

Book 1
Unbroken

Chapter 1

“And this is where the magic happens.”

No windows illuminated the assembly chamber. Industrial espionage wasn't worth the risk. Instead, giant floodlights bathed the colossal room in whites and yellows. Every sound bounced off the steel walls and vibrated through the air, smoke sucked into ventilators high above.

It was like stepping into a cathedral, and that wasn't necessarily far off.

In the middle of the chamber stood the Frame, treated in every way that mattered with reverence. At 115 feet, it towered over everything else in the room. Almost every light in the room was positioned in such a way that it lit up the chrome, steel and titanium alloy that made up its chassis.

“Beautiful, isn't she?”

Diana hooked her hands through the loops on her overalls, transferring grease from one to the other, although it was hard to tell which got it worse. Not that it mattered. It was not the first thing the eyes were drawn to, at least not the eyes of a connoisseur.

And Epoc was a connoisseur in the truest sense of the world. She had loved women since she was old enough to love things, and Diana was the kind of woman that was easy for a woman like her to love.

Overalls tied around her waist, a once-upon-a-time white tank top that accentuated the heavily defined musculature of her forearms, stained by grease and sweat and hard labor. She had a reserved smile, tugging gently at the corners of her mouth, and her eyes were starting to crease with crow's feet, betraying her age. Hard work, a steady diet, and some gene therapy had otherwise kept her looking young. That, and she could probably fold a door in half.

Epoc tore her eyes away from Diana and looked back up at the Frame. It really was a gorgeous machine. Designed for combat, yes, but the Mako Group did good work. It wasn't all mercenary contracts and corpo warfare. They were small, and a bit of an up-and-comer, but they'd already made a name for themselves doing disaster relief and combating megafauna, something they apparently excelled at.

“What's her name?” she asked.

“Nexus Alpha,” Diana said, and walked them into the room. “You wanna take a guess at how much it weighs?”

“This size?” Epoc said. “With or without the Higgs modulator active?”

“You know your stuff!” Diana said. She seemed happily surprised as she led them to an open-walled elevator. There were yellow lines on the floor, but other than that, people were expected to use common sense. “Let's say without.”

“Easily twelve hundred tons, then. Something this big would crumple under its own weight.”

“Pretty much, yeah. So wanna guess how much she actually weighs?”

“About two hundred tons?”

“Half,” Diana said, raising her eyebrows to see if Epoc knew what that meant. She did.

“That’s not supposed to be possible!” She looked up at the machine with renewed admiration. “How would you even get it that light?”

“I’m just really fucking good at my job,” Diana said proudly. “If you can get everything in its sweet spot, you can square the output.” She talked the entire elevator ride up, and Epoc didn’t mind. She was an enthusiastic audience, and the engineer really did seem to love Nexus.

“How fast is she?”

Diana looked at her with the kind of pride shared only by engineers and parents. “Fast,” she said, and there was a glimmer of manic energy in her eyes. Good. No engineer worth their salt didn’t contain within them the seed of a mad, evil genius. Epoc had no doubt that if Diana could find a way to make Nexus Alpha break the laws of physics entirely, she would.

“I’d love to fly her.”

“Well,” Diana said, “you seem capable enough, but it’s not up to me.” The elevator stopped. The catwalk they were on still overlooked the hangar. Everything did. When you had to build something this big, it was just economical to have every other part of your business adjacent to the big fuck-off room. Space was a premium. Offices lined the catwalk. “Look,” Diana said, “usually you’d be talking to Theia. She’s Ms. Winter’s assistant and she deals in acquisitions and hires. That said, Ms. Winter wanted to see you personally, so when you’re talking to her, just be yourself. She respects honesty.”

She paused, and Epoc stopped with her. “Always am.”

Diana crossed her arms, and Epoc wondered briefly if she was doing it on purpose to fluster her or if she just Did That. Either way, the effect was one of feeling supremely intimidated in a not entirely unpleasant way. Diana being half a foot taller than her certainly didn’t hurt. Or help. “I figured, but it bears repeating. Don’t play games, just answer truthfully and I’m sure you’ll fit in just fine. I’m not going to give you the whole ‘we’re a family here’ spiel but you don’t get many companies that are all-women, and we try to keep a good atmosphere. Honesty is... an important part of that.”

“Why are you telling me all of this?” Epoc asked.

“Because I like you,” Diana said with a shrug. “You seem like you take this job seriously and yeah, you’re a little younger than the average pilot but we need some young blood in this business and you’ve got your head on straight. Besides, you listened to me ramble about Nexus Alpha for a good ten minutes, and your eyes didn’t even glaze over once.”

“Are you kidding me?” Epoc said. “There’s way too much to look at for me to zone out. Besides, if I do end up piloting her, I will want to know *everything*.”

“Yeah,” Diana said. “That’s why I like you.” She stuck out her hand.

Epoc liked to think she was pretty fit. You had to be, as a pilot. Yes, technically speaking a Frame did all the work for you, but in practice you were still moving your limbs as your brain tried

to manage the fact that you were operating two bodies, and if your little fleshy one was out of breath, that could still take you out of the battle. Epoc had been training for ten years. Not one donut.

Despite all of that, Diana's hand almost crushed hers, and it took her a lot of effort to give her some decent resistance. After a few seconds, the engineer let go, winked, and walked off with a swagger. Then, she stopped. Epoc wondered what was wrong when Diana suddenly flexed, the muscles on her back rippling under her shirt.

With a wink and a smile, she turned a corner and was gone, leaving Epoc with an overclocked heartbeat and fried brain. Diana had known exactly the effect she'd had on her! This was evil! This was *flirting!* Had she been flirting all along? Had there been other signs? There was no way of knowing, and that was, of course, worse.

She took a deep breath and turned back towards the door. Mako Group was a women's corporation. That didn't mean it wasn't a corporation, that just meant it had a different culture than the average. The woman who owned it was still a multi-trillionaire with enough spending cash to start a company and own several Frames, each of which was a hundred-million expense on its own and could take years to pay itself back. All that to say that this was not going to be a meeting of equals.

Epoc was, in essence, applying to become property of the Mako Group.

There were worse things, of course. Most corporation contracts involved some form of indentured servitude and one way or another, but if Epoc got the job, she'd get to pilot the mech. Where she slept and ate didn't matter all that much to her. There was no greater freedom than sitting in a Frame and seeing the world through its eyes.

She'd only had the chance once before. It had been a decade ago, at the age of nineteen, and it had altered the course of her life immediately. It had been a simulation, but a remarkably good one, of what piloting felt like. The synchronicity of the muscles and limbs. The sensory overload that, once it settled, made her normal vision seem small and insignificant and lacking by comparison. She could see and be so much more.

There was something else, but she didn't tell people about that. It was awkward and embarrassing and it was one of the reasons she had dreamt of piloting every single night since that day. Not something for polite company.

After a knock on the door, Epoc was let into the office. It was large, with a lot of open space, and a large window that overlooked the assembly yard. Surprising was the glass floor. It added an air of danger to the room. They were suspended close to 80 feet of the ground below, where people moved gear back and forth. If you had a space this big, it didn't make sense not to also use it as a storage room, after all.

Behind the desk sat a woman. It had to have been a woman because statues don't blink. She looked like she was carved out of stone, her hair slicked back and braided tightly. She was younger than Epoc had expected, maybe a few years older than herself, but she carried herself with the stern

seriousness of someone older. She wore a tailored suit with the company logo just above a breast pocket, though she had decided to forego the customary clip-on tie.

Her perfectly manicured hands were steepled in front of her, and she smiled slightly when she noticed Epoc looking at her. Her lipstick, at least three shades of blue, purple and a deep red, made it all that much easier to notice. Epoc tried not to look at it too hard, looking her in the eyes instead. They were a deep, warm amber.

“You must be Epoc,” Ms. Winter said. “No last name?”

“No, ma’am,” she replied. “I quit.”

“Daring. May I ask why?”

“I’m a very good pilot, Ma’am,” Epoc said. “I was losing my mind driving loaders around a construction site all day.”

“Hmm.” Ms. Winter stood up and to her absolute horror, Epoc realized this woman was taller than her, too. Her heels clicked gently as she walked around the desk to approach her. “You know,” she said, “the recruiter spoke quite highly of you.”

Epoc swallowed as she found herself craning her neck to look up at the woman. “Yes,” she said. “Like I said. I’m a very good pilot, Ms. Winter.”

“Apparently. And please, that’s a little formal. Call me Antimony. Only clients call me Ms. Winter, and my pilots call me Handler.”

“You oversee missions yourself?” Epoc asked, trying not to fidget.

“Yes,” Antimony Winter said as she walked over to the window, holding her hands behind her back. “I pride myself on a close working relationship with all my pilots, and I like to think it’s what makes us competitive in this market. Do you know what the early retirement rate is for pilots?”

“A little over eighty percent,” Epoc said, parroting the statistic. Most pilots, if they didn’t end up in a coma, spent the rest of their lives severely shaken, often unable to function in society after the heavy duress piloting had put on their minds.

“Do you know Mako Group’s?”

“At a guess? Closer to fifty?”

“Almost,” Antimony said, turning around with a smile that briefly, it seemed, reflected stars. “Five. Not only do all our pilots stay in action longer, but they all end up taking desk jobs at Mako Group after they stop piloting. Most choose not to, of course. Our oldest is Chiara. She’s pushing seventy.”

“But... how?”

“We take care of our own here, Epoc,” Winter said. “We make sure everyone has their needs met and comes back asking for more. We don’t fuck around, and we’re a team.”

“That’s... admirable,” Epoc said, and it wasn’t a lie. It was just unheard of. Why didn’t they lead with those numbers? They’d get potential pilots falling over themselves to... ah. That was probably why.

“So, Epoc.” Antimony Winter stepped closer. “Why did you decide to become a pilot?”

“Because,” she said, “there’s nothing like it. When I was in that cockpit the world was tiny and I was... free. Free in a way *nobody* is anymore. It made me feel like I could do anything, go anywhere, take on anyone. The world was larger and smaller at the same time, in the best way. And, well, I’m really, really good at it. I hold the record for most sim hours and successful remote runs for anyone my age.”

She’d said the last bit with a not-earned sense of pride. And yeah, remote runs weren’t the same. Input delay could make the difference between life and... well not death, which was the point, but between success and ruining a very expensive piece of machinery. That’s why remote jobs tended to be mostly construction, and that was hardly Epoc’s goal.

“Good start,” Antimony said. “Is that everything?” There was a knowing hint in her voice and Epoc felt her ears burning. She just hoped the CEO couldn’t tell. She swallowed and opened her mouth, but Antimony got there before she did, sitting down on the edge of her desk. “Be honest with me, Epoc. I have no use for a pilot who can’t tell me what things are like on the ground.”

Opening and closing her mouth like a beached fish for a few seconds, Epoc, took a breath. “It’s exhilarating,” she finally said. “If I’m honest I... I’ve never felt so alive and...” she kept trailing off under Antimony’s scrutiny, but she pushed through, “there’s a... sexual element.”

The silence was deafening. She stared at Antimony Winter, who didn’t so much stare back as she pinned Epoc to the wall with her eyes. It was stifling, like being lifted by her collar and slammed into the metal prefab wall with enough force to knock the air out of her.

Antimony opened her mouth and it looked for a second like she was panting, and then her lips curled into a grin, the first outward expression Epoc had seen her make. She gestured to the chair. “Have a seat, Epoc.”

“Why?”

“Because I want you to be comfortable?”

Epoc resisted the giggle rising in her throat, tension bubbling up between her shoulder blades. “No,” she said, “why did you ask me that? Why did you make me—”

“I made you tell me the truth, Epoc,” Winter said. “That’s it. And the reason is because we do things a little differently here. But I think you’re exactly the kind of person we’re looking for.” She stepped behind her desk again, opened a drawer, then put three folders on top of it. “I’d like to offer you a contract.”

“Oh?” Epoc sat down as she was asked and looked at the three files. The first had a little symbol of a mouse on it. The second had a cat. The third just said “CLASSIFIED” in big red letters.

“The three contracts we’re offering are, I think, very fair. It’s all up to you.”

Epoc shrugged. “Let’s hear it.”

Chapter 2

“The first is a Rat contract. That’s the unofficial name but it stuck.” Winter pointed down. “Most of the people on the factory floor work with Rat contracts. Six months, competitive pay. If you can find the same job elsewhere for more pay, we’ll match it. And, I’m quite proud to say, it’s union.”

“Wait, really? I thought unions were outlawed?” Epoc leaned forward and opened the folder. It was hefty, but there was, indeed, a tab marked as such.

“Not strictly speaking, no. Lobbying for a union is illegal, but any company is allowed to help its employees unionize.”

“That’s... different. What’s the job?”

“Nothing special. You’d be using an A5 Frame. You’re familiar.”

“I am,” Epoc said. An A5 unit was about 20 to 25 feet tall. They were extremely mobile, and often had open canopies. There had been some controversy because of their use in various warzones, being small enough to hide inside of a building. There had been... casualties.

“At Mako we found their use in disaster relief, deep-sea and low orbit construction, and, when no such contracts are available, they work well as a loader. It’s not glamorous work, but you’d make a steady wage, and you’d have access to our in-house facilities, including cafeteria and sleeping quarters.”

Epoc refrained from shrugging again. It really was good work. It wasn’t the work she wanted, or the work she’d really trained for. It was basically glorified power loader work. A5’s were often just juiced-up exoskeletons. “What are the other contracts?”

The CEO smiled a deeply genuine smile and Epoc felt something stir in her stomach. The nebula on Antimony Winter’s lips seemed to shift every time she moved her mouth.

“Cat contracts are proper pilot contracts. I think this might be more your speed. Six months to two years. You work from A6 Frames and up. You share Nexus with the other Cats until we find us a Hound. Highly competitive pay, room and board is taken care of. You’d sign an NDA, because you’d get up close and personal with some proprietary technology. After five years or five contracts – whichever comes first – we offer an indefinite contract where you own a share of the corporation.”

“What kind of share?”

“Exactly one room, your own vehicle, benefits, and the option to buy company stock.”

“Why?”

“We like our pilots loyal, Epoc,” Winter said.

“That sounds... *really* good,” Epoc said. “What kind of benefits? What kind of vehicle?”

“Oh, we can only offer company cars, I’m afraid. You don’t get a private loader,” Antimony said with a little giggle that was like ice cubes in a crystal glass. “And benefits include medical care, dental, and legal protection in case of future post-Mako contracts.”

“What’s the work like?”

“It’s hard work,” Antimony said with a nod, pursing her lips. “Disaster relief, but on a larger scale. You’d assist in megafauna disposal and cleanup. If you consent, you could be a part of military parades, and VIP protection. There may be occasional off-world excursions.”

“Frontline combat?” Epoc shifted uncomfortably. “It’s only because, well, I don’t, have, uh...”

“We’ve seen your file, Epoc,” Winter said. “I’m not sending you into a warzone without military experience. That said, you would be taking mandatory training. A6 Frames are war machines first, and while we try to stay out of conflict, neutrality is expensive. That said, Mako Group gets plenty of contracts that don’t include human hostiles.”

“That’s good to hear,” Epoc said, relaxing a little. “That sounds really good, to be honest.” The thought of getting to fly Nexus was already a dream. But a part of her was hungry for more. She glanced at the third file. Antimony put her hand on it, perfect fingernails pearly and, Epoc noticed, filed quite short. There was that flutter in her stomach again.

“You want to know.” It wasn’t a question. Epoc nodded.

“Yes, please.”

“Good.” Antimony said, and there was another word that hung in the air, unspoken. Epoc had to breathe through her nose for a second. “This is a Hound contract. I won’t hold it against you if you don’t take it.”

“Why is that?”

“It’s... extensive. Shortest contract is five years.”

“Woah.” That sounded like a good thing. No company offered job security like that.

“Don’t get excited *yet*.” Antimony opened it. “The cancellation fee on your end is... big. If you sign up, you can negotiate for early termination once a year, but your first time is tomorrow.”

“Why tomorrow?”

“Because, Epoc, if you take this contract, it’s very possible you’ll want out by tomorrow.” Winter looked at Epoc through thick eyelashes. “Under a Hound contract, *Nexus Alpha* –” She gestured out the window of the office at the head of the giant frame, “– is essentially yours. You can customize it to your specifications, as long as you can get Diana to agree to the changes.”

Epoc couldn’t believe what she was hearing. She’d be sole owner and pilot of what was likely to be the most cutting edge Frame currently on the market? That was a dream come true.

“On top of this, room, board, medical and legal expenses are all covered.” Antimony leafed through the pages, tapping the pages at relevant passages. “There is an on-staff nutritionist and trainer to make sure you’re taking care of yourself, as well as a therapist and we have the facilities for

several religious ceremonies should you want to make use of those, privately or with others. Basically, if you want it, it's yours."

"Okay, okay," Epoc said. "What's the catch?"

"Well," Antimony said, "this is the big one, Epoc. The catch. The reason we only have two Hounds on staff." She turned the page. "Total relinquishing of autonomy." Epoc blinked. Did that mean... "Under a Hound contract, Mako Group owns you. You are our property. Your bodily *integrity* is guaranteed, but where it goes and what you actually do with it is up to us. There are a lot of consent forms and yes, those can be negotiated, but only to a certain limit."

"But that's indentured servitude!"

"Yes," Winter said. "It is."

"Why would anyone take this?"

Winter flipped to a page. The top of the page read "LONG TERM MATERIAL TRANSFERENCE."

"After four contracts or twenty years, whichever comes first, Nexus Alpha is yours."

"Wait, you mean—"

"Yes," Antimony said. "After twenty years of piloting, this fifty-billion dollar machine would be, effectively, yours. You just can't sell it or sell its specs. Industrial secret."

"But... that's... *how?!?*"

"It is an investment we consider worth making. We currently have two Hounds on staff, and four ex-Hounds that have decided to stay in our employ as freelancers. That's how my mother did things, and her mother before her, and it has always been more than worth it." She turned a page. "In the event of your death, ownership transfers to your next of kin. In case they refuse, Nexus Alpha becomes ours again and ten percent of the estimated market value of Nexus Alpha is paid out. In case no next of kin present themselves, we obviously take Nexus back and she gets a new pilot."

"That's... a lot." Epoc said. Indentured servitude. And it's not like she wouldn't be able to fly Nexus Alpha on a Cat contract. But... it would be *hers*. And twenty years wasn't *that* long of a time. She'd barely be fifty by the time she got out of the contract. She could go anywhere in a machine like that. She could go off-world if she wanted to. She could do *anything*. "Why?"

"Why?"

"Why this? Why the indentured servitude?"

"Because of the way we work here," Winter said. "It requires that we have... more control over the bodies of our pilots than is traditional. It's for your own health, but it doesn't always feel that way. In order to keep you from burning out in the cockpit, we need to be able to do what is necessary, whether you like it or not."

"What does that mean?"

"I can show you, if you like. That might convince you," Winter said.

Epoc squinted and raised an eyebrow. "O-kay?"

“Sign this.”

She slid forward a document. It was a non-disclosure agreement. Epoc looked at it. It basically guaranteed that what she was told during the interview process was not to be repeated. It seemed very generous, not extending beyond the conversation. The only problem was the fee. It was in the billions. Hesitantly, she signed it.

Antimony Winter walked around the desk again. “I may have to touch you. Revoke consent at your discretion.” She pressed a button on the wall and the window became opaque. The one on the floor, Epoc noted, didn’t. “You asked me earlier why I made you tell me how flying a Frame made you feel.”

“Yeah,” Epoc said.

“Flying a Frame, especially the Delta through Alpha classes, puts a tremendous load on the nervous system. That’s why most pilots burn out after five years. There’s exceptions, of course, and my family has done extensive research into why. It’s a closely guarded family secret.” She sat on the desk, directly in front of the chair. Her thighs were maybe a foot away from Epoc’s face. “In a small subset of the population, the Link process causes sexual stimulation. The mental pressure is temporarily offloaded onto the pleasure centers, as it were. Stand up.” Winter paused. “Please.”

She felt a little silly, but Epoc did as she was told. Now they were on equal level, at least, although that wasn’t *necessarily* an improvement. She didn’t mind being eye-to-thigh.

Antimony continued. “Lift your shirt for me?”

“Excuse me?”

“Humor me,” Antimony said. “If this is too much, a Hound contract will not be for you.”

Epoc lifted her shirt, showing her stomach. She was quite proud of a stomach that had moved through ‘taut’ and had come out on the other side. An ex of hers had joked about using it to shred cheese. None of that mattered when Antimony’s cool fingers touched her abs and sent jolts of electricity through her body. Her underbelly was swarming with butterflies now. She could feel herself straining against the clearly insufficient cloth of her underwear.

“We discovered that, if that stimulation is maintained and amplified, we can delay the negative effects of the neural load,” Winter said as she traced the outlines of Epoc’s stomach. She walked around behind her and hesitated. “May I continue?”

Epoc’s breathing was heavy. She hadn’t expected this. She hadn’t expected any of this. She also, deeply and powerfully, didn’t want this to stop. She nodded and then, with a quiet voice, whispered, “yes.”

Antimony Winter pressed her hand flat against Epoc’s underbelly and gently pushed her back, directly into herself. Epoc found herself leaning against the taller woman. “If you take the Hound contract,” Winter whispered in her ear, “you belong to me. I would own you, and whenever you’re out in the field, I’d be the one in your ear.” Her fingers traced the hem of Epoc’s pants. “And as long as you’re piloting, you’d be constantly stimulated. As activity increased, you’d

be teased harder. Constantly on the edge of climax. We carefully monitor your autonomous nervous system to keep you from reaching it until you come *home*. To me.”

The hand stopped again. Epoc realized she was being asked again. She nodded. Words wouldn't be coming anymore.

Very carefully Antimony's fingers slipped under the waistband, and moved down. It wasn't long before they found something to wrap around, and Epoc's head swam. It was hard to imagine this was really happening. The woman's perfumed breath brushing against her ear and cheek, filling her head with pink clouds. Those soft but cool fingers gripping her cock.

“Take it off,” Antimony said. Epoc did as she was told, pushing her pants down. The recycled air of the office was cool and the gentle breeze of the air conditioning was causing her to stiffen even more, if that was even possible at this point. Very gently, Antimony moved her hand up and down. “You would be mine,” Antimony continued, “and mine alone. I would get to do whatever I want to you, whatever I feel is necessary to make you the most effective you could possibly be.” Antimony pushed her pelvis against Epoc's ass as she gently stroked the pilot's cock. Every time her fingers reached their apex, she slowly traced one against Epoc's tip. Gently, Antimony ran her fingernails against the sensitive skin, sending little sparks of electricity up and down through Epoc's nervous system.

She squeezed and started to increase the speed of her movements.

“Do you want me to stop?” she asked.

Epoc shook her head. She was too far gone now. Completely surreal, as if in a dream.

“Good girl,” Winter purred in her ear and suddenly Epoc felt the other hand pressed against her lower back. Excitement gave way to trepidation for a moment when she realized several of her fingertips were coated in something *cold*. The hand slipped between her legs and she practically jumped.

“Wait,” she whispered just as the fingers pressed against her asshole, and Antimony immediately stopped.

This was it, Epoc realized. The moment where she could just end this whole fever dream in an instant. She could walk. She could take the Cat contract. She'd be allowed to pilot the Nexus in short bursts and have more money and comfort than she would anywhere else. For many, it would be the perfect job.

But then she wouldn't *own* Nexus Alpha. It wouldn't be *hers*. She wanted to be a part of that machine as much as she wanted it to be a part of her. And if that meant belonging to Mako Group...

She relaxed and pushed back against Winter's hand and the waiting digit slipped inside of her. The groan that came out of her mouth was the rawest noise she might have ever made, and she found herself grinding against Antimony's hand. She realized the woman wasn't moving. That she was simply holding still and that Epoc was fucking herself on the woman's hand.

“Yes,” she whispered, and Winter moved again. No longer teasing. Her fingers moved with purpose, pressing against her g-spot with one hand and jerking her off with the other.

Then there was her voice again.

“You’d be mine,” Antimony said. “And when you come home, to me, I would make sure all of that mental load is taken off. I would push you over the edge until you can’t stand anymore and then keep pushing until you can’t speak and then keep pushing until you can’t think, until you are completely spent. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” Epoc gasped. She was pushed to the edge, fingers fucking from behind, and she leaned forward onto the desk.

“Look down,” Winter said. Epoc did as she was told. The glass floor showed the factory floor far below. If someone looked up, it would be hard to make anything out. But she felt completely exposed all the same. It was pushing her closer to the edge. Antimony increased the speed of both her hands. “Are you close?” she asked.

“Yes,” Epoc groaned.

“Hold it,” Antimony said, squeezing her cock just above the base. “Not until I say so. That’s how this will work.”

“Yes.”

“I will be your handler,” Antimony said, squeezing as her fingers gently fucked Epoc.

“Yes.”

“I will be your owner,” she said as she bit the pilot’s neck. Epoc found her hips trying to fuck the woman’s hand of their own accord, but she wasn’t giving her anything to work with. She was so close. So fucking close.

“Yes.”

“You will be mine.”

“Yes.”

“Do you want to come?”

“Yes.”

“Yes what?”

“Yes, please.”

“Good,” Antimony said, and she relaxed her grip, then moved her hand down Epoc’s shaft again. “Are you ready, Epoc?”

“Yes.”

“Come for me.”

Epoc had never orgasmed so hard in her life. It started in her abdomen and flared out, like a chain reaction, expanding and exploding into her skin. It ran up her spine like a geyser and blossomed in her head, blacking out her vision and out of her mouth in a low, throaty groan.

When it stopped, Antimony didn’t. Her hands kept moving, and in the middle of a daze, head swimming, Epoc realized she was being pushed towards a second climax while the first was

still ebbing away. “W–” she said, and then a second, slightly lighter shockwave went through her body. Winter’s fingers were teasing every sensation they could out of her.

Epoc was being milked, she realized, and she couldn’t stop it. The low groan became a constant, desperate moaning. She was lightly aware of the sound of her cum hitting the glass floor, but it was all she could do to stay upright. Her knees buckled and her arms trembled.

“Good girl,” Antimony said, and pushed her fingers deeper into Epoc’s hole. The stimulation was becoming too much, and Epoc shook her head.

“Stop,” she whispered. “Please.”

Immediately, Winter ceased. Fingers were withdrawn, but gently. Epoc felt herself fall to the floor and then–

Two arms caught her, wrapping themselves around her shaking body.

“You’re okay,” Antimony said. “You did *so* good.” A hand gently stroked Epoc’s hair and back. “Breathe. Gently. You’re okay.”

Epoc breathed and slowly but surely her vision came back. Reality snuck back in at the edges and Winter helped her put her clothes back on and sit back down in her chair. When blinked to clear her eyes, she realized there was a *large* puddle on the floor in front of her. Surely that couldn’t all be hers, could it? Antimony knelt next to her with a look of kindness in her eyes that was beyond rare in a corporate executive.

“How are you feeling, Epoc?”

“Overwhelmed,” she wanted to say, but all that came out of her mouth was a light croak. Antimony handed her a glass of water and Epoc was surprised by how much her hands shook. She took a deep breath. Winter stroked her hair. “Spent.”

“That,” Antimony said, “is a Hound contract.”

“I see,” Epoc said and clenched her jaw.

“What happened here is completely confidential. It was only a taste and you would not be the first to turn it down. Nobody would hold it against you and if you don’t take any contracts I am still willing to write you a glowing recommendation, much as I’d like to have you on our team. I want you to take your t–”

Epoc reached forward, grabbed the pen from the desk, and signed.

Antimony smiled, reached forward, took Epoc’s head in her hands, and kissed her forehead.

“Very well,” she said. She brought her bracelet to her mouth. “Theia, come in.”

If there was a response, it was likely through an implant, because Epoc couldn’t hear anything. Not that she was parsing much. Her mind was shutting down, and she felt herself struggling to keep her eyes open.

“Prepare a Hound suite. Yes. She did. Me too. Oh, and have someone bring some tissues. Actually, on second thought, maybe a mop and bucket. Yeah. You have no idea. Yeah. No. Oh, and run a bath. Yeah. Clear my schedule. Thank you.”

As Epoc’s vision went black, she felt Antimony’s forehead against her own.

“Thank you, Epoc,” she said. “You won’t regret this. I promise. I’m going to take care of you. You’re mine.”

“M’yours,” Epoc mumbled.

“Good girl,” Antimony Winter said, and Epoc dozed off.

Chapter 3

Epoc woke up in darkness. Something went beep on the side of her head. She reached up carefully and realized she had electrodes stuck to her temples. Ah. Gently stripping them off, Epoc sat up and looked around. She was in a darkened room, though as soon as she sat up, a small light beeped on the table next to her.

“You’re awake.” Antimony’s voice chirped from the little communicator. “I’d be there, but I’m afraid I’ve been pulled away on some urgent business. I’ve taken the liberty of dressing you, but you’ll find there’s a wardrobe in your room. Take a minute to get your bearings. According to your vitals as of... thirty seconds ago, you’re still waking up.”

Epoc picked up the communicator. “Should I not have taken the electrodes off?”

“Oh, that’s fine. I just wanted to make sure you were okay. Don’t worry, we’re not plugging anything into you without your permission.” Antimony left the slightest pause, as if she was waiting for Epoc to laugh. “Anyway, you have another fourteen hours to change your mind. I recommend you take a tour of the facilities. Meet the other Hounds. It goes without saying you can’t leave the premises. That’ll void the contract. How are you feeling?”

“Still a little overwhelmed.” Epoc stretched. She’d signed the contract almost on a whim but... She felt something stir when she remembered the events immediately preceding the signing. “Did last night really happen?”

“It did,” Winter said. “You were very eager. You can talk to the other Hounds about it, but that’s it.”

“Part of the NDA?”

“Bingo. The Cats know about the indentured contract, but they don’t know about our... proprietary technology. They just think we put something in your heads to keep your brains from liquefying.”

Epoc frowned and touched her temple. There was the slight indent of the electrode where she’d slept on it, but no seams or anything. “Uh,” she said, “do you?”

