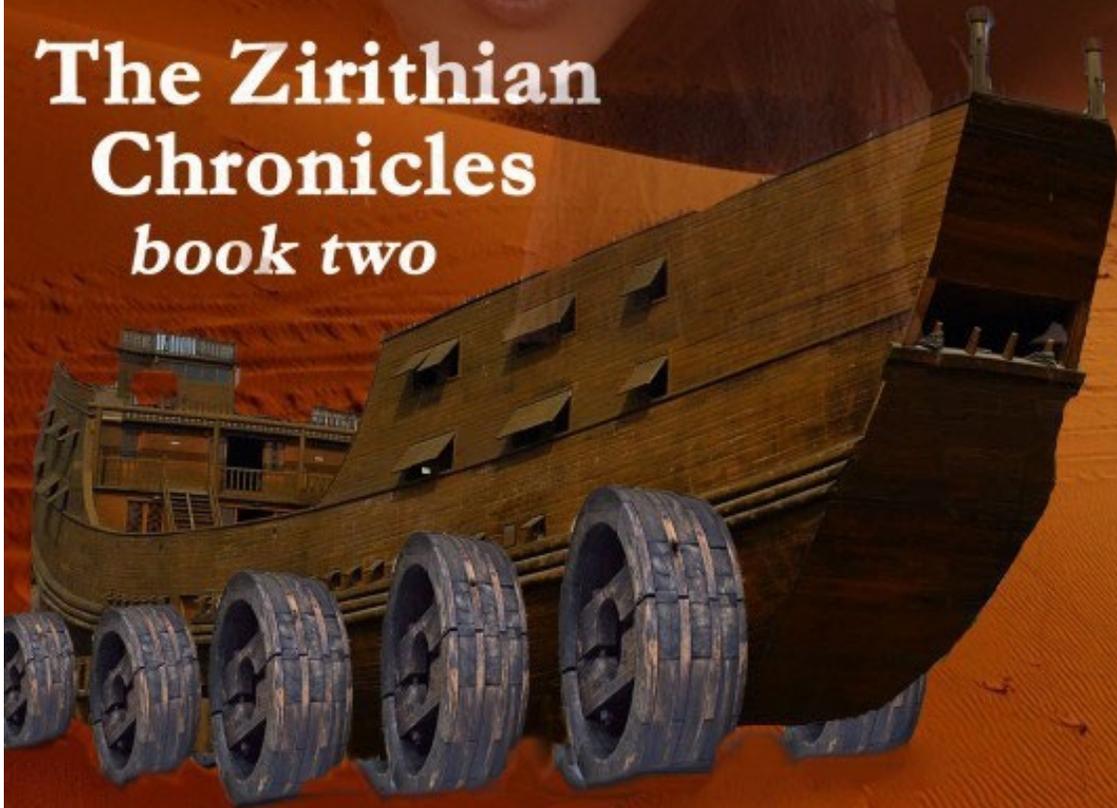


Slave To The Wheel

**The Zirithian
Chronicles**
book two

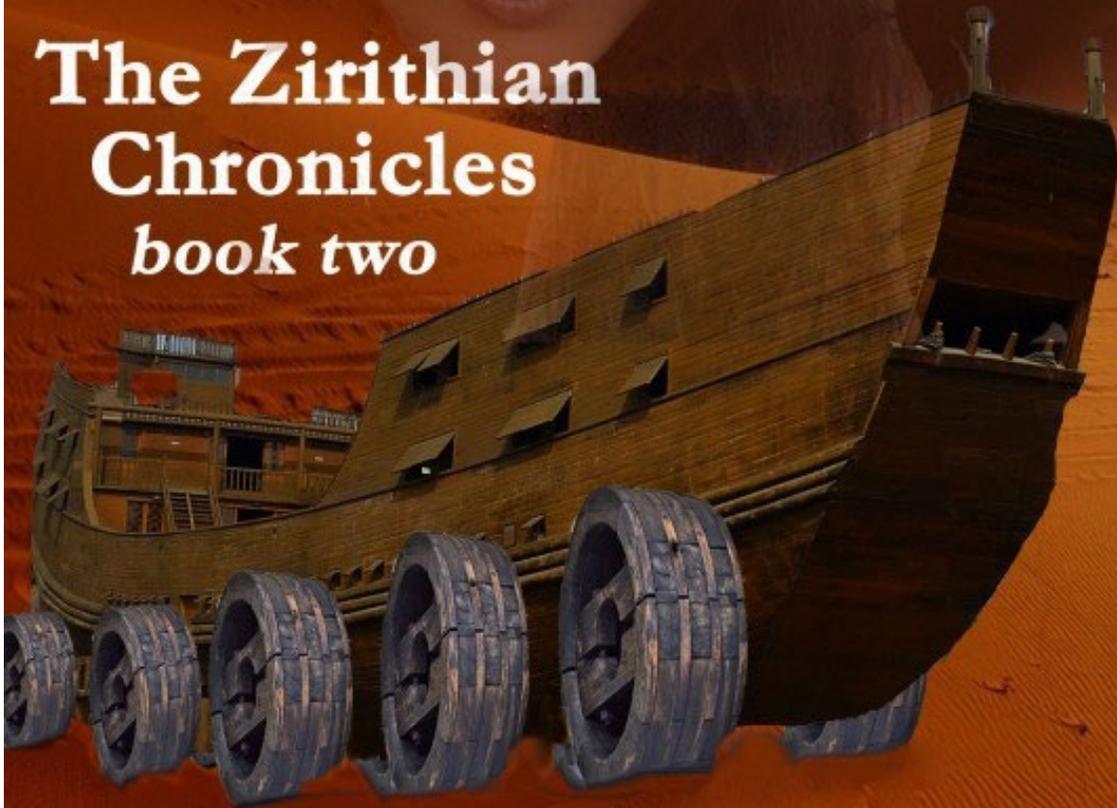
Clare Seven



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The Zirithian Chronicles – book two

Smashwords Edition

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Publisher's note to the Smashwords edition

This edition of "Slave To The Wheel", the second book in the Zirithian Chronicles series, has been edited to meet the requirements of some retailers. It remains a story strictly for adults, a dark, sci-fi horror that pulls no punches and will have the reader cringing at the misfortunes of the heroine, but some of the more explicit and erotic passages have been removed or rewritten.

An unexpurgated edition of "Slave To The Sands" is available from some other ebook sellers and can be found in the "erotica" section of those retailers.

Chapter 1

Anya was led as a slave in the dismal coffle. She still wore the ankle fetters and hand manacles that had been attached to her by the slavers in Urra. As it was, led in a line of seven pathetic slaves, this made her predicament bad enough. What made matters worse however, was the manner in which the guards treated the women, whipping them at every opportunity or when one threatened to slow the others. She had been purchased by another 'human' – the English woman, who appeared to have made the crossing to this strange world in which Anya found herself a slave. They were in various states of bondage, albeit all were in chains and all had piercings of one sort or another.

The slaves had been chained together for their short journey from the slave market in the walled city of Urra to the massive sandships that lay 'docked' outside the walls. A length of heavy iron chain had been used to tether them together. The chain itself had been fastened at each end with an iron ball, both to prevent its slippage through the links at each slave and, in Anya's opinion, to add an element of discomfort to any untoward movement the coffle might make. The ball, although weighty, was lighter than the tortuous device that Anya had had to carry across the desert sands in Elias's slave train, after she had been captured so many days before – its tormenting weight attached via chain to the piercing between her legs.

The issue with her current predicament, although less debilitating perhaps than had been her situation when she had been 'in ball', as the slavers had called it, was that the guards had fed the chain through the thick ring piercing her, which made the act of walking at any pace difficult and distinctly uncomfortable. Luckily, she had been placed sixth in line, and thus only felt the pull of the ball lightly through the chain. She realised that had she been placed at the back of the gruesome column of women, the pain would have been more tangible. She tried to remind herself just how 'lucky' she was, as she walked across the hot sands, legs wide apart to avoid the rubbing of the ring and the chain.

The naked women struggled over the soft terrain, their grunts and gasps punctuated by loud screams as a long, thick whip was used by one of the guards to drive them onward. Anya looked down as she struggled to walk, seeing once

more the wheel-like, eight spoked brand that had been placed upon her lower belly, just above her pubic hair – symbolic of her newfound status as a ‘work slave’ – sensing the cruel smiles of the guards at her predicament. She heard the whip slice through the air before she felt it across her lower back.

“AUGHHHH! DAMMIT!”

The sting was like fire as she twisted and the chains rattled. She could almost feel the welt rise across her flesh. Combined with the whipping Elias had given her between her legs and the lashes she had received on her journey across the desert with his slavers, she was welted and striped with the marks of a slave.

One of the guards screamed something at her in a language she did not understand – although unlike the creatures that had taken her what seemed like eons ago, these men were human rather than vaguely reptilian as Elias had been. She had not seen him or that bastard Michelson, who she realised had been responsible (through his tech geek Balham) for sending her to this place. She had even thought that this whole thing had been some sort of computer generated test at first. The state of her body and her approaching exhaustion, however, combined with thirst and hunger, as well as the newly formed pain across her back, reminded her that it was not. And still her mind wondered at Michelson’s words when he had told her that her husband, Carlos, was not only still alive – but was on this vile world. In addition, he had said he would reveal Carlos’ location to her, but had left only a one word message after he had tried to have her body and had failed at pleasing himself or her; the one word, Chelen. She also remembered how Elias – the vile reptilian slaver who had whipped her, had also made love to her. She had never climaxed like that before, and so many times as he thrust at her, and his hands had pleased her so much.

“AYEEAHHHH!”

The whip reminded her where she was once more, as it welted across the backs of her thighs, pulling the chain as it struck and sending lancing pain through her.

She could remember going into the office with Balham on that fateful morning so long ago when all of this had started, and the ‘gate’ that had opened into this vile and hostile world. This place was so far from that isolated office building in California that she could still scarcely believe it was real. She looked down at her naked body, clad only in chains and thick piercings. She reminded herself of

how she had looked at her figure in the reflection of the window, going in on that day when everything had changed for her, before she had been made a chained slave. Her striking blue eyes, her broad features; she could not see her dark brown hair – still in an unkempt bob, but she knew it was dishevelled and scruffy now. She had been fit, even muscled before. Now she was lean, leaner than she had ever been, with muscles standing out like knots in her arms and legs – not only through the considerable distance she had been walking but also through a lack of carbohydrates, her body having switched over to burn the fats from the poor food she had been eating, as fuel.

She had first seen the ‘ships’ as she left the walls of the city. They stood like enormous, apparently wooden, barge-like vessels on the soft sands. They were ship-like, she told herself, although enormous wheels adorned each of the sides. She could not take her eyes from them as her bare feet paced through the sand toward them, chains rattling as the motley group of slaves moved toward their fate. She estimated that the large sandship in front of her was over two hundred feet long and at least sixty feet wide. As it did not need to travel on the sea, it was squarish, the upper deck being at least thirty feet above the sands. She could see cargo being loaded with rudimentary slinging apparatus, which was mounted on the sides of the thing. Yes, she reasoned, it was more like a barge than a ship, and the wheels – large and wide and again made of heavy wood, would give the massive vehicle traction over the sands. She could count ten of the large wheels on one side along the outside of the barge, supporting the structure above it with what looked like complex woodwork, and even some metallic substance that glistened in the sunlight.

Her thoughts were dispelled as the whip fell again across her back and she screeched. The fire of the lash had been so stinging this time and she arched even as she gasped, suppressing the lancing pain of the slap.

She could see now where a wide wooden access-way had been lowered from the rear of the ‘vessel’. As she saw that the cofile of slave women was being herded toward the access, it was as if her mind fully realised the import of what was happening. She would be a slave on the sandship – naked and chained, most likely. Did that mean that she would be worked to death? She wanted to cry, but the soldier in her refused those tears, preferring instead to remind her to raise her head proudly and defiantly, despite her nakedness, her chains and the welt marks of the whip. She clenched her teeth together and set her jaw, as her bare feet cleared the hot sand and began to pad up the rough wooden access plank –

heading toward her fate on the barge.

The coffle of chained women seemed to pause slightly as it reached the top of the gangplank, and entered the main deck. Two thick masts, adorned with rudimentary sails, dominated the deck, though even these were not the most striking aspect. The heat of the sun burned the naked women who stood there taking in the awe of the spectacle that was presented before them. Finally, the nature of the work that a 'work slave' or a 'wheel slave' might do, and even the reasoning behind the red brand that she had been seared on her lower belly was made clear to Anya.

Along the length of the long upper level, near the crude hand railing, large, eight-spoked wheels were positioned above where the wheels were below. They were wooden, yet almost geometrically perfect, and shaped just like the brand she now wore. She realised too that each spoked wheel was geared and lubricated such that its being turned would slowly turn the heavy wooden wheels that linked the barge decks to the sand. Cargo was being loaded onto the hot, wooden deck, and being lowered through grilles into cargo space below it, but even the movement of cargo could not take attention away of that which all the slave women now stared at.

Each wheel was adorned with chained female slaves. They were at rest – of course – since there was no requirement to turn the filthy black wheels at this time. Anya could not suppress the fear that took her, threatening to engulf her. Most leaned against the central post of the wheel, and as Anya looked down, she could understand why none of them lay down. Their passage – as they turned the wheel, took them around and around on a steel grille, with drainage holes. This grille was doused and covered in waste. She could smell the stink of it. She could see, further up the deck, that the grilles were being brushed – water perhaps being too rare a commodity to waste on the filthy deck of a cargo sandship.

All of the women were naked, and from what she could see, all bore the brand – the brand of slavery – on their lower bellies. As she continued to stare, she could make out additional details. The uncomfortable chain that she bore through the ring that pierced her was a marked requirement on this vessel, it seemed. In order to secure each of the eight (or in some cases less) women to each of the capstans that bore the eight-spoked wheel, a chain ran right around – linking each of the slaves and presumably making it difficult to veer much from the task

at hand – the horrible labour of pushing the thick spoke and thus the wheel.

The whip fell again on the cuffle of slaves as she walked on, encouraged by a shouted command from a guard who clearly did not appreciate the fact that Anya and her chain sisters had slowed down to look at the spectacle and the promise of hellish hard labour that lay in their future. The lash had fallen mainly on the woman behind Anya, but she felt its tip whistle past and strike her buttock as she twisted and yelped, moving along in the uncomfortable chains.

The women at the wheels shared one unenviable characteristic: each looked exhausted. They were dark skinned, lighter skinned, heavily sunburned, and all had been driven well beyond their capacity for hard work. In addition, each slave appeared to have been well whipped. Their backs bore considerable numbers of stripes, old and new. Some of the older, more haggard women almost appeared close to death, as the cuffle was driven further up the deck. At selected wheels, the line was made to stop, and one of the new slaves was released from her chain, and pushed toward a wheel, before being secured in the chain ring that ran around the slaves, and through their painful tether.

The line of slaves lessened as they moved along the long, miserable deck. Anya wanted to be sick. The condition of the some of the women was completely wretched. Some simply sat on the grille, staring into space, hair dishevelled, bodies apparently bent from the work and covered with horrid welts, old and new, from the vile whips of the overseers. She could see some of the overseers now, near the cabin-like structures at the end of the deck, and some near one of the masts, both men and women, clad in loincloths and sandals. They appeared to be human, their skin burned by the sun in this place. The women were mostly blonde, as were some of the men, while other men were smaller and bent – almost like animals. What other surprises and, indeed, races of humans did this vile place have to offer, she wondered as she felt the woman behind her being untethered with a gasp. She felt the weight of the ball on the end of the long chain dragging at her now as she continued to walk, urged forward with one more lash of the whip across her buttocks as she writhed and bit down hard on the scream that her body wanted to give out in reaction to the hard welt.

A guttural grunt convinced her to stop with the other women, as she felt the chain unfastened from its ball and pulled through the ring, snagging at her as it slipped through and she cried out. She was pushed toward one of the spokes on a massive wheel on what would have been the starboard side, if these people even

understood the term.

She watched as one of the guards untethered the chain from the slaves who lay collapsed or kneeling against the massive capstan. In similar fashion to her transport here, she noted that the slaves were tethered via a ring and chain – as she had seen upon first arriving onto the deck. As this ran around all eight slaves that were used to push the wheel, and the diameter of the chain did not allow it to be pulled outside the diameter of the spokes. The women, though tethered loosely perhaps in contrast to their predicament, had they been chained to the spoke or capstan itself and were effectively unable to escape the ‘wheel’.

Anya looked down at her brand once more; dull red, deep, and she noticed that the redness in the skin surrounding the seared mark had now disappeared, despite the darker appearance of her sunburnt, naked body. She saw the mark of the wheel, a crude copy of the real wheel, the thing that she would be tethered around – inescapable, no matter how much freedom this form of chaining apparently allowed her. Perhaps that was added torture for the slaves. Conservative chaining, yet the agony of not being able to escape the source of agonising labour, with welts of the whip designed to drive the pathetic women forward to greater heights of exhaustion.

