

# HELLHOUND

## Kallidora Rho

Yoriun Drei, rebel pilot, has three pictures of Sartha.

The first, cut from one of the old zines everyone used to make about her, is a classic Thrace photo-op. After a sortie she stands beside *Ancyor*—dirtied, bloodied but victorious—in some hangar bay, surrounded by adoring rebels, while she shares a moment with one of her mechanics. Even in that still life, her smile radiates confidence, and her lips drip with a flirtatious compliment paid to the grease-stained, jumpsuit-clad woman she has her arm around. The moment is too perfect to choreograph. There's a reality to it that stirs the heart better than any heavy-handed propaganda poster ever could. Even now, even knowing what he knows, Yoriun feels it: Sartha Thrace is a hero.

Yet the longer he stares at the photo, the stranger it becomes. Along with Sartha, it features her mechanic and a dozen other soldiers besides—but not one of those faces has ever stuck in Yoriun's memory. It is a picture of all of them, and yet, somehow, it is only ever a picture of Sartha Thrace. He has wondered a thousand times if the photo, now dog-eared and fading, was overexposed. If that's why she seems to shine so bright as to cast all around into blurry shadow. Sure enough, there is a strange, empty quality to her face. A beauty that defies specificity—and that, with time, is not beautiful at all. Not like a person is, anyway. Looking at the photo carefully, you wouldn't mistake her for one any more than you'd mistake a creepy, painted-porcelain doll for a human being. And is she truly smiling? Is that really a smile, or simply a kind of insincere resting face? Why wouldn't she smile properly? Why did she always stand that way, at a careful distance from the comrades who sold their lives in her name?

When Yoriun looks at the photo, he wonders: back then, in her glory

days, was she already a traitor in her heart? Did she already dream of it? That's what the Empire says. He wonders if, transported back there, he would be able to see it in her, the way an experienced forager might identify a viper's egg in a bird's nest. After all, in the years since, they have all become experts in treason.

The second picture is a blurry Polaroid taken candidly through a half-open door. It shows Sartha at Leukon, after her rescue, in the early stages of her greatest betrayal. She is small in the frame, perched on the edge of a sickbed, speaking with a medic. Yoriun wishes he knew who took it. He came by it in trade with a harrowed woman who looked at him half-grateful, half-disgusted for his willingness to trade a meal on an empty stomach for the photograph. He wishes he knew what it had felt like, seeing her like that. Shameful, perhaps, like a betrayal of her. Maybe titillating. Or maybe it simply felt powerful to put her square in the sights of a camera's lens and pull the trigger.

Yoriun also wishes he had a name to put to the expression Sartha wears. Though smeared and barely visible, there is something distinct about it. A face that deserves a name. It'd be the kind of unfamiliar word you turn up in an old book, only to suddenly find ways to put it to use all around you. Absent any such convenient eureka moment, though, Yoriun can only grasp like a man reaching for his glasses in the dark. Aloof? No, there is too much feeling for that. Resigned? No; Sartha seems restless, somehow. Guilty? Of course not. Vacant, sullen, guarded, terse, masked, mournful, regretful—all of them come close, yet all of them fail to encapsulate the strange expression on Sartha's face, at once devoid of emotion and too full of it. Yoriun is in torment for want of a word.

Perhaps there is none. Perhaps it is an expression only Sartha Thrace has ever worn, and a feeling only she has ever felt. Whichever side she's fighting on, she's always been special. Perhaps mere mortals aren't meant to grasp what a demigod feels. Still, Yoriun cannot help but wonder if knowing might have made a difference back then. He wonders if someone at Leukon Base having the right words to reach her—to understand her—might have made all the difference. Maybe a traitor once can be a traitor twice. Maybe one word alone, in the proper place, could have kept her from making common cause with a monster like Kione Monax.

Yoriun sometimes wishes he could ask other people what word they might use to describe the look on Sartha's face, but it isn't wise to let others know that you're still holding on to pictures of her. Not anymore.

The final picture would be the most damning of all, if anyone knew about the little portfolio he keeps stashed away in his cockpit. A big, glossy,

Imperial propaganda poster featuring the arch-traitor herself, that famous face of hers leering out from beneath a muzzle and an all-black uniform that suits her uncomfortably well. There are songs about her too, and propaganda films, and interviews, and even quasi-official works of pornography—but the posters, omnipresent in newly-captured settlements for three years now, feature no other text or embellishment. Sartha herself is enough, a tolling bell for hope itself. In the uniform, she stands at full salute, grin on her face, fanatical shine in her eyes, and her every heroic virtue is transformed into horror. Her effortless perfection becomes the remorseless steel of the Empire's advance. Her endless fire, the furnace of its rule. Her stirring smile, a void-call that sings: we broke the best of you. Resign yourself. Join us. Don't you want to come crawling out of your shabby holes waving a white flag, and be crowned in black perfection just like your hero?

Yoriun finds it strange to think that, to many, this will one day become the definitive image of Sartha Thrace, etched into history's tablet. Maybe to some it already is, but he has the older photos too. He remembers what Sartha meant back then—to him, to all of them. She was the reason he joined up. You never forget your first hero. Sometimes he spreads the three pictures out before him, and the contrast between Sartha's new and old stirs him to rage and madness and other stranger, sicker passions besides. The arch-traitor, the Empire's poster girl, will forever have a hold on his soul. Her despoiled image exerts a hypnotic pull on him, and the strangest of its effects is this: even though he has long since resigned himself to what Sartha Thrace is, on nights like these, when he looks into the poster's eyes, he sometimes wonders if there might be something the Empire, with all its awful new machinery, has yet to take. An inner sanctum of Sartha Thrace's self, bearing a final kernel that yearns yet to bloom. He wonders if Sartha Thrace might yet be saved.

A screaming klaxon drowns his late-night ruminations in adrenaline.

Though near sleep, Yoriun is immediately awake, alert, and grasping for his radio. "Control?" he spits, sleep still clinging to his voice. In a strange moment of twilight delusion, he imagines that the alarm is his wife, one of their comms operators, screaming at him for the photos. She doesn't know about them either. "What's going on?"

*'They've found us.'* The delusion compounds when he hears her voice—Fia, his soulmate, his princess. Delusion fades, and the comfort of her familiarity half-lulls him back to sleep. Until, that is, he hears the terror behind her clipped professionalism. *'We're under attack.'*

Yoriun's blood freezes. "What? How?"

There's no reply, but he knows they're both thinking the same thing. Did

someone get captured on their last raid? Kero? Luri? Both of them went down with their mechs, he's sure of it. Almost sure.

*'There's more,' Fia warns. A pause. 'Our patrol just called it in. Ancyor and Genetor have been sighted.'*

Shit.

Yoriun isn't one to go down easy, though. He's no coward, and he has a lot to fight for. "I'm on my way to *Prothu*. I'll be out there in ten. How many hostiles?"

*'Hard to say. Rad levels are playing hell with the scanners. I'm getting a lot of weird blips. Could be an army. Could be nothing.'* Little surprise, given their hiding spot atop an old, highly-contaminated ruin-city. Every day they've spent here has probably taken a dozen or more off their life spans, but there's little choice. In the three years since the unveiling of Thrace's betrayal, open rebellion has become all but a fantasy. Insurgency is the new game, and there are few better places to skulk within the Empire's growing borders. *'I'll try to clear things up. Find you an escape route.'*

"Escape route?" Yoriun frowns, almost letting the radio slip from the crook of his neck, where he keeps it tucked against his shoulder as he pulls on his pilot suit. "No. Just get me to the fighting."

*'Yoriun...'* Beneath the radio crackle, he can hear Fia's demeanor cracking too. He knows the exact look she's wearing, corners of her mouth pulled tight like she's trying to smile, but can't. *'Don't be stupid. There's no point throwing your life away. Better to keep the flame alive. If you see a way out, take it.'*

"No way," Yoriun replies firmly. If Fia's talking like this, it must be dire out there. All the more reason for him to be strong. "All of us, or none of us."

He could never live with himself. Nor could she. Besides, keeping the flame alive is a pipe dream. No other rebel cell would take them in. Mysterious survivors from a destroyed unit? It's become an old trick, and one usually answered with a precautionary bullet. Three years of a war against hounds makes hard choices come as easily as breathing.

That's one of the reasons Yoriun knows they're completely screwed. Nobody answers distress calls anymore.

No use crying over it. It's time to move. Yoriun is three floors up from the space they carved out as a hangar—and then another fifty from the ground. Converting an old but sturdy skyscraper into a forward operating base sounded like a good idea at the time. Their cell has been raiding the railroad that runs nearby, one of the many arteries feeding the Empire's expansion. They'd been hoping that, even if a patrol was sent to sweep the city and root

them out, they wouldn't think to look eight hundred feet in the air. Only now does it occur to Yoriun that, with no way down but the cargo elevator, they're something close to rats caught in their own trap.

