

Rescue Hound

CHAPTER FOUR

Kallie

When the knock comes at Kione's door, she smiles. She knows that it's Sartha long before she answers. Every few days, she comes to Kione's quarters. It's become a regular pattern for the two of them, but the regularity hardly makes it feel routine. Instead, it's ritual; something sacred, the tension further heightened by Kione's slight uncertainty about which nights, exactly, Sartha will come calling. Each evening, Kione gets to soak in the anticipation—and on the nights she doesn't come, it's hardly a disappointment. Kione always knows it won't be much longer.

Sartha Thrace finally needs her. She needs her new handler.

Kione doesn't much care for that term, in truth, although it is growing on her. It seems too clinical for what they have, and a little sinister. But it fits, doesn't it? And if she thinks about it that way, it's like she's completely replaced that awful, dark figure she saw on the recording in Sartha's mech cockpit.

Kione promised she'd save Sartha. What is this, if not salvation?

This night, like all nights, when she opens the door, Kione is rewarded with the special smile on Sartha's face. It's furtive, and a touch guilty—but only a touch, and much, much more than that, it's excited. It's desperate. It makes Kione feel like she's sixteen again, and slipping out of the bomb shelter to go spend the night with the older girl her parents always told her to stay away from. It makes her feel like what she shares with Sartha is the scandal of secret lovers.

Which, she supposes, it is.

"Hey, Kione," Sartha greets her, eyes shining and lips wet. "Can I come in?"

Kione takes her time in answering. She wants to enjoy the sight of Sartha on her doorstep—and besides, it's a pleasure to keep her waiting. Just for a heartbeat or two.

"Sure," she replies eventually, smirking. "Make yourself at home."

She steps back to allow Sartha entrance. Sartha ducks inside with a grateful grin, Kione shuts the door, and then the two of them are alone. Her quarters are transformed into a magical space. It's time.

They begin by chatting a little. Kione likes talking with Sartha, plus it seems polite. But both of them are impatient too, and so, as usual, it's not long before Sartha takes out her muzzle and offers it to Kione.

The mercenary takes it without hesitation. For a moment, she strokes her fingertips over its cold metal bars and firm leather straps. It's funny; Kione remembers being so afraid of the object at first. Now, that seems silly. Now, it seems to her a tender thing. It's well-crafted, and it's the firm hand Sartha needs. In a way, the muzzle is loving. Does anyone take a dog's collar any other way?

“Here,” Kione says quietly, as she lifts the muzzle.

Obediently, Sartha bows her head to receive. Kione places it over her face, moves the cage into position, and then begins to tighten the straps. She’s become deft at the task, able to avoid pulling Sartha’s hair or slipping the muzzle out of position even when she moves quickly. Kione takes it slow anyway. She binds the muzzle tight because she knows Sartha likes it that way, and she relishes the moment when the whole personhood of Sartha seems to melt away into the cage’s embrace, her shoulders giving up their tension and the pained, haunted, needy look in her eyes relaxing into something dull and soft and blissful.

Kione tightens the straps as far as she can, then forces them a little tighter. Sartha moans. She likes it when it hurts, so why not hurt her?

With the muzzle on, they are ready. But still, Kione takes it slow. Always slow. This, with Sartha, is the greatest pleasure she’s ever known, so why rush it? Why not linger? It’s funny; Kione always thought money could buy anything worth having. Sartha was the exception. Special. Priceless. Impossible to own.

How wrong she’d been. You could buy her after all. Just not with money.

“You really do look perfect like this,” Kione murmurs. She sees it now. This version of Sartha—muzzled, still, obedient—isn’t creepy. She’s beautiful.

“Thank you,” Sartha replies. She blushes a touch. That’s a rare thing, to most. Not to Kione. Not anymore. It’s easy for her to make Sartha blush.

“You’re welcome.” Kione’s lips curl into a smile.

Sartha's gratitude is intoxicating. Intoxicated by it, Kione reaches out and rests her hand on the top of Sartha's head. She pets her, rubbing her hand back and forth, messing her hair with one stroke and brushing it back the next. Sartha seems confused by the gesture at first but soon finds comfort in Kione's gentleness. She closes her eyes and relaxes into the touch. She sheds her outer self and is fully at peace, all because Kione is running a hand through her hair.

Is this what love looks like? Kione is beginning to think so.

But she has more love to give—in another woman's words, to be sure, but Kione is confident that in time she'll make them her own. It's what Sartha needs, for now, until Kione can teach her something better. And Kione isn't so cruel as to keep her beloved waiting.

"Sartha," Kione says, taking on the voice of the imperial handler she's come to think of as both her predecessor and her rival. "Off The Leash."

