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Chained Vengeance

Tales from
The Riverwake Tower 2

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Tales From the Riverwake Tower

Book 2: Chained Vengeance

A Story of Love, Betrayal and Slavery in the World of the Riverwake Tower

by Clare Seven

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Chapter 1

The woman strode purposefully toward the citadel.

The walled keep that crowned the uppermost portion of the city of Arlos had been called the citadel after the succession wars that had spilt so much blood across its ancient stones, but it was scarcely big enough to justify the term. That said, there were few left alive who would argue with its right to uphold the claim and the description.

Kings, nobles, mercenaries and barbarians had fought and died on the natural stone outcropping and the man-made edifice that crowned it, in the years that had both heralded and followed the bloody wars of kings and despots that had soaked the land in so much blood in the last fifty years – until such time as the city state had learned to be ruled by the most politically competent nobleman or woman – if such a thing actually could be said to exist.

Elenna walked toward the spiral and walled path that led toward the tower. She could already see that the two guards at the base of the heavily fortified entryway were watching her approach. They were professionals. She could tell even from this distance. They had singled her out – though she had, in this instance at least, made no pretence with regard to blending in as she was wont to do, her training taking over in order to allow her to become one with the crowd and normally go unnoticed.

No. In this instance she wanted to be seen, and assumed, correctly she surmised, that Duke Pylar of Arlos would waste neither time nor silver on the services of second-rate mercenaries with which to guard the citadel. She had debated whether she should test out the Duke's men and ascertain whether they were in fact worth the silver he had paid. But that would have been something she would only have done in her younger days – when she had been reckless and a defiant rogue... stupid perhaps? Now that she had seen more than forty summers in this world, and had had such adventures – many of which her apparent 'patron', Duke Pylar, had financed and benefited from – she was a good deal less careless and, indeed, more vigilant than she had been twenty years ago. There had been good times, and bad. For those times she had made love to wild, uninhibited and heroic men, she had felt her share of the whip; for those times when she had

soared above the clouds on mountaintops in daring raids upon ancient temples and crypts, she had spent her share of time rotting naked in chains in deep, stinking dungeons or prisons. No, she was a much more sensible woman now.

The guards had clearly marked her out, making subtle hand gestures with regard to her avenue of approach and their likely response should action be required. She simply stared at them as she got closer, which piqued their interest and the subtle flurry of activity as hands went for blade hilts beneath robes, which although appearing ceremonial and useless in a fight, she knew were all too functional when required to be.

It was as if no one else was in the street as she got to within distance such that she could see the whites of their eyes beneath their shining chromed headpieces. In fact, she judged now, perhaps they were not so professional after all, as had she had a second who could now flank them, they would be... A movement behind a wall on an upper storey betrayed her thoughts. Ah, she chided herself; these were no simple guards; a crossbowman had been covering the surrounding area while the two guards focused on the apparent determined approach. So the Duke had not softened in the intervening years. In fact, she believed that he might well have become even more security conscious. She shuddered a little, as she remembered when it had not always been so, when he had been somewhat careless with those he called comrade, or to whom he had leant his patronage...

The guards pulled at her. Her clothing had been ripped to some extent during the fight. She could also feel a bruise rising on her side. She debated as to whether she had been right to submit and surrender. No, she told herself. They had her caught in a crossfire with the bows from the rooftop. It would have been suicide to fight on.

“Bring the bitch forward,” the captain yelled as he sat behind the desk, nursing his bruised jaw. She allowed herself a smile, remembering how her elbow had connected solidly with his face during the initial exchanges in the tavern.

She grunted as they pushed her, one bare breast falling free from the ripped tunic, straining as she tried to stay upright with the heavy and unwieldy wooden yoke across her shoulders – locking wrists and neck into place. Had this been the only contrivance she wore, she might have had a chance at escape – perhaps

using the yoke as a weapon. It would have been a long shot, of course, but she was used to those, wasn't she? Perhaps seeing her intent, or at least perceptive of its potential, they had removed her leather boots at the tavern, after locking her in the yoke, and clad her ankles with heavy chains, allowing her little movement as she was then forced to walk the muddy streets of Irulan barefoot and shackled, toward her fate at the Riverwake Tower.

The captain pawed at his bruised face as she was shunted in front of him.

"Remove her clothes, and have her put in chains in one of the black cells," he said slowly, smiling as his men advanced...

She shuddered again as the memories faded. She had been younger then. She remembered being determined that she would not be broken by the worst prison on the coast. Though she hated to admit it, it had almost broken her in the end, at least until her opportunity to escape had come. There was no time for that now, however. She was close enough to the guards for them to hear her speak. As if in anticipation of the potential for violence that seemed to hang in the air, those who walked the streets near the high walled entrance to the citadel seemed to fade into the background and shy away from the area that, subconsciously almost, appeared to hold so much threat to their well being should they linger too long in the wrong place.

The guards moved the polearms they carried, so that they could effortlessly put them to good use before using swords should the approaching woman declare herself to bear ill intent.

"My name is Elenna," she finally said, her boots stopping in the still muddy ground that had been made sodden in the recent rains. "I'm here to see the Duke."

* * * * *

The stone edifice of the citadel loomed large above her as they marched her

toward one of the wide, cold looking entrances. A word of command and they had been let through. They had searched her, of course, but at least it had been done in a professional manner, and she had let them check every nook and cranny of her body. They had not apologised, and neither had she protested. She knew the price that must be paid to work for nobility or, in this case, to repay an old friend. She was reminded once more of the foul prison stay that she had endured in her youth.

She had been stripped naked in one of the lower guardrooms by men who took great pleasure carrying out the orders they had been given. As they removed her clothes, she tried to remove her mind from the situation, as she had been trained once by the masters of the thieves' guild. 'Learn to detach the emotion from every situation. Face it with logic and initiative...'

It had not been easy of course. Her ankles had remained in heavy iron chains as they ripped and sliced at her clothes, taking their time to grope her. The yoke was removed as she stood naked, and her hands bound tightly behind her with thick rope. She knew that she could bring her arms around her legs if she wanted to, but they held her at swordpoint, perhaps aware of the potential for danger that the thief still held.

She was forced to walk barefoot and chained through the vile prison, firstly down the cold and slimy staircase, then along the cracked cobbles – where she had to watch her footing, both to avoid the sharper corners of the stone, and the slime filled puddles that had pooled in the recesses of the uneven floor. The smell was the first thing to hit her as the light dimmed around her. The heavy fetters hampered her walking, hobbled as she was by the steel, her bound hands not making the situation any easier.

“Move, wench,” a guard said, poking her with the hilt of his blade. She grunted, promising herself that in another time, when she got out of this vile place, she would have her revenge; against him, against them all.

She was marched past horrible cells, gagging at the stench that emanated from them. Naked men and women lay within, caked in filth, trying to stay out of fetid puddles of their own making, their ankles in horribly rusted fetters chained to the wall. She could tell those who had stayed longest by their vile condition, and

the red rawness of their chained ankles in the poor light. She feared how long she would have to stay here. No, she reminded herself. Detach the emotion. She calmed her breathing.

“No, wench”, a guard said, as if reading her thoughts, and pushing her again. “You won’t have the luxury of staying here. You’re going down a level...”

The guards flanked her as she was guided through the maze of corridors in the citadel. She imagined that they had been trained to march her in subtly different directions amidst the mahogany panelled boudoirs of the concubines and the more functionally finished stone of the guardroom areas. She took it all in, and mapped the entire layout, as she had been trained to do when she was but an apprentice in the thieves’ guild, so many years before. Did they really believe that this attempt to disorientate her would work? Perhaps they had no idea who they were dealing with. It was clear that the Duke had not told them.

Fine, she reasoned. If they wanted to play their games, then so be it. The Duke would understand.

* * * * *

After what seemed an age of walking through the opulence and architectural excellence of the Imperial citadel, the scent of incense mixed with subtle perfume filled the air as she was brought before two great oak doors with steel supported frames and brass fittings. More of the crimson robed guards stood with spears, which, unlike those cheaper versions, were finely crafted and gilded with leather handgrips and fighting accoutrements. Perhaps the Duke was a little concerned as to his safety. It had not always been so. At least, that was how she remembered it.

She tried to move as the pain lanced through her back again.

They had chained her to a collar in the foul cell, necessitating that she stand naked, her hands bound behind her, her feet in chains. The collar meant that if she wanted to survive, she had to stay awake. That had been two days ago. Two days chained and bound in the blackness of the cell, with only the feeling of the odd rat running across her feet or trying to nibble at her leg, to break the hours of monotony. She could not sleep, lest she fall against the collar and choke herself. Perhaps, she reasoned, that was what they wanted. She kept telling herself that it was not what she herself wanted, no matter how much the thought of torture kept filling her mind. She tried to remember her training. Don't think on that which has not yet happened. Dwell on the present, the moment, the potential of a single, unchangeable, moment in time.

Yet still, thoughts of her lying naked, chained hand and foot to some vile stretching rack, her sweating body being stretched by the action of the roller and ratchet, as sinew, shoulder and knee threatened to separate, filled her with dread. She had developed an image in her head of how the tormentors would look. Thickly set men, with naked torsos, sweating amidst the heat of the chamber and the braziers that held branding irons, their heads covered with black masks, so that the poor wretch being tortured might not see their hideous expressions of glee. She imagined one racking her taut body tighter as she screamed and cried out, as another whipped her naked flesh with a cat o nine tails.

It had been a semi dream state at the end, as she stood half conscious in the darkness of the cell. She could scarcely remember them coming to release her from the collar. She could remember being dragged across the cobbles of the corridor, to another cell where her hands were released and tied above her, and a sackcloth bag placed over her head. Then, they began with the whips. They used a single-tailed lash across her back and a cat o nine across her breasts. The pain was unimaginable and she screeched beneath the hood. She had always told herself that she would not scream for at least twenty strokes, were she ever caught and publicly flogged at the post, but the reality of being whipped was very different, especially so in her exhausted state.

She had eventually been taken down and dragged upstairs to one of the cells she had seen on her way in. There she lay now, her naked ankles clad in heavy iron fetters, themselves attached to a thick chain which was fed through a ring in the wall at floor level. She was chained, just as she had sent the other naked wretches chained on her way in, lying in pain from the whipping she had

received.

She was not sure how long she stayed there. She drifted in and out of exhausted and painful sleep as she lay on the filthy wet cobbles, shivering and huddling herself in her nakedness, being careful to lie on her side lest the dirt of the floor would infect those lashes that had left deep wounds. It meant, of course, that her body became covered with dirt and dampness, yet she knew that a naked prisoner in the Riverwake Tower could do little to avoid this. She drifted off to sleep again, coughs and moans from other naked prisoners and what she thought were distant screams punctuating the silence of the terrible prison.

She jumped with a start, wincing at the agony left from her whipping, as she heard the key in the lock of her cell door...

The doors made hardly a sound as they were opened. She found it strange that these men had scarcely searched her. She sensed also that this gave them a sense of consternation, as they were obeying a strict order, unwillingly perhaps. She smiled, remembering how insistent the Duke could be.

Fragrant, scented air greeted her as the doors opened, a long stoneworked hall flanked by ornate columns, all lit by well positioned torches, lay in front of her. At the end, though the light was somewhat dimmer than at the entrance, she could see a man and woman sitting on stately thrones. The Duke had come a long way, she thought to herself absently.

“Enter,” a voice boomed from the far end. It was his voice, just as she remembered it, though tinged with a timbre of age and some sadness, at least as far as such emotion could be detected in the voice of another. She had been trained to detect those things, and could remember vividly the first time she had heard that voice.

“Is this the thief?”

“Aye my Lord.”

She turned slightly as she lay face down on the filthy cold cobbles, the

debilitating chains at her ankles rattling as she did so. She dared not move too far, as the lancing pain in her back from the whip burned ever worse now. She saw one of the dark figures nod, as she realised that another was carrying a bucket.

“EAHHHHHHHHHHH!”

The freezing, salted water splashed across her back, bathing the swollen lashes and filling the wounds that had been left with yet more pain to add to the red haze that she was seeing. She writhed, pulling at the chains as she bucked and tried to escape the freezing water that engulfed her.

“How many lashes did she take?” the first voice said, as she gritted her teeth, moaning against the sting.

“Thirty or forty my Lord, well laid on by Tormentor Rensor.”

“Well laid on indeed. Her back is a mess.”

Elenna raised herself to her elbows now, her breasts falling against the cobbled floor as she tried to turn, at least to see the men who were talking about her. Her blond hair fell across her face as she did so, though she could trace out the outline of a tall man in some armour, armed with sword and dagger, standing beside the hunchbacked jailor in the foul light. She could also see the large erection that made the jailor’s breeches poke outward as he stared at her dirty breasts and chained legs.

“I will have need of your services thief, unless you’d prefer to stay in prison...”

Elenna looked up at him...

She could tell as she walked up the column-flanked passage, the tense guards beside her, that Pylar was smiling from the ‘throne’ upon which he sat. She could also tell that the grey haired woman beside him, however, was far from happy. She kept her eyes fixed on Pylar.

He was leaving the small dais upon which the thrones sat now, coming down the steps as her guards tensed and slowed her approach.

“Elenna! My dearest Elenna! It is you?”

One of the guards put an arm across her front. She stifled the reaction to break it, knowing that now was not the time for such a response.

“It has been so long!” the Duke said, still approaching.

“Caution, my Lord,” one of the guards urged, as Pylar ignored the plea and the grey haired lady on the dais stood up in consternation at his actions. There was no attempt to stop the embrace that followed, neither from the guards, who despite their inability to keep the Duke’s actions in check, at the very least placed their hands on their sword hilts.

She felt his hot breath at her neck, and she grimaced as he squeezed her too hard. She wanted to smile. It had been a long time since her patron had spoken with her.

“So is this another job, my Lord?”

“HA,” he responded excitedly, stepping back from her. “Let me look at you!”

“What’s this?” he said, teasing, motioning toward her belly. “You’ve put on a little weight?”

She deflected the slight. “As have you, my Lord Pylar.” She smiled as he patted his stomach.

“The result of us getting too old for this sort of thing I suspect, Elenna,” he whispered in response.

She got the distinct impression that he had wanted to say more, much more, but both were interrupted by the grey haired woman who still remained on her ornate chair.

“So this is the mighty Elenna who you have told me so much about?”

Pylar turned now, pulling her gently toward the dais, even as the guards politely followed, watching her. The woman was thin yet muscled, displaying what Elenna supposed were the remnants of a career that had not been entirely based upon courtly manners. Her face was narrow, and her hair tied back tightly. Her

years were not given away by her skin, which was reasonably smooth as if she had, in latter years at least, taken some care to stop the aging process as much as cosmetics and the unguents of merchants and sorcerers could, yet her eyes showed themselves as narrow and scornful, as if they had seen so much pain, yet even now held something horrible back. Elenna had prided herself in being able to accurately size up individuals on the basis of her first cold impression. On this occasion, she could see pain, sadness and other less positive emotions. She tried to stifle the feeling that Duke Pylar might not have made a good choice.

“So, Pylar, this is the woman who you saved from prison and slavery all those years ago.”

Her voice seemed brittle, as if on the verge of exhaustion or anger. Elenna was not sure which.

“Indeed. Elenna – the best rogue in the seven kingdoms. If ever you hear her footfalls behind you, then it is too late, or so they used to say, my dear, eh?”

He patted her back as he spoke, his jowls shaking behind his beard as he spoke.

“My Lord pays me a great compliment,” she began. The lady on the throne interrupted.

“...and yet he insists that you not be searched before coming before us,”

Pylar looked between both women, who stared at each other now.

“May I introduce you, Elenna, to Lady Tremaine of Alnar. My wife.” Elenna could feel his strained smile nearby.

Pylar lowered a hand as Elenna curtsied dutifully, using the least amount of grace in the subtle motion and not removing her eyes from the noble lady.

“Am I to be searched then?” she asked.

“Elenna, Miriam,” Pylar said, looking at the two women who had been involved in his life.

“Please. I want you both to be friends, especially so considering the nature of the task that needs resolved.”

Chapter 2

They had retired to a feasting chamber, with the Duke at one end of a long table, Lady Tremaine at another, with Elenna in the middle, her back to the large fire which subtly warmed the room, despite its size. Elenna was far from happy with the arrangement, especially so as the guards who flanked her and were nestled in alcoves behind her, could strike at a moment's notice. Still, this was Duke Pylar, her Duke Pylar. She was sure, reasonably so at least, that she could trust him.

She was not sure of Lady Tremaine, of course. She wondered at what Lord Pylar might have told her about their previous relationship. It was, like most friendships in her profession, somewhat complicated.

Elenna stood naked in front of the nobleman. She shivered a little. The prison and the stone floor under her feet was cold. At least she had been released from the foul leg fetters and the filthy and disgusting cell in which she had been held. Her back still stung like fire from the savage whipping that she had received. They had doused her in several buckets of salt water and listened to her scream, writhing in her chains.

