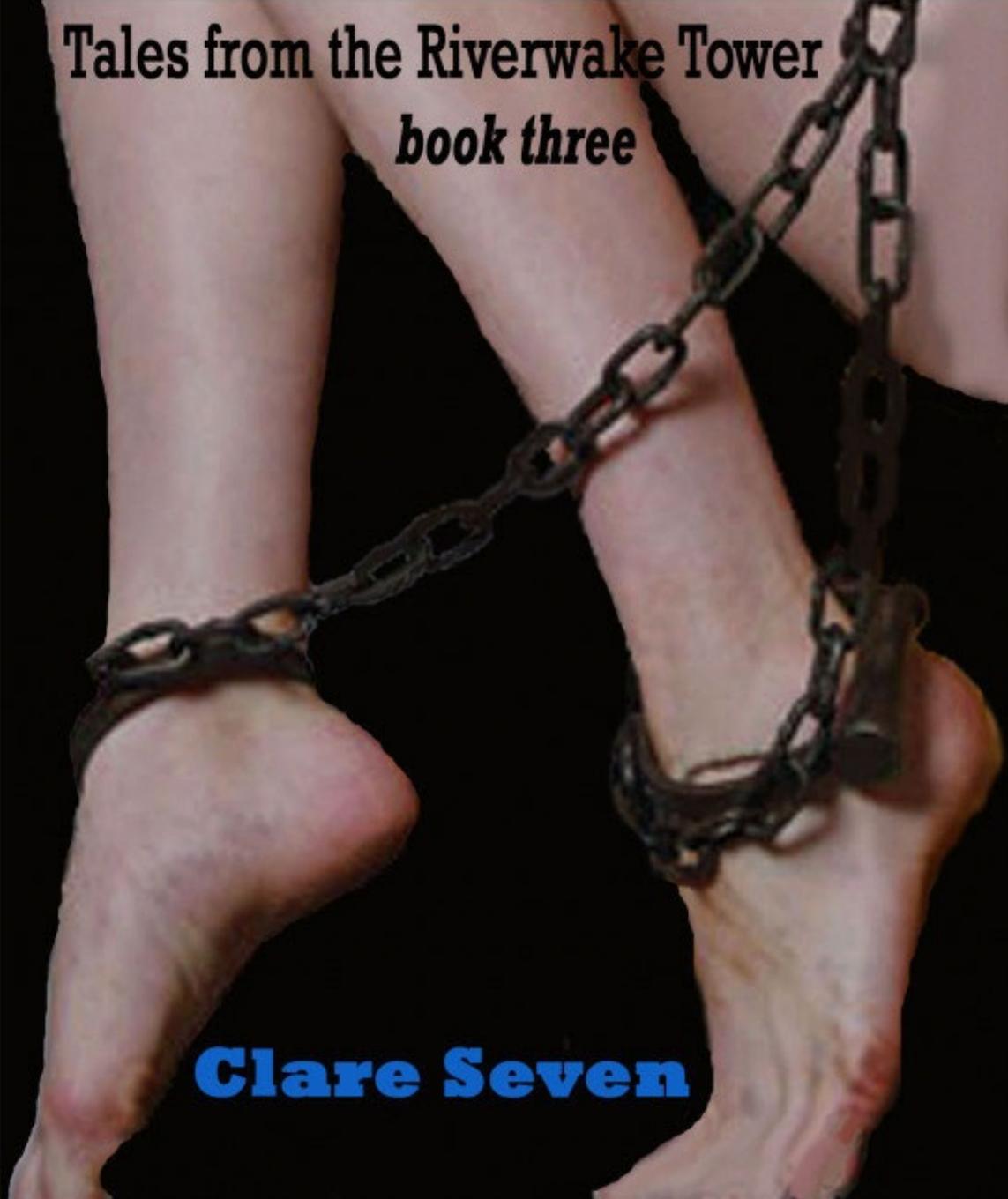


# Shadows Of The Past

Tales from the Riverwake Tower  
*book three*

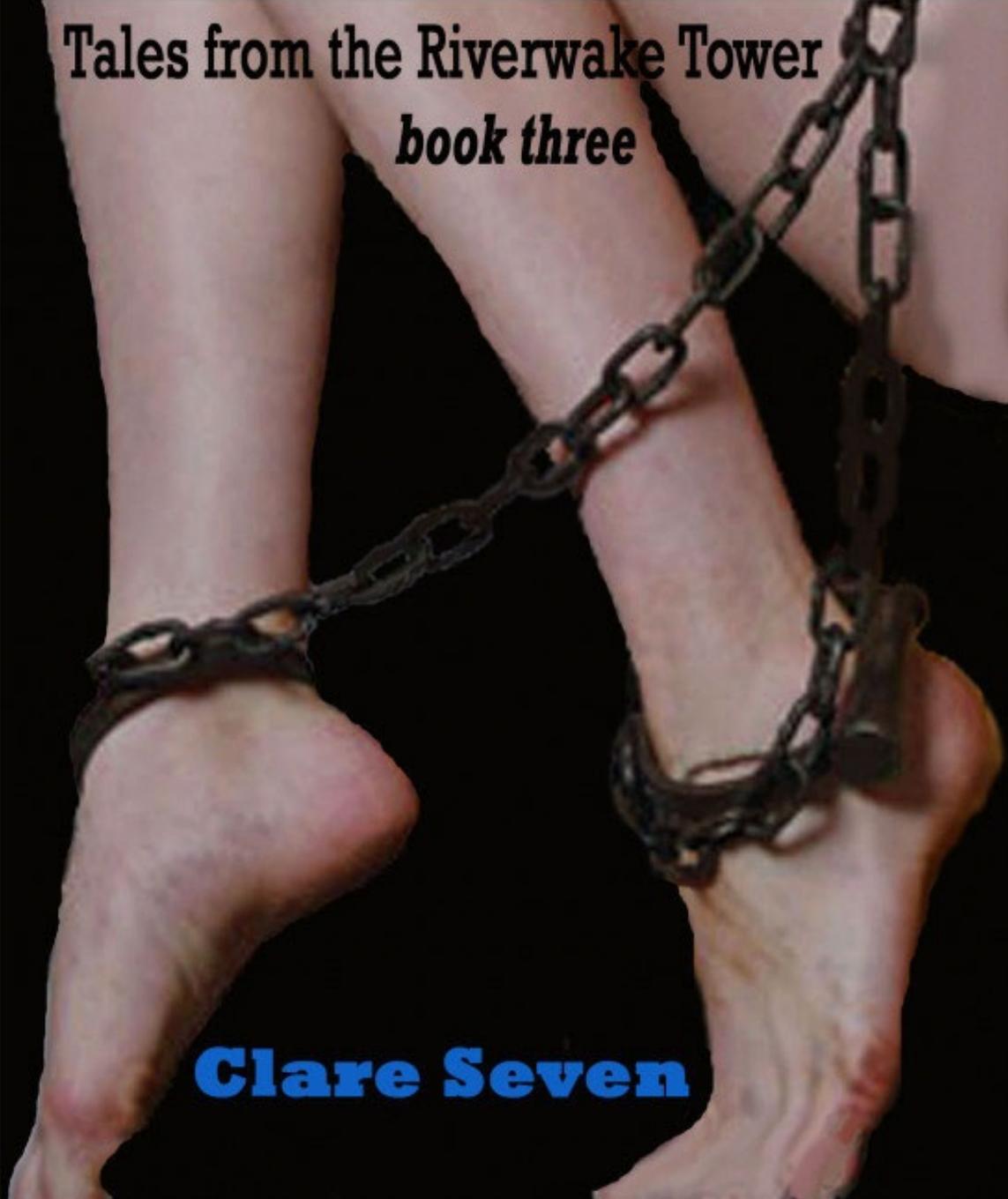
**Clare Seven**



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# **Shadows Of The Past**

*Tales from the Riverwake Tower – book 3*

**by Clare Seven**

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## Chapter One: The Magistrate

Reena Valeris strode purposefully toward the postern gate of the citadel. Anyone who did not know her would have immediately realised by the look on her face that she was on mission, at the very least of personal nature. Her chainmail armour rattled as she walked, though the power and grace, and her stature, which seemed to have been built to fight and wear armour as was the case for many women of the realms, seemed to accentuate the effort required to wear heavy clothing and armour, with a sword tucked neatly at her side.

“I need to see the Magistrate,” she remarked gruffly to the duty guard, who was considerably younger, and as a young male citadel soldier in one of the Duke’s mercenary regiments, had learnt not to question the female Captain – who did not suffer fools gladly.

“The Magistrate has insisted... ahh... that he receive no visitors... Ma’am.” His voice stuttered over the words, fear obvious on his face. He regarded the tall woman in front of him. Her black hair was tightly tied back, the ponytail that emerged blessed with some natural curls. Her features might have been described as coarse by one of the noble women in the Duke’s court. They would have regarded her as a rough fighter – bereft of beauty. The man who regarded her knew different. Her hawkish features and dark eyes were framed by her warrior’s hair. She had strong, broad shoulders, and he knew, despite the relative covering aspect of the armour that she wore, that she had a set of large, firm breasts. Though her frame was wide, the amount of work and training that she still did meant that despite her thirty-five or forty summers (no one really knew her true age), she was strong and muscled – her mind and body constantly striving to deceive and better those men of the profession who might have thought her unsuited to its pursuance. Like most of the men in the regiment, he admired her, while still yearning to discover just how the nature of her affections might be enjoyed. So far, of course, there were few, if any, who had managed to get so far with Captain Reena Valeris.

“You’re going to let me in, soldier,” she said, with no hint of tremor or concern in her voice.

“I am, ma’am?”

She sighed in response.

“Yes, you’re going to let me in, because if you don’t, you and I are going to have a matter to deal with. As you know, I normally win such contests.” Her voice was low, deep and still, commanding and direct, and she knew the effect it would have on the young soldier.

“I’m... sorry ma’am,” he said, subconsciously straightening himself, trying as he might to regain his composure despite the thumping of his heart and the gnawing feeling in his brain screaming at him that he was going to lose this particular contest. “I... I have...”

“You have your orders, is that it?”

She was angry now. The man could not have known that her anger was not directed at him.

“I... uhhh...”

“Just tell him I ordered you to submit. You can keep your honour and have nothing that besmirches your reputation,” she added slowly, not breaking eye contact with him.

She watched as he thought about the proposition, closing his mouth lest he look like some sort of buffoon.

“Yes... ma’am,” he finally said, his voice shaking slightly as he moved to one side.

\* \* \* \* \*

Beros Kradish was doing his best, though the whore that currently rode his cock was clearly acting. His erection was fading fast, though she did not seem to care. Clearly he was getting what he paid for, no matter what the whore thought. She was a good actor this one, supple and lithe, thin and gifted. He gasped as she writhed on him, pulling at his cock with her sex and twisting him so that he

could feel the tender touch of her love. She moaned and cried out. No, he was fading and she was clearly acting. He considered that he might have her punished – harshly whipped. He was not going to let some whore, especially one that was costing him so much, decide that she could... they both stopped, looking at the thick oak door simultaneously as it was wrenched open by a heavy hand.

The woman that burst through was tall, clad in leather and chainmail in the style of the citadel mercenary guard, and clearly she meant business.

“By the nine hells,” Beros screeched, throwing the whore from him as she lost her balance and fell onto the wooden floor behind the bed, landing with a thump and an audible scream. Beros covered his fat belly with the white linen sheets, caring little for the whore that he had thrown off him. She cursed as she tried to sit up.

“Magistrate Kradish,” Reena said, closing the thick ironwood door behind her.

“What is the meaning of this, you bitch? Captain Valeris!” He stared at the woman from the bed. “I’ll have you flogged for this!”

“I think not, Magistrate. You’d have to influence quite a few at court to have me whipped at the post. You’ve made a few enemies in your time yourself, eh?” He could see that the woman was incandescent with anger.

“What is the meaning of this? How dare you interrupt me when... I...” He looked down at the whore who had managed to raise herself to her knees now and stare maniacally at him in her efforts to determine how exactly that she could get even a little satisfaction from this beastly man, and secondly, how exactly she had ended up on the floor?

“You will not have Zara flogged. I want you to change her sentence,” Captain Valeris stated plainly and simply.

“What? You think because you break in here that...” He tried to remember the woman. Ah yes, the blonde barbarian. He had wanted to visit her in her cell before she was whipped... such a waste.

“You will do it, or the Duke will hear of your little solicitations with the whores of the red tower...” She gestured at the woman on the floor. “This wouldn’t be your first one, would it?”

Magistrate Kradish tried to stand up, caught himself off balance and fell back onto the bed, the linen sheet falling from him as he did so. Reena smiled as she looked down at his manhood.

“I would have thought that you could do better than that, my Lord,” she said mockingly as he grappled for the covers.”

Despite his anger, the Magistrate would not rise to her challenge, neither literally nor verbally...

“You have burst into my apartments in the citadel to plead for a woman who was clearly caught by the watch while brawling in the city?”

“She has already been in the Riverwake Tower for ten days. She does not deserve eighty lashes for brawling. It will take her days, perhaps weeks to fully recover. I need the woman on the wall, not face down on a bunk having her raw back tended to by a physic. As she spoke, she could feel her own anger beginning to subside. Perhaps he was going to listen after all.

“And you threaten me, in order to have her released, is that it? You threaten me with telling the court of my... preferences, with regard to womenfolk?” He looked back at the redhead on the floor, who had resigned herself to not reaching climax before lunch.

Reena sighed, despite herself. “Forgive me,” she finally said, trying to remain calm. “I merely think it unfair that Zara has spent days in chains. The brawl was not her fault.”

Kradish was laughing now. “Yet, she struck a nobleman... don’t you think that merits something a little extra?”

“No. I... she did not know anyone who was in the brawl. If you recall, the evidence suggested, in fact, that a male barbarian had attempted to steal her favours.”

“She put three men in the infirmary...”

“She is nothing if not effective.”

“That is not an excuse.” Kradish smiled. “Very well,” he nodded his head as if in

supplication. “I will accede to your demands. The wench shall not receive eighty lashes.”

Reena sighed in relief. “My thanks, Magistrate.”

“She shall instead receive one hundred and fifty.”

Reena would later reflect on the wild tide of anger that arose inside her at the time. The strike of a gauntleted hand across the Magistrate’s face was not hard, considering the level to which some of the mercenary classes in the city of Irulan might strive. It was a strike, however, that would change her life.

\* \* \* \* \*

By coincidence, or perhaps by the nefarious designs of the gods of Irulan, one of the guards that now led Reena Valeris to the dungeons of the Riverwake Tower had been the self same youth that she had convinced to let her into the apartments of Magistrate Kradish. There had been considerable argument from her comrades regarding the fact that she was to be treated as a common prisoner, yet she was far from a member of the nobility, and indeed, if arrested she would be ordered to strip naked and taken down to the cells. Her bare feet walked through puddles of filth now as she reached the lower levels. Her hair flowed freely, no longer tethered by the ties. Her breasts also, now freed from the restrictions of the chainmail and leather that had held them, bounced a little as she walked. Her hands had been tied behind her back – it was a common requirement for naked prisoners – though that made it no easier to bear.

“Have a good look,” she whispered to the guard, as he snatched another glance at her naked body, as she veered slightly to avoid another puddle of filth, then grunted as she was placed back on track by a guard, causing her to walk through the sludge.

“Sorry, Captain, but you’re the last person I expected to be guiding to chains this afternoon,” he said.

“Quiet there. Just do your job,” a more senior soldier commanded. “Just get the

captain to her cell. We can let others sort out the details.”

“Do any of you know... if... if Zara survived her whipping?”

“No, ma’am,” the senior said. “Though... I can tell you that she took one hundred and fifty.”

“Did she survive?” Reena asked, a tremor finally evident in her voice.

“She was breathing when they took her from the whipping post, ma’am. That is all that I can tell you,” he answered.

“I suppose that I should thank you for your honesty,” Reena replied, pulling against the binding chord that has been used on her wrists – not that she would have much hope even if she could escape. “How long will I be in chains?” she asked quietly, as the group slowed. Clearly they were coming close to the cell. She knew the jailor, and indeed the torturer – the vile Rensor – in the Riverwake Tower. She hoped that her stay would be short enough such that she would meet neither.

“We’re not sure, ma’am. You know that were just doing our job.” He paused. “But assault of a leading city official can sometimes carry quite a punishment, and he is the Magistrate, after all...” He let the thought hang, then glanced back at her as the group slowly came to a stop.

“I see that you have served on the galley before... I don’t know if a second bout of service might be in store for you. Let me put it that way, ma’am.”