She flinched, and stopped her forward motion. Once she was chained here, she would never escape. They would drive her in the same manner they had driven these other wretches, until she was worked to death. She saw one older woman, burnt dark brown from the sun. She was bent, had teeth missing, and her eyes told of her story of pain and suffering at the wheel. She reasoned that the woman had been here for years. She would not, could not, let herself become that wretch. No!

She brought her elbow up, using practised skills and reflexes honed from a life of soldiering, bringing it crunching into the face of the guard to her right. She dropped, sweeping her legs around to put another guard behind her on the ground. She was unchained now. She could make it. She had no time to think about what she might do, even if she did get off the barge, but knew that she had to try. The soldier in her would never forgive her if she did not try, she reasoned, rather than simply give in to a life of chained slavery. With speed that surprised even herself, she bounded and leapt across the prone guards, heading back toward the gangplank and the way they had come, the thick rings between her legs and her breasts bouncing as she moved. No time, she thought, as she saw

that even now men were pulling it in, as if the barge were about to get underway.

By now, the guards that had been with the coffle further up the deck had realised that a slave was about to make her escape, and were running behind her shouting, even while overseers too, apparently disbelieving what they were watching, started to react.

It did not matter to her that the crude gangplank had been pulled in. She would run for the opening in the rail that surrounded the deck, and jump to the sand if necessary. If she broke her legs, then at least they would not be able to use her at the wheel. Perhaps death was the only luxury afforded her in this vile place. She thought of Carlos then, and gasped. Michelson had told her that Carlos was alive, that her husband, who she had long thought killed in action, was actually in this abhorrent place. Michelson had even left her a clue; a place called Chelen. Thinking about Carlos had made her slow, she reasoned later. She was not sure if it had been one of the guards, or even one of the more lithe overseers who had managed to bridge the distance to the naked slave who had been running for the edge of the deck.

She instinctively put her hands around her neck as she felt the long whipcord slash and wrap around it, stopping her forward motion and yanking her off her feet, and she grunted, her body falling to the wooden deck with a crunch. Then they were on her. She could not count the lashes that fell across her naked body as she lay writhing, each guard or overseer seemingly wishing to demonstrate both what happened to an escapee and the fact that they had the authority to beat a naked slave when required.

She lay screaming and crying out, twisting and crawling in a vain effort to get away from the burning leather whip strokes.

“Berash,” the cry came ultimately. Some lashes landed subsequent to the shout, but within seconds the savage whipping seemed to have ended.

It had been a woman’s voice, and nearby, Anya reasoned, as she tried to collect herself amidst the blinding fiery pain that covered her flesh. She grunted, shaking, and looked up, between the legs of the men and women with whips that surrounded her now. She could see the woman who had spoken; tall, clad in a long white dress and sandals, designed to keep her cool in the harsh climate of this desert world. It was the English woman, the woman who had purchased her

at the slave market. Her hair was grey and tied harshly back, making her look dangerous and evil.

Another command in a foreign language and Anya was pulled to her feet. She winced and gasped as the pain of the whips reminded her of why it was not a good idea to attempt escape, or at least to get caught while doing so.

“For an Earth woman, you seem to lack common sense,” she said as she looked at the fresh raw welts marking Anya’s body,

Anya sighed and panted, gritting her teeth against the harsh stinging welts that she had received.

“Isn’t it... a slave’s duty to e... escape?” she stammered, her head falling with the effort.

“No. It is not. Unfortunately, you’ll be crucified on the mast now for your ridiculous actions.”

Chapter 2

“What?” Anya’s head shot up in response as she stared at the English woman.

“Yes. Your hands will be nailed to a beam, then the beam hauled up the mast and secured, before your feet are nailed to the mast at height, so that all the slaves can see what happens to those who try to escape. What did you think might happen?”

Anya stared at her.

“I hadn’t given it much thought,” she retorted, trying to steel her resolve.

“Clearly not,” the woman said, staring blankly at her. “Something you can think about while your arms are nailed to the beam and a spike has been nailed through your feet, as you writhe in agony until you die.”

Anya stared at her, amazed at how cold and calculating her voice was, as she spoke of crucifying her, another human being, another woman from Earth. What had this barbaric place done to her, to make her so callous and cruel, that she would simply stare and state how she would die?

The words were out of her mouth before she could stop them.

“You expect me to beg for my life, is that it?” She winced, the sting of the horrible lashes subsiding a little on her welted body.

“No. I simply expect you to suffer and die. Your cries might keep me awake for a few nights as you dance on the cross, but that will encourage the slaves that remain to work hard and forget any similar heroic ideas of escape.”

Anya narrowed her eyes. In another time, she almost recognised the woman – or at least her type. She talked like a diplomat, but a cold and calculating one. She had acted as bodyguard for enough of them in countries across the world to recognise the type.

“You know I’m from Earth. How could you even consider this?” Anya fought

hard to keep the tremors from her voice. She glanced behind her. Already, two of the male overseers were pulling a long, squarish lump of timber toward them. She swallowed nervously. They were going to nail her hands or arms to that and drag her up the mast? Oh God, she thought. Her heart was pounding. Instinctively she looked at the tall mast in front of her, the makeshift sails gathered in. Yes, there at a point about twenty feet above the deck, she could make out holes where nails had been put through the wood and, lower down, a multitude of large, apparently deep holes, where feet had obviously been spiked to the mast. She wondered how they could reach, even as her thought was answered by the dragging sound of a rough ladder being pulled across the deck. They were going to do it. They were going to crucify her. She could feel a nervous sheen of sweat across her body. She had been under stress before, under intense fire from people who wanted to kill her, but this was worse; this was much worse.

Her lip trembled as she stared at the woman, her greying hair implacable even as the slight breeze shook its edges. Was there nothing she held dear?

“You bitch!” Anya said, tears welling in her eyes as she felt her arms grabbed, felt herself being pushed to the deck. Thick ropes were being pulled tightly around her arms, with a spacer block placed under the wood that she would be nailed to. The logical part of her mind told her that this was to prevent her being nailed to the deck. They had thought of everything.

She started to struggle, slowly at first and then more forcefully as they pulled on the ropes, holding her fast to the thick beam and tying her to it. From somewhere, a heavy peen hammer was produced, and then she saw the nails.

She cried out, struggled, pulled at the ropes and kicked her feet.

“No. Wait! NO!”

The nails were perhaps half an inch thick and at least six inches long. She could not take her eyes off them, watching them closely as one of the women handed it to the man with the hammer, who slowly, delicately, brought it near her hand. Her instinctively clenched fist mattered little as the point of the nail was placed on her wrist. She struggled desperately.

“No! Dammit. You can’t! NO!”

She felt the point of the nail on her wrist, felt the strength of the man holding it, as the overseer with the hammer knelt to support the blow that would come. She stared at the sky. This was it, she considered. This was the end, and she would die screaming on a mast.

The English woman screamed a single word, just as the man with the hammer had raised the tool, and was about to bring it down upon the nail, pinning her to the wood in agony. He stopped, responding to the command. The woman stepped forward, and the overseers moving aside as she neared.

“I will spare your life, perhaps because you are from Earth, perhaps because it would be unfair for me to end it here, now, before you have the chance to understand, explore and suffer all of the degradations and pain of slavery.”

Anya was slowly untied and pulled to her feet, the overseers, almost afraid, showing deference and respect for this mysterious woman. Anya’s face was level with hers now, and for the first time she stared completely into the face of her enemy. There was no other word that accurately described her for Anya. This mysterious woman, from her home planet of Earth, had bought her as a slave, seen her made to walk naked and chained across the sands, and now tormented her by threatening to have her crucified to the mast of this crude vessel. She hoped that not having carried out the threat to have her put to death was not just a temporary reprieve, and that she would not once more be forced down upon her back.

“No. Perhaps it would be best to see you work as a slave should do for a while first. After all, I did spend money on you. You have a strong back and strong legs.”

She moved a hand forward as Anya shuddered, squeezing the muscles of one arm before brushing against her breast with the side of her hand, and moving to her thigh, her thumb playing with the ring between Anya’s legs. She smiled, and said something in the foul language that Anya did not understand. One of the female overseers moved off, as if in response to the order.

“You will be placed in the ‘hot helm’, perhaps for a week, perhaps even months, until I decide that you have learnt your lesson. In the helm, you will continue to serve me at the wheel. After all...” she said, running her smooth hand across Anya’s breasts, “I want my damned money’s worth.”

She nodded at one of the women behind Anya, who proceeded to lower something large and metallic over her head as the overseers held her steady. Anya struggled, but there were too many strong arms holding her in place. She felt the heavy steel, rusted in places, being placed on her head, as its two halves were closed about her and darkness filled her vision.

“You can’t put me in this thing!” she screamed, the echo of her plea reverberating about the steel head enclosure.

She had been punished by the hideous cruel devices available on this planet before. She had been put in ball; she had been horribly whipped, but this was different. Already the heat was stifling. Her vision was limited only to a small grille-like mouthpiece that appeared to be the only part of the helm that opened, once it was fixed in place. The helm was roughly round, globe like, in two halves that were crudely hinged – and it was so very heavy. A collar secured it in place as it was locked around her neck, and her head fell forward with the weight. She had worn light Kevlar helmets when she had been a soldier, and old timers had joked about how light they were compared to the ‘steel pots’ that they had had to wear in battle. But this was very different; crude steel beaten into a globe that was worn by the slave as severe punishment. Perhaps being crucified might have been preferable. She would have been allowed to die in this place then. As it was, she had no idea how long she would have to wear this debilitating device, which made it brutally difficult to breathe and already made her gasp at the heat inside. What would it be like to work in? She dared not to imagine. She shouted her defiance, and almost deafened herself with the loud echo that resonated again around the steel chamber that now surrounded her head. The small grille on the lower part of the globe was designed to be opened so that she might be fed, she realised. They were truly going to keep her encased in this thing.

She was being pulled and jeered across the deck now, with no means of really seeing where she was going, as the grille in the face plate only allowed her to see her blistered feet and the deck.

“Welcome to slavery at the wheel,” she heard the woman say.

Chapter 3

Anya was exhausted.

The chain that connected her to the other slaves ran through the ring between her legs, as she had seen when she had first boarded the strange sandship. That had been days ago. She had been led by such a chain after she had been bought, though she had not reckoned with the constant grinding that links made as they moved. The constant motion of pushing the heavy wheel with the other slaves meant that the chain would be pulled to and fro through the ring, making her flesh raw and sensitive and, with prolonged exposure, each step meant movement and the touch of the sun warmed links, which at times became maddening, while at other times was strangely exciting. The contrast of both feelings was torment itself. She could hear, outside the confines of the heavy punishment helm that she still wore, how some women appeared to have been driven to bouts of euphoria then crying with the chain, its movement driving them mad with pain and some perverted desire that they could not fulfil with their filthy hands and fingers, lest the overseers bring the harsh whip across their back. She walked on, her toes sometimes falling into the holes of the steel grille on which she walked, which became so very hot and slippery in the midday sun, along with the steel of the torture helmet that she wore.

The grille was a very practical device. The stink of the waste that fell into it rose and seemed to fill the confines of the helmet, so much so that the stink of shit seemed to be in her nostrils all the time. She could hear the massive gears rotate below as she helped push the spokes of the wheel, reasoning that somehow they were greased or at least made immune to the vagaries of waste that fell through the grille onto them. Such detritus made the grille itself very slippery, such that it was difficult to grip the surface with bare feet when walking normally, and Anya was forced to try to find the slots and holes in it so that she could painfully push her toes inside and thereby gain leverage to push the wheel. She had tried simply moving with the other slaves, letting them do the work, though the overseers were no fools and did not take long to bring their long leather whips down hard across the backs, buttocks or legs of those women who might attempt such trickery.

The weight of the metal helmet had made it doubly hard for Anya to endure the tortuous labour. At times, she had been able to let it lean on the massive spoke that she pushed with filthy hands, its weight making her head and neck ache, the heated air inside it making it difficult to breathe and making her faint during those periods when the pace of the wheel was increased, and the savage thick whips of the overseers fell across her back.

Each time she screeched as the whip fell, she almost deafened herself, the resounding echo of her cry forced around the helmet. She could feel her matted hair on her face, plastered to her head with dried sweat. Though the slaves were washed each week or so, water was scarce and the helmet was never removed, so that she could bathe her face or hair.

The slaves ate a rough, hard biscuit of some sort, which Anya convinced herself must be energy giving, and yet this also helped to bind up the slaves' stomachs to the extent that waste was not an overly difficult issue for the gears and wheels that turned and rattled below the deck. Perhaps, she even reasoned in her dark imagination, the biscuit was seasoned such that the waste the slaves produced helped lubricate the wheels in some way. Feeding however, at least for her, was even more the prerogative of the overseers, as they decided when the grilled lower front of the helmet could be opened for her to feed or drink. On each occasion that it was, and food was thrust toward her, she ate vigorously and drank deeply, like a caged animal.

Water was available, but harshly rationed – though, of course, even the owners of the slave ship recognised that women could not work under harsh conditions without relatively copious amounts of it.

She was not chained for all of the day, though, as it transpired, hers was the worst shift. So as to keep the wheels turning and the barge moving across the desolate sands (the geography of which she could only imagine – being forced to see very little of it), the slaves gained no breaks during their twelve-hour shift. In order to get most from the purchased slaves (presumably before they died and were cast overboard), the slaves were removed from their capstans but still held in their chains, then led to the deck below via grilles in the deck, to cages that lined the spaces across the beam of the ship, between the giant cogs that turned the wheels. The grinding noise made it difficult to sleep, though the gradual numbing exhaustion and the debilitating effects of constantly wearing the helmet made her collapse, her limbs aching, into a deep sleep – only to be woken by the

slap of the lash all too soon after she had started her rest.

None of the slaves in her 'ring' appeared to speak English. The mind-numbing drudgery continued until she lost count of the days, the weeks, that passed. She did not know if they had reached civilisation, another city, or even where they were in relation to the city of Urra where she had been bought as a work slave.

As the sun rose one morning, however, there was significant consternation, both with the slaves in her ring and the overseers who had come to wake them. In the night, one of the older slaves, whose voice had been distinctive and aged when she spoke, had died. She gasped as she felt the ring pulled through and past her flesh, sensitive and tender from the days of working in close proximity to the horrid chain. She heard whines and the welts of the lash, which made her jump, as another slave was made to join the ring and it was re-secured through the connecting steel that pierced her and those of the other slaves.

“All right... ALL RIGHT!”

She heard the words, and they seemed alien to her after so many weeks of listening to the hard guttural speech of the natives.

“You... you speak English,” she said, her voice hoarse and strained inside the helmet. She repeated the words louder, so that the new woman who had joined her slave ring could hear, almost deafening herself in the process. She heard her stir in the vile, wet straw, which should have been changed days, probably weeks, before.

“Yes,” she said, her accent clearly English, but of a higher pitch than the owner of the barge who had tried to have Anya crucified to the mast.

“Please... I... how long have you been on this hell ship?”

Anya found herself moving forward as she spoke, the echo of her croaking words reverberating around the heavy steel that she wore, as the locked collar moved awkwardly and the weight made her head duck forward.

She felt around on the filthy deck, trying to get closer to the first woman who she had heard speak her language since she had been placed in the helmet. Her hands flailed in front of her, until she felt her hold her arms.

“It’s ok. Hey, ease down, it’s ok,” the woman said soothingly. “My name is Sarah. What’s yours?” she asked, her voice calming as they both moved against the difficult restrictions of the ring piercing, now tethered together since its release from the capstan so that the slaves were still held in a ‘ring’, though now free to lie and try to rest in the filth of the deck cell.

Anya felt the suppressed emotion of the last weeks – propagated by living in chains, naked, being whipped and held in chained bondage – wanting to escape. She suppressed the tears, as she had held back so many tears in her past, burying the pain deep, hoping it would stay buried, yet realising that some of it would surface in her nightmares, no matter how hard she tried.

“Anya,” she croaked.

Sarah ran her hands up Anya’s arms, trying to sooth her and relax her, as much as she could a whipped slave in a punishment helmet.

“I saw them put you in the helm, when you arrived. Why did you try to escape, Anya?”

She raised her head in response.

“You expect me to become a slave, like the rest of...”

She sighed then, as the tears came, her sobbing loud within the steel confines of her headgear.

“Easy now,” Sarah said in her polite English vernacular, moving closer to Anya on the wet straw so that she could feel the warmth of her leg and body beside her. “But you are a slave, as am I. We just have to learn to accept it.”

“How long have you been on this ship?”

“Two years... give or take a week or so,” Sarah replied, her voice distinct now since it spoke in words that Anya could understand.

“What? Are you trying to tell me that being naked and chained and whipped as a slave gets better?” Her voice reverberated, and she let the helmet rest against the rusted bars of the cage, her chain rattling as she moved.

“Easy now. Just do as they say and work hard, that’s all I mean. If they see that you might last a while, they’ll remove the helmet rather than damage a useful asset, I mean. If nothing else, Captain Carlagh Janson has never been known to have a slave put to death until she had maximised her use.”

“You know the Captain?” Anya asked, exhausted. She could feel her dry cracked lips, swollen and sore. She hoped they would unlock the front of the helmet soon and let her eat and drink.

“Yes, I know her.”

“And you are from Earth too?”

“Good,” she replied.

