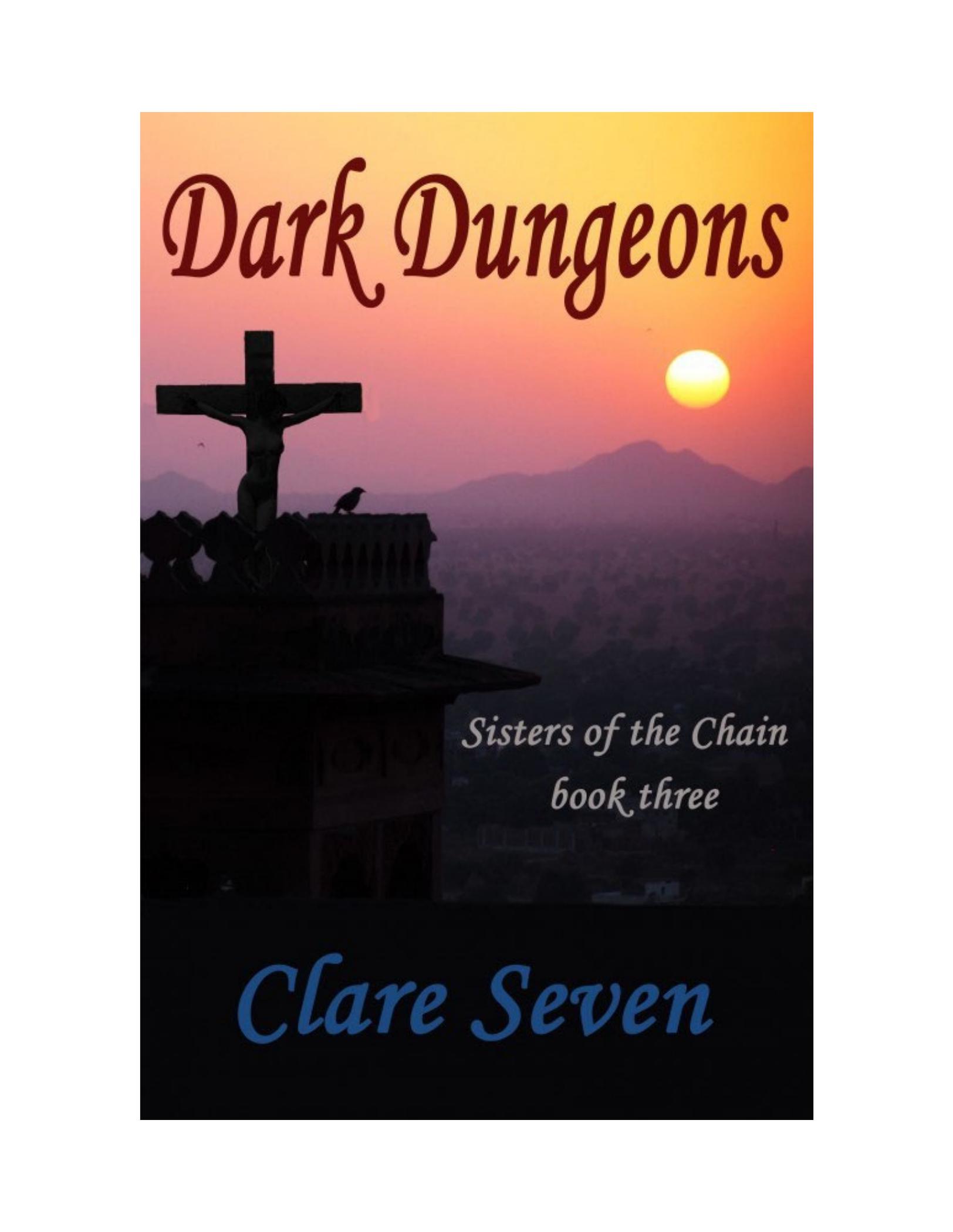


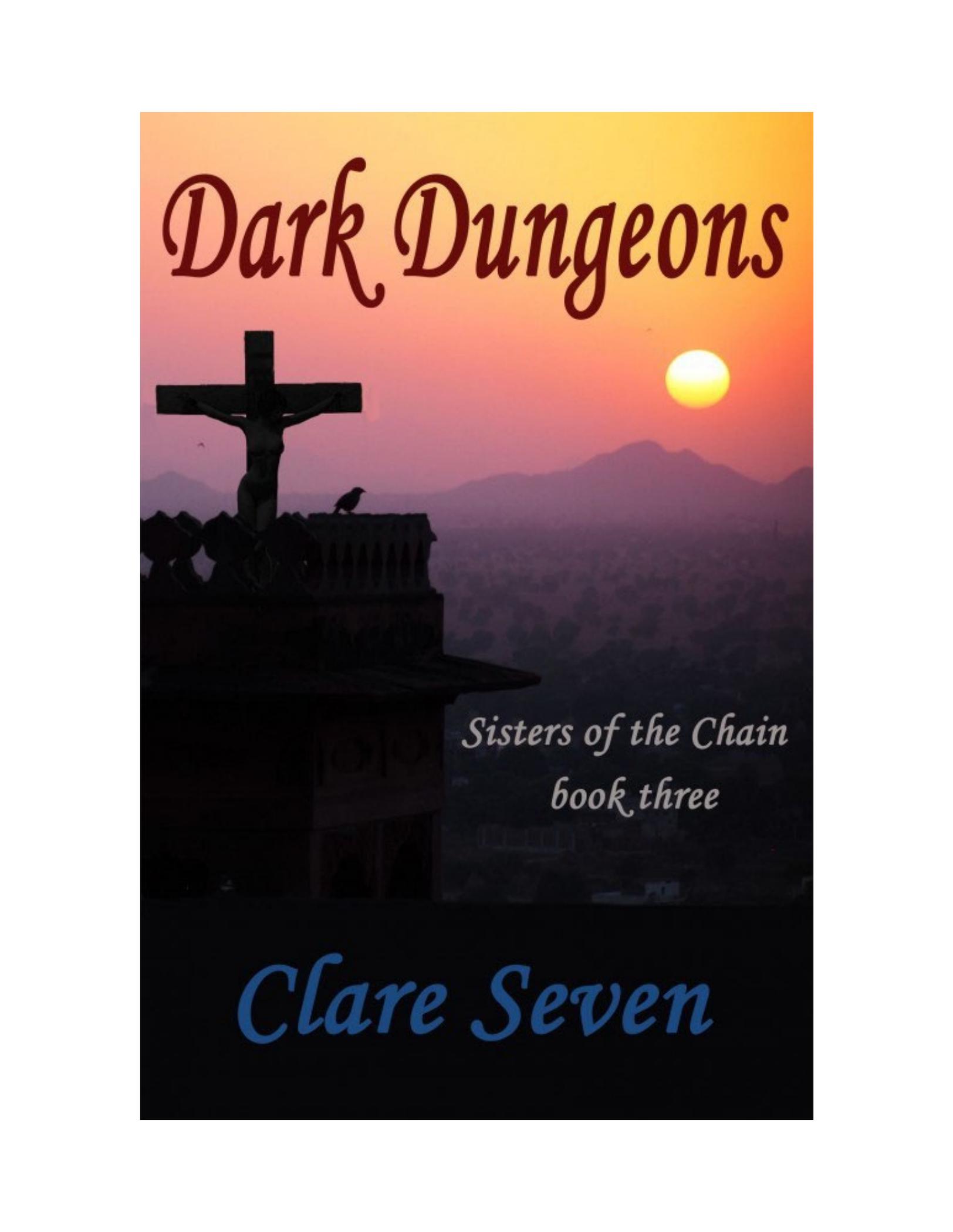
Dark Dungeons



Sisters of the Chain
book three

Clare Seven

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by Clare Seven

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Introduction – a brief history of the main characters.

Meline Talvallin – the youngest daughter of the Talvallin merchant family. She escaped the machinations of her evil sister in Irulan, only to become embroiled with someone else’s devious scheme in the Farloss Isles. She is the latest charge of Lady Demos and faces torture.

Alia Talvallin – despite her ascendance to the head of the Talvallin merchant house, she endeavours to play politics in Irulan, and is imprisoned in the Riverwake Tower, her (and Meline’s) merchant empire being usurped by Lord Gorus (Book 1).

Kirian – a former mercenary archer in Lord Hardor’s forces. She agrees to suffer public punishment originally destined for Hardor’s wife Marie, after her adultery. She hopes to free her sister, who has been condemned to the cargo galleys, as a reward for her desperate actions.

Tria, Ritix and Portia – three sailors, formerly of the Raven, a merchant ship sailing out of Irulan. Though sunk through the machinations of Alia Talvallin, they survived and were placed aboard one of Alia’s ships as galley slaves. These ships are run eastern style – the women collared, heads shaved, and their foreheads branded with the oar symbol. They are tethered via their sex to the bench on a short chain. Punishments for infraction are many, and varied. Tria is at breaking point.

Marie – ex wife of Baron Hardor, who until recently languished in prison in the Farloss Isles, at the mercy of her husband who then decides to murder her for her transgressions.

Lady Demos – grand inquisitor of Hellgate prison. An old, vile female torturess, who has questioned the bodyguard Narissa, and who now has charge of Meline Talvallin.

Narissa – an Atlantean, and Trask’s former lover. She is also the former bodyguard of Lady Marie. Narissa is tortured by Lady Demos in order to determine the identity of Marie’s lover.

Trask – an Atlantean who first met Meline aboard the Raven, where he served (or plays the role) of overseer for the galley deck. He later shows Meline the nature of his sorcerous powers.

Captain Fallon – senior officer in the military forces of Baron Hardor. He was having a secret affair with Hardor's wife Marie, and subsequently falls for her 'double' Kirian before her public punishment in the town square.

Chapter 1

Kirian tried to move again. It was not so bad this time, in that the agony that had previously stung her body with almost every move, seemed to be easing.

“Are you ready to do this?”

“Thanks to your healing, I think so,” she said quietly.

She pulled herself up, gasping and grunting. She was still almost naked, covered only by the short rag that the man, no – she reconsidered, the sorcerer who had healed her, had provided.

The pain had subsided considerably since she had been perched atop the wooden horse in the town square, horribly whipped across her naked body, then had had the basket of heavy stones tied off at her toes in order to pull her sex even further onto the wooden apex of the terrible device.

She had thought herself ruined forever by the experience, her sex splayed and body lashed to an extent that she would never again feel the warmth and affection of a lover, a hag that no man would ever consider looking at.

The bleak warehouse, which seemed as if constructed from rotten timber as she found it beyond the realms of possibility that the rough and rotting material used for construction had ever actually been new, creaked loudly as the material of the rough dock swayed with the movement of the current underneath them.

“I forgot to thank you for saving me from the wooden horse. A pity you didn’t free me before I was beaten,” she croaked, looking up as the sorcerer seemed to have recovered from the sleep which had gripped him shortly after they had arrived and he had healed the lashes across her body and pressure wounds on her sex that she had borne after her savage ordeal astride the wooden horse in the town square. It was as if his spellcasting had drained much of his energy from him.

“It’s fine. Though thanking me, perhaps, is not what you should do when you consider what actually occurred,” he said, his voice resonating throughout the

large empty wooden hall as he spoke.

“I understand,” Kirian said slowly. “It was not me that you wished to save, but the woman who should have been there. Though your actions have not only created an issue for yourself but also for me. You see, it is not just you that has been... betrayed.”

She held back tears that she knew would come now, as she looked at her beaten body and noted that, even now, some of the wounds were starting to miraculously heal. Whoever this sorcerer was, perhaps he was a useful man to know, despite the agony that she had had to go through to meet him.

He looked up. His face seemed less lined than it had been when he first removed the heavy steel helmet from her head after he had carried her from the punishment horse.

“Yes,” he considered, his voice deep as he stared into the middle distance, barely seeming to focus on the presence of the almost naked, punished, blonde woman who leaned against the timbers nearby. “I mean that it was not you I intended to rescue, yet, I suppose, if it had been the person I believed it was... then you would not have been there. So, perhaps the fates have conspired to set you free yet deny me the woman I thought I was releasing.”

Suddenly, he turned his face to stare at her. She was blonde, muscled – perhaps not as pretty as the women who had dallied and flirted with him in the local taverns during his time on the Farloss Isles, but certainly she was wiry and powerful – a warrior, upon closer examination.

Kirian shuddered as he regarded her, trying to shut down the feeling that had this strange mystic realised it was not Hardor’s wife who languished, whining in agony upon the wooden horse after she had been beaten, he might not even have tried to save her. She turned as he spoke again, surprised that there was little pain left upon her formerly lash-wracked body.

He spoke – his lips moving imperceptibly as if he was less concerned about the level of his voice than he was about using the words.

“I am more concerned that Meline has not yet joined us here.”

* * * * *

Meline screeched as the thin cane was brought down upon her bulbous breasts. The jaws of the press had been brought together such that her breasts were squeezed into red orbs with the passage of time. The old torturess known as Lady Demos had worked on that part of her first, which also allowed the steel, spiked plate upon which she stood, to heat proportionally over time. Meline tried to spread the load on her chained bare soles, thus avoid the heating steel as much as possible, but it was becoming increasingly more difficult as the fetters that held her ankles in place and the agony at her chest made her focus less on the growing heat at her feet – which the torturess had ensured were coated in animal fat so that they might roast nicely as time passed – and more on the immediate blows from the cane on her more sensitive parts. Having squeezed her large breasts progressively in the press, such that she was afraid to move her body too much, the woman had proceeded to inform her that she would begin the caning process in order to secure what information she might know. The cane fell again and she cried out, turning her head, knowing that to wrench her body might risk damage to the flesh of her breasts.

For the first time in a long while, Meline was terrified as she screamed.

“GNNNNnahhhhh!!! D... damn you to hell, old woman,” Meline said, frustrated and completely powerless, pulling on the bonds that held her wrists behind her, yet determined, despite her position, to remain defiant and not to show how frightened she was.

The position was complete in its ability to torture. Her ankles had been chained to the foul, spiked steel plate, which was slowly being heated from below and thus roasting her coated soles. Her breasts were trapped and squeezed roughly by the jaws of the press while being repeatedly beaten, and her hands were bound and secured behind her, meaning that her degree of free movement was reduced to nothing – save pulling at her own breasts in the press – which would in turn exacerbate the hellish pain she felt. Lady Demos truly knew how to torture a woman.

The old woman beat her globular and swollen breasts again and again, and then stopped as Meline’s cries filled the chamber, echoing horribly, and tears ran

down her face.

“You are a strong one, that is sure. Though you will not win, so you should, in all honesty, tell me what you know. If you do not... the jaws will close tighter, your womanly breasts will be beaten such that scarring is permanent, and your feet will begin to roast. You will speak at some stage, you will break; all women do. It is just a matter of time. Speak now and prevent the inevitable, and save your body from the torture. This is just the beginning.” Her voice was like broken glass, rasping and gasping with each breath.

She looked across the chamber, cruelly lit by flickering torches, pointing with one spindly white finger at a large plank-like wooden horse with dull steel spikes along its apex.

“There are other methods, of course. I’m sure you don’t want to ride on there for days, for instance.”

Meline gasped, looking away from the terrible device to which Demos had pointed. Her entire body was held in the strictures of the horrible press that she had been attached to. The tortures that were being inflicted upon her were built upon by the combination of agony of her breasts, which were made more sensitive by the press then subjected to the cane, in combination with the slow roasting of the soles of her feet, and now even breathing was starting to cause her agony. No one could resist this for long. She knew that even if she did try, the result would leave her with permanently scarred breasts and branded feet. It was not something she relished... and for the sake of a man whom she scarcely knew?

“I... I...”

“Yes, dear?” Demos seemed to tower over her as Meline screamed and tried not to pull her body away and cause further pain.

The cane fell again, and she screeched horribly.

“I’ll talk gnnnnn! I’ll talk, damn you!”

* * * * *

“The woman is called Meline Talvallon, my lord,” Lady Demos said slowly, as Lord Hardor stared down at her from the ornate throne, sipping wine from the golden goblet that he appeared to be grasping too hard in his shaking hand. Demos’ hooded head moved slightly, as if inviting response, the flesh of her blanched cheeks pinching a little.

“Yes. Go on.” His face ticked slightly as he said it.

“She is the daughter of Harik Talvallon, a noted merchant from the west. I did not believe this at first, of course, and I had to subject her to a little more of my art, though I now believe it to be true.”

Demos’s voice rasped with each syllable as she spoke, though her voice held sway when, as in her youth, her words could have led legions yet now had been somehow turned against the light through the activities of her profession.

The man sitting on the ornately carved and stylised wooden throne stared at her. One of his eyes was caught in some sort of spasm, though he quickly moved his hand to touch his face in a vain attempt to control the seemingly involuntary movement.

“What was done to her?” he said, his voice cracking as he spoke. He licked his lips, which had become red and dry.

Even the normally impassive and coldly cruel Lady Demos could sense that all was not well with Lord Hardor, though it would have been remiss (some might have said impossible) for her to show any emotion.

