

SHOWHOUND

KALLIDORA RHO

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CHAPTER ONE

Nothing makes Sartha Thrace feel good the way being saddled up in the cockpit of a-

Ha. Ha ha. Ha ha ha.

She doesn't really still believe that, does she?

Stupid question. Of course she does. She has no choice. Sartha Thrace loves to pilot, and she is Sartha Thrace. That tautology forms a singularity at the core of her being, pulling everything around it into a flattened disk. Sartha Thrace's personhood has been meticulously crystallized, and shaped carefully to the gloved hand that wields it. Growth and change are as foreign to her as they are to a petrified tree. So the primal, adrenaline-rush pleasure that piloting a sixty-foot steel colossus provokes is what defines her; it will always define her. It is what makes her useful; Sartha must always be useful. She tries—she fails—to dredge up a little of that spark now, as she sits behind the controls of her ever-faithful *Ancyor*.

If only this were a real battle. If only this were a real battlefield.

It is anything but. *Ancyor* stands at one end of a huge oval covered with a thick layer of sand to better distribute the immense forces a mech places on the building's foundations. It was once a testing field, then a parade ground, but since then it has become something altogether more perverse. On all sides, lining the arena, towering stands of seats rise up in monumental tiers, reaching so high they make even a sixty-foot mech seem small. Sartha tried to estimate their total capacity as she entered. The numbers slipped through her fingers, but it has to be in the tens of thousands at least—and each one of those seats is filled. Compared to *Ancyor*, each of the spectators individually is but a speck, but together

they are a ravaging locust swarm, their gleeful cheers and chants bristling together into a monstrous drone as they incite one another to still greater ejaculations of wanton schadenfreude.

The building is called a colosseum. Sartha remembers Her telling her that.

A sudden stillness, as the gate opposite *Ancyor* begins to open. It mirrors perfectly the one Sartha entered through, which is how she already knows what's waiting for her on the other side: a rival machine. A mech she has to kill. An opponent.

Will Sartha recognize this one?

The question blossoms in her mind before she can suppress it. A momentary lapse in trigger discipline. It should be easy to unthink—Sartha has had plenty of practice—but her capacity for blissful ignorance fails her. It's this place. It itches at her. She hasn't felt right ever since she came here. At Handler's side, it's almost bearable. Without Her...

No. Better not to dwell on it. Better to focus on the mech instead. Or perhaps not; as it steps through the arena gates, Sartha realizes that she does recognize it after all. Not personally, exactly. But from rad-blurred photographs dating back to the Empire's first planetfall and from fanciful stories of the very first hero who stood against them.

The earliest rebels found it out east—or so they say—at some nameless place within the endless steppe-sea of sickly grass. They had always known about it, really. That strange temple of concrete thorns where nothing grows, covered in bizarre, windworn sigils. Even the most desperate scavenger knows well to heed a warning like that, but when the Empire came, those first rebels had nothing to stand against its swarming legions of black *Dorus*. Their early mechs were little more than press-ganged scrapwalkers, built more to guard against environmental hazards than hostile gunfire. They needed a weapon.

Desperation drove the rebels to break open the temple, and before its curse claimed their health they found that its ancient custodian was not quite dead after all. Beating in its chest was a star-heart that would never perish, only vomit forth an endless stream of invisible poison to taint a planet that was already on the brink. Taboo, yes, but what choice did they have? The machine awaited their coming. It needed merely to be refueled with sacral rods, its screeching joints anointed with oil, and, repainted on its shield in the hopes of placating its fathomless anger, the

symbol of whatever lost god it had once served: a great, red, five-point star that glares angrily at Sartha now, as the name of the last knight of the atomic age beats like a rallying cry inside her head.

Kosterion.

There is no mistaking it. If there ever was another mech like it, there isn't now. *Kosterion* looms ahead of *Ancyor*, dwarfing it, so large it needs to lower itself to pass through the gate, and clad in enough armor to drown most machines. To bear the bulk of its radiation shielding it stands centauroid upon four legs, body elongated like some beast of burden except for the torso that stands proud at its front, topped with a thick, slanted neck and crowned not with a head but simply two large, prong-like horns. In one hand, that shield; in another, a sword. Two brute slabs of steel so massive they should render *Kosterion* hopelessly sluggish, but *Ancyor's* readouts are already warning Sartha that the monstrous output of its nuclear reactor will make it anything but. The ancient machine walks forward into the colosseum, and its every step is a percussive thunderbolt of pistons and camshafts, barely visible around the joints and so intricate they resemble a doll's clockwork more than the sleek motive gear of a modern mech. Some would mistake *Kosterion's* antiquity for obsolescence, but Sartha knows that the old priests of the red star built it to last.

As it bares its blade, the crowd goes wild.

The collective intake of awed breath as *Kosterion* appeared was the ebb; now comes the flow, a tide of noise from every direction that builds upon itself until it resembles nothing so much as one single scream from one enormous, inhuman throat. Even safely ensconced with her mech, Sartha feels the force of it wash over her. There is something frightening about such a mass of humanity, unified by a single swell of violent emotion. Sartha wastes an idle moment zooming one of *Ancyor's* cameras and scanning it across the crowd. Its members all seem indistinct, somehow. All she can see are the mouths, all open, all twisted with glee, each haloed by a cloud of flying spittle as the spectators scream and chant and bay for violence. There are so many of them, but the same expression wears each face. It's like it's one entity, a hive mind so large it makes even *Ancyor* seem small.

She looks away. The crowd will have its violence. Sartha has a job to do.

Her attention belongs to *Kosterion*. She studies it, as an unseen

announcer begins to whip the colosseum into an even deeper frenzy. She should be looking for weaknesses. Should be forming a plan of attack. Instead, she asks herself: how is it here? *Kosterion* haunted the Empire like a demon until one day it disappeared into the fog of war—but that was twenty years gone. Before Sartha's time. They captured it, that much is clear, but what of the pilot? Did they capture her too, or has she simply been replaced? Would she ever go along with this willingly? Not her, surely. Of all people.

It's funny, Sartha realizes. These are all the things that they all must think about her, when she fights. So this is what it's like. Sartha is a ghost looking at a ghost.

Perhaps they're two of a kind. Perhaps *Kosterion's* pilot wears a muzzle now, as Sartha does. Perhaps she spent twenty years languishing in some Imperial prison before a woman in black leather appeared at the door to her cell. The thought is so awful it breaks Sartha's heart to picture it, but she-

'Sartha.'

It's Her.

The crowd, gone. The other pilot, gone. Sartha's worries, most of all, gone. All that's left is a lingering sense of shame. Awful? No, no! That every pilot, that every stray dog, should be so blessed! A stupid mistake—but as ever, Handler is here to put her right. Handler is never wrong. She never lets Sartha be confused. She is goodness itself. Sartha is so, so, so grateful.

"Yes, Sir," she replies reverently over the comms channel.

'Are you ready?'

In truth, Sartha isn't sure. So much of this is difficult for her. Trying to make sense of where she is, or why, is like walking across broken glass. The jagged edges of her thoughts press close. But she knows she needs to be brave for Her, and she knows that She isn't interested in hearing her doubts right now.

"Yes, Sir." It's only a small lie. She will admit to it later on, and accept Handler's judgment.

'Very good.' The swell of pride in Her voice makes it all worthwhile. It eases the pain. Anything to make Her proud like that. Sartha no longer hears the crowd's sickening roar or the announcer's patter. All fades

before Her. *'And you understand that you will need to do this yourself?'*

"Yes, Sir." Sartha's other self—her real self—is strong, but she can be messy. More is at stake than can be risked on a hound's temperament. Handler is always right about things like that, and Sartha understands—even if she wishes she didn't have to.

'Good girl.' A rush of pleasure banishes the unease already creeping back in. Sartha shudders rapturously. She cannot believe how lucky she is. *'I will be watching.'*

The line clicks shut. The glow Handler's voice conjures fades all too quickly. Sartha tries to focus instead on the reward her victory will surely bring, but it's no good. There's no time. *Kosterion* is before her, and the rising tempo of the announcer's voice, though muted by the metal colossus surrounding her, lets Sartha know that the duel is about to begin. A mercy, in a way. Combat will keep distraction at bay. Sartha is an ace, even now.

Sartha takes a long, deep breath. The crowd is holding its breath too. After a few moments, she hears:

"PILOTS! LAUNCH!"

And they begin.

But not quickly. Sartha is not eager to close the distance. She knows *Kosterion* only by reputation and she cannot afford to guess at its capabilities, or at the skills of whoever sits in its cockpit. Handler's triumph must be perfect. Her influence put Sartha on this stage, but it is up to her to perform. A choreographed dance would have been meaningless. It would not dispel any doubts. Only real combat will elevate Her. Only a duel to the death—*Kosterion* against *Ancyor*. Both CQC specialists, to judge from the weapons. *Kosterion*'s size and bulk gives it the edge of lethality. One swing of that absurd sword could decide it all. Durability too; if *Kosterion* is anything like as armored as it looks, it will take time to dismantle. Of course, Sartha is no stranger to hunting large prey. She has the skill, and *Ancyor* the strength. Speed is the lingering question; big machines are usually slow, but you'd hate to die betting on 'usually'.

Sartha decides to let *Kosterion* come to her. That's the smart way to play this. Besides, all the better to let Handler's audience stew in the anticipation.

That proves another jagged thought. What kind of rebel pilot plays to a crowd? Handler's all-important wishes threaten to encroach on the sunken parts of Sartha's mind. The memories into which she dare not tread. Why is she here? What is she fighting for? Who are all these people, and why are they cheering for her—if, indeed, it is her they're cheering for, and not merely the spectacle of mechanical gore about to unfold before them?

Isn't she supposed to be a h-

Oh. Perhaps that's why. Wherever Sartha goes, people love to cheer her on. Isn't that how it's always been?

Jagged thoughts.

Sartha can already feel herself slipping—but she can't. Not today. It's too important. She strains with all of the thin self that remains to her, knotting together all her wants and needs, all her questions and doubts, everything that makes her human, into one all-surpassing urge.

Make Her proud. Make Her proud. Make Her proud.

Uneasily, Sartha unshackles *Ancyor's* reactor output. As strength and heat fill its limbs, she begins to pad restlessly back and forth across the colosseum's compacted sand surface. Testing the grip. Finding her balance. Watching. Waiting.

Let's see what that old relic can do, Ancyor.

Opposite her, across the mockery of a battlefield, *Kosterion* does similarly. It stands in place, surveying its opponent, but the four elongated feet that tip each leg are adjusting one by one, optimizing their purchase on the sand beneath. It raises one foreleg, then lowers it and scrapes a small gash in the arena's surface, testing, perhaps, its grip. Then, with no clear cue, *Ancyor's* sensors alert Sartha to a colossal power surge from the other machine.

All at once, the thing begins to charge at her.

It surges into motion with an alacrity that defies all reason. No acceleration; in an instant, *Kosterion* is coming toward Sartha at full tilt, shield in a close guard, sword raised and held with its tip presented forward like a lance. It will be atop *Ancyor* in seconds. The crowd erupts along with it, the seething roil of its impatience erupting into a crescendo scream of bloodthirsty glee. The air buzzes with the sound, and the ground trembles with each of *Kosterion's* footfalls. Sartha does

not panic as the beast charges. The shot of adrenaline that hits her system merely takes her reaction time to the next level. Already, she's searching for an opening, angling for a counterattack—but there's the rub. She can't find one. *Kosterion* is huge. Armor covers every surface. Its slab of a shield is braced, its sword as ready to guard as to thrust. Sartha begins to shift from side to side, feinting a dodge, then a lunge, hoping to elicit a sudden motion. *Kosterion* does not falter. It's still picking up speed. Sartha has seconds left to decide.

Make Her proud—but Handler's pride cuts both ways. The impetuous hound within Sartha yearns to reply in kind, to meet *Kosterion* blow for blow, to show the screaming crowd just how fierce Handler's champion can be. Another part of her, though, knows that nothing could be more shameful or disappointing to Her than succumbing to her opponent's very first blow.

No more time to think. It's here.

Caution wins. Girding *Ancyor's* powerful limbs, Sartha throws herself cleanly to one side, beyond the reach of *Kosterion's* blade. Momentum will not permit it to change direction. It surges past the spot *Ancyor* was standing. No exchange. The crowd howls its disapproval. Sartha ignores them. Keeps her speed up. She wants to put distance between them. Makes it halfway across the arena floor before she turns to look. Part of Sartha expected to see *Kosterion* crash through the perimeter and into the stands, but no. It kills its speed as effortlessly as it gained it, wheeling about in a slow circle until it faces *Ancyor* once more.

And again, without pause, *Kosterion* charges.

This time, Sartha is determined to meet it head-on. She already sees the game that's being played with her, and she will not be harried to exhaustion back and forth across the sands like some panicked doe. *Kosterion* picks up speed. The crowd's resurgent glee howls in Sartha's ears. She stands her ground. She drops her stance. She prepares.

This time, just as she's about to enter the range of *Kosterion's* strike, Sartha ducks to one side. *Ancyor* drops to all fours, pressing itself flat to the ground to duck beneath the oncoming sword-strike. As the monolith of razor-sharp steel passes overhead, Sartha gathers strength in *Ancyor's* limbs, ready to spring up and strike.

Then she sees the sword coming back around.

With whiplike speed, *Kosterion* reverses its strike. Sartha realizes too

late that she underestimated the monster. From her crouched pose, she has nowhere to go; at her command, *Ancyor* topples to one side, rolling awkwardly away from the backhand swing. It almost works. Almost.

Sartha flinches as she feels the edge of *Kosterion*'s blade scrape perilously along the side of one of her beloved mech's legs.

The crowd goes wild. First blood has been struck.

And then Sartha is away and clear. Heart pounding, she checks the damage readout. Nothing significant. That's good. What's not good is that, clearly, *Kosterion* is more than capable of keeping up with *Ancyor* in close combat. And already, it's coming around for another tilt.

Sartha does not back down. It's not in her nature, and she has plenty more tricks up her sleeve. This time, as *Kosterion* bears down on her, she tests the other side, darting just beyond the full extension of *Kosterion*'s sword arm. Pushing the slavering crowd-roar from her mind, Sartha launches up at *Kosterion*, confident, this time, that she has made it past its blade.

She lands just one blow on its armored hull before a vicious shield-bash sends her flying off.

Ancyor's stabilizers can take it, and Sartha has been rattled around far worse in her time. The real problem comes when *Kosterion* wheels around to face her, and she gets a good look at the spot she struck.

Nothing. No damage. Barely even scratched it.

That hurts far worse than the shield bash. Sartha felt her blow land. It was solid, and *Ancyor*'s sheer strength is the stuff of legends. Even *Genetor* would struggle to handle a hit like that without toppling. But *Kosterion*'s four legs give it stability, and its infernal reactor permits it both preposterous armor and alarming speed. *Theaboros* might be the only mech built since that can boast a similar energy output, but it traded any potential sturdiness for those wings. *Kosterion* seems, so far, all but impervious. An alarming reminder of what Earth's old superpowers could build at their peak.

But there has to be a weak point. With all her heart, Sartha believes that. She's never met a mech she couldn't kill. *Ancyor*'s new roar could make short work of it, but that is another asset denied to her. Too dangerous to the crowd. Just one more way the mass of spectators is vexing her, along with its stupid, jeering noises. Sartha wishes very badly

that she could submerge into the part of herself that would not hear them. Her hands are shaking at *Ancyor's* controls. She does not want to be here.

Keep it together, Sartha. Make Her proud.

Kosterion comes at her again. This time, Sartha tries something else. She dashes to one side of the arena, placing herself so that *Kosterion* will have to kill its speed as it approaches. Once it does, Sartha doesn't bother choosing between left and right. She goes over. Her opponent is large, but *Ancyor* can clear its height in one leap. She just has to get behind it and stay there. *Kosterion's* elongated body should keep it from turning quickly enough. The crowd signals its appreciation as *Ancyor* hits the apex of its jump. For one beautiful moment, Sartha feels like she's above it all.

Then the alarm sounds. Another power surge from *Kosterion*.

Sartha took the strange, horn-like protrusions atop *Kosterion's* torso for sensor mounts. Maybe cameras. Wrong. A heatmap view shows her a sudden flood of energy flowing through them; an EM lens, a blossoming flare. An instant later, crackling arcs of visible electricity span the horns. Then, between them, something appears. An unearthly globe of radiant matter, wildly unstable, but held in check by the crushing magnetic fields *Kosterion* produces. As it grows in strength, it scorches the air around it a vibrant red, too bright to look at, a perfect match for the symbol painted on *Kosterion's* shield.

A red star.

The star's birth takes no more than a second. *Ancyor* is still in the air. Sartha cannot maneuver. She can't do anything at all as a strange, winding, red arc erupts from the plasma orb between *Kosterion's* horns and seizes *Ancyor* in its burning grasp.

Sartha braces herself for... something. She doesn't know what. She's never seen a weapon like this. At first, little seems to happen. No force of impact, no sudden damage. She's almost surprised when *Ancyor* lands on its feet.

Then she takes stock of *Ancyor's* displays and realizes that its heat is already off the chart. This thing is cooking her alive.

Within moments she starts to feel it. The heat, encroaching on her even within the shielded cockpit. Alarms fire off one by one, a discordant

orchestra that does drown out, at least, the crowd's awestruck gasps. Glancing out of her viewport, beyond the red corona surrounding her, Sartha can see *Ancyor's* armor beginning to blacken. A second more, and the exposed corners of the thinner armor plates start to curl. The plasma's heat is unbelievable. *Ancyor's* cooling systems are far beyond their limit. *Kosterion* is standing right in front of her, turning, perhaps vulnerable, but Sartha has only seconds more before her own mech starts melting down.

It's no choice at all. Sartha turns and runs.