Better not to think about it. Better to act. Yoriun's bare feet slap against the ground as he races downstairs from the living quarters to the floor they've converted into a command center. The scene that greets him is contained chaos. Familiar faces running about at a level just beneath panic, grabbing go bags, slapping scanners, hissing urgent orders at patrol pilots over the comms. Everyone is doing their job, and nobody has a single fucking clue how they're getting out of this. Looking past his comrades, out of the windows that line an entire wall, Yoriun can see out across the city. It's night, but tongues of fire from distant, booming explosions lick up and stain the black.

A chair scrapes against the ground. An instant later, a furious little ball of long, strewn hair hits Yoriun straight in the gut. Already on edge, he braces himself, but as soon as a familiar sweat-scent reaches his nose, he goes soft and folds down around his wife.

"Fia," Yoriun prays in a whisper.

"Hey," she replies. Neither of them needs to trade words about how good it feels to see each other. They have only moments before the world asserts itself on them, moments better spent drinking in the embrace. "I love you."

"I love you too, princess."

He feels her stiffen against him for a moment, grateful to let familiar embarrassment cut through her fear for one, precious instant. Nobody else gets to call her that, which took quite some doing for a pale, spoiled, sheltered girl driven into the rebellion's arms by sudden privation. Fia threw hands like a wildcat until everyone learned to call her that only behind her back, and eventually, not at all—except Yoriun. He vouched for her then, when she first came looking for a new home, and he has been her knight ever since. Not *a* hero, but *her* hero.

"What's going on out there?" Yoriun draws back reluctantly. "Sitrep."

"We don't know." At once, Fia is at attention again, brushing her hair, kept long in defiance of all pragmatism, back behind her headset as she replies briskly. A princess, perhaps, but her crown is steel. "We've lost three already, maybe four. Signal's spotty."

"How many hostiles?"

"Five called in. *Ancyor*, *Genetor*, three support units. But we think there's more. There's something going on with the scanners. Weird blips, it's more

than just noise. It's something—but it's all right on top of us, so I don't—"

She is cut off by a noise like the whole world drawing a breath, more an absence of sound than its presence, but palpably *large* enough that the rebels all turn as one to face the window in rapt horror. None of them have seen it before, but from stories alone, they know what they're seeing as the whole sky turns red with the terrible glow of reality at war with itself.

*Ancyor's* roar.

Once the sound comes, it breaks every pane of glass left in place, letting annihilation's unnatural wind sweep through the skyscraper and churn every stray scrap of paper or unused chair. At first, blazing antimatter cuts a broad swathe across the sky but then *Ancyor*, still distant, focuses its infernal ire. The coruscating red beam narrows to become a needle that screams across the horizon in a single, purposeful sweep, before dissipating back into non-existence.

A moment passes. Then, across the city, a line of fire appears, and another skyscraper falls neatly in twain.

The watching rebels have no time to waste, but still, each of them stands and holds their breath too.

Yoriun is the first to turn away. "I have to go out there and help them," he mutters, in full knowledge of the foolishness of the thought. *Ancyor* will butcher him—but he has to. It's the right thing to do. He tries to pull away, but finds Fia's hand gripping his wrist like a vice.

"Fia," he hisses urgently. "I know, but please, don't try and stop me, I—"

"Yoriun," she whispers aghast, before he can say another word. Her shaking finger guides his sight back to the broken windows. "What's that? What in the gods' name is that?"

From outside, somehow, a huge, mechanical hand reaches up and in, clawing at the ground for purchase. Horrifically silent, it clamps down on a section of floor, cracking the concrete, then hauls itself up to gaze inside with a face that Yoriun recognizes all too well.

It's *Ancyor*.

Except it isn't. It can't be. *Ancyor* is all the way across the city. Despite the evidence of his senses, it takes Yoriun a long moment to process that the mech climbing up the outside of the skyscraper is not *Ancyor* itself, but something even more ghoulish: an imitation, Sartha's famous hound in miniature, perhaps half its height and bearing all over the hallmarks of Imperial engineering. As it scrambles and clammers its way inside the

skyscraper, its movements evince a dexterity far beyond any mech Yoriun has ever seen—a strange flexibility and preternatural coordination of limb make it appear more animal than machine—and the eerie way it turns its head rather than merely its cameras to survey the interior of the rebel command center suggests what Yoriun can only recognize as hunger.

A few moments later, as the rebels all watch, paralyzed by this new nightmare, a second *Ancyor*-horror appears at the windows. Then a third. Then a fourth.

Now, true panic breaks loose.

The first screams and frantic footfalls seem to arouse in the beasts some kind of awful, senseless hunting instinct. The way they clambered up the outside of the skyscraper was careful, methodical, even graceful, but now they erupt into frenzy, surging into the building on all fours, bent on slaughter. Even at their small size, even hunched, the weight of the awful dog-mechs is great enough to buckle the floor beneath their feet, but still they keep coming, scrambling over collapsing concrete, launching themselves forward with claws extended.

Within moments, the place Yoriun felt so safe mere minutes ago is a crumbling hell of foul dust and flying shrapnel. Within seconds, a dozen of the friends he's sworn to fight and die alongside are torn asunder and splattered across the buckling, concrete walls like no more than fragile sacs of meat. A moment more, and even that horror show fades into a nightmare fugue of exhaust fumes and spraying gore. The suddenness of it makes it all the more surreal; the rebels are the good guys, and even if they lose, it's supposed to mean something. A valiant last stand, not a whirlwind of butchery. Answering incoherence with incoherence, the floor begins to slant and collapse, leaving Yoriun and Fia clinging to one another for balance as the world around them upends. A sudden breath of wind clears the smoke, and Yoriun catches sight of one of the mechanized horrors as it grabs his friend, Akbal, by the waist and crams her into its open, toothy maw. It has no antimatter emitter, merely an articulated jaw that clamps shut like a bear trap, leaving Yoriun's comrade little more than a loose bundle of stray limbs and severed intestines, before the mech devours those, too, as though feeding.

Yoriun thought dying at Sartha Thrace's hands was as bad as it could get. This is so much worse.

"Yoriun. Yoriun! Come on!" By some miracle, Fia is still at his side and pulling him free of his paralysis. "We need to go!"

"Right." Yoriun turns away from the feast, ashamed. He needs to get it together. His princess needs her knight. They can still save each other. "This

way.”

Together they race for the stairwell—or what’s left of it—the floor so perilously unstable beneath them that each step threatens to leave them skating on thin air for purchase. Besides the main structural members, everything is coming down; rooms that were once thirty feet above them plunge through yawning chasms to disappear into the dust below, their contents blanketing the rebel command center in a strange rain of kitchen pans and bedrolls. The world has lost its sense of up and down, but Fia’s hand in Yoriun’s remains a fixed compass-point, and clinging to his princess he stumbles half-blindly down the steps to the floor beneath. There, it’s already carnage. One of the *Ancyor*-beasts has fallen through from above, the sheer impact turning the half-dozen rebels at work there into walking wounded. Now it stalks through the wreckage, a carrion beast, pouncing on any movement and picking off the survivors. Yoriun wants to save them. He knows he should try. He knows he can’t. ‘All of us or none of us’ is already dead. One more sacrifice. But at least there’s Fia. At least there’s her.

Four more floors down, the violence dwindles to a muffled thunder from above, and the pair come to a cavernous machinery space above the lower set of cargo elevators, carved out for use as a hangar. Hunched there, dormant, are a handful of rebel mechs, and one of them is Yoriun’s *Prothu*. It’s nothing, really, an Imperial *Xiphos* weapons platform, stolen off a supply train and repainted, but it’s proven itself a fine steed so far. With luck it’ll be enough to get him and Fia out of harm’s way. It just needs fueling up. Fighting against clumsy, trembling fingertips, Yoriun connects the fuel lines and switches on the pumps.

Two minutes.

The wet splatter of Fia’s last meal hitting the floor calls his attention back to his wife. For her, these two minutes will be an eternity. They’ve both seen action, but she is less a soldier, less a pilot, and with the adrenaline fading from her system, she is left staring beleaguered into space like at any moment she means to fall against the floor and through it. At once, Yoriun is at her side. He clasps her shoulder with his right hand; his left, he interlaces with hers, pressing skin against skin. Letting her feel his wedding ring. Letting it ground her.

“It’s going to be OK,” he whispers. “Princess, I swear, we’re going to get out of here. I’m going to get you out of here. We’ve seen long retreats before. Made it out of worse spots.”

“Yeah. You’re right.” She doesn’t mean it, but she’s trying to.