“Good?” Anya queried, surprised by her response.

“Yes. You have accepted that you are on another world. It takes most women months to even begin to admit that this isn’t some sort of video game. Ha. When Balham put me through I...”

“What? Balham?” Anya sat up and immediately regretted it, as pain lanced through her exhausted body and the heavy steel pulled her head down.

“Easy now,” Sarah responded. “Yes. You know him?”

“He was the bastard that put me through!”

The disturbance created by Anya’s raised voice had attracted the attentions of a guard, who pounded across the deck, in front of the slowly turning wheels pushed by the nightshift slaves above, as he avoided the dripping from the grilles.

He barked something through the cage. Sarah replied in the guttural tongue that he had spoken in – begging forgiveness, it seemed, and soothing Anya by stroking her arms and breasts. Anya gasped at her touch. The guard laughed, placated perhaps. Anya could hear him walking away.

“What did you tell him?” she said, curious.

“That you needed to be... satisfied sexually, and you were making a little too much noise.”

“What?... but I...”

“Forget it. It got rid of him, didn’t it?”

“Why were you involved with Balham,” she asked, hoping that Sarah had not noticed the slight writhing of her hips at the suggestion that she could be satisfied sexually.

“I was part of the team that developed the gate,” she replied, almost matter-of-factly. “That little bastard Balham worked for me,” she sighed. Anya could hear her breathing slowly, as if trying to calm herself and forget the fact that she had been made a slave – as if she had come to terms with it. She made a mental note to let herself never come to terms with it as Sarah had.

She could just make out her new companion’s lithe and sunburnt figure through the perforations in the mouth area of the helmet. Her body bore marks of the lash, almost everywhere, it seemed. Anya wondered if this apparent ‘scientist’ had been a little heavier before she arrived here – the slavery ‘diet plan’ having worked wonders on her figure, if not on her flesh.

“You said you knew the Captain?”

Sarah snorted and laughed. Anya watched the tight muscles of her legs shake as she moved closer. Her legs were filthy, her feet blistered and hard from the daily effort of pushing the wheel.

“Yes. I used to work for her. Until she got greedy, and had me enslaved to the wheel.”

As she said the words, Anya could just discern Sarah’s own wheel brand, partially covered by dirt and sweat but still clearly visible. The dark pubic hairs were also apparent, having been allowed to grow wild within the vagaries of wheel slavery. Anya wanted to cry again. The knowledge that she would become a naked chained thing, destined to push as part of the vast machine and be whipped and otherwise used, for all she knew until she dropped, fell on her again. She tried to talk, knowing that if she did not, despair would grip her. She was a soldier, dammit!

“She made you a slave? Why?”

For the first time Sarah sighed in response.

“I threatened to go public with what she and Michelson, and Balham of course, had been doing. She was the brains behind the operation and had a lot of clout.”

“Had?”

“Well, there was the inevitable break-up.”

“What do you mean?”

“A fallout. Michelson and Janson had a violent disagreement.”

“Violent?”

“He tried to have her killed. One of his mercenaries,” Sarah said quietly.

“Wait. I was...”

“Oh, I see,” she interrupted. “I was about to ask what it was you did for the company. Did you ever have to kill anyone for him?” Sarah’s tone had suddenly changed.

“No. No, things never got that far for me.” Realisation struck her like a hammer. “Wait. You know of others who have been sent through the gate?”

“Yes, many,” she said, suddenly surprised by Anya’s insistent tone and the fact that she had forcibly moved her helmeted head from the bars it had rested on, as if wanting to see and stare at her as she spoke.

“A man... a merc, named Carlos?”

She felt Sarah tense.

“Carlos?”

“Yes... he was my... I worked with him. Michelson told me he was here when he was... with me.”

Something told her not to reveal everything just yet, despite the fact that her heart was racing beneath her naked breasts.

“Carlos?” she repeated. “Carlos was the one they sent to kill Janson,” she whispered slowly.

Chapter 4

There had been little opportunity to talk after the revelation that her husband, the man who Anya had thought dead before coming here, had been ordered to kill the cruel captain of the sandship – a former scientist in Michelson’s employ. It was all getting very complicated.

A scramble of filthy, naked bodies meant that the food was coming. Chains rattled, and hungry, thirsty slave women shuffled to the bars in the hope that they might get enough food and water to continue living their pathetic existence, and so the frustrating questions that Anya needed answered would have to remain open.

Guards entered and unlocked the front plate that allowed her to eat amidst the scramble of sweating bodies. Invariably, this meant that Anya would only be able to get crumbs, broken pieces of the strange ‘biscuit’ that they were forced to eat, and the dregs of the available water, as the debilitating helmet not only reduced her ability to fight for food and water, but also made it more difficult to even see the paltry morsels that were provided.

Some rest followed, but the crowded cell, with some women trying to eat (or ‘feed’, as it seemed they were more like working animals than anything else), made it impossible to continue the conversation with Sarah.

All too soon, the slaves were put back to work, driven with whips and tethered via their chains around the capstans, each desperate soul faced with the prospect of exhausting herself, being savagely whipped, and with the constant threat of crucifixion, or worse, should their dreams of escape turn to action.

Though Anya had got used to the changed weight distribution of the helmet, her neck and shoulders now ached constantly. The overseers, of course, helped little, knowing when, and indeed how, to apply the lash for maximum effectiveness. She shrieked, echoes bouncing around her silent prison, whenever the thick lash landed harshly across her back or legs. There was no escape, merely the pushing of the wheel, around and around, her toes pushing against the filthy steel grille, seeking purchase on the dripping holes that formed its structure.

Sarah had been behind her during the arduous slave shifts, whispering words of encouragement or cursing in the guttural language of the natives when the heavy whip slapped harshly across her back. Anya bore her own share of the lash, wincing and crying out whenever it landed across her back, filthy buttocks or legs.

At night, when the sound of the night slaves toiling above were punctuated by the exhausted moans, and shouts borne of nightmare from the slaves in the cages, Anya and Sarah lay beside each other. Anya had grown a little stronger, mostly due to Sarah making sure that she got enough food for both of them. She had got into a few scuffles, but she appeared to be stronger and more ready for violence than most of the weaker native women, and thus ensured at least that Anya would not go hungry when the helmet was opened.

Anya had asked Sarah to tell her about Carlos, about her husband. Something held her back from revealing the full truth, however, believing that she might find out more if she kept her relationship to Carlos hidden. She merely informed Sarah that he had been someone she had worked with in the past.

After some nights, she had resolved to ask Sarah to teach her the language.

“It will take a while,” she had responded, without thinking.

“It seems I have nothing better to do,” she said, loudly enough so that Sarah could hear it outside the helmet.

“Sorry, of course...”

Their legs had rubbed together in the tight confines of the cage, each becoming more akin to the feel and smell of each other – something that Anya could never have considered back on Earth, unless she had been in prison or captured. Her current situation was worse than even that, she considered. Even if she could escape, where could she run to?

She felt Sarah’s hand move up her leg, her fingers tugging lightly on the ring, as she gasped.

“Wait... are... we allowed?”

She heard herself utter the words. What was she saying? She had never had any

interest in women, and yet here she was, letting Sarah start to fondle her. She gasped as she felt her fingers probe and pull lightly.

“A lot of us do it,” Sarah whispered, teasing the area around her belly.

“I... I... stink,” was all she could find to say.

“So do I...”

Suddenly, Anya felt Sarah’s hand pull away sharply. She could sense, just at the edge of what the helmet allowed her still to hear, footsteps on the lower deck, getting louder in their approach. Guards? No wonder Sarah had retracted her probing hand so quickly. Anya winced slightly. Despite her disgust, she had wanted Sarah to continue, and explore further. There was something about being a slave that made any contact, any touch, welcome amidst the misery of a life of hard labour, nakedness and chains.

A guttural voice. A woman’s, and the cage was opened.

“Hello, Sarah,” it also said, in English. Janson? It was the captain. The cruel woman who had stopped just short of having her crucified to the mast.

Sarah began to stand, tugging on the slightly wet chain and making Anya grunt.

“What do you want here... Captain?”

“You’d better sit right back down, slave,” Janson replied, using the term with such derision. “Or I’ll have you flogged until your back is raw, and then leave you on the sands for the Gilroths to feed on.”

Anya could almost feel Sarah’s shudder from where she lay.

“I’m fine, Captain,” she answered to the unasked question. “How are you, since you had me put in chains?”

“I’ll get a few more years from you yet, Sarah. You seem to be getting stronger.” She asked something in the native tongue of one of the overseers, who appeared to answer in the affirmative.

“Harus says you push well, although you can be recalcitrant. Perhaps you like

the lash, do you?”

“Not as much as you used to, Janson,” she said. Anya could almost sense Janson’s anger at the comment. Another guttural comment, and the whip began to fall across Sarah’s body.

Anya counted ten in all, harsh welts, which brought forth cries of angry defiance from Sarah, as the chain rattled and other slaves tried to get as far as the restraints would allow them in the confines of the cell. She could hear Sarah’s defiant gasps as she lay in the straw, trying to get onto her knees after it was over.

“It isn’t even you I’ve come for. It’s this one,” she said. Anya could just see her sandaled feet facing her.

“I want to see if it’s time to remove the helm. Well? Would you like that slave?”

“Yes,” Anya responded, without even thinking.

There was a gesture from above. Anya screeched as the whip lashed like fire across her breasts – agony coming from the fire of the lash and the painful movement of her bosom in response to the strike.

“Yes... Yes... Mistress,” she shouted finally.

“Better. Unchain her, have her cleaned and bring her to my cabin.”

* * * * *

Free from the confines of the chain, it was much easier to walk. Janson seemed to disappear momentarily, as the guards brought Anya to an area at the stern of the sandship. She was roughly cleaned, with what she felt was the equivalent of a thick haired brush. She could feel the marks the rough scrubbing was leaving upon her already abraded skin. Clearly, the cleaning of a slave needed little more than the most basic of implements. At least, she considered, the filthier parts of her anatomy were getting cleansed, despite the discomfort of the activity.

She walked slowly through the wooden corridors then, being taken no doubt to the captain's quarters. The helmet had remained in place – clearly they would not be washing her face – a face that she knew was covered with grime and dried sweat.

She could discern doors being opened and could feel the creaking wooden floor beneath her – the distant sound of the wheels and the crying of the slaves still evident. Having only really seen the size of the vessel from the outside as she was led to it, and on deck before she was placed in the helm, she had not really grasped the full extent of it, though it was brought home to her now. This end of the ship must have held cabins and perhaps offices.

She could smell the difference as she was brought into Captain Janson's cabin, however. She could see even through the grille how opulent it was: carpets, wooden fittings, comfortable chairs and sofa like furniture – and the distinct, almost overpowering smell, of perfume and something like incense.

“Bring her in,” Janson spoke from the far side of the room.

Anya could feel her standing in front of her as she was pushed across the carpeted floor.

“There. You do clean up quite nicely,” she said slowly, almost purring. Anya felt Janson's hands touch her breasts lightly. She raised her own hands in response, and then quickly stopped.

“You still display defiance, even now? Don't you want to have the helmet removed?”

“Yes. More than anything. Yes, Mistress,” Anya responded, surprised at the demure sound of her voice. It was as if her body, made weak by the restricting helmet, were answering for her, in its weakness. The marine she had been would never have spoken in such a manner – it would have shown weakness, yet, she reminded herself, the marine she had been had never been naked, whipped and humiliated like this. She resolved that she would remain unbroken.

Janson said something in the local language, and Anya gasped as the guards moved to the locks on the back of the steel helmet. They were going to take it off? She could hardly believe it.

“The helm will be removed, slave. I’m sure you are happy that your mistress has had the compassion to allow this? Well, speak, slave!”

Compassion? Anya balked. This from the woman who had wanted to have her crucified? But the excitement of the moment gripped her. She was having this damned thing removed from her head.

“Yes, Mistress. Thank you, Mistress,” she said from behind gritted teeth, her jaw set.

“Good,” she said, as Anya felt the final locks released and the helm pulled apart before being raised from her.

The rush of air to her nose and mouth was the first sensation. The coolness of that air was the second; the steel confines had heated horribly in the sun, burned her on the hotter days, made her breath hot and her head hotter. Now, the helm had gone. She could see, feel, breathe.

She stared at the woman who had wanted to crucify her so many days (or was it weeks?) before, who regarded her with an evil smile, her grey hair tied tightly back.

“There. The woman that I almost had nailed to the mast. Your face is a little less sunburnt than the rest of you,” she said.

She moved her hand to Anya’s head and pushed dried, stinking hair away from her face.

“Here... use the basin.”

She pointed to a wooden basin filled with water.

“Wash your head and hair, if you wish.”

Anya stumbled toward the water, wanting to drink it more than anything else, her rings rattling. As if sensing her thoughts, Janson spoke.

“There is drinking water to the side. Have your fill.”

Anya could see clearly how rich the chamber was now as she began to cup water

in her hands and raise it to her face. Then she saw the mirror.

She gasped at her own image. Her face was drawn, haggard and filthy. Her hair matted with grime and dried sweat. She could barely recognise the face – an image characterised by dark, tired eyes, withdrawn cheeks and badly puffed and cracked lips. She had once considered herself attractive. Now, she reminded herself of the older, more decrepit slaves who she had seen on the deck before she had been forced to wear the helmet.

“You see what the helmet does? Perhaps you would have preferred crucifixion?” Janson said, suddenly appearing behind her as she let the water fall through her fingers.

“Understand. If you do not do as I say here – and pass the test that I have prepared for you. I will put the helmet on for a year. Do you understand, slave?”

Anya gasped, turning sharply to her, as if the very thought terrified her.

“Yes. Yes, Mistress,” she stammered. Damn, she was becoming like a dog, she considered – alive and subservient to every foul whim of this woman.

She continued to wash and drink, wondering what devilish intent Janson had, trying to avoid the thought that she would face further torment or pain. The guards stayed back, though perhaps Janson still sensed Anya’s capabilities and preferred to keep armed men in the room.

“Here. You shall ride the horse for me.”

Anya turned toward the wooden apparatus that Janson now indicated, at one side of the room beneath a painting – of sorts, which appeared to show flying ships or gliders of some kind above a desert city.

The contrivance beneath was ugly and wooden. The wood itself seemed beautifully crafted, and stained with dark patches – although by its design, Anya could only suspect an instrument of torment. It looked nothing like a ‘horse’, however.

Two stout triangular legs, tapering to a stable base at the bottom and finely carved, supported the structure, although clearly there was no weight upon it... even as Anya realised that it was designed to take a human’s weight... in some

manner at least.

Janson reached out to one of Anya's breasts and squeezed, dragging her toward the thing as she winced and moaned. She wanted to raise her hands to this vile woman, put her in a neck grip and force her to the floor before pummeling the shit out of her, though she had to restrain herself; she had to. She did not want to be put back in that helmet or, worse, find that the threat of crucifixion might indeed be turned into reality at the whim of the demonic captain of this vessel.

The tapered posts that supported the device – Anya now realised that it was in fact crudely fastened to the wooden deck – were of different heights, such that the rounded rail that they supported had a gradient upon it. This angled to a dark, rounded wooden pommel, which sat atop the taller post. The rail was approximately at waist height or slightly lower, the pommel a little higher.

“You will ride the horse for me, and you will be tested. If you pass, you will no longer wear the helm of anguish. Should you fail, you will be placed inside for another year, though you are unlikely to last that long at the wheel in the helmet.”

Anya stared at her, realising that to do so would probably warrant punishment. Was a lowly slave even supposed to look into her Mistress's eyes? There was so much about this world that was still foreign and alien to her, albeit that she understood how cruel it was.

“How am I supposed to ride that?” she asked, a quiver in her voice as she stared at the rounded rail, noticing dark stains along its length again – a length that exceeded three feet.”

“You will start at the lower end and move along the length of the rail, then mount the pommel. You do understand, don't you? You will be subjected to the ravages of the wood, before finally having to accept the wood here,” Janson said, almost laughing, her long fingers tapping lightly on the wooden ball. She turned to stare at the naked slave in front of her.

“Are you ready, slave?”

Anya was still in shock, staring at the device, finally understanding what it was that she was being asked, no, told to do. But if she wanted to be rid of the ghastly helmet that she had been wearing, what choice did she have? She

watched as Janson barked an order and the guards began to move, even as she walked to her desk, picking up a long, thin wooden cane from the top. As Anya focused on the fact that Janson had gripped the rod, she felt the guards grab her arms. A yoke was lifted from against a nearby wall.

“Wait...WAIT. What the hell?”

She wanted to protest at this new torture, yet she knew that there was little point. Her arms were brought up and offered to the rounded holes of the yoke, as was her neck. She had been freed from one collar-like device, only to be locked into a heavy wooden contrivance that bore down on her shoulders as they locked it into place.

“I... I’m going to be beaten?” she asked, almost innocently. “I’ve been whipped at the wheel, dammit. What more point will this serve?”

Janson brought the cane up to her chin, raising her head with the tip of it.

“And yet she still shows defiance. You will be tested, slave. I would see the limits of your pain and endurance, and also your capacity for pleasure.”