The way it happens is nothing short of magic. Kione will never tire of studying the minute micro-expressions Sartha's face makes as the trigger phrase washes over her. She's greedy for it; her eyes widen in thrilling anticipation as she hears the words fall from Kione's lips, but then, at the end, there's a bare hint of resistance as whatever remains of Sartha Thrace's shattered superego fights against its own destruction.

But it doesn't win. It can't, because the words are just that powerful—and in any case, Sartha doesn't want it to win. She wants to surrender. She closes her eyes and gives herself to oblivion, just as she has done so many times before. At first, relief. Her craving is finally sated. She can put down the heavy burden of pretending to be a person. Then, bliss. The pleasure of the transformation is something that, as Kione can see, has been carved into Sartha's psyche with all the subtlety of an ice pick. She's hooked on it. To Sartha, this is better than anything.

And then? Then, there's nothing at all.

Kione has seen so many sides of Sartha Thrace lately. But this one—the emptiness, the nothingness—is the one that's provoked the deepest obsession. Kione was never one for meditation, but she thinks she gets it now. All that stuff about thinking about nothing. From studying Sartha, she's learned that nothingness is far from boring. It's empty, but it's far from passive. This nothing-Sartha, empty and hollow and receding into herself, is intimately related to the desperate, addicted Sartha that Kione met once before, during their first nightly rendezvous. Two sides of the same coin. A nothingness that reaches outward and pulls inwards, so great is its desperation to be free of itself.

It's captivating. The sinking spiral shape of it is hypnotic.

The very best part, though, comes at the very end. Out of nothing comes something. New life. Not an accident of nature. A being sculpted by human hands, small and sleek and pointed like an arrow in how singularly purposeful it is. Once, Kione was afraid of how little of Sartha was left behind in her new self; of how much was carved away and discarded. It struck her as destructive. Now she's forced to acknowledge its elegance. That handler has an artisan's hands, however loathsome and bloodstained they may be. Kione can only resent her so much. It's only thanks to that awful woman's divine alchemy that Kione has what stands before her now.

Her Hound.

Hound's eyes open. Nothing human remains. Hound is as simple as a beast. As fierce as a landslide. As violent as a knife. But not to Kione. She's the one who wields it. To Kione, Hound is simply beautiful. She's not nothing. She's everything. She's hers.

Fuck. It's amazing.

“Hey, puppy,” Kione giggles, caught up in childlike glee at the thing she has conjured.

It feels a little trite as a term of endearment. Kione knows perfectly well that Hound is no pet. She’s a weapon. But calling her that is fun. It makes Kione feel powerful. And she’s sure Sartha would find both the enjoyment and the humor in it.

Hound’s only reply, naturally, is a wet, brainless gurgle. From the glazed, vacant look in her eyes, you’d be forgiven for thinking she doesn’t understand Kione at all. Kione knows, though, that she’s hanging on her every word.

Kione takes the time to pet her. Giving Hound as much attention as she gave Sartha only seems fair. It’s adorable how Hound reacts just as Sartha did, melting eagerly into Kione’s petting. But it’s different, she supposes. Kione and Sartha are lovers—she can call them that now, right? Sartha is a little less than a person, but she’s still human enough to find joy in a lover’s touch.

With Hound, it’s simply that whatever Kione does—whatever attention Kione gives her—is her whole world.

Kione keeps testing that. Pushing further and further in what she’ll make Hound do for her. Always harmless things, of course. Nothing in bad taste. Little, Kione hasn’t done with other girls, if she’s being honest with herself. But it’s special now. And she’s confident Hound always enjoys them.

“Sit,” Kione commands, pointing down.

No hesitation. Hound drops to her knees. Pose perfect, head held up to look at Kione expectantly. Expecting praise, perhaps. Expecting a reward. Expecting another command. Anything. It’s all just as good to her.

Kione giggles again at the slight spark she sees in Hound's eye, making the brainwashed woman look momentarily alive. Pleasure. The special pleasure Hound can only get from obedience.

"Lie down," Kione says impulsively.

She hasn't tried this one yet. She wants to see how Hound will take it. Without missing a beat, Hound turns and stretches forward from her kneeling pose until she's lying flat on her front.

"Roll over," Kione tries next. She has to, right?

Hound obeys. She turns over and lies on her back.

That gets another giggle from Kione. She's light-headed. Each night they meet, she has to remind herself that she can do anything with Hound. Each night, it hits a little better.

"Sit! Up!"

The eagerness in Kione's voice prompts Hound to scramble back up to her knees. Gods, Kione could do this forever.

"Paw," she laughs.

It takes Hound a moment to actually figure that one out, but once she clocks it, she offers her hand up to Kione without hesitation or complaint.

