

Hunting Hound

Kallie

Nothing makes Leinth Aritimis feel good the way being saddled up in the cockpit of a huge mech suit does.

It's not a rare refrain for a pilot. Most are enraptured by the sheer power it brings. You can feel it in your gut; the thrum of the engine, the shaking of the earth, the divine thunder of artillery. It's never been that for Leinth, though. Truth be told, the noise and fury of her own *Genetor* still frightens her at times. But what really matters is what it lets her do.

Fight.

Leinth never set out to be a hero herself. She just wanted to be a little like her own heroes. To do her part. That was the least anyone could do, and the duty had grown heavy in her belly during the last years of her adolescence, until she was finally old enough to join up. The war isn't going well. They're always on the back foot. But that means Leinth always has something to defend, and knowing that makes her strong. The looks of hope and relief she sees on peoples' faces when she dismounts after a long, hard-fought battle - that's what feels good.

Now, after a couple of years, people were starting to call her a hero. Crazy.

She doesn't deserve it, and she always tells them so. She's no Sartha Thrace, and her *Genetor* is certainly no *Ancyor*. *Ancyor* is a proud old beast. *Genetor* is a slab. A fortress as much as a vehicle. Huge, angular, unwieldy - but not for Leinth. She's learned well how to wield it. In her hands, the rebel prototype is a bulwark. She takes pride in that, and she's proud of her machine in turn. Proud of the way it keeps moving even now, with an awful, jagged chunk taken out of its right leg.

Leinth reaches up overhead and punches a few switches, shunting power into the sensor suite for one more sweep. A few moments later, it clicks back its report. Nothing. No movement. That's a relief. Maybe it's actually over.

"*Genetor* reporting," she says into her radio. "Sector is clear. I'm gonna stay out just a little longer. Make sure the bastards are gone for good."

You got it, comes the warm reply, after a brief burst of static. *But I think we got 'em, Leinth. Don't wear yourself out.*

Right now there's little choice but to take the sensors at their word. No use looking outside, that's for damn sure. The day's fighting has turned the cityscape into a blackened ruin where ash hangs in the air like fog, billowing on unnatural winds. What tall buildings remain are nothing more than burnt rebar skeletons ; in amongst them are the carcasses of mechs that haven't quite managed to fall, looming over the shattered concrete like strange, harrowed statues. Most of them are so ravaged by the firestorm, Imperial and rebel models look exactly alike.

It's demoralizing. But as long as there's land and there's people, they can rebuild. Leinth always insists upon that, to herself.

It's been bad here. Intense. A fresh Imperial offensive. There's no telling how much worse tomorrow might be. This could have been the final battle or merely an opening skirmish. Sometimes the resources and reserves at the enemy's disposal seem all but unlimited. There's a push-pull logic to the ever-moving front lines that Leinth can't perceive. It's not her job to, as a pilot. But like everyone else, she knows that they are not winning.

Maybe they can win here. Maybe Leinth can be the rock on which the tide breaks. She's the one who never loses faith.

The falling dusk is a mercy, in a way. It hides the worst of the damage, and the most heartbreaking details. The contents of a wardrobe and a life ripped out of a building by an artillery shell and strewn all over the ashen ground. No good comes from looking. Those things - the human traces, the human remains - are too small for most mech pilots to notice. But in quiet moments, Leinth finds herself looking, magnifying them to fill the *Genetor's* viewscreen. It's a bad habit, and the darkness of night saves her from it. If she indulges, it's too easy to let her thoughts turn to dark things.

Dark things like Sartha Thrace.

It's been months since she disappeared. She went out like a hero. Her *Ancyor* was last seen plunging deep into the enemy's lines to fight a furious rearguard. She's listed as MIA not KIA, technically, but Leinth has done her best to make her peace with her hero's passing. The rumors are making it damn hard, though. Rumors about seeing the *Ancyor* back in service on the wrong side of the war. Rumors about it moving the way only she could make it move.

Leinth hates hearing that shit. She's said so often enough and angrily enough that no one says it to her face anymore. But that doesn't mean she doesn't overhear when people are whispering about it. And it's hard as hell to get it out of her head. Sartha

Thrace means the world to her. Meant the world to her. That poster above her bunk in the barracks. An idol. Even Leinth's transition goal, in the early days before she knew better. Now the kind thing to do is to let her memory rest until the time comes when they can honor it properly.

It's not that she doesn't wish Sartha Thrace was still alive. She wishes that more than anything. Especially in battles like these, it sure would be nice to have a hero to believe in.

Genetor! Headed your way! Leinth!

The urgency of her CO's voice on the radio catches her attention just as much as her name. Leinth snaps back to attention and looks down at her scope - and then freezes. Her first response - her rational response - is that it's a glitch. It has to be. It doesn't make sense for a heat signature like that to be moving that fast. Then instinct takes flight. Leinth can feel it already. The vibrations. The heat in the air. She brings *Genetor* around to face the new threat, brings her weapons up, and kicks her searchlights up to max.

It's too late. No time to brace herself. *Ancyor* is upon her.

Leinth would recognize its savage face anywhere, even here, and it makes her hesitate. If she wasn't already screwed, that pause is what screws her. Once Leinth can make her hands move, it's far too late to make use of *Genetor's* shields. And *Ancyor* doesn't stop to launch a blow. It simply barrels into her. With a raw howl of steel on steel, the mechs collide. *Genetor* might be a slab, but *Ancyor* is monstrously strong and it has momentum. There's no contest. The impact sends Leinth off-balance. The ACS screams at her, but there's nothing to be done.

Genetor topples over. The bastion falls.

And it will not be allowed to stand. *Ancyor* is still on her, driving its massive chainblades into the prone mech's limbs. Leinth cries out in panic. She feels the severance in her own flesh. The rattling, the noise, the flashing lights as *Genetor's* systems struggle to shunt power to the cockpit - it's a nightmare. She already knows she's lost. There's no coming back from this.

But it gets worse. *Ancyor* rears up, and amongst the ashen city, lit only by *Genetor's* flickering searchlights, it looks truly awful in its lupine fury. Then it brings its fist down, right on the cockpit. The sound of the blow is an awful crunch; a noise no metal should ever make. Leinth screams as the wall of her cockpit starts to bow in against her. *Genetor* holds, but only just. Another blow has it convulse, and Leinth's scream is silenced when her head is thrown back against the back of the cockpit. No ACS to compensate now.

She starts seeing in black and white. Not good. Concussion, at least. It happened so fast. Leinth is still struggling to believe in what she's seeing and feeling. It doesn't make sense.

There's only one woman who can pilot *Ancyor* like this. But it's not her. It's not her.

There's no third blow. Or if there is, Leinth is too far gone to feel it. She hears something, though. Other vehicles approaching. Not mechs. Smaller. They get close, then stop, then Leinth hears scrambling. Shouting. Climbing. The realization of what's happening makes her breath catch with fear, but she's beyond even adrenaline now. Darkness is here for her.

The last thing she feels before oblivion is the Imperial engineers starting to drill their way into *Genetor's* cockpit.

There is no time, in the room. No daylight, no clock. Leinth has been counting sleeps and by that tally it's been fifteen days, but that's surely off by a day or more. Especially given how hard she got knocked around.

