WARHOUND

VOLUME ONE

KALLIDORA RHO

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To Charlotte, my angel

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WARHOUND

Nothing makes Sartha Thrace feel good the way being saddled up in the cockpit of a huge mech suit does.

She usually likes to say it's because of all the good you can do with that kind of power, since it's a good line for pro-rebellion propaganda, but the truth is that it's far more immediate than that. The joy comes from a million different things. The way the seat beneath her thrums as the machine kicks into life. The scent of machine oil and burnt steel as the reactor spools up. The way everything in the world shakes when her almighty machine, as big as a skyscraper, takes just one single step. The joy isn't in her head. It's in her blood. Her guts.

It's fucking perfect.

All in all, it makes Sartha feel like she's not merely a person anymore. A person is just meat, however much of a hero they are. In the cockpit, she's a sixty-foot-tall titan ready to crush the world under her heel. There's nothing like the power trip, and it helps take her mind off some of the anxieties that like to eat at her.

Ancyor is the name of her beast. They know it everywhere, because Sartha is, after all, a hero. Just a name, no class, no model number. Not much point now. *Ancyor* isn't like anything else on legs after all the cannibalism Sartha's had to do to keep her running. Everything's been replaced twice. Most of it, three times or more. So now *Ancyor* is one hell of an ugly mongrel, but that hasn't done anything to keep it off the rebel recruitment posters. They like using its face almost as much as they do Sartha's.

It's what you get for being a hero. Hell, for being *the* hero. She's the big hero of the rebellion.

They're just coming up on the battlezone now. Sartha trusts her instruments but she trusts her eyes even more, so she takes a moment to peer out of *Ancyor*'s grubby little viewports even though it's difficult with her muzzle in the way. She can see her comrades' battle line unfolding on either side of her, and it doesn't make her happy. None of the other mechs look anything like *Ancyor*.

They're all brand new and freshly painted, and far too sleek for their own good. The kinds of machines that have just rolled off an Imperial production line. Fresh tech given to fresh meat that doesn't even know how to use it properly. Something about it unsettles Sartha. She has too many ghostly little memories of fighting on the other side, against machines like that. Being with them doesn't feel right.

Memories of someone else's life. That's what Handler always calls them when she tells Sartha not to dwell on them. Sartha does her best to listen, because Handler is always right. Handler is wonderful.

Sartha raises a hand and touches her muzzle as she thinks about that.

'Everyone's in position,' comes the voice over the radio. Snooty. Elitist. An officer.

'Copy,' comes the reply. '*We're ready*.'

'Can we send the dog in first?' someone asks. A bunch of snickers follow.

'Negative,' says the officer. '*We stick to the plan. Commencing bombardment.'*

A few moments later, the ground starts rumbling and the whole sky lights up red and white. Sartha doesn't look. She knows better than to stare at the fireworks. This isn't her first battle. She's a hero, and she knows what she needs to do. The little drip of adrenaline the blasts prompt helps her focus.

"Here we go, *Ancyor*," she murmurs to no one.

When she opens up the throttle, *Ancyor* responds as always, with an ugly purr. The beast surges forward. Sartha wants to be right on the heels of the bombardment. That's what she does best. She gets stuck in with blade and chain wherever the fighting's getting good and messy.

That makes her a really big target, obviously, and sure enough, the enemy is already replying to the artillery in kind. Beams and missiles start to fly past

Ancyor as it sprints. Well, not all of them. Some of them hit home, and Sartha feels the impact in her own body. It does nothing but put a crazy grin on her face, behind the muzzle's metal cage. She feels her mech clunk underneath her as redundant systems slam into place wherever the damage isn't so superficial.

It'll take more than that to put her beast down.

But since she isn't actually crazy the way people say, Sartha shelters behind a ruin, ready for the tense dance of sprinting from cover to cover as she advances. As she does, she sees her comm system lighting up. It's the enemy, yelling at her across an open channel.

Obviously Sartha knows she should ignore it, but there's never been an ace pilot who didn't know how to trash talk. She isn't so professional she won't reach over and flick a few switches so she can listen in.

At first the transmissions are too loud, and so messy they almost sound like interference. It's not, it's just too many damn people yelling at once. As usual, the sight of *Ancyor* loping into combat is getting a nice healthy response. After a moment, Sartha manages to pick out a few things here and there:

'Traitor.'

'How could you do this to us?'

'Why?'

'What the fuck is wrong with you, Thrace?'

'What did they do to you?'

Somehow, some of that makes it through the adrenaline and Sartha stops grinning. It's not the words exactly. It's the emotion. There's this one woman in particular she can pick out, howling into her radio. It's not familiar, it's no one she knows, but there's something in her voice. A depth; a ragged, throatfucked anguish that only comes from something real.

From real betrayal.

Sartha risks taking a hand off the joystick to adjust her muzzle, trying to make it less uncomfortable.

At the same time, she tries to convince herself it's all bullshit. She tries to remind herself where she is, and what she's fighting for, but that's hard because she doesn't know. All that stuff—the briefings before the mission, for example—is just a haze. It's fog. It's nothing. It's like she wasn't even there. So what the fuck is this battle?

Another look through the viewport. The whole place is already buried under inches of dust and napalm, but Sartha still can't quite shake the feeling that she knows this city. It feels like maybe, in one of those other lives she sometimes remembers, this was a place she wanted to defend.

There's something wrong with her, she thinks. It's the only way to explain why she keeps flinching whenever she sees one of those sleek, black, fresh Imperial mechs punch out of the dust-fog. Stupid, stupid. They're on her side. She needs to get that straight. She needs to keep moving. Sartha keeps *Ancyor* on the move, darting between buildings and across streets, but that's just instinct, and instinct isn't half as good when you're not paying fucking attention. And she can't stop paying attention to that howling voice on the comms.

'What did they do to you, Thrace? Was it money? What the fuck did they do to you?'

What did they do to her? Sartha doesn't know, although she's sure it wasn't money. She remembers something, maybe, unless it's just one of those other people's lives. A room. A room that scared her shitless. And pain. From electric shocks, she thinks. And lights—lights shined into her head so bright she thought they would punch all the way out the other side. And most of all, words that never ever ever ever stopped whispering.

Fuck. Fuck. She's breaking down now, like a raw rookie. Only Sartha's not a rookie, she's a hero—only maybe she's not even that if she's a traitor like the voice on the radio says. She needs to get her head on straight. She needs to figure out where she is and what this battle is. She needs to get this freakish fucking muzzle off her head. She needs-

Click.

The radio goes silent and Sartha goes dead still. She knows *Ancyor* better than she knows her own soul. She knows every little noise it ever makes, and this one is very important. It's a remote override for the comm system, activating a direct line to somebody special. Sartha's breast swells with hope and bile in the instant before she hears Her voice.

'Can you hear me, Sartha?' Handler says.

"Yes," Sartha replies at once, because she would never keep Handler waiting. She's already pulling herself together. She can't break down like this. Not with Handler.

'It seemed as though you were getting confused,' Handler says. '*So here I am.'*

Hearing that almost feels bad because it's almost a reproach, but Sartha feels good instead because she's simply happy to listen to Handler talking. Handler's voice is love.

'I'm going to take care of that for you,' Handler tells her. '*Ready?'*

"Yes," Sartha says. She's never quite ready for what's coming, but she's cringingly grateful for it anyway because in a few moments all the things she was worrying about won't matter.

'Hound,' Handler says in a special voice. '*Off The Leash*.'

It's not quite instant, and so Sartha gets a single moment to experience her own psyche cracking like an egg. It feels, more than anything, like clarity. She gets it now, as she falls away from herself. Sartha Thrace isn't a real person anymore. Sartha Thrace is gone, they just kept the shape of her. Like a papier-mâché mask that preserves the imprint of someone's face.

They needed her body, because it's recognizable. They needed her piloting skills, because she's the best. Everything else they scooped out, except for whatever they needed to keep to make a nice little convenient shell for the thing that's inside her now. The thing that's coming out, now that she's Off The Leash.

Sartha Thrace goes away, and Hound wakes.

Hound whoops and growls, prompting an approving laugh from Handler over the radio, and guns *Ancyor*'s throttle so viciously the mech starts to scream underneath her. Hound doesn't care. Hound doesn't care about anything. She's right where she belongs—in her colossal metal body, muzzle strapped to her face, beloved Handler in her ear.

And in front of her, there are targets.

Hound makes *Ancyor* lunge out of cover, surge towards the nearest thing she sees that doesn't look like one of her sleek, black packmates, and start tearing it to shreds. The way *Ancyor* jerks and whines in protest as it really rips into an enemy mech turns Hound's growl into a wolf-scream of pure, untainted glee that lasts until the broken, bleeding thing under *Ancyor*'s blades finally stops moving.

Then Hound lopes off into the rebel city in her mech, looking for more things to kill.

* * *

Sartha Thrace doesn't know how long it's been by the time *Ancyor* heaves back into its berth in the hangar. She only knows it's now after the battle, and the main reason she knows there was a battle is that *Ancyor* is beaten to hell and she's covered in fresh bruises and her own, matted blood.

It hurts, but in a good way, like how an amazing workout hurts. The core of that euphoria is the mercifully vague sense that she has done a good job today. She fought hard, and they won.

Handler will be proud of her.

Despite how exhausted Sartha is, that knowledge puts a spring in her step as she dismounts from *Ancyor*'s cockpit onto one of the huge piers that line the hangar in rows. The hangar is a vast, cavernous space, too big to feel real, so big it'll make your eyes hurt if you stare at the ceiling or the far wall. It's steadily filling up as more and more of Sartha's comrades make it back. Not as many as there had been when they left, but that's always how it is. Sartha knows how to make herself cold to it.

She gets a lot of hard, bad looks from the other pilots as they dismount. Some even spit. Sartha doesn't let it trouble her. She isn't really one of them, she knows. They're all Imperial to a T: neat, black uniforms, cropped hair, stiff hats and straight backs. Sartha wears grubby old military khakis instead, with more than a few personal touches, and her mid-length blonde hair is messy in a deliberate, handsome way. She doesn't look like one of them. She looks like one of the people on the other side.

And there's the muzzle, of course.

If she put her mind to it, Sartha could probably figure out the other, less superficial reason she isn't really one of them. The reason they glare at her so suspiciously. But she doesn't, because Handler has told her not to. Handler always knows best.

Maybe something happened in the battle, and that's why they're so mad. That's a convenient thing to believe. Sartha doesn't really remember, past the beginning. It's all fog. She doesn't worry about that. Another thing Handler has told her not to worry about. Sometimes it feels like her whole life has been

swallowed up by fog, but thanks to Handler she never worries. That's one of Handler's many gifts to her, and in exchange Sartha needs to be very, very good. She delights in being good. She won't remove her muzzle without permission, even now, as it rubs uncomfortably into her face. She even wears it in her sleep, if She asks.

And there! Sartha catches sight of Her coming down the pier, as if in response to the hero pilot's yearning.

Handler.

She's magnificent. Beautiful, yes, but in a special way, more like a goddess than a person. Everyone else knows She's special too. The other pilots, the ones who'd been spitting at Sartha, move out of the way and salute at Her passing. A special uniform marks Her rank. It's more ceremonial than practical: tight-fitting leathers and high boots, with a sleek cap to crown Her platinum hair and a heavy, black coat to make Her silhouette all the more imposing.

Sartha senses that the other pilots are a little bit afraid of Her, but she isn't. She could never be afraid of Handler.

"Sartha," Handler says, in a voice that makes Sartha shiver every time. "Congratulations. You did well."

Every single muscle in Sartha's body goes stiff at the praise. Her head starts spinning giddily and a nervous, twitchy grin comes to her face. This is a sacred moment. But it's too good to be true. It's too much.

"I got... confused," Sartha replies in a crestfallen tone. She can't disagree with Handler, obviously, but nor can she be dishonest. She needs to volunteer these things.

"That's true," Handler concedes. "But you made it back on track. That's what matters. It was a very confusing place for you. You did well."

Sartha gasps and shudders. Butterflies in her stomach. The praise is all the sweeter now that she's unburdened herself. She feels the ecstasy of purification.

"Thank you, Sir," she blurts out nervously, stupidly.

Talking to Handler always does this to her. Sartha has as many notches on her bedpost as any other ace but with Handler she's fourteen again, a tongue-tied teenager struggling to think of a good enough line to get one of the older, prettier girls to take her to the dance. She has to grab her left arm with her

right hand to stop it shaking too much. But the anxiety is more than balanced out by elation. She can't be anything but happy when Handler is here.

A thin smile comes to Handler's face. On anyone else it might have seemed cruel, but Sartha knows that Handler is beyond petty things like cruelty. "You're a very good hound, Sartha."

That phrase is like a magic spell. It lets Sartha relax into the praise. She giggles, and the grin on her face becomes broad and innocent. She's a good hound for Handler. It's perfect. It makes whatever she was worrying about earlier when she was confused feel utterly remote and small. Nothing matters when she's a good hound for Handler. It's the only important thing in the entire world, and her whole body knows it.

Sartha's brain bleeds endorphins into her system at a dangerous rate. She's seeing stars and shivering rapturously. She's blushing and dripping between her legs; turned on like hell even though this pleasure is so much more than just sex. Being a hound is better than being a person ever was.

She's a good hound for Handler.

"And you know what that means," Handler adds, smiling still. "Don't you?"

Sartha dares to nod. She has her hopes, but it would be blasphemous to get her hopes up.

"Good hounds get rewards," Handler tells her, and reaches out to pet her head.

This is special and it makes Sartha stop thinking altogether. Handler's touch on her head is infinitely familiar, and more reassuring than anything. Her thoughts turn into bubbles that pop as Handler messes her hair affectionately. Sartha doesn't try to collect herself, she just grins her stupid grin and stretches her back to try and push her head against Handler's fingers. The lack of self-discipline is an indulgence, but one that she's allowed from time to time.

"There we go!" Handler coos. "You deserve this. Don't you?"

"Yesyesyes," Sartha blurts out, all in a rush. "Thankyouthankyou."

She could cry. She's never been happier.

Handler gives her the blessing of letting her enjoy this for a few long moments before She says, "I think there's another thing you deserve too. You deserve a treat. Hound deserves a treat."

Sartha nods, drunk on eagerness. A treat is something different.

Something specific. She always gets a treat after a mission, unless she's been very bad.

"Sit," Handler commands.

At once Sartha is on the ground. Kneeling doesn't take thought. She sees that some of the other pilots are gathering round, and that some of them are laughing at her. Sartha doesn't care. She doesn't care about anyone else while she's with Handler. Those other pilots just don't understand how special She is.

Handler leans in and looms over her and says in that special voice of Hers: "Hound. Off The Leash."

Sartha Thrace goes away, and Hound wakes.

It's a very different Hound from the one that awakens in the thick of battle. Hound doesn't growl—she can't, not at Handler—she just makes her eyes big and looks up at her owner. Handler's smile widens.

"Very good," She purrs at Hound's display of patience. Handler pointedly sets one foot forward, resting Her big, heavy, leather boot on its heel. She waits a few moments, allowing Hound's need to build. "You may."

Hound throws herself forward and wraps her entire body around Handler's leg. She pushes her thighs apart as wide as she can—all the better to start grinding her cunt against Handler's boot. Immediately, Hound lets out a desperate whine of pleasure so loud it echoes around the hangar instead of being swallowed up. Her mind goes blank. The few thoughts Hound is permitted to have vanish. Touching Handler this way makes her unbelievably sensitive. The sensation is earth-shattering despite the heavy material of her clothes in the way. What this represents is more important than how it actually feels.

Safety. Purpose. Reward.

This is Hound's safe place. Perhaps the only place she feels truly safe, and that's because this is where she's meant to be. There's no doubt. No uncertainty. Not with Handler. Hound does what she's told and she gets her treat. It's so blissfully simple. If being good for Handler is the only thing that matters, she doesn't need to think about anything else. And this is how she knows she's been good for Handler.

"Good girl," Handler says, looking down at her.

Handler sounds so very amused, and Hound is simply pleased to be the

one amusing Her. She puts her face as close to Handler as she possibly can. Her muzzle is in the way so she has to turn her head and rub it desperately against her owner's hips. She's desperate for Handler's scent; that mix of leather and polish and dark perfume is infinitely comforting. As it fills her nose, she starts humping more slowly and deliberately, pressing hard so that she can feel every one of the taut laces of Handler's boot rubbing against her cunt. Hound's whimpers start to fill out into panting, breathless moans. The exertion is almost too much for her. She was already exhausted from combat. But she won't stop. She'd never give up her treat, not for anything.

The crowd around Handler and Hound is growing as more and more Imperial pilots gather to watch the strange ritual. Despite their lurid curiosity, they keep a respectful distance; Handler commands a great deal of fearful respect. Most of them are laughing or leering or making cruel, obscene comments to one another. Hound barely notices, and doesn't care at all. They don't matter. Only Handler matters. She does care, though, when one of the pilots breaks the circle and approaches. A woman. The laughter dies away, replaced by hushed pleas for their comrade to retreat back into line. She doesn't. Hound flashes her a look, teeth bared, although her treat is too all-consuming for her to expend more than a stray thought on anything but rubbing her cunt all over Handler's leg.

The woman returns Hound's look with a hateful glare. "How can you let that... *thing* do that to you?" she demands of Handler.

Handler stares at her. The pilot doesn't flinch, which is impressive. Handler remains relaxed. Amused. "What do you mean?"

"She's a fucking rebel!" the woman spits. She takes another step forward. "An enemy."

"Not anymore," Handler replies calmly. "What's your name, pilot?"

"Sergeant Meetra Kotys," she answers. "Sir," she adds, a beat too late.

"You needn't be afraid, Sergeant Kotys," Handler tells her. "I personally oversaw Thrace's reconditioning. My domestication procedures are extremely thorough. There is no risk of reversion to adverse behavior."

Hound hears but doesn't listen. It's not her place to listen. It's her place to rut against Handler's boot like the dumb animal she is.

"I'm not afraid!" Sergeant Kotys spits. "I'm fucking disgusted. That woman took down half my wing at Hebros Ridge last year. Six people in the ground—

because of her." The pilot's eyes are uneven. Wild. "She deserves worse than this."

Handler takes her time composing a reply. She pushes Her foot forward, pressing Her boot against Hound's cunt. Hound moans, unfathomably grateful for this gift. She keeps humping, the rhythmic, bucking motion of her hips growing steadily more and more desperate.

"The Hound and her mech are a significant asset to the Imperial forces," Handler says eventually. Her voice is icier now. More menacing. "That is all you should need to know, Sergeant. I'm pleased you value the lives of your fellow pilots. You might consider how many more of them would have been lost today without Hound here."

Sergeant Kotys bristles at that. With a woman like Handler there's an implied threat lurking behind every word, but the pilot is too aggrieved to care.

"But," Handler adds, pausing for long enough to emphasize Her charity. "Perhaps it will help you to think of it like this: my little warhound here is not Sartha Thrace. She is not the Sartha Thrace who killed your comrades. Whatever you want to do to her, it won't be revenge. She is no longer Sartha Thrace. I have made her something else. Understand?"

Sergeant Kotys's eyes flit uncertainly between Handler and Hound as she struggles to wrap her head around that, to reconcile her anger with it. In the end, she shakes her head.

"No," she snarls. "No. That's her. That's fucking her. Seen that face a hundred times on the posters. That's her fucking face. Gods, why can't you at least put her in one of our uniforms? If she's not really her, why does she have to go around dressed like that?"

"Ego totems." Handler's calm was impenetrable. "A few personal touches, nothing more. A little continuity and familiarity helps to maintain a sustainable, pliable outer persona."

Sergeant Kotys just laughs thickly. "Fuck whatever that means."

She takes another step forward. This is too close for Hound; she rouses herself a little from her stupid rut and growls protectively at the sergeant from behind her muzzle. She only stops and returns to humping when Handler rests Her hand on Hound's head.

"How can you touch her like that?" Sergeant Kotys demands. She is

furious beyond reason. Furious enough to risk the pilot's wings she wears so proudly on her collar. "It makes me sick. Every time we're told to drag her out into combat I feel like I'm gonna throw up in my damn cockpit."

Hound isn't paying attention again. The sounds of her rubbing herself on Handler's leg are turning increasingly wet. Her cunt is soaked, and the dark stain on the front of her pants is starting to drip.

"Feel like I'm gonna get shot in the back every time I'm not looking her way." The corner of Sergeant Kotys's mouth keeps twitching. "We all do. How do you know she's not just playing you, huh? How do we know she's not gonna just snap out of it, or something?"

Handler's lip turns upwards. "Does she look to you like she's going to snap out of it? See for yourself."

Sergeant Kotys looks at Hound—really looks at her. She looks at the expression of dumb, grateful lust on her face. At the metal cage strapped firmly over her mouth. At the vacancy in her eyes, and the vulgar, bestial enthusiasm in her hips. She stares for far too long.

"Fuck..." she breathes. Her cheeks are red. "I can't believe this. This is wrong. This is the woman who... I should just..."

She reaches to her side and draws her pistol from its holster.

A few brave members of the crowd of pilots start to reach forward, especially when Sergeant Kotys points her gun straight at Hound. Handler seems to know something they don't, though. She flashes them a look, and they freeze. All eyes are on the sergeant. She moves slow and jittery. Like Hound, she's not uninjured. There's a mean cut on her forehead and a couple of bruises on her cheek. She looks exhausted too, but her hand is steady when she puts the barrel of her gun right against Hound's forehead. Hound barely even notices. To her, it's nothing more than a little shock of cold as the metal touches her skin. A mere distraction from what actually matters. She's in heat. Handler is right here with her. Enjoying her treat is the only thing she needs to think about.

"God," Sergeant Kotys grunts. She sounds almost disgusted, and almost something else entirely. "What the fuck is wrong with her?"

The tip of her gun travels down the side of Hound's face. The sergeant uses it like an extension of her own hand, dragging it heavily and callously across Hound's skin until she's prodding it into her cheek. The pitch of

Hound's moaning changes for a moment, but only for a moment.

"What about this, huh?" Sergeant Kotys nods to Handler as she jabs the tip of her gun hard into the side of Hound's muzzle. Hound whimpers. "What's this for?"

"That's for your benefit, sergeant," Handler replies. There's a slight smirk on Her face. "It helps our people understand her new place."

"That's fucking twisted."

The expression on Sergeant Kotys's face is so mixed it's impossible to read. She hasn't taken her eyes off Hound in minutes. She's transfixed, and she barely seems aware of what she's doing as she starts pushing harder with her gun, steadily dislodging Hound's muzzle from where it's supposed to be. Even in heat, Hound can't fail to notice this. A sudden burst of anxiety claims her. She doesn't know what this means, so she looks pleadingly up at Handler.

"Wait." This is the first true order Handler has given. Her voice is crisp and expectant and makes even Sergeant Kotys pause and look. Handler holds her gaze for a long moment. "She is an asset," She reiterates firmly. "Do not damage her."

Sergeant Kotys nods. A moment later, Handler nods too. Both Hound and the sergeant see the nod for what it is.

Permission.

The barrel of Sergeant Kotys's gun is even more insistent now as it presses against the side of Hound's muzzle, steadily moving the metal cage out of its proper place. Hound lets out an uncertain little whine. Her muzzle is tight enough that it hurts as it's pushed across her skin, but more importantly, this is unfamiliar. She doesn't try to stop the sergeant, though, and she doesn't stop bucking her hips against Handler's leg.

Handler gave permission.

Eventually the muzzle comes away from Hound's face. The strap that attaches it to Hound's head is still fastened, but it turns sideways and hangs awkwardly against her cheek. It's a welcome relief, but the crushing pressure of the tight muzzle is almost immediately replaced by the cold of Sergeant Kotys's handgun. She angles it slightly, wedging the very tip between Hound's lips and using it to pry them apart. Hound whimpers. The sergeant isn't gentle. She butts the gun against Hound's teeth and folds her lips up against her face. Hound can't help but drool; she was already drooling from the way the sheer,

gratifying pleasure of Handler's boot against her cunt short-circuits her devastated brain, but now trickles of saliva are dangling down her face and coating the gun's barrel. She looks like a woman ruined.

Sergeant Kotys's expression twists.

She keeps going. She takes her time exploring, watching Hound's face twitch whenever she moves the gun like this or like that. Everyone is watching her as she goes ten times further than any of the other pilots would have dared. They're not laughing now, they're just staring, mesmerized by what's happening.

The sergeant looks mesmerized too. She looks like she can't stop.

Her pushing and prodding turns more deliberate. Hound is panting from pleasure, and Sergeant Kotys takes advantage to push her gun deeper, forcing Hound's teeth apart and ramming the long, metal barrel into her mouth. It slips in deep enough to make Hound choke on the unfamiliar object.

But after that, she starts sucking.

It's what Sergeant Kotys wants. Hound can tell from the way she moves the gun back and forth, thrusting it, fucking Hound's face. Hound doesn't care about the sergeant at all, but she cares about Handler more than anything and she senses Handler wants this. That alone is enough to fill her with giddy, heady enthusiasm, to make her bob her head as she laps pleasingly at the gun barrel despite the acrid taste of burnt metal and oil.

"Fuck," Sergeant Kotys breathes as she looks down at her.

There's something in the sergeant's eyes. Something bright, something growing. She keeps pumping faster with her gun, daring Hound to match her pace. She's wearing the expression of a girl who's just figuring out that breaking toys is simply a special, better way of playing with them. Her nostrils flare with each breath, and the way her chest rises and falls beneath her uniform is sinful. There are a hundred ways to read what's going on in her face, but one thing is very obvious to every single person watching.

She is enjoying this.

Hound is enjoying it too. She enjoys everything Handler wants her to do no matter what, but after grinding her needy cunt into Handler's boot for so long, her head is full of endorphins that make her stupid and transform everything into pleasure. And beyond that, a part of her—a simple, brute, canine part of her they hammered into her head to make her more workable

—simply loves the attention.

So, she has to try as hard as she can to be a very very good hound, and that means sucking off Sergeant Kotys's gun with the rapturous adoration she'd usually reserve for Handler Herself. She doesn't have to pay attention to the way her hips are moving, that's automatic, so can lavish all her attention on the stiff rod of the gun's barrel, lapping at it, drooling on it, taking it as deep as she can into her throat. It's still difficult. Hound is delirious on everything now —the pain, the exhaustion, the attention—and she's trembling desperately as an orgasm builds inside her. Her drool and spittle form a messy stain down the front of her top almost as bad as the one on her pants, and Sergeant Kotys's gun has been completely defiled with hanging loops of sticky, trembling saliva. Hound's moaning is back, so bestial and lewd and breathy it makes all the watching pilots blush.

She's close. Close to finishing her treat.

Then she hears a loud *click* as Sergeant Kotys flicks off the safety.

The click provokes a shudder from everyone, and Hound is no different. She glances up and sees that Sergeant Kotys's eyes are as wide as ever. She looks capable of anything. Despite how fucked out of her skull she is, that click reminds Hound of what the object in her mouth is.

It's a gun, a killing thing, just like her.

That thought is as exciting as it is terrible. The danger makes Hound freeze in her tracks, but only for a moment because then her body screams at her and reminds her that, no, she can't stop, not now, Handler didn't say she could stop, and besides, she's too fucking close, she can't take it. So she starts humping again, moans low and breathy and pitiful, and somehow it feels better than ever. It's lightning against her cunt. Despite how insanely dangerous it is, Hound can't help jostling the gun with her twitches and gyrations. She can't remember if Sergeant Kotys's finger is on the trigger and it's too late to check because all she can see is white.

All Hound can do is fuck herself stupid and choke herself on the barrel and prepare for the thunderous oblivion that's coming. Her hips have hit the point of agony but she's rutting faster than ever, and so is the sergeant, turning Hound's throat into another cunt with her pistol. The long piece of steel, now dripping wet and body-warm, chokes Hound's moans, but she doesn't care how uncomfortable it is. She just wants to explode. She wants the end. Every

part of her is desperate for it. Even the parts that used to be Sartha Thrace.

Especially those, perhaps.

When it finally hits her, Hound howls around the gun at the hangar ceiling before finally, blissfully, she can let herself go slack and slump against Handler's body. This is as close as she gets to heaven. It's sacred. It's her treat. The privilege of getting to touch Handler like that outweighs anything, any potential humiliation—not that Hound has much concept of humiliation. It's the ultimate affirmation, smothering all doubts as the indelibly-conditioned link between obedience and reward gets another notch deeper.

This is her. This is Hound. This is her purpose.

Unusually, no one is looking at Hound right now. They're all looking at Sergeant Kotys.

She looks like she's just come too, even though she has not touched herself. A few moments later, her face contorts and she looks utterly consumed with disgust and shame. Then the disgust recedes and she fills with calm, but it's a calm that glows from within and makes her fellow pilots nervous. Sergeant Kotys takes her time as she kneels down and cleans her gun on a dry portion of Hound's soiled clothing. Then she stands, turns to Handler, and salutes.

"Thank you, sir," she says crisply. "I think I understand now."

Handler's smile widens. She's pleased with the lesson, and pleased with Hound as she starts to rouse herself from her post-orgasmic stupor and see to the task of licking clean Handler's boots. "And what do you understand?"

"That this thing isn't Sartha Thrace, sir," Sergeant Kotys replies. "There's no way Sartha Thrace would have ever let me do that." She relaxes a little and the calm expression slips from her face, replaced with a smirk that is a mirror to Handler's own. "We broke her."

She's still pushing it by speaking to someone as senior as Handler this way, but she senses—correctly—that she can get away with it. The two of them share something now. An appetite, perhaps. An understanding that her fellow pilots have yet to partake in.

"That's right," Handler says. "Now, sergeant, please report to my facilities tomorrow. We need to discuss your conduct today."

It isn't a threat. It's an opportunity. Sergeant Kotys salutes again as she is dismissed. "Yes, sir!"

Handler turns next to Her charge. “Up, Hound.”

Hound is so exhausted and stupefied by her orgasm that it takes her a moment to register what’s being asked of her but inevitably, she obeys. With some reluctance, she hauls herself to her feet. Handler’s boots aren’t clean yet. It’s a task that mustn’t be left half-finished.

“You can attend to that later, in your kennel,” Hander instructs. She always knows what’s going on inside Hound’s head. “Now, here.”

She reaches past Hound and properly unfastens her muzzle just so She can fix it back in place and tie it tight. The way She does it is strict, but not even slightly cruel. She makes sure not to pinch Hound’s skin or knot her hair. There’s something gentle, even loving about the way She attaches the muzzle. Discomfort ripples through the crowd of watching pilots.

“There,” Handler says, once She’s finished. And then, in Her special voice: “On The Leash.”

Hound submerges instantly, but it takes a long while for Sartha to truly wake up, leaving their shared body to sway emptily for a moment before she finds her footing. Once she does, she just smiles. Handler is here. All is well. Her presence washes away any lingering confusion, and the aftershocks of pleasure in her own body only bolster her mood.

She doesn’t question them. She has no need. She’s with Handler.

“Come along, Sartha,” Handler says, turning away. “I need to debrief you.”

Sartha nods and trots after Her so she can stand at her place, at Handler’s heel. The debriefing is important, she knows. She never remembers her debriefings, but she knows she needs them to stay good. The two of them walk across the hangar deck to the elevator, Handler’s boots clacking loudly against the metal floor. Before they leave, Sartha glances back over her shoulder.

All her fellow pilots are watching her. Some of them are smiling. Some of them are laughing. Some of their faces are filled with awe. Sartha isn’t surprised by the way they’re staring. She’s used to it. It’s only natural.

She’s a hero, after all.

GRASPING THE WEAPON

Walking across the floor of the colossal hangar bay is like navigating a forest. On every side the legs of iron titans stretch up to the sky, their hulking trunks blotting out the distant, overhead lights. The hangar is a space scaled to proportions so far beyond that of a single person that it becomes unnerving. It's all the worse when you think about how all these mechanical trees can move.

Normally, like any reasonable person, Sergeant Meetra Kotys dislikes it here. It's uncomfortable even for a pilot, at least until she is strapped into her other body. Her war body, her machine body. It's one of the ones looming overhead, although Kotys can't pick it out at the moment. It's standard issue and just like the others, an Imperial *Doru*, special only because it's hers.

In the hangar, only the monstrous *Ancyor* stands apart from the rest. Normally, Kotys hates to look at the thing. Today, it makes her smile.

And today, as she walks, Kotys leaves her mark on the hangar's vast space. She *clacks* her heels on the ground, marking each step with a sound that echoes far too far, blasphemous in its loudness. It reminds Kotys of how the handler walks. For herself, at least, she knows it's just an affectation, but it's one she feels entitled to. Sergeant Kotys is overcome with daring.

What happened the day before, after the battle, changed her. She can feel it. Hell, everyone can feel it. All evening and all morning, the other pilots in Kotys's unit gave her a wide berth. They don't want to speak with her. In the canteen, they wouldn't sit at the same table. As a soldier sticking out from the pack isn't smart, normally, but Kotys has evolved beyond caring. It doesn't

matter to her if they want to do this boot camp clique bullshit, and it doesn't matter to her if they're afraid of her or creeped out by her.

After all, that's how everyone feels about the handler.

And, fuck, if nothing else, what a feeling! It was so worth it. Even if this comes to nothing, it was worth it. Even if it somehow gets her executed—maybe even then, it would have been worth it. Kotys had never imagined that Sartha fucking Thrace, out of everyone, would be the catalyst for her ascension; for her claiming the fate—the specialness—she'd known since girlhood was hers by right. But inside her warm, wet, receiving mouth Kotys touched something beautiful and now she is so very hungry for more.

That is why the handler has summoned her to the Kennels. She could tell. That beauty has passed between them. They are of a kind now.

The Kennels are beneath the rest of the base, on a lower level accessible only through a tunnel on the floor of the hangar. It makes the Kennels feel like a dungeon, although Kotys knows that it is mostly simply a prudent separation. It's best the other soldiers on base not think too much about the Kennels' dogs. The tunnel is dark and unnervingly clean, and takes Sergeant Kotys deeper. Eventually there is a door, big and heavy, and Kotys is still deciding whether to knock or announce herself when it opens to receive her.

Beyond is a room that is almost normal, complete with desk and chair. It's too luxurious, though, and unnerving in so many ways, especially the warren of claustrophobic passageways that Kotys can see leading off from it, each one lined with cells and other, more sinister facilities. There's no time to dwell on that, though, because the handler from yesterday is standing there, waiting for her.

Behind the handler stands Sartha Thrace.

Sergeant Kotys can't look anywhere but at her. She looks the same as yesterday, yet different. The same clothing, the same face, the same muzzle, but there is nothing lurking behind those things. She's too placid and her eyes register no curiosity at Kotys's arrival; instead she's still staring at a wall, looking but not seeing. Kotys has seen the handler's dog on the base before, between missions. She's always like this. She's... dormant is the word, Kotys guesses. God knows what it takes to reduce a person to this for days, weeks on end. Heavy tranquilizers are the least unsettling possibility. It's like looking at a ghost instead of a human being, so numb you'd think their skin is cold to

the touch.

There is one particular detail that stands out to Kotys, red-hot, bright as a fresh brand. Among all the war wounds on Thrace's face, one is special. A split lip. It wasn't there when she dismounted her *Ancyor* yesterday. It's Kotys's handiwork. She was too rough with the barrel of her handgun.

It's her mark.

That gets Kotys excited. It gets her wet.

But the handler cannot be ignored for long. Her presence is overbearing. Platinum hair and fair skin aside, all of her is black, from her cap to her leathers to her hulking coat. It's a uniform, of a kind. It makes the handler look like fear itself, although Kotys is no longer afraid. She envies it, and she envies the way that, just from how the handler's standing, it's obvious that Thrace is hers—her thing, her creature.

"Sergeant Meetra Kotys," the handler says. Her expression is another thing Kotys envies. It's powerful in its detached, knowing amusement. "Tell me, why have you come here?"

Kotys salutes, of course. "Reporting as ordered, sir," she responds crisply.

The handler waves her hand in that way that means 'at ease'. "Is that the only reason why?"

"No, sir." Kotys chooses her words carefully. "I'm... curious."

That earns a small laugh, although not an unkind one. "You were more than curious yesterday, I think."

"Yes, sir." Kotys hopes she isn't blushing. She might be. It's too cold down here to tell.

"I am inclined to indulge your curiosity." Kotys can't tell if the handler is mocking her. "Ask."

There is a question that burns a hole in Kotys's mind more than any other. Maybe the handler already knows what it is. She glances at Thrace again. "Does... it always feel like that?"

The handler laughs. It's an approving laugh, maybe. She is a difficult woman to read. "Perhaps. That depends on a great many things. On your perspective."

"My perspective, sir?"

"That is what I've ordered you here to assess." The handler opens her

hands, inviting. “And with it, your suitability.”

Jubilation surges inside Kotys. She knew it. Yesterday was her moment, and now this is her chance. She lets herself grin; surely this handler was once here, in her place. Surely she once knew how it felt.

Kotys salutes again. “I’ll do everything I can to live up to your expectations, sir.”

“Hm,” is all the handler says to that. “Then let’s begin with some simple instruction.” She gestures to Sartha Thrace. “What is she?”

Kotys cannot help but grow flushed with the memory of her, and vibrates the way any eager student would. She remembers this well, and will never forget it.

“She isn’t Sartha Thrace,” Kotys recites. “Not anymore. She isn’t even a person.”

“I’m glad you were listening,” the handler says. “But that’s only what she is not. Now tell me what she is.”

Kotys winces. She should have foreseen the real thrust of the question. It was never going to be that easy. She isn’t in basic anymore. She needs to do better, and so she looks at Thrace more closely. There is an obvious answer, but if this is a riddle and she is chosen, then her obvious answer might be the truth.

“She’s a dog,” Kotys answers. “A hound.”

The handler laughs again. This laugh is less kind.

“A child could see that.” Handler reaches up and touches Thrace’s muzzle. She dotes on her for a long moment, caressing where iron meets skin. That brings Thrace to life, just a little, just enough to nuzzle back, the ghostly nothing on her face becoming a ghostly smile.

“A pet,” Kotys corrects herself hastily. “*Your* hound.”

“Think. Feel.” The handler’s sharpness cracks like a whip across Kotys’s pride. “Don’t just blurt out whatever comes into your head.”

Kotys tries to think. She forces herself, as hard as it is with humiliation still echoing through her. No defeat in combat has ever tasted so sour. “She’s an enemy. A rebel. We must always remember that.”

“Wrong,” the handler tells her flatly. “She is broken. Domesticated.”

Now Kotys starts to panic. She’s scrambling. What else is Sartha Thrace?

“A... a pilot. That’s why she’s useful to us.”

The handler sighs, and the regret on her face makes Kotys wince. “Close enough, I suppose. She is useful to us, yes. A tool. A single cog, in the Empire’s machine of war. She is a thing to be used. A weapon.”

Kotys nods as if she understands, but she can’t help but rile against the unfairness of it. How was she supposed to guess that?

“And,” the handler adds, “what are you, Sergeant Meetra Kotys?”

She feels able to relax into this answer. “I’m like her, sir. A cog in a machine.”

It’s a good soldier's answer, one drilled into her ever since basic. Which makes it all the more dispiriting when the handler sneers as if disgusted.

“If you are nothing more than a cog in a machine,” the handler tells her, “then you are wasting my time.”

“I’m a pilot.” Kotys’s hands are balled into petulant little fists at her sides. “Sir. More than just some foot-slogging grunt.”

“How curious.” The handler’s smile is back, and it is not welcome. “You said that she’s a pilot. Does that make you like her?”

“No!” Kotys yells. “Fuck no.”

Where is the handler from yesterday? The one who gave her permission. The one who shared that knowing smirk with her. It’s the same woman, but now she’s like a demon. It’s like Kotys is her victim instead of Thrace.

“No,” the handler muses. “No, I suppose not. After all, Sartha Thrace is an undisputed ace. She’s one of the greatest pilots the Earth has ever seen. I thought it best to stop her from counting her kills, but I’m sure her tally would be in the hundreds. She is truly exceptional.”

As she says this, she’s caressing Thrace again. She goes further, bringing her hand up to stroke and mess her hair, and then down to scratch gently behind her ears. Like everything else between them, it’s ghoulish. A kind of fondness only fit for beasts. You’d never treat a person that way. A person would never let themselves be treated this way. But from the dreamy smile on Sartha Thrace’s face, it’s clear she’s in heaven. Kotys doubts she knows where she is, or if it’s day or night, but she knows that her handler, the center of her world, is praising and adoring her.

She looks like she’s about to come.

"And then there's you," the handler says to Kotys, her voice freezing over. "I reviewed your file. You are average. A pilot of unremarkable skill. You have some experience, but no particular accolades or achievements. There is nothing to distinguish you from any other pilot."

That stings worse than anything else, and the deepest pain is that there is nothing Kotys can call upon to answer her. There's nothing she can do at all except stew in her frustration. Under the weight of her own impotence, her anger curdles. It feels like tears are about to well up in the pilot's eyes and she hates herself for that. She doesn't cry. She's no crybaby.

It's the handler, of course. She has that way about her. She makes you care about what she thinks. It's an awful power. Kotys decides to let herself get angry instead.

"I didn't come here to be abused," she says. "*Sir*. And I didn't come here to play games. You seem to know exactly what you think I am. So tell me."

The handler lets out a long, loud laugh. Kotys hopes she wasn't simply testing to see if Kotys would eventually stand up for herself. That's the very worst and most cliché kind of test. A stupid person's idea of a smart trick.

"You're a person, Sergeant Kotys." The handler shows teeth. "Or at least, that's what I'm hoping."

Kotys blinks.

"A tool needs a hand," the handler lectures. "A wielder. You can't own another human being's soul if you're just a cog in a machine. You must demonstrate that you're capable of grasping the weapon."

"I am, damn it!" Kotys knows she is. She feels it deep within herself. It's a power she's already tapped into once. "You've seen that I am. You know I am. That's why you called me here, right? So just tell me how to fucking prove it."

The handler takes her time in answering. She turns her back and walks over to her desk, Sartha Thrace following at her heel. She carefully picks up something—a small case—then opens it and turns to face Sergeant Kotys once again.

"You have to stake your humanity."

Inside the case, Kotys sees an old-fashioned metal syringe, alarmingly large and tipped with an uncomfortably thick needle. Within, visible through a slim, glass panel, is a liquid so green it is plainly unnatural. Something about it makes Kotys shiver.

"What is that?" she demands. "Is it..."

Her eyes betray her, and she glances nervously at Thrace.

"A tool," the handler tells her. "One of many. There are other drugs and other methods. Perhaps soon, you'll be instructed in their use." The handler's smile curls. "If you are what I hope you are."

"A person, right?" Kotys grimaces. She doesn't know how the hell this is meant to prove that, but she knows one thing: she'll succeed. She's special. She's different. There were two dozen pilots watching Sartha Thrace and the handler the day before. She alone stepped forward. That means something. "Fine. Let's do it."

As much as she dreads the green fluid she can see sloshing around in the large syringe, part of her is hoping that the handler will lash out and jab it into her before she can think twice. There's no such kindness. Instead, the handler simply offers it to her. Kotys takes it, of course.

"In the neck," she instructs. "Find your large vein."

Like any pilot, Kotys has done enough medic training to know how. Once you're sealed up in a cockpit, it's not like anyone else is going to be there to patch you up. Carefully, she curls her fingers through the metal loops of the syringe and brings the needle's point against her skin. She pauses. She breathes.

This is just another battle. When she says it herself like that, adrenaline is her ally. It gives her the courage to make herself grin and look the handler dead in the eyes. Then, Kotys pushes the needle into her skin and pushes down on the plunger with all of her strength.

She's used combat stims before, so the sensation of something cold flowing in her veins isn't unfamiliar. Neither is the sudden, uncomfortable awareness of her heartbeat that it brings. Kotys closes her eyes to balance herself. One beat of her heart brings the drug into her chest. The next expels it and sends it rushing throughout her body. Kotys feels something. But what? Is it the weakness in her legs? The tingling in her fingertips? How long does it take this drug to take effect? Kotys is getting lightheaded. As moments pass, she's increasingly certain of that. She feels herself spinning even with both feet firmly on the ground. The shape of the room around her is disappearing into nothing. She needs to open her eyes, but when she does, she sees Handler.

Handler is made of stars.

Kotys has seen stars just once, transiting from orbit. From the surface, they're almost never visible through the dust storms. That memory has always stayed with her, and she feels it again as she looks at Handler now, every point on Her skin twinkling with light. She is flesh and blood and stars, and when She looks intently at Kotys, the drugged pilot feels the entire weight of the cosmos bearing down on her.

"Good," Handler says, after peering at Kotys's pupils. Kotys flinches under Her gaze. "You're taking to it well, I see."

Kotys nods, because how can she do anything else? She's so small.

"Then let's begin," Handler says. Kotys is losing herself in Her smile. "Down."

"D-" Handler's words snatch back Kotys's attention. "W-what?"

"On the ground." Handler helpfully indicates with Her hand. "Down. Now."

It does not occur to Kotys that disobedience is a possibility. She's a leaf in a stream, and Handler is the current. When Handler tells her to go down, it's like she's feeling gravity for the very first time. Inevitably, she sinks unsteadily to her knees. The ground is hard and cold but she's numb to all of that. The numbness is a reminder of the drug coursing through her veins, otherwise seductively easy to forget.

"You're much more obedient than you were yesterday," Handler comments. "Aren't you, dog?"

Kotys slow-blinks again. Dog? This feels like something she should question, but it's hard to be sure. She's trying to find her booze legs but being drunk has never been this confusing. "I'm... a...?"

"A dog," Handler confirms for her. "You're a dog."

This thunderous proclamation rolls slowly through Kotys's mind. Once again, disobedience or disagreement do not occur to her as possibilities. Not when it's coming from this godlike, star-like woman. Instead her mind buckles, warping itself into a new shape, and 'dog' is its central pillar.

How does that feel? Kotys can't decide. It feels humiliating, vaguely, but she's numb even to that, and being upset with it seems as futile as being upset with the weather. She is a dog. It's a brute fact, even if it's also a new one. But what does that actually mean? She doesn't know, and the uncertainty makes her nervous. This is too important not to know.

So, she glances, again, at Sartha Thrace. The hierarchy between them, so sure and vivid until moments ago, is now in question. But maybe this other dog, this hound, will help her understand.

"No," Handler adds, Her voice firm. She repeats things the way you do with stupid children. Or pets. "No. No, not like her."

Kotys slumps. If not like her, then what? She's becoming desperate to understand. Ever since she walked in, she's been craving Handler's approval, but now the need for Her smile, Her nod, Her agreement has become all-encompassing. The lack of it is like a physical pain, like her stomach is cramping up from famine. It's the one thing she's not numb to.

"She's a hound," Handler explains kindly, as Kotys looks up at Her, stupefied. She reaches for Thrace once more, petting, fawning, and now Kotys wishes so very badly that it could be her instead. She wants that care from Handler. That love. "She's well-trained. I domesticated her myself, and she has never let me down since. My hound is a very, very good girl."

A little whine threatens to escape Kotys's throat. She can only imagine the perfect, encompassing affirmation that such a comment might bring. It would be enough to warm her through any cold. She's drowning in longing.

"But you?" Handler's attention falls back on Kotys, and it is cold. "You aren't trained. You aren't domesticated. You are not special. You are nothing. Just an average pilot."

Kotys thought that comment hurt before. Now, it stings infinitely worse. She doesn't have anger to insulate her. She can't be angry. Not at Handler. In her eyes, Handler is stars and light.

"You're no hound," Handler mocks—and it is mockery, her tone makes that plain. The cruelty of it is unbearable. "You're a mutt."

At this, Kotys doubles over in anguish. The approval she craves has never felt further away. She's left with nothing. She's a mutt. She's a mutt, and Sartha Thrace is a hound. That's a fresh knife into her heart. She's lower than Thrace now, and she's already seen how low Thrace can be. A broken thing with a broken mind, but Kotys is lower still. How will Handler ever love her if she's just a mutt?

"So." Handler folds Her arms as if the matter is settled. As if Kotys is a piece of trash She's thrown away. "What do you want, mutt? What are you doing here?"

Kotys has to answer, because Handler's questions need to be answered. To do that she needs to peer inside herself, and to her surprise, that rouses something. A memory. An impulse. She was here for something before the drug, before she awoke to Handler's true greatness.

She's here to prove her humanity.

Only now does she realize what that means, but the realization doesn't make the task seem easier. Her humanity has never felt further away. Hasn't she already given in? She's on the floor like a dog, just because Handler told her that's what she is. Wouldn't it be easier to simply let herself sink into the abasement? She's touched a hint of the bliss that comes with it, and it's just as dangerously alluring as what she touched the day before, with her gun in Sartha Thrace's mouth.

But something inside Sergeant Meetra Kotys isn't ready to give up that easily. She's a pilot, after all.

So she dares to straighten her back and look up. "I'm n-not," she says, in a drooling, unsteady voice, her conviction already wavering in the face of Handler's glorious stature, "a m-mutt."

Handler hits her.

Kotys barely feels the blow, and only pieces together what happened once she's already sprawled out on the ground. But the reprimand of being struck by Handler—that hurts. Handler is special. She's made of stars. She's at the center of the world. And She hit her.

Tears start forming behind her eyes again.

"You're a mutt." Handler's words are thunderous, even though She doesn't raise Her voice. She doesn't need to. "That's all you'll ever be."

It's a gut punch far worse than Handler's clean blow to the side of Kotys's face. She whimpers, and can't help but notice how pathetic and canine she sounds. But still, she finds something stubborn within herself and lifts her head.

"N-n-nooo," Kotys tries to insist.

Handler advances on her, and with each step the weight of Her presence bears down on Kotys. It's like gravity is getting stronger, pulling her downward, encouraging her to slump to the floor and plead and beg. It's frightening and awe-inspiring and beautiful all at once. Kotys has never known a woman like this. A woman with the gravity of stars at Her command.

It feels like blasphemy to question Her. Like hubris.

"You're a mutt," Handler insists. The fact that She needs to repeat herself makes Kotys feel shameful in her stupidity. "I saw you, yesterday. I know what you are. Merely an animal who couldn't resist her own urges. You couldn't control yourself. Just a beast in heat."

To punctuate Her statement, to make sure even a stupid dog like Kotys understands, Handler takes a deliberate step forward and places Her boot between Kotys's thighs.

Kotys's clothes do nothing to dull the sensation. Her drug-induced numbness is instantly a thing of the past. She wasn't aroused before but she sure is now, more than she's ever been. This arousal is different. Special—because of Handler. It's not just that there's something against her, touching her. It's that it's Her. Her touch is a blessing, even when it's cruel.

"Go ahead." Handler's lips curl up into that mocking smile that Kotys cannot help but adore. "You know what you want to do. I'm giving you permission."

Kotys's body betrays her with a twitch, and the twitch brings bliss as the single, half-voluntary movement presses her cunt against Handler's boot. They both know what she wants, and the knowledge of Handler's permission is electric. The voice of temptation is already whispering to her, telling her just once, one time, maybe it'll take the edge off, and when her head is full of clouds and haze it's very hard to remember that the voice of temptation is not her friend. Isn't this right and proper, for a dog like her?

But she knows that if she does it just once, one time, she'll never be able to stop. And there's no mistaking what that would mean.

Even so, Kotys can't quite bring herself to pull away.

"Oh?" Handler laughs at her paralysis. "The little mutt doesn't know what it's doing, does it?"

"I..." Kotys can't speak when Handler is this close. Her mouth is dry, and the words drool uselessly out of her mouth as soon as she opens it. Words are so far beyond her now.

"What's the matter?" Handler's cruel delight is plain, and that's another temptation. It's tempting to give in, just to delight Her all the more. "Don't you want to enjoy your treat?"

There is no chance that Kotys can deny wanting Handler right now.

Instead she simply whines.

"I guess not," Handler decides for her. She retracts Her boot. Another whine. "Perhaps you're more interested in my hound instead, like you were yesterday."

Kotys groans like a drunk. She doesn't know anymore, and it's easier to simply wait for Handler to tell her. That's always easier, for dogs. The emptiness inside her head keeps getting worse. She realizes she's only just hitting the peak. She needs to remember what she came here for.

"Sartha."

Handler makes an expectant tongue-clicking noise, and that seems to rouse Sartha Thrace. Her eyes clear of fog, if not of delusion. It's not like waking up, not really. She doesn't look around to get her bearings. She looks up at Handler, and an expression dawns on her face that's so hopeful it's almost pleading. Kotys knows exactly what Thrace is hoping for. She's hoping for an order, because an order is a chance to win Handler's approval.

It's disturbing to Kotys how effortlessly she understands Thrace now.

"Sir?" Thrace ventures eagerly.

"Off The Leash."

Before her eyes, Thrace transforms. No. Thrace dies. Kotys catches it—the moment her eyes go wide and dark before the whole of this woman, this hero, crumbles from within. Implosion follows. She goes slack, loose, empty. A shell. A scarecrow. It's terrifying to behold, like the death of a sun. It makes Kotys tremble. It's not exciting the way it was before. It's too close to home.

But then she resurrects, filled with a false life, so artificial and constructed the strings are all but visible. Her shoulders slump lazily and her mouth hangs open. There's a light there, a spark, but it's Handler's. An electric candle facsimile of a soul. In one sense, she's brighter than before. She's more alert. More aware. In another, she's so much dimmer. Her thoughts are crude and simple. She growls instead of speaking. She knows of nothing but obedience.

Hound.

She is not pleased to see Kotys. There's something vicious and possessive about the way she leans close to Handler and glares at Kotys, her lips pulled back in a snarl. She's territorial. It's like she's caught the scent of a rival dog.

"This is what you want, correct?" Handler says to Kotys. She pets Thrace's head as She speaks, and that takes the edge off Hound's snarl. "I know how

much you pilots enjoy blowing off steam and comparing body counts. Perhaps you're not so average in that department, mutt. You seemed keen enough with my hound yesterday. Perhaps you need her to scratch your itch."

Each of Her words is dripping with mocking condescension, and they make Kotys churn with conflicting emotions. She doesn't want Handler to mock her. She wants Handler to love her the same way She loves Her hound. But mockery is still attention, and this attention in particular makes Kotys's brain buzz with something warm and suffocating.

Wait. No. She doesn't want Handler to love her. She wants Handler to... what? To accept her? To train her? It's slippery. But she needs to try to keep hold of it.

"N. Nnnooo," Kotys forces herself to say. It wants to come out as a pathetic bleat—or maybe a bark.

"I think you do." When Handler decides for her, the matter is settled. "Hound."

Hound goes very still as Handler calls her to attention.

Handler's smile goes very thin and wider than ever as she nods to Kotys. "Fuck her."

Kotys isn't prepared for what happens next. Hound flies at her faster than she can think. There's nothing to hold her back—no shame, no inhibition, no self-preservation. Hound throws herself on top of Kotys, pinning her to the ground, and is on her in a frenzy, hands tearing and muzzle scraping. It's like how she's forgotten how to remove clothes, and so instead she's just tugging and ripping until buttons pop and seams come apart.

Kotys can't resist. She's blinded by starlight.

Now even Hound seems like she's made of stars. She's not Handler, of course. She's not special like Handler. But she's an instrument of Handler's will and, perhaps because of that, she partakes in some of Her radiance. She's flush with it; it makes her seem faster, stronger, harder to fight. Or maybe it's just the way she's already forcing a hand between Kotys's legs, touching her, forcing her way inside her, forcing her to feel just how greedy her own body is. The pleasure alone is blinding. She held back from the edge earlier, with Handler. Now Hound is going to make sure she falls.

Kotys doesn't notice that she's making noises until she notices her throat has started to hurt from moaning.

Even in her drugfucked brain, she hasn't lost sight of how humiliating this reversal is. Just one day ago, she had her gun in Hound's mouth. She watched Hound suck and mewl and drool and it was glorious. She felt like she'd mastered her. Like she'd finally beaten the great Sartha Thrace—if not in combat, then in something even more fundamental.

Now she's the one mewling.

So maybe it was nothing. A fluke. Or worse, a gift. Handler's charity. Power that wasn't really hers. That feels more true, now that she's dripping on Hound's hand while the brainwashed hero drools through the bars of her muzzle, desperate to bite. Hound is rougher than any woman Kotys has ever had. She was told to fuck Kotys, but not to be gentle about it. This barely feels like sex. It feels like rutting. Handler stands above it all, watching, Her smile unreadable. She ordered this depravity, but She is not tainted by it. Not one fleck of dirt or wetness has soiled Her boots. She's judging Kotys, of course, and that makes Her seem all the more like a goddess.

Kotys can't meet Her gaze. She can only arch her back and buck her hips and moan and drool and scream and try her hardest not to beg for more.

She's going to lose.

She can feel that more keenly now than ever. She's already hitting her limit. Hound is teasing it out of her. If Kotys comes, if she comes from this, then there's truly no difference between the two of them. If she comes from this, she's truly a mutt. She'll have lost something forever, she senses. In Handler's eyes especially.

And then... what? She'll just have to go back to her dormitory and her unit. They'll take her back, probably. They'll pretend to forget. It'll be like nothing ever happened—except for the moments she thinks back and remembers the time she touched glory and let it slip through her fingers. In those moments, she'll know that she failed to become what she was always meant to be.

Sergeant Meetra Kotys can't face that.

She digs deep within herself and finds reserves—not of dignity, but of strength, of ferocity close to that which she can see on Hound's face. Acting on some instinct that Handler's drug hasn't quite dulled, she reaches up, puts her hand into Hound's matted blonde hair and makes a tight fist. Hound steels herself, ready to resist if she's pushed away, but Kotys isn't pushing away.

She's pushing down.

Hound isn't ready for this and so, for just a moment, her balance slips. She's still fighting tooth and nail but Kotys is no slouch in a brawl, and the lapse lets her shove Hound far enough down that she can hook her thighs around her head and trap her there. It doesn't bring any relief— Hound's hand is still halfway inside her cunt—but it helps her bruised ego.

Hound is furious. She writhes like a kicked dog, but she can't really fight back. Handler told her to fuck Kotys, and Handler hasn't told her she can stop. At least half her attention is on keeping her hand moving against Kotys's body. An addled grin comes to Kotys's face as she sees Hound accept this new position. It's not much, but it's something. A foothold. That victory immediately goes to her head. She turns euphoric. The drug makes it easy to let the feeling sweep her away. It helps that this is what Handler wants from her too. A turning of the tables. It's starting to make sense. This is how she proves her humanity.

She needs to show Hound who's really the mutt.

Kotys fixes that goal in her mind. Now, riding high on dominance, she can simply do what comes naturally. Kotys reaches her other hand down and slips her fingers through the thin metal bars of Hound's muzzle. Then, once her grip is solid, she pulls. Hard. Hound lets out two cries as the muzzle, punishingly tight, slips free and goes flying across the room. The first is pain. The second, louder and worse, is grief. Kotys is sure Handler doesn't let her be without her muzzle. But she doesn't care. She needs to prove that Handler isn't the only one in charge, as hubristic as that might feel. She forces Hound's face between her legs.

"Here," she growls. "Eat me out."

Kotys squeezes down with her thighs to make sure Hound cannot possibly escape. Hound whines a few times, but eventually submits. She's been told to fuck Kotys and she'll obey even if her tongue is all she can use. When Kotys feels it inside her, it's so good she starts to laugh and giggle. This is even better, maybe, than making her suck her gun barrel. This is true mastery.

Sartha Thrace, the rebel hero, obediently lapping at her cunt.

"That's better," Kotys snarls. "Lick, bitch."

Dominating the hound between Kotys's legs is effortless now. She's found her flow. She's not sure if the drug is wearing off or simply taking her to fresh heights, but she feels more focused than ever. Now it's like she's the one

who's made of stars. She can do anything. Already, she's picturing herself in Handler's garb, in that black coat and cap and boots. Maybe Hound is picturing her that way too. Maybe that's why she seems so servile now. She's pressing her face into Kotys's body, greedily licking and lapping, tonguefucking her like it's the only way she can breathe. Hound has accepted her place. Her purpose.

Pleasing Kotys.

For Kotys, it's something close to the thrill of piloting a mech. Every pilot knows it; the feeling of striding across the world a titan, armored in invincible steel, armed with the power to blow mountains apart. It's the thrill of domination. Kotys knows a lot of pilots who sleep around, but she doesn't know any who'd take sex over the chance to put an enemy machine in the dirt. It's just that addictive.

Kotys has always been an average pilot. Fine. She can accept that. But now she sees. Piloting was never her true calling. This is.

And it's better.

Kotys rolls over suddenly, keeping Hound pinned beneath her body, grinding her cunt furiously on the brainwashed woman's face. She's going to come, but it's going to be on her terms.

"You can do better than that," she snarls. "Fuck me, mutt. Use your tongue."

Hound responds exactly as she'd hoped: with submission. That's how Kotys knows she's won. Hound is her creature now. Her plaything, straining to eat her out deeper and better. Kotys has passed the test. The euphoria bubbling through her brain tells the whole story.

Which means there's no more reason to hold back.

Kotys lets herself come all over Hound's face. She rides her to the very end, eager to milk every last drop of pleasure out of her victory. She's earned it, after all, just as she's earned the right to buck her hips and fill the room with her ragged screams of bliss.

Fuck. She's so alive.

This is true triumph. A medal on her chest wouldn't even come close. Neither would any other sex Kotys has ever had. None of it means what this means. Handler spoke earlier of owning another human being's soul. Now Kotys understands. She understands how awe-inspiring the feeling is. She understands that she needs it again, and always will. The addiction is instant.

The craving is almost enough to make her want to ride Hound's face a second time.

But she didn't come here for just sex. So after Hound goes limp, Kotys extracts herself and clambers wearily to her feet. She chooses to savor the moment and so, unhurried, she takes a long while to fix her clothes before she turns to address Handler. But when she does, the expression she sees is worse than any she might have thought to dread.

"How very disappointing," Handler sighs.

Boredom. Total, crushing boredom.

That chills Kotys all the way through. Maybe the drug isn't quite out of her system yet because she feels the reprimand as a stab wound. An icicle in her chest. What's going on? It can't go wrong. Not again.

"But I..." she splutters. Her power, her dominance, is a lost memory, snatched away in three simple words. "I..."

"You. Failed." Handler says it so very clearly.

"No," Kotys pleads. "No, I-"

She trips backward and is sent sprawling again. Handler seems to loom above her. It's obvious to anyone that She has already passed judgment, but Kotys is already far beyond dignity.

"I beat her!" Kotys whines. "I did! I made her-"

"You rolled around on the ground like a pair of stupid animals." Handler observes clinically. "Is that what you suppose I wanted to see, Sergeant Kotys?"

Like before, all Kotys can do is turn her uncontrollable shame into anger. "B-but that's what you do!" she babbles. "You freaks. Down here. We're the same!"

That, at long last, earns something more than bored contempt. It earns a little anger, and even that little is so much worse. In a swift, disciplinarian movement, Handler steps forwards, grabs Kotys by her messed-up hair, and wrenches her head upwards so hard it makes her neck scream.

"Unlike you," Handler hisses at her, "I don't fuck dogs."

Once again, She's a god. A star-being. Under Her gaze, Kotys crumples. She knows in her heart that Handler is right. She's always right. They are not the same. Handler possesses a power beyond strength, and it is Hers. Kotys

was just a brat She was indulging. And for her hubris, she deserves whatever's coming her way.

"I-I'll go," Kotys blubbers, fighting to stand. She wants to collapse and pass out, but she wants to be away from Handler even more. She wants to be away from all this. "I'm sorry. Sir. I'll go. B-back to my-"

"No." Handler smiles cruelly at her. "You won't. You're ruined for that now. I've already arranged your transfer, Sergeant Kotys. We have uses for mutts down here."

She clicks Her tongue again, and Hound is upon Kotys. This time, Hound isn't play-fighting. She unsheathes her true strength and there is no resisting her—not that it matters. Kotys has no resistance left. A glorious destiny will never be hers. She was a pilot—an average pilot, yes, but still a pilot—and now she's nothing. She threw it away. There's nothing left to fight for. If the order is given, if the paperwork is signed, then there's no going back. That's the way the Imperial war machine operates. Kotys doesn't know what happens to mutts, but whatever it is, she'll accept it.

After all, Handler knows best for all Her dogs.

The broken pilot sobs as Hound begins to drag her into the depths of the Kennels.

HUNTING HOUND

PART ONE

Nothing makes Leinth Aritimis feel good the way being saddled up in the cockpit of a huge mech suit does.

It's not a rare refrain for a pilot. Most are enraptured by the sheer power a mech places at your disposal. You can feel it in your gut: the thrum of the engine, the shaking of the earth, the divine thunder of artillery. It's never been that for Leinth, though. Truth be told, the sound and fury of her own *Genetor* still frightens her at times. But what really matters is what it lets her do.

Fight.

Leinth never set out to be a hero herself. She just wanted to be a little like her own heroes. To do her part. It was the least anyone could do, and that sense of duty had grown heavy in her belly during the last years of her adolescence, until she was finally old enough to join up. The war isn't going well. They're always on the back foot. But that means Leinth always has something to defend, and knowing that makes her strong. The looks of hope and relief she sees on people's faces when she dismounts after a long, hard-fought battle—that's what feels good.

Now, after a couple of years, people are starting to call her a hero. Crazy.

She doesn't deserve it, and she always tells them so. She's no Sartha Thrace, and her *Genetor* is certainly no *Ancyor*. *Ancyor* is a proud old beast. *Genetor* is a slab. A fortress as much as a vehicle. Huge, angular, unwieldy—but not for Leinth. She's learned well how to wield it. In her hands, the rebel prototype is a bulwark. She takes pride in that, and she's proud of her

machine in turn. Proud of the way it keeps moving even now, despite the awful, jagged chunk taken out of its right leg.

Leinth reaches up overhead and punches a few switches, shunting power into the sensor suite for one more sweep. A few moments later, it chatters back its report. Nothing. No movement. That's a relief. Maybe it's actually over.

"*Genetor* reporting," she says into her radio. "Sector is clear. I'm gonna stay out just a little longer. Make sure the bastards are gone for good."

'You got it,' comes the warm reply, after a brief burst of static. '*But I think we got 'em, Leinth. Don't wear yourself out.'*

Right now there's little choice but to take the sensors at their word. No use looking outside, that's for damn sure. The day's fighting has turned the cityscape into a blackened ruin where ash hangs in the air like fog, billowing on unnatural winds. What tall buildings remain are nothing more than burnt rebar skeletons; in amongst them are the carcasses of mechs that haven't quite managed to fall, looming over the shattered concrete like strange, harrowed statues. Most of them are so ravaged by the firestorm, Imperial and rebel models look exactly alike.

It's demoralizing. But as long as there's land and there's people, they can rebuild. Leinth always insists upon that to herself.

It's been bad here. Intense. A fresh Imperial offensive. There's no telling how much worse tomorrow might be. This could have been the final battle or merely an opening skirmish. Sometimes the resources and reserves at the enemy's disposal seem all but unlimited. There's a push-pull logic to the ever-moving front lines that Leinth can't perceive. It's not her job to, as a pilot. But like everyone else, she knows that they are not winning.

Maybe they can win here. Maybe Leinth can be the rock on which the tide breaks. She's the one who never loses faith.

The falling dusk is a mercy, in a way. It hides the worst of the damage, and the most heartbreaking details. The contents of a wardrobe and a life, ripped out of a building by an artillery shell and strewn all over the ashen ground. No good comes from looking. Those things—the human traces, the human remains—are too small for most mech pilots to notice. But in quiet moments, Leinth finds herself looking, magnifying them to fill the *Genetor*'s viewscreen. It's a bad habit, and the darkness of night saves her from it. If she indulges, it's

too easy to let her thoughts turn to dark things.

Dark things like Sartha Thrace.

It's been months since she disappeared. She went out like a hero. Her *Ancyor* was last seen plunging deep into the enemy's lines to fight a furious rearguard. She's listed as MIA not KIA, technically, but Leinth has done her best to make her peace with her hero's passing. The rumors are making it damn hard, though. Rumors about seeing the *Ancyor* back in service on the wrong side of the war. Rumors about it moving the way only she could make it move.

Leinth hates hearing that shit. She's said so often enough and angrily enough that no one says it to her face anymore. But that doesn't mean she doesn't overhear when people are whispering about it. And it's hard as hell to get it out of her head. Sartha Thrace means the world to her. Meant the world to her. That poster above her bunk in the barracks. An idol. Leinth's transition goal, even, in the early days before she knew better. Now the kind thing to do is to let her memory rest until the time comes when they can honor it properly.

It's not like she doesn't wish Sartha Thrace was still alive. She wishes that more than anything. Especially in battles like these, it sure would be nice to have a hero to believe in.

'Genetor! Headed your way! Leinth!'

The urgency of her CO's voice on the radio catches her attention just as much as her name. Leinth snaps back to attention and looks down at her scope —and then freezes. Her first response— her rational response—is that it's a glitch. It has to be. It doesn't make sense for a heat signature like that to be moving that fast. Then instinct takes flight. Leinth can feel it already. The vibrations. The heat in the air. She brings *Genetor* around to face the new threat, brings her weapons up, and kicks her searchlights up to max.

It's too late. No time to brace herself. *Ancyor* is upon her.

Leinth would recognize its savage face anywhere, even here, and it makes her hesitate. If she wasn't already screwed, that pause is what screws her. Once Leinth can make her hands move, it's far too late to make use of *Genetor*'s shields. And *Ancyor* doesn't stop to launch a blow. It simply barrels into her. With a raw howl of steel on steel, the mechs collide. *Genetor* might be a slab, but *Ancyor* is monstrously strong and it has momentum. There's no

contest. The impact sends Leinth off-balance. The ACS screams at her, but there's nothing to be done.

Genetor topples over. The bastion falls.

And it will not be allowed to stand. *Ancyor* is still on her, driving its massive chainblades into the prone mech's limbs. Leinth cries out in panic. She feels the bite in her own flesh. The rattling, the noise, the flashing lights as *Genetor*'s systems struggle to shunt power to the cockpit—it's a nightmare. She already knows she's lost. There's no coming back from this.

But it gets worse. *Ancyor* rears up, and amongst the ashen city, lit only by *Genetor*'s flickering searchlights, it looks truly awful in its lupine fury. Then it brings its fist down, right on the cockpit. The sound of the blow is an awful crunch, a noise no metal should ever make. Leinth screams as the wall of her cockpit starts to bow in against her. *Genetor* holds, but only just. Another blow has it convulse, and Leinth's scream is silenced when her head is thrown back against the back of the cockpit. No ACS to compensate now.

She starts seeing in black and white. Not good. Concussion, at least. It happened so fast. Leinth is still struggling to believe in what she's seeing and feeling. It doesn't make sense.

There's only one woman who can pilot *Ancyor* like this. But it's not her. It's not her.

There's no third blow. Or if there is, Leinth is too far gone to feel it. She hears something, though. Other vehicles approaching. Not mechs. Smaller. They get close, then stop, then Leinth hears scrambling. Shouting. Climbing. The realization of what's happening makes her breath catch with fear, but she's beyond even adrenaline now. Darkness is here for her.

The last thing she hears before oblivion is the Imperial engineers starting to drill their way into *Genetor*'s cockpit.

* * *

There is no time, in the room. No daylight, no clock. Leinth has been counting sleeps and by that tally it's been fifteen days but that's surely off by a day or more. Especially given how hard she got knocked around.

Leinth remembers being pulled from *Genetor*'s cockpit. She remembers

being bound and guarded and dragged into an infirmary to receive only the most basic medical care. Leinth had been in and out for most of that, twitching and shouting whenever she was close to consciousness, but eventually they gave her something that brought her all the way back up to uncomfortably sharp awareness. Then, an interrogation. Noise, bright lights, sternness, threats—the usual. Crude. Blunt. Like all pilots, Leinth has prepared herself for this long ago. They got nothing from her.

She'd been bracing herself for torture to follow—but no. At least, not that kind of torture. Something interrupted the proceedings. There had been a whisper in an ear, and then a strange ripple had gone through her interrogators. With fresh urgency, they'd dragged her to her feet and she'd been taken somewhere else. Somewhere down, under the hangar, far beneath the rest of the Imperial base.

It's strange here. The walls are dark, and it's much too quiet. None of the hustle and bustle that's everywhere in any normal military facility. Since then, nothing. Leinth has been left to sit and rot in her uncertainty and her boredom. The solitude is maddening. There is nothing to disturb it except occasional meals given at irregular intervals through a slot in the door.

From how it leaves her feeling, Leinth is pretty sure the food is drugged. She eats most of it anyway. Tricking her into starving herself could be another way of softening her up.

The sound of locking bolts retracting into the wall heralds change. At once, Leinth is completely focused. Any information about her situation, any stimulation at all, is a sweetness she's desperate for. When the heavy cell door swings open, she catches sight of the person holding the key. Immediately she regrets her eagerness. This is almost more disconcerting than seeing nothing at all.

The menial standing before her had once been an Imperial pilot, judging from the uniform and the wings on her lapel. Once, but no longer. There's something unmistakably broken about her. Her uniform is wearing thin from neglect and she moves with a strange, stooped, shambling gait that just doesn't look right on a person. She's like an animal that's been beaten one too many times. Leinth wishes she could see her face, if only to verify her humanity, but she can't. The menial is wearing an awful hood that hides her face—leather, perhaps, and fashioned to look like a dog's head.

It's some sick shit, even for Imperials, and Leinth doesn't have a clue what it means.

All is forgotten, though, when the menial steps aside and reveals Leinth's visitor.

Sartha Thrace.

Her presence is electricity on Leinth's skin, and for that reason she knows she's real even before she pinches herself and blinks—three times, four times, five times. It's impossible, but she'd know that face anywhere, even here, even in the woefully inadequate glow of the cell's dim lights. It's the real deal. Leinth believes it with her whole heart, especially when Sartha Thrace flashes her a classic smile and reaches up to rake back her messy blonde hair. Somehow, in the flesh, she's even more beautiful than she is on the posters.

"Leinth Aritimis?" Sartha says. "Looks like you got scooped up pretty rough, huh?"

"I... I... you..." Leinth's mouth is struggling to catch up with her mind. There are too many questions, and the first to fall from her lips is embarrassingly juvenile. "You know who I am?"

"Sure." Sartha walks into the cell—ushered in, it seems—and the door closes behind her. "We fought together, right? The Dacian salient?"

Leinth nods numbly. She remembered. She actually remembered. They'd only met in passing, two pilots among many, and Leinth had been nobody then. She'd assumed Sartha Thrace had taken no notice of her. She feels—and notes with humor—a flicker of gratitude for her capture.

Then she blinks. She remembers her place.

"I should..." Leinth stands and salutes as best she can. "Captain!"

"Woah, easy." Sartha laughs and waves her off. "I've never been a stickler, Leinth, and it doesn't seem to make much sense here. Just call me 'Sartha'."

Leinth nods. She can barely believe her luck. It's like a dream come true —circumstances notwithstanding.

"So they... they got you?" Leinth asks slowly, as Sartha walks over and sits next to her on the long bench that is the cell's sole furnishing. "We all thought you were dead."

"Yeah." Sartha smiles faintly. "I guess they did."

"I saw *Ancyor* out there," Leinth says. "It's what took me down. I guess

they... gods."

Sartha doesn't reply. She just looks down. In the dim light, Leinth can see there's a strange look in her eye. Distant. Glassy. She's not herself, in that moment. Leinth can't blame her for it. She doesn't want to think about how she'd feel if she knew someone else had taken *Genetor* from her. Was using it against her people. The violation would be monstrous. She silently prays her mech was too badly damaged for that.

"So," she says, hoping to bring Sartha back. "What happens now? To us. To me."

"Wish I could tell you." Sartha looks up. She sounds OK again. "I don't even know how long I've been here."

"Did..." Leinth is afraid to ask, but she needs to know. "Have they done something to you? Anything I should prepare myself for?"

Sartha looks down again. "I don't... know."

Leinth has no words for that. She shivers. She clamps down hard on her own, faint disappointment. She tries to remind herself that Sartha Thrace is more than a hero on a poster above Leinth's bunk. She's been through hell. Anyone would be in pieces after months down here.

"But," Sartha adds after a long moment, "you'll be OK. I remember how I felt when they first put me down here. You're strong. This is not the end. I'm still here, aren't I? And now there's two of us. It'll be easier."

Now Leinth feels ashamed of even that brief flash of disappointment. She can hear the grit in Sartha Thrace's voice. She can feel the warmth, and she is warmed by it. Thanks to her—thanks only to her—this chthonic hell is bearable. She's gonna get through this. They're both going to get through this. She can believe that, with a hero at her side. Leinth is so very grateful for Sartha's presence.

But that begs a question.

"Thank you," Leinth says, but frowns. "Why do you think they put us together like this?"

"Dunno," Sartha replies. "She didn't tell me anything."

She? Who? The menial? Maybe, but there's something about how Sartha said it. It's probably not important.

"Could be they want to get us talking?" Leinth glances around. "This place could be wired for sound. Maybe they're hoping we'll let something slip."

"Maybe."

"Let's keep it light, eh?" Leinth says. "Just in case. No secrets."

"You got it," Sartha agrees. "I do have something important to ask you, though."

"OK." Leinth glances around again. She decides to trust Sartha's judgment but just in case, she leans in so they can whisper to one another. "What?"

"Have you met Her yet?"

"No," Leinth answers immediately, as if she hopes she can dispel the nasty feeling Sartha's question puts in her gut. She cannot, and curiously quickly nips at her. "Who?"

"*Her*."

That one little word contains an entire ocean of feeling. Sartha quivers with excitement as she speaks it. She can barely contain herself. It's a prayer, swelling with reverence, bursting with unnatural devotion. Leinth can sense already that Sartha is consumed by this 'Her'. Nothing she said to Leinth before matters. Whatever—whoever—she's talking about is utterly totalizing.

"Sartha," Leinth says hesitantly. "What are you talking about?"

Sartha Thrace smiles, and now her smile is all wrong. It's too serene. "Ah. You haven't. You'd know if you had. Don't worry. I'm sure it won't be long."

