

RESCUE HOUND

AFTERTHOUGHT: LEINTH

Kallie

“You win, Leinth. Well done.”

The five sweetest words in all the world. The words for which Leinth Aritimis would kill and die. The words around which she has rebuilt herself. Pursuit of them has driven her into her *Genetor*’s cockpit again and again. It has made her fight harder and crueler than she ever did when the lives of her comrades were on the line. Leinth does not have comrades anymore. She has her Handler and she has Sartha, her packmate. She has the game that they play. Winning means exaltation. Losing means the pain she deserves and the forgiveness that follows. Nothing else matters.

“You win, Leinth. Well done.”

How blissful those words sounded.

How hollow they became.

As soon as Sartha was gone, it went sour. For a few deluded days, Leinth luxuriated in the fantasy that she might take her place as

Handler's beloved. As Her most faithful. Without Sartha to show her up, why shouldn't she enjoy victory after victory—and the sweet rewards that follow?

Stupid. Naive. It should have been obvious. Games only count if there's real competition.

Without Sartha, winning was meaningless. Winning was numb. Oh, Handler still offered her those sweet words—but winning didn't warm her the way it should. Even Handler's reward brought little satisfaction. Leinth has now realized: winning isn't enough. She needs to be better. She needs to put that so-called hero of hers in her place.

Without Sartha, it was all empty.

Worse, without Sartha, Leinth was left alone to bear all the groping hands and ravenous mouths of the imperial pilots she fights alongside. They demand satisfaction. They demand to humiliate her. It doesn't matter if Leinth is a winner; if there's no loser for them to fuck, Leinth must play the role. An indignity she's familiar with, certainly, but that didn't make it burn any less.

And worst of all, even from afar, Sartha was the apple of Handler's eye.

Leinth can tell. She is infinitely attentive to Her every mood. While she would not say Handler has been neglectful of her—not that, never that—it's undeniable that Her attention was elsewhere. Not on the other candidates filling the kennels' cells. Not on the strange projects Her imperial masters have assigned to Her. Certainly not on Leinth. She gave each of them their proper time, of course—but She took Her greatest pleasure in reviewing Her files on Sartha and her rescuer, in dissecting Her sparse communications with them, and in refining Her plans for what came next.

Even when there's nobody at Her side but Leinth, Leinth is not Her favorite.

And there was nothing she could do about it. Nothing but pour out all her misery and bitterness into whatever foes Handler sent her against, on far-flung battlefields carefully chosen to keep her out of the way of Handler's plans. There, Leinth fought like a demon. She has honed her soul into a sharp, pointed thing, without room for hesitation or regret. It grows thinner and sharper with each sortie, and she is a better pilot than ever. Desperation has always lent Leinth strength, and it turns out that desperation to please is a better ally than desperation to save ever was. Unburdened from the need to act as a shield to others, Leinth can unleash *Genetor's* true potential. It's like a landslide: unstoppable, devastating, and three times faster than anyone believes. Leinth wields her colossal mech suit with a rare deftness, and she has long since lost count of the enemy machines that have been crushed beneath its feet.

But it was not enough. It's never enough.

When Leinth was briefed on the assault on Leukon Base, she thought her moment had finally come. When she held that irritating red peacock of a mech in *Genetor's* grasp and broke its wings, she felt true victory at hand. Sartha might be Handler's favorite—but Leinth brought Sartha home. Shouldn't that count for something? Surely with Sartha back, the old system would reassert itself—but with Leinth on top. She would receive the blessing of Handler's boot, and Sartha the role of imperial stress relief.

Still so stupid. Still so naive. No such good fortune, of course. Sartha returned as much the golden girl as she left. Handler lavished attention upon her during her extensive reconditioning, and much of Her remaining time was spent with the other prisoner. The one Leinth had quite literally dragged back to base in ignominy. And for Leinth herself?

Nothing. No reward. No special favor. And with Sartha back, she's stopped winning. She is second best, once again.

Two wolves gnaw on the rotted strings in Leinth's heart. One is violently angry. Not with Handler—never with Her—but with Sartha. It's all her fault, isn't it? It's her fault for leaving, and her fault for coming back. Her fault for being so damn perfect all the time. Her fault for leading Leinth astray and taking her place in the spotlight. Somehow, deep down, Leinth knows that everything has always been Sartha's fault. If only she could kick her like the dog she is.