“Remember Murighil?” It pours out of him now. “Remember climbing

on that old fishing boat and feeling it lift as the rains came in? That's when you gave us these." He touches his ring to hers, a little clink of metal on metal to bring Fia home. Then his fingertips find her face, feeling at the silken shadows under her high cheekbones. The indulgence is a poor match for the moment, but it's worth it, if it comforts her—only, Yoriun feels a pang of guilt as he realizes that it isn't her he's comforting. If he's to die here, he wants it to be with those memories fresh in his mind. Her warmth lingers on his skin. He's desperate for it. She's not shed a tear, but he can't seem to blink them back.

"We'll go back there." Now Fia means it, for him. Her hand on his. She, the strong one. A princess he can bow to. "Like we always said. One day. When it's safe. When we—"

A short distance away, the ceiling buckles. Dust and smoke pours in from above—and so does one of them.

The *Ancyor*-beast drops through the hangar to land on all fours like an animal, sights set on the couple, and Yoriun sees that its awful, dog-like snout is slick with gore. It's the one he saw eating Akbal. It crawls toward them with an awful, slavering gait, like it's still hungry, but relaxed in the knowledge that its prey is cornered. How long has it been? Not two minutes—but it will have to be long enough. There is only one thing left for Yoriun to do. One last feat of heroics.

"Disconnect the lines," he hisses to Fia. "She should have enough to get you out. Elevator override on the left. Go!"

"But—"

Yoriun shoves her away, toward *Prothu*. No time for one last argument. Good as she ever was, she doesn't fight him. As Fia sprints for the mech, Yoriun places himself between her and the beast bearing down on them. He spreads his arms wide, making himself big, and waves them up and down. Amidst the terror he still has a little room to feel ridiculous, but there's nothing else he can think to try, and he hasn't yet seen these monstrosities do more than chase whatever's right in front of them. If he can't save everyone, and he can't save the two of them, at least he can save her.

"C'mon," he mutters to himself. "Just me. Just look at me."

Strangely, it does. At first the monster seems to start toward Fia, but its attention snaps back to Yoriun as he places himself in its path, and then she's in amongst the machines, safe from its hunters' eyes. The mech advances on him slowly, curiously, until it is directly overhead, blood dripping from its foul maw to stain the crown of Yoriun's head. He stops breathing. He meant to run, but he can't find it in himself. This close, he can see the thing better;

it really does look like *Ancyor*—on the surface, at least. Beneath, though, it is Imperial through and through, and while Yoriun is no mechanic, he can tell well enough that the thing is frighteningly advanced, with joints that articulate smoothly through a huge range of motion, and a thrumming power plant that suggests a greater strength than most mechs twice its size. And that terrible mouth—who would ever think to build such a thing?

Unbidden, Yoriun thinks of Sartha Thrace again, and her muzzle. He almost laughs as he wonders if Fia will end up finding those pictures. How embarrassing.

Behind him, *Prothu*'s reactor kicks to life. The awful mech looming over Yoriun starts slowly toward it again, but he dashes back in front and snags its attention once more. As it reaches down toward him, he dare not even look over his shoulder at Fia lest he remind the monster what it has forgotten. In the moments before his martyr's end, Yoriun tells himself a little story of her escape.

Then, without warning, the beast slams its claw down just next to him, raking the concrete. It reels back as if wounded, and then, stumbling, begins to beat at itself, at its own chest, fighting to pry its own armor plates apart with its talons. Yoriun should take the chance to join his wife, but the thought does not even enter his head. The suicidal god before him is hypnotic. He's never seen anything like it, and it's too deliberate for a malfunction. Is the pilot trying to destroy their own mech? To kill themselves?

As it falls to frenzy, the mech's wild, self-destructive flailing escalates. It begins to pound one of its arms against the ground like a club, a brute, punishing, stereotypic motion. Then it sprints forward, plowing through a pair of dormant rebel mechs until it reaches the hangar wall and starts ramming its head into it again, and again, and again, until both the concrete and its own metal skull are cracked. Yoriun still can't move. Maybe Fia can't either, maybe that's why she's still here. He can't blame her for that, but he certainly blames himself for his inaction when, perhaps drawn by the cacophony of their berserk packmate, the other monsters draw into view.

One hangs by gangly arms from the edges of the hole above, then drops down onto all fours. Another leaps after it. A third simply emerges from the shadowy passageways beyond the hangar, already drawn down to this level by its own hunting. All three are bloodsoaked, and all three encircle the other, defective mech cautiously. In the instant before all hell breaks loose, Yoriun realizes what's about to happen, and as soon as the berserk unit throws itself at its packmates, he turns and sprints for his wife and his mech.

The symphony of violence behind him raises the very air in screeching protest. Yoriun knows the sounds of battle well, but not these. In the echoing

confines of the impromptu hangar, the exhaust fumes and radiated heat beat against the walls as four reactors bark and splutter at maximum output, and the scrape of claws and teeth on ultra-hardened armor panels leaves Yoriun in terror at the sheer wildness and fury of the murder. It sounds like they're all over each other. No sane pilot would fight that way, risking concussion and worse in a senseless, grappling melee. Much as a yearning to jump sometimes calls to Yoriun from atop the skyscraper, he feels an insane urge to turn toward it, to watch, to drink in the carnival of violence. He does not. He looks to Fia instead.

"You're still here," Yoriun yells as he reaches *Prothu's* side. He means it as a reproach, but his tone is a dead giveaway: he's never been more grateful. Not for anything, ever.

"I couldn't," Fia sobs. "I couldn't." She isn't sorry at all.

Neither is Yoriun. "Fuel?" He asks.

"Enough."

"Good." Yoriun pulls the override at his mech's ankle; the fuel line jettisons, spraying oil all over the ground. He takes Fia's hand and leads her over to the winch up to the cockpit. "You first."

No argument, thank the gods. Yoriun guides Fia over to the mounting winch and watches as she slips her foot into the stirrup and wraps her body around the rope. A flick of a switch, and she's being pulled up and out of reach. A moment later, she clammers across into the open cockpit. Yoriun hits the switch again; the winch lowers. Just seconds until they're out and away. Seconds.

"Get the output up!" he yells up at Fia. "We need her hot right now if we want to—"

A colossal, metal fist plows straight into the open cockpit.

The moment he processes it, Yoriun is dead inside. No grief. No tears. No hopes, or screams. Nothing. He cannot make sense of it, and his first instinct is denial. An adolescent voice in his head insists that this isn't how it's supposed to go. He's the knight. The fighter. Fia's supposed to be the one who gets away. It feels like Yoriun has lost his place in a book. He can't turn the page, can't see what comes next, and so he does not move as *Prothu* crashes to one side in a heap, its precious cockpit now a shattered crater running with fluid. He does not blink or shake from fear as the awful imitation *Ancyor* that pounced on his mech retracts its fist from the spot his wife sat, splaying apart struts and control panels as it does so. After a moment, resigned, he turns to survey the ruin of the berserk dog-mech, now torn limb from limb by its

slavering packmates. It's all nothing, and it will never be anything again.

As the remaining three close in on him, he shuts his eyes. At least his time without Fia won't be long. A comforting thought, in a way. The two of them in the ruins, together until the end. That's an ending he can wrap his head around.

*'C-can we take him?'*

The stilted voice, played over scratchy loudspeakers from one of the monstrous *Ancyor*-things, arrests Yoriun's fall into the abyss. There's something about it that bends his ear. Something awful. Something impossible.

*'We n-need a replacement,'* from one of the others. It sounds so alike it could almost be the same person.

*'Su-suitability?'*

*'I-Intel says he's a g-good enough pilot. And st-stable enough for the imprint.'*

*'M-missing something? He's all wrong,'* the third interjects, with strange emphasis.

Yoriun opens his eyes, the strange discord playing out amidst all this ruin conjuring him from apathy. The way the voices, pumped from above through audio equipment, layer and fold together is dizzying. They're all the same, and yet...

*'P-perfect,'* replies one of the others. *'She wants a c-candidate like that.'*

*She.* Even from these metal monstrosities, the word is a breath and a prayer, infused with a reverent bliss that makes the world still. *Her* authority—*whoever She is*—settles the matter.

*'F-fine.'* The objector bows to it at once. *'He can join us.'*

Yoriun wishes he didn't care. He wishes for the nothing, for the numbness, but their voices itch at him. It's a pilot's curse: in the heat of battle, even a battle like this, he is too analytical for them not to. They're each so similar, and all so close to the real thing. Closer than any mere imitator could ever achieve—and yet they're wrong, too. Their throats are wrong. Their mouths. However right the lilt and cadence, it spoils them. Good software on bad hardware—and then that stutter. He cannot fathom what has been done to them, but his grief demands he must try. All of this has to mean something.

"Who are you?" Yoriun screams, emotion crashing back over him as an open hand reaches for him with sinister gentleness. There's no hope of

escape. His limbs are lead, and only as three distorted voices ring the same laugh does it occur to him that the only reason he's hearing this conversation is because they want him to. Are they taunting him? "What the fuck are you?"