“Bodily integrity is guaranteed,” Winter said. “We guarantee that nothing enters your body without written consent beforehand.”

“But if you own me, can’t you just *make* me sign a consent form?”

“No. That’s a part of the main contract. Don’t worry. You’ll have plenty of time before the second signing. The first one’s mostly for show anyway. There’s a copy on the desk if you want to have a look right now. Just for you to rifle through. There’s some things that need negotiating.”

“Oh,” Epoc said. That was a relief. “Are you going to be on the line all day?”

There was a silence on the comm that seemed to stretch out uncomfortably, until Winter’s voice came back. “Would you like me to be?”

“Oh, I didn’t mean—”

“Epoc,” Antimony said, “if you decide to stay with us, you’ll be wearing a cuff like mine. If you decline the aural implant, the cuff will function as a communication device. I will *always* be reachable. No matter what. But right now, if you want to explore in peace and quiet, that’s an option. Did I address any questions you had about this subject?”

“Yeah,” Epoc said. “Yes, you did. Thank you.”

“Very good,” Antimony said as Epoc stood up and held out the communicator in front of her to illuminate the room, and saw a button by the door.

“So what d–*Fuck*.”

“What’s wrong, Epoc?” Antimony’s tone shifted immediately. It was razor sharp.

“Nothing. Smashed my shin into what I think is a solid glass coffee table. Sorry.”

“Ah. Go see the doctor. I’ll let her know you’re coming. Press the blue button on your communicator and it should highlight which of the lines on the floor to follow to his office.” Epoc paused, but decided not to argue. If she was going to be company property, it only made sense that she shouldn’t be damaged. “If I can ask, Epoc, which is it?”

“Hm? Which is what?” she asked when she finally managed to get the light on. The first thing she noticed was that there was a desk lamp next to the bed that she had managed to miss completely. She swore under her breath, turning the phone away from her mouth when she did.

“Do you want me to stay on the line or give you privacy?”

“I think, if I take the job, it’ll be my last day where I’m not on call, so I think I’ll go with ‘reachable but not unreasonably so.’ Sounds doable?”

“Perfectly. Do go see the doctor. I insist. I sent the directions to the communicator. Anything else you need?”

“I could eat,” Epoc said, putting a hand on her stomach. The image of Antimony’s fingers tracing her skin flashed across her eyes and she shuddered briefly.

“There’s a mess hall but I can have someone bring you something if you want to.”

“No, no. I think it’s a good idea for me to meet the rest of the team and where better to do that than at the cool kid’s table, you know?”

Winter paused again. “I don’t. I’ll trust your instincts. I’m going to hang up now.”

“Okay,” Epoc said and put the communicator down. She looked down at what she was wearing. A zipped-up hoodie over a tank top, with loose fitting, comfortable pants. Basically pajamas. Everything in the Mako Group’s signature blue colors.

Still, they had pockets. She put the comm away and explored the room. There wasn’t a great deal to it. Desk, with, indeed, the promised contract. It had a built-in monitor she could use, which was nice. It looked detachable too. There was the wall closet, which had neatly folded stacks of clothes.

Epoc decided to just stay in the clothes she was wearing and just put some socks and sneakers on. No need to go crazy.

Leaving the room, she realized she was in a living room. There was someone sitting on the sofa. She couldn't have been older than 24, and was currently playing something on the console across from her. As soon as she saw Epoc, she went from horizontal to vertical while barely making any of the necessary steps in between.

"You're awake!" she shouted. "Yo! Aaliya! She's awake!"

Epoc saw two doors along the same wall as the one she had just exited, and realized these were probably the Hound quarters. That meant that the excitable girl and this Aaliya were going to be her colleagues. One of the other doors opened and a woman with the most amazing breasts Epoc had ever seen stepped out. She noticed the breasts first because they were the first thing that came through the door, and because they were fully naked.

"Yeah?" Aaliya said, rubbing a towel through her hair, the other holding up a larger towel around her waist. She looked at Epoc. This woman's scars had scars. Her muscles had muscles. She had laugh lines bisected by what looked like shrapnel. One of her eyebrows was basically missing, and that eye was a different color. She was missing at least two fingers. She was one of the most beautiful women Epoc had ever seen.

"bbb," Epoc said.

"Hey. I hope you don't mind. I just got out of the shower. Nice to meet you. I'm Aaliya." She stuck out her hand. The one that had been holding the towel at her waist, which was now just being held together by forces beyond mortal ken.

"Gnk-" Epoc said, then she swallowed and shook the hand. "I mean no, I don't mind. Just a little shocked."

"You can be weird about it!" the younger woman said. She was upside down in an armchair. "I am! She's okay with it!"

"It's true," Aaliya said. "I have an exhibitionist streak. Kind of a requirement for this job." She went back to drying her hair. It went past her waist. "Anyway, you're on your probation day, yeah? Take your time, babygirl. It's a rough job, and it's not for everyone. Only take it if you're sure."

"Oh, don't let her scare you. She's on round *two!*"

"Excuse me?" Epoc said. "Is that true?"

"Yes," Aaliya said. "I was her age when I did my first double decade contract. I'm two years into my second."

"But... don't you get to *own* your own Frame if you complete a full contract?"

"Yeah," Aaliya said. "But have you considered—" she held up several fingers "— *two* Frames?"

"She's got a point," the younger woman said. "But that's not the only reason, is it?"

"Nope. This job is my life and I wouldn't give it up for the world."

"Sorry," Epoc said. "What's your name, by the way?"

The girl slid out of the chair like she was made of liquid, crawled back upright, and scurried over, sticking out a hand of her own. "Hex," she said. "Hexacorallia, but that's more than a

handful. Or you can call me Cora if you want or Hexacora or Coral if you're weird or Lia if you want to be contrarian or—

"I'm going to stick with Hex, if that's alright with you," Epoc said. "Nice to meet you both." She put her hands in her pockets. "So... should I do it?"

"Yes!" Hex said. "I've been on contract for three years and I *love* it."

"You're not reliable," Aaliya said. "You like being owned."

"It's truuuee," Hex purred, then pawed at Aaliya, who grabbed her wrist to make her stop.

"The point is that you should take your time. Epoc, right?"

She nodded. It made sense they would've been briefed on her.

"How's about this: tour the facility. Get some breakfast in you. Then you come back here, and I take you for a spin in one of our battlers. See if you like the vibe. If Handler Winter approves, of course. That way you'll have a pretty good idea of how we do things around here."

She suddenly stood up straight and her eyes glazed over. After a second, she turned to Epoc.

"Handler Winter says you need to see the doctor first."

"Is she listening in?" Epoc asked, a little annoyed at what seemed to already be a breach of confidence. She wasn't under contract yet.

"No," Aaliya said. She paused as she was being told more. "No, though she also did just predict you'd say that. She assumed Hex and myself would have kept you from going to see the medic. And, I mean..."

"Handler Winter is never wrong!" Hex said. "Come on, go! We'll still be here when you get back!" Aaliya nodded in agreement.

"You should go."

"Alright," Epoc said, retrieving her communicator from her pocket and pressing the blue button. It immediately told her to follow the green line. What green line?

"Out of the room," Aaliya said, and put her hand on Epoc's shoulder, vaporizing her insides instantly and turning her into a human-shaped juice box. The woman's grip was like that of a predator. Relaxed, but with enough power to rip her in half the way Epoc assumed she could do to a book. She pointed. "There are colored lines on the walls. The communicator knows where you are. Follow the right line and you'll be fine."

"Gotcha," Epoc whimpered and made for the door. Behind her, she heard the other two talking.

"I should teach you a lesson for behaving like that in front of a potential new hire," Aaliya said.

"Oh *noooooo*," Hex whined. "Not punishment for little old meeeee."

The next thing she heard was the voice being abruptly interrupted as she was yanked into Aaliya's room. Those two seemed pretty close. Epoc wasn't going to make any assumptions there.

A visit to the doctor where she turned out to be completely fine later and she explored the facility. Mako Group's hangars were huge.

She got a chance to take a peek at Reefdancer – Nexus Alpha’s older sister – as she stood in her own hangar. She was a little shorter, and had blue stripes across her. Thick thighs and a massive forearm. This thing *punched*. She was told it was Hexacora’s.

The last one, then, was Aaliya’s. The hangars were positioned in a three-pronged star, with most of the living quarters in the middle. Aaliya’s Frame was the shortest of the three, by far, and was jet black. The shoulder-mounted guns made it look like it had three heads. Her name was Cerberos.

Epoc also found out that Nexus Alpha was a temporary name. Her first Hound would get to name her. That was an impressive honor.

The rest of the complex wasn’t nearly as interesting to her as the mechs, but she roamed the place for several hours anyway, until finally she sat down in the mess hall. Diana waved her over and stood up from the table of what were obviously fellow mechanics.

“Hey!” she said. “You’re still here.” She slapped Epoc on the back. “Good to see.”

“Yeah,” Epoc said. “But I’ve got some time to decide if I think it’s for me.”

“That’s a good thing,” Diana said. She walked Epoc over to the trays and then down to where food was served. “But, uh, look, can I be honest with you?”

“Of course.”

“You already know what you’re going to do, kiddo,” Diana said. “Take the stew. Always do. These two assholes know their spices.” She pointed at the cooks with her plate, who gave her a grin back and ladled food onto it. “Skip the bread rolls though, they’re overdone.”

“That was *one time*, you *whore*,” one of the cooks said and laughed. “Don’t listen to her. I make them myself in the morning.

“Fine, but try them at your own peril.”

“I think I will,” Epoc said, smiling as she got her own food, still thinking on what Diana had told her. “And... I think I will. About working here, I mean. But Aaliya offered to try out a... battler? One of those. I’m not sure I’m familiar with them.”

“Oh, *fuck* me,” Diana said, sitting down at a table, and Epoc joined her. Several engineers and pilots sat down around her, eager to get to know the new blood. “That bitch needs to talk to me before she decides that shit.” She poked a piece of chicken with her fork. “A battler is basically a Frame custom built for sparring. They’re not fit for duty but they pack a fucking punch. And *I* usually get to fix them.” She looked around. “Well, you know, the team.”

“Wait, Aaliya is taking the battlers out?” Two of the other engineers groaned and one of them got up like she needed to make sure the stove was off.

“Yo,” one of the other pilots said, pointing at Epoc, “are you really going to take her on?” She had a patch with an emblem of a Cat on her arm. The tag on her jumpsuit read her name as Oona.

“I guess so,” Epoc said. “I don’t really expect to be able to put up a lot of a fight. She’s got, what, twenty-two years of experience?”

“Damn,” Oona said, running her hand over her head. “Still. Rather you than me.”

“Well, you’ll have an audience,” Diana said.

Everyone introduced themselves to Epoc, who returned it, and people briefly shared their histories. How they got to work for Mako Group. All of them talked about the company with a kind of reverence you didn’t usually see in corporations like this. They were all motivated, and talked about the company’s successes like their own. Dinner was, all things considered, a very pleasant experience.

“So,” Oona finally said, “think you’ll be a Hound?”

“I guess,” Epoc replied, “I’ll know after I get in the battler. I haven’t been in a live cockpit in ten years, so maybe I’ve been kind of overhyped in my head, you know?”

“Nah,” one of the other pilots said. “I’ve only had the chance to take Sierra Nova out for a spin once. I had to lie down for two days but it was the best thing in the world.”

“You all think I should do it?”

Diana put a hand on her arm. “You wouldn’t still be here if *you* didn’t think you should. And what we think doesn’t matter at that point.”

Epoc nodded. She wasn’t wrong. She stood up. All that was left to do was to get her shit kicked in by Aaliya.

Chapter 4

“You’ve done a lot of training, girl?” Aaliya asked.

The changing room was otherwise quiet. It had been extensively used, but only on one side. Decades of use had worn through some of the leather seats, but it was clear that it had always been the same people, the same seats.

Epoc smirked. She knew about pilot superstitions and it was kind of funny to see they were alive and well in the Mako Group’s team as well. You picked a seat to change and that was your seat, and a locker that was *your* locker, and if you picked someone else’s locker that was bad fucking luck. She had heard of older pilots who straight up refused to go on a sortie because they could tell by the assprint on the bench someone had sat in their spot.

“Yeah,” Epoc said. “25,000 sim hours, give or take.”

She could tell Aaliya had intended to smirk or make a derisive noise, but she seemed genuinely taken aback. “Damn. Really?”

“Yeah. And two years of remote piloting.”

“Hm,” Aaliya said, opening her locker. “Well, let’s see if that’s worth anything. I know a lot of you kids think sims or loader practice will prepare you for what it’s like to pilot something bigger than a Gamma class.”

“I know it won’t,” Epoc said, finding a locker that was missing the telltale scratches of use. It was in the middle of the room – the ones near the corners, that offered the most privacy, had all been used. This room was used by the Cats as well, so it was best to play it safe, even if she was a little more exposed here. “I’ve been told by every instructor that sim time will only get you so far. But the way I figured, why practice if you’re not going to learn from it and be the best?”

Aaliya grinned. “Careful, babygirl,” she said. “Hubris is fine seasoning on a prime cut like you.”

“Excuse me?” Epoc turned around just in time for Aaliya to take her coveralls off, letting them fall to the floor. She was, indeed, excused. So excused her heart thundered in her chest. Aaliya was stark naked. What’s worse was the way she put her hands on her hips, knowing she was giving Epoc a show. She looked like a tightly-wound spring, ready to, hopefully, crush Epoc’s head between her thighs. Briefly, Epoc wondered what it would be like to have her face shoved into the woman’s bush and then finally clenched her jaw and looked away.

“I’m going to devour you,” Aaliya said with a wolfish grin. “If you’re uncomfortable, I can leave, girl. If you’re feeling intimidated, you know.”

“No,” Epoc said. “I’m fine.” She stripped off her own clothes and shoved them into the locker, keeping her underwear on. She heard a tutting from Aaliya.

“Babygirl,” Aaliya said, “you pilot them naked. That’s the only way they work.”

“Oh.” Epoc suddenly remembered and realized what Winter had told her, about the way they reduced the mental load from piloting the Frames. Swallowing, she pushed her briefs down, exposing herself to the cool, dry air of the changing room. She felt her heart beat in her cock, the anxiety and stress of the situation very real.

“Excited to get started, are you?” Aaliya said, baring her teeth like a hyena. She pointed to the door behind Epoc. “Right through there. Mine is on this side. You can pick up an earpiece just past the airlock. And you could have kept your socks on. You know. If you have some performance anxiety.” She winked and left.

“I’m going to be... fine,” Epoc replied, but the door closed behind Aaliya mid-sentence.

She calmed her breathing and went through the door. A part of her now expected all of this to be a prank and for there to be a crowd on the other side to point and laugh, but it was just an airlock. On the wall to her right was a small cabinet with a communication piece inside. She put it in her ear and pressed the button. “Testing.”

“Reading you loud and clear, Epoc,” the voice crackled on the other side.

“Winter?” The ground vibrated suddenly, and she steadied herself on the wall. She was moving.

“You’re playing pilot, so today I’m Handler Winter. Deal?”

“Deal,” Epoc said. “What do I do?”

“Just wait a few seconds. Getting into a Beta class like a battler is a little different from climbing into a loader. You’re actually in a skybridge right now. This airlock will take you directly into the head of your battler. Her name is Amy.”

“Amy?”

“Well, AM-1, but the unofficial nickname stuck.”

“Gotcha.”

The skybridge stopped with a gentle, mechanical whine, and the door ahead of her opened. She had expected a seat, but in front of her was what looked to be the guts of the machine itself. The only indication where she was supposed to sit were the holes designed for arms and legs, heavily padded, along with a seat and what looked like an unactivated holo-display.

“Alright, Epoc. Take a seat.”

“Uh...”

“Once you’re in there, we can see your vitals and your kinetics. We’ll be able to adjust your seat as needed.” Winter’s voice was reassuring, but it still looked a lot more claustrophobic than she’d expected. She had seen the inside of a cockpit before and it had looked more like, well, a chair. With controls and a headrest. Sometimes even cupholders. This was not that.

Gathering her courage, Epoc reached forward and grabbed one of the handlebars she was only now noticing. Gingerly lowering herself into the seat, her legs slipping into what she could only describe as... sleeves? Holsters? They fit comfortably, made of some kind of synthetic cotton. This would probably not be that bad. There were comfortable holds for her to put her feet on.

She slipped her arms into the two sleeves in front of her too and found that there were individual holes for her fingers on the end of it. She had to lean forward in the seat to fully fit her arms inside, and found her face pressed to what was essentially a screen where she could rest her chin. There was a comfortable pad for her chest to lean on too. As she leaned forward, it settled slightly to give way for her breasts. There were seams in the material where cold steel peeked through, and she hissed gently when she felt it press against her stomach.

Finally, she felt a similar pad push against her back, keeping her in place. She took a deep breath. Despite the fact that right now she couldn't move, she wasn't panicking. Yes, cockpits and sims were not this claustrophobic, but they weren't exactly rooms you could walk around in. She steadied her breathing.

"You," Handler Winter said in her ear, "are doing *really* well, Epoc. Your vitals are perfect. Better than anyone I've ever seen on their first time." That last part was quiet, like she wasn't sure she was supposed to be telling her. "Holy shit," Epoc heard her whisper. Antimony switched back to Handler mode. "Alright, we're going to adjust to your exact body shape, so don't move for a second."

"Sounds good," Epoc said, and she felt the sleeves around her body shift gently, her knees being bent a little bit until she was perfectly snug, pressure spread evenly for maximum comfort.

"Now for the last part. Just try to stay relaxed. I'm here. I'm with you."

In the airlock, Epoc had gone fully soft, so when she'd sat into the seat, her cock had just fit into what had basically been a small cup for it to rest in without being crushed. Now, however, something slipped around her shaft. It was wet and warm. Something else, warm, soft and slippery gently probed against her backside.

"What is—"

"This," Handler Winter said, "is going to drive up your arousal. Would you like me to talk you through it?"

"I..." She needed to think about this. Finally, she realized she didn't want to just endure this. "Yes," she said. "Yes, please, Handler."

"Good," her handler said. Then her voice gained a fuller quality, like she was closer to the microphone and with it, closer to her ear. Winter's voice was the only sound in the world. It was the only *thing* in the world, other than the feeling of her bare skin against artificial fabric and cold steel. "Good girl," she said. "You're getting aroused, Epoc. Last time to back out."

"No," came the reply. "No, if this is how I become your best pilot, give it to me."

There was a moment of silence. Her eagerness was being processed. Then, her handler's voice turned back on. "Hound," she said, "Right now, your cock is slipping into a sleeve made just for you. It's a mouth, draining you, emptying you, and it's not going to stop, Epoc."

She felt a very gently rhythmic sucking motion, slowly sucking away at her already stiff cock.

“You should feel the plug go into your ass, too. Amy is a machine, but she’s more than capable of fucking you. She’s going to gently slide into you, over and over again. She’s going to rub against your prostate and drive you wild.”

The screen in front of Epoc turned on, and suddenly her senses, previously completely denied, were now overloaded. *This* she was used to. The screens projected information onto her retina in high detail, and the world opened up. She was no longer Epoc, a small person inside of an enclosed space, but a 60 foot tall machine made for nothing but combat.

The tight fabric around her limbs provided immediate haptic feedback. She raised an arm, and in front of her she saw the giant hand respond to the movements her brain was sending to her own limbs. Information about every part of the Frame was quite literally at her fingertips. She knew how to move every digit to move through menus. She slightly adjusted the sensitivity and response time to pull it just a little tighter.

“You’re a natural, Epoc,” Handler Winter said, and suddenly she was Epoc again and she was being gently fucked again. Her head swam. “There. Sorry for pulling you back for a second, but we have to keep you two aligned. If you fully dissociate, our tech can’t do its job.”

“Understood, handler,” Epoc said. She closed her eyes and focused on the sensations. It was easy, they weren’t exactly subtle. She was being fucked by a machine the size of a small skyscraper, and it was doing a better job than most of her exes. “Fuck,” she whispered. The soft tip of the plug was rubbing against her prostate and sending sparks through her underbelly.

An orgasm was already coming, and she pushed herself into the machine to let it come over her. It was like moving to the top of a snowy hill, ready to slide all the way down.

Like a solid grip, the machine clenched around the base of her shaft, and the dildo in her ass lost its consistency and stopped applying the pressure where it had, leaving her just on the edge.

“Ah,” she said, panting through gritted teeth.

“I see you’re starting to get how this is going to go.”

“This is hard, Winter,” she said. “Sorry, Handler Winter.”

“Yes,” Winter said. “It is. I have your vitals right here.”

“Was that a joke?”

“A little one. Not unlike—”

“*Thank you*, Handler Winter,” Epoc said, blushing now too.

“Very well, Epoc. Let’s continue. Your responses are nominal but a little strong. That’s to be expected with your first time. As you keep piloting, it’ll be easier for you to stay in that state of not-quite orgasm. On top of you not dying from neural overload, when you get into that state, you’ll also be a better pilot. Inhibitions and fears are reduced in that state, and you’re more likely to do what you have to to achieve your goal.”

“Because the goal is release,” Epoc said as the feeling ebbed away. She noticed, though, that the plug was still inside of her.

“Exactly. Try moving around.”

Epoc took a few tentative steps, and she felt Amy moved along with her. God damn, she wasn't fancy, but she was incredibly responsive.

"Hey! Epoc!" she heard over the comms. With a flick of her thumb, she opened the channel to Aaliya's Frame.

"Hey there, Aaliya," Epoc said. She opened the readings from her scanner and pinpointed the exact location of the other mech.

Amy spun on her heel and took three swift steps off to the side. Most people who had not seen an effective pilot move a Beta class didn't realize how quickly Frames could move. She stood opposite Aaliya's frame. The callsign on Epoc's monitor read that her name was, less imaginatively, AM-2. The battler was extremely barebones. No armor on the back. It was weighty and made exclusively for heavy blunt impacts from the front. Nonetheless, like all Frames, she was a gorgeous machine.

The way the leg flowed from the hip down to an elevated heel that forced the machine to lean slightly backward. That way, forward momentum was harder to stop. The heavy forearms were dented in a million places and shined from their thousands of impacts over the years.

The small cockpit had several rows of glowing scanners, giving the impression of half a dozen green, glowing eyes. Epoc jumped from one foot to another.

"*Damn,*" Aaliya said. "Aight." AM-2 pointed to a nearby field. It looked like it had been the impact site of a meteor shower. "Let's go into the field and show me what you got."

Space was at a premium, sure, but a company like Mako Group could buy a chunk of land and afford to put a box over it to keep prying eyes out. The ceiling was about 150 feet high. Epoc resisted the urge to see if she could tune up the Frame to try and jump up and touch it. Testing its structural integrity was probably not the best idea.

"Alright, babygirl," Aaliya said, squaring up her arms in a traditional boxing stance. "Rules of engagement: if someone touches the yard wall, time out until we move away from it. Respect a tap-out. Anything you want to add?"

Epoc raised her arms. "Yeah," she said. "Don't hold back."

Aaliya was on her in a flash. Sure, Epoc thought she could move quickly in a machine this size, but the woman she was up against was on a whole other level. A massive fist rammed her Frame in the chest and she felt the material on her chest stiffen and push into her instantly. Amy started to topple backwards. That was not a great start.

She leaned to her left as far as she could, hoping the internal hydraulics wouldn't rip her in half, and put her right hand on the ground, turning her fall into an upward roll, leading with her left elbow, slamming into AM-2's arm. Shame. She'd been aiming for the head.

Handler Winter's voice purred in her ear. "Nice job, Epoc," she said. "Time to kick things up a notch." The mouth on her cock started to suck again, and the probe resumed its gentle fucking. She realized it was also continuously lubing her up. Epoc's breathing grew heavy.

"Fuck."

“Yes,” her handler said. “Now, keep it up.”

Epoc stepped forward and ducked, raising her arm barely in time to block a swing that was aimed at her cockpit. The impact was double. One against the flat of her forearm, the second, with a responsive thrust, against her prostate. The shock of it sent her own fist forward reflexively.

When it landed on Aaliya, another thrust. Epoc needed to test something. She sent strike after strike at AM-2, and with the same rhythm, the ministrations on her cock intensified. Her hips bucked involuntarily.

A colossal metal knee hit Amy in the midriff and Epoc flew backwards. The haptic feedback wasn't strong enough to knock the wind out of her, but landing on her back unexpectedly did, even with the Frame all around her.

“Get up, Epoc,” Winter whispered in her ear. “For me.”

“Yes,” she replied, “ma'am.”

She rolled off to the side, a not insignificant feat in a machine that weighed as much as a battleship. Where her cockpit had been, where *she* had been, a giant foot crashed down. Aaliya wasn't letting up though. She jumped over and smashed her fist down at Epoc, who had to keep moving. AM-2 was almost down on all fours, crouched down low.

“Aaliya,” Epoc said, “chill.”

The other woman wasn't responding, instead slamming her forearms down at Epoc as fast and hard as the battler Frame would allow, over and over again. All Epoc heard was an increasingly labored breathing over the radio. It was all Epoc could do to keep her arms up, to keep the blows from crushing her in her cockpit.

“I said,” Epoc grunted, “*chill!*” She grabbed both arms by the wrists as they came down.

In response, Aaliya rammed her own cockpit into Epoc's.

Amy's sensors briefly blacked out, and the metal casing rang like a gong in a disorienting cacophony. She barely managed to shove the larger mech off of her, halfway through getting up when a giant metal foot crashed into Amy's side and she was thrown to the side again. She wasn't even on her feet before Aaliya was in front of her again, fists coming down.

She deflected several blows, and as a reward the stimulation on her cock increased as well. She felt herself getting worked up again as she got into the rhythm of deflection and attack, even though her blows weren't landing any more and more and more of Aaliya's got past her defenses.

“She's beating you, Epoc,” Handler Winter said, whispering softly in her ear. “Do you know why that is?”

“She's faster than me.”

“Do you think her being stronger and faster than you has *anything* to do with muscles?” Handler Winter asked. “In there?”

“No.”

She felt the pressure inside of her increase. The probe was swelling and she felt her body strain to take it. She had *some* experience taking things up there, but this was stretching her to her limit. At the same time, the sucking rhythm increased.

“Feel, Epoc,” Handler Winter said. “Feel the machine. Feel the sex. Feel the oncoming orgasm, like an oncoming storm inside you. Feel the place where they meet, in your chest. In your cock. In your head. There’s a place where battle and release meet. That’s where she is.” The plug shoved a little deeper. “That’s where you’ll beat her.”

Epoc felt the plug gently fuck her. The mouth around her cock pump. She started to move her hips against it and realized it was the one movement she could make that the Frame wouldn’t replicate. She started to roll her pelvis, feeling the plug slide out when she pushed forward and the pressure increased on her cock when she pulled back.

She deflected another blow as she fucked herself in the cockpit, *letting* her mind swim. Letting the feelings from her lower stomach blossom out, her skin tingling in her fingers and toes. The next blow was deflected automatically and in one swift movement she rammed Amy’s elbow into AM-2’s lower chest.

Epoc moaned as she felt that climax on the horizon, something that was terrifying in its scope. It was a wave of pleasure and release that would knock her out, and she didn’t know how she’d deal with it. She felt the promise of that wave, that storm, and let it inside of her.

Another moan as her next fist also hit home. A leg sweep, and she knocked Aaliya’s feet out from under her. She didn’t let up, pushing Aaliya’s dominant arm down with her left and smacking the other woman’s cockpit, knowing it would disorient her.

Her orgasm was so close, but the systems inside and around her were doing everything they could to keep her from climaxing. That didn’t stop her from increasing the movements of her own hips as she slammed AM-2 over and over again. She was humping her own harness with wild abandon, moaning and grunting like a dog in heat as she slammed those giant fists down, over and over again.

Every strike, a thrust.

Every hit, a reward.

Closer.

And closer.

So.

Fucking.

Close.

“Epoc,” the voice said in her ear. “*Epoc.*”

Everything stopped. The machine froze up and all external sensors shut down. All that remained was her handler’s voice.

“Epoc,” Handler Winter said again. “Stop.”

What rose out of her throat was a soft, animalistic whine. She had been so close. So close to winning. So close to coming. They were the same thing, weren't they? And she was on the edge so why make her stop when she had almost won?

"Hey," Handler Winter said, "you did... amazing. Hold on, let me lower the sensitivity. Do you hear that?" In the background, Epoc heard cheering, slowly dragging her back into reality. "You amassed quite the audience."

"Wh-what?"

"In twenty-two years, nobody's managed to defeat Aaliya in hand-to-hand combat," Handler Winter said. "Nobody except you."

"I... I did good?" Epoc asked. She realized she was drooling but she couldn't reach her face. She just shook gently in her place. The plug had returned to its previous, smaller shape, but was still inside her. Her cock was still hard, throbbing, demanding her attention;

"You did better than I could have ever dreamed, Epoc," Handler Winter said. "Return to base."

At those words, Amy resumed functionality. Nothing pumped or sucked, however, and resisted being humped at. The machine wasn't giving her anything, and that was probably for the best. She was so close to the edge, she felt like she was going to pass out.

Still, she managed to stand up.

"What about Aaliya?" she asked.

"She's passed out," Handler Winter said. "Don't worry, she's fine. The battlers are tougher than they look, and the cockpit is the sturdiest thing we make. But you rung her bell something fierce and she was pretty far gone, too."

"Were you talking to her, too?"

"No. When more than one of you is in the field, we have other handlers that can take care of you. My predecessor was with her. We had a little bet." There was a pride in her voice that filled Epoc's chest with a warm glowing light and her cock with an aching need for release. Though that might have been there already.

She walked back to the hangar and associated hanging room, letting the automated systems push her back up against the wall and the airlock moved up to her head. Now that she was doing this with the systems on, she could see that the internals of the cockpit could actually turn sideways to allow the pilot to get in or out.

This time, however, a scaffold was also lowered. On it stood Handler Winter. Epoc saw her through three different cameras.