The other is violently guilty instead. It is true, after all, that Sartha is better than Leinth. As a pilot, as a hero. If only Leinth could be so perfect—but she isn't. She's riven through with faults and imperfections. If only she could fix them. If only she could reach inside herself and carve them all away, one by one, until she's as sleek and perfect as Sartha Thrace. But since she can't, the punishment and the neglect is only right. It's what she deserves. It's what Leinth Aritimis always deserves.

Snarling and snapping at each other over every meager scrap of her soul, the beasts consume Leinth utterly. Their struggle keeps her preoccupied during the long spans of barren time between sorties. There are other distractions too, of course. Meals. Tests. Training exercises. Neuro-conditional maintenance. But those only eat up so much of the day. The rest of the time, Leinth sits patiently in the kennels' rec room. She listens to Handler's music: songs from the long-dead past, played on an old, crackling player. The music puts her into a stupor that keeps boredom and forbidden thoughts at bay. Listening to that music, Leinth can sit for hours and hours as identical days pass by in a blur, thinking of nothing at all, and letting her two wolves eat her heart until there's nothing left.

Then one day Kione Monax comes waltzing into the rec room.

Leinth knows of the mercenary by reputation but It's the first time she's seen her in the flesh, save for a few glimpses from across the hangar bay as they dismounted after Leukon. Then she had seemed so ashen and haggard. No better than a ghost. The Kione that Leinth sees now is both more and less. She moves with an air of purpose, but it's clear too that Kione takes an indulgent pleasure in the way her dark coat streams out behind her as she walks, at the contrast between the black of its leather and the crimson of her jumpsuit, at the menace commanded by that handler's pin she wears so insolently and unworthily on her collar. Her every step is an arrogant peacock's strut, but she reminds Leinth more of some little poisonous creature, her bright colors and bold manner the aposematic warning of a danger that is all too real. Kione is sharp. Like Leinth, she has been whittled away to a fine point, sharp and deadly—but accordingly, there is a certain thinness to her being. A shallowness. Perhaps only somebody who has been dismantled like Leinth has could see it. Perhaps Kione's keen awareness of it is why she makes such a performance of herself.

“Wow,” Kione snorts as she looks around the room and begins laughing. “She wasn't kidding. You really do live like this. Amazing.”

She's talking to Leinth, it seems. There's nobody else here. Leinth can't figure out what's so funny, though.

“Huh?” she replies, annoyed.

“You don't see it?” Kione snorts again. A decidedly ugly sound. “You can't! She really did a number on you.”

“What are you talking about?” Leinth snaps.

“These crappy, sheet metal walls?” Kione runs a hand over the nearest one. “The shitty lights? All the old Thrace propaganda posters? Hell, it's just like Leukon!” She turns to leer at Leinth, an awful, slouching smirk on her face. “They built you your own fake

little rebel barracks.”

“That’s not... it’s...” Leinth frowns. Her head starts to throb. It’s just a normal room. Isn’t it? “What are you talking about?”

“Oh, perfect,” Kione purrs sadistically. “You can’t even think about it, can you?”

A little whimper escapes Leinth’s throat. Of course she can—unless she can’t. There are some things she isn’t supposed to think about. Leinth knows that. She always keeps them out of her mind. She’s always on her best behavior. Is this one of those things? Leinth isn’t sure. It’s just a normal room. Right? Never mind that the other rooms on the base are nothing like it.

It’s a perfectly normal room.

“Amazing,” Kione wolf-whistles appreciatively. “A whole room like this, just to keep you from ever thinking about what side you’re really on.”

Abruptly, something within Leinth begins to froth over. Who does this bitch think she is? Waltzing in here in a uniform she doesn’t deserve, talking to Leinth that way? Kione might outrank her, but they’re way beyond military protocol. Leinth doesn’t have to take this lying down.

“And what about what side you’re on?” Leinth spits viciously. “Merc.”

More laughter, maddeningly. “Oh, this is gonna be good!” Kione snorts. “Come on, then. Let me have it. Tell me how you really feel, Leinth Aritimis.”

Leinth stands up and cracks her neck. Nothing would give her

greater pleasure.