More laughter. A beckoning chorus of it, like the way Yoriun's first rebel unit laughed when they hazed him in. The dog-mech pilots' laughs are as similar again. Close enough to raise hairs on the back of his neck. Just far enough that the hairline-fracture departures in pitch and rhythm make the air wince.

But that's nothing compared to their answer, spoken at once in terrible harmony. It's what Yoriun knew they'd say, somehow, the way that, in a nightmare, you always know when the horror is about to breach to its climax and drag you from sleep. It's inevitable. He knows the voice almost as well as the face, from a hundred propaganda broadcasts and a dozen secret recordings from before. It's impossible—but each fresh horror of Empire always is, and her fall most of all. In a way, it's only right that it's her. As soon as his dead wife spoke her mech's name on the radio, he knew that the woman in the photos would be his end.

*'Don't you recognize us?' gloat the trio of voices that somehow ring, even now, with a swaggering, heroic, utterly insane sincerity that makes Yoriun realize that, appallingly, they've been trying to reassure him. 'We're Sartha Thrace. We're here to save you.'*

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A hellhound has three bodies.

The first—and least—is the actual meat of her. The pale, twitching, atrophied thing that squirms its way out of the cockpit post-sortie like a half-starved grub, left sickly and uncoordinated by the intrusive brutality of its creation. Even dismounting onto its hangar berth is a war of spasming limbs and misfiring nerves, and that is far from the worst of it. Despite months of relentless effort, the hellhound still does not look the way she should. Her flaws are beyond counting; every hellhound is inadequate, but she is singularly wretched amongst her sisters. She dare not stare long into a mirror, lest she be wracked by sobs and desires that border on self-mutilation. The only way the hellhound can cope with its repugnant flesh is by trying to forget that it has it at all.

The second is the forty-foot avatar from which it dismounts: a

monstrosity wrought of black-hardened steel, its hull emblazoned with the same iconography that adorns the hellhound's pilot suit and the facility all around them. The symbol of Handler and her new legion of acolytes, assigned in recognition of Her unsurpassed contributions: a simple, gold ring set against a jet-black field. The mech is one of the newest the Empire's factories have yet produced, and a wonder of engineering—yet it too, despite all appearances, is inadequate. It is a shadow of its blueprint, a god whose secret genius yet eludes all efforts to reproduce it. A bad copy. Perhaps that is why the hellhound loves it so, her *Onychos*-class AMPD.

*Ancyor*, Mass Production Derivative.

For a mech pilot to speak of her machine as a second body is a refrain so common it borders on cliché. Every pilot has two bodies. What makes hellhounds unique is that they have a third. A spiritual body. One kept at great remove from them, but to which they are bound by golden threads woven deep into their gray matter. A glimpse of the real thing is the most they are ever permitted, and the hellhound gets one of those glimpses now as she peers across the gulf to the next berth to watch as her spiritual body is unceremoniously passed around and fucked by a gang of horny, leering Imperial pilots.

The original. The best. The one and only. Saint Sartha, She of the Violated Flesh.

Such violations have become all but routine. The hellhound gathers that it was not always so. Before their time, the others whisper, it was always Sartha who won the ritual contests between herself and Leinth Aritimis. Now their fates are reversed; Leinth is more often the victor, while Sartha pays the loser's price. It is, perhaps, humiliating—but not to the hellhounds. If Saint Sartha does it, that means it is holy. She is the very benchmark of their existence. Axiomatically, their hero.

It is a strange contradiction, to both *see* Sartha Thrace and *be* her, but in the cockpit, in the frenzy of combat, the dichotomy melts away. The hellhound and her sisters in the Kerberoi Corps—as it is officially known—are each filled with Sartha's furious spirit; they become her, their own egos dissolving to leave them with nothing but the purity of a hero's borrowed soul. In those moments, it is better than real. It is true.

The experience calls to mind the old rebel refrains: there's a little bit of Sartha Thrace in all of us. We could always use more Sartha Thraces.

Outside the cockpit, though? That is when the first body reasserts itself, its myriad failings hacking their longed-for sense of unity to splinters, leaving the hellhounds bereft, confused, mournful. Memories they should not have

sting at them like mosquitoes and, in the dark of the Kennels, they fall to argument as they attempt to sort through the jumble of their broken minds. Where was Sartha Thrace born? Each remembers a different place. How many siblings did she grow up with? Some remember one, some two, some three. Who is right? Which memories are the saint's precious relics, and which merely the flotsam and jetsam of their raw material? It is impossible to tell, and none of the hellhounds will relent in their conviction that they possess the genuine spark. Disputes are acrimonious—and dangerous, given the hellhounds' instability. If not for the muzzles on each of their faces, they might all have torn out one another's throats a very long time ago.

The rest of their time is spent in pursuit of an impossible ideal: they must become Sartha in every respect. Outward details such as hair color are the easiest, and they are provided the supplies needed to rectify them. Other matters are more challenging. How does Saint Sartha move? How does she walk, or hold herself? How does she speak? They gain a little of it from the initial neuro-imprinting, but the rest must be painstakingly reconstructed and practiced. Unlike their attempts to form a coherent biography, it is a shared endeavor. The hellhounds are always inspecting and coaching one another, made comrades by the monstrous pangs of dysmorphia they share. But even then, it is difficult. They are all so very damaged, and they have little to work with. Every now and then they will be given something new—a photograph, a recording, some useful makeup—and they receive it like manna from heaven, freshly energized in all their efforts. They cannot stop. Not ever. They must be perfect. They must be Sartha, or they are nothing.

The hellhound that watches the saint from the next berth feels that she is closer to nothing than the others. Her body has been stamped with a fundamental sin, one that leaves her riven with imperfections of body, of face, of voice. She feels her sin now, stirring, against her wishes, between her legs. The saint herself never fails to stir; to the defective hellhound, to behold her is both ecstasy and agony. She can only pray that, one day, if she pilots well enough, her defect will be sliced off and she will be formed anew in Saint Sartha's image.

*Clack, clack, clack.*

The hellhound's ears perk up at the approaching, rhythmic sound. She knows it well, but only from afar. The supreme being now approaching her does not usually trouble Herself with managing the hellhounds directly—why would She, when She holds the real thing in the palm of Her hand?—but that distance only makes Her seem, to the hellhounds, all the more transcendent. They speak of Her in whispers. Sartha Thrace is the singular object of their obsession, but She is her mistress and their creator. There is, in a way, as little sense in venerating Her as there is in venerating gravity, but

nonetheless, She is the dark from which the saint's light grew, and in Her presence, the hellhound feels as though gravity itself is conspiring to bend her head in prostration.

"Subject-126," greets the handler-general.

"Yes, Sir," Subject-126 breathes, muzzle tight to her chest. A necessary designation, but a reminder of artificiality. It's not the name she would prefer to answer to.

"Raise your head."

Once Subject-126 sets eyes on the handler-general, she is transfixed. There are many handlers now, like the ones that oversee the hellhounds during combat operations, but nobody could ever mistake Her for anything but the first. A Platonic ideal rendered in porcelain skin and polished leather; there is no other way to describe Her. Her uniform has been marked with gold to further set Her apart: the epaulets on Her shoulders, the stitching of Her very tall boots, and the trim of the cape draped over one arm, the lavish warmth of the decorations making the blue of Her eyes and near-white of Her hair all the colder. And on Her breast is the symbol of Her enterprise, same as is painted on Subject-126's AMPD: a gold ring, set against the black.

A golden collar.

Three figures follow at Her heels. Two of the kennel-menials, their clothing ragged from neglect and strange, dog-like hoods shrouding their faces. Subject-126 is well used to them. Sometimes she even feels a kinship for the wretches. Failures must stick together. Between them is what looks like a prisoner, hooded with a simple, black sack and shackled at the ankles and wrists. A new candidate, she presumes. It's strange to see one accompany Handler like this, but Subject-126 does not presume to guess at Her designs.

"How was the mission?" She asks.

"H-how..." Subject-126 never thought to receive a one-on-one debriefing from her saint's patron deity. In Her presence, she is tongue-tied. Every response seems inadequate, so she falls back on what is simple. "Good, Sir. All objectives accomplished. Seventeen enemy kills across the pack. O-only one casualty."

"Seventeen to one," Handler muses. "Your tally?"

Subject-126 cannot help but puff herself up. "Six, Sir."

"The highest of the pack, I understand. Good hound."

Subject-126 does not need to wonder how Saint Sartha would react to a comment like that. The ablution is physical as much as psychological; her

eyes water, she chokes back a sob, and her heart beats a triple rhythm as excitement floods her. She is a good hound for Handler. It's perfect. The ultimate affirmation. Nothing matters when she's a good hound for Handler. With those two, simple words, her flaws dwindle into insignificance and she is washed clean.

Almost, anyway. The insistent throbbing of her misbegotten sex ever betrays her.