She realised instantly what he referred to. A crude brand of a “5” decorated her left breast, the device cruelly pressed in against her nipple, partially disfiguring its original shape; even though it appeared to be an old brand. Her thigh too was decorated with the galley brand symbols of the merchant’s guild: a small, stylised oar symbol. There were two such markings on her right thigh, indicating that she had served two years (or so depending on when the new year of the moons occurred) of the time that she had been punished with. All of the guards, almost simultaneously, imagined how she must have looked, sweating naked, lashed, under the oar. They had all heard stories that such slaves or prisoners might be required to offer their mouths to the slave masters. Each man in turn was imagining how his career might flourish in such a profession, and with such a woman at the oar – though no one commented on the fact that only three out of

the five years appeared to have been served.

In addition, her ankles bore the marks of years of steel fetters – with hard and discoloured skin around them even now.

“I fear... well, ma’am, I fear he might give you life at the oar for this.”

She did not react, but they all knew what it meant. A brand on the forehead, and never again to see the sun out of chain. The L for Life symbol forever branded above the eyes.

“How long ago was your debt paid?” The question seemed laden with doubt, as it was clear to anyone that she had not served her term.

They came to a stop at a cell. She had already passed many naked chained wretches, their ankles held to the wall via thick fetters and ankle chains.

“10 years ago.” She stared into the cell now.

“We await the jailor, ma’am.”

As if on cue, a jangling sound came from the bottom end of the corridor.

In the unearthly glow of the torches, a misshapen figure was emerging into the light – limping as he came. As he passed cells with naked prisoners, who had heretofore pressed hands and faced against the bars, they recoiled – in a few cases with a gasp, as they realised who it was.

He spoke with rasp as he recognised the Captain.

“It is true then?” he panted. Clearly the effort of coming from the lower levels had tired him.

“Never did I think, in all my wildest imaginings, that I would have Captain Reena Valeris as a guest in my prison.”

“Last time I checked, it belonged to Lord Gorus... Jailor.” she responded, proud despite her nakedness and bonds.

He approached. She raised her head slightly in defiance, though with her hands

tied she could do little to prevent his touch. She gasped as he grasped her breast.

“You were a galley slave? I never knew that you were a galley slave, Captain?”

“There is much that you do not know about me, Jailor.”

“Oh do call me Merlo. We have much time to get to know each other. Well, at least until you are sentenced.”

She pulled her breast away as he laughed.

## Chapter Two: Lord Gorus

Lord Gorus rarely came down to the lower levels. Sometimes he came to the chamber of torment to watch Rensor work. On other occasions, he might have to speak with a prisoner. That was his intent on this occasion, and he had found his quarry at last.

“Captain Valeris,” he said, enunciating the syllables of her name.

The naked woman, who had been lying on the rough cobblestones, had tried to stay away from the blocked drain in the corner of the cell, which appeared to be clogged with a puddle of waste. Gorus winced as he watched her flinch, knowing the longer that she stayed in this foul cell, the more a part of it she might yet become.

Reena sat up, placing her off hand on the ground to support her, in an effort to keep her other hand relatively clean in the filth of the cell. As it was, she had no idea how long she would have to stay here, naked and chained, and so she was determined to at least keep part of her as clean as possible.

“My Lord Gorus,” she croaked, the rattling of heavy chains on her feet accompanying her words. “It’s good to see you down here.”

Gorus covered his nose. No matter how many times he came down to the dungeons of the Riverwake Tower, he never could quite get used to them – the stench of naked unwashed men and women in chains; their piss; their sweat; their fear.

The muscular woman made to stand up, wincing at the effect that the heavy rusted chains that attached her to the wall of the dungeon had as they handicapped her movements.

“Still a beautiful woman, Captain, despite the chains and filth, if you don’t mind me saying,” Gorus rasped, staring at her muscles and curves as she stood in the pale torchlight.”

“Why thank you, Lord Gorus, but you appear to have me at a disadvantage. I am

the one who is naked and chained.”

He smiled and nodded, “By your own hand, if I recall the detail?”

Valeris spread her arms in mock supplication. She nodded, almost in acquiescence. It was important to try to retain some modicum of control and lack of panic.

“And I see you bear galley brands, Captain. Quite a novelty, if you will... you were a galley slave – a prisoner of the oar, before you joined us, that is?”

“I was, aye.” There was little point in denying it now.

“It is interesting, Captain,” he continued, but she could already see where he was going with his argument. “So, you see, my concern is that we took you on in good faith, as a warrior, a mercenary whose allegiance and service was paid for in coin... and yet, you were an escaped galley slave? You did not finish your galley sentence? You can imagine how that sits with the magistrate you struck. A turn of good fortune for him, perhaps?”

She tried not to react. “I have never let my Lord down,” she said in response, her heart pounding as she stood naked in chains.

“Perhaps not, my dear Captain, though that helps you little, in the face of the retribution requested by my Lord Kradish.”

“He had my soldier whipped for no reason,” she said quickly.

“Worse than that, I fear,” Gorus interjected. “The woman has died from the flogging she received.”

Valeris surged forward, the chains at her feet stopping her from attempting to rip the iron bars from the rusting hinges upon which they rested. “Zara is dead? That bastard!”

“You must learn to not let your emotions rule your actions, Captain,” Gorus stated, louder and more forcefully as if to calm the feelings of hatred for the magistrate that he knew were building in the former soldier. She had pulled forcefully on the thick chains at her ankles, such that they now stretched against the pull, such that she was able to grip the thick round bars of the cell front.

“He killed her, he whipped her to death!”

“Things like this happen.”

“No, they don’t! Not if the dukedom is ruled sensibly!” She gritted her teeth with anger.

“They do, my dear,” he shouted sternly now, as if reminding her that she had finally overstepped some almost invisible mark of authority between them.

She growled in response, leaning against the bars and gripping them until her fingers threatened to bleed in her anger, leaning hard against the force of the chains attempting to pull her back, iron fetters cutting at her ankles and heels.

“Lord Kradish would see you crucified as an escaped slave, beaten half to death before being forced to drag the beam through the city, under further flogging, then nailed to it and placed on your perch, feet nailed to stop you squirming. Would you prefer that fate, Captain?” He had screamed the last sentence. Somehow it seemed to help Valeris remember where she was, but more importantly, what might yet still become of her.

She calmed relatively quickly, trying not to think of Zara lying naked in a cell with a raw back, finally succumbing to infection or the shock of her beating.

“So you have come to gloat before I am crucified. Is that it, my Lord?” almost smiling in her anger, wanting to finally say her piece after having held her tongue in the face of these so called “noble” men for so long. Though she stood naked, her feet chained to the wall, in a filthy dungeon, challenging the nobleman who could see her fate sealed in a manner ranging from death to torture or horrible slavery. What was she thinking, something inside her head began to scream at her.

Such defiance could earn her worse punishment. As it was, he could have her stretched on a rack, or whipped, or worse, well before any crucifixion. Her life was at risk and she knew it. She leant forward to the bars.

“I did what I thought was right. The man is a scumbag and you know it, my Lord,” she said, with an echo of demure sarcasm.

Lord Gorus’s greying black locks rattled against his head as he shook it in

despair.

“I mean this sincerely when I say it, Captain Valeris,” he said slowly and deliberately. “I will miss you when you are gone.” He turned to walk away.

“What? What does that mean, my Lord?” she said sarcastically. “Am I then to assume that I am to be crucified? Will you be placing the nails in my hands and feet yourself?” She gritted her teeth and shook with anger. He turned, as another poor wretch, who clearly had been in the dungeons for years, appeared at the bars with a pleading look of supplication, as if merely being in the presence of Lord Gorus might be enough to earn her more food, or more water, or less beatings from the Jailors. Predictably, he ignored her.

“My dearest Captain. You see, the issue is that I cannot allow you to remain in the city. There would be too much recrimination, too much doubt in the power of authority, if I were to pardon you. I cannot continue to let you wander about this city, and yet, ironically, I can’t make you a martyr either. Were I to have you whipped to within an inch of your life, then paraded through the streets naked, bearing a heavy cross to be nailed to, your screams – audible across the city as they raised you at the gate... why, I would face rebellion!”

Reena stared at him, the weight of the fetters plying on her ankles now.

“You really consider me that dangerous, Gorus?”

He turned, as the prisoner nearby flinched, mouthing the word “water” as if her supplication might grant her the basic needs.

“Oh no, my dear, not at all.”

“Then I don’t understand,” she said, trying desperately to continue to stand against the pull of the rough iron fetters. Despite the pain she felt, she forced herself to retain her position.

“You see, my dear, this place is made up of factions. In your case, the mercenaries, who are held tenuously together by myself and the favourite nobles of the mercenary companies. If I nailed your troublesome body to a cross....” He looked her naked body up and down. She wanted to hide it but refused to budge. “Some would see you as the hero of the hour. There would be questions, potential disobedience and trouble. And trouble is something that I do not need

at the moment. So it would seem that you were once a galley slave, and escaped. The nature of your brand would suggest that it was long ago.” He raised a hand to stop her interrupting, to explain.

“Save me your excuses. The simple fact is that you will be escorted from here, without punishment, to a ship of my choosing. That ship will take you as far as Arlos. There you might begin again, but, I assure you, that if you ever show your face again in Irulan, I will have you crucified!”

She looked down, afraid to stare back at him for the first time. She nodded sullenly.

“There,” he added quietly, “you do understand.”

She moved back, the pain on her ankles easing, and slumped down the wall, her naked flesh cold against the grimy stone. Oh yes, she understood. That much was certain.

### Chapter Three: The Raven

She had been allowed some water to wash the grime of the prison cell and chains from her body, though she knew that it would not be enough. She could still smell the vile stench of the Riverwake Tower on her as she walked the timbers of the dock. The thick, black wood creaked with each footstep as she moved. It was all she could do; her pride was all she had left. She had been given some of her clothes, the jailor had made sure to burn the remnants before she was released – she had little choice in that. One of her tunics was returned as well as a battle harness and shortsword, and sandals, and little else bar her loincloth: not much to face exile in Arlos. Indeed, she had not even been given silver to trade. She was as she had started all those years ago, when a rusted chain link had enabled her to break her fetter free from the galley chain, had enabled her to escape the oar, and be free. There was no chance to see Gorus again, and perhaps it was better that way, she considered.

Her gods had been cruel; that she had been forced to reveal the marks of her own imprisonment while seeking justice for another, and yet the gods had also seen to it that she might have another chance. Some might have said it was a chance to redeem herself, but she had been falsely accused, falsely placed in chains, naked and toiling under the foul whips of lustful overseers so many years ago. Her escape had not been a betrayal, it had been justice. Yet the gods had defied her for it.

The water had not been enough. She could still smell the foul stench of the cell and her unwashed self as she walked. Damn them. She pushed her long black hair back and tethered it in a ponytail with a filthy length of leather thong that she had liberated from the tunic. She knew she was not alone.

The patrol stayed about 40 paces behind her, not keen to make it look like an escort though nevertheless willing and able to ensure that she boarded the ship bound for her new home. She knew they had crossbows, and at least one or two men (whom she had even helped train) that knew how to use them. No, they would ensure that she did not jump into the water, swim to shore, at best attempt to escape the exile that Gorus had arranged for her, at worst that she might incite insurrection in the city.

She smelt the ship before seeing it, knew the stench of galley slaves before she even saw the massive cargo vessel. She swallowed nervously, trying to bury deep the memories and feelings that were rising to the forefront of her mind. The Raven. A massive galley, used to haul cargo up and down the coast, and no doubt a very lucrative trade for the merchant captain that commanded her; not so bountiful for the slaves that toiled in the heat and amidst the violence and lust under her decks. She remembered the toil, the sweat, the vile porridge like food designed to give energy and little else, and brackish water... and the lusts of the overseers. They were barred from using the slaves with their cocks, despite their evil compulsions, or even the wishful lusts of desperate galley slaves. Punishment was severe for those who did so, and many an overseer had been nailed to the mast as an example to others. Indeed, some captains recruited only female overseers for their cargo ships, knowing that male slaves and prisoners would be used exclusively for war galleys. It was, however, difficult to recruit female mistresses of the galley deck. Even those hardened through mercenary services or retired guards found it difficult to mistreat and whip and punish their own sex, at least to the degree that less scrupulous captains and even less particular overseers might be concerned.

“Ho there!” a voice called from the darkness of the deck above her.

“You’re Valeris?”

“Aye,” she called back. It had taken her a moment to adjust to it. The shock of her name being called in such a manner. For so long, she had been called “Captain”, well before her name was used. Even though she already knew that those particular days had gone, some part of her mind resented the fact that she was a simple sellsword once more.

“Come up! The gangplank there... aye!”

Not even a ‘ma’am’, she considered. She looked back once at the skulking patrol behind her, and placed a sandaled foot on the narrow plank which led up at an angle, trying hard not to look at the eyes of the stinking rowers who skulked behind the open oar-ports of the galley deck, staring at her, jealous of her freedom.

“You have a letter? From a High Lord?”

“Aye, I have it,” she replied back stoically as the gangplank creaked under her

weight.

“A letter of reference from Lord G...” She remembered his instructions, “From the merchants’ guild.”

“Aye, that’s it, wench. Come aboard.”

Wench? Her hand raised for the short sword on her harness, before some tamer part of her mind stopped it. She set her jaw and continued up the ramp. The man at the far end was half naked, dressed only in trows, his bronzed and thickly muscled body gleaming in the pale moonlight, crowned by a bald pate and a scarred face.

“I had no idea that my passage would be with pirates?” she said, in jest. She had not though about the remark before she had said it.

He immediately understood her intent, however, his lip curling up in a snarl as his fists clenched.

“You bitch... I...”

“Taron!” a voice called from the upper deck above them. “Is that our lady?”

“Yes, Captain,” he snarled back, not taking his gaze from the woman in front of him, as she held it fast.

“Bring her up here.”

Reena smiled as she sensed the displeasure in this new man, Taron. Though perhaps he would think twice before calling her a mere wench next time, or at least he would mean it with some feeling. She knew from experience that she had made her mark on him. She followed him up the creaking steps to the upper deck. The man who stood before her gripped the deck rail, watching her closely as she ascended toward him.

“It seems you knew that I was coming?” she said quietly.

“Aye,” he said, his voice a low gravelly growl. She could not decide if it was by accident or design that he sounded authoritarian, but she immediately felt her guard go up. She was not sure why; perhaps it was something in the way he

looked at her; his age and experience seemed etched into the wrinkles in his face. He did not seem old, despite the greying hair at his temples, though it was clear that he had seen much of the world and his outlook had become etched and shaped by what he had seen.

“You are Captain Valeris?” His face softened a little as he smiled at her. She felt him look her up and down, take in her muscles and curves, along with the statuesque nature of the wiry body that had been honed by product of her fighting experience in the citadel.

“I am. And clearly,” she said, rising to the same level on the deck upon which he stood, “you have come to some ‘arrangement’ with Lord Gorus?”

She placed emphasis on the word, which framed exactly what had happened. Gorus had paid to be rid of her from his city. It was perhaps more convenient than to have her publicly flogged then nailed to a cross, and have her scream her very public protestations as she slowly died, reciting her rebellious words to those who might listen and who thought her innocent of all charges; words which might yet stir rebellion. No, he considered, better to be rid of a troublesome mercenary commander, rather than make her a martyr.

He pushed a hand out to her in the old style.

“Captain Arness. And yes, you could say that it has been made worth my while to transport you to Arlos. Would I be correct in assuming that you have little say in the matter... the moving wooden deck of a galley cabin being... shall we say... preferable to the lying naked in chains in a dungeon?”

She had tried not to react, but the tick in her gaze back at him betrayed everything.

“It would seem that you know a considerable amount about me,” Reena replied, grasping his hand firmly then releasing. “Arlos it is then. You have a cabin for me? What luxury.”

“Aye, Ma’am. I have a few women sailors who reside below. The only other women I have will be staying in far worse conditions than that – below at the oars.”

She had tried again not to react to him, but there was something about the man

that seemed to drag out the truth of her feelings. He canted his head slightly as she reacted to the presence of tens, if not hundreds of female galley slaves below – the origin of the foul stench that pervaded the deck. She had of course smelt it before, though then she had been a rower herself. She tried not to remember; tried not to think of what it had been like, and what she had seen other poor slaves go through, and how they must have died, chained, naked, whipped, abused and exhausted – then cast overboard like animals.

“I’m sure you are a kind master to them, and make sure that you get the best out of... your slaves.”

She knew that she had looked weak whilst playing his game.

He had surely noticed. “I get the most out of my rowers, be they condemned for life or, indeed, prisoners sentenced to the oar for a number of years. I brand them yearly, so that they are released when their time is done.”

He knows, she surmised; paranoia, an intervening emotion she so rarely felt, taking control. Gorus has told him, a voice in her head was screaming at her. Gorus had told him that she had not only been sentenced to the galley in her youth, but that she had escaped, which, of course, meant that she could be arrested and reassigned, and put back in chains and...?

“You need not worry about prisoners and slaves below, Captain,” he said, as if reading her mind. “Come, let me show you to your cabin,”

The stern of the massive cargo galley loomed into view as they made their way past the cargo and lumber that lay secured on the upper deck. She wondered idly if galley slaves had been released from the oar below in order to load the cargo, or if the sailors had been made to do it. No, the rowers would have needed the rest, if her own experience had been anything to go by.