“Mercenaries like you,” she growls, “are nothing more than gods damned parasites. Leeches, looking to drain whoever’s got the most to give—or whoever can’t say no.”

More laughter. That does nothing but piss Leinth off even more.

“Your type always has a nose for desperation,” she goes on. “Always turning up when we can’t quite afford to turn you away. And what does it cost? Oh, just all the precious resources we’ve spent months on end painstakingly salvaging and trading for. Every merc is offering the same deal: win the battle, lose the war. Disgusting.”

Kione strikes a little pose, all but cackling with mirth. “Yeah. I’m disgusting. Sure thing.”

“You’re the worst of them!” Leinth snarls. “A mercenary and a traitor! What’s the matter with you? The money wasn’t enough? You took Sartha away, and now you’re dressed like... like that. You’re nothing like Her! You’re just a fucking traitor.”

Still, Kione laughs. She seems to swell in stature with each piece of malice Leinth hurls at her, until she snags on a particularly juicy morsel to toss back into Leinth’s face.

“A traitor?” Kione replies with distinct pleasure. “And who exactly did I betray, hm?”

“Us!” Leinth exclaims. It’s obvious. “The r-“

She freezes. A short leash snapping taut. Her own tongue threatens to choke her. There it is. One of those things she cannot allow herself to think.

“What’s the matter?” Kione twists the knife, her face leering larger and closer. “Hound got your tongue?”

“Shut up!” Leinth spits, but she can’t summon the venom. She finds herself sweating feverishly.

“See, it’s funny for you to lecture me about sides and allegiances,” Kione purrs. “You don’t know the first thing about what side you’re on. You don’t know anything about yourself. But I do.”

Leinth’s head feels like it’s splitting in two. She’d give anything for Kione to stop talking right now.

“Asset Aritimis’s fixation on Asset Thrace has remained a key psychological pillar throughout her reconditioning,” Kione quotes. “Attempts to reconcile her admiration for Thrace with her disappointment at Thrace’s current status have been deliberately stunted. Asset’s natural predisposition for feelings of guilt and responsibility have been successfully grafted to her artificial self-conception as a responsible party in Thrace’s psychological breakdown. Her guilt complex now forms a stable equilibrium with her desire for cathartic anger-release. Recommended ego levers: forgiveness, superiority, guilt complex reconfirmation, religious upbringing, gender euphoria—see other transgender subjects.” Kione trails off as she finishes quoting. “See? I know you inside and out.”

“Shut up,” Leinth whimpers. Kione words keep making her head throb anew. Her mind contorts itself desperately to try to erase the forbidden knowledge it has just received; doing so leaves Leinth seeing strange auras in the peripheries of her sight.

“C’m on, puppy,” Kione wheedles. “I asked you a question. Who’d I betray? C’m on! You can put the pieces together! You’ve got this!”

“Hnggh,” Leinth drools. An answer beats itself to the front of her overtaxed brain: Handler. She is the only person any of them are

truly forbidden to betray, after all. That would make sense of her hatred for Kione. But it doesn't seem right; there is another answer, or at least the shape of it, but Leinth cannot let herself grasp its substance.

"And how about this, huh?" Kione reaches out and raps obnoxiously on the tip of Leinth's muzzle with her gloved knuckles. "What is this? Why are you wearing it? Do you even know that?"

"I..." Words stir in the base of Leinth's brain stem. "It's what I deserve! For hurting Sartha! You'd wear one too, if you had any shame."

Pride swells in her, as false and artificial as the words she speaks. It makes perfect sense to her and Leinth cannot help but expect praise for supplying the right answer—and cannot help but be disappointed when Kione simply continues mocking her.

"Oh my god. You really are fun! All wound up around yourself." Kione licks her lips. "I can't wait to get my fingers in your head."

"Fuck you." Leinth bristles instinctively at the suggestion. For all her anger and all her guilt, she still has a little pride. Handler is a living goddess. She has a right to Leinth's devotion—She, and nobody else. "You're even more wretched than me."

Kione laughs again. "Not what it says right here, babe." She taps the triangular badge on her collar—a fist, dangling a muzzle from above. "And you're going to be a very good dog for me, whether you like it or not. It's just the way of the world. I'm better than you. Enjoy it! I can be sweet, I promise. Just ask Sartha."

