

RESCUE HOUND

CHAPTER TEN

Kallie

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. “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, the distant laughter of an unseen imperial handler echoes in her ears.

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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. Just not talking.

"Leinth. Listen to me." Kione decides to take a one-in-a-million shot. "Off The Leash."

Now, buried within the radio crackle, 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 anything 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.

Great. 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 to the ground.

“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 starts contracting 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 gloves 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 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 re-strategize, 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, 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," Sartha replies. 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 brash and 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 blasted and blackened 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, insanelly, she steps out onto *Genetor's* flat palm and is lifted 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 gear 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 seems to speak with the gods' 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 last 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.

It'd be 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:

++OBJECTIVE ONE OF THE RESCUE PROJECT, 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: TO DEMONSTRATE THE RELIABILITY OF INDOCTRINATED ASSETS. DETRACTORS HAVE SUGGESTED THAT SUBJECT PROGRAMMING WILL DEGRADE WITHOUT CONSTANT OVERSIGHT. THIS OPERATION IS AN OPPORTUNITY TO DEMONSTRATE OTHERWISE. OUR METHODS DISTORT THE PRIMARY EGO BEYOND RECOGNITION. SARTHA THRACE IS NO LONGER A REAL PERSON. SHE IS BEYOND SAVING. SHE IS MY 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 display of balance and agility. It comes crashing down on *Theaboros* feet first, its weight threatening to crush the slender mech as it lands. Kione fires her thrusters to dodge but without her wings, she's off-balance. She stumbles—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: THE ACQUISITION 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 EXHIBIT A FASCINATING
PSYCHOGRAPHIC PROFILE. 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 TRIGGER 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?

Ah, there it is. 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 on the horse. It didn't count then, but Kione decides that it does now. She can do this.

After all this 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. They have a strength beyond strength, a fire 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++

Hearing that 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 its arm. The colossal mech begins to trudge back across the plateau and down the mountain, dragging *Theaboros* 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.

RESCUE HOUND

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Kallie

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