The warren of wooden corridors seemed larger and maze-like as she entered the confines of the cabin complex at the stern of the vessel. There had been something very familiar about it all. It had, after all, been the first time that she had set foot... and sandaled foot rather than bare foot in chained fetters... on a galley since she had escaped the confines of imprisoned galley service so many years before. It had unnerved her and undermined the calm and confident reserve she usually felt, which, in fact, she had felt for so many years previously while in the mercenary employ of the Lords of Irulan.

As with the years of her youth spent labouring on a galley for something she should never have been punished for, there was almost a return to those years of rebellious innocence, if indeed, such a term could be used to describe her youth and her chaining inside a stinking galley deck. Perhaps it was the smell, and the distant sounds below that brought back the memories to her – memories that ranged from bleak exhaustion to outright terror in the face of the overseers' cruelty to those that had been enslaved for life, and those, only marginally luckier, who had been sentenced to a number of years in chain.

“Here,” the first mate grunted.

“Leave us, Taron,” the Captain grunted back. The muscled first mate shrugged in apparent frustration and left them at the small wooden door to the cabin.

“You can stay here,” the Captain said gruffly, moving to open the steel latch on the ancient door. “It’s one of the larger cabins but, as you correctly surmise, Lord Gorus paid well for your passage.”

She licked her lips, trying to push away the vile thoughts and feelings of claustrophobia that invaded her mind.

“It will be fine, thank you.”

She pushed at the latch, making contact with his hand. He smiled in response, his touch almost electric to her.

“I would be enchanted if you would join me for dinner, milady.”

“Milady? Charming,” she replied gruffly. “A little better than what your first mate called me on the dockside... I believe it was ‘wench’.”

“I can see that you are more than a mere wench, Captain,” Arness replied, taking her by the arm briefly, before departing.

“We’ll be underway in an hour. Join me in my cabin soon after that. I’ll send someone for you,” he said, moving down the corridor as the timbers creaked beneath his feet.

The cabin was small, yet the confines were not as damning to the soul as she had thought that a return to a galley might have warranted. A simple bed with clean

bedding took up most of the room, and the cabin even had a lockable chest at the foot of the bed.

The small porthole that allowed light to fill the room was significantly larger than the oarport hole below, which, aside from the barred grille in the deck above the rowers, was the only source of light in the dim gloom of the rowing deck.

\* \* \* \* \*

*She drifted back to her chained servitude, blinded by sweat in the gloom, arms and legs, hands and blistered feet, aching through overuse, fetters at her ankles leaving bloody marks after days, then months, years of overuse of muscles and joints; her back made raw by the grim application of the whip, forced to suck overseers' cocks with the ever present threat of the sweet agony of having to ride the wooden horse in front of the rowers as punishment. They had made her do that twice... she felt the pain in her loins as she thought about it. She had resolved to escape, no matter what the cost, after her second ride. She had succeeded.*

Lurching from below made her jump from the bed with a start. She had fallen asleep, scarcely recognising the toll that days in chains in the dungeon had exerted upon her body. That had been a number of days, scarcely a moment compared to the years that some poor prisoners stayed there, becoming ugly and emaciated, a shadow of their former selves, scratching at whatever master remained outside the bars, as she had seen the other prisoner do.

She had been sweating. The ship was under way, which explained the lurching that she had felt. She left the bed and stood on tiptoe to stare out the porthole, still in the clothing that she had boarded in. Damn, how long had she slept... all this for wanting to seek justice for her friend Zara? All this, and she would lose her position, find herself exiled to Arlos.

There was a banging at the door.

“Ma’am... you’re to come to the captain’s table.” The voice of Taron resounded

in the corridor outside. At least he had called her something a little more respectable this time. There was no time to wash in the brackish water that had been left in a wooden bucket near the bed. She would go as she was.

She pulled open the door just as Taron was about to bang upon it again. Behind him stood a female sailor – at least that was what she appeared by her attire. The heat of the deck meant that she wore simple treads and a halter top, and little else, long tousled auburn hair falling to her shoulders and swaying as she carried bowls and a jug of water. Reena noticed immediately that Taron carried nothing.

“Let me help you.” She moved to take the jug of water from the teetering woman.

“You’re not a member of the crew, wench... Captain... Ma’am,” Taron corrected himself.

“I’ll help anyway.” She shoved him out of the way as she took the water from the struggling female sailor. She could sense Taron clenched fists, even if she could not see them. He relented, as Reena smiled and hefted the clay jug.

\* \* \* \* \*

The captain appeared surprised that one of his passengers had helped to carry the material that had been assigned to a crew-woman, staring angrily at Taron as he entered the dining area. Reena immediately noticed that there were four bowls. She wondered who she might be dining with, then realised quickly as Taron and the woman took their places, that she had already met both of them.

“I don’t believe that I have introduced Kail – she does my administration, and helps to keep the rowing deck overseers in line.”

Reena stared, leaving down the heavy jug of water. She had thought that the thin woman had been merely a servant or similar. She had a position of authority on the ship?

“You seem surprised by this, Captain?” Arness said, pouring himself wine from

a small pitcher rather than sampling the water that she had carried.

“No, not all. Greetings, Kail.” The woman nodded in response. Taron laughed. “You won’t be hearing her talk much. She doesn’t have a tongue.”

Arness stared at Taron. “Silence, dog,” he hissed. “Or perhaps you’d prefer she have her way with you? Not something you might relish, mind.”

“Kail is a barbarian from the north. Her people were enslaved long ago and taken to the east. I... purchased her from a slave market there, and gave her freedom. Her mind... is a jewel. I make more money on the back of her calculations with regard to cargo, navigation, even her impression of people, than I do from any of her other talents. Taron,” he pointed the cup of wine at him as he said it, “would do well to remember this.”

Kail immediately gripped Arness’s cuff and pointed at Reena, making signs and gestures with her hands that Reena, and apparently Taron, could not understand.

Arness nodded his understanding, however. “She is quite perceptive, Captain Valeris,” Arness said, sipping at the wine again. “She tells me that you have a secret.”

Kail nodded, smiling innocently at Reena.

“A secret?”

“Yes... do you?”

Reena breathed out slowly, and leaned forward, reaching for the wine. “If Lord Gorus has told you anything... Captain,” she almost spat the word out, “It would be that I have many... many secrets. Perhaps we should eat, before the stew becomes cold...”

\* \* \* \* \*

The food, or stew as it appeared to be, was excellent, though Reena found

herself comparing it more than favourably with the rotten vegetables or sour porridge that she had received every other day in prison. She could also smell the pottage stew that the slaves would receive below, realising that they were fed a mix of energy giving foods that would sustain them during the twelve or even eighteen hour shifts that they suffered. She sipped at the wine that was offered too, knowing that, despite the temptation to indulge, she did not want it to get the better of her lest she say something that she should not. There was idle conversation on cargos and shipping, though she tried to remain stoic when it came to the slaves below.

“And the plague that we had below?” Arness looked at Kail, who shrugged, then began signing again. Taron nodded. “Aye, it would seem that it has died out, though we lost seven women to it. Of those, four were old, three lifers and one who was a nine year veteran, a year shy of freedom.” No one showed any remorse that a woman who had served nine hard years in oar service – a 10 branded on her breast – and nine year brands on her thigh – had died so close to release. Reena gulped at the goblet of wine so that they could not see the disgust that must have been self evident on her face.

“And the others?”

“They were a greater loss.” Kail nodded at the words, agreeing, whilst showing little emotion.

“We lost two recent acquisitions from the prison in Irulan – both had served a year or so – one of them had looked like we might get the full ten years out of her – strong.”

“And the final one?”

He glanced at Kail. “The blonde barbarian... the one that you had... favoured... last year.”

Reena knew what he meant without asking.

“The one that you had Janik crucified over.”

Arness slammed the goblet down, spilling the remnants of his wine across the rough table.

“Janik knew the rules. I will not have male overseers having their way with rowers, be they condemned or prisoners... I will have no babes made on this boat while there are plenty of mouths that can suck cock, and ride the horse if they refuse.”

It was all that Reena could do to retain her composure, though she noted that Kail seemed to smile at the mention of the horse. So, she considered, the rules were the same here. In fact, she wondered idly, was it the same across all merchant fleets? Punishments, the lash, the horse and enforced offering of the mouth and pleasuring of men. The women were not even allowed to pleasure themselves. The memories were flooding back even as she considered the hell that was her tenure on the galley.

Her thoughts were interrupted, however, as Arness, clearly incensed by Taron’s remark regarding the blonde barbarian, struck him hard across the face.

“Enough!” he screamed, as even Kail, it seemed, was taken aback by his actions.

The threat of further violence was enough to persuade Taron not to dwell any further upon the matter. The resulting silence was pregnant with opportunity.

“So, how long until we reach our destination?” Reena asked, almost innocently, as if trying to diffuse the situation that had become dangerously primed with possibility.

Arness looked at her.

“Excellent. Well, you certainly know how to take the bite from my anger, Captain... or should I say former Captain.”

“As you apparently know how to re-ignite mine,” she replied, as Arness had slurred her former rank in an attempt to insult her.

“How many galley slaves do you have on board?” She had not wanted to ask the question, though somehow some part of her had remained inquisitive as to the plight of the wretches below.

Arness sipped at his wine, before considering her question.

“It’s an imperial style galley, which effectively means that it’s heavy in the

beam, so it takes a lot of rowers to move it. Of course, I'd prefer male slaves – though they are reserved for the war galleys by law. We must do what we can with the women...”

He sensed her disgust at his comments, and smiled.

“I do not mean to demean your sex, Captain...” the casual disregard in the way that he pronounced her former rank was evident again...” but you realise that the average...” he stared at her physique “...and I do mean average woman, is not built for the rigours of galley slavery, not in the long term at any rate. My rowers are a mix of women; all sorts.”

He wiped his chin of the wine that had dribbled down it, as if remembering something as he stared into the space around the moving cabin, given rhythmic motion by the movement of the waves around it and the juddering monotonous pull of the rowers below, their moans a distant echo as they pulled in unison.

“I have three tiers of rowers. The lower tier sits above the bilge – dirty work, so the prisoners usually go there.”

“I don't understand,” she said. “You mean those who are sentenced to a number of years?”

“Aye. You see, I will ultimately lose them. So if a woman is sentenced to 3 years, or even 5, better to put her on the lowest tier rather than lose one of my lifers to disease.”

Reena gasped. “You put their lives at risk, since you only have them for a short time?”

“Of course. I could get 10 or more years from a lifer or a slave. Why would I risk them? I could keep a prisoner longer than her term... though, of course, that is against imperial law.”

“Next tier up, and staggered against the lower tier positions, I have single rowers again. In older style designs, these oars had two women, though that's more difficult now. The configuration and, might I say, price charged to get the chains to work in such circumstances is more than prohibitive. I end up with tangled chains and slaves who... well... get too close.”

Reena looked away. She could remember riding the wooden horse for having pleased a woman who had sat by her.

“Then I have standing rowers on the top tier, balanced against the side of the hull. Rough and tough work. I use barbarians and stronger women when I can get them. The oars are longer and I need strength up there. He looked her up and down again. “Someone of your build would suit the work well.”

She sniggered.

“Aye. I’m sure that’s true... sir!”

It was her turn to use the term sarcastically.

“Have you rowed before, Captain?” he asked, in a matter of fact manner.

She stared at him. Had Gorus told him of her past, that she had been a galley slave, a prisoner branded and forced to serve naked in chains?

“You are asking me if I was a prisoner at the oar? A galley slave?”

He moved his hand as if to assuage her concerns.

“No, no, of course not. I merely wish to ascertain your experience in this regard, as it would seem that you have the build of a fine rower.”

She tried to maintain her composure, while simultaneously trying not to think back on the memories of her service, lest the thoughts might yet give vent to visible effects of her feelings.

She noted also that the woman Kail was now regarding her with interest. Did she somehow suspect?

“No, I have not rowed as a slave,” she said deliberately.

Arness smiled, clearly imagining how the lithe and muscled body might look at the oars, his oars, such that he might use the mouth of the rower as was the law. At least, the look that he gave her in that moment appeared to suggest that was what he was thinking.

“Do many women survive the oar and go on to better things?”

It was Arness’s turn to speak now.

“Most end up as beggars on the streets of port towns, actually. They get picked up by slavers and sold on – sometime as galley slaves – and they end up back where they started, though in the latter case with no hope of release... unless you count death at the oar.” He rubbed his chin. “Why do you ask? Would you like to serve?”

She swallowed, concerned that she had said anything, feeling under pressure.

“Of course not.”

Arness continued. “I have seen some long term rowers – ten year women – half blind and simply existing as living mechanical devices – beg not to be released. They become institutionalised and part of the rowing artifice, or machine as they might call it in the west. They beg, offer to suck cock, offer themselves even, if they might be allowed to stay at the oar, naked, feet chained, working under the lash and cock of the overseers. Can you begin to understand how that might feel?”

“No. I would want to be freed as soon as possible.”

Against her better nature, and despite the fact that the warrior inside her rebelled against the thought, she could fully understand it. There had been times when she had wanted to succumb, to try to lessen the impact and frequency of the whip on her back, especially when she had been made to ride the wooden horse for refusing to suck cock, but the better part of her had reasoned that escape would be more advisable than giving in to servitude and the safer path, and the warrior had won.

“In that situation, I would never give in,” she said – confident, staring at him.

“How could you know if not faced with it, Reena?” He used her first name now, trying to unseat her nerve by using familiarity, it seemed.

“Have you rowed, Captain?” she replied. “Perhaps a male rower faces even worse depredations, bearing in mind that they too face male overseers... do they suck cock on a male war-galley?”

He made to laugh, but she could see that it was forced. He does not like the thought of men having to row, she considered.

The awkward silence that followed was enough to instil a sense that there was nothing further to discuss. Kail was the first to get up, indicating via some sort of sign language that she had to get back to the galley deck – after all, she had rowers to co-ordinate, overseers to direct, and, Reena considered, to ensure that whips were used on the weak and exhausted to drive them to greater things before they died, while trying to balance the cost of new slaves.

## Chapter Four: Pashta

Reena stood on the main deck, the wind tugging at her dark hair. It was hot, as the sun beat down and sailors moved around the deck carrying out various tasks under Taron's direction.

The sailors watched her. Although there were male and females working the decks – paid sailors rather than slaves or prisoners – and they could, from what she could hear from the quarters deck below, make use of each other's charms, she could feel the men, and even a few of the women's eyes upon her. She had changed into a simple tunic and sandals, which showed her musculature and curves, and cared little for the looks of admiration, or even jealousy, that she received.

She discovered that there were also other passengers on board. A diplomat, from the eastern state of Rejan, was travelling with a massive bodyguard. She had not seen them during boarding, and neither had they been present at the meal that she had shared with the "officer" crew, which indicated, to Reena at least, that they wanted to keep their customs, practices and perhaps food to themselves.

The woman was richly dressed, but not tall, yet thin in stature as befitted the courtly diplomatic nature of her role, while the man was massive – taller than Reena by a handspan and festooned with weaponry large and small, which he never seemed to remove, despite the heat and obvious discomfort from carrying so much.

The woman watched her now as she stood, her foot rubbing back and forth on the rusted steel grate on the deck, the view through which she could see the plight of the slaves below. Sunlight granted her a full view of the proceedings.

As Arness had stated, there were three tiers of rowers. She watched them pull in unison, releasing a low, exhausted, monotonous moan – which made her heart pound with the memory of her own experience each time she heard it, and the drone of which drowned out the noise of the sea as the massive galley ploughed through the waves.

Some of the rowers stared up at her as she watched, as they pulled in time with

the deep drumbeat from the stern. One of them, a thin slave bearing a large “10” brand on her breast, coughed and turned away suddenly, seemingly blinded. Reena realised that she had kicked powdered rust from the grille into the woman’s eyes and immediately withdrew her sandaled foot from the steel. It was too late, however. The momentary lapse of concentration from the rower attracted the attention of a burly, bearded overseer, dressed only in a loincloth and bearing a long-handled whip, with a thick tapering lash curling as he manipulated it to strike hard across the woman’s back. She cried out in pain, leaning forward with the stroke. Even if she had wanted to, Reena would have been unable to identify the new lash-mark against the crisscross mapping of dull and fresh red welts that patterned the woman’s back. She found rhythm again, slowly – though the issue with her being unable to clear her eyes meant that she missed the pull again – or at least it was less than perfect, attracting another heavy whiplash. Reena tensed and recoiled, wincing at the sound and smelling the vomit inducing stench from below, carried by the wind now. A mixture of sweat, urine, fear and an animal like stink of humans held in close confinement.