Would Sartha have done this? Would she have found it too childish? Too demeaning? Kione keeps wondering if, through these silly little commands, she'll find the limit. The point where Sartha reasserts herself a little, either to complain or to giggle along with her.

But no. It never happens. Hound has no inhibitions. No limits.

“Here.” Kione turns and grabs something at random from her bed—the vest top she was wearing under her jumpsuit the day before. “Fetch!”

She scrunches up her top and tosses it across her quarters. Quickly, Hound springs to her feet and chases after it. Kione can’t keep still from glee as she watches Hound faithfully bring it back to her. She doesn’t quite have the enthusiasm of a real puppy, but it’s close. Kione has given her command after command; chance after chance for her to display her obedience. Now, as Hound proudly hands over her prize, she wears a look on her face like she’s drunk with bliss.

All because she was told to go and fetch a piece of laundry.

The simplicity of her psyche is breathtaking. Obedience, reward, Disobedience, pain. Right down to her soul, Hound is nothing but the simple equation of carrot and stick. Everything else—everything unnecessary—is scooped out by those three magic trigger words and left behind.

How? How do you do that to someone? Kione is dying to know.

But not now. For now, such thoughts are to be pushed aside. Kione has her hound to attend to.

“Very good!” she finds herself saying as she reaches up to pet Hound again. “Good puppy. Good girl. Good girl!”

Kione’s praise has Hound all but delirious. The grin that hangs from her face behind the muzzle is like nothing Kione has ever seen on Sartha’s face. Fuck, she looks stupid like this. She’s pretty. She’s so pretty. But she looks so stupid too, drooling down her chin, eyes

clouded over and teary with the simple pleasure of Kione's approval.

There it is. The feeling Kione craves above all. The power trip.

She feels like a god.

"Good girl," Kione repeats, keen to drive Hound to fresh heavens. But she's keen for more than just that, of course. "I think my puppy has earned her reward."

Hound bristles with excitement. She knows exactly what a reward from Kione means. Admittedly, though, Kione's pretty sure she could tip cigarette ash into Hound's mouth and as long as she called it a reward, she'd be almost as thrilled.

"Here. Strip, and put this on."

Kione grabs Sartha's strap and harness from her footlocker and tosses it to Hound, who catches it and immediately starts removing her clothes. They decided—Kione decided—she could hang on to Sartha's strap-on. She gets a smug little kick every time she thinks about it. If Sartha ever wanted to fuck anyone else on the rebel base, she'd have to ask very, very nicely. She'd have to beg.

Entertained by that notion, Kione stands to one side and watches as Hound strips. The way Hound does it isn't particularly sensual, but it really, really doesn't need to be. Sartha's body always drove Kione crazy; even more so now that it's hers. Watching Hound fix her harness and strap-on into place certainly doesn't help matters. It's muscle memory for her at this point, and the efficiency with which she pursues the task is itself captivating.

By the end, Hound stands at attention naked. Her excitement has made her sweat just a little, highlighting the shapes of her muscles beneath her skin and catching the light on the edges of all her small scars. The muzzle juts out from her face, and her artificial cock juts

out from between her legs. Hound looks like every bit the weapon she is. Every bit the tool.

She looks magnificent.

“Up, puppy!” Kione tells her, grinning and patting her mattress. “Lie on my bed.”

Hound obeys. Just as Kione wants, she clambers onto her bed and lies flat on her back. Kione loves the simple act of posing her. It’s as effortless now as manipulating her mech.

“Stay,” she commands next—and while Hound watches rapt, she gets onto the bed too and mounts her, straddling the brainwashed pilot’s hips.

The look of addled awe and need Hound gives her from below is one more intoxicant atop all the rest.

“Watch me,” Kione says, and begins to strip out of her jumpsuit.

Unlike Hound, the way she strips is absolutely sensual. Her jumpsuit fastens at the front, and so Kione can slowly, teasingly, pull down on the zipper, each inch revealing more of her dark skin; collar, then cleavage, then stomach. The skin-tight garment loosens and comes apart bit by bit, peeling away from Kione’s shoulders and, eventually, allowing her entire chest to slip out.

Naturally, Kione isn’t wearing anything underneath. It’s been a few days, so she was certain Sartha was coming tonight. She has planned this moment.

Hound’s attention is electric as she watches Kione. Her eyes are all but bulging and she’s visibly salivating all over herself. Kione was careful to plant her ass against the shaft of Hound’s strap, and

she can feel her pet's hips practically vibrating as Hound struggles to control her urges.