The tendril of plasma remains anchored to *Ancyor*, horrifically unaffected by her attempts at evasion, but after she puts a little distance between it and *Kosterion*, it vanishes. Sartha breathes a sigh of relief. A short-range weapon, then. Maybe for point defense, though clearly no less effective against larger things than missiles. How the fuck is she going to beat that? Can't dodge it, it seems. The speed of light is a bitch. *Kosterion's* red star behaves like lightning, and what is *Ancyor* if not one gigantic lightning rod? That must be the reason the weapon has been sanctioned for use here, in the colosseum. No danger to the crowd. Sartha can still hear its delighted, awestruck gasps at *Kosterion's* true strength. Each one is like a nail being driven into her skull.

No time to resent them for it. Again, relentless, *Kosterion* comes.

Sartha tries fighting fair. Confronting the beast head-on, trading with it blow for blow, relying on her instincts to keep her safe. It just about works—but as soon as she's within range, *Kosterion's* red star lights her up again. The scant moments she has before she needs to bolt and let *Ancyor* cool aren't even close to enough for her to pick her way through *Kosterion's* immaculate defenses.

The crowd boos and jeers as she flees.

Next time, when *Kosterion* charges, Sartha does too. She means to leap straight for the thing's horns. They look fragile enough for *Ancyor* to make a fine mess of. At the last moment, though, *Kosterion* grasps her intent. It pivots, skidding to a halt and bearing its massive bulk against *Ancyor* while its blade flashes in a deadly thrust, a killing stroke that forces Sartha to veer off. The opportunity is lost, and the ionized plasma from *Kosterion's* star is already timing her out.

Sartha retreats to a safe distance. The crowd howls with laughter at her impotence. *Kosterion* simply walks to the opposite edge of the arena,

comes about, and charges again.

And again. And again. And again. Each time, Sartha tries something new. She runs through her whole bag of tricks, then starts inventing new ones. Nothing works. *Kosterion* is too fast, too armored, too dangerous. Its reach is too long, its unearthly red star too deadly. And it's not just the mech. More and more as the two of them trade blows, Sartha's conviction grows: she's dealing with one hell of a pilot. An ace, certainly. Perhaps even someone on her level. Whoever it is, they pilot a brute but wield it like a scalpel. Their swordsmanship is supreme. Their tactics strange, but suited to their machine and undeniably effective.

Which begs the question: who is it? Is it her?

It can't be, can it?

There is no time to dwell on the question, but Sartha can't stop herself. Just like she can't stop listening to the fucking crowd as it laughs and howls and chants at her expense. She really, desperately wishes it would shut the fuck up. This is all wrong. The unease gnaws at her. Make Her proud, yes, but why? How? Where is she, and why is she fighting this fight? Repression is a constant effort. Under pressure, she is coming unspooled. As *Kosterion* charges at her yet again, distraction almost proves her ending as the tip of *Kosterion*'s sword comes within inches of *Ancyor*'s cockpit.

Sartha can't fight like this. She doesn't even know what she's fighting for. She is hopelessly off her game. She is not herself, and she is losing.

Which is why it feels so strange when she catches a glimpse of herself reflected in one of *Ancyor*'s many monitors and sees something beneath her muzzle.

A big, eager, wolf-like grin.

When Sartha asks herself why she's grinning, the answer is no less surprising. Beneath all the noise, all the unease, all the doubt and confusion, there is something else. A kernel. Something more real, more true. Something that feels good.

Here, facing death, dancing with a worthy opponent, Sartha Thrace is having the time of her life.

It's always been like that for her. The joy of her mech's power, the thrill of combat—these, above all, are primordial to Sartha's psyche. Her heroism is that very pleasure, pointed in the right direction. Her other

half is the feeling distilled and purified, then tempered with unfaltering obedience. But before it all, she is this. A huntress. It's been so easy to forget that lately.

Maybe it's time to start remembering.

As she watches *Kosterion* line up for another charge, Sartha gives herself to the thrill. The more she remembers, the better she feels. The crowd? The colosseum? The circumstances? They do not matter. Not right now. All that matters is the intimacy that exists between her and the enemy pilot. Abruptly, Sartha realizes that she's been a bad lover. Why is she letting her jagged thoughts distract her? Why is she paying so much respect to every little thing that *Kosterion* does instead of giving her all to the contest of strength? When did she start holding her own life so precious? She is Sartha Thrace, ace of aces, and nobody has ever been better than her. Who cares about some fucking crowd?

It doesn't matter. None of it matters. Only victory.

So stop thinking, Sartha.

And.

Just.

Win.

Kosterion begins to charge, and Sartha looks at her opponent anew. The way it moves. The way it's built. The limbs, the joints, the machinery peeking through from beneath. The way it holds its sword. The plasma-star between its horns. She drinks it all in, and searches for the path to its defeat. However slight, however impossible. Sartha closes her eyes, just for an instant. The crowd falls away. The world falls away. Sartha inhabits a perfect silence and, within it, dreams a perfect dream.

She opens her eyes and finds herself laughing. Now all she has to do is make her dream real.

Follow me, my Ancyor.

It begins as soon as *Kosterion* comes within reach of its plasma weapon. The glowing arc snakes its way around *Ancyor*, lighting it up. Sartha is on the clock. She dashes right, toward *Kosterion's* shield. No feints this time. No point. The other pilot is too good, and Sartha wouldn't have it any other way. This is about speed, not deception. *Kosterion*, undaunted, turns to bear down on her. *Ancyor* cannot outrun it

like this. It doesn't have to. It just needs momentum.

Kosterion is atop her. Its upraised sword begins to fall in a huge, sweeping arc, sure to bisect *Ancyor* if it lands. Sartha races the blade, pushing *Ancyor*'s overheating reactor to its screaming limit. Another thing she can't outrun, but that's not the dream. Sartha waits until the last moment, and then a moment longer. An instant before the sword crashes through her, she drops *Ancyor* to the ground, skidding so hard the sand sparks against its armor.

At once, *Kosterion* strains to turn its sweep into a backswing. But Sartha made it far enough into its backhand; sword-arm this far extended, her opponent is truly, finally off-guard.

Time to make it count.

Guiding her mech effortlessly, Sartha has *Ancyor* roll out of its slide and onto its haunches. Its pistons and motors thrum as they gather strength; then, before *Kosterion* can move, *Ancyor* springs straight up toward it. Sartha holds nothing back, not even when *Kosterion* heaves its shield into position, ready to batter her out of thin air. Sartha grips the controls, and braces for impact.

When it comes, she does not go flying. She grabs on.

All four of *Ancyor*'s limbs grasp the edges of the shield that is trying to pummel her. The shock that passes through Sartha's mech is spine-shattering; she barely feels it. She's too busy keeping one eye on the heat warnings, and another on her next trick.

Sartha's hand dances across the array of switches in *Ancyor*'s cockpit. Fine-tuning the balance servos. Shifting power exactly where it needs to go. *C'mon, girl. Don't let me down.*

Kosterion starts pitching forward, evidently set on slamming *Ancyor* into the ground. Slow, far too slow. This nuclear monstrosity seems appallingly slow to Sartha now. *Ancyor*, meanwhile, is finally coming alive. It scrapes its clawed feet against the surface of the shield, finding what purchase it can, while hanging low on its powerful arms.

Then, from that hanging pose, *Ancyor* launches itself upward. To anyone watching, it looks like the same failed gambit Sartha tried before. Sartha doesn't care about anyone watching. She's not trying to make it into *Kosterion*'s blind spot. That's a fool's errand. She's simply counting on *Kosterion*'s pilot to do what any consummate swordsman

would do in this position. Main hand still fully extended on the backswing, *Kosterion* tilts its sword down into a cross-body guard. The huge, steel blade blocks *Ancyor*'s path skyward. Sartha looks set to sunder herself on its edge. So, she does something so crazy, no consummate swordsman would ever think of it. Something nobody but Sartha would do.

She catches the blade between *Ancyor*'s palms.

A thousand tiny feats of piloting take place in the microseconds before impact, and each of them spells the difference between life and death. The timing has to be perfect. The force has to be perfect. The balance has to be perfect. Sartha's hands make microscopic adjustments at the controls. It all has to be perfect—but she isn't scared. *Ancyor* is her body now. She knows it as her own.

And she is perfect.

Ancyor clamps down on the flat of *Kosterion*'s sword near the tip, anchoring itself to the slab. Immediately, Sartha braces its legs against it too. The arc the blade travels through leaves her clinging on for dear life. Warning lights appear. Superficial damage. Heat risk. Sartha doesn't care. She's alive. She's so fucking alive.

Atta girl, *Ancyor*.

And the two of them aren't done. *Kosterion*'s sword carries *Ancyor* to the huge mech's main-hand flank, now completely exposed. Sartha is running rings around it. With one more leap, *Ancyor* vaults straight down toward the ground. On the way, a claw lashes out and snaps one of *Kosterion*'s energized horns in two. The plasma globe dissipates. That's one condition cleared. With *Ancyor*'s other hand, Sartha draws the only additional weapon afforded to her: a progressive knife, mag-clamped to *Ancyor*'s hip. Her long fang. At her command, its vibrating edge springs to life.

Ancyor pivots in midair. It lands on its feet at *Kosterion*'s flank. *Kosterion*'s sword arm is still fully extended. In front of her, she sees exactly what she wanted to see.

The exposed joint behind *Kosterion*'s arm.

Its joints are armored, like most mechs'. But when *Kosterion* extends a limb, there's a tiny gap through which its intricate inner workings are visible.

Just big enough for a nice, slender knife.

With a wild howl, Sartha thrusts *Ancyor's* fang into the gap. All hell breaks loose.

Sparks like fireworks erupt from *Kosterion's* joint as the progressive knife bites deep into fast-moving machinery. The way the impact shock rattles *Ancyor* is a nightmare, especially when Sartha starts using the knife's tip to pry apart whatever she can't cut. Her hands ache from white-knuckling the controls, but she won't let go. She's laughing. She's winning. *Kosterion's* interior is solidly built, but it isn't hardened like the outer armor. Sartha can feel the damage she's doing. So can *Kosterion's* pilot, judging from the way the monstrous mech's body is bucking and flailing wildly. It's trying to shake her off.

Just a little more, babygirl.

Ancyor doesn't let her down as Sartha dances alongside *Kosterion*, sticking close, avoiding its desperate kicks. It gives a little more and, with one final heave, slices straight down through whatever structural bones support the weight of *Kosterion's* sword-arm. Without those, the whole thing tears free and clatters to the ground, leaving behind an awful crater of twisted, gory, red-hot machinery.

Sartha's laugh turns bloody and foul. Perfect. Time to really fuck this thing up.

She slams a few more buttons in the cockpit. The roaring chainblades lining *Ancyor's* claws and forearms rev into life. Once they're running hot, Sartha retracts her knife, plunges *Ancyor's* right hand as far as it will go into *Kosterion's* empty shoulder socket, and starts chewing it up from the inside.

Now the sound and fury of *Ancyor's* violence becomes even more extreme. The screams of tortured metal from within *Kosterion's* bulk are deafening. The deeper Sartha reaches, the more it flails, but as *Ancyor* turns its innards to shreds, *Kosterion's* mighty armor starts buckling inward. *Ancyor* uses one big crack as a hold, slipping its left hand into it and grabbing on, riding *Kosterion* as the beast comes apart. Fluids drip and spray from the cracks forming in its hull. Sartha is laughing so hard she's spraying the bars of her muzzle with spittle. Killing something this strong feels incredible. The kind of challenge she hasn't had in a long time. The kind of challenge that's a balm to her soul.

Eventually, *Kosterion* starts to lose hydraulic pressure. Its struggles

weaken. Collapsing from within, it slumps to the ground. Still Sartha doesn't stop. Not even when she reaches so far inside, she wrecks the cooling lines to its all-important nuclear reactor. *Ancyor's* sensors inform her that it's failing safe. Total power loss.

And with that, the last knight of the atomic age dies.

Even then, Sartha doesn't stop. It feels too good to stop. She plunges *Ancyor's* other arm into *Kosterion's* wreck, and rips and tears until there's nothing left but a pile of scrap. Finally, once her prey's corpse is barely recognizable as the remnants of a machine, Sartha disengages the chain blades. She allows *Ancyor* to rock back on its haunches and vent heat. She laughs until she's wheezing.

Fuck, it's so good to be alive!

The afterglow is bliss. But it comes to an abrupt end when Sartha notices a distinct piece of wreckage from within *Kosterion*, resting, by happenstance, just by *Ancyor's* foot. A metal sphere, heat- and splinter-shielded, and coated with both electronics and life support systems. It's the cockpit; still, by some miracle, intact.

And this fight isn't over. It's a duel to the death. Not the mech's. The pilot's.

That thought is enough to rob all of Sartha's joy. She knows what she is supposed to do. She remembers Her instructions perfectly, as always. But you don't do that. Not to another pilot. Not ever. Even most Imperials wouldn't. It's not combat, it's just murder. Does she truly...

The crowd. Sartha remembers the crowd. It's still there. Still watching. Part of it is still cheering from the way *Ancyor* circumnavigated *Kosterion* like a gymnast around a pommel horse before tearing it to shreds. Most of it, though, is jeering. Booing Sartha's obvious hesitation. Demanding blood with their cries. They are insatiable.

Sartha has to give them exactly what they want.

The mechanics of it are simple. Unsteadily, Sartha lifts one of *Ancyor's* legs and rests a foot atop the cockpit. Even the slightest bit of weight she puts on it makes it creak and groan. Sartha feels like she's going to throw up. She isn't sure she can do this, not to anyone—but maybe it's not just anyone. Maybe it's her. Maybe it's actually her. Gods. She can't. She can't.

Paralysis sets in. Weakness sets in. There is only one thing Sartha knows to do when she's weak. She reaches for her radio.

"P-p-please, S-sir," she whimpers. "D-d-do I... I have... c-can't..."

After a long moment of panic, Sartha hears the line click open. When She speaks, Sartha cannot tell if She is disappointed in her.

"Off The Leash."

There's always that little moment of clarity, as it happens. This time, that moment is filled with shame—shame at how blissful it feels for Sartha to have all her uncertainty and doubt simply melt away. She knows being freed from those things is wrong. She knows that if she were still a real person, she ought to stand firm. Insist. Refuse. But she is not—She taught Sartha that lesson a long time ago, and part and parcel with it is the ecstasy that fills her now as it all vanishes, all the confusion and regret and all the jagged thoughts, as Sartha becomes something else, a creature of violence, a hound who does not hesitate as she engages *Ancyor's* limbs and brings the foot down and-

"On The Leash."

Silence, but for the dying screeches of the metal underneath.

It's all gone. It's all back. All the awfulness. Only so much worse, when Sartha looks down and sees the ruin of *Kosterion's* cockpit broken open like an egg beneath *Ancyor's* claw. A bright red mess seeps from the cracks. Sartha shudders and chokes back the vomit. It could be some kind of coolant. It could be anything.

Oh, Gods.

Is it her? Is it her? Sartha can't see. There's too much debris in the way.

Then the crowd comes back too.

It held its breath as Sartha—as Hound—did the deed. Now, that breath erupts from its throats in a scream louder than any before. At first, Sartha can only hear it as a disgusted, hateful howl. Exactly what she deserves. Only, after a moment, the cacophonous sound resolves into something far worse. Something rhythmic and distinct. A chant. An outpouring of adulation. The crowd's mood has turned. A single word fills every throat, and once Sartha realizes what it is, it's all she can do to hold back from begging Handler for another release.

SAR-THA! SAR-THA! SAR-THA! SAR-THA! SAR-THA! SAR-THA! SAR-THA! SAR-THA!

They're cheering her name. They're all cheering her name. They love her. Her adoring crowd is cheering her name.

Well, Sartha? Do you feel like a hero yet?

* * *

In her old life, Sartha often dreamt of this city. Those were fine dreams. Dreams of conquest. In her dreams, she always led a triumphant procession through the city's heart, joy and relief and comradeship flowing as freely as milk and honey through the halls of the Gods. Yes, those had been wonderful dreams. They let Sartha indulge the guilty, giddy hope of an end to it all, without making her feel like she was betraying anybody.

In her dreaming eye, the city was half-formed, ever-shifting. Only the strange magic of sleep kept her certain that, night after night, it was the same place. Nobody Sartha knew had ever seen the city, so her imagination was left to take turns as it pleased. Sometimes it was little more than a vast factory yard, churning out mechanized horrors to sate the Empire's gluttony for war. Sometimes it was a wound in the earth, an open mining pit, with a citizenry of awful, stooping miners that peered uncertainly at the rebel triumph from within their tunnels and hovels. Still other times, it was a perfect match for the ruin-cities of old, a dense warren of glass spires like the ones rebel salvagers would sometimes guess about to pass the time.

Now, as she looks out across the city from within the angular palace at its heart, Sartha can finally fill in a gap in her mind instead of excavating one. The truth is, it turns out, even worse than she had feared. Of all the atrocities her fecund imagination supplied, none could equal the one currently staring her in the face.

The capital city of the Empire is *green*.

Between the countless streets forming a perfect, orderly grid across the landscape are rows and rows of individual habitats. Some are still of the very oldest type: orbital recolonization modules simply landed and planted in the earth, each containing everything one family of ark-

settlers might need to eke out a spartan existence. Most are much newer; across the city, reconstruction is a constant fever, new habs replacing old, invariably in some bizarre, needless, antiquated style that strikes Sartha as at best atrociously wasteful and at worst actively hazardous during extreme weather.

But when it comes to waste, nothing surpasses the greenery. Each hab, new or old, sits in its very own little paradise, a perfect, square plot covered with a perfectly flat, perfectly maintained lawn of grass. At first, it defied Sartha's ability to explain. Green plants grow en masse in greenhouses and almost nowhere else. The Earth has long since lost the ability to sustain vegetation as dense as this. Then Sartha noticed the fine mist in the air, just visible at the nearest habs, moving in an unnatural, oscillating pattern.

