

Hunting Hound

Kallie

PART ONE

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

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

Fight.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Dark things like Sartha Thrace.

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

the *Ancyor* back in service on the wrong side of the war. Rumors about it moving the way only she could make it move.

Leinth hates hearing that shit. She's said so often enough and angrily enough that no one says it to her face anymore. But that doesn't mean she doesn't overhear when people are whispering about it. And it's hard as hell to get it out of her head. Sartha Thrace means the world to her. Meant the world to her. That poster above her bunk in the barracks. An idol. Even Leinth's transition goal, in the early days before she knew better. Now the kind thing to do is to let her memory rest until the time comes when they can honor it properly.

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

Genetor! Headed your way! Leinth!

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

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

Leinth would recognize its savage face anywhere, even here, and

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

Genetor topples over. The bastion falls.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The menial standing before her had once been an Imperial pilot, judging from the uniform and the wings on her lapel. Once, but no longer. There's something unmistakably broken about her. Her uniform is wearing thin from neglect and she moves with a strange, stooped, shambling gait that just doesn't look right on a person.

She's like an animal that's been beaten one too many times. Leinth wishes she could see her face, if only to verify her humanity, but she can't. The menial is wearing an awful hood that hides her face - leather, perhaps, and fashioned to look like a dog's head.

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

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

Sartha Thrace.

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

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

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

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

salient?"

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

Then she blinks. She remembers her place.

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

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

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

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

"Yeah." Sartha smiles faintly. "I guess they did."

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

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

She's not herself, in that moment.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Now Leinth feels ashamed of even that initial flicker of

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

But that begs a question.

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

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

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

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

"Maybe."

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

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

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

another. “What?”

“Have you met Her yet?”

“No,” Leinth answers, before thinking. The question puts a nasty feeling in her gut. “Who?”

“Her.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

going on.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Help me? What the...”

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

inhuman.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I-I have to do what She says.” Sartha sounds almost pleading now. “It’s not like I’m... we’re soldiers, aren’t we? We follow orders.

And Her orders are special.” It’s like she’s tricking herself. Searching for justification. She’s found one now, however thin and false. Her distress abates. “If you just met Her, you’d understand...”

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

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

“Just leave me alone,” Leinth says quietly. When she catches Sartha looking sadly at her, she balls her hands into fists. It pisses her off. “Get the fuck out already! Go. It’s not like you’re a prisoner here, right? I don’t want to fucking look at you.”

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

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

Leinth just stares at the wall, so Sartha walks over to the door of the cell. She bangs on it twice with her fist and the door opens.

Leinth stays dead still until she leaves and the door closes again behind her. Then she buries her head in her hands and starts to sob.

Fuck.

* * *

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

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

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

Either way, by the time Leinth is dragged back to the cell she feels like her skin's been ripped inside out. She feels like one of those mech carcasses, still standing even though they've been burned to ash on the inside. All she can do is collapse and lie shivering on the floor of her cell, trying to piece herself back together. Sometimes, all the sensations they inflict on her seem to linger on in her body, burrowing deeper, until she can remind

herself they're not real. Sometimes, the drugs leave her with an impossible euphoria that makes Leinth feel like she can't trust any of her own thoughts.

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

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

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

Sartha's good company, too. Even though she's a traitor. She only wants to talk if Leinth does. She's never pushy. She'll put up with Leinth's insults and anger. And sometimes, it even feels like Leinth is getting through to her.

She's so beautiful, too. That helps.

After a time, it becomes a rhythm. Torture, then Sartha. The rhythm makes it easier to bear. No matter what they do to her, no matter how it feels, after a while Sartha will be there. They can talk

if Leinth needs to hear her voice, or not if Leinth needs quiet. Eventually, her anger abates. There's no point being angry at Sartha Thrace. They're both in hell. Maybe Sartha's just in a little deeper.

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

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

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

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

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

"Huh?" Sartha, sitting just along from her in the cell, turns her

head.

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

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

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

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

“Try me.”

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

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

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

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

Leinth nods.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Yeah.” Sartha’s voice is empty.

“And...” Leinth takes a deep breath. “And you know it’s not like this for most people, don’t you? You know it’s not right.”

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

* * *

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

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

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

Leinth can’t even count the hours or the days. She can’t tell if she’s putting up a good fight. What haunts her more than anything

is that all of this could have been no more than a couple of weeks. What if she's falling apart like this in just two weeks.

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

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

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

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

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

She tries to sob silently and cover the shaking motions she makes when her breath catches awkwardly in her throat. Maybe she

doesn't want to cry so nakedly in front of an enemy. Maybe she doesn't want to cry so nakedly in front of her hero. Either way, she keeps her face turned away and hopes Sartha can't quite see her in the dark.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Eventually, after a long while, she manages to make herself still.

She stops crying. She's shed enough tears for the day. But there's no escaping the knowledge that tomorrow will be the same. Fresh torments. And once they're over, even less of her will remain.

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

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

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

A longer pause. Then:

"Yeah."

* * *

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

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

It sounds a little too good to be true. But what choice does Leinth

have but to put her faith in Sartha, and hope she has enough of her own strength left to overcome any unexpected challenges?

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

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

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

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

"This way," Sartha says.

They start moving quickly, not quite running for fear that their feet pounding the concrete will alert something or someone. It's just

as dark out of Leinth's cell as it is inside it, and to her the dark corridors and passageways Sartha is leading her through are utterly indistinguishable. She's tried mapping the place based on what she sees when the menials drag her out each day, but no luck. There's too little light, and their work leaves her far, far too disoriented.

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

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

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

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

It's Her.

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

as her eyes. She wears a thin smile as she stares down the escapees.

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

Sartha Thrace does something much worse than freezing up.

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

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

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

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

"Good girl," the handler says as Sartha throws herself at her feet. She reaches down and blesses her head with a couple of fond pats. Leinth is grateful she can't see the look on Sartha's face. She's sure it would break her heart. "Hello, Leinth Aritimis."

Leinth grits her teeth. This is as bad as it gets. She needs to get

her head into gear. This is combat. She should run. But she needs to ask the question.

“What did you do to her?”

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

Anger swelled in Leinth’s bosom. “You’re sick.”

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

That makes her skin crawl. “She’s not happy, you piece of shit.”

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

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

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

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

heard anything like it.

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

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

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

A muzzle.

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

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

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

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

Which is worse?

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

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

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

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

"Off The Leash."

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

Except it isn't.

Nobody could go from zero to sixty that fast. Nobody. No person. But Sartha doesn't really count as one of those anymore. She's staring down at Leinth with a look of impossible, bestial hate, eyes as furious as they are shallow. Her hackles are raised and her back is

arched, and her lips are drawn back to expose snarling teeth. There's a sound coming from the back of her throat; a low, rumbling growl, like the rolling of thunder. It's a sound that has no business coming from a human.

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

A hound.

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

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

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

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

Only Sartha.

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

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

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

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

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

The handler arches an eyebrow. "Hound. Up."

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

"Take off your jacket," the handler instructs.

Again, Hound obeys without thought. She discards the military jacket she was once so proud of like it's nothing. Underneath she's wearing a simple, khaki tank top. The handler lifts the hem to Hound's chest and uses her other hand to fondly touch the pilot's

abs, feeling at their definition. She's enjoying them - her smirk makes no secret of that - but this is all for Leinth's benefit. She's trying to piss Leinth off. Showing her that only she gets to touch Sartha Thrace this way.

It's working.

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

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

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

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

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

Hound kisses it.

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

Depraved. There's no other word for it.

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

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

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

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

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

"No!"

The word bursts from her lips, an explosion, before she can

catch herself and add the appropriate 'sir'. Sartha is suddenly desperate. Panicked, far more so than she'd ever been with Leinth in her cell. Her eyes register a wounded confusion.

Is she being abandoned? What did she do wrong?

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

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

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

And Leinth's faint hopes grow fainter still.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“And,” the handler adds. “Lust. You want her.”

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

“You do,” the handler decides. She says it so academically. Like she’s putting together a puzzle. Like she’s dissecting a frog. “Why deny it? We know your inclinations. She’s attractive, isn’t she?”

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

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

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

Except...

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Leinth goes very still. "What?"

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

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

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

"Yes, sir."

She doesn't hesitate before answering, of course. Leinth is just about prepared for that, but she isn't prepared at all for how plainly

eager Sartha is. She's looking at her handler with hope in her eyes. She wants her handler to say the word. She wants to be given a chance to obey.

No matter what.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Sartha Thrace, on her knees, before you. Warm. Eager. Welcoming.”

“N-no!”

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

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

“Yes, sir!”

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

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

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

If it wasn’t already too late to pretend, it is now. Leinth is hard.

Her clothes aren't tight, but it's still obvious.

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

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

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

"She- ah!"

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

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

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

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

“Yes, sir!”

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

“Then do so.”

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

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

The question provokes an uncomfortable curiosity.

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

“Yes, sir.”

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

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

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

“Sartha,” she says. “Kiss her.”

“Hu-“

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

Sartha’s lips taste like leather and boot polish.

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

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

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

Many have.

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

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

"No?" she asks.

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

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

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

change that!"

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

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

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

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

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

Sartha Thrace looks pained.

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

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

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

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

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

"You have such faith in her," the handler says. "You think it makes you strong. It just makes you brittle. You can think you can handle seeing her broken and dirtied and disappointing. Perhaps.

But you cannot handle the real truth of Sartha Thrace.”

It’s that pain. It has to be. Leinth wants to close her heart off to it. To make a hated enemy of Sartha in her head. Then she wouldn’t need to care. She can’t do it, of course.

“The chink in Sartha’s armor,” the handler tells her, “was you.”

Leinth opens her eyes in disbelief.

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

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

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

Sometimes, when Leinth pilots *Genetor*, she takes some pretty fucking big hits. It’s part of the job, after all. *Genetor* was built for it. It’s the kind of machine that was designed to stare down an

avalanche and dare the mountain the do its worst. That doesn't mean it doesn't feel like shit, though. It doesn't matter how heavily built a machine is. When you get hit by heavy ordnance, the force has to go somewhere. It goes through you. And the noise. It's deafening, in the most literal sense. After some battles, Leinth can't hear properly for hours afterward. There's nothing in her ears but a skull-splitting mosquito whine of complaint.

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

It was her fault?

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

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

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

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

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

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

PART TWO

Who are you?

“Leinth Aritimis, pilot.”

The question burns a hole in Leinth’s brain. She hears it, every single day, from Handler’s lips. It’s been like that ever since the escape. The doomed escape. Sartha Thrace - or Hound, Sartha’s other half - dragged her here, to a new cell, where she’s been kept ever since. Here, she is subject to Handler’s personal attentions. And each session begins and ends with the question.

Who are you?

“Leinth Aritimis, pilot.”

It’s an answer. The only one Leinth has to give. It’s not exactly wrong, but it’s not exactly right either. And it’s not the one Handler is looking for. Leinth can tell that much from Her expression. She’s tried giving other answers. She could pretend it’s to amuse herself, but really it’s because she’s hoping she’ll hit upon whatever answer Handler wants to hear. Once, Leinth even answered ‘hound’.

Handler didn’t like that. She made the measure of Her disapproval plain. She wants the truth. Only the truth. So Leinth

gives it to Her. She's not sure why. Handler's approval shouldn't matter to her. But it does.

Who are you?

"Leinth Aritimis, pilot."

Leinth's new cell is nicer, she supposes. Brighter. A touch more comfortable. She thinks it's close to Handler's quarters, but that's just idle speculation. She's given up on trying to make a mental map of this place. No point. She's never getting out. She knows that now.

There's also a mirror. They couldn't have picked a worse torture device. What can Leinth do but spend hours staring at herself, letting her self-loathing ferment in her belly? The mirror asks the same question Handler does. Who is she? She doesn't look much like a pilot anymore. Too skinny. Pilots always get the good rations and they always stay in good shape. Leinth just eats whatever they give her, and she doesn't have the strength to exercise. She looks more like a corpse than a pilot.

Her eyes don't help with that.

It's tempting to break the mirror. That's what Leinth knows she should do, if she still had the will. What stops her is knowing that Handler wants it here. Leinth can't seem to bring herself to deny Her. Not anymore. It's impossible even to imagine it. Like trying to imagine the sun moving backward across the sky.

Leinth has been down here too long. She knows that. Knowing doesn't help.