She had heard the nobleman ask to have her brought before him, when she had recovered. She reasoned that he was of obvious importance, at least to the guards and the foul jailor of this terrible place of misery.

Elenna stood now in front of him, her back tilted slightly. She could see that he was admiring her breasts in the torchlight. He had dismissed the guards, despite their protests, apparently wanting to speak with her alone. She reasoned that she could slip the bonds, though they had been tied tightly. She flinched as he raised a hand to flick the nipple of her left breast, which was dirty from the floor of the cell, lying as she had been, in order to keep her more seriously welted back off the dirty cobbles and away from the myriad puddles of urine.

He gripped her nipple, and she gasped.

“You’re quite beautiful, thief.”

Her blonde hair shook as she tried to pull away from him, reasoning how long it might take her to escape the tight leather thong that bound her arms, should this nobleman decide that he wanted more than a simple grope of her muscled body.

“Do not fear me,” he said, looking into her eyes, seeing the mix of sadness and desperation that stared back at him.

“My intent would be that you not be sentenced to the galley for your crimes.”

She licked her lips, stifling the fears that welled up in her mind. Had he heard that she would be condemned to the oar? Branded, chained and naked in the bowels of some cargo hulk, rowing a thick wooden oar in the semi-darkness, under the whims and lash of cruel, barely human overseers who demanded that their cocks be sucked at every opportunity? Aye, she’d heard stories of women who had served in the galleys. Some were given shorter sentences. Surviving and living with the horrors of recovery from the slave labour had been worse for them.

“You would see me released then... sir?” she said, using her voice and staring back at him, as she had been trained, in order to entrance and charm those of influence who could help one’s cause.

He smiled. “You seek to charm me, is that it? Ha!”

He moved his hand beneath her chin, lifting her face.

“Where did you receive your training?”

Her eyes fell.

“I could have the information tortured from you, if you prefer,” he whispered, watching her face harden at the threat.

“I jest,” he said, before she could react. “I would not see your body broken on the rack, or watch your cunt widened and branded by the splitter and phallus. You are too useful to me for that.”

Her heart was pounding. She did not want to be tortured. Of that, she was certain. He had threatened her with the rack, and she had heard of the legendary ‘splitter’, and how it was used upon women – their legs forced wide on the

bench, and of how they were allowed to fall onto a cruel steel phallus. There were stories that the steel cock was even heated before use. She suppressed a shudder.

“I am glad to hear that my Lord does not wish me put to torment. And yet, I am also curious, with regard to how he knows of ‘my art’.” He had referred to ‘the voice’ and the other wiles in which mistress thieves of the guild were trained – to charm men, and some women, with their voice – an art that some were naturally gifted with, having found their way into the guild from being imperial courtesans down on their luck, though even perfection could be honed further.

“I am familiar with your ways, thief. Your candour and courage show me that you are not new to the game your guild plays, and that, is why I take interest in you,” he said, running a hand down her thigh.

“It would be a shame to see you even put to the oar for a few years, each year branded on that muscled thigh. It would ruin you, I think. Those are marks which I’m sure you’d rather not earn.”

“Yes, my Lord,” she repeated, staring straight ahead, her nipples hardening in the cold of the guardroom.

“You dismissed the guards for a reason, my Lord?” she asked finally. She resolved that if he was going to try and force himself upon her she would lose the bonds in seconds, break his neck in less, and make for the sewerage grille she had seen on the lower level. She might yet make her way out of here.

“Aye, wench. My galley sits at anchor in the harbour. I will see to it that it waits until dawn.”

“Whatever do you mean, my Lord?”

She stared at him, using the voice, trying to seduce him to her will with words. He simply laughed. Had he been trained in the ways?

He produced a small lock-pick, finely crafted in weapon steel, and potentially unbreakable. He moved to tuck it into the recesses of her tangled and dirty hair.

“Take this to aid your escape. If it is all you need, then join me on my galley – ‘The Victor’. If you are not there, then you are not the thief I thought you were,

and you will rot in prison and die as a galley whore.” He glanced around the dank walls. “Though let’s face it. You won’t last long in either event.”

She narrowed her gaze as he called for the guards...

The wine flowed long after dinner was complete, though Pylar seemed to have the measure of the refreshment available. Elenna and Lady Tremaine, although partaking, seemed tense and keen to remain alert, though for different reasons.

Pylar’s jests were getting worse, even as he made fun of the professional mercenaries that formed his bodyguard. Elenna balked at the idea of using men who could be bought as any form of guard, no matter how much the elite of their profession professed their supposed honour.

“Perhaps we should get to the point, husband,” Lady Tremaine suddenly interrupted.

“Yes... indeed. Milady, Elenna here... the only woman ever to escape from the Riverwake Tower...”

Tremaine seemed impressed by that, Elenna noted, though broadcasting the fact that she had once been a prisoner and escaped justice, when in the vile city state of Irulan, was not something that she had wanted Pylar to do upon meeting him after so many years. Especially so when they were surrounded by mercenaries, and in the presence of a noblewoman that she knew little about.

“Elenna... is the woman you seek.”

She looked toward Tremaine. So it was the noble old lady that wanted her services, not her former Master? That made things interesting.

The woman nodded, a signal apparently for one of the mercenaries to move forward. Now that she noted their attentions upon her, she realised slowly that there was some link between them. Were these mercs actually a guard for her, something that Pylar had inherited with his wife perhaps?

The man whom she had summoned moved forward, carrying a number of scrolls, which he proceeded to lay on the table. Tremaine indicated that he

should use wine goblets and plates to weigh down the corners as she began to spread them. Pylar shared her gaze once and nodded.

“Please pay attention, Elenna,” she remarked curtly.

Elenna stared at her, recognising the remark as a slight, but choosing not to react for Pylar’s benefit. She found herself nodding in assent to Tremaine’s request, as the first large scroll was unfurled. She could see what was represented on the lacquered parchment almost immediately.

The scroll held spindly lines of dark ink, carefully drawn to illustrate a number of views and, in some cases, directions for carpenters in terms of sketches and notes, together with some detail for the moving parts. She recognised a large galley ship straight away. Unlike the sleek, military scout ships, or even the larger cargo vessels, it was a massive hulk-style ship. She had seen them on the inland canals, and near the coastal ports. They were used largely for cargo transport, and...

“It’s a prison ship,” Tremaine said slowly, confirming the thought that was clearing in Elenna’s head.

“Why are you showing me a prison ship?” she asked, looking back at Pylar.

“I’m sorry, Elenna, but this is the only way we can help...” he trailed off, looking at his wife.

Tremaine moved a goblet as if to attract Elenna’s attention once more to the plan at hand, before speaking.

“What you see before you are the construction scrolls for a galley. Unlike the faster, sleeker, cargo or scout ships that you see in port, this series of massive vessels were constructed as slow cargo shunters, or in some cases prison hulks. Either way, they are rowed by slaves or prisoners.”

Elenna nodded her understanding. She had seen the prison hulks before. They were massive and stinking, moved slowly by myriad prisoners – it was enough in most coastal cities to put people off committing crimes – the intent, in the end, of the deterrent.

“I’m sure you are aware of what conditions they might row under.”

Elenna nodded sternly. She had never served as a galley slave herself, of course – she had escaped the Riverwake Tower before she might have found out – though she knew what they could do to people. In most cases, cargo galleys or prison ships were rowed by errant women, who had got themselves into trouble, or whose husbands had incurred large debts and had either died in military service, run from their responsibilities, or indeed had simply sold their wives into slavery in order to pay their debts. For men, it was normal to be condemned to fight in one of the Penal regiments in the wars against the barbarians, or to be condemned to a military ship where life expectancy was (mercifully) reduced.

She remembered Lana Gerant suddenly. It must have been ten years ago. Lana had been captured during a raid on a temple in Arlos. Her actions had made sure that Elenna had got away. Even now, she could remember the thief's lithe build, her long dark hair. She had been taken to the Port Gaol prison and, as with most of the inmates, stripped naked and placed in chains, awaiting her name to be called in the massive prison maze, so that she might have her fate determined.

She had not seen Lana for another month, until, that was, she learned that Lana had been condemned to the galley... for five years.

She had tried to catch Lana's attention as she was marched past, naked and filthy in the slave coffle, her ankles in heavy fetters, with each naked woman linked by chain. The line had held a motley collection of those condemned: wives, adulteresses, debtors, thieves and whores. The worst to behold were those whose forehead had been branded with an 'L', indicating that they would be condemned to the oar for life, never to be freed. There had been considerable debate in Arlos's early years as to how women might be condemned to the galley for lesser crimes, and thus the cargo ships could be used as prisons without filling up perfectly good holding facilities with rotting prisoners in chains. The council had come up with an idea, of course.

Women, such as Lana, who were to be chained within a prison hulk for five years, would be branded on the breast with a '5'. During each new year celebration, the occupants of the oar decks in the prison hulks would have an oar brand applied to their thighs. After the correct number of brands were received, the rower would be released. Of course, the system was heavily influenced by when the 'criminal' had been taken, in relation to the new year. Nevertheless, even a five-year term at the oar would be harrowing.

There were three tiers of oars in the larger prison hulks, each placed against the curving hull. Each massive oar was pulled by a single woman – the oars so big on some of the largest vessels that their hands could not in fact fit around the roundness of the wood, and special handles were located to allow them even to move it.

Prisoners would row completely naked, with detritus being collected in the bilge at the feet of the lower tier, then cleaned or washed down via the scuppers in the hull by the slaves when they reached port, or during the rest period for one shift. The shifts were staggered such that at least two tiers were rowing at all times, the third tier perhaps being allowed six or eight hours sleep.

The pace of the oars, being a cargo galley, was not fast, though the weight and constant rhythm meant that many either went mad with the drudgery or were slowly bent and broken by the excessive workload on their weakened bodies, exacerbated, of course, through the constant whip lashes across back, breasts and thighs, received from the cruel overseers.

Some women took to the labour more easily than others. Those who had toiled in taverns or on cargo vessels or with labour of any kind during their lives, took to the harsh labour much more easily than members of the thieves' guild – who had made themselves lithe and flexible, though had less bulk and muscle. Those few women who had scarcely lifted a bucket and had servants to do their bidding never lasted very long at the oar, seeing their end before even five years had passed due to the ravages of the conditions and the heavy whip across their naked bodies.

Newer prisoners, whose mouths had not been infected with sores from sucking multiple cocks, routinely found themselves on the lower tier, their heavily chained ankles and feet in the filthy bilge water, usually near some haggard and wretched slave who could show them the rhythm – how to push with their feet and pull hard on the oar. Their position was also uniquely convenient for the male overseers who could satiate their lusts in the mouths of the prisoners during breaks. Any other contact was not permitted, as even the most inept captain could understand that a rowing deck full of heavily pregnant women was not something that could be considered in any way practical.

She remembered again how she had watched as Lana, in chains and naked, had been taken to the prison hulk that day. It was sad, but Elenna – ever objective

(some would call her cold) realised that there had been little she could do. The coffle was too well guarded, the hulk too remote for a rescue without someone on the inside. She would, however, come to somewhat regret her decision with regard to her lack of action, when next she met Lana.

It had been around five years later – of course it must have been, she reasoned later – that had been Lana's term of 'service' for her crime, and even with the slight time tolerance regarding when an oar brand was placed on a thigh during the new year turnover, it could not have been long since Lana had been released. She had thought her a beggar at first, when she saw the woman in the street. She was barefoot, perhaps naked under the filthy shawl that covered her against the rainy night in Arlos. Her hands and feet were gnarled, with black and missing nails, initially making Elenna believe that the woman was an aged hag who was down on her luck. That feeling was accentuated by the fact that she seemed bent, as if her back no longer gave the requisite support for her frame.

Elenna remembered that she had elected to walk past her, ignore the plight of the beggar, until the woman in the soaked shawl, called her name. She had turned to look at the haggard face, and through the pain, the sad eyes, and the misery behind them, she recognised Lana – the thief who had been condemned to five years at the oar.

When she got her inside a tavern to get her warmed up, she listened to her croaking voice tell her about conditions on the awful hell ship, but it was what she saw that Elenna would never forget. The gnarled feet and ankles still wore the heavy chain fetters. These, it seemed, never came off once put in place. She had placated the shouts from the innkeep that he did not keep a bench for beggars or ex galley sluts.

Lana showed her the whip marks across her body, the brands on her thigh for her years served, and then described the horrors of the slavery. It was more than she could bear. She had a few silvers at the time and gave them to the poor half naked woman, who would either find some modicum of sanctuary amongst the beggar population of Irulan, or find herself rearrested and condemned for life this time.

As she stared at Lana before leaving, she realised that perhaps that was the only thing she could hope for, to become a bent, galley hag again, as the rest of Irulan society would treat her as less than human for the remainder of her life.

“You have some knowledge of the galleys?”

Madame Tremaine’s voice snapped Elenna back into reality.

“I...” she looked across at Pylar. “No. I’ve never been a galley slave, if that’s what you mean.”

She saw the look that Tremaine gave Pylar then, understanding fully that Pylar had given her a full discourse of how he found her.

“But you were a prisoner, and a thief, so you know of... living in poor conditions and how merciless it must be.”

“I’ve seen my fair share of prisons, and rotted in chains a while, aye,” she remarked, looking across at Pylar herself. “Can’t say I’ve suffered as an oar slave, though I’ve seen women that have.” She lowered her voice as she said it.

“Ah, I see. Then you know what it can do to a woman. One who was condemned to some years then.”

Elenna’s eyes narrowed. What exactly was this noblewoman driving at?

“I have seen what the cruelties of forced, hard labour and the depredations of lash... and cock... can do,” she said, wondering if she might get a reaction from Lady Tremaine at her overt use of crudity. Instead, she heard a sharp intake of breath from Pylar. Lady Tremaine merely smiled.

“All the more reason then that you might help me, us, in a mission that needs to be accomplished.”

Pylar cleared his throat, expectant that the foremost thought in Elenna’s mind might soon be voiced.

“The reward, would be something that you might find to your liking,” he said, joining the conversation.”

“I’m not sure, my Lord. There’s quite a bit that I do not have that I might like.”

Pylar laughed, his shaking jowls helping to break the tension that had somehow developed over talk of galley slaves and condemned women.

“Do this thing,” he said, “and I will grant you land, and a title, and you will never have to fear capture, torture or imprisonment again. You might live... and love, as you choose.”

For the first time, and contrary to her training, she flinched. It was plain for all to see, that the statement had hit home. Pylar, of course, had realised exactly what might trip the deep set emotions of her past. She had loved a few men, though her and Pylar’s relationship had been... distant. She had known, of course, that he loved her but had chosen status over lowering his social sights to that of a gifted thief in his employ. He still held deep affection for her, she could tell, and, of course, he knew of the men that she had loved and yet had had to leave because of the dangerous nature of her work and the fact that they might become embroiled in the intrigue, thievery and violence to which she had become accustomed under the duke’s employ. But peerage? Nobility? At least she would free. Would she miss the life of danger that she had come to know? She doubted it.

“My Duke knows ever what it is that my mind sees in my preferred future, at least as I grow older,” she said.

“Indeed. You... always said that it was freedom through wealth that appealed to you most, as is the case with most,” he said sadly.

“Yet my Lord... my Lady,” she doffed her head curtly, “have not informed me as to the nature of this mission.”

Lady Tremaine nodded, spreading the goblets across the drawing of the galley in order to point out certain facets of its construction.

“It concerns my idiot brother,” she said. She sighed as if to accentuate her words.

“My brother is Lord Telmar of Brek. You probably haven’t heard of him. No matter. He is, to put it bluntly, an idiot.”

Elenna nodded politely. In reality she had heard of Mercenary Captain Telmar. His sister’s description was completely accurate.

“He has... had a mistress. A woman not of the nobility – a baker’s wife, in fact.”

Elenna raised one eyebrow quizzically, though felt sure that she knew where this

was going.

“The woman is called Sylvie Goras. She is pretty enough, though unremarkable in her own way. The issue, however, is that my brother found himself caught by his mistress’s husband. There was, of course, little that the man could do to a nobleman, no matter how minor. Arlosian law, however, does state that there is much that can be done, in relation to his wife.”

Tremaine cleared her throat, as if dismissing any latent emotion that might play into the words that might follow.

“Her husband is also the guild head in the city – the official guild head, of course, notwithstanding the influence your thieves’ guild might have.” Elenna smothered the smile that was starting to emerge at the naïve slight.

“He had her tried within the full extent of the law. She was stripped naked and put in chains as an adulteress, imprisoned and tried. She then received public beating and humiliation – forty strokes of the cane on the soles of the feet. Horrible, I’m sure you’ll agree, though her husband – a man who clearly had little feeling for her, used his influence and the full rigours of the law against his former wife.”

Elenna nodded in understanding. “She was condemned to the galley?” she added.

“Yes, she was. Ten years at the oar. Life, on reflection, might have been a mercy. Ten years gives one the hope of release, yet is so long that death in chains is more likely.”