As Leinth's headache abates, anger, thick and bloody, rushes to fill the gap. She needs to wipe that smirk off this bitch's face. And she knows exactly how.

“You’re better than me? Funny. That didn’t seem to stop me ripping you out of the sky and plucking you like a slaughtered chicken, did it?”

Kione stops laughing. Her face darkens.

“Excuse me?” she warns.

Leinth doesn’t heed her. Feeling Kione’s overinflated ego crumple beneath the blow is far too satisfying. “That’s another thing about mercs. Never quite the pilots you wish you were, right? Especially not when it counts. All that fancy tech, and you couldn’t land a scratch. So which of us is better, really?”

It feels good. Really, it does. The pleasure lasts until Kione speaks again, her voice full of familiar promise.

“You know,” Kione says dangerously, “you really shouldn’t speak to me like that, Leinth.”

Normally, Leinth would spit in the face of anyone in a uniform telling her something like that. But not now. Suddenly Kione sounds different. Behind the theatricality lies the sharpness—the sharpness that’s now bared at Leinth’s throat.

Why does this awful woman suddenly sound so much like Her?

“Fuck you,” Leinth repeats. The defiance is instinctive, but her bravado is already gone.

“You should be careful,” Kione warns again. Her anger is real—and so is the threat. Leinth already regrets her taunts. Any pilot who lives long enough has a sixth sense for deadly situations. Hers is screaming. “You should speak to me with respect.”

Respect? Leinth can't imagine respecting a woman who's gotten this mad over a jab at her piloting. But that's the old Leinth talking, and the old Leinth hasn't mattered for a long time. The old Leinth is just a thin shell over the dog that remains, and the dog has long since learned a harsh lesson: there are only two kinds of people in the world.

Handlers and hounds. And Leinth knows what handlers can do.

"You can't..." Leinth says quietly. A futile prayer. She refuses to accept that this awful, petty woman has this power over her.

"I can," Kione promises menacingly. "She's been working my voice sample into your conditioning sessions for weeks."

She doesn't sound like she's lying. Maybe Kione doesn't need to lie anymore, not ever. Like Her.

But that's not... that can't...

"Wanna put it to the test?"

Leinth shakes her head. This isn't right. The great chain of being as she knows it is suddenly precarious. Surely this fucking merc isn't so far above her. "You can't..."

Kione draws herself up, resplendent in her smugness, and speaks slowly to savor each and every one of the words that shred Leinth's soul.

"Leinth. Off The Leash."

And it works.

Leinth fights harder than she has in a long time to cling to the

broken remnants of herself. Handler has, after all, preserved in her a certain, stubborn pride. It's a useful thing, in a pilot. The thought of submitting her very personhood to someone like Kione Monax stirs her from the doldrums of fatalistic acceptance she's spent months now languishing in. Leinth fights the way she fought the first few times, making an anthem, a mantra, of her simple refusal:

Not like this. Not like this. Not like this.

But another of the harsh lessons she's had to learn is that all the faith in the world won't save her down here, in the kennels. You cannot refuse reality, and the fact that Leinth Aritimis is no longer a person was etched deep into the world by the hand of an exquisite craftswoman. Kione is not Her, but she sits at Her right hand. She is permitted to wield Her chisel, and when She rams it home into Leinth's brain, her stubbornness and pride endure for no more than a heartbeat. They are fractured, shattered, forgotten—just like all the rest of her.

Leinth Aritimis goes away, and the Hound wakes.

More wretched than ever.

"There we go," Kione coos, surveying Leinth's obliteration with drooling interest. "Isn't that a better look on your face?"

Hound says nothing. A discontented, embarrassed whine passes her throat. She now understands the blasphemy she has committed.

"Yes," Kione purrs. "You get it now, don't you? But let's make sure. Sit."

It's automatic. Hound doesn't need to think about it for even an instant. She drops to her knees in fervent obedience.

“Good dog,” Kione giggles. She reaches down and pets Hound’s head with a strange, sudden fondness. Hound stretches up into the touch, grateful for it despite herself. “On The Leash.”

As suddenly as she went away, Leinth crashes back into herself. She closes her eyes, opens them again, sees Kione’s face, and wishes she was dead.