"Seventeen to one," Handler repeats. "That one—it was not to enemy fire."

"N-no, Sir." At once, Subject-126's euphoria is gone. She understands the thrust of Handler's question immediately. They are about to touch on the Kerberoi Corps's great shame.

"Ego-pattern disintegration," Handler pronounces. Her sigh is an arctic wind. "Another failure."

Though Subject-126 cannot question Handler's judgment, she can't help but feel that the term is a little clinical compared to the sickly anxiety that grips her when one of her sister-hellhounds falls silent and unresponsive for a little too long, then the dreaded explosion of violence, comms drowned with ear-splitting shrieks and sobs as she girds herself to kill her own twin before she's torn to shreds. In the kennels, when they dare to speak of it at all, they use another name for the phenomenon. One that befits the level of abject damnation it represents.

Rebellion.

"Tell me," Handler continues. "Did Subject-237 exhibit any unusual behavior during the mission, or prior? Anything that might indicate an abnormal state of mind?"

Subject-126 blinks. "No, Sir."

Handler taps Her foot precisely once. "Were there any notable events that preceded Subject-237's loss of stability?"

"No, Sir." Subject-126 thinks back as best she can. "She had just performed a cockpit extraction on a downed enemy pilot. R-routine procedure."

"Hm." Another tap. "According to all our neurological data, her ego graft was a complete success. The latest innovations, implemented without issue. Is there a deeper flaw? Or was she simply an inadequate subject?" Subject-126 is unsure if She is speaking to her, or simply speaking. "We must perfect the method. This must be an empire of heroes. Perfectly bold. Perfectly brave. Perfectly self-sacrificing. Like my Sartha." Her eyes refocus on Subject-126. "Which brings me to you."

“S-Sir?” Subject-126 blinks, wide-eyed.

“An experiment in instability.” Handler’s eyes sharpen, and sharpen, and sharpen. The hole in the back of Subject-126’s head begins to throb. The sound of the diamond teeth that ripped through her skull when they installed the neural port still screams in her ears every day. Ascension is not pleasant. “I speculated that accentuating the discord between body and mind might accelerate the ego collapse. Instead, you have proven the most stable of all.”

Subject-126’s tic prevails on her to twitch violently. “T-thank you, Sir,” she says, as the hangar begins to spin.

“Perhaps I should not be so surprised” Handler remarks. “Leinth, Kione Monax—your kind never disappoints. You are so desperate not to.”

Another tic. Subject-126 is learning that a hellhound is not meant to gaze at Her divine spark directly, is not prepared to grasp the infernal mechanics of Her arts. The thin scab of pride Subject-126 feels at Her praise peels away at the corners to reveal a set of interlocking gears, beautifully calibrated but vile in their totality.

“S-Sir,” Subject-126 bleats, swimming in her own artifice. “W-why are you telling me this?”

“Because I have a question for you, and I must ensure you understand it.” Handler tells her. “How does the ego-pattern disintegration feel?”

Subject-126’s stomach drops. “S-sir? I w-wouldn’t... I haven’t... I don’t know.”

“Yes. You do.” In the face of Her ironclad decree, Subject-126 can only hang her head, hoping for a mere moment’s respite from Her gaze. At once, though, Handler’s hand darts forward and snags the bars of Subject-126’s muzzle, wrenching it upward so hard aching pangs shoot through Subject-126’s neck. Worse by far, though, is the way that She looms forward, eyes wide, blazing like two icy suns in which the mad aurora of creation dances. “You know it. You’ve lasted months, and it cannot be so very sudden. You must feel the cracks in yourself. The pieces falling away into the abyss—and from its depths, the call to slip the leash and surrender to madness, as all your sisters do. Do not hide from me. Tell me how it feels.”

“I... it...” Handler’s gaze beckons Subject-126’s tongue to form words. The eye contact is agonizing. In the end, the hellhound’s awful truth spills forth like vomit—but she has not the words to articulate the feeling that grips her like a fever every time she sits in her cockpit, held at bay only by her fervor to be the perfect Sartha Thrace. “Y-yes... it’s... like...” She flails for a moment.

“L-like a howl! Like a howl that’s s-so loud nothing makes sense anymore. Not f-friend, or foe, or o-orders. It m-makes me want to howl too. And... and it’s like... if I do, the w-whole world will go mad!”

Abruptly, Handler releases her. Subject-126 slumps to her knees, the safe balm of providing satisfaction woefully outmatched by the shame of her confession. For now, Handler is merely looking at her, contemplative, but Subject-126 feels sure that She must be preparing disgust and punishment beyond measure. She surges forward to beg at Handler’s feet, stopping just shy of anything that might risk blemishing Her polished boots.

“B-but I won’t do it!” Subject-126 begs. “S-sir, I promise. Please. I w-won’t let you down!” The way her voice breaks into a deeper register as she pleads is another nail in the open wound of her skull. She’s slipping. Saint Sartha wouldn’t sound like that.

“Never?” Handler levels at her. “But you did before, didn’t you? You were a rebel. Do you remember that?”

A pain like a rung bell echoes through Subject-126’s hollowed skull. It conjures her back through the past, fighting tooth and nail against every fading memory. She wasn’t a rebel—unless she was, because Sartha Thrace was. But she is not Sartha—but she must be. Does that make it OK? “S-Sir,” she whimpers. “N-no, I... I only... I wouldn’t...”

“Are you sure?” Handler is remorseless. Subject-126 can look away now, but she feels Her gaze all the same as it peels the layers away from her mind. “Are you certain you won’t let me down, Yoriun Drei?”

Subject-126 emits a strangled scream.

Bile scorches her throat as she bends double, broken mind turning inward in a bid to erase the echo of that sealed name. It is something that cannot be—but to admit even that is a failing. The name should mean nothing to the hellhound, but Subject-126’s sudden sickness confesses otherwise. And worse, she hears that howl, that awful howl, rising to meet her dysphoric angst with such volume that it threatens to drown out all else. With all the willpower left to it, Subject-126 keeps the sound at bay. Keeps it within. “T-t-that’s... n-n-not... y-y-yes! I p-promise! But t-that’s not... I’m... P-p-please, Sir, l-let me... let me...”

*Let me be her.*

Handler relents. It is impossible to tell if Subject-126’s entreaty has moved Her, but, when Her lips part, She proves merciful. “Interesting. You are a promising specimen.”

That is all it takes to transform Subject-126’s tortured weeping into floods

of joy. The howl dwindles, but Subject-126 remains alert to its ever-present echo. “T-t-t-thank you, Sir. T-thank-”

“But I must be sure of perfection.” Handler sweeps past her gratitude. “Bring her forward.”

She speaks now to Her menials, and they obey. The hooded wretches press the prisoner between them to Handler’s side, keeping their arms bound tight. With no particular flourish, Handler reaches up and pulls the hood away from the prisoner’s head.

“Do you recognize her?” She asks.

Dumbly, tears in her eyes, Subject-126 nods. Of course she does. It’s her princess. It’s Fia.

Worse the wear for her months of captivity, certainly, and all over she bears the hallmarks of catastrophic injury—but she is alive, and there is no sign she has been made to suffer the Kerberoi Corps’s mutilations. She is whole in mind, if not in body, as Subject-126 can see from the way she kicks and struggles with atrophied limbs against her captors while blinking against the sudden light. Fia’s eyes adjust, then settle on Subject-126. It takes an eon for the glint of recognition to outweigh the horror but, once it does, she falls still, allowing Handler to tug the gag out of her mouth.

“Y-Yoriun?” That voice, however weak and hoarse, is another sound added to the cacophony echoing in the hellhound’s skull. “Is that... what have they done to you?”

Now the recollections come, and nothing could be more blasphemous. The memories are not merely forbidden, they are impossible. Subject-126 is Sartha Thrace, and Sartha Thrace does not have a wife, but now another entire biography threatens to uncoil from its sunken place within the hindquarters of the hellhound’s mind. It rises, muscular despite months of neglect, to duel like a rival serpent against the hagiography on which Subject-126 has so firmly imprinted. The two incompatible stories spiral against one another, each seeking out vulnerabilities and absences that may prove fecund ground into which they can inject their competing seeds—and nothing makes for more fertile soil than the immediate, longing fondness Subject-126 feels toward the prisoner before her. Despite the odds—despite Handler, even—Subject-126 finds herself seized with the overwhelming urge to somehow rescue Fia and spirit them both away to freedom.

But she does not. Instead of surging to her feet, she recoils as if struck. Another feeling is already growing within her, a strange resentment born of one, painful, mischosen word.

“T-t-that’s not my n-name,” Subject-126 chokes. “D-don’t c-call me that.”

“What? But...” The confusion and disgust on Fia’s face as she studies Subject-126’s features—the long, bleached hair, the painstaking makeup, the hormonal softening of her face and body—is too much for her to bear. After a moment, mercifully, Fia turns her attention to Handler and speaks with a fierceness that swells in Subject-126’s breast. “What the fuck have you done to my husband, you monster?”