If the galley were like the one she had escaped from, then the slaves might be lucky enough to wash out the bilges with seawater when the ship arrived at port. The woman regained her sight eventually, staring up with hatred at Reena, who raised her hands as if in apology. The glare from the rower below did not seem to accept her signified apology, as she bit down on the pain and rowed on. She had six oar marks on her thigh. So – she had served six years of her ten year sentence. Reena wondered if she would survive another four years and complete the term.

The three tiers worked as cogs in a giant artifice, as Arness had said. The lowest tier, closest to the damp and creaking wooden walkway, which the overseers patrolled, held slaves in the worst conditions, their chained ankles almost submerged in the vile bilge water. They were filthy, some caked with dried sweat and dirt. Their heads and shoulders moved against the line of the walkway. She knew that they would have to stand if they were required to offer their mouths to the overseer.

Some of the slaves had had their heads shaven. She wondered whether lice had been, or continued to be, a problem. She had seen worse, and indeed better slaves in her time. Arness seemed no worse nor better than any captain keen to cut costs and get the most from his slaves and prisoners. She knew too that good rowers might be kept beyond their term. It was easy to turn a “5” into a “15”,

using a branding iron, illegal in terms of sovereign law perhaps, and punishable by death, but who could tell the authorities if such a thing were to happen?

The next tier sat on rough wooden square style benches, little more than rough hewn trunks of wood, which granted little comfort to pampered buttocks, and scarcely better to those women that might be used to sleeping in the open or a barbarian lifestyle. Yet they were not designed for comfort. The mid-tier oars were slightly longer, thus stronger women were placed on the seats, though the movement forward meant that they would almost leave their “chairs” in anticipation of the heavy pull that the oar required.

Above the mid-tier, women stood on two levels of wooden protrusion from the hull. One leg to steady while the other foot was braced against a more forward positioned piece. The constant stress of such movement could make weaker rowers lame, unless they were shuttled from port to starboard. Indeed, forcible “laming” of some was used as a punishment. Women might stay in the same position for a year, enforcing swollen ankles and useless legs on one side. It was no idle threat, and would condemn the woman to begging if she were ever freed. Their task was made even less easy through the longer length of the heavy oar, necessitating the stronger built women – both mentally and physically – to carry out the difficult and potentially crippling task, those who could survive and even thrive in the role.

All three tiers, on both sides, moved in unison, with the moans as their song during the pull, to the beat of the drum:

BOOM!

Push the oar forward, straining the back and arms whilst keeping it out of the water.

BOOM!

Drop the oar in the surf – controlling the drop.

BOOM!

The terrible pull, when core, chest and arms made use of legs to make the body actively row against the waves. Were co-ordination not perfect, the ship might change direction or lurch, and infractions or poor timing would inevitably attract

the attentions of an overseer, and result in a whiplash across the already raw back, buttocks or thighs.

BOOM!

Exhausted from the exertions of the pull, the sweating rower would have to push down on the oar to take it from the waves – a difficult task in itself, which is why the upper tier women have to stand; it is backbreaking, and made worse by the fact that the next BOOM of the drum signalled that the heavy oar is to be pushed forward and thus start the horrible task once more.

Thus the purpose of the overseers was defined and underlined. When a rower detracts from the careful choreography of the rowing steps, the lash is applied until their mind and body learn that sharp, stinging, fiery pain will be the result of a misstep or error in judgement or timing. They become conditioned, and thus, Reena reasoned, perhaps Arness was correct about their not wanting to leave the calm predictability of chains, servitude and the whip... with the occasional swallowing of man's seed, in terms of the utter drudgery and complete predictability of effort in contrast with life as a free woman in the city where slavery due to debt or worse could be just around the corner.

Perhaps it was that certainty, that the inevitable slavery had come, that there would be no more need to fear it, that food would be provided, and one would only have to survive the inevitable cruelty and harshness of the whip, that made some remain in chained drudgery.

It was impossible to watch the slaves without noticing the chains. Slaves were fitted with ankle fetters – rounded steel in most cases, though some had deep and thick anklets which were of a poorer design and ultimately would rub the skin and create hard scar tissue over time. If this remained uninfected, the slave might survive; otherwise, it could spell their doom.

Each fetter had a rounded link cast in, or at the very least an attached ring, whereby the fetter could be attached to local lengths of chain by passing them through the loop. The slaves were “attached” to the ship itself in such a fashion – the chains passing across the beam or ship width and linking the slaves width-wise. The added incentive, of course, was that slaves would go down with the ship unless the length of chain was released – perhaps motivating them to row faster in a chase with pirates. It also meant that to release a slave in the lower

tier, the overseer had to undo chains at the far side, which, albeit temporarily, might release slaves across the row width of the two oars being processed. Though, in the presence of whip bearing, vile overseers, escape would be the last thought on most minds.

The chains swayed with each moaning stroke of the oars, almost in perpetual and perfect unison with the rowing of the women. There were other items, however, that marked slaves out from their rowing sisters.

Some were old – and haggard in appearance. One poor woman bore a “20” on sagging breasts. Reena could not quite see the number of years that she had served so far, but her body bore a map of welts. No one survived twenty years, she mused. She wondered idly what the woman’s crime had been. Another was a red haired barbarian – clear from the heavy defined muscle. She bore a “10”, and Reena could see at least three oar brands on her leg. Seven years would reduce the strong woman to a broken wreck. The same woman had a rag about her loins – perhaps, if convention was similar on this ship as to the one that she had slaved upon, a slave during her “bloods” might be allowed to have a loincloth. The same redhead also wore wrist chains – perhaps as a punishment for some infraction. She had remembered wearing them herself for a time. It did not seem like much, but the discomfort of wearing manacles over time would become unnerving, and make a rower obey. The weight, and the constant contact of chain against belly or breast during the pull, became akin to the drip torture that they would use in eastern countries, and, as she could see on the redhead, would rub at the skin of the belly, creating a sensitive area that would become sore to the touch. It was a devious and subtle punishment indeed.

Another younger woman, perhaps a little cleaner than the rest and showing signs of distress upon her face, was clearly new, and neither prepared nor designed for the galley service. She bore a “3” upon her breast, and Reena wondered if she had committed a crime, or been placed at the oar by a vengeful father or husband, in order to teach her a lesson about humility. She had heard of certain states and families on the Arlosian coastline where it was considered “duty” for women to serve at the oar – a few years to make them understand suffering. She would never understand families that might take such actions. “Your mother served at the oar, and so shall you before marriage,” she could imagine a father, with clear issues, stating to his daughter.

She had become engrossed in the rowing women, flinching obviously at each

whip stroke, as if feeling it herself – which meant that she had not been attentive to the person approaching her, until she spoke.

“You pity them?” the voice said as Reena moved with a start.

She turned around to the dark olive skinned face of the eastern diplomat – perhaps a hand shorter than her. Reena’s senses returned in a rush, and she immediately saw the massive bodyguard but a few paces away, who perhaps had no option but to allow his charge to approach Reena – but that did not mean that he had to like it.

“What?”

“I said, do you pity them?” she repeated.

“Of course.”

“They are lucky.”

“Lucky?” Reena stared at the well manicured and clean woman with astonishment. “In what manner might you consider them lucky?”

“In my country, galley sluts are condemned for life. There is no release, not for any of them.” She glanced down at the rowers. Reena blinked as a harsh cry came from one after the slick slap of a whip across her bent back. “The only release is death.”

“I understand... perhaps that is...” Reena tried not to think of the harshness of an eastern galley, where slaves must have died in droves.

“They are chained to the bench in a different manner too...” the woman continued, interrupting her while shifting her gaze from the rowers back to Reena,

“I don’t understand.”

“In my country, they have their sex lips pierced. A bright steel ring is pierced through the sex and linked to a chain at the bench. As I said, their sex is permanently attached to the bench. There is no escape. There is very little crime in my country.” She looked up at Reena, a slight smile curving her lips. There

was something about the way the woman formed the words – her intonation and deliberate stressing, that excited Reena, despite herself.

“That’s hideous.”

“Indeed, though I have always wondered at the sweet agony of service at the oar.”

She looked down at the pale wretches below.

“There is nothing sweet about the whip and cock,” Reena said slowly, staring down at the motion of the rowers.

“Cut off from the light of day, serving at the oar, under the whip,” the smaller woman continued, almost entranced as she watched. The way she had said it seemed to make the words come to life, however. Her voice was accented, a little brooding, yet her lilting tones seemed to give life to her words. A typical diplomat, Reena considered.

“You want to know what it feels like – are you serious?”

“Not physically – though the feeling of servitude... I have often wondered.”

Without warning she brushed her hand lightly against Reena’s bare arm.

“My name is Pashta.” She held her palm up. Reena had seen it before amongst the eastern nations. It was a sign of greeting, and she responded likewise, as they both bowed slightly. She could feel the bodyguard looking on, his anger rising at the fact that his charge was speaking with a warrior on a ship in the middle of nowhere, and there was little that he could do about it without infringing upon the direct orders of his mistress. Reena had done a little of that type of work herself, and immediately understood his frustrations, even if he had not given voice to them.

“Perhaps we might dine together, you and I, and talk more of the slaves.”

Reena heard a grunt in a language she did not understand from the bodyguard, but it was dismissed with a simple raise of the hand from Pashta, whose dark eyes seemed alive with anticipation of her response.

“I think your man there might object?”

“Oh, Garluk? Do not be concerned about him. He is a mere plaything that my family put in place for my protection. I am in the upper cabin, the Royal Cabin as the captain terms it. Please arrive at sundown,” she said matter-of-factly as if the request were an obvious order.

She moved her hand again, as Garluk made a motion that suggested he was going for his blade. Reena shot a glance at him then looked away as she refocused on Pashta, who had now moved her hand to hers and teased at her fingers.

“I would enjoy discussing the slaves more later with you,” she whispered.

It had been a long time since she had been with anyone, let alone a woman. She felt her heart pounding as she made her way back to her own cabin. She had wanted the woman to pleasure her, on some carnal level. She locked the cabin door and lay on the bed, beginning to pleasure herself. She could not help it. She had avoided it during her mercenary service. There had been a few lovers, but never enough. She had avoided it in the dungeon of the Riverwake Tower, but there was something about the strange eastern woman that made her forget her composure, as she teased then tugged gently at her womanhood, whining slightly. By the gods, she wanted the easterner to do it. She broke into a sweat as she tensed and pleased herself – she could not stop now, even if she wanted to, and she knew that before the end of the night she would need more... much more.

\* \* \* \* \*

They ate at a small, though well made round table in the large cabin. It was well appointed and, it seemed, Pashta had brought a considerable amount of luggage with her. Garluk had been told to remain outside.

“Do you usually eat with the captain?”

“Only once,” Reena replied, “Though the conversation was a little one sided?”

“Oh?”

“They wanted... perhaps as you do... to talk about exploiting the galley slaves.”

“Oh, I do not seek to exploit them. I merely wonder after their lot in life.” She plucked a sweetmeat from one of the finger bowls and popped it into her mouth. Reena watched her pert lips suck the juice before chewing. Gods, she wanted the woman now. She crossed her legs and squeezed them together, hoping that her desperation did not show.

She chewed on the morsel slowly. “I watch them... naked... chained... under the heavy whip.” She accentuated the word as she looked across at Reena.

“Sometimes I yearn to feel the whip across my back... my breasts... my legs.”

She did not take her eyes off Reena as she stretched her legs. They were shorter than the warrior thews of the mercenary that sat in front of her, but nonetheless well formed and reasonably muscled, despite the easy life that Pashta had undoubtedly led.

She wore a long red dress and had left her sandals off, moving one bare foot across the distance beneath the table that separated them.

“Have you ever been whipped, Reena?” she whispered, as she moved the foot across Reena’s shin, before concentrating on its position and tracing it delicately up the inside of her leg, delicately pushing one leg from the other in an attempt to placate Reena’s apparent attempt at futile resistance and thereby to deny her.

“I assume that you are royalty?” Reena said, her voice catching a little as she began to get excited.

“Nobility you might say in your language, yes.”

“And what you are doing is... legal?”

“Not at all”

Reena adjusted herself a little as Pashta traced the line of Reena’s leg and inner thigh with her long toes.

“Then perhaps you should stop?”

“Why?”

“Because I’d really prefer not to end up with my cunt chained by ring to one of those benches that you talked about!” She gasped as Pashta moved forward in her cushioned chair and teased the now wet part of Reena’s loincloth with her toes.

“Then we must be quiet, yes?”

Reena wanted to get up and leave. Why take the chance of what might happen next? Why would she risk throwing everything away for a night with this strange eastern woman?

“Yes. Ok,” she simply said, biting her lip.

Pashta smiled and moved toward her, the dress sloughing from her shoulders, almost as a snake might shed its skin. She revealed firm breasts with subtly dark nipples, but that did not catch Reena’s attention as much as the hand which now moved up her thigh toward her wet and excited womanhood. She moaned softly as she instinctively parted her legs for the shorter stranger, whom she knew would no longer deserve that description in the next few minutes. She leaned back, loosening the rough leather tunic that she wore, as Pashta pushed gently with one hand past the defences of her loincloth. Reena placed her own hand on her lover’s shoulder, as if intent upon stopping her proceeding further, then lessening her grip as she realised that to attempt to prevent what was now inevitable, was futile.

The foreign woman moved her lips close to Reena now, gently kissing her shoulder then neck, as Reena purred.

“You are very tense.”

“Y... yes,” murmured Reena.

Pashta ran her hand up the leather tunic, pushing the straps from Reena’s shoulders as she made to remove it. She traced the curves of her upper body.

“You have seen much violence. Your flesh marked by it. It is a part of you now.”

Reena nodded and threw her head back as she writhed in response the probing fingers of Pashta's other hand, which seemed to have been attracted to the spot that might give Reena most joy. She could feel her pulling the tunic down, while loosening the cords at the back.

Suddenly, she stopped.

"You were a galley slave?"

Reena shuddered, all thought of climax shunted from her mind temporarily. Pashta had seen her brand, she realised.

"I was." She wanted to pull away from the woman, whose fingers still played with the folds of her sex. "A prisoner. I was sentenced to the oar. Many years ago, in my youth. Please... don't stop," she whispered.

Pashta nodded, and smiled.

## Chapter Five: What A Galley Slave Feels

They moved to the bed after Reena's first climax. The bed was a simple affair, though nonetheless functional for the needs of the two women. Pashta did not mention the galley brand – the "5" on Reena's breast, again. There had been other matters that would concern the two women more fully. When both began to tear at each other's remaining clothing, knowing that fulfilment would come now after a long process of pleasure, Pashta paused, putting her finger over Reena's lips at her question of why they had stopped.

"I have a surprise," she gasped, reaching across the bed and letting her dress fall, while stepping out of the sandals until she walked naked across the cabin. Reena became suddenly aware of the sway of the galley on the waves. She was very warm, and sweating a little, her heart pounding at the excitement of the moment. Pashta opened a heavy wooden chest, which Reena envisaged that Garluk had had to carry at various stages of their journey.

Reena undressed quickly, shedding the tunic, loincloth and sandals, and the hidden dagger, and moved back to the bed as the smaller framed and naked Pashta returned with a large wooden contrivance, which, given a few seconds Reena could ascertain the nature of. Her eyes widened as she realised that two large phallus-like objects struck out at angle from a small central disc. The device itself appeared to be made from a lacquered wood, and was clearly designed such that two women could pleasure each other through its manipulation.

"In my country, we call this device the Hindra. A Hindra is a soldier who has been gone from the house for a long time, at the wars. This version is used by wives who imagine what it might be like to have him back."

She mounted the bed and widened her legs, setting it between them as Reena began to get excited, the legacy of Pashta's manipulations keeping her wet. She writhed in anticipation as the olive skinned woman held it in place and began to tease her own sex with it.

"Join me... and you might hold the central disc and push as you please... to pleasure us both."

Reena needed no further encouragement and moved her sex to the tip of the curved phallus – which offered a girth that few real men would have, and fewer still might keep the distance in comparison to the wooden contrivance – which never tired and never suffered from the effects of too much alcohol.

The already enflamed hood of her sex seemed to find purchase with the tip easily, as she moved down the length of the shaft, widening her legs, and using her heels to pull Pashta toward her. Pashta too, despite the fact that she had not been touched by Reena also found the tip and was writhing, groaning in ecstasy as she started to mount her side of the device.

“Some... sometimes... women ‘race’ to see... who might reach the bottom first...” she gasped, smiling at her partner who was slowly becoming lost in pleasure. She mewed and pulled on the central part of the device, shaking the other side as she did so and making Pashta yelp with excitement. She twisted and shook as she pushed her way down the shaft, letting it take her, using her fingers to tease her nub as she did so, exciting herself.

“I will attend to you,” Pashta said, leaning forward, and moving onto her knees before letting the phallus enter her at an angle, then moving her hand to service Reena as she placed her own hands back and lay backward, bringing her knees up, in a fashion which allowed her to manipulate the entry and depth of the phallus inside her.

