts are chasing each other around in circles as she tries to get a grip on whatever split-identity nonsense Sartha was spouting. She can’t let it go.

Then she notices the distinct hum of *Ancyor*’s electronics, still running.

It’s almost funny. Sartha truly is off her game if she’s left all the secondary systems switched on. That’s the kind of rookie mistake that makes you the laughingstock of boot camp.

It does get Kione curious, though. She remembers something from one of the rebel debriefings about how *Ancyor*’s computer systems have been seriously overhauled. Their engineers can’t even get into most of the files. They’re locked out with heavy-duty imperial codes.

But if Sartha plugged in her authorization...

Impulse takes over. Kione clambers up into the cockpit. It should feel like a violation to sit there in Sartha's place, but she's already past that. She turns her attention to the viewscreens. Everything's unlocked. Jackpot—or not. After a cursory inspection, it's clear most of the files are hopelessly corrupted. Kione shouldn't be surprised, after the beating *Ancyor* took. She's about to give up when something intact catches her eye.

A two-way recorded vid transmission, timestamped to the very moment Kione and the rebels ambushed Sartha on the bridge.

Privacy be damned. Kione hits play.

The recording starts up. Sartha's voice starts playing, and the viewscreen shows her a grainy, flickering, distorted image that only slowly resolves into the shape of a woman.

At once, Kione knows. It's her.

Sartha's imperial handler.

*'Taking fire,' Sartha is saying. 'Ambush at waypoint three. I see five hostiles.'*

*'Only five? Interesting.'*

The handler's voice sends shivers down Kione's spine. She's never heard a woman sound quite so bloodlessly cold. She's wearing an imperial uniform of some kind, although not one Kione's familiar with. It's all long, black, unnervingly neat leather, complete with a crisp visor cap that makes her sleek, near-white hair all the more striking. The damage to the recording makes her face hard to make out clearly, but Kione can't quite shake the irrational feeling that those ice-cold eyes aren't looking at Sartha, weeks in the past. They're looking right at her, right now.

Kione wonders: is this the woman who messed up her Sartha this badly? If so, she should hate her for it. Hate isn't what she feels, though. Only an instant, itching fascination.

*'Permission to engage?'*

For as curt and clinical as Sartha sounds on the recording, there's still more passion in her voice than Kione has heard from her since the rescue. More than passion. Purpose. Reverence.

Love.

*'Granted,'* the handler says. And then she says something else, in a different, special voice, one underscored with significance that's as palpable to Kione as it clearly was to Sartha. *'Sartha. Off The Leash.'*

Kione's eyes go wide as the cockpit is filled with the sounds of growling and snarling.

\* \* \*

After a quick detour to the infirmary storeroom, Kione is headed for Sartha's quarters with thunder in her veins. She's beyond reason. Beyond second-guessing herself. She needs answers.

How could Sartha let that woman do that to her?

Kione doesn't know exactly what she just heard, but she knows some sick sex shit when she sees it. She knew it had been bad, whatever brainwashing the imperials had pulled on her. She hadn't realized Sartha had been getting her rocks off the entire time.

That's what you need, Sartha? That? You couldn't have just asked me?

The sounds of Sartha barking and growling like a dog at that handler's command are seared eternally into her memory. Even after her friend's pitiful performance in their duel, she hadn't believed Sartha Thrace could sink that low. Yeah, she was never a saint. But she always had dignity. She had standards. Kione had always counted on her for that much.

Now, all that seemed like it meant nothing at all.

Kione's broken faith is curdling into something anguished and dark. Her grip on the small, brown bag in her hand is so tight it hurts. She's tried reminding herself that it wasn't Sartha's fault. She was captured. Brainwashed. That doesn't help. It doesn't soothe the pain of betrayal. Kione needs answers. Real answers.

She needs to see who Sartha Thrace really is.

When she reaches Sartha's quarters, Kione doesn't bother to knock. She just pushes her way in. She finds Sartha lying down and staring at the wall—not even on the bed, gods, on the fucking floor—but once she sees Kione, she scrambles to her feet quickly enough. The look of numb shock on her pretty face is deeply satisfying.

"Damn, Sartha," Kione sneers. "Didn't realize that if I wanted to get you to come running to my bunk for a change, all I needed to do was cry 'heel'."

All at once, Sartha goes pale. "You—"

"Yeah, I saw. In *Ancyor*. Shut down the computers for you, by the way. Wouldn't want anyone else checking out the comms log, huh?"

"Gods..." Sartha whispers.

Finally, she looks ashamed of herself. Good. She deserves to.