“In a similar fashion to that which you witnessed with the barbarian woman – your wife’s former bodyguard – she was placed in the breast clamps, her feet chained so that they might feel the heat of the spiked steel as the coals warmed it and roasted her soles. I then proceeded to strike her breasts with the cane as I exerted pressure. It took a while for her to speak, though speak she did... of course.” Hardor could sense an involuntary movement of Demos’ thin lips, which, had the observer not known the torturess very well, might have been interpreted as a smile.

“She claims that she was hired by a man named Trask to rescue the woman on

the horse.”

“Trask!” Hardor hissed.

“Yes, my Lord,” she said slowly, not taking her eyes from him.

It was the same name that they had wrung from the lips of the barbarian. She had been put to severe torment on the press, her breasts welted and beaten as she stood on the heating spikes, her body locked into the breast press.

Hardor stared at her. He had always had a love for women, a love for their soft, moist bodies and the way they would writhe against his cock. He had made it his singular aim to make their lives better by making love to them. He had made love and pleased that mercenary archer, for instance, the one who it had been Captain Fallon’s idea to have impersonate Marie on the punishment horse... no, he reminded himself, he must not think about Marie.

“So, the use of your arts upon another naked screaming wretch has yielded results.”

“Yes, of course, my Lord,” she said slowly, her voice hissing. “I have not yet failed you in this regard.”

“Aye, that is true. You have gained much information through pain and suffering.”

He wanted to say more, much more, and tell her how he felt that she enjoyed her art a little too much, how he believed that she was a twisted old witch who enjoyed torturing women, though, of course, his one fear of her – so difficult to quell ever since his childhood when his father had recruited her, prevented him from saying more. He sat back in the throne, his hand still shaking. He noticed it clearly now as the wine shook a little in the goblet.

“Is something wrong, my Lord?” she rasped.

“No. No, Lady Demos... Where is the woman now?”

“She resides in heavy chains in the dungeons, my Lord.”

“I see. Let her rot there a while then.”

Demos bowed slightly, retreating in a manner that yet suggested she was in control of the situation, her small, demonic eyes staring at Hardor.

“I have taken the precaution of placing her in the same cell as the barbarian... in the expectation that their conversation might yet reveal more to me.”

“Yes... yes... A good idea, Demos...”

He had scarcely heard her as he stared into the middle distance. He thought of Marie lying in one of those dungeon cells, before he had...

“Leave me,” he snapped.

* * * * *

Meline Talvallin shivered again. The pain that wracked her body had subsided a little, though her breasts still felt as if they had been on fire. She had stopped crying soon after being released from the contrivance in which she had been held and tortured horribly by the demonic woman. Her feet, too, still felt raw and sore from the spikes and the heat of the steel. She had had little choice but to talk, to tell everything she knew, under the worsening torment that she had endured. Had she even tried to last, to eke out the time and not talk or, she sensed, fabricate a story which she knew the old woman would not have believed, the damage to her breasts and feet might have been so severe that she would not have been able to maintain her current position for very long.

As it was, she had been fixed into a collar that hung from the ceiling in a dark cell. She had been barely conscious when dragged in, though they had ensured that she was awake when they fixed her into the collar then bound her hands behind her back. The collar had then been adjusted so that she could stand, with difficulty, but not rest. She had fallen against it, jerked her body upright several times, before she realized her full predicament. Other collars hung around her and the cell was quite large, though the stink of urine, sweat and fear, was palpable. She had seen the cell only in the light of the torches that the guards used when they fixed her in position. Once they closed the door, darkness filled the room, forcing her to use her other senses, or at least her hearing, since her

sense of smell was rapidly being overwhelmed by the stench. She had thought that she sensed some movement in the cell before the door was closed, but she had spent her time since then focused on remaining upright and understanding the nature of her predicament, and that meant she had not called out to see who else might be sharing the foul prison cell with her.

She fought back against the despair that threatened to overwhelm her. In recent weeks she had been whipped, forced into galley slavery, racked, imprisoned, and now once more she found herself a victim of torture, held naked and chained in some stinking hole.

She sighed, thinking back on her deal with Trask – the Atlantean superman who she had once known as a galley overseer and who had turned out to be a sorcerer in search of his lost love.

“Trask,” she croaked, as her shoulders sagged and her neck fell against the cold steel, her legs weak from the torture and being forced to stand, as if uttering his name might give her some semblance of relief, or he might even hear her plea.

Even as she said his name, she heard a shuffling somewhere in the corner behind her, in concert the sound of a shifting body. She heard a sigh, from a woman. Clearly, someone shared this awful place with her. The poor victim was behind her, and she repeated the name.

“I know Trask.” Her voice was dry, and Meline winced as she turned in the heavy steel and it grated against her collarbone. She almost fell as her foot dragged against the slime on a loose cobble, though she managed to right herself. Her heart pounded. How many poor wretches had actually killed themselves deliberately in this position, rather than face further tortures at the hands of Lady Demos?

“Who... who are you?” Meline croaked, standing awkwardly now in the darkness. Even if she could not see her companion who, from the sound of her, lay in heavy chains in the corner, she at least wanted to speak to her in the right direction.

“My name is Narissa.” The voice was defiant still, though Meline could tell from its dryness that the woman was weakened, even despite the trace of inner strength that she could detect behind the slight accent.

“Tell me. How do you know Trask?”

Meline moved her neck awkwardly, trying to move the horrible steel weight from her without using her hands, which had been tightly tethered behind her.

“I... Wait... you are Narissa?”

Meline thought she heard a wry laugh from the corner as heavy chains rattled.

“Aye. And you speak of my former mate as if you know him intimately?”

Meline sighed.

“I don’t know him that well, though he is certainly the reason I am here. It seems that the fates have conspired to see us both in chains in this hellhole.”

“Aye, though Hellgate is its real name. You have met Lady Demos?”

“Yes.” Meline shuddered. “She... that bitch had me tethered and roasted as she beat my breasts. They’re still on fire, dammit!”

“She did that to me, and more,” Narissa said in a low voice. “You don’t want to know where she goes next. Now, tell me more of Trask.”

Meline sighed. “I... knew him after I left Irulan. He was a galley master on a cargo ship. That ship... went down.” Meline closed her eyes as the images of the drowning and screaming female slaves, chained to the deck, naked at their oars, went into the black waters as the Raven sank. It seemed so long ago. She must not, could not dwell on it.

“Go on,” Narissa said dryly, her chains clanking as she moved again.

Meline bit down hard. The stench of the cell made her want to retch. Her predicament meant that her feet, which throbbed from the steel spikes and the heat that had singed them, were swollen from standing and manoeuvring her weight in an attempt not to fall against the collar.

“My... friends were taken as slaves. I escaped. I thought that Trask had died, until I saw him gaining the coastline. I knew he was strong, but I always wondered how he had made it there so quickly. Now I know, of course. He is

more than simply human, like the rest of the twelve tribes of these lands, and older.”

She wanted to turn before speaking again.

“As are you, Narissa,” she said.

“Indeed,” the woman in the corner replied. Meline got a sense, from the clanking of the chains and the disturbances on the puddles of the cobbled, filthy floor, that the Atlantean woman was sitting up against the wall. She could hear Narissa’s gasps as she moved a battered and tortured body into position. She dare not think of what had been done to her in the days since she had been captured.

“He had wanted to rescue you, you see,” Meline said slowly, concentrating on staying awake now. She felt so drained.

“Yes... I understand.”

Meline thought that she could hear emotion in the chained woman’s voice.

“He... he wanted to kidnap the Duke’s wife... hold her and get you as ransom.”

“Marie?”

Suddenly there was interest.

“Y... yes. She was horsed and beaten in the public square.”

“What?” Narissa’s chains clanked, betraying their weight, as she tried to stand, moaning and shuffling bare feet against the cobbles and puddles. “Marie was punished like that?”

“Yes. We tried to rescue her, then Trask was coming for you.”

“It would never have worked,” Narissa said sullenly. Meline could almost discern her head falling in morose acceptance of defeat.

“You... Atlanteans, are people of great passion. I know that chained and tortured in a dungeon is a fate that none should suffer, but... take heart. He might yet reach you.”

“Ha. I think we will die here, Meline, long before Trask rescues us,” she said, slumping to the cold cobbles once more.

Chapter 2

Trask watched from the wooden dockside, trying to block the stench from his nostrils. The Dominator was a massive galley. Its design was such that it was more like a wooden hulk rather than a sleek cargo ship, such as the Raven had been. He did not dwell on his memories of that ship and the people that had died upon her at the hand of the then crew of the Dominator. It did seem, however, that much of the trappings of war had been removed from her. Even now, she dwarfed the docks area, her massive beam longer than the smaller harbour boats that patrolled the waterways. The stench was the most palpable thing. The galley had been decorated in an eastern style and, he supposed, the poor galley sluts on the rowing deck would have been chained in the eastern way, a ring through their sex lips tethered to the piss soaked benches upon which they sat. He winced. He had promised Meline that he would free Portia, Ritix and Tria from the chains of slavery. He pondered whether he should in fact first try to get Meline from the dungeons where, perhaps even now, she was being tortured. No, he considered. He would take the ship first, and then work out how to free Meline and his love Narissa.

He watched the crew at work on the massive deck in the twilight across the island chain empire of Ferloss. He had come here to find Narissa. Now she was in chains, had been tortured – if she was still alive – and the woman who he had allied himself with in order to release his lost love had probably suffered a similar fate.

His plan had been flawed. He realized that now.

* * * * *

He could hear Kirian approaching from behind him. She had dared to venture outside the confines of the deserted warehouse, clad still in the loincloth and makeshift halter that she had fashioned.

“Your wounds are healing well?”

“Y... Yes. Thank you. I do not know how you have done it, yet the pain from the horse, the weights and the lashes... it diminishes with each passing moment, as do the scars.” She sighed. “I am in your debt.”

“I can accomplish a degree of healing. Thankfully your wounds were not severe.” He turned. “I asked you to stay inside. Someone could see you,” Trask said, as if dismissing her thanks.

“It’s getting dark. The only people around here are drunk sailors... and female sailors defending themselves from them,” she said, covering her nose against the stench from the galleys. She followed his eyes, and stared at the large vessel.

“So, that’s the ship you promised your accomplice you would ‘liberate’.” She coughed a little, the stench reminding her that her sister, even now, was slaved naked and chained on a similar ship somewhere. She focused, trying not to visualize the hell she might be going through.

“Yes. As I explained earlier... I made a deal... though perhaps I was wrong. It would never have worked.”

“How so?” Kirian remarked, shivering against the slight chill on the dockside from the breeze that was rising as the sun went down, and sensing that Trask was a man of impulse who might have made several such poorly judged decisions in his lifetime.

“I wanted to hold Marie to ransom, and have my... have Narissa returned to me – never realizing that you were in his wife’s place.” He turned to her now. “Do you think Lord Hardor would ever have paid for that?”

She shook her head. “No.”

He turned his attentions back to the hulking galley that lay at rest in the distance. Kirian winced as the breeze carried the cries and whimpers, mixed with the slash of a whip, from the rowing deck, as some poor rowing slut was whipped for some infraction.

“Probably refused to suck the overseer’s cock... or didn’t do a good enough job,” Trask muttered.

Kirian closed her eyes, trying not to think on her sister's plight.

"Are you going to free them?" she said finally.

Trask nodded.

"If only I could find a way to break into Hellgate Prison and release Narissa... and Meline."

Kirian paused before speaking. "I might be able to help with that."

* * * * *

Captain Fallon watched Lady Demos leave Lord Hardor's chamber. He had been told to wait outside until they finished their discussion, and he was now motioned to enter by the guard.

"My Lord," he said as he approached. He noted that Hardor was shaking. He had been like this for some days now – since the issues in the dungeons, in fact. He had sealed the cells off to only himself and some selected elements of his guard force. Fallon had considered that he wanted to spend time with his wife Marie – perhaps even that he had forced himself to find some sort of forgiveness for her, after she had admitted to the affair she had had with persons unknown; though Hardor had created a scheme which threatened to unravel his mind, perhaps. Marie would not tell him the identity of her lover, and so Hardor had had her bodyguard horribly tortured, the warrior woman Narissa, in the dark chambers of Lady Demos' domain. It seemed that this had yielded some results, and Hardor had at least relented to Fallon's own plan in terms of using the woman Kirian – a former mercenary in Duke's band of troops – as a proxy victim of the punishment that was intended for his wife. Perhaps it would have worked, had the rescue attempt on the supposed Hardor's wife not been successful. At least, those rescuers had not been entirely successful, he reasoned, watching Lord Hardor, and they had captured one of them – a woman, and an Atlantean crossbow, which he noted still lay by the side of Hardor's throne.

"My Lord?" He cleared his throat again, as Hardor, with trembling fingers,

focused on getting something from the wine goblet that he must have believed he still held. His conscious mind was telling him that Hardor was slowly becoming unhinged, despite it being treason to suggest such a thing. He did not want to end up in the clutches of Lady Demos, as the potential rescuer of Kirian had. He had managed to keep his illicit affair with Marie, Hardor's wife, from his patron lord – that he, despite Narissa naming another, had in fact been the man that Hardor sought. He swallowed nervously and hoped that he was hiding his fear well.

“My Lord, you summoned me?” he repeated, finally making Hardor look up and stare at him, his eyes flickering as if recognition would have to come deep from his mind. What was wrong with him, Fallon wondered idly.

“Ah, Captain Fallon!” the overweight man on the throne shouted. “Glad you're here. Glad you're here.” He moved in sliding fashion from the filthy cushion that sat astride the wooden throne, limping toward Fallon and patting him on the shoulder in most uncharacteristic fashion. “I have news.”

He motioned him to the large cushioned divan that sat in the middle of the throne room, and which Fallon knew had been used for less savoury activities with the slave women of the kingdom. He winced as he tried to avoid a stained area of the floor.

“Sit my friend. Sit. I insist.”

Fallon found it hard to hide his disbelief. Was this the same sadistic nobleman who had treated him like dirt for so many years?

“Yes, my Lord,” he croaked, as Hardor reached for the wine.

“I would have had a slave serve us, but...” his eyes darted from side to side, “Spies are everywhere.” He gripped Fallon's arm as he flinched in response. “I have news.”

Fallon was no stranger to the privations of despair that could bend and re-shape men's minds. He had seen men after battle, mortally wounded and even after torture, and the stare in those eyes that indicated their minds stood on the brink of madness. That same look stared at him from the eyes of his former Lord. He had become mad.

“I have news,” Hardor barked.

Fallon was almost afraid to acknowledge the fact. Should he seek help for Hardor? His Lord had always been a little suspect in terms of decision making, though Fallon had considered this simply a result of his noble lineage. Weren't they all mad?

“Yes, my Lord?” he relented. “Please tell me.”

“The woman. The auburn haired woman that you captured. Demos has had her tortured.”

Fallon winced. He remembered the woman who had helped rescue the mercenary Kirian from the rigours of her punishment on the wooden horse in the town square. Yet, she in turn had done it in order to have her sister freed from galley slavery. A promise that he knew, without doubt, Hardor would never have honoured anyway.

“Tortured, yes. I saw her fastened to the instruments.” He could see her large breasts squeezed between the bars of the press even as the memory returned to him. He did not dwell on the image.

“Yes,” Hardor continued, his eyes manic now as flecks of spittle flew from his mouth onto his beard and the goblet of wine. “She is a Talvallon, one of the merchant Talvallon's daughters. What luck, eh? We have a woman of some note entrapped in some vile scheme to have the villain freed, eh? And... and...” he repeated, his face agitated now, “She screamed a name during her torment. Trask... Trask again! Ha... if only I could give that man to Demos, the man who slept with my...”

He looked away suddenly, as if Fallon's gaze, or the route down which the discussion were going, had made him stop his progress.

“Your wife, my Lord?” Fallon finished for him. He sensed immediately that something was wrong.

“What of Marie, my Lord? Have you forgiven... I mean, now that in the eyes of our people she has been put to punishment through the rod and wooden horse, should she now be freed from chains and the dungeons?”

He knew he had gone too far. Being careful of one's words in front of Lord Hardor was something that his trusted lieutenants had become expert at, at least those who had survived long enough to become 'trusted'. The look in Hardor's eyes made Fallon's heart miss a beat. He swallowed nervously.

"She... She's gone, Fallon."

"Gone, my Lord?" What was he saying? Had he let her escape?

"Dead."

The shock hit Fallon like a hammer. Bad enough that he had spent these long months hiding the fact that he had been having an affair with his Lord's wife, but to be presented with the revelation that she was now dead, while having to hide his shock, was almost more than he could bear to cope with.

"How...? When, my Lord?"

Hardor smiled politely, and stared out of the nearby window.

"Yes, I killed her myself. It was essential, you see. She had betrayed me."

Fallon's hands became fists as he began to shake. He set his jaw. The old mercenary in his head began to speak. Stay Calm. Do not react. Hold your warrior's temper... while every fibre of his being screamed at him to end this fat, noble stain on humanity for the sake of all. Yet, it would do no good to give in to his base feelings now. In fact, if not killed out of hand, he would face a traitor's death after weeks of slow torture at the hands of Lady Demos. He was wise enough to realize that revenge was something that had to simmer, and revenge was never an immediate option when faced with poor odds.