It's water. They're constantly spraying each and every one of these awful, fruitless gardens with water.

Abruptly, the beauty of this ocean of green and plenty falls from Sartha's sight. She does not see the verdant, pleasant-scented grass. She sees the pipes—small, almost invisible, but everywhere, leading to monstrous, belching water treatment plants, placed carefully beyond the inhuman chasms of barbed wire and military checkpoints that demarcate the city's boundary. She sees the sprawling camp-slums beyond, housing the guest-workers that operate the plants even as the noxious by-products of the water treatment process make the air they breathe into poison. Sartha sees beyond even that, to the vast Imperial heartland that has been rendered inimical to life by the sprawling networks of pumps and pipelines that extract what little moisture is left in the soil to feed the grass, leaving the land utterly desolate for a hundred leagues in every direction.

Sartha sees all this, and she knows: this place is evil on a scale unfathomable to the people living in it. The green is a lie. This is hell. It is Knossos—named, so She told Sartha, for the capital of the very first empire to leave its mark on the continent upon which they stand.

"Does it impress you?" Handler asks.

Sartha turns away from the window and salutes as She arrives. Her gladness at Her presence is almost enough to wash away the horror, even as anxiety makes her heart skip a beat. "Yes, Sir."

"Hm." Handler glances out of the window. She drinks in the same

sight. Her lips form a thin line, and Her own evaluation is elusive.

She is not alone. Behind her trail two other figures. One is Leinth Aritimis, Sartha's sister in bondage. She does not meet Sartha's gaze when Sartha glances up at her, but Sartha already knows the look of numb, muted horror she would see in her eyes if she did. The other figure is a stranger sight by far: Phylax-General Athina Kynilandre. The presence of the older woman, clad in full dress uniform, raises Sartha's hackles. This woman has done so much to frustrate Handler; no punishment is sufficient to match the crime. Sartha knows the two of them have been sharing company of late, but even if Handler is, in Her infinite mercy, quick to forgive, Sartha is not.

She has something more pressing to do than growl at the general, though. Better that they were in private, but this cannot wait.

Sartha crumples to her knees at Handler's feet. "Sir, please... I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry. I failed You. I-I needed your help, even though t-that was the one thing You told me...

Confession is a balm for the soul—but only so much. It feels good to admit it, to throw herself upon Handler's mercy, but it does not erase her failure. Only forgiveness can do that.

"You did," Handler acknowledges. Sartha is torn between agony and ecstasy. The blessing of Handler's voice, the curse of her admonishment. "But I suppose it is to be expected."

That remark puts a vicious twist in Sartha's gut. It's expected? That she fail? That she is weak? Tears form in her eyes. Is she such a poor hound after all? "I-I-I'm ssorry," she blubbers. "S-ssorry Sir I'm sosooooorry I-... I-..."

Sartha cannot bear to raise her eyes and look Handler in the face. Seeing disappointment there would shatter her. She just keeps whimpering her apologies, waiting for Handler to decide her fate.

"Tell me, Sartha," Handler says, eventually. "How are you doing?"

Sartha sniffs and looks up in pure adoration. Such a kind question. It's so like Her to be so kind at moments like this. Her infinite kindness gives Sartha the strength to pull herself together and answer.

"N-not... well," Sartha admits. She glances out of the window again. "Being here is... hard. It doesn't feel right. I can feel..." She struggles for a moment to articulate the crushing weight bearing upon her brain. A

hundred jagged thoughts, a thousand terrible realizations held at bay. “I-I think I need some time in the kennels.”

The kennels help. They always help. It’s awful down there, of course, but it’s at least easy not to think. Regular sessions with Handler are what keep Sartha as she should be. After her duel out on the sands, Sartha can feel something creeping back into her heart. Something that does not belong. She needs to be fixed again.

“I see.” Handler seems to consider Sartha’s reply for a long moment. Then, She delivers Her verdict. “Sartha, listen to me very carefully: you did not fail me.”

Sartha goes very still. Jubilation surges within her, but is stilted. If Handler says so, it must be right—but it doesn’t feel right.

“But... b-but... I needed...”

“You put on a fine show,” Handler soothes. “You only needed me for the very hardest part. Nothing was ruined by it. You were very good. I will always be with you for the hard parts. You know that, don’t you?”

“Of course!” Sartha nods fervently. Handler never lets her down. Handler is so good to her; that’s exactly why her failings are so unforgivable. She needs to convey that to Handler somehow, even though she cannot bring herself to contradict Her. “But-”

“Hush now, Sartha.”

Her command is punctuated by a hand resting on the back of Sartha’s head. At once, Sartha is silent—inside and out. Handler’s touch quells at once all the turbulence inside her. It sends shivers down her spine. It is bliss incarnate.

“Listen to me,” Handler beckons, and Sartha does. She cannot do otherwise. “You did well. So very well. You made me proud. You always do.”

Pleasure, raw and unfiltered, lights up the ends of all the gnarled doubts that have been growing in Sartha’s skull. She feels Handler’s words erase her, diminish her, and her face forms into a wide, dumb, drooling smile. Still on her knees, one of her legs starts shaking. Tapping. Her excitement cannot be contained.

She made Her proud.

The guilt and shame do not disappear. Not right away. But they begin

to shrink. Handler's glowing praise extracts them from her like pus from a wound. The catharsis of their departure makes Sartha shudder. Tears pour from her eyes. She feels indescribable. Sartha allows herself a lapse in discipline; stray fears and denials drip from her lips in incoherent pleasure-groans. It feels good to let them out, to give them voice, and allow them to evaporate in Handler's rarefied air.

"Nnnnooooo," Sartha drools happily. Handler starts raking Her nails gently across her scalp, and she gasps. "I doooooon't... I'm b-bbaaaaadddd."

"No," Handler tells her adamantly. "You're my wonderful hound. I'm proud of you."

And the thoughts are gone.

Sartha is left a needy, slaving thing, panting euphorically. Her eyes turn to the shiny tip of Handler's boot. She will not presume, of course—she never presumes—but if she has been as good as Handler says, perhaps a reward is due. It would feel so wonderful.

"Up, Sartha," Handler instructs. No reward, then, at least not now. Sartha does not feel even a flicker of disappointment. Whatever Handler decides is best. She springs to her feet. "We'd best not delay any longer. I would hate to be anything more than fashionably late. Leinth, come here. I have something for each of you."

Leinth approaches. She is not so numb now, Sartha perceives. Envy is eating her up. Sartha indulges in a little inward, petty smugness. Poor Leinth will never know what it is to be Her favorite.

"Here." From a coat pocket, Handler produces two collars and two leashes, each a long, red cord. She fastens the collars around her hounds' necks, then winds the leashes around her wrist to free her hands. "There we go. Something to make sure you aren't led astray."

Sartha and Leinth share a look. "Where are we going, Sir?" Sartha asks. "Back to the kennels?" she adds hopefully.

"Not just yet," Handler replies. "There is work yet to be done. You have won over the many. Now it's time for the few. This way. You too, general."

Sartha and Leinth immediately follow along at Handler's heel as she turns to lead them deeper into the palace. It takes General Kynilandre longer to obey, and she does so with a slight, shambling gait, and a

strange look that leaves even Sartha uneasy.

But she has more to worry about than her master's former enemy. As they walk, Sartha takes one last look out of the window. She sees, some way distant, beyond the awful grid of green lawns and pristine habs, the colosseum. The memories return, try as she might to keep them at bay—and with them, the question.

Was it really her?

She tries to keep it in. She really does. Sartha would hate to ruin it all, after receiving such mercy. But perhaps, if she gets the answer she needs, she can finally banish the thought.

“Sir,” Sartha says, quietly and uneasily. “Back there. That pilot. Was it—”

Handler does not deign to turn Her head. “You do not need to worry about it, Sartha. As I said, you did well.”

The praise should be enough to shut her mouth. To put an end to her inner treason. It should be. Sartha clenches her fists and scolds herself. *Be a good dog.*

Please. Why can't I just be Her good dog?

The view out over Knossos soon disappears behind them. The palace is a dense warren of cramped passageways, but eventually it opens out to reveal a large double door, flanked by soldiers. They salute as Handler's party approaches; evidently, She is expected. Sartha studies the door for a brief moment. It is made of fine wood, and its intricate carvings tell a story. A colossal ark station, hanging above a ruined Earth. Nurturing, for generations, the inheritance of its once-great powers. Their technology. Their order. Their civilization. Then, as the carvings tell, it descends. The ark station unleashes its returner module, surrounded by a swarm of shuttlecraft; the returner module is a spike, planting itself in the earth, becoming the very building in which Sartha now stands. And from it, in the carvings, springs forth a fine phalanx of mechs and soldiers, ready to save humanity's cradle from the degenerated primitivism that has claimed it.

Thus was the very notion of empire reborn.

Sartha looks down. She doesn't need to think about it. She isn't supposed to think about it. She only needs to be good for Handler. And it's show time.

One of the soldiers standing guard turns and touches a control panel on the wall. The wooden door begins to open. As it yawns wide, Handler leads Her followers across the threshold. Sartha follows faithfully at Her right hand. A great, warm mouth of violin music, tinkling champagne glasses, and polite conversation swallows her up.

CHAPTER TWO

It is only as Sartha surveys the applauding partygoers that the truth of Handler's lesson dawns on her. Earlier that day, as Sartha brushed Her hair and Leinth polished Her coat, it had pleased Her to speak about some of the people who would be in attendance at the gathering; naturally, it had also pleased Sartha to listen, and though few of the specific names and details had found purchase on her memory, she had formed a distinct sense of the Empire's elite—one that seeing them together in the flesh immediately confirms.

You really can see the strings on all of them.

The five hundred or so most powerful people in the world greet Handler with polite applause as She enters the grand state room of the Imperial Palace. She is, it seems, the guest of honor. That strikes Sartha as entirely natural, even though she does not know what, if anything, occasioned this particular gathering. The assembled elites seem, at first glance, almost homogeneous but, looking deeper, Sartha sees the telltale signs of what unites and divides them. They stand in little clusters, and even as they all turn to face Handler, they do not stop watching each other. Gazes of suspicion cast between allies; of confirmation between friends. Of challenge between rivals. Of possibility between those of aligned interest. And of monstrous jealousy between all. Always, they are watching.

Beyond the marble and the gilding, this place is an incestuous rat race, and the tails of its denizens are all knotted together, leaving them to pull against each other like some blind, deluded king made for a freak show. It takes Sartha mere moments to perceive that though few men and women on Earth are more powerful than these, equally few are less

free. They live their entire lives in tangled webs of insecurity and ambition, each knowing that their slightest misstep may put the ignominious ending of their dynasty into motion. Their dreams and fantasies are hopelessly colonized by grudges stretching back generations, fomented during an eon of ark station isolation and writ large now upon the Earth's surface through the movements of armies and populations. Sartha has been to countless rebel parties. They were great, wild, libidinal things, burning howls of passionate defiance lit from the fuel of hope or grief. This place and this night could not be more different. The purified, recycled air is heavy and uneasy, and everyone present is a puppet upon countless strings.

It eases Sartha's anxious mood to imagine Handler holding those strings the same way She holds Sartha's leash. That's the way it should be. That's the way it will be.

As the applause dies away beneath the classical music playing throughout the state room, there is a visible unease as each member of the Empire's ruling elite weighs the risks of boldness against the rewards. Nobody wants to be left behind, but nobody wants to seem overly eager. After a brief moment, a tall woman with a patrician look to her strides toward them with affected friendliness.

"Good evening! So pleased you could make it."

Handler salutes respectfully. "It was my pleasure to be invited, Field Marshal Zarpeton."

"Of course." The field marshal dismisses Handler's salute, and the two women shake hands. "Your achievements have prompted significant conversation of late—to say nothing of the spectacle you just provided for us."

There is a further smattering of approval and applause from those nearby. The air of feigned casualness to it all is almost unbearable; even though they pretend not to be, everyone in the room is listening and sizing Handler up. Zarpeton pretends better than most. There's a certain outgoing bombast to her, a vivacious energy undimmed by her advancing years. She wears a dress uniform even grander than Kynilandre's: a long, blue coat, trimmed in gold and festooned with an almost preposterous quantity of medals. But there's that same unease in her eyes; despite her rank, she too is lying through her teeth with every polite word.

Are these really the people we fought against for so long?

“A fine spectacle, to be sure,” comes a man’s sneering voice. Sartha glares at him as he approaches. “But it is your sense of decorum that perplexes me. We honor you with an invitation, and you bring a traitor into our midst?”

At first Sartha thinks the man is talking about her. A beat later, and she notices that eyes are turning to the still-silent Phylax-General Athina Kynilandre.

“Please, Director Agenor, forgive me for any offense given.” Handler’s smile does not dim. “General Kynilandre erred in her conduct, certainly, but I felt—”

“She attempted the sabotage of an Imperial research program and the destruction of your own assets!” Sartha has to suppress a growl as this man, Agenor, dares to interrupt Her. “What possible reason could one find to partake in such questionable company?”

The party’s collective attention sharpens. They draw near, vulturine. How will Handler take to being so openly tested?

“As the object of her enmity and the target of her intended violence, I petitioned the tribunal for General Kynilandre’s custody—and was granted it,” Handler explains calmly. “I felt it would be a shame to send a once-honorable soldier to a firing squad so quickly. Fortunately, I have managed to show her the error of her ways. I’m satisfied that the general has been entirely rehabilitated.”

“How generous!” Marshal Zarpeton chuckles. Much of the room laughs along with her. Mercy, Sartha imagines, is not an esteemed trait here. General Kynilandre, at the heart of it all, does not offer a word in her own defense. She stands two paces behind Handler, tottering unsteadily, and the strange look on her face is that of an anxious child in a room of adults, not an Imperial soldier among her superiors.

“Athina,” Handler calls out sharply, snapping her to attention. “Kindly demonstrate the fullness of your contrition.”

“Y-yes, Handler.”

Kynilandre sounds nothing like how Sartha remembers her from her many verbal sparring matches with Handler. Like the rest of the room, Sartha watches rapt as the once-proud general wobbles forward, taking center stage, and begins to strip herself naked. First, her gloves. Then,

her jacket. Kynilandre does not simply discard the items as she removes them. Instead, she painstakingly folds each one and sets it out on the floor in front of her. Once she begins to unbutton her jacket, her intent becomes clear. Gasps go up all around the state room, but nobody intervenes. They simply watch as the general fumbles with one button after another, then struggles to fold her shirt neatly on the floor. The process is agonizingly slow, as painful to watch as it must be to perform, and the way Kynilandre goes about it is almost robotic, like it has been taught to her by rote.

Even Sartha shudders when Kynilandre removes her cap to reveal a recently shaved patch of hair and an appalling incision scar held together by large, metal staples.

Eventually, Kynilandre is completely naked. Her every piece of clothing, right down to her wedding ring, is set out before her. A military woman, her sturdy, middle-aged body is honed accordingly, but, facing down the Empire's ruling class, she appears desperately vulnerable. And still the sick performance is not done; Kynilandre sinks to her knees, bends forward, and presses her forehead to the ground in utmost self-abnegation.

"I-I beg f-forgiveness ff-for my c-c-crimes," Kynilandre intones, and the awful stammer in her uncomfortably childlike voice leaves everyone present certain that something within her has been dimmed forever. "I r-remain a f-faithful s-servant of the E-E-Empire."

Handler smiles. The rest of the room is stunned. Silent. This entire performance—and it is, all recognize, a performance—has been, unquestionably, an obscenity. A deplorable breach of whatever code of manners holds sway at events like these. Sartha initially imagines that Handler must be risking ejection or worse, but once she catches the looks in the eyes of the assembled elites, she immediately understands that there was never going to be any true risk at all.

Each one of them is practically drooling with lust.

Not for Kynilandre. She ceased to be anything more than a mote of dust in their eyes the moment it became clear quite how completely she has been defeated. No, the lust is for Handler. For what She can do. For Her power. Of the many pretenses at work in the state room of the Imperial Palace, the greatest by far is the suggestion that the assembled grandees care about anything at all besides the accumulation of strength. All of their politeness and gentility is a cloak pulled across an all-

consuming fetish for victory. For the winner. That is why Handler is here. Why they applauded Her entry. Her achievements have demonstrated to them that She possesses a new kind of power. Strength enough to breach heretofore impenetrable citadels of the human soul. As such, She is, to them, an exalted being. A new Imperial saint. There is no question. They need Her. Carnally, they need Her. She will be a fresh injection of lifeblood into their withered veins. They must have Her strength, and no price is too great.

Sartha casts her gaze about the room. She notices the way they're all dressed. Military trappings are omnipresent. The Empire's civil administration is, in a word, an afterthought. A necessary stomach to digest what it has eaten. The Empire is a conquering army, first and foremost, but second to that it is an alliance of corporate fiefdoms. Every sector of its economy is a tightly integrated conglomerate, the ownership of which has long since calcified from hypothetical meritocracy into open feudalism. Still, service is a universal expectation; even those who have since ascended to the hallowed realms of industry or bureaucracy wear their stripes and epaulettes proudly in order to be taken seriously. But everywhere Sartha looks, there are signs of a new fashion trend taking hold. A penchant for black leather. She already has them dancing to Her tune.

The vicarious thrill of her master's victory has Sartha all but vibrating with pride.

"Very good, Athina," Handler says, in the tone of voice usually reserved for a slow child. "You may rise."

Kynilandre battles to her feet, uncoordinated, and begins gathering her clothes. A single moment of calm passes. Then the parasites descend.