Handler is more skilled than Her creepy, dog-hooded menials. Her personal attention is overwhelming. That's like if the sun froze in the sky, and it was shining just for you. She touches the threads of Leinth's mind as skillfully as a musician playing the strings of a harp, but She always leaves them fraying, twisted, undone. She takes - time, memories, moods. Whatever She wishes.

It doesn't always hurt. But it is always torture, whether it's drugs, electricity, lights, strange devices, or even just talking. When it does hurt, it's not so bad. Leinth can give herself to the pain. It's better than the gnawing guilt she feels when it doesn't.

It's never an interrogation, though. Leinth refuses to give up any secrets that would endanger her fellow rebels. That's a barrier within herself she's determined not to relinquish. Maybe the very last one. But Handler doesn't ask, not about that. She asks about other things. Personal things.

When did Leinth first know she's a woman? Who was her first crush? What was the first time her parents were ever disappointed in her? And it's always so easy to tell Her. It always seems like a good idea in the moment. Like it'll feel good. Like it'll be a release.

It never is. It feels awful. Each time, Leinth is left feeling like she's lost something. Like the memory she's told belongs to Her now. Leinth is hollower for it. Less herself. Handler, by contrast, seems magnified by each secret shared. It's like She's feasting on them, as ridiculous as Leinth knows that is. But the impression persists. She can't remember how much of herself she's given away. What doesn't Handler know about her, now? Is there anything? She

must understand Leinth better than any other living soul could. The way only a god could.

But She keeps asking. Every time.

Who are you?

“Leinth Aritimis, pilot.”

At this point, what does it even mean for Leinth to call herself a pilot? That it’s her true self, somehow? Leinth wonders about that. If she could again sit in *Genetor*’s cockpit, if she could ride it to battle, would it fix her? Would she feel whole again?

Or would she throw up over the controls? That feels more likely. More true. Leinth may never be able to pilot *Genetor* again, but even if she could, it would be wrong. Sacrilegious. *Genetor* is a good thing. It does good. Leinth doesn’t. Not anymore. She’s unworthy of it. She always has been.

Because of Sartha. Because of Sartha Thrace.

If there’s one genuine kindness to being under Handler’s personal care, it’s that Sartha Thrace no longer comes to visit Leinth. Seeing her now would be unbearable. Thinking of her is unbearable; all Leinth can do is try to keep thoughts of her pressed against the far walls of her mind, there to scratch and itch as she lies down on the bunk to sleep.

Sartha Thrace is a hero. And Leinth ruined her.

Not just Leinth. But yes, her. She ruined Sartha with her praise and her wishes and her expectant, hopeful eyes. She knows this to be true. She feels it in her soul. Leinth has tried blaming Handler, a little. It doesn't stick. Doesn't have the same ring of dreadful truth to it. No; it was Leinth.

If only she'd just stopped and thought about how all that hero worship must have felt to Sartha. About what a burden it must have been to bear. Then, at least, Leinth would be innocent. But she never had. She'd always assumed Sartha could carry all that weight.

And why couldn't she? Why couldn't she just carry it? Isn't that what heroes are for?

Leinth can't blame Sartha, though. It's her fault. She did this.

Those thoughts chase each other's tails in Leinth's head, round and round, over and over. Guilt and anger. They never settle. She can't make peace with how she feels. There are, as they say, two wolves inside her.

That phrase seems so much more sinister now.

Leinth is grateful when the drugs they put in her food give her simple oblivion. But just as often they do the opposite. Especially lately. They've added something particularly obscene. Some kind of aphrodisiac. It's potent. It leaves Leinth at odds with her own body, pent up, pacing her cell, filled with base urges that leave her disgusted with herself.

She can't even blow off steam the way every soldier does when they have the barracks to themselves. When she tries, there's only one face that comes into her head. And Leinth would never forgive herself if she soiled her hero even more than she already has.

How long has that drug been in her food now? How long has she been down here? And how long until she knows the answer?

Who are you?

Leinth Aritimis? Pilot? It feels worse and more absurd every time she says it. It drools from Leinth's lips, weary from overuse, becoming just a set of sounds she barely remembers how to say.

Lay-inth. Lee-inth. Ah-ree-ti-mis. How is it that Handler says it? She always speaks like She's wielding a scalpel on Her tongue. Dividing up the syllables. Clipped. Precise. That's Handler's way. She knows. She always knows best.

Is that one of Leinth's thoughts, or one She gave her? Does it still matter? It won't for much longer.

Leinth is too smart not to know that she's about to break into pieces.

A sound drags Leinth from the spiral of her own mind. Scraping. Metal on metal. The door opening.

Leinth looks up, and sees Sartha Thrace.

And she gags. It feels ten times worse than she'd guessed it would. Nausea. Blind panic. Fuck. The guilt swells like a tide. But the look on Sartha's face isn't accusatory. It's worse than that. It's apologetic.

At least now there are no pretenses between them. Not with that sick fucking muzzle on her face.

"Hey," Sartha says.

What is Leinth supposed to say to that? What the fuck is she supposed to say to *that*? Absolutely no words could match what had passed between them the last time they saw each other, and so Leinth just sits there on her bunk, mouth open, staring stupidly, until finally she musters up enough of herself to say:

"Hey."

Even her voice doesn't sound like her own at this point.

Sartha seems to take that one little word for permission. She enters the cell. Doesn't close the door behind herself. Doesn't need to - she knows Leinth won't run. She moves cautiously. Timidly, even. It doesn't suit her. Sartha Thrace shouldn't tiptoe around Leinth like a mouse in a lion's den.

"I'm sorry I couldn't come to see you sooner," the former hero says. "I wanted to. But She said... well, She thought it would be best."

A line of thought presents itself for Leinth's consideration. She

could try to reason out why, exactly, Handler would want to keep them separated for a time. Figuring that out could help Leinth understand what Handler is doing to her. Understanding could help her resist. Mind games don't work as well when you know the rules. At least, she hopes not. Leinth doesn't have all the pieces of the puzzle, of course. But she could at least try to figure it out.

Leinth decides not to bother. She's just too tired.

"She did, huh?" she says instead, voice heavy. "And why does She think it would be best to come talk to me now?"

"I asked to," Sartha replies. "I've asked a few times. I wanted to make sure you were OK."

Does she really believe it was her own idea? Pointless to ask. That delusion strikes Leinth as absurd, but less absurd than it might have at the start of her captivity. It's impossible not to believe that, sometimes. Maybe Sartha's even telling the truth - but as soon as that occurs to Leinth, another voice in her head tells her different.

She's lying to you. Betraying you. That's what she does, Leinth.

"That's a little hard to believe," Leinth says through gritted teeth. She adds, belatedly: "Traitor."

Instantly she regrets the insult and her anger ebbs. She's not even sure where it came from. It's beneath her. No, she's beneath it. And it's her fault, isn't it? She helped ruin Sartha Thrace. Leinth has no right to any righteous fury. The wounded look on Sartha's face only adds to her guilt.

"I did," Sartha promises, rising above the taunt. "I've been worried about you. I... know how it is, right now. I've been exactly where you are."

"I doubt that," Leinth mutters. It's not the same. Handler's made that clear. There is a terrifying specificity to the way She dismantles people.

Sartha isn't to be dissuaded. "I want to help you, Leinth. A shoulder to cry on. Someone to vent to. Someone to... to take out your frustration on - anything."

Leinth has trusted those words before. Sartha isn't here to help. She's part of something, and Leinth can't let herself be drawn in. But that doesn't make them any less enticing. How long has it been since she's had company? Outside of Handler, anyway.

Not that She counts. The gulf between them is just too great.

Company sounds like salvation, but Sartha's company? That would be like a mosquito biting her skin over and over. It's too loaded. Leinth can feel it, even now. The cocktail of emotions she's barely been able to keep repressed. Admiration, loathing, attraction, admiration, hurt, guilt. She's never felt more on edge - not once, not even in the heart of combat. What's Sartha doing to her?

"Can... I at least sit down?" Sartha ventures.

Leinth really doesn't want her to. Having her here just feels wrong. Like she's doing to get kicked again. But something keeps

her from refusing. She doesn't want to be alone either. And more importantly, perhaps, she knows Sartha's presence is Handler's will.

So, Leinth just gives her a stiff nod.

"Thanks." Sartha's still cautious and slow as she approaches. Moving that way is so wrong for her. As she perches on the other end of Leinth's bunk, it's almost like she's afraid. "First of all, I wanted to say this, straight-up: it's all going to be OK. This will all make sense soon."

Leinth looks at her uneasily. "You said something like that the first time we met down here."

"Yeah." Sartha nods. "That was the worst part, for me. Not knowing. Not having any... any faith." She smiles at Leinth. Tries to smile, anyway. "I thought you might need to hear that again, right about now."

"Faith." Leinth feels nauseous. Faith - Sartha is all but overflowing with it. There's a light buried in her eyes, a light she can always see. It's wrong. "Faith in Her."

"Yes," Sartha says hopefully. "In Her."

Sartha's voice trembles with awe as she says that. Leinth tries to pretend hers doesn't too.

"She wants what's best for us," Sartha adds. "Maybe you can see that better now."

Leinth just snorts. How can this be best for Sartha? It seems absurd. But she knows now, of course. What Sartha was going through before. When she was a hero. Leinth knows what all that did to her. So it doesn't seem as crazy as it should.

But, this? How could *this* ever be better? Wanting to run is one thing. Wanting to betray everything you held dear and break your own psyche into two halves is another. Leinth will never, ever understand that.

At least, she hopes not.

"Just trust me, OK?" Sartha promises. "It'll get easier. She says you're doing very well."

Leinth twitches. That's not good.

"Fuck Her and fuck you," she manages, although her heart isn't in it. "She can waste her time with me forever. She'll never get what she wants."

The boast rings hollow to them both. Sartha doesn't even look offended, just pitying. Leinth knows why.

This is passive resistance. Not active. She's not fighting anymore. Not really. Just betting that whatever Handler's rooting around in her head for isn't actually there. She's not denying that Handler can take her apart, brick by brick.

“It’s normal to be angry,” Sartha tells her. “You can be angry at Her, for now. She won’t mind. She’ll forgive you.”

Leinth just hates that a part of her brain lights up with relief at that. She tries to suppress that pleasure, to shove it back down in the dark where it belongs. She can’t. It’s hard. Too hard.

Why can’t she think? Why’s it so hard to just fucking think?

Sartha’s to blame, Leinth.

It’s Sartha’s fault. It’s like she’s doing something to Leinth just by being here. Being on edge doesn’t even begin to cover it. It’s deeper than that. Atavistic. Like being prey in the presence of a predator. Or... the opposite? Leinth’s not sure, she just knows it’s itching at her all over. She can feel Sartha in the air. On her skin. It’s consuming. Leinth has never been more aware of another human being before.

And there’s something else. Something weirder and worse.

Leinth is unbearably fucking horny.

It’s more distracting than it has any right to be. The arousal has been present for at least a dozen sleeps, since they started adding that aphrodisiac to Leinth’s food. It’s been a constant buzz that keeps her from finding any center or inner calm. But now it’s turned up to eleven. It’s thunder in Leinth’s veins.

And it’s all directed at Sartha.

Every stupid, embarrassing, idol-struck wet dream she's ever had is now throbbing at the forefront of her brain. Leinth just has to avert her eyes and pray it isn't showing. But it must be - she can feel herself sweating and drooling and tenting the coarse pants they gave her. Gods, it's like being a teenage boy all over again. More intense though, and there's something else. She can hear a heartbeat, pounding in her ears. It must be hers. But it feels like Sartha's.

"Are you alright?" Sartha says. Out of the corner of her eye, Leinth can see concern on her face. It hurts.

She doesn't deserve concern. She's the one who ruined Sartha. She's still doing it even now, in her mind's eye. Leinth is the worst. The lowest it gets. She can feel control slipping out of her grasp. Like an animal in heat - but that would be a hundred times easier to deal with. You don't blame an animal for being in heat.

"I'm fine," Leinth grunts.

She's not. She shifts a couple of inches down her bunk, hoping distance will help. It doesn't. It just makes the yearning that much more intense. Sartha Thrace is right here, still within arm's reach. Her warmth. Her skin. Her body. Fuck. It's so damn hard not to think about it when Handler's demonstration keeps flashing through her mind.

Her lips, yielding and kissing. Her mouth, open, wet, willing. The way she licked Handler's boot like it was a lover. And, above all, the promise Handler made.

Why not enjoy her, if it pleases you? Many have.

Leinth reaches up and clutches at her head. Fuck. She's so disgusting.