He said nothing further, but merely stared.

* * * * *

Kirian walked back to the dockside warehouse silently with Trask. They moved

in silence since her statement regarding how she would be able to help. They waited until the darkness engulfed them in order to continue the conversation, and then Trask found a balcony near the top of the deserted, rotting dockside enclosure.

“Tell me what you meant,” he said sullenly, hearing Kirian sigh in response.

“My sister was sent to the galleys, the cargo galleys. The stench you remarked upon when we looked at that ship, reminded me of her plight. She has been on the galley ships for two years, if she still lives.”

“Did she look like you?” Trask said matter-of-factly, staring at her.

“What? Yes... yes she did. Why does that matter?”

He reached slowly for her blond hair. She did not stop him.

“She would last a while, then. You do not want to hear why.”

She raised her head, almost in defiance against his particular opinion.

“I can hear it,” she said, a slight catch in her voice, as if her defiance masked that perhaps she would really rather not want to hear what he said.

“Very well,” he nodded slowly, licking his lips. “A good looking oarslave will be used.” He held up his hand. “Not in the way you think. It is forbidden, on pain of death, for overseers to have sexual knowledge of a slave at the oar. The last thing a captain needs is to have slaves with neither strength nor endurance because their bellies are full with child. However, there are male overseers – and they are, after all, crueller and get more work from a slave before she collapses at the oar, her back raw from the lash. So, they are offered an alternative, something that satiates the lusts of the overseer, while enabling the slave’s body to focus on its purpose – keeping rhythm at the oar.”

Kirian winced. “You’re talking about offering the mouth?”

“Aye.”

“And what does that have to do with my sister?”

“It takes two years for an overseer to tire of a pretty slave woman. Be under no illusion, they will have stood in line to use her mouth, though by now she will be so degraded and worn that her looks will have gone and they will have moved on to newer slaves.”

He sighed. Tears were welling in Kirian’s eyes as she thought of her sister serving horrible men by sucking cock after cock.

“They will have kept her alive this long at least, in order to have their cocks tended to. The only danger is if she has rebelled, though the wooden horse and the whips will have meant that any rebellious behaviour would be short lived.

“The danger perhaps is now... though if she has been broken, and is strong, she might yet serve... live, five, perhaps ten more years, though by then she will be bent, broken...”

“Enough!” Kirian hissed.

“My apologies,” Trask intoned. “You said you might have a plan?”

“Lila... my sister... she was condemned because of a fight with a nobleman. He was her patron and she was a thief, belonging to the guild here on the Ferloss Isles. It is why I came here. She had left home years ago, I more recently. She had a reputation with the Thieves’ Guild. If anyone might know a way to have prisoners released from the Hellgate Prison you speak of, they should.”

Trask nodded at first, staring blankly into the middle distance as if the plan held water, then just as quickly shook his head.

“That can’t work,” he said quickly. “The problem with Thieves’ Guilds is that they are in fact... thieves, and tend not to trust the best natured requests for favours, even when they can get something out of it, and we, my dear, have no, what the merchants might call – collateral.” He looked askance at her. “Unless, that is, you know different?”

She shuddered slightly, pulling the cloak that he had offered her about her shoulders, where even now the red, raw lashes of the foul birches that had been used on her naked body were but dull red welts – as if months had passed since her public punishment. Trask’s magic was nothing if not effective.

“I know the head of the guild. Let me speak with him.”

“It’s too dangerous,” Trask interrupted.

“Why do you care? All you are interested in is getting your women back?”

He turned to her then, and raised a hand to her cheek. She gently gripped his wrist.

“Haven’t you had enough women?”

He smiled, kissing her gently on the shoulder, before caressing her with one strong arm.

Kirian wanted to draw away, but there was some feeling deep within her that wanted Trask to continue. She was not sure if it was a mixture of the fact that he had rescued her from her ordeal after being whipped on the wooden horse, or whether it was something else, something about the bronzed, muscled man, who sometimes appeared to be something much more than human in terms of the way he carried himself. She almost fell into his arms, whether from the weariness she seemed to be feeling as a result of the healing powers he had used or perhaps, despite her having been roughly taken by Lord Hardor then taken again by Captain Fallon in the dungeons, she simply desired to have another man’s attentions.

She shuddered as Trask moved his large hand across her breasts. The rag that she had been wearing almost fell away as she wriggled out of it, pushing her chest forward as if daring him to touch her more. Trask did not disappoint her, moving his hand toward her thighs, as she spread her legs to each side of the rough bench upon which she sat. He began to slowly probe and play with the folds of her womanhood, moistening her lips as he played with them, and she gasped then moaned in response, letting her body fall back a little and widening her legs still further as he probed more delicately yet deeper. She bit her lip. Her body felt so alive, yet she knew that it was because of this man’s sorcery. Was he casting more of his spells upon her even now? She did not care, simply knowing that the pleasure he was giving her made her feel so alive. She closed her eyes and felt dizzy for a moment, as Trask held her in his thrall, moving and massaging her sex in ways that she had never felt before.

“Uhhnnnn, wh... where did you learn how to do this?”

He did not reply, merely moved a little faster, a little deeper inside her.

He began to move his body towards hers, moving in rhythm as he began to undress, his large erection brushing her leg as she purred with excitement at the prospect of him entering her.

“Oh gods,” she gasped, writhing upon his hand in ecstasy, her arousal more intense than she could ever remember feeling. She reached a hand toward his cock, gripping it as she would a sword, rotating her thumb gently around the end, stimulating him. He moaned himself, but in a more controlled fashion than she had done. He remained in control, in control of the fiery explosion of pleasure that Kirian knew awaited her, as he moved toward her, his free hand groping her breasts as he laid her down upon the rough bench and began to explore her body with his lips...

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Captain Fallon looked at the trembling guard again. It was only the stout iron bars of the portcullis like door to the dungeons that separated them, which meant that Fallon could see how nervous the man was.

“Tell me your orders again, please, and be specific,” Fallon said slowly and deliberately, as if controlling his words so that his rage might not spill out.

“Sir... I...” The guard stumbled over his words, clearly in a quandary, his mind unable to decide who was the most terrifying noble to be dealing with when his orders contradicted Captain Fallon’s.

“I was told by Lord Hardor that only he might enter the dungeon levels of Hellgate Prison, sir... He... he was very specific, sir.”

The man was sweating now, obviously unable to decide what he should do – his mind lurching from his duty to obedience then back to how he might be punished if he did the wrong thing.

“Very well, sergeant. Let me tell you how this will play out. You have heard the

screams from Lady Demos' chambers no doubt?"

"Yes, Captain," he stuttered.

"Well, I simply need fifteen minutes in the dungeons. If I don't get it, I'll find a way to let you spend some time with her. Am I making myself clear?"

He said the words slowly and clearly, accenting each point so that there would be no misunderstanding on the part of the sergeant.

The man sighed in response, his head falling as if realizing that there was no possible way he could win the debate.

"Please, sir, I beg you. Don't tell Lord Hardor."

"You have my word, sergeant."

* * * * *

Fallon held the scented kerchief tightly to his nose, as his boots slid slightly on the uneven cobbles of the corridor filled with cells. He had known where Marie was being held – the thought of her naked and in chains had been enough to convince him not to visit before, and raise suspicion, but now he had to be sure that Hardor had indeed killed his wife. He had to make sure that she was dead, and that Hardor had not concocted a story rooted in his current madness that seemed to, this time at least, completely engulf any sense that might have been left in his dark mind. He had to be sure, before he sought his own revenge on the old bastard.

He stopped at the cell where she had been held, removing the kerchief and not noticing the stench that he was breathing in. There was a cough and a moan from somewhere, a gasp that said, "Water... please," and another muffled whimper from another cell. He ignored them.

"Open this one."

The sergeant had ensured that no one, not even the jailor was in the area before taking Fallon down. He had, however, also ensured that he had sufficient keys to open any cell that the captain might desire to explore.

“Yes sir,” he said, fumbling with keys as his hands shook.

The lock on the reinforced ironwood door clicked, echoing along the corridor. It was one of the more ‘private’ cells, in that the front had a door and a wall. Most cells were bar-fronted only, leaving no privacy for the naked and chained, miserable men and women that languished inside. Fallon was reminded of this as he saw filthy hands grip the bars of a nearby cell, a woman’s face appearing in the dim light cast by the sergeant’s torch.

“Please... please... don’t send me to her again... please...”

Fallon paid her no heed, moving into the stinking cell as the door opened. There was a little light from a high barred window, though not enough that a prisoner might find solace in knowing with accuracy that there was a world outside the horrible prison. Fallon grimaced as the stink of piss filled his nostrils. Certainly, there was a good deal more straw than any other prisoner seemed to have. Despite his wife’s affair, and the fact that he had kept her naked and chained, Hardor had not wanted her to suffer the shame of having to sit on a bare stone floor. He almost smiled at the irony, yet reminded himself of why he was here as he kicked at the straw.

In one fluid movement he grabbed the torch from the sergeant and shone it toward the corner where he had kicked. Beneath the damper parts of straw there was dried fresh material – though it was coated in a dull red-brown colour. Fallon had seen dried blood before, and in significant quantities, though the sight he witnessed now tore into his soul. He breathed in deeply before continuing.

“His wife was here, sergeant.”

“Sir... yes, Captain.”

“She is dead?”

“Captain... I can’t...”

Fallon’s movement caught him off guard as he pulled his sword from its

scabbard, its edge finding the man's throat in a single, practiced movement.

"She is dead?" It was a statement of fact that he wanted confirmed, on pain of death from the man whose throat he held his blade to. Fallon poked the blade into the flesh of the man's neck, just enough that he grunted as blood slowly dripped down onto his breastplate.

"Yes sir. She... she was killed."

Fallon nodded, knowing what the answer would be yet hoping that the gods would in some way deny that which he already knew – that they might concoct some alternate reality so that he might live on and have Marie again, against all the evil wishes and actions of Lord Hardor and his ruined mind.

"Hardor?"

"Sir?"

Fallon pressed the blade a little further as the man screamed and gripped his neck.

"Yes... YES, sir. It was Lord Hardor."

Fallon's lips quivered a little as he smiled maniacally.

"Take me to the women who were recently tortured," he said bluntly, removing the blade from the sergeant's neck as rapidly as it had been placed there.

* * * * *

The stench became worse as Fallon was led deeper and deeper into the dungeons. He ignored the piteous moans and weeping that seemed to emanate from every barred cell, concentrating instead on burying the potential for violence that threatened to engulf him with each step, to emerge from the hatred that coursed through his mind. He scarcely perceived the black puddles that he strode through, most of which had spilled over from the rank liquid that trickled

from the cobble floored cells. The sergeant was still shaking as he reached the ironwood door and pushed the long key into the lock.

“They lie in darkness?”

“Aye, my Lord... There is some light from a tower window, but it is one of the worst of the dungeons, kept for the most dangerous prisoners.”

Fallon nodded, gagging slightly as the door opened and the fetid air inside found a method of escape. A rat, seeking one of its few chances to get away, scurried around the corner of the door jams, slinking artfully into a drainage gully in the floor and running away.

“It has the right idea,” Fallon remarked casually, wincing as the sergeant pushed his torch into the darkness of the cell.

“The new one, sir, she was placed in standing chains.”

As the flame illuminated the two women, Fallon took in their condition. The one standing naked in chains was Meline – the one who he had seen and left to the tender mercies of Lady Demos. She had markings from the cane across her breasts. There was also evidence that they had been squeezed in the press. Her feet were swollen from standing, and were filthy from the floor of the chamber and cell. The image of the warrior, Kirian, held in the punishment cell immediately returned to him. He closed his eyes momentarily as he remembered taking her as she stood in heavy collar suspended from the ceiling. She had enjoyed it, despite the misery of her captivity, he seemed to remember, or he at least perceived in his own mind that she had.

He stepped inside.

Chapter 3

Kirian found the boots awkward to walk in. She was not sure whether they had originally belonged to a soldier or whether the cut of the leather was a little too tightly angled. Whatever it was, she found that it made descending the stone stairs even more awkward than it was designed to be. The task was made all the more difficult because of the dark hood that she wore over her head. The stink of sweat – possibly from the last person who had worn it – pervaded the closed environment around her head, reminding her of the heavy steel helmet that she had worn under punishment on the wooden horse some days ago. She suppressed a shudder.

They had searched her for weapons, despite her protest that she carried none. They found nothing, of course. Kirian had neither been naïve enough nor, indeed, stupid enough to risk carrying a weapon, however covert, into the nest of thieves that she now entered.

She was now beginning to regret the decision she had made, however. She could feel herself being led into the depths of the guild house – presumably into some cellar complex beneath the tavern that she had initially entered. Her sister Lila had told her much in relation to where the guild was centred in the city.

The thoughts returned to her again, racing thoughts of Lila and of how she laboured in heavy chains, naked, under the lash, forced to...

She gasped as she heard a door open, felt the touch of a man's hand on her arm again.

“This way. Your footing is free. Walk as directed.”

The voice was cold and emotionless, as if this particular member of the Thieves' Guild had guided wayward, temporarily sightless visitors along these cold corridors before.

She was aware that she had passed through a doorway of some nature, as the noise increased – though it was a low hum in comparison to what she might have heard in the tavern upstairs through which she had entered. Her inquiry had

raised suspicions, of course, though Lila had given her enough passwords and phrases that she at the very least raised eyebrows as opposed to being ejected from the establishment, or worse. Thieves of the guild in the isles were well known to kill first then ask questions later.

The noise that had been around her abated suddenly and she could feel the eyes in the room staring at her, even though she could not see any of them. Without warning, the black bag was plucked from her head. It was refreshing, at least in her mind, to have the stink removed, though her other senses were now assaulted by the view of the chamber.

It was long, and lit, at least partially, by flaming torches placed in sconces along the walls. Stone pillars lined the length of the area, creating alcoves and darker hideaways where Kirian could sense movement from the corner of her searching eyes. The poor lighting in some areas, however, contrasted strongly with the effects of the torches along the inner length of the chamber. Ruffians and bandits – male and female – though without obvious signs of weapons, were leaning, sitting or posing here and there, punctuated by the chained and naked presence of slaves – women who wore collars and slave brands and appeared to be there for the entertainment of the guild. At the end of the chamber she could also clearly discern a wooden throne-style accoutrement. At first she could only see the flesh that draped across it – more slave women – one of whom it seemed had been recently whipped, judging by the red welts across her back. She writhed and moved her hands across the man who sat on the throne, while the other woman stood behind it and massaged his shoulder. Kirian was pushed forward and began to walk up the relatively narrow hallway, guided by the two men at her side – who appeared to be the only obviously armed thieves in the immediate vicinity.

Noticing her approach, the guild head – if that was who it was – moved subtly on his makeshift throne. One of the slaves, the one that had been whipped, appeared to take this as indication that she should pleasure him, and she nervously began to undo his trews, opening her mouth in the hope, presumably, that sucking his cock might prevent her from receiving further whippings.

“Away, wench,” he grunted, physically tossing her from his lap as she cried out and fell roughly to the stone floor beside the throne. She turned and stretched out, placing her head near his lap as if used to the harsh treatment that she had been given. The woman was older, nonetheless lithe and thin, and with large

breasts, Kirian noted, a shock of red hair framing a round face, with piercing blue eyes. She might have been sold as a slave on the block, but Kirian could see that the woman had once been free and even now wore the collar and manacles with difficulty – having not yet accepted her slavery. The marks of the heavy lash across her back and buttocks would not be the last, she suspected. Kirian glanced quickly at the other naked female slave, who bore neither the marks of the whip nor chains. She was younger, dark haired, and Kirian could not help but notice the smile with which she greeted the Thief Lord's treatment of her 'sister' slave. There were dark machinations at work, Kirian considered, as she finally regarded the leader of this den of cutthroats.

He was bald, though he possessed thick black to grey eyebrows, suggesting that he had once borne a thick head of hair. He was overweight, judging by his stubbled jowls and girth, yet still his frame suggested power by the thickness of his arms and the way he had thrown the slave to the ground. He was clearly aroused, and his smile suggested, as he stared at the lithe blonde woman that approached him, that it was not just the presence of the naked women beside him that sustained his cock's fire. Kirian suppressed her inclination to stare back at him and she looked away, as if in supplication. She had a favour to ask, after all – yet, she decided, she should not consider herself to be too lowly. Perhaps this villain might respect some defiance.

She stopped, in front of him, bowed slightly, yet in a firmly controlled and suggestively defiant manner.

He wheezed slightly as he spoke, as the younger slave stared at her and, simultaneously, moved her hand to his crotch and gently stroked the erection that was clearly visible in his trews.

Mainly because it would have meant a swift, or perhaps torturously slow death, Kirian suppressed her internal rage at this arrogant piece of filth and the fact that he had enslaved these women – the older, and considerably worse off of the two even now leaning against his makeshift wooden throne.