Leinth remembers being pulled from *Genetor's* cockpit. She remembers being bound and guarded and dragged into an infirmary, to receive only the most basic medical care. Leinth had been in and out for most of that, twitching and shouting whenever she was close to consciousness, but then they gave her something that brought her all the way back up to uncomfortably sharp awareness. Then, an interrogation. Noise, bright lights, sternness, threats - the usual. Crude. Blunt. Like all pilots, Leinth has prepared herself for this long ago. They got nothing from her.

She'd been bracing herself for torture to follow - but no. At least, not that kind of torture. Something had interrupted the proceedings. There had been a whisper in an ear, and then a strange ripple had gone through her interrogators. With fresh urgency, they'd dragged her to her feet and she'd been taken somewhere else. Somewhere down, under the hangar, far beneath the rest of the Imperial base.

It's strange here. The walls are dark, and it's much too quiet. None of the hustle and bustle that's everywhere in any normal military facility. Since then, nothing. Leinth has been left to sit and rot in her uncertainty and her boredom. The solitude is maddening. There is nothing to disturb it except occasional meals given at irregular intervals through a slot in the door.

From how it leaves her feeling, Leinth is pretty sure the food is drugged. She eats most of it anyway. Tricking her into starving herself could be another way of softening

her up.

The sound of locking bolts retracting into the wall heralds change. At once, Leinth is completely focused. Any information about her situation, any stimulation at all, is a sweetness she's desperate for. When the heavy cell door swings open, she catches sight of the person holding the key. Immediately she regrets her eagerness. This is almost more disconcerting than seeing nothing at all.

The menial standing before her had once been an Imperial pilot, judging from the uniform and the wings on her lapel. Once, but no longer. There's something unmistakably broken about her. Her uniform is wearing thin from neglect and she moves with a strange, stooped, shambling gait that just doesn't look right on a person. She's like an animal that's been beaten one too many times. Leinth wishes she could see her face, if only to verify her humanity, but she can't. The menial is wearing an awful hood that hides her face - leather, perhaps, and fashioned to look like a dog's head.

It's some sick shit, even for Imperials, and Leinth doesn't have a clue what it means.

All is forgotten, though, when the menial steps aside and reveals Leinth's visitor.

Sartha Thrace.

Her presence is electricity on Leinth's skin, and for that reason she knows she's real even before she pinches herself and blinks - three times, four times, five times. It's impossible, but she'd know that face anywhere, even here, even in the dim glow of the cell's lights. It's the real deal. Leinth believes it with her whole heart, especially when Sartha Thrace flashes her a classic smile and reaches up to rake back her messy blonde hair. Somehow, in the flesh, she's even more beautiful than she is on the posters.

“Leinth Aritimis?” Sartha says. “Looks like you got scooped up pretty rough, huh?”

“I... I... you...” Leinth’s mouth is struggling to catch up with her brain. There are too many questions, and the first to fall from her lips is embarrassingly juvenile. “You... know who I am?”

“Sure.” Sartha walks into the cell - ushered in, it seems - and the door closes behind her. “We fought together, right? The Dacian salient?”

Leinth nods numbly. She remembered. She actually remembered. They’d only met in passing, as two pilots amongst many, and Leinth had been nobody then. She’d assumed Sartha Thrace had taken no notice of her. She feels - and notes with humor - a faint flicker of gratitude for her captivity.

Then she blinks. She remembers her place.

“I should...” Leinth stands and salutes as best she can. “Captain!”

“Woah, easy.” Sartha laughs and waves her off. “I’ve never been a stickler, Leinth, and it doesn’t seem to make much sense here. Just call me ‘Sartha.’”

Leinth nods. She can barely believe her luck. It’s like a dream come true - circumstances notwithstanding.

“So they... they got you?” Leinth asks slowly, as Sartha walks over and sits next to her on the long bench that’s one of the cell’s only features. “We all thought you were dead.”

“Yeah.” Sartha smiles faintly. “I guess they did.”

"I saw *Ancyor* out there," Leinth says. "It's what took me down. I guess they... gods."

Sartha doesn't reply. She just looks down. In the dim light, Leinth can see there's a strange look in her eye. Distant. Glassy. She's not herself, in that moment.

Leinth can't blame her for it. She doesn't want to think about how she'd feel if she knew someone else had taken *Genetor* from her. Was using it against her people. The violation would be monstrous. She silently prays her mech was too damaged for that.

"So," she says, hoping to bring Sartha back. "What happens now? To us. To... me."

"Wish I could tell you." Sartha looks up. She sounds OK again. "I don't even know how long I've been here."

"Did..." Leinth is afraid to ask, but she needs to know. "Have they done something to you? Anything I should prepare myself for?"

Sartha looks down again. "I don't... know."

Leinth has no words for that. She shivers. She clamps down hard on her own, faint disappointment. She tries to remind herself that Sartha Thrace is more than a hero on a poster above Leinth's bunk. She's been through hell. Anyone would be in pieces after months down here.

"But," Sartha adds after a long moment, "you'll be OK. I remember how I felt when they first put me down here. You're strong. This is not the end. I'm still here, aren't I? And now there's two of us. It'll be easier."

Now Leinth feels ashamed of even that initial flicker of disappointment. She can

hear the grit in Sartha Thrace's voice. She can feel the warmth, and she is warmed by it. Thanks to her - thanks only to her - this chthonic hell feels bearable. She's gonna get through this. They're going to get through this. She can believe that, with a hero at her side. Leinth is so very grateful for Sartha's presence.

But that begs a question.

"Thank you," Leinth says, but frowns. "Why do you think they put us together like this?"

"Dunno," Sartha replies. "She didn't tell me anything."

She? Who? The menial? Maybe, but there's something about how Sartha said it. It's probably not important.

"Could be they want to get us talking?" Leinth glances around. "This place could be wired for sound. Maybe they're hoping we'll let something slip."

"Maybe."

"Let's keep it light, eh?" Leinth says. "Just in case. No secrets."

"You got it," Sartha agrees. "I have something important to ask you though."

"OK." Leinth glances around again. She decides to trust Sartha's judgment, but just in case, she leans in so they can whisper to one another. "What?"

"Have you met Her yet?"

"No," Leinth answers, before thinking. The question puts a nasty feeling in her gut.

“Who?”

“Her.”

That one little word contains within it an ocean of feeling. Sartha quivers with excitement as she speaks it. She can barely contain herself. It’s a prayer, swelling with reverence, bursting with unnatural devotion. Leinth can sense already that Sartha is consumed by this ‘Her’. Nothing she said to Leinth before matters. Whatever - whoever - she’s talking about is utterly totalizing.

“Sartha,” Leinth says hesitantly. “What are you talking about?”

Sartha Thrace smiles, and now her smile is all wrong. It’s too serene. “Ah. You haven’t. You’d know if you had. Don’t worry. I’m sure it won’t be long.”

“Sartha...” Leinth’s stomach is plummeting. She’s panicking again. This isn’t right. “What the fuck?”

“She’ll explain everything,” Sartha assures her, and it’s like she thinks Leinth will be grateful for the assurance. “Once She talks to you, everything will make sense. You’ll make sense.”

“Stop talking like this!” Leinth pleads. “Just... just tell me what’s going on.”