On her knees, Pashta was able to pleasure herself with the moving phallus that Reena seemed in control of, while leaning forward and tending to Reena’s pleasure centre. The device was particularly devious in design – where either or both women could take or hand over control on a whim. Clearly, it had been designed by a woman in need, and created by a craftsman of excellent skill, at least in terms of the angles and entry requirements concerned with the female sexual anatomy.

Pashta played with the flesh around the glistening wetness of Reena’s thighs now, pushing her hands further around the sensitive skin.

“You will cum soon,” she said, as if her expertise in the use of the device had been honed over years, as if she knew the signs and depth and manipulation that was required. Reena opened her eyes briefly. She had almost taken the entire length of the phallus.

“By... by the gods...” she gasped.

Pashta continued to probe and tease.

“Soon.”

Reena could feel it now – even as she watched Pashta simply buck her end of the device in response. She could see that despite what she might believe, it was Pashta who was in control – both through using her end of the phallus to manipulate Reena’s sex and the soft movement of her hands.

“You only bear the brands for two years service at the oar,” she said softly. Reena hardly heard her.

“Yes.”

“You were sentenced to five?” she added.

“I... I escaped,” Reena gasped. “Women here... uhhh... aren’t cunt-chained as yours are...” she moaned.

Pashta wanted to say more, but instead she watched Reena taken in sweating ecstasy in the throes of her first climax.

She bucked and yelped as the smooth wood stripped her of all inhibitions and she came violently against it, the controls of her sexual climax physically unleashed in a storm of uncontrollable pleasure.

They lay together for a while, as Reena teased at Pashta, as she had not fully reached her climax. She came quietly, under Reena’s control, though even then she found herself using the device while Pashta moved around it, as if, Reena considered, she were but an automaton under the younger woman’s dominion.

They lay facing each other a while.

“Might I see your back?” Pashta finally said.

“Why?”

“There must be a few whipmarks there.”

“A few, yes... some remain forever. Two years in galley service must inevitably mean that the lash leaves permanent marks.” She shuddered a little as she considered showing her, then slowly turned so that she could see in the candlelight.

She winced as Pashta traced the line of some of the white scarring on her back.

“You were flogged much?” she whispered.

“I was not an obedient rower. The overseers made much of making me an example to the others through the use of the whip. That is why I have some scarring on my back, and thighs – from my time at the standing oar.”

“Were you punished in other ways?”

“Aye. I rode the horse a while, when I wouldn’t suck their cocks.”

“But you gave in.” It was a statement rather than a question.

“When you ride the horse for three hours, with weight attached to your toes, you realise that you have little choice,” Reena said slowly.

She could hear Pashta behind her and feel her movements. Was she becoming excited by it? She turned to watch the smaller woman playing with herself, rubbing her lips hard and moving rhythmically.

“I dream of the whip and the horse, and the naked servitude of my sisters.”

“What?” Reena replied, her ire rising, getting the better of the pleasure that they had shared but now starting to evaporate at her words. She gripped Pashta’s shoulder.

“This should not be exciting you! These women are treated terribly, made to suck cocks and forced to work under the whip! Are you mad?”

“Ohhhh,” Pashta continued despite Reena’s urgings. “Let me feel it then... please... go to my trunk there. You will find a whip. Use it on me. Please.”

Reena considered for a minute. No, she would not do such a thing and slake this woman’s thirst for such a monstrous thing that she would not really be suffering

– certainly not in the same conditions, under the same depredations. It would be a mockery to those poor women that did serve, no... “slaved” at the oar, she corrected herself.

“Do it, Reena,” she hissed. “Whip me!”

Reena shook her head. Pashta’s face took on a darker tone in response, as if something in her mind had shifted. She sat up.

“I demand to be whipped. Hard, please. If you do not, I shall tell the captain... that your brands do not match your term. She pointed with a hand shaking by virtue of her excitement, at the brand on Reena’s chest.”

She gasped in response, sitting up on the bed. “You wouldn’t dare!” she gasped, incensed at the thought of what her partner was suggesting.

She got off the bed, finding her tunic and pulling it over her shoulders.

“Then, whip me!”

In fury, Reena pulled the tunic down to cover herself and pulled on her damp loincloth, and strode toward the wooden trunk, as Pashta, relishing what might come, played with her sex before stretching spread-eagled across the bed, her breath harsh and coming in rapid gasps in anticipation of the whipping that she might receive. She gripped the posts of the bed, and spread her feet and legs wide to the opposite corners, her buttocks writhing as she awaited the lash.

Reena found the whip, dark, brooding, multi-tailed and heavy. It was unlike the long tailed, easily controllable, single-tails that the galley overseers used below, or had used upon her back so many years ago. It would be harsh and stinging on the younger woman’s back – especially so when wielded with the force that Reena’s anger now stirred within her.

She lifted the whip and walked toward the woman lying face down in front of her.

“Do it!” Pashta hissed.

Without warning, Reena raised the whip high and brought it down with a slash across the olive back of her lover, gritting her teeth as she did so. Pashta grunted

and bit the sheets and pillow at her head. The lash fell again, crossing the earlier stroke, and again across the lower back. Pashta gasped in response, then bit down, tensing arms and legs, fighting the urge to escape her predicament.

“T... tie me in place... I don’t want to get away.”

Reena winced.

“No.”

“Please... I want to feel it... to feel what those poor women feel. Do it!”

Reena paused, looking to the trunk once more, where, conveniently, she had seen batches of thick cord.

“You have done this before?” she asked.

“I have wanted to many times, but most women... do not understand,” she added.

“So I am the first to whip you?” She approached Pashta with the ropes, slowly tying wrists around the bedposts then moving to restrain her feet. Pashta let the question hang unanswered.

“You will feel what the galley slave feels,” Reena intoned. “It will hurt.”

Pashta writhed in response.

“Good. I want to be taken by the whip handle too, when you have whipped me,” she whispered.

Reena paused. What in the nine hells was she doing? Trying to prove a point?

“We’ll see,” she simply said.

When she had secured Pashta’s feet, she resumed the whipping, bringing the thick leather cords down with ferocity and not holding back.

“Do you understand now?” she grunted, delivering harsh lashes across the olive back, now increasingly marked with red welts. She hit harder and harder. Pashta was already screaming, loudly, before Reena realised that she had lost control.

She could see only the backs of heavily whipped slaves, who, even if they had wanted to try and impress their masters, or even, try to perform the task well and thus blank out the fact that it was not a job, not something for which they were getting paid, such motivation would only be rewarded by the sting and welt of the whip, or the forced sucking of cock.

Her frustrations ran deep as she wielded the whip, until she realised that Pashta was screaming for her to stop!

She was sweating and panting as she pulled the whip away from the welted back and buttocks.

Garluk was pounding at the door, screaming something in his own language. Reena froze, as she heard other voices now, looking down at the crying Pashta, as Taron and Garluk burst through the broken door.

## Chapter Six: The Brand

Reena did not resist as Taron summoned sailors and took the whip from her. She tried to resist as they bound her wrists behind her, but the blades that were pointed at her naked throat convinced her against doing anything rash anyway.

Clad only in her leather tunic and loincloth, they had marched her out of the room as Garluk released his charge, his fury at Reena clearly evident as the crew kept him back from her. She stood now, still bound in Arness's cabin, with Garluk and a recovering Pashta, clad in a blanket with her back being tended by Kail, as she winced at the touch of the damp cloth, staring at the floor.

“Do you want to tell me, Captain, exactly why you were whipping a tied up noblewoman?” Arness simply said, admiring her breasts in the skimpy outfit as he spoke.

Reena pulled at the tight thing that bound her wrists.

“May I be untied?”

“I don't think that's a good idea. You have assaulted a woman of the eastern lands – minor royalty, I might add.”

“I didn't know that when she asked to be whipped,” Reena barked in response.

Arness glanced across at Pashta, who nodded slightly, her eyes focussed on the floor in her apparent embarrassment.

“That may be. It may even be that the naiveté of, forgive me, milady, the nobility might have led you both down a path to apparent ruin, though at least one of you – you Captain – should have known better.”

It was Reena's turn to stare at the floor now.

Garluk spoke without invitation – in an apparently weak grasp of the common tongue. He pointed at Reena.

“She... must be punished... hard,” he grunted, anger still visible on his face as he patted his lady’s shoulder and she winced.

“I am responsible for... my lady!”

Arness leaned back on the chair, moving in time with the motion of the galley.

“I can have her clapped in irons for the remainder of the journey,” he said slowly, looking up at Garluk.

“No!” he said forcefully. “Falak is due!”

Arness seemed puzzled, though Kail looked up from her ministrations on Pashta’s back, as if she understood. She slowly raised her sandaled foot, and pointed to the sole behind her, as Pashta explained.

“He... he means that she should have the soles of her feet beaten.”

Garluk nodded. “100 strokes. I will do it,” he said forcefully.

Reena recoiled, and was pushed forward again by Taron, who held her shoulder.

“You can’t be serious. She asked for what I gave her. I won’t have my feet beaten in some archaic punishment for doing what I was told, Arness!”

The Captain sighed again, placing his hand across his forehead as if thinking what management decision might be best under the circumstances. As it was, of course, Reena had least recourse in the delicate situation. He could do as he liked, in effect – as she had, whether she liked it or not, been guilty of infraction on board the ship.

“100 strokes seems harsh, Garluk,” he said.

Reena gasped. “You are considering this?” she surged forward, even as Taron grabbed her shoulder. “Let go of me, damn you...” but Taron held her fast.

“In my country, women such as she would be beaten and put to the oar for the rest of their lives... after receiving 200 strokes upon the feet. I am already being merciful to her.”

“It’s not your decision to make. You mistress asked me to whip her. I did as I was bid,” she screamed.

Garluk seemed to calm at her fear, as if it pleased him, while Pashta said nothing.

“I have taken your... ignorance... into my consideration... you receive only 100... girls in my country receive more from their fathers when they rebel...”

Reena shunted forward again, and again was restrained by Taron.

Arness raised his hand and called for quiet.

“And if I see that she is punished... you will let the matter rest, without informing the authorities with regard to what has happened here?”

Reena gasped. “You’re going to let him beat my feet? You bastard!”

He ignored her.

“100 strokes risks permanent damage. Her ability to walk?”

“Unlikely,” the barbarian grunted.

“But possible?”

“Yes.”

“How is this done?”

Pashta raised her head, interrupting her bodyguard.

“The woman is tied... as Reena is now, laid upon her back, her feet tied to a staff which two men hold – each beats one sole.”

“I have no need of another man,” Garluk said proudly.

“Very well,” Arness said, silencing him. “She will receive 50 strokes on each sole – but given by my crew.”

“NO!” Reena screamed.

“She’ll have her ankles tied to the mast – and Taron and Kail will deliver the strokes. You understand this, Garluk? Milady?”

Garluk made to object, but Pashta’s hand silenced him.

“That is acceptable, Captain,” she said.

“Pashta!” Reena said, almost pleading.

“I am sorry, Reena... please... just accept the beating.”

“Accept it? For doing what you asked?”

“I.. I didn’t ask for this.” She turned slightly, revealing the deep red welts that covered her back.

“Take her away... bind her to the mast,” Arness said, raising his voice above the others.

\* \* \* \* \*

They had to drag Reena the last part of the short journey to the mast. Other sailors watched, aware that punishment of a passenger was extremely rare, and for most of them, not something that they had seen before. Reena’s hands were left bound behind her, as she was forced to sit. Despite her best efforts, Taron and other sailors then pulled her legs forward, such that they could be tied to either side of the mast, and above the deck, until she sat on her buttocks, with legs raised and tied either side of her – meaning that they were free to be beaten by anyone standing on the other side. She grimaced, staring at Kail, who would not catch her eye – almost seeming embarrassed as a thin narrow cane was passed to her. Taron, in contrast, gripped the rod and swished it through the air, and looked for signs of emotion on Reena’s face. He found none.

“Ready,” he said, almost smiling.

“I hope you feel good about beating a restrained woman,” she hissed back at

him. Kail nudged his arm, in apparent eagerness to get the messy affair over with.

Arness could be seen talking to Garluk and Pashta, who politely excused herself and limped to her cabin, not wishing to see her former lover punished. Garluk went with her, but only to stand outside the door. He wanted to make sure that he witnessed Reena's pain. She could hear sailors placing bets now on which stroke she would first scream at.

Her heart began pounding. She could rotate her body slightly, but could not move her arms and hands – still bound behind her – nor her legs and feet, bound either side of the thick mast in front of her. Taron continued to swish his cane through the air, in practice. Kail simply seemed sullen and predisposed to dislike the errant responsibility that she had been given.

“Just get on with it,” Reena hissed.

As if in answer to her reluctant plea, Arness began to speak.

“Former Captain Valeris here, assaulted a fellow passenger in the most extreme of circumstances. The noble lady who suffered has decreed, that she will be punished in the eastern style, and will receive the punishment known as Falak! To this end, she shall be beaten upon the soles of her feet – 50 strokes each. Begin!”

Reena tensed, closing her eyes.

“One!” Arness barked.

She felt the rod fall hard across her sole. There was no pain at first, then a growing fire of a sting, then Kail's rod fell – softer, but she grunted at the sting. If only that were all, but Reena knew, as with whiplashes across the back, that the pain would be in repeated strokes, and as they fell across each other and the swelling flesh, the pain would become worse.

“Two! Harder this time, Kail... or you'll take her place.”

Taron struck first again, she heard him grunt with the effort. Then Kail struck hard too. The stings reverberated along her leg as she reflexively tried to turn her feet away. Fire grew as they pulled back again.

“Three,” Arness said hoarsely. The rods fell hard, and Reena tensed, gritting her teeth and biting at the sting.

“Four.”

The whacks fell simultaneously as she threw her head back, her legs pulling at the bonds as she shook her head. Fifty? She would have to take fifty? She had to focus on riding through the pain.

“Five!”

It was incessant. There was no time to adjust to the pain. The sting would get worse; the shock along her leg was agony.

“Six!”

He was increasing the rapid nature of the count... damn.

At the eleventh stroke, Reena screamed out, and sullen sailors exchanged coin with happier ones.

She was wide eyed and hissing between strokes, trying to find a place where the pain would not be at the forefront of her mind, as the rods fell again and again and again. The strokes would fall one after another, drawing grunts and screams from her. She heard Arness shout the number but could barely discern it unless she concentrated, and hearing it would only remind her of how far there was to go, how long the burning pain would last. Kail followed Taron, which made it worse, as if the agony were doubled, the expectation of pain made worse.

“Thwack... Thwack” was echoed by her cry of pain, as she tried to bite down on the fiery sting, which became worse and worse, as she twisted her feet in a vain attempt to get away from the pain. She could feel the welts, hear the slap, hear the grunts of her assailants.

“Thirty-six,” Arness shouted hoarsely. By the gods, would it ever end?

One welt fell as she cried out, but Kail had stopped. Reena dared to open her eyes, gasping, tears welling, her swollen feet shaking in their bonds, as Kail looked at something, at her.

She moved forward, pointing.

Arness continued as Taron made ready to strike, apparently enjoying the experience.

“Thirty-seven... Kail... Kail?”

Taron struck home across Reena’s reddening sole anyway, drawing a wretched hoarse scream from her as the thud reverberated along her leg. Kail tried to calm him using her hands, as Arness approached.

“What is it?”

The woman moved to Reena, who was shaking and sweating in her agonies... she gasped as Kail reached for her tunic and pulled it further down, revealing her hanging breast.

“You were a galley slave? You never mentioned this Captain?” Arness said.

Kail moved around her as Taron suddenly realised that he was not required to beat the woman... just for the moment anyway. Garluk too was now approaching.

“Why have you stopped?”

Kail reached for the tunic at her leg and began to pull it up, raising two fingers when she saw the brands. Arness held a hand up to silence Garluk, who responded angrily with a grunt and ripped at the other side of the tunic. Nothing.

“You were sentenced to five years... yet apparently rowed only two?”

Reena blinked the tears from her eyes.

“J... Just f... finish the beating and untie me... you bastard.”

“You served two! Tell me now, and avoid further pain. Did you escape the oar?”

Reena looked up at the accusing faces around her, her mind at least at ease that the pain had abated for a time.

“Why does it matter?”

“Because, the law of the sea demands justice,” Arness said.

“HA... the... law of the sea? Are... you making that up?”

“Did you escape the oar?” he repeated.

She nodded

“It was a long time ago.”

“Untie her... put her in chains while I speak to Lady Pashta,” Arness said.

Reena screamed as they untied her swollen and beaten feet and let them fall to the deck. She fell on one side and pulled at the tunic, at the shoulder strap that had slipped in her contortions, revealing her breast, revealing her brand.

\* \* \* \* \*

Arness stood in front of Pashta, while Garluk flanked her. She had dressed and, it seemed, recovered quite well from what Arness considered now to be the relatively mild series of welts that she had received.

“So you have determined that the Captain is in fact a galley slave... an escaped one?” Pashta said, before Arness could speak.