"Sartha..." Leinth's stomach is plummeting. She's panicking again. This isn't right. "What the fuck?"

"She'll explain everything," Sartha assures her, and it's like she thinks Leinth will be grateful for the assurance. "Once She talks to you, everything will make sense. You'll make sense."

"Stop talking like this!" Leinth pleads. "Just... just tell me what's going on."

Sartha pauses and composes herself. Leinth can still see the light of energy and enthusiasm brimming within her, though. She's just holding back because she can see Leinth isn't ready yet.

"Handler," she explains. Her tone is worshipful. "Oh, Leinth. You have no idea how wonderful she is!"

"Your..." Leinth feels like she's going to throw up. "Sartha. Out there. The *Ancyor*. That... please. Please don't tell me that was you."

"It was." Sartha tilts her head. Her eyes grow distant. "Well. In a way."

Leinth doesn't know what the fuck that means, but she's heard more than

enough. She springs to her feet. Leaps away. Anger claws at the inside of her skin.

"Traitor!" she snarls. "How... how could you? How did they... no, no, it doesn't fucking matter. You betrayed us!"

Sartha looks saddened, a little. Not enough to doubt herself. "She said you'd say that. But it's OK. She said that I don't need to listen. I think She just wants me to help you."

"Help me? What the..."

Leinth doesn't want to hear that. It's awful—that whoever 'She' is, all she has to do is say one word, and Sartha shuts off? That's inhuman.

"Help you," Sartha repeats. "It's... an adjustment. Being with Her. I struggled with it too, at first. At least, I think so. She says I don't have to remember anymore. But once you accept it—once you accept Her—everything gets better. You'll see."

Obviously they've done something to her. Brainwashing. Obviously she's a victim too. Leinth knows that—but knowing isn't enough. She would have kissed the ground Sartha Thrace walked on. She would have given everything for her. Now she's with them. Leinth begins to shed tears as her voice becomes a bitter, frigid growl.

"Traitor," she spits, hoping she can inject enough venom into her voice to make it sting. "You're a fucking traitor."

It works. Sartha looks offended. Wounded. She looks away, like she's trying to go distant again, but she can't quite manage it. Even now, even after whatever the fuck they did to her, she has just a little bit too much fight for that. She needs to retort.

"You shouldn't call me that," Sartha says defensively. "I'm not a... I'm a hero, right? You know that. The way you looked at me, it's... I'm just here because..."

Because? Leinth can see gears spinning in her head, and that she's going nowhere. She doesn't know why she's here or what she's doing. Not really. She looks so lost.

"I-I have to do what She says." Sartha is almost pleading now. "It's not like I'm... we're soldiers, aren't we? We follow orders. And Her orders are special." It's like she's tricking herself. Searching for justification. She's found one now, however thin and false. Her distress abates. "If you just met Her, you'd

understand."

Her confusion is so obvious it hurts to witness. It's embarrassing. Sartha Thrace is meant to be a hero. She's meant to be better than this. Contradicting feelings gnaw on Leinth's mind. She wants to forgive the confused woman in front of her. Their captors must have done something truly awful to her. But that also makes her presence hard to bear. Is it a warning of what fate they have in store for Leinth? Leinth doesn't want to think about that. Not for one second.

Sartha Thrace is meant to be better. She's meant to be the hero on the poster. Not this. Leinth doesn't want to see her like this.

"Just leave me alone," Leinth says quietly. When she catches Sartha looking sadly at her, she balls her hands into fists. It pisses her off. "Get the fuck out already! Go. It's not like you're a prisoner here, right? I don't want to fucking look at you."

She laughs bitterly at that. Sartha looks for a moment like nothing more than a kicked puppy. She stands.

"I'm sorry you feel that way," Sartha says stiffly. "I'll be back, though. I promise. I don't want to leave you all on your own down here. And I really think She wants me to help you. To look after you. She's so kind, you see."

Leinth goes silent and stares at the wall, so Sartha walks over to the door of the cell. She bangs on it twice with her fist and the door opens. Leinth stays dead still until she leaves and the door closes again behind her. Then she buries her head in her hands and starts to sob.

Fuck.

* * *

After that, it all changes. The solitary boredom, interminable though it was, is something Leinth comes to miss. Because after Sartha's first visit they start torturing her.

That's how Leinth chooses to think of it, anyway—torture. She's not sure what else she'd call it. It's not a kind of torture she'd ever prepared herself for, though. It's not an interrogation. There are no questions. It's not pain for pain's sake, either. Sometimes it doesn't hurt at all. They drug her with drugs that

make her feel like nothing else. They hook her up to strange machines that seem to do nothing and everything. They shine bright, flickering lights into her eyes, and it's like they're projecting something, like an old movie on film, and only part of her mind is able to see it.

Other times, it hurts worse than Leinth could ever describe.

Either way, by the time Leinth is dragged back to her cell she feels like her skin's been turned inside out. She feels like one of those mech carcasses, still standing even though they've been burned to ash on the inside. All she can do is collapse and lie shivering on the floor of her cell, trying to piece herself back together. Sometimes, all the sensations they inflict on her seem to linger on in her body, burrowing deeper, until she can remind herself that they're not real. Sometimes, the drugs leave her with an impossible euphoria that makes Leinth feel like she can't trust any of her own thoughts.

At times like those, when Leinth is at her very lowest, Sartha Thrace comes to visit.

The first few times, at least, Leinth finds the strength to tell her to fuck off. To Sartha's credit, she does. But she keeps coming back and eventually, in a moment of weakness, Leinth relents. It was meant to be just that once, but somehow after that Sartha always ends up staying. Leinth is not made of stone. Without Sartha, she'd never see a single soul except for the hooded menials that drag her from her cell each day, and they barely seem to count as human.

She takes infinite comfort in simply sharing her cell, for a time, with another, familiar person. Just seeing Sartha's face, seeing her little human gestures like the way she adjusts her clothes and rakes back her hair, makes Leinth feel less crazy. Less alone and forgotten, less like she's died and gone to her own private hell.

Sartha's good company, too. Even though she's a traitor. She only wants to talk if Leinth does. She's never pushy. She'll put up with Leinth's insults and anger. Sometimes it even feels like Leinth is getting through to her.

She's so beautiful, too. That helps.

Over time, it becomes a rhythm. Torture, then Sartha. The rhythm makes it easier to bear. No matter what they do to her, no matter how it feels, afterwards Sartha will be there. They can talk if Leinth needs to hear her voice, or not if Leinth needs quiet. Eventually, Leinth's anger becomes

impossible to summon. There's no point being angry at Sartha Thrace. They're both in hell. Maybe Sartha's just in a little deeper.

The rhythm is troubling too, though. Leinth isn't blind to all the ways it could be used against her. Everything that's happening to her in this place seems as regular as clockwork, but sometimes Leinth senses something behind that. A presence. A person. The rhythm's conductor, perhaps. It might even be that mysterious 'she' Sartha sometimes refers to.

Or it might not. Maybe Leinth is just losing her mind.

Talking helps with that. It feels like it helps, anyway—not that there's much to talk about. Mostly, Leinth talks about herself. Sometimes they talk about the war, although it's difficult to draw Sartha out on that subject. It's like she doesn't want to think about what's happening, or what side she's really on. It's like she prefers to be confused. Leinth learns that if she presses too hard Sartha might shut down on her, or worse, leave, and so Leinth also learns how to press her just the right amount. How to draw out Sartha's cognitive dissonance without scaring her off.

And sometimes there are glimpses of the old Sartha. Of someone bright and brilliant, full of charisma and hope. Leinth comes to live for those glimpses. Even now, Sartha is a kind of hero to her.

"'In a way'," Leinth says slowly, one day, thinking back to their very first conversation. "What did that mean?"

"Hm?" Sartha, sitting just along from her in the cell, turns her head.

"That first time, when I asked you about piloting *Ancyor*," Leinth presses. "You said it was you—'in a way'. Tell me what that means."

Sartha looks away. "I just meant... nothing. It was me."

"Bullshit." Leinth has learned what it looks like when Sartha doesn't want to think about something. "Tell me. Stop hiding something."

Now Sartha sighs. "I'm not hiding. You just wouldn't understand."

"Try me."

It's possible she's pushing too hard, but the question has been burning inside Leinth. After a pause, Sartha sighs.

"It's like... it's like there's someone else in my head," she says slowly. Then, realizing how that sounds: "I mean, it's still me. Obviously. But sometimes I can... let them take over. When She wants me to."

Leinth doesn't need to say anything. Her expression does all the talking. Sartha gets defensive.

"I-It's not how it sounds," Sartha insists. "I'm just not explaining it well. It's like... it's like how, sometimes, in the heat of battle, you just go on autopilot. You know that feeling, right?"

Leinth nods.

"It's just one step further than that." She's grasping and she knows it. Leinth can tell. "It's better this way. A clearer separation." Sartha taps her foot restlessly. "I wish She was here. If She explained it to you, you'd understand perfectly."

"Why do you need to be separated?" Leinth fires back. "I don't. I want to be me—when I'm piloting, when I'm fighting. I want to know what I'm fighting for. Don't you?"

"I..." Sartha taps her foot faster. Agitated. "N-no. No, it gets distracting. Better to keep it separate. Better to focus. Better to ignore everything except orders. Her orders. She says I don't need to think, and the other me makes it easier. It's better this way!"

By the end, she's almost shouting. It's the first time Sartha's seen her get so worked up. She wants to push further, but she can sense that this is the limit—for now, at least. Perhaps Sartha's mistress doesn't realize how fragile she is. Perhaps Leinth is starting to figure out where the cracks are.

But she'll be smart about it. Rhythms go both ways. Now she can be the one to provide comfort. She slides along the bench and rests her arm across Sartha's shoulder. She squeezes her. Sartha relaxes. She welcomes the touch.

"You know," Leinth says slowly, after a minute or more has passed, "that it wasn't always like this, right?"

"Yeah." Sartha's voice is empty.

"And..." Leinth takes a deep breath. "And you know it's not like this for most people, don't you? You know it's not right."

Sartha plants her head in her hands. She might be crying. Then slowly, finally, she nods.

* * *

Time passes. It goes on. It gets worse. Whatever they're doing to Leinth, it's getting more intense. Not more painful—no, that would be preferable. Increasingly, instead of blurred memories of nameless, throbbing agonies, Leinth is left with no memories at all. She's left without clarity. Often for hours, even after she's returned to her cell. Blackouts. Lost time. It's like her mind is being packed into smaller and smaller boxes. Each day, less space remains. Less of her survives, and the rest is all an endless, wandering fog. Each memory and each clear thought becomes a hard-fought battle.

It's a war. And Leinth is losing this war too.

The pilot has no defense against this. She knows how to be strong, but strength isn't enough. Leinth's emotions are starting to fray. She screams. She sobs. She bangs her fists on the cell walls until her skin breaks. Leinth has long since lost track of the hours and the days. She can't tell if she's putting up a good fight. What haunts her more than anything is that all of this could have been no more than a couple of weeks. What if she's falling apart like this in just two weeks.

The mere possibility brings her to despair. Only Sartha Thrace can comfort her.

Leinth is lying across Sartha's lap, allowing her former hero's warmth to cradle her. Sartha is the only soft thing she ever gets to touch. When the inside of her own head feels like a hive of bees or a yawning abyss, she can lose herself in the scratchy texture of Sartha's clothes. She can become something that only exists in the present tense, without her past to grasp at and her future to dread. She can't remember when she lost enough of her pride to accept this embrace, from a woman she's called a traitor. But Leinth is glad she did. Without this, she couldn't make it. Her very worst fear is that one day, Sartha will simply stop appearing at the door of her cell. She can only pray they don't start using that against her.

Sometimes they talk. Not often, though. What's there to talk about? Nothing changes down here. Leinth tries to keep working Sartha, though. Putting her fingers in those cracks. Prying them apart. She thinks it's working —not that she trusts herself to judge. But Sartha talks less and less about 'Her'. She seems more uncomfortable whenever Leinth questions her. That's something, right? That's hope?

None of that today, though. Leinth isn't together enough for it. All she can

do is rest her head in Sartha's lap and sob.

She tries to sob silently and cover the shaking motions she makes when her breath catches awkwardly in her throat. Maybe she doesn't want to cry so nakedly in front of an enemy. Maybe she doesn't want to cry so nakedly in front of her hero. Either way, she keeps her face turned away and hopes Sartha can't quite see her in the dark. Then it strikes her: of course she can. It's dim in here, but not pitch black. Sartha is right above her. Of course she can see that she's crying.

Leinth pulls her arms and legs in tighter. She tucks in her head. "Sorry," she says quietly.

Mercifully, Sartha doesn't say anything. She doesn't even make some condescending, cooing little noise. She just, very gently, reaches down and starts to stroke Leinth's hair.

Leinth closes her eyes. At first from shame, but slowly she relaxes. Sartha's touch is startlingly pleasant. An angel's touch. Suddenly, Leinth is struck with a kind of vision.

She imagines that it's the Sartha Thrace from the poster, sitting above her, stroking her hair. Sartha Thrace as she once was. Always victorious. Always right. Resplendent in her heroism. Her stirring beauty shining like the sun. Smiling a cocksure smile that lets everyone with her know that it's going to be OK.

The fantasy is a little childish, she guesses. But she needs it right now. Leinth gives herself over to the pleasant daydream. It makes her feel like it's going to be OK.

Eventually, after a long while, she manages to make herself still. She stops crying. She's shed enough tears for the day. But there's no escaping the knowledge that tomorrow will be the same. Fresh torments. And once they're over, even less of her will remain.

"Sartha," Leinth says. Her voice is shaky and hoarse. "I'm not going to make it in here. I'm going to end up like you. Or worse."

There's a long pause. Then: "I know."

Leinth summons up her courage. "Will you help me escape?"

A longer pause. Then:

"Yeah."

* * *

They make a plan. A simple one. No time for refinements. Leinth is desperate to get out and, frankly, she's not sure she can trust Sartha to keep her word.

From what Sartha's told her, simple should be good enough. This part of the base—the Kennels, Sartha calls it—is large, but has only a small contingent of those creepy, dog-hooded menials. Sartha can send them away once the cell door is unlocked, and then she can lead Leinth to freedom. They shouldn't encounter anyone else on their way to the hangar. All Leinth has to do is steal an Imperial mech and run like hell.

It sounds a little too good to be true. But what choice does Leinth have but to put her faith in Sartha, and hope she has enough of her own strength left to overcome any unexpected challenges?

The real sticking point is Sartha herself. She says all this like she's not coming. Leinth senses that she shouldn't ask. Now more than ever, she can't afford to push Sartha to breaking point. She can see, plain as day, all the fear and doubt inside the captured hero. For all her reputation, she's like an abused puppy now. She isn't just thinking running away will earn her another kick. She's thinking that running away will mean she's nothing at all.

Leinth wants to prove her wrong. She's nursing a hope that, at the very last moment, when they're standing at the threshold, Sartha will choose to take her hand. They have a connection, as pilots and fellow prisoners. Whatever Sartha's done, she can still be redeemed. She can be whole again. A hero once more.

And Leinth can be the one to take her back into the light. It feels like fate, in a way. Maybe that's why her chest is filling with tentative confidence.

The moment comes. Leinth hears the lock on her cell door disengage. There's a pause—longer than usual—before it opens. Sartha is standing in the doorway. No one's behind her. Sartha steps back, beckoning Leinth. Leinth's heart starts to race. It's happening. It's real.

"This way," Sartha says.

They start moving quickly, not quite running for fear that their feet pounding the concrete will alert someone or something. It's just as dark out of

Leinth's cell as it was in it and, to her, the dark corridors and passageways Sartha leads her through are completely indistinguishable. She's tried mapping the place in her head based on what she sees when the menials drag her out each day, but no luck. There's too little light, and their work leaves her far, far too disoriented.

Sartha appears to know the place intimately, though. She leads and Leinth follows, and eventually she senses that the ground is sloping upward. It takes longer than she'd hoped. How big is this part of the base? Is this sprawling complex just for prisoners like her and Sartha? There's no sense to it that she can discern.

She can puzzle that out later. For now she just needs to escape.

They round a corner and Leinth almost runs headfirst into Sartha's back. She's stopped. Leinth can immediately see why. For the first time, they can see light—not the light of day, but the harsh, artificial lights of the mech hangar, and that's close enough. It's still distant and faint but it's closer than Leinth dared hope to get.

But that's not why Sartha froze. There's something else. Someone standing between them and freedom. Not one of the menials. Leinth immediately knows who this is.

It's Her.

Sartha's handler. The woman she is utterly in awe of. There's no one else it could be. She's wearing a strange kind of uniform—black leathers and a dark cap, with a long coat that lends her a formidable silhouette. Her hair is platinum, almost white, as cold as her eyes or the thin smile she wears as she stares down the escapees.

This is bad. Leinth knows that right away. But she's already running the numbers. This woman's no bigger than she is. Even if Sartha freezes up, which seems likely, it's a fair fight. Leinth can win those.

Sartha does something much worse than freezing up.

"Well done, Sartha," the handler says. She gestures down. "Now. Heel."

Leinth freezes in horror as Sartha rushes across to the handler's side and kneels.

Her obedience isn't the worst part, much as Leinth wishes it was. The worst part is the way Sartha is bursting with energy. With certainty. There's no hint of doubt or shame or guilt in her demeanor. She's rushing forward.

Practically wagging her tail. So eager it's embarrassing.

If she was always going to betray Leinth again, the least she could have done was hesitate.

"Good girl," the handler says as Sartha throws herself at her feet. She reaches down and blesses her head with a couple of fond pats. Leinth is grateful she can't see the look on Sartha's face. She's sure it would break her heart. "Hello, Leinth Aritimis."

Leinth grits her teeth. This is as bad as it gets. She needs to get her head into gear. This is combat. She should run. But she has a question she needs to ask.

"What did you do to her?"

Handler takes her time. She tilts her head. Considering, perhaps, how to answer. "I gave her a gift," she says. "The kind of gift that would win anybody over. I made her perfectly happy."

Anger swelled in Leinth's bosom. "You're sick."

The slight smile on the handler's face is maddening. "Do you think so? I believe I'd like to give you the same gift, Leinth."

That makes her skin crawl. "She's not happy, you piece of shit."

"Doesn't she look happy to you?" the handler replies. She extends her palm, and Sartha stretches her neck to rest her chin on her hand. There's nothing more Leinth wants than to rush over and break the handler's jaw. But who knows how Sartha would react to that?

"I've seen what she's like," Leinth growls. "It's no gift. She's suffering. She's in anguish. I've seen it. Half the time, she's falling apart!"

"Indeed," the handler muses. "She struggles without me, doesn't she? But she put up with it so bravely. I'm so proud of her."

The emotion dripping from her lips is a sickening mixture of mocking condescension and genuine affection. Leinth has never heard anything like it.

"Sir," Sartha pipes up. She has eyes only for her handler and she seems nervous about speaking up, but the praise has made her too excited to hold back. "May I have it back now?"

The handler smiles down benevolently at her. She's so proud. "Of course you can, Sartha."

She reaches into one of her coat pockets and retrieves something—a

small, elongated, metal cage with a pair of leather straps mounted to it.

A muzzle.

Sartha presents herself and keeps dead still as her handler bends down and affixes it to her face, taking care to brush her hair out of the way and make sure the straps are exactly as tight as they need to be. It's as loving as a kiss. As twisted as a curse.

"Up," the handler says once she's done.

Sartha rises to her feet. She turns to look at Leinth but barely seems to register her presence. The muzzle jutting out of her face is grotesque. Leinth can't help but notice how serene she is now. Sartha's face is clear of doubt, wracked by none of the confusion that had plagued her whenever they'd spoken in Leinth's cell.

Was it an act? Or does the handler's presence simply have this much sway over her?

Which is worse?

Leinth swears to herself and spits on the ground. Fuck this. Fuck whatever this is. She's not going to fall to pieces over this. She's not going to stand here and stare and let this woman play games with her head. She's getting out of here.

"See you in hell, freak," she snarls, and breaks into a sprint.

All she needs to do is put the handler down and run. Leinth can figure the rest out on her own. Sartha isn't going to help her. Not now.

She makes it a few paces before the handler reacts. She doesn't panic, though, or raise her arms to defend herself. She just says something to Sartha in a firm, clear voice.

"Off The Leash."

The next thing Leinth knows, she's on the ground. It's just like when she got laid out by *Ancyor*. Something is on top of her. Something panting and violent and angry. It's Sartha.

Except it isn't.

Nobody could go from zero to sixty that fast. Nobody. No person. But Sartha doesn't really count as one of those anymore. She stares down at Leinth with a look of impossible, bestial hate, her eyes as furious as they are dim. Her hackles are raised and her back is arched, and her lips are drawn

back to expose snarling teeth. There's a sound coming from the back of her throat, a low, rumbling growl, like the rolling of thunder. It's a sound that has no business coming from human lips.

This is her. The other self Sartha was talking about before. Leinth knows it. Not a person. Just a honed instrument of her handler's violent will.

A hound.

"Easy, Hound," the handler says. "I don't want her harmed."

Hound eases off—but only just. The hate burning in her eyes as she looks at Leinth is so singular. So totalizing. Leinth tried to desecrate her goddess. That's all there is to it. The extent of her devotion is so unnatural it makes Leinth's skin crawl.

The handler moves to stand over her, looking down at her. "You will not escape from here," she pronounces. "You will never leave this place again. Not unless I permit it. Understand?"

Her manner demands an answer. Leinth doesn't have one, not even a foul spit of defiance. She's just trying not to fall to pieces. She's cursing herself for her optimism. For not seeing the signs. She's trying not to tear up too, because that would just be too pathetic. She doesn't want to give this woman the satisfaction. But for that strength, she needs hope. And there's precious little to hope for now.

Only Sartha.

There has to be something left of her, right? You can't just take a human being and pull them apart and put them back together like this. Right? You can't just make a person this small.

There's something left. Surely. Leinth just needs to get through to her.

"Please," she mouths silently at the hound. She tries to meet her gaze, hard as it is. So much hate in eyes that had become so familiar. Her muzzle disfigures her. It's hard to look past that and see the face of a hero. But Leinth is determined to try.

"You have such faith in her." The handler's lips curl. "Don't you see? She's mine now."

"No!" Leinth cries, although her voice is weak. "She... she wants to leave with me. She knows this is wrong. She knows you're her enemy. I saw it."

The handler arches an eyebrow. "Hound. Up."

Hound rises to her feet instantly, offering Leinth one last warning growl. Leinth knows better than to try to stand.

"Take off your jacket," the handler instructs.

Again, Hound obeys without thought. She discards the military jacket Sartha wears so proudly like it's nothing. Underneath she's wearing a simple, khaki tank top. The handler lifts it to Hound's chest and uses her other hand to fondly touch the pilot's abs, feeling their definition. She's enjoying them—her smirk makes no secret of that—but this is all for Leinth's benefit. She's trying to piss Leinth off. Showing her that only she gets to touch Sartha Thrace this way.

It's working.

Then the handler makes her hand into a fist and punches Hound in the gut.

She may not be a pilot, but she's a military woman and her form is good. And more to the point, Hound makes no attempt to defend herself. The blow leaves her bent double, retching and heaving, before her legs give way and she sinks to her knees. She looks like she's in agony.

Leinth is sure that Sartha Thrace—Hound—whatever—is quick enough to have sensed the blow coming. But she didn't brace herself. Didn't even tense her muscles or expel the air from her lungs.

What the fuck kind of control is that? Control on an instinctive level. In her nerves, her muscles, her reflexes.

And that's not the end. After watching Hound contort and groan for a few moments, the handler lowers the offending fist to Hound's lips and lifts her muzzle aside.

Hound kisses it.

The kiss is almost innocent. It's like a knight kissing her liege's ring. But knowing it's the hand that just left a mean bruise on Hound's stomach makes it twisted, and it gets worse when the handler extends her fingers and uses them to pry Hound's lips apart, running her fingertips over her teeth, pinching her tongue, smearing drool across her face.

Depraved. There's no other word for it.

"Do you still think she wants to leave?" the handler asks as she pulls back and fixes Hound's muzzle.

"Yes, damn it!" Leinth's wishes her voice sounded firmer. "You've done something to her. That... thing is not Sartha Thrace. It's just something you put

in her head. It's not her."

"Would it help to hear it from her own lips?" the handler asks. "I'm trying to help you see the truth of her, Leinth. She doesn't deserve your faith." She turns to Hound. "On The Leash."

Light returns to her eyes—a semblance of it, at least, but smothered by the handler's presence. It's Sartha again. The muzzle, though, still ruins her face.

"Sartha," the handler says. Sartha's ears prick up, grateful merely for the attention. "Do you want to leave me?"

"No!"

The word bursts from her lips, an explosion, before she can catch herself and add the appropriate 'sir'. Sartha is suddenly desperate. Panicked, far more so than she'd ever been with Leinth in her cell. Her eyes register a wounded confusion.

Is she being abandoned? What did she do wrong?

"No, sir!" Sartha repeats. Her eyes flick and flit manically. She's on the brink of collapse. "P-please..."

"Don't worry." The handler pets her head again. "You don't have to leave, Sartha."

All at once, the hero relaxes. Shoulders sink. Muscles release their tension. Her face slumps into a glowing smile. This is all she needs. God is in her heaven; all is right with the world.

And Leinth's faint hopes grow fainter still.

"That's... not..." She feels the need to set this to right somehow. To explain it away. To make an excuse. "You're in her head! You have been for months, you sick freak. Whatever fucking game you're playing with her doesn't change the fact that she's still Sartha Thrace!"

"Hm." The handler looks impressed, or something like it. "You believe in her so very much. More than I'd expected."

Leinth would be proud. She takes faith as a mark of strength. For rebels like her, faith in one another is indispensable.

She would be proud, if not for how pleased the handler seems.

"Where does that come from, I wonder?" the handler muses. "Loyalty and admiration so fervent it persists in defiance of reality itself. You can understand, I'm sure, why I might take a professional interest."

Leinth spits. She's sure this woman knows absolutely nothing about loyalty. Less than nothing.

"The way you look at her is fascinating," the handler goes on. She's bending down a little, peering at the pilot. "Respect. Faith. But other things, too. Envy? That's normal, between pilots. Who wouldn't envy my hound?"

At that, Leinth just snorts. It's nothing she hasn't thought about before. 'Do I want to be her friend, or do I just want to be her?' She's at peace with it.

"And," the handler adds. "Desire. You want her."

"What?" Leinth feels something pull tight in her chest, even as she laughs and scoffs. "Don't be stupid."

"You do," the handler decides. She says it so academically. Like she's putting together a puzzle. Like she's dissecting a frog. "Why deny it? We know your inclinations. She's attractive, isn't she?"

"I didn't mean..." Leinth glances at Sartha. She has eyes only for her handler, even now, but surely she can hear both of them. "Of course, but-"

"The way you look at her is obvious," the handler interrupts. She glances at Sartha. "It's obvious to her, too."

Leinth's eyes flash wide. That's... no. No. She's lying. The handler is messing with her, that much is obvious. And Leinth was always so careful. She never let those feelings reach her face.

Except...

She can't be quite so confident, can she? Trying to sort through her own memories of her captivity is like trying to grasp at water. At times, she was all but delirious from the pain and the drugs. Did she let something slip? Did something filthy reveal itself in her gaze?

Leinth looks to Sartha, hoping for confirmation. She's unreadable. She's in a blissful daze, shining with gladness at the reunion with her handler and her muzzle.

"Tell me, Leinth," the handler says. "That poster, above your bunk. Did you ever look at it while you touched yourself?"

Leinth recoils like she's been struck. Cold washes over her, turning all the hairs along her spine into little icicles. "How do you know about that?"

"Our methods are very effective for extracting information," the handler tells her. "Did you think that my staff were merely amusing themselves?"

Panic. More panic. Leinth scrambles away across the concrete floor. Suddenly the handler's eyes on her skin are unbearable. What else might she know? Leinth tries to reach back into memory and find pieces of herself. She finds a black hole. She can't remember spilling any secrets—but clearly she has.

Who has she betrayed? Please let it only be herself. Please let it not be anyone else.

"I think we can take that as confirmation," the handler says. "Not that I needed any. You want her." Her smile widens. "You could have her, you know."

Leinth goes very still. "What?"

"Is that what would make you happy, I wonder?" The handler reaches out to Sartha again. A light touch across her torso, where a bruise is already beginning to rise. "All I'd need to do is say the word."

"No. Fuck—no!" Leinth's stomach churns at the suggestion. "I would never—fuck, she would never."

"Not at all." The handler's confidence is supreme. "If I ordered you to, you'd give yourself to Leinth. Wouldn't you, Sartha."

"Yes, sir."

She doesn't hesitate before answering, of course. Leinth is just about prepared for that, but she isn't prepared at all for how plainly eager Sartha is. She's looking at her handler with hope in her eyes. She wants her handler to say the word. She wants to be given a chance to obey.

No matter what the order is.

Leinth can't tell if it's too hot or too cold now. She starts to clamber to her feet, leaning heavily on the nearby wall for support. She feels dizzy. She feels like up is down and down is up. Before she knows it, the handler is right there, merely a kiss away, her eyes inescapable.

"Do you want her, Leinth?" she asks, voice barely a whisper. Like what she proposes could be a secret, safely told. "Do you want her body?" Her lips brush Leinth's skin. "Do you want her to suck your cock?"

The handler is a pillar of ice, but somehow, just for that one, simple question, she makes her voice impossibly sinful and tempting, like warm syrup being poured into Leinth's ear. It sticks to her. It makes Leinth's body stir. Leinth recoils violently, thrown into panic, trying to flee—but she's

already against the wall, there's nowhere to go.

She can't let it show. She can't. But it's too late, of course.

Disgusting. She's disgusting. The handler's disgusting. Hound is disgusting. This is all disgusting.

"You could go down on her too, of course," the handler adds. "If that's more to your taste. But I think... yes. This is what you want. Sartha Thrace, on her knees, before you. Warm. Eager. Welcoming."

"N-no!"

Leinth's voice trembles. She squeezes her eyes shut. Her fantasies are turning against her and all she can do is turn inward, trying to sterilize them with white-hot shame.

"Well, let's see." The handler is ice again as she steps back and beckons Sartha forward. "Here, Sartha. Kneel. Remove your muzzle. Open your mouth."

"Yes, sir!"

Leinth can hear the eagerness of Sartha's obedience as she rushes and falls, and briefly fumbles with the strap of her muzzle. Her mind's eye does the rest, and the picture it paints makes her shiver.

"Look," the handler commands, and the sheer force of will in her voice is irresistible. "Open your eyes."

Leinth holds firm for a few moments but it only takes one lapse. One moment of weakness—or perhaps, she fears, of curiosity. Once her lids part, there's no going back. She's transfixed. Sartha Thrace is kneeling before her. Her mouth is open. Waiting. She is ready to receive. There's a warm smile on her face—it's for her handler, of course, but it could so easily be for Leinth. It would be so easy to pretend. A mere fantasy—a wet dream—could never be so vivid or so real.

If it wasn't already too late to pretend, it is now. Leinth is hard. Her clothes aren't tight, but it's still obvious.

"There." The handler says. She's not smug, just sure. She doesn't need to be smug. She knew exactly what was going to happen. "Now, Leinth. Should I say the word?"

Leinth shakes her head in mute horror. If she answered 'yes', if she even considered it, she'd become something unforgivable.

"Why not?" The handler asks. "You want to. She wants to."

"She- ah!"

The handler interrupts her by resting her hand on the back of Sartha's face and pushing her forward until Sartha's face is pressed against Leinth's front. The touch is sparks to dry kindling. Leinth twitches awkwardly, trying to shrink back, but there's nowhere to go and the handler won't let her.

Sartha, sensing her handler's intent, starts rubbing and nuzzling, eager and happy to be of use, and that makes it so much worse.

"S-she," Leinth stammers, struggling to keep the thread of her reason taut. "She doesn't! She's... you made her like this! It's your fault! She doesn't—Sartha Thrace would never—want this."

"That doesn't matter." The handler shuts her down brutally. "Who knows why anyone wants what they want? It doesn't matter. Look at the woman in front of you." She turns to Sartha. "Sartha, would you like to clean my boot?"

"Yes, sir!"

Leinth winces. More of that bubbling, twisted eagerness. Each time is another knife.

"Then do so."

She extends a foot forward pointedly. Again, there's no hesitation. Sartha bends forward, prostrate, as if in prayer, and puts her lips to the tip of the handler's long, tall, black, leather boots and begins to kiss. The wet licking sounds that follow stroke Leinth's imagination.

Leinth wishes she could look away, but Sartha Thrace's fall is hypnotic. It's a solar eclipse. She'll take a punch and thank her handler for it. She'll kiss her boot like it's a lover. She'll make herself a whore at her handler's command. Is there anything she wouldn't do for that woman? Any limit?

The question provokes an uncomfortable curiosity.

"That will do, Sartha," the handler says, after several long seconds. "Stand."

"Yes, sir."

Sartha's voice is breathy with excitement. When she stands, Leinth can see that the handler's boot is shiny with her spit. She keeps staring.

"Look at her, Leinth," the handler chides. "Not at my boot. Look at *her*."

Leinth doesn't. She doesn't want to. The handler doesn't fight her on it. She has other tactics.

"Sartha," she says. "Kiss her."

"Hu-"

Leinth can barely breathe before Sartha, her hero, is pressing against her. Their lips meet. Sartha is insistent, and Leinth doesn't have the strength to push her away. The kiss isn't chaste or robotic or forced. Sartha sinks into it willingly. She's passionate. Eager. After a moment, Leinth sinks too. The fantasy is too nice, even though there's one unmistakable difference between this and her fond daydreams.

Sartha's lips taste like leather and boot polish.

Sartha is the one who pulls away in the end, which is its own kind of humiliation. In the moments after the kiss, with her face inches from Leinth's, she looks breathy. Flushed. It's enough to make Leinth pine for more.

"Do you see it yet?" The handler's voice breaks the moment. It's as final as a sunset. "She's not your Sartha Thrace. Not anymore. So why not enjoy her, if it pleases you?" Her smile ticks upwards. "Many have."

A spike of anger brings with it a kind of clarity. This is wrong. It's not even a fantasy anymore. Whatever daydreams and intimate thoughts Leinth has succumbed to, here and there, she never wanted this for Sartha. Never.

Many have.

It makes Leinth shudder. This isn't a wet dream. This isn't her long-cherished fantasy. This is just... cheap. Cheap titillation. It's unworthy of her. It's even more unworthy of Sartha Thrace.

"No!" Leinth cries. She finds her voice for the first time in what feels like an age, and the force in her denial drives Sartha back an uncertain step. The handler looks at her—surprised, perhaps, although more curious than afraid.

"No?" she asks.

"Just go fuck yourself already!" Leinth screams. It feels good to scream. "You can throw me back in the damn cell, but you're not gonna get me to... to..." She just looks at Sartha. "I don't know how you got so twisted that you get off on this sick shit, but I'm better than that. *She* is better than that."

"She is not." The handler says it with a knowing smile, like she's the one who has grasped Sartha's soul in her hands, and that pisses Leinth off even more.

"Yes she is!" Leinth insists. "She's Sartha gods damn Thrace! She's a hero. She's *the* hero. You can change a lot of things but you can't change that!"

It feels good to say it to her face. Everything's fucked up right now, but not Leinth's faith in Sartha. She's placing that beyond reach. Her faith is the midday sun, boiling away the morning fog. If nothing else, she can make sure the handler goes to her grave knowing that she was never able to tarnish it.

"There will always be people out there—rebels out there—fighting because they were inspired by her." Leinth is finding her theme and her voice. "Her face and her name are on recruitment posters all over the planet. People will always believe in her. *I* will always believe in her. No matter what you make her say or do, people will always know: it's not real. It's not her. The real Sartha Thrace was always a hero."

For the first time, the handler is silent. Her silence is intoxicating. Seeing her, of all people, lost for words is almost as rewarding as freedom itself. It's tempting to keep going, to rub her face in it, but there's something far more important at stake. Leinth turns again to Sartha. She steps forward and clasps her hero by her shoulders, pulling her close.

"And you," Leinth says. "Listen to me. You will always be a hero. I know that's not getting through to you right now because of how badly they've fucked with your head. But it's true. We spent a lot of time talking down in that cell. It wasn't all fake. You can't tell me that. You're still in there, somewhere. And one day, you're gonna get out. You're gonna escape. You're gonna find your way back to yourself. It'll be hard, it'll be painful, but I know you'll do it because that's what a hero does. And when that day comes, you'll... you'll..."

She trails off. There's something in Sartha's eyes. She's listening to her now. Leinth's words have made it through. The look dawning on her face is real, and that's exactly what makes it so devastating.

Sartha Thrace looks pained.

It's a bone-deep, weary kind of pain. Suddenly she doesn't look like a captured hero or a brainwashed hound. She just looks tired. Like she's a woman who's been ground down and chewed up by the world. And now, just by talking, Leinth has become one of the teeth. She's hurting her. Sartha simply wants her to stop.

Leinth can't go on. She didn't think it would be like this. In the face of this mysterious wound in Sartha, she's powerless.

But now, of course, the handler has something to say.

"There's a chink in the armor of every single human being." The handler speaks slowly. She wants every word to sink in. "At least one. If you pry it open, you find a void. If you can fill that void, then they are yours. Right down to their soul. She is the chink in your armor."

Leinth closes her eyes. She doesn't want to hear this. She doesn't want to know that all this, all her defiance, was just another step in this woman's dance.

"You have such faith in her," the handler says. "You think it makes you strong. It just makes you brittle. You can think you can handle seeing her broken and dirtied and disappointing. Perhaps. But you cannot handle the real truth of Sartha Thrace."

It's that pain. It has to be. Leinth wants to close her heart off to it. To make a hated enemy of Sartha in her head. Then she wouldn't need to care. She can't do it, of course.

"The chink in Sartha's armor," the handler tells her, "was you."

Leinth opens her eyes in disbelief.

"Not just you, of course," the handler explains. "Not you personally. But all of you who call her a hero and worship the ground she walks on. All that faith. All those expectations. Did you think she could carry that much weight? That she didn't notice? That it didn't drag her down with every step? She was tired of it, Leinth. Deep in her soul, she was tired of it. She wanted to be free of it. She would never have admitted it out loud, of course. But she knew it all the same. And when I offered her freedom, even as she spat in my face something deep inside her reached out and took my hand. That is how I made her mine."

Leinth is frozen. She never thought about it. Not once. To her, Sartha was always a woman on a poster. Why didn't she ever...

"I should thank you, shouldn't I?" The handler says it without mirth. "For helping to wear her down. For helping to deliver her into my arms. And after that little speech, I think she's more mine than she's ever been."

Sometimes, when Leinth pilots *Genetor*, she takes some pretty fucking big hits. It's part of the job, after all. *Genetor* was built for it. It's the kind of machine that was designed to stare down an avalanche and dare the mountain the do its worst. That doesn't mean it doesn't feel like shit, though. It doesn't matter how heavily built a machine is. When you get hit by heavy ordnance, the force has to go somewhere. It goes through you. And the noise. It's

deafening, in the most literal sense. After some battles, Leinth can't hear properly for hours afterward. There's nothing in her ears but a skull-splitting mosquito whine of complaint.

Even that doesn't compare to how bad her head is ringing now.

It was her fault?

She looks at Sartha once again. That's the only thing that can save her now. Sartha telling her that it's a lie. That she never felt that way. That she was OK with it. But Sartha avoids her gaze, and her shame speaks louder than any words.

And that's the problem, isn't it? She's still just looking to Sartha to save her.

"A hero, a martyr, or a traitor," the handler muses. "Those are the only fates you left her with. No wonder it was so easy to make her a hound instead."

Leinth gets it now. There are no heroes down here. Not a one.

"Sartha," the handler says once she's sure it's all sunk in. She knows the signs. The slumped shoulders. The sagging, lightless eyes. "Off The Leash. You can take Leinth to my room now. She's ready for my personal attention."

It's a mercy to be faced with Hound instead of Sartha. Hound knows no shame. No judgment either. Hound doesn't hesitate. She simply puts a hand on Leinth's shoulder and starts guiding her, unresisting, away from the light, and back down into the labyrinthine Kennels beneath the base.

PART TWO

Who are you?

"Leinth Aritimis, pilot."

The question burns a hole in Leinth's brain. She hears it every single day, from Handler's lips. It's been like that ever since the escape. The doomed escape. Sartha Thrace—or Hound, Sartha's other half—dragged her here, to a new cell, where she's been kept ever since. Here, she is subject to Handler's personal ministrations. And each session begins and ends with the question.

Who are you?

"Leinth Aritimis, pilot."

It's an answer. The only one Leinth has to give. It's not exactly wrong, but it's not exactly right either. And it's not the one Handler is looking for. Leinth can tell that much from Her expression. She's tried giving other answers. She could pretend it's to amuse herself, but really it's because she's hoping she'll hit upon whatever answer Handler wants to hear. Once, Leinth even answered 'hound'.

Handler didn't like that. She made the measure of Her disapproval plain. She wants the truth. Only the truth. So Leinth gives it to Her. She's not sure why. Handler's approval shouldn't matter to her. But it does.

Who are you?

"Leinth Aritimis, pilot."

Leinth's new cell is nicer, she supposes. Brighter. A touch more comfortable. She thinks it's close to Handler's quarters, but that's just idle

speculation. She's given up on trying to make a mental map of this place. No point. She's never getting out. She knows that now.

There's also a mirror. They couldn't have picked a worse torture device. What can Leinth do but spend hours staring at herself, letting her self-loathing ferment in her belly? The mirror asks the same question Handler does. Who is she? She doesn't look much like a pilot anymore. Too skinny. Pilots always get the best rations and they always stay in good shape. Now Leinth just eats whatever they give her, and she doesn't have the strength to exercise. She looks more like a corpse than a pilot. It's funny; Leinth always had a broad build, and she sometimes wondered if shedding a little weight might help a little with the dysphoria. Clearly not. Her shoulders are as wide as ever, and the rest of her figure is left to hang lifelessly from them. Her brown hair, once shaved on one side and brushed over, is now a tangled, dull, half-grown mess, and it's the same story with her face. Girls always called Leinth handsome more often than they called her pretty, but now even that painful accolade has been taken from her. Nobody would call her sallow, hollow cheeks anything but ghoulish.

And then there's her eyes. Her eyes—brown, once rich—are the worst of all.

It's tempting to break the mirror. That's what Leinth knows she should do, if she still had the will. What stops her is knowing that Handler wants it here. Leinth can't seem to bring herself to deny Her. Not anymore. It's impossible even to imagine it. Like trying to imagine the sun moving backward across the sky.

Leinth has been down here too long. She knows that. Knowing doesn't help.

Handler is more skilled than Her creepy, dog-hooded menials. Her attention is overwhelming. That's like if the sun froze in the sky, and it was shining just for you. She touches the threads of Leinth's mind as skillfully as a musician playing the strings of a harp, but She always leaves them fraying, twisted, undone. She takes—time, memories, moods. Whatever She wishes.

It doesn't always hurt. But it is always torture, whether it's drugs, electricity, lights, strange devices, or even simply talking. When it does hurt, it's not so bad. Leinth can give herself to the pain. It's better than the gnawing guilt she feels when it doesn't.

It's never an interrogation, though. Leinth refuses to give up any secrets that would endanger her fellow rebels. That's a barrier within herself she's determined not to relinquish. Maybe the very last one. But Handler doesn't ask, not about that. She asks about other things. Personal things.

When did Leinth first know she's a woman? Who was her first crush? What was the first time her parents were ever disappointed in her? And it's always so easy to tell Her. It always seems like a good idea in the moment. Like it'll feel good. Like it'll be a release. It never is. It feels awful. Each time, Leinth is left feeling like she's lost something. Like the memory she's told belongs to Her now. Leinth is hollower for it. Less herself. Handler, by contrast, swells in presence with each secret shared. It's like She's feasting on them, as ridiculous as Leinth knows that is. But the impression persists. She can't remember how much of herself she's given away. What doesn't Handler know about her now? Is there anything at all? She must understand Leinth better than any other living soul could. The way only a god could.

But She keeps asking. Every time.

Who are you?

"Leinth Aritimis, pilot."

At this point, what does it even mean for Leinth to call herself a pilot? That it's her true self, somehow? Leinth wonders about that. If she could again sit in *Genetor*'s cockpit, if she could ride it to battle, would that fix her? Would she feel whole again?

Or would she throw up over the controls? That seems more likely. Leinth may never be allowed to pilot *Genetor* again, but even if she could, it would be wrong. Sacrilegious. *Genetor* is a good thing. It does good. Leinth doesn't. Not anymore. She's unworthy of it. She always has been.

Because of Sartha. Because of Sartha Thrace.

If there's one genuine kindness to being under Handler's direct care, it's that Sartha Thrace no longer comes to visit Leinth. Seeing her now would be unbearable. Even thinking of her is unbearable; all Leinth can do is try to keep thoughts of Sartha pressed against the far walls of her mind, there to scratch and itch as she lies down on the bunk to sleep.

Sartha Thrace is a hero. And Leinth ruined her.

Not just Leinth. But yes, her. She ruined Sartha with her wishes and her adulation and her expectant, hopeful eyes. She knows this to be true. She

feels it in her soul. Leinth has tried blaming Handler. It doesn't stick. Doesn't have the same ring of dreadful truth to it. No; it was Leinth.

If only she'd just stopped and thought about how all that hero worship might feel for Sartha. About what a burden it must have been to bear. Then, at least, Leinth would be innocent. But she never had. She'd always assumed Sartha could carry all that weight.

But why couldn't she? Why couldn't she just carry it? Isn't that what heroes are for?

But Leinth can't blame Sartha. It's Leinth's fault. She did this.

Those thoughts chase each other's tails in Leinth's head, round and round, over and over. Guilt and anger. They never settle. She can't make peace with how she feels. There are, as they say, two wolves inside her.

That phrase seems so much more sinister now.

Leinth is grateful when the drugs they put in her food give her simple oblivion. But just as often, they do the opposite. Especially lately. They've added something particularly obscene. Some kind of aphrodisiac. It's potent. It leaves Leinth at odds with her own body, pent-up, pacing her cell, filled with base urges that leave her disgusted with herself.

She can't even blow off steam the way every soldier does when they have the barracks to themselves. When she tries, there's only one face that comes into her head. And Leinth would never forgive herself if she soiled her hero even more than she already has.

How long has that drug been in her food now? How long has she been down here? And how long until she knows the answer?

Who are you?

Leinth Aritimis? Pilot? It feels worse and more absurd every time she says it. It drools from Leinth's lips, weary from overuse, becoming merely a set of sounds she barely remembers how to say.

Lay-inth. Lee-inth. Which one? Ah-ree-ti-mis. Ah-ra-tee-mis. How is it that Handler says it? She always speaks like She's wielding a scalpel on Her tongue. Dividing up the syllables. Clipped. Precise. That's Handler's way. She knows. She always knows best.

Is that one of Leinth's thoughts, or one She gave her? Does it still matter? It won't for much longer.

Leinth is too smart not to know that she's about to break into pieces.

A sound drags Leinth from the spiral of her own mind. Scraping. Metal on metal. The door opening.

Leinth looks up, and sees Sartha Thrace.

At once, she gags. It feels ten times worse than she'd guessed it would. Nausea. Blind panic. Fuck. The guilt swells like a tide. But the look on Sartha's face isn't accusatory. It's worse than that. It's apologetic.

At least now there are no pretenses between them. Not with that sick fucking muzzle on her face.

"Hey," Sartha says.

What is Leinth supposed to say to that? What the fuck is she supposed to say to that? Absolutely no words could match what had passed between them the last time they saw each other, and so Leinth just sits there on her bunk, mouth open, staring stupidly, until finally she musters up enough of herself to say:

"Hey."

Even her voice doesn't sound like her own at this point.

Sartha seems to take that one little word for permission. She enters the cell. Doesn't close the door behind herself. Doesn't need to—she knows Leinth won't run. She moves cautiously. Timidly, even. It doesn't suit her. Sartha Thrace shouldn't tiptoe around Leinth like a mouse in a lion's den.

"I'm sorry I couldn't come to see you sooner," the former hero says. "I wanted to. But She said... well, She thought it would be best."

A line of thought presents itself for Leinth's consideration. She could try to reason out why, exactly, Handler would want to keep them separated for a time. Figuring that out could help Leinth understand what Handler is doing to her. Understanding could help her resist. Mind games don't work as well when you know the rules. At least, she hopes not. Leinth doesn't have all the pieces of the puzzle, of course. But she could at least try to figure it out.

Leinth decides not to bother. She's just too tired.

"She did, huh?" she says instead, voice heavy. "And why does She think it would be best to come talk to me now?"

"I asked to," Sartha replies. "I've asked a few times. I wanted to make sure you were OK."

Does she really believe it was her own idea? Pointless to ask. That

delusion strikes Leinth as absurd, but less absurd than it might have at the start of her captivity. It's impossible not to believe that, sometimes. Maybe Sartha's even telling the truth—but as soon as that occurs to Leinth, another voice in her head tells her different.

She's lying to you. Betraying you. That's what she does, Leinth.

"That's a little hard to believe," Leinth says through gritted teeth. "Traitor," she adds, belatedly.

Instantly she regrets the insult. Her anger ebbs. She's not even sure where it came from. It's beneath her. No, she's beneath it. Because it's her fault, isn't it? She helped ruin Sartha Thrace. Leinth has no right to righteous fury. The wounded look on Sartha's face only adds to her guilt.

"I did," Sartha promises, rising above the taunt. "I've been worried about you. I... know how it is, right now. I've been exactly where you are."

"I doubt that," Leinth mutters. It's not the same. Handler's made that clear. There is a terrifying specificity to the way She dismantles people.

Sartha isn't to be dissuaded. "I want to help you, Leinth. A shoulder to cry on. Someone to vent to. Someone to... to take out your frustration on—anything."

Leinth has trusted those words before. Sartha isn't here to help. She's part of something, and Leinth can't let herself be drawn in. But that doesn't make them any less enticing. How long has it been since she's had company? Outside of Handler, anyway.

Not that She counts. The gulf between them is just too great.

Company sounds like heaven, but Sartha's company? That would be like a mosquito biting her skin over and over. It's too loaded. Leinth can feel it, even now. The cocktail of emotions she's barely been able to keep repressed. Admiration, loathing, attraction, admiration, hurt, guilt. She's never felt more on edge—not once, not even in the heart of combat. What is Sartha doing to her?

"Can... I at least sit down?" Sartha ventures.

Leinth really doesn't want her to. Having her here just feels wrong. Like she's going to get kicked again. But something keeps her from refusing. She doesn't want to be alone either. And more importantly, perhaps, she knows Sartha's presence is Handler's will.

So, Leinth just gives her a stiff nod.

"Thanks." Sartha's still cautious and slow as she approaches. Moving that way is so wrong for her. As she perches on the other end of Leinth's bunk, it's almost like she's afraid. "First of all, I wanted to say this, straight-up: it's all going to be OK. This will all make sense soon."

Leinth looks at her uneasily. "You said something like that the first time we met down here."

"Yeah." Sartha nods. "That was the worst part, for me. Not knowing. Not having any... any faith." She smiles at Leinth. Tries to smile, anyway. "I thought you might need to hear that again, right about now."

"Faith." Leinth feels nauseous. Faith—Sartha is all but overflowing with it. There's a light buried behind her eyes, like curdled gold. It's wrong. "Faith in Her."

"Yes," Sartha replies. "In Her."

Sartha's voice trembles with awe as she says that. Leinth tries to pretend hers didn't too.

"She wants what's best for us," Sartha adds. "Maybe you can see that better now."

Leinth just snorts. How can this be best for Sartha? It seems absurd. But she knows now, of course. What Sartha was going through before. When she was a hero. Leinth knows what all that did to her. So it doesn't seem as crazy as it should.

But, this? How could this ever be better? Wanting to run is one thing. Wanting to betray everything you held dear and break your own psyche into two halves is another. Leinth will never, ever understand that.

At least, she hopes not.

"Just trust me, OK?" Sartha promises. "It'll get easier. She says you're doing very well."

Leinth twitches. That's not good.

"Fuck Her and fuck you," she manages, although her heart isn't in it. "She can waste her time with me forever. She'll never get what She wants."

The boast rings hollow to them both. Sartha doesn't even look offended, just pitying. Leinth knows why.

This is passive resistance. Not active. She's not fighting anymore. Not really. Just betting that whatever Handler's rooting around in her head for isn't

actually there. She's not denying that Handler can take her apart, brick by brick.

"It's normal to be angry," Sartha tells her. "You can be angry at Her, for now. She won't mind. She'll forgive you."

Leinth hates the way that a part of her brain lights up with relief at that. She tries to suppress the feeling, to shove it back down in the dark where it belongs. She can't. It's hard. Too hard.

Why can't she think? Why's it so hard to just fucking think?

Sartha's to blame, Leinth.

It's Sartha's fault. It's like she's doing something to Leinth just by being here. Being on edge doesn't even begin to cover it. It's deeper than that. Atavistic. Like being prey in the presence of a predator. Or... the opposite? Leinth's not sure, she just knows it's itching at her all over. She can feel Sartha in the air. On her skin. It's consuming. Leinth has never been more aware of another human being before.

And there's something else. Something weirder and worse.

Leinth is unbearably fucking horny.

It's more distracting than it has any right to be. The arousal has been present for at least a dozen sleeps, since they started adding that aphrodisiac to Leinth's food. It's been a constant buzz that keeps her from finding her center. But now it's turned up to eleven. It's thunder in Leinth's veins.

All directed at Sartha.

Every stupid, embarrassing, idol-struck wet dream she's ever had is now throbbing at the forefront of her brain. Leinth just has to avert her eyes and pray it isn't showing. But it must be; she can feel herself sweating and drooling and tenting the coarse pants they gave her. Gods, it's like being a teenage boy all over again. More intense, though—and there's something else. She can hear a heartbeat pounding in her ears. It must be hers. But it feels like Sartha's.

"Are you alright?" Sartha says. Out of the corner of her eye, Leinth can see concern on her face. It hurts.

She doesn't deserve concern. She's the one who ruined Sartha. She's doing it even now, in her mind's eye. Leinth is the worst. The lowest it gets. She can feel control slipping out of her grasp. Like being an animal in heat—but that would be a hundred times easier to deal with. You don't blame an

animal for being in heat.

"I'm fine," Leinth grunts.

She's not. She shifts a couple of inches down her bunk, hoping distance will help. It doesn't. It just makes the yearning that much more intense. Sartha Thrace is right here, still within arm's reach. Her warmth. Her skin. Her body. Fuck. It's so damn hard not to think about it when Handler's demonstration keeps flashing through her mind.

Her lips, yielding and kissing. Her mouth, open, wet, willing. The way she licked Handler's boot like it was a lover. And, above all, the promise Handler made.

Why not enjoy her, if it pleases you? Many have.

Leinth reaches up and clutches at her head. Fuck. She's so disgusting.

Suddenly, a memory forms. Not of Sartha. Of Handler. Leinth remembers being in the sweet embrace of Her tools and instruments, in some secret room of these sinister kennels. She remembers herself being opened and Handler pouring words into her, sweet as honey, bitter as cocoa. It's the same voice she can hear even now, at the back of her own brain.

All of its words are about Sartha Thrace.

Before Leinth can fathom the meaning of that. Sartha catches her attention.

"There's something else," the hero says, with palpable reluctance. "I... wanted to apologize."

Leinth might have laughed if she wasn't in her own private hell. "Apologize?" she chokes out.

What does Sartha have to apologize for? Much, of course. But not to Leinth. Those scales are tipped firmly and irrevocably the other way.

"Yeah," Sartha says earnestly. "For what you saw that day. I'm sure it's been weighing on you."

Leinth's hands have started shaking. It's really bad. "Did She tell you to say that?"

"No," Sartha replies, although there's no knowing if that's really true. Not even for Sartha herself. "I swear. This is all me, Leinth. I'm sorry. Really sorry."

"For what?" Leinth's voice cracks.

"For laying all that on you."

"You didn't," Leinth croaks. "She did."

"That's different," Sartha shoots back quickly. She's defensive of her mistress, of course. "She was just telling you the truth. That's all. It was kind of Her, Leinth. You just don't see that yet."

Kind. Leinth's hands shake worse. Listening to Sartha talk about this is so twisted. Her head is nothing but a seething mass of insane contradictions, and Leinth is fast losing the ability to sort them out.

"I meant... in my head," Sartha explains. "I put it on you by letting it get to me. My status. The way people looked at me. Shit like that. You shouldn't have to feel bad about it."

Leinth buries her face in her palms. No, no, no. This is so wrong. Sartha shouldn't be apologizing. She's a hero. She *was* a hero. Whatever.

"Everyone needs people to look up to." Sartha's still talking. Why won't she just shut up and go away? "I sure as hell did, in my day. Even if I never thought I'd become... well, it just comes with the territory, I guess. If you survive long enough. I should've known. I should've been ready."

Leinth wants to stop her, but her blood is boiling and her tongue would loll stupidly out of her mouth if she tried to speak. Her passion is up and it leaves no room for words. She just wants this torture to end. Compared to this, Handler truly is kind. Leinth just wants to be free of this feeling. This guilt. But even by listening, she's making it worse. Why can't she stop violating Sartha this way?

"I wish..." Sartha pauses, considers, corrects. "Part of me wishes I'd just been stronger. That it hadn't come to this. Then I wouldn't be such a disappointment to you. But it's for the best. I met Her, and She saved me. Fixed me. Made me a hero again."

That self-pity. It's disgusting. As disgusting as Leinth is. A hero shouldn't feel that. Speak that.

"You deserved better." Sartha seems to settle on that thought. "You deserved a hero you could really look up to."

And then it roars out of Leinth, furious as the report of *Genetor*'s guns.

Shut her up, Leinth.

"Just shut up already!" she screams, in a voice that barely remembers how to speak. It comes out raw and ragged. "Don't you have any fucking pride?"

She's on her feet, though she doesn't remember standing. She can look down at Sartha now. That feels good. It feels right.

"I ruined you!" Leinth screams. That confession is a balm for her eroded soul. Letting it out, an unspeakable release. "I'm part of what broke you! You can't even be mad at me? Even now it's out in the open? What's wrong with you?"

Sartha doesn't reply. She looks surprised, but not hurt. Not afraid. She's serene. That pisses Leinth off even more.

Why isn't she angry? If she was anything more than a broken mutt, she'd be angry.

"Why aren't you angry?" she rages. It's not right, Sartha's strange tranquility. Sartha Thrace isn't like that. Her *Ancyor* is a furious machine. Sartha Thrace always fought with an avenging anger in her heart. "You're a hero! Stand up for yourself. Stand up for something, hells! Aren't you tired of taking it all lying down? Me, Handler... fuck, if you're a traitor, at least be a traitor. Not... not this!"

Still no reply. Why not? Why won't she talk? What's she hiding? Leinth needs to see. She needs to see closer. She crosses the gap between them in a stride and grabs Sartha's collar up in her fists. Hauling the broken woman to her feet is easy; maybe the anger is making Leinth strong. She puts her face close to Sartha's—as close as that ridiculous muzzle permits. What's with that anyway? Why won't she just take it off?

"Look at me!" Leinth roars. She needs to see into those eyes. Sartha obeys, and for a long moment Leinth just stares and stares, searching for an answer. Searching for a feeling, for any feeling. For something real.

In Sartha's eyes, she reads validation. Sartha is validated by Leinth's anger.

That feels like an even greater betrayal. Leinth's rage flares hotter still—but there's something else, too. Being this close to Sartha is a mistake. Her scent is overpowering. Leinth can feel her heat under her hands. It's too much. She was horny before, from the drugs; there's no word for what she is now. It's too much. It becomes all of her, flooding her senses and her limbs, flooding even her anger, joining with it. It's all one feeling now, violent and restless and needy.

"Did you..." Leinth growls. Words come hard and slow. She's beyond them. "Did you ever really mean it? Did you ever really believe in

something?"

Even Sartha looks a little shocked at the insinuation. "Yes!" she cries. It's a prayer. A hope. "I did—I do—I... I'm a hero. I'm a hero."

She's trying to make sense of herself. It's useless, of course. She is only what Handler allows her to be. Handler's the one to be angry at. But Leinth can't imagine that anymore, and in any case, Handler isn't here.

But Sartha is.

She's lying to you, Leinth.

"Stop lying!" Leinth yells in her face. There's no stopping the strange alchemy happening inside her as her feelings fold and merge. Something deep within her is being dredged up and forged anew. It defies reason and reality, but that doesn't matter. It's primal. Atavistic. "Stop... stop pretending! You lied to us! To all of us! How could you do that?"

"I didn't-"

Make her pay.

Leinth just hits her.

Right in the gut. A hammer blow. Sartha is taken by surprise mid-breath and doubles over, gagging and choking. Only Leinth's other hand, firm on her collar, keeps her on her feet. She looks like she's in agony.

And it feels good.

Better than anything Leinth's felt since she first came down here, that's for sure. It's a revelation. She's never before thought about what a simple joy inflicting pain can be. It's power, and power is so precious. It's a tiny little release valve for what's boiling inside her.

She deserves it.

Leinth is no sadist, of course. Just the opposite. She'd never want to hurt anyone who doesn't deserve it. But Sartha does. She absolutely does. That feels too right to be wrong. Which means there's nothing to stop Leinth from making Sartha as bruised outside as Leinth feels inside.

"You can-" Sartha begins to choke out as she recovers.

"Stop talking!" Leinth snarls. She pulls close, overwhelmed with a craving for greater savagery. She means to bite; she can imagine her jaws clamping down, and skin breaking, and blood in her mouth.

Instead, she finds herself clawing the muzzle away from Sartha's face and

kissing her.

The kiss is no gentler than a bite. It's ugly and messy. Leinth bites Sartha's lip hard, and invades her mouth with her tongue, claiming her, soiling her face with blood and drool. The kiss makes Leinth euphoric. It's vindication. She can do this. She can cross this line with Sartha. And that means she wasn't really such a hero after all.

Plus, Sartha Thrace is kissing her back.

Leinth lets her, for a moment, but then pulls back and shoves her to one side so hard she goes sprawling across the floor. She can't let Sartha think this is a coupling of equals. It's not. Sartha is nothing. A pretender. A traitor. A dog.

Sartha, perversely, looks up at Leinth with stars in her eyes. "You can hit me," she pants, "if you want. She said that you could."

Permission. What does that mean? It implies anticipation. Did Handler plan this? That should trouble Leinth, but she's far, far too fixated on Sartha to devote any thought to it. Sartha wants this. Whatever guilt Leinth made her feel has transformed into sheer masochism. That disgusts Leinth. The Sartha Thrace she once believed in would never have looked at anyone like that. She's not disgusted by herself anymore, though.

She's not like Sartha. She's one of the good guys. That's why she can do whatever she wants with a piece-of-shit liar like this.

Sartha looks Leinth up and down. Her eyes settle on the telltale mark of Leinth's arousal. Those stars in her eyes don't get any dimmer. "You can fuck me, too. I-if you want."

Her eagerness is pathetic. Leinth wonders how she ever saw anything good or heroic in the brainwashed woman slumped on the ground before her.

But she's willing. And Leinth is horny. That's simple enough.

"That's what you do for all of them," Leinth growls as she advances on Sartha. "Isn't it?"

"I... that's..." Sartha struggles. She's trying to make that agree with her sense of self. "W-when She wants me to... when they need..."

Leinth snorts. "Why am I even talking to you?" she spits. "You barely even know where you are. What side you're fighting on. You're nothing. Why did I ever think you were a hero? You're just a warm body."

"I ju-"

"Shut up!" Leinth snaps. "Get up."

Sartha does what she's told—or tries at least. That's both intoxicating and infuriating. A hero shouldn't—but Sartha isn't a hero, Leinth knows that now, and it's so fucking hot that she does. It makes Leinth feel like she can do anything she wants. And she wants so much. It's burning in her veins. Leinth feels powerful as Sartha fights to her feet, and she feels powerful as she decides she's moving too slow. Leinth reaches down to haul her to her feet and toss her roughly onto her bunk.

"Take your fucking clothes off," Leinth orders next. Even Sartha's clothes piss her off. It's still her old rebel garb. "You don't deserve to wear that."

Once more, Sartha is too slow. When she fumbles a little with her jacket, Leinth intervenes and starts ripping it from her body, popping buttons and tearing fastenings. It's as easy as shredding paper. Leinth has never felt so strong. And she doesn't stop there; she makes her hands into claws, hooks them into Sartha's vest, and pulls apart until the whole thing comes to pieces in her hands.

The sight of Sartha's chest spilling out prompts a hot rush of pleasure and satisfaction. This is exactly the defiling that false idols deserve.

Leinth keeps going—not until Sartha is naked, just until she's naked enough. Until Leinth has access to everything she wants.

But she takes a moment to reach down and fix the muzzle back into place. It suits Sartha. Leinth sees that now.

"On the bunk?" Sartha pants, with a filthy eagerness. "Or I could su-"

"Shut up."

Leinth hits her again, this time a hooked punch to her side that collapses Sartha onto the bunk. She doesn't want Sartha to talk. It's wrong when she talks. Hound doesn't talk, not unless She tells her to, and maybe that's the real Sartha after all. Maybe Leinth can bring Hound out to play. That's what Sartha wants. She wants the blissful surrender of sweat and heaving bodies.

Fine. She can have that. As long as Leinth gets to prove she's not a hero. Just a body.

She deserves this too, Leinth. Fuck her. You want it. And so does she.

Leinth kneels on the bed behind Sartha as she scrambles to her knees. Leinth's need is bursting out of her at the seams. She wants this. And so does Sartha. Leinth starts undressing herself furiously and frantically, shucking her

pants to her knees so she can free her cock and press it against Sartha's cunt.

Sartha is clearly wet, and Leinth can see the bruise on her side already beginning to form, blossoming blue and purple where she planted the tip of her fist. Leinth grins.

And starts fucking her former hero.

Their sounds are animal. Sartha's whining moans, the way Leinth growls her every breath, the feral slap of flesh on flesh. There's absolutely no art to it. Leinth is no stranger to good sex. She considers herself more restrained than most, but she gets just as much pussy as every other ace pilot and she likes to make sure the girls she brings back to her quarters go out and spread the right kind of rumors afterward. But Sartha isn't like them. This is barely sex. More like jerking off, only the long-held fantasy of Sartha Thrace isn't just in Leinth's head anymore. Admittedly, she didn't want Sartha this way. But having her at all is good enough

Leinth feels free, paradoxically. Freer than ever. There's nobody to look up to. Nobody to disappoint. She can simply be this.

And this is what you are, Leinth.

Her pace is furious. Desperate. The lust-drugs have been in her food for weeks, and Sartha's face in her mind's eye has been an aching curse, keeping her from release. Now the curse is broken. Now it's a red rag to a bull, and Leinth just wants to see that face soiled and bruised and made hers. She has her hands on Sartha's hips and pulls back on them hard with each thrust. Whenever Sartha doesn't match her pace with sufficient enthusiasm, she digs in with her nails, grown uneven and sharp from her captivity. Every stupid, pathetic puppy-whine from the woman on her knees in front of her spurs Leinth onward. To make her louder, she rakes her claws hard enough to draw blood.

This is ascension. Better than piloting, better than victory. This is the best she's ever felt.

Leinth doesn't care if it lasts long. She just wants that one moment: the release, the moment she truly makes Sartha hers. She's frenzied for it. Leinth reaches forward, puts her hand on the back of Sartha's head, and pushes—hard. Hard enough that Sartha's elbows buckle and she crashes forward, face planting awkwardly into the hard mattress. Leinth pushes down, mounting her and keeping her there. The position lets her thrust longer and harder—and

more importantly, it's even more degrading. Leinth likes that she can make Sartha take her whole weight, crushing her, making her bend her neck and brace on her shoulder. She's practically contorting herself.

Because Leinth is making her.

This is all she is.

"This is all you are," Leinth growls. She's so glad she gets to be the one to show her. "Not a hero. Just this. Understand?"

It's all personal now. She's the one Sartha betrayed. Not the rebels. Leinth's comrades are all but forgotten now. In reply, Sartha just gurgles. Probably, she can barely breathe. Leinth doesn't care. Let her choke.

A stupid, broken dog.

"Stupid. Broken. Dog," Leinth grunts, voice cracking as her pleasure peaks. "I... I... fuck!"

Good dog.

She cums hard as hell. As she does, she slumps against Sartha, drugged-up limbs finally permitted to release the last of their strength. Her mind goes blank from the pleasure. It's everything that's been building up in her for weeks. Maybe months. She lets it all go, driven by raw instinct.

Her marks on Sartha. Her cum in Sartha. Her furious words thundering through her ears. Her victory—her domination—feels complete. This moment is the culmination of Leinth's entire existence. The satisfaction is infinite.

Until it isn't.

When her orgasm dies, it's not just Leinth's need that fades. It's her anger. It's the wound of betrayal and resentment, pressing on her brain like a canker sore. It all goes, all at once, everything that's been animating her. Leinth collapses back onto the back, legs splayed, face aghast with dawning confusion.

Then, slowly, horribly, as Sartha draws weak, shuddery breaths, Leinth becomes aware that they are not alone in the cell.

"My," remarks Handler, from where She's been watching. Leinth didn't notice Her enter, but She must have seen the entire filthy thing. "Leinth Aritimis. What have you done?"

Leinth hadn't realized just how fucking cold it was in the cell. Shivering, she meets Handler's gaze for a moment, and that's a mistake. In Handler's

eyes, she doesn't see smug glee or victorious scorn. Her eyes are simply impossibly cold, like the winter sky. They are a mirror, and they are perfectly truthful.

Under those eyes, Leinth can't keep it together. Not even for a moment.

"I d-... I didn't..." Leinth's voice sounds absurdly small compared to those growls from just moments ago. She's grasping for something. That voice in her head, the one that made everything seem so clear. "Y-you... made me..."

Handler merely tilts Her head to one side. "Is that what you think?"

She doesn't, not really. Leinth doesn't feel like anyone made her do anything. It was all her. Every ugly feeling and every blackened thought. Her decision to... what? Fuck Sartha? It feels worse than that, although Leinth can't tell if it really is or not. This is all too twisted, and all she knows is that her chest is ripping itself in two with guilt. Even if that voice had been Handler's, Leinth chose to listen to it. Surely she had a choice.

But there's something. There has to be *something*.

"You put d-drugs," Leinth babbles, "in my food."

"Of course," Handler replies.

She doesn't need to deny it. She knows it's not enough. Leinth can already rehearse argument and counterargument in her own head. How does she know the drugs aren't showing who she really is? Why would drugs absolve her responsibility?

And it's not like she can pretend she didn't want it. She's always wanted Sartha Thrace.

No. Leinth knows what she chose. She felt herself chose it.

But acceptance is still a bridge she can't cross. "But..." Leinth splutters. She glances at Sartha in half-panic. "No, but..."

"Why are you so worked up about this, Leinth?" Handler asks her. "You haven't done anything wrong."

At that, Leinth goes very, very still. Her eyes fix on Handler again. She can't believe she just heard that. She never even considered that. The thought is foreign. She hasn't... but no, of course she has!

"No," Leinth shakes her head. "How can you say that? I... she..."

"She wanted this." Handler is the kind of calm that makes Her easy to believe. "Every part of her. I'd know."

Leinth knows poison when she hears it, but she can't stop herself listening. "That's n-not true. Sartha wouldn't."

"She would," Handler tells her. "I've been telling you, Leinth. Sartha isn't what you hoped she'd be. She's not a hero. She is my hound."

The dreadful memory of what happened smothers any retort Leinth might have. She wants to insist that Sartha didn't want it, but she remembers in her body the way Sartha hungered for her kiss and welcomed Leinth inside her. Fuck, the eagerness in her voice. She was practically begging for it.

Would a hero ever do that?

What Handler offers isn't right. Leinth knows that. But it's so tempting, and she's struggling to remember why it's wrong.

"Don't worry," Handler says softly. She sounds so kind now, or maybe that's just in Leinth's head. "I sent her in here, you know. If you need to blame someone, you can blame me. I won't hold it against you."

Now that's irresistible—especially when Handler extends Her hand and touches Her fingertips to Leinth's cheek. She means to pull away; she almost does, but Handler's touch is perfectly cool. It feels like the only thing that can soothe the pounding heat inside Leinth. So she lets herself be weak for a moment. It's just a touch, she tells herself.

"Right," Leinth breathes. "It's your fault."

Handler nods. With that permission, Leinth bundles up her guilt and gifts it to the woman standing over her. In her mind she recites all the reasons she should blame Handler rather than herself. It works. It helps. She feels lighter for it. Handler, conversely, is unchanged. Untainted. She's not like Leinth. She can swallow all that guilt and culpability effortlessly. There's too much of Her. It can't leave a trace.

Leinth is just grateful, in a sad, pathetic way, that Handler isn't throwing it back in her face. That would be the perfect way to twist the knife. There's no way Leinth could handle it. She'd break. She'd shatter. Leinth doesn't know the meaning of this kindness, but she's still grateful for it.

She feels, unfathomably, at peace.

And she feels like she could stay that way forever, but for one thing: Sartha. Sartha is still there, still next to her, drawing weak, shuddery breaths that remind Leinth of her presence. Sartha seems contented, in a way. Leinth figures she got the oblivion she was craving. But now Leinth can't even stand

to turn her face in her direction. The sight of her makes everything too raw and it makes her remember— remember that ugly, false reality, the one she's trying to push away.

The one where she's guilty.

"Can you..." Leinth begins quietly. She's hoping Handler's mysterious kindness will stretch just a little further. "Can you get her out of here?"

"Oh?" Handler's still stroking her cheek. "Are you done with her?"

Leinth whimpers. She wishes She wouldn't put it like that, but she can hardly hold it against Her. And she desperately needs Sartha gone so she can begin to regroup. "Y-yes. I just... I can't..."

Handler interrupts her with a disapproving, tongue-clicking noise. To Leinth, it's as loud as thunder.

"No, that's no good," Handler chides, in a hauntingly affectionate way. "That's guilt talking, isn't it? Don't listen to that feeling, Leinth."

"OK," Leinth says sheepishly. She feels stupid now that Handler's lecturing her. What else can she say but 'OK'? Her head is still splitting in two. She can't think. Still can't think.

"Look at her," Handler instructs firmly.

Leinth whimpers again. "No, no, I-"

Her head jolts and everything flashes white, and she realizes Handler has slapped her. Tears well up in her eyes. Stupid. It wasn't even hard. Certainly not as hard as Leinth hit Sartha. Just a shock, to get her attention and stop her rambling. But for Handler to lay a hand on her like that...

"Look at her," Handler repeats. She touches Leinth again, guiding her. Leinth doesn't resist. She's puppy-weak. She looks at Sartha

Really looks. She has to, because that's what Handler is telling her. It's not easy. Sartha is a fucking mess. If she was a hero twenty minutes ago, she isn't now. Her clothes are ruined. She's bleeding in half a dozen places. She's drenched in both her own sweat and Leinth's, and the expression on her face is something truly inhuman, a fucked-stupid look of gratified, delirious masochism. It hurts to think that Leinth put it there, and it hurts just as much seeing how Leinth's cum is spilling out from between her legs to stain the bunk.

This is the ruin of a hero.

"Look," Handler urges. "Isn't she pathetic?"

Her words pull at the string of Leinth's heart. They make her twitch. Yes, Sartha is pathetic. There's no use in denying it now. But the guilt is roaring back and forces a choked whimper from Leinth's throat.

"It's OK," Handler soothes. "You haven't done anything wrong, Leinth."

The head-splitting pain is worse than ever. Unfathomably bad. Leinth has felt her own mech being split open while she's inside and that's the only thing she can think of that comes close. "B-but... I... to her..."

"She wanted it," Handler reminds her. "She asked for it."

Leinth shakes her head violently as the ache grows. "No. No, no, no, no, no."

"Yes." Handler sounds so firm. So sure. How is it so easy for Her? "She's a traitor, Leinth. Remember that. She betrayed you."

Her words aren't helping, however kindly they're meant. If anything, they're making it worse. It's like Leinth is seeing double. There are two versions of Sartha in her head. One a saint, a hero, faultless, a martyr for her cause until Leinth defiled her. The other a traitor, a deceiver, someone who pretended she could bear the weight of the world until she gave up and decided to indulge in whatever sick fetish Handler satisfies.

It doesn't make sense. Sartha can't be both. And Leinth can't hold onto both versions at once. It's too much.

"She tricked you," Handler says. "All of you. She pretended to be more than just a woman. She let you believe in her, and hated you for it. And now she's making you feel guilty, too. All for giving her what she wants."

"Please stop," Leinth sobs. She's about to pass out from the pain. "Make it stop. Please."

"You didn't do anything wrong," Handler reiterates. "Say it for me."

"I d-didn't do anything wrong," Leinth repeats. She'd do or say anything now, if it helped.

"That's right."

It did help, a little. Or maybe Handler's approval does. But only a little.

"B-but." Leinth can't stop herself saying it. She wants desperately to fall into Handler's abyss. The pain is that bad. But guilt is still her anchor. "I d-didn't have to... that's not me, I... even she doesn't deserve..."

"Yes, I see," Handler says. She seems to understand perfectly. "Leinth, listen to me: whatever you did wrong, I forgive you."

"You..."

Leinth looks back to Her. Handler's eyes are still the sky. Cold. Pure. Free of compassion and accusation both. As always, they make Handler's words ring true. Leinth hadn't even thought about forgiveness. She hadn't imagined anyone could award her forgiveness. But when Handler promises it, she believes.

She believes so much she doesn't stop to ask why Handler's forgiveness would matter, or what she's being forgiven for if she did nothing wrong.

And then Leinth feels it. Absolution.

She implodes from it. Leinth crumples over and inward, wracked by dry, silent sobs of sheer relief. The pain is gone. It's like it was never there. She's free. Before she can stop herself she finds she's clasping Handler's hand. It was on her cheek but she brings it to her lips, kissing, praying. This is more unburdened than she'd ever dared hope to feel.