Sartha pauses and restrains herself. Leinth can still see the light of energy and enthusiasm brimming within her, though. She’s just holding back because she can see Leinth isn’t ready yet.

“Handler,” she explains. Her tone is worshipful. “Oh, Leinth. You have no idea how wonderful she is!”

"Your..." Leinth feels like she's going to throw up. "Sartha. Out there. The *Ancyor*. That... please. Please don't tell me that was you."

"It was." Sartha tilts her head. Her eyes grow distant. "Well. In a way."

Leinth doesn't know what the fuck that means, but she's heard more than enough. She springs to her feet. Leaps away. Anger is clawing at the inside of her skin.

"Traitor!" she snarls. "How... how could you? How did they... no, no, it doesn't fucking matter. You betrayed us all!"

Sartha looks saddened, a little. Not enough to doubt herself. "She said you'd say that. But it's OK. She said that I don't need to listen. I think she just wants me to help you."

"Help me? What the..."

Leinth doesn't want to hear that. It's awful - that whoever this 'She' is, all she has to do is say one word, and Sartha shuts off? That's inhuman.

"Help you," Sartha repeats. "It's... an adjustment. Being with Her. I struggled with it too, at first. At least, I think so. She says I don't have to remember anymore. But once you accept it - once you accept Her - everything gets better. You'll see."

Obviously they've done something to her. Brainwashing. Obviously she's a victim too. Leinth knows that - but knowing isn't enough. She would have kissed the ground Sartha Thrace walked on. She would have given everything for her. Now she's with them. Leinth starts to shed tears as her voice becomes a bitter, frigid growl.

“Traitor,” she spits, hoping she can inject enough venom into her voice to make it sting. “You’re a fucking traitor.”

It works. Sartha looks offended. Wounded. She looks away, like she’s trying to go distant again, but she can’t quite manage it. Even now, even after whatever the fuck they did to her, she has just a little bit too much fight for that. She needs to retort.

“You shouldn’t call me that,” Sartha says defensively. “I’m not a... I’m a hero, right? You know that. The way you looked at me, it’s... I’m just here because...”

Because? Leinth can see gears spinning in her head, but she’s going nowhere. She doesn’t know why she’s here, or what she’s doing. Not really. She looks so lost.

“I-I have to do what She says.” Sartha sounds almost pleading now. “It’s not like I’m... we’re soldiers, aren’t we? We follow orders. And Her orders are special.” It’s like she’s tricking herself. Searching for justification. She’s found one now, however thin and false. Her distress abates. “If you just met Her, you’d understand...”

Her confusion is so obvious it hurts to witness. It’s embarrassing. Sartha Thrace is meant to be a hero. She’s meant to be better than this. Contradicting feelings tear into Leinth’s mind. She wants to forgive the confused woman in front of her. Their captors must have done something truly awful to her. But that also makes her presence hard to bear. Is it a warning of what fate they have in store for Leinth? Leinth doesn’t want to think about that. Not for one second.

Sartha Thrace is meant to be better. She’s meant to be the hero on the poster. Not this. Leinth doesn’t want to see her like this.

“Just leave me alone,” Leinth says quietly. When she catches Sartha looking sadly at her, she balls her hands into fists. It pisses her off. “Get the fuck out already! Go. It’s not

like you're a prisoner here, right? I don't want to fucking look at you."

She laughs bitterly at that. Sartha looks sorry for both Leinth and herself. She stands.

"I'm sorry you feel that way," Sartha says stiffly. "I'll be back, though. I promise. I don't want to leave you all on your own down here. And I really think She wants me to help you. To look after you. She's so kind, you see."

Leinth just stares at the wall, so Sartha walks over to the door of the cell. She bangs on it twice with her fist and the door opens. Leinth stays dead still until she leaves and the door closes again behind her. Then she buries her head in her hands and starts to sob.

Fuck.

After that, it all changes. The solitude and boredom, as interminable as it was, is something Leinth comes to miss. Because after Sartha's first visit, they start torturing her.

That's how Leinth chooses to think of it, anyway - torture. She's not sure what else she'd call it. It's not a kind of torture she'd ever prepared herself for, though. It's not an interrogation. There are no questions. It's not pain for pain's sake, either. Sometimes it doesn't hurt at all. They drug her with drugs that make her feel like nothing else. They hook her up to strange machines that seem to do nothing and everything. They shine bright, flickering lights into her eyes, and it's like they're

projecting something, like an old movie on film, and only part of her mind is able to see it.

Other times, it hurts worse than Leinth could ever describe.

Either way, by the time Leinth is dragged back to the cell she feels like her skin's been ripped inside out. She feels like one of those mech carcasses, still standing even though they've been burned to ash on the inside. All she can do is collapse and lie shivering on the floor of her cell, trying to piece herself back together. Sometimes, all the sensations they inflict on her seem to linger on in her body, burrowing deeper, until she can remind herself they're not real. Sometimes, the drugs leave her with an impossible euphoria that makes Leinth feel like she can't trust any of her own thoughts.

At those times, when Leinth is at her very lowest, Sartha Thrace comes to visit.

The first few times, at least, Leinth finds the strength to tell her to fuck off. To her credit, she does. But Sartha keeps coming and eventually, in a moment of weakness, she relents. It was meant to be just that once, but after that Sartha always ends up staying. Leinth is not made of stone. Without Sartha, she'd never see a single soul except for the hooded menials that drag her from her cell each day, and they barely seem to count as human.

She takes infinite comfort simply in sharing her cell, for a time, with another, familiar person. Just seeing Sartha's face, seeing her little human gestures like the way she adjusts her clothes and rakes back her hair, makes Leinth feel less crazy. Less alone and forgotten, like she's died and gone to her own private hell.

Sartha's good company, too. Even though she's a traitor. She only wants to talk if Leinth does. She's never pushy. She'll put up with Leinth's insults and anger. And

sometimes, it even feels like Leinth is getting through to her.

She's so beautiful, too. That helps.

After a time, it becomes a rhythm. Torture, then Sartha. The rhythm makes it easier to bear. No matter what they do to her, no matter how it feels, after a while Sartha will be there. They can talk if Leinth needs to hear her voice, or not if Leinth needs quiet. Eventually, her anger abates. There's no point being angry at Sartha Thrace. They're both in hell. Maybe Sartha's just in a little deeper.

The rhythm does trouble her, though. She's not blind to all the ways it could be used against her. Everything that's happening to her in this place seems as regular as clockwork, but sometimes Leinth senses something behind that. A presence. A person. The rhythm's conductor, perhaps. It might even be that mysterious 'she' Sartha sometimes refers to.

Or it might not. Maybe Leinth is just losing her mind.

Talking helps with that. It feels like it helps, anyway. Not that there's much to talk about. Mostly, Leinth talks about herself. Sometimes they talk about the war, although it's difficult to draw Sartha out on that topic. It's like she doesn't want to think about what's happening, or what side she's really on. It's like she prefers to be confused. Leinth learns that if she presses too hard Sartha might shut down on her, or worse, leave, and so Leinth learns not to. She finds the line where she can draw out Sartha's sense of contradiction without scaring her off.