It’s not the impossible, infuriating smugness writ large on the former mercenary’s face, as bad as that is. It’s what Leinth suddenly feels towards Her.

Crushing, all-encompassing, awestruck reverence.

“You know, I didn’t come down here on a whim,” Kione tells her proudly. “She sent me. Said she wanted the two of us to get properly acquainted. After all, if I’m gonna supervise you in the field, you need to understand the proper pecking order.”

Leinth nods. “I’m sorry, sir,” she whimpers. “I didn’t...”

The guilt falls across her like a familiar cloak. It’s comforting, in a way. Beneath the anguish, there is something irresistibly, miserably affirming to it. It feels natural. It feels right.

“No, you didn’t,” Kione agrees, with smooth menace. “But you’ve learned. Kicked dogs always do.”

Again, Leinth nods. She experiences, in real time, the complete reorganization of her own thoughts and feelings. Kione is a handler—a superior being. That is a fact, as undeniable as the fact that the sun rises and sets. Everything else bows to it. Leinth’s earlier attempts to stand up for herself are recast, in her mind’s eye, as senseless, inexcusable insolence. Kione’s wheedling and mockery as Her perfect right. There is a second power in heaven, as cruel as Handler is kind. The cosmic dualism of this new paradigm settles

comfortably across Leinth. Within moments, it seems perfectly natural. There must be punishment as well as reward, and any punishment this new goddess hands down is justice incarnate. She owes Leinth nothing, and Leinth owes Her everything.

Leinth might not like it. But it is the truth.

“Yes, sir,” Leinth replies dully. “I’ve learned.”

“Good. You know, I was really hoping the two of us could get along.” Kione places Her foot forward and uses the tip of Her boot to guide Leinth’s knees apart. “After all, not many girls like us around here.”

With Leinth’s legs spread, Kione presses the tip of Her boot against the faint bulge at the front of Leinth’s jumpsuit. Leinth lets out a gasping, rapturous moan.

She cannot resist a handler’s touch.

Even the scent of boot polish is enough to elicit a Pavlovian response. Leinth’s hips betray her, and she rolls them in sudden, shameless eagerness. Kione laughs again, and even Her laughter feels like a blessing.

“What do you think?” Kione says. “Girl talk? Painting each other’s nails? Trying on each other’s clothes?” Her face twists. She reaches down and fondles Leinth’s jumpsuit. “Guess not. You couldn’t bear to trade in one of your precious ego totems, even if you’ll never understand why. You’re just an animal. Nothing more.”

Leinth gasps and throbs. Kione’s degrading words pound in her ears. They feel so right. They make the shame of her earlier transgressions burn all the hotter. A need rises in her, eclipsing all else.

“Please, sir,” Leinth whimpers. “Forgive me.”

“Oh, there it is!” Kione remarks sardonically. “Poor little guilty Leinth. Maybe I will. You’ll find that I’m not exactly like Her. I have my own way of doing things. I’ll make you work for it. But I can be generous, too.” She glances down and licks Her lips. “Take off your jumpsuit. To the waist, at least.”

Leinth practically jumps at the chance to obey. She unzips her jumpsuit and peels it as far away from her body as she can. Beneath, all she’s wearing is a tank top and underwear.

She’s already hard, of course. Kione’s boots did that to her. Kione seems to enjoy the sight.

“And those.” Kione indicates Leinth’s underwear. “To one side.”

Leinth does as she is bid, letting her cock spring free. She releases a sound that is at once a moan and a whine. This is not what she needs—but it doesn’t matter. Attention from a handler is like sparks to kindling.

“Good dog,” Kione tells her. Leinth giggles euphorically. “And good dogs get treats, don’t they?”

Before Leinth can answer, Kione lifts one foot a few inches into the air and places it down carefully on Leinth’s cock.

Not hard. Kione keeps her foot at just the right height, so that the sole of her boot applies gentle, insistent pressure on Leinth’s cock. Leinth lets out an immediate, loud gasp and arches her back as pleasure shoots through her. The stimulation the coarse leather provides doesn’t feel good, exactly—except it does, it feels transcendent, because it’s a handler doing it. Better yet, it’s a treat!

Kione said so. She's a handler. Handlers are always right.