Suddenly, a memory forms. Not of Sartha. Of Handler. Leinth remembers being in the sweet embrace of Her tools and instruments, in some secret room of these sinister kennels. She remembers herself being opened and Handler pouring words into her, sweet as honey, bitter as cocoa. It's the same voice she can hear even now, at the back of her own brain.

All of its words are about Sartha Thrace.

Before Leinth can fathom the meaning of that. Sartha catches her attention.

"There's something else," the hero says, with palpable reluctance. "I... wanted to apologize."

Leinth might have laughed. "Apologize?" she chokes out.

What does Sartha have to apologize for? Much, of course. But not to Leinth. Those scales are tipped firmly and irrevocably the other way.

"Yeah," Sartha says earnestly. "For what you saw that day. I'm sure it's been weighing on you."

Leinth's hands have started shaking. It's really bad. "Did She tell you to say that?"

“No,” Sartha replies, although there’s no knowing if that’s really true. Not even for her. “I swear. This is all me, Leinth. I’m sorry. Really sorry.”

“For what?” Leinth’s voice cracks.

“For laying all that on you.”

“You didn’t,” Leinth croaks. “She did.”

“That’s different,” Sartha shoots back quickly. She’s defensive of her mistress, of course. “She was just telling you the truth. That’s all. It was kind of Her, Leinth. You just don’t see that yet.”

Kind. Leinth’s hands shake worse. Listening to Sartha talk about this is so twisted. Her head is nothing but a seething mass of insane contradictions, and Leinth is fast losing the ability to sort them out as she hears them.

“I meant... in my head,” Sartha explains. “I put it on you by letting it get to me. My status. The way people looked at me. Shit like that. You shouldn’t have to feel bad about it.”

Leinth buries her face in her palms. No, no, no. This is so wrong. Sartha shouldn’t be apologizing. She’s a hero. She *was* a hero. Whatever.

“Everyone needs people to look up to,” Sartha’s still talking. Why won’t she just shut up and go away? “I sure as hell did in my day.

Even if I never thought I'd become... well, it just comes with the territory, I guess. If you survive long enough. I should have known. I should have been ready."

Leinth wants to stop her, but her blood is boiling and her tongue would loll stupidly out of her mouth if she tried to speak. Her passions are up and they leave no room for words. She just wants this torture to end. Compared to this, Handler truly is kind. Leinth just wants to be free of this feeling. This guilt. But even by listening, she's making it worse. Why can't she stop violating Sartha this way?

"I wish..." Sartha pauses, considers, corrects. "Part of me wishes I'd just been stronger. That it hadn't come to this. Then I wouldn't be such a disappointment to you. But it's for the best. I met Her, and she saved me. Fixed me. Made me a hero again."

That self-pity. It's disgusting. As disgusting as Leinth is. A hero shouldn't feel that. Speak that.

"You deserved better." Sartha seems to settle on that thought. "You deserve a hero you could really look up to."

And then it roars out of Leinth, furious as the report of *Genetor's* guns.

Shut her up, Leinth.

"Just shut up already!" she screams, in a voice that barely remembers how to speak. It comes out raw and ragged. "Don't you have any fucking pride?"

She's on her feet, even though she doesn't remember standing. She can look down at Sartha now. That feels good. It feels right.

"I ruined you!" Leinth screams. That confession is a balm for her soul. Letting it out, an unspeakable release. "I'm part of what broke you! But you can't even be mad at me? Even now it's out in the open? What's wrong with you?"

Sartha doesn't reply. She looks surprised, but not hurt. Not afraid. She's serene. That pisses Leinth off even more.

Why isn't she angry? If she was anything more than a broken mutt, she'd be angry.

"Why aren't you angry?" she rages. It's not right, Sartha's strange tranquility. Sartha Thrace isn't like that. Her *Ancyor* is a furious machine. Sartha Thrace always fought with an avenging anger in her heart, for anyone who ever hurt her comrades. "You're a hero! Stand up for yourself. Stand up for *something*. Aren't you tired of taking it all lying down? Me, Handler... fuck, if you're a traitor, at least be a traitor. Not... not this!"

Still, no reply. Why not? Why won't she talk? What's she hiding? Leinth needs to see. She needs to see closer. She grosses the gap between them in a stride and grabs Sartha's collar up in her fists. Hauling the broken woman to her feet is easy; maybe the anger is making Leinth strong. She puts her face close to Sartha's, as close as that ridiculous muzzle permits. What's with that anyway? Why won't she just take it off?

"Look at me!" Leinth roars. She needs to see into those eyes.

Sartha obeys, and for a long moment Leinth just stares and stares, searching for an answer. Searching for a feeling, for any feeling. For something real.

In Sartha's eyes, she reads validation. Sartha is validated by Leinth's anger.

That feels like an even greater betrayal. Leinth's rage flares hotter still - but there's something else, too. Being this close to Sartha is a mistake. Her scent is overpowering. Leinth can feel her heat under her hands. It's too much. She was horny before, from the drugs; there's no words for what she is now. It's too much. It becomes all of her, flooding her senses and her limbs, flooding even her anger, becoming one with it. It's all one feeling now, violent and restless.

"Did you..." Leinth growls. Words come hard and slow. She's beyond them. "Did you ever really mean it? Did you ever really believe in something?"

Even Sartha looks a little shocked at the accusation behind her words. "Yes!" she cries. It's a prayer. A hope. "I did - I do - I... I'm a hero. I'm a hero."

She's trying to make sense of herself. It's useless, of course. She is only what Handler allows her to be. Handler's the one to be angry at. But Leinth can't imagine that anymore, and in any case, Handler isn't here.

But Sartha is.

She's lying to you, Leinth.

"Stop lying!" Leinth yells in her face. There's no stopping the strange alchemy happening inside her as her feelings fold and merge. Something deep within her is being forged and dredged up. It defies reason and reality, but that doesn't matter. It's primal. Atavistic. "Stop... stop pretending! You lied to us! To all of us! How could you do that?"

"I didn't--"

Make her pay.

Leinth just hits her.

Right in the gut. A hammer blow. Sartha is taken by surprise mid-breath and doubles over, gagging and choking. Only Leinth's other hand, firm on her collar, keeps her on her feet. She looks like she's in agony.

And it feels good.

Better than anything Leinth's felt since she first came down here, that's for sure. It's a revelation. She's never before thought about what a simple joy inflicting pain can be. It's power, and power is so precious. It's a tiny little release valve for what's boiling inside her.

Leinth is no sadist, of course. Just the opposite. She'd never want to hurt anyone who deserves it. But Sartha does. She absolutely does. That feels too right to be wrong. Which means there's nothing to

stop Leinth from making Sartha as bruised outside as she feels inside.

She deserves it.

“You can-“ Sartha begins to choke out as she recovers.

“Stop talking!” Leinth snarls. She pulls close, overwhelmed with a craving for greater savagery. She means to bite; she can imagine her jaws clamping down, and skin breaking, and blood in her mouth.

Instead, she finds herself clawing the muzzle away from Sartha’s face and kissing her.

The kiss is no gentler than a bite. It’s ugly and messy. Leinth bites Sartha’s lip, hard, and invades her mouth with her tongue, claiming her, soiling her face with blood and drool. The kiss makes Leinth euphoric. It’s vindication. She can do this. She can cross this line with Sartha. And that means she wasn’t really such a hero after all.

Plus, Sartha Thrace is kissing her back.

Leinth lets her, for a moment, but then pulls back and shoves her to one side so hard she goes sprawling across the floor. She can’t let Sartha think this is a coupling of equals. It’s not. Sartha is nothing. A pretender. A traitor. A dog.

Sartha, perversely, looks up at Leinth with stars in her eyes. “You

can hit me,” she pants, “if you want. She said that you could.”

Permission. What does that mean? It implies anticipation. Did Handler plan this? That should trouble Leinth, but she’s far, far too fixated on Sartha to devote any thought to it.

Sartha wants this. Whatever guilt Leinth made her feel has transformed into sheer masochism. That disgusts Leinth. The Sartha Thrace she once believed in would never have looked at anyone like that. She’s not disgusted by herself anymore, though.

She’s not like Sartha. She’s one of the good guys. That’s why she can do whatever she wants with a piece-of-shit liar like this.

Sartha looks Leinth up and down. Her eyes settle on the tell-tale mark of Leinth’s arousal. Those stars in her eyes don’t get any dimmer. “You can fuck me, too. I-if you want.”

Her eagerness is pathetic. Leinth wonders how she ever saw anything good or heroic in the brainwashed woman slumped on the ground before her.

But she’s willing. And Leinth is horny. That’s simple enough.

“That’s what you do for all of them,” Leinth growls as she advances on Sartha. “Isn’t it?”

“I... that’s...” Sartha struggles. She’s trying to make that agree with her sense of self. “W-when She wants me to... when they need...”

Leinth snorts. "Why am I even talking to you?" she spits. "You barely even know where you are. What side you're fighting on. You're nothing. Why did I ever think you were a hero? You're just a warm body."

"I ju-"

"Shut up!" Leinth snaps. "Get up."

Sartha does what she's told - or tries at least. That's both intoxicating and aggravating. A hero shouldn't - but Sartha isn't a hero, Leinth knows that now, and it's fucking hot that she does. It makes Leinth feel like she can do anything she wants. And she wants so much. It's burning in her veins. Leinth feels powerful as Sartha fights to her feet, and she feels powerful as she decides she's moving too slow. Leinth reaches down to haul her to her feet and toss her roughly onto her bunk.

"Take your fucking clothes off," Leinth orders next. Even Sartha's clothes piss her off, she's realizing. It's still her old rebel garb. "You don't deserve to wear that."

Once more, Sartha is too slow. When she fumbles a little with her jacket, Leinth intervenes and starts ripping it from her body, popping buttons and tearing fastenings. It's as easy as tearing paper. Leinth has never felt so strong. And she doesn't stop there; she makes her hands into claws, hooks them into Sartha's vest, and pulls apart until the whole thing comes to pieces in her hands.

The sight of Sartha's tits spilling out is a hot rush of pleasure and satisfaction. This is exactly the defiling that false idols deserve.

Leinth keeps going - not until Sartha is naked, just until she's naked enough. Until Leinth has access to everything she wants.

But she takes a moment to reach down and fix the muzzle back into place. It suits Sartha. Leinth sees that now.

"On the bunk?" Sartha pants, with a filthy eagerness. "Or I could su-"

"Shut up."

Leinth hits her again, this time a hooked punch to her side that collapses Sartha onto the bunk like a stack of bricks falling over. She doesn't want Sartha to talk. It's wrong when she talks. Hound doesn't talk, not unless She tells her to, and maybe that's the real Sartha after all. Maybe Leinth can bring Hound out to play. That's what Sartha wants. She wants the blissful surrender of sweat and heaving bodies.

Fine. She can have that. As long as Leinth gets to prove she's not a hero. Just a body.

She deserves this too, Leinth. Fuck her. You want to. And so does she.

Leinth kneels on the bed behind Sartha as she scrambles to her knees. Leinth's need is bursting out of her at the seams. She wants this. And so does Sartha. Leinth starts undressing herself, furiously and frantically, shucking her pants to her knees so she can free her cock and press it against Sartha's cunt.

Sartha is clearly wet, and Leinth can see the bruise on her side already beginning to form, blossoming blue and purple where she planted the tip of her fist. Leinth grins.

And starts fucking her former hero.

Their sounds are animal. Sartha's whining moans, the way Leinth growls her every breath, and the feral slap of flesh on flesh. There's absolutely no art to it. Leinth is no stranger to good sex. She considers herself more restrained than most, but she gets just as much pussy as every other ace pilot and she likes to make sure the girls she brings back to her quarters go out and spread the right kind of rumors afterward.

But Sartha isn't like them. This is barely sex. More like jerking off, only the long-held fantasy of Sartha Thrace isn't just in Leinth's head anymore. Admittedly, she didn't want Sartha this way. But now that she has her, it's almost as good.

Leinth feels free, in a way. There's nobody to look up to. Nobody to disappoint. She can simply be this.

And this is what you are, Leinth.

Her pace is furious. Desperate. The lust-drugs have been in her food for weeks, and Sartha's face in her mind's eye has been an aching curse, keeping her from release. Now the curse is broken. Now it's a red rag to a bull, and Leinth just wants to see that face soiled and bruised and made hers. She has her hands on Sartha's hips and pulls back on them hard with each thrust. Whenever Sartha doesn't match her enthusiastically enough, she digs in her nails,

grown uneven and sharp from her captivity. Every stupid, pathetic puppy-whine from the woman on her knees in front of her just drives Leinth onwards. To make her louder, she rakes her claws hard enough to draw blood.