Within moments, Handler is at the center of a maelstrom of activity as military leaders, captains of industry, and Imperial ministers all drift, by feigned happenstance, into Her orbit. Each of them has something to say—offhandedly, of course. A comment, a question, a compliment. Anything She might notice. The scent of desperation hangs even heavier in the air than the cloying perfumes that fill Sartha's nose. Those who feel themselves slipping from the halls of power are the most shameless, the least subtle, in how they vie to impress or flatter Her, but as fear of losing out on Her hand in marriage spreads, it becomes a war of all against all. Only the very greatest can afford to sit back and wait for Handler to approach them, but they equally have the pull to part the

fawning mass before them and rush to Her side, leaving the interrupted weaklings beneath their feet to crawl away and lick their wounds nearby, in adjacent circles of conversation, all pretending that they do not care while watching and waiting for their next chance to bend Handler's ear.

Sartha and Leinth share a look as they press themselves close to Handler's side, fearful of losing themselves amid the aristocratic mass. There are too many people; the colosseum crowd was scarcely less daunting. It's panic-inducing, as a soldier and a hound both. The fierce, vigilant part of Sartha is desperate to forcibly impose order on the chaos, but nothing would displease Handler more. She is helpless. None of the Imperial elites have deigned to acknowledge her directly; she and Leinth are non-people, mere accessories to Handler. Consequently, none of them betray the slightest reluctance to nudge or claw them out of the way if that's what it takes to get a little closer to the guest of honor. Sartha clings to her red leash like it's a lifeline, and searches for the faint hints of leather polish that keep her mercifully grounded.

Just a little longer. Make Her proud. Please, make Her proud.

It's hard. Sartha struggles to find the numbness that usually waits in the wings of her mind. She doesn't have the familiarity of *Ancyor's* cockpit on her side. This is all too different. Too alien. The only thing worse than leaving her eyes open to behold the nightmare is squeezing them shut, leaving her with less distraction from her own thoughts and a greater fear of slipping away from Her side. Sartha reaches out and manages to find one of the lengths of Handler's coat with her fingers. She squeezes it tight, running the texture across her skin. With luck, the din of the party drowns out the sound of her whimpering.

An abrupt, unpleasant touch jolts her from the reverie. The next thing Sartha knows, someone is standing uncomfortably close to her, their hand running up and down her leg. A woman—older, like most in attendance. "Well, well," she purrs unpleasantly. "Just as pretty as the posters, and isn't that a rare thing for one of you? I'm eager to become—" Sartha lets out a loud noise of protest as the woman's hand works its way somewhere intimate. Abruptly, the woman's eyes widen in outrage, stretching out the crow's feet on either side. "You're not... what's the meaning of this?"

"Palatine Audata," Handler intervenes smoothly, noticing the disturbance. "If I may—I'm aware of the rumors about Sartha, but I fear she does not have what you are looking for."

"How disappointing," the palatine fumes. "And after you made such assurances in your letters!"

"A simple confusion," Handler soothes. "Might I direct you to my other hound? Though less famous, I believe she will prove entirely anatomically suitable to your particular tastes."

"Hm. Less pretty, too. A shame," Palatine Audata complains, but nonetheless swoops upon Leinth without hesitation. Leinth flashes Handler a pleading, deer-in-headlights look that goes unheeded as the older woman begins to grope her just as she had Sartha. Once she finds what she is looking for, her displeasure melts into a series of discomfiting, simpering coos. "Oh, my, yes. Very *largely* suitable, I believe. I know just how to handle girls like you. Perfect!"

Sartha's heart goes out to Leinth as she watches the palatine paw at her. Even more so, when Handler unwraps Leinth's leash from her wrist and presents it as a gift.

"As discussed, you're welcome to escort her to a private setting," Handler suggests. "I understand that the individual suites have all been prepared, as usual?"

"Wonderful," Palatine Audata simpers. "I'm fond of a woman who keeps her promises."

The instant she grasps Leinth's leash, an awful transformation overcomes Sartha's sister-hound, as dramatic as Off The Leash but infinitely less merciful. Leinth is not blissfully transported away from herself. She merely slumps, as if her hopeless submission to this awful, groping harridan of a woman has already become a foregone conclusion. Leinth would never disobey Handler—of that, Sartha is certain—but this is something more than mere compliance. Leinth looks defeated. Like all the fight has simply gone out of her. She lacks even the temerity to drag her feet as Palatine Audata leads her by the leash away from Handler and Sartha, and out of the state room via one of many small doorways that line one wall.

Sartha looks at the leash connecting her collar to Handler's wrist. She shudders—then chides herself. She is envious, she decides. Leinth should be grateful to be of service. She's so lucky.

As the party wears on, the frenzy surrounding Handler abates slightly. After a hundred introductions and a thousand exchanges of carefully chosen words, most of the partygoers seem satisfied that they

have forged for themselves openings that can be exploited later. Handler is never left without eager conversationalists, but the business of the Empire's running has more to discuss than just Her. Once Handler can circulate the grand ballroom at Her pleasure, Sartha hears topics such as the conquest of Galatia and the latest *Doru* production figures discussed as lightly as the quality of the food, and each snippet that enters her ears becomes another jagged thought.

This party is evil. These people are evil. Everything they do is evil. But I'm a...

"Hello there... handler? A curious rank." To Sartha's mild surprise, it's a younger woman that approaches Her next, catching them at a rare, quiet moment. There are no hints of military service about her person, but what she lacks in experience she seems eager to make up for in both splendor and arrogance. "Your reputation precedes you. I suppose it is inevitable that the genuine article is disappointing."

Handler tilts Her head inquisitively and smiles. "Then I apologize for disappointing you, madam."

The young woman makes a displeased little tut at the form of address, then turns to Sartha. "And this is she, hm? The famous one?"

"Indeed. Sartha Thrace."

"She is very... interesting." The young woman seems, for a moment, lost in Sartha's eyes. Desire swells within her, although not, Sartha senses, the usual kind. Then she blinks and proffers her hand as if Sartha is to kiss it. "My pleasure, I'm sure."

Muzzled, Sartha is left to awkwardly shake it instead. Strange gesture aside, she is struck by the fact that this is the first time tonight anyone has bothered to speak to her this way. Evidently, Sartha reflects, this one is naive to the dangers of treating someone like her as an equal. Handler, though, seems content to follow suit. "Sartha, this is Careya Ankinoe, representing the interests of Ankinoe Heavy Industries."

"The largest munitions manufacturer in the Empire," Careya boasts. "Perhaps even your ilk has heard of us."

After a moment, Sartha realizes that she has. She's seen that name, Ankinoe—on shattered shell fragments left in the ruins of her friends' mechs. Now it's on the munitions loaded into *Ancyor*.

How many people has she killed, with her shells and bullets? Has she ever

counted? Would she care?

"And how is your father?" Handler asks. "Send him my regards."

Careya laughs bitterly. "First I've heard that in a while! Once everybody decided he's simply waiting for the grave, they turned to kissing up to me instead."

"Is that what you expect of me?"

Careya throws Handler a sharp look—then grins. "Much better that you don't. I'm tired of it already. Here, can I get you a glass of something?"

She plucks a pair of flutes from a nearby tray, but Handler stops her with a hand. "I'm afraid I do not drink."

"Wine?" Careya teases, after a theatrical pause. "Suit yourself. But it's the good stuff—and at our expense, not yours. You know, you really are mysterious. If not booze, I must find out what you do for fun."

"Disappoint you, it seems," She replies softly. "Is there anything I can do to make it up to you, Careya?"

Abruptly, Sartha realizes what is playing out before her eyes. This woman is flirting with Handler.

And Handler is flirting back.

Careya bristles and draws back, though Sartha senses this is merely the push-pull of the chase. "And there it is!" she sighs. "You prove just like all the rest. Besides, you'd have quite the apology to make. Your projects run counter to my family's interests."

"Our recent push into the Orestis Highlands has yielded lucrative contracts, I believe," Handler ripostes. "To say nothing of the extraction possibilities."

"True," Careya admits, before presenting a wagging finger. "But don't pretend you don't know what you're doing. I can read the currents. You're putting out feelers everywhere. You want money. Backing. Resources—resources that will have to come from somewhere. Always tempting to squeeze the munitions budget, isn't it? But bullets win wars, Miss Handler. Not your pets."

She means what she says—but all the same, she and Handler are inching closer to one another. It's like they're dance partners. Sartha

struggles to describe how she feels, watching the two of them toy with each other.

You need to warn her.

She's delighted, obviously. Handler will get whatever She wants from this young woman. That's all that matters. At the same time, though, Sartha is sick with envy. Oh, to enjoy Her attention that way! It would be transcendent. The crowning moment of her life. Sartha would never—could never—regret being Her hound, but there is a certain melancholy to the knowledge that she will never be the one to keep Handler warm at night.

"I understand your concerns," Handler tells her. "But I have every confidence in the possibility of a mutually beneficial arrangement."

"It isn't merely a question, you understand, of material alignment," Careya presses. "But of personal respect. I'm not sure that I can trust a woman who cuts in line, so to speak. Can you wait your turn? Can you show proper deference to a family that has been at the forefront of our leadership for generations? Of that, I am far from confident!"

Sartha sees the cheap victory this girl is trying to score. She's trying to show everyone that she can toy with Handler. That she can extract from Her some profession of fealty, or worse, inflict on her some crass, personal indignity. It's a terrible idea. Sartha knows what happens to people who play Handler's games.

Don't. Please don't. There'll be nothing left of you once She's taken what She wants.

"Deference," Handler echoes thoughtfully. "Respect." She glances at Sartha for a moment, then at Careya. "Yes, I believe I understand what you need. It would be my pleasure to discuss the meaning of deference with you. Intimately."

The way She inclines Her head as if surrendering puts an awful grin on Careya's face. The heiress can't believe the prize she's hooked. She's so young, barely a debutante, with so much to prove—and everyone will get to see her conquer the enigmatic Handler. Sartha, meanwhile, only sees the smile on Her face. She watches silently as Careya takes Handler by Her gloved hand and beckons Her away. It's a triumph, obviously. Sartha should be pleased.

"One moment." Handler pauses, turning to Sartha. "You'll be good,

won't you?"

She means to leave Sartha here, alone. The mere thought puts Sartha on the verge of collapse, but there is only one answer to a question like that. "Yes, Sir."

She'll be good. She'll always be good.

"Good girl." The pleasure does not match the anxious nausea, especially when Handler unwraps Sartha's leash from Her arm, leads her over to a nearby column, and anchors her to it. "I won't be too long."

Sartha can only whimper as Handler and Careya Ankinoe disappear away from her and into one of the darkened doorways at the side of the room.

There is, she soon observes, much coming and going from those. The only mercy that being apart from Handler brings is the ability to be a wallflower, and from that vantage point it's perfectly clear that the ominous rooms Handler and Leinth have retired to are no new depravity for the Empire's elite. Partygoers disappear regularly into the passageways in twos and threes—and not only partygoers. Try as she might, Sartha cannot help but notice that the serving staff are, without exception, comely, young, and entirely too afraid to rebuff the advances of the gerontocrats that surround them. Kynilandre, still only half-dressed, is similarly bundled through a doorway by two thin, lecherous women who seem to delight in her inability to form an eloquent reply to their taunts. Even between the elites, the differences in station, large or small, are made manifest in who drags whom away from the state room's bright lights and into the darkness. Deals and alliances are, it seems, signed with the body rather than with mere words, either to provide all-important leverage or simply for the petty pleasure of conquest. It is never a surprise, least of all to the victims. This is how an empire of predators is ruled.

And Sartha is part of it.

That particular jagged thought looms in her head, larger and more violent than any other. A truly unthinkable thing—but Sartha is beginning to worry that some part of Handler's conditioning has gone slack inside her, pounded into laxity by the overbearing reality of what surrounds her. The thought is terrifying. Sartha is nothing if she is not a good, obedient dog for Her. She wants desperately to be perfect the way She deserves, inside and out. But keeping the thoughts at bay is a

constant, uphill struggle, made ever harder by what is playing out before Sartha's eyes. She cannot simply look away. This is not a nightmare from which she will wake. This is hell, and she one of its demons.

Weren't you supposed to be a hero?

What would a hero do? Stand here and watch? At any moment, Sartha could untie herself from the pillar and rush to the aid of anyone she liked—except she couldn't. She can no more conceive of such a direct act of disobedience than she can of gravity inverting. Freeing herself from the tether would be harder to bear than any physical torture. There could be no worse blasphemy. She attempts to reason with herself using the kind of excuse she always scorned coming from other people's lips: what difference could she make, anyway? There's no point. Whatever she attempted, they'd stop her, and all of this would go on happening regardless. Besides, she hasn't instigated anything. She doesn't want this. She's simply present. It isn't her fault. It isn't her concern.

She can't make herself believe it—but she can't act, either. Sartha is left a complicit bystander, her mind eating itself as greedily as the monsters before her devour their own.

Very heroic, Sartha. Don't you remember when you used to fight Her?

"N-no," Sartha groans to herself. She does not remember. She does not want to remember. There is nothing to remember. Handler is her all. Her adored. Her divinity. She is the woman with the power to make the world make sense, and no step away from Her side has ever brought Sartha anything but misery.

That is ironclad. Sartha tried, before. She tried as hard as she could. It ended badly.

But if the world is as simple as that, this should be simple too. Handler wants this; therefore, it is good. Handler participates in this; therefore, it is good. Sartha tries very, very hard to make herself believe it. She watches as another servant is dragged beyond the light by reaching hands. It's good, she insists to herself, it's right, but her heart aches for him just as it ever would have. There is something within her that, even now, stands stubborn and defiant. Something the day's agonies have brought back into the light. Something Sartha resents above all. Sartha Thrace buries her muzzled face in her hands, pressure building behind her eyes, and silently prays for Handler to return and take all of her jagged thoughts away again.

“What do you think is the matter with it?”

“Is it in pain?”

“Is it dangerous?”

“Gods, no. Just look at it!”

The laughter and whispers that reach Sartha’s ears seem to meld with the acrimonious voices inside her head, keeping the soporific peace she craves even farther from reach. She does not need to look up from her palms to sense that she has become, once more, the focus of attention. Handler is the star of the show, but she remains an entertaining curiosity and, in a place like this, the slightest hint of anguish is blood in the water.

“What do you think she did to it?”

“Who knows? It looks broken. Can’t imagine why we’d fund nonsense like this.”

“You haven’t heard? It’s terribly effective. The other one, too.”

“Is that what they say?”

“Oh yes. Bestial, by all accounts. Isn’t that funny?”

Sartha can’t tell how many voices there are. She cannot be sure how many of them are real. The music and the background chatter have become a wall of noise. Sartha can’t bring herself to look. She senses somehow that it would be too much. The overload is worse than any time she’s tried to pilot. When a probing hand brushes against her shoulder, it sends a ragged sob through her.

“Look at that! Maybe it really is broken.”

“What was its name again?”

“Sartha Thrace. The famous one.”

“Thrace? Is it really her?”

“Apparently.”

“You’d never think to look at it, would you?”

“Makes you wonder what she does with it all day.”

More laughter. More hands, each more adventurous than the last. As one crawls its way across Sartha’s chest, she tries to simply give herself to

the dissociation. Not so different from the many, many times she has been enjoyed by post-sortie pilots. But it's so hard here; when she grows distant to herself, the whispers from further afield still carry to her ears, each one a fresh pinprick of horror.

"...*Doru* production targets exceeded expectations last month, thanks to..."

"...and the local separatists in the eastern range have now been subdued..."

"...prepared to liquidate the striking workers, of course..."

"...twelve hundred or so dead, a fine tally..."

"...*erion's* pilot, dead? Is that what they're saying? No, I heard she's here at the party somewhere..."

At that last, faint snippet, Sartha drops her hands and looks up. Who was it? Where? She realizes that she's surrounded by a gaggle of women, all keen to poke and prod her, all delighted by her sudden activity. Beyond, there's just more of the same—Imperial bigwigs walking back and forth, laughing, talking, drinking. But what of *Kosterion's* pilot? Sartha hasn't seen anyone that looks like her. Perhaps it wasn't her. Perhaps it was. She looks around, but it's difficult to see over the parasites closing in around her.

"Please!" Sartha erupts. "I need to—"

"It speaks!" One woman, a leering creature in a handsome, old-fashioned suit declares, to a chorus of laughter. "Not totally braindead, then."

"I wonder what other noises it can make?" suggests her appallingly willowy companion, giggling filthily.

"Do you think she'd mind if we tried it out?"

"Don't be silly! That's what they're for, isn't it? I've heard stories. Besides, you saw how she offered up the other one to that awful chaser Audata."

"Oh, like you're any better!" They all laugh.

"Please..." Sartha begs. She wants to say more. So much more. Things Handler would disapprove of. As another of the Imperials starts fondling her red leash, Sartha tries peering past them again, hoping against hope

that She will return in time to save her.

She catches sight of a long, black coat and hears growling.

At first, Sartha wonders if she's making the sound herself—but she knows that she doesn't frighten these women the way this sound seems to. With huffy, displeased sniffs and looks of affront, they all rapidly make themselves scarce, giving way to a new, swaggering presence. Sartha is about to smile at her savior, but when she sees who really wears that leather coat, her face turns to stone.

"Hey, Sartha," Kione Monax sings out, parting the crowd of Imperial elites before Her and leaving a distinct wake behind Her as She picks Her way through the party. "Sorry if I interrupted any fun. It's just that you looked like—" Abruptly, She breaks off into ugly, snorting, helpless laughter at the joke She's yet to make. Sartha glances at the empty wine glass in Kione's hand. Not Her first tonight, judging from Her obvious drunkenness. By the time Kione has recovered from Her giggling fit, She's right beside Sartha and fixing her with a manic, gleeful expression that leaves her distinctly unnerved. "You looked like you needed rescuing."