“What age is she?” Elenna asked.

“She was over forty summers. My brother’s... predilections, are never predictable.”

“I see.” This time she clamped her teeth tightly against the anger that was emerging – and yet she was normally so in control of her emotions. Damned noblemen and their machinations – and now an innocent woman toiled in chains.

“And so where do I come in, Milady, and these drawings of the ship?”

She watched them pause before continuing.

“One does not simply walk onto a prison hulk and hope to rescue galley slaves,” she said purposefully.

“No, Elenna,” Pylar said. “We were hoping that you might have some ideas in that regard.”

All three of them gazed at the plans of the ship, the parchment a sickly yellow in the dancing light of the candles.

“I can see that you have questions,” Tremaine said. “Let me attempt to answer them.

“My brother... is the heir to our father’s domain. This, some would say unfortunately, places him in a position where his decisions regarding matters for the western alliance, permit him to curry favour. There are limits, however,” she sighed, as if in exasperation, “yet he has refused to comply with what would become a critical vote in the council chambers unless this request is met.”

Elenna almost laughed. “So his sexual proclivities must be sated before he plays politics with, well, if you’ll excuse my term, Milady, those who ‘you’ would wish to manipulate?”

Tremaine’s smile was forced in response, as she nodded slowly.

The discourse that followed was somewhat informal, especially when one considered that it was with a former thief – to all intents and purposes a criminal who might find herself condemned to the galley herself, or worse, had she been caught in some of the regions and principalities within which she had worked. Elenna tried not to think of such things as she discussed aspects of the galley design.

“The fact is that you don’t know where this woman is chained; at which bench she pulls the oar. Look, you can see how the oar benches are fashioned. There are three tiers– the women sitting on the curved wooden ribs that make up the shape of the hull. They’re scarcely benches at all.”

She paused, her mind wandering to consider just what it would be like to sit chained in the hellish hold. She could see how the drawing outlined a catwalk

that traversed the length of the lower deck – the rowing deck, from stern to prow. She shuddered as she imagined overseers with whips who would walk the raised area, savagely whipping those women who either did not keep sufficient rhythm, or who they simply wanted to be cruel to.

“We can give you a description. In fact, my brother commissioned a portrait to be painted.”

Tremaine snapped her fingers as a guard moved to one side and lifted a rolled-up length of canvas, unfurling it further down the table.

The artist had rendered a suitably detailed piece, even if the apprehension on the woman’s face showed through in his reproduction of her. She seemed strong; perhaps as Tremaine had alluded to, being to wife of the city’s guild baker, she had conceivably seen a life of labour and drudgery, helping her husband at all hours of the day and night. It was little wonder that the attraction of a minor noble, no matter how unseemly, would have seemed a better option for her.

She also noted that the woman in the portrait was nude. There was a birthmark under her right breast, which made her quite distinctive however.

“You note the birthmark. It’s how you might recognise her,” Tremaine added.

“Aye, she’ll have been branded on that breast – her years of service. A large ten.”

Pylar canted his head, though Tremaine never caught his gaze.

“You know something of these things?”

“I was never a galley slave, if that’s what you mean,” she said slowly, “though I’ve seen what happens to women there. She might even live for ten years in that hell, though the woman that emerges from chains will not be the same person.”

“All the more reason why my brother wants... would like to have her rescued.”

“And with his voice in court, you might achieve more of your... aims, Milady?”

She nodded imperceptibly, as Elenka realised that she had not only perhaps gone too far, but had also hit the mark with regard to her own part in all of this. Tremaine could have had her taken away, stripped and chained in some dank

dungeon, then publicly whipped in the town square, for her words, yet Elenna knew that Pylar's influence was too great, and in addition, they needed her to rescue her brother's mistress.

"It won't be easy getting onboard," she said, looking at Pylar this time.

"No, Elenna. That is why I employ the best," he smiled.

She could sense Tremaine's displeasure as their eyes locked. In fact, she knew that Tremaine's permission for this little mission to continue was dictated more by the requirement for her brother's compliance in whatever political negotiations they were to be a party to. She would undoubtedly have preferred not to have her husband once more have contact with a woman who appeared, at least on the surface, to be a former lover.

She simply smiled back at him.

"There is one way." Tremaine interrupted the moment.

"Yes, there is," Elenna echoed, tracing a finger along the galley deck.

Tremaine continued, "Obviously there would be difficulties inherent in your getting onboard, in your current guise, then getting the woman unlocked from her chains, in the midst of other chained women, then getting off the ship again."

"Of course," Elenna remarked. Tremaine had clearly seen the issue. It was all very well getting onboard. She could swim in the vile waters near Arlos, board the vessel, slip past the guards – all without incident. Once she got to the galley deck, however, there would be hundreds of women, all locked in chains, all wanting to be freed, and all clamouring for said freedom. It would be difficult to firstly find the baker's wife, and then nigh impossible to free her without incident.

"Our issue is that we have no agents aboard the vessel. It is run by the guild of prisons, who are..." she sighed, "somewhat difficult to deal with. Port Gaol is one thing, but this prison hulk, quite another. They take their incarceration of prisoners quite seriously in Arlos.

"Though, as I say, we can get you onboard."

“Aye,” Elenna remarked, slowly looking up, “as a slave.”

Tremaine nodded, realising that the other woman had been thinking along the same lines. It was Pylar who had been seemingly slower on the uptake.

“What? I don’t understand? Elenna would be a slave? A galley slave?”

“It’s the only manner in which she might gain easy access to the prison hulk and, indeed, determine where the baker’s wife is chained, before escaping.”

“Wait. These things are designed to be inescapable for prisoners. Isn’t that the whole point?” Pylar grunted, exasperated, as if only he could see the obvious flaw in the plan that both women seemed to be agreeing upon.

“Yes, my love.” The words seemed forced as Tremaine uttered them. Elenna was reminded of how a marriage of convenience might sound. “But as you have pointed out, you know Elenna of old, and how effective she can be.”

Elenna nodded. “You know if anyone can be put in chains as a galley slave and escape, I can... my Lord.”

“Yes, my... Elenna.” He cast a furtive glance at Tremaine as he said it. “You... imagine that you can escape?” he said.

“For my freedom, for nobility, a chance at a real life? Yes, I think I can.” She had not meant to say the words, to let the mask of emotionless impassivity that she had been taught to put up, slip so easily – yet she had done it, and both Tremaine and Pylar had noted it. She realised as she saw the impact of her words that even the guards had noticed that moment of honest clarity!

Chapter 3

“We have enough contacts to have you placed on the hulk as a prisoner, though it won’t be either an easy journey or an enjoyable one. Are you certain that you can remember her face? The baker’s wife?”

“Yes, of course,” Elenna said, surveying the lower levels of the citadel to which she had been taken. Like most prisons, there was a latent odour of urine, shit and fear in the air.

“You never did tell me her name.”

Pylar had left them now. Elenna was not sure whether it was because of some task of nobility that had to be performed or because he did not want to see her naked in front of his wife to be. Either way, part of her was glad that he was not there – though she could not quite fathom the reasons behind her thoughts.

Tremaine paused. “Her name is Sylvie Goras. You can remember her features, her details, from the painting? You’re certain that you’ll be able to identify her?”

“I’m certain. You mentioned on the way down here that your man will be able to attach fetters that can be removed... by me, that is?”

“Yes. Petros is one of the better smiths in the city and is dedicated to the works of the citadel. He will be able to do what you ask.” She paused. “Of course, you realise that you will have to suffer a brand. There is little that can be done about that.”

Elenna remained silent. She realised that in order for the ruse to work at all, she would indeed have to be branded, to be made to look like a woman who had been sentenced to the galley for real, at least in terms of the mark that her body might receive. It would be something that could not subsequently be removed. She asked herself once more whether the price of being ‘freed’ in terms of being made nobility, was worth receiving a galley brand, which she, and indeed her future lovers, might see upon her body.

At the back of her mind, still, was the gnawing suspicion that what she was

doing was wrong – completely wrong, even if it did mean that she would be able to rise above her career as a thief, her allegiance to the guild, that she would become more than she had ever hoped to be, in fact. She ground her teeth as she smelt the palpable stink of the dungeons and neared the heat of the torture chamber, where the smith had prepared the chains and brands. No, she resolved. She would go through with it.

* * * * *

The torture chamber stank of sweat and fear. Elenna tried not to look at the long, stained rack in the corner, and the tall, four legged, wooden horse that dominated the centre of the room – on which victims would ride the narrow triangular edge while tied in place.

The smith was a large, bald man – somewhat characteristic of all of the smiths she had ever met. That did not make it any easier for her to strip in front of him. He was, of course, confused by the entire affair.

“So... Milady. This woman is to be chained – with these special fetters – and branded as a galley slave, though she is, uh... not a galley slave. Do I understand... right?”

“Yes, Petros,” Tremain said, watching Elenna slowly remove her clothing.

Elenna’s heart was pounding. At least, if she had really been sentenced to serve years aboard the galley, it might have been easier. Still, having a choice, of sorts, simply made the decision to proceed more agonising.

“Have you thought of how many ‘years’ you might be... serving?” Tremain asked stoically, her serious face betraying no emotion in the situation where an innocent woman was about to be branded and effectively sentenced, at least in the short term, for a crime she had not committed.

“Let’s go with three,” Elenna replied, her voice remaining stern and showing no sign of nervousness. Her training and experience had helped to alleviate any such concerns. Tremain nodded in assent, and indicated to Petros that he should

proceed.

“She should be chained, Mistress.” The strange nature of the situation was obviously confusing the smith, who was more used to helping the torturer heat irons or move prisoners for torment, or making the chains and contrivances which the torturer might use to aid his dark arts.

Elenna gave the smith a look and he visibly recoiled, his movement akin to the natural reaction at sensing the presence of an acid trap at the last moment.

“I... I mean, if she allows it... it’s a precaution, Milady.” He seemed afraid to address Elenna directly now. “In case, well... she’ll struggle. Her natural reaction will be to push away the brand. It’s impossible to resist it.”

“I think you’ll find I’ll be fine.”

Elenna had removed her boots and tunic, and stood barefoot on the cold cobbles as she undid her blouse, pulling it away and leaving it with the other clothes on a nearby bench, still apparently stained with dried blood. Tremaine watched as the confident woman, apparently not affected by the fact that she was stripping herself naked, aware that she was about to be branded, stripped away her treads. She continued, reduced to loincloth and halter, which she quickly removed, then moved to stand beside the hot brazier with heating irons, her feet slightly apart as she placed her hands behind her blond haired head and laced her fingers together, moving her head back slightly.

The nervous smith sorted through the heated irons, searching for the numbers he had made for the end of irons, drool forming on his lips as he tried to quell his loins’ reaction to the naked woman standing in front of him. This was unheard of. Usually, women were chained or locked in the rack, or chair, or splitter, and he could watch the tormentor work on them. But his mind could not get around what was happening on this occasion.

“Are... you sure she shouldn’t be chained, Milady?” he said nervously, conscious that this strong looking wench might strike him as he branded her.

“Get on with it, Petros. Her right breast. The number three.” She sighed, pointing to Elenna’s rounded breast as she realised that the smith had trouble telling left from right at the best of times, never mind when he was facing the object of his less than agile mind’s calculation as to the distinction, and therefore might have

to put more thought into his actions.

Elenna stared forward, her mind disappearing into another place, focusing on other planes and realities, in order to avoid the agony of what was coming.

It was several seconds before she heard the terrible screech and realised that it came from her.

* * * * *

She had lain in the straw near one of the cells for a time, before realising that the branding was complete. Her breast was in agony. She started to rise, staring into the cell in front of her, aware still of the presence of Tremaine and the smith behind her. She realised too that the dark cell in front of her, presumably a holding area for those under torment, was occupied.

She stared at the eyes that looked back at her from the corner of the dark cell for a moment, relieved that the situation was not reversed and she did not await torment at the hands of the smith's colleague.

She stood and turned, looking down at the large number on her breast, marked in order to show how many years she would serve on the terrible galley prison hulk. Had she been a real slave, she could have expected an oar brand on her thigh upon each year that she remained in chains, until someone had noticed that she had three. She wondered idly if slaves had to then beg for release, or whether cruel overseers or equally unscrupulous captains even cared.

“Now, the fetters. Explain to her, Petros.”

She walked forward, shuddering a little in the cool air as the smith proudly lifted his latest work from the bench where her clothes still lay.

“Most of the fetters that are fitted to galley slaves have a hot rivet put in place, which then seals the ankles into the fetter... so that they can't get out. The fetters have a ring on them, so that the galley chain can be looped through to secure them to the deck.”

“Yes, yes, Petros. Show her why these fetters are different.”

The smith swallowed nervously and continued.

“They... I have made them look like the real thing, Milady... but see...” he pushed a small clasp on the underside of the fetter and it clicked open. She can release herself, Milady.”

Elenna smiled. The smith still seemed reticent, if not afraid, to speak directly to her. She reached for the fetters, taking them from the smith’s thick fingered, shaking hands, and kneeling down to snap one around her ankle before testing its release mechanism.

“They seem fine.” She clicked the second chain into place, before releasing both and replacing them, wincing as her body’s movement brought on the fiery sting of the brand in her flesh once more.

“Here, the lockpick you requested.”

The small, straight pin-like device flexed a little as Elenna accepted it, then she pushed it deep into her hair near the scalp, using a short hook at its end to fasten it against her hair before closing a small clasp with her nail, so that it could be obtained at a later date.

“What if it falls out?” Tremaine asked.

“It won’t. I’ll make certain of it. Unless they shave my head, that is?”

“No. They don’t take the time to do that on the prison hulks – not worthwhile, apparently. Were you being purchased as a slave and worth something to a merchant captain, the situation might be different.”

Elenna nodded. “I won’t lose it.”

“Now, as we discussed,” Tremaine said, “the galley travels along the coast, then back through the Telos canal, before returning to Arlos. That’s a month’s round trip. It would be best if you can wait that long and thus escape in Arlos. If that’s not possible, then there are other ports that may prove opportune, but remember, you must bring her back to Arlos and the citadel.”

Elenna nodded. “I understand.”

“Fine,” Tremaine said. “The next step is to have you placed with the women condemned to the oar. Please replace the fetters, Petros...”

* * * * *

It was the smell that woke Elenna from her slumbers. Her eyes snapped open and the chains at her feet rattled. Some of the women moaned, and she heard a distant cough and splutter from the darkness of the foul dungeon. The chain that connected all of the unfortunate women together was looped through the right fetter of each woman. Someone had clearly thought (or at least considered) that the women would have to walk to the galley in their chains, and thus running said chain through the same fetter on each prisoner would make the movement more efficient. She considered the strangeness of her first thought upon awakening, forgetting for a moment that she was naked, in chains and lying on a filthy dungeon floor with ten or more similarly condemned women (at least as far as appearances were concerned).

Having said that, she had not really been sleeping – at least, she had not felt her mind drift away into dreaming. It had been so long since she had. She drew her chained legs to her chest and huddled them for a little warmth. She had been on her guard for so long, drifting between constant wakefulness and just enough to let her body rest, but it had been many years since she had truly slept. But was that not what all of this was about? A chance to get out of the world of thievery and adventure, to settle down, perhaps to take a lover...

Her thoughts were disturbed by a noise of the jailor at the cell door.

“Move away there, wenches... if you want water, that is...”

The hunchbacked and overweight man at the barred door pushed a long key into the rusty lock. It squeaked as it slowly turned. She saw some of the women lick their lips in anticipation of water. As she watched them, she could see the numbers branded into their breasts: a five, a ten, a three like her. Images of how they might look, even if they were to survive their term, flashed through her

mind. She was lucky. Despite her brand, she had a way out, a means of gaining escape from the oar slavery that would befall these others. Part of her wanted to save them, but the emotionless part of her that was required in order to do her job, dismissed the idea instantly. Was that not how she had been trained? Establish the mission parameters and deal with them, to the exclusion of all other people and, more importantly, all sentiment. No. She would rescue the baker's wife, get off the galley by the time it docked in Arlos again – or sooner – and have the promise that Pylar had made honoured. A pang of emotion gnawed at her. She had not really spoken with him before she had been taken to the dungeons to have her mock fetters put on and be placed in chains. She looked at the fetters around feet that had already been mired by the filth that covered the dungeon floor. She could see the catch on them that would allow her to escape, find the woman, and get off the galley. It all sounded so simple. She would, of course, have to free Sylvie and thus needed a means of picking the chain lock at the hull and...

“Move, wench!” Her thoughts were interrupted by the jailor pushing his way in with a bucket of water – a film of scum decorating its top and the rim of the container that held it. He kicked at her leg with a thick boot, as she yelped and jerked back to the wall, disturbing a puddle that had been left in a convenient depression in the cobbled floor by the woman beside her. Thoughts of the Riverwake Tower flooded back to her mind. The stench was similar here, yet the distant screams, sobs and moans were strangely less distinct and unnerving.