"Epoc," she said. "You were fantastic. You deserve your treat. Three options." She put her hand up on the metal of the cockpit, and Epoc saw the screen register the touch as non-hostile. "One: I let Amy take care of you. Two, you step out and I give you release. Three, a mixture of both. You stay inside but I get access and help you out."

She blinked several times. It wasn't fair. She'd been a very good pilot. She'd won. Why was she being made to make a decision? "Idncare," Epoc mumbled through her teeth. She just wanted to come.

"Very well," Handler Winter said, pushed a button on her tablet, and Epoc felt the cockpit turn. After a second, she felt the cool open air wash over her and she realized she was covered in sweat, head to toe. Another button and she was spun around. The mouth was removed from her cock and she leaned back. The sleeves opened and suddenly she was sitting in what looked very much, well, like a traditional pilot's chair. Only with a dildo up her ass and her cock sticking straight up.

Winter stood in front of her.

"Hey," Epoc said.

Her handler stepped closer and put a hand on the metal next to Epoc's arm. "Can I touch you?"

"Yes!" Her response was immediate. Desperate. A smile played on Winter's lips. "Please," Epoc whimpered.

Without another word, Winter very carefully put her knees in the stirrups on either side of Epoc's legs, straddling her.

"I'm so proud of you, Epoc," she said. "I want you on my team. I want you. I *need* you."

This was a lot. A lot to take in, and especially a lot to take in when she was so hard she thought she was going to burst out of her skin.

"You were so good," her handler said, reaching down and touching the tip of Epoc's cock. A jolt of fire and lightning washed over her. Her fingers were as soft as Epoc remembered them, but instead of grabbing onto it, she pressed it against her own groin and very gently started to grind against her.

She was slick with precum. Her desire and arousal had been leaking out of her and now that she wasn't being literally sucked dry anymore, it had nowhere to go. She was coating Handler Winter's crotch and she didn't even manage to care.

The skin of her pants was soft as silk, and Epoc looked at her with pleading eyes. Handler Winter nodded down at her, and immediately she started to buck against her, rubbing her cock against the other woman's crotch.

There was a brief moment of annoyance when the handler pulled out a tablet, until she realized why and the plug started to move again, with speed and purpose. It was fucking her, and it wasn't being as gentle as it had been before.

She moaned hard, Handler Winter rubbing Epoc's sensitive cock against herself, humping, taking Epoc's face in her hands. She pulled her close, so close their lips were almost touching.

"Come for me, Epoc. Come hard. I want you to come so hard you forget your own name."

The orgasm rolled like a storm. Like a wave. It came hard and fast, and so did Epoc. She covered herself in come, ejaculating load after load onto herself while the dildo slammed into her tender asshole.

All sense of propriety, of decency, of shame, was forgotten as she moaned and groaned coming over and over again, the machine not letting up. Her first orgasm was followed up by a second, and then a third, each marked by a stiffening of her muscles before Winter resumed her gentle stroking and humping, and the machine started its fucking over from scratch.

Finally, with one final shudder, she clenched down on to the dildo, one last thrust, she slumped into the chair. The plug retreated.

Epoc expected Winter to stand up, but she didn't.

"Aren't you going to leave?" she asked.

Winter wiped a hair away from her forehead. She was covered in a coat of sweat and cum, and the perfect and proper CEO was pressed up against her.

"Would you like me to?" Winter rolled off to the side. Apparently when the chair was folded open, there was enough room for a second person. She didn't roll *away*, though, her body still pressed firmly against Winter's. She gently stroked Epoc's hair.

Epoc thought long and hard about that.

"No," she said.

Winter pressed a few more buttons and the outer shell of the cockpit closed.

They stayed like that for a long time, until Epoc, finally, more spent than she had ever been, drifted off into the deepest sleep of her life. Her second-to-last thought was that tomorrow she was going to have to make a decision. Her last thought was how nice it was to have Winter right there with her, keeping her safe.

Chapter 5

For the second time, Epoc woke up in the unfamiliar darkness. She shifted. Her whole body resisted her movements, like a three ton weighted blanket had been laid on top of her, and she realized her muscles were sore in a way they had never been before. She'd worked out before. She'd done lifting, once upon a time. She'd run a marathon, but that was just the one time and not up for a repeat.

After all of those, she had not felt as drained as she did now, in more ways than one. Her groin ached. As she shifted, she felt something against her ass. She thought for a second she'd been lubed up but a cursory inspection later revealed it to be a cream of some sort. Probably for the best.

She sat up and found the lamp on her desk by knocking it over. It turned on as it hit the floor.

"Damn it," she said, just as the communicator lit up. No voice. A message. She picked it up.

"You're awake," it read. She didn't have to guess who sent it. *"Take the time you need to wake up. You have four more hours to decide. The contracts are on your desk. Use your communicator to get food brought to your door – there's an application – if you need it. Think this through. Do what's best for you."*

Because it had been written by a clearly well-adjusted individual, the message was also signed.

"Antimony Winter.

CEO

Handler."

Epoc looked down at the comm in her hand. It was like she was holding a solid gold brick. Had things always been this heavy? She moved her head from side to side and every muscle in her upper body sent in their protests signed, notarized and in triplicate, up to her brain.

"Fuuuuuuck me," Epoc whispered, and realized that even her voice was hoarse. She stood up to do some very light stretches and realized she was naked, this time. She hadn't been dressed like last time. She had, however, been bathed again and, the slickness between her cheeks reminded her, treated. There were two chairs by her bed. On one were the clothes she had arrived at the facility with the day before.

On the other were the colors of Mako Group. Ah. Antimony was being *subtle*.

For now, she just settled for underwear and made her way to the desk while she asked the kitchen to bring her a cup of coffee. On it were three contracts.

The left one, rat. It had a little sticky note that read, "legally this has to be here too."

The right one, cat. Another sticky note. “In case you change your mind.”

The middle. Hound. No note.

Epoc sat down and opened it. It was a *thick* contract but, perhaps more importantly, she realized, there were two of them. One of them for reading. The one under it was the real deal. Presumably, in case she made the decision then and there. A little presumptuous, sure, but it also made Mako Group seem desperate. How much bargaining power did she have, here?

The first few pages detailed the benefits she’d receive and, indeed, it was nothing to sneeze at. The wages alone were not insignificant. After twenty years of a desk job with an income like this, you could retire, buy a small palace, and never think about money again.

There was also guaranteed food, medical care – elective and necessary – and the Hound suite she was currently in. What surprised her was also guaranteed leave. A guaranteed 8 days per month. That was a not-insignificant amount, though there was a footnote to some small print, and she was not the type to skip it.

“Should the pilot make use of their leave, they must guarantee a return to facilities within the allotted time. No more than thirty days of leave can be used consecutively,” and then a lot of stipulations that basically guaranteed she wouldn’t just work for a year or two and then take several months off. Fair enough.

She turned a page and felt her heart beat in her throat.

“Post-mission neural stress reduction consent form negotiation sheet.”

What Handler Winter had done to her in the cockpit, how she’d grinded against her until she’d whimpered and begged to come... that would be her future. What could be done to her was right here on this sheet.

It was a column. On the left were a series of described acts. On the right, simply checkboxes. At the bottom of the page was a tally. She had to meet the tally, or the contract was null and void. With trepidation, she leaned forward to read the first line, when a gentle buzzer nearly made her jump out of her seat.

“Yes?” she shouted.

“Coffee, ma’am,” a voice said over the small speaker by the door.

“Oh, shit, right.”

She thanked the woman, who was wearing a small patch with a Rat on her shoulder with a little blip on it, they saluted each other with an amused smile, and then she went back to reading.

“The pilot consents to the following:

- *Vaginal stimulation [N/A]*

Epoc skipped ahead a little. She didn't want to get rid of what she was working with, and the next several lines didn't pertain to her.

- *Mental stimulation (affection)*
- *Mental stimulation (degradation)*
- *Mental stimulation (praise)*
- *Penile stimulation (manual)*
- *Penile stimulation (oral)*
- *Penile stimulation (impact)*
- *Penile stimulation (temperature)*
- *Penile stimulation (restriction)*
- *Penile stimulation (electric)*
- *Testicular stimulation (manual)*
- *Testicular stimulation (oral)*
- *Testicular stimulation (impa*

Epoc shook her head and skipped down the line. It went like this about every part of her body, going over every potential sex act one might have, including some she had never even heard of, let alone considered. Why would anyone want their buttocks shocked with a cattle prod?

There was anal, oral, something called 'breath play,' she had an idea of what watersports was, she wondered briefly *how* the facility would support a kink that involved roleplay, and smirked when she saw 'sissification'. No, thank you, she'd been there, done that. She had successfully sissified herself (with some help from an overeager ex-girlfriend).

At the bottom of the page was a tally. She would have to agree to no less than *twenty one* of the above mentioned if the contract was to be valid. There was another small note there explaining the number.

"This number has been carefully chosen to increase the effectiveness of post-mission neural stress reduction. Repetition of stress reduction techniques can lead to reduced performance and long-term neural damage."

That was fair enough. She wondered if that was really true, but realized that, well, it didn't really matter, did it? This was all about what she was willing to do to achieve her dream *in this way*. A strange moment of clarity came over her.

This wasn't the only way she could fly a Frame. Pilots were in short supply and high demand. She could work a Cat contract for a year, get some experience, and then go to one of Mako's bigger competitors. There was always a need for pilots.

And there was no real *point* to owning a Frame. Especially a frame as large as Nexus Alpha. Sure, she could start her own company with the money of a twenty-year contract or just be an independent contractor for the rest of her life. But it would be a lot of work and it was honestly safer and better to work for a corporation. That wasn't even going into the maintenance and potential paperwork that would come with owning Nexus Alpha.

On the other hand

She would own Nexus Alpha.

Epoc would *own* her own Frame.

She wouldn't just be a pilot, she'd be one of *the* pilots, making a name for herself, not by doing freelance work and sitting in someone else's cockpit, but instead owning and driving the most expensive and prestigious vehicles ever created by humankind.

And

And

And she hadn't *bated* it. That feeling of being on edge. Her brain being eroded by need until she was acting on efficient instinct. The desire to push forward and seek victory and release at any and all costs. The drive and need for victory and pleasure wrapped into one mind-shattering, all-consuming ball of lust and power.

And after.

Antimony Winter, with her galaxy lipstick and manicured nails, who barely smiled and whose voice was soft and husky and who had made her come in her hands, twice now. That woman whose lips had been so close to hers and whose words floated through her head while she was in the pilot's seat.

Her Handler.

Chapter 6

She went down the list again. Might as well. Most of the basic stuff she was okay with. She'd basically been fingered and fucked in the ass already, and, well, she didn't mind in the least, as long as things were kept clean and healthy and within constraints. She skipped most of the things she wasn't familiar with. Getting slapped in the balls was not at the top of her priority but a little spanking never h— Well, she was okay with that.

Slapping?

She tapped the pen on the paper. Degradation in general was something she had little experience with but she had always wanted to try out. She imagined Winter tilting her head up and calling her a whole bunch of names and by the time her underwear strained to contain her, she had ticked the little box. Worth a shot.

She felt very vanilla going down the list, but she realized this was likely to cater to the tastes of the kind of people for whom the basics *didn't* quite cut it anymore.

She tallied them up at the end.

- *Mental stimulation (affection)*
- *Mental stimulation (degradation)*
- *Mental stimulation (praise)*
- *Penile stimulation (manual - other)*
- *Penile stimulation (manual - self)*
- *Penile stimulation (restriction)*
- *Penile stimulation (artificial)*
- *Penile stimulation (frottage)*
- *Anal stimulation (oral)*
- *Anal stimulation (manual - other)*
- *Anal stimulation (manual - self)*
- *Anal stimulation (penetration)*
- *Anal stimulation (artificial)*
- *Oral stimulation (manual)*
- *Oral stimulation (penetration)*
- *Mammary stimulation (manual)*
- *Mammary stimulation (oral)*
- *Penetrative intercourse (vaginal)*
- *Penetrative intercourse (anal)*
- *Public stimulation (as above)*
- *Sensory deprivation*

- *Multiple stress reduction professionals*
- *Exhibitionism*
- *Bondage*
- *Impact play (light) (areas negotiated)*

Doing a quick count, Epoc realized she was at 21. That was... she hadn't expected that. She was surprised she got this many to begin with. There was a mixture of pride and shame rising inside of her. She felt her cheeks burn slightly, but she felt like she was taking it safe. There were drugs on there whose names she'd only ever heard in news reports – the scary kind – and the word “needles” was there on the page with no context that could ever make it better.

She briefly considered ticking ‘clowns’ if only to see what the fuck that was about, but decided against it. Similarly ‘pred/prey’ and ‘primal’. That felt like the kind of thing you didn't want to sign up for if you weren't ready to commit to it. ‘Tickling’ was a big no.

Epoc sighed and turned the page, relieved that she had now gone over the most difficult part of the contract, only to realize there was another table just like it. She wasn't done yet. This section had a thicker, black border, and a note at the top.

“Should the pilot not achieve the required stress-reduction score, it is possible that some of the following techniques may assist in achieving the desired result. It is additionally possible and even advised that a pilot who has achieved a satisfactory stress-reduction score consider these techniques to increase the efficacy of the program.”

With gritted teeth, she went over them. There weren't nearly as many, but that didn't mean they weren't significant. The list was... daunting.

- *Punishment and discipline (handler)*
- *Punishment and discipline (third party)*
- *Social conditioning and behavioral control (handler)*
- *Social conditioning and behavioral control (third party)*
- *Verbal conditioning and orgasm control (handler)*
- *Verbal conditioning and orgasm control (third party)*
- *Maintained chastity*
- *Leash training*
- *Public humiliation*
- *Public use*
- *Public urinal*
- *Tentacles*
- *Marking*

- *Branding*
- *Tattooing*

The list went on a little longer, but most of the items mentioned were too much for her. Nonetheless, when she was done, she realized there were a few of these she was interested in anyway. With a slightly shaky hand, she ticked them off, then looked at the list and what she would be consenting to if she filled out the actual contract the same way.

- *Punishment and discipline (handler)*
- *Punishment and discipline (third party)*
- *Social conditioning and behavioral control (handler)*
- *Verbal conditioning and orgasm control (handler)*
- *Verbal conditioning and orgasm control (third part)*
- *Maintained chastity*
- *Tentacles*

She took a deep breath and kept reading. The rest of the contract was less... it wasn't a list of things that might be done to her. It was *normal*. It was an explanation of what the contract entailed. Any and all of what she agreed to, she could be subjected to at *any* time, by the agreed-upon parties.

Her coming and going was mostly up to her, unless stated otherwise by the company, and she couldn't leave the complex, the city or the planet without explicit approval. She was to be designated as official company property and all damage done to her, either by herself or by third parties, would be considered a fineable offense.

She would lose the right to style and dress herself unless stated otherwise.

There were several more places where she had choices, however. She had the right to decide how much of the contract was publicly available information, both within and outside of the company – Epoc quickly and without hesitation selected 'none' – and had a little say in her appearance to third parties.

Her name would be her own, though her callsign was chosen by the company.

She could name third parties she was okay with fucking, and she wrote down a few old fuckbuddies. If Mako Group could dig them up, she was okay with them being around for a lay.

If there *was* a medical emergency as outlined in an extensive couple of pages – all of which were quite reasonable – treatment could be performed without her consent. That said, and like the CEO had already told her, without immediate illness that could impede her functioning as a company asset, she couldn't be the subject of any medical intervention.

A guarantee for a rejuvenation treatment at the end of her contract, if so desired.

There was a voluntary and optional aural implant that sidestepped the need for a handheld communicator most of the time, which she decided to forego for now. Apparently she could still opt in later.

Not optional was an implant at the base of her skull that monitored her vital signs. In case she was in danger or being ‘damaged’. She didn’t look forward to that, but it did make a degree of sense.

The money, of course.

Term limit. Four terms of five years. Twenty year contract total.

And finally.

“Any and all modifications made to Nexus Alpha are entirely at the pilot’s discretion, provided these modifications do not substantially lower the market value of Nexus Alpha or reduce its combat effectiveness below acceptable parameters, as determined by an informed third party [DIANA MONTAGUE]. Additionally, no changes can be made to the cockpit or nervous center of Nexus Alpha that inhibit the effectiveness of the intra-mission neural stress reduction system.”

That was pretty huge. Nexus Alpha would be hers to modify, down to the minutest detail.

And she would have to maintain a healthy physique.

That was it.

Was she insane? Had she gone insane? Had the touch of a woman who had made her come her brains out twice driven her up to the brink and kicked her past it? Was she fully mad that she was not only considering this, but that she felt like this was all quite reasonable?

That this was something she

maybe

possibly

wanted?

With a feverish intensity, she looked down at the page again. Was this really it? Very carefully, she withdrew the real version of the contract from under the other. Her head was swimming again. Her underwear was now beyond tenting, she was hard and leaking through the fabric. That didn’t mean she was stopping.

The pen slid across the pages, selecting the options. She copied the choices she’d made on the consent forms and, on a whim, added ‘collaring’ as well. It was almost a game to try to make every tick mark look perfect. She giggled slightly hysterically to herself, being concerned with how neat her lines were on the contract to sign away her right to bodily autonomy.

Epoc was signing away her personhood, and it was suddenly very, *very* funny.

At the bottom of every page was a little spot for her initials, and she scribbled them, one after the other, until the last page appeared.

There it was. The post-it note.

“Epoc,” it said, “I trust you to do the right thing for you. If you’re reading this, you’ve made your choice already, so I’ve taken the liberty of signing this contract already. The rest is up to you.”

This was it. All or nothing. Not a thought experiment. A decision that would impact the rest of her life, one way or another.

Slowly, Epoc stood up and walked over to the chair and got dressed, taking care to tie her shoes. The contract was rolled up under her arm as she made her way through the complex. Would it have been possible to do this via the communicator? Of course. But that would be doing it wrong.

The elevator took her up to the offices, where Antimony Winter’s was, and she walked the rest of the way with a determination she hadn’t felt in a long time, even though it felt like her blood was on fire. With a tap on the sensor by the door, the bell rang, and she was let in only seconds later.

The CEO looked just as perfect as she had the last time. Wearing a loose-fitting tunic over a skintight black suit, with Mako-blue accents. One of those accents was in her hair, too, which was unexpected. Her lipstick was a dull, wet gold. Epoc couldn’t help but stare at it. Her lips looked like liquid honey.

“Oh,” Antimony said, looking slightly surprised. Epoc could tell because her eyebrows moved up. The woman really did *not* emote much. “I hadn’t expected you up here. What can I do for you, Epoc?”

Epoc walked over to the desk and put the contract down, last page facing up. The line where her signature was supposed to be was still empty.

“Ah,” Antimony said, and her voice was... flat. She was dejected. “I’m sorry you feel that way, Epoc. I really did mean it when I said that we want you working for this company. Is it the pay? I’m sure we can negotiate that. Is it the stress reduction system? I understand that it’s a lot but—”

“Stop,” Epoc said, and then, a little daring, “handler.” The woman sat up a little straighter, confused. Epoc picked the pen up from the desk. “Handler Winter,” she said, “if I signed my rights over to you, I’d be less than an employee. I’d be your property.” The CEO stood up and walked around the desk and stood directly opposite her. She was wearing flats, barely any taller than Epoc like this. It was impossible not to stare at her lips.

“That’s right,” Handler Winter said.

“Then I have one request before I sign this.”

“Anything,” Antimony said, a desperation in her voice. “If it’s within my power, I’ll make it happen.”

“If I do that, then I want one thing from you, not as employee or property, but as an equal.”

“What?”

“A kiss.”

“It’s yours,” Handler Winter said. “If you sign.”

Without one more thought, she turned to the contract and signed it. She was halfway to turning back when Antimony took Epoc's face in her hands and kissed her.

The CEO of Mako Group's lipstick really did taste like honey. She tasted like honey and her breath was like a hot summer breeze and her body was like a coiled spring wrapped in the most expensive fabrics money could buy. Her skin was soft and perfect and unblemished and it made her want to sink her teeth into it. She wanted to *devour* this woman.

Epoc pushed back up against her and shoved the woman against the desk. Small objects fell over. Antimony wrapped her legs around Epoc and pulled her in, the kiss going from needy to positively animalistic in the blink of an eye. They ran their hands through each other's hair and pulled. Her head pulled back, Epoc felt the woman's teeth on her neck and she let out a low, happy growl.

She started to grind against Antimony, when suddenly she felt a hand on her chest, pushing her away ever so slightly. Despite her need and desire, she really was still recovering from yesterday, and it was probably a good idea not to overdo it anyway. On top of that, well... that kind of gesture was a pretty clear one.

"Epoc," Winter said as she turned the windows of her office opaque once more. Memories of their first meeting jumped back at Epoc. "You got the kiss you wanted?"

"Yes, ma'am," she said with a grin.

"You signed the contract, Epoc," Handler Winter said. "You know what that means?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"I own you, Epoc."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Now, you sh- hold on." Antimony looked down and picked the contract up. "Let me just check something. I need to make sure that... oh, tentacles? Really? Interesting. Anyway." She put it down again carefully. "I'll read the rest later. But for now, Epoc, kneel for me."

She pointed at the carpeted floor in front of her. Between her legs.

Epoc didn't need encouragement. She dropped down on her knees and put her hands on the woman's thighs, but they were swatted away.

"No touching," Handler Winter said, "until I tell you."

"Yes, Handler," Epoc said.

"Good girl," Winter said, unzipped her pants and let them drop to the floor. Her underwear was white lace, all frills and barely any cloth. "Closer."

Moving closer, the smell of arousal met Epoc halfway. It filled her nostrils and then her whole head. She had never wanted to put her mouth on something more than what was right in front of her, but she had the very distinct feeling she was going to have to wait. She looked up at Winter, who looked down at her through half-open eyes.

Handler Winter hooked her thumbs through her waistband and pushed her underwear down, exposing her trim pussy to the office air. They fell to the ground and she carefully stepped out of them, lifting one leg and putting it on Epoc's shoulder.

"Epoc," she said, softly. "My Hound."

"Yes?"

"Eat."

She didn't need much more. Epoc put her tongue on her Handler's pussy, pushing the lips apart with her tongue. Despite her cool demeanor, the woman was deeply aroused, her taste filling Epoc's mouth. Her scent filled Epoc's lungs. Whatever Handler Winter wanted filled Epoc's mind.

She tasted and ground her tongue against Winter's folds finding a gentle rhythm, a hand in her hair forcing her to keep it up whenever she thought about changing something. Slowly, her Handler began to ride her face, moaning softly, and Epoc happily let her.

This genuinely made her happy. After the woman got her off twice in a row, she was happy to return the favor, and she was happy to finally be face-deep in her crotch to get her there.

The next twenty years of Epoc's life were decided, and they had been decided for good reason. This woman had given her everything she wanted and right now what she wanted more than anything was for Winter to come on her face until she made the kind of noises that Epoc would take to bed with her. She was already making the kind of expressions a CEO shouldn't be making in her office and it struck Epoc as funny and ironic that this was the most expressive she'd seen her yet.

But she could do better.

She redoubled her efforts. Handler Winter let out a high-pitched moan and shoved Epoc into her, who obliged without a thought, continuing her ministrations while she was being face-fucked, until her Handler finally shuddered to her climax, bucking against Epoc's face.

She started to lick again, wanted to see if she could push for another, but she was pulled back by her hair. It was impossible to keep a grin off of her soaked face as she looked up at Antimony's flushed cheeks, parted lips.

"Good dog," Handler Winter said. "A little eager, but that's going to deserve a treat, later."

"Later?" Epoc asked.

"Yes, Epoc," her Handler said, playing with Epoc's hair. "You're still recovering from yesterday. I don't want to bruise you on your first day. Why don't you go get freshened up, get some *real* breakfast, and you take the day off. Tomorrow, Diana is going to go over Nexus Alpha with you. I want you fresh and ready. Up."

Epoc stood up as she was told. "Is there anything else, Handler Winter?"

"Yes," Antimony said, getting dressed again. "There is. If you end up being aroused, you're not allowed to masturbate past 5AM. Get it out of your system before then. You can go to one of your other hounds if you need help, call on one of the people in the contract – though anyone outside of the company will need to be vetted first – or, after 8PM, you can come to me, though

don't wake me up *too* late." She sat down behind her desk, took the contract in front of her, and started reading.

"I... Thank you. I, uh, I'll keep that in mind."

"That's all," Antimony said, not even looking up.

"Handler Winter?" Epoc asked.

Her Handler immediately looked up.

"Thank you. For this. For the chance. For the kiss. For letting me touch you. Taste you."

Winter smiled warmly at her.

"The pleasure is all mine, Epoc. I'm glad you decided to stay. You made the right choice. Now go! You're keeping me from reading about you." She held up the contract by way of demonstration.

As the door closed behind and the juices on her face started to dry, Epoc smiled. She put her hands in the bright blue pockets of the company hoodie.

For now, and for the next twenty years, she was going to be Epoc Mako, and she was going to make the best of it.

Chapter 7

Epoc took the rest of the day to haunt the facility, hands in her pockets, exploring what remained of her freedom. A strange feeling, altogether. Sure, Winter had given her the rest of the day to do what she liked, but every time she got close to a door there was a little **beep** from her communicator to remind her that she wasn't supposed to leave the building until all the arrangements were in order.

She received a message in her inbox reminding her that her official name change had been approved, and that her classification – from citizen to property – would be made official at the soonest possible moment.

Well, that was it. All rights granted to her by the state were gone. For the next twenty years. All that was left was what was guaranteed by the contract. Well, okay, it was actually five years. She'd made sure she'd read the fine print.

Every five years there was a renegotiation. Essentially, if she decided in five years that the Hound contract was too taxing, she had the option to switch to another or quit altogether. She'd keep her pay, regain her autonomy, but she'd have to say goodbye to Nexus Alpha. A comforting thought, that.

It made her feel like she had some power here.

Hounds had a very high turnover rate, and it was clear Antimony wanted her around. Not even thirty and able to keep up with a veteran pilot? That *was* something to be proud of. Without the contract, she was likely to be sniped by a competitor. The Mako Group would do its best to keep her happy.

Well, it was nice to have a last name again, at least.

The first person she went to go see after lunch was Diana, who smacked her on the arm hard enough for Epoc to feel something click in her shoulder.

“Glad to hear it, Epoc,” Diana said. “Told you I had a good feeling about you!” The balcony they were on was on the other side of the hangar from Nexus, floodlights illuminating her stern gaze and polished chassis. She was, without a doubt, the most beautiful machine Epoc had ever seen. Diana leaned on the railing. “So, you’ve got full spec control on my b–” She sighed and ran a greasy hand through her greasy hair and grinned apologetically. “I guess it’s *your* baby now.” There was a quiet sadness in her voice.

“Nah. I was thinking, you know, maybe something like shared custody suits me better.” Epoc winked. The visible relief on Diana’s face was so palpable, Epoc almost wanted to reach out and touch it. “I know you’re supposed to tell me what’s possible and what isn’t, but you’ve spent the last, what, two years? Tuning her?”

“Three,” Diana said. “She’s been waiting for someone strong enough to claim her for a while.” Epoc shook her head in disbelief. She was honored. “Anything you’re thinking of right now, though?”

“Without looking at her sheets and diagnostics? Are you crazy?” Epoc said.

“Good answer. I know people who swear by the new AiroNaut X-440 reactor, but all these idiots forget that bigger isn’t necessarily better. Do you know how long it took us to get into space? Tsiolkovsky comes for us all, man. You can’t just plop a fifty ton engine inside of something like this and expect it to not make a difference. That’s a whole-ass plane.”

“But the 430 is way overtuned,” Epoc said. “The output is great, you know, if you want to make trips of up to thirteen seconds.” She laughed. “Nah, AiroNaut is for show ponies.”

“*Thank* you!” Diana said. “That’s what I keep telling people, but they think that bigger is better. You know sometimes, things that are more expensive are *worse*.” She grunted. “But don’t worry, I’m not scared of modifying her. She’s tuned to how *I* like her, right now, but right now she’s standing still in a hangar. You’re the one who has to fly her, so if you need major changes pushed through, I’m happy to listen and make it happen.”

“Well...” Epoc said, “I *have* always been interested in trying a digitigrade frame. Would that be feasible? Nexus is *massive*. And I mean, it’s not like you’d have the parts lying around, right?” She looked at Diana, who looked back with a grin so smug she could see herself reflected in the grease on Diana’s cheeks. “Right?”

“Sweetie,” Diana said, “we have a *lot* of parts here. And when you prove you deserve her through and through, they’re all yours to fuck around with. Obviously, give us a day to make those changes, but yeah. I can do digitigrade.”

“At this size though...”

“Call me Madam Wizard,” Diana said with a wink, and flexed her arm, which had an effect on Epoc’s composure the same way a handgun has an effect on that of a housefly.

“Haha,” she said.

“What’s wrong, Epoc? Handler got your tongue?” She grinned and nudged Epoc with her shoulder. “Don’t worry, I won’t tell how weak you are to strong women. I’m going to keep that all to myself and let everyone else figure it out on their own. Because you’re so good at hiding it.”

Epoc gritted her teeth and turned to Diana. “*Why?!*”

“Because you’re cute,” Diana said. She looked at her nails and pursed her lips innocently. “Because you’re one of us now. Because I was actually sent a copy of your contract and what you agreed to. Because you agreed to ‘punishment and discipline’ by a third party and because I’m a third party and because I like you but if you come home and Nexus Alpha took hits it shouldn’t have, I’ve been authorized by a certain someone to punish and discipline you so it doesn’t happen again. You know. The little things.”

“Ah,” Epoc whimpered. “What does... uh...”

“You’ll have to find that out yourself, aren’t you?” Diana said. “And then it’s up to you to figure out if that’s something you think is worth repeating.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” she squeaked the reply. “I, uh, think the other Hounds were expecting me.”

“Sure they were,” Diana. “See you later, Epoc. Talk to you again some time.” As Epoc began to shuffle away, Diana straightened up a little and the tease on her face ebbed away. “Read those specs. I really want to know what you think. Nexus Alpha is going to be your home as much as anywhere else here. She should feel like it.”

