

# SHOWHOUND

## Part Two

### Kallidora Rho

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 willowly 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 gargoye. "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.”

“Nnhhgnnn,” 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. “Pleasepleasepleasepleaseeee,” 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-tooppp!” 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 ssaiddddd 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. “Pppleeeee!” Sartha tries again, even though she’s so far beyond coherent speech. “D-Donnttt 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 Hebrons 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.

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