He paused for a moment, knowing full well that the woman, who had most likely shared her bodily secrets with the former mercenary captain, must have seen the brands and no doubt understood their meaning.

“I would ask Milady that we pause the rest of the foot beating – the Falak as you call it.”

“I see.” She looked at Garluk, but he showed no reaction. “Go on.”

“I would ask this as new information has come to light with regard to Reena’s... the former Captain’s past.”

“Yes... she is an escaped slave?” Something in Pashta’s demeanour suggested that she was enjoying this, that it was beyond simple revenge for her flogging, as

if she wanted to see Reena returned to the oar, in fact.

“Yes, milady. She bears the brands of two years’ service... as a prisoner, rather than a condemned slave. It would be my intent to return her to the oar, such that she might finish her service. She was branded to serve 5 years by a court and magistrate. She should finish that service.”

“But that is not how you normally punish escaped slaves... oh, my apologies, prisoners?”

“Milady?”

“Haven’t I seen escaped prisoners nailed to crosses at the port, for escaping their chains?”

“I... Perhaps, Milady, though that is not always the case, and it has been a number of years since her escape, I would imagine.”

“Hmmm... I think that is irrelevant Captain, even by your own laws, is it not?” Arness winced in response.”

“I sense, Captain, that you would prefer to halt the Falak so that your rower is not further damaged, and that you would put her to your own oar so that she is not damaged further... rather than any sense of wanting to see justice done. Would I not be correct in that assumption?”

“Milady, I merely wish to...”

“No, Captain,” Pashta interrupted. “I think you wish to profit from the captain’s misfortune in being caught abusing me. That you wish to use her talents and strength rather than see her executed as an escaped prisoner who did not serve her term. Am I correct?”

Arness smiled.

“What would you have me do then? Would you have me hand her to the authorities when we reach port?”

“Hmmm, what would happen to her?”

“At Arlos? There is no doubt that she would be committed to Port Gaol for a time – the hell prison of the rock. If she survived... if she heard her name being called, she would be taken before a magistrate... if not, she would be left to rot in chains.”

“And what might the magistrate determine.”

“That she should be crucified at the city gates... and die nailed to a cross in the sun,” he said.

“I see...” She considered for a moment, but Arness knew what her answer would be.

“I shall be using your ship again, Captain, and might like to see her below in the next few years, when you have her confined her in chains to serve her term.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Reena moaned as she tried to move again. She had been placed in a small cell at the prow, just above the rowing deck, though the sound of the deck being so close made her shudder as whips struck flesh and women cried in pain.

They had stripped her of her leather tunic, though she had retained the small loincloth, which was tied around her waist with a thin strip of material.

The chained manacles on her wrists rattled as she moved her legs again, trying to keep her beaten, swollen soles away from contacting the floor or wooden wall of the hull, or indeed the iron bars that kept her in this place.

She had screeched as they untied her feet, and could do little as they took her below and fitted thick fetters to her ankles; fetters of a design similar to those that had left dull scar tissue on her ankles so many years ago, fetters that held a ring, through which a chain might be passed. She guessed her fate even before they had hammered the rivet home that would hold them on her ankles for the next few years. She was to be returned to the oar.

The hatch opened and Arness, followed by Kail, climbed down the wooden ladder that led to the makeshift brig.

“You are awake, I see.”

“I’m sure you’re glad to see me relatively undamaged, so that I might be placed at your oar, eh?” Reena grunted in response.

“Of course. The placement of fetters around your ankles will have alerted you to the fact that you will be returned to the oar... my oar.”

He smiled, admiring the revealed curves of her body as she moved.

“Perhaps that was your plan all along?”

“Of course not. I am merely using the delicate, if fortunate circumstance to further my own ends. It’s difficult to get good rowers. You have committed a second crime in escaping your former galley, for which you would be crucified, unless I intervene to see that justice is done.”

“You don’t even know what my crime was, so many years ago.”

“Neither do I care, Reena. All you should be concerned with now is ensuring that you row well and finish your sentence, that you earn the rest of your brands.”

“Earn them?”

“Aye. I care not that your crime was false, that you might have been innocent. I care only that you can row for me and earn the rest of your marks, or I can turn you over to the authorities in Arlos. Have you heard of the Port Gaol prison?”

She closed her eyes and swallowed. Aye, she had heard of Port Gaol. Prisoners were placed in heavy chains and held in one of many communal cells, which sat in a hub like rock structure in the coastal cliff face. They would rot until a magistrate would be available. Their name would be called twice when they were to be taken out of prison. If they did not respond, it would not be called again and they would die in chains. Prisoners became half alive, afraid to fall asleep lest their name be called and they might miss it.

“Even if you made it out of that place, they’d crucify you. Don’t you think you might be better off at my oar? I might even return your things after your service, and you would bear all of the brands that would ensure your freedom. Do we have an agreement?”

“An agreement?”

“Of course. You will serve as a galley prisoner, and cause me no concerns. You will be freed after your term, and bear the brands that will free you.”

“Where will I be released?”

“That depends where in the world we are, of course. Isn’t that the risk that every galley prisoner takes?”

“I seem to have little choice, anyway,” she said, lifting her manacled hands as the chains rattled.

“We’ll keep you in manacles until you have adjusted to your renewed role at the oar. If you obey, and row well, we can have them removed after a time. I’m sure you’ll want that, eh?” He reached through the bars and lifted her chin, as she tore away from his touch, grimacing at her plight.

## Chapter Seven: Year One At The Oar

Reena walked down the steps carefully on beaten bare feet, her limping movement made more unwieldy through the heavy fetters that had been riveted crudely about her ankles. They had also kept her wrist chains in place. She reached the bottom of the steps and gagged at the stink. The mid-tier was on a rest period, and she automatically registered that it would be there that she would be placed. She gagged at the stench – hot sweat and piss, and worse – which greeted her nostrils. She hacked as she was pushed onward, the chains rattling as she raised her hands to cover mouth and nose. The brief waft of stink that she had sensed in the deck above had not been indicative of just how bad matters were below. She felt Kail’s hand at her back, a silent reminder that she had three years to serve here. It was early in the year, so despite the advantages inherent in being sentenced in the latter segment of the annual period that others might take advantage of, she would benefit little from it – and would truly serve most of the remaining three years that she had been sentenced to so long ago, if in fact, Arness intended to see that her brands were kept up to date and that she would bear five leg brands to match the number that had been seared into her breast so many years ago.

She wanted to turn and punch Kail as she ushered her onward, as she dropped her hand from the covering action of her mouth.

“Enjoy your time at the oar, cunt... three long years eh?” she heard Taron shout from the steps. The stench was oppressive as she moved down the walkway, past women of all sorts, though each was thin and at various stages of muscle development. All shared some common traits, however: each was naked – bar a few that wore the bloodcloth, tethered to the vessel via ankle chains; each bore the marks of the whip, across the back mainly – with red welts of darker tones decorating older welts, in combination with odd mark across thighs and breast, some seemingly having been punished for some minor infraction with breast whipping.

She faced them as she walked down the aisle, looking across at them – younger women, prostitutes, thieves, wives whose husbands had wanted them to disappear, errant warriors and mercenaries like herself, punished for some

infraction. She saw numbers branded with differing amounts of quality and effectiveness on their breasts. Many 5s and 10s, a few 15s, even a few 20s on some old hags who had gone blind and whose bodies had been misshapen while pulling at the oar, such that they had become parts of the machine that would only be released through an early death before their 20 leg brands were ever made up. She lost count of the number of marks on a woman's leg as she walked past – though she could tell that the poor wretch would not last much longer, and she shook as she pulled the oar.

Kail tapped her and pointed to the woman. Was she to replace the old woman? What would happen to her?

In answer to her questions, the overseers started to pull the chain through her leg fetters. She watched the hag-like woman wince as the steel moved and grated further against ankles almost rubbed to the bone via constant pressure and weight of the steel. She could barely resist them as they pulled her from the oar. Reena tried not to look at the damp soiled bench where she had sat, though it would have been difficult to find a bench that was not covered in piss and grime.

The old woman was dragged past her, too tired to even look up, as a thick set muscled overseer, with whip in hand, gripped Reena's arm and started to push her toward the empty bench. She wanted to scream, to fight back; anything rather than the inevitability of the hell that would be three long years in galley chains.

“What will happen to the old woman?” she asked, as if to distract herself.

One overseer grunted as they watched the slave dragged off. “She'll be thrown overboard – food for sharks – she is worn out.”

He said it with an air of inevitability, as if uncaring at her demise, as if it was unavoidable because of the number of years that she had to serve, though there was nothing that Reena could do, naked and chained at least.

She stepped across the slave rowing beneath her, a younger woman bathed in sweat and clearly in distress at the pace of the oar – a red 5 emblazoned upon her breast. Reena wondered idly how long she had to go. She seemed new – not reduced to the haggard collection of muscle and deep set eyes just yet, that most rowers became after their first two years. She did not want to think about how she might look after three.

\* \* \* \* \*

Reena pulled hard again on the oar, grunting as she did so, becoming part of the collective female grumble that was the result of the terrible effort, again and again and again. She braced her feet against the harsh timber block – and used them as a base for the pull. The practice of using her powerful legs to aid with the pull, so that her arms and shoulders did not take the full brunt of the pressure of the oar against the water, seemed to come back to her quickly. Even if the muscle memory had not returned, the threat and determined use of the overseer’s whip was enough to convince her to comply. As if to remind her, she heard the swish, then felt the burning fire of the lash across her upper back. She winced and yelped – more at the shock of the strike than the lance of pain across her back, which had already seen much of the whip since she was stripped, chained and forced below.

They had left the wrist manacles on her, warning that they would remain unless she became the docile rower that they knew “she wanted to be”. She knew what that meant; that she would have to suck cock without complaint, in the hope that a kind overseer who had enjoyed the feeling of her lips around his cock, might take pity and remove them. They would become a problem, she knew. The main issue would be that the constant rowing, and the relatively light fall of the chains across her chest and belly as she pulled, even despite her rolling the chains around the oar stem, would leave the skin raw and red. In isolation, a few strokes meant nothing, but the thousands that she would be forced to make over the next few months, and then years, would make the area tender and painful – worse still if the chains became rusty and infected the area. She hoped that the overseers saw the same issue, and had at least seen it with other rowers, and might take pity – she would have to please them, and their cocks, if the chains were to be removed.

She was bathed in sweat, her back sore from the vile whip, when the rest period came.

“You’re new, so you’ll get a lot of attention,” the overseer barked, as he fished in his stinking trews for his erect cock, before standing on the timber border of the

walkway and presenting it to her face. She stared for a few moments.

“Hurry up, wench. Do you want to ride the wooden horse on your first day?”

“No, overseer,” she said quietly, before taking the bulbous end of his member in her mouth, chains clanking as her hand reached for his balls such that she could stroke them in the way that she knew men liked.

As the days passed, and the sunlight streamed down through the steel grille above, Reena noticed that Pashta would watch her at work through the grille from time to time. On one occasion, as the whip fell hard across her shoulders and she gasped loudly and twisted from its force, drawing a second blow across the lower back for losing rhythm, Pashta smiled, and rubbed a hand across her breast, as if gaining gratification and satisfaction from Reena’s naked and chained plight. With each moaning stroke, she stared up through the grille at the foreign woman, who bit her lip in perverse anticipation of the next whiplash across her flesh. As the bearded overseer, who by now she had sated almost daily and emptied him of his seed, such that the stains of her actions had left marking of his dried seed on her sweat stained breasts – where the drops had cleaned her – looked up at Pashta, silently interpreting her wish to see Reena suffer still further. The bearded man brought the whip down across Reena’s breasts as she pulled – she yelped, wide eyed, in response, then bit down on the pain as she moved forward with the drumbeat, dipped, and pulled again – as the lash fell across her breasts.

“YAHHHHH!”

The pain was horrid now, as she dare not lose momentum or rhythm, yet each pull would draw the lash of the whip across breasts which could not sustain the amount of slashing pain that was being delivered. Wide eyed, she continued to row, as he brought the whip down three more times. By the fifth lash, she wanted to scream and cry, but she would give neither of them the satisfaction as the welts began to rise.

The overseer laughed, and moved on to deal with a weak slave, who apparently could not handle the pressure of extended rowing. Reena gasped in relief, and looked up as she pulled, watching the smiling Pashta walk away from her viewpoint.

“Gone... UGGHHH to... satisfy yourself,” she grunted.

“It’s best... not to rile them...” a voice said from nearby – across the walkway. She glanced across, realising now, against the mass of moving female flesh that plied the ship through the waves, that she had been chained near to a barbarian who she had seen from above.

Others hissed “be quiet... don’t get their attention” as they spoke – women who would rather row in supplication, in silence, than stand out from the crowd and feel the whip across their bodies, or worse, have to suck cock and tease balls. She pushed the oar and answered the large barbarian.

“Aye... I’ll comply until I get these chains off.”

The barbarian simply nodded, focussing on using her bulk, strength and legs to keep rhythm.

\* \* \* \* \*

Reena’s feet healed, despite having swollen in the heat. She had kept them out of the filthy water as much as possible, sleeping during rest periods, with her legs curled up beside her as far as the chain through her leg fetters would allow. She thanked the gods that they had not put her in the lowest tier where her feet would almost have been submerged in the bilge. The sun had risen and shone through the grille as the whip fell harshly across her gathered thighs and she screamed herself awake. Her heart pounded as she righted herself on the bench, chains clanking and rattling as she reached to push the oar out.

“Wait, oar Slut,” a voice commanded as she struggled to see in the sunlight.

“I wanted to see you before I go, Reena,” a husky female voice added. “I hope to see you again, if I am on this ship.”

Reena blinked sleep from her eyes, and rubbed her face with filthy hands. The manacles hurt more than ever as they slid across her wrist bone, and the chains landed with a thud at her thigh.

She wanted to lunge forward and grab Pashta, but knew it would mean that she

would never be free of the chains, that she would be badly whipped and she might even be forced to ride the wooden horse.

“Perhaps,” she simply grunted. “Might I ask a favour?”

Pashta leaned forward, placing an affectionate hand under her chin. “Of course, my love?”

Reena bit down hard on her anger. The woman that had seen to it that she was now a galley slave, who had not risen to her defence, who had effectively seen her consigned to chain and naked servitude, was treating her like a plaything now. She forced herself to speak and rise above her anger.

“Could you ask them to have me released from the chains at my hands? I know that I must retain the chains on my feet – but the manacles,” she lifted her arms as if in demonstration, “they are a punishment... and I have been obedient.”

Pashta looked at the overseer, who smiled and nodded, touching his cock. Reena looked downward, keeping her eyes away from them, knowing that in her anger, she might yet do something rash, if she were to let her emotions take over. Something which would see her suffer.

Pashta smiled. “But you look so good in chains, Reena?”

She closed her eyes in response, her blood boiling.

“Hmmm... let me see now. Now that you are a prisoner, a slave...” She accentuated the word. “Perhaps if you were to recognise me as your better, perhaps I could use my influence to release your arms. Would that work for you?”

“I don’t understand,” Reena said, trying to remember the woman whom she had pleased, then whipped.

“I am your mistress, yes?”

The overseer laughed, and then struck out wildly with the whip at the other side of the oar deck, garnering a harsh cry from a rowing blond woman who had slowed.

Reena understood...

“May I have the manacles removed, please, Mistress,” she intoned, wondering even if Pashta had the authority to do so.

“I can’t hear you, rower... or is it ‘oar Slut’?”

“May I have the manacles removed please, Mistress?” she said, more loudly, spitting the words out.

Pashta raised her hand to her chin, in apparently mock consideration of the request.

“Hmm... well, it’s not up to me?”

Reena grimaced and made fists with her chained hands.

“Put the slave back to work, overseer,” she said slowly. “Perhaps I’ll visit this stinking hole when next I travel on this ship. I look forward to it, my love.”

She smiled and walked away, listening to the whips fall across errant galley slaves as they were made to start their daily shift of hell.

## Chapter Eight: Marek

Marek Neros strode across the deck of the cargo ship in search of the captain, trying to allay the stink that came from the galley deck and assaulted his nostrils. He pushed back his cloak, in an apparent attempt to reveal the sword that hung at his hip. His new employer had decreed that as part of the thing he called “the magic of supply” that his new charge of cargo vessels, with which he hoped to make significant silver and coin via taking control of much of the trading along the western coast, would need competent men that could lead and discipline – and so he had offered Marek a job. He had even talked of taking a segment of the eastern trading, though he knew that such was a nigh impossible task – the eastern coast was controlled by so called merchant fleets, which in reality were closer to being bandits, thieves and half bred demons, if the way they treated their galley women was anything to go by.

“Captain Arness?” he said, seemingly having found his charge, staring at the bulky man who stood at the base of the steps that led to the upper cabins.

“And you are?”

Marek stopped, and stared at the bulky man. “Marek Neros... I’m sure you’re expecting me...”