Epoc found herself smiling back. “I will.” She turned and speed walked away. Yes, it had been a convenient excuse, but it was also true that she really had agreed to meet with the other Hounds now that she was officially a part of the Mako Group, as a part of the on-boarding traditions. She presumed there would be “do’s” and “don’ts” and “who’s turn is it to clean out the microwave in the kitchenette” type of stuff.

Oh god, she had *roommates*. She hadn’t had roommates in years. She had lived with some friends at the academy, but she had managed to make enough to rent herself a hab container of her own for a while now. Wait, was the rent on that still due? Would Mako Group get rid of that? What about her car? It was still in the building out back.

A thousand and one thoughts went through her head, most of them practical, when she walked into the Hound quarters. She looked around. She was going to be spending some time here.

The room was quite large, divided into three separate pieces by rounded arches and sliding wooden doors. The kitchen was not likely to be used often. It didn’t even have a coffee machine. Sure, they could have coffee brought up to them, but Epoc *liked* the ritual. Maybe she could requisition one?

In the main, central area, which Epoc mentally referred to as the conference room, was a large oval table with chairs, clearly for team meetings and briefings. There was a screen in the middle of it that confirmed her suspicions, and a large screen on the wall she suspected wasn’t for casual movie watching.

The final area was the largest. On one wall were the three doors to their rooms, and the rest of the room was dedicated to recreation. Several large, comfortable L-shaped sofas were pointed at two giant screens, one of which was hooked up to a console. They had a foosball table and even a couple of arcade cabinets.

It was clear that it had, once upon a time, been a pretty sparse room, but over time the Hounds had adorned it with posters – often propaganda shots of themselves or their Frames – as big as fridge doors, various cultural decorations, and all kinds of knick-knacks that Epoc assumed were battle trophies. There was a tooth the size of a human torso hanging from on one of the walls. It was covered in writing, too.

Currently sitting at the conference table were the other pilots, reading something. When she approached, she realized to her horror it was her contract.

“Oh no,” she said quietly to herself.

“Oh *yes*,” Hex said with the kind of grin you didn’t want to see in the dark. “This is *great* reading, Epoc!”

“And that’s saying a lot, coming from her,” Aaliya said, turning the page calmly. “She usually has a hard time with text boxes in her games. For her to sit down and read like this is an achievement.”

“Why are *you* reading this?!” Epoc whined as she approached the table.

“Section 3, paragraph 2. It’s before any of the Stress Reduction tables, so it would make sense that you didn’t think much of it,” Aaliya said matter-of-factly. “Any and all post-mission stress reduction techniques may be performed by a fellow Hound if no Handler is present. If a Handler is present, consent from both parties is required.”

“That means we fuck if Winter’s not around!” Hex said excitedly.

“I think she got that much, you little turd,” Aaliya said with a smile. “But yes. It does.”

“And you need to know what I agreed to,” Epoc said, rubbing her eyes. “Fuck.”

“That’s the idea!”

“Fair,” Aaliya said, “is fair.” She slid two contracts over to Epoc. “Here’s ours. So you get an idea of what we’re down for. It also just makes sense. You know, in case one of us needs stress reduction.” Aaliya’s smile was a little lopsided, courtesy of her scars, but that only made her glittering teeth all the more imposing.

Epoc changed her mind. She’d take Hexacora’s unhinged grin over this one any day. Hex looked like a cartoon villain. Aaliya looked like the thing between the rustling leaves before the jungle swallowed you whole. There was a threat to her existence that was equally attractive and terrifying. There were fangs.

Carefully, Epoc opened Aaliya’s contract, skipping forward to the... relevant passages. A lot of it was what she’d expected, similar to her own choices. Aaliya was down for most of the more vanilla things, as well as some light bondage and various ‘artificial’ stimulations, and clearly into spanking. Everything looked pretty normal to Epoc, until she got to a section she herself had skipped over.

- CNC (giving)
- Impact play (giving)
- Pain play (giving)
- Knife play (giving)

It went on like that for a while. She swallowed and looked up at Aaliya with wide eyes. Aaliya smiled back with that smile usually reserved for prey animals. Hexacora’s happy grin popped in from the edge of Epoc’s slowly narrowing vision.

“She’s trying to scare you!” Hex said. “She can’t do anything to you that you haven’t consented to even if you two do fuck!”

Aaliya held Epoc’s gaze for a second longer and then burst out laughing. The tension drained from the room as Hexacora joined her.

“*Damn*,” Aaliya said. “You ruined it, Cora. I’ll get you for that.”

“Promise?” Hex said, leaning on her hands and fluttering her eyebrows.

“This is hazing, isn’t it?” Epoc said. “Fuck, you had me going.”

“Hehehe.” Aaliya didn’t laugh. She *chortled*. “Yeah. Don’t worry. My tastes are a little more... extreme than most, but I have a healthy outlet for them.”

“It’s me,” Hex said, “I’m healthy outlet.”

“You’re a lot of things, Cora,” Aaliya said. “But healthy’s not one of them.”

Epoc opened Hexacorallia’s contract and, as advertised, every single place where one could be on the receiving end of... pretty much *anything*, Hex had put a little tick.

“Testicular impact play?” Epoc asked, wincing and looking at Hex.

“What? You want people to just say good morning and not slap my balls?” Hex said, putting her legs on the table, spreading them. She was wearing shorts. Tight shorts. Her bulge was very visible, even from where Epoc was sitting. “What can I say? I like what I like.”

“It’s the only way she feels loved,” Aaliya said. “So if you ever want someone to give you a tongue bath or use when you can’t sleep, she’s down.”

“The more disinterested you are, the better!”

“Thanks,” Epoc said with a slightly sheepish laugh. She didn’t know what to say. This was all a lot to get used to. “So you two, uh, ‘help each other out’ a lot then, huh?”

“We fuck, Epoc,” Aaliya said. “I need to let off steam from time to time, and Cora needs someone to make her shut the fuck up sometimes and I’m happy to oblige by fucking her mouth with the strap until she can’t breathe and passes out.”

Epoc didn’t even have words. The other women were so frank in their discussion of their sexuality. She frowned. “Is everyone here like this?” she asked. “At Mako Group? I mean, Winter—”

“Handler Winter,” Hex said happily.

“Yeah, Handler Winter. Diana was talking about how she was the ‘third party’. You two...”

“Wait,” Aaliya said, “you think Diana is the *only* third party they can call in?”

“Yeah, no, fair enough. But that’s my point. Is everyone here just horny and fucking all the time?”

Aaliya laughed and shook her head. “No,” she said. “Outside of the Hound program, most people are frighteningly normal. I’m pretty sure a couple of the Cats are fucking but that’s like, gossip stuff. Nobody’s getting fisted in the lounge as far as I know.”

Epoc resisted the titanic pull of the couch to her left as it demanded that she look at it, imagining Aaliya wearing Hex like a sock puppet. “Cool.”

“But the core: the Handlers, the Hounds, I think we’re all a little... different.” She shrugged. “You know. ‘You don’t have to be crazy to work here, but it helps’ type of shit. We’re all a little fucked in the head. Welcome to the party, pal.”

“Thanks,” Epoc said. “So when did—”

She was interrupted by an alarm. The screen in the center of the table lit up, as well as Epoc’s comm and, she assumed, so did Hex and Aaliya’s implants.

“Ochre Alert,” Winter’s voice said. “Megafauna detected on the southern continental shelf. Orbital drop confirmed. Coastal defenses are going to be useless. Wardog, you’re wheels up in fifteen.”

Chapter 8

Aaliya stood up and touched the spot right behind her ear. “Already on the way.”

Just like that, she was out of the room, leaving Epoc and Hex sitting on either side of the screen. On it was a digital recreation of the area, including a plan of engagement, all in pretty little graphs and animations. Were these automated? Did someone animate them? That seemed excessive. There was no way someone had gone through the trouble of making an infographic for a time-sensitive mission briefing.

Megafauna was a problem.

Epoc didn't think much about the planet she was on. It was just, well, her home. Her planet. She was too busy thinking about her life and her neighborhood to think about the whole thing.

Beadrillard-II had, once upon a time, been very lush. Untamed. Now it was not. Now it was just another slab of concrete covered in habitats and factories and warzones. For the most part.

The reason it had originally been chosen for colonization was twofold. The first was that it was indeed, easily habitable. Perfect conditions for human life. The second was the *ease* with which it would be to send goods up and down. Because it was a binary planet orbiting a binary star system, gravity could get a little *interesting* at points, especially around the equator, when everything lined up.

Good for sending cargo up to or down from orbit. Less good when people realized the other planet in the binary system, Beadrillard-I, had developed a unique ecosystem that contained a strange fungal-fauna hybrid capable of ascending to and surviving in a vacuum for short periods of time in what were essentially fully sealed cocoons. By the time those landed on Beadrillard-II, they were fully grown, hundreds of feet long, and very hungry. They migrated. Between planets.

It boggled the mind.

People had tried to go down to Beadrillard-I to cleanse the planet of spores but that was expensive and dangerous and, as it turned out, ultimately futile. Orbital strikes were useless since the fungus itself was deeply heat-resistant and chemical weapons had led to adaptation that had only made the resulting megafauna even harder to deal with.

Currently, one of the creatures, what appeared to be a Hexapod, was fishing itself out of the ocean, ready to start feeding. Soon it would pick up on the enormous heat signatures generated by the closest human settlement, crawl out of the sea, rampage for a while, and then fall asleep, spreading spores into the upper atmosphere. That was to be avoided at all costs.

For the longest time, Epoc had looked at news footage of the Frame pilots who went up against the Megafauna with a mixture of adoration and confusion. Why would someone choose to go out there and fight something like that? Then she'd sat in a cockpit herself and she'd understood why someone would fly. Now that she'd actually been in a fight, she understood fully.

“Damn,” Hex said.

“What?”

“It’s barely a class-B,” she said. “Wardog is going to come home bored.”

“Really?” Epoc said. “Isn’t that a bad thing?”

“If she can’t go feral in the field, she’s a lot calmer when she comes back.”

“And you want her to—”

“--be feral when she’s here,” Hexacora said sagely. “Hey, have you checked out the sparring room yet?” She hopped and ran over to the kitchen, coming back with a bottle of water for Epoc and what appeared to be an oversized can of some kind of energy drink for herself. “Come on! They’ve got towels in the changing room!”

She was practically bouncing by the door and Epoc, a little hesitantly, followed her. “Why do you want to show me the sparring room *now*?” she asked. “Don’t you want to watch Aaliya fight? She might be in danger.”

“Naaah,” Hex said and chugged the can as they walked down the corridors. She let out a burp that could stop a Class-B in its tracks. “If she’s not gonna use me like a sleeve and-or punching bag when she gets home, I want to at least work up a sweat. Besides, maybe you can give me a run for my money.” She winked. “I doubt you could even land a blow, though.”

“Wait,” Epoc said, “I’m sparring with you.” She looked down at Hex. “No offense but...”

“Aaliya can’t do it,” Hexacorallia said. “Does that help?”

“Wait, really?”

“Yup!” Hex said. “We’re here!” She pushed the door open into what was basically a gym locker. The smell of stale sweat and deodorant hung in the air. This place was used recently and regularly. The two of them quickly got changed – besides the lockers there was also a dispenser and disposal unit for workout clothing.

A few minutes later they stepped into a room that was mostly mats. Epoc had spent a lot of time in rooms like this. Hand to hand training was common in pilot training programs. Mostly mixed martial arts. The idea that one culture or another had a monopoly on fighting better than any other was ridiculous. That said, there had been a heavy emphasis on kickboxing.

“Alright!” Hex said. “Try to land a hit on me. I’m going to put you in holds. Bonus points if you can break out of them!” She did a little bouncy dance, moving across from Epoc, cricking her neck.

“Do we need any rules? Like, no hits to the groin and stuff?”

“Nah!” Hex said. “I’m not going to be striking and, yknow, you’re not going to be hitting.” She kept bouncing, her feet never not moving, and nodded. “Come at me!”

Epoc did. She approached carefully, expecting a low dive into a grapple. That her opponent had *told* her she’d exclusively go for grapples meant there were a few guarantees. Going for a kick was going to be dangerous until she could guarantee she could land it faster than Hex could read her movements and grab.

She launched an experimental jab and then the room turned upside down and the air was knocked out of her.

How?

She'd been out of a throw for *sure!* There was no way for Hex to move that quickly, except that she had mounted a full arm bar and seemed to be gently humping Epoc's right shoulder while casually blocking her airways with her leg

"Good try!" Hex said. "I don't think you can lift me, so I'll just let g—"

Epoc rolled away from Hex and then toward her, folding the girl double. Sure, an arm bar was hard to get out of, but Hexacorallia wasn't going to dislocate her arm in a sparring session and while she wasn't strong enough to fully lift her off the ground with one arm, Epoc was more than capable of getting her legs under her and pushing Hex down onto the mat, her left arm free.

She slammed her fist down at her opponent's face. If the goal was to hit her opponent, then all she had to do was make sure the other woman knew she was taking this seriously.

Instead of skin (and potentially, teeth) like Epoc expected, she hit the mat. Two hands grabbed her wrist and the room did another somersault. She landed on her back a second time but this time two legs landed on either of her arms. More insulting was the girl's package, landing on her nose and mouth.

Hex slapped Epoc's stomach.

"That would've been a crotch shot, taking you out of the fight!" She wiggled her ass in Epoc's face, then rolled off and started to dance in place again. Epoc got up with an indignant huff. Hex giggled. "That would have really hurt if you'd hit me!"

Okay, strikes likely weren't going to achieve much. She had to think smart, because Hexacora was much, much faster than her. She had to negate that speed somehow. She wiped her face and took up a more aggressive striking stance.

A few steps forward and, feinting like she was going for a hook, she swiped at Hex's legs. The girl had seen it coming and jumped over the kick with little effort.

Pretty much the exact way Epoc had planned it. She punched as hard as she could at her opponent's center of mass, stopping several inches short and pulling her arm back. As she expected, Hex had anticipated the jab and had reached out to grab the arm and turn the momentum in another grapple, presumably another bar. Instead, Epoc's hand was the one to close around *her* arm.

"Gotcha," she said with a grin, and kicked Hex in the ass, hard. The girl yelped and laughed, then spun around to grab Epoc.

"Is that the best you got?!" she shouted.

Alright then, you little shit. Epoc grabbed her other wrist and twisted both behind her, kicked the back of her legs, and forced her onto her knees, then her stomach, and finally straddled her.

"You," Epoc said, "are really fucking slippery."

“That’s what Aaliya keeps telling me!” She seemed almost pleased.

Epoc slowly caught her breath and relaxed a little, though she kept Hex’s arms in their uncomfortable position. It wasn’t a bad view. Hex had a nice ass. And she did like to be punished. She pushed the loser a little harder into the mat, and carefully pushed her own hips forward a little. Tentatively. Hex responded by purring and pushing her ass back. Alright then.

Just about to fully grind against her, Epoc jerked up when the door to the changing room opened with a shout.

“Handler on DECK!”

She jumped upright, and so did Hex. Both of them immediately stood in a line and saluted. Pilot training was pretty adamant that you show respect to a superior officer. Apparently even Hex didn’t joke about that.

The woman who had entered the room had a lion-like mane of gray-white hair that rolled down her shoulders, cascading like a frozen waterfall. She was, somehow, bigger than both Diana and Aaliya. Possibly combined.

Epoc knew why, too. There was a previous generation of pilots that had undergone extensive physical modification. Back then, physical strength and limb length had played a much greater role in effective piloting. This woman must have been one of them.

“Hexacorallia!” the Handler shouted. “Looks like someone finally got the better of you!”

“She outsmarted me, Handler!” Hex responded.

“Can’t have been too difficult,” the woman said with a grin. “Epoc Mako?”

“Handler!” Epoc said, looking straight ahead because looking at the woman would have left her extremely normal. She was somewhere in her late fifties, possibly sixties. It was hard to tell because she’d undergone significant rejuvenation treatment. On top of that, she had kept in shape. Her muscles didn’t bulge, but she looked like the world’s largest swimmer, moving with an intentionality that was hard to pinpoint until you imagined her piloting a Frame.

“You can call me Levi Mercer, Epoc,” she said. “At ease,” the woman said. “Both of you.”

Instantly, Hex launched herself forward at Mercer, wrapping her arms around the much larger woman’s neck. Levi didn’t even budge a little, only holding Hex in place with an arm and a laugh.

“Levi!” she said. “You’re here!”

“Of course I am,” Levi said. “After the ass-whooping Epoc here gave my girl yesterday, I had to come over myself to meet her in person.”

“I’m afraid I don’t understand, Handler,” Epoc said, defaulting to the woman’s title until she was sure of the kind of relationship she was supposed to have with her.

“Of course. You don’t know jack for shit yet,” Levi said, and held out her hand. It was massive. Like a dinner plate. Epoc did her best to shake it. “I’m Aaliya’s handler,” she said and squeezed very lightly. There was a sound like someone trying to quietly bite into a potato chip.

“Wait,” Epoc said, her face not moving a muscle. “Handler Winter said you were her predecessor.”

“Oh, of course she did. She can be so vague. Never let the enemy know what you’re thinking.” Levi laughed, a loud and uproarious sound. The kind of laugh you only got when you truly stopped caring what others thought. It filled the room. “It’s true,” Levi Mercer said. “In a way. I’m a graduate of the program too. Her grandmother trained me, actually, but I didn’t get on *nearly* as well with her as I did with Antimony’s mother.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah, that’s why we had her.”

“Ah.”

“You fuck her yet?”

“She hasn’t!” Hex shouted helpfully. “Handler Winter got her off a couple of times though!” Levi laughed again and slapped Epoc so hard between the shoulder blades she flew forward and slammed face first into the mat.

Chapter 9

“Are you going to be training us?” Hex said with a twinkle in her eyes that would be delightful if it had come from someone else. She dropped to the ground.

Levi Mercer shook her head and handed them both a towel. “I’m just here for Aaliya today.” When she got a sad-puppy look from Hex, she put a hand large enough to be a helmet on the young woman’s head and ruffled her hair. “First off, I’m out of shape,” said the pilot that looked like someone had tried to put clothes on a muscle golem, “and besides, day one is way too early to put our new Pilot through her paces.” She grinned at Epoc.

Epoc nodded and then squinted. Levi looked familiar. “I’m sorry, Handler,” she said, “if this is too forward.” She chewed her tongue for a second. Her boss’s mother had just asked her if they’d already fucked and she was worried about being inappropriate. “Do I *know* you from somewhere? You look familiar.”

“Hah!” Mercer said. “You might have. I was in some ads back in my day.” She struck a pose, hands on her hips, looking dramatically and wistfully at a non-existent horizon. “*For a brighter future,*” she said. “Hah! I haven’t been Leviathan in *years.*”

“Wait, Leviathan?” Epoc said. “You piloted Scylla Nova! Holy *shit!* I had posters of you!” Epoc’s desire to pay due respect to a superior officer (not to mention the mother of the woman she’d been nose-deep inside of less than a day ago) evaporated in the face of one of the people that had made her want to be a pilot in the first place.

The Leviathan had been an almost legendary character among Frame pilots. She’d had a background in corpo work, but most of her career she had been a mercenary, famous for saving the day when nobody else could. Epoc realized that the ‘corpo work before she became independent’ meant she’d been a Hound at Mako Corp. There had been so many stories about her, it had been hard to sift fact from fiction, and the name of the corporation she’d worked for hadn’t been a big part of her marketing machine when she was independent. It also explained why she’d had a career that was longer than almost any other living pilot.

“Did you really do a sub-30k ft deepwater mission?”

“Fuck, kid,” Levi said with a laugh. “You’re bringing up old memories. Yeah, me and the old Coyote went down into the trench once. One of the big bugs had dropped down and was laying eggs down there. Depth charges weren’t cutting it, so we went down there on a bug hunt.” She shook her head. “Man, that was a fight. Every step was like lifting a car. Coyote ended up sacrificing his dumb ass for me, too.” She frowned. “I feel like I need a shot if I’m going to be reminiscing. You guys wanna do shots?”

“Levi, it’s 9 in the morning.”

“Fuck me, I’m jetlagged to *fuck,*” Levi said. “It’s like 2 in the morning for me.” She put her hands in her pockets and left the room.

Hexacora nudged Epoc. “We’ll talk about what happened earlier some other time,” she said with a wink. “I didn’t know you were clamoring for my gussy *that* bad.”

“Your *what*?”

“You know. Girl-boypussy.”

“Your ass?”

“If you want to be pedantic about it,” Hex said and chased Levi down. Epoc had to hurry to follow them. Levi was taking a casual stroll, the other two jogging to keep up.

“Good thing I barely need sleep,” Levi said. “Come on you two, let’s at least get something to eat. The ladies at the cafeteria know what I like.”

“What do you mean, you don’t need sleep?” Epoc asked as she and Hex followed Levi to the cafeteria. For every step Levi took, they had to take an outrageous *three*. “Is it because of your body augmentations?”

“I said *barely*,” Levi said. “And no. I’m just built different. How tall do you think I was before I joined the old pilot program?”

“Uh,” Epoc said.

“I know this one!” Hex said. “You were 6’6!” She grinned happily as she bounced backwards through the hall to look at them both. Several engineers rushing by had to dodge her. “Mother of the beast,” Hex said. Levi looked a little smug.

“Yup,” Mercer said. “The program added an extra foot and change, but I was already a mutant and a half. They did *so* many tests before me and Winter could have a kid. Uh, Miranda. Antimony’s mother. But I wasn’t toxic, just really fucking weird.” She chuckled. Every head in the cafeteria turned when she walked in, which was immediately followed by cheering and whistling. When Levi held up a hand it quieted down.

“She’s basically a celebrity here,” Hex said. “She’s been with the company longer than anyone.”

“Thanks for making an old woman feel older,” Levi said. “The rejuvenation treatments work miracles, but fuck, those diminishing returns really do diminish.” They grabbed some food – Levi had two *very* full trays, Epoc noticed – and sat down at a table. Levi’s bench creaked dangerously, and her legs stuck out on the other side of the table. “But yeah, I was a massive anomaly already. I can hold my breath for like ten minutes before my cognitive function suffers, and then another five before I’m in trouble. Ask me how I know.”

“How do you know?”

“Because at the end of that deepwater mission my girl was taking in aqua faster than she could expel it, and I had to walk back to base. They said I was unconscious by the time I was on the shore, but I kept walking. Apparently Hydra was a walking water bowl at that point!” She laughed and ripped a steak in half with her teeth, eating it like most people would eat a sandwich. Epoc liked women a normal amount.

“Is that when you renamed her?” Everyone was listening in at this point. Hearing an old fighting machine like Leviathan tell war stories was a rare treat.

“Yeeup,” Levi said. “I was hired to do a ton of aquatic missions after that, until they realized they needed my help for land-based drops too. I mean, that’s where the Hydra nickname started. Scylla and Hydra were always the same Frame. Because there was a triple attack in one day and I dealt with all three.”

“The Seaside Rampage,” Epoc said, positively salivating. She was sitting (diagonally) across from a living legend. The Leviathan had been her hero for years. And now she was here and she was close enough to touch and she was... “Hold on, how old *are* you?”

Levi looked down at her plate and for a brief moment the cafeteria went *very* quiet. “You’ve got some fucking nuts on you, Epoc, I’ll give you that.” She downed her pitcher of water in one go, then put it down carefully – the alternative was shattering it. “I’m eighty-four years old,” she said with a grin. Her teeth glittered. Her canines looked like they could tear metal. “Looking pretty good for my age, huh?”

“Ye,” Epoc managed. “I was just wondering.”

“Well now you kn–”

Every single com in the room went off at the same time. Hex frowned. “Again? That’s the second time today. They don’t usually fall at the same time. This is really–”

The main alarm went off too. Antimony Winter’s voice echoed through the complex. “Crimson alert. Multiple orbital drops confirmed. All hands to battle stations. Repeat. All hands to battle stations.”

Hex touched her ear and her face fell. She sprinted out of the room followed by all the other pilots.

Levi looked at her wrist. Her muscles tensed up. “Epoc,” she said. “You’re with me.”

They rushed to Operations. It was a part of the complex she hadn’t been to yet because she didn’t have clearance. When she’d been exploring, the doors to the elevators had simply refused to open, and a small camera had been pointed at her face the entire time. She’d given it a small wave and had moved on. That made sense. Operations was where the actual missions were distributed from. It was the nerve center for all the Mako Group’s frames. It was also half a mile underground.

Walking next to Levi, though, the doors opened and the elevator shot down. There were handholds, and Epoc found herself needing them. Elevators didn’t usually go this fast.

When the doors slid open, a cacophony of voices and ringing communicators blasted them in the face. The Operations headquarters was in complete disarray.

“Antimony!” Levi said, her voice easily carving the noise in half like a gun through butter. “What the *fuck* is going on?!”

Antimony Winter was standing by a table at the center of the room, a headset around her neck. She looked positively haggard. By the far wall were a series of chairs that were completely isolated, literal glass bubbles built around them. Only one of them was occupied. The one labeled

A. WINTER was turned sideways and the door was open. So this was where the Handler sat when she was in Epoc's ear.

"We don't fucking know, Levi," Antimony said. "Cerberos is in pieces. We have a crew trying to recover what's left of Aaliya but she's half a kilometer under water. We've got two more orbital drops, one of them two clicks out from New Cordoba. Serpent Class A, it looks like."

"And the other one?"

"Other two. The first landed on top of Wardog. Some kind of high-altitude flier. No classification yet but it came down and destroyed Cerberos," Antimony said. "The Megafauna on the are sticking together headed east. It looks like they're headed to Villafranco."

"And the fourth one?" Levi said, looking at the map. It was a mess of notifications and lines. Epoc had a hard time making out what it was supposed to say.

"Coming here." Antimony said.

"This is an attack," Leviathan said. "A bicontinental drop doesn't just *happen*."

"That's not possible," Epoc said. Everyone around the table suddenly looked at her. They probably hadn't even noticed her. "They're just animals, dropping in from orbit. They can't have a plan."

"Yeah, well," Levi said, "in that case we're very unlucky." Everyone looked at Leviathan – not a difficult feat, considering she was the kind of person to take up roughly a third of the real estate in someone's vision simply being in the room. But she nodded at Antimony. "What's the plan, boss?"

"Reefdancer is spooled up. Callsign Barrier is headed to New Cordoba."

"Good. Hex can take care of a Class A. NC's current CEO has a good head on his shoulders and some fantastic rail guns to go with it. All Hex has to do is be smart and be fast." Levi took a confident breath. "Is her Handler up to it?"

"We're about to find out," Antimony said, glancing at the occupied chair behind her.

"We'll see if she earns her plaque," Levi said.

"She will." She took a breath. "I need Epoc here to defend the base. The Rats and Cats are suiting up as we speak, so she won't be alone. We've got a few mercs coming in as well."

"Who owns Villafranco at the moment?" Levi asked.

"Wingspan," Antimony said. "And yes, before you say anything, I *know*. There's a reason we don't buy from them. There's no way they can hold off an attack of this size on their corporate headquarters. But maybe they can slow the megafauna down."

Levi growled. "No," she said. "They might be able to turn them around. I've seen those guns."

"You really think so. You think we shouldn't deploy?"

"Absolutely not," Levi said. "If they manage to turn them around, they'll go back the way they came, and Cerberos is back there." She stood up straight. "I'm waking Scylla up. I'll clean up the duo at Villafranco. Everyone else, deal with the other two."

With that she was out of the door. Epoc blinked and turned to the CEO. “What, uh, what about me? Am I supposed to pilot Nexus Alpha?”

Antimony Winter shook her head. “No. Nexus isn’t ready for the field yet. It won’t be ideal, but we have an artillery frame on standby. It’ll suit you fine, and it’s guaranteed not to fry your brain. I’ll be with you the entire time.” She put a hand on Epoc’s shoulder and squeezed. “You can do this, Epoc. This isn’t how I wanted your first sortie to go, but if that thing reaches Mako Group’s headquarters, it’s all over. Be smart. Be fast. Be one with your Frame.”

Epoc took a deep breath. “Yes, Handler,” she said. “Two questions.”

“What is it?”

“What’s her name?”

“She’s currently being prepped. Her name is Arcus. She’s feisty. You’ll like her.” Antimony gave her a slight smile that failed to reach her eyes, as much for her own benefit as it was for Epoc’s. It didn’t work. “What was your other question?”

“Where, uh, do I go?”

Chapter 10

Antimony pointed to the doors behind her. “There’s a pilot elevator there. It’ll take you to where you need to go. *Fuck*. We’re really going to have to explain the color system to you. Now go. We have an hour before primary engagement.”

Without another word and a stern nod, Epoc went through the doors. She had expected an elevator. Instead, there were private changing rooms and what appeared to be a car seat of some kind, covered in straps. Ah. She quickly stripped out of her clothing (*all* of her clothing, a small sign on the wall reminded her) and she deposited everything in a bin to her side. She sat down on the seat, fiddled with the straps for just a second, figured out what clicked where, and put her feet and hands on the stirrups and handlebars. This felt like an “arms and legs inside the ride” kind of situation.

Epoc pushed the big red button next to her.

Instantly, the seat launched upward, the g-forces meticulously calibrated so as to keep the average occupant from fainting while still allowing for the highest possible speed. She realized she was being shunted through a tube network at the same time as she came to a standstill. The seat was turned to a round aperture that slid open and revealed... a cockpit.

Ah. She undid the straps and climbed into it.

“Arcus, huh?” she touched the inside of the Frame. Going by the kind of make, Arcus wasn’t a Mako design. She looked Old World, or at least designed to resemble it, all hard angles and shiny blacks, with gold and bronze finishing. Industrial decadence.

She slipped into the seat, shivering when metal, leather and cloth touched her bare skin, and she quickly turned the machine on, turning on the internal climate control. Frames like this needed a little bit more fiddling than what Mako Group presented. Mako prided itself on their Frames being smart enough to mold itself to its pilot. Arcus, by contrast, needed its car seat adjusted.