This is ascension. Better than piloting, better than victory. This is the best she's ever felt.

Leinth doesn't care if it lasts long. She just wants that one moment; the release, the moment she truly makes Sartha hers. She's frenzied for it. Leinth reaches forward and puts her hand on the back of Sartha's head, and pushes. Hard. Hard enough that Sartha's elbows buckle and she crashes forward, face planting awkwardly into the hard mattress. Leinth pushes forward and down, mounting her and keeping her there. The position lets her thrust longer and harder - and more importantly, it's even more degrading. Leinth likes that she can make Sartha take her whole weight, crushing her, making her bend her neck and brace on her shoulder. She's practically contorting herself.

Because Leinth is making her.

This is all she is.

"This is all you are," Leinth growls. She's so glad she gets to be the one to show her. "Not a hero. Just this. Understand?"

It's all personal now. She's the one Sartha betrayed. Not the rebels. Leinth's comrades are all but forgotten now. In reply, Sartha just gurgles. Probably, she can barely breathe. Leinth doesn't care. Let her choke.

A stupid, broken dog.

“Stupid. Broken. Dog,” Leinth huffs, voice cracking as her pleasure peaks. “I... I... fuck!”

Good dog.

She cums, hard as hell. As she does she slumps against Sartha, drugged-up limbs finally permitted to release the last of their strength. Her mind goes blank from the pleasure. It’s everything that’s been building up in her for weeks. Maybe months. She lets it all go, driven by raw instinct.

Her marks on Sartha. Her cum in Sartha. Her furious words, thundering through her ears. Her satisfaction - her domination - feels complete. This moment is the culmination of Leinth’s entire existence. The satisfaction is infinite.

Until it isn’t.

When her orgasm dies, it’s not just Leinth’s need that fades. It’s her anger. It’s the wound of betrayal and resentment, pressing on her brain like a cancer sore. It all goes, all at once, everything that’s been animating her. Leinth collapses back onto the back, legs splayed, her face aghast with dawning confusion.

Then, slowly, horribly, as Sartha draws weak, shuddery breaths, Leinth becomes aware that they are not alone in the cell.

“My,” remarks Hander, from where She’s been watching. Leinth didn’t hear or notice Her enter, but she must have seen the entire filthy thing. “Leinth Aritimis. What have you done?”

Leinth hadn’t realized just how fucking cold it was in the cell. Shivering, she meets Handler’s gaze for a moment, and that’s a mistake. In Handler’s eyes, she doesn’t see smug glee or victorious scorn. Her eyes are just impossibly cold, like the winter sky. They are a mirror, and they are perfectly truthful.

Under those eyes, Leinth can’t keep it together. Not even for a moment.

“I d-... I didn’t...” Leinth’s voice sounds absurdly small compared to those growls from just moments ago. She’s grasping for something. That voice in her head. Was it Handler’s? Or was it her own? How can she possibly hope to tell? “Y-you... made me...”

Handler just tilts Her head. “Is that what you think?”

She doesn’t, not really. Leinth doesn’t feel like anyone made her do anything. It was all her. Every ugly feeling and every blackened thought. Her decision to... what? Fuck Sartha? It feels worse than that, although Leinth can’t tell if it really is or not. This is all too twisted, and all she knows is that her chest is ripping itself in two with guilt. Even if it was Handler’s voice, she must have chosen to listen to it. Surely she had a choice.

But there’s something. There has to be *something*.

“You put d-drugs,” Leinth babbles, “in my food.”

“Of course,” Handler replies.

She doesn’t need to deny it. She knows it’s not enough. Leinth can already rehearse argument and counterargument in her own head. How does she know the drugs aren’t showing who she really is? Why would drugs absolve her responsibility?

And it’s not like she can pretend she didn’t want it. She’s always wanted Sartha Thrace that way.

No. Leinth knows what she chose. She felt herself chose it.

But acceptance is still a bridge she can’t cross. “But...” Leinth splutters. She glances at Sartha in half-panic. “No, but...”

“Why are you so worked up about this?” Handler asks her. “You haven’t done anything wrong.”

At that, Leinth goes very, very still. Her eyes fix on Handler again. She can’t believe she just heard that. She never even considered that. The thought is foreign. She hasn’t... but of course she has!

“No,” Leinth shakes her head. “How can you say that? I... she...”

“She wanted this.” Handler is the kind of calm that makes her easy to believe. “Every part of her. I’d know.”

Leinth knows poison when she hears it, but she can’t stop herself

listening. "That's n-not true. Sartha wouldn't."

"She would," Handler tells her. "I've been telling you, Leinth. Sartha isn't what you hoped she'd be. She's not a hero. She is my hound."

The dreadful memory of what happened smothers any retort Leinth might have. She wants to insist that Sartha didn't want it, but she knows in her body the way Sartha hungered for her kiss and welcomed Leinth inside her. Fuck, the eagerness in her voice. She was practically begging for it.

Would a hero ever do that?

What Handler offers isn't right. Leinth knows that. But it's so tempting, and she's struggling to remember why it's wrong.

"Don't worry," Handler says softly. She sounds so kind now, or maybe that's just in Leinth's head. "I sent her in here, you know. If you need to blame someone, you can blame me. I won't hold it against you."

Now that's irresistible - especially when Handler extends her hand and touches her fingertips to Leinth's cheek. She means to pull away; she almost does, but Handler's touch is perfectly cool. It feels like the only thing that can soothe the pounding heat inside Leinth. So, she lets herself be weak for a moment. It's just a touch, she tells herself.

"Right," Leinth breathes. "It's your fault."

Handler nods. With that permission, Leinth bundles up her guilt and gifts it to the woman standing over her. In her mind she recites all the reasons she should blame Handler, not herself. It works. It helps. She feels lighter for it. Handler, conversely, is unchanged. Untainted. She's not like Leinth. She can swallow all that guilt and culpability effortlessly. There's too much of Her. It can't leave a trace.

Leinth is just grateful, in a sad, pathetic way, that Handler isn't throwing it back in her face. That would be the perfect way to twist the knife. There's no way Leinth could handle it. She'd break. She'd shatter. Leinth doesn't know the meaning of this kindness, but she's still grateful for it.

She feels, unfathomably, at peace.

And she feels like she could stay that way forever, but for one thing: Sartha. Sartha is still there, still next to her, drawing weak, shuddery breaths that remind Leinth of her presence. Sartha seems contented, in a way. Leinth figures she got the oblivion she was craving. But now Leinth can't even stand to turn her face in her direction. It makes everything too raw and it makes her remember; remember that ugly, false reality, the one she's trying to push away.

The one where she's guilty.

"Can you..." Leinth begins quietly. She's hoping Handler's mysterious kindness will stretch just a little further. "Can you get her out of here?"

"Oh?" Handler's still stroking her cheek. "Are you done with her?"

Leinth whimpers. She wishes She wouldn't put it like that, but she can hardly hold it against Her. And she desperately needs Sartha gone so she can begin to regroup. "Y-yes. I just... I can't..."

Handler interrupts her with a disapproving, tongue-clicking noise. To Leinth, it's as loud as thunder.

"No, that's no good," Handler says, in a ghoulishly affectionate way. "That's guilt talking, isn't it? Don't listen to that feeling, Leinth."

"O-OK," Leinth says sheepishly. She feels stupid now that Handler's lecturing her. What else can she say but 'OK'? Her head is still splitting in two. She can't think. Still can't think.

"Look at her," Handler instructs firmly.

Leinth whimpers again. "No, no, I-"

Her head jolts and everything flashes white, and she realizes Handler has slapped her. Tears well up in her eyes. Stupid. It wasn't even hard. Certainly not as hard as she hit Sartha. Just a shock, to get her attention and stop her rambling. But for Handler to lay a hand on her like that...

"Look at her," Handler repeats. She touches Leinth again, guiding her. Leinth doesn't resist. She's puppy-weak. She looks at Sartha

Really looks. She has to, because that's what Handler is telling her. It's not easy. Sartha is a fucking mess. If she was a hero twenty minutes ago, she isn't now. Her clothes are ruined. She's bleeding from at least three places. She's drenched in both her own sweat and Leinth's, and the expression on her face is something truly inhuman, a fucked-stupid look of gratified, delirious masochism. It hurts to think that Leinth put it there, and it hurts just as much seeing how Leinth's cum is spilling out from between her legs to stain the bunk.

This is the ruin of a hero.

"Look," Handler urges. "Isn't she pathetic?"

Her words pull at the string of Leinth's heart. They make her twitch. Yes, Sartha is pathetic. There's no use in denying it now. But the guilt is roaring back and forces a choked whimper from Leinth's throat.

"It's OK," Handler soothes. "You didn't do anything wrong, Leinth."

The head-splitting pain is worse than ever. Unfathomably bad. Leinth has felt her own mech being split open while she's inside and that's the only thing she can think of that comes close. "B-but... I... to her..."

"She wanted it," Handler reminds her. "She asked for it."

Leinth shakes her head violently as the ache grows. "No. No, no, no, no, no, no."

“Yes.” Handler sounds so firm. So sure. How is it so easy for Her? “She’s a traitor, Leinth. Remember that. She betrayed you.”

Her words aren’t helping, however kindly they’re meant. If anything, they’re making it worse. It’s like Leinth is seeing double. There are two versions of Sartha in her head. One a saint, a hero, faultless, suffering for her struggle until Leinth ravaged her and left her like this. The other a traitor, a deceiver, someone who pretended she could bear the weight of the world until she gave up and decided to indulge in whatever sick fetish Handler satisfies.

It doesn’t make sense. Sartha can’t be both. And Leinth can’t hold onto both versions at once. It’s too much.

“She tricked you,” Handler says. “All of you. She pretended to be more than just a woman. She let you believe in her, and hated you for it. And now she’s making you feel guilty, too. All for giving her what she wants.”

“Please stop,” Leinth gasps. She’s about to pass out from the pain. “Make it stop. Please.”

“You didn’t do anything wrong,” Handler reiterates. “Say it for me.”

“I d-didn’t do anything wrong,” Leinth repeats. She’d do or say anything now, if it helped.

“That’s right.”

It did help, a little. Or maybe Handler's approval does. But only a little.

"B-but." Leinth can't stop herself saying it. She wants desperately to fall into Handler's abyss. The pain is that bad. But guilt is still her ankle. "I d-didn't have to... that's not me, I... even she doesn't deserve..."

"Yes, I see," Handler says. She seems to understand perfectly. "Leinth, listen to me: whatever you did wrong, I forgive you."

"You..."

Leinth looks back to Her. Handler's eyes are still the sky. Cold. Pure. Free of both compassion and accusation. As always, they make Handler's words ring true. Leinth hadn't even thought about forgiveness. She hadn't imagined anyone could award her forgiveness. But when Handler promises it, she believes.

She believes so much she doesn't stop to ask why Handler's forgiveness would matter, or what she's being forgiven for if she did nothing wrong.

And Leinth feels it. Absolution.

She implodes from it. Leinth crumples over and inward, wracked by dry, silent sobs of sheer relief. The pain is gone. It's like it was never there. She's free. Before she can stop herself she finds she's clasping Handler's hand. It was on her cheek but she brings it to her lips, kissing, praying. This is more unburdened than she'd ever

dared hope to feel.

How can Handler do this? How does She have this power? It's like She's the first real person Leinth has ever met - and for once, she's simply grateful to have met Her.

"Good," Handler pronounces. She sees the change in Leinth. And She's pleased, which is another wonderful gift. Handler glances at Sartha. "Wake up," She says. "Come along, Sartha."

Sartha is trapped in some kind of daze, but she obeys without hesitation and rises to her feet as if oblivious to her bruised, cum-drenched state. She looks wretched - Leinth can say that to herself now, she learns, without guilt - but when she starts following Handler out of the cell, Leinth is almost jealous.

It would be a blessing to get to follow Her around. To spend a little longer in Her presence. Especially since Leinth is so very afraid that as soon as She leaves, all that fearful doubt is going to come right back. Handler might be the enemy, but Leinth's inner voices hurt worse.

Handler, as always, knows what's in her soul. "Don't worry, Leinth," She says over Her shoulder as She departs. "You're doing very well. I will be with you again soon."