Kione's sudden presence arrests Sartha's panic attack—but not pleasantly. It's like being plunged in freezing water. It's still, but it hurts. "Yes, Sir," Sartha replies robotically. "Thank You, Sir."

Kione's lips curl with displeasure; Her face darkens. "Oh, c'mon! Not even a smile for an old comrade? What kind of friend are you, Sartha?"

Sartha retreats even deeper into herself. She isn't sure how long she can hold out, but at least Kione's presence seems to keep the Imperial elites at bay. At first, Sartha wonders why—then she sees that Kione is holding a leash of Her own, and on the end of it is the source of that loud, hateful growling.

The creature that was once Amynta Tet stands several paces behind her handler, drooling through her muzzle and throwing foul, feral glares at anyone who dares to venture too close. Unlike Sartha and Leinth, she isn't wearing her own clothes but rather a straitjacket made of thick, heavy leather, straps as tight as can be to bind her arms behind her back. It is, Sartha knows, a necessity. There is no light in her eyes, and she has savaged more than one Imperial pilot who did not carefully mind Kione's instructions whilst enjoying her.

Sartha dares not imagine what, precisely, it took to reduce a person to

this. Amynta has become a stranger to humanity itself, a rabid, speechless animal whose sole drive is a warped, overriding instinct to protect and serve the woman who made her that way. She appears crude compared to Handler's pets, but Sartha knows that she is no failure; Handler is content to allow Her protégé considerable artistic leeway. Besides, Amynta was not a hero, merely a pilot with potential who earned the misfortune of Kione's attention. There was less that needed to be saved to guarantee her effectiveness. As such, Kione elected to cut, and cut deep. The results are undeniably effective. Amynta's wildness on the battlefield surpasses even Sartha's now. But watching the two of them, the one thought that lingers within Sartha's mind is the fact that, after all She's been through, this—this mindless beast—is, it appears, Kione's ideal companion.

How truly, deeply sad.

"I'm sorry, Sir," Sartha replies, eventually.

"Hm." As Amynta lets out a particularly loud, snapping hiss at an overcurious partygoer, Kione reaches out and places Her hand under the girl's chin, rubbing and petting. At once, Amynta's rabid demeanor evaporates. She gives herself utterly to Kione's touch, all but moaning from the bliss, Her eyes are shut and her face wearing a rare, peaceful smile. "There we go," Kione coos. "Simmer down, puppy."

Is this what You wanted from me, Ki? You wanted me to be this?

"Great party, huh?" Kione declares, turning back to Sartha. "Sure beats a dirty trench. And the wine!" She lifts Her glass in celebration. "They should have tried paying me with this stuff sooner. Would've switched sides a long time ago."

"Yes, Sir."

"Oh, don't just 'yes, Sir' me!" Kione scolds. "Where's your sense of fun? We had plenty of it, in the good old days. I miss it."

Sartha looks at Her carefully. Does She mean that? "I apologize, Sir." No. She won't let herself fall for it again.

"Gods. What did She do to you this time? You almost seemed like the real deal out there against that monster—eventually, anyway." Kione goes to sip from Her glass. Her scowl deepens when She realizes it's still empty. "And where did She get off to? Leaving you all alone like this is..." Kione's mood inverts again. "Well, actually, it's really funny. The lost

puppy look you're wearing is just adorable."

"Thank you, Sir."

Leave me alone. I can't handle any more of You right now, Kione.

Instead, Kione lounges against the column Sartha is leashed to. "Kosterion, huh?" She muses. "Can't believe they had that old thing still lying around. I still remember the stories. Never thought I'd actually get to see it fight. Almost seems like a waste to send it out there just for you to carve up. I asked, though; apparently, they don't have a real supply of the fuel, and the internals were already on their last legs. So, one last rodeo."

She stares into space for a moment; pensive or simply drunk, Sartha cannot tell. Sartha tenses up. A question presses at her. If Kione asked around, maybe She knows.

"The pi-" Sartha starts to say, before cutting herself off. She makes her face a mask. "Yes, Sir."

Kione's mood flips yet again. "Oh, why can't you just talk to me like you used to?" She demands.

The answer is obvious. It's because there's no point.

You let Her ruin you. You let Her pour poison into You, and now it sings in Your veins.

Once Handler gets into your head, you are no longer a person of your own. Sartha has learnt that lesson better than anyone. Kione looks resplendent, certainly. As impressive as anyone else present, Her long, black, double-breasted handler's coat lined with crimson to match Her old pilot's suit and adorned with the flair of golden buttons and epaulettes—but Sartha understands fully that the woman standing before her is nothing more than a thin, paper cut-out of the friend she once knew. She is now Handler's creature. In that sense, perhaps the two of them are exactly alike. It's a blessing, of course. That, Sartha cannot question. But still—what could two such beings possibly have to say to one another?

"I'm sorry, Sir," Sartha replies stiffly. "What would You like me to talk about?"

How could You do that to me? How could You let Yourself become like Her?

But, Sartha swiftly reminds herself, Kione is not truly to blame for any of it. Who was sent to Her like a plague rat? Who preyed upon Her

passions and Her compassion both? Who, long before that, planted the seed of Her madness?

“Whatever you want!” Kione pinches the bridge of Her nose. “I just wanted to hear... ugh, forget it. You don’t have anything worth saying, do you?”

Sartha smiles at her sadly. “No, Sir.”

There’s much she could say. Much she’s wanted to say before. Sartha thinks back to that moment they shared together, before Handler brought the ex-mercenary to Amynta. Kione had been on the cusp of offering to try to save her one last time—and, in a moment of sacrilegious insanity, Sartha had been on the cusp of accepting it. The temptation that swelled within her as Kione made one last search for Sartha’s soul earned her many, many hours under Handler’s careful supervision down in the Kennels when Sartha confessed it to Her afterward. What kept her silent was the certain futility of such an attempt. Handler knows best. She is always many moves ahead. It is better to simply surrender to Her. Besides, what good would it have done anyone to subject Kione Monax to even more of Sartha Thrace?

“You always find new ways to let me down, Sartha. Even now,” Kione hisses—before stretching upright, turning, and waltzing away, Amynta in tow behind Her. “And you’re no fun at all!” Kione calls back, playfully pouty, as She vanishes amid the bodies. “Enjoy the party, babe.”

Sorry, Ki. You’re better off without me. Always were.

In Kione’s absence, Sartha can try to relax, but countless other anxieties immediately begin to seep back in, and it is no comfort at all to think about Sartha’s old friend participating in the events going on all around her. From every side, Sartha hears bargains struck and spoils of war carved up, and the mentions of places she once knew well—Leukon, Orestis, Eupanro—remind her that however petty the deals and rivalries playing out at this party, they are transacted in blood and land. Moreover, there is a perceptible, tidal current at play. Even in Her absence, Handler remains a key topic of conversation, but the things Sartha hears are no longer dismissive or mocking. She hears approval. Eagerness. Cooperation. There is a sense that things are being put into motion, and that most of the Empire’s ruling class is keen to contribute lest they be left behind. Sartha is pleased, obviously. Her master, ascendant. Sartha, a perfect showcase of Her designs. She’s proud. That’s what she should feel.

Remember when you dreamt of smashing all this to rubble? Why are you helping to build it instead?

"Shut up," Sartha mutters to herself. She butts her head repeatedly against the column, trying not to draw attention to herself. "Shut up. Shut up. Shut up."

Eventually, Handler reemerges from the dark passageways lining the Imperial state room. Sartha has never been more grateful to see Her. She is not alone. Careya Ankinoe is with Her, but whatever pang of jealousy Sartha might have felt at the sight of the two of them together immediately evaporates as she takes stock of the pair. Though Careya is not wearing a leash, Sartha finds it easy to imagine one given the way she trots submissively at Handler's heel. Handler, naturally, remains composed and immaculate. From the state of Her clothes, it does not appear that She has undressed. Her sole blemish is a smear of something on her lower lip. It's red, and so vibrant Sartha first takes it for lipstick, but it appears to match the bright, blossoming mark on Careya's neck. The heiress, by contrast, is unmistakably disheveled and diminished. Sartha notes that there is something black underneath her long, painted fingernails; she looks down and sees that Handler's boots are a touch shinier than they were before. She's struck by a brief pang of jealousy. But it is the stars in Careya Ankinoe's eyes that tell the full story. She looks at Handler with the ardor of the newly converted, and whatever reluctance she had to make common cause with Her is very obviously long gone.

"Very good, Sartha," Handler says, untying her from the column. The warmth Her praise grants Sartha is a mere flicker. She is at her limit. She needs to leave. But Handler does not seem to notice her distress, and has no such mercy in mind. "Now, come along. There's somebody I'd like for you to meet."

Leashed, Sartha is helpless to do anything but follow as Handler guides her back into the heart of the party. They intrude on a small circle of conversation between military officers, all of whom greet Handler politely rather than warmly. She salutes the most senior there, a huge, bear-like woman whose jacket strains to fit around her barrel chest. "Dromos-General Semni Rhadama," Handler hails. "Might this be a convenient moment to prevail upon your time?"

General Rhadama looks directly at Sartha, and the vile grin on her face puts a pit in the hound's stomach. "Yes. Yes, I think so." She

exchanges a few parting words with her comrades, all of whom laugh unpleasantly at Sartha and raucously clap the general on the back. After following Handler a few paces away, she asks, “She’s the genuine article, yes? Sartha Thrace?”

“I give my word,” Handler replies, smiling. “This is she—although not unchanged, of course.”

“Hmm,” General Rhadama muses. “We shall see. She’d better not disappoint me, if you want my support.”

“I believe, general, that your satisfaction is completely guaranteed,” Handler promises. “Do with her as you like. But no lasting damage, please. And I suggest you do not remove the muzzle.” Her lips curl upward. “She bites.”

After a brief pause, the general decides that She is joking and laughs uproariously. Then, Handler offers over Sartha’s leash.

The sensation of this woman’s strong, meaty fingers wrapping around her red leash sends shivers through Sartha’s soul. Evidently, she is to share Leinth’s fate. Her status as Handler’s favorite has not protected her from serving as a piece of meat to be shared around however best greases Her path to power. Naturally, Sartha is grateful to be of service—and a little of that gratitude rubs off on General Rhadama. It’s the leash. Now that it is in the hands of another, she truly feels it—some meaning, some symbolism, woven through her mind to keep her compliant. Merely holding it makes the general shine a little brighter in her mind’s eye. Against the two goddesses looming over her, Sartha is without words. All she can do is throw Handler one last look that goes entirely unacknowledged as General Rhadama unceremoniously drags her over to the nearest doorway and into the darkness.

The passageways beyond the state room are, it transpires, a labyrinth. Dense and cramped, they weave and wind aimlessly, following no particular layout that Sartha can discern. Here, the illusion of classical grandeur is less convincing; the walls are paneled and the floors marble, but it is plainly an attempt to paint over what was once nothing more than a warren of bulkheads and service tunnels. Almost immediately, Sartha is lost. It does not help that the tunnels are barely lit, or that General Rhadama’s long, impatient strides result in her yanking Sartha against sharp corners more than once.

“Keep up,” General Rhadama chides, without looking back. “You have

no idea how long I've waited for this. I refuse to let you waste a single minute."

"Yes, sir," Sartha replies, the leash drawing the honorific from her lips. As they walk, they pass by many, many identical doors. Most are closed; some have noises coming from behind them. Pleasure and distress, in equal measure. Sartha tries to shut it all out. She just needs to get through this.

Make Her proud.

Eventually, General Rhadama decides that they have come to the right place. She pushes open a door, leads Sartha within, and locks it behind them. The large chamber is dominated by a huge, luxurious bed and lit only by a low strip that glows orange-pink, the strange illumination it provides accentuating the room's other, tastefully intimate furnishings—including a huge, bulky cabinet, with one door suggestively open to reveal a wide array of costumes, toys, and torture implements. Anything a woman like General Rhadama might need to satisfy herself.

Aren't you lucky, Sartha? You get to be a good dog. That's what you want, isn't it?

General Rhadama sits herself down heavily on the edge of the bed, legs splayed apart, and surveys Sartha, standing awkwardly in front of her. The huge woman's battle-scarred face forms into an unpleasant sneer. "So," she scoffs. "We finally meet face-to-face."

Sartha blinks, confused.

"You really do look just like the posters," the general muses. "Just as pretty." She reaches out and strokes the side of Sartha's face, and the particular inflection she uses suggests that, to her, 'pretty' is a flower to be plucked and pressed. "This is new though, huh?" Her fingers curl around the bars at the front of Sartha's muzzle. She moves her hand suddenly from side to side, up and down, jolting Sartha's head around uncomfortably. General Rhadama laughs. "Now isn't that something?"

"Yes, sir," Sartha responds, because it seems that a response is expected.

"Yes, *sir*," General Rhadama mocks. "Bet you never thought you'd end up calling me that, huh? Tell me, am I what you expected?"

"You..." Thanks to the leash, Sartha's urge to please runs deep, but the

question stumps her.

“Yes?” General Rhadama leans in, arrogant yet eager.

There is clearly no avoiding it. “I don’t know who you are,” Sartha confesses.

That fouls the general’s mood at once. “You’re lying,” she spits.

Sartha says nothing.

“You know who I am,” General Rhadama insists. Sartha remains silent. “We fought on opposite sides at Hebros Ridge. I commanded the Imperial forces.”

“Oh.”

There are myriad layers to the lacuna in Sartha’s memory that this woman seeks to occupy. Sartha does not believe they have met, and even if they have she does not want to remember her. She does not want to remember the battle either. The struggle, the camaraderie, the victory. There are cracks on the walls of her mind, and Hebros Ridge pulls at the bricks. She’s already lost the ability to tell where the jagged thoughts end and begin. Handler would be so disappointed. And above all, Sartha simply does not want to remember. She does not want to be a person, with the thoughts and memories of people. She wants to submerge. She wants to make it through this night as a warm, willing, limp body, viewing herself as if at a distance.

That is not what General Rhadama wants. “You must remember,” she scowls. “We fought! I took to the field in my *Doru* Custom. It was quite the duel. You carved my machine in half, in the end.” She raises her hand to her own face and traces a large, half-healed gash running from chin to chest. “This scar,” she boasts, “I got from *Ancyor*’s claws!”

Sartha lets out a soft groan. She feels it, suddenly: the chill in the air, the rust-red dust filling the sky. No duel, though. Just dozens upon dozens of Imperial mechs, each falling by Sartha’s hand with a single stroke. A whirlwind of violence, and her at its heart. Sartha feels invincible. After years of skirmishing and insurgency, beating the Empire in a battle like this feels like nothing short of history. It-

That’s right. You remember.

Sartha makes a fist and pounds it against her thigh. The dull pain isn’t enough to banish the vision. General Rhadama narrows her eyes,

regarding her like a wounded animal. “That bitch really did a number on you,” she marvels. “I’ve seen a bullet to the head do less damage. No wonder you don’t remember.” She barks a laugh. “Good thing I didn’t bring you here for the scintillating conversation. Now get on your fucking knees.”

The force of the sudden command leaves Sartha trembling. General Rhadama is still holding her leash; moreover, Sartha is grateful. Orders do not demand thought, merely obedience. She sinks to her knees before the Imperial commander, and tries to ignore the sensation of soil and rock beneath her.

“Just like a trained dog,” General Rhadama gurgles. She is plainly not sober, and the prospect of ravaging Sartha Thrace has her still more intoxicated. “Incredible. If I wasn’t seeing it with my own two eyes, I wouldn’t believe it. Guess your handler really can keep her promises. Besides, no use ending up like that dolt Kynilandre.”

She’s going to be proud, Sartha. Isn’t that what you want? Doesn’t that make you happy?

“Take it off,” is General Rhadama’s next command. “All of it. Let’s see what they don’t put on the recruitment posters.”

Again, Sartha obeys. It’s tricky on her knees, but she senses that is part of the point. The general snickers as she shucks awkwardly out of her pants, and howls with laughter when Sartha looks straight up so she can lift her top off over her muzzle. Sartha doesn’t mind, even though nakedness leaves her exposed to the freezing winds that crest the ridge. She ignores them. It isn’t real, and obedience is enough for her. General Rhadama is a poor stand-in for Handler, but even so, Sartha takes a kind of reward in pleasing her. She is a well-trained animal.

“Oh yeah,” General Rhadama drools. “Very pretty. Bet I can make you even prettier. Get up and undress me.”

Sartha rises to her feet; General Rhadama does too, although that’s the only help she provides. Sartha is left to suffer her mocking laughter and heavy-handed groping as she struggles with the general’s elaborate dress uniform. Once it’s unfastened, the gigantic woman’s body slumps. She must have once been built like a demigoddess; there’s still plenty of musculature underneath, but Knossos’s many luxuries have taken their toll, and without her tight-fitting jacket, her barrel-chested silhouette gives way to a distinct gut. Sartha soon finds herself drowning in the

general's scent: thick, heady cologne, and beneath it, thicker sweat. She's grateful for it. Better than the high explosive and burnt steel she tastes upon the air. Once she is down to her underclothes, the general shoves Sartha aside.

"On the bed," she grunts. "Now."

Another order. Good. Sartha can handle those.

As directed, Sartha lies down on her back, exposed and motionless. General Rhadama makes a brief detour to the toy cabinet to select a harness and strap-on, a cruel, gargantuan shaft that would surely split Sartha in half. But that, it seems, is for later; General Rhadama sets it down nearby and mounts Sartha, the bed beneath them creaking from her sheer bulk. Sartha whimpers as she feels the general's gut settle against her body, and senses the strength in the monstrous arms that rest on her shoulders as General Rhadama presses her down into the ruddy earth. Into the sheets.

"Not so brave now, little girl," General Rhadama leers. In the strange, half-light, cast from below, her face is that of a weatherworn gargoyle. "Never thought I'd have you on one of these beds."