She will, of course, control them. Obedience is woven through Hound's very soul. But so is lust. There's a lot Kione still doesn't understand about the nature of Sartha's brainwashing but she has, at least, glimpsed that it is fundamentally libidinal. Obeying turns Hound on. The presence of her master—her handler—has her on a hair trigger. The kind of pleasure-reward Kione is offering right now is a singular, consuming fixation.

Kione's wondered about why that is. Maybe human sexuality is just that fundamental. Maybe it's the way arousal is like a drug; addictive, soporific, powerful enough to smother whatever vestiges of individuality and willpower remain.

She's not sure. But clearly it works, whatever the reason. And more to the point, it's really fucking hot.

"Look at me," Kione purrs.

Hound does. She stares. Her single-minded attention feels like the sun on Kione's skin. She can feel Hound's want for her throbbing through her new puppy.

"You want me," Kione tells her. "You want to be inside me."

It doesn't need to be said, but saying it redoubles Hound's desperation. She starts twitching, and Kione can feel her pounding heart. Only her ironclad conditioning keeps her in place.

"You want me to be inside you," Kione laughs. "Any part of me. Anything."

Why not say it? Why not imprint that on Hound? It's so easy.

Caught up in that ease, an impulse takes Kione.

“Here,” she says. “Open your mouth.”

Hound obeys. Kione leans forward a little and spits into her mouth.

Some of it gets caught on the muzzle, but some of it makes it through and falls into Hound’s open, waiting, drooling mouth. Hound accepts it like a gift. Like it’s ambrosia. As she tastes Kione’s drool, the seething, twitching need in her eyes only grows.

Kione can’t stop laughing. This really is how a god feels, isn’t it? Hound will accept anything from her, and be grateful for it.

That’s love, isn’t it? It has to be.

And Kione needs to feel all of Sartha’s love.

“Stay,” she commands sternly. She shrugs her shoulders out of her jumpsuit and peels the rest of it away from her body. From beneath it, her hard cock springs out. Kione is pleased to note the way Hound’s eyes track the tip as it bounces and rubs against her strap-on.

“Stay,” Kione warns. She reaches to the small table next to her table and grabs a bottle of lube. She squeezes some of it into her hand and reaches down to rub it the length of Hound’s strap.

“Stay,” Kione insists, as she lifts herself up on her knees and lowers herself down so that Hound’s strap-on cock is rubbing against her ass. She repeats the move a few times, raising and lowering, letting Hound feel her ass pressing up and down against the length of her artificial cock. Then she raises herself up once more and uses her hand to position the tip of the strap-on against her entrance.

Hound's breath comes in deep, ragged growls that send spittle flying up against the bars of her muzzle. All over, she's twitching and tensing, hips subtly rolling in anticipation of what's to come. Like never before, Kione can feel the sheer power held within Sartha's body. She's athletic, her strength honed by years of fighting. She's a soldier. A weapon.

And all of that, Kione holds back with just a word.

Until she doesn't.

"Fuck me," Kione commands.

Despite all her teasing, Kione isn't quite prepared for the violence of the way Hound reaches up, seizes her by the hips, and pulls her down to impale Kione on the end of her strap-on.

Kione shudders as she takes all of Hound's length inside her. A moan erupts from her lips, shattering, for a moment, her demeanor of smirking dominance. Her back arches and precum drips from her quivering cock to stain Hound's abs.

Then Hound really starts moving.

Keeping her grip on Kione, she starts rolling and bouncing her hips, jackhammering up, down, up, down. Each stroke has Kione seeing stars. The pleasure is indescribable. Sartha was good, but Sartha never fucked her like this. This is something only Hound can do; only a living weapon can be this relentless, this tireless, immediately straining herself to her very limits and then beyond to keep her cock moving in and out of Kione.

Fuck, it's good. Kione has never regretted staining her hands with Sartha's psyche less.

It's tempting to let Hound do all the work, but Kione is just a little too excited for that. Once strength comes back into her legs, she starts moving too, bouncing her hips, meeting Hound blow for blow, stroke for stroke. Her pleasure is all the greater for it. Kione's peaking moans intermingle with Hound's grunts, each of them growing steadily more ragged as they expend their strength into each other.

"More!" Kione cries, heedless of Hound's physical limits. "Harder!"

The puppy between her legs responds with gusto. Of course she does. She's perfectly brainwashed. Perfectly obedient. She's perfect.

Kione can't get enough. She's discovered she loves getting fucked like this. Kione isn't smaller than Sartha, but when she's on top like this, she feels that way. She feels delicate, almost, but not in a way that diminishes her. On top of Hound, looking down on her, she feels both precious and powerful. She feels the way she always wants to feel. She feels like she's made of marble and gold.

It's not long before it makes her cum. Hard.