“No wonder you weren’t exactly thrilled to get rescued,” Kione laughs. “Guess they had better doggy treats over there. Did they throw a stick? I should’ve thought to try that.”

“It’s not like that!” Sartha protests.

“Then what was it like?” Kione retorts instantly. “You won’t talk to anyone. Or let me guess: you don’t remember? Yeah, that must be easier than trying to explain how you let some imperial cunt make you her own, personal bitch.”

Without warning, something flashes across Sartha’s face. “Don’t call Her that!” she snaps.

The look in Kione’s wide, wounded eyes says it all. An instant later, Sartha clasps a hand over her mouth, horrified. At herself? At her conditioned loyalty for her handler?

Or simply at having given herself away?

“Traitor,” Kione hisses.

“I’m not.”

“As far as I can tell, you’re literally in bed with them,” Kione sneers. “Does it feel that good, Sartha? To get treated that way? Like a fucking animal?”

“I-it’s not like that!”

Sartha’s voice turns ever shriller as Kione’s words pierce her. Kione has never felt more powerful. Finally, she can make Sartha Thrace feel something. Finally, she can make her hurt.

“I guess it’s just her, then.” Kione advances further into Sartha’s room, driving her back with each step. “She must be something special, huh? Tell me: what makes her so much better than me? What’s the trick? What does it take to get Sartha Thrace, the great hero of the rebellion, down on her knees?”

“W-what?” Wrong-footed, Sartha almost trips. She’s so clumsy now. Has she always been that way? That flawed?

“And you need her to pilot properly? Is that it?” Kione is addicted to twisting the knife. She’s not sure she’ll ever get enough. “So you can do it for them, but not for me. Not for your comrades. What do you call that, if not being a fucking traitor?”

“Stop. Please.”

That’s what she’s reduced to. Begging. Clasp her hands to her head like a child. As weeks of frustration pour out of Kione, she wonders why she ever let Sartha make her feel anything at all, if this is all she is once you peel back the layers.

“Or this what you need, Sartha?”

Kione reaches into the bag in her hand and takes out Sartha’s muzzle. It had been easy to swipe from the infirmary. Not like anyone wanted to keep a close eye on it. As she thrusts it out toward Sartha, she watches the rebel ace go very still, eyes slowly widening.

“Go on. Give it a try,” Kione spits. “Maybe then you’ll be less of a joke.”

Sartha can’t stop looking at it. She’s clearly on the verge of breaking down. Part of Kione can’t bear to see it. Another part, the part that’s in the driving seat, wants to push her over the edge.

“Kione,” Sartha whimpers. “P-please.”

No. No, she really can’t stand how pathetic Sartha sounds. Where’s the bestial thing Kione fought on the bridge? At least that pilot is useful. At least she makes for a real fight.

Maybe there’s a way. A twisted flower of an idea blossoms in her head. At first it seems absurd, and too cruel to consider. But Kione’s realizing she can enjoy being cruel. And she also knows that if she never tries it, she’ll never stop wondering.

“Sartha,” Kione pronounces, trying her best to sound a little like that woman on the recording. To fill her voice with all the weight and power and dismissive authority she can summon. “*Off The Leash.*”

With those simple words, Sartha Thrace goes away. And the beast wakes up.

Now that she’s seeing it up close and personal, though, Kione’s realizing that it’s not quite a beast. Not exactly. A beast is strong, yes, and ferocious. But a beast is wild. The not-person waking before her now, a look of dull confusion in its faded eyes, is not wild. In their previous encounter, Kione was simply on the wrong end of the leash. Now she sees beyond the ferocity. She sees the chains. She sees the unfailing obedience, and the deep, gnawing need for a guiding hand.

Yes. This is a captive animal. It has been broken. Brought to heel.

It’s not a beast.

It’s a Hound.

“Fuck,” Kione gasps.

She should feel guilty, right? Whatever she's just done to Sartha—that's what they did. The imperials. It's wrong. Obviously.

But if it's so wrong, why is curiosity the only thing Kione feels?

"Sartha?" she ventures.

The only reply she gets is a faint, guttural noise from Hound's throat. The look in the wretched thing's eyes is guarded, but not necessarily hostile. More than anything, she's confused. Why is Kione the one who's calling it to attention? That's not normal.

Kione gets it at once. Tame dogs don't always take to a new master right away.

They need a firm, confident hand.

"Here," she says, holding out the muzzle. "This is what you want, isn't it?"

Hound is just as transfixed by the object as Sartha was—already, the two are distinct in Kione's head—but differently so. Sartha seemed, at least on some level, horrified by it. Hound isn't. Kione sees longing in its eyes. The muzzle is a comfort.