How can Handler do this? How does She have this power? It's like She's the first real person Leinth has ever met—and for once, she's simply grateful to have met Her.

"Good," Handler pronounces. She sees the change in Leinth. And She's pleased, which is another gift. Handler glances at Sartha. "Wake up," She orders. "Come along, Sartha."

Sartha is trapped in some kind of daze but she obeys without hesitation, rising to her feet as if oblivious to her bruised, cum-drenched state. She looks wretched—Leinth can say that to herself now, she learns, without guilt—but when she starts following Handler out of the cell, Leinth is almost jealous.

It would be a blessing to get to follow Her around. To spend a little longer in Her presence. Especially since Leinth is so very afraid that as soon as She leaves, all that fearful doubt is going to come right back. Handler might be the enemy, but Leinth's inner voices hurt worse.

Handler, as always, knows what's in her soul. "Don't worry, Leinth," She says over Her shoulder as She departs. "You're doing very well. I will be with you again soon."

Leinth just nods. She's doing very well. She can hold that praise tight to her chest. It'll keep her warm.

Once Handler leaves, the cell door closes and locks. Leinth is alone again. The loneliness is more uncomfortable than ever. Her head is clouded over, but she's starting to realize that's not so bad. It'll keep her from dwelling on the things that don't fit right.

There's something she can't help dwelling on, though. Something unsaid between her and Handler. The question Handler doesn't need to ask, because She always asks.

Who are you?

Leinth still doesn't have an answer for Her. But she's closer, perhaps. Leinth stands up and walks to the mirror. As she peers into it, searching for clarity, it happens again. That strange double vision. Like the whole world is fracturing. But not around Sartha, this time. Around Leinth.

First, Leinth sees herself, or what she's always taken to be herself. A woman who still looks a little like a pilot. A rebel. The person she's always been, who she could always live with being, but also the person she cannot reconcile with what she has just done.

But then she sees something else too. Something deeper. Truer. Something that is barely a person at all. Something feral. It's whatever came out of her when she was on top of Sartha, hitting and fucking and growling. Perhaps it was always there, in the corner of her eye. Leinth just couldn't see it before because she was too afraid. The thing she sees is abominable. Unforgivable—except for Handler. She can forgive it. Only Her. Leinth knows that because she knows exactly what she's looking at.

It's a hound. A hound of Leinth's very own.

PART THREE

Nothing makes Leinth Aritimis feel good the way being saddled up in the cockpit of a huge mech suit does.

Except 'good' isn't the right word at all. Leinth isn't sure what would be. She doesn't know how to describe the knife-edge, stomach-churning, nauseous thrill she feels as she sits in *Genetor*'s cockpit. It's a superposition of guilt and vindication, threatening, at any moment, to crystallize into either one, and Leinth is constantly, achingly aware of just how narrow the tightrope she walks is. She doesn't know the name for a feeling like that. She just knows that she needs it. Leinth is long past mere addiction. This feeling, as much as blood, is what flows through her veins. It keeps her alive. That was a hard lesson to learn, but she's learnt it well. She won't forget.

In exchange, there are so many other things she's had to unlearn. Her whole life. Leinth often thinks it's all gone, but somehow, each day, there's more to lose. More to change. More to reframe and reinterpret. She has two lives now, but one is true, while the other is merely real. It's confusing. Leinth can barely carry all that weight. Fortunately, Handler is always there to help.

Leinth trusts Her, of course. How could she not?

She even gave *Genetor* back to her. *Genetor*, repaired and refitted with Imperial tech. It stands ever so slightly taller and darker and prouder than before, and Leinth can pilot it, even if she doesn't deserve to. Since she's unworthy, she pays special care as she descends the steep slope into the Corlu Valley. Leinth doesn't deserve any more second chances, not from anybody. A mech could easily lose footing on the loose shale and go crashing into the

mountainside, but even a walking fortress like *Genetor* can be delicate in the right hands. Hell, with a pilot like Leinth, it can even be stealthy.

As the dawn just begins to break, the Corlu Valley is filled with rad-saturated fog. Looking down into it from the surrounding peaks, what you see is more like a lake than a valley. It feels that way, too, when you're walking through it, and the visibility out of the viewports is almost non-existent. This dirty shit plays havoc with sensors. Leinth finds herself jumping at shadows sometimes as the fog shifts and billows in unnatural formations, like there's something inside it. Fog isn't supposed to move like that. It's supposed to billow gently with the wind as it settles down amongst the mountains.

Problem is, mechs like *Genetor* are mountains that move. And it's not the only one down here.

Leinth is out hunting. They have intel and they can't make too much noise on the way in, so there's no one at her side. None of those unnervingly uniform, blackclad, Imperial *Doru* mechs Leinth has been getting used to fighting with. It's a solo mission... almost. And she's closing in on the designated position. If their intel is right, she's only a mile or so away from them.

The enemy. The... who? Leinth frowns. She tries not to think about that part. Handler told her she doesn't have to. But it still doesn't sit quite right. She can't help the stray worries that fog her head and turn her thoughts into a messy swarm of doubts. Handler says that's OK too. She says Leinth just isn't quite finished yet. She's so kind.

Leinth reaches up and scratches where her muzzle meets her skin.

"I'm in position," she murmurs into her radio as she brings *Genetor* to a halt and opens a channel. "No contact."

'Good. Sit tight.'

Leinth sits bolt upright, on the edge of her seat. Just those three words have her at attention, electrified—and all because it's Her. Her voice. The voice of Leinth's god. So she has to listen, every part of her, even the parts that normally thrive on rebellion and defiance. Like the feeling of being within *Genetor*, it's not all good. Leinth feels as much hate for Handler as she does love—but that's not such a contradiction anymore. You can hate god and you can love god. It doesn't change anything. Not what She is. Not what Leinth is.

Handler will love her all the same.

Leinth hates that Her voice reminds Leinth of her own nature. She is a sinner. An animal. That knowledge boils within her breast. Leinth feels herself stir and get hard. She's salivating so bad she's actually drooling a little. All conditioned reflexes. It's humiliating. It makes her angry. But she loves that even over the radio, Handler's voice promises release. The gift only She can give.

That's for later. For now, Leinth needs to focus on the mission. And that means she needs to ask about her. The other one.

"Is she ready?" Leinth has to choke out the pronoun through rising bile.

'Not yet. Still on the approach.'

Leinth is first. She grins behind her muzzle. A small victory, but it still counts. They all count.

In this case, though, winning means sitting and waiting. Leinth doesn't care for that. It's not safe for her. Waiting means thinking. Thinking means temptation. If Leinth sits and waits for too long, she'll find herself tempted to reach for something forbidden: her freedom.

Leinth has seen every inch of the rebuilt *Genetor*, inside and out, which is why she knows there's no contingency plan. No hidden lockout or remote override. There is absolutely nothing to stop Leinth from marching her mech down into the valley, alerting the... enemy, switching sides, and repaying against Handler every little bit of the pain and torture Leinth has herself suffered.

She squirms. The mere thought is blasphemous. She'll need to be punished later. More drool.

Only, what would happen if she did betray Handler? Most likely, the enemy would never trust her. She's far too compromised. Oh, they'd make use of her intel as best they could—but then they'd lock her up for the rest of her days. Or worse, they'd execute her.

Leinth can't stomach that. It would be too kind.

And what if they believed her? Trusted her? Gave her a second chance? Then things could be just like before—before Leinth's fall, in the part of her life she barely remembers. She could pilot *Genetor* on that side and fight the good fight once more. She'd be a hero again. A greater hero than ever, surely. The one who came back. The one who redeemed herself, and gave them all

of Handler's secrets. Before long, they'd have her face on the recruitment posters instead of Sartha's.

And through it all, no matter what, they'd never know who she really is. They'd never know the weight of what she's done, and the penance it demands. They'd never be able to forgive her.

No. Only Handler can do that. Leinth's course is set.

She squeezes *Genetor*'s controls so tight her knuckles ache as she daydreams these useless, stillborn dreams.

Thanks to that, Leinth is ready to move at the first sound of artillery. An instant after the dull roar echoes off the mountain walls, the fog before *Genetor* parts in a spiral as the shell barrels toward her. Leinth reacts in time —but not to dodge. *Genetor* isn't built for that. It's built to take the hits. Leinth simply raises an arm and lets the mass deflectors built into the mech's structure absorb all the force and fire of the shell's explosion.

Genetor shudders violently for a moment, but quickly stabilizes as the attitude control systems kick in. Within the cockpit, Leinth grins. Old instincts are coming to life. She knows exactly what to do. She knows she'll win—and if she doesn't, it'll be a mercy.

It's then that Leinth feels her footing beginning to slip underneath her. Her grin fades. She needs to focus. The earth beneath Leinth's feet is beginning to collapse, and the only way for a mech as huge and unwieldy as *Genetor* not to go down is to let momentum keep it upright. That means heading in only one direction. Forward. Down.

Towards them.

Leinth brings her weapons to bear and snarls behind her muzzle. Where is she, damn it? This was supposed to be an ambush. There's no telling how the enemy spotted her. Maybe Leinth fucked up. Maybe the plan was bad. Maybe it was just an unlucky patrol or sensor sweep.

Doesn't matter now. Leinth is fighting for her life.

"I'm made," Leinth hisses into the radio. "Engaging prey. Tell her to hurry the fuck up."

'She's close.' Again, Handler's voice is magic. It turns Leinth into frozen steel. She already regrets the instinctive profanity. '*If you need her, that is.*'

Leinth growls something fierce. Handler makes it sound like a perfectly neutral comment, but Leinth recognizes when her pride is being stoked.

Doesn't make it any less effective. But she doesn't talk back, not to Handler.

Four shapes emerge from the fog as Leinth descends the valley's slopes. An elite team. They're who Leinth is supposed to be hunting. But four against one, without the advantage of surprise—those are long odds. As *Genetor* crashes to a halt on level ground, two of them start to climb the slopes around Leinth. Before they can complete the flank, she picks one of the others, pushes *Genetor*'s motive plant into the red, and charges.

It's funny. Leinth never used to fight like this. She remembers being calmer. More methodical. That time, in the ruins, against *Ancyor*, she wondered how it was possible to make a machine seem so bestial. But now she has it too. That animal edge. She's never been more dangerous behind the controls.

And *Genetor* is well-suited for it. It's faster than people think—especially now. A few long, lurching steps is all it takes to close the gap. At the last possible moment, Leinth opens up with *Genetor*'s cannon. Its missile pods too. She hopes she's guessing the float time right. Her life may well depend on it. Her cannon shots go wide, unsurprisingly. That just leaves CQC. Leinth draws her chain hawk. Her opponent does the same with their saber. Here they come.

'You!' the other pilot howls over an unencrypted radio channel, as their blades make contact and the whole valley seems to shake with clashing steel. '*Traitor!*'

Leinth flinches. She can't help it. They always say that, and it always gets to her. She tries not to listen. Her axe swings are slow, relatively, but each one could take out a building. Her opponent needs to respect that, and does. They retreat. Leinth keeps moving forward. Down. Driving them away from the rest of the squad.

'How'd they get to you, Leinth?' There's bitter laughter, distorted by static. '*Can't have paid you too fucking much if you're still piloting.*'

That makes Leinth whine. It's not about money. It was never about money. She longs to tell them. They deserve, she thinks, to know that she was never really one of them. She was a poison pill, forcing herself down their throats. She ruined one hero. She'd do the same to them all, in time. Why don't they get it? It's just better this way.

'C'mon, how?' The other pilot demands, as they riposte, taking a chunk

out of *Genetor*'s shoulder. At least the machinery there is redundant—mostly. '*Don't tell me you're a true believer. Not you.*'

Leinth isn't; that bothers her. What does she believe in? It's strange how it hasn't occurred to her in a very long time that there's more at stake here than the psychodrama of her own soul. There's a war going on out there, but that's been out of view. Beyond what she deserves, why would she be fighting on this side? She doesn't want them to win, does she?

'They must have some sweet fucking perks, over there,' Leinth's opponent spits. '*That's my bet. Better girls. Nicer quarters. Hot meals. Better than squatting in holes like a rebel rat. Am I right?*'

Rebels. Not just enemies. Rebels. That's who Leinth is fighting against. The cause she used to be part of. She's still moving forward. Down. Chain hawk still swinging in *Genetor*'s titanic hand. But her stomach feels like it's being turned upside down.

For the first time in what feels like forever, it dawns on Leinth that she could just... not fight. She could take her hands off the controls, and let whatever happens happen. And why not? What would be so wrong with that? It seems nice, in a way. Peaceful. Maybe.

Leinth hesitates, and with that, she's fucked. Her opponent is no rookie. A single opening is all they need. They reverse momentum in the span of a heartbeat, and suddenly their saber is coming straight at *Genetor*'s center of mass.

Then, the stars overhead fall out of the sky.

To her credit, Leinth nailed the float time. The distance too. When the missiles fall around her opponent like rain, they seem to come from nowhere. Part of that's the projectile size. They're small chaff rockets, meant for active defense. Against a mech, they won't do more than disorient; against a good pilot, not even that. The rebel Leinth's fighting doesn't even flinch. They're determined to make their strike hit home.

But Leinth doesn't need them to flinch. She just needs to deploy *Genetor*'s stabilizer pylons for a moment while the mountainside collapses all around them.

From the intel, Leinth knows this terrain is just as foreign to the rebel team as it is to her, and Leinth has learned quickly how perilous it can be. When the shale splinters and shatters beneath her opponent, they're not

ready for it. They topple forward, and now, under gravity, their own mech's bulk is their enemy.

The rebel crashes hard, right on their front. Mechs like these don't get up easy, especially not on this kind of terrain, but they start scrambling for a footing immediately. Leinth's piloting instincts take hold again. She retracts her stabilizing pylons, walks forward, and stamps on the rebel mech's leg.

Genetor is a fortress. Under its immense weight, the leg splits in two. The stump is a gory ruin of sparking wires and leaking hydraulic fluid. No getting up now.

But down doesn't mean out. A fallen mech still has weapons. It's still dangerous. That's why Leinth needs to finish off her prey before the others are in position. She raises her axe over her head, ready to deliver the coup de grâce.

Again, she hesitates.

Why? Why do this? To win Handler's blessing? To earn Her forgiveness? Perhaps, but what sense does it make to commit yet another sin for that cause? Doesn't she already have enough on her ledger? Leinth knows, of course, that you need to sink in order to rise. If she won't make herself do terrible things, there's nothing to forgive—and forgiveness is everything. But... is that all her life will be? Misdeed after misdeed, all at Her command. A great hamster wheel of karma that she's left running in until she's spent. Why do that? What's the point?

For a single moment, Leinth achieves clarity. She sees that the control is the point. Nothing more. Whatever sick love Handler has for her is predicated on that. It's fake. This is an unending purgatory, an Escher painting hell that Handler has crafted out of Leinth's traumatized psyche. She can only be free if she stops. Now.

But then she comes. Sartha.

Ancyor falls through the fog overhead like a descending comet. Sartha must have leapt from some precipice hundreds of feet above. The impact pulverizes the treacherous rock beneath *Genetor*'s feet, throwing her wildly off-balance and sending a spray of shattered pebbles in all directions.

Any pilot would lose control after a crash landing like that. Probably pass out from the shock, too. But somehow, Sartha Thrace doesn't. She lands like the side of the mountain is nothing more than a springboard, and rebounds

straight toward Leinth's fallen foe. *Ancyor*'s engines howl as it extends its claws and buries them, all at once, into the mech's cockpit. Then it rips.

The mech that was lunging at Leinth just seconds earlier comes apart in a wet shower of reactor coolant and superheated oil.

Even for a pilot of Leinth's experience, it's one hell of a fucking spectacle. Enough to stun her out of her previous train of thought. Before that moment of clarity slips away from her, though, she's filled with a terrible sorrow, and gripped with the urge to train her weapons on *Ancyor*. To set Sartha free the only way she still can.

Then Sartha says something that sweeps all of that away.

'*One*,' she counts over the radio, in a low, smug growl that could be either one of her halves.

Suddenly, all that Leinth felt before is gone, replaced with vicious, petty jealousy. That was her prey. Her kill. Hers. Leinth took her down. It should be her tally.

But... does Handler know that?

"That was mine!" Leinth insists furiously. All of that stuff about control and trauma, it's all forgotten. She needs the kill credit. She needs Handler to see what she's done.

'*You were slow*,' Sartha tells her. It must be Sartha, Leinth decides. Still on the leash. She sounds just a hair too much like her old self. Like a hero lecturing a rookie, despite the absurd unworthiness of the argument

"I put her down," Leinth snarls, "while you were blundering around in the fog!"

As they argue, they bring their mechs about to face their pursuers. The pendulum has already swung. Three against two now. And there'll be no retreating, not now the rebels have lost one of their own.

'*I was following the plan*,' Sartha retorts. '*But you got spotted. I had to improvise.*'

The only reply Leinth has for her is a vicious growl that leaves loops of spittle drooling from the bars of her muzzle. Her head is getting dangerously fuzzy. Being around Sartha always does that to her. Once again, she can't quite figure out what she wants.

She wants to punish Sartha. She wants Sartha to punish her. She wants Handler to punish them both. She wants Handler to forgive her.

Leinth headbutts the side of her cockpit in self-destructive frustration. It's all mixed up. But... she has to be good. She has to be better. She knows that much. She has to win. Because what's the point, if Handler won't smile at her and mess her hair and tell her she's done well?

That's all Leinth lives for.

Why did she hesitate? Why did she fucking hesitate? Why does this all have to be so confusing?

'Leinth?'

Handler's voice brings as much shame as comfort this time. She must have noticed the way Leinth is slipping. Hot tears well up in Leinth's eyes. After all this time, she still can't stop fucking up. It's pitiful. She doesn't deserve anything. Her vision is blurred and streaked as she tries to focus on the monitor in *Genetor*'s cockpit. She can barely tell *Ancyor* and the rebels apart.

"I... I-I..." she chokes out. She can't hide it.

'It's OK,' Handler promises. Leinth sobs, because she believes it. Handler never lies to her. '*Do you want me to save you now?'*

"Yes!" Leinth seizes on the offer like she's drowning. She's never needed that sweet salvation quite so bad. "Yes. Please. Please. Yesyesyes."

Mercifully, Handler doesn't drag it out. She's the kind of god that never lets you down.

'Leinth. Sartha. Off The Leash.'

Leinth feels her implosion happen in real time. In that brief moment, she understands why it's always so hard. It's because there's nothing at the heart of her. Not anymore. Handler stuck her fingers into her head and scooped it all out. Now she'll always be empty. She should hate Handler for it, but she loves Her instead because Handler is the only way she'll ever feel full again.

Full of love. Full of purpose. Full of pride. Leinth Aritimis may have ceased to be a real person, but there's something left in the ruins of her personhood. Something animal and angry and so very loyal to the master that holds her leash. In her last moments, the tears in Leinth's eyes become joyful. It's such a relief to let go of it all, and be the beast instead.

Leinth Aritimis goes away, and Hound wakes.

Leinth-Hound is young, to be sure, but that just means she's filled with an untested pup's eagerness. Briefly, she regards the carcass of her prey and snarls at her packmate for stealing the prize of the kill. It's not fair, but there's

no time to settle that now. Sartha-Hound is still on her side. That's what a pack is. And those rebels? They're the other side. They're for hunting.

The nascent Leinth-Hound guns *Genetor*'s motive plant in a way she'd never normally dare, right to its screaming limit. Explosive bolts light up like fireworks all over, and armor plates go flying into the fog, exposing emergency vents, specially designed and already white-hot. Leinth-Hound isn't worried. She knows this iron body as well as she does her own. She knows it can take it.

Now, when *Genetor* moves forward, it's not a fortress. It's a thunderbolt. They don't see it coming. But Sartha-Hound does; *Ancyor* is right at her side, moving with preternatural synchronicity. In moments like these, they don't need to talk or plan. They're animals. Their pack instinct speaks louder than words ever could. They are Handler's perfect weapons, and they won't let her down.

As fast as *Genetor* is now, *Ancyor* is faster still. Sartha-Hound uses the speed well, blitzing around a flank and picking out their first victim. By the time Leinth-Hound is upon them, there's nowhere to go. Hammer and anvil. Unstoppable. The killing begins not long after.

Three against two. It was never going to be close.

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Dismounting *Genetor* after it lumbers back into its hangar berth feels like emerging from a deep, timeless sleep. Not a restful one though. Leinth's heart quickens anxiously as she surveys the mess that's been made of her pride and joy. Stripped paint, ashen blast-scars, jagged wounds in the armor, and... could that be blood?

Leinth hopes not, but the flashes she remembers of the battle make her tremble. She tries not to think about it. Instead, she does exactly what she's been told, and looks for Her.

The hangar is a vast space, an empty monument to the war machines that demand such excessive facilities. Looking up and trying to focus on the ceiling so far above makes Leinth's eyes ache. In here, a person is no more than an ant, and unhelpfully the hangar is swarming with them—mechanics,

engineers, pilots from other teams. It looks like another cohort is returning to base at the same time as Leinth and Sartha. A small army is being disgorged into the hangar to see to refueling, repairing, rearming. It's hard to pick out just one person amid all that.

But Leinth's ears soon prick up at the distinctive sound of those heavy boots clacking against the concrete.

As Handler approaches, Sartha leaps athletically from the cockpit of her *Ancyor* and lands just next to Leinth. The two mechs share a berth, just a little way apart from the others. A healthy separation. Leinth flashes Sartha a resentful look. She remembers enough to know that Sartha screwed her over. This isn't the time or place to hash that out, though. Not in front of Handler. Leinth will just have to hope that She has the wisdom to see past it.

Leinth reaches up and adjusts her muzzle ever so slightly. She needs to be perfect in Her eyes.

Handler looks perfect, as always. There are no wrinkles in Her coat or blemishes on Her leathers. Her boots are perfectly clean, despite the oil and powdered metal all over the ground. Every last long, pale hair on Her head is immaculate. Leinth remembers how, at first, she wondered how it was possible for a person to be so inhumanly composed. It seemed impossible. Miraculous. Now she knows a little more. She knows that she and Sartha labor for hours every night, polishing boots and tending to leather. Sometimes She even permits them to brush Her hair. But the weary knowledge of the service involved doesn't make it any less miraculous. Gods have their followers. It's just the way of things.

"Sartha," Handler says as She approaches, looking between them. Assessing them. "Leinth. You did well. I'm pleased."

Leinth closes her eyes and just lets that wash over her. For a moment, it cleanses her of all the shame of hesitation and all the frustration of being bested. All the guilt, too, which is the most important thing of all. Leinth tries her very best to stretch that moment out into an eternity, counting all her heartbeats and the spaces in between. She knows now, again, that she did the right thing. This is right where she's supposed to be. No one but Handler could ever make her feel like this.

She's smiling. Her face hurts from it. Leinth doesn't care how stupid her dumb grin looks. Handler's praise is worth more than any dignity. It helps to

know that, standing right beside her, Sartha is smiling the very same smile. She doesn't even mind the crowd that's gathering around the three of them—at a respectful distance, of course. Pilots and mechanics alike, all smirking. They seem poised. Eager.

"Especially you, Leinth," Handler says, and Leinth can barely believe her luck. Nothing has ever felt sweeter in her ears. "This is the first time I've needed to send you so far away from me. But you didn't lose sight of what matters. You're becoming a wonderful hound."

"T-thank you, sir," Leinth bleats in a small, girlish voice. She has to choke down on a joyful sob. It's all she's ever wanted, even if she never knew it.

And now there's a delicious little edge to the joy; she can hear a wounded, envious little rumble coming from Sartha's throat. Perfect.

Before it's ruined.

"Now," Handler says expectantly to Leinth. "What's your tally this time?"

Leinth's blood runs cold. She was hoping that, on an unusual mission like this, Handler's normal rules wouldn't apply. She was wrong. She'll have to face the consequences.

For just a brief moment, Leinth considers lying. Claiming the one Sartha stole out from under her. But she cannot be dishonest with Handler—she needs to volunteer these things—and so the ugly, bitter truth forces its way out of Leinth's trembling lips.

"One."

Just one, cored through with a solid round from *Genetor* at damn near point-blank range. A hell of a shot for most pilots, given that cannon's heft and recoil. But for Leinth, it changes nothing. One is one. It's not enough.

"I see," Handler replies evenly. "And you, Sartha?"

"Three." Sartha can say it proudly, with her chest puffed out. She's won.

Leinth hates her for that. Truly hates her. For the pride she must feel, and the reward she'll receive. It's mutual, she knows. Before her, Sartha was Handler's only hound, and then the reward was always hers. Now it's split, decided each time by competition. But Sartha usually wins, and Leinth overflows with resentment for her. Only Handler's stern hand keeps the urge to lunge at her suppressed.

Then, moments later, the backlash. The cold flush of shame that howls at her for daring to feel even one little bit of anger or hate for Sartha Thrace. Did

Leinth forget? Did she lose sight of the reason they're here? Leinth made Sartha this way. It's her fault. All her fault. She doesn't deserve to hate.

But she does anyway. Once again, Leinth is reminded of just how low and vile she is. The abasement feels good, in a twisted kind of way. It's freeing. There are no pretenses here. But it makes Leinth itch too. She needs Handler. She needs those magic words.

"I see," Handler says again. "You know what that means, don't you? Sartha has won."

Leinth nods her head, ever so slightly. There's no sense in denying it. No sense in being angry at Handler. She speaks with judgment's impartial voice. That doesn't mean Leinth needs to enjoy what happens next, of course.

"Sartha." Handler beckons the other hound forward. "It's time for your prize. Sit."

Sartha takes one overeager step forward and then drops like a rock. She kneels like being on her knees is the only place she ever wants to be. She bends forward, pressing close to Handler, head so low her muzzle is almost scraping along the ground.

"Good hound." Handler rests her hand on Sartha's head and starts to pet. There's a thin smile on her face—cruel, yes, but Leinth doesn't mind, when she's smiling at her. God can be cruel. "Good hound."

Even from behind, Leinth can hear the ecstatic little whimper that erupts from Sartha. She's in heaven. Who wouldn't be?

All Leinth can do is watch, as every kind of bitterness curdles in her gut. As every cell in her body yearns to trade places. All those other pilots and mechanics are watching too. Laughing.

"Would you like your treat?" Handler asks Sartha.

"Yes, sir." Sartha's voice is trembling from the sheer thrill of the moment. She was a hero, once. It's hard to believe that now. "Yes, sir. Please. P-please."

Her eyes are fixed on a single spot. It's the same place Leinth would be looking if their positions were reversed.

Handler's boots.

"Oh, this?" Handler makes a point of extending one foot forward. Her smile widens. "You want this?"

Sartha nods rapidly. She's an overexcited child. "Yes. Yyyyes. Sir."

Slurring her words. It's undeniably pathetic. The entire watching crowd clearly thinks so. But yes, a hero, once. Until Leinth and her ilk.

"Very well," Handler says, with benevolent gravitas. "Good hounds get rewards, and you've been good. Sartha, Off The Leash."

The words aren't for Leinth so they don't draw her under their power, but she still trembles at their force. Watching them work their way through Sartha is a terrible thing. For a moment she goes limp and sags, like she's completely crumbling, and what comes alive within her after a mere instant has an unmistakably different presence; she's hunched, hackles up, heaving with each panted breath as her tongue lolls, dog-like, out of her mouth. The new presence is dangerous, but not right now. She's too caught up in adoration of her master.

It's Hound. Sartha's Hound.

"Good," Handler says softly. She glances down at Her extended boot. "Now go."

Sartha-Hound surges forward, needy for her reward. As quickly as she can manage, she wraps herself around Handler's leg, presses against Her boot, and starts to grind. The first sound out of her throat, loud even in the hangar, is a gratified moan so wild and pure it makes even the watching crowd of Imperials blush. It's clear that she's been yearning for this, and the yearning has made it all the sweeter.

This—humping the boot of the woman who broke her—is Sartha Thrace's highest pleasure.

It's Leinth's too, of course. But she's denied it. She didn't win. Now, as Handler turns Her attention to Leinth, she braces herself.

It's not that Handler wants to hurt her, of course. It's just that Leinth needs to understand that she can do better.

Take your medicine, Leinth.

"You know what to do, Leinth." Handler's small smile fortifies her. "They're waiting for you. Off you go."

"Yes, sir."

Leinth nods and turns, and her cheeks fill with the color of shame as she heads toward the waiting crowd. Their eyes are all lurid and full of humor. Apparently, they used to be afraid of Handler and Her hounds. They still fear Handler, and they still hate Leinth and Sartha, but something happened, and

the pair of hounds are now entirely declawed in their eyes. The terms of the contest help with that. It ensures steady familiarization. They're well-used to Leinth by now, after all her defeats, but that doesn't make it any less of a spectacle when Leinth begins to strip.

Unlike Sartha, Leinth has always favored a standard-issue, green piloting jumpsuit, although she can't resist keeping it unzipped to the waist and tied loosely around her hips. Gets too damn hot in the cockpit otherwise. But now, as around two dozen Imperials watch and leer, she tugs it down her legs and steps out of it after first kicking away her boots.

Someone wolf-whistles.

Beneath that, Leinth always wears a synthetic bodyskin that clings tight to her form, black and sleek. It's not modest, but that's what the jumpsuit's for; the skin helps monitor her vitals and protect her from abrasions when *Genetor* takes a big hit. It unfastens from the back of her neck, and there's no way to take it off in front of people that doesn't end up looking like a strip show. Leinth just tries to make it quick, as she unzips it down to her ass and peels it away from her physique.

She has no love for these people. She acknowledges that they're her comrades now, but only because of Handler. Leinth is only doing this because it's what She wants.

Once the bodyskin is tossed aside, Leinth is left in nothing but her sweat-soaked underwear. Those go quickly, and then she's completely naked. She tries to hide herself; Handler doesn't object to that. Probably because it doesn't help. Trying to cover her body with her hands just makes Leinth feel young and small and like it's her first time in the girls' locker room again.

It doesn't help that the hangar is damn cold. Hopefully, it'll be over quick.

"Go ahead," Handler calls out. Her voice is mixed with the sounds Sartha-Hound makes as she humps Her boot. She's practically dripping through her pants now. "She's all yours."

This time, She isn't talking to Leinth. She's talking to the crowd.

They all salute their thanks to Handler before swarming toward Leinth, a seething mass of dirty, petty, horny pilots and mechanics. Within moments they're all around her, pressing in, each one of them desperate for their chance to grab, grope, slap, touch. Whatever trepidation they once had regarding Sartha is plainly long gone. To them, Leinth is just meat. They have

seen with her own eyes that she's no longer the rebel ace whose face she shares.

But that doesn't mean they can't take out their resentments on her.

"Rebel bitch!" Leinth hears, as she's pushed this way and that by the crowd crush. "Not such a fucking hero now, huh? Glad you know your fucking place."

She hears it from all around her. Worse, too. All kinds of insults and terms of abuse, in voices that are full of nothing but mockery and contempt. It's not long before it's all just an overwhelming, incoherent din—but somehow Handler's voice still cuts through it all, clear and strong. And as ever, Her words deliver sweet mercy.

"Leinth. Off The Leash."

Now more than ever, perhaps, Leinth welcomes the oblivion. Ego death is salvation. With each part of her that falls away, the sheer humiliation of what's happening to her burns just a little less. Leinth yearns to be less. To be nothing at all, maybe, so that nothing hurts, but even if that's too extreme, she's sure that diminishing will set her free. As quickly as the trigger word works, she can still feel it coming for a heartbeat or two. The approaching threshold of transformation. It's like an orgasm. She closes her eyes and lets it take her.

Leinth Aritimis goes away, and Hound wakes.

It's not like Hound enjoys what's happening. At least, not at first. Waking up is always a little confusing, and the crowd of people accosting Hound make no concessions to her confusion. Before she can get her bearings, Hound finds herself forced to her knees as her legs are swept away. She snaps and growls her complaints at the women closest to her, but they just laugh. It's an empty threat, and they know it. She can't bite, and not just because of the muzzle. Handler wouldn't like her biting,

"Dumb mutt," someone jeers. Must be someone who's been around long enough to know what's what. Hound whines.

"Come here, dog."

Hound can barely see amid all the bodies pressing in on her from all sides, but a moment later, as she turns her head cluelessly from side to side, she feels someone grab hold of her muzzle and pull her towards them. Then, suddenly, there's a boot between her legs, forcing her thighs apart, so rough it's all but kicking her as it grinds against her cock.

Hound whines again. People laugh. “This is what you want, right?” someone jeers. “Sick fuck.”

It’s not. Not even close. This is just a mockery of the reward Sartha-Hound is receiving. Leinth-Hound can’t hear her cries of pleasure over the din of the mob, but she can certainly imagine. She knows how good it feels. Not like this at all. Handler is special.

Even Her boot.

Entirely against her wishes, Hound’s body is beginning to respond to the rough treatment she’s receiving. Anger surges within her as she notices it—the rising heat that tempts her hips to buck and threatens to turn her whines into something like moans. It’s irresistible. Handler likes her with a hair trigger. Hounds need to be keen. She can’t help but feel good. She does hate it, though. Hates it bitterly. Hound has little concept of humiliation or dignity, but she does have an instinct to fight, to claw, to win, to dominate. To lead the pack. This pleasure flies in the face of all that. Hound wants to lash out, but she can’t. She’s powerless. She has to submit.

And they know it. Worse, they notice.

“Bitch in heat,” someone sneers. Hound catches a glimpse as they bend down to squeeze and maul her tits. A female pilot. “Gods. You’re actually enjoying this.”

Hound whines again, but her voice betrays her. More laughter.

“Think all the rebels are like this?” asks another woman.

“Definitely,” replies yet another. “You can tell, they keep letting us fuck ‘em out there.”

Laughter from every direction.

“C’mon already,” calls a different voice, terse and irritated. “I’ve been scrubbing out cockpits all day. I need some stress relief.”

The crowd around Hound heaves as someone pushes their way to the front. Only the wall of bodies around her keeps her from slumping to the ground. It’s unbelievably hot, and the smell of sweat and machine oil is inescapable.

“And get this stupid fucking thing off her face,” the mechanic spits. “I want to use that.”

Hound yelps in distress as she feels her muzzle being pulled away from her face. The leather straps, still bound tight, bite painfully around her head,

but it's more than that. The muzzle is Handler's gift. She's not allowed to remove it. Her face is wrong without it. But the woman assaulting her doesn't care, and try as Hound might to lunge for her treasure, within moments it's borne aloft and away by the mob. Hound hears it clatter to the ground somewhere nearby. There's no time to dwell on that agony. In just another moment Hound feels a fist in her hair, gripping tight. A moment more and she's being yanked forward, her face immediately pressed between a pair of strong, muscular thighs. The mechanic has shucked her clothes down to around her knees. Her intentions are clear.

"Lick, slut," she demands.

Hound doesn't want to, but she knows she's supposed to obey. Even a moment's hesitance might displease Handler, so she buries her tongue into the mechanic's cunt and starts to lap with all the eagerness she can muster. Her reward is that the mechanic squeezes down on her even tighter and starts filling the air with smug, breathy grunts of pleasure. The others coo enviously; the grabbing and groping intensifies. Everyone wants a piece.

This is what Hound is now. Stress relief. She's everyone's toy.

And inevitably, she's enjoying it. Hound's instincts cut both ways. Wanting to fight for dominance is just one side of the coin. This treatment is making the pecking order nice and clear. A bitch like Hound can't help but accept it. Can't help but embrace her place at the very bottom. Besides, it's not like she doesn't enjoy eating pussy. Soon, Hound's cock is fully hard, and drooling all over the hangar floor.

A few people laugh at the display of submissive need. One woman reaches down and jerks Hound off a few times, lazily, making her howl with the pleasure of it.

Why not? To them, her cock is just another toy.

It's not long before Hound feels herself grabbed and pulled backward, away from the mechanic she was servicing. She can't tell if they got to finish or not. It doesn't matter. There's already something new in her face. A hand this time, fingers pressing down on her tongue, making her drool all over herself, daring her to bite. Someone grabs her wrist and makes Hound extend her arm until her hand ends up wrapped around a cock. She catches a glimpse; it's one of the female pilots who was mocking her earlier. Hound starts obediently jacking her off.

She's a prisoner to the energy of the crowd now. She is what they want her to be. And she won't be done until they're all satisfied.

Hound quickly becomes delirious. She's turned on and exhausted and there's too much going on around her to keep track of, so she stops trying. Her world becomes a never-ending kaleidoscope of bodies and flesh. Of laughter and moaning. The hand retreats from her mouth, and something else is inserted. At first, Hound thinks it's a cock. Then she realizes it's a toy they want her to lube up with drool as they force it down her throat. At some point, her other hand is forced between a woman's thighs so she can ride Hound's fingers. Her ass is red and bruised from all the people that keep slapping it. Her cock twitches violently every time it's touched, but nobody in the crowd wants to be the one who lets her come. Hound just accepts it. All of it. Right now, that's what her mouth is for. What her hands are for. What her body is for. She's a toy. A spectacle. Most of the people who can't get close enough to touch her are openly masturbating at the sight of someone who used to be a rebel ace be so completely defiled. Amidst the havoc, Hound loses track of how many people she's eaten out or sucked off.

At some point, she becomes aware of something damp and sticky plastered down her front and across her chest, and realizes those female pilots have been coming all over her.

Hound welcomes it. Her animal moans are getting louder and more desperate with each passing moment. It feels good, and even the parts that don't are gratifying. This is her penance. Her personal harrowing. It's right. It's what she deserves, even if she yearns so very desperately to be in Sartha's place instead.

Can Handler see her? Does Handler know how good she's being? Is Handler pleased?

An unnatural hush descends over the crowd little by little, washing in like the tide. People start pulling away from Hound, whispering urgently to one another. Hound lets out a little keening whine. She hasn't finished. She hasn't done her job yet.

Then she sees why everyone has gone cold on her. There's an officer on deck.

Not just an officer. The woman walking out into the hangar is the commander of this entire facility: Phylax-General Athina Kynilandre. She

cuts an unmistakable figure; on a base full of young pilots, her silver hair and timeworn face mark her out, and her dress uniform, with its medals and lapels, makes it clear that she is not a woman to be trifled with.

Nor is she a woman that people wish to see them gang banging a brainwashed rebel pilot.

There's a lot of coughing and looking aside and surreptitious uniform-fixing as she withers the crowd with her disapproving glare. There are no words of reprimand, though. Not for them. General Kynilandre has eyes only for Handler. As she approaches Her, Sartha-Hound finally takes notice. She looks like she's about to growl a warning, before Handler stays her with a single gesture.

"Tell me," General Kynilandre demands of Handler, "is this the kind of conduct your practices encourage?"

Handler salutes politely. She is completely self-assured, even now. "It has its place. I've sanctioned their behavior. I would ask you not to punish them."

"Hm." The general's face is a thin, stern line. It's plenty clear that there's only one person she'd like to punish. After a moment, she glances at Leinth. "I came here to receive your report. I'm to evaluate your... new approach."

"Of course." Handler takes this all completely in stride. She'd never let Her hounds down. "Asset Aritimis performed well in the field. I expect that her reconditioning will be complete soon, as Asset Thrace's is. Everything is proceeding smoothly. I'm sure the results of their latest sorties speak for themselves."

"I am not," General Kynilandre retorts. The distaste she holds for Handler is plain, and palpable enough to raise Hound's hackles. "I've been reviewing cockpit recorder transcripts. I see clear evidence of a lack of unit cohesion between your two pets. Overcompetitiveness, resentment, petty jealousy—these are traits we actively discourage in pilots. This ought to concern you, does it not?"

She means this to humble Her. Instead, Handler smiles wider than ever before. "No."

General Kynilandre raises a furious eyebrow. "No?"

"That's right." Handler nods.

"Explain yourself," the general demands. Handler's laconic comments are pissing her off.

Handler pauses for a moment. Considers.

"You know, they'd gladly kill me," Handler says. "My hounds, I mean. If they could."

The general's eyes widen. She seems faintly astonished by the confession. Pleased, though. She thinks it's something she can use.

"Not easily, of course," Handler muses. "They'd agonize and they'd hesitate and they'd sob. I'm not sure what they'd be able to do afterward. They'd need the moment to be perfect. But if their hands were around my neck? Yes, I think they'd squeeze down with all their strength. They hate me, after all. Even Sartha."

Hound is violently horrified. She feels like she's going to throw up. She would never. Could never. She wants to scream her denial out loud, but Handler's words hold her under a strange spell.

"It's only natural," Handler continues. "They need to hate something. Everybody does. It's fundamental. They can't hate the rebels. Not truly. That would unbalance everything. And think of all I've taken from them. Who would they hate but me?"

"You make a strong case for terminating your initiative," General Kynilandre rumbles. "Reliance on such an unstable element is unacceptable."

"That's individually," Handler notes. "Unstable? Yes, maybe. Sartha, I believe, is close to perfect. My finest. But even with her, I could never be completely certain." She turns her gaze to Leinth-Hound. "Until now."

"Get to the point."

Handler isn't to be rushed. Her genius deserves space. "Now that I have two of them, they don't need to hate me. They can hate each other instead."

"Absurd," the general sneers. "What kind of pilot team hates each other?"

"One you can trust," is Handler's answer. "Trust perfectly. They will never betray me. Never let me down. If they did, the other would be proven the better hound. And they can't bear the thought of that."

Now General Kynilandre goes quiet. She's beginning to see.

"Repression is never completely successful," Handler explains. "Better, then, to provide them with an outlet. Their animosity, petty as it may seem, allows them to sublimate their violent urges towards me. It was surprisingly easy to engineer. To Sartha, Leinth is someone who asked too much of her—and now, an interloper on our relationship. To Leinth, Sartha is someone who

let her down and over whom she feels unfathomably guilty—and now, a rival who hoards my affection."

Handler licks Her lips. There's something deeply unwholesome creeping into her voice. A kind of pride, in something nobody should be capable of taking pride in. A pleasure, too. Everyone listening can hear it. If it was anyone else they'd accuse them of perversions, but Handler seems so far beyond that. She's never touched Sartha or Leinth that way—unlike most of them. But all the same, it's undeniable.

Handler enjoys Her work. She enjoys it very much.

"Thanks to this dynamic, they strive like never before." Handler isn't just proud of Herself. She's proud of Her hounds too. Maybe that's even creepier. "You will have seen their piloting metrics, general? They tell the whole story. Sartha Thrace and Leinth Aritimis have never been better pilots than they are right now, in hatred of each other." Her smile is unnervingly bright. "And thanks to each other, they're free to love me with all their hearts."

"That is..." General Kynilandre's words die. She doesn't know what it is. "How can you say that? They're damned, broken wretches."

"Do you think so?" Handler seems entertained by the general's assessment. "I think they're quite beautiful, if I do say so myself."

General Kynilandre falls very quiet for a long moment. When she speaks again, her voice quakes with outrage—but everyone, even the lowest-ranking mechanics, recognizes her anger for what it is: impotent.

"This is no way to run a war," she says quietly. "Using people like that. I don't give a damn about the piloting metrics. I got my wings long before you were wearing that coat. We used to... It's just wrong."

She doesn't give a damn about the piloting metrics. But others do, and they both know it. Handler is untouchable. There's nothing more to be said.

"Will that be all, general?" Handler asks politely. She's still smiling. "If you'd care for a hands-on demonstration of their eagerness, I'm sure Leinth would be more than willing-"

"Go fuck yourself," General Kynilandre spits, before stalking back out of the hangar.

After she's gone and the door slides shut behind her, the assembled crowd of pilots, mechanics, and other staff collectively let out the breaths they've been holding. But not completely. No punishment is certainly a relief, but

more than a few of them have been unnerved by Handler's speech. It's spoiled the atmosphere.

Hound isn't unnerved, though. Everything Handler said ended up washing over her like it was nothing. Like it was about someone else entirely.

She isn't Leinth Aritimis. Not right now. She's just a bitch.

Handler looks over the crowd. "You may continue," She says.

She's talking to Sartha-Hound too, and she does. Enthusiastically. The crowd is slower to get going. It takes a little while for them to shake off their inhibitions again. But, in the end, not one of them leaves or holds back. Nothing's changed.

Hound is still a warm, willing body.

More or less.

* * *

Eventually it ends. One by one, each of the bored, horny, frustrated base personnel spends their lust all over Hound's body. Once they've had their fill, they fix their clothes and drift off to the mess, or their next duty shift, or back to their bunk. After enough of them leave, the party is over. The atmosphere dies, and the stragglers make a hasty exit. Nobody wants to be left alone with Handler and Her hounds.

They know attracting Her attention is unwise. People still whisper about Meetra Kotys.

So in the end, it's just the three of them. Handler stands impassive, as Sartha-Hound nuzzles and ruts and ruins her own clothes. She could go all day. She's in heaven. Leinth-Hound isn't so lucky. Wet and soiled and shivering, all she can do is lie splayed out across the ground as she waits to be told what to do.

Everything aches. Her mouth. Her ass. Her cock. They didn't waste any gentleness on her. At the end of it all, Hound's torn between two feelings. One is a kind of weary acceptance. Her penance is done. She can be at peace with that. The other is anything but peaceful. Hound craves release. Her body demands it. She's still hard. She's in heat.

More out of sheer, automatic reflex than anything else, Hound starts

touching herself. She looks to Handler for permission as soon as she realizes what she's doing. She's pushing her luck, but she knows that at moments like this, She is inclined to be indulgent. The imperceptible nod Handler offers her is a gift from god.

Hound starts moving faster. She touches herself in a brute, stupid way, reaching down, pawing uselessly at herself, rubbing her cock against her own thigh. It's all she's capable of. She's bruised all over. All her strength is spent. Even wrapping her hand around her shaft feels like too much. Her fingers are cramping.

She whines. She wails. It's still enough. All her stamina is spent, too. She's close.

Handler has another gift.

"Leinth," She says. She's using that special voice of Hers. "On The Leash."

Hound lets out a pained groan from the exertion as her shattered, overtaxed mind is forced to pull itself back together. Leinth doesn't want to wake. She'd sooner stay buried. But Handler's special words are like the tides. There's no fighting them. So, after little more than an instant, Hound goes away, and Leinth awakens.

And finds herself in hell.

The first thing that hits is the pain. It hurts all over. The sheer exhaustion is agony, bone-deep and paralyzing. Next, it's the cold, and the hard floor, and the wet, and the stickiness all over her, and the stench of sex and sweat clinging to her skin. The visceral discomfort of it is staggering.

After just a couple of seconds, Leinth's mind catches up. She remembers, vaguely, what's happened to her. What she's done. And the shame hits harder than anything.

She was used. By everyone. By people she still vaguely remembers that she's supposed to detest. Like an animal. Like a toy. Now Leinth is slumped in the mess of it all, debased worse than any whore she's ever seen soldiers use. And she's touching herself.

And she can't stop.

She just can't. Leinth needs this too bad. In her body, but in her heart too. What if she stopped herself? What if she reclaimed that barest little shred of dignity and personhood? That little act of defiance would threaten to mean something, and Leinth doesn't want that. She's too tired for it. She can't

handle what might come after.

Better to sink instead. To embrace what she's doing. To just be this. It's easy, in a way. It feels right—right because of the guilt she feels over Sartha, and right because, deep down, she knows she's become exactly the same kind of traitor. If Leinth makes herself come like this, she's the worst. And she knows how to be the worst. Handler taught her. It makes sense.

Leinth needs permission, of course. She looks to Handler.

"Please..." she musters. Her voice is ragged. Her eyes ask the rest of the question.

Handler nods again. "You may."

That's all Leinth needs. She quickens her pace and, after just a couple of seconds, her pleasure peaks. After a couple more, she spills everything all over herself and all over the ground. Her cheeks burn with the humiliation of it.

The pleasure feels good. It's what her body needs. The humiliation does too, in a way. But the emptiness that descends afterwards is terrible.

Handler doesn't let her languish in it. She is infinitely merciful.

Setting Sartha-Hound aside with a little gesture, She crosses the hangar floor to Leinth's side. "Up," She says. "Sit."

Leinth thought she couldn't move, but when Handler orders her, she finds the strength. Leinth fights her way up to her knees. Handler reaches down and touches Leinth's cheek, very lightly. Leinth shivers. It feels amazing. It's Handler, and it's the gentlest anyone has been with her in forever.

"Are you ready?" She asks.

Leinth gasps. She knows what comes next, and she needs it. Bad. "Yes. Please. Pleasepleaseplease."

"I forgive you," Handler pronounces softly.

Those three words mean everything to Leinth. Her entire body goes rigid. She tears up. She closes her eyes. Leinth is forgiven for all her failures. For losing today's contest. For not living up to Handler's expectations. For being the worse hound. But for much more than that, too. She's forgiven for trying to escape, long ago. She's forgiven for every time she ever cursed Handler's name. She's forgiven for being a rebel, and for betraying them. She's forgiven for it all.

Handler has that godlike power. Leinth feels the weight of every sin she's ever committed as they're lifted from her shoulders—for a little while, anyway. Until they come back, she can bask in this. In her slate washed clean. In perfect atonement. She's never felt so free.

"Thank you," she weeps. "Thank you."

"You're welcome," Handler replies. "I'm sure you'll do better next time, Leinth. Now, come along."

Handler turns and begins to walk away. She doesn't need to look back. At once, Sartha is at Her heel. Leinth leaps to her feet, but before she returns to her rightful place, she dashes a few paces away from Handler.

She hasn't forgotten. She needs it. Her muzzle.

As quickly as she can, Leinth fits it back into place over her mouth. Wearing it makes her just that little bit less anxious. Everything is right again. She's forgiven. Once again, she's a good hound. Good hounds wear their muzzle. Handler will inspect the straps later, and She expects them to be perfect. Leinth won't disappoint her. Not ever again. Leinth knows she's just a stupid dog, but she's very, very determined to learn today's lesson.

Leinth thinks back to the mission, and to what she did wrong. She makes a vow to herself, in Handler's name. One that seals her fate utterly.

Next time, she will not hesitate.

RESCUE HOUND

CHAPTER ONE

Nothing makes Kione Monax feel good the way being saddled up in the cockpit of a huge mech suit does.

Cause it pays really, really well. Duh.

Provided you're the best, of course. Kione doubts any of those fifth-rate Imperial grunt pilots they never seem to run out of get paid more than a pittance—not that they'll ever live long enough to spend it, if she's the one they're up against. But Kione? She's the best. Nowadays, at least. And that means she can name her damn price and the rebels will pay it, no matter how sour the looks on their faces when she comes to collect.

It's not all about the money, obviously. Kione would be the first to admit that there is a very clear and distinct pleasure in being the very best. To ruling the battlefield like a queen. To tapping into the merciless rhythm of combat, and feeling the beat change when she decides it's the moment—the moment to kick her *Theaboros*'s reactor into the red and soar, allowing herself just a single moment to drink in the stupefied, upturned, defeated faces of her prey before she puts them out of their misery.

Fuck, it's good. It really gets her hot.

But it's not better than money, because money is what bought her the *Theaboros* and its wings, and its state-of-the-art systems, and its fresh coats of paint—for vanity, although sometimes she lies and calls it 'branding'—plus all the fancy drinks she buys for the very best hookers before she buys them too. That's what life is all about. Not principles. Lots of people get big, stupid ideas in their heads once they're sitting behind the controls of a sixty-foot

mechanical god. If your ideas are big enough and stupid enough they start calling you a hero, and Kione is very, very determined not to end up as one of those. They always die bad.

That's how scumbag mercenaries like Kione wind up as the best.

'Hey, merc,' comes a terse voice over a shitty, crackling radio, just as Kione finishes planting the charges. *'You better be in position.'*

Kione sighs quietly to herself before she answers. "I am. Plan B is in place."

'Good,' says the girl on the radio. *'Get ready. And remember: no work, no pay.'*

Kione rolls her eyes. Why do people always feel the need to remind her? Contrary to popular slander, mercenaries aren't cowards or turncoats. Any mech-for-hire who pulls that kind of shit just saw their very last payday. And besides, Kione refuses to help out the Imperials. Purely out of self-interest, of course—there's no place for free spirits like her in the kind of world they'd like to build. She's bloodied their noses more times than she can count, and you'd think that would win her some actual gratitude from the rebels she fights alongside.

Hell no. Kione had fought with unit after unit, recruit after recruit, and each one proves to be just as naively idealistic as the last. They all think they're put here to save the world, and they hate that Kione knows she's only here to make some hard cash. The girl barking orders at Kione over the radio is one of those. An idealist. A firebrand. She flashed Kione a nice, mean look before they shipped out. Stars in her eyes, hell on her lips.

Kione knew then and there she'd have to fuck her, once they made it back. It wouldn't be hard. Girls like that always went for her once they saw first-hand how good she was. She went for them, too. She just loved to make them choke on her.

'She's here. Cut the chatter. Everybody focus.'

At once, Kione lets go of her sleazy fantasies and gets herself back in the zone. Not for the first time, she wonders about the targets. How many? How well-equipped are they? Guess she'll find out soon enough. Not that she can see shit right now, hanging from the underside of this colossal bridge.

It's a good place for an ambush and a great place to get yourself killed if a thousand tons of reinforced concrete come down on your head before you know what's happening. That's why Kione's there. That's the truth of

mercenary work: you get the real shit jobs. The ones they don't expect you to walk away from.

Suits Kione just fine. She'll groan and grumble until they pay her double, then prove she's worth every penny.

For now, though, there's only waiting. That gets to Kione the same way it does to every soldier. Eventually, her mech's sensors pick up vibrations. Footsteps on the bridge above. Another machine. A pretty big one, too—but only the one, which prompts some serious fucking questions. Who the hell are they ambushing here? A high-value target, clearly. Maybe an Imperial higher-up. But those don't fly solo. A pilot, then? Some ace? It'd have to be. Kione can't think of any other reason they'd pay her fees for a gig like this.

It has to be someone good. Someone only she can beat.

Kione finds herself grinning.

More waiting. The target is moving slow. A nice, steady march. It gets closer, and closer, and closer, until Kione can hear each step; can feel them reverberating through her body. Until the enemy is directly above her. The enemy mech's footfalls are heavy and almost familiar. Despite everything, Kione is all but bursting with anticipation. She loves getting to put a rival ace in the dirt. Nothing better. But she knows she needs to be patient. She's not the first wave. She's the coup de grâce.

The radio crackles again. '*Now! Open fire!*'

An instant later, the air trembles with the report of a dozen guns. The rebels scattered themselves across the bridge, each pilot picking their ambush spot to secure kill zones and neutralize cover. Nowhere to run, nowhere to hide. The rebels don't have many advantages over the Imperials, but this is one of them: they're good at this guerrilla shit. As the barrage wears on, Kione's grin starts to slip. She's beginning to think they won't need her after all.

Then, one by one, the guns go silent.

Kione can pick out each machine as it goes dark, just from the sound. No two rebel mechs are alike; consistent supply and production lines are a fleeting fantasy so each machine is somebody's pet project, customized according to parts and needs. That makes it all too easy for Kione to count.

One down. Two down. Three down.

What the fuck?

It's hard to believe, but Kione can hear it happening. Up above, the enemy mech pounds the bridge with its footfalls. That thing must be moving like a hound out of hell, dodging beams and missiles, throwing itself at one rebel after another. Its engine is deafening, an insane scream of tortured metal and unholy combustion fuelling the carnage. Screaming is just about all Kione can hear over the radio, too. The rebels' comms discipline has broken down. They can't make sense of how fast it's gone wrong.

'Merc! Where the fuck are you?'

That's her cue. It's the moment—and with a worthy foe, too. Kione can't stop herself laughing nastily into the radio as she retracts the anchors keeping her attached to the bridge and slips into free fall.

And again, when she punches *Theaboros*'s flight system.

Mechs can't fly, yeah? Everyone knows that. It just doesn't make a lot of sense. You want to fly, you get in a plane. You'd need a stupid amount of thrust to get something as big as a mech suit in the air. A big engine won't help. The tyranny of the rocket equation will murder you. Weight means fuel, fuel means more weight. The aerodynamics would probably be shit too. And that's not even getting into the economics problem. Nobody can spare that much reactor fuel for just one machine. The best way to square the circle would be to build the entire thing out of some kind of crazy cutting-edge superalloy, but those are hell to get and worse to maintain. No, a flying mech would be a ridiculous vanity project. The Imperials would never sanction it, and the rebels could never afford it.

Good thing Kione Monax has never worked for free a day in her life.

It helps that she built *Theaboros* smart—or at least, paid other people to. It's a slender beast. Tall, upright, almost human-like in its posture. It weighs a fraction of most of its rivals, and so when it spreads the six sleek, silver pinions mounted on its back, Kione can actually feel them catch the air. Every little helps when you're fighting gravity.

But what really, really helps is the state-of-the-art antimatter reactor surging to life and pumping out a steady stream of antiparticles that singe the air around her mech a deep, unearthly red as they annihilate and, for just a fraction of a second each, keep the fundamental forces of the universe at bay.

With that on her side? Fuck yeah, *Theaboros* can fly. And Kione falls a little more in love with it every time.

It flies now, with her gripping the joysticks, gliding the unnaturally nimble machine between cables and tresses as she boosts clear of the bridge's superstructure and tilts up, pulling a tight loop that brings her down onto the deck, ready to give her target the surprise of a lifetime.

Except—no.

Kione is the one left with her jaw on the floor when she sees who she's up against. All at once, she realizes she was wrong before. It's not someone only she can beat, because it's the one person she never ever managed to beat, in all the long evenings they spent sparring together.

It's Sartha.

It's *Ancyor*, anyway. Or most of it. Actually, it's more like *Ancyor* died and came back wrong. The base frame is still there; Kione can tell as much from that dragging, lupine gait as it lurches across the bridge. The exoskeletal armor is the same too. If anything, it looks even more beat to hell than usual. But beneath that, it's all wrong. The reactor. The weapon systems. The raised, pneumatic hackles that augment those deadly claws. They've all been replaced. Upgraded. Imperial tech. It gives Kione the creeps. It's like someone's wearing her dead friend's skin.

Whatever they've done to it, it's clear *Ancyor* has lost none of its effectiveness. In its terrible wake, Kione counts four of the mechs she shipped out with lying in shattered, ugly heaps. They went down bad. Catastrophic kills. If anything, it looks like *Ancyor*'s pilot took special pleasure in plucking out and crushing each cockpit. That really gives Kione the creeps. Even Imperial pilots usually don't sink that low.

At least she knows it's not Sartha in there.

Unsurprisingly, the remaining three rebels have gone to pieces. They're backing away, giving up the only tactical advantages they have—prepped positions and unit cohesion—and the radio channel is full of little more than panicked screeching. The squad leader, the girl who was barking at Kione earlier, is trying to instill some kind of discipline. It's not working. She's too young. They all are.

'Take her down, damn it!' she yells, when she sees *Theaboros* land. '*This is what we're paying you for.'*

"You got it," Kione mutters.

In all honesty, she's weighing up the pros and cons of simply hitting the

bricks and running. But she reminds herself: this isn't Sartha. Just a pale imitation.

And besides, there's money on the line. Duh.

In any case, the choice gets taken away from her when *Ancyor* turns its awful snout in her direction and starts barreling toward her.

"Shit!"

At once, Kione kicks her mech's flight system into high gear. She manages to get enough thrust to pull up and clear—but only just. *Ancyor* is even faster than the last time they fought. Kione wheels around in the air to find her target, extending and clasping her long spear in *Theaboros*'s right hand. Once the weapon is deployed, its tip starts glowing red-hot as her systems reroute surplus reactor heat. Kione would prefer to keep Sartha's hellhound at a comfortable distance, but CQC is the only good way to finish a fight sure and quick.

As soon as Kione sets her sights, she realizes that *Ancyor* has already turned to look up at her. Silently, four openings appear in its torso. An instant later, four wire-guided harpoons are coming right at her.

That's new. Fuck.

Two of them, she manages to dodge. One, she bats aside with the flat of her spear blade. But the fourth, kept on target by tiny thrusters, buries itself in one of *Theaboros*'s long, slender legs. That's not good. The damage itself is fairly negligible. What's not negligible is *Ancyor*'s massive weight as it pulls the cable taut and starts reeling her in.

And, at the same moment, launches itself into the air with enough force to crack the concrete beneath its feet.

Kione's display is filled with warnings she's pretty sure she's never seen before. She dismisses them with a furious gesture, but all she sees on the viewscreen afterward is the ruin of *Ancyor*'s face coming at her at an insane speed. No time to cut herself free, and no aerial maneuver Kione can think of is going to make a damn bit of difference with another mech weighing her down like an anchor.

So, stupidly, she does the only thing she can think of: she points her jets in the opposite direction and blasts herself straight down toward *Ancyor*.

Fifty feet in the air above the bridge deck, two meteors collide.

Ancyor has sheer mass on its side, but *Theaboros* has gravity and thrust.

Kione is no rookie; getting her head knocked around in the cockpit isn't going to ruffle her. She's focused on what counts: getting this damn dog off her.

It's not easy. *Ancyor* is scrambling all over her, its wickedly sharp chain-claws working to find purchase. It's clear whoever's behind the controls knows Sartha's style. They want to keep the two mechs bound together, grappling, where *Ancyor*'s sheer savagery makes it invincible.

All Kione can do is wield her long, elegant spear like a brawler's stick, keeping it between them, leveraging them to try and force *Ancyor* away. Unfortunately, *Theaboros* isn't great at this kind of contest of strength. It's simply not built for it. Desperately, Kione uses the flight system's jets to throw the two of them into a series of loops, heads over feet, hoping the g-forces will destabilize the beast.

Of course, it's just as likely that what happens is that *Theaboros* goes down face-first into the bridge.

Splat.

But maybe it's working. *Ancyor* is starting to peel off. The harpoon comes loose and one of its arms slips, windmilling through the air. Kione presses the advantage, wrenching her spear around to make *Ancyor*'s grip untenable. After one last lunge that goes clean past her shoulder, Sartha's mech is sent tumbling back down to earth where it belongs.

Wiping sweat from her brow, Kione grins. Down, dog. The sky is all hers.

Then she notices the warning lights. She stops grinning as she realizes that last lunge didn't go clean past her shoulder at all. It hit exactly where it was meant to. It ripped off one of her goddamn wings.

Ah. Well, that's really not good.

Theaboros isn't dead in the air. At least, not quite. But the thing about wings is that however many you've got, you probably don't wanna be on less than that. Lest she choke her reactor to death, Kione is forced to ease off and touch down on the bridge. Once her baby has cooled off, she should still be able to pull off a trick or two.

'Merc? You still breathing?'

Kione's glad radio girl is still here. Judging from the guns Kione hears, her surviving squadmates are too. Maybe they can still do this.

"I have a name, you know," she grunts.

'Yeah? Get us back to base in one piece, maybe I'll think about learning

it.'

Kione cackles. She likes a girl who can keep her head.

"You can buy me a drink instead," she tells her. "You already know my name. If you're not careful, I'll make you say 'please' when you use-"

She cuts herself off when she sees what's about to happen.

Kione never takes her eye off the ball, but it's taken her a moment to stop seeing white. Now that she has, she's realizing *Ancyor* isn't nearly as debilitated by its fall as she'd hoped. It always was freakishly tough. And it's doing the worst thing it possibly could. Worse even than coming at Kione again while her flight system's cooling down.

It's going after the easy prey.

In a single bounding leap, *Ancyor* hurls itself at the rebel currently spray-and-praying it with ineffective beam fire. The poor bastard freezes up, and *Ancyor* lands squarely on their shoulders.

It doesn't need weapons. Its weight does the work. Even Kione flinches from the crunching sound.

'No!'

It's radio girl. So much for keeping her head. Maybe she knew them well. Maybe it's just one loss too many. Either way, because she's one of those rebel idealists, she's doing the brave thing. The stupid thing.

Breaking cover. Trying to save her comrade.

Idiot. That's exactly what a predator like *Ancyor* wants

There's some distance between the two of them, but nothing *Ancyor* can't cross in the blink of an eye. It's happening half the bridge's length away. *Theaboros* has a rifle, but the stopping power is nowhere near enough. Kione can already see exactly what's going to happen. Radio girl is going down. No chance her last squadmate sticks around after that happens, which leaves Kione trapped in a one-on-one. Not good odds.

So, the right move is obvious: ditch. Now. The mission's a bust. Losing Kione's pay is better than losing her life. As long as she takes off right this second, she should be able to make it out clean.

All she's gotta do is outrun the other rebel, right?

Kione sighs. It should be an easy choice. But here's the rub: she really was looking forward to that drink with radio girl.

So much for letting the reactor cool.

As *Theaboros* throws itself forward at her command, Kione punches the reactor straight back into the red. The thrust alone has her in the air; Kione works the flight system with a master's touch, pitching her machine slightly off-axis to compensate for the wing she lost. It's a rough ride. Her baby's running too hot. The wing tips are starting to disintegrate. Antimatter annihilation's a bitch. Kione doesn't want to think about how much the repair bill's gonna come to this time.

So instead, she grins.

You thought your ride was fast, Sartha? Think again.

Ancyor lunges. Radio girl is right under its outstretched claw. *Theaboros* is hurtling toward them at a truly unwise speed. In the cockpit, Kione is rattling around like crazy—but she doesn't let up. She only has a fraction of a second. No time to shoot, no time to strike, no time to parry. Only time to do something dumb.

Theaboros rams into radio girl shoulder first, shoving her out of the way. She raises her left arm in a feeble bid to fend off their attacker. The impact with the rebel mech wreaks havoc on *Theaboros*'s frame.

And then *Ancyor*'s claws rip her arm off.

Shit.

No time to take stock of the damage. No room to get her balance. No heat overhead to spend on a boost. *Ancyor* just keeps coming. It switches targets to *Theaboros* without missing a beat. Kione stumbles back just barely out of reach, wheeling her spear in a furious series of parries and ripostes. Not furious enough. Nothing's as furious as *Ancyor*. It matches Kione step for step, blow for blow. Only a matter of time until one of them lands home. Kione grimaces. At least radio girl is free and clear—not that that's worth much. Can't get paid if you're dead, and she's sure starting to feel dead. *Theaboros* has taken too much damage to put up an even fight.

Kione snorts, despite everything. What, is she making excuses for herself?

That'll look great on her tombstone. Kione Monax: it wasn't fair.

It stings that it's not even true. Now that she's at the right distance to get a good look at *Ancyor*, it's plain enough that it took a fierce beating in the rebel ambush. Radio girl's crew wasn't so bad after all. They took some mean chunks out of its armor. All over *Ancyor*, clouds of leaking coolant hiss and

exposed electricals crackle. At least one or two major servos are missing. It must be handling like a pig right about now, but it's moving like nothing's happened. Whoever's behind the controls is just that good.

Which begs the question, doesn't it?

Who the fuck is piloting that thing?

Sartha Thrace is dead. Kione made her peace with that a long time ago, and she has no time for stupid rumors. But now she can't help but wonder. Who else could handle *Ancyor* like this? From their sparring sessions, Kione recognizes all the little trademark moves. Hell, the only reason she's lasted this long is because she has a sense of Sartha's cadence. It's like she's fighting her friend's ghost.

No, not her ghost. Something worse. Sartha was never quite like this. Never quite so heedless of herself. Never so proud she wouldn't simply retreat from this kind of ambush. This animal ferocity—Kione has seen it before, but it was always a rare thing. It came over Sartha only when something drove her to her very limit. This pilot? It's like she's got all of that side of Sartha, and nothing but. Her rage and violence, distilled. Purified.

A shiver runs down Kione's spine. It's so wrong.

'Merc?'

That's her radio girl. Kione rolls her eyes. She'd been hoping the rebel pilot would just run. If both of them die trying to save each other, she's gonna throw up. That's just too much.

"You clear of the bridge?"

'Yeah.'

Thank the gods.

Her distraction almost spells her end. *Theaboros* is driven yet another step backward and almost trips off the side of the bridge. Kione glances behind. She's out of space. Shit. Shit! There has to be something left. Kione knows it. She feels it. This can't be the end. Not of her. Not yet. She's too good. There has to be something.

A plan B.

Oh, right.

Kione checks her reactor. Flight still isn't on the menu. It's gonna be ugly.

"Radio girl?" Kione calls out, as *Ancyor* brings its claws up for an overhead

blow. She raises her spear to meet it. Sparks fly as the weapons meet.

'Who- yeah?'

"Plan B. Blow it."

To her infinite credit, radio girl doesn't hesitate, which means Kione only knows it's happening when the ten thousand-ton reinforced concrete bridge under her feet suddenly isn't.

In desperation, Kione throws herself over the disintegrating edge. A drop is one thing. But getting crushed? That's what'll kill you. Unfortunately for her, the bridge is already falling. She can't kick off cleanly. Best she can do is scramble at asphalt and rebar that's quickly turning into little more than dust while she overboosts her flight system as far as it'll go.

It's good enough—almost. For just a moment, Kione thinks she's threaded the needle. She's going to glide clear.

Then *Ancyor* comes flying at her one last time.

How it managed a leap like that, Kione will never know. The way it screams as it comes at her almost stops her heart. It gets close. Way too fucking close. But Kione manages to wheel her machine around, kicking its legs up and out of *Ancyor*'s reach.

Not the wings, though. It gets another one of those.

That's bad. Extremely bad. Kione suddenly realizes she ought to have been more appreciative of only being down the one wing.

Ancyor falls away and disappears into the bridge's wreckage at the base of the valley. That's a mercy. But *Theaboros* isn't much better off. Spitting smoke and almost completely out of control, the best Kione can do with it is a crash landing.

But hey, any landing you can walk away from, right? And *Theaboros* can still walk. It just can't do a whole lot else.

Kione lets herself vomit all over the cockpit. That's a first.

A minute or two later, as she's slowly picking herself up, radio girl comes skating down the wall of the valley. Her mech is a bit shit—common enough, for rebels—but it looks a damn sight better than *Theaboros* right now.

'Holy shit,' radio girl calls out. '*You're alive! You... you saved me.*'

She's got that naive awe in her voice, like she's talking to some hero. Kione frowns. Can't have that.

"Don't get used to it," Kione retorts gruffly. "You die, who's gonna make sure I get paid?"

She senses radio girl bristle a little, but it's not quite enough to penetrate that dense coat of rebel sincerity. '*Thank you, Kione*,' she replies earnestly.

Even though it almost makes her throw up again, Kione laughs thickly.

"Told you. You already know my name."

Now she senses the other pilot blushing.

'Shit,' radio girl says after a moment, as her mech's head turns toward the ruins of the bridge. '*We really fucked this up. I don't know how I'm gonna explain this to command.*'

Kione happens to disagree with the 'really fucked this up' part of that assessment. She happens to think she pulled off a goddamn miracle, actually. But then, she still doesn't know what they were really after. Who they were really after.

'Wait,' radio girl says slowly. '*Is that... oh gods, I think that's her.*'

Before Kione can ask, she's dashing for something she's spotted in the wreckage. Kione makes *Theaboros* limp after her. When she spots it too, her eyes go wide.

It's *Ancyor*.

It's almost in one piece. Almost. Tough son of a bitch. Kione half-expects it to come roaring at them again, but once radio girl shifts the bridge pylon that landed on it, she sees that *Ancyor* has finally given up the ghost. It's not beyond repair but the torso is cracked open like an egg, leaking oil and worse in a steady stream. Looks like the protection systems deployed OK, at least.

Which means the pilot might actually be alive.

Sure enough, as radio girl peels away one half of *Ancyor*'s ruined cockpit, Kione sees her—and for the first time in a long while, she's completely and utterly lost for words.

Lying there, battered and bleeding and unconscious but very definitely alive, dressed just like usual except for what looks freakishly like a fucking muzzle strapped to her head—is Sartha.

Sartha Thrace. The hero. Kione's friend.

"She..." Kione splutters eventually, overcome. "But how did... all this, just for..."

'Yeah,' radio girl answers. '*All this was for her.'*

There's something in the rebel's voice. Something at once sorrowful and unbearably hopeful. Kione has never heard anything quite like it. But, uncomfortably, she realizes it was in her voice too.

'She's the objective. We're bringing Sartha Thrace home.'

CHAPTER TWO

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 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 now. The medics probably figure it's something simple. A gun to her head. A bomb in her mech. Hostages. Torture. At most, 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, frightened 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 the 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. Her Imperial XO. It has to be. Someone Sartha's been calling 'sir' and 'ma'am' and other things besides. Only, no Imperial officer Kione's ever crossed paths with would 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, 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.

* * *

After that, it's a while before Kione gets to see her again. 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. 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 become of 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, perhaps. 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 that. But living like that does something to you. The rebels need something to believe in. They need heroes. In 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 them.

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, block-concrete monoliths the Imperials call bases. Instead, it's a set of loosely interconnected outposts and installations, all connected by various trenches, tunnels and paths and 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 natural cavern, excavated out and reinforced as necessary. The 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 and 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 for the whole thing. 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 says. 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. She realizes she's nervous. Maybe more nervous than she's ever been.

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 the closest to a panic attack she's ever come.

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 would be.

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."

* * *

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. 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 exactly 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 for 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-worshipers 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 always 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 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 be the ones to actually deal with Sartha. Little by little, she slips through the cracks. 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, of course.

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 distant climes. There are rebels here from all over, blown by the winds of conflict, scattered from their conquered homelands and joining up to fight wherever they can. And 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, and 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 mutters, beginning 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 want to 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 out that much. It's common enough for prisoners, 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.

Frankly, that 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. I checked this morning. 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, Ki?"

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?”

“Sheesh,” 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 narrows her eyes 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! Enough 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 is pretty sure Sartha had absolutely zero inclination in that direction. As in all things, she is one in a million.

"Whatever," Kione chokes out lamely. "Not my fault she was a bad lay. I wanted some decent company."

"Decent company." Sartha cocks an eyebrow. "I remember you being a little more enthusiastic about me than that."

Her flirting is getting Kione even more worked up than usual. It's been a while, she guesses. Maybe sometime soon, if Sartha is starting to feel better...

Gods. She needs to stop blushing right in the middle of the canteen. It's going to ruin her reputation.

"A-anyway," Kione recovers. "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 realization 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 familiar 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 don't want to make Sartha uncomfortable, and they certainly don't want

their own fantasies shattered. Maybe this one is 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 eagerly. 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. Right?"

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 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.

* * *

Kione 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 repaired. You wouldn't want to take either of them into a war zone, 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 the pesky angels of Kione's better nature. 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.

Kione's been looking for that for a long time. The two of them are more than just friends. They're rivals.

"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. '*Green*.'

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 shooting. Not lunging or 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, so Kione restricts herself to light hops and short jumps, using the maneuvering thrusters to change direction rapidly as she moves. It's more than enough. Gravity can't touch her.

Sartha, by contrast, looks a little clumsy. Slow off the mark. But she's starting to find a rhythm. She matches her movement to Kione's, and the raw 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. Duelling 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, intended to distract or disorient rather than damage. Sartha steps out of the way, but not cleanly. 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 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 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.

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. "Those 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, yeah? 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, right? Let's call it best two out of three."

'Kione,' Sartha pleads. She sounds choked up. She sounds pathetic. '*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 godsdamn fight. Understand me?"

'OK.'

After a long moment, Kione realizes that's all she's going to get out of her friend. She still isn't moving in *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, right? 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*, Kione immediately storms 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, a hundred times over! 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. But 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, of all people. 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 vaguely at the rebel base around them, “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 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 absorbing or agreeing with 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 older 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 it hard to make out her face 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. Beyond 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 fills 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 wanted to believe Sartha Thrace could sink that low. Yeah, she was never a saint. But she always had dignity. She had standards. Kione always counted on her for that much.

Now, all that seems like it never meant anything 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 staring at the wall—not even on the bed, gods, curled up 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-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?"

"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 really 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. Clasping 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. Try it on," 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.

Now that she's seeing it up close and personal, though, Kione realizes that it's not 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 her 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 breathes.

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 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 mind—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 a little slighter than Kione. Delicate, in a certain light—not that she'd ever allow Kione to experience her that way. She lets Kione touch her, but she never let anyone own 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. Better yet, 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 innocence. 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 here to listen.

"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. "I'm giving you permission. 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.

A heartbeat later, it clicks. 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.

There's the beast again.

Hound starts pawing and clawing at Kione's clothes. Her desire is clear, although 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 masochistic 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 her. Without hesitation, Kione starts undressing herself. She's plenty

confident in her body. Kione 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 searches through Sartha's bag. Kione already knows for what, but she still gasps in delicious shock when she sees it.

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. She aches for it, but she knows better than to make the first move. Hound doesn't make her wait. She approaches Kione, 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 as slow as 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 from some of Hound's growls.

But Hound doesn't stop there. Once she sets herself to the task, her endurance proves all but 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 good dog can be.

Tears come into Kione's eyes. She can't 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."

CHAPTER THREE

I'll save you, Sartha. I promise.

Those words, drawn out of Kione by a poisoned, unnatural faith, curdle in her heart as she passes the night in Sartha's arms. At first, they felt like a blessing. Not for Sartha. For Kione. There's an inimitable sense of power to promising salvation to someone—to Sartha Thrace, of all people—and feeling her trust you. Feeling her melt into your own body, sobs subsiding and fear falling away as she believes. That's intoxicating. That's divine.

But it doesn't last. Once Sartha settles into a heavy, peaceful sleep, Kione is left awake and alone with her thoughts, which increasingly circle the terrible implications of what she has done.

They both wanted it. Didn't they? It was hardly out of character for Sartha. She'd certainly seemed passionate enough. Desperate, even. Like she had pent-up urges to vent. It was probably good for her to get it all out of her system. Has Sartha ever once complained about getting a chance to fuck Kione? Is it really such a big deal?

Yes, Kione knows. Of course it is. Because she did it by using the words that Imperial handler put in Sartha's head.

Restful sleep isn't coming. And Kione is slowly realizing she's the scum of the earth.

Even basking in Sartha's body heat strikes her as a sin. Before long, Kione can't take it. She needs to be somewhere else. She needs to be back in her quarters so she can beat herself up in private. As Kione extracts herself from Sartha's arms and prepares to leave, she casts a glance at the muzzle she put

on Sartha's head.