All systems powered up, and she once again felt the strange sensation of her genitalia being cradled and the gentle prodding against her backside. It looked like Mako Group hadn’t wasted any time in adjusting Arcus to their own unique piloting style.

“–me in, Epoc. This is Winter. All systems nominal. Please respond.”

“Right here, Handler,” Epoc said, letting herself relax into the seat. The Arcus vision system was different than that of the battler she’d been in. The battler had relied on a screen and projected data, following her iris to ensure maximum efficiency. Arcus, instead, lowered a headset onto her head, with screens very close to her cornea. There was a lot of debate as to the perfect information display system, but Epoc preferred the latter. She liked the comfort of the screen in front of her eyes. It allowed her to project herself into the Frame easier, made her feel less like someone trapped in a small can.

That said, Arcus' headset was a little too heavy for comfort. She was in the dark, green lines of confirmation running up and down her vision to show her all the breakpoints. No issues yet. In fact, this engine was *well* tuned. Arcus was a backup, she needed to be ready for the field at a moment's notice.

"She's still booting up, but purring like a kitten. I'm waiting on weapon systems. Please advise."

"We're reloading. For obvious reasons, we don't keep these cannons armed in storage."

"Makes sense," Epoc said, settling into the seat, trying to get comfortable. She realized that, in this context, it was a lot harder for her to really, well, pay attention to her crotch. Arousal wasn't nearly as close to the surface when people's lives were on the line.

This wasn't sparring.

"Epoc," Handler Winter said, "we haven't had the time to do conditioning yet, but I'm going to need you to listen to me, okay?"

"I'm not synchronizing."

"You're not synchronizing," Winter confirmed. "Primary viewport is booting up now."

The eyes on Arcus sent their data directly to Epoc's field of view. In front of her was a giant open door. Haptic feedback was being sent to her body. She could *feel* the weight of the missile launchers as they were placed on her shoulders. Her arms moved sluggishly because of the cannons attached to each hand, one dual launcher each.

"Weapon systems, online," Arcus told her with a little tinny, artificial voice.

"Oh, you speak?"

"Yeah," Handler Winter said. "She's not very vocal but she'll keep you up to date if something's wrong and you can't afford to start reading text."

"Neat," Epoc said and took a step forward. Gamma Frames were large, standing a hefty forty feet tall, but they couldn't compare to the giants of the Alpha classes. That said, they had mobility options the big boys didn't. She went through all her options.

"High velocity propulsion systems, online," Arcus said.

"That's what I'm talking about," Epoc said with a happy grin.

"You think that's nice, just wait until Nexus is ready."

"She's way too big for jets," Epoc said. There was no response. "Isn't she?"

"Let's just focus on the mission. We've got incoming in forty-five and I don't want you to engage that thing anywhere near our base, so we're going to get a move on," Handler Winter said.

"Copy." Epoc stepped out of the hangar and looked around. She saw Frames all around her stepping out of the hangars. Some were her size, and most were smaller. "Going to say hi to the team."

"Make it quick, Epoc. We need to synchronize you."

"Will do, Handler," she said, and switched bands.

"This is Epoc. All systems green across the board."

“Hey! Girls! We’ve got a Hound with us today! Try to put your best foot forward!” One of the Frames, a bit to her left, waved. It was a sleek model, seemingly made for high velocity and higher altitude. She had folded wings. The person speaking switched to a private channel. “This is Angel. I’m team leader on Panther Squadron. Don’t worry, you’ll get a callsign when you’ve done your first mission.”

“Good to meet you, Angel,” Epoc said. “Looks like that’s going to be sooner than I’d like.”

“It’s going to be fine. You’ve got a bunch of fresh Cats all looking to impress Mako’s new Hound, and it looks like you’re armed and ready to go fight a war all on your own.”

“I’ll do my best to keep up!”

“Just try not to make us look bad. And when in doubt, follow my lead.” Another wave, and they were back on an open band. “Alright, Rats! I don’t want to see any Pack Rats getting in the way like last time. Not pointing any fingers but Des, fuck’s sake, get over your ex. Stormrats, follow your team lead! This is a *single target*, so just strafe and stay out of its way. If you’re drawing attention, pull back and let another team take over.” A little chatter of confirmation later, Angel continued. “Panthers!”

“Yeah!” All the voices of the squad chimed in at once.

“Do you want to die today?”

“No, *Ma’am!*”

“You gonna?”

“No, *Ma’am!*”

“Good girls. Move out!”

With a smirk, Epoc signed out of the com band. She was going to be taking her orders from someone else. She kept the line available though. She wouldn’t be cut off from them.

“Handler,” she said. “I’m here.”

“Had your fun? Good. Then let’s get you synchronized. We don’t have much time, so I’m going to need you to listen to my voice.”

“Yes, Handler.”

The ground trembled from the multitude of frames and vehicles marching out. They were headed north to meet the oncoming creature head on.

Handler Winter’s voice was soft in her ear. Gentle. Whispered. Epoc wasn’t sure if she was imagining it or if Arcus was blowing her ear. Whatever it was, it worked.

“Epoc,” she said. “Listen to me very carefully.” Under her, the machine very gently started to stroke, very deliberately. At a very deliberate pace. “What you’re feeling right now,” Handler Winter said, “is me. I’m in that cockpit with you.” Slowly, the plug, lubricated and warm and pliable, pushed inside of her. “What you’re feeling right now is me. The hand on your cock is mine. The cock inside you is mine. Arcus isn’t fucking you. I am. Do you know why?”

Panting and trying to think of what to say, trying to steady herself, Epoc bit her lip. “Because—”

“Because you’re my Hound,” Handler Winter said. “Because you want me to. Because I own you, Epoc, and this is how I make you my best pilot. Because you’re a good girl who deserves to be fucked.”

“Yes,” Epoc said, slowly grinding her hips. She had to resist falling to her hands and knees. The feeling was intense, but the mental image of her Handler not just whispering in her ear but wrapped around her, inside of her, gently pumping away, was intense. She was about to go into battle and her Handler would be inside of her the entire time.

“Good girl,” Handler Winter said. “Can you do something for me?”

“C-copy,” Epoc managed.

“Bark for me?”

“Wh-What?”

“Bark. Say woof. You’re a Hound. Dogs bark.”

Epoc grit her teeth. Why was she being asked to do this? Fuck, it was really hard to think through the haze of sex.

“Woof.”

“Good *girl*,” Handler Winter said. “You are green for go, Epoc. Go catch up with the others. I’ll be right with you.”

“Copy,” she said and then, because she couldn’t help herself, “woof.”

“Easy there,” her Handler said, but Epoc could hear the smile in the woman’s voice. “Eager.”

“Yes, Handler,” Epoc said. The rhythm had slowed down, but now she leaned into it. She hovered constantly on the edge of letting herself sink into it and tuning it out. She needed to let it keep her sharp.

“Want to go running?”

“Hmm?”

“I have controls for the High Velocity Propulsion system right here. I can let you go running. You just have to ask.”

“Hell yes,” Epoc said. “Handler, permission to use the HVP?”

“Say please.”

“Fucking—” Epoc started, and then the plug slid very deep into her ass and her vision went double. She groaned deeply. “Yes, Handler,” she moaned. “Can I please use the HVP?”

“There, was that so hard?” Winter said. “HVP approved.”

Gently bouncing onto the now-retreating plug, Epoc leaned forward and fired off the boosters. She could feel Arcus slowly being pushed forward, and she had to make adjustments to make sure she was going forward and not up or, heaven forbid, *down*. But she managed to keep the Gamma Frame steady and moving and looking forward as her engine put out more energy than entire cities did in seconds, all to keep her in the air. Despite the imminent danger to herself and her new friends, Epoc was happy, and not just because her Handler had a finger on Epoc’s *very* literal buttons.

Sure, it was easy to say that one wanted to become a pilot to save the world or to fight monsters or even just for the boost in power. It was tempting to describe it in philosophical or high concept terminology but the real reason almost anyone had ever wanted to be a pilot was very simple.

Because you want to fly.

Chapter 11

Epoc flew.

For a brief moment, everything fell away. The city behind and below her. Smog and smoke cleared the way for a hundred tons of steel, and Epoc soared above it all. She could faintly hear the whooping of pilots through the intercom, the Cats and Rats glad to have a Hound on their side, no matter how inexperienced.

And everyone enjoyed the sight of a Frame on their side accelerating in mid-air, after all. It was not a common sight, seeing a machine that size – one easily able to wrestle a suspension bridge and win – spin left and right in mid air, expelling superheated plasma behind it.

That Epoc was gyrating in her seat, something none of the cheering people below were aware of, and that it was like being gently fucked by a lover the size of a skyscraper, was a little bonus just for her. And for Winter.

“I’m glad you’re excited, Epoc,” her Handler said. “Now, eyes forward. The target is roughly 8 clicks away and approaching fast. Should be visible on scanners.”

Epoc stopped, letting the hover mode kick in. It wasn’t going to keep her up for more than a few more seconds – the reactor couldn’t sustain that kind of output indefinitely – but she wanted to see what was coming. “What can you tell me, Handler?”

“It’s heavily armored. Appears to be able of limited gliding, though we don’t know if that was only during re-entry. Six legs. Heat signature is off the charts, so keep your distance. We don’t know what it’s capable of. Operational designation is Gecko.”

“I see why,” Epoc said, letting max zoom show her the oncoming monstrosity.

Codename ‘Gecko’ was a colossal creature with far too many eyes to be comfortable, a distant shape of toxic green and yellow. Its legs dragged it forward through the landscape. What worried Epoc was its carapace. Layered and spiked, it looked thick. The scanner indicated it was easily 100 feet high, which meant it was several times that in length. It would be almost impossible to stop.

“Handler.”

“Yes, Epoc?”

“What’s the operational range of these missile pods? I haven’t exactly had a chance to look those up yet.” She pulled up the schematics. It wasn’t looking good.

“Six kilometers,” Winter said. “It’s about to reach that threshold.”

“Good.” Epoc targeted a spot at the left front leg, just around the inside of the joint. The head, back and shoulders would be too heavily armored. She needed to know if she was able to put a dent in the weakest parts of it. She opened another channel. “Angel, come in.”

“This is Angel. Eager Hound, yeah? We’re coming up behind you. What do you need?”

“Any of the Pack Rats bring heavy artillery?”

Pack Rats were considered invaluable for any sortie with significant levels of engagement. A Frame needed to be as light as possible, so you couldn't exactly bring redundant equipment into the field. Pack Rats were quick and mobile and had limited boost capability, so they could both install equipment onto frames mid-sortie, or create gun emplacements with them. One way or another, they brought more firepower to the field.

"They did," Angel said. "A few long range pieces and one heavy plasma cannon. They're setting all of it up right now."

"Tell them to hold off on that for now," Epoc said. "The last one, at least."

"Epoc," Angel said, switching to a private channel, "not to tell you your business, but your Gamma Frame's generator isn't built for heavy output like that. It would fry your whole system."

"Yeah, that's why it's a last resort. But I'd rather have a cannon like that mobile than stuck on a turret somewhere. I know how long those things take to reload. You'd only get one proper shot anyway."

"If you're sure." The answer was uncertain, and more than a little apprehensive, but being a Hound ranked Epoc higher by default.

"Thank you, Angel." Epoc looked through her viewfinder and saw that Gecko had crossed the threshold. "Probing defenses, full missile salvo," she said across broadband. She knew the other pilots would all be looking at the leader of Panther Squadron, but it was only courteous to let them know she wasn't just firing willy-nilly.

Switching weapon systems with a click of her finger, she balled her fists three quarters of the way. Some pilots preferred individual triggers, assigning a different gun to each finger. Some older pilots were, apparently, able to control entire subsystems using only facial expressions. Epoc wasn't nearly that refined. The missiles all locked onto the same spot. That was the advantage of a missile. Here or several kilometers away, the explosion was the same.

"Ready, Epoc?"

"Yes, Handler. Permission to fire."

"Permission granted, Epoc. The battlefield is yours."

"Thank you, Handler."

Handler Winter's voice was really close in her ear and she felt Arcus squeeze her cock gently. She knew where that was coming from. That was Handler Winter, the exact same way she had in her office when they'd first met. She was egging her on.

Epoc squeezed the triggers on both shoulder-mounted missile batteries.

The miniature jets fired off one after the other, launching themselves out of their rocket tubes in a perfect line, going down row after row, just as Epoc had anticipated. Not a single misfire – thank you, Pack Rats.

What she hadn't expected was the vibration sent through her groin with the launch of each individual missile. The full launch lasted only three seconds, but that entire time, the plug inside her vibrated like mad against her prostate. She only just managed to turn off the com to the other

pilots when she moaned like mad in her cockpit. Her entire lower body, from her diaphragm down, spasmed briefly from the unexpected intensity and she almost came, then and there. The grip around the base of her cock tightened to prevent that exact thing from happening. To keep her right on the edge, groaning and panting and grinding.

When the firing stopped, the vibrations did too. Epoc felt something wet on her chin and realized she was drooling on herself. That had been... intense. She found herself involuntarily thrusting, but there was no give. Release wasn't going to happen.

"Fuck," she grunted.

"Good girl," Winter whispered in her ear. "Remember that feeling."

"Yeah," Epoc said, composing herself, "I'm not forgetting it any time soon." She shook her head and read the scanner. "Shit. Negative effect on target."

"Copy that, Epoc. Refuel and stick with the Cats. Try to hold it off as long as possible. I'll see if there's any free mercenaries in the area." Winter sounded like she was trying not to worry. Her voice cut off. Epoc wasn't going to bother her. She was going to be making calls. Antimony had to be CEO and consider worst case scenarios while trying to prevent them. It was not exactly an enviable position to be in. She took a deep breath and descended, landing next to Angel.

The Panther Squadron leader's Frame was a Gamma as well, slightly smaller than her own, similarly equipped with missile launchers. It was painted in black and purple patterns and had a snarling cat on its shoulder, with angel wings behind it.

"Angel," Epoc said. "I'd like that cannon right about now."

"Damn, that did *nothing*," Angel said. "Alright." A few seconds later, several Rats scurried over to Epoc, one of them piloting a big rig. It unfolded behind her and revealed a canon as long as a cargo bus. "Any thoughts, Hound?"

"We're going to hold this thing off for as long as we can," Epoc said. "Either we take it down or we delay it long enough for reinforcements to get her." She looked behind her. The edge of the city – and the facility with it – was only a few kilometers away. "If it gets through us, they're fucked."

"There's *never* been an attack from the mainland like this before," Angel said. "We can't let it through. You taking orders?"

Epoc shook her head, then realized Angel couldn't actually see that. "No. Handler is busy. I think they might have to evac." At the urge of the Pack Rats, she ejected the shoulder weapons, which were caught and stowed.

"Makes sense," Angel said. "Alright, in that case, you're with me. Keep that cannon primed but unpowered. If two dozen micro-missiles don't put a dent in it, that cannon is going to bounce right off."

"Lead the way," Epoc said. The heavy plasma cannon was lowered onto her shoulder with a heavy **clunk**, and she felt the shoulder mount hiss its clamps shut to keep it in place. Keeping her

balance was going to be a premium. Thankfully, the barrel could retract some, so she wasn't going to fall over *just* yet.

"Panther Squad!" Angel shouted. "Let's kill this thing!"

Her Frame pointed forward, and all the other Frames charged forward. The Stormrats stayed close behind in little clusters, making up for their lack in running speed by essentially vaulting and then boosting themselves forward, hopping across the battlefield.

They were funny to look at until you saw how much damage a well-led and well-trained loader squadron could do. That they were easy to fabricate had made squads like that a staple of the First Corporate War.

With a jolt, Epoc chased them and fired off her HVP system to keep up, without rushing ahead this time. The primary firing line was already fully set up, and cannons and missiles were being brought to bear. People were holding fire until Angel's signal, though. Sustained fire was more effective if the target had no time to recover, after all. She joined them and raised the cannons in her hands, locking the arms in place and digging in her heels.

There was a pregnant silence as everyone waited for the creature to come within range. The environment was perfect, the low hills outside the city creating a divot in the landscape between them. Right in the creature's path. It was, in theory at least, the perfect killbox.

"All Frames, focus fire on the eyes. If we can blind it, we buy ourselves some time. Pick a target and hammer it until it stops moving."

A chorus of 'ooh-rah's and excited shouts from the women around them was encouraging. Epoc readied herself in her mech, and let the gentle, automated rhythm of Arcus slowly get her worked up again. She had come down pretty hard after she'd been prevented release earlier, and the buildup was slow. With a flick of her finger, she selected one of the creatures' frontmost eyes and locked on, then readied her weapons.

Epoc's body tingled. The anticipation of battle was there, yes, but there was also the full realization that, as soon as she fired her cannons, Arcus would respond in kind and get her worked up again. She wasn't sure how well she'd be able to stay in formation if the machine decided to push her up to that brink. But then again, maybe that was the point.

"Ready!"

She steadied her breathing, which was already quite steady. The machine had slowed down its rhythmic pumping significantly, as if it was waiting for the barrage as much as she was. The creature was fully in view now, dragging itself forward on its awkward legs, its dumb eyes rolling around to scan the world around it. The ground trembled.

"Aim!"

All weapons and guns were raised, now. A moment of perfect silence disturbed by the attacking creature. Then, when all weapons were trained on it and all fingers were on triggers, Gecko stopped.

"Fire!"

A cacophony of gunfire erupted. Kinetic shells hammered Gecko's head. Explosions caused by various kinds of missiles soon followed. Several high-intensity lasers bounced off the creature's carapace, and microwave and plasma weapons were all unleashed. The higher-yield explosives now hit, covering Gecko's head in smoke and debris.

With gritted teeth, Epoc pulled the trigger. Her guns fired, a massive shell each, one after the other.

She was fucked. The plug inside of her expanded slightly, coated in whatever lubricant it used, and slid deep into her. Once. Then again. Then it stopped and slipped back out. She whined like a dog, realized what she had to do to keep that going, and fired again. One. Thrust. The other. Thrust.

Pretty soon she was fucking herself silly, firing off both guns in a perfect rhythm, Arcus fucking her insides with a cock she could swear was getting bigger. Maybe it was her imagination. Didn't really matter at this point. Her moans were basically constant, so when Arcus told her, calmly and robotically, that her primary weapons were at 10% capacity, it took a titanic effort for her to actually parse it.

She lowered her guns, her entire body twitching. She was soaked. She could feel it. Slick with sweat. Drool. Condensation from all the panting she was doing. She swallowed and looked at the battlefield.

Gecko wasn't moving, its head covered in smoke. Was that really it? No. She had a bad feeling about this. She saw the Cats around her lower their – presumably equally spent – guns and thought for a second. What was it her Handler had said? Something about its energy signature. No, temperature.

Shit. Epoc switched to thermals. Its temperature was rising, and fast.

"Everybody *move!*" she shouted and fired her HVP, launching her up and forward, sending her in a perfect parabolic arc above Gecko. From her position she could see the creature suddenly coil. Without taking its head out of the cloud, the creature released a wall of fire, rolling out of the smoke. It moved far too quickly. Shit, *shit, shitshitshitshit*.

Several of the Cats and two Stormrat squadrons were drowned in the flames, their microphones and signals instantly cut off. That wasn't just a fireball, that was something worse. Hotter.

The Gecko, now moving forward again, almost lazily, slowly turned its head, vomiting liquid fire at the Frames that had assaulted it. Angel was already calling for a full scale retreat for the Cats, but the Rats were boosting... towards it.

Using their own propulsion systems, they flew over the flames as best they could, though every once in a while one or another was lost to the flames. Nonetheless, they sustained small arms fire on the creature's eyes, trying to keep it from firing at the remaining Frames.

Epoc steadied herself, hovering directly above the Gecko. Roughly a third of the Frames had been incinerated in the first attack. The others were retreating, but the force and speed of the flames guaranteed the others would be too if the creature repeated its assault.

“Handler,” she said. “Come in, Handler Winter.”

“I’m here, Epoc. We’re overseeing the situation. We have a contractor coming in. She’ll be there in less than an hour.”

“That won’t be enough, Handler,” Epoc said. “Can you tell Diana I’m sorry?”

“What are you planning, Epoc?”

“I’m going to stop this.” She was easily half a kilometer up. This ought to do it. “HVP propulsion system overloaded,” she said, flicking digital switches to release safeties.

This was not something that was ever recommended for anyone to do. It was highly dangerous, and often lethal to the pilot. That said, so was fighting Megafauna. Sometimes, Epoc felt, you had to take a risk.

“Disabling antigrav lattice.”

“Epoc...”

“Handler, if you find my actions disagreeable, you can remotely shut Arcus down,” Epoc said. She waited a second. Arcus stayed entirely active. Winter could see the writing on the wall too. This thing was going to keep moving unless someone did something. “Calibrating interval.”

“Interval between—” Winter started, and then Epoc fired the thrusters, straight down. The Gecko was charging up another attack. Its fiery breath was like a weapon. Like most weapons, it likely wouldn’t respond well to its barrel being closed.

Arcus fell out of the sky like a brick. At this height, it would take her almost ten seconds in freefall. With the HVP, it was less than three. Still, better make the best of it. She fired off both guns, the Frame dutifully ramming her ass with every shot fired, hoping to slow it down just the littlest bit. Thermal imaging already showed the fire building up inside of it.

Despite the danger of the situation, Arcus’ relentless assault on her had Epoc grinning. She managed to fire the thrusters at the last second, spinning around and landing feet first onto Gecko’s head. Despite its gargantuan size, five hundred tons of metal landed on its skull at a thousand kilometers per hour, snapping its mouth shut. Fire belched out of the corners of its maw, but the majority of the chemical reaction burned inside of it.

Chapter 12

Arcus struggled. The sudden deceleration, while caught by the internal shock absorbers, very briefly caused Epoc's vision to black out, but she quickly recovered. Her whole body felt like a bruise. High-G exposure had been a part of training, after all. She tried to move, but fell off Gecko awkwardly. Arcus' left leg was completely shot. Both cannons were empty. She pushed the Frame up on one leg and ejected the cannons. In front of her was a maw of giant teeth, half as big as she was.

Gecko was down but not out. The creature struggled, and parts of it were blackening where the fire had caused internal damage, but it was still *moving* which meant that it could still be a danger. Fuck. Her whole body felt so heavy. The impact had knocked the air out of her. Yeah, she could recover from an impact like that but that didn't mean her muscles appreciated it.

“-poc. Come in, Epoc. *Talk to me!*”

“I'm here, Handler,” Epoc said. “I'm still here. I could use a bit of help, though.” She struggled to keep standing, the broken leg unable to bend. “I'm running on fumes here.”

“Get out of there, Epoc,” Handler Winter said. “You've done enough.”

“Aww, come on, Antimony,” Epoc said with a laugh, and tapped her shoulder. “I've been dragging this big fucking gun around, would be a shame not to use it. Besides, I've got it on the ropes.”

“I... fine. You want it like that? First of all, you call me *Handler*, Epoc.” Winter's voice was strained, but close. Immediately, the tension on Epoc's cock increased. Sucking. Pumping. Milking her. Despite her exhaustion and the fact that she was struggling to keep her eyes open, she started bucking her hips. Her ass was being prodded again. It felt like fingers this time, gently probing.

“Ye-es, Handler,” Epoc said, and bit her lip.

Through Arcus, Handler Winter slowly started to fuck Epoc. “What are you?”

“A pilot.”

There was a buzzing sound, and the probe inside of her vibrated aggressively. Fuck. She was drooling again. “Wrong. What are you?”

“Yours.”

“Good. Good girl. My what?”

It all stopped. Epoc panted. She knew what she had to say. “Your Hound,” she said.

“Good dog.”

The machine resumed its movements, hard and aggressive fucking, squeezing everything out of her and pumping it back in. Epoc stepped forward and smashed a mechanical fist against the Gecko's teeth. She felt the impact deep inside of her, and she squirmed briefly, letting the sensation carry her for a moment. There was a hairline fracture in the tooth. Oh, yes, this was going to work out just fine.

“Woof,” she said, and punched again. Another thrust. “Woof,” she repeated, then laughed at the absurdity of it all. Her fists slammed into the keratin over and over again, the thin lines becoming a spiderweb of cracks, and Epoc barely cared. Arcus’ fists were slowly turning into scrap, but Epoc didn’t care. Her words had turned into incoherent barking, after every strike, every thrust. All she knew was that she had to get through those teeth at all costs. Her forearms struck over and over again.

When the tooth gave way, she howled, a primal sound that came from deep inside of her, a mixture of happiness and rage and excitement and a desire to win and come more than anything. She shoved what remained of her arms into the Gecko’s mouth and pushed up.

“Right shoulder mount charged,” Arcos said. “Warning, power drain exceeds maximum recommended—”

“Shut the fuck up,” Epoc said with a laugh, and fired the canon down the Gecko’s throat.

The vibration was the most intense thing she’d ever felt. Her entire body needed release, her pleasure center completely overloaded, her pulsing cock straining against the clamp that kept her from reaching that orgasm. She blacked out again, briefly, and then looked up.

Something reacted in the back of its mouth. There was a brief moment where Epoc could see something lighting up, and then a chain reaction of fire blew the back of the creature’s head and neck sky high. Not that she was looking at it. She was too concerned with the fire coming towards her.

Then, she suddenly moved back and up.

“Gotcha!” Angel said, her Frame’s hands under Arcus’s Arms, dragging both of them up and away from the Gecko’s dying breath before it could vaporize them. “Damn, rookie. I thought I told you not to make the rest of us look bad. You okay?”

“Ghh,” Epoc managed. She was drooling. Panting. She wanted to come. She just wanted release. She’d won, hadn’t she? Why wasn’t she given release? Did she do something wrong? What was wrong?

“Are you okay?”

“Pilot Angel,” Winter said, “our Hound is alright but not currently able to respond. We’ll handle retrieval. Get your women back to base. You all performed admirably. There will be bonuses.” With that, Angel disappeared, leaving Epoc lying down in about 30% of a Frame and groaning. “Epoc, can you hear me?”

“Yesss,” she hissed, barely able to keep it together. “Handler, please. Please, I’m so close.”

“I’m afraid that last shot completely fired your systems. In just a moment the radio is going to go out too. But I’ve got someone coming to get you. Then, when you get to base, you’ll have all the release you need.”

“Mmmf.” Epoc practically bit through her lip. “Please?”

“Just... hold o—”

The radio went dead. The whole Frame was dead. Epoc couldn't move. She couldn't do anything. She couldn't even fuck herself on the mech because all the parts that would allow for that had gone inert. She moaned in frustration, then realized nobody could hear her and her moaning became screaming and then briefly crying and then groaning. She was *still* rock hard. Lying on her back, she could feel her cock leaning onto herself, her lower stomach getting wet.

Then, suddenly, the Frame started to move. She began to pant again. She was close. So close. Epoc could feel she was being carried, her Frame being moved. She wasn't that far from the base, was she?

As it turned out, she was still another agonizing thirty minutes from base. By the time she heard the clunk of the airlock shoving into Arcus, she was straining against Arcus' cockpit like a dog against a leash.

When she felt fresh air against her skin, the hiss of the pressure difference equalizing itself, and then all the clamps and safeties fell away and she practically jumped out of the cockpit, rock hard and dirty and not caring. She needed release. She turned to her Handler and

The collar snapped around her neck.

She looked down. Handler Winter smiled at her.

"I am *so* proud of you, Epoc," she said. "I think it's time to get you a treat."

"*Not here?!*" Epoc said, not even caring how desperate and pathetic she sounded.

"No. Not this time. In order to ensure efficacy of the Post-Mission Neural Stress Reduction system, we have to change things up. But that's honestly not what you want to hear right now. So." She hooked a finger through the loop in Epoc's collar and yanked her forward and down, bringing her face low and close to Winter's. "You're going to wait because I tell you to, Epoc, like a good dog, is that understood?" The airlock started to move.

"Yes, Handler," Epoc said, whimpering. Her lower lip trembled. She was being chided. A part of her brain tried to figure out if this was punishment or reward and decided to just enjoy it all the same, shame blooming in her chest and crawling down to her still rock-hard cock and sensitive asshole. She was all raw nerves. She moved to relieve the pressure but a single look for her Handler put a stop to that. "Woof," she said quietly.

Winter's face briefly became unreadable. "Good dog," she said very quietly, and planted a small kiss on Epoc's lips, then turned towards the door, just as it slid open.

The room in front of them was... strange. Half of it was covered in what Epoc quickly realized was bondage gear and equipment, as well as various... implements. The other side was full of sofas, beds, couches, even tables, like a furniture store.

On one of the beds was a woman, bound, gagged and blindfolded. She was on her knees and drooling through the ball gag in her mouth. Her cock was massive and leaking profusely. An older woman stood next to her, several gray streaks in her hair. She was whispering something in the woman's ear, causing her cock to twitch.

“Hexacorallia came back to get you,” Winter said. “Because of that, and how well you did, we decided to reward her. That is, if you agree, though it seems there was some playful attraction between the two of you.”

“Yeah,” Epoc said and took a step forward, already forgetting about the leash. “Grhkl.”

“Not so fast,” Winter said. “You’re free to use her mouth and ass. You don’t touch her cock. She won’t know it’s you. You can be as rough as you like, as long as you don’t cause any permanent damage. This is for her benefit too, so her Handler would prefer it if you’re a little... harder than you might otherwise be. It’s up to you to reveal your identity, though she likes the anonymity. Ideally, don’t stop until both of you are spent, but don’t feel obligated to. Understood? Bark.”

“Woof,” Epoc said.

“Good girl.” She took Epoc off the leash again. Epoc hurried over to the bed, where the older woman put what appeared to be headphones over Hex’s head, then stepped back, hands behind her back. She was going to be watching, then? Epoc liked to think she didn’t care but that wasn’t true. It only added fuel to the flames. So, Hex didn’t know it was her. And she wouldn’t know, one way or another.

Though the idea of shoving her dick in Hexacorallia’s usually overly busy mouth was tempting, Epoc needed to *fuck* something, and ideally, she wanted to avoid the risk of teeth. She approached the edge of the bed and climbed on.