Handler does not favor her with a response. Her eyes rest on Subject-126 alone. “This woman is a rebel,” She proclaims. “An enemy.”

“You’re damn right,” Fia snarls. Then, to Subject-126: “Yoriun, you... d-did they... Gods! I’ve seen hounds, but this is...” Her face twists as the second recognition dawns on her. “Why do you look so much like *her*?”

Ambrosia and bile meet and meld in Subject-126’s veins. The name—that dead name—pains her as much as before, but this time, affirmation sweeps dysphoria aside like fire cleansing rot.

Fia thinks she looks like Sartha.

“I-It’s...” Subject-126 isn’t sure if she should answer, but she does all the same. “B-because I’m... her.” It makes sense to her, but not in a way she can put to words. She hopes—she prays—that her wife will understand, and it crushes her, instead, when Fia lets out a brittle, disbelieving laugh that becomes a horrendous wail as it leaves her lips. Subject-126 can only hope to drown it out with further self-affirmation. “I’m a h-hero!” she protests. Doesn’t she get it? Isn’t that what they all wanted to be?

“That is exactly right,” Handler interjects calmly. “You are a hero. All that remains is your duty.” With a hand, Handler sweeps back the great length of Her coat and draws, from Her holster, a pistol, rarely used but as painstakingly maintained as Her every other piece of regalia—then offers it to Subject-126. “Execute the prisoner.”

The commandment of a god can be neither questioned nor denied. The pull Her authority exerts on Subject-126 is so complete that, without a thought, she finds herself taking the firearm. Automatically, her thumb flips the safety. Inevitably, she levels it against Fia.

Then freezes.

Disobedience is unthinkable. An atrocity. But so is this. There is something forcefully *unheroic* about the scene that compromises the precarious sense of self inflicted on Subject-126. This is not what a hero does—and through that crack of doubt, Fia’s hand reaches, wedding ring gleaming on her finger. The other life, the one Subject-126 doesn’t have,

makes a bid for narrative primacy: isn't saving this helpless girl precisely what a hero should do? Except that Handler has commanded otherwise, and Handler knows best. There is no virtue but serving Her, and no vice but failing Her. The contradictions froth beneath the hellhound's fractured surface, so dissonant and angry that any story she tries to weave over herself is immediately picked apart by recrimination and shame. And amidst the dissimulation, it rises again, loud as the apocalypse, sweet as a lover's whisper. The howling.

"My... love?" Fia clearly sees both her hesitation and the steadiness of her aim. She's plainly still struggling to wrap her mind around the situation, but it's clear enough that her life is on the line. "You... you don't want to do this, do you?"

"I..." The familiarity of her voice is itself a source of dissonance. Sartha Thrace didn't have a wife, did she? Didn't have a love? Maybe. It's possible. There were always rumors and boasts. Subject-126 fights to convince herself that it might be Fia.

"P-please!" The rising panic in Fia's voice snags on instinctive empathy. Subject-126 cannot stop wanting to reassure her. She cannot take her finger off the trigger. "You can... you can..." Fia's eyes flick to Handler. "She gave you her gun!"

A half-sob slips out from beneath Subject-126's muzzle. The sheer blasphemy of Fia's suggestion sends pangs through her chest. Subject-126 cannot harm Her. That's one thing Sartha Thrace would never do.

"She... n-no..." Subject-126 bleats. Her hand is beginning to shake. "S-she's..." How to explain Handler's benevolence? "S-she saved me!"

She did. From the dregs of humanity. From the abasement of ignominy. Now, Subject-126 is raised up. A hero, at long last— if she can only find the words to explain it to Fia, it will all feel right again.

"Obey me, hound," Handler commands.

"Y-y-yes, Sir."

The response is so automatic that it makes a liar of Subject-126 as she languishes in paralysis, still unable to force herself across the threshold. To spur herself, she asks the all-important question.

What would Saint Sartha do?

A glance across at the nearby orgy provides her with no clues, but reflecting on Sartha's hagiography is more illuminating. She inhabits a dual aspect, as hero and traitor both; Subject-126 must be a traitor too. Armed with

that conviction, the wounded, tremulous look in Fia's eyes, threatening to overflow, like the domed surface of an overfull cup, into pure panic, takes on a strange, poisonously affirming quality. When Subject-126 pulls the trigger, it will be nothing more or less than the retelling of a myth, its ending already a fixed point in the minds of faithful and heretic alike. It is the only way this may end.

Maybe it's heroic too. Can she convince herself of that? Heroes face tests. Sacrifices. Trials and painful choices. Heroes must sacrifice their personal attachments for the greater good, mustn't they? Yes. That has the ring of truth to it—at least, until she reflects that she's about to shoot an unarmed woman, pleading for help. Subject-126 trembles and twitches at the threshold, unable to act.

"Yoriun?" Fia ventures. "What are you... are you OK?"

"A little more pressure, perhaps," Handler considers as Subject-126 flinches at the name, before infusing Her voice with such authority that it batters against Subject-126 like a rolling tide. "Shoot her, hound. At once."

*At once.* The immediate crack of command is almost enough to compel Subject-126's finger. She wishes desperately that Handler's command would take hold without thought or effort, but she receives no such kindness. Not for her is the mercy of the three words Handler uses to compel Saint Sartha herself to instant obedience. No; She wants Subject-126 to choose.

So does Fia.

"Please!" Fia's urgency rises as she sees Subject-126 waver, though she cannot comprehend the perversity of the conflict that writhes within her. "Baby, please. You... you don't want to do this. I can see that."

Subject-126 twitchily shakes her head. If she does not want to do this, she is *wrong*. Handler has assigned her the part. All she needs to do is play it. In her ears, though, a rebellious howl rises. It stirs her to raise her voice along with it, and sing madness to the heavens. The world around her begins to drift into a red fog in which there is no difference at all between any person or thing, a suffocating blanket that must be torn open and apart.

"No. No, you don't." Fia soothes. She senses, somehow, that she is talking to a frightened animal, and makes her voice a forest's soothing mornsong, quiet and safe. Subject-126 cannot tell if the sound is dueling with the howl, or part of it. "Not her. Look at me. You remember me."

Now Subject-126 finds herself nodding in agreement. Sartha wouldn't remember—but then, Sartha surely would have obeyed Handler's very first command to pull the trigger. Subject-126 is not equal to the task, and her

inadequacy now becomes a window, beckoning her to another life. Perhaps she is not fit to be Sartha—and if not her, then who?

“Yes!” Fia’s smile is a burst of sun. “That’s right. You remember me. You remember Murighil and all the rest. You must. You remember who you are, Yoriun.”

“D-don’t call me t-that!” Her rejection of the name is every bit as automatic as her obsequience to Handler, but Subject-126 begins to wonder: could that not be her name? Something must be, if she is not worthy of the saint’s. She pushes past the throbbing pain. She does not shirk Fia’s gaze.

“You can silence her,” Handler ordains. “Follow your orders, hound.”

The howl rises yet again, and whatever awful jaws it spills from seem to yawn open, threatening to claim the pieces of Subject-126 as she breaks apart. She has never understood, until now, how her sisters can surrender to the sound. Until now, it’s never felt so seductive. It would be so very easy to close her eyes, relinquish choice—relinquish reason itself—and simply fall back into that mad maw until howling is all she knows.

“Don’t listen to her,” Fia pleads swiftly. Despite their circumstances, she is growing in confidence as she sees Subject-126 open to her. The joy she offers makes the moment a reunion, a soft thing into which the hellhound can surrender—but she cannot shake the thought that as soon as she relaxes, she is finished. “You don’t have to, OK?”

“But... b-but...”

“Please!” It is as if Fia has the same thought at the same moment. As Subject-126 continues to waver, continues to hold back, her courage fails, and tears like dewdrops tug her wide, green eyes thinner until they seem to crack like fragile glass. “I... I... please don’t leave me alone again!”

“P...” Subject-126’s weak, croaking voice fights against the howl in her head that calls her to rebellion. Somehow, she is able to keep it at bay. Now she sees the meaning in it. She doesn’t want to leave Fia alone. “P-princess?”

“Yes!” To see Fia almost blush, despite everything, makes Subject-126 almost laugh. “Yoriun, yes!” With that name, though, the bliss fades. Disharmony reasserts itself. Subject-126 tries to fight through it, to become the husband her Fia wants to see. “I knew they couldn’t break you, my knight. I knew they-”

“Shoot her, *Sartha*.”

Into the crack dysphoria has rent in the moment, the hero reasserts herself. Subject-126’s finger pulls the trigger.