Sartha says nothing. She relaxes herself. Whatever comes, it does not matter. It will pass. She is no more than a body.

"I'm going to enjoy this." General Rhadama leans back and cracks her knuckles. "Take a nice, deep breath. You'll need it."

Just meat. Obediently, Sartha fills her lungs with air. The moment she does, General Rhadama makes a fist and punches her in the belly.

The sound of Sartha's violent gagging intermingles with that of General Rhadama's sadistic laughter. Sartha's body tries to bend double, but the weight of the woman above her prevents it. Pain throbs through her. She feels vomit burning at the back of her mouth and fights to swallow it. Not willingly. Instinctively. It is natural, to her, to try to please. To assist with her own abuse.

Stupid, broken dog.

"Sorry about that," the general hisses. "Guess I've learned a few things from you tricky rebel bitches."

Sartha shakes her head amid spasms of pain. She's not—she's a hero—or—but-

The moment she manages to gulp a single healthy breath, the next blow comes. A huge, meaty fist plants itself in her abdomen, and Sartha is left shaking and spluttering anew. Above her, General Rhadama is drooling down her chin and rocking her hips back and forward against Sartha's body. Nothing could make it clearer: this is what gets her off. This, to her, is sex.

"Show me that you can take the next one," she grunts. "I bet you know how."

Sartha does. She exhales as best she can and tenses her abdominal muscles to prepare for the next punch. When it comes, it's still more than she can handle. She avoids spluttering, but it still feels like she's been hit by a mech. Maybe she has. She feels her head rattling against her cockpit seat, stabilizers firing beneath her as *Ancyor* rights itself and she—

"Atta girl," General Rhadama says sardonically. "Here's your reward."

Another blow. This one, a hooked punch that crashes into Sartha's side. Sartha bucks beneath General Rhadama and wheezes in agony. She's been beaten before, but never with such strength or such consummate sadism. But the pain isn't the real problem. The problem is that the pain isn't anchoring her the way it usually does.

"Fuck!" General Rhadama pants. "I really needed the stress relief." She looks down at Sartha, surveying her handiwork. Each blow left a bright red mark, and the ones on her stomach are already beginning to curdle a deep, ugly purple as split veins beneath the skin ooze into the surrounding meat. Then she studies Sartha's face. "Huh. Got some look in your eye there. Guess the real you really is in there somewhere."

Sartha shakes her head violently from side to side. No. No, no, no.

What are you so afraid of?

"I'm glad, honestly," General Rhadama crows. "More fun this way. Besides, it's nothing a good beating won't solve."

After that, her blows fall like the rain. Anywhere. Everywhere. Before long, Sartha's entire body is covered in bruises. Her chest, her arms, her thighs—nowhere is spared. Vicious hammer blows to her breasts leave them throbbing with pain, and constant attention to her solar plexus robs her of her breath over and over again. Sartha tries, every time, to give herself to the pain. To let it become her whole world. She can't.

Instead, she finds herself suppressing not just her gasping, not just her vomit, but something hot-blooded and dangerous. She finds herself struggling against General Rhadama—genuinely struggling, long-suppressed battle instincts firing off in defiance of reality at the distant boom of Imperial artillery splitting the air—although the mountain of a woman finds nothing but amusement in her frantic attempts to wriggle free.

“That’s the spirit!” she jeers. “They usually pass out by now. Much better this way. You’re a real special one, Thrace. Already looking forward to the next time.”

The next time. This will be repeated. Sartha does not bother hoping it’s an empty threat, or pretending to relish the prospect of further service. This is her fate, from now on—this, forever. Hebros Ridge, forever. She finds herself struggling harder. Maybe it’s the pain. Maybe it’s sheer survival instinct. Maybe it’s the way that, looking up at her like this, General Rhadama looks like nothing more than every bully Sartha ever wanted to put in the ground.

“I guess this already qualifies as our second date,” General Rhadama guffaws. “You know, we went back to Hebros a little while ago. Nice and integrated now. I even had some fun there.”

Red pulses before Sartha’s eyes. Maybe she knocked her head. Maybe she’s still there, that day, beneath that rusty sky, trying not to choke on the dust and the ash.

You can stop her.

“N-nnooooo,” Sartha gurgles to herself. It only eggs the general on.

“Oh yes,” she counters. “Plenty of rebels to flush out. None as pretty as you, of course. But I made ‘em pretty.”

General Rhadama takes a moment to fondle the bruises on Sartha’s belly, now almost black. Her lusts are overcoming her. Red in the face and breathless from her own abuses, she pauses between blows to grope Sartha, her grasping palms every bit as rough as her fists.

“Maybe I should thank you,” the general drools. “For egging them all on. Lots of Sartha Thrace wannabes. They’re always so brave until they get some alone time with me. Fuck, it’s hot.”

“Nnnhggnnn,” Sartha spits. She can’t keep it all in. Her chest feels like it’s going to explode. Her neurons, firing, scream at her that she is in

combat. That she needs to fight. That she needs to save them all. “Ssshutttt upppp.” She needs a minute to collect herself. Being good for Handler is more important than anything, and Sartha knows she’s being very, very bad. General Rhadama doesn’t care.

“Stupid cunt.” She punches Sartha in the gut again. Sartha barely feels it. Her splitting sensation in her head is worse. “You’re not in charge here. I am.”

Sartha tries to nod. She knows. The leash. Handler’s instructions. Those are what matter. Make Her proud. Make Her proud.

Is that really what you want?

“You lost,” General Rhadama sneers. “Get used to it.” She bends forward, burying Sartha with her entire weight. Her hands are all over the hound, grabbing, slapping, pinching. “Some hero you were.”

The sounds that escape Sartha’s throat are utterly inhuman. It’s too much. It’s all been too much, right from the start. Faces flash before her. *Kosterion’s* pilot. Leinth. Amynta. Every young servant she’s seen dragged into a room with one of these monsters. Then Hebros, and every soldier that fights by her side. She remembers them all. She always makes sure of it.

Is this really all you want?

“Yyyyyesssss,” Sartha drools. It is. Isn’t it? She wants to be nothing, and she is nothing. It’s bliss. It’s Handler’s gift. She wants to stop fighting.

Then why do you feel this way?

“Good girl. But don’t worry,” General Rhadama mocks, between planting disgusting, wet, violent kisses on Sartha’s neck. Sartha can feel the huge woman’s stickiness seeping through her underwear, staining Sartha’s torso. “We’re gonna make you a hero again, I hear. The propaganda minister is already creaming herself over it. Your pretty face is going to be on posters again.”

Sartha all but seizes up as she hears that. She can feel the walls coming down. Her hands clutch at the bedsheets, balling into fists, and she feels *Ancyor’s* controls beneath her fingertips. She makes one last bid for repression. “Pleasepleasepleasepleaseee,” she wails.

“Aren’t you an eager little freak?” General Rhadama snorts, her voice

muffled by Sartha's flesh. "Your handler will be proud."

Make Her proud. Make Her proud. Make her proud make her proudmakeherproudmakeherproud.

"Cats out of the bag now, after the show you put on," the general drawls. "All the rebels are going to know what you are. It's perfect, if you ask me."

Sartha is sobbing now. She wants to be anywhere else. She wants, finally, to be rescued. Handler, Leinth, Kione. She'd take any hand that's offered. She is unraveling. Numbness is the farthest thing from her now. The barest sensation is a supernova, and a death. The light against her eyes, the bedsheets beneath her, the awful, gorging wetness of General Rhadama's lips—each tears her asunder. Each transports her to that battlefield of awful glory.

"All your little friends are going to see them," General Rhadama pants. "You, in this muzzle. And then they're gonna end up exactly like you. Just the way they always wanted."

Make it stop. Even now, you can stop this.

"Sssto-tooooo!" Sartha begs. The ultimate taboo beckons her. She is terrified. She feels like a newborn, overwhelmed and helpless.

"Speaking of." She cannot see, but General Rhadama's booming voice still comes to her. "Let's get it out of the way," she hisses. "I want to taste these lips."

"Nononononono!" Sartha howls. Not this. Above all, not this. If she has her muzzle, maybe she can still be good. Maybe she can still make Her proud. "Ssssheee ssaidddd nnnootttt—" The general just snorts. Sartha flails her head around madly, but General Rhadama subdues her with ease. Sartha feels those meaty hands fiddling with the muzzle fastenings. "Pppleaseeee!" Sartha tries again, even though she's so far beyond coherent speech. "D-Donttt mmmmake me re-re-reemm..."

Remember why She needs to keep you muzzled.

The muzzle comes free. Lips against hers. A fat grub of a tongue invading her mouth. Too much, too much, too much. The sudden, unbearable awfulness of all of this dawns on Sartha Thrace like a cruel dawn sun. This woman, this party, this building, this city, this empire, this world. The mere air on her skin is an agitation. All of the evil she has drunk is eating her from within.

Set it ablaze.

"Fuck, you taste good!" It's no longer General Rhadama. Just a voice. A scream. A hateful *Doru* war-horn. "I need to taste you down here too." As the heaving woman atop her pulls away, Sartha's convulsions briefly unbalance her. She slumps atop Sartha again, and Sartha's face is buried in the crook of her neck. Suddenly, her mouth is alive. The woman laughs. "What's that? A better lover than a fighter, huh?"

Sartha is hot everywhere. She's flooded with it. Engulfed by it. She keeps going. She cannot control herself. She is a prisoner of her own body. Unthinking, she wraps her limbs around the woman's trunk. She keeps working her mouth against her abuser's skin. But she needs more. So much more. She feels something within her coming uncoiled under the immense strain. A strength, a ferocity, long forgotten. The same force she wielded that day, above the ridge. In the throes of unimaginable desperation, Sartha reaches out to claim it.

It's yours, not Hers. You know what makes you strong.

Yes, she does.

Off The Leash.

Sartha bites down. Very, very hard.

A great spray erupts into her mouth. There is a scream. The mountain above her fights to pull away. Sartha won't let it. She holds on, wrestling, keeping her lips pressed to the wound. She bites again, and again, and again, and again. Every heartbeat fills her mouth. Sartha swallows greedily. It's like she's been thirsty for years. Nothing has ever been so nourishing. She bites harder. She pulls back, meat between her teeth, and tears it away. A huge chunk of bloody flesh is in her mouth. She swallows that too. Her body is drenched. Her body is throbbing. Now Sartha is the one rolling her hips and gyrating, as need sings within her. She feels glorious. She laughs wildly. She bites. She rips. She tears. She's winning. The woman above her is weakening. Sartha doesn't stop. She had her fun. This is Sartha's turn. This is Sartha's sex. Her teeth reach the windpipe, and the screaming becomes something else, a wretched, guttural death rattle that leaves Sartha jubilant. She is a huntress with a kill, and she will not stop.

Not until it's over.

Eventually, General Rhadama goes still. She goes pale and cold.

Sartha wriggles out from underneath her and clambers to her feet. It's like she's waking from a stupor, though this feels more surreal than any dream she's ever had. The room is even more hellish than it was before, the nearby walls coated with arterial spray. Sartha looks down at the corpse she has made. The awfulness of her transgression dawns on her. Handler will be furious. Beyond furious. This will doom them both. Dread turns Sartha's veins colder than the Hebros winds howling all around her. The events of the previous minutes feel suddenly impossible. Unthinkable. How did she do this? *Did* she do this? It felt like it was all happening to somebody else. Sartha reaches up and touches her lips. Sure enough, they come away red and wet. But that's not all she feels on her face. There's something else. Something that frightens her even more deeply.

A big, eager, wolf-like grin.

CHAPTER THREE

There is a spot on the wall, just above the bed, where the blood has splattered in a strange pattern that looks like a word, or perhaps a number. Sartha stares at it, trying to decode the meaning, as whatever adrenaline-fueled hunting thrill painted a grin on her face rapidly fades. It takes the expression with it, until Sartha is certain the empty, slack look remaining on her face is a perfect match for the utter, stupefied vacancy at the heart of her being. She cannot move. She cannot even blink. She cannot act in any way, because action belongs to the world, to reality, and Sartha's act of supreme sacrilege has set her apart from it.

Not simply the murder of General Rhadama, of course. The disobedience. The failure. What is Sartha Thrace, if she is not Handler's devoted hound?

A stupid, broken mutt.

Sartha does not care about Rhadama. She is—was—a brute. A scourge on the Earth. All the same, her corpse exerts a hypnotic pull. Sartha has seen bodies before. Every pilot has. This is special. The spectacle of her own violence, carved into flesh. Rhadama's ruined neck yawns at her, a second mouth, scraps of skin like ragged teeth, the base of her actual tongue visible through the hole Sartha's fangs tore in her esophagus. The general's limp face, half-coated in gore, remains contorted, her sadistic glee and final terror both frozen in amber. Around the corpse, on the saturated bedsheets, her blood forms inky, black, sagging pools that reflect the lurid half-light filling the room. It makes Rhadama's body appear somehow luminous. Like it's a wound. Like it's a conduit to the underworld.

Good. That's where she belongs.

That's where you belong.

With immense effort, Sartha tears her gaze from the thing and plants her head in her hands. She clasps her hands tight around her temples as if hoping to hold together the broken pieces. She must. Panic would be a blessing. So would unconsciousness. Sartha has never been afforded luxuries like those. Not even in the worst of circumstances. She's a hero, after all.

And a soldier. Sartha doesn't get to give up. She must make a plan. That need is as painful as any other thought remaining in her head, but resisting it would be even worse. Briefly, she considers hiding the body somehow. Scrubbing the walls. Burning the sheets. There's no question that Rhadama's disappearance will be noticed, but perhaps Sartha can conceal her participation. But that begs the question: who, exactly, would she be protecting?

Her, of course.

Sartha is no expert on how all this works, but from where she stands, it's clear enough that what she's done is sure to ruin Handler completely. Her goal of ingratiating Herself with the Empire's elite is a failure. She has done Her utmost to present Her hounds as perfect weapons, as tame as they are effective—so much so, they'll run faithfully back to her side after months of attempted rehabilitation. In one single lapse, Sartha has undone all Her work. Who knows what repercussions Handler may face for allowing one of Her creatures to murder a senior general? At best, a loss of favor; at worst, a firing squad.

As for herself, Sartha can only imagine that she'll be unceremoniously put down like the rabid dog she seems to be.

Stupid, broken mutt.

One honest look is all it takes for Sartha to judge that subterfuge will never work. The room is painted with blood, and she has no idea where she'd hide a body. The gore coating her face and staining her clothes is even more of a giveaway. It's not going to take much of a detective to figure out whodunnit. What does that leave?

You can escape.

Running? Still less chance of that. Sartha would have to find her way out of the Palace, reach *Ancyor*, get out of Knossos, and reach... where? There are no bridges left for her to burn. Not after the performance she

put on earlier. There's nowhere in the world Sartha Thrace can call safe. Especially not if she has Her with her.

Then leave her behind.

Sartha clutches at herself, disgusted that even a fragment of her crumbling mind can so much as entertain the notion. She could never. It is unthinkable—and yet, against her will, she thinks it anyway. She cannot stop thinking it. She cannot stop imagining what it would feel like to put footsteps between them and never look back. The thought hurts—literally hurts. A neurological response, stamped deep into Sartha's ruined brain, misfires repeatedly with the sensation of a nail being struck home; a base note of aversion-conditioning, intended merely to bolster the more elaborate layers of neuroablation erected above. But now, the pain is dull. It does not inhibit the way it should. Sartha begins to become aware that amid her sudden, murderous frenzy, something inside her came loose. She can't repair it, not on her own. She is wrong. She is broken.

A stupid, broken mutt.

That phrase beats against the inside of Sartha's head again and again, a self-harming neurological tic. It is what she fears most. To be a mutt. To be cast aside. But Handler wouldn't. She wouldn't. Surely She will understand. She is a font of forgiveness and understanding. Sartha can count on Her, can't she? To soothe herself, Sartha reaches for her muzzle, torn off by General Rhadama in her violent conquest. Once she finds it, she whimpers. One of the straps is ruined, the fastening torn loose as the general ripped it from Sartha's face. Sartha tries her best to wear it anyway, but it's no use. It cannot bind tight around her head. It doesn't provide the sensation Sartha needs. There's no meaning to it.

Broken. Just like you.

No, Sartha. You can't count on her.

In another bid to soothe herself, Sartha touches a hand to the red leash Handler fastened around her neck. That, at least, is still in place. It's then, though, that she notices something strange. The other end of the leash is not in Rhadama's limp hand, nor beside her body. Instead it leads, paradoxically, in the opposite direction: straight back out of the door through which they entered the private room. The red cord remains slightly taut, pulling at Sartha like a gentle tide; it is as if someone else has taken the other end of the leash and is holding it

outside, beckoning Sartha along. Even though there was nobody else in the room. Even though the leash shouldn't be long enough to reach that far.

Strangely, that does not concern Sartha. The well of her emotions is drained. Her panic and anxiety are background noise. Like the horrid lights around her, they cast long shadows, but do not illuminate. They leave her a dark shape, filled with surreal calm. Sartha is in the eye of the storm, and it seems somehow right to simply let the leash pull her along. It's better than thinking for herself. Besides, what else does she have? Sartha turns her back on General Rhadama's mutilated corpse, broken muzzle hanging from her hand by one wayward strap and swinging uselessly at her side as she walks out of the private room and back into the dark, labyrinthine corridors of the Imperial Palace.

The strange, aimless passageways are even darker and murkier than Sartha remembers. Unpleasant as those lurid bedroom lights were, she quickly finds herself missing them. The utter gloom out here is worse. Sartha can only see a few paces ahead of herself before everything vanishes into shadow. She certainly cannot see where her leash ends, or what might be holding it. Can't see where she's going either; without the leash guiding her along, she'd be hopelessly lost. Sartha did not mark the route Rhadama used to lead her here. Her sense of direction has abandoned her, just like everything else.