And sometimes there are glimpses of the old Sartha. Of someone bright and brilliant, full of charisma and heroism. Leinth comes to live for those glimpses. Even now, Sartha is a kind of hero to her.

“In a way,” Leinth says slowly, one day, thinking back to their very first conversation. “What did that mean?”

“Huh?” Sartha, sitting just along from her in the cell, turns her head.

“When I asked you about piloting *Ancyor*,” Leinth presses. “You said it was you - ‘in a way’. Tell me what that means.”

Sartha looks away. “I was... nothing. It was me.”

“Bullshit.” Leinth has learned what it looks like when Sartha doesn’t want to think about something. “Tell me. Stop hiding something.”

Now Sartha sighs. “I’m not... hiding. You just wouldn’t understand.”

“Try me.”

It’s possible she’s pushing too hard, but the question has been burning inside Leinth. After a short time, Sartha sighs.

“It’s like... it’s like there’s someone else in my head,” she says slowly. Then, realizing how that sounds: “I mean, it’s still me. Obviously. But sometimes I can... let them take over. When She wants me to.”

Leinth doesn’t need to say anything. Her expression does all the talking. Sartha gets defensive.

“I-It’s not how it sounds,” Sartha insists. “I’m just not explaining it well. It’s like... it’s like how, sometimes, in the heat of battle, you just go on autopilot. You know that feeling, right?”

Leinth nods.

"It's just... one step further than that." She's grasping and she knows it. Leinth can tell. "It's better this way. A clearer separation." Sartha taps her foot restlessly. "I wish She was here. If She explained it to you, you'd understand perfectly."

"Why do you need to be separated?" Leinth argues back. "I don't. I want to be me. When I'm piloting. When I'm fighting. I want to know what I'm fighting for. Don't you?"

"I..." Sartha taps her foot faster. Agitated. "N-no. No, it gets distracting. Better to keep it separate. Better to focus. Better to ignore everything, except orders. Her orders. She says I don't need to think, and the other me makes it easier. It's better this way!"

By the end, she's almost shouting. It's the first time Sartha's seen her get so worked up. She wants to push further, but she can sense this is the limit - for now, at least. Maybe Sartha's mistress doesn't realize how fragile she is. Maybe Leinth is starting to figure out where the cracks are.

But she'll be smart about it. Rhythms go both ways. Now she can be the one to provide comfort. She slides along the bench and rests her arm across Sartha's shoulder. She squeezes her. Sartha relaxes. She welcomes the touch.

"You know," Leinth says slowly, after a minute or more has passed, "that it wasn't always like this, right?"

"Yeah." Sartha's voice is empty.

"And..." Leinth takes a deep breath. "And you know it's not like this for most people,

don't you? You know it's not right."

Sartha plants her head in her hands. She might be crying. Then slowly, finally, she nods.

Time passes. It goes on. It gets worse. Whatever they're doing to Leinth, it's getting more intense. Not more painful - no, that would be preferable. Increasingly, instead of agonizing memories that reverberate yet more pain, Leinth is left with no memories at all. She's left without clarity. Often for hours, even after she's returned to her cell. Blackouts. Lost time. It's like her mind, her life, is being packed into smaller and smaller boxes. Each day, less space remains. Less of her is able to survive. The rest is all an endless, wandering fog. Each memory and each clear thought becomes a hard-fought battle.

It's a war. And Leinth is losing this war too.

The pilot has no defenses against this. She knows how to be strong, but strength isn't enough. Leinth's emotions are starting to fray. She screams. She wails. She sobs. She bangs her fists on the cell walls until her skin breaks.

Leinth can't even count the hours or the days. She can't tell if she's putting up a good fight. What haunts her more than anything is that all of this could have been no more than a couple of weeks. What if she's falling apart like this in just two weeks.

It brings her to despair. Only Sartha Thrace can comfort her.

Leinth is lying across her lap, resting her head in the softness and warmth of her former hero. It's the only soft thing she ever gets to touch. When the inside of her own head feels like a hive of bees or a yawning abyss, she can lose herself in the slightly scratchy texture of Sartha's clothes. She can become something that only exists in the present tense, without her past to grasp at and her future to dread.

She can't remember when she lost enough of her pride to accept this embrace, from a woman she's called a traitor. But Leinth is glad she did. Without this, she couldn't make it. Her very worst fear is that one day, Sartha will simply stop appearing at the door of her cell. She just has to pray they won't start using that against her.

Sometimes they talk. Not often, though. What's there to talk about? Nothing changes down here. Leinth tries to keep working Sartha, though. Putting her fingers in those cracks. Pulling them apart. She thinks it's working - not that she trusts herself to judge. But Sartha talks less about 'Her'. She seems more uncomfortable, whenever Leinth questions. That's something, right? That's hope?

None of that today, though. Leinth isn't together enough for it. All she can do is rest her head in Sartha's lap and sob.

She tries to sob silently and cover the shaking motions she makes when her breath catches awkwardly in her throat. Maybe she doesn't want to cry so nakedly in front of an enemy. Maybe she doesn't want to cry so nakedly in front of her hero. Either way, she keeps her face turned away and hopes Sartha can't quite see her in the dark.

Then it strikes her: of course she can. It's dim in here, but not pitch black. And Sartha's head is right above her. Of course she can see.

Leinth pulls her arms and legs in tighter. She tucks in her head. "Sorry," she says quietly.

Mercifully, Sartha doesn't say anything. She doesn't even make some condescending, cooing little noise. She just, very gently, reaches down and starts to stroke Leinth's hair.

Leinth closes her eyes. At first in shame, but slowly she relaxes. Sartha's touch is startlingly pleasant. It feels like an angel's touch. Suddenly, Leinth is struck with a kind of vision.

She imagines that it's the Sartha Thrace from the poster, sitting above her, stroking her hair. Sartha Thrace as she once was. Always victorious. Always right. Resplendent in her heroism. Her stirring beauty shining like the sun. Smiling a cocksure smile that lets everyone with her know that it's going to be OK.

The fantasy is a little childish, she guesses. But she needs it right now. Leinth gives herself over to the pleasant daydream. It makes her feel like it's going to be OK.

Eventually, after a long while, she manages to make herself still. She stops crying. She's shed enough tears for the day. But there's no escaping the knowledge that tomorrow will be the same. Fresh torments. And once they're over, even less of her will remain.

"Sartha," Leinth says. Her voice is shaky and hoarse. "I'm not going to make it in here. I'm going to end up like you. Or worse."

There's a long pause. Then: "I know."

Leinth summons up her courage. "Will you help me escape?"

A longer pause. Then:

“Yeah.”

They make a plan, that night. It's a simple one. No time for refinements. Leinth is desperate to get out and, frankly, she can't trust Sartha to keep her word.

From what she's said, simple should be good enough. This part of the base - the 'kennels', Sartha calls them - is large, but has only a small contingent of those dog-hooded menials. Sartha can send them away once the cell door is unlocked, and then she can lead Leinth to freedom. They shouldn't encounter anyone else on their way to the hangar. All Leinth has to do is steal an Imperial mech and run like hell.

It sounds a little too good to be true. But what choice does Leinth have but to put her faith in Sartha, and hope she has enough of her own strength left to overcome any unexpected challenges?