The jailor was despicable, and looked – at least from the poor light from the torch outside – as if half his face had been burnt off at some point. Elenna thought it might have something to do with his attitude as he kicked at the women.

“Now, you wenches get water... one ladle each, mind.”

Instinctively Elenna looked at the door, which he had left open. Two armed guards stood there. The chain that linked them all had a heavy ball at each end, so there was little chance at escape should any of the others desire it. Even should they decide to attack the jailor, the guards would soon put paid to any actions. The women hovered thirstily around the creature who commanded dominion and ultimately survival over them. One older woman licked dry lips as she sat up on her knees. The chain pulled through the links of the fetters savagely as each woman vied for attention and water.

“Please... please... I need water,” one woman said. A redhead – her build and skin suggested that she was descended from the northern barbarian tribes, though she had been whipped and showed some signs of torture. They had clearly beaten the resistance from her, and though she had been strong, her early days in the galley would be hard.

The jailor slapped at her, clipping the side of her head as the chains rattled and the women pulled away, lest his anger should be vented on them too. “Wait your turn, wench!” he barked, slobbering from the side of his mouth as he stared at her with his one good eye and laughed.

Elenna made her way forward. There were no bowls, and each woman took what she could in her cupped hands, concentrating on keeping as much water in filthy hands as possible, so that she could drink. Scuffles broke out amongst the women as they tried to make sure that the water would not run out before they made it. Elenna moved slowly at first, moving herself between scuffles as she neared the bucket. She reached it lithely and dipped her hands into the cold water, cupping them and withdrawing the cold liquid, holding her hands up amongst the maelstrom of thirsty and anxious women.

She moved through them quickly, moving away from the panicking throng, toward the red-haired barbarian who sat disconsolate against the wall. By now, however, the tangle of chain acted against her and she shunted forward as it tugged – the tangle being pulled into the storm of panicking slaves.

She nodded to the barbarian.

“Here, drink, before I lose it.”

The redhead stared, wide-eyed for a second, before realising that one woman in this godforsaken dungeon was actually trying to help her. She moved forward into the poor light – the tangle of chain making her movements awkward.

Elenna could see now that she bore no brand on her breast – even though her strong body did bear the marks of the whip and torture with hot irons. She winced – wondering what information they had wanted from her. Then she saw it. She had already noted that the barbarian’s breast had not been branded – at least, not with a number, and as Elenna looked up she saw why. The barbarian’s wild red hair parted to one side as she moved, revealing the large ‘L’ that had been branded on her forehead. She was a lifer – condemned forever to the oar –

at least as long as she lived.

She nodded her thanks as she took the filthy, brackish water from Elenna's hands.

"My name is Kariss," she gasped between slurps.

"Elenna," she nodded, as the din began to settle and the jailor summoned the guards to get the women back to their places, wondering if he would have to untangle the chains that tethered them together.

* * * * *

The slow, dismal coffle moved slowly, though the naked women in chain were encouraged through judicious use of the thick lash that the guards around them used. Each step renewed the weight of the chain pulling on their ankles, just as each step resounded across the cobbles of the city street as the condemned wound their way to their destiny, one of the foul prison galley hulks of Arlos.

They were jeered by elements of the crowd with each step, especially, Elenna noticed, by townswomen of every ilk, who shouted and threw rotten fruit at them. In their dresses or smocks, those same women, she considered, were only a minor crime away from being in her position themselves. Did they really think themselves so superior that they were beyond reproach and the reach of Arlosian authorities? She decided not to dwell on such things, clad as she was only in the fetters of captivity (albeit hers were somewhat escapable) and the filth of the dungeon from which she had been released that morning.

She estimated that there were thirty of them, and that they had been joined by the occupants of another dungeon, two long coffles of desperate women on their way to the hell of the galley.

She moved her arms up to huddle herself. There was a breeze blowing in from the sea, cooling the air. One of the guards noticed the motion – as it attracted his attention. She heard the lash unfurl even as he moved to whip her. Every reflex in her body was ready to turn and catch the whip as it fell, turn it, pull him off

balance before delivering a blow from her knee into his midriff – though she realised that such an act would reveal her intent – part of who she really was – and so she did nothing.

“EAHHHHH!”

She cried out as the heavy whip landed squarely across her upper back. Another lash to cover the older scars from her whipping so many years ago and, she suspected, the first of many new marks.

“Move, wench. Stop wasting time.”

She nodded dutifully, shuffling onward through the city puddles, playing the at least partially broken prisoner – soon to be a galley slave – to the best of her ability. She twisted as the fire of the lash stung her back, eating up the pain as her mind focused elsewhere, as the guard turned his attentions, and whip hand, toward some other naked wretch.

The attentions of the local populace diminished, as she recognised that the streets along which they were now being paraded led to the docks. She could smell it anyway, even without having to realise where she was, as the shambling line of the condemned rattled their way toward the line of ships.

Familiar smells of sea and the stink of poorly kept galley slaves greeted her nostrils as they got close, ever closer to their destiny. She looked down at herself, naked, chained and fettered – a large ‘3’ dominating her right breast, where it had been branded with her term. Her mind kept telling her that she would not be serving those three years, that she would be away within a few weeks, possibly less time if she could see a way off the hulk with her charge.

The stink of the docks grew stronger. The heat of the air and the humidity were stifling, and the smell reminded her of badly kept stables along some country road somewhere in the empire. It brought back memories of freedom, of missions for patrons that had gone well, and not so well. She had seen prisons, chains and the cruel intent of guards and jailors before, but this was different. Even though she only pretended to be a prisoner – a galley slave, it felt very real, especially when the thick leather of the whip landed across her back or legs.

She tensed and yelped, as if the guard who had been standing near had been reading her thoughts, welting her hard across the lower back with the strand of

the lash that he held.

“Keep moving!”

The chains rattled, as the hobbled and pathetic women marched barefoot to their doom.

* * * * *

It was the size of the galley that made Elenna gasp. She could tell from the outside that it was a massive hulking vessel. She had even been able to tell that from the spidery drawings on the parchment showing the plans that she had seen back at the citadel. Being inside the hot, humid and stinking wooden vessel, however, was a different experience entirely.

The women, still chained in coffle, were led down rickety wooden steps, each step covered with wet mud of some nature. The stench of the galley deck hit their senses like a hammer-blow, stunning them momentarily, as if their brains had to forcibly make their lungs inhale, the strength of the stench being strong enough perhaps to make the body shut down if care was not taken to try and survive the sensual onslaught.

The coffle was slowly marched up the deck, the end of the chain being unlocked to release the women and force them into their slots at certain benches. Further up the deck, Elenna could see that women were being unchained from positions with a view to their being replaced. In many cases, they were old, bent and haggard, crying out at being moved, protesting that they could ‘still row’ in harsh, weak voices. She wondered what terrible fate might face them if the threat of being removed from the oar made them want to protest and stay longer in the position that would make them suffer further.

The wooden boards of the catwalk were wet and slimy under her bare, chained feet. She could make out movement underneath the boards, and as she stared downward she realised that there were women held in the hull, underneath the deck. She walked over a steel grille and gathered further evidence to that effect, as shivering wretches looked back at her. Perhaps being held down there was

worse than being at the oar. As her eyes adjusted to the poor light, in a deck lit only by the sunlight coming through the oar apertures, she saw how badly off the prisoners actually were. There were three successive tiers of rowers. In each case, the oars were thick and heavy, and bearing in mind that only one woman powered each one, she reasoned that the vessel would neither gather much speed nor would it be easy to row in such conditions, with such a heavy load.

She winced as she saw the condition of the women. The highest tier sat well up the hull, upon makeshift ribs that supported the structure and could not be called a 'bench' by any stretch of the imagination. She realised that the timber benches were in fact simple sections of the hull timbers, cut such that a narrow seat, jutting out from the side of the hull, was thus created. It would make for an uncomfortable seat. As she stared at them, however, she restrained herself from wanting to retch. Though some were worse than others, all had telltale marking of slurry and dampness that had slithered down the backs of the timber – the waste products of the decrepit slave rowers.

Her attention was focused, however, as the shuffling prisoners, most of whom were still trying not to vomit at the smell, the conditions, and a stark vision of their own futures, were urged forward with some lashes from an overseer.

“Move, wench... you’ll be put to work soon. Time to serve your sentences for your wrongdoing.”

She grunted and clenched her teeth as the fiery sting of his whip landed hard across her own back. The first of many, she suspected, hoping that he would not notice...

“Wait. Ah... this one has suffered the lash before.”

She felt him grab her shoulder and pull her back. He was strong, and her immediate reaction was to start to raise her hands in order to break a finger, then an arm – before remembering that she had a role, a mission on this ship of the damned. She was, to all intents and purposes, a prisoner and a galley slave, the non-regulation fetters that she wore on her ankles notwithstanding. It was poor fortune that this keen eyed overseer had noticed her strokes in the gloom and singled her out.

She gasped as he moved his hand and grabbed her hair.

“You’ve seen the lash before, wench?”

“Aye,” she grunted. “You think I got put on the galley because I’d been an honourable citizen?”

Damn, she had said too much.

“Oh? This one has a mouth on her. We’ll have to keep an eye on it, when it’s not sucking my cock.”

Grabbing her by the hair he pulled her toward one of the lower tier benches. She could see the vile liquid muck of the bilge water and the rusting chains lying in it, in the area where her feet would sit. The narrow bench itself was covered in the dried waste of the previous occupant. As if responding to the nodded request of the overseer who held her, the guards started to pull the chain through the rings of the fetters of the women in front of her, so that she might be released. It seemed that she had found her place, and she had not even determined where the woman Sylvie – the baker’s wife and the nobleman’s mistress who she had come here to free, could be found.

She clenched her teeth as, now free from the chain, the overseer manhandled her by the hair toward the bench. She had already attracted too much attention. Now this man would focus upon her and she would have to appear to be broken quickly. She moved hands toward his hand where he pulled at her scalp. Under other circumstances, she would have killed him where he stood, but, she reminded herself, she could earn her own freedom if she played her part.

Chapter 4

He whipped her savagely after she had been chained in place. She set her jaw, waiting for another lash, which never came. She gripped the thick oar as he had told her, then yelped as the heavy whip fell across her naked back and yelped again and again with each blow. Another overseer had fed the rotting chain through the rings in her fetters and locked it in place on the side of the hull. She sat close to the bench of the next rower above her to her left, whose encrusted bench she could smell. The woman was exhausted, and shuddered at her oar as the odd whipstroke from the overseer who was determined to see Elenna broken before she even started to row, caught her across the thigh or rump with its tip. Even then, she did not complain, simply accepting what was part of the life of a galley slave. As she bent and screeched with the lashes, Elenna noticed a '10' branded into her neighbour's breast, noting also that she bore three oar marks on her thigh, and debating whether the poor wretch would ever see her ten years served.

During her flogging, the woman stayed stock still, afraid that noting the fact that she had been struck herself, however accidentally, might lend credence to further action being taken against her. In this simple action (or lack of it) on the part of the prisoner beside her, Elenna saw how one might appear as a broken and subservient galley slave.

Elenna stared forward and let the overseer show her what it meant to be lashed, letting her mind go to a place where the pain was simply a physical thing, as she had done long ago when she had been whipped in the Riverwake Tower. As she lay across the oar, naked and sweating, gasping from her beating, she heard him approach across the deck, reflexively moving her chained feet in the filth of the bilge.

“And now I'll show you what a galley slave must do to please her overseer.”

Elenna could almost feel the sense of relief from the rowers around her, thanking the goddess that she was the one selected and not them. As she gradually started to recover from the sting of the burning lashes across her back, he stood at her side, loosening the cord that secured his trows, pulling out his long, and now erect cock.

“Now, wench. Time for you to earn your keep. I have you for three years. I want to ensure that you’ll be able to satisfy me. Begin.”

She slowly turned her head to the long member in front of her face, the chains rattling as she moved. Her back was still on fire from the whip. Her mind was telling her to grab his cock, twist it, get out of her false fetters and run, but then the mission would be a failure. No, she had to endure.

She licked gingerly at the cock as he gasped and started to writhe, then used both hands to play gently with it, not daring to look up lest the motion might provoke a further flogging, then she enclosed the head with her mouth slowly taking it in until it met the back of her throat and she gagged. She felt his hands grip her hair and force to take more, moving her head as he thrust into her face, grunting.

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Satisfying the overseer took some time. He had insisted that one of the overseers come to sample this new slave before the oars were put to water and the galley made to move. Elenna was exhausted and still tender from the lash by the time she had finished. Her mouth ached, and the taste of their seed filled it. Indeed, droplets of it covered her breasts and thighs. Some animalistic part of her had yearned for them to touch her sex. They had, in fact, commented that she had moved her legs together instinctively and writhed slightly during her service of their cocks. She was unsure whether the motions had been part of the role that she was required to play, or her sexual instinct reacting to the knowledge that although she satisfied the overseers, she would receive nothing in return for her actions. Despite what the overseers desired, they were expressly forbidden to have intercourse with the prisoners. That would have meant multiple pregnancies, and a prison ship full of pregnant rowers was not something that the authorities could either condone or cater for. Hence the penalties for having sex with one of their charges were severe, up to and including being condemned to die on a cross.

No, she reasoned, as their seed dried on her belly, it was perhaps enough that they could have their pick of mouths to satiate the lust in their cocks – enough for them, at any rate.

* * * * *

The pace of the rowing was harsh. Elenna had put on some weight in recent years and certainly was less agile and fit than she had once been. She was somewhat unused to heavy labour, though she still bore a deep resilience to exhaustion. This did not help her much, however. The action of the oar was controlled by a drumbeat, such that she would brace her bare feet against the hull beam in front of her, ankle deep in the mire of the bilge as the chain stirred its contents – then use her body and the pushing action of her legs to pull back on the oar, then push down and forward, let the oar fall again, before pulling once more. Each movement was controlled by the deep thud of a drum somewhere in the semi darkness of the stern. The rowers would either follow the drumbeat – dip, raise, push, pull – or be flogged until they got the rhythm and adequately followed the BOOM of the distant drum. It was a system that meant the ragged and filthy women moved in moaning unison, parts in a terrible flesh and chain machine.

She closed her eyes as she pulled the heavy oar against the waters of Arlos's main canal. The oar was thick and difficult to control, due to its own weight and length. It was as if the weight and unwieldy nature was in itself designed to add to the torturous work that a prisoner had to perform on the stinking hulk, as if thoughts of rowing efficiency and speed were seen as secondary to the requirement of punishment, torture and exhaustion of the captive.

In her first hour of drudgery and labour, Elenna tried to pace herself, though she found it difficult. With her age and the weight she had put on in recent years, her endurance had been reduced somewhat, though she suspected that she was doing better than any poor baker's wife. She reminded herself why she was there, grunting as her legs locked, feet pushing against the unyielding wood of the hull base, trying to avoid the disgusting waters of the bilge and ensuring that only her heels dipped into it.

Being in the lower tier also meant that she was regularly used by the overseers. In fact, at times during her rest period, a short queue developed, each of the pathetic men wanting to have their lusts sated by the new and as yet clean and

smooth, mouth and throat of a new slave.

She wanted to release herself from the fetters and kill these bastards when they had their backs turned, yet she held on.

* * * * *

Elenna had been rowing for ten days. She had been careful to calculate where they were – or at least where she thought they were in terms of the coastal map of Arlos and the surrounding regions – based on the relative speed of the vessel. She estimated that they had pushed south, along the coast, and indeed she had been able to see the coastline and villages as they passed toward the end of the hook of land that dominated the southern part of the western continent. The temperature steadily grew as they headed south. The barge was so massive that it made little speed, and she was concerned at first that pirate fleets might find interest in the cargo that the prison hulk carried – whatever it might be. She reminded herself, however, that the barge was filled with armed parties of men and women – mercenaries from the citadel. She could see, at times, female archers looking down through the deck grille at her and the other rowers, their faces masked for the most part, yet she was sure that they watched for two main reasons. The first, she considered, obvious, that the women – used to supporting charges or defending larger groups of troops – would not wish to be stripped naked, have their feet placed in heavy chains, and whipped to force them to row until exhausted, then have large cocks forced into their mouths, and punished when they did not comply with the overseers' wishes to suck them dry. Secondly though, she believed that some dark part of them wanted to know, however paradoxically, what it might be like.

Ten days had also been enough to give her the look of the galley slaves with whom she shared the oar. A mixture of dirt and congealed sweat covered her naked body, whose muscles strained under the relentless pressure of rowing. She grunted with the others during the pull, closing her eyes and letting her head fall backward, giving in to the rigours of the effort. Her hands were blistered, as were the balls of her bare feet, consistent with the rowing action and the force of pushing against the timbers in the sodden bilge.