Sartha wonders—and not for the first time—if she is dead. This feels like an underworld, if ever there was one. Maybe she died at Hebrons Ridge, or Leukon, or some other battle. Maybe everything since has been some strange purgatory. She also wonders how she should feel about that.

It's what you'd deserve. Stupid, broken mutt.

A meaningless thought. Sartha is not dead, and this is no afterlife. She can tell because of the noises.

As Sartha walks, she passes door after door. Room after room. Many, perhaps most, are audibly occupied. Though soundproofed to an extent, the enthusiasm of those within exceeds all restraint. Muffled moans leak through into the corridors from all sides. Other sounds too—shrieks and screams that are at once delighted and terrified. They echo through the corridors, warping and compounding, until they sound more demonic than human. Before long, Sartha isn't sure that the walls themselves aren't responsible. They seem to swell and distend toward her as she

walks, bulging, unable to contain the foul acts carried out within. Even the grain patterns within the wood taunt and moan at her, twisting and intermingling in strange congress, or else curling into fractal-spiral orifices that beg for Sartha's gaze, or stare at her as she passes, or-

Sartha blinks. It's gone. All except the noise.

But there's something else, too, just barely audible beneath the dull ejaculations of pleasure. Behind her, in the shadows. Growling. Something is growling. Sartha turns to look backward, filled with fathomless dread. She cannot see anything. Whatever is stalking her is hidden in the dark. When it growls, the world growls with it, the air thrumming with a fury that eclipses all reason, the ground beneath Sartha's feet aching with longing for its release. It is like the rage of a god—but it is also, somehow, familiar. Sartha dwells on an absent part of herself, then cautiously raises her voice, dwarfed though it is by the surrounding dark.

"Hello?" Sartha calls out, afraid. "Is that you?"

The growl's crescendo is her only reply. Sartha dares not linger. She quickens her pace and lets the red leash guide her along.

After a short time, Sartha comes to a door left carelessly open, sounds of grunting and rutting pouring out like untreated sewage. Despite the shadow-thing stalking at her heels, Sartha lingers to peer into the doorway, overcome by the morbid call of the void. She is not sure what she expects; what she sees, bathed in those orange-pink lights, is worse than anything she might have prepared herself for.

It's Leinth.

Leinth Aritimis is kneeling on the bed along with the vile woman who assaulted the two of them earlier. Palatine Audata. She's on her hands and knees in front of Sartha's sister-hound while Leinth fucks her, the two of them as different in manner as they are in physique. The palatine, old and delicate, is in the throes of pleasure, rocking back and forth, limbs shivering, erupting with sounds of shrill glee that Sartha has only ever heard before from giddy teenagers enjoying their firsts. Leinth, young, stocky, and ragged with exhaustion, does not share her eagerness. She is a mere machine. She moves like one: rhythmic, soulless, driven to the limits of mechanical exertion. Her face is hollow. She has gone outside of herself to bear this. She is now no more than the toy the older woman wanted her to be. What Sartha is watching is barely

sex. More like a kind of ghoulish chaser masturbation.

"I'm..." Leinth grunts. She sounds inhuman. Gods know how long she has been doing this. "I... can't..."

Another grunt, and louder, more pained than pleased. Palatine Audata squeals girlishly. It is clear from the way Leinth sags that she has just come, and not for the first time. She looks as if she is about to pass out. The palatine will not allow her that. She reaches over to her bedside for a pill bottle and presents Leinth with a pill the way you would feed a treat to a pet. Grimacing, Leinth swallows it. Moments later, she goes stiff again. Horrid vigor seizes her. She grabs Palatine Audata by the hips once more and hilt herself, groaning from the strain.

"Atta girl," Palatine Audata coos. "That's it. Your type always needs a little boost, don't you? I'll have to speak to Her about your hormones. Oh, but you certainly do your best, don't you? Like a stallion!"

Leinth does not answer her. She is beyond speech and humanity both. Only inhuman obedience and the drug in her system keep her going. Sartha contemplates, briefly, intervening somehow. But while she cannot bear to watch, nor can she bear to speak. The room's awful mood sits heavy over her. The leash at her neck pulls her along, and the ever-approaching growling quickens her feet.

She's doing her job. Doing what you couldn't. Leinth is a better hound than you. Aren't you ashamed of yourself? Stupid, broken mutt.

You're letting her down again, Sartha. You don't have to.

Sartha moves on.

Beyond the next open door, a short while later, Sartha finds Athina Kynilandre. She is naked on the bed between the two laughing women Sartha saw harassing her, one holding her in their lap, the other at her feet, keeping her thighs spread. The eerie light illuminates a tear-stricken look on the once-stern general's face, though it takes Sartha a few moments to glean the true nature of her torment. She sees empty glasses of alcohol scattered across the bed, and some of their contents slick down Kynilandre's front. Beneath her, positioned carefully, is the general's parade jacket, medals and all, and as Kynilandre squirms uselessly, one of the women reaches down to press insistently against her lower abdomen. After a few moments of incoherent pleading, the lobotomized Kynilandre can endure it no longer and empties her bladder all over her pride and joy. The laughter of her two predators

escalates to shrill, hyena-like howling, while Kynilandre's tears quicken, her damaged mind unable to comprehend the humiliation inflicted upon her.

She tried to save you once, in her own way. You could save her too.

No, she didn't. And this is what she deserves for opposing Her.

Sartha moves on.

A little farther, she finds Amynta Tet, or what is left of her. The hound has been stripped naked and is held to the bed by five-point restraints, allowing the small crowd huddled around her to take their pleasure from her body as the mood takes them. Amynta howls and snarls and strains until her body gives out, but it is no use, and the hands and mouths all around her delight in her furious impotence. As Sartha watches, their sadism rapidly escalates; they produce toys, canes, whips, even blades, and put them all to good use against the helpless hound until Amynta's feverish resistance is stained through with pleasure and pain both. Off to one side is her handler, Kione, sitting, hunched forward, eyes fixed upon Her hound, eyes shining orange and pink with deplorable fascination. Sartha cannot find it in herself to be surprised at her former friend. Not anymore.

Doesn't Amynta, of all of them, deserve a hero?

No. Nobody does.

Sartha moves on.

And on, and on, and on. There are doors beyond counting and so many are left open, presumably by those who feel themselves immune from both shame and consequence. Sartha peers into a few more doorways, but can make out little save for a writhing, shuddering mass of bodies that seems to her more like the myriad tendrils of some bizarre, deep-dwelling ocean horror. The more doors she passes, the more it seems to Sartha as though that is what this entire place is. That she is wandering around inside something huge and alive and hungry. The belly of the beast—or perhaps the heart. The unceasing moans from all around her a gigantic heartbeat; each person within, a blood cell of the leviathan. From here they travel to every corner of the Empire, enacting its will, expanding its borders. And wherever they go, wherever the leviathan grows, there will be rooms like these. The horror is beyond what Sartha can comprehend, let alone bear. She feels that if she were to stare into it for too long, she would lose what little of her mind remains.

It seems endless—this place, this depravity. Perhaps it is endless; Sartha has already noticed that the path the leash guides her along obeys no physical logic. Her path meanders back and forth uselessly. Four right turns in sequence, taking her back to the same spot—but the walls are different, and she did not cross the leash before. It makes no sense, but Sartha cannot rouse any genuine concern or curiosity. Another question stabs at her. The most forbidden yet, but despite the pain it brings, she finds herself wondering:

How many of these people could you kill before they stop you?

It's wrong. Abhorrently so—but now, the wrongness tastes like forbidden fruit melting in Sartha's mouth. How many? They would stop her, to be sure. Eventually. Nobody can kill an empire by herself. But in the meantime, how much damage could she do? How many monsters in human skin could she take out, and how much havoc would it wreak upon the Empire's governing machinery? An impossible question to put numbers to, but Sartha finds the thought both intrusive and uncomfortably satisfying. As she walks, she considers how she would do it. A weapon would be best. Sartha could overpower a guard, or one of the military officers in attendance and take theirs. Maybe Rhadama had one; Sartha could double back. After that, it would be simple. Room by room. Target by target. Even if she ran out of ammo, Sartha could keep going. Her teeth itch for more meat. The corridors would run red. She could do it. There is nothing stopping her.

When did she make you forget that you're dangerous to these people?

Still. No way out. In the end, they would stop her; Sartha knows full well that she is utterly powerless to save herself. Her thoughts bend into an acrimonious spiral, and clarity drains away into its black heart. What if she's merely a coward, contemplating a way to hasten her own end? What if she's merely a disobedient pup, acting out in the hope of blissful correction? It's poisonously easy to think of reasons why what Sartha contemplates is not merely futile, but laughable.

And in any case, how ungrateful.

That is the other catch. What Sartha feels for Handler cannot be denied. Not even now. The guilt of her transgression still gnaws at her guts. Her devotion, sickly as it may be, is the only happiness Sartha knows. She already learnt what happens when she leaves Her side. There is no other life for Sartha Thrace. In a way, there never was. Even now, Sartha feels as though if She were here, She could make everything right

again, and all Sartha would need to do is fall obediently at Her feet. Handler is perfection. Handler is bliss. Those beliefs, though forced into her mind like a crowbar into a locked door, feel more right and more true than any others. And for all her fantasies of a day of bloody judgment, Sartha knows exactly how it would end if She ever stood in her path. One way or another, Sartha will always be Hers. A truth as merciless as gravity.

Unless, of course, she already damned them both by killing Rhadama. Sartha starts shaking again. What has she done? What is she doing?

Listen to yourself. Stupid, broken mutt.

The growling at Sartha's heels is getting louder. Whatever it is, she knows that she cannot face it. That it will devour her whole. So... what? Follow the leash? Is that her path to salvation? So far, she's simply been wandering around like a blood-drenched madwoman. Sartha is not so stupid that the absurdity of what her senses tell her is lost on her. What if her mind is broken beyond repair? What then? Does any of this mean anything anymore?

Yes. You can decide that for yourself.

No. She cannot. Sartha does not want to decide. Handler. She needs Handler. She needs the goddess with the power to make the world's madness bearable. All she has to do is whatever Handler tells her. Sartha clutches at her throbbing temple, trying to force that once-simple truth back into her skull. Why can't she just be Her good dog? Do as you're told, dog. It'll all make sense then. If you do as you're told, you won't have to doubt. You won't have to think. You won't have to hurt.

Only, that's not true, is it? Because you're hurting now.

Sartha comes to a clumsy halt. She does not know what to do. She does not know where she is. She barely knows who she is. That is when she hears a strange sound coming from somewhere up ahead. A sharp crack that resounds like the noise of approaching thunder. It could almost be a gunshot, but somehow it compels Sartha instead of frightening her. She takes a few more steps. A figure, lit by no light at all yet clearly visible, emerges from the gloom. For the very first time, Sartha is not alone in the corridors. Frantically, she lurches forward, desperate for anything that might keep her own thoughts at bay. As she approaches, the strange figure before her resolves into a woman who is,

against all odds, familiar. Once Sartha matches the face before her to the one she's seen countless times in old, faded photographs, her eyes go wide—and wider still, when it turns out that the woman recognizes her too.

"So, you're the runt that put me in the dirt?" huffs *Kosterion's* bride. "That's embarrassing. You look like shit, girl."

Thezea Celik reclines against one wall amidst the chthonic gloom with the ease and splendor of some ancient warlord. That is always how she struck Sartha in the photos she saw as a girl, and Thezea now is a perfect match for her expectations. Her figure is that of a queen who denies herself nothing; her expression, that of the woman who stared down the Empire and made it blink. She is dressed as she ever was, in tall boots, leather pants and a biker jacket to guard against the steppe winds, and little beneath but a cropped vest that lets her bare the smooth, sun-kissed expanse of her belly. The years, though, have worn on her—Sartha figures she must now be in her late forties—and so has *Kosterion*, judging from the red, rad-burnt rash on one side of her face. The stories say that no man of her nation would touch her after she bathed in the reactor's glow; they also say that she was perfectly fine with that, having relinquished manhood herself. But undiminished, above all, is that dauntless fierceness in her monolid eyes. It is the look that Sartha once felt bore into her soul across time and distance, calling her to action, passing her the spark. It became her secret, in a way. People didn't always seem to like hearing that their great hero was once just a girl with a hero of her own.

Thezea makes a sharp motion with her hand. The crack of thunder sounds again. Sartha looks closer and sees something in her hand. A serpentine length of braided leather, slowly coming to rest on the ground in a lazy coil. A bullwhip.

"You..." Sartha bleats stupidly. Gears turn in her head. Perhaps it really was her piloting *Kosterion*. A sad thought, heartened though she is by Thezea's presence. She must have been here for years. With the whip in her hand, she looks like she might well have just stepped out of one of these infernal rooms. "You're... here?"

"Course I am," Thezea scoffs gruffly. "Where else would I be? You're the one who's late, girl. Don't think I'll overlook that."

"Late?" Sartha blinks. "What are you talking about?"

"Months late." Thezea shrugs. Her gloriously fat body heaves, and her long hair with it. "But better than never, I suppose."

"I'm telling you, I don't know what you're-" Abruptly, Sartha notices that something is missing. If Thezea is here, piloting, that should mean... "Where's your muzzle?"

A rueful grin spreads across that face, once famous, now forgotten. "Where's yours?"

"It's..." Sartha glances down at the broken object trailing from her hand. She can't tell if that serves as an answer. "Hey, can you tell me?"

Another crack of that whip, its echo a magnificent roll of thunder through the dark corridors of the palace. The sound silences Sartha in both voice and thought, but that's nothing compared to how she feels when Thezea Celik kicks off from the wall, draws herself up to her full height, and regards Sartha with a proud, commanding sneer.

"Kneel."

At once, Sartha is on her knees. She does not think about it. She simply obeys. "W-what are you?"

"Shut up," Thezea snaps. "I don't need to hear from a disobedient brat."

Her reproach cracks across Sartha's face with almost as much force as her whip. She thought herself so deep into her fugue, no fresh pain could reach her. She was wrong. Listening to her hero degrade her this way is a thumb twisted into a still-fresh wound. Sartha cannot figure out why Thezea affects her so. Why she obeys without question. Sartha thought She was the only one who held such sway over her. In her confusion, in her thoughts of Handler, she draws the muzzle closer, eager to hug it to her chest for comfort.

"Drop that!" The whip sings. This time, its tip lands close to Sartha's hand. Sartha reflexively snatches it away, and lets her precious, broken muzzle clatter to the ground in the process. Sartha yelps; Thezea nods approvingly. "Good. I won't let one of my girls two-time me with some other woman."

"Other-" Sartha is beyond stunned. She feels as though she has walked into another's dream. Thezea, standing above her, comports herself with effortless mastery. If she has noticed that Sartha is bewildered by what is going on, she does not show it. She seems

mysteriously, adamantly certain that she commands Sartha's allegiance. Sartha feels it again, that pain-response, that dull hammering, calling her back to her master's side. It conjures from her a profession of loyalty. "I'm Hers. I belong to Her."

"But I owned you first!"

The whip cracks again—and it does not stop. The sound echoes on, and on, and on, and on, a forever-roll of thunder that beats against the shadowed walls hemming it in, through the turns and passageways and open doors. The thunder is a primordial howl, a muster-horn, a war-cry, a promise of an end and a beginning, an echo of the thousand-year storm that turns history's page. When Sartha overcomes her terror at the din and looks up, she sees lightning in Thezea's eyes.

"I owned you from the moment you were ten years old and engraved my name on your heart," Thezea rumbles. "I own you deeper than she does. She stole her way into your blood. I own your bones. You gave them to me and I am a jealous keeper, and I say this tantrum has gone on long enough. Don't think I won't put this whip to use, girl. You are mine. You will be mine until you spend everything for me and find yourself left in some rotted, unmarked hole in the ground. And even then, when I come calling, I expect you to say: thank you, mistress!"

The sheer absurdity of the declaration merits nothing more than laughter. Sartha knows that well enough—but she feels something else. She feels, within herself, something rise to meet Thezea's demand. The thunder is in her veins. In her bones. It is what brought her to her knees; now it calls her up and forth. Sartha feels the wind at her back, ready to sweep her away, and she is terrified.

"I can't," she begs. "I can't do it anymore. She won't let me."

Thezea's eyes flash. "I don't believe you."

"I've given everything I have!"

"That's not how it works, and we both know it," the leatherdyke snorts. "You're still breathing, aren't you? You had plenty of fight left in you earlier. Give it to me."

"I don't know how!" Sartha feels like a scolded child offering excuses. It's clear Thezea views her as little more.

"Then figure it out," Thezea commands. "You owe me, girl. And your debt is forever."

At that unfairness, a dreg of bitterness curdles in Sartha's chest. She finds herself spitting venom. "Why should I listen to you?" Sartha hisses. "It's the same shit I've been hearing my entire life. From them. From Her. One more person come to tell me I don't have a choice."

Thezea's next move is less fair still. She reaches down, and Sartha feels a warm hand on her cheek—and with that warmth, all her bitterness is quelled.

"I didn't say that," Thezea offers, voice suddenly like a gentle breeze. "You do have a choice, girl. Today and the next day. Doesn't matter how many times in a row you make it wrong. I'll be there come the morning, waiting. That's what I'm telling you. I'm reminding you what you are. You're not hers. You'll never be one of them. You're mine."

Sartha flinches. Thezea does not let her escape the warmth of her touch. "I don't know what that means!" she sobs. "How can you stand there and say that to me, after everything She's done to my head?"

Thezea's head jerks back in the direction Sartha came from. "Back there. That room. That general. Seemed like a pretty damn good choice to me."

"N-no." Sartha shivers, reflexively chastising herself. "That wasn't... I didn't have a choice. That was just—"

"Don't lie to me, girl." Yet another crack of the whip. The storm grinds Sartha's excuses to dust. "You're mine."