Hound glances up at Kione briefly. Studying her. Assessing her. Then, very slightly, it bows its head.

Kione has been around enough animals to know what that means. She reaches out and presses the cage of the muzzle over Hound's mouth. Then, she slips the leather straps over its head and into position—one above her ears, one below. She tightens them until Hound lets out a faint gurgle of satisfaction.

As she steps back to assess her handiwork, Kione feels a little bit like a god.

It's not dissimilar to how she feels when she's piloting, really. The superiority. The certain knowledge that she has the power to reach down from the skies and snuff out any poor fool who catches her attention. It's amazing, and Kione is far from the first pilot to feel its allure. But—as the rebels who hire her are always quick to remind her—it's not her fight.

What she's doing to Sartha? This is hers. It's ownership.

Fuck. It's hot. Really, insanely, mind-blowingly hot.

And like all newborn gods, Kione is desperate for a deeper taste of her own power.

"Hey," she says. "You'll do what I tell you, right?" She reaches out and thumbs the collar of Sartha's jacket. "Take this off."

There's a little glint of something in Hound's eyes. Like she's bristling at a command from someone who isn't her precious handler. Kione is ready to be challenged—but in the end, Hound simply nods and slips obediently out of her jacket.

As soon as her shoulders come into view, Kione is breathing hard. Gods, Sartha is hot. Athletic, as any soldier is, but compared to Kione she's a little slight. Delicate, in a certain light—not that she'd ever allow Kione to experience her that way. She lets Kione touch her, but she won't let anyone possess her.

Until, of course...

That thought fouls Kione's mood once again. An urge rises within her: to wipe away the stain on Sartha's honor with force. To

erase what was done by overwriting it. To stamp her mark of ownership on Sartha Thrace so deep there's no trace of anyone else's.

Kione barely knows what that would actually mean. But she knows she wants it.

"Take this off." She indicates Hound's tank top. "And... the rest."

Again, Hound tenses—but again, she obeys. As she tilts her head back to lift her top off over the muzzle, Kione notes that she must have done this many, many times before. That deepens the wound and the urge both. But for the moment, she's entranced by the sight of Hound taking her clothes off at her command to reveal Sartha's body.

It's funny. Sartha was always the kind of top who'd make the other girl undress first.

Without her clothes, she looks different. Vulnerable. Kione's anger ebbs away, drained by the simple spectacle of her friend's body. Though there's so many things she wants to do, all the merc can bring herself to do right away is reach out and place her hand on Hound's side, stroking up and down a little.

She's gentle. Something about that makes Hound growl. Kione guesses she isn't used to gentleness. A pang of guilt hits her. Right. This is what they did. The bad guys. Stripping her. Touching her. Kione isn't like them if she goes through with this, is she?

It's an uncomfortable thought. One that gives her genuine pause. But then she remembers all that she's seen of Sartha these past few weeks. Listless. Gray. Dead. She remembers what Sartha told her about needing her other side back. About needing Hound.

No. This is simply Kione giving Sartha what she needs.

It's for the best, isn't it?

Kione is reassured. And better still, she's wondering if, perhaps, at last, she'll be able to get her beloved friend back.

"Sartha," Kione says quietly. "I missed you. I missed you a lot."

Hound blinks, uncomprehending. Sartha is not here. Sartha does not want to be here.

"Without you, everything seems..." Kione sighs. "Whatever. Just... let me touch you."

Hound will, of course. As unsettling as she finds Kione's gentleness, she will not disobey. Compliance has long since been branded into the core of her being. Hound just stands there as Kione steps closer, hand moving across her skin; her side, then her hip, then her chest.

"Gods," Kione breathes. This feels almost sacred.

Compared to the urges that possessed her mere moments ago, the things she wants now are almost embarrassing in their naivety. Her travesty of a duel with Sartha and the deeply fucked-up situation she's created for herself have ruined her nerves. Amidst all that, she wants familiarity. She wants her friend. She wants what she always wanted.

To be the apple of Sartha Thrace's eye.

"You're beautiful," Kione whispers. She's always thought someone should tell Sartha that. She gets called so many other things: hot, cool, brave, heroic. But not beautiful. Nobody thinks to call her that.

Kione knows what she needs to hear. Even if right now, she's not truly hearing it.

"Look at me," Kione instructs. Hound, as ever, obeys. Kione moves in to kiss her before the absurdity of that gives her pause. They can't kiss. The muzzle is in the way.

What does that leave? Just one thing. The craving that's been burning a hole in Kione ever since she first dragged Sartha out of *Ancyor's* wreck.