The real sticking point is Sartha herself. She says all this like she's not coming. Leinth senses that she shouldn't ask. Now more than ever, she can't afford to push Sartha to breaking point. She can see, plain as day, all the fear and doubt inside the captured hero. For all her reputation, she's like an abused puppy now. She isn't just thinking running away will earn her another kick. She's thinking that running away will mean she's nothing at all.

Leinth wants to prove her wrong. She's nursing a hope that, at the very last moment, when they're standing at the threshold, Sartha will choose to take her hand. They have a connection, as pilots and fellow prisoners. Whatever Sartha's done, she

can still be redeemed. She can be whole again. A hero once more.

And Leinth can be the one to take her back into the light. It feels like fate, in a way. Maybe that's why her chest is filling with tentative confidence.

The moment comes. Leinth hears the lock on her cell door disengage. There's a pause - longer than usual - before it opens. Sartha is standing in the doorway. No one's behind her. Sartha steps back, beckoning Leinth. Leinth's heart starts to race. It's happening. It's real.

"This way," Sartha says.

They start moving quickly, not quite running for fear that their feet pounding the concrete will alert something or someone. It's just as dark out of Leinth's cell as it is inside it, and to her the dark corridors and passageways Sartha is leading her through are utterly indistinguishable. She's tried mapping the place based on what she sees when the menials drag her out each day, but no luck. There's too little light, and their work leaves her far, far too disoriented.

Sartha appears to know them intimately, though. She leads and Leinth follows, and eventually she senses that they are sloping upward. It takes longer than she'd hoped, though. How big is this part of the base? Is this sprawling complex just for prisoners like her and Sartha? There's no sense to it than she can discern.

She can puzzle that out later, though. Now she just needs to escape.

They round a corner and Leinth almost runs headfirst into Sartha's back. She's stopped. Leinth can immediately see why. For the first time, they can see light - not the light of day, but the bright, harsh light of the mech hangar, and that's close enough. It's still distant and faint but it's closer than had Leinth dared hope for.

But that's not why Sartha froze. There's something else. Someone standing between them and freedom. Not one of the menials. Leinth immediately knows who this is.

It's Her.

Sartha's handler. The woman she seems utterly in awe of. There's no one else it could be. She's wearing a strange kind of uniform - black leathers and a dark cap, with a long coat that lends her a formidable silhouette. Hair is platinum, almost white, as cold as her eyes. She wears a thin smile as she stares down the escapees.

This is bad. Leinth knows that right away. But she's already running the numbers. This woman's no bigger than she is. Even if Sartha freezes up, which seems likely, it's a fair fight. Leinth can win those.

Sartha Thrace does something much worse than freezing up.

"Well done, Sartha," the handler says. She gestures down. "Now. Heel."

Leinth is frozen in horror as Sartha rushes across to the handler's side and kneels.

Her obedience isn't the worst part, much as Leinth wishes it was. The worst part is how bursting with energy Sartha is. With certainty. There's no hint of doubt or shame or guilt in her demeanor. She's rushing forward. Practically wagging her tail. So eager it's embarrassing.

If she was going to betray Leinth again, the least she could have done was hesitate.

"Good girl," the handler says as Sartha throws herself at her feet. She reaches down

and blesses her head with a couple of fond pats. Leinth is grateful she can't see the look on Sartha's face. She's sure it would break her heart. "Hello, Leinth Aritimis."

Leinth grits her teeth. This is as bad as it gets. She needs to get her head into gear. This is combat. She should run. But she needs to ask the question.

"What did you do to her?"

Handler takes her time. She tilts her head. Considering, perhaps, how to answer. "I gave her a gift," she says. "The kind of gift that wins anybody over. I made her perfectly happy."

Anger swelled in Leinth's bosom. "You're sick."

The slight smile on the handler's face is maddening. "Do you think so? I believe I'd like to give you the same gift, Leinth."

That makes her skin crawl. "She's not happy, you piece of shit."

"Doesn't she look happy to you?" the handler replies. She extends her palm, and Sartha stretches her neck to rest her chin on her hand. There's nothing more Leinth wants than to rush over and break the handler's jaw. But who knows how Sartha would react to that?

"I've seen what she's like," Leinth growls. "It's no gift. She's suffering. She's in anguish. I've seen it. Half the time, she's falling apart!"

"Indeed," the handler muses. "She struggles without me, doesn't she? But she put up with it so bravely. I'm so proud of her."

The emotion dripping from her lips is a sickening mixture of mocking condescension and genuine affection. Leinth has never heard anything like it.

“Sir,” Sartha pipes up. She has eyes only for her handler and she seems nervous about speaking, but excitement at the praise has overcome her. “May I have it back?”

The handler smiles down benevolently at her. She’s so proud. “Of course you can, Sartha.”

She reaches into one of her coat pockets and retrieves something - a small, elongated, metal cage with a pair of leather straps mounted to it.

A muzzle.

Sartha presents herself and keeps dead still as her handler bends down and affixes it to her face, taking care to brush her hair out of the way and make sure the straps are exactly as tight as they need to be. It’s as loving as a kiss. As twisted as a curse.

“Up,” the handler says once she’s done.

Sartha rises to her feet. She turns to look at Leinth but barely seems to register her presence. The muzzle jutting out of her face is grotesque. Leinth can’t help but notice how serene she is now. Sartha’s face is clear of doubt, wracked by none of the confusion that had plagued her whenever they’d spoken in Leinth’s cell.

Was it an act? Or does the handler’s presence simply have this much sway over her?

Which is worse?

Leinth swears to herself and spits on the ground. Fuck this. Fuck whatever this is. She's not going to fall to pieces over this. She's not going to stand here and stare and let this woman play games with her head. She's getting out of here.

"See you in hell, freak," she snarls, and breaks into a sprint.

All she needs to do is put the handler down and run. Leinth can figure the rest out on her own. Sartha isn't going to help her. Not now.

She makes it a few paces before the handler reacts. She doesn't panic, though, or raise her arms to defend herself. She just says something to Sartha in a firm, clear voice.

"Off The Leash."

The next thing Leinth knows, she's on the ground. It's just like when she got laid out by *Ancyor*. Something is on top of her. Something panting and violent and angry. It's Sartha.

Except it isn't.

Nobody could go from zero to sixty that fast. Nobody. No person. But Sartha doesn't really count as one of those anymore. She's staring down at Leinth with a look of impossible, bestial hate, eyes as furious as they are shallow. Her hackles are raised and her back is arched, and her lips are drawn back to expose snarling teeth. There's a sound coming from the back of her throat; a low, rumbling growl, like the rolling of thunder. It's a sound that has no business coming from a human.

This is her. The other self Sartha was talking about before. Leinth knows it. Not a person. Just a honed instrument of her handler's violent will.

A hound.

"Easy, Hound," the handler says. "I don't want her harmed."

Hound eases off - but only just. The hate burning in her eyes as she looks at Leinth is so singular. It's utterly totalizing. Leinth tried to desecrate her goddess. That's all there is to it. The depth of her devotion is so unnatural it makes Leinth's skin crawl.

The handler moves to stand over her, looking down at her. "You will not escape from here," she pronounces. "You will never leave this place again. Not unless I permit it. Understand?"