She traced the tip of the rod slowly down one breast, prodding and pulling at the ring on Anya’s large nipple as she did so. She barked a guttural command, and the two guards gripped her on each side of her body – one hand on each arm, and another behind her thigh – as they lifted her toward the horse.

“Hey... wait... Janson... wait!” she pleaded, yet she knew they would not wait, would not delay, as they raised her legs and splayed them wide. They had cleaned her, so the stench she had slowly got used to from her own nether regions was not as bad as it had been in the cells under the deck, though it was a minor pleasantry compared to what was about to happen to her.

“You call me Mistress,” she barked, moving the cane around in the air with smooth, practiced actions now.

Anya realised as she was moved closer to it, her neck and arms tethered in the wooden yoke, that the wooden rail which started below waist height on one post then slowly angled upward to the pommel on the taller post, was rounded only in some portions. In others, it had a vaguely aerofoil shape, as if the person who had carved it had sought to give random geometrical profiles running into each

other, and thus increase the hideous torment for the women who had to “ride” it.

“No. Dammit no!” she screeched, as slowly the men lowered her onto the rail, taking care to ensure that she sat centrally and her flesh was not trapped in any way – but splayed wide for maximum effect.

She grunted, before looking down at her predicament as her bare feet met the floor. She looked up as Janson swung the cane in the air with a horrible swishing sound. The balls of Anya’s feet were in contact with the deck. She could perhaps allow more of her feet to make contact, though that would mean letting more of her weight sag down around the rail, and thus put pressure between her legs.

She shuddered, adjusting her weight as best she could and striving to avoid the rail pushing into her. Yet, the rail moved forward and upward... perhaps three feet in front of her and rising perhaps six inches overall to the dark, stained pommel. She looked down, realising what she was going to have to do. Her slave brand was dark against her sunburnt belly, which was beginning to shine with the sweat of her efforts.

“So... what do I do... now... Mistress?” she grunted, trying to utter the statement at least with a degree of defiance and sarcasm, which Janson appeared to miss.

The grey haired woman smiled, her dress swishing as she moved forward and raised the cane. The guards backed away, and then left as Janson nodded to them, closing the door behind them.

Janson touched the cane lightly to the lower part of Anya’s belly, and pushed against the flesh beneath.

“You will receive one hundred strokes of the cane – though you can easily reduce this number.”

Anya gasped. She still bore the dull lashes around her sex from when she had been whipped by the slaver Elias in the desert, within a day of coming to this vile place, when she had still believed the whole thing to be some sort of wicked computer simulation – wondering even then at its complexity and detail. But, her plight reinforced her belief in it being all too real.

“Your goal is to reach the pommel here.” She snapped the rod back to it, tapping

the hard wood loudly before snapping the rod back to Anya's flesh. Anya winced as its point pushed against her.

"And then to ride it for me," she grunted finally. Anya swallowed nervously.

"You... you can't be serious?"

The rod came up with a whoosh before being delivered hard against Anya's lower belly with a sharp crack.

"YEAHHH... GNNN... you... c... can't be serious, Mistress," she repeated.

"Better. But I haven't finished explaining. On the way up the rail, you will be beaten with the rod. The one hundred strokes will be apportioned to differing areas of your body at my choosing. You will also have your own choice, however."

Anya stared at her, already feeling the effects of the rail. Part of her wanted to writhe on it, but the part of her mind that was still a soldier refused to back down to Janson's base desires.

"I will place the rod on part of your flesh. You will then tell me how many strokes you will receive in that area. Here for instance?" She poked Anya's belly. "You might say 'ten' or even 'eighty'. I will then deliver the amount requested before moving somewhere else. The faster you make it to the pommel, the quicker it will be over. Rest assured, however, none have ever made it to the pommel without receiving all one hundred. In fact, no one has ever even made it to the pommel." She laughed menacingly.

Anya gasped. She promised herself that she would get out of this, somehow, as anger stirred within her. She wanted to swing the heavy yoke and try to strike Janson, no matter the personal discomfort of such an action, yet she knew that Janson would simply welt her half to death with the cane in that instance, or worse, have her crucified – without reprieve this time.

Janson's gaze suggested she was trying to read Anya.

"You hate me, of course, yet you don't wish to plead for mercy before the ordeal begins?"

“I know it would be a waste of time... Mistress,” Anya said, simply staring forward, standing on the balls of her feet – her long legs accentuating her lithe muscled figures – and shuddering slightly under the load that they bore, her breasts sitting beneath the yoke, jutting proudly as her very pose almost screamed defiance.

“Then we will begin,” Janson announced.

Anya gritted her teeth, trying to prepare herself.

The cane swished, and then halted abruptly... pausing just above her left breast.

“How many strokes?”

Anya paused.

“Quickly. The ordeal has begun. You should really be trying to make you way up the rail slave.”

“Ten,” she said hoarsely. Ten? Was it enough. Shit, this was unreal. She was telling Janson how many strokes to... “EAGHHHHH!”

Janson pulled the rod back sharply and brought it down with a harsh slap across Anya’s breast. There was no pause, no gap between the first and second stroke, then third and fourth. Anya screamed wide eyed as the cane made her breast wobble horribly, stroke after stroke landing painfully on her, welts overlapping making the pain worse, each stroke becoming more intense and agonising.

“YEAHHHH,” she screeched again. She had lost count of the horrible welts. How many were still to come? Then it was over. She looked down – below the wheel brand where she sat astride the rail – the rail on which she had not even yet tried to move forward.

She flinched as the tip of the cane touched her sweating belly.

“How many strokes?” Janson asked coldly. “...and I really think you should attempt to start moving, slave!” she added.

Anya grimaced. She had little choice but to play the game – this cruel game of pain.

“T... Ten,” she stammered, as the cane started to fall repeatedly across her lower belly, across the brand that had been seared into her flesh to let her know who and what she had now become.

“AUhhh AIII” she screeched as the cane fell again and again. There was no stopping it.

“Move, you bitch,” Janson shouted, welting her belly harshly. Anya realised that she had to move or she would end up in the helmet again. Anguish mixed with the pain in her body as she lurched forward. She could not allow herself to be put in that thing again... could not let herself be...

“GNNNNN!”

She lurched forward on the rail a few inches, sliding awkwardly as she did so and causing further discomfort. The rail angled upward in front of her. She stared at it, and gasped as the final stroke landed across her flesh.

Janson admired her handiwork.

“That’s twenty so far. Another eighty.”

Anya could not believe that this bitch was going to go through with it, but the same woman had been about to crucify her, so there was little doubting her intent in this cruel game of pain.

She swished the rod, bringing it close to her body, pushing against the fleshy side of her left thigh.

“How many?”

“GNNN... I... you can’t do this,” Anya responded, lurching again as she moved up the rail another inch, the yoke heavy about her neck and shoulders, her belly still raw and screaming from the rod.

“I can. Now how many, slave... or perhaps I’ll decide myself.”

“What made you so cruel?” Anya gasped, looking toward Janson as far as the heavy yoke would allow her.

“How many?” she repeated more urgently.

“Ten,” Anya gasped, almost trying to hold back the words as she said them.

Janson nodded, and it began again. The cane flashed and welted hard against Anya’s muscled leg, lifting raised lines across the soft flesh and making her screech in agony, even as she tried to focus on moving further up the rail. She focused on a spot just ahead of the rail, and then realised that her goal was the pommel – the stained, rounded wooden pinnacle of the post. She had to get onto it in order to be free. She swore to herself that she would, and lurched forward again, driving hard against the agony of the cane as it bruised and striped her thigh. She tried not to scream, tried to grit her teeth and take the pain, but the impact of fiery stroke was too intense, especially as multiple strokes landed across her leg, making it burn. It was too much, too agonising, and each stroke felt as if it were driving her back against the progress she had made on the rail.

In turn, as she advanced up the rail against the sickening blows to her now striped and bruised leg, her feet were forced to raise her up, so as to avoid her full weight landing on the wood and making it impossible to move further forward. She had started almost comfortably (though it was a purely relative term) on the balls of her feet, with her soles angled slightly up. Now, she pushed forward with her toes, the angle of her foot getting higher with each excruciating push.

“YAIIE!” she screeched as the cane swung and connected, her beaten thigh horribly red, and it ended. Had she reached ten? Anya felt faint. The combination of dehydration, stress and the beating was making her want to pass out. She could not let that happen. She was a damned soldier. She would not let this happen to her. She had to get to the pommel.

Janson moved behind her slightly as she lurched, moving another few inches up the rail. She gasped horribly. That last move had been agonising, scraping her soft flesh. She began to understand the dark staining that she had seen before she mounted the thing, the marks of previous victims on this foul instrument of torment.

The tip of the cane pushed painfully across her buttock, then smoothed in a round motion across both round cheeks.

“How many?”

The sensation made Anya's eyes widen. The touch, under other circumstances, might have been pleasurable. As it was, being readied to be thrashed horribly across her ass, the sensation was less inviting.

"You... it seems you haven't gotten over being almost killed by one of Michelson's men then?" she grunted. What was she doing? She was in agonising bondage and torment, and she was now taunting the woman who held a thick cane over her, ready to beat her naked body.

"What? What did you say?" Janson replied, moving back in front of her.

"Carlos... he tried to kill you... I... knew him" she managed, gasping as she found another inch of movement on the rail. She could feel it pushing up against her pubic bone now. There was something else, however; a tantalising feeling somewhere down there. Something that was a sensation somewhere within the pain, but that she knew was becoming a growing sense within her mind and body.

Despite the agony and the queer sensations that she knew might betray her, Anya revelled in the fact that she had apparently got through to Janson. She did not want to think about the months when she had thought that Carlos was dead, when in reality he had been in this terrible place, trying to kill Janson. If only he had succeeded, she thought to herself, perhaps she might not be splayed on a wooden rail like this being beaten with a rod.

"I said, what did you say?"

Anya almost smiled, staring into those dark eyes, which stared back at her with hatred.

"I said... twenty... Mistress."

The rod fell savagely across both buttocks as Janson grunted with the effort of hurting and humiliating Anya at the same time. Despite her agonising shrieks and the fact that Janson left no time between welts for her to prepare for the next one, resulting in a long fiery arc of anguish, Anya had been calculating. The automatic reflex of her body in moving away from the abuses of the cane almost forced her forward. Thirty lashes would also have done more lasting damage on other areas of her body. She knew that welts across her buttocks would heal, no matter the existing amount of strokes of the whip she had already received there.

She lurched forward, screaming from the sliding motion across her sensitive flesh and throwing her head back as the cane fell again and again across her muscled buttocks. She grunted, pushing herself on and on toward the pommel, straining against the collective anguish of the falling rod, the pressure on her flesh, and the fact that now only the edge of her foot and some of her toes were all that were propelling her forward.

But, despite the fire across her rear, it was working. She was pushing herself toward the awful pommel. She realised that had she been shorter, had her height and the length of her legs not played into this, she could never even have got this far. She hoped that Janson's proud boast to the effect that no one had ever made it to the pommel was a reference to native women, whose lack of nutrition and poor treatment had made them shorter. She screamed again, trying to keep the pain distant, lurching a little more with each welt, getting closer to her goal.

She could feel her feet and toes straining and shaking, as what parts remained in contact tried to push her forward – reacting instinctively to the harsh, cruel welts of the rod against her body. Her scream had become dry throated, like an animal, as she tried to stare at the pommel, her destination. Finally, it stopped. Tears were streaming from her face, dripping onto her breasts and mingling with the sweat that had gathered there.

She was panting, exhausted from her efforts. She blinked her eyes to fight against the streaming tears. She needed water, but she would not let that deflect her from her goal. She was stronger than that, stronger than this bitch.

“And what would you know about the man who tried to kill me?”

Janson swished the cane in the air. It had a slight bend in it now from welting Anya's body.

“Gnnnn. I... I know enough,” she said, trying to lurch forward but falling back a little. It was less than twelve inches away. She fought the panic that was telling her she could not make it, that the pommel was too far away, that it was too high and she could not possibly get onto it. “I know that he w... worked for Michelson. I did too... once.”

“I see. So Michelson sent you here. Another one of his victims to watch, to be enslaved. He tried that with me too, you know.”

Anya glanced up at her, through the tears and sweat.

“I... get the impression... you would not have made a good slave,” she grunted, letting her weight sag onto the rail slightly as the sweet agony mixed with pleasure and she threw her head backward in the yoke, moaning, before using the slight fall to give her the required momentum to thrust forward on her feet again... shifting another inch up the rail.

“Ah, so you are beginning to experience the duality of the rail, I see. You feel the pleasure somewhere in that cloud of agony. Sweet pain.” She paused. “I suppose you think you are going to make it onto the pommel, hmmm?”

“I... do not want to wear the helmet.”

“Indeed.” She moved the cane slowly, pushing the point against Anya’s untouched, right breast.

“How many strokes?”

The simple question again, yet Anya knew how the answer would feel. How many had it been, she reasoned. She could not remember. In her blind agony, concentrating on moving along the rail, she had lost count.

“Twenty,” she said instinctively, knowing that the more she could bear, the quicker it would be over, but that also meant she might be put back in the helmet if she had not reached the pommel in time. Damn!

“YAAIAIIII!” The welt fell harshly against her wobbling breast, soon followed by another and another, as she moved slowly up the rail, on her toes now, pushing against the hell of the wood that now pressed deeply between her legs, tugging and sliding against her. The fact that she had asked for twenty strokes against her breast did not help with her forward movement, her body’s propensity to move back rather than forward. She was halfway through the ordeal of twenty strokes when her head fell and she sagged in despair, crying openly as the rod abused her – grunting and screeching dryly, unmoving. It ended, and she cried openly, in despair. Her breasts throbbed, striped with the foul red and purple strokes from the rod.

“Given up so soon? Perhaps you will try to remember how much harder you could have tried when you are back in the helmet, for the next year – if you last

that long of course.”

Janson swung the cane as she spoke, keeping her tired arm from becoming stiff. There were still forty hard strokes to administer, after all. Anya looked up, through the blinding tears. Was she really going to give up, wear that thing for another year? She could feel stirrings within her, making her want to writhe despite the pain of her predicament. What a foul torment this was. Damn it, something inside her told her no. She had to resist!

She cried out as she pushed forward on her toes again.

“Good,” Janson said, smiling, moving behind her and lowering the rod to her upper back.

Anya grimaced. She knew how bad the pain was going to be, and against the already whipped skin on her back – it would become unbearable, though the strokes would make her flinch in the correct direction of travel.

“Twenty,” she grunted, her voice trembling, not quite able to believe that she had quoted so high a figure, but with the devastating effect of having strokes placed on her front, effectively pushing her back when she needed to move forward, would be too much to bear. In addition, she was so close, and that distant feeling that made her writhe on the rail, despite the pain, despite the insistence that her body was screaming at her that she needed to get off this contraption, was becoming stronger and more uncontrollable. As Janson raised the cane, smiling, she hoped that she would not be forced to come on this hideous device in front of her tormentor, or, if she were forced to – that at least she would have reached the awful pommel. She considered how in fact she might be able to take the pommel as Janson had ordered her to do, and then dismissed the thought as negative, even as the harsh rod welted hard against her back and she cried out in agony.

She was moving on her toes now. Her feet strained and ached as she tried to push her body forward, along the line of resistance that was created by the harsh rail that thrust itself up and into her. She looked down, as more tears fell and her back felt as if it was on fire; four, perhaps five inches to go. Her legs were stretched and trembling, her arms too, held as they were in the cruel embrace of the yoke. She gritted her teeth as the stroke fell on a back which had already suffered so much, striking against tight muscle and burning even more than the

strokes on other areas of her body had. The ring that pierced her below was now a major hindrance to movement, placed as it was through her most sensitive body parts, and slowly grinding into her as she moved.

She was almost blind with pain, though it focused her mind on her task as she moved her toes inches ever forward, her legs stretched to accommodate the movement up and along the rail. There were inches, mere inches left to cover.

As the harsh strokes came to an end, the front of her pubic hairs just touched the end of the round pommel. As she felt the sensation, she shuddered, even as the strokes were ending. At the same time, and despite the ache, the distress, she could feel sensations mounting inside her, driving her towards a climax. The cane swung down in a controlled motion, stopping short, then moving slowly to touch her breasts, both of them being massaged slowly, compressed by the cane, as Janson slid the cane across them, pushing them in different directions.

“How many?” she said menacingly.

Anya gasped and shuddered, lifting one foot in a rapid attempt to make her first assault on the high pommel, trying to push her toes against the awkward load and the even more awkward obstacle that sat in her way. How could she possibly do this? She had to focus, concentrate.

“I said, how many?” Janson repeated, lifting the cane slightly and slapping it gently against Anya’s exposed and welted breasts.

“You... you already beat my... tits, dammit!” she struggled to say.

“Not both together.”

Anya was so close.

“Ten... no... twenty!”

Janson smiled.

“Perhaps you haven’t been counting, slave. This would have been the last ten strokes. If you have not taken that post by the time I am finished, you’ll be wearing the helmet for a year; well, if you last that long, that is. And, if you insist upon twenty...”