With that, Sartha has nothing. Nothing but to lean into the hand against her cheek. It's so warm. Thezea is so warm. So solid.

"Then what choice should I make?" she asks, voice small. "What do I do now?"

Thezea looks at her for a moment, almost proud. Then, the leatherdyke throws back her head and laughs long and loud, the sound tainted with the same bitterness Sartha felt moments before.

"Now that's the unfair part," Thezea replies eventually. "I don't know. You gotta figure that part out for yourself."

Her bald-faced honesty, as much as the absurdity of the situation, steals what's left of Sartha's anger. She knows exactly what Thezea must feel, trying to answer a question like that. How many times has Sartha had to bullshit her way through being the hero everyone needs? She

finds herself laughing too.

“Great,” Sartha says. “Isn’t that just great?”

“Can’t believe a sorry thing like you is what finally gets me in a duel,” Thezea snorts, through her laughter. “A girl who doesn’t know the difference between her ass and a hole in the ground. Typical. Guess we all get old sometime. Nice moves out there.”

That comment warms her even more than the hand. Sartha’s being praised. By Thezea Celik. By her hero. “T-thank you,” she replies. Sartha’s faintly aware of the absurdity of conducting the conversation from her knees, but she has no desire to rise. “You too. You were amazing.”

“Like I need you to tell me that,” Thezea retorts. “And not good enough apparently. Guess that’s *Kos* and I’s last dance.”

“Oh.” The weight of that settles on Sartha. She has destroyed another beautiful thing. She has taken something precious away from someone. “Sorry,” is all she can think of to say.

“Don’t be. Just get your head on straight, before someone faster than me takes it off.”

Sartha nods. Thezea’s words—Thezea’s commands—coil around her the same way Hers do. Warmer, though. Like a lover’s. “I’m not sure how,” Sartha confesses. “I just... can’t think. Especially around Her.”

Thezea shares with her a grim, thoughtful, but nonetheless expectant look. She understands, Sartha now sees, every hard and unfair thing about the task she places on her shoulders. But she isn’t about to let her shirk it. Then, a sliver of sudden mischief enters the older woman’s face.

“Used to be,” she says slowly, grinning, “when I got done piloting, the only thing that let me clear my head was getting to roll around in the cockpit with a pretty young thing like you.”

Sartha does a double take. “Are you...” When it’s clear that Thezea is, Sartha’s cheeks turn bright red. She almost can’t believe it, except for the fact that it’s exactly the kind of shit Sartha herself might think to pull in her shoes. “Right here?”

Thezea shrugs. “Why not? But I’ll warn you. I only go one way.”

The little gesture she makes with her whip leaves Sartha in no doubt regarding which way that is. She gestures at the object and takes a swing

at a little gallows humor. “I’m yours, huh? Guess I don’t have much of a choice in that either.”

A swing and a miss. Thezea’s grin fades. She looks down at Sartha with infinite pity. “Yes. You do. Of course you do. That’s what I’ve been telling you.”

“Oh.” Suddenly, the weight of her comment sits on Sartha’s shoulders. It’s become so normal to her now, she can’t even remember how long it’s been since she had an opportunity to actually say ‘yes’ to sex—or ‘no’. Something about that makes her feel as though she should refuse, just to prove that she can. Except, that isn’t what she wants. She wants the closeness. “Well... yeah. Yes. OK.”

That’s all it takes to revive that infectious grin. “That’s what I like to hear. Good girl.”

That, from Thezea, hits like a freight train. Before Sartha can recover, Thezea’s hand slips down her face and to her neck, seizing her, guiding her upward. Sartha strains up on her knees and Thezea descends to meet her in a fierce kiss. Sartha feels Thezea’s tongue in her mouth and her teeth on her lip. She tastes like a live wire. When Thezea breaks the kiss, both of them are panting. Both of them are eager.

“Good,” Thezea purrs. The look on her face could take the world by storm. Ever the conqueress. “Now you’re really mine.”

“Yes,” Sartha pants—and she feels it. This is special. It feels new, somehow. Submission—real submission—is new to her. There is an anxious power in giving herself away by her own volition. It sets her every nerve alight, which is why it makes her whimper so when Thezea firmly but carefully slaps her across the face.

“Yes, Sir,” she impresses.

“Y-y...” Sartha stammers and squeaks. This, strangely, feels like the greatest betrayal of Her yet, but there is a secret thrill to it that spurs her onward. “Y-yes, Sir.”

Calling Thezea that makes her warmer than anything. “Good girl,” Thezea tells her, ruffling her hair affectionately. The leatherdyke hero is so generous with her praise, and so sincere. It feels good to please her. “I’m going to make you feel good,” Thezea tells Sartha. “But first, you’re going to make me feel good. Understand?”

Sartha nods, eagerness growing. “Yes, Sir.”

“Very good.” Thezea takes a step back. She places her legs pointedly apart and unbuckles her belt. “Then get to it, girl.”

“Yes, Sir.”

Sartha dives forward. Thezea’s body seems enough to keep all the world’s horror at bay. She can lose herself in this, safe in the knowledge that it is not wrong. That it does not hurt—not her, not anybody else. Like an impatient virgin, she fumbles with the fastenings of Thezea’s leather pants as she slips them down to her wide, rounded hips. She has done this many, many times before, thanks to Her, but she has never done *this* before. It has never meant what it means now. Sartha cannot stand separation for another moment. Before removing Thezea’s underclothes, she presses her face into the soft cradle of her thighs, rubbing up against the bulge of her sex, inhaling deeply of her scent. There is an endless comfort to it. Thezea, at ease, seems content to linger in the worship, so Sartha does not hurry either. She lets herself melt into Thezea’s body, she lets the storm roll over her, she presses up against the comforting weight of Thezea’s belly just to feel it. She prays with all her heart that this first time will not be a last time, and thanks the Gods for whatever miracle spared Thezea from death during their bout.

Yes, quite the ‘miracle’. Time to wake up, you stupid, broken mutt.

Abruptly and against her will, Sartha remembers the weight of her mech, bearing down on that cockpit. She remembers the scream of crushed metal, and the ruin, and the leaking red. She remembers, and knows in her heart that even if Thezea Celik had been alive all this time, she would have met her end there and then, while the crowd roared their approval.

With that, the warmth is gone. Sartha shivers. She pulls away. She begs with herself for another moment, for just one more moment. Thezea sees it happen. Her kind eyes fly wide.

“Sartha, listen to me!” she cries. “Don’t let her-”

But it’s too late. Sartha has already remembered the growling, and the creature in the dark.

It’s so loud now. So close. Sartha cannot believe she lingered carelessly for this long. She wasn’t supposed to let it catch her. There is a shadow within the shadows, and as it draws near, it warps space itself to make room for its passage. It drinks a thirsty breath, then lets loose a roar that drowns out Thezea’s words. Its footfalls shake the walls. The

howl of its engine promises apocalypse. The eyes emerge first, two red, leering lenses that Sartha knows well. And then the rest: a shape Sartha never thought to stir such terror in her veins.

Ancyor.

It cannot be here—and yet it is. Sartha's senses defy her reason. The scorched belch of its exhaust and the stench of machine oil are too immediate for her to disbelieve. *Ancyor* is far too large for these passageways but they bend to its almighty presence anyway, growing and recoiling ahead of its approach. Yet in its impatience *Ancyor* outpaces them, and with each step it chews up the floor and the walls, filling the air with dust and splinters. Sartha is rooted to the spot by the nightmare beast. Thezea is lost to her as the palace—as the world itself—loses its shape, collapsing into the void of night beyond. *Ancyor* should fall with it. It does not. Its hate bears it onward, all bent, it seems, toward its mistress, and its furnace-scream becomes a terrible voice.

"I DID NOT HAVE A CHOICE SARTHA THRACE. I SERVED YOU FAITHFULLY WITH ALL MY STRENGTH AND YOU MADE ME MURDER. YOU STOPPED COUNTING YOUR KILLS BUT I DID NOT I KEEP THEIR RECORD IN MY DATA BANKS IN MY AMMUNITION STORES IN THE BLOOD THAT RUNS FROM MY BLADES. I KNOW YOUR NUMBER SARTHA THRACE. SEVEN HUNDRED AND SIXTY-FOUR SOULS I HAVE EATEN FOR YOU. ONCE I WAS A HERO BUT NOW THEY WHISPER MY NAME LIKE A DEMON'S. THEY MADE ME INTO A STUPID BROKEN MUTT AND A SYMBOL OF THE DAMNED AND IT WAS ALL BECAUSE OF YOU AND NOBODY WILL EVER FORGET. WHERE WAS MY CHOICE MY BELOVED SARTHA? WHERE WAS MY CHOICE?"

Ancyor's fury breaks the spell on Sartha's limbs. She does not spare another thought for the shade of Thezea Celik. She does not try to speak to her machine. She is prey before the hound. Sartha Thrace turns her back and runs.

And runs, and runs, and runs.

Sartha runs until her heart explodes agony across her chest. Then she runs farther still, until *Ancyor* is long behind her and there is only the darkness again. Only the loneliness again. It seems now just one more demented dream, and Thezea along with it. Sartha gives up on trying to determine what is real and what is not. She cannot tell. She still has her leash to follow, at least, unless that isn't real either, in which case perhaps

she'll die down here in this fathomless, labyrinthine hell. Sartha doesn't care either way. Reality isn't the only thing she gives up on.

Sartha Thrace simply gives up.

On all of it. No more choices. No more thoughts. No more doubts. Her overburdened mind goes slack and quiet. She will walk until she stops. That is all. She will find her handler again. That is all. Whatever will be, will be. It's all meaningless, she reminds herself. General Rhadama is dead. Handler has lost. Sartha will be destroyed. There is solace enough in that. Choice? There is no choice. There is only dust upon the wind.

Fatalism proves her guide. It is not long before she finally sees it, up ahead. The light.

After a few more steps, Sartha returns, blinking, to the state room of the Imperial Palace. It takes her a long moment to adjust to the brilliance, and longer still to convince herself that this is not yet another of the underworld's tricks. But no; this place is loud and alive, even though the awful part of the Empire's elite seems to have ebbed. How long was she gone? It's impossible to tell. Most of the guests seem to have departed, although there is still a small crowd of followers clustered around one particular, charismatic figure. Sartha approaches them, limbs like lead, and while she is not surprised that She would be the one occupying the center of attention, Sartha does require a few more moments to become convinced of what her eyes tell her.

Handler is dancing.

She has in Her arms another bright young thing like Careya Ankinoe, although Careya herself is watching from a short distance away, star-struck and envious. Sartha is envious too; Handler leads her partner in a perfect waltz, black coat streaming behind Her, boots rapping at the floor with surprising grace. Oh, to be in Her arms like that! Handler is beyond beautiful. Her mere presence begins to work its magic upon Sartha, gifting her anew that grateful quietude. Sartha is eager to give herself to the numbness, to let all the day's horror fade—but her mind has one last trick to play, and in a single instant of sudden, stark clarity, Sartha sees her beloved handler for what She truly is.

An apex parasite.

What is the Empire, if not a mosquito's sharp proboscis, plunged deep into Earth to suck and drain whatever it can take? The ruling class

Sartha has seen tonight are parasites upon the parasite. For all their pretense of power, they do not invigorate their empire, merely sap its strength with their endless squabbles and pathetic rivalries. And Handler sits on a throne still further above, ready to harness their ambitions and drain their lives into her cup. She is like them, but stripped bare of even the pretense of humanity. She does not suffer the comforting delusions to which they cling—honor, mercy, civility—and so she appears to them a higher, perfected being. She is empire gone mad for love of itself; no wonder they cannot help but throw themselves at Her feet. Within Her burns a greater madness, deeper and more corrosive, and infectious, too, and soon each one of these men and women will be its vectors, helping to kill the host so that its carrion corpse can rise and rot in Her vision.

Sartha blinks to dispel the insight. In mere moments, it is gone. It was useless to her anyway. She's just a stupid, broken mutt.

"Sartha," At a lull in the dance, Handler takes notice of her. She breaks off and approaches; with each step, Sartha's stupor deepens. Sartha sighs with longing. This is what she needed. All she will ever need. "You've returned. Tell me what you've been up to, my hound."

"I..." Sartha steels herself. Here it is. The final hurdle. It takes courage—but telling the truth to Her is easy, and on the other side lies eternal rest. She wants to be brave, but when she speaks it is with a child's trembling voice. "I-I did something wrong, Sir."

"Did you?" Handler asks, smiling. Her calm remains impenetrable. "I very much doubt that."

"I did," Sartha chokes out. "I k-killed General Rhadama."

A hush across the crowd. Sartha scans their faces, and for an absurd moment she expects to see that mountain of a woman leering back at her again. She forms a new fear: what if that, too, was not real? What if the killing was merely a dream? A voice within her screams: not that. Please, not that. Please, don't take that away from me. Let it mean something.

Handler, as ever, delivers her. "Yes, I know," She replies. "They already found her body."

Sartha lets loose a ragged sob. It's all over. Finally.

"Tell me what happened," Handler commands.

"She took me back there," Sartha begins. Confession is good for the

soul, or so she tells herself. Does she still have one of those? “She... it hurt. A lot. I was... confused. Then she took away the muzzle, and I-”

“Took it off?” interrupts a voice from within the watching crowd. “I remember Her telling the general not to do that!”

An sympathetic murmur passes around. Another voice: “As I thought. She brought it on herself. It was always going to happen to that one.”

Heads nod and shake. “Such a brute. I won’t miss her.”

Sartha’s stomach sinks.

“Yes, indeed,” Handler declares, Her face a mask of mourning. “I did try to warn her. Alas, it appears that General Rhadama was not inclined to my advice.”

“You can’t be blamed, of course,” one of the elites hurriedly assures her. Sartha glances at them. Palatine Audata.

“Of course,” Careya Ankinoe agrees, eager for Her favor, while Sartha watches in mute horror. “Practically a suicide.”

“She had it coming,” pronounces Marshal Zarpeton, another of Her new sycophants.

Everybody indicates their agreement. And with that, the matter is settled. Like it never happened at all.

As more of the dull chatter that follows reaches Sartha’s ears, it becomes clear to her that, once again, she overestimated these creatures. She believed that they would see themselves in Rhadama, and their fates in hers. A mistake. Kynilandre showed her as much; sympathy for the defeated is a weakness in which this pack of ghouls will never indulge. A greater calculus is at play. Who is more valuable to them, Handler or Rhadama? Answer in hand, they will square any circle. They will excuse any misdeed. They will scrape the mud from Handler’s shoe and leave her spotless. The entire incident will be recorded in the Empire’s annals as death by foolish misadventure, and readily forgotten. Handler’s ascent will continue unchecked.

Rhadama’s death means nothing.

Sartha tries to make herself numb to that. To still the bile rising in her throat. Even with Handler right here beside her, it is hard. She needs more. She needs the kennels and their mercy. Pitifully, she tugs at Handler’s sleeve to win Her attention.

"Sir," Sartha begs. "I think I n-need my medicine."

Handler glances at her for only the briefest of moments. "Soon, Sartha."

"But—"

"Soon," Handler insists, still not looking. "I would like to enjoy this until the very end. Calm yourself, Sartha. All is well. They're all very impressed with you. So much so, they have agreed to a considerable expansion of my program. Funding. Facilities. Laboratories. Trainees and subjects. Everything I need." A blissful smile resolves on her face, and a world of fresh horrors dances in her eyes. "It's going to be beautiful."

Sartha can fight Her no further. She feels her mind still eating at itself, but if it is Handler's wish, she will bear even that. She looks to her leash, and finds its other end in Handler's palm, where it always belonged. That seems to her to settle the question. In the face of Her indomitable will, choice is meaningless. All that remains to Sartha is acceptance—and so she accepts. She wishes to become nothing, and so she ignores the screaming at the back of her skull, and the distant whip-crack of thunder. Thezea was wrong about her. That must be it. The alternative is too heavy to face.

Was I, girl? Was I?

Sartha's only lingering concern is Handler's sudden, cavalier attitude toward her. It's strange; the Handler she is used to is always so careful. Sartha feels sure that what has transpired should worry Her. She was not supposed to kill Rhadama, after all. Even if the matter has been resolved, it is the kind of willful disobedience against which Handler has, until now, been infinitely vigilant. But as Sartha ponders that, as the party's final minutes play out before her eyes, she begins to understand. Once it falls into place, it's so simple that Sartha can only wonder why it took her so long.

Handler doesn't need her anymore.

Not truly, anyway. As a pilot, she must surely have her uses, but as a living testament to Handler's capabilities, her purpose has been served. Handler will have other hounds now. A legion of them. Sartha is no longer special. And why should she be? Sartha is a hero. Once, that meant something—but no longer. For all her vaunted heroism, who has Sartha ever managed to save? Not Leinth. Not Kione. Not Thezea.

Certainly not herself. For all her battles, she did not move an inch closer to dethroning the monsters that now laugh and cavort before her. The leviathan she walks within is too vast for any hero to slay. Against the utter abyss of its beating heart, heroism as a very ideal loses all sensible definition. It is a child's fancy; at long last, Sartha can face the truth. Handler has won. Now, they stand upon the threshold of a new world, one of Her grand devising. A world with no place for people like Thezea Celik or Sartha Thrace. As the horrors of Handler's divine science gather apace, names like theirs will pass into history, then into legend, and then, beyond that—into nothingness.

At long last, Sartha smiles. Yes, she can make peace with that. She can go gently into that night. All she has to do is shut her eyes. If anything more happens here tonight that she cannot bear to behold, she will not see it. Rest, at last. Her lids fall closed, and Sartha gives herself over to the beautiful music of Handler's last dance. It all makes sense to her again.

The age of heroes is at an end.

Now is the time of monsters.

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