“My men tell me that you are the sister of Lila?”

Kirian moved her eyes to stare at him now, taking her gaze away from the poor slavewomen. She nodded curtly.

“Perhaps you are, perhaps not. Certainly you knew enough about our ways and

words to get this far. You might, of course, be a spy sent by the Duke.”

Kirian thought suddenly of Duke Hardor. Before she had ridden the wooden horse and been flogged, he had made savage love to her in his chambers. She had been supposed to stand in for his wife during the punishment, in exchange for Lila’s release, and now circumstance had dictated both that she had suffered the punishment and had very little to show for it.

“I did once work for him – however briefly.”

There were some gasps in the chamber, though their leader simply nodded and smiled.

“And now?”

“Now I seek only to further my sister’s release, and to aid the man that helped me.”

“Ah yes. Lila toils in chains, naked at the oar.”

Kirian noticed that the older slave flinched slightly.

“That is where Tanis here will go if she displeases me again.”

Kirian nodded.

“Isn’t that flogging enough?”

“No. It is not. Though, we not here to debate the niceties or otherwise of galley slavery, are we?”

“No, my Lord.”

He seemed to enjoy that. The fact that she had addressed him in a way that at least acknowledged the power he appeared to wield.

“So, you sought your sister’s release and it went badly? And now you seek my aid?”

“Yes, my Lord. I would...” She paused

“You would seek a favour.” He writhed on the seat as the second slave ran her hand down his long thigh. It was statement of fact rather than a question.

“Yes, my Lord. I seek your knowledge of the Duke’s dark dungeons.”

He seemed to ignore her. “A pity that I lost Lila. She was such a good thief. Do you know what they did to her?”

Kirian looked up, startled. What did he mean? “No. I don’t understand?”

He almost smiled at having knowledge over her, something that she was unaware of in relation to her sister, though Kirian knew that he could be striving to create a ploy, a bargaining chip in the discussions to come. By shocking her with some revelation, he might gain advantage – and gaining advantage was how the guild of thieves operated.

“I saw her as she was marched in chains with other slaves to the galley. She had been put to torture – the marks of the whip and branding iron were clearly evident.”

Kirian tried to keep her composure. She would not let this man exploit the weaknesses inherent in her emotions regarding her sister.

“Aye, and from the amount of whipping she received during her long walk, and her limping, it would seem that she was stretched on the rack too.”

“And you were happy to see one of your preferred thieves treated in this manner?” Kirian shot back. Silence filled the chamber, the thieves of the guild expectant of a victorious response from their master. Instead, he smiled.

“I was happy only to understand that she told them nothing, that her training managed to convince them, even under the vilest torture, that she was not a senior member of the guild and that she had in fact been caught through happenstance. Clearly they believed her – though the machinations of Lady Demos are quite exquisite. Perhaps they simply cast her aside.”

Kirian nodded, the jibes having goaded her, though she would keep her aim in sight. She noticed that she had clenched her fists – as she tried to free her body and mind from the tightening that threatened to overcome it.

“Perhaps.” There was a catch in her voice as she spoke. This verbal sparring had to come to an end, she considered.

“I would save her through other means, my Lord. I would seek for you to grant me a favour through her loyalty to you. If she revealed nothing, or through her...” She paused, trying not to think of her sister stretched naked on the rack, under the whip and iron.

“...Loyalty to you under torture, and her ability to convince this Demos that she was little threat.”

He nodded in response.

“The Lord of Thieves seldom grants favours without some recompense.”

He subconsciously reached for the slave’s belly as he said it, moving his hand toward her sex as she writhed in response.

“You have not even heard what it is I seek, my Lord,” she said hesitantly, watching as the slave rubbed his crotch, smiling and looked defiantly back at her. The older slave sat on her knees now beside the throne, legs spread, hands upturned on her thighs in supplication, and adopting the standard slave pose that in most realms stated: ‘I am yours. Take me.’

She kept her eyes low, presumably not wishing to feel the whip again.

Kirian sighed. It seemed that she would have to let another man have her, simply to get the information she required.

“I have a request, yes.”

Kirian nodded. He pointed at the older slave. “You and Tanis here shall indulge me.”

Kirian winced. So, she and the woman would make love in front of them all.

“You will fight each other – naked – and with barbed whips. If you win, I will tell you that which you need to know. If you lose, you will take her place at my side, and I will free her.”

Tanis's eyes widened in hope and her expression changed as she realised that she might yet have a way to escape her slavery.

Kirian sighed.

* * * * *

Meline cried out in anguish. True to Demos's promise, she had been dragged from her standing, collared pose in the chamber in order to undergo further torture. She was hungry, thirsty, and kept awake by the urge to avoid slipping and hanging herself when she had been in the iron collar. Perhaps that was its aim: that prisoners might kill themselves rather than face further torment at the hands of Lady Demos. Perhaps only the stronger willed prisoners were put in the hanging collar, such that they would struggle to survive and exhaust themselves through lack of sleep in the process.

As it was, the kindly Lady Demos had placed her upon a savage wooden horse. Though, as with most contrivances in this dungeon of vile torment, there was a twist in the instrument's nature and design.

Meline's hands had been tied above her head. In fact, she had been lowered onto the vile device by being painfully hoisted then lowered – as Demos played with her sex in order to ensure that her lips were spread appropriately before she landed and straddled the sharp, triangular edge of the long wooden horse, whose effect had been accentuated through the addition of cold steel. Her feet were allowed to touch the floor, at least with the tips of her toes – until Demos ensured that her ankles were chained and the chains pulled wide, such that her legs were spread even further and her sex allowed to sink more painfully onto the apex of the device, her legs pulled until only the points of her toes were in contact with the cold stone floor. The position was therefore agonizing in the extreme, as her body weight was placed alternately between the upper part of her sex and the tips of her toes – which had been given just enough purchase on the hard floor as to make the ordeal worse.

A round, metal, ball-like steel helm had been placed around Meline's head, the weight of which forced her head to fall forward. In addition, the slight relief that

she had from pulling on the ropes that held her hands above her, was removed, as her hands were instead tied to a ring at the top of the steel helm – in a fashion that reminded her, as she endured her torment and tried to stop herself from losing her mind, of the terrible punishment that the woman in the town square had suffered.

She shuddered now as she heard Demos' voice through the echoing contrivance of the steel helm.

“Now, we shall begin with the hot irons.”

Meline felt herself shaking her head.

“No... NO!”

* * * * *

All the thieves and slaves in the underground, poorly lit chamber watched as Kirian undressed. She removed the crude tunic, boots and treads until she stood in halter and loincloth. At a motion from the Thief Lord, she slowly placed arms behind her to untether the makeshift halter top she wore. He smiled as he pointed at the loincloth.

“I am to be naked – like a slave?” She gestured at the redhead in front of her – who even now regarded her evilly, lifting one of the cruel whips that had been thrown onto the floor.

* * * * *

Meline screeched and twisted on the wooden horse – her entire weight supported only on her toes, her legs spread widely on the horse as it bit into her womanhood. But she could feel none of that really – at least in comparison to the

burning agony of the iron as it had been applied to the back of her thigh. Sweat rose from her as steam, as the implement was taken away. She could not see the iron's approach – only feel it, as she wore a heavy steel helm about her head, which currently reverberated with her screams and made them echo, deafening her.

“UGnnnnN! GAhhhh!”

Her voice was hoarse from screaming, her throat raw. She had taken four... no five brands across her body, in places where her female tormentor knew it would develop the most agony. Her armpits, belly, thighs had all been touched with the iron – however, lightly at first – though she knew that each touch seemed to last for longer, no doubt a method that meant, at least to the victim, that each touch would be worse and administer more pain until the subject broke.

Meline held back tears, knowing now that she would die here.

“I... I have told y... you everything I know.”

“Oh my dear,” the voice hissed near the steel helm. “We have only just begun.”

She could feel the heat of a new iron, near the front of her thigh.

“No... NO!”

* * * * *

Kirian stripped the clothes and boots she had borrowed, until she stood only in a loincloth. The Thief Lord stared at her, almost naked, and smiled.

“You would make me a fine slave, wench,” was his only comment as she made no effort to cover herself, amazed herself at how the marks from the beating she had received only days before had almost completely gone. She was still aware of some marking, because she knew it had been worse, but those loathsome thieves who regarded her now, clearly could not discern them.

“The loincloth,” he gestured. “Remove it. You fight naked.”

She winced and hooked her thumbs into the dark garment before pulling it and letting it fall down her long legs, then stepping out of it.

She cocked her head in mock supplication, before moving toward the whip that had been thrown on the ground near her. There was a visible movement from the crowd. Perhaps their having seen such battles before was enough to convince them that the lash was not the ideal weapon in an enclosed environment, if one wanted to avoid being a bystander that was accidentally struck.

The Thief Lord smiled as the two women began to circle each other, their bare feet finding purchase on the rough oblong stones of the ancient floor. The whips were short and thick, well fixed to the end of a rod, rather than a simple handle, as if a mistress of the art of wielding such a weapon would thereby be given a degree of control that a slave – or other more common user – would not have. As Kirian circled the slave in front of her, and watched the motioning and movement of her hand, combined with her stance, it was clear that she had used the whip in this form of combat before. She swirled it confidently – the end snapping as she did so. Kirian weighed the balance and tried to understand how she might inflict maximum damage with it. It was clear that Tanis knew what she was doing, and she seemed to have grown in confidence since she had been made the promise of freedom by her erstwhile master, though Kirian did not intend to be made a slave herself, despite her earlier concerns for the plight of the woman in front of her.

A flick of Tanis’ lash near her face was enough to waken her from her thoughts as she dodged to one side. The duel would not be easy, and it was hardly gladiatorial, due to the nature of the weapons – though that very nature would mean that blows were somewhat easier to inflict and, if hard enough, would wear the opponent down over time. Kirian even considered, as she dodged another lash, that watching two naked women engage in combat with whips, was something that appealed to all the men in the Thief Lord’s retinue.

Another blow surged toward her – timed and angled at the last minute to cut across her legs unexpectedly. She cried out as the whip left a welt across her thigh and the crowd cheered. The walls of the chamber and posts surrounded them, making escape impossible, even had she wanted to. Kirian tried her own stroke now, as Tanis dodged – clearly still nimble despite slavery and her

beating. Her large breasts shook as she did so, and her fighter's frame belied a sense of purpose and dexterity that would not be altogether evident to the casual observer who would otherwise only see a slave down on her luck.

The whips cracked in turn as each woman looked for a blind spot in the other's defences. Kirian was struck again across the arm as she mistimed her move, while Tanis laughed and used her knowledge of the lash, and the hall in which they fought, to outwit Kirian's every move.

Another blow twisted around her midriff, the tipped end of the whip welting her belly as Tanis pulled back and spun Kirian around. Losing her bearings, she fell to the floor, her shoulder banging against one of the stone pillars as she crunched to the ground. The lash pulled back and she instinctively recoiled as she tried to right herself, though it was too late. The lash struck from Tanis's advantageous position, again and again across Kirian's naked and vulnerable body, and the crowd around them yelled for blood.

"Ha. It would seem that Tanis values her freedom, and you, sister of Lila, will be mine to use."

She could hear the Thief Lord's laughter as she gasped and cried out with each whip stroke... noticing Tanis's face – full of hate and rage – as she got closer with each stroke, hoping to end the fight with Kirian's complete supplication.

The pain was terrible as the whip lifted welts from her exposed flesh. She cried out in pain, sensing that Tanis was close. She had one chance.

She moved her legs across the stone floor swiftly, catching one behind Tanis's ankles, and bringing the other in front of her, before pulling them together across the woman's legs. Tanis lost her balance instantly and fell on her back, yelping... and dropping her whip. Kirian moved fast. She had no option now, at least if she wanted to avoid becoming a slave herself.

She jumped to her feet, light headed from her beating, as she scooped up both her own and Tanis's whip, before commencing to lash the prone slave, before she could find her bearings, before she could regain the advantage in the fight. She felt her own rage building, some animal part of her – deep and fearful – found its way out as she rained blow after blow across the screaming woman's thighs, breasts and back – each blow leaving a welt, across older welts. Tanis tried to use Kirian's own trick, trying to trip her attacker and bring advantage

back to her – but Kirian moved away, far enough that she could keep her opponent pinned through the hard lashes. She struck without finesse or skill, although she had finally adjusted to how to use the weapon, her mercenary skills coming to the fore at last. How dare this slave whip her, the dark side of her mind told her. Finish her off, it screamed as she gritted her teeth in rage. This damned slave tried to stop you having your sister released, it reasoned from some dark corner of her memory.

As she struck her slowing foe, she realized that the barbs on the end of the lash could be targeted against flesh, and she pulled the blows, letting the steel tip do its work as Tanis screamed in agony until, finally, she slumped – half unconscious. Kirian paused, then stopped, dropping both whips and, as her conscious mind began to take hold, moved slowly toward the gasping, beaten women. A thief raised his arm to stop her.

“Enough!” shouted the Thief Lord. “Take Tanis to the galleys. Have her sold to the oar. She is of no further use to me.”

“No!” Kirian yelled. “That wasn’t part of the deal!”

“I am changing the deal, Kirian – pray, for your sake, that I don’t alter it further. Take her away!”

The woman that Kirian had whipped senseless was lifted and dragged away. Kirian set her jaw, realizing that she had sealed the woman’s fate – to be sold to some vile merchant ship and whipped to death in chains, sating the lusts of overseers with her mouth until she became a bent, blind hag – until such time as death would be welcome. She moved to gather her clothes, before being stopped by another thief.

“What’s this? Are you altering the deal after all? Am I to be your slave?”

The Thief Lord regarded her, even as the man who had stopped her progress seemed to be a little uncertain himself and of the fate that his master had for the woman. If reading his face was possible, it might have indicated that, for a moment, he considered overpowering the well built woman – finely shaped, with beautiful breasts – despite the fresh welts that she wore, chaining her and forcing her to suck his cock at his makeshift throne. He considered, and then thought better of the idea, perhaps. This rebellious mercenary would make a poor sex slave, despite the pleasure that he might take in breaking her to the lash and

cane, and forcing her to kneel by his side in chains.

“You have a deal, woman.”

* * * * *

Trask had slept as much as he could before starting the conjuring. In fact, he realized as he slowly started the incantation, there were a number of issues with what he had first proposed to Kirian. He had considered that he would still be powerful enough to complete the spell, which would be the key to taking the Dominator, though he had not considered just how much Kirian’s healing had taken from him in terms of his own magical constitution. Atlanteans were old, strong, powerful – though in this new world, there was a limit even to their powers – as exemplified, of course, by Narissa, a strong Atlantean woman, being taken and tortured. He tried not to think about it, nor the fate that had also befallen Meline, praying to the nine gods silently that she had not suffered too much in the time that it was taking to arrange the rescue, if rescue it was. Kirian had not yet returned, and he had promised her that she should walk unmolested onto the ship by the time she had finished with her part of the plan, though he felt weak as he began the conjuring.

The words were guttural as he conjured the thing – realizing that it itself was weak as the figure formed in the mist. He cursed silently – he was slowly passing out. Damn. He would have to alter the spell, and fast. He had planned, of course, to eliminate all those above decks through the death demon, though he realized quickly that such a thing would not now be possible. He continued with the spell, growing hoarse as the ancient rasping tongue that he intoned rasped against his throat. He had hoped to conjure at least one demon, one that would rampage along the upper decks, and let him reach it unmolested. As it was, however, he had not the strength to bind the dangerous forms, and he needed to think of something else... fast.

* * * * *

Telia walked the deck again, looking over the side into the water. It had not been easy working for Captain Darnech – especially so, when fiends like Ballo were allowed to paw over the women that worked the deck. She had requested to go below and oversee the slaves – but even then, being the one who had to whip poor women who had been chained to the deck by their sex lips, was not a task one relished. She shuddered, realizing that Ballo was watching her from the far side of the deck. Damn, she had not put on any other clothing on the hot night, and wore only loincloth, halter top and sandals. That wretch Ballo would want to put his hands all over her. She remembered another crew-woman – Meline. Aye, she had taken Ballo on, and been put in the stocks, the captain obviously wanting to see women suffer rather than punish Ballo – though Meline had been teased at her sex while she was stocked. Telia wondered idly how that had felt, feeling herself go slightly moist under her loincloth.

“Ah, lovely Telia,” he said, approaching quickly. She went for the handle of the whip at the belt that held up her loincloth.

“Away with you Ballo... I...” She gasped as the shape rose behind Ballo. She made to warn him, even as the thin steel blade pierced his throat and doused the deck in a spray of blood.

“NO!” She moved to the other side of her belt where she kept the thin dagger, then stopped. The figure became shrouded in mist, as more figures, ghostly this time, seemed to emerge from behind him.

“D... devils!”