That goes all over Hound too. Up her chest. Across her face. It drips from the bars of her muzzle in long, pearly loops that soon fall down into Hound's eager mouth. She receives it all, and when Kione goes still from the orgasm tearing through her, Hound works hard enough for the both of them to keep her master bouncing up and down on her strap. For more than a moment, Kione feels like she's going to pass out from the sheer pleasure. Hound won't relent. Won't give her a moment to breathe.

Of course she won't. Kione hasn't permitted it.

It's minutes before Kione finds the breath in her lungs to gasp:

“S-stop!”, and by that time she’s bent over her Hound, face resting against her neck, tasting all of her sweat and body scent, still moving against her in heaving thrusts as Hound continues rolling her hips and pounding in and out of her.

It doesn’t help that through it all, she can’t stop laughing from the euphoria.

Hound stops. She goes completely still, both content with her reward and waiting eagerly for her next chance to earn one. That’s Hound’s permanent state of being.

No more orders come. Not right away. Kione lets herself linger in the moment. She presses herself to Hound’s chest as a lover would do. Perhaps she’ll let herself fall asleep like this. She bets that if she did, she’d wake up the next morning and Hound wouldn’t have moved an inch.

Before she can settle, she turns her head and accidentally butts against Hound’s cold muzzle.

She glances up, curious to see what expression she might read on Hound’s face. It’s the same expression as ever—dumb, dull, awestruck, mind-fucked adoration, tainted a little by evidence of exertion. But for just a moment, in that window of post-orgasmic clarity, Kione imagines something else in Hound’s bloodshot eyes and drooling grin.

Hate.

Hate can consume just as much as love or obedience, can’t it? What if there’s a small part of Sartha that still rails against what’s been done to her? Kione’s seen no evidence of that, but she can’t quite stop herself from dwelling on the thought. In her mind’s eye, it grows and grows until she’s almost sure that’s how Hound is looking at her. Kione finds herself imagining that maybe, if the

muzzle wasn't there, Hound would break her conditioning and, in a moment of perfectly justified ferocity, sink her teeth into Kione's neck.

The moment passes. The impression passes. Kione scolds herself. Silly. Stupid.

Sartha is hers now. Hound is hers. Both of them are happy. There's no more to be said.

Because Kione alone gets it. To the other rebels, Sartha's a legend. A saint. An icon. To the imperial handler who brainwashed her, she's a tool. A weapon. A victim.

To Kione, she's both. Kione sees both halves of Sartha Thrace, each one propped up against the other like two playing cards in a tower. Sartha still wants, she's sure, to be a rebel icon, but she needs to be a victim too. Kione will provide. She'll give her friend whatever it takes. Whatever command. Whatever cruelty. She'll ruin herself for Sartha.

It's worth it, for her. Because it goes both ways. Because Kione knows that, deep down, no matter what, for her, Sartha Thrace will always be a hero.

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"Command, this is *Theaboros*. *Ancyor* and I are approaching the active zone. Two clicks out, approaching east by north-east. Ready to begin in five."

Roger, Theaboros. Begin when ready. We'll be watching. Switch to private comm channels. No cheating.

"Would I ever?" There's no reply. "Understood, command."

Switching to private comms.”

Kione reaches up to her radio and switches to her and Sartha’s assigned frequency. Once that’s done she sighs, then relaxes a bit. Rebel commanders can be a stiff bunch. Not nearly as bad as imperials, of course, but all that duty and righteousness starts going to their heads. Lately, they’ve been trying to drill a little comms discipline into Kione. She wishes they wouldn’t. It’s really boring.

“Sartha, can you hear me OK?”

Yeah.

She sounds tense. Heavy. It’s no surprise. Kione’s used to that by now.

“Are you ready to go?”

She’s used to what comes next, too.

I think I still need it, Ki.

Kione smiles to herself in the cockpit, just slightly. Of course you do, my poor, broken girl.

“Put your muzzle on.”

Yes, Kione.

There’s absolutely no doubt in Kione’s mind that she’s obeying, and that by the time she speaks again, her muzzle is fastened to her face.

OK. It’s on.

She'll always need it. Sartha needs the muzzle. She needs the words. Without them, she's nothing. Useless as a pilot, or worse than. She'll fall apart even on a training exercise like this.

Lots of those, since Sartha got back in the saddle to take out that imperial recon unit. The rebels are desperate to have her back in action; her success and kill count were too great to ignore, but her initial hesitation was just as noteworthy. They need to be able to rely on her, they say, and so they keep putting her through her paces over and over.

Plus, now that Kione and Sartha are officially a unit, they want to get a sense of how the two of them operate together.