The lashmarks of days punctuated the filth across her body. The overseer who had first forced his cock into her mouth had considerable experience in driving the women to new heights of desperate exhaustion, in their efforts to stay with the unremitting beat of the drum. He had used the long handled, single-tailed lash to whip her across the back as she bent forward before the pull, then across her thighs or breasts as she pulled with the others. His methods ensured that parts of her body – upper back, upper part of breasts where the brand stood out, and the area from lower belly, across her sex and to the upper parts of her muscled legs – were mapped with welts, both light and a dull red, and heavy where the flesh stood out as a dark welt. She lost count of the number of times that she had wanted to wait until his back was turned, then unfasten the fetters from her feet, and stand up with a view to snapping his neck – though she knew that her moment had yet to arrive.

It was not until the eleventh day that she found the woman she had been seeking. She had first noticed that an overseer had been overusing the lash on a tall, rangy woman further up the deck but on the other side of the catwalk. She scarcely had time to consider the cruel whipping that the poor prisoner was receiving until she partially turned her head, in order to plead to the insidious bastard who laid abuse across her pale flesh – as Elenna grunted, pulling on the oar, feeling the cruel blisters that lined her hands pop as she tried not to break the rhythm and incur the wrath of ‘her’ overseer. She could not help but notice that she recognised the woman’s face, and beyond the fear and exhaustion of a condemned galley slave, was Sylvie Goras, the baker’s wife.

She had to contain her excitement. She had found her charge. The flaw, or at least the only potential flaw, in the whole desperate plan, had been that she might never find the woman – restricted in particular in this endeavour through the fact that she was effectively tethered in one place, and thus her hopes of finding Sylvie would be restricted to her current viewpoint through the relative darkness of the deck. She had not initially been concerned by the restriction, conscious of the fact that she, somehow, always found a way. Yet again, the opportunity for success in the mission, had presented itself to her, and she was able to proceed to the next step, fortunately – before her mind insisted that she do something about the man who was not only whipping her body savagely but was also force-feeding her his cock on a regular basis. Now, of course, was not the correct time to act in order to complete the mission, but, she reasoned to herself, her time would soon come.

She had watched while Sylvie was beaten – confirming during one twist of her body as she was whipped that there was a birthmark near her breast, and hoped that the fate that the overseers had discussed openly for her, would not occur. She could hear them discussing the ‘wooden horse’. Elenna had a good idea what the punishment might entail, having seen a contraption which would fit the description further up the deck, facing the rowers – matching the hideous device that she had seen in the citadel’s torture chamber. A long, rough saw log, which had been cut such that only a roughly triangular section, apex facing up, was supported by four sturdy wooden legs. She could guess by the staining across the apex that women were made to ride the foul object. She had seen similar punishment and torment before. Its practice on this foul vessel in addition to the toil and hard labour under a whip did not surprise her, since Arlosian justice, and its requisite cruelty, apparently knew no bounds.

Her tormentors had seen fit to change their minds, cruelly playing with her reason, and amidst her tears Elenna could see that it would not take long to break her. So, she had found her charge, and now the second stage of what was becoming a very risky plan, could be put into operation.

* * * * *

Elenna decided that it would take further time in chains, under the lash and servicing the overseers’ cocks, before she could ultimately make her move. She had closely studied the patterns of changeover, when tiers of exhausted women might be allowed a break, and the related patterns of overseer shift movement could be closely analysed. She had, unlike many of the other new slaves, not become a frenzied thing, begging for mercy, or constantly weeping at night. Instead, she had drawn new focus from discerning when the best time might be to act; indeed, it was this new enthusiasm – lending credence to the continued plan, that made her almost yearn for the lash, and eagerly suck the overseers when her time came, knowing that it would all soon come to an end.

On one occasion, as she had lowered her hand to touch her filthy sex while sucking an overseer’s cock, as her mind played tricks upon her and she sought her own pleasure, she had been cruelly whipped for her action, and told that it

was not permitted; at least, not while sucking an overseer. During one of the periods when both shifts were allowed to sleep, however, she had brought herself to climax and fulfilment.

Two days after she had first noted the location of the baker's wife, however, she was surprised at a sudden scuffling further behind her. She was rowing hard to the rhythm at that time, and hence there was little opportunity for her to look behind to witness the events.

After a time when clearly fighting had been going on, she was surprised to see a tall, muscled and badly lashed woman being dragged up the deck, toward the wooden horse. She realised quickly that it was the redhead who she had shown kindness to in the dungeon – the barbarian Kariss. She struggled, with some success, as she was led up the deck toward the wooden horse, cursing the existence of the strong overseers who held there, necessitating the intercession of a third who began beating her savagely with the oar whip. As Elenna continued to row obediently, ignoring the pain in her back and arms from the long shift, she noted how badly the barbarian had already been lashed. The leathery flesh of her strong back was already mapped with numerous, crisscrossing welts, as were her thighs and breasts. They had plainly made it their aim to break her with the lash, and as this had apparently not worked, her brusque defiance had now earned her some time on the wooden horse. Elenna suppressed a shudder, simply staring forward as she grunted at the strain of pulling to the drumbeat.

They made much of the effort of putting Kariss on the wooden horse, having to restrain her arms behind her back with thick ropes before two of the strongest men grabbed her under wet and filthy thighs, before spreading her legs and lifting her (even at that the strength of her thigh muscles threatened to snap shut and break the fingers of the men who held her legs apart). In the gloom, Elenna could see Kariss's feet, still wet and filthy from the bilge water, moving frantically as her splayed sex was slowly lowered onto the apex of the savage wooden horse. Elenna winced as the flesh contacted the ridge, and Kariss shouted in defiance as her weight was allowed to settle and her legs released. Her breasts wobbled as she struggled, her hands bound behind her, on the terrible punishment device. In order to prevent her using her bound hands to push against the wood behind her, and – despite its lack of effectiveness, attempt to push against the growing pressure upon her sex, the men tied a rope to her bonds, and pulled her arms up – securing the rope to a hook on the timbers above – thus, not only forcing her arms up and away from the device but also

driving her body and sex forward – thereby to ensure that the sensitive flesh was further crushed upon the horrible wooden peak.

“Damn you to the nine hells!” she hissed. “Damn you all!”

But, Elenna knew that it was Karris who was damned; damned to be punished upon the hellish wooden horse.

Knowing that it would take more than hours of straddling to finally break a strong barbarian, they dragged a wooden bucket – really half a wooden barrel – in front of her, before tying lengths of thick twine to rings at the top. They then moved the bucket beneath the horse while one of the overseers gripped an ankle tightly – allowing another to secure the twine around he largest toe – then the operation was repeated on her other foot, before the barrel was left to dangle, held aloft by Kariss’s feet. She struggled desperately. Elenna could see that even at this point, the barbarian was not sure what was going to happen next, until from somewhere, presumably in the ballast of the massive ship, large rocks – bigger than a hand – were produced. The overseers laughed as they began to fill the barrel, as Kariss hissed her defiance once more. That defiance was short lived, however, as the weight of the heavy stones began to take its toll on firstly her toes, then legs, then upon the sex which was splayed across the painful wooden apex of the horse, covered in old stains from previous victims, all of whom, Elenna reasoned, must ultimately have been broken on the foul device. She stared for a time, her concentration obviously slipping as the heavy whip fell across the small of her back as she dipped the oar.

“EAGHHHH!”

She heard the hiss of the overseer as he coiled the whip – still slick with the sweat of her back. He lowered his head so that she could clearly hear the words.

“Keep your concentration, wench, or you’ll end up on the horse suffering with her.”

* * * * *

A whole day and part of the next passed, while Kariss suffered on the awful torture device. Elenna could hear during the rest periods how she suffered and held back the tears as her womanhood was ground into the terrible apex – growing raw and more tender with each passing hour. From time to time, the overseers would drop more weight into the half barrel suspended from her toes, causing a groan at first, which fast became an agonised cry as time and the pressure upon her sex increased.

Elenna could see land outside the oarport on the morning of the next day, and despite the ache in her arms with the pull and the soles of her feet were becoming badly blistered because of the constant pushing upon mire soaked wood, she worked hard, eager to avoid more lashes that might weaken her further before the time came to move, use violence if necessary, and escape with the baker's wife – and be done with this foul vessel of harsh slavery and agony.

The hulk slowed as it neared port. She could hear gulls through the grille in the deck above, indicating that they were coming to a stop, no doubt to unload the cargo that the massive ship carried.

She had spent enough time on the vessel now to understand how things worked. As the ship came to port and was anchored, some of the stronger slaves – and those who were freshest, were released from their chains of bondage and headed toward the deck above. These, she reasoned – her belief echoed by the sounds of driving whips above – were used to help unload the cargo at the dock. She could roughly establish their position along the coast, based on the length of time that she had been at the oar and – again roughly – through the speed that she supposed the many pairs of hard, blistered hands and chained feet had managed to attain while travelling through the coastal waters from Arlos.

Working frantically, and at speed while her naked body moved in rhythm, her buttocks splayed across the uncomfortable and sodden timber of the makeshift bench upon which she laboured, her thoughts began to focus on what might happen next. Were the ship to anchor for a period of one day, or even longer, her opportunity to end the mission would present itself rapidly. There would be long periods when the overseers would let the slaves rest and sleep, and the same men would also want to leave the ship to seek taverns, wenches and other proclivities which were best left to their own dark imaginations. She had opted against Tremaine's earlier suggestion of staying aboard for a month. Despite her own qualities of determination, she now knew that she would not have the

temperament for it.

To that end, she could release her feet from the chains at night, pick the locks of the woman she was here to rescue, and be gone over the side with her before any might notice. She had checked to ensure that the lockpick was still locked in place. She would not fail.

The ship was anchored now, and a collective moan from the exhausted rowers was punctuated only by the cries of the barbarian on the wooden horse. A cruel overseer dropped a heavy rock into the half barrel, then added to Kariss's discomfort by delivering twelve hard lashes of the oar whip across her breasts, each stroke successively harder until he obtained loud screams from the trapped woman.

Part of Elenna felt deeply for the poor woman, but there was nothing that she could do now. Events had been, and would be, set in motion to ensure her own escape from this hellship and to ensure her own secure future.

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Elenna pretended to sleep for a while, as other slaves tried to make their areas, and themselves, cleaner. Other women, especially the older, more decrepit ones, had simply half collapsed across their bench, some in exhaustion, others in a dulled stupor, staring into the middle distance, like animals in cages. As Elenna waited for her moment, she realised that that was what they had become. The horrible years of servitude and cruelty had made them automatons, knowing that death in naked slavery would be the only thing that would set them free from bondage.

She snapped her eyes open. She had been lying against the bench and the warm leg of the woman to her side, who moved her bare, chained foot suddenly. Elenna winced at the long, black nails, made horrible from years of service on the galley, and looked forward at what had alerted her. A group of men were descending the steps into the lower deck. Elenna recognised some of the overseers, even a couple of the guards, but there were officers of the Arlsoian guard – dressed in the same fashion as Pylar's mercenaries had been and, she

noticed, another man in a cowl – whose face she could not see because of both his cloak, and the pale light.

Her danger sense was screaming inside her head – something was wrong. The appearance of two of Pylar’s mercenaries was enough to indicate that her plan was about to hit what she had called in the past, a ‘variable’. But she was naked, tired, whipped and chained. She moved forward, her slow motion not betraying enough to suggest that she had noticed anything awry. The gathering of men, including the hooded one, were moving toward her now. One of the overseers met them, discussed something in hushed tones, and then pointed directly at her. She shifted her centre of gravity slightly further forward, moving a filthy, blistered hand toward the release mechanism on the thick fetter that encased her right ankle – made raw by the constant rubbing of the steel on her flesh. She did not have much time.

There was a slight click as she actuated the release. She brushed her hand across the second fetter, but the overseer and guards were at her oar station before she could release it. In an instant her mind took in the nature of the men standing beside her. There were two mercs, both with hands on swords, and the overseer, who coiled the lash in his hand as he stared.

“This is the one you seek. She’s a good mouth on her. Is she to leave us?” He smiled as he spoke. Elenna stared forward. She had time, perhaps, to release her other foot... but then...

The overseer nodded to two of his companions.

“Bind her arms – release the chain through the fetters. She’s to be taken to the captain.”

Elenna winced. What was this about? Had she ‘impressed’ the overseer to the extent that she was to be taken to the captain’s cabin, there to suck another, albeit more important cock.

She grunted as they grabbed her arms and forced hands together, binding them tight with leather thong. Her body was forced forward, making her buttocks ache as her position on the rough and uncomfortable rowing bench was changed, and her breasts dangled in front of her. They pushed her awkwardly, moving to release the chain from the hull, which passed through her fetters. She gasped as her position shifted and her feet were pushed into the bilge, disturbing the

floating remnants of another rower's waste. She wanted to be sick, though her eyes widened as the fetter on her right ankle fell away.

The men stopped what they were doing and stood in awe. Even the mercenaries slowly moved their hands to their sword hilts. She pulled hard on the bonds – it had been her chance – now was her only chance, but as she moved, she realised that the men had tied her wrists tightly, putting the presumably well practised bond that they used on slaves and prisoners into place. Only the hooded man interrupted the silence, as he leant forward and removed his hood.

It was Petros, the blacksmith who had placed the chains on her feet, had branded her with a '3', and who had been working with Lady Tremaine.

Of all the men who now leered at her, only Petros remained relaxed.

"It's fine," he said as he moved forward and released her other foot by activating the catch. "Bring her."

She stared at him, and the hatred and revulsion that only a galley slave can know illuminated her face.

A filthy, stinking sack was placed over her head as they brought her up from the chains. She had heard the overseers argue about how she could have had the fetters removed so easily. Was this a trick? Was she some sort of agent? What was she doing on their ship? The captain would have many questions. It was Petros that she heard silence them.

"Quiet, fools, if you want your gold."

Chapter 5

She had struggled and been punched, restrained and dragged at one stage, through the upper levels of the massive prison hulk. She was no fool, however, in terms of being able to piece together the events and circumstances. Her feet, still slick with the watery muck of the bilge, slipped on some of the more polished timbers in what was obviously the upper part of the galley, her perception still keen enough, despite the filthy sack that covered her head, to determine that the only stink in this section of the prison hulk was her own, combined with the corruption that she sensed was beginning to sour the whole plan. She remained calm, as she had been trained to do by the guild of thieves, as she had learned to do quickly in times of stress. To lose one's mind in such situations only added to the desperation, and the mind could not therefore think clearly. She had to remain calm and focused, so that if an opportunity for escape presented itself, she would be in a position to exploit it quickly and effectively.

She was panting as they brought her to a halt. She perceived that she had been brought up through two levels, and was now deep in the bowels of the living area – or at least that area in which the senior 'officers' lived. Even a foul women's prison galley needed its administrators, she considered idly, trying to stem the raging torrent of fear from her mind.

She gasped as the hood was torn from her sweating head. Her first thoughts were the relative position of the guards, before her mind began to take in the size of the cabin and potential escape routes. There was a small window to her right, fashioned so as provide air in the captain's cabin. She watched as the man behind the bench rose and moved to open it – in order to help remove the stink from the cabin – her stink. She smiled.

“So this is the woman?” he said, returning to the well styled and lacquered bench. He was tall, though carried a substantial amount of weight, and appeared at least to be dressed in the official capacity of a city militia officer. Did that mean that he was in charge of the ship? She winced. Perhaps she should have done a little more research on the staff of the vessel. They seemed content, for now, to talk about her as if she were not in the room, however – or indeed, as if she were nothing more than a slave.

“This is her, my Lord. We had a deal?”

It was Petros that spoke from behind her. The Captain, as she supposed he was, stared at her now.

“A pity. She’s fine looking prisoner.” He moved forward to grip her breast as she flinched and moved back, only to be pushed forward again by the overseer. “I might have been able to have her as she neared the end of her service.”

She gritted her teeth and stared into the middle ground ahead of her – at the back of the cabin wall. Tremaine had set her up – clearly. Jealously, hatred, Pylar’s words and recollections of her patron’s wife filled her mind. Clearly, they had all pointed to one impediment to the ongoing relationship that she might have with her new lord, and the noble ‘lady’ had then taken steps to rectify that situation. She wanted to speak, and at least vent her anger, before she tried some vain attempt at escape, though she knew that she had to control her emotions and look for an opening.

“Her hair – a lockpick,” she heard Petros murmur, realising that even that last vestige of hope was being taken away. One of the guards, whose hands were not used to delicate work, tore away much of her blond hair while looking for the short steel tool, as she writhed and grunted in desperation.

The captain looked at the small device as he spoke.

“Very well, Petros, I’ll deal with her. And the gold?”

“It will be donated as arranged, my Lord... and to your men as agreed.”

“Good... you may leave us.”

Elenna gasped as the captain moved his hand down her sweaty, grimy belly to her cunt, gently playing with her hairs and then her sex.

“My Lord?”

“I said you may leave us.”

“That... that is not part of the agreement, my Lord. I am to see to it that the deed is carried out, that she is despatched properly. If that is not the case, you will

have to deal with my... superior.”

Elenna tensed. So they were going to kill her. She pulled at the bonds, placed her feet a little wider apart on the deck. At least they had removed the fetters. That would help her if she had to use her feet in the fight to come. She saw the captain nod. She scarcely felt the swift blow that smacked the back of her head... and she fell, down and down into blackness.