“Oh?” the face changed. “ Sorry, sir. I’m not the captain... I...”

Marek raised a hand as a voice bellowed from above.

“Taron! I told you to expect a nobleman... what in the nine hells?”

Marek looked up, taking in the old and aged face of the captain, who, it seemed, he had eventually found. Beside him, a young woman clad in loincloth in the heat, pulled on some ropes, her breasts smooth and sweating as he admired them.

Marek smiled and motioned to make the man move. Taron stood his ground, defiant now in the face of his mistake and hoping to make up for his embarrassment in an apparent display of bravado, it seemed.

“Taron!” the Captain hissed. The half naked woman looked on in amazement, wildly motioning him to move. She could not speak, or perhaps was dumfounded, Marek reasoned. Interesting, he considered, he had never had a mute woman – he wondered how she might cry out as she reached climax, as he felt the stirrings in his loins.

“I am sorry, my Lord,” the captain said, as Taron, nodding and pouting, eventually moved, an expression of superiority on his face.

“It is understandable, Captain. These young men must see themselves as heroes in the absence of their service with the military, must they not?”

“I suppose so, sir... I...”

Marek considered the thin, well proportioned woman as he spoke.

“How will you have him punished?”

There was silence between the two, though they now had Taron’s attention from below.

“My Lord?”

“Whipped, perhaps... you have your sailors whipped?” He glanced at Kail. “Has this one been whipped?” He used it as an excuse to turn her around gently. “Ah, no. It would appear not.” He moved his hand down her back as she tensed, then withdrew it.

“How many lashes will he receive? I will report back to the Merchant Guild how effectively you have dealt with an onboard miscreant.”

Arness sighed. “Fifty, my Lord, should suffice.”

Taron made fists below, but knew there was little that he could do if he wanted to live.

“Make it a round one hundred, Captain, if you will. Sentence to be carried out immediately. Now... who is this lovely woman – my guide for the galley deck perhaps?”

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The slick slashing of the whip above, and the awful cries of the man tied to the mast there, punctuated the dark silence of the galley deck. Exhausted, chained rowers, in various stages of exhaustion and recovery, lay on benches or across oars, as Kail, still shaking from what had just happened above and keen to ensure that she escaped the whip herself, walked at a pace which she judged would suit the inspection. She could sense the ominous figure of the noble behind her as they walked down the creaking and sodden walkway of the deck. A few overseers who had chosen to remain below got out of his way as he approached. Marek stopped as he noted that one overseer was using the mouth of an obviously new slave (if her cleanliness, unmarked hair and lack of welts on her back were anything to go by).

He watched as the rutting overseer gasped, throwing his head back whilst grasping the head of the rower and forcing it against his manhood, as she almost choked with the effort.

“That’s enough,” Marek said, the tone of his voice, and air of authority seemingly adequate enough to make the overseer jump and withdraw from the exhausted woman, who fell against her oar, nodding her thanks.

He nodded as Marek walked past.

“Go up to the deck and finish yourself off, boy. Leave the woman to rest.”

“Yes, my Lord.”

“Your tongue was cut out, Kail?” he said, as if from nowhere. She nodded solemnly in response. “I am sorry to hear that.” Kail found it difficult to calculate whether his pity was genuine or not. She hated nobles, but knew enough not to cross one. She could not understand this man, she reasoned, nodding her thanks.

“Some of them wear manacles – a punishment?”

She nodded affirmation again.

“This one has worn them too long.”

They had come down the bow steps, and thus first approached the banks of rowers from behind. The sea of welted and striped backs was bad enough – though this particular woman appeared to have been abused more than most. Her back had old and new welts patterning the strong muscles and bones beneath her skin, highlighted by the sun as it shone through the steel grille above and patterned the welts with the shadows of the bars. She shuddered slightly, almost in time with the lashes and increasingly shrieked response from Taron above... Kail winced as she heard “sixty-three” being called out, wondering if Taron would survive the whipping.

Marek reached to one of the rower’s gnarled hands. “She has worn manacles too long – I’m amazed she can still row, with those raw wrists and hands. I want these removed. Now.”

Kail nodded and moved toward the ring of keys at her belt, fumbling for the key that would unlock slave manacles.

He lifted his cloak to cover the stench of the bilge as he moved around the rower. She was strong, and they had eroded her usefulness to a large extent. He gripped her moist and filthy hair and started to raise her head, in order to expose the breast brand – seeing the large 5 seared into her flesh. He moved to the side, disturbing the fevered sleep of another rower, in order that he might see how long she had served by the brands on her long muscled thigh. Her ankles had suffered having been encased in galley fetters, but he knew that he could do little about that. He jumped with a start as she shot awake with a cry, one partially shut eye – infected perhaps – punctuated by the glistening wetness of her good eye which stared at him, ready for whatever it was that he was attempting. He raised a hand in supplication, moving her knee to one side.

“Easy... I am having your manacles released.”

Waking from her dream, she finally understood what was going on, wincing as she moved her battered body with difficulty, glad finally that someone – anyone – was going to remove the chains from her hands.

The man looked at her. From somewhere, he seemed familiar, and he too, in

turn, appeared to recognise her face, despite the grime and misery that had become etched into it.

“Gnn ahhhhhh.” She gasped as the first manacle was slowly unlocked and removed from a bruised and red wrist, followed by the second. The endless drop and fall of the chain, despite her attempts to roll the chain around the oar, had indeed made her tender where it had landed. She would be glad of its absence.

“Valeris!” the man said. “Captain Valeris?”

She paused, her mind wondering what new trick this was, what new way this would result in her having to suck a cock, then nodded, trying to recognise him in the bad light.

“I’m Lord Marek... you... you must remember me, us... you served on the wall, Captain. You... fled Irulan, without saying goodbye?”

She raised a hand, as tears welled in her eyes, touching the side of his face, before starting to regain her composure. He had been a lover, for a time, before she felt herself becoming involved, knowing that she could not afford such a thing in her position.”

“It... was a little more complicated than that,” she croaked, starting to cough then recovering. “I’m afraid I’m a Captain no longer.”

Kail listened to the discourse, as did other waking galley slaves.

“You ran from Irulan!”

“They wanted to crucify me for striking the magistrate.”

“Aye, Beros Kradish.”

“He’s still alive then?” she said, sighing, as if part of her had hoped that he had gone to the same place as Zara, so that she could have her revenge upon him.

“Aye. He sentenced a few more of your women to the whip, or condemned them to the galley or mines, for minor infractions after that, as if he was trying to punish you for getting away. I assume you did it with someone’s help?”

“Aye,” she added, thinking that there might be something to be gained by not revealing the name, then reasoned that it would hardly matter. “Lord Gorus.” She looked up as if in realisation. “Kradish condemned my women?”

“Aye. Most didn’t deserve it and he was stopped by the Duchess, though a few have ended up serving terms at the oar, or mining for ore in the quarry – not a nice place. How did you end up at the oar?”

“A long story.”

“Wait... your brand. They saw your brands – and reasoned that you... Damn!”

He looked at her thigh.

“You still had 3 years to serve... if I remember.” He ran his finger around the latest brand as she winced. “Two now. By the goddess – they have you legally, it seems.”

She nodded. “I’ll serve my term. Two more years. It won’t beat me.”

He stood up.

“Have this one released and brought to my cabin – for medical attention. Have her cleaned up first. Is that understood?”

“Yes, my Lord!” an overseer barked. Kail too nodded furiously.

Somewhere above, a shriek was followed by a hoarse shout of “one hundred”.

\* \* \* \* \*

They pulled her chain from her ankle fetters and washed her, bathed her welts and wounds as far as possible with stinging seawater and a rough salve. It would not be enough, of course. In light of the fact that a noble had asked for her, they had given her a cloth and rough bristled brush to try and improve her galley slave appearance. Reena Valeris did not care. She only gave credence to the fact

that she would find some respite from the hard labour for a time.

Her feet were hobbled by the fetters and by being blistered from the pull, and difficult to use since it had been well over a year since she had walked properly, though walk she would.

She limped up the stairs into a blinding sunlight that she had not seen other than through an oarport or deck grille in months. Holding a hand up, finally free of its chain, she walked, guided by Kail. Fresh blood had spattered the deck near the mast – clearly whoever had been flogged – perhaps on the order of Marek himself – had suffered a great deal. Her knees almost buckled with the effort of walking up the steps, which, so many months before she had ascended to meet Arness for the first time. He seemed to have disappeared, and she wondered idly if Marek had had him replaced. Dread gripped her, as she wondered if another captain might not look so kindly upon releasing her, ever – if her story was related to him or her.

Kail left her at the open cabin door. Marek was inside, and greeted her with wine.

\* \* \* \* \*

She sat astride him as they made love, fierce, hard love – unfettered by any thought of restraint. It had been so long since she had been with a man, and this one appeared to care little for the very rough edges of her appearance.

She rode him, her hands holding the wooden bedhead as she jerked up and down upon his erect manhood, yearning and willing herself to cum. Marek had always been a patient and attentive lover, and rather than throw her on her back after her first climax and risk abrading the savage lashes that graced her full and muscled body, he wrestled her to one side and took her from behind, using his cock to further torment her. He tried not to look at the whipmarks that punctuated her flesh, tried not to think of what marks might remain.

She yearned for him, wanted him, and rode him hard, since it was forbidden for rowers to tease themselves or each other, with the threat of a few hours on the

wooden horse to end their thoughts of pleasuring their own sex ever again. Months of restrained needs were taken out on Marek in moments of pure pleasure.

They lay in each other's arms for a time afterward.

"You will have to go back to the oar."

"I know."

"I wish there was something I could do, but it would mean breaking Imperial law."

She kissed his lips gently as tears started to form.

"I understand, Marek. I have promised to do my term. It is better this way. I will be free of the brand," she said, rubbing her hand across his muscled chest.

"The thought of them whipping you."

She tensed as he gently ran a hand near the lash marks, grunting a little.

"I'm sorry."

"It means nothing. Something I have to do."

"But you were innocent of the original crime. Why should you have to serve out your five years?" he said, his voice cracking with frustration.

"If I do not, I will be forever hunted, unable to reveal the brands."

"Only I need know your secret," he said, running his hand along the line of her breast now, kissing her nipple as she let her head fall, and let him take her again.

## Chapter Nine: Year Three At The Oar

Reena screamed as the iron was pressed harshly into the flesh of her thigh, gripping the oar hard, needing the brand – the fourth brand – to be there, even if she did not relish the pain. She wept as she fell forward across the oar, staring at filthy feet as they balanced her on the standing position at the hull. She had been moved to the long oar relatively recently, when a strong woman there had died of heart failure. She did not relish the long oar at first, and, it seemed, most women did not last very long there, though she would be freed of the rigours of having to provide her mouth to sate the lusts of the overseers, since long oar positions were too far from the walkway. They were not too far from the depredations of the whip, however. In fact, the nature of the long lash meant that the fast moving tip was used to drive the long oar rowers – and the additional pain from the blow from the whip end was not something that Reena relished. It did mean that she was spared the cat of nine tails, whose weight could be oppressive when used in successive strokes, however – and it was oft used during the end of the shift when the women started to tire.

The work was not easy. The long oar was designed to provide stability and had to be moved at the same stroke speed as the smaller oars – so there were few slaves and prisoners that could do it, and the discipline of the lash tail meant that she soon picked it up.

If anything, the distance from the walkway, and the fact that long oar rowers were almost considered an elite amongst the women, meant that they shared equally a modicum of respect from the overseers, and were hated by the other rowers, despite the fact that long term use could make the hull rowers misshapen – though she did not bank on being there for more than one more year.

Other screams reverberated around the deck as the heated irons, with the oar symbol, were seared into the flesh of oarswomen, keeping tally of their service. Some looked at the brand afterward, perhaps the third or fourth required of a ten year service, and wept at their condition, looking at the bent old hags who had six or seven brands – praying to the gods that they might not end up in the same condition as their older sisters, but, Reena reasoned with bitterness, it was inevitable.

She had to think only of herself now. If she could survive one more year. One more year.

Upon parting, Marek had told her that he would follow the Raven closely and pay heed of where the vessel might dock, and her patterns of sailing, such that when Reena was released, he would be aware of what port she might be in. He pledged to her that he would find her so that he could firstly guarantee that she would not fall into begging upon the streets of some foreign city, and secondly that Arness would be compelled to honour their agreement. He was, after all, an important part of the Talvallen merchant empire, and Lord Talvallen wanted to ensure that he ran “a tight ship” in his words.

There was a proviso, however. During their lovemaking, he had asked that she would marry him, after her galley service. She had agreed; indeed, what choice did she have? Had she not agreed to the tryst, there would have been a chance that Marek might have forgotten his bargain and left her to fend for herself, broken and naked on the streets of a foreign city.

Smoke from the brand and the smell of seared flesh filled the deck as the last of the screams died away.

“Oarswomen!” a voice called. She recognised Arness, with Kail standing beside him. Taron was half the man he had been now, and Kail had signed to her that he had been the man flogged at the mast on the day of Marek’s arrival. She did not want to think about his dark side, but it was not something within her power to control now anyway.

“You have all lived for another year. For those of you that are slaves – row well, live a while longer. For those of you sentenced to the oar – take heart. You have lived another year of your sentence and been marked for it. Remember the number on your breast. When the marks on your legs equal that number on your breast, you will be set free, marked for your terrible crimes – yes – but free once more, from the oar.”

It was scant reassurance for those women that had died and been thrown to the sharks along the way. Reena was determined now that she would not be one of them.

\* \* \* \* \*

Months passed at the long oar. Her newfound status almost made galley life bearable. Her hands and feet had become hardened and accustomed to the push and pull of the heavy oar. They would bear calluses for the rest of her life and, she was sure, she would wear the marks of the lash across her back and body too.

She grew strong and lean, even asking for her hair to be shorn again to avoid the parasites which seemed to grow to infect every galley vessel. She was glad to be high on the hull, far from the bilge, growing accustomed to being treated slightly differently, seen very much as one of the stronger rowers.

She became more than the damned and beaten slave that she seemed to have been when in the lower tiers, reminding herself each day that she only had one more brand to receive and she would be freed. She thought of Marek, in the dark times, as she rowed hard, pushing one blistered foot against the hull, while steadying the pull with her other foot on the standing contrivance that graced the hull-side, hoping that he would not change his mind, that he somehow would be waiting for her at whatever port she was destined to end her term or imprisonment in; hoping that he would not lose interest in the beaten and bent galley slave.

She would simply grunt and nod her understanding now, as the overseers laid the whip across her back or buttocks, urging her to keep time. Both overseer and upper tier rower had reached a kind of understanding, leaving to focus on the lower slaves who had to be urged and whipped, and who, of course, might be used to sate their lusts.

She knew that her situation had changed, from the oft whipped lower galley rower to the strong and independent rower, with less than a year of service left to go. She would not become misshapen like those the weaker women on the long oars, or those below her on the deck, sitting like a coiled spring forced to move under pressure of the seated oar. The only issue was the fall of chain at her ankles, which tended to weigh down her feet, though, by hooking the chain around the footrest, the pressure could be minimised. She saw some of the other stronger women, including the barbarian, who had also been moved to the upper

tier due to her strength and the death of some older slaves, doing the same. She could feel her warrior spirit returning as her strength grew.

\* \* \* \* \*

It was during the change to the hotter months that she had gathered from listened conversations above deck (which she could now hear due to her proximity to the deck above), and between overseers, that they had been travelling further north, even dropping anchor at Irulan itself on a number of occasions. She thought little of it. After all, there was little that she could do to influence events there or with regard to the travel of the vessel, naked and chained to the hull as she was.

She heard passengers boarding that day, heard guffawing and scuffling above, little understanding or wanting to know who might be boarding. She heard a woman's voice, and the guffawing of a man, amongst others sounds, though was oblivious to them, inured to simply serving her time until she could get her final brand seared into her leg and be released, then meet Marek at wherever the ship might deign to leave her.

It was on the second day after the ship had left Irulan that the visitors decided to visit the galley deck. She heard their laughter before she saw them, a man and a woman. She grunted during the heavy pull, placing her foot on the forward rest, leaning back on the other, using muscle and bodyweight to lever the long oar. She glanced down as they walked past, as the woman, seemingly looking for something, glanced at the lower tiers. Reena recognised Pashta immediately, almost in the same instant that she, reasoning that her former lover was not on the same shit soiled bench where she had last seen her, had been moved – and therefore looked around at the other tiers.

She smiled as she recognised Reena.

“There you are. There, my love. I told you that I knew one of the slaves.”

The man she spoke to smiled and nodded at first, until he too stopped to stare at the strong, well muscled and sweating galley slave that laboured on the highest tier, watching her push, dip then pull the oar again, before he recognised

something of her stature, something of the colour of her hair, something of the hawk-like yet delicate features that graced her filthy face.