Hex could tell someone had joined her, because her cock twitched. It was a shame Epoc couldn’t touch it. She wanted to taste it. She wanted so many things. But what she wanted, more than anything, was to come.

Moving behind Hex, she kissed the woman’s neck, feigning gentility, before grabbing a handful of the woman’s hair and shoving her down onto the mattress. Fuck. Her asshole was well-lubed, presumably from her own Frame, and her huge dick was red and throbbing. She was so desperate for it.

Well.

Epoc didn’t need any encouragement. She buried her cock in the girl’s ass, with a low grunt. Her eyes rolled into the back of her head. She grabbed Hexacora’s hips and fucked her. She was already so close but having an outlet like this meant she wanted to appreciate every second of this. She felt the rising feeling in her lower stomach, the realization that she was about to fill Hex to the brim and then some. And Hex was just as close.

She was going to rearrange the woman’s guts and have her come her brains out. In fact...

Epoc, despite herself, stopped. Hex moaned against the gag, but Epoc wasn’t going to pay her any attention. What she wanted was to come when Hex did, because right now that was the hottest thing in the world she could think of.

She laid down and pulled Hex towards her. The girl moved obediently and realized she was supposed to straddle Epoc, which was easier said than done with her arms behind her back, but she

managed. She even managed to sit directly on Epoc's dick, sliding it all the way in, causing them both to groan. Her cock was twitching with her heartbeat, leaking precum onto Epoc's stomach.

Rolling her hips, it was clear Hex couldn't help but try to fuck herself on Epoc, but that wasn't going to be enough. Epoc reached up and grabbed her by the throat. She had never been one for rough fucking but right now she needed to get this out of her. She rammed her hips up and Hex whimpered.

A handful of her hair and Epoc yanked Hex's head back, biting her collarbone and scratching her back hard with every thrust. She pounded the girl's ass until the orgasm approached again. She could feel it building up, low and hard. She could tell Hex was close too, but she wasn't supposed to touch the dick in front of her. So, instead, she reached up, undid Hexacora's gag. Briefly, she could hear the girl's desperate moans, then shoved her fingers into the girl's mouth. She sucked as soon as they passed her lips, and came.

Thick ropes of cum blasted out of her and onto the stomach, breasts and neck under her. The other woman shuddered and groaned, but she didn't stop sucking and grinding on Epoc's fingers. Halfway through her orgasm, Hex reached down and started cleaning Epoc's chest with her tongue, going by touch, until she was licking and sucking on Epoc's nipples.

That was it. That was the drop. The girl on top of her couldn't see, couldn't hear, but she was licking her own cum off of Epoc's chest all the same. Epoc grabbed her hips and buried her cock deep in Hexacorallia's ass, and came.

She pumped her full. It was bliss. It was agony. It was like the heavens collided in her balls and fired hot starfire directly into the woman on top of her. It burned and seared and it was the most blissful feeling in the world, shattering her every last thought, over and over again, until she was spent.

After what felt like an eternity, she slipped out, and she could feel her own cum leak out of Hexacora and out of herself. Hex herself was, gently, guided off of Epoc. A leash was attached and she was carefully led away.

Winter sat down on the bed next to Epoc.

"How are you feeling?"

"I... Spent," Epoc said. "Happy to be alive. Happy to not be pent up anymore."

"I wasn't lying," her Handler said. "I really am incredibly proud of you. Do you need anything?"

"Would you stay with me?" Epoc said.

Winter smiled. "Of course, my Hound."

Chapter 13

Epoc woke up, to her surprise, still in the same bed, though her Handler was gone. Her communicator was on the nightstand, a little message from Winter, apologizing for not being there when she woke up.

Thankfully, the room — which Epoc mentally referred to as The Playroom — had a shower. Going by the many, many, *many* sex toys, harnesses, straps, belts, whips and what appeared to be a pillory on the far side of the room, this was a room for sex. Sorry, no, “*Post-mission neural stress reduction.*” Yeah. Sure. It was the room where she fucked Hex until they’d both been drained, literally and figuratively.

After her shower, she got dressed and made her way down to Hound quarters. She tried calling Winter, but she got a polite “sorry, we’ll talk later,” so that was a bust.

Thankfully, the Mako Group primary facility was fine. It had been completely untouched by the creature’s attack. More regrettably was the sheer number of Rats and Cats lost in the attack. Something like this was unheard of.

Ordinarily, Megafauna made an orbital drop and then landed in the ocean. It’s how the massive creatures survived not only re-entry, allowing the water to cool them off, but it also significantly reduced their impact. So most coastal cities had massive gun batteries that could hold off anything up to a Class B, and the bigger cities could indefinitely halt a Class A’s advance until the Frames showed up.

They simply didn’t show up inland. There were no defenses for it. A vigil was being held, tonight, for the lives lost, and Epoc made a little note to herself to join them. She’d stood side by side with them and several of them had given their lives so that she could have taken the creature down.

She was standing in front of a memorial wall, laser-carved during the night with the date and time of the attack, and tried to memorize some of them. She hadn’t known *any* of these people. They had, she presumed, trusted her, or at least they’d trusted her title. Had she let them down, somehow? If she had acted faster or more decisively, would she have been able to save them? Should she have? Epoc was only one person.

On the other hand, she was a Hound. She was *Winter’s* Hound. Hand-picked. The best of the best. And yet, over forty people, apparently, had died. She let her shoulders hang and stared at the names. Faceless names, although she imagined it would be quite easy to look those up in the personnel files but what would be the point of that?

She hadn’t *known* them. They’d just be faces, no more capable of becoming *people* than their names were. They were dead. More than one person came over to thank her, though she waved them off. Group effort, and all that.

There was a part of her that felt gross. She hadn't felt *gross* in a long time. She had felt gross the first and last time she'd slept with a boy. She'd been a lot younger then and, back then, *anything* for validation. She'd felt gross when a man on a bus had slipped his hand up her skirt. And she felt gross now.

While many had been mourning, she had been pleading and barking, begging for her Handler to let her come. While others were burying their friends and relatives, she had been balls deep in her colleague. On the other hand, what was she supposed to do? Get brain damage because someone else was sad?

She shook her head and turned around, ready to walk away, when she was stopped by someone. Epoc gave the woman an apologetic smile, sorry she couldn't have done more. She wasn't good enough yet.

Angel was the one who stopped her. She knew it was her because of the logo on her jacket, the crossed wings. She was more than deserving of the callsign. Not only had she saved Epoc's life from the explosion by literally flying her out of there, but she was also much, *much* more beautiful than she had any right to. In another life, Angel should have been a dancer. There was a grace to her, like a moving statue made of obsidian. Her eyes were a pure hazel so bright they were almost yellow, and her hair was pulled back tightly. Freckles dotted her skin, and she had clear laugh lines, currently underutilized.

The worst part, beyond the default feelings women elicited from Epoc, was that Angel saluted her.

A crowd of pilots, Cats and Rats alike, had gathered by the memorial wall but there were a lot more than when she'd approached it. Had her standing in front of it drawn such a crowd. She had just... felt guilty. This wasn't an appropriate response.

And yet, one by one, all the pilots saluted her.

A voice in the back of her head pointed it out. The simple truth behind the simple gesture. They had all lost someone. But everyone in this room was alive and for the majority of them, the reason for that was her. Forty people had died. More than triple that were alive, and that was because of her. That was worth something. That was worth, if not a celebration, then a thank you, and a salute.

"Come see me tonight," Angel said. "We're having a wake. It would mean a lot if you could be there."

Epoc struggled for a second. "I didn't know any of them," she said. "I don't know if it would be *right*."

"You shoved your whole face into that thing's mouth after landing on it, all on your own," Angel said, "and saved pretty much all of our hides. Any one of us would have done the same thing, sure, but 'would' is doing a lot of work there because none of us did. *You* did."

Looking around, Epoc got the distinct impression that Angel's extremely generous interpretation of events was not unanimous. There were at least a few pilots who gave her not so much *dirty* looks as mildly smudged ones.

"I'll think about it," she said. "I need to go check on the other Hound."

Angel nodded and let her through. It was true enough — Epoc wanted to see how Aaliya was doing — but she also just really wanted to get out of there. Angel really had spoken the truth, in that Epoc was pretty sure that any pilot worth their salt would have tried something as stupid and suicidal as her if it had meant achieving the mission. Sure, maybe they wouldn't have been as... on edge as she had been, but several Stormrat squadrons had absolutely charged the Gecko.

The biggest difference had been means. Epoc had been in possession of a Gamma class with strong thrusters and a big gun. That was it. She couldn't really hold it against some of the other pilots if they resented her for the fact that Angel was hailing her as some kind of hero.

Aaliya, apparently, was just on her way back to the Hound suites as well, so Epoc decided to intercept her and walk her the rest of the way or, as it turned out, push her.

"Hey," Aaliya said, waving from the chair. "Lookit my new wheels." She spun in a little circle. "Coolest motherfucker in the building."

"Well damn," Epoc said. "Can't argue with that. Want some help?"

"Yes, fuck, please," Aaliya said, relenting. Epoc gently pushed her as they made their way to the common rooms. Apparently a nurse had pushed her most of the way, had received a call, and Aaliya, in her infinite wisdom, had told her to go check on whatever it was. "I told her I'd be fine. I'm a fucking idiot."

"So, what's the situation?"

"Busted legs," Aaliya said. "Gonna take me *weeks* to get back to operational strength, unless I get more implants or just fucking replace them. Might as well, my knees already sound like someone snapping twigs whenever I get up."

"Hold on. *More* implants?"

"Oh, yeah," Aaliya said. "One of my eyes is fake, I've got a plate in my skull, my right clavicle is titanium and a chunk of my lungs is artificial." She chuckled, then coughed. It had clearly been a bad idea to laugh. "I've been through worse, I just hate waiting."

"Well, I mean, one way or another you're going to have to spend some time recovering, right?" Epoc asked hesitantly as the door to the Hound suites opened.

"As little as possible," Aaliya said. "I live for the cockpit."

"So what happened?"

"I got blindsided. That thing fell on top of me. They're not supposed to do that. Hey, Cora." She waved at the girl as Epoc wheeled her in.

Hex wasn't wearing much, just a short skirt and sneakers with remarkably thick soles. Her tits were fully out. Despite having seen them the night before, Epoc still blushed as she saw the girl bounce over shamelessly.

“Aaliya!” She shouted and moved to give the woman in the wheelchair a hug. Aaliya held up her hand, meaning Hex ran face-first into it. It didn’t stop her in the least. Aaliya relented and let Hexacora hug her. “I’m glad you’re okay.”

“I’m in a wheelchair, Hex.”

“Yeah, well, nothing wrong with that, some of the hottest and horniest people I know use wheelchairs,” Hex said, fully crawling in Aaliya’s lap and hanging off of her neck.

“This is going to make shutting you up so much harder,” Aaliya said. “I can’t get up and go over to smack you now.”

“I could just be closer to you all the time,” Hex said, fluttering her eyelashes.

“Not happening. I’ll just have to figure out a way to shut you up remotely.”

“I can think of a few things.”

“I’ll leave you two to it,” Epoc said, wanting to extricate herself from the situation. “I’m going to see about grabbing something to eat.”

“Sounds good,” Hex said, and then turned back to Aaliya. “Did you know they brought in a third party for me last night? She was pretty good. Nice tits. Not a huge cock but damn could she come. I haven’t been that full in a while.”

Epoc had been about to walk out the door when she heard Hex talk about her and there was a part of her that wanted to hear what she had been like.

“I mean, she doesn’t compare to you, of course, but she was a little rough with me and she made me come pretty good.”

“Yeah?” Aaliya said. “She came in your ass?”

“Yeah!”

“Slut.”

“Yeah!”

Epoc realized she couldn’t justify dawdling in the doorway any longer and stepped out. Checking her com, she realized she had a message. It was from Diana. Everything else was drifting back to normal. Aaliya was okay, at least.

Chapter 14

Diana was a few floors up. The advantage of the com system was that, if you turned it on, its location was shared on a closed network. Easy to find and meet up with someone. You just had to follow the right colors.

The main hall where Nexus Alpha was being kept had several minor hangars branching off of it. Overlooking one of those, Diana sighed as Epoc approached. There, not so much standing as coat-hangered, was what remained of Arcus.

"I think," Diana said, "she's going to have to retire."

"I mean, a bit of tape. A lick of paint." Epoc tried to joke. Diana even did her the courtesy of cracking a faint smile. "I'm, I'm really sorry."

"You know," Diana said, "I'm supposed to be partially in charge of punishment for you. I'm a designated third party that puts you in your place, so to speak, if you damage my babies too much. Whatever way I see fit. But..." She sighed. "If you hadn't stopped that thing I might not even *be* here, Epoc. That puts me in a bit of an *awkward* situation. What, am I going to punish you for taking a risk that saved my life and who knows how many others? Not exactly spanking material, is it?"

"Hold on, back up," Epoc said. "You were going to *spank* me?"

"It was in your contract. Nothing too egregious, but we can't have you going off and having us costs millions of dollars on every sortie, now can we?" Diana grabbed the railing she was leaning against. "Fuck I shouldn't have stopped smoking."

"How long?"

"Five years," she said. "Wish I could tell you it gets easier."

There was a silence and Epoc, diplomatic genius, decided to break it. "How much did I cost Mako Group?" she asked.

"Are you kidding me?" Diana looked at her with surprise. "You made Mako Group a couple billions, easy! When someone takes down one of these things, there's always an argument about who did what and which guns delivered the final blow and who has salvage rights. Nah, I'm pretty sure the board could kiss you right now."

"Oh," Epoc thought, not thinking of Winter at all in any capacity, way, shape or form.

"Yeah," Diana said. "So no. No punishment today."

"I mean, I feel like I completely ruined a machine that was important to you."

"Epoc Mako," Diana said with a raised eyebrow, "it seems to me like you *want* someone to punish you." She flashed her a grin, revealing her network of crow's feet. It was a very attractive feature. "Maybe we can grab a drink some time and discuss modes of punishment, yeah? Then we can talk about Nexus, too. What you want to do with her. She should be ready for her first walk next week and I want to make sure she's perfect for you, too. I want to be there."

“You know what goes on inside that cockpit, right?” Epoc said. Diana helped build them. Of course she knew.

“I said what I said,” Diana said with a little smirk and, surprisingly, a blush.

“I’ll make sure you’re invited.” Epoc straightened up. “Hey, I’ve been a little lost since I got here. Would you mind explaining the way the colored lines, the alarm codes, all of those work?”

“You didn’t get the brief?” The woman frowned for a second and then shrugged. “Alright. Come with me.”

As she explained the different categories of alerts and colored lines on the floors, the way the tracking systems worked, she guided Epoc through the facilities again.

Generally, red lines were for battle stations. If you knew where to look, they were numbered, and the orientation of the numbers also told you something. Pilots without a communicator who were assigned to a new facility should just follow their number and end up with their assigned Frames. The one exception was “0”. That one took you to the nearest exit.

Blue was for medical issues. No numbers, only a white triangle. Follow the point to the medical station in case of an emergency. Go in the opposite direction towards medical storage. Fairly straightforward.

Yellow for canteen, white triangle again. Point towards the canteen, flat towards the deep freezer. Adjacent to medical supplies, because two freezers were more expensive than one.

Green was for recreation. Bunch of numbers, but they were organized, with the decimals indicating the kind of facility. “You’ll learn what’s what,” Diana said. “Personally, I try to spend some time at the pool every day. Keeps me limber.” Epoc didn’t say a word, and Diana heard it. “You’re welcome to come with some time if you like,” she said. “Good for a pilot to get a solid workout between sorties.”

“Yeag,” Epoc said with what could only be described as a choked chortle.

Diana continued with a grin.

White was executive and administrative suites. If Epoc ever needed to find her way to Winter’s office, just follow the big fat “1”. White was also for information. “0” would take you to the nearest terminal, in case you were lost.

Finally, black was for barracks. The numbered ones were for Rats and Cats. Finally, α was for Hounds. You couldn’t miss it.

The lines were on the ground of every part of the complex. In case of a power outage, someone who didn’t have their com with them could still navigate based on those numbers.

“They’re universal across all Mako Group facilities,” Diana said. “Also, emergency numbers, like 0’s are always visible as a thinner line next to the main one.” She pointed them out. She also explained the way the coloring system for alarms worked, but that was mostly a matter of rote memorization.

It was a comfortable way to spend the day, all things considered. Epoc was happy for the distraction. The events of the day before had done a number on her, in more ways than one.

“Thank you,” she finally told Diana.

“For what?”

“For... a moment of *normality*,” Epoc said. “It’s been a lot.”

“I can imagine,” Diana said. “I imagine you don’t have a lot of people to talk to, either. Don’t tell them I said this but the other two Hounds are a little...”

“Extreme?”

“I was going to go for ‘intense.’ But yes. Hex is—”

“Hex,” Epoc finished. “Like a horny squirrel on ketamine.”

“Hah! Yeah. Girl’s got *issues*. And Aaliya is... Hold on, have you seen Cerberos yet?” Epoc shook her head, and Diana walked her to the Wardog’s hangar. The Frame had been almost literally ripped in half by the Megafauna yesterday. It was only connected in the midriff by a few plates and cables. Epoc shuddered. She didn’t want to imagine what it was like to be on the receiving end of that kind of punishment. All the damage to Arcus had been self-inflicted.

Cerberos herself, though, was a different creature from any Frame Epoc had ever seen. Hunched over with a long, elongated head. Long limbs with clawed hands and a curved, almost hunched spine, which gave the Frame a shorter stature than the average Alpha Frame. A remarkable feature were the heavy cannons mounted on each shoulder, giving the Frame a three-headed silhouette.

Most surprising were the digitigrade legs. Epoc had never really tried them. They were panned by most pilots, not because of their lack of practicality but because they were, for most people, too hard to maneuver in. Like standing on tiptoes the whole damn time, she’d been told. Like you were constantly falling forward.

The Frame in front of her didn’t look like it was about to fall over. Even with its miles of titanium guts hanging out and being soldered back together, Cerberos looked like a coiled spring.

“Yeah,” Diana said. “Me too.” She crossed her arms. “That took *work*, I’ll tell you. Those legs are powerful but they *soak* energy. She’s easily twenty foot shorter than Nexus but weighs several dozen tons more, just to keep the whole thing balanced and moving.” Epoc smirked and looked over. She enjoyed seeing a woman proud of her work. Diana looked at her, catching the smile and responding with one of her own.

“Can I see Reefdancer?”

A minute later, they were in Hexacora’s hangar. Thankfully, Reefdancer was in a lot better shape. She had a bit of battle damage, but it was mostly surface level. She was currently being hosed down to get the seawater out of her.

Compared to Cerberos, she looked a lot more like a standard frame, except for three antenna-like structures sticking out of its shoulder.

“What are those?”

“Torpedo launchers,” Diana said. “Barrier – sorry, Hex – is underwater more than most frames, so she had those installed as a permanent fixture. Her chassis houses a whole range of

different torpedoes, from sonar to hyperbaric charges. It's actually regulation that Reefdancer can never set foot within city limits. If her reactor goes critical, the results would be, uh..."

"Catastrophic?"

"Bad. Anyway, that's how she likes it and what our Hounds want, our Hounds get. Besides, she can be trusted with it." She pointed at the Frame's legs, which were a lot wider than standard. "She's also built for wading and moving through water," Diana continued. "I had to make them wide to support its movements, but most of her plating can actually shift to allow for flow. She's the fastest Alpha I've ever built. Moment to moment, anyway. I think Cerberos is faster in a flat sprint."

"She's beautiful," Epoc said, hands on her hips. "You've done amazing work here, Diana."

The engineer shrugged. "It's not that hard when you have the budget and manpower for it. Yeah, Mako Group isn't the biggest company in the system, but we don't have to be. Our pilots are the best, our Frames are the best, and we do good work. And, not to put too fine a point on it, we have a *really* good marketing department. Our Cats and Rats get really good deals all the time."

"Still. I haven't seen a lot of Frames built with this much... care?"

"We do our best here," she said with another shrug, but the pride started to seep through again.

"So... Barrier?"

"Hex's callsign, as you figured. She got the name by wrestling three Boar Class B, practically at once. The last one was about to get through, knocked her down, and then she managed to roll over on top of it. Even when she's out, nothing gets through. The nickname stuck. Aaliya's is Wardog, for obvious reasons." She hooked her thumbs in the waist of her overalls. "You'll get yours soon enough."

"We'll see," Epoc laughed.

"So, do you have any ideas of what you want to do with Nexus Alpha, now that you've seen the other two?" Diana asked, walking them back to the main hangar.

"Some," Epoc said. "I'd have to pilot her once first, I think. I need to know how she feels."

"That's fair," Diana said. "Look, I actually have some more work to do, but let's do this again some time." She put her hand on Epoc's shoulder, then seemed to consider something for a moment. Finally, she gently lifted the pilot's face with her thumb and index finger, nudging her chin up. Epoc didn't know what was happening but it didn't stop her heart from fluttering up into her chest. Then, out of nowhere, Diana ever so slightly slapped her cheek. "There's your punishment," Diana said. She wasn't smiling, and just turned around to leave.

Epoc just rubbed her cheek in confusion and shook her head. Why was everyone here *like this*? Was there something in the water? With a sigh, she turned to go grab dinner.

The wake was quiet. Well, the first part. There was a tradition. There was a bowl of LED's, near the entrance of a large, empty room where the memorial wall had been moved. There were

several plaques and walls like it, but with more than enough room for more. In the center of the memorial hall was a table, full of little lights.

Carefully, Epoc picked and memorized a spot – the grid was numbered – and stuck the LED in there. She tried to keep the names in her head as she did, let the sadness over lost life, the guilt over not remembering or even knowing the women who lost their lives, all of it, flow through her for a moment. Her little light lit up. It flickered lightly. It was not constructed well. The LED would probably give out in a day or two.

As the tradition dictated, you were not allowed to mourn longer than it took for the light to burn out. That said, you were expected to come check.

It kept you grounded.

The *second* half of the wake was not quiet. There was a second canteen where she followed everyone else to, wondering why they didn't use the primary one, only to find out that, instead of the sterile, professional environment, this one looked like a bar. The food counter had been emptied and had a truly outrageous number of shots on it.

It was going to be *that* kind of night, then. Before joining anyone, Epoc stepped out. The mourners spilled into the hall, happily recounting stories of the fellow pilots they'd lost. Some cried. Some were already, somehow, wasted and passed out.

"Winter?" she asked quietly on the com.

"Epoc. How are you doing? I'm seeing you... at the secondary canteen. Is everything all right?"

"Yah," Epoc said. "I was just... checking in on you. You lost a lot of people today. You should be down here."

"You don't– I know. Thank you. Sadly, I'm preoccupied." The com fell silent, but Epoc gave her another second. Silence was a good way to get people to open up, more so than prodding. "Significant loss of life incurs significant paperwork," Winter added. "I'm afraid I'm busy."

"I don't believe you," Epoc said. There was a quiver in Winter's voice, and if there was one thing Epoc couldn't stand for, it was a woman crying alone. "I'm grabbing a bottle and coming up to you."

"*You will do no such thing, Epoc Mako,*" Winter snapped. "You overstep. We are *not* friends. You are my employee, and you will behave yourself as such. I *order* you to stay with your fellow pilots and mourn in whatever way you see fit. Leave me out of it."

The line went dead. Epoc stared blankly at the com. Really. *Really?*

She took a deep breath, walked back into the cafeteria. People raised her glass when they saw her walk in and she forced a smile on her face. Alright. Antimony wanted her to partake? Then she was going to fucking partake. She walked over to the makeshift bar and grabbed two shots. No time for second guessing or thinking.

“To the ones we lost!” She raised her shot. Angel, already at least one shot deep, copied the motion, and everyone else followed, including the ones who didn’t seem particularly eager to join the new recruit in a toast. Ignoring it was just... not done.

The hard liquor hit the back of her throat like gasoline, and it was only because of her frustration and, to be frank, several extremely inadvisable weekends back at the academy that she swallowed all of it without coughing.

“To the ones we didn’t!” The second shot went down a lot easier. People cheered. She tossed both shots on the ground and slammed her heel down on the broken glass. Her head swam and her throat burned. But something in her chest needed to be let out.

She had lost people. People she didn’t even know and would now never know. She could have done better. Should have done better. She had done her best and now her Handler was treating her like... like...

Epoc balled her fists and screamed. Shouted. *Raged*. The entire cafeteria joined her. After all, when a Hound howls, it’s bad luck not to howl with them.

Hours passed in a drunken haze. At some point there was crying. There was throwing up. Then some more shots. Somehow, following the black lines on the ground, did she manage to find her way back to the Hound suites.

Dreams were loud and incoherent. Fucking. Giant monsters. Giant Frames. Women. Touching.

She woke up in her bed, and that was a mistake. Her head throbbed and she felt poisoned which, well, wasn’t *not* true. However, when she tried to move, she felt weirdly heavy. It took her a second to realize that that was because of the arm draped across her chest.

“What?” Epoc said quietly.

“Hey,” Angel said. “Good morning, puppy.”

“*What?*”

Chapter 15

"I'm sorry, that's just what you asked me to call you last night," Angel said as Epoc made coffee for them both. Angel was in just her underwear and Epoc's shirt, which was easily a size larger than her. It made her look incomprehensibly attractive. Epoc had hoisted herself into a pair of sweatpants and an unzipped zip-up hoodie. It was all she could stomach to have on her skin right now. Her brain felt like it was sweating. "There was barking."

"Yeah, sorry about that," Epoc said. "I'm going through some stuff, Angel. Cup?"

"Thanks. Call me Devah, by the way." She took the cup gratefully. "Is it a Hound thing? Do they do something to your brains or do they just find people like you to pilot the Alphas?"

Bit of both, Epoc thought, but how was she going to explain to Devah that this was all because of her own CEO? No, thank you. This was already strange enough without the truth of the Hound post-mission program. "It's complicated," she said, pouring herself a cup.

"I mean, if it's a kink thing I'm happy to oblige," Devah said and raised her eyebrows suggestively.

"Really? Now? You're not hungover?" Epoc grimaced as she burned the roof of her mouth on the coffee, but pushed through. The painkillers were supposed to kick in any minute now. Devah shook her head and leaned against the counter of the Hound suite's kitchenette.

"Nah. I was actually not a very good pilot starting out. Kept getting nauseous. It's actually really hard to clean—" She caught Epoc's queasy face. "You know what, I'm not going to go into detail. Suffice to say, HVP was not for me, and it limited my efficiency. So I got a cochlear implant that helps with balance, and a regulator on my stomach. I can drink as much as I want now and never get sick. I don't even fall over!"

"Damn." Epoc tapped her fingers against the edge of the glass. She remembered *some* things about the night before. Bringing the cup to her mouth, she surreptitiously sniffed her fingers, confirming those specific suspicions. "Should look into that."

"You plan on getting drunk like that more often?" Devah said with a smile.

"I mean, normally I'd say no, and not only because I feel like someone is trying to charbroil my head from the inside, but I'll be honest... not the worst way to wake up." There. That was all of her smooth used up for the day. It seemed to work though, because Devah smiled into her cup and took a sip, not taking her gorgeous eyes off of Epoc.

"You're cute, you know that?" Devah said.

"Shut the fuck up," Epoc grumbled. "I look like a Frame sat on me."

"Like you'd mind."

"Hmm?"

"You're a pilot," Devah said. "You get it. You don't get into this job if a small part of you doesn't *kind* of want to fuck the Frames." They walked to the living area and sat down at one of

the sofas. Devah leaned on the back of the couch, resting her head against her hand and staring intently at Epoc. Angel was an intense kind of person.

“I mean... they’re the greatest feat of human engineering ever devised. Yeah, we’ve gone into space, but starships don’t have nearly as many moving parts, and the fact that we can make them practically *dance*, and that we now have the bimodal haptic feedback so they can read the *intent* of your movements more than the actual movements and—”

“Yeah, exactly,” Devah said. “You want to ride the giant robot like it’s a giant girlfriend.”

There was a glint of something mischievous in her eyes. She bit her lip and leaned in close. “You come inside one yet?”

Epoc gritted her teeth and put her cup down, crossing her legs. No, she had not had an orgasm inside of a cockpit. She had been very, *very* explicitly *denied* orgasm inside the cockpit, thank you very much. Both Amy and Arcus had been a fantastic, erotic ride, their steel bodies had been perfectly accommodating lovers, but Epoc had not been allowed to climax. She shook her head.

“But you did something, didn’t you?” Devah said. Her eyes went to Epoc’s lips, and then down. Epoc’s hoodie had fallen open a little, revealing her stomach. Devah’s gaze was like a caress, admiring the visible abs, and then down a little further. “I can tell.” She whispered.

Epoc moved to cross her legs but Devah, not taking her hands off of her crotch, stopped her, putting her hand on Epoc’s thigh. “I might have,” Epoc whispered.

“Me too,” Devah said, quietly, moving closer, her hand on the inside of Epoc’s thigh, index finger drawing little circles. “The first time I went out in Sadakiel I got so turned on I couldn’t think straight. I think I came five times. I had to wipe down my chair but I think Diana knew.”

Epoc leaned closer to Devah. “She knew,” she said, her lips so close to Devah they grazed the other woman’s. She could feel the breath against her skin. “I don’t think she minds.”

The hand slowly slipped up Epoc’s thigh, ever so slowly. Her bulge was impossible to hide now, straining as she did against the fabric of the sweatpants. Devah’s breathing got more shallow, but didn’t move, her lips and Epoc’s only touching accidentally. “Can you imagine,” she said, “fucking something like that? Hundreds of tons of steel, ravaging you? Engulfing you? Becoming you? Towering over the world while she consumes you, takes you into herself?”

“Yes,” Epoc said. “I can.” That, she thought, was what being a Hound *was*. Driving the Frame as much as it drove her, controlling it as much as it controlled her. It was bliss of the highest order. It was a little death stretched to infinity and never giving the satisfaction of oblivion. And she couldn’t tell Devah. Proprietary secrets. But she could speak in hypotheticals. “Imagine,” she said, and very carefully licked Devah’s lips. The woman shuddered. “Imagine being encased in your cockpit, every part of you held tight, and then she enters you and you can’t even reach down to push yourself over the edge. She owns you. She has you so firmly in her grip, your pleasure is entirely up to her. You don’t come until she lets you. All you can do is whimper, every step of her perfect machinery driving her deeper into you, every shot fired driving you closer to the brink.”