"Fuck me," Kione orders Hound. "Just like you used to."

Hound's nostrils flare. She tilts her head. It's not the kind of command she's used to. Kione senses her reservations. She presses closer still, wrapping her arms tentatively around Hound's naked body. Her warmth is intoxicating. Kione is overcome—and she notices Hound's body beginning to react too. Clearly she isn't the only one with pent-up needs.

"Don't worry," she whispers desperately. "I'm giving you permission. Y-you can be rough with me. You know it makes me feel good."

Her breathy voice raises hairs on Hound's neck. She can sense her words melting away Hound's reluctance. She's so close to giving Kione everything she wants.

Kione blinks, and before she can tell what's happened, she's face-down on Sartha's cot.

Oh, right. Hound shoved her. Kione shivers rapturously at the realization. Finally. She gets to be Sartha's again.

Before she can drink in the moment, Hound is on top of her, pressing down with her entire body weight. It forces all the air from Kione's lungs, and as she tries to turn her face up to look at Hound, she finds her cold, hard muzzle pressing painfully against her cheek. Her ear fills with the sound of loud, voracious growling, and a splatter of drool falls on her skin.

Once more, she's dealing with a beast.

Hound starts pawing and clawing at Kione's clothes. Her desire is clear, though impossible to fulfill with Kione pinned down like this. Kione tries pushing up on Hound so she can get the room to slip out of her jumpsuit; Hound responds by reaching up and clamping her hand down hard around Kione's neck.

Kione freezes up as her air is cut off. It's more than just a warning. She can't breathe. Kione's combat instincts swell, but something even greater rises to quash them. A prey-urge. Something Sartha Thrace helped her to cultivate. It's still. It's an ocean. It pacifies her, and fills her with a paradoxical bliss. By the time Hound lets her breathe again, there is no part of Kione that wants to do anything but submit.

After several long moments, Hound lets up. Kione gasps for air, but she doesn't move. She doesn't try to rise or change position.

She knows her place in this dynamic now. Hound has given her a simple, brutal, unmistakable demonstration.

Hound growls and tugs at Kione's jumpsuit again before clambering off of her. Without hesitation, Kione starts undressing herself. She gets to take better care of herself than most soldiers. Gotta spend all that cash on something. But it's not confidence that makes her so eager to strip. It's simple eagerness.

She wants Sartha to look at her. She needs it.

The need is burning through her. Kione's dark skin is flushed a deep red, and her body heaves with every breath. Precum is already dripping from her cock.

She's been rock hard ever since she dropped Hound's trigger phrase.

While she strips, Hound is searching through Sartha's bag. Kione already knows for what, but she still gasps in delicious shock when she sees it.

It's the rebel hero's strap-on and harness.

Hound slips the harness around her hips with practiced ease. By the time she's tightened the straps and fixed her artificial cock in place. Kione is all but drooling for it. She aches, but she knows better than to make the first move. Hound has made that perfectly clear.

Hound approaches her, kneeling there on the bed. She surveys Kione for a moment as her hand works up and down, coating her strap with lubricant. Kione shivers. Not with cold, just with anticipation. She longs for Sartha's touch; slow, teasing, coaxing her to a delicious, roiling boil of need so desperate it wipes away the stain of all her dark thoughts. Sartha knows just how to get a girl worked up. She's as good as that as she is at piloting.

Kione only realizes something is wrong when Hound pounces atop her again and pushes her face into the pillow with more roughness and force than Sartha would ever have used.

Even if the coarse pillow hadn't been there to muffle her words, Kione wasn't sure she would have been able to mount any protest. She's lost to subspace. Smothered by that heady bliss, words and thoughts come to her like treacle. But as Hound begins to mount her, Kione becomes dimly aware that this isn't what she had wanted.

It doesn't feel the way it once had.

This isn't her Sartha.

Then Hound levels her strap against Kione and pushes down into her with her whole weight, and even that thought slips away as Kione howls her moans into the bed.

There is nothing gentle about the way Hound fucks her. Certainly nothing romantic. It's passionate, yes, but more like an animal's mating rut than a lover's touch. Now that Kione has given her permission, Hound is set on just one thing: discharging her urges. There is, though, a certain flair to the way she growls and snaps and rakes Kione's back with her fingernails while she thrusts in and out of the mercenary.

Hound is enjoying it. Getting off on it. There's no doubt about that. But it's something else, too. Hound is used to this, and as more than a source of gratification.

As a way to establish dominance.

In a more lucid moment, Kione wonders about that. About what kind of sick carnival Sartha's brainwasher orchestrated for her. Are there other hounds too? There are rumors about that, and Kione knows Sartha isn't the only pilot to go MIA under strange circumstances. There have been a few by now. Aritimis, for instance.