* * * * *

She had dreamt of the sea, the smell of the ocean and the call of seabirds on the ocean breeze. There was a distinct smell too. Was she dead? Was this the afterlife, or part of the nine hells?

There was a burning sensation at her sex. Was she alive after all? The feeling was somewhere between a tantalising pleasure and the pressure of numbing, and growing, pain. She could feel that her feet – a pressure – pulled on them. Her eyes snapped open. She stared down the length of the galley. Even in the pale light she could discern the slaves in rows, chained and desperate looking as they rowed. She looked down and saw her hands – no, someone else’s hands, bound in front of her, as hers had been stretched behind her and bound... she saw the terrible apex of the wooden horse splitting her sex as full realisation struck her. She cried out, swaying her legs, realising that her big toes had been tied onto the bucket – weighing her down, realising too that she shared the device with another – the barbarian Kariss. She gasped, wide eyed as reality hit her. She was not dead – it was worse than that, much worse.

She struggled as her body found new balance after her movements. Kariss screamed behind her. So, they had kept her alive, and mounted her with the barbarian aboard the horrible wooden horse. The apex bit into her sex as she moved, the pressure exacerbated by the weight of the bucket of rocks suspended from her and Kariss’s toes. She screamed, dry throated, as her body and mind realised that she was not in fact dead but would be subjected to the horrible agony that she had watched the barbarian suffer before she had been taken away from the oar through Petros and Tremaine’s machinations. As consciousness and the grip of reality made her mind waken further, she slowly realised the full

import of the predicament in which she had been left with the barbarian. Their hands and arms had been tied behind them such that they ‘embraced’ the other from behind, before being tightly secured with rope, which meant that questing and probing fingers nestled just above or near the squashed sex of the other, adding additional sweet pain to the process of punishment – wherein the body was unable to discriminate between the agony of pressure and the light brushing of another in sexual torment.

The barbarian hissed each time Elenna moved, trying to adjust her position against the torture. They were inextricably linked in pain, a movement of legs or body causing pain to the other, though Elenna realised that Kariss had been on the instrument for hours, perhaps even days. The damage had undoubtedly been done, and she knew enough of this form of punishment to realise that the barbarian at least would not find the same kind of pleasure from a lover again, even if she survived the ordeal.

“GNNN... b... be careful of your movements...” the red haired woman gasped. Her voice was dry and throaty. They had kept her dehydrated – a waste, as any galley captain on a merchant vessel would at least want to maintain his slaves in some form of health, even if they did require punishment.

“I... am sorry, Kariss,” she said in response.

“You... you remember me?” She gasped in agony as the bucket moved slightly, pulling her already tortured sex wider against the apex.

“Yes. I remember you.”

“It seems we are to suffer together. GNNNNNN!”

The barbarian’s longer arms and larger hands meant the span of her reach was such that her long dirty fingers touched the hood of Elenna’s clit. It was maddening, and Elenna could only writhe in response – an action that thereby made her grind against the wood, thus pulling Kariss further over and making the bucket rock and pull their legs, propagating more movement, and so the cycle would begin again. As the minutes passed, though Elenna suffered and sweated under the pressure of the load and the pain, it was Kariss who began to cry in agony.

Elenna tried to focus on something in order to stop her movement, but she could

only look across the length of the busy rowing deck where wretched women rowed naked and chained under the lashes of cruel men, most of whom patrolled the decks with erections under their loincloths, awaiting the time when they might force said member into the mouths of exhausted prisoners.

Watching the scene from the nine hells unfold in such now familiar fashion was enough to focus Elenna's attention and divert her from the fact that the barbarian's massive hands were drawing pleasure through touching her intimately. She stared forward, even perceiving that a few of the newer galley slaves were in tears simply through watching their suffering, and believing that it might yet happen to them. She could even see Sylvie, the baker's wife and the former reason why she had been placed here – but that had all been lies – a trick in order to have her killed – at least that had been the original plan, though it appeared that the captain simply wanted to break her spirit now.

Kariss was unconscious by the time the barbarian's touch forced Elenna to cum. She writhed painfully on the torture device, her legs pulled by the toes via the heavy bucket, wrenching in turn at Kariss who had thankfully passed out, yet this meant that she could not control her long hands and arms which, draped around Elenna, and making the position worse, meant that the climax was long and painful.

Her cries, however, had attracted the attentions of the overseers, one of whom now watched her closely as she writhed. He touched her breasts, pulling savagely at one nipple as she screeched, before reaching for a cane.

“You need another lesson, prisoner...” he grunted. He was a large, dark skinned man. Elenna had seen him during her time at the oar, and his was a reputation that guaranteed any slave in his charge would have her back and body mapped with many harsh lashes.

The cane fell hard across her breasts, striking the backs of Kariss's inert arms in the process as the savage blows wrenched desperate cries of pain from her and she lurched horribly on the horse, splitting her numb swollen sex even wider on the terrible device. Eventually, she too passed out.

* * * * *

The agony in her loins woke her. Her head ached – desperate searing aching... She was not sure. Had she been removed from the horse? The lash of the whip across her side was enough to settle the issue as she screamed, both in pain and surprise at the apparent feeling in her body. Her feet, chained again, fell into the familiar muddy soup of the bilge. She felt the wooden supports on the hull beneath her feet, the rough timber of the makeshift bench under her naked buttocks.

Her eyes snapped open, feeling returning to her body as she began to sit up – and pain from her swollen loins lanced through her. She was back at her bench, though... as reason and reality hit her at once... her feet were in fetters – real fetters this time. She leant forward desperately, her wrists reaching, before she realised that they too had been clasped in irons. Her heart was pounding in the terrible, yet familiar surroundings. She snatched at the ankle fetters, looking for a steel catch or button that was not there, as the sting of the lash exploded across her back again.

“You’re a slave for real this time, wench.” The overseer knelt down so that he could speak close to her ear. “And this time, you’re here for life,” he whispered, rising slowly and coiling the whip as realisation struck her. She sat bolt upright, one hand rising to her forehead as the chains at her wrists rattled and weighed against the action. Her finger traced the line of the swollen raw flesh, and the brand that had been applied to her forehead – presumably while she had been unconscious, the deep swelling having left the large character. She had been branded a ‘lifer’.

“No.. NO!” She pulled at the chains and writhed, struggling on the bench as the woman to her side moved away – hoping to avoid the rain of whip lashes which she knew this rower would clearly earn due to her erratic behaviour. Was it not better to work until death, remain quiet, insignificant, avoid the lash? Something that this recalcitrant slave, who had even been clad in wrist chains as punishment, still needed to learn.

Elenna’s cries filled the ship as she was whipped down into submission.

Chapter 6

I had not approached the prospect of journeying on the slave ship with any degree of pleasure, yet the fact that this prison hulk in particular was returning to the city of Arlos certainly suited my needs. I had travelled on merchant ships before – and thus was used to the stench created by the women below – who were kept as animals. Even on war galleys, which were usually rowed by male slaves or mercenaries, the stench was somewhat different, as strong men were perhaps deemed more useful, and thus there was more interest in ensuring that some degree of cleanliness was respected on the galley deck, so that more than simply the strong and resistant might survive against the lash and the threat of disease. Matters on a prison hulk, however, were somewhat different.

I could smell the vessel long before the carriage entered the docks area of the port, its stench almost pervading the very walls of the fort around which the town had been built. I resisted the urge to vomit as we drew closer. The ship was impressive – I do remember that much, certainly a feat of local shipbuilding ingenuity; the three tiered system of its large oars clearly powerful – yet I knew, even before I saw the galley deck, that being a prison ship, they would put only a single vile, weakened woman on each of those oars, hoping to break her back and frame through constant efforts under a savage whip, wielded by some bastard who was too weak to be a mercenary and too cruel to be of any use in another profession.

Aye, I had seen how galley women were treated on merchant ships – stripped, chained and whipped – their mouths used as a vessel for hungry cocks. I expected nothing less aboard the prison vessel on which I would now travel.

The course of events that did transpire, however, was something that I would never have expected.

Captain Ruric Devlan – Phalanx Commander – Red Blades of Irulan

* * * * *

Ruric watched the coast as the massive ship moved slowly, heavy oars plying remorselessly into the churning white surf as the wooden vessel disturbed the otherwise banal peace of the unsullied sea. He had tried to put the smell from his mind in the first few days of the sea voyage, yet it was something that one could not quite remove. By the fourth day, in fact, it seemed to pervade his clothes and belongings and the contents of the travel chest, which he had brought with him on his journey. He had spent time polishing weapons, ensuring that his cabin and bunk were secure, and trying, in vain, to pass the time without dwelling on dark thoughts related to the past. He resolved that he would not be pulled back into old nightmares and regrets, though the atmosphere of this hellship, where most of the human beings were chained on a deck which was akin to a layer of the nine hells, made the act of remaining positive somewhat difficult. He pulled at his short beard before adjusting the shortsword, which he had determined at least to carry about him while navigating the massive ship. He had seen over thirty-five summers now, had even been considered somewhat of a prodigy in his youth, and was selected for early command. The year had been challenging, though he had won through with – though he said it himself – considerable aplomb.

He remained lean and fit, and was a skilled, if perhaps unremarkable in some aspects, swordsman. Even he recognised that it was his ability to inspire men and women who bore arms that had got him thus far, and to the unenviable position of command within a large and profitable mercenary company.

He winced as he heard a whiplash and a cry amidst the sounds of agonised rowing below; another poor woman under the welts of the whip. He placed a kerchief across his nose and wandered across the wooden boards of the deck in his thick calf boots, staring down through the grille into the semi darkness below, punctuated with the pulling motions of the chained slaves. A collective moan, underpinned by the communal clanking of chains interspersed the sound of the wind and the calls of gulls that circled the ship. He suspected that with the provision of scraps from the crew, the gulls were better fed than the slaves. This was a ship of prisoners, after all; women punished for some infraction, though despite any loyalties he might have, even he knew that many charges were trumped up and false, designed to put women on the oars, if not of this particular

prison hulk in particular then certainly of the hundreds of merchant ships which plied the sea lanes.

Perhaps the women below were lucky, he considered idly. Faced with cruel conditions and high death rates, the galleys of the foreign coasts far to the east, past the isles, had resorted to enslaving foreign women on sight, as the number of indigenous women required to fill oar slave positions had actually begun to affect the birth rate of the countries along the eastern seaboard. Conditions on their galleys were horrific, even to an experienced mercenary such as himself. He had seen women tethered to the oar deck with chains through their sex lips... and much worse, in his time there.

He stared downward, the new slaves or prisoners standing out starkly from the older through the fact that their bodies bore less welts. They were also relatively clean, and their hands and feet – at least in terms of nails – were in reasonable condition. The relative state of some of the women below made him want to look away, yet some strange fascination of the whipmarked flesh, eyes empty of hope, and horribly manacled limbs disturbing the shit-filled bilge water made him stare on.

Then he saw her.

He had recognised the face as the woman pulled against the oar. He swallowed sharply as some memory of her rung like a distant bell in his memory. He could not place her at first, but he was sure that he knew her. She rowed in the middle tier, one above the pathetic wretches whose feet were permanently dipped in the bilge water. She was in bad condition, at least from what he could see. He knelt by the grate in order to see her in more detail against the backdrop of filthy flesh moving rhythmically to the tune of a thumping drumbeat.

Her filthy blond hair was bedraggled and matted, though the state of her body had already told him that she was not a new prisoner. The hair had been cut savagely – though only, it seemed, in order to make the back clear for the whip. Her thighs seemed strong during the pull, her arms too. Whatever foul food she had been fed, her body had adapted to the work – though that same body was covered with lashes from head to toe – both old and new. Her hands and feet were in particularly poor condition, becoming, like those of many galley slaves that he had seen, gnarled and misshapen with long or missing nails and old blisters born of the pulling and effort at the oar. She pulled again with the others,

her body almost lying flat as it tensed and weighed against the effort.

“You like what you see, sir?” the deck officer asked from somewhere behind him.

Ruric quelled his natural reactions as his body tensed. He was concerned that the man had been able to get so close to him without him realising. Perhaps it was the fact that the ship was not his natural ‘hunting ground’, or, more disturbingly he realised, that he had been distracted by the galley slave. He stood up, pushing the sword to one side.

“I doubt that. These women are foul.”

“They’re prisoners sir. They’re here to be punished.”

Ruric nodded.

“Though,” the deck officer continued, “the Captain told me to see to your needs sir, since you had paid up front in silver and all... so...”

He moved his eyes toward the grille.

“If you’d prefer one of the newer prisoners, sir, the Captain might allow it, as a special case. The newer prisoners wouldn’t be bent or broken. Some of those older ones are just hags, waiting for death to come, sir.”

Ruric swallowed the bile in his throat as he gnashed his teeth in anger. “I see,” he said slowly. “And where would I... use this prisoner, should I desire one of them?”

“The captain has mentioned that he would make his cabin available, sir, though it might cost a few extra silvers.”

Ruric looked up. “When is the rest period for the second tier?”

* * * * *

Ruric had noticed the change, even in terms of the condition of the deck as he marched down the steps. The wood of the galley deck was black and slick, moistened with sweat, blood and worse, gathered through the motions of the rowers. The fact that the bilge was designed such that it provided a slick waste track for the slaves, but was rarely drained as much as was considered proper by its original designer it seemed, did not surprise him. The air was warm, thick and made any newcomer hack for minutes until their lungs eventually found some modicum of air to breathe amidst the foul gas that the rowers lived in. He brought the kerchief from his tunic again, using it to cover his nose as he passed the worst of the women. The benches, merely the jutting ribs of the interior of the vessel, were dowsed with waste in some instances, by those women who had been too exhausted to move back and use the bilge. He wanted to wretch, but he forced himself to walk on. The deck hand led him up the deck with an overseer, the women's welted backs clearly visible. The middle tier had been allowed a brief rest – their wet oars pulled in, while the other tiers continued to row.

He swallowed as he saw another woman, clearly new, who sat astride a wooden horse far up the deck, so that all could see. She had been recently put there, evidenced by the fact that a bucket had been tied to her toes, and was now being filled with rocks as she cried and screamed how sorry she was for not sucking cock well enough. Ruric distanced himself, tried to remove his conscious mind from the scene. He was only here for one thing.

“Wait,” he said, as they came level with the blond haired woman that he had seen from above. Her flaccid breasts, crisscrossed with lashes and one decorated with a brand which indicated three years, drooped and moved as she panted, clearly exhausted from her shift of slavery. Her feet dangled at the mid section of the hull – allowed some respite from the pressure of pushing against the board on the bench in front of her. Years of such action had made them gnarled and blistered, toes curled to such an extent that it seemed permanent, nails long and black or missing entirely. The ankle fetters weighed her legs down and left their own mark in turn, as he could see that the rubbing of steel on skin had worn and scarred her. He wondered idly if she had been moved from a lower tier as she had become ‘ugly’ to the overseers, and thus not worthy of their cocks.

This one wore heavy chains on her wrists too – which had left similar scarring – that he knew would remain with the woman as long as she lived, which in these conditions could not be much longer. Unlike some merchant galley slaves, who were shaved to prevent lice, the apparent requirement to maintain lack of hair

had not been applied to any of these women, and large tufts of hair, mingled with sweat, covered her sex.

The overseer reached forward with the whip handle, placing it under her chin and raising her head as she gasped.

Ruric swallowed as he saw old sores around her mouth, a result perhaps of her early years on the prison hulk, sucking cock. One eye was closed and swollen, with a dull redness behind the lids. As she sat up, one eye widening in anticipation of some service that she must perform, he noticed that the action of the wrist chains falling as she pulled, had left a raw red gash along her belly – something which must have been maddening with each stroke. Her forehead was dominated by the large L – the brand of a lifer. She also bore a 3 upon her breast – perhaps from an earlier galley term. This one would die at the oar, it seemed.

The officer and overseer looked at him now.

“This one? She’s a hag, sir, a lifer, been here for years. Probably forgotten how to speak even. Right, wench?”

The overseer brought the whip down hard across her lower back. She yelped and arched, falling forward.

“AAIAII uh uhhh yes m... master,” the woman croaked. Ruric could tell that even now it was difficult for her to call anyone master, though chained and whipped as she was, beaten down by years of cruelty and enforced servitude, she had little choice.

“Clean her up... as much as you can. I’ll have her in the captain’s cabin.”

The overseer looked with incredulity at the officer, who looked back at him in turn.

“Do as he says.”

* * * * *

The door opened slowly. Ruric could hear the chains clanking. Paying the captain had been easy. Part of him was glad that his last bonus payment had been so bountiful. Rather than beat and rob him, which would have brought down the wrath of his mercenary company upon the entire ship, the crew, it seemed, were determined to pry him from his silver by promising not only galley slaves to please him but also the use of the captain's cabin whenever he needed it. The captain, who seemed to be perfectly cruel in terms of the man required to fill the role of governor of this particular prison ship, had accepted his money with glee.