Devah clearly couldn't take it any longer. She ran a finger over Epoc's shaft. As soon as her finger touched the tip, Epoc twitched and their mouths met. Devah's tongue met her own, and they kissed, a greedy, hungry kiss. When they pulled away, a strand of drool broke between them.

"You get it," Devah said. "I've been wanting to tell someone since forever. Sometimes I go into the hangar at night. I sneak into the cockpit and I fuck myself on the controls. I swear to god, being a pilot fucks with your head." She kept running her hand up and down Epoc's bulge. "God, if I could fuck Sadakiel I would," she whispered. Epoc could *see* her heartbeat under her skin. She was not just turned on, she was laying her deepest secrets bare.

"Why not have someone pilot her? Just a small part," Epoc said. "Just big enough for Sadakiel to be, you know, alive. And you do the rest."

"I've thought about it. I had an ex I wanted to do it but... she didn't get it. Left after one Rat contract. And I've never, you know, talked to anyone about this." She bit her lip and squeezed the base of Epoc's shaft, causing her to squirm in her seat. "I thought I was the only one."

It took all of her willpower for Epoc not to laugh. If only she knew. "Can I ask you a personal question?" Epoc said. Devah responded by running her fingers under Epoc's waistband, causing her to inhale sharply. She had the hands of someone who was used to manually controlling her Frame, the skin between her thumb and index finger slightly calloused. All the same, her touch was soft, incredibly gentle.

"Go ahead," Devah said, not grabbing Epoc's cock but running her fingers over it, grazing it with her palm, putting her fingers on the dab of precum and using it to draw little circles over the head.

"Why did you choose the Cat contract?" Epoc asked. "Not to be pushy but I feel like it would be your thing." She wanted to tell Devah why. She wanted to tell her that she would get what she wanted, what she clearly *needed*, on that contract. That she'd get fucked by an Alpha Frame in the way that she'd dreamed of.

"There were no spots free," Devah said, shrugging. "And my Cat contract doesn't end for another year."

"Did I take your spot?" Epoc, deciding she didn't want to be a passive party the whole time, put her hand on Devah's thigh. She immediately took the hint and lifted her leg. Epoc didn't wait and ran her fingers gently along the skin. She could see the other woman twist a little. Her crotch was *radiating* heat.

"No, don't worry," Devah said with a smile and wrapped her hand entirely around Epoc's cock. "Damn you're hard. Pent up, aren't you?"

"Wait, I didn't come last night?"

"Puppy, no," Devah said. "You *demand*ed to go down on me. I didn't exactly mind. I've never had someone eat my ass like that. That was new. And no, don't worry, I don't hold you becoming the newest Hound against you. If Mako Group gets themselves a fourth active Alpha Frame, I'll apply, but I need my Contract to run out first."

“I might put in a good word for you,” Epoc said. “You did save my life.” She ran her finger against the inside of Devah’s leg, against her underwear. She was already soaked.

“I don’t think they’ll build a Frame just for me,” Devah said, but there was a hopefulness in her eyes that was positively irresistible. “Have you been inside of Nexus Alpha yet?” She started to slowly stroke Epoc, making constant eye contact, panting. Epoc slipped her fingers into Devah’s panties. She remembered what had set the woman on fire the night before and gently grazed against the bundle of nerves. Devah jerked in place. It was hard not to grin.

“No,” Epoc said, softly fingering her, “but Arcus was made for a Hound and I can tell you with certainty that she was one of the hottest things I’ve ever been inside.”

“Yeah?” Devah said. “Did she turn you on?” She squeezed Epoc’s cock again in revenge.

“You have no idea,” Epoc said. Flick.

“She make you hard?” Squeeze.

“Yeah,” Epoc said. “When I got back to base, I was ready to burst.” At her last word, she slipped a finger into Devah, who angled her hips to give Epoc even better access.

“Come see me next time,” Devah said, pushing Epoc’s pants down and fully jerking her off now. “We’ll shower together and we can put that energy to use. I want you to get so horn you can’t think and then fuck my brains out.”

Epoc fingerfucked Devah and focused on that as she tried to think of what to say. She got the distinct feeling that “I’ll talk to my boss about it” wouldn’t go over well. “The Hound post-mission stress reduction system is strict,” she finally managed. “But I’ll see what I can do.” Maybe she could add Angel to the list of third parties allowed to help her with the system? That would probably mean informing her, but she already worked for Mako Group.

“God, yes,” Devah said. “Fuck.” She was starting to buck, then pushed Epoc’s hand away. For a second, Epoc thought she’d done something wrong, but realized that wasn’t quite what was happening when Devah straddled her, facing away from Epoc.

There were not many perfect butts in the world, so when one of them sat on her face, Epoc was going to do one thing, and one thing only. She slumped lower into the sofa, then wrapped her arms around Devah and jammed her mouth into the pussy in front of her.

Tasting the salty taste of a pussy that’s already come several times in the last few hours, she focused on pushing Devah right back to where she’d been, quivering slightly. It wasn’t that difficult, Devah was very sensitive, especially to having her clit gently but repeatedly flicked.

Squeezing the other pilot’s ass, Epoc buried her nose in Devah’s pussy and went to town. It wasn’t long before the gasps and moans she had been hoping for came out of Devah’s mouth. Epoc lubricated some of her fingers and playfully circled Devah’s ass, something she vaguely remembered her being enthusiastic about the night before. Devah squealed, and then, almost without warning, took the cock in front of her in her mouth. Epoc’s hips bucked, accidentally shoving herself into Devah’s mouth.

They played back and forth like this. One moment, Epoc would be so lost in giving head that she barely noticed what was being done to her, and then her attention would be drawn straight down when a tongue swirled around her head in a way that made her see stars. Then she'd wrest control again by running her tongue over Devah's asshole or slipping a finger inside while she ate her, gently fucking her ass with a finger as she increased the intensity of her oral ministrations.

Devah began to buck. She was close. It actually took considerable strength to keep her in place to actually push her to orgasm. Leave it to a pilot to buck herself off of a climax. Epoc wasn't having it and hung on, not letting up until Devah's moans became a low, guttural, animalistic thing. Not very catlike at all. She bucked a few times, grinding herself onto Epoc's face pretty strongly, then calmed down. Epoc stopped. Much as she liked to overstimulate a partner, Devah would just get sore quickly.

The woman sat up, fully smothering Epoc, barely giving her enough space to breathe through her nose. With a very satisfied purr, Devah started to jerk her off again.

"Good puppy," she said. She wasn't teasing now, focused on making Epoc come. Epoc moaned into the pussy on top of her, and allowed her mind to swim, allowed the sensations to guide her to her climax. It wasn't *easy* to breathe, but then again, who wanted to breathe well with an ass on their face and thighs around their ears? If she had to die somehow, this was how she would have wanted to go.

Orgasm was coming, and coming fast. She groaned and moaned, but Devah wasn't moving. It was part of it. She couldn't see, could barely move, couldn't do anything but lazily push her tongue into Devah's pussy while she was being made to come.

She squeezed the woman's hips when she came. When she felt the orgasm rise up from deep inside her her whole body convulsed as she was brought to the edge. The door opened.

Devah practically jumped off of her and stood upright. She was saluting. Oh no.

"Shall I come back?" Winter said with an unreadable expression on her face. Her eyes were fixed on Epoc's still rock hard dick, leaking cum onto herself. "You seem preoccupied."

Chapter 16

“Handler,” Epoc said, “it was just—”

“Just sex, I am aware, Epoc.” Handler Winter said. Epoc had put on some (fresh) clothes as quickly as possible and was now practically chasing Winter through the halls, trying to keep her voice down while trying to make sure she hadn’t just done something very stupid. “There is nothing in the contract forbidding you from engaging in consensual sex with others, Epoc, unless I expressly forbid you to.” She looked sideways at Epoc with a cold stare. “I didn’t, did I.”

“You didn’t.” They turned a corner and stepped onto the elevator. Epoc did her best not to feel and look as guilty as she did, “so why am I still waiting for disciplinary action?”

“I don’t know, Epoc,” Winter said. “You tell me.”

“Is this, is this about last night?” Epoc said, interrupted briefly by the elevator starting. “Because you hung up before I could even apologize.”

“No,” Winter said. “This isn’t about last night because this isn’t about anything. Our relationship is very simple, Epoc Mako. I am your boss and you are my employee.”

“I thought I was your *property*,” Epoc said as they arrived at the CEO’s office.

Winter looked at Epoc with a blank face, and nodded, slowly.

“You’re right. Step inside.”

“No, thank you,” Epoc said. Winter shook her head.

“It wasn’t a question. In. Now.” Epoc felt something tighten in her chest as she stepped into the office. Winter stepped in behind her, closed the door, and darkened the windows, which included the one below them. She walked up to her desk. “You’re correct in telling me that you did nothing wrong. No boundaries were crossed and no part of the contract was violated. That said, I am, still, your owner, and I think it might be important *to* set some boundaries. Strip.”

“Excuse me?” Epoc’s ears burned.

“You heard me, Hound. I don’t like repeating myself.” Winter leaned against the desk and crossed her arms, glaring. Without another word, Epoc slowly began to strip. There was no pretending like stripping wouldn’t include her underwear, so she didn’t bother waiting for an additional command. Whatever was going on with her Handler, it was best not to annoy her any more than she clearly already was.

The problem Epoc was facing was that this was, in a way she didn’t have words for, working for her. Winter’s disapproving glare. The fact that she was dressed to the nines while Epoc was stark naked. The fact that she felt herself get turned on by the situation and that Winter could clearly *see* her arousal. Still, she made an effort to stand at attention (though in one more way than usual) hands by her side.

“Can I ask you something, Ma’am?” Epoc was very deliberate in her choice of words.

“That depends on the question, Hound,” Winter said.

“You hold executive power over me,” Epoc said. “But is that within your position as CEO, or as my Handler? When you tell me to strip, which is telling me?”

Winter was clearly a little confused by the question. She had probably expected Epoc to say something upsetting, something to challenge her authority. This wasn't that. She pushed herself off of the desk and approached her.

“You're... surprising, Epoc, I'll give you that.”

Winter, wearing heels, towering over her made Epoc feel Some Type Of Way, especially since she was fully clothed and Epoc was, decidedly, not. “As CEO of Mako Group,” she continued, “I own you. You are my property and I can do with you whatever I want so long as I don't violate the terms of the contract you signed, and where applicable, every single one of those actions also applies to the Handler. It just so happens that that is also me. So, it depends on how you want to see this, Epoc. Do you want to see me as the woman who owns you, or simply the one who holds your *leash*.” Epoc jumped at the last word, the way Winter bit it off between her teeth made it impossible for her to look anywhere else. Her Handler reached up and tilted Epoc's face up. “I don't care which it is, as long as you obey.”

“Then why—“

“Because I say so,” Winter interrupted her. “When you have a question that starts with ‘why’ and it pertains to myself or you or Mako Group, the answer is always going to be ‘because that is how I will it.’ You do not get to argue. You have done your bargaining and arguing, Epoc Mako. This is the transaction after the fact. Turn around.”

Shaking slightly, Epoc turned around. “What are you doing?” She could only look at the wall as Winter walked around the office. Turning around was a bad idea. She knew that. But the tension was killing her.

“I'm exercising my rights as owner,” Winter said as she approached her again. She grabbed Epoc's buttocks. Not exactly what the pilot had expected. Carefully, her cheeks were spread, and something was being pressed against her asshole. It was cool, and metallic. “Relax,” Winter said. “Considering the punishment you've received inside of the cockpit, this should be no issue for you at all. Take a deep breath.”

Epoc did as she was told. Gently, the Handler worked the object into her. It was thin at the tip, but rapidly widening, and Epoc had to steady herself against the wall. After what felt like achingly long minutes, during which she was stretched, more than she could remember having been, it slipped inside her, her ass closing up against the flared base.

“There,” Winter said, tapping it with her fingernail. Little shocks went up Epoc's spine. The plug inside her was heavy, and she could feel its presence, gently pressing down. “That's one part done. Don't move.”

She stepped away again, leaving Epoc standing fully erect. The pressure in her ass, the weight of it, caused her to twitch involuntarily from time to time. She was getting close to leaking on the floor, she could feel it. Wouldn't be the first time, either. The recycled, cool air in the office

occasionally brushing up against her didn't help either, just made her shiver more, and every time she squeezed, the plug refused to yield.

After a minute of agonized waiting, Winter returned to her. She was holding what looked like a small hair tie, but Epoc had her suspicions that it was not, in fact, a hair tie. Suspicions confirmed when Winter clinically slipped it over the tip of Epoc's cock and rolled it down, like a sleeveless condom. She knew what that was. She had felt something like that in the cockpit.

"What's—"

"From now on," Winter said, "you don't come unless I tell you to." She held up a hand when Epoc was about to say something. "This isn't punishment. I fully support you fraternizing with the other pilots, including the Cats and the Rats. Fuck to your heart's content. But you don't come without my say-so."

"So that just... stays on?" Epoc asked incredulously.

"Yes, it'll adjust to whether you're flaccid or not. If you try to take it off without permission, I'll know, and then there *will* be punishment and it *won't* be fun."

"What do I tell people?" Epoc looked over her shoulder but didn't move. It was hard to explain why, considering what she'd already done in this office, but she felt shame over being so aroused without Winter even really touching her.

"Whatever you like," Winter said. "As long as you don't divulge company secrets to those without proper clearance. Tell them you're extremely kinky. Tell them you like being edged. Tell them you're my bitch. But if you want to come, you need my express permission."

"That's..."

"In your contract," Winter said.

"What if I need to use the bathroom?" Epoc demanded, glancing over her shoulder. Not that she could see her ass, but her Handler got the message.

"Oh, that's not staying in there all day."

"Then wh—" was about as far as Epoc got when Winter raised a small remote and pressed the button. The vibration that surged through the plug was intense and immediate, shattering Epoc's ability to conceive of anything but it. The vibrations stopped.

"Just for today," Winter said. "I'd like to see how you respond to it."

"Respond to what?" Epoc said, breathing heavy. "Everyone would have a strong response to this stuff." She turned to face Winter, but received smack on her ass for her troubles. It was in the contract. That she moaned in response wasn't, and while it was possible she'd imagined it, she thought she caught a hint of a smile on Winter's mouth.

"That's not what I mean, Epoc," Winter said. "You signed it yourself. '*Social conditioning and behavioral control.*' What did you think it meant? Kneel." She pressed the buzzer. One. Two. Three times. Each time the vibration was slightly more intense than the last. Epoc groaned. "Not fast enough," Winter said, and pressed again.

This time, Epoc dropped to her knees, still facing the wall. Trying to catch her breath, she stared at her own cock, leaking on herself. “Wh—what is—“

“Obedience training, Hound,” Winter said. “The problem with servitude is that it is normal to want to be free. Free to do what you want. If you are my property, there is a distinctly human part of you that does not *want* to be property, because property means you are *not* free. So, because I’m not a monster, instead of removing the part of you that wants, I am going to simply give you something else to want. Do you know what that is? Speak.”

She pressed the buzzer once. Epoc let out a soft gasp and watched a bubble of precum form on her tip before rolling down the shaft. She tried to catch her breath and open her mouth, but she was too late.

“Too slow. Speak.” Another press.

Epoc jerked again, and groaned, bucking her hips. “Woof,” she managed, straining through her teeth.

“Louder.” Another buzz. Her whole body vibrated with that one.

Epoc didn’t say woof. Her brain didn’t let her. When she opened her mouth, what came out was a fully-formed, dog-like bark. That’s what her Handler wanted, wasn’t it?

“Good girl,” Antimony Winter said, and ruffled Epoc’s hair. She had to lean forward a little to make it happen. “We’re going to be doing this a few times a day. We need to get you in the habit of responding quickly, Hound.”

“Can I ask you something, Handler?” Epoc asked.

“Yes, Hound.”

“Why?”

“Because,” Winter said, “when you start associating my orders with *pleasure*, you’re going to be a much, *much* better pilot for it. Trust me. Stand up.” No buzz. Epoc carefully stood up. She was shaking slightly, her stomach contracting randomly. “Follow.”

For a brief, horrific moment, Epoc almost expected her Handler to open the door to her office, parading Epoc through the main hangar bay like this, naked and begging. She wasn’t exactly in a position of power, but she would have protested to that one. Not only that, but she was pretty sure she had explicitly *not* signed under ‘public humiliation.’ Winter wasn’t going to commit a breach of contract any time soon.

No, instead, she went to a wall with a keypad on it, typed in a ludicrously long passcode, and the door disguised as a wall panel slid open.

“Panic room,” Winter said by way of explanation. “Among other things.” She walked through the door and Epoc followed. Her thighs were slick with her own precum, but what was she going to clean it off on? The walls?

The walk wasn’t long, but there were several doors, all of them unmarked. Only the CEO knew these codes, Epoc assumed, and only she knew what was where. They went through another door into—

Chapter 17

“A firing range?”

“You’ve had training,” Winter said. “Top marks too, I believe.”

“I’m a better shot with a Frame,” Epoc said, “but yes, I know my way around small arms.”

Epoc looked around. On the walls were several boards, each one covered in weapons. Why was this here? Was this all for Winter to train with? How often did Antimony go into the field? For a CEO to be a combatant was unheard of, so why would she need training? Why was this here?

“Pick one,” Winter said. “Go ahead. Something you’re good with. Doesn’t have to be flashy or fancy.” Epoc blinked for a second, then looked around. Slowly, her arousal was going away. Maybe it was the cold space, or Winter’s casual demeanor, but Epoc was, strangely, starting to relax a little. Well, that wasn’t exactly true, she was wearing an adjustable cock ring and a vibrating buttplug, ‘relaxing’ wasn’t exactly the operant word here, but the cloud of sex was starting to dissipate.

She walked over to a wall and picked a handgun, the standard pilot training pistol, and a foldable bullpup rifle she had randomly chosen back in the academy for training one time and had taken a liking to. Epoc wasn’t going to pick weapons she was *bad* with. Despite everything, she still wanted to impress her Handler.

Carefully, she put down both weapons on the table. Winter looked for a second, then retrieved two boxes of the appropriate ammo. “The HB-210 is a classic — we actually have a running contract with the Helmaria Brothers Company — but I’m curious why you picked the foldable Remming.” She nodded at the firing range. She’d already set it up, stationary and moving targets.

Epoc took all of it to the booth and reloaded the 210, then looked at Winter. Another nod. She took the safety off and took up a firing stance. She took a deep breath.

“Kill,” Winter said. Epoc fired in four round bursts, aiming each shot so the first bullet of each hit in the sternum and the fourth in the forehead of the targets. Five bursts, and the magazine was empty. She put the gun down and... “Good girl,” Winter said. She pressed the buzzer twice, holding down on the second vibration for several seconds. Epoc had to steady herself on the table.

“What—“

“Kill,” Winter said again, pressing the buzzer twice, very quickly. Like this, there was barely enough time to register it as pleasure. Like it was just the signal. An encouragement. In a flash, Epoc reloaded and aimed the gun again. “Individual rounds.”

“But that—“

“Don’t argue with me, Epoc, or we’re done here.”

Epoc frowned. Hadn’t she *wanted* to be done here? But she was doing a good job now, it wouldn’t make sense to *stop*. She switched firing modes. Fine, then. She counted every shot fired.

Rather, she counted every shot not yet fired. Counted down, and made sure every bullet hit its mark. Headshots and center-of-mass only. She fired the last shot and put the gun down, then looked expectantly at Winter.

Her Handler smiled. “Good girl,” she said again, then pressed the buzzer twice, sending shockwaves through Epoc’s body. She moaned, then laughed. Winter cocked her head in curiosity. “Why are you laughing?” she asked.

“Because,” Epoc said, “this is working for me, and if you told me a few weeks ago this is what I’d be doing I would have laughed at you.”

“And now?” Winter asked. Epoc glanced at the remote. “Ah. Bark.” She pressed the button.

Epoc barked eagerly and got a heavier button press as her reward.

“I see. You’re learning quickly, Hound. I’m proud of you.” She nodded at the firing range. “Let’s see what you can do with that Remming. Mix single shot, burst and auto fire for me. I want to see what you can do.”

With a grin and another bark stuck in her throat, she turned back to the range, acutely aware of the fact that she was leaking on the floor. She was a little beyond caring. Quickly reloading, she pressed the butt of the weapon against her shoulder. The Remming was a black sheep in a lot of military engagements because it didn’t have the penetrative power of a regular assault rifle, but to Epoc it more than made up for that in accuracy and mobility. The deviation per shot was next to nothing, and combined with a high rate of fire, landing everything in the ten rings even on full auto was *easy*.

She did her best not to rush through it, to avoid making mistakes, but it was difficult. The anticipation was killing her. When the last bullet fired and the last casing landed in the receptacle to her right, she put the gun down and quickly turned to her Handler.

“Epoc,” Winter said. “Do you want your treat?”

It took her a second to realize what she was being asked, but as soon as she did, she nodded.

“Kneel,” Winter said, then clicked three times. The vibrator inside of Epoc sent shocks forward, and she moaned a little. Faster than she should have, she dropped down. She didn’t care that she was going to feel this in the morning. “Good *girl*,” Winter said. “Treat?”

Epoc nodded.

“Beg,” Winter said, and pressed once. The intensity of the vibration made Epoc shudder. She barked. She barked loudly and eagerly. “Good girl.” She pressed the button once, then twice, then something clicked and she put the remote down on the table. The vibrations didn’t stop. Winter knelt down in front of her, her knees between Epoc’s, and she took the Hound’s face in her hands, not caring about Epoc’s look of desperation and confusion. “Do you want to come, Epoc?”

Epoc nodded. “Please?” she said.

Winter reached down and very gently ran her fingers over Epoc’s testicles, then pressed them down on her perineum. Epoc groaned, but the Handler’s hand moved further, pushing the plug

just a little deeper. The orgasm played in her lower stomach but was being stopped at the last second.

Epoc groaned. Her hips moved on their own accord, thrusting her forward. She left a smear of precum on the CEO's immaculate, thousand-dollar suit. She whimpered an apology and couldn't even make herself stop.

Winter smiled. "Are you a good girl?" She grasped Epoc's cock in one hand, and picked up the remote with the other. It was all Epoc could do to nod. "Do you want to come?"

Another nod.

"Do you want to come for me?"

Nod.

"Bark." She pressed the button. The vibrations got more intense for a second. Epoc barked as she stumbled forward. Her Handler caught her, resting her Hound's head on her shoulder. "Good," she said. "Good dog. Good puppy."

Epoc heard a click. Something that had been restraining her was gone. She felt Winter's hand gently stroke the tip of her cock, and heard the press of another button. The vibrations dropped and then came back, intensifying, oscillating.

"Good girl," Winter said again. "Come for me, Epoc. Come in my hand. Be a good girl."

It was too much. Epoc cried in release, whimpering, howling and mewling softly. Her hips shocked and Winter was helping her along, playing with the vibrations so that every thrust and spasm was more intense. When she was done, Epoc slumped back. She was done. Empty.

Winter looked at her, holding up her arm. Her hand was covered in cum, dripping in long strands to the floor and on her expensive pants. Epoc looked at it and moved forward. She was a dog. She should clean up her mess. She opened her mouth, ready to serve Winter in a way she would have never thought to do, but was stopped when her Handler moved.

Antimony Winter looked her deep in the eyes as she brought her hand to her own mouth, and licked it. Epoc didn't understand. Why was her Handler doing, well, *that*? Why was she licking her own hand clean, almost like it was the most pleasant thing in the whole world, pushing her tongue between her fingers and sucking them clean. She noticed Epoc's confusion and smiled, cum on her lips.

"Now there's a part of you inside of me." It was all she said by way of explanation, then stood up.

She guided Epoc back to the office. Removed the plug. Helped her get dressed. The ring stayed on, though. It had softened, and was barely noticeable anymore. That alleviated a small worry she'd had, at least. Having a blood clot in her dick wasn't on her bucket list. "What, uh, do I do now?"

"Now?" her Handler said. "Whatever you like. We have an assignment tonight but I'm not putting you on it. You *just* got back from a sortie. I'll hire some contractor for it."

Already halfway to the door, Epoc stopped and looked at Winter. "What's the assignment?"

“When Levi dispatched the two creatures outside Villafranco, there was a blip on the radar. We thought it was a glitch but Operations think the Hexapod had offspring that got away. It’s a deepwater bug hunt. We’d send Scylla but she took a hit to her left leg. It’s fine, we’ll find someone else. There’s always contractors out there who can use the money.”

“No,” Epoc said.

“No?”

“No. I need to take Nexus Alpha out some time anyway. I can’t keep her in dry dock forever. Besides, I’ll never be able to tell Diana what I need for her to be perfect if I don’t actually pilot her. I’ll be there for the briefing. Besides, it’ll save you money.”

Winter tapped her fingers on the table. “I’d rather you didn’t...”

“Is that an order, Handler?”

There was a slow, deep sigh. “No. It isn’t. It would be a significant cost.” She closed her eyes, rubbed the bridge of her nose, then nodded. “Fine. Briefing is at 0200 hours, wheels up 2:30, so take it easy today, and get some rest early.”

“Why so early?”

“Actionable intel others don’t have. Every corp with a few Frames or money to swing around is going to send something out to kill that thing. Salvage alone is worth at least a billion in Credits, not to mention the research potential. The thing is, we have an idea of where it is, thanks to Levi, and we have the older one’s carcass, which gives us more to work with. That said, we don’t want too many other people in our search grid and whenever we make a move, everyone is going to be converging on our position, so we’re going under cover of night to draw as little attention as possible.”

“Sounds good,” Epoc said. “Thank you for telling me.”

“Usually the answer is ‘because I’m fucking telling you so,’ but you needed to know.” Winter shrugged, then closed her eyes, taking a breath. Was she mustering her courage? “Epoc Mako?”

“Yes, Handler?”

“Are you, are you okay?”

“I suppose I am, Handler.” Epoc bit back a ‘why’. She got the feeling Antimony wasn’t going to find that nearly as funny as she would. “I’m a little tired.”

“Are... *we* okay?”

“I’m not sure how to answer that, Handler,” Epoc said. “I’m your Hound. You’re teaching me how to be a better pilot. How to better serve you. I’m not your friend and I’m not your colleague. You own me, every part of me, for the next twenty years. That might as well be my life.” She tried to figure out what it was that her Handler was steering at. “I trust you with that, if that answers your question.”

“I... thank you, Hound,” Winter said. “That’ll be all.”

Epoc nodded, and walked out of the door.

Chapter 18

“Diana?”

“She’s ready, Ma’am. We have green light from Infrasec and FR8. The orbital lift is ours to use.”

“Good.” Winter nodded. Operations wasn’t nearly as busy as it had been during the initial attack, but even at this time of night, there were several people occupying the various monitors. On every single one was either a flat data feed or some part of the ocean, seen through the eyes of one satellite or another. Many of them were on coms.

“What do we know?” Epoc said. “You mentioned Levi’s data.” She put her hands behind her back and explicitly looked at the table in front of her. She had no reason to look anywhere else, after all.

“Geographical survey data suggest there is a crevice in the continental slope here,” Winter said, her voice flat. The table showed a height map and, even with the additional data, it wasn’t easy to spot. Still, it was likely at least a quarter kilometer wide. “Now, there’s likely several of these, but a nearby buoy owned by MaBio has picked up some uncommon tissue. We purchased the buoy and all of its data, and it was a genetic match for the Hexapod. Between that and Levi’s reported behavior of the Hexapod – it seemingly attempted to burrow during her mission – we suspect it might have found a hole to crawl inside of. Your mission will be to go down into that hole and kill it.”

She jutted her jaw forward. “Much as we dislike it, there are a few other companies who *own* chunks of that particular piece of sea floor. While we have exclusive salvage rights if we kill the creature, we can’t set foot there without their permission. Not if we don’t want to start a four-way intercompany incident.”

“Fair enough,” Epoc said. “So I won’t be alone down there, but it’s competition, not... colleagues.”

“Yes.” Winter wrapped an arm around her midriff and pressed some buttons on her table. Pilot ID’s popped up on the table. “These pilots have been down there since graveyard watch. We suspect their companies have them scanning the sea floor, but you won’t be touching down without them seeing you and, probably, following you. Keep chatter to a minimum.”

“Callsign Priestess,” Epoc read. “Piloting Gospel. That’s a TransAm Republic Frame, isn’t it?”

“Correct. The other two are both mercenaries from the same company. Cèilidhean is a little older than we are, but they’re a subsidiary and their parent company goes *way* back,” Winter said. “They’ll know each other, so don’t get in a fight. Two against one, even in Nexus Alpha, they’d have each other’s backs and you’d be ripped to pieces.” She looked down. “Maeve and Fae’rynn.”

“Phantom Queen. What do I know that name from?”

Winter looked a little offended. “Her frame was in a few magazines a few months ago. Voted ‘this year’s hottest top model’ or something. Pfah. That’s only because the public hasn’t seen Nexus Alpha yet.” Epoc smirked.

“Anything else, Handler?”

“Not much. Hexacorallia will be on standby, but I’d like to keep her on base for now. She’s been... helpful in Aaliya’s recovery, and I worry that she wouldn’t be mentally in the right space for a mission. I don’t want her distracted down there.” Handler Winter’s lips became a thin line. “Diana, are we sure—”

“I know you’re the CEO, ma’am, but I need you to trust me to do my job,” the mechanic said over the speaker. “Nexus Alpha is factory fresh. We have double and triple checked every single stat a dozen times. Every redundancy is at peak efficiency. Her internals are purring. Her cockpit haptics are the most responsive any haptics have been in the history of haptics. Even the VI passed all checks who knows how many times over. There is not a single panel to this Frame that is not ready to leave. If I was a superstitious woman, I’d tell you she *wants* to be let out.”