“Damn you,” Anya whispered. This was it, she reminded herself. Something had told her that she had had enough. More logically, she had reasoned that if she did not get herself onto the pommel soon she would be unable to do it at all. Fatigue had set into her legs, having been beaten in a position where she had been forced to stand agonisingly on tiptoe for an extended period.

“Just do it,” she said.

Janson raised the cane.

“You are in little position to issue me a command, wench. I’ll tell the guards to get the helmet ready.” The cane fell harshly across Anya’s breasts and she threw her head back in a dry throated yelp.

Time was running out. Mere seconds were all that remained in order that she might have control over her future – in the steel helmet, or out of it. She had some control. It was up to her to manoeuvre onto the large rounded ball-like pommel that sat in front of her. The cane fell harshly against the soft and striped flesh of her bosom, and she pushed hard, forcing the wood deeply between her legs. She had to do it... had to. She yelped maddeningly, trying to focus her final energies on moving herself up. She was close, yet she knew that she was also close to total failure – and she knew that that would end the matter, end everything and commit her to die in a roasting steel helmet.

“NOOO!” she screamed, ignoring the cane as it beat her, as the mounting strokes fell.

One of her aching feet left the ground again as she pushed hard with the other, awkwardly mounting the rounded pommel, committing her to one more, awkward, sideways lunge. She suddenly remembered Carlos, and remembered that she had to find him, remembered that he was here in this foul place, as the rod fell across her again.

“NOOO!” she screeched finally, using one foot to let herself down then push hard against the weight of her body as she forced herself, up, up and onto the ball.

Her feet left the ground. She gasped horribly as she began to fall down onto it, and the cane strokes stopped and Janson stepped back.

The slave ship captain watched in exasperation as the naked, beaten and yoked woman in front of her began to slide remorselessly into the embrace of the unforgiving pommel.

For her part, Anya was now writhing in the throes of an uncontrollable climax, twisting and bending forward in forced, unrestrained jerks as she cried out.

“You... you did it. But no one has ever done it,” Janson whispered.

But Anya could not hear her any more. She was focused on pleasure inside the mantle of pain that she had been fighting with.

For Anya, it was as if the entire vessel was starting to shake, Her movement was uncontrollable as her throat, made dry and rasping from her ordeal, began to utter sounds of pleasure and dull yelps as she lurched uncontrollably on the pommel. Her first fear was that she might suffer damage. She stood on her toes, after all, with no means of controlling the bucking and swaying that her body was undergoing. But there was little space in her thoughts for such considerations amidst the flow of pleasure – agony and pleasure – that filled her mind.

Janson stood back and watched, like a proud owner whose pet had just done what it was told after years of being trained. She smiled, even as Anya sweated and tried to remain in place as best she could, her toes balanced, but shuddering, against the trembling load that they were trying to support. She watched as Anya’s hands became fists within the bond of the yoke. No one had ever made it this far. She was astonished, reminding herself that some of the stains on the pommel were from herself, during those times when she needed, no, demanded satisfaction, when she had been alone and able to try to mount the pommel herself – without having to walk her way up the rail under the strikes of a cane.

Anya had recovered slightly now, and stared through eyes that streamed with tears and sweat.

“I... ughhh... I will not be placed in the helmet then... Mistress!”

The word ‘Mistress’ had been spoken harshly, with teeth clenched. Perhaps the slave, formerly from Earth, still needed to learn some lessons. But, she reminded herself, few existed that could even hope to make it as far as the end of the wooden horse. She had punished so many on the device, even a few women

from Earth. She remembered how she had told Sarah that she would get her freedom if she made it to the pommel, though that all seemed so long ago now. Sarah had failed, of course, and she had had her put in chains at the wheel – just before the assassin had tried to...

“Please... tell me I won’t get the helmet...” Anya repeated, ever more desperate as Janson approached.

“No. You will not be placed back in the helm of anguish.”

She summoned the guards.

Chapter 5

It was days before Anya could walk properly again. Janson had watched her for some time, merely sitting on a nearby chair and waiting. Anya had tensed and writhed once more, screaming loudly as her body shuddered for a second time. This time it was raw and violent, and it hurt more, because Anya knew to expect it, knew that she would lose control of her body. Janson watched her, sipping wine as she moved a hand beneath her robes and began to stroke herself. Anya wanted to be disgusted when she saw what Janson was doing, she recalled, but there was little point in such thoughts or emotions after what she had seen on this vile planet and the ordeals that she herself had been subjected to. She began to believe that she had seen it all, part of her secretly hoping that no further cruelties awaited her.

She had suffered much under the whip after being returned, dragged in fact, back to the wheel to be tethered with the other naked women with a chain running through the ring between her legs. She needed water and care, neither of which the overseers seemed particularly interested in giving her. As the heavy whip fell across her shoulders and she yelped in anguish, trying to find the holes in the foul grille below where she might insert her toes and get some traction, she reminded herself that she was free of the helmet at least, able to breathe the air rather than suffer in its stifling heat. She considered it her first victory, though the numbing ache in her loins reminded her just how much it had cost.

She was swollen and sore for days, trying to push the wheel, lashed at almost every turn, her back, legs and buttocks becoming striped with harsh welts as the overseers, sensing that she had passed some test in their mistress's cabin, strove to reassure her that it meant nothing, that she was still a slave – a cog in the massive machine that could be easily replaced should their mistress's whim desire it.

As she pushed and suffered each day, Anya reminded herself that she was tough, hardened from the rigours of military life. Indeed, she had watched the other women closely, noting how the older slaves had become bent and thin, their heads bowed as they toiled from day to day with no hope for the future – only the certainty that they would be worked, or whipped, to death. She told herself

that she would not become like them. One old woman was almost at an end – thin and bent, unable to straighten her back when the chain was pulled, walking gingerly on rough feet, hampered by long black toenails and shaking knees.

She told herself she would not become that woman, as hour followed painful hour, as day followed exhausting day and the welts from the lash became part of the daily routine and her flesh almost hardened to the work and the whip.

Sarah sat near at night. When it became cold, they sat and huddled together, lending each other warmth, two Earth women caught in hellish slavery on some distant planet. Certainly it was as distant from reality – her reality – as Anya could ever fathom in her wildest dreams or even fantasies.

At times, during those long nights, Sarah had teased Anya's leg, before moving her exploring fingers towards the top of Anya's thigh, using her other hand to play with and tease her own soft flesh. Anya had turned away. She could not face sexual contact yet after what she had gone through on the horse. She clung too to the doubts she had had when Sarah had approached her days before. She hoped that Sarah would understand.

“Janson told me that you had been forced to ride the wooden horse,” Anya whispered in the darkness one night, her words almost drowned out by the whining of the wheels above and the gears outside the cell, punctuated by the cries of slave women and the slaps of the whips above.

Sarah stopped her movement. She had been rubbing her leg against Anya's, hoping to catch her attention, hoping that the intimacy she had been promising night after night, might not be politely refused on this occasion. She looked away, writhing and pulling her legs together.

“Yes, she made me ride that thing, just as she made you do it... I take it that is what you have not wanted to discuss these past few nights? The cane welts on your breasts and back also tell me what had really happened – but I reasoned that if you didn't want to discuss it...?” Sarah responded, narrowing her eyes at another wiry, dark haired slave who grunted some insult at them, as if they had disturbed the sleep that her body demanded if she were to avoid the whip tomorrow.

“She told me that you were made a slave because you could not reach the pommel.”

Sarah stopped her movement – that had been directed at a pleasurable association with her companion slave – and simply stared, then looked down at her lithe and welted body.

“Yes, that’s true,” she said, tears welling in her eyes.

Anya could feel the painful memories that it had brought back to her slave mate, and almost regretted bringing the matter up. She instinctively placed a reassuring hand on Sarah’s shoulder.

“I... I couldn’t do it... couldn’t make it to the pommel. I had been given the choice of freedom if I could, but it was too much and the cane had been too painful.”

Sarah turned away, reliving the incident in her mind, not daring to let Anya see her weakness.

“I suppose you failed too, if you are still a slave?”

There was a catch in Anya’s voice as she spoke, moving slightly – rattling the chain chain as she did so.

“No. I rode the pommel. My reward was the removal of the helmet.”

Sarah gasped audibly.

“But... it seemed impossible?”

“Well, I can tell you it wasn’t easy,” Anya replied softly, looking through the steel bars at the workings of the wheel outside.

“But you... did it?”

“Yes. And with these welts as a bonus,” she tried to mock, raising a hand to her striped and swollen breasts.

“Well done,” Sarah said, then realised that congratulations for having made one of the Captain’s fantasies a reality was hardly cause for congratulation. “If only I could have done it, I might have been working with the scientists to perfect this place, rather than be a slave amongst its detritus.”

“What do you mean?” Anya asked, sensing that Sarah knew so much more than she was saying.

“This is one grand experiment,” Sarah said, not catching Anya’s gaze, as if slipping off somewhere.

“You mean with Michelson and Balham?”

“Yes – I don’t know the full story, of course. I was just a technician working for Janson, really, but the original team were profiting from technology that was not actually theirs. From what I can gather, it was stolen from a client in the far east – the portal technology, that is.”

“How did you learn the language so quickly?”

“Oh, we were taught it before we came in.”

“And the team? What did they come here for?”

“Gold, minerals, you name it. This place has many assets,” Sarah said quietly.

“It is another planet then?”

“From what we can gather, well – yes and no. It’s hard to explain, but it appears to be an alternate reality – existing in tandem with our own. You know anything about quantum physics?”

Anya shook her head. “I’m a marine, Sarah. I know how to kill things and break stuff – very well, as it happens.”

“Ok, I’ll keep it simple. There are... were, theories related to the existence of alternate realities, sheltering... if you like, in dimensions parallel to our own, but we never understood the science, didn’t really understand the theory even.”

“Right. There is something I need you to do for me?”

Sarah moved closer.

“Just ask.”

“I need you to teach me the language.”

Anya flinched as Sarah moved a filthy hand back across her leg, and whispered into her ear.

“There will be a price, slave...”

Chapter 6

As the days went on and on, and Anya's initial elation at having the helmet removed, was diluted by the exhausting slave labour that she forcibly undertook, the nights of quiet passion with Sarah became something that she looked forward to. Sarah had been gentle at first. Anya was still recovering from the effects of the pommel after all, and she was still tender. As time progressed, however, she learned to please Sarah too – and learned to enjoy it.

In return, Sarah began to teach her the rudiments of the simplistic language that the indigenous population spoke.

Anya had learned middle-eastern languages, or at least the basics that would allow her to communicate relevantly with indigenous populations. She noticed instantly that there were similarities between the guttural language of the natives of Zirith – as Sarah called it, and the languages she had learned in her past. It seemed that as the days became weeks, and she grew ever more used to the bane of slavery and the lash that she underwent each day, she picked up more and more of the strange, yet at the same time familiar, language of the natives.

She readily paid the price that Sarah asked every few nights – that of comfort, solace and a physical release of her frustration – so much so that guards on occasion, who presumably should have been preventing the activity, would stand and watch from a distance, pleasuring themselves as they did so.

Whether it was the condition of the slaves, or some understood rule with regard to interfering with Captain Janson's 'property', Anya and Sarah were left alone by the overseers. Anya, and she noticed Sarah to a lesser extent, was avoided by the overseers for the most part. She suspected that this was due to the fact that they had both ridden the horse and mounted (or tried to mount in Sarah's case) the horrid pommel. Did this mean that they somehow belonged to Captain Janson? Had word of her ordeal made it to the overseers?

Anya noticed too that she rarely saw the captain now, not even on deck. Her days were filled with mind-numbing and exhausting hard labour and the welts of the whip across her naked body. The movement of the chain had made her flesh rough and swollen, though with time it was starting to heal – growing used to her

ordeal, as indeed was the rest of her body. She had developed lean muscle mass and built her thighs and shoulders as a result of the hard labour, and for some reason seemed never to feel as hungry as she should, reasoning that the strange biscuit style food that was fed to the slaves was designed solely to make them resilient to the rigour of fatigue, at least to a degree. By night, when pleasure with Sarah was not used to pass the time, she would learn the language. Sarah became impressed at how quickly she adapted to its nuances, and how well she learned and remembered.

“I have little else with which to occupy my mind,” Anya would whisper in her ear, smoothing her muscled thigh with a filthy hand before they went back to lovemaking.

Indeed, it was the drudgery of the work that made her want to learn, want to succeed. Perhaps, something in the back of her mind told her that by understanding the language it would make her next escape attempt more likely to succeed. Thoughts of escape, however, were always punctuated by her memory of almost being crucified on the last occasion she had tried to make her getaway. She had had several nightmares after the incident, more so when her mind drifted back to thoughts of that first escape attempt. In every case, she had hung my nailed hands and feet from the crossbeam, feet crossed over, savagely punctured and thereby held to the mast. In her dreams she had been screaming, pulling herself up via nailed limbs, and then falling in despair and agony before repeating the ‘dance’ again when she could no longer breathe. It would be a terrible death, and one that she dared not think about, even less so tempt by plotting or undertaking an escape attempt. She dared not even tell Sarah her thoughts, lest she be overheard and implicate her new friend in some plot – either real or imagined by the guards – which would result in Sarah perhaps being punished or even crucified herself for having been involved.

By day, with new words and idioms having been learned at night, she would quietly repeat what she had learned, etching it into her memory – quietly enough so that she might not attract the lash of the overseers through talking.

* * * * *

The sandship would stop infrequently at what appeared to be oasis settlements dotted across the desert landscape. The frequency of these settlements was such that the crew could trade some of the cargo it carried, sell and buy new slaves, and take on water and provisions – of which there appeared to be ample in these ‘points of light’ that sat alone in the desert. Sarah explained that there were considerable water sources under the ground, restrained by bedrock, but that cities would sprout up where the water could be reached. The job of the sandships, similar to the one on which she laboured, was to transport trade goods and accept other commodities that might be sold in other regions. More than simply cargo shunts, the ships were captained by speculators of a sort, who might spend years moving between inhabited regions, buying and selling, and, if they were smart and knew the market needs, turning an excellent profit through their dealings, only possible through the cruel and inhuman treatment of the hundreds of slaves at their wheels.

From Anya’s viewpoint, however, chained to the wheel and able only to view what she could from the deck, the vista gave her little additional information about the world – aside from that which Sarah had already shared with her in what had become there ‘intimate’ moments. She had since noticed that some of the other slaves enjoyed pleasuring each other – though most, she noted with interest and trepidation, were too exhausted or suffered too much from the welts of the whip, or were simply in too poor a condition due to the general depredations and hardships of the terrible slavery they suffered.

On every occasion the ship stopped, she would try to ascertain the name of the area or city, hoping that she might hear a word in conversation or otherwise that would be similar to Chelen. In her dreams, she imagined a tall spiralling city in the desert wastes, though by day, when she suffered the depredations of the lash and the ever present cruelty of the overseers, she knew that it was significantly unlikely that anything that could be considered beautiful, in any sense of the word, was likely to exist on this planet.

It had taken time, but Sarah had convinced her finally that she was indeed in a different reality, a planet not necessarily light years from Earth but in a different dimension entirely. While slowly teaching her the harsh language of the natives, Sarah related the story behind world of Zirith and its inhabitants.

When she had been taken on as part of Janson’s team, she had had no idea what the work entailed, only that it was complex and completely original, or so she

had been told. Of course, she had little idea as to how original that might be, having no concept of other realities even existing. After months of trials with technology that was completely alien to her, she still had little idea of how the technology worked. In fact, the staff joked that some of the crystalline substances used in research experiments were in fact from another dimension. She had laughed at first, until she seemed to gain the trust of Janson, while simultaneously becoming a focus for the lusts of Michelson – who appeared to be putting up the money for the whole research effort.

In an effort to get away from Michelson's all too obvious attentions, she had become closer to Janson, who, she later realised, also had interests in her, of a similar nature in fact.

“Yes,” Anya said. “I got the impression she had a liking for women, at least insofar as she could watch them cruelly placed in painful situations.”

Sarah had been compliant at first, using the work as a focus to detract from any dislike she had for Janson's approaches and intent, though she and others had suffered in the power play that was developing between Janson and Michelson. Both had significant amounts of money in the company and, as far as Sarah could work out, in the research. She could not tell Anya if there had been government support, foreign or otherwise – although she suspected it.

The project, the prospect of finding a new parallel world, not in some unreachable arm of the galaxy but instead in a parallel reality, would have been too important for one small private defence contractor with a scientific budget. No, Anya reasoned, as the weeks in chains passed and as her body grew accustomed to the terrible depredations of naked, chained slavery, there had to be official figures involved at some level.

Chapter 7

Anya was not sure of how much time had passed. In the early weeks and months, of course, she had tried to mark days through notching the floor of the cell she was in, though she was rarely put back in the same barred enclosure twice within the same week. This was not calculated to ensure that slaves would not be able to get their bearings within the vessel or record time as she had tried to do, but was more motivated, she reasoned, by the overseers' complete lack of concern as to where their 'cattle' were stored for the night; their only regret being that the slaves required rest to function and keep the sandship moving and that they could not be driven hard throughout the night, when the older more haggard and weaker slaves would be forced to take over.