It's truly awful. A symbol of every violation that was inflicted on her friend. It would be a mistake to leave it with Sartha. A crime to let her wake with it on. Kione should slip it off, take it with her, and throw it away.

But after the way she just wielded it, she can't even bring herself to touch the thing.

Kione puts on her jumpsuit and slips out of Sartha's quarters empty-handed. Maybe she'll find a bottle to swipe before she retreats into her own. She needs that, right now. Oblivion. But she can't face going to the bar. She can't face being witnessed by another living soul. She just has to hope that at this time of night, the only people awake on the rebel base are the lookouts posted outside.

No such luck. Just as she's closing the door to Sartha's room, a rebel soldier comes around the corner and catches her. Her eyes go wide and, for a brief instant, Kione feels transparent, like all her sins are visible to the eye. She goes still. She doesn't know what to do.

It's even worse than that, it turns out. Kione quickly sees that from the rebel soldier's perspective, all she's done is caught Kione making the walk of shame. Her suspicion is confirmed when, a moment later, the rebel does the worst thing she could possibly do. Calculated, seemingly, to bring Kione the maximum conceivable level of gut-wrenching guilt.

She flashes her a roguish, knowing wink.

* * *

It's an entire day before Kione leaves her quarters. Isolation does nothing to quell the froth of shame rising in her gut, but that's nothing compared to knowing that she's out there, somewhere.

Sartha.

How can Kione face her? How can Kione ever face her again? More than once, she makes up her mind to run to the hangar, climb in *Theaboros*, and fly a thousand miles away just so she doesn't have to. But each time, as soon as her hand touches the door, what freezes her in her tracks is the simple fear that as soon as she opens it, she might find her friend standing right there.

What kind of look will she have on her face when Kione sees her? Kione's dark dreams answer that question a hundred different ways when she finally makes herself settle down to sleep. When she's awake, there's little for Kione to do but ask herself an endless stream of questions: how could she have done that to Sartha? Why did she get so angry after their sparring session? Why hadn't she been able to stop herself?

And why had it all felt so fucking good?

She thinks about the Imperial handler, too. The one she saw on *Ancyor*'s comms log. She's the one who brainwashed Sartha. Has to be. What kind of person do you have to be to do something like that? To rip open someone's mind and brand those three words into their thoughts, to serve as a collar they can never slip? Kione already knew that it had happened, of course. But until last night, she hadn't even begun to grasp the sick artistry of the brainwasher's craft. It haunts her now—the memory of the handler's eyes, as sharp as scalpels as they stared through the screen and through time, straight into Kione's soul.

The handler is a monster. One look at her and Kione's certain of that. But after what she did, is she really any different?

All her many questions are nothing more than a spiral. They lead Kione inexorably inward and downward, through fits of crying, of self-punishment, of vicious ideation. The weight of her actions hangs on her, a heavy, cold sweat, and everything she's ever felt about Sartha Thrace tastes like poison.

In the end, hunger is what drives her from her self-imposed, self-pitying isolation. The gnawing in Kione's belly overtakes the gnawing in her head and, as despicably unearned as any act of self-preservation feels, she makes up her mind to slip out of her quarters, steal down to the canteen, and swipe something to eat. If nothing else, she'll need food in her belly if she decides to run.

Head down, long jacket covering her jumpsuit, it all goes just fine until Kione reaches the canteen and finds Sartha's already there, waiting for her.

There's no use trying to duck beneath her notice. She's keeping an eye out, and as soon as Kione enters the room, Sartha's on her feet and headed her way. Kione is a deer in headlights. Her blood is ice. This is how it's gonna be, huh? Sartha wants to expose her. Have it out in front of a crowd. That makes sense. It's safer, Kione figures, and guarantees that everyone will know

exactly what she's done. Kione will be lucky not to get executed on the spot.

She doesn't try to flee. Kione accepts her fate. She deserves it, right?

When Sartha reaches her, the expression on her face is unreadable. But when she speaks, the distinct, earnest adoration in her voice is as stark and shocking as a thunderbolt.

"Hey, Kione," Sartha says, a touch breathily. "You need to eat, right? I already got us a table."

After a long moment, Kione replies with an awkward, jerky nod. Her hunger is instantly forgotten, so she simply follows Sartha over to where the hero was sitting. She can't help but notice that Sartha doesn't have a tray of her own. Just waiting then, not eating. For a moment, Kione resists what's staring her in the face. The stay of execution she's received isn't comforting. It's horrific. But as they sit down, Kione's forced to acknowledge that the expression on Sartha's face isn't unreadable at all. It's the expression Kione's put on the faces of dozens of girls by rocking their world after feeding them some stupid pickup line about feeling a connection. The blush. The parted lips. The eager, awe-filled hope in their eyes. She'd know it anywhere.

But on Sartha? It's so wrong.

"You OK?" Sartha asks. "I got worried. Wasn't sure where you'd gone when I woke up."

"You got... worried?" Kione repeats dumbly.

Sartha just smiles at her. "Of course."

Kione can't stop staring at her. She doesn't know what to say, and she's too busy grappling with her feelings to try and figure that out. A moment ago, her veins were full of ice. Now they're hot, and flooded with something sticky and intoxicating.

Sartha was worried about her.

It's not that she didn't care, before. Sartha was never a bad friend. Not exactly. But she was under a hundred pressures and had a thousand people vying for her attention. She was the hero of rebellion, and her eyes were always set on the far horizon. Not the kind of friend to count on for if you're a little quiet and sad and you haven't eaten in a while and you need somebody to take notice.

Until now, it seems.

"Um..." Sartha begins, after the awkward silence has dragged on for a little

while. Her visible anxiety is a wonder. “About last night... I’m sorry.”

Kione thought she’d already found the limit of her own capacity for surprise. She was wrong.

“*You’re* sorry?” she splutters.

Sartha nods. She looks ashamed.

“Why?” Kione asks in a hushed, incredulous voice.

“When we sparred,” Sartha begins. That’s what she wants to talk about? “I disappointed you. I completely fucked up. You were right. You were absolutely right. I need to try harder. Gotta get my head back in the game.” She looks across the table at Kione hopefully. Hoping for forgiveness. “I’ll do better next time.”

It’s everything Kione thought she wanted to hear—and it makes her sick to her stomach. Numbly, she shakes her head.

“No, but...” she stutters. “That’s not... I was...”

Her clear discomfort only seems to fuel Sartha’s penitence. She leans in, voice infused with fresh eagerness.

“I’m sorry,” she insists. “You were right, Kione. I needed to hear it. All of it. I really did.”

“N-no,” Kione groans. “I should be...”

She doesn’t want this. She doesn’t want how this makes her feel. She doesn’t want this Sartha.

“Please, Ki,” Sartha presses. Why does she look so damn happy? “I’ll do better. I can do better. I mean it. I’m sorry.”

“Stop!” Kione snaps. Sartha flinches. The wounded look on her face doesn’t make it any easier.

“But-”

“Don’t!” Kione hisses. If she hears one more ‘sorry’ from Sartha’s lips, her head is going to split in two. “Understand? Just... don’t. Do not apologize, Sartha.”

Appallingly, a strange light appears in Sartha’s eyes. She sits up very straight and nods.

“Yes, Kione,” she pants.

A fresh wave of nausea passes through the mercenary. No. No, no, no. She has to fix whatever she broke.

"Last night," Kione attempts. "Uh... after we sparred, I mean."

"Yeah?" Sartha nods. Gods, she's hanging on Kione's every word.

Kione looks down. Something in Sartha's manner makes it damn near impossible to bring it up, but she has to try.

"I came to your quarters," Kione forces out through gritted teeth. "I said... some things. No, I mean, I said... something in particular. Some words."

"Ah." Sartha hangs her head. Kione senses that she'd be apologizing for something right about now, if not for the command Kione gave. "I guess I'm still a little messed up from when they... took me. I'm afraid I don't remember that much about what happened."

Kione blinks. "You don't?"

Sartha shakes her head. Pink stains her cheeks, and she speaks in a quiet, secretive voice.

"I mean, I remember a little. Memories kind of bleed over, you might say. From the other me."

After all that heat, Kione goes cold again. She feels feverish. She feels insane.

"So you do remember?" she presses, even though it pains her.

"We fucked, right?" Sartha grins sheepishly.

"No," Kione replies. "Or, well, yeah, sure, I guess. But what I mean is-"

"Don't worry about it," Sartha interrupts. Kione realizes she looks a little pained too.

"I kinda have to, Sartha," Kione presses on. "Especially after I used-"

"Look, um," Sartha interrupts again. "I wanted it. Let me just say that much, Ki. I wanted it. And it was really, really good."

Now Kione's the one blushing like a rookie with a crush. "You did?"

"Of course," Sartha tells her. For as much of a ghost as she's been these past weeks, in moments like this, her smile still has some of its former radiance. "We've hooked up plenty of times, right?"

"Well, yeah."

It's so tempting to just agree with her. To simply bask in Sartha Thrace's favor. To wonder if, perhaps, all the yearning Kione felt the night before wasn't just one-sided.

Kione Monax has never been very good at resisting temptation.

"I guess so," she concedes.

She wanted it. Sartha wanted it. They both went a little too far, and clearly the details are a little mutually embarrassing. In that sense, is it really that different from some of Kione's other misguided conquests?

"So there's no problem?" Sartha asks hopefully.

Kione wouldn't go quite that far. There's one important boundary to set before they can dispense with this.

"Let's just agree," she says, blushing. "Not to let that happen again. I mean, maybe sometime, we can... y'know. Again. If we both truly want to. But not like that. With you, Sartha, I don't want it to be-"

Once again, Kione is interrupted. Not by Sartha. By her own growling stomach. Now that her anxiety is settling, the hunger is coming back. It's making her just as light-headed.

"Gods, Ki," Sartha says, face a mask of concern. "Haven't you eaten?"

"I guess not," Kione admits. "But seriously, let's-"

"No, wait." Sartha stands up out of her chair. "You need some grub. You stay right here. Let me get you something."

She hurries off before Kione can mount a protest. Once again, it's her concern that proves intoxicating. Nobody else in the canteen is sitting close enough to listen in on their hushed conversation, but a couple of rebels quickly pick up on the fact that Sartha is fetching a meal on Kione's behalf. Some of the jealous looks Kione gets are truly filthy. As usual, looks like that scratch her pride and demand in reply a big, smug, shit-eating grin.

Maybe that's why she can't quite find it in herself to broach the subject again once Sartha trots back with a laden tray, looking every bit as proud as a dog with a stick.

* * *

After that, Kione promises herself that she'll force the issue. That she'll have a real conversation with Sartha about the way she took advantage of her Imperial trigger phrase. She really means it, too. It's important. She has too much respect for Sartha to leave her apology unsaid.

But in the end, it's easy to simply not.

Sartha obviously doesn't want to talk about it. She breezes past all of Kione's feeble attempts to touch on the subject. Plus, it's not like Kione is thrilled at the prospect of explaining to Sartha that she feels like an abusive piece of shit for what she did, and that it's disturbing how Sartha doesn't seem to view it in the same light.

Why force that talk when, instead, Kione can simply stay quiet and enjoy the new bond she shares with Sartha?

That's exactly what she ends up doing. In the wake of her silence, everything returns to normal. Not normal-normal, of course. Sartha's still damaged goods, and most of her rebel comrades are still plainly, hopelessly unable to cope with that. But it's closer than ever before, weirdly. Contrary to Sartha's fears, what Kione did to her doesn't send her back to the infirmary. If her betrayal is a fresh, deep wound in Sartha's psyche, a reminder of how her Imperial handler opened up her soul and hollowed it out, it doesn't show. Quite the opposite.

Now Sartha is *better*.

Not all the way. But there's a fresh brightness to her smiles. They seem less forced. Everybody senses it. Her comrades start waving to her again, and she waves back. When they let their hero worship show, she accepts it with a gracious nod and an easy, modest comment. The rebel doctors closely monitoring her psychological health are all smiles. According to them, she must be healing. Bouncing back. Soon enough, they reckon, she'll be back to her old self.

And if she's always at Kione's side, hanging on the mercenary's every word? Why, clearly all she needed was a good friend to lean on.

Hearing that puts one hell of a vicious knot in Kione's stomach.

But not for long. With Sartha at her side, there's only so much time she can spend wringing her hands. It feels like a waste. Sartha is doing well, isn't she? Even the doctors think so—and they'd know, right? Besides, doesn't Kione deserve this? She's been a good friend to Sartha, despite a couple of lapses. She stuck with her when nobody else did. Sartha's affection starts to feel, more than anything else, like simple recognition.

She still has reservations. Kione can't quite shake the worry that all of this points to a nameless sickness within the rescued hero. Perhaps that's why she doesn't push Sartha to try piloting *Ancyor* again, even though she would if

Kione asked. It's growing difficult to tell what Sartha genuinely wants, and what she simply thinks Kione wants. But perhaps, after everything she's been through, putting her in the cockpit of a peerless, hundred-ton war machine isn't actually the wisest move.

Once or twice, her reservations build to the point she's tempted to tell someone. The doctors, maybe. About Sartha's trigger phrase, if not the way she used it. That seems like something they should know, right? It seems like it might be important. Really, extremely important.

But then Kione will mention—off-handedly and thoughtlessly, of course—that she needs something and Sartha will bounce up and race off to find her exactly what she's looking for. When she gets back, she'll flash Kione this eager, hopeful look until Kione says 'thank you, Sartha', and then Sartha will show her the brightest, most contented smile Kione has ever seen on the hero's face.

The temptation fades. The gods are in their heaven. All is right with the world.

Until the night there's a knock at Kione's door.

Kione is just bedding down to sleep when she hears it. She sits up and frowns. Nobody ever comes knocking, and the base is all quiet tonight. Everybody else shipped out on some mission. Apparently not one worth paying Kione for. Given everything that's been happening, she probably shouldn't be surprised when she opens the door to her quarters and sees Sartha standing there. But she is.

Sartha never comes to knock on her door. It's always the other way around.

"Hey, Ki," Sartha says. The look on her face is fathomless. Sad and eager and ashamed and gleeful all at the same time. "Can I, uh, come in?"

"Sure."

Kione steps back and lets her in. Once she gets over her surprise, she can't keep herself from grinning. It's perfect. It's what she always wanted. Sartha Thrace, here to climb into her bed. Kione's growing hot already.

"What's up, Sartha?" Kione asks, playing it as casual as she possibly can. A bit of a fool's errand, given that she probably looks like the cat that got the cream. But she really, really wants to get Sartha to say it.

"Not much." Sartha sounds decidedly flustered as she steps inside and

closes the door. That's good. That's amazing. "You busy?"

It's funny; Kione hasn't seen as much of her today as she's become used to. When they had lunch, she seemed a touch listless. But now, Sartha's all over the place. Frenetic. Manic. Practically vibrating, and she keeps looking all over everywhere like she's afraid to let her gaze settle.

As far as Kione's concerned, it's perfect.

"Not really, I guess." Kione stretches lazily. "So, uh, what brings you here?"

Getting to watch Sartha squirm for a moment before she answers is better than Kione could have hoped. "Um..." she replies slowly, voice fraying from the sheer, bubbling tension. "Actually, I... was hoping we could, maybe, do something together. Like before."

It's a little mean, but Kione can't quite bring herself to not smirk and laugh. Gods, Sartha! She sounds like a schoolgirl with a crush. It's flattering, really. Kione is immediately, desperately tempted to throw herself into Sartha's arms. To savor her warmth once more. As tarnished as she is, Kione knows she'd still taste like the sun. But Kione reckons she can go for just one more tease. One more bout of squirming.

"Oh, like what, exactly?" she asks, feigning confusion as best she can with this dumb, horny grin on her face. "Not sure what kind of stuff you mean."

Sartha wraps her arms around herself and squeezes tight. She glances away in desperate embarrassment, and it's everything Kione could have hoped.

"You know... this?"

Every bit of Kione's glee turns sour when Sartha sticks a hand into one of the big pockets in her bomber jacket and fishes out the muzzle.

"What the..." The ghost of Kione's smile remains etched onto her face, and she lets out an inadvertent, nervous titter as hairs rise on her spine. "You're joking, right?"

"No." Sartha shakes her head. She's blushing and embarrassed but something else is moving through her, compelling her to hold the muzzle out reverently toward Kione like an offering. "I need it."

"I don't think that's a good idea, Sartha."

Kione's stomach is churning. Why did it have to be this? Why couldn't it have just been sex?

"Why not?" Sartha pleads. Her eyes are wide, and a jagged, needy light shines from within them. Kione has seen this before, or something like it. She knows it for what it is: addiction.

"Because...." Kione can't figure out how to explain it; it's so blindingly obvious that the fact Sartha can't see it is damning. But it's so hard to just say 'no' to her. That's one skill Kione never got the hang of. Instead, she tries bargaining. "OK, um, you want me to... put the muzzle on you? And then we fuck? Shit, if that's what does it for you, then sure. Seems a little dark, but who am I to blame a girl for developing a few kinks after going through it?"

The forced lightness in her voice is a feeble attempt at manifesting. Kione is hoping Sartha won't say the thing she was always, inevitably going to say.

"N-no. I mean, yes, um... we can fuck if you want to. Yes. Absolutely. But that's not..." For a moment, Sartha squeezes her eyes closed. Shame and need are fighting a battle within her. Need wins. It was always going to win, and it leaves her leaning in ever closer to Kione and visibly salivating when she opens her mouth to speak. "I need you to use the words."

Kione lets out a whimper.

"No." She shakes her head. "No, no, no. No way, Sartha."

Sartha takes another step toward her. Tut the muzzle is between them. Kione jumps back. That thing terrifies her.

"Why not?" Sartha protests.

"Because—holy shit!" Kione splutters. "That's so many different kinds of fucked-up I don't even know where to begin."

"Why?" Sartha asks again.

Kione is about to deride her for her childishness until she realizes that it's a real question. On some level, Sartha simply doesn't get it.

"Gods," Kione says quietly. "Don't you see? Those words are what they did to you. A way to control you. It's not right. People just... they just aren't supposed to have something like that."

Sartha goes quiet for a long moment. She looks down—then up again, and Kione sees that her plea for sanity skated off Sartha like a pebble across ice.

"But," she says eventually. "I need it."

Kione is on the verge of tearing up. "No," she begs. "You don't."

She's still in there somewhere, isn't she? The Sartha Thrace that Kione

remembers. The ace that pushed her to her limits. The hero that made her want to be better. The woman who never needed anything—not even Kione.

"It makes me feel whole again," Sartha explains miserably. It's like she's half-aware of how abjectly awful what she's saying is—but only half. "That's all I want. To feel good. To be... to be free. That's what I get from my other half. Without that, it's just me. And I feel everything, all the time, weighing me down. Whenever anybody around here looks at me. I can't do it, Kione. It's too much."

The pain in her voice makes it so damn hard. Kione wants so badly to be the one who makes her stop hurting. But it's too awful. She's forgiven herself once, just about. No more second chances.

"No, Sartha," she says, with all the firmness she can find. "You can do it. You really can. I believe in you. Or, you... you can at least try, right? If it sucks, if it hurts, I'm there for you. But anything's better than pulling on the levers they stuck in your head. Hells, there's so much we don't know about what they did to you, or how. We don't know what they were using you for. We don't know why you were traveling in *Ancyor* like that, on your own, when we intercepted you. So... you need to stay clear of all of it, OK? You need to get those words out of your head and forget about them. That's what you need to heal from. Right?"

That's as heartfelt as Kione Monax gets. She looks long and deep into Sartha's eyes, praying to see clarity. Praying to see hate. Hatred might mean she understands, at least, the extent of the violations committed against her. Mostly, though, Kione hopes that they can embrace and fall into bed together, shed tears together, find comfort together. As friends and equals. As more, perhaps.

It's a stupid dream, of course. Kione should know better. Now she gets what's coming to all stupid dreamers.

Sartha blinks, and when her eyes open again, she's gone. Just as gone as when Kione put her off the leash. This time, though, it's not Hound. Not Sartha's other self. It's just the part of Sartha Thrace that is nothing but need.

And need can fight dirty.

"It's funny," Sartha says. The way she smiles at Kione, crooked and bleak, is more unnerving than anything Kione has ever seen. "How you're saying all this now. Where were all these reservations the other night, Ki?"

"Wha-" Kione's guts churn so violently she almost gags. She's never seen this Sartha before, not once.

"You keep pretending you don't want it." Sartha's eyes are vast and dark. Empty. There's nothing inside them. Kione feels swallowed up by their gaze. "But you do. Why not just do what you want with me? That's all I'm offering you."

"Gods!" Kione gasps. "N-no I don't. I swear."

"You do," Sartha insists. She's unsteady. It's like she's drunk. "Be serious, Ki. You've been on cloud nine ever since it happened. Just do what you want."

Another gut punch. The truth itches at Kione's skin. She can't deny it, and she can't stop feeling devastated by the sudden realization that if she keeps saying 'no', all of Sartha's doting adoration will be over.

"You want me to be all yours, yeah?" Sartha whispers, and it's all poison. "Always have. All you have to do is say the words."

"S-shut up," Kione snaps violently. She can't handle this Sartha. Not even for a moment.

Sartha's smile widens still further, but there is absolutely no joy in it. "You know how you could make me shut up?"

"Fuck!" Kione flinches away from her, aghast.

She was right the first time. This is addiction. But still, she hadn't been prepared for this: for the withdrawal, for the addict who'll say anything. It's even more pitiable than the forlorn depression, but that doesn't stop it getting under Kione's skin.

Gods, Sartha. That handler. What did she do to you? How did she crawl this deep into your heart?

"Just give me what I need," Sartha wheedles, advancing on her, not giving her an inch of space. "One more time, at least. Can't you do that for me, Kione? Don't you owe me that? Come on. Make it up to me."

"No!"

"Why not? Why not just do it again?"

"Because it was rape!" Kione's been nursing that bitter truth for days. Saying it out loud is a perverse kind of release.

Until Sartha licks her lips to make them wet, then parts them as she looks seductively up at Kione, eyes shining, breath coming in hot pants of deranged

craving.

"Don't you wanna rape me again?"

Kione lets out a wet grunt of pain. It sounds a little too much like a moan for her liking. She's dizzy. She needs to get out of here. All the ultra-honed merc alarm bells in her head are ringing. This is dangerous. This is her own personal hell.

"You could." Sartha seizes her advantage. "Any way you want. I made you feel good, right? You want me to fuck you again, Ki?"

Kione's back is against the wall, and there's nowhere else to go. Sartha is pressed all the way up against her. The broken hero's body heat is another vector of attack. This close, Kione can see the burning fever in Sartha's face. She looks crazed. Like she barely knows what she's saying.

Only that it's working.

"Or," Sartha whispers. "You could fuck me instead. How about that, huh? You could finally have my body. All of it."

Her voice is so breathy. Feminine, melodic, seductive. It's so wrong for Sartha Thrace. But who could ever resist it? Not Kione, that's for sure. It's more than just dizziness that's making her lightheaded. She's sick to her stomach, but there's more to her appetite than just her stomach. To her utter horror, Kione realizes that she's hard.

A moment later, Sartha notices too. That's even more horrifying.

"It's n-n-not..." Kione stammers pathetically. "I'm n-n-not..."

It's not that she wants to fuck Sartha. That's what Kione's trying to say. It's not about sex. It's about attention. It's the way that, right now, she is the focal point of Sartha Thrace's existence. She has eyes for nobody else. It's not Kione's fault she's completely, hopelessly intoxicated by the experience. How long has she admired Sartha? How often has she wished she could be that good? That strong? That principled and hopeful? All those good, earnest, honest yearnings are crucifying her now. That's what Kione wants to say.

It's kind of a lie, unfortunately. Because she also really does want to fuck Sartha.

"Just say those three words for me," Sartha promises, "and I'll be all yours. You can make me anything you want. Anything you need."

"N-n-nooo," Kione whines. "Get... off..."

"C'mon." Sartha wheedles. She nestles her leg between Kione's thighs and raises it so that it presses against her cock. That has Kione seeing stars. "Don't you want me?"

"Yyyyes!" Kione cries. "Or... I m-mean...!"

Now she's admitted it, is there really any point pretending?

Yes. She wants it. Kione wants it so bad. Of course she does. She wants the dependence. She wants that moment when she felt herself reaching into Sartha's broken head and playing with the pieces. She wants to be Sartha's everything. She wants to be her god.

And Sartha wants it too. So what's the problem?

All of a sudden, it's on the tip of her tongue. Kione wants to say it. It would be so easy to say it. Everything after that would be so easy too. Maybe she could order Sartha to back off. Maybe she could use the words just to get some space to clear her head. Or maybe she and her hound would be swept up in each other until morning, and the morning is so far away. Not having to think and be strong until morning would feel amazing.

"O-Off..."

"Yes," Sartha pants. "Gods, yes, Kione!"

She can sense Kione's will breaking. In the face of her impending victory, her seductiveness evaporates. Once again, there's nothing in her eyes but gnawing, bitter need. It makes Sartha look like a black hole into which you could pour everything forever without filling it. She starts tearing up, and they are the tears of someone finally approaching the end of their pain.

They reveal that, in the end, Sartha never actually wanted Kione. She just wanted to be nothing at all.

Kione brings both her hands to Sartha's chest—and shoves her off. Sartha doesn't resist. She seems stunned that Kione found the strength. In that instant, as she looks at the merc, she's like a lost child.

"Get off me." Kione says. Her voice is ragged, but it's firm. It's not that she doesn't want Sartha. It's just that if she says 'yes' to her now, she'll never get from her what she truly wants. "Not like this."

Then, all over the rebel base, alarms start blaring. And everything goes to shit.

* * *

It feels like an eternity, even though it's just twenty minutes later that Kione is standing in the hangar bay on the boarding pier next to *Theaboros*, making the last few essential pre-launch checks—and watching, from a short distance away, as Sartha does the same with *Ancyor*.

To most people—to all the mechanics watching from the sidelines and saluting with stars in their eyes—it probably looks like she's her old self again. Sartha Thrace, getting back in the saddle. Just where she always belonged. Kione can see different. She can see how Sartha's hands are shaking. She can see the abject terror in the hero's eyes. After their sorry spectacle of a duel a few days before, she can see the painful truth.

Sartha can't do this.

But she's going to try, because they asked her to. Her comrades. The people she's been fighting for all these years. She always lets them ask too much of her.

Admittedly, it would have been hard to say 'no' to this one. As soon as the alarms started sounding, Kione went for her radio and found they were already calling for her and Sartha both. She was preposterously grateful for the interruption until she heard the sitrep.

An Imperial recon force is sweeping the sector, and heading straight for the rebel base.

It's far from unprecedented. Rebels and Imperials play a constant cat-and-mouse game with one another as the Empire tries to ferret out rebel positions while the rebels try to keep them hidden. It's the only way to wage an asymmetric war. Battles and fronts have to be chosen with care; the rest of the time, strength must be conserved and secret. To that end, rebel fighters are skilled in the art of misdirection. They know just how to put together an ambush in a way that throws Imperial hunters off the scent and leads them somewhere else entirely. This time, there's just one problem.

Everybody is already sortied and out of range, lending assistance to a fight in a neighboring sector.

Plus, the Imperial patrol is a lot beefier than usual. The scant few rebel pilots that remain to be deployed aren't enough to head them off. Not without

Sartha.

"I'll do it," Kione offered, when they asked. "Send me out. You know my fees. You know I'll get it done."

Put the money front and center. Can't let them know how off-kilter she is. Can't let them know how much she cares about keeping Sartha Thrace out of combat. Unfortunately, they already had their wallets out. They want Kione out there. But they want Sartha too. Even then, they said, they'll be outnumbered. Without Sartha to even the odds, there's no way.

Kione grimaced when she heard that, and again when she checked the reports for herself and saw that it was probably true. All the same, when they turned to Sartha and told her that they were sorry it was so soon but that they had no choice, Kione was shaking her head and mouthing 'please' behind their backs.

Sartha locked eyes with her, then turned to the base commander, saluted, and said, "You can count on me."

So here they are, mounting up. Everyone in the hangar has eyes for Sartha. All the rebels are betting their hopes and dreams on her glorious return to the battlefield. Meanwhile, Kione is looking past the heroism, past even the shaking, fearful hands, and searching for signs of the broken, needy, hollowed thing she encountered in her quarters just minutes before, begging for ego death.

Fuck. This is going to be a disaster. Kione just knows it.

But since she can't just say that out loud and expect anybody to listen, Kione remains miserably silent as *Theaboros*, *Ancyor*, and just two ramshackle rebel mechs shudder to life and file out of the hangar to march across the mountainous landscape to battle.

Single file, they follow the bed of a long-dried river that leads away from the rebel position. It's the kind of thing few Imperial surveyors take notice of; with luck, the scouts will be in the valley below and easy to take by surprise. Kione would love to take the skies and find them herself; *Theaboros*'s wings are back online, although she's been warned to be careful with them. Smarter to simply follow the rebels, though. This is their terrain. They know it, and it knows them. Unlike *Theaboros*, all of their mechs are painted the exact color of the dust their feet are kicking up. They might look like heaps of junk, but they're built smart.

'All machines,' someone familiar says over the radio, *'head's up. We're closing on their last known position. I'm running command and comms, so keep it clean and listen to me.'*

It shouldn't make much difference given all the different kinds of hell Kione's wading through, but for some reason, the little lightbulb moment of recognition she gets at the voice is enough to pierce through it all and, just for a moment, bring her actual, heartfelt joy.

"Radio girl!" she calls out, delighted.

There's a derisive snort. Radio girl is trying to sound serious but even over the crackling comm link Kione can tell she's smiling.

'I have a name, you know,' she replies.

"Yeah?" Kione is smiling too. "Get us back to base in one piece, maybe I'll think about learning it."

That gets a laugh out of the rebel. A win, in Kione's book.

'Is this where I tell you to buy me a drink instead? radio girl says. *I guess at that point we could just call it even.'*

"No, no, no," Kione tuts. "No drinks? Where's the fun in that? Let's get twice as drunk instead."

She hears more laughter over the radio—then another voice. One Kione's not familiar with. The other rebel pilot.

'Merc, stop flirting!' the other pilot snaps. '*Focus.'*

Not one who's been introduced to Kione's unique charms, then.

It's one hell of a request. Where's the fun in a scrap if you're not flirting? Might as well join the Empire, and have nothing to say besides 'yes, sir' and 'no, sir'. But Kione's willing to play nice and keep her mouth shut, given the circumstances. Maybe she can have her pleasure later instead, if she wows Miss Wet Blanket in combat and then tracks her down for a drink and more once they're back at base.

Kione blinks. It's been weeks since she's had a thought like that. Piloting *Theaboros* against the Imperials is starting to make her feel like her usual self again. She can't believe how good the idea of spending a night all wrapped up in someone who isn't Sartha sounds.

'I see them!'

Radio girl's not flirting now. She's all business, and so is Kione. A few more

steps and Kione sees them too. Almost two dozen black shapes passing in several columns, no more than three hundred feet down the hillside. The rebels are in perfect ambush position, but even so—four perfect shots and four perfect kills would still leave them outnumbered more than two to one.

And that's assuming Sartha does her part. Kione casts a glance back at *Ancyor*. During their march, she hasn't spoken a single word.

'Everybody get in cover and pick your targets. Quick, before they leave our kill zone. Get ready. On my mark.'

Kione obeys silently. This is no time for her smart mouth. She unholsters *Theaboros*'s weapon and levels it carefully at her chosen target. A short distance away, Sartha does the same. That's good. At least she's present enough for that. Maybe they're not totally doomed.

They wait, and the wait is murder. The Imperials inch closer and closer at a lazy pace until they're perilously close to the rebel ambush. Their reactor signatures should be well shielded by the terrain, but at this distance all it would take is for one of those idiots to look up. It occurs to Kione to quickly pray that each member of their impromptu squad is aiming at a different hostile. It's always truly, comically grim when that part of an ambush goes wrong and everyone shoots the same guy.

'Fire!'

At radio girl's word, the rebel squad opens up. The ripping roar of two large autocannons tears open the air and fills the valley beneath with smoke and, a moment later, the crack of *Ancyor*'s long rifle is punctuated by the crash of its victim collapsing to the ground, disabled. That gun might be Sartha's sole concession to long-range combat, but it would be a mistake to assume she doesn't know how to use it.

Kione is the only one who isn't shooting yet. Oh, she's pulled the trigger. Her weapon just takes a moment to actuate. In the cockpit, Kione feels her entire mech thrum as *Theaboros*'s reactor spins up, juicing the long, unwieldy firearm in its hands with antimatter. Turns out, that stuff is good for more than just floating. Controlled micro-annihilations play ungodly havoc with magnetic fields, and with enough charge and the right design—concentric rings firing in sequence around the barrel—you can accelerate a heavy, solid, ferrous slug to sanity-defying speeds until it pierces straight through the core of the first target it hits, comes out the other side, and lodges in the cockpit of the second.

A railgun.

While *Theaboros* opens all its external vents and literally lets off steam, Kione smirks. Two-in-one. Now that's a shot. Maybe she should raise her fees again.

Her smirk fades when, even as five of them fall, the rest of the Imperial patrol pulls together and begins to return fire with alarming alacrity.

Imperial pilots are invariably unimaginative, but they sometimes prove annoyingly professional. These ones have been drilled well. They shift rapidly into a defensive formation and take what cover they can, and soon enough the sounds of their guns utterly drowns out all of the rebel weaponry combined. Most of them are *Dorus*, and Kione's never had trouble putting those down, but there's a newer model with them too. A *Xiphos*, according to *Theaboros*'s targeting data. It opens up with more than just gunfire; a large, shoulder-mounted mortar fills the air with deadly hail that threatens to blast the rebel cover apart, leaving them all exposed.

Uh-oh.

It's not the lethality of their firepower that keeps Kione and the others hopelessly pinned down. It's certainly not the accuracy either. It's the sheer volume. Kione is forced to huddle against the bank of the dried river, and the constant whipping and screaming of shells above her head leave her no opportunities to line up a shot. Sticking her head up for even a moment would be a death sentence. When you boil it right down, a mech is a giant tin can with a little squishy grape inside. Kione knows you don't need to punch holes in the can to pop the grape. Rattle it around enough, and you'll be left with nothing but pulp. Keep whaling on it, and little shards will shear off and start flying around the inside like bullets. Spalling. Bad way to go. Whale on it with something that goes bang, and you can propagate an internal pressure wave that makes the grape implode. Worse way to go.

Kione doesn't fuck with small arms fire. Armor is a last resort.

As if to vindicate Kione's train of thought, the rebel who snapped at Kione for flirting gets impatient. Bad move, but easy to do when you're sitting in a ditch getting shot at. She stands up, ready to shoot, ready to lead the charge, roaring defiance over the radio. A moment later, her mech's torso is simply gone. The legs are left to topple over like two dominoes.

Well, shit.

As usual when things get rough, Kione thinks about bolting. It would be so easy this time. All she has to do is turn around and fly away. They'd never catch her. Giving radio girl mixed signals really would suck, though. And above all, Kione can't leave Sartha behind. Not now. She resolves to stick it out. The odds are awful, and sitting tight isn't going to help matters. Reinforcements are not on the way. They need a plan, and Kione can't think of one. It's looking grim. But the thing is, Kione has been through worse with Sartha at her side. As bad as this is, she knows they can win.

All she needs is a hero.

Kione looks over at *Ancyor*. Oh no. Sartha isn't even trying to shoot back.

But she wouldn't leave Kione out to dry. Would she? When Kione truly needs her, she'll rise to the occasion. The mercenary is sure of it. Which means all she needs to do is force the issue.

"Sartha!" Kione yells down the radio. "Remember Pathyris? Let's go!"

Before Sartha can tell her not to, Kione guns *Theaboros*'s flight system and rockets up into the sky.

It's one of those dumb moves that anybody would tell any rookie pilot to never ever do, no matter how much of a hotshot they think they are. Never. Be. The. Distraction. The thing is, though, Kione's beloved *Theaboros* makes for a truly excellent distraction. The sight of it floating into the sky, all six wings extended and shimmering with antimatter, will catch anybody's attention. It makes her target number one, but it always takes Kione's enemies a moment to adjust their aim. Even once they start shooting in the right direction, *Theaboros* is maneuverable enough that, if she really needs to, Kione can spend a little time dancing with bullets.

All in all, you couldn't ask for a better ploy to let *Ancyor* break cover, charge straight at the Imperial lines, and get stuck in right where it belongs.

It's always worked in the past—but only because they're both really that good, and only because they both really, truly trust each other. Kione trusts Sartha not to keep her waiting, and to put the bad guys down before they can land a solid hit. Sartha trusts Kione to take the flak and be her eyes in the sky, and to use her railgun to blow apart anyone who threatens to put holes in *Ancyor*. It's the kind of tactic nobody would ever teach but Kione and Sartha have honed it over and over, fighting back-to-back against long odds. It's something only they can do. It is their bond made manifest.

And Sartha isn't moving.

Kione spares a precious millisecond to switch over to a private comms line. "Thrace!" she cries. "I've got you covered. Get in there. We need you."

All she hears over the radio is sobbing.

'I can't do it, Kione.'

Sartha's letting her down. Again. And now they're all gonna die.

"Sartha!" Kione screams. The shots are getting real close now. She doesn't have much longer. "Yes, you can! You can do this! Please!"

Even now, after everything, Kione struggles to let go of the deep-seated conviction that, at any moment, her hero is going to spring into life and save her—but it's beginning to dawn on her that she won't. She really won't. Sartha isn't a hero. Not anymore. She's just scared and helpless, and nothing Kione sobs or begs or yells will change that.

Except one thing.

Kione doesn't want to say it. She really doesn't, even now. But she's realizing that all her guilt and reservations, all that effort spent saying 'no' to Sartha, in her quarters—it was all for nothing. All her pleas were wasted breath. It's a little embarrassing it took her this long to figure it out. Sartha would never come begging to Kione's quarters and Sartha would never let Kione die like this, so Sartha is gone. Dead. All Kione rescued on that bridge was a husk. A shell. Nothing more.

But Kione still cares about the husk. And more to the point, the husk has its uses. That Imperial handler clearly knew as much. Now Kione's learning the same lesson. She will make use of the husk of Sartha Thrace, oh yes. With the right leverage, she'll be everybody's hero once more. She'll be the shining star all those rebel mechanics need to see. And she'll get Kione and radio girl out of this mess in one piece. Kione will make sure that happens.

Whatever it takes.

"Sartha," she says into the radio, and the certain knowledge that this will work makes her voice calm and firm. "Off The Leash."

The sound of growling and slavering is what lets her know that she's going to be OK. Isn't that funny? It's not the dashing, cool, brave Sartha Thrace that saves her. It's the faithful, brainwashed, obedient Hound.

She doesn't need to be told what to do. She's a good dog. Already, she's breaking cover and sprinting at the enemy. All Sartha's hesitation is gone,

replaced by a fathomless rage that these prey-things dare try to hurt Kione. Kione can sense the current of her thoughts. They're seductive. Kione feels herself pulled into that same feral, violent mindset. And why fight it? Now that they have *Ancyor* barreling toward them, the Imperial mechs are starting to step back and split their fire. The pressure is receding. In its wake, in the sky, Kione is supreme. Beneath her, the Imperials look like bugs. *Ancyor* takes enough pressure off that Kione can take aim with her railgun and turn another one of them into a cored, melting heap.

It's that *Xiphos*. Kione starts laughing. New model? It's nothing. Nothing at all. Don't they know? Kione has Sartha Thrace in the palm of her hand. She can do anything. She's a goddess.

All it took was using those three little words.

Why did she waste so much time fighting it?

It feels amazing. The ego trip is unbelievable. Wielding Sartha like the greatest weapon ever forged feels so good. Even the codependency feels good. Kione loves that Sartha needed her to do this. That's real power. It's more power than all her merc money ever earned her. Now all she wants to do is enjoy it. She wants more. Is this how the Imperial handler who brainwashed Sartha gets to feel all the time? She's been in Kione's dreams ever since she saw the recording, in her black leathers and with her sharp, icy gaze. She seemed, even in that brief glimpse, more than human. Perhaps Kione is starting to understand why.

And she yearns to revel in this moment of apotheosis.

"Sartha," Kione laughs into her radio. "Kill for me."

Hound whooping with glee and snapping her jaws is all the answer Kione needs.

Split, disorganized fire isn't even close to enough to put a beast like *Ancyor* down. Once Hound makes it into melee combat, the fight doesn't last long. She has all of Sartha's skill, and Sartha is a legend for a reason. *Doru*s have basic CQC capabilities, but those do little to keep them from being ripped apart by *Ancyor*'s hulking limbs as the hellhound of a mech ducks and weaves through their fields of fire without taking a scratch. A predator among prey. It's only moments before their squad cohesion collapses, and after that, it's just a matter of picking off stragglers. Hound gets most of them. Kione takes out a few, as the mood takes her. Even radio girl manages a couple. She's

still alive, and a better pilot than Kione has been giving her credit for.

Then the Imperials are all dead. It's over.

All it took was letting Sartha off the leash.

The elation of turning defeat into victory washes away any regrets Kione might have had. This is good, she sees. This feels too good to be wrong. It's saved them, and isn't that a lesson? Now Kione is sure. The Sartha Thrace that was cowering uselessly in that ditch doesn't deserve Kione's anguished scruples. The Sartha Thrace that was begging for oblivion back in her quarters doesn't want them, and will never appreciate them. It was all pointless.

Kione gets it now. Sartha Thrace needs a handler.

It's time for her to step up. Duh.

CHAPTER FOUR

When the knock comes at Kione's door, she smiles. She knows that it's Sartha long before she answers. Every few days, she comes to Kione's quarters. It's become a regular pattern for the two of them, but the regularity hardly makes it feel routine. It's a ritual. It's sacred, the tension further heightened by Kione's slight uncertainty about which nights, exactly, Sartha will come calling. Each evening, Kione gets to simmer in the anticipation—and on the nights she doesn't come, it's hardly a disappointment. Kione knows it won't be much longer.

Sartha Thrace finally needs her. She needs her new handler.

Truthfully Kione doesn't much care for that term, although it is growing on her. It seems too clinical for what they have, and a little sinister. But it fits, right? And if she thinks about herself that way, it's like she's completely replaced that awful, dark figure she saw on the recording in Sartha's mech cockpit.

Kione promised she'd save Sartha. What is this, if not salvation?

Like all the nights she comes, when she opens the door Kione is rewarded by the special smile on Sartha's face. It's furtive and a touch guilty—but only a touch, and much, much more than that, it's excited. It's desperate. It makes Kione feel like she's sixteen again, and slipping out of the bomb shelter to go spend the night with the older girl her parents always told her to stay away from. It makes her feel like what she shares with Sartha is the scandal of secret lovers.

Which, she supposes, it is.

"Hey, Kione," Sartha greets her, eyes shining and lips wet. "Can I come in?"

Kione takes her time in answering. She wants to enjoy the sight of Sartha on her doorstep—and besides, it's a pleasure to keep her waiting. Just for a heartbeat or two.

"Sure," she replies eventually, smirking. "Make yourself at home."

She steps back to allow Sartha entrance. She ducks inside with a grateful grin, Kione shuts the door, and then the two of them are alone. It's time. They begin by chatting a little. Kione likes talking with Sartha. It makes their relationship feel all the more real. But both of them are impatient and so, as usual, it's not long before Sartha takes out her muzzle and offers it to Kione. The mercenary takes it without hesitation. For a moment, she strokes her fingertips over its cold metal bars and firm leather straps. It's funny; Kione remembers being so afraid of the object at first. Now that seems silly. Now it seems to her a tender thing. It's well-crafted, and it's the firm hand Sartha needs. In a way, the muzzle is loving. Does anyone take a dog's collar any other way?

"Here," Kione beckons.

Obediently, Sartha bows her head to receive. Kione places it over her face, moves the cage into position, and then begins to tighten the straps. She's become deft at the task, able to fit the muzzle to Sartha quickly without causing her a single measure of discomfort. Kione takes it slow anyway. She binds the muzzle tight because she knows Sartha likes it that way, and she relishes the moment when the whole of Sartha seems to melt away into the cage's embrace, her shoulders giving up their tension and the pained, haunted, needy look in her eyes relaxing into something dull and soft and blissful. Kione tightens the straps as far as she can, then forces them a little tighter. Sartha moans. She likes it when it hurts, so why not hurt her?

With the muzzle on, they are ready. Still, Kione takes it slow. Always slow. Doing this with Sartha is the greatest pleasure she's ever known, so why rush it? Why not linger? It's funny; Kione always thought that while money could buy almost anything worth having, Sartha was the exception. Special. Priceless. Impossible to own.

How wrong she'd been. Turns out, you can own her after all. Just not with money.

"You really do look perfect like this," Kione murmurs. She sees it now. This version of Sartha—muzzled, still, obedient—isn't creepy. She's beautiful.

"Thank you," Sartha replies. She blushes a touch. That's a rare thing to most. Not to Kione. Not anymore. It's easy for her to make Sartha blush.

Intoxicated by Sartha's gratitude, Kione reaches out and rests her hand on the top of Sartha's head. She pets her, rubbing her hand back and forth, messing her hair with one stroke and brushing it back the next. Sartha quickly relaxes into the touch. She sheds her outer self and is fully at peace, all because Kione is running a hand through her hair.

Is this what love looks like? Kione is beginning to think so.

But she has more love to give—in another woman's words, to be sure, but Kione is confident that in time she'll make them her own. It's what Sartha needs for now, until Kione can teach her something better. And Kione isn't so cruel that she'll keep her beloved waiting.

"Sartha," Kione says, taking on the voice of the Imperial handler she's come to think of as both her rival and predecessor. "Off The Leash."

The way it happens is nothing short of magical. Kione will never tire of studying the micro-expressions Sartha makes as the trigger phrase washes over her. She's greedy for it; her eyes widen in anticipation as she hears the words fall from Kione's lips but then, at the end, there's a bare hint of resistance as whatever remains of Sartha Thrace's shattered superego fights against its own destruction. It can't win, because the words are just that powerful—and in any case, Sartha doesn't want it to win. She yearns to surrender. The pleasure of this transformation has been carved into Sartha's psyche with all the subtlety of an ice pick. She closes her eyes and gives herself to oblivion, just as she has done so many times before, and it's clear that the only thing she feels is blissful relief.

Then, she feels nothing at all.

The nothingness fascinates Kione. She could stare into its abyss forever. Sartha is a void that reaches outward and pulls inwards, so great is her desperation to be free of herself. There's something miraculous about that—but the greatest miracle is yet to come. A heartbeat later, Sartha's nothingness births something. A new life. A being sculpted by human hands, small and sleek and singularly purposeful. Once, Kione was afraid of how little of Sartha remained in her new self. Of how much was carved away and discarded. It

struck her as destructive. Now she acknowledges its elegance. That handler has an artisan's hands, however loathsome and bloodstained they may be. Kione can only resent her so much. It's only thanks to that woman's awful alchemy that Kione has what stands before her now.

Her Hound.

"Hey, puppy," Kione giggles, caught up in childlike glee at the thing she has conjured.

It feels a little trite as a term of endearment. Kione knows perfectly well that Hound is no pet. She's a weapon. But calling her that is fun. It makes Kione feel powerful. And she's sure Sartha would find both the enjoyment and the humor in it. Hound's only reply, naturally, is a wet, brainless gurgle. From the glazed, vacant look in her eyes, you'd be forgiven for thinking she doesn't understand Kione at all. Kione knows, though, that she's hanging on her every word.

"Sit," Kione commands, pointing down.

No hesitation. Hound drops to her knees. Pose perfect, head held up to look at Kione expectantly. Expecting praise, perhaps—or simply another command. She'd relish either. Kione giggles again at the slight spark she sees in Hound's eye, making the brainwashed woman look momentarily alive. Pleasure. The special pleasure Hound can only get from obedience.

"Lie down," Kione tells her next.

She hasn't tried this one yet. She wants to see how Hound will take it. Without missing a beast, Hound stretches forward from her kneeling pose until she's lying flat on her front.

"Roll over," Kione tries next. She has to, right?

Hound rolls over to lie on her back.

That gets another giggle from Kione. She's light-headed. Each night they meet, she has to remind herself that she can do anything with Hound. Each night, it hits a little better.

"Sit! Up!"

The eagerness in Kione's voice prompts Hound to scramble excitedly back up to her knees. Gods, Kione could do this forever.

"Paw!" is her next whim. Once more, Hound obeys.

Would Sartha have done this? Would she have found it too childish? Too

demeaning? Kione keeps wondering if, through these silly little commands, she'll find a limit. The point where Sartha reasserts herself a little, either to complain or to giggle along with her.

It never happens. Hound has no inhibitions. No limits.

"Here." Kione turns and grabs something at random from her bed—the vest top she was wearing under her jumpsuit the day before. "Fetch!"

She scrunches up her top and tosses it across her quarters. Hound immediately scrambles after it on her hands and knees. She doesn't quite have the enthusiasm of a real puppy, but it's close. Kione has given her command after command, chance after chance to demonstrate her obedience. As Hound proudly hands over her prize, she's nakedly drunk with bliss.

All because she was told to go and fetch a piece of laundry.

The sheer simplicity of her psyche is breathtaking. Obedience, reward, Disobedience, pain. Right down to her soul, Hound is nothing but the simple equation of carrot and stick. Everything else—everything unnecessary—has been scooped out by those three magic trigger words and left behind.

How? How do you do that to someone? Kione is dying to know.

But not now. For now, such thoughts are to be pushed aside. Kione has her hound to attend to.

"Very good!" she finds herself saying as she reaches up to pet Hound again. "Good puppy. Good girl. Good girl!"

Kione's praise has Hound all but delirious. The dumb grin that hangs from her face behind the muzzle is like no smile Kione has ever seen on Sartha. Gods, she looks so stupid! She's pretty. She's so pretty. But she looks stupid too, drooling down her chin, eyes clouded over and teary with the simple pleasure of Kione's approval.

There it is. The feeling Kione craves above all. The power trip. But it's not enough. Not yet.

"Good girl," Kione repeats. "I think my puppy has earned a reward."

Hound bristles with excitement. She loves rewards. Kione's pretty sure she could tip cigarette ash into Hound's mouth and as long as she called it a reward, she'd be almost as thrilled.

"Here. Strip, and put this on. Get ready."

Kione grabs Sartha's strap and harness from her footlocker and tosses it to

Hound. They decided—Kione decided—she could hang on to Sartha's strap-on. She gets a smug little kick every time she thinks about that. If Sartha ever wanted to fuck anyone else on the rebel base, she'd have to ask very, very nicely. She'd have to beg.

The way Hound strips it isn't particularly sensual, but it really doesn't need to be. Sartha's body always drives Kione crazy. Watching Hound fix her harness and strap-on into place and lubricate the shaft is even worse. Before long, Hound stands at attention, naked. Her excitement has made her sweat just a little, the sheen highlighting the shape of her musculature and catching the light on the edges of all her small scars. The muzzle juts out from her face, and her artificial cock juts out from between her legs. Hound looks like every bit the weapon she is. Every bit the tool.

She looks magnificent.

"Up, puppy!" Kione giggles, patting her mattress. "On the bed."

Hound obeys. Just as Kione indicates, she clambers onto her bed and lies flat on her back. Kione loves even the simple act of posing her.

"Stay," she commands next—and while Hound watches rapt, she gets onto the bed too and mounts her, straddling the brainwashed pilot's hips just above where the strap rests. The look of addled awe and need Hound gives her as Kione begins to strip out of her jumpsuit is one more intoxicant atop all the rest. "Look at me."

Unlike Hound, the way she strips is proudly, deliberately sensual. Her jumpsuit fastens at the front, and so Kione can slowly, teasingly, pull down on the zipper, each inch it travels revealing more of her dark skin: collar, then cleavage, then stomach. The skintight garment loosens and comes apart bit by bit, peeling away from Kione's shoulders and, eventually, allowing her chest to slip out and her hard cock to spring free. Kione isn't wearing anything underneath. It's been a few days, so she was certain Sartha was coming tonight. She has planned this moment, and it's getting exactly the response she desired. Hound's attention is electric as she watches Kione. Her eyes are all but bulging and she's visibly salivating all over herself as she struggles to control her urges.

"You want me," Kione tells her, as she positions the tip of Hound's strap-on against her ass. "You want to be inside me."

It doesn't need to be said, but saying it redoubles Hound's desperation.

Why not imprint that on Hound? It's so easy. Caught up in that ease, an impulse takes Kione.

"Here," she says. "Open your mouth."

Kione leans forward a little and spits into her open, panting mouth. Hound accepts it like a gift. Like it's ambrosia. As she tastes Kione's drool, the seething, twitching need in her eyes only grows. Kione can't stop laughing. This really is how a god feels, isn't it? Hound will accept anything from her and be grateful for it. That's love, right? It has to be.

And Kione needs to feel all of Sartha's love.

"Fuck me," she commands.

Despite all her teasing, Kione isn't quite prepared for the violence of the way Hound reaches up, seizes her by the hips, and pulls her down to impale Kione on the end of her strap-on. Kione shudders as she takes all of Hound's length inside her. A moan erupts from her lips, shattering, for a moment, her demeanor of smirking dominance. Her back arches and precum drips from her quivering cock to stain Hound's abs. When Hound starts moving her hips rhythmically, Kione sees stars.

Fuck, it's good. Kione has never regretted staining her hands with Sartha's psyche less.

"More!" Kione cries, heedless of Hound's physical limits. "Harder!"

Kione can't get enough. She's discovered she loves getting fucked like this. Kione isn't smaller than Sartha, but when she's on top like this, she feels that way. She feels delicate, almost, but not in a way that diminishes her. On top of Hound, looking down on her, she feels both precious and powerful. She feels the way she always wants to feel. She feels like she's made of marble and gold.

It's not long before it makes her come hard.

Hound keeps fucking her all the way through the orgasm and out the other side. She won't relent. Won't give Kione a moment to breathe.

Of course she won't. Kione hasn't permitted it.

It's minutes before Kione finds the breath in her lungs to gasp, "S-stop!", and by that time she's bent over her Hound, face resting against her neck, tasting all of her sweat and body scent. Hound stops. She goes completely still, both content with her reward and waiting eagerly for her next chance to earn one. That's Hound's permanent state of being.

No more orders come. Not right away. Kione lets herself linger in the moment. She presses herself to Hound's chest as a lover would. Perhaps she'll let herself fall asleep like this. She bets that if she did, she'd wake up the next morning and Hound wouldn't have moved an inch.

Before she can settle, though, she turns her head and accidentally butts against Hound's cold muzzle.

The unexpected pain brings Kione a moment of sobriety. She glances up, curious to see what expression she might read on Hound's face. It's the same as ever—dumb, dull, awestruck, mindfucked adoration—but for just a moment, in that window of post-orgasmic clarity, Kione imagines something else in Hound's bloodshot eyes and drooling grin.

Hate.

What if there's actually a small part of Sartha that still rails against what's been done to her? Kione's seen no evidence of that, but suddenly she can't stop herself from dwelling on the thought. In her mind's eye, it grows and grows until she's almost sure that's how Hound is looking at her. Kione finds herself believing that, if the muzzle wasn't there, Hound would break through her conditioning and, in a moment of perfectly justified ferocity, sink her teeth into Kione's neck.

The moment passes. The impression passes. Kione scolds herself. Silly. Stupid.

Sartha is hers now. Hound is hers. Both of them are happy. There's no more to be said.

Because Kione alone gets it. To the other rebels, Sartha's a legend. A saint. An icon. To the Imperial handler who brainwashed her, she's a tool. A weapon. A victim. To Kione, she's both. Kione sees both halves of Sartha Thrace, each one propped up against the other like two playing cards. Sartha still wants, she's sure, to be a source of inspiration and leadership for the rebels, but she needs to be a victim too. Kione will provide. She'll give her friend whatever it takes. Whatever authority. Whatever cruelty. She'll ruin herself for Sartha.

It's worth it, for her—because it goes both ways. Because if Kione makes herself her villain, she knows that Sartha Thrace will always be her hero.

* * *

"Command, this is *Theaboros*. *Ancyor* and I are approaching the active zone. Two clicks out, approaching east by northeast. Ready to begin in five."

'Roger, Theaboros. *Begin when ready. Switch to private comms channels at T minus sixty. No cheating.'*

"Would I ever?" There's no reply. "Understood, command. Switching channels."

Kione reaches up to her radio and switches to her and Sartha's assigned frequency. She sighs, then relaxes a bit. Rebel commanders can be a stiff bunch. Not nearly as bad as Imperials, of course, but all that self-righteousness really goes to their heads. Lately, they've been trying to drill a little comms discipline into Kione. She wishes they wouldn't. It's really boring.

"Sartha, you hear me OK?"

'Yeah.'

She sounds tense. Heavy. It's no surprise. Kione's used to that by now.

"Ready to go?"

'I think I still need it, Ki.'

She's used to that too. Kione smiles to herself in the cockpit, just slightly. Of course you do, my poor, broken girl.

"Put your muzzle on."

'Yes, Kione.'

Sartha needs the muzzle. She needs the words. Without them, she's nothing. Useless or worse as a pilot. She'll fall apart even on a training exercise like this. Lots of those, since Sartha got back in the saddle to take out that Imperial recon force. The rebels are desperate to have her back in action; her success and kill count were too great to ignore, but her initial hesitation was just as carefully noted. They need to be able to rely on her, they say, and so they keep putting her through her paces over and over.

Plus, now that Kione and Sartha are officially a unit, they want to get a sense of how the two of them are going to operate together.

Among the rebels, its not so unusual for pairs or small groups of pilots to form themselves into official formations. Loved ones fight fiercest at each other's sides, and while the irregular squads can be an organizational

headache, there's a strong presumption against splitting them up. After all, isn't stuff like that what the rebels are fighting for? Sartha Thrace finally getting herself hitched sure as hell caused a stir, though. Especially to a mere mercenary. The rebel brass weren't thrilled about the idea—but they couldn't say no. They've seen what Sartha and Kione can do together. And after everything Sartha has given to the cause, could they really refuse when she asked so very insistently?

At Kione's prompting, obviously.

It had seemed like a good idea at the time. Sartha gets her handler, the rebels get their hero, and Kione gets her Sartha. Only, now she's stuck in training exercise after training exercise. It's boring, and direly unprofitable—but little by little, Kione is teaching herself a new way to fight alongside her pet.

"Ready?" Kione asks.

'Ready.' She still sounds desperately anxious, but Kione can tell Sartha's taking comfort from her. It's time to deliver her from the burden of free will.

"Sartha. Off The Leash."

A brief growl is all Kione needs to hear to know that Hound is in the driving seat. She grins. Training exercises get on her nerves, but there's something to be said for getting to put on a show.

"Let's make this quick and efficient," Kione instructs. "And remember: tracer rounds and disabling blows only. Go easy on them. No messes. No corpses."

It needs to be said. Kione learned that the hard way the first time they tried this, and had to rush to stop a truly nasty friendly fire incident. Hound has no allegiances. None but her handler.

"Alright." Kione licks her lips. "Go fetch, girl."

Ancyor's engine roars a little louder, and the bestial mech lopes forward after its prey.

The exercise is simple. Just up ahead is a rebel squad doing their best impersonation of a dug-in Imperial position, and Kione and Sartha need to take them out. There's little question that the two aces will succeed, but their COs are looking for more than just success. They're looking for alacrity, for precision, for teamwork. They're looking for perfection.

Kione will give it to them in spades.

"Hound," Kione calls out as she takes flight in *Theaboros* and scans for targets. "Ten o'clock. A hundred yards out. Camouflaged. Avoid the crossfire."

Hound's trust is absolute. She responds instantly, throwing *Ancyor* through the air in a bounding leap that places her at the exact spot Kione indicated—right in front of a concealed sniper. One swift, disabling blow takes them out, and thanks to Kione's warning she's already prepared to evade the hail of retaliatory fire that swiftly comes her way. The position they're attacking is well laid out. Favorable terrain, good concealment, overlapping fields of fire.

But it's not going to be enough.

"Three o'clock," Kione orders, laying some down covering fire—not with her railgun, alas, just a low-caliber autocannon. "Seventy yards. Two of them. The soil looks disturbed. Watch for land mines."

Hound responds with instant obedience. In her hands, *Ancyor* becomes an extension of Kione's will—Kione's, not Sartha's. Kione's hands, meanwhile, remain clean. She can remain high above, safe in the skies, and watch admiringly as *Ancyor* moves with an acrobat's precision and a wolf's hunger.

It's funny; at first, Kione couldn't help but treat it as a competition. She'd set Hound loose, then try to match her kill count. Didn't take her long to realize how pointless that was. Competing, they only got in each other's way. As good as Kione is, she can't keep up. If she tried, she'd make mistakes—but her pride demanded nothing less.

Then she realized: who cares? Hound is hers. Hound's kills are hers.

No matter what, Kione wins. Duh.

So instead, Kione started playing backup. Now she covers for Hound. Spots for her. Watches her back. It works even better than she could have dreamed. Kione'd always had a certain tactical acumen, she's just never needed to use it for anyone else's benefit before. Turns out, she makes a great field commander. Ironic, for a mercenary. But with her choreographing *Ancyor*'s murderous dance, Sartha is more lethal than ever before.

"Behind you. A small frame. It's baiting you. Keep the range, but let them think it's working. Good. Use your vulcans. Should be enough."

Another kill. Easy.

"OK, now the ambushers. One left, one right. Right first. Full speed. Don't let the other one support them."

Another kill. Easy.

"Good. The other one's at seven o'clock. Forty yards. It thinks you aren't ready for it."

Another kill. Easy.

Hound's trust in Kione is absolute. Not a single stray thought slows her down. Thanks to Kione, she can fight faster than humanly possible. Up in *Theaboros*'s cockpit, Kione is grinning maniacally. She's feeling something about Sartha she's never felt about anybody or anything before.

Pride.

"Two left. Both of them in foxholes. Three o'clock, one-twenty yards. Five o'clock, one-forty." Kione decides she can afford to have just a little fun. "I have the shot on that one. You take the other. I want you to see if you can beat me to it."

Hound does. Kione's bosom swells with affection. It helps to know that they've completed the exercise in record time.

Whoever knew Sartha Thrace would make such a good dog?

* * *

'Thrace: cleared for a return to active duty. Logistical support assigned for *Ancyor* overhaul programme. Partnership with mercenary Kione Monax approved.'

That line in the after action report—that validation—fills Kione with a giddy euphoria that keeps her warm all the way through the debriefing and afterward, as she takes Sartha down to the canteen for some grub. Things are changing there too. Sartha is no longer a pariah. And weirdly, neither is Kione. Now, when they eat, everybody wants to join them.

"Ki. Sartha. Heard you killed it out there again. Nice work."

Kione nods and smiles warmly at the rebel sitting down at their table. "Hey, radio girl."

Radio girl rolls her eyes. "I have a name, you know."

She does. Amynta Tet. They've been getting acquainted ever since their recent sortie against the Imperial patrol, but Kione would never let a good bit die that easy. A few of Amynta's friends join them, and Kione finds that she knows their names too. Camarina. Vola. Nese. Knowing their names is

strange. Recognizing people in the corridors of the rebel base and receiving friendly waves is strange. It makes her smile more than she'd expected. Along with the pride she takes in Hound, this is the other new feeling Kione's been discovering. Perhaps it's even what people call 'belonging'.

"So, Ki," Camarina asks, as they eat. "Amynta was telling me you've really been around. Says you fought at Hebros. That true?"

"Yeah, it is." Kione can't help but smile. It's not the first time she's been asked about her exploits. "Sartha was there too, of course."

"What was it like?"

Kione and Sartha exchange glances.

"All in a day's work," Kione shrugs. Can't have them getting the idea she cares too much. "Long day, though. Hell of a long day. But I can't complain. More hours, more pay. And I feel like I earned my cut."

Her display of mercenary cynicism doesn't seem to put them off the way it used to. Kione's a little grateful for that.

"That was a long day, yeah," Sartha agrees. At once, all eyes are on her. "They made us work for it. That's for sure."

The younger rebels all nod thoughtfully like they get it. They can't get enough of Sartha's modest hero shtick. Only Kione can sense Sartha tensing a little under the weight of their adoration.

"Damn right," Kione adds, sighing. "It's not my place to complain, but frankly I'm not sure it was worth the trouble."

"No." Something in Sartha's voice makes Kione look at her. She sounds oddly contemplative. Like she's remembering something from a past life. "No, it was. We don't get to take many steps forward. But at Hebros, we did. We pushed them back. We won. It was amazing."

Kione's eyes widen.

"Yeah," she confesses. "It was."

All the other rebels go all quiet and reverent. Kione does too. It's been a long while since she heard anything quite like that out of Sartha. Her heart starts beating fast. It's just like she's been telling herself. She's still in there. The one Kione's been doing all this for. For a long moment, she's lost for words.

"I'm surprised that's the part you remember," Kione recovers, after a few seconds. "I remember the days before and after the battle too. You racked up quite the count, and I'm not talking about *Dorus*."

Thankfully, the other rebels start giggling. Kione can relax a little.

"Ki," Sartha admonishes half-jokingly. "I'm trying to set an example here."

"Oh, c'mon," Kione teases back. "Don't act like you're better than me."

"I'm not?" The smug look on Sartha's face as she delivers the killing blow is obnoxiously pretty. "Then how come my 'count' was so much higher?"

Kione feels her face turn red. Amynta and her friends keep giggling—not that they're genuinely scandalized. Pilots love to compare all kinds of scores. Must be something about the personality type. In truth, it's out of character for Kione not to have been burnishing hers. Amynta has made a few passes at her, and normally Kione would jump at the chance to be some rebel girl's mean mercenary lay. Lately, though, the only person in her head is Sartha.

"So," Vola ventures, a look of bravery on her face. "Are you two... like... you know?"

She points, and her finger wanders back and forth between Kione and Sartha.

Suddenly, Kione's face isn't just red. It's on fire.

"We..." she splutters like a schoolgirl. "That... uh..."

Like what? Like girlfriends? Like whatever the hell you'd call what they've been doing together on a near-nightly basis?

"We're just..." Kione struggles lamely. The stares she's getting are only growing more curious. Helpless, she turns to Sartha. "W-What would you...?

Sartha, infuriatingly, just smiles back at her in perfect earnestness. "We're whatever you want us to be, Kione."

Appreciative coos and giggles go up all around the table. Kione's glad nobody is looking under it. They'd see her bouncing her leg like crazy. She can't keep still. She feels like she's about to melt into her chair.

"Great," Kione mutters eventually. "Cool."

Gods, she sounds like an idiot.

"Well, congrats," Amynta reaches over the table and clasps Kione's shoulder. "Looks like you're one of us now."

Kione snorts a laugh although she's grateful for the topic shift, however

slight. “And what’s that supposed to mean?”

“C’mon,” Amynta wheedles. “You’re not just gonna ditch us and leave Sartha behind, right? Face it. You’re a rebel now, Ki. Welcome to the cause. We should see about getting you the rattiest combat jacket you’ve ever seen, it’ll help you fit in.”

“Fuck you, radio girl,” Kione throws back, grinning. She’s not gonna let that pass. She has a reputation to consider. “I’m a merc, through and through. No causes for me. They stop paying my fees, and I’m in the wind.”

“Whatever you say!” Amynta throws her hands up. “It’s just, I’ve heard this is the first time you’ve ever stayed in one place this long. From where I’m sitting, you’re looking real tied down already.”

More giggles. Oh, Kione is not gonna let that pass unchallenged. She folds her arms.

“That’s what you think,” she retorts brashly. “Maybe it’s just the opposite. Maybe Sartha’s the one who’s getting tied down. Maybe when I leave, she’s coming with me. Sartha and Kione, mercenary duo. The best there ever was. We’ll make a killing.”

Immediately, everybody starts laughing—Kione included. The idea is absurd. Beyond absurd. Sartha Thrace, mercenary? Kione just can’t picture it. Like that bleeding heart could ever bring herself to turn away from an underdog with empty pockets. No; as they laugh, Kione is forced to dwell on the possibility that Amynta might be right. How could she ever leave Sartha’s side now? Separate, both of them would come undone. Sartha needs her handler. And Kione, she admits to herself, needs her hound.

Does that make her a rebel? Does that mean she’d stay and fight even if there was nothing in it for her? The very idea sticks in her craw. But would it really be so bad?

“Is that what you want, Kione?”

Hearing that instantly culls Kione’s laughter. Her head whips around, and she stares in abject shock at the woman sitting next to her.

“Huh?”

Sartha looks at her with big eyes that are deadly serious—and worse, earnest. Like she’s found a killer opportunity to please Kione. Better than a hundred fetched meal trays.

“I said,” Sartha repeats. “Is that what you want, Ki?”

Kione starts shaking her head. No, Sartha. No, don't do this. I thought you were OK. I thought you were still in there.

"For us to be mercenaries?" Sartha presses. Gods, the hope in her voice is sickening. It's like she wants nothing more than to say 'yes' to Kione, and for Kione to say 'yes' to her. "We could leave whenever you want. You're right. We'd make a killing."

It's like she wants nothing more than to abandon everything she ever cared about.

"No." Kione plants her face in her hands and groans softly. "I don't want that, Sartha."

"Oh." Sartha sits back—a little disappointed, but mostly just placid. "OK."

The other girls had stopped laughing. Chilled, perhaps, by Sartha's manner. Now, though, their mirth comes roaring back. They're practically cheering for their hero. As far as they're concerned, they just witnessed her getting one over on Kione. Sartha called her bluff and won, just like Sartha Thrace always does.

They don't see what Kione sees. They don't see the hunger in Sartha's blank eyes. How could Kione have been so stupid? How could she ever have let herself believe this would be OK? Shame, anger, and disappointment all fight for prominence in her gut.

Sartha, you were meant to be teasing me right alongside Amynta. Prodding me about joining the rebellion. Convincing me to fight the good fight. Isn't that what you always did? Isn't that why Kione always made sure to fight with the rebels, and never the Empire?

Hadn't she always believed in Sartha, even if she never believed in anything else?

The little propped-up playing card diorama in Kione's head is falling apart. What if Sartha's gone—really gone? What if the little kernel Kione's been believing in isn't there?

For a brief moment, Kione tries to convince herself that Sartha's just joking around. She tries to have faith—but it's useless. She knows Sartha too well to trick herself. She sees the truth.

When she offered to leave everything behind for her, the great hero of the rebellion couldn't have been more serious.

CHAPTER FIVE

Is that what you want, Ki?

Well, is it?

That's what Kione keeps asking herself over and over as she stalks aimlessly around the rebel base. Does she want Sartha Thrace, hero of the rebellion, to take off with her as a fellow mercenary, going wherever the fighting is most profitable and leaving as soon as the credits run dry? It's a hell of a prospect. Until about ten minutes ago, Kione hadn't realized it was on the table. She's never dared to give it any thought.

It should make her happy. Right? Sartha's willing to give her everything. To drop everything for her. Isn't that what Kione always wanted? Isn't that kind of devotion she's always longed for? If Kione just said 'yes', maybe they'd finally be equals. Partners in crime. She once heard somebody say that was the most intimate relationship between two people.

It means Sartha loves her, doesn't it?

The very idea tastes rotten in Kione's mouth. No. Not love. Something much, much worse.

But perhaps it could be love. Perhaps if they simply got away from everything, even for the worst of reasons, Sartha could finally heal. Perhaps it's just what she needs. Kione has seen firsthand how much Sartha struggles to bear the adoring, expectant looks from the rebels that surround her. She knows better than anyone how hard she's finding it to slip back into those old shoes.

What if she didn't have to? What if they were simply gone?

Kione pictures it for a moment. *Ancyor* marching across the horizon, nice and slow, cockpit open, letting Sartha taste the wind as it streams through her hair. In her mind's eyes, Sartha smiles. It's beautiful.

And it's wrong.

Sartha Thrace never gives up. Sartha Thrace never leaves anybody behind. Sartha Thrace has never abandoned a single soul, and Kione knows she wouldn't start by ditching everything she's ever held dear.

But she would if Kione told her to. That's a problem. Because any Sartha Thrace that would do that isn't the real deal. And Kione won't settle for a cheap imitation.

She makes her sick, actually. Sartha does. Right now, it's all Kione can do not to throw up the meal that's still working its way through her stomach. She's not sure she's ever been so disgusted with anyone—except maybe herself, for all these weeks spent pretending Sartha could still be the woman of her dreams.

Fuck. She's so godsdamn stupid.

It's tempting to just climb into *Theaboros* and fly off. That thought is never far from Kione's mind. It's her baseline survival reflex. If in doubt, hit the bricks. Merc survival 101. This time, though, it doesn't take. Kione knows she's too weak for it. And she's bound tight by the chain of her own promise.

I'll save you, Sartha.

What does saving her even mean? Fixing her? Or simply making sure she gets to keep pretending? Kione doesn't know. There are so many things she doesn't know. She could, of course, go to Sartha. She could storm into her quarters again, throw her against a wall, and demand that she explain why she's so pathetic. Didn't get her very far the first time, though. One of the only things Kione does feel certain of is the fact that Sartha would simply fawn and beg and apologize and it would all be completely fucking pointless. Maybe that's why, instead, Kione finds herself heading to the place she got some answers before.

Ancyor.

In the hangar cavern it stands as tall and motionless as a statue, half its outer panels peeled away to facilitate the upgrade program the rebels have put into motion. The exposed inner skeleton makes it look even more

monstrous than usual. It's like one of those huge, animal-headed idols Kione has seen in deserts a thousand miles away. The computer systems are still up and running, though, and as Kione clambers up into the cockpit, none of the mechanics do anything but wave and offer to help her on her way.

She's Sartha's partner. They've got no reason to raise an eyebrow.

Kione slips into the pilot's seat and closes the hatch. She got Sartha to tell her the launch codes last week, just in case, and now she uses them to access the databanks and starts picking her way through the data, mostly at random. It's not like she knows what she's looking for. She's just hoping to find whatever missing piece will slot into place and help her understand.

What did they do to her? How did they make Sartha like this?

No, not they.

Her.

The comms systems are all still Imperial tech, yet to be ripped out and replaced. The rebels probably wouldn't approve of Kione booting it up on a whim, but she's beyond caring. At worst, it sets off a little light on some Imperial console somewhere. Kione thumbs through old transmissions and tracks a few old signals, looking for something that isn't hopelessly corrupted. Kione thought she never wanted to see that Imperial handler ever again, but at this point, she'd take anything. Any answer.

She almost jumps out of her skin when the cockpit lights up with an incoming long-range transmission.

Briefly, Kione freezes. There are a hundred reasons she should ignore it. Another hundred why she should immediately alert whoever's in charge of *Ancyor*'s refit. As far as Kione can tell, the equipment should be capable of two-way communication without transmitting any location data—but that's only as far as she can tell. No matter how she looks at it, it's an insane risk. And yet...

Fuck it.

In a moment of supreme, nihilistic impulse, Kione accepts the hail.

The viewscreen before her flickers into life. And it's Her.

It's Sartha's handler. Kione has seen her before, on that recording, and she looks absolutely no different now. Black leathers immaculately polished, not a single hair out of place beneath her cap. The signal is much clearer this time around, but the clarity does nothing to make the woman appear more human.

Just the opposite; the more Kione searches for flaws, blemishes, for signs of basic humanity, the more she finds them eerily lacking. Everything about the handler—the way she breathes, moves, holds herself—is a little too perfect. Inhumanly immaculate. It's all done with such clipped precision, like how a machine moves. Even her eyes. There's nothing human in her eyes at all.

Kione shivers as they're trained on her. Before, when she watched the recording, she'd been struck by the irrational impression that the handler could see back into her through the screen and across time. This time it's much more than just an impression.

'Ah. Kione Monax. As I expected.'

Her tone makes Kione's temper flare, as does the cold smile writ across her face.

"And who the fuck are you?" she demands.

'You already know that.'

She's so pale, too. Bloodless. Like a corpse. It's so easy to imagine that her veins have been drained empty, then filled with coolant and machine oil. How else does someone become like this?

"Shut up," Kione snarls. It's all she can do not to punch the screen in front of her. "You don't know what I know. You don't know anything about me."

'Of course I do, Kione.' It is impossible to disbelieve her. *'My files on pilots such as yourself are very extensive, and they are never wrong. I know that you're with Sartha. And I know that you're sitting in* Ancyor *because you're trying to understand her.'*

The air inside the cockpit suddenly feels dangerously heavy.

"How..." Kione asks before she can stop herself.

'It's not so difficult. I know that you were one of Sartha's rescuers. I know that you recently participated in combat alongside her, and that you haven't been seen elsewhere. I know that, during that action, Sartha fought with what the deceased Imperial pilots described as an unnatural level of ferocity. I know that, a few weeks ago, our communications network picked up a weak, brief, damaged signal from Ancyor. As if someone careless was picking through its comms logs.'

Kione wants very badly to tell her that she's wrong. To rip away a little of that perfection. She can't. She has nothing to say. She simply feels seen. She feels shame.

'So, have you been taking good care of my hound?'

The anger returns in a rush, and Kione is pitifully grateful for it.

"She's not yours!" she spits.

'Isn't she?'

"I—we—got her back." Kione tries to match her supreme confidence. "I took her from you."

'Oh? Is that how you feel?'

There's a question behind the question: why doesn't she feel that way? Why, now that Kione has Sartha in the palm of her hand, has she never felt more distant?

She doesn't know.

Kione does know that she should put a stop to this at once. Terminate the transmission. Nothing good comes of talking to someone like this. To someone who knows things they shouldn't. That impulse is like a bell ringing in Kione's head: clear, strong, but diminishing a little with each echo as Kione feels herself sinking deeper into the eerie eyes of the handler. Holding her gaze, even though it's making her clench her hands so hard her fingers ache.

Can't blink. Can't look away. Can't back down.

So focus up, Ki.

"What did you do to her?" Kione says, voice as measured as she can make it.

'What kind of answer are you looking for?'

"Don't bullshit me!" Kione snaps. She takes a deep breath. "Just tell me how you made her like this."