It's not so unusual, amongst the rebels. Pairs or groups of friends or sweethearts fight the fiercest at each others' sides, and while the irregular formations can be an organizational headache, there's a strong presumption against splitting them up. After all, isn't stuff like that what the rebels are fighting for?

Sartha Thrace finally getting herself hitched sure as hell caused a stir, though. Especially to an outsider. A mere mercenary. It's downright scandalous, even, but who doesn't love a sexy scandal? The rebel brass weren't thrilled about the idea, but they weren't dismayed either. They've seen what Sartha and Kione can do together. And after everything Sartha has given to the cause, could they really refuse when she asked so very, very insistently?

At Kione's prompting. Obviously.

It had seemed like a good idea at the time. Sartha gets her handler, the rebels get their hero, and Kione gets her Sartha. Only now, she's stuck in training exercise after training exercise. It's boring, mostly, and direly unprofitable—but bit by bit, Kione is teaching herself a new way to fight alongside her pet.

“Ready?” Kione asks.

Ready. She still sounds desperately anxious, but Kione can tell Sartha’s taking comfort from her. It’s time to deliver her from all her fears. From the burden of free will.

“Sartha. Off The Leash.”

A brief growl is all Kione needs to hear to know that Hound is in the driving seat. She grins. Training exercises get on her nerves, but there’s something to be said for getting to put on a show.

“Let’s make this quick and efficient,” Kione instructs. “And remember: tracer rounds and disabling blows only. Go easy on them. No messes. No corpses.”

It needs to be said. Kione learned that the hard way the first time they tried this, and had to rush to stop a truly nasty friendly fire incident. Hound has no allegiances. None but her handler.

“Alright.” Kione licks her lips. “Go fetch, girl.”

With a gleeful howl over the radio, Hound pushes *Ancyor* a little harder and the bestial mech lopes forward after its prey.

The exercise is simple. Just up ahead is a rebel squad doing their best impersonation of a dug-in imperial position. Kione and Sartha are tasked with taking them out. There’s little question, of course, that the two aces will succeed. Their COs are looking for more than just success. They’re looking for alacrity, for precision, for teamwork. They’re looking for perfection.

Kione will give them exactly what they want to see.

“Hound,” Kione calls out, as she takes to the sky in *Theaboros* and

scans for targets. “Ten o’clock. A hundred yards out. Camouflaged. Avoid the crossfire.”

Hound’s trust is absolute. She responds instantly, throwing *Ancyor* into the air in a bounding leap that places her at the exact spot Kione indicated—and right in front of a concealed sniper. One swift blow takes them out. Thanks to Kione’s warning, she’s ready for the inevitable retaliation and able to dodge and weave out of the hail of incoming fire. The position they’re attacking is well laid-out. Favorable terrain, good concealment, overlapping fields of fire.

But it’s not going to be enough.

“Three o’clock,” Kione orders, laying some down covering fire—not with her railgun, alas, just a low-caliber autocannon. “Seventy yards. Two of them. The soil looks disturbed. Watch for land mines.”

Hound responds with instant obedience. In her hands, *Ancyor* becomes an extension of Kione’s will—Kione’s, not Sartha’s. Kione’s hands, meanwhile, remain clean. She can remain high above, safe in the skies, and watch admiringly as *Ancyor* moves with both an acrobat’s precision and a wolf’s hunger.

It’s funny; at first, Kione couldn’t help but treat it as a competition. She’d set Hound loose, then try to match her kill count. Didn’t take her long to realize how pointless that was. Competing, they only got in each other’s way. As good as Kione is, she can’t keep up with Sartha’s monstrous skill. If she tried, she’d make mistakes. But her pride demanded nothing less.

Then, she realized: what does it matter? Hound is hers. Hound’s kills are hers.

No matter what, Kione wins.

So instead, Kione started playing backup. Now she covers Hound.

Spots for her. Watches her back. Assigns her targets and movements. And it works even better than she could have dreamed. Kione'd always had a certain tactical acumen. She'd just never needed to use it for anyone else's benefit before. Turns out, she makes a great field commander. For a mercenary, it's a little ironic. But with her choreographing *Ancyor's* murderous dance, Sartha is more lethal than ever before.

"Behind you. A small frame. It's baiting you. Keep the range, but let them think it's working. Good. Now, use your firearm."

Another kill. Easy.

"OK, now the ambushers. One left, one right. Hit the right first. Full speed. Don't let the other one support them."

Another kill. Easy.

"Good. The other one's on your seven. Forty yards. It thinks you aren't ready for it."

Another kill. Easy.

Hound's trust in Kione is absolute. She obeys without a single stray thought to slow her down. Thanks to Kione, she can fight faster than humanly possible. Up in *Theaboros's* cockpit, Kione is grinning maniacally. She's feeling something about Sartha she's never felt about anybody or anything before.