In her mind's eye, Kione can see it. Deep in the bowels of some imperial facility, captured pilots kept like dogs. Pitted against each other constantly. Fighting and fucking for position. Win or lose, it affirms their new, hollowed selves.

Kione shivers. It's awful, of course. But she can see the elegance of the design.

Lucidity doesn't last long. Kione orgasms fast. It's been too long, and Hound is merciless. Even the bitter stimulation of the coarse bedsheets rubbing against her cock is more than Kione can take. Kione spews her mess all over them with a weak, whining gasp that doesn't sound so different to some of Hound's growls.

But Hound doesn't stop there. Once she sets herself to the task, her endurance proves almost limitless. Her grunts and irregular howls grow steadily more ragged and high as she keeps fucking Kione, drawing pleasure herself from the rhythmic grinding of her strap against her cunt. It drives Kione to the next peak before she's recovered, and then again, and again, and again, until her pleasure comes dry. Until she is spent.

Still, Hound keeps going.

Eventually, Kione becomes numb to the pleasure. She becomes a simple vessel for what Hound gives her. As much a brute animal as her top, grunting and moaning and humping as she's pounded into the mattress over and over again. It feels awful. It feels amazing. Kione wants it to stop. She wants more. She wants everything. She wants the moment to go on forever, because at least now, even if it's all wrong, Sartha Thrace is hers, hers, hers.

But it ends, of course. Once Hound's strength is all spent, she simply collapses in a great heap atop Kione's back. Kione is too exhausted to do anything but lie there beneath her, prone and still, as she feels loops of Hound's drool dripping from the muzzle to stain her hair. With Hound's face so close to her, she can hear all the little growls that come from her throat. Gleeful. Proud. Content, as only a fed, good, obedient dog can be.

Tears come into Kione's eyes. She can't quite tell if they're good or bad.

For a long time, they lie there like that, wet and exhausted and

expended. Kione drifts in and out of sleep and, as the bliss of submission slowly recedes from her, she starts to wonder, again, about the significance of what she's just done.

Before she can come to terms with that, though, she realizes something else: it's not Hound anymore. It's Sartha again. And she's crying.

Instinctively, Kione moves to free herself. She turns and props herself up so she can face Sartha. She's ready to apologize. To prostrate herself in shame. She's even ready for Sartha to hit her, or recoil from her in disgust and fear.

The last thing she expects is for Sartha to press desperately close to her, tears falling on Kione's skin, as if the great hero of the rebellion is terrified of even an inch of distance existing between them.

Slowly, Kione's anxieties fade. She wraps herself up around Sartha so she can embrace her while she cries, and hushes her sobs with sweet, comforting nothings until they ebb away like all the rest of her.

"Don't worry," Kione murmurs to Sartha as she lays her down to sleep, an unbidden sense of confidence moving through her. "I'll save you, Sartha. I promise. I finally know how."



I would like to express my gratitude for the generosity of all those who support me on Patreon, and to give a special thanks to the following patrons in particular for their exceptional support:

Artemis, Chloe, Grillfan65, The Secret Subject, Morriel, Dex, orangesya, dmtph, MegatronTarantulas, Vanessa, Madeline, BTYOR, Sarah, Mattilda, Emily Queen of sloths, Neana, Shadows exile, Abigail, Hypnogirl\_Stephanie\_, Jade, mintyasleep, Michael, Be\_Be, Tasteful Ardour, Chris, Dennis, Full Blown Marxism, Morder, S, Brendon, Drone 8315, Jim, Erin, HannahSolaria, hellenberg, Kay, Miss\_Praxis, Violet, Noct, Charlotte, Faun, BrinnShea, B, Foridin, Jennifer, EepyTimeTea, Slifer274, Phoenix, Jim, Sebastian, Joseph, Yaoups, Thomas, Liz, naivetynkohan, Basic dev, SuperJellyFrogEx, Katie, Lily, spyrocyndersam13, zzzz, Mal, Bouncyrrou, Anonymous, Nimapode, Kunoichiru, FemKUltra, Ash, Artemis, Geckonator, TheRealG, Anonymous, J, nathan, GladiusLumin, Ada, Marina, Space Prius, Alex, Michael, Thomas, Dasterin, Jackson, Djura, Christopher, Pluto, Daedalus, Joe, Stuart, Mattilda, matthew, Ana, proletkvlt, DOLLICIOUS, Yodasgirl, Allie-, Cusco, Dante-, Griffin, Bouncyrrou