'An instruction manual, then? I doubt we have time for me to explain the entire process to you. But in a word: trauma. The way a human mind reshapes itself under sufficient duress is fascinating. Once the right pressure is applied, the cracks reveal themselves. Then all that's needed is a wedge, a hammer, and the skill to use them.'

Torture. Fundamentally, what she's talking about is torture. Kione isn't shocked that it happens, but something about the handler's voice is more unnerving than Kione can put into words. Clinical, almost, like it's nothing to her, but with an edge of pride. Of passion.

"You make it sound so..." Kione mutters.

'Easy?'

Kione nods.

'It is easy.'

She freezes. What the fuck is she supposed to say to that?

'The wrong word, perhaps. Simple, in a certain way. It merely requires the will to do what must be done. But you already know that, don't you Kione?'

"I..." Kione is dying to get out of the cockpit.

'You found the words from the communications logs, I suppose. And I see that you've put them to good use. Hound is impressive, isn't she? My finest work.'

"What the..." Kione breathes.

Impressive. It's not the word Kione would choose to use. But it's not wrong, either.

'Have you fucked her?'

Kione almost throws up right then and there. Obviously she wants to deny it—but it's clear that would be pointless.

'Interesting. I imagined that you had. There's no need to feel guilty, you know. I'm sure Sartha's told you that for herself. She's very well-trained. Very useful, too. The other pilots always seemed to enjoy her.'

Gods. That mental image that brings the bile all the way into Kione's throat.

"You're a fucking freak," Kione growls at the screen. "You're a monster."

'I've never touched her.'

Again, it is impossible to disbelieve her. The handler's words feel like etchings into the stone of the world. Carved there, indelible. Kione can't doubt them. She's simply left to contemplate their awful meaning.

If the handler never touched Sartha that way, what does that say about Kione? Is Kione worse than her?

No. No, that's impossible.

"I just did what I had to do," Kione attempts. "Sartha needs to fight. We need her to fight. But you fucking broke her."

'You didn't need to fuck her to make her fight—not, again, that you should feel guilty. And if that's the case, let me ask you: have you told anybody else

about Hound? About her trigger phrase?'

Kione's heart is pounding. She knows. She really does know.

"I... couldn't trust... they might've..." she bleats.

'No. You want her for yourself.'

Breathing hard now. Kione is all but tipping over into panic.

"I..."

'Don't be ashamed of your devotion, Kione. It's a precious thing. You don't often hear of a mercenary fighting out of love. And besides, it brought you to me.'

"Fuck this," Kione spits. What does she think this is? "I'm outta here."

She reaches out to terminate the transmission but the handler's voice, surprisingly earnest, calls her to attention.

'Don't get me wrong. I'll help you. You came here for answers, didn't you? I will give you the answers you're looking for.'

A poisoned promise. Kione's not so dumb she can't see that. And yet...

"How do I fix her?" she asks. She doesn't expect the truth. But anything she can extract from this woman might help her. Might help Sartha.

'You can't.'

So much for that, then.

"What the fuck do you mean, can't?" Kione explodes. That's the one thing she refuses to hear.

'She will never be the way you once saw her. Sartha Thrace will never be able to pilot without hearing those three words you've been making such good use of. She will never again be a hero.'

It's impossible to disbelieve her.

"Don't fucking tell me that!" Kione yells. She slams her fist into the iron wall of the cockpit. "You're the expert on messing people's heads, right? So tell me how to fix her. I'll do whatever it takes. I swear, I'll figure out how to use your... your 'pressure', or whatever other sick shit you like to do to people. I'll play your game. I'll use it to put Sartha back together again. Just don't try and tell me you broke her for good!"

It feels good to let a little of her anger out. It Kione what she's here for. She needs to save Sartha. It's the only way she can redeem herself.

'You misunderstand. I didn't break her for good. She was already broken.'

Kione snorts. She's got no interest in sophistry.

"No, she wasn't. She was beautiful. She was incredible. I saw it."

'You saw what you wanted to see.'

"Bullshit." Kione's hackles are raised. She refuses to budge on this. But the handler won't stop smiling that thin, cruel smile.

'Tell me, Kione. How does she look to you, when you use her trigger? When you remake her into a hound?'

Happy. She looks happy. She looks like she's just taken a hit of pure bliss.

"I'm not answering riddles," Kione replies.

'Doesn't she look completely, perfectly relieved?'

Yes. Exactly. Relieved. "That doesn't matter," Kione retorts. "You made her feel that way."

'What makes you so sure?'

"Fuck you!" Kione feels herself on the verge of panic. "You ruined her."

'I tore her open and showed her the ruin of herself. But a house eaten through by termites is ruined long before you push against the walls and make them fall.'

"But-"

'The reason she's relieved is because she's found the path out of the ruins. The path I taught her. The path I gave her. In that moment, she is happy. She is free.'

Free? Kione wants to laugh at the word—but she doesn't. It plucks a chord in her, despite the absurdity. Isn't that how Sartha looks, in a certain light? Free?

"You make it sound like you did her a favor," Kione challenges.

'Why do you think she's so grateful to me?'

Kione has never felt hotter—or colder. The curdling mixture of temperatures within her is something she associates only with the worst of fevers.

"She didn't want this." Kione needs to say it out loud. She needs to guard herself against the thought.

'Remember what I told you. My method does not create cracks. It reveals them. Exploits them. But they must be there. If there was truly no part of Sartha Thrace that wanted this, I could not have forced it upon her. Not with

all the will in the world.'

It's the truth. It has to be. Kione feels the truth of it—and besides, this monster in human skin never soils herself by speaking anything less. Kione already has that measure of her. Coming to terms with it—that's the hard part. Kione can already feel herself collapsing inward around the revelation. Staying in control is impossible with this handler pouring her truth in her ear. She's so angry. At herself, for being weak. At Sartha, for being weak. At this handler, for being anything but. But Kione is determined not to forget what she came for.

"Tell. Me. How. To. Fix. Her." Kione forces out each word. It's a mantra. It's the only thing that counts.

The handler does not leave her wanting.

'Find her crack. Her key. Once you know the secret that rules her, you can make her anything that you need her to be. Perhaps you can even make her a person again. Or at least, something close enough to satisfy you.'

Even now, as absurd as it may seem, it's impossible to disbelieve her.

Kione sees at once that the handler is playing a game with her. It's a taunt. A dare. Use my methods. Stain your hands, as I have. She can only guess at the reason. Maybe it's a ploy to alienate her from the rebels. Maybe it's a gamble, a way to trick Kione into reopening Sartha's wounds so they don't heal. It doesn't matter.

What matters is that there's hope.

You wanted this, Sartha? Fuck you. But I'm still not giving up on you.

"What's the key?" Kione demands thickly. "The secret? Tell me."

'You don't need me to tell you that, Kione. You can simply ask her yourself.'

The transmission cuts out. But somehow, as Kione stares dumbly through the veil of her own falling tears at the blank screen before her, she can't quite banish the image of that perfect face, those cold eyes, and that thin, cruel smile.

* * *

Sartha wanted it.

That simple fact—and it is, Kione accepts, a fact—assumes primacy in her mind as she sits in her quarters and waits for Sartha. The waiting is important. Kione must calm herself. Clearly, that Imperial bitch wants her off-balance. Impatient. Irrational. Kione won't let that happen. She'll be in control. She can make herself cold too.

It's not that easy to banish her anger completely, though. It sits beneath the surface as she waits. It ferments. Kione pays heed to her anger. Lets it sit with her. She embraces the source—cleanly, clearly. She mustn't let things get out of hand. Not like before. But denying it would be just as meaningless. She will be one with her anger. She will make it true. She will be angry for all the people who will never know how deeply Sartha has betrayed them.

Kione says that over and over to herself. For hours.

She's sure Sartha is coming. Kione's developed a keen sense of Sartha's moods. She knows that after a training sortie like the one they aced earlier that day, Sartha will need the stability that submerging into Hound grants. She'll wait until nightfall, though, for discretion's sake. Plenty of time for the mercenary to work on her script.

When the knock comes, Kione smiles. She always smiles for Sartha. She can't help it. But this smile is different. Kione feels it frozen to her face like a gash in ice. That's good. It needs to be cold, and a little cruel. It needs to be like hers.

You need a handler, Sartha? I'll be a handler. I'll be her, and more besides. I'll be everything to you.

She opens the door—and now it's time for Sartha's smile. Eager. Almost frantic. Kione supposes that makes sense. Sartha did well today. She deserves a reward. That's how it's supposed to go, right? Good dogs get treats. It's so simple. She's so simple.

Was she ever more than this? Or was Kione just naive?

"Hey, Kione," Sartha says, with that air of nervous, giddy excitement. Gods, she's all but drooling. "Can I come in?"

Kione waits. Longer than usual. She makes a weapon of her patience. She wonders how long Sartha would squirm if Kione let her.

"Sure," she tells her eventually. She's not that cruel. Not yet. "Make yourself at home."

She leads Sartha inside. The broken pilot follows her with a pathetic,

grateful grin and pauses only to close the door behind herself. What passes between them is private. No prying eyes. Nobody knows.

Nobody. Not her. Not the handler. This does not belong to her.

"Stand at attention," Kione commands. Sartha looks surprised. She knows Kione usually likes to ease into it. Doesn't hesitate, though. She snaps her legs together and her back straight in an instant. Ever the perfect little toy soldier. Kione lets her stand like that until she knows Sartha's legs must be aching. "Is there something you want to ask me?"

Sartha blinks. "Um... are you alright, Ki?" she asks. "Earlier, in the canteen, you seemed a little..."

Kione scowls. She doesn't want this concern. It's off-script.

"That's not really what you want to ask me, is it?" she replies softly.

Sartha's lips part. Then, she relaxes. She can't be ill at ease when Kione is acting like this. It feels too right.

"Was I good?" Sartha's need eclipses her concern. "Did I do good today?"

Kione laughs quietly. So predictable. It's too easy. She wonders if it was always easy for the handler.

"Yes," Kione tells her. The cold smile on her face should frighten Sartha. It doesn't. It reassures her. Kione can tell. "Oh yes. You were a very good dog, Sartha."

Sartha Thrace grins, and it's sunlight. She's never looked so happy. And she's a hero, right? When heroes smile, the world smiles with them. Once, Kione would have ridden into hell for a smile like that.

"Thank you," Sartha pants. She's all but drooling. "Thank you. Thank you."

She needs the praise. Kione needs to give it to her, and Sartha's always so grateful to receive. It's a kind of ritual. For a moment, Kione wants to push against that. To break the pattern. It might be safer. She wants to pull Sartha back from the darkness, right? Not drag her further in. But it's going to be hard. Kione needs strength. She needs the comfort ritual gives her. She knows by now that kindness will get her nowhere. Sartha doesn't want kindness. The only way out is through, and Kione is determined not to falter along the way.

So she takes out Sartha's muzzle.

"Good dog," she soothes, holding it up for Sartha to see. "You want this, don't you?"

Of course she does. She stares at the gleaming bars of the muzzle with indescribable longing. The effect it has on Sartha is hypnotic. Kione can only imagine what it's like to see the annihilation of your self wrought in metal and held comfortably in the palm of a hand—and to crave its iron touch more than anything else in the world.

When she thinks about it like that, maybe she can do more than imagine. Kione's no stranger to the siren call of her own firearm. She always resisted it, of course. If only Sartha was still capable of resisting.

"You've earned it." Kione bats aside her ruminations. "Here."

As always, slipping the muzzle on over Sartha's face feels like a baptism—not that Kione means to be a priest. She means to be something infinitely worse. A god. She will steal the Imperial handler's fire. She will reach into Sartha's soul and remake it. And gods mustn't spoil their children. Kione forces herself to be brisk as she tightens the straps that bind the muzzle to her hound's head. Tender, yes, but she can't let herself linger. The task ahead is too important.

Learning Sartha's truth.

"Sartha," Kione declares. "You're going to tell me what happened to you when you were captured."

Sartha's eyes are wide. Her lips quiver. She looks almost betrayed as she stares at Kione.

"It's... not easy to talk about," she replies pitifully.

That look! More than once, it's melted Kione's heart and forestalled her questions.

"I don't care," Kione tells her. Not today. "You're going to tell me anyway."

Another lip quiver. Sartha's face is full of shame. It's funny; normally, once the muzzle goes on, she's all but immune to that. Guess she must really have something to be ashamed of.

"I don't remember much," Sartha pleads. "I-it's difficult to remember anything-"

Kione stops her with a simple, forceful gesture. She reaches up under the muzzle and seizes Sartha's chin, and forces the pathetic, quivering pilot to meet her gaze.

"Remember," she commands.

Sartha doesn't have it in her to resist that. A direct order in a stern voice—and from her handler. Kione's words reach into Sartha's head and stir up her memories, like stirring a fork through a soup with a thick skin of scum on its surface. Sartha grows briefly absent in that strange way she does when she's trying not to exist. When she speaks again, there is less of her than before.

"Yes, Kione," Sartha says blankly.

Despite the awfulness of the task ahead, Kione grins. To work her thoughts with the ease of a weaver at a loom—how could it not feel good? "How did they get into your head?" she asks.

"They took me." Sartha replies slowly. "Got me out of *Ancyor*. Into an... interrogation? But no questions. Not real questions, anyway. They were all just about me. And the one asking them was..." She closes her eyes. "Her."

The way she speaks makes Kione flash hot with jealousy. She crushes the emotion. One day, she vows, Sartha will speak her name in that same hushed, reverent tone. A moment later, she feels ashamed of the promise. She's meant to be fixing Sartha, isn't she? Another moment, and she doesn't. Yes, fixing her. That's exactly why Kione will deserve it. She'll be better than a handler.

A savior.

"Go on," Kione orders.

"There was... they took me to a room." Sartha's brow twitches as the memories come. "Over and over again. Put me on a... table? A chair? Like a doctor would have. They made me look at things. They shone lights. And She was always there."

Against her will, Kione shudders.

"She'd talk to me afterwards," Sartha is saying. "And I didn't feel right. I felt like... like somebody else. But She always knew what to say." She trembles. There's are tears in her eyes. "She made me feel whole again."

The tear is gratitude, Kione realizes. Her fists clench. No, Sartha. Don't you see? You're not whole. You've never been further from whole. Don't you see that?

"What did she say?" Kione demands.

Sartha squeezes her eyes closed, lost now to the recollection. She's drowning in it, and it hurts. "She knew," she confesses.

Here they are. Kione shivers—not from the horror, this time, but with the

thrill. “She knew that you wanted it.”

Sartha’s eyes open. She’s confused. And then she’s not, and Kione loves that. She loves the implied acceptance.

Kione is her handler. Of course she already knew.

“Yes,” Sartha whispers. More shame. She can barely breathe for it. “I was just... it was just a small part, just a little voice, but... I thought I was weak. I thought I just needed to block it out. But She showed me. She taught me that voice was my true self. She promised me she could make its dreams real.”

Kione is in awe of that woman. She hates her, yes. But she’s in awe of her too.

“Why?” Kione leans in. This is what’s pivotal. The axis on which Sartha Thrace turns. “Why did you want it? Tell me.”

“I was so tired.” Sartha reaches up like she wants to bury her face in her hands. Instead, though, she presses the muzzle against her skin harder enough to leave marks. Her voice is quiet. Whispering, like she doesn’t want the gods to hear her confession. “That’s all, Kione. I was so tired of the way all of you look at me.”

All of you?

“What do you mean?”

“Whenever I walk into a room, everybody looks at me like I’m going to fix every single thing that’s wrong with the world.” Now that it’s coming out, Sartha sounds almost relieved. “But I can’t. I can’t fix anything at all. But they won’t stop looking. That’s what a hero’s for, I suppose. But I... I couldn’t do it anymore.”

“Oh, Sartha,” Kione breathes.

It makes all the sense in the world. Kione has seen as the way the rebels treat her. She’s not surprised by what Sartha feels. Just that her Imperial handler was able to grow so much from that poisoned seed. How did she do that, exactly? Sartha mentioned lights and images, and Kione’s sure drugs were involved too. Clearly it’s equal parts psychology and technology.

And artistry, of course.

“With her, it’s like... it’s like I’m everything and nothing. Whatever I need. Whatever She needs.” Sartha can’t stop herself. “She lets me feel like a hero, sometimes. But when I was with Her, nobody expected anything from me.” Behind her muzzle, Sartha smiles with a ghoulish fondness. “It was wonderful.”

Kione remembers what the handler said about how those Imperial pilots 'used' her. Oh yes, she bets they looked at her like she was anything but a hero.

"No wonder being rescued was so hard on you," Kione murmurs. "Being surrounded by them again. They still look at you the same way, don't they? Even after everything. I've told you, Sartha. You let them ask too much of you."

Sartha goes oddly quiet for a long moment. As Kione wonders why, her hound's earlier wording pricks at her.

"Hey," Kione asks slowly, "you said 'all of you', earlier. You're talking about the other rebels, aren't you?"

A little war plays itself out in the empty space behind Sartha's eyes. She really, really doesn't want to say it. She doesn't want to say anything that would displease her master. But the truth is being asked of her, and lies are no more a part of her nature than disobedience.

When she finally says it, the war is over. And she just seems so, so tired.

"Kione," Sartha tells her quietly. "You're just like all the rest of them."

Kione's blood stops flowing through her veins.

"No, I'm not," she retorts.

Sartha flinches a little at her firmness. "OK," she agrees miserably.

Kione's too angry to let that sit. "Fuck off," she snarls. "What do you mean I'm just like the rest of them?"

Eyes closed again. It's like Sartha can only say it if she pretends Kione isn't there.

"You look at me like that." Her voice is empty. "You want me to be your hero. You want me to save you."

Kione shakes her head numbly. Sartha can't see it.

"You think you don't because you're not one of them. But it's no different. I can feel it whenever we talk. Why do you think I always tried to talk you into joining up? It's not because I need to say it. It's because you need to hear it."

"I..." Kione is shaking.

"You needed to hear that there was something worth believing in, even if you couldn't quite buy it. You needed a reason to keep going. You were

always searching for it. For me. You couldn't leave me alone." Sartha breaths come in pained half-sobs. She can't quite pretend she's alone. She is painfully aware of the bridge she's burning. "But I... I hated it so much."

"Shut up!"

Sartha's lips clamp shut. Of course they do. It's an order.

Kione's veins are still frozen. She's still wearing that cold smile, but only because every nerve in her body is lit up and paralyzed in awful shock. The ice in her veins is tearing her open. But all the same, seeing Sartha obey her provides a small spike of blissful dopamine. Kione clings to it. It's the only thing that feels real. All the rest is merely a nightmare. It's the only thing she can bear.

"Shut up," she repeats. She starts pacing. Can't bear to stand still. "Dogs can't talk," she snaps meanly.

Sartha nods. She's silent—finally, thank the gods.

"Never say that to me again," Kione adds furiously. "It's not true. You hear me? It's not true."

At that moment, she catches the look in Sartha's eyes.

Sartha believes her.

Despite everything, she believes her. Everything she just said? It's not true. Not anymore. If it comes from Kione, if it's an order, she'll believe it. She'll break her own brain just to believe it. That's how desperate she is. That's how much of a worthless, hopeless animal she is.

Now Kione gets it. To be a handler is to rewrite reality itself.

"She made you believe that," Kione decides. It's the only thing that makes sense. As if she'd ever need someone this worthless. "That woman. You believed anything she told you, right? She told you all that stuff. Poured it right in your ear. And you just lapped it up, huh?" Her smile widens as she sees Sartha accept it all. "Dumb mutt."

Sartha whimpers a touch, but beneath that Kione can tell she's drawing a kind of pleasure from the abasement. She longs to be put in her place, however twisted the reason. It's what she deserves. Easier to be a mutt than a hero.

"You gave in to her because you're stupid and weak," Kione instructs Sartha. "How could you be so fucking weak? Traitor."

As one, they believe it. Sartha does because it's coming from Kione. Kione does because it's just so easy to believe. Look at her, sniveling behind that muzzle. Her weakness is so obvious. How didn't Kione see it before? How did she ever look up to her so much?

"You need correction," Kione announces. She smirks at her own cleverness. "That's the kind of word the Imperials love to throw around, right? Correction. Dumb dog needs proper training." The smirk becomes a sneer. "Don't worry, Sartha. I promise I'll stop looking at you like you're a hero. I won't make that mistake again."

Kione makes a fist and punches Sartha in the gut.

With a silent gasp, she bends double and goes down on her knees. Didn't see that one coming, huh? The expression on her face is so perfect. Shocked. Breathless. Wounded—spiritually, not physically. Punishment implies guilt. Kione's glad she can make Sartha feel that. It's what she deserves.

"Weak," Kione spits. She needs to make sure that sinks in. "You let her in your head. You let her break you. How could you do that to me?"

Just to make sure she doesn't answer, Kione gives Sartha a firm kick in the ribs. Sartha sinks even lower, then slumps over on one side. Instinctively, she clutches at herself, trying to keep herself from crumpling completely. Still no word passes her lips. No protest. Somehow, that makes Kione even madder.

Can't this stupid bitch even muster the will to defend herself?

"Can't believe you let me believe in you all this time," Kione snarls, kicking her again. "You should have shown me this side of you sooner, Sartha. We could've had more fun. I could've, at least. Could've wasted a lot less time fighting for lost causes."

How many times did she agree to come to a battlefield, just because Sartha was there? How many times did she give up good money just because Sartha would've disapproved of who she'd have been fighting for? How many times did she risk her life for chump change, because she hoped Sartha might take notice?

Too many.

"You never believed in anything," Kione decides. "You were just tricking me."

It's not even half true. She knows that. But it's still true enough to hurt both of them. At least Kione has a nice, willing victim to take her pain out on.

She hits Sartha again. Again, again, again. With her hands. With her feet. Whatever feels right. It all feels right. Every time Sartha crumples beneath one of Kione's blows, the mercenary stands a little taller. Feels a little bigger. Already, she can see bruises and welts rising on Sartha's body here and there. She's marking Sartha all over—except the face, of course. It's not just that the muzzle is in the way. Gotta keep the poster girl looking pretty, right?

"I won't forgive you," Kione promises, once her strength is spent and the willingness to keep throwing punches has all but left her. "But I will make you better. Better than you ever were before." No more cold smile. She's grinning now. "Better than she could."

It's then that Kione realizes she's never been more turned on in her life.

Playing with her puppy always gets her like this. Normally, this is when she'd get Hound to work out some of her urges. Kione hadn't been planning on that tonight. Getting matters straight with Sartha was more important. But now that she knows exactly what lurks at the bottom of her friend's soul, she's thinking: why not? Clearly Sartha's done a lot worse for the other side. Anyway, doesn't Kione deserve this? Don't they deserve each other? They're bonded in awfulness. Married in hell. When she looks down at Sartha, beaten and bruised, Kione knows she's already crossed so many lines, she'll never be able to forgive herself.

So why not take her pleasure where she can?

Kione thinks about reaching over to where she keeps Sartha's strap. It's not as appealing as usual. Kione has never seen a woman as pathetic as the one slumped on the ground before her, and the idea of letting a broken dog mount her makes her scowl in disdain.

"Get on the bed," Kione snaps at Sartha. "Take everything off."

Her lip curls as the worthless thing on the floor before her starts to haul herself to her feet. It's plenty clear that Sartha's in pain, but Kione won't let that melt her heart. She sees past the pain, to the deep, noxious glow of masochistic release. Kione knows exactly what's going on in Sartha's head. She's glad that finally, at long last, she's no longer Kione's hero. Once she's naked, she turns to Kione.

"Please," she begs, in the smallest voice Kione has ever heard. "Use the words."

Kione's eyes widen for a moment. Sartha sounds so pitiful, it almost

moves her. Then, she reminds herself: be hard. Be ice. Be the handler Sartha needs.

"I told you," Kione replies vindictively. "Dogs don't talk."

She reaches forward, plants her open hand on Sartha's head, and forces her face down into the bedsheets. As Kione positions herself behind her, she spares a moment to reflect that it's a little embarrassing she hasn't done this to Sartha or Hound before. She was clinging, she supposes, to a silly, girlish ideal. Topping Sartha had been a dream, and in the back of her mind, she'd thought that having the dream was better than fulfilling it.

Stupid. The dream was always made of smoke. There's nothing to it. Certainly nothing that can match up against the pleasure of having Sartha Thrace wrapped around her cock.

The dream vanishes the moment Kione leans her weight forward and pushes herself inside Sartha.

The way Kione fucks her is nothing like the way she normally fucks girls. Normally, she sets a nice, slow, firm rhythm and lets it build until they're begging. But with Sartha—why bother? She doesn't matter. She's not a person. Fucking her feels as much like masturbation as it does like sex. The only reason she holds anything back is that she wants this to sink in. She wants this to last.

"This is how you like it, right?" Kione mocks, already breathless. "Doggy style?"

"P-please, Ki," Sartha tries again. This physicality of sex has flipped a nauseating switch inside her. She's hit her limit. "This is t-too much. I need it."

"Shut the fuck up," Kione laughs. "You can take it. You've taken worse."

To drive the point home, she reaches under Sartha, grabs one of her tits, and pinches and twists the hard nub of her nipple so hard it makes her yelp in pain. Sartha's strength gives out. Kione's beating was no pantomime. Her legs splay out beneath her, ruining Kione's rhythm.

"Damn it," she grunts. "Can't you do anything right?"

"Just... please..." Sartha gags. "U-use... it..."

"Dogs don't fucking talk," Kione snaps. "Don't make me tell you again." As she looks down at the weak, begging, beaten, sprawled-out Sartha, disgust wells up within her. The kind of disgust it feels good to indulge in. "Roll over,

dog."

Even though she's at the very limit of her strength, Sartha obeys. She always will. She wants Hound's oblivion, but she lacks the guile to bargain for it. She simply obeys, wincing from the pain as she turns onto her back. Kione wonders about that. How far would she go? Would she break a bone? Cut off a finger?

She hopes so.

"That's better," Kione announces, as she forces herself inside Sartha again. "Let me see those pretty eyes. Let me see how there's nothing there."

There really is nothing there. Sartha's eyes are empty pools. She's checked out. Willingly, hopelessly dissociated. Only the barest glimmer remains. It threatens to slip away as Sartha slumps back and goes limp, but Kione won't let that happen. She wants her friend to feel every moment of what's happening to her.

"Hey," Kione snaps mockingly. "Tighten up, stud. Make me feel it."

Kione waits for the moment after Sartha inhales a big, heaving breath, and then punches her in the gut once more. Pain flares in those dead eyes. The physical sensation of it is inescapable. Sartha's body throbs and arches as she coughs and whines. And, pleasingly, Kione feels her cunt contract sharply around her shaft.

Unfortunately, being present makes Sartha start begging again. "Please, Ki!" she shrieks through sobs. "Pleasepleaseplease. J-just use the words on me, please, I'll do a-anything."

She really means it. Isn't that something? Her earnest submission almost makes Kione come on the spot.

Unfortunately for Sartha, that isn't what she was asking for.

"I already told you, dog," Kione growls. "Shut. Your. Stupid. Lying. Mouth."

She can already tell that Sartha isn't going to. She can't. She's passed into a kind of insensate delirium. A panic attack, or worse. Poor little broken-brained Sartha Thrace just can't take it anymore. She needs to be Hound.

Too bad.

"I'm begging you K-"

Kione cuts her off. She clamps her hand down around Sartha's throat and squeezes as tight as she can.

"You don't deserve it!" Kione yells, and the flow of abuse from her lips is pure id. "You betrayed me. You know that? You betrayed everybody. You don't deserve to be so skullfucked you don't even care."

Sartha's eyes bulge. They fill with tears. Kione can't tell if that's because of her words, or just because she's cutting off her air.

"I know you're already broken." Kione wraps her other hand on top of the first and uses her choking grip on Sartha's throat to force her limp body into the perfect rhythm. "I just have to break you even harder. I have to break her out of you."

Sartha can't do anything but gurgle weakly in reply. Her face is turning a deep, unhealthy red-purple.

"I will rip that fucking handler out of your head," Kione vows. She's almost as out of breath as Sartha. Puffing and panting her words between thrusts as she rams her cock in and out of the hero's limp body. "Out of your heart. I promise, Sartha. Maybe I can't save you from yourself, but I can save you from her. I'll even let you go on pretending to be a hero. I'll make sure none of your precious rebels ever see you for what you really are."

So close now. So fucking close. She can feel that Sartha is too. Her brain is boiling from the lack of oxygen. She's coming apart. Her lips still mouth incoherent begging. For air? For Hound? Kione isn't sure.

She lets out a wild laugh. She thought she felt like a god before? Oh, no. That was nothing.

"All you need," Kione promises, leaning over Sartha, bringing her face as close as she can to the broken woman's. "Is me."

At that moment, Sartha thrashes again. The last, long-dimmed vestige of her instinct for self-preservation is rousing itself. Reflexively, Kione fights her. She squeezes down harder. Dangerously hard. Sartha's eyes roll back. Too long without air. Spittle flies from her lips in a white foam. She looks awful. Like she's dying. It's not the first time Kione's choked a girl too hard, but that was back when she was too young and stupid to know better . With Sartha, it's simply that she doesn't care. Even so, learned instinct calls on Kione to pull back. To let Sartha breathe.

But what if she just didn't?

What if she kept going? Further. Harder. Tighter. What if she took them both all the way over the edge? Kione, into atrocity. Sartha, into... what?

Oblivion? That's exactly what she wants. Rest? Wouldn't that be a kindness?

Isn't an ending the only thing Kione has left to offer?

Kione squeezes tighter. She senses in Sartha's manner a certain yearning for the end. Suicide, she assumes, is an impulse the handler has utterly eradicated from her. If she can't put an end to herself, maybe Kione should do it instead. Kione tried offering her freedom on a long leash. It didn't work out. It did her no good. Maybe this is the only way Sartha Thrace can be truly free.

Maybe it's the only way Kione can be free.

As Sartha's lungs begin to implode, Kione finds herself trapped in the awful moment, mesmerized by the spectacle of a body shutting down. There's something clinical about it. Something beautiful too. The threshold calls to her, like it does at the edge of a very tall building. Kione isn't sure she can resist. Not even once it's clear she has only moments left to pull back from the brink.

In the end, stupidly, orgasm is what saves her.

The burst of pleasure snaps her out of her nihilistic trance. Torn between ecstasy and horror, Kione lets up. She releases Sartha's neck, planting her hands on the pillow beside her head to support herself as sheer instinct conjures from her a few more heavy, rutting thrusts that leave Sartha's cunt painted with traces of her.

Sartha's marked now. Inside and out.

Despite it all, Kione laughs. She almost lost control. Almost—but didn't. She passed the test. That's what counts, right? Once she can see straight, she checks Sartha's breathing. She's alright, if barely conscious. Her eyes are slumped half-shut, flickering open and closed unevenly to expose the foggy, uncomprehending pools of her eyes. She looks like a wreck.

Now's the time, Kione judges, to offer kindness.

"Off The Leash."

Despite it all, Sartha's eyes fly wide. Then, she's not Sartha at all. She's something even stupider. Even worse. Something that sees with perfect clarity all that Kione has just done, and is grateful for it.

Gratitude to her handler is just about the only thing Hound is allowed to feel.

Biology cannot be denied. Hound is no more capable of remaining conscious than Sartha. Right away, sensing that their punishment is over for

the night, Hound relaxes into the sleep that rushes to claim her. As she does, she pulls close to Kione. Seeking her warmth. Entrusting herself.

It's enough to bring a little warmth to Kione's heart. It's wonderful. It's love. Hound loves her. Sartha loves her.

She must, mustn't she?

And as she looks down at the hero now, red-faced, bruised, heaving, muzzled, drooling from her mouth and her cunt, it strikes Kione that there's only one reason she'd even consider staying with such a ruin. The handler told her as much, and she's never wrong.

"I love you," Kione breathes. "I love you so much."

It's the most romantic moment of Kione Monax's life.

CHAPTER SIX

"Let me ask you something," Kione says languidly. "How come the food keeps getting worse around here?"

Muted laughter and groaning around the rec room. Vola, Nese, Amynta—radio girl—and a few others Kione doesn't really know yet. All bored shitless. Sorties have been few and far between. Nothing to do but keep their heads down while the Imperial net closes.

"Terribly sorry, my lady." Amynta feigns a little bow from her slouched pose on the bench. "Any requests for dinner? A nice salad? Fresh fish, perhaps?"

More laughter. Their banter isn't exactly high comedy, but anything to lighten the mood.

"If you could bring me that," Kione sniffs, "I'd pay you your mech's weight in Imperial coins."

"Gods," Vola grunts, taking a drag on her cigarette. "Don't you ever get tired of being such a rich bitch about everything?"

"No."

"Then, don't you ever feel like putting that ridiculous hoard of yours to good use? A contribution to the cause? That's what a good rebel would do."

"No."

"Can't you at least share it around a bit? Among friends?

"Got that fresh fish for me?"

Everyone rolls their eyes at her. Kione drinks it in, of course. She's never

happier than when she gets to play the villain. Plus, all the rebels seem to appreciate having someone to groan at too.

"No fish." That's Nese. She's been quiet today. Sounds dour. "Imperials secured the east bank of the Lethys River a few days ago. We're cut off."

That brings down the mood at once. This front of the war hasn't been going well—not that any of them have. The Imperial war machine crawls across the land like a locust swarm. Let them take what they want, and they'll never stop. Fight them, and the buzz of resistance drives them into a frenzy. Oh, the rebels fight well, to be sure. But you need resources to win a war, and on that front more than any other, the Empire is unmatched. They have machines that turn mountains into legions. That rip great wounds into the ruined earth, drinking the dredges of its long-spent wealth the way a mosquito might a still-warm corpse. Against a foe like that, victories are only temporary. The accountant's toll of gains and losses is forever.

The rebel base—Leukon Base, it's called—is getting surrounded, inexorably but slowly. It's up in the Orestis Highlands, a range of hills and low mountains flanked to the east by the Lethys. Difficult territory to claim. So far, the rebels have managed to remain in the shadows. Probably, the Imperials don't know if it's a fully-fledged outpost or just a few stragglers, and they also probably don't know which hole or peak they might be hiding in. So they have time—but only time. They're in a salient that grows more tenuous by the day. Resupply will keep getting harder. Kione's glad she got *Theaboros* all patched up already.

Learning all these proper nouns for places is kind of a pain in the ass, honestly. Kione never bothered with it before. You take a job, you get a map, get some coordinates. You show up, you shoot some people, you get paid, you fuck off before anyone can try to engage you in a scintillating conversation about the nobility of their cause. Now, Kione hears the place names coming out of people's mouths, and they actually mean something to her.

'Not part of the job', is what she'd normally say. But she supposes this one stopped being just a job a long while ago.

"Doubt we were getting much fresh fish out of the river anyway," Kione grumbles. "That's fairy tale stuff."

"Not true," Nese tells her. She's staring at playing cards. "Most of the year, it snows clean on the mountains to the north of here. Keeps the waters pure.

There's a few springs, too. Plenty of fish spawn in the hills around there, and some of them even make it this far downstream without choking on runoff."

Finally, Kione twigs it. "You're from around here, aren't you?"

Nese nods.

"Shit, I'm sorry." Kione feels oddly nervous about offering condolences. She's not used to it. "Your people?"

"Don't know."

"Damn," Kione replies. Then she says, "I'm sorry," again because she's not really sure what else she's supposed to say.

"Thanks." Nese looks up from her game of solitaire and offers Kione a brief, nurturing smile; 'A' for effort, apparently.

"Relax, merc," Amynta reaches over and claps Kione's shoulder. "It's not such a rare story around here—no offense, Nese."

"Yeah," Vola pipes up. "I grew up in the Memphin Desert, across the Panropa Basin. They occupied it years ago. Turns out there's still oil under there, if you dig deep enough." She takes a breath. Exhales cigarette smoke. "Hope they drown in it, although I'm not holding my breath. Either way, I'll probably never see that sand again."

Kione nods slowly as she absorbs that. "You?" she finds herself asking Amynta, because, weirdly, she actually wants to know.

"Me?" Amynta is surprised by her curiosity. A little delighted, too. "I'm from nowhere, babe." She flashes a peace sign. "Born on a refugee trail. Grew up moving here and there. Joined up to fight the first chance I got. Now, your turn. Where you from, Ki?"

"Uh." She asked it casually enough, but the question lands on Kione like a lobbed boulder. She's not good at talking about herself. But she's really in it now; this has already turned into a sharing circle. And worse, she asked first. "I'm... from Kinbashi."

She sees recognition in Amynta's eyes. A touch of pity, too. Kinbashi is—was—a large city-state, one of several in the resource belt far to the south of even Vola's home. They city had once been a sad little comfortable dream of people who wanted to keep living sad little comfortable lives, the way people used to do in the days the world was whole.

"Surprised you didn't join our cause a long time ago," Nese snorts. "Pay the Imperial cunts back for it."

Kione shakes her head. “It’s Imperial now,” she corrects. “But Kinbashi fell a long time before them. Madness and greed. People fighting and dying over all sorts of stupid shit. I grew up running from shelter to shelter with my parents whenever the sirens sounded.” She forces a smile. “Then one day, the sirens were a little too late, and I was on my own. Kinbashi in rubble. Nothing to stay for.”

From all around the rec room, sympathetic looks. Kione really wishes they wouldn’t. There’s a reason she doesn’t usually go on about herself.

“’Madness and greed’,” Amynta echoes. “If that’s how you see it, why be a merc?”

Now Kione grins. “Yeah, and it was madness because none of those greedy fucks ever actually got what they were fighting for. Now I make damn sure I’m getting paid before I get out in front of a bullet.”

The smiles return. Everybody loves the rich bitch. Doesn’t quite banish the sympathetic looks, though. They’re all getting a bit too used to it. They don’t see Kione as just some merc anymore. They see her as one of them. Not all of the rebels, of course. Skulking in one of the rec room’s corners is Pela, that Sartha fangirl Kione once dressed down in the canteen. There are plenty of others like her. Rebels Kione has pissed off so mightily it’ll take more than just time to bury the hatchet. But on the whole, they’re softening. Kione is too, and she knows their names, and she knows the the places they’re fighting for.

It’s a new feeling. One Kione isn’t quite sure how to get to grips with. Even more uncomfortable is the novel idea that these rebels might be starting to know her too.

“I’ve never heard you tell that story to anyone besides me, Ki.”

But for now, there’s plenty they still don’t know.

They don’t know about Sartha Thrace. They think they do; Kione can tell from the little looks of trusting adoration on all their faces as the hero walks in. She’s been in the hangar, helping to prepare for *Ancyor*’s new upgrades. With her arrival, she warms the room. The world is brighter and better with her in it. The rebels look at her, and see a hope beyond hope. They see salvation.

Not Kione.

The truth of Sartha Thrace stares her in the face. Sartha is wearing her jacket buttoned up tight all the way to the top. To most, nothing noteworthy. Just a concession to the cold. Only Kione knows that beneath her collar are a

bouquet of bruises that match her own fingers. Evidence of the previous night's excesses, now blossoming into grotesque purple. Just thinking of it makes Kione shudder.

She went too far, of course. Kione knows that. But she's already come to terms with it. Her task is to plumb the depths of this woman's soul. Certain mistakes are inevitable. What counts is that the damage is not permanent. And in the process, Kione grasped something crucial.

Sartha Thrace is not human.

Presumably she was, once, but she gave it up. Traded her humanity for the comfort of existing on the end of a metaphysical leash. She does not think as people do. She does not feel as people do. When she was taken and brainwashed, Sartha was not broken on the surface; coerced into a set of simple, mechanical acts as the core of her personhood buried itself deep within her mind for protection. Oh no. She was broken all the way through. Broken the way glass breaks when an entire pane shatters from a single strike —because she wanted it. Now, her very internality has been made abhorrently one-dimensional. There is no deeper meaning to be found in her than one would find in a dog scraping the bottom of its bowl for food.

Can you really speak of abusing such an animal? Of violating it? Of course not. Kione's guilt would be senseless; that senseless guilt is what almost drove her over the edge when she had her hands clamped around Sartha's throat. So now, she has discarded it. She has forgiven herself—and for whatever it's worth, she knows that Sartha has forgiven her too.

Why? Because they're in love, of course.

"Hey, Captain Thr- I mean, Sartha," Amynta turns to greet her. Sartha has been insisting on names over titles, but it doesn't come easy to most of the rebels.

"Hey," Kione says too.

Sartha has eyes only for her. She hurries across to Kione's side, adoring, no hint of fear or resentment over the way Kione tortured and strangled her. That no longer strikes Kione as strange. When Sartha looks into the eyes of those around her, she sees hero-worship reflected back. Only Kione sees her clearly—and for that, Sartha would gladly trade all the abuse in the world. She is sick with love for Kione.

But to everybody else, the way Sartha nudges people aside so she can sit

next to Kione and rest her head on the merc's shoulder is cute. Innocent. They're a little jealous, probably, but mostly they're glad Sartha has someone at her side. They can only imagine what the two of them do behind closed doors. They don't know what Sartha is.

Something about that sticks in Kione's craw.

Can't they see it? Isn't it obvious? It is to Kione. She doesn't know how she ever missed it. She sees an abyss in the dark pupils of Sartha's eyes, the surrounding color a mere echo of the spirit that had once driven her. She sees nothingness on Sartha's lips, wet and parted when she looks up at Kione, eager for commands or praise or abuse or the three words that deliver her from the thin pretense of personhood. She sees oblivion in everything Sartha does, so why doesn't everyone else?

That must be why Kione can't be one of them. Not truly. She sees. And they are blind.

"How's the new beast looking?" Amynta asks.

"Good." Sartha grins as she leans into Kione. "She's shaping up something special. A new weapon. Nobody will see it coming."

A couple of appreciative whistles. "Watch it," Vola teases. "Kione'll be complaining we keep getting parts shipped in instead of haute cuisine."

"No way." Amynta answers on Kione's behalf. "Even she's not that much of a hypocrite. You were plenty grateful for our supply lines when you were getting your babygirl fixed up, right Ki?"

"Yeah, I'm so 'grateful' to them for charging me more than I've ever made working alongside you lot. Sure." Kione rolls her eyes theatrically.

As she plays up her discontent, Kione reaches across and drapes an arm over Sartha's shoulder, her forearm accidentally pressing against Sartha's collar and the bruises beneath. Sartha flinches slightly but then presses even closer to Kione, a look of giddy, drunken contentment settling across her face.

She's a true freak. But nobody else takes any notice.

"From what I heard, you paid so much because you needed some seriously weird shit," Nese puts to her. "How does that machine of yours work, anyway? The flying, I mean."

"Antimatter." Kione shrugs. She has a pretty good idea of *Theaboros*'s basic engineering—enough to direct repairs, anyway—but the deeper physics escape her. "You want much more than that, you'd have to ask the person I got

to design it for me."

"What's their name?" Nese asks. "I had no idea any rebel groups had the labs and resources to develop this kind of tech."

"They don't," Kione replies. "She's Imperial."

That gets a few looks. Rebels are no strangers to appropriating Imperial technology, but they usually have to steal or salvage it, not commission it.

"How'd that work, exactly?" Vola asks, a touch guardedly.

"First of all, I'm a merc," Kione reminds her. "If I take a bit of care, I can go wherever I want. Second, have you ever met a mech engineer? Those adorable little freaks are all exactly the same. They're all gagging for a chance to get their pet prototypes built."

"How'd you get her to give it to you, instead of the Empire?"

Kione looks from side to side, then leans in, like she's about to let everybody in on a big secret. Then she brings her free hand to her lips—and makes a little gesture of sticking her tongue out between the V of her fingers.

All the rebels howl with laughter. Not Sartha—but it's not jealousy or envy that stop her. She looks up at Kione, awestruck, like Kione's some kind of goddess. Can the rest of them really not see her for what she is?

"OK, seriously," Kione explains, as the laughter dies. "You gotta remember, the Imperials don't build like you do. It's all production lines and interchangeable parts over there. No way you can get their bean-counters to approve some flashy one-of-a-kind machine that's only as good as whatever fresh-faced academy dipshit ends up in the cockpit."

Vola nods slowly. It's a hard thing for some rebels to get their heads around, especially if they're still a little green. If they've only ever fought in skirmishes and insurgency actions, not in the kinds of full-scale battles that showcase the Empire's terrifying aptitude for total warfare. Their factories can churn out *Dorus* on a scale that a girl like Vola could scarcely believe possible. It just doesn't make sense for an industrial war machine like that to derail its manufacturing, maintenance and support logistics just to build exactly one of something that might turn out to be a terrible idea anyway.

For the rebels, it's just the opposite. Every rebel mech is a mongrel. They're all one-of-a-kind, so if you have the parts to build something special and a pilot that can make it work, why not? It'll be no more of a pain in the ass to keep in service than any of the hundreds of bespoke, thrice-reconstructed

Imperial mechs the rebels usually fight in. Besides, rebel tactics are necessarily local and improvisational. Give them a weird machine, you can bet your ass they'll figure out an equally weird way to put it to good use.

"So..." Amynta ventures, "you didn't really eat out an Imperial engineer to get *Theaboros*?"

"I paid her handsomely, and I gave her a chance to see her baby fly," Kione answers primly. "And then I ate her out. Just for fun. I mentioned she was an adorable little freak, didn't I?"

Amynta gives her a playful punch whilst everyone else groans.

"Whatever," Vola snorts. "If you ask me, you're the freak for trusting it. I'd never want to count on Imperial tech to keep me five hundred feet in the air. I'll bet on my *Phassus* any day of the week. She's not flashy. But she gets it done."

Amynta and Sartha both flash her a warning look, but it's too late. She said the magic word, and Kione is already wearing her finest shark grin.

"You'd bet, huh?" Kione purrs. "Easy enough to settle that—unless you're all talk, of course."

At once, Sartha switches gears. Suddenly she's a guard dog. A cheerleader. She partakes in Kione's smugness, and glares challenging daggers at Vola. The other rebel bristles at Kione's taunt, but radio girl is quick to shut down the suggestion.

"Absolutely fucking not," she insists. "Command is not in the mood, and neither am I. Try for some dick-swinging duel, and I'll have both of your machines drained of fuel so the entire base can laugh at you when you try and launch only to fall on your asses. Do not test me."

"Fine," Kione yawns, instantly bored once again. "No fun allowed."

A crooked smile forms on Nese's face. Apparently Kione isn't the only one who wanted a show.

"How about you get it out of your system a different way?" Nese suggests.

"What did you have in mind?" Vola asks. She's game.

Nese licks her lips. "Nobody's gonna complain about a little arm-wrestling. Right?"

And nobody does. It only takes a few moments to set it up; Kione and Vola on chairs, a table between them, staring menacingly at each other while the

other rebels pretend to be an appropriately riled-up crowd. They're all in Vola's corner, of course. She's the hometown girl. Kione's the heel. Only Sartha stands behind her, resting a hand on her back with a doting affection.

She's so damn obvious about it. They're going to see you, Sartha. They'll see the nothingness in you. They'll see that you'll always betray them in the end.

Kione hopes they see. And she hopes Sartha sees that none of them could ever love her the way she does.

"Three," Amynta counts, as Kione and Vola plant their elbows on the table and grip each other's hands. "Two. One. Launch!"

Kione tenses the muscles in her core as she begins to push against Vola. She feels the other woman's palm shifting in her grip as both of them jockey for position. Vola is young and strong. She gives it her all from the first signal, and Kione has to give it hers just to stay in the contest. She can tell at once, though, that she's being underestimated. Ever the show-woman, she lets Vola bring her to the brink—but just as her rebel comrades are beginning to celebrate, Kione flashes them a grin and starts pushing back. Vola's already out of juice. After a few seconds of grunting, Kione plants the other woman's hand flat on the table.

Victory.

Lots of groaning. Kione takes that as applause. Sartha rubs her back proudly. Vola grimaces, embarrassed, but amicably shakes Kione's hand. She gets up—and Amynta sits down.

"Come on, then." Radio girl winks at her. "Can't have everybody think a merc is better than a rebel."

Kione's arm is already tired. She really shouldn't—but she rolls her eyes and meets Amynta grin for grin. She just can't say no to a good flirt.

"Fine," Kione replies. "You're on. Just one sec."

She makes a little performance of the way she reaches up and unzips her jumpsuit from the neck, before peeling it away to her waist in order to expose her shoulders and her belly. Only a thin, fabric sports bra covers her torso, and Kione's dark skin is covered in a sheen of sweat from her bout with Vola. Everyone is ogling her. Especially Amynta.

Kione smiles. There's more than one way to skin a cat.

"OK." Kione makes a show of stretching, too—bending left, then right,

then folding her arms across her shoulders, all the while making sure Amynta gets a fine look at her back muscles flexing. “Let’s do this.”

“Yeah,” Amynta pants. “Let’s.”

The atmosphere in the room has changed. Amynta is openly eyeing up at Kione. She can’t help it. The poor girl has been sweet on her ever since that first mission together. Sartha is the only thing that’s kept them from sharing a bed. Now she’s feeling motivated by more than just rebel pride. She’s not the only one. The other rebels are watching with intense interest. They want to see who comes out on top.

In many senses of the word.

“Three.” Nese counts this time, as the two women grip each other’s palms. “Two. One. Go!”

Kione tenses up again as she and Amynta begin to grapple. Amynta can’t hide her interest; her eyes keep flickering to Kione’s stomach and shoulders as Kione bares her figure. She’s distracted. This is going to be fun. But not right away; no, first Kione lets Amynta get a little warm and a little riled.

Then Kione flashes Amynta the filthiest eyes Amynta’s ever seen, licks her lips, and does something truly sinful with her extended tongue. Amynta blushes and squirms and, just for a moment, lets her concentration slip completely. Slamming her hand down onto the table is like taking candy from a baby.

“No fair!” Amynta protests, while Kione throws back her head and howls with victorious laughter.

“Love and war, babygirl,” Kione tells her. That forces another blush into Amynta’s cheeks. “Merc two, rebels zero. Kind of embarrassing for all of you, honestly. Surely you can do better than that.”

“We can,” Nese declares.

And looks at Sartha.

A heartbeat later, everyone’s looking at her. Their eyes are full of expectation. Sartha can’t lose. Sartha, to her credit, doesn’t flinch from it, although Kione feels her tense invisibly at her side.

“What do you say, Ki?” Sartha asks, with false lightness. “Think you can go another round?”

Asking for permission, while still finding a way to act like the confident ace everybody wants her to be. Cute. How does that work, exactly? Kione makes

a mental note to pry into that, the next time she's playing with Sartha's head. Is it a carefully-planned deception? An anxious, offhand lie? Is dishonesty simply second nature to the dog Sartha Thrace has become? Does she feel guilty about it, or has the fundamental duplicity of her identity so completely overtaken her, she no longer realizes she is deceiving everyone who ever trusted her?

Kione's nostrils flare. She has so much to learn, if she's to become the equal of Sartha's handler.

"Sure," Kione answers eventually. "One more."

The assembled rebels all cheer riotously as Sartha sits opposite her. More pour in the doorway to watch. There's precious little entertainment going, and who wouldn't want to see Sartha Thrace take the merc down a peg? On the surface, Sartha is a perfect match for their expectations. She sits easily in her chair, a slight, smug smirk on her face; it's easy to imagine her piloting *Ancyor* with the same ease. Kione, though, can only imagine her one way: on her knees, wearing a muzzle.

What would all the rest of them think if they saw her like that?

"Ready, Ki?" Sartha challenges.

Kione plants her elbow on the table. The two of them lock hands. "Ready."

"Three," Amynta counts. "Two. One. Launch."

Gods, Sartha's strong. Stronger than Kione, that's for sure. Even if she'd been fresh, Kione couldn't have beaten her. Within moments Sartha has her on the ropes. Her fellow rebels couldn't be more thrilled. The looks on their faces are jubilant. To them, it's justice. Their hero carries the day again.

Something about that just pisses Kione off. Don't you get it? She betrayed you. And she'd do it again. Maybe Kione should show them. Just a little bit. Just in a small, harmless way.

She looks straight into Sartha's dead eyes and tells her: "Sartha. Let me win."

Most of the people who hear it laugh. They think Kione's begging. Sartha doesn't laugh. Her eyes flash wide for an instant. Not in surprise; it's just the bow shock of a cold, clear command spearing through the persona she's been wearing. A moment later, color hits her cheeks. Gratitude. Arousal. Every chance to obey is a chance to submerge into obedience. Sartha is always glad of those. Kione's lips curl.

They're all watching you, Sartha. Show them.

"Yes, Kione," Sartha replies.

And lets her win.

Sartha's arm goes limp. Kione feels the fight drain from her. She is a doll in Kione's grip. Something she can pose with ease. The rebel crowd grows hushed. Kione looks over each of them, delighting in the strange, confused expressions on their faces, before slowly forcing Sartha's hand to the table.

Clean sweep.

The audience churns uncomfortably. This isn't what they wanted to see. Even the few that giggle at what they take to be a kink dynamic spilling out from the bedroom seem faintly dispirited. They can't quite place the strange energy passing between Kione and Sartha. All they know is that Sartha Thrace doesn't just lose. Not like that. To them, the natural order has been upended. Amynta is looking between Sartha and Kione like she's suddenly not sure she knows either of them at all.

That's right, Kione thinks to herself. We can play nice and swap stories all we like, but the truth is: I'm not one of you.

And neither is Sartha.

* * *

"Here," Kione commands. "Strip. Take everything off."

It's late at night. Leukon Base is asleep. That's the only reason nobody has seen Kione leading Sartha through the base's narrow corridors, muzzle bound tight over her face.

"Yes, Kione."

Kione had been wondering if this would prompt any questioning or hesitance from Sartha. Clearly not. A fervent eagerness shines across the surface of Sartha's deep, dead eyes as she shrugs her jacket off her shoulders. The more clothes she removes, the more bruises she reveals; a discolored necklace around her collar, then a few irregular rows down her sides and a couple of huge, yellowing marks on her belly. All of them are two days faded now, but all the prettier for it. As excessive as the violence was, Kione is proud of the proof of her handiwork. She made Sartha look like exactly what

she is.

A kicked dog.

As she sees her now, naked, beginning to shiver against the nighttime chill, Kione almost bursts with love for her. She's so lucky. Nobody has ever been more lucky. She and Sartha are joined utterly. They have stared into one another's darkness, and they have not blinked. What bond could be purer?

"Chin up," Kione instructs.

As the tip of Sartha's muzzle tilts upward, Kione reaches into her pocket and fishes out a dog collar—a real one, sized for a large breed. She was able to pick it up at Leukon Base's commissary. Trust the rebels to have whatever you need. They salvage everything, and never throw anything away. Kione could have tried to get something nice and leather, hand-crafted, padded on the inside, with a nice big D-ring on the front for ease of use. The rebels are no prudes, after all. But Kione thinks this ugly, red nylon thing that fastens with a cheap clip instead of a proper buckle is a much better fit. Sartha's opinion on the matter doesn't count, but Kione is pleased that she seems eager enough; her eyes widen with palpable excitement as Kione twirls the collar around her index finger.

"Long overdue, right?" Kione grins. "Here."

She fastens the collar tight around Sartha's neck. Sartha relaxes eagerly into its embrace, grateful for the chance to be a pet instead of a person. And with that, Kione has Sartha Thrace collared. It's the stuff of dreams. Kione lifts her hand and strokes her fingertips lovingly across the high part of Sartha's cheek, the part that peeks over the muzzle's cage. She allows herself to bask in the moment.

Then she snaps out of it. Then she remembers. Sartha doesn't want gentle. Doesn't deserve it either. She's a traitor, after all.

"Get down," Kione barks. Before Sartha can possibly react, Kione grabs the end of her muzzle and uses it to shove her downward. "On your hands and knees."

Sartha stumbles a little from her roughness, but obeys instantly. A rictus grin comes to Kione's face as she watches Sartha shed her humanity for her. As she kneels, naked and collared, she is so much less than the woman she was —and that's precisely what Kione is so determined to enjoy. She will not love the false idol that is Sartha Thrace, hero. She will love the dog sitting

obediently at her feet.

"There we go." Kione bends down and starts petting Sartha's head. It's so hard not to love her when she starts looking stupid and brainless like this. "That's where you belong. How do you feel, Sartha? Not too cold?"

"No, I'm- ah!"

Kione cuts her off by knotting her hand into a fist in Sartha's hair and yanking so hard Sartha's hands lift off the floor. Her face is pained, but Kione sees the ecstasy beneath.

"Wrong!" Kione laughs. "Do you know why it's wrong, Sartha?"

"No, K- f-fuck!"

"You really are a dumb bitch," Kione mocks. "It's wrong because dogs don't talk, duh. What do dogs say, babe?"

Sartha gets it at once and, as Kione releases her grip and lets her pet slump back to the ground, a look of voracious, submissive glee settles across her face.

"Woof!"

Kione laughs a little at that, but she isn't completely satisfied. Sartha says it a little too much like a person-word, rather than a sound.

"Try again," she encourages. "Bark."

"Arf!"

To her credit, Sartha senses exactly what Kione wants from her. The sound that comes out of her mouth is a simple, brute, guttural ejaculation, so ridiculous and demeaning it makes Kione throw back her head and cackle.

Gods, doesn't she know how fucking embarrassing that sounds?

"Good girl," Kione exclaims gleefully. "Again. Louder."

"Arf!"

"Louder!"

Now Kione senses a touch of hesitancy—although only a touch, before Sartha lets out another wretched, bleating, "Arf!"

Kione knows exactly why Sartha hesitated. Yes, it's late at night, but a rebel base like this sleeps with one eye open. There are sentries. There could be people awake and wandering around for all kinds of reasons. Hell, the walls around here aren't so thick that someone in their bunk might not overhear them.

A little shiver of danger races down Kione's spine. Yes, this is going to be delicious.

"You really do make a good dog," Kione tells Sartha. "And honestly? I've been a neglectful pet owner. I've waited this long to take you out for walkies."

Deep in subspace though she is, Sartha's cheeks redden from sheer embarrassment. She's not completely beyond it—not until Kione gives her the words. For now, all she can do is twist and turn in her own nauseous delight. In the shame of being, and the bliss of being less than human.

"Arf!" is her only reply. That, and the sound of a drop of Sartha's wetness hitting the floor.

"Good," Kione repeats. "And now..."

Kione pulls out a leash. Her next commissary indulgence. It takes no more than a moment to clip it to Sartha's collar—and then Kione turns on her heel and begins taking Sartha for a walk.

She picks her pace carefully. Not rushing, but not slow either. Leisurely—but not leisurely enough for Sartha. Shuffling on her hands and knees, she struggles to keep up. Unfortunately for her, Kione was careful to pick a short leash. After just a short distance, Sartha's pace slackens as she pauses to breathe. Kione steps forward again, heedless, and pulls Sartha up short. As soon as Kione feels the barest hint of resistance, she yanks. Hard.

"Keep up," Kione orders merrily. "Or do I need to find a bone to throw for you?"

Being pulled along by her collar only makes Sartha's task harder. She's forced up onto her feet, not her knees, and into a desperate, headlong scramble just to relieve the pressure on her neck. When she catches up, it's no better. Kione is still walking just a little bit faster than she can comfortably crawl or shuffle, so Sartha ends up settling into an awkward, exhausting, half-raised gait just so she can keep herself at Kione's side.

Kione's face hurts from grinning, but she can't stop. You're perfect, Sartha. Perfect like this. Maybe this is how you were always meant to be.

"Good girl," Kione tells her again. Sartha deserves to keep hearing it. This is her apology for the other night's excesses. "I promise, I'll keep you safe with me. Just like this. Forever."

You don't need that handler, Sartha. I'll be her. I'll be better than her. Just you watch.

As they walk through Leukon Base's corridors, the two of them pass door after door. Most of them, closed; a few of them, open, leading into empty rooms or dark passageways. Each of those that they pass makes Kione feel like she's going to throw up and blow her load at the same time. Each time, she glances into the dark doorway and thinks the shadow she sees has a pair of eyes. Would happen if someone saw them? Kione keeps running through it in her head. What would they think of her? What if they saw her use Sartha's trigger? What then? Would they hate her? Would they punish her? Would they envy her?

It's too much. The adrenaline is kicking her something fierce. Kione can't stop giggling as they walk.

And what about Sartha? Would they hate her? Would they think she's let them down? They'd be right to, of course. But would they look upon her as a traitor? Or merely as a broken, needy, pathetic mess? Kione is desperate to find out. Her curiosity is a cable pulled too taut, begging to snap. It's starting to overwhelm her better judgment. Who knows? Maybe some of them would actually envy Sartha. She's not the first rebel girl to enjoy being collared. Plenty of them would look good that way, too. A sudden vision hits Kione, as the flames of arousal lick at her: Amynta Tet, her radio girl, muzzled and kneeling.

Kione laughs long and loud. She's not sure if Amynta swings that way. But it sure would be fun to find out.

"How you doing, Sartha?" Kione comes to an abrupt halt. "Getting some of that energy out of your system?"

That's an understatement. Sartha looks wrecked. Fit as she is, scrambling on all fours after Kione has left her bedraggled with sweat and shivering from both cold and exertion. Kione's heart swells with the knowledge that Sartha would keep going forever if Kione told her to. Until she collapsed into sleep from exhaustion.

"A-arf!" Sartha answers. Her voice trembles, but she's no less eager for being so tired. "Ruff!"

Love and contempt fight for primacy in Kione's bosom. It's strange how accustomed she's becoming to those two emotions coexisting. She wants Sartha to be so much more than this, even as she adores her being lesser. In the end, they fuse into a kind of twisted pride as Kione notices something

very important about how Sartha replies to her.

She remembered! She remembered not to speak. Who could ask for a better pet?

"Good girl," Kione purrs gleefully. "You're doing so well. Such a good dog. Almost perfect, in fact. You're just missing one last piece."

There's one other thing Kione got at the commissary. Kione plucks it out of her pocket now, already giggling from excitement.

A butt plug. With a long, canine tail attached to the other end.

"Turn around," Kione orders. "Ass up."

Sartha obeys at once. Kione uses her spit to get the plug nice and slick, then bends down and slowly pushes it all the way into Sartha's ass. Sartha yields to her without question, but her legs almost give way from the sensation and she lets out a wild, throaty moan that fills the dim corridor. Kione can't help but notice that Sartha seems used to this form of penetration. A surge of jealousy threatens to spoil her euphoric mood. She would rather not picture all the ways Imperial pilots have been using her.

"Quiet, slut," Kione snaps. "Unless you're really that eager to be overheard."

The adorable little whine Sartha lets out banishes Kione's darker thoughts. Sartha really is being loud, though. If she carries on like this, it's almost inevitable that someone will overhear them. Kione suddenly wonders about that.

"Maybe you really are," Kione muses. "Is that what you want, dog? You want people to see you? Hear you?"

"Aarrfff," is the only reply Sartha can give. Kione can't tell if it's meant to indicate yes or no—but it's certainly eager.

Sartha is incapable of anything but eagerness. Her eyes are as wide and shiny as any puppy's. Her shivering is now more pleasure than anything else, and Kione can see rivulets of drool trickling down her chin behind her muzzle. She's exactly where she wants to be. Maybe she really does want to be discovered. Maybe that would be a release for her, or an ending. Kione finds herself craving that same ending more powerfully than she had expected. She fights to keep a tight rein on the self-destructive impulse. Not now. Not when they've both come so far. She'll give Sartha a climax, yes. But of another kind.

She'll make sure that, for a little while, there's no Sartha at all.

"Sartha," Kione says. Her tone is enough to make Sartha yip with glee. "Off The Leash." Kione giggles. "Not that you'll be coming off this leash any time soon."

She's growing used to Sartha's dissolution, but that doesn't stop it from feeling like a fresh miracle each time. The way Kione appreciates the transformations keeps changing, though. More and more, she finds beauty in it. When she wields those three wonderful words against Sartha Thrace, she is a sculptor with a chisel, cleaving away at all the rough edges and imperfections of her. Removing what is not needed. Removing what is impure. The gossamer-thin facade of her personhood fades, and she is so much better without it.

In its wake, there is nothing.

In its wake, there is the hound.

There is no confusion in Hound when she wakes. She understands her place perfectly. There's a kind of comfort in her brainwashed eyes as she looks up at Kione. This is exactly where she belongs. All is right with the world. She doesn't want to walk on two legs, because that's what people do. She doesn't want to speak in words, because that's what people do. Better to be this. A thing. A weapon. A pet.

Kione's heart aches in love for her. Sartha's better half. Sartha's truest self.

"Come along," Kione says sweetly, adoringly. "You deserve to stretch your legs too, puppy."

Kione turns her back again and begins to walk. The same awkward pace as before—only now, thanks to the tail plug, it's infinitely harder. The way Hound has to move her hips with each scrambling step works her new tail around inside her, prompting a cacophony of moans and whimpers. After just a short distance she's shivering violently, plainly struggling to keep herself from collapsing onto her belly.

It's wonderful. Kione keeps grinning and laughing. She's so hot, and so pathetic, and so needy, and so easy, and she's all hers. Kione must be merciless with her.

"Keep up," she warns, and yanks on the leash.

Hound does, although it's almost more than she can take. Her panted moans turn ever more strained, and her whole face is drenched with sweat

and drool. Between that and her bruises, she's never looked less like a person. The tail is the final touch, of course; as Hound moves, it sways from side to side with her gait, just about stiff enough to stick a little way into the air when she fully extends her hips. It's ridiculous and frivolous and hot and utterly humiliating all at the same time. Kione cannot stop giggling over it.

"R-rarf!" Hound bleats, as her legs give way. From the arch of her spine and the helpless tremble of her thighs, Kione can tell what happened immediately: she came.

A crooked smirk comes to Kione's face. Just from that? Adorable.

"Let's head back to my room," Kione decides, after allowing Hound a moment to recover. She's gotten exactly what she wanted out of this little excursion—and besides, Hound looks exhausted. "This way. Should take us a full circuit."

She leads the way. Slower, this time, to let Hound crawl comfortably at her side. Kione still holds the leash tight, though, so it tugs on her a little with each step. She knows Hound will appreciate it. Walking just like that, they make it almost all the way back to Kione's quarters before Kione notices something dangerous.

An open door. A light. Voices.

It's the rec room. It's unusual for anyone to be in there so late, but not unheard of. Sometimes soldiers find themselves sleepless and in need of company. As they come to the doorway, Kione stops. She can make out two distinct voices, and it sounds like they're lounging on the couches over in the corner, with their backs to the door. It should be easy enough to pass by without attracting their notice.

But...

Was their little walk really enough for Sartha? She's used to much worse; of that, Kione's certain. Used to being watched, too. Kione can't suppress a hint of disappointment at how uneventful their nighttime walk has been. Obviously someone discovering them could have been disastrous—but she wanted to see what might happen.

"Hound," Kione instructs quietly. "In the doorway. Now."

She doesn't need the gentle leash-tug Kione provides for guidance. Unquestioning, unhesitant, Hound crawls into the doorway. The yellow light within spills out onto her face, leaving a long, canine shadow behind. Hound

shivers. Even now, it seems, she retains a certain pilot's instinct, flooding her with adrenaline.

She's exposed.

And what a sight she'd be, down a mech suit's targeting scope. The slower pace Kione struck was easier on her, but there's only so easy moving can get with something so large and intrusive inside her. Her body is covered with proof of her deprivations. Bruises, scrapes, sweat, drool, her own slickness. She's a mess—and then, of course, there's the muzzle itself.

What would any of the rebels say if they saw that? The rictus grin is carved so deep into Kione's face it hurts. Maybe she'll finally get to find out.

"Up," she hisses, not loud enough to risk anyone overhearing. "Sit."

A pair of heartbeats pass as Hound works her fucked-up brain to try to figure out what pose Kione wants from her. She gets there in the end; Hound straightens her back and then raises herself up, balanced precariously on the balls of her feet, her torso bared into the rec room.

Still, Kione can hear voices coming from inside.

"Go on," she urges gleefully. "Paws up too".

It doesn't matter how dumb or humiliating Kione's orders get, there's no question that Hound will obey. Trembling, fighting for balance, Hound lifts her arms to the level of her shoulders, wrists hung limply to make her hands into feeble, ludicrous impressions of a dog's paws. Kione is about to bust a gut. At this point, if anyone hears anything, it's going to be her dying of laughter—not that she isn't just as aroused as her pet. Hound always turns her on. But Kione cares far more about power than about any base, physical gratification, and exercising this power makes her giddy with mirth.

"Legs apart," Kione orders next. She's grinning so wide she's showing teeth now. Her voice sounds wet. "Let's give your friends a good show."

A drooling whimper comes from Hound's lips as she spreads her thighs apart, adopting a truly pornographic, bow-legged pose that sends shocks of pleasure up her spine as her butt plug digs all the way in. A moment more, and she can't take it. Can't keep the pleasure in.

She moans.

Kione's heart stops. Did someone hear? She isn't sure. The voices from inside the rec room have stopped. Can Kione talk her way out of this? Excuse what she's doing with Sartha as some kinky sex that got out of hand? Maybe.

But there are those who would immediately see in Sartha's muzzle something far, far more sinister. Anyone who saw Sartha as they brought her in from the rescue, or who participated in her rehabilitation. Kione should put a stop to this, right now.

But she doesn't. She doesn't want to.

The ludicrous risk of what she's doing crashes over Kione. When her heart beats again, it's in her throat. What is the point of this? She's risking everything. All her progress. All her efforts to reclaim Sartha from the handler's jaws, just so she can... what? Get her off?

It doesn't make sense. She can't make it make sense. But she can't stop, either.

The voices from within the rec room resume. A reprieve. Clearly, it's time to end this madness.

Then Kione looks at Hound.

Fuck. She's a mess. She's such a glorious mess. She looks so turned on by it, too. By the abjection and dehumanization. By being turned into a stupid, exhibitionist bitch for Kione's amusement. Beneath her, a small but distinct puddle of her wetness has formed on the floor, and she's got a look on her muzzled face like she's riding the edge again. Like she craves discovery every bit as much as Kione does.

Before the merc can think better of it, the order slips out.

"Speak."

"Rrrrarf!"

The eager yip erupts instantly out of Hound's throat. Ever the good dog. Ever obedient. At once, she tenses up and, for the second time, cums her bitch brains out all over the floor. It makes Kione moan her laughter—even as a voice calls out from within the rec room.

"Hey!" someone calls out. "Who's there?"

A chair shifts.

Instantly, Kione's instincts take over. "Quick," she hisses, and yanks hard on Hound's leash. Still in the throes of orgasm, Hound does her best to walk, to crawl, to keep up with Kione as she hurries away from the rec room. Luckily, the next corner is only a few paces away. Not far beyond it is Kione's quarters, and safety. As they reach it, Kione's heart is pounding something fierce. She's terrified—but she's grinning too. She's never felt more alive.

She's never felt more in tune with Sartha Thrace, with Hound, with her dog, with her love.

"I love you," she giggles, swept away in the moment.

She hopes to hear it back. But of course, dogs don't talk.

That's OK. The night has been perfect. Kione knows, more than ever, that she is Sartha's, and Sartha is hers.

Her only regret is that she couldn't be there to catch the looks on those rebels' faces as they stumbled upon the mess Sartha left for them.

* * *

"I win."

Kione swells with the manifest truth of her boast as she stares up at the viewscreen that's displaying an image of the Imperial handler. She's in *Theaboros* this time, not *Ancyor*. Copied over the comm codes. Continuing to slip into Sartha's mech seemed unwise. Arguably letting this bloodless ghoul into *Theaboros* is even more unwise, but Kione's pretty sure her systems are secure. Besides, if talking to the handler is a red line, it's one Kione has already crossed.

'And how is that?'

Above her, the handler is a monolith. She looks exactly the same as when Kione last saw her. She is one with her black leather uniform; the coat, the cap, the way they frame her icy face. She is perfection itself.

Kione wants very, very badly to see that composure of hers shatter like glass. She wants to do it somewhere Sartha can see. She wants to ruin her in Sartha Thrace's eyes.

"I asked her," Kione brags. "Just like you said. I got Sartha's secret. I know what she is—and I'm still here."

'What is her secret?'

A shiver races across Kione. She is being weighed and measured. She puffs herself up.

"She wants this," Kione answers. "You brought that desire to the fore, yes, but it was always there. It grew inside her, nurtured by the weight of expectations placed on her shoulders. She couldn't handle the pressure. She

needed an escape—and now she has one. She needs Hound too, because otherwise the sheer hypocrisy of her being would tear her apart, but that's a price she's willing to pay. She's happy, like this. After a fashion."

The handler nods. Her smile sharpens. She's impressed. Kione grows warm.

'Correct. Sartha Thrace's spirit grew thin under the weight of her own weariness. She conceived a broken longing for freedom—from strength, from the burdens of heroism. From humanity itself. That is exactly what I gave to her.'

Another shiver. Kione's heart is beating the way it usually only does in combat. When she flies *Theaboros* high above the battlefield, looking down on all the rest of humanity, the thrill of superiority sings through her veins. This is no different.

"It's... it's why there's no fixing her." It's the first time Kione's said that out loud. That truth should weigh on her, but she feels as light as a feather. Talking to the handler like this feels like sparring. It's energizing. "She doesn't want to be fixed. She knows she can't carry that burden again."

'Just so.'

"But." Kione glares daggers at the viewscreen. "I can still save her from you."

The handler laughs, just once. A quiet sound, like snow trampled underfoot.

'She does not want to be saved, either.'

"No," Kione admits. "But she deserves it. For who she used to be. At least I actually give a shit about her. At least I won't make her betray her own people."

'I assure you, I care for her deeply. Regardless, what makes you so confident that you can—as you put it—save her?'

"Because she loves me," Kione answers firmly. She's ready for this. She rehearsed her answers in the shower. "Duh. And I love her. I'm... still learning how to do that, exactly. But I can give her what she wants. Last night, I stripped her naked and walked her around the rebel base. Muzzle, leash, tail. She loved it, and I took care of her afterwards. I can give her everything she wants. She doesn't need you anymore."

'Fascinating.' The handler's smile is like a needle. *'I have a question for*

you. After your walk with Sartha, did you fuck her again?'

"What the fuck is wrong with you?" Kione splutters. The question takes her entirely off-guard. "Do you need all the lurid details to jerk off to or something?"

The handler smiles politely. *'It's merely a question. We've already discussed your proclivities.'*

Kione finds herself red in the face. Gods, it's like talking about sex with your schoolteacher. Or your priest.

"I'm not answering that," she growls. "I don't have to give you shit."

'I see.'

And she really does. That's the truly awful part. Her blue eyes flash with something—the color of the stars, perhaps—and Kione has never felt more seen.

'You aren't embarrassed because you fucked her. You're embarrassed because you didn't.'

"The fu-" Kione has to fight to calm herself, but it's hard when she suddenly feels cold all over. "How do you know that?"

'Tell me why. Why not use her?'

Her words are a fishhook down Kione's throat. Before she can think better of it, she finds herself answering.

"It seemed..." she spends a moment grasping for the word, "perfunctory."

The handler nods thoughtfully. *'Say more.'*

"And..." Kione's brow tightens. She had not thought to put a name to the feelings that moved her to release her urges on her own time, rather than with Sartha. "For me... demeaning?"

She didn't mean for it to come out like a question, but it did. The handler lets it hang in the air for a moment. Kione has plenty of time to ask herself why she's so stupidly nervous.

'You're doing very well with her indeed. It's true that Sartha has been conditioned to crave sexual gratification and objectification, but it needn't be from you, in quite such a... direct fashion. You will find that she prefers a certain separation. Authority is as essential to her as degradation. Beasts rut with other beasts. Their master provides something altogether different.'

Kione nods slowly as she absorbs that. It doesn't occur to her to doubt it.

She would never dream of trusting the handler, but she hasn't misled her yet. Besides, Kione feels as though she's already seen much of that in Sartha. The only hard part is maintaining her grip on her own emotions as she digests what she's being told. She doesn't want the handler's praise to feel good.

But it does.

"Well, thanks for the notes," Kione says sarcastically. Brashness is her refuge. "Really helpful. But I think I'm good, actually. No need for any more delightful little chats. I just wanted to give you a friendly heads-up. Sartha's mine. I win."

'What makes you so sure that she won't come running back to me the very first time she hears my voice?'

Kione's blood freezes.

"I... she won't," she replies lamely.

'Why not?'

"Because... because she loves me!"

'I can make her love me instead.'

Cold, then hot. Kione's fighting not to throw up. She's embarrassed that's all it takes to plunge her into a panic attack, and the shame only deepens her struggle. She can feel sweat on her brow. No. No, no, no. She wouldn't. Not love. She loves Kione.

'I'm the one who saved her, Kione. I'm the one who broke her in the precise way she needed to be broken. You forget yourself. You believe that simply because you hold a stolen leash, you are my equal. You are not. You are a pale imitation. I know it. You know it. Sartha knows it.'

A nightmare unfolds before Kione. She sees it happening. Sartha, running away from her, toward the loathsome, beautiful creature on the viewscreen before her. She'd be eager. It'd be a homecoming. And all the words in the world couldn't stop her.

Kione starts fumbling for the hatch release to her cockpit. She's panicking. Can't even spare a moment to terminate the transmission. This place feels more like the handler's domain than her own. She can't breathe. She can't believe she was so stupidly fucking cocky. She needs to get out of here.

'Calm yourself, Kione. I meant what I said: you're doing well. But you're still finding your footing. You must go much, much deeper if you wish to make Sartha Thrace truly yours. Did you forget that I promised you that I'd

help you? I always keep my promises.'

Kione can just about hear her words over the sound of her own pounding heart. "How?" she asks thickly, before realizing that's the wrong question. "No... why? Why pretend you're fucking helping me?"

'Because you and I are not entirely dissimilar. And I would hate to see someone else with such rare qualities remain so aimless.'

"We're nothing alike," Kione growls. She can't hear this. Not when she's already so angry. Being made anxious always gets her angry.

'You should hope to be wrong about that. If you're right, you stand no chance.'

"Fuck you." A furious spray of Kione's spit hits the viewscreen. "Fuck you! I don't care what you have to say. I'm gonna beat you. Understand me? I am going to reach into Sartha's head and rip you out of it. I don't care how deep I have to go. Whatever it takes. I will tear your face and your voice out of her memories. I will make her hate you. I. Will. Win! Bet your fucking ass on it."

All the anger in the world wouldn't have made the handler flinch. Kione should have known that; now, as the corners of her lips turn upward, Kione feels petty in her rage. Still, petty is better than panicked.

'I'm no gambler, but you can call it a wager if that makes you more comfortable. I admit, there's a certain charm to the idea. Sartha Thrace is the game, and the prize. If you can take her from me, I invite you to do so. I'll even show you how. Your next lesson is already on its way.'

Before Kione can question the sinister implications of that, the handler makes her another, even darker promise.

'But one day—and it will not be so very far off—I will come for her. Mark me well, Kione. I will come for her. I will come at your worst moment, to call Sartha back to my side. And if you are not prepared for me, you will lose everything.'

Strangely, Kione's heart has begun to slow. A wager. A challenge. She can handle that. Kione's life has been nothing but challenges. That's life, as a mercenary. Nobody's ever had her back, and it's never kept her from winning. Kione meant what she said: whatever it takes. She thinks back to that night she had her hands wrapped tight around Sartha's throat. Kione knows that moment was the cusp of something. A metamorphosis. She gazed into the darkest black, and held its stare. There is nothing she is not capable

of.

For love. For Sartha.

Kione nods. It's on. But as she girds herself to cross the threshold and enter the handler's world, another question comes to her. Another why. An embarrassing one, really. One any sane person would have asked right at the start. She had been meaning to ask about what Sartha had been doing when Kione rescued her, about why she'd been traveling alone in her mech along the front lines, but this is somehow more pressing. Kione feels almost childish as she asks her question—but she really does need to know.

"Why do this?" Kione says quietly. "Any of this, I mean. Turning people into... like that. I can't even imagine... I get it, it's useful. It works. But, fuck, how did you ever even begin to think of something like that?"

The handler raises an eyebrow. She's not truly taken aback, but the question seems to have surprised her a little. Perhaps it's just the incredulous simplicity of it. The tall, black-clad corpse of a woman takes her time to properly consider before answering. Before speaking the words that take root inside Kione and grow there like a tumor.

'*Kione*,' the handler says slowly, and with great weight. '*Haven't you ever moved through your life and felt like you were surrounded by nothing but dogs?*'

CHAPTER SEVEN

Midday, in the canteen of Leukon Base. The place is heaving as all the rebels who aren't on active duty file in to pile food on their trays and stuff it into their hungry mouths. The quality of the meals is declining a little as the Imperial noose closes, but full bellies make for happy soldiers all the same. Besides, by rebel standards it's far from a doomed fight. Spirits are high. Words flow freely between comrades. All in all, it's a normal mealtime.

But not for Kione. She sees the world with fresh eyes.

Since her most recent conversation with Sartha's former handler, a very particular set of words have been burning bright in her mind. She turns them over, and over, and over, the same way Kione tosses and turns on her bed at night. There is something irresistible about them. They reveal something that, once seen, cannot be unseen.

Haven't you ever moved through your life and felt like you were surrounded by nothing but dogs?

As Amynta and the others chatter around her, Kione watches. On one side of the room, one rebel snaps at her friend over nothing at all—a stray annoyance—as they queue for their meal. She doesn't know why, but she'll justify it to herself somehow. Their conversation lapses into silent resentment. A friendship soured—and why? Simple: because she's hungry and irritable. They'll probably forget their awkwardness in minutes, but they might not. Regardless, the point is proven.

The rebel is a slave to her animal needs, and she doesn't even know it.

At the next table, a different rebel has spiked her own drink with hard

liquor. Kione first noticed her doing it two weeks ago. Then, it seemed like nothing more than a fun little habit. Now she notices so much more. The rebel lifts her cup to her lips, drinks, tastes the booze. Self-loathing breaks across her face. Nothing fun about this for her. She detests herself for it. But then, a moment later as she sets the cup down—warmth. Relief. Gratitude, as the alcohol fills her belly and soothes what ails her.

A few seconds pass, and the pitiful cycle begins again. Addiction, tugging at her impulses and urges like a marionette's string.

Sitting beside Kione, Vola isn't so different. Oh, she's no alcoholic. It's not her drink that captivates her, it's the woman sitting across the table. Camarina, another of the pilots on Amynta's squad. The two of them have a nascent little romance they think they're doing a good job of keeping secret. But what's interesting to Kione is just how deeply Vola dotes on her new flame. Hangs on her every word, practically. When Camarina laughs at a joke, Vola laughs too. Whenever Camarina looks her way, Vola smiles. She has eyes only for Camarina. To everyone else, she's deaf and dull. It's not so different from how Sartha's come to look at Kione.

How easy would it be for Camarina to lead Vola around on a leash? Metaphorically—or not, who knows? To make the other woman useful to her, in whatever way she pleases. Camarina has no idea, of course. It wouldn't occur to her to think of it that way—but still. How easy it would be.

All because Vola's in love, and a little horny besides.

Hunger, addiction, lust. There are a hundred other strings that pull on people, but none of them seem so very much more complex. It's all so mechanical. So rudimentary. Is every human being so disappointingly simple?

Kione knows that she herself was, not so long ago. For her, it was money. The accumulation of things. How did she ever make the mistake of believing that a number on a ledger sheet meant anything? A crude, shameful weakness. Kione has resolved to discard it. If she held all her worldly wealth in her hands as coins, she'd choose to let it slip through her fingers just to prove that she could. To herself. To the world. To a woman in black leathers.

But it's not enough. Kione still has so much further to go before she's cleansed of weakness. Now that she sees herself with clear eyes, even the basic act of consumption disgusts her. To satisfy her hunger is to let it own her. Kione picks at her food. It's all she can bear to do. She plucks a piece of

meat from her stew and begrudgingly spoons it into her mouth. The sensation of chewing it between her teeth makes her want to gag. It's unbearable. It makes her feel weak, somehow. It's like she's nothing more than a feasting animal.

Kione glances around the canteen once more. Everybody is eating. She shudders.

Even her disgust disgusts her. It feels childish and petulant. Surely this, too, is simply a stage she must pass through. Kione finds herself wondering: how does the Imperial handler do it? How does she eat? It's hard to picture it at all. Even harder to picture her picking at her food the way Kione currently is. She must eat the way she does everything: with infinite composure.

Kione tries to imagine how she might sit. How she might hold her cutlery. The look on her face, even. She tries to imitate it. Her mind's eye fails her. Again, she has to fight not to gag. Another failure. Kione's knuckles turn white as she squeezes her spoon in her hand.

She needs to win. She needs to beat the handler. Kione must grind her into the dirt. She must discover all of that ghoulish woman's secrets and make them her own. She must. It's the only way. She has promised herself that she will steal the handler's place in Sartha's heart.

Ah, Sartha...

She's sitting next to Kione. Eating, although Kione finds nothing disgusting in that. Sartha knows her place too well to elicit any feeling but pride. In a sudden flash, Kione remembers how uncomfortable Sartha seemed in the canteen when she was first rescued. Kione remembers noticing the look Sartha gave her knife and fork. Like she was no longer accustomed to them.

Another flash. This one imagination, not memory. The handler at a table, taking her food delicately. Sartha, beside her—on the floor, lapping an ugly meal out of a dog bowl.

Yes. Yes, that's how it should be.

Kione's disgust is gone. Instead, she finds herself on the verge of giggling as she pictures Sartha that way. The great hero, eating from a bowl on the ground. She'd be so clumsy! There's no helping it. Nobody, however heroic and graceful, is built for eating that way. The poor thing. Her face would end up slathered with it. How dreamy. How perfect.

Kione vows to check out the rebel commissary later. Surely somebody has

a dog bowl to sell her.

"Kione?" Amynta Tet asks, snapping Kione back to the ugliness of the real world. "You sick or something? You're hardly eating."

The distraction from her fantasies is entirely unwelcome, but Kione refuses to let her irritation show. It's simply another emotion to be mastered.

"It's the food, duh," she complains, affecting her usual abrasiveness. "Hard to work up much of an appetite."

"Appetite or no, you'd better eat," Amynta admonishes. It's hard to stay annoyed at her. She's young, but such a mama bear when it comes to the women under her command. "Remember, we're shipping out in sixty. We both know you don't want to end up gnawing on field rations for sustenance."

"Fine, fine," Kione grumbles. It's good advice, unfortunately. Piloting on an overfull stomach is infamously unwise, but piloting on an empty one is just as dumb. Kione starts devouring her stew with forced gusto. At first, it's unpleasant—but in the face of a sortie, she finds that concentrating on the utility of the act makes the food palatable. Kione is not a slave to her needs. Her body, much like her mech, is a tool. She must keep it well-honed and ready.

Yes, that works.

Now as she eats—for purpose, not for appetite—Kione can take a certain satisfaction in it.

The world is full of dogs. But she will not be one of them.

* * *

At first the glare off the snow keeps giving Kione a headache, but once Amynta tells her how to adjust *Theaboros*'s optics to compensate she's forced to acknowledge that it's beautiful up in the mountains. She's never really had much time for nature. Nothing to do, nothing to buy. But now Kione finds a certain tranquility in the bleakness of the rocky peaks and perilous trails, away from the cacophony of the rebel base. No dogs out here. The rebels aren't highly disciplined—at least, not by Imperial standards—but when they're suited up and on the march, their petty wants and needs fall away, leaving them united by shared purpose.

There's something else too. In months, this is the farthest Kione has been from Sartha Thrace.

It's strange—good and bad. A little like radio static receding. Kione hadn't realized quite how constantly Sartha keeps her head clouded by her very presence. Here, she can breathe clearly for once. But there's a horrid anxiety, too; a fishhook stuck into her brain, its line drawing her inexorably back to Sartha's side. Kione's craving for Sartha is atrociously fierce. Already, she wants to see her again. To fall deep into those empty, wounded eyes. She's grown so used to being Sartha's handler, without the hero's presence she feels somehow empty.

That need makes Kione uncomfortable. Needs are weaknesses. Needs are for dogs. Isn't that what the Imperial handler has been trying to teach her? Kione calms herself by reminding herself that, no matter what, everybody must have a reason to go on. Sartha is hers. What better reason is there than true love?

In any case, Kione would certainly prefer to have Sartha with her now. Who wouldn't, on a mission? There's never been a better pilot. Unfortunately *Ancyor* is still in the throes of its refit, and the brass don't much like the idea of throwing Sartha Thrace into a half-broken spare machine. Still, Kione isn't worried. She's handled as much without Sartha as with her. This sortie will be a piece of cake.

'Now closing on last known position. Three hundred yards north-west, one hundred elevation. Eyes peeled. Weapons ready.'

That's radio girl. Kione and four other pilots signal their assent, and the column of six mechs fans out into a skirmishing formation as they head up into the large hollow, nestled between two mountain peaks.

They're here on search and rescue. Not Kione's usual wheelhouse, but she'll try anything once. Last night, a rebel mountain patrol failed to return to base. No mayday call, no alarm raised. They simply vanished. Not good, obviously. The worst and plainest possibility is that they were ambushed by an Imperial force of some kind; if that's the case, the mission will be to find and destroy it. That's why rebel command has sent six machines. That's why Kione and the others are on their guard. But it's just as likely that they simply lost comms. The mountains can play havoc with radio signals, and there's a rad cloud blowing in; Kione can see it now, the layer of vapor above the snow, and

the faint, blue glow of Cherenkov radiation emanating from the frozen fog hanging in the air. Even at a mere hundred yards or so, the radio signal from Amynta's mech is degrading like crazy. And if the rebel patrol lost comms, anything could have happened.

An accident, for instance. This terrain is hell for mechs. Steep, slippery, likely to give way to avalanche at the slightest provocation. It's a damn miracle the rebels can operate up here at all. Kione has to keep *Theaboros*'s wings extended, powered just enough to lighten her step as she makes the treacherous ascent. The rebels have no such assets. They know the terrain, yes, and their mechs are modified to suit it. But even so, to Kione it seems likely the people they're looking for are buried under fifty feet of snow and rock.

'Tet to control', Amynta radios in. '*No sign of them at last contact site. We'll sweep the area, see if we can pick up a trail.'*

She's doing it all by the book. But there's no reply on the long-range channel except a low crackle.

Amynta clicks her tongue. Then, Vola: '*Kione, why don't you fly up? Take a look around?'*

Kione grimaces. "Thanks, but no thanks. Last resort only. My baby is quick, but she's not subtle. I pull that, I'm putting a great big neon sign right over our position."

'Right', Amynta agrees. '*For the moment, Camarina, you come with me. I want to crest the ridge, get eyes on the next valley. Vola, Avin, take up defensive positions just in case. Kione, Maara, go poke into that cave.'*

Kione can't help raising an eyebrow. "It's barely a crack, radio girl."

'Looks that way. But no, there's a large cave beyond it. The kind of place our people might seek refuge in, in a bad spot.'

"Right," Kione mutters. "Remind me to figure out my caving fee when we get back."

Laughter over the radio. Kione immediately regrets the comment, and resents the others for finding humor in it. The joke doesn't feel like her anymore.

At the heart of the icy hollow is a large crevice, tall and wide enough to accommodate a mech. It looks like nothing more than a random gash in the rock but if it's as Amynta says, it's worth investigating. The other rebel—

Maara, Kione gathers—is already heading in. Her mech was once a *Doru*, probably, but it's been stripped to the bone, leaving it diminutive enough to navigate the opening with ease. Kione follows slowly; *Theaboros* is slender but tall, and its wings painfully delicate. Gods help any survivors if Kione so much as scratches the paint finding their sorry asses.

The crevice doesn't look deep from the outside but, after a sharp turn, it opens out into a slightly larger passageway that does, indeed, become a fully fledged cave. Perhaps even a cave system; Kione makes an idle note to ask if anybody has thought to map it. Little tunnels lead away on all sides and overhead, and there's no telling how deep they might go. Kione flips *Theaboros*'s searchlights on and sweeps them over their surroundings. She sees nothing but shadows that could conceal anything at all.

"You see anybody?" Kione calls out over the radio. "Tracks? Wreckage, maybe?"

'No... nothing,' Maara replies, the interference from the rock enclosing them breaking her voice into jagged fragments of noise. '*But... I'm getting some... heat signatures... nearby.'*

"People?" Kione hefts *Theaboros*'s railgun.

'Negative. Too... big. Small for... mechs, though. Could... be... just ticking over... for warmth?'

After a few more steps, *Theaboros*'s scanners pick them up too. Multiple, scattered signatures. Too many—they're only looking for a patrol of three. They're all around them, too. Above and below. Weird.

"Maybe some kind of geothermal heat source?" Kione murmurs. Does that even make sense? Do you get hot springs this high up?

That's the last thing she thinks before they attack.

Before her, Maara's mech is a single, sharp-edged shape; lit up in the glow of *Theaboros*'s searchlights, it belongs to a different world than the indistinct shadows and contours of the surrounding rocks. When something dark falls on her from above, Kione's first thought is that it has to be a loose stalactite or something. For the first time in her career as a mercenary, she actually freezes up when she sees the dark shape unfold murderously; four limbs, each one sharp-tipped with claws and talons, and, worst of all, a distinct, elongated snout-like head on which four pinpricks of low, red light appear.

It's a mech suit. It has to be. But to Kione, right now it looks like nothing

more or less than a demon.

'What wa-... that?' Maara asks, barely audible, as her mech slumps to one knee from the impact. '*Something hit-... rock? Maybe we-... of here? Could-... cave-in. I don't thi-... we sh-* '

There's no scream. Just instant, dead silence when the small dog-mech clinging to her machine's shoulder puts one of its claws straight through Maara's cockpit.

Immediately, dozens more little red lights appear in the cave all around Kione—including four of them directly overhead, plunging toward her.

It's only that brief instant of forewarning that allows Kione to survive. She stumbles back in *Theaboros* and brings her railgun up in both hands to fend off the assault. It doesn't work, not really. The dog-mech that had been clinging to the cave roof above her, keeping its reactor at minimum output, doesn't miss a beat. As it lands it simply wraps itself around the firearm, all four limbs slashing violence and death just a few feet from Kione's cockpit. No, not just the limbs. On its elongated head, beneath the swiveling, quad-eyed orb that mounts its optics, there is a horrid, vice-like maw that unhinges nightmarishly wide, containing actuated spikes that Kione has no doubt would rip through *Theaboros*'s armor like paper.

Gods. Who the fuck built these things?

Just barely, Kione manages to keep it at bay. The dog-mech keeps flailing at her for a moment—but only for a moment, before it changes tack and starts trying to gnaw its way through the railgun in *Theaboros*'s hands. Within seconds, the highly sophisticated precision weapon is a sparking mess of torn plates and extruded coils, and the dog-mech is clambering through its ruin. Kione only has one choice; that saves her from the paralysis of indecision. She throws the broken railgun as hard as she can, and the dog-mech with it. Then, as the rest of the pack begins to move, she turns tail and flees, picking her way back up through the cave as quickly and desperately as she can.

It's a small comfort when Kione glances at her reverse camera and sees that they aren't giving chase. Less so, when she notices that the pack is instead clustered around poor Maara's fallen machine, tearing apart its carcass with claws and teeth, sending up great sprays of hot oil and spent coolant.

Like they're eating it.

Theaboros has never run so damn fast. By the time Kione sees sunlight

again, there are a dozen gouges in the paint thanks to how heedlessly she threw herself at the exit. The glare of sun on snow is more blinding than ever, and the shock of it hitting Kione's eyes is enough to give her pause and make her wonder: was that real? Or was it just a nightmare? It seems impossible, after all. A cave full of half-sized dog-mechs? It sounds like something that belongs in the tall tales of scared soldiers. Not reality.

And Kione's had nightmares like that. Oh yes. More and more, lately. Dogs. A world of dogs. And all of them for her; after her, hunting, chasing, biting, clawing, slavering. Each night, it's worse. The dogs closer and closer at her heels. Kione runs so hard in her nightmares, she wakes up sweating and exhausted. There's no succor or safety in those dreams. Not ever. Just an eternity of baying hounds—and on the horizon, a woman in black leathers, beckoning Kione onward, her teeth, no less visible for being entirely human, gleaming disturbingly in her open-

'Kione? Ki! Gods, Ki, calm down and shut up!'

It's only then that Kione realizes she's been screaming. At Amynta's voice she lets the ragged sound die, but it's a long moment before she can find the breath to speak again.

"T-they're..." Kione gasps down her radio. "I-in the cave."

'The patrol?'

"No! Or... fuck, maybe. Probably. But that's... fuck, fuck!"

'Ki, what the hell are you talking about? Are- wait, Ki, where's Maara?'

It's then that Kione hears them again. The scraping of taloned feet on rock and ice. The insistent buzz of all those little reactors.

"Dead," Kione hisses. "Get ready. Hostiles coming."

For the second time in her life, Kione is profoundly grateful for the fact that Amynta Tet doesn't hesitate. As soon as she registers the word 'hostiles' and the awful urgency in Kione's tone she's barking orders left and right, calling the three other surviving rebels into a loose, defensive formation, weapons trained on the crack in the rock. Kione falls in with them. Her only remaining ranged weapons are the vulcan guns in *Theaboros*'s chest, so she extends her spear and drops automatically into a defensive stance.

And then—nothing.

Nothing moves. The dogs of war do not appear. Along with all the other rebels, Kione just stands there for a full minute, waiting.

The doubt creeps back in. Was it real? Was it a nightmare? Maara's gone. That has to mean something, doesn't it? Kione slaps herself across the face in frustration. She shouldn't be guessing at this. She should be sure. It's just that sometimes her nightmares don't end when she wakes. Sometimes the things that she sees in her dreams wake with her and sit in the shadows in the corner of her quarters while she lies there, paralyzed.

'Ki?' Amynta again. The doubt in her voice makes Kione's cheeks burn. '*What exactly are we dealing with here?'*

How can Kione possibly answer that? Kione has never seen anything like those beasts. The way they'd been hiding is bad enough; the way they moved is beyond description. Ferocious, violent, downright desperate, like they felt bloodlust in their pistons and motors, but worse than even that, there was something eerily animal and fluid about them. A coordination of limb and purpose that could easily elude even the best of pilots.

'Ki?'

"Uh..."

'Hold on.' Camarina saves Kione from needing to vomit out all those fetid thoughts. *'I'm getting something on the seismic scanners. It's faint, but it's definitely movement.'*

'How many?'

'Hard to say.'

'You get a count, Kione?'

"Maybe... a dozen?" In her mind's eye, it's already blurring into terror. "But small. Uh... I didn't see firearms."

She can sense their skepticism. Gods. Kione can't blame them. She'd be skeptical too.

'Heading this way,' Camarina yells. Her sensor suite must be top-notch. *'Get ready!'*

They're ready. Fear and uncertainty made Kione's hands shake, but a stern tactical assessment stills them. The crevice is narrow. Even those small dog-mechs will only be able to come single-file. The rebels are in a close skirmishing formation—near enough together to support one another, far enough apart that there's no risk—at a good vantage point, weapons all trained on the entrance. A twelve year-old could tell you it was going to be a massacre.

It's a little strange, though. If they're heading this way, shouldn't they be here by now? Kione knows the tunnel leading to the surface wasn't all that long.

"Camarina, how far out?" she asks.

'That's the weird part.' Kione can hear the frown on her face. *'Signal's bad. Kinda... fuzzy? Hard to say. But they should be right there. Almost on top of us, actually.'*

Kione shivers. Not what she wanted to hear. She wanted very much to watch her allies blast those creepy dog-mechs into scrap. The wait is dragging on, and it's murder. All she can think about is them moving around down there, scrambling, loping, growling. The more she thinks about it, the more it's like she actually hear it; the scraping of metal on rock as they move through all those little tunnels, the ones that seemed so easy to get lost in, leading up and down, left and right, off on all sides into the mountain's unfathomable depths...

...and under their feet.

Oh, shit.

"Move! Now!"

They do, a mere instant before everything goes white.

Kione's first thought is that her viewscreen died as she launched herself into the air. It's only once she hovers high enough that she sees what really happened: the ground gave way under their feet, throwing up a massive spray of powder snow. More than enough to blind the retreating rebels. It confuses their thermal sights too, leaving them all but helpless as the awful dog-mechs crawl out of the tunnel and begin to hunt.

Diminutive, half-sized mechs like these are far from unheard of. Mostly as labor mechs but even in warfare they have their specialized uses. In stealth and infiltration units, for instance, or as sappers. It's rare to see them in direct combat roles though, because it's so damn easy to get yourself killed in one. In a world of giants, being half the size of your enemies makes you ludicrously fragile. A single kick can snap you in half. Splash damage from a half-decent cannon might be enough to do you in. You have to be one hell of a pilot to survive long enough to truly get to grips with it all. Kione's one hell of a pilot, but she's always thought that you'd need to be insane to climb into one of those death traps.

But here's the thing: it's rare because it's so difficult and dangerous. Not

because it's not effective.

When you're that small, there are a hundred different ways you can fight dirty. Kione's heard of a few mercenaries who've developed their own styles for it. Falke, for instance, who uses hooks and anchors to clamber all over her foes. As long as she doesn't get swatted out of the air like a fly on the approach, it's all but impossible to stop her. How is a mech supposed to fight back against something like that? Against an enemy that can simply clamber into its blind spots and start disassembling it at her pleasure?

With the dog-mechs, it's a little different. They don't have hooks and grappling lines. But they're fast, and they've got the rebels off-balance. Outnumbered, too. So when a dog-mech lurches out of the glowing blue, rad-tinged snow clouds, claws bared, its target doesn't see it coming. The victim lurches back unsteadily, trying to create distance. Trying to buy a moment to come to terms with the new hell they've found themself in. Only, it doesn't work; there's another one, already snapping at their heels. Another dog. And they can't move away in time. Not again. So they take a hit. Just a little one. Those claws aren't big enough to bite deep. But they bite deep enough to be the first of a thousand cuts, as they find their way into all the little vulnerabilities every mech has. The joints. The rear. The underside. Each time they tear out something important. Not indispensable, but important. A power coupling. A hydraulic line. A coolant pipe. And the wounded rebel is left even more panicked than before, fighting through confusion and blaring damage reports, wheeling aimlessly back into the broken snowscape.

And then another dog appears out of the rad-mist...

From the sky, Kione sees it happen over and over again. The dogs move with preternatural pack instincts, switching effortlessly from one target to the next, a never-ending dance of predation and violence as they harry the rebels apart from one another. It's remorseless. It's elegant. It's going to kill them all.

Kione should do something. She needs to do something. She can hear loud voices over the radio. Everyone's screaming for help. Not for Kione's help in particular—they don't know she's just floating there like a useless coward—but all the same, their screams claw at Kione. Why can't she move? She should just...

What?

What can she do?

She doesn't know. Kione keeps trying to find an angle, a tactic, an opening, anything, but she can't. It's all simply too much for her. The cave. The dog-mechs. The snow and the screaming. She can't get the situation clear in her head, and worse, her tactical mind is starting to shut down as her breaths come ragged and thin. A useless, stupid, bleating voice in her head keeps telling her instead: run. Run just run. You can't go down there, you can't not with the dogs, the barking is driving you crazy, just let them go, just let it all go, run run run run run.

Kione laughs hysterically as it clicks. Great. She's having a fucking panic attack.

'Clear the comms! Everybody shut up!' Amynta's voice. She's grunting and panting and sounds like she's about to panic herself. She sounds very, very far away. '*Who's still alive? Sound off, in sequence.*'

And they do, miraculously. Radio discipline slowly reasserts itself. Nobody in the rebel squad is a greenhorn. Everybody sounds pretty fucking distressed, but it seems like everybody—except poor Maara, of course—managed to keep themselves alive.

'Ki? Kione?'

"H-huh... I..."

'Kione! Are you good?'

Suddenly, somehow, she is.

"Yes." All business again. "I'm in the sky."

'Good,' Amynta grunts. *'I might have something. There's an outcrop up on that peak to the west. It's not too far. Looks like there could be a cave up there too. Should be defensible. We can make it there and hunker down. Figure out a real plan. Understood?'*

A chorus of agreement. The snow in the air is clearing up. Kione can see the outcrop Amynta is referring to. It's not a bad plan. Mostly, she's just pathetically grateful to have Amynta's voice in her ear, calling her back to herself. That's her radio girl.

'Kione.' Amynta's breathing hard. Kione picks her out of the melee below. She's fighting well, but taking hits all the same. '*You're the only one with a clear six right now. I think most of us are limping already. Need you to cut us a path.*'

Fear buzzes in Kione's brain. Not down there, not with the dogs, not amid

the barking and drooling and-

"You got it." The swaggering confidence comes easily into Kione's voice. It's an old friend, albeit a fake one. "Just give me the word."

Amynta laughs. She sounds just as grateful for Kione as Kione feels for her. '*Gods, girl, you think we've got time for that? Just fucking go!*'

Kione laughs too, and throws herself into motion.

Cut a path? That's a tall order, especially without her railgun, but she'll make it work. Kione glides to the edge of the melee and waits for an opportune moment. The rebels are all doing their best to pull together, to circle the wagons against the wolves. They're in bad shape, but eventually they manage to win an inch of room for themselves.

And that's enough.

Kione kicks up the acceleration and flies forward in *Theaboros*, nice and low. Instinctively, the dog-mechs shift back a pace, wary of the new threat. As Kione moves between them and the rebels she pitches over, tipping a red-hot wingtip into the snow. The heat is more than enough to vaporize it all into a curtain of hissing steam.

"Now!" Kione yells. "Go!"

A few clipped words of gratitude and the rebels are sprinting up the mountain slopes as best they can in their hobbled machines.

The screen of steam leaves the dog-mechs confused and unable to pursue —but only briefly. The steam quickly freezes to snow and falls out of the air, and the sight of their targets brings back all of their viciousness. Kione has the count now—ten of them, fanning out as a pack, moving on four limbs when needed to find purchase on ice and rock. Small but fast. Even with a head start, the rebels aren't likely to win a running race.

Which means Kione needs to fight a rearguard.

No time for cowardice now. Kione sets herself down on firm ground, readies her spear, and sets her sights on the nearest hostile.

Crossing blades with it is worse than Kione could prepare herself for. It's relentless. It has no respect for the rhythm of close combat, for parry and riposte, for distance and danger. It just comes at her again, and again, and again, and again, throwing its entire body forward, heedless of the tip of *Theaboros*'s spear. Kione has to work at her limit just to keep up with it, let alone keep her eyes on its pack mates skirting around the edges of their duel.

She lets herself be driven back so she can keep her six open, but the dog-mech won't allow her any breathing room and each of its strikes promises death. Sure, *Theaboros* could take a hit—but it wouldn't be just one hit. Once this thing makes it inside her guard, that's probably the end.

Gods. It reminds her of the bridge, and-

No. Kione won't let herself think that. Sartha is nothing like these monsters, not ever. Besides, they might have Hound's ferocity—more, even—but they have none of Sartha's skill. That's the reason Kione's still alive. Why her parries work, why her light, jabbing thrusts are sufficient to keep her foe at bay, just barely.

The dog-mech comes at her again. Kione swings her spear in a broad sweep, hoping to keep it at bay, but it falls to all fours, ducking under, and then springing up straight at *Theaboros*'s center of mass. Kione fires off a burst from her chest-mounted vulcans, but even a half-sized mech has armor that's proof against such a small caliber. The gunfire's violence does drive it off, though; the dog-mech falls short, before scrambling to its feet to come at her once more.

Gods. Don't these things ever get tired? Don't they have any sense of self-preservation? What the fuck kind of pilots are these?

Time for questions later. For now, Kione needs to bail. She's being encircled. As she fires her wings up again and leaps out of the reach of the baying, snapping hounds, Kione has to hope the other rebels have made it far enough.

They haven't.

Most of them are on the outcrop, or close enough. One of them isn't. Looks like Avin took a crippling hit to one of her machine's legs. Amynta drops back to help her, but there's only so much she can do. Avin's having trouble navigating the mountain slopes. About half the pack was on Kione; the other half is hot on the rebel's heels, and gaining on her. One look from Kione, and she can tell: the poor girl isn't going to make it.

She closes her eyes and looks away when they pounce on her, driving the rebel's mech against the snow. The sounds of twisting steel and screaming are bad enough.

Quick as *Theaboros*'s wings will carry her, Kione ascends the peak and touches down on the outcrop beside Vola and Camarina. Should be a safe spot,

at least for a few minutes, but Kione doesn't allow herself to breathe easy. Not yet. The dogs. They always keep coming. Kione is immediately on lookout, sure that at any moment she'll see a claw on a ledge, and a beast pulling itself up, barking and drooling and-

There's nothing.

Kione is grateful—until she sees why.

Down the mountain, where Avin fell, they congregate. Drawn there, it seems, by instinct greater than the hunt; Amynta is still almost within reach, but they don't seem to care. A couple of the dogs were on her, but they've already broken off pursuit. Kione can only watch in mute terror as the entire pack descends on the slain machine, fighting for position like jackals around a kill, each desperate to get their claws on it. To rip, to tear, to bite, to defile their trophy beyond reason.

At least now Kione knows she hadn't imagined it in the cave. It really is like they're eating it.

On second thought, she wishes she had imagined it after all.

All around the dog-mechs, the snow is turning gray as soot and ash are thrown from the carcass of Avin's mech. Then black, as they bite deep into the joints, sending great sprays of oil over the mountainside.

Then red, as they reach the cockpit.

Kione is glad she didn't fill her stomach before they sortied.

The rest of the dwindling rebel squad is faring little better. Their sounds of disgust and insane grief are loud over the radio. Eventually, Amynta makes it up to them and starts giving orders—mostly, Kione thinks, because making them each do something trivial is better than letting them watch their friend's corpse get stripped.

'Camarina, watch our flanks. Vola, check out that cave. Looks small, but I don't want any more nasty surprises. Kione, can you find a vantage point higher up? Maybe find us a way down?'

Nobody says anything, but they obey. Kione takes wing and glides up a little higher. Finds a ledge to perch on. She doesn't bother looking for another route down for more than a moment. She's just glad for a moment of quiet. Glad that up here, the wind whips away all the sounds of crushing, eating and gnawing. What the fuck are those dogs? What the fuck have they walked into?

Then—a sound. A radio hail, in fact. Kione makes the mistake of letting

herself hope that the rebels at Leukon Base have found a way to punch through the interference, even though only the Imperials have tech like that. Then she takes note of the frequency, and feels something else altogether.

She should have known. She really should have known. And she knows she shouldn't answer. There couldn't be a worse time to let somebody fuck with her head.

'Hello, Kione. How are you finding the mutts?'

This time Kione can't see her, but she can picture perfectly those cold, thin lips, their edges pulled up into the faintest of smiles, so close to her ears they practically kiss her as the handler speaks. Kione breathes out, and when she inhales her lungs swell with hatred. It's as cold as the snow outside her mech; its bite as sharp, as clear. She's grateful, in a way, to have the handler speaking to her. It's clarifying.

"You," Kione growls. "This is all you, isn't it? Those... things."

'That's right.'

Kione is so ready to be angry, but something she hears in the handler's voice surprises her so much she forgets all that. The woman sounds almost... pained?

"You don't sound too pleased about it," Kione probes.

'My participation in their creation is somewhat regrettable.'

"Yeah?" Despite everything, Kione smiles viciously. She's never met a knife she didn't want to twist. "Even you have your limits, huh. Get squeamish all of a sudden?"

'Not at all. But I do disapprove. My hand was forced.'

Kione can barely believe what she's hearing. It's bizarre, on so many fronts. To be talking to the handler at all like this, up a mountain with a pack of dogs hunting for her, is ridiculous. The fact that the handler is sharing her troubles like they're coworkers around a water cooler is an absurdity beyond even that.

"Guess even you have to answer to somebody," Kione mutters.

'I answer to the Empire. But politics is ever an obstacle, and I have enemies. General Kynilandre, for instance. This is her latest petty gambit—to force me to waste my time with mutts. The project was too appealing to high command for them to refuse, I imagine. It speaks to one of their greatest obsessions.'

Her voice weaves a spell over Kione. She's greedy for each secret that passes the handler's lips. "And what's that?"

'Mass production.'

Kione sucks in a sharp breath.

'I'm sure she will have advised them that the merits of my work—such as those are, in her eyes—are wasted on the cultivation of specific individuals. They are inclined to favor the development of a template instead. A method that can be easily reproduced at scale, to furnish the military's ranks.'

"That's..." Kione can scarcely summon the word for it. She sees it already; a waking nightmare. A thousand thousand dogs crawling across the face of the world, leaving ruin behind them. "Disgusting."

'And foolhardy. They cannot fathom what we know intimately, Kione.'

Kione's skin crawls—but there's something else too, a kernel of pleasure at being acknowledged a peer. "And that is?"

'That battles are not won by armies. They are won by heroes. There are individuals that stride the battlefield like titans. Warriors that the gods love as their own. They are the world's fulcrum. The kind of men and women who would be entered into song in any age. Be it with boldness, inspiration or sheer skill, they turn every tide. They matter, and they alone. Not the throng.'

Kione doesn't need to ask. She already knows it in her bones.

The handler's talking about Sartha.

How many times has Kione seen it? Sartha Thrace and her *Ancyor* at the speartip of the rebellion, winning battles nobody else would dare to fight. Whenever she appeared, a kind of magic would settle across the field. Logistics, numbers, equipment, reserves, terrain—material facts such as those seemed to melt away, until all that mattered was Sartha. Her story. Her rebellion. Her victory.

Who could blame Kione for falling in love with her?

But already, the wheels of Kione's mind are turning. Since Sartha was taken, the rebellion has suffered defeat on so many fronts. Is... it all because of her? Did they lose more than just a good pilot? More than just a pretty face on the propaganda posters? And what did the Empire gain when they hollowed her out and replaced her soul? More than a pilot, perhaps. Her light. Her mandate of heaven.

It sounds childish. But it feels true.

'That's why I've contacted you, Kione. To wish you success. I would hate for the high command to learn the wrong lessons.'

That raises Kione's bile again. "Wish me success? Fuck you. You want me to beat them? Tell me how to beat them."

'I'm confident in your abilities. You will find victory. And if not, then perhaps you're not the woman I had hoped. I would have to content myself with winning our wager.'

And winning back Sartha? No. Kione promised she will not let that happen. That promise, above all, is unbreakable. She forged it of steel within herself. But thoughts of their wager call to mind another detail of their previous conversation.

"You mentioned some kind of lesson, last time," Kione spits. "What kind of deluded lesson is this, huh? I'm not playing the eager student. Just tell me."

'This is merely the beginning. You will find the true lesson in their ruin. I look forward to its fruits. Don't disappoint me, Kione. You haven't yet.'

And before Kione can swear at her again the transmission cuts off, leaving Kione alone once more with the howling wind and the dogs.

From this up high they're little more than black shapes, details indistinct but their presence all the clearer for being cast against the snow. For the moment, they're still gathered around Avin's carcass. Not much left of it now, judging from the way they're crowding tight and jockeying for position. As Kione watches, the crack of Amynta's long rifle shakes the snow from nearby rocks. Its shell pierces the fog and lands square in its target. One of the dog-mechs twitches and slumps, all but snapped in half by the high-caliber round.

Nice shot, radio girl.

Only, with their grisly feast all but over, the shot seems to remind them of their purpose. As one, the dog-mechs look up. They begin to move, fanning out across the snow, slowly picking their way up the peak the rebels are stuck up. Their sudden patience is even creepier than their earlier ferocity. This isn't the hunt's frenzied climax. It's the early stages. Driving the prey. Tightening the net. Deceptively calm, and inexorable. And when Amynta's firearm sounds again her target sidesteps in a burst of motion, and then simply keeps walking up the mountain.

Fuck.

Nine of them now. But with three rebels plus Kione, that makes the odds

worse than two to one. Laughably slim.

'Kione.' Amynta, on the rebels' comms channel. This time, her voice isn't so reassuring. It's pitifully obvious that she's asking from sheer desperation. Almost as panicked as Kione was earlier. '*Got anything for us?'*

"Negative," Kione replies. Heading up the peak had been a good idea at the time, but now the rebels are stuck. On every other side, the mountain falls away in escarpments so steep they couldn't possibly navigate them. She's not even sure that she could escape by herself. *Theaboros* can only manage true flight for short distances, and gods help her if she overheats and is forced to land with the pack still snapping at her heels.

'Then...' Camarina, this time. '*What do we do?'*

There's no reply.

'Amynta.' She tries again, even though everybody else wishes she wouldn't. '*What's the plan?'*

I... Her voice cracks. It's the sound of a woman at her limits. *I don't know.* Then it gets worse. The head of Amynta's mech tilts up. She's looking at Kione. She's surrendering. '*Kione, what do we do?'*

That pause that follows is brutal.

"Just... give me a minute," Kione replies. "I'll think of something."

Kione turns her radio off.

Her fist slams forward. The reinforced glass of her viewscreen doesn't crack, but the skin on her knuckles sure does. Kione doesn't care. Barely feels it. No, that's a lie. She feels it, and she wants more. Another punch. And another. And another. And then she loses track, and she's simply screaming again as she beats against the inside of *Theaboros*'s cockpit.

Fuck.

It's not panic this time. It's all anger. With each blow, Kione imagines that the viewscreen is still lit up with the face of the Imperial handler. It's infinitely satisfying to imagine that the pain Kione feels is hers instead, that the blood trickling down the screen is hers, that the brutal crack as a hairline fracture finally appears in the glass is the sound of her pale, perfect nose being crushed to a pulp by Kione's fist.

"Fuck you. Fuck you. Fuck you. Fuck you."

She's screaming it, her voice and thoughts growing darker with each

repetition until eventually, all the strength deserts Kione's body and she slumps forward, limp as a child's rag doll.

Kione is a hundred clicks from Sartha, up a forsaken fucking mountain, in the middle of a fight for her life, and still the handler makes her feel like she's playing some twisted fucking game she can't possibly understand. There's only one way Kione has ever known to respond to a taunt like that. She has to win.

But how the fuck is she supposed to win this? According to the handler, all this is barely a prelude, but to Kione the situation seems beyond doomed. They're outnumbered, with no support and no option for retreat. A bad start. Kione's fought against superior numbers a hundred times, but to win out you need an edge. Firepower. Planning. Terrain. Hell, even the simple ability to trade space for time.

They have nothing.

The dog-mechs are closer to a pack of animals than a conventional enemy. A swarm. How do you fight a swarm? Kione calms herself and brings herself to bear on the problem. Obvious answer: swarms are dumb. You lure them, get them clumped, and blow them away with ordnance. So, what ordnance do they have?

Nothing.

No heavy weapons on any of the rebel mechs. The rebellion is wanting for them in the first place, and in any case it's not the kind of thing you'd choose to bring on a rescue mission in the mountains. Kione's railgun might have served, but that's broken and discarded.

OK. She'll circle back to that. How do you get them to clump up?

Lure them into a chokepoint. Perhaps there's a cave around here. Only, then they'd be even more like trapped rats. The way the dog-mechs are moving now—slow, prowling, methodical—suggests they aren't quite as dumb as Kione needs them to be. For that reason, triggering an avalanche is also a dim prospect. They'd be more likely to kill themselves than the dogs.

But Kione has seen them clump up entirely of their own volition.

That's something. Maybe.

Maybe she should try hitting the bricks after all. Kione could fly. Leave Amynta and the rest. If she gets lucky, the pack might stay on them instead of following her. And if she did make it back to Leukon base, the other rebels

would never even know. Kione allows herself a small, rueful smile as she shakes her head High time for her to stop pretending she's ever going to play that card. For a dozen reasons—but most of all, because running is not winning.

Kione needs to win.

Another possibility comes to mind: set her antimatter reactor to go supercritical and throw herself down the mountain, into the dog-mechs' waiting jaws. Blow them all to hell, and half the mountain with it. That might actually work. The dogs' ghoulish feeding response strikes Kione as all but compulsive. Unfortunately, killing herself probably doesn't count as winning either. Besides, Sartha needs her. Sartha needs her so very, very much. That matters almost as much as winning.

What, then? There has to be something. Think, Ki. What do you have? Your spear? That's no good. Your wings? Kione almost cut her own head off with those a dozen times when she was still getting the hang of *Theaboros*. Maybe that's something, if she cranks the reactor output to suicidal levels. Maybe that's something, if the dog-mechs all agree to stand in a nice, helpful conga line.

Kione punches her cracked viewscreen once more, for good measure. There really is something there. She can sense it. An answer, lurking just out of sight. Kione never was much good with tricky puzzles. Always a lazy student. Always quick to give up. But this time, that's not an option.

Then it comes to her. Not the answer. Not right away. But another question. The right question.

What would the handler do?

Kione thinks about all the resources she has at her disposal. Instantly, she perceives: it's enough. It's not about ordnance or terrain. Not about time or space. It's about people. It's about rebels. What would they do? Whatever it takes. That's the good thing about rebels. They'll do anything for each other. The bad is that they'll only do it if it's for each other. They're not focused. Not like the handler is. Not like Hound is. Not like Kione needs to be.

So find the crack, Ki. Who has the least to lose?

No, wrong question.

Who has the most to give?

Kione thinks back to earlier, to the canteen. The answer comes. Beautiful

in its simplicity. It'll work. She knows that even before she opens her mouth, and so despite the awful task ahead, a nasty grin comes to Kione's face as she switches her radio back on.

"I've got something," she whispers. "I... I think I can pull it off."

Kione keeps a tight rein on her own voice. Wouldn't do for them to hear that grin she's wearing. Instead, she makes sure she sounds nervous—but excited. That's what they want to hear.

'Yeah?' Amynta answers—pathetically grateful, and pathetic is good. She won't have the authority to gainsay this. '*What's the move?*'

"No time to explain," Kione assures her. She lets them pick up on a little of her confidence. They're hooked immediately. But here comes the hard part. "But... I need somebody to take point. To get their attention."

Sudden silence. Some of the rebels are young, but they've all seen enough action to know a bullshit euphemism when they hear one. 'Get their attention' is about as blatant as they come. They pick up what Kione's putting down.

She's asking for a sacrifice.

The rebellion is desperate enough that nobody is a stranger to those. That's part of the problem. Given half a chance, they'll all volunteer. And that means discussion, and arguing, and how long before one of them gets the inevitable bright idea that there has to be a better way?

Kione can't let that happen. She needs to win. Which means she needs to pick. And she has her girl.

"Vola," Kione says, voice thick with the appropriate heaviness. "You can do it, right?"

More appalled silence. But within that silence, Kione senses compliance. She's put it all on Vola's shoulders. The rebel won't allow herself to shift or shed that burden.

'Yes,' Vola replies ardently, eventually. '*Whatever it takes.*'

Because she's in love.

'No!' A raw shriek across the radio channel. That's Camarina, right on cue. *Vola, you can't*!

Good. Argue with her. Not with Kione.

'I have to,' Vola replies calmly. '*It's the only way we're making it down*

from this mountain, and you know it.'

Kione all but purrs with satisfaction. They're all so quick to accept the framing Kione offered. All it took was a certain efficiency of language and voice. The mercenary is beginning to understand the power of playing to their psychology like that; from the moment they join up, each and every rebel believes themself a martyr in the making. When somebody provides the opportunity, it feels like nothing more or less than destiny.

'But-'

'There's no time, Cam.' Vola is gentle with her now. *'I wish we had more time. A lot more time. But you will, OK? Promise me.'*

Camarina promises—time and faith and love and many more things. She's still fighting what's happening with every breath, every whispered denial stained by tears and panic, but she's losing the battle. Vola is determined, and quick to steady her. Their two breathless voices melt together as they begin to say things they had always meant to say, some day.

'Kione,' Amynta pleads quietly, above their affections. *'Don't do this.'*

She doesn't want this. She's angry, but her anger hasn't had the time to crystallize. She's out of focus. She couldn't find the answer, so nobody is listening to her. They're listening to Kione.

"I'm sorry." Kione lets out a little banked-up sorrow. Lets herself get a little choked up. It'll keep Amynta from interfering. "This is how it has to be."

She sounds sure enough that her certainty sweeps away the others. She has them.

'What do you need me to do?' Vola asks above Camarina's sobs.

All business now. Get everything in motion. Don't give them time for second guesses. "Head down there while I get in position. Get them on you. All of them. Buy me as much time as you can. That's all."

'Got it.'

Vola steps forward, her mech planting one foot on the edge of the outcrop. Kione feels herself a player, advancing a piece on the chessboard. It's a new kind of euphoria. But there's no time to indulge in it. She has work to do. As Vola throws herself from her perch, Kione throws *Theaboros* into the air and flies.

Up. Straight up. As high as she can. The altitude is the point. It's not the distance, nor the speed she'll pick up on the descent—although both are

valuable. It's the cold. Up in the sky, the air would freeze a person to the bone in an instant. Not a mech, though. Mechs run hot. All of them, but *Theaboros* especially. Heat is a resource. A budget. An overhead. The more she can cool her baby down, the better Kione's odds of actually pulling this off. Kione reaches up and punches a few large, analog switches. There's a whir as, all over *Theaboros*, cooling vents and hydraulic flaps yawn as wide as they can. Kione's beloved mech suit exhales steam and coolant, bathing itself in a strange halo that turns to crystalline snow at the next gust of arctic wind. Then it inhales, drinking deep of the mountain air, drowning its profane reactor in it. Kione watches as the temp dials plummet, and frost begins to form on the inside walls of the cockpit.

She's ready.

Kione has to crank *Theaboros*'s optics all the way up to see what's going on at ground level. Her IFF readout helpfully picks out Vola for her—just one of several specks, at this point. She's giving the dog-mechs one hell of a chase. But in the end, there's simply no hope. Nine against one. The beasts have all the time in the world to chase her this way and that, pinning her against the edge of a great ravine while the pack unfurls and blocks off her escape.

Giddy though she is, Kione's glad she's so far away she can't actually see it when they bring her down.

There's no time to dwell on the grisly spectacle. This is Kione's moment. Her triumph—but only if she can thread a hundred needles at once. Kione takes one deep breath, bringing herself in sync with *Theaboros*'s cooling cycle. Once she's ready, she pitches her entire mech suit forward and begins to fall.

Vertical, *Theaboros* is a knife through the air. The wind is loud but it's far louder, a dreadful trumpet-howl as the mech's aerodynamic frame slices a path straight down. The instant she points the machine's head at the ground, Kione redlines the antimatter reactor. She's used to making gravity her bitch, but the vicious kick as *Theaboros*'s boosters kick in and the numbers on the altimeter become a blur is something else entirely. This isn't flying. This is turning Kione's precious *Theaboros* into a ballistic missile.

Kione howls with laughter at the sheer insanity of what she's attempting. What else can she do? A moment later, she realizes she's on the verge of passing out. That's no good. She reaches down for one of her little emergency

measures: Imperial combat stims autoinjector. An instant later, she's more awake than she's ever been. She can think so fast, *Theaboros* starts to seem slow. The warning alarms that explode within Theaboros's cockpit as she gathers speed harsh her buzz, but only until Kione reaches overhead and finds the switches to flip them off, along with all the other safeties and limiters.

Sorry, babygirl. If it's any consolation: we're in this together.

Theaboros, ever-faithful, rises magnificently to meet her unreasonable demands. The antimatter reactor gives more than it ever has. The entire cockpit around Kione starts shaking and shuddering with alarming violence as her machine is subjected to subatomic forces mankind can barely comprehend, let alone harness. Kione can imagine what kind of damage she's doing to the internals—but that doesn't matter. All that matters are her wings.

Out of the viewport, Kione can see them. All six, fully extended—and, oh, how they're shining! Whenever *Theaboros* is in flight they're surrounded by antimatter. A layer, one subatomic particle thick; barely visible but burning a deep, rich red as it annihilates with the air. But now, as the reactor output keeps spiraling upward, shunting more and more power into the antimatter arrays, it becomes something much more.

It becomes a miracle.

As Kione watches, the glow of annihilation grows and grows. It extends to fully cover each of the wings and then beyond; an inch, then a yard, then more, much more, as reality is kept at bay by Kione's sheer, hysterical, bloody-minded refusal to know her limits. More and more, conviction is sweeping her away. She can do this. Nothing is more real than your own will. The handler taught her that.

This is real. This is godhood.

As the antimatter sheathes on each of the six wings meld together, becoming two vast, glowing, sweeping pinions, the heat coming off *Theaboros* is impossibly fierce. Inside, Kione is cooking in her own skin. If not for the combat drugs, she'd have passed out a hundred times over. Outside, the falling snow is vaporized as it approaches, becoming a vast halo of hissing steam. Kione's grin is a jagged thing, tearing her face in two. The world cannot touch her. She will rend it apart. She will make it her own. *Theaboros*, the handler, Sartha, the rebels, the dogs, the sky, the-

-ground.

Oh, gods.

Kione wrenches back on the controls a heartbeat before it's too late. *Theaboros*'s wings shift, suddenly catching the air instead of slicing it. The sheer violence of the maneuver almost rips the mech into a thousand pieces, but its vast antimatter wings work their magic, protecting her from even that. The air annihilates before it can beat against *Theaboros*'s metal shell as Kione pulls horizontal in a great, swooping glide. That's one death avoided. This could still go horribly wrong—only Kione doesn't believe that, because now her belly is fully with the confidence of kings. She knows exactly what to do. She's got this.

The pack of dog-mechs lurches into motion at the sound of the approaching death-scream, but Kione is already threading the needle. It's far, far too late for the mutts. Kione is supersonic. She's an unstoppable force. She picks her path, straight through the center of the pack, directly above the spot where Vola fell, and then she carves a jagged scar of herself into the world with her passage.

On either side, her wings cut through the dogs like they aren't even there.

Kione doesn't feel the impact. Not even a little bit. The heat coming off her wings is unimaginable. It simply melts straight through them. In her wake, each dog-mech is nothing more than a bisected, superheated slag heap collapsing under its own weight. As she savors her triumph, Kione is quick to SCRAM her reactor, fire her airbrakes and reverse burners, open every possible cooling vent, and then plant her victorious angel in the snow to bring it to a screeching halt.

Holy shit. She did it. She actually did it.

Kione opens her hatch. With *Theaboros* flat on the ground she crawls out of the cockpit and presses her face against the snow. She sees blood drip from her nose to stain the white, and she does not care. The bitter, piercing cold is the reminder she needs.

She is alive. She won.

It's a shame the others don't seem to agree.

Once Kione clambers back into *Theaboros*—still in running condition, by some miracle—she heads back over to Amynta and Camarina. She expects awe. She expects adulation. Instead, she finds silence and grief. The two of them have made their way down the mountain in their mechs and are

huddled around what remains of Vola's machine, picking through the wreckage. They say nothing as Kione approaches.

"Hope you got that on camera," Kione radios, prodding them for the praise she so richly deserves. "Cause otherwise, I'm not sure anyone back at Leukon is gonna believe me."

More silence. They aren't even looking at her. Just at what's left of Vola.

'Kione.' Amynta, eventually. Stone cold. '*Give us a minute. Please.'*

That's all it takes to make Kione's euphoria run cold. She's still high from the combat stims; the emotional whiplash bites far harder than it usually would. Immediately stewing with bitter recriminations, Kione stalks off into the snow.

Fine. They can have their minute. Kione is a merciful god.

Without really meaning to, Kione comes upon the remains of one of those creepy fucking dog-mechs. The sight of its impotent upper half, mechanical innards spilling out and melted into sludge, fills her with no small amount of smug glee. Not so scary now, huh? Not such a predator now, huh? Curiosity strikes. The torso is relatively intact. Cockpit practically peeling open from how the heat of *Theaboros*'s wings warped the metal. It seems unlikely that the pilot is still in one piece—but you never know.

The handler's words come back to her, unbidden. You will find the true lesson in their ruin.

It'll give Kione something to do while Amynta's being maudlin, if nothing else. At Kione's command *Theaboros* kneels and cups its hands around the dog-mech's corpse, sheltering it against the cold and the wind. Kione dismounts with the ease of long practice and clambers up the machine's broken hull. The hatch is loose, but still emits a tortured, metallic scream as Kione levers it open with both arms.

Then she sees the pilot—and really, really wishes she hadn't.

Like any ace, Kione has seen more pilots die than she cares to remember. Once it goes down, a mech suit is little more than a very expensive death trap. For that reason, just about every pilot spends a little time rehearsing how to bail out in case it ever comes to that. Survival comes first, always, and well-designed mechs go to great lengths to facilitate it. Eject capsules, quick-release hatches—whatever. *Theaboros* is packed as full of contingencies as its slender frame will allow. Kione has always believed that even if there are

causes worth fighting for, there aren't ones worth dying for.

Perhaps that's why the first thing that makes her retch is seeing that this machine's pilot was living dead from the moment she was first sealed into it.

The poor pilot is, quite literally, strapped into their seat, wrists and ankles bound by leather straps to keep them in position. There's no sign of any way for them to open the hatch; it's like the cockpit was sealed from the outside. It doesn't seem possible for the pilot to operate the mech's controls, either. Kione gingerly climbs inside and as she does, it only gets worse. Now she can see that the pilot's head, too, is bound, kept fixed in place and directed forwards by a horrid, metal brace.

And she's muzzled. Of course she is.

Already, this is a thing of nightmares. But there are fresh horrors yet to come, and the first of them is these: she is still alive.

Only just. A huge, jagged piece of spall ripped through her side as her mech melted down; there's so much blood, Kione assumed she was already a goner. As she senses Kione's presence, though, the wretch rouses herself to one last fit of wounded consciousness. Kione's heart stops as her eyes open. There's no awareness in them, no true sentience, just a frenzied shadow even deeper than the one Kione has seen in Hound's. The pilot's lips draw back as she tries to growl, froth pouring forth from between her teeth. Kione jumps back, terrified, leaving the pilot to snap impotently at the intruder with what little strength she has left in her body.

At once, Kione perceives that the muzzle is more than merely symbolic. There are appalling marks all over the pilot's arms and hands. Even over her lips. It's like she's been gnawing at herself. At anything that comes too close, probably.

Kione has never wanted to run so far, or so fast.

It's a mercy for Kione and the pilot both that her last gasp doesn't last long. After just a few seconds of barking and growling, her eyelids slump again. The life goes from her. A mutt, put out of its misery. Kione is quietly grateful she doesn't have to do the deed herself.

"Gods," Kione breathes quietly, to herself. "What did they do to you?"

Better that she had said nothing at all. She wasn't expecting an answer—but all the same, one comes. A radio in the cockpit, half broken, spits back to life. Even before she hears it, Kione knows whose voice is coming. Even

here, there's no escaping her.

'Well done, Kione. You have my congratulations.'

Hands into fists. Knuckles white. "Shut up!" Kione yells.

The Imperial handler laughs a little, the sound distorted by the near-broken radio into something even more sinister.

'I thought you wanted answers.'

She shouldn't. Kione knows that. If she was a good person, she'd be too horrified to care—but Kione's never mistaken herself for one of those. The handler takes her silence for acquiescence.

'I advise you to take a good look. Behind the head, assuming enough of that is intact. Perhaps you can grasp the design.'

"I advise you to eat a bullet," Kione mutters—but all the same, she clambers even further into the dog-mech's maw and peers at the equipment surrounding the deceased pilot's head.

Fresh horrors. How does it keep getting worse?

The pilot has undergone some form of experimental surgery. At least, Kione certainly hopes this was done in an operating theater—not that it would ever pass muster as safe or medicinal. A circular opening has been carved into the back of the pilot's head, just above the neck, and a section of skull removed, leaving the brain itself—gods!—exposed but for a delicate, metal mesh placed over it. Into the open port, a long, thin, arm-like appendage has been inserted. It's covered in wires; some of them are attached to the surface of the pilot's brain by electrodes whilst others pierce and knot into the gray matter as if pilot and machine have been woven together on a fundamental level. Kione cannot imagine how the assembly could ever be removed without simply killing the victim.

There's more. Those long tubes running into the pilot's brain stem aren't all wires. Some of them are IV lines hooked up to hanging bags of saline, of antiemetic and anti-inflammatory medications, and of another drug that Kione doesn't recognize: a foul, green substance within which something twinkles faintly. It's like starlight in liquid form, if the cosmos itself was as diseased as the mind that conceived this butchery.

Kione has seen enough. She knows what this is. It's an attempt at something that, to her knowledge, has never before been successfully achieved. The sick dream of mad geniuses ever since the first days mech suits

walked forth on the world's surface.

"Neural link," she whispers.

'That's correct. I am not proud of the mutts, but even a misconceived project can prove occasion for a breakthrough.'

Kione shakes her head numbly. What she's seeing is impossible. Inconceivable. Neural links don't work.

That's what she and everybody else with half a brain has concluded, after reading up on the grisly outcomes of all previous efforts. Kione has always had an interest in cutting-edge mech tech, and she once found neural links alluring —until she educated herself. The idea is seductive in its simplicity: what if you could control a mech as easily as you control your own body? Well, too bad. You can't. Doesn't work. A mech is not a body. It doesn't move or work like a living thing. The way a human mind moves a human body is instinctive, anchored to blood and muscle and meat. You force those instincts to bear on a sixty-foot colossus with hydraulic limbs and mechanical joints, there's only one possible outcome: incompatibility. Rejection. Damage.

They call it the interoception barrier. The frontier of the self. The fundamental inability of the human ego to transcend the anchor of its individual, physical body. The barrier has never been crossed. It cannot be crossed.

Until now, it seems.

Kione has a million questions. But the first of them is this:

"Who was she?"

'A prisoner. I did not acquaint myself with the specifics. Suffice it to say: nobody of consequence.'

There's an emotional part of Kione that rises, red and furious, eager to scream at her that she is a living atrocity. But there's another part, nodding thoughtfully, because it makes sense. Prisoners, naturally disposable. Stray dogs, unworthy of the handler's notice.

Kione's stomach churns. She turns to her next question.

"How?"

'My research concerns itself with neuroablation and reconditioning. How to alter thought patterns. How to reconfigure a subject's sense of self. Even bifurcate it, if necessary. You have enjoyed the results for yourself.'

Gods, this awful woman sounds so damn proud of herself.

'Once I turned my attention to the problem, the solution presented itself clearly. Could I not simply apply the same techniques? Induce the pilot to conceive of the mech as their authentic self—just as Sartha conceives of her auxiliary ego as hers? As you can see, my approach has been highly successful.'

Sartha. It all comes back to Sartha. Why is it that every evil Kione encounters seems to well up from the depths of her soul?

Answers beget more questions. Kione thinks of the distinct, canine physicality of these monstrosities. What sense does that make? Is it simply to torment her?

"But why-"

'Why dogs? Initial prototyping suggested the value of a non-human mammalian reference point. A kind of intermediary. Our minds can more easily conceive of a dog's locomotion than a mech's—but it's still inexact. The conceptual gulf there is useful. It helps the pilot's mind grapple with what they experience as unfamiliar without rejecting it entirely.'

And so they learn to be a dog, instead of a person. Ghoulish. Ingenious. And Kione is certain that the symbolic associations—servility, loyalty, ferocity—are only assets to the handler's cause. But she's already born witness to an imperfection.

"They're defective." Kione means it as a taunt. It doesn't come out as one. To her horror, she sounds more like a student angling for extra credit—but she can't stop. "They're... they're hungry. They try to eat things. Can't help themselves."

'Ah, yes. The feeding response. A simple case of overidentification. The mutts forget they have steel bellies which cannot be filled. Dialing back on some of the integration protocols should resolve that. The calibration will require great care, however. Provided they can keep it under control, their hunger makes them particularly lethal. Wouldn't you agree?'

"Fuck you," Kione spits, but means it for herself as much as the handler.

She hates that she finds all of this so utterly hypnotic. She hates that she can feel herself joining dots and making conjectures. Like everything the handler tells her, it's an infection. An idea that cannot be unthought. She sees in this—in all this—the awful face of all mankind's future. A muzzle on every

raised head. A firm hand on every leash.

A world of dogs.

It disgusts her, of course. It would disgust anyone clinging to even a tattered shred of their humanity. But she can *see* it. She can see the nuts and bolts, the levers and gears that would make it tick and spin and work. It's hell. It's coming.

'I have something for you. A lesson—and a gift. Something you'll need.'

"What?" Kione growls. She's had enough of this. Of all of it. She's at her limit. She craves home and Hound.

'Do you see that green bag, suspended above the pilot's head? It ought to be intact. Take it with you. It should be straightforward to unhook and store.'

She's talking about that liquid starlight shit. It gives Kione the creeps already. "Why would I do that?" Kione demands, although she's already reaching up to disconnect the IV lines.

'Because you will need to put it to good use. Therein lies the lesson.'

"But what is it?"

The handler laughs again, just once, before she terminates the transmission.

'It's Sartha's medicine.'

* * *

Nothing but grim looks on the faces of the hangar crew as Kione and the others haul in. That makes sense, Kione supposes. The rebels were hoping they'd return with more people than they shipped out with, not less. Losing half their number on a rescue mission is a grim result by any measure. Still, it irks Kione that she's yet to receive any recognition for the insane feat of piloting she pulled off. It's the only reason there's three of them instead of zero. She deserves a fucking parade for that.

Instead, it was all silence on the way home. Amynta wasn't in the mood. Camarina was nursing her grief. And Kione, for her part, had her head all wrapped up in the things the handler told her. Still though—mission accomplished. They aren't all dead, and it's pretty clear what must have happened to the missing rebel patrol. That's gotta be worth something.

Guess not. As soon as Kione dismounts her *Theaboros*—burnt and blackened on the outside but still, somehow, in one piece—she sees Amynta heading down the berth toward her, fists clenched, face of rage.

So much for her parade.

"I need to talk to you." Amynta demands, as soon as she's within earshot. "What the fuck were you thinking?"

Everybody turns to look. Oh boy. This isn't going to be pretty.

"And what is that supposed to mean?" Kione shrugs, taking the opportunity to stretch languidly now that she's out of the cockpit. Her aching muscles scream at her for it, but she doesn't let the discomfort show. She needs her armor.

"Cut the shit," Amynta snaps. Come on, Kione thinks. Didn't we have a good thing going? "I'm talking about that stunt you pulled up there. You might as well have just killed Vola yourself!"

A hundred or so paces behind her, Camarina is slumped on the ground, bawling her eyes out. As soon as she clambered out of her mech, she went down like a sack of potatoes. Friends are rushing to her from all sides, offering comfort. Once word spreads of Vola, their faces turn ashen.

Kione feels bad for her. Really, she does. She liked Vola. But why are they pretending?

"That stunt I pulled," Kione replies in a warning tone, "is the only reason you've still got the breath to bark at me like that, radio girl."

Amynta doesn't back down. "Not the point, Kione," she shoots back furiously. "You knew exactly what would happen. Admit it. You sent her down that slope to die. You used her as bait."

"So what if I did?" Kione explodes. Doesn't she get it? You don't win a game of chess without trading away a few pieces. "This is war, Amynta. Or did you forget that? What I did wasn't nice, I get it. But it was the only way."

"You don't know that!" Amynta cries, exasperated beyond reason. She's tearing up too. "Gods, Kione. Do you really think I'm so stupid I don't understand we were in a rough spot? That's not what this is about!"

Kione rolls her eyes. She's so, so tired. Enough grandstanding. At this point she'd sooner take the Imperial handler's sinister candor. "Then what is it about, huh?"

"It's that you didn't even try!"

Something about that completely short-circuits Kione. What? She tried. Didn't she? She must have. She remembers wracking her brains. She tried everything. Didn't she?

"That's not..."

That's not fair, is it?

"Save it." Amynta sounds appalled. Kione knows she's probably just getting it out of her system. She's tired. Overtaxed. Guilty, too, from the way she ran dry of ideas in the heat of the moment. Maybe Kione will get a half-hearted apology later. But that won't change the fact that Amynta means every word of this. "I heard you. You were so... so fucking pleased. And you sold it so well too, didn't you? Were you as proud of yourself as you sounded? Did it feel as good as it seemed? I hope so."

The venom in her voice is too much for Kione. She's unsteady on her feet. She just wants to be gone.

"Maybe you don't understand this." Amynta slows down. She's unsteady too. They're both beyond exhausted. "But we don't fight that way. Understand? We don't use each other like that. We're not disposable. Maybe it'd have always gone the same way, in the end. But I'd sooner have laid down my life trying to get every single one of us off that mountain. Understand me? That's how we fight."

There's only one thing Kione can think of to say to that—even if the words damn her. Even if there might never be a way to mend the wedge they hammer home.

"Then I suppose I'm not one of you after all."

Amynta's anger vanishes as quickly as it appeared. In its wake, she looks exactly as tired and sad as Kione feels. It's enough to bring Kione to the verge of tears. Amynta looks like she's about to cry too.

Then her gaze shifts. She's looking up, over Kione's shoulder and beyond. Kione turns to see what's caught her attention.

It's Sartha.

Sartha, rushing towards her. Sartha, throwing herself into Kione's arms. The mercenary barely manages to catch her without toppling over. Then Sartha's scent washes over her, and all is right again.

"Ki," Sartha whispers gratefully. "You made it back. When I heard that only three... gods, I'm so glad."

Kione squeezes around her, tight as can be. Then, all of a sudden, she becomes aware of her own fragility. Of just how close she is to collapsing to the floor as a sobbing wreck. It's too much, it's all too much. The dogs. The mountain. The handler, and her dark words. Kione knows closing her eyes won't make the memories go away, but maybe she can keep them at arm's reach for a moment. Maybe there's a way for her to stop thinking, just for a little while.

With Sartha, she can build a private, fleeting little world of nothing but the two of them.

Because she's not sure she can stand her own fragility a moment longer, Kione puts her lips to Sartha's ear and gives her exactly what she always wants, even though there are dozens of people watching.

"Sartha," Kione whispers. "Off The Leash."

She can't see Sartha's eyes while they're embracing, but she can feel the change. She can feel Sartha go limp against her for the briefest of moments as her spirit exits her body, allowing something simple and crude and artificial to fill the vacuum. Base, instinctive, canine—but not merely a dog, no, nothing like those awful beasts. This thing is the product of precise craftsmanship. It is loving and it is beautiful—and inside and out, it is Kione's.

The fragility recedes. Instead, Kione feels powerful. Everyone's watching, but none of them have any inkling of what Sartha truly is. They think they're just seeing two lovers lean into each other. Nobody else knows. Only her.

"I need to sleep," Kione whispers, holding Hound tight against her. "With you. Take me to my room."

Hound doesn't reply. She just squeezes Kione again, and then allows the mercenary to lean on her heavily as they two of them walk away, heading for the pilots' quarters, while Amynta and many others watch silently. Kione is entirely content with the judgment in their eyes. Now that she's spoken it, the truth has petrified within her heart.

She isn't one of them. She never will be. But that's OK. Sartha isn't one of them either.

They're in love. They have each other.

That's enough.

That's everything.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Outside of Kione's quarters, there are dogs.

She knows this because she can hear them—running, scraping, barking, howling, snapping, screaming. They race through the confines of Leukon Base day and night. Mostly when Kione has just woken or when she's lying down to sleep, but not just then. At all hours of the day. It's unbearable. How's she meant to sleep with the constant racket? It's kept her from proper rest for days on end, ever since Kione returned exhausted from that doomed rescue mission. Her exhaustion has only grown since; every bout of nightmare-filled sleep is ended prematurely by the awful sound of sharp claws scraping on the door to her quarters.

Kione hasn't seen the dogs. They're always gone by the time she hauls herself over to the doorway, no matter how fast she hurries. Maybe it's just a few of them sprinting by, even though it sounds like a huge, endless pack. That would make sense; there can't be that many dogs on the base. None at all, if Amynta Tet is to be believed.

Kione doesn't believe her.

She ran into radio girl yesterday, on her way to slip in and out of the canteen for food. A dismal meeting. As predicted, Amynta apologized to her for the harsh words they had exchanged in the hangar. It wasn't Kione's fault, she said. Kione had just been doing her best. It was nobody's fault but the Empire. Amynta had simply been struggling with her grief.

Well, all true. The problem is that Amynta herself doesn't believe it.

She's hardened her heart against Kione. She can tell. Happens a lot to

mercenaries. A wall has come down between them and even though Amynta will make nice, her words don't come from the heart. Kione sensed no affection from her. Whatever little spark there had been between them was snuffed out on a snowy mountainside. It's a shame. Kione genuinely liked Amynta. But the young rebel is too judgmental, clearly. It's not fair. Kione shed her own tears over Vola, privately, in Sartha's arms. Whatever Amynta and the others think of her, she's not a monster. She's not a monster. She's not a monster. She's not a monster.

She is not a monster.

Amynta seems to think she's crazy too—or maybe she's just pretending. She certainly seemed concerned, when Kione asked her about the dogs. It's funny; more than ever, Kione is sure of her sanity. Crazy is in the past. Crazy was when she still suffered from gold fever, and the delusion of Sartha Thrace's humanity. No longer. Mercilessly, Kione has extinguished each and every misconceived idea within herself. More than ever, she sees the world as it really is.

That's why she didn't believe Amynta about the dogs. Only, she checked later and there really aren't supposed to be any dogs on the base. Which leads Kione to another theory: perhaps it's the rebels themselves. Perhaps it's their version of a cruel joke, making those noises outside her quarters to wake her up and remind her of her supposed misdeeds fighting against the Imperial handler's dog-mechs. Perhaps Amynta's in on it. That would make sense. Kione will catch them in the act, sooner or later.

For now, though, it just seems safer to stay shut up in her quarters as much as possible. Not that Kione is scared of the rebels. She just doesn't want to be out there with the dogs. She can stay in bed with Sartha instead. Sartha believes her about the dogs, even if she hasn't heard them for herself.

Sartha always believes her.

Sartha is a dog too, but that's different. She's a splendid, obedient hound. Sartha knows her place perfectly, and that's a wonderful thing. A blessing. More people should be so lucky. If everybody was like Sartha, the world would be a better and brighter place.

Kione laughs. It's funny how she never stopped believing that, even as it began to take on a very different meaning.

Then, Kione glances over the room to the IV bag of sinister, iridescent

green fluid that she has placed carefully on an empty shelf. All she knows is that it's Sartha's medicine—and that it was used on the poor, mind-broken wretches wired into those dog-mechs. Some kind of neuroablative agent, designed to soften the self so that it can better be molded beneath the handler's perfect hands.

Which means Kione can use it too, on Sartha. To fix Sartha. Medicine, to cure what ails her. Despite mountains and dogs, Kione has not forgotten her one and only purpose: to reach into Sartha's head and rip the handler out of it. To tear her face and her voice from Sartha's memories. To make Sartha hate her, and love Kione instead with all her ruined heart—just as it was always meant to be.

And today is the day.

Right on cue, there's a knock at the door. Kione knows the knock well; it's Sartha. As always, when Kione answers the door she's standing there wearing a look that straddles surreptitious shame and barely contained excitement. She reminds Kione of a woman sneaking away from her betrothed for a sordid tryst.

"Hey, Sartha." In her presence, all hesitance and uncertainty is gone. Kione becomes more focused. More determined. A wolf among dogs.

"Hey, Kione." With Kione, and Kione alone, Sartha is eager. Sheepish, but excitable. With every nervous smile and delicious shiver, she bares her neck and invites Kione to take what she will.

"Come on in," Kione beckons, grinning. As Sartha steps inside, Kione spares a moment to peer past her. No dogs at the moment. That's a relief.

With the door shut, they are safe. Kione wastes no time with niceties. It's not like Sartha needs them. "Muzzle," she instructs.

"Yes, Kione."

At once, Sartha fishes it out and hands it over. She needs her usual fix so very badly.

"Lose the rest," Kione instructs, after carefully, lovingly fixing the muzzle to Sartha's face. The act has become second nature. Her face slides into an ugly, lop-sided smirk as Sartha strips off all her remaining clothes. Whoever thought it'd ever be so easy to get Sartha Thrace naked?

And whoever thought it'd ever become so natural? By now, Kione has seen this so many times it barely registers as remarkable. Sartha really does

look breathtaking, though. Every bit as heroic and handsome in real life as she is on the posters, especially now that the bruises Kione left on her are healing.

Maybe Kione should give her some new ones. That's what she sees, when she looks at Sartha now: a blank canvas. The chalk outline of a hero, waiting to be filled in. A pretty shape—but above all, empty. Sartha can be painted in any color. A hero, a villain. A person, a hound. The purple of a bruise, the red of a razor line. Anything.

No wonder Kione doesn't want to fuck her anymore.

Certainly, she still finds Sartha attractive—but that's not quite the same thing. Kione has always loved, above all, the delicate push-pull of the chase. The frisson of negotiation that persists even during sex; wills and bodies pressing, colliding, heaving against each other, competing for position and gratification. That was always the best part of fucking Sartha—trying to make-believe that Sartha wouldn't always end up on top.

That's gone. For a little while simply possessing Sartha was enough to drive Kione crazy, but the novelty has worn off. There's no resistance when Kione pushes against her, and so, inevitably, incredibly, using Sartha to satisfy her lusts has become rote. Boring. Not Sartha herself; Kione is simply discovering she likes her better as a pet than a partner. And that, Kione doesn't think she'll ever get tired of. Plus...

Authority is as essential to her as degradation. Beasts fuck other beasts. Their master provides something altogether different.

Kione points at Sartha to catch her attention, then curls her finger to beckon her forward, then points straight down. "Sit," she instructs—then giggles, when Sartha attempts to perch on the edge of her bed. "No, not there. No pets on the furniture."

Sartha turns deep red as she sinks to her knees on the floor instead. Her gratitude at each little morsel of dehumanization is such a rush. That's another thing Kione will never get tired of: seeing how deeply she needs to not be a person.

Kione turns and grabs something out of her footlocker: a medical syringe. The last time she took Sartha out for walkies, she made her go fetch it from the infirmary for her. The obedient little hound didn't even ask why. Now she learns, as she watches Kione fix a sterile needle to the syringe and then plunge it into the valve on the IV bag she took. As she retracts the plunger, the

syringe fills with the unnatural, roiling, green liquid.

"You know what this is, don't you?"

Sartha nods. Her green eyes are wide. Rapt. Her expression could be mistaken for fear, but Kione knows better.

"It's your medicine. Isn't it?"

Sartha nods. She's not afraid. She's desperate. Kione has no way of knowing exactly what the substance in her syringe is. But if she's right about what it does, it's potent enough to render the victim a pliant, helpless participant in their own unmaking. To obliterate the very self. And that, more than any singular drug, is Sartha Thrace's addiction.

" And you need your medicine, don't you?" Kione asks softly, menacingly.

"Yes, Kione," comes the wet drool from Sartha's lips.

It's funny, really—the idea that what's wrong with Sartha could ever be cured. Kione remembers when she used to believe that. Gods, she was so naive then.

"Don't worry," Kione tells her. "I'll fix you, Sartha. I'll save you."

I'll save you from her.

Bit by bit, she's learning how. Her technique may be unrefined, but hasn't Kione already proven herself a savant? She knows what makes Sartha tick, and she knows how to mess with the clockwork. She's gleaned more than a little, too, from the little secrets that Sartha's handler has, in her arrogance, let slip. Kione spends hours pouring over each pearl of poisoned wisdom, turning it over, wondering how best she can exploit it. The handler thinks she can bait Kione with these things, taunting her with knowledge and tools she isn't prepared to make use of. Too bad, Imperial bitch. You don't know what Kione Monax is made of. She'll do whatever it takes.

Kione has a plan. One thought through meticulously. She's spent her nights concocting what she'll do and what she'll say, and her days rehearsing the words as she paces around her quarters, trying to ignore the dogs outside. It'll be perfect. She knows it.

"Head to one side," Kione instructs, as she advances on Sartha with the needle. She remembers where the IV was connected to the dog-mech pilot. She's given herself a dozen shots in the same place. Gotta know how to patch yourself up, when you're a merc. Nobody's gonna do it for you. "Keep your eyes open. I want to see it happen."

Sartha doesn't move a muscle as she readies for the shot, neck exposed, but her muzzled face registers endless obedience. Kione is already tripping on the power she feels when the moment comes crashing to a halt with one simple, stupid realization.

The dose. Kione doesn't know the dose.

"How..." Kione asks, reluctantly. "How much does she usually give you?"

"I'm not sure," Sartha whimpers, with equal reluctance. She'd much rather be of use.

"Fuck." Kione turns her back and starts pacing.

Too little, it won't work. Too much, and... fuck. How much was that dog-mech pilot being dosed with? Too much, probably, but clearly not enough to kill. She was wired up with a full bag, but who knows how quickly or slowly it was drip-feeding the drug into her veins?

Kione could ask the handler, of course.

No. No, fuck that. Kione isn't going to give that bitch another chance to mess with her head. She isn't going to give her the satisfaction of seeing Kione come crawling and begging for help. What does that leave? Asking some rebel doc? Like they'd know. Like they wouldn't try to mess with her, especially if they knew why she was asking. Kione finds herself breathing fast and pacing furiously. This is no good. She needs to pass this test. If only she had a test subject. It's all she needs, really. A warm body that, unlike Sartha's, isn't irreplaceable.

Oh.

It's a stupid idea, Kione thinks to herself as she raises the needle to her own neck. Sartha thinks so too; that much is plain from the look on her face as she watches Kione. Doesn't say a word, though. Good as gold, when she's muzzled and kneeling. Briefly, Kione wonders if she should heed Sartha's concern. Maybe wait for another day. Maybe see if a wiser course comes to her.

No, it has to be now. It has to be this moment. Kione senses it, just as she does when she takes *Theaboros* to the skies. She's taken insane risks in her mech and lived because her gut is sharp, and she knows when to let it guide her. This is no different. Kione feels the hand of destiny on her shoulder, wearing a black, leather glove. A crazed instinct demands she press onward. If she backs down now, she is nothing and no-one. And that's one thing Kione

will never, ever submit to.

She presses the needle into her jugular vein and depresses the plunger. Not all the way. Just a little, for what she hopes is a small dose. Not enough to ruin her. Just enough that she'll feel something—and know what to give Sartha.

Moments later and, oh, she's certainly feeling it.

But it's nothing Kione can't handle. Room spinning? Perspective distorting? Please. This isn't her first rodeo. Hells, this isn't even her first rodeo with Sartha. She's piloted mechs in worse states. Kione grins, her momentary anxiety banished like it was never there. Kione is soaring now. The world is hers. She can do anything.

Best not to waste the moment. Unsteadily, Kione refills the syringe. Clearly, the dose she gave herself was little more than a taster. It'll take more than that to get what she wants—especially with Sartha, who's built up gods know how much tolerance. She can handle a full vial, at least. Kione doesn't know how she knows that, but she does. Her instincts don't lie.

She can do anything.

Whatever concern was in Sartha's face vanishes the moment the needle kisses her skin. She craves this too badly to care about anyone or anything else. Poor, pathetic Sartha; no oblivion is too deep. Kione is, as always, here to provide. She does fuck up the injection a bit though. Her hands are shaking. She draws blood here and there haphazardly, but eventually she finds the vein—and buries the plunger to the hilt as quickly as she dares.

Sartha's eyes dilate impossibly as her soul yawns open. She welcomes the drug into her body like a lover. No hint of reluctance or resistance. Sartha relaxes into the high, evidently conditioned to accept it as her natural state. As Kione commanded, she keeps her eyes open, letting the mercenary savor the fall. Savor the way something at once foggy and starry settles over her eyes—a sheen, a layer of unreality, thick and impenetrable. This goes beyond Off The Leash. Sartha is even stupider than a dog now as her eyes wander, chasing stars only she can see, enthralled by even the slightest movement of Kione's hand.

"You can still hear me," Kione breathes. "Right?"

"Yes."

Sartha's voice is emptier than ever, and the music of her emptiness sends

a shiver down Kione's spine. She can't look away from those eyes—from those wide, blank, starry eyes.

"How do you feel?"

The answer is worse than empty. Sartha infuses one word with all her breath, and a ragged, bliss-filled awe the likes of which Kione has never heard, even from her. The depth of her addiction is chilling.

"Wonderful."

"Good." Kione nods. Even that one word is music, and Kione feels it strike a harmony within her. Wonderful. Yes. She feels wonderful too. She can do anything.

She can make Sartha hers.

"I want you to repeat everything I tell you," Kione begins. Just as planned. She can do anything. "Understand?"

"Yes, Kione."

There's that music again. Kione could listen to it forever. She could do anything, which means she could listen to it forever. She giggles a little as it washes over her, giddy even though she loses her place for a moment.

"Uh..." It's weird; Kione had it so clear a moment ago. Doesn't matter. She can do anything. "You..." She finds the thread. "I own you, Sartha."

"You own me."

The echo is instant. Unhesitant. Not without meaning, though. She speaks the words with all the ardor of a bride on her wedding day. It's not that she doesn't understand what she's giving to Kione. It's simply that her normal, human desire to own herself has been completely snuffed out. Kione giggles maniacally. She perches down on the edge of her bed so she can kick her feet. Better that way, anyway. She was starting to get dizzy.

"Say it again!"

"You own me."

Instant. Sincere. Once more, Kione giggles.

"Again! Again!"

"You own me."

Kione slaps her bed as she laughs. It's so good to hear that—from her, from Sartha fucking Thrace. All she ever wanted, and it was this easy to take. All it took was a little syringe of green liquid.

"I'll always own you," Kione presses.

"You'll always own me." An oath. An offering.

"I own everything about you." Kione can't stop laughing. Howling like a hyena, loud enough to drown out the dogs outside.

"You own everything about me."

"I own Sartha. I own the hound."

"You own Sartha. You own the hound."

"Yes," Kione hisses. "Yes! You obey me."

"I obey you."

"Only me!"

"Only you."

"Not..." Kione licks her lips. She's reluctant to taint the ritual with any mention of the other woman—but it must be done. "Not her."

"Not..." Sartha begins—but the word catches in her throat. Her head tips back. Her eyes widen, and even Kione can see the stars in them. When she speaks, it's not an echo. It's a prayer. "A-ah! Her!"

"No!" Kione snaps.

This isn't right. She can do anything, so this isn't right. Kione leaps to her feet. Starts pacing again.

"You obey me! Not her!"

"I obey you. Not her."

"I am your handler!"

"You are my handler."

It's just not right. Not anymore. That one moment of misplaced worship given to the woman Kione hates more than anyone else in the world, and the music is spoiled. Out of key. There's a note of insincerity that Kione hears—or thinks she hears—in Sartha's voice. Like she's only saying it to please her.

Fuck.

Calm down, Kione. You can do anything. Think. Think!

When it comes to her, the smirk is returns, lazier and uglier than ever. It's simple. Kione just needs to dig a little deeper, to rip out all the poisoned seeds that have been buried in Sartha's head. It was never going to be easy. She shouldn't have expected it to be easy. But Kione can do anything. So it can be done—and she just has to make use of another one of that handler's tricks.

Stupid woman. It's like she didn't realize she was giving Kione every tool she'd need to beat her at her own game.

Sartha has been conditioned to crave sexual gratification and objectification.

"Up," Kione orders. "On your knees."

Sartha moves like she's swimming through tar, but once the command makes its way into her drugfucked skull, there's no hint of hesitancy. She raises herself upright on her knees, starry-eyed and expectant. Kione goes rooting around in her footlocker, and fishes out her prized trophy: Sartha's strap-on dildo. Kione spits into the suction cup at the base, then bends down unsteadily to stick it to the floor between Sartha's legs.

"Down."

Sartha is so out of it that even though she just watched Kione put it there, it seems to come as a surprise to her that lowering herself back down means filling herself with the dildo. The way she shivers and shakes once the toy reaches full depth is gorgeous. Drugged as she is, the penetration is overwhelming. Overstimulating. Kione will not let that go to waste.

"I am your handler," Kione impresses on her. "Say. It."

"Youareee," Sartha gurgles. "Myy... handler."

"Good!" Kione giggles. This is better. This is power. The humiliation makes it real again. She can do anything. "Now say it again." She leans down, putting her face close to Sartha's muzzle so she can see how very lost her eyes look. "But bounce."

It takes a gargantuan effort. Not physically—Sartha's in as fine a shape as ever—but mentally. The pleasure she's getting from her strap-on makes her weak at the knees. Her usual barriers are gone, swept away by the sinister drug. Sartha howls as she fights her way upward.

"You... are... my... handler," Sartha grunts, between moans. Kione laughs. A sheen of sweat already covers Sartha's entire body. She can barely hold herself upright. Her pupils are dilated unhealthily, and her wetness splatters against the floor beneath her as her body heaves with exertion. After a long moment, Sartha's legs give way and she slumps back down again, once more impaling herself to full depth. Her stupefied, wailing moan is downright operatic.

Ah, Sartha! Just when it seems like she can't get any more beautiful. Who

would ever recognize her now, if they'd only seen her on the recruitment posters?

"Good girl," Kione cackles. "Again."

And again. And again. Kione runs her through each of the promises she's already given, and many more besides. Each one a reckless, heedless, mindless pledge of fealty. Each one, punctuated by the wet sound of Sartha's cunt tightening around the silicone shaft as it enters her, or the high, warbling, pathetic moan she makes when the sensation ruins her composure. The ritual drags on, minute after minute, until time loses its sense. Kione makes Sartha pledge herself in every way she can think of, and Sartha echoes her every word with the unblinking, unthinking obedience of a lost puppy as her body, drained of energy by the handler's soporific drug, pushes itself far beyond the limit of her endurance in a senseless, pointless, utterly pornographic display of abject loyalty.

All while Kione masturbates furiously at the sight. It's been a little while since she actually fucked Sartha. Her lusts have bled away from her here and there, as her focus has become more and more consumed by the task of brainwashing Sartha. Her idle moments are rarely given to self-gratification, haunted as they are by the noises of distant dogs. Now, though? Now, Kione is more turned on than she's ever been in her life.

Hunched over, her hand is stuffed down her jumpsuit, furiously pumping at her throbbing, needy cock. She can't help it. Her body sings with need, threatening to pull her attention from Sartha unless she satisfies it. Better to give in. Kione can do anything—which means she can do this, without distracting or demeaning herself. It'd be a shame not to, really. Sartha is stunning like this. The way she twitches and thrashes and shudders as she forces out each and every demeaning mantra Kione feeds her. Sartha Thrace is always the star, always the center of attention, but now she seems like she belongs on some passed-around porno tape, not a propaganda film. Not using her to get off would be a waste. But more than anything physical, thinking about all the ways she's stamping her mark on Sartha's psyche is what drives Kione into a frenzy. Each mantra, each repetition, etched by pleasure into the beleaguered hero's mind. Bit by bit, chipping away that other woman's signature, leaving Sartha less, and less, and less—until she's nothing more than the simple, obedient dog she ought to be.

Sartha is Kione's.

Sartha obeys her.

Only her.

Kione owns her.

Kione is her handler.

Forever. She can do anything with Sartha, forever and ever.

"F-f-fuck," Kione pants, seeing white. Seeing stars. It takes her several seconds to realize that she's orgasmed, and even longer to actually stop pumping her hand up and down her now-slick shaft.

Kione looks down. She frowns. She lacked the presence of mind to take her clothes off; her jumpsuit makes the process a touch laborious. Now, her underwear is hopelessly stained at the front. That gnaws at her. The sensation, sticky and unpleasant, dampens her euphoria. Even if Kione can do anything, she needs that to stop right now. Clumsily, Kione peels away her sweat-drenched jumpsuit and liberates herself from her stained underwear. The relief is immense; being naked feels so, so much better. Kione is about to toss her ruined garment aside, but then a better, meaner idea comes to her.

"Hey," Kione calls out, already giggling filthily. "Stop for one second."

Sartha crashes to a halt and rocks back on her knees, strap-on deep inside her. Delirious, grateful for the respite, her eyes swim around, starry and unseeing. Kione loosens Sartha's muzzle a little and pulls it an inch or two away from her face.

"Here," Kione tells her. "Something for you to sniff on, puppy. Take a deep breath."

She stuffs her cumstained underwear into the cage of Sartha's muzzle, and tightens it back into place. This is what you do with dogs, right? Scent training?

Sartha obeys. She breathes deep, and as she fills her lungs she shudders again, the aroma of Kione's sweat and seed curdling in her parietal lobe. Another layer of stimulation, when she was already over her limit. There's no escaping it. No clean air to be found. As Kione watches, Sartha's eyes begin rolling back into her head. Kione wolf-whistles appreciatively, and starts getting hard again.

"You," Kione says, in that careful, intoned voice that cues Sartha up to accept yet another mantra, "belong to me."

"I b-b-belong to you!" Sartha moans, her words muffled, just slightly, by the panties in her muzzle. As she speaks they slip partway into her mouth, forcing her to spit them out and leaving them sodden with drool.

"You don't need anyone but me," Kione pants.

"I don't need an- ff... anyone b-but you!" Hearing Sartha drone her own words back to her in that stupid, drooling voice is so much better than sex could ever be.

"You don't want anyone but me." You don't want her. You don't want her. You never wanted her. As she speaks, Kione imagines her tongue reaching into Sartha's skull, lapping at her gray matter, leaving a wet imprint of her will.

"I don't... want... anyone... but... you!" Sartha's chest is heaving fiercely. Her voice gasps and strains to make itself heard, and pleasure rips her words into shrill, insensate ejaculations of noise. She looks like she's about to pass out, like maybe she's overdosed or something, but Kione won't let this end here. Not just yet. Would the Imperial handler let her stop? No. Not before Kione inflicts the final, crucial mantra.

"You love me," she orders Sartha.

"I... I..."

At that moment, Sartha's mind seems to snap. She shudders again, more violently than before. Her back arches and her face tilts upward. She can't speak. No air in her lungs. Instead, it's like her eyes are fixed on something—a single point, perhaps on the ceiling. It's like there's something she's just now seeing. Kione knows she's probably simply hallucinating. But before that thought can catch up with her, the mercenary makes a catastrophic, fatal mistake.

She looks up too, and sees the stars.

All of them. All at once. The whole night sky, pouring in from above. The blank ceiling of Kione's quarters has become ephemeral, leaving the cosmos's expanse hanging directly overhead, bearing down on Kione and Sartha. A thousand pinpricks of starlight spear through Kione, transfixing her. This is an unspeakably beautiful sight. Once-in-a-lifetime, in the centuries since the sky was ruined. It's enough to make Kione forget everything else, and simply stare in wonder.

It's special to her. She knows this sky.

Just once in her life, she's seen it.

Growing up far to the south, in Kinbashi, one of Kione's many neighbors had been an old man with a star chart printed across two pages of a big, old book. He looked out for Kione when her parents were looking for work or aid, or when they ended up crowded together in a shelter. He'd take out his book and show her the stars, pointing out the names and constellations with a slow, kindly voice and a long, crooked finger with a broken nail. For the longest time, Kione loved it. It had seemed like a secret, like magic; up there, beyond the brown sky and bleeding clouds, there were all these bright lights with names and personalities, just like people had names and personalities. That wonder is back with her now, in the present. It's like Kione can hear that old man's voice again. It's like she can taste Kinbashi on her lips. The memory is strong enough to make her tremble.

After a time, she'd grown up. She gave up on the stars, especially after the old man left—or died, more likely, although her parents would never have told her that. What did it matter if they were up there? And besides, wasn't that where the Imperials came from? Up there? For all intents and purposes, the stars were gone. They had abandoned the world. No lights in the sky except for the dim sun, and the ailing glow of its radiation on the bleach-stripped atmosphere.

Then that night. Then Sartha.

It wasn't their first battle together, but it was when they were first truly getting to know each other. Kione barely remembers the place. Was it Odesza? On the eve, there had been a few beautiful, magical hours when the sky had well and truly cleared. No smog, no clouds, no sickly aurora or Cherenkov glow. And for the first time in her adult life, Kione had felt well and truly proud she knew the names of the stars. That night is back with her too. Cold, yes. Tense, yes, but all the more reason to press close together in *Ancyor*'s open cockpit while they stargazed. Kione remembers reflecting that a lifetime's mercenary pay couldn't have bought her the feeling of Sartha Thrace, hero of the rebellion, clinging to her arm so she could peer along its pointing arc, mouthing the words after Kione as she told Sartha what each star was called.

Those moments had always been magical. The ones when Sartha wasn't really a hero at all. Just a young woman, beautiful and strong, full of awestruck curiosity, her heart open to anyone and anything, eager to learn, eager to take

in whatever of the world's beauty remained and keep it close. After that, it had gotten so hard to say 'no' to her when she talked about Kione joining up as a true rebel. She made it sound so good. Her optimism was overflowing and infectious, her hopes naive, yes, but just weather-worn enough to make them feel tangible. Nobody believes like Sartha. Nobody makes you believe like Sartha. With her, you can truly-

No, wait. That's not right.

Kione sways unsteadily on her feet.

That's not right. Sartha isn't like that. Wasn't like that. Was she? Kione remembers her that way. But she knows another truth now, a deeper, greater truth. The empty Sartha. The broken Sartha. The Sartha cracking and breaking under the weight of her own heroism. Kione has become accustomed to Sartha the traitor. To the Sartha that hates everyone who ever looked up at her, and hates herself especially. What need would a Sartha Thrace like that have ever had for the names of the stars?

Kione must be remembering it wrong. However vivid the memory seems, it can't have happened that way. It can't, because Sartha is empty, Sartha was always empty, because if she wasn't, then what is Kione doing to her now? If there was ever something real to her, Kione should have tried to salvage it. She should have said 'no' to her, when she came to her door—properly. She never should have used those three terrible words.

But she did. Kione has done those things, and worse besides. Which, if there was ever anything of Sartha to save, makes her just as bad as-

No. She's sure of it now. That night never happened quite like that. Sartha was always broken.

But isn't it a nice memory, however false?

It'd be nice to indulge it, for a time. To bring every detail into clear view, aided by the wonderful drug singing through Kione's veins. She feels as though she could play it out from start to finish, and it would be like living it all over again. How did it start? Kione remembers pointing. Guiding Sartha's hand along with hers. Look for the brightest star, she'd said to her. It's always the easiest to find, and then you can work outward. Sirius, it's called.

The dog star.

Kione's face twitches into a frown. Something about that makes her deeply, profoundly anxious. She tells herself it's just a coincidence, but it

doesn't help. This is starting to feel like some awful, cosmic joke, played on her by a malicious god. She needs to stop thinking about this right now, but it's too late. She's already following along with her memory. She can see the stars again above her head, more vibrant than ever. Kione cannot stop herself from joining one to the next, lines etched into the night sky, the constellation taking shape before her eyes.

Canis Major. The great hound.

No. No, no, no.

But that's right. It is—Kione knows the stars too well to deny it. And she can see it now. The great hound. Its form is pure starlight, canine and vile and impossibly large. It's like it's coming towards her, consuming maw open and hungry, but it just looms eternal, Kione's vision telescoping to make it always approach and never arrive. There is a beast in the stars. Kione has never known terror like this. She backs away, wheeling crazily for balance.

It's not real. She knows it's not real. Knowing isn't enough. Because it's not the beast she's scared of.

It's Her.

How did She do this? It's Her. It has to be Her. There's no other explanation. How did She write Her name in the stars? How did She make them wrong? The stars are ancient and vast. Is She that old, and that distant? No, of course not—but something in Her, perhaps, some animus, ancient as humanity, ever-living, ever-devouring, ever-cruel, and Her its latest avatar, ever-rising to snap up the brittle bones of people like Sartha in its jaws.

It's coming for Kione too. It has her scent, she can feel it. She'd flee, but there's nowhere to go because how could you ever flee from the stars? They were beautiful a mere moment ago, but not anymore. They're too bright. Too close. Her head is splitting open from their presence. Sirius the dog star is worst of all. She can't bear it a moment longer—but it's not real in the first place. Kione slaps the side of her head, anguished. What's happening to her? Maybe she's crazy, like with the dogs outside. Maybe it's the drug—it has to be, really, but Kione doesn't feel reassured by that. Maybe she took too much, maybe she's overdosing and she's going to die alone, in her quarters, jerking off and blubbering about starlight.

Wait. She's not alone. She has Sartha. Kione can't help but trust in Sartha's presence. She's her friend, despite it all. Her hero, however fake. Her

beloved hound. Thinking of Sartha gives the strength to tear her gaze away from the warped stars. For a moment she stares stupidly at the wall, and there are stars there too. An endless field of them, near and far. It's like she's peering through some kind of celestial fog. It makes her nauseous. She needs to look at something concrete. Something real. It has to be Sartha. She saves people when nobody else can. Perhaps even Kione, even now. Panicking and on the verge of a sobbing breakdown, Kione decides to look to Sartha to be her anchor.

Looking at Sartha is an even worse mistake than looking up.

Sartha Thrace is the one dark thing in a room of starlight. She's still kneeling there on the floor, twitching and throbbing, half-mouthing a few of the deranged mantras Kione worked so hard to etch into her shattered mind. In short, she's just as Kione saw her moments before—but there's something else, too. In the moments between her heartbeats, Kione sees Sartha as something else entirely. Her silhouette collapses in on itself, leaving her cast in shadow. The shadow collapses further to become a door, a gateway to something beyond. A sunken space, darker than darker, Sartha opens out into something just as endless and terrifying as the stars above. But there are no stars inside Sartha Thrace. Just a great turning wheel, dark and dark and dark, gnawing at her insides, gathering what little light remains into itself with such fury it glows red-hot along the mad, whirling, spiral pattern of its arms.

A black hole.

Kione's arms fall limp to her sides. It's beyond hypnotic. More beautiful than all the stars, and more terrible. She could look it at forever, and perhaps she will. Perhaps she already has. There's something calming about the black hole. It scared her, but only at first. Then it took her fear into its heart and stretched it beyond breaking point. In its presence, the great hound of the stars is forgotten and Kione is no longer afraid. She sighs gladly. Blood drips from her nose. She watches the black hole's glowing arms spin and spin.

It has more to take. Kione has more to give. Her guilt, for instance. Her doubt. Her hesitation. Even her memories—all the ones about Sartha that don't agree with the black hole she sees before her. It feels good to give herself to the void. Everything that's ripped out of her is a tension finally releasing, the sensation of their departure as addictive and cathartic as picking at a scabbed wound. In the wake of each loss, Kione feels hollow—but a

blissful, tranquil kind of hollowness. It's like she's floating. A dead log in still water. It feels like like she's exactly where she needs to be, in all the universe.

Exultant pleasure rises in her. Oh, to be hollow like this forever! Is this how She feels? Is this what She sees, whenever She looks at Sartha? If so, it's difficult to resent Her—for any of it. This is a transcendant truth. It goes beyond any the handler has shown Kione before. It goes beyond hero and hound, Empire and rebels. It goes beyond words. It sings in Kione now, the truth, and she throbs with it, the heartbeat of a dead star within her breast, and it's almost as though she could reach her hand all the way through Sartha and-

And then it's gone.

All of it. No more stars. No more black hole.

Kione is standing in her quarters, above Sartha Thrace, who is still obediently kneeling at her feet; a dog, awaiting her master's command. Kione must have orgasmed again. She can see the evidence streaking down Sartha's chest. Besides that, it's like nothing has changed at all. Except everything has, because that perfect hollowness is still with Kione.

Kione's heart is a barren cave. A smirk comes to her face. She sees it so clearly now. No more doubts. No more shame. No more sentimentality. She's been holding back. No more of that. No more trying to preserve anything of Sartha Thrace. The only victory lies in possessing Sartha utterly. The Imperial handler has a fearful head start, but Kione is making fine progress. Now, as inspiration strikes, it occurs to her that there are moves the handler has not availed herself of.

Why keep Sartha's unmaking a secret? It makes sense, but only from a military perspective. It serves to maintain the fog of war and make the psychological effect of Sartha's arrival all the more devastating. How many rebel battle lines have crumpled into nothing simply because nobody was prepared to see *Ancyor*, of all machines, coming at them? If the rebels knew, if they could prepare, they might be able to harden themselves against it. Smarter to keep them in the dark.

But Kione doesn't care about any of that.

"Up, Sartha," she whispers. Her throat is painfully dry. Sartha looks at her with dull, adoring eyes as Kione helps her to her feet. Her strap sticks inside her for a moment, before slipping free and falling to the ground with a wet, ugly noise. The two of them slump over onto the bed and Kione cradles

Sartha's head to her chest, wincing only slightly as the metal bars of her muzzle dig into her skin.

"Good girl," Kione murmurs. Against her, Sartha lets out a low, pleased, animal sound. Gods, she's perfect. "You did very well for me," Kione tells her. "You deserve a reward."

Sartha shifts ever so slightly. She's eager, despite her exhaustion. She wants to hear about her reward. Kione kisses Sartha's forehead. Then, she nods her head toward the door—to the outside world, to the base, to Amynta and all the rest. To the rebels. To the dogs.

"I promise you," Kione whispers, stroking Sartha's hair lovingly, blessing her the way only a benevolent goddess could. "I will set you free from all of them. One by one, I will ruin you forever in their eyes."

CHAPTER NINE

Darkness grows strange in the corridors and hallways of Leukon Base at night. The rebels recently decided to switch to minimum power to mask their heat signature from the Imperial patrols that have begun venturing alarmingly close to the facility. That means no bright overhead lights, only the emergency strips that line the walls at ankle height. During the day, enough sunlight filters down from the surface through the ventilation shafts to provide a facsimile of genuine illumination, but at night the shadows grow upward, tall and wide, accentuating stature and distorting shape. Nothing has done more damage to rebel morale. Now they truly feel like they're living in a foxhole.

Kione presses herself flat against the corner. She smiles as she hears approaching footsteps. Kione is right at home, and her prey is right on time.

The rebel's increasingly dismal position doesn't cause Kione grief. She is not one of them. A wolf among sheep. That's why, she believes, the dogs aren't barking tonight. They know a real hunter when they see one. The world is full of dogs, but Kione is not among them. She is one of the rare few who hold the leashes instead.

It's good to be a predator.

The footsteps get closer. Just one person. It's all going according to Kione's plan—not that there's anything difficult about ambushing someone alone at night. All Kione had to do was pull the duty roster, pick a night her victim is on watch, and lie in wait. Once they're just a few paces from Kione, the mercenary steps out in front of her to bar her path.

"Hey, Pela," Kione sings, as the fangirl jumps halfway out of her skin. "Nice

to see you again."

It's the kind of lie that, though banal, is so egregiously dishonest it raises immediate red flags. Even when Kione was playing nice with Amynta and the rest, Pela never forgave Kione for chewing her out that one time in front of Sartha.

"Fuck!" the Pela exclaims. She eyes Kione suspiciously as she regains her composure. "Gods, what are you doing?"

"I thought we should talk, duh," Kione supplies merrily, an unwholesome grin plastered across her face. "Clear the air a little."

An even more blatant lie. Pela bristles visibly—but before she can question it, something else catches her attention. "Wait, what the fuck are you wearing?"

"This old thing?" Kione can't help herself. She gives Pela a little twirl to show off the way it spins. "Picked it up from salvage the other day. You don't like?"

Pela does not, and Kione can certainly see why. Most rebels have learned to be wary of anyone wearing a long, heavy, black coat. That's Imperial fashion. Kione, though, is feeling giddy the same way she did the first time she wore a dress. It looks killer over her red pilot suit, even if it's a bit too long and drags on the floor when she walks. She'll have to hunt down a good pair of boots when she gets the chance.

"I... whatever." Pela shakes her head. "It's late. I'm too tired for this. See you around, merc."

"Woah, woah!" Pela tries brushing past Kione, but Kione stops her with a hand. "Why so quick? I'm serious, I wanna talk."

Pela narrows her eyes. "About what?"

"Matter of fact, I want to apologize." Kione draws back on her shit-eating grin just far enough to sell it. All part of the hunt. "I'm sorry for giving you shit. A mercenary with an attitude—cliché, right? But we're all in this hole together now. So: I'm sorry. My bad."

A hard sell, that's for sure. There's more than one argument in the canteen standing between them. Like every other rebel, Pela's heard about Kione and Vola. But for a bleeding heart like Pela, saying 'no' to a genuine apology is even harder.

"Thanks," Pela says, offering a curt, wary but grateful nod. "I appreciate it.

Seriously. Now, I'm gonna-"

"Hey, c'mon," Kione laughs, still blocking the rebel girl's path. "What, I don't get the time of day?"

"It's just-" Pela sighs. "Look. Apology accepted. I just want to get out of the cold, alright?"

"Funny you should say that. I was just thinking: why not come to my quarters instead? We're having such a nice chat, after all. I'm right around here, too. I could fix you some tea—or something stronger."

Pela recoils. "You're messing with me."

"I'm dead serious."

She really is, and that makes Pela nervous as hell. "I... don't think that's a good idea."

"Why not?"

"It's..."

"Come on, what's the matter?" Kione can smell blood.

"Amynta said," Pela replies uncomfortably, "we should be... careful around you."

This time the laugh Kione lets out is utterly humorless. "Oh, really? How come?"

"She said..." Pela can't even meet Kione's gaze. There's something cute about that. Kione's going to enjoy breaking this girl. "You've been erratic. Wandering around at night. Buying some weird stuff at the commissary. Talking about... about dogs, or something? She says Sartha's spending too much time with you."

Jealous, radio girl? Really? That's petty by her standards.

"Don't worry about any of that," Kione says sleazily. She loves that she barely needs to hide her insincerity. "I'm just trying to make amends. Share a drink with a new friend. That so wrong?"

Pela doesn't say anything. She's wishing she was anywhere else.

"C'mon," Kione adds. She's all smiles. The girl you can't say no to. The girl who's showing you her teeth so you'll think she's not going to use them. "I'm not going to hurt you, Pela, if that's what you're worried about. Relax."

It's a fight to keep her laughter contained. Pela can't seem to figure out if Kione's trying to cruise her or not. She also can't seem to figure out how she'd

feel about that. Wouldn't be Kione's first weird rebel hatefuck—but that's not what she has in mind for Pela. She's got bigger plans.

"Maybe some other night." Pela decides. Her smile doesn't touch her eyes. "I'm really tired right now. So, um... later."

"Suit yourself. Later."

Pela makes to push past Kione. At last, Kione lets her go. Lets her feel safe with a few paces of distance. She doesn't know that Kione already has her cornered.

"It's a shame, is all. Sartha was looking forward to it."

Pela freezes in her tracks. So predictable. It's like Kione's already got her on a leash.

"Sartha's there?" Pela asks, her voice a confused blend of disappointed and hopeful.

"'Course," Kione replies casually. "She's the one who wanted me to invite you."

"W-why would she do that?" Now it's excitement that has poor, simple Pela tripping over her words.

Kione shrugs. "You know what she's like. The friendly type. Though she did mention something about you catching her eye a while back. Guess she thinks you're someone worth getting to know."

"She..." Gods, now she's blushing. Incredible.

"Well." Kione says, like it's an afterthought. "I'll just tell her you're too tired."

It's so transparent a manipulation—which is why it makes Kione so gleeful to see that it's working anyway. She can see from Pela's face that she knows that, on some level, Kione is fucking with her. Playing with her food. Being toyed with is humiliating, obviously, but suddenly there's so much more at stake. Sartha Thrace, and the things women will subject themselves to just to breathe the same air as her. Kione's own personal black hole.

"Wait," Pela says haltingly, even though she plainly hates the self-satisfied smile that appears on Kione's face. "If Sartha really-

"She did," Kione promises. "She's waiting for you."

It's every fangirl's wet dream. She could never refuse it. Pela is a fish on a hook.

"If she's not, I'll leave," Pela warns. Still so guarded. It won't help her.

"Hand on heart." Kione even makes the gesture. "Right this way."

She turns around and walks, her long, black coat billowing out behind her and Pela following along at her heels. Kione senses Pela's apprehension melting away into childish excitement. She's about to meet her hero—for real, this time. Kione giggles under her breath. This is perfect. The more relaxed Pela lets herself get, the better. The idiot fangirl has no idea just how real her meeting with Sartha is going to be.

"Here," Kione says after a short distance, indicating one of the many identical doors lining the halls of Leukon Base. She opens it. "Head on in."

Pela's eagerness gets the better of her. She steps forward, and notices too late that the only light in Kione's quarters is the little that's spilling in from the hallway.

"What the fuck?" Pela demands, as the door to the darkened room begins to close behind the both of them. "Monax, I swear to god, I will report this and you'll be-"

The only thing Kione has to do to shut her up is turn on the lights.

Only emergency strips in here too. They hum to life slowly, but the very first glow is more than enough to illuminate Sartha. Their full brightness simply throws into sharp relief the details that are already robbing Pela of her voice. Kione is distracted by the sight too. As much as she'd like to enjoy Pela's reaction she can't bring herself to look at anything but Sartha, a huge, proud grin on her face.

She was all alone in the dark, but she hasn't moved an inch from where Kione put her. What a good dog she is!

Sartha Thrace sits kneeling on the floor in the center of Kione's quarters. Muzzled, of course, but that's just the start. Kione has begun to feel that there's a certain dignity to a muzzle. You muzzle an animal because it is dangerous. Because it deserves respect. There's nothing dignified, conversely, about the pair of big, floppy, fake animal ears on the top of Sartha's head, attached to a headband. As Sartha raises her head to stare adoringly at Kione, they flop backward. Kione giggles deliriously. The ears are perfect. So is the collar around her neck—a dog collar, the one Kione got for her before, now with a little bell that jingles every time Sartha moves. Perfection.

Better still, though, is the trailing length of fuzz that extends behind

Sartha. Kione regains enough presence of mind to glance at Pela, and her reward is that she gets to see the moment the penny drops and Pela realizes what it is, and how it's attached. No belt. No harness. Just a plug—and that, too, is visible because besides muzzle, ears, collar and tail plug, Sartha is wearing nothing else. She is a vision.

Buying weird stuff at the commissary? Kione hadn't realized that Amynta was such a prude. This isn't weird. This is beautiful. This is Sartha Thrace, and she has never looked so true or so utterly, delightfully adorable.

"See?" Kione giggles smugly. "Told you she was here."

Pela doesn't see the beauty. Not yet, anyway. She's shell-shocked. After all, this is her hero she's seeing. The woman she worships. The pilot she always pictures just as she looks on the posters; ruggedly handsome, shoulder-length hair blowing in the wind, clad in that swaggering combat jacket and striding forward, victorious. But not anymore. From now on, she's always going to be thinking about this moment. To instantly, irrevocably rewrite a woman's mind like that—that's true power, isn't it?

Kione feels powerful.

Beneath the shock, there's something else. Disappointment. She is disappointed in Sartha. Pela's eyes keep dancing this way and that like she's trying to look at anything else. Like she's trying to bargain with herself, and find a way to keep believing. Maybe this isn't such a big deal. Maybe it isn't what it looks like. Maybe there's a good reason it doesn't hurt the way it does. Maybe, maybe, maybe—but nope. It's no good, and that's why next, there's anger. Anger at Kione, first of all. Kione understands. She was angry too, in the beginning. But just like Kione's anger, Pela's isn't all for the person showing her the truth. Plenty of it's for Sartha. Pela is angry at her hero, for not being everything she wanted and more. Angry at her for letting her down.

Sartha doesn't care. She's too far gone for anger to mean anything to her but bliss. Each hero-worshiper who has the scales torn from their eyes makes her inability to be a person that much more real. It's what she lives for. It makes her life bearable. It makes her wet.

Kione licks her lips. It's unbelievable how hot she is. And Pela sees that, too.

Past denial and anger and bargaining and disappointment, there is a final stage to the young rebel's reaction: lust. It's not her fault, really. Who wouldn't

be moved by the sight of a beautiful woman, presented like this? Pela is not to blame for noticing the shape of Sartha's body; the way her stiff, upright pose bares her chest and her musculature, or the way her legs, folded beneath her, are so shapely and soft, or the way her knees, slightly apart, beckon the gaze to what's between them: her cunt, open, slick, inviting. No, Pela isn't to blame. It's only natural. But even so—how delightful, to see that hint of pink in her cheeks and know that she probably hates herself for it? It's enough to get Kione a little worked up too.

"What..." Pela breathes slowly, "the fuck..."

"OK, so perhaps I buried the lede a little," Kione shrugs. "In my defense, I'm not sure you'd have believed me if I'd told you exactly how Sartha wants to get to know you."

"She- wait." Pela does a near-comical double-take. "She wants to-"

"Of course!" Kione claps a hand across her back. "Just look at her."

Pela is looking. She can't stop looking. "I thought you two were..."

"Oh, we are," Kione confirms. "But Sartha here is a little bit of a freak—as you can see." She waltzes over to Sartha and affectionately messes her hair.

"I d-don't believe it," Pela murmurs. "Sartha's... she looks like you've drugged her or something."

Kione laughs. Pela doesn't know the half of it. But the concern isn't unreasonable. With those glassy eyes, Sartha hardly looks like someone in her right mind.

"Sartha?" Pela ventures. She waves a hand in front of the hero's face. Sartha's eyes don't track it. "Are you OK?" No reply. "Do you need help? Did Kione... give you something?

"So suspicious!" Kione giggles, delighted. "She's not just going to answer you, duh."

"Why not?"

"Because Sartha Thrace is a dog." Something must have flashed through Kione's eyes as she said that, judging from the way Pela flinches away from her. "And dogs don't talk. Not unless you tell them to bark."

Disappointment comes raring back to the fore. Pela doesn't want her idol to be a dog, no matter how hot it is. Silly girl. She'll learn.

"Tell her, Sartha."

For the first time, Sartha opens her mouth—and her words do little to dispel the appearance that she is not in her right mind. Sartha's voice is uncharacteristically stiff and rigid as she recites the words Kione fed her earlier that evening.

"Kione is right. I'm a dog. I want this. I enjoy this. I want you to fuck me."

"Gods..." Another thing Pela can't help but be turned on by.

"See?" Kione wheedles. "C'mon. You can't tell me you don't want to. Let me guess: you've got one of those posters of her above your bunk."

Unguarded, Pela nods.

"Knew it." Kione leans in, dropping into a teasing whisper. "I don't even need to ask how many times you've masturbated to it."

The way Pela blushes tells Kione everything she needs to know.

"B-but..." Pela is still clinging to her discomfort like a safety blanket. It's like she can't let herself believe what's being offered to her. "Wasn't she wearing something like that when you brought her on? Isn't that a little... I mean, maybe it's, like-"

"Sartha?" Kione prompts, interrupting Pela. She's losing patience. This part's boring.

"Don't worry," Sartha recites. "I want this. I am safe, sane, and risk-aware. I consent."

Enough for even the goodiest of goody two-shoes, surely.

And it is—if not thanks to Pela's better judgment, then thanks to a different, far less virtuous part of her mind. After all, what is she supposed to do: say no? Not fuck Sartha Thrace? As if. Girls just like Pela have died in combat in the hopes a chance like this. Pela nods, just as Kione always knew she would.

"So, uh..." Pela glances across at Kione. "It'll be a threesome?"

"Relax." Kione laughs at the palpable relief on Pela's face. "I'll just watch. I don't fuck dogs. Duh."

Pela doesn't love that, but another long look at the bland, dissociated smile on Sartha's face puts her at ease. If it's good enough for Sartha Thrace, right? "OK. Sure."

"Wonderful! Then we're all happy." Kione swans over to a chair planted in the corner of the room and throws herself down, briefly enjoying the way her

new coat splays out at her sides as she slouches. “Proceed.”

Slowly, Pela begins to strip. What else is she going to do? Kione enjoys the awkward, clumsy way she removes her clothes, too excited and too nervous to play it cool or seductive. More nervous than excited, judging from the way Pela can’t stop herself glancing in Kione’s direction. Kione adores the way her mere gaze makes the girl uncomfortable.

“Should we, um, get on the bed?” Pela asks Sartha.

No reply.

“She’s a dog,” Kione reminds her sardonically. “Just tell her what to do.”

Pela swallows very uncomfortably. “OK, um... up!” she attempts, with unconvincing exuberance.

She is rewarded. In a smooth, singular motion that captivates the young rebel all over again, Sartha rises to her feet.

“G-good,” Pela mutters, blushing. She awkwardly takes Sartha’s hand and attempts to lead her over to the bed—then pauses. “Um. Who... what are we...”

Kione can already hear what she’s trying to say. “Who tops?” Pela nods reluctantly. “You do.”

The visible disappointment in Pela’s eyes gives Kione the measure of her right away. How predictable: another ‘top-leaning switch’ secretly hoping for Sartha Thrace to rock their world. Sartha deserves better. Kione knows that intimately.

“But I heard she-“

“Sartha doesn’t do that anymore. Is that a problem?”

Pela shakes her head.

“Good.” Kione’s face relaxes back into a sleazy smile. “If you need it, I’ve got her old strap-on around here somewhere. If yours isn’t up to the task, you can fuck Sartha with her own cock.”

That brings all kinds of pretty colors into Pela’s cheeks. “It’s fine!” It isn’t. Kione can tell. “Sartha. Can you, um, on the bed? Or... up!”

She’s already learning that Sartha responds better to commands than requests. Sartha drives the lesson home by shaking her hips as she springs onto Kione’s bed, making the bell on her collar ring and the tail Kione shoved into her ass wag eagerly. Kione sighs fondly. She just keeps getting better.

"No, on- wait, I mean... roll over!" Looking for something romantic? Good luck with that, given the muzzle in the way. Still, the sight of Sartha lying on her back, legs open to her, keeps the stars in Pela's eyes. The real thing is better than Pela's fantasies could ever be. This Sartha is even hotter than the one on the poster above Pela's bunk. The one she'll never be able to look at properly again.

"OK, uh... just give me a moment," Pela blurts out, reaching down. Kione has to crane her neck to see what's going on.

Pela can't get hard.

Not properly. The poor girl is aroused, yes, but between her hormones and her nerves, her body isn't playing along. All she can do is stand there, furiously beating at herself, staring at one part of Sartha after another in the hope that some stray spark lights her fuse, all while shame and embarrassment make the task harder by the second. The whole thing is sure to end badly but for Kione's intervention. "Sure you don't want that strap?"

The last thing Pela wants right now is to hear Kione's voice. "Shut up!"

"Just offering!" Kione shoots back, wounded. "There's no shame in it, you know. You should really get over that. But if you really don't want to, then instead..."

As Kione stands, she reaches into one of her coat pockets and produces a small pill bottle, pops the cap, and pours a couple into her hand. Imperial combat stims. They aren't hard to come by. The Empire loves to issue them; nice and addictive. Most Imperial pilots end up popping them like candy. For that very reason the rebels are, as a rule, highly averse. Probably for the best. Pilot pills are good for more than just cutting reaction times. The things these drugs can do to your sex drive are truly concerning. Kione bets those Imperial pilots loved having Sartha around as an outlet. Kione uses them with caution, and cautious is precisely how Pela eyes them as Kione holds them up for her to inspect.

"Just a little performance boost," Kione assures her. "Everyone needs it from time to time."

Pela glances uncomfortably back and forth between the pills and Sartha. She's caught on the horns of a now-familiar dilemma: take Kione's awful bargain, or miss out on the chance of a lifetime? Pela's already made her choice. She takes the pills from Kione's hand and, with a grimace, chucks

them back dry.

As they hit her system, the two of them share a grin for the first time that night. Combat stims work fast, and as they flood Pela's system they fill her with an unfathomable sense of euphoria and confidence. As a pilot, that can be your best friend or your worst enemy. The euphoria is why Pela matches Kione grin for grin. The confidence is the reason why, all of a sudden, she's certain Kione is on her side. Her best friend in the world. Someone she can trust.

Idiot.

"There you go," Kione purrs. "Enjoy yourself."

Pela nods eagerly. Her dysfunction is a thing of the past. She's painfully hard, and painfully desperate to use it. Kione stops her before she can.

"Wait. There's a better way. Tell her to roll over and get up on her hands and knees."

Pela heeds her advice. Kione is her best friend. "Roll over! Up! Hands and knees!"

Sartha obeys swiftly. There's that wagging tail again. Now both Kione and Pela giggle at the sight.

"Turn around, Sartha," Kione instructs. "Look." She puts her lips to Pela's ear, whispering conspiratorially. "You've seen how dogs fuck, right?"

That's all the encouragement the young rebel needs to start fucking Sartha Thrace from behind. Kione slouches back down in her chair to enjoy the show. And what a show! As soon as Pela enters Sartha, she moans like an animal in heat and starts rutting into her hero just as elegantly. Kione's room is filled with the ugly, raucous sound of flesh slapping against flesh, made all the more comical by the constant chime of Sartha's bell collar. The combat stims have eliminated everything holding Pela back. She is a thing of appetite now, bucking her hips endlessly, faster and faster until the exertion leaves her preposterously red and sweaty in the face. The pills sustain her through orgasm after orgasm; Sartha has no such chemical fortification. Eventually her arms give way and she slumps forward onto the bed, but even if her body is weak, her ruined spirit is willing. She welcomes the freedom of being nothing more than a convenient source of release. No more the hero. Just a warm body. Any warm body would do, and that's what makes it hit so right. The pleasure spews from her lips in moans so weak and uneven they resemble,

more than anything, a puppy's yips and whines.

And Kione? Kione just watches.

She pops a pill herself, just because. Recent experiences have left her with a few chemical cravings. The pill puts a tent in her piloting jumpsuit that goes entirely untended. Kione isn't interested in getting herself off. Instead, she sits back, head hazy, and thinks about meat.

It's all just meat, isn't it? That's what Kione is beginning to realize, as her vision blurs and as Pela and Sartha appear to fold together into one sordid, masturbatory flesh. In moments like these, all else seems to fall away into meaninglessness—especially the lofty ideals the rebels sometimes like to spout. Freedom? Humanity? Humanity appears to her nothing more than one great, slavering beast. A drooling maw, open, endless, insatiable—but waiting, crucially, to be harnessed for greatness by a stern hand and a firm leash. That strikes Kione as a worthy purpose. Isn't that what she's doing right now? Disabusing falsehoods, laying waste to fantasies. In the wake of Sartha's truth, Pela will be sharper and harder than ever before. Isn't that a good thing? Isn't that a powerful thing?

Kione feels precum oozing across the inside of her jumpsuit.

Abruptly, Kione realizes that she's drifting off into meaninglessness herself. Happens sometimes, if you're understimulated on pilot pills. That's no good. There's work yet to be done. She drags herself upright and stumbles over to Pela, currently bucking and thrusting her way to her fourth or fifth orgasm. The poor girl. simply can't stop herself.

"Hey, Pela," Kione sings. Then, a stage whisper: "Wanna know what really gets her off?"

Pela looks over at her as if remembering her existence for the first time in an eon—but she's not perturbed. Her eyes are shining. Kione's her best friend. "Yeah," she drools.

Perfect.

"Call her something," Kione whispers.

"Huh?"

"You know." Kione sighs, exasperated. "Something mean."

"Oh!" A lightbulb switches on somewhere behind those horribly dilated eyes. Pela turns her attention back to Sartha. "You... you slut!"

Kione rolls her eyes. Basic, but it's a start.

"That's it," she purrs. "Can't you feel her tightening up? Do it again."

"Slut!" Pela barks. "Bitch!"

Then she starts giggling, probably at the irony of the insult. Sartha's tail rubs up against Pela's torso with every thrust, and even with Sartha's face buried in the bed, her fake ears are nice and perky.

"Good," Kione encourages. "Now hit her."

"Huh?"

"Right here," Kione points at Sartha's ass. "Trust me. She loves it." It's not even a lie.

Pela gasps from the sheer thrill as she hits Sartha's ass. Spanking Sartha Thrace? It's like blasphemy. Sartha's reaction is even more dramatic. She takes the sudden pain as encouragement, moaning and rousing herself to begin rolling her hips in time with Pela's thrusts.

They're both enjoying this. Everybody's having a good time.

"Do it again," Kione orders. Pela does. "And again." After that, she doesn't need to issue any more reminders. It's like winding up a clockwork toy. Enough tension, and it just goes and goes. Smacking Sartha's shapely, pretty ass until it's bright red becomes part of Pela's rhythm, as pleasurable and compulsive as thrusting her hips. "Don't forget to keep insulting her."

"You like this, you fucking painslut?" Pela slurs, as she spanks Sartha again. She's getting used to it all. Getting crueler, too. She's starting to sound like she means it. "Yeah. Yeah. I can feel it from your cunt."

Sartha's pleasure is the ultimate intoxicant, more dazzling and more seductive than any praise or drug Kione could provide. To know viscerally that you're making the legendary Sartha Thrace feel good. To feel her tighten around you. What could be more wondrous? It's an instant addiction. Kione knows that better than most. She lounges back down in her chair, allowing Pela to continue working herself up. Making her worse is a delight; sitting back and watching her make herself worse is even better. Pela is playing chicken with herself: how far can she push it? How mean can she get? How hard can she hit? How far can she go before she hits Sartha's limit?

Only Kione knows: Sartha has no limits. A bottomless pit with a handsome face.

As Kione watches, she wonders: how would this end, if she took her hands off the wheel? Would it become a pleasant memory for Pela? A complicated

one to be sure, but hey—sex with Sartha has got to count for something. Perhaps it could be a gateway to a new side of herself. Perhaps it could even be a connection with Sartha. Perhaps Pela could come to terms with the disappointment Kione read on her face earlier, and develop a healthier view of the woman she idolizes. Too bad they'll never know. Kione intends to snuff out all those possibilities.

"Hey, Pela," Kione heckles, interrupting the stream of pornographic insults pouring from Pela's lips. "You can do better than that. Don't you want to really let her have it?"

"H-huh?" Pela replies, but she's already nodding.

"The meaner you get, the harder she comes," Kione wheedles. "So why not make it personal?"

"I... u-uh..." the idea makes her nervous, but the last thing Pela's capable of right now is restraint. "Like..."

"Anything," Kione promises. "Doesn't matter what. Tell her the worst things you've ever thought about her. Rub her face in it. Really let her have it."

"I... uh... I don't..."

"Sartha?" Kione interrupts.

"Please!" Sartha begs, right on cue. Such a good dog. "I c-consent."

The only three words Kione told her she's allowed to say after Pela starts fucking her. And with that all-important permission, the cracked floodgates within Pela truly start to spill open.

"You..." she says slowly to Sartha. "Why do you have to get off on this? Huh?"

Sartha's only answer is a ragged moan, but her audible enjoyment is all Pela needs to embrace this new form of degradation.

"Can't you have some fucking... some fucking dignity?" Pela demands. "Aren't you ashamed of yourself?" She sounds truly disgusted. She's harder than ever. All her disappointment is pouring out of her, a stream of black bile and bitter acrimony that crystallizes as soon as it meets air. Becoming real. Becoming irrevocable. "I know they seriously messed you up. But you come back here and act like... like this, when we spent all that time waiting for you?"

The noises coming from Sartha's throat, already barely human, are only

becoming more strained and high-pitched. No limit. She is a machine for transforming abasement into ecstasy. It's beautiful to behold.

"The fucking dog ears?" Pela rants. She reaches forward and grabs at them, as if hoping to snatch them off Sartha's head. All she succeeds in doing is pulling Sartha's hair. Predictably, Sartha moans at that too. "Gods! And you... you come back, and you hook up with that disgusting freak of a mercenary?"

That gets a big, knee-slapping laugh out of Kione. Oh, that's rich.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?" Pela demands, her anger undercut by the bulging, ruddy look on her face and the constant, ludicrous sound of the bell on Sartha's neck. "We all love you so much and it's like... like you don't even care! Why couldn't you at least pick one of us instead? You're Sartha Thrace! What the fuck are you doing? Why won't you say something?"

She's practically delirious now. Kione can't stop laughing. Through giggles, she decides to throw a little more fuel on the fire. "You know, if you want, you can choke her too. Right, Sartha?"

"I c-consent!"

That seems to make Pela even more furious. She doesn't take Kione up on the offer—for the best, probably—but she does plunge a layer deeper into her own psychosexual filth.

"You'd... you'd think you'd want to at least make it up to us!" she raves. "After all the damage you did. I-I had friends, you know. On that mission, the one to get you back. I... I didn't blame you, then. I thought... I thought that wasn't really you." It's hard to tell if she's even still enjoying fucking Sartha. The look on Pela's face speaks to something much more than mere enjoyment. It's dark, cathartic, compulsive. She'd probably stop if she could, but the combat stims won't let her. "Now I'm n-not so sure. Cause—fuck—look at you! Look at yourself! Were you like this for them too, huh?"

Sartha's moans seem to answer her in the affirmative.

"Fuck!" Pela growls. She's losing control. As her body approaches exhaustion, her mind begins to come apart. Dark thoughts peer through the cracks. "S-Sartha, you... Gods! You fucking... you're just... a fucking..."

Kione hunches forward. She can hear the word Pela's about to say, its sharp tip already forming on her lips. Kione grins madly. This is going to be even better than she'd hoped. "Go on! Let it out!"

"You're a fucking t-traitor!" Pela screams, with one last heaving thrust.

Her back arches for a brief moment, as another wave of awful pleasure tears her to shreds. This one is her limit. The ultimate thrill. The final bitter kernel Pela has been nursing in her heart. Sartha comes too, naturally. For her it's the ultimate insult, all the better for its truth. It confirms for her everything she needs to hear about herself. With both of them sated, they become still and the room grows quiet, submerged beneath an awful, suffocating silence.

Time for Kione to deliver the coup de grâce.

She waits just long enough for Pela to seem like she's on the downhill slope of her combat stim trip. In short: when she's most vulnerable. Did Pela forget? Kione's more than just a spectator. She's a predator. She reminds Pela of that now, as she grabs the young rebel by the arm and hauls her upright.

"Hey!" Kione yells into Pela's slack, half-satisfied, half-appalled face. "What the fuck is wrong with you?"

It takes a long moment for Pela's brain to catch up with what's happening. Once it does, it's like Kione's dropped a bucket of ice water over her head. All her walls are down, and the sudden disapproval leaves her blubbering like a scolded child.

"W-w-w-whuh?" is the best she can do.

"Where do you get off, treating her like that?" The smug, lopsided, shit-eating grin on Kione's face should be a dead giveaway, but Pela is too high and too stupid for that.

"B-but," she whimpers. "Y-you told me-"

"I didn't tell you to call her a traitor!" Kione spits. "Gods. Is that really what you think?"

"N-no," Pela protests. She probably doesn't have a clue what she really thinks. "I just-"

"Just what?" Kione knows there's no answer. There's no name for the kind of betrayal you feel upon seeing this side of Sartha Thrace. "Huh?"

"B-b-but," comes the next gurgled excuse, "s-she enjoyed it! R-right, Sartha?"

Sartha doesn't say a word. Good dog.

"Get the fuck out of my room so I can take care of her," Kione jeers. "I never want to see you again. Neither does she. Didn't realize you thought about Sartha that way. Gods, Pela. Get out of here!"

Pela gathers up her clothes and flees the room without even putting them on. There are tears in her eyes. It's not the first time Kione has sent Pela packing with her tail between her legs, but this one is sure to take. She has inflicted on this girl the ultimate unfairness. She's taken so much away from her in the span of a single night. Her hero. Her self-belief. Her pride. And, gods, it was so much fun. That Imperial handler has one thing right. It really is easy to break someone. You just have to be willing to do whatever it takes. Kione keeps her game face intact until the door closes. As soon as it does, she collapses onto the bed next to Sartha and promptly busts a gut.

"Holy shit," Kione wheezes, eventually. "Did you see the look on her face?"

Naturally, Sartha does not reply.

"She's in for one hell of a time when she gets back to her bunk and sees whatever stupid poster of you she's got up." Kione can barely breathe for laughing. "Hey, you think she throws it away? Or keeps it stuffed somewhere —you know, for whenever she needs to rub one out?"

Still nothing. Dogs don't talk.

"I wonder if she'll tell anyone," Kione muses. As her own high wanes, she's feeling decidedly sleepy. "Wonder if anyone would believe her if she did. Personally, I'm betting she'll keep it all bottled up. But hey, it's fine either way, right?" She reaches across the bed and fondly messes Sartha's hair. "I promise, she's only the first. Soon enough, you won't be a hero to anyone anymore."

With that, she pulls Sartha into her arms so that the two of them can sleep.

Only, they don't sleep. Usually, after a night like that, Sartha would be quick to drift off. Not tonight. Kione can sense inside her some mysterious knot of tension, keeping her stiff. Keeping her awake. Kione spends several hours drifting on the edge of sleep, unable to relax into unconsciousness and unable to rouse herself to address whatever problem is at hand. The result is far from restful, and it drags on until Sartha pulls herself out of Kione's arms and rises to sit on the edge of the bed.

Then, she takes the muzzle away from her own face.

"Kione," Sartha says in a small, strange voice, as Kione begins to force herself upright. "I think we should stop doing this."

Now it's Kione's turn to feel ice water tipped over her soul. "What?"

Sartha makes a forlorn little gesture at her muzzle, then at her stupid little

dog ear headband. “You know. This.”

Instantly, Kione is all the way awake. She feels like she just stepped on a landmine. “Sartha, what the hell are you talking about?”

Sartha flinches, but doesn’t bend. “I just... think it would be for the best. You know?”

“No!” Kione is shaking her head over and over. “What do you... Sartha, you need this. Remember?”

No reply.

“Hells, you begged me!” Now anger is beginning to rise to Kione’s surface. “Or did you forget about that?” Another flinch. It’s painfully obvious how difficult Sartha finds it to cause Kione any measure of disapproval. But she perseveres, in a small, frightened voice that leaves Kione disgusted.

“I know,” Sartha trembles. “And I’m sorry. It was a mistake.”

“Don’t say that!” Kione pleads. It occurs to her, suddenly, how easy it would be to put a stop to this conversation. She knows the three words she’d have to use. It wouldn’t be difficult. The temptation is infinite—but the need to pick her way through this is even greater. “Why would it be a mistake now? Sartha, talk to me. What happened?”

She doesn’t want to say it. She really doesn’t want to say it—probably, because she knows exactly how Kione will take it. It comes out of Sartha’s lips slow and heavy.

“That girl. Pela. I... didn’t think you were going to start hurting people like She does.”

She.

“T-that’s...” It’s more nerves than anything, but Kione finds a laugh rising to her lips. Laugh it off, Ki. “That’s ridiculous. C’mon, Sartha. It’s no big deal. She’s not really hurt.”

“Yes. She is.”

“She’ll be fine! It’s a lesson. She’ll get over it.”

“I don’t know, Ki. You hurt her. And you enjoyed it.” Sartha is too correct for Kione to keep laughing about it. She lapses into a silence that Sartha takes as an invitation to keep talking. “I’m worried about what you’re turning into, Kione. You weren’t always like this—and it’s because of me. I thought... I thought it was just for me. All that cruelty. And t-that was good. I want it. I

don't know if I can live without it. But nobody else deserves it. So... we should stop, I think. I really think."

Though her words are tepid, Sartha says them with an air of finality. Worse, an air of mourning. Their bond is, to her, already dead. There's nothing Kione can do about it. The decision is made. In this moment, as dawn's first, coldest fingers touch Leukon Base, as Kione languishes in sleepless exhaustion and the backwash of the combat stims she took, she doesn't have the heart to fight it. She just wants to understand what happens next.

"But..." she asks slowly. "You do need this. Right?"

Miserably, Sartha nods.

"What are you going to do?"

Sartha glances at the door. "I thought maybe I'd just... leave."

"From the base?" A nod. "Where would you go?"

Now she looks down. It takes her a long time to reply. "I figured... maybe I-I'd just go back to..."

Her.

There she is again. An unspoken presence. She's always been in the room with them, hasn't she? Sartha's handler. Kione is sick of it. Unspeakably sick of it. Just thinking about Sartha's handler brings back thoughts of their wager. Their rivalry. Kione remembers how important that is. She remembers it's about more than what Sartha wants. Kione is about to lose—to the vilest woman in the world.

"She hurts people," Kione spits venomously, knowing full well how whiny she sounds. "But I can't?"

Sartha's head whips round in alarm. Her big eyes are so very wounded.

"You're better than that," Sartha pleads. "That's what I mean."

Kione ignores that. She doesn't want to be better. She wants to win. "She makes you hurt people too. You understand that, don't you?"

"I..."

"Then what the fuck are you talking about?" Kione explodes. She rises and starts pacing furiously. "I hurt people? I enjoy it? Fuck you! I'm doing it because of you. I'm doing it for you, Sartha. Everything I've done—it's to save you from her!"

She could stop all of this at once. Off The Leash. But Kione won't. That's not good enough. She doesn't want to see emptiness in Sartha's eyes, not right now. She wants to see acceptance.

"And I tried saying no! You remember that part, Sartha? I told you no—and you wouldn't even hear it."

"I know," Sartha replies quietly. She's trembling now. Going against someone in Kione's position violates every tenet that's been burned into her brain. That she can do so at all is a testament to her strength—not that Kione cares. Why should Sartha be strong now, after letting that awful woman break her into pieces? It's not fair.

"You think I wanted our relationship to be like this?" Kione spits. "I wanted so, so much... but, no, it had to be this, you were too fucking ruined for anything else. So I broke myself too, for you. I tried to be what you needed. And now you want to throw it all away. I... no. No! I won't let that happen. I won't just let you waltz out of here and go back to her."

Sartha's face keeps getting paler. She looks genuinely frightened of Kione. Kione wishes that made her feel powerful instead of awful. She keeps pacing. "This will work out," Kione pants, as much to herself as to Sartha. "We'll work this out. Maybe... maybe I went a little too far. I can fix this. Let me fix this."

She doesn't believe it. She's losing control. Sartha's handler never loses control. She never needs to bargain. But there is something Kione has that she doesn't.

"It's going to be OK," Kione decides, pulling that thought tight around her to calm herself. "You'll stay, and we'll be OK because we're in love. That's what matters most."

"What?"

The genuine shock in Sartha's voice makes Kione look at her sharply. Why does she sound so surprised? No. No, no, no. Don't take this from me, Sartha. Not this.

"We're in love," Kione says slowly, dumbly. "I love you. You love me."

"I..."

Kione would give away all the money she ever earned to see anything at all on Sartha Thrace's face right now except faint but palpable embarrassment.

"You love me?" Kione repeats, pleading.

Sartha averts her eyes. Her reply is slow enough to be truly devastating. "I

don't think I ever said that, Ki."

Ten silent seconds pass. Then Kione starts laughing again.

She throws her head back. Really leans into it. What else can she possibly do but laugh as everything crumbles around her? If everything she did for Sartha was meaningless then it's all simply one big joke, just like everything else Kione has ever tried believing in. The laughter comes with surprising ease. Maybe it's the combat stims. Maybe it's the glimpse of herself she catches in her mirror, wearing this ridiculous, oversized black coat. Kione doesn't care. She just hopes it never stops. Kione doesn't know what the hell she's going to do when she stops laughing.

"Kione?" Sartha is trying to get her attention. She looks genuinely concerned. "Are you OK?"

Kione doesn't answer. She keeps laughing. She realizes Sartha isn't the only one trying to talk to her. Her transmitter, sitting beside her bed, has suddenly crackled to life. A tinny voice is sounding over a rebel frequency.

'Kione Monax. Do you read us? This is base command. Do you read?'

She ignores it, obviously. It doesn't matter. Nothing matters anymore.

"Kione!" Sartha tries again. "Can you even hear me?"

'Monax! Gods dammit, where are you? They're coming!'

"Ki! I'm sorry. I'm sorry, I..."

She wants to take it all back—but she isn't going to. Kione can tell. It's funny. It's hilarious.

"I can't believe it," Kione wheezes eventually. She's laughing so hard she's crying. "I did all this for you. And you don't even love me."

Sartha looks despondent. At least that's something. At least they're in hell together.

'Kione Monax! Repeat, Kione Monax! If you're there you better answer right this second, merc, or I swear to the gods I'm gonna make you-'

"I'm fucking busy!" Kione yells as she picks up the transmitter and answers. Her laughter is gone. Not her tears, though. "Fuck off."

'We're under attack. We need you to sortie immediately.'

"No. I'm busy."

'What do you mean, 'no'?'

"N-O. I'm busy." Kione badly wants them to shut up and leave her alone.

Any time but now.

'This is an order.'

"I don't care."

'We're paying your rates, for gods' sake!'

"I don't care! Send somebody else." A nasty sneer enters her voice. "Send Sartha."

'We can't reach her. We hoped you'd know where she is. Monax, please.'

Right, that figures. Sartha's not in her quarters, and she doesn't have her radio with her. But something else is getting to Kione. The rebels don't normally say 'please' with her. They don't normally sound so desperate. Whatever's going on, it has to be bad.

"What's the situation?" Kione asks—begrudgingly, at first, although she quickly realizes she's grateful to have something else to pay attention to. She turns around so she doesn't have to look at Sartha's sad, sorry face.

'A hostile mech is directly approaching our position. We need you to intercept.'

"One hostile?" That's almost enough to make her start laughing again. "Send somebody else."

'There are signs of significant Imperial activity on all sides of us. It's the assault we've been dreading. Everybody else is en route to their positions, but the vanguard mech has already taken out our sentries on the forward approach. We need someone with your experience.'

An ace? Could be fun, though the seriousness of the overall picture is taking the shine off—plus, Kione's never been less in the mood. Her head and her heart ache something fierce. One question does end up stabbing at her, though.

"How'd they take out the sentries?" Kione asks. They're supposed to be well-hidden. Invisible. Waiting in ambush. Just how wrong is this all going?

'They...' The rebel on the radio falters for a moment. '*The attacker is transmitting a friendly IFF code. Outdated, but legit. Our sentries recognized it and felt moved to attempt direct contact at close range. They were wiped out.'*

Well, that was stupid of them. Using stolen IFF codes is the oldest trick in the book. It's why you keep changing them. Unless by recognized they

meant...

"Who is it?" Kione demands. "Send me the code."

'Do you know where Sartha is?' the rebel asks instead. '*We need her out there, but not alone. We don't know what this means exactly. We're worried she might need someone at her side, that's why we would prefer you to-'*

"Just send me the fucking code!" Kione yells. She knows nervous waffling when she hears it.

A pause. *'Transmitting now. Please. Find Sartha. Get her out there.* Theaboros *is being prepped.* Ancyor *is ready. Deal with it quick. We don't know how much time we have before they're all over us.'*

Over and out. A moment later, Kione's transmitter chimes.

As soon as she looks at it, she panics.

She recognizes the name on the screen. Any smart merc would. They always keep their eyes on up-and-coming heroes. But it's not that Kione can't beat her. It's the malign intent that lurks behind the name. This is Her. It has to be Her. She's the only one who could orchestrate this. It's too perfect in its horror to be anybody else. Kione remembers the promise that was made. '*I will come at your worst moment, to call Sartha back to my side*.' Kione cannot fathom how She knew, but her lack of understanding changes nothing. Perhaps she's never really understood any of this. Outside her quarters, the unseen dogs are back. Their howling is louder than ever. It's deafening. Their baying signals the end. It's the sound of Kione's oncoming ruin. Kione panics as she sees all of that and worse in the three words printed alongside the IFF code she has just received:

LEINTH ARITIMIS - GENETOR

CHAPTER TEN

The Empire is coming. *Genetor* is coming. She is coming.

As soon as Kione stops hyperventilating, she punches Sartha straight in the gut. Sartha goes down with little more than a breathless gasp. She doesn't see it coming—or perhaps she does, and she's simply incapable of bracing herself against the woman who's spent months holding her leash. Either way, she ends up slumped to the ground and bent double, helpless for long enough for Kione to grab a cable tie out of her footlocker and bind Sartha's wrists to one of the legs of her bed. It's bolted to the floor; Sartha isn't going anywhere.

"Sorry," Kione tells her with a breeziness she doesn't feel as she shrugs out of her stupid black coat and grabs her sortie gear. "I don't have a choice."

Can't let Sartha go out there. Can't expose her to whatever her monster of a handler has planned. That might be the only win Kione has left on the table.

"Wait..." Sartha wheezes as Kione opens the door to leave. She still can't breathe, not really, but gods know she's trying. You always try too hard, Sartha. "Ki..."

Kione doesn't have time for a goodbye. She knows that. She also knows this might be the last chance she gets.

"I'm sorry," Kione says heavily over her shoulder. "I wish I'd been better. But it's too late. I think this is all I can do for you now."

Kione steps out into the corridor, where alarms are blaring and rebel pilots are already scrambling past her. If Sartha says anything else, it's lost in the din. The door closes behind her.

The hangar is five minutes away from Kione's quarters. She makes it there in two. As promised, her *Theaboros* is fully repaired and ready to go. Kione wastes no time preparing to launch—until she catches sight of *Ancyor*. Not just repaired, upgraded. Kione freezes for a moment. This has to be a joke. Yet another awful, cosmic joke.

Once she recovers from her shock, she finds the nearest rebel mechanic, grabs them by the neck, and shoves them into the wall. "What did you do?" Kione bellows in her face. "What the fuck did you do?"

The mechanic doesn't reply, only flails. Kione backs up once she realizes she's choking her. "Gods," the mechanic gasps, "what the hell are you-"

"What the fuck is this?" Kione thunders, gesturing up at *Ancyor*.

"Huh? Oh." She huffs knowingly, but it soon becomes clear she misunderstands the source of Kione's ire. "Sorry, merc. I know we promised not to copy your homework—but look, you had us procure all those spare parts, and since you already made us get familiar with the tech..."

Kione nods slowly. That makes enough sense to defuse the worst of her irrational paranoia, but as she looks up at *Ancyor*'s new, terrible face before racing across to *Theaboros*, the distant laughter of an unseen Imperial handler still echoes in her ears.

* * *

Dawn breaks falteringly across Leukon Base. Nestled and hidden up in the Orestis Highlands, the light has to creep its way between peaks and through valleys, leaving the small plateau on the base's frontal approach in dappled twilight for long stretches in the evening and morning. The base is a connected web of caves, both natural and artificial, and the above-ground portions that comprise its beating heart face east out across the landscape. The views of the peaks near and far can be spectacular, but on this day the base is cast into shadow by a new mountain, one that belches smoke and cracks the land beneath its colossal feet.

Out of the sun, *Genetor* marches.

Kione has only a passing familiarity with the machine and its pilot. She's heard of Leinth Aritimis, and she once fought alongside her mech at the

Dacian salient. It was big then, a looming, walking bastion that shielded all the rebels following in its path. It's bigger now. The Empire's engineers have not been sparing with their modifications. Slabs of blackened, factory-fresh metal cover *Genetor*'s lumbering frame, bristling exhaust stacks and heat pumps attest to a bolstered reactor, and batteries of heavy-duty weapons adorn every spare surface of its broad shoulders and hulking back. *Genetor* has always been, in Kione's eyes, an ugly brute, but now it's truly monstrous—taller, wider, an unnatural stitching together of rebel ingenuity and Imperial over-engineering. In one hand it clasps a buckler and an axe that could slice *Theaboros* in half with a single blow; in the other, a cannon that could render it to ash with a single hit. All in all, Kione has seen actual fortresses with less firepower. Those rebel sentries probably didn't stand a chance.

Does *Theaboros?*

As she guides her mech down to land on a rocky outcrop, Kione senses the attention of *Genetor*'s pilot fall upon her. The rebels at Leukon Base have a good cohort of pilots and mechs, but they've all been directed elsewhere. *Genetor* is merely the vanguard. In the time it's taken for Kione to make it out here, the hammer has fallen. The attack is coming from everywhere at once. An encirclement. Kione can hear the sounds of distant combat from the surrounding highland slopes, plus plenty of rebel radio chatter attesting to the dire situation. Kione tunes it all out as she switches from the rebel channel over to an open frequency.

"*Theaboros* to *Genetor*," Kione hails. "*Genetor*'s pilot, do you copy?"

No reply.

"Leinth Aritimis," Kione tries. "Repeat: do you copy me?"

The faintest possible crackle comes back to her. It sounds like somebody's there, listening.

"Leinth. Listen to me." Kione decides to take a one-in-a-million shot. "Off The Leash."

Now, buried within the radio static, Kione hears the sound of violent, angry growling. She sighs. She hadn't expected it to work, but still—worth trying, right?

"So you are listening!" Kione says, trying to affect her usual, swaggering confidence. "Didn't realize your master had another one of you. Well, guess what? You better turn around and run with your tail between your legs.

Otherwise, I'm putting you down, mutt."

The growling escalates into a furious string of barks and snarls. Clearly whatever's left of Leinth Aritimis hates that word, and hates Kione for her hubris. Kione tries to hate her back. She'd love to feel any of the cocksure bravado she just hurled at Leinth. Besides, isn't that how it's supposed to go? The brave rebel hero, filled with righteous disdain for her inhuman foes, bravely ventures forth to turn the tide? That'd be a nice thing to believe in. Kione wishes she believed in stories like that. She wishes she believed she could win.

But it's hard to believe in much of anything, standing face-to-face with another of the handler's creations. Kione can picture Leinth now: muzzle on her face, bent forward in her cockpit, snarling at the viewscreen with absolutely no trace of personhood in her eyes. What's the point of having faith in humanity once you know it can be chiseled away, piece by piece, until there's nothing left but obedience and violence? The combination of both is what frightens her the most. Leinth is not a rabid beast. There is a woman holding her leash, and that woman doesn't strike Kione as someone who acts without the certainty of victory. Perhaps Kione's doom is already written in the stars.

Genetor takes another step forward.

Perhaps. But there's only one way to find out. Kione raises the output of *Theaboros*'s reactor, unsheathes her wings, and launches her mech up into the air.

Immediately, things go wrong.

As soon as *Theaboros* clears the ground, *Genetor*'s weapon batteries open up. That's fine. Kione expected this. She also expected she could put on enough speed to evade, and that's her mistake. Too late, she notes the kind of firepower *Genetor* is packing: rotary cannons spitting death a thousand times a minute and larger-caliber guns that fill the air around *Theaboros* with bursting lead fruits and surround the fragile, lightweight mech with blossoming flak clouds. *Genetor* is a walking anti-air platform—and it must have one hell of a targeting suite, judging by the precognitive accuracy of its shots.

Ten seconds of flight, and Kione's already pulling out the truly unsafe maneuvers to avoid being shot down and turned to mince. She makes a

valiant effort to fight for altitude, hoping forlornly that she can escape *Genetor*'s effective range—or that perhaps, Gods willing, it'll have to stop and reload. No such luck. Its onslaught only grows more fierce with each passing second as its tracking computers update and adapt. *Theaboros*'s computers, meanwhile, are screaming at Kione about a target lock. She glances down and sees *Genetor* open up with a pair of missile pods. Dozens of surface-air missiles streak through the air toward *Theaboros*, each payload big enough to blow *Theaboros* out of the sky. There's no evading them, so Kione pulls out an old trick: she kicks up the reactor output again and shunts all the heat to the rear vents.

The SAMs burn up and detonate in Kione's searing exhaust trail mere moments before impact. Surviving isn't a relief, though, not with the flak bursts still coming within inches of *Theaboros*'s wings. The string of expletives that fly from Kione's lips as the missiles rattle her cockpit make for a weak retort. It's clear enough: she's lost the skies. Her only choice is to dive and fight on ground level, where *Genetor* might have a harder time bringing its full armory to bear.

Kione dives hard and makes it back to Earth. Sure enough, most of the dedicated anti-air weapons on *Genetor* fall silent. Kione made the right call—but she can't help but notice the way *Genetor*'s shots at her were all skewing high rather than low. Like it was trying to herd her down to earth.

"Fine," Kione growls. "But fuck you, mine's bigger."

Weapon systems green. Kione snaps her antimatter railgun up on target and fires off a shot. Center of mass. Enjoy, you big bitch.

Genetor isn't as slow as it looks—but it is slow. And Kione is sure that no metal ever forged, however hard, can withstand a metal slug accelerated to ten times the speed of sound by enormous electromagnets. Kione never counts her chickens before they hatch but she fully expects the damage to be catastrophic, especially when she sees that, idiotically, *Genetor* has raised its shield arm in anticipation. Like it's somehow going to block the railgun.

Which is exactly what it does.

The bright, white explosion as the railgun slug hits leaves Kione momentarily blinded—and then stunned, once she sees that *Genetor* is, somehow, still standing. It takes her several seconds and a dedicated scan to appreciate what happened. At the very instant of impact, shaped charges

within *Genetor*'s buckler detonated, creating a directed explosion that shattered its outer layer of armor and produced enough energy to deflect the railgun slug off to one side. *Genetor* itself is entirely unharmed.

That's extremely bad for two reasons.

One, Kione was seriously counting on her railgun for this fight. True, the buckler trick is probably limited-use, but Kione can't fire again until her barrel has cooled off. No guarantee she'll live that long. Two, it's starting to seem like *Genetor* has been fitted out specifically to take down Kione's *Theaboros*. A less specific concern, perhaps, but infinitely more unnerving.

No time to dwell on it. *Genetor* takes another step forward. From behind Kione, rebel gun batteries concealed in the mountainside find their range and open up. Their fire support amounts to little more than a distraction. The few glancing hits they land fail to knock *Genetor* off-balance; *Genetor*'s reply sees each rebel battery fall silent, one by one, each shot with its main cannon expertly placed. Then it turns its attention to *Theaboros* again, autoloaders forming a drumbeat as they ram shells home into the breaches of its many cannons, underscoring the constant rattle of the ammunition belts being greedily sucked into *Genetor*'s vulcans.

Kione should have been grateful for the brief moment of respite the rebels offered her. Should have been making a plan. Instead she's sitting there in her cockpit like a slack-jawed rookie, stunned by how much armor and armament has been piled onto a single mech. Besides, what kind of plan could she have made, really? Kione has been in this fight for two minutes and all her options have already been snuffed out.

All that's left to her is close combat. Kione puts on a fresh burst of speed as *Genetor*'s gunfire begins to fall around her again. She might not be able to fly high, but she can still put *Theaboros*'s wings and boosters to good use, gliding and skating low across the ground, weaving between the great geysers of rock and earth that spout wherever *Genetor*'s shells land.

Leinth Aritimis is a good shot. But she can't keep up with Kione.

As Kione charges she extends *Theaboros*'s spear, its red antimatter glow scalding the air. *Genetor* stands its ground and keeps firing. As Kione closes the range it gets harder and harder to evade the unending barrage of shells; Kione has to pull out every last trick in the book, rolling and pirouetting, throwing *Theaboros* through loops and leaps that are only possible thanks to

its unique ability to defy gravity. Kione's vision contracts as the G-forces take their toll, but she throws caution to the wind and keeps gunning the throttle.

No point in half-measures. This is for Sartha, after all.

Once she makes it close enough, Kione makes *Theaboros* kick off from the ground in a great lunge, speartip thrust forward at supersonic speed. In her mind's eye, she can see it hitting home—straight into the cockpit. In reality, no such luck. It meets with the flat of *Genetor*'s huge axe, sending *Theaboros* spinning off to one side as Kione works to harness its momentum, bringing it around in an acrobatic loop to strike at *Genetor* again from above. But the axe is there too, blocking, then sweeping across Kione's trajectory, forcing her to kill her speed to avoid death.

And then they're dueling.

Each second, each breath, punctuated by the ringing of steel on steel as *Theaboros* and *Genetor* trade blows, Kione's spear meeting Leinth's shield, Leinth's axe meeting thin air as Kione attempts to duck and weave away from the blows. This is not an even fight. *Genetor* towers over *Theaboros*. Gotta be three times the mass, and it's putting it all behind every single swing of that hefty axe.

Parrying is very definitely a last resort.

Kione has a crucial edge when it comes to speed and agility. Not as much of one as she'd hoped. *Genetor* is big but it has the power to match, and its pilot is an expert at turning all of its bulk into momentum. Kione is reminded of crossing blades with Sartha on the bridge. Like then, she can sense a preternatural, animal ferocity lurking within the machine opposite her. It attacks with a furious disregard for itself; reckless, almost, except for the fact that its pilot is operating on the bleeding edge of human capability, pushed past her ordinary limits by a woman in black leather who has refashioned her into a living weapon. Each of *Genetor*'s attacks covers the next: a constant advance, a whirlwind of axe strokes and danger-close mortar blasts that allows little room for ripostes or counter-strokes. Kione shudders as she imagines Leinth now, froth and spittle drooling from her lips as she bends all that's left of her broken will towards Kione's death.

If only Kione had that kind of focus. As she fights, stray thoughts and doubts continue to pick at the edges of Kione's concentration. Doesn't help that she can hear rebel radio chatter filtering into her ears. From the sounds of

it, the battle's going bad. The reports that make it through the Imperial jamming paint a miserable picture. Surrounded on all sides by an overwhelming force that seems to know exactly where they're hiding. More than one desperate cry for help is cut off by an ominous burst of razor-sharp static, and each one of those tugs at Kione's pounding heart.

It's all coming to an end. The closest thing to a home she's had in her adult life as a mercenary. The longest place she's ever stayed. It's burning. It's all burning.

Shit. Maybe she did care a little bit after all.

But Kione can save them. She can stop this. She has to—for Sartha. It's all for Sartha. Kione owes it to her, after all, to do one damn thing right by her. The simple urge to be anything more than someone else who let her down lends Kione strength. It drives her to find a path through *Genetor*'s defenses, weaving her speartip around *Genetor*'s axe and past its defenses to leave a searing scar along one of its arms. Then again, a few moments later. Then again. Each blow is a battle to land, but little by little, Kione ekes out an advantage. Perhaps she's actually going to make it back in one piece.

Back to...

What?

What is left for Kione if she returns triumphant to Leukon Base? Sartha? Hardly. According to her, she'll be in the wind as soon as Kione unties her. Some reward—for this, for everything else. Kione immediately reprimands herself for being so entitled, but... is it really fair? And if she can convince Sartha to stay, what then? They're over, after all. Back to small talk over canteen meals? Kione doesn't know if she can handle that. She doesn't know if Sartha can handle that either.

So what, then? What's Kione's future? Back to itinerant merc work?

That sounds empty. Kione's life is completely empty.

No. Kione clamps down hard on the breakdown before it can truly land. She does not have time for her own fragility. One wrong move and it's all over. As *Genetor* fires off a brace of chest-mounted, air-bursting explosives in a bid to saturate the air around her, Kione tumbles to one side, firing her thrusters to let her skate along the ground beneath the blast zone. It's tempting to back off, to get some distance she can use to restrategize, but Kione knows *Genetor* has the advantage at range.

Nothing to do but plunge back into melee.

To stave off panic, Kione forces herself to use every spare bit of her mental capacity to study *Genetor* for any more nasty tricks or any hidden weaknesses. Not an easy task. It's dripping with auxiliary weapons. No blind spots. No obvious vulnerabilities. The glancing blows Kione has landed have done nothing to slow it down. Mounted on its back, behind the AA defenses, there's other equipment Kione doesn't recognize. Heavy-duty electronics. Looks like comms gear, maybe, but it'd be strange to see such a heavy-duty suite on a siege mech.

What if it's an EMP? Kione needs a plan for that, but it's damn hard to come up with one as she's busy backing up to avoid the flurry of axe swings *Genetor* is throwing at her. *Theaboros*'s electronics are hardened. What if it's not enough? What if it's something new? Kione is panting for breath. Where are her combat stims? No. Shit. She popped a pill just a few hours ago. She'd give herself a heart attack. Can she keep up? It's hard. It's getting too hard. Does she need to risk putting on some distance? Some altitude? She might need it if *Genetor* pulls out something unexpected. What if she goes back and Sartha isn't there? What if Kione does everything right and Sartha leaves her anyway? What if Sartha goes back to her handler?

Fuck. You're doing it again, Kione. Get your head in the-

Genetor's axe swings down and lands at *Theaboros*'s feet. It looks like a clumsy stroke, a chance to retaliate, until it pulverizes the rocky ledge Kione just put *Theaboros*'s weight on. Suddenly she's in the air, wheeling backwards. It's only a dozen or so feet until the ground, but that's a dozen feet of falling in which she can't step, can't jump, can't move properly.

Genetor leaps after her, a mountain in motion. Kione fires all of *Theaboros*'s reverse thrusters, overboosting away, trying to put distance between them at any cost. It works—just.

A horrid, screeching sound rips through Kione's soul as that massive axe slices through the outermost layer of *Theaboros*'s thin armor, mere inches in front of her face. In that moment, her own mortality echoes with each of her frantic heartbeats. In that moment, Kione understands something crucial:

She's going to lose.

Not yet. But soon. Kione has seen a hundred lost battles. She's fighting one now. Her nimble spear strikes mean nothing to *Genetor*. They do not bite

deep enough to matter. The smoking gouges she's left in its armor plates are flesh wounds, nothing more. One or two of the blows managed to reach crucial joints or power couplings, and they meant equally little. *Genetor* has as many redundant systems as it does weapons. Kione could peck it at for hours without bringing it down—and she doesn't have hours. She only has as long as it takes for *Genetor* to land one single, solid blow.

It's hopeless. She's going to lose and she's going to die. As fear claims her, Kione finds herself moving back, back, back. She stops striking at *Genetor*. There's no point. She's going to lose and she's never going to see Sartha again. Sartha, my love...

Fuck that.

No. Kione isn't some panicking rookie. She's seen a hundred lost battles because she's won most of them. She's faced death before, countless times. There has to be something she can do. However desperate. However crazy. However heroic.

Off The Leash? Whoever said Kione couldn't win a girl's heart the old-fashioned way?

The plan comes to her at once. If she's got to put it all on the line, it's obvious how. The mountainside, a few weeks ago. Her wings of light. Force enough antimatter through them, and they'll cut through anything. Even *Genetor*.

Immediately, Kione starts ramping up the reactor output. She's got to be fast or she'll get shredded by anti-air fire on the way up. Fast is fine. Fast is what *Theaboros* was built for. Kione bides her time, just a little. She dances close to *Genetor*, teasing it with victory, tempting the broken animal in Leinth Aritimis's skin to overcommit, ever so slightly, to a strike.

Leinth does. She lurches forward in *Genetor* to deliver a brutal uppercut, one that leaves her momentarily overbalanced. It's by a matter of inches, but that'll have to be enough. Kione takes the opening and rockets herself up into the air, a trail of antimatter burning crimson behind her wings. She's alert, ready to maneuver, braced for the volley of overwhelming firepower that'll be coming her way as soon as *Genetor* has set its sights.

She is not ready for *Genetor* to simply drop its axe, reach up, and clamp its iron grip around *Theaboros*'s ankle.

Oh.

It's over. Just when she thought she was about to pull off something sweet.

Even as Kione guns *Theaboros*'s thrusters, she knows it's useless. Their roar slowly dies into a weak, reedy whine as her reactor overheats and begins to trip its automatic safeguards, shutting down so it doesn't boil Kione in her cockpit. *Theaboros*'s audible struggle is all the bleaker for the impassive ease with which *Genetor* holds her bound. It is mercilessly strong, and its bulk keeps *Theaboros* tethered to the earth. With what little her mech has left to give, Kione wheels, spear raised, hoping against hope that one last blow may prove decisive. It does not land. *Genetor*'s other hand is there to clamp down on *Theaboros*'s arm at the shoulder, paralyzing it.

As *Genetor* drags her down, keeping that firm grip on her spear arm, Kione wracks her brains for anything she might do to save herself. There's nothing. She can't move. It is the end.

She feels it in her own body when *Genetor* reaches up, wrenches its mighty fist, and tears off one of *Theaboros*'s wings.

Then another. Then another. *Theaboros* is slowly, agonizingly dismembered. The senseless, sadistic cruelty of it prompts Kione to hammer at *Theaboros*'s controls for a moment, but her baby can do little more than writhe and squirm in *Genetor*'s fists. The squirming wins her little more than a tightening of the noose; *Genetor* clamps on *Theaboros*'s shoulder hard enough to rupture armor plates and prompt a fresh set of wailing alarms. *Theaboros*'s broken frame bleeds sparks and drools coolant until Kione simply gives up. As one, pilot and mech go limp.

Sorry, Sartha. I fucked it up for you one last time.

Kione isn't sure she has the right to offer a self-soothing apology like that, even in her heart. All she knows is that she really, really wishes she could see Sartha Thrace again one last time. She tries picturing her face, if only to block out the scream of tortured metal each one of her fragile wings makes as it's torn off. Kione wants to see the old Sartha just once. The one from her memories. From before she was ruined.

It's no good. Why can she only picture Sartha Thrace wearing a muzzle?

Maybe it's because that's the only Sartha she deserves. The old Sartha would never have tolerated what Kione has done to her. The old Sartha never would have let Kione hold her and tell her she loves her.

Stupid, useless thoughts for a stupid, useless death. At least it'll be over

soon. With *Theaboros*'s last wing plucked and discarded, *Genetor* holds it firm against the ground and reaches for its axe. Out of the viewing port, Kione sees the weapon raised into the air, ready to deliver mercy. She thinks about herself. She thinks about Sartha.

Before the axe falls, a curtain of raw, bleeding red passes between *Theaboros* and *Genetor*, ripping reality itself in two.

For a moment, Kione entertains the thought that this is simply what death looks like. Or hell, perhaps. A moment later she realizes that her heart is still beating, and that she knows this red. Antimatter. Unshackled, projected forth to annihilate in an uncontrolled stream, the light of subatomic particles ripping each other apart tainted by the subtle, gravitational, redshift pull of the reaction. Blistered by the impossible heat, *Genetor*, barely visible through the antimatter, backs away and hunkers down. Its reactive armor plates are no defense against this. All it can do is use its bulky arms to shield its core, allowing their armor to melt and peel away from its frame like slag.

Kione is saved—but better that she hadn't been. There's only one other machine that can harness this power.

Ancyor.

Kione saw it earlier, in the hangar. She sees it now, as *Ancyor* rises above the horizon, venting coolant from every open manifold. The rebel mechanics cobbled together a second antimatter reactor out of little more than *Theaboros*'s spare parts. Kione thought she'd been careful not to leave them enough to work with; apparently, she underestimated them. Since it's a retrofit, they had no choice but to mount it on *Ancyor*'s back; to compensate, its natural gait has been adjusted to be lower, more hunched, more forward. And *Ancyor* has no railgun. Wouldn't suit it. Sartha always shined the brightest in the thick of the fighting, putting her claws to good use.

Instead, *Ancyor* has been given a new kind of weapon. Its head has been elongated into a canine snout, permitting it to mount a large, actuated antimatter emitter that's fed by glowing conduits bolted all over its outer armor. *Ancyor* has a mouth and it can scream, and its unearthly howl leaves devastation in its wake.

But Kione isn't thinking about *Ancyor*. She isn't thinking about the ghoulish echo of a muzzle that's been rigged up over its once-handsome face. She's thinking about the woman inside.

"Sartha," she weeps into the radio, anguished. Here she is. Kione got her wish, and it's killing her.

'Ki.' She shouldn't be here. Even so, her voice is an indescribable comfort.

"How..."

'Had to gnaw through the cable tie,' Sartha tells her. *'It sucked. But somehow I knew you'd need me to come and save you. Business as usual, right?'*

Her words are brave, but she sounds so very tired. Kione knows Sartha doesn't want to be a hero anymore. Apparently she just can't help herself.

"But you were supposed to..."

You were supposed to run. That's what Kione wants to tell her. You can't be here. You're in danger. Your handler is behind all this. Run. Please, run. Saving Sartha was the one hope Kione had left. The one good thing left to her. A noble final chapter to her sordid story. But there's no point, is there? Sartha Thrace was never one to run from a fight. Not even if you begged her—not that Kione can muster begging. She doesn't want this comfort, but she needs it. Kione has always been weak for Sartha. Leaving her in her quarters took all the strength she had. Now, she can think of nothing but standing at Sartha's side. It's disgusting how happy that makes her, even though she knows that all she's done is put Sartha in danger one last time. She can feel it already, closing in on them. A tightening noose. Kione has a mercenary's sixth sense for when she's walking into a trap.

That's when she notices that *Genetor* is doing something strange.

Its hunched form is blackened and blistered by *Ancyor*'s antimatter howl, but it's still standing. Still, impossibly, in fighting shape. Only, it doesn't look like it's trying to fight. Instead, *Genetor* brings its hand level to its chest. To its cockpit. Kione's eyes widen as she sees the hatch open. Exposing yourself in the middle of combat is so obviously stupid, they don't even bother to teach new pilots not to do it. Through the window of her viewport, Kione catches a glimpse of Leinth Aritimis. Just a glimpse. From this distance her expression is unreadable. All Kione can make out is the metal cage strapped over her face.

Then she sees somebody else. Somebody wearing a long black coat that billows in the high winds as, insanely, she steps out onto *Genetor*'s flat palm and is borne aloft.

It's Her.

Her black, stark outline is as unmistakable as Leinth's muzzle. Kione has only seen this woman before over viewcomms; she recognizes Her at once, but a screen doesn't do Her justice. In the morning's bleak light, Her dark silhouette casts a long shadow; with Her leathers and Her cap and Her long, pale hair that streaks out behind Her in the wind, She is more than a woman. She is a symbol.

Kione's undoing, in the flesh.

For too long, Kione just stares, slack-jawed, as the handler stands, unafraid, fifty feet in the air in the palm of *Genetor*'s hand. Eventually, though, she registers the comms headset beneath Her cap. When She speaks, it becomes clear that *Genetor*'s unusual electronics were comms equipment after all. She is tapped into *Genetor*; it amplifies Her voice, broadcasting it out loud and across every possible radio frequency. Her words are ear-splitting and earth-shaking as She reaches out toward *Ancyor* and speaks in a beckoning, domineering voice as unnatural as it is undeniable.

++SARTHA, MY HOUND. IT'S TIME TO RETURN TO ME++

Her voice is redoubled through Kione's radio in a horrid shriek of static that makes Kione clutch at her ears, her head pounding. Through it all, she hears the dogs howling again. She wonders if this is real. It all seems too much—the insane risk, the absurd performance of it all. But in a moment of lucidity, she understands.

The handler needs Sartha to see Her. She needs Sartha to feel the weight of Her presence.

"No!" Kione shrieks. Her voice seems small and insignificant in comparison, but she has to try. If the handler is doing it like this, if She needs to make sure that Sartha sees Her, then maybe it's not a sure thing. Maybe Kione has a chance. "Sartha, don't listen to her!"

Sartha has not moved. *Ancyor* stands there, little more than a statue. Inside, its pilot is silent.

++YOU'VE DONE VERY WELL, SARTHA. GOOD DOG. I REGRET THAT YOU HAD TO BE WITHOUT ME FOR SO LONG++

Kione tries in vain to block the signal. No good. *Genetor* is, it seems, well-equipped for electronic warfare—and even if *Theaboros* could run interference, the handler's voice is being amplified so loudly that Kione can

hear it clearly even from within in her mech's cockpit. All Kione can do is beg.

"Sartha, please," Kione screams. "Listen to me. You don't need her! I promise, I'll... I don't know. I'll be whatever you want. I'll be better. But don't listen to her. Don't do it!"

The promise rings hollow. How can Kione promise that, after everything she's done? But she has to try. She has to hope that enough of Sartha is left to be able to tell when someone is reaching out to her.

++I KNOW IT'S BEEN HARD. BUT IT'S ALL OVER NOW. YOU CAN COME HOME. LET ME SET YOU FREE AGAIN++

The handler speaks with the gods' own voice. Kione has no idea how she can match it. She only knows that she has to try.

"Please!" Kione pleads. "Yes! Yes, it's been hard! I know. You let me bring you back. You shared every part of yourself with me. Don't throw it all away, Sartha! Home is here! Home is me!"

Her pleas don't matter. Not really. Kione knows what's coming.

"Listen to me," Kione begs again. "Not her. Me! Let me take her place. Let me be what you need."

The only words that count are the three that have been meticulously etched into Sartha Thrace's soul. Kione musters all of herself to speak them one more time. She pours into the words every trace of her adoration for Sartha, and every dreg of the sick desires that first made her give them voice. She screams them more passionately than ever—even as they are drowned out utterly beneath the Handler's augmented voice.

"Off The Leash!"

++OFF THE LEASH++

Nothing happens.

Ancyor sways unsteadily in the wind. Kione can easily imagine Sartha cradled within, tormented by the two women playing tug of war with her free will. Kione must make the most of her indecision. It's embarrassing that it's taken her this long to realize: the handler is right there. Right in front of her. She's as mortal as anybody. *Theaboros* is still operational. Bent, but not broken. With a single stroke, Kione could end Sartha's torment forever. *Genetor* only has one free hand to parry. All it would take is knocking it off balance, just slightly. The fall would take care of the rest.

Kione grabs *Theaboros*'s joysticks and slams them forward. Despite the damage, her mech answers her call. Kione's baby can't fly anymore, but it can move like a thunderbolt. It can lunge forward at her command, spear extended, the distance between her and the handler shrinking to almost nothing in the blink of an eye. *Genetor* hasn't moved. It's too slow. Its pilot, distracted. Kione's going to-

Out of nowhere, something smashes into *Theaboros's side*. Kione braces herself as her mech crumples to the ground. Instinct has her pick herself back without thinking—and that's good, because thinking is suddenly the last thing she's capable of. Kione is already in despair. She already knows what she's going to see once she finds the strength to look up.

Between *Theaboros* and *Genetor*, hunched over, hackles raised, a hound protecting its master.

Ancyor.

"Sartha?" Kione whimpers down the radio, defeated.

A feral growl is her only reply. Then *Ancyor* is upon her.

The only reason Kione lives more than five seconds is that she knows Sartha's moves so well. That keeps her alive by a hair. It's like the bridge, except this time Kione's mech is damaged and Sartha's is fresh. That's not good. It's really not good. What's worse is that Kione isn't fighting to win. How can she? Winning is no longer a possibility. It's only her reflexes that keep her moving—always backward, dodging and deflecting as *Ancyor* lunges and pounces like a starving beast. The rest of Kione's head is a churning mess. A cauldron of vibrant pains—guilt, anger, shame, recrimination—all chasing one another in circles until they blend together into a dark, suffocating hue. One thought, the darkest of all, rises above the rest: it is over. Everything is over. There is no point to anything. She lost. Each time *Ancyor* surges toward her, blades brandished, claws bared, it is an invitation to step into oblivion. All Kione would need to do is stand still.

A more peaceful oblivion than Sartha's, at least.

Kione can't do it. It doesn't matter how much she wants to close her eyes and be nothing at all. Mercenaries don't die that easily. They're worse than cockroaches. At the last moment she always blinks. She's fighting for her life, even if she's fighting for nothing else. Too cowardly to die—maybe that's it.

It's OK. Sartha will save her soon enough. She always was the better pilot.

But the end won't be quiet. Sartha's handler sees to that. As *Ancyor* weaves beneath *Theaboros*'s failing guard, tearing a great gouge from its side and showering Kione in sparks, She begins to speak again:

++MY OPERATION HAD THREE OBJECTIVES. OBJECTIVE ONE, ASSIGNED TO ME BY HIGH COMMAND: TO NEUTRALIZE THE REBEL POSITION IN THE ORESTIS HIGHLANDS WITH MINIMAL LOSSES AND BRING THE TERRITORY UNDER IMPERIAL CONTROL. A FORMIDABLE TASK. BUT SARTHA GAVE US EVERYTHING WE NEEDED. SHE'S BEEN TRANSMITTING INTELLIGENCE TO US FOR SOME TIME++

Oh, Sartha...

She couldn't help it. Kione tells herself that. It's not Sartha's fault. It's Kione's, like everything else. She should've known. Should've seen. An uncomfortable question presents itself: when did it start? Right away? The first time Sartha got back into *Ancyor*? She probably waited until she was under less direct supervision. But was it before or after Kione started using Off The Leash on her? Which is worse? To think that Kione might have made her relapse, or to think that she might've been pretending with Kione all along?

It's a stupid question. They're all stupid questions. The answers as meaningless as the asking. Kione's future is painted only in black.

++OBJECTIVE TWO, DICTATED BY POLITICAL CIRCUMSTANCE: TO DEMONSTRATE THE RELIABILITY OF INDOCTRINATED ASSETS. DETRACTORS HAVE SUGGESTED THAT SUBJECT PROGRAMMING WILL DEGRADE WITHOUT CONSTANT OVERSIGHT. THIS OPERATION IS AN OPPORTUNITY TO PROVE OTHERWISE. OUR METHODS DISTORT THE PRIMARY EGO BEYOND RECOGNITION. SARTHA THRACE IS NO LONGER A REAL PERSON. SHE IS BEYOND SAVING. SHE IS MY FAITHFUL HOUND++

"Shut up!" Kione begs uselessly through tears. She doesn't want to believe it. Or does she? If Sartha could be saved, why didn't Kione save her? If Sartha could be saved, how could Kione have failed her so utterly?

It's easier to believe, instead, that there's nothing left of Sartha. She's putting her all into every merciless attack as she comes at Kione now. No memory of friendship holds her back. No ghost of affection makes her

hesitate. As Kione attempts a half-hearted parry, *Ancyor* leaps up over the spear in a supreme feat of acrobatics. As it's in the air, it fires off its chest-mounted harpoons. Kione fires her thrusters to dodge, but too late, she realizes that they weren't meant for *Theaboros*. The harpoons bite deep into the ground beneath her mech's feet and *Ancyor* immediately starts reeling itself in, using the harpoons like grappling hooks to accelerate its descent. Kione isn't ready for Sartha to land on top of her quite so fast. She stumbles as she boosts out of the way—and for her mistake, *Ancyor* claims another chunk of metal from her shoulder.

It just keeps coming. Each attack flows into the next. It's like Sartha doesn't need to think. Like there's nothing left of her besides violence. The very first time Kione saw her awake after the rescue, in the rebel infirmary, snarling from behind the muzzle—perhaps that was her truest face of all.

++OBJECTIVE THREE, OF MY OWN DESIGN: THE RECRUITMENT OF A NEW ASSET. KIONE MONAX++

The way Kione falters upon hearing that very nearly costs her her life. *Ancyor*'s claws bite even deeper into *Theaboros*'s torso than *Genetor*'s axe did. So much metal is cut away, Kione can see daylight peering through the cracks in the inner cockpit shield.

++YES, KIONE. YOU. YOU HAVE THE POTENTIAL TO BE A FINE HANDLER IF YOUR TALENTS ARE CULTIVATED. YOUR BOND WITH SARTHA IS UNIQUE AND ENLIGHTENING. I BELIEVED YOU MIGHT EASILY BE LED INTO CLAIMING HER LEASH. I WAS CORRECT++

One last hollow laugh slips from Kione's lips. There it is. The final confirmation. All along, this was planned. She has been nothing more than a puppet. It seems so obvious, looking back. Their conversations. The way the handler goaded her. But She can't take all the credit. Oh, no. Kione remembers all too well that she took the first—and worst—steps herself. She was never compelled. Never deprived of her freedom. The handler did little more than pluck the strings that were already within Kione's soul.

All her fault.

++DID YOU EVER WONDER WHY SHE WAS TRAVELING ACROSS THAT BRIDGE ALONE? BECAUSE WE KNEW THAT YOU WOULD BE THERE TO RESCUE HER. DID YOU EVER WONDER WHY YOU FOUND THOSE RECORDINGS IN *ANCYOR*? BECAUSE WE LEFT THEM THERE

FOR YOU TO FIND. DID YOU EVER WONDER WHY HER ACTIVATION PHRASE WORKS FOR YOU AT ALL? BECAUSE I MADE IT SO. I WAS COUNTING ON YOU AT EVERY TURN, KIONE. AND YOU DID NOT ONCE DISAPPOINT ME++

Death has never seemed so inviting. As Kione wields the haft of her spear to bat aside *Ancyor*'s blade, she asks herself: Why? Why prolong her ending? She kicks off from the ground, leaping backward, counting on her mech's lightweight construction to provide her with superior agility.

Why?

It doesn't. *Ancyor* bounds after her, spitting fire from its exhaust stacks. Its reactor is burning white-hot; when it leaps, it pulverizes the ground beneath its feet and moves with impossible speed. As it lands, *Ancyor*'s infernal maw opens and it howls a stream of burning antimatter out over *Theaboros*. Kione throws herself out of the way again, ignoring how many alarms and warnings blare into her disintegrating cockpit, and is lucky to lose only one of *Theaboros*'s hands.

Why?

What is she fighting for? What is her reason to go on?

Self-preservation died the moment she heard *Genetor* was coming for them. Spite no longer has any meaning. The only person Kione hates is herself. So, what? Then, suddenly, it clicks. The one thing she has left to do.

Put Sartha out of her misery.

Nihilism is the only sanctuary Kione has left, and a nihilistic resolve is better than none. All Kione has to do is beat the finest pilot there's ever been, one-on-one. But she's done it before—that day, that duel, back when she naively believed Sartha Thrace just needed to get back in the saddle. It didn't count then, but Kione decides that it does now. She can do this.

After all her retreating, it actually seems to take Sartha by surprise when Kione pivots on a dime from defense to attack. That surprise is exactly the edge Kione needs. She brings her spear down into a low guard as if she's ready to throw all her weight into a great, wide sweep. One last gambit—or so it might appear. *Ancyor* threatens to meet her blow for blow, trusting in its superior strength, but at the last moment Kione wheels around and drives with the blunt butt of her spear. By some miracle, Sartha's strike slips by harmlessly and Kione's hits home. She feels armor plates buckle and

antimatter conduits rupture beneath the blow. It turns *Ancyor*'s momentum aside and sends the beast sprawling to the ground.

Kione does not hesitate. She does not allow herself to think about what she is doing. She prays at once for victory and defeat as she leaps atop *Ancyor*, spear in motion, its tip angled down and pointed straight at *Ancyor*'s cockpit. All Kione needs to do is thrust—but *Ancyor* is still moving. With animalistic vigor, it scrambles upward, fighting for ground, clawing at *Theaboros*, ready to defend itself. Kione doesn't know if her deathblow will land. She doesn't want to know. This is the best chance she'll ever get. That's all that counts.

++SARTHA. HOLD++

At the handler's sudden command, *Ancyor* freezes. It's suicide. It guarantees Sartha's death. With *Ancyor* motionless, there is nothing to stop Kione's spear from piercing through the cockpit and the pilot within.

Except, of course, for Kione herself. Her speartip comes to a halt in the air mere inches from *Ancyor*'s cockpit. It's as far as it will go. Confronted by certain victory, her resolve fails.

Kione can't do it.

With that, a strange calm settles over the situation. There is now no denying that this is a mere facsimile of real combat. Kione is not trying to win. She's barely trying to survive. Her flame has gone out. She is a hollowed-out mannequin of a woman, in a mutilated mech that's barely standing. Peace was the last gift she had to offer Sartha, and she couldn't even manage that.

A shear crack forms at the beating heart of Kione Monax's existence. She achieves nothingness. She is nothing.

And into that nascent void, She speaks.

++KIONE MONAX. YOU HAVE FAILED ON EVERY LEVEL IMAGINABLE. AS A PILOT. AS A FRIEND. AS A LOVER. AS A HUMAN BEING++

She's right. She's always right. Even if Kione wanted to deny it, it would be futile. The handler speaks with absolute authority. There's no point fighting Her anymore.

++ALL THE SAME, A PLACE HAS BEEN MADE FOR YOU. YOU NEED ONLY TAKE THE HAND THAT I OFFER++

And what other option is there? Briefly, Kione considers overloading

Theaboros's antimatter reactor. Who knows how big the explosion might be? Big enough to kill them all, perhaps. Simultaneously damnation for Kione and the handler both.

It's just a fantasy, of course. She can't. Not with Sartha here.

++I CAN TEACH YOU HOW TO BE A PERSON AGAIN. ONCE THIS IS OVER, IT WILL STOP HURTING. FOREVER++

Wouldn't that be wonderful?

Kione thinks about the rebels. They would never consider such a bargain, not even for a moment. Kione is ashamed of herself for having mocked them in her heart all this time. She should have joined up when she had the chance. Sartha gave her a thousand chances, but Kione let each one slip by out of pride and cynicism. Maybe if she'd accepted, this all could have been different. Maybe then she'd have what the rebels have: a strength beyond strength, a spark of resistance that lets them rage against the dying light in defiance of all reason. She can still hear them over the horizon, fighting to the last. Fighting for each other. It's beautiful.

They're so much stronger than her. Kione Monax isn't like that at all.

++YOU'RE IN LOVE WITH SARTHA THRACE. COME WITH ME, AND SHE WILL NEVER LEAVE YOU. SHE WILL NEVER WANT TO++

Sartha. All for her. Always for her. Kione has gotten so used to telling herself that. Maybe it's enough to sustain her, in the life beyond death that the handler offers.

++REFUSE ME AND YOU WILL NEVER SEE HER AGAIN++

That promise prompts a fresh, shuddering sob from Kione's breast. It's more than she can bear. She wants to see Sartha again so very much. She finds herself looking now, but all she can see is *Ancyor*—and *Genetor*, and *Theaboros*. Three metal machines of war. Besides those, there is only Her. She looks strong, standing against the wind. She stands above the chaos in Kione's heart. There is a strength worth having. There is a strength that cannot be refused. In Her black coat and polished boots, she is an embodiment. She is Empire itself. She is the apocalypse tide. She is conquest, the horseman. All this, thanks to Her, was inevitable—and that's a comfort, is it not?

So give in to the inevitable, Kione.

"Yes," Kione whispers, with a voice cracked and broken. Even that fails

her. During the fight, her radio must've gotten knocked out. The handler can't hear her. Somehow, though, she senses Kione's choice.

++DEMONSTRATE YOUR COMPLIANCE. KNEEL++

This is the threshold. Past this, there is no redemption. Kione knows that well. But she already remade herself once, as a teenager. Perhaps she can do so again and find something that passes for happiness as a broken traitor. She looks at *Ancyor* again. Hey, Sartha. At least we'll be in hell together, right?

You didn't want that. But maybe I did. It's what I did to us.

Theaboros is already on its last legs. It takes no effort at all for Kione to guide it down to its knees. Her choice, made. Her loyalty, given. What she is in this moment, she will be forever.

The end.

The handler takes a long moment to drink in the sight of Kione's surrender. Eventually She signals to Leinth, who brings *Genetor*'s palm back down to its chest. The handler turns Her back to Leukon Base and its doomed inhabitants as She steps back into the darkness of *Genetor*'s cockpit.

++TAKE HER, LEINTH. SARTHA, JOIN THE ATTACK. MAKE ME PROUD++

As *Theaboros* shuts down, finally succumbing to its wounds, *Genetor* reaches out and seizes it by the arm. The colossal mech begins to trudge back across the plateau and down the mountain, dragging *Theaboros* along with it, as the woman who had almost been a rebel slumps in her seat and lets a feverish unconsciousness claim her. Behind them, *Ancyor* does not hesitate as it turns toward the nearest sounds of mech combat and lopes forward, looking for something to kill.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Nothing makes Amynta Tet feel good the way being saddled up in the cockpit of a huge mech suit does.

At least not anymore. It used to be that she had other pleasures. Safety. Comfort. Comradeship. Not since Leukon fell. The retreat from the Orestis Highlands has been grueling. No time to share a fire or a bed. Piloting is all she has left. Her mech's cockpit is the only place Amynta feels safe. Here, she is powerful. Here, she can do some good. Fighting the advancing Imperial forces is not safe or comfortable, but bringing safety to others is worth any risk, and there's comfort to be found in every Imperial mech she leaves a burning wreck. Amynta allows herself a rare, rueful smile as she straps herself into her *Daseatus*. That kind of thinking is probably why some of the others have started treating her like some kind of hero. Amynta's reward for spearheading the breakout from Leukon and allowing a few of them to make it out of there with their lives.

Some reward. Amynta has learned the hard way not to believe in heroes.

But for now, the others need to. That's why she does her best to bear it stoically when some of the rookies they've recruited along the way look at her with big, worshipful eyes or ask her if the stories about her exploits are true. It'd be cruel to remind them that she barely has more experience than they do. What else do they have to comfort themselves with?

For three months now, they have been fighting a running, losing battle. Each day they hide, and each night they retreat a little further under the cover of darkness, searching for another rebel group who can offer sanctuary or

resistance. So far, no luck, and the pursuing Imperial force snaps at their heels at every turn—like now. As soon as the alarms sounded, Amynta was scrambling to her mech. Anything to buy the weak and wounded time to escape. She can barely see straight for lack of sleep and she hasn't had a full belly in weeks, but what's one more fight, after all that?

"This is Tet," Amynta calls out over the comms as she flips the overhead switches that bring her mech to life. "Give me a sitrep."

'They're right on top of us!' somebody replies. From the sounds of it, the fighting has already started. Amynta can't imagine their hastily-dug fortifications are doing much good. *'Don't know how they slipped under our proximity scans. Some kind of jamming, I think? Something new. I can't reach our patrols. Can't get a clear picture of anything. And I think I see... wait... gods, is she-'*

Abruptly, the radio cuts off. Amynta has experienced that more times than she'd care to count recently—but this is different. It's like someone else has wrested control of the radio frequency. Instead of silence or the ominous crackle of a burnt-out mech transmitting in its final moments, all Amynta can hear is an unnatural, deafening scream. The impossible sound worms its way into the frequency, transmitting with unbelievable strength, overriding everything else and straining Amynta's radio to breaking point.

Amynta shuts it off to spare herself a headache and immediately switches over to her radar display in the hopes of getting a clearer picture of what's going on. No such luck. It's the same—her radar jammed by a massive, discordant signal that blooms bright red like a spider lily across the EM heatmap. Lidar is the same. Amynta doesn't know what the fuck is going on. She's seen Imperial jamming before, but this is on another magnitude. The power output defies her imagination. It's like they're standing on top of a solar flare.

With a grimace, Amynta shuts off her useless electronics. She's flying blind now, but a single glance out of her viewport shows her where she needs to go. She can see tracer rounds from Imperial *Xiphos* mortar mechs flying overhead. Amynta starts heading for the fighting, and she can see her comrades doing the same. Recognizing Camarina's mech out there brings her a sad smile. The last of her old squadmates. Nese never made it out of Leukon. Amynta feels all those ghosts with her in the cockpit whenever she

pilots. It's heavy—but it's better than being alone.

Then, as she gets a little closer, Amynta sees another ghost coming straight toward her.

Theaboros.

At least it used to be. *Theaboros* has changed, and not for the better. It still has wings but it floats instead of flying, lingering impossibly in the air between each step. Its railgun is gone, and its head now projects upward and backward in the shape of a huge ring that glows crimson with exhaust heat and vented antimatter. Amynta immediately sees it for what it is: a radar disk and the source of the jamming that currently has the rebel force scattered and disoriented. But she's more struck by what it reminds her of. It's like those creatures Amynta remembers reading about in old myths.

An angel. That's it. Amynta is staring at a fallen angel.

Theaboros moves slowly, following behind the advancing Imperial formation in a manner Amynta can't help but think of as arrogant—defying gravity, taunting the rebels with its apparent fragility. Right before Amynta's eyes, one of her comrades takes the bait. A rebel pilot attempts a reckless breakthrough, diving through the Imperial battle line and up at *Theaboros*, firing off every single missile in its arsenal as it does. They streak through the air, dozens of them, each following a slightly different trajectory as they track their target—until they don't.

The radio is still jammed, so Amynta can only watch helplessly as *Theaboros* turns its haloed head to regard its assailant. As soon as its attention falls upon the rebel, the missiles go haywire. Their targeting vectors overwhelmed by massive interference, they fly off in all directions and collide with one another in pairs or trios, detonating harmlessly. Only, one such explosion isn't so harmless. It throws the rebel mech off-balance, leaving it vulnerable as it lunges clumsily toward the floating *Theaboros*.

Amynta wails with grief as a single, casual spear stroke cleaves the rebel mech in half.

No time to mourn. Similar scenes are happening all around her. It's a bloodbath. Cloaked by *Theaboros*'s jamming, the Imperial force pulled off an ambush; now the rebels can't so much as talk to each other to hatch a plan. While their gambit didn't pay off, Amynta's fallen comrade had the right idea. They need to take the angel down.

Instinctively, Amynta knows that Kione Monax is the one in its cockpit. There's nobody else it could be. She knows what happened that day, as Leukon fell. Everybody heard the sick, psychosexual babble being blasted across every comms channel, and plenty of rebels watched from a distance, horrified, as *Ancyor* turned traitor again and *Theaboros* bent the knee. What Amynta doesn't know is why. Was Kione paid off? Was she resentful of Amynta and the others? She certainly seemed that way—and Amynta knows something happened between her and Pela, even if the poor girl gives her a thousand-yard stare whenever Amynta asks about it. Or was she, perhaps, another sleeper agent in their midst, a victim of the same kind of brainwashing that was used on Sartha Thrace?

Amynta shakes her head to brush away those thoughts. It doesn't matter. As she switches all her targeting over to manual and begins to pick her way through the fighting towards *Theaboros*, Amynta Tet reflects that the reason changes nothing about what she must do now. She learned her lesson from Sartha Thrace. There are no heroes and no redemptions. Even if it's not her fault, Amynta only has one thing left to give to Kione Monax. The same thing the ghosts at her side demand of all the Empire's dogs.

A good death.

* * *

"I love you, Kione. I think I've always been in love with you, I just wasn't ready to say it back. But you've always been special to me. There's never been anybody in my life like you, Ki."

Sartha Thrace speaks, and all the stars in the cosmos sing with her.

Kione sees them now, floating at the hero's back. Her own personal aurora. Countless pinpricks of starlight, each twinkling in time with Sartha's words. An irresistible harmony. A love song from the stars themselves.

Kione ignores it. She counts the beats of her own heart as it pounds in her ears. It's so very fast. That's no surprise, although it is a shame. There's so much weakness Kione has yet to shed.

"I know I hurt you," Sartha says. Her voice is more beautiful than ever, and perfect in its sincerity. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. Never again, I promise. I just

want to be with you—together, in love. Don't you want that too?"

Only a statue could fail to be moved to tears by such a profession of love. Kione isn't made of stone. She feels the tears stain her cheeks. She feels Sartha's words tug at her heartstrings. But she sees, too, the deeper truth. The one that counts. The one that's staring her in the face, as dark as the stars are bright. Sartha Thrace is a black hole. It's all she ever was and all she will ever be. It's how she has the gravity to hold the stars in their orbit. Sartha is nothingness collapsing into itself. Her words are empty.

"Please." Sartha leans in close—so close, nobody else could possibly hear her. "Take me away from here. Save me, Kione. I want to be free. I want to be all yours forever. I love you so much. Nobody can save me but you."

Kione cannot help but try to reply to her. She wants to say yes. She wants to meet every grand declaration of love with one of her own. When she opens her mouth, a thick wad of drool falls to trickle down the collar of her jumpsuit.

"I love you—and I need you." Sartha's voice takes on a breathy, lust-stained note. Slumped back in the chair, Kione cannot stop Sartha from clambering into her lap and straddling her with unmistakable eroticism. Sartha's muzzle brushes against her ear as she whispers everything Kione ever wanted to hear. "Won't you fuck me again? Please, Ki. I'm desperate for you. Nobody else can make me feel so good. I'm begging you. I'll do anything for you. Don't I turn you on?"

She does. Of course she does. No girl has ever done it for Kione like Sartha Thrace. Kione feels her body hearkening to the wet-dream promise in Sartha's voice. Blood flows to her loins, and a throbbing tent forms in her jumpsuit. Sartha coos as she notices, and makes no attempt to hide her intentions as she stretches back to rub her ass against Kione's cock. Kione lets out a weak, lurid groan. Her body burns with longing for Sartha.

But she doesn't fuck dogs. So instead, she makes herself think about meat.

Everything is meat, and Kione herself is no exception. The pounding of her heart, the mechanical swelling of her arousal, the way her brain hearkens to the sinister green drug she pumped into herself—these and a thousand more biological processes add up to form a human being. But a human being is nothing more than an animal. Humanity is little more than meat begetting meat through the instinctive satisfaction of its inane cravings.

Humans are no better than dogs. That is the handler's first secret.

The second is that it is possible to be more. To be a person rather than a dog. To rise above. To hold the leash—and the first leash Kione must hold is her own. She must see herself in all her ugliness. So she counts the beats of her heart. She notes dispassionately each breath. She dissociates from herself, and the sheer strangeness of that brief, out-of-body experience fills the animal called Kione Monax with disgust. She must put a stop to this unseemly, humiliating rutting. She must put this dog in its place. The only tool Kione needs is her own will. With great effort, she pulls the strings of the drugged, insensate meat-puppet she inhabits. She moves the lungs, and the tongue, and the lips, and though it is not elegant, she manages to say what must be said.

"Sartha," Kione drools. "Off The Leash. Get down."

As quickly as it appeared, all that love and lust drops away from Sartha's face. Then more—then everything. They were lies, just like each and every moment of Sartha's life in which she pretends to be more than a drooling wretch. Faithful to Kione's command, she slips out of her lap to kneel on the ground in silent obedience. The itching cravings of meat recede. Kione returns to herself. She has vanquished this falsehood. She has passed the test. Through her drugged, starlit haze, Kione allows herself to enjoy a moment of satisfaction and quiet.

Until the slow clapping of gloved hands pierces the silence anew.

"Well done," Handler pronounces. "Handler Kione."

The three of them are in a room deep underground beneath the Imperial base. There are dozens of rooms down here, if not hundreds. A labyrinth. The Kennels have been Kione's home for months. Her home—but not her prison. Handler made that perfectly clear from the start. The only thing keeping Kione here is the fact that if she runs away, she'll never be able to come back. It's more than enough.

Not that Kione wants to leave. Not when she has so much to gain by staying. Her curious apprenticeship has consisted of endless lessons, demonstrations, tests. Kione has grown more than ever. She has been reborn here, beneath the earth. It hasn't been easy, of course; Kione can't count the tears shed or the hours spent staring at herself in the mirror, frothing with guilt and uncertainty. She looks at the floor, where the syringe of liquid starlight Handler offered her slipped out of her hand after she injected herself. This isn't the first time she's been drugged, either. Sunlight, sanity, and

friendship have all grown strange to her.

But it's worth it. It's worth it. It has to be worth it.

Handler beckons to her and Kione rises to her feet. She's a touch unsteady, but the drug is beginning to wear off and without Sartha in her lap she can get her bearings. As she stands she almost trips from the weight of her black leather coat. Another of Handler's gifts. She's not used to wearing it yet, but she will be soon. It fits her perfectly, after all. Kione stands at attention to receive another gift: a badge of rank, pinned to her collar. With that, it is official.

She's an Imperial handler.

"Follow me," Handler instructs, turning Her back. "There's something more. Come along, Sartha. On The Leash."

Kione follows Handler out of the Kennels. It's not her first time—they've sent her on sorties already—but it's her first time like this. As a higher being. The Imperial personnel they pass as they exit up into the cavernous hangar bay note her new rank with unease. Despite the mutinous resentment in their eyes each one defers to protocol, standing stiff and offering Kione a perfect Imperial salute. It's funny; the Imperial penchant for saluting and 'sir'-ing is something she always used to laugh at. It seemed so pointless. Now Kione knows better. Now she understands that each of the soldiers saluting her is, at heart, no better than a rabid dog. Kione still hears barking all the time. It reminds her: human beings cannot be permitted to run free across the surface of a precarious Earth. They must all be leashed; pretensions like rank and uniform are adequate enough for those born into domestication.

Isn't Kione herself the perfect proof of her new ideology? When she was off the leash—so to speak—what did she make of her coveted freedom? Nothing. Less than nothing. She ruined herself and Sartha both. Unforgivable. Now she gives thanks for the collar on her neck, and she'll expect it for each collar she places on others. Now she works for the betterment of all mankind.

There's no sense dwelling on her past sins, is there? It was only human nature.

Handler leads Kione and Sartha upward until the three of them reach the large, suspended walkway that passes through the hangar at cockpit height. As they pass through the forest of faceless, identical *Doru*s, Kione can't help but spare a moment to admire her own mech, marked out from the pack in

vibrant red. She's started to come around on the Imperial refit that Handler insisted on. A handler who is a pilot is, it seems, unusual. Her ability to oversee hounds directly whilst in combat is valuable—so valuable, Handler has firmly discouraged the kind of suicidal acrobatics Kione has become known for.

Her babygirl has been overhauled accordingly. Less flight time. No more huge railgun that redlines the reactor with every shot. Kione misses it a bit, but the new electronic warfare suite has done much to make it up to her. The antimatter reactor's power output allows for an awful lot of awfully high-spec equipment to be crammed into the strange disk that now forms the mech's head. It's the same kind of tech *Genetor* was using that fateful day, but infinitely more refined. Kind of boring to be relegated to back-of-the-battlefield command and control duty, but Kione quickly found ways to pull off some fun, sadistic little tricks with targeted jamming and brute force hacking. After a few missions, she loves her rebuilt beauty more than ever. She's taken to calling it the *Theaboros Archon*.

They walk on. Exiting the hangar bay, they head for the holding cells. The military ones, used for captured rebels of all stripes. The Kennels are only for the select few who win Handler's attention; those in the Imperial military who revile her methods insist on a careful separation and on making her requisition her desired assets through official channels and tedious paperwork. Handler turns to Kione as they reach one of the featureless rooms used for processing fresh catches.

"Wait here. I will finalize the transfer arrangements."

"Yes, sir." Kione salutes and watches as Handler sweeps out of the room—leaving her alone with Sartha.

In months of Imperial custody, Handler has been careful not to leave Kione and Sartha alone together. Always one of her people in the room. Always watching—but not now. Kione's struck by the preciousness of the moment. Who knows when it might come again? Kione has to use it well. She has to ask.

"Sartha," she begins haltingly.

"Sir?"

It feels strange to hear Sartha calling her that. It feels kind of awful, actually. But there's no helping it. Kione is a handler—even if she'll never be *her*

handler.

"Those things you said back there," Kione ventures. "You didn't mean them, did you?"

Sartha just looks at her, eyes as wide and guileless as any puppy's. "I'm not sure what you mean, sir."

Kione shivers. Sartha is often like this now that she's back at Handler's side. She lives inside a shrinking dream of herself, conscious of little more than the task given to her and the praise waiting for her. Gods know how many hours she spends in a state of complete, blissful dissociation between missions. It is impossible to tell whether she remembers what happened mere minutes ago—but Kione needs to be certain.

"You told me you loved me," Kione reminds her. "You told me you wanted me. Is that true?"

"I did?" Sartha's foggy eyes widen for a moment. She's drooling a little behind her muzzle. "I'm sorry, sir."

"Never mind apologies," Kione replies quickly. Who knows how long they have? "I just need to know if you meant it. You... you begged me to save you. You asked me to take you away. Is that what you want?"

Something within Sartha stiffens—some instinct, driven deep into her skull by merciless conditioning. "I would never want to be separated from Her."

It's a conditioned response. Kione can tell. She needs to pry deeper.

"But if it was me. If you could have me instead. Would you want-" Kione cuts herself off. She hangs her head. Not this again. She's setting herself up for the exact same fall. "Never mind. She just told you to say those things, didn't She?"

"Did She?" Sartha echoes numbly. She knows nothing. She is nothing.

"Yes," Kione decides, hardening her heart once more. "It was a test, after all. She fed you a script. That's all it was."

Something passes over Sartha's face for the briefest of moments. A pang of recognition. A moment of grieving. It looks like she wants to say something. Perhaps even reach out. Perhaps even shed a tear. The moment passes. It's like it never happened. Kione decides it didn't. The starlight drug is still wearing off.

That settles it. No regrets. Something else presses on her, though.

Something else that demands to be said in this precious moment.

"I'm sorry," Kione blurts out. She finds herself shaking as the words leak from her in an unbridled rush. "I'm sorry for everything. For how I treated you. For what I did to you. I..."

I brought us here. I sealed both of our fates. I snuffed out every last hope that you could heal or that the two of us could truly be together. I deserve to die. I deserve to be hung upside down and put on display as an example of what's coming to every single idiot, traitor, failure, collaborator who can't look past the end of their own dick or their own overbearing need to be loved by-

No.

Kione cannot allow herself to think these things. Not now, not ever. If she does and if they're right, she'd fall apart all over again. Kione does not have the strength for that, which means they have to be wrong and she should not think them. It's as neat and tidy as that. It really is embarrassing that such falsehoods threaten to make her voice tremble and her eyes well up with tears. Wouldn't do for Handler to see her like this. That could jeopardize all the rewards Kione has won as Her apprentice—as hollow and bitter as they seem, in the strange mood that has suddenly claimed her. So, Kione tells herself: reach for your mask. You know the one. The one you always put on after you've done something wrong. Wear it properly. Wear it with pride. Wear it until there's nothing left behind it.

Kione draws herself upright. She lets her emotions drain away and her face slump into a bastard's grin. Handler has shown her how. All is right with the world.

"I'm sorry, Sartha," Kione begins again. Her familiar, cocksure facade comes to her so naturally it barely feels like she's pretending. "For ever trying to treat you like a person. Stupid of me, really. Just look at you. But don't worry, puppy. I won't ever make that mistake again. That's a promise. You're exactly where you belong." Her sardonic smile widens until her face aches. "Duh."

Trapped in her waking dream, Sartha does not truly understand. All the same, she welcomes the abuse. Her empty eyes fog over with bliss, and her muzzled face relaxes into an expression that speaks of nothing at all. Yes, they're both exactly where they belong.

The door opens. "She is ready," Handler says as She returns. "Follow me,

Kione. Sartha, wait here."

Kione follows Her, leaving Sartha behind. Beyond lies a long corridor lined with cells, each marked by a large, heavy-duty security door with a number stamped into it. The corridor goes on a long way; Kione wonders how many cells are filled. She wonders if any of them are filled with faces she'd recognize. Then she decides to stop wondering. She's getting better and better at that.

"I think you're ready for one of your own," Handler tells her as they walk. "Do with her as you see fit. I have confidence in your instincts."

"Not Sartha, then?" Kione tries to keep the hope out of her voice.

"Not Sartha." From behind Her, Kione can see Handler's thin smile. "But you're welcome to visit my hound as often as you require."

So that's Kione's leash. No sense pretending it won't work.

"I was pleased we could recover this specimen from your deployment earlier," Handler continues. "I gather you have some history with her. That can be either an asset or a hindrance. Make it an asset. Exploit her familiarity and her passion. Remember your lessons."

"Yes, sir." Kione remembers it all. Ego totems. Psychographic profiles. Pharmaceutical textbooks and photo-neuroablative techniques. Even strange theories about the falsehood of souls. Things she cannot unlearn. It's all part of her now.

"Here." They reach cell forty-nine, where an Imperial soldier is waiting for them. She salutes, then unlocks the door. It opens with a loud, metallic clunk. "Savor it," is Handler's last piece of advice. "There is nothing quite like your first."

Kione heeds Her words well as she steps across the threshold and recognizes the person inside. She doesn't feel guilty. She refuses to let herself feel even the slightest shred of guilt. She's wearing her mask—the smug mask, the cruel mask, the cold mask. The mask she'll wear until it's the only face she has.

The woman in the cell recognizes her too, even though she can barely raise her head to see her. She's on her knees, straitjacketed and bound in a painful, bent-over pose by a set of eight taut straps that attach to anchor points on the walls, leaving the rebel unable to move even an inch. She's wearing a muzzle—not the light, mostly symbolic kind Sartha wears, but a thick, sturdy,

heavy-duty cage, painted black and marked with hazard symbols identifying her as a dangerous militant. She remains silent as Kione enters, but the eyes that glare up at Kione from beneath the rebel's messy, bloodied hair scream pure hatred. Kione shivers ecstatically at the expression of loathing and defiance. Yes! Hate me! I deserve it.

And I can use it.

Kione reaches into one of the pockets of her black coat and produces a small vial. This is not the starlight drug—disodium isoseratrin, as she now knows it—but merely something to begin softening the mind. Kione reaches down through the muzzle's bars from above to pinch the rebel's nose and wrench her head upward. When she opens her mouth to breathe, Kione pours the vial's contents out onto her tongue. The rebel does her best to cough it up, of course, but some of it trickles down her throat all the same. Kione giggles a little at the violent look on her face and the dumb, guttural, animal sounds she makes as she chokes. She'd almost forgotten how fun this could be. A petty pleasure? Certainly, but if she'll never be her best self, why not be her worst? Isn't that a kind of victory?

Isn't that the only kind of victory?

"Hey, radio girl," Kione calls out, sing-song, to Amynta Tet. To the woman she's going to ruin. "Guess I'm finally getting you that drink after all, huh?"

AFTERTHOUGHT: LEINTH

"You win, Leinth. Well done."

The five sweetest words in all the world. The words for which Leinth Aritimis would kill and die. The words around which she has rebuilt herself. Pursuit of them has driven her into her *Genetor*'s cockpit again and again, has made her fight harder and crueler than she ever did when the lives of her comrades were on the line. Leinth does not have comrades anymore. She has her Handler and she has Sartha, her packmate. She has the game that they play. Winning means exaltation. Losing means the pain she deserves, and the forgiveness that follows. Nothing else matters.

"You win, Leinth. Well done."

How blissful those words sounded. How hollow they became.

As soon as Sartha was gone, it went sour. For a few deluded days, Leinth luxuriated in the fantasy that she might take her place as Handler's beloved. As Her most faithful. Without Sartha to show her up, why shouldn't she enjoy victory after victory—and the ensuing rewards?

Stupid. Naive. It should have been obvious. Winning only counts if there's real competition.

Without Sartha, winning was meaningless. Winning was numb. Oh, Handler still offered her those sweet words—but winning didn't warm her the way it should. Even the reward of her boot brought little satisfaction. Leinth has now realized: winning isn't enough. She needs to be better. She needs to put that so-called hero of hers in her place. Without Sartha, it was all empty.

Worse, without Sartha, Leinth was left alone to bear all the groping hands and ravenous mouths of the Imperial pilots she fights alongside. They demand satisfaction. They demand to humiliate her. It doesn't matter if Leinth is a winner; if there's no loser for them to fuck, Leinth must play the role. An indignity she's familiar with, certainly, but that didn't make it burn any less.

Worst of all, even from afar, Sartha was the apple of Handler's eye. Leinth can tell. She is infinitely attentive to Her every mood. While she would not say Handler has been neglectful of her—not that, never that—it's undeniable that Her attention was elsewhere. Not on the other candidates filling the kennels' cells. Not on the strange projects Her Imperial masters have assigned to Her. Certainly not on Leinth. She gave each of them their proper time, of course—but She took Her greatest pleasure in reviewing Her files on Sartha and her rescuer, in dissecting Her sparse communications with them, and in refining Her plans for what came next. Even when there's nobody at Her side but Leinth, Leinth is not Her favorite.

And there was nothing she could do about it. Nothing but pour out all her misery and bitterness into whatever foes Handler sent her against, on far-flung battlefields carefully chosen to keep her out of the way of Handler's plans. There, Leinth fought like a demon. She has honed her soul into a sharp, pointed thing, without room for hesitation or regret. It grows thinner and sharper with each sortie, and she is a better pilot than ever. Desperation has always lent Leinth strength, and it turns out that desperation to please is a better ally than desperation to save ever was. Unburdened from the need to act as a shield to others, Leinth can unleash *Genetor*'s true potential. It's like a landslide: unstoppable, devastating, and three times faster than anyone believes possible. Leinth wields her colossal mech suit with a rare deftness, and she has long since lost count of the enemy machines that have been crushed beneath its feet.

But it was not enough. It's never enough.

When Leinth was briefed on the assault on Leukon Base, she thought her moment had finally come. When she held that irritating red peacock of a mech in *Genetor*'s grasp and broke its wings, she felt true victory at hand. Sartha might be Handler's favorite—but Leinth brought Sartha home. Shouldn't that count for something? Surely with Sartha back, the old system would reassert itself—but with Leinth on top. She would receive the

untainted blessing of Handler's boot, and Sartha the role of Imperial stress relief.

Still so stupid. Still so naive. No such good fortune, of course. Sartha returned as much the golden girl as she left. Handler lavished attention upon her during her extensive reconditioning, and much of Her remaining time was spent with the other prisoner. The one Leinth quite literally dragged back to base in ignominy. And for Leinth herself?

Nothing. No reward. No special favor. With Sartha back, she's even stopped winning. She is second best, once again.

Two wolves gnaw on the rotted strings in Leinth's heart. One is violently angry. Not with Handler—never with Her—but with Sartha. It's all her fault, isn't it? It's her fault for leaving, and her fault for coming back. Her fault for being so damn perfect all the time. Her fault for leading Leinth astray and taking her place in the spotlight. Somehow, deep down, Leinth knows that everything has always been Sartha's fault. If only she could kick her like the dog she is.

The other is violently guilty instead. It is true, after all, that Sartha is better than Leinth. As a pilot, as a hero. If only Leinth could be so perfect—but she isn't. She's riven through with faults and imperfections. If only she could fix them. If only she could reach inside herself and carve them all away, one by one, until she's as sleek and perfect as Sartha Thrace. But since she can't, the punishment and the neglect is only right. It's what she deserves. It's what Leinth Aritimis always deserves.

Snarling and snapping at each other over every meager scrap of her soul, the beasts consume Leinth utterly. Their struggle keeps her preoccupied during the long spans of barren time between sorties. There are other distractions too, of course. Meals. Tests. Training exercises. Neuro-conditional maintenance. But those only eat up so much of the day. The rest of the time, Leinth sits patiently in the Kennels. She listens to Handler's music: songs from the long-dead past, played on an old, crackling player. The music puts her into a stupor that keeps boredom and forbidden thoughts at bay. Listening to that music, Leinth can sit for hours and hours as identical days pass by in a blur, thinking of nothing at all, and letting her two wolves eat her heart until there's nothing left.

Then one day Kione Monax comes waltzing into the rec room.

Leinth knows of the mercenary by combat and reputation but It's the first time she's seen her in the flesh, save for a few glimpses from across the hangar bay as they dismounted after Leukon. Then she had seemed so ashen and haggard, no better than a ghost. The Kione that Leinth sees now is both more and less. It's clear that Kione takes a lazy, indulgent pleasure in the way her dark coat streams out behind her as she walks—and in the contrast between the black of its leather and the crimson of her jumpsuit, and in the menace commanded by that handler's pin she wears so insolently on her collar. She relishes her power and her status. Her every step is an arrogant peacock's strut, but she reminds Leinth more of some little poisonous creature, her bright colors and bold manner the aposematic warning of a danger that is all too real. Like Leinth, Kione has been whittled away to a fine point, sharp and deadly—but accordingly, there is a certain thinness to her being. A shallowness. Perhaps only somebody who has been dismantled like Leinth has could see it. Perhaps Kione's keen awareness of it is why she makes such a performance of herself.

"Wow," Kione snorts as she looks around the room and begins laughing. "You really do live like this. Amazing."

She's talking to Leinth, it seems. There's nobody else here. Leinth can't figure out what's so funny, though. "Huh?" she says, annoyed.

"You don't see it?" Kione snorts again, a decidedly ugly sound. "You can't! She really did a number on you."

"What are you talking about?" Leinth snaps.

"These crappy, sheet metal walls?" Kione runs a hand over the nearest one. "The shitty lights? All the old Thrace propaganda posters? Hell, it's just like Leukon!" She turns to leer at Leinth, an awful, slouching smirk on her face. "They built you your own fake little rebel barracks."

"That's not... it's..." Leinth frowns. Her head starts to throb. It's just a normal room. A normal barracks. Isn't it? "What are you talking about?"

"Oh, perfect," Kione purrs sadistically. "You can't even think about it, can you?"

A little whimper escapes Leinth's throat. Of course she can—unless she can't. There are some things she isn't supposed to think about. Leinth knows that. She always keeps them out of her mind. She's always on her best behavior. Is this one of those things? Leinth isn't sure. It's just a normal room.

Right? Never mind that the other rooms on the base are nothing like it. It's a perfectly normal room.

"Amazing," Kione wolf-whistles appreciatively. "A whole room like this, just to keep you from ever thinking about what side you're really on."

Something within Leinth begins to froth over. Who does this bitch think she is? Waltzing in here in a uniform she doesn't deserve, talking to Leinth that way? Kione might outrank her, but they're way beyond military protocol. Leinth doesn't have to take this lying down.

"And what about what side you're on?" Leinth spits viciously. "Merc."

More laughter, maddeningly. "Oh, this is gonna be good!" Kione snorts. "Come on, then. Let me have it. Tell me how you really feel, Leinth Aritimis."

Leinth stands up and cracks her neck. Nothing would give her greater pleasure.

"Mercenaries like you," she growls, "are nothing more than gods damned parasites. Leeches, looking to drain whoever's got the most to give—or whoever can't say no." More laughter. That does nothing but piss Leinth off even more. "Your type always has a nose for desperation. Always turning up when we can't quite afford to turn you away. And what does it cost? Oh, just all the precious resources we've spent months on end painstakingly salvaging and stockpiling. Every merc is offering the same deal: win the battle, lose the war. Disgusting."

Kione strikes a little pose, all but cackling with mirth. "Yeah. I'm disgusting. Sure."

"You're the worst of them!" Leinth snarls. "A mercenary and a traitor! What's the matter with you? The money wasn't enough? You took Sartha away, and now you're dressed like... like that. You're nothing like Her! You're just a fucking traitor."

Still, Kione laughs. She seems to swell in stature with each piece of malice Leinth hurls at her, until she snags on a particularly juicy morsel to toss back into Leinth's face.

"A traitor?" Kione replies with distinct pleasure. "And who exactly did I betray, hm?"

"Us!" Leinth exclaims. It's obvious. "The r-"

She freezes. A short leash snapping taut. Her own tongue threatens to choke her. There it is. One of those things she cannot allow herself to think.

"What's the matter?" Kione twists the knife, her face leering larger and closer. "Hound got your tongue?"

"Shut up!" Leinth spits, but she can't summon the venom. She finds herself sweating feverishly.

"See, it's funny for you to lecture me about sides and allegiances," Kione purrs. "You don't know the first thing about what side you're on. You don't know anything about yourself. But I do."

Leinth's head feels like it's splitting in two. She'd give anything for Kione to stop talking right now.

"Asset Aritimis's fixation on Asset Thrace has remained a key psychological pillar throughout her reconditioning," Kione quotes. "Attempts to reconcile her admiration for Thrace with her disappointment at Thrace's current status have been artificially stunted. Asset's natural predisposition for feelings of guilt and responsibility have been successfully grafted to her self-conception as a responsible party in Thrace's psychological breakdown. Her guilt complex now forms a stable equilibrium with her desire for cathartic anger-release. Recommended ego levers: forgiveness, superiority, guilt complex reconfirmation, religious upbringing, gender euphoria—see other transgender subjects." Kione trails off as she finishes quoting. "See? I know you inside and out."

"Shut up," Leinth whimpers. Kione words keep making her head throb anew. Her mind contorts itself desperately to try to erase the forbidden knowledge it has just received, leaving Leinth seeing strange auras in the peripheries of her sight.

"C'mon, puppy," Kione wheedles. "I asked you a question. Who'd I betray? C'mon! You can put the pieces together! You've got this!"

"Hnggh," Leinth drools. An answer beats itself to the front of her overtaxed brain: Handler. She is the only person any of them are truly forbidden to betray, after all. That would make sense of her hatred for Kione. But it doesn't seem right; there is another answer, or at least the shape of it, but Leinth is not permitted to grasp its substance.

"And how about this, huh?" Kione reaches out and raps obnoxiously on the tip of Leinth's muzzle with her gloved knuckles. "What is this? Why are you wearing it? Do you even know that?"

"I..." Words stir in the base of Leinth's brain stem. "It's what I deserve! For

hurting Sartha! You'd wear one too, if you had any shame." Pride swells in her, as false and artificial as the words she speaks. It makes perfect sense to her and Leinth cannot help but expect praise for supplying the right answer—and cannot help but be disappointed when Kione simply continues mocking her.

"Oh my god. You really are fun! All wound up around yourself." Kione licks her lips. "I can't wait to get my fingers in your head."

"Fuck you." Leinth bristles instinctively at the suggestion. For all her anger and all her guilt, she still has a little pride. Handler is a living goddess. She has a right to Leinth's devotion—She, and nobody else. "You're even more wretched than me."

Kione laughs again. "Not what it says right here, babe." She taps the triangular badge on her collar—a fist, dangling a muzzle from above. "And you're going to be a very good dog for me, whether you like it or not. It's simply the way of the world. I'm better than you. Enjoy it! I can be sweet, I promise. Just ask Sartha."

As Leinth's headache abates, anger, thick and bloody, rushes to fill the gap. She needs to wipe that smirk off this bitch's face. And she knows exactly how. "You're better than me? Funny. That didn't seem to stop me ripping you out of the sky and plucking you like a slaughtered chicken, did it?"

Kione stops laughing. Her face darkens. "Excuse me?" she warns.

Leinth doesn't heed her. Feeling Kione's overinflated ego crumple beneath the blow is far too satisfying. "That's another thing about mercs. Never quite the pilots you wish you were, right? Especially not when it counts. All that fancy tech, and you couldn't land a scratch. So which of us is better, really?"

It feels good. Really, it does. The pleasure lasts until Kione speaks again, her voice full of familiar promise. "You know," Kione says dangerously, "you really shouldn't speak to me like that, Leinth."

Normally, Leinth would spit in the face of anyone in uniform telling her something like that. Not now. Suddenly Kione sounds different. Behind the theatricality lies the sharpness, now bared at Leinth's throat.

Why does this awful woman suddenly sound so much like Her?

"Fuck you," Leinth repeats. The defiance is instinctive, but her bravado is already gone.

"You should be careful," Kione warns again. Her anger is real—and so is

the threat. Leinth already regrets her taunts. Any pilot who lives long enough has a sixth sense for deadly situations. Hers is screaming. “You should speak to me with respect.”

Respect? Leinth can’t imagine respecting a woman who’s gotten this mad over a jab at her piloting. But that’s the old Leinth talking, and the old Leinth hasn’t mattered for a long time. The old Leinth is just a thin shell over the dog that remains, and the dog has long since learned a harsh lesson. There are only two kinds of people in the world: handlers and hounds. And Leinth knows what handlers can do.

“You can’t...” Leinth says quietly. A futile prayer. She refuses to accept that this awful, petty woman has this power over her.

“I can,” Kione promises menacingly. “She’s been working my voice sample into your conditioning for weeks.”

She doesn’t sound like she’s lying. Maybe Kione doesn’t need to lie anymore, not ever. Like Her. But that can’t be.

“Wanna put it to the test?”

Leinth shakes her head. This isn’t right. The great chain of being as she knows it is suddenly precarious. Surely this scumbag merc isn’t so far above her. “You can’t...”

Kione draws herself up, resplendent in her smugness, and speaks slowly to savor each and every one of the words that shred Leinth’s soul. “Leinth. Off The Leash.”

It works.

Leinth fights harder than she has in a long time to cling to the broken fragments of herself. Handler has, after all, preserved in her a certain, stubborn pride. It’s a useful thing, for a pilot. The thought of submitting her very personhood to someone like Kione Monax stirs her from the doldrums of fatalistic acceptance she’s spent months now languishing in. Leinth fights the way she fought the first few times, making an anthem, a mantra, of her simple refusal: not like this. Not like this. Not like this.

But another of the harsh lessons she’s had to learn is that all the faith in the world won’t save her down here, in the kennels. You cannot refuse reality, and the fact that Leinth Aritimis is no longer a person was etched deep into the world by the hand of an exquisite craftswoman. Kione is not Her, but she sits at Her right hand. She is permitted to wield Her chisel, and when She

rams it home into Leinth's brain, her stubbornness and pride endure for no more than a heartbeat. They are fractured, shattered, forgotten—just like all the rest of her.

Leinth Aritimis goes away, and the Hound wakes. More wretched than ever.

"There we go," Kione coos, surveying Leinth's obliteration with cloying interest. "Isn't that a better look on your face?"

Hound says nothing. A discontented, embarrassed whine passes her throat. She now understands the blasphemy she has committed.

"Yes," Kione purrs. "You get it now, don't you? But let's make sure. Sit."

It's automatic. Hound doesn't need to think about it for even an instant. She drops to her knees in fervent obedience.

"Good dog," Kione giggles. She reaches down and pets Hound's head with a strange, sudden fondness. Hound stretches up into the touch, grateful for it despite herself. "On The Leash."

As suddenly as she went away, Leinth crashes back into herself. She closes her eyes, opens them again, sees Kione's face, and wishes she was dead. It's not the impossible, infuriating smugness writ large on the former mercenary's face, as bad as that is. It's what Leinth suddenly feels towards Her.

Crushing, all-encompassing, awestruck reverence.

"You know, I didn't come down here on a whim," Kione tells her proudly. "She sent me. Said she wanted the two of us to get properly acquainted. After all, if I'm gonna supervise you in the field, you need to understand the proper pecking order."

Leinth nods. "I'm sorry, sir," she whimpers. The guilt falls across her like a familiar cloak. It's comforting, in a way. Beneath the anguish, there is something irresistibly, miserably affirming to it. It feels natural. It feels right. "I didn't..."

"No, you didn't," Kione agrees, with smooth menace. "But you've learned. Kicked dogs always do."

Again, Leinth nods. She experiences, in real time, the complete reorganization of her own thoughts and feelings. Kione is a handler—a superior being. That is a fact, as undeniable as the fact that the sun rises and sets. Everything else bows to it. Leinth's earlier attempts to stand up for herself are recast, in her mind's eye, as senseless, inexcusable insolence.

Kione's wheedling and mockery as Her perfect right. There is a second power in heaven, as cruel as Handler is kind. The cosmic dualism of this new paradigm settles comfortably across Leinth. Within moments, it seems perfectly natural. There must be punishment as well as reward, and any punishment this new goddess hands down is justice incarnate. She owes Leinth nothing, and Leinth owes Her everything. Leinth might not like it. But it is the truth.

"Yes, sir," Leinth replies dully. "I've learned."

"Good. You know, I was really hoping the two of us could get along." Kione places Her foot forward and uses the tip of Her boot to guide Leinth's knees apart. "After all, not many girls like us around here."

With Leinth's legs spread, Kione presses the tip of Her boot against the faint bulge at the front of Leinth's jumpsuit. Leinth lets out a gasping, rapturous moan. She cannot resist a handler's touch. Even the scent of boot polish is enough to elicit a Pavlovian response. Leinth's hips betray her, and she rolls them in sudden, shameless eagerness. Kione laughs again, and even Her laughter feels like a blessing.

"What do you think?" Kione says. "Girl talk? Painting each other's nails? Trying on each other's clothes?" Her face twists. She reaches down and fondles Leinth's jumpsuit. "Guess not. You couldn't bear to trade in one of your precious ego totems, even if you'll never understand why. You're just an animal. Nothing more."

Leinth gasps and throbs. Kione's degrading words pound in her ears. They feel so right. They make the shame of her earlier transgressions burn all the hotter. A need rises in her, eclipsing all else. "Please, sir," Leinth whimpers. "Forgive me."

"Oh, there it is!" Kione remarks sardonically. "Poor little guilty Leinth. Maybe I will. You'll find that I'm not exactly like Her. I have my own way of doing things. I'll make you work for it. But I can be generous, too." She glances down and licks Her lips. "Take off your jumpsuit. To the waist, at least."

Leinth practically jumps at the chance to obey. She unzips her jumpsuit and peels it as far away from her body as she can. Beneath, all she's wearing is a tank top and underwear. She's already hard, of course. Kione's boots did that to her. Kione seems to enjoy the sight.

"And those." Kione indicates Leinth's underwear. "To one side."

Leinth does as she is bid, releasing a sound that is at once a moan and a whine. This is not what she needs—but it doesn't matter. Attention from a handler is like sparks to kindling.

"Good dog," Kione tells her. Against all reason, those two words of praise prompt Leinth to giggle euphorically. "And good dogs get treats, don't they?"

Before Leinth can answer, Kione lifts one foot a few inches into the air and places it down carefully on Leinth's cock. Not hard—Kione keeps her foot at just the right height, so that the sole of her boot applies gentle, insistent pressure on Leinth's cock. Leinth lets out an immediate, loud gasp and arches her back as pleasure shoots through her. The stimulation the coarse leather provides doesn't feel good, exactly—except it does, it feels transcendent, because it's a handler doing it. Better yet, it's a treat! Kione said so. She's a handler. Handlers are always right.

"Go on, Leinth," Kione jeers. "Do what comes naturally."

Leinth obeys, and starts fucking Kione's boot.

The space between the sole of Kione's boot and the floor forms a perfect little slot for Leinth to press her cock in and out of with each movement of her hips. The pleasure is blinding—how could it be anything less? This is a blessing. Divine magnanimity. Leinth's animal instincts force her to avail herself, and the sheer bliss she experiences with each ugly, uncoordinated thrust welds her loyalties tighter and tighter to Kione. Within moments, Leinth is in heat—but she's fighting to hold back. There's something else she needs.

"P-please!" Leinth moans. "Forgive... me."

It's more important. Without that, the guilt within Leinth will grow and grow, a poisonous seed, knotting around her chest tighter and tighter until it brings her to collapse. Without forgiveness, Leinth will stew in her shame endlessly. Handler condemns her to that only as the most severe of punishments, and Leinth has not deserved one of those in quite some time.

"Forgive you?" Kione muses. "I'm not so sure. Is that really what you want, puppy?"

Leinth nods frantically, but her moans betray her. Her brain is being scrambled over and over again by her own urgent, whimpering thrusts. She can't stop to think, and she can't think to stop. Her brute, animal urges drive her onward, forcing her to pitch forward, propping her torso up with her arms

and grinding her hips low against the ground for a more favorable angle.

She doesn't care how dumb she looks or how loud Kione laughs. Leinth Aritimis is a bitch in heat. She needs whatever feels good. But she needs forgiveness too. It's just difficult to keep it straight in her head. Leinth's superego was torn to shreds a long time ago. Restraint is foreign to her, and with Kione egging her on, she's a slave to her own cock and Kione's bootheel.

"P-please," Leinth gasps on the cusp. "F... fff... rrfff... rrruffff..."

'Forgive me'—that's what she's trying to say, as she lapses into humiliating, animalistic grunts. To come like this, with her sin still as heavy as lead in her belly, would reduce Leinth to a wreck. Such an act of indulgence would be truly unforgivable, but her body doesn't care. Even as she whines and yips in protest, her hips work overtime to grind her cock beneath Kione's boot. A great tension within her is hitting its limit.

"Well, let's see," Kione says languidly, as Leinth begins to see white. She looms over her, imperious and invincible, and imbues Her next words with pointed significance. "Maybe. But I wonder... which of us is actually the better pilot, Leinth?"

The absolute pettiness of Her question completely fails to register with Leinth. She can no longer perceive Kione's flaws. All she sees is a lifeline, and she takes to it with the eagerness of a woman drowning.

"Y-you are!" Leinth howls, desperately clamping down her pleasure for a few more precious moments in the hope of salvation. "You! You! Youuuu!"

"That's right!" Kione cackles, a child-goddess drunk on Her own power. As Her mood waxes, it brings with it mercy. "Good dog. I forgive you."

That's all Leinth needed to hear. A wordless howl signals the limit of her endurance. She gives one more heaving thrust, and spills her seed all over the ground. Kione sniffs at her and carefully lifts her boot away from the mess. Then she giggles, and reaches down to pet Leinth again. "See? I told you I can be nice."

Leinth nods, her gratitude infinite. She is rewarded. She is forgiven. It's all she ever needs. Deep at the back of her brain, resentment and bitterness beat like a drum. It's enough to make her tear up in frustration—but she will not listen to those feelings. With the ease of long practice, she shoves them back down into the abyss. She blinks away the tears.

"Thank you, sir," Leinth bleats quietly, a dull, blissful smile spreading

slowly across her face. “Thank you.”

The gratitude is the truth of her. The gratitude is binding. From now on, she is Handler Kione’s obedient dog.

“You’re welcome, puppy.” Kione messes her hair. “I knew the two of us would get along! I can’t wait to introduce you to Amynta. She’s doing so well. In fact, I must check on her. It wouldn’t do for her to be without me for so long. She gets so protective, you see.”

Leinth shudders, although she does not know why.

Kione turns to leave, but pauses at the last moment. She turns back to Leinth, and the smile that breaks across Her face as She indicates the puddle of thin, white liquid spreading across the ground is brighter and crueler than ever before.

“You win, Leinth. Well done. Now lick that up.”

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