“You!” was all he said. Reena stared in shock, as much as she could amidst the savage depredation of pulling the heavy oar, looking down into the eyes of the overweight man, the eyes of Magistrate Beros Kradish – the man who she had apparently “attacked”, who had had her friend Zara whipped to death, who had caused all of this. Her head snapped forward, focusing on the pull and the manipulation of the oar, not wanting to engage with him, not wanting to attract attention, in case...

“This one should be punished, overseer,” he barked across the deck.

“My Lord?”

“I want her punished, harshly, and such that I can see it being done.”

Pashta moved to speak, but he interrupted her. “Please... I know this one, Lady Pashta... she is trouble. Trust me.”

“But I don’t understand?” Pashta said, unaware that her pointing out of the rower could have resulted in what she could only pre-suppose would be a result that she had not intended, even though part of her now wondered at what punishment might yet befall Reena.

“She is one of the better rowers, sir,” the bearded overseer added, clearly concerned. There were at least a dozen weaklings and miscreants that should see severe correction before this one.

“You heard me, Overseer. Your worst punishment, please.”

## Chapter Ten: A Lifetime At The Oar?

Reena had started to struggle as the strong arms of the overseers held her fast and forced her to limp up the deck. She knew where they were taking her, just as she knew that her fate was unavoidable, as she heard the Magistrate of Irulan gloating to his new lady friend.

“I... I don’t think this is necessary, my Lord.”

“You don’t know this bitch as I do, my dear. I want to see her suffer greatly... then I’ll decide if she needs a new galley brand... a 15, perhaps a 20... on those beautiful tits!”

Reena pulled at the strong grip that held her. She knew that he could do it, knew that he could order her sentence increased beyond that which her mind and body could ever hope to endure. She would never see the light again!

Her hands were bound behind her as they lifted her across the wooden horse, spreading her sex lips such that they were splayed equally across the triangular apex of the vile instrument, separated from the deck by the four high legs of the device. She winced as the apex bit into her sex, as she tried to gain purchase with the hands bound behind her. It would be to no avail – her feet kicked the air above the deck as her weight fell on her sex. She had ridden the horse before, knew that her hands would provide little respite through pushing upward, that her initial feelings of... almost pleasure... would eventually become raw pressing agony up through her lips and into her bones. She tried not to panic as they fumbled with a bucket underneath her. Oh gods... not that. She had seen it happen with others. The bucket would be tied to her big toes with strings, such that it was suspended under the horse. It would then be filled with rocks from the ballast, over time pulling her downward, enforcing the agony, until she became the sobbing, screaming wreck that she had seen others become after a few hours of the sweet agony of torment astride the infernal horse – made worse, of course, by the eternal swaying of the ship. It would not take long for her to break, and she knew it.

Her breath came in fits and starts as she rode, as they fitted the bucket beneath her, as she tried, without success, to shift her weight, each movement becoming

more uncomfortable – knowing that after an hour, such movement would draw cries of agony.

“Are you sure, my Lord... I have use of her.”

Kradish struck the man hard with the back of his hand. He grunted and took the welt, wanting to respond, but knowing that it would mean his own death.

“Yes, my Lord...” he muttered, nursing his jaw, then looking almost apologetically at Reena.

“Fill it with rocks, and have her breasts caned.... oh, and heat the irons... I want that five on her breast turned into a fifteen!”

Reena finally screamed, “NO! You bastard! NO!”

\* \* \* \* \*

Taron limped across the deck. He could hear the slashes of a cane below, accompanied by a muted scream of some poor wretch. This magistrate was even worse than that merchant guild bastard Marek. At least this one seemed to be taking it out on the women, rather than on him.

The flogging had left him half dead, and it had taken months to recover, on no pay – which would leave him destitute when he eventually birthed for the winter. His comrades mocked him now, where once he had been feared. Even Arness, he believed, secretly wished that the flogging had killed him, for now he was damaged, half the man he had been in the eyes of the crew, and he had damaged the Captain and the Raven’s reputation with the merchant guild. He had woken at night, with nightmares of the flesh torn from his back, wanting revenge. He would fully recover, though the scars would be with him always.

“Take the wheel, Taron... Taron!” Arness shouted. “Take the wheel, you fool. At least act as if you are still of use to me.”

Even Kail, turned away, not wishing to get splashed with the venom that still

seemed to be soaking Taron after his flogging. She moved toward the steps of the galley deck, in order to see which poor wretch had been selected for crippling punishment by the magistrate this time.

Taron took the wheel as commanded, as Arness shook his head in disgust. “I’m doing my rounds... alert me if there is any trouble. That is, something which I’ll have to deal with!” The implication in his voice, Taron reasoned, was that it would be something that Taron couldn’t deal with.

\* \* \* \* \*

Reena had never felt such agony, each impact of the wooden rod making her breasts shake and, worse, making her writhe in agony upon the horse, trying, to no avail, to pull legs and feet up from the heavy load of rocks that another overseer was slowly filling. She bit down hard on the pain of each blow, feeling the impact across her body as Kradish laughed and held Pashta tightly in one arm. Reena was not sure what had happened to her bodyguard, perhaps even reasoning that Pashta had somehow come under Kradish’s control. The younger woman looked away, wincing as the rod fell hard across Reena again and she screeched in agony. He would do it... he would brand her... fifteen years. She could not face that, all because she had struck this bastard in a moment of anger? By the gods, she could not face it. She would rather die.

She watched Kail walking down the passageway, clad in a loincloth and sandals. She stopped as she realised what was happening, realising that Reena was being savagely beaten and horsed for no reason. She might have been in charge of the deck, but there was nothing that even she could do in the face of the desires of the Magistrate of Irulan. She looked down, and slowly walked back up the deck – wanting to get away rather than watch it.

\* \* \* \* \*

Taron had been watching the ship on the horizon for a while now. The long sleek hull was built for speed and it had come from the eastern shores. Its shape did not indicate that it was a cargo vessel – which meant only one thing: Pirates!

They would try to board, steal whatever cargo was on board – take the women, and see them ring chained by their cunts to oar benches where they would be abused and live for a few years. The men would most likely be killed or taken into slavery. Somewhere, deep in his imagination, he saw what would happen, what would play out, that if it were a typical eastern cargo vessel, that it would try to come alongside, board with greater numbers, and hack them all to death... unless he could stop it. He winced as he moved, his back still bent. The flogging had almost killed him, but he may yet have his revenge. A Talvallen guild ship and crew? Perhaps it was his fate to decide what happened next.

\* \* \* \* \*

Pashta herself had been forced to continue to fill the bucket as the weight pulled Reena's legs taut against the wooden horse, tears streamed down her face as she rode in agony now, taking the heavy thud of the rod across her body. She stared with hatred at Kradish as he laughed. He had started this – started her descent into pain and enslavement at the oar. He had had Zara flogged to death. She tried to pull her legs up against the load, but only enforced more pain as she writhed, her sex split by the apex of the horse. By the gods, when would it stop?

\* \* \* \* \*

Taron manipulated the rudder and turned the ship, gradually at first but then more forcefully. The pirates would expect a larger ship to run, to unfurl what sails it had, to increase the drumbeat and whip the women harder in order to enforce an increased pace. That would exhaust the slaves, such that all the pirate had to do was shadow the vessel until it was ready to strike. Pirates would not expect what he had in mind. He could see their course projected in his mind, see

that they had the wind and kept their distance – a distance that was slowly decreasing as he moved to “thread the needle” and come across their path. A ship like that would have a hard metal horn on the prow for piercing a retreating foe. Few of those retreating foes would do what he had in mind.

He gently came about on the rudder. All he needed was for the gods to grant him some more time. He hoped that Arness would be kept busy.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Who ordered that this woman be horsed and beaten?” Arness bellowed at the assembled throng that stood and watched Reena’s naked body being put to torment.

“I did, Captain!” Magistrate Kradish turned slowly and regarded the new visitor with disdain, even though it was his ship.

Arness held his composure. “She is one of better rowers.” He held a hand up as if for effect. “You can see how difficult it is to get good rowers.” At least one of the stronger women looked across at him as they pulled hard, grunting with effort, pushing chained feet against the board, trying not to look at the destroyed figure of Reena, while also trying to make Arness aware that they were not one of the weak females he was obviously referring to with his statement.

“I know this woman. She struck me in the past and was not adequately punished. I would see it done now.” Kradish spat the words as he spoke.

“Might I remind the magistrate that he is but a passenger on my ship and does not dictate the punishment of the rowing women, be they prisoner or slave.”

“Might I remind the captain that I am a noble of Irulan, and...”

“You still do not have jurisdiction aboard a merchant vessel... my Lord, no matter what your rank,” Arness interrupted. He could see that he had embarrassed the man, but also that he could do little about it. Kradish approached Arness slowly, hands behind his back, as Reena screeched and the

rod fell across her breast again.

“I will not forget this, Captain,” he said quietly.

“I would expect nothing else, my Lord,” Arness said in mock supplication, bowing slightly for effect, without taking his eyes from the heavier man’s gaze. “Cut her down!” he bellowed.

\* \* \* \* \*

The pirate ship had not yet realised Taron’s intent. He had drawn steadily closer, plotting a course that would draw him directly in front of its path. He reasoned that they must have thought that the merchant vessel had not seen them or, at the very least, was aware of their presence and simply did not know how to run. The first of the crew to see it from the main deck was Kail, who had come up now, having seen enough of Reena’s punishment. She pointed madly without words at the pirate ship, looking up at the wheel and the figure of Taron, who stood there, drawing the ship inexorably closer, and now at speed, toward a collision with the fast moving pirate ship.

Kail gasped as she saw his face, realising that he had lost the spark of life and wanted to end his... and, if necessary, the lives of all onboard the Raven. She bolted for the lower deck in search of the captain.

\* \* \* \* \*

Reena was afraid to move her feet as they cut away the bucket, knowing that if she moved on the perch, the agony would return as the numbness went away. The choice was made for her as her bonds behind her back were cut and she was helped to the deck. Her chest was on fire from the beating and she dared not look down at the new welts that had been left across her body. They had to drag her along the deck, even though she tried to walk. They were putting her back on the

oar? She gasped at the thought that she had been badly beaten and horsed. Her entire body was in pain, and they expected her to go back to the full rhythm of the long oar? She watched the Magistrate grab Pashta by the arm and start to guide her to the light at the steps, which led to the upper deck.

“Come, my dear,” he chided forcefully. She was unsure what hold this vile man might yet have over her former lover and accuser. She would never find out, it seemed.

“I will see you crucified yet, wench, if I can’t condemn you to the oar for life!” he shouted back as he walked toward the first step.

Screams and shouts came from the rowers on starboard suddenly, as some of them had seen something dark obscure the paltry light from their solitary oarport. Some stopped rowing and shrieked, beaten then, as if through some dull reflex of the part of the ship that formed the reaction of the overseers. Even under the lash they pointed to the oarport, at the approaching darkness, the impending doom of the bulk that was about to strike their galley – to which they were still chained in place.

Then it struck.

The ship lurched violently as the starboard was first lifted then pierced by the pirate ship’s spike, then fell back onto the sea. Reena stared in horror as women died at the impact point, as the spike drove home, then she started to scramble toward the hole. She had to help, yet was now surrounded by screaming rowers, who, having realised what had happened, began to scabble at the chain around their feet, knowing that by virtue of the fetters and the connection of the through chain to the deck, that they would go down with the ship unless they could get away.

As water engulfed most, some women, who realised immediately their predicament, tried to organise and pull at the chains, and at the hooked attachment to the hull... but the nailed connection, borne deep in order to prevent slaves escaping, would be too much for the strongest of men, never mind exhausted galley slaves. Others screamed at the overseers to release them, while other scrambled at the feet of their masters in an attempt to wrestle them to the ground and get the keys. Reena was thrown to the deck as the men beside her were pulled at, wielding their whips in response to the wild women at their feet,

despite the lurching of the deck. Water poured into the ship now, and began to fill the vile contents of the bilge, making the black mess of water stream across the walkway. Despite the impaling effect of the other vessel, it could not hold the larger galley in place, and the size of the hole in its side meant that the Raven would go down, and as Reena watched the screaming, scrambling and bloody rowers scramble for survival, she remembered that she was free.

Overseers had drawn swords and were hacking at their charges now, even as they were pulled into a mass of chained slaves who in turn performed bloody murder on their former masters. At the far end of the deck, the lurch of the ship had thrown Pashta off her feet, while the magistrate, who had abandoned her, was moving his bulk up the steps in a panic. Reena moved up the deck on hands and knees, free of the ropes and chains that had bound her, and the only galley slave who was not searching for keys. Part of her urged that she should save as many rowers as possible, that she should find the keys amidst the mass of bodies and start freeing slaves – though she knew that would not save many. The ship lurched and women screamed, as the water coming in, now at waist level, served as a reminder that if she were to save herself she had to move fast.

She saw the barbarian, and others, pulling at the chains that held them to the deck, making rough hands bloody in their efforts, as others panicked, prayed, or simply resigned themselves to the water's cold embrace.

Pashta screamed her name as she reached the base of the water covered stairs, even as slaves pulled at her fine clothing, not realising in their panic, and perhaps not now caring, that the woman would not have had any keys to the chains. Her logical mind screamed only one thing, as the salt water bit at the wounds on her body, as she limped up the steps from the galley deck, which now only held a small air gap as the screaming subsided and chained slaves went under. It screamed "revenge".

As she reached the top of the slanting staircase, she heard screams of the dying behind her, and the pressure from expunged air as the galley deck filled with water. Hands pushed out of the grilles on the deck, then fell back as water now began to emerge from there too, filling the upper deck. Foul eastern pirates from the smaller vessel now began to flood onto that deck, meeting little resistance from a crew, who for the most part had not even known that they were coming and were completely unprepared. She recognised Kail, fighting valiantly beside Taron, though they would be engulfed by numbers. She envisaged Kail taken,

stripped, used by the pirates, and tethered naked and shaven-headed to a galley oar by her sex lips. She realised that she had to save at least one person – at least Kail. Moving to a dead pirate she pulled the dagger at his belt free and started to ward the fight when she saw the Magistrate. He had drawn gold from his pockets now, and was hoping to fend off the advances of pirates, reasoning that he could either bribe them or identify himself in the hope of fetching a ransom from Irulan. He was slowly being surrounded by them. They would realise his importance, keep him alive. Some scum in Irulan, perhaps even Gorus himself, would then pay ransom for him and it would begin again. She could not allow that – even if the gods would – she would defy them this time – this time she had to! There were too many pirates for her to take on, especially so in her current condition. She had but one chance.

It was a long time since she had thrown a dagger, though a well balanced one could be used as a missile of sorts with the correct range. She paused, balanced the weight and angled the weapon, throwing it with a practiced effort of muscle and will, grunting with the effort and the pain in her arm from overuse of the oar. She watched it, as if all other movement on the deck had stopped and only the dagger mattered. It careened at an angle and fell toward the head of the pleading nobleman, its point finding his eye and burying itself up to the hilt in his head, even as he screamed his name to the pirates. The momentum of the throw carried him backward onto the mast and he slumped down to a sitting position as the point of the blade found what was left of the functioning part of his brain.

The next few seconds seemed to last forever. She ran toward the throng that surrounded Kail. Taron had been slain, and a large force of pirates surrounded the terrified woman. They were not expecting an attack from the rear as she took one pirate with her fist, grabbing his sword and despatching another. A flurry of blade strokes took down others, and Kail killed the one in front of her as he turned to engage the new attacker from behind.

“Come on!” she screamed, moving to the side of the ship and jumping over into a bloody sea of dead sailors. Kail followed, dumping sword, boots and anything that might weigh her down, and landed with a splash beside Reena.

\* \* \* \* \*

Reena's eyes shot open as salt water washed in and out of her mouth. She pushed herself up on tired arms with a start and spat the water out, realising that she was in the surf of a beach. They had got away, avoided the torrent of missiles and the questing pirates who had searched for survivors. They had seen the island as the light faded, and despite being weighed down by her ankle fetters, they had both made it to shore. Exhausted – they must have fallen asleep. The salt water bit at her welts as she rose to a sitting position, her long legs covered in wet sand. Where were they, or more appropriately, where was she? As she rose, she realised that Kail had gone. She stood and limped up the beach. Were those footprints? Yes, bare footprints in the sand moving inland toward the jungle area. Had Kail gone off on her own? Damn.

She had survived, but survival itself had come at a distinct price. She was naked, and still wore galley fetters on her feet. She only had four of the five brand requirement which still marked her breast as her sentence. Despite all that she had gone through, she would still be seen as a galley slave by anyone that found her – if she could be found, of course. Despite Marek's promise to marry her after her "service", she was lost. How could he ever find her now if the Raven had gone? She looked out to sea. There was no evidence of a battle, or even of the hellship upon which she had served.

She had killed the magistrate. At least she could be sure of that. She moved up the beach slowly, following Kail's footprints. Finding the former galley deck overseer would be the first step...

**The End**