Leinth just nods. She can hold that praise tight to her chest. It'll keep her warm.

Once Handler leaves, the cell door closes and locks. Leinth is alone again. The loneliness is more uncomfortable than ever. Her

head is clouded over, but she's starting to realize that's not so bad. It'll keep her from dwelling on the things that don't fit right.

There's something she can't help dwelling on, though. Something unsaid between her and Handler. The question Handler doesn't need to ask, because She always asks.

Who are you?

Leinth still doesn't have an answer for Her. But she's closer, perhaps. Leinth stands up and walks to the mirror. As she peers into it, searching for clarity, it happens again. That strange double vision. Like the whole world is fracturing. But not around Sartha, this time. Around Leinth.

First, Leinth sees herself. Or what she's always taken to be herself. A woman who still looks a little like a pilot. A rebel. The person she's always been, and who can she live with being.

But then she sees something else too. Something deeper. Truer. Something who is barely a person at all. Something feral. It's whatever came out of her when she was on top of Sartha, hitting and fucking and growling. It must have always been there, in the corner of her eye. Leinth just couldn't see it before because she was too afraid. The thing she sees is abominable. Unforgivable - except for Handler. She can forgive it. Only Her.

It's a hound. A hound of Leinth's very own.

PART THREE

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

Except 'good' isn't the right word at all. Leinth isn't sure what would be. She doesn't know how to describe the knife-edge, stomach-churning, nauseous thrill she feels as she sits in *Genetor's* cockpit. It's a superposition of guilt and vindication, threatening, at any moment, to crystallize into either one, and Leinth is constantly, achingly aware of just how narrow the tightrope she walks is. She doesn't know the name for a feeling like that. She just knows that she needs it. Leinth is long past mere addiction. This feeling, as much as blood, is what flows through her veins. It keeps her alive. That was a hard lesson to learn, but she's learnt it well. She won't forget.

In exchange, there are so many other things she's had to unlearn. Her whole life. Leinth often thinks it's all gone, but somehow, each day, there's more to lose. More to change. More to reframe and reinterpret. She has two lives now, but one is true, while the other is merely real. It's confusing. Leinth can barely carry all that weight. Fortunately, Handler is always there to help.

Leinth trusts Her, of course. How could she not?

She even gave *Genetor* back to her. *Genetor*, repaired and refitted

with Imperial tech. It stands ever so slightly taller and darker and prouder than before, and Leinth can pilot it, even if she doesn't deserve to. Since she's unworthy, she pays special care as she descends the steep slope into the Corlu Valley. Leinth doesn't deserve any more second chances, not from anybody. A mech could easily lose footing on the loose shale and go crashing into the mountainside, but even a walking fortress like *Genetor* can be delicate in the right hands. Hell, with a pilot like Leinth, it can even be stealthy.

As the dawn just begins to break, the Corlu Valley is filled with rad-saturated fog. Looking down into it from the surrounding peaks, what you see is more like a lake than a valley. It feels that way, too, when you're walking through it, and the visibility out of the viewports is almost non-existent. This dirty shit even plays havoc with sensors. Leinth finds herself jumping at shadows sometimes as the fog shifts and billows in unnatural formations. Fog isn't supposed to move like that. It just blows gently with the wind as it settles down amongst the mountains.

Problem is, mechs like *Genetor* are mountains that move. And it's not the only one down here.

Leinth is out hunting. They have intel and they can't make too much noise on the way in, so there's no one at her side. None of those unnervingly uniform, blackclad, Imperial *Doru* mechs Leinth has been getting used to fighting with. It's a solo mission... almost. And she's closing in on the designated position. If their intel is right, she's only a mile or so away from them.

The enemy. The... who? Leinth frowns. She tries not to think

about that part. Handler told her she doesn't have to. But it still doesn't sit quite right. She can't help the stray worries that fog her head and turn her thoughts into a messy swarm of doubts. Handler says that's OK too. She says Leinth just isn't quite finished yet. She's so kind.

Leinth reaches up and scratches a little at her muzzle.

"I'm in position," she croaks into her radio as she brings *Genetor* to a halt and opens up a channel. "No contact."

Good. Hold tight.

Leinth sits bolt upright, on the edge of her seat. Just those three words have her at attention, electrified - and all because it's Her. Her voice. The voice of Leinth's God. So she has to listen, every part of her, even the doubts and fears and rebellious instincts. Like the feeling of being within *Genetor*, it's not all good. Leinth feels as much hate for Handler as she does love - but that's not such a contradiction anymore. You can hate God and you can love God. It doesn't change anything. Not what She is. Not what Leinth is.

Handler will love her all the same.

Leinth hates that Her voice reminds Leinth what she is. A sinner. An animal. That knowledge boils within her breast. Leinth feels herself stir and get hard. And she's salivating so bad she's actually drooling a little. All conditioned reflexes. It's humiliating. It makes her angry. But she loves that even over the radio, Handler's voice promises release. The gift only She can give.

But that's for later. For now, Leinth needs to focus on the mission. And that means she needs to ask about her. The other one.

"Is she ready?" Leinth has to choke out the pronoun. The feelings that thinking about her summons are like bile.

Not yet. Still on the approach.

Leinth is first. She grins behind her muzzle. A small victory, but it still counts. They all count.

In this case, though, winning means sitting and waiting. Leinth doesn't care for that. It's not safe for her. Waiting means thinking. Thinking means temptation. If Leinth sits and waits for too long, she'll find herself tempted to reach for something forbidden: her freedom.

Leinth has seen every inch of the rebuilt *Genetor*, inside and out, which is why she knows there's no contingency plan. No hidden lockout or remote override. There is absolutely nothing to stop Leinth from marching her mech down into the valley, alerting the... enemy, switching sides, and repaying against Handler every little bit of the pain and torture Leinth has herself suffered.

She squirms. Just the thought is blasphemous. She'll need to be punished later. More drool.

Only, what would happen if she did betray Handler? Most likely, the enemy would never trust her. She's far too compromised. Oh, they'd make use of her intel as best they could - but then they'd lock her up for the rest of her days. Or worse, they'd execute her.

Leinth can't handle the thought of that. It would be too kind.

And what if they believed her? Trusted her? Gave her a second chance? Then, things could be just like before - just like they had been before she fell, in the part of her life Leinth barely remembers. She could pilot *Genetor* on that side again. Fight the good fight once more. She'd be a hero again. A greater hero than ever, surely. The one who came back. The one who redeemed herself, and gave them all of Handler's secrets. Before long, they'd have her face on the recruitment posters instead of Sartha's.

And through it all, no matter what, they'd never know who she really is. They'd never know the weight of what she's done, and the penance it demands. They'd never be able to forgive her.

No. Only Handler can do that. Leinth's course is set.

She squeezes *Genetor*'s controls so tight her knuckles ache as she daydreams these useless, stillborn dreams.

Thanks to that, Leinth is ready to move at the first sound of artillery. An instant after the dull roar echoes off the mountain walls, the fog before *Genetor* parts in a spiral as the shell barrels toward her. Leinth reacts in time - but not to dodge. *Genetor* isn't built that way. It's built to take the hits. Leinth just raises an arm and lets the mass deflectors built into the mech's structure absorb all the force and fire of the shell's explosion.

Genetor shudders violently for a moment, but quickly stabilizes as the attitude control systems kick in. Within the cockpit, Leinth

grins. Old instincts are coming to life. She knows exactly what to do. She knows she'll win - and if she doesn't, it'll be a mercy.

It's then that Leinth feels her footing beginning to slip underneath her. Her grin fades. She needs to focus. The earth beneath Leinth's feet is beginning to collapse, and the only way for a mech as huge and unwieldy as *Genetor* not to go down is to let momentum keep it upright. That means heading in only one direction. Forward. Down.

Towards them.

Leinth brings her weapons to bear and snarls behind her muzzle. Where is she, damn it? This was supposed to be an ambush. There's no telling how the enemy spotted her. Maybe Leinth fucked up. Maybe the plan was bad. Maybe it was just an unlucky patrol or sensor sweep.

Doesn't matter now. Leinth is fighting for her life.

"I'm made," Leinth hisses into the radio. "Engaging prey. Tell her to hurry the fuck up."

She's close. Again, Handler's voice is magic. It turns Leinth into frozen steel. She regrets the instinctive profanity. *If you need her, that is.*

Leinth growls something fierce. Handler makes it sound like a perfectly neutral comment, but Leinth recognizes when her pride is being stoked. Doesn't make it any less effective. But she doesn't talk back, not to Handler.

Four shapes emerge from the fog as Leinth descends the valley's slopes. An elite team. They're who Leinth is supposed to be hunting. But four against one, without the advantage of surprise - those are long odds.

As *Genetor* crashes to a halt on level ground, two of them start to climb the slopes around Leinth. Before they can complete the flank, she picks one of the others, pushes *Genetor's* motive plant into the red, and charges.

It's funny. Leinth never used to fight like this. She was calmer. More methodical. That time, in the ruins, against *Ancyor*, she wondered how it was possible to make a machine seem so bestial. But now she has it too. That animal edge. She's never been more dangerous behind the controls.

And *Genetor* is well-suited for it. It's faster than people think - especially now. A few long, lurching steps is all it takes to close the gap. At the last possible moment, Leinth opens up with *Genetor's* cannons and missile pods. She hopes she's guessing the float time right. Her life depends on it.

The cannon shots go wide, unsurprisingly. That just leaves CQ. Leinth draws her chain hawk. Her opponent does the same with their saber. Here it is.

You! the other pilot howls over an unscreened channel, as their blades make contact and the whole valley seems to shake with clashing iron. *Traitor!*

Leinth flinches. She can't help it. They always say that, and it always gets to her. She tries not to listen. Her axe swings are slow, relatively, but each one could take out a building. Her opponent needs to respect that, and does. They retreat. Leinth keeps moving forward. Down. Away from the rest of the squad.

How'd they get to you, Leinth? There's bitter laughter, distorted by static. *Can't have paid you too fucking much if you're still piloting.*

That makes Leinth whine. It's not about money. Was never about money. She longs to tell them. They deserve, at least, to know that she was never really one of them. She was a poison pill, forcing herself down their throats. She ruined one hero. She'd do the same to them all, in time. Why don't they get it? It's just better this way.

C'mon, how? The other pilot demands, as they riposte, taking a chunk out of *Genetor's* shoulder. At least the machinery there is redundant - mostly. *Don't tell me you're a true believer. Not you.*

Leinth isn't; that bothers her. What does she believe in? It's strange how it hasn't occurred to her in a very long time that there's more at stake here than the psychodrama of her own soul. There's a war going on out there, but that's been out of view. Beyond what she deserves, why would she be fighting on this side? She doesn't want them to win, does she?

They must have some sweet fucking perks, over there, Leinth's opponent spits. *That's my bet. Better girls. Nicer quarters. Hot meals. Better than squatting in holes like a rebel rat. Am I right?*

Rebels. Not just enemies. Rebels. That's who Leinth is fighting

against. The cause she used to be part of. She's still moving forward. Down. Chain hawk still swinging in *Genetor's* titanic hand. But her stomach feels like it's being turned upside down.

For the first time in what feels like forever, it dawns on Leinth that she could just... not fight. She could take her hands off the controls, and let whatever happens happen. And why not? What would be so wrong with that? It seems nice, in a way. Peaceful. Maybe.

Leinth hesitates, and with that, she's fucked. Her opponent is no rookie. A single opening is all they need. They reverse momentum in the span of a heartbeat, and suddenly their saber is coming straight at *Genetor's* center of mass.

Then, the stars overhead fall out of the sky.

To her credit, Leinth nailed the float time. The distance too. When the missiles fall around her opponent like rain, they seem to come from nowhere. Part of that's the projectile size. They're small chaff rockets, meant for active defense. Against a mech, they won't do more than disorient; against a good pilot, not even that. The rebel Leinth's fighting doesn't even flinch. They're determined to make their strike hit home.

But Leinth doesn't need them to flinch. She just needs to deploy *Genetor's* stabilizer pylons for a moment while the mountainside collapses all around them.

From the intel, Leinth knows this terrain is just as foreign to the rebel team as it is to her, and Leinth has learned quickly how

perilous it can be. When the shale splinters and shatters beneath her opponent, they're not ready for it. They topple forward, and now, under gravity, their own mech's bulk is their enemy.