Pride.

"Two left. Both of them in foxholes. Three o'clock, one-twenty yards. Five o'clock, one-forty." Kione decides she can afford to have just a little fun. "I have the shot on that one. You take the other. I want you to see if you can beat me to it."

Hound does. Kione's bosom swells with affection for her. And it helps to know that they've completed the exercise in record time.

Whoever knew Sartha Thrace would make such a good dog?

* * *

'Thrace: cleared for a return to active duty. *Ancyor* upgrade package authorized. Partnership with mercenary Kione Monax approved.'

That line in the after action report—and the implicit validation of everything she's done to Sartha—fills Kione with a giddy euphoria that keeps her warm all the way through the debriefing, and afterward as she takes Sartha down to the canteen for some grub.

Things are changing there too. Sartha is no longer a pariah. And weirdly, neither is Kione. Now, when they eat, everybody wants to join them.

"Ki. Sartha. Heard you killed it out there again. Nice work."

Kione nods and smiles warmly at the rebel sitting down at their table. "Hey, radio girl."

"I have a name, you know!"

She does. Amynta Tet. They've been getting acquainted ever since their recent sortie against the imperial patrol, but Kione would never let a good bit die that easy. A few of Amynta's friends join them, and Kione finds that she knows their names too. Camarina. Vola. Nese. Knowing their names is strange. Recognizing people in the corridors of the rebel base and receiving friendly waves is strange. It makes her smile more than she'd expected. Along with

the pride she takes in Hound, this is the other new feeling Kione's been discovering.

Call it belonging, maybe.

"So, Ki," Camarina asks, as they eat. "Amynta was telling me you've really been around. Says you fought at Hebros. That true?"

"Yeah, it is." Kione can't help but smile. It's not the first time she's been asked about her exploits. It's starting to feel like she's not that far away from getting her own little fan club. "Sartha was there too, of course."

"Wow," Nese breathes. "What was it like?"

Kione and Sartha exchange glances.

"All in a day's work," Kione shrugs. Can't have them getting the idea she cares too much. "Long day, though. Hell of a long day. But I can't complain. More hours, more pay. And I feel like I earned my cut."

Her display of mercenary cynicism doesn't seem to put them off the way it used to. Kione's a little grateful for that.

"That was a long day, yeah," Sartha agrees. At once, all eyes are on her. "They made us work for it. That's for sure."

The younger rebels all nod thoughtfully like they get it. They can't get enough of Sartha's modest hero schtick. Only Kione can sense Sartha tensing a little under the weight of their adoration. But she'll bear it, for Kione.

"Damn right," Kione adds, sighing. "It's not my place to complain, but frankly I'm not sure it was worth the trouble."

“No,” Sartha replies. She sounds oddly contemplative. Like she’s remembering something from a past life. “No, it was. We don’t get to take many steps forward. But at Hebros, we did. We pushed them back. We won. That’s worth anything. It felt incredible.”

Kione’s eyes widen.

“Yeah,” she confesses. “It did.”

Now, all the other rebels go all quiet and reverent. Kione does too. It’s been a long while since she heard anything quite like that out of Sartha. Her heart starts beating fast. It’s just like she’s been telling herself. She’s still in there. The one Kione’s been doing all this for. For a moment, she’s lost for words.

“I’m surprised that’s the part you remember,” Kione says, recovering. “I remember the days before and after the battle too. You racked up quite the count. And I’m not talking about *Dorus*.”

Thankfully, the other rebels start giggling. Kione can relax a little.

“Ki,” Sartha says, half-joking. “I’m trying to set an example here.”

“Oh, c’mon,” Kione teases back. “Don’t act like you’re better than me.”

“I’m not?” Sartha’s pretty face twists into a smug look. “Then how come my ‘count’ was so much higher?”

Kione feels her face turning red. Amynta and her friends keep giggling—not that they’re genuinely scandalized. Between pilots, comparing body counts is almost as common as comparing kill counts. It must be something about the personality type. In truth, it’s

out of character for Kione not to have been burnishing hers. Amynta has made a few passes at her, and normally Kione would jump at the chance to be some rebel girl's mean mercenary lay.

Lately, though, the only person in her head is Sartha.

"So," Vola ventures, a look of bravery on her face. "Are you two... like... you know?"

She points and her finger wanders back and forth between Kione and Sartha.

Suddenly, Kione's face isn't just red. It's on fire.

"We..." she splutters like a schoolgirl. "That... uh..."

Like what? Like girlfriends? Like something more? Like whatever the hell name you'd put to what Kione has been doing to Sartha on a near-nightly basis?

Gods.