She backed away, fidgeting for the dagger, as the things... the men, came closer. They seemed to murmur, sounds that made her relax despite the imminent danger she knew she was in... danger... wasn't it? They enveloped her. They were men all right, she could smell them. Her hand fell from the dagger. They wanted her to undress, she could sense them. They wanted to pleasure her. Yes, she could feel it, as their touch wandered all over her body and she sighed, her hand motioning over her tethered breasts. Yes, release them. Yes, she would obey. She pulled at the loose material, pulling it away from her body, then moving to the loincloth and tearing at it. They wanted her, and she wanted them.

“Telia?” The deckhand had come up from the stinking galley deck, and he

watched as his crewmate had appeared to writhe, tear at her clothes and fall to the deck. He saw Ballo lying bleeding on the deck. Had Telia killed him? By the gods!

He scarcely felt the wide broadsword as it plunged through his back, through his vital organs, and died before he could even see his attacker.

* * * * *

Trask gasped, leaning on the bloody sword. The conjuring was fine, though he doubted that he could adequately control it. He watched as the male-shaped mists, their erections forming and crumbling as they multiplied, made for another female that had come from below. She gasped at first, before succumbing to the hidden desires in her heart as the lust demons went to work and she began to tear and rip at her clothes, writhing and widening her legs in anticipation as they took her. The lust entities had been easier to conjure but would be harder to control. The drawback with them, of course, was that they would have no effect on the men. No, the men he would have to kill – and he was scarcely in any condition for combat. He sighed, then his eyes widened as he saw what happened next. Several of the misty figures had split from the main body, passing through the grille that led to the galley deck below.

“Oh no,” he whispered.

* * * * *

“I have proceeded further with my examination of the woman Meline Talvallon, my Lord.”

Demos bowed slightly in front of Duke Hardor.

“And what have you determined, Milady?”

Fallon winced as Hardor spoke. The Duke's head bobbed now, a facial tick reducing his expression to one which suggested that if madness had not already taken hold, it nudged him slowly toward a precipice from which there would be no turning back.

“As I have stated,” the woman hissed. “This woman had taken a position aboard the Dominator, which even now, I am informed, remains at our dockside. Her intent in this regard had been to rescue three of her comrades from the galley deck – and her knowledge of this man Trask was only by virtue of her previous position aboard a ship called the Raven.”

Demos continued, her rasping tone punctuated by her breathing as her gaze canted to Fallon at one stage, as if recognizing that only one other sane person was in the room with them. Fallon gritted his teeth so hard that he thought they would break. He could kill Hardor now, perhaps – though realized that if he did so, he would also have to kill Demos. Even if that did work, there were too many that still remained loyal to Hardor, and he had not done enough to create support in the noble court such that he could develop a following of his own. No, now was not the time – not just yet. He had to be patient.

“Her part in the kidnap of your wife, I believe, is due to the fact that the Trask wanted to hold her to ransom.”

Fallon had noticed it as Demos said it. She had accented the word ‘wife’. Did she also know the truth? – that it had been Kirian on the wooden horse in the town square and not Marie? Did she then know that Hardor had in fact killed his own wife? He tried to suppress the rage once more – the fact that he had been the one who had been having an affair with Maria, and his Lord had not known; the fact that her bodyguard had been arrested and tortured, that Maria herself had been imprisoned. Was all of this in fact his fault?

“I see, I see,” Hardor stammered. “Fallon,” he barked raising his hand as if the good captain should immediately jump to attention. “Seize this ship and have all on board crucified... including the slaves.”

“My Lord?”

“You doubt me, Captain?”

“No sir.” Fallon looked away. “I believe that you want the crew and oarsluts

crucified... from the docks to the palace, sir, in line along our streets?”

Hardor nodded gleefully, rubbing his hands. “Yes... Yes – I like your thinking, Captain.”

Even Lady Demos saw fit to raise a pencil thin eyebrow at the suggestion, a slight curl of her lip indicating how the prospect would look to the denizens of the city.

“And make sure there are plenty of the more appealing oar sluts near the palace...”

* * * * *

“Explain to this me, by the gods!”

It was bad enough that two women on the deck had passed out, and two men had been murdered. In fact, there might even have been an explanation to that. What Captain Darnech could not explain, as the froth from his spittle, exacerbated by his shouting, trickled down his beard – was quite what was going on in the galley deck before him.

The naked female oar slaves, who all bore marks of the lash, made an inharmonious din as they clamoured in ecstasy. They were filthy, heads shaved to prevent the spread of lice, and tethered to the oar deck via the sex lips chains that they wore, though none of this prevented them from writhing on their benches and in the bilge as they made love with apparently invisible foes.

“Find whoever has done this,” Darnech hissed, as they stared down through the grille on the galley deck. Even the female overseers had dropped to the floor and writhed – the mass of bodies like parts of a machine that existed only to provide pleasure to multitudes of men – who they could not see. What male overseers remained below had taken to whipping the slaves in the hope of restoring some order, though it seemed, as the heavy lashes fell, that some even appeared to be enjoying the combination of whip and the rampant sexual stimulation that they appeared to be suffering from. The collected moan reminded Darnech of that

which he would hear on the pull stroke during rowing – though this time there was no pulse, no rhythm to the moan, and it was certainly not derived from the exhaustion of the slaves.

The male overseers looked up, almost shrugging – there was little that they could do. Some of the older women, slaves who had rowed for years, against the odds on a vessel like the Dominator, who had become nothing but wrinkled collections of galley muscle, blind from untreated eye infections and with long, hideous nails, had collapsed under the onslaught of pleasure that they appeared to have suffered, their hearts apparently unable to cope with the shock of an almost forgotten pleasure.

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Tria bucked again. She knew that she should feel agony from the ring through her cunt that was attached to the galley bench as it tugged and teased her sex, though she could barely feel it. She cried out in ecstasy. It was a dream, yes – that was it, this was a dream, but she was deafened as all of the women near her writhed in the bilge or banged their bodies against the walkway as they were taken by some mysterious force of nature. She could feel them, though could only see a blurry haze of smoke or a ghostlike blurring as the men – the things who she thought were men – gave her pleasure beyond imagination. After the pain of the lash and the horrors of the wooden horse that she had suffered in recent months, to feel such pleasure – she gasped – she was going to climax again, her body involuntarily bucking against the onslaught as they probed her, as she felt another near her whip welted breasts... she fell into the throes of orgasm once more... remembering that Meline had told her, and Ritix and Portia from the ship called the Raven, that she would rescue them... but these creatures – she gasped as she felt them push to continue her climax and she purred – perhaps she did not want to be rescued now.

* * * * *

Darmeche's men's attention had been so focused that they never saw their assassin. He moved quickly for a man his size, though that would be his undoing. He had taken three men down before the others were able to react, being able only to wound another before they finally found the man, if that was truly what he was, that had started this entire affair aboard their vessel.

* * * * *

Trask faced three men now, and he knew that two more were on the galley deck. Darmeche, a tall man, who, as he drew shortsword and dagger, appeared to have some experience, adjusted the leather cuirass he wore and signalled to his men to flank this new cloaked and hooded adversary – as the din and clamour of writhing women below began to subside, just a little – as some of the weaker ones passed out from multiple climaxes at their filthy benches. Trask was exhausted, and wanted to take the sword and lean on it like a crutch, rather than even attempt to use it. He stared at Darmeche as the two on either side of him started to flank him.

“I don't know who you are, stranger, nor what sorceries you have conceived upon my ship – though you will not live long enough to offer any explanation, I feel,” Darmeche grunted, his eye ticking as if to accentuate the rage that was building in him.

Trask despaired. It had not worked, and now he would die at the hands of the few remaining crewmen that he had failed to subdue. His immediate concern was for Kirian, who would be returning to the ship that he had failed to take. What might become of her; he prayed to the spirits silently that she would not be captured and made a galley slave on this vile galley.

He heard the swish in the air just before he heard the thunk of the arrow into the side of the man at his left. He crumpled, moaning, to the deck. The Captain shouted in despair for cover, just as the second arrow pierced the throat of the man to Trask's right – leaving only Darmeche wondering as to the origin of the attack.

Trask had one chance. He grunted as he moved with the sword – though

Darmeck had anticipated the move and dodged easily as Trask lurched forward, the weight of the sword against the meek resistance that his exhausted body could maintain being too much. He went sprawling, as Darmeck, with practiced skill twirled his blade, ready to bring it down across his neck... when the third arrow pierced his throat.

Darmeck's prone body landed on top of Trask – who was too weakened from his spellcasting to try to move it. He could turn his head, barely, grunting as he did so. He saw legs and feet of a woman as she jumped from the deck and began to walk toward him. As the image was made clearer in the gathering torchlight, he could see that she wore only a loincloth, her clothes and body dripping from her apparent swim to the side of the galley – some of the flesh crisscrossed with recent whiplashes. He saw the bow, and then the welcome face of Kirian.

“You’ve been busy, Trask, eh?” she said, stooping to lay down the bow as she pulled a dagger to finish off the wounded crewman.

“Let’s finish the overseers below, because they become a problem too. We don’t want to attract any more unwelcome attention now, do we?”

* * * * *

Meline cried out as she tried to move again. Her body lay half in a puddle on the cold, cobbled dungeon floor. She had been locked into a heavy steel collar, which fixed her to the wall and the weight of which made her – in her considerably weakened state – lie on the floor.

Every move brought agony. She had been tortured over the two – or was it three days that she had been held naked in this vile place. First there was the heat on her soles while her breasts were held, squeezed and thrashed. Then there was the agony of the wooden horse – her sex ached just thinking about it and the iron. That bitch had used the iron upon her ten times... maybe more... the searing heat finally making her pass out and leaving marks that would never heal, though she was in too much pain to act upon the anger that she felt flood her mind. She had told all that she knew, and even after that Demos had continued with the torture – ensuring that she painfully garnered the last of her truths. She

tried to pull herself toward the filthy wooden bowl of water that sat near the steel door of the dungeon, but she collapsed halfway in tears. She gasped as the heavier form of Narissa moved her foot to bring it closer to her, as the larger warrior's own chain rattled with her movement.

"You will recover in time, Meline, though you will always bear the marks of her torment."

She brought the bowl to Meline's dry and swollen lips.

"Drink."

"GNnn..." Meline turned slightly as she moved her broken body to sip the brackish water, chain rattling at her throat as she tried to bear the weight of the collar.

"We will lie here and r... rot... food for the rats."

"With the food and water they give us, we might last only a few years at best Meline. Now, drink. You must try to recover."

"Why?" Meline snapped, tears in her eyes.

"Show the bitch that she has not broken you," Narissa added slowly.

Chapter 4

Kirian wiped the bloody blade of her sword on her still wet loincloth, as she finished dragging the last of the bodies up the wooden steps, moving the dead overseers away from the galley deck where they had formerly held charge. She was gasping with the effort – more so because the now only half awake Trask was having trouble, even with the load that should have been relatively paltry for two of them. As it was, it appeared that the wiry yet smaller Kirian was doing most of the work.

“C’mon, Trask. Do I have to do everything?”

“Gnnn. Remember, it was I who provided the diversion, Kirian...”

“Perhaps – though I notice you didn’t exactly help me to get the female crew members down to the galley deck. I’m not sure what you accomplished with the women on board this ship, though I suppose I should be grateful that most of them passed out from it.”

He nodded – acquiescing to what he guessed might have been her way of thanking him for having done most of the work in terms of taking the ship.

As it was, several of the older and more exhausted slaves’ hearts had burst during the efforts and contortions of whatever sorcery he had worked upon them (though Kirian had noted that they all appeared to have died with smiles on their faces). In order to replace their number at the oars, she had moved the female crewmembers to the galley deck, stripped them, and pierced their sex such that the lip chain could be attached. They might not be slaves, though they would awake to find their feet in the bilge water, their clothes gone and the womanhood in chain and bondage, ready to serve at the oar until they were no longer required to do it. Yes, it was an injustice, she admitted to herself, though there was little time for niceties now, as they continued to pile the corpses in one place. The voice came from the relative darkness of the deck.

“What has happened here?” it said menacingly.

Kirian instinctively drew her blade; it hissed from the make shift scabbard that

sat at her only garment – a skimpy loincloth. Despite Trask’s apparent attempt to also make ready, the weight of the single body that Kirian had let go, now simply took him to the deck with its weight and he collapsed, grunting. Kirian winced in response, without looking down.

“Who are you?” she challenged the cloaked figure in the shadows, moonlight glinting from his own naked blade as he stepped forward.

“My Lord Hardor wants me to have you, your accomplice, and every oarslut aboard this vessel crucified along the public avenues. Would that be to your liking?” Captain Fallon said as he stepped forward, though there was a tremor in his voice as he finally recognized the woman who stood almost naked in front of him – and his hopes were at last fulfilled.

“Hello, Kirian.”

She breathed a sigh of relief.

“Fallon?”

When last they met, he had taken her in the punishment dungeon while she had been forced to stand in collar, after she had agreed to his proposal that she would substitute herself for public punishment so that the Duke’s wife might be saved. She had done it all in order that her sister Lila might be released from the galleys. Was it even possible that such a rescue might happen now? Had Fallon come back to help her?

She raised the blade.

“Why are you here? More to the point, how did you know that I would be here?”

Fallon stepped forward and lowered his own sword, noting that Kirian was careful to keep hers angled up in trained defensive posture.

“The woman Meline. She has been tortured, and she has told much.”

“Meline?” Kirian looked down at Trask as he gasped, staring at Fallon.

“You bastard!” His voice spat venom, even if the price he had paid for his spellcraft meant that there was little he could do physically to back up his words.

“You tortured her?”

“Not I,” Fallon said. His head fell slightly. “The Duke has killed Maria. I would see that he suffers for it.” His eyes narrowed. “For that, I need allies. I can think of none other than the woman I substituted for her, and the man who vexes him.”

Kirian cocked her head.

“I see...”

* * * * *

“Know this,” Kirian shouted down the galley deck. “Those of you that are here will remain in your sex chains, and you will remain naked.”

There was a cacophony of moans in response, from a band of galley slaves who had been whipped, pushed to labour and made to suck cock for so long that the fight had gone out of most, if not all, of them.

“There are those of you who have been placed in chain and who were former sailors. You women have been clad in extra chains.”

There was some shouting from these few, though Trask was quick to move in and use the whip across their now naked backs. The women who had been taken by the lust demons and passed out had been used to replace those older women whose hearts had given out under the effects of the entities that Trask had summoned. Still, it was only really Trask who had any inkling of what had actually happened on the ship. He lashed those new slaves that complained without mercy. They would have to learn quickly. The other slaves got out of the way as he administered his painful lesson to the former female sailors, now nothing but naked galley slaves and who had been restrained further with ankle fetters and manacles in order to further deter any rebellion. The manacles had in turn been nailed to the oar. The main things that denoted these new ‘slaves’, however, were that their heads had not been shaved and they did not bear the mark of an oarslave on a brand upon their foreheads.

“As I have said,” Kirian continued forcefully, “You will all be released. We ask only that you help us in our task and row a little longer. My colleagues will only use the lash, if required, but will not force you to suck their cocks. Do us this favour, and we will grant you all...” she looked pointedly at the ex sailors, “... your freedom.”

She turned on her heel as Fallon, who had removed his armour and taken up his own whip in order to help the still weakened Trask on the galley deck, passed her on the wooden steps. He gasped a little at the stink of the wretched slaves.

“It’ll take a bit of getting used to, even for me,” he said slowly.

Kirian stopped. “It didn’t seem to stop you when you came to the dungeons in search of my cunt,” she said sternly, staring at him.

He nodded in response. “Aye. Well, perhaps my actions in this plan of yours might help make up for my past transgressions. You’re sure the map is genuine?”

Kirian patted the scroll at her belt, remembering the circumstances of her obtaining the scroll in the first place.

“Aye. I trust its detail at least – though perhaps not entirely the motives of the man who gave it to me.”

“Then are you sure we will even survive this?”

“I can be sure of nothing Captain – though, as you have outlined to me, you want your revenge, no? At the very least, I want you to find out which ship my sister slaves upon – anything, and to determine that, we must help this man rescue the women he cares for – at least, what’s left of them.”

* * * * *

The galley had travelled some distance around the headland, before Tria dared say anything to Trask, hoping against hope that he might recognize the pathetic, emaciated oar slave she had become as the attractive sailor who had been

Meline's friend aboard the Raven, before it had been sunk. It all seemed so long ago now.

It was Portia that Trask recognized first. He sighed as the woman coughed and spluttered, upsetting her rhythm, and so he had little choice but to whip her hard across the back. She cried out, but the characteristic twist and arch of a slave who knew her place and how she had to try harder, was not there. He whipped the woman again, and she collapsed across the oar, dry vomiting as she did so.

"She is sick," Fallon shouted above the din of the women's groans as they pulled. "Help me pull her oar in."

After securing the loose beam, the two men helped the woman lie back on the bench.

"Portia!"

"You know her?"

"You know more than her Trask," a blond shouted from down the deck.

He looked up into the filthy face of Ritix – still recognizable despite the myriad of whip marks across her body, filth and distended pussy chain that were her only accoutrements.

"Ritix, Portia," he exclaimed. "We will free you."