The rebel crashes hard, right on their front. Mechs like these don't get up easy, especially not on this kind of terrain, but they start scrambling for a footing immediately. Leinth's piloting instincts take hold again. She retracts her stabilizing pylons, walks forward, and stamps on the rebel mech's leg.

Genetor is a fortress. Under its immense weight, the leg simply splits in two. The stump is a gory ruin of sparking wires and leaking hydraulic fluid. No getting up now.

But down doesn't mean out. A fallen mech still has weapons. It's still dangerous. That's why Leinth needs to finish off her prey before the others are in position. She raises her axe over her head, ready to deliver the coup de grâce.

She hesitates again.

Why? Why do this? To win Handler's blessing? To earn Her forgiveness? Perhaps, but what sense does it make to commit yet another sin for that cause? Doesn't she already have enough on her ledger? Leinth knows, of course, that you need to sink in order to rise. If she won't make herself do terrible things, there's nothing to forgive - and forgiveness is everything. But... is that all her life will be? Misdeed after misdeed, all at Her command; a great hamster wheel of karma that she's left running until she's spent. Why do that? What's the point?

For a single moment, Leinth achieves clarity. She sees that the control is the point. Nothing more. Whatever sick love Handler has for her is predicated on that. It's fake. This is an unending purgatory; an Escher painting hell that Handler has crafted out of Leinth's traumatized psyche. She can only be free if she stops. Now.

But then she comes. Sartha.

Ancyor falls from the fog overhead like a descending comet. Sartha must have leapt from some precipice a hundred feet above. The impact pulverizes the treacherous rock beneath *Genetor*'s feet, throwing her wildly off-balance and sending a spray of shattered pebbles in all directions.

Any pilot would lose control after a crash landing like that. Probably pass out from the shock, too. But somehow, Sartha Thrace doesn't. She lands like the side of the mountain is nothing more than a springboard, and rebounds straight toward Leinth's fallen foe. *Ancyor*'s engines howl as it extends its claws and buries them, all at once, into the mech's cockpit. Then it rips.

The mech that was lunging at Leinth just seconds earlier comes apart in a wet shower of reactor coolant and superheated oil.

Even for a pilot of Leinth's experience, it's one hell of a fucking spectacle. Enough to stun her out of her previous train of thought. Before that moment of clarity slips away from her, though, she's filled with a terrible sorrow, and gripped with the urge to train her weapons on *Ancyor*. To set Sartha free the only way she still can.

Then Sartha says something that sweeps all of that away.

One, she counts over the radio, in a low, smug growl that could have been either one of them.

Suddenly, all that Leinth felt before is gone, replaced with a vicious, petty jealousy. That was her prey. Her kill. Hers. Leinth took her down. It should be her tally.

But... does Handler know that?

"That was mine!" Leinth insists furiously. All of that stuff about control and trauma, it's all forgotten. She needs the kill credit. She needs Handler to see what she's done.

You were slow, Sartha tells her. It must be Sartha, Leinth decides. Still on the leash. She sounds just a hair too much like her old self. Like a hero lecturing a rookie, despite the absurd unworthiness of the argument

"I put her down," Leinth snarls, "while you were blundering around in the fog!"

As they argue, they bring their mechs about to face their pursuers. The pendulum has already swung. Three against two now. And there'll be no retreating, not now the rebels have lost one of their own.

I was following the plan, Sartha retorts. *But you got spotted. I had to improvise.*

The only reply Leinth has for her is a vicious growl that leaves loops of spittle drooling from the bars of her muzzle. Her head is getting dangerously fuzzy. Being around Sartha always does that to her. Once again, she can't quite figure out what she wants.

She wants to punish Sartha. She wants Sartha to punish her. She wants Handler to punish them both. She wants Handler to forgive her.

Leinth headbutts the side of her cockpit in self-destructive frustration. It's all mixed up. But... she has to be good. She has to be better. She knows that much. She has to win. Because what's the point, if Handler won't smile at her and mess her hair and tell her she's done well?

That's all Leinth lives for.

Why did she hesitate? Why did she fucking hesitate? Why does this all have to be so confusing?

Leinth? Are you alright?

Handler's voice brings as much shame as comfort this time. She must have noticed the way Leinth is slipping. Hot tears well up in Leinth's eyes. After all this time, she still can't stop fucking up. It's pitiful. She doesn't deserve anything. Her vision is blurred and streaked as she tries to focus on the monitor in *Genetor's* cockpit. She can barely tell *Ancyor* and the rebels apart.

"I... I-I..." she chokes out. She can't hide it.

It's OK, Handler promises. Leinth sobs, because she knows it is. Handler never lies to her. *Do you want me to save you now?*

"Yes!" Leinth seizes on that like she's drowning. She's never needed that sweet salvation quite so bad. "Yes. Please. Please. Yesyesyes."

Mercifully, Handler doesn't drag it out. She's the kind of God that never lets you down.

Leinth. Sartha. Off The Leash.

Leinth feels her implosion happen in real-time. In that brief moment, she understands why it's always so hard. It's because there's nothing at the heart of her. Not anymore. Handler stuck her fingers in her head and scooped it all out. Now she'll always be empty. She should hate Handler for it, but she loves Her instead because Handler is the only way she'll ever feel full again.

Full of love. Full of purpose. Full of pride. Leinth Artimis may have ceased to be a real person, but there's something left in the ruins of her personhood. Something animal and angry and oh-so very loyal to the master that holds her leash. In her last moments, the tears in Leinth's eyes become joyful. It's such a relief to let go of it all, and be the beast instead.

Leinth Artimis goes away, and Hound wakes up.

Leinth-Hound is young and immature, to be sure, but that just means she's filled with an untested pup's eagerness. Briefly, she regards the carcass of her prey and snarls at her packmate for

stealing the prize of the kill. It's not fair, but there's no time to settle that now. Sartha-Hound is still one of hers. That's what a pack is. And those rebels? They're the other side. They're for hunting.

The nascent Leinth-Hound guns *Genetor*'s motive plant in a way she'd never normally dare, right to its screaming limit. Explosive bolts light up like fireworks all over, and armor plates go flying into the fog, exposing emergency vents, specially designed and already white-hot. Leinth-Hound isn't worried. She knows this iron body as well as she does her own. She knows it can take it.

Now, when *Genetor* moves forward, it's not a fortress. It's a thunderbolt. They don't see it coming. But Sartha-Hound does; *Ancyor* is right at her side, moving in preternatural synchronicity. In moments like these, they don't need to talk or plan. They're animals. Their pack instinct speaks louder than words ever could. They are Handler's perfect weapons, and they won't let her down.

As fast as *Genetor* is now, *Ancyor* is faster still. Sartha-Hound uses the speed well, blitzing around a flank and picking the first target. By the time Leinth-Hound is upon them, there's nowhere to go. Hammer and anvil. Unstoppable. The killing begins not long after.

Three against two. It was never going to be close.

* * *

Dismounting *Genetor* after it lumbers back into its hangar berth feels like emerging from a deep, timeless sleep. Not a restful one, though. Leinth's heart quickens anxiously as she surveys the mess

that's been made of her pride and joy. Stripped paint, ashen blast-scars, jagged wounds in the armor, and... could that be blood?

Leinth hopes not, but the flashes she remembers of the battle make her tremble. She tries not to think about it. Instead, she does exactly what she's been told, and looks for Her.

The hangar is a vast space, a chasm-like monument to the war machines that demand such excessive facilities. Looking up and trying to focus on the ceiling, so far above, makes Leinth's eyes ache. In here, a person is no more than an ant and, unhelpfully, the hangar is swarming with them - mechanics, engineers, pilots from other teams. It looks like another cohort is returning to base at the same time as Leinth and Sartha. A small army is being disgorged into the hangar in order to see to refueling, repairing, rearming. It's hard to pick out just one person amongst all that.

But Leinth's ears soon prick up at the distinctive sound of those heavy boots clacking against the concrete.

As Handler approaches, Sartha leaps from cockpit of her *Ancyor* and lands just next to Leinth. The two mechs share a berth, just a little way apart from the others. A healthy separation. Leinth flashes Sartha a resentful look. She remembers enough to know that Sartha screwed her over. This isn't the time or place to hash that out, though. Not in front of Handler. Leinth will just have to hope that She has the wisdom to see past it.

Leinth reaches up and adjusts her muzzle ever so slightly. She needs to be perfect in Her eyes.

Handler looks perfect, as always. There are no wrinkles in Her coat or blemishes on Her leathers. Her boots are perfectly clean, despite the oil and metal powder all over the ground. Every last long, pale hair on Her head is immaculate. Leinth remembers how, at first, she wondered how it was possible for a person to be so inhumanly composed. It seemed impossible. Miraculous.

Now she knows a little more. She knows that both she and Sartha labor for hours every night, polishing boots and tending to leather. Sometimes She even permits them to brush Her hair. But the weary knowledge of the service involved doesn't make it any less miraculous. Gods have their followers. It's just the way of things.

"Sartha," Handler says as She approaches, looking between them. Assessing them. "Leinth. You did well. I'm pleased."

Leinth closes her eyes and just lets that wash over her. For a moment, it cleanses her of all the shame of hesitation and all the frustration of being bested. All the guilt, too, which is most important thing of all. Leinth tries her very best to stretch that moment out into an eternity, counting all her heartbeats and the spaces in between. She knows, now, again, that she did the right thing. This is right where she's supposed to be. No one but Handler could ever make her feel like this.

She's smiling. Her face hurts from it. Leinth doesn't care how stupid her dumb grin looks. Handler's praise is worth more than any dignity. It helps to know that, standing right beside her, Sartha is smiling the very same smile. She doesn't even mind the crowd that's gathering around the three of them - at a respectful distance, of course. Pilots and mechanics alike, all smirking. They seem poised.

Eager.

“Especially you, Leinth,” Handler says, and Leinth can barely believe her luck. Nothing has ever felt sweeter in her ears. There are tears in her eyes. “This is the first time I’ve needed to send you so far away from me. But you didn’t lose sight of what matters. You’re becoming a wonderful hound.”

“T-thank you, sir,” Leinth bleats in a small, girlish voice. She has to choke down on a sob. It’s all she’s ever wanted, even if she never knew it.

And now there’s a delicious little edge to the joy; she can hear a wounded, envious little rumble coming from Sartha’s throat. Perfect.

Before it’s ruined.

“Now,” Handler says expectantly to Leinth. “What’s your tally this time?”

Leinth’s blood runs cold. She was hoping that, on an unusual mission like this, Handler’s normal rules wouldn’t apply. She was wrong. She’ll have to face the consequences.

For just a brief moment, Leinth considers lying. Claiming the one Sartha stole out from under her. But that’s the kind of sin even she doesn’t get to commit, and so the ugly, bitter truth forces its way out of Leinth’s trembling lips.

“One.”

Just one, cored through with a solid round from *Genetor* at damn near point-blank range. A hell of a shot for most pilots, given that cannon’s heft and recoil. But for Leinth, it changes nothing. One is one. It’s not enough.

“I see,” Handler replies evenly. “And you, Sartha?”

“Three.” Sartha can say it proudly, with her chest puffed out. She’s won.

Leinth hates her for that. Truly hates her. For the pride she must feel, and the reward she’ll receive. It’s mutual, she knows. Once, Sartha was Handler’s only hound, and then the reward was always hers. Now it’s split, decided each time by competition. But Sartha usually wins, and Leinth overflows with resentment for her. Only Handler’s presence keeps the urge to lunge at her suppressed.

Then, moments later, the backlash. The cold flush of shame that howls at her for daring to feel even one little bit of anger or hate for Sartha Thrace. Did Leinth forget? Did she lose sight of the reason they’re here? Leinth made Sartha this way. It’s her fault - all her fault. She doesn’t deserve to hate.

But she does anyway. Once again, Leinth is reminded of just how low and vile she is. The abasement feels good, in a twisted kind of way. It’s freeing. There are no pretenses here. But it makes Leinth itch too. She needs Hander. She needs those magic words.

“I see,” Handler says again. “You know what that means, don’t

you? Sartha has won.”

Leinth nods her head, ever so slightly. There’s no sense in denying it. No sense in being angry at Handler. She speaks with judgment’s impartial voice. That doesn’t mean Leinth needs to enjoy what happens next, of course.

“Sartha.” Handler beckons the other hound forward. “It’s time for your prize. Sit.”

Sartha takes one overeager step forward and then drops like a rock. She kneels like it’s her rightful place. She bends forward, pressing close to Handler, head so low her muzzle is almost scraping along the ground.