"Go on, Leinth," Kione jeers. "Do what comes naturally."

Leinth obeys, and starts fucking Kione's boot.

The space between the sole of Kione's boot and the floor forms a perfect little slot for Leinth to press her cock in and out of with each movement of her hips. The pleasure is blinding—how could it be anything less? This is a blessing. Divine magnanimity. Leinth's animal instincts force her to avail herself, and the sheer bliss she experiences with each ugly, uncoordinated thrust welds her loyalties tighter and tighter to Kione. Within moments, Leinth is in heat—but she's fighting to hold back. There's something else she needs.

"P-please!" Leinth moans. "Forgive... me."

It's more important. Without that, the guilt within Leinth will grow and grow, a poisonous seed, knotting around her chest tighter and tighter until it brings her to collapse. Without forgiveness, Leinth will stew in her shame endlessly. Handler condemns her to that only as the most severe of punishments, and Leinth has not deserved one of those in quite some time.

"Forgive you?" Kione muses. "I'm not so sure. Is that really what you want, puppy?"

Leinth nods frantically, but her moans betray her. Her brain is being scrambled over and over again by her own urgent, whimpering thrusts. She can't stop to think, and she can't think to stop. Her brute, animal urges drive her onward, forcing her to pitch forward, propping her torso up with her arms and grinding her hips low against the ground for a more favorable angle.

She doesn't care how dumb she looks or how loud Kione laughs. Leinth Aritimis is a bitch in heat. She needs whatever feels good.

But she needs forgiveness too. It's just difficult to keep it straight in her head. Leinth's superego was torn to shreds a long time ago. Restraint is foreign to her, and with Kione egging her on, she's a slave to her own cock and Kione's bootheel.

"P-please," Leinth gasps on the cusp. "F... fff... rrfff... rrrufff..."

'Forgive me.' That's what she's trying to say, as she lapses into humiliating, animalistic sounds. To cum like this, with her sin still as heavy as lead in her belly, would reduce her to a wreck. Such an act of indulgence would be truly unforgivable—but Leinth is long past holding herself back. Even as she whines and yips in protest, her hips work overtime to grind her cock beneath Kione's boot. A great tension within her is hitting its limit.

"Well, let's see," Kione says languidly, as Leinth begins to see white. She looms over her, imperious and invincible, and imbues Her next words with pointed significance. "Maybe. But I wonder... which of us is truly the better pilot, Leinth?"

The absolute pettiness of Her question completely fails to register with Leinth. She can no longer perceive Kione's flaws. All she sees is a lifeline, and she takes to it with the eagerness of a woman drowning.

"Y-you are!" Leinth howls, desperately clamping down her pleasure for a few more precious moments in the hope of salvation. "You! You! Youuuu!"

"That's right!" Kione cackles, a child-goddess drunk on Her own power. But as Her mood waxes, it brings with it mercy. "Good dog. I forgive you."

That's all Leinth needed to hear. A wordless howl signals the limit of her endurance. She gives one more heaving thrust, and

spills her seed all over the ground.

Kione sniffs at her and carefully lifts her boot away from the mess. Then, though, she giggles and reaches down to pet Leinth again. “See? I told you I can be nice.”

Leinth nods, her gratitude infinite. She is rewarded. She is forgiven. It’s all she ever needs. Deep at the back of her brain, resentment and bitterness beat like a drum. It’s enough to make her tear up in frustration—but she will not listen to those feelings. With the ease of long practice, she shoves them back down into the abyss. She blinks back the tears.

“Thank you, sir,” Leinth bleats quietly, a blissful smile spreading slowly across her face. “Thank you.”

The gratitude is the truth of her. The gratitude is binding. From now, she is Handler Kione’s obedient dog.

“You’re welcome, puppy.” Kione messes her hair. “I knew the two of us would get along! I can’t wait to introduce you to Amynta. She’s doing so well. In fact, I must check on her. It wouldn’t do for her to be without me for so long. She gets so... protective.”

Leinth shudders, although she does not know why.

Kione turns to leave, but pauses at the last moment. She turns back to Leinth, and the smile that breaks across Her face as She indicates the puddle of thin, white liquid spreading across the ground is brighter and crueler than ever before.

“You win, Leinth. Well done. Now lick that up.”



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