“Fine, Diana. You make a compelling, if overly eager, argument.” Winter turned her attention to Epoc again. “And you, Epoc?”

“I’m ready. Got some sleep in. Took additional recommended vitamins and was cleared greener than green by the medics. I’m ready and eager, Handler. Let me go down there and finally spend some quality time with Nexus Alpha.”

“Very well. Pilot, take the regular elevator.” Epoc raised an eyebrow. “It’s tradition,” Winter explained, a little awkwardly. “First flight, you’re supposed to walk up there yourself. You can make your way to the changing rooms. Red 451 will take you there. If you’ll excuse me, I need to prepare for my duties as Handler.” With a thin barely-smile, she turned around and walked to one of the glass handler bubbles. After she sat down, the glass turned a matte black. Epoc shook her head and left Operations.

“That was awkward,” Diana said over coms. “What *happened*?”

“Nothing happened,” Epoc said. “CEO Winter simply has a lot on her mind.”

Diana sighed. “Sure she does. I’ll meet you outside of the changing rooms.”

Fifteen minutes later, as promised, Epoc saw Diana lean against the wall by the changing rooms.

“I’m not allowed in,” Diana said. “I feel like I’m missing out on *so* much. The smell of sweat. Possibly deodorant.” She shook her head in an almost offensive mock-wistfulness. “Sniff. Anyway. You ready?”

“As I’ll ever be. I promise, I’ll take good care of her.”

“You better, or I take it out on you,” Diana said. She was only kidding a little bit. “You get enough sleep? Not feeling groggy?” A pause. “Hungover?”

“Neuroptic readings were optimal,” Epoc said. “I’m fully recovered, hydrated, in my lane, flourishing. Don’t worry, Diana. I’ll do you both proud.”

“That’s what I like to hear. Listen, anything, and I mean *anything*, that comes to mind during the sortie, make a note of it. *I* think she’s perfect, but I’m not the one piloting her.” Diana smirked. “One day, maybe I’ll be in one of those cockpits, but for now, striving for perfection will have to do.”

“One of these days,” Epoc said, “you’re going to have to tell me why you’re not a pilot.”

“Boring story. But I’ll hold you to it. Buy me a coffee.”

“Deal,” Epoc said, waving over her shoulder as she walked through the doors. “It’s a date.”

She blushed at her own forward attitude when the doors closed behind her, but, well, being a little forward was the way to get things done sometimes, right? She sat down on *her* bench, the one in the middle, and put her clothes in the locker, until she was naked and looked down. She took the com.

“Handler.”

“Hound.”

“Do I take the ring off?”

“Yes. You’ll be putting it back on after post-mission stress reduction.”

“Copy.” She slipped the ring off of her penis and put it in the locker, closing it. She presumed her Handler had a tracker inside of it or something, and she likely also had the code to her locker. No point in not putting it there.

Epoc realized she was strangely focused. Her head was on the mission. Despite being fully naked, she wasn’t aroused. More like... driven. She wanted to see what Nexus Alpha could do. The Battler had been effective but almost crude, a machine made for brawling. Arcus had been powerful but not exactly state-of-the-art, and a little clunky. Nexus Alpha was supposed to be at the forefront of Frame technology. The best machinery money could buy.

And she was going to be the first to pilot it. She took a breath and opened the airlock. If she had her spatial awareness right, the skybridge ought to just take her directly into the back of Nexus Alpha’s head, directly into the cockpit. This was also the largest Frame she’d ever been inside of, and she wondered how that would translate.

With a hiss, Nexus Alpha’s cockpit opened.

It was... not what she’d expected. But then again, what *had* she expected? Maybe something similar to the battler. A wall of electronics with just enough room for her to slide her arms and legs into what were basically holsters. A human-shaped sleeve for her to be inside of, out of the way of all the moving parts and sensitive equipment. A brain that slotted perfectly into a body. This was different. It was almost like the cockpit of a military vehicle. Crowded, yes, but with space to move in. There was a giant screen in front of her, currently turned off, and something that looked like a chair in the middle of the space, but it was closed. Like a coffin sitting upright. This was different.

“Epoc,” Winter said over the com by the wall. Epoc stepped over. She didn’t even have to duck. She could stand up in here. That was new. “Do you read me?”

“Loud and clear, Handler. Uh, I’m a little lost. Please advise.”

“The chair beside you should have a pad on one of the armrests. Press your hand down on it.”

A second later, the chair opened with a hiss. Inside was, well... a chair. Ah.

“You’ll be free to customize the cockpit to your heart’s content, of course, but this is what we have installed in the Alpha Frames by default.” Epoc sat down. It was a *remarkably* comfy seat, considering she had to sit down in it buck-ass naked. The screen in front of her turned on. Apparently, the small pods for Handlers had a camera in it. Winter appeared, larger than life, in front of her. “You are currently in what we call Cruise mode. There may be a slight jolt.” As predicted, the cockpit bumped slightly. “We’re currently transporting Nexus Alpha to the orbital lift. There’s no point in fully immersing you in the cockpit as of yet, and this way you can travel in relative comfort without having to leave the Frame.”

“Neat,” Epoc said. “But I assume it closes?”

“It does. It’s been adjusted to your exact proportions, and will hermetically seal itself, fully. That whole room could be under water and you’d never know it. It’s been tested in pressures of up to ten kilometers. You could fall down an aquatic trench and we’d be able to recover you.”

“Does that happen often?”

“Can’t hurt to be prepared,” Handler Winter said without a hint of irony in her voice. “The ‘seat’ itself will actually reconfigure itself to your specifications. The outer shell is actually a highly flexible composite lattice that can soften and harden as we need it. It could survive atmospheric re-entry.”

“I reiterate,” Epoc said, this time with a little laugh, “is that likely to happen?”

“It’s not impossible. When we get to the orbital lift, we’ll start synchronization. You’ll have the time to completely adjust the configuration as we do that. We needed a bit of extra space for that mobility, and Diana gave us twice what we needed. You can have a mini bar installed if you like, as long as you don’t mind it being deadbolted.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Epoc said with a smile. The chair had a number of controls on the armrests. While it wouldn’t be ideal for a high-intensity confrontation, she realized it was possible to fully pilot Nexus Alpha from the chair like this. It reminded her of her time at the Academy. Just sitting in a chair, a pair of control sticks and a whole bunch of buttons. That’s how they used to do it, and that’s still how beginning pilots were taught, even if every single Frame currently in use also required neural input.

“You have an incoming call,” her Handler said. “I’ll let you explore your space for a minute while you answer it. You have privacy. Handler out.”

“Thanks,” Epoc said, and pressed a few buttons on the chair. One shifted the chair forward by a good two feet, closer to the giant screen. Hah! A few others moved her around. Finally, one of them picked up the com. She should have probably guessed it was the one with the little red light next to it. “Hello?”

“Hey!” Devah’s voice came out of the speakers of the chair. Neat. It was like she was sitting right behind Epoc. “I hope you’re doing okay. Listen, this morning ended really awkwardly, but I hope we can do it again some time. If you’re up for it, of course. And... I *really* hope you’ll tell me about what it’s like to ride Nexus Alpha. She looks like a beast.”

“I will,” Epoc said. “And I’m absolutely down to meet you again in a... non-professional context. Maybe I’ll be able to leave the complex some time in the next few days. You can show me a café you like or something.”

“I’ll think about it. I won’t take any more of your time. Go get ‘em, puppy. And rub one out in there for me.” With a voice that had a smile and a wink in it, Devah was hard to resist. She hung up. Immediately the light started blinking again.

“Epoc’s pizza delivery service, how can I help you today?” Epoc said dryly.

“Smartass,” Diana said. “Everything up to spec in there?”

“It’s perfect, Di.”

“Di?”

“I’m trying it out. Don’t like it?”

“Not my thing. My friends call me Wrench sometimes.”

“Makes you sound like an old bald guy with a beard.”

“Yeah.”

“Okay, well, that aside, I love it. You’ve done an amazing fucking job, Diana. How do you even build a chair like this? These kinds of materials don’t fucking exist.” Epoc ran her hand along what her brain could only register as ‘flexible, pliable metal’. Like what she imagined touching lava was like.

“Trade secret, Epoc. But that’s not her only surprise. You should check out her weapon systems when you’re fully synchronized.”

“I will.”

“You’re going to do great, Epoc. Don’t stress out. You’re one of the best pilots I’ve ever seen at Mako, and I don’t say that easily.”

“Thanks, Diana.” Epoc shifted in the seat and sighed. “I needed that.”

“Yeah, well, you better get your game face on. You’re about to get into the orbital lift.”

“How bad is it going to be?”

“You’re getting fired into low orbit and then you’re going to enjoy what’s known as a ‘controlled descent’ directly below the southern shelf, landing on top of the offspring of some escaped Megafauna.” She laughed. “You’ll be fine. Anyway, you should do your pre-flight check and synchronize with Nexus already. I’ve got an eye on her internals, but your vitals are up to your Handler. I’ll leave that up to her. Oh, and Epoc?”

“Yeah?”

“Have fun.”

The line went dead. A second later, Handler Winter appeared on the screen again.

“Are you ready, Epoc?”

“I think so, Handler.”

“Very well,” she said. “Beginning synchronization now.”

The chair closed around Epoc. A pair of goggles slid down over her eyes. A breathing mask on her mouth. Instead of plating, instead of cloth and metal parts sliding around to cover her, the chair itself deformed to encase her completely, like she was wearing an exosuit. Even stranger, she felt like she might still be able to move around.

“Try to relax. Figure out a position you’d be comfortable holding for extended hours,” Diana said. “The chair will adjust to your needs and then make sure that position is sustainable for your joints and spine.”

Alright. Epoc tried to find a position that worked for her. She found herself leaning forward a little, legs wide, knees bent, arms raised a little. There. The chair locked into place, like it recognized this was what she wanted. When she tried to move her limbs, she met resistance, but not so much that she felt fully trapped.

“Excellent job, Hound. Epoc. Now, let’s synchronize.” Winter’s voice came from Epoc’s left ear. It was soft. Careful. Uncertain. “Ordinarily, this is the part where I tell you to relax. Where I get you hard and excited. This is the part where I do my job as Handler.”

“I sense a ‘but’ coming.”

“Yes,” Handler Winter said. “But.”

“But what?”

“We have time before the orbital lift takes us up. I think we need to talk.”

“About what?”

There was a pause. It stretched out to infinity and came back as awkward as it started.

“I... I... Do you think we could... start over?”

Chapter 19

“What does that mean?” Epoc said.

“I just... I feel like something is wrong,” Antimony said, “and I don’t think I know how to *fix* it.”

“I don’t think we *can* go back, Handler,” Epoc said, a little awkwardly as she shifted in the seat. She pressed a few buttons and moved Winter’s camera to the inside of her visor. If she was going to be having this conversation, she wanted to be able to see the person she was talking to. “I signed the contract, Handler. I’m not going anywhere.”

“That’s not, that’s not what I mean,” Antimony groaned, rubbing her face. Epoc had never seen her like this. Usually she was composed. In control. She looked disheveled.

“Have you slept, Handler?”

“That’s none of—” Antimony snapped. She stopped, clamped her mouth shut, then reached out. The camera turned off. What followed was several seconds of the most muted screaming and shouting Epoc had ever heard come out of a grown woman who wasn’t actively getting her ass beat. Epoc let her Handler get it out of her system for a second before pressing the com button on her side.

“Uh, Handler? You didn’t turn off your audio.”

There was a little squeak on the other side, and then the connection cut out. Epoc couldn’t help but laugh. She was basically strapped inside of a harness that was being shipped to a giant space cannon, she was basically human property, and yet, somehow, she felt like *she* was the one who had her shit together.

“Hey, Handler? Winter?” Epoc said. “What *did* you mean?”

After a second, the camera and microphone turned back on. Winter’s eyes were red. Epoc knew that look. Her eyes must’ve been *burning*. “What I mean,” Handler Winter said, “is that I’m not... very good. At this. Yet. Um.” She tucked some stray hairs behind her ear. “You are, in a sense, my first. I underestimated. This. Some of it.”

“Handler, respectfully, what?” Epoc said. “Weren’t you Handler for Wardog and Barrier?”

“*Not on missions*,” Winter moaned. “I had Levi around for Aaliya, and I am *not* prepared to deal with Hex on a *good* day for any extended period of time. She’s been here for three years and has gone through *eight* Handlers! We just brought in a new one and she did *really* well but it’s always a gamble and then yesterday I lost forty women and—” She grabbed her head and groaned. Was she rocking in her chair? Epoc shifted uncomfortably.

“Hey, uh, Winter?” she asked. “Are you okay?”

“I’m not. Fucking. Okay,” Winter said. “I’ve never lost someone before! Let alone *forty!*” She suddenly sat up, her face extremely stern, and took several deep breaths, and composed herself. It lasted approximately seven seconds before she started hyperventilating.

“That’s... I’m sorry, Handler,” Epoc said.

“You’re my first, Epoc. My first Hound. I mean, *my* first Hound,” Winter said when she managed to catch her breath. “I’m doing my best here. I’m really trying. I’m doing everything by the book. So what if I do everything right and I lose you anyway?”

“Wait, is that what this is about?”

“What’s what about?”

Epoc stared at Winter, trying to make the ‘unamused’ as clear on her face as possible, which was made harder due to the oxygen mask and the visor over her eyes. Oh well. Winter was just going to have to read the fucking room.

“I just... I’m not good at this.”

“Permission to speak freely, Handler?”

“I... of course. Uh. Granted.”

“No fucking shit, Antimony,” Epoc said. “You’re fucking batting me around like a cat with a ball, and then expect me to be available at a moment’s notice to be your sex toy and then you ask us if we’re okay and like... what the *fuck*, man?”

“Um. That’s a bit more freely than I thought you were going to be.”

“Tough shit,” Epoc said. “No. We can’t start over. That’s not how this works. I’m a fucking adult and so are you, so I’m not going to pretend like that was okay or that I’m just over it or that it’s forgotten.”

“That’s... entirely understandable,” Winter said. “There are several Handlers we have on our extended roster. I’ll contact one of them. It’ll take a few minutes to—”

“I wasn’t finished, Antimony.” The expression on her Handler’s face was almost worth the gross overstepping of professional boundaries she was committing. “The problem is that I don’t fucking know you and yeah, I trust you with my life but that’s because I trust you to be responsible with your property. I trust you in the same way I would trust a car merchant to take care of a car. It’s good business sense.” She took a breath. “I don’t fucking know you, and I tried to get closer to you and you made it very clear that that was a *bad* idea, and then you got fucking mad at me over it, and that kind of shit flies when you’re a teenager and you’re dating your first girlfriend but it doesn’t fly with me!”

“You think I’m your girlfriend?” Epoc couldn’t tell if she was shocked or *excited*.

“*Are you even fucking listening to me, Antimony Winter?*” Epoc wanted, more than anything, to take her Handler by the shoulder and shake her until whatever was going on inside of her head fell out. “I’m saying this isn’t going to work, not with me, and not with anyone, if you don’t get over yourself and accept that, if I’m going to let you in, that’s going to go both ways.” She closed her eyes and groaned. “*Technically* speaking, you don’t fucking have to. You own me and you can do whatever the fuck you want, but, and I need to be really fucking clear here, I will only ever be good enough. A monetary investment that makes back what you put into it. Maybe a little more.

But if I can trust you, I promise you, Handler, I'll be the best fucking pilot this company has ever seen."

Antimony sat almost defeated in her seat and looked up at the camera. "How?"

"I'm motherfucking glad you asked," Epoc said. "What's your favorite band?"

"What?"

"I'm about to be fired into space, Handler. I need something to listen to, and I need to get into *your* headspace, right? I'm synchronizing with the Frame, sure, but I do that by synchronizing with you. You get into my head and I do that by losing myself into you. So, let's get to know each other. What's your favorite band?"

"What?"

"What do you listen to? Work with me here, Antimony. I'm really trying here."

There was a moment of silence. "WOL," she said. "

"Never heard of them," Epoc said. "You control the speakers in here. Put something on." There was a shock through the cockpit. "Hold on, I think I'm getting on the lift." The Frame came alive around her, and her Handler was relegated to a corner of her vision as the cameras around Nexus Alpha's head showed her an expanded view of the world around her.

The orbital lift was a near-impossible feat of engineering that, as far as Epoc understood it, had not been recreated on any other world. It was proprietary technology (of course) so there was a lot of speculation on how it actually worked. Current theory was that it folded space within a narrow tube, moving mass through the tube at extreme speeds without applying the massive pressure that came with acceleration. It was how you got anything off world. That's why FR8 owned the whole planet.

Epoc was on a circular platform in the middle of the lift, a mechanical voice counting down from sixty. "We only need you in low orbit," Winter said. "So the trip will take thirty minutes at most. After that, you're going to intercept a couple of satellites. We purchased them, and there's enough fuel left in there to break your fall."

"You know, they really make all this sound so simple in training," Epoc said. "It's just not the same when there's hundreds of tons of pile driving you down into the planet."

"That's why we've got the rockets to slow you down. Besides, you'll be landing in the ocean. This is the least dangerous part of the whole trip."

"Hah!" Epoc said. "Don't remind me. Come on. Music."

"Alright," Antimony said. "You have to promise not to make fun of me."

"Make me."

"I *order* you not to make fun of me."

"Aye aye, Handler," Epoc said.

"Good dog. So World's Okayest Lobotomite is a kind of post-trance neo-edm mix that's based entirely on sorting algorithms. You know, they say she recorded her entire first set on a calculator."

“Let’s hear it,” Epoc said. The orbital lift was down to ten seconds. “Engaging all primary systems.” Epoc slipped a little more comfortably in the seat while what was, indeed, the sound of a sorting algorithm spooling up played through the speakers. As the algorithm went through its paces, however, she started to notice a beat start to peak through the electronic beeps and boops.

Even more interesting was how her Handler had closed her eyes and was gently bobbing along to that rhythm. To think she had been scared of this woman. Epoc shook her head.

That’s when she felt it. Not the seal around her crotch and the probe against her back, but something more... subtle. Like a hand against her stomach.

“What,” she said, and then Winter shushed her.

“Shhh,” Antimony said. “Listen. Listen to the beat. Close your eyes.”

Epoc did as she was told. There was only the music, and the sense of fingers against her flesh. She was reminded of parties back at the academy, when she’d drunkenly been pressed body to body with a dozen, a hundred other drunk, horny partygoers. Of a girl feeling her up on the dance floor, someone whose name she didn’t even know, high on life and drunk on cheap booze shoving her tongue into Epoc’s mouth.

As what could only be Winter’s hands, first one, then two, then three, then too many to count, caressed her body, she was reminded of a time when she’d gone home with two girls from a band in what had *undoubtedly* been an awful idea but there was only so much one woman could do when two goths stood on either side of her and looked at her like she was a chew toy.

She remembered their hands undressing her eagerly, hungrily. The way they’d scratched and clawed at her in a way that had made her feel desired, for the first time.

When Winter pushed against her ass, it reminded her of the first time she’d slept with someone like herself, someone she had met online, as they made their way to a hotel room. The other woman had been just as insecure and inexperienced as she was, but she had been just that bit hornier and Epoc had felt her bulge press against her ass in the elevator.

When it slipped inside, it reminded her later, the way her then-still-very-sensitive breasts had been pressed against the shower wall while the woman finally worked up the courage to penetrate her and how it had hurt and then all of a sudden it had hurt *good* and her eyes had rolled up into her head.

The entire time, the awful, *awful*, perfect music thundered through her skull, just a grade above safe. Whatever. If she got hearing damage, that was future Epoc’s problem to work out with the medics. Through the probe, which had a lot more give than the previous ones, Winter made love to her.

This was different than ever before. The flexibility of the pilot’s chair was absolute. She felt hands wrap around her wrists. They didn’t pull her back, but she felt restrained all the same. Hands on her hips, like they were holding onto her. Like Winter was pulling her into herself.

Epoc sneaked a look at the camera in her Handler’s pod.

She didn't know what she'd expected. A look of pure, absolute concentration on Winter's face. Her hands moving across a table of controls, her fingers a blur as they moved buttons and knobs, sliders left and right. Every action taken by her Handler was reflected back directly onto Epoc and that it took so much effort and direct concentration was strangely attractive. Winter was putting everything into this. There was sweat on her temples. Epoc smiled and whispered something, too low for the microphone to pick up. That was okay. That was just for Epoc.

Strangely, her cock had been largely neglected. Not that she minded. She was being railed, pinched, caressed and stroked everywhere else. She wasn't going to be coming any time soon anyway. A part of her imagined her cock sticking out of the chair's crotch, dripping on the ground, and couldn't decide if it was funnier than it was hot or the other way around.

The orbital lift fully started to pick up speed, she was informed. She couldn't tell. The platform didn't seem to be moving, and neither did the walls of the lift.

"ETA five minutes," Handler Winter said.

Chapter 20

“Aww, already?” Epoc said. She tried to sound casual but she was having a hard time keeping a straight face. Everything else aside, Winter was very, *very* good at this. Epoc felt like the only woman in the world like this.

“We’ll just have to make it a good five minutes,” Winter said. “Would you like to continue training?” she asked. There was no pressure in her voice. She was making sure. “If you’re okay with that. I don’t want to bring back bad memories.”

“No, that’s fine,” Epoc said. “Let’s do it.” Right now, she would’ve said okay to pretty much anything, but that was another matter.

“Let’s see if you remember,” Winter said, and pressed a button on her desk. Vibrations rocked through Epoc from the inside. The cock inside of her stopped being one altogether and coiled. Wait a second, dicks didn’t do that! But then again, they didn’t vibrate either, and she hadn’t complained about that either. The vibration stopped, leaving Epoc a panting mess. “Hmm, I guess you need more training.” She pressed the button again. “Speak.”

Epoc barked as the shape inside her coiled and vibrated again, stretching her and rubbing against her prostate. Her bark turned into a loud groan.

“Good dog,” Winter said. “Again.”

Again, the vibration rocked through her. Again, she barked loudly and obediently, this time with a smile on her lips. The music pounded in her head, and she was ready to actually give herself up this time, and it wasn’t just because she was horny. Antimony was learning to trust her too.

With titanic effort, she forced her eyes open and her mouth shut. She wanted to make sure. That what she suspected was true, in more ways than one.

“Hey,” she said.

“Yes, Epoc?” her Handler said. “Do you want more?”

“Do you ever get yourself off in there?” Epoc asked. She laughed at her own audacity. The look of horrified, terrified and, above all, *guilty* shock on Winter’s face told her everything.

“That– I don’t– That’s–”

“Really? That’s what embarrasses you?” Epoc laughed.

“Epoc,” Winter said, her voice level. “Hound. You are playing a *very* dangerous game. So I’m going to make a deal with you. Either I let this go, or I let you see how deep this rabbit hole goes. Either I forgot you asked that, or I reward you for taking a risk. And then, when you get back, you get a punishment.”

“I’ll take the stick and the carrot,” Epoc said. “I’ll never learn otherwise.” A little red dot appeared in the corner of her vision. She frowned. “What’s that?”

“That’s a reminder that, no matter what you do during this mission, punishment is waiting for you back at base. Think of it as motivation.”

“What kind of punishment?”

“Let your imagination run wild,” her Handler said. “For now, focus on your reward.” The voice that had been in one ear now shifted around. The pilot chair had surround sound. Neat! The hands on her hips hadn’t moved, and now the cock inside her started its slow and relentless plowing again. Epoc didn’t mind. “Now,” Winter said. “Feel this?”

Something touched the tip of Epoc’s cock. It was wet. Pliable. Slowly, she felt it being pushed against her. Whatever it was, her dick slid inside it, pushing it open.

“That’s me,” her Handler said. “You know it’s me. You’ve tasted it. You’ve been face-deep inside of it. That’s me, descending onto you.” The sleeve slid over her cock and wrapped around her and Epoc fully did not care if what she was currently fucking was indeed an accurate recreation of her Handler’s pussy or not, she was going to fuck it like it was. What felt like arms wrapped around her, pressed against her back. Gentle pinpricks, like nails scratching.

She was fucking and being fucked and

“Ejection imminent,” the orbital lift announcer said.

“I know!” Epoc said. “But she won’t let me!”

That caught Winter off guard. She started to laugh loudly just as, seemingly out of nowhere, the roof of the orbital lift appeared. Well, the outer ring of it. There was no inner ring.

Nexus Alpha was shunted into space.

It was

everything.

All around

In every direction

Simply

Everything

Briefly, as the sounds of the wind rushing past exploded and then disappeared and Nexus Alpha went fully immobile and the music cut out and there was nothing except everything.

There were stars. So many stars, so many more than Epoc had ever really imagined. Sure, she’d seen pictures and footage but those were cameras and those could see things the human eye couldn’t, right? And those pictures had been taken by specialized satellites.

But now there were stars all around her. Billions of billions of them. Epoc opened every outside camera to its maximum aperture. She tried to see all of it, all at once. Was it possible to implant feeds from the outside of the Frame directly to her occipital lobe?

“-llo?”

Epoc fiddled a bit with the receivers. She actually looked around again. The lower orbit belt was covered in communication satellites, and she’d been cut off from the Mako Group communications systems. She cycled through bands.

“Hi!” Epoc said. “Come in. Can you hear me?”

“Hi!” The voice on the other end of the line was *not* Winter. She was picking up another satellite’s transmissions.

“Who is this?” Epoc asked.

“I d-” The line cut out.

“-poc? Who are-”

“Hello?”

“There you are,” Winter said. “We had some interference, but we’ve got a solid lock on you. I’ve got you.” Her voice was warm. “Now that you’re out of eyesight, let’s get you armed up.”

“What?”

“What, did you think we’d send you a couple clicks below sea level with just two fists and a dream? In Nexus Alpha?” Antimony said. Well, if she put it like *that*. “No, we’ve got a care package on its way to you. Should be coming up on your upper starboard right now.” There was, indeed, something headed toward her. Quite fast, too. “Alright, slave it to Nexus. Your onboard algorithms should take care of that.”

A few quick presses and the satellite’s specifications popped up on her screen. The list of available modification components was extensive. Beyond extensive. “What?! Handler, half of these aren’t even legal! *I see at least three war crimes in here!*”

“Yes, and you better not tell anyone. There’s a reason we have these satellites in orbit,” Winter said matter-of-factly. “Now, pick something. I’ve highlighted weaponry that might be useful at that depth. I also recommend you take the advanced sonar.”

Epoc nodded. Mako Group was a corporation. Of course they were ready for conflict. Of course they were ready to get their hands dirty. Still, she hadn’t really expected them to get *this* dirty. Mako prided itself on its squeaky clean image.

While she trusted her Handler with this kind of thing, she had been training for this kind of thing extensively. She knew what kind of weapons she preferred for deepwater missions, even if they’d been simulations. Epoc knew that traditional kinetic weapons were largely useless. Plasma was an active detriment to the person shooting, boiling the water around the gun. At that depth, the thermal blooming would turn a laser into a short-range microwave.

She selected a torpedo array for one shoulder, and a sonic cannon for the other. Neither would have the satisfying oomph of a cannon or grenade launcher, but she’d just have to deal with that. Finally, instead of occupying her hands with guns, she decided to go for a kinetic gauntlet. It was extremely close range, but her opponent was a creature used to deepwater movement and wasn’t likely to try to engage her in a long range fight.

After her selection was sent through, the satellite moved closer to her. It was a matter of letting its automated systems slot the weapon systems onto her back, and then on her arms.

“Satisfied?” Winter asked.

“Almost,” Epoc said with a little smirk.

“Bark,” Winter said.

Epoc groaned in satisfaction. Winter's hands-by-proxy caressed her all over, grasping at her limbs and stroking her dick.

"Woof," she said quietly. "Now I am."

"Good girl. Now, we've got your parachute coming on. Turn 80 degrees to port and 45 up."

Up in this case being 'away from the planet,' Epoc was just in time to see what was barely more than space debris rocketing her way.

"Uh, Handler? Please advise?"

"It doesn't feel like it, Epoc, but the orbit you're currently in is, well, fast. We're going to use the parachute to get you going in the right direction and then slow you down when you get there."

"How?!" Epoc said. "Scanners say this thing isn't even a Mako satellite!"

"Relax, Hound," Winter said sternly. Epoc felt a hand on the back of her head and immediately found herself doing anything but relax. It *did* however pull her attention from the oncoming hunk of metal directly to her Handler's voice. "Nexus Alpha is the most advanced piece of hardware ever built. Of *course* it is installed with the strongest encryption and decryption packages we could throw at it. Slave the satellite to Nexus."

It only took a few presses and the satellite's internal systems were open to her, as easy as accessing her own coms. Surely this technology wasn't legal?

"Don't worry, we paid for the satellite. They just don't know what we're going to do with it, and we didn't feel the need to pay for access codes," her Handler said. "Enter these motion coordinates. And get ready for a shock."

With trepidation but trusting her Handler, Epoc did as she was told. Nexus Alpha turned its back on the oncoming satellite, but that didn't mean it didn't have an eye on it. Epoc could see the estimated point and moment of impact in real-time.

"Prepare for pitch adjustment, 105 degrees," Winter said. "Short burst. *Now.*"

Nexus Alpha spun forward at Epoc's command at just the right time. Then a sound like a freight train being crushed like a tin can rocked through the entire Frame and the orbit suddenly became freefall.

"Epoc. The satellite is yours. Adjust your course. Estimated point of impact is 13 minutes and 26 seconds. Let's turn it into a descent instead of a crash, shall we?"

"Yes... *ma'am,*" Epoc said, straining against the controls. She was crashing down to the planet, wearing a satellite like a backpack. If she didn't fire off every single thruster at the right time, she'd be dead. Too early and she would pick up too much speed again after. Too late and the weight of the satellite might throw her off balance or snap Nexus in half like a toothpick. And that was before slamming into the ocean fast enough to turn her into an oil spill.

All of that while the arms of her handler were wrapped around her, keeping her on edge like a cruel lover, and on her way to fight a creature the size of an oil rig that wanted nothing more than to kill her.

She laughed. She was having the time of her fucking life.