Her manner demands an answer. Leinth doesn't have one, not even a foul spit of defiance. She's just trying not to fall to pieces. She's cursing herself for her optimism. For not seeing the signs. She's trying not to tear up too, because that would just be too pathetic. She doesn't want to give this woman the satisfaction. But for that strength, she needs hope. And there's precious little to hope for, now.

Only Sartha.

There has to be something left of her, right? You can't just take a human being and take them apart and put them back together like this. Right? Right? You can't just make a person this small.

There's something left. Leinth just needs to get through to her.

"Please," she mouths silently at the hound. She tries to meet her gaze, hard as it is. So much hate, in eyes that had become so familiar. Her muzzle disfigures her. It's hard to look past that and see the face of a hero. But Leinth is determined to try.

“You have such faith in her.” The handler’s lips curl. “Don’t you see? She’s mine now.”

“No!” Leinth cries, although her voice is weak. “She... she wants to leave with me. She knows this is wrong. She knows you’re her enemy. I saw it.”

The handler arches an eyebrow. “Hound. Up.”

Hound rises to her feet instantly, offering Leinth one last warning growl. Leinth knows better than to try to stand.

“Take off your jacket,” the handler instructs.

Again, Hound obeys without thought. She discards the military jacket she was once so proud of like it’s nothing. Underneath she’s wearing a simple, khaki tank top. The handler lifts the hem to Hound’s chest and uses her other hand to fondly touch the pilot’s abs, feeling at their definition. She’s enjoying them - her smirk makes no secret of that - but this is all for Leinth’s benefit. She’s trying to piss Leinth off. Showing her that only she gets to touch Sartha Thrace this way.

It’s working.

Then the handler makes her hand into a fist and punches Hound in the gut.

She may not be a pilot, but she’s a military woman and her form is good. And more to the point, Hound makes no attempt to defend herself. The blow leaves her bent double, retching and heaving, before her legs give way and she sinks to her knees. She looks like she’s in agony.

Leinth is sure that Sartha Thrace - Hound - whatever - is quick enough to have sensed the blow coming. But she didn't brace herself. Didn't even tense her muscles or expel the air from her lungs.

What the fuck kind of control is that? Control on an instinctive level. In her nerves, her muscles, her reflexes.

And that's not the end. After watching Hound contort and groan for a few moments, the handler lowers the offending fist to Hound's lips and pushes her muzzle aside.

Hound kisses it.

The kiss is almost innocent. It's like a knight kissing her liege's ring. Knowing it's the hand that just left a mean bruise on Hound's stomach makes it twisted. It gets worse when the handler extends her fingers and uses them to pry Hound's lips apart, running her fingertips over her teeth, pinching her tongue, smearing drool across her face.

Depraved. There's no other word for it.

"Do you still think she wants to leave?" the handler asks as she pulls back and fixes Hound's muzzle.

"Yes, damn it!" Leinth's wishes her voice sounded firmer. "You've done something to her. That... thing is not Sartha Thrace. It's just something you put in her head. It's not her."

"Would it help to hear it from her own lips?" the handler asks. "I'm trying to help you see the truth of her, Leinth. She doesn't deserve your faith." She turns to Hound.

"On The Leash."

Light returns to her eyes - a semblance of it, at least, but smothered by the handler's presence. It's Sartha again. The muzzle, though, still ruins her face.

"Sartha," the handler says. Sartha's ears prick up, grateful merely for the attention. "Do you want to leave me?"

"No!"

The word bursts from her lips, an explosion, before she can catch herself and add the appropriate 'sir'. Sartha is suddenly desperate. Panicked, far more so than she'd ever been with Leinth in her cell. Her eyes register a wounded confusion.

Is she being abandoned? What did she do wrong?

"No, sir!" Sartha repeats. Her eyes flick and flit manically. She's on the brink of collapse. "P-please..."

"Don't worry." The handler pets her head again. "You don't have to leave, Sartha."

All at once, the hero relaxes. Shoulders sink, muscles release all their tension. Her face slumps into a glowing smile. This is all she needs. God is in her heaven; all is right with the world.

And Leinth's faint hopes grow fainter still.

"That's... not..." She feels the need to set this to right, somehow. To explain it away. To make an excuse. "You're in her head! You have been for months, you sick freak. Whatever fucking game you're playing with her doesn't change the fact that she's still

Sartha Thrace!"

"Hmm." The handler looks impressed, or something like it. "You believe in her so very much. More than I'd expected."

Leinth would be proud. She takes faith as a mark of strength. For rebels like her, faith in one other is indispensable. She would be proud, if not for how pleased the handler seemed.

"Where does that come from, I wonder?" the handler muses. "Loyalty and admiration so fervent it persists in defiance of reality itself. You can understand, I'm sure, why I might take a professional interest."

Leinth spits. She's sure this woman knows absolutely nothing about loyalty. Less than nothing.

"The way you look at her is fascinating," the handler goes on. She's bending down a little, peering at the pilot. "Respect. Faith. But other things, too. Envy? That's normal, between pilots. Who wouldn't envy my hound?"

At that, Leinth just snorts. It's nothing she hasn't thought about before. 'Do I want to be her friend, or do I just want to be her?' She's at peace with it.

"And," the handler adds. "Lust. You want her."

"W-what?" Leinth feels something pull tight in her chest, even as she laughs and scoffs. "Don't be stupid."

"You do," the handler decides. She says it so academically. Like she's putting together a puzzle. Like she's dissecting a frog. "Why deny it? We know your

inclinations. She's attractive, isn't she?"

"I didn't mean..." Leinth glances at Sartha. She has eyes only for her handler, even now, but surely she can hear both of them. "Of course, but--"

"The way you look at her is obvious," the handler interrupts. She glances at Sartha. "It's obvious to her, too."

Leinth's eyes flash wide. That's... no. No. She's lying. The handler is messing with her, that much is obvious. And Leinth was always so careful. She never let *those* feelings reach her face.

Except...

She can't be quite so confident, can she? Trying to sort through her own memories of her captivity is like trying to grasp at water. At times, she was all but delirious from the pain and the drugs. Did she let something slip? Did something filthy reveal itself in her gaze?

Leinth looks to Sartha, hoping for confirmation. She's unreadable. She's in a blissful daze, shining with gladness at the reunion with her handler and her muzzle.

"Tell me, Leinth," the handler says. "That poster, above your bunk. Did you ever look at it while you touched yourself?"

Leinth recoils like she's been struck. Cold washes over her, turning all the hairs along her spine into little icicles. "How do you know about that?"

"Our methods are very effective for extracting information," the handler tells her. "Did you think that my staff were merely amusing themselves?"

Panic. More panic. Leinth scrambles away across the concrete floor. Suddenly the handler's eyes on her skin are unbearable. What else might she know? Leinth tries to reach back into memory and find pieces of herself. She finds a black hole. She can't remember spilling any secrets - but clearly she has.

Who has she betrayed? Please let it only be herself. Please let it not be anyone else.

"I think I can take that as confirmation," the handler says. "Not that I needed any. You want her." Her smile widens. "You could have her, you know."

Leinth goes very still. "What?"

"Is that what would make you happy, I wonder?" The handler reaches out to Sartha again; a light touch across her torso, where a bruise is already beginning to rise. "All I'd need to do is say the word."