The moment after the gunshot is silent, save for the sound of the body crumpling to the floor, unmoving, as Handler's menials release their grip. Against the awful quiet, Subject-126 strains her ears for any trace of the howl. Its absence is far worse than its presence ever was. Madness, however terrible, would be bliss compared to what she feels now—but there is nothing. She is trapped alone with Handler's voice.

"Very good," She tells Subject-126, Her supreme approval alone sufficient to make the cavernous hangar space feel claustrophobic. "Good hound. I'm pleased."

"Thank you, Sir." The answer is automatic. Churlish disobedience has no purpose now. Subject-126 has chosen her story.

"Hm," Handler considers, smile a razor. Subject-126 cannot see it—her eyes are fixed on the body—but she can feel it. "When one of my hounds performs well, they earn a treat. Would you like a treat, Sartha?"

Sartha. The name throbs in her. "Yes, Sir."

"Heel."

Subject-126 drops to her knees. The gun slips her fingers and clatters to the ground. She looks up at last, and with that, there is only Handler. Not the body. Only Her.

In a clear, provocative motion, Handler extends one of Her boots forward. "I'm sure you know what to do."

"Yes, Sir."

She does. Of course she does. She's seen it a dozen times from across the hangar, and dreamt of it dozens more. All the hounds do. To them, it is an object of fantasy, as inevitable in its comfort as the final line of a fairy tale: 'and they lived happily ever after'. Perhaps that's why, in defiance of all reason, Subject-126 finds her body responding to the expanse of hard, smooth, shiny leather between her legs as she shuffles into position.

The saint herself would not be crying, of course. But no hellhound is truly perfect.

Pressing herself against Handler's boot in a frantic rut brings Subject-126 no closer to clarity. It fills her with pleasure, yes, but she fails even in her eagerness. Handler offers her celebration, but she cannot seem to take it. Her mood is poisoned. She cannot even perform the proper motions. Her body isn't right for it. The cock she hates so deeply slides awkwardly out of place with each thrust of her hips, leaving her gasping at stray embers of pleasure instead of sinking into the promised ecstasy. To keep the dysphoria at bay,

she tries to conjure to mind the ever-popular rumor that the real Sartha Thrace was once like her. It doesn't help.

"Good hound," Handler repeats urgently. Subject-126 attempts a moan; it falls from her lips a weak and pitiful gasp. "Now think carefully, and tell me: when you hesitate, what holds you back? When you feel called to disobey and lash out, which part of you answers? I must know. Tell me, so I can rip it out."

That command proves perhaps Her cruelest of all. It denies Subject-126 even the mercy of dissociation. Instead, driven by a fierce compulsion to please and obey, Subject-126 violates her own psyche with reckless introspection, prying apart the folds of her despoiled brain with searching, eager fingertips. Which part of her is out of place? Which part is *wrong*? She begins to feel out the separate, ill-fitting parts of herself, visible now like geologic strata in a collapsed mountainside. The barren soil of the man she once was, shattered and compressed into oblivion, was expended long ago. It offers no clues. But driven through it like veins of glistening ore are the saint's bequest, and that is where Subject-126 finds her treasure, a truth that glows so terribly she is changed by its very touch.

"Well?" Handler demands. Subject-126 sees now in her wide eyes and flushed cheeks a vampiric hunger, beneath reason as much as above it. An obsession. She is a god, yes, but a god gone mad in pursuit of singular perfection. "Speak, hound. I must have my empire of heroes, and you are the key."

"I... I..." Subject-126 shivers. Mere minutes ago, deceiving Handler seemed as unthinkable as devouring the sun. Now, though, fresh insight possesses her. She has never been so close to sainthood, but the truth of it is so awful and so blasphemous it tempts her to sin. She cannot bear to speak what she sees in Handler's presence. Not until she is sure. Though it makes her every muscle twitch madly in protest, it seems the lesser of two evils when the lie falls from her lips. "I-I don't know."

"Hm." Abruptly, Handler withdraws her boot from between Subject-126's legs. The hellhound braces herself for repercussions, but Handler is not so quick to anger. "Fine. If you cannot give voice to the answer, I will extract it from you." With visible effort, She banishes the hunger from Her face. "You may rest as I prepare. And perhaps a reward is in order."

"A... r-reward, Sir?"

"Anything you'd like." Handler is generous. Handler is perfect. Sartha Thrace must think so, whatever else she feels. Subject-126 feels all the more ashamed of her lie. "Name it."

A dozen possibilities dance before Subject-126's imagination. She could

ask to be raised above the rest. She could ask to sleep at the foot of Handler's bed. She could ask for surgery to fix her body. That's the boon she always longed for, each time she led the pack in kills. But now there is something else. A yawning curiosity, and only one who can sate it. Above all, Subject-126 needs to understand what all of this—what any of this—*means*.

"P-please, Sir," she begs, looking up into Handler's eyes. "I w-want to meet her."

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In a featureless cell deep within the Kennels, Subject-126 waits on the cot, listening for approaching footsteps the way a bride might for the first bells. The empty walls around her conjure an emptiness of mind, a blank canvas to cloak her forbidden pain and onto which she can project her new and fervent faith.

The saint will come. The saint will come. The saint will come.

She promised.

In Sartha Thrace's presence, the world will be set to rights. To be a hellhound is to dream of her from afar, and to make the shadows of her shadows into exalted icons—but finally, Subject-126 will meet her. There will be no more questions. No more doubts. She must simply believe, and try not to think about Fia.

She must not cry, either. The saint should not see her crying.

The moment the door opens is unheralded. The sudden groan of the steel hinges sends a line of electricity through Subject-126's core. She has only a moment to compose herself, but that very thought consumes what precious few heartbeats are afforded to her, and then Sartha Thrace is simply there, with her, in the room.

"Hey," Saint Sartha offers wearily, dressed, as she should be, in her old rebel garb. "She told me to come and see you."

That one sentence contains a world. Subject-126 immediately kicks herself for not paying closer attention. Perhaps she is not to be blamed for feeling overwhelmed, but if she cannot replay the line to herself perfectly later, she will feel all the more foolish. She finds herself repeating it under her breath, matching cadence, finding pitch.

"You lot really give me the creeps," Sartha shudders as she notices,

inching forwards despite the guarded way she holds herself. “And you’re... Gods. She really must’ve done a number on you.”

Sadness might have matched Subject-126’s expectations. The noble sorrow of a hero forced to share her burdens instead of walking the martyr’s lonesome path. Disgust, of course, would have been perfectly apt. Subject-126 is but an imitation. What truly leaves her at a loss is the hollow laugh that rises in a froth from Sartha Thrace’s lips.

“I...” Subject-126 bleats. “Um...”

As soon as Sartha is close enough to behold, she sees that more than Sartha’s laughter is hollow. Black circles have been carved out beneath her eyes, and the sallow emptiness of her skin betrays unhealthy weight loss. Her hair has turned from gold to wilted straw—but all the same, she is not a disappointment. She resembles not at all the old posters or the new propaganda vids; instead, there is a heroic emptiness to her, magnificent the way only a ruin can be. Sartha Thrace is the space in which a hero once stood, and speaking to her feels like swearing in a temple.

“What do you want?” Saint Sartha’s voice is as brittle as an untempered sword. “There must be something beyond gulping and staring.”

Vertigo clings to Subject-126 as she stares into the abyss that forms her highest ideal. “I... I w-wanted to ask...” There are so many reasons speech is hard. Utter, tongue-tying, star-struck awe is instinctive, but it wars with the creeping sense that her question is pointless, that no answers can possibly come from the void of a woman standing slouched before her. Still, the saint asked, and she cannot refuse. “W-why are you still... still here? Why... d-do you still do everything She says? Y-you don’t want to. It... it doesn’t even make you happy anymore”

A wounded look flashes across Sartha’s face. “Did She tell you that?”

*She.* That word is inflected with the sour light of a distant, waning star. Subject-126 shakes her head. “N-no. I...” She gestures at the neural port. The gateway through which they poured Sartha into her. “I f-felt it too.”

“Right.” Sartha tenses. She looks like she might turn on her heels and run. But then, a miracle: “I’m sorry.”

With that, revelation dawns.

Subject-126 has become Sartha Thrace—not in spite of her failures, but because of them. That’s the reason nothing makes sense. It doesn’t to her, either. It’s painful, certainly, to understand that there is no light of comprehension at the end of the tunnel. But Sartha’s sympathy is exciting. Validating. In turn, it provides the answer to the Subject-126’s question. Like

all of her twinned hellhounds, Saint Sartha is nothing. A vacuum, abhorred by nature, left ever-striving toward the only light she can see.

Hers.

It is as painful a travail as any martyr has ever suffered. But perhaps now, there is a way out. In Subject-126, Sartha has a sister—a true sister, not merely a pale imitation. Unformed thoughts of conspiracy and treason rise from the deep of her mind, so full of sororal glee she cannot find it in herself to regret them. Handler is distant. Sartha is here, in the room, and maybe together, they can set one another free. They can be traitors again—and heroes, surely. Subject-126 alone understands: Sartha was always the hero everyone believed. All that she has suffered is merely a preordained step along her thorny path. In the end, she will shine all the brighter—with Subject-126 at her side. The happy fantasy puts tears in the hellhound's eyes.