“Good hound.” Handler rests her hand on Sartha’s head and starts to pet. There’s a thin smile on her face - cruel, yes, but Leinth doesn’t mind, when she’s smiling at her. God can be cruel. “Good hound.”

Even from behind, Leinth can hear the ecstatic little whimper that erupts from Sartha. She’s in heaven. Who wouldn’t be?

All Leinth can do is watch, as every kind of bitterness curdles in her gut. As every cell in her body yearns to trade places. All those other pilots and mechanics are watching too. Laughing.

“Would you like your treat?” Handler asks Sartha.

“Y-yes, sir.” Sartha’s voice is trembling from the sheer thrill of

the moment. She was a hero, once. It's hard to believe that now. "Yes, sir. Please. P-please."

Her eyes are fixed on a single spot. It's the same place Leinth would be looking, if their positions were reversed.

Handler's boots.

"Oh, this?" Handler makes a point of extending one foot forward. Her smile widens. "You want this?"

Sartha nods rapidly. She's an overexcited child. "Yes. Yyyyes. Sir."

Slurring her words. It's undeniably pathetic. The entire watching crowd clearly thinks so. But yes, a hero, once. Until Leinth.

"Very well," Handler says, with benevolent gravitas. "Good hounds get rewards, and you've been good. Sartha, *Off The Leash*."

The words aren't for Leinth so they don't draw her under their power, but she still trembles at their force. Watching them work their way through Sartha is a terrible thing. For a moment she goes limp and sags, like she's completely crumbling, and what comes alive within her after a mere instant has an unmistakably different presence; she's hunched, hackles up, heaving with each panted breath as her tongue lolls, dog-like, out of her mouth. The new presence is dangerous, but not right now. She's too caught up in adoration of her master.

It's Hound. Sartha's Hound.

“Good,” Handler says softly. She glanced down at Her extended boot. “Now go.”

Sartha-Hound shuffles forward in a frenzy, needy for her reward. As quickly as she can manage, she wraps around Handler’s leg, presses herself against Her boot, and starts to grind. The first sound out of her throat, loud even in the hangar, is a gratified moan so wild and pure it makes even the watching crowd of Imperials blush. It’s clear that she’s been yearning for this, and the yearning has made it all the sweeter.

This - humping the boot of the woman who broke her - is Sartha Thrace’s highest pleasure.

It’s Leinth’s too, of course. But she’s denied it. She didn’t win. Now, as Handler turns Her attention to Leinth, she braces herself.

It’s not that Handler wants to hurt her, of course. It’s just that Leinth needs to understand that she can do better.

Take your medicine, Leinth.

“You know what to do, Leinth.” Handler’s small smile fortifies her. “They’re waiting for you. Off you go.”

“Yes, sir.”

Leinth nods and turns, and her cheeks fill with the color of shame as she heads toward the waiting crowd. Their eyes are all lurid

and full of humor. Apparently, they used to be afraid of Handler and Her hounds. They still fear Handler, and they still hate Leinth and Sartha, but something happened, and the pair of hounds are entirely declawed in their eyes. The terms of the contest help with that. It ensures steady familiarization. They're well-used to Leinth by now, after all her defeats, but that doesn't make it any less of a spectacle when Leinth begins to strip.

Unlike Sartha, Leinth has always favored a standard-issue, green piloting jumpsuit, although she can't resist keeping it unzipped to the waist and tied loosely around her hips. Gets too damn hot in the cockpit otherwise. But now, as around two dozen Imperials watch and leer, she tugs it down her legs and steps out of it after first kicking away her boots.

Someone wolf-whistles.

Beneath that, Leinth always wears a synthetic bodyskin that clings tight to her form, black and sleek. It's not modest, but that's what the jumpsuit's for, and it helps monitor her vitals and keeps her from scraping her skin against the cockpit instruments when *Genetor* takes a big hit. It unfastens from the back of her neck, and there's no way to take it off in front of people that doesn't end up looking like a strip show. Leinth just tries to make it quick, as she unzips it down to her ass and peels it away from her physique.

She has no love for these people. She acknowledges that they're her comrades now, but only because of Handler. Leinth is just doing this because it's what She wants.

Once the bodyskin is tossed aside, Leinth is left in nothing but

her underwear. Those go quickly, and then she's completely naked. She tries to hide herself; Handler doesn't care. It doesn't help. Trying to cover her body with her hands just makes Leinth feel young and small and like it's her first time in the girls' locker room again.

It doesn't help that the hangar is damn cold.

Hopefully, it'll be over quick.

"Go ahead," Handler calls out. Her voice is mixed with the sounds Sartha-Hound makes as she humps Her boot. She's practically dripping through her pants now. "She's all yours."

This time, She isn't talking to Leinth. She's talking to the crowd.

They all salute their thanks to Handler before surging forward toward Leinth; a seething mass of dirty, petty, horny pilots and mechanics. Within moments, they're all around her, pressing in, each one of them desperate for their chance to grab, grope, touch, slap. Whatever trepidation they once had regarding Sartha is plainly long gone. To them, Leinth is just meat. They have seen with her own eyes that she's no longer the rebel ace whose face she shares.

But that doesn't mean they can't take out their resentments on her.

"Rebel bitch!" Leinth hears, as she's pushed this way and that by the crowd crush. "Not such a fucking hero now, huh? Glad you know your fucking place."

She hears it from all around her; worse, too, all kinds of insults and terms of abuse, in voices that are full of nothing but mockery and contempt. It's not long before it's all just an overwhelming, incoherent din - but somehow, still, Handler's voice cuts through it all, clear and strong. And as ever, her words deliver sweet mercy.

"Leinth. *Off The Leash.*"

Now, perhaps more than ever, Leinth welcomes the oblivion. Ego death is salvation. With each part of her that falls away, the sheer humiliation of what's happening to her burns just a little less. Leinth yearns to be less. To be nothing at all, maybe, so that nothing hurts, but even if that's too far, she knows that diminishing will set her free. As quickly as the trigger word works, she can still feel it coming for just a heartbeat; the threshold of transformation. It's like an orgasm. She closes her eyes and lets it take her.

Leinth Aritimis goes away, and Hound wakes up.

It's not like Hound enjoys what's happening. At least, not at first. Waking up is always a little confusing, and the crowd of people accosting Hound make no concessions to her confusion. Before she can get her bearings, Hound finds herself forced to her knees as her legs are swept away. She snaps and growls her complaints at the women closest to her, but they just laugh. It's an empty threat, and they know it. She can't bite, and not just because of the muzzle. It's because Handler wouldn't like that.

"Dumb mutt," someone jeers. Must be someone who's been around long enough to know what's what. Hound whines.

“Come here, dog.”

Hound can barely see amongst all the bodies pressing in on her from all sides, but a moment later, as she turns her head cluelessly from side to side, she feels someone grab hold of her muzzle and pull her towards them. Then, suddenly, there’s a boot between her legs, forcing her thighs apart, so rough it’s all but kicking her as it grinds against her cock.

Hound whines again. People laugh. “This is what you want, right?” someone jeers. “Sick fuck.”

It’s not. Not even close. This is just a mockery of the reward Sartha-Hound is receiving. Leinth-Hound can’t hear her cries of pleasure over the din of the mob, but she can certainly imagine. She knows how good it feels. Not like this at all. Handler is special.

Even Her boot.

But, entirely against her wishes, Hound’s body is beginning to respond to this rough treatment. Anger surges within her as she notices it: the rising heat that tempts her hips to buck and threatens to turn her whines into something like moans. It’s irresistible. Handler likes her with a hair trigger. Hounds need to be keen. She can’t help but feel good.

She does hate it, though. Hates it bitterly. Hound has little concept of humiliation or dignity, but she does have the instinct to fight, claw, win, dominate. To lead the pack. This pleasure flies in the face of all that. Hound wants to lash out, but she can’t. She’s powerless. She has to submit.

And they know it. Worse, they notice.

“Bitch in heat,” someone sneers. Hound catches a glimpse as they bend down to squeeze and maul her tits. A female pilot. “God. You’re actually enjoying this.”

Hound whines again, but her voice betrays her. More laughter.

“Think all the rebels are like this?” asks another woman.

“Definitely,” replies yet another. “You can tell, they keep letting us fuck ‘em out there.”

Laughter from every direction.

“C’mon, already,” calls a different voice, terse and irritated. “I’ve been scrubbing out cockpits all day. I need some stress relief.”

The crowd around Hound heaves as someone pushes their way to the front. Only the wall of bodies around her keeps her from slumping to the ground. It’s unbelievably hot, and the smell of sweat and machine oil is inescapable.

“And get this stupid fucking thing off her face,” the mechanic spits. “I want to use that.”

Hound yelps in distress as she feels her muzzle being pulled away from her face. The leather strips, still bound tight, bite painfully around her head, but it’s more than that. The muzzle is

Handler's gift. She's not allowed to remove it. Her face is wrong without it. But the woman assaulting her doesn't care, and try as Hound might to lunge for her treasure, within moments it's borne aloft and away by the mob. Hound hears it clatter to the ground somewhere nearby.

There's no time to dwell on that agony. In just another moment, Hound feels a fist in her hair, gripping tight. In the next, she's being yanked forward, and her face is immediately pressed between a pair of strong, muscular thighs. The mechanic has shucked her clothes down to around her knees. Her intentions are clear.

"Lick, slut," she demands.

Hound doesn't want to, but she knows she's supposed to obey. Even a moment's hesitance might displease Handler. So, she buries her tongue into the mechanic's cunt and starts to lap with all the eagerness she can muster. Her reward is that the mechanic squeezes down on her even tighter and starts filling the air with smug, breathy grunts of pleasure. The others coo enviously, and the grabbing and groping intensifies. Everyone wants a piece.

This is what Hound is now. Stress relief. She's everyone's toy.

And inevitably, she's beginning to enjoy it. Hound's instincts cut both ways. Wanting to fight for dominance is one thing, but this treatment is making the pecking order nice and clear. A bitch like Hound can't help but accept it. Can't help but embrace her place at the very bottom. Besides, it's not like she doesn't enjoy eating pussy. Soon, Hound's cock is fully hard, and drooling all over the hangar floor.

A few people laugh at the display of submissive need. One woman reaches down and jerks Hound off a few times, lazily, making her howl with the pleasure of it.

Why not? It's just another toy.

It's not long before Hound feels herself grabbed, pulled back, away from the mechanic she was servicing. She can't tell if they got to finish or not. It doesn't matter. There's already something new in her face: a hand, this time, fingers, pressing down on her tongue, making her drool all over herself, daring her to bite. Someone grabs her wrist and makes Hound extend her arm until her hand ends up wrapped around a cock. She catches a glimpse; it's one of the female pilots who was mocking her earlier. Hound starts obediently jacking her off.

She's a prisoner to the energy of the crowd now. She is what they want her to be. And she won't be done until they're all satisfied.

Hound quickly becomes delirious. She's turned on and exhausted and there's too much going on around her to keep track of, so she stops trying. Her world becomes a seemingly never-ending kaleidoscope of bodies and flesh. Laughter and moaning. The hand retreats from her mouth, and something else is inserted. At first, Hound thinks it's a cock. Then she realizes it's a toy they want her to lube up with drool as they force it down her throat. At some point, her other hand is forced between a woman's thighs so she can ride her Hound's fingers. Her ass is red and bruised from all the people that keep slapping it. Her cock twitches violently every time it's touched, but nobody in the crowd wants to be the one who lets her

come.

Hound just accepts it. All of it. Right now, that's what her mouth is for. What her hands are for. What her body is for. She's a toy, and a spectacle. Most of the people who can't get close enough to touch her are masturbating at the sight of someone who used to be a rebel ace be so completely defiled. Amidst the havoc, Hound loses track of how many people she's eaten out or sucked off.

At some point, she becomes aware of something damp and sticky plastered down her front and across her chest, and realizes those female pilots have been coming all over her.

Hound welcomes it. Her animal moans are getting louder and more desperate with each passing moment. It feels good, and even the parts that don't are gratifying. This is her penance. Her personal harrowing. It's right. It's what she deserves, even if she yearns so very desperately to be in Sartha's place instead.

Can Handler see her? Does Handler know how good she's being? Is Handler pleased?

Suddenly, an unnatural hush descends over the crowd, little by little, washing in like the tide. People start pulling away from Hound, whispering urgently to one another. Hound lets out a little keening whine. She hasn't finished. She hasn't done her job yet.