"No! Fuck - no." Leinth's stomach churns at the suggestion. "I would never... fuck, *she* would never."

"Not at all." The handler's confidence is supreme. "If I ordered you to, you'd give yourself to Leinth. Wouldn't you, Sartha."

"Yes, sir."

She doesn't hesitate before answering, of course. Leinth is just about prepared for that, but she isn't prepared at all for how plainly eager Sartha is. She's looking at her handler with hope in her eyes. She wants her handler to say the word. She wants to be given a chance to obey.

No matter what.

Leinth can't tell if it's too hot or too cold now. She starts to clamber to her feet, leaning heavily on the nearby wall for support. She feels dizzy. She feels like up is down and down is up. Before she knows it, the handler is right there, merely a kiss away, her eyes inescapable.

"Do you want her, Leinth?" she asks, voice barely a whisper, like what she proposes could be a secret, safely told. "Do you want her body?" She puts her lips against Leinth's skin. "Do you want her to suck your cock?"

The handler is a pillar of ice, but somehow, just for that one, simple question, she makes her voice impossibly sinful and tempting, like warm syrup being poured into Leinth's ear. It sticks to her. It makes Leinth's body stir. Leinth recoils violently, thrown into panic, trying to flee - but she's already against the wall, there's nowhere to go.

She can't let it show. She can't. But it's too late, of course.

Disgusting. She's disgusting. The handler's disgusting. Hound is disgusting. This is all disgusting.

"You could go down on her too, of course," the handler adds. "If that's more to your taste. But I think... yes. This is what you want. Sartha Thrace, on her knees, before you. Warm. Eager. Welcoming."

"N-no!"

Leinth's voice trembles. She squeezes her eyes shut. Her fantasies are turning against her and all she can do is turn inward, trying to obliterate them with white-hot shame.

“Well, let’s see.” The handler is ice again as she steps back and beckons Sartha forward. “Here, Sartha. Come. Kneel. Remove your muzzle. Open your mouth.”

“Yes, sir!”

Leinth can hear the eagerness of Sartha’s obedience as she rushes and falls, and briefly fumbles with the strap of her muzzle. Her mind’s eye does the rest, and the picture it paints makes her shiver.

“Look,” the handler commands, and the sheer force of will in her voice is irresistible. “Open your eyes.”

Leinth holds firm for a few moments but it only takes one lapse. One moment of weakness - or perhaps, she fears, of curiosity. Once her lids part, there’s no going back. She’s transfixed. Sartha Thrace is kneeling before her. Her mouth is open. Waiting. She is ready to receive. There’s a warm smile on her face - it’s for her handler, of course, but it could so easily be for Leinth. It would be so easy to pretend. A fantasy, a wet dream, could never be so vivid and so real.

If it wasn’t already too late to pretend, it is now. Leinth is hard. Her clothes aren’t tight, but it’s still obvious.

“There.” The handler says. She’s not smug, just sure. She doesn’t need to be smug. She knew exactly what was going to happen. “Now, Leinth. Should I say the word?”

Leinth shakes her head in mute horror. If she answered ‘yes’, if she even considered it, she’d become something unforgivable.

“Why not?” The handler asks. “You want to. She wants to.”

“She- ah!”

The handler interrupts her by resting her hand on the back of Sartha’s face and pushing her forward until Sartha’s face is pressed against Leinth’s front. The touch is sparks to dry kindling. Leinth twitches awkwardly, trying to shrink back, but there’s nowhere to go and the handler won’t let her.

Sartha, sensing her handler’s intent, starts rubbing and nuzzling, eager, happy to be of use, and that makes it even worse.

“S-she,” Leinth stammers, struggling to keep the thread of her reason taut. “She doesn’t! She’s... you made her like this! It’s your fault! She doesn’t - Sartha Thrace would never - want this.”

“That doesn’t matter.” The handler shuts her down brutally. “Who knows why anyone wants what they want? It doesn’t matter. Look at the woman in front of you.” She turns to Sartha. “Sartha, would you like to clean my boot?”

“Yes, sir!”

Leinth winces. More of that bubbling, twisted eagerness. Each time is another knife.

“Then do so.”

She extends a foot forward pointedly. Again, there’s no hesitation. Sartha bends forward, prostrate, as if in prayer, and puts her lips to the tip of the handler’s long, tall, black, leather boots and begins to kiss. The wet licking sounds that follow stroke Leinth’s imagination.

Leinth wishes she could look away. But Sartha Thrace's fall is transfixing. It's a solar eclipse. She'll take a punch and thank her handler for it. She'll kiss her boot like it's a lover. She'll make herself a whore at her handler's command. Is there anything she wouldn't do for that woman? Any limit?

The question provokes an uncomfortable curiosity.

"That will do, Sartha," the handler says, after several long seconds. "Stand."

"Yes, sir."

Sartha's voice is breathy with excitement. When she stands, Leinth can see that the handler's boot is shiny with her spit. She keeps staring.

"Look at her, Leinth," the handler chides. "Not at my boot. Look at *her*."

Leinth doesn't. She doesn't want to. The handler doesn't fight her on it. She has other tactics.

"Sartha," she says. "Kiss her."

"Hu-"

Leinth can barely breathe before Sartha, her hero, is pressing against her. Their lips meet. Sartha is insistent, and Leinth doesn't have the strength to push her away. The kiss isn't chaste or robotic or forced. Sartha sinks into it, willingly embracing her duty. She's passionate. Eager. After a moment, Leinth sinks too. The fantasy is too nice, even though there's one unmistakable difference between this and her fond daydreams.

Sartha's lips taste like leather and boot polish.

Sartha is the one who pulls away in the end, which is its own kind of humiliation. In the moments after the kiss, with her face inches from Leinth's, she looks breathy. Flushed. It's enough to make Leinth pine.

"Do you see it yet?" The handler's voice breaks the moment. It's as final as a sunset. "She's not your Sartha Thrace. Not anymore. So why not enjoy her, if it pleases you?" Her smile ticks upwards. "Many have."

A spike of anger brings with it a kind of clarity. This is wrong. It's not even a fantasy anymore. Whatever daydreams and intimate thoughts Leinth has succumbed to, here and there, she never wanted this for Sartha. Never.

Many have.

It makes Leinth shudder. This isn't a wet dream. This isn't her long-treasured fantasy. This is just... cheap. Cheap titillation. It's unworthy of her. It's even more unworthy of Sartha Thrace.

"No!" Leinth cries. She finds her voice for the first time in what feels like an age, and the force in her denial drives Sartha back an uncertain step. The handler looks at her - surprised, perhaps, although more curious than afraid.

"No?" she asks.

"Just go fuck yourself already!" Leinth screams. It feels good to scream. "You can throw me back in the damn cell, but you're not gonna get me to... to..." She just looks at Sartha. "I don't know how you got so twisted that you get off on this sick shit, but I'm better than that. *She* is better than that."

"She is not." The handler says it with a knowing smile, like she's the one who has grasped Sartha's soul in her hands, and that pisses Leinth off even more.

"Yes she is!" Leinth insists. "She's Sartha god damn Thrace! She's a hero. She's *the* hero. You can change a lot of things but you can't change that!"