Tria could not believe what she was seeing. It was Trask. It really was. She called out with a voice that for months had only been used to scream hoarsely against the slashing of the whip across her naked body.

"Tria!" Trask turned to Kirian. "We have to free them, free them all!"

"Now wait a minute. You want to save your woman, and this Meline? How are we going to do that with the rowers being allowed to do what they want?"

She put a hand on his shoulder.

"Where is Meline?" Tria croaked weakly. Portia had been sick, and she was faring little better – it would not be long before she could row no longer.

“We need to rescue her,” Trask said excitedly, like a child who was having trouble seeing the bigger picture for some reason.

It was Tria who spoke first.

“And this woman will free us if we row one last time?”

“Yes,” Kirian interjected.

“Then I agree to row... one last time... if it means that we can help. Meline helped us. It is the least we can do.”

Despite the ongoing protests of the former sailors who were newly chained galley slaves, their sex lips raw from the piercings that tethered them to the filthy benches, the slaves moaned as they realised that, despite initial hopes, they would have to row one last time.

Fallon whispered to Kirian as he made ready.

“You realize our escape might be all the more difficult when you free these women?”

“One problem at a time, Fallon,” she said.

* * * * *

“Where is Captain Fallon?” Hardor screamed as he surveyed the wall and streets beyond his palace. “I expected crucifixions today, and I have not seen any!”

The hiss behind him as Lady Demos sighed unnerved him slightly.

“I am informed that he did not go to his chambers last night, and his bed has not been slept in... my Lord.”

“What! Where is he?”

Demos shook her head. “The guard have been unable to find him, my Lord.”

Hardor rubbed his hands hard, the rings catching his flesh as he rubbed already raw skin.

“Treachery, Demos. Treachery! He plots against me. I knew it. He has killed my wife too!”

“My Lord?” Demos hissed.

“He will not bring me what I want. I want to see women on crosses, and he has decided to desert me in my hour of need.”

She nodded in obedience.

“There are women in the dungeons, my Lord. And they are of little further use to you.” Her lips creased in a thin smile.

Hardor paused, trying to understand her.

“Of course. Marie’s bodyguard Narissa. The one who mentioned Trask. It would fill me with joy to see her nailed to the cross – writhing in agony.”

“And the other woman, my Lord. Meline.” Demos hissed.

Hardor clasped his hands with joy, then moved one to rub his crotch and the erection that was slowly developing.

“Make it so, Demos, and ensure that my finest wine is brought here so that I might watch them both suffer in the courtyard.”

* * * * *

Meline had woken up, but she knew that as she tried to sit up in her chains and lean against the cold stone wall it would bring agony to her tortured body, but there was nothing else for it. She refused to reject the hope that she might yet get out of here. Surely Trask would not forget them – especially so since his former lover shared the cell with her, in their misery.

“Do you need help, Meline?” Narissa said, as if reading her thoughts.

Meline nodded, holding back tears. Her stretched and battered body meant that she was incapable of even looking after herself. She noticed that she had been lying in a pool of urine.

She heard the movement of heavy chains as Narissa crawled to the boundary of the limit allowed by her bondage.

“Here,” she grunted, trying to lift Meline as she cried out in anguish. Her body had stiffened in the night, and the pain from healing flesh and stretched joints meant that she was in agony.

“The pain will pass as you heal. Believe me, weeks rotting in this hellhole have taught me that. The small amount of food we get will help, believe it or not. Your body will learn to survive on the meagre amounts. The fact that there is no bread is a boon, as you will adapt to what nourishment we get, depending on how long we rot here.”

She helped to settle Meline against the wall.

“Will... he rescue us, do you think?”

Narissa looked at her, half her auburn hair matted with filth and still wet from the dungeon floor.

“He might yet,” she smiled, taking no care to avoid the puddle that she had pulled Meline from, scarcely believing what she was saying herself. There was little point after all. “Though we must be prepared for the worst and, potentially,” she added, “a long stay in chains.”

Meline fought back the tears. She had been freed from the Riverwake Tower and now found herself locked up again. At least in the Riverwake she had not suffered at the hands of a torturer.

“You need rest,” Narissa added at last. They both raised their heads as they heard movement in the corridor outside.

“Food will come soon.”

Narissa resumed her place back in the corner of the dank cell, wincing as the heavy chains pulled on limbs that had already been abraded and made raw by the steel.

There was a clanging of steel as a heavy key was placed in the lock of the dungeon door and turned. Light from torches flooded the dark cell, and the women held their hands across their faces.

“Both of you up!”

Narissa moved to help Meline.

“There is no need to further torture her,” she said, staring first at the whip that one of the guards carried, then straight into his eyes as if accentuating the fact that the fight had not quite been beaten out of her yet.

A third guard entered, carrying two heavy wooden yokes with cut-outs to suit the neck and wrists. Each yoke had a length of chain such that the victim could thereby be pulled along.

“Where are we going?” Narissa asked slowly, as Meline finally struggled to her feet by pushing against both Narissa and the dungeon wall.

“Just take the yokes and there’ll be no trouble,” the guard said, tensing as if conscious that there could be a struggle if he revealed all he knew.

Narissa sighed, nodded her head as if resigned that something was coming though not wanting to share the fate she guessed would come with her fellow prisoner. “Come, Meline. There will be a little more discomfort for us today.”

* * * * *

Trask and Fallon had indeed been forced to keep rhythm by whipping the slaves. They had had to call the strokes, as the old woman who had been assigned to the drum had passed on when the spirits had taken her. Fallon remembered that whatever sorceries Trask had wrought had pleased so many women, and those

who died from their hearts bursting had done so with a smile on their faces. For Trask's part, it appeared that he had tried to put the episode behind him. There would be time to dwell on what had happened, and the degree to which he had lost control of his power, later on after he had rescued Meline and Narissa. He had had little time to consider Kirian either, although she appeared to have become colder and more determined since he made love to her in the rotting warehouse in the docks.

And so now, they had a fully-fledged galley. He noted that one of the sailors who had been made a slave was still actively rebelling – almost trying to pull the strokes and unbalance the oars around her. He pulled back, and the whip struck the chained woman hard across the back as she pushed forward. She cried out, clamping her jaw shut and biting down at the sting across her naked and sweating back – which was becoming decorated with whip welts.

“GNNN... I am no slave hnnnnn!” she grunted as she pulled back, her bare feet pushing hard against the board beneath her as she winced at the pain of the chain at her sex lips.

Trask knelt beside her.

“You're a slave until I say otherwise. Now, you can row, or I can give you another ten lashes from my whip. Do you have a preference, woman?”

“Gnnn... I'll row,” she grunted, knowing that she had little option.

“Good choice.”

“GNNn... when will we be freed?” a hoarse voice said from nearby.

He turned. The woman was a strong slave, certainly as well built as Ritix. Her reddish hair – though obviously once shaven, had been allowed to grow back to an extent, and though it might once have been finely combed it was now matted and lice ridden, though as it fell across her eyes during the action of dropping the heavy oar, it hid the oar brand that had been placed on her forehead – many months, or perhaps years before. Clearly, the overseers had not seen fit to shave her. Her condition was poor and she was covered in filth and welts – old and new. Despite the depredations of the galley, she appeared to have maintained strong musculature and frame, and she had not become bent and misshapen in the manner that he had seen with older galley slave women.

Her breasts were bulbous, and they complemented her strong frame, though they now bore the marks of welts that had been delivered during her pull stroke. A shame to ruin such beauty, he considered for a moment.

“What is your name?”

“Sania,” she replied, focusing on the position of her feet during the pull. Fallon called the rhythm in the background as the women tried to stay in time – believing, at least, that this might indeed be the last time they would row.

“It is good that you remember. How long have you been here?”

She grunted with the pull of the oar, before responding. “Six hundred and seventy five days.”

He gasped. “You keep an accurate count?”

“Besides remembering my name and my time, there is little else to do... GNNNN... bar suck eastern cock and be abused.”

Trask winced. He had forgotten how bad these eastern style galleys were.

“I doubt you could have spoken with such freedom to the previous overseers.”

“No, they would have cut out my tongue to make more room for their cocks had I... GNNN... spoken so.” She pulled the stroke with effort.

“I see – so you trust us then, and our word.”

“I have... little choice.”

He nodded. “You row well. You were a warrior?”

“I was...”

“What happened to you, that you were condemned to the oar as a slave?”

“I made some wrong choices in the Riverwake Tower... GNNN... in Irulan.”

“Choices?”

“I was the governor... though it didn’t last long...”

Trask wanted to hear more of the woman’s story, as she moved her feet slightly and disturbed the fetid waters of the bilge. Her muscled body tensed as she rowed on, pulling back on the thick oar with rough and blistered hands.

“The governor... of the Riverwake Tower prison? I think you lie, woman.” He coiled the whip reflexively.

“I do not lie,” she groaned, staring ahead. “But at least now I will be free, after these last efforts.” She looked up suddenly at him, awkwardly pulling back on the oar and almost upsetting the rhythm. “Unless, that is, you lie yourself?”

Her body might once have been strong and beautiful – bulbous breasts once proud, now decorated with welts from the whip; blue eyes once striking, now heavy and ringed from the exhaustion of the labour; red hair once flaming and flowing – now matted and ugly.

“And what is your name again, Governor?”

S... Sania... AUGHHHH!”

Trask brought the whip down hard across her back as she pushed forward, adding a new welt to the multitude that crisscrossed her muscled body, as she yelped wildly, eyes wide in anguish as she twisted on the filthy oar bench.

“Keep rhythm there,” he grunted, lifting the lash from the wincing woman and coiling it once more.

* * * * *

“What are they going to do to us?” Meline said weakly, as she watched long timbers being pulled toward them.

“We’re to be crucified, Meline,” Narissa said calmly.

Meline did not understand her words at first, labouring under the weight of the yoke, and wounds of torture, such that she simply stared as they were dragged into the blinding sunlight.

Thick square beams of wood with thick ropes lay on the ground, as their eyes adjusted to the light of what might otherwise have been a glorious day in the Farloss Isles.

“No,” Meline gasped. “Wait. No! I have done nothing!”

The guards grabbed both women, lifting the large top beam that would be held across their shoulders and tied at their wrists and arms, such that their limbs would be adequately pinioned, ready for the terrible nails that would be used to secure them.

Meline screamed, even as Narissa tried to calm her. Neither was strong enough to fight, and so Narissa, with her Atlantean wisdom and apparent lack of the sorcery that her mate used to such effect, resigned herself to her fate. Trask was not coming for them, and she was ready to die. Her only regret was that this innocent woman should die alongside her.

“At least we will not rot in chains in a dungeon, eh? At least we will see the light, for a time.”

“NO!” Meline was struggling desperately as the guards relieved the women of their chains and yokes, and lifted the heavy beams to their shoulders, gripping their arms and tying them in place for the walk across the courtyard, and the nails that would be plunged into wrists and feet as they were placed on the T shaped crosses.

* * * * *

Kirian was still concerned that they had left the ship anchored though with no one to guard it. She had argued that though everyone on board was chained, if they found out that all three of them had left the ship the slaves might yet find a way of escaping the restraints that held them to the deck. There was little debate

to be had, however. Trask would not be dissuaded from striving to rescue his lost love, while Captain Fallon, for his part, was determined to wreak terrible revenge on Duke Hardor for his crimes – something upon which they could all at least agree. Kirian was concerned only that if she did not go, then these two idiot men would let their rage get the better of them and force the plan to go awry.

No, it was simpler if they all went. They had been careful not to make any plans in front of the galley slaves – who would remain oblivious (she hoped) to the fact that they had left the ship. She informed them only that their freedom was close, that the chains would be cut from their sex lips soon, and that they would be freed. The slaves – most of whom were too exhausted to comprehend fully what was happening to them, remained silent, scarcely daring to believe that their freedom from painful chain and whip would come, while the sailors, who had only recently been forced to row naked, were more vocal.

Fallon and Trask took the whips to the women who complained most, leaving them whining and bent over their oars, chained feet in the bilge water, nursing the fresh welts which had been left upon their bodies. They made no more sound as their new captors left the galley deck.

“This map of yours. You’re sure it is accurate?” Fallon asked, tracing his finger along the line that marked approximately their position on the coast, toward the rocky headland then through the tunnels that had been marked – ultimately heading toward the palace in the capital.

“And these tunnels – do you have any idea how we gain entry?”

Kirian shook her head, as Fallon stared at her in apparent disgust.

“I never said the plan was perfect!”

“This is far from perfect, woman!” Fallon said, raising his voice so that it echoed throughout the wooden cabin.

“We’ll make do,” Trask said slowly, even as Fallon continued to complain. “I said, we’ll make do!” he eventually shouted forcefully, kicking one of the light wooden chairs against the wooden bulkhead as all three of them watched it shatter into pieces.

“The plan is not perfect... but we have women to rescue... now let us be about

it.”

Fallon nodded... remembering that he had come this far for one reason – revenge.

* * * * *

Meline and Narissa were forcibly dragged across the open pavilion. There were few to watch the execution that would come, bar the guards and officials that had gathered there and, of course, Duke Hardor, who watched from a balcony on the ornate frontispiece of the large palace.

Narissa stared at him defiantly, showing no outward signs of fear with regard to her impending execution. She walked naked, and still with heavy chains around her ankles, which dragged as she walked toward the holes which had been dug in the soft ground near the edge of the wall, the guards believing that she was the more dangerous of the two and should keep her fetters in place. The area in which they were to be crucified had been secured such that even Hardor, with the exception of his current ‘persona’ perhaps, might feel safe from the ravages of humanity in the city state beyond the wall.

The chains at her feet pulled at her ankles – raw from the steel that she had worn in the dungeons for so long. The metal clanked and rattled across the smooth ground as she marched toward the men who awaited her, ready at the large post to which she would be attached, ready with ropes, heavy hammers, and long, cruel nails.

She marched defiantly, oblivious to the weight of the chains and the conditions in which she had been kept, the tortures she had undergone and the poor food and water that she had been forced to take to sustain her. Her head was high and proud, and that of an Atlantean warrior. The sun had baked the ground underfoot and made the stone blocks hot – though Narissa scarcely noticed.

Meline, in contrast, was screaming as they tied the heavy beam about her shoulders, taking especial care to position and pinion her wrists so that she would be unable to struggle when the nails were used to pin her finally, fatally,

to the finished cross. She was groped, pulled and manhandled across the courtyard, not wanting to waste time or breath my shouting her defiance at Hardor, who smiled as he watched the woman struggle... his desire growing even further as he considered how she might writhe when on the cross. He licked his lips in anticipation.

Chapter 5

The small party stripped to loincloths for the journey. Kirian suppressed a smile when she removed her halter top to reveal her full breasts, and Fallon stared, remembering when he had last sampled the woman. Trask too watched, then both men almost simultaneously regarded the other as if knowing that they had both tasted the same woman and then trying to suppress the deep seated anger that threatened to engulf them – each believing that Kirian was theirs. Yet, of course, there were few men in the sum of all kingdoms who could ever make a pretence of having possessed Kirian.

They left the galley as surreptitiously as possible, clad in loincloths and with their blades tethered across their backs. The two muscled warriors flanked the more lithe and dexterous blonde haired woman as they swam for shore. Despite initially reducing their speed so that Kirian might stay with them, both found to their cost that she was a more than capable swimmer and themselves found that they had to step up their pace in order to keep up with the lithe blonde mercenary woman.

By the time they made the rough beach near the cliffs close to the capital, the two men were panting from their exertions. They watched as Kirian tightened the loincloth top across her. Both men looked at her ample breasts, both thinking that they had plunged their cocks into the woman, though in drastically different situations.

Each of them secured the light equipment they had brought. Due to the weight of larger swords, they had daggers and short, curved, naval sabres they had secured from the ship and which were designed for close-in fighting and, in the right hands, could be both precise and deadly.

They were barefoot and clad in loincloths, though they now proceeded to use black paste to obscure their skin and give them a degree of camouflage. They would travel light, without armour and planned to escape in exactly the same manner in order to return to the ship.

The map laid out the complex network of tunnels hollowed out the seemingly impassable cliffs and bluffs that now faced them. The light was poor as they

made for the rocks and the supposed entrance to the network of caverns and tunnels.

They had covered torches in greased cloth to keep them dry. Now they lit them as they had entered the darkness of the tunnels, following Kirian – who at least appeared to be able to find her way. Trask had tried to interpret the map, even as Fallon had handed it back to Kirian, tutting that the supposed ‘sorcerer’ found it so difficult. For his own part, he considered himself far too noble to consider map reading as a skill, and so allowed the wiser and perhaps more practical mercenary woman to take charge in this instance. Besides, he reasoned, if his eyes were distracted through the interpretation of the map, he would not then be able to stare at Kirian’s breasts as they walked along the rocky passageways. He tried to hide the growing erection in his loincloth as he moved with the small party. By the gods, he still wanted her, despite the hatred in his heart that he felt both for the loss of his beloved Marie and the fact that Duke Hardor had killed her.