Then she sees why everyone has gone cold on her. There's an officer on deck.

Not just an officer. The woman walking out into the hangar is the

commander of this entire facility: Phylax-General Athina Kynilandre. She cuts an unmistakable figure; on a base full of young pilots, her silver hair and timeworn face mark her out, and her dress uniform, with its medals and lapels, makes it clear that she is not a woman to be trifled with.

Nor is she a woman that people wish to see them gangbanging a brainwashed rebel pilot.

There's a lot of coughing and looking aside and surreptitious uniform-fixing as she withers the crowd with her disapproving glare. There are no words of reprimand, though. Not for them. General Kynilandre has eyes only for Handler. As she approaches Her, Sartha-Hound finally takes notice. She looks like she's about to growl a warning, before Handler stays her with a single gesture.

"Tell me," General Kynilandre demands of Handler, "is this the kind of conduct your practices encourage?"

Handler salutes politely. She is completely self-assured, even now. "It has its place. I've sanctioned their behavior. I ask you not to punish them."

"Hm." The general's face is a thin, stern line. It's plenty clear that there's only one person she'd like to punish. After a moment, she glances at Leinth. "I came here to receive your report. I'm to evaluate your... new approach."

"Of course." Handler takes this all completely in stride. She'd never let Her hounds down. "Asset Aritimis performed well in the field. I expect that her reconditioning will be complete soon, as Asset

Thrace's is. Everything is proceeding smoothly. I'm sure the results of their latest sorties speak for themselves."

"I'm not," General Kynilandre retorts. The distaste she holds for Handler is plain and palpable enough to raise Hound's hackles. "I've been reviewing cockpit recorder transcripts. I see clear evidence of a lack of unit cohesion between your two pets. Overcompetitiveness, resentment, petty jealousy - these are traits we actively discourage in pilots. This ought to concern you. Doesn't it?"

She means this to humble Her. Instead, Handler smiles wider than ever before. "No."

General Kynilandre raises a furious eyebrow. "No?"

"That's right." Handler nods.

"Explain yourself," the general demands. Handler's laconic comments are pissing her off.

Handler pauses for a moment. Considers.

"You know, they'd gladly kill me," Handler says. "My hounds, I mean. If they could."

The general's eyes widen. She seems faintly astonished by the confession. Pleased, though. She thinks it's something she can use.

"Not easily, of course," Handler muses. "They'd agonize and they'd hesitate and they'd sob. I'm not sure what they'd be able to do

afterward. They'd need the moment to be perfect. But if their hands were around my neck? Yes, I think they'd squeeze down with all their strength. They hate me, after all. Even Sartha."

Hound is violently horrified. She feels like she's going to throw up. She would never. Could never. She wants to scream her denial out loud, but Handler's words hold her under a strange spell.

"It's only natural," Handler continues. "They need to hate something. Everybody does. It's a fundamental drive. They can't hate the rebels. Not truly. That would unbalance everything. And think of all I've taken from them. Who would they hate but me?"

"You make a strong case for terminating your initiative," General Kynilandre rumbles. "Reliance on such an unstable element is unacceptable."

"That's individually," Handler notes. "Unstable? Yes, maybe. Sartha, I believe, is close to perfect. My finest. But even with her, I couldn't be completely certain." She turns her gaze to Leinth-Hound. "Until now."

"Get to the point."

Handler isn't to be rushed. Her genius deserves space. "Now that I have two of them, they don't need to hate me. They can hate each other instead."

"Absurd," the general sneers. "What kind of pilot team hates each other?"

“One you can trust,” is Handler’s answer. “Trust perfectly. They will never betray me. Never let me down. If they did, the other would be proven the better hound. And they can’t bear the thought of that.”

Now General Kynilandre goes quiet. She’s beginning to see.

“Repression is never completely successful,” Hander explains. “Better, then, to provide them with an outlet. Their animosity, petty as it may seem, allows them to sublimate their violent urges towards me. It was surprisingly easy to engineer. To Sartha, Leinth is someone who asked too much of her - and now, an interloper on our relationship. To Leinth, Sartha is someone who let her down and over whom she feels unfathomably guilty - and now, a rival who hoards my affection.”

Handler licks her lips. There’s something deeply unwholesome creeping into her voice. A kind of pride, in something nobody should be capable of taking pride in. A pleasure, too. Everyone listening can hear it. If it was anyone else, they’d accuse her of perversions, but Handler seems so far beyond that. She’s never touched Sartha or Leinth that way - unlike most of them. But all the same, it’s undeniable.

Handler enjoys her work. She enjoys it very much.

“Thanks to this dynamic, they strive like never before.” Hander isn’t just proud of herself. She’s proud of her hounds too. Maybe that’s even creepier. “You will have seen their piloting metrics, general? They tell the whole story. Sartha Thrace and Leinth Aritimis have never been better pilots than they are right now, in

hatred of each other.” Her smile is unnervingly bright. “And thanks to each other, they’re free to love me with all their hearts.”

“That’s...” General Kynilandre’s words die. She doesn’t know what it is. “How can you say that? They’re damned, broken wretches.”

“Do you think so?” Handler seems entertained by the general’s assessment. “I think they’re quite beautiful. If I do say so myself.”

General Kynilandre falls very quiet for a long moment. When she speaks again, her voice quakes with outrage - but everyone, even the lowest-ranking mechanics, recognizes her anger for what it is: impotent.

“This is no way to run a war,” she says quietly. “Using people like that. I don’t give a damn about the piloting metrics. I got my wings long before you were wearing that coat. We used to... It’s just wrong.”

She doesn’t give a damn about the piloting metrics. But others do, and they both know it. Handler is untouchable. There’s nothing more to be said.

“Will that be all, general?” Handler asks politely. She’s still smiling, though. “If you’d care for a hands-on demonstration of their eagerness, I’m sure Leinth would be more than willing-“

“Go fuck yourself,” General Kynilandre spits, before stalking back out of the hangar.

After she's gone and the door slides shut behind her, the assembled crowd of pilots, mechanics, and other staff collectively let out the breaths they've been holding. But not completely. No punishment is certainly a relief, but more than a few of them have been unnerved by Handler's words. It's spoiled the atmosphere.

Hound isn't unnerved, though. Everything Handler said ended up washing over her like it was nothing. Like it was about someone else entirely.

She isn't Leinth Aritimis. Not right now. She's just a bitch.

Handler looks over the crowd. "You may continue," she says.

She's talking about Sartha-Hound too, and she does. Enthusiastically. The crowd is slower to get going. It takes a little while for them to shake off their inhibitions again. But, in the end, not one of them leaves or holds back. Nothing's changed.

Hound is still a warm, willing body.

More or less.

* * *

Eventually, it ends. One by one, each of the bored, horny, frustrated base personnel spends their lust all over Hound's body. Once they've had their fill, they fix their clothes and drift off to the mess, or their next duty shift, or back to their bunk. After enough of them leave, the party is over. The atmosphere dies, and the

stragglers make a hasty exit. Nobody wants to be left alone with Handler and Her hounds.

They know attracting her attention is unwise. People still whisper about Meetra Kotys.

So in the end, it's just the three of them. Handler stands impassive, as Sartha-Hound nuzzles and ruts and ruins her own clothes. The hound could go all day. She's in heaven. Leinth-Hound isn't so lucky. Wet and soiled and shivering, all she can do is remain splayed across the ground as she waits to be told what to do.

Everything aches. Her mouth. Her ass. Bruises all over. No gentleness was spared for her. At the end of it all, Hound's torn between two feelings. One is a kind of weary acceptance. Her penance is done. She can be at peace with that. But the other is anything but peaceful. Hound craves release. Her body demands it. She's still hard. She's in heat.

More out of sheer, automatic reflex than anything else, Hound starts touching itself. She looks to Handler for permission as soon as she realizes what she's doing. It's pushing it, but she knows that at moments like this, She is inclined to be indulgent. The imperceptible nod Handler gives her is a gift from God.

Hound starts moving faster. She touches herself in a brute, stupid way, reaching down, pawing uselessly at herself, rubbing her cock against her own thigh. It's all she's capable of. She's bruised all over. All her strength is spent. Even wrapping her hand around her shaft feels like too much. Her fingers are cramping.

She whines. She wails. It's still enough. All her stamina is spent, too. She's close.

But Handler has another gift.

"Leinth," She says. She's using that special voice of Hers. "*On The Leash.*"

Hound lets out a pained groan from the exertion as her shattered, overtaxed mind is forced to pull itself back together. Leinth doesn't want to wake. She'd sooner stay buried. But Handler's special words are like the tides. There's no fighting them. So, after little more than an instant, Hound goes away, and Leinth awakens.

And finds herself in hell.

The first thing that hits is the pain. It hurts all over. The sheer exhaustion is agony; bone-deep and paralyzing. Next, it's the cold, and the hard floor, and the wet, and the stickiness, all over her, and the stench of sex and sweat, inescapable. The visceral discomfort of it is staggering.

After just a couple of seconds, Leinth's mind catches up. She remembers, vaguely, what's happened to her. What she's done. And the shame hits harder than anything.

She was used. By everyone. By people she vaguely remembers she's supposed to detest. Like an animal. Like a toy. Now Leinth is slumped in the mess of it all, debased worse than any whore she's ever seen soldiers use. And she's touching herself.

And she can't stop.

She just can't. Leinth needs this too bad. In her body, but in her heart too. What if she stopped herself? What if she reclaimed that barest little shred of dignity and personhood? That little act of defiance would threaten to mean something, and Leinth doesn't want that. She's too tired for it. She can't handle what might - should - come after.

Better to sink instead. To embrace what she's doing. To just be this. It's easy, in a way. It feels right - right for the guilt she feels over Sartha, and right because, deep down, she knows she's become exactly the same kind of traitor. If Leinth makes herself come like this, she's the worst. And she knows how to be the worst. Handler taught her. It makes sense.

Leinth needs permission, of course. She looks to Handler.

"Please..." she musters. Her voice is ragged. Her eyes ask the rest of the question.

Handler nods again. "You may."

That's all Leinth needs. She quickens her pace and, after just a couple of seconds, her pleasure peaks. After a couple more, she spills everything all over herself and all over the ground. Her cheeks burn with the humiliation of it.

The pleasure feels good. It's what her body needs. The humiliation does too, in a way. But the emptiness that descends afterwards is terrible.

Handler doesn't let her languish in it. She's infinitely merciful.

Setting Sartha-Hound aside with a little gesture, She crosses the hangar floor to Leinth's side. "Up," She says. "Sit."

Leinth thought she couldn't move, but when Handler orders her, she finds the strength. Leinth fights her way up to her knees.

Handler reaches down and touches Leinth's cheek, very lightly. Leinth shivers. It feels amazing. It's Handler, and it's the gentlest anyone has been with her in forever.

"Are you ready?" She asks.

Leinth gasps. She knows what comes next, and she needs it. Bad. "Yes. Please. I n-need it."

"I forgive you," Handler says softly.

Those three words mean everything to Leinth. Her entire body goes rigid. She tears up. She closes her eyes. Everything. Leinth is forgiven for all her failures. For losing today's contest. For not living up to Handler's expectations. For being the worse hound. But for much more than that, too. She's forgiven for trying to escape, long ago. She's forgiven for every time she ever cursed Handler's name. She's forgiven for being a rebel, and for betraying them. She's forgiven for it all.

Handler has that godlike power. Leinth feels the weight of every

sin she's ever committed as they're lifted from her shoulders - for a little while, anyway. Until they come back, she can bask in this. In her slate washed clean. In perfect atonement. She's never felt so free.

"Thank you," she weeps. "Thank you."

"You're welcome," Handler replies. "I'm sure you'll do better next time, Leinth. Now, come along."

Handler turns and begins to walk away. She doesn't need to look back. At once, Sartha is at Her heel. Leinth leaps to her feet, but before she returns to her rightful place, she dashes a few paces away from Handler.

She hasn't forgotten. She needs it. Her muzzle.

As quickly as she can, Leinth fits it back into place over her mouth. Wearing it makes her just that little bit less anxious. Everything is right again. She's forgiven. Once again, she's a good hound. Good hounds wear their muzzle. Handler will inspect the straps later, and She expects them to be perfect. Leinth won't disappoint her. Not ever again. Leinth knows she's just a stupid dog, but she's very, very determined to learn today's lesson.

Leinth thinks back to the mission, and to what she did wrong. She makes a vow to herself, in Handler's name.

Next time, she will not hesitate.

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