It feels good to say it to her face. Everything's fucked up right now, but not Leinth's faith in Sartha. She's placing that beyond reach. Her faith is the midday sun, boiling away the morning fog. If nothing else, she can make sure the handler goes to her grave knowing that she was never able to tarnish it.

"There will always be people out there - rebels out there - fighting because they were inspired by her." Leinth is finding her theme and her voice. "Her face and her name are on recruitment posters all over the planet. People will always believe in her. *I* will always believe in her. No matter what you make her say or do, people will always know: it's not real. It's not her. The real Sartha Thrace was always a hero."

For the first time, the handler is silent. Her silence is intoxicating. Seeing her, of all people, seemingly lost for words is almost as rewarding as freedom itself. It's tempting to keep going, to rub her face in it, but there's something far more important at stake. Leinth turns, again, to Sartha. She steps forward and clasps her hero by her shoulders, pulling her close.

"And you," Leinth says. "Listen to me. *You* will always be a hero. I know that's not getting through to you right now because of how badly they've fucked with your head. But it's true. We spent a lot of time talking down in that cell. It wasn't all fake. You can't tell me that. You're still in there, somewhere. And one day, you're gonna get out. You're gonna escape. You're gonna find your way back to yourself. It'll be hard, it'll be painful, but I know you'll do it, because that's what a hero does. And when that day comes, you'll... you'll..."

She trails off. There's something in Sartha's eyes. She's listening to her now. Leinth's words have made it through. The look dawning on her face is real, and that's exactly what makes it so devastating.

Sartha Thrace looks pained.

It's a bone-deep, weary kind of pain. Suddenly she doesn't look like a captured hero or a brainwashed hound. She just looks tired. Like she's a woman who's been ground down and chewed up by the world. And now, just by talking, Leinth has become one of the teeth. She's hurting her. Sartha just wants her to stop.

Leinth can't go on. She didn't think it would be like this. In the face of this mysterious wound in Sartha, she's powerless.

But now, of course, the handler has something to say.

"There's a chink in the armor of every single human being." The handler speaks slowly. She wants every word to sink in. "At least one. And if you pry it open, you find a void. If you can fill that void, then they are yours. Right down to their soul. She is the chink in your armor."

Leinth closes her eyes. She doesn't want to hear this. She doesn't want to know that all this, all her defiance, was just another part of this woman's dance.

"You have such faith in her," the handler says. "You think it makes you strong. It just makes you brittle. You can think you can handle seeing her broken and dirtied and disappointing. Perhaps. But you cannot handle the real truth of Sartha Thrace."

It's that pain. It has to be. Leinth wants to close her heart off to it. To make a hated

enemy of Sartha in her head. Then she wouldn't need to care. She can't do it, of course.

"The chink in Sartha's armor," the handler tells her, "was you."

Leinth opens her eyes in disbelief.

"Not just you, of course," the handler adds. "Not you personally. But all of you who call her a hero and worship the ground she walks on. All that faith. All those expectations. Did you think she could carry that much weight? That she didn't notice? That it didn't drag her down with every step? She was tired of it, Leinth. Deep in her soul, she was tired of it. She wanted to be free of it. She would never have admitted it out loud, of course. But she knew it all the same. And when I offered her freedom, something deep inside her reached out and took it. *That* is how I made her mine."

Leinth is frozen. She never thought about it. Not once. To her, Sartha was always a woman on a poster. Why didn't she ever...

"I should thank you, shouldn't I?" The handler says it without mirth. "For helping to wear her down. For helping to deliver her into my arms. And after that little speech, I think she's more mine than she's ever been."

Sometimes, when Leinth pilots *Genetor*, she takes some pretty fucking big hits. It's part of the job, after all. *Genetor* was built for it. It's the kind of machine that was designed to stare down an avalanche and dare the mountain to do its worst. That doesn't mean it doesn't feel like shit, though. It doesn't matter how heavily built a machine is. When you get hit by heavy ordnance, the force has to go somewhere. It goes through you. And the noise. It's deafening, in the most literal sense. After some battles, Leinth can't hear properly for hours afterward. There's nothing in her ears but a skull-splitting mosquito whine of complaint.

Even that doesn't compare to how bad her head is ringing now.

It was her fault?

She looks at Sartha once again. That's the only thing that can save her now. Sartha telling her that it's a lie. That she never felt that way. That she was OK with it. But Sartha avoids her gaze, and her shame speaks louder than any words.

And that's the problem, isn't it? She's still just looking to Sartha to save her.

"A hero, a martyr, or a traitor," the handler muses. "Those are the only fates you left her with. No wonder it was so easy to make her a hound instead."

Leinth gets it now. There are no heroes down here. Not a one.

"Sartha," the handler says once she's sure it's all sunk in. She knows the signs. The slumped shoulders. The sagging, lightless eyes. "*Off The Leash*. You can take Leinth to my room now. She's ready for my personal attention."

It's a mercy to be faced with Hound instead of Sartha. Hound knows no shame, and no judgment either. Hound doesn't hesitate. She just puts a hand on Leinth's shoulder and starts guiding her, unresisting, away from the light and deeper into the catacombs beneath the base.

I would like to express my gratitude for the generosity of all those who support me on Patreon, and to give a special thanks to the following patrons in particular for their exceptional support:

Artemis, Chloe, J, Secret Subject, Kathryn, Lucy, Dex, orangesya, Red, dmtph, Ember, MegatronTarantulas, Vanessa, Matt, Jeremy, Mattilda, Emily, William, ntad, Flluffie, Silgon, The Flock, ourladyofililacs, Luna, Abigail, steb, Hypnogirl_Stephanie_, nicholas, Sue, Alan_, mintyasleep, Noelle, Lavender, Madness, Michael, Tasteful Ardour, Michael, Matthew, Full Blown Marxism, Anonymous, GrillFan65, Huge_Nerd, ZephanyZephZeph, Tram345, 8947jts, Chris, Breadloaf, Kyle, Emma, Jack the Monkey, Paul, Willow, Shadows exile, Drone 8315, Matthew, Alex, Sam, Selina, Daniel, Bubble_Butt, Francesca, WhyamIhere, John, Sarah, Crittergang, Setcab, Erin, Elysium, Bacon Man, Flintnsteal, Arik, John, bluaph, Kyle, Morriel, Jack the Monkey, Sola, NewtypeWoman, Envy, hellenberg, shoktherapy, L, Jim, Black Star, Kay, Michael, John, Praxis Memetics LLC, Frank, William, Christopher, Charlotte, Faun, Riley, Brinn, Brendon, B, Jackson, Kyle, Dennis, Nandi, Sanya, David, Morder, Myles_EXVS, Jade, Skylar, Foridin, Jennifer, Selina, Violet, Slifer274, paxDulcetGirl, Hal, Phoenix, Ivy, Jim, Michael, Joseph, June, Yaoups, Peter, Paige, Sophie, imaencuru, Thomas, Liz, naivetynkohan, Ada, EepyTimeTea, nitin, Sebastian, ds2coffin, Yaoups, SuperJellyFrogEx, Utumnon, Bacon Man, J, Daedalus, Queenfisher, night, Basic dev, Katie, BTYOR, Lily, Emily Queen of Sloths, SkinnyQP, spyrocyndersam13, John