* * * * *

Narissa had not really struggled as they had laid her on the ground, her back on the thick wood of the post that would be raised when she was attached to it. She knew that there was little that she could now do anyway to change the situation. Her wrists were still tightly tied to the heavy crossbeam, which she had carried from the prison, across the courtyard. As she looked up at the ornate balcony, she could see Lord Hardor staring down at her filthy, naked body, scratching at the erection in his treads as he blinked constantly – showing the signs of what she knew, even from here, was his impending madness. Beside him now, clad in a thin, dark cloak that seemed to create bony contours around her thin, sharp body, was the Lady Demos – the vile witch who had tortured both her and Meline with such effectiveness.

As thoughts of how Meline must have suffered returned to her mind, the sound of her cellmate’s screaming in the courtyard filled her ears, as the self same guards tried to push her, tied to her own crossbeam, across the yard – as she struggled, spat, bit and shouted her resistance.

Narissa felt her bare legs pulled together now, the chains removed, legs bent slightly, and one foot placed on top of the other – in the position that she would eventually adopt on the cross. One of the guards slid his hand up the inside of her thigh as she shuddered. Amazingly, the guard was chastised by his sergeant.

“Leave it, Geros. The woman is about to die – you’ll not be disgracing her.”

“What? Why not? She’s just a prisoner. I can do anything I...”

He gasped as the older guard cuffed him about the head.

“I said leave it!”

He looked at Narissa as she lay, her legs positioned where he had left them.

“Do I need to tie your legs... or will you accept the nail as is?” he asked, almost politely.

She lifted her head, slowly, deliberately.

“I’ll not flinch, if you make the strike true,” she said, her voice rasping as she spoke, yet betraying no fear.

The sergeant nodded and reached for the thick nail and heavy hammer.

* * * * *

Travelling barefoot had been a problem for Fallon, who was used to travelling and traversing rough terrain in booted feet, unlike these barbarians he travelled with, he considered as he moved from the slippery rock to the seaweed covered section of the tunnel that they would move through. Kirian’s footing appeared to be more certain – as did Trask’s; clearly they were more used to operating outside the rigours of armour and booted feet.

“This way,” Kirian barked as she changed direction, using the torchlight to look from map to the layout of the tunnels. They had not been easy to find, and the

party had wasted precious time uncovering the well hidden entrance to the tunnel complex, though Trask, with what sorcery he could muster (he still suffered from the effects of casting his last spell) had helped. The entryway had been small and Trask and Fallon had had trouble following the smaller and more nimble Kirian at first, though the tunnels had widened considerably now.

Fallon looked across at her, her sweating breasts illuminated by the torchlight. She was keen not to make a mistake, even as Trask loomed over her, keen, it seemed, to ensure that they would be delayed as little as possible.

“We need to hurry, Kirian.”

“I know that, Trask,” she said, her forehead beaded with sweat, which dripped onto her chest.

“This way,” she said with certainty. They followed her torchlight as it darted through the caverns.

Their motion was rapid, such that they could scarcely see the thing that dwelt in the caverns, perhaps more specifically because it dwelt on the roof. It was ancient, at least in terms of the age of man and, had it still been in its prime, it would have taken all three of the animals which crossed its path – but its age would be its undoing. The slimy, slug-like thing, full of oddly shaped mouths with pointed yellow teeth, dropped as it sensed the movement beneath it.

At first Trask believed that the torch had gone out in front of him, then there was a stinging biting sensation, worsening with each passing second as he realized that he was being attacked, and he finally understood what manner of devilry was attacking him.

Kirian heard the muffled scream behind her first and spun on her heel, tucking the map in her loincloth and reaching for the blade at her back. She was too slow, however. Fallon, already having realized the danger, rammed his blade upward toward the base or root of the thing that was biting and clutching at Trask’s large body. Various mouths seemed to appear in the mottled flesh in the semi darkness, biting at Fallon as he hacked away at the root that clung to the roof of the cavern. He could hear Trask screaming under the hood of the thing.

With some effort, and with the advent of Kirian’s blade joining his, they managed to detach the monster from the roof as it seemed to lose strength. They

struggled desperately then to pull Trask out, who was now covered in bites and his own blood, before they hacked what remained of the beast into pieces – covering them both in black, ichor-like blood that made their skin itch.

“Are you all right, Trask,” Fallon gasped as they finished it off.

He moaned in response.

“Can you walk? Has it poisoned you?”

“I... yes... I can walk, I think.”

They helped him to his feet, both nervously regarding the ceiling of the cavern now, and hoping that it was a one off event. There was a rustling sound from somewhere.

“We need to move. I don’t want to take the chance of there being more of these things.”

* * * * *

Narissa stared at the sky, using the old techniques that Trask had taught her so long ago to relax her long lithe body – starting with arms, legs, and then closing her eyes.

She was positioned now. Her arms were still tied to the beam, which had been nailed and roped to the post that lay on the ground. They had positioned her legs and feet and, despite her assurances to the sergeant, they ensured that her ankles would remain in place by tying a rope around them. Meline had similarly been pushed toward her own post and they were attempting to secure her, though she struggled madly, screaming until she was hoarse and forcing the guards to whip her savagely until she was weakened enough for them to lay her down.

Narissa could see Hardor and Lady Demos staring down from the balcony above them. Hardor was shaking, rubbing at the erection that filled his trows, while Demos simply stared down at the scene, awaiting the horrible violence that was

about to happen. If nothing else, Narissa reasoned, she must have become inured to watching and witnessing the abuses on this terrible isle.

She tensed, feeling the prick of the first long steel nail against her wrist. She could still hear Meline's shouting nearby, though it seemed more distant now, as if it was an echo from another world.

"Ready?" the sergeant said deliberately, his panting audible behind his words, having helped the men with manhandling Meline in the last few minutes.

Narissa shuddered, and nodded. It was inevitable.

The Captain nodded his head.

She could see the heavy hammer raised in her peripheral vision. She focused on the sky, the clouds moving across the island, the gulls high in the sky far above all this despair.

She scarcely heard the sharp rap as the hammer struck the nail, held in place by the soldier, though as it burst through flesh and bone on its way to making her one with the timber to which she had been tethered, she gritted her teeth and screamed behind them, eyes wide in agony.

The second sharp thump of the hammer brought further excruciating pain. As she tensed and pulled at the source of the pain, her instinct and reflexes acting as one to pull away from it, her body arched. Yet her mind knew that the third blow was inevitable, as it struck home and drove through the other side of her wrist and finally into the timber – though it would require four more blows to fully secure her. By the end, she realized that she had been screaming, bucking and writhing with each blow – she realized that she had almost been floating outside her body, watching as she was nailed, watching as her doom was sealed. She was drenched with sweat, moaning still, her arm covered in her own blood, as they moved to secure her other arm.

Meline had stopped shouting. Her voice was hoarse as she simply shook her head, watching the scene unfold... knowing that she would be next. Narissa had screamed like an animal, involuntarily bucking against the guards that tried to hold her, her arms and wrists still tethered by ropes. She screamed "NO!" as they started on the other arm, the bloodied and naked Atlantean writhing in her agonies as Meline was held prone on her own cross. The second nail, although

perhaps less of a surprise to the wounded woman, was no less agonizing – either to feel or, from Meline’s point of view, knowing that she would be next, to watch.

Narissa’s body lurched – a cry wrenched from her lips with each heavy thump from the hammer as her arm was nailed to the timber behind it, blood spurting from the new wound.

Meline was in tears as they moved to the warrior woman’s feet, guards holding her legs in place, knowing that her natural reaction would be to move sharply away from the pain, even against the ropes. The sergeant, doused in a little blood, and manoeuvring the nail to hammer it home, winced as he positioned it on one foot, ensuring that the other foot was placed underneath such that one nail would hold her in place.

Narissa face turned towards Meline once, attempting a wounded smile as they hammered the nail through her feet and she screeched madly.

* * * * *

Whatever had bitten Trask had clearly done some damage, as he slowed considerably during the last part of the journey through the tunnels. Of course, bearing in mind what had attacked them, both Fallon and Kirian were less than confident to proceed at the pace that had previously meant they had missed the creature. It was difficult to continue moving without looking up at intervals, in order to ensure that the attack was simply a one-off and not the harbinger of some greater threat that lived in the caverns.

They were, however, clearly coming to the end of the passageway, as some points of light streamed in at intervals. If the map were correct, the exit would bring them out near the dungeon level. Kirian therefore assumed that the pinpricks of orange light she could discern, were torchlight.

“Come on, Trask. Can you still do this?”

“Yes... yes, of course,” he grunted, but Trask was woozy – and seemed

exhausted by the attack and bites of the creature.

Kirian and Fallon both came to the same conclusion as they shared a glance. Trask would be of little use in the coming fight unless he recovered, and they would have to be cautious to avoid becoming overwhelmed. It seemed that something cut short his energies, magical or otherwise, on almost every occasion when he might prove useful.

The route led them to a grate that appeared above them – apparently in the floor of a dungeon, where torchlight flickered. They realized that the area above them was actually a corridor. With some effort, they were able to open the rusted grate. Both Fallon and Kirian were dirty from the effort, and particles of rust and dirt covered Kirian’s breasts – which made Fallon smile.

“You find this funny?” she said coldly.

“Perhaps you’ll let me clean you down later.”

“Hardly the time or place, Captain,” she replied, though suppressed a smile of her own.

Whatever the reasoning behind the apparent lack of security, something which she was sure only the local thieves guild could answer, she was glad that the access-way had at least led them to the palace – albeit the lower levels.

She recognized the smell immediately. The foul stench of urine and sweat, human waste and fear – that had pervaded her senses when she had had her own extended stay in the punishment cell, when she had stood on steel spikes in chains, when Fallon had... she remembered how he had taken her in her chains, how he had had her in the cell. She closed her eyes, unsure of whether she was trying to relive the moment, or whether she was trying to re-align her focus for the mission.

“Let’s get moving,” Fallon said, interrupting her thoughts. Perhaps even he was conscious of what the stench of this place must have brought back to her memory.

The level they had come to appeared to be empty and used for storage, though they were soon able to move up toward the cells. Kirian had lost her bearings, unsure of where she had been held previously, though she was sure that Fallon

knew where he was.

“We’ll have to move past a level of prisoners. Don’t engage. We don’t want any of them thinking that we are here to rescue them, when that is not our plan.”

They managed to help Trask into the passageway, though it appeared he was getting weaker.

“Perhaps you should stay here and wait for us, Trask,” Kirian suggested.

“No, I am coming,” he grunted. “That thing has poisoned me, but I will survive. I will use all my powers to recover.”

Kirian and Fallon shared a glance before moving on.

* * * * *

Meline tried not to look at Narissa now. She grunted and gasped behind gritted teeth as the last blow of the hammer put the heavy nail through both her feet, breaking bone and tearing sinew. She was in agony – crushing her eyes closed as tears streaked her grimy face.

“Raise her,” the sergeant called out suddenly.

Her eyes shot open, as if in realization of what would happen next. She swallowed nervously, readying herself for it. She would die on this cross, she knew that now, but she would not make it easy for them. She snatched a glance at Hardor, who was actively playing with his cock beneath his treads, even as Lady Demos looked on – still scarcely conveying any emotion on her emaciated, wrinkled features.

The men had tied ropes to the beam, and as one anchored the base of the post near the hole into which it would drop, the others started to pull.

Narissa screamed behind gritted teeth as her tortured body was jostled as the cross started to rise, her weight beginning to be taken by the nails as her body

slumped along the ever decreasing angle of the cross.

“Keep going. Line her up. That’s it... and position the post. There.”

Narissa was screaming like a dying animal. Meline was horrified, watching the vision of what would be her own future in but a few short minutes. The Atlantean woman, who she had so far seen as strong, almost undefeatable, had been turned into a writhing thing, devoid of any human emotion but her ability to deal with the suffering and torment to which she was being subjected.

The cross was brought up, and then an audible thunk into the ground indicated that the post had found its mark. Narissa’s body shuddered in response – her pinioned limbs shaking against the thick steel nails that held her in place. She screeched as the slam of the post into the hole in the ground made her agonized body shake in response – tears streaming from her as she bravely fought against the pain and as her ‘dance’ on the cross began.

Meline stared in horror, her own eyes filling with tears now, She dared not accept that she would be next, that she would hang from the cross to die. By the goddess, how could they do this to them?

But, slowly, inexorably, as they finally secured the swaying cross in the ground beneath the bleeding, screaming warrior woman above them, the guards then moved away, toward their second victim of the day.

* * * * *

Fallon had been a little concerned at the lack of guards in the lower levels, having fully expected to have to rob several of their lives on the way to the surface. They had attracted the attention of some of the prisoners, however, but had moved past hoping that their presence would either not register fully with the wretched people lying naked in their cells, or that the prisoners were too weak to raise any form of alarm in the hope of gaining some sort of favour from the guards. They had, however, eventually encountered one of the jailors, patrolling the lower level. The surprise would almost have been complete – had he not turned at the last moment to see a loincloth-clad blond woman push a

shortsword through his guts before covering his mouth with her hand as he collapsed in a bloody heap. Fallon took the keys as they left him in a dark alcove.

It was as they moved silently past one of the cells that they heard a woman's voice.

“Please... please, help me get out of here.”

Against her better nature, against everything that it seemed had mattered up to this point in terms of the mission, Kirian stopped and looked.

The woman was dark haired and naked, save for the dungeon grime that covered her body, punctuated by the marks of the whip. Her eyes were ringed with dark circles and her body seemed weak.

Trask and Fallon urged speed, though Kirian was having none of it, as the woman stretched a filthy hand through the horizontal and vertical cell bars that kept her imprisoned. The manacles on her hands slid down red raw wrists, even as the chains that held her ankles to the wall rattled dully.

As filthy fingers gripped the thick, square bars, torchlight shone on the woman's features. They could see that she had been whipped – badly, presumably thrown in prison after some form of public punishment. Having suffered the rigours of the Farloss Isles' brand of justice herself, albeit in her case having been subsequently healed by Trask, Kirian could sympathise.

“You were whipped?” she said, staring at the shuddering woman in front of her. She had probably been attractive once, though the effect of lying in this horrible place, in chains, away from the light, and probably forced to suck jailor's cock in order to get even basic food and water, had taken its toll on her.

She nodded. “The magistrate thought it best to make an example. Two years, he said. At least they didn't send me... t... to the galley.” She attempted a smile.

“Please. You aren't supposed to be here, which means you can free me... free all of us.”

Kirian looked back at Fallon.

“It might cause a suitable diversion?” she said, though it was clear that her real motivation was related to some intrinsic need to see the pathetic prisoner released rather than to some higher purpose related to the party’s plan.

Fallon nodded, apparently seeing some sense in the scheme, and he passed the keys to her.

“Thank you,” the prisoner gasped, “Thank the gods...”

Having opened the door, however, they fumbled for keys that would unlock her leg chains. Kirian felt the bile in her throat as she stared at what long exposure to heavy fetters had done to the tethered woman’s ankles, and the general condition of her body.

“L... leave me the keys. You clearly have somewhere to be...” the woman croaked now, reaching for the jangling steel that Kirian held.

“We need to move,” Trask said, apparently having recovered a little from the creature’s attack, or was it some sort of sorcery that he had cast upon himself, Kirian wondered.

“Very well,” she replied. “Free as many as you can.” She made to move on, then stopped. “Wait... there were two women in the dungeons – a warrior, and an auburn haired woman – recently taken.”

The prisoner nodded. “I have seen the red haired woman yes. She passed by, or was dragged past a few times. She was put to torture. They... they have been taken to the courtyard... recently.”

Kirian heard Trask gasp behind him.

They began to run forward and up, almost naked, passing wretched, chained prisoners as they went.

* * * * *

Narissa's 'dance' had begun in earnest now. Her feet were pinioned and bleeding, and as she placed her weight on the ruptured bone and sinew in order to push herself up, the sweet agony lanced through her body once more. The need to do this was fostered by the fact that her nailed arms were stretched by the weight of her body, and in order to strive to breathe properly, she had to pull herself upward. She realized that these actions would become more painful and more exhausting with each passing hour that she was on the cross. Though, she remained strong despite her stay in the dungeons, and it would take days to die in agony. She stared up at the sun – this was no way to die, though she had resigned herself to it. She felt pity for Meline, who though she had been tortured, was still reasonably fit and would herself suffer for days on the cross alongside her.

Even now, Meline struggled as the men held her in place, trying to position the first nail at her wrist, trying to hold all in place such that they could be rid of this annoyance and perform their orders – and thus see both women prisoners suitably crucified for their master. Meline fought and pulled, and so far the guards had only been able to tie her to the beam and ensure that at least her arms were in place.

Her head lolled, though she was determined to stay conscious. She stared up at Hardor, who smiled and clapped at Meline's resistance and exertions that had so far prevented her from being nailed in place. The guards again resorted to beating her with whips in order to restrain her ardour, so that they could at least nail her in place – perhaps they thought that she should accept her fate in the way the warrior woman had – though clearly, they did not know Meline.