"We're... just..." Kione struggles lamely. The stares she's getting are only growing more curious. Helpless, she turns to Sartha. "W-What... would you... are we?"

Sartha, infuriatingly, just smiles back at her in perfect earnestness. "We're whatever you want us to be, Kione."

Appreciative coos go up all around the table. Kione's glad nobody is looking under it. They'd see her tapping her foot like crazy. She can't keep still. She feels like she's about to melt into her chair.

"Great," Kione mutters eventually. "C-cool."

Gods, she sounds like an idiot.

“Well, congrats,” Amynta reaches over the table and clasps Kione’s shoulder. “Looks like you’re one of us now.”

Kione snorts a laugh, though she’s grateful for the topic shift, however slight. “And what’s that supposed to mean?”

“C’mon,” Amynta wheedles. “You’re not just gonna ditch us and leave Sartha behind, right? Face it. You’re a rebel now, Ki. Welcome to the cause. We should see about getting you the rattiest combat jacket you’ve ever seen, it’ll help you fit in.”

“Fuck you, radio girl,” Kione throws back, grinning. She’s not gonna let that pass. She has a reputation to consider. “I’m a merc, through and through. No causes for me. They stop paying my fees, and I’m in the wind.”

“Whatever you say!” Amynta throws her hands up. “It’s just, I’ve heard this is the first time you’ve ever stayed in one place this long. From where I’m sitting, you’re looking real tied down already.”

More giggles. Oh, Kione is really not going to let that pass. She folds her arms.

“That’s what you think,” she retorts smugly. “Maybe it’s just the opposite. Maybe Sartha’s the one who’s getting tied down. Maybe when I leave, she’s coming with me. No more hero of the cause. We’ll be a merc duo. The best there ever was. We’ll make a killing.”

Immediately, everybody starts laughing—Kione included.

The idea is absurd. Beyond absurd. It’s inconceivable. Sartha Thrace, mercenary? Kione just can’t picture it. Like that bleeding heart could ever bring herself to turn away from an underdog with

empty pockets.

No; as they laugh, Kione is forced to dwell on the possibility that Amynta might be right. How could she ever leave Sartha's side now? Without each other, both of them would be undone. Sartha needs her handler. Kione, she admits to herself, needs her hound.

Does that make her a rebel? Does that mean she'd stay and fight even if there was nothing in it for her? The very idea sticks in her craw. But would it really be so bad?

"Is that what you want, Kione?"

That's all it takes to cull Kione's laughter. Her head whips around, and she stares at the woman sitting next to her.

"Huh?"

Sartha looks at her with big eyes; deadly serious—and worse, earnest. Like she's found a killer opportunity to please Kione. Better than a hundred fetched meal trays.

"I said," Sartha repeats. "Is that what you want, Ki?"

Kione starts shaking her head. No, Sartha. No, don't do this. Not like this. I thought we were OK. I thought we'd found our balance. I thought you were still in there.

"For us to be mercenaries?" Gods, the hope in her voice is sickening. It's like she wants nothing more than to say 'yes' to Kione, and for Kione to say 'yes' to her. "We could leave whenever you want," she offers. "You're right. We'd make a killing."

It's like she wants nothing more than to abandon everything she ever cared about.

“No.” Kione plants her face in her hands and groans softly. “I don’t want that, Sartha.”

“Oh.” Sartha sits back—a little disappointed, but mostly simply accepting. “OK.”

The other girls had stopped laughing. Chilled, perhaps, by Sartha’s manner. Now, though, their mirth comes roaring back. They’re practically cheering for their hero. As far as they’re concerned, they just witnessed her getting one over on Kione. Sartha called her bluff. She won, just like Sartha Thrace always does.

They don’t see what Kione sees. They don’t see the empty, hungry horror in Sartha’s blank eyes. How could Kione have been so stupid? How could she ever have let herself believe this would be OK? Shame, anger and disappointment all fight for prominence in her gut.

Sartha, you were meant to be teasing me right alongside Amynta. Prodding me about joining the rebellion. Convincing me to fight the good fight. Isn’t that what you always did? Isn’t that why Kione always made sure to fight with the rebels, and never the empire?

Hadn’t she always believed in Sartha, even if she never believed in anything else?

The little propped-up playing card diorama in Kione’s head is falling apart. What if Sartha’s gone? Really gone? What if the little kernel Kione’s been believing in isn’t there?

And if that, what do their bonds—new and old—even mean?

For a brief moment, Kione tries to convince herself that Sartha’s just joking around. That she’s calling her bluff, just like the other rebels think. She has to try and have faith in that. But it’s useless.

She knows Sartha too well to trick herself. She sees the truth.

The hero of the rebellion couldn't have been more serious.



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