Anya reasoned that the fate of every fit slave was to be put on the 'night' shift, where, like an old horse, one was put to die. The shift consisted of old, naked, wrinkled slaves – their bodies bent and creaking after years of hard labour, their backs and buttocks lined and creased with years, perhaps decades, of the marks from overseers' whips.

On those nights when Sarah lay in her arms, they would tell each other that they would not allow either to end up like that, that one would strangle the other in the night rather than let her become a chained animal, but neither of them really meant it. Anya fought, at least in her mind, to prevent herself becoming accustomed to the captivity and slavery, to prevent herself becoming an animal, and she fought to do the same with Sarah.

As the months passed, however, it became more difficult, as they became hardened, hands and feet calloused and blistered, gnarled, with broken nails. They became hairy – something that Sarah had grown used to, but a matter that Anya had to rail against as it removed her from her own perception of humanity. She had faced special operations courses, survival courses, real operations, but none had lasted as long as this or had such real pain and discomfort associated with them.

She grew closer to Sarah and found that she began to pick up more and more of the basic language that the indigenous people on Zirith used – so much so that she could answer back an overseer when they allowed, that she could answer

when asked a question or told to ‘put her back into it’ – a demand which she could now understand.

The work and the conditions seemed to grow ever more harsh as time went on. Realising perhaps that Anya was becoming a strong and dependable slave, the overseers began to rely on her for the wheel she pushed. Sarah too seemed to be growing in strength – they worked well as a team, while the other naked slaves seemed weaker, not helped by their less capable muscles and bone structure – brought on, Anya realised by their having grown up on Zirith where nutritious food and water did not appear to be plentiful.

Weeks turned to months, and Anya’s inability to record the time as she had first intended to, made her start to believe that she was approaching a year in chains.

The ship had travelled from settlement to settlement across the godforsaken wasteland that appeared to be all that this vile planet offered. The settlements seemed either to have sprung up around water sources that were apparent by the proclivity of dense foliage which could be seen on the ground below or to be part of large vertical rock clusters, though she could only see such vistas when she was on the right side of the wheel and the overseers were not paying attention – otherwise, her lack of concentration on the wheel would earn her another lash to add to the hundreds of aging stripes that she was sure now decorated her back and buttocks and legs.

Learning the language had kept her focused. Day after day repeating the phrases and words that she had learned from Sarah the night before helped to keep her sane, though she could feel herself starting to drift in recent weeks. The thought of becoming like one of the old hags terrified her, as they let the wheel almost pull their emaciated and striped husks rather than push it themselves, waiting until they dropped and were thrown over the side. She could not let herself become like that, and yet what chance was there for escape? She still had nightmares regarding being crucified. Though she rarely saw the captain now, only when they had ‘docked’ at a settlement, the implied threat was always there, waiting – which meant that none even attempted escape. She did not want to die like this, so far from home, so close to Carlos and yet so far.

* * * * *

She saw them first as specks in the sky, though her vision was blurred by the harsh sun. She had seen many alien flying creatures since her arrival here – most resembling Earth birds, at least in some measure, though much larger. These seemed to be different, and as she looked, at least one overseer followed her gaze – as a prelude to using the heavy lash if she were staring at something that she should not be and her work at the wheel were affected.

She jumped in fright as the cry went up, upsetting the rhythm that had heretofore meant that one blistered, filthy foot paced slowly in front of another, her hard body driving the wheel. She did not understand the word the overseers shrieked, before they started to run to various stations on the barge and unlock barrel-like storage containers, pulling out weapons and crossbow like weapons in rapid fashion.

She had enough of her combat senses left, even after so long working as a chained slave, to understand that matters were about to ‘kick off’ as she used to call it when operations were about to start. Her gaze had affected her concentration and, inevitably, as with other slaves at other wheels, this meant a slowing of the forward motion of the wheeled vessel. Those few overseers who had some sense of what was happening with the slaves, let their whips fly across the naked, sweating backs of the women. Anya also suffered, twisting and yelping as the thick lash welted her across the lower back.

“There, look there!” she screeched in the native language, her training and perseverance in learning the language of these cruel people having paid off at last, biting her lip against the sting of the whip that was magnified by the swollen flesh of earlier welts, pointing to the flying creatures – with riders, which were getting ever closer. Even as the slaves whined at the fresh lashes they had received, they saw that all of the overseers were now rushing for weapons, as slaves, no longer encouraged by the ravages of the whip, now began to slow and tug at the thick chains that held them to the capstan.

In similar fashion, the haggard women and the fresher slaves began to panic at her own wheel, as Anya turned back to Sarah.

“Who are they?” she cried against the din of panicking slaves. She noticed now, for the first time despite the depredations and suffering that she has felt, that

even Sarah looked worried.

“No... damn they can't!” she exclaimed staring at the sky as the wheel ground to a halt, slaves in chains trying to free themselves. Anya gripped Sarah by the shoulders.

“Who are they?” she cried in English.

“Raiders... Blood Raiders!” she cried. “We have to get out of these chains!”

“Why?”

“Cannibals,” Sarah responded, staring into her friend's eyes as Anya tried to remain calm.

“Ok... Listen... we need to stay calm!” Anya shouted above the clamour of panicking overseers.

By now, the great flying creatures had landed on the deck with a thump. As Anya spun around, the chains pulling at her flesh as the other slaves tried frantically to be free, she could see five of the massive flying reptilian creatures – which in that instant, reminded her somewhat of dinosaurs. Their riders were even more terrifying, however. Each was clad in sophisticated looking headgear, which Anya quickly realised was composed of the skull of some unearthly animal or lizard. They were muscled and strong looking, their skin burnt red-brown by the sun of Zirith above. Each of them carried an ornate, heavy looking steel weapon of sorts – stylised and very sharp looking – the metal a dark blue colour. As these new ‘men’ left their rides, they went into combat with the overseers who rushed at them with lesser swords and somewhat inadequate spears. Anya glanced at the women around her, tethered, and pulling rusted chains with blistered, rough hands in a paltry effort to escape capture, or worse.

She watched as one of the nearby combats unfolded, as more and more of the raiders landed, and finally she watched as Captain Janson appeared on the deck above, near where her cabin was situated; that same cabin where Anya had suffered so much on the wooden horse. She could see, even as the combat unfurled in front of her, that Janson had a rifle-like weapon of sorts, and was starting to point it toward the crowds who were fighting, not even aiming, it seemed, oblivious as to who she might hit with the weapon. The warrior in front of her had put down five of the overseers – his mighty blade literally cutting

through the steel of theirs. She wondered what sort of material might do that, even as the warrior focused his attention on her and on the slaves at her wheel.

Anya now struggled with the chain, realising that she had attracted attention, even as she was startled by the sound of a rocket-like device and a projectile that exploded against one of the creatures and its rider. Janson had a weapon, which was easily seen as superior technology on this planet – judging by the reaction of most of the fighters – as they either moved to get away from the device or moved toward the stairs leading to Janson’s cabin. She realised quickly, however, that the skullheaded warrior was still coming toward them, toward her, and was now raising his sword above his head.

She backed away defensively, now pulling at the rough chain herself. She felt the concussion from another explosion as Janson despatched yet another rider and his mount, while simultaneously causing damage to the deck and a wheel; slaves also going down in the blast. It was chaos – the chaos of a battlefield, Anya realised, as the thickly muscled warrior reached her wheel and the slaves. She dove out of the way, despite the restrictions of the chain, as the thick blade came down near her. She was ready to respond, to reach up and punch the man in his crotch before she realised that a tension had gone from her body – he had sliced the chain that bound the slaves to the wheel. She gasped, pausing to take in what had happened and what it meant, even as the other slaves, including Sarah, backed away from him.

The warrior was shaken as another nearby explosion rocked the vessel, taking down more of his own people and including a group of slaves and overseers who were in the wrong place at the wrong time within the body of the fight. This did not detract from his obvious efforts, however, as he lurched forward with a grunt, apparently to grab the nearest slave. The explosion had sent Anya to the deck and, she quickly realised, out of arm’s reach. Instinctively she pulled at the rough chain that fed through the ring, feeling it pull through swollen and cracked skin until she was free. The sense of freedom that she felt was palpable. Free of the chains, would this be her chance to get away without fear of being crucified?

She almost felt it grow silent as the thoughts hit her. Afterward, when she remembered the event, it would seem like hours in her recollection. In reality, it had been milliseconds. It reminded her of ‘bullet time’ when she had been in combat zones before she had been a slave; that sense of unreality, of slow motion, of a tangible feeling of moving in mud until training and the body’s

natural reactions took over.

She was free of the chains, but suddenly that did not seem to matter as she watched the tall, muscled barbarian, wearing what was obviously some form of animal skull in the style of a helmet, made a grab for the now freed body of Sarah, who screeched as the massive hand encircled her arm and began to pull her like the spoils of war she was.

Anya could see other women being grabbed now, all around the ship, as a ring of other raiders tried to fend off the attacks of the overseers. There was little they could do about the rocket launcher weapon that Janson was using, however, as it did untold damage to their ranks but also to the deck of the sandship.

Anya had to react – her mind telling her frozen body to move. She lurched and jumped to her feet. By now, Sarah was being dragged struggling across the deck. Anya caught a glimpse of her face once – and was horrified by the terror she saw there. She determined then that she was not going to let Sarah be taken at any cost.

Old programming from her years in security seemed to take over, as she ran naked across the deck toward the warrior and the trailing deckslave, her mind working out where on his lower back she could place the hammerblow that would come from her fist, that might be most effective in reducing his movement for the maximum possible time and letting both her and Sarah get away from the ugly fight that had developed.

Her punch was swift, and she cried out with the effort of it, stabbing her fist into the pressure point in his lower back – just as she had been trained to do so many times.

He buckled slightly, but crucially he released his grip on Sarah. Anya was concerned that he had made no sound, having been used to the grunt of men on the receiving end of her hand-to-hand skills. Perhaps, she reasoned in that instant, she was out of practice, having suffered during the many long months in which she had been a naked, chained slave – whipped at the wheel.

She was not entirely surprised, therefore, when the warrior spun quickly around, leaving Sarah where she fell, and swung his arm and fist around in a sweeping blow. Anya saw it, realised it was coming, yet its speed flatfooted her and she felt it connect heavily across her face as she fell to one side.

She tried to recover as quickly as she could, but realised, as she felt herself now being thrown over the shoulder of the man, that she must have been out for a few seconds. She had to move, and move now, she screamed at herself. The warrior felt her recovery and squeezed her, almost breaking her back – or so it felt – as she gasped. She could not see Sarah, only the signs of the ongoing battle and the explosions from Janson’s weapon, which seemed less frequent now. She realised, however, that the warrior was approaching his lizard-like flying steed.

She felt herself dropped, and realised that her chance to either escape and find Sarah, or renew the assault, had come. Thoughts of movement, however, were quickly dissipated as she hit the deck. The light of the sun was obscured as the large, scaly, birdlike claw of the flying lizard that first engulfed then gripped her, threatening to suffocate her entirely.

“No... NO!” she screamed. “Sarah!” But Sarah was nowhere to be found.

The sudden rush of air as the beast lifted off revived Anya to a large extent. She was held around her body within the massive grip of the flying thing, and could see the sandaled feet of the warrior in makeshift stirrups above her. The deck fell away, though the beast was flying straight along the line of the deck, toward the bridge and the cabins that had been a far off tower of despair – the place where she had ridden the wooden horse. She swivelled in the grip of the creature, trying to escape while she could still make the ground beneath her without breaking a limb, or worse. She could see, however, the opposing claw reaching out, making a grab as it neared the upper deck. At the last moment she saw Janson trying to reload the projectile gun that she held in both hands, trying to aim it at the creature, which proved far too fast and accurate for her as the claw plucked her from the deck and the creature flew high into the sky, goaded by its grunting rider. Anya watched as the gun, whose devastating results were clear on the burning barge below, fell out of Janson’s fumbling hands to the sands, and Janson screamed in desperation.

Chapter 8

The journey across the sky marked the first time that Anya had left the barge since her months of wheel slavery had begun. The reptilian bird gripped her tightly, even as the rushing of air cooled her against the harsh heat of the day. At times, she found it hard to breathe, forcing her to turn her face away from the air in front of her and look back, down toward the now burning barge which wave after wave of flying creatures and riders were rapidly leaving, each creature in turn gripping one or two apparently freed wheel slaves in its massive claws.

She forced herself to relax, as struggling seemed to no avail, even despite the fact that there was nowhere to go but down in her current predicament. She tried to push the thought that she was at the mercy of this strange reptilian birdlike creature far from her mind. If, at a whim, the creature decided that dropping her might be more pragmatic, he (or she) could easily do so. So, she forced herself to relax and take some solace in the fact that the uncomfortable chain no longer rubbed at her.

She stared across at the woman who, months before, had made her suffer such agony during the ordeal of the wooden horse. She had scarcely seen Janson in the interim period, but stared at her now even as she struggled desperately in the grip of the flying beast, her dark dress flapping about in the wind as her greying hair stretched out in the wake of the bird's flight.

Anya found it difficult not to smile. The pain of the bird's grip on her, crossing flesh that had been recently punished by the whip and was still tender, could be ignored as she thought palpably of the irony of the situation – even as the finality of her own situation struck home.

If these men were in fact cannibals, as Sarah had stated, then both she and Janson would die. Janson plainly deserved it, she told herself – though she agonised at the thought of dying without having spoken to Carlos once more. She would never find Chelen now, it seemed, and Sarah – she closed her eyes as she remembered. She had tried to rescue her and had been taken herself. As she looked around and heard the cries of those other slaves who had been lifted into the sky, she tried to make out if Sarah had been taken by a different flying beast. She was unsure whether to be glad or not, even if she did find Sarah, however.

She had a chance at survival, however slim, if she had been left behind.

“Your situation has not changed, bitch!”

Her thoughts were shattered by Janson’s harsh shout.

“Really?” she barked back, with the master slave relationship that had previously conspicuously fettered her speech to the ‘Mistress’ now removed. “I might prefer to be a slave than be eaten.”

She stared as Janson laughed, forgetting her own predicament for a moment as she held onto the black talons of the winged creature – gasping a little as it gripped her tighter about the middle.

“These people aren’t cannibals,” she croaked. “That story is told to frighten barge slaves.”

“Well, they seem frightening enough.”

“Aye... because they are slavers. Raiders of a different kind, perhaps, but still slavers,” Janson barked above the noise of the rushing wind between them.

“Then it is not I who should be concerned, you malicious bitch,” Anya cried. “You’re a slave now too. I only hope I get to watch while you receive a brand and are beaten down by the whip, as you have ordered your scum to do to me!”

She was livid with anger. If she was going from one set of chains to another, at least the woman who had caused her such cruel agony would be going with her.

But Janson was laughing in response.

“We’ll see, slave, we’ll see.”

* * * * *

Anya reckoned they had been flying for an hour before the ‘birds’ began to reduce their altitude. The air had been quite thin, and she had noticed a marked

drop in temperature as they had been flying at high altitude for some time. The cries and screams of those slaves who had been taken from the barge diminished, as each woman slowly realised that there was little she could do about her plight. From a distance, Anya had seen one older woman who had snatched and bit at the claw that held her – less afraid of dying than she was of being eaten, perhaps. The rider, evidently fed up with her display, had touched a long spear to the claw and the thing dutifully dropped the woman, even as Anya screamed her defiance into the air at the act. She stared at Janson, wondering if she had reinforced the rumours about these so called ‘cannibal’ men and thus indirectly killed another slave woman.

They had passed a number of huge, impossibly high cliff-like rock formations, and now, as it was clear that their descent had begun, they were closing quickly on one of them. The descent was fast. Under other circumstances, the flight in toward the dangerously sharp rocks might have been described as exhilarating. Anya was reminded of fast helicopter drops and insertions. As it was, however, unaware of who these people really were and ignorant of what further cruelties, torments and hard labours might be inflicted upon her battered body, she was distinctly apprehensive.

She watched as creatures in front of her approached a flatter part of the plateau, and then slowed by flaring their wings before dropping their precious cargos a few feet from the ground with practised precision.

Anya’s heart was pounding as she realised that it was her turn. She could see Janson out of the corner of her eye, bending her legs and making ready to hit the ground. She could make out caves at the top of the long, narrow mountain now, at the end of the plateau – and figures, scantily clad men with nets, chains... and whips. Janson, it appeared on the surface at least, had been right. She made ready to drop, sensing the beast’s grip on her reducing significantly, hearing the ‘tic tic’ of the rider above as he nursed and guided the thing. Then she was falling.

She fell hard, sensing that Janson had also hit hard and winded herself. Anya rolled, using her bodyweight to carry her forward before using her legs to diminish her momentum, alert and ready to take on this new batch of approaching slavers if she had to. She did not want to be enslaved again – not if she could avoid it this time.

She started to rise, instinctively looking for a means of escape from the cliff top plateau, the smooth rock warm under her bare feet that were hardened and gnarled from months of pushing at the wheel. But there was nowhere to run, and certainly no cover to hide in. She could only watch as a group of these new slavers approached her. By now, Janson had begun to gather herself and get to her feet, nursing her arm. Both of them watched as women were grabbed, screaming, while heavy steel collars were locked around their necks with a crude version of something akin to a padlock, while other men grabbed their legs, locking their ankles in turn into chains that appeared to offer perhaps two feet of movement. A few even tried to resist, but the men carried long, thin and stiff whip-style instruments, which they used with reckless abandon upon the already abraded flesh of the new slaves.