As Hardor watched the scene, the tick in his face growing worse and spittle forming at the edges of his mouth, but Lady Demos appeared to be growing bored. Narissa stared up at the woman who had personally had both her and Meline tortured – a broken old woman who clearly revelled in the pain that she had inflicted upon others, both men and women.

She would not have her revenge on this occasion.

She looked around – Meline had stopped crying out from the lash as the guards had managed to subdue her and, it seemed, she had been broken enough to accept the fact that she was going to have her wrists and feet nailed to the wood. The heavy nail was positioned at her wrist and one of the guards raised the

heavy hammer... and stopped. Narissa could see his eyes, even from her position hanging on the cross. He wanted to hammer the nail home but he could not. The sergeant behind him moved to take the hammer from him, cursing as he did so, pushing the man out of the way, but something was clearly wrong. His arm seemed to be moving in water now, as if he too did not want to hammer the nail home.

Meline was shaking, staring at the man above her, staring as they wanted clearly to hammer the nail through her arm, breaking bones and sinew – yet something held them back.

She could hear footsteps coming closer, scuffling, shouts and the blunt thunk of weapons striking flesh.

* * * * *

Trask left the dungeon complex first, and moved into the light, though he stopped as the almost naked Kirian and Fallon flanked him, shielding their eyes as they got used to the sunlight and clear air that had both been absent in the vile claustrophobic isolation of the prison.

Then they saw what Trask was staring at. The woman writhed naked on the cross, clearly in agony, her arms and feet decorated with trickled blood from the wounds that had been so viciously inflicted upon her.

She and Trask made eye contact, and her head fell as she began to cry.

“Narissa,” he whispered softly, aware that his chances of saving her were gone.

“Trask. Trask!” Kirian shouted, pulling him from his trance. “Save the other one at least. They are going to crucify her.”

Fallon had by now seen that Hardor, his ultimate target, was watching from the nearby balcony and, without thinking, he had immediately began to scale the outcroppings of the architecture which would lead him to his prey. Kirian shouted, aware that in his rage and in Trask’s pause she had been left alone to

cope with the guards who had by now seen them. Worse, however, was that if he were killed she would never find out which galley her sister was on.

As if in answer to her first desperate, silent plea, Trask seemed to find his role once more and cast something, murmuring between sharp intakes of breath as his sorcerous powers took hold, but she could see that he was still weakened by the trials that he had undergone. She prayed to the goddess that it would be enough.

* * * * *

Meline, kicked against the hands that held her, as the guards either froze or began to melt away toward the new threat that had presented itself. She pushed both men with her feet – as her arms were still tethered to the crossbeam. They in turn only appeared to be able to move their eyes in terror at finding that they could no longer move of their own volition. Damn, she had to get free. She struggled to get up, as the guards that could move began to move toward the intrusion into the courtyard. She saw three people – a woman who she did not recognize, a man – who even now was climbing the architecture toward the balcony – though his gait seemed familiar, short sword in his teeth and... Trask – who had once more been using his sorcery. She shot a glance at Narissa, who hung – nailed to the cross.

She realized that she had to do something, anything, and bolted across the courtyard as fast as her tortured body would allow, still carrying the heavy beam, straight into the nearest guard who collapsed under her. She had to get free.

As she did so, she reached for any blade that he might have, hoping that she could somehow use it to cut the ropes that held her. He carried a short throwing spear and his sword remained sheathed even as he tried to right himself after the unexpected assault from behind. She collapsed in the dust behind him, trying to batter his helmeted head with the end of the beam, in some desperation. As she swung, it welted his face, breaking his nose and knocking him out. She scrabbled, naked in the dust... before realizing that the end of a blade was close to her face. She looked along it, up to the sergeant who had commanded the men, who had spoken with Narissa as she was crucified, who had nailed her in

place.

He stared down at her now, the melee erupting behind him.

“J... Just end it,” Meline said, holding back tears, certain that it was all over.

“I’ve condemned enough women to death for one day,” he replied, swinging the blade as she gasped, and slicing the ropes that held her before looking up at Hardor, throwing the sword away, backing away from the fight and retreating slowly. It was clear that he had recognized something, someone, who even now ascended the palace walls in order to get to the Duke.

* * * * *

Fallon had left Kirian and Trask to fend for themselves against the guards below, and now he struggled to ascend the heights to the balcony where Hardor had stood with Demos. He could see him glance at the crucified Narissa. Yes, it had been Narissa – the former bodyguard of Marie. He remembered suddenly why he was here, to avenge her death at the hands of her husband, when he, Captain Fallon, had really been the one she had loved.

His bare feet slipped on the rough, carved surface, though he caught himself just in time and he continued to climb the square shaped architecture, sword in his teeth. He could just see Hardor now, peering over the balcony, and he pulled himself up the final few metres and jumped over the edge.

“Hardor... you scum... time to die!”

“I think not, Captain,” the Duke responded, a distinct tremor in his voice as he raised a shaking hand.

Demos pulled the trigger on the ancient Atlantean weapon and the bolt thumped into Fallon’s chest. He stared at her as he realized that he had failed.

Demos smiled. “Oh, Captain, you were ever an exquisite opponent, but when I saw you below I explained to the Duke how it was you who had been the man

that was bedding Lady Marie. It could only have been you, Fallon, for that would explain so much about how my art could not determine the truth for so long. Oh, Captain, if only I had been given an hour with you in my chamber.”

Fallon grunted, gripping the sword that he had taken from his teeth, trying to hold it, moving forward... as a second bolt thumped solidly into his chest and he gasped. He had failed, and Hardor had won, after all.

* * * * *

Meline threw off the beam and stared up at the balcony as she saw the man shot with the crossbow. Those bolts, that sound. It was the Atlantean weapon that Trask had given her for the rescue attempt.

She could see, but could it really be happening? In the shadows of the curtain, parted by the wind near the rear of the balcony... Demos! She saw her fire at the man, who she now realized was the same Captain that had captured her in the streets after the rescue attempt, who had warned her to talk rather than face torture. She shouted as Demos fired the weapon, the bolt piercing the half naked man, followed by a second shot.

Meline’s hand seemed to reach instinctively for the spear by the guard on the ground beside her. The sergeant had given her this chance at life. She was not going to waste it. It was quite a distance, though she had thrown the harpoon often enough when she had served aboard ship. It would be a weak throw – she had been tortured and left to rot in a filthy dungeon, but she had to make it count.

* * * * *

Fallon caught himself on the lip of the balcony before dropping the sword, his breath coming in deep wheezes. He was dying. He shuffled a step forward,

closer to Hardor, as if in death he could embrace the fiend and impart at least some of the hate that remained in him. He tensed as he felt Demos aim the crossbow once more.

“Kill him, Demos,” Hardor hissed.

His eyes widened as the spear passed between his face and Fallon. There was a sound in the air – a remnant of the anger that had fuelled its almost perfect cast, perhaps. There was an audible thunk and then a dark scream that ended its path, louder and more hideous than the sounds that the crossbow bolts had made as they entered him.

The thick spear still had considerable momentum as it had passed up toward the balcony then descended in a shallow arc which ended as it passed through Demos’s face, its own weight adding to the damage it had done. It killed her almost instantly, though even the wounded Fallon could see a final look of utter confusion as her eyes and mouth moved subtly before her brain realized that she was dead, and she collapsed.

The wounded Fallon shot a brief glimpse toward the courtyard where a naked woman, nursing her shoulder from the throw and still exhausted from the torture that she had received, nodded before falling to the ground herself.

Fallon had one last hope, one last chance. Hardor screamed in desperation and leaped toward the dropped Atlantean crossbow, gripping it in one fat hand. Fallon could feel his life flowing away, but he placed his large bulk in front of the softer, less well trained Duke before grabbing him in one final death grip and letting himself fall from the balcony, embracing the man who had killed his lost love.

Meline winced as she heard the sickening crunch of both men striking the stone floor of the courtyard, lifting her head to see the impossible angle at which Hardor’s head now lay – his neck clearly broken.

She was determined to get up. She watched the battle that was developing at the entrance from the main buildings. Trask, and a woman, both wearing only loincloths now, were slowly being beaten back by the lightly armoured though nevertheless more advantaged men-at-arms who faced them.

Meline watched Trask stare at Narissa – nailed to the cross and lolling like some

dying animal, and at that moment his attitude changed. He had been defending blows from the men who outnumbered him, but now his expression altered. He surged forward, using his bulk to clear a path and ignoring the myriad cuts he received from indiscriminate sword thrusts, screaming as men were broken in his wake. He had left Kirian behind in his rage, killing and breaking men that got in his way in his need to be with his lost love. He was, however, slowly leaving Kirian to be surrounded, and although her sword skills were good, they would be no match for the numbers that were steadily enveloping her.

Meline shouted at Trask, even as he now fought his way toward Narissa. He knew that even his sorcery would not save her broken bones and that she would be forever maimed by the actions that had crucified her on the cross. Her head slowly raised, her arms stretched by her own weight, legs cruelly crossed over – pinioned by the nail through her feet, as she looked across the courtyard at Trask, and smiled – her eyes full of tears.

“End it, Trask,” she croaked.

Trask stumbled forward, barely missing the broken bodies of Fallon and Hardor that littered the stone courtyard. He could scarcely hear Kirian’s cries for help as she was slowly surrounded and outmatched, as he walked toward the still noble, cruelly crucified warrior whom he had loved. He lifted the sword and swished it through the air, his own eyes tearful now.

“Narissa...” he gasped.

“End it, Trask...” she moaned back, her head falling to one side, as if the effort of speaking itself weakened her already broken body.

“I... can’t,” he said, stopping the sword’s arc, standing slightly beneath her on the upright cross. He fell to his knees, tears falling over her broken, bloodied feet. She winced as he touched the nail, but she refused to give in.

“Do it, my love. You will see me again, in the halls of Atlantea... in the other realms. Do as I ask.”

Trask, as if commanded by a master, slowly nodded his head, and he stood to look her in the eye one last time, as he slowly, deliberately poised the sword for one final strike.

Meline wanted to stop him, yet she found herself drawn instead to the battle that the woman was facing against the remaining guards. She knew that she could not stop Trask, even if she wanted to. She glanced across at the broken bodies of Hardor and Fallon, and there, barely in the dead Duke's grasp, was the crossbow. It must have either fallen with them or one of the men had grabbed it as they went over. It was her time to act once more, she reasoned quickly.

* * * * *

Trask stared into those dark eyes as he plunged the sword up and into Narissa's heart. She gasped, dry cracked lips parting once, as she spoke.

“Thank you, my love,” and she died.

Trask screeched in a berserk rage, and then he turned to rejoin the fray, even as Meline picked up the crossbow and began to fire at new groups of guards who were appearing from the palace doors.

She began to make her way to the battle, firing at semi armoured men as they appeared and hoping at least that with Trask's fury and the woman's spirited defence it would be enough. The crossbow did its work and appeared to have at least a viable armour piercing effect, working rapidly as man after man went down before they could even join the battle. She had never really known how the device worked and whether it might run out of bolts. She hoped that it would not happen now.

Trask hewed and leapt and stabbed, ignoring the myriad of small cuts that were the inevitable result of running unarmoured into combat with the men-at-arms.

“Go!” he screamed. “Kirian, Meline... GO!”

Kirian had been pushed back and wounded herself, gripping her stomach as she fended off a blow, and she fell against a wall.

The naked, auburn haired woman – pockmarked with brands and welts, who appeared to have come to their aid, reached her and helped her up.

“We have to do as he says or we’ll all end up on crosses. Do you know a way out of here?” she gasped, firing at a charging soldier and watching him sprawl.

Kirian nodded. “But we can’t leave him!”

“We have to,” Meline said. “If we don’t, we’ll die here!”

Kirian finally understood, and with the cover of the crossbow and Trask’s berserk fury, they made their way back to the dungeons. They both looked back once, for one last sight of the Atlantean who had saved their lives, atop a growing pile of soldiers and plying his bloody trade with sword and spell.

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The tortured Meline and wounded Kirian were in no shape for further fighting, and they made their way gingerly, yet with enough haste borne of knowledge that pursuers would eventually come, back through the caverns to the beach.

“Can you swim?” Meline asked, still holding Kirian up, as she dropped sword and any other equipment that might hold her back.

“I can. We make for our galley in the bay – the Dominator.”

Meline smiled and nodded. Her plan might have worked after all, despite all that had happened. She was about to drop the crossbow, though she then thought better of it and wrapped a cloth sling around it so that she might be able to swim to the ship with it.

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Both women were exhausted by the time they made it to the ship. Meline immediately tended to Kirian’s wounds, even as Kirian applied some salve to the

brands on Meline's flesh.

"This would have been much easier if Trask were still alive."

"It would," Meline nodded, staring at the blond warrior. "But he is gone, and we must move on. Though first, there are some slaves I need to release."

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Tria screamed and cried as Meline walked down the deck clad in a cloth that she had wrapped around her loins.

"Meline... is... it you?"

They embraced, and Meline made short work of releasing her from the terrible cunt chains that had held her in place these past weeks.

She moved to Ritix, amidst a clamour of cries and shouts from the other slaves. Ritix was appreciative. She had been badly whipped and punished in her time onboard. The news was not all good, however. The cold corpse of Portia, who had died at the oar, had to be disposed of quickly due to the threat of disease.

"You remaining women must row for me now," Meline shouted. Most could remember her from her short time as an overseer, and most, could remember that she was at least more honourable than the male bastards who had forced them to suck cock.

Some wanted to be free – especially those who until very recently had been female sailors, but most saw the logic in Meline's plan and complied. They were soon underway, and Ritix, once more appointed as deck overseer, found that she did not have to apply the lash much.

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Meline stood on the prow as the sun rose and the ship headed east, looking down at Demos's handiwork upon her flesh.

"You're heading east? These are dangerous waters, especially for women," Kirian said, interrupting her thoughts.

"Aye, though we are wanted women. Sailing into a nest of vipers is preferable to returning to our home coast, where every bounty hunter and pirate will be after our heads. I say we take our chances."

Kirian nodded.

"Perhaps. Though we need to look at what slaves we can turn into sailors and warriors then. Being alone and being chased do not sit well together if we cannot defend ourselves."

"Agreed," Meline said. "I hadn't realized that you were the one we rescued that night. As intrigues go, this has been one of the strangest," she added.

"Yes," Kirian said, smiling, trying to avoid looking at what Demos had done to the strong willed, auburn haired woman. "Perhaps it is destiny?"

Meline smiled and nodded.

The women shook hands and walked back toward the lower deck.

Epilogue

Dungeons of the Riverwake Tower, the City of Irulan

Alia Talvallin shifted slightly bringing more pain to her twisted legs and aching loins. She licked dry, parched lips. The chains around her raw ankles rattled as she moaned. There was a noise at the barred door and she looked up, panting heavily. No, they could not be coming for her again.

Lord Gorus stepped into the cell with the massive bare-chested tormentor – Rensor.

She stared up at the larger man, wide-eyed, terrified.

“Please. Please... not the splitter again. Please!”

Gorus, in mock supplication, raised a hand.

“You will not be split again, Lady Aria,” he said, a sense of sarcasm in his voice. “How many times has she ridden the splitter, Rensor?” he added, glancing at the muscled tormentor.

“Four times, my Lord. She has been brought to the edge of the heated phallus on two occasions – her sex lips have felt the touch of the heat.”

Aria retreated into the corner, shaking her head.

“Please, no more, please not again. I have been ruined!” The chains rattled as she moved, her body covered in the filth of the dungeon.

“Would you say she enjoys it, Rensor?” Gorus asked, quite seriously.

Aria shuddered.

“Perhaps recently, my Lord, she has become used to the inevitability of having her legs spread far, her hips creaking, and falling onto the tip of the heated phallus, yes sir.”

Gorus came closer to the shivering woman. She had lost a considerable amount of weight since her imprisonment had begun, due to poor food and conditions, of course. He thought now that she had lost the excess bodyweight she had been carrying, and she was almost attractive.

“You don’t have to suffer the splitter again, Lady Aria,” he whispered.

She stopped shaking her head, her dark eyes looking up at him.

“Let me tell you of what I have heard of your sister, Meline. You remember her, don’t you?”

Aria hissed through clenched teeth. “She... she’s the reason that I am here!”

“Yes, quite. I am told that she is making quite a nuisance of herself. Now that I own the former Talvallin merchant fleet, it is prudent that I do something about the issues she is causing on the seas. Would...” He tapped a finger on his lips, backing away as if thinking.

“Would you be interested in having your revenge upon her?”

The chains clanked and rubbed against raw flesh as the woman moved, yet she ignored the feeling, her mind hovering on his every word.

“Yes. YES!” she barked. “Please, anything to have my revenge, to be rid of these chains, of the stink of these dungeons. Please. Give me a chance, Lord Gorus. I won’t let you down, my Lord!” she crawled across the cobbles, almost kneeling in front of him.

Gorus nodded in response.

“Very well. Release her, Rensor. Have her cleaned up, and bring her before me.”

Gorus turned away and made toward the cell door, his face creased by an evil smile.

The End