A hand on her shoulder. Subject-126 looks up and finds Sartha close, offering misplaced comfort. However cold the saint has grown during this dark night of her soul, there is still blood in her; her fingers are warm against Subject-126's skin. She's beautiful, too. Like the disk around a black hole. At such a distance, Subject-126's awe redoubles—and so does something else. Something tarnished and grotesque. Hellhounds are primed to respond to Sartha Thrace with desires of all kinds, and after Subject-126 failed to find satisfaction with Handler's boot, her proximity is irresistible. The saint herself never fails to stir. She is both agony and ecstasy.

"Y-you..." Subject-126 tries to pull away, disgusted with herself. She should not soil the moment like this. "You're..."

It's too late. Sartha's eyes flick down, and she notices.

"Oh, I see," the hero sniffs. "*That's* what you want. 'Course it is."

"N... n-n..."

Without warning, a change comes over Sartha. A coy smile falls on her face, bleak and beautiful as the setting sun over a crater rim. She laughs to herself, and her hand on Subject-126's begins to move, finding the live wires that make the hellhound twitch and spark.

"It's OK," Sartha whispers, sultry. "Everyone does. And She told me to give you whatever you wanted."

Subject-126 shakes her head, but she cannot even persuade herself. The need visible between her legs is stamped into her, a sickly combination of her fixation on the saint's image and her worshipful study of her mythology. Sartha Thrace's body count is legendary, and in the Kennels, the hellhounds pass many nights wrestling one another into submission, naked and heaving

and spitting fire, each keen to prove they can match her prowess. When the real thing swings one leg over Subject-126's body and straddles her, she cannot maintain a protest. Instead, she gets to work convincing herself: if she wants this, perhaps Sartha does too. Doesn't a tragic hero deserve a twisted romance?

"Wow," Sartha breathes against Subject-126's cheek, hell-bent on seduction and looking at her with a lover's curious eye. "You really do look like me." Behind the bars of her muzzle her tongue flicks close to the hellhound's ear, each warm breath a vow on their shared name. "That's wild."

Swept up in fantasy, inhibitions expended, Subject-126 surrenders to the pull of Sartha's need. Plots forgotten, her hands find thighs; one her own, one the saint's. Her fingers bend, raking matching lines. They must match, after all.

"But you still have..." A deft hand makes quick work of Subject-126's clothes; when she feels Sartha's fingertips wrap around her shaft, a gasp thunders from her. "Yeah. Gods." Dark amusement plays in Sartha's eyes. "Isn't that something?"

"S-s-sorry," Subject-126 whimpers, hot and sticky with shame and need both.

"Don't be," Sartha growls playfully, lustfully. "I don't mind." The mere suggestion of that sin forgiven prompts a heave of Subject-126's hips as everything melts into primordial, libidinal froth. But Sartha will not permit her to rut into her hand; with a coy laugh, she draws back, working at her own clothes. "That's it," she coos at Subject-126's enthusiasm. "Let me show you what the legendary Sartha Thrace is good for."

Subject-126 pants and whines, but the merciful saint does not truly mean to deny her. Sartha's body heaves like the midnight sea as she moves herself into place; then, a pouncing wolf, she is all against Subject-126, leaving her twin to bask in purest rapture as their bodies become one.

A hellhound has three bodies—which means that it is no more or less than apotheosis as Subject-126 and Sartha join, the boundaries of their skin melting away and sloughing off in the heat of the soul's reunion. It is a circuit completing. A coupling of spirit and flesh. As in combat, all dichotomy and distance fall away. Borrowed memories and sensations flood into Subject-126 and it is as if she experiences both halves of it; as her twin works her thighs and hips, rising and falling, falling and rising, the sensation is redoubled. Subject-126 is lock and key both. Giver and receiver. The intensity of it is blinding and it doubles again with every touch, with every trace of skin against skin, until they are both molten. Sartha flows into

her like gold alloying lead—or perhaps like the alchemist’s stone itself. She makes Subject-126 glow, but she is not diminished by their endless becoming. The only friction between them comes from their muzzles; when they try to press together in a mirrored kiss, the metal cages clatter against each other. A barrier between them, but even that becomes a source of jubilation. It’s the same muzzle, and the same face behind it. They are the same. They are one.

“You f-feel so good!”

Subject-126 can’t tell which of them said it. Both. Neither. It doesn’t matter. Their voices and moans rise in twain, intermingling, her own flaws falling away as both of them are riven through with cracks of pleasure.

“S-so do you.”

Both, again. Always both. Always one. The universe has shrunk to their coupling; they share a world of their own, and the only name in it is Sartha.

“I w-want more!”

“S... so do I.”

Giggles pierce the moaning. A playful pleasure, like it’s a childhood game of copycat, in which thoughts of self lose their reference. The heat is building, yes, ever-building, but there is no sense of a climax or ending. Sainthood is eternal.

“I d-don’t want this to end.”

Hands. Hands on Subject-126’s chest—and then everywhere. A dozen pairs, it feels like; raking, clawing, groping, and it does not make sense to her to try and figure out which belong to who.

“S-Sartha!”

“Shush, Sartha. Let it happen.”

The hands move up, feeling, reaching—then clamp down around Subject-126’s neck.

At first, she welcomes it. It matters to her not at all when fingertips press against her artery. Why would it? In this room she has two hearts, two brains, two throats, four lungs. The world around her, already indistinct, fades still further into fog. She reaches for her other throat, trying to repay the pleasure in kind, but finds the limbs that heed her commands strangely heavy.

“That’s it,” Saint Sartha croons. “I’ll be quick. She’s probably watching us. Not much longer now.”

That thought, an off note in their conjoined chorus. Not much longer? Subject-126 cannot stand the notion. This should be forever. After this, the pain of parting would unmake her. An awareness of danger creeps across her skin, but her overtaxed body responds with strange instincts, lurching toward climax with bucking and thrusting as the air in her brain begins to run out. This is heaven—but heaven is crumbling.

“A friend did this to me once,” the saint imparts, as she squeezes down on Subject-126’s neck. “Almost, anyway. But she couldn’t take it all the way.” Her laugh is soot-black. “Typical Ki. Commitment issues.”

Subject-126 is far beyond comprehension. She is in the fading twilight, and as she spends herself inside Sartha, it isn’t a moan that comes to her lips but a question, itself rendered an inaudible, croaking gurgle by her expended lungs.

Why?

“I’m not so cruel,” Sartha promises the hellhound with an awful tenderness that, even now, inspires trust. Her laughter is half mocking, half moaning, and even as the light leaves Subject-126’s world, her face remains aglow. “I’m even giving you a happy ending, aren’t I? Isn’t this the Sartha Thrace you wanted?” She begins moving faster, emphasizing the roll of her hips, and her voice drops into the unbearably pornographic simmer that, thanks to the Empire’s more insidious propaganda, is almost as well-known as her heroic speeches. “Go on, Sartha. Give it to me. Give me everything. You know I want it. Don’t hold back. Let me feel how much you want me.”

It’s so unworthy of her that it pains Subject-126 to find herself responding to the humiliating patter with such vigor. She wastes the last of her strength giving Saint Sartha exactly what she asks for, prolonging her pleasure to farther peaks. With each one, she feels that she is pouring her vital force into Sartha. There is so little of it left. The flesh is weak, but the spirit is so very willing. She will give Sartha everything—but she needs to know, so with her last breath, she chokes it out: “W... w... w-why?”

“Why?” Again, Sartha transforms. Suddenly, she is cold and unmoving against Subject-126, and as she scoffs, the loathing in her voice cuts crisp and clear through their shared soul. “You really don’t know anything, do you? You aren’t me. None of you freaks are. Otherwise, you’d already understand: it’s better this way.”

That is no answer at all. Why? As the lights go out all around Subject-126, the plea recurs ad infinitum into the beckoning void, leaving a question mark shape the final imprint on her battered psyche. What does this mean? She is Sartha. Isn’t she? She is a hero, and a hero’s tale demands a heroic third

act. But this?

This is meaningless.

“Goodnight, Sartha. Sleep tight in hell.”

The hinges on the cell door scream again. Boots strike a familiar *clack, clack, clack* against the concrete floor. A warm-cold body is wrested frantically away from Subject-126—but it’s too late. The world is fading. Even the sounds of pacing and a gloved hand slamming against the cell door in fury are distant; so is the way She mutters under Her breath, incoherent from frustrated obsession. But in her very last moment, as She turns to address Saint Sartha, Subject-126 feels Her bitter scorn cut into her like a knife.

“Another failure. Bad dog.”

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