Anya stood now, offering a quick glance to Janson, in part realising that she might be her only ally in this new fight, as one group of slavers detached from the rest and started toward them, their dark eyes intent upon Anya in particular.

As they closed, Janson began screaming at them. Anya's newfound command of the Zirithian language afforded her some insight into Janson's plan straight away. She recognised the words 'friend', 'slavemaker' and at least some further indication that she was attempting to tell the men that she was on their side.

Anya watched as orders were barked and two of the men approached Janson, a length of binding fibre in the hands of one as they moved toward her. The balance of the group now made their way toward Anya, whips at the ready and chains dangling.

She backed away as far as she could, aware that flying lizards were still landing around her as the men rushed her. They were wide and muscled, and most had shaved heads – clad in loincloths and sandals. Like their flying cousins, they appeared strong and rugged, with dark eyes. Anya took one in the throat, even as the long, spindly lash of another took her across the back of her thighs. They rushed her then, their superior numbers, weight and power forcing her down, even as she screamed and felt the weight of the thick collar as it was locked around her neck and her legs were pulled taut and ankle fetters locked in place. Once more, she was a slave on Zirith – in even more chains than she had been at the wheel.

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Anya watched carefully as a similar band of men started to chain Janson. They placed her in a similar collar, but merely bound her hands behind her, rather than stripping her and attaching the heavy ankle chains. Somewhere in Anya's mind, some dark part of her regretted this – even as she herself was led into the high cave from which the men with chains had emerged in the first place. She had wanted to see Janson stripped as she had been – by Silas, when she had been made a slave out on the open desert. She wanted to see the older woman placed in debilitating chains, so that she would find it hard to walk, hard to work, hard to live even – and filled with thoughts of foreboding and terror at the thought of what the overseers might do. She had wanted this for many reasons, not least because of the cruel torture Janson had made her face so many months before on the horse.

Sensing that there were those among the new slaves who might cause trouble, the slavers bound the hands of some of the slaves behind them, with thin lengths of hairy, leather like fibre. Anya tried to resist, but the welt of the long spindly lash across her legs, reminding her of the months of slave labour that she had already gone through, was enough to convince her to comply. After all, she was in chains once more, so what more could she do?

She shook her head at the negative thoughts as they started to walk inside the cave. Had she not resolved to eventually escape from the confines of the chain? Had she not at least succeeded in that, after a fashion? Her real regret was that she had not escaped from the burning barge with Sarah, rather than with the captain of the ship.

Janson was taken down a side corridor, her guttural protests echoing through the dim chambers as she was led away – with most of the words easily translatable, as Anya recognised 'Mistress of Slaves' and 'Captain', or 'Leader'.

The ground underfoot became more difficult to walk on, as small stones made it almost impossible to make pace at any speed. The walls of the cavernous structure were dimly lit with some sort of round lamp, encased into the walls it seemed. She followed the other slaves, certainly incapable of escape, as the bonds at her wrists had been tied tightly and the chains weighed heavily against

her ankles. She knew that they would eventually abrade the skin there. She would have to try not to move too much – no matter what her fate might be. The fact that these men carried whips, and the cries up front reassured her that they were not afraid to use them, meant that her fate was most likely sealed in this crucible of hard labour. She tried once more not to despair.

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Janson's cries had ensured that she too was bound before reaching what appeared to be the living quarters of the rock settlement. She moved her head at the awkwardness of the steel collar, as the guards stood back. She had been brought into a large, domed room, in front of what appeared to be a throne or similar headman's chair. She knew that the stories of the Rock Nomads being cannibals were not true – a rumour that she herself had perpetuated in fact, in order to keep unruly slaves in line. The thought did not make her feel any more reassured, however, tied and collared as she was in her current predicament. She tried the bonds once more – to no avail. These people knew how to handle slaves, and that, she realised, was what scared her. She had spent so long as a cruel mistress that the thought of being on the receiving end of a whip made her baulk in response.

“Ahhh, there she is.”

The voice came from behind her as the man strode in followed by guards, surveying her as he walked past – two scantily clad slave women at his arms.

His skin spoke of his Latin American heritage, though it had wrinkled slightly under the ravages of the desert sun. Clearly, he had not spent much time in the raider's lair, perhaps preferring to be in the air with the flying lizards.

“You look well, Janson. Well for a woman your age, at any rate.”

He wore hardened leather armour on his torso, with thick, practical leggings and tough sandals. His dark hair had been cut close to his skull, giving him a fearsome, fighting look – which was accentuated by his wide shoulders, muscled back and thick legs. There was little fat to speak of on a body that seemed to

have been designed and carved to face the ravages and depredations of Zirith.

The dark haired and blonde slaves were clad only in tight black loincloths, as they mewled and bathed in the radiance of his presence. She could see whip marks across their backs and breasts. Clearly he had not allowed them to suffer under the delusion that they could not be punished at any time, for some misdemeanour, fabricated or otherwise.

She gasped as she recognised him.

“Hello, Chelen.”

“It’s been a long time,” he said, circling her slowly, staring at her body.

“Since you tried to kill me, you mean?” She had meant the statement to sound brave, professional, defiant even. As it was, the slight catch in her voice made her fear apparent. Chelen smiled in response.

“I was following orders. You know that.” He put his hand under her chin, raising it slightly.

“You look well. Have you been working out?”

“Go to hell,” she responded curtly.

His eyes narrowed.

“You know I can have you whipped for that, Janson. You aren’t on your little slave ship any more.”

“Clearly not. Did you arrange to have your men raid us – knowing it was my ship?”

“I had my suspicions, yes.”

“Then you must have known how difficult it would prove to be. I think you lost many men.”

“Ah yes. I’ve been informed that you had some new technology. Something you brought through the gate with you?”

“Something I’ve been working on.”

“A pity it was lost to the desert. I could have used such a weapon.”

The women played with him, rubbing smooth hands slowly up and down his body as he spoke, whispering and biting at his ear in their need for apparent satisfaction, as he brushed them away lightly.

“I see you still have a penchant for slaves,” Janson said at last, pulling against the restraints that held her arms. “Does my collar indicate that I am to be a slave?”

She gritted her teeth as she said it.

“That depends on you.” He rubbed her cheek, patting a bruise that had developed there from either the fight on the barge or the scuffling outside.

“I want you to develop those weapons for me,” he said. “You know you will come to no harm if you do so.”

She laughed. “I see. So now that you realise it’s me you have captured, now that you realise following my ship has at least granted you some recompense, now we see what it is you really want: my mind. It figures. My body is too old for you, judging by these pair.”

The mewling slaves ignored her, lightly massaging Chelen’s back as they looked down on this particular new slave.

“Oh I don’t know,” he responded gripping her breast through her dark dress, as she gasped.

“You might yet prove useful, if not to me, then to my men.”

“You bastard,” she spat. “You wouldn’t dare!”

“Then tell me how you have constructed the weapons, woman!” His voice grew angry as he tried to tower over her. Her height was not so short and her demeanour not so meek that she was easily intimidated, however. Despite her bravado, she looked away.

“You know I can’t. We’ve disturbed the fabric of this place enough, for too long, without me destabilising it even further. That’s what prompted us to fall apart in the first place.” She raised her head again. “That’s what prompted Michelson to have you try to kill me. Isn’t that right, Carlos?”

He smiled, blinking. The name clearly having an effect on his practiced composure.

“It is. That was a long time ago, Janson. You’ve felt the pull of this place since then, the need to own slaves and, at least from what I hear, carry out your own cruelties upon them.” He stared at her now, as if defying her to react. She held his gaze.

“What I do with my slaves is my business.”

“Any normal woman, with normal desires...” He touched her other breast now. “Might want a male slave to satisfy her, or even a female to tug at her loins rather than watch as she tries to do the impossible on a cruel torture device.”

She paused, as if seeking a thoughtful and intelligent response, or at least one that would regain her the upper hand in the conversation. She remembered how talking with these military people had always been difficult – like banging one’s head against a wall. She had also thought of Carlos, at least, as a little bit smarter than the rest, even after Michelson had ordered him to have her killed.

“It’s not impossible. I’ve had a slave do it.”

He stared at her in surprise. “How nice for you. I’d like to meet her someday, and ask her why she even tried.”

Janson made to speak, then stopped herself.

“At least my proclivities...” he rubbed the muscled buttocks of one of the lithe women, tearing at her loincloth, “are more natural.”

“Proclivities?” Janson responded sarcastically. “That’s a big word for you, Carlos.”

Even the slaves, who by now had become used to ill treatment meted out by a master, were surprised by the strength and ferocity of the vicious, backhanded

slap he delivered across Janson's cheek. She grunted sharply at the blow – turning to stare defiantly at him as blood trickled from her lip.

“Put her in chains, and put her to work,” he barked.

* * * * *

Anya gasped as she struck the rock with the pick once more. Her arms were heavy with fatigue, and her sweating body was coated with dust like grime that had become part of the dirty, noisy and dangerous environment where she now worked. She had soon learned that the tall, somewhat elegant rock formation, sitting high above the desert surface, belied what lay inside. The inside had been hollowed out – or perhaps was naturally hollow to some degree. The shell of the sheer spindle of rock on the outside, was home to a sophisticated and busy mine on the inside, complete with schedules, considerations for moving material, strong overseers with savage whips, and a full complement of naked, chained female slaves.

She had been given a pick when she had been put to work, and told to strike the rock face – giving preference to the silvery metal deposits that showed clearly in some areas, less clearly in others. She had taken the lash often for the first few hours, screamed with anguish at this new, more severe whip bite as she had tried to do what they asked, however loudly, in the language of which she had now some basic understanding.

“Right... RIGHT...OK... YAAIIIIII, GNNN... I understand, dammit!”

The lash had welted her harshly across back, buttocks and thighs as she had tried to manipulate the pick and strike at the right area of rock.

She learned, after earning many new strokes, when and how to apply the pick. There were other ‘trades’ within the mountain – some of which she did not relish trying out, if her time would come to be transferred.

Women in chains were used to move the rock from the seams in large, wheeled trucks, which they were forced to push along rails. These were collected at

various stations that allowed the ore to be lowered to the lowest level (and possibly lower still, or so Anya believed). Slaves were used to hack at the rock, lift the ore into the trucks, push the trucks, and deliver the ore to the winch-like mechanisms that lowered it below. The women in charge of the winches were old and bent, and reminded Anya of the naked hags, in their last days of life, that she had seen on board the sandship.

Light came from the globe-like orbs that had been seemingly planted into the rock face at various positions throughout the structure, and gave off just enough illumination to work by, though Anya noticed that the older women could not see very well, having worked so many years in the poor light.

Though the welt of the whips was worse than she had experienced on board the ship, the worst issue was the nature of the ground. On the sandship, she had forced her bare feet against the steel rungs of the grille. Over the months, though in poor condition in general, her blisters had hardened and her feet had grown used to the pushing, becoming an extension of the strong leg muscles she had developed, the mainstay of the requirement for pushing the wheel.

In the mine, the rocky ground underfoot was uneven and covered with sharp stones and rocks. This made the going difficult, a situation only made worse by the heavy wrought iron chains that encased each slave's ankles.

Thankfully, water was plentiful; so much so that it led Anya to believe there was an underground lake or river with which the natives had contact or had access to. At night, after what seemed like sixteen hours with few breaks and less food, the slaves were allowed to sleep – in shifts, at least, though even sleeping was not made easy.

Sleeping on the rock face or filthy dust was bad enough, but it was made worse by the slaves' ankle chains being brought up and padlocked to the collar. At night then, unless one could pick the lock, there was no chance to escape, as a slave would either be forced to stand awkwardly in a hunched position, lie on her back with legs wide and raised, or – more normally – on her side, the cramps from the day's labours almost being forced upon cruelly bent legs.

Many suffered from cramp in this position, and screamed and writhed at night in their exhausted stupor, suffering horribly while overseers laughed or whipped them.

Anya suffered through days of the harsh slavery, never believing that she could ever have looked back on her chained slavery aboard the ship as a brighter point in her brief tenure on this foul planet.

* * * * *

It was a week before she was nudged with the handle of a whip one dark day, an hour after she had been woken with a kick – and made to stand in line for inspection – a daily routine when overseers would prod and feel for weakness, taking full advantage of the slave’s nakedness and exposure.

She turned around, aware of some of the words being used at least, conscious that she was being moved from the task that she was doing to some other tedious chore, her eyes widening as the overseer pointed at one of the heavy steel trucks on the rails nearby.

Her gaze shifted then, to the slave – perhaps not as filthy as her, and older, who stood beside the overseer, ready to replace her. It was her gasp that made Anya take notice.

Janson had been stripped naked and placed in the same horrible chains as she had. She had been here for a few days at least, though the cleanliness she had started with – in stark contrast to how Anya had looked when she began to toil in the mine, made it clear to all that this one had not been a slave beforehand. She had not recognised Janson at first, naked, hair unkempt, and head bowed in the aspect of slavery that Anya knew so well.

“You!” she said in English.

Janson visibly backed away as Anya’s eyes lit with surprise and intent upon seeing the woman she had learned to hate.

“Leave me alone,” she said defensively.

The overseer, puzzled by what exactly was happening, hesitated, before remembering his task and slashing Anya across the front of her legs and pointing

at the truck, while pushing Janson forward toward the rockface.

Anya cried out, almost doubling before slowly and gingerly picking her way over the sharp stones, never taking her eyes off the now enslaved Janson.

* * * * *

The days that passed were easier for her, it seemed. Firstly, she found the pushing of the truck, laden though it was with the rocks she had loaded by hand, was more akin to the heavy work she had done on the sandship, and she could use the power of her long muscled legs. Secondly, on each rotation and returning to the slaves working at the rockface itself, it made some dark part of her very happy to see Janson's sweating, and now heavily welted back and buttocks. She had been carrying some weight when her slavery had started – though that had rapidly been disappearing with the vagaries of the work – using the heavy pick. Each time she saw or heard Janson moaning or yelping from the lash, Anya laughed inwardly at the irony of the former slave owner's situation, and yet, she was still an Earthwoman like herself, whose future and prospects remained uncertain, bar the fact that ongoing life in chains would guarantee only that she would have a short life remaining, and die a slave.

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It was during feeding one day, that events conspired to change both of their destinies. In a similar manner to the wheel slaves on board the barge, the slaves were fed the harsh, though apparently nutritious biscuit that Anya had grown used to, in combination with just enough water to prevent them from dying of thirst in the heat and dust of the mine.

She had not deliberately sought out the slightly hunched figure of Janson, but inevitably she found herself standing in line behind her. She could not help but speak.

“So you find yourself in chains Janson. How does it feel?”

Janson paused for a moment, then turned.

“I wondered when we might have pause to speak.”

As Anya looked into the beaten woman’s eyes, she pushed hard against the feelings of pity that were rising.

“Ironic, isn’t it? That you, the purveyor of flesh, the woman who saw me in chains so long ago and purchased me for the wheel, because of this damned brand, should now be naked and working under the same whip?”

The woman who she had hated since she had made her ride the wooden horse in her cabin simply stared back, dark rings under her eyes from lack of sleep, limbs hanging limp.

A cry from behind indicated that the line for food had moved on – and that Janson should move. As she turned away, Anya snapped.

“I’m not finished,” she screamed. “I’m not finished with you!” she shouted, grabbing the turning slave by the shoulder and spinning her around, before slapping her hard across the face. In response, Janson sunk low and punched toward Anya’s stomach, connecting – though not as hard as she had hoped.

Both of them spun around as the surrounding slaves moved aside or gave them room – as their twisting bodies and limbs, aching and tired from exhausting hard labours, grappled in the dust.

It took seconds for the overseers to be alerted and gather, the welts and slaps of their vicious whips echoing through the chamber as both women were dragged from each other.

“It was her! Her! Not me!” Janson screamed in the native tongue. “Punish her!”

But the time when Janson could give an order for a slave to be punished and have that order obeyed had passed now. No longer could she command respect or even obedience. All she could hope for in the mine was to avoid the whip herself.

By the time both women had been pulled up and separated, their bodies were covered with fresh welts and they were gasping in pain.

“Take them both up... and collar them!” an overseer said gruffly.

* * * * *

Anya had wondered at what the overseer meant. She had already been collared, after all. She wondered at what new cruel horror awaited her in the upper levels, She was sure that the winding corridors she was led up differed from those where she had entered the mine through – indicating that the network of mazelike corridors was more complex than she had originally envisaged. She closed her eyes, cursing that she had lost control and her composure. The fact that she had attacked Janson was less at issue; she deserved it – but that she had ended up being punished and made to suffer further pain would weaken her, both mentally in terms of her resolve and physically in terms of her ability to withstand the slavery and hard labour that she was being subjected to in the mine.

She had expected a severe whipping, or to be denied food and water – and hoped silently that something as horrible as the crucifixion that Janson had once promised her was not one of her possible fates. What she and Janson had received instead, however, would prove agonising, yet delivering no permanent damage to the valuable slave. All the peoples that she had seen amidst the trials and ordeals she had undergone to date, were nothing if not very conscious of the value of human (or otherwise) flesh, and its ability to be moulded through rigorous though not permanently debilitating forms of punishment.