The pathetic creature limped slowly in, prodded by the officer

“Move, wench. Please this man. You might be allowed to stay clean a while longer.”

Ruric swallowed in disgust, forcing himself to smile in appreciation of the deck officer's efforts.

The woman could barely walk. This was no surprise, of course, as having been chained not only in the confines of the galley deck, she had also been made to sit in the same position for presumably many months, if not years. As expected, her hands and feet were gnarled and scarred from the pushing and pulling, and her back bent, meaning that her whipped breasts, which must once have been proud and attractive, now sagged and drooped due to the ravages that she had suffered at the oar. Her head was bowed. She had clearly been through cruel treatment before. Ruric could detect no trace of fear, just the sense of acceptance that an animal which had been beaten into compliance might exhibit when pushed in front of yet another cruelty.

She had been washed and cleaned, after a fashion. It seemed that the mess from the bench had been washed from her buttocks at least, and her feet and legs had been dowsed with seawater, in order to make an attempt at reminding the mercenary that this was indeed a woman. They had clearly taken some steps to clean the area around her sex, though Ruric anticipated that it would take more than a bucket of seawater to remove the lice infestation that undoubtedly lived there.

“Leave us,” Ruric commanded the officer as she was made to stand, bent and shivering slightly, in front of the captain's bench. The deck officer complied, a slight smile betraying his thoughts upon an evil looking face. He was under no

illusion as to what this well paid mercenary was going to do, though he admitted that his choice of female was somewhat bizarre.

He stood and approached her, making ready to speak.

“They treat you like an animal,” he said to the woman, whose bowed head and shuddering mannerisms told him that she had become inured to treatment such as this. Perhaps that was the secret of the galley slave. Keeping one’s emotions far, far away from the harsh reality of naked, chained servitude lent something to the ability to deal with it.

Her head remained bowed. He could see her one good eye, flitting up at him, as if she was afraid to speak lest it incur more lashes. Ruric sensed that despite the fact that the lash and cock had broken her spirit, something still remained.

“They cleaned you? Well, after a fashion.”

She nodded her head at last.

“Am I to pleasure you?” she said slowly, a harsh whisper, betraying a grating tone in her voice.

He winced. The woman was older – perhaps forty-five summers, though the deprivations of prison hulk slavery had made her seem old, though not yet decrepit. The slight stoop in her gait, fostered through years of pulling an oar, which was designed to be too heavy a load for a single woman, had made her bowed, though she still showed some strength. She was not quite a galley hag yet, as the officer and overseer had described her.

“Perhaps,” he replied, walking around her. She shuddered, the intake of breath rasping inside her body as he sensed her anger, deep and resentful, that she would be used by another man in such a fashion.

“How long have you been a slave?” He noticed that the heavy fetters had effectively hobbled her ankles, though he sensed that if they were removed she would recover to a degree. The chains on her wrists also appeared to have been in place for years, effectively rubbing her wrists and arms raw for so long that they had rusted. If she stayed on this vile vessel, she would not last much longer before sickness took her – perhaps a year.

“I... I believe I have served... f... for four years, master.”

Her head rose now as she spat the word ‘master’, determined that he should realise that she spoke it under duress, with only the threat of the whip, or worse, to enforce it.

“Four years?” He stopped in front of her, staring at breasts, which must once have stood proud and erect. “They have tried to break you?”

She stared at him. He could see that she wondered just exactly why this man was asking questions rather than forcing her across the bench before taking her.

“Yes,” she replied. “Master.”

He moved a hand to her overgrown bush. They had tried to clean her as much as possible, though it was difficult. She shuddered as he found her sex, still raw and red, more so from sitting on a vile galley bench and constantly rowing than through any sexual activity.

She gasped in response. “S... so, I am to be used then, master,” she said curtly.

“Not unless you wish it,” he said in commanding fashion, “and there is no need to call me master.” He smiled. “Especially if you do not mean it.”

Her legs writhed against each other as he pushed further into her. There was something different this time, something that made her want to enjoy the experience of being away from the oar and being given permission to reject him if she wanted. It was a trick, surely?

His finger pushed further into her sex, making the overgrown area wet. At least they had cleaned her to some degree, Ruric thought. He had not wanted to put her through this, he considered, though, despite her lashed flesh, despite her almost broken body and the condition of hands, feet and face, she was still attractive to him; she still had the spirit to resist the things that had been done to her.

“Do you wish it?”

She swallowed, apparently nervously, as she regarded him, one eye wide and almost tearful, the other closed and bloody behind the lids. She nodded almost

imperceptibly, partly an enforced response due to the conditioning she had received as a chained galley slave, and partly because, deep down, she wished to experience requested, unforced, love – unconditionally. It was the response of a caged animal, and she still retained enough humanity to realise it, yet suddenly she did not care.

He gripped her gently and helped her hobble to the bench, where, in almost practiced fashion, she leaned across it, elbows taking her weight while she eased her legs wide apart, careful not to move too quickly. Her muscles had become conditioned to rowing, such that any sideways movement was difficult and bent her limbs in ways which did not lend themselves to the last ravages of her strength, so she spread her legs slowly, carefully. Ruric did not look at her bruised yet muscled buttocks. Years of sitting on the galley and shitting in the bilge had made her like this, but it appeared not to matter to him, as the urgency of his erection told him that no matter how primal, how much like some rabid animal, this slave had become, he still wanted her, wanted it.

Her back had been terribly lashed, old and new strokes that had left scarring. Suddenly he felt such emotion for her, wanted to protect her from further abuse. He untethered his trews, moistening her again with his hand and fingers as he plunged further and further into her sex. She moaned in response, perhaps the first purely human sound of actual pleasure that she had made in a long time, in years perhaps, as Ruric, his mind now overcome by the needs of his body, fumbled to release his cock from the restrictions of his trews. He watched the slave underneath him writhe as he continued to prepare her sex with his fingers, while releasing his cock. He wanted to pleasure her further, with his hand and his tongue, despite the relative condition of her lips, though his mind would not give him time for such decadence.

She shuddered as his cock brushed against her muscled thighs and solid, if overworked, buttocks. She purred in anticipation. It had been so long since she had done so, so long since she had not felt like a slave – a prisoner destined to row until death, which in recent months she had considered would not be too far in her future now. The fact that a man might want to make love to her, rather than simply use her mouth, was new, and she fought against her natural feelings to think that something had changed, even as she cried out as the mercenary guided his cock into her wet and ready cunt.

She responded to the man's touch as she had not done in many years, bucking

against his motions as he eagerly moaned and widened her. Her mind was filled with the emotion and sadness of months and years of cruelty, something which this man had not shown her, despite the fact that she looked and felt like a galley hag – a broken mess of a woman who would be rowed and flogged to death.

Although the splayed position was not easy for her to hold, the need for a man's love rather than simply abusive satisfaction of an overseer's carnal need, filled her and she responded in kind, grinding against his hardness as it surged further into her. Part of Ruric wanted to look away as he saw how difficult it was for the slave to move, to even perform the simple act of lovemaking with him, as he thrust harder and further against the matted hairs of her sex, widening her cunt until each thrust produced hoarse cries of pleasure from her, her legs and feet shuddering to balance on the creaking planks of the cabin's deck.

He withdrew, then re-entered, his large cock teasing and tormenting her each time it played and toyed with her sex, before fulfilling her needs to be properly satisfied – needs which had remained vacant for so long. Yet the slave knew that it must end, and whined – almost dismally, as the cock was finally pulled away. Despite her belief that the pleasure had ended, she moaned as the man pulled her around, his cock larger than she had seen upon any overseer that ever came in her mouth. He parted her legs, laying her gently onto the bench – pushing scrolls and maps to the floor in his eagerness to enter her again.

She yelped in surprise, moving to enclose him with whipmarked thighs and gnarled feet as he pushed into her, looking into her face as he thrust and gasped. She knew that she would cum this time. It stirred memories of men she had made love to in the past. Men who had wanted to stay with her, men who had wanted to marry her even, and men who she, deep down, had loved – and so, ultimately, she had convinced herself to run away from them. Her head fell back and she cried out, gripping the younger men in an embrace of muscular thighs and calves, cleaned as far as they could be by rough overseers, yet her condition did not seem to bother him, as he held her in turn and thrust harder and harder, almost pulling away from her and teasing her clit in his motions as he thrust in again and she purred with pleasure. The ugly steel fetters and wrist chains bounced off his muscled, yet still mostly clothed, torso as he made love to her, until she was close to that moment when she would cum.

It took her in its embrace like a sudden storm upon the sea, as she tried to hold him close and he teased her whipped breasts as a lover would, rather than pulling

them as a cruel overseer might. The climax seemed to last for minutes as he held her close and ensured that he came himself – ending inside her in an explosion of warm pleasure.

Both of them threw their heads back, warm bodies writhing as one as they came together.

They lay for a while, before he helped her up and leaned against the bench, lightly kissing her breasts, as the tears came and she fell against him, remembering real lovers and all of the emotion that she had blocked out in the years since she had become a horrid slave to the oar.

“You don’t remember me, do you?” he said at last.

Her sighted eye opened wide, as she turned to stare at him.

“I... I don’t understand...”

He kissed her gently on her forehead – lips on the brand, as if trying to kiss away the mark that indicated that she would die at the oar, decrepit and destroyed.

“My name is Ruric Devlan. I was once a lieutenant on the wall guard on Ferloss – the island city.”

“I... I know of it, yes,” she croaked, choking back tears.

“You were a thief. A good one. We had known that you were in the city, but no one could identify you. Neither did any of our officers realise just how good you were. We were protecting the staff of power – apparently a powerful sorcerer’s item – though I do not believe much in magic these days. You... had apparently been contracted to steal it.”

She shuffled to one side, her body bent again as if recovering from the sex, and taking on the persona of a worthless slave again. She swallowed, and tried to remember.

“You had not killed any of my men that night, yet they had been rendered unconscious. I came to the wall as you took the last one down, rushed you from behind, pulled away the mask that you wore. I saw your face in the moonlight as you turned. It was beautiful. I will never forget it.”

She gasped, and limped back from him. “I... don’t... remember you.” Her head fell in despair.

“Your reflexes were astonishing... twin swords enclosed my throat before I took a breath, and my arm stiffened even as I tried to raise a blade. You could have killed me that night. You should have – I had seen your face, after all, but you did not.”

“N... No... I may have r... rendered you unconscious though,” she said, trying to smile as one side of her mouth raised, the other hampered by an old sore which had left a scar, as she tried in vain to remember.

He smiled in return. “Indeed, though you did not kill me,” he repeated. “They say the gods work in very mysterious ways. I believe in them, even if I believe that magic is something of a confidence trick. So, when I saw your face again on the galley deck, I believed that it was for a reason.”

He pointed to the cabin window. A small square hatch, which she had first seen many years ago when dragged here after Petros had revealed her deception to the captain. She had seen it again when brought before the captain, for his ‘pleasure’.

“Do you believe that you can fit through that opening?”

Hope made her gasp, as she tried to quell her heartbeat, even as the part of her mind that had bowed to cruelty, that had been institutionalised to pain and suffering, told her that escape – unless through death – was all but impossible.

“Y... Yes... of course,” she croaked desperately.

He nodded, fumbling in a belt pouch as he secured his treads once more, and producing a small vial protected with a leather, which he proceeded to unstopper in front of her.

“Your name?” he said, almost casually. “I never did know your name, the night you spared me.”

“Elenna,” she said slowly, choking back tears from the eye she would still see through.

“Will they believe that you were able somehow to escape through your own devices?” He checked the contents of the vial, swooshing whatever liquid was inside. She noticed that smoke emanated from the opening as he ‘woke’ whatever the contents were.

“This will free you from the leg fetters and wrist chains.”

She was crying openly now, shaking her head.

““You must focus,” he said, gripping her by one shoulder. “Yes?”

She nodded frantically.

“There are few here you will miss, no? Friends?”

She choked a little as she remembered Kariss the barbarian woman – who had been allowed to die on the wooden horse, and Sylvie, who she had never even spoken to, but had died of disease a year later.

“No. None,” she croaked.

“Remember the woman you were. Think of that night, and you will become her once more. Yes?”

She swallowed. “I’m ready.”

“Good. This acid will melt the steel. I will ensure that it does not damage your skin. Careful now...”

He dripped the acid carefully onto the manacles first. Her hands were shaking so violently that he had to steady them.

“Easy... easy now.”

“I... can do it,” she said slowly through the tears.

“Remember the woman you were, Elenna. Remember that night. Let the galley slut be gone.”

She nodded as he moved to her feet, dripping the corrosive liquid onto the hardened and rusted steel, careful to avoid her skin.

She gasped as the steel melted at her wrists, hissing as she shrugged her way out of the chains and they fell heavily to the wooden deck. She stared at her freed limbs, the raw and scarred flesh on her wrists.

Ruric had to work at the thick fetters, in order to twist the steel from her ankles. She fell to the ground as they came away, her body so used to the weight of them that freedom without them seemed still an impossible dream to an institutionalised galley slave.

“Get up, quickly now. I need you to take this dagger and strike me hard with the pommel. You are near to the coast. Arlos lies to the north.”

She nodded, gaining some composure as she stood up.

“Strike me down, and I will convince them that you found the acid amongst my belongings. You made your escape through the portal. Now, you must swim. Can you do it?”

Elenna set her jaw now. It was as if it was a dream of some kind.

“I can do it.” She took the dagger in her hand, still shaking, and raised it as he nodded.

“Thank you,” she whispered, as she struck him hard across the jaw before running for the portal.

Chapter 7

The shape moved through the maze of stonework like a spider, using trained muscle and techniques that only master thieves might know in order to move freely in confined spaces and gain access to buildings through ways which no normal mortal could do. The efforts were made doubly difficult by virtue of the fact that the maze of tunnels was wet and stinking from the waste and other detritus that partially filled them. The presence of such vile material did not, however, deter her from the process of moving along the rough bricked passage. The figure was clad in black and masked, with some sleek and matt-like material that hugged her nubile figure. It held her breasts in check, while granting a form of camouflage to her movements in the darkness. Even so, there was a suggestion of old injury that would have been evident to the experienced eye at least. The woman was clearly trying to do more than the limitations of her body would allow, trailing a foot here or missing a gripping point with her fingers there. That same educated eye might have noticed that the woman's limbs were perhaps not as lithe as might be suggested by her movements. One might have thought that she was older, were it not for the fact that her body was finely toned and well muscled in all the right places – the characteristic indicators of a professional thief.

Elenna sweated and winced behind her mask. She still suffered from the pervading injuries that she had suffered aboard the galley and it had taken her a long time to recover. It had come as a shock to those members of the thieves' guild who she knew she could implicitly trust, when she had arrived, broken and dressed as a poor merchant, barely able to walk, at one of the dens in Irulan, begging for help.

The swim and escape from the galley had not been easy. The brand mark on her forehead and breast, and the lack of depth perception through the loss of vision in one eye had considerably hampered her efforts, firstly in getting through the city of Arlos without being arrested, tortured and crucified as an escaped galley slave, then – without resources of any kind, escaping Arlos and making her way to a city which, perhaps not necessarily more inviting, would at least grant her the benefit of allies and thief masters who owed her favours and allegiances.

She tried to blank out the scenes that had punctuated her life since Ruric Devlan had enabled her escape. The salt water of the ocean had caused such pain to her lashed body during the swim. Her misshapen feet and hands had meant that it was difficult to swim at all, though pure hatred meant that she had made it to the coastline, and the city inside the walls. She found herself wondering, in more lucid moments, what might have happened to him – though that was not her prime concern now.

She had stolen rags to cover both her body and brands, and found shelter in dockhouses, avoiding as much as possible the attention of the sailors and townsfolk. Her luck had held, though she had had to spend several weeks posing as a beggar – both in order to obtain food and enough coin to enable her to at least get out of the city. It had not been easy. She had watched the walls of the citadel each day as she lay in alleyways and begged or stole, knowing that Lady Tremaine remained inside – powerful and safe. She wanted to get inside, kill her and take Pylar for her own, but even then, after years of galley slavery, she was able to retain a cool head and keep her emotions in check.

Those had been days of hunger and pain, as she recovered and evaded the attentions of male beggars who in turn wanted their own lusts satisfied. The lack of the lash and her own ability to steal food and remain alive in primitive shelter near the docks had meant that she began to recover, though it had been weeks until her mind had been able to snap out of the institutionalised state of slavery in which it had found itself. She found herself whispering ‘no more chains’ again and again, in order to remind herself that she was free – bar the fact that she should avoid capture and death or, worse, a return to the oar. The very thought had at first made a part of her disturbed mind welcome the prospect. She knew what she was and where she was – how she would feed and serve – when she had been a slave. It took her mind a long time to move on from the feeling.

She was eventually able to sign on as a guard on a poor trading caravan – though she was poorly armed and succeeded in convincing the merchant (who appeared to be in the wrong profession) that she was a punished mercenary. That had got her to Irulan and the guild.

