

Rescue Hound

CHAPTER THREE

Kallie

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 Thrace'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 around the terrible repercussions of what she has done.

They both wanted it. Didn't they? It was hardly out of character for Sartha. And 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 has put in Sartha's head.

Restful sleep isn't coming. And Kione is 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 cursed 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 writhing 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 try and 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 knew 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 seemed to stare through the screen and through time, 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 inward and downward, inexorably, 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. It 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 is 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 the implications staring her in the face. The stay of execution she's received isn't comforting. It's horrifying. 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 thousand pressures and had a million 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 need somebody to take notice.

Until now, apparently.

"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 completely right. I need to try harder. Gotta get my head back in the game." She looks across the table at Kione hopefully. She's 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 open. “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 her instruction. “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 very 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 hooked up, 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. 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, Ki. 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 that 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 just... 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 brainwasher 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. There's only so much time she can spend wringing her hands, with Sartha at her side. It feels like a waste. Sartha is doing well, isn't she? Even the doctors think so, and they'd know. 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 it seems like 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, doesn't it? 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. That's weird. 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 turned on 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 great. "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 knows she's a great top. She doesn't get as much feedback about being a bottom. Sartha's the only woman in a position to give it. Clearly, Kione's ass is quite the prize.

It's desperately tempting to throw herself at Sartha already. 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. "Y-you're joking, right?"

"No." Sartha shakes her head. She's blushing and embarrassed, but something else is moving through her too, compelling her to hold the muzzle out reverently toward Kione like an offering. "I-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 has 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, but the muzzle is between them. Kione steps back. That thing terrifies her.

“Why not?” Sartha protests.

“Holy shit, Sartha!” 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: 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.”

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, yeah? 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 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. "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."

"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 dotting adoration will be over.

"You want me to be all yours, right?" 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?"

"Gods!" 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?"

"B-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 up at Kione, eyes shining, breath coming in wet 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 light-headed. 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. Cause 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.

“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-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 the morning, and morning is so far away. Not having to think and be strong until morning would feel amazing.

“O-Off... The...”

“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 she's like a lost child, as she looks at the merc.

"Not like this," 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 it's been 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 fear, 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. Damn her, 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—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 Thrace. 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 a sign of the broken, needy, hollowed thing she encountered in her quarters just minutes before.

Fuck. This is going to be a disaster.

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 blasted landscape to war.

Single file, they follow the bed of a long-dried river that crests

several nearby hills as it leads away from the rebel position. It's the kind of thing few imperial map-makers 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 light-bulb 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 scornful but even over the crackling comm link, Kione can tell she's smiling.

I have a name, you know, she retorts.

"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. That's 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. Another 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 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 two 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 said a single word.

Everybody get in cover and pick your targets. Before they leave our kill

zone. Get ready. On my mark.

Kione obeys without a word. This is no time for her smart mouth. She unholsters *Theaboros*'s rifle 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 passing the closest point their path will take them 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.

Now! 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 jezzail 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. Even now, it seems.

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 rifle in its hands with antimatter. Turns out, that stuff is good for more than just floating. Turns out, 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. Trying to withstand it 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.

That's why—as usual, when things get rough—Kione is thinking 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 Kione can't leave Sartha behind, of course. Especially not now.

While she's fighting to formulate some kind of plan, 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. Moments later, her mech's torso is simply gone. The legs are left to topple over like dominoes.

Well, shit.

Kione grits her teeth. The odds are awful and getting worse. Sitting tight isn't going to help. But the thing is, Kione knows she and Sartha have been through worse. As bad as it is, they can do this.

All they need 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 has 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 hot-shot 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 anti-matter, 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 works—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. 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 coming 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, even after everything, Kione can't shake 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, and 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, a husk has its uses. That imperial handler clearly knew as much. Now Kione's learning the same lesson. And 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 to try and 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 ants. *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 dependency 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 ride it out. 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. *Dorus* have basic CQC capabilities, but those do nothing at all to keep them from being ripped apart by *Ancyor*'s hulking limbs as the hellhound of a mech ducks, weaves and leaps through their fields of fire without taking a scratch. A predatory spider amongst the ants. 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.

And 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 the 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 message? 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.



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