It seemed as if they had been standing on the rough sharp stones for hours now. Anya’s feet and soles ached horribly. They had been brought to the small, enclosed cavern-like area, which had been purposefully covered in the smaller stones and rocks from below, in a fashion that meant it was impossible to find a smooth portion of rock on which to stand. She noted the dangling chains that had been solidly anchored into the rocky ceiling, then realised their function as her collar was carefully unlocked then reattached to one of the vertical chains, as she was pushed across the rough surface on her bare feet. As a final insult, her hands

were tied tightly behind her back with the binding fibre that had been used when they were brought in.

Both women were cruelly positioned, unable to lower themselves or seek respite from the agonising small rocks beneath their feet, while being forced to stand erect – the height of their collars on the dangling chains having been cruelly positioned such that they were forced to stretch their legs slightly, since otherwise they would have to stand on tiptoe and thus make the agonising punishment even worse.

They stood facing outward, silhouetted in the dim light of the small globe that partially illuminated the cavern.

Anya understood most of what the guards had said.

“Leave them to suffer for three days. That should at least make them think twice before wanting to fight again.”

Janson yelped as the cruel overseer who had taken the lead grabbed one nipple of her sagging breast and pulled sharply as he was leaving.

“And you could have avoided this, wench – simply by giving the master what he wanted,” he grunted, and then tugged her breast again before laughing, and leaving.

The two women, breathing heavily under the rigours of this new torment they were suffering, spent several minutes simply getting to grips with their newfound pain, before Anya broke the silence, the chain that tethered her in a standing position chinking slightly as she turned her head.

“What... did he mean?” she gasped, her throat dry already. She hoped that at least they would get water, despite their enforced predicament. “What did he mean, that you could have had a choice?”

She had turned her head too far, and the tension of the chain pulled her back. She could have changed the position of her feet, though was unsure how the renewed pressure of new rocks would increase the discomfort that she was feeling there.

“You go to hell, slave!” Janson hissed in response, struggling to remain still, conscious that as time went on, each and every move would bring renewed pain

– which could only get worse as they grew more tired and needed to sleep.

“You might as well tell me, Janson. You’re just like me now.”

“Then why... why did you attack me, you stupid bitch, and get us both into these damned chains.”

Anya wanted to apologise, then stopped herself. No, she would not be apologising to the woman who had tortured her. Not a chance, she reminded herself.

“Did you really expect me to forget what you had done to me? I’ll never be the same again, thanks to you.”

Janson’s evil laugh turned into a savage cough as her chain rattled and chinked, which threatened to injure her as she moved her position to avoid slipping and falling.

They had both begun to realise the delicate nature of their position. One slip, one moment’s lack of concentration, and one of them could fall and end up being choked by the collar, unable to use their hands to get up, and sprawling on numb, blistered feet that might not find purchase before it was too late. Worse than that, they both realised that the likelihood was that one falling woman would hit the other on the way down and knock her off her position, thus potentially killing both of them. They both realised that the punishment was cruel yet effective, and had the added benefit of forcing two former enemies either to work together or die trying.

A few hours would have been bearable, a day difficult but not impossible. For them, to be forced to stand here, focused on not falling and thus staying awake for three days, would be more difficult than any slave could imagine.

Anya felt sweat trickle down her belly, find its way into the impression of her dark slave brand, and form ticklish rivulets as it made its way through the cruelly marked flesh above the overgrown hair.

“Tell me, dammit. Tell me what he meant!” she grunted.

“The head of this place, this Kreth as they call it in their language; he wants me to develop weapons for him.”

“And you refused? With the threat of working naked in chains under the whip, and you refused?”

“I have little choice. My knowledge and the potential I hold, is what keeps me alive. I would be dead as soon as I gave away my secrets here. Their master has tried to kill me before.”

Anya paused, partially remembering what Janson had said before when she had been torturing her, but she could not quite put her finger on it.

“You have... many enemies?”

“Of course I do. You don’t get to this place under the circumstances that I came in, without making enemies.”

“And an evil woman like you must have many,” Anya whispered slowly.

“For someone that wants information, you have a remarkably ineffective way of getting it,” she grunted in response, groaning as she changed her footing slightly on the sharp stones.

Anya tried to laugh, though her arms were starting to cramp and the soles of her feet had splayed awkwardly across the myriad stones and rubble that both women were forced to stand upon.

“Gnnn... well, you’ve got nothing else to do but tell me, unless you’d prefer to concentrate on the pain in your feet for the next few days.” She winced as she was forced to change her stance.

“So, you endure the slavery rather than make him more powerful?”

“I retain my usefulness rather than become a liability,” Janson answered.

“Well, you’re useful to no one standing on this torture floor. Neither of us are.”

“You started this.”

“Does that surprise you? You were the one who forced me onto your torture horse?” Anya barked back.

“Yes, I have my sexual proclivities perhaps.”

“Not sure that I’d use that term – even if I knew what it meant, though certainly you get off on the pain of others. Perhaps you enjoy watching me suffer standing here?”

“It’s entertaining. It would be more so, of course, if I wasn’t sharing your agony.”

“The only thing that we can be sure of, is that it’s going to get worse,” Anya whispered finally.

It helped both of them to talk a little as the hours wore on, though the burning sensation of pain and growing cramp was never far away.

“Gnnn... so Sarah pissed you off and you put her in chain too?” Anya grunted as both women swayed with exhaustion, eager to sleep yet aware that one moment’s lack of concentration might mean their death, as they might slip and break their necks.

“She was not... uhhh... to be trusted...”

Anya winced as she looked across the small cavern, seeing that after so many hours, Janson was becoming exhausted. Her legs shook and her upper body was slumped. It was clear that there was no chance of her making three days standing like this.

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“You did what?” Carlos shouted, pushing aside the naked slave that had been lolling across his lap, tugging at the ties of his loincloth, eager to taste his cock and hopefully profit by gaining the benefit of his attentions.

“She was placed in the standing cavern, Chelen,” the overseer, almost kneeling now and sweating for fear of what his master might do after having been brought this bad news, stared at the floor.

“I ordered her to be put to work, put in chains. At what point did I order her punished?”

“She was fighting, my lord,” the man said, a catch in his voice making him sound terrified.

Carlos glared at the overseer as he told his story, so much so that the man fumbled for his words and visibly cowered under Carlos’s eyes.

“Who was she fighting with?”

“One of the new slaves s... sir. A strong one, who seems to have had some previous argument with her, aboard the sandship we took them from.”

Carlos nodded. “No surprise there. I’m sure there are many slaves that we took from the vessel who would love to kill her.”

“Yes, my lord. They have been there for one turn of the sun. Their feet will be tender, their legs in agony. They have two days to go.”

“Release the slaver. Do it now, and put her back to work.”

“And the slave?”

“Another day on the stones, then prepare her for the arena. We’ll show the slaves that we will have discipline in the mine.”

* * * * *

“Hold on, Janson, dammit!”

“Why do you even care? D... didn’t you want me dead?” Janson grunted, barely awake now, the discomfort of standing so long on uneven footing sending shooting pains through her tired and pain-wracked body.

“Ha... I care more than you might think. After all, I want my own revenge on you for what you did to me, not let these bastards have their own way – and see

you die before I can get my hands on you!”

Janson laughed. “Perhaps that’s enough to keep me alive.”

Silence followed for a time, as both women tried to adjust to the numbing tiredness that gripped them. Anya pushed her soles and toes against the ground in order to stay awake.

“Gnnn. Just stay awake, Janson. Ok?”

“I’ll... try,” she murmured, swaying slightly, but it was clear to Anya that she would fall asleep or pass out in the next few hours, and potentially choke herself against the iron collar as she slipped or fell, or, worse, knock her off her position and kill them both.

She did not want to let a fellow human being, from Earth, suffer like this – not if she could do something about it, even though she reminded herself about what this woman had done to her. No, she could not let them win, not now. Not when she was so close and could still find out where Carlos was on this damned alien planet.

She could hear guards approaching, to gloat she told herself. Wait, there was a flash in her mind as something struck her, something she suddenly remembered.

“Janson. Janson, wake up! They’re coming, but I need you to tell me.”

There was only a slow moan from the suffering woman who slumped and swayed beside her – held mostly by the confining collar, on the verge of collapse and perhaps death as she struggled to remain conscious.

“Janson. You said a man tried to kill you. You said someone here – the master of this place, tried to kill you?”

She moaned in response, trying to lift her head and hold her body erect, in some vain attempt to prevent from falling further into exhaustion and letting herself sleep.

“Janson!”

The guards arrived, their light armour clanking and echoing as they moved

toward the smaller of the two women.

“What are you doing?” Anya gasped, her throat dry and raw. “We need water!”

She found the words easier to remember, the language starting to come more rapidly to her mind as she was forced to use the words in anger, rather than simply repeating them to Sarah.

“What are you doing?”

But it was clear that they were unlocking Janson from her plight. Anya sighed. At least they were going to be freed early, and neither of them was going to have to suffer any more. Janson fell into their arms as she was released, and they began to drag her away.

“What about me?”

In one swift movement, the overseer drew his stiff whip and welted it harshly across Anya’s belly as she screeched, wide eyed – the chains rattling as she tried not to fall as the blow burned like fire. More lashes followed across her breasts, threatening to bring tears to her eyes with the ferocity of the blows.

She could smell the guard’s fetid breath as he levelled his face with hers.

“You get to stay collared, slave. At least, until you provide us with some entertainment tomorrow.”

Anya shuddered, wincing at the pain of the welts as they left her alone with her pain.

* * * * *

The night had been exhausting. One day in her predicament had been more than enough for any human to stand. Standing, without sleep, was a torture in itself. With the added discomfort of the stones, it made the act of finding any sort of relaxation impossible. Anya swayed, shooting pains lancing up her legs when

she moved too much now. She was thirsty, desperate for water. She had not suffered like this before, she told herself, not even when Elias had had her tied between two posts and whipped her. Damn him for bringing her this far, and damn these people for doing this to her. She realised, however, no matter how much she tried to deny it now, that she had brought this upon herself, that her own actions had brought her to this point – where she might die.

But Janson had not answered her question. She had made a point about the man here wanting to kill her. Was it Carlos? Was he really here – and the master of this place? If he was, she would be freed, she would be with him. She fought back tears, tempered by the pain she felt across her body. Would Carlos run a mine full of chained women? Would he allow himself to be in charge of it, even?

She did not know, and understood the whole thing even less. She swallowed, and winced as her throat ached. She needed water and soon – yet she had no idea how many hours had passed. They had left her here to rot, allowing the torture of standing on the rocks to do its vile work.

She drifted again, her mind playing tricks on her, remembering her last moments with Carlos, the last time she had seen him before he was deployed – never believing that she might never see him again, but knowing that it was an operational risk.

She woke again, her body in agony, the sound of the guards moving down the passageway toward her.

She felt them grab her, unlock her collar, even as she fell into their arms, begging for water. She received some, but it only made her stinging throat hurt all the more. She was delirious as she was dragged from the cavern, through myriad passageways, though she could tell that she was being taken down, past the area where she had been worked, into the depths of the fortress-like structure.

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Carlos gasped as the slave moved her head faster up and down his erect cock,

teasing and playing with one hand, while rubbing his leg with the other. They were both bathed in sweat. The blonde slave that he had just seen whipped in front of him had made him hard. She hung between the posts across the chamber, tied taut and stripped naked, shaking slightly and moaning. The overseer had whipped her horribly. She had once been a good slave, though now she made constant mistakes, and it seemed that her attentions were forced rather than seen as her duty.

So he had made her suffer. She had seemed defiant after thirty lashes, so he had seen to it that she would receive another thirty. She had passed out screaming at some stage, though Amela – her dark haired sister slave, nervous perhaps at possibly being selected next for the whip, had begun to pleasure her master enthusiastically even as the last lashes had fallen. He moved one muscled arm toward her, pressing his fingers between her legs as she writhed and cried out in ecstasy.

“Please, Master Chelen, please take me as you would have taken the women from your home planet. Please do it now,” she moaned, moving up his naked sweating body and kissing him around his neck, her hot breath caressing him. He rolled her onto her back, trying to remain in control himself. It was remarkably easy to please these women, he reminded himself, not least because they were slaves of course – though he tended to, or wanted to, forget that on occasion and just live for the moment.

She writhed and gasped underneath him.

“My Lord?” the overseer said from the entrance to his chamber.

Chelen spun his head around, still thrusting wildly.

“What is it, you fool?”

“You asked to be made aware when the slave was entering the arena, Sir.”

“Yes... Gnn... I will be there soon... Now leave me be!”

He stared into Amela’s eyes as he moved faster and she screamed in delight.

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Anya fell awkwardly as she was pushed into the high walled, circular pit, her ankle chains rattling as she hit the hard surface. The ‘walls’ she noted now, being considerably revived since she had received water, were simply the more rounded surface of the cavern. A crowd of overseers and armoured guards stood on top of the platform that was formed by the circular walls, with some slaves who had been herded in chains to watch from the parapet above – presumably in order to see what would happen to an unruly slave who had chosen to start a fight.

She was tired – so tired, and now they expected her to fight. She looked up, trying to focus. The walled part of the natural pit that surrounded her was not completely closed. She now could see; a large steel grate covered an opening at the far end of the rockface – perhaps sixty feet away. Inside that was a cave – a dark cave. What new horrors awaited beyond that, she had no idea. Though she knew, that she was now fated to face whatever would emerge.

The metallic clang of a heavy steel object hitting the ground beside her made her flinch. She stared at the ornately curved sword – the weapon she had seen when she had been taken on the plateau above – and now within her own reach. Well, she consoled herself, at least she would not die without a weapon in her hands, although she reminded herself that an assault rifle might have been a little more appropriate.

The sword was curved and dangerous looking, unlike any weapon she had ever seen. She immediately recognised that it was a similar style and material to the one she had watched the raider use to slice through steel chains on board the sandship. In addition, she could see that the blue-silver ore the slaves mined was used to make the metal that composed it.

A deep and ominous roar came from the cavern, as a few of the overseers cheered.

Anya gripped the blade, though her arms were still numb from having been bound behind her for two days. It was light, with a centre of gravity that seemed to be designed to allow swift, defiant strokes. She had little time to practice, however. She tried to stand, and her legs threatened to give way. She could not

put weight easily on her chained and tortured feet. One of them especially was in particularly bad condition, she noted. She would have to make the best of it. Whatever this thing was, she had no choice but to face it. She backed away slowly with the blade, trying to find an area where she might manoeuvre and yet still be able to dodge, wondering how much time she might still have as she watched a thick rope attached to a pulley start to raise the iron grate and unseal the cave mouth.

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Carlos pulled the loincloth around him and put on his sandals, then reached for the long red cloak. He would have to make an appearance above the arena, at least in order to inspire his men and, of course, to intimidate the slaves. Production had to continue. There was too much at risk for it not to. The ore was important to everything that had to happen, everything that was required if he wanted to...

He paused, wondering who this unruly slave might be, as he reached the end of the precipice, his men moving out of the way as he looked down. He could see the slave now. She looked strong – wiry and tough. A pity she had to die, he thought. He watched as she moved one of her feet back awkwardly. The pain of punishment had made her weak. Her body was covered with lashes. She looked as if she had been beautiful once, and she reminded him of... He stared as the woman looked round. He noticed her face as she turned – open and broad, dominated by deep set eyes – beautiful in its own way. Her hair was filthy and matted, her legs long and muscled, yet shapely. He watched the curve of her breasts as she turned slightly, as her muscles tensed, as he recognised her.

“Anya,” he gasped. His voice left him and he felt sick. He wanted to scream down to her. He moved forward. “Wait! Wait!” he shouted as the Gilroth came charging through the cave mouth.

* * * * *

The thing that emerged was black with too many legs to count. Some fearful part of her mind had screamed spider at her – but it was not a spider. The black fur that covered its hideous body was slick with some oily substance. Its stink emanated from its body or some other orifice and made her want to gag. It had two legs and four arms – although some of these limbs could also have been used as legs. There was little time for Anya to work such matters out, however, perhaps even less time for her to prepare to fight, despite her fatigued state, as she stared at the thing’s head.

Her brain could not relate to what it saw. The thing had multiple eyes on what appeared to be stalks – all staring at her, it seemed, focused on this new prey that had been presented to it. It appeared to be ten feet in length, at least, and wide enough to prevent much of the sideways movement that she was hoping might let her dodge its attack. The head was massive, and as it opened its mouth it was as if the jaw distended, revealing layer upon layer of sharp, yellowed fangs. She had no time to fear. She knew that nightmares would come later, if she could survive this fight.

She noted something on the parapet above, out of the corner of her eye, something that distracted her, when that was the last thing that she needed as the beast came on at her, lolloping over the sand as she made ready to receive its charge or dodge out of the way.

But she saw the guards trying to prevent a man moving to the edge of the parapet, a man who was screaming her name.

“Carlos?”

The End

Anya Larsen will return in “Slave to the Sword”.