It had taken months of training and help in order to get her body to respond in the way it once had. Again, it had been her mind (her slave mind, as she called it), that had needed to be convinced that she could recover – though the thirst for revenge enabled her to get through it. She would never be able to move, fight

and perform in the way she had in her youth, and the years at the oar had made things even more difficult.

Though what friends she had made, and even the younger women she had trained, helped her in terms of recuperation. The constant pressure of her bare feet against the timbers of the hull had made them almost bend, and her ankles had similarly been damaged through the weight of the fetters. Her gnarled hands could grip a blade, but her fingers had become such that climbing was difficult. She had to relearn all the skills that had made her the mistress thief she had been before she was condemned to slavery. In addition, a headband to cover the brand and an eye patch to cover the infected eye that had lost vision, made her appearance even more sinister than it had been, and lent an air of defiance and certainty to her quest for revenge. Her body's limits, her lack of depth perception with one eye being all she could use, and her body having been bent to labour, meant that she would have to find new ways to overcome the rigours of not being seen, guile and stealth – the marks of the thief of the guild.

Those she had trained helped her in those days – much more so than the guildmasters, who had little time for a bent galley hag who lacked skill. 'She'd be better off back on the oar – and we should claim a reward' was mentioned by more than one unscrupulous (was there any other kind?) Master Thief, though, it was her former protégés who understand her situation and shared the understanding of her need for revenge.

And so, despite the fact that it had been more than three years since her escape from the galley, she trained her body to adapt and recover from her ordeal. She fought infection and disease, and what appeared to be her reduced ability to move quickly. Despite this, she seemed to have greater endurance now, and her body was lithe and thin – an apparent advantage that she had kept from her trial by slavery.

She worked on her stance – though remained stooped and had a persistent back problem. She could not rely on her stomach and core muscles – as they had been strained and torn by hauling the oar – though she remained strong in her upper torso. All this she had adapted, and learned to move and climb in a different manner. Those she had taught were so much better than the broken woman she had become, but all she needed was to hone her skill enough to exact revenge. They all wanted to come with her, or even perform the mission for her, but she knew it was something she had to do for herself. It took months to get a proper

layout of the tightly controlled citadel, whose original architects had been slain after its design and construction – though there was enough information across the continent that she could piece together clues, and in combination with actual reconnaissance and questioning, could yield results.

All that was behind her now. The old tunnel she moved through would lead directly to the underside of the oubliette in the torture chamber, in the dungeons of the citadel. It was not a propitious place to break out of, she had been advised – and she tried to forget about when she had been there before, receiving her breast brand and fetters. Despite the protests of those from the guild that were helping her, she opted to go alone, and insisted that no other should help her. This was her mission and hers alone.

Some of the younger women who helped her had argued over this; she knew that they had, and so she had opted to proceed on a date well before the one they agreed, lest they opt to aid her without her knowledge in some foolhardy diversion or similar escapade. She could not risk those who had helped her being captured and tortured to death for information, or worse, being condemned to the oar. She would not let it happen.

She reached the grate at the side of the oubliette, near the rusted grille that covered it. As she peered out in the bad light, she could perceive the drop below her which fell to the bottom of the pit, down to whose bottom hapless victims might be lowered in order to rot. The grate in front of her appeared to be some form of drainage that allowed whatever effluent might flow from the torture chamber floor to drain into the main sewer system. She listened for a while, ensuring that whoever was present in the chamber would not see what action she had to perform next.

She could neither hear the shuffling of guards nor movement of a torturer or gaoler, and thus presumed that either the chamber was empty or its denizens had passed out from the pain. The rusted grate came away after she had manipulated its rivets with her tools. She caught it lest it might fall to the bottom of the pit. She could sense movement below, though she had no time to free every prisoner or victim she found. She had already resolved that she would have to be harsh in her approach. She did not have time to free any poor wretches, no matter how pitiable their condition.

Moving the grate back inside the tunnel from which she had emerged, and

positioning it such that it would not make noise, she leaned out of the tunnel and proceeded to feel for the latch and lock on the oubliette's grille mechanism. It was easily found despite the poor light, and she closed her eyes, feeling for the lock and imagining its barrel like structure as she twirled the delicate lock-pick in her hands and began to unravel the puzzle of the lock's workings with practised precision. Her heart was pounding. It had taken months of practice to regain the use of her gnarled fingers, after the years of galley servitude had effectively mangled her delicate hands – but she had done it.

She began to breathe again as the delicate click indicated that she had succeeded. She forced her mind to relax, thinking of her mantra that she had used for so many months... years...

'No more chains' she whispered as she moved silently, pushing the grille, ready to stop opening it should the creak of steel become obvious. She sensed its motion, sensed the speed that would remain as silent as possible and opened it fully, simultaneously moving out of the tunnel and using the edge of the pit to gain purchase and pull herself onto the floor of the torture chamber. She writhed out of the pit and onto the floor, while slowly lowering the grille and securing it again – though leaving it unlocked.

The entire movement caused her body pain, though she blocked it. Years ago, the motions would have been more fluid, though that had been before her slavery. She put such thoughts from her mind as she rose, sticking to the shadows cast by the flickering torches and ignoring the smells which reminded her of a galley deck.

She winced as she saw the instruments, made worse by the flickering light. The massive, stained wooden horse dominated the centre of the chamber, generating a pain in her loins as she looked away. The rack was long and hideous, spiked rollers running across it so that the victim would be thrust upward and have their back raked – most likely after some evil tormentor had whipped it to shreds. They had adapted the devices in the intervening years. Damn them to hell.

She had to keep moving, not daring to look at the design of the steel chair in the corner or the wide beam with posts at each end and a windlass behind. She had a mission to complete. The main door was made from sturdy ironwood oak, blackened from years of use. To one side were dark cells, the entrance crisscrossed with flat steel bars. She had recovered in one of them after her

branding – she could remember it now. A place where those unfortunates, who might deserve further attention from the tormentor or gaoler, would find out just how exquisitely terrible their skills in inflicting pain were.

She studied the door lock. It would take time, and she had no idea if there was a guard outside or not. She knelt and got to work, operating in silence, careful not to alert a guard. She froze as she heard voices outside, though they seemed to pass, while speaking to someone near the door. So, there was a guard. It would be her first kill of the night.

“I’ve... never seen a thief break into a torture chamber before...”

The voice was high, and almost squeaked like a rodent.

Elenna froze and looked to one side. It had come from the cells. She gasped as a hideous old woman moved close to the bars, her emaciated face framed by a nearby torch. She had seen much of the results of cruelty aboard the galley, though this was different. The woman seemed ancient and haggard, black rings surrounding her eyes – the whites made yellow by poor food and worse hygiene. Under any circumstances, she should not even have lasted this long in this hellish place. She placed a finger across her mouth to indicate that the woman should be silent.

“There is a single guard outside the door. Not one of the Duke’s mercs, a simple fellow,” she said, ignoring Elenna’s advice.

Elenna shook her head in response. She did not want to have to kill the old woman. She could see now that she was clothed only in a ripped and lice infested tunic, and bore considerable marks of torment across her body – the iron brand, lashes, and other marks, though it was clear that she could still move, to a degree.

She resumed work on the lock, hoping that the woman would remain quiet.

“Who are you here to kill?” she said, lower now, aware perhaps that any noise could end the operation and result in the assassin’s death.

“Be quiet. I don’t want to have to kill you, woman.”

The old woman was startled, her grey and matted hair shaking as her body heard

the words.

“You... I... know you...”

Elenna stopped dead, and looked to her side. “No, you don’t. You’re just confused. How long have you been in that cell?”

“No... the years and torture have not destroyed my memory. You are Elenna – the thief.”

Elenna slowly withdrew the lock-pick and calmly turned to the old woman.

“How could you know that?” she gasped?

“I recognise your voice, my dear. My name is Tremaine.”

Chapter 8

In her fury, Elenna tore away her mask in order to get a better look at the hag in the cell. Without thinking, she drew a stiletto knife from the bandolier she carried, grabbed the woman by the hair and pulled her to the bars before stabbing the point toward her throat. Something stopped her finishing the action, however.

“You,” she hissed. “I came here to kill you!” She was shaking.

“You had me put in chains on that hellship, to suffer and suck cock and worse!” The tears came, even as the part of her that needed to go on surviving told her to keep her voice down.

“I... I didn’t!”

“Then who did?” she said behind gritted teeth. “It was Petros who betrayed me, all those damned years ago! Is he here?”

“It... it was Pylar, my dear. Look what he did to me. No one has seen the new duchess in years. Does that not surprise you? He cannot kill me, not just yet, as he has killed many others in my family of influence. No, not yet. He will wait until I die in this place.”

“I... you lie!”

“No... I do not. Petros is gone. I know not where. But Pylar is here, still here.”

Their attention moved to the door. Clearly the guard on the other side was not so deaf as to ignore what he was hearing – even through several inches of ironwood.

The lock clicked and the door creaked open.

“Are you talking to yourself again, old woman?”

Elenna moved like a coiled snake. Her final thoughts were that he had been a

young man.

* * * * *

It took several minutes for Tremaine to explain the situation. After all, time was not something that either of them had in abundance. It was clear though, that despite outward appearances from the citadel with regard to her welfare, few questions had been asked about the fact that she had not been seen. Even her brother, who had been one of the ways in which she had been ingratiated into the scheme, had machinations in the east now and had apparently little time to care for his sister's needs. Tremaine did, however, know the layout of the upper levels – which of course were familiar to Elenna after her first visit, though she also had the added knowledge with regard to where guards and mercenaries might be posted.

Elenna considered the decrepit old woman for many minutes, before finally releasing her.

“Can you walk?”

“This... is my first taste of freedom in six years dear. I'll make do.”

The woman, unlike Elenna on the galley, had not been hobbled by her years in chains. She had, after all, not been forced to labour, merely suffered torment and imprisonment. It was enough for Pylar that she had been kept alive – just enough.

“Why did he do this to us both?” Elenna could not understand anything about his motives. Had he not saved her, been her patron?

“You really do not understand him, my dear, do you?”

Elenna could hear her panting, her slow walk considerably hampering their movements, but, she considered, revenge could take its time if she knew the best way to find him.

“You... will have to make it to the next level. There will be guards.”

She nodded.

“You didn’t answer my question.”

“He hates us, my dear.”

“What?”

“He hates women,” Tremaine repeated, scuffling along the stone floor,

“No. He... he saved me!” Elenna whispered, careful not to give away their position.

“No, he didn’t. He saw to it that you were caught and placed in prison, then that you were whipped. His ultimate reward was to see you believe that he was your friend all these years, and then have you killed aboard the galley. That is his cruel reward. It’s... good to see that you weren’t,” Tremaine croaked, clearly tired from exertions that she was not used to.

“That doesn’t make sense,” Elenna said. She could not understand. Could Pylar really be that evil?

Elenna guided them as closely as she could to the throne room. Even from here the sounds of merriment and moaning were clearly heard.

“You stay here... in the shadows. Leave this to me.”

She knew, even judging the distance to the four mercs at the main doors to the chamber, that the approach would be difficult. They were trained –well trained, and two of them carried crossbows.

The probabilities went through her mind, and she decided.

“Can you get out of here?” she whispered to Tremaine.

The old woman nodded, shuddering.

“What about...?” But Elenna had gone.

The mercenaries were alert, and, as she expected, had not let the apparently decadent years of citadel rule soften them. Her thrown stiletto took one of the bowmen in the throat, even as the two swordsmen drew their weapons. She had seconds to close the distance, but it was enough for the second crossbowman to loose a bolt at her. She covered the distance quickly enough, and used the few seconds of surprise well; well enough that she still had time to evade the bolt – after a fashion, or at least ensure that its speed was slow enough to do less damage than it would have done at an effective distance.

But she was neither as fast nor as lithe as she had been in her youth, or even before being almost broken in the galley. She felt the bolt pierce her leather armour and punch hard against the flesh below her ribs, piercing her as she threw her second stiletto into the bowman's throat, just beneath the effective area of his helmet.

The wound meant that her range of movement was now more limited, and yet she had to silence both swordsmen before they could sound the alarm, or... perhaps she did not require that luxury. As they had been trained, one of the swordsmen used his bulk to fill the corridor as a second began to bound up the corridor for help. She could take one... she hoped. The second was screaming 'alarum' as he ran. There was no time for a shot at him, as she drew the twin short swords and rolled. Her body ached – the move was one she could have performed easily years before – but she had no choice. The merc struck downward as she passed, judging his blow correctly, though she was not where he had expected her. His blow struck her shoulder as she screamed and felt the hot blood flow down her arm – even as she stabbed both swords into his groin from below and he collapsed on top of her.

She bit down hard on the pain, the bolt still in her side as she wrenched the man off her. She could hear shouts now, and booted feet as she grunted and pushed the two great oak doors with steel supported frames and brass fittings – which had not changed in the intervening years since she had first seen them. She crawled, and then stumbled into the throne room.

The sound of disturbance had reached the room. She had expected more guards but there were none. Her senses checked the balcony above – supported by columns. It had been cleared, but she sensed that that would be the source of reinforcements.

She took in her surroundings. It had changed to some degree from when she had been here before, though not enough that she did not know where to go. A long stoneworked hall, flanked by ornate columns, all lit by well positioned torches. The area was markedly different – covered in cushions and divans that were occupied by men, naked men – and with only one stately throne this time. She gasped. There were at least ten of them, though in contrast to the man she had just fought, they were pale and thin and, by the looks of them, could scarcely carry a blade. Several of them cried in terror as the woman with eye patch, blond locks tied back, wide shouldered and strong, and horribly wounded, strode purposefully into the throne room, for at the centre of the writhing mass of fawning male lovers, was the fatter, older, Pylar.

He did not recognise her at first as she hobbled and limped, the bolt protruding from her side, and blood coursing down her useless right arm, a tall, well built woman, with an eye patch and a band covering her forehead. She had left the short swords buried in the midriff of the mercenary, though it mattered not as she moved to draw the small stiletto from its sheath at her waist.

“You don’t remember me, Pylar, do you?” she grunted, ripping away the cloth that covered her forehead, revealing the lifer brand. Her vision was becoming blurry. She had to stay alive just long enough to finish him.

It took Pylar several seconds to recognise the woman who appeared to be bleeding to death in his throne room.

“Elenna? But you’re…”

“Dead? Is that what you were hoping for, Pylar?” She was close now. The effeminate men were scattering to get as far away as possible from the approaching mad woman.

The fat, naked duke, covered with spilled wine and his own sweat from his exertions, pushed himself back up the steps of the dais that led to his throne.

“Wait. Wait! Elenna, I… you know how I feel about you!”

She stopped. She was weakening, falling to her knees now.

“Guards!” he screamed.

Booted feet could be heard moving to the balcony.

She pulled the stiletto free from its sheath, and pulled back her arm to throw it as the crossbow bolt struck her full in the chest and she grunted hard. The second took her in the thigh, the third in the arm that had been about to throw the knife, and she fell to the ground.

Pylar, gasping, stood to his feet, his flaccid cock shaking as he moved to one side in glee.

“Kill her. Kill that bitch now! Fire! F...”

The bolt that struck Pylar was fired from the doorway. Perhaps the shooter had been aiming for his chest, or perhaps his head. As it was, the bolt struck him in the neck. Blood sprayed about the dais and on those of his lovers who had opted to stay close to their master, as he fell to the ground, staring at the ceiling and breathing his last breaths as his lifeblood slipped away.

At the doorway, an old woman, clad only in rags, her body shaking yet her arms remaining stock still and true, began to speak as every crossbow on the balcony, and the swords of the men who had arrived behind her held her life in the balance.

“You all know who I am. And you all know what has happened here. Cease firing now and take no further action in this matter, and some of you might yet live when my family decides to determine what precisely happened here today.”

The mercenaries paused. Yes, they knew exactly who the woman was. Pylar was dead, and unless someone was immediately placed in charge of the citadel, they were effectively out of a job. Worse than that, they were also aware that there would be repercussions for all the actions that had occurred today. Better to be on the right side.

“Stand down,” one of the senior officers snorted.

* * * * *

Elenna felt hands lift her, then fail to hold her as if through weakness. She could smell the old woman beside her, cradling her head. Her eyesight was blurred, but she could sense that Tremaine was crying.

“Is... is he dead?” she gasped.

“He is. I can say that those years when I was taught a few of the fighting arts did not let me down today,” she said confidently.

Elenna nodded, and coughed hard, the motion racking her pierced and broken body.

“Easy now. The physician has been summoned.”

“Too late,” she croaked. “Too late.”

“Aye. It is,” the woman who would now be in charge of the city state of Arlos’s affairs replied, tears in her old eyes.

“I am sorry, for all of this.”

“Perhaps... you... should improve the lot... of your subjects. Especially... the galley slaves.”

“I will do what I can,” the new duchess replied.

Elenna stared